

VIDEHA · ILLUSTRATED FICTION

NEW WINGS

Stories for Young Readers



Translated from the original Maithili by the author himself

GAJENDRA THAKUR

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TWENTY STORIES • ORIGINAL COLOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

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STORY 01

Space-Time Displacement



“Listen, everyone. Turn off all the outside lights.”

Dhaumya spoke very softly, but everyone in the laboratory was listening closely. Apala went to the wall and lowered the covers over the lamps, one by one. Shvetaketu dimmed the light on the main machine. Raikva shut the window panels. Satyakama and Ghosha took their places around the round table.

Within moments, the room filled not with darkness but with a strange blue glow. On the glass panel in the middle, a tiny white point of light appeared. Then came another. A fine line emerged, joining the two.

Dhaumya smiled. “Imagine that this point is a living being. In its world there is only forward and backward. No left or right, no up or down—nothing else. However far it travels, it must stay on the same line.”

Apala leaned closer. “What if another living being comes straight towards it?”

“Then the first one cannot get past. In its universe, there is simply no way to step aside.”

Shvetaketu burst out laughing. “So if you block the path, you stop its whole world!”

“From its point of view, yes,” said Dhaumya. “But not from ours. We exist in a third dimension. If we wished, we could lift one point off the line and set it down somewhere else. The creature would have no idea what had happened to it.”

Ghosha’s eyes lit up. “Could something like that happen to us, too? Might something that seems impossible to us be quite easy for a being from a higher dimension?”

Dhaumya did not answer at once. He swept his hand across the tabletop. The line disappeared, and in its place appeared the flat outlines of a circle, a triangle and a square.

“Now look at a two-dimensional world,” he said. “Here, as well as forward and backward, there is left and right. But still no up or down. Imagine a surface stretching without end, yet with no thickness at all.”

Raikva asked, “How would the beings in that world see one another?”

“Not in their complete shapes. Each would see only a cross-section of the other, like a line. If a circle moved past, another being would first see a short line, then a longer line, then a short one again. Only by putting many experiences together could it understand the whole circle.”

Satyakama kept writing on his slate. “We live in three dimensions—length, width and depth. Then what is the fourth dimension?”

Dhaumya raised his head into the blue light. “Time.”

The room fell silent again.

Time—something everyone experiences, yet no one can touch with a hand. It leaves the past behind and keeps opening the future ahead of us.

Dhaumya said, “We can move through the three dimensions of space, but we experience time moving in only one direction: onward from birth, from the present towards the future. What if time could be bent, just like space? What if two moments far apart could be brought close together?”

“Then travel across space and time would become possible,” Apala said quietly.

“And that is why this third laboratory was built.”



The first laboratory had been made for one-dimensional creatures, the second for two-dimensional creatures. Both were kept separate from the physical conditions of Earth, so that the beings inside would make sense of any interference from the outside world according to the rules of their own worlds. Dhaumya had spent many years observing their behaviour.

But the third laboratory was not built to observe other creatures. It was built to test the limits of what they themselves could do.

Dhaumya gave each of his five students a different task.

Shvetaketu and Raikva were to develop a theory of a tunnel through space and time, connecting two distant points from within. Dhaumya explained it by comparing it to a woodpecker’s hollow in a tree: two places may seem far apart on the outside of the trunk, but a hollow inside can offer a shorter route between them.

Apala began working on a cosmic string. She did not imagine an ordinary length of string, but a tiny structure of enormous density, powerful enough to bend spacetime a little.

Satyakama searched for the possibility of extra dimensions hidden at an incredibly small scale. He kept asking, “What if those dimensions exist, but are curled up so tightly that our eyes cannot detect them?”

Ghosha’s task was different from all the others. She drew up the rules and ethical principles for the experiment.

One evening she said to them, “If we manage to reach the past, who will give us the right to change history for our own convenience? What if someone tries to destroy an enemy before that enemy is even born? What if one tiny change alters the lives of thousands of people?”

Shvetaketu joked, “Then your first rule should be that nobody is allowed to go back and peek at the questions on an exam paper.”

Everyone laughed.

Ghosha did not. “It may sound funny,” she said, “but the greater our power becomes, the greater our responsibility must be.”

Dhaumya looked at her with satisfaction. “Whether this experiment succeeds or fails, that rule must succeed.”



Months passed. The laboratory walls filled with drawings of curved lines and spheres, calculations and paths among the stars. Sometimes the machines hummed all night. At other times, an entire week went by without a result.

One day Raikva picked up a globe and placed it on the table. “Teacher, if you add up the three angles of a triangle drawn on flat paper, you get one hundred and eighty degrees. But on the curved surface of the Earth, you can draw a triangle with three angles of ninety degrees each.”

“That is exactly what we must understand,” Dhaumya said. “There is nothing wrong with the line itself. If the surface curves, the line’s course changes. And if spacetime curves, the path of light changes too.”

Satyakama said at once, “Then we are not prisoners of straight paths. With the right curvature, distant places could come close together.”

Apala picked up a slender filament from the table. It shone like silver. “And this cosmic string will hold the passage steady.”

For the first time that day, Dhaumya’s eyes shone with the excitement of a long-awaited discovery.

Work began on Pushpaka. Its name was ancient, but the craft itself was entirely new. Its outer shell was made of lightweight metal. Inside were a time-measuring instrument, a device for finding direction among the stars, a light-speed meter and a protective shield. Most

important of all was a circular machine for opening a tunnel through spacetime. Apala's cosmic string was fixed at its centre.

"Who will make the first journey?" Shvetaketu asked.

"I will," Dhaumya replied.

The five students looked at one another.

"Please don't go alone," Apala said immediately.

"The first risk belongs to the teacher," Dhaumya said calmly. "The second journey will belong to the students—if there is a way back from the first."

Ghosha held out a sheet of paper. "Then read these rules and sign them. No interfering with the past. No attempt to change any living being, object, event or decision. The journey is for observation only."

Dhaumya laughed. "I entered the world of science only to live long enough to see the day when I would need my own student's permission!"

"The rules are the same for everyone," Ghosha answered.

Dhaumya signed.



On the night of the journey, the sky was clear. The stars shone as though news of the experiment had reached them too.

Pushpaka stood motionless on the runway. Around it, the five students carried out their final checks.

"Time gauge?"

"Ready."

"Cosmic string?"

"Stable."

"Spacetime tunnel?"

"It will open as soon as the signal arrives."

Dhaumya climbed aboard. Before the window closed, he looked at all five students.

"What if you haven't returned by morning?" Apala asked.

"Then do not call the experiment a failure," Dhaumya said. "First, try to find out where I have gone."

The blue light of the instruments grew brighter. The air trembled. A dark circle appeared in front of the craft. It was not really black; it seemed to bend light inwards. Along its rim, the stars looked like lines stretched thin.

“The tunnel is open!” Raikva cried.

Pushpaka moved slowly forward. Then, in an instant, it became a stream of light.

Before Dhaumya lay not stars but long trails of starlight. The time gauge shook wildly. Outside, the light turned blue, then white, then deep red. Space and time seemed to fold like layers of cloth, unfolding and folding again.

Dhaumya kept his eyes fixed on the instruments.

Suddenly, an enormous dark chasm appeared ahead of the craft. Light swirled round and round it. Dhaumya’s heart began to race, but his hands stayed steady. The cosmic string pulled tight. A warning sounded from the machine.

“Too much curvature,” Dhaumya said to himself. “Change course.”

He turned the controls a little. Pushpaka slipped past the edge of the dark chasm.

Then an astonishing signal appeared on the instrument panel. A place Dhaumya had believed to be in an immensely distant part of the universe suddenly looked close on the map. It was as though the meaning of distance itself had changed.

Dhaumya understood: the experiment was working.

But at that very moment, an unfamiliar number flashed on the time gauge. The time at the laboratory and the time aboard the craft no longer matched.

“What is this?”

Dhaumya checked his calculations again. Only a few hours had passed inside the craft, but the reading for time outside was racing forwards at a terrifying speed.

He immediately sent the signal to return.

The spacetime tunnel opened again. Pushpaka turned towards Earth, a streak of light.



The craft landed on Earth shortly before the first light of dawn. Dhaumya breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m back.”

But when he opened the window, his breath caught in his throat.

This was not the same runway. The old laboratory building was gone. All around him rose tall, smooth towers, with shining roads suspended in the sky between them. People travelled silently in strange, lightweight vehicles. Signs along the ground read: ‘Straight-Time Route’, ‘Spacetime Route’, ‘Long-Distance Displacement Route’.

Dhaumya hurried outside.

“Shvetaketu!”

No answer.

“Apala! Satyakama! Raikva! Ghosha!”

Only the soft hum of distant machinery.

A young man approached, staring at him in surprise. His clothes were unfamiliar to Dhaumya, but the curiosity on his face was something Dhaumya recognised.

“Young man,” Dhaumya asked, “what time is it?”

The young man laughed. “Which time? Straight time, or spacetime-displacement time?”

A shiver ran through Dhaumya. “Straight time.”

The young man glanced at the transparent face of his wristwatch. “The year 3100...”

Dhaumya barely heard what he said next.

Only one thought rang in his ears: a thousand years!

For Dhaumya, less than a night had passed inside Pushpaka. On Earth, nearly a thousand years had gone by.

The young man was still explaining something—standard time, displacement time, planetary-route time. Dhaumya gazed around him. The mystery he had devoted his life to exploring was now something people here used as casually as an ordinary road sign.

His first thought was, “Who can I tell about my discovery?”

His second question was even bigger: “Or did these people solve the mystery long, long ago?”

Then the young man looked towards Dhaumya’s craft. Suddenly, his eyes widened.

“That... that looks like the old Pushpaka I’ve seen in pictures at the museum!”

Dhaumya turned towards him.

“The museum?”

The young man stepped closer, slowly. “Where... where have you come from?”

Dhaumya looked up at the sky. The last star of dawn was fading. In a rush, he remembered his five students from a thousand years earlier, the unfinished laboratory, Apala’s question and Ghosha’s rules.

He smiled.

“Before I answer that,” Dhaumya said, “show me a library. I want to know everything you have learned in the thousand years that have passed.”

The young man laughed. “A library? Of course. But first, won’t you tell me your name?”

Dhaumya was silent for a little while. Then he said—

“Dhaumya. I am a student—of time.”



STORY 02

Life on Crutches



Morning sunshine was spreading across the college grounds. It was the day of the entrance examination for engineering, so the gate was crowded with parents and students. Some were checking their admit cards again and again, some were counting their pens, and others were going over formulas one last time. A student on his way to the examination hall stopped beside a staff member standing near the noticeboard. “When will the college reopen after the summer holidays?” he asked.

Without even looking up, the staff member replied, “It’s written on the noticeboard. Read it.”

As soon as they heard this short exchange, two men standing in the shade of the veranda looked at each other and suddenly burst out laughing.

“Do you remember, Gunadev?” the first man asked.

“How could I forget!” said the other. “He treated that noticeboard as though it were his own forehead!”

They laughed again. In a moment, eighteen years of separation seemed to melt away. The first man was Ratish; the second was Phool. They had studied together at school and college, but life had carried them along different roads. By chance, both had come to this very college today, each bringing his son to sit the entrance examination.



The examination would last three hours. Their sons went inside, leaving the two old friends with three whole hours in which to open the doors of memory.

“Do you remember our reed pens?” Ratish asked.

Phool’s face brightened. “We used to dissolve tablets of ink in warm water and pour it into the inkwell. If the reed wasn’t cut properly, the letters came out all wrong.”

“Even then, your handwriting looked as lovely as a flower,” Ratish said.

“With a name like Phool—Flower—my handwriting had to do something to live up to it!”

They laughed once more. The earthen courtyard of their school, the long walks to high school, their science practical notebooks, examinations and results—one memory after another found its way into their conversation. Ratish had continued his studies and gone into engineering. Phool had taken a job at the post office. Then came work, marriage, families and transfers. Time had swept them so far apart that they had never found an opportunity to meet.

Ratish asked, “And how has your family been all these years? I couldn’t even attend your wedding.”

Phool was silent for a little while. Looking towards the sunlight spread across the field, he said, “My family’s story is not a short one.”

His younger brother had been born unable to use one of his hands fully. He had learned to write with the other hand, studied, taken his examinations and, in the end, found a job in a government office. Phool said, “In our family, we worried more about how people looked at his hand than about his hand itself. In the village, some people called him by his physical difference instead of his name. My younger brother would hear them and remain silent, but it hurt our mother.”

“People often laugh at what they do not understand,” Ratish said quietly.

“Yes,” said Phool, “and sometimes even pity can feel like an insult. My younger brother used to say, ‘Give me work, not sympathy.’”

A few years later, Phool’s mother came to stay with him. One day a Maithil family visited them. During their conversation, the subject of marriage came up. The visiting woman’s daughter also walked with a slight sway because of a difference in the structure of her leg. At first, both families began listing what they considered to be the physical shortcomings of their children.

Phool smiled as he told the story. “Later my mother said to me, ‘What sort of way is this to discuss a marriage? Are we talking about two capable human beings becoming husband and wife, or making a list of faults in two bodies?’”

Ratish grew serious.

“We discussed it again at home,” Phool continued. “My younger brother said clearly, ‘First, I want to speak to her. I am looking for a life partner, not someone to feel sorry for.’ The young woman said much the same thing: ‘I want a husband, not a protector.’ Once they had said that, the way towards their marriage opened.”

They were married. Both went on with their work, looked after their home, laughed, talked and built a life together. There were difficulties, too. For several years, their children did not survive. The family worried. They went from doctor to doctor, and time passed

between hope and disappointment. Phool told this part of the story very slowly.

“One day my younger brother said to me,” Phool recalled, “Life does not give everyone the same measure. But whatever life gives us, we must live it fully.”

After many years, they had a son. The joy in the house was so great that all the difficult days seemed to have been left behind. But the baby was very delicate. After a spell of bitter cold, his health suddenly worsened, and he did not survive.

The smile disappeared from Ratish’s face. “That must have been terribly hard...”

Phool nodded. “Yes. But the strangest thing about sorrow is that it stays in the house, and still, when morning comes, people have to get up and go about their work. The post office opens. The school bell rings. The cooking fire is lit. Life waits for no one.”

After some time, his younger brother and sister-in-law gathered the pieces of their lives together again. They had another son. As he grew, he became a healthy, lively boy who loved his books. Phool smiled. “Now he runs faster than any of us. He says he’s going to be an engineer.”

Ratish breathed a sigh of relief. “That really is wonderful news.”

The hands of the clock tower moved slowly on. In the college grounds, some people were drinking tea, some reading newspapers and others looking at their phones. The conversation between the two friends turned once again towards their own children.

“What does your son enjoy studying?” Phool asked.

“He’s very interested in mathematics. He takes machines apart and then puts them back together. Sometimes he has two screws left over, and then he says, ‘Those were extra!’” Ratish laughed.

“Then he shows every sign of becoming an engineer,” Phool said.

“And your son?”

Phool paused a moment before answering. “He likes science, too. But he enjoys asking questions even more than sitting examinations. He says, ‘Before we can find the right answer, we have to find the right question.’”

“He sounds like a clever boy,” Ratish said happily.

“Whether he’s clever or just stubborn, his results will tell us,” Phool said with a laugh.

Just then, the bell rang inside the examination building. Everyone waiting on the veranda suddenly became alert. Some moved towards the gate; others stepped out of the shade. A few minutes later, students began coming out in groups. Some looked delighted, some worried, while others were already arguing over the answers to the questions.

Ratish spotted his son in the distance, coming out with his friends. Ratish raised a hand to signal to him. His son waved back, but a question from one of his friends held him there a little longer.

“Where is your son?” Ratish asked.

Phool looked into the crowd. “He’s coming.”

At that moment, a teenager appeared among the students. A bag hung from his shoulders, there was sweat on his face, and his eyes were bright. With a crutch tucked beneath each arm, he was moving quickly towards them. He paused at the last step, steadied himself, and then came to stand before Phool with a smile.

“Father, the questions were good!” he said eagerly. “One mathematics problem took me a long time, but I solved it in the end. I’m not sure about one answer in physics.”

There was such pride on Phool’s face that, for a few moments, Ratish could not say a word. Only now did he understand: this was Phool’s son.

Phool introduced them as naturally as could be. “This is your Uncle Ratish, an old friend of mine. We went to school together.”

The teenager greeted him respectfully with a namaste. Ratish returned the greeting, but his eyes drifted involuntarily towards the crutches. The boy noticed his glance, yet there was no embarrassment on his face.

“Two years ago, the nerves in his leg were badly damaged in an accident,” Phool said calmly, as though he were talking about the weather. “He underwent a great deal of treatment. Now he walks with crutches. The doctors say he may improve further.”

The teenager broke in with a laugh. “But I have to solve engineering questions with my head, not with my legs.”

Ratish laughed too. “Now that is well said!”

The teenager took out his question paper and began showing it to Phool. “Look here. At first I went about this one the wrong way. Then, in the last five minutes, I understood it.”

Phool bent over the paper and studied it with complete attention. There was no extra fussing, no false pity in his manner. He was simply a father listening to his son talk about an examination.

All the stories Phool had told came back to Ratish at once: the younger brother who could not fully use one hand, the sister-in-law whose leg was different, the family’s worries, the way people stared, the baby who had died too soon, and the healthy child who came afterwards. And here, now, was Phool’s own son, standing on crutches and dreaming of becoming an engineer.

For a moment, Ratish felt that life was not a straight line. Some people had strong bodies but weary minds; some had weak legs but powerful determination; some travelled smooth roads while others faced steps at every turn. Yet everyone had an equal right to reach a destination.

Phool asked his son, “Are you tired?”

“Not a bit. But I am hungry.”

“Then first we eat. Afterwards, we can put your question paper on trial.”

Ratish’s son had arrived by now, too. The four of them walked towards the gate together. Phool’s son put his crutches forward, lifted himself and took his next step. Every step demanded a little extra effort, but he did not stop moving.

Near the gate, a small child was watching him with curiosity. Perhaps he had never seen crutches from so close before. The teenager smiled at him, and the little boy smiled back. The unspoken question was answered without a word.

Ratish leaned close to Phool and asked softly, “You told me so much, but why didn’t you mention your son’s difficulty earlier?”

Phool looked at him in mild surprise. Then he said, “Why would I? I was telling you about my son—how he loves science, asks questions and wants to become an engineer. His crutches are one part of who he is, not the whole of who he is.”

Ratish said nothing. He had found the answer to his question.

The four of them began crossing the road. There was a place to eat on the other side. The two teenagers walked ahead, still discussing the examination, while Ratish and Phool followed behind.

Ratish looked once more at the rhythm of Phool's son's steps—crutches, legs, then crutches again. But the boy's gaze was fixed on the far side of the road.

And then a sentence rose in Ratish's mind: Life may move on crutches, but dreams never do.



STORY 03

I Will Not Go Abroad



Saurabh held two pieces of paper in his hands—one was a letter confirming his scholarship, the other an airline ticket. Both sheets were light, yet they weighed heavily on his mind. For three months, everyone at home had been talking about his journey abroad for higher studies. His teachers were delighted, his friends were excited, and the neighbours kept saying, “When will you ever get another opportunity like this?”

Saurabh was happy too. Science was his favourite subject. Ever since he was little, he had taken radios apart to see how they worked, made small devices from the motors of old fans, and hung containers from trees to measure rainfall. When he won the scholarship, it felt for the first time as though the wings of his curiosity might truly carry him a long way.

But the closer his departure came, the more another question stirred inside him: I am going far away, but where am I going from? The courtyard of his home, the pond, his school, his own language, his grandmother’s stories, the raised borders of the fields, the people pushing boats through floodwaters—were these merely things he would leave behind, or would they remain within him?

He had never put that question plainly to anyone. His father would say, “Study, learn, see the world.” His mother would say, “Wherever you are, make sure you eat properly and get enough sleep.” His little sister would say, “Show me the stars from there.” There was love in everything they said, but none of it answered his question.

Around that time, Lal Kaka came to visit. He was a distant relative of Saurabh’s father, but he came and went like a member of the family. When he heard that Saurabh was going abroad, he said, “Before you leave, I want you to meet someone. Your Uncle

Dwijendra. He is regarded as a great scholar of history, both in India and abroad. But you don't know him, and he probably doesn't know you either."

"Then why should we meet?" Saurabh asked with a laugh.

Lal Kaka laughed too. "Sometimes a relative you hardly know can tell you something about your own home more clearly than anyone else."

Dwijendra lived in a quiet part of town. There was nothing particularly grand about the outside of his house, but inside was a whole world of books. Shelves covered the walls. Manuscripts, archaeological pictures, old maps and keepsakes from conferences in faraway places filled the room. Saurabh's eyes came to rest on a glass case containing a little lump of earth, a reed pen, a scrap of blue cloth and an old letter.



Uncle Dwijendra spoke very softly. "So you are Saurabh? You have won a scholarship?"

"Yes."

"Very good. What will you study?"

"Environmental engineering. I'll be working especially on floods and water management."

Dwijendra's eyes brightened. "Then Mithila has already been your classroom for years."

Saurabh liked that thought. But Lal Kaka was not a man who believed in sitting quietly. He pulled up a chair and said, "You have travelled through so many countries. Did you ever find time to visit the pond in your own village?"

Dwijendra did not smile. "That old question of yours still hasn't grown old?"

"The answer may be old, but the question is still alive."

For a few moments, silence filled the room. Saurabh felt that he was sitting in the middle of a conversation that had begun long before he was born.

Dwijendra began speaking slowly. "I received my primary education in the village. I used to walk all the way to Jhanjharpur. I loved studying. In those days I thought that if I could only get away from that small place, the world would open up before me. And it did. I went to university. History became my companion. I received prizes, positions, books, invitations to conferences—everything."

He looked towards the glass case. "But there was one thing I failed to understand: leaving your roots behind is not the same as living far away from them."

Saurabh listened without speaking.

"I kept thinking: first I'll find my feet, then I'll bring Mother to live with me. First I'll get a good position, then I'll visit the village. First I'll build a house, then I'll repair our old home. Human beings put a great deal of faith in that one word—then."

Dwijendra's voice faltered a little. "Mother went on waiting. I went on being busy. By the time I had enough time, money and a house—everything I thought I needed—Mother was no longer there."

This time Lal Kaka said nothing.

Dwijendra opened the glass case and took the reed pen in his hand. "These are things my mother kept. She was educated. She read books at home. I understood her far too late—only when the person I needed to understand was no longer there."

Saurabh thought of the airline ticket. Suddenly he asked, "Do you think it is wrong to go abroad?"

Dwijendra looked up at once. “No. Never draw that conclusion.” Saurabh was startled.

“There is nothing wrong with going far away. Even forgetting cannot always be called a fault—sometimes circumstances pull people away. But deliberately cutting the threads that connect you to your own people is foolish. I went abroad and lived in many cities across India. All of it increased my knowledge. My mistake was believing that I would look after my relationships after I had become successful. Relationships are not something to attend to only after success.”

Saurabh looked out of the window. The evening light was falling across the pages of the books.

Dwijendra continued, “Your subject is flooding. If you travel far away, learn new ways of working with rivers and return, this land can wait for you. But if, as soon as you leave, you begin to think that the problems here are too small to matter, half the meaning of your learning will be lost.”

Lal Kaka laughed. “See? If I gave you a lecture, you would run away. But when a scholar gives one, you sit and listen in silence.”

“This is not a lecture,” Dwijendra said. “It is an account of my regrets.”

On the way home, Saurabh did not ride his bicycle. His father drove the motorcycle slowly, and Saurabh sat behind him, looking at both sides of the road. Children were playing ball beside the pond. An egret sat in a tree. An old man was repairing a little bamboo bridge. Saurabh had seen these sights a thousand times, yet today it felt as though he were seeing them for the first time.

That night he opened his scholarship papers again. The programme was excellent. The laboratories, the teachers, the chance to study water science—everything suited his dreams. Yet the question was no longer simply whether he should go abroad. It had become a question of what direction he wanted his knowledge to take.

The next day, the head teacher held a small farewell ceremony at school. Saurabh’s friends gave him a thick notebook. “Write down everything you see over there,” they told him. They had all written their names on the first page.

In an empty space, Saurabh wrote, “Wherever I go, I will set out from here.”

A day before he was due to leave for the airport, heavy rain began to fall. It rained until night. In the morning, news came that a small stream west of the village had overflowed. The school science team had already set up a simple instrument to measure the water level, and Saurabh was a member of that team. His teacher phoned him. “If you have time, come and look at the readings. Your measuring instrument has been running all night.”

His mother tried to stop him. “You’re leaving tomorrow!”

“Just one hour,” Saurabh said.

He reached the school. The rain had stopped, but the grounds were wet. As he studied the readings from the small device, he realised that the stream was rising much faster than its average rate over the previous three years. “Send these figures to the village council,” he told his teacher. “People in the lower-lying neighbourhood can be warned in advance.”

His teacher sent the message immediately. Within a few hours, people had moved their livestock and essential belongings to higher ground. By evening, the water had reached the edge of the neighbourhood, but everyone was prepared.

Saurabh came home with mud all over his clothes. His mother looked at him, ready to scold him, but then fell silent.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Saurabh said. “The measuring instrument worked.”

His father smiled. “So you’ve become an engineer even before going abroad?”

Saurabh did not sleep that night. Dwijendra’s word then, his mother’s long wait, the school’s measurements, the people of the low-lying neighbourhood and the laboratory in a distant country kept coming back to him. Both worlds were pulling at him.

In the morning he went to his father. “May I tell you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m not going abroad.”

His father looked at him for a few moments. “Are you frightened?”

“No.”

“Have Uncle Dwijendra’s stories made you emotional?”

“A little. But that’s not the only reason.”

Saurabh unfolded his papers. “I can apply for this scholarship again in a year. I want to finish the river-measuring project I’ve begun here. The state university also has a new course in water engineering. I want to study here first and work on the problems we face here. Later, if I need to study abroad, I will go. But I’m not going now just because everyone says that travelling far away makes your life greater.”

His father was silent for a long time. Then he asked, “Is this your own decision?”

“Yes.”

“Then I accept it.”

His mother had been standing in the doorway, listening. There were tears in her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. “Don’t stay because of me.”

“Not just because of you,” Saurabh said with a smile. “Because of myself.”

That evening Saurabh phoned Uncle Dwijendra.

“Uncle, I’m not going abroad for now.”

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line. Then Dwijendra’s voice came through. “Have you changed your decision because of my story?”

“Partly.”

“Then be careful. Don’t turn another person’s regrets into your own future.”

Saurabh smiled. “I’m staying for my own reasons. There is a project I want to finish. If I need to go later, I will.”

“Good. If you have wings, you will fly. But wings are not the enemies of roots.”

The following week, Saurabh wrote to the scholarship organisation to say that he would not be able to accept the offer that year. Some of his friends understood his decision; others did not. One said, “You gave up an opportunity like that!” Another said, “I would never have let it go!”

Saurabh listened to them all. He no longer felt the need to explain himself to everyone straight away.

By the end of the rainy season, the school's small water-monitoring project had spread to three villages. The students designed not only mobile-phone alerts but also signals using local bells and coloured flags, so that people without phones could receive warnings in time. Saurabh understood that science was not only the gleam of a distant laboratory. Sometimes science was also a bamboo pole, a measuring scale, rainfall readings and a warning given at the right moment.

One day Uncle Dwijendra came to the village himself. When Lal Kaka saw him, he laughed so loudly that half the neighbourhood realised some old matter was being brought up again.

Dwijendra stood for a long time at the place where his old house had been. Then he went to the school and looked at Saurabh's water-level measuring instrument.

"Is this why you stayed?" he asked.

"For now."

"And what about the future?"

Saurabh looked up at the sky. A flock of egrets was flying north.

"In the future, I'll go wherever there is something I need to learn. But I'll keep the way home in mind from the very beginning."

Dwijendra said nothing. He simply placed a hand on Saurabh's shoulder.

At that moment Saurabh understood that "I'm not going abroad" was not merely an announcement that he would not go to a particular place. It was the courage to choose the direction of his own life. Sometimes he would stay, sometimes go, sometimes return. But his decisions would come not from the noise of the crowd, but from his own curiosity and sense of responsibility.

And as he watched the egrets flying across the distant sky, he felt that the farther his wings carried him, the clearer the way home should remain.



STORY 04

Migration



For the first week after Nachiket moved from Madhubani to Haldia, everything seemed unfamiliar. The salty air from the sea, the enormous factories, the wide river, the Bengali spoken along the streets—everything was different from the world he knew back in his village. His father had been posted to Haldia, and so the whole family had had to move in the middle of the school year.

Nachiket was in Class Nine. At his old school, he had his circle of friends, a small science club, a kabaddi team, and all the familiar corners of the library. On his first day at the new school, he felt as though someone had taken away the middle pages of a familiar book and put a different book into his hands.

The teacher introduced him to the class. “This is Nachiket. He has come from Mithila.” Some students smiled, some nodded, and others went on talking among themselves. Nachiket did not know Bengali very well. His classmates understood Hindi, but they spoke Bengali to one another. Whenever anyone laughed, he imagined they were laughing at him, though most of the time they were not.

Within a few days, he understood that language was more than words. It was also a doorway to friendship and belonging. At lunchtime, little groups formed. Whenever he approached one, the conversation slowed. The others were not all unfriendly, but getting close to them was not easy either.

One day, outside the science laboratory, a thin boy stopped him. “Do you understand electrical circuits?” he asked in broken Hindi that sounded a little like Maithili.

Nachiket laughed. “If you had asked me in Maithili, I would have understood at once. But I understood you just as you asked.”

The boy laughed too. “I’m Tapas. I don’t know Maithili. But I can learn.”

That one sentence was the beginning of their friendship. Tapas had been working with the school’s science team for three years. Taking apart motors, joining wires, making a windmill from an old fan—he was quick and skilful at all these things. But he hesitated when it came to writing reports and giving presentations. So other students often took the things he had built to science fairs while he stayed behind.



The district science fair was due to take place the following month. Its theme was “Clean Energy and Disaster Preparedness in a Coastal Town.” A senior student, Devadatta Bose, was putting the team together. Once again, Tapas was making the motor, fitting the wires and building the frame, but beside his name on the list someone had written “Assistant.”

Nachiket asked, “Who built the machine?”

“We did,” Tapas said quietly.

“Then why isn’t your name on the main team?”

Tapas shrugged. “That’s how things have always been here. I’m not good at speaking on stage.”

Nachiket remembered his science teacher back in the village. The teacher used to say, “The person who makes something deserves a chance to explain it too.” Nachiket helped Tapas write his report. In return, Tapas taught him Bengali words for water, air, thank you, friend and be careful. They went back and forth between languages, laughing as they learned.

In three days, they had made a small model: a windmill turned by the sea breeze that stored electricity and rang a little bell when the water level rose. The idea was simple, but it was useful. “This won’t be helpful only at the fair,” Nachiket said. “It could be useful down by the river landing too.”

Tapas’s eyes lit up. “Then let’s make a bigger one.”

When Devadatta learned that Nachiket and Tapas were building a separate model, he was annoyed. “You’ve only just come here. The school already has a team. It isn’t right to take one of my members away and start another group.”

Nachiket answered calmly, “I’m not taking anyone away. Tapas wants to show his work under his own name. We can all be on the same team if you like, but his name must be on the work he has done.”

Devadatta said nothing then. But the next day, the atmosphere in the laboratory was unpleasant. Some students began calling Nachiket an “outsider” and leaving him out. Tapas grew worried too. “Because of me, you’ve ended up arguing with everyone.”

“Not because of you,” Nachiket replied. “Because your work wasn’t being given fair credit.”

Their science teacher, Ananya Didi, had been watching everything. She did not take sides. She simply said, “There are five days left until the fair. The team with a useful idea, clear work and members who can work together—that’s the team that will go. Quarrelling over names won’t make a model run.”

Meanwhile, strong winds began blowing in from the sea. Following a warning from the weather department, the school closed for two days. Such weather was not unusual in Haldia, but it was

Nachiket's first experience of it. Windows rattled, rain slanted across the sky, and water gathered in the streets.

Tapas phoned. "The water is rising in the settlement near our river landing. The electricity keeps going off."

Nachiket immediately thought of their model. With his father's permission, he called Ananya Didi. "Don't go outside," she told him. "But if your design can work, send the drawings and instructions. The local volunteers should have the materials."

Speaking to people by phone from their separate homes, Nachiket and Tapas simplified the design. All it needed was bamboo, an old bicycle bell, wire, an empty bottle and a small battery. When the water rose, the bottle would float upward, pull the wire and ring the bell. No expensive equipment was needed: ordinary things found nearby could give people a warning.

Devadatta had been following the group messages too. After a while, a message from him appeared: "My uncle is one of the volunteers at the landing. I'm sending him the drawings. I have two batteries as well."

Nachiket looked at the screen for a moment, then typed, "Send them. This is everyone's work."

By nightfall, temporary warning bells had been installed in three places. At one of them, the water suddenly rose and the bell rang. People were able to move to houses on higher ground in time. It was no great scientific invention, but on that particular night it was a useful solution.

By the next morning, the wind had calmed. The school was still closed, but all the members of the science team joined a phone call. For the first time, Devadatta spoke openly. "Tapas, your water-level idea worked yesterday. The fair report will name you as the main builder."

Tapas was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I'll speak on stage too."

Everyone burst out laughing. Nachiket said, "Then you'll have to practise first. Five lines in Bengali, five in Maithili, and the rest in whichever language feels easiest."

Devadatta laughed. "Everyone at the fair will run away!"

And amid the laughter, the tension that had stood between them slowly melted away.

When the school reopened, Ananya Didi called the whole team into the laboratory. “Now decide,” she said. “Will you take separate models to the fair, or one combined model?”

Devadatta answered himself. “One combined model. The windmill will use our old frame, the water-level bell will be Tapas’s, and the circuit for storing electricity will be Nachiket’s. We’ll all give the presentation together.”

Nachiket was surprised. Only a few days earlier, this same boy had treated him as an outsider. Now he was giving Nachiket’s idea an equal place in the team.

On the day of the fair, Tapas stood trembling on the stage. He spoke his first sentence in Bengali, his second in Hindi and his third, quite suddenly, in Maithili: “This device warns people before the water rises.” Hearing his pronunciation, Nachiket could not keep from laughing. Tapas laughed too, and the whole hall relaxed.

The team did not win first prize. Instead, it received special praise for “Local Usefulness.” No one looked disappointed on the journey home. They all knew that something more important than winning a prize had already happened on the night when their little bell had really rung.

Within a few months, Nachiket had begun to understand Bengali. Tapas would grin and ask, “How are you?” in Maithili. Devadatta invited him to play football. The group at lunchtime that had once seemed like a closed circle now had a place for him inside it.

One day his father asked, “Do you still miss home?”

Nachiket looked out of the window at the sky above Haldia. “I do. But this place doesn’t feel unfamiliar any more.”

“So your time away from home is over?”

Nachiket thought for a moment before replying. “Perhaps being away from home doesn’t end simply because you’ve moved somewhere else. When the names, language, sadness and laughter of people in a new place begin to feel like your own, that place becomes a part of home.”

That evening, Tapas arrived with an old motor in his hands. “Come on. Let’s take the windmill apart again. This time it’ll make more electricity.”

Nachiket put down his bag and went with him. Outside, the salty breeze was blowing. Far away, the river glittered. And Nachiket understood: wings do not simply carry you away from home. They teach you how to make a new home too.



STORY 05

An Even Exchange



Quiet.

Lost in thought.

Alone.

I cannot say for certain now whether those three words were first meant for him or for me. When this story begins, he is the one sitting alone; a little later, I am the one left alone. Somewhere in between, we seem to exchange one another's ways of being. In my mind, I have given that exchange a name: harahari—an even exchange.

Today, seven students were sitting in the reading room of the district library. Six of them kept whispering to one another, laughing, asking to borrow pens, and discussing examination papers. The seventh sat silently, bent over his desk. Before him lay two books, a red pencil, and a glass of water.

His name was Chandan Chaubey. Some of the students called him “the philosopher” behind his back, simply because he spoke so little. If anyone asked him a question, he would give a complete answer, show them where to find a book, or point out a mistake in a calculation. But he never joined in unnecessary chatter.

I had come to the library to submit my application papers for a state scholarship. I was one photocopy short of a certificate. The assistant at the counter pointed towards the reading room and said, “Ask Chandan. He knows all the rules.”

I went over to his desk. He examined my papers, marked two places with his red pencil, and said, “You need your school's stamp here. And your signature at the end of this declaration. You can still submit everything by tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded but said nothing more.

I had almost reached the door when my feet stopped. I did not know why, but his face seemed familiar. I turned around.

“You’re Chandan Chaubey, aren’t you?”

For the first time, he looked at me properly. “Yes. Have we met somewhere before?”

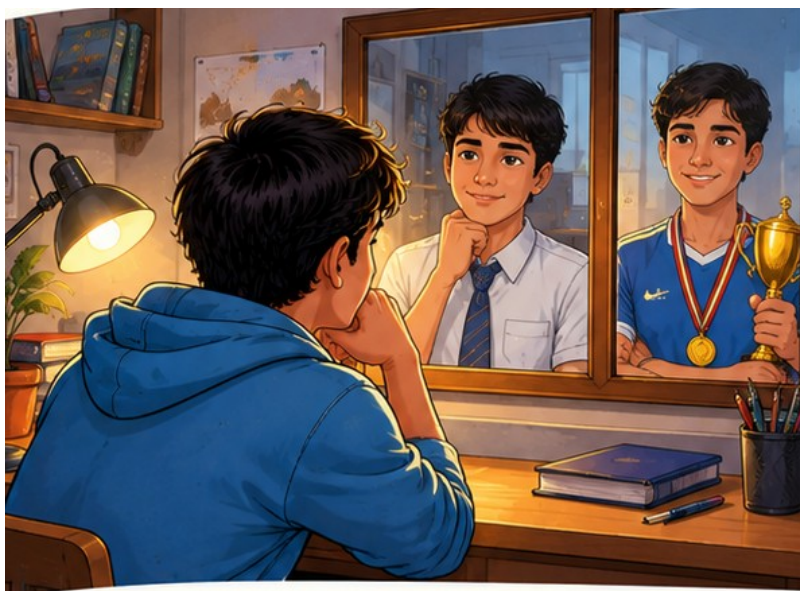
“Three years ago—the State Talent Scholarship Examination. The examination centre in Darbhanga.”

A little light came into his eyes. “Oh! You’re the one... Anay?”

“Yes.”

This time he smiled. “I remember now.”

And all at once, I remembered that morning three years earlier.



I was in Class Nine then. I had been standing alone near the gate of the examination centre, going over my notes. All the other students seemed to be in groups. Some were guessing what questions might come up, some were revising formulas, and others were receiving last-minute advice from their parents. I did not feel like talking to anyone.

Just then, a cheerful boy came and stood beside me. “Are you taking both the history and science sections?”

I had only nodded.

He introduced himself. “Chandan Chaubey. But if you call me Chaubey, my grandfather will turn around to see who’s calling. Just call me Chandan.”

That was the first time I laughed that day.

Once Chandan started talking, there was no stopping him. From history he moved to rivers, from rivers to floods, from floods to bridges, from bridges to engineering, and then, quite suddenly, to the stars in the sky. His conversations paid no attention to the limits of a school syllabus.

The bell rang, and we went inside. After the first paper, I met him again during the break. He was carrying two samosas. He held one out to me.

“Want one?”

“I’m not hungry.”

He burst out laughing. “On examination day, ‘I’m not hungry’ is the biggest excuse of all. Your stomach still has a job to do. Ambition can’t do it for you!”

I took the samosa.

Before the second paper, he asked me ten questions, and he did not know the answers to half of them himself. We went back inside laughing. When the examination ended, he disappeared somewhere in the crowd. We had exchanged neither telephone numbers nor addresses. All that remained in my memory was his face and that conversation about a samosa.

And now, three years later, the silent student sitting before me in the library was that very same Chandan.

Had I become like him, or had he become like me? Three years earlier, I had been quiet, thoughtful, and alone, while he was cheerful and talkative. Now I belonged to the school debating team. I spoke at gatherings and struck up conversations with new people, while Chandan seemed to spend his words as carefully as if he were saving them.

An even exchange.

A balancing of accounts? A swapping of places? Some invisible arithmetic of life?

I sat down opposite him again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“How did you become so quiet?”

Chandan twirled his red pencil. “And how did you become so talkative?”

I laughed. “My question first.”

He was silent for a little while, then said, “All right. But the answer isn’t short.”

The other students were slowly leaving the reading room. Evening light fell across the desk through the window. Chandan closed his book.

“After that examination, my father lost his job,” he said. “We had to move house. In two years, I changed schools three times. Every new place meant new introductions and new groups of friends. I used to talk to everybody, but having to tell your whole story from the beginning, again and again, wears you out.”

I said nothing.

“Then we had to manage on less money at home. I began helping at my maternal uncle’s shop in the evenings. After school, there was work, and after work, studying. There was less time to talk. Slowly, people began saying, ‘Chandan has become so serious. Chandan has changed.’ At first, I didn’t like hearing it. Later, I began to believe it myself. Perhaps this is simply what I’m like, I thought.”

“But you weren’t like that before.”

“And you weren’t the way you are today.”

His answer was simple, but it reached somewhere deep inside me.

Then I told him my story. A few months after the talent examination, there had been a speech competition at school. My Maithili teacher had entered my name even though I did not want to take part. The moment I stepped onto the stage, I began to tremble. I forgot my first two sentences. From behind me, my teacher said just one thing: “Speak the way you speak when you’re talking to me.”

I began speaking, slowly at first. Then came another competition, then a play, and later a presentation at the science fair. Part of the silence I had thought was my nature had really been fear. As the fear grew smaller, the words began to come out.

Chandan listened closely.

“So could part of my silence be fear too?” he asked.

“Only you can work that out. But not every silence comes from fear. Sometimes people are quiet because they are thinking. Sometimes they are tired. Sometimes they haven’t been given a chance to speak. The trouble begins when other people attach a single label to us — ‘philosopher,’ ‘chatterbox,’ ‘shy,’ ‘arrogant’ — and we begin to think that one word is our whole identity.”

Chandan smiled. “You really have become terribly talkative in three years.”

“Perhaps your share of the talking has come to me.”

“So, an even exchange?”

“An even exchange.”

We both burst out laughing. The librarian sitting in the reading room turned to look at us, so we lowered our voices.

After that day, I began going to the library regularly. I no longer needed an excuse about my scholarship application; I had found an excuse to talk to Chandan. Sometimes I did most of the talking and he listened. Sometimes he brought up a subject—the design of old bridges, the rivers of Mithila, the constellations, or some forgotten event from history—and I listened instead.

I began to see that the old Chandan had not disappeared completely. His laughter was still safe inside him. He simply opened the door to it less often.

One Sunday, the library began an “Open Table” for its young readers. The rules were simple. Anyone who wanted to could speak about an idea for five minutes; anyone who did not want to speak could just listen. No making fun of anyone. No interrupting.

The librarian asked me to lead the session. I immediately said, “Chandan will help too.”

Chandan stared at me, wide-eyed. “Me?”

“You can write the rules. And stop me if I talk too much.”

Eight students came on the first day. One girl showed a sundial she had made. A boy explained an idea for building boats during floods. Two students only listened. All the while, Chandan watched the clock and wrote down names. At the end, a younger boy asked, “Brother, aren’t you going to say anything?”

At first, Chandan tried to avoid answering. Then he stood up.

“I’ll just say this,” he began quietly. “Someone who speaks less does not have fewer thoughts. Give that person time.”

Nobody in the room laughed. Everyone listened.

Chandan sat down again. For a moment, the smile he had worn on that examination day returned to his face.

A few weeks later, it was once again the day of the State Talent Scholarship Examination. This time, Chandan and I were running a help desk near the examination centre on behalf of the library, offering water and pens to the students.

A crowd had gathered by the gate. Some students were reading notes, some were repeating formulas with their eyes closed, and others were listening to their mothers and fathers.

My eyes fell on two boys. One was standing alone at the side, looking at a sheet of paper. The other went up to him and said, “Are you taking both the history and science sections?”

I looked at Chandan.

He looked at me.

We both smiled at exactly the same moment.

“An even exchange,” Chandan whispered.

“An even exchange,” I repeated.

The bell rang. The two new students walked towards the examination room, one talking and the other listening. Who could say what either of them would be like a few years later? A cheerful boy might one day grow quiet. A silent boy might become a speaker on stage. Or perhaps neither would change places at all. Perhaps they would simply open a new room inside themselves.

In that moment, I understood that no person can be summed up in a single word. “Quiet,” “talkative,” “clever,” “shy,” “weak,”

“brave”—each might describe someone for a moment, but none could decide the course of a whole life.

Chandan put two little paper packets of samosas on the help desk. “Want one?”

I deliberately replied, “I’m not hungry.”

He roared with laughter. “And after three years, you still haven’t given up that lie!”

I picked up a samosa.

Quiet.

Lost in thought.

Alone.

Those three words were no longer anyone’s permanent identity. Words can change. People can change too. And if a friend can still recognise an old smile, then, even in the middle of all that changing, we can find a part of ourselves again.

An even exchange.



STORY 06

The Morning Star Beneath the Pond



It was a cool morning in the month of Kartik. The village was not yet fully awake, but the black sky in the east was slowly turning blue. Dew sparkled on the grass, the first birds were beginning to sing in the bamboo grove, and the water of the old pond to the south of the village lay as still as glass.

The pond was called Tara Pokhari—the Star Pond. No one knew for certain how it had come by that name. Kusum’s grandmother used to say, “The morning star comes to drink from this pond.” When Kusum was little, she would listen to those words with wide eyes. Now she was in Class Nine, and although she smiled at her grandmother’s story, the mystery of the name still lingered in her mind.

Kusum was not alone that morning. Mihir, Anshu and Richa were with her. All four belonged to their school’s nature-study club. Their task was to record the pond’s water temperature, its clarity and the creatures living in it. Their science teacher, Malati Di, had told them, “The water changes as the day grows warmer. Make a record of what it is like at dawn, too.” So the four had given up their sleep and reached the pond before sunrise.

Mihir was lowering a short bamboo measuring rod into the water. Anshu was writing down the time, and Richa was filling a glass bottle with a sample. Suddenly Kusum, who had been looking towards the middle of the pond, went completely still. Far down in the water a brilliant white point was shining—as though someone had lit a lamp on the pond’s bed.

“Look!” Kusum whispered. “What’s that over there?”

All four stared at the same spot. The bright point appeared to lie deep beneath the surface. Around it was blue darkness; above it,

motionless water; and in the middle, a single gleam. Richa bent forward. “It looks like a star,” she said.

Mihir laughed. “A star at the bottom of a pond? Has your grandmother’s story come true?”

This time, nobody laughed. The sight really was strange. Kusum looked up at the sky. The eastern horizon was hidden behind the trees. A few faint stars were still visible overhead, but there was no bright star directly above the point shining in the pond.



Anshu dropped a small pebble into the water. Ripples spread out in circles. For a moment, the white point broke into many little flashes; when the water grew still again, the flashes gathered into a single point.

“If there were a lamp under the water,” Richa said, “why would the ripples change its shape like that?”

Mihir fetched a long bamboo pole and lowered it into the water where the light seemed to be. The pole reached the bottom, but it touched nothing solid. Nor did the water turn muddy. The white point appeared to slide a little to one side, as though trying to keep away from them.

Her grandmother’s words echoed in Kusum’s mind once more: The morning star comes to drink from the pond. But she was no longer a little girl who simply listened to stories. Another question rose within her: If this wasn’t a star, then what was it?

The four students drove two thin bamboo stakes into the bank to mark the spot. They wrote down the time—5:36 in the morning. The direction—southeast. The water—almost perfectly still. The sky—clear, with a light mist along the horizon.

At school, they told Malati Di everything. She did not give them an answer straight away. Instead, she asked, “What did you actually see, and what did you merely assume?”

“We saw a white point of light,” Anshu said.

“Good.”

“It was inside the water,” Richa added.

Malati Di smiled. “Did you see that it was inside the water, or did it only seem to be?”

Richa fell silent.

Malati Di drew two arrows on a piece of paper. “Sometimes, when light reaches our eyes from a certain direction, our minds place the object somewhere farther along that line. That is why a reflection can sometimes seem to be in a different place from the real object. But we won’t decide anything yet. Go back at the same time on each of the next three mornings. Stand in different places, record the time and mark wherever you see the light.”

The four returned the following morning. This time the bright point was not at yesterday’s mark. It was a little farther north. “It moves!” Mihir exclaimed.

Kusum stopped him at once. “First let’s find out whether it moved, or we did.”

They stood at different places along the bank. Then something astonishing happened. Mihir saw the light in one spot, Richa saw it a little elsewhere, and Anshu saw it somewhere else again. When Kusum took a step to the left, the bright point seemed to shift through the water with her.

“What an obedient star!” Anshu laughed. “I move, and it moves too.”

That day in the school laboratory, they filled a bowl with water. Malati Di placed a lamp to one side, and all four looked into the bowl from different angles. Each saw the lamp’s reflection in a different place. Kusum’s eyes lit up.

“Then the bright point in the pond might be the reflection of something.”

“It might,” Malati Di agreed. “But of what? That is still the question.”

On the third morning they arrived with more equipment than before. Anshu had brought a simple compass, Mihir a protractor made of cardboard, and Richa the sketch they had drawn the previous day. Without telling the others, Kusum had tucked her grandmother’s old brass mirror into her bag.

Once again the pond lay still. Once again the white point shone. But this time Kusum searched not the water, but the eastern horizon. Between a great branch of a peepal tree and a clump of bamboo there was a narrow opening. She moved a little to the right. Suddenly, in that gap, she saw an extraordinarily bright light.

“Here!” she cried, then caught herself. “It’s up there too!”

The others hurried to where she stood. A dazzling white object shone between the trees. The sun had not yet risen. This light looked much brighter than the other stars, steady and white.

Mihir pulled a face. “So the mystery is over? The star was up there, and its shadow was in the water.”

“Not its shadow,” Richa corrected him. “Its reflection.”

Anshu checked his compass. “And it’s in the same direction as the line leading to the light in the water.”

When Malati Di studied their drawings later that day, she said, “You saw the morning star. But in astronomy, it is not a star at all. It is the planet Venus. Because we see it in the sky near the sun, it can shine very brightly sometimes at dawn and sometimes in the evening. People have called it the morning star or the evening star since ancient times.”

“But why couldn’t we see it above the pond yesterday?” Kusum asked.

“Because the branches of the trees hid Venus from the place where you were standing. Light reflected from the surface of the water reached your eyes from another angle. Your eyes traced that reflected light back along its path, making the bright point seem to lie deep beneath the water.”

Mihir burst out laughing. “So the star hadn’t come down into the pond. Our eyes had got the directions all mixed up!”

“Your eyes made no mistake,” Malati Di said. “They worked according to their own rules. The mistake would have been to treat our first impression as the final truth.”

The matter could have ended there. But Kusum still had one question: Why was the pond called Tara Pokhari?

That evening she sat beside her grandmother and told her the whole story of their discovery. Grandmother listened attentively. At last Kusum said, “So your story about a star coming down to drink water turned out not to be true.”

Grandmother smiled. “Did I ever tell you that a story was a science textbook?”

Kusum felt a little embarrassed.

Grandmother went on. “My father’s grandfather used to get up at dawn to look at the fields. In those days, there wasn’t a clock in every house. He used to say, ‘When the eastern star shines in the middle of Tara Pokhari, you know the night is saying goodbye.’ Farmers, boatmen, and cattle herders all looked at the sky and the water to tell the time. Perhaps that is how the pond got its name. I received a story from the old people. It is for you children to search for the reason behind it.”

Kusum quietly took her grandmother’s hand. She realised that stories and experiments need not be enemies. A story can awaken a question; an experiment can show the way towards an answer. And even after an answer is found, the story can live on as a memory.

The following week, the nature-study club began keeping a little dawn diary beside Tara Pokhari. They recorded the date, the time of sunrise, the direction of Venus, the state of the water, the first birdsong, and the thickness of the mist—everything they could observe. On some days Venus could not be seen; on others it hid behind clouds. Sometimes its apparent position had changed so much that the old markers were of no use.

Mihir was delighted by these changes. “It’s a good thing the star doesn’t stay in one place. Otherwise we’d have finished our diary in three days!”

At the end of the month, Richa marked all their observations on a map. Anshu made a table of times. Kusum continued writing down the old tales about the pond as her grandmother told them. Together, their work became a most unusual book—half sky, half water, half calculations, half stories. Mihir laughed. “Four halves?”

“At Tara Pokhari,” Kusum replied, “even mathematics has a reflection.”

As winter advanced, a morning came when a strong wind was blowing. The pond was no longer still. Venus shone above, but instead of a single point appearing in the water, the reflected light trembled across it like a thousand broken lines. The four friends stood on the bank watching for a long time.

Kusum remembered their first morning, when she had been certain there was a star beneath the water. Now she knew where the light came from, how the water changed its path, and how her eyes judged its position. Yet the sight had lost none of its beauty. If anything, understanding it made the shining seem more wonderful than before.

She wrote a final line in the diary: “There was no star beneath the pond. Nor was there really a star above it—it was a planet. But the question? The question had been shining inside us all along.”

Morning had fully arrived. The first rays of the sun touched the pond, and Venus slowly faded into the brightening sky. The four friends gathered their papers and set off for school. Behind them, Tara Pokhari lay still again, as though waiting for the next question.



STORY 07

The Village's Old Library



Near the heart of the village, a little west of the great peepal tree, stood an old building. Its whitewash had peeled away, the wood of its windows had turned black, and a large, rusty padlock hung on the main door. There was a stone plaque high on the building, but dust and moss had almost hidden its letters. The village children called the building the “Locked House.”

Of all the things in the village, the Locked House fascinated Mayank, a student in Class Nine, the most. On his way to and from school, he would try to peer through a broken gap in a window. Inside, amid darkness, cobwebs and dust, he could just make out the spines of books here and there. One day his friend Neha told him, “It isn’t a locked house. It’s an old library.”

“How do you know?” Mayank asked.

Neha told him about her grandmother. Grandma had said that when she was a teenager, people used to sit reading in that library until evening. Schoolchildren, farmers, teachers, post-office workers—anyone who loved reading could come. On Sundays there was hardly enough room on the veranda.

Mayank’s eyes lit up. “Then why is it closed?”

Neha shrugged. “Even Grandma doesn’t know the whole story. She says Raghunath Kaka, who used to look after the library, died. Then the roof began to leak. The key was handed over to the village council. The council changed, and nobody remembered which box the key had ended up in.”

The matter might have ended there, but that evening their third friend, Indraneel, brought some news. His grandfather was an elderly blacksmith. He remembered making the lock for that building

thirty-five years earlier. “The lock might still work,” Grandpa had told him, “if only you can find the key.”

The next day, the three friends went to their headmaster, Sudhakar Jha. At first he laughed. “Have you run out of books to read at school?” But when Neha told him about the old library, his face grew serious.

“I went there when I was little,” he said quietly. “I read my first science magazine there. I saw a picture of human beings on the Moon and couldn’t sleep all night.”

Mayank grew excited. “Then let’s open the lock, Sir!”

“I don’t have the key.”

“We could look for it,” Neha said at once.

Sudhakar Jha thought for a moment. Then he gave them the name of the secretary at the village council office and said, “Don’t touch the lock without permission. But if you get permission, I’ll come with you.”

At the village council office there were three cupboards, two iron chests and heaps of papers. The secretary, Shambhunath Babu, threw up his hands at first. “A key that old? How would anyone know where it is?” Indraneel told him what his grandfather had said. Shambhunath Babu softened a little. “Very well. We’ll look on Sunday.”

They began searching early on Sunday morning. In the first chest they found old tax receipts; in the second, election papers; and in the third cupboard, broken seals and locks no longer fit for use. Neha kept sorting one bundle after another. Mayank blew so much dust off the papers that his eyes grew red. Indraneel examined the shape of every key and sorted them into groups.

By midday Shambhunath Babu was tired. “Let’s stop now. Perhaps the key was destroyed long ago.”

Just then Indraneel picked up a small cloth pouch that had been hidden behind an old map. Inside were five keys. One was unusually long and heavy. Its teeth were rusty, but its shape matched the description his grandfather had given him.

Everyone went to the library. Sudhakar Jha joined them there. At the door, Indraneel slipped the key into the lock. The first time, it

wouldn't turn. They applied some oil. The second time, it turned halfway. On the third try came a sharp click, and the lock sprang open.

When they pushed the door, a cloud of dust rose from inside. All three friends took two steps back together. They opened the windows, and shafts of sunlight poured into the room. Dust motes danced in the light as though they were welcoming brightness into a room shut up for years.



Wooden bookshelves lined the walls. Some leaned to one side; the glass in others was broken. A thick layer of dust covered the books. In one corner stood an old globe, and in another lay rolls of maps. A large table occupied the middle of the room. On it were a dried-up inkwell, a broken penholder and a library register.

Neha reached for the register, but Sudhakar Jha stopped her. "Clean your hands first. Old paper can be fragile." He sent to the school for cloth gloves. They opened the register. Its pages had turned yellow, but the writing was still clear.

On the first page was the date the library had opened. After that came the names of people who had borrowed books. Mayank put his finger on one name. "Sir! That's your name!"

Sudhakar Jha took off his glasses and brought the page closer. Sure enough, there was the name of a much younger Sudhakar Jha, and beside it the subject of the book he had borrowed: "Astronomy." A smile spread across his face unlike any his students had seen before.

"That book changed my life," he said. "Perhaps I decided to become a teacher—" He stopped, then corrected himself. "Perhaps that was the day the first seed of the idea was planted in my mind."

Neha turned to another page of the register. Against many names was a date showing when the book had been returned. Against others, the space was blank. “Were these books never brought back?”

“Possibly,” said Sudhakar Jha. “But after so many years, let’s save the library before we start looking for someone to blame.”

The three friends decided to spend two hours every evening for the next seven days cleaning the place. The school provided brooms, dry cloths and face masks. Two elderly villagers came to help as well. Some people moved piles of books; others swept cobwebs from the windows or scraped moss from the walls.

On the third day of cleaning, they found a narrow wooden box behind a bookshelf. Once again Mayank’s thoughts raced towards a mystery. “What could be inside?”

The box wasn’t locked. It held about a dozen handwritten books, old magazines and several photographs. In one picture the building’s veranda was crowded with people. In another, boys and girls sat in a circle while a white-bearded man in the middle read aloud from a book.

Neha took the picture to her grandmother. Grandma studied it for a long time. “That’s Raghunath Babu,” she said. “We called him Raghu Kaka. He used to say, ‘Books aren’t meant to stay shut inside a building. They’re meant to pass from hand to hand.’”

Grandma recognised her younger self in the photograph too. Neha stared in amazement. “You used to sit there?”

Grandma laughed. “Every day! I read Maithili stories and then told them to my friends. Once my family got angry because evening had passed and I still wasn’t home. Raghu Kaka brought a lantern and walked me all the way back.”

That memory changed the nature of their work. Now the three friends were doing more than clearing away dust: they had begun gathering the history of the library. One person had an old membership card; another had a picture of Raghu Kaka; someone else had a poetry book from those days. Whenever they found something, they wrote its details in a separate notebook.

Indraneel tightened the screws in the old shelves. His grandfather repaired a broken latch. Neha began sorting the books by subject—

stories, poetry, science, history, farming and children's literature. Mayank recorded the condition of each book: safe, in need of repair, or extremely fragile.

One evening, Mayank found a dried peepal leaf inside a thick science book. Folded within the leaf was a little slip of paper. In a child's handwriting, someone had written that reading the book had made them want to look at the sky. The name was faint. Mayank showed the note to Sudhakar Jha.

Sudhakar Jha was silent for a long while. "That looks like my handwriting."

"Shall we keep it, then?" Mayank asked.

"Yes. But keep it as part of the library's memory, not just mine."

Those words gave the three friends a new idea. One corner of the building would become a "Memory Box," where photographs, letters, membership cards and little keepsakes found between book pages could be preserved. But nothing belonging to anyone would be kept without the owner's permission.

The work planned for seven days stretched into seven weeks. The village council had the roof repaired. Students from the school raised some money by selling old newspapers. Villagers began donating books from their homes, provided the books were in good condition. Rules were set for donations: no torn, incomplete or unsuitable material, and every book had to be checked before it was accepted.

Then one question arose among them all: who would run the new library? Placing the whole burden on one person, as they had once done with Raghu Kaka, would mean repeating the same mistake. Neha proposed, "Let's have different volunteers on different days of the week—students, teachers and anyone else in the village who's willing to help."

Shambhunath Babu laughed. "So the village council's lock will never go on the door again?"

Mayank answered at once, "At night, yes. But not during the day."

On the day the library reopened, no ribbon was cut. Sudhakar Jha said, "Why cut a ribbon for a place that's simply coming back to life?" Instead, the oldest member—Neha's grandmother—took the first book from a shelf and handed it to the youngest reader.

The youngest reader was Sonu, a student in Class Six. He looked a little nervous as he held the book. “Should I sit here and read it, or can I take it home?”

Grandma replied, “Both. Books need to travel.”

Once again, the veranda began to fill with people. Some read newspapers, some searched for books to help them prepare for exams, and others leafed through picture books. Story-reading sessions began on Saturday evenings. For the first one, Neha told an old folktale she had heard from her grandmother. The following week, Mayank demonstrated a small science experiment. In the third week, Indraneel spoke about the old ways of making locks.

One day Mayank stood outside the door, looking at the old padlock. It now hung on the wall as a keepsake, with no words written beside it and its shackle left open. Indraneel came up to him and asked, “Would the library have opened without that lock?”

Mayank laughed. “Not without its key.”

Neha spoke from behind them. “And we wouldn’t have found the key if we hadn’t looked for it.”

The three fell silent for a while. From inside the building came the sound of pages turning, quiet conversations and children’s laughter. The place that had remained locked in darkness for so many years was now filled with evening light.

Mayank understood then that old things aren’t meant only to be saved and put away. Some find their meaning when they are used again. The library’s key was made of iron, but the real key had been three questions: What is this place? Why is it locked? And how can it be opened again?

That night, on his way home, Mayank looked back. Light streamed through the library windows. Peepal leaves stirred in the breeze, and on the veranda Neha and her grandmother were putting the books away. Mayank thought to himself: How many houses are locked by padlocks, and how many by forgetfulness? The first kind of lock can be opened with a key. The second needs memory, hard work and people coming together.



STORY 08

The Mystery of the Goat's Bell



In the southern part of the village, Ramapati Kaka had a white goat. His coat was white, the tips of his ears were black, and two little horns grew from his head. A brass bell hung around his neck. During the day, whenever he chewed his cud or ran about, the bell went tink-tink. The neighbourhood children could tell from a distance: Chand was coming. Chand—meaning Moon—was the name Ramapati Kaka had actually given him.

Everyone was fond of Chand. But for the past few nights, the sound of his bell had puzzled the villagers. Late at night, when the courtyards had fallen silent, a tink-tink-tink could be heard from the old orchard to the south. “That sounds like Chand’s bell,” people would say. Yet every morning Chand was found tied up in his shed.

Ramapati Kaka laughed whenever anyone mentioned it. “I tie him up myself every evening. I fasten the latch on the bamboo gate from the inside. Surely the goat isn’t flying all the way to the orchard!”

The sound did not come every night. It returned after a gap of two or three nights, and soon all sorts of stories spread through the village. Someone claimed that a shepherd’s shadow wandered through the old orchard at night. Someone else thought it might be the bell of the old monastery. And someone said, “It’s all a trick of the wind and weather.”

Prachi, Neel, Vihan and Madhup, who were in Class Eight, loved mysteries of this kind. The four friends decided that instead of guessing, they would look for evidence first.

“Our first question,” Prachi said, “is whether the bell we’re hearing really belongs to Chand.”

Madhup knew the sound of that bell very well. His house stood just two doors away from Ramapati Kaka’s courtyard. “There’s a little

broken note in Chand's bell," he explained. "First it goes 'tink', then a shorter 'tank'. That's exactly the sound we hear at night."

"Even if the sounds match, that doesn't prove Chand himself is wandering about," Neel said. "There could be another bell like his somewhere else."

The four friends first went to inspect Chand's shed in daylight. Ramapati Kaka gave them permission. The bamboo gate looked strong, but one of the bamboo poles on its right side had been rubbed smooth near the bottom. Vihan ran his hand over it. "Something keeps scraping against this spot," he said.

There were hoofprints in two or three places on the ground inside the gate. A tiny strand of twine had caught in one corner. Prachi examined Chand's horns. The tip of the right horn shone a little, as if it had repeatedly rubbed against something hard.

"Could he be pushing the latch with his horn?" Madhup wondered aloud.

Ramapati Kaka laughed again. "You think this goat is that clever?"

Prachi smiled. "It needn't be cleverness. It could be practice. If doing the same thing brings an animal a reward again and again, it can learn to do it."

That evening the four friends told the adults at home everything they had discovered. Nobody liked the idea of children roaming about alone at night. Then Neel's father said, "If you want to solve the mystery, investigate towards dawn. I'll come along too."

They made a plan. With Ramapati Kaka's permission, they tied a fine thread to the gate latch. They arranged it so that the thread would break if the latch was lifted, without hurting Chand in any way. They also sprinkled ash over the soft earth outside so that any hoofprints would show clearly.

Nothing happened on the first night. In the morning the thread was still intact. The second night was quiet too. But after midnight on the third night, the familiar tink-tank, tink-tank came again from the south. The four friends stayed in their own homes. As soon as morning came, however, they went with Neel's father to Ramapati Kaka's courtyard.

The thread had snapped. Chand was back in his shed, calmly chewing leaves. The ash showed hoofprints leading out through the gate—and another set coming back in.

This time Ramapati Kaka did not laugh. “So he really does go out!”

Neel’s father examined the gate. The latch opened as soon as it was lifted upwards. Chand could press a bamboo pole with the tip of his horn, raise the latch a little, and then jerk his head. After trying this several times, he had learned how to open it. The gate did not close fully behind him, so when he returned he could push it with his nose and slip back inside.

“Now the question is—where does he go?” Vihan said.

Neel’s father made the decision. “Tomorrow, before dawn, we’ll watch him from a distance. No running, and nobody must frighten the goat.”

The next night there was a half-moon in the sky. Several hours after nightfall, the air turned cool. Neel’s father, Ramapati Kaka and the four friends sat quietly in a dark corner of the veranda. For a long time nothing happened. Then came a faint rustling from inside the shed.

Chand walked up to the gate. He lowered his head and slipped a horn beneath the latch. Once. Twice. At the third attempt the latch rose. Pressing his body against the gate, Chand squeezed through the gap. His bell gave a soft tink ... tank.

The four friends’ eyes lit up. Ramapati Kaka could hardly hold back his laughter, but Neel’s father put a finger to his lips, asking for silence.

Chand did not take the main village road. Instead, he followed a narrow path behind the bamboo grove. It led towards the old mango orchard. Everyone followed, keeping well back. As Chand walked across the dew-soaked grass, his hooves left shining marks behind him.

In the middle of the orchard stood an old brick cottage. It had once been the home of the orchard’s caretaker. Half the building was now in ruins, but Dulari Kaki still lived in one room. Her son worked in a distant town with his family, and Dulari Kaki refused to leave the village.

Chand went straight to the cottage veranda and rang his bell. A faint light shone from inside. After a little while Dulari Kaki came out, carrying tender pigeon-pea leaves and a handful of salt.

“So you’ve come, Chand?” she said, as though greeting a dear old friend.



Chand went up to her and rubbed his head against her hand. Dulari Kaki stroked his forehead. The four friends watched in silence from behind the bushes. Ramapati Kaka was speechless too.

After a while, Neel’s father cleared his throat to let her know they were there. Dulari Kaki started. “Who’s that?”

They all stepped into view. Fear passed across Dulari Kaki’s face, followed by embarrassment, and finally weariness.

“Kaki, does he come here every day?” Ramapati Kaka asked.

Resting a hand on Chand’s neck, Dulari Kaki replied, “Not every day. Only when he feels like coming, I suppose. I never call him.”

“You know him?” Prachi asked.

Dulari Kaki sat down on a low seat below the veranda. “When he was very little, his mother died. He belonged to me then. I fed him milk from a bowl and wiped him clean. On cold nights I spread old clothes inside a basket to keep him warm.”

Madhup stared at Chand in astonishment. “Then how did he come to live with Ramapati Kaka?”

“I fell ill. It became difficult to find fodder for him. Ramapati offered to take him in, so I let him go. He has looked after him well.” Dulari Kaki turned towards Ramapati Kaka. “Nobody is to blame.”

Ramapati Kaka's expression softened. “I didn't know the whole story. I thought I'd bought him at the market, through a middleman.”

Dulari Kaki laughed. “Bought or given away—Chand doesn't understand such accounts. What he remembers is the way here.”

Everyone fell silent at those words. The bell sounded softly again. Now it no longer seemed frightening. It sounded familiar, almost like a welcome.

Even after they had solved the puzzle of the shed, Vihan had one more question. “Kaki, how does he find his way back?”

“When he has eaten, I tell him, ‘Go on, go home now.’ At first he wouldn't listen. Later he began going back on his own. I don't walk far with him. My knees hurt.”

Ramapati Kaka bowed his head and thought for a while. “But wandering about at night isn't safe. There are dogs, vehicles, ditches—anything could happen.”

“That's true,” Neel's father said. “We've solved the mystery. Now we have to keep him safe.”

Dulari Kaki looked a little sad. Prachi spoke up at once. “Couldn't Chand come here during the day?”

Ramapati Kaka looked at Prachi, then at Dulari Kaki. “Why not? Madhup or I can bring him before evening. Kaki can keep him for as long as she wishes, and then we'll take him home.”

Dulari Kaki said nothing. She simply went on stroking Chand's head. The corners of her eyes glistened.

The first light of morning was spreading across the sky. On their way back, the four friends walked together along the path through the old orchard. “So that's the end of the ghost story,” Madhup said.

Neel laughed. “It wasn't a ghost. It was hooves.”

“And horns,” Vihan added.

“And memory,” said Prachi.

That day they fitted a new latch to the shed gate, one that Chand could not lift by pushing it from inside with his horn. They also closed the gap beneath the gate with bamboo. Chand tried two or three times to open the latch his old way. At last he gave up and began chewing leaves.

Before evening, Madhup took hold of his lead and walked him to Dulari Kaki's cottage. She had already gathered leaves for him. Chand tried to run to her as soon as he saw her, and his bell rang loudly.

Now the people in the neighbourhood were no longer frightened when they heard the bell. If anyone asked about it, Madhup would say, "There was a mystery, but there was no magic."

A few days later, the science teacher at school was talking about "Guesswork and Evidence." Prachi wrote in her notebook: First we recognised the sound. Then we examined the marks. Next we tested the latch. Finally, we watched safely with our own eyes. Only then did we draw a conclusion.

But at the end of the page she added one more line: "Not every mystery is about things. Some mysteries are about relationships. Their proof is found less in what we see than in how someone behaves."

On Sunday the four friends sat on Dulari Kaki's veranda. Nearby, Chand was chewing leaves. Dulari Kaki told them stories of the old days: how she had fed little Chand milk from a bowl; how he had been afraid the first time he saw the bell; and how, within two days, he had learned to run about ringing it himself.

Madhup took the bell in his hand and examined it. There was a tiny crack along one side. That was why it made a "tink" followed by a "tank." And that very sound had started the mystery.

Prachi tied the bell around Chand's neck again. Chand tossed his head—tink ... tank.

All four friends burst out laughing. Dulari Kaki laughed too. A breeze stirred the old orchard, mango leaves rustled, and the bell rang once more.

Now everyone understood: there had been less mystery in that bell than memory.



STORY 09

The Book Saved from the Flood



It was the last week of Sawan, the rainy month. For three days, the clouds had seemed to hang over the village without moving. Rain fell day and night, and the river to the north began to spill beyond its old banks, spreading across the fields and open land.

Ishan, who was in Class Eight, rose early and looked out from the veranda. The water in the courtyard had reached his ankles. Bamboo leaves floated on its surface, and a calf could be heard calling from the cowshed.

His mother said, “You won’t be going to school today, son. A notice has come from the headmaster. The school stands on high ground, so people will be able to shelter there if necessary.”

Ishan’s thoughts flew at once to the village’s old library. On their way home from school, he and his friends Arpita, Neeraj and Sonali often visited it. The building was old, but its wooden cupboards held piles of books, handwritten pages, old magazines and records of the village.

An elderly man named Vidyabhushan Jha looked after the library. All the village children called him Pothi Baba—the Book Grandfather. He often told them, “Books aren’t just letters on paper. They are people’s memories. If those memories go under water, the village will forget half of who it is.”

Ishan asked his mother, “Do you think the water has reached Pothi Baba’s house?”

Looking out through the window, his mother replied, “There’s more flooding in that part of the village. Don’t leave the house yet. Let the grown-ups see how things stand first.”

A little later, the village council bell rang. People gathered at the raised square. The river had risen past the edge of the old pond and was

moving towards the southern neighbourhood. Two families had already gathered their essential belongings and gone to the school.

There Ishan spotted Arpita, Neeraj and Sonali. The same question shone in all four pairs of eyes: What about the library?

Pothi Baba himself arrived at the square. His clothes were soaked, a bamboo walking stick was in his hand, and worry was written across his face.

“The water has reached the back of my house,” he said. “It may get into the library’s ground-floor room. We’ve moved as much as we could onto the higher shelves, but some of the chests are too heavy.”

Arpita asked at once, “What’s inside those chests?”

“The village’s old registers, two handwritten books, and records of past floods,” Pothi Baba replied. “The oldest pages are probably more than a hundred years old.”

Neeraj’s eyes widened. “Records of past floods? Could there be an account of a flood like this one?”

“There might be,” said Pothi Baba. “But this is the time to save them, not read them.”

The head of the village council announced that no young person was to go into that neighbourhood alone. Two boats were made ready: one to take people to safety, the other to bring back essential supplies.

Ishan’s father knew how to handle a boat. When the four friends asked to go with him, he said, “You may come, but you’ll follow my rules. Do exactly as you’re told. Floodwater is no game.”

All four agreed. Rope, dry sacks, two wooden planks and some thick cloth were placed in the boat. Pothi Baba climbed aboard too.

The boat moved slowly through the flooded lanes. Where bicycles had raced along the road only yesterday, water now gleamed. Only the tops of the bamboo fences could be seen. Now and then they passed a wooden stool floating out of someone’s courtyard, or a bundle of rice stalks.

“The village looks as if someone has painted a different colour over a picture we know by heart,” Sonali whispered.

“A flood changes the face of a village,” said Pothi Baba, “but as long as its people stand together, the village is not lost.”

When they reached the library, they saw that the water had risen faster than expected. It was knee-deep on the veranda. The lower wooden fittings in the first room inside were already wet.

Ishan's father showed everyone where it was safe to stand. One end of a rope was tied to the neem tree outside, while the other was taken into the building.

Pothi Baba took out his key and unlocked the inner room. Old pictures hung on the walls, and books lay on shelves wrapped in cloth. Near the floor stood a heavy wooden chest. The water was just touching its base.

"The registers are in this one," said Pothi Baba.

Neeraj and Ishan tried to lift the chest, but it would not budge. Inside were metal containers and thick books, weighing it down.

Looking around, Arpita said, "It'll be difficult to lift. Perhaps we can get it onto the planks and slide it out."

Ishan's father smiled. "That's why we brought the planks."

The two wooden planks were carefully pushed beneath the chest. A rope was tied around it. Two people pulled from outside while Ishan and Neeraj pushed from within. Meanwhile, Sonali and Arpita wrapped the wet books separately in cloth and moved them up to higher places.

At one point the chest stuck fast. The water rose a little more. Ishan's foot slipped, but he held on to the rope. His father immediately caught him by the shoulder and steadied him.

"Slowly," his father said. "Save the books, but remember—no book is worth more than your life."



Ishan nodded. Everyone took up their positions again. This time the chest slid onto the planks. The rope tightened, and slowly the chest made its way out to the veranda.

When the chest had been loaded into the boat, Pothi Baba let out a long breath. Then his gaze caught on a corner of the room.

“There was a book tied up in red cloth,” he said. “Under the shelf.”

Arpita swept her torchlight around the room. In a corner she spotted a piece of red cloth, half-submerged in the water. She reached towards it, but it was too far away.

Sonali held out a bamboo stick. Using its tip, Arpita drew the cloth towards her. Inside was a thick, soaked handwritten book. Some pages around the edges were already wet, but the middle section was still safe.

Tears filled Pothi Baba’s eyes. “This is an account of floods written by my great-grandfather. It tells us which years the water reached which places in this village, which ponds filled up, and which riverbanks broke. It’s all written here.”

Ishan asked, “So it isn’t only a story of the past? It might also give us warnings for the future?”

“You’ve understood,” Pothi Baba replied. “Sometimes the memory of the past can protect the future.”

The boat turned back towards the school. The rain had eased a little. People had already spread mats across the school’s veranda. One

room had been kept free for dry supplies, and the books were laid out there.

Arpita suggested that they should not try to pull the wet pages apart all at once. The school's science teacher was there too. "We must be patient," he said. "The pages may tear if we separate them carelessly. First soak up the extra water with clean, dry cloth, then let them dry in a shady place with plenty of moving air."

The four friends worked for hours. Some pages carried names from family genealogies; others recorded old boundaries between fields, songs, or descriptions of the watermarks left by earlier floods.

While reading one page, Neeraj stopped. "It says here that in an old flood the water reached the roots of a peepal tree. Isn't that tree beside the village council office now?"

"Yes," said Pothi Baba. "Yesterday the water was two cubits below those roots. By now it's probably almost level with them."

Ishan's father told the council head what they had found. Members of the village council immediately went to check the water level at the peepal tree. They compared it with the old account. The people whose homes stood on low ground were brought to the school without delay.

By evening the water had risen further, but every family in the village had reached safety. That night lamps glowed on the school veranda. Outside was the floodwater; inside were people's quiet conversations, children's laughter, the clatter of dishes—and, in one room, the pages of books slowly drying.

Sonali said softly, "I thought we were saving the books. But these books are saving us too."

No one needed to reply. The four friends turned towards Pothi Baba. He was smiling quietly.

Three days later, the river began to recede. People returned to their homes. Dark flood marks remained on the library walls, but most of the collection had been saved.

The village's group of young people decided that books would never again be stored close to the ground. With help from the village council, they put up tall wooden shelves in the library. Copies were made of important pages, and a list was prepared showing where each book was kept and who was responsible for looking after it.

Ishan and Neeraj began reading Pothi Baba's old flood records and marking the old high-water levels on a map of the village. Arpita and Sonali listened to elderly residents' memories of earlier floods and wrote them down.

At school they put on a small exhibition called "Our Village's Water Memories." Instead of displaying pictures alone, they recorded the years, water levels, places of safety, old drainage channels, raised roads and the experiences of villagers.

On the opening day, Pothi Baba said, "Protecting the written word does not simply mean keeping books dry. It also means understanding what is written and putting that knowledge to use in our lives."

Ishan was placing the book that had been wrapped in red cloth inside a fresh, dry cover. Flood stains still marked the edges of some pages.

"Won't those stains come off?" Arpita asked.

"Let them stay," Pothi Baba replied. "Some stains are more than signs of damage. They also help us remember."

Outside the window, the river was flowing once again in its own channel. Sunlight sparkled on the water. The books stood in neat rows on the library's new high shelves.

Ishan gently closed the pages of the red-covered book. He understood now: that day, the flood had not merely spared a single book. The old memories of the village had passed into the hands of a new generation.



STORY 10

The Children's Science Fair



It was the last week of Phagun, the month that brings winter to an end. At the school assembly, the headmaster announced that this year's annual science fair would not be just a display of things to look at. Every team would choose a real problem from its surroundings and think of a simple way to solve it.

Madhav's eyes lit up. He was in Class Eight and loved taking machines apart and putting them back together. Meenakshi was good at drawing and measuring things. Arindam asked question after question, while Saloni had a special gift: she could explain even the most difficult ideas in a way everyone understood.

The four friends sat beneath the mango tree behind the school. Madhav said, "First, let's choose a problem. Without a problem to solve, science will become nothing more than a toy."

Meenakshi listed three problems in the village: the muddy water in the pond during the rains, the frequent power cuts in the evening, and the darkness along the path behind the school.

Arindam spoke up at once. "Can we bring all three problems into one experiment?"

Saloni laughed. "Don't try to catch the moon, the sun and lightning all at once. Let's do one thing properly first."

Just then Ramlochan Kaka, the school attendant, passed by, collecting empty water bottles. Meenakshi noticed the bottles. "Are all these going to be thrown away?" she asked.

"Yes," said Ramlochan Kaka. "Once enough of them have collected, a scrap dealer comes and takes them away."

Madhav picked up a bottle and turned it in his hand. "If we put pebbles, sand, charcoal and cloth inside a clear bottle, we might be

able to remove some of the dirt from muddy water. But making the water safe to drink is another matter.”

Arindam immediately asked, “Then what if people see the filtered water and drink it straightaway?”

Meenakshi grew serious. “That’s why we must make it clear that this is only the first stage of filtering. To get rid of germs, the water must be boiled or treated by another safe method.”

The four friends decided to build a filter called “The First Step Towards Clean Water.” They would also demonstrate a small device that lit a lamp when someone turned bicycle pedals. Both experiments would have the same purpose: to help people understand science using things available in the village.

The next day, they brought an old bicycle wheel to school. Madhav’s father had given them an old dynamo. Their science teacher, Satyanarayan Guruji, supplied wires, a small lamp, a switch and a measuring instrument.

Guruji began with a warning. “Electricity is not something to play with. We will use only a safe, low-voltage circuit here. No one is to connect anything to the mains electricity supply.”

Madhav turned the pedals. The wheel spun faster, but the lamp did not light up.

Arindam laughed. “Our first invention has turned out to be a machine for making the darkness darker!”

“Don’t laugh,” Saloni said. “Let’s find out why it isn’t working.”

Meenakshi checked the wire connections. One end was loose. She tightened it, and they turned the pedals again. This time the lamp gave off a faint glow.

All four cried, “Oh!” at the same moment.

When Madhav pedalled faster, the lamp shone more brightly. Satyanarayan Guruji said, “Now you can see it: mechanical movement is being changed into electrical energy. But this little machine has its limits. The more load you add, the harder you’ll have to work to turn the pedals.”

Meenakshi carefully noted the measurements: slow speed, medium speed, fast speed—and the corresponding readings on the instrument. They were taking actual measurements, not making guesses.

Their second task was filtering water. They cut the bottom off an empty bottle and turned it upside down. At the bottom of the filter they placed clean cloth, with crushed charcoal above it, then a layer of fine sand, followed by coarse sand and pebbles.

They slowly poured muddy water from the village pond into the top. The water that collected in the vessel underneath was still somewhat cloudy, even after the first filtering.

Arindam's face fell. "It hasn't turned clear like the water in the picture."

Satyanarayan Guruji smiled. "That's what science is about. Nature doesn't obey instructions in pictures. Your materials, the size of their grains, the amount of dirt in the water—all these things affect the result. Try again."

Meenakshi made the sand layer thicker. Madhav slowed the flow of water. Saloni kept the water from the first attempt separately and filtered it a second time. This time the water looked clearer.

Saloni suggested writing a warning in large letters on a sheet of paper: even if filtered water looked clean, it must not be considered safe to drink without proper treatment.

Arindam said, "Children who come to the fair will run towards the shiny things first. We'll say the warning aloud as well."



In the middle of their work, a new problem appeared. The belt on the pedal-powered machine kept slipping off. Madhav lost his temper. "I've fixed it so many times, and it's come off again!"

Meenakshi silently handed him a piece of chalk. "First draw the wheel's outline. Then see exactly where the belt slips off."

They drew the circular outline of the wheel on the ground. Now they could see that the dynamo had been fitted at a slight angle. Once they straightened it, the belt stopped slipping off.

Madhav said, “Sometimes it isn’t more force that fixes a problem. Sometimes you just need to look at it straight.”

Saloni replied immediately, “That saying will be useful outside the science fair, too—in life.”

The day before the fair, the four friends tested their display in front of some of the younger pupils. Gauri, who was in Class Three, asked, “Why does the lamp go out when the pedals stop?”

Madhav answered, “Because this device has nothing separate to store energy. It generates electricity only for as long as the pedals keep turning.”

Gauri asked another question. “Then could I run and make all the lights in our house come on?”

Everyone burst out laughing. Satyanarayan Guruji said, “That’s a good question. A little energy is enough for a small lamp, but lighting an entire house requires much more. Science measures the size of a question, too.”

On the day of the fair, the school grounds were transformed. In one place, children demonstrated how seeds sprout; in another, they measured rainfall; elsewhere stood a model for heating water with the sun’s warmth. Colourful paper decorations were everywhere, but Satyanarayan Guruji reminded everyone, “Let your experiments speak louder than the decorations.”

The water filter stood at the front of the friends’ table. One vessel held muddy water; another held filtered water. Behind them was the bicycle-pedal machine.

Their first visitor was Dulari Aaji, an elderly woman from the village. Looking at the water, she asked, “It’s clear now. Does that mean we can drink it?”

Saloni answered at once, “No, Aaji. This is only the first step in removing dirt. We can’t see germs with our eyes. Drinking water must be made safe by proper treatment.”

Aaji was pleased. “Good. Science that teaches us to take care is useful science.”

After that, some teenagers formed a queue to try the pedals. One turned them slowly, and the lamp glowed faintly. Another pedalled faster, and the light grew brighter. Pointing to the measuring instrument, Meenakshi explained how the amount of electricity produced changed with the speed.

Arindam asked the visitors questions: “If pedalling becomes harder, what might be the reason? If a wire is loose, what will change? If the water flows through too quickly, how will that affect the filtering?”

People were not merely listening to answers. They were thinking. That gave the four friends more pleasure than anything else.

At midday, the judging panel arrived. One member asked, “What is new about your experiment? Bicycle dynamos and water filters are already well known.”

For a moment all four were silent. Then Madhav said, “Our aim wasn’t simply to invent something new. We wanted to turn familiar scientific principles into something the children of our village could see and touch for themselves.”

Meenakshi added, “We wrote down the measurements and kept a record of our failed attempts, too. The water wasn’t clear on the first try, and the belt kept coming off. We haven’t hidden any of those mistakes.”

Saloni said, “And we made it clear that filtered water isn’t always safe to drink. Sometimes incomplete knowledge can appear helpful while actually causing harm.”

The elderly scientist on the judging panel smiled. “Exactly. One of the qualities of science is having the courage to say, ‘I don’t know,’ when something is not yet understood.”

The prizes were announced in the evening. The four friends’ team did not come first. First prize went to a well-designed experiment in collecting rainwater, complete with measurements.

Arindam looked a little disappointed. Just then, the headmaster called their names. “Special Award: Best Experiment for Public Understanding!”

All four went up on stage. They received a small certificate and a set of science books. But as they came down, Gauri ran towards them.

“When I get home, I’ll ask Baba for the dynamo from our old bicycle. I’ll ask our teacher first and build it safely.”

Madhav looked at his friends. He understood that this reward was greater than any piece of paper.

The following week, the school began a small weekly gathering called “Science with Our Own Hands.” There was one rule: no one needed to bring anything expensive. Ask questions using ordinary things found at home or around the village; measure, test, and then write down your conclusions.

Meenakshi brought two glasses of water and some paper to the first meeting. Arindam brought a stick for measuring shadows. Saloni brought pages for recording how seeds sprouted. Madhav brought the axle of an old wheel.

Satyanarayan Guruji stood at the doorway. He said, “A science fair lasts for one day. If a scientific way of thinking stays with you, then the fair has been a success.”

Outside, evening sunlight fell on the new leaves of the mango tree. Inside, the four friends were bent over another question.

This time they were not worrying about prizes. The question itself was an invitation.



STORY 11

The Mango Tree's Decision



Right in the middle of the village, on the eastern side of the old pond, stood an enormous mango tree. Its roots spread so far that they held the soil in place during the rains, and its branches were so thick with leaves that even on a blazing afternoon in Jeth, the hottest part of summer, people could sit beneath it and feel cool. The villagers called it the Big Mango Tree.

No one knew exactly how old the tree was. Dulari Aaji used to say, “Even on my wedding day, it was so big that half the wedding party sat in its shade.”

Every day on their way to school, four Class Eight friends—Sugandha, Anoop, Shashank and Ishani—passed the tree. In summer they watched the tiny unripe mangoes beneath it; during the rains they listened to the patter of drops on its leaves; and in autumn they sat there to do their homework. All of this had become part of their daily lives.

One morning, a notice appeared at the school gate. The village's main road was to be widened. The proposed route would run along the edge of the old pond and pass straight through the place where the mango tree stood.

Shashank read the notice and fell silent. Anoop was the first to speak. “Does that mean they'll cut down the tree?”

Ishani's face fell. “It's good to make the road wider. But why must they cut down the tree to do it?”

“First, let's find out exactly what the plan is,” Sugandha said. “Being sad won't save the tree.”

The four friends went to see the headmaster, Nachiketa Jha. He read the notice carefully and said, “This is only the village assembly's

first proposal. There is still time to offer suggestions. If you can give sound reasons and suggest another route, the assembly will listen.”

“Sound reasons?” Anoop asked.

“Yes. Loving a tree is one reason to save it. But if you want the road to take a different route, you must consider measurements, usefulness, the environment and safety.”

Those words changed the four friends' task. Saving the tree was no longer simply an appeal from the heart. It had become something they needed to study.



On the first day, they measured all around the tree. Shashank brought a rope and measuring tape. They wrote down the size of the trunk, the spread of the branches, the distance to the road and the distance to the edge of the pond.

Ishani made a list of birds. Sitting there for two hours in the morning, they spotted mynas, sparrows, a woodpecker, a koel, bulbuls and green parakeets. A squirrel had made its home in a hollow in the tree, too.

Anoop was interested in soil and water. He asked their science teacher, Satyanarayan Guruji, for help. Guruji showed them how to compare the soil around the tree's roots with bare soil a little farther away.

“Look,” Guruji said, “the roots help keep rainwater from rushing away all at once. Fallen leaves form a covering over the earth. But saying that much isn't enough. Watch where the water actually goes when it rains.”

That week it rained. The four friends went out with umbrellas. Beneath the tree, water moved slowly towards the pond. But where the soil lay bare, little streams formed and began carrying the earth away.

Sugandha drew a diagram showing where the water came from, where it collected and where it washed away the soil.

Their second study was about the tree's place in village life. Every Sunday a small market gathered beneath it. Stalls selling curd, vegetables, fruit, things made of bamboo and earthen pots spread out in its shade.

Ishani asked the market sellers, "If this tree were gone, where would you sit?"

An elderly potter laughed. "Then before I could open my stall, I'd have to buy some shade!"

Everyone laughed, but the four friends understood the serious truth behind his joke. Sitting there in the open heat of midday would be difficult.

Sugandha worked out how many people used the tree's shade in a week. Anoop wanted to know how much cooler it was beneath the branches than beside the open road. Guruji gave them two ordinary thermometers.

At noon in the hot month of Jeth, they placed one thermometer in the tree's shade and the other at the exposed roadside. After a while, they noted both temperatures. The difference was clear.

"Now we have numbers, not just feelings!" Shashank said excitedly.

But that did not solve the whole problem. The road really did need widening. The school vehicle, vehicles carrying sick people and farm machinery all had trouble passing along the narrow road.

"If all we say is, 'Don't cut the tree,' people will ask us how we intend to solve the road problem," Sugandha said.

The four friends went to the panchayat office and examined a copy of an old land-record map. Beyond the pond lay a strip of unused public land. The road could pass that way, but it would have to bend a little.

"Would that bend make things difficult for vehicles?" Anoop asked.

Shashank drew two lines on a sheet of paper. “The straight road is shorter, but the tree would have to go. The curved road is a little longer, but part of the pond’s embankment could be strengthened at the same time.”

“And vehicles would naturally slow down at the bend,” Ishani added at once. “Slower traffic near the school would be a good thing.”

Still, guesses were not enough. The headmaster had told them to find facts. So they measured both possible routes—not by counting steps, but with measuring tape and rope, and later with help from the panchayat surveyor.

The surveyor, Ravindra Mandal, smiled when he first met them. “So, are you four going to build a road?”

“No, Kaka,” Sugandha replied. “But we want to find out whether the road can be built without losing the tree.”

Ravindra Kaka became serious. He studied their measurements, the slope of the land and the edge of the pond. At last he said, “Your curved route isn’t impossible. But the drainage channel would have to be moved.”

“Please write that down!” Shashank said eagerly.

Ravindra Kaka laughed. “I’ll write that the idea is worth a technical examination. The engineer will make the final decision.”

Meanwhile, people in the village were growing divided. Some said, “It isn’t right to hold up development for a single tree.” Others said, “If that tree is cut down, a part of the village’s identity will disappear.”

At first, even Anoop’s father did not favour saving the tree. “Sometimes we have to let old things go,” he said. “People need a proper road.”

Anoop did not argue. That night he studied their notes. The next morning he told his father, “I don’t want to stop the road. I want a road that can be built while the tree stays.”

His father took the papers and looked through them: the temperature readings, the flow of rainwater, the alternative route, the ways people used the tree at the market. After a while he said, “Then explain all this clearly at the village assembly.”

On the day of the village assembly, the panchayat courtyard was crowded. The four friends were given five minutes to speak.

Sugandha spoke first. “We are not asking you to stop the road. We are proposing a small change in its route so that the mango tree can be saved.”

Ishani presented the information about birds and the people who used the shade. Anoop showed drawings of the rainwater's path and the soil it washed away. Shashank compared the measurements and lengths of the two routes.

One man asked, “Won't the bend make the road more expensive?”

“It might cost a little more,” Shashank replied. “That's why we need an engineer's estimate. But the loss of shade, protection for the soil and a public gathering place if the tree is cut down should be counted, too.”

Another man asked, “The tree is old. What if it falls in a storm?”

The four friends had no answer to that question. They fell silent.

Then Sugandha said, “We haven't been able to check that. We should have a tree expert examine its health.”

A faint smile appeared on the headmaster's face. He was glad they had said, “We don't know,” instead of making up an answer.

The village assembly decided that before the road's final route was fixed, an engineer and an officer from the Forest Department would examine both locations.

The inspection took place two weeks later. The tree's main trunk was healthy, but two dry branches needed to be removed. The experts also advised against heavy digging around the roots.

The engineer examined the curved route. With a few changes, he designed a road that kept a safe distance from the tree, allowed proper drainage beside the pond and included a bend near the school that would slow traffic.

On the day the plan received final approval, the four friends sat beneath the mango tree. There was no victory celebration. They simply watched the light filtering down through its leaves.

“I used to think we could save the tree just by caring about it,” Anoop said.

Sugandha smiled. “Caring is what makes us begin. To find a solution, we need measurements, questions and alternatives.”

A few months later, the road was complete. A circle of bare earth had been left around the tree so rainwater could reach its roots. The dead branches had been removed safely. The market stalls gathered once again in the same familiar shade.

The next mango season, the tree bore a great deal of fruit. The panchayat decided that some mangoes would be given to the children at school with their midday meal, some would be shared at the market, and seeds from others would be used to grow new saplings.

The four friends planted four mango saplings behind the school. Ishani asked, “When will these be as big as the Big Mango Tree?”

“Probably not while you are still young,” Satyanarayan Guruji said.

Sugandha interrupted at once. “Probably not, Guruji—only probably not!”

Everyone burst out laughing, Guruji included. “Quite right. Probably not. But when people in the future sit in their shade, they will enjoy the result of toda—” He stopped.

“Today’s,” Anoop supplied with a laugh.

Guruji nodded. “Yes, the result of today’s decision.”

The leaves of the four young saplings trembled in the breeze. Behind them stood the old mango tree, steady and still—as though it were spreading not its own answer but its next question in every direction.



STORY 12

A Day Without a Mobile Phone



On Monday morning, as soon as the students entered their Class Nine classroom, they saw something new. Their teacher, Aniruddha Guruji, had placed a square wooden box on the desk. Inside it were twelve small compartments.

Mayank laughed. “Sir, what experiment is this? Is there still something left to do for the science fair?”

Aniruddha Guruji smiled. “It is certainly an experiment, but not with a machine. It is an experiment with our own habits.”

The students looked at one another. Guruji said, “Next Sunday, anyone who wants to take part will go without using a mobile phone from morning until evening. Except in an emergency, no messages, no games, no videos, and no staring at a screen without a purpose. At night, everyone will write about the experience.”

Ishan spoke up at once. “That will be easy.”

Lalita smiled at him. “Easy? Yesterday you stopped to look at your phone three times on the way to school.”

Ishan looked a little embarrassed. “I was checking the time.”

“Three times, at three different times?” Mayank asked, and the classroom burst into laughter.

Aniruddha Guruji raised his hand to quiet them. “This is not an exercise against mobile phones. A mobile phone is a useful tool. The question is simply this: is the tool in our hands, or is our attention in its hands?”

Five friends—Ishan, Lalita, Mayank, Sujata and Neel—decided to try the experiment together on Sunday. They told their families in advance that anything important could be communicated through the home telephone or by speaking to them in person.



On Sunday morning, Ishan reached towards the pillow beside him as soon as he woke up. His phone was not there. The night before, he had put it in the wooden box and had the box placed on the top shelf of the living-room cupboard. When his hand came back empty, he laughed at himself.

Usually, the first things he looked at on waking were the weather, messages, short videos and game notifications. Today he opened the window instead. Dew sparkled on the tulsi leaves. A dahiyar bird was singing in the tree. He wondered: surely the bird sang like this every day. How often had he actually listened?

As his mother served him tea, she said, “Today I didn’t have to call you twice. You came to the table all by yourself.”

Ishan laughed. “I haven’t got my phone, have I?”

His mother laughed too. “No phone—or no excuse?”

After breakfast, Ishan opened a book. Ten minutes later his hand went towards his pocket again. Then he remembered: the pocket was empty. He drew a little line in the margin of his notebook. He decided that whenever he felt like looking at his phone, he would draw another line.

By noon there were seventeen lines. He stared at them in surprise. Even without the phone in his hand, the memory of it kept tugging at his attention. Aniruddha Guruji’s question returned to him: “Whose hands hold your attention?”

Meanwhile, something quite different was happening at Lalita’s house. Lalita sat with her mother as she prepared food. Usually Lalita listened to songs through earphones at this time. Today her mother began humming an old wedding song. Lalita understood half the words, but not the rest.

“Where did you learn that song?” she asked.

“From my mother,” her mother replied. “Your grandmother used to sing it.”

Lalita immediately thought of recording the song on her phone. Then she laughed—there was no phone today. She fetched her notebook and began writing down the lines. As she wrote, her mother explained the meanings of the words.

For Mayank, the day was a little harder. The friends usually arranged by message when to meet at the playing field. With no phone, Mayank guessed that four o'clock would be right and arrived then. Nobody was there. Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen. He began to feel annoyed.

Just then Neel arrived on his bicycle. “I thought you'd come at four.”

“And the others?”

“Sujata said quarter past four. Lalita said twenty past four. Not everyone's clock runs alike.”

They both laughed. While they waited, they made a little wicket from dry bamboo lying at the edge of the field. When the others arrived, they were ready to start playing at once.

In the middle of the game, Sujata suddenly stopped. “Look at the colour of the clouds in the west.”

Everyone looked up. As the sun began to set, the edges of the clouds glowed like copper. Mayank said, “Usually I take a picture at a time like this.”

“And after you've taken the picture?” Lalita asked.

“I send it to people.”

“And how long do you look at it yourself?”

Mayank was silent for a moment. “Probably only a second or two.”

“Then let's look for five minutes today,” Sujata said.

All five stood quietly watching the clouds. Nobody took a photograph. Yet the colours settled into each of their memories in a different way.

On the way home, the chain came off Ishan's bicycle. On another day, he would have taken out his phone first and called someone.

Today he turned the bicycle upside down and examined the chain. His hands turned black with grease. Twice he tried and failed. On his third attempt, he turned the wheel a little and slipped the chain back into place.

“I can do this myself!” he exclaimed before he even realised he was speaking.

At eight that night, the five friends met at the little crossroads near their school. Each had brought a sheet of paper. Ishan showed them his seventeen lines. Neel said, “I didn’t count, but this morning my hand went into my empty pocket three times.”

Lalita opened her notebook. Inside were the lines of an old song passed down from her grandmother. “If I’d had my phone, I would have recorded the sound. But because I was writing, I asked my mother what the words meant, too. That probably wouldn’t have—” She stopped herself, then went on. “That probably wouldn’t have happened if I’d had my phone.”

Mayank spoke softly. “A phone saves time as well. It would have been easy to ask when the game was starting. But while we waited, Neel and I made a wicket. Not every inconvenience is a loss.”

Sujata added, “A phone may be essential in an emergency. So it was good that the experiment allowed us to use one if something urgent happened.”

All five agreed. The point was not to give up mobile phones. It was to understand how to use them.

On Monday, Aniruddha Guruji listened to everyone’s experiences in class. Some students had found the day easy, others difficult. One said they had been able to spend time helping with work at home. Another said it had been hard to find out the bus times without a phone. A third, a girl, had finished reading a book she had left half-read.

Guruji wrote two phrases on the board: “Convenience” and “The Right to Choose.” Then he said, “We need convenience, but we also need control over our own time. Simply switching off a phone is not the solution. We should decide for ourselves when to open it, why to open it, and how long to use it.”

Together, the class thought of five simple rules: keep phones away during meals; turn off unnecessary notifications before beginning to study; put screens aside half an hour before bedtime; do not look at a phone in the middle of a family conversation; and once a week, spend at least two hours doing something without a phone.

Nobody was forced to follow these rules. Each student would choose the ones that suited their needs.

Ishan wrote one final line in his notebook: “My mobile phone is my key, not my home. It opens many doors, but I do not have to open every door and go inside.”

That evening, when he reached home, he took the phone out of the cupboard. The screen lit up. A heap of notifications had collected. But he no longer felt the old rush to open them all at once.

Instead, he went to his mother first. “Do you know the name of the dahiyar bird that was singing yesterday?”

His mother said, “Is your phone switched off again today?”

Ishan laughed. “No. Today my phone is switched on—but I’ve got a little more of my attention back for myself.”



STORY 13

The Boy Who Counted Birds



Madhav loved the early morning. When smoke had not yet begun to rise from most of the village houses, he would set off towards the pond with a small pair of binoculars, an old exercise book and a pencil. As the first light spread across the sky, sounds woke among the branches—mynas here, parrots there, sparrows elsewhere, and the distant call of a cuckoo.

He did not simply write down the birds' names. How many he had seen, which tree they had perched on, whether they went towards the water or flew over the fields, how long they stayed in one place—he recorded it all with little marks. Every page of his exercise book had separate spaces for the date, the location, the state of the sky and the number of birds.

Some of his classmates laughed at this interest of his. Neel had once said, “Madhav, don't you have enough counting practice? One day you count leaves, another day you count clouds!”

Madhav had laughed. “The leaves aren't always in the same place, and neither are the clouds. Birds move about even more. That's what makes counting them interesting.”

Neel had smiled at the answer, but he still could not understand why Madhav got up so early. At first, Madhav himself might not have been able to explain it clearly. Going to the pond with his grandmother had been a habit since childhood. Whenever she heard a call, Grandmother would say, “Listen, that's a cuckoo. Look, a parrot at the top of the bamboo. That white bird standing by the water's edge is an egret.” Grandmother was old now, and walking had become difficult for her. In a way, her old watchful eyes lived on through Madhav's binoculars.

One Monday, their science teacher, Aniruddha Sir, said to the class, “This month we are going to observe the living things in our village for ourselves. Looking at pictures in books is not enough. Look at what is around you, write it down and make comparisons.”

The classroom filled with excitement. One student chose different kinds of leaves, another the creatures living in the pond, another ants, and another insects in the fields. When the teacher reached Madhav, the boy laid his old exercise book on the desk.

Sir turned the pages, his eyes lighting up. “Why, these are records from two whole years!”

“I haven’t written something every day,” Madhav said softly. “Only on the days I could go.”

“This time, choose one particular place. Count at the same time each day for seven days. Then spend the next seven days in another place. After that, see what you discover—not just differences in the numbers, but possible reasons for them.”

To Madhav, the assignment felt like a game. But he did not want to play it alone. At the break he went up to Neel, Tanya and Lalit. “Will you come to the pond with me for seven mornings? Just half an hour each day.”

Neel pulled a face. “In the morning?”

“How early?” asked Tanya.

“A little before sunrise.”

Lalit burst out laughing. “Are you inviting us to be your friends or giving us a punishment?”

Even so, all four arrived the next morning. Neel’s eyes were half closed; Tanya held a little bowl of warm milk; Lalit had an old pair of binoculars hanging around his neck; and Madhav, as always, carried his exercise book.

At the pond, Madhav announced one rule. “For the first five minutes, nobody speaks. We only listen.”

Neel pressed his lips together. Less than two minutes had passed when his eyes grew wide. An Indian roller, the blue bird known as a nilkanth, flew from a mango branch towards an empty paddy field. Tanya whispered, “What beautiful colours! I’ve lived in this village all my life, but I’ve never noticed them before.”

Madhav did not answer; the five minutes were not yet over. Neel looked at him and kept smiling.

Once the five minutes were up, everyone began talking at once. Madhav gave each person a different task: Neel would record the numbers, Tanya would listen carefully to the calls, Lalit would mark the places, and Madhav would try to identify the species. If they could not name a bird, they would note its colour, size, beak and way of flying.

On the first day they saw forty-nine birds. On the second, fifty-five. A light drizzle fell on the third day, and the count dropped to thirty-eight. On the fourth day, a field on the north side of the pond was ploughed, and the egrets gathered there. On the fifth, there was unusual activity in a distant peepal tree.

By the seventh day, Neel was the first to arrive in the morning. Madhav asked, "Not sleepy today?"

"Of course I'm sleepy," Neel replied. "But I still haven't found the name of that little black-and-white bird we saw yesterday. I want to look for it again today."

Madhav smiled to himself. Counting birds had caught hold of Neel too.



For the second week, Sir suggested that they choose an old mango-and-bamboo orchard about half a kos from the pond. There was no water there, but there were thickly growing trees, bushes and a small grassy clearing in the middle. The four friends agreed to observe for half an hour at the same time each morning, just as before.

The scene in the orchard was quite different. At the pond they had seen more egrets and birds that stayed near the water. Here the calls of

woodpeckers, cuckoos, mynas, parrots and many smaller birds filled the air. Tanya was beginning to recognise the different sounds. With her eyes closed, she could say, "That call came from the peepal tree. This one came from near the bushes."

Lalit devised a new method. He sketched a rough outline of the orchard on a sheet of paper and marked each sighting with a small dot. At the end of seven days, the dots revealed an interesting pattern: most of the birds were in the part with dense bushes and two old hollow trees.

"Why are there more birds here?" Neel asked.

"Perhaps they have nests in the hollow trees," Madhav suggested. "Perhaps they find insects in the bushes. But we'll write those down as guesses, not facts."

Their teacher was pleased with their care. "That's the scientific way of thinking. Call what you've seen an observation, and what you've guessed a guess. Don't confuse the two."

That day, as the four walked home from school, they noticed a yellow string near the orchard. It stretched between two trees, and some bamboo poles lay nearby. "What's going to happen here?" Lalit asked.

By evening, news had spread through the village. A wedding pavilion was to be built in part of the orchard. There would be a great feast in three days' time. Bushes would be cut, bamboo poles would be planted, and music would play throughout the night.

"A feast! That'll be wonderful!" Neel said excitedly. Then he suddenly remembered the hollow trees. "But what about the birds?"

"We aren't going to stop the wedding," Tanya said. "But do all those bushes really have to be cut?"

The four went to see Mahendra Kaka, who owned the orchard. At first he laughed. "So you've all become lawyers for the birds now?"

Madhav opened his exercise book. "Kaka, please look. During these seven days, we saw more birds in this part of the orchard than anywhere else. Birds visit these two hollow trees every day. We aren't against the wedding. We're only asking whether the pavilion could be built a little farther to the right."

Mahendra Kaka studied the pages. “You children counted all these birds?”

“Yes. In the mornings.”

“For so many days?”

“Seven days here, and seven days beside the pond.”

Kaka grew serious. “The people who are building the pavilion will come tomorrow. Make sure you’re here too.”

The next day Madhav, Tanya, Neel and Lalit returned. The two people who would build the pavilion were there, along with Mahendra Kaka and several members of his family. Lalit showed them his sketch of the orchard. Tanya pointed out the birds flying in and out near the hollow trees. Neel made a simple suggestion: “Move the pavilion five cubits that way. Instead of cutting a path through the bushes, we could make the path along the outer edge.”

The builders measured the space. After some discussion, the pavilion was indeed shifted a little. Only two dry bamboo stalks were cut; the thick bushes and the hollow trees were saved.

Neel whispered in Madhav’s ear, “I used to wonder what good counting birds could do. It turns out that counting can even help save a place!”

“Not the counting alone,” Madhav said. “Understanding what the numbers mean.”

On the night of the wedding, the sound of music travelled far. The following morning, all four friends returned. There were fewer birds. Neel felt sad.

“We can’t reach a conclusion from just one day,” Madhav said.

Three days later, the numbers rose again. On the fifth day, they saw a pair of mynas flying in and out of one of the hollow trees. Tanya said softly, “They’ve come back.”

Madhav did not write only a number in his exercise book. Beside it he added, “Birds observed returning after the disturbance.”

At the end of the month, all the groups presented their observations at school. One spoke about lines of ants, another about the shapes of leaves, and another about insects in the pond. Madhav’s group stood before the class with two thick sheets of paper and a hand-drawn map, rather than a chart.

Neel began. “I used to think counting meant nothing more than numbers. But when we count in the same place again and again, we begin to see changes.”

Tanya spoke about sounds. “Sometimes you can’t see a bird, but its call tells you it’s there. So we need our ears as well as our eyes.”

Lalit held up his map with the dots. “Not all trees are the same. Hollow trees, bushes and the water’s edge all have different uses for birds.”

Madhav spoke last. “We also wrote down what we didn’t know. We still aren’t sure of the names of several birds. We’ll go back next month. Our work isn’t finished.”

Sir asked, “And what was the greatest thing you learned?”

“Getting up early is difficult, but not impossible!” Neel said at once. The whole class laughed.

Madhav thought for a moment before speaking. “Just because we see something every day doesn’t mean we truly notice it. When we pay attention, our own village seems new to us every day.”

That evening, Grandmother was sitting on a low wooden stool in the courtyard. Madhav took his exercise book to her. She put on her spectacles and began turning the pages.

“So many birds!” Her face shone with childlike delight. “I used to tell you their names, and now you’ve kept count of them too.”

“Grandmother, which bird is your favourite?” Madhav asked.

She thought for a moment. “Whichever one I hear next.”

They fell silent. The evening breeze rustled through the bamboo leaves. After a while, a distant sound reached them—something like “kukur-kukur.” Madhav started to get up and run inside for his binoculars, then stopped.

“What is it?” Grandmother asked.

Madhav sat down again on the stool. “First I’ll listen with my ears.”

The sound came again. This time he worked out its direction. The third time it sounded, a small bird flew from the top of the bamboo and perched on a mango branch. Madhav did not know its name.

Grandmother said gently, “Look for its name tomorrow. Let it be for today.”

Madhav opened his exercise book, but wrote nothing in the space for the species. He noted only the time, the direction and a clue about the colour. He left the space for the name blank.

Before, a blank space had made him feel that something was unfinished. Now he understood that a blank space could also be an invitation. What he did not yet know was calling him outside again the next morning.

The following day, Neel was already standing beside the pond when Madhav arrived. Tanya and Lalit had come too. Neel called from a distance, “Madhav! Did that unknown bird from yesterday come back?”

Madhav smiled as he opened his exercise book. “We’ve only just begun looking.”

The four sat quietly in the shade of a tree. The sky was growing pale. One call came from somewhere in the bushes, another from the water, and a third from the top of a peepal tree.

Madhav took hold of his pencil, but he did not begin writing at once. First he listened. Then he looked. Only then did he count.

And it seemed to him that there was a lesson even greater than the number of birds: every little sound of nature, if listened to patiently, can open a new page in the story of one’s own village.



STORY 14

The Clay Robot



The monsoon rains had passed, but the ridges between the fields were still soft. On his way home from school, Nachiketa saw his grandfather using a bamboo stick to make small holes along a ridge. Into each hole he dropped mustard seeds and covered them with soil. The work looked easy, but by the time Grandfather had finished one row, his back began to ache.

Nachiketa asked, “Grandfather, couldn’t a small machine do this work?”

Grandfather laughed. “If you want to build a machine, go ahead. But how will a machine understand the field? Here the earth is soft, there it is hard, and somewhere else water has collected. You have to notice all these things.”

That night, Grandfather’s question kept turning over in Nachiketa’s mind. The following month, his school was holding a science exhibition on the theme “Needs of Our Own Community.” Each group had to make a model that could help with some real task in the village.

The next day, he told his friends Arya, Kanak, Udayan and Shailaja about his idea. Udayan immediately exclaimed, “A seed-sowing machine!”

Kanak smiled. “And what if the machine sinks into the field?”

Arya drew two large wheels on a sheet of paper. “If the wheels are bigger, they won’t sink so easily into soft soil.”

Shailaja added, “And all the seeds mustn’t fall out in one heap. We need a way to release a few seeds at a time, at fixed distances.”

The five went to their science teacher, Aparna Didi. After listening to everything, she said, “First, break the task down into smaller parts. Everyone’s eyes light up when they hear the word robot. But a robot is,

at heart, a machine that follows instructions. Be clear about three things: what it must detect, what it must do, and when it must stop.”

The group wrote down three questions: How would it move along the field ridge? How would it drop seeds at equal intervals? And how would it stop if it came upon deep water or a hole ahead?

In the school’s storeroom of old materials, they found two small motors, some wire, a wheel, a gear from a broken toy and a simple distance sensor. Nachiketa thought of bringing an old metal container from home, but Shailaja stopped him. “Shouldn’t it have something special from our village? If we simply join together things bought in the market, where is our own identity in it?”

Just then, Kanak remembered his uncle. Uncle was a potter. He made clay pots, water pitchers, lamps, and little bird-shaped vessels. That evening, all five children went to his courtyard.

The potter listened and remained silent for a while. Then he picked up a lump of clay and said, “Clay is beautiful, but you must understand its nature. Make it too thick and it becomes heavy; make it too thin and it breaks. Unfired clay absorbs water. Fired clay becomes hard, but it cannot easily withstand a sharp blow.”

Nachiketa asked, “Then could we make the robot’s body out of clay?”

“Don’t make the clay carry the whole weight,” Uncle replied. “Build a light bamboo frame inside, and a clay shell outside. Don’t seal the parts that need to be opened again and again with clay.”

Everyone liked that suggestion. Udayan drew a new design: a square frame made from four light strips of bamboo, two large wheels, a seed container in the middle, a small sensor at the front and a clay shell on top.

They made the first model in three days. Its clay shell was beautiful. On the body, Kanak carved designs of leaves, ears of rice and rippling water, without a single letter. Everyone felt that, if the robot could be made to move, it would be the most eye-catching model at the science exhibition.

They tested it in the school garden. Nachiketa turned on the switch. The motor whirled, the wheels turned, the robot moved

forward two cubits—and then tilted to the left and collapsed with a thud.

Udayan's face fell. "Everything's ruined!"

Aparna Didi laughed. "A model that works perfectly the very first time gives you fewer chances to learn. First find out why it tipped over."

Arya measured the wheels. The left wheel was half a finger-width smaller than the right. Shailaja checked the weight: the seed container was heavier on one side. Kanak lifted the clay shell: it too had been made thicker on one side.

They wrote down every fault. The wheels were made equal, the container was moved to the centre, and the clay shell was made thinner. In the second test, the robot travelled ten cubits, but all the seeds spilled into one heap.

"Now we have our second problem," said Nachiketa.

To release the seeds, they used a little toothed wheel from an old clock. With every turn, it briefly opened a hole in the container. On the table, the seeds began to fall one by one. But mustard seeds were tiny, while maize kernels were large. The same opening would not work for both.



Shailaja suggested, "Make thin plates with different-sized holes. When we change the kind of seed, we can change the plate."

The potter made three small plates of thin, fired clay, with a small, medium and large opening. "This part may break," he warned. "Keep two spare plates as well."

The third test took place at the edge of a field. Grandfather, the potter and Aparna Didi were all present. The robot moved slowly

along the ridge. At regular intervals, seeds dropped from it. The five friends followed close behind, counting as they went.

Suddenly, a small hollow filled with water lay ahead. The distance sensor could detect the surface of the soil, but not the depth of the water. Instead of stopping, the robot went forward and its front wheel dipped into the water. They switched off the motor.

Grandfather said, “Didn’t I tell you? You have to look carefully at the field.”

Nachiketa was not discouraged. “Then we’ll have to teach the machine to look more carefully, Grandfather.”

Aparna Didi explained that fitting a costly sensor was one solution, but the aim of their school project was to make a useful, inexpensive model. The five began thinking of another way.

Arya stood a thin bamboo stick upright on the field ridge. “What if the robot had a light feeler rod at the front? If it reached a deep hollow, the rod would bend down, press a small switch and stop the motor.”

Udayan put the arrangement together from wire from an old umbrella, a thin split piece of bamboo and a little switch. It did not look pretty, but it worked.

In the fourth test, the robot stopped before the hollow. Everyone clapped. Nachiketa looked at Grandfather. Grandfather only smiled, but the sparkle in his eyes was every bit as bright as the applause.

One question still remained: what was the point of the clay shell? If it was only for decoration, metal or plastic would be lighter. Kanak discussed this with the potter.

Uncle soaked a small, thin strip of clay in water to demonstrate. “Clay changes temperature slowly. It can give the wires and machinery inside some protection from the sun. But the joints must be properly sealed so that rainwater doesn’t get inside. And if the shell breaks, we can make it again here in the village.”

Aparna Didi said, “This is where science and local craftsmanship speak to one another. Clay isn’t suitable for everything. Use it where it offers an advantage, and accept its limitations where it doesn’t.”

The group made the robot’s clay shell in three pieces: a top cover and two side panels. That made repairs easier. They placed strips of old

rubber at the joints so that the vibrating clay would not strike directly against the bamboo.

A week before the science exhibition, some pupils at school saw the model and laughed. “A clay robot! It’ll dissolve if it rains!”

Kanak answered calmly, “Unfired clay may soften and fall apart. This is fired clay. But water could still get inside, so we have to protect the joints. We’ll write down that limitation too.”

Later, Nachiketa asked, “Didn’t their laughter make you angry?”

Kanak smiled. “Uncle says a pot hardens in fire, not through insults. If someone asks a question, we should answer with facts.”

On the day of the exhibition, all the groups arranged their models. Some demonstrated rainwater harvesting, others a stove that produced less smoke, and still others ways of watering a garden with less water. Beside their robot, Nachiketa’s group displayed four objects: the wheel that had failed in the first test, a broken piece of clay, an interchangeable seed plate and the feeler rod.

A visitor asked, “Why have you put the failed parts on display?”

Arya replied, “Because the successful model stands on all these failures. If we show only the finished version, half of what we learned will be hidden.”

Another visitor, a farmer, watched the spacing of the seeds and asked, “Will it work for rice?”

“Not yet,” Shailaja said. “This is a test model for dry field ridges and some larger kinds of seeds. The water and soil in a rice field are different. We’d need new tests for that.”

The farmer was pleased. “Good. Saying what a machine can’t do is part of science too.”

The judges spent more time studying the group’s testing notebook than watching the model move. Day by day, the children had recorded every fault and improvement, the distances travelled, the number of seeds, the sizes of the wheels and the weight.

One judge asked, “What does the word robot mean to you?”

Udayan thought before answering. “A machine that works according to instructions, senses something of its surroundings and repeats a task. But our robot is still incomplete. It needs a person to watch over it.”

Nachiketa added, “I don’t think being unfinished is anything to be ashamed of. It is the path to the next experiment.”

The group did not win first prize. They received a special award for “An Excellent Union of Local Skill and Science.” Udayan was a little disappointed, but Grandfather put a hand on his shoulder and said, “If your machine can sow even one row properly in my field, that will mean more to me than a prize.”

Two days after the exhibition, the five returned to the field. This time their aim was not a prize, but one complete ridge. The robot moved, released seeds, got stuck in one place and was pulled free. They changed the plate twice. Along the way, a thin section of one clay side panel cracked.

Kanak laughed. “I’ll ask Uncle to make a new piece tomorrow. That’s why we made the shell in three parts!”

By evening, they had completed one row. Grandfather had been sowing another row alongside them, holding his seed container in his hand. At the end, they looked at the two rows together—one sown by human hands, the other by a machine.

Nachiketa asked, “Grandfather, which one is better?”

Grandfather picked up a handful of soil. “The better one is whichever does the job for the time, place and need. People give birth to machines; machines don’t replace human experience, they add to what it can do.”

The potter had arrived too. He examined the robot’s cracked shell. “This part became too thin. Next time we’ll make it a little thicker here.”

Aparna Didi said to her pupils, “Do you see? A laboratory isn’t only a room in a school. A field, a potter’s courtyard, your grandfather’s experience and your own exercise books—all of these can become laboratories.”

That day, Nachiketa did not take the robot home. He left it in the potter’s courtyard so that the shell could be remade. In the red evening light, the pattern of rice ears carved into its clay body seemed to glow.

Nachiketa thought that the most remarkable thing about the robot was not its motor, sensor or wheels. What made it special was the wisdom of many hands inside it: Grandfather’s understanding of

the fields, Uncle's skill with clay, his friends' calculations, his teacher's questions and the marks left by all their failed tests.

The next morning, the potter was turning his wheel. Nachiketa sat beside him, watching him make a new side panel. Round and round the clay went on the wheel, taking shape as it turned.

Uncle asked, "Is the robot finished?"

Nachiketa laughed. "No. We've only made its first version."

Uncle nodded. "That's right. Whether it's clay or the mind, its shape grows better each time we work on it."

The potter's wheel kept turning. Beside it, the robot's two wheels stood still. Yet Nachiketa could see clearly that both kinds of turning were part of the same journey: one came from an old craft, the other from a new experiment. Together they were shaping the road ahead.



STORY 15

The Forest Path, the Story of Home



Behind the village lay a green forest. It was not very large, but it was closely woven into the lives of the villagers. A small stream flowed through it. Trees and other plants helped hold back the rainwater, and on winter mornings many birds came to rest there. To the young people of the village, the forest was both a playground and a book full of questions waiting to be explored.

That morning Neeraj, Sumi, Afreen and Lalit set off for school along the old footpath through the forest. Repairs were under way on the bridge along the main road, so this path made the journey a little shorter. The four friends walked on beneath the shade of the trees, breathing in the scent of leaves and listening to the murmur of the stream in the distance.

After they had gone a little way, Sumi noticed a red mark on the trunk of a tree. Then she saw the same mark on a second tree, a third and a fourth.

“Why are these trees marked in red?” Sumi asked.

Touching one of the trunks, Lalit said, “Yesterday Father was saying that people are discussing a new paved road to the market. Perhaps these are survey marks.”

Neeraj’s heart sank. “If the road comes through here, what will happen to all these trees?”

Afreen spoke at once. “First we should find out. There’s no point worrying without knowing the facts, and we shouldn’t object without evidence either.”

When they reached school, the four friends went to speak to their science teacher, Kalpana Didi. She listened carefully, then asked them a question. “You want to save the forest. That’s a good thing. But why do the people who want a new road think they need one?”

The children fell silent. At last Lalit said quietly, “During the rains, the old paved road gets flooded. It’s difficult to take sick people to hospital. Farmers are delayed in getting their produce to market.”

Didi smiled. “Then the question isn’t ‘the road or the forest’. The question is whether we can find a way to make travel easier for people while doing as little harm to the forest as possible.”

After school that day, the four returned to the forest. This time they had not come to play, but to take measurements. Neeraj carried a notebook; Afreen had a paper map instead of a mobile phone; Sumi brought string and a measuring tape; and Lalit carried a little field guide for identifying birds and trees.

They followed the proposed route marked in red. They wrote down the number of marked trees, counting thick trunks separately from slender ones. They noted where the route would cross the stream. In one place the soil was very soft; in another the slope was steep. A little farther on stood a dense clump of bamboo, with small birds darting in and out of it.

“Will counting the trees tell us everything we need to know?” Sumi asked.

“No,” said Afreen. “We’ll have to look at the water, the soil, the animals and the ways people use this place too.”

The next day they met Raghunath Kaka, a herdsman who grazed cattle near the forest. He had been taking his animals through the area for fifty years. “After the rains, water stays below this slope for a long time,” he told them. “The tree roots hold the soil together. But a new road is needed too. It’s hard to get grain out of the fields.”

Neeraj asked, “Could the road go another way?”

Kaka drew a line on the ground with his walking stick. “There used to be a bullock-cart track beside the field boundaries. It’s overgrown with bushes now. The way would be a little longer, but there aren’t so many large trees there.”

The four friends grew excited. The following Sunday, they went with Kalpana Didi to inspect the old track. They measured the distance with string. It was about six hundred metres longer than the proposed route through the forest, but only a few small bushes would need clearing, and almost all the large trees could be saved.

There was one difficulty, however. During the rainy season, part of the old track turned into a marsh.

“Then people will say the route through the forest is easier,” Lalit said.

“Don’t go looking for an easy answer,” Kalpana Didi told them. “Find out why that stretch becomes waterlogged.”

The four friends waited for the next heavy shower so that they could see where the rainwater flowed. When the rain came, they went out carrying umbrellas. They discovered that an old drainage channel from the fields had become blocked, causing water to spread over the track. If the channel were reopened and a small culvert built, the water could drain away.

At school they carried out a small experiment too. They filled two identical containers, one with dry, bare soil and the other with soil covered by fallen leaves and grass. They poured an equal amount of water into each. Muddy water quickly ran out of the container of bare soil. In the other, the water came out more slowly and carried away less soil.

Sumi wrote in her notebook: “This experiment does not prove how the entire forest behaves, but it does show one effect of keeping soil covered.”



“We must keep that sentence,” said Neeraj. “We shouldn’t draw a bigger conclusion than our observations allow.”

Afreen made a comparison of the two proposed routes: their lengths, the number of large trees that would have to be cut, the flow

of water, the slopes, the need for a culvert, access to the fields and the possibilities for improving each route. Lalit drew pictures of the trees and birds. Neeraj recorded all their observations by date. Sumi asked twenty village families what they most needed from the new road.

The answers were interesting. Most people wanted a road they could use throughout the year to reach the hospital and the market. No one insisted that it had to pass through the middle of the forest. Some people even remembered the old bullock-cart track.

On the day of the village meeting, the children arrived carrying their papers, maps and calculations. At first, a few people laughed. “What can children have to say about such an important matter?”

But the village head said, “If they’ve gone out and taken measurements, we ought to hear what they have to say.”

Afreen began by acknowledging the need for a new road. “We don’t want to stop people from having better facilities. Sick people, students and farmers all need a good road.”

Next, Neeraj read out their findings about the route marked through the forest. Sumi presented the replies from the families. Lalit unfolded the map of the old bullock-cart track. Finally, they put forward their proposal: clear the bushes from the old track, reopen the blocked drainage channel, build a small culvert over the waterlogged stretch, and, wherever removing two or three small trees was unavoidable, plant a greater number of saplings of native species in their place.

The meeting did not reach an agreement at once. Some people said the longer route would cost more. Others argued that a road cut through the forest would dry faster in the sunlight once the trees were cleared. Still others wanted to know how long a culvert would last in the rainy-season current.

The children could not answer every question. When they did not have the facts, they said so plainly: “An engineer and a forest officer will have to examine that.”

Kalpna Didi sat at the back, smiling. Learning to admit what you did not know, even when you had evidence for what you did know, was part of learning too.

Two weeks later, an engineer from the block office and a forest officer came to inspect both routes. After their examination, they said the track beside the fields could be made usable if the drainage was put right. It would cost a little more, but major tree-felling inside the forest could be avoided.

The final decision was to divert the new main road towards the old bullock-cart track. The footpath through the forest would remain for walkers and cyclists only. Most of the trees marked in red were saved. The village youth group took responsibility for planting native saplings to replace the few young trees that had to be removed.

On planting day, Neeraj's hands were covered in soil. Sumi was making little ridges of earth around the saplings. Afreen brought pitchers full of water. Lalit was putting together small protective fences of bamboo.

Watching from a distance, Raghunath Kaka said, "The forest has been saved and the road is being built. But the work doesn't end here. Planting a sapling is easy. Keeping it alive is hard."

From that day on, the four friends went to check the saplings once a week. If a plant's leaves were drying out, they watered it. If a protective fence was broken, they tied it together again. At school they also began a small campaign asking people not to throw rubbish on the forest footpath.

A few months later, the new paved road had been built beside the fields. Motor vehicles began using it. The old forest path remained peaceful. Birds called from the shade of the trees, the stream flowed on, and patches of sunlight trembled upon the leaves.

One evening, the four friends were walking home along that footpath when Lalit asked, "Did we save the forest, or did the forest teach us something?"

Sumi laughed. "Both."

Neeraj looked towards the village ahead. Smoke was rising from the cooking fires of its homes. He understood then that the forest was not a green island cut off from the village. Water from its stream reached the fields, birds scattered seeds, trees held the soil in place, and people built their lives among them all.

“That’s why the path through the forest is also a story about home,” Afreen said softly.

For a while the four friends said nothing. Then, with leaves rustling around them, they made their way down towards the village.



STORY 16

The School Built in a Tree



At the eastern edge of the village, near the pond, stood an old peepal tree. Its roots spread above and below the ground as though stories buried in the earth had come to the surface. Its thick branches were always filled with the sounds of birds: parrots in the morning, mynas at midday and flocks of small birds in the evening. The village elders said the tree had stood there since they were children.

One day, on their way home from school, Nayan, Megha, Ishan and Reva sat down in the shade of the peepal tree. The summer sun was fierce, but the breeze beneath the tree felt cool. The four friends opened their schoolbags and began their homework. After a while, Megha looked up and said, “Wouldn’t it be lovely to have a little platform up there among those branches? What a wonderful place to study!”

Ishan’s eyes lit up. “A school in a tree?”

Reva laughed. “We already have a school at school. But here we could read books, watch birds, identify leaves and measure the water in the pond. It would be a classroom without walls.”

Nayan was excited too, but he spoke up at once. “If we build a platform, we mustn’t hurt the tree. What if someone hammers nails into the branches?”

The four fell silent. It was a fine idea, but not if the tree had to pay the price. They agreed to find out whether the tree was healthy before doing anything else.

The next day they spoke to their science teacher, Sudhanshu Sir. After listening to their plan, he said, “It may be possible to make a place like that, but safety and the health of the tree must come first. Don’t make unnecessary holes in its living wood. And don’t guess how

much weight a structure can bear without the proper experience. Who in the village knows how to work with wood?”

“Bisesar Kaka,” Ishan answered at once. “He makes beams and doorframes for old houses, and platforms out of bamboo.”

That evening the four friends went to see Bisesar Kaka. He examined the peepal tree, looking carefully at its branches, trunk, dead limbs and roots. Then he said, “We are not going to hang a house from the tree. We can build a platform among its branches, supported by four bamboo posts set firmly into the ground around it. The tree will provide the shade, but the ground will carry the weight. That way we put much less strain on the tree.”

Megha asked, “But if the platform isn’t supported by the tree, how can we call it ‘The School Built in a Tree’?”

Kaka smiled. “A name belongs to the heart. The platform will be among the branches. The shade, the breeze and the birds will all belong to the tree. But the responsibility for holding it up will belong to the earth.”

Everyone laughed at that.

Before construction began, they made a set of rules. The platform would not be very high. There would be a wide ladder, with strong guardrails all around the platform. Only a limited number of older children could go up at one time. The platform would be closed in rain, strong winds or darkness. Younger children could climb only when accompanied by an adult. No new branches would be cut from the tree.

“Following the rules matters more than writing them down,” Bisesar Kaka reminded them.

On Sunday, several parents, students and teachers from the village came together. They measured the bamboo, tied the ropes and marked where the posts would go into the ground. Some dug the earth, some held the bamboo steady and others fetched water. Nayan and Ishan had drawn a small plan of the platform on paper. Bisesar Kaka checked every measurement again.

In two days, the main framework was standing. On the third day, they laid thin wooden planks across it, leaving space around the branches so the tree could continue to grow. Handrails were fitted on

both sides of the ladder. In one corner of the platform they built a wooden chest with a lid for storing books, but Bisesar Kaka said that no books should be left up there during the rainy season.

When the four friends climbed up for the first time, their village seemed entirely new. From there, the pond shone like a bright circle. The boundaries between the fields looked like fine lines drawn across a piece of green cloth. The roof of their school, the temple spire, the bamboo grove and the mango orchard all came into view at once.

“From down below, everything looked separate,” Reva said softly. “From up here, it all seems connected.”



“Then our very first lesson has already taken place,” Megha said.

They divided the school week into different activities. Mondays were for reading books, Wednesdays for observing nature and Saturdays for group discussions. On Sundays, an elder or craftsperson from the village would come to share their experience. This tree school was not meant to replace their regular classes. It was an extra place to learn.

On the first Wednesday, Nayan brought binoculars. Ishan was making a list of birds. Megha studied the shapes of leaves and drew pictures of them. Reva had made a simple measuring stick to check the water level in the pond. They were all sitting in the same place, yet four different kinds of questions were opening up before them.

At midday a bird suddenly flapped its wings noisily. Everyone looked up. On a branch a little above the platform was a small nest. Inside it, they could see two eggs.

Nayan immediately lowered his voice. “Are we disturbing the birds by coming here?”

For the next two days, the tree school remained closed. The children watched the nest from a distance with their science teacher. He told them, “If a bird keeps coming towards its nest but turns back in fright, we must limit the use of the platform. The first rule of studying nature is not to disturb the lives of the creatures we observe.”

After that, they changed their timetable. No one climbed onto the platform in the morning, when the birds were most active. Lessons took place only for a limited time in the afternoon. They also removed the seating area on one side to give the nest more space.

A few weeks later, the eggs hatched and chicks emerged. The children watched only from a distance. No one touched them. On the day the chicks took their first flight, Reva said, “We built a school, but the birds have become our teachers.”

The Sunday gatherings gradually became famous throughout the village. One day Kamli Aaji came and spoke about some household uses people once found for peepal leaves. She also warned the children not to use anything as medicine without advice from someone qualified. Another Sunday, Raghuvir Kaka came and recalled the old drainage routes around the pond. On another occasion, Shanti Didi, a potter, showed them simple ways to tell different kinds of clay apart.

The children wrote down what they heard. But if they had no evidence to support a claim, they marked it ‘folk memory’. Nayan would say, “It isn’t right to call something a fact just because we’ve heard it. What people remember has its own value, and what has been tested has its own value too.”

Then, one day, another kind of problem arose. Some children from the school’s lower classes gathered beneath the platform and begged to go up. The older students explained that the rules did not allow them to climb without an adult. The little ones went away disappointed.

Megha was troubled. “Have we made a school where younger children can do nothing but stand below and look up?”

Bisesar Kaka said, “Don’t change the safety rules. But why should learning happen only on the platform?”

That question led to a new project. They made low earthen seats in a circle beneath the tree. They placed a small box of books there, to be

opened during the day and taken home every evening. The younger children could draw pictures, listen to stories and count leaves. The platform remained a place where the older students could study, but the whole tree became a school for everyone.

The rainy season began to approach. Before the first heavy downpour, Bisesar Kaka checked every joint in the platform. Loose ropes were replaced. The book chest was emptied. The ladder was removed and stored safely so no one would climb up in the rain.

The wind blew all night. In the morning, the children ran to the peepal tree. Leaves and small branches were scattered over the ground, but the platform was still standing. One of its guardrails, however, had come loose.

“It survived!” Ishan cried happily.

Bisesar Kaka, who was coming up behind them, stopped him at once. “Just because it’s still standing doesn’t mean it’s safe. Inspect first, climb later.”

No one went up that day. They checked the joints, the condition of the bamboo and how firmly the posts were held in the ground. Only when the repairs were complete two days later did the school reopen. The children understood that safety was not something to think about once and forget. It meant looking after the platform continually.

In autumn, the school held its annual exhibition. Nayan and his friends presented their experience of ‘The School Built in a Tree’. They showed more than beautiful pictures. They explained the construction rules, the change in the timetable because of the nest, the learning circle built below for younger children and the inspections carried out after the rains.

The headteacher asked, “What is this school’s greatest achievement?”

Reva thought for a while before answering. “I don’t think it’s the platform. Our greatest achievement is that we’ve learned to ask questions. Are we hurting the tree? Are we troubling the birds? Why can’t the younger children join in? Is the platform safe after the rain? Each question made our school change.”

The headteacher smiled. “Then this school isn’t something fixed and unchanging. It’s alive.”

One cold winter morning, the four friends were sitting on the platform. Sunlight filtered through the leaves onto their books. Mist hung over the pond in the distance. Down below, Kamli Aaji was telling the younger children an old story. To one side, Bisesar Kaka was inspecting some new bamboo. A bird sat silently on a branch.

Nayan closed his book. “We climbed the tree to come up here, but everything we’ve learned has come from the earth below.”

Megha laughed. “A tree’s branches grow upwards and its roots grow downwards. What would a tree be without both?”

Just then, a gentle breeze stirred. A page of a book turned by itself. Reva reached out to hold it down, then stopped her hand. The page kept fluttering in the breeze, and for a while everyone listened to the sound.

At that moment, nobody in the school was reading a lesson. And yet the learning went on.



STORY 17

The Girl Who Made a Sundial



Neha had an unusual curiosity about time. For her, time was more than the school bell, the clock on the wall at home or the numbers on a mobile phone. She wanted to see its passage in the light of dawn, the calls of birds, the shade of trees and the reddish sky at evening.

One morning in the hot month of Jeth, she was sitting in the courtyard with a book. The shadow of a slender bamboo pole planted near the tulsi altar was slowly moving. When Neha looked again half an hour later, its direction had changed.

She asked her grandmother, “Aaji, when there were no clocks, how did people tell the time?”

Aaji smiled. “The sun, shadows, birds and even the time the cows came home gave us clues. But you had to learn how to read them. Around midday a shadow grew shorter, then began to lengthen on the other side.”

A question took shape in Neha's mind. If a shadow could tell the time, could she measure it and make a clock?

The next day, in science class, Archana Didi was explaining how the Earth rotates. Neha raised her hand. “When the Earth turns, is that why the shadows of trees and bamboo poles change direction?”

Archana Didi was pleased. “Exactly. The sun appears to move across the sky, but the main reason for this daily change is the Earth's rotation. Since ancient times, people have made instruments that tell the time by measuring the movement of shadows. One kind is a sundial.”

“I'm going to make one,” Neha declared at once.

Her friend Meenakshi, sitting at the back of the classroom, laughed. “In just one day?”

Neha laughed too. “If I manage it in a day, what sort of experiment will that be? Every mistake will teach me something.”

In the school’s science club, Neha, Meenakshi, Kaushal and Ritesh drew up a plan. Their first task was to find an open place that received sunshine from morning until evening, without the shadows of nearby trees or buildings getting in the way.

A corner of the small green field behind the school seemed suitable. The four friends levelled the ground. They planted a thin bamboo stick in the middle. Using a string with a small weight hanging from it, Neha checked whether the stick stood straight up from the ground.

For their first attempt, they made twelve marks at equal distances around a circular clay dial. Their idea was simple: twelve hours, twelve equal divisions.

The next morning, everyone arrived full of excitement. At eight o’clock, Neha placed a pebble where the tip of the shadow fell. At nine, she placed another; at ten, a third. By midday something puzzling had become clear: the shadow marks were not falling at equal intervals.

Ritesh scratched his head. “We divided our circle into equal parts. Why won’t the shadow follow our lines?”

“Nature doesn’t have to follow lines we’ve drawn,” Meenakshi replied. “We have to draw our lines after understanding how nature moves.”

After school that day, all four went to Archana Didi. She studied their measurements and said, “Here is your first lesson. Dividing a clock face into twelve equal sections doesn’t automatically make a sundial accurate. Latitude, direction and the tilt of the stick that casts the shadow are important.”

Neha opened her notebook. “How do we take latitude into account?”

Using a globe, Archana Didi explained that the Earth is round, and that latitude describes how far north or south a place lies. On a horizontal sundial, the shadow-casting stick can be tilted towards the north or south in such a way that its angle is related to the latitude of the place.

Didi warned them, “Don’t just memorise this as a formula. First check the direction, prepare a level surface, and then observe the shadows over several days. Clock time and local solar time don’t always agree exactly. Record that difference too.”

The four friends now found their work even more interesting. Using the school’s atlas and the location information available to them, they worked out the approximate latitude of their area. They used a compass to find direction, but Archana Didi told them not to depend on a single instrument. They should also observe the direction of the shadow as it grew shortest around midday.

They removed the first bamboo stick and set up a new one. They tilted it to the required angle and fastened it securely. The clay dial was made level again. This time they did not draw the hour lines in advance.

“Let nature give us the marks first,” Neha said. “We’ll draw the lines afterwards.”

For three sunny days, they marked the edge of the shadow at fixed times on the clock. Beside each mark, they wrote the date and clock time in their notebook. When Neha transferred all the points onto paper, she saw lines spreading out from one centre like an open fan.



On the fourth day, clouds gathered overhead. The shadow was faint. Kaushal said sadly, “Our work has stopped for today.”

Neha looked at the clouds. “It hasn’t stopped. Today we’ve learned one of the sundial’s limitations. When there isn’t clear sunshine, it’s difficult to read the time from a shadow.”

Meenakshi wrote a new heading in the notebook: “When This Instrument Will Not Work.”

Neha laughed. "Writing down failures is part of science too."

On the fifth day, the sun came out again. But the shadow at twelve o'clock did not fall in quite the same place as it had the previous week. The difference was small, but Neha noticed it.

She went back to Archana Didi. "The Earth doesn't only rotate," Didi explained. "It also travels around the sun, and its axis is tilted. At different times of the year, the sun's apparent movement changes. That is why a simple sundial and an ordinary clock may show slightly different times."

"Then will my clock never be right?" Neha asked.

"Think about what you mean by 'right'," Didi replied. "If you mean that it will show civil time, minute by minute, just like a mobile phone, then no. But if you mean that it will help us estimate local time from the sun's shadow, understand direction and see how all this is connected with the Earth's movement, then it is a very valuable instrument."

Neha was happy with that answer. Her goal changed. She no longer wanted to make the "most accurate clock", but to gain the "clearest understanding".

When Hari Narayan Kaka, the village potter, heard about the science club's work, he came to the school. "If your clay dial melts away as soon as it gets wet," he said, "how will you keep observing it for months?"

"Kaka, could you make us a round dial from fired clay?" Neha asked.

On his potter's wheel, Hari Narayan Kaka shaped a thick, round disc like a broad plate. He wrote no numbers on it, marking only the centre and the outer circle with slightly raised ridges. The disc was dried and then fired.

Once they placed the disc at school, Neha marked the lines on it again, following their earlier measurements. Instead of numbers, they used small symbols of different shapes, so that younger children could watch the shadow move and understand the order of the marks.

One midday, a group of children from Class Five came to see it. One asked, "When everybody has a clock in their hand, why do we need this clay clock?"

Neha showed the child the field around them. “With this clock, we don’t just tell the time. We learn about the sun’s direction, changing shadows, the Earth’s rotation, the seasons and the care needed when taking measurements. It teaches us to ask questions.”

Another child placed a hand over the stick’s shadow, hiding part of it. Everyone burst out laughing. “See?” Neha said. “The person observing a measuring instrument has to be careful too.”

On the day of the science fair, a crowd gathered around Neha and her friends’ exhibit. Some asked how it would work at night; others asked about cloudy days. Still others pointed out that its reading differed from clock time by five or seven minutes.

Neha was open about its limitations in every answer. “It won’t work at night.” “On a cloudy day, the shadow will be unclear.” “There can be a difference between civil time and local solar time.” She had learned that a good presentation was not one that offered a dazzling answer to every question, but one that did not hide what it could not do.

One member of the judging panel asked, “What was the most important discovery you made during this project?”

Neha thought for a moment. “At first I thought time was just numbers. Now I understand that knowing time comes from observation. A clock gives us numbers; a sundial helps us understand why.”

That year, the prize was awarded to the science club as a whole. Neha was even happier that the school gave permission to keep their sundial permanently in the science garden.

Autumn arrived. Neha went back to check the old shadow marks. Once again, she found some differences. She did not worry. She wrote down the new date, measured the direction of the shadow and compared it with her earlier observations.

One evening, Aaji looked through her notebook and said, “We used to look at the sun to tell the time. You look at the sun and find questions.”

Neha laughed. “If I hadn’t had your experience to learn from, I wouldn’t have thought of the questions either.”

Aaji stroked her head. “New knowledge isn’t the enemy of old knowledge, as long as each tests and enriches the other.”

One bright winter morning, Neha stood alone beside the sundial. The stick cast a long shadow over the clay disc. After a while, the shadow shifted a little. The change was so slow that the eye could hardly catch it, yet time was passing.

Neha did not open her notebook. This time she simply watched the shadow. She understood that no one could stop time, but its passage could be watched with care.

The school bell rang in the distance. Neha picked up her schoolbag and walked towards her classroom. Behind her, the shadow moved slowly towards the next mark on the round clay disc—as though the Earth itself were teaching a lesson.



STORY 18

The Friends Who Saved the River



An old branch of the Kosi River flowed past the eastern side of the village. During the rains, its voice grew loud. In winter, the water level dropped, and in spring the white plumes of kans grass waved in the breeze along its banks. The village elders said that a river was not merely water; it was the village's memory.

Over the past two or three years, that familiar scene had begun to change. After market day, plastic bags, discarded containers and other rubbish lay scattered on the bank. A drain also emptied into the river, and in some places the water had begun to smell different.

Meena, a Class Nine student, first noticed the change because of the birds. In the mornings she used to go birdwatching by the river with her friends Aarav, Sonam, Tamay and Kavya. Places where they had once seen cormorants, egrets and shoals of small fish now seemed to have fewer living creatures.

"I think the river is trying to tell us something," Meena said.

Aarav laughed. "Can a river speak?"

"Not with words," Meena replied. "With changes. If the water begins to smell different, the fish become fewer and rubbish piles up on the bank, those are all signs."

That day, the five friends went to see Malati Didi, their science teacher. They told her about the river. Malati Didi did not jump to a conclusion. Instead, she asked, "What have you actually seen, and what are you only guessing?"

All five fell silent.

Malati Didi said, "In science, concern is useful, but concern must be supported by evidence. Divide the riverbank into sections and make regular observations. Keep records of the water's appearance and smell, floating objects, aquatic life and plants along the bank. Measure

whatever you can. If something cannot be measured, say clearly that it is only an observation.”

Early the following Sunday, the friends set out. They divided a stretch of river about two kos long into five sections. They chose a marked spot in each section: Peepal Ghat, the Old Bridge, the Market Bank, the Bend Behind the School and the Confluence near Kamlahi Pond.

Sonam prepared a thick notebook. On its first page she wrote: “Date, time, sky conditions, water colour, smell, objects floating on the surface, aquatic creatures sighted, condition of the bank.”

Tamav asked, “What can we learn by looking for just one day?”

“Not enough,” Meena answered. “We’ll have to visit at the same time for several weeks at least. Rain, sunshine and market day all affect the river differently.”

Malati Didi gave them clear glass bottles, a measuring tape, a thermometer and simple acid–alkali indicator strips from the school. She warned them, “These measurements cannot tell us that the river is safe or unsafe. They are only preliminary observations at school level. If you suspect serious pollution, proper testing by an accredited laboratory and the relevant authorities is necessary.”

Aarav’s eyes lit up. “So we’re not detectives. We’re observers.”

“Exactly,” Didi said with a smile. “And good observers record the limits of what they know.”

In the first week, the water at Peepal Ghat looked comparatively clear. At the Market Bank, however, more plastic, leaves and discarded scraps of food floated on the surface. Beneath the Old Bridge, near the drain’s opening, the water looked somewhat dirty and had an unpleasant smell.

Kavya wrote, “The differences between these places are a question in themselves. The river is not the same everywhere.”

In the second week, the friends spoke to the village washerman, boatman, farmers, fishers and women who lived near the riverbank. They did not immediately treat anyone’s answer as a proven fact. Instead, they recorded each account under a separate heading: “People’s Experiences.”

Ram Bahadur Kaka, the boatman, told them, “Ten years ago, you could see water as clear as glass here. Now the bank is filthy after market day.”

Saraswati Kaki, the washerwoman, said, “Don’t put all the blame on the market. Drains from houses flow towards the river too. We should all think about where the dirty water leaving our own courtyards ends up.”

Meena drew a circle around those words. She understood that saving a river did not begin only on its banks. Homes, markets, drains and fields were all connected through the same water cycle.

In the third week, the friends made a simple map. They wrote no household names on it. They marked only the drains, market, school, fields, belt of trees and direction of water flow. They saw that rainwater carried large amounts of light litter straight towards the river.

Tamay asked, “Then should we first pick up everything from the bank?”

“We do need to pick it up,” Sonam said. “But if we don’t stop it at the source, it will just pile up again.”

That idea divided the group’s work into two parts: safely collecting the rubbish already on the bank, and reducing the flow of new waste into the river.

They obtained permission for the clean-up from the headteacher, the village assembly and the children’s parents. The children were strictly told not to touch sharp glass, medicine containers or unfamiliar chemicals with their hands. If they found anything like that, they would ask an adult for help.



On Sunday morning, villagers gathered at the river. Some brought sacks, others bamboo tongs, and others thick cloth gloves. Plastic, paper, small metal containers and organic waste were collected separately. Items that could be used again were set aside; the rest was handed to the panchayat workers for disposal under the local arrangements.

In the middle of the clean-up, Aarav held up an old shoe. “Where would this float to in the river?”

“Wherever the current carried it,” Ram Bahadur Kaka replied. “But the real question is why it ended up in the river at all.”

Everyone laughed, yet the question stayed in their minds.

Their next task was the Market Bank. The friends met with the people who ran the market. It would have been easy to accuse them, but Meena first showed the group’s observations: the number of plastic items rose a day after the market, fell somewhat after three days, then rose again on the next market day.

One seller said, “Customers ask for bags. What are we supposed to do?”

“We haven’t come to blame anyone,” Kavya replied. “We’ve come to look for alternatives.”

The school's sewing group made several carry bags from clean, old cloth. Potters brought small clay containers. At two places on the Market Bank, they set out bamboo collection bins with lids, so that light pieces of rubbish would not blow into the river.

But during the first week, one of the bins toppled over. Dogs and cattle scattered its contents in every direction.

Tamam was disappointed. "Our idea failed."

"It didn't fail," Meena said. "It showed us that the lid and the base weren't strong enough."

Bisesar Kaka, the carpenter, showed them how to anchor the bamboo bins in the ground. They also made a simple rope fastening for the lids. In the second week, the bins did not fall over.

The friends turned their attention back to the drain. It would not be wise for them to build something there to block the flow themselves. An unsuitable obstruction could cause waterlogging or increase the risk of disease. Malati Didi said, "Your job here is to gather evidence and inform the proper authority, not to build an engineering structure yourselves."

They submitted a written report to the panchayat. It gave the location of the drain, their observations of the smell, dated photographs and details of the conditions after rain. The panchayat passed the information to the block office. A few weeks later, an inspection took place, and work began on improving the drainage outlet and installing a mesh barrier to keep discarded waste from passing through.

Meena realised that change did not always happen at once. Many kinds of work needed written evidence, permission, money and time.

Meanwhile, the school celebrated "River Week." But it was not just a week of speeches. The Class Six children drew pictures of river birds. Class Seven built a model of the water cycle. Class Eight listed the plants that grew along the banks. And the Class Nine friends presented three months of observations.

Sonam made an important point clear: "We cannot say the river has become completely clean. Our measurements are limited. But we have seen less plastic thrown onto the bank, more people using the

collection bins at the market, and the start of an inspection of the drain. Those are changes we have actually observed.”

Malati Didi was pleased. “That is scientific honesty: make only the claims your evidence supports.”

The rains returned. Fast-moving water washed away soil from parts of the bank. Now the friends faced a new problem: erosion. They learned from their botany teacher that the roots of native grasses, shrubs and trees could help hold soil together along a river’s natural banks. But the same solution was not suitable everywhere.

They discussed the problem with the village assembly. Following advice from the Forest Department, they planted native species in safe, erosion-affected places. The children were not sent near the river’s active, fast-flowing channel.

As Kavya planted a little sapling, she said, “Perhaps we won’t see the shade of this tree.”

“But the river will,” Aarav replied.

One autumn morning, all five friends went back to Peepal Ghat. Sunlight shimmered on the water. A few egrets had appeared again, and a shoal of small fish flashed near the bank. Meena did not immediately announce a victory. She simply wrote down the date and her observations: “Morning. Clear sky. Three egrets. Small fish sighted.”

Tamay laughed. “After all these months, you’re still just writing things down?”

“We have to,” Meena replied. “If we simply go home happy, how will we make a comparison next year?”

Looking at the river, Sonam said, “I used to think saving a river meant cleaning up its bank for one day. Now I understand that it takes a long time. It’s about habits, systems, knowledge and constant vigilance.”

That day, the friends changed the name of their group. Their notebook had previously said “The Friends Who Saved the River.” Meena said, “Let the name stay. But we aren’t the river’s owners. We’re its companions.”

Aarav asked, “Then what is the river to us?”

Meena did not reply. She gathered a little water in her palm and gently let it flow back into the current.

The school bell rang in the distance. The five friends picked up their schoolbags and set off. Behind them, the river kept flowing— ceaselessly, carrying its memories and the consequences of every small and large choice made in the village's courtyards.

That morning, they understood that protecting the river was not a favour they were doing for it. It was a responsibility towards their own future.



STORY 19

The Map of a Moonlit Night



It was a clear night after the rains of Ashadh had passed. The day's oppressive heat had eased with the evening, and the sky above the village had grown so clear that countless stars shone as far as the eye could see.

Anvi, a Class Nine student, lay on a cot in the courtyard of her home, gazing at the sky. She had always loved the stars, but that night a question kept troubling her: "How did people use all these stars to find their direction and tell the time?"

The next day at school, their science teacher, Sudhanshu Sir, began talking about the sky. Anvi raised her hand at once.

"Sir, if there were no electricity, no mobile phone and no instrument to show us directions, how could we find north and south from the sky?"

Sudhanshu Sir smiled. "That's a good question. But you won't find the answer only in a book. This week, we'll observe the night sky ourselves."

Anvi was delighted. Her friends Neel, Madhav, Champa and Raghav were equally eager. First, the teacher laid down the rules: night observations must take place with adults, in a safe, open area; bright torchlight should be kept to a minimum; and no one must go alone along unfamiliar paths through the fields.

To the west of the village, on the embankment of an old pond, there was a high, open spot. Few trees blocked the view, so a large part of the sky was visible. On Sunday evening, everyone gathered there with their parents or guardians.

Sudhanshu Sir said, "Don't start with the Moon. Look at the stars first. Give your eyes time to get used to the darkness. After five or ten minutes, you'll begin to see stars that weren't visible to you at first."

They all gazed silently upwards. Gradually, the number of stars seemed to increase. Neel whispered, “The sky is like an open book.”

“It will be a book,” Anvi replied, “when we learn how to read it.”

Sudhanshu Sir pointed north. “Find the group of seven stars called the Saptarishi, or Great Bear. Imagine a line joining its two pointer stars and extend it onwards. It will lead you towards the Pole Star. The Pole Star shows us approximately where north lies in the sky.”

Madhav opened his notebook immediately. “Approximately? Not exactly north?”

“In science, ‘approximately’ is an important word,” Sir explained. “The Pole Star is not exactly on the north celestial pole, but it is close to it. That makes it useful for finding a general direction.”

Anvi wrote the sentence down carefully. She understood that, in science, admitting the limits of a claim was not a weakness. It was honesty.

That night, everyone tried a simple exercise. They identified the direction of the Pole Star, pushed a short stick into the ground to mark their estimate of north, and then checked it against a compass. They recorded how much their estimate differed.

Champa laughed. “My line ended up a little crooked.”

Raghav said, “If it’s crooked, we’ll measure it again. That’s what we’re here to do.”

The following day, Anvi made a round disc out of paper on the roof of her house. She marked its centre, wrote in her estimated four directions, and imagined plotting the positions of the stars on it, night after night.

Her grandmother watched her and asked, “What are you making?”

“A map of the sky.”

Grandmother laughed. “But the sky keeps moving. How can its map stay still?”

The question brought Anvi to a halt. She went straight to Sudhanshu Sir and asked him about it.

Sir said, “That’s exactly the right question. The stars appear to move from east to west through the night because the Earth rotates. So you

must record the time on your map. A picture of the sky at one hour of the night will look different from a picture taken at another.”

Anvi changed her plan. The group decided to observe the sky from the same place, at roughly the same time, for four weeks. They would record the date, time, phase of the Moon, cloud cover, visible groups of stars and their estimate of direction.

During the first week, the Moon was half full. In the second week, the moonlight was brighter, so several faint stars were no longer visible. In the third week, the Moon rose later, and the sky seemed a deeper black. Anvi promptly wrote: “The stars have not vanished. Fewer are visible because of the Moon’s brightness.”

Neel said, “I used to think the sky was the same every night.”

Champa replied, “Now we can see that when the conditions of observation change, our conclusions may change too.”

In the fourth week, there was a light mist. Finding the Pole Star became difficult. Madhav grew a little restless.

Sudhanshu Sir said, “When the sky doesn’t let us see, science teaches us patience. Write down what you couldn’t see as well.”

Anvi wrote on her page: “The observation did not fail; conditions were unsuitable.”



Looking at the picture, Grandmother remembered something from her childhood. “My father used to look at the Pole Star to find his direction when he returned from the fields at night,” she said. “But he also kept the time of night and the season in mind.”

“Aaji, did you all know the names of the stars?” Anvi asked.

“Not all of them,” Grandmother said. “But people knew certain groups of stars, the movements of the Moon and the changes of the seasons. The signs in the sky often came up in conversations about farming, journeys and festivals.”

Anvi recorded this traditional knowledge on a separate page of her notebook. She decided not to mix people’s memories with her scientific observations. She would record each as a different kind of source.

Madhav asked, “Why are you being so careful?”

Anvi answered, “Because people’s experience is valuable, but scientific conclusions need measurements and repeated observations. Both deserve respect in their own place.”

A few days later, the school held a small exhibition about the stars. The friends displayed their four weeks of observation notes, star diagrams marked with times, comparisons of directions, and a summary of how moonlight affected what they could see.

One student asked, “Could we use this map to travel somewhere at night?”

Anvi did not answer at once. Sudhanshu Sir looked towards her.

Anvi said, “It wouldn’t be safe to travel through an unfamiliar place relying on this sheet of paper alone. This is an exercise to help us understand the sky. For a real journey, we need a map of the land, a compass, local knowledge and a safe plan.”

Sir smiled. “That’s the answer I wanted.”

After the exhibition, Devkant Kaka, an elderly boatman from the village, visited the school. He had once worked on the Kamala River. Looking at Anvi’s drawings, he said, “At night, the sky was useful out on the water. But the river’s current, the shape of its banks, the wind and familiar trees also helped us find our way. Never depend on just one sign.”

Anvi added another page to her notebook: “The sky gives direction; the land confirms it.”

The friends talked about that sentence for a long time. Neel said, “Perhaps life is like that too. Dreams show us a direction, but we should check each step we take on the ground.”

Champa laughed. “You’ve turned our science lesson into philosophy!”

But Anvi liked what he had said.

On a clear night in the month of Kartik, everyone gathered once more on the pond embankment. This time, their notebooks stayed mostly closed. First, they simply looked at the sky. The Saptarishi seemed to have shifted a little; the Pole Star appeared to hold its quiet place; and a few new stars were rising in the east.

“My first map won’t be correct any more,” Anvi said.

Sudhanshu Sir replied, “Your map isn’t wrong. It’s a record of the sky on a particular date, at a particular time. When time changes, the view changes. That’s the value of a scientific record: it tells us ‘when’ and ‘where’.”

Suddenly, Anvi understood that a map was not merely a picture of a place. It was also a memory of time.

On the way home that night, the Moon was a little lower in the sky. Its light trembled on the surface of the pond. Anvi stopped on the path and turned to look back at the sky.

Grandmother asked, “What are you looking at?”

“I’m not measuring anything just now,” Anvi said with a smile. “I’m only looking.”

Grandmother took her hand, and they walked on.

When they reached home, Anvi closed her book of sky maps. On the inside of its cover, she wrote a line: “While making a map of the sky, I learned that direction isn’t found only by looking upwards. It also comes from the courage to ask questions, the patience to test evidence and the wisdom to stay connected to the earth.”

When the school bell rang the next morning, Anvi placed her notebook in her bag and set off. The stars of the night could no longer be seen by day, but a new map of the sky remained open in her mind. 🐦

STORY 20

The Cheerful Watchman and the Missing Key



It was a morning in the month of Phagun. Dew sparkled on the leaves of the siris tree in the school courtyard. As he opened the main gate, Bisesar Kaka jingled his old bunch of keys and laughed. “Look! My keys reach school even before I do.”

Bisesar Kaka was the school's watchman. If a door got stuck, a schoolbag tore or a bicycle chain slipped off, he would turn up with his little toolbox. He had one rule: work first, anger later. But even his anger usually turned into laughter.

Several keys hung from an iron ring attached to his belt. Each key had a string of a different colour—red, green, blue or yellow. Bisesar Kaka said the colours helped him recognise the keys even when his eyesight grew dim.

That day, preparations were under way for the annual exhibition of books and records. The old records room had to be opened. It held attendance registers from the school's earliest days, handwritten songs, old maps, scientific instruments and some prize-winning objects. The headmaster said, “Bisesarji, please open the room. The children will arrange the materials in order.”

Bisesar Kaka lifted the bunch. Red string—the office. Blue—the science room. Green—the library. But the large brass key with the yellow string was missing.

He turned the bunch over and over. Once. Twice. A third time. Then he widened his eyes and said, “Well, this is something! The key has grown wings.”

The teenagers standing nearby laughed. But a little worry lay beneath Bisesar Kaka's laughter. There was a spare key to the records

room in the headmaster's cupboard, but the headmaster had gone to town and would not return before evening.

Meena, Ishan, Ranjana and Tushar of Class Nine were there. Meena asked, "Kaka, when did you last see the key with the yellow string?"

Bisesar Kaka scratched his head. "Yesterday evening, when I locked the records room. I had it then. After that, I picked up the long wooden bench that had broken in the verandah and put it under the neem tree. I gave Mali Kaka some water. I rang the last bell, locked the main gate and went home."

Ishan said at once, "Then we'll retrace that route, step by step."

Ranjana added, "And we won't assume that someone has taken the key. We mustn't say anything like that until we have evidence."

Bisesar Kaka smiled. "Wonderful! I've lost the key, and you're saving me from being treated like a criminal."

First, the four teenagers examined the bunch of keys carefully. The main iron ring had opened out slightly at one point. Tushar touched it with his fingernail. "There's quite a gap here. A key could slip off on its own."

Meena also noticed a tiny fibre from the yellow string caught on the edge of the ring. She thought the missing key might have slipped out through that gap. But where had it fallen?

First they went to the door of the records room. There was dust on the ground, but no key. They searched the corners of the verandah, beneath the windows and near the bell rope.

Tushar brought a large magnet from the science room. "The key is metal. It'll be easier to find with a magnet."

Ishan borrowed another key from Kaka and held the magnet near it. The key did not move. Their science teacher, Malati Didi, had been watching from a distance. She said, "Not every metal is attracted to a magnet. This is brass. Before you try an experiment, understand the properties of the object."

Tushar laughed. "We haven't found the key, but we've learned a lesson."

Now all four concentrated on the route Bisesar Kaka had taken the previous evening. He had dragged the long wooden bench from the

verandah to the neem tree. Faint marks were still visible on the ground.

Under the neem tree, Meena noticed a shiny iron nail sticking out from one side of the bench. A fine fibre of yellow thread was caught on its point.

“Look at this!” Meena cried.

Bisesar Kaka bent to look. “Yes! Yesterday, while I was lifting this bench, I felt something catch at my waist. I thought my dhoti had got snagged.”

Ranjana said quietly, “Perhaps the key’s string caught on the nail, the ring opened and the key came loose.”

Everyone searched the bench. On top, underneath, behind it—but there was no key. Ishan lifted the bench to look. Only dry leaves and dust lay below.

Tushar was beginning to lose hope, but Meena spotted a fresh scrape on one of the bench’s wooden boards. “If the key fell here, where did it go next?”

Just then, two children from Class Six came running over. One of them said, “We moved this bench a little this morning. The sun was shining on us.”

“From where to where?” Ishan asked.

The children pointed out the places. The bench had first been on the eastern side of the neem tree, and then they had dragged it to the western side. The four teenagers followed the route, searching the ground again.

Something glittered among the grass. Everyone rushed over, but it was only a shiny sweet wrapper. Tushar picked it up, put it in the rubbish bin and said, “This mystery is teaching us to keep the place clean.”

A little farther on, they found a shallow groove in the earth, left by one of the bench’s legs as it had been dragged along. The groove ended near an old wooden cupboard at the school.

The cupboard door had been opened for cleaning that morning. The bench had stood against it for a little while as the door was opened. Ranjana took a torch and looked beneath the cupboard door. Nothing.

Meena said, “Why are we looking only at the ground? After falling, the key might have become trapped between the bench’s wooden boards and its supports.”

The four carefully tipped the bench onto one side. There, inside a wooden joint, they saw a knot of yellow string. Tushar pulled it gently with his fingers. Something jingled. Out came the large brass key.



Bisesar Kaka laughed so loudly that the teachers standing in the verandah turned to look. “Oh! My key didn’t leave the school after all. It just went to sit on the bench!”

Meena placed the key in Kaka’s hand. “Kaka, please open the room now. But there’s something else we need to do.”

“What? Shall we make the key write its name in the attendance register?”

Everyone laughed again.

Ishan showed them the old iron ring. “This gap could open again. We need a new, strong ring. And the string on every key should be fastened properly.”

Malati Didi had joined them by then. She said, “And improving the tools alone isn’t enough. There should also be a record of keys

being taken and returned. Who took which key, at what time, and for which room—write it all in a small register.”

Bisesar Kaka stopped laughing and grew serious. “That’s right. It isn’t wise to depend entirely on memory. A good system helps people.”

That day, the four teenagers set up a new system for the keys: a strong ring, thick strings of different colours, a secure hook inside the door and a small register. Whenever someone borrowed a key, their name and the time would be recorded. A mark would be made when the key was returned.

When the headmaster returned that evening, he heard the whole story. He asked, “What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned?”

Tushar answered at once, “Brass isn’t attracted to a magnet.”

Everyone laughed. The headmaster asked again, “And another?”

Ranjana said, “Before suspecting anyone, we should examine the sequence of events and the evidence.”

Meena added, “A small fault—like a gap in a key ring—can cause a big problem. Things need to be checked regularly.”

Ishan said, “And what we’re looking for isn’t always far away. Sometimes something lies hidden in the work we did yesterday.”

Bisesar Kaka folded his hands. “My lesson is this: when you lift a bench, save your keys first, and then your back.”

The next morning, Bisesar Kaka opened the main gate. The keys jingled once more on their new ring. Meena was entering school with her three friends. From a distance, Kaka called out, “I’ve counted every key this time. If I go missing myself, follow the route I took yesterday!”

Tushar called back immediately, “We’ll look for evidence first, Kaka!”

The school bell rang. Laughing, Bisesar Kaka walked towards the verandah. The bunch of keys jingled at his waist, as though the keys, too, were smiling at yesterday’s mystery.

The four teenagers went to their classroom. The mystery had been solved, but a new habit had begun to grow in them: observe, connect, test—and only then believe.





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