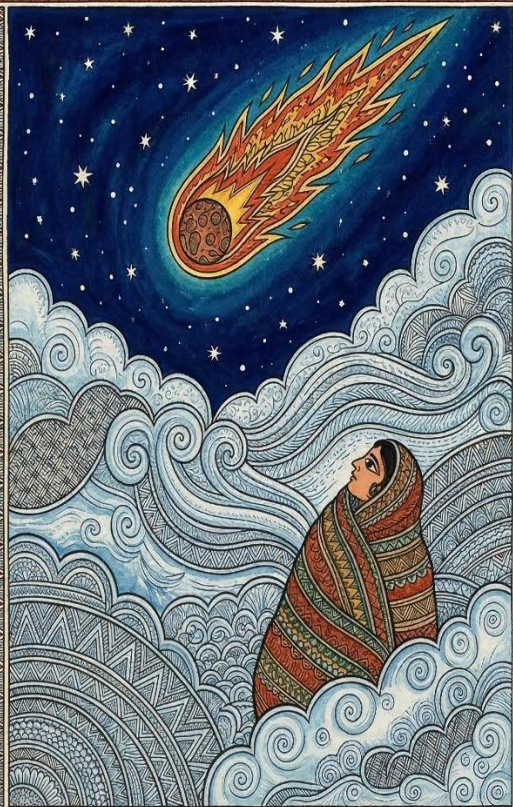


THE COMET'S COMA

Lost in the Frozen Clouds

[Sahasrabadhani Maithili Novel by Gajendra Thakur,
translated into English by the author himself]



GAJENDRA THAKUR

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"One day I saw Kalit moving forward on his knees. Once he stepped out of the courtyard and saw the uneven, stony path, he lifted his knees and began moving forward using only his hands and feet," his wife recalled.

"One day I saw him gripping the wall, trying to stand up by the window. A thought struck me—let's just leave him be today and see him try on his own. After two attempts, as he went higher while clinging to the wall, he slipped onto the couch. His hands just couldn't reach. Then, on the third try, it was as if he leaped; his hands caught the window frame and he stood bolt upright," Jhingur Babu suddenly remembered.

"One day I was counting 'one, two' out loud. I said 'one,' and he mimicked, 'hoo.' Then I said 'two,' and he said, 'oo.' It was then I realized he was imitating me."

"One day I returned from the fields and was clearing my throat after a heavy meal. I went 'ahaha,' and it felt as if Kalit did the same. I turned around and saw him sitting there, playing with a ball. I cleared my throat a second time, and he followed suit again. I told everyone that he was doing nothing but copying me. Everyone on the outhouse porch began to laugh. After that, whoever came by would say, 'Kalit, oo-hoo-hoo,' and in response, he would say 'oo-hoo-hoo' right back, but in his own unique style."

The child whom Jhingur Babu had first

found indifferent and had only seen smiling in dreams was now crawling, then walking, and was now receiving his education. He still remembered how, while crawling, the boy's hands wouldn't move forward properly; instead, he would leap straight ahead from the back like a frog. "Just like a frog," Jhingur Babu thought, and he burst into laughter.

His wife asked, "What are you smiling about?" At first, he hesitated, but then he shared all the swirling memories he had been pondering. One story led to another.

The Year 1885

A boy was born in the house of Jhingur Thakur. This year was destined to be recorded as a significant milestone due to the founding of the Congress Party. The British Raj had fully established itself. Kings and chieftains felt a sense of pride in considering themselves friends of the British. In the educational world, the Congress was quickly being branded as a disruptive element. The era of rote Sanskrit learning was fading. Obtaining a government post was impossible without learning English. In those days, a 'government post' essentially meant being involved in tax collection for the local royalty.

Consequently, the boy was kept away from the allure of a Sanskrit education. English

had almost no presence in the family, which had caused the household to fall a generation behind. However, Jhingur Babu arranged a tutor—a 'Calcutta Babu'—for his son's education. Later, in Darbhanga, another Bengali gentleman taught the boy English. Slowly, through his wit and intelligence, the boy, Kalit, became a master in the art of charming others.

"When I heard the stories, he must have been six or seven months old." "When I heard them, what could his age have been? At most nine or ten months."

In the absence of her in-laws or outsiders, the wife would speak directly to Jhingur Babu, saying, "I heard this," or "Do this or that." But in front of the elders, she remained formal: "Do you hear? So-and-so was saying..." Jhingur Babu was no less; he would respond with the philosophical detachment of the Gita, matching her tone. But in private, everything returned to normal.

Jhingur Babu smiled again, making a silent vow to free Kalit from these traditional entanglements. He wanted the boy to know his father was no old-fashioned man. When his wife asked again what he was smiling about, Jhingur Babu brushed it off and walked toward the porch. There, a few people were discussing the upkeep of the wrestling pit (akhara).

The morning talk at the akhara was something else entirely. At dawn, children and youths would gather. The pit was soft as

a cushion, made of dug-up and crushed earth. Every child except Kalit would go there. This pained Jhingur Babu, but others would console him: "Why do you feel bad? You have kept him away for a greater purpose." The Thakur family, once a single household, had grown into five. In the distribution of the Dakahi fish catch, the Thakur cluster now received a share equal to an entire neighborhood. Counting Kalit's peers, there were now eight families in the cluster, and the children were already being given their due recognition.

Just then, a messenger arrived from Ekaur, carrying a message written in the Tirhuta script on a palm leaf. Jhingur Babu gave him a pot of water to wash and began reading. It was an invitation to a thread ceremony (Upanayan).

"Make sure to see the Sabha-gachhi (Assembly Grove) of Partapur on your way," Jhingur Babu told the messenger. He felt a sudden surge of kinship toward these relatives linked by ancestral lineage. He then began reading the letter aloud in the courtyard:

|| Shri: ||

Salutations at the feet of the revered Jhingur Thakur. From Gulab, millions of prostrations. All is well here. I am pleased to share the news of the Upanayan ceremony of my sons, Gadesh and Chandramohan. Your great-grandfather and mine studied together. My grandfather instructed us to keep

exchanging news with our kin. If news of joy or sorrow is not shared between our villages, it invites misfortune. Now, may you five Thakurs, like the five Pandavas, grace the occasion. I intend to make your eldest son the Acharya (presiding priest). Since you all visited the Panchkoshi of Partapur's assembly grove, many are eager to talk with you. If you arrive by next Monday, the work will proceed smoothly. The preliminary rituals begin Wednesday. Thus ends the message.

The sprawling trees of Partapur stood by the banks of the Balan River, with the Assembly Grove beneath them. The Balan was deep and perfectly still. (It was only later that a massive tree from the Himalayas fell into the river near Pipraghat, blocking its straight path and creating a new branch. The old Balan flowed toward Jhanjharpur, while the new stream moved toward Menhath, Gadhiya, and Naruar.)

The Balan was deep and calm, with no sign of silt; the Kamala, however, was frothy and destructive, bringing sand with its floods. In summer, the Balan maintained its form, making it impossible to cross without a boat, whereas the new stream could be crossed on foot. Later, the Kamala merged with the Balan at Pipraghat, and the devastation of the floods began. The great trees of the Assembly Grove withered, sand covered everything, and the grove was uprooted. All the grandeur shifted to Saurath. But in Jhingur Babu's time, the Panchkoshi was still

measured from the landmark of Partapur.

Kalit was to return from Darbhanga the day after tomorrow; then they would head to Ekaur. The poor boy had toiled hard in his studies. This time, Jhingur Babu planned to take him to his maternal uncle's home and his sister's home. Everyone was looking forward to it.

Father and son arrived in Ekaur. The village felt familiar. As per the tradition of scholarly debate, a group of learned men began discussing various subjects—the British Raj and the military campaigns of Indians. Mangru Babu began a detailed description of how many battles he had fought in his red coat. He spoke of the 1867-68 Abyssinian War with Sir Charles Napier, and how, during the Second Afghan War, a lack of time forced the troops to wear brownish-grey (malichhah) uniforms instead of red—the color that later became famous as 'Khaki.' He told the story of the Enfield rifle that sparked the 1857 revolt and the sturdier Snider rifle introduced in 1887. Mangru Babu even discussed the Congress.

Meanwhile, Jhingur Babu was busy making a list and estimate for the feast. Kalit was lost in conversation with students his own age. Among the crowd was Pannu Babu of Raje village, whose sister and brother-in-law lived in Ekaur, making him a frequent visitor. He

hadn't seen Kalit before and, struck by curiosity, enquired about him. Upon learning Kalit was Jhingur Babu's son, he hurried over to him.

During their talk, Jhingur Babu mentioned that after the Permanent Settlement, the Darbhanga Raj had gained tax collection rights in Mithila based on parganas. He added that after finishing his studies, Kalit would go to Katihar for tax collection work. Kalit had already completed his English education. Pannu Babu, who was searching for a suitable groom for his daughter, saw an opportunity. It was decided that Pannu Babu would visit Partapur the following month to accept Jhingur Babu's hospitality.

However, the relatives soon pressured Jhingur Babu so much that he finalized the marriage between Kalit and Pannu Babu's daughter right there. He returned home in a daze, worried his wife might scold him for the sudden decision. But upon hearing of the marriage, his wife was overjoyed, almost ecstatic. All the worries of the past four days vanished in an instant.

Foot travel or the katahi (wooden) cart—these were the only modes of transport. The mahfa (palanquin) was also a carriage, heavily built and adorned with exquisite carvings. The groom rode in a mahfa, while the young men of the wedding party traveled on foot. Those who were somewhat elderly set off in wooden carts. Upon arrival at the doorstep, they were greeted with fragrances,

flowers, and refreshments. This hospitality felt excessive to some members of the party. Meanwhile, the chatter of the wedding guests flowed like a steady stream—filled with scholarly debates and witty anecdotes. While the parichhan (welcoming ritual) and various customs took place inside the courtyard, a fountain of gossip erupted at the outhouse. People would occasionally pop in to look for something or say a word before disappearing again. "Where is the jewelry?" "Who will provide the veil?" "The veiling cloth hasn't been found yet!" Such snippets kept the wedding guests informed about the progress of the ceremony. Thus, the wedding festivities continued both in the courtyard and at the entrance until five in the morning. A sacred thread was tied around the hands of the bride and groom by the priest, to remain for four days. With that, the marriage was complete.

After waiting for the day of departure, Jhingur Babu sent them off, and Kalit returned to his village. Soon, preparations were made for his departure to Katihar. After bidding a tearful farewell to his mother and the villagers, Kalit left for his place of employment.

Arriving in Katihar, a region perennially plagued by the terrors of the Kosi floods, Kalit quickly became an expert in his work. As the workload increased, he sent for his paternal cousin and nephew to join him. Within a short time, Kalit earned great prestige among the local people. In this

region, the past experiences with the Permanent Settlement of the Zamindari system had been quite bitter. Kalit revolutionized the corrupt methods previously used by tax officials. But destiny had written a different script. Before Kalit's dwiragaman (the ceremony of bringing the bride home), his mother passed away. She left with many unfulfilled desires and whims. She used to tease Kalit, saying, "I will pick many fights with your wife, just to see whose side you take—mine or hers." Now, Jhingur Babu began to grow detached. Kalit urged him to come live with him, but how could a man leave the place where he had spent his entire life?

In the third year, Kalit's dwiragaman took place, and only then did Jhingur Babu feel a sense of peace. Before he passed, he told Kalit, "You have spent most of your time outside the village. It was this girl—Buchiya—who looked after us. Now, you must take up the responsibility of your sister. I had hoped to find her a groom and be free of my duties, but your mother's passing broke me. Now you are capable enough. Even when a man has a five-year-old son, people say, 'What do you have to worry about? You have a son.' You are educated and earning your livelihood." Entrusting Buchiya to his daughter-in-law's care, Jhingur Babu took his leave from this world. Kalit had

never seen him in such a hurry. Even a steady, calm-minded farmer who worries only about the harvest becomes restless once his life partner departs.

After returning to Katihar, Kalit was consumed by a single worry: Buchiya's marriage. While his father was alive, he never felt the weight of such burdens. But now, he had to show the world that Kalit would not neglect his sister just because their father was gone. He couldn't even raise the topic of marriage until the first death anniversary was observed. But time flies. After performing the village feast for his father, Kalit began searching for a groom. He went to the Sabha-gachhi of Partapur, but no groom seemed suitable for his Buchiya. His fifteen-day leave went to waste. He returned to Katihar. Through his work, he became acquainted with families from Gidhaur, Barh, and other areas south of the Ganges. There, he heard of a boy near the town of Barh who worked for the Gidhaur State. He immediately rushed to Gidhaur to meet him. The boy was truly divine. After gathering details, he went to Barh to talk to the boy's father. The legacy of the Panchkoshi had reached this region near Barh after so long that it was impossible to refuse the proposal. After finalizing everything, he returned to Menhath for the formal agreement. The elders were astonished. "Like father, like son," they remarked. Just as Jhingur Babu had once finalized Kalit's marriage unexpectedly, Kalit had done the same.

Though the distance was great, Kalit lived far away himself and had experience with the world; this thought satisfied everyone. The whole neighborhood began preparing for the wedding. Buchiya was a girl of all virtues—she would have no trouble. Whether it was singing or crafting Sarai-Katora (clay vessels), she could create beautiful, delicate things in an instant. She would brighten whichever home she entered.

The marriage was performed with all rituals. The groom's side proposed an immediate dwiragaman, but Kalit was not ready. The groom's family had to leave with only a hand-print of the bride as a symbol.

Kalit's wife was a woman of pure heart. She and Buchiya were like sisters. Buchiya never tired of calling her "Bhouji, Bhouji." In the third year, the dwiragaman arrived. When the maid who accompanied Buchiya returned and described the sight of the Ganges and the lands beyond, tears flowed from her sister-in-law's eyes. She asked Kalit many times, "Where exactly is this Barh?" With time, everything became normal. Once Buchiya visited a couple of times, her sister-in-law felt at ease.

Then came the earthquake. After spending a night at the Mahadev pond with his wife, two daughters, and a son during the 1934 earthquake, Kalit moved his family to Katihar for a while because of the month-long aftershocks. But his wife pined for her home. Their house had collapsed in the

quake, so Kalit left that patch of land and built a new house near the village orchard. He gave his old ancestral land to his kinsmen and settled on the new plot. Later, they were blessed with another son and daughter. A new family cycle began.

Soon, his own daughters were of marriageable age. To a parent, children always seem like babies, but time moves on. He married his first daughter into a family in Kachabi and the second in Kharrakh. The Kachabi family were employees of the Royal Court—horses, palanquins, and vast lands. However, during childbirth, Kalit's first daughter passed away. Her infant daughter, Nan-kirabi, survived and lived with her maternal grandparents. But when she was barely five, she complained of stomach pain one day and joined her mother in heaven. Kalit watched this battle between life and death. Sometimes cholera would ravage the village, sometimes the plague. One person would return from a cremation only to hear news of another death. Yet, Kalit's immediate family remained intact.

Kalit's status and prestige in Katihar continued to grow. His nephews lived there permanently. His two sons began studying at Kejriwal High School in Jhanjharpur. In the slow crawl of time, a sudden moment of fate often arrives. After marrying his third daughter into a village near Tamuria, Kalit felt a sense of relief. He married off his elder son and felt confident in his younger son's academic brilliance. However, he also

noticed his younger son's streak of superstition. Once, a rumor spread that in the dense Channa orchard—dark even during the day—ants were rising from beneath a tree. His son had rushed there to collect them. When the time came in the eighth grade to choose between Science and Arts, Kalit agreed with his son's decision to take Science. Some people warned him, "Look at Satyanarayan Babu and others who failed Science and had to switch back to Arts." But Nand did not listen. In Science, he chose Mathematics. Kalit hoped that studying Science would lessen Nand's fascination with the unseen.

For some reason, Kalit felt a strange sense of finality after this. He had come home from Katihar for a visit. One morning, after finishing his daily routine, he was walking toward a pile of fine clay to wash his hands when something happened. The brass pot flew from his hand. He collapsed. His wife ran to him, but the game of life is played once and ends once. Nand was a witness to his father's death. This form of death was entirely new and mysterious to him. The power of the unseen began to weigh upon the supremacy of science in Nand's life.

The circle completed its rotation around the center, caught in the grip of an invisible axis. Nand began to grow under the shadow of his mother, Yashoda, both in age and in studies.

He became a favorite of his teachers. The cleanliness of his practical notebooks was discussed in the staff room. His flower-like handwriting matched his physical grace.

Another incident occurred during this time. Yashoda's two sons were sleeping on the floor in front of the prayer room. In the morning, their mother saw a cobra bitten into four pieces, with a mongoose standing guard near the children's heads. The mongoose had likely killed the snake, keeping Yashoda's sons safe. Nand moved forward with the memory of this event. Meanwhile, a family partition occurred. The homestead and the fertile fields were split into two. Outsiders whispered that injustice was being done to the two brothers.

Having earned a scholarship, Nand enrolled in the Mathematics branch of Intermediate Science at R.K. College, Madhubani. Initially, he struggled with Math, so he began to memorize it. He applied the logic of rote learning so that people wouldn't mock his choice of Science. But after a few days of memorizing, he began to truly understand it. The memories of the village football field faded; he had no time to play. Before the exams, his Math teacher gave a set of 300 questions, saying that anyone who solved 60% correctly would surely pass with a First Division. Nand prepared 70% of the questions and showed them to the teacher. As expected, he passed with a First Division.

In 1959, he applied for Engineering. Based

on his top marks, he gained admission to the Muzaffarpur Institute of Technology. At that time, only Civil Engineering was taught there. He arrived dressed in a dhoti and kurta. Professor Dikshit saw the machines in the workshop and told him, "Your dhoti will get caught in these. Come in full pants and a shirt." Nand had to buy two pairs of pants and shirts. Buying fabric and getting it tailored would take too long, so he bought readymade ones. However, whenever he went home, he would stop outside the village to change back into his dhoti and kurta. He never once entered his village wearing pants.

From 1959 to 1963, his engineering studies continued. He was then recruited as an Engineering Assistant by the Bihar Government, and a year later, in 1964, he became an Assistant Engineer. Engineering was an expensive pursuit, so his marriage had been settled on the condition that his father-in-law would bear the costs of his education. However, during the one-month summer break and the fifteen-day Durga Puja holiday, the father-in-law would deduct the allowance for those days, paying for only ten and a half months instead of twelve. Later, whenever his in-laws would boast, "We are the ones who made you an engineer," Nand would laugh and reveal this detail.

The circumference of the circle was growing larger. The cycle of time had completed its first full rotation and now began its expansion. A story of joy and sorrow, of rise

and fall.

The enthusiasm of Independence Day—August 15, 1947—saw Nand roaming with school children, hoisting the flag. A deep devotion to the Congress party stayed with him. However, after the 1962 Chinese invasion, the nightmare of the Indian army's retreat set in. After India's surprising decision not to use the Air Force, a sense of despondency took hold. When All India Radio announced that "our army is retreating with pride," Nand's heart felt as if it had stopped. Thus, during the 1965 war, when a call was made for engineers to join the army as Captains, Nand and Saha Saheb both applied. Saha Saheb's wife began to cry, forcing him to stay back. Nand's wife, however, did not offer a single word of resistance. But Nand was ultimately rejected for being overweight. He remained dejected. Following this, he became obsessed with fitness, a drive that only grew over time. He had but one dream: to build a concrete house in the village. Using survey maps, he raised the plinth of the house high enough to ensure no part of it encroached upon the road. Only half of the house's design could be completed.

Each transfer brought a new experience. In those days, it was customary to address one's wife in the third person, but Nand broke tradition by using the second person ("You"). Instead of facing criticism, this change was embraced, and other villagers began adopting this form of address in their own

homes. During his posting in Dehri-on-Sone, he received the full cooperation of the local tribal people for development projects. His conscience never wavered at the sight of money. He would jump into his jeep with total dedication to finish his work. Sometimes, if the jeep went too fast, he would worry about hitting a child, yet no accident ever occurred. He provided jobs on the master roll to people of all castes from his village and encouraged locals to seek employment. The poor local tribals looked upon Nand as a deity.

It was here that Nand suffered his first asthma attack. A local healer worked day and night, bringing herbs from the forest. While Allopathy has no permanent cure for asthma, that single dose of herbal medicine kept Nand free from the ailment for many years. His companions nicknamed him "Bholenath." He tried to teach people ways to earn a living, but having seen rural helplessness so closely, he remained focused on service. Despite their poverty, the affection he received from the locals was unparalleled. During this period, he was blessed with a daughter and then another son. The daughter was born in her maternal grandmother's village, and the son in his own village. Watching the children grow—their steady gaze, their laughter, their first steps—felt like witnessing the very creation of the world and the evolution of consciousness. After the early death of a nephew, Nand developed a sense of equanimity toward his

own children; he remained neither overly elated in joy nor utterly shattered in sorrow.

Once, while Nand was away for training in Delhi, he had a dream. He saw his nephew, Naveen, sitting on the porch of a thatched house in the village. The child, for whom Nand held great affection, got up to play, but soon complained of stomach pain. Everyone gathered, offering old remedies, but shortly after, the child passed away. Nand woke up startled. He remembered his elder sister's daughter—a similar tragedy had occurred where an old woman had placed a hand on the girl's stomach, and by some coincidence, she died of pain shortly after. Nand held a deep-seated belief in the unseen—ghosts, spirits, and the supernatural. Thinking of this, he began to cry loudly. His companions woke up in a panic. When they heard the story, some tried to reassure him that the dream meant his nephew's life had actually been lengthened. Some reminded him of his scientific outlook as an engineer. But no one could comfort him. Nand left his training and rushed to the village based solely on that dream.

When he arrived on the third day, he saw his elder brother with a shaved head and his heart sank. Anyone he met at the village outskirts spoke in hushed, mournful tones. When he reached the courtyard, his mother began to wail. Every detail of the dream had been true, literally. His nephew had summoned him just in time for the funeral rites. Behind Naveen's photograph, Nand

wrote the dates of his birth and death in fountain pen ink, recording the child's stammering voice calling him "Kaka-Kaka." The child had left before the concrete house was built, but he had called his uncle in a dream.

After his daughter's birth, the construction of the concrete house finally began. As the daughter grew, she remembered the deep trenches dug for the house's foundation. But Nand reminded her, "Your uncle used to hold your hand and lower you into the trench to clear out the leaves—so how could it have been that deep?" The daughter found her answer in her father's lap: the trench felt deep to a child, yet her uncle was indeed tall enough to lower her into it by hand. Nand's mother became the "Ba" (Grandmother) to all the children. She called Nand's son "Banand's Nand," sometimes "Gopal," and sometimes "Rajkumar," doting on his laughter and his thick black hair. Just as Ba's concrete house was completed, she began suffering from stomach pain. Having witnessed two deaths in the family due to stomach pain attributed to the "unseen," Nand ignored superstition and took his mother to various allopathic doctors in big cities. She was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment—burning the tumor with radium—was more painful than the disease itself. Ba broke down. She passed away in Patna and

was cremated on the banks of the Ganges. (It was a local belief that the Magadh region ended where the lowing of a cow on the Ganges bank could no longer be heard). The funeral rites followed in the village. Ba left before the birth of Nand's second son, but her presence remained. Her photo became a source of inspiration for her grandsons. Even the mangoes from the trees used for her funeral ceremonies were not eaten by the grandchildren; they were placed as an offering at her memorial. Witnessing the branding of the cow during the Godaan ritual to cross the mythical Vaitarani river, Ba's two sons vowed that such rituals would never be performed in the family again. Through her patience, Ba had succeeded in restoring the family's prestige and their devotion to education (Saraswati) before she died.

Before her own passing, Buchiya (Nand's sister) came from Barh to Patna to visit her sister-in-law. The two women lost themselves in old stories. The sister-in-law had become the "Ba" of the household, and Buchiya had become the "Budhiya Didi" (the old elder sister) to the children. Budhiya Didi's stories became legendary among the kids—long epics that took many nights to finish. One by one, the children would fall asleep. The next night, a fight would break out. The eldest would say, "Start from where you left off!" while the younger ones who slept early wanted a restart. Budhiya Didi was clever; she would start the story from a bit further ahead. When the eldest

complained he hadn't heard that part, she'd say, "I kept telling the story like a madwoman and you fell asleep, so I stopped!" Eventually, it was decided the story would restart from wherever the youngest child requested.

Nand had a boring well dug in the large Kola field, hoping to irrigate the parched land. But after days of labor by workers and masons, it was discovered there was no water below. The pipes remained buried in the dry earth. To the children, it became known as the "Boring Field." Later, when the government announced a boring project for the village, Nand's elder brother realized it was being planned for a water-rich area rather than the dry wasteland. He led a delegation to Patna to petition the Chief Minister, and finally, the dry land was reclaimed. A tall, fair "English" engineer arrived with machines and finished the task in two days. Someone later remarked he was actually American, adding that "not every white man is English."

Then came the construction of embankments on both sides of the Kamala-Balan. It worked for a while, but soon silt began to fill the riverbed. No matter how high they raised the embankments, the silt rose faster. Sand filled up to the bottom of the Jhanjharpur bridge. Even a little rain would push the water past the danger mark, flooding the ponds and fields through the sluice gates. High-value lands became worthless, and farming stopped in the fertile fields. In the sandy soil between the embankments, crops had to be

planted three times. People began growing pointed gourd and sweet potatoes in the sand. Around the Dakahi pond, farmers had to switch to scattered rice (chhitua) because transplanting became too expensive. The old embankments remained waterlogged. Between Kothia and Mehat, there was a deep depression—likely an old, stray branch of the Kosi.

Stories of the old rivalry between Mehat and Kothia survived... like the feat of the blind old man from the Bhumihaar colony. His family had tied him up so he wouldn't join the fight, but he broke the door, attached a spear to a large bamboo, and rushed into the fray. "A hundredweight of bangles were broken in Kothia that day," the legend went. And over what? A dispute over pig feed! And then there was the story of the old uncle's "Jhathaha" (a traditional stick-fighting move) that sent all the monkeys fleeing from the orchards. The elders lamented, "Look at the boys today; can any of them strike a blow that touches the very top of a tree? Everyone has plowed over the wrestling pits—how will they ever build their strength?"

Budhiya Didi once brought her son to Nand's house in Patna to find him a job. The children always looked forward to the taste of "Barh ki Lai" (a sweet snack) whenever she visited. After the end of the Zamindari system, government jobs were the new craze, but hard to get. Jayram, the barber, used to joke, "Nand gave jobs to every caste, but only the barber-Thakurs are left. If not Nand, I'll ask

his son for a job for my boy." Everyone got a job, but Budhiya Didi's son did not. Times had changed; earlier, people didn't even want jobs. Gulab Jha of the eastern colony used to say, "A job (nokri) means 'don't do' (na-kari), and if you do, what do you get? A salary (tan-kha) that eats away your body (tan)."

Nand's children grew up amidst the stories of Budhiya Didi, the sweets from Barh, and the local village squabbles over wells, ponds, and orchards. Nand never kept his children away from the village. At least three times a year—summer vacation, Holi, and Durga Puja—the whole family would visit. The children would go to their aunt's village just to eat mangoes. Walking long distances on foot—sometimes through the sands of the Kamala, sometimes through mango groves—was a unique experience. The midnight fish-and-rice feasts in the orchards, the games of Ti-Ti and Satghariya, the thrill of blowing smoke through hollow stalks, or the trick of putting lime on a sour mango to make it taste sweet—how could today's children experience any of this if they don't visit the village? Nand once told his son-in-law, "For the next seven births, I will not even look toward the city."

In 1975, during the great Patna flood, Nand was working on the North Ganga Bridge project. He was raising his family—two sons and a daughter—all of whom were doing well in school. No one knew then that this year would become a dividing line in their lives, changing the flow of their existence

forever.

The essence of Aruni's story is this: at the time of his birth, someone told his father that a baby girl had been born. For two or three days, his father remained under the impression that he had a daughter. It was only a day before the Chhathihar (sixth-day ceremony) that he discovered he had a son. From this uncertainty emerged a profound truth: a fact remains true only as long as it is perceived as such. Aruni's personality manifested as a tribute to the various forms of truth—forms that are not necessarily false, but are shifts in perception. Since birth, Aruni remained a witness to these shifting layers of reality.

Aruni's grandmother, Ba, passed away before he was born. Yet, whenever Ba was discussed, Aruni would listen intently, his curiosity growing. Gradually, Ba became an integral part of his life. Though she was no longer physically present, her essence permeated the house. At first, there seemed to be no connection between Aruni's story and Nand's, but as Aruni grew, his talents began to mirror nature itself. It is human nature to compare and contrast; many spend their lives analyzing similarities and differences. Between Aruni and Nand, a natural symmetry was visible. Despite their superficial differences and so-called ideological disagreements, their core

personalities remained identical.

Aruni was no exception to the hopes and anxieties that define the upbringing of a middle-class child. Just as all parents see sparks of genius in their children's smallest actions, Aruni's parents—especially his father, Nand—began to see an extraordinary talent in him. Aruni was a vivid dreamer. He would often grind his teeth in his sleep. His dreams contained both good and bad elements, though the terrifying ones predominated. For a long time, Aruni tried to figure out how to stop these nightmares. He would wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, only to find his parents sitting by him, fanning him.

Questions about existence haunted him: Who was born first? Who came before them? If God made everyone, who made God? These thoughts left Aruni deeply worried. In his dreams, he would see himself wandering on the village rooftop, which felt like a vast, well-like expanse of nature. He would find himself drifting toward the edge of the roof against his will. He wanted to move back to the center, but the "gravity" of that well-like nature kept pulling him toward the brink. Just as he was about to fall, he would wake up, feeling a mix of joy and sorrow—joy that it was only a dream, and sorrow at the fear of it returning.

He once asked his father, "Do you see such dreams too?" Nand replied, "No, not anymore. But when I was a child, I used to

dream of the great-haired Sahasrabadhani (The Thousand-Armed One). Fierce and breathing fire, as if she would swallow the Earth. Dreams are just what you think about during the day. I don't know which elder told me the legend of the Thousand-Armed One—how her arrival was a bad omen, bringing years of disease and famine. That is what haunted my dreams. But that was in childhood; now I barely sleep, so where would dreams come from?" Aruni thought how wonderful it would be if he, too, could simply stop sleeping so much.

Aruni began to "research" when he fell asleep and when he dreamed. The next day, he would try to recall: "I was awake until nine, I was awake until ten... so when did I drift off?" Within a few days, he diverted his mind, realizing that if he could remember the exact moment he fell asleep, he wouldn't actually be sleeping at all.

His name was changed several times. Nand studied ancient texts for this purpose. Then, Aruni's formal education began. He was taught to write the "Aukush" (hook) of Lord Ganesha in six different ways. Along with these shapes, he was taught the invocation to Gauri-Shankar: Siddhirastu (May there be success).

Saate bhavatu supreetaa devi shikhara vaasini... (May the Goddess dwelling on the peak be pleased...)

Aruni would burst into laughter at the phrase Pashupatih patih (Lord of the Beasts). Interestingly, this laughter helped cure his stammering. While reciting numbers from one to a hundred, the rhythm of that prayer would stay with him.

Aruni, Nand's younger son, began to embody Nand's hopes and aspirations. There was a reason for this. While Nand was teaching him to write from one to a hundred, he first taught him one to ten. When he started moving past eleven, Nand hesitated, thinking it might be too much of a burden for a child. However, by the time the boy reached twenty and then thirty, Aruni realized that everything was just a repetition of the numbers one through ten. When he discussed this logic with his father, Nand challenged him to write all the way to a hundred. When the boy succeeded, the problem of naming each number arose. Nand specifically explained the nuances of numbers like eleven, twenty-one, seventy-nine, and eighty-nine. When his mother came by thirty minutes later to check his progress, she was stunned to find that the father and son had already completed the entire "syllabus." Nand was overjoyed, but his mother shared the news with very few people, fearing the "evil eye." Such instances etched an image in the father's heart of a son who could do no wrong.

Aruni had an obsession with remembering the past—dates, events, and how they connected. He had a deep hunger to know the life stories of his parents and the elders. Sometimes, he felt a strange anxiety: how did the world keep functioning when he wasn't watching? How did it move while he was asleep?

He only had a few scattered childhood memories: the movie Bobby playing in a cinema hall; a photo at a studio with his parents before his ritual head-shaving (Mundan); and a memory of throwing the entire household's bunch of keys into a muddy ditch because his mother was ignoring him. Then there were the scenes of crowds during village festivals. Aruni concluded that his continuous memory began in 1976, when he was five or six years old, the year his mother started making him read parts of the newspaper. Years later, Nand discovered Aruni's diary, where Aruni had recorded his memories like a historian.

Aruni's Diary Entry:

I, Aruni, consider the year 1976 as the dividing line of my life. Before this, my memories are broken links without a sequence. Sometimes I wonder if some of them are from a previous birth.

In 1976, we were living in the colony built at Hajipur, on the northern bank of the Ganga Bridge Project. My father is a government engineer by profession, but he is also a Gold Medalist MD in Homeopathy—a hobby of

his. The entire colony collects funds to order homeopathic medicines from Kanpur. A few people go with Babuji to Kanpur to fetch them. In our government quarter, a cupboard, two chairs, and a table in the drawing room are dedicated to this medical work. My small table is also in this room, where I read the 30-paise Aryavarta newspaper aloud to my mother.

As far as I remember, the colony had two parts. It was surrounded by a boundary wall, with another wall in the middle dividing it into the 'Residential Area' and the 'Warehouse Area.' In the warehouse area, I remember piles of iron rods, weighing machines, trucks, and a Kadamba tree. One weighing machine was so large that when I stood on it, the needle wouldn't even budge. I was told it was only for heavy things; the weight of a 15-17 kg child was like a mere speck to it.

In the residential area, there were two fields—one large and one small. Between them stood a massive water tank and a pump house. The pipe bringing water into the pump house was very thick, and I remember it was always open. I once tried to peer into it but backed away in fear, wondering what would happen if I fell in. The pipe was usually covered with a sack.

At the northern end of the large playground was a ration shop. To the west, a statue and temple of Hanuman were being built. It had been under construction for a long time

because the craftsmen couldn't get the nose right—it would break off, either due to poor materials or mischief. Finally, the statue was completed. On Tuesdays, the Aarti would begin, and the colony would overflow with devotion. But as with many institutions, the initial fervor faded, and the social plans surrounding the temple remained just plans.

I began going to a school far from the colony. My elder brother and sister studied there too. One day, I got into a fight with another boy. We both had slates. We started using them as weapons. I thought, "If I hit his head with this slate, he will bleed," so I only used mine for defense. But the other boy was fierce... thwack! A stream of blood started flowing from my head. The teachers took me to the Principal's room. They used something other than Savlon or Dettol on the cotton—I can still remember its color and smell. After first-aid, they didn't wait for the evening bell. I was sent home with my sister in a rickshaw—not the school rickshaw that had "Caution: Children" written on it, but a private one.

I asked my sister, "What does 'Caution: Children' mean?" I thought it meant that all the children in the rickshaw were "cautious," and that the other boy had disagreed with that, which started the fight. My sister replied, "It's a warning so that other vehicles don't hit it from behind and drive carefully."

"But why?"—I would ask, never quite satisfied. I grew up amidst such questions

and answers. Sometimes, out of sheer exasperation, my mother would say, "I used to wonder when you'd finally grow up, but now that you have, you've made my life difficult with your endless talk!"

All of us siblings attended a school outside the colony named after a Christian saint. After the incident where I got my head cracked open by a slate, Babuji called a meeting of the colony officers. It was decided that a ration shop (the Public Distribution System shop, commonly called the 'quota shop') located near the boundary wall at the northern end of the playground was far larger than necessary. The license for that shop had also expired for some reason. Thus, the decision was made to convert that 3-6 room asbestos-roofed house into a primary school. A few teachers were recruited, a committee was formed, and the school began. Six months later, the neighboring Gandak Colony was invited to send their children there too. The school's name was painted on the outer northern wall, which grew faded and grimy over time, but the school's prestige only rose.

Whenever someone came to enroll their child, the teachers would suggest placing them one or even two grades lower, boasting about the school's high standards. If the parents persisted, the teachers would call me to conduct a "test." They would ask me the very questions the aspiring third-grader couldn't answer. When I gave the correct response, the teacher would offer a sly smile

to the parent, as if to say, "See?" Roughly speaking, I was the brightest student in that school—before the students from the local villages arrived, no one could stand a chance against me. I had a unique obsession with studying, though it eventually turned into indifference.

I remember once, while delirious with fever on an exam day, I kept muttering that I mustn't miss the test. Eventually, the question paper and answer sheet were sent to my house so I could complete my exam. The school was small, but the colony residents participated in every activity with gusto, be it sports or cultural events. In one race, two students would have one leg each tied together to run as a "three-legged" pair. They had to run to the other end of the field, solve a math problem written on a blackboard, and race back. It was a test of both physical and mental agility, and I usually came out on top.

Two other events stand out. First, a boy arrived from a village school. For a few days, he was a challenge because his village textbooks contained new information, but once I caught up, I reclaimed my lead. The second was a boy's accident. During our play hours, we would take turns peering through his window to check on him. Later, I would sometimes go into his room and read his diary. Some parts of it remain etched in my memory:

"I began to lack time for myself. Part of it was my own habits, and part was my

accident, which made a year and a half of my life feel like it passed in a mere day and a half. I worried about how to recover that lost time. I thought of waking up earlier, but sleep was a stubborn barrier. Then I thought of limiting my social circles. In this, I succeeded without effort. The reason was my seemingly endless illness. Between various doctors' opinions, a few botched surgeries, and the collective impression that I would have to live as a cripple, even I started believing it. I felt the doctors were giving me false hope. Even the number of people calling to check on me dwindled.

So, when I suddenly progressed to crutches and then a cane, and eventually started driving a car, many found it awkward to resume a normal relationship with me. I maintained ties with those who stayed close, but my behavior toward those who had drifted away remained detached, which discouraged them from reconnecting. My attitude toward those who mocked me in my dark days was one of mere pity. This saved me a lot of time. At first, I wondered if anyone at the office would recognize me. But when I arrived, I was welcomed like a hero. However, my colleagues hid the fact that seeing me walk with a cane caused them inward turmoil; they only praised my courage.

When I finally abandoned the cane and showed up in jeans and a shirt, a friend said, 'Now you are back to your old self.' I thought about this at home. With my wife's help, I

had her record me walking on a handycam. I was stunned. My gait still looked like a limping run. It must have been worse before, but my friends never let me sense it. Later, my family said, ‘This is nothing; it used to be much worse.’ Then I realized how painful it must have been for those who cared about me. I understood the secret behind their constant encouragement. The loneliness of my early life, the fear of being sidelined in public life after getting a job—these feelings and experiences provided a different kind of strength to my personality.”

He was my peer, yet he wrote in his diary with the voice of an older, married man describing his recovery. I would feel unsettled watching the laborers’ colony in the evening, seeing them dry their clothes on pushcarts. Despite having no homes, they had smiles on their faces. I saw small children begging, watching us with wistful eyes while we played. I feared the scorn of society—what if this calamity befell me? No one else seemed to notice them, and I wondered if I was the only one who felt this way. I pondered how the world kept moving even when I wasn’t there. I read in a book that some creatures see only in two dimensions, while we live in three. I wondered if earthquakes and other disasters were the work of something operating in a fourth dimension—something beyond imagination.

Whenever we saw a man selling red sticks for five paise, Babuji would say, “Look, these people support their families by selling

these five-paise sticks. The value and need for money will grow as much as you allow it.” Life went on—living with one’s environment, the thoughts of life after death, muttering in my sleep, my studies, and the stresses of my father’s job.

I remember one morning, my father kicked a contractor's suitcase with such force that it flew across the room, scattering money everywhere. My cousin picked up the cash, put it back in the suitcase, handed it to the contractor, and told him to run before the police were called. My mother took me to the inner room. Even as a child, I understood that the money was a bribe from a Ganga Bridge contractor to get my father to ignore some faulty engineering work. My father muttered to himself for a long time afterward. Sometimes, if there was too little salt in the dal or for some other trivial reason, the sound of him throwing a utensil made my skin crawl. Then, after a moment of silence, he would call us children over and shower us with affection.

I always came first in class. On the day results were announced, a neighbor, Sinha Chachi, would always feed me Lattha (a sweet made of jaggery and flour). I can still taste it. That aunt had a semi-mad brother-in-law who played the sitar. Once, while we were crossing the Ganges on a steamer, he almost tried to throw his brother overboard. That aunt had a daughter named Rajni. I don’t know what illness she had, but she became bedridden under the care of

allopathic doctors. We visited her many times. I was usually shy about going to other people's houses, but I always went there. Everyone called her 'Didi.' She was much older than us, but she died soon after. My mental struggle with death became even more intense after this.

Even after her death, the aunt sent her sons to school the very next day, which a "tough" aunt in the colony disapproved of; it was a topic of gossip for a long time. The aunt's brother was a lecturer at the Muzaffarpur Institute of Technology—the same college where my father studied. He visited us in Hajipur and scolded his brother-in-law, blaming a lack of money for the failure to get better treatment in Patna. I used to think that the big doctors in Patna could conquer death. But one day, when a cousin living with us discussed nuclear war—saying there were enough atomic weapons to destroy the Earth many times over—even that shield of belief was shattered.

My early life was full of such experiences. Later, accidents became a matter of jest. I didn't feel deep sorrow, nor was I obsessively driven toward a goal. I preferred individual sports over team sports, because in a team, someone else's poor performance becomes an excuse for failure. In individual sports, the praise or blame belongs to you alone. You can't say, "I lost because of him, even though I played well."

Outside of school, there was little space for

play. The indifference toward goals that I developed later wasn't there then. Back then, I wanted to conquer the world. Coming second wasn't an option—it was the same as failing. In sports, in studies, even in a scuffle.

We visited the village often. In the village, my uncle would tell the teacher at the school near the Mahadev pond, and I would attend school even during my holidays. City kids wouldn't even know the names of games like Kabaddi, Satghariya, or Laal-Chhadhi. Everything about the village education system was different. The thought of writing with a reed pen made me shiver. I kept a daily diary: "Woke up early, did my chores, had breakfast, sat down to study, went to school, came back, played, went to school again, returned to the village, had a snack, played again. Came back, cleaned the lantern glass, studied, and went to sleep after praying." On Mondays, I had to write a two-day entry because of the Sunday holiday.

Independence Day in the village was a different experience. Morning and evening, we marched, shouting "Bharat Mata ki Jai" and praising great men. I didn't understand why the teacher warned us not to get into fights. But as we reached the village boundary at dawn, I understood. As soon as the students from the Mahinathpur school appeared from the other side, a brawl broke out. Somehow, it was settled. When I returned to the village, the older students told stories of how, years ago, they had used banana stems to cross the pond and beat up

the "outsiders" on Independence Day. They were looking for revenge the following year, but... the next year, after another meeting between the two village schools, the other team simply changed their route.

Brawling in the village was like a festival. It would start at the Durga shrine with a jar of chocolates being smashed or a wooden leg of a stall being uprooted, and then the fighting would break out. The aftermath was always the most entertaining. Once, a middle-aged man slapped a newlywed young man several times. I kept my ears open to find out why, and eventually, my cousin asked the man, "Was it about that same matter?" Everyone agreed—it was "that matter."

Finally, I gave in and asked, "What is this 'matter' that everyone knows but me?" He explained that the older man had approached this young man to arrange a marriage for his own daughter, but the deal fell through. The young man married elsewhere instead, and so, the older man invented a false excuse to corner him and give him a thrashing. I asked, "But if they had married, they would have been father-in-law and son-in-law. Would he have beaten him over a lie then?" Everyone laughed and said, "You've gone off on a third tangent entirely!"

At night, while watching plays, we would look at the 'Dandi-Taraju' (the constellation Libra/The Scales). I'd ask, "If there's only the beam (Dandi), why do you call it a scale?" Then there was my friend's trick to

start a fight with outsiders during the play. He was pestering an outsider, hurling insults. When the man threatened to speak up, my friend yelled, “I’ll call Naren Bhaiya right now!” The man replied, “Go ahead, I’m not afraid of your Naren Bhaiya.”

Then, listen to what happened next. My friend suddenly started crying loudly, tears streaming down his face. He wailed as he ran to Naren, claiming an outsider had hit him and said he didn’t fear Naren, adding all sorts of made-up insults. Naren Bhaiya arrived, demanding to see who it was. As soon as he shone his torch on the man, he blurted out, “Bhajar! It’s you! It must be this boy’s fault. If he’d accused anyone else, I might have believed it, but you? No.” He noticed my friend wasn’t even bruised—he was just shedding crocodile tears as if he’d been brutally beaten. Naren asked me, “Brother, did he say anything to the boy?” I said, “No.” At that, my friend’s tears vanished as quickly as they had appeared. He stood there with his head bowed, taking a scolding, but as soon as Naren left, he told everyone, “He’s a friend of Naren Kaka; if anyone says anything to him, it’ll be bad for us.” Then he whispered to himself, “Narrow escape today!”

The village primary school held exams for everything: music, art, drama. There were many skilled harmonium and dholak players in the village. Initially, plays were only performed during Durga Puja, but later they started for Krishnashtami and Kali Puja as well. A traveling Ramleela troupe once

stayed for a month, performing plays every few days between the Ramleela acts. A performance couldn't begin without a 'Mala' (a donation covering a day's expenses for the artists). For the first few days, people would rush to the mic, competing to sponsor the Mala. After a few days, to avoid the troupe's desperate pleas, the villagers made a schedule based on the different neighborhoods (tols). Back then, acting felt like a miracle to me, and I secretly dreamt of becoming an actor.

One Saturday, with the teachers' permission, we planned a school play. Since we had no scripts, I wrote one myself: Danveer Dadhichi. I gathered the school's "artists." Listen to their names: Pothaa (The Snotty), Lulha (The Crippled), Nengra (The Lamé), Potsurka (The Snot-Sniffler), Lelha (The Simpleton), Dahibala (The Yogurt-Boy), Kanha (The One-Eyed), Andhra (The Blind), Totraha (The Stammerer), Bauka (The Mute), and Bahira (The Deaf). These were my child actors. Those who thought themselves "refined" wouldn't dream of acting.

Each name had a story. If a child with a stammer once called yogurt (dahi) "dahi," he became Dahibala. If a child had a runny nose in winter, he was Pothaa; if he sniffed it back in, he was Potsurka. If someone tripped in the dark, he became Andhra. Since I started speaking late as a child, I was Bauka. If you were too honest, you were Lelha. If you ignored what people said, you were Bahira.

If you wore a new watch (even a toy one) and held your arm too stiffly, you were Lulha. If you lived in the Kabiyaathi neighborhood and stammered, you were Totraha. If you squinted or turned your eyelids inside out to scare someone, you were Kanha. If you limped after stubbing a toe, you were Nengra. Of course, if you were a rich man's son or had a fierce mother, no one dared call you Kanha even if you were one-eyed!

The day of Danveer Dadhichi arrived. We reached school early. We made a curtain out of old bedsheets in a corner of the veranda. The ropes wouldn't work, so we decided to just have someone manually lift and drop the sheets. The actors put on their "costumes"—which consisted of nothing but face powder and their gamchhas and dhotis. The teacher in charge of the play had an emergency and took the day off. The older boys in the village heard that the "primary kids" were putting on a show and showed up to heckle us. I told the actors they were trying to provoke us to ruin the play. My younger brother lost his temper. He shouted, "Listen, just because we are in costume doesn't mean we won't fight! We'll toss these costumes aside and finish you off!" The heckling didn't stop. Finally, my brother yelled, "Forget the play! I'll handle their mischief right now!" He uprooted a stall post and chased them. A crowd gathered to stop the fight, and just like that, Danveer Dadhichi—the play I wrote and was to direct—ended before it began. I didn't speak to my brother for days. He'd say, "What

could I do? I was furious!” Eventually, things went back to normal, but the obsession with theater left me after that day.

In the village, we never studied anything twice except Math and Science. If a teacher saw a student reading History or Civics more than once, they’d be mocked: “Is this History that you’re trying to memorize by heart?” In the rain, students would use their sitting mats as umbrellas, running while shouting numbers. If we saw the teacher on his bicycle during a holiday, we’d run away shouting, “Kabaddi-Kabaddi, Namaste Teacher, Kabaddi-Kabaddi!” Once, I stopped and bowed so deeply to the teacher that the opposing team caught me—the teacher was so impressed by my respect that he praised me in front of the whole school.

Life in the village was a great source of strength. We’d run in wooden clogs (khadam), even on the slippery ridges of the fields during the monsoon. The clogs didn’t slip. Later, when flip-flops arrived, people were constantly slipping and hurting their backs. I remember the lines for kerosene, the sweets, the rubber balls, the fights between neighborhoods after the fish died in the pond, the crowds gathered to watch the floods, the village meetings (panchayats) over trivial things, and the sight of ripe mangoes hanging from the trees... I wonder if all of this will eventually vanish.

“Uncle, I didn’t put the stinging nettle

(kabkabauch) on him!" I said, tears in my eyes. Some boys had rubbed the stinging plant on a servant while he slept. We had been discussing the plant's effect on skin near the orchard. No one wanted to test it on themselves, so they saw the servant sleeping and rubbed it on him. I was walking behind them, and as the other boys vanished, the servant saw only me. He told my uncle. Uncle wouldn't listen to me; my punishment was ten squats while holding my ears. Also, instead of playing with friends, I had to walk through the fields with my uncle and his companions every evening to "keep me out of trouble." It was flood season, and we'd watch the sillee birds from a boat. My heart, however, was back in the village, imagining the games my friends were playing.

After eighteen months in the village, Babuji was transferred to Patna. I traveled there with my elder brother via Palezaghat and Mahendrughat. Entrance exams were required for the city schools. Babuji made my brother test for 7th grade and made me test for both 6th and 7th. That's when I realized why he'd made me study 6th-grade Math and Science while I was still in 5th—those were the subjects on the test. Both of us were selected for the Zila School. To our surprise, even the government schools in the city had uniforms. We went with Babuji to get two pairs of half-pants and shirts tailored.

On the first day, a fight almost broke out. A boy called me a "villager" (dehati). At that age, I didn't mind the word; only later did I

realize he meant it as an insult. When I didn't get angry, he started calling us "Bengali-Bengali" because my brother and I were thin, fair, and neatly dressed. I couldn't take the mockery and lunged at him. My brother broke it up. The boy started crying and went to find a school bully. When he came back alone, he stopped crying and told me I was lucky the bully wasn't at school today. For days, I worried he'd bring the bully back.

Eventually, that boy got into a fight with someone else on a day the "hero" bully was present. Right in front of me, the bully entered our class and punched the other boy in the stomach. No one dared intervene. Later, when a teacher was absent, the class decided to boycott the bully and report him. The boy who had started the trouble began to panic. He went to the bully and whispered that everyone was plotting against him. The bully came in and ordered everyone to stand up. No one moved. Then he looked at me and said, "Stand up." I stood. One by one, he made a few others stand, and eventually, the whole class was up. He began threatening us.

This time, our class monitor showed some courage. He pointed at me and said to the bully, "Look at him. Does he look like a troublemaker? This boy (the instigator) was using your name to bully even him." The bully, who was a simple-minded brute, got angry at the instigator and warned him never to come to him crying again or use his name to start fights.

School life continued. One day, a boy chortled in class. This boy had once run away to Bombay to become a child actor. When he returned, the teacher asked why he came back. He said, "Everyone there told me they are all B.A.s and M.A.s, and that I should at least finish my Matriculation." After the noise, the teacher stopped the lesson to investigate who did it. Based on a majority vote, one side of the room was ruled out. Then the front rows. Finally, it came down to one bench of six students. Then it was narrowed to two—one of whom was our "Bombay Hero." It was a 1:1 tie because neither would admit who had blown the raspberry.

After that, the diary was blank. Nand called his son over, handed him the diary, and simply said, "Focus on your studies." There was no reason to feel ashamed, yet Aruni's siblings teased and pestered him about it for a long time. Eventually, one day, he tore the diary up, and thus, this autobiographical novel ended before it could truly begin.

The struggle Nand had waged against the prevailing disorder had taken a brief pause. The children had spent a year and a half in the village, and for much of that time, Nand's salary had been withheld. In the village, his elder brother—a budding politician—had

used his influence to get Nand's posting changed. He was moved from field work to an office-based role in design and project mapping. The brother had advised him: "Just go to your office, come back, and focus on the children. Try to get along with everyone."

Once in Patna, Nand took his brother's advice to heart. He enrolled his daughter in a college and looked for a house for rent right next to the campus. He filled out entrance exam forms for his two sons and summoned everyone to Patna. He instructed his nephew to bring the family via the Bihar Government steamer at Palezaghat, explicitly ordering him not to take the private "Bacha Babu" steamer. Though the private one was popular, it was always dangerously overcrowded. The government steamer, on the other hand, ran on a strict schedule regardless of the number of passengers; it had a fixed capacity, proper ticketing, and provided insurance for the travelers—none of which existed on the private boats.

In the Ganga Bridge Colony, Nand had lived like a recluse. He hadn't even allowed his family to socialize much with the neighbors. But in Patna, everything changed. His neighbors were a retired army officer, a policeman, and a secretariat employee. The very next day, Nand took both his sons to all three houses to introduce them and pay his respects. The children began attending school. Nand would walk five kilometers to his office every day, and on his way back, he would handle the household errands. Every

Thursday, he would visit the local market (haat) to bring back fresh vegetables, rice, and lentils. He even spent his Sundays doing housework. The children's responsibility was strictly limited to their studies. He even opted for packet milk delivery so the boys wouldn't lose study time going to fetch milk from a dairy.

His eldest son, who in the Ganga Bridge Colony used to pluck neighbors' flowers or throw pebbles at windows, had turned quiet after eighteen months in the village. Nand remembered how he once had to take the boy to a neighbor's house to apologize after the boy threw a stone at the poor woman while she was looking out her window. His younger son had once thrown a stone at a bigger boy on a bicycle because the older boy had broken his promise to share the bike after one lap. At that time, the younger son had refused to apologize, believing he was in the right. By the time they reached Patna, the elder son's mischievous nature had completely vanished, but the younger son remained stubborn in his convictions. Both boys, however, consistently ranked first in their classes.

For a while, life seemed stable. The old anxieties appeared to have faded. A few people from their village also lived in Patna, and one Sunday a month was reserved for a family outing—sometimes to a relative's

house, other times to the zoo. During a trip to the zoo, Aruni asked his father:

“We’ve come to the zoo, but the board outside says 'Botanical Garden' and the gate says 'Biological Garden.' Why?”

Nand explained, “In the old days, temporary bird exhibitions were held at the Sonepur Fair, and the word Chidiyakhana (Zoo) stuck in people's minds. But here, trees are planted across many acres, each with its botanical details listed—hence 'Botanical Garden.' Later, they realized biology includes both flora and fauna. Since this place has plants, birds, and tigers, they renamed it 'Biological Garden' (Sanjay Gandhi Jaivik Udyan). The old signs just stayed up where they were.”

During a visit to a fellow villager’s house, the conversation turned to the Ganga Bridge. People were skeptical: “They’ve been saying the bridge will open 'this year' or 'next year' for three years now. When do you think it will actually open? The Chief Minister says it will be done this year.”

Nand replied bluntly, “It will never happen at this rate. For years, I’ve seen that whenever a pillar is built, they use so much sand in the mixture that it develops cracks within days. Then, they have to tear it down at night and start over.”

Whenever the bridge was mentioned, Nand saw images of laborers falling to their deaths from the pillars into the Ganges. He was in constant conflict with contractors and fellow

engineers. He had formally protested the construction of one particular pillar; shortly after, a massive crack appeared right down its center. The contractors and engineers had it demolished under the cover of night. To hide the scale of the failure, they draped tarpaulins over the cracks the next day so no one would notice. While Nand's reputation for integrity grew among the lower-level staff, he became a "Ravana"—a villain—in the eyes of the contractors and his peers.

Life remained disciplined. The boys would finish their entire year's math and science syllabus between January and March. However, because Nand handled every household chore himself, the children remained almost entirely ignorant of the outside world. Their only outings were with their father. Their personalities were being shaped in a very insular, peculiar way.

Nand lived a seemingly normal life, but the corruption surrounding the Ganga Bridge project gnawed at his soul. Slowly, he stopped visiting friends and relatives. He stopped inviting people over. The only entertainment in the house was a medium-wave Japanese transistor. The children called it a "radio," but Nand would correct them, saying a radio is large, while a transistor is small. He remembered the old Bush radio he had brought to the village when he started his career—the whole neighborhood had

gathered to hear it. This Japanese transistor, however, was a battery-guzzler. Nand only bought batteries once a month with the groceries, and they usually died by the 10th. For the remaining twenty days of the month, the children had to invent their own fun.

They built "goalposts" out of interlocking plastic toys and played a version of hockey using walking sticks and a ball made from alphabet blocks. They were the masters of their own invented games.

Then, two things happened that broke the peace. First, the official inauguration of the Ganga Bridge was announced. Second, for the first time ever, both of Nand's sons failed to secure the first rank in their mid-term exams.

Nand began to unravel. Though these two events were unrelated, the turmoil in his mind grew. He felt he could find no justice within the government system, and now, he felt his sons were falling behind. His old obsession with "invisible powers" and the supernatural returned. When a person feels they cannot find a diagnosis or a cure through the visible world, they turn back to the invisible. And Nand, since his childhood, had always been drawn to the unseen.

"Is Nand there?" An middle-aged man—his teeth stained black from constant betel (paan) consumption, thin-framed and dark-

complexioned—asked as he rattled the grill of Nand's house.

"No. He hasn't returned from the office yet, but he is expected any moment. Please come in and sit," Nand's son replied.

"I will come back in a little while."

A short time later, Nand arrived, humming to himself in his own world as he usually did, walking straight into the house without looking left or right. The gentleman followed him inside. Upon seeing him, Nand exclaimed:

"Shobha Babu! After so many years!"

"You recognized me?" Shobha Babu remarked.

In response, Nand sat down, and tears began to flow uncontrollably from his eyes.

"Oh, you crazy man! Your madness hasn't left you yet?" Shobha Babu's heart swelled with joy at receiving such a heartfelt welcome.

Shobha Babu was from the village of Kachbi, the brother-in-law of Nand's eldest sister. That poor sister had passed away long ago. Her daughter had also met a sudden death due to a stomach ailment while visiting her maternal village, Mehath. Nand's brother-in-law used to be a wealthy farmer who rode a horse to collect land revenues. However, after the niece's death, the relationship with the brother-in-law gradually faded—not out of spite, but naturally over time. Now, after

twenty-five years, Nand was meeting Shobha Babu in Patna.

"How is Ojhaji (the brother-in-law)? We urged him many times to remarry, but he didn't listen."

"That old era of grand farming is over. Zamindari is gone, and so is the farming. But the expenses remain the same as the old days. How long can one survive by selling off land? Everyone started fleeing to the cities. But I told him, 'You are much older than us and have seen great luxury; it wouldn't look right for us if you went out to do some menial job.'"

Shobha Babu went silent, making an excuse that a piece of betel leaf was stuck in his throat, but the truth was that his eyes and throat were choked with emotion. After a moment of silence, he continued:

"So, without taking his formal permission, I left home with some flattened rice and jaggery. Wandering through forests, I bathed at Simaria, crossed the Ganges by boat, and somehow reached Patna. Initially, I worked at a tea stall for a few days. In those days, there weren't many people from our region in Patna. I was young too. After several years there, I heard rumors had spread in the village—some said Shobha was dead, others said he had become a monk. Only after I opened my own tea stall did I send a postcard home. For twenty years now, I've been running a tea stall near B.N. Collegiate School. I've set up a betel stall there as well."

"You've lost all your teeth, Shobha Babu."

"Working in a tea stall, I became addicted to drinking tea. That wasn't the problem. But once I got the betel shop, I would drink hot tea and immediately put a cold betel leaf under my teeth. The sudden change from hot to cold destroyed them all."

At this, both Nand and Shobha Babu shared a laugh.

The conversation shifted. Shobha's sister-in-law had passed away, but had the niece lived, the bond between the villages of Mehath and Kachbi would have remained alive. But tragedies often come all at once. Nand remembered how the little girl was playing in the neighborhood and came home to tell his mother that someone in a certain courtyard had placed a hand on her stomach. Immediately, she developed such a severe stomach ache that no remedy could fix it, and the girl died mysteriously right before Nand's eyes.

Shobha Babu sighed, "If only that girl had lived, the connection would have endured."

But Nand's mind had drifted elsewhere—back to the subjects that had obsessed him since childhood. This "worldly mess"—buying vegetables from the market, worrying about children's exam results—he did all this half-heartedly only because his elder brother insisted.

The Ganga Bridge (Mahatma Gandhi Setu) had been inaugurated, but Nand's two sons failed to secure first ranks. His daughter, who was studying Science (Biology) in Intermediate, also saw her marks drop. There was no logical link between the bridge and exam scores, but Nand believed that the parents' actions shaped the children's future. His failure in his campaign against the corruption involved in the bridge's construction, and his attempt to prioritize family responsibilities over his activism, weighed on him.

Once, Nand's elder brother visited Patna. Nand greeted him and asked: "Did you come via the Ganga Bridge or the steamer?"

"I came by steamer. I didn't realize the bridge had opened. I'll take the bridge back; I hear there are plenty of new deluxe coaches."

"No, don't go by the bridge. There was massive corruption in its construction. It could collapse any day."

The elder brother couldn't understand what was wrong with Nand. "Are you feeling alright? Is your asthma bothering you again?" -both brothers suffered from asthma.

"No, I am fine. But I tried to forget the past because you told me to. I watched laborers fall to their deaths during the construction of that bridge; hundreds died. The engineers filled their pockets through corruption. And when it opened, they only put thirty names

on the plaque and gave awards to the engineers. There's no telling when it will crumble. When I started a struggle against this, they stopped my salary. After every transfer, the salary stops, and the family has to be left in the village. Because of your advice, I gave up the fight and took this transfer. I wanted to forget the falling corpses and their weeping families. But they come to me in my dreams like a 'Sahastrabadhni' (a comet having thousand-armed spirit). My struggle is like a cursed soul wandering the universe. Now look at my children's results—they always came first, and now look. This is the result of me abandoning my struggle midway." Nand began to sob uncontrollably.

"Don't be a fool. Those who committed the corruption will be the ones to know (suffer). Those who snatched away the rights of the laborers will surely reap the fruits of their actions. You, for your part, did everything you could to struggle. But you aren't managing your own family life. Will you let your children be ruined because of someone else's mistake? What is their fault in all of this?"

Then, the two brothers began chatting about news from the village. In the middle of talking, Nand would occasionally drift off into silence. The elder brother knew that this "flood" (of emotion/trouble) within Nand wouldn't stop now. He kept offering words of

reassurance, but he had seen Nand's stubbornness since childhood; he didn't know what Nand might do next. He didn't speak directly to his sister-in-law, but addressing her indirectly, he said:

"Kaniya (Sister-in-law), it is all on you now. Take care of the children."

Nand took his elder brother along and dropped him off at the steamer at Mahendru Ghat, because he was afraid that his brother might otherwise leave by bus across the bridge—and that bridge was bound to collapse today or tomorrow.

Eventually, Nand turned to astrology and horoscopes. He began wearing various gemstones and placed them on his children's fingers. He bought Hanuman Chalisa booklets for everyone in the house and kept extras for guests. In this state of desperation, he met a fraudulent Tantric.

The Tantric exploited Nand's psyche so well that Nand began to view him as a messenger of God. The Tantric claimed to have solutions for everything: punishing the corrupt, improving the children's grades, and ensuring health. Nand, who never doubted the "science" of Tantra, began giving the man money for "secret rituals." The Tantric

promised that the goddess had appeared in his dreams and that by the festival of Navaratri, all would be solved. He taught Nand rituals and "shavasana-yoga," which Nand practiced with the discipline of a devoted student.

Months passed. Navaratri came and went, but nothing changed. The Tantric then claimed the punishment for the corrupt engineers would come with the rains. A year passed, and the deadline for "divine justice" kept shifting. When the Tantric faced financial troubles, Nand bore the burden. The Tantric's children even began "performing" at Nand's house, claiming the Goddess was under the bed, leading Nand to actually peer under the furniture in search of Her.

The breaking point came when the Tantric proposed marriages between his children and Nand's children. Nand's mind finally recoiled. He could tolerate personal folly, but he would never accept anything that harmed his children's future. Meanwhile, Nand's brother and nephew confronted the Tantric at his home, eventually forcing him to admit he knew no magic and could punish no one. Though he promised to return Nand's money, he never did.

This was a massive blow to Nand. He would pass by the Tantric's house in Bhakshi village, but neither would acknowledge the other. Eventually, Nand's daughter got married, and Nand, having lost all hope from every direction, began to walk the path of life

without a goal.

Daily commutes to the office and long, pensive evenings became Nand's routine. The reading of scriptures and books, which he once enjoyed, had ceased. He no longer sat and studied with his children as he used to. The tradition of visiting the village during Phagua (Holi) and Durga Puja was also fading. Now, the whole family went only during Durga Puja. However, Nand never forgot to visit the village alone during Phagua.

During these visits, Nand began visiting a distant maternal uncle (Pisa) in the village. This uncle was a devotee of Goddess Kali and lived in a village adjacent to Nand's. He was a kind soul. Nand would sit with him and listen to his discourses, eventually taking initiation (diksha) from him. Apart from chanting the Kali Sahasranamam (the thousand names of Kali), Nand did little else; he spent his entire day immersed in that prayer.

However, his mind remained clouded by thoughts of witchcraft and the "evil eye." He began looking at his neighbors with suspicion. When he accompanied his children to their exams, his heart was filled with dread that some enemy might harm them. But after the initiation from his uncle, a sense of detached self-confidence emerged in him.

Life began to move at a slow, steady pace. The children's education, their job

prospects—it was the usual collection of middle-class savings and aspirations. There were the usual hassles of marriage negotiations and small disputes at home and abroad. Seeing his children's courage to compete with the world finally reassured Nand. His children had rarely stepped out of the house and had no social circle of friends, yet they were competing with the outside world. They would pass the written competitive exams, but in the interviews, issues of language and regional background often arose. Nand had never raised them in an environment that prepared them for this, and the children themselves were often surprised by this new world.

Eventually, both of Nand's sons secured jobs. Although Aruni (the eldest) did not reach the high post Nand had hoped for, he secured a "Group B" government job with the Government of India. His son-in-law was an engineer in government service, and his second son became a bank officer.

The children had lived a disciplined, almost isolated life—they hadn't seen a movie in a theater for ten years. They hadn't seen the Patna fairs, the Patan Devi temple, or the Golghar. Initially, people mocked this, but later, everyone realized that this austerity had become the hallmark of Nand's family. There wasn't even a television in the house. It was a matter of wonder for others that the entire family had not seen a single episode of the Ramayan serial, as they never went to others' houses to watch TV.

After getting his job, Aruni brought a television home. Seeing the advertisements for the Mahabharat serial, Nand one day asked his wife: "Why doesn't the Mahabharat show on our TV?"

"Our TV only has DD1," she replied. "The person living upstairs said his son bought a machine for 300 rupees. If we attach that to the TV, we get DD Metro, which shows Mahabharat. Our son bought the TV for 3,000 rupees; you should buy that machine for 300 rupees from next month's salary."

"The one who owns the TV should be the one to bring the machine too," Nand remarked.

When Aruni heard this, he laughed and installed the machine the very next day. The following Sunday, when the father watched Mahabharat, everyone was very happy. That same month, Aruni had to leave Patna for weapons training. During this month-long training, Durga Puja arrived. For the first time, the father did not go to the village for the festival. Aruni, having a break for the holidays, returned to Patna on a Sunday. Mahabharat was playing on the screen. Aruni had a friend over, and the two had gone out for some work without eating. When they returned, his mother brought food for both.

"Has Babu-ji (father) eaten?" Aruni asked.

"Yes. It's three o'clock. He ate and went to sleep after watching Mahabharat. You kids eat; I'll make tea for him in the meantime, and he'll wake up when he hears the name of

tea."

Aruni took a few bites and suddenly stood up. His friend asked, "What happened?" "I don't know. I feel a sudden restlessness." "Is it because you have to return to training tomorrow?" "I don't know."

Just then, a cry came from inside. Everyone rushed in. "What happened, Ma?" "Look, I brought his tea, but he isn't opening his eyes. Usually, he sits up the moment he hears the word 'tea'."

Nand's body had gone stiff. Hearing the cries, a doctor living upstairs arrived with a stethoscope and declared Nand dead. Aruni stood there, stunned and silent.

Aruni's friend took charge, calling other friends and assigning duties—some at the gate, some in the drawing-room. A crowd began to gather. His friends packed the bedding and approached Aruni. "We must prepare for the last rites, Aruni. We need to arrange to take him to Bans Ghat. I'll go arrange a vehicle."

"Father was deeply attached to the village," Aruni said. "He used to say he wouldn't return to the city for seven lifetimes. Although he performed his own father's cremation in Patna, the Ganga Bridge didn't exist then. Now, we can take him by car, and the cremation can happen in the village by morning."

The car arrived shortly. A concern arose about the police stopping the vehicle because of the body. "You have your uniformed ID card, don't you?" his friend asked. "It shouldn't be a problem, but show it if they stop us."

The house was locked. The two brothers and their mother left the city of Patna with their deceased father on that moonlit night. The car stopped on the Ganga Bridge. On the bridge, there was a plaque listing the laborers who had died during its construction. Aruni got out and looked at the list.

He saw names like Oraon, Jha, and many others. One was a "Jha," but most were tribal names. Hundreds had died, but the engineers and contractors, with the help of the police, had disposed of the bodies overnight. Only thirty names were listed here.

"Laborers falling from the pillars... I reported it so many times, but no one listened. Since I couldn't get them justice, I feel I am guilty too." Aruni recalled reading this passage in Nand's diary. He thought to himself that he would look for that diary when he returned.

The car moved forward, leaving the bridge behind. They passed the Ganga Bridge Colony—the witness to Aruni's childhood, his school, his home, and the playground. Next to it was the bridge warehouse. Aruni remembered how trucks full of stolen goods used to emerge from there. People used to gather like a fair to see the massive trucks, and as children, they would count the

wheels—fourteen or sixteen.

In the competition of life, Aruni had forgotten these things. The corruption, the deaths of the laborers, his father's struggle—it was all coming back to him now.

"It has all come before me again as a memory of my father, but not as his defeat. Why did my father choose the name 'Aruni' for me?"

"What did you say, son?" his mother asked. "Nothing. Looking at this colony brought back memories." "Don't look at this wretched colony," she replied.

Discussing the Ganga Bridge had become a taboo in their house. Aruni knew this. But he wondered if another struggle was beginning. His mother, sensing his thoughts, felt a deep internal tremor.

The silence that settled over them then only broke when they finally reached the village. In the way, a fragment of light broke and fell—not the Sahastrabadhni itself, but its diminished form, a mere remnant."

The elder brother held his deceased brother's face and began to weep. "Who could ever have a brother like this? Oh, you fool, does a younger brother ever leave before the elder one? You never cried in your life, so why are you making us cry today?" The entire neighborhood had gathered. Upon hearing the news, no one in the village had lit their stoves to cook. No one knew who had

telephoned, but the news had reached everyone.

"He shall be cremated in the family orchard (Kalm-gachhi) as per Father's wishes," the elder brother declared, and the body was taken there. Everyone carried him on their shoulders to the orchard.

"Look, see the smile on his face; he doesn't look dead for a second," Nand's elder brother remarked.

As Aruni's elder brother extended his hand to light the funeral pyre, he became visibly shaken. His uncle offered him support and reassurance. The body merged into the fire, ending any possibility of return. All the rituals and arrangements felt less like a funeral and more like the grand preparations for a festival. The Shraddha ceremony was performed under the direction of the Mahapatra (priest), accompanied by the evening recitations of the incredible accounts of the Garuda Purana. Everything was completed.

Absolute peace or a profound clamor—Aruni was lost in the re-analysis of his past. Now, Aruni Thakur was somewhat unwell, immersed in solitude and study within his flat in a massive apartment complex near Woodland Nursing Home in Kolkata. Moments of restlessness came to him unbidden. There was a time when he would

lighten the burden of his heart by sharing his problems with his relatives. Slowly, the problems grew to such an extent that talking about them only made him feel more detached. Thus, he began keeping things to himself. His relatives assumed Aruni was now free of troubles.

Since childhood, Aruni had seen terrifying things in his dreams. He still remembered how he would wake up drenched in sweat in the middle of the night, while his worried parents would fanned him with a hand-fan. Who was his father's father, and who was his creator? If God is everyone's ancestor, then who is God's ancestor? People used to laugh off these questions, but later, when Aruni studied philosophy, he realized that many sages had dedicated their lives to answering this, yet the question remained unanswered.

In his illness, these unanswered questions returned as dreams. Sometimes in his sleep, he felt he was on the roof of his house, and against his will, he was slowly moving toward the edge of the unfenced roof. A gravitational force was pulling him—a force like the heavy, long-haired body of the Sahastrabadhni. He would feel this until he fell. Was this a direction from destiny or a message to avoid a future accident? For a while, Aruni tried to track the "correct" time to sleep, but eventually, he realized that dreams and sleep are two mysteries of life that defy rules and remain unexplained.

Aruni grew up, and his formal education began with the Agastya Stotra:

“Saraswati Namastubhyam Varade
Kamarupini, Vidyarambham Karishyami
Siddhirbhavatu Me Sada.” (Salutations to
Goddess Saraswati, the giver of boons... I
begin my studies, may I always achieve
success.)

Along with the blessings of Lord Ganesha,
there was the prayer to Gauri-Shankar:

“Saate Bhavatu Supreeta Devi Shikhara
Vasini...”

While reciting these shlokas, especially during the rhythmic Samavedic chanting of "Pashupati-Paati," Aruni would often burst into loud laughter ("Ha-Ha!") and then suddenly stop. His father thought that starting his studies at a young age would break Aruni's habit of sitting with his head in his hands.

Aruni didn't like one habit of his mother—she would often ignore his words while talking to others. Once, when a friend of his mother visited, she wasn't paying attention to him. Aruni, holding the large bunch of house keys, threatened that if she didn't listen, he would throw the keys into the nearby puddle. His mother thought he was just bluffing and continued to ignore him. The result was inevitable—he threw them. Despite much searching, the keys were never found; even today, many almirahs in the house use duplicate keys. Thinking of this after so

many years brought a spontaneous smile to Aruni's face.

His idealistic father constantly faced troubles in his job, which is why he wanted Aruni to grow up as quickly as possible. He was promoted directly from the third grade to the fifth. Then, as per routine, everyone went to the village for the Holi holidays. His father left them there and returned to work. Soon, a letter arrived saying his salary had been stopped again and everyone would have to stay in the village. His mother wept, but Aruni was delighted.

However, in the government school there, a tradition under the "New Education Policy" resulted in him being placed one grade lower. When his father found out, he was furious. As a counter-move, when they returned to the city after the fifth grade, he made Aruni skip a grade again, enrolling him directly into the seventh grade instead of the sixth. Aruni only realized the purpose of his father's instruction—to finish sixth-grade Science and Math while in the fifth—when those subjects appeared on his entrance exam. For a long time, whenever anyone mentioned the "sixth grade," Aruni felt a sense of being an outsider to that experience.

Once, while staying in the village, Aruni wrote a letter to his father because he had left his shoes in the city. The shoes arrived, but the letter came back with a detailed list of three spelling errors Aruni had made. He was

also reminded of a math competition where, in his rush to finish first, he had solved only two problems instead of three before submitting his copy.

He didn't realize when anger entered his nature, but he remembered his father instructing him to recite the Sanskrit shloka "There is no enemy equal to anger" ten times. There was also an incident where a boy hit him on the head with a slate. Aruni picked up his own slate to retaliate but stopped, thinking the other boy's head would break. Consequently, his father did two things: he replaced Aruni's metal-edged slate with a wooden-edged one, and he gathered other officers to open a school within the colony itself so Aruni could study there. Later, when priests suggested reading the Sundarkand or astrologers suggested wearing a moonstone on his little finger to reduce anger, he would always remember those Sanskrit shlokas.

Due to his childhood upbringing, Aruni still feels awkward asking for help or compromising. However, he lost the belief in fighting a war where winning and losing are equal—victory became his sole target. Those he helped with all his heart eventually stood by him. Over time, compromises reduced his struggles. It became difficult to maintain his old friendships, and there was no room for new friends in a new city. Ambition is endless, and the art of living is unique to everyone. The name "Aruni" was now only heard occasionally at home.

Kolkata worships talent, but there was a hurdle in becoming a businessman—the knowledge of Bengali alongside English. He picked up the language just by walking the streets. In his busy life, he only found rest when he was ill. After buying his flat, he called his mother to live with him. He knew she wouldn't be impressed by the luxury; she was an officer's wife and wanted to see her son in that same role. This new city had replaced Aruni's father's "idealism" with "practicality."

Before succeeding in business, Aruni worked at a friend's printing press. He asked to work on a percentage basis instead of a salary. He would bring in orders, manage the binding and printing, and slowly set up his own press. When he discovered that middlemen were printing through him and selling to customers at a markup, he cleverly placed his own press's calendars in every bundle. When the end-users realized they were buying through unnecessary middlemen, they began ordering directly from Aruni.

The "schemes of the world" had ended his father's struggle, but Aruni fought the commercial war with his intellect and won. When his mother arrived, he started hearing the name "Aruni" twenty times a day. When his friends told his mother about his business success, Aruni would feel uncomfortable and change the subject. His mother had actually come with the intent of getting him married. When she insisted, he was surprised, as "stubbornness" was usually his monopoly.

But his mother realized her son had become "practical" and had forgotten how to be stubborn. Aruni decided that since he had been stubborn as a child, it was now time to fulfill her wish.

Marriage followed, then a child. His mother saw her husband's image in her grandson. Before the husband died, the son had become practical, but she wouldn't let that happen to the grandson. She named the grandson by combining the names of her son and husband: Aruni Nand.

The education began again: Siddhirastu, the blessings of Ganesha, and the same prayer to Pashupati. Her husband had taught her son; she had managed the house. Now the daughter-in-law managed the house, the son had no time, and the grandmother taught the grandson.

"Utpatsyeta hi mama ko'pi samanadharma, kalo hyayam niravadhih vipula cha prithvi." (Someone with a similar nature to mine will surely be born; for time is endless and the earth is vast.)

Aruni felt a distance from his mother. He was unwell, alone in his thoughts in his Kolkata flat. Since he was still within the age limit for competitive exams, he had appeared for a few and became a "Group B" uniformed officer for the Central Government. His mother felt a small sense of peace—even if it wasn't Class One, at least it was a government job, and he had left that "business-wusiness" behind.

"Come and eat something; you can't go on like this," Aruni's younger maternal uncle said affectionately. The funeral rites were over. It was time to return—to his job, and to the path his father had walked.

It was November 1995. With his head shaven (in mourning), Aruni boarded a bus from Darbhanga to Patna. A book peddler arrived, rhyming his sales pitch to highlight the features of every book. He distributed everything from storybooks and medical guides to Manohar Pothi and books on Phoolan Devi to the passengers. Some passengers haggled and bought a few; the rest he took back.

As the bus prepared to leave, a series of vendors boarded and departed—a man selling lemon-squeezing inventions, followed by sellers of combs, pens, and screwdrivers. Despite the bus staff claiming a 10:30 AM departure, Aruni realized it was a lie to lure passengers from the later bus. The bus finally geared up to leave at 11:00 AM, but a five-minute debate ensued among the passengers and staff about whether the clock actually showed 11:00 yet.

The chaos intensified when the conductor of the following bus started a row with the current bus staff, threatening that if they were even a second late, there would be trouble. Suddenly, the driver blasted the horn. An old

lady sitting next to Aruni began calling out loudly for her son. A few latecomers who had just arrived by rickshaw scrambled to board. One middle-aged man among them managed to find a spot in the "two-by-three" seating section right next to Aruni.

Aruni was in a somber, quiet mood, but his new neighbor was eager to talk. First, the man thanked his luck for getting a seat, explaining that arriving late in Patna would have ruined his work. He introduced himself as an Assistant Director and boasted about owning palatial houses in both Darbhanga and Patna—double-storied buildings adorned with marble and granite, built through his own hard work.

Finding Aruni to be a good listener, the man asked, "In which neighborhood of Patna is your house located?" "I don't have a house; I live in a rented place," Aruni replied. After a brief silence, the man pulled out a betel (paan) case and offered one to Aruni. "No, thank you." "I knew it just by looking at your teeth," the man remarked expertly. He then began talking about his daughters' in-laws and his son's IAS preparations in an elite study group.

The bus stopped at a "line hotel" (roadside eatery). Some passengers protested, claiming the driver stopped there only for a free meal, the cost of which was secretly added to the passengers' tickets. Despite an appeal for no one to get down, everyone eventually did. When the bus started again, it soon came to a

jarring halt with a flat tire. The man who had protested earlier grumbled that the "trip's luck" had been spoiled the moment they stopped at that hotel.

While waiting for the repair near Vaishali, the man next to Aruni, who had been dozing off, became alert again as they reached Hajipur. Pointing toward a colony, he said: "That is the Ganga Bridge Colony. Look what it has become. One part was for quarters, the other for construction materials. Now, even the maintenance is gone."

Aruni was startled. "There used to be a school there, wasn't there?" The man pointed. "Look, the name is still there, though faded by the rain." He then asked curiously, "How do you know about it?" "I studied in that school." "But only the children of the engineers building the bridge lived there." "We lived in this colony," Aruni said quietly. "What is your father's name?" "Shri Nand Thakur."

"You are Thakur-ji's son?" The man's gaze shifted from casual acquaintance to deep affection. "My name is I.A. Azam," he introduced himself. Aruni immediately recognized the name and listed the man's children; his son, Nehal Azam, had been Aruni's classmate.

Azam Saheb's tone changed completely. "Two people in that colony were very devout—Pandey-ji and your father. But while Pandey-ji made money through his rituals, your father was completely honest

and kind. He used to order homeopathic medicines from Kanpur with collected funds and treat everyone in the colony for free. He cured a large growth on my daughter's head when no allopathic doctor could. Even as an engineer, he had the heart of a healer."

Aruni vividly recalled the small glass bottles of homeopathy medicine in their drawing-room. "Where is he posted now?" Azam asked. "It's been fifteen years since we lost touch." "He passed away fifteen days ago," Aruni replied.

Looking at Aruni's shorn hair, Azam said remorsefully, "It was my mistake. I saw your hair and didn't ask. That's why you've been so quiet all the way." He continued, "He was always so worried about the laborers."

The bus reached the Ganga Bridge and stopped at the toll gate. Aruni's mind flooded with images of the construction days—the piles of broken walls and his father's claims of corruption between engineers and contractors. He remembered a suitcase full of bribe money that his father had literally kicked away.

He remembered his father taking him on a steamer near the bridge pillars and saying: "Look. During the construction of these pillars, so many laborers fell into the Ganges like spinning wheels. More than a hundred. I saw them with my own eyes. Only a few families got compensation. The others aren't even on a list. And yet, the engineers are in league with the contractors."

Aruni snapped out of his trance. He stepped off the bus to look at the list of "martyred" laborers displayed on the bridge. Just as he suspected, the names were few—mostly only those who had received compensation.

Back on the bus, Azam Saheb spoke again. "You said you're going to a rented house in Patna?" "Yes. We went to the village for the funeral. My mother couldn't bear to stay in that house after his death, so she stayed in the village. I have to find a new place in Patna now. I work in Kolkata."

"Just think," Azam sighed. "After thirty years of honest service in the P.W.D., he couldn't build a single house. People have made fortunes, but after 1981, I followed your father's path. Even my 'two-story' houses are barely finished. What did the government give your father? Death before retirement. No honors. While every engineer got a 2,000 rupee bonus at the bridge inauguration, he didn't care for such things. Others fought for 'work' divisions to make money; he fought for 'non-work' divisions to stay clean."

Azam asked Aruni about his job. "I am in the Intelligence Department in Kolkata," Aruni replied. Azam Saheb handed him his addresses in Patna and Darbhanga with a fatherly touch as they reached the Hardinge Park bus stand. "Come visit us. Bring your mother; my wife would love to meet her."

As Aruni watched the hoardings of Patna, he felt a strange mix of emotions. Without his

father's shadow, he felt he had to compete with this city now. He wondered about the coincidence—why did he meet Azam Saheb today of all days, after fifteen years? What did destiny want from him?

He caught a rickshaw for home, lost in thought.

Once, at two o'clock in the morning, Father suffered from severe bloating after eating jackfruit bulbs. It didn't even occur to him to call the neighbor, Shravan-ji's father, to summon a doctor. Actually, it had occurred to him, but since they had never spoken before, he lacked the courage to ask for a favor only when in need. Mother had to pound on the door to wake the neighbors, weeping and scolding Father all the while. Only after the neighbor called a doctor was Father's life saved. Mother continued to curse their isolation, saying, "Even people with a five-year-old son find reassurance; they say, 'Why do you cry? You have a son.' But as for this family... fine, go on, suffer it yourself; I will eventually leave this world."

Aruni's sister studied in college. She had to walk to her college, and the school for the two brothers was just beyond it. She asked them to walk with her. One day, the two brothers did go with her, but they walked far ahead without speaking a word. They were terrified that other boys might recognize her

as their sister. Now, Aruni wonders—what if they had recognized her? Was this a lack of personality development? Later, when they grew up, they would reproach their parents: "You labeled us as 'home-stayers' and 'introverts,' but did you ever think? Your sermons about not talking to neighbors, not making friends, and not going out—while intended to shield us from social evils—are exactly what made us introverted and reclusive."

At night, Aruni would see scenes of his parents' quarrels in his dreams and wake up in a fright. Aruni used to fight frequently with his older brother and sister. But once, after a particularly bad argument between his parents, he cried bitterly and spoke his heart out. Before that incident, communication between the siblings had ceased following their own fights; usually, the elders had to initiate conversation. But this time, Aruni, while weeping, spoke to his sister first, and after that, he never fought with her again. He still had minor squabbles with his brother, who was close to him in age and studied with him, but they were infrequent. Mother blamed Father for all of this, saying she never stopped them from talking to neighbors or relatives—it was all Father's fault.

Once, Aruni insisted on buying a globe. He was repeatedly told, "It will come today... tomorrow." Finally, Aruni stopped studying altogether until the globe arrived. His sister

still remarks that after the obsession with the globe was fulfilled, Aruni lost his academic rhythm. His class rank dropped from first place, and Father began looking for the cause in "occult rituals" (Tantra-Mantra). This led to an encounter with a Tantric.

For many days, they kept moving back to the village. In the Ganga Bridge Colony, an accountant once told Father, "You don't take bribes, but your wife takes them in your name." Following this, everyone was sent back to the village. In Bihar government service, salary often stops after a transfer, which is why Nand would send everyone to the village after every relocation. During one such stay, Nand wrote a letter to Mother which Aruni happened to read. Nand wrote, "If you have taken bribe money, return it. I have written to the Vigilance Department; there will be a raid, and if money is found, it will bring great shame."

In these circumstances, Aruni tried to forget his domestic troubles at school. He started practicing a fake laugh—a habit that stuck. He began boasting about his home life. While people praised Nand's honesty, Aruni avoided mentioning the domestic strife outside; he feared people would mock them. He lived within the "glamour of honesty." The habit of overthinking and brooding became so ingrained that, whether in dreams or while awake studying, it haunted him like the Sahastrabadhni.

During his tenth-grade mid-term exams, he

attempted a question in Commerce. It went wrong. He tried a second and third time. He knew the answers to all other questions, but he couldn't finish the first one. He hid his answer sheet under his shirt and, on the pretext of getting water, he left the school and went straight home. He would spend hours staring at a single page, lost in thought.

Once, they went to the zoo and ran into some of their high-society relatives. They were very "high-flyers." Though they said nothing, seeing their status gave Aruni an inferiority complex. He quietly slipped away into the crowd and headed home. He had no money in his pocket, so he walked the entire way. At the zoo, everyone was terrified that he was lost. When they all reached home, he lied and said he had truly lost his way. He never told anyone the truth. Everyone he met would say, "You are the son of so-and-one; he is truly a god."

At the office, pay slips had to be prepared for Father's salary. Once, when Aruni went to get a pay slip, the clerk said, "Make his father's slip without taking any money (bribes)." Neither Father's colleagues nor the contractors were happy with him—the colleagues disliked him because he neither earned extra himself nor let others earn.

Aruni's elder brother was considered a "naughty" child. But once, after a transfer to the village, the same brother—who used to uproot the best plants from everyone's gardens to plant in his own—became a timid,

back-bencher student within a single year. That stay in the village was particularly long. When a local leader, a contender for the Chief Minister's post, came to the village for votes, Aruni's uncle met him. He requested, "Transfer my brother from a 'works' division to a 'non-works' division so his children can be raised properly." The leader replied, "If I win, I will certainly do this. I have received many requests to move into works divisions, but this is the first request to move out of one." Coincidentally, the leader won and became the Chief Minister. After his oath, he kept his word and transferred Father. Nand's family moved back to the city.

Aruni witnessed the toll of their financial situation. Two events deeply disturbed him. The first was the month of March—the month of income tax deductions. This happened every year, but one year the deductions increased so much that his father's entire March salary was gone. Mother cried, "How will we eat? You all will have to go begging now!" But Nand sent a postcard to a nephew in the village, who brought eight hundred rupees, ending the sense of insecurity. To this day, Aruni feels a pang in his heart whenever he sees someone begging.

The second event was an accident in front of their house. Afterward, his brother stopped eating and cried until his eyes were red. When Nand tried to console him, the boy replied, "If something happens to you, what will happen to us?"

Father then explained the finances—insurance benefits, GPF, and gratuity—to his son, showing that 99,000 rupees would be available immediately, followed by a monthly pension. For nearly an hour, Father counseled his eldest son.

Once, a maternal uncle (Pisa) visited. Even today, whenever someone visits, the family feels secure. Since Nand was the uncle's brother-in-law, they shared jokes. The uncle mentioned an honest BDO in Jhanjharpur who, like Nand, lived in hardship. The uncle had told him, "Why did you become an officer? You'd be better off in the village, sitting on a wooden platform and eating fish and rice. You'd make more profit in the fish trade."

After Aruni's sister got married, the brother-in-law would occasionally visit. As soon as the son-in-law arrived, Mother and Father would start fighting because there were never enough provisions in the house. After his transfer, Father started a campaign to punish the corrupt. When his faith in the government system crumbled, he fell into the trap of that Tantric. The strife between the parents escalated. One day, Aruni had a heated argument with his father, and all three siblings held each other and wept. After that day, Aruni never fought with his siblings again.

Aruni arrived at the house, lost in aimless thoughts. For two or three days, he went out searching for another rented house, returning every evening to the same brooding silence.

One day, Aruni was returning home from school. As he walked, he sensed an uneasy tension in the air; people on the street were whispering about something terrible that had happened. Aruni and his brother were both in the seventh grade, but that day, his elder brother had gone home early after lunch due to a stomach ache.

Aruni often felt a sense of envy toward other children who seemed happy, contrasting their lives with the constant quarrels between his parents at home. He lived in fear that the strife would never end. He felt unable to talk to anyone or ask for help. His mother's harsh labels—calling him "reclusive" and "weak-mouthed"—stung deeply. Festivals and outings were non-existent in their lives. He recalled an earthquake where everyone rushed outside in panic, but he had remained lying on his bed, partly out of lethargy and partly thinking that if the house collapsed, it would at least be an end to his troubles.

As he neared home that day, the sight of a crowd made his heart sink. He feared something had happened to his father. He rushed inside and asked his mother and sister, "What happened?" When they tried to reassure him, his anxiety turned to rage. He began to cry loudly, shouting, "Is Father

dead? Where is his body?"

His sister corrected him: "No, he is fine. It was your friend—the landlord's son. He, his younger brother, their father, and a rickshaw puller were all on a rickshaw. The poor rickshaw puller had just gotten married and brought his bride home. A massive truck hit them. They died on the spot."

Aruni stopped crying. The tragedy had struck someone else's home. The boy who died had walked to school with Aruni every morning for a year and a half. Just the day before, the boy had rung the doorbell as usual. Aruni's sister, irritable and wearing her glasses, had yelled from upstairs about why he was ringing it so loudly and repeatedly. After that, Aruni had told the boy, "I won't ring the bell for you from tomorrow. If you want to go with me, come downstairs and wait."

Because Aruni hadn't rung the bell that morning, the boy had missed his usual routine and ended up on that fatal rickshaw with his father. Aruni felt a cold wave of guilt—had his refusal to ring the bell caused this? Yet, he felt a secret, dark relief that it was not his own father who had died.

Years later, after moving his mother to a new rented house, Aruni returned to his job in Kolkata.

"No, it's nothing like that; we simply have to

do this as part of our duties.”

“But don't you realize that you all have been a bit too cruel this time?”

“There is no question of cruelty. We operate based on specific information.”

“Suppose I have an enmity with someone, and on that basis, they use the Department for their own personal interests and grudges?”

“Do you have a suspicion about someone?”

“No, I was just giving an example.”

“No, we don't just set out immediately based on any random information. First, we conduct an investigation, and only after that is permission granted to search so many locations.”

“But even if you say now that you've made no mistake, will my reputation be restored?”

“In that case, we would have to sit idle with our hands tied. But your point is also valid. If someone has acted out of malice against you, action will be taken against them.”

“What action will be taken? The 'action' has already happened to me. All my buyers will break away. We are such an old establishment, involved in this business for three generations. Would we really resort to clandestine removal? All the buyers were raided, nothing was found anywhere—who

will believe that now?"

The man's point was valid. This plywood trader was known for fair dealings, but the information Aruni had received said the opposite. However, this raid had turned up empty. The teams returned empty-handed from the factory, the house, and the dealers. Now, what answer would Aruni give to the officers? It was a famous company; the senior officials, fearing the risks, had granted permission for the raid only because of Aruni's personal reputation.

Aruni was receiving call after call from Headquarters. It was already morning by the time the raid concluded; he had been told to report to the office at 10:00 AM. The factory owner also gave him a piece of his mind, bringing up various issues. This company, named 'Swarnply,' had reach all the way to Delhi. Exhausted and frustrated, Aruni reached his quarters in the morning, switched off his mobile, set an alarm for 9:00 AM, and tried to sleep. The raid had been going on since yesterday morning—how did this happen? Why wasn't even a single raw slip for 'clandestine removal' found? Could the case have been leaked? But besides Aruni, only the Director of Vigilance knew about the case. He lay in bed thinking of all this; sleep didn't come, but the 9:00 AM alarm went off.

In the office, it seemed as if everyone was waiting for him. Some even remarked that

they also had intelligence on this case, but since proving clandestine removal is difficult in such matters, they hadn't touched it. Whispers began that he used to act like such a hero, and now he would emerge from the Director's office with a transfer order.

Aruni went into the Director's office and directly asked for a few days' time. He talked around his specific plans to keep them vague. This time, he didn't want to leave room for any kind of confusion.

Now, Aruni began working away from the Swarnply factory and its dealers. He memorized every single document. He started noting down information on paper. Then, according to his plan, he set off from Calcutta to Patna, and from there, toward Araria.

He didn't used to eat paan, and he only ever drank tea at home. But if one wants to learn things from the people, how can work proceed without visiting the tea and paan shops? So, he started taking tea and paan. He grew quite fond of Babul Dada's *gulkand* (sweet rose petal preserve) paan.

Afterward, Babul Dada gave him a list of all the plywood factories near Araria. However, the roads leading to those factories were at the mercy of God. Somehow, through the

dust and grime, he found one factory that supplied Swarnply. The watchman there told Aruni that the owner sits at the other factory; thus, Aruni obtained the addresses of two factories.

Aruni reached that factory exhausted. A Marwari gentleman was sitting there. "Where have you come from?" "I've come from Patna, but I don't see how I'll get back."

"Yes, a leader has been shot dead after coming out of jail. The leader was technically in jail, but he used to roam outside Purnia jail without following any rules. What could the jailer do? Last month, when the previous jailer didn't let a prisoner go out for a stroll, he was shot in Bhatta Bazar. This time, because the new jailer allowed it, the government suspended him. After this murder, there is a call for a *bandh* (strike). Stay with me. I stay here in my guest house. My family lives in Siliguri. I am unmarried. I have to go to Calcutta in the morning. First, I'll go to Siliguri in my car, then I'll change routes and drop you at the Purnia bus stand on the way."

Aruni liked the young man's talkative nature. That night at the guest house, they talked a lot—about the extortion by leaders and how those collecting donations would forcibly issue receipts.

"In such a situation, one would go into loss without doing 'clandestine' (evading tax);

yes, it's a compulsion. And the ones to blame are these leaders. What can a businessman do?"

Now the Marwari youth, whose name was Naval, looked at Aruni out of the corner of his eye. Aruni wondered if he had become suspicious. "No, our principle is not to do clandestine work. Yes, some 'adjustments' have to be made."

Aruni remembered how even the owner of Swarnply, in the flow of conversation, had let slip: "If we do it, we'll do clandestine removal." Then what do these people actually do? Anyway, this Araria factory did 'job work' for Swarnply, so the entire burden of government duty lay on Swarnply. What would this factory gain by doing clandestine removals? The tax had to be paid by the other party.

Just then, a phone rang. The ring was long, so Aruni had no trouble realizing it was an external STD (long-distance) call. After that call, the youth suddenly looked at Aruni and went silent.

The cook, whom the youth addressed as Navalji Jha, informed them that dinner was ready. Only formal conversation took place between Aruni and Naval. Then both went to sleep. In the morning, true to his word, the youth dropped Aruni at the Purnia bus stand. Before getting off, Aruni asked Naval:

"There is an office of Swarnply in Calcutta. Are you going there?" The youth laughed. "You are from Vigilance. The STD call I received yesterday was from Swarnply's Calcutta office. Someone from your own department informed them about your trip to Araria. Look, I've said that I only make 'adjustments.' And what benefit do I get from that? I don't have to pay the tax. Yes, because of it, I get work. And the external minor expenses for the department, the police, and the leaders get covered. That's all."

Saying this, the gentleman left Aruni stunned and drove away. When Aruni reached the office in Calcutta, everyone knew that Aruni had visited a factory on government expense which the government had already exempted from tax.

After meeting the Director, Aruni went to Patna and then back to Calcutta. He kept haunting police stations, trying to find out if there was any case against Swarnply or any of its employees. But Swarnply had maintained a very clean image from the start. Now Aruni was lost in thought. Based on the input-output ratio, this company was stealing crores in taxes. But there was no proof.

Aruni left his address and phone number at the police stations, requesting to be informed if any case involving this company or its employees arose. He told his Director, "I won't submit the closure report yet. Let's see if I can find some information from

somewhere."

Six months later. The phone rang in the morning.

"I am speaking from the Salt Lake Police Station, Calcutta. A gentleman has filed a complaint stating that while returning with a payment from the Swarnply office, an auto-driver snatched his suitcase, which contained some cash and checks."

"How much cash and how many checks?"

"1.79 lakh in cash and 1.83 lakh in checks. Apparently, there was insurance on the cash, which is why he filed the FIR. Payment on the checks can be stopped."

Aruni, along with his team, raided the house of the man whose money and checks had been snatched by the auto-driver. During the search, Aruni discovered a diary. He then called Patna and requested the latest removal returns from the Araria factory. Later, he brought the gentleman whose house had been raided to the office. On the way, it was revealed that this gentleman was Naval's brother-in-law and served as both the accountant for the Araria factory and a liaison officer for Swarnply.

Now, all the facts were out in the open. The diary that was found had columns for cash

and checks, with details listed by date. The check payment columns matched the Araria factory's clearances, proving that in every transaction, nearly half the payment was made in cash by Swarnply. These details existed neither in Swarnply's accounts nor in the Araria factory's books. Swarnply was paying tax only on the half-removals paid for by check (*pakki*). Aruni submitted this report to the Director.

The accountant's offense was bailable. The court released him on bail. "Tell me, how is Naval? He is a very good man, but he didn't reveal anything."

"He died in a road accident yesterday while going from Araria to Siliguri—or perhaps he was made to die. We are going there directly from here with the Accountant Babu," an agitated-sounding man, who had come to collect the accountant, blurted out.

"But understand this: your success came from my foolishness. If I hadn't fallen for the greed of an insurance claim for the cash, none of this would have happened," the Accountant Babu remarked.

The Director ordered proceedings against Swarnply. A show-cause notice for a tax scam worth crores was sent to them. Aruni, however, was lost in thought. "Naval was right. He was only making 'adjustments.' Someone else was doing the stealing; he was merely a medium. Have I too, somewhere,

become the medium for Naval's death?"

Following Aruni's professional success, his career began to flourish. Whether he became a "medium" or not, he would not lose like his father. Yet, his father's words would flash in his mind from time to time.

"I say, are you listening? Our daughter is growing up. You've done nothing for the sons. We haven't even built our own house. Where will we live after retirement?"

"Don't worry about our daughter. The suitor for our son will come on his own. These children are getting more facilities than we ever had. Whether they study or not is up to them. After retirement, I'll go live in the village. I won't turn back toward the city for seven lifetimes."

"When relatives visit, there isn't even enough in the house to welcome them properly."

"What is the need for 'arrangements'? Just add one extra measure of water to the pot for the rice."

Aruni had grown up listening to these conversations between his mother and father. Once, a relative had come to see his father in the hospital. Their words felt somewhat similar:

"What have you done to your body? Didn't you feel any pity looking at these children? Where would they go to study? You had no

facilities, nor any worries. You ruined your own life and theirs too."

Just then, there was an interruption. His wife told him there was a phone call on hold.

"Aruni, there's a major political game playing out in the office. A conspiracy is brewing against you. It was my duty to warn you. But you aren't giving any reaction at all"—on the phone, Aruni was listening to the voice of his only true companion, his 'Ram-bhakt Hanuman' (Manindra).

"Aruni! What has happened to you? Will you remain fearful like your father? After a few days, will you admit defeat and become a sage? Or will you destroy the wicked? Which of these two will you choose?"

"Don't worry," Aruni said with a laugh and hung up the phone.

A lobby in the office had turned against Aruni. Following a series of transfers and postings, pressure had mounted on him. Some people had filed baseless complaints against him. An officer named Shashank was behind this. The postings of Shashank's close associates hadn't gone according to his wishes, and he wanted to push Aruni behind in the race for promotion. During this period, Aruni's phone had been 'dead' for a few days. After that, calls to Abu Dhabi and Dubai

were made from his phone. However, in those days, one had to notify the telephone department to enable ISD (International) facilities on an official phone. An administrative officer in his office had written a letter to the telephone department to enable this facility without Aruni's knowledge. In the Vigilance inquiry, that officer gave a statement saying that since Aruni was the head of the office, he had to follow even his verbal orders; hence, he had written the letter for ISD facilities based on Aruni's verbal command. The mafia had compromised that officer, and in doing so, the administrative officer had entangled himself as well.

On Monday, the fax arrived, and Aruni's transfer order was issued.

"Represent (appeal) against this order!"—it was that same familiar voice, Manindra's.

"Why are you getting involved in this mess? Everything will be fine," Aruni replied over the phone.

A party was held at Shashank's house.

"Mr. Aruni didn't even file a representation. He took his release and left. Consider it a total surrender."

"Consider his promotion stalled for ten years. His seniority will be affected. The defamation is a separate matter entirely. I hear he used to talk to smugglers in Dubai

over the phone."

On the other hand, Aruni found himself remembering his father's transfer, his struggle for honesty, the failure of that struggle, and how his father subsequently became entangled in occultism and rituals, becoming detached from his home, office, and worldly affairs. Following this train of events, a line of worry appeared on Aruni's face. But it did not linger in his mind for long. He had turned defeat into victory many times before—both in his career and in business prior to that.

"What is it, Manindra? No phone calls at all. Just because I got transferred, have you all forgotten me?"

"Not just me; everyone here has forgotten you."

"What did you think—that I have forgotten too? Do you remember when, after my Inter exams, I went against my father's wishes and left Science for the Arts? I threw all my science books into the pond at 11 o'clock at night. I didn't leave a single trace of that subject in my house. And I only went back to the village once I secured a first-class division in Arts. Before that, I missed so many weddings, so many births and deaths. But I did not go home."

"Oh brother! You remember everything. I thought you had become like your father (Kaka). These people are not worthy of forgiveness. Show them a little of what you are. Now I have faith that something will happen."

"There you go again. When you haven't changed, how can I? I had just let myself go for a few days. Now listen. Do exactly as I say. Don't talk too much. You know that at the time the calls were made to foreign countries from my phone, my telephone was out of order. A complaint was even called in from my home to the telephone department. But since that complaint was made over the phone, there is no written letter or receipt for it. Find out if the telephone department keeps any record of such complaints."

A few days later, Manindra called to say that the department resets its complaint numbers every month, so that lead didn't work.

"Fine, then find out which specific foreign numbers were called from my number. And also find out which numbers those foreign callers have called back."

"Yes! I didn't even think of that."

The list of phone numbers Manindra brought back were all from public telephone booths. However, not a single call had been returned to Aruni's number.

When Aruni described all this during the

Vigilance hearing, Shashank was stunned. It was lucky for Shashank that his men had only contacted the booth operators; otherwise, they would have been caught, and Shashank's name would have been dragged into it. Regardless, Aruni emerged clear from the investigation.

"Brother, it's Manindra. Nothing happened to those people (the conspirators)."

"I've been transferred to Delhi. Let's see. You stay worry-free."

"I became worry-free the day you reminded me of those old stories. You have to avenge the insult to your father. Only the people have changed; the characters remain the same."

In Delhi, Aruni was posted to the Information Technology branch of the Vigilance Department. This department was considered a "shunting" post (an insignificant placement). The fact that Aruni chose this posting even after clearing the Vigilance inquiry seemed to prove that he was exhausted—that he would sit in a corner for five years. Shashank's group was overjoyed.

Meanwhile, Aruni restarted the "Science" lessons he had once abandoned. All day long, he remained immersed with computers and technical experts. Those experts, too, were seeing an officer after a long time who was actually dedicated to the work; others usually

just tried to finish their term and run away.

In reality, this department was very sensitive. Aruni developed a close rapport with all the employees. Everyone's applications were processed ahead of time. New equipment began arriving for the office. Previous officers were only interested in passing time and hadn't even fulfilled the office's basic needs.

A new piece of equipment arrived in the office intended to curb corruption. It had the facility to tap the phones of smugglers.

Some time continued to pass this way.

“Manindra. No phone calls?”

“I am finally at peace now, brother.”

“Yes, the time has come. Do one thing: get a news story published in the papers regarding Shashank's links with smugglers. Everything else is ready on this end.”

Over there, the news broke in the papers. The Minister's Public Relations Officer—whose job was to clip departmental news from the newspapers and bring it to the Minister—delivered that clipping to him. The timing was perfect because the departmental

Minister was facing numerous allegations at the time; the Parliamentary session was ongoing, so he took no risks. He ordered an inquiry.

The case arrived at the Vigilance Department. Internal meetings were held, to which the Information Technology department was also summoned. Usually, in most cases, the IT department would issue a 'No Objection Certificate,' and the case would be closed after the inquiry.

The date for the meeting was set. Aruni attended as a member of the Vigilance Committee.

“No charges are being proven against Shashank. Aruni, your department was provided with telephone tapping equipment. But in this office, even a fax machine stays in its box for six months before being installed—so is this machine still just sitting there, or has some conversation actually been recorded?”

“Sir, this machine arrived on the first of this month and its use began that very day. The smuggler named in this case is on the list of individuals whose calls I was ordered to record. Shashank’s conversation with this person is almost non-existent—just two conversations of half a minute each. The second conversation is from 9:00 PM, and immediately after that, the smuggler calls his

own employee, which also lasts only half a minute.”

“What date was this?”

“The fifth.”

“On the morning of the sixth, a raid was conducted at that smuggler's place and nothing was found. Give us the details of these calls, Aruni.”

“In the first call, Shashank says to come and meet him at his house at 8:30 PM; that it is a very urgent matter. At 9:00 PM, in the second conversation, he says angrily that it is already nine and the person hasn't arrived yet. The reply is also there—the smuggler is standing at Shashank's gate.”

“What is the dialogue in the third phone call?”

“The smuggler makes the third call to his office staff at 9:30 PM. He orders the employee to come to the office immediately, saying he is also arriving. That's it; nothing besides that. No evidence could be found in this case. If you say so, I shall issue the No Objection Certificate.”

“Aruni! What are you saying? Your department hadn't done a single thing until today, but today you have connected every single link. Shashank called to meet. In the second call, the man was at his gate. In the

third call, why would his employee go to the office so late at night? Shashank leaked the news of the raid. That employee removed all the papers, and my department's officers returned empty-handed in the morning. Now, make one more call. Shashank's number couldn't be tapped, but as per procedure, his voice sample must be matched. When he picks up, say it's a wrong number and hang up."

"That shall be done."

The process was carried out immediately.

"This is an open-and-shut case," the Chairman of the Vigilance Committee told the Director General. The Director General summoned Shashank and gave him two options.

"Shashank, after these events, you have two choices. You must take compulsory retirement from the department, or the inquiry will proceed."

Shashank took compulsory retirement. He left the department and went away.

"Brother Manindra. No phone calls?"

"Brother! I became at peace the very day I realized you remembered everything from our childhood. There is no difference between you and Kaka (your father). Only the paths were different. I used to tell you so much so that you would walk this path of

victory, remember? But the day you started recounting those childhood stories to me, I knew I could rest easy.”

The graph of Aruni’s studies used to rise and fall with his father’s state of mind. But he would always return to achieve his goal. This pattern happened once more even while he was in service.

And then, after an official trip, Aruni met with an accident. After fifteen days on a ventilator and a year on crutches, Aruni stood on his own two feet once again. Where would that boy be now, the one who used to write a diary? That imaginary storyteller had written the absolute truth; he was voicing Aruni’s future. In Aruni’s diary, this too was inscribed-

“I began to lack the time to talk about myself—that is, about Aruni. Part of the reason was my own habits, and part of it was my accident, due to which a year and a half of my life felt as though it passed in a mere day and a half. My attention also turned toward how I could compensate for the loss of time incurred during that period.

Then, the idea of limiting my social connections came to mind. In this, I achieved success without even trying. The reason was my seemingly endless illness. Between the differing opinions of various doctors and a few botched surgeries, the collective impression was that I would now have to live

the life of a cripple. Forget about others—even I started feeling this way. It felt as if the doctors were merely giving me false reassurances. In this process, the number of people calling or inquiring about my well-being dwindled.

So, when I unexpectedly moved from crutches to a cane and then began driving a car, many people found it awkward to re-establish a normal relationship with me. I forcibly maintained ties with those who had never distanced themselves, but my behavior toward those who had walked away remained indifferent; consequently, people felt discouraged from reconnecting. To those who laughed at me during my dark days, this behavior of mine could actually be considered sympathetic.

Because of this, I began to save a great deal of time. Initially, I wondered if anyone in the office would even recognize me. But when I arrived, I felt as though I was welcomed like a hero. However, my colleagues hid the fact that seeing me walk with a cane was creating a sense of inward turmoil for them. They only kept praising my courage. When I finally started walking without the cane, one friend said, 'Now you are returning to your old self.'

I came home and thought about this. With my wife's help, I had her record a video of my walking on a handycam. For a moment, I was stunned. My way of walking still looked like

a limping trot. It must have been much worse before, yet my friends hadn't let me sense it even one bit. Later, my family told me, 'This is nothing; it used to be much worse.' It was then I realized how painful it must have been for my friends and those who felt an attachment to me. I finally understood the secret behind their constant encouragement and praise of my bravery.

After the loneliness of my early life and the doubts, hopes, and expectations of being sidelined in my professional and public life, this experience provided even greater strength to the unique development of my personality.”

Aruni underwent several operations. Each time he emerged from anesthesia, it felt to him as though a thousand-armed goddess with flowing hair was swinging him through the air and hurling him back into this world. Aruni had conquered death. But when he returned to the office after a year and a half, people could hardly believe it. There was that same familiar smile on his face. Some people even whispered that this wasn't merely an accident, but a planned one—because this accident bore a striking resemblance to the 'accident' that had killed Naval.

