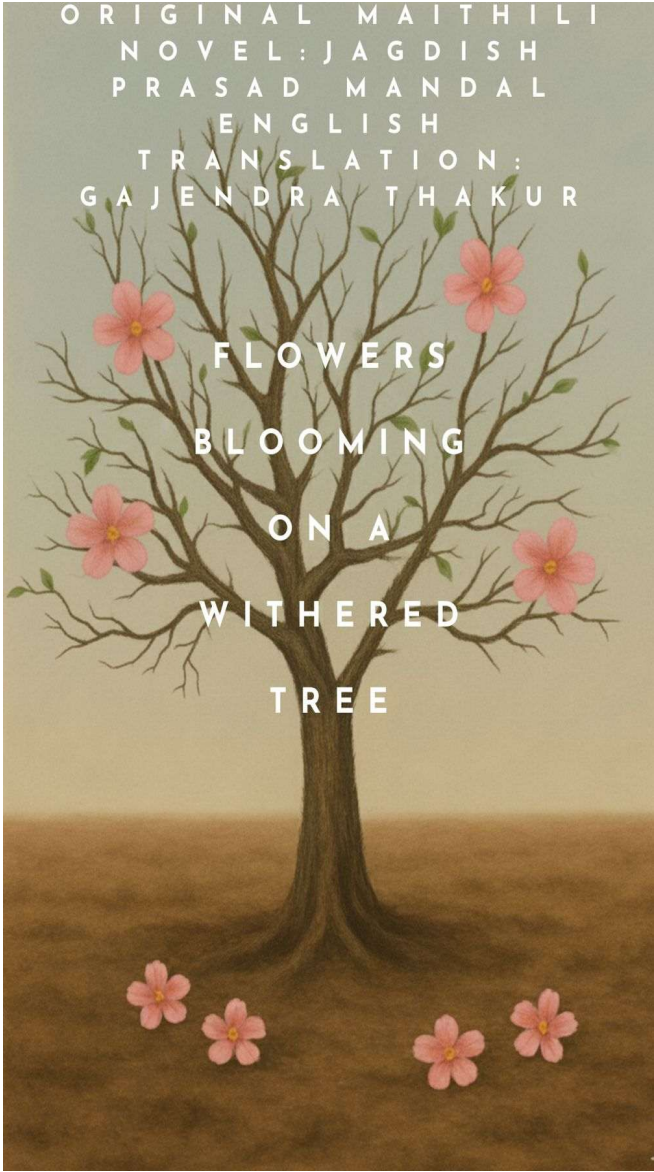


ORIGINAL MAITHILI
NOVEL: JAGDISH
PRASAD MANDAL
ENGLISH
TRANSLATION:
GAJENDRA THAKUR

FLOWERS
BLOOMING
ON A
WITHERED
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2 ||Original Maithili Novel: Jagdish Prasad Mandal/ English Translation: Gajendra Thakur

FLOWERS BLOOMING ON A WITHERED TREE

Original Maithili Novel (Maulail Gachhak Phool):

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

English Translation: Gajendra Thakur

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DEDICATION

To the Vrindavan of Mithila.

*To those who plant gardens while sitting on
mounds of sand.*

-With the herald of a new dawn.

1.

After two years of relentless drought, the land lay bare and cracked. Days scorched, and nights brought no relief. People tossed and groaned through sleepless nights, rising again and again—even at midnight—just to sip a little water. At dawn, the sun bared its fangs. It felt as though someone had struck a sudden, brutal blow, so fiercely did its heat descend upon the earth. The roads and footpaths had hardened like cement. Feet slipped as they walked over the parched ground. The water of ponds and wells had vanished into the netherworld, retreating to protect their very existence.

Not a single drop of rain had touched the soil in two years, and the earth's beauty was fading fast. Creepers turned yellow, like fevered bodies surrendering to disease. Leaves lost their colour. Vines, pomegranates, coconuts, and other fruit-bearing trees began to wither. Mango, jamun, gamhar, and shisham trees shed their leaves, carpeting the ground in brittle, rustling layers.

By mid-morning, dust storms and scorching winds tore through the air. Giant cracks split the earth open. What to eat? What to drink? How to live?

People muttered these questions to one another; their voices dry with despair. Cattle and goats, starved of grass and water, shrivelled like dry sticks; many collapsed without warning. Diseases and plague seized the moment, spreading death from livestock to humans like wildfire.

With crops destroyed, people tied up their pots and utensils and fled toward Morang, Dinajpur, Dhaka- anywhere where hope still flickered. Farmers and sharecroppers met the same fate. Vows and rituals were offered to Indra, lord of rain, in desperate hope that mercy would descend from the skies.

For three days, no fire had burned in Anup's hearth. Like Nala and Damayanti from the ancient tale, he and his wife Radhiya sat in silence beneath a mountain of sorrow, staring at each other without words. Their twelve-year-old son, Bauelal, lay weak on the cot. In a broken whisper, he said to his mother,

"Ma, I'm dying of hunger. My stomach twists like a knife. I can't live anymore."

Hearing this, tears welled up in Anup and Radhiya's eyes. Words caught in their throats. Radhiya rose silently, picked up a bucket and

pitcher, and walked towards the well.

But the water had sunk so deep that even the rope attached to the bucket no longer reached up to the water inside the well. No matter how far she bent, the bucket met only air. Radhiya's heart trembled. When misfortune comes, it comes like this, she thought. Baelal will not survive. Of five children, one had already died in infancy, and now this one, too. Oh God, what sin am I paying for? Leaving the bucket at the well's edge, she hurried home to fetch another length of rope. Seeing her face, Anup asked, "What happened?"

In a broken voice, she replied, "What else? Fate has struck again. The rope is too short. I came to get another piece."

Anup opened the storage chest by the veranda and handed her a longer cord. She tied it to the existing rope, lowered the bucket, and finally drew water. Carrying the brimming pitcher, she returned to the courtyard and called out to Baelal.

But the boy was too weak to rise. Setting the pitcher on the veranda, she lifted him in her arms and propped him upright. She dipped her fingers into the water and sprinkled some on his eyes and

lips. His body trembled violently, and that trembling seemed to pass into her own. She raised the pitcher to his mouth, but her hands shook so badly that the vessel slipped, spilling water across the cot.

Beating her chest with both fists, Radhiya screamed- "Baelal is gone! This is the hour, the very moment!"

Anup's wailing rose to the sky. Hearing it, neighbours and relatives rushed in. Their faces were etched with the same misery. No one could offer comfort; they all shared the same fate.

Among them came Rupni, Anup's cousin-sister, shrieking from her doorway. Seeing Baelal, she cried- "Brother! The child still has life in him! Why do you weep before the last breath leaves? While the body holds breath, there is still hope. Hush now, hush!"

She lifted Baelal into her lap and rubbed his chest with the heel of her hand. After a few tense moments, the boy opened his eyes and whispered, "Sister, hunger gnaws at my belly like a beast."

Rupni asked gently- "Shall I make bread for you, my child?"

Baelal nodded. "Yes."

The single word “yes” from Bauelal struck Radhiya like a command from heaven. She went inside, took out the silver vessel her father had given her at the time of her farewell, and handed it to Anup. Clutching the vessel, Anup ran to the shop, sold it, and returned with wheat.

As soon as he stepped into the courtyard, Radhiya quickly lit the hearth and poured the wheat onto the pan. Together, they began grinding it on the millstone. The moment enough flour was ready for a single bread, Radhiya set the rest aside and began to bake. Anup stayed at the millstone, grinding what remained.

When the bread was cooked, Radhiya brought it to Bauelal. The boy was too weak to eat on his own. Holding her breath, she fed him morsel by morsel. He finished the entire bread. Then, with strength returning, he lifted the pitcher and drank on his own. But as soon as he swallowed, his breath grew heavy, and he collapsed onto the floor.

Radhiya gathered the remaining flour and returned to the hearth, kneading it in a tray. Anup brushed the flour from his thighs, stood up, and walked towards the well with the pitcher and bucket.

After washing his hands and feet, he filled the vessel with water, returned to the courtyard, and sat down to eat.

Radhiya placed before him bread, salt, and chilli. Hunger tempted Anup to swallow the whole bread at once, yet he broke it piece by piece. When he finished eating, he looked at Radhiya. She had placed only three breads on the tray and stored the remaining flour in the bin. Seeing the look in her eyes, Anup said nothing. Instead, he drank two pitchers of water and rose.

It was still broad daylight when Nathu came running, smiling. "Brother Anup! Girhat Kaka has started work on the big pond. From tomorrow, you'll be joining. Both of you will earn wages."

Hearing this, Radhiya felt as if she'd found gold coins. Her heart filled with sudden joy. Even Anup's lips curved into a smile. Seeing him cheerful, Nathu continued, "Musna Kaka will serve as timekeeper. He'll keep the attendance."

As they were talking, Musna himself appeared, breathless. Nathu pointed toward him and said, "Here he comes! Now he'll explain everything clearly."

The offer of timekeeping had made Musna's heart

swell with pride. Though he had never served as a timekeeper before, he had watched others in road and embankment work enjoy both income and authority. Inwardly, he was elated. I'll write names as I please, he thought. Whoever pleases me, I'll mark present. Whoever displeases me, I'll leave out. That will be my power. And what use is power if not exercised? If I don't use it, then how will I be any different from the ordinary workers?

Smiling, Musna said to Anup, "Brother, from tomorrow, the work on the big pond will begin. You must come. For each full day of digging, the wage will be two seers of paddy and one seer of millet. The pond is so vast, it'll take the sun itself to cross it. I hear people from other villages are coming too, but we won't let them dig. This work belongs to us."

Hearing this, Bauelal jumped up and cried- "Uncle, count me too! I'll dig earth as well!"

"Very good, my child," Musna said. "The three of you shall come. The work will be under my hand. At noon, I'll let your aunt return early to cook."

Saying this, both Musna and Nathu departed.

The next morning, before the first spade had

touched soil, people from four villages had gathered at the pond's bank. Some carried shovels, others baskets. The slope of the pond looked like a fairground. For every local, there were ten outsiders.

Seeing the crowd, Musna's heart swelled with pride, but in the same instant, fear struck him, and his body trembled. A chilling thought pierced his mind: Now who will listen to me?

Clutching his head with both hands, he sat down, helpless. His senses dulled. The pond bank teemed with people, villagers and strangers alike, shoulder to shoulder, spades poised in the earth.

At last, Musna decided: I must go to Girhat Kaka and tell him everything. Rising quickly, he set off to meet Ramakant Babu.

Meanwhile, quarrels broke out between the villagers and the outsiders. The strangers shouted—"We haven't come here to beg! We will work honestly and take honest wages!"

The villagers retorted, "This pond belongs to our village, so the work is ours to do!"

On the embankment, Sukhet's Bhutkumra and the village's Singheshra were piling up earth side by side. Harsh words soon turned into insults.

Everyone shouted at once, and no one could hear anyone else. One quarrel led to another until Bhutkumra lunged at Singheshra, and Singheshra pushed back. The two wrestled, each trying to pin the other to the ground. Both were strong men. At first, Bhutkumra threw Singheshra down when his foot slipped into a hole, but Singheshra did not admit defeat. He got up again and, with a sudden grip, hurled Bhutkumra to the ground.

At that very moment, Ramakant Babu was sitting at his doorway, tallying accounts of his rice and millet. Breathless, Musna appeared. Seeing him, Ramakant asked what had happened, but Musna struggled to speak. After a pause, he managed to say, "Kaka, so many outsiders have arrived that there's hardly any space left for our own people. No matter how much I told them, they refused to listen. Please come and see for yourself."

Leaving his papers inside, Ramakant set out, with Musna following close behind. Even from a distance, as they neared the pond, Ramakant could hear the uproar. His mind grew anxious. Will the outsiders obey? he wondered. If I stop the work, our villagers will lose their earnings. If I allow it, will the strangers accept our terms? It

was a tangled situation.

As soon as he reached the pond, people surrounded him from all sides. They shouted in unison- "If work goes on, then we too will labour!"

Perplexed, Ramakant addressed them- "Look, this is a time of drought. Every village has its own work to do and its own labourers. Come, let us go together, and I will ask that each village engage its own people on its own projects."

Satisfied, the outsiders picked up their spades, baskets, and tools and departed. Ramakant walked with them for a while. Then, turning quietly to Musna, he instructed, "Once they've gone, set our villagers to work."

Meanwhile, word reached Singheshra's wife that her husband had been struck down and humiliated. Upon hearing this, she and her children left the village, cursing loudly as they made their way toward the pond. But by then, the outsiders had already left. Work on the pond had begun.

At one spot, Anup, Radhiya, and Bauelal marked out their patch and began to dig. Anup cut the soil with his spade and filled it into the basket. Radhiya and the boy carried it on their heads to

the embankment and emptied it there. By noon, Ramakant came by the western bank to observe the work. At his signal, Musna ran up. Ramakant pointed toward Bauelal and asked, "Who is that? Tell him to meet me in the evening."

Saying this, Ramakant turned and headed home. The sight of twelve-year-old Bauelal digging earth left people astonished. While another labourer might empty one basket, Bauelal emptied three. Seeing his son's work, Anup thought silently, "He's better than a hired labourer." But what is the use of such thoughts?

Just then, Musna—returning from Ramakant—approached Anup and said- "Brother, the master has called for both you and your son to meet him this evening."

At these words, a ripple of joy stirred in Anup's heart, though he steadied himself and replied, "When the master has summoned us, we will certainly go."

As the sun set in the west, Musna returned once more and said to Radhiya, "Sister-in-law, you may go home now. I've marked the day's attendance. It's time to start cooking."

Radhiya departed for the courtyard, while Anup

and Bauelal kept working. By four in the afternoon, the labourers put down their tools and returned home.

At home, Anup and his son bathed and sat down to eat. Radhiya had prepared bread from the leftover flour, some leafy greens, and a chutney. The three of them—Anup, Radhiya, and Bauelal—ate together and then sat on the veranda, talking. Anup said to Radhiya, “God is great. His eyes remain upon us all. See how, even in such hard times, He has brought about this turn of fate.”

As they conversed, evening descended. At twilight, Anup and his son set out to meet Ramakant. On the way, many thoughts rose and fell in their minds, but both felt a quiet joy.

At his doorway, Ramakant sat with Musna, tallying the names of labourers. Musna had written down everyone’s names but had forgotten to include his own, so the accounts did not match. Both were still poring over the figures when Anup arrived with his son.

From a distance, Anup folded his hands and bowed before Ramakant. Bauelal too touched his feet. Smiling, Ramakant looked at the boy and said to Anup, “Anup, give me this son of yours.”

Anup's heart was startled. What is he saying? For a moment, he sat in silence. Then he replied, "Master, Bauelal is not mine alone. He belongs to the whole community. Whenever you have a need, you may call him."

At these words, everyone present fell silent. The schoolmaster gazed at Anup with wide eyes. A young man, who had arrived just two days earlier—battered by fate—sank deeper into his own silence, caught between hope and despair.

He had completed three years of agricultural science, with only one year remaining. But during that time, to treat his ailing father, he had sold every field and plot of land. Despite the cost, his father did not recover and died within days. To perform the funeral rites, he borrowed even more. Under the weight of debt, he was forced to abandon his studies. No path of livelihood remained.

He sat there, defeated by life's cruel turns. A year ago, he had married. Now he bore the double burden of an elderly mother and a young wife, with no clear way to survive. The days were slowly consuming his mother. Hearing Ramakant Babu's generous words, the young man had stepped

forward, drawn by a flicker of hope.

Ramakant Babu drank his crushed bhang every afternoon at four. As the evening deepened, the bhang took hold. This habit did not come from his father. Ramakant's father had been a scholar of law. He lived away from the village and was rarely at home. As a result, his ways had not shaped Ramakant. Still, Ramakant had grown to be both honest and largehearted.

While they spoke of the pond work, Ramakant turned to Musna and said, "From tomorrow, give Bauelal double wages."

Musna froze when he heard that. After a moment, he replied, "Master, if we raise one man's wage, others will demand the same. That will cause trouble. If trouble begins, the work itself might not get done."

When he heard talk of the work stopping, Ramakant responded sharply. "Why would the work stop? Whoever works, we will pay them accordingly."

2.

Ramakant, though wealthy and comfortable, was known as much for his honesty as for his generosity. In the village, he was respected and trusted. He did not possess much ancestral land, yet during his father's stewardship, many estates had come into the family's possession as gifts from prominent courts. His father, Madhukant, had been a renowned scholar of philosophy, grammar, and law.

From an early age, Madhukant's passion for study was evident, prompting his father to send him to Banaras. After completing his formal education

there, he spent three additional years under the guidance of a master of jurisprudence in Kashi. This training transformed him completely. Due to the limited educational facilities in the village, he never felt at home there. He struggled to find like-minded individuals or harmony in village life. As a result, he spent most of his life elsewhere. Madhukant's reputation extended beyond his own state into neighbouring kingdoms. His unique talent lay in explaining the foundations of Indian thought with clarity. In many of his writings, he analysed both the strengths and shortcomings of the social order. However, much of his work remained unpublished due to various circumstances. His home displayed medals and certificates of honour. During his visits to the village, he often spoke out against harmful customs and blind superstitions. People admired him for this. He shared stories from his own life and took a keen interest in the lives of others. Deceit never tainted his way of living. He sought to show people how societal structures create obstacles in human lives and how true freedom might be attained. He spent seventy winters on this earth.

Every afternoon at four, Ramakant would take his bhang, drink tea, chew a paan, and set out for a walk, returning by dusk. Once home, he would wash his hands and feet and sit by the doorway. Neighbours often gathered around him. Their conversations ranged from worldly affairs to light-hearted jokes, accompanied by tea and paan. Among the regular visitors were Master Hiranand and a young man named Shashi Shekhar.

One evening, as they sipped tea, Ramakant asked Shashi Shekhar, "Son, what do you wish for yourself?"

With a voice heavy with despair, Shashi Shekhar replied- "I am trapped in such a mire that when I lift one foot, the other sinks deeper. How can I escape this?"

Once, when Shashi Shekhar cleared the entrance exam for the agricultural college, the light of a bright future shone before him. His father, upon hearing of his success, was filled with boundless joy. Never before had he been so elated. It was as if a miraculous fruit had blossomed on a thorny bush, or a rose had bloomed in barren soil. So rare was Shashi Shekhar's achievement. His father vowed that even if he had to sell every last field,

he would see his son become an agricultural scientist.

Shashi Shekhar, too, began to dream big: to become a scientist, to secure a good position, to fulfil his parents' wishes, not only for his family but to serve society, wherever and whenever possible. Yet fate altered the course of his life. Just as a boatman's pole slips from his hands midstream and the passengers are thrown into turmoil, so too was Shashi Shekhar's life upended. He had completed three years of the four-year course when his father suddenly fell ill. He left his studies in the final year to care for him. Alongside the cost of treatment came the burden of managing the household. Their only source of income was a few small plots of land. More than half of them had already been sold.

Still young and unacquainted with the harshness of life, Shashi Shekhar, with little experience or guidance, attempted to shoulder responsibilities far beyond his years. He sold field after field to pay for his father's treatment, yet the troubles continued. Eventually, his father passed away. Helpless, Shashi Shekhar borrowed money to perform the funeral rites. For him, all light

vanished from the world. Everything turned to darkness.

Eventually, he thought to himself: If I take up tutoring, perhaps I can resume my studies. But what will happen to my family? I can't earn enough from tutoring to both study and support them. The more I earn, the less time I'll have to study. That's not possible. If I spend all my hours teaching others, when will I attend classes? When will I prepare?

Since my father's death, my mother's body has withered in sorrow. Age already weighs heavily on her, and grief has aged her even more. If a man, born into this world, cannot serve his parents, then what sort of man is he? Nothing but a shadow of humanity. I will not be that. Whether the world calls me wise or foolish, I do not care. With a degree, I might get a good job, earn a good salary, and live in comfort. But life is more than food, clothing, and shelter. Life demands knowledge, action, and virtue. If one cannot earn honour, what is the purpose of living? If I abandon my mother today, who will share her suffering? She needs care day and night, from waking to resting, from feeding to tending. We are the

children of the same soil where once a son like Shravan Kumar was born.

It was these thoughts that led Shashi Shekhar to abandon his studies. With no other refuge in the world, he turned to Ramakant and poured out his story to Master Hiranand.

Hearing Shashi's tale, Hiranand's heart softened. He thought, this young man, who could have become a pillar of service to the nation, is wasting away. He must be supported, lifted back onto his path.

Ramakant, still puzzled, asked Shashi Shekhar again- "I still do not fully understand your words." At this, Master Hiranand explained, "Shashi has fallen into deep misfortune. He needs your help. Only then will he rise again."

Hearing this, Ramakant replied firmly- "If my help can bring Shashi any welfare, then I will surely help him."

This assurance from Ramakant lit a dawn in Shashi Shekhar's heart. As the rising sun awakens the hope of the day, so too did faith awaken within him. A smile broke unbidden across his lips. The long night of his life began to turn toward the full moon of hope.

With grave earnestness, Hiranand said, “Shashi, set aside your worries. Step forward into a new life. This is a land of action. Only through work and dedication can one truly live.”

Hearing this, Shashi stood, clasped their hands, and inwardly vowed a lifelong friendship. He said, “As a gardener binds and waters a withered tree until it blossoms again, so you both have given me new life. I am indebted. Wherever possible, I will serve you.”

At his words, Ramakant’s heart overflowed with joy, as boundless as Karna’s generosity. Smiling, he said, “Son, I am not a learned man. When my father lived away from the village, I had to manage the family. Yet neither in the past nor now have we felt any vacuum. Whatever he taught me when he came home, I have kept in my heart to this day.”

Ramakant had two sons, both doctors, working in Madras. They returned home occasionally, but only for a day or two. Both had married there, and their wives were also doctors. Four doctors in one family, all with steady incomes. In ten years of service, they had saved well. They built a three-storied house in Madras, owned four cars, and had

established their own clinic. For a long time, Ramakant had considered moving to Madras, yet the distance held him back.

He continued- "The pond work is nearly finished. Once it's completed, I'll go to Madras. When I return, I will arrange everything for you. Until then, bring your mother and your wife here and stay with us."

That afternoon, Hiranand and Shashi Shekhar went out for a walk. At the northeast corner of the pond stood a great shady mango tree. Beneath it, on the soft grass, they sat together and began to talk.

Hiranand, speaking of his own past, said to Shashi Shekhar, "Shashi, after passing matriculation, I went for an interview for a teaching post. When I arrived, I realised the interview was merely a formality. Bribes and bargaining were happening openly. I felt it would be wrong to leave without raising my voice, so I stayed. In my heart rose the thought that I must protest. I tried to rally others, but everyone had already joined the game of bargaining. Not a single person stood with me. My heart grew restless.

Then another thought struck me: to resist, to

create an uproar. But both sides were complicit. I alone stood apart. Anger gripped me, and my body trembled. I weighed gain against loss and saw that the loss far outweighed the gain. Yet my mind would not yield. I thought, why not strike those climbing the ladder of appointments? I would be jailed for ten days, perhaps. But still... Then I reflected. I had my degree and ability. Many such jobs would come and go. In a land where thousands of youths had shed their blood for the country's freedom, could I not endure this small injustice?

Thoughts rose and fell within me like waves in the ocean. Resolution and doubt came and went. All the others had left. I alone remained. At last, I too departed, still unsettled. My steps dragged as I returned home.

My wife understood everything without a word. To lift my spirits, she came forward with a pitcher of water and said, 'You must be tired. Wash your hands and feet. It will ease your weariness. I'll bring food.'

By the time I had washed, she was already there with the plate, as if she had been waiting with it prepared. After eating, I placed my kurta on the

bench by the doorway and reclined, folding my arms behind my head.

As I lay there, many thoughts passed through my mind, but two stood out clearly.

The first: Is bribery limited only to teacher appointments, or is it present across all departments? I looked around and saw it was even more widespread elsewhere. I asked myself, if corruption exists in every corner, how will the country ever move forward? From bottom to top, the same disease grips the system. My mind grew heavy.

Then came another thought, sharp and piercing. Just as winds from the east or west sweep from earth to sky, so too this wind of corruption blows everywhere. The only way to change it is to change the system itself.

But changing the system is no child's play. It is a difficult task. The system is not limited to human actions alone. It also lies in human thought and conscience. A person's actions arise from the kind of thoughts they hold, and thoughts are born from the kind of intelligence they possess. Until human intelligence changes, actions will not change. And until actions change, the

system will remain the same.

To speak of change without understanding this is an empty exercise. What is needed is to awaken new intelligence in people. From that intelligence will come new actions. From new actions, new paths will emerge. And through those paths, new destinations will be reached. At those destinations, all human beings will stand as equals. There, the divide between rich and poor, high and low, will flatten into level ground.”

At that very moment, a knock sounded at the door of memory. Hiranand recalled his old high school teacher, Devendra Babu. Devendra Babu always told his students- “A man must never fall into despair. The moment despair comes, death walks close behind. Therefore, a man must remain ever hopeful. However hard the time, with the support of reason, he must keep moving forward.” The moment Devendra Babu’s words came to mind, I resolved that if I ever stepped onto the path of teaching, I would remain a teacher, no matter what obstacles arose. When he was a college student, the struggle for the country’s freedom was at its peak. Along with five or six companions, Devendra Babu had set fire to the

post office. The building burned down. Three days later, the police arrested him, beat him, and threw him into jail.

Before going to prison, he had felt some fear, having heard that prisoners were given no food and were beaten every evening. But once inside, he found thousands of patriots and revolutionaries already there. For them, prison was as natural as home. He spent a year behind bars, and in that year, he learned much. His life changed entirely. From then on, he thought not only of himself or his family but came to understand that the nation is made of society, and society is made of individuals and families. Therefore, one must serve not only oneself but also society and the country. After his release, he enrolled in a B.A. course. Once he completed it, he became a high school teacher. There were many teachers in the school, but his life was different from theirs. He considered private tutoring a sin, and in the classroom, he taught with such devotion that no student ever needed extra help. In a small hut beside the school, he lived alone. Once a month, he would visit home, see his wife and children, hand over his salary, and return.

After such talk, the two friends rose and parted. Hiranand returned to his house. A little later, a stranger arrived. Though Hiranand did not recognise him, he courteously brought a pitcher of water, asked him to wash his feet, and invited him to sit. Then, calling out to his wife from the courtyard, he said, "A guest has come. Prepare some tea quickly."

Returning to the doorway, Hiranand asked the man his name and village. As they spoke, his wife gestured from the courtyard that the tea was ready. Breaking off the conversation, Hiranand took the two cups in his hands, offering one to the guest with his right hand and holding his own in the left. They drank together, their conversation continuing to flow.

Soon, his wife signalled again, this time for food. Hiranand, with a slight hand gesture, asked her to wait. One should not eat food immediately after drinking tea; it is better to eat before tea. So, after the tea and a paan, they resumed their conversation.

Hiranand asked- "Where have you come from?" The guest replied, "In our village lives an old woman, a widow with no son. She is related to

me through family ties and is like a grandmother to me. One day, she thought to herself: Why not build a school for the children? She owns four bighas of land. The community urged her not to let the property be divided and wasted, but to dedicate it to a school. Now, she has given two bighas for the school and kept two for herself. When she dies, all four will belong to the school." Listening intently, Hiranand smiled and said, "That is a fine thought."

The guest continued, "I have come to ask you to help run the school."

"Certainly, I will," Hiranand replied. "Stay here tonight. In the morning, we will go together."

"It's only a short distance," the man said. "I can reach by tomorrow evening. I will not stay."

"Don't hurry," Hiranand insisted. "I too am weary. In the morning, after tea, we will both go."

At last, the guest accepted his invitation. From the corner of the kitchen, Hiranand's wife, Arati, had been listening to all their talk.

Later, the two men chewed tobacco, drank water, and went for a stroll. In the evening, they returned, sat at the doorway, and talked again. Supper was prepared. They ate and then lay down

to sleep.

At four in the morning, they awoke. After washing, they brushed their teeth while Arati prepared tea. They were sipping it when the sun rose.

That day's sunrise seemed to hold a special glow. Was it the light itself, or the glow in each heart? In Arati's heart was the quiet pride that her husband was about to take up a new responsibility. In Hiranand's heart was the stirring of purpose, the feeling of climbing a new step in life. In the guest Matkan's heart was the hope of his son's education.

After tea, Hiranand gathered a clean dhoti and a towel. As they walked and talked together, he learned that Ramakant had played a key role in founding the school. So, upon reaching the village, he told Matkan, "First, let us meet Ramakant. Then we will go to see Grandmother."

Both men reached Ramakant's house. Sixty-year-old Ramakant was at the cattle trough, mixing fodder with his own hands. Seeing them on the veranda, he quickly washed his hands, came forward, and said- "Come, come, sit down."

Hiranand took a seat on the bench, but Matkan

remained standing.

Ramakant said to him, "Go on ahead. We will follow. How could I let Master Sahib leave my gate without food first?"

Matkan went ahead and reached the old grandmother, delivering all the news. Hearing it, her heart leapt with joy. She felt that now the children of the village would walk from darkness into light.

After breakfast and tea, Ramakant and Hiranand set out for grandmother's house. It was only a short distance away. On the way, Ramakant's thoughts stirred. A school is not a private institution, he reflected, but a social one. In a social institution, everyone's support is needed. Thanks are due to grandmother for giving all her wealth to the community, but we too must share responsibility. At the very least, I will provide for the teacher's food and lodging. The yield of my fields will serve as his salary, and if the whole community contributes to building the schoolhouse, that will be best.

Thinking thus, they reached grandmother's home. Ramakant called her "Bhauji," for in social relations, her late husband had been like a brother

to him. She, too, had been waiting eagerly for the arrival of the teacher.

Once they had gathered, Ramakant said to Matkan, "Matkan, this school will be a great institution for the village. So, inform the people of the community. Let everyone come together and think carefully before taking the next step. Bhauji's sacrifice deserves endless praise. The very wealth for which people stoop to the lowest deeds, that wealth she is offering freely to the village. Now that Master Sahib has arrived, there is no need to rush. First, call the entire village. At midday, we will all sit together and decide."

By noon, people began to gather quickly. Curiosity and eagerness filled their minds. In the midst of all, Ramakant spoke- "You all know that Bhauji is giving her entire property for the children. This will bring good not only for them but for all of us. But we, too, bear responsibility. As long as I live, I will provide for the teacher's food and lodging. You, together, must build the schoolhouse."

Everyone clapped in support of Ramakant's idea. Smiling, Hiranand said- "Building the house will take some time. In the meantime, send your

children. I will begin teaching at once.”

This thought too was met with loud applause.

Then Dukhia rose and said- “Where will the teacher find time to farm? We villagers will till the land together. Just as Master Sahib serves us, so we shall all serve him.”

3.

For six months, Sone Lal's wife had been ill. The local doctors, vaid, hakims, and folk healers had all grown tired, but Sugiya's illness would not yield. She lay there, wasting away. Day and night passed without a moment of peace. Sometimes a physician came; sometimes someone ran to the market for medicine. At times they fetched milk for the baby, at other times food for the patient. They hardly thought of their own meals. Some days they chanted charms; some days they ran to the fields to prop up a plough ox.

The fear of losing his wife gnawed at Sone Lal, but deeper still was the dread over the four children, especially now that the fourth had just been born. When the newborn arrived, Sugiya's pain intensified. The birth came in the heart of winter, on a night of famine. Cold winds stung the skin. Drops of rain fell like the last threads from dying trees. From that night onward, Sone Lal felt helpless. Even in a neighbor's house, he could not sleep. He feared that if he left for even a moment, something worse might befall them. Darkness and secrecy closed in around him. Every hand he reached for came back empty. He was caught in a strange calamity.

Ever since Sugiya's illness and the birth of the baby, Sone Lal's life had unraveled. Yet he did not lose courage. Whoever named any remedy or countermeasure, he brought it and gave it to Sugiya. At last, he decided to mortgage five kathas of land for five thousand rupees and go to Laheriasarai.

The children were still small and needed care, so he called his sister to manage the household while he was away. When Sugiya's milk dried up, they tried feeding the baby goat's milk. But his sister's

own little child had also grown weak, and her milk had failed. Seeing the infants suffer, the sister began drinking mashed green lentils. Slowly, her milk returned, and the infants began to suckle again.

Preparations for Laheriasarai began in earnest. At the landlord's house, they took down the hanging cot and cleaned the sacks and bundles. Where the ropes had frayed or torn, they mended and retied them.

Sone Lal said to his sister, "Sister, take out the new clothes now. Tomorrow morning, we leave by cart. Pack ten days' rations of rice and lentils. There is still rice piled in the store, but we'll need to buy lentils. Lay everything out and prepare."

On hearing this, his sister asked, "Brother, which of your clothes should I wash?"

"Take one dhoti, one vest, and one sheet for me. Also, pack your own things. I'm already wearing one dhoti. There are six more hanging on the line, wash those so they dry in time for bathing. I'll wear one of the freshly washed ones and take off the one I'm wearing."

Their sister stood nearby with a sari in her hands, ready. Seeing her, Sone Lal said, "Don't go beyond

the doorstep. Keep the children at home and feed the livestock. These are troubled times. Look how some of the youngsters in the village smoke bhang and ganja and shout at others. If anyone causes trouble, tie them up.”

His sister took out the green lentils and rice and spread them to dry in the courtyard. The newly threshed rice had not yet been winnowed. She fetched more clothes to wash while the lentils began to soak and swell.

Sone Lal repaired the cot and lashed two large bundles to its foot. After the clothes had been gathered, his sister asked, “Brother, how much rice and lentils should I take?”

Sone Lal replied- “Sister, there will be two of us eating there, so take rice and lentils accordingly. We’ll buy vegetables once we arrive.”

She said, “Brother, we’ll buy salt there, but take turmeric, chilli, and mustard oil from here. Also, take one big plate, one water pot, and two small cooking pots. Pack everything into the pots. If you pack things loosely, they’ll spill, and the lentils will break. Even if we have food and clothing, the lentils will still be half crushed.”

Sone Lal said- “If the bundle is heavy, what can

we do? When the drum is struck, it must sound.” As his sister prepared for Laheriasarai, her mind filled with sorrow. God had thrown her brother into such misfortune. If her sister-in-law were to die, her brother would be left broken. What could he do alone? The children were so small. Who would look after the fields, the children, the cattle?

“Oh God,” she prayed, “let not such suffering fall even on the homes of my enemies. And what can I do? I, too, am alone, with four children of my own and cattle to tend. My home is tied to the village. Yet if, at such a time, I do not stand by my brother, what will people say? And even if people say nothing, would my own heart forgive me?”

At dusk, Sone Lal went to the station to look for two men. Though he had relatives, at such times, who could be relied upon? In confusion, he reached Fuddia’s house. His name matched his nature. Seeing Sone Lal, he asked- “Brother, where have you come from?”

“I have worked with you, Fuddia.”

“What is it? Speak.”

“Tomorrow at dawn, I must catch the cart. I will

take Rekhia's mother to Laheriasarai. She cannot move on her own; she must be carried on a cot. For that, two men are needed."

Fuddia replied, "Brother, if my blood can serve you, I will give it. I will never forget your help as long as I live. I remember when my daughter's wedding was delayed for three days because my son-in-law waited, and the clothes had not arrived. You brought money just when I needed it. Such kindness I cannot forget."

Sone Lal said, "In society, everyone's needs are met by others. That is how it always is. I came to you because I trusted you. The cart leaves at five in the morning. We must leave an hour earlier."

"Good," said Fuddia. "I always wake by four. We brothers will set out together. You prepare yourself. If I do not wake, you must come and rouse me."

Returning from Fuddia's, Sone Lal told his sister, "Sister, pack everything neatly in one place, or in the morning, in haste, something will be left behind."

Hearing him, she began to worry that something might indeed be forgotten. She said, "Brother, tell

me again the names of all the things. We will gather them one by one.”

The brother and sister went through every item carefully. After checking, Sone Lal said, “Sister, rise at four. If the food is ready, let me eat before I go.”

He washed his hands and feet and sat down to eat. But his anxious mind robbed him of appetite. Somehow, he forced down a few mouthfuls. Then he went to the cowshed, fed the cattle, and returned to sleep. His sister also ate and lay down with the child at her breast. Before lying down, she asked her sister-in-law, “Bhauji, do you feel any better?”

A faint reply came: “Yes.”

On his bed, Sone Lal could not sleep. His mind was torn in two. One part wished for rest so he could rise early; the other fretted over his wife’s condition, keeping him awake. At last, after tossing and turning, breathless with worry, he drifted into a shallow slumber. But soon he stirred and called out to his sister- “Sister, is it dawn yet?”

She too was awake and replied, “Brother, we only just lay down after eating. How could dawn come

so soon?"

At three in the morning, Fuddia arrived and shouted from the yard- "Sone Lal! Brother Sone Lal! Still asleep? Get up. The morning star has risen!"

At his call, both brother and sister woke with a start. Sone Lal rushed out, eyes half-closed, and said- "Thank you for coming to wake us. I'll gather the things while you set the cot in order." Because it was still dark, his sister lit two lamps. One she placed by the doorpost, the other inside the house. Fuddia brought out the cot, tested the ropes, and checked the tied bundles.

Then he said, "Brother, the bundles are strong enough. But where is the bamboo pole for carrying?"

The bamboo pole lay in the cowshed. Pointing with his finger, Sone Lal said, "There it is."

Fuddia brought the pole and, in the lamplight, checked whether all the knots had been smoothed. They had. To spread on the cot, Sone Lal fetched an armful of straw and said- "Fuddia, you know how to arrange it. Lay the straw evenly. Square it well."

As he laid the straw, Fuddia asked- "Brother,

what shall we spread over it?"

Sone Lal went inside and brought a small carpet and a sheet, handing them to Fuddia. When the bedding was laid, Fuddia said, "Brother, while shifting shoulders on the road, she might slip from the cot. Should we tie ropes across both sides of the frame?"

The thought pleased Sone Lal. After a pause, he said quietly, "What can I say, Fuddia? In trouble, even the mind goes numb. You are no fool. Do as you think best."

They placed the patient on the cot. Then Sone Lal said,

"Fuddia, the children will remain at home. There is no one to watch them. Even Sari is new here. So, you must eat and sleep here tonight."

"Very well," Fuddia replied, and stepped forward. Sone Lal balanced the bundle of rice, lentils, and utensils on his head and followed. Their sister came carrying the child at her breast.

As they reached the village crossroads, Sugiya murmured from the cot- "Stop a moment."

Fuddia halted and asked, "Why did you stop us?" From the cot, Sugiya whispered- "O holy one, if we return safely, I shall offer a feast of fifty

measures of grain.”

Then the cot moved on. Along the way, no one spoke. Each carried a storm of thoughts.

Fuddia pondered how cruel God was to bring such sorrow upon a good man like Sone Lal.

Sone Lal thought: Three daughters, and now a son. If my wife dies, the boy too will be lost. Even if I give him to a wet nurse, what is the guarantee? And if instead a daughter had been born, the lineage would have ended, and I would have spent my life bound in the traps of dowry and weddings.

The sister thought: If my sister-in-law dies, my brother's whole life will be drowned in grief. O God, why do You act so?

At the station, Sone Lal set down the bundle and went to arrange for a cart. Seeing him buy a ticket, Fuddia knew the train was near. He bought his own ticket as well.

Soon, the train arrived. Together, the three lifted Sugiya into the carriage. Sone Lal remained inside. Fuddia handed him the bundle, and he placed it by the seat, then took the baby from his sister's lap. She too climbed aboard.

When the train pulled away, the two brothers—

Fuddia and Sone Lal-parted, Fuddia carrying the empty cot back toward the village.

The train reached Darbhanga. It ran only on the small line as far as there, and after two hours, it would turn and continue toward Nirmali. Passengers began to disembark, but Sone Lal sat still, unhurried. When all had gone, he rose and said to his sister, "Stay here. I will fetch a conveyance."

Leaving the carriage, he went outside the platform to where a tempo stood. The driver was looking around for passengers. Nervously, Sone Lal said, "Brother, I must go to the doctor's house. Will you take us?"

From his manner, the driver guessed he was a simple villager. But he felt drawn to him and asked, "Where is the patient?"

"In the train."

"Bring her out."

"She cannot come by herself. We will have to carry her."

Bringing the tempo close to the platform, the driver followed Sone Lal to the carriage. Seeing the sick woman and the luggage, he realised one more man would be needed. Glancing about the

platform, he spotted two sweepers who had just come to clean the train. He called out "Brothers!" Hearing the word brothers, they looked up, saw the driver, and came over.

"What is it?" they asked.

The driver said, "Friends, there is a suffering woman in this compartment. Help lift her down and seat her in the tempo."

The two sweepers set aside their brooms and, along with the driver, carried Sugiya down to the tempo. Sone Lal lifted the bundle, and his sister, with the baby at her breast, followed behind. Once Sugiya was settled in the tempo, the sweepers returned to clean the train.

Grateful, Sone Lal tried to press a ten-rupee note into their hands.

Seeing the money, one of the men, half-dressed in rags, said- "Brother, I too am employed by the railway. I draw my wages. I helped you not for payment. In the hardship you face today, I should be offering help with both my hands and my purse. But I am poor, and my own living comes hard. You yourself know that all sorrows fall upon the poor. The rich adorn their gods of gold with offerings of milk and cream, but my God is this

broken, suffering humanity. I did my duty. May God grant that you return home in happiness. Keep this note with you."

Hearing such words, Sone Lal was struck with wonder. How pure was the soul of one whom society considered untouchable?

The tempo moved forward. After a short distance, Sone Lal said to the driver, "Sir, I am a stranger here. I have never come before. You live in this town, you know everything. Take us to such a doctor as can save my wife."

"Very well," the driver replied.

Inwardly, he thought: Admitting her to the government hospital would not be wise. The facilities are poor, and only those with influence receive proper care. Best to take her to Doctor Banerjee. He has retired and set up his own practice. A good doctor and a good man.

It was twelve o'clock. Doctor Banerjee's first hours ended at noon, and his second shift began at four. He was preparing to leave when the driver pulled the tempo straight into the courtyard. Seeing it, the doctor sat down again. The driver alighted and said, "Doctor Sahib, the patient cannot walk. Please allow a room first."

With a glance, the doctor signalled to the compounder, who quickly opened a chamber in the adjacent quarters and handed Sone Lal the key. Then, with a servant and a stretcher, they carried Sugiya inside and laid her on a bed.

Returning, the compounder said, "All arrangements are made."

Doctor Banerjee entered, with the compounder, driver, and Sone Lal following behind. One look at Sugiya told him the nature of her illness, yet he asked a few more questions to be certain.

Sone Lal's heart was broken. His mouth felt parched, and his eyes were wet. Tears rolled down his sister's face. The doctor instructed the compounder to bring an injection. As he went, Sone Lal asked- "Doctor Sahib, will her pain be cured?"

The question melted the doctor's heart. Gently, he replied, "Within twenty-four hours, she will be up and walking. For now, I shall give her an injection. She will sleep until five o'clock. Do not wake her. She will rise on her own. When she wakes, give her water to rinse, then tea and biscuits."

The injection was given, and Sugiya soon fell

asleep. Doctor Banerjee turned to them and said, "Now you must eat and rest."

Then he departed. The driver lingered a moment longer and explained, "The water tap is nearby. There is a stove for cooking. You can prepare your food here. I will show you the shops outside, but go anywhere else; too many rogues prowl around here. Keep your money clenched in your hand when you buy things. Now I must go. Do not worry. Everything here is under the doctor's care." At five o'clock, Sugiya awoke. Beside her sat Sone Lal, with the baby in his sister's lap. Opening her eyes, she whispered from the bed, "I feel like eating something."

The words reminded Sone Lal of the doctor's advice. He hurried to fetch tea and biscuits, placed them before her, brought water from the tap, and helped her rinse. Sitting up, she dipped the biscuits in the tea and ate. When she had finished and wiped her mouth, Sone Lal asked- "How do you feel now?"

"A little lighter," she replied. Joy rose in their hearts. The sister silently prayed, "O Lord, heal her completely."

Sugiya began to recover. By the third day, she

was moving about. Twice a day, Doctor Banerjee himself came to see her. For every task, Sone Lal was ready and tireless in his service.

On the tenth day, Doctor Banerjee gave her permission to return home. Sone Lal settled the account with the compounder. Counting the money, he placed five hundred rupees extra before the doctor.

The doctor, surprised, said, "There is five hundred too much here. Take it back."

But Sone Lal replied, "There is no mistake. This is an offering of gratitude."

At the word gratitude, Doctor Banerjee fell silent. He thought, surely this poor man has borrowed the money. Yet, see the nobility of his words. What do I have that I should touch his surplus? His mind drifted back to the days of the old zamindars.

Every year, the landlords held a punah gathering in their courts. Fifteen days in advance, the tenants would be informed. On that occasion, heaps of motichoor laddus were prepared. Each cost one rupee, and every tenant was expected to buy one. Among the tenants, there were two kinds: those who lived only on grain and thus were

poor, and those who, besides their crops, had some cash income from milk and curds, vegetables, betel leaves, or pottery and other crafts.

The word *punah* carried a religious sense. Since religion stirred the hearts of the people, each tried to outdo the other in devotion, turning the event into a kind of competition. A *laddu* worth scarcely two *pai* would be sold for a rupee, even though a rupee's worth of sugar bought four *seers* of grain from which the sweets were made.

There were contests, some between individuals and others between entire castes. People rejoiced in it. In truth, landlords collected more money through *punah* than through land tax. In the very society where peasants' lands were auctioned off for arrears, in the name of *punah*, there was also plunder.

It was this memory that returned to Doctor Banerjee. Smiling, he told Sone Lal, "You are going home with joy. That is my *khushnamah*, my blessing. May God cause your family to grow and flourish."

The three of them set out on the road home. Sugiya carried the child in her lap, the sister balanced the bundle of utensils on her head, and

Sone Lal walked beside them with nothing but a heart grown light. Together, they reached Darbhanga station and caught the train.

At their own station, Tamuria, they alighted in happiness and walked toward the village. As they left the railway compound, Sugiya said to her husband, "On the way to Darbhanga, I vowed to hold a feast of fifty measures of grain if I returned safely. A vow must not go unpaid. Tomorrow, we must fulfil it."

Sone Lal too was happy. "We have rice and lentils at home, and some money left over. But not tomorrow. Curd must be set, and vegetables, salt, and oil must be bought in the market. In four or five days, we shall hold the feast. And my sister is still here with us."

At the word sister, she herself spoke. "Brother, you were in such dire straits that I left everything to come. But you forget that I, too, have duties. Tomorrow I must return."

Sone Lal's heart overflowed. As water set on the fire heats from below until it bubbles upward, so his joy rose within him. From the station, he said, "You two sit here. I will go and buy what we need."

Sugiya and his sister sat beneath a mango tree by the roadside, while he went toward the row of shops: one selling fish, another poultry and eggs, one milk, one tea, one betel, and six or seven vegetable stalls. He thought, Today I must buy all kinds of vegetables, milk, and pigeon-pea dal. For six months, we have neither eaten our fill nor known peace of mind. Tonight, let us eat well and invite both brothers—Fuddia included—who have served us like a servant.

At a stall, he bought a kilo of pigeon-pea dal and half a kilo of sugar. Then from the greengrocers, he picked up seven or eight kinds of vegetables: round brinjals, river-bank gourds, even Hyderabad yams. He also took two kilos of fresh milk. Tying everything in his clothes, he returned to his wife and sister.

Seeing the bundle, his sister asked, “Brother, what all have you bought?” She thought perhaps puffed rice and fried snacks for the children, for the bundle was large.

Smiling, Sone Lal said, “Sister, I have bought provisions for a good meal. Tonight, we shall all eat together. Poor Fuddia, who has run about like a servant, shall also dine with us. Vegetables, milk,

dal, everything is ready. With the three of you to cook, the meal will be quickly prepared. For once, let me host you. Sister, I have received more happiness from you than from any brother. I shall never forget your kindness. May God grant everyone such a sister.”

Hearing this, her heart filled with emotion. She said, “Brother, I only did my duty. It was no favour. If at such a time I had not stood by you, what kind of sister would I be?”

Listening to her, Sugiya looked at her husband and said, “Your sister speaks of leaving tomorrow morning. I don’t have even a single new sari in the house to give her. How can I let her go empty-handed?”

Smiling, the sister replied, “Sister-in-law, I’ve already kept aside four saris for my children’s weddings. What need do I have for new ones now? You know he borrowed money even to meet these expenses. How could I add to his burden? If you offer, I will not take it.”

As soon as they reached home, joy poured forth from family to village. Sugiya’s three children clung to her neck, and she kissed them one after another, pressing them close. Just as trees and

plants, stiff with winter frost, revive and take on a new form when touched by spring's warmth, so it happened here. The six months of destruction, sorrow, and despair seemed to fall away from Sone Lal.

Neighbours came again and again to see Sugiya, to hear stories of the treatment at Darbhanga. Soon, the courtyard was filled with children and relatives, and just as quickly, it emptied again. The three of them set about preparing the kitchen.

For many days, Sone Lal had not bathed to his heart's content, so with a bar of soap in hand, he went to bathe.

The meal was prepared, and everyone ate to their satisfaction. After eating, sleepiness came over them all, and one by one they lay down and drifted into rest.

The news of Sone Lal taking his wife to Laheriasarai began to circulate through the village. Some praised his devotion, while others discussed the cost of the treatment.

Early in the morning, after giving the children a holiday, Hiranand came by. Seeing him, Ramakant asked, "Why did you close the school so early,

Master Sahib?" Ramakant knew somewhat of Sone Lal's situation, but he had not considered it with the same seriousness that weighed on Hiranand's mind.

Hiranand replied, "The children had no heart for study, so I gave them leave."

"Why had they no heart for study?" Ramakant asked.

Troubled, Hiranand said- "First, the poor fellow Sone Lal was struck by the flood, and then his wife was gripped by such severe illness that no strength was left in him. The thought of it kept turning in my mind. Teaching felt heavy, as if not a drop of joy remained in it."

Hearing this, Ramakant's heart too began to ache. What had weighed on Hiranand now weighed on him as well. It was like stumbling against a stone and falling face down, the blow striking not only the knees but the chest. A wound opened within his heart, though he bore it silently. He thought, how sad that in a village with four doctors, people must still cry out in pain for want of treatment. Is it right that such doctors are worshipped like gods?

He continued reflecting: Those who have no love

for their village, their kin, or society, and care only for their own comforts, why did their mothers bless them with the hope of long life on the sixth day after birth?

Again, another troubling thought surfaced: Just as cattle are suddenly struck by a deadly disease, so too can men be seized by sudden illness. Suppose his own mother or Mahendra's mother were stricken, what would these doctors do then? Would they respond with the same neglect?

Ramakant's mind grew clouded and restless, as if his very breath were being stolen away.

Three days later, Sone Lal arranged for the vowed feast. With an open heart, he prepared everything: tulsi-flower-washed rice, pigeon-pea dal, eleven varieties of vegetables, and curd sweetened with sugar.

In the village, there were two sects of sadhus. One was led by Mahant Ramapati Das, who had built a Ram-Janaki temple and performed daily worship. The other was led by Ganga Das, who did not have a temple of his own but had followers both in this village and in others nearby. Sone Lal's heart held no trace of deceit or favouritism, so he gave twenty-five measures of

grain to Ramapati Das and twenty-five to Ganga Das. After handing over the grain, he began to clean and polish the courtyard and doorway. The cooking vessels were washed and set ready. Banana leaves for dining were cut and cleaned until they gleamed.

Though both sects lived in the same village, a vast distance separated them. The first sect was supported mainly by the higher castes, while the second was embraced more by the lower castes, with little regard for ideas of untouchability. The feast was to be held during the day.

The sadhus of the second sect arrived early, washed their feet, and began singing hymns. At the sound, neighbours and children gathered, filling the courtyard until the threshing ground was crowded.

When three hymns had been sung, Ramapati Das arrived with his disciples. Seeing the other sect already gathered, jealousy stirred in his heart. Still, he suppressed his anger and came to sit at Sone Lal's doorway.

Seated there, he said to Sone Lal- "Our assembly should be held apart."

Bowing respectfully, Sone Lal gestured to the

courtyard and replied, "Please remain here at the doorway."

Hearing this, Ramapati Das thought to himself: If I demand a separate assembly space now, in the midst of the feast, it will not be possible. And if I quarrel, who would I quarrel with? The poor householder? After all, they received grain just as we did. They are no different. If I argue with the other sadhus, it will become a clash between religious sects. But this is a feast, not a stage for sectarian debate. To assert superiority now would be sheer cowardice.

Mahant Ramapati Das found himself in a strange predicament. He stood silent and motionless between the doorway and the threshing ground, like a post fixed in the earth, unable to move forward or back. He thought, If I ask the disciples who have come with me and they answer against my wishes, what then? Never before have I consulted them in this way, and it would not be proper to begin now. It would break the distinction between guru and disciple.

His mind began to falter, and sweat glistened upon his brow. Just then, the man carrying the harmonium on his shoulder suddenly stepped

forward and placed it on the bench in the porch. Seeing him, the drummer set down his drum, and one after another, all began laying aside their vessels and cups. For how could they sit without the ritual washing of feet? And unless the guru himself sat, how could the disciples sit?

When he saw everyone putting down their instruments, Ramapati Das felt a glow within. With a troubled mind, he said, "If everyone wishes it, then why not sit at the doorway? The householder is showing us respect."

On one side, his heart still burned. On the other hand, he felt pleased that the welcome, the washing of feet, and the honour were being shown to him above all. At last, they all had their feet washed and sat down.

Sugiya flitted about the courtyard like a bird. At times, she went to check the curd in the house, lest a cat touch it, then back to guard the vessels in the porch from crows or children. She checked the pots, pans, and buckets set out in the courtyard, then hurried to the rear to scatter straw for the hearth, all the while keeping an anxious eye on the crowded doorway and threshing ground, fearing a quarrel might break out at any

moment. Yet within her, a new gladness was rising.

Meanwhile, sweat trickled from Sone Lal's temples down his neck, soaking his dhoti.

The listeners filled the space, children and adults, men and women alike. Among them was Motia's mother, fifty years of age, who spoke up when the singing ceased, addressing Buchai Das- "O Buchai Das, will it not be a sin if we begin the feast without hymns?"

At her sharp words, Buchai Das replied- "It is long since we smoked. Let us first take a little hemp, then we shall sing and dance and speak the words of Kabir. Just give us a moment more. Raghudas, quick, light the fire."

Without music, Buchai Das began to hum and chant- "Stay away, saints, the cat has broken the pot..."

The play of words and the sparkle on his lips made the children and villagers burst into laughter, like puffed rice spilling from a broken string bag.

Then the singing began in earnest in both the courtyard and the threshing ground. In the second sect's assembly, drums, cymbals, and khanjari clashed together. In the first sect's circle,

pakhawaj, jhalar, harmonium, and sitar joined in one rhythm, one melody, and one voice- "O Keshav, how can I speak of the unspeakable..."

But the voices of the second sect rose so loudly that the first could scarcely be heard. Ramapati Das went outside, pacing and listening, his heart smouldering. The songs from the porch never carried beyond the walls, while those from the threshing ground spread far and wide. Anger boiled in him, and he muttered under his breath. At last, he shouted to Sone Lal- "What kind of noise have you allowed here?"

Trembling, with folded hands, Sone Lal answered- "Master, I am ignorant. I did not know such a thing would happen. What has happened, has happened. Please do not be angry. If I have erred, forgive me. You are like the ocean, able to contain both good and bad. The rice for cooking has not yet been put on the fire. Please give your order." Ramapati Das flared. "All my sadhus shall cook and serve separately. Therefore, give us half of the utensils, rice, lentils, and vegetables."

"Very well," said Sone Lal, and he divided everything into two equal parts. Four men set to each cooking fire, and two hearths were lit. Sone

Lal brought the vessels, rice, and lentils, placing them by both hearths in turn.

The singing in the porch fell silent, but in the threshing ground it continued. Buchai Das led the group, sitting in a circle with space left in the middle. There he stood, singing lines of hymns, dancing, and explaining their meaning between verses.

Ramapati Das beckoned to Sone Lal and said with a frown, "There is too much disturbance. Stop the singing."

Obediently, Sone Lal went to Buchai Das and said, "Master, please stop. The Mahant is troubled."

But on hearing this, all-young and old-declared with one voice- "We will not begin the feast without hymns!"

Sone Lal was astonished. His whole body trembled like a banana leaf in the wind. Yet what could he do? None had come without disciples. Each guru had his following, and each considered himself honoured.

Standing by the mat spread in the courtyard, Sugiya thought anxiously: If the sadhus quarrel among themselves and leave without eating, then my vow will remain unfulfilled. And if the vow is

not completed, sorrow may return. Should sorrow fall upon us once more, who knows whether we will live or die. O Lord, turn the minds of these sadhus, let them remain steady! With a folded heart, she repeated the name of God.

By two o'clock, the food of the Nirgun sect was ready. As soon as it was done, Ganga Das said to Sone Lal, "The food is prepared. Now arrange the dining place."

Hearing his words, Sone Lal's heart trembled even more. How was this to be managed? On one side, the sadhus had insisted on cooking their own food, and now the meal was ready. From the moment they had entered the house, there had been nothing but tension. Somehow matters had passed without a quarrel until now, but what if, at this final moment, conflict flared again?

With a bundle of straw in hand, he went to the courtyard. Sitting down, he pretended to be busy himself, waiting for the moment to pass. Before long, he heard that the other side had also finished cooking. Carrying the straw, Sone Lal returned to the threshing ground. There he sprinkled water, spread the straw, and laid out the seating mats.

One by one, the sadhus rose and sat in neat rows. Leaves were placed before them, and as soon as food was served, Ramapati Das began striding up and down his line, leading a chorus of jai jai cries. From the other side, the sound of hymns began to rise.

All the sadhus ate, and when they rose, the leaves of the first sect were smeared and scattered like those of a wedding feast. But on the second sect's side, not a grain or morsel had been touched. As the sadhus departed, crows and dogs came rushing in from all sides to devour the leftovers.

The Nirgun sect left with drums and cymbals playing, while Ramapati Das remained behind, determined to claim his due. Sone Lal, naïve and bewildered, stood with a tray of betel and areca in his hands.

Ramapati Das called out, "Now that we are leaving, give us the customary dakshina."

"What kind of dakshina?" asked Sone Lal, confused.

With authority, Ramapati Das replied- "One hundred and one coins for the temple, one hundred for me, one hundred and one for each

sadhu, and eighty-one for those who cooked the food.”

The offerings for the cooks and for Mahant Sone Lal were understandable to some extent, but meanwhile, Ganga Das and Buchai Das had been watching everything unfold. With a glance, Buchai whispered- “A right is a right. Whatever dakshina Ramapati Das receives, not a coin less, we will accept.”

Adding up the amounts, Sone Lal went to the courtyard, brought the money, and placed it in Ramapati Das’s hand. Counting it carefully, the Mahant blessed him and departed. Sone Lal accompanied him a short distance before returning to where Ganga Das stood. Bowing low, he asked- “Master, what is your dakshina?”

Seeing the anguish in his heart, Ganga Das was moved. His compassion melted slowly, like ice turning to water. For a moment, he was speechless. At last, looking toward Buchai Das, he said, “You too are our elder. How can I answer without consulting you? Two matters lie before us. First, the rights of the two sects. If we accept less, it will seem as though our sect has been diminished. Second, Sone Lal held this feast to

fulfil a vow. He is already burdened by sickness and hardship. To ask more of him now feels unjust.”

Hearing this, the other sadhus of the Nirgun sect sat in silence, each absorbed in thought. Yet every mind followed a different path. For the detached ascetic, one way; for the worldly-minded, another. Even when two men are equally learned, their conclusions may diverge. The same applies to spiritual versus material thinkers. In a society divided by sects, impartial judgment is rare, for sects are not merely doctrines but ways of life, bound to family and community. Deep reflection is further hindered by the difference between an empty stomach and a full one. The body's senses weigh heavily on the mind, and those senses are driven by energy, which is sustained by food.

Yet food is not the only nourishment. Other elements sustain the spirit, separate from the sustenance of the body.

Finally, Buchai Das stepped in to mediate. “Master, we too are soldiers of our sect. To retreat now would be treachery. The defence of our holy faith rests with us. Therefore, give us the same amount that was given to Ramapati Das. For six

months, we have heard of Sone Lal's sufferings. Let us share in his sorrow, and afterwards, we shall return the money to him."

And so, it was done. With smiles and songs, the feast came to an end, and the sadhus departed with cries of jai jai.

4.

When the train reached Madras station, Ramakant let out a deep sigh of relief. After sitting for two nights and three days, the bodies of all three—Ramakant, Shyama, and Jugesar—had grown stiff and weary. As the train came to a halt, Ramakant leaned forward to look at the platform. On the other lines, too, trains stood waiting. It was

nothing like their home station, where trains came only occasionally, with no need for bridges or overpasses, and where people simply walked whichever way they pleased. The trains there were small, and the lines were short.

Here, however, even while still in the train, Ramakant didn't feel entirely out of place; it was, after all, a Bihar train filled with Bihari passengers.

As the passengers began to disembark, the three companions stepped down with their bundles. They moved forward and began to climb the overbridge. The stairs were crowded with people, but not with the frantic pushing and shoving they were used to at their local station. Noticing this, Ramakant told Shyama and Jugesar to be cautious. From the bridge, they could see trains on both sides, and as they climbed higher, new sights opened up before them.

On the steps, both Ramakant and Shyama felt the strain in their legs. Reaching the top, Ramakant said to Jugesar- "Juge, put the bundle down for a while and roll some tobacco. I'll rest a bit too."

Jugesar placed his bundle on the ground and

began to prepare the tobacco. By now, all the familiar passengers from their train had vanished, replaced by new faces. Not just the people, but their clothes, their manner of speaking, everything felt unfamiliar.

After chewing tobacco, they picked up their bundles and looked around for someone to ask. But they couldn't understand anyone's speech. Ramakant watched the people, and the people watched them, each group regarding the other with curiosity. Seeing their dhotis, the locals stared. Ramakant too observed the men and women of the place, noted their clothing, and quietly smiled. The experienced could tell at once that they were Biharis. Others, unsure, simply stood staring, trying to figure them out.

A group of women passed by, talking as they went, each with a key tucked into her waist, just like the men. Seeing this, Shyama whispered to Ramakant with a smile- "Look, even the women here tuck their keys at their waist like men."

Ramakant laughed but said nothing. He kept lifting his eyes, marvelling silently: What a city the government has built. So neat and polished. Places to sit, places to lie down. Nothing like our

stations, where filth reaches the knees, where banana peels, betel stains, peanut shells, scraps of paper, and torn tobacco wrappers lie scattered everywhere. Not only that, crowds of beggars, pickpockets, and cheats swarm from station to bus stand. But here, none of it is seen. Not a single rogue in sight.

Their bodies still ached from the jolting of the train. Jugesar continued preparing tobacco, while Ramakant thought, We've fallen into a great trial. What will happen? Who knows? For a long while, they lingered, watching the ebb and flow of the crowd. At last, the press of passengers from their train began to thin, and the place grew calmer.

Just then, a man rode up on a motorbike and stopped before them. Ramakant looked at him, and the man looked back. In that exchange of glances, it was as though recognition had passed between them.

Ramakant stood, took a slip of paper from his pocket, and showed it to the man. The man read it, then gestured to a tempo driver. At the man's instruction, the driver came over, nodded, and agreed to take them to their destination.

The three companions sat in the tempo and set

off. The driver spoke neither Hindi nor Maithili, so there was no conversation along the way. As soon as they left the station yard, Ramakant kept lifting his eyes to take in the market and the people. The difference wasn't in the numbers or the bustle, but in the people themselves, and their language. Inwardly, Ramakant began to compare this place with his own. Back home, fair and dark complexions were more or less balanced, but here, darker skin was more common. The people's speech had a completely different tone, like the buzzing of bees. Yet unlike back home, there was nothing deceitful or sly in their manner.

As they passed through the marketplace, Ramakant noticed little distinction between rich and poor, yet the market itself appeared far cleaner, brighter, and more orderly than those in his own area. There wasn't a trace of filth anywhere.

From the main road, a lane turned eastward. Along that lane stood both Dr Mahendra's house and his clinic. The hospital where he worked was on the main road itself. At the corner of the lane, the tempo driver stopped, let the three passengers down, collected his fare, and drove off.

On both sides of the street stood large houses. At the corner, the three set down their bundles and sat. Their bodies, sore from the jolting of the train, ached so much that none of them could remain standing. To Ramakant, it felt like the way clouds gather on a dark, moonless night and spread only more darkness. An unfamiliar place, a language they could not understand, today he realised how much distance language can create between human beings.

Shyama thought to herself, O God, what sort of place is this, where we are lost even while surrounded by people? The three of them sank into a sea of despair. Ramakant's mind churned: What shall we do now? Never in my life have I faced such a trial. All my wit and sense have deserted me.

Ramakant said to Jugesar, "Jugesar, my mind feels clouded. Roll some tobacco."

Jugesar began preparing it. All three sat in silence, eyes lowered.

Just then, Ramakant's elder son, Dr Mahendra, was returning home in his Fiat car from the hospital. From the road, he saw the three figures sitting at the corner. At first, he was uncertain,

but then he recognised their familiar faces. Turning his car from the main road, he steered into his own lane and stopped. Getting down, he approached and bent to touch his father's feet. Then he touched his mother's feet. Taking the bundle from his father's hand, he placed it in the car. The three rose and moved toward the vehicle. Jugesar also placed his bundle inside. All four then seated themselves, and the car moved ahead.

Mahendra was at the wheel. Seeing him drive, his mother asked, "Child, do you drive the car yourself?"

"Yes."

"There is no driver?"

At this, Mahendra smiled and replied, "When I'm in the car, what other work do I have that I should keep a driver? It would only add to the expenses."

When the car reached their house, Mahendra sounded the horn. At the sound, a servant came out and opened the gate. Mahendra drove inside and parked. Stepping down, he opened all three doors for his family.

As they alighted, Ramakant looked up at the house. A three-storied mansion stood before them, with a flowering garden in front. Ramakant

thought, we have wealth in the village, but no house like this. Not even in our wider neighbourhood has anyone such a dwelling. Could Mahendra have built this from his own earnings? Or taken a bank loan? Or is it rented? He did say he bought land and built it. But such a house must have cost at least fifty lakhs. How could he earn so much in so short a time?

Led by Mahendra, they entered. Every room was tiled. On their first day there, their feet slipped on the polished surfaces.

Dr Mahendra took them up to the top floor, assigning one room to Ramakant and Jugesar, and another to his mother. Without even washing his hands or feet, Ramakant threw himself onto the bed. The fan whirled above. Two beds were placed in the room, along with tables, a large mirror, pictures of deities on the walls, and two wooden wardrobes. The room was painted blue. On each bed lay thick mattresses with fine coverings, and cushions were piled at the head. By the door, next to the frame, a washbasin had been installed. From where he lay, Ramakant let his eyes wander over everything.

Just then, a servant arrived with refreshments

and water. Rising from the bed, Ramakant sat up and began to eat. After a few morsels, he drank some water and sipped his tea. Jugesar too ate and drank, while Mahendra stood nearby with a cup in his hand, sipping as he stood.

Between sips, Ramakant asked- "Son, is this house your own?"

"Yes."

"How much did it cost to build?"

At the mention of cost, Mahendra smiled and replied, "Father, I've written down all the expenses in my diary, so without checking, I can't say exactly. But I remember that I bought the land for three lakhs. Once the land was ours, the four of us worked and saved, and we built the house. How much was spent on construction? Who can say? But I've noted the major expenses in the diary. Without it, I can't give you a precise account."

Placing his cup on the table, Ramakant said, "It's been four days since I've bathed. My body feels no freshness at all. First, I'll bathe, then eat, and afterwards sleep to my heart's content."

"Excellent," Mahendra replied. He stepped out of the room and told a servant, "Call all three

brothers and tell them that Mother and Father have arrived."

Then he returned to his father and said, "Come, I will show you the bathhouse."

Mahendra led the way, with Ramakant and Jugesar following. Opening the door to the bathing room, Mahendra said, "There are two adjoining rooms. You can bathe together."

He lit the lamps in both rooms and left.

The two looked around the bathhouse in wonder: a shower with a tank, a soap stand, a rack for clothes, everything neatly arranged.

Ramakant said to Jugesar, "Juge, we drank tea but haven't chewed tobacco yet. My mind longs for it. Go and bring some first."

Jugesar stepped out, returned to the room, and began preparing tobacco on the palm of his hand. He handed some to Ramakant and took some himself. Spitting out the juice, Ramakant said, "Juge, at home I'm counted among the wealthy, yet never in my life have I seen a lavatory or a bathhouse like this. All my life, I've gone to the open field for nature's call and bathed in the pond."

"Kaka, we live in the village. This is how life is in

towns and cities. People here can't live like villagers, even if they want to. The population is large, the space is small, so they have to build such arrangements. But just as we pour water from a lota to bathe, here too, water is poured over the body. Still, the satisfaction of immersing oneself in a pond can't be found here."

"Would those who live this kind of life be able to survive in the village, Juge?"

"How could they?"

"My son often tells me that although all human bodies look alike, the way of living creates two different kinds of men."

"Kaka, I don't quite understand."

"Look, a man who works hard every day, if he suddenly stops, his body aches and even food loses its taste. Likewise, a man who does light work daily, if he is forced into hard labour, his body too will ache, and food will lose its taste. In the same way, when villagers move to towns and their lives change, they no longer wish to return to the village."

"Kaka, village folk are poor. From food and clothing to shelter, medicine, and education, nothing is adequate. That's why they don't want

to stay in the village.”

Having shown his father the bathhouse, Mahendra returned to his room and telephoned his wife, his brothers and sisters-in-law, Dr Ravindra, Dr Jamuna, and Dr Sujata, to inform them that his parents and Jugesar had arrived from the village. After informing them, Mahendra went to the kitchen, thinking to himself, Will the food here please them? Better to prepare village-style dishes. Then again, he thought, but the cook here is local. How will he know the village recipes? If not, I'll have to cook myself. Rice, lentils, and spiced vegetables could be managed by the cook, but leafy greens had to be prepared carefully. Without them, Father would feel slighted. Milk and curd were also essential, but curd was not available at home. The nearby shops sold it, though, so he decided Ravindra could buy some from the Darbhanga Hotel. He called Ravindra on his mobile and gave instructions. Ravindra, returning from the hospital, went straight to buy curd.

Meanwhile, Mahendra himself set about frying bitter gourd leaves, parwal, ridge gourd, brinjal, and potatoes. With the gas stove, everything was

done quickly.

When Ramakant went to use the lavatory, his first instinct was to look for earth to rub his hands with. But no trace of earth was to be found. From bathing to washing hands, everything was done with soap. Ramakant turned to Jugesar and asked, "Jugesar, without earth, how shall we cleanse our hands?"

Hearing Ramakant's words, Jugesar smiled and said, "Kaka, in every land one must live as the land demands. In the village, we are always among earth and soil, but here, even to touch earth is difficult. You can see, the soil lies deep beneath. There are no mud houses, no earthen paths. Soap too has a fragrance. What harm is there in washing hands with soap?"

Ramakant replied, "What you say is true, but there is a difference between washing the hands and satisfying the mind. If the mind does not accept it, then what kind of cleansing is it?"

"Kaka, I agree. But when it comes to removing dirt, soap cleans even better. The mind follows reason, and reason will teach the mind to accept it."

"You are no longer a child who doesn't

understand. Tell me this: why does a man say after eating that his stomach is full, and yet also say his heart is not satisfied?"

"We live in Mithila, Kaka. The soil of Mithila is sacred. But this is Madras, so it is right to do as people here do."

"Very well."

With that, the two set about their routines.

While Ramakant and Jugesar remained in the bathhouse, Ravindra, Jamuna, and Sujata each arrived in their own cars. Each brought their own kind of eagerness. Some longed to see their father Ramakant, others their father-in-law. Entering the rooms, they learned that the elders were bathing. Hearing this, each went to their respective rooms to change.

Ravindra removed his trousers and shirt and put on a lungi, then went straight to his mother's room. As soon as he entered, he bent to touch her feet.

Shyama did not recognise him at first, but unknowingly, she gave her blessing. Ravindra smiled quietly, while his mother, uncertain, stared at his face as though he were a stranger. In that moment, Jamuna and Sujata also entered and

bent to touch their mother-in-law's feet. She blessed them both. Ravindra understood that she had not recognised him.

Smiling, he said, "Mother, it is I, Ravindra."

At the sound of his name, Shyama was startled. The word escaped her lips- "Ravindra!"

For four years, Ravindra had not returned to the village. Before, his body had been thin and fragile like a twig. Now, he had grown strong, carefree, and robust. The change in his physique had transformed his appearance. As her only son, the flood of a mother's love surged in her heart. Words failed her. Only her eyes spoke, and even they overflowed with tears.

As she wiped her eyes with the edge of her sari, memories stirred. She remembered how little Ravindra had once hidden in that very fold of cloth. Her heart glittered with dreams of a happy life, like the stars that sparkle in the evening sky. With a gesture, she told her daughters-in-law to sit beside her. They sat on either side of her, and placing her hands on their shoulders, Shyama drifted into a world where there was no sorrow, only joy.

But joy exists in two worlds. One belonged to

Shyama; the other to Ravindra. Shyama's world was moving toward renunciation, compassion, and detachment. Ravindra's life, and that of his brothers, was advancing toward wealth and physical comfort.

Ramakant and Jugesar returned from their bath. The fatigue of travel left them, replaced by freshness and vigour. And with that vigour came hunger.

Just then, Ravindra came from his room into his father's, and Mahendra arrived as well, urging everyone to come for the meal.

Meanwhile, beside their mother-in-law, the two daughters-in-law sat quietly, gathering the threads of kinship, family, and human connection. The mother-in-law, with her fifty-five years of village life, and the daughters-in-law, shaped by city life, each wandered along her own path of thought. Yet, though their paths differed, shared human feeling and the simple rituals of daily life brought them together.

A life that has passed becomes memory and history. The life to come is shaped in the present. On one side stood fifty-five years of lived experience; on the other, modern education and

refinement. Though their thoughts diverged, they belonged to one family, and that sense of belonging bound them together.

Shyama's mind questioned itself: When I live thousands of miles away from my sons and daughters-in-law, how much happiness do they truly find?

In society, I see families where generations—from the oldest of eighty to the youngest infant—live together, sharing life in laughter and unity. There may be little food or wealth, but all kinds of nourishment are spread upon the earth. Some we call delicacies; some we despise. Yet both sustain life.

Inequality exists, yes. One man may eat fine dishes from a plate that another man's dog might lick, while elsewhere a man goes to bed hungry. Still, the earth offers countless forms of nourishment. People neither recognise them nor strive to claim them.

In Jamuna and Sujata's minds arose a different concern: to carry the family forward, children were necessary. Servants and nurses may care for infants, but true nurture lies in a mother's own milk. When the child grows, he is sent to a

residential school to learn. After education comes the life of earning. This, too, is part of the cycle of existence.

Just as Jamuna and Sujata reflected on these matters, Shyama's thoughts turned inward as well, filled with images of her ancestral family garden. In that moment, she could see neither the path ahead nor the one behind. Was the future to be difficult, dense, emotionally complex, or devoid of feeling altogether?

Between human beings, there must be real bonds, not optional, but necessary and inevitable. Every person born on this earth has the same right to live as any other. Without such understanding, what power can prevent strife and bloodshed? Yet the question remains complicated. Life today has become so uneven that even between two brothers, it is hard to maintain equality, let alone among all of humanity.

The dining hall was a spacious and elegant room. Its walls were painted with colourful flowers. A soft pink hue glowed throughout, and the air-conditioning kept the space cool. At the centre stood a large, round dining table surrounded by more than fifteen chairs. Built into the walls were

sound boxes, from which soft melodies floated through the air.

Mahendra had adopted the modern practice of dining together. Yet, with the arrival of his parents, he found himself in a dilemma. Inwardly, he thought: We brothers and our wives eat at the same table, but Mother will not sit opposite Father. She will eat with us brothers, but not with her daughters-in-law. If I insist, it might create tension. And if something goes wrong, it will be awkward indeed. What should I do?

After thinking it over, he decided suddenly: Better to ask Mother herself.

Approaching her, he asked- "Mother, we all eat together at one table, but...?"

Understanding his concern, Shyama replied, "Son, I am now fifty or sixty years old. How can I break the customs I've held half-sacred all my life? How many more years do I have left? Why should I abandon the ways passed down from our ancestors?

"This isn't only about our family, it's the same throughout society. As long as I am here, perhaps this can be managed. But once we return to the village, things will go back to how they were. So,

it's not right to make changes now. Life should follow the customs of society, for that brings stability and order. Even if others who live differently see us as backwards."

Hearing her words, Mahendra decided it would be better to arrange two sittings: in the first, he, Jugesar, and Father would eat; in the second, everyone else.

After the meal, Ramakant soon grew drowsy, and Jugesar did too. After washing their hands and faces, the two lay down to sleep.

Three nights without rest, combined with the heaviness of the meal, overcame them.

At four o'clock, Ramakant awoke. Still half-asleep, his eyes fell on the wall clock; it was four. The hour for drinking bhang had arrived. Ramakant had long held this habit, and before coming to Madras, he had brought a bundle of leaves with him. Shyama, too, understood that the time for his bhang had come.

The ingredients were ready: bhang leaves, pepper, fennel, and anise. Only the grinding remained. Rising from his bed, he opened the bundle and took them out.

At that very moment, Sujata entered, carrying a

large bottle of brandy and a glass. She stood before her mother-in-law. During the meal, Shyama had mentioned to her daughters-in-law that the old man always drank bhang at four in the afternoon. Sujata knew nothing of bhang, but she was familiar with brandy. She, Shyama, and Ramakant now stood, each hesitating in their own way.

Ramakant roused Jugesar, who washed his face and went to the tank. Hearing the sounds, Shyama understood what was happening. Sujata stood ready with the bottle. Yet within her, the culture of Mithila stirred uneasily. She didn't know the practical ways of this place and moved like an animal wandering through an unfamiliar jungle. Thoughts arose: Here, is this how daughters-in-law behave with their fathers-in-law? In Mithila, too, is it the same, or different? In the educated world, old customs are transformed into new forms, but...

With the bottle and glass in her hands, Sujata wandered through that world of thought.

The hour for Ramakant's bhang had arrived, and a light sweetness entered his mood. Just then, Shyama approached and said, "The bhang is not

yet ground. But our daughter-in-law is standing with a bottle in her hand. What does she mean by that?"

At first, when Ramakant heard that the bhang had not been ground, his mind grew irritated. But when he heard mention of the bottle, he wavered, became restless, and then smiled. He said, "What difference is there between a daughter and a daughter-in-law? A daughter-in-law is like one's own daughter. And the younger one, she is like a daughter born of one's own flesh. In this world, no relationship is inferior, so long as it remains within its bounds. But when those limits are crossed, modesty and restraint become necessary. Traditions stand before us like walls, yet even old customs have not entirely died. To hold on to good conduct in life cannot be called backwards."

Sujata listened to his words. Inwardly, she felt joy that her father-in-law was so wise. Yet she knew it would not be right to step forward without her mother-in-law's consent. So, with the bottle and glass in hand, she stood hesitating at the threshold. Seeing her there, Shyama encouraged her gently- "Go, daughter. God has given you a father-in-law as gentle as Lord Shiva himself. He

will treat you not as a daughter-in-law, but as a daughter.”

Holding the bottle in her left hand and the glass in her right, Sujata stepped forward and opened the cork. At once, the room filled with a strong fragrance, and the very air seemed intoxicated. After drinking one glass, Ramakant turned to Jugesar and said, “Jugesar, you too have a glass.” “Kaka, how can I drink sitting beside you?”

“Jugesar, you’re no longer a child, and I am not greater than you. We are all human beings, and human beings live best together.”

At this, Sujata offered a glass to Jugesar. In one long draught, he emptied it. Warmth tickled his belly. As another glass went down, Ramakant turned to Sujata and said, “Daughter, bring something salty too.”

Hearing this, Sujata placed the bottle on the table, fetched two small plates from the kitchen, and returned with spicy Madras bhujiya. One plate she set before Ramakant, the other before Jugesar. After a few mouthfuls, Ramakant drank two more glasses. He was used to bhang, which took time to affect the senses, but brandy rose to the head at once. Jugesar, though he had only

two glasses, already felt his senses swim. The bottle was soon empty.

Ramakant belched and said, "Daughter, bring me a betel leaf with cardamom."

Shyama had already told her daughters-in-law about his habits, so Sujata knew what to do. She returned with two betel quids, a small tin of strong tobacco, cardamom, and thin slices of roasted areca nut, and placed them before her father-in-law.

In the colour of liquor, Ramakant was flushed, and so was Jugesar. Their words grew loose and stumbling. Taking the betel into his mouth, Ramakant asked Sujata, "Daughter, how did you come to study medicine?"

At her father-in-law's question, Sujata sat on a nearby chair without hesitation and began to speak.

"Babuji, my father and mother earned their living by washing clothes in our neighbourhood. That was their daily work. Somehow, we managed to survive. We had only one small house. We bathed and fetched water from other people's wells. My father drank palm wine. One evening, he came home heavily intoxicated. On the road, there was

a pit. He fell into it.

“Just then, a truck, driving without headlights, passed by. It ran over him. His whole body—bones and all—was crushed. At first, we didn’t know. The next morning, there was a commotion. I, my mother and my brother went to see. The body was beyond recognition. Only from his clothes and slippers did our hearts cry out, and we knew it was him. We brought him home and cremated him.”

At this point, Jugesar exclaimed- “Oh God!”

At his exclamation, tears welled up in Sujata’s eyes.

Ramakant had been listening with his eyes closed. At Jugesar’s words, he opened them. His heart softened. The story of Sujata’s father drinking palm wine stirred a thought within him: I too drink intoxicants, yet how vast is the difference between life here and life in the village. Beyond that lies the question of livelihood. Our rural life is peaceful. Poverty exists, but just as it does here. In cities, a few industries and traders prosper, and the poor envy them, which makes their lives restless. To quiet that unrest, people turn to spoiled forms of drink, which destroy the very

path of their lives.

With these thoughts, Ramakant rose from his bed and stepped outside to spit out his betel. He spat into the drain, rinsed his mouth at the tank, and returned to the room.

He said to Sujata, "Daughter, will you bring me tea?"

Wiping her eyes with the edge of her sari, Sujata went to the kitchen. In Ramakant's heart, a special fondness for her had begun to grow. As Hanuman carried Sita and Ram in his heart, so too did Sujata carve out a sacred space in his own. The question he had asked her—about her past—was one no one had ever asked before. It painted a brighter picture of him in her heart, even as his own heart softened. Certainly, Sujata had found a place within him.

Bringing two cups of tea, she handed one to Ramakant and the other to Jugesar. Holding the cup in his hand, Ramakant seemed to forget himself. He gazed into Sujata's eyes and asked gently, "Do you still remember that time of your life, or have you forgotten?"

Her eyes still wet, Sujata wiped them and replied—"Babuji, how can I forget? That event is a crucial

chapter in the history of my life.”

Nodding, Ramakant asked- “And what happened after that?”

Sujata sank again into her memories and began to speak.

“There are only two of us, my brother and me. At that time, I was eleven and he was eight. We both went to school, which was in our neighbourhood. My brother was too young to work, but I helped my mother wash clothes, spread them to dry, iron them, carry bundles back and forth, and collect money.

“Whatever little we earned, we lived upon. We went everywhere, from the homes of learned families to shopkeepers and labourers. In the homes of the educated, I begged for their worn-out books so that I could study.

“For food, we managed with what we earned. In this way, I passed my matriculation with first division. When the results were announced, the entire neighbourhood praised me. My spirit rose, and I resolved to pursue a B.Sc. At that time, I dreamed of becoming a doctor, though I hardly knew how. With what little sense and resources I had, I thought accordingly.”

College admissions had begun. That morning, my mother and I arrived early with a bundle of clothes for Mahendra Bhaiya. He lived in the hospital quarters and was shaving on the verandah. My mother placed the bundle down and called out to Jamuna Didi- "Mistress, here are your clothes." My brother and I stood nearby. As soon as Didi came out, her eyes fell on me. She turned to my mother and said, "Your daughter has passed. Give her sweets!"

At this, Mahendra Bhaiya lifted his face from the shaving mirror. For a moment, he looked at me silently, then returned to his razor. After finishing, he put his things away and called out to us. I had no particular thoughts in my mind; we used to come and go every few days.

Bhaiya asked Didi to make tea. She prepared five cups: two for themselves and three for us. That day, for the first time, I drank tea in his quarters. He asked my name, and I told him. He asked about my exam results, and I answered. Then he turned to my mother and said, "Since the school and college are nearby, there's no need for her to go out of town. She can study here. From now on, all her expenses—fees, books, and supplies for both

children—I will bear.”

Hearing this, my heart leapt with joy. I sat silently, gazing at him. From that day until I became a doctor, he bore every expense himself.

Listening, Ramakant thought: If even a little help is given to the poor, their lives can be uplifted. My father helped. My son, too, has helped. But I, have I done nothing? Or have I simply forgotten? He had done much for others and would do more, yet in that moment, it all seemed forgotten.

Night fell. It was eight o'clock. Suddenly, three cars arrived. Mahendra stepped out, changed his clothes, and went straight to his father. Seeing him, Ramakant said, “Son, I will not stay here long. I’m a man who lives among ten people. Alone, I feel uneasy.”

Mahendra replied gently, though uncertain- “You are weary from travel. Rest here for four days first. After that, we’ll decide what to do.” □

It had been ten days since Ramakant arrived in Madras, though he hardly noticed how quickly the time had passed. During this period, Mahendra personally drove his parents and Jugesar to visit the principal attractions in the region: Ootacamund, Kodaikanal, and other hill stations, as well as Suchindram, Rameswaram, Tiruchendur, Madurai, Palani, Tiruchirappalli, Srirangam, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Nagore, Velankanni, Vaitheeswaran Koil, Chidambaram, Tiruvannamalai, Kanchipuram, Tiruttani, and Kanyakumari. Everywhere they went, they observed customs, manners, and ways of life different from their own and came to realise that the local people were notably hardworking and honest.

Following India's independence, the States Reorganisation Act led to the renaming of Madras State to Tamil Nadu on January 14, 1969. Portions of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh were incorporated to form the new state. Tamil Nadu had been a significant centre of Dravidian civilisation since ancient times. In the fourth century BCE, under the Chola, Pandya, and Chera dynasties, Dravidian culture thrived. In the early thirteenth century,

the Kakatiya dynasty ruled this region until 1323, when the Tughlaq sultans of Delhi defeated them. Later, the Qutb Shahi sultans of Golconda established control over what is now Hyderabad. During the waning days of Mughal rule, Emperor Aurangzeb appointed Asaf Jah as governor; he later declared independence and took the title of Nizam. In 1639, the East India Company established a settlement in Madras, by which time much of the subcontinent had already come under British dominion.

Geographically, Tamil Nadu is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Indian Ocean to the south, Kerala to the west, and Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to the north.

The night before, their conversation had lasted until half past one. There was much to reflect on after the seven eventful days they had spent in Madras. At around half past two in the morning, a road accident occurred. All four doctors were urgently summoned. Mahendra quickly informed the household—Ravindra, Jamuna, and Sujata—saying, “Get ready quickly. We must go.” All four left together in a single car.

At the scene, Mahendra saw that a car had

collided with a lorry parked on the roadside. All the passengers were severely injured. There were eight individuals in the car, all from a single industrialist family. Two were in critical condition: an elderly man's head was split open, and he cried out incoherently, while a woman's chest had been crushed, and she struggled to breathe. A young woman had both thighs broken. Two children had each lost an eye and an arm. Only an infant remained unharmed.

As Mahendra arrived, other doctors and nurses also reached the site. Both local and district police were present. The doctors agreed that the injured must be transported immediately to the hospital, as there were no medical supplies or equipment at the scene. All eight were carried to the hospital, but despite efforts, two succumbed to their injuries during examination.

By half past five in the morning, the doctors returned home. Hearing the sound of the car, Ramakant awoke. Regardless of the hour, the four entered and went about their routines. Lying in bed, Ramakant reflected sorrowfully: Today is the eleventh day, yet I have not seen even one of my grandchildren. In a family with five grandchildren,

not meeting a single child is a profound sorrow. Where is the love that parents and grandparents are meant to show? Without such affection, what impression will these children form of their elders?

All human beings should indeed love one another, yet in a world where life is measured by personal wealth and responsibilities, affection is the first casualty. Life is fleeting. Each stage of life has its own strength. Just as a child's responsibilities fall upon the parents, in old age, when the body weakens, the responsibility should pass to the children. If this balance is broken, life becomes a burden. Why do people migrate from one state to another, or even across countries? Only to ensure a better life for themselves and their families. These thoughts weighed heavily on Ramakant's mind.

Mahendra had three children, and Ravindra two. There were five grandchildren in total. Mahendra's eldest, Ramesh, studied in high school and lived in a hostel, while the other four attended residential schools. Mahendra visited every month or two to cover their expenses. At the insistence of the grandparents, a plan was made to visit the

children. Sunday was chosen, as the schools would be closed. They planned to leave home at seven in the morning.

Ramakant, Shyama, and Jugesar were ready early, but Mahendra, weary from the long night, was delayed. His body felt heavy with exhaustion, yet he took some medicine to fight off the drowsiness. Then he approached his father and said, "Babu, I haven't slept all night. Just as I lay down, I received news of a road accident. Eight members of a single industrialist family were in the car. We treated them until morning."

Jugesar asked- "Did anyone die?"

"Yes," Mahendra replied. "Two of the businessmen died. One suffered a brain haemorrhage and will remain mentally impaired for the rest of his life. Another's chest was crushed, and he has only a few months to live. Three others will survive, but they're broken. Only a four-year-old child escaped unharmed."

Ramakant listened silently and thought: This is life. For this, people stoop to inhuman acts, treating others as less than human. And yet they preach religion, organise kirtans and bhajans, spend thousands and lakhs to install stone idols

and offer lavish gifts. But who looks at the man with no food in his belly, no clothes on his body, no roof over his head, and no means to earn a living? This is the deception, the snare of ritual and vanity.

Seeing his father in a serious mood, Mahendra smiled and said, "Such is the life of a doctor. One sleepless night is nothing; there are times when I stay awake for five nights in a row and still feel fine. We have medicines that can bring sleep within moments. While you have your tea, I'll get ready as well."

Saying this, Mahendra went to his room to prepare.

The four of them set out in the car. Both schools were located close to each other, just a short distance apart. They first visited Ramesh's hostel. It was enclosed by high walls, with a single gate fitted with an iron grille. A guard was always stationed there, and he knew Mahendra well from his regular monthly visits. The four entered the premises. Inside was a common hall for visiting guardians, furnished with chairs arranged along the walls. They sat there while Mahendra sent for Ramesh.

Ramesh arrived and touched his father's feet, then stood hesitantly before the others. Neither did he recognise his grandparents, nor did they recognise him. Seeing his son's awkwardness, Mahendra said, "Son, bow to your grandparents." At his father's prompting, Ramesh touched the feet of all three elders. They blessed him, observing the customary courtesies. Yet in Ramakant's heart, a storm was brewing. He thought: If a grandson cannot even recognise his grandparents, what service will he ever render? Education is essential for everyone—it teaches the ways of life—but if children are educated while living apart from their families, how will they come to know their kin, or understand their responsibilities toward them?

A family links one generation to the next, forming the joint family structure, which is the legacy of Mithila. In contrast, the nuclear family breaks off and grows distant. In such a setup, sons and daughters may come to see their parents as burdens and discard them. If this system continues to spread, what role will parents have in their children's lives? What will become of society? And what then will separate human

beings from animals? Even now, though we share the same blood, it feels like the anonymous crowds of fairs and markets, thousands gathering, yet all strangers to one another.

It would be far better if, just as individuals form families, and families together form society, each member were embraced, so that life could be lived in joy and harmony.

Seeing his father silent and grim, Mahendra said, "Babu, let's go now. Every child here follows a strict routine. If we linger, it will disturb their schedule."

Suppressing his heavy heart, Ramakant rose and said, "Yes, yes, let us go. We must see the other children as well."

Ramesh returned to his hostel, and the four resumed their seats in the car. It moved on.

Soon, they arrived at the nearby nursery school. The guard there also recognised Mahendra and allowed them to enter. Mahendra asked for the children, and four of them came running to touch his feet. With a gesture toward Ramakant and Shyama, he said, "Children, these are your grandparents. Touch their feet."

At his instruction, the children bowed to the three

elders. Ramakant and Shyama's hearts broke within them. They thought: What had we imagined when we came here, and what are we witnessing instead?

They no longer felt it was right to stay, yet having come this far, they would not return without the consent of their son and daughter-in-law. Moreover, a few sights remained to be seen. With a torn heart, Ramakant said, "We have seen the children. Now, let us go. Thoughts of the village pull at me. We must return soon."

Mahendra couldn't understand his father's meaning. His years in the village had been spent merely as a student, and once he became a doctor, he had moved directly to Madras, fully adapting to its way of life.

After a short while, the four set out to visit the Brahmachari Ashram. The ashram had no temple, only two houses. One served as a guesthouse; the other was the residence of the Brahmachari himself, with space for sleeping, cooking, and storing utensils. The Brahmachari, a son of Mithila, was a great scholar of Advaita philosophy, which ran through his very being.

Although the ashram was nearby, Mahendra had

never known of it until a priest mentioned it during their trip to Rameswaram. It was located about ten rods west of the main road, along a narrow path. Mahendra parked the car by the roadside, and the four walked toward the ashram. At its boundary, Ramakant and Mahendra looked around attentively. There was no bustle of pilgrims, no sound of bells, no crowds. The houses, though built of brick, looked more like ordinary dwellings than sacred structures. Yet something in the atmosphere touched their hearts, it felt as though they had left the soil of Madras and stepped into Mithila.

The Brahmachari was in the orchard, smiling as he cut dried banana stems. The grove was dense, so neither he saw them, nor they saw him. Though the sound of the car had reached his ears, he paid no attention, assuming it to be just another passing vehicle, and remained immersed in his work.

The ashram spanned about one acre and contained everything necessary for self-sufficiency. Two houses with adjoining courtyards and cowsheds stood on two plots. A small pond stretched across four plots, while another five were filled with trees

and plants. Two plots were used to grow fodder for the cows, and seven were cultivated for grain. The four visitors first reached the pond's steps, paved with smooth stone slabs. Standing there, they gazed at the water with quiet delight. Along the banks, a flock of herons from Mithila waded and foraged. Fixing his eyes on them, Ramakant thought: Since coming here, only now have I seen the herons of my homeland. There are herons here, too, but those from Mithila have a distinct grace and manner all their own.

He lifted his gaze to the pond, where clusters of lotus leaves floated like flowers, gently stirred by the breeze. A pair of waterfowl, just awakening, cried out, just like the pihuā back in Mithila. As they watched, a bird swooped down and settled softly on the pond's surface.

Jugesar said, "Kaka, that is our own Purain tree. Even the flowers look the same."

Ramakant raised his head and replied- "Yes, Jugesar. It is indeed the lotus."

After washing their hands and feet, the four climbed the steps and looked around for the Brahmachari. Not seeing him, Ramakant assumed he must have gone elsewhere. But then Jugesar's

eyes turned toward the orchard, where he spotted someone and said, "Kaka, someone is working in the grove. Let me go and ask if he's the Brahmachari."

Hearing this, Ramakant and Mahendra both lifted their heads. But the man's rough, sun-darkened face led Ramakant to believe he was just an ordinary labourer. At that very moment, Ramakant's voice carried across the orchard and reached the man's ears. The moment the sound registered, the man, though holding a sickle, did not let it fall.

The Brahmachari was a man well-versed in many languages and dialects. On seeing the visitors, he immediately sensed they were from Mithila: Jugesar and Ramakant wore dhotis in the Maithili style, and although Mahendra's modern attire gave him pause, the sight of Shyama's sari confirmed his guess.

Ramakant asked- "Where is the Brahmachari?"

The man was dressed in a plain dhoti, knotted at the waist. A small towel was the only other garment on his body. He had neither shaven his head nor grown a beard. No rosary hung around his neck, and no sacred thread crossed his chest.

Smiling, he replied, "You've come from Mithila. Why do you stand so stiffly? Come, sit and talk with me. The Brahmachari will appear soon."

Saying this, he laid his sickle beside the pond, washed his hands and feet, and spread a mat of moong stalks in the courtyard. Then, from the house, he brought out a bunch of bananas and placed them before his guests.

One glance at the fruit told Ramakant that these were not the small, common variety, but the large, golden Malbhog bananas of Mithila: perfectly ripe and sweet, full and round, without the thinness of inferior kinds.

The Brahmachari placed the bunch in their midst and invited them all to partake. Jugesar thought that had he not already eaten so much, he could have devoured the entire bunch himself.

Ramakant said, "Only an hour ago we had our meal, so I'm not very hungry. Yet, since this is prasād from the Brahmachari Ashram, I will certainly eat two fingers' worth."

He broke off two bananas and ate them. Seeing him, Mahendra and Jugesar also took two each. Shyama, however, sat silently, her hands withdrawn.

Noticing her hesitation, the Brahmachari said, "Sister, I understand why you're reluctant. In our Mithila, indeed, a wife does not eat before her husband. But during wedding rituals, men and women share the same food. Don't feel shy here. This is a simple ashram, and it is also a sacred place."

His words stirred something within Shyama, though her habits still held her back. Sensing her inner struggle, Jugesar laughed and said, "Aunt, when my wife once cut her finger while pounding rice, I fed her with my own hands. You are only old in years, not in spirit."

At Jugesar's words, Ramakant lowered his head. Shyama then quietly ate two bananas. Afterwards, they all washed their hands and faces.

Turning to Ramakant, the Brahmachari asked- "How did you come to be here?"

Pointing to Mahendra, Ramakant replied, "This is my eldest son. He studied medicine and settled here for work. Once a year, he visits the village. His wife and children have never been there; they remain here. My wife and I felt the urge to see our son, his family, and this land, so we came."

Looking toward Mahendra, the Brahmachari asked,

"How long have you lived here?"

Mahendra was silent for a moment. Then, recalling the years, he said, "It's been twenty-two years."

"So long here, and yet we never met?"

With a hint of helplessness, Mahendra replied, "My profession is demanding. As a doctor, I rarely get rest, let alone time to explore. Even if I wanted to, it was difficult to make the time. That's why we never came."

"And what brought you here now?"

"Four days ago, we visited Rameswaram. There, a priest mentioned you."

Smiling, the Brahmachari said, "Once a month, I too go to Rameswaram. Standing at the shore beside the vast sea, I watch the waves in silent reflection. In that ocean rise two kinds of waves: good and bad. The good waves gladden the heart; the bad waves burn it. Yet still, I pray that the bad waves may not grow too fierce, and that the good ones may rise forever."

These thoughts struck Mahendra as if they had awakened his sleeping mind. A question arose within him: Have I stepped from darkness into light, or from light into darkness?

He found himself in a strange state. The forms of his parents and of Jugesar appeared to him in a new light. Restless, he rose and walked into the orchard. The Brahmachari understood.

Meanwhile, Ramakant asked him, "Why did you leave Mithila and come here, to a land of another faith, another culture, and another people?"

Smiling, the Brahmachari replied, "No caste, no sect, no culture is, by itself, the foundation of life. The true foundation of life is human intelligence, thought, and action. When a person builds his life upon noble deeds, then religion, culture, conduct, and ideals all transform, shaping the true human being. Such a person we call a great soul, a saint, or a man of high order. This kind is steadily diminishing in Mithila. It has not completely disappeared, but it has grown so faint under pressure that it has become weak and stifled.

The native people of Mithila have been reshaped by dominant classes—by parasitic groups and outsiders—who have moulded society in such a way that ancient culture has been suppressed while aristocratic culture has been exalted. The truth of life has been buried and replaced by an artificial

existence, leading people away from reality. It has not been eradicated, but it has weakened so much that distinguishing the genuine from the false is now difficult.

I see all human beings as human. No one is black, no one is white. Yet the structure of society has become such that one person is made greater than another, and another is made lesser. In truth, everyone is greater in some way and smaller in another. But, like a spider that spins its own web from its belly, people have woven nets in which all are trapped.”

His eyes were closed as he spoke. Ramakant then asked again, “You are a great scholar. Why did you leave Mithila and come here?”

At the repeated question, the Brahmachari grew serious and said, “I understand your concern. But the thinking of both the educated and uneducated has become such that good thoughts are no longer allowed to flourish. It has been said that even Brihaspati alone is of no use. More than that, those who themselves need upliftment do not willingly walk the right path. The thief himself cries, ‘Stop thief!’ What can be done?

If the struggle were only one of ideas, it could be

fought. But it is not so. In daily life, those who create disorder do so in ways that toy with human lives without mercy. The aristocratic class has become so powerful that honest men are treated like bulls mired in a swamp, while jackals, dogs, vultures, and crows gather to pluck out their eyes while they are still alive. This is how honest men are treated there.

Yet I am not ready to surrender, nor will I. Just as every new sunrise marks the beginning of a new day, new men, too, will rise and move toward a new life. In that, I take consolation.”

Ramakant asked- “Who is in your family?”

The Brahmachari replied, “My father was a householder. He had fifteen bighas of land, which he and my mother cultivated together to sustain the family. There was heat and hardship, but they endured it. We were two brothers. I studied at the village school and later spent some time at Lohana Pathshala. My younger brother worked alongside my father in the fields and did not pursue studies. My parents have since passed away. I never married. I arranged my brother’s marriage, and after that, I left home.

I had hoped to reform the evils of Mithila, to

guide society from wrong to right, from disorder to order, from corruption to truth. I tried, but in the end, I departed in defeat. The system there, and the so-called educated men who claim wisdom yet stand behind the aristocrats, have distorted truth in such a way that unworthy men are elevated while the worthy are crushed. The paths to true humanity have been destroyed, taken over by looters, violence, caste and religious frenzy, and all kinds of crimes. Wealth has seeped into the very roots of society and corrupted everything. Because of that, society has lost its way.

The most painful thing is that even the best, the most respected, and the most learned say one thing and do another. In such a place, the voice of truth has been silenced. How can good men survive in such a society? That is why I left Mithila behind and came here. People have grown blind in their pursuit of bodily pleasure.”

Hearing these words, Ramakant felt his own attachment to wealth begin to dissolve. He thought: I, too, possess two hundred bighas of land. What is the use of so much? If I were to divide it among the landless poor, how many

families could live in peace? Those for whom I hold the land already have more than enough. Since ancient times, Mithila has been the land of renunciants and great souls. Why should I not adopt that tradition and revive it once more?

With such thoughts stirring within him, Ramakant asked the Brahmachari- “Are you content with this life?”

The Brahmachari laughed and answered, “Yes, I am perfectly content. What could life be better? In my library, I keep the scriptures and literature of every language, as well as the sacred texts of all major religions, Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmanas, Yajnavalkya, Jyotisha, Puranas, Ramayana, Samvarta, Shankha, Gargya, Devala, Sharatatya, and Shatatapa Smritis, along with the Bible, the Quran, and the Guru Granth Sahib. I study them all.

I engage in physical labour daily to keep my body healthy, and I spend the rest of my time studying and contemplating. Once a month, I invite scholars from different religions to speak about their traditions. Once a month, I also hold a political discourse and another on literature. At other times, we host farmers’ assemblies, medical

discussions, scientific forums, and reflections on the good and the evil in today's globalised world, all through the lens of reason and evidence. In such a life, the days pass so swiftly that I scarcely notice them."

As he was speaking, Mahendra returned. His face looked wild, almost unhinged. Ramakant, too, seemed to have stepped away from the outer world and entered the path of the inner world.

The four of them touched the Brahmachari's feet in reverence and prepared to leave. Understanding their intent, the Brahmachari himself accompanied them back to the car. Along the way, none of them wished to speak. Each remained immersed in his own thoughts.

Once home, Ramakant said to Mahendra, "Son, I shall not stay another day. Thoughts of the village are drawing me back. Please arrange for my departure as soon as possible."

Mahendra replied, "Very well. I'll have the tickets booked today. The train for Darbhanga runs only once a week. Even if we manage to get seats, we'll still have to stay here for five more days."

That night, at eight o'clock, they all gathered together and began speaking of their village,

recalling the days of their youth. Mahendra said, "I never truly found the time to reflect on what life once was and what it has now become.

As children, we lived like birds in the open sky, flying free, without worry or care. Life moved forward at its own steady pace, like a cart gently rolling down a village road. There was no fear of competition, no anxiety about exams, no hunger for employment. I ordinarily passed my intermediate examinations, entered medical college, and became a doctor.

But once I donned the doctor's robe, the hunger for money grew so strong that I left behind my village, my homeland, and my people, and came thousands of miles away. Here, I became part of a market-driven society and culture, while my family and folk traditions slipped away from me.

The more I earn, the greater grows the burden of work. And what of enjoyment? There is no time. Life is so busy that day's pass without my even opening a newspaper. The ideas I once had about life now seem like illusions. What I once thought was happiness, I now realise was not true happiness.

A person's life must have its essential needs

fulfilled; only then can peace be found. Families are formed by individuals, and society is formed by families. Every person's first duty is to stand on their own feet and support their family. When the family is secure, society too can stand and move forward.

But then, what is happiness? That is the first question to be asked.

Man is formed by the union of body and soul. Joy and sorrow, good and bad, these are experiences of the soul, not the body. Ideally, every person in the world should live on equal footing, but that is not the case. The world is divided into countries, countries into governments and systems, and societies into fragments of language, culture, caste, and custom. As a result, food, clothing, and conduct differ everywhere.

I say that I serve mankind, but in truth, I serve only those who can pay. The poor, who are in greatest need, are left without food, clothing, shelter, or medicine. Their lives have become worse than those of animals. They live in human form, but their condition is no better than beasts. And it is they who need us the most."

All listened with deep attention. Ramakant shook

his head and said, "Son, in the very village where you were born, in the soil and water that raised you to become a doctor, people still die for want of proper treatment. How grievous is that?"

At his words, all fell silent. No one could answer. They looked at one another in helplessness. The village lay thousands of miles away. How could treatment reach them from here? The question lingered in every mind. At length, Mahendra spoke. "Babu, your question is heavy indeed, and an answer is hard to find. But one thought has come to me."

"What is it?"

"When you return to the village, send two young people—a boy and a girl with some education—here to us. We shall keep them for six months, train them, and send them back to begin immediate treatment. Along with that, the four of us will each take one month in turn every year to live in the village and serve the sick. And should any serious case arise, we can be called by phone. Laheriasarai is nearby as well."

The idea pleased Ramakant. Smiling, he said, "Son, but the villagers are poor. How will they afford treatment?"

At the mention of the poor, Ravindra quickly replied, "Babu, we earn well. Whatever the cost of their treatment, we shall bear it. Not only that, once you return, send those two students here. Next month, we shall go to the village and establish a health centre there, where everyone will be treated."

The idea brought smiles to every face. In Ramakant's mind, however, a question stirred: I own two hundred bighas of land, but what do I truly own? If I look honestly, am I not myself a thief? In the Mahabharata, it is said: he who hoards more than he needs is a thief. That was the truth my father often repeated. I may not have seized land by dishonesty, yet I have hoarded it in plenty.

As they spoke, night drew on, and it was half past ten. Supper was served, and all paused their conversation to eat.

The next morning, from the first light of dawn, Ramakant's sons and daughters-in-law busied themselves with preparations for departure. Many families in the area had become their friends through shared work and fellowship. It seemed only right to inform them, so they began sending

word to each other. Their own circle of friends also gathered to take part in the parents' farewell. In those four days, Ramakant abandoned his usual walks and wanderings and sank into deep thought. Day and night, he lay upon his bed—drinking tea, chewing betel, eating his meals—yet always reflecting upon life. Until now, he had known only one world, but now he felt he had glimpsed another. One was the outer world, visible to the eyes; the other was the world within the body, unseen until now. And this inner world seemed more beautiful than the outer, like a garden filled with blossoming flowers of hope.

At five in the evening, the train for Darbhanga departed from Madras station. Because they had reserved tickets, Ramakant felt no anxiety. Such unrest belongs to passengers who travel in general coaches, with tickets bought on the same day. In a reserved carriage, each seat and ticket is accounted for, and no outsider may enter.

By two o'clock, all the luggage had been packed neatly into trunks and cartons. Food for the journey was placed in a basket: ten litres of water in a can, tea in a thermos, and betel leaves in a small container. Dr Sujata handed over a carton

of foreign liquor to her father-in-law, with a glance that conveyed its meaning.

At four o'clock, after eating parathas and vegetables, the three elders dressed in new clothes and made their final preparations. Since the station was nearby, there was no rush. Yet, with so much luggage, it seemed wise to leave early. The train originated from Madras, so there was no difficulty in placing the baggage. At a quarter past four, they left the house and made their way to the station to board the train.

Although it was a holiday, Hiranand did not go to his village. Normally, since it was nearby, he would visit every Saturday and return on Monday before school reopened. But things had changed since Ramakant had gone to Madras. With him away, the full responsibility of the household had fallen on Hiranand.

After offering water at the shrine, he bathed, drank tea, and set out for Bauelal's house. His mind was crowded with thoughts: Ramakant Babu had said- "I am going to Madras to see my children and take a short tour; then I will return." But today marked the fifteenth day, and he still hadn't returned. Of course, Madras is far, and since his family lives there, a delay was natural. Every child Hiranand passed on the road folded their hands in respect, and he blessed them as he walked by. Just before he reached Bauelal's house, Bauelal spotted him, hurried forward, bowed, and led him inside.

Overjoyed, Bauelal busied himself, eagerly showing what he had learned and correcting himself in small ways. He seated the master on a single-legged stool and went to fetch water. Returning with a lota, he poured water for him to wash his

feet. The simple act stirred something deep within Hiranand. He thought: How wise our ancestors were to establish such customs!

After washing his feet, Hiranand sat on the cot. Bauelal went to make tea, as his mother didn't prepare it herself. Just then, Anup-Bauelal's father left his hoe in the garden, entered with hands still muddy, saluted the master, and sat humbly at the foot of the stool. Noticing his hands, the master asked, "What work were you doing?"

Without a trace of embarrassment, Anup replied, "I was planting amaranth greens. The weeds had grown so thick they were covering the plants, so I was weeding them."

"Come," said the master. "Until Bauelal returns, let me see it too." He rose, and Anup led the way. The plot was small, divided into two beds. Seeing the greens, Hiranand exclaimed- "Never in my life have I seen such amaranth! It's wonderful. I also grow the plain green variety, but this looks like a flower; half the leaf is red, half green. Where did you get this seed?"

Pleased by the curiosity, Anup said, "I saw it at a feast where I had gone to help. My heart was

taken by it, so I brought back some seed. For ten years now, I've sown it every season. When the stalks set seed, I let them stand. Later, there's so much seed that I plant my beds and share it with whoever asks."

"Give me some of this time as well," Hiranand said.

"Gladly," replied Anup.

The two returned and sat again beside the stool. Soon, Baelal arrived with tea, served it to both, and then carried cups to the courtyard for himself and his mother. A short while later, his mother, Radhiya, thin-bodied, her hair greying, her eyes sunken, came to the doorway. With her veil drawn, she touched the master's feet.

The sight pierced Hiranand's heart. Ah, poverty, fiercer than fire! How has a woman of thirty-five or forty been reduced to this?

Opening one smiling eye, Radhiya said, "Today my fortune is awake, for Master Sahib has come to my humble doorway. I won't let you go without food. You must eat whatever greens we have."

The tenderness in her words brought tears to Hiranand's eyes. Wiping them with his thumbs, he replied, "I had only intended to take a short

walk, but your love will not let me leave without a meal. I will certainly eat.”

Since there was no betel nut at home, Bauelal went to the shop to buy some. Meanwhile, the master asked Anup, “How long ago did your ancestors settle in this village?”

The question startled Anup. No one had ever asked him such a thing. But in his heart, the master was like a second soul. Because of him, his son had learned to read and begun walking the path of humanity. Smiling, Anup began- “Master Sahib, my father had no home of his own. We lived on another man’s land, ploughed his fields, transplanted seedlings, and weeded for him. At harvest time, we gleaned the fallen stalks of paddy and mustard. We kept another’s cow and gave him the milk. Whatever festivals came, and even ordinary debts, were paid by selling that milk or whatever else we had.

One day, my father was in a foul mood. The landlord came, demanding that he carry pots and pans for his daughter’s wedding, without pay. Irritated, my father refused. The landlord called his son, and together they abused my father, tore down the cane screens at our doorway, and

ordered us to leave their yard. My father pleaded with many, but all sided with the landlord.

Broken and helpless, he gathered our few earthen pots and pans, a plate and a lota, a bundle of clothes, a sickle and a hoe. With my mother and me, he fled. We went as far as a mango tree by the embankment and sat there. My father clutched his chest, tears streaming. My mother wept. After resting a little, we set out again.”

As Anup spoke, tears welled up in his eyes. Seeing him cry, Hiranand felt his own eyes moisten. He wiped them with a handkerchief and gently asked, “And then what happened?”

With soil still clinging to his hands, Anup brushed away his tears with his knuckles and continued, “This house is from my mother’s side, Master Sahib. At that time, my maternal grandfather was still alive. He had only one daughter, my mother. When the three of us arrived here, my grandmother and mother clung to each other, arms around each other’s necks, weeping. My father, too, began to cry. My grandfather lifted me into his lap, wiped my tears, and called us in from the yard. My grandmother, still sobbing, placed our bundle inside the house and hastily lit

the hearth, while my mother kept on weeping.”

In between, Hiranand asked- “And how did your grandfather manage his living?”

At this, Anup gave a faint smile and said, “Master Sahib, what else could he do? In a month, eight or ten evenings would pass without any proper meal. I was a child, so my grandmother would keep some stale rice in a small basket, and that is what I ate.”

Listening to this, Hiranand’s heart melted. He said softly, “Go on, see to your work. Bauelal has returned.”

Obedying his words, Anup went back to weeding. Meanwhile, Bauelal and Hiranand began to talk about Ramakant.

“It has been nearly fifteen days now,” Bauelal said. “Why has Baba not returned? He had promised to be back within eight days. Could something have happened?”

“Not yet,” replied Hiranand. “No letter has come to suggest anything.”

They rose and strolled through the garden. Hiranand’s eyes lingered on the pomegranate tree. It was the first crop, and the fruits were large and round. The lower branches bore ten big fruits,

while those higher up were smaller and shrivelled. Five or six fruits had split open, and one had begun to turn red. Pointing to it with his finger, Hiranand said, "Baelal, pluck that one. It may not be fully ripe, but it is ready to taste. We are strong enough to manage it."

The tree was not very tall, and Baelal reached up easily, broke the fruit, and rubbed the milky sap against the earth. Together, they returned to the courtyard. Hiranand sat on the cot while Baelal fetched a knife and a plate. He cut the fruit into pieces, filled the plate, and placed it before Hiranand.

"This is too much for me alone," Hiranand laughed. "I will eat six or seven segments at most. Take the rest inside."

Baelal did as he was told. After eating the pomegranate and drinking some water, Hiranand suggested, "Come, let us take a short walk."

The two wandered along the path. By the time they returned, Radhiya had cooked rice from coarse grain, a curry of small fish, and fried taro leaves. She had swept the courtyard clean with wet clay, washed her hands, spread a cotton quilt neatly on the floor, and placed plates, bowls, lotas,

and glasses—washed and shining—beside it. She filled the lotas with water and asked Bauelal to call the master for food.

Hiranand entered the courtyard and sat on the quilt, reflecting silently: Food fills the stomach, but affection fills the heart, and it is the heart that now feels full.

Soon, Bauelal placed a plate before him: steaming rice, a ladle of fragrant fish curry, a wedge of lemon, and a bowl of spicy relish. Seeing it, Hiranand smiled and said, “You have arranged the meal beautifully. Just looking at it fills the stomach.”

Unable to restrain herself, Radhiya said, “Master Babu, you are great, like a god. It is my good fortune that you should eat in the house of a poor woman like me.”

Hiranand sensed in her words a feeling of unworthiness, as though she considered the food impure. Covering her thought with kindness, he replied, “I consider Bauelal my younger brother, and his family as my own. Why should there be any hesitation in sharing their food?”

Hearing this, Radhiya’s heart swelled like monsoon clouds. She felt an urge to pour out the story of

her life. With renewed energy, she said, "Master Babu, we have endured such hardship. Once, my younger brother came to visit, and there was not a single grain of rice in the house. I worried about what to feed him. I went to three or four homes to borrow rice, but everyone's condition was just as poor. They had nothing for themselves; how could they give to me? At last, I cooked millet bread and a curry of beans and gourds, and served it. I too ate the same. But now, by the grace of Ramakant Kaka, we have everything."

Pouring curry over his rice, Hiranand asked, "Can you feel the difference between the past and the present?"

"Master Babu, what a question," she replied. "By comparison, today we live like kings. Once we were beggars, always worried about filling our stomachs."

As Hiranand chewed his rice and fish, a bone suddenly lodged in his gums. He swallowed the rice, pulled the bone out with his fingers, laid it on the edge of the plate, and asked with a smile, "Tell me, do you work harder now or did you work harder before?"

Radhiya sighed and said, "In the old days, I

worked far harder. After sowing in the fields, I would return only to start again with the household chores. Once the yard was tidied, I would cook, bending over the hearth until my back ached. Only then could I eat.”

From where he sat on the veranda, Anup looked toward her and said, half-jokingly- “Shall we let Master Sahib finish his meal in peace or not?”

Before Radhiya could reply, Hiranand interjected- “Anup, why are you scolding her? I am eating and listening at the same time. What Kakiji says pleases me.”

With the master’s support, Radhiya felt encouraged, and a new eagerness rose within her. She thought, let me pour out everything stored in my heart. She continued, “Master Babu, for more than half the year, we ate nothing but greens and pickles. During Magh and Phagun, when we harvested khesari and lentils, we might eat dal for ten or fifteen days. Otherwise, whatever greens grew wild in the hedges or garden, those were our meals. Most of the time, it was greens alone. In the khesari season, we ate either khesari leaves or bathua twice a day, every day, for a month.”

At the mention of khesari greens, Hiranand asked with interest, "How do you cook khesari leaves?"

The question stirred memories for Anup. Smiling, he replied, "Master Sahib, no one cooks khesari leaves like a widow does."

Hiranand laughed and said, "My own wife makes them with green chillies and garlic fried in oil. I find them delicious."

With a teasing tone, Anup said, "Ah, but your wife must have many women to help her. It is we alone who must struggle on. Otherwise...?"

Understanding his meaning, Hiranand kept silent. But Radhiya, with a playful glance, added- "Otherwise I would not have survived in this household, isn't it so?"

Anup retorted, "Remember the day you came here as a bride. How many skills did you bring with you? If your mother-in-law had not taught you, would you have learned anything?"

Radhiya countered warmly- "What difference is there between a mother and a mother-in-law? A husband's mother is no less than one's own. If I learned, it was from her."

They looked at each other, Anup at Radhiya and Radhiya at Anup. There was no anger in their

eyes, only affection, and so the air was filled with sweetness.

Turning the conversation, Hiranand said, "Our ancestors were very poor. Unlike today, there was not even enough grain. Most of the time, they survived on greens."

The food was simple, the vessels clean, the seat a humble spread in the courtyard, but the meal carried with it a sense of history. One by one, Hiranand ate all the dishes set before him. He drank no water, for he felt neither heavy nor parched. Satisfied, he washed his hands in the bowl and rose, saying, "Never in my life have I eaten such a hearty meal."

Leaving the courtyard, he lay down on the cot. As he stretched himself, he told Anup and Bauelal, "Now you must eat as well. I feel like resting."

Soon he fell into drowsiness, turning from side to side. In his thoughts, he reflected:

In so few years, Anup has risen so far. The reason lies in raising his family in the right way. A family that walks a true path will advance swiftly. But life's road is never straight like a bamboo pole. It is crooked and winding. At every step lie three-way and four-way crossings where a man may

lose his way. And if he has no sense of where the road begins and ends, he is lost all the more.

On this path, some stumble and fall, while others, weary of confusion, abandon home and wander. Many surrender lasting happiness for fleeting pleasures. Small desires push aside greater joy and rise like mountains, blocking the way.

The road of life is not one but many, yet the destination is the same. Each person's path is different. The ignorant and the wise alike fail to see, at the start of life, which path will lead them to the right place. Every teacher and every sect speak of salvation and tells its own stories, but the hidden snares along the path are many.

Yet it is also true that many have already reached that destination by living pure and blameless lives, and many more will reach it, even if they never had full meals or proper clothing.

Unless the dry tree of society is watered with the pure Ganga of compassion, how can it bear flowers or fruit? And if watered late, its blossoms soon wither.

Sorrow too is not of a day or two. It is deeply rooted. Many great men have tried, with courage and strength, to uproot it, yet sorrow endures.

We are all children of the Motherland, and it is our duty to serve her. On the night of Chhath, when the mothers and sisters of the land hold the offering close to their hearts, how can we abandon them? Are we all strangers? Do we have no kin of our own?

As the afternoon waned, Hiranand thought of leaving. Bauelal urged him to stay for tea, but with his stomach full, the master declined. "Forget the tea," he said. "I did not drink water during the meal. Just give me a lota of water."

Bauelal brought it from the courtyard. After drinking, Hiranand added- "It feels as if I have only just risen from the dining mat. I will not take tea. Give me only one chew of tobacco."

Anup began preparing the mixture. Meanwhile, Hiranand turned to Bauelal.

"You are reading more advanced books now. Whenever you are free, teach the children of the neighborhood. In that way, you will not feel idle, and some of them too will begin to lean toward learning."

At the mention of study, Anup laughed.

"Master Sahib, whose children would Bauelal teach? Look at those three houses. They are

Kurmis, and we have a long-standing enmity with them. There is neither eating together nor even exchanging greetings. That house belongs to fishermen. All day, they carry nets, fishing in ponds and rivers. They live by selling fish, then come home drunk on toddy and liquor and begin quarrelling. Over there is the Kujur community. They are poor but sharp in business. The women sell vegetables; the men deal in scrap iron. They are always fighting over caste. We are ten households of Dhanuks. All of us are poor. Only I received two bighas of land from Ramakant Babu. Otherwise, we would still be working as hired labourers. Our young daughters carry baskets on their heads and go to other villages for wages. They have their own school, while we are left behind. There is neither eating together nor any social exchange. Now tell me, whose children could Bauelal teach?"

Hiranand was silent. Inwardly, he thought how strange society had become. To enter into such divisions was immensely difficult.

After a pause, he said, "You are right, Anup. But such sickness was greater in the past. It remains, but it is changing. People are leaving the village

for work in towns and factories. In the villages, too, small tea stalls are opening, changing lives little by little. Farming is almost dead. One year there is drought, the next a flood, and everything is destroyed. Both the landless poor and the landowners suffer alike. Even landowners are forced to sell their fields to cover the costs of weddings, sickness, or schooling. At the root of all this is ignorance, which will not vanish without education. Every parent wishes to educate their children, but that wish remains only in the heart. In practice, they do not have a single coin. After all, how can a person with no food in his stomach and no clothing on his body ever study?"

In the garden next door, twelve-year-old Sumitra was listening as she scrubbed an old cooking pan. She was Anup's neighbour, and though household quarrels meant little to children, her heart was stirred by the talk of schooling.

After chewing his tobacco, Hiranand rose to go. Bauelal followed him down the road, then turned back. When he returned, Sumitra was waiting, the pan set aside. She came close and whispered—"Teach me."

Before replying, Bauelal thought of the long

quarrel between his father and Sumitra's father, Ram Prasad. He had seen them exchange insults many times. How can I teach her, then? Yet Hiranand's words echoed in his mind, and he fell silent in thought.

At last, he said, "Ask your mother first."

Sumitra ran into the courtyard.

"Mother, may I study?" she asked.

Her mother replied, "Where will you study?"

"With Bauelal."

At that name, her mother hesitated. We may have no direct quarrel, but my husband and Bauelal's father are bitter enemies. After some thought, she said, "If Bauelal is willing to teach you, then learn."

Sumitra belonged to a proud family. Unlike other village women who carried baskets of goods on their heads, her mother never did such work. Ram Prasad himself did it, but not his wife. When disputes flared between Anup and Ram Prasad about carrying loads, Sumitra's mother sympathised with Anup. Yet how could a woman openly oppose her husband? She sat silently in the courtyard, cursing her fate for being married into such a family.

Returning, Sumitra told Bauelal, "Mother agreed."
"Good," said Bauelal. "But when will you study?
All day I am busy with work, and in the evenings,
I go to my own lessons."

They thought for a moment and agreed that the
best time would be early morning, before the
day's chores began.

7.

At three in the morning, Hiranand awoke. He stepped out of his room, saw the misty darkness, and returned to bed. Just as sleep had left him, Anup's words began to stir in his mind. He felt shaken by the thought that society had grown so bitter and divided that every household, every caste, every neighbourhood seemed at odds, like quarrelling buffaloes. How could such a society ever advance? Progress required mutual love and trust. But how could that be achieved?

The more he tried to find an answer, the more tangled his thoughts became. A strange unease spread through him. Countless questions arose in his mind, and every line of reasoning led only to confusion. It was as if even his wisdom had abandoned him.

Meanwhile, from the east, he heard the chirping of birds. He stepped out again and looked toward the dawn. The sky glowed faintly red with the first light filtering through the clouds. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was five o'clock. Taking his lota, he set off toward the fields. But his mind

remained so caught in these questions that he walked without knowing where he was going. By the time he regained awareness, he had wandered far. He set the lota down, walked about the open field, and tried again to search for answers. Still, no clear conclusion came.

He returned home, cleaned his teeth, washed, and began preparing tea. The ingredients were already laid out on the hearth; only the kettle and glasses needed washing, and firewood had to be brought from the shed. Once everything was arranged, he sat down to make the tea, though his mind continued to drift. He filled the kettle with water and set it on the fire. When the water boiled, he suddenly thought, Why am I making so much tea for nothing?

He lifted the kettle off the fire and poured some of the hot water into a glass with milk, setting it aside. He refilled the kettle, added milk, and returned it to the fire. But his thoughts wandered further. He forgot to add the tea leaves. By the time he remembered and lifted the lid, the water had boiled away. With a cry of surprise, he put the tea leaves back in their tin, refilled the kettle again, and at last, prepared the tea properly.

At dawn, he sat quietly and drank two glasses of tea, yet his mind grew even more restless. The warmth of the tea only unsettled him further. Like a man who has lost something and searches everywhere for it, Hiranand sought a solution to the problem that was breaking society into fragments. With no one nearby to debate with, he questioned and answered himself. His formal education had reached only as far as matriculation, yet he did not abandon the search. He felt like a traveller lost in the wilderness who still manages to stumble upon a path.

His thoughts turned to the tradition of Mithila's philosophy and the structure of its society. In that moment of recognition, his mind lit up with a new radiance, as if touched by a spark of divine light. He rose from his bed, walked to the courtyard, and began pacing up and down. At last, he murmured aloud- "Ah, the thinkers of Mithila, teachers of the world. The truths that arrived on this soil thousands of years ago were the very truths that Marx rediscovered through hard struggle in the nineteenth century, changing the course of human thought. Yet the misfortune of Mithila was that selfish rulers distorted those

truths. The thinkers had shown that all human beings are one, yet the rulers broke that unity into fragments. Today, the urgent need is to join those fragments together and make them whole again. It is no small task, and even now, there is no shortage of those eager to divide. Worse still, those already divided lack the awareness to see that they lie helpless on the ground, like prey to crows and dogs.”

At this stage of thought, Hiranand felt his heart grow more agitated. Yet in that restlessness, there arose a new energy, a new awareness, and a fresh enthusiasm. He began to look at everything with new eyes. Just then, Shashi Shekhar, strolling nearby, appeared.

Seeing him, Hiranand seemed to glow, as though he had just bathed in a pond. His heart remained immersed in thought. He reflected: gold dust, flax fibre, or cotton strands may all be fine and delicate, but it is the craftsman who gathers them with a spindle and turns them into thread, weaving cloth or strong rope. In the same way, broken individuals must be bound together to form a cohesive society. Only then can a new society emerge. It is no easy task; it is hard. And hard

tasks demand hard labour. Yet labour alone is not enough. There must also be a right understanding and a clear sense of direction. Without that, all effort is wasted. To succeed, one must possess tireless determination and deep reflection, the courage to move forward, and a firm resolve.

With these thoughts, a quiet but powerful determination took root in Hiranand's mind. The early morning sun rose red in the sky, yet its rays carried a coolness. Fixing his eyes on the sun, Hiranand joined his resolve to his thoughts, as if clasping both hands in friendship. This union brought new vigour to his heart, and a rush of strength coursed through his body.

Just outside the door, the road ran north and south. Turning to Shashi Shekhar, Hiranand said, "Come, let us take a walk together. I have much to discuss."

As the two men stepped out of the doorway, they saw three children approaching from the north, heading south. Their bodies were thin and dark, their hair tousled by the wind. Each wore only a torn, blackened pair of trousers held up with a string. None of them had any other clothing. In their hands, they carried makeshift bags, corners

of old saris tied together. Chattering happily among themselves, they walked past, their voices carrying clearly to Hiranand.

The boy nicknamed Bengba laughed and said, "We ate so much of yesterday's stale bread with wild greens that it feels like I can't even move. My stomach is stuffed."

Stretching out his right hand, he added, "Smell my hand, it's like the spices got rubbed into it." Then he drew his hand back and asked his friend, "What about you, Roghi? What did you eat?"

Roghi replied with a grin- "My mother told me to go gather dokas. She said that by the time I return, she'll grind flour and make ragi bread. We'll eat it with doka chutney."

Bengba turned to the girl, Kabutri.

"And you, Kabutri?"

Kabutri answered, "My mother went to sell dokas yesterday. On her way back, she bought puffed rice. That's what I ate."

Hearing this, Bengba declared with the authority of a little judge, "Then your meal was the best of all. Today, you'll find the most dokas, I a little less, and Roghi the least."

Roghi protested sharply.

"You act like some great scholar. According to you, I get less, and you both get more. But who among us knows best where the thickest patches of dokas grow? I do. Do you know?"

Embarrassed, Bengba asked, "Then tell us where they are."

"Why should I tell you?" Roghi shot back. "When you found them, did you ever share with me?"

Bengba laughed- "If I shared, would that make me God himself? And even if I told you now, would I give you my share once we get home?"

At this, Roghi fell silent. Hiranand and Shashi Shekhar had been standing quietly, listening to the lively argument. The children soon reached them. With a wave of his hand, Hiranand stopped them.

"Children, where are you going?"

Bengba answered eagerly- "To gather dokas."

"And what will you do with them once you gather them?"

"We eat some ourselves, and our mothers sell the rest. My father says that with the money we get, he'll buy me a shirt and trousers. I'll wear them to Gurhna's wedding when I go with the wedding party."

Hiranand turned to Roghi.

“And you, child?”

Roghi said, “I’m going to gather dokas too. My mother promised that whatever money we get from selling them, she’ll buy me perfumed oil, scented soap, ribbons, and clips for my hair when the Shivratri fair comes.”

Hiranand smiled gently and nodded, thinking to himself how even the poorest children lived by hope. With a glance toward Shashi Shekhar, he said quietly with his eyes, Look, Shashi, see how they live, and see what they hope for.

Then he turned to the third, Kabutri.

“And you, child?”

Kabutri looked into his eyes and said, “My mother said she’ll buy me a frock and a slip with the money from the dokas.”

The morning was slipping away, and Hiranand told them kindly- “Go then.”

The children continued down the road, still talking among themselves.

A little farther along, Kabutri turned to Bengba.

“Bengba, when will you marry?”

At the mention of marriage, joy flickered in Bengba’s eyes. He laughed- “Not yet. When I

went to my uncle's village, my elder brother said that once I grow a little older, he'll take me to Bhubaneswar. There, I'll work. When I earn plenty of money, I'll build a house of brick, and then I'll marry."

Roghi interrupted with a sneer- "And will a weakling like you be able to manage a wife?"

The word wife filled Bengba's heart with delight. Beaming, he said, "You don't know me, Roghi. I'm a man who could manage not one but three wives!"

Kabutri laughed.

"And what will you feed your wife?"

"When I start working in Bhubaneswar, don't you see how much I'll earn? Two thousand rupees a month," Bengba said proudly.

Roghi burst out laughing.

"Two thousand! And how will you even count so much money?"

"Why not?" Bengba retorted. "I'll count it twenty by twenty. With that money, I'll have trousers tailored, buy a fine shirt, a wristwatch, a radio, a mobile phone, and shoes with laces. Then you'll see how I look."

Roghi teased- "And who will give you that job?"

"My brother will. He told me himself. He works for a rich master, and the same master will hire me. The master is very wealthy and has many servants. When I went to my uncle's, my brother came home too. He told me he stays at the master's house. His wages are good, and besides his salary, he earns plenty of extra money.

The master has a daughter who goes to a big school and college. She drives a car herself. Every day, my brother goes with her to school. She studies; he drives. When school is over, they come home together. The young mistress treats my brother with great kindness. She takes him to the cinema and the bazaar. They eat sweets together at big shops. On Diwali, the rich master gives all his servants fine clothes. He gave them to my brother, too. The young mistress, on her own, buys him new trousers and shirts. She even gives him money."

The three children reached the embankment. At once, they scattered in different directions and began to search for dokas. The creepers spread thickly all around, and soon they were busy plucking. After gathering their share, they disappeared down the path.

Back at the doorway, Hiranand turned to Shashi Shekhar and asked, "Shashi, what did you see in those children?"

With a troubled look, Shashi replied, "Brother, watching them filled me with unrest. I saw their tattered clothes, yet I also saw the happiness in their eyes. It was as if they had no concern for the world, completely free of care, absorbed in their own little lives."

Hiranand said, "You are right. But I thought of something else as well. Our society is so vast that within it dwell both beggars and kings. On one side stand palatial mansions; on the other, mud huts. On one side live people who call themselves modern and advanced; on the other, those whose ways belong to the age of primitives.

Such a long history society carries within itself, but few read it, and fewer still who understand it."

"You are right, brother," Shashi agreed.

"Till today, we've only looked at the surface of society. But what we need to see is its inner framework. Everyone notices the waves on the ocean, but who looks beneath to see what lies in the depths?"

Each morning, before the neighbourhood had risen from sleep, Bauelal studied and also taught Sumitra. They managed an hour-sometimes more-of lessons. Because of her curiosity and eagerness, Sumitra quickly mastered the letters. In a single day, she learned from 'a to ya, ra, la, va. From syllables, she progressed to reading simple books and learning to write.

Seeing her study brought joy to her parents. They had long cherished the wish to educate their children, but time and poverty had crushed every hope. Now, with Sumitra's lessons, that hope began to sprout again. Human life, guided by thought and behaviour, always moves forward and reshapes itself.

The bitterness Ram Prasad had once held in his heart toward Anup began to soften. Sumitra's mother even started going to Anup's courtyard and sometimes exchanged vegetables in secret, hiding them from her husband. Yet the old enmity did not vanish completely.

Like a dried streambed regaining its flow at the first rains, education began to reshape the outline of Ram Prasad's household. The old hostility between the brothers gave way to a trickle of

affection.

One day, while Anup had gone to the market to buy chillies, vegetables, and lime, Ram Prasad came several times to his shed looking for him. In his mind, he cursed the half-formed thoughts that had guided his past actions and allowed new, better ones to take root.

That evening, as Anup returned from the market, Ram Prasad came again. Catching sight of Anup, he laughed awkwardly and said, "Brother, you will live long! I've been looking for you since the afternoon. Where had you gone?"

The change in his expression and tone startled Anup. He thought to himself, Has the sun risen from another direction today? How has a lifelong enmity suddenly dissolved?

He remembered the past. His quarrel with Ram Prasad had grown out of half-hearted dealings. For this, he silently thanked Tarakant, who had risked beatings and shame to abolish the custom of forced portorage in the village. As long as Ram Prasad had engaged in that trade, enmity had been natural. But now that he had left it behind, why should Anup cling to the past?

Time had its own current. Life was changing.

People no longer hire porters as before. Goods were now carried by vehicles, not by human shoulders. Many young men had gone away for work. The authority of the old landlords was steadily diminishing.

In answer, Anup said, "I had to go to the market. There were no chillies or lime at home. The lime-seller's mother-in-law had died, so he hadn't come for days. This year, I haven't tasted even a single piece of jackfruit, so my heart was set on buying one."

He went into the courtyard, placed the jackfruit and chilli bundle on the verandah, and set the lime in the corner.

Meanwhile, Ram Prasad sat down on a cot, selecting leaves for a chew of tobacco. Anup returned from the well, having washed his hands and feet, and sat beside him. Passing him the tobacco, Ram Prasad said, "Brother, I've been thinking since the afternoon. Both your oxen and mine are yoked in other villages. Why not leave them there and instead put them together for our own fields? It will be easier for both of us."

Spitting to the side, Anup replied, "Bauelal has been saying the same thing for some time. The

work that takes hours with a single pair of oxen would be done in half the time with two.”

Nodding, Ram Prasad said, “Then tomorrow you speak to your driver, and I’ll speak to mine. From the day after, we’ll plough our fields together.”

Radhia had been sweeping the courtyard, but when she heard their voices, she stood near the hearth, astonished to see them talking face to face after so long.

After they had finished discussing the oxen, Anup said, “It’s getting late. You should head back now. I need to go to the latrine as well.”

Just as a lotus rises clean and pure from muddy water to be offered to God, so Bauelal’s dedication to study began to shine for all. The entire village began to speak of him. With Hiranand’s encouragement, he soon learned to read the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, stories, and poetry. In a village where men wasted their days on cards and gambling, Bauelal’s routine set him apart. His life was taking a new path.

Often, Hiranand would say to him, “Bauelal, the greatest friend of the poor is hard work. Whoever makes hard work his friend will defeat the demon of poverty. Whoever seizes his time and works in

*the right way will enjoy the blessings of this earth
and of life itself.”*

8.

*From Rautu's cart, Ramakant and his two
companions alighted at their station. It was a
night, the small station swallowed by silence. Only*

two men were awake—the station master and the pointsman—who sat inside the office with the door bolted, a single lamp flickering. There wasn't a light on the platform or in the waiting room.

In the darkness, Ramakant and his companions placed their luggage in the waiting room, spread out a rug, and sat down. After two nights of broken sleep and the jolting of the train, their bodies felt heavy with exhaustion. There was no tea stall beside the platform, no shop lit up, no sign of life. By chance, not a single other passenger had disembarked at the stop. The waiting room was theirs alone.

Sleep tugged at Ramakant, but he longed for tea. Finding no way to get it, he rose, paced restlessly, then sat down again beside the luggage. Shyama and Jugesar had already fallen asleep. Still, Ramakant felt uneasy, fearing that if they slept too soundly, thieves might steal their belongings. The whining of mosquitoes offered some small help in staying awake. Shyama and Jugesar had covered their faces with sheets and continued sleeping.

On the platform, fifteen or twenty stray dogs prowled. At the rear of the station, heaps of bones

gave off a strong stench. A trader in Sakri dealt in bones, buying them from village hawkers who collected cattle carcasses and sold the bones here. When the pile grew large, it was shipped out in wagons. Until then, the bones attracted dogs from every corner. Day and night, they gnawed, fought, and lingered near the heaps. Dogs from other villages had even abandoned their homes to live there.

A puppy and a young bitch came down the eastern side of the platform, tails wagging. Another dog caught sight of them and leapt forward. The bitch raised her head, sniffed the intruder, then bared her teeth and pounced. Her companion barked sharply, and in an instant, every dog on the platform rushed toward them, surrounding her. The night echoed with furious barking. Yet the bitch did not flinch. Regal as a queen elephant, she strode westward and sat in front of the ticket office. At once, the other dogs tumbled about her in a riot of snarling and snapping.

Behind the platform, beneath a kadam tree, Dom families had pitched their makeshift shelters. At that very moment, a boy and a girl slipped away westward, whispering and laughing in secret play.

The uproar of the dogs woke one man. Peering into the darkness, he caught sight of the boy and girl together. He didn't call anyone else, but quietly rose and walked toward them. They, too, saw him approach. The boy slipped aside and sat nervously under a bush. The girl, bolder, called softly- "Uncle?"

At the word "uncle," the man said nothing and did not turn back, but kept walking. She crept after him, then laid a hand on his shoulder and whispered again: "Uncle."

At her touch, the man's mind faltered. Like a hunter stumbling upon another's prey, he felt a sudden surge of desire. He placed his hand on her body. Instantly, she shrieked. The boy, who had been watching, leapt up and shouted as well. Their cries roused the camp. Men and women rushed forward.

Hearing the commotion, the station master told the pointsman, "Raghu, there's a disturbance on the platform. Go see what's happening."

But the pointsman replied, "This is a station. People of all kinds come and go. If I go out and thieves sneak in, will you guard everything alone? We both should stay inside. If government

property is stolen, we'll be blamed. There's no security guard here to take the fault."

The station master thought for a moment and said, "You're right."

So, the two of them remained inside, talking, as the lamp burned on. The pointsman glanced through the crack of the door and saw only dogs snapping at each other. In the darkness, he couldn't make out the Dom families beyond.

On one side, the barking of dogs; on the other, the shouts and curses of the Doms filled the night. Ramakant thought to himself, whatever it is, at least the noise keeps our belongings safe. He roused Jugesar and said, "Juge, go see what all the shouting is about."

Jugesar stood up, muttering, "Uncle, why get into trouble? At bus stands and railway stations, there are always quarrels, usually over nothing. Let's stay out of it. Why get involved for no reason?"

As dawn broke, tongawallahs began to arrive. From the north side, temple bells and gongs rang out in the Thakur courtyard. Hearing their sound, Ramakant exhaled deeply in relief. He turned to Jugesar and said, "My head feels heavy from lack of sleep. I hear people quarrelling at the tea stall.

Let me go have a cup of tea. Meanwhile, watch the luggage.”

Ramakant went to the well, rinsed his mouth, drank some water, then headed to the stall, had a cup of tea, chewed a betel leaf, and returned. He said to Jugesar, “Now you go. Have some tea and bring back two tongas.”

Jugesar also washed at the well. Just as he was about to head to the tea stall, a thought occurred to him: It’s still early. Only three or four tongas are here. If I go now and someone else hires them, we’ll be stranded. Better to secure one in advance. Approaching a tongawallah, he asked- “Brother, is your tonga free?”

“Yes.”

“Will you go?”

“Yes, I will.”

The tongawallah’s wife lay ill. He needed to take her to the doctor by ten o’clock. With no money in hand, he had rushed to the station at dawn, hoping to earn at least one or two fares. He needed fifty rupees for medicine, food for the children, fodder for the horse, and ten rupees to pay the bank collector.

I cannot miss this morning’s fare, he thought.

These tongawallahs, what are they worth? They form a union, but it's useless. They meet, they talk, but the moment a few coins come in, each one runs off to drink toddy. They promise mutual help during sickness and hardship, but when have they ever given me anything?

My wife has been sick for fifteen days. I've pawned everything in the house. My horse hasn't had even a fistful of grain. I eat only half my fill. The children are hungry. If they weren't helping, who would care for their mother? I drag the cart beside my horse. If I leave it all to him, he'll die. He is my Lakshmi, my goddess of fortune. Through him alone do I earn money. How can I abandon him?

And my wife, though weak now, has been my companion through all of life. She raised the children while I laboured. The whole household rests on her shoulders.

Still lost in thought, he heard Jugesar ask- "How much will you charge?"

The question of fare made the tongawallah pause. It's morning, and I must reach the doctor as well. If I name a high fare and they refuse, the quarrel will send them to another Tonga, and I'll be left

waiting. Better to load their luggage first and settle the fare later.

So, he said aloud- "Whatever is fair, that I shall take. If I ask you a thousand, will you pay?"

Jugesar laughed and replied, "Very well then, go have your tea first."

The tongawallah, another driver, and Jugesar went to the tea stall. They drank tea, chewed betel, and Jugesar paid. Returning, they loaded the luggage. Shyama and Jugesar climbed into one tonga. Ramakant got into another fight with the bags.

A little way down the road, Ramakant asked the driver, "Your horse looks weak. Don't you feed it properly?"

At this, the tongawallah's eyes filled with helplessness. He looked at Ramakant as if to speak, but his heart, heavy with pain, choked the words. Tears welled up, and wiping them with his towel, he said,

"Sahib, this horse and cart are my life. They feed my family. Since my wife fell ill, all I earn is swallowed up by medicine. Even my children and this horse suffer from a lack of food. What can I do? Somehow, we keep alive. If life remains, the

seasons will turn.”

Hearing this, Ramakant’s heart melted like snow under the sun. He said nothing, only reflected. There are two kinds of helplessness. One is that of idlers who do nothing. The other is of those who labour day and night, yet fate and society conspire against them. This tongawallah belongs to the second kind. Helping such people is an act of dharma. But hardworking men have a pride that won’t let them beg. If I give him something outright, he may feel insulted, and my own heart would ache. How then can I help him?

Lost in thought, he finally asked- “Tell me, how much support would bring you through your present trouble?”

A flicker of hope lit the driver’s face. After quickly reckoning in his mind, he replied- “Sahib, if I had enough for five days of food for my family and horse, and a hundred rupees besides, I could bring my life back on track. Once it’s on the track, it will run on its own. My wife’s treatment, the children, the business, none of these can be left aside.”

From the tongawallah’s words, Ramakant understood the man’s hope for help. Seeing his

expectant face, a quiet joy stirred in Ramakant's heart. A thought flashed through his mind: If instead of five days' provisions, I gave him ten—and instead of one hundred rupees, I gave two—he would not protest. With the assurance of relief, courage too would return to him.

Yet another question arose: There are two tongawallahs. Should I help both, or only this one? The other had spoken nothing of his troubles. It was this man whose heart had opened, whose plight Ramakant had come to understand. So, he resolved: he would help this one. To the other, he would simply ask for the fare and pay it. With the first driver, he would settle generously, then quietly send him on his way. To heal the heart of the poor is the noblest of acts.

Lost in these thoughts, Ramakant reached home. The house was locked; Hiranand had gone to the latrine. The two tongas halted before the gate. They unloaded the luggage and set it in the courtyard. Just then, Hiranand returned from the pondside, wiping his mouth with water, and saw the tongas at the door. At once, he knew Ramakant had arrived.

Unlocking the house, he welcomed them in.

Together, they carried everything inside. Ramakant paid the second driver his fare and dismissed him, while with a glance, he signalled the first to wait. Then he gave him two hundred rupees and ten days' provisions, two measures of gram and three of rice.

Overwhelmed, the tongawallah mounted his cart, humming as he left, tears glistening in his eyes- "You remember everyone, O Baba, why have you forgotten me..."

Removing his sweat-soaked kurta and vest, Ramakant laid them on the cot. His body was weary, but his heart rejoiced at having reached home safely. Before Hiranand could ask anything, Ramakant himself inquired- "How are things in the village?"

"All well," Hiranand replied, then asked, "And how was your journey?"

"What can I say of the journey?" Ramakant smiled faintly. "My mind is still clouded, and I haven't bathed in three days. Let me bathe first, then I'll tell you everything."

The four cartons given to Jugesar at his farewell in Madras had been carried in. His wife and children came to meet him. Proudly, he said,

"These are ours. Come, let's take them into the courtyard."

At the word ours, his family burst with joy. Together, they carried the boxes home.

News of Ramakant's return spread through the village like wildfire. From children to elders, people flocked to see him. A crowd gathered at the gate. Putting aside his own fatigue, Ramakant said to Jugesar, "Juge, bring the cartons of gifts here. Distribute two pieces to Chetan and one each to the children. Let no one say they received nothing."

Jugesar opened the cartons. The villagers pressed forward eagerly. Coconuts were broken and shared. One box emptied quickly, then another, yet still the people kept coming.

When the crowd finally thinned, Ramakant sighed deeply and said, "Now go, Juge. Wash, eat, and rest. I must bathe as well."

In his courtyard, Jugesar opened his own four cartons. In Madras, he hadn't seen what lay inside, and curiosity now burned in him. Each box bore the gifts of a friend: Dr Mahendra, Dr Ravindra, Dr Jamuna, and Dr Sujata.

From Mahendra's carton came a pair of dhotis, a

piece of kurta cloth, blouse fabric, a bedsheet, a towel, and a pair of shoes for Jugesar; for his wife, a sari, blouse piece, and slippers; for his children, trousers, shirts, and three hundred rupees in cash. The other boxes also held clothes, shoes, and gifts for each member of the family.

Seeing all this, joy flooded their household. The children donned their new clothes at once and danced in the courtyard. Never before had they touched garments so fine. For Jugesar and his wife, their hearts swelled with gratitude. He thought silently, if we wear these sparingly, they will last us for years. Such rich clothes have never been our fortune until today.

Jugesar's eyes lingered on the gifts, while another gaze rested tenderly on his wife's eyes. In both, it seemed as if the spring of life itself had arrived. He recalled their wedding. A deep longing stirred in him to draw his wife close and press her to his chest, and she, too, felt a desire to merge wholly into him. But Jugesar's body was weary from three days of travel, and drowsiness pulled at his eyelids.

He said to his wife, "Keep one set of clothes and shoes aside to wear, and carefully store away the

rest.”

The afternoon wore on. Bathed and dressed in a new dhoti and vest, with a towel over his shoulder, Jugesar went to Ramakant's house. Ramakant was asleep in the doorway. In the courtyard, Jugesar looked around for Shyama to see whether she too was resting, but she had already risen and washed. She looked at him steadily, smiled, and teased- “Today you look like a bridegroom returning from afar, Jugesar.”

Laughing, Jugesar replied, “Aunt, these are gifts from brother Mahendra.”

At the mention of Mahendra's name, Shyama's face lit up.

“May God reward him! And what else did he give?” she asked with joy.

Jugesar said, “Aunt, what can I tell you? Clothes and shoes enough for all of us, from all four of them, enough to last a lifetime.”

Hearing of her son's generosity, Shyama's heart swelled with delight.

“Did they give money too, or only clothes?” she asked eagerly.

“I didn't count, Aunt, but it looked like ten or fifteen notes were tucked in.”

“Wonderful! Has Master seen them yet?”

“He’s asleep. I dressed and came just to show him.”

“Then I’ll make tea. Go wake him.”

“Very well.”

Saying this, Jugesar went to the doorway to rouse Ramakant. When Ramakant opened his eyes, he glanced at the clock on the wall. Four o’clock. He reckoned the length of his nap and muttered- “Such slumber never came to me even in youth!” Rising from the bed, he told Jugesar, “Go make the tea. Even now, my eyes feel heavy. I’ll go wash first.”

As he relieved himself, Ramakant felt the pressure of tea still lingering in his bladder. He also realised he had passed water more times than usual. At the well, he rinsed his eyes and ears, washed his mouth, and drank deeply. With that drink, half his sleep seemed to lift away.

Jugesar brought the tea. As Ramakant sipped it, Hiranand returned from school, and Shashi Shekhar arrived too. Hiranand asked- “How was the journey, Jugesar?”

Smiling, Jugesar replied, “On the way, the train was so crowded! Not once could I stretch or sleep.

The reserved seats were always taken. Wherever I sat, people just kept pouring in. At every station, two got off and twenty climbed aboard. But by God's grace, I reached safely. At Madras station, I saw people of another kind, not like at home, where all colours and castes mix. There, most were dark, though some were fair. And when I reached the house, it was so grand, I could hardly believe it was ours, vast rooms, no shortage of space."

"Did you get to see everything properly?" Hiranand asked.

"What can I say, Master? Brother Mahendra kept us riding around in his motor car the whole day. The car was so comfortable that wherever we sat, we felt sleepy. What I saw, I hardly remember."

News of Ramakant's return from Madras brought with it another visitor, Subudh, Mahendra's old schoolmate, who now taught at the local high school. Mahendra and Subudh had studied together up to that level, Mahendra in science, Subudh in the arts. After graduation, Subudh became a teacher, while Mahendra went on to study medicine.

After inquiring about Mahendra's well-being, Subudh asked Ramakant, "What difference did

you notice between the people here and those in Madras?"

Comparing both places, Ramakant replied, "The difference is as wide as the sky and the earth. The people there are more hardworking and honest."

Shashi Shekhar interrupted- "What do you mean by hardworking?"

"Before comparing people, consider the soil and water," Ramakant explained. "Our land is rich and fertile, soft to the touch, and our water is sweet. But in Madras, the earth is poor, and the heat is greater than ours. Yet their people are diligent. Our people tend to be lazy; they give no value to time. Or if they do, they live parasitically. A few live with dignity and are worthy of respect, but even they are burdened by the disorder in society. In Madras, people move in step with time. Though their soil is less fertile, they manage life better. They consider begging shameful and never stretch their hands. But here, people treat begging as though it were a profession."

Subudh asked- "And how is their education?"

"I saw schools, colleges, and universities. Boys and girls often study in separate institutions, though

sometimes they study together. There are more girls in school there than here. If our boys lag, what can we say of the girls? On trains and buses, there are separate arrangements for men and women. But here, everyone jostles together without concern.”

Subudh asked- “And what about their food?”

“The food of the poor is meagre and austere. Yet, in one sense, our way is better. Our clothing, too, in its own style, is finer than theirs.”

Even as he spoke, Ramakant glanced at Jugesar, signalling him to bring out a bottle of brandy. Jugesar went inside and returned with one. At the doorway, he rinsed the tea glasses and filled each one to the brim. Ramakant lifted his first glass and drank it down in a single draught.

Hiranand, Shashi Shekhar, and Subudh hesitated. None of them had ever tasted liquor before, and a quiet fear held them back.

Ramakant, glass in hand, urged them- “Drink! It’s nothing but fruit juice. It will do you no harm.”

Still, they sat, looking at one another. Ramakant drained his second glass and pressed them again. Subudh thought to himself, It’s no poison. If men were to die of it, wouldn’t the elders have gone

before us? Better to know than to sit doubting. Taking up his glass, he sipped cautiously, then said to Hiranand- "Master, drink, drink! The taste is not unpleasant."

Encouraged, Hiranand and Shashi Shekhar lifted their glasses. Meanwhile, Ramakant downed a third. A flush rose to his eyes, his limbs grew light, and his speech quickened. Like water rising to a boil, heat spread through him, lifting words from the depths of his heart.

Shashi Shekhar asked- "Uncle, does Mahendra live in such merriment there?"

Already warmed by the liquor, Ramakant grew bolder.

"Seeing his earnings, I was shaken. A grand house, four motorcars, influence in the bazaar, money heaped in banks. He has no need for our property here. Why would he? His own wealth overflows!"

Subudh interjected- "Then give these fields here to the poor."

Without hesitation, Ramakant cried out- "What a noble thought! Why should I hoard these acres? In the hands of the poor, the land would yield more, and lives would be uplifted. As it is, a landlord's field feeds only one family, while

hundreds go hungry. That is grave injustice! All men are men alike. Why should some toil and starve while others' grain rots in storehouses?"

Jugesar was called to bring betel with cardamom. As he left, Baulaal arrived, bowed, and sat down beside them. Ramakant, his eyes gleaming, turned to Hiranand.

"Master, Mahendra has advised me: send one boy and one girl from the village to Madras. We'll keep them with us and teach them to treat common ailments. Here, people die for want of medicine. Poverty strangles them, and in the absence of doctors, they perish. So, we'll build a small hospital where treatment will be free. Whatever costs arise for medicines, we four brothers will bear. Each of us will return one month a year to serve here. Meanwhile, the two, once trained, will look after ordinary illnesses. If any grave disease appears, we will cover the expenses for that too. Send two people to Madras, we'll provide their stipend!"

At these words, all agreed that Baulaal and Sumitra should be sent. Hiranand turned to him and said, "Baulaal, you've heard everything. Tomorrow, you and Sumitra will leave for Madras."

Tossing and turning, Hiranand remained awake throughout the night. At times, he pondered how the land donated by Ramakant could be distributed among the community. Then again, Ramakant's generous spirit and his act of renunciation would vividly return to his mind. Yet doubts also crept in, what if it was merely the intoxication of liquor that had led him to make such declarations? And when the effects wore off, would he retract his words? For the wealthy, breaking promises seemed almost second nature. But I am a teacher, Hiranand reminded himself. Respect for teachers has always existed in society, and always will. In that case, if we two teachers—Subudh and I—backed away, how could we face the community?

Hiranand found himself trapped in this strange dilemma. Soon, he began to question his own actions. Was I, too, under the influence of alcohol, speaking out of turn? The thought startled him. He got up from his bed and stepped outside to look around. The darkness was thick, the night eerily still; nothing was visible even at arm's length. Yet the sky was clear, and the stars

glittered like water chestnut blossoms. Though the air was still, the night remained cool. Returning indoors, he lay down again, but sleep still evaded him. Thoughts of the land persisted.

Later, when he felt the call of nature, he stepped out into the yard. Relieving himself brought a sense of ease and lightness. With that comfort, he returned to bed, and finally, sleep overtook him. Subudh too had spent the night awake. Yet unlike Hiranand, he was not lost in confusion. As a sociology teacher, his mind was clear and his vision for society well defined. Determination and purpose filled his thoughts. Still, he kept reflecting: just as a society weakened by poverty gains strength when supported, that strength too must be given direction. And that was something Ramakant Kaka could not provide.

Ramakant, driven by honesty and generosity, was prepared to renounce his property. But how would that property evolve? Just as a family progresses at a double, triple, or even quadruple pace, so too should property grow. And such growth would come only when labour was harnessed to drive it forward.

There was no shortage of labourers to power that

engine. The real challenge lay in how to channel their efforts. One approach was to reshape them into new roles, assign them unfamiliar tasks. But that required new tools and methods, which in turn demanded new knowledge. Another way was to refine the tools and skills they already possessed. In this lies both possibility and suitability. But even this path required a guide, one whose absence was deeply felt.

After all, I too am employed, Subudh reflected. Out of seven days, I spend only one Sunday in the village; the rest of the week, I am away. How, then, can progress be made?

Society is vast, its problems numerous, and each issue requires a distinct solution.

As the Buddha once said, if an enemy finds even the tiniest opening, he will force an elephant through it. Society's problems are no different.

Detached from worldly ties, a thought stirred in Subudh's heart: Just as Ramakant Kaka is ready to give away all his property to society, I too must resign from my job and offer my knowledge to the people. Though I possess knowledge, I continue walking the same stale, decaying path, for the sake of my own comfort.

There are seven bighas of land, a pond, ten kathas of orchard, and a grove of bamboos. With these, my father lived well and educated me. And what have I done? Nothing more than clinging to a salaried position. The fields remain untouched. How much progress have I truly made?

Yes, one thing has changed: I have turned my wife and children into idols of wealth, feeding them offerings of comfort, adorning them with fine things, and in doing so, made them idle.

Do I not see men with their bones protruding from their chests pulling rickshaws all day? Do I not see sixty-year-old women roasting rice flakes by smoky chimneys? Or men on the verge of death ploughing fields, hunched under the weight of grain? Is their flesh made of iron while ours is made of cotton?

This is the deception of wealth and intellect. Society, and those who shape its laws, have long thrived on this illusion. But reform is inevitable. Otherwise, what will distinguish human beings from beasts?

In a world where people are forced to live like animals, should not the enlightened drown themselves in shame in even a single drop of

water?

These thoughts stirred a firm resolve in Subudh. Tomorrow I will submit my resignation at the school. The life I've lived so far is enough. A new life must begin.

Between such resolution and lingering doubt, his thoughts circled endlessly.

At dawn, Subudh rose from bed and set off toward the fields, a water pot in hand. But his mind remained caught in those same reflections. A short distance on, he heard a commotion rising from the village. He paused to listen. What could it be?

No one appeared on the path from whom he could ask. He speculated: Had there been a mishap during the night? A snakebite? A theft?

But it was none of these.

The idea Ramakant had spoken of the previous evening had spread like wildfire through the village.

Subudh turned back, plucked a twig of karchi to clean his teeth, and walked home. At the entrance to the courtyard, he saw Sukan sitting. But Sukan's gaze wasn't on him; it was fixed on the gate.

“Sukan,” Subudh asked, “why are you here so early in the morning?”

Startled, Sukan rose from the cot, folded his hands respectfully, and replied, “Master, you know well that in every task and effort, we come together to manage things. Please look after the poor.”

Subudh couldn’t make sense of Sukan’s words. He asked, “Sukan bhai, I don’t understand. What are you trying to say?”

Sukan said, “People are saying that Ramakant Kaka is giving all his land to the poor, and that you will be the one to distribute it.”

Hearing this, Subudh fell silent. This is a matter of land and property, he thought. I cannot speak hastily. If the matter is discussed openly among the villagers, it may cause an uproar. And in uproar, the work could collapse. Careful thought is needed.

Still, if I say this to Sukan now, he’ll feel discouraged. It’s better to give him a word of hope. So he said, “Sukan bhai, when the land is divided among the poor, you too are one of them. Why shouldn’t you receive your share? For now, go ahead.”

Sukan departed. Standing in the heat of yesterday's words, Subudh found himself trapped in a strange dilemma. On one side was the question of the poor. Even the slightest misstep could leave him burdened with a lifetime of blame. Honesty was essential.

Yet every time he looked toward honesty, he saw dishonesty creeping in from within himself, from his family, and from society. Even among the poor, he had noticed that some, through hard work, had earned and built much: homes to live in, hand-pumps for clean water, and, with sharecropping, cattle tied in their yards. But those who were idle had nothing.

Even if I wish to act honestly, Subudh thought, there will still be complications. I'm not alone in this. Others are involved too. It isn't guaranteed that every leader will treat people equally. If someone tries to distribute land with favouritism and I oppose it, will they listen? That is unlikely. And if Ramakant Kaka himself wants to favour someone, what could I say? It is his property, after all.

Lost in this forest of thoughts, Subudh's mind wandered. The twig in his hand, which he was

using to clean his teeth, moved now and then, at times active, at times still. A sleepless night behind him and now this mental entanglement clinging like a creeping vine, it wasn't easy to untangle. A little pressure, and everything might snap. His mind remained unsettled. If the root disease of society isn't gripped firmly, he thought, everything will dissolve into chaos.

Just then, Munma entered the courtyard, carrying a pot of milk. She placed it down and, folding her hands humbly, said- "Brother, please show mercy on us poor."

Subudh's mind was already burdened, and her request only added to his agitation. With barely restrained irritation, he said, "Go now. When the land is divided, you too will be called."

After brushing his teeth and washing his face, Subudh stepped into the courtyard and asked his wife, "What did Munma bring in the pot?"

"Milk."

"Did you pay her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I thought you had sent her."

Hearing her reply, Subudh felt a surge of anger.

He said curtly, "Go make tea quickly. I have to go to school."

His wife, startled, asked, "Why are you leaving for school so early? You usually eat before going. Why not today?"

"The game of last night is still stuck in my throat. I won't eat now."

Saying this, Subudh changed from his lungi into a dhoti. Just as he was putting on his kurta, his wife brought him tea. He drank it, finished dressing, and set off for school.

Never in his life had Ramakant slept as peacefully as he did that night. When Jugesar, judging by his sense of time, arrived at the window and cleared his throat as a signal, he found Ramakant Kaka in a deep sleep, snoring soundly.

Seeing him still asleep, Jugesar knocked loudly on the door. The noise roused Ramakant, who rubbed his eyes and got up. Jugesar stepped into the courtyard to fetch tea. Ramakant, too, came out and rinsed his mouth at the well. By the time he returned, Jugesar was at the doorway with the tea.

As Ramakant sipped, a thought stirred in his mind: Acharya Chanakya was indeed right when he said, "For whom should wealth be kept?" This wealth was earned by my father. While he was alive, I hardly gave it any thought. But after his passing, it all became mine. Now, my two sons earn handsomely and do not need it. How many more days do I have left? Eventually, this wealth will be wasted, picked at by crows and dogs. Better to give it away to the poor and needy. Just as the Tibetan prince Chenpo of the eighth and ninth centuries gave away all his wealth to the

people, so will I. This will strengthen the bonds of brotherhood in society.

If Sage Vyasa were alive today, he would surely come unbidden to bless me. If the path to heaven lies in renunciation, then why shouldn't I walk it? I owe gratitude to Subudh and Hiranand Master, who opened my eyes. When my sons and daughters-in-law hear of this, they will be glad at heart. Will not the virtue of my action also belong to them?

After drinking his tea and chewing betel, Ramakant took a water pot and walked toward the orchard. Under a Krishna-bhog mango tree, he set the pot down and strolled about, gazing at the trees.

That morning, the trees appeared in a form he had never seen before. It was as if each leaf was laughing, imbued with the power of the earth, vibrant and eager to serve.

Moved by the vision, Ramakant's heart swelled with emotion. Lifting the pot, he made his way to the latrine. Just then, a sound reached his ears, cheering and chants of victory. Faint at first, distant and unclear, yet unmistakable. Gradually, the sound grew louder. As he finished, he listened

intently. Amidst the shouts of praise, he heard his own name. Startled, he cupped his hand to his ear to hear more clearly.

The closer the crowd came, the more distinct the sound. Pot still in hand, he hurried to the pond's edge, rinsed himself, and returned home. Hearing his name echo in their cheers filled him with curiosity. What was happening? Why were they chanting his name?

His chest began to throb; a delightful thrill rose within him. His heart swelled with excitement.

By the time the procession reached the house, Ramakant was already at the door, looking out. Hiranand and Shashi Shekhar stood on the verandah, watching and listening. Old and young, children and women, all spoke in one voice. All were cheerful, eager, dancing, radiant with laughter.

The procession halted at the threshold. At the front were five men in horse costumes, prancing, galloping, neighing, and rearing on their hind legs. Behind them, the beats of drums and melodies of flutes spread the fragrance of spring. Many danced to the rhythm, shouting praises.

Ramakant, overwhelmed with joy, could no longer

restrain himself. He descended from the verandah and leapt into the procession, dancing with abandon.

Young and old, great and small, surged together like a flood. From every house, women poured out and joined the growing celebration.

From the courtyard, Shyama stepped forward and stood at the door, her gaze fixed on Ramakant. Watching him dance, she thought to herself: What is happening? People dance out of joy when they receive something. But what has he gained that he leaps like this in old age?

Shyama's understanding was limited, and so she could not grasp that when a river merges into the sea, its current dances and swirls as it meets the still waters of the ocean. On one side flows the river, restless and swift; on the other lies the vast, steady ocean, where only waves rise and fall. This is only natural.

Until now, the procession and dance had come from the northern quarter of the village. But now, another procession approached from the south, accompanied by peacock and peahen dancers. Between the two processions, the entire village opened its heart and danced in shared joy.

Standing to the side, Hiranand said to Shashi Shekhar, "This bliss we see, how could it remain in society every day?"

Shashi Shekhar found no words to reply. Yet the question echoed in his mind. It was a profound question, and to answer hastily would not be right, so he remained silent. But within him, a thought stirred: If people continue to walk with zeal upon the path of good deeds, surely such joy could endure for a lifetime.

In the midst of the procession, Ramakant danced until he was drenched in sweat. Yet his heart urged him to continue. A young, strong, broad-shouldered man came forward while dancing, caught Ramakant with both hands, hoisted him onto his shoulders, and danced with him held aloft. Seeing Ramakant raised high, still dancing, the crowd erupted in applause and shouted praises.

Hiranand, standing nearby, grew uneasy, fearing Ramakant Babu might fall. He rushed into the crowd and helped bring him down safely.

Once set down, Ramakant immediately resumed clapping and dancing. Raising both hands, Hiranand signalled the people to be silent. At his

gesture, the crowd hushed. Wiping the sweat from his brow with the end of his dhoti, Ramakant declared- "I tell you all: the fields and lands that were mine until now, from this moment, belong to you."

At his words, laughter burst forth from every mouth, like grains of parched rice spilling from a brimming basket. A society that had long wilted under the burden of poverty now blossomed with new flowers of joy. Laughing and chattering, the people gradually dispersed toward their homes.

Leaving his house, Subudh went straight to his quarters. There, he wrote out his resignation. After settling all accounts with his hostel-mates, he went to the school. Handing the letter to the headmaster, he said, "Sir, from today I can no longer serve."

As he turned to leave, the headmaster rose quickly from his chair and called out, "Subudh Babu, please wait a moment!"

At his request, Subudh paused and smiled. "What is it, Master?"

The headmaster's heart raced, and his words came in a rush.

"Subudh Babu, you've taken this decision in

haste. I urge you to withdraw your application."

With a calm and steady voice, Subudh replied, "Sir, until now, I remained with you. But now, I am going to walk with the renunciants. I have no desire to linger here, not even for a moment. I feel no sorrow, none at all. Until today, I lived a private life; now, I will live a public one. For this, I ask only your blessing."

On one side, Subudh's face glowed with a new radiance; on the other, the headmaster's countenance dimmed.

News of Subudh's resignation spread quickly among the teachers. One by one, they left their rooms and gathered in the headmaster's chamber. Folding his hands, Subudh addressed them—"Brothers, I have lived my life alongside you until now. If ever I have erred or fallen short, please forgive me. Until today, I was lost in the world of books and theories. But now, I go to bring that knowledge down to the ground of practice."

Just as a lotus remains pale before sunrise but gradually reddens as it receives the morning sun, so too did Subudh's heart change when it was touched by the blazing light of society. Stepping briskly down from the school verandah, he walked

away with firm, resolute steps.

Seeing his quick pace, Vivek Babu lengthened his stride and joined him, saying, "Subudh bhai, what you've done, you've done out of conviction. I have no objection. When you joined this school, you understood life in one way. Today, you understand it differently. Back then, you acted according to your beliefs of that time; today, you're guided by new understanding. But my bond with you is not only as a fellow teacher, it's also as a fellow student."

Subudh and Vivek had been companions since high school. From school to college, they studied side by side. Subudh was three days older than Vivek, a fact neither of them ever remembered. In both school and college, Subudh had consistently been the better student, always scoring slightly higher marks than Vivek. Though both passed in the same division, there was always a small gap between their scores. Vivek saw Subudh as his senior.

An example of this was the day they were appointed to the school. Though Vivek's documents were processed first, he requested the headmaster to list Subudh as the third teacher

and himself as the fourth. Even when appointment letters were revised later, the headmaster kept this order in the official register. Subudh's heart held the same deep affection for Vivek.

Together, they returned to Subudh's quarters. On arrival, Vivek's wife served tea to both men and quietly withdrew, standing silently by the window. Vivek's heart trembled at the breaking of a lifelong bond, and in a wavering voice, he asked, "Just a day ago, you said nothing of this. How did you make such a sudden decision?"

Smiling, Subudh replied, "It wasn't planned. When I went to the village this time, the thought came to me. Just as the gods and demons once churned the ocean together, so too has the time come for society to be churned. For that, society needs me. I, too, am a learned man of society. That is why, to fulfil my duty, I have left my job."

Vivek Babu remained silent. Seeing his friend so quiet, Subudh continued, "To attain a great life, service is essential. If salaried employment alone is to be called service, then what do we call the farmer who toils in the fields? He too labours, sowing for wages, just as an employee does. Of

course, earning is necessary to fill one's stomach. Without income, what will one eat? And what will one feed others? The hungry must be fed, whether with food for the body or nourishment for the mind.

Therefore, whether it is a job or any other form of livelihood, if it is carried out honestly and directed toward a higher purpose, that is true service. This is true whether it lies in the field of knowledge or in fulfilling life's basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, education, and health.

Knowledge, when it becomes service, has real value only when it unites with life and takes the form of action. If it remains only on the plane of thought, what difference can it make? Mithila, after all, never lacked great thinkers. Many were born there and showed paths for human salvation. Yet even today, society remains bound by the same conditions that existed thousands of years ago.

Yes, some progress has been made. This is also true. But those who advanced intellectually or economically, did they extend a hand to lift the weaker ones forward? Or did they push them further behind? That is the question before us.

If the purpose had truly been to uplift others, then why were so many castes, sects, and rituals created? The powers of both the state and society have only pushed the marginalised further behind. So be it. Let it be. I will not stay here another moment. My path leads to Ramakant Kaka, who must even now be waiting for me."

Vivek Babu gently held Subudh by both arms and sat him down. Turning to his wife, he said, "Quickly set the meal. Subudh bhai seems in a hurry to leave."

After the meal, Subudh took his leave from Vivek Babu's home. Folding his hands, Vivek said softly—"Keep us in your care as well."

The moment Subudh entered the village boundary, he forgot all about his own home. The entire village began to feel like his family. Fixing his gaze on the fields, ponds, groves, and orchards, he thought to himself: If this wealth of land could be cultivated properly, if work were organised systematically and progressively, then surely happiness would return to the people.

Until now, the fields had become barren, and the ponds and thickets had dried up. Most troubling of all was that man himself, crushed under

pressure, had become so diminished that only the shell of humanity remained. A new consciousness, new methods, and the use of modern tools and techniques were needed. Only then could the shrivelled form of winter be transformed into the blossoming form of spring.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Subudh reached Rajinder's house and stopped. Rajinder's home was divided into three sections. One part of the courtyard was covered with mats. The southern building stored grain and also served as the sitting room. In this sitting area, two cots were kept, one for Rajinder himself and the other for guests.

Seeing Subudh, Rajinder folded his hands in greeting, respectfully seated him on the guest cot, and called out toward the doorway- "Master sahib has come. Bring a pot of water at once!"

Hearing him, his wife Gulbiya brought a lota of water and stood shyly at the threshold. Seeing her cover her face, Rajinder said, "Don't you recognise him? He's Subudh bhai! Why are you hiding your face?"

Subudh smiled and said, "Though I live in the village, I've become a stranger! Since I took up

service, I drifted away. Coming only once a week, I never had time to walk about, so people no longer recognise me. But now, I've left the job to live here in the village. Now you'll recognise me." Hearing this, Rajinder told his wife, "Subudh bhai is a great man. Since he has stepped onto our threshold, how can we let him leave without food or drink? Go, pluck four ears of corn from the garden and roast them."

At her husband's words, Gulbiya smiled and went out.

Rajinder turned to Subudh and asked, "Brother, why did you give up your job?"

Not wishing to reveal the full truth, Subudh replied, "I didn't find joy in it. I have my own fields and land. Now I'll take up farming."

Soon, Gulbiya returned with four roasted ears of maize. She placed them before Subudh on a plate with salt and chilli, then sat down on the floor. Seeing the maize, Subudh was pleased. Taking one ear in hand, he carefully examined the grains. They were plump and flawless. Admiring them, he said,

"Such fine maize. On our own land, too, if cultivated properly, it could yield just as well. In

Begusarai, Saharsa, and Muzaffarpur, I've seen families grow prosperous from maize farming. They harvest it year-round. As the crop, so the yield, five to six maunds per katha. And it's delicious. You can make bread, flour cakes, roasted kernels, satua, everything. Maize satua with peanuts is like nectar, even for those without teeth."

Holding the ear of maize in his left hand and plucking a grain with the fingers of his right to put in his mouth, Subudh asked- "Rajinder bhaiya, how many children do you have?"

Rajinder remained silent, but Gulbiya replied, "Three brothers and sisters. The eldest daughter is married and doing well at her in-laws'. The second was married too, but her husband went missing. He was working in Delhi but disappeared. No letters, no money, no trace. We kept her at her in-laws' for six months and then brought her back. People coming from Delhi say different things. Some claim he remarried, some say he went to the Gulf, others say he joined the army or became a militant. Nothing is certain. In the end, we brought her back. She has been living with us for the past four years. But there are

such loafers and rogues in the village who have no respect for a woman's honour."

Pointing with his hand, Rajinder said, "Do you see that house? In that courtyard, there's a boy who sometimes goes to buy fish and sometimes accompanies people who take photographs. We, both husband and wife, spent our days in the fields and orchards. We hardly paid attention to the amusements of the village. Only when people started gossiping did I begin to worry. My elder daughter was home at the time. I asked her, and she took the boy with her. I didn't arrange another marriage for her, thinking her husband might still be alive. Later, she married her elder sister's husband. Both sisters now live in the same house and share affection. We also have a younger son, and he's married as well."

Smiling, Subudh asked, "What did you give in dowry?"

At the mention of dowry, Gulbiya laughed and said, "The matchmaker himself came, along with the girl's uncle. As soon as they entered the courtyard, Bhola's father began asking questions. I was sitting there, plastering cow-dung cakes. I had tied a cloth around my waist, the end of my

sari was slung over my neck, and both my hands were smeared with dung. How could I adjust my sari with hands like that? So, I just kept working as I was. Who was there to recognise me anyway? He didn't know me, and I didn't know him. He was a stranger, and so was I. But he was a human being, and so am I, so why should there be any shame between us?"

Hearing her words, Rajinder clenched his teeth and interrupted- "Even at this age, you haven't learned any restraint? You speak whatever comes into your mind."

Suppressing Rajinder's words, Gulbiya replied, "What lie have I told, that I should feel ashamed? Is Master Babu an outsider, that I should go beating the drum about it in the streets?"

Intervening, Subudh asked, "What happened after that?"

"Then he too came. Both of them sat on the cot and began talking. My work was finished, so I went into the courtyard. After washing my hands and feet, I stood quietly at the back and listened. The girl's uncle seemed a bit boastful, but the father was very steady. Poor man, he spoke so gently. He said, 'Look, your son and my daughter,

in this world, everyone lives only for their sons and daughters. Just as you are, so am I. Just as you live on salt and bread, so do I. Letting grain be stolen by crows is foolishness. I married my elder daughter with one lakh rupees in cash, with such pomp that even the sixty thousand in my bank account was gone. I will not do such a thing again. For this daughter and son-in-law, I will provide a hand pump, build a two-room house, give a pair of cows or buffaloes, along with clothes, utensils, firewood, and all other necessary items. I will bear all the marriage expenses. You won't have to spend a thing, because whatever is spent will ultimately belong to them.'

"I liked the proposal. But my mind was restless. The men were doing all the talking, and I thought, if any quarrel arose later between the families, neither kinship would remain nor honor. My thoughts grew uneasy. I hoped he would bring it up himself, but he didn't. I folded my hands to signal my agreement, but still, he said nothing. What could I do? The match was good, but if even a small obstacle came up, everything would be ruined. So finally, I went to the door myself, stood before him, and said, 'Brother, the matchmaker

has spoken well. Let us marry Bhola.'

"After saying this, I returned to the courtyard, prepared sherbet, and served it to all three of them. The bond was sealed. The marriage took place on the next auspicious date."

By then, Subudh had finished eating the four roasted ears of corn, and the conversation came to an end. After drinking water, he began walking toward his home. But after covering a short distance, he paused, wondering whether he should go home or head to Ramakant Kaka's place instead.

At the crossroads, he stopped and thought. One part of his mind urged him to rest; after all, he had been active the entire day, and rest was necessary. But another part whispered that if, in youth, one started seeking rest, life itself would slip away.

Lost in thought, Subudh reflected that the news of his resignation must have reached home by now. With a restless heart, he turned away from the road to Ramakant's house and, taking a narrow lane through Malhatoli, made his way toward his own home. As he drew near, everything seemed transformed, as though the world itself

had been swept up in joy. Even the chirping at the doorstep sounded sweet to his ears.

Reaching the courtyard, he removed his kurta, placed it on the cot, and called out to his wife-
“Bring me a lota of water. I’m very thirsty.”

Hearing her husband’s voice, Kishori came with the water. Taking the lota from her hand, Subudh drank deeply and said, “From today, I’ve left my job. I handed in my resignation at the school.”

Startled, Kishori looked at him. But since jesting often passed between husband and wife, she could hardly believe him. Smiling, she said, “Well done. Earlier, you came to visit once every eight days. Now we’ll meet day and night. That suits me too.”

Hearing her reply, Subudh realised she had taken his words as a joke. He repeated- “You think I’m joking? I’m speaking the truth.”

Taking a copy of the resignation from his pocket, he showed it to her.

“Here, look. The paper.”

Just then, Mangala arrived. Seeing him, Kishori grew shy. Smiling, Subudh turned to him and said, “Uncle, I’ve left my job. Now I’ll stay in the village, work the fields, and serve society as best

as I can.”

Hearing this, Mangala replied, “My boy, I may be older in years, but you are educated, a teacher. Surely, you’ve made this decision knowing what is best.”

His words reassured Subudh. Smiling, he said, “Uncle, unless educated people live among the villagers and take part in building society, how will it ever progress?”

As Subudh and Mangala were conversing, Kishori suddenly began to wail in the courtyard. Subudh understood, and he sat uneasily. Hearing her sudden cry, people from the neighbourhood began to rush in. Soon, the courtyard was filled with a crowd.

The young wife was asked, “What has happened that you’re crying like this?”

But she did not answer. She only wept louder. Her companions—Phool, Paan, Gulab, Kadam, Chaan—Kishori’s friends, all asked her the same question—“What happened?”

The more they asked, the louder she cried. No one could make sense of it. Guesses and rumours spread like wildfire. Everyone imagined something different.

Seated at the gate, Subudh inwardly rejoiced. He thought, unless men and women cast aside the old ways and adopt the new, how can a new society be born? This was not just a question for society but for the family, and for every human being. So, he remained silent.

It was the evening hour. From the pastures, cows, buffaloes, and goats returned home. Women with bundles of grass on their heads, and others carrying baskets of cow dung to spread, were returning through the lanes.

Budhni and Somni, with grass loads on their heads, came near Subudh's house and heard the crying. They guessed it was Subudh's wife. Somni said to Budhni, "Sister, put your bundle down. Let's see what's going on."

Budhni replied, "Why bother, sister? Listening to the fuss of these fancy folk, what good is it? All day, they sip tea and think that's the whole world. Whatever happens to the men, the women act like queens. While we're here breaking our backs, going through the village, stacking grass, gathering wood, washing utensils, why waste time over their fuss? Let's go."

Shaking her head, Somni said, "You're right,

sister. Everyone cries according to their own comforts. We're lucky, we earn, we eat, and we live in peace. Listening to these painted women makes me want to spit in their faces."

11.

All day, Subudh's mind was weighed down by a single unease: in this village, where enthusiasm had soared so high, what if unrest suddenly erupted, like the gusty winds that blow before dawn? Society is unpredictable; who can say what people might say or leave unsaid? Dissatisfaction could ignite at any moment. His heart whispered that the village's so-called intellectuals, over

matters of land and money, might stir discord. To obstruct the people's momentum is perilous, just as slamming the brakes on a speeding cart may cause a crash, so too might negligence in this work lead to disaster. Yet who would know that he had been caught in such thoughts all day? To the villagers, it would simply seem as though their concerns were being ignored.

With these anxieties swirling inside him, Subudh set out to meet Ramakant. By then, dusk had fallen. A short distance ahead, near Suraitiya's house, he overheard a group of half a dozen men talking.

"The drum of land distribution was beaten by Ramakant Kaka," one said, "but is he truly dividing anything? Who among us is free from greed? Do you think he'll actually give up his fields? This is just another trick of the rich."

Another chimed in: "People don't think about what's right or wrong. They hear something and caw like crows, spreading it all over the village. But so, what? If he doesn't divide the fields, will anyone die?"

A third voice added- "A man who hoarded wealth through deceit will now, with a smile, hand over

land to the poor? Never! The suffering etched into the poor man's brow; must he bear it forever? And how shamelessly Ramakant danced before the people, as if he were offering them a gift!"

Standing in the road, Subudh listened. Their words ignited a fire in his chest. He thought, I, too, spent the whole day worrying, yet clearly, something has begun to stir in the village. Without a word, he continued and reached Ramakant's house.

Seeing him, Hiranand exclaimed- "Here comes the very man we were talking about!"

Ramakant said, "I wanted to speak with you all day, but you were nowhere to be found. Where were you?"

Subudh replied- "I was so preoccupied that I've only just become free. I spent the whole day outside, unsettled."

Surprised, Ramakant asked- "What troubled you?"

"Last night, as I lay in bed, your words echoed in my mind. My stomach turned, and I kept thinking and thinking. I couldn't sleep. Eventually, I made a decision: just as you gave all your wealth to society, I will resign from my job to serve the people. Just as a train depends on its engine,

society too needs one. At that moment, a story from history came to mind..."

At the mention of history, Hiranand leaned forward eagerly. "What story?"

Subudh replied, "There was once a prince in Tibet named Chenpo. He saw the vast divide between the rich and the poor in his kingdom. To bridge it, he gave away all his wealth to the people. But within a short time, things returned to how they were: the rich became rich again, and the poor remained poor. The prince was heartbroken. Why had it happened?"

Shashi Shekhar, intrigued, asked- "Why did it happen?"

"As a student of sociology," Subudh said, "I've come to understand this much: unless the system itself changes, human life cannot improve. That is why I felt it was my duty to resign. I belong to this village, to every soul in it, rich or poor, child or elder. But I will not act as naively as that Tibetan prince did."

Ramakant's heart swelled with joy upon hearing this. Though he said nothing about the story, Hiranand and Shashi Shekhar were lost in thought. Just then, Jugesar brought in tea, and

they all drank together.

After a moment, Ramakant said, "Look, I've given all my fields to the people. I no longer feel any attachment to them. But I must insist on one thing: there must not be any disorder in society. Everyone should have land."

In response, Shashi Shekhar offered his suggestion. "Let's count all the poor families in the village, then calculate the total land available. Divide it equally so that everyone receives the same share."

At this, Hiranand wrinkled his nose and muttered- "Hmm... not so simple."

Subudh, covering his mouth with his hand, thought silently. Some people do not even have a homestead to live on, while others own two kathas of paddy fields along with their houses. Some have five kathas. If all the land were pooled and divided, could everyone's share truly be equal?

Meanwhile, Hiranand reflected that even among the poor, differences are significant. Some are hardworking, others are idle or in poor health. Some waste their lives on drink, while others live simply and honestly. The condition of the poor varies greatly. The real question, he thought, is

how society as a whole can be uplifted.

As silence stretched between them, Ramakant spat out the tobacco from his mouth and asked, "Why are you all so quiet? I don't understand the workings of society, but you are educated and intelligent men. So why is no one speaking?"

Hiranand admitted his confusion and turned to Subudh.

"Brother, whenever I try to think clearly, I get lost. You must explain it to us in simple terms."

Growing serious, Subudh began- "Our society is deeply backward. In such a society, countless problems cling like a swamp, refusing to let progress move forward. But solutions cannot be drawn like lines on paper. These problems grip people's lives as painfully as a knife piercing flesh. Until they are addressed, no real progress is possible.

For now, let us focus on just two questions. First, every family must have land of its own. Second, along with the land, whatever capital resources exist must be used wisely."

As Subudh was speaking, Jugesar interrupted- "Master, say it more clearly. If you speak like something hidden in a bundle, how will we

understand?"

Subudh did not take offence. Smiling, he said, "Very well, Jugesar, I will explain. Look, land alone does not yield a harvest. It must be worked. First, the field must be tilled and prepared. Then water must be provided, seeds must be sown, seedlings transplanted, and the field weeded and tended. Only then does the harvest come.

Along with land, labour itself is a form of capital. And for labour, tools are required. Tools have their own long history. In the beginning, people worked with the simplest implements. As tools improved, people's lives improved. But our village remains far behind. Modern tools are beyond our reach, as they require money we do not have. For now, we must manage with simple tools. As conditions improve, our tools will improve as well."

Hearing this, Jugesar's face brightened, and he said, "Ah, now I understand! Truly, it is said that when a learned man takes up the plough, his shoulders straighten."

Hiranand added, "Very fine words, Brother Subudh. Now speak about the division of land itself."

Looking into Hiranand's eyes, Subudh replied-

“Heera Babu, every poor man in the village who owns less than a bigha of land will be allotted a full bigha. Not only Ramakant Kaka’s fields but also my own land will be added to the pool. For example, a man with no homestead at all will be given a full bigha. One who already has five kathas will receive only fifteen more. And one who has still more will receive even less.”

Hearing this, Ramakant burst into laughter and said- “Splendid, splendid! Such fine thoughts, Subudh. But the night has grown late. It is time to eat and drink. Bread tastes best when eaten hot, so let us end our talk here. Tomorrow morning, I will have the drum beaten and call the people together. In front of everyone, I will announce my decision. The work of dividing the fields will be left in their hands. Otherwise, there will only be noise and confusion.”

At dawn, the drums sounded. People were already alert, and at the beat of the drum, every household spilled into the streets. Just as one leans forward, eager to hear a judge’s verdict, the entire assembly waited anxiously that morning. Even eighty-year-old Sonelal Baba had come. He owned only two and a half bighas of land, yet the

excitement of the moment had drawn him in. Sitting down, he craned his neck and asked, "Has any neighbourhood been left out? Make sure everyone from every locality is counted."

Hearing Sonelal Baba's words, people began calling out to their neighbours, gathering them together. Only Boka and Gosaimā had not come to the meeting. Two men from each of their tolas were sent to bring them. When the men returned with them, Sonelal Baba asked, "Didn't you hear the sound of the drum?"

Boka replied, "We heard the drum. But we have no job, no parents, no children. What would we do with a plot of land? Even arranging a wedding is difficult. People think we're ruined, so why bring more trouble on ourselves by showing up?"

When Boka finished, Sonelal Baba nodded in understanding. Then Gosaimā added, "We are both old and childless. But we have a grown-up daughter living in another village. We could marry her off this time, and she would go to her husband's house. Who would take care of the land then? How could we accept a field for ourselves?" Again, Sonelal Baba nodded with sympathy. After hearing both of them, a thought occurred to him:

the village might lose two households. Saving both separately could be difficult, but if the two households were joined into one, something might be possible.

He said, "Boka is just a name. What a fine fellow he is. And Gosaimā's daughter lives in another village. Once she marries and leaves for her husband's house, her parents will be left alone in their old age. So, marry Boka to Gosaimā's daughter, and the two households will become one."

More than half the assembly approved of Sonelal Baba's suggestion. A few villagers objected, saying, "We don't usually marry boys and girls from the same village. If we do, it will be improper."

Lakhna stood up and shouted- "What kind of village or custom is that, where boys and girls can't marry within the village? If you arrange the match properly, it will bring benefits. Who cares about appearances?"

Lakhna's argument convinced the crowd, and everyone agreed. The marriages were settled.

A new question then arose: should Boka and Gosaimā be counted as one family for the

purposes of land allocation, or as two separate families? After some debate, the villagers agreed to treat them as a single household and allocate a joint share.

Then came the question of who would measure and divide the land.

Ramakant said, "You can do it yourselves."

Subudh thought Ramakant was right. If they did not divide the work among themselves, it would be a mistake. If everything were left to just a few people, what would the rest of the village do? And if an error occurred, it could be corrected more easily.

He proposed, "Many of us know how to measure fields using a rope. Hiring an admin and conducting a formal survey would cost too much. That money could be used elsewhere; there's plenty to spend on already, so let's avoid unnecessary expenses.

Look, just as the courts keep lawyers busy all year, land surveys keep amin officials busy. But we should not let the crows steal the grain. Let the land pledged during the betrothal pass safely into people's hands. If we drag in officials, as some fear, things will end up just as people say: with

no one left properly served.”

Hearing Subudh's words, Bilta leapt up in excitement and declared- “From Magh to Jeth, we measure fields, not just in one year, but every year. And not just recently, but since the day I first drew breath. What need is there for an amin or a commissioner to come and measure? This village? I've measured not only here, but for miles around. We've even gone into Nepal. Year after year, measuring and re-measuring, I know every plot of land in this village, who owns how much, which field lies where.

There is no need for a formal survey. I can recite from memory the size of every field. All we need is to write down how much land is to be given to whom. As I speak, I will point out each boundary. There was once a great pundit, famous in his time, whose name I forget, who measured the entire world in three steps. In the same way, with a staff of just three steps, I could measure not only this village but the lands beyond.”

At Bilta's words, Ramakant laughed and said, “Wonderful, wonderful.”

The assembly dispersed. By afternoon, all the women of the village, along with a swarm of

children—boys and girls—headed out to dig the smooth clay soil. Each carried a spade or a basket. Seeing this, Shrichan wondered to himself: Why are the people doing this? The tenth day has not yet come. There is no festival or holy day. Then why such commotion among the women? What strange spell has spread through the village, one that the men do not sense, yet the women all understand? Even his own wife had gone off with them!

The more he thought about it, the more puzzled he became. Growing irritated, he walked over to Rudal, who was nearby. Rudal, too, looked confused. Seeing Shrichan, he asked- “Tell me, brother Shrichan, what frenzy has overtaken the women, that they go off in this blazing sun to fetch soil?”

Hearing this, Shrichan grew even more perplexed. I was away from the village, so I didn’t know, he thought. But Rudal lives here. Why doesn’t he know either? He resolved to ask his wife when she returned with the clay. His mind grew restless. Looking at Rudal’s face, it was clear that the women had taken up something significant, without consulting anyone.

Though inwardly amused, Shrichan put on a serious face and said, "Tell me, brother Rudal, did you quarrel with your wife? Is that why she went off without asking you?"

Not catching the tone of the remark, Rudal snapped- "What can I say, brother? Never trust women. When it's their own work, they laugh and speak sweetly. But when it's yours, they suddenly have a headache!"

Shrichan stifled a laugh, but Rudal grew red with anger. As Shrichan walked away, he said, "I go now, brother. Seeing the antics of these women, I can make no sense of anything."

Irritated, Rudal shouted, "Women have grown too clever. If they're really so clever, let them come dig the earth with a spade. Then I'll believe it!"

Shrichan walked a little ahead, then turned and said,

"Brother, what can we do? The reign of women has begun."

Rudal replied- "What do I care for reign or kingdom? I plough, I dig, I earn three seers of grain, and I eat. All this time, only men were called thieves, but now women will become thieves too. They'll land in jail and start making friends

with the police!”

Shrichan continued on his way, while Rudal stood still, both hands on his head, lost in thought.

Meanwhile, everyone brought clay and piled it in their courtyards. Drenched in sweat, the women rested for a while, then took up pestles and rollers to pound the earth for building walls. They mixed in dung, fetched water from wells and pitchers, and kneaded the soil. As soon as the water touched the dry clay, a sweet fragrance spread through the village. The very air changed. Just as twilight fills the air with the scent of jasmine or night-queen, so too did the aroma of moist earth and water make the village glow with fragrance.

As they kneaded the clay, everyone began building small walls. Once the walls were formed, they tore pieces from old, clean garments and rubbed them against their thighs using the palm of the right hand to fashion tiny lamps. These lamps were then arranged along the walls, filled with mustard oil, and decorated. Some placed them upon flower stems, some in little bamboo baskets, some in earthen bowls, and others on banana leaves, before going to bathe.

It was a strange sight indeed, an unexpected

festival. A new curiosity. A new hope in every heart.

The sun had not yet set, but it had dipped low; sunlight had faded from the trees. Each person went to their household shrine, placed the lamps before it, and, standing on one leg, prayed that the Goddess of Fortune who had arrived might never depart. After touching the feet of the deity, they all moved together toward the village's common shrine. The village had turned into a wondrous scene.

In their own courtyards, they had been alone. But as they stepped out toward the shrine, they began to meet one another, forming groups. As they walked, they sang hymns in praise of the deity they were approaching. Through every lane of the village, not one but many groups moved joyfully toward the shrine, their songs echoing through the evening air. In every heart, there was the joy of land secured, and even the gods seemed to smile in return. In every mind stirred the thought: Let one become twenty-one.

Now that the land was in their hands, the poor and dispossessed of the village felt the lamps of hope begin to glow within, like the earthen lamps

they had lit. The poverty that had bound them for thousands of years suddenly seemed to have been cut loose. Each began to form new plans in their mind, plans through which the chains of sorrow might be broken and their feet might step into the realm of happiness. In every heart, the yearning to live a new life had begun to rise.

12.

With the land now in their possession, the thoughts of every member of Bhajua's family began to shift. The new landowners reflected that just as Ramakant Kaka had accepted them, they too must now live as respectable members of society.

"First of all," they resolved, "we will invite Ramakant Kaka, Subodh, Shashi Shekhar, and Master Sahib to dine at our home. But our current

ways and habits must certainly change. The courtyard, the house, and the entrance are all in disarray. This is no condition in which to welcome honourable guests. We've managed until now, but how will dignified people sit here? They'd be repelled by the sight. Therefore, starting tomorrow morning, everyone must help clean the courtyard and entrance. And those of us, men and women alike, who have worn old and torn garments must change them as well. While such clothes may suffice for daily labour, they are not appropriate for hosting guests."

Bhajua's eldest son had in-laws in Bela Mor, Darbhanga. Whenever he visited them, he was struck by their refined lifestyle, manner of speech, and conduct. His heart longed to adopt similar ways, but the poverty of his village had always kept such aspirations at bay. Still, the impression of what he had witnessed in Darbhanga remained vivid.

This eldest son, named Jholia, was the senior-most among the seven brothers, and so the others deferred to him. He said, "Among the seven brothers, Ramakant Baba has given us seven bighas of land. He hasn't asked for a single coin.

Who gives away land like that? He was moved by compassion for us. For this, we must honour him as a truly noble man. In the village, we can rent chairs, tables, carpets, rugs, and utensils. Just as arrangements are made for a wedding feast, from dining to lodging, we must prepare accordingly.”

Hearing Jholia’s plan, the six brothers and their father nodded in agreement. Jholia continued, “Father, you should visit Ramakant Baba. Invite him and his four companions, and speak to him personally. Meanwhile, two brothers will arrange for the rental of furniture and supplies, and two others will go to the market for food items. Everyone must begin working from early morning.”

On the veranda, Ramakant and Hiranand were drinking tea, chatting about the affairs of the village. As they talked, Ramakant’s gaze fell upon Bauelal and Sumitra. Setting down his glass, he said to Hiranand, “Mahendra Babu had said he would send the two of them here after six months of training. But why haven’t they come yet?”

Hiranand replied, “There must be some reason. After all, medicine is a difficult science. It takes time to master.”

They were still conversing when Bhajua arrived.

He came forward, touched Ramakant's feet, and bowed to Hiranand as well. Hiranand blessed him and asked, "Brother Bhajua, are you keeping well?"

"Yes, Master Babu! There was a time I was ready to flee the village altogether. But Kaka didn't let me go."

Startled, Ramakant asked, "What happened? Why would you leave?"

Bhajua began narrating the story of how his family came to settle in the village:

"In this village, people of our caste didn't originally live. But the work of the Dom is needed in every village, from birth to death. Our ancestors lived in Gonba. As the Kosi flowed eastward, it neared Gonba. During the flood season, the river would swell. In the very first surge, such a flood came that not only the embankments but even the houses were submerged. For three days, neither cattle nor people could leave their homes. Those days passed in cries and distress. But since it was the first flood, the water receded by the third day.

At that time, only my grandfather and grandmother were alive in the family. My father

hadn't been born yet. As soon as the water receded, they took ten goats and some household items and left the village. While leaving, my grandmother said, 'Where else can we go? My parents are still alive, let's go to them.' My grandfather agreed, and the couple came to this village.

When they arrived, they let the goats graze and lay down to rest. At that time, no Dom families lived here, so the village children and elders gathered to look at the goats. There was quite a stir. The elders came and said to my grandfather, 'Stay here.' So, he stayed. At the edge of the village was a piece of fallow land. On that land, the villagers built a house for him. In those days, the fallow land was large, though it was surrounded by cultivated fields. Gradually, the landowners expanded their fields, cutting into the fallow. Bit by bit, it shrank. Eventually, only the house, courtyard, and cattle shed remained. Still, life went on peacefully.

My father was the only son. In our generation, we were two brothers. When we divided the household, the house and land were also split. Even then, we managed without much difficulty.

Now, between us two brothers, there are seven sons, four mine and three my brothers'. We earn our living through hard work, but sorrows in the household remain."

Hearing this story, Ramakant asked, "So now you have plenty of land?"

"Yes, Kaka, now many generations will live in comfort. The house hasn't been built yet, but farming has already begun."

At this, Hiranand asked- "Where were you off to so early in the morning, Bhajju brother?"

Bhajua replied calmly- "Last night, the family decided that just as Ramakant Kaka made us part of society by giving us land, we must also honour him. We'll invite him for a meal and present him with a dhoti before his departure. I've come with that invitation."

At the mention of a feast, Ramakant said, "When are you giving the invitation? Hiranand should be present too. And call Subodh and Shashi as well."

"Yes, Kaka, of course. We won't invite just the two of you. They'll be invited too. For now, only you two are here. Shashi Bhai and Subodh Bhai are not around. So please finish your morning routine, and I'll go call them."

Hiranand asked- "Is the invitation for today?"

"Yes, Master Sahib!"

Ramakant said- "Excellent! Shashi has gone toward the pond; he should return soon. In the meantime, go and call Subodh."

Bhajua then went to Subodh's house. Subodh was sipping tea while teaching two children. Seeing Bhajua, he asked- "Brother Bhajju, how are you?" Touching his feet, Bhajua replied- "Brother, I've come to see you as well. Ramakant Kaka and Master Sahib were sitting together. I've already informed them, and now I've come to tell you."

"What have you come to say?"

"I've come with an invitation."

"What's the occasion?"

"There's no special occasion. It's simply our wish to offer a meal to the four of you."

Hearing Bhajua's words, a conflict stirred in Subodh's mind. A question arose: Bhajua, too, is a part of this society. Just as the human body contains both noble and ignoble organs, each essential for life, so it is with society. But still, the body and society are not the same. Society is divided by caste and sect, in which some are placed above, others below.

On the surface, all are Hindus in the name of religion. But within that, countless castes create divisions. One caste won't eat food touched by another. There are no shared kinships, no intermarriages. Even the gods are divided. The deity one caste worships may be rejected by another. And even if they are acknowledged, worship does not happen together, nor are offerings shared. Sometimes, reverence is withheld altogether. Some gods are viewed as impure, associated with Shudras and the so-called lower castes.

If these were trivial matters, perhaps it would not matter. But they are deeply ingrained. Who knows, perhaps one day, from such small issues, a great explosion will tear through society. People are so tightly bound to these questions that they mistake them for the highest truths of life, though they are not.

Smiling, Subodh said to Bhajua, "Then you go ahead to Ramakant Kaka's house. I'll come after bathing."

Bhajua departed. Subodh remained, lost in thought. Caught between reasoning and counter-reasoning, his mind gradually settled. At last, he

reached a firm conclusion: as long as such petty customs are rigidly observed, society will never progress. This, in fact, is one of the main causes of social backwardness. Therefore, it must be broken as soon as possible. With this thought, he went to bathe. After bathing and dressing, he set out for Ramakant's house.

By the time Subodh arrived, Ramakant, Shashi Shekhar, and Hiranand had already bathed, dressed, and were ready. As soon as Subodh appeared, Hiranand said, "Brother Subodh has also come. Now it wouldn't be proper to delay any longer."

Subodh didn't even sit down. They all set out immediately, Ramakant leading the way and the others following behind.

After walking a short distance, Hiranand asked Bhajua- "So, how have you managed your farming, Bhajju?"

In a restrained tone, Bhajua replied, "Brother, we have no oxen. We couldn't even plough the land. But the boys insisted, so we bought ten spades. Every morning, we rose early and went to the fields to dig. In fifteen days, we prepared all the land. It turned out well. If the harvest is good

this time, we'll buy oxen."

Hiranand asked, "Since you already had fields, why didn't you buy oxen earlier?"

"How could we do everything at once? If we had bought oxen, where would we have kept them, and what would we have fed them? If we had started everything, buying oxen, building a house, arranging food, all at once, how could we have managed? That's why we're doing everything step by step."

"You've thought very wisely."

Talking thus, they all reached Bhajua's house. In front of the house lay two kathas of land. A canopy had been erected there. On one side, chairs were arranged; on the other, mats, carpets, and pillows. All members of Bhajua's family, from men to women, had bathed and dressed in new clothes. The arrangements resembled those of a wedding celebration.

Seeing the setup, the four—Ramakant, Subodh, Hiranand, and Shashi Shekhar—were astonished. No one could have guessed this was the home of a Dom family. All four sat on the chairs. As soon as they did, one of Bhajua's sons brought sherbet. Ramakant drank two glasses, let out a satisfied

burp, and said, "Now bring the betel leaves."

Sherbet was still being served when Bhajua's granddaughter arrived with tea. Panting, Shashi Shekhar finished his sherbet quickly. The tea was served in steel cups. Made from pure milk, it was neither too sweet nor too bland. Its colour was perfect, with a foamy froth like coffee. Drinking it, Ramakant felt his stomach grow heavy. Feeling full, he said, "Let the three sit on the chairs. I'm going to lie down on the bedding."

Ramakant walked over to the bedding and lay down. Betel leaves were distributed, and everyone began chewing. The betel had barely settled in their mouths when Bhajua pressed them to take refreshments.

At Bhajua's urging, Ramakant said, "I will eat while lying here. Serve the others at the table, but after a short while."

The entire household of Bhajua seemed like attentive hosts. From the moment the four guests had arrived, a new wave of enthusiasm had surged through the family. Men and women alike were filled with joy. Even those women who were usually caught in quarrels now wore cheerful smiles. The same thought seemed to stir in every

heart: man, alone, is the greatest doer and sustainer in this world.

Bhajua's granddaughter, who was from her maternal family in Darbhanga and had spent many years there while attending high school, caught the attention of Subodh and Hiranand. Observing her manners and refined way of doing things, the two exchanged glances. With his eyes, Subodh hinted to Hiranand- "If a person is given a good environment, he can achieve something, no matter if he was born in the lowest of families." Hiranand responded- "What people say-that the fruits of past-life deeds are received in this life-is nonsense. Yes, if you interpret it as meaning that the earlier part of this very life influences the later years, then that makes some sense. Look at this girl, Bhajua's granddaughter, how practical she is. She was born in this very family, yet having lived in an advanced region among progressive people, she too has become progressive. Is she any less than the daughter of a wealthy household?"

The refreshments arrived: flattened rice, curd, sugar, bananas, pickles, vegetable curry, and five varieties of sweets. The four guests ate heartily.

After the meal, everyone settled into casual conversation. Ramakant, having washed his hands, began to doze on the bedding, while Subodh, Hiranand, and Shashi Shekhar remained seated on the chairs, continuing their discussion. Nearby, Bhajua's entire family sat like close kin, having also finished their meal.

Subodh asked, "When you have so many members in the family, why don't you raise cattle?"

Among the younger generation, Jholia was the wisest. Even his family regarded him as their guide. He answered, "Master Sahib, until now our family has always reared pigs. But pigs are only for meat. They can't plough fields, nor do they give milk. Smaller animals can't even pull carts. And where people barely manage to eat, how often can they afford pork? Still, we keep them. They are our own, so during festivals we sometimes eat. Because there aren't enough buyers here, we take them to Nepal to sell. In Nepal, people eat more pork than here. Pork is considered a hotter meat than goat or sheep, and our climate here is already hot. Pork is mainly suited to colder regions. Yet we continue to keep pigs, because if we were to keep cows or buffaloes, who would buy the milk

from us?"

Hearing Jholia's words, Subodh asked, "Does that not exist anymore?"

Jholia replied, "In earlier days, there used to be many pigs. Rearing them was easy. A single man could manage a hundred and fifty to two hundred pigs. Early in the morning, after eating a little, we would drive them out of the sty to graze. There was no need to feed them at home. We reared them throughout the year and once a year took them to Nepal to sell.

Last year, my father and uncle took a hundred and fifty pigs to Nepal. There, a weekly market is held on Tuesdays. That market has the largest trade in pigs. Big traders are always present. Our pigs were kept in one section of the market. My father sat on one side and my uncle on the other. A trader came with seven or eight men. Bargaining began. The price was settled. After counting all the pigs, one trader remained behind while the others drove the animals away. That man then said to my father and uncle, 'Come, let's eat something first. I'm very hungry.' All three went into a shop and began to eat. Something had been mixed into the food. While

eating, both my father and uncle became intoxicated. They collapsed right there in the shop. What happened after that, they had no idea.

When they woke up the next day, neither the trader nor the shop remained. The stalls were makeshift, and once the market ended, everything disappeared. Both brothers, weeping and furious, left the place. They had not a single coin, nor any food. Hungry and faint, they staggered toward Dagmara. On reaching there, both of them fell unconscious.

In Dagmara, we have a relative. Seeing their condition, he was stunned, unsure of what to do. After a long time, they regained consciousness. When they awoke, they drank some water. Feeling a little better, they bathed, ate a meal, and lay down to sleep. After resting, they regained some strength. They stayed there for two days and returned to the village on the third day. From that time onwards, pig-rearing was abandoned.”

Astonished, Subodh asked, “So you have no money at home?”

Jholia replied- “There’s only a little, what grandfather gave to father, saying, ‘When I die, use this money for the funeral feast.’ The money

has never been counted. It's kept in bamboo tubes, hidden in the pigsty."

Excited, Ramakant said- "Bring it here. Let's see how much it is."

Bhajua fetched seven bamboo tubes from the sty and placed them before Ramakant. These were hollow sections of bamboo, sealed with clay at one end and tightly stuffed with rags at the other. The rags from each tube were pulled out, and the coins were poured out before Ramakant. Lifting one coin, Ramakant examined it closely and saw that it was a silver rupee. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the pile of coins. Ramakant turned to Hiranand and said, "Master Sahib, count these coins."

Rising from his chair, Hiranand came near and began to count. From the seven tubes emerged a total of seven hundred silver rupees.

On hearing this, Subodh began calculating silently. One silver rupee was worth seventy-five rupees in current currency. A hundred would amount to seventy-five hundred; seven hundred would mean fifty-two thousand five hundred. A pair of bullocks would cost five thousand. A boring pump would come to around fifteen thousand. If third-

grade bricks were used with mortar and asbestos sheets laid on top, a seven-room house could be built for twenty-five to thirty thousand.

Meanwhile, the family members were already earning daily wages, and the seven bighas of farmland also yielded produce. Within a year, they could become a prosperous farming household. And here they already possessed capital. All their difficulties seemed to have a solution.

Such strange thoughts filled Subodh's mind. From one angle, the family appeared well-off; from another, they lacked even a proper house and struggled with daily needs.

Yet Subodh noticed one admirable quality in Bhajua's family. Unlike other Dom families in the village, they had no habit of drinking toddy or liquor. What they needed was only awareness and direction.

With a deep sigh, Subodh turned to Bhajua and his family and said, "Brother Bhajju, we want to see our society smiling, not weeping. That's why we never think of anyone's loss. Let everyone prosper. Let every family live in joy. Let every son and daughter have the opportunity to study and live in a good home. Let no one die for lack of

medicine. That's why I say, spend this money wisely. Your father had indeed asked for it to be used for the funeral feast. Do a little of that too. But if you've delayed it this long, then it can wait a few more days. First, use the money to build a house, buy a pair of bullocks, and install a boring pump. Once your land begins to yield, you may hold the feast as well."

Supporting Subodh's advice, Ramakant added, "Bhajju, Subodh has given you a fine idea. Learn what life is and how it is to be shaped. Unless you learn this, you'll keep wandering in confusion."

Bhajua remained silent, but Jholia spoke up at once- "What father said, we have taken to heart. You must also consider us your younger brothers. As long as our family lives and we live, we will walk alongside you."

Hearing Jholia's words, Hiranand was filled with joy. Laughing, he said, "Brother Bhajju, you've grown old now, so your eyes no longer turn toward new ventures. But your sons and nephews are still young; let them take on new work. Unless people step forward according to the needs of the time, they cannot keep pace with it. Otherwise, time

will sweep ahead like floodwaters, and people, like reeds and grasses, will be cut and cast aside. That's why you must seize time and move with it. Now, with all the brothers together, you have seven bighas of land. A good household can only be built when all the arrangements for cultivation are made. Without water, nothing grows. Bullocks are just as essential. Land only gains value when all the means of production are in place. You have plenty of money, use it to build your life."

The conversation was still going on when, panting and breathless, Doctor Mahendra and Bauelal arrived.

Like a Mahant, Ramakant lay on the bed, his head propped upon a pillow. On seeing Mahendra, everyone was astonished. Mahendra and Bauelal went straight to Ramakant and bowed to touch his feet. Blessing them, Ramakant said, "Why have you come here? We were going to meet shortly anyway. You must be tired from the ride, bathe, eat, and rest first. Was I lying somewhere else that we couldn't have met?"

Doctor Mahendra looked silently at his father. Seeing him, he regretted inwardly that false news had reached him, but he said nothing. In the

meantime, gesturing toward Mahendra and Bauelal, Bhajua told Jholia, "Son, first serve both the guests."

Jholia took charge of serving Mahendra and Bauelal their meal. The dining area was already prepared. In the nearby shed, the two guests were served. After eating, they set out for home.

From behind, Kushesari called out to Mahendra—"Uncle, please take some betel and areca nut."

Hearing her, the two guests stopped on the path. Quickly, Kushesari came with a tray of betel and areca nut. Instead of offering it by hand, she extended the tray in front of Mahendra. Looking at it, Mahendra said, "Child, I don't chew betel. If there's cardamom and a cigarette at home, bring those instead."

Immediately, Kushesari turned back into the courtyard. She soon returned carrying a packet of cigarettes, a matchbox, and some cardamom. Turning northward so his father wouldn't see, Mahendra lit a cigarette quietly. The two guests chatted as they took their leave.

Seeing Kushesari, Mahendra felt no surprise. In a Mithila village, she might be considered an unusual girl, but not in Madras.

Mahendra had earlier received an anonymous letter from the village. It said- “Your father has gone mad! He is doing all sorts of senseless things in the village. If you do not arrange treatment in time, he will surely lose his mind completely.”

Reading the letter, Mahendra had decided to return home. He felt it necessary to consult his brother, Ravindra, so he waited a day. The next day, Mahendra, his wife Sujata, Baelal, and Sumitra—all four of them—took a carriage and set out for the village.

Upon arriving, Mahendra did not see his father, and his suspicion deepened. He asked his mother only one thing: “Where is father?” She told him everything. Leaving his suitcase behind, Mahendra went straight with Baelal to Bhajua’s house. Dr Sujata stayed at home. Following custom, her mother-in-law forbade her from going outside.

It was four o’clock. Neither Ramakant nor anyone else had an appetite. The food was ready. The longer it waited, the less appealing it would become. Bhajua wanted everyone to eat while it was hot, but the four guests, not feeling hungry, kept postponing. Amid the confusion, Bhajua said to Ramakant, “Uncle, the food is ready. As you

wish..."

Burping, Ramakant said, "I've eaten so much at breakfast that not a grain can fit into my stomach. I still feel heavy. Yes, let me at least touch a morsel to my lips."

Bhajua replied- "As much as you wish..."

The four guests rose and went into the courtyard. The entire yard had been freshly plastered with wet clay, and the fragrance of earth lingered in the air. Though the courtyard was small, with so many people gathered, it appeared spacious. A blanket had been spread neatly on the ground. Plates, tumblers, bowls, and glasses gleamed as if newly bought.

Seeing the arrangement, Ramakant was moved. What purity, what grace, he thought. If only I had an appetite, I would have eaten heartily. But with no hunger, how can I?

After the meal, the four guests prepared to leave. Before their departure, Jholia brought out a colourful bamboo basket containing four pairs of dhotis and placed it before them. Looking at the dhotis, Ramakant said, "Jholia, you are poor. Keep these for yourselves. You dressed us, and we accepted; that should be enough."

13.

In Madras, Dr Mahendra would rise at four every morning and immerse himself in his daily responsibilities. Yet in the village, even by five, he remained in a deep, restful sleep. Why was this so?

At dawn, Ramakant entered Mahendra's room and found him snoring in profound slumber. He chose not to wake him. Instead, he thought to himself, "In a father's home, a son can live so carefree." With a pitcher in hand, he set off towards the river for his morning ablutions.

At six, Mahendra awoke. As soon as he opened his eyes, a question stirred within him: Why such deep slumber? Was it the calming essence of Mithila's soil, water, and air, or simply the absence of work? He was still pondering when Jugesar arrived with a cup of tea.

Meanwhile, Ramakant strolled through the fields and returned via the village lanes. Entering the tola, he stopped at a hand-pump to wash his face and hands.

Beside the pump stood Mangal's house. Seeing Ramakant, Mangal quietly brought out a cane chair and a small table, placing them on the veranda. As Ramakant finished washing and began heading home, Mangal called out, "Uncle, please sit here for a while."

Ramakant smiled and accepted the invitation. Taking a seat on the chair, he remarked, "What a fine chair! When did you have it made?"

"Just eight days ago. My younger son brought it from Delhi," Mangal replied.

In the courtyard, Mangal's son Rabia was preparing tea. Shortly after, he appeared with a tray bearing biscuits, savoury bhujia, and a glass of tea, which he placed on the table before Ramakant. Touching Ramakant's feet, he said softly- "Baba, please have some tea."

Hearing this, Ramakant's mind wandered back. This is the same Mangal who, when his house in Bihaari was destroyed, had to take shelter with relatives and stayed at my home for seven days. And today, he has built such a fine house, furnished with a beautiful chair and table. Remarkable!

Smiling, he asked, "Mangal, where does your son

work?"

"In Delhi, Uncle. He's doing very well," came the reply.

Ramakant sipped his tea, nibbling on biscuits and bhujia. Just then, Rabia returned from the courtyard carrying a German-made pocket radio. Placing it before Ramakant, he said, "Baba, I brought this especially for you."

Looking at the radio, Ramakant said, "What will I do with such luxuries at this age? You're young, these things suit you. What use is it to me?"

But Rabia pressed the radio into his hands, gently holding Ramakant's wrist with his other hand and insisting, "Baba, this was bought only for you."

After finishing his tea, Ramakant rose and started for home. He walked ahead, with Mangal following behind, carrying the radio all the way to the house.

By then, the sun had risen a full bamboo's height in the sky. Mahendra sat on the veranda, brushing his teeth. At that moment, five or six children arrived, balancing baskets on their heads and holding small pots in their hands.

Dr Mahendra continued brushing in silence, watching them carefully.

They set the baskets and pots down on the veranda. One little girl stepped forward and asked, "Where is Baba?"

Mahendra gave no reply, unsure of what she meant. Instead, he peered into the baskets and pots: one held cabbage, another tomatoes, another bitter gourd, and another eggplant. The pots contained milk as well.

Puzzled, Mahendra wondered, "What is all this? Why have they brought these things here?"

The meaning escaped him. His mind grew restless. After a moment, he asked, "Children, why have you brought all this?"

A sharp-tongued little girl answered, "Baba gave all his land to us. He kept nothing for himself. Then what would he eat? That's why we brought this."

Hearing this, Mahendra fell silent. He thought to himself, "I am his son. It is my duty to care for him. Truly, it is said: 'As you sow, so shall you reap.'"

Covering his mouth with his hand, he reflected further:

"In vain do people divide this world into 'mine' and 'others.' Whoever you act for will surely act

for you in return, whether your own or another's." Lost in these thoughts, he suddenly saw his father approaching. At once, he rose and went inside.

As soon as Ramakant appeared, the little girls stood up and stepped forward to touch his feet. His eyes fell upon the baskets of vegetables and pots of milk. Seeing everything, he said, "Children, why have you brought so much? Well, since you have, place it all in the courtyard."

The girls nodded and carried everything into the courtyard.

The news of Dr Mahendra's arrival spread rapidly through the village. One after another, people began arriving, hoping to have their ailments treated. However, Mahendra had not come prepared to offer medical services; he had brought neither instruments nor medicines. Still, he asked Jugesar to summon Bouelal and Sumitra.

Jugesar went to call Bouelal. Whatever instruments for examinations and basic surgical tools Bouelal and Sumitra had previously purchased, they now brought with them. Bouelal sat down beside Mahendra, while Sumitra joined Sujata, sitting on the veranda behind the doorway.

The women came to Sujata for consultation, while the men approached Mahendra.

Mahendra had examined only four or five patients when suddenly four or five more arrived, carried on cots. They were from another village. Seeing them, Mahendra suspected an outbreak of cholera. He and Bouelal stepped down from the veranda. The bearers brought the cots closer, cries of pain filling the air. Some patients had split heads, others broken arms, and some had swollen bodies from beatings.

Mahendra had no medicines with him. In haste, he told Bouelal to prepare a list of dressing materials, bandages, and medicines, and to fetch them quickly from the market. Bouelal sped off on his bicycle.

Ramakant, approaching the patients, asked one of the cot-bearers, "How did the head injury happen?"

The man, trembling with fear, replied- "From a beating, sir."

Hearing this, Ramakant turned to Mahendra and said, "Son, treat them all with care."

Saying this, he sat down on a bedding spread across the veranda and beckoned the cot-bearers

closer.

“When did the fight take place?” he asked.

“Last night, during food and drink.”

“Then you haven’t eaten anything since?”

“No.”

Realising they were hungry, Ramakant told Jugesar, “Feed them first.”

But the house had no provisions for feeding fifteen or twenty people. Jugesar called out to Sumitra- “Daughter, your aunt is elderly, and the young bride is inexperienced. You must set a large pot and prepare khichdi. These poor men have been hungry since last night. We’ll gather the supplies.”

As he spoke, Sumitra went into the kitchen. Sujata, too, came from time to time to assist. Meanwhile, Bouelal rode swiftly to the market, purchased the supplies, and returned. As soon as he arrived, he and Mahendra gave the patients injections for pain. Soon after, the cries of anguish subsided.

Sujata and Sumitra brought khichdi and potato curry for the patients. Once fed, their torn, blood-stained clothes were changed, and treatment began. Three had head wounds, and two had

fractured arms. Sujata and Sumitra busied themselves with plastering, while Mahendra stitched the head wounds. Bouelal ran tirelessly, fetching whatever was needed.

After two hours, all were out of immediate danger. Then Ramakant asked, "Why did the fight break out?"

Wiping her tears, Jokhan began to speak—"Makshudan's daughter, Sitiya, had gone to the market to sell gourds. She must have been seventeen or eighteen, tall, well-built, with a simple, round face and bright, expressive eyes. Last year, she had reached womanhood. Usually, her mother went to the market, but she had been unwell for the past week.

On one and a half kathas of land, Sitiya had grown gourds. The crop was strong. She carefully picked the largest ones, tied them into a bundle, and set off. She had to sell the gourds and also buy medicine for her mother. She tied the prescription slip into the corner of her sari so she wouldn't lose it.

After selling the gourds and buying the medicine, she started home alone. The Gosai Pond lay behind her. It wasn't completely dark, but dusk

had fallen. The road was growing quiet; most who had visited the market had returned home. Only a few stragglers remained.

Just then, from behind, Lallba and his servant Guletia came riding their bicycles. Guletia was Lallba's man, his follower. Lallba, the only son of his father, owned twenty to twenty-five bighas of land. He had been quarrelsome since childhood, spoiled and reckless. The two of them, drunk on liquor, were babbling nonsense as they made their way home.

When they neared Sitiya, Lallba said, 'Guleti, the prey is caught!'

Sitiya said nothing, but inside, her heart burned with rage. She quickened her pace. Lallba dismounted and blocked the road by propping his bicycle across the path. He pulled a cigarette and a matchbox from his pocket, lit up, and began to smoke.

Suspicion flickered in Sitiya's mind, but she didn't feel fear. She stepped past the bicycle to the side and continued walking.

Lallba and Guletia remained standing, smoking and exchanging crude remarks, then resumed walking behind her. With the cigarette dangling

from his mouth, Lallba pulled a fifty-rupee note from his shirt pocket and held it out to her.

Seeing the money, Sitiya's body burned with anger, but she said nothing and kept walking. Lallba, still holding out the note, followed close behind.

Sensing their nearness, Sitiya stopped. She adjusted the bundle on her head with one hand and thought to herself, "If needed, I'll strike them down with this bundle."

Meanwhile, Lallba once again thrust the note toward her. Seizing the moment, Sitiya spat so forcefully that while a little landed on the note, most of it splattered across Lallba's face.

With spit on his face, Lallba grabbed her arm and tried to drag her. But Sitiya, already holding tightly to her bundle, struck out twice in quick succession. Both men seized her arms and pulled. The bundle fell, and Sitiya toppled off the road and down into the field.

The moment she hit the ground, she gathered her strength, rose, clenched her right fist, and began striking with fists and feet, flailing wildly. Guletia, startled, stepped aside in fear, but Lallba wouldn't back off; he, too, began to throw punches.

Seeing Guletia retreat, Sitiya's fury surged. Lallba, drunk, stumbled and fell. The instant he hit the ground, Sitiya pounced and unleashed a storm of blows.

Just then, a group of women returning from the market passed by. Hearing their footsteps, Sitiya's resolve flared even more. The thought of her honour gave her the strength of a tigress. Blow after blow, she beat Lallba until he lost consciousness.

By then, the woman had reached her. Seeing Sitiya in such a fearsome form, Hasina asked, "Sister, what happened?"

Sitiya replied, "Ask me nothing now. I will not rest until I've drunk the blood of this scoundrel." She spoke as she struck, raining down furious blows. Four women rushed to restrain her, but even Hasina, Zulekha, Rehna, and Khatun together could barely hold her back. She shook them off and once again threw herself onto Lallba, kicking and beating him.

At last, they managed to grip her tightly and began dragging her toward the village. But as soon as they reached the edge of the settlement, Sitiya broke free again and charged back at Lallba.

Rehna and Khatun rushed ahead and blocked her path. Hasina and Zulekha quickly caught up and held her back. Sitiya's heart boiled with rage. Her only thought was that she wouldn't spare Lallba unless she had his blood, even if it meant going to the gallows.

Together, the four women restrained her and dragged her home.

News of the incident spread through the village like wildfire. The entire village stirred with unrest. An atmosphere of tension enveloped the night. From the eldest elders to the youngest boys, everyone gathered.

Meanwhile, the four women also brought Lallba back and laid him on a cot. He regained consciousness but groaned deliriously. His paternal uncle called for a doctor and began his treatment. A saline drip was administered, and the doctor sat nearby, monitoring the flow.

In the meantime, Lallba's uncle began mobilising villagers armed with sticks. All the powerful and influential men of the village rallied behind Lallba. Seeing the strength of their numbers, Lallba's father declared, "When honour is lost, what use is wealth?"

Shouting- "Victory to Goddess Durga!", ruffians from fifteen to twenty villages—armed with sticks—marched toward Sitiya's hamlet, chanting slogans as they went.

Makshudan's settlement numbered only twelve families, all poor. Yet every able-bodied man stood guard at his door with a stick in hand, resolved- "To die for honour is dharma. Whatever happens, happens, we shall not step back." People of every caste in the hamlet also pledged their support: "As long as our men stand, we stand by them. If the men fall, we too will raise our sticks."

The fire already burning within Sitiya flared higher when she heard this. She shouted, "All young daughters and daughters-in-law, tie your saris tightly and bind them across your heads like turbans so your skulls will not split. Let the old women remain aside. Those storing millet seeds, bring them out and put them together in one place. Let us see what comes. Just as all sisters will die together, so shall all sisters be reborn together."

The small children were taken away by the elderly into the groves. Soon, the men from Hanseri hamlet arrived, shouting challenges. Sitiya wanted

to rush out alone to confront them, but discipline and collective decision mattered in battle, so she held her ground. The men of her hamlet fought back with all their might. Sticks flew recklessly from both sides. Five men were injured, yet Hanseri did not retreat; with thoughts of seizing wealth and honour, they pressed forward.

Seeing her people fall back and Hanseri advancing, Sitiya—a scarf wound tightly around her head—leapt forward, followed by the hamlet's women, who bore pestles. Like a flash of lightning, the daughter of Mithila charged before them. Ah, the daughters of Mithila! Mithila is not only a land of duty and faith; it is also a land of valour. Alone, Sitiya felled four men. Blood flowed. Panic seized Hanseri's ranks; they stumbled backwards, scattered in confusion. The clash continued a short distance further on.

Her people carried away the wounded. Others dared not lift their fallen for fear—“If we go to retrieve them, the same fate may befall us.” Much later, creeping under cover, they gathered the injured. The village had only two practitioners—neither formally degreed—both living at Lallba's house. At night, no one dared venture out, fearing

another attack. Anxiety gripped everyone. Yet the wounded did not let their faces pale; in their hearts was a strange pride, and thus they endured the pain.

The women heated water, tended to the wounded, rubbed vermilion into gashes, and bound them with cloth to stop the bleeding. No one slept that night. At dawn, word reached Dr Mahendra that he was needed in the village, so he came.

Hearing Jokhan's words, Ramakant sprang to his feet. Standing tall, he declared loudly- "If anyone ever calls upon me to protect their honour and dignity, I will burn through all my wealth for them. But I will not abandon them. Son, whatever strength you have, do not waver. For food, water, or medicine, I will provide all the help you need. Be reborn on this very soil. This is a land of duty. A man is born not only to live for himself but to support others who are committed to righteousness, as far as he can.

Jokhan, what's done is done. But remember, whenever a crowd gathers, come find me. As long as life remains in this body, I will stand by you." Soon after, four young girls arrived with their families, bringing food: a basket of rice, a large

pot of lentils, a smaller pot of vegetables, banana leaves for serving, and two pitchers of water.

Seeing them, Ramakant asked, "Daughters, why have you brought food?"

Sitiya replied, "Baba, we didn't know, so we brought it."

"All right then," Ramakant said- "since you've brought it, ask everyone whether they will eat here or return."

While Ramakant was speaking to Sitiya, Jokhan added, "Kaka, these are the same girls who fought and drove away that band of attackers."

Startled, Ramakant exclaimed, "What? These are the ones? Bravo! Only daughters like you can uphold the honour of this land."

Jokhan's words spread quickly from Ramakant's doorway and courtyard throughout the village. It was said that Sitiya and her companions had fought off the men of Hanseri, smashed heads, and chased them all the way to the village boundary.

When the villagers heard the news, men and women flocked to see the girls. It was a remarkable scene.

From the courtyard, Shyama sent a message

through Sumitra- "Send those girls here into the courtyard so we may see them too."

At the doorway, Sumitra conveyed the message to Ramakant. Hearing it, Ramakant turned to the girls and said, "Daughters, please go into the courtyard."

Led by Sumitra, the four girls followed her inside. On the veranda, mats had been laid out, where Shyama and Sujata were seated. Sumitra walked ahead, and the girls followed behind her.

The four girls touched the feet of Shyama and Dr Sujata. Suddenly, the women and daughters of the village entered the courtyard to see Sitiya and her companions. Shyama invited them to sit beside her, while Sujata continued to gaze at the girls from head to toe.

A strange power shone on the faces of the four. Their eyes moved now toward Shyama, now toward the other women. Joy filled everyone's hearts, though no smiles appeared on their lips. It was as if their happiness carried with it an undercurrent of indomitable spirit, boundless courage, and vibrant energy. That special radiance drew all eyes to them. Even the women standing at a distance found themselves edging closer to

Sitiya.

Shyama said to Sumitra, "Sumitra, when will we see such people in the courtyard again? Don't let them leave without offering them something to eat."

At this, Sujata rose and brought a box of Madras fried snacks she had fetched from her home. Seeing the box, Sitiya said, "Babi, we ate just before leaving. We're not hungry at all."

Meanwhile, Ramakant sent Jugesar to the courtyard to summon the four. Jugesar returned with the message. The girls stood, touched Shyama's feet, and prepared to leave. Shyama gave them her blessing and said, "May God grant you a life filled with laughter and joy."

As the four girls left the courtyard, the others followed suit and dispersed.

Time passed. The sun's harsh heat began to ease. Dr Mahendra turned to Jokhan and said, "There's no need to keep the patients here any longer. Bauelal will visit their homes morning and evening to give the injections. The medicines will continue. Within fifteen or twenty days, they should be completely well."

With that, everyone departed.

As evening fell, Ramakant and Jugesar sat by the doorway, talking about Madras. Smiling, Jugesar said, "Kaka, let's go to Madras once more."

Wrinkling his nose, Ramakant replied- "Ah, fool! People die in those trains. It's so suffocating there. There's no peace in the trains or buses, and you can't count on safety on the roads or footpaths either. Walk down a street, and you're constantly shoved by the crowd. How beautiful is our village, where roads hardly matter, where from one end to the other, across fields and pastures, you can wander wherever your heart desires. There's no fear of being pushed by a bus, no worry of thorns or shards piercing your feet. You can speak to anyone, ask after their well-being. But there, it felt as if the tongue had forgotten how to speak. We lived like mutes."

With a touch of sarcasm, Jugesar said, "How comfortable the houses were there. No need to go anywhere to bathe or relieve oneself."

Ramakant retorted- "Nonsense! Had we stayed there for two months, we would've fallen ill. Even sitting or standing felt suffocating. To tell you the truth, in all the days I stayed, I never once drank water to my heart's content, nor relieved

myself freely. It felt like I had constipation the entire time. Every time water touched my lips, my mind grew restless.”

Still smiling, Jugesar asked, “And how did that grape juice taste when you drank it? Have you forgotten?”

At the mention of grape juice, Ramakant grew slightly uneasy and replied- “People say grapes have great strength, but what is that compared to our bananas, mangoes, wood-apples, creepers, and the like? Where would grapes get such power? They make wine from grapes, but could that ever stand against our bhang? English liquor shoots straight to the head like fire and drops just as fast. But our bhang, now that’s a royal intoxication. It doesn’t drive one to madness or crime, and it won’t let a single worry rise in the mind.”

Their conversation was overheard by Sujata, who stood nearby, quietly listening. At that moment, Heeranand and Shashi Shekhar arrived, strolling. As soon as they were seated, Ramakant turned to Heeranand and said, “Master, the troubles in the fields are now resolved. That is a great relief. Tell me, do all the people of the village consider this

village their own?"

Heeranand replied- "Yes. That is nothing new. It has always been said, and it will always be said."

"If the village belongs to all, then doesn't everything in the village belong to everyone as well?"

"That's where the difficulty lies. Yes, the problem is that the society and the village, which once stood united, have now splintered into fragments. So, we must bring the pieces back together, step by step, to rebuild a unified society. But this cannot happen all at once."

As Heeranand was speaking, Subudh arrived from the north, and from the south came Mahendra and Bouelal.

Ramakant turned to Bouelal and said, "Bouelal, now that you're a doctor, you're still the youngest among us. Go make some tea."

At the sound of the word 'doctor,' both Mahendra and Heeranand felt a surge of pride, for Bouelal had once been their student. Smiling, Bouelal rose and went off to make the tea.

Ramakant then turned to Subudh and said, "Subudh, the land has been settled; only the pond remains. Shashi is young, educated, and capable.

Stock fish in the pond."

Subudh said, "What a wonderful thought you have, Kaka. I was thinking the same. In our village, we have only two things: soil and water. These must be used in such a way that, just as a man with five sons sees his family grow fivefold, the fields and water sources should also multiply. If proper labour and modern methods are applied, why shouldn't they progress five times faster, just like human beings? If we achieve that pace, the village will not take long to advance.

There are more than twenty bighas of water in the village, and they never dry up, even during the scorching months of Baisakh and Jeth. Even if a severe famine struck, crops could still survive with the help of boring wells. Yet until now, the ponds remain neglected, choked with weeds and moss. They are used neither for bathing nor for raising fish or makhana. How shameful it is that in a land suited for fish and makhana, the villagers have no access to either. And whose fault is that? Isn't it ours? Of course it is. No matter how many excuses we make, the blame lies with us.

I see some well-off families enjoying not only fish and makhana but also many other luxuries, while

the majority, what is their condition? They taste fish only at the festival of Jitiya and see a few makhanas on Kojagara. So, if we truly want people to prosper, we must ensure abundance. Without abundance, how can happiness ever arrive?"

As Subudh was still speaking, Bouelal returned with the tea. At the sight of it, some cleared their throats; others stood to spit out their paan. Jugesar began distributing the tea. Taking a sip, Heeranand asked Mahendra, "Doctor Sahib, how many days of leave have you come for?"

Hearing the question, Mahendra hesitated. Inwardly, he thought, how can I speak of the letter? It had turned out to be entirely false. If he claimed to be on long leave, that too would be a lie. He had come in a rush. What should he say, and what should he hide?

He found himself in a strange predicament. Just then, Jugesar interjected cheerfully- "Ah, Master, Doctor Sahib has become so accomplished now. Nothing is lacking. When we seated him in the carriage, it felt like he was being enthroned on Indra's seat!"

And so Heeranand's question remained unanswered. He privately assumed that perhaps

Mahendra had come quietly because of his father. After everyone finished their tea, they handed their cups to Bouelal, who carried them off toward the courtyard well. Meanwhile, Subudh turned to Mahendra and said, "Brother Mahendra, when you look at the people of the village, what do you see? Doesn't it seem as if everyone is suffering from one sickness or another? So please examine them all and offer treatment."

Subudh's words struck Mahendra. He replied, "That's my thought as well. It will take four or five days just to complete the examinations. I'll check everyone, and wherever possible, I'll also begin treatment. Today I was caught up in other matters, but from tomorrow, I'll get to work."

At this, Shashi Shekhar asked- "Doctor Sahib, now that the old man has divided all his fields, what about you?"

Hearing this, Mahendra smiled and said, "There are two of us brothers. Father made both of us doctors; what more can a father do for his sons? As for the land, am I going to take up farming? If the land has gone to those who will till it, what could be more fitting? It's father's hard-earned property; he alone has the right to give it away.

What claim do I have? Besides, to bind a renunciant with worldly attachment is itself a sin.”

Shashi Shekhar asked again- “And how do you find Madras?”

Mahendra seemed to recall something. He paused, then replied with a sigh- “When I first received my medical education, I thought it was a good decision to go to Madras. But now, the love of the village has seized my heart so completely, I can’t explain it. Like a bird pierced by an arrow, I feel restless. Often, I feel like giving up everything in Madras and settling here. And yet, the question remains: from where should one begin the play of life? It’s a serious question. My mind is tangled in it. There’s no clear answer, because the reply keeps changing depending on how you look at it.”

14.

News spread through the village that the sick would be examined and given medicine. From early the next morning, patients from every hamlet would be checked in turn, and medicine would be distributed.

At dawn, people from the outlying hamlets began to arrive. The men were examined by Dr Mahendra, while the women were attended to by Dr Sujata. Bouelal assisted Dr Mahendra, and Sumitra helped Dr Sujata.

Within three days, every patient in the village had

been examined and given medicine. Such joy swept through the community that it felt as if illness itself had fled the village. Everyone's hearts overflowed with a single colour of happiness, and they began to dance. Their spirits soared, as though no trace of disease remained and death had vanished altogether. Their ecstatic dancing was so intense, it seemed that even sickness was frightened away.

Yet life holds many kinds of afflictions; sickness is only one. Still, these were the emotions of the heart. But if it's merely a feeling, then what is the reality? That can only be seen in the lived experiences of the people.

For days, Bhalesara had been seen as nothing but ill. He had even stopped working. But today, he was spotted carrying a large basket of dung to scatter in the fields. When Sonma asked him on the way, he replied, "There is no pain in my body now. I'm going to spread the manure, then harvest the autumn paddy and bring it home."

Likewise, Tetara was seen returning with two bundles of rice stalks slung over his shoulders.

Sonma's heart leapt with amazement. How had this happened? She thought: At the hospital in

Laheriasarai, patients lie for six months on iron cots, taking injections and swallowing pills, and still they die. But here, how has suffering disappeared so quickly? It was truly strange. Oh! Perhaps we don't even understand what sorrow truly is.

Lost in thought, Sonma wondered: If we do not understand, how can we ever hope to understand? If we think for ourselves but our reasoning falters, then misunderstanding becomes inevitable. And whether we misunderstand or fail to understand, what difference is there?

Without true understanding, people continue acting, and through their actions, they continue to err. Even if their intentions are right, the outcomes may still be flawed. So then, what should one do?

If we place our trust in someone, we believe to be wise, and he speaks nonsense, we fall deeper into confusion. And if we ask even the truly knowledgeable and he too speaks wrongly, we are left no better than before.

But there is one certainty: he speaks, and we act, and if the outcome of that action proves false, then who bears the blame?

What is to be done?

Now the age is no longer one where one can return to school. It's the children who go to school now. In her reflections, Sonma thought: When I was of school-going age, why didn't I study? Did I not study at all? My name was on the school rolls, and I studied up to the fifth class. Then why did I leave? Was it my choice, or did the teacher's beatings drive me out? Why did he beat me and force me to quit?

When I entered the sixth class, the English teacher came and taught that B.U.T. is read as 'but' and P.U.T. as 'put.' That's when I said he was teaching incorrectly. Was that a mistake? I hadn't spoken wrongly. If I hadn't erred, why did he strike me? If he didn't want to teach me, he could have just said- "Leave the school, I won't teach you." Why beat me?

And even if he did beat me, he should've explained the reason so I could understand. Then maybe I would have accepted it and moved on. But he didn't. And so, I remained uneducated.

Was there anything lacking in my hands or feet that I couldn't have become a constable? The job I lost wasn't it the teacher who took it from me

by forcing me to leave school?

The same has happened with my children. I see it in Chetan, too. What life is this now?

As these thoughts swirled in her mind, Sonma began to wonder if perhaps she had fallen into some false sorrow. But whom could she ask? Who would help her see things clearly? Everyone around her seemed to think the same way. Am I to spend my whole life just ploughing fields? Will I never mount a horse and go hunting?

With both hands on her head, Sonma sat beneath a tree, lost in thought. She reflected: Just as a mango tree is planted, so are khair and babul. Yet the mango bears sweet fruit, while khair and babul grow thorns. The act of planting is the same. Of course, there are wild trees too. A mango can grow wild, and so can the khair and babul.

Mahendra had come to the village on a seven-day leave, but eight days had already passed. The journey to and from Madras alone took five days, so his leave would now need to be extended. He was set to leave the next morning by train. Subudh knew this well. It struck him that, despite being childhood friends, he and Mahendra hadn't shared a proper, heartfelt conversation even once

during the visit. With Mahendra departing tomorrow, today was their only chance. Setting aside all his tasks, Subudh went to speak with him.

Dr Mahendra was sitting at the doorway, talking with his father.

"Babu," he said, "of all the patients I examined in the village, not a single one had any serious illness. No tuberculosis, no cancer, no AIDS. Astonishingly, the very diseases so common in towns and markets are absent here in the village. That is truly something to be grateful for."

Subudh, who had just arrived, also listened to Mahendra's report. Upon hearing the words "something to be grateful for," Ramakant asked, "Then what illnesses are these many people suffering from?"

Smiling, Mahendra replied, "Minor ailments, nothing serious. Most can be cured without medicine. If their diet improves, their conditions will resolve on their own. In fact, more than half the patients aren't ill at all. They only think they are. But unless they're given two or three tablets, their minds won't be at ease. So, I examined them out of formality, prescribed a few pills, and

handed them some medicine.”

Hearing this, both Ramakant and Subudh chuckled inwardly. Stifling his laughter, Subudh said, “Brother Mahendra, you’re leaving tomorrow, and who knows when we’ll meet again. That’s why I’ve put everything else aside to speak with you today. Life gives us endless things to talk about, but since you’re a doctor and I was once a teacher, though no longer, I’ve always had a deep curiosity about the causes of illness. So, I’d like to ask you something.”

“What is it?” Mahendra asked.

“My first question is about madness. When I look around, it seems to me that every human being is mad in some way.”

Startled, Ramakant interrupted- “How so?”

Subudh replied, “Uncle, those who are celebrated administrators, capable of governing entire regions and nations, struggle to manage their own families. Great mathematicians fail in calculating their personal lives. Brilliant engineers can’t design the blueprint of a stable home. And leaders, what can I even say about them? They’re like frogs that appear in droves when the monsoon arrives early and pours down in torrents.”

Smiling, Ramakant said, "Yes, you are right."

"Not only that, Uncle," Subudh continued. "One person is mad for liquor, another for wealth. Some are mad for studies, others for luxury and comfort. One for food, another for clothes. Some are obsessed with work, others with rest. Some people are mad for sports, others for dance and entertainment. Where will all these kinds of madness ever find a cure?"

"And beyond this, one kind of madman calls another mad, and he, in turn, calls a third mad. Likewise, some suffer from physical illness and call themselves sick. Others suffer from hunger, from a lack of clothing or shelter. Still others are distressed by a single harsh word. Looked at this way, how many people can truly be called free from illness?"

"And more than that, if we look within each person, we find many ailments at once. But these are all surface-level matters. The real question is: how can life bloom every day like a rose in spring?"

Hearing the words "how can life bloom every day like a rose," Dr Mahendra let out a deep sigh. He lifted his eyes and looked into Subudh's. In that

moment, as their eyes met, Mahendra felt that Subudh was immersed in an unfathomable ocean, while he himself was only floundering in a small pond.

As this thought passed through his mind, Mahendra's gaze turned slowly from his parents to his brothers, and then to his children.

How much hope their father had placed in educating both the brothers, and yet, how far away he himself now lived from them. How could he care for them when they needed him most? Each passing day only increased their need for support. Their age was advancing, and as the body aged, its organs would grow weaker. The weaker the organs became, the more bodily functions would falter. New illnesses would silently enter the body, and with each illness, suffering would multiply. Would he not be responsible for that suffering? Yes, he would. But what could he do about it? Nothing.

At present, both his brothers and their wives were still young. But in time, they too would grow old, just like their parents. And there was no certainty that their own sons would remain by their side. For now, they all lived in the same country,

though at opposite ends, his parents on one side, and he on the other. And yet, with the way the winds were blowing these days, people often left even their homeland to earn a living in distant countries. What if the same fate awaited him? What then?

Mahendra's face turned desolate. Inside, his mind grew restless. It felt as though he were walking through a silent forest, with fear slowly creeping over him. Sweat began to bead on his skin. After a while, he felt his strength begin to fade. Drenched in perspiration, Mahendra turned to Subudh and said, "Brother Subudh, life's path is indeed strange. Every human born into this world must live out their life. But the road is so full of twists and turns that only a rare few truly understand it. The rest stumble along blindly."

Smiling gently, Subudh replied, "Brother Mahendra, you are a doctor. You live among educated people. Why do you speak like this? As for me, when I worked as a teacher, I taught children. And since leaving that job, I've lived in the village, observing society here as it really is." Mahendra responded, "Brother, what you say is certainly visible. But within you lies the insight

to understand human nature, and the wisdom to guide others along life's path. You are hiding your true self."

Hearing Mahendra's words, Ramakant thought to himself: This is the man who went thousands of miles from home, who earned and built so much, why is he now seeing himself as so weak? Yet he didn't interrupt the conversation between the two friends. Sitting quietly, he shifted his gaze between Mahendra and Subudh.

At the words "hiding your true self," Subudh replied, "Brother Mahendra, the question that troubles you isn't all that complicated, but it isn't simple either. It only requires bringing light into one's eyes and walking mindfully by that light."

Inside the inner room that opened to the courtyard, Sujata sat by the window, watching everyone and listening to their conversation. At times, her heart filled with joy; at others, with a faint bitterness. Yet she remained silent. Speaking didn't seem proper. Still, being educated, she sometimes felt the urge to join in. But within just a few days, her mother-in-law had made her well aware of the customs and manners of Mithila. "Sujata of Madras" had now begun to transform

into "Sujata of Mithila."

She no longer believed in sealing her lips completely, but she had begun to watch her words carefully. Whom to speak with, in what tone, at what moment, and using which words, on all these points, she now kept a close eye. Her speech had become measured. Although she had not yet fully adopted the ways of this place, she was making every effort to do so.

Subudh's seemingly nonsensical words did not upset Mahendra. Instead, even within such light remarks, he tried to uncover a deeper truth.

Noticing Mahendra's serious expression, Subudh understood that he was genuinely eager to engage with the deeper questions of life. He decided it would be appropriate to share such thoughts with him.

"Mahendra Bhai," he began, "yours is the foremost family in this village, whether in terms of wealth or education. But reflect a little. Despite all this wealth, you live thousands of miles away from home. Tell me, how much wealth will finally bring you contentment?"

"But there's another side to this question, the idea of world brotherhood. Even our great thinkers

here didn't merely accept this idea in theory; they also tried to bring it into practice. In principle, world brotherhood is a noble concept. But the nobler the idea, the harder it is to realise in practice.

"People light lamps at dusk at their village shrines, or before the household deity. This is right, and it also shows the direction of deep reflection. In the same way, the play of life should begin with the self. From self to society, from society to region, and from region to nation and the world, one must keep moving forward. But if someone skips over his family and society to rush ahead, something or the other is bound to go wrong.

"Just as the number of people burdened with problems in the world is countless, so too are those who struggle against them. The world's problems cannot be solved by one individual alone. That's why, wherever one is born, one should dedicate oneself to honest and diligent work."

Accepting Subudh's words, Mahendra said, "Yes, this responsibility belongs to every human being." Subudh continued- "If this responsibility lies with all of us, then look at our own village. Only this year, after land was distributed, has a little

prosperity come. But before that, you yourself saw it; there wasn't enough food, proper clothing, or safe houses for everyone. Even now, these things are still not fully secure, nor are there reliable ways to protect ourselves from disease."

At this point, Dr Mahendra spoke up: "Yes, that is true."

"Now tell me," Subudh went on, "we were born into this very society. Are we so weak that we should abandon our village? In other words, should we go only where our stomachs can be filled? If someone leaves their village and society just for that, what else can we call them but cowardly and idle?"

"And yet people do go. Why? To earn more money or to live with less effort. But living in ease without effort is impossible unless we enrich our country through our labour. If the prosperity of a nation is measured only by the wealth of a few individuals, then that very thinking will bind the nation in the chains of slavery."

No country becomes a slave by itself. It is the people who become enslaved, and gradually, their very way of living falls into servitude. The lure of money works in society much like bait on a fishing

hook. The large fish, tempted, get caught, and people are drawn in the same way. Anyone who observes with a steady eye can see this clearly. Mahendra nodded in agreement with Subudh's thoughts. Yet, even as he nodded, a trace of doubt lingered in his heart. Subudh noticed this from the look on his face and continued.

"Mahendra, look at our condition today. Those we call the cream of the crop—scientists, engineers, doctors—leave for foreign lands and sell their intelligence for money. They may earn more, but their wealth only strengthens powerful nations that, through new machines and weapons, either attack weaker countries or flood them with goods that keep them even further behind.

"Some people argue that, since our country lacks the infrastructure to fully use their talents, they go abroad. But to me, that argument carries no real weight. Throughout history, prosperous nations have exploited weaker ones, whether through war or trade. As a result, they plunder whatever resources the weaker nations have. And when they are plundered like this, how can they ever move forward?"

Bowing his head, Mahendra asked, "Then what

should be done?”

Subudh replied, “Raise your eyes and think. Has anyone ever become a scholar without first learning the alphabet? If not, how can underdeveloped nations or people move forward without hard work? They must understand this truth. If they fail to realise it and simply imitate advanced nations, they will walk again down the path of slavery.

“What could be more shameful than to be wounded by the very weapons we created ourselves? But let us speak of something else.”

Looking at Mahendra’s face, Subudh continued.

“The family system that has existed here since ancient times is one of the finest in the world. Today, the global community is once again moving toward the idea of familyhood, which is the essence of our joint family tradition.

“Think about human life. It moves through three stages: childhood, youth, and old age. Childhood and old age are times when people need the support of others, and that need cannot be fulfilled in a nuclear family. Modern nuclear families are like clay pots on a potter’s wheel, unstable and likely to topple.

“Parents live in one place, sons and daughters-in-law in another, and the daughters and sons elsewhere entirely. Human affection, which was once considered priceless, is being slowly destroyed. Indifference has taken its place. We all know how fragile human beings are, like earthen vessels. Who can say what will happen to the body, or when?”

“In good health, anyone can live anywhere. But in sickness and helplessness, life becomes unbearably painful. You too must reflect on this.”

Subudh’s words shook Mahendra to his core. His body trembled, and his voice began to falter. For a while, he couldn’t steady his mind, but at last, he composed himself and said, “Brother Subudh, though we only studied together up to high school, you have understood life with a depth that I never could. To tell the truth, I always thought of you as just an ordinary schoolteacher. That was my illusion. Even as a companion, you are my teacher. “Many times, when I sit in solitude, I wonder: I earn so much, yet why am I restless day and night, never at peace? What happiness am I chasing that keeps me constantly tormented? I cannot understand. There’s a television in the

house, but I never have time to watch it. When I sit down to eat, I barely swallow a few bites like a bird before my mind flies off, reminding me of places I must go, promises I must keep, because if I don't, my income will suffer. It's the same with sleep. But what do I really gain from all this toil? Only money. And is money life?"

Hearing Mahendra's changed thoughts, Subudh smiled and said, "Brother, money is only a means to live, not life itself. Inside money, there lies a kind of corruption that can make a man wicked. And when a man becomes wicked, the first thing to disappear is his humanity. His conscience fades, and criminal tendencies begin to grow within him. Once those tendencies take root, they drive him toward more serious crimes.

"That's why true life isn't about looking only at oneself. It means seeing your life in relation to your family and your society. A person must always be ready to serve and do whatever they can. Still, the world of action is incredibly difficult. So difficult that even the most diligent become weary along the way. But that weariness is not defeat; it is victory. The tree of society that has dried up must be watered at its roots so

that it may bloom again. To that task, we must dedicate ourselves.”

Through Subudh’s firm words, Mahendra’s own resolve began to strengthen. A radiant light appeared in his eyes. In a strong voice, he said to both his father and to Subudh, “I tell you both this: not a single day in the year will pass without one of us four being present in the village.

“There is a lot of work in Madras, and leaving it entirely would not be wise. But I will not abandon my family or my society either. Whatever I earn in Madras will be used for the benefit of both. I may not have much experience yet, but it is my sincere wish that any expense required to rid society of its ailments, I will bear it.

“Just as Father gave food to the people, I will dedicate myself to giving them health. Let everyone know that anyone suffering from illness should come here without hesitation. They will certainly receive treatment. This time, I came to the village unprepared, so I could not bring much with me. But I promise that whatever medical equipment can be arranged, I will send it from Madras.

“For now, Bhau will remain here in the village.

Bouelal and Sumitra will also stay. And when I return next, it will be for a longer stay. I will train as many people as possible in medical care, and together we will drive disease out of the village. This society is mine, and I belong to it."

ORIGINAL MAITHILI
NOVEL: JAGDISH
PRASAD MANDAL
ENGLISH
TRANSLATION:
GAJENDRA THAKUR

FLOWERS
BLOOMING
ON A
WITHERED
TREE

