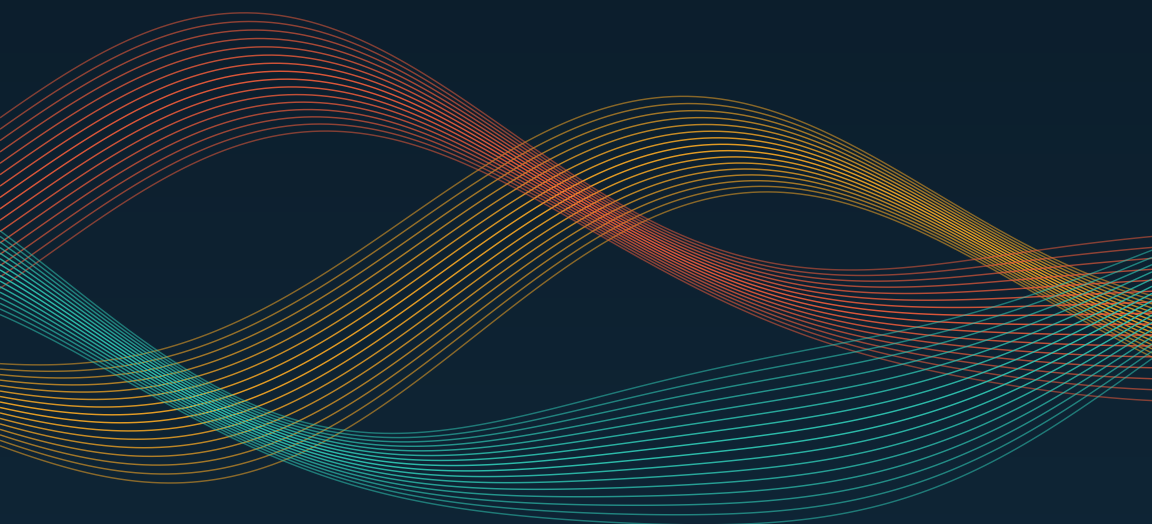


VOLUME II

STORIES 101-200

THREE STREAMS *of Stories*



GAJENDRA THAKUR

Three Hundred Selected Stories · Translated from the Original Maithili by the Author

THREE STREAMS OF STORIES

VOLUME II

(Three Hundred Selected Stories by Gajendra Thakur)

STORIES 101–200

GAJENDRA THAKUR

*Translated from the Original Maithili into English by the Author
Himself*

THREE STREAMS OF STORIES

Gajendra Thakur's three hundred selected stories are a living mirror of the many forms of life in Mithila, Vajji, and Anga: human relationships, changing times, village and town, sorrow and joy, tradition and modernity, nature and society, women and men, the minds of children, old age, migration, memory, struggle, and hope.

Across these three volumes, the simplicity of the people's language, the depth of lived experience, and the cultural pulse of Mithila, Vajji, and Anga abide together.

Stories remain alive for as long as people and language remain alive.

— Gajendra Thakur

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STORY 101

FOUR HANDFULS OF SEED

It was the last week of Aghan. After three days of sunshine, the colour of the paddy heaps in the threshing ground on the southern side of Majhaul village had begun to change—the fresh-cut gold was slowly turning grey-gold.

Sunaina was the first to arrive through the morning mist. A small red thread was tied to the corner of her sari. It was not meant for anyone to notice; she intended to use it to mark the sack of paddy selected for seed.

Only two oxen were tethered in the threshing ground so far, and Gopal was levelling the earth with a broom.

“Was the dew heavy last night?” Sunaina asked.

Gopal picked up a fistful of paddy and brought it to his nose.

“A little on the surface. Inside it is fine. If we turn it till ten o’clock, it will do.”

Sunaina bit a grain between her teeth.

“We will keep the seed heap separate, won’t we?”

Gopal stopped sweeping and looked at her.

“Let the division be done first. The question will come up today.”

“Will good grain be left after the division?”

“Whether it will be left or not is not the point. The point is, I do not know whether this field will remain in my hands next year.”

Sunaina did not answer. She tucked the red thread back into the fold of her sari.

The three bighas on the southern side belonged to Baldev Babu. For five years Gopal had cultivated them on a half-share basis. Gopal supplied the seed, farmyard manure, and part of the labour; Baldev Babu paid half the diesel for the pump and half the chemical fertiliser. After harvesting and threshing, the expenses were deducted and the remaining paddy divided equally.

Nothing was on paper.

Between the two households lay five years of memory—who had bought how many sacks of urea, who had repaired the pump pipe the previous year, in which year the paddy had stood under floodwater for three days, in which year mice had eaten the seed.

Within that memory, a small practice had continued since the days of Sunaina’s mother-in-law.

While the sacks were being filled, four handfuls of good paddy were taken from every sack and set aside.

That grain went into the seed sack.

Before the division.

It belonged neither to the landlord’s share nor to the cultivator’s share.

It was the cost of the next sowing.

At first Sunaina had found the practice rough and pointless. What could four handfuls amount to? But by the time thirty or thirty-five sacks had been filled, those four handfuls had grown into nearly a full sack.

For the past five years, the southern fields had begun again each season from that seed.

This year was different.

Baldev Babu's younger son, Naresh, had returned from the city. He had said that next year the field would not be given to Gopal; he would farm it himself with his maternal cousin and a tractor.

Gopal had not heard this from Baldev Babu's own mouth, but the village had begun saying it.

And once a thing begins to circulate in a village, it is hard to know when it becomes the owner's decision and when it remains merely the people's guess.

Baldev Babu arrived at half past eight.

He carried an old walking stick, a cloth bag tucked under his arm, and a white gamchha on his head. Naresh came with him.

Naresh wore an old pair of city shoes, but once his feet sank into the earth of the threshing ground, his gait became that of a villager.

Baldev Babu looked at the heaps.

"The yield has not been bad this year."

Gopal said, "By God's grace. It would have been better still if the pump had not stopped during the last irrigation."

Naresh spoke at once. "And diesel had to be fetched three times in two days then."

Gopal looked at him but said nothing.

Sunaina went on turning the paddy.

By ten o'clock two more labourers had arrived. Instead of the old brass weights, this time a small iron balance and a fifty-kilo scale had been brought. Naresh had said that if all the sacks were of equal weight, selling them later would be easier.

Gopal liked the idea.

"The measurement will be clear," he said.

Baldev Babu laughed.

"Whether clear measurement reduces quarrels or begins a new kind of quarrel—we shall learn that today."

For the first time, Sunaina smiled.

The first sack was lifted onto the scale.

A little under fifty kilos.

Gopal added paddy from the top.

The needle came level.

Sunaina stepped forward. With her right hand she took out four handfuls of paddy and dropped them into a small bamboo basket kept nearby.

Naresh asked, "What is that?"

"Seed," Sunaina said simply.

"Whose seed?"

At the four words of that question, Gopal's hand stopped.

Sunaina looked at Naresh's face.

"The field's."

Naresh did not laugh.

"Will you open a granary in the field's name?"

Baldev Babu kept scratching the earth with the tip of his stick.

Gopal said, "It is the custom. It has always been kept aside first."

Naresh rested a hand on the sack. "When you are not even going to cultivate this field next year, why should your house keep the seed?"

Sunaina said, "Why should my house keep it? Let the sack remain in Baldev Babu's store room."

"Then take it from our share. After the halves have been divided."

"Seed is not selected after division. The good grain is here before us now."

A crease appeared on Naresh's forehead.

"If all the good grain goes into seed, will only bad grain remain to sell?"

This time Sunaina laughed softly.

"Not all the good grain. Four handfuls."

"Four handfuls from every sack."

"Yes."

"If there are thirty sacks?"

"Almost one sack."

Naresh turned to Gopal.

"One sack of paddy is not a small matter."

Gopal said quietly, "It is not a small matter. That is why for five years it has been kept aside before the division."

Baldev Babu had remained silent until then.

He looked at the first sack, then at the basket.

"How much was kept last year?"

Sunaina answered at once. "Forty-two kilos."

"How much seed was used?"

"About thirty-seven kilos. Five kilos remained. Mice ate two kilos of that. I dried the remaining three and kept them. This year those were the first to go into the nursery bed."

Naresh asked, "Where is all that accounting written?"

Sunaina slipped a hand into the fold of her sari. She did not take out the red thread. Instead, she drew out a small old notebook she had brought from home.

On one page, in pencil, was written: Southern Tract, Lalmania, 42 kilos.

Below it: after Rohini nakshatra, 37 kilos.

Naresh looked at the notebook.

"This is not an official register."

Sunaina said, "Neither is the paddy government property."

The two labourers burst out laughing.

Baldev Babu did not laugh.

He said, "Dry the paddy first. We will discuss the matter later."

But the matter did not wait for later.

When the second sack was filled, Sunaina again took out four handfuls. Naresh reached out and stopped the basket.

"Wait. Let the decision be made first."

Gopal's face hardened.

"Are you stopping the sack or the seed?"

"I am stopping nothing. I only want a clear account."

"Then count five years of custom in your clear account as well."

"You cultivated for five years. In the sixth year someone else will cultivate."

"The field will still be the same."

"But who did the labour of preparing the seed?"

At that question, Sunaina turned fully toward Naresh for the first time.

"That is a good question."

She set the basket down.

"Who sorts the paddy, dries it, puts neem leaves in it, and turns the sack three times?"

Before Naresh could speak, Gopal said, "Sunaina."

"Then," Sunaina said, "if someone else cultivates next year, give the seed to him. But let the work of preparing the seed this year also enter the account."

Baldev Babu raised his head for the first time.

"How much is that account?"

Sunaina fell silent.

She had never thought of a separate price for that work.

For five years the work had lived inside farming itself—like untying the cattle at dawn, turning sacks in the sun, watching the first water in the nursery bed.

The moment a price was put on it, the work seemed to change its shape.

Gopal said, "It is not about price. It is about the rule."

Naresh answered at once, "A rule exists only when it is clear. Otherwise the same dispute will return next year."

Baldev Babu walked to the edge of the threshing ground and sat down, leaning on his stick.

"All right. Do not stop filling the sacks. Let the weighing continue. The seed basket will remain here. We will decide by evening."

The work began again.

But now, whenever the four handfuls came out, every eye fell on the basket.

Third sack.

Four handfuls.

Fourth sack.

Four handfuls.

While filling the fifth sack, Chhotu, one of the labourers, asked, "Would it be good to keep seed this way in my field too?"

Gopal said, "Your field is your own."

Chhotu replied, "In one's own field, seed is the first thing people sell. Cash is always needed."

No one answered.

By noon fourteen sacks had been filled. The basket was half full.

From time to time Sunaina sorted the grains, separating diseased ones, black-spotted ones, and the half-ripe.

Naresh watched her twice.

The third time, he picked up a handful himself and asked, "Are these good?"

Sunaina spread the grains on her palm and looked.

"Two are light. Blow on them."

Naresh blew. Two grains fell to the edge.

"These are not seed?"

"You can eat them. Why put them in the seed?"

Naresh returned the handful to the basket.

Lunch came from Baldev Babu's house—flattened rice, curd, and jaggery.

Everyone sat along one side of the threshing ground.

Gopal had grown quiet.

Sunaina knew that he needed cash. The fertiliser bought on credit the previous month was still unpaid. Their daughter Rani's annual school fee was due the following week. Even half the value of a sack of paddy was not a small amount for them.

Sunaina asked softly, "What do you think?"

Gopal set down his bowl of curd.

"Let the old custom remain."

"If the field leaves our hands?"

"Then the seed belongs to Baldev Babu."

"And what I sort?"

Gopal was silent for a while.

"That was part of the farm work."

"Whose farm work?"

Gopal looked at her.

Sunaina did not smile.

"I am not asking for money. But if a rule is being made, let the work have a name."

Gopal let out a breath.

"You want a name for everything?"

"If it has no name, next time people will say—it simply happened by itself."

At that moment Baldev Babu came near.

"What happened by itself?"

Sunaina did not hesitate.

"The seed."

Baldev Babu took a handful of flattened rice.

"In my father's time, seed used to be set aside separately. But in those days sharecroppers changed less often."

Gopal said, "Will it change now?"

Baldev Babu did not answer directly.

"Naresh wants to farm."

“Let him.”

“You are not upset?”

Gopal kept breaking off bits of jaggery.

“The field is yours. I have cultivated it for five years. Let the accounts be settled properly.”

“That is all?”

Gopal lifted his head.

“Does saying ‘that is all’ make it any smaller?”

Baldev Babu looked at him for a few moments.

“No.”

After noon, Mohan Sah, a trader from the market, arrived.

He left his motorcycle outside the threshing ground and immediately began counting the sacks.

“The price is good today,” he said. “It may fall tomorrow.”

Naresh’s eyes brightened.

“How much?”

Mohan Sah named the price.

Gopal calculated at once in his head.

At that rate, if he sold his half, he could clear the fertiliser debt, pay the school fee, and still save something.

Mohan Sah looked at the paddy in the basket.

“Why has that been kept separately?”

Naresh said, “There is a dispute over the seed.”

Mohan Sah laughed.

“Sell the paddy and buy seed from the market. Certified seed. Higher yield.”

Sunaina asked, “The last certified seed you brought—how much of it germinated?”

Mohan Sah’s smile faded a little.

“Every year is not the same.”

Baldev Babu said, “Market seed is not bad. But one’s own seed is not useless either.”

Mohan Sah patted a sack.

“The price is here today. If you keep one sack as seed, you are holding back one sack’s cash.”

Everyone understood that.

Naresh understood it.

Gopal understood it.

So did Sunaina.

The custom of four handfuls had suddenly ceased to be merely tradition. It had become a question of cash.

Mohan Sah left.

Naresh said, “You heard him? One sack means this much money at today’s price.”

Sunaina replied, “And when seed has to be bought next Jeth, what will the price be then?”

"Who knows?"

"That is why seed is a cost."

"But what if I sow a new variety?"

"Then sell this one."

"Whose money?"

The same question again.

This time Sunaina did not answer.

Baldev Babu said, "We will weigh it in the evening. First let us see how much it comes to."

The work continued until dusk.

There were thirty-two full sacks and another containing twenty-seven kilos.

The seed basket was emptied three times into one separate sack.

It weighed thirty-eight kilos and six hundred grams.

Sunaina wrote it in her notebook.

Naresh watched carefully.

"How much will be needed for the next sowing?"

"Thirty-five to thirty-seven kilos will be enough for this field."

"Then one and a half or two kilos will remain."

"Some will be lost in the germination test. And there are mice."

Baldev Babu said, "Good. Now the accounts."

They all sat in the middle of the threshing ground.

Gopal brought his notebook. Baldev Babu took fertiliser and diesel receipts from his bag. Naresh used a calculator.

First the expenses.

Then the total weight.

Then the half shares.

When the thirty-eight kilos and six hundred grams of seed were kept outside the total before division, Naresh stopped again.

"Write 'seed' here. But who is the owner?"

Gopal was silent.

Sunaina held her pencil motionless over the notebook.

Baldev Babu said, "Write my name as owner."

Sunaina did not move the pencil.

Naresh looked at her.

"Why?"

"If you are the owner, then this becomes your share. Why should it be taken out before the division?"

Baldev Babu grew slightly irritated.

"Then whose name?"

Sunaina said softly, "The Southern Tract."

Naresh burst out laughing.

"Will the field sign its name?"

Gopal laughed too.

The tension loosened a little.

Smiling, Baldev Babu said, "The field will not sign, but the field will not change."

Sunaina said, "The cultivator will."

"Yes."

"Then let the field's name remain."

Naresh stopped smiling and became serious.

"All right. But what will be the rule for using it?"

This time everyone was silent.

With his stick, Baldev Babu drew four lines on the earth.

First line—how much seed.

Second—who receives it.

Third—what happens if it is not used.

Fourth—whose work it is to sort and dry it.

"These four things must be clear," he said.

Gopal said, "Whoever cultivates the field next year will receive the seed."

Naresh asked, "Free?"

"It has already been taken out of this year's produce before division."

"But the person who cultivates next year has given nothing this year."

Sunaina said, "At the next harvest, he will set aside the same amount of seed again."

Naresh paused.

"What if the crop fails?"

"As much as possible. If less can be kept, let it be written down how much less."

Baldev Babu said, "Good. The seed is like the field's revolving capital."

Sunaina smiled a little at the word 'capital'.

"I do not know such grand words. Seed is simply seed."

Gopal said, "Third question—what if new seed is bought?"

Naresh replied immediately, "Then sell the old seed."

"The money?" Baldev Babu asked.

Gopal said, "Half to the owner and half to the cultivator of the year in which this seed was produced."

Sunaina interrupted, "First, the cost of preparing the seed?"

Naresh smiled.

"Now there is a cost again."

"Sorting, drying, neem leaves, the sack—does the air do all that?"

Baldev Babu said, "How much will you take?"

Sunaina faltered again.

She did not want to put a price on the work; she only did not want the work to remain invisible.

After thinking a little, she said, "No money. The household where the seed is stored must be responsible for drying it twice and protecting it from mice. If there is any loss, it must be written down. That is all."

Naresh asked, "And the labour?"

"This year I sorted it. Next year the household of whoever cultivates will sort it. Write that into the rule."

Baldev Babu nodded.

“That is fair.”

The fourth point was settled.

Only one question remained—where the seed would be kept.

Baldev Babu’s masonry store room was secure, but damp had entered it the previous year. The raised platform in Gopal’s house was dry, but if his connection with the field ended, coming to ask for the seed next year would be awkward.

Naresh said, “Let it stay at our house.”

Gopal did not object at once.

Sunaina pressed the sack with her hand.

“Let it stay there. But write the field’s name, the variety, the date, and the weight on the sack. And let both households seal it.”

Naresh was startled.

“Seal it?”

“With thread.”

Sunaina opened the fold of her sari and took out the red thread.

“I will tie red. You tie your colour. If the sack is opened, both threads will have to be cut.”

Gopal laughed.

“A register on top of a register.”

Sunaina said, “Paper gets lost. Thread can be seen.”

Naresh felt in his pocket. He had a thin green plastic cord, the kind he used to tie his motorcycle papers.

“This is my colour.”

Baldev Babu said, “For the first time in this threshing ground, there has been more discussion of thread than of paddy.”

Evening was falling.

The accounts were completed. Gopal’s sacks stood to one side, Baldev Babu’s to the other.

The seed sack stood in the middle.

Mohan Sah came back again.

“Will you sell?”

Gopal looked at his sacks.

“I will sell ten sacks from my half.”

Baldev Babu said, “I will sell twelve.”

Mohan Sah looked at the seed sack.

“And this?”

Naresh answered, “Not this one.”

Mohan Sah shrugged.

“If the price falls tomorrow, do not blame me.”

Gopal said, “Tomorrow’s market will not decide the price of seed.”

Laughing, Mohan Sah left.

Before nightfall, the seed sack was carried to Baldev Babu’s house.

On a piece of white paper Sunaina wrote:

Southern Tract.

Lalmania paddy.

Aghan.

Thirty-eight kilos, six hundred grams.

For the next cultivator.

After use, seed to be set aside again at the next harvest.

If not used, the sale proceeds to be divided equally between the two parties of this year.

Sorting and drying the seed to be the responsibility of the next cultivator.

Below, Baldev Babu and Gopal affixed their thumbprints/signatures. Sunaina wrote her name beside the words 'seed sorted by'. Naresh signed as witness.

The paper was stitched onto the sack.

Red and green threads were tied across its mouth.

Gopal said little on the way home.

Sunaina asked, "Are you upset?"

Gopal said, "Because the field will leave us."

"Is it certain yet?"

"Baldev Babu will not brush aside Naresh's wish."

"Then we will look for another field."

"Will we find one?"

"Are fields scarce, or hands?"

Gopal smiled.

"Hands are more plentiful."

They walked some distance in silence.

Behind them, chaff was blowing across the threshing ground.

For the next three months, Gopal's life kept its usual course. The money from the paddy paid the fertiliser debt, the school fee was deposited, and two sacks were kept for the household to eat.

In Magh, Baldev Babu said plainly that the following year Naresh and his maternal cousin would cultivate the Southern Tract.

Gopal merely said, "All right."

Sunaina heard it and raised no quarrel.

In Phagun, Gopal settled on two bighas of land on a half-share arrangement along the boundary of another village.

At the end of Baisakh, Naresh came to Gopal's house one day.

The same white paper was in his hand.

"We have to open the seed sack."

Gopal was sitting under the eaves.

"Why do you need me?"

Naresh showed him the paper.

"There were two threads, remember? Sunaina had said the red thread was yours."

Sunaina came out from inside.

"The red thread was not mine. It belonged to the cultivator's side for that year."

“That was you.”

“Now you will cultivate the field. The old side only has to be present when the sack is opened.”

The three of them went to Baldev Babu’s house.

The sack was brought out of the store room.

The green thread had turned dull. The red had faded too.

The writing on the paper was still clear.

Sunaina pressed the sack.

“Open it in the sun first. I can feel dampness inside now.”

Naresh said, “We will sun it tomorrow.”

Gopal asked, “Have you tested the germination?”

“No.”

Sunaina said, “Soak a hundred grains. You will know in two days.”

Naresh nodded.

The sack was not opened that day.

The next day, in the sun, both threads were cut.

A hundred grains were wrapped in a wet cloth.

On the third day, eighty-six had sprouted.

Naresh said, “That will do.”

Sunaina said, “Keep a little more seed. Germination is eighty-six per cent.”

Naresh laughed.

“Is the seed mine now?”

Sunaina looked at the paper.

“It is still the field’s. Once it goes into your nursery bed, it becomes your responsibility.”

Without a word, Gopal helped lift the seed sack.

Naresh did not stop him.

Two men carried the sack outside.

Baldev Babu stood at the doorway.

“Gopal, do you have seed for your new field?”

“The owner’s household will provide it.”

“On paper?”

Gopal looked at Sunaina.

Sunaina laughed.

“This time we will ask first.”

Naresh could not load the sack onto his motorcycle, so a handcart was sent for. When the cart moved away, the paper label faced outward.

Southern Tract.

No man’s name above it.

Gopal read it once.

Then he took the road that led toward his new field.

THE PLOUGH'S ROAD

It was the second Monday of Ashadh. After a light rain through the night, the unmetalled road in Majhau village was soft with mud, but not so soft that the oxen's hooves would sink into it.

At dawn, Jagesar opened the door of the cattle shed and first ran a hand over Moti's back. The other ox, Karia, had his muzzle in the trough and was eating chaff.

The two oxen were the joint property of two brothers. Jagesar was the elder, Nandu the younger. While their father was still alive, he had said, "Divide the fields if you must, but the oxen cannot be divided into two."

After their father died, the fields were indeed divided, and even a thin wall rose through the middle of the courtyard; but Moti and Karia, the plough, the yoke, and the old bullock cart remained in the joint possession of the two brothers.

On days when the oxen were free from work in their own fields, the brothers hired out the plough and oxen to the village's small farmers.

The rule was very old.

From morning till noon—a half-day.

From noon till evening—a half-day.

The rate was the same.

Whether the field was near or far.

Whether the soil was hard or soft—none of this was asked when the rate was fixed.

Nandu strongly favoured this simple rule.

"The account stays clear," he would say. "A half-day means a half-day. Look at the clock, pay the money, and the matter is finished."

Jagesar would usually laugh.

"The cleaner the account, the fewer the complications."

That Monday morning's half-day had been entered in Mohan's name.

Mohan's field lay east of the village, beyond the old mango grove, on the far side of a small stream. It was about half a kos from the cattle shed.

Lifting the yoke, Nandu asked, "Will the road there be muddy now?"

Mohan, who was already standing by the cattle shed, said, "The main road is all right. It may be a little soft near the stream. I will take a spade."

Jagesar looked not at a clock but at the sky.

"The morning is good. If you reach there before the sun climbs, the oxen will have an easier time."

Mohan said, "That is why I came while it was still dark."

Nandu took the plough on his shoulder. Jagesar untethered the oxen.

The custom was that with each hire, one of the two brothers went along to handle the plough. If the customer wished, he could handle it himself, but the

rate remained the same, because the oxen and the plough were considered the principal part of the hire.

Today it was Nandu's turn to go.

Mohan walked ahead carrying the spade. Nandu came behind with the plough, with Moti and Karia between them.

The road through the middle of the village was easy. Someone was sweeping a doorstep, someone turning cow-dung cakes, someone walking towards the pond with a lota in hand.

Beyond the grove, the road narrowed.

At one place, water had collected in an old bullock-cart wheel rut. Mohan cut a channel at the edge with his spade and let the water drain away.

Nandu stood waiting.

"Five minutes went here," he said.

Mohan smiled.

"From my field's time?"

Nandu laughed too.

"The half-day clock started the moment we left the cattle shed."

Mohan gave no answer.

Near the stream the road was softer still. Moti's right hoof slipped twice. Nandu put the plough down and loosened the yoke a little.

"Wait a little," he said.

Mohan sat down on the grassy edge.

The oxen spent five or seven minutes catching their breath.

By the time they reached the field, the sun was emerging from behind the clouds.

Mohan pointed out the bund of his field.

"The northern patch first. The soil there is a little heavy."

Nandu took hold of the plough.

With the very first furrow, he understood that the night's rain had softened the topsoil, but the earth beneath was still hard.

Moti and Karia leaned into the yoke.

After two furrows Nandu stopped.

"Do you want it deep?"

"It is the first ploughing," Mohan said. "As deep as the oxen can go comfortably."

The work settled into its rhythm.

Mohan kept cutting grass from the bund. From time to time he took the plough handle himself and gave Nandu a rest.

After about an hour, Karia began panting with his mouth open.

Nandu stopped the plough.

"Water."

Mohan ran towards the bucket kept in a corner of the field.

The oxen were not given too much water at once. Their mouths were washed, they were allowed to drink a little, and then they were made to stand in the shade.

Mohan asked, "How long a rest?"

“Ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Does that count in the half-day too?”

This time Nandu did not laugh.

“If the oxen do not rest, how will they work the second shift?”

Mohan nodded.

“That is true.”

A little later, the ploughing began again.

Before noon, Nandu looked up at the sky.

“We have to turn back now.”

Mohan was startled.

“Only this much?”

The northern patch was finished, but two rows in the south were still untouched.

Nandu said, “The second half-day belongs to Shivrath. His field is on the western side of the village. We have to reach the shed, give the oxen chaff and water, and then set out again. That will take time.”

Mohan brushed the soil from his hands.

“I will pay for a half-day, but the ploughing I received was barely an hour and a half or two hours.”

“The oxen were walking on the road too.”

“The road did not plough my field.”

“Is the road not work for the oxen?”

Mohan was silent for a moment.

“It is work. But then say that I am hiring the oxen for half a day, not buying a half-day of ploughing.”

Nandu let go of the plough handle.

“That is exactly what we hire out.”

“Then a man whose field is close by gets three hours of ploughing in the oxen’s half-day, while I get an hour and a half. Yet the money is the same.”

“I did not create the distance.”

“Nor did I take a distant field for the pleasure of the road.”

Neither man raised his voice.

Moti had turned his muzzle towards the shade. Karia was swishing flies away with his tail.

At last Nandu said, “For today, the work has been done according to the rule as it stands. Speak to my elder brother.”

Mohan paid the full amount.

Nandu did not count it. He put it into the pouch at his waist.

They spoke little on the way back.

When they reached the cattle shed, Jagesar asked, “Did the work go well?”

Leaning the plough against the wall, Nandu said, “The field was good. The account was bad.”

Mohan remained standing there.

Nandu told the whole story.

After listening, Jagesar looked first at Mohan and then at the oxen.

“Did you pay the full amount?”

Mohan said, "I did. I am not asking you to break the rule. I am asking you to understand the rule."

Just then Shivnath arrived. His western field was not even ten minutes from the cattle shed.

He heard the last part of the conversation.

"What fault is mine?" he said with a laugh. "I bought a field close by, so I get more ploughing."

Mohan smiled as well.

"It is not your fault. Nor is my question addressed to you."

Jagesar went on putting chaff into the trough.

"The half-day rate has been there since our father's time," he said. "The village was not spread out so far then. Few fields beyond the eastern stream were cultivated."

Nandu said at once, "If we change the rule, the account will become a headache. Measure the road, measure the rest, measure the field—spend the whole day writing."

Jagesar looked at him.

"What do we lose by writing it down for three days and seeing?"

Nandu frowned.

"For whom?"

"For ourselves."

Shivnath laughed.

"Write down my shift today as well. Let us see how much advantage I am getting."

Jagesar went into the house and brought out his son's old school notebook. Half a page still carried arithmetic sums. On a blank page he ruled four lines.

Name.

Time of departure from the cattle shed.

Ploughing in the field—start and finish.

Rest for the oxen.

Nandu said, "Where is the time of return?"

Jagesar added a fifth line.

Time of return to the cattle shed.

"All right now?"

Nandu twisted his mouth.

In the afternoon Nandu went to Shivnath's field.

Left the cattle shed—1:05 p.m.

Ploughing began—1:17 p.m.

First rest—2:56 p.m. to 3:08 p.m.

Ploughing ended—4:05 p.m.

Returned to the cattle shed—4:16 p.m.

Jagesar added up the time.

Road—twenty-three minutes, outward and return together.

Ploughing—two hours and thirty-six minutes.

Rest—twelve minutes.

Nandu wrote down Mohan's morning figures from memory.

Road—one hour and five minutes.

Ploughing—one hour and forty minutes.

Rest—about twenty minutes.

Jagesar did not suggest sending the notebook to Mohan's house. He simply kept looking at the page.

Two days later, records for four more customers had accumulated.

One field was close, but the soil was so slick that the oxen slipped again and again. There was less ploughing and more rest.

One field was far away, but the road was dry and straight. The oxen reached it quickly.

One farmer handled the plough himself, so Nandu merely took the oxen there.

At one place they had to wait half an hour because a field bund had broken.

By the end of three days, the "half-day" had separated itself into four different things.

Road.

Ploughing.

Waiting.

Rest.

Looking at the notebook, Nandu said, "What rate are we supposed to produce by writing all this?"

Jagesar said, "Not the rate yet. First let us understand what we are taking money for."

"For the oxen."

"The oxen walk on the road, plough in the field, and rest in between. All three are the oxen's time. But the work done in the customer's field is not equal in all three."

Nandu fell silent.

On the fourth day a new complication appeared.

The morning shift belonged to Ratneshwar. His field lay by the eastern grove, halfway along the road to Mohan's field. The afternoon shift again belonged to Mohan, because he wanted the untouched southern patch ploughed.

Nandu ploughed Ratneshwar's field in the morning.

Around noon the oxen were given chaff and water there, under the shade of a mango tree.

Jagesar arrived from home with food.

Mohan too came over from his field.

Jagesar said, "Do we now return to the cattle shed and then come back this way?"

Nandu laughed.

"This time the notebook will save me. We will go straight to Mohan's field."

Ratneshwar asked, "Then who pays for the road time from the cattle shed to my field?"

Mohan said, "And there was no road journey at all from the cattle shed to my field."

The three men looked at one another.

Jagesar opened the notebook.

Here the old half-day rule came to a complete halt.

If the whole road journey from the cattle shed to the fields were charged to Mohan, then that day the journey had not even been made for Mohan.

If it were charged entirely to Ratneshwar, then the oxen would not return to the cattle shed until after Mohan's work was over.

Nandu said, "The road is not only the customer's. It is part of the oxen's day as well."

Jagesar looked at him.

"If you had said that three days ago, you would have laughed at yourself."

"Three days ago there was no notebook."

Everyone laughed.

That day Mohan was given a full two hours of ploughing.

When the work ended, he asked, "How much do I pay?"

Jagesar said, "For now, the old rate. We will not set a new one without speaking to everyone."

Mohan said, "I do not want a concession."

"I am not giving you one."

"Then?"

"We are learning the account."

That evening Jagesar and Nandu sat on the low platform outside the cattle shed, the notebook between them.

Nandu wrote down three possibilities.

First—the old half-day.

Second—only the hours of ploughing.

Third—ploughing separately, road separately.

Jagesar asked, "Rest?"

"Why should that fall on the customer?"

"The oxen get tired while ploughing his field."

"But if we do not rest them, the oxen will suffer. That is also part of our cost of keeping animals."

Jagesar smiled.

"Now you are the one changing the rule."

Nandu closed the notebook.

The following Sunday, people gathered beneath the village peepal tree. It was not a formal panchayat. Because the rain had stopped for the previous two days, farmers had come there to talk about their fields.

Jagesar brought the notebook.

He read out the accounts of five days.

Someone immediately said, "If you calculate by the hour, people will quarrel over the clock."

Another said, "If the soil is hard, the plough will move slowly. The customer will say you deliberately stretched the time."

Shivnath said, "My field is close. Why should I pay for the road to a distant field?"

Mohan was there too.

Before he could answer, Jagesar spoke.

"You will not pay for the whole road to a distant field. But some share of the oxen's upkeep is present in every hire. At present that expense is hidden inside the half-day."

An elderly farmer, Phuleshwar, said, "In the old days, when we said half a day, we read the sun, not a morning clock. And all the fields were close. Now new strips to the east and south are being cultivated. The old word has grown longer, but its measure has stayed the same."

Nandu opened the notebook.

"I can see one way."

Everyone looked at him.

"The hire should not be for a 'half-day'. It should be for 'ploughing time'. If someone wants two hours of ploughing, he takes two hours. If he wants three, he takes three."

Shivnath asked, "And the road is free?"

"No. The road is separate. But its rate is lower than the field rate."

"Rest?"

"Rest will be recorded, but its full duration will not be counted as the customer's ploughing time. A small equal share for the upkeep of the oxen will remain in every hired shift."

Phuleshwar asked, "And a distant field?"

Jagesar said, "The first twenty minutes after leaving the cattle shed and the last twenty minutes on the return will count as our own business travel. It will not be charged separately to any customer. Any additional road time beyond that will be added at a lower rate."

Mohan listened carefully.

Nandu added, "If there are two customers in the same direction, the shared stretch of road will not be entered twice. As far as their route is common, that part will be divided between them."

Shivnath laughed.

"Now we will need a calculator."

Nandu said, "No. Fifteen-minute blocks. Four marks in the notebook."

Someone said, "Too much trouble."

Jagesar replied, "The trouble exists in the half-day too. It simply is not written down."

They talked for a long time.

In the end, no permanent rule was made.

They agreed on a one-month trial.

New lines were ruled in the notebook—

Ploughing.

Road.

Rest.

Waiting.

Ploughing time at the full rate.

Separate road time at less than half that rate.

The first and last common approach time to belong to the owners.

Compulsory rest not to count as the customer's ploughing time.

If waiting was caused by the customer, it would be entered separately; if it was caused by the oxen or the plough, it would belong to the owners.

Nandu said, "People will run away the moment they see all these lines."

Jagesar said, "We will see after a month."

The first week was difficult.

Someone would forget to note the time.

Someone would insist that the oxen had entered the field five minutes earlier.

Someone would call a ten-minute rest eight minutes.

Jagesar found a new method.

On reaching the field, when the first furrow began, the customer himself made—not a thumb impression, merely a small slanting mark—in the notebook. At the end of the work he made a second mark. Nandu wrote the time.

"I will write it; you can see it," Nandu would say.

Mohan's next shift was again in the eastern field.

This time the departure from the cattle shed was recorded.

Twenty minutes—the owners' common initial road time.

The next thirty-five minutes—separate road time.

On reaching the field, the oxen spent ten minutes catching their breath—rest.

Then a full two hours of ploughing.

Twelve minutes for water in between—rest.

On the return journey, the road as far as the grove was Mohan's separate road time; after that came the common initial stretch.

The account was made up in the evening.

Compared with the old half-day rate, Mohan's payment came out neither much lower nor much higher—because he had received the full two hours of ploughing and there was additional road time as well.

Hearing the amount, Mohan smiled.

"It costs about what it used to?"

Nandu said, "About the same."

"Then what is the difference?"

Nandu turned the notebook towards him.

"Today you know what the money is for. And the full two hours of ploughing are there."

Mohan looked at the notebook.

"That is not a small difference."

In the second week, Shivnath's nearby field had its turn.

He paid less than under the old half-day system, because his road time fell within the ordinary allowance and he had taken only two hours of ploughing.

He said at once, "I have gained by this."

Nandu said, "If you had taken three hours of ploughing, you would have paid more."

Shivnath laughed.

"I took only as much as I needed. Earlier there was no option except to take half a day."

In the third week the problem was reversed.

One farmer booked three hours of ploughing, but on reaching the field they discovered that half of it was still too wet. The work had to stop after an hour.

He said, "I booked three hours. Do I have to pay the full amount?"

Jagesar said, "One hour of ploughing. But the time left idle because of the condition of your field comes under the waiting or cancellation rule."

There was an argument.

At last a new note was added to the notebook: if the condition of the field had not been disclosed beforehand and the oxen had already arrived, the minimum charge would be one hour.

That evening Nandu said, "The rules are not shrinking. They keep growing."

Jagesar replied, "Life is larger than half a day."

The month came to an end.

People gathered beneath the peepal tree again.

On the last page of the notebook, Jagesar had added up the totals.

The oxen had gone out on almost as many days as before.

Farmers with distant fields had received more actual ploughing time.

Among those with nearby fields, some had saved money by taking less time; others had paid more because they took more ploughing.

There was very little change in the two brothers' total income.

But one difference was clear.

The oxen's rest was now less often a cause of quarrel as "time eaten out of the customer's share."

The time spent on the road was no longer hidden.

Looking over the page, Phuleshwar said, "The old half-day was not bad. It was right for the old village."

Mohan said, "The roads of the new village have grown longer."

Shivnath added, "And some fields are near, some far."

Nandu closed the notebook.

"Then shall we keep the rule we tried for a month?"

No one supported it loudly. No one opposed it either.

Many village rules endure in just this way—not because a meeting applauds them, but because, the next time the need arises, people use the same method again.

By the time the rains were passing, half the notebook had filled up.

One morning Mohan came again.

“The last southern patch has to be ploughed. Two hours.”

Nandu opened the notebook.

“The same road?”

“They have filled in new earth near the stream. It will take a little less time.”

As Jagesar laid the yoke across Moti’s back, he said, “On the way back you will pass Ratneshwar’s field. Enter the common road time accordingly.”

Mohan nodded naturally.

Nandu wrote the name on the page.

Mohan.

Ploughing—two hours.

Road—to be entered once they were under way.

Rest—as much as the oxen needed.

He did not close the notebook. He left the page open, because the first time still had to be entered.

As they moved out from the cattle shed, Moti went slightly ahead and Karia slightly behind, skewing the pair. Nandu straightened the yoke.

Mohan took the spade onto his shoulder.

Jagesar stood at the doorway.

Nandu asked, “What time is it?”

Jagesar looked at the clock hanging inside the house.

“Five fifty-eight.”

Nandu wrote the time in the notebook.

Then he lifted the plough.

This time, a half-day had not begun.

Only the road had begun.

STORY 103

HALF A BAMBOO

It was the first week of Sawan. Clouds wandered across the sky all day, yet the rain came only twice, for five minutes each time. The earth was wet on the surface and still warm underneath.

Near the market at Majhaul village, Ramcharit's pile of bamboo lay slantwise along the roadside: fifteen long poles, five somewhat shorter ones, and two that tapered so much toward the top that they were almost like staffs.

Ramcharit always kept the thick ends of the bamboos pointing the same way. He would say, "Look at the thick end first. It tells you the age of the bamboo."

That morning Binti Devi arrived carrying a length of old rope in her hand. Three knots had been tied in it.

Ramcharit asked, "What measure is this?"

Binti uncoiled the rope. "The crossbeam of the thatch has broken. The carpenter said I need eight hands and a little more. I measured it at home and tied the knots."

Ramcharit stretched the rope out. "What does 'eight hands and a little more' mean?"

"That is what the third knot is for. The old crossbeam reached up to here."

Ramcharit looked toward the bamboo pile. "Take a whole bamboo."

Binti laughed. "What would I do with a whole bamboo?"

"Cut it."

"And the part left over?"

Ramcharit said easily, "Keep it at home. Bamboo is never wasted."

The smile faded from Binti's face. "It may not be wasted, but I would have to pay for the whole thing today."

Ramcharit fell silent.

A whole bamboo cost one hundred and sixty rupees. Cutting was another ten rupees. Binti had expected to pay somewhere between eighty-five and a hundred rupees for a piece eight or ten hands long.

There was no custom in the market of selling bamboo by halves. Ramcharit explained the reason: the thick end was strong, the slender end light; the joints in the middle might be straight or crooked. Two equal lengths cut from the same bamboo were not necessarily equal in usefulness.

Binti said again, "Give me half for half the price."

Ramcharit shook his head. "It is easy to say 'half.' Which half?"

"The half that is useful to me."

"And will the remaining half be useful to me?"

Binti wound up the rope. "Is that all there is to it?"

Before Ramcharit could answer, the bell of a bicycle sounded from the direction of the market.

Kamli Devi came pushing a bicycle. It was not hers but her son's. A small old wooden doorframe was tied to the rear carrier. She untied it and set it down in front of Ramcharit.

"Look at this. The beam above the cattle-shed door has rotted. I need seven hands of bamboo—not very thick."

Ramcharit looked at Binti. Binti looked at Kamli.

Kamli asked, "What happened?"

Binti said, "I need a little more than eight hands, and he sells only a whole bamboo."

Kamli replied at once, "Then let the two of us divide one bamboo."

Ramcharit laughed. "So now both of you will teach me how to account for my bamboo?"

Kamli ran a hand over the wood of the doorframe. "Not teach you. Save ourselves some money."

Ramcharit pulled out a bamboo about sixteen hands long.

"Very well. Look at this. I cut eight hands from the thick end for your thatch. The remaining slender part—about eight hands—goes to Kamli Devi. Equal halves. Eighty rupees each. Five each for cutting."

Binti's eyes brightened.

Kamli lifted the slender end of the bamboo and examined it. "Will this hold the beam of my cattle shed?"

Ramcharit said, "It is bamboo."

Kamli lifted it again. The slender section was slightly flattened in the middle, and two joints lay very close together.

"These two joints will fall exactly where I have to tie the rope."

Binti said, "My part is thick."

Kamli looked at her. "Yours is thick, so eighty? Mine is thin, and still eighty?"

Ramcharit's face hardened a little. "That is why I do not sell halves."

All three fell silent.

Just then Harinath the carpenter came from the market side, a saw on his shoulder, a hammer at his waist, and a thin strip of bamboo in one hand.

Binti called from a distance, "Harinath bhaiya, come here."

Harinath came over. "What has broken?"

"Not the roof—the arithmetic," Ramcharit said.

Harinath laughed. "If the arithmetic is broken, what am I supposed to hammer back into place?"

Binti opened her rope and showed him the measurement. Kamli showed him the doorframe. Ramcharit explained the difficulty with half-price bamboo.

Harinath said nothing at first. He laid the sixteen-hand bamboo straight on the ground, planted a foot on the thick end, and raised the slender end.

"This would do for the roof crossbeam, but the first hand and a half at the thick end is too thick. The notch for the old crossbeam is not that wide."

Binti asked, "Then?"

"We shave the first half-hand thinner, or choose another bamboo."

Harinath walked toward the slender end. "Kamli didi can get her seven hands from this bamboo, but where it would be tied to the frame there is a hairline split. It is small now; once the bamboo dries, it may widen."

Ramcharit said, "So this bamboo is bad for both of them?"

"Not bad. Different parts of the same bamboo are good for different jobs."

Harinath pulled another bamboo from the pile. It was a hand and a half longer than the first. Its thick end was somewhat less bulky, the middle was straight, and the slender end was not excessively light.

He measured Binti's rope from the thick end. "Eight hands and three fingers—up to here."

He asked for charcoal. Ramcharit brought a small piece from inside the shop. Harinath drew a line across the bamboo.

Then he laid Kamli's doorframe on the ground and measured seven hands. "This much from the slender end." He drew a second line.

Between the two lines, about two hands and three fingers of bamboo remained.

Ramcharit said, "Now who owns this middle piece?"

Kamli said, "You do."

Ramcharit laughed. "The two of you take the useful parts, I keep the little piece in the middle, and you still pay half and half? Is that how my business is supposed to run?"

Binti said, "Then why should the two of us pay for the middle piece?"

Harinath rolled the charcoal between his fingers. "First tell us this—how do you arrive at one hundred and sixty rupees for a whole bamboo?"

Ramcharit said, "Length, thickness, straightness. The market rate."

"Then why should this two-hand middle section be worth nothing?"

"It is not worth nothing. But when will I find a buyer for it?"

"A peg in a cattle shed, a prop under a thatch, a small gate, a rack above a hearth—there are plenty of uses."

Ramcharit shook his head. "There may be uses, but there is no buyer for it now."

The discussion stopped at that one sentence.

Binti's need was now. Kamli's need was now as well. The buyer for Ramcharit's leftover piece did not exist now.

None of the three truly wanted 'half a bamboo'; each simply did not want to push his or her own risk onto someone else.

Harinath drew three lines on the ground. Beside the first he wrote: thick section. Beside the second: middle section. Beside the third: slender section.

Ramcharit laughed. "Are we opening a school for bamboo now?"

Harinath said, "No. We are only looking at where the money goes."

He asked Ramcharit, "This whole bamboo is one hundred and sixty. You value the thick section highest?"

"Yes."

"The middle?"

"Medium."

"The slender end?"

“Less.”

“Then why should equal lengths carry equal prices?”

Ramcharit did not answer.

He pulled three old offcuts from the pile: a thick piece two hands long, a medium piece three hands long, and a slender piece five hands long.

“These are from last month. Look. The thick piece would have sold in two days, but a joint has split. No one has asked for the medium piece. The slender one will sell when the children come looking for a bamboo pole for their kite string.”

Kamli asked, “So you keep no register of the pieces you cut?”

“A register?”

“How long, how thick, how much money?”

Ramcharit laughed. “I sell bamboo. I do not run an accounts office.”

Binti said quietly, “But if I go home empty-handed because I cannot buy a whole bamboo, then your bamboo does not sell either.”

Ramcharit was silent at that.

The market was slowly filling. Vegetable sellers were spreading their cloths, the oilman was unloading tins of mustard oil, and the tea seller had set down his first kettle, smoke curling upward.

Ramcharit sat on the bamboo pile.

“I did not buy the bamboo for one hundred and sixty,” he said. “My own money is in it, transport, the cutter’s wage, the place where it is dried—all of that is included. If I charge only for the useful pieces, the leftover may lie here for a month. Who pays for that?”

Kamli said, “Whoever wants the leftover piece.”

“And if nobody wants it?”

Harinath said, “Then the leftover remains Ramcharit’s stock. But do not value it by simply deducting something afterward. Decide its value first.”

Ramcharit frowned. “How much?”

Harinath picked up the old thick two-hand offcut. “If you sold this, what would you charge?”

Ramcharit looked at it. “Twenty.”

“The medium three-hand piece?”

“Twenty-five.”

“The slender five-hand piece?”

“Thirty, if it is straight.”

Harinath wrote the figures beside the lines on the ground.

“Then from the bamboo we cut for Binti didi and Kamli didi, the middle piece—two hands and three fingers—will remain yours. Tell us what you would value it at, right now, as your own stock.”

Ramcharit tapped the middle of the bamboo. “Twenty.”

Binti said at once, “Then subtract twenty from one hundred and sixty. That leaves one hundred and forty.”

Kamli said, “But mine is the slender section and Binti didi’s is the thick one.”

Harinath said, “Exactly. Length alone cannot decide the price.”

Ramcharit began doing the arithmetic with his finger on the ground. "The thick section, eight hands and three fingers—eighty?"

Binti asked, "Why eighty? Because that is half the price of the whole bamboo?"

Ramcharit did not get annoyed. This time he thought about it.

"The thick section is worth more. Eighty-five."

Kamli said, "And my seven hands?"

"Fifty-five."

"Fifty-five and eighty-five make one hundred and forty," Harinath said. "Ramcharit keeps the middle twenty as his own stock. Cutting: five rupees each for the two pieces."

Binti was quiet for a moment at the figure of eighty-five. "I had expected to spend up to a hundred. All right."

Kamli said, "If I had had to buy a whole bamboo, it would have cost me one hundred and seventy. My work will be done for sixty."

Ramcharit said, "For today, perhaps. But if this becomes the rule, everyone will ask for the thick section. Who will take the slender one?"

Harinath said, "Whoever has a job suited to the slender section. If no such need exists, do not cut the bamboo."

Ramcharit looked at him. "So the customer gives me a measurement and I hunt for a bamboo to fit it?"

"Until now you have been pressing a whole bamboo on the customer. Now match the customer's measurement to the bamboo."

Ramcharit laughed. "You have put the carpenter's work on my head."

Binti said, "We will bring the measurements. You only have to look before you cut."

Kamli lifted the doorframe. "And look at where the joints will fall."

Ramcharit laid the bamboo straight on the ground again.

Harinath placed Binti's rope along it. "If we cut here, the thick piece is eight hands and three fingers. But when it is set into the thatch, one joint must remain outside. The cut should be two fingers behind this line."

Binti's required length grew a little.

Ramcharit said, "Then the slender piece will shrink."

Kamli immediately laid the doorframe down again. Harinath measured it.

"Seven hands still comes out. The middle piece left over will be a little less than two hands."

Ramcharit said, "Then the middle cannot be valued at twenty."

"How much?"

"Fifteen."

The arithmetic changed again.

Binti's portion: eighty-seven. Kamli's: fifty-eight. The middle: fifteen. Total: one hundred and sixty. Cutting: ten rupees extra.

Binti burst out laughing. "I came looking for half a bamboo, and the arithmetic has turned out harder than buying a whole one."

Ramcharit said, "That is why I used to sell the whole thing."

Harinath took out his saw.

"Wait," Ramcharit said.

Everyone looked at him.

Ramcharit went inside the shop and tore two pages from an old school notebook.

"Let us write it down first. Later someone will say the thick part was not this long, or the slender part was crooked."

Harinath laughed. "You do not run an accounts office?"

Ramcharit smiled. "Not an office. My memory is small."

On the page he wrote:

Bamboo No. 7.

Full price—160.

Binti—thick section, 8 hands 5 fingers, 87.

Kamli—slender section, 7 hands, 58.

Leftover—1 hand 11 fingers, Ramcharit, 15.

Cutting—5 + 5.

Harinath said, "Write about the joints too."

Ramcharit glared at him. "How many joints?"

"Not that. Write: 'Customer saw the cutting line.'"

Ramcharit wrote it.

Binti did not put a thumbprint. She could write her name. Slowly, she wrote "Binti." Kamli signed her name as well.

Harinath darkened both cutting lines with charcoal once more.

The saw began to move.

At the first cut, the scent of bamboo rose out—a moist green smell still sealed beneath the dry outer skin.

The thick section came free.

Binti tried to lift it. "It is heavy."

Harinath said, "Heavy is good for the thatch. But one thing: when you get home, dry both ends in the shade, not in direct sun."

The second cut was made.

Kamli lifted her section. "This is right."

The small middle piece lay beside Ramcharit's foot.

He was about to toss it into a corner of the pile, then stopped. He looked at the notebook page, picked up the piece, and placed it apart from the rest of the bamboo. With charcoal he wrote on it: 15.

Binti asked, "You are writing a price even on such a little piece?"

Ramcharit said, "It is now fifteen rupees' worth of stock, not something to throw away."

Three days later the rain truly came down hard.

Harinath removed the old crossbeam from Binti's thatch. Half of it had been eaten hollow from within. The new bamboo was set in place.

Binti's son climbed up and held the rope.

From below Harinath said, "We needed two fingers more than the measurement you had tied into the rope. Good thing we shifted the cut."

Binti stood below, smiling. "And for those two fingers I should have bought a whole bamboo?"

Harinath did not answer.

That evening the slender bamboo was tied above the doorway of Kamli's cattle shed. A thick bamboo would, in fact, have been too heavy there.

As Kamli tightened the rope she said, "Not half for half the price. The part that suits my work."

Her daughter-in-law asked, "Who took the rest?"

Kamli said, "Whoever had a use for it."

On the fifth day, for the first time, someone came to Ramcharit's shop asking for the small middle piece.

Nandu the bullock-cart driver needed a short, sturdy pole at the back of his cart to stop sacks from sliding off.

Ramcharit brought out the piece. "One hand and eleven fingers. Fifteen rupees."

Nandu said, "Ten."

Ramcharit looked at the notebook page. "Give twelve and take it."

Nandu paid twelve.

Ramcharit's account was now three rupees short. Beside the fifteen on the page he wrote in small letters: "Sold 12."

That evening he looked over the full account once more.

From a bamboo priced at 160: $87 + 58 + 12 = 157$.

Three rupees short. The ten rupees for cutting had been received separately.

Ramcharit wondered: a three-rupee loss, or two new customers? He did not reach a conclusion.

At the next market an old farmer came asking for five hands of slender bamboo.

Ramcharit was about to say what he always used to say: "Take a whole one." The sentence reached his lips but did not come out.

On an old piece of sacking hanging behind the pile, he wrote four lines in charcoal:

Thick piece—how many hands?

Medium—how many hands?

Slender—how many hands?

Leftover piece—how much?

The farmer could not read.

He asked, "What is that?"

Ramcharit said, "Tell me your measurement first."

The farmer stretched out his hand. "Five of these."

Ramcharit picked up the rope. "Everyone's hand is not the same. Measure it on the rope and give me that."

The farmer laughed. "Now I must sit an examination to buy bamboo?"

Ramcharit laughed too. "No. An examination in how not to pay for a whole bamboo."

Two market days later, more lines had appeared on the sacking.

Someone wanted four hands of thick bamboo. Someone wanted six hands of slender bamboo. Someone wanted only a strong two-hand piece.

Ramcharit could not meet every need.

Sometimes he would say, “There is no match for it yet. If I cut a whole bamboo, there will be no one for the part left over.”

Earlier such an answer would have annoyed customers. Now some of them left their measurements behind.

Ramcharit made small loops of rope and hung them on the sacking. Beside each loop he wrote a name and a measurement:

“Sita—6 hands, slender.”

“Mahendra—4 hands, thick.”

“Suresh—2 hands, medium.”

Whenever three sections of one bamboo happened to match three separate needs, Ramcharit first sent word to all three customers.

Sometimes it took two weeks. Sometimes it happened the same day.

One day Binti came to the market and saw the sacking. Her old sheet of paper was pinned under a nail.

She asked, “Why is my name still here?”

Ramcharit said, “It was the first account.”

“The one with the three-rupee loss?”

“Yes.”

“Then take it down. It was a bad beginning.”

Ramcharit shook his head. “Not bad. It was an account that taught me something for three rupees.”

Binti read the names written across the sacking. Nowhere did the words “half a bamboo” appear.

She said, “It ought to be called ‘Half a Bamboo.’”

Ramcharit asked, “Why?”

“People will understand.”

Ramcharit picked up the charcoal. At the top of the sacking he wrote: “Half a Bamboo?”

Then, beneath the question mark in smaller letters, he wrote: “Measure First.”

Binti laughed.

That evening the rain began again.

The market packed up earlier than usual. Ramcharit was covering the bamboo pile with the sacking when a boy came running toward him.

“Uncle, do you have three hands of thick bamboo?”

Without uncovering the pile Ramcharit asked, “What is it for?”

“To lay across the drain behind the house.”

“Exactly three hands?”

“About that.”

Ramcharit pulled the measuring rope from beneath the sacking.

“Not ‘about.’ Take this. Measure it and come tomorrow.”

The boy ran off with the rope.

Ramcharit tied the sacking down again.

At the top, the charcoal words “Half a Bamboo?” had blurred a little in the spray of rain.

Beneath them, “Measure First” was still clear.

STORY 104

THE COWSHED'S FIRST MILK

Kartik was drawing to its close. In the mornings drops of dew fell from the cowshed roof, though once the day advanced the sun was still warm.

For two months Sudama Chaudhary's cow, Surti, had stood tethered in Gauri Devi's cowshed, her belly swollen with pregnancy.

Surti was not white. There was a grey patch near her neck, a small white mark on her forehead, and the edge of her right ear was slightly torn.

Gauri could recognise her by her voice.

When Gauri opened the cowshed gate at dawn, Surti would look first not at the manger but at her hand.

For there was usually a handful of bran in Gauri's palm.

Surti was not a cow from Gauri's own household.

Two years earlier, after Sudama Chaudhary's knee had grown bad, he had reduced the work of keeping cattle.

His son was away in another place, and his daughter-in-law was managing the house with two small children.

Sudama's cowshed was not empty, but cutting grass every day, clearing dung, washing the manger, and milking had become difficult for him.

So, not in a formal village council but simply before four people, an oral arrangement had been made.

The cow would stay in Gauri's cowshed.

Grass, chaff, water, and the daily care would be the responsibility of Gauri's household.

Half the milk would belong to Sudama, half to Gauri.

The cow would remain Sudama's.

If a calf was born, male or female, it too would belong to Sudama.

That was all that had been settled.

The first year everything went smoothly.

Surti gave about five and a half to six seers of milk a day.

In the morning Gauri measured the milk and divided it equally between two brass lotas.

Sudama's grandson came and carried one lota away.

From her own share Gauri kept half for the household and sold half at the market.

The evening followed more or less the same pattern.

If there was half a seer more or less on some day, neither household treated it as illness or theft.

A cow is not a machine—on that point both sides agreed.

But when Surti became pregnant again, her milk slowly diminished.

At last it stopped altogether.

During the first week Gauri thought little of it.

No milk, no division.

But the manger still had to be filled.

Evening chaff was still needed.

Oilcake was still needed.

Water was still needed twice a day.

And because of her swollen belly, Surti could no longer be taken far out to graze.

One day Gauri's husband, Makhan, added up the expenses and said, "The milk has stopped. The expense has not."

Gauri said, "She is a cow. She will calve. Then there will be milk again."

Makhan said, "I am not saying we should stop the expense. I am only trying to understand the account."

On an old sack he wrote in charcoal: twenty-seven days.

By then Surti had been dry for twenty-seven days.

Gauri folded the sack over.

"What will come of writing this?"

"Nothing yet. But we will not forget."

Sudama Chaudhary had asked nothing about those twenty-seven days.

Now and then he came to see the cow, stroked her forehead, looked at her belly and said, "It will not be many more days now."

Once he brought five kilos of oilcake.

Gauri accepted it.

That day, beside the twenty-seven on the sack, Makhan wrote: oilcake, five kilos, owner.

Gauri looked at him again.

"That register of yours will start a quarrel one day."

Makhan said, "A register does not start quarrels. Forgetting does."

On the first Monday of Aghan, Surti became restless during the night.

Again and again she rose and sat down.

She lifted her tail, then looked toward the manger.

Gauri understood that the time was near.

She woke Makhan.

"Fill the lantern."

Half asleep, Makhan asked, "Now?"

"Yes. Surti's gait has changed."

Their daughter Rekha woke as well.

She was in Class Seven, but what she knew about cows and calves she had learned not from books but by staying beside Gauri.

Gauri told her to remain inside the house.

Five minutes later Rekha came into the cowshed wrapped in a shawl.

"You are here alone."

Gauri did not send her back.

At about half past one in the night, the calf was born.

Small, wet, trembling.

Surti turned at once and began licking it.

Gauri spread out a dry sack.

Rekha brought straw.

Makhan ran to Sudama's house with the news.

Sudama did not come himself this time.

The pain in his knee had worsened.

His daughter-in-law Nirmala came with Deepak, a boy from the neighbourhood.

As soon as Nirmala entered the cowshed and saw the calf, she smiled.

"A bull calf?"

Gauri said, "Yes, a bull calf."

Nirmala touched Surti's forehead.

"Babuji will be pleased."

The calf tried twice to stand, then fell back onto the straw.

Gauri straightened its forelegs.

"It must drink the colostrum first."

Nirmala asked, "Has the milk come down already?"

"It is coming."

By dawn the calf had managed to stand.

Gauri guided its mouth to the udder.

The first time it only sniffed.

The second time it pulled its mouth away.

The third time Gauri held its lips against the teat.

The calf began to suck.

Rekha watched in silence.

Nirmala asked, "How long will it drink?"

Gauri replied, "As much as it needs now."

Nirmala said nothing.

After sunrise, Dinesh, Sudama's son-in-law, arrived on a motorcycle.

He collected milk from the village and carried it to the market.

He had heard that Surti had calved.

Stopping the motorcycle outside the cowshed, Dinesh said, "If there is first milk today, it will fetch a good price at the market."

Gauri was inside the cowshed.

Nirmala stepped outside and asked, "How much?"

"More than ordinary milk. People who make pithar have been asking for colostrum."

Gauri heard him.

She kept looking at Surti's udder.

Dinesh said again, "Whatever price we get today, tomorrow it will be back to the ordinary rate."

Nirmala looked toward Gauri.

"Sister, milk out a little. The calf has already drunk."

Gauri felt the udder with her hand.

"It has drunk, but I do not know whether it has drunk its fill."

Dinesh said, "Half the milk belongs to the owner, doesn't it?"

The sentence was short.

But inside the cowshed its sound became long.

Gauri rose to her feet.

"Half the milk belongs to the owner. That is true."

Dinesh said, "Then the owner's half should be given."

Gauri looked at the calf.

"From what point does the division begin?"

Nirmala asked, "What do you mean?"

"Before the calf drinks, or after?"

No one answered at once.

Dinesh glanced at his watch.

"The market will be over."

In a calm voice Gauri said, "The market will be held again. The calf's first morning will not."

Dinesh grew slightly uncomfortable.

"I am not saying the calf should be denied its milk."

"Nor am I saying the owner should be denied his milk. I am asking—whose share comes first?"

Nirmala said, "The calf belongs to the owner too."

Gauri looked at her.

"Then will whatever the calf drinks be deducted from the owner's half?"

Nirmala fell silent.

Dinesh said, "If we begin accounting like this, there will be no end to it."

Rekha stopped in the middle of gathering the straw.

Makhan had come to stand at the cowshed door.

He had barely slept since the night before.

He said, "The account was not made this way during the dry days either."

Dinesh asked, "What dry days?"

Makhan pulled out the sack kept behind a post of the cowshed.

The charcoal figures had faded.

After twenty-seven, many small strokes had been added.

The final number was forty-six.

"Forty-six days without milk. The fodder continued."

Nirmala looked at the sack.

"Why did you not tell us?"

Gauri said at once, "At the time it did not seem necessary to say anything."

Makhan said, "Now it does."

Dinesh turned the motorcycle key, then switched it off again.

"So now you will deduct the fodder for the first forty-six days before dividing the milk?"

Makhan said, "I did not say that."

"Then?"

"At the moment I do not understand it either."

That answer loosened the quarrel a little.

No one had come with his or her position fully prepared.

Gauri guided the calf to the udder again.

Dinesh stood there for another five minutes.

At last he said, "I will not take any today. But speak to Babuji."

Then he left.

Nirmala remained a little longer.

As she was leaving, she said to Gauri, "Sister, please do not let Babuji think we came to snatch away the milk."

Gauri said, "I do not want him to think that either."

At noon Sudama came himself, leaning on his walking stick.

Makhan placed a low stool outside the cowshed for him.

Sudama looked at the calf.

"Is it well?"

Gauri said, "For now. It is drinking."

Sudama stretched out his hand and touched the calf's back.

"My father used to say the first milk is the calf's share."

Gauri said nothing.

Sudama himself continued.

"But we had an agreement too—half the milk."

"Yes."

"Dinesh says no milk was given today."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Gauri answered directly.

"I could not understand whether the calf's share should be taken before the milk was halved or after."

Sudama placed both hands on the knob of his walking stick.

"The calf is mine."

"Yes."

"Then its share is mine."

Gauri was silent for a moment.

"Then whatever the calf drinks will be deducted from your half?"

Sudama raised his eyes and looked at her.

Dinesh had tried to answer that question.

Sudama did not.

Makhan set the sack before him.

"And these forty-six days?"

Sudama looked at the figures on the sack.

"What is this?"

"The dry days."

"A cow goes dry. Is that something new?"

"No."

"Then?"

Makhan said slowly, "The milk is half and half. Whose are all the dry days?"

Sudama folded the sack over.

"You should have said this earlier."

Gauri said, "Earlier I did not understand it either."

Sudama said, "And now that the milk is coming, you understand?"

His voice was not harsh, only tired.

Gauri replied, "Now the division is beginning, so what was left outside it earlier has become visible."

Sudama watched the calf for a while.

Then he said, "I do not want any milk today. We will see tomorrow."

He rose.

As he left, the tip of his stick struck the sack.

Two charcoal strokes were rubbed away.

The next morning the calf drank first.

After that Gauri milked a little.

Less than two seers.

She did not measure and divide it.

She kept one lota at home and left the rest in Surti's udder.

Rekha asked, "None for the owner today either?"

Gauri said, "The division has not begun today either."

"When will it?"

"When the rule is clear."

"The cow does not understand rules."

Gauri laughed.

"That is why people must."

Two days later Surti's appetite declined a little.

She sniffed the oilcake and left it.

Gauri grew worried.

Ramesh, the village livestock worker, was called.

After examining her, Ramesh prescribed some medicine.

"She is weak after calving. Watch her water, rest, and feed. If the fever rises, let me know."

The medicine cost three hundred and sixty rupees.

Gauri paid at the shop.

Makhan pinned the prescription to a post in the cowshed.

Sudama came that evening.

He saw the prescription.

"Why did you not tell me?"

Gauri said, "The medicine was needed during the day. No one was at your house."

"I will pay."

Makhan asked, "All of it?"

Sudama looked at him.

"The cow is mine."

Makhan said, "The milk is half and half."

Sudama remained holding the prescription.

Gauri spoke between them. "This is why we need a rule."

This time Sudama did not object.

"Sit down tomorrow evening."

The following evening four people sat on the veranda of the cowshed.

Sudama, Gauri, Makhan, and Nirmala.

Rekha was studying inside, but her ears were outside.

Sudama spoke first. "I do not want a long document."

Makhan said, "Nor do I."

Gauri said, "Four things should be clear."

Nirmala brought an old exercise book.

Half of the first page was torn away.

She wrote: Surti.

Below it, the date.

Sudama said, "Milk first."

Gauri said, "The calf first."

Both fell silent again.

Nirmala stopped her pen.

Makhan asked, "Shall we call whatever milk comes into our hands after the calf has drunk the milk?"

Sudama said, "Then who will know how much the calf has drunk?"

Gauri said, "No one knows that now either. If we pull its mouth away merely so that the half can be measured, the account will be clean and the calf weak."

Nirmala said quietly, "Let the calf drink first. Whatever is milked afterward will be divided."

Sudama looked at her.

"You belong to the owner's household."

Nirmala said, "That is why I am saying it. The calf belongs to the owner's household too."

Makhan did not laugh.

Nor did Gauri.

Sudama rubbed his thumb over the knob of his stick.

Then he said, "All right. First line—the milk after the calf has drunk."

Nirmala wrote it down.

The second matter was medicine.

Sudama said, "I will pay for medicine in a serious illness."

Gauri asked, "Who will decide what is serious and what is minor?"

Sudama was silent.

Makhan said, "Prescription medicines, half and half? The cow is yours, the milk belongs to both of us."

Sudama nodded.

"Any sudden large expense should be discussed first."

Gauri added, "If medicine is urgently needed and you cannot be found, the prescription will be kept."

Nirmala wrote it down.

The third matter was the dry days.

This took the longest.

Sudama said, "When the cow is dry, where will there be milk to divide?"

Makhan said, "There will be no milk to divide. But that I must provide all the fodder—that was never made clear in the agreement."

Gauri said, "I will provide the ordinary grass and chaff. But if the milk is zero for two months, all the oilcake and purchased fodder fall on me."

Nirmala asked, "Then during the dry period should Babuji provide half the fodder?"

Gauri did not answer at once.

"If that is the agreement, it will work. But I am not asking now for all the money for the previous forty-six days."

Sudama asked, "Then what do you want?"

Gauri looked toward the old figures on the sack.

"Let it be recognised that dry days are days of care too. Next time the cow goes dry, the extra purchased oilcake and fodder will be half and half. Household grass, labour, and water will remain my responsibility."

Sudama said at once, "That is fair."

Makhan asked, "And the previous forty-six?"

Gauri stopped him.

"It was not written down last time. Babuji supplied half the oilcake once. Let the old account close there."

Makhan wanted to say something, but did not.

Sudama looked at Gauri.

"You are letting it go?"

"Not letting it go. I am not pushing an old unclear matter into a new clear one."

Sudama nodded slowly.

The fourth matter was the half share of the milk.

That was the simplest of all.

Whatever was milked after the calf had drunk would be measured and divided in half.

If, for household need, either side took more on some day, it would be written in the register.

The adjustment would be made at the next division.

Nirmala wrote the four lines and turned the page toward Gauri.

Gauri read them.

From inside Rekha called, "Ma, have you written 'dry days'?"

Everyone laughed.

Gauri said, "Do your studying."

From inside Rekha replied, "I can hear everything."

At the bottom of the page all four wrote their names.

Gauri could write.

Makhan signed.

Nirmala wrote her name in clear letters.

With a trembling hand Sudama made a small signature.

No witness was appointed.

No seal was affixed.

The page was hung from a post in the cowshed.

The next morning the new account was used for the first time.

The calf went to Surti.

Gauri did not pull it away.

After a while the calf stepped back on its own.

Gauri milked the cow.

Three seers, twelve chhataks.

Makhan measured it and wrote it down.

Rekha asked, "How much is half?"

Makhan said, "No calculator needed. One and a half seers and six chhataks."

Gauri smiled.

Nirmala carried away one share.

Gauri kept the other.

At noon Sudama came to look at the register.

The first line read: after the calf drank, 3 seers 12 chhataks.

Below it were the two equal shares.

Sudama asked, "How much did the calf drink?"

Gauri said, "We did not measure it."

Sudama looked at the register again.

"Then the account is incomplete."

Gauri said, "The account begins from the point where the division begins."

Sudama was silent for a few moments.

Then he hung the page back up.

For three days everything went well.

On the fourth morning the milk was less.

The calf had already drunk twice during the night.

When Gauri milked Surti, there were only two seers and eight chhataks.

When Nirmala came for the share, she stopped short at the measurement.

"So little?"

Gauri said, "That is all today."

The old question appeared on Nirmala's face—how much had the calf drunk?

But she did not ask it.

She wrote the figure in the register.

The next day the milk increased again.

Looking at the register, Sudama said, "A cow is not a machine."

Gauri smiled.

It was an old sentence, but now it had a different place.

A week later Surti's course of medicine ended.

The two prescriptions together came to four hundred and twenty rupees.

Sudama paid two hundred and ten.

Gauri paid two hundred and ten.

Nirmala wrote in the register: medicine equally shared.

One evening Dinesh came again to collect milk.

"The market rate is good today. Shall I take the owner's whole share?"

Sudama said, "Take only as much as the register says is the owner's."

Dinesh laughed.

"So now the register will run everything?"

Sudama said, “The cow stays in Gauri’s cowshed more days than she stays with me. The register belongs to both sides.”

Dinesh said nothing.

He took away the measured milk.

Two weeks later a new question arose.

Surti’s milk had increased.

Gauri’s share was more than her household needed.

She began selling part of her half at the market.

Sudama’s household sometimes did not use its entire share.

One day Nirmala said, “Sell half a seer from our half as well. I will take the money later.”

Gauri said, “I will write it in the register.”

Nirmala laughed.

“Now even the milk will not move without the register.”

Gauri said, “The milk will move. What comes afterward—the memory—will not.”

Rekha heard the sentence and wrote it into her exercise book.

A few days later the calf had begun running about the cowshed.

It pushed its muzzle into the manger, chewed at the rope, and tugged at Rekha’s shawl.

Surti kept sniffing it.

The morning division had now become regular.

First the calf.

Then the milking.

Then the measuring.

Then the two shares.

Some days the milk was less, some days more.

The figures on the page changed.

The order did not.

On a cold morning in Paush, Sudama arrived very early.

Gauri was still cleaning the cowshed.

The calf was drinking from Surti.

Sudama remained standing at the doorway.

Gauri said, “The stool is inside.”

Sudama said, “I am fine standing.”

He watched the calf.

After a while the calf moved away on its own and began licking the straw.

Gauri sat down with the bucket to milk.

Sudama looked at the register hanging from the post.

The old page was full.

Nirmala had added a new page.

At the top it again said: Surti.

Below it, the first line: milk after the calf has drunk.

Then: medicine.

Then: extra fodder during dry days.

Sudama straightened the edge of the page.

The wind had curled it.

As she milked, Gauri asked, "How much do you need at home today?"

Sudama said, "Whatever my share is."

Then, after a brief pause, he added, "After the calf."

Gauri said nothing.

The milk kept falling into the bucket, drop by drop.

The register hanging from the post stirred in the wind.

The old oral agreement had contained only two words: "half the milk."

The word "half" was still there on the new page.

But now three lines stood above it.

STORY 105

NIGHT ON THE WATCH PLATFORM

By the time Aghan was well underway, the paddy in the eastern tract of Majhaul village had turned yellow.

Four fields lay so close to one another that, seen from a distance, the ridges between them looked like little more than thin lines.

At one corner near the middle stood a bamboo watch platform.

The platform belonged to no single field.

Two bamboos had come from Ramlochan, four old planks from Kishori Mandal, the tiles from Jagdish, and two days of labour from Budhan.

Once it was built, the villagers began calling it the 'four-field platform.'

The last twenty days before the paddy ripened were considered the hardest time for those four fields.

Birds descended by day, stray cattle wandered in at dusk, and at night nilgai or wild boar prowled along the field edges.

The four households had divided the night watches among themselves.

One night was Ramlochan's, the next Kishori's, the third Jagdish's, the fourth Budhan's.

Then the same order began again.

A piece cut from an old fertiliser sack hung from one post of the platform.

Dates and names were written on it in charcoal.

Beside the name of whoever had the watch that night, a circle was drawn.

At dawn, a tick was placed inside the circle.

The arrangement was so simple that for three weeks no one had called it a rule.

It was merely a custom.

Budhan was the only one of the four whose field was not his own.

He cultivated one and a half bighas belonging to Ramdas Chaudhary on a sharecropping arrangement.

On the watch roster, Budhan's name was written instead of the landowner's, because Budhan was the one who spent the night there.

Ramdas Chaudhary lived in town with his son.

He invariably came at harvest time for his half of the paddy, but the night watch on the platform was not part of his share.

Budhan had never questioned this.

The land was not his, but his labour was in the crop.

If the crop survived, half of it would reach his household too.

That was why the watch was his as well.

Budhan's house stood about half a kos behind the fields.

He lived there with his wife, Phulo, their twelve-year-old daughter Chandni, and his elderly mother, Sukni Devi.

Sukni Devi's knees had troubled her for years, but she was not a woman who would stop working and sit idle.

On days when paddy was dried, she could still turn the grain in a basket.
But for the past month, her breathing had grown a little heavy after dusk.
Twice Budhan had brought tablets from the village medicine shop.
Sukni would say, 'It is old age. How many medicines can I go on taking?'

Phulo would answer, 'Old age is one thing, breathlessness another.'

That Wednesday was Budhan's turn on watch.

He had remembered it since morning.

In the afternoon he went to the platform and inspected the southern corner of the thorn fence.

Three days earlier, a dry karil branch had fallen in the wind.

Budhan raised two branches and propped them upright again, but the soil underneath was loose.

He told Ramlochan, 'This corner ought to be tied up today.'

Ramlochan, rubbing a paddy ear between his fingers, said, 'We'll see to it by evening.'

Kishori was there too.

He said, 'First open the northern drain, otherwise the water will stand.'

The small jobs of the four fields kept pushing one another to the back of the queue all day long.

Budhan drove two stakes into the ridge of his field and returned home.

He intended to eat early and go to the platform.

After sunset, Phulo was taking the rice off the hearth.

Chandni brought water.

Sukni Devi sat by the courtyard wall, rubbing mustard oil into her knees.

Suddenly she began to cough.

Twice at first.

Then without stopping.

Phulo held out a lota of water.

Sukni tried to drink, but after half a sip she set the lota down.

Her breaths had become short and shallow.

Budhan left the morsel in his hand on his plate and sprang up.

'Ma?'

Sukni raised a hand as if to say it was nothing.

But her chest was rising and falling rapidly.

Phulo stopped what she was doing and rubbed her back.

'Not the medicine shop this time,' she said. 'Take her to the health centre.'

The primary health centre was three kos from the village.

Transport was hard to find after dusk.

Budhan ran to borrow a neighbour's bicycle.

Only then did he remember his turn on the platform.

He went towards Ramlochan's house.

Ramlochan was not there.

His daughter-in-law said, 'Kaka has gone to the market. He hasn't returned yet.'

Budhan said, 'When he comes, tell him that tonight is my watch, but I am taking my mother to the health centre.'

‘All right.’

Budhan then turned towards Kishori’s house.

Kishori’s door was closed.

His younger brother opened it.

‘Kishori bhaiya?’

‘He has gone to our maternal uncle’s house. He’ll be back by nine.’

Budhan said, ‘As soon as he comes, tell him someone must reach the platform. My mother is ill.’

The boy nodded.

Budhan thought of going to Jagdish’s house as well, but from home came Phulo’s voice.

‘Don’t waste time!’

He ran back.

It was not easy to seat Sukni Devi on a bicycle.

In the end Ramsevak lent them his old handcart.

They spread a sack over it and seated Sukni there.

Budhan and Phulo pulled the cart together as far as the main road.

Chandni stayed with a neighbour.

After half an hour on the road they found an empty milk van.

The driver took Sukni to the health centre.

Budhan’s mobile phone had very little charge left.

He dialled Ramlochan’s number.

It rang once, then the phone died.

Budhan put it back in his pocket.

The health centre was not crowded, but the doctor was seeing another patient.

It took time before Sukni was taken inside.

It was eight o’clock at night.

The watch platform kept entering and leaving Budhan’s thoughts.

He said to Phulo, ‘Should I go back?’

Phulo looked at him as though the answer to the question had already been obvious.

‘Leaving Ma here?’

Budhan fell silent.

The doctor said phlegm had accumulated in her chest; they would give her medicine and steam, and watch her breathing through the night.

There was no great danger at present, but sending her straight home would not be wise.

Budhan sat down in the veranda.

There, the first watch of his night passed.

Meanwhile, the fertiliser sack on the platform flapped in the wind.

The circle beside Budhan’s name was empty.

Ramlochan returned from the market at about half past eight.

When he reached home, his daughter-in-law gave him Budhan’s message.

Ramlochan was tired.

As he untied his gamchha, he asked, ‘Does Kishori know?’

'Budhan said he had told them there too.'
Ramlochan assumed Kishori must already have gone.
Kishori returned from his maternal uncle's house a little after nine.
His younger brother was asleep by then.
Budhan's message never reached him.
Jagdish was stitching up sacks of paddy in his courtyard.
His watch was the following night.
A little after ten, he put the sack aside and washed his hands.
From the direction of the distant fields came the sound of a metal plate
being struck once.
Then silence.
Jagdish paused.
Whoever stayed on the four-field platform would strike the plate now and
then to make his presence known.
Tonight it had sounded only once.
He thought Budhan must have arrived.
A little later his dog began barking towards the fields.
Jagdish stepped out to the doorway and stared into the darkness.
Nothing could be made out from that distance.
He took a torch and walked towards the fields.
The platform was empty.
The sack hanging from the post moved in the wind.
The metal plate lay on the ground.
Jagdish climbed up and swept his torchlight across all four fields.
At the southern corner, the karil fence looked pressed down.
He climbed down and went there.
There were fresh hoofprints in the soil.
Two nilgai had forced their way in through the gap in the fence.
One still stood near the ridge of Ramlochan's field.
The other was two or three paces inside the paddy field Budhan cultivated.
Jagdish shouted at the top of his voice.
'Hut! Haa!'
He picked up the metal plate and beat it with a stick.
The sound carried as far as Ramlochan's house.
Kishori heard it too.
Within ten minutes all three were in the fields.
The nilgai fled.
Some paddy plants had been flattened.
The gap in the southern fence had opened still wider.
Ramlochan's first question was, 'Where is Budhan?'
Jagdish said, 'The platform is empty.'
Only then did Kishori remember what his younger brother had been
trying to tell him.
He went home and woke the boy.
Rubbing his eyes, the boy said, 'Budhan Kaka said his mother was ill.'
Kishori slapped a hand to his forehead.

'Why didn't you tell me earlier?'

'You weren't at home.'

'And when I came back?'

The boy said nothing.

Ramlochan said, 'Leave the blame there for now. First close the gap.'

Together the three men stood the karil branches up again.

Jagdish brought a slender bamboo from his field.

Kishori brought rope.

By about eleven the fence was closed again.

Ramlochan said, 'Someone will have to stay now.'

Jagdish climbed onto the platform.

'I'll stay. Tomorrow was my turn anyway. Count this as one day early.'

Kishori said, 'Then tomorrow?'

'We'll see tomorrow.'

Ramlochan stayed with him until midnight, then went home.

No animal came again that night.

At dawn, Jagdish did not put a tick inside Budhan's circle on the fertiliser sack.

He drew only a short line beside it.

After sunrise, the four cultivators gathered again.

Kishori began counting the flattened plants.

'Twenty-two here.'

Ramlochan looked at another row.

'Eleven here.'

Jagdish said, 'Some of them will stand up again.'

Ramlochan said, 'The paddy is ripe. What is broken is broken.'

The discussion moved at once from plants to money.

Kishori estimated, 'As much as one paseri lost.'

Jagdish laughed.

'One paseri from twenty-two plants?'

Kishori was not offended.

'I said it was an estimate.'

Ramlochan said, 'And who will compensate on the basis of an estimate?'

Both men looked towards Budhan's field.

Jagdish said, 'First let Budhan come back.'

Budhan returned from the health centre at about nine.

Sukni Devi had been advised two days of medicine and steam inhalation.

Phulo took her home.

Budhan went straight to the field.

Seeing the platform empty, he first read the fertiliser sack.

He saw the line beside his name.

Then he saw the newly tied rope at the southern corner.

Ramlochan said, 'Animals got in last night.'

Budhan's face tightened.

'How many?'

'Two were seen.'

‘The paddy?’

Kishori showed him the flattened rows.

Budhan bent down and began lifting the plants.

Some ears were pressed into the soil; some stalks were merely bent.

He straightened them one by one.

Kishori said, ‘The question for all of us is that the watch was missed.’

Budhan stood up.

‘It was missed - I accept that.’

Ramlochan said, ‘Then there must also be some accounting for the loss.’

Budhan did not answer at once.

He went to the southern fence.

He scraped the soil beneath the newly tied bamboo.

‘This gap was there yesterday afternoon too.’

Ramlochan said, ‘A little. The animals pushed it down at night.’

‘I had said it should be tied.’

‘You did. I went to the market.’

‘Kishori bhaiya was busy with the northern drain.’

Kishori remained silent.

Budhan looked again at the hoofprints.

‘The animals did not come by way of the platform. They came through the gap.’

Ramlochan’s voice hardened.

‘If a watchman had been here, he would have driven them off as soon as they entered.’

‘That is also true.’

Budhan’s reply was brief.

‘Then?’

Budhan said, ‘I did not complete the work of my watch. Whatever work is decided in its place, I will do. But why should the price of twenty-two or thirty-three plants be put on my head by guesswork?’

Kishori said, ‘Because it was your night.’

Budhan looked towards the platform.

‘The night was mine. Whose fence was it?’

No one answered immediately.

The southern fence of the four-field platform actually began along the outer edge of Ramlochan’s field and ran to the corner of the field Budhan cultivated on shares.

When the fence was first made, Ramlochan had supplied the bamboo, Jagdish had cut the karil, and Budhan had done the work of driving it into the ground.

On paper, it belonged to no one.

By custom, it belonged to all.

Jagdish said, ‘The fence belongs to all, the watch belongs to all.’

Kishori said, ‘But the turns belong to one person at a time.’

Budhan nodded.

‘All right. Then let me make good my turn.’

Ramlochan asked, 'How?'

'I will spend the whole day today finishing this southern fence. And on one of the next seven nights, whichever watch is weakest, I will stay from two in the morning until dawn as an extra man.'

Kishori said at once, 'How can a day's fence work equal a night's watch?'

'I am not saying it is equal. I will do both.'

'And the loss?'

Budhan looked at the flattened plants.

'Count the ones that are broken. After harvest, see how many ears actually fail to fill. To call it one paseri now is not an account.'

Ramlochan fell silent.

Whether he fully liked Budhan's answer or not was hard to tell.

But the words 'one paseri' had begun to feel heavy even to him.

Jagdish took the old fertiliser sack down from the platform and spread it on the ground.

'Come, first let us look at the previous watches.'

They all sat around it.

It was hardly worthy of being called a register, but the dates and names were all there.

Jagdish asked, 'Ramlochan Kaka, last Monday night was your watch?'

'Yes.'

'Until what time?'

Ramlochan thought.

'The pump men came at two. I went home, then returned at dawn.'

Kishori laughed.

'Then from two till dawn?'

'No animal came.'

Jagdish said, 'Is that an answer?'

Ramlochan's face changed.

'I am saying there were circumstances.'

Budhan said nothing.

Jagdish looked at the next date.

'Kishori, it rained on your watch.'

'I was on the platform.'

'You went home after midnight.'

'It was raining heavily. Where would animals have come from?'

'Then you too had circumstances.'

Kishori began folding the fertiliser sack.

The matter was no longer about Budhan's night alone.

All four were beginning to see that the old custom recorded only presence with a tick; it had no language for a lapse.

One man stayed the whole night, another half; someone sent a brother in his place; someone arrived late because of work at home.

As long as there had been no damage, no one had asked for an accounting.

The moment damage appeared, the old ticks suddenly became a rigid rule.

Ramlochan said, 'Then make a rule. Otherwise we will quarrel until harvest.'

Kishori drew three lines in the soil with a stick.

First - night watch.

Second - fence/ridge.

Third - emergency.

Jagdish asked, 'What happens in an emergency?'

Budhan said, 'If before evening you know you cannot go, exchange the watch with another household and write it down.'

Ramlochan said, 'And if it is sudden?'

Thinking of his mother, Budhan paused for a moment.

'Then whatever the reason, say so in the morning. That night will be marked vacant. In return for a vacant night: one day's work on the shared ridge or fence, and one extra late watch.'

Kishori asked, 'How late a watch?'

'From two until dawn.'

Jagdish said, 'That is the difficult watch too.'

Ramlochan nodded.

'Fine. But what if someone is only making excuses?'

Budhan said, 'Everyone can hear the reason and decide. On the paper, write only "emergency," not the whole story of the illness.'

Jagdish looked at him.

'Why?'

'Why should the platform register record how many times my mother coughed?'

This time Kishori nodded silently.

Ramlochan ran the stick once more along the third line in the earth.

'And the damage?'

Jagdish said, 'If an animal came through a gap in the fence, inspect the gap first. If the watchman was found asleep, that is different.'

Kishori added, 'If a field was left open, its loss should not fall on everyone.'

Budhan said, 'Write down what can actually be seen. No sacks of guesswork.'

Ramlochan laughed.

'That one paseri has really offended you.'

Budhan laughed too.

'I have nothing against a paseri of paddy. I object to a paseri that was never weighed.'

The tension eased a little.

That day, though he had returned exhausted from the health centre, Budhan worked on the southern fence until afternoon.

Jagdish joined him for an hour.

Two new bamboos were driven into the ground.

The karil branches were tied not only at the top but also at the bottom.

Where the soil was loose, mud was packed onto the ridge.

Kishori came in the evening to inspect it.

He said, 'If this work had been done four days ago, there would have been no meeting today.'

Ramlochan replied, 'There would have been no meeting, and no rule either.'

Kishori smiled.

Jagdish replaced the old fertiliser sack on the platform with a sheet of stout paper.

At the top he wrote: 'Watch Register.'

Below it he drew four columns - date, name, night, shared work.

Kishori said, 'Emergency?'

Jagdish added a fifth column.

'Do we write the reason?'

Budhan said, 'If necessary, only "emergency."'

Ramlochan said, 'Agreed by all?'

All four nodded.

That night was supposed to be Jagdish's first regular turn, but he had already stayed the previous night in Budhan's place.

The first test of the new rule arrived immediately.

Kishori said, 'I will stay tonight. Jagdish can take my next turn.'

Jagdish said, 'All right.'

For the first time, an exchange of watches was written in the register.

No merely spoken assurance.

An arrow between two names.

Three days passed quietly.

Sukni Devi's breathing gradually returned to normal.

She began sitting in the courtyard sunshine again.

When Budhan left for the fields she would ask, 'Did the paddy survive?'

Budhan would say, 'The paddy and the platform both.'

Sukni would laugh.

'There was a quarrel because of me, wasn't there?'

'Not because of you. Because of an empty watch.'

'I don't understand.'

'Don't. That is better.'

On the fifth night it was Ramlochan's turn.

At dusk his small grandson developed a high fever.

There was only one bicycle in the house, and Ramlochan had to go to the market for medicine.

He went to the platform and said to Jagdish, 'Can we exchange watches tonight?'

Jagdish had no work at home.

He agreed.

Another arrow was drawn in the register.

Kishori sat on the platform watching this.

He said softly, 'The rule was made because of Budhan, and Kaka is the first to use it.'

Ramlochan laughed.

‘If a rule is for only one man, what kind of rule is it?’

Budhan was not there that night, but when he saw the register the next morning, he smiled.

His extra late watch was fixed for the seventh night.

It was Kishori’s turn.

At two in the morning Budhan left home.

Sukni Devi was awake.

‘The platform again?’

‘Half the night.’

‘Is it your turn tonight?’

‘The part left over from the old turn.’

Whether Sukni understood or not, she said nothing.

She only brought out an old shawl from inside and gave it to him.

Budhan draped the shawl over his shoulders and left.

Kishori was waiting for him on the platform.

He climbed down.

‘I’m not sleepy. If you want, shall I stay with you?’

Budhan said, ‘The turn has to be made good, not shared.’

Kishori laughed.

‘All right, owner.’

‘The word “owner” does not suit me.’

Both laughed.

Kishori went home.

Budhan was alone on the platform, but this solitude was not like the solitude planned for his original watch.

He knew now that if a watch stood empty, the register had a name for that condition.

The night was somewhat cold, though the wind was not strong.

Wrapping the shawl around himself, he looked over the four fields.

The paddy ears did not shine alike in the faint moonlight.

One field lay a little lower, another higher.

One ridge was thick, another thin.

The platform was one.

At about three there was a rustling at the southern fence.

Budhan climbed down at once.

He swept the torchlight there.

Two goats outside were eating the karil leaves.

He drove them away.

This time the fence did not bend.

He tested the bamboo knot with his hand.

It was firm.

Towards dawn the sky began to whiten.

Budhan untied the register from the post of the platform.

He found the old date beside his name.

There the word ‘emergency’ had been written.

In the shared-work column opposite it was written: ‘southern fence.’

The space for the date of the extra watch was still blank.

Budhan picked up the charcoal.

He wrote the date.

Then he put a small tick beside it.

He did not fill in the empty circle from the old night.

The circle remained empty.

Beside it now stood two marks - one for a day's work, one for a night's watch.

By sunrise Ramlochan reached the field.

He looked at the register.

'Account settled?'

Climbing down from the platform, Budhan said, 'The account for the work I missed is settled. Not the account of my mother falling ill.'

Ramlochan was silent for a moment.

Then he looked towards the southern fence.

'The rope hasn't loosened?'

'No.'

The two walked along the ridge.

Most of the paddy plants that had been flattened were standing upright again.

Where the stalks had broken, the ears were beginning to dry.

Ramlochan took one ear in his hand.

'Not one paseri.'

Budhan smiled.

'We'll say after it is weighed.'

Ramlochan laughed too.

Behind them, the register on the platform post moved in the wind.

One night on that page was still empty.

But opposite that empty night, both the daytime fence work and the late-night watch were now recorded.

THE SHARE OF CHAFF

It was the second week of Chait.

In the rear threshing ground of Majhaul village, the sheaves of wheat had been lying in the sun for three days.

Whenever the morning wind rose, the dry leaves rubbed against one another with a crisp crackle.

Ramjeevan Yadav stood in the middle of the threshing ground, looking towards the old heap of chaff.

Some of last year's chaff was still left in the lower storeroom.

But by now it had turned grey, and dampness had entered its smell.

This year he had thought that if threshing did not take too long, he would sift the chaff and store it in the cowshed in good time.

In his mind, "saving time" had become linked with the machine.

For the first time that year, two mobile threshing machines had come to the village.

A belt from the tractor drove the machine; wheat sheaves went in from one side, and grain and chaff came out separately from the other.

People said: two days' work in half a day.

Ramjeevan liked the sound of that.

But Parvati Devi had reached the threshing ground before him.

For the past seven years, Parvati had worked at this household during the harvesting and threshing season.

With her were her husband's younger brother's wife, Phoolkumari, and their neighbour Mangali.

All three women held short bamboo forks and were turning the sheaves.

Parvati broke open a dry sheaf and examined the grain inside.

"Will the threshing be done today?"

Ramjeevan said, "Yes. The machine should be here by ten."

Mangali's hand stopped.

"A machine?"

"Yes. With bullocks the threshing would take two days."

Parvati said nothing.

She began turning the sheaves again.

Ramjeevan noticed her silence.

"There won't be any reduction in your wages."

Parvati raised her head.

"Did I say anything about wages?"

Ramjeevan tried to laugh.

"No, but I thought you would ask."

Phoolkumari said, "We certainly will. The machine is coming into the middle of the work our hands used to do."

The old arrangement for harvesting and threshing in that village was simple, though it had never been written down.

Cash on the day of harvesting.

Some grain on the day of threshing.

And once all the chaff had been made, a customary share for the labouring group.

Who had first said exactly how much that share was?

No one could say with certainty.

Sometimes one heap out of twelve.

Sometimes two cartloads, depending on the size of the field.

Sometimes more, if the owner needed less for his cattle.

But in this household one thing had remained steady for the past four years.

The group that stayed for the entire threshing would receive chaff as well as grain.

Parvati had two cows at home.

Mangali had a heifer.

Phoolkumari had no animal, but she sold half her chaff and bought salt and oil with the money.

To them, chaff was not refuse.

It was one form of wages.

A little before ten, the sound of a tractor came from a distance.

A green threshing machine was hitched behind a red tractor.

In white paint on the machine were the words: "Jai Kisan Mobile Threshing Service."

Shambhu Mahato was driving the tractor.

He was from the neighbouring village of Parsahi.

His younger brother Naresh and two helpers were with him.

The tractor stopped at one side of the threshing ground.

Shambhu climbed down and first examined the ground.

"Will the belt run straight here?"

Ramjeevan said, "It will."

Shambhu looked over the heap of sheaves and measured the open space with his eye.

"The chaff will fall on this side."

Parvati immediately asked, "How much chaff?"

Shambhu looked at her.

"Whatever comes out."

Parvati smiled.

"That much is obvious. I'm asking—which heap will it belong to?"

Ramjeevan intervened.

"Let the machine be set up first."

Shambhu looked again at Ramjeevan.

There was a small question in that glance.

Ramjeevan understood it.

"What we agreed yesterday will stand."

Parvati heard him.

“What agreement?”

Ramjeevan’s face tightened slightly.

“The machine-hire agreement.”

Parvati laid her fork on the sheaves and stood upright.

“Does the hire include chaff too?”

Shambhu decided it was no longer proper to remain silent.

“I offer two kinds of arrangement.”

“One: full payment in cash.”

“The other: a little less cash, and a share of the chaff.”

Mangali asked, “Which one for this field?”

Shambhu answered matter-of-factly, “Less cash and two cartloads of chaff.”

Parvati looked at Ramjeevan.

The air of the threshing ground suddenly felt heavy.

Ramjeevan said, “Two cartloads as part of the machine charge.”

“And ours?”

“You will still get the grain portion of your wages.”

“The chaff?”

Ramjeevan paused before replying.

“The machine has come now. The old threshing work is no longer the same.”

Phoolkumari thrust the point of her fork into the ground.

“Was the harvesting not still the old work?”

“Was tying the sheaves not still the old work?”

“Who will feed the sheaves into the machine?”

“Who will fill the grain into sacks?”

Mangali said softly, “Don’t ask everything at once.”

Phoolkumari fell silent.

Shambhu kept opening the machine belt.

He said, “I have come according to the arrangement made with me.”

Parvati said, “I am not blaming you.”

“But the same chaff is being divided twice.”

Shambhu stopped.

“How?”

“Earlier, there was a workers’ share in it.”

“Now that same chaff has become the machine charge.”

Ramjeevan said, “The amount of labour has gone down.”

Parvati asked, “By how much?”

Ramjeevan had no answer to that.

He could have said—a lot.

But “a lot” was not an account.

Shambhu turned the iron wheel of the machine to test it.

“Look, my machine doesn’t run for free either. Diesel, two men, belts, repairs.”

Parvati said, “I don’t run for free either.”

Shambhu did not laugh.

"That is fair."

Ramjeevan felt the dispute might grow before the threshing had even begun.

He raised his hand.

"Run one heap first."

"Then we will sit and settle the account."

Parvati asked, "Once one heap has run through, whose heap will its chaff fall into?"

This time Ramjeevan did not answer at once.

Shambhu said, "We can let it fall separately."

"Keep the chaff from the first heap separate."

That one sentence allowed the work to begin.

The mouth of the machine began swallowing sheaves.

Naresh lifted the sheaves from one side.

Phoolkumari loosened them and fed them towards the mouth of the machine.

Mangali gathered the dry stalks.

Parvati held the sack on the side where the grain fell.

Ramjeevan changed the empty sacks.

Shambhu watched the belt and listened to the machine.

It was difficult to talk over the roar.

In half an hour, work equal to many hours of the old hand-threshing was done.

Sweat stood on Parvati's forehead.

Dry stalks had scratched Phoolkumari's palms.

Chaff had gone into Mangali's eyes.

She went to wash them with water.

When the machine stopped, the threshing ground suddenly seemed very quiet.

Shambhu looked at the time.

"Thirty-two minutes."

Ramjeevan examined the heap.

The grain had come out clean.

The chaff was light and even.

He could not help being pleased.

"With bullocks this would have taken half a day."

Parvati took some chaff in her hand and rubbed it between her fingers.

"The machine is good."

Ramjeevan looked at her.

Parvati continued, "The question is not whether the machine is good or bad."

"The question is: when the machine arrived, where did the share that had already been agreed upon go?"

Shambhu sat in the shade of the tractor.

"I'll state my two arrangements again."

With his finger he drew two lines on the ground.

"Full cash payment—the chaff belongs to the farmer."

"Reduced cash payment—two cartloads of chaff are mine."

Ramjeevan said, "I chose the second arrangement."

Parvati asked, "When you chose it, did you also count our share of chaff?"

Ramjeevan was silent.

The silence made the answer clear.

No.

The labourers' share had never been counted as a separate thing in the bargain with the machine owner.

It had simply been treated as the field's chaff.

Phoolkumari said quietly, "Our name was never in the bargain at all."

Ramjeevan's voice became a little sharper.

"You will get your full cash wages."

Parvati said, "Cash is one thing; chaff is another."

"If you had told us beforehand that once the machine came we would get no chaff, we would have asked for wages accordingly."

Shambhu nodded.

"That is fair."

Ramjeevan looked at him.

"You have come to take your chaff."

"I will take what was agreed with me," Shambhu said.

"But I did not know beforehand what arrangement existed between you and the labourers."

Mangali came back, wiping her eyes.

"Shall we stop work?"

Parvati said, "No."

Ramjeevan looked at her in surprise.

"No?"

"The wheat is dry. Clouds may come again. If we stop, everyone loses."

"But we will not run the second heap without settling the account."

This time Ramjeevan did not object.

An old wooden cot was brought to the corner of the threshing ground.

Ramjeevan's son Chhotu was returning from school.

He was told to bring the old ledger and a piece of charcoal from the house.

Chhotu asked, "Which ledger?"

Ramjeevan said, "The one with the fertiliser accounts."

The ledger came.

On its earlier pages were entries for urea, diesel, seed, and pump expenses.

The word chaff did not appear even once.

Parvati turned the pages.

"Chaff was never on paper at all."

Ramjeevan said, "It was custom."

"The day a custom changes, that is the day paper is needed."

Shambhu took the charcoal and wrote three headings on the narrow edge of the cot.

“MACHINE.”

“PEOPLE.”

“CHAFF.”

Chhotu burst out laughing.

“There is a ledger right here. Why write on the cot?”

Shambhu said, “First let it remain where everyone can see it.”

Under MACHINE, Ramjeevan said, “Lower cash rate per hour.”

Shambhu corrected him.

“Lower rate, plus two cartloads of chaff.”

Under PEOPLE, Parvati said, “Harvesting is already done.”

“Today: carrying the sheaves to the machine.”

“Changing the sacks.”

“Gathering the chaff.”

“Making the heaps.”

Mangali added, “Picking up the grain left behind after the machine stops.”

Phoolkumari said, “And finding water when chaff gets into our eyes.”

Everyone laughed.

The tension eased a little.

Under CHAFF, Ramjeevan asked, “How much was the old share?”

That question created another difficulty.

Someone said one-twelfth.

Someone said “two cartloads.”

Parvati said, “Last year the three households together received four loads.”

Ramjeevan said, “Four loads do not make a cartload.”

“I am not saying they do.”

“Then what measure?”

No one had an answer.

Shambhu said, “That is why first decide the measure.”

He looked towards his cart.

“How much chaff my cart carries is a separate matter.”

“The workers’ share does not have to be measured by the same unit.”

Ramjeevan opened the ledger.

“Then what about today’s work?”

Parvati said, “First point: the old chaff share does not suddenly become zero.”

“Second: it must be clear whether the machine’s chaff charge comes from the farmer’s share or from everyone’s total chaff.”

Ramjeevan asked, “Why from the farmer’s share?”

Parvati replied, “Because you made the machine bargain.”

“It is not right to pay that charge out of our wages without asking us.”

Shambhu listened quietly.

Ramjeevan ran a finger along the edge of the ledger.

The argument felt severe to him.

But it was not unfair.

He could say—the machine had reduced everyone’s work.

But reduced it by how much?

And what part of the work had the chaff share originally paid for?

No one had ever written down the answer to that.

Ramjeevan's wife Janki came from the house carrying water.

She looked at the three words on the cot.

"Has a village council assembled here?"

Ramjeevan said, "A council of chaff."

Janki did not laugh.

She kept watch over the household cattle.

She understood better than Ramjeevan how many days the chaff would last.

"If two cartloads go to the machine, how much will remain for our own cow?"

Ramjeevan said, "How can we weigh it yet?"

Janki looked at Parvati.

"You people had a separate share, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Janki said to Ramjeevan, "Then why did you not count that when you made the machine bargain?"

Ramjeevan grew irritated.

"Must every single thing fall on my head at once?"

Janki replied calmly, "You made the bargain."

Shambhu, drinking water, said, "There is one way."

Everyone looked at him.

"Today I can take one cartload of chaff instead of two, and the rest of my payment after the wheat is sold."

Ramjeevan said, "Then my cash payment goes up."

"Yes."

"How much?"

Shambhu stated the rate.

Ramjeevan began calculating in his head.

Parvati intervened.

"We do not want Shambhu-bhai's charity."

Shambhu smiled.

"I am not offering charity. I am offering the other arrangement."

"The remaining cash later, and one cartload of chaff now."

Ramjeevan's difficulty was cash.

That was why he had chosen the lower cash payment plus chaff.

Now everyone understood the problem.

The machine owner was not greedy for chaff.

The farmer was not deliberately trying to cut the labourers' share.

The labourers were not against the machine.

The difficulty was that there were three separate accounts, but all three bargains had landed on one thing—chaff.

Parvati opened a blank page of the ledger.

"Write this down first for today."

Chhotu brought a pen.

Ramjeevan said, "Machine—one cartload of chaff, the remaining cash after the wheat is sold."

Shambhu said, "Agreed."

Parvati said, "People's work—today's agreed cash wage, in full."

Phoolkumari added, "And the harvesting cash, as before."

Ramjeevan wrote it down.

"Chaff?"

Parvati did not rush.

She said, "Once today's total chaff has been heaped, first mark three portions: one for the household cattle, one for the machine cart, and one for the labourers' share."

Ramjeevan said, "How much for the labourers?"

Parvati said, "Whatever reached the three households last year—measure that today and write it down."

"And if no one remembers?"

Mangali said, "There are old marks in the bamboo bin at my house."

Phoolkumari laughed.

"You have marks on everything."

Mangali said, "Without marks, a poor person's account blows away."

For a few moments no one spoke.

Shambhu brought two ropes from his cart.

"Chaff is harder to measure than grain."

"Make loads of roughly the same size."

"We can count ten loads as one small heap."

Ramjeevan asked, "Is that science?"

Shambhu laughed.

"No. But it is better than judging by the eye."

Work began again.

This time the machine's chaff did not fall into one undivided heap.

Mangali and Phoolkumari used the rope to tie loads of roughly equal size.

At every tenth load, Parvati drew one line in the ledger.

Chhotu counted the lines.

While watching the machine, Shambhu would occasionally say, "Tie them loosely, otherwise dampness will remain inside."

Janki had the filled grain sacks placed near the veranda of the house.

By noon, more than half the wheat had been threshed.

Ramjeevan was still pleased with the machine.

The work truly was fast.

But he now understood that "the work is faster" and "the wages have fallen" were not the same sentence.

At lunchtime everyone switched off the machine.

Chaff drifted in the air over the threshing ground.

Shaking out the end of her sari, Parvati said, "In the old days, on threshing day the body would be broken by night."

Shambhu said, "Then the machine is good, isn't it?"

"It is good."

"Then why the quarrel?"

"The arrival of a good thing does not mean an old share should disappear without a word."

Shambhu nodded in agreement.

Breaking a morsel of rice, Ramjeevan said, "Then next year, if the work is done by machine, will the chaff share stay the same?"

Parvati said, "Not necessarily."

Ramjeevan looked at her in surprise.

"Then?"

"Next year, settle it beforehand."

"How much work the machine does, how much the labourers do, and what labour the chaff share pays for—settle all of that before the work begins."

"If the rate has to change, let it change."

"But not after the work has started."

Janki said, "I like that."

After noon, a thin line of cloud appeared in the north.

Everyone returned quickly to work.

The machine ran without interruption.

Before four in the afternoon, the last sheaf too had gone through.

Shambhu shut down the machine.

Suddenly a humming seemed to remain inside everyone's ears.

Fourteen sacks full of grain stood in a row in the threshing ground.

Five separate heaps of chaff had been made.

Chhotu looked at the ledger.

"Forty-eight loads in all."

Mangali said, "Two loads are loose."

Parvati said, "Tie them again."

They counted once more.

Forty-seven equal loads, with some loose chaff left over.

Shambhu said, "The loose chaff can go on top when the cart is filled."

Ramjeevan looked at the ledger.

"One cartload for the machine—how many loads?"

Shambhu measured his cart and said, "With this tying, about fourteen."

Ramjeevan drew a line after fourteen.

"For the cowshed?"

Janki said, "We need twenty loads for now."

"And the rest?"

Parvati said, "See how much the old share used to come to."

Mangali ran home.

After a while she returned with a thin bamboo strip.

There were three old charcoal marks on it.

"Last year I received five loads."

Phoolkumari said, "I received four. I had sold half and kept half."

Parvati said, "I received six."

Ramjeevan added them.

"Fifteen in all."

Shambhu said, "Then forty-eight minus fourteen for the machine, twenty for the house, fifteen for the labourers—makes forty-nine."

Chhotu immediately said, "The total is forty-seven."

Everyone laughed.

The account had snagged again.

Janki said, "Twenty for the cowshed was only an estimate. We can manage with eighteen."

Ramjeevan looked at her.

"Can we?"

"If it is kept dry."

Parvati said, "Let the workers' share remain fifteen."

Ramjeevan wrote in the ledger:

Machine—chaff equal to fourteen loads.

Labouring group—fifteen loads.

Household—eighteen loads.

Loose chaff—to go on top when the cart is filled.

Shambhu began loading his cart.

Parvati, Mangali and Phoolkumari helped him too.

Shambhu said, "Why are you filling my chaff?"

Parvati said, "Gathering chaff is written under today's people's work."

Shambhu laughed.

"That ledger will become a burden."

Parvati replied, "A ledger makes the burden lighter."

As evening fell, the tractor drove away.

Three heaps remained in the threshing ground.

One for the household.

One for the labouring group.

And one small loose portion.

Ramjeevan looked towards the labourers' heap.

"Who will divide this?"

Parvati said, "We will."

"According to who has animals at home and who needs to sell."

Ramjeevan asked, "Then there will be another dispute?"

Parvati smiled.

"If there is, it will stay within the fifteen loads."

"Your machine charge will not enter it."

Ramjeevan laughed too.

The next day Parvati's group went to work in a field in another village.

A machine was to be used there as well.

The field owner stated the wages.

Parvati's first question was not about cash.

She asked, "In what form is the machine being paid?"

The field owner said, "Entirely in cash."

"The chaff?"

“Belongs to the household.”

“The labourers’ share?”

The field owner paused.

“The old custom is different here.”

Parvati said, “Then write it down before the work begins.”

From that day onward, ledgers did not become compulsory in every threshing ground.

Some people wrote things down.

Some did not.

Some continued exactly under the old custom.

But at Ramjeevan’s house the following year, three lines were written down one day before threshing began.

Machine payment.

People’s work.

Share of chaff.

That year Shambhu came again.

He looked at the ledger.

“No chaff for me?”

Ramjeevan said, “Full cash payment this year.”

Shambhu looked at the rate.

“Fine.”

When Parvati arrived, her name had already been written in the line for people’s work.

She looked at the line for chaff.

The quantity was written there too.

Parvati put a small tick beside it with the pen.

No one made a speech.

No one reopened the old dispute.

The machine started.

The chaff was not divided three times.

First the three accounts remained separate.

Only then did the work begin.

STORY 107

THE TWO GHATS OF THE POND

It was the second week of Jeth.

From a distance, the pond at Majhaul still looked full, but the moment one descended to the ghats it became clear how far the water had receded since the previous month.

The seventh step of the northern ghat had dried out.

At the southern ghat, one now had to cross mud from the brick edge to reach the water.

People in the village still spoke of “the two ghats.”

The water, however, was slowly joining both ghats into the same shallow crescent.

At first light, Malati Devi reached the northern ghat with a bundle of clothes on her head.

Subhadra and Pano were with her.

The three women descended the steps, and when they reached the last stone, Malati stopped.

Two thin bamboo poles had been planted obliquely in the water.

A red cord was tied between them.

From the cord hung a small wooden board.

Written on it in charcoal were the words: “Do not cross beyond this point.”

Subhadra frowned.

“Who put this here?”

Malati touched one end of the cord.

“It wasn’t here last night.”

Just then a narrow dugout, almost like a little boat, came gliding across the water.

Bhola Sahni was in it.

That year the pond had been leased to him for fish farming.

Bhola brought the dugout to the ghat.

“I tied the cord.”

Pano asked, “Why?”

Bhola pointed towards the green growth beneath the water.

“Yesterday evening there was a shoal of small fish here. As the water falls, they are all coming into the shallows. When clothes are washed, the soap foam flows straight here.”

Malati lowered her bundle.

“But this is the ghat.”

“I haven’t closed the ghat.”

“Then what is the cord saying?”

Bhola remained silent for a moment.

“It is saying: leave this side for the fish.”

Malati looked towards the water.

Where the cord now stood, two months earlier the water had reached to the waist.

Now it came only to the knees.

Beyond it began the deeper green water.

Subhadra said, "Are we supposed to wash clothes in the air?"

Before Bhola could answer, Pano burst out laughing.

"The soap foam belongs to the fish, and the mud belongs to us?"

Bhola stepped out of the dugout and came onto the ghat.

His legs were wet to the knees.

"I'm saying—don't stop washing clothes. Just do it a little higher up."

Malati looked at the dry steps.

"Where is the water higher up?"

Bhola did not answer.

That day the matter ended there.

The three women washed their clothes on the near side of the cord.

But the space was so narrow that when one wrung out a sheet, another woman's bucket overturned.

The wind carried the foam around and back beneath the cord.

Malati said nothing.

Bhola too was watching.

By noon, the red cord had become a subject of discussion throughout the village.

Some said Bhola was fencing off the pond.

Some said that since he had taken the lease, he had to protect the fish.

Some said that if clothes could no longer be washed there, a new quarrel would begin in every household.

That evening another problem arose at the southern ghat.

Ramcharit brought his two cows and a heifer to drink.

There was no water now on the old slope of the southern ghat.

The animals came down through the mud and reached the same shallow stretch where Bhola had tied the cord that morning.

One cow stepped two paces farther in to drink.

Mud churned up.

The water turned cloudy.

Bhola came running from a distance.

"Kaka, keep them a little to this side."

Holding the cow's rope, Ramcharit said, "Where exactly is 'this side'?"

Bhola pointed south.

"The old ghat."

Ramcharit laughed.

"The old ghat is on dry land now. Shall I teach the cow to read a map?"

Bhola fell silent.

The cow continued drinking.

The heifer sank a hoof into the mud.

Ramcharit quickly caught it by the neck and pulled it out.

At that moment Sarita Devi, the ward member, was passing by.
She stopped.

“What happened?”

Ramcharit said, “The pond has two ghats, but the water has become one-ghat water.”

Sarita laughed at first, then looked towards the pond.

It was true.

The next morning Sarita came to the pond carrying two old bamboo poles, a rope, and a hand-span measure.

Bhola was already there.

Malati, Subhadra, Pano and Ramcharit also arrived.

Sarita said, “First let us see where the quarrel actually lies.”

Malati said, “The quarrel lies in the red cord.”

Bhola said, “The quarrel lies in the falling water.”

Ramcharit said, “In both.”

Sarita planted a bamboo pole in the water.

The first mark was made where the old stone steps of the pond ended.

The second where the water now reached the knee.

The third where Bhola said the shoals of fish were circling.

Three charcoal lines were drawn on the bamboo.

Pano asked, “And what will these lines do?”

Sarita said, “Nothing yet. We will watch for two days.”

In two days, the water fell one finger below the first mark.

In four days, three fingers.

On the seventh day, the cord at the northern ghat hung half over mud.

Bhola untied it himself.

Malati watched from a distance.

She said, “Has the cord lost?”

Bhola smiled.

“The water has won.”

For the first time, Malati laughed.

But the inconvenience remained.

Those washing clothes now had to keep searching for stones as they moved lower.

The animals too were drinking from the same side.

One morning Subhadra’s sari was stepped on by a cow.

Ramcharit immediately lifted the cloth.

“My fault.”

Brushing off the sari, Subhadra said, “Not yours. There is only one path.”

That evening a small meeting was held beneath the peepal tree beside the pond.

There was no platform.

Sarita placed a register on an old wooden stool.

Bhola did not bring his lease papers.

Malati did not bring any petition either.

Ramcharit had a rope in his hand, because it was nearly time to take the cows home.

Sarita asked the first question.

“How does it work when the pond is full?”

Malati said, “The northern ghat is for washing clothes.”

Ramcharit said, “The southern ghat is for the animals.”

Bhola said, “The deep middle is for fish.”

“And when the water falls?”

All three fell silent.

From a little distance Pano called out, “Then all three become the same place.”

Sarita drew three lines in the register.

“Then the rule cannot be about fixed places. It has to be about the water level.”

Bhola said, “The level will change every day.”

“That is why there will not be a new village council every day. There will be marks.”

Sarita copied the three bamboo marks into the register.

Upper water line.

Middle water line.

Lower water line.

Malati asked, “At the upper line?”

“As with the old two ghats.”

“The middle?”

Instead of answering, Sarita said, “That is what we now have to work out.”

Here the meeting became difficult.

Bhola wanted the soap foam not to flow directly into the pond.

Malati said that carrying water twenty hand-spans uphill to wash clothes was impossible for an elderly woman.

Ramcharit wanted the animals to reach the water but not sink into deep mud.

Sarita asked, “What is actually needed for washing clothes?”

Subhadra said, “A level stone, water, and a place to wring them.”

“Is it necessary to stand inside the pond?”

“No. The water only has to come within reach of the hand.”

“For the animals?”

Ramcharit said, “A slope. Water at mouth level. That is all.”

Bhola said, “I need the shallow green growth in the middle to survive.”

Sarita wrote three more lines in the register.

Washing.

Water for animals.

Shallow refuge for fish.

No solution was reached that day.

But the next morning Malati brought an old square stone from her house. She placed it beside the fourth step of the northern ghat.

Pano brought two bricks.

Subhadra brought an old tin basin.
 Bhola watched from a distance.
 He asked, "What are you making?"
 Malati said, "First we are seeing whether clothes can be washed by drawing water upward."
 Bhola said nothing.
 From his dugout he brought out an old thick rope.
 "For lowering the bucket."
 The first trial was not easy.
 Half the bucket spilled while it was being pulled up.
 The stone was too small.
 The tin basin rocked unsteadily.
 After bending twice, Malati's back began to ache.
 She said, "This rule will make old people sit at home."
 Bhola nodded.
 "Then it is not right."
 At noon Sarita brought out two discarded stone slabs from the rear room of the panchayat building.
 They had once belonged to a broken platform.
 Four young men carried the slabs to the ghat.
 Malati said, "Why is everyone working for us?"
 Sarita replied, "Not for you. To keep the pond water from receiving soap directly."
 Bhola said, "The expense will not fall only on the women."
 He agreed to provide sand and two sacks of gravel the next day.
 Ramcharit said, "I will give labour to make the slope at the animal ghat."
 Sarita wrote it down.
 No one became a benefactor.
 It was written whose work brought benefit to whom.
 Within three days, a small level washing platform was made above the northern ghat.
 The platform stood eight hand-spans above the pond.
 Water was pulled up with rope and bucket.
 A narrow channel was made along one side of the platform.
 Water from the channel did not run towards the pond, but towards a soak pit in the earth beside two banana plants.
 On the first day Pano said laughingly, "So the fish no longer drink our soap?"
 Bhola said, "The banana plants do."
 Subhadra interrupted, "The banana plants should not drink too much soap either."
 Everyone laughed.
 Sarita wrote: "Use less soap; foamy water towards the soak pit."
 Malati said, "Write a rule, but I don't want a policeman measuring soap."
 Sarita did not underline the word "less."
 She wrote only: "Foam must not flow directly into the pond."

Ramcharit's work at the southern ghat was harder.

The animals' hooves sank into the mud.

He laid broken bricks and roof tiles.

Bhola said, "The edges of the bricks may cut their hooves."

Ramcharit removed them again.

In the end a slope was made by pressing three pieces of old thick bamboo into the mud.

Two flat stones were placed over them.

The animals could descend to the water, but to prevent them from going into the deeper part, two bamboo poles were tied horizontally across the way.

The bamboo was low enough for a cow to stretch its head forward and drink.

It was high enough to keep the whole body from moving through.

On the first day Ramcharit's cow was frightened by the bamboo.

It backed away.

Ramcharit stroked its forehead.

When it saw the second cow, the first one came forward again.

Both drank.

Ramcharit said, "This can work."

Bhola looked at the colour of the water.

Less mud had been stirred up than before.

But seven days later the inconvenience changed again.

The water fell below the middle line.

The rope at the northern washing platform was now becoming too short.

The end of the southern slope was once again on dry ground.

Opening the register beneath the peepal tree, Malati said, "We are back where we began."

Sarita looked at the marks on the bamboo.

"No. Now we know that building a fixed ghat will not work."

Bhola asked, "Then?"

With a thin stick Sarita drew the shape of the pond on the ground.

"The ghat stays above. Access moves."

Ramcharit said, "Explain."

Sarita pointed towards the bamboo at the southern slope.

"The horizontal bamboo should not be fixed. The stakes must be movable."

Bhola understood at once.

"As the water falls, the stakes move lower. But the deep-water boundary moves with them."

Malati said, "And my rope?"

Pano said, "Longer."

This time the laughter was brief, but the answer was right.

Bhola cut two long pieces from an old strong net rope.

Malati objected.

"Don't cut up your fishing gear."

Bhola said, "It is old. Knotted. It is good for this."

The stakes at the southern ghat were pulled out and planted again.

A rule was made: when the water passed below the middle mark, the stakes would be moved one stone lower.

When it passed below the lower mark, only a narrow place for animals to drink would remain open; the rest of the shallow green stretch would be left as refuge for the fish.

Malati asked, "And clothes at the lower mark?"

Sarita said, "On the platform. With the long rope."

"And anyone who cannot pull it?"

The matter stuck again.

It would have been easy to say: a young person in the household will pull it.

Malati rejected that immediately.

"What of a household with no young person?"

Bhola thought.

"I can leave a filled drum every morning."

Malati said, "That will increase your work."

"If the fish survive, I benefit too."

Sarita said, "It must not depend on one man."

In the end two medium-sized drums were placed beside the northern platform.

The first person able to draw water in the morning would fill them with two or three buckets.

Those washing clothes would refill them in turn.

Leaving a drum empty was not declared an offence.

The register merely said: "As much as you take, refill as much as you reasonably can."

Pano said, "This rule has no punishment."

Sarita replied, "Not every rule exists for punishment."

Bhola said nothing.

He remembered the sentence.

On the eighth morning the drums were found empty.

Malati was alone.

She pulled the first bucket.

Then the second.

On the third pull, her hands began to hurt.

She sat down.

At that moment Bhola was setting out with his boat.

He came to the ghat and half-filled both drums.

Malati said, "Your name won't go into the register for this."

Bhola laughed.

"Then write the fish's name."

Malati laughed too.

At noon Pano filled the drums again.

In the evening Ramcharit's son left two buckets of water.

Slowly, the work began to become habit more than rule.

Then, on the last Monday of Jeth, a strong wind rose.

That night the first proper rain came.

Not much, but it continued for two hours.

By morning the pond had risen by half a hand-span.

The moved stakes at the southern ghat now stood too far inside the water.

Ramcharit said, "So now we move them back up?"

Bhola looked at the water-level marks on the bamboo.

The water was touching the middle line.

Sarita said, "A rule that moves downward must also return upward."

The stakes were moved one stone higher.

The washing platform at the northern ghat remained where it was.

Some of the women washing clothes wanted to return to the old steps now that the water had risen.

Malati said, "The water has risen. The path of the soap has not changed."

Bhola looked at her.

He said nothing.

That week the fishing net was lifted.

Bhola released the small fish and separated the larger ones.

Ramcharit stood at the edge.

He asked, "Did all this trouble truly save the fish?"

Bhola showed him a small fish in his palm.

"How many were saved, I cannot say."

"Then?"

"Less mud is being churned up. Foam is not coming straight here. That much I can see."

Ramcharit said, "And my cows no longer sink in the mud."

Both statements were separately true.

No one tried to combine them into a single benefit.

A month later, at an ordinary meeting of the panchayat, Sarita read out the pond register.

Someone asked, "Does the pond now belong to the fish or to the village?"

Before Sarita could answer, Bhola said, "The water is used by everyone; the fish are my responsibility."

Malati said, "And the ghats move with the water."

A few people at the meeting laughed.

But Sarita did not write that sentence in the register.

She wrote only the three water-level rules.

Upper line—the old two ghats remain open; the washing platform may be used; animals use the southern slope.

Middle line—washing on the platform; the animal stakes move one stone lower; the shallow green area remains clear.

Lower line—long rope; movable animal stakes; no one steps inside the fish-refuge strip.

Below that she added one more line.

"Foamy water must not flow directly into the pond."

No one added a "penalty."

No one wrote the word "owner."

No one wrote “only” either, except in the prohibition against stepping into the refuge strip.

In the first week of Asadh, the rains became regular.

The pond began to fill.

The dry steps of the northern ghat became wet again.

The bamboo pressed into the lower part of the southern slope was half submerged.

The first stake that had once carried the red cord had been removed long before.

Malati had tied its cord into her clothesline.

One morning Bhola saw the red cord fluttering in the wind.

He laughed.

Malati asked, “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why did you laugh?”

Bhola said, “Once this cord tried to stop the pond.”

Wringing out a cloth, Malati said, “Did the cord ever stop the pond?”

Bhola did not answer.

The water had now risen to the upper mark.

The two ghats once again appeared clearly separate.

Clothes were being washed at the northern ghat.

Ramcharit’s cows were drinking at the southern ghat.

In the deep middle, Bhola was checking his net.

From a distance the scene looked as it had before.

The only difference was that beneath the peepal tree, three water lines were now written in the register.

And they were marked on the bamboo at the ghat as well.

When the water rose, the lines disappeared beneath it.

When the water fell, they appeared again.

No one erased them.

THE CREDIT LEDGER

Sawan was drawing to a close.

After three days of rain, the mud on the main road of Majhaul village had dried a little, though water still stood in the potholes along the edges.

For the first time, Devaki went alone to Mahendra Sahu's shop.

It had been eight months since her marriage had brought her to this village.

During those eight months she had gone to the shop many times, but usually with her mother-in-law or sister-in-law.

Today her mother-in-law's knee was aching, her father-in-law had gone to inspect the field bunds, and the household had run out of salt.

Besides, her young brother-in-law Naval had had a fever since the previous day.

The ordinary fever tablets prescribed at the village health room were kept at the shop.

Devaki tied two hundred rupees into a knot at the end of her sari.

She thought she would buy salt, soap, the tablets and a little mustard oil; if the money fell short, she would have thirty or forty rupees entered on credit.

Mahendra Sahu's shop stood at the village crossroads beside an old peepal tree.

One half held rice, lentils, oil, salt, soap and matches; the other held seed, rope, umbrellas, cheap notebooks and pencils, and a few common medicines.

Behind the counter lay three thick ledgers, one on top of another.

The red ledger was for cash sales.

The green ledger was for wholesale goods.

The blue ledger was for credit.

Everyone in the village knew the blue ledger by name.

Mahendra Sahu did not announce in front of outsiders how much any household owed.

But he himself knew almost every account by heart.

When Devaki arrived, there were two customers in the shop.

An elderly man was buying tobacco; a child was buying half a kilo of sugar.

Devaki stood at one side of the counter.

Mahendra Sahu returned the child's change, wrapped the old man's purchase in paper, and then asked, "Tell me, bahuria, what do you need?"

Devaki recited her list.

Mahendra Sahu took out the items one after another.

"One kilo of salt?"

"Yes."

"Half a kilo of oil?"

"Yes."

"One bar of soap?"

"Two."

"How many tablets?"

Devaki held out the prescription.

Mahendra Sahu read it and took out two strips.

He placed everything on the counter and added it on the calculator.

The total was thirty-seven rupees more than two hundred.

Devaki untied the knot of her sari and gave him two hundred rupees.

"Write thirty-seven on credit. If Madhav comes by evening, he will pay it."

Mahendra Sahu casually opened the blue ledger.

The ledger was not arranged alphabetically but according to an old sequence of households.

He turned the pages.

"Harinayaran Jha..."

Devaki became attentive on hearing her father-in-law's name.

At the top of the page, in thick letters, was written: "Harinayaran Jha Household."

Below it ran entries from many years.

Sometimes "flour," sometimes "oil," sometimes only an amount of money.

Nowhere was the name of the person who had taken the goods.

Nowhere was the full list of items.

Mahendra Sahu drew a new line.

"Today—thirty-seven."

Then he looked at the previous total.

"With the old balance, that makes one thousand seven hundred and forty-two."

Devaki thought she had misheard him.

"How much?"

"One thousand seven hundred and forty-two."

"I only asked you to write thirty-seven."

"I wrote thirty-seven as the new credit. I told you the total including the old balance."

"How much was the old balance?"

Mahendra Sahu looked at the last addition above.

"One thousand seven hundred and five."

Devaki's hand stopped on the bag of soap.

"When is that from?"

"It has been running for a long time. Money has been paid into it from time to time, then more goods have been taken."

"From before I came here?"

Mahendra Sahu turned the page and checked the dates.

"The first balance here is from five years ago. Since then it has gone down and up."

Devaki remained silent for a few moments.

“Then why is what I bought today being joined to something from five years ago?”

Mahendra Sahu looked at her.

“I have not put it on your head. It is the household ledger.”

“My father-in-law’s name is at the top of the page.”

“Yes. That was the name under which the household account was kept.”

“Then whose thirty-seven is what I took?”

“The household’s.”

Devaki’s question came again.

“And the one thousand seven hundred and five from five years ago?”

“That too belongs to the household.”

Mahendra Sahu said it in a manner that suggested the answer was self-evident.

To Devaki it was not.

She had entered this household only eight months ago.

Five years earlier she had been a student in her parents’ home.

Who had taken oil from this ledger then, who had taken rice, who had paid money—none of it was written down.

She did not suspect the shopkeeper of theft.

The problem was not in the shopkeeper’s eyes. It was in the lines on the page.

The ledger knew the “household.”

It did not know the people inside it.

Devaki said, “I gave you two hundred rupees. Against which debt did those two hundred go?”

Mahendra Sahu looked at the ledger again.

“They were deducted from the total.”

“From today’s goods?”

“From the total.”

“Then if Madhav gives you thirty-seven tomorrow, which line will that reduce?”

“The total.”

For the first time Devaki smiled slightly.

“So the ledger adds everything together, but separates nothing.”

Mahendra Sahu smiled too.

“Old shop accounts are like that.”

“If they are old, isn’t there even more need for them to be clear?”

Before Mahendra Sahu could answer, another customer came into the shop.

He closed the ledger.

He handed Devaki her bag of goods.

“When Madhav comes this evening, we will talk.”

Devaki returned home.

All along the road, the number one thousand seven hundred and five revolved in her mind.

At home she first gave Naval's prescription and medicine to her mother-in-law.

Then she filled the salt jar.

She put away the oil.

She placed the soap in the box on the veranda.

Her mother-in-law asked, "How much did it come to?"

"Two hundred and thirty-seven."

"You ran short of money?"

"Thirty-seven on credit."

Her mother-in-law said casually, "He must have written it in the account."

Devaki looked at her face.

"There is already one thousand seven hundred and five in the account."

Her mother-in-law's hand stopped.

"Still?"

That "still" startled Devaki.

"You knew?"

"Not how much. There was an old account."

"Whose account?"

Before answering, her mother-in-law lifted the lota to drink water.

"The household's."

Devaki heard the shopkeeper's answer again.

"Who inside the household took it?"

"Sometimes I did, sometimes your father-in-law, sometimes Madhav, sometimes Naval. Sugar and tea for the field labourers also came from there. At your sister-in-law's wedding, half the price of two sacks of rice was paid later."

"None of that under separate names?"

"Who used to write all that in those days?"

Devaki fell silent.

Her mother-in-law, now a little uneasy, said, "Don't think that the old debt has been put on your head."

"I am not saying that."

"Then?"

"I want to understand why what I took today must remain tied in the same knot as entries from five years ago."

Her mother-in-law did not answer.

Madhav returned in the evening.

Devaki told him everything.

At first Madhav laughed.

"You are thinking this much over thirty-seven rupees?"

"Not over thirty-seven."

"Then?"

"Today I paid two hundred. The shopkeeper says it was deducted from the total. If you pay five hundred tomorrow, that too will come off the total. If Naval takes a notebook on credit, that too will increase the total. Five years

from now someone will ask—who took what?—and the answer will again be ‘the household.’”

Madhav’s laughter slowly faded.

“This is an old custom.”

“Does an old custom mean the account itself must remain old?”

Madhav looked towards his father’s room.

“Babuji will not like this. He will think you want to separate the household accounts.”

“I do not want to separate the household. I want to separate the lines.”

Madhav said nothing.

The next morning Harinayaran Jha raised the matter himself.

“I hear there was an argument over the account?”

Devaki was sitting near the hearth.

“Not an argument.”

“Mahendra said you asked questions after looking at the page.”

Devaki understood that even when a village shop kept accounts private, words still travelled like air.

“I only asked why old and new credit were not kept separately.”

Harinayaran Jha coughed and said, “A household account belongs to the household. Are we going to count how much salt went into each mouth inside it?”

Devaki replied calmly, “The salt is shared. The medicine was for Naval. The rice from five years ago was for sister-in-law’s wedding. The reasons are different.”

“The money will still go from the household’s pocket.”

“Every time?”

Harinayaran Jha paused.

Madhav stood silently by the doorway.

Devaki continued, “Yesterday I paid two hundred rupees saved from my sewing. Did that money reduce the old wedding rice or today’s oil? The ledger does not say.”

Harinayaran Jha’s face grew a little stern.

“Are you trying to say your money is separate?”

Devaki did not answer at once.

She looked at the fire in the hearth.

“I am saying that it should be written who paid the money. It should be written for whom the goods were taken. If something is shared by the household, let it be written as shared. That is all.”

Harinayaran Jha went out onto the veranda.

The matter stopped there, but did not end.

Three days later Naval came home with a notebook and pen bought on credit.

That evening Devaki asked, “Did you pay?”

“No. I had it written in the account.”

“Under whose name?”

Naval laughed.

“Our household’s.”

Devaki said nothing.

That same week sugar, tea leaves and jaggery for the field labourers were again brought on credit.

Harinayaran Jha said, “That is a field expense.”

Devaki asked, “Is that written in the ledger?”

There was no answer.

The problem was no longer merely Devaki’s question.

Madhav himself began to think about it.

He did brick-and-mortar work in town.

When the contractor paid the weekly wages, days, hours, advances and deductions were written separately.

Many times there were quarrels over those accounts, but at least one could look at the lines.

The household credit had only one total.

The following Sunday Madhav went to Mahendra Sahu’s shop.

Devaki did not go with him.

Madhav placed five hundred rupees on the counter.

“Deposit this.”

Mahendra Sahu opened the blue ledger.

Madhav said, “First, one thing.”

“Tell me.”

“Against which balance will these five hundred be deducted?”

Mahendra Sahu laughed.

“Now everyone in your household asks the same question.”

“The answer?”

“From the old total.”

“What if I say three hundred should go against the sugar and tea for the field, and two hundred against the household’s everyday goods?”

Mahendra Sahu looked at the ledger.

“The old ledger has no columns like that.”

“Can you make them?”

Mahendra Sahu remained silent for a while.

“I can. But if I make them only for your household, others will ask why not for theirs.”

“Then make them for everyone.”

Mahendra Sahu scratched his neck.

“Writing the name of every customer will not be easy. A child will come, a daughter-in-law will come, a labourer will come. One person will say, ‘write it to the household,’ another, ‘put it under the master’s name.’ How much can I ask when the shop is crowded?”

Madhav said, “Ask three things—who is taking it, whether it is shared by the household or for some specific purpose, and when money is paid, which balance it is meant to reduce.”

“Three questions are too many in a crowd.”

“Fewer than the quarrels caused by one vague total.”

Mahendra Sahu did not agree immediately.

He thought about it throughout the day.

Credit in his shop was not merely a convenience.

In many village households, cash ran out in the middle of the month.

One family would pay after the crop was sold, another after wages arrived, another when money came from the city.

For him, keeping accounts under a household name was simple.

One household, one page, one total.

But simple for whom?

For the shopkeeper.

Not always for the customer.

That evening something happened.

Lalita Devi's son Ramesh took five kilos of rice on credit.

Two hours later Lalita Devi came and said, "I had told him we were not to buy on credit today. His wages come tomorrow; he will pay for it himself."

Mahendra Sahu said, "But the page is under the household name."

Lalita Devi replied, "The household name may be there, but his earnings are separate. He took the rice for himself, not for the family kitchen."

For the first time Mahendra Sahu understood that Devaki's question was not merely an argument inside one household.

The next day he brought a new blue ledger from the market.

He did not throw away the old ledger.

On it he pasted a white sheet and wrote: "Old Balance—Where the Purpose Is Unclear."

On the first page of the new ledger he made four columns.

Date.

Name of person taking the goods.

Purpose—"Household Shared" or "Personal/Special."

Amount.

Then he added a fifth column—"Payment credited against which balance."

His son Chhotu said, "If you write this much, customers will run away."

Mahendra Sahu said, "We will watch for seven days first."

On the first day the arrangement slowed the shop down.

An elderly woman buying oil said, "Why do you need the name of the person taking it? Don't you know my name?"

Mahendra Sahu smiled.

"I know it. Let the ledger know it too."

A child asked for biscuits on credit.

Mahendra Sahu asked, "For the household or for you?"

The child laughed.

"How can biscuits be shared?"

People in the shop laughed.

Mahendra Sahu wrote: "Personal—Ravi."

On the second day the problem was reversed.

A farmer bought jaggery and tea leaves for labourers.

He said, "Household shared."

Mahendra Sahu asked, "Household, or field work?"

The farmer scratched his head.

"Field."

In the ledger was written: "Special—Transplanting."

On the third day Devaki herself went to the shop.

She bought salt, turmeric and soap.

Mahendra Sahu opened the new ledger.

"Person taking—Devaki."

Devaki smiled.

"Salt and turmeric are household shared."

"The soap?"

Mahendra Sahu asked.

"That too is for the household."

"All of it?"

"All of it today."

Mahendra Sahu wrote it down.

Devaki asked, "And the old one thousand seven hundred and five?"

Mahendra Sahu showed her the old ledger.

"It has not disappeared. The old balance remains exactly as it is. As much as the family can clarify about the old entries, they can tell me and I will add notes. What cannot be clarified, I will not give a made-up name."

Devaki nodded.

"That is better."

"And the payment?"

"I'll pay cash today."

"Then there is no new credit."

"Yes."

When the seven-day trial was over, Mahendra Sahu placed the blue ledger before him after closing the shop.

Chhotu kept adding the figures.

There was more writing than under the old method.

But two kinds of quarrel had already diminished.

Once, Ramesh's personal rice had not been charged to his mother.

Once, goods taken for field labourers had not been merged into the household's monthly kitchen total.

And once, a woman paying two hundred rupees from her own savings had been able to say clearly, "Deduct this from my previous personal medicine debt."

For the first time Mahendra Sahu wrote a name in the payment column.

On the eighth day Harinayaran Jha himself came to the shop.

He had five hundred rupees in his hand.

Mahendra Sahu opened the old ledger.

"Against which balance?"

Harinayaran Jha raised his eyebrows.

"Our household's."

Mahendra Sahu said, "Against the old unclear balance?"

Harinayaran Jha thought for a few moments.

"Yes. Against the one that has been running for five years."

Mahendra Sahu deducted five hundred.

Then in the payment line he wrote: "Harinayaran Jha—Old Unclear Balance."

Harinayaran Jha looked at the words.

"Why 'unclear'?"

"Because the old page does not say what was taken, or for whom."

Harinayaran Jha opened his mouth to answer, then closed it.

After a while he said, "Fine. Better 'unclear' than falsely clear."

Mahendra Sahu smiled.

The new ledger did not fill up in a month, but its method became understood in the village.

Not every household separated all its internal accounts.

Not all credit became personal either.

Rice, salt, oil and matches were still usually entered as "Household Shared."

A school notebook went under a child's name.

Jaggery and tea for farm work became "Special—Field."

Medicine was entered under the name of the person for whom it had been bought.

And whenever someone paid money, Mahendra Sahu now always asked one sentence:

"Against which balance?"

Many people were irritated at first.

Then they thought and answered.

Sometimes the answer was, "The oldest one."

Sometimes, "Today's goods."

Sometimes, "My own line."

By Dussehra, Harinayaran Jha's old unclear balance had fallen to less than half.

Meanwhile, twice medicine was entered under Devaki's name, and once sewing thread.

Oil, lentils and salt continued under the Household Shared line.

One evening Devaki arrived at the shop and found Mahendra Sahu with both the old blue ledger and the new blue ledger open together.

On the old page, in thick letters, was still written: "Harinayaran Jha Household."

At the top of the new page was the same household name.

But in the lines below were separate names, dates and purposes.

Devaki looked at both pages.

Mahendra Sahu asked, "Has the household broken apart now?"

Devaki laughed.

"No."

"Then?"

Devaki placed a finger on the page of the new ledger.
“Now the account lets us see the people inside the household.”
Mahendra Sahu closed the ledger.
Naval was standing at the door.
He asked for a notebook.
Mahendra Sahu opened the ledger again.
“Household shared or Naval’s?”
Without laughing, Naval replied, “Naval’s.”
Mahendra Sahu wrote the date.
Then the name.
Then: “Personal—Notebook.”
The old household name remained at the top.
Below it, for the first time, the people too remained visible.

STORY 109

THE MANGO TREE AT THE EDGE OF THE FIELD

It was the last week of Chait. The scent of mango blossom had begun to fade, and tiny young fruits were appearing on the trees.

At the eastern edge of the village, an old mango tree stood on the last bund of Raghunath Chaudhary's field.

The trunk of the tree stood inside Raghunath's field.

No one disputed that.

The fruit of the tree was also considered Raghunath's.

No one disputed that either.

The dispute lay elsewhere.

It concerned the path by which the tree could be reached.

On the southern side of Raghunath's field, Ramsakhi Devi had two katthas of mung.

The rows of mung were new.

The soil was still soft.

The heaviest branch of the mango tree leaned towards Ramsakhi's field, but the ground beneath it was now full of mung plants.

Raghunath owned the tree.

Ramsakhi owned the mung.

And once mango season arrived, the men who climbed the tree to pick the fruit became a third party.

For many years Raghunath had sold the entire crop on contract before the mangoes ripened.

The trader would inspect the tree.

Estimate the fruit.

Name a lump-sum price.

Raghunath would accept.

After that, the risks of ripening, storms, insects, picking and transport belonged to the trader.

That year the trader was Shambhu Sahu.

He had already inspected the tree three times.

On the fourth visit he came carrying a thin notebook.

"There is more fruit than last year," he said.

Raghunath looked up.

"If there is more fruit, there should be more money too."

The bargaining went on for a long time.

In the end they settled at six thousand four hundred rupees.

Shambhu wrote in his notebook: "One tree, entire crop, picking by trader."

Raghunath did not use a thumb impression; he could write his name.

He signed.

At that time Ramsakhi was working with a hand hoe in her field.
 She had nothing to do with the bargaining.
 But when Shambhu, on his way back, stepped straight through her mung
 to reach the bund, Ramsakhi called out.
 "Not this way."
 Shambhu stopped.
 "What?"
 "There is mung here."
 "I'm only passing through."
 "Even empty feet crush plants."
 Shambhu took two steps back.
 Then he made the longer turn along the bund and went out.
 The matter might have ended there.
 But in the first week of Jeth, five men came on the day the mangoes were
 to be picked.
 Two bamboo poles.
 One rope.
 Three baskets.
 One long fruit-picking pole.
 And a sack full of cord.
 Shambhu was with them.
 The morning dew still lay on the mung leaves.
 Ramsakhi was pulling weeds at the far end of her field.
 The first picker stepped down from the road and walked straight through
 her mung.
 The second followed.
 The third carried a bamboo pole.
 Ramsakhi dropped her hoe and ran.
 "Stop!"
 The first man stopped.
 "The path is over there."
 Ramsakhi pointed towards the northern bund of Raghunath's field.
 Shambhu said, "Going around that way is much farther."
 "If it is farther, that does not make my mung any smaller."
 Shambhu did not laugh.
 He looked at the rows of mung.
 Broad footprints had already appeared in three places.
 "It is only two trips there and back," he said.
 Ramsakhi replied, "Five men going twice makes ten passages."
 "The mangoes will be heavy."
 "The mung is light, so it is easier to crush?"
 By then Raghunath had reached the field.
 Word had reached him that something had come to a halt.
 The moment he saw him, Shambhu said, "The tree is yours, the fruit is
 mine, but the path is closed."

Ramsakhi answered immediately, "Did you also give him a path on contract?"

Raghunath remained silent for a moment.

Shambhu took out his notebook.

He opened the page.

"One tree, entire crop, picking by trader."

Ramsakhi looked at the page.

"Where is my field written here?"

It was not.

Raghunath said, "Last year everyone went by this same way."

"Last year this patch was fallow."

That was true.

The previous year Ramsakhi had grown nothing on this strip.

The year before that there had been mustard, but it had already been harvested by mango-picking time.

This was the first year that the mung season and the mango season overlapped.

Shambhu looked up at the branch.

Most of the mangoes were on the southern side.

"The bamboo has to be set from that side," he said.

Ramsakhi replied, "Set the bamboo, but where will the feet stand?"

Shambhu did not answer.

The pickers remained standing.

One man asked quietly, "Shall we take down the mangoes from the northern side first?"

Shambhu nodded.

"Come."

The men went around along the bund of Raghunath's field.

The path was long.

There was an irrigation channel in the middle.

The soil in the channel was wet.

Carrying the bamboo across it was difficult.

On the first round, only two baskets of mangoes came down.

Shambhu checked the time.

"At this pace it will take the whole day."

Raghunath said, "Let it take the day."

Shambhu looked at him.

"The labour for the extra time comes out of my contract price."

Ramsakhi was listening from a distance.

She said, "And whose account carries the labour of my mung?"

Raghunath's face tightened.

He was irritated not with Ramsakhi, but with the situation.

The contract had been made by him.

He had never thought about the path.

By noon, much of the fruit from the northern side had been picked.

The heavy southern branch was still full.

Ramdev, one of the pickers, had climbed the tree.
 From above he said, "If the rope stays below on the southern side, the baskets will come straight down."
 Shambhu looked at Ramsakhi.
 Ramsakhi said, "The rope goes through the air, not feet. Lower them."
 A bamboo pole was planted on the bund.
 The rope was turned over its top.
 Ramdev filled the baskets from the tree.
 Below, two men standing in Raghunath's field pulled the rope.
 The basket swung from the southern branch and then came down into Raghunath's field.
 In the first basket, some mangoes struck against one another.
 Shambhu picked one up and examined it.
 "It will bruise."
 Ramdev called from above, "Give the rope a little more slack."
 The second basket came down better.
 The third better still.
 Ramsakhi stood at the edge of her field and watched.
 No one stepped into the mung.
 But the work was slow.
 By evening, even half the tree had not been cleared.
 Shambhu said, "We will have to come again tomorrow."
 Raghunath asked, "How much extra has this cost?"
 "One day."
 "In money?"
 Shambhu named the four labourers.
 Ramsakhi said, "Why did that money become necessary—because my field exists, or because the contract never mentioned a path?"
 No one answered immediately.
 Shambhu closed his notebook.
 "We will talk tomorrow."
 The next morning Raghunath first went to Ramsakhi's field.
 He carried a short bamboo stick.
 He stopped beside the footprints.
 Of the three marks from the previous day, the plants had risen again in two.
 In one place four or five plants were still flattened.
 Ramsakhi said, "I am not asking money for these five plants."
 "Then?"
 "Next time it will not be only five."
 Raghunath understood.
 The issue was not merely the damage of the previous day.
 The issue was that the next contract must not again rest on the same incomplete sentence.
 He sent for Shambhu.
 When Shambhu arrived, he had brought a thin bamboo and red cord.

“Let us measure the path,” he said.

The three of them walked around the edges of the fields.

From the road to the tree along Raghunath’s northern bund was one hundred and twenty-two paces.

Cutting straight across Ramsakhi’s field was fifty-six paces.

The difference was sixty-six paces.

Shambhu said, “That difference enters the labour cost.”

Ramsakhi said, “And the shorter path enters the mung.”

Raghunath did not bring out a map of the fields.

He drew three lines on the ground with the stick.

First—from the road along the northern bund.

Second—the place where the irrigation channel had to be crossed.

Third—the open circle beneath the tree.

“Where is the difficult part on this route?” he asked.

Ramdev, the picker, said, “The channel.”

The channel was not wide.

But when it was wet, crossing it while carrying bamboo was difficult.

Ramsakhi said, “There are two old planks at my house.”

Shambhu looked at her.

“Will you lend them?”

“For two days. I want them back unbroken.”

The planks were brought.

They were laid across the channel.

Carrying the bamboo became easy.

Now the difficulty was the baskets.

It took time to carry heavy baskets along the long bund.

Raghunath brought his old handcart.

The cart could run on the bund, but grass had to be cut in two places.

Within half an hour the route was cleared.

Shambhu checked the time again.

“Now it will not be as slow as yesterday.”

Ramsakhi smiled.

“And my field is not any smaller than yesterday either.”

By noon that day the remaining mangoes had been brought down.

Once, a basket swung towards Ramsakhi’s field.

The man holding the rope stopped it at once.

The basket remained hanging in the air.

Ramsakhi called from below, “The mangoes have not become mine.”

Everyone laughed.

So did Shambhu.

But after the laughter he took out his notebook.

“What should I write in the contract?”

Raghunath said, “Next year’s matter belongs to next year.”

Ramsakhi said, “No. Write now what we learned this year.”

Shambhu rested the notebook on his knee.

Raghunath said, “Fruit—one tree.”

Shambhu wrote it.

Ramsakhi said, "Access path—the owner's northern bund."

Shambhu wrote it.

Ramdev said, "Planks over the wet channel."

Shambhu laughed.

"Shall I write that in the contract?"

Raghunath said, "Do not write 'planks.' Write who must keep the route usable."

Shambhu wrote: "On picking day, keeping the access route usable is the tree-owner's responsibility."

Ramsakhi thought for a moment.

"If for some reason it becomes necessary to step into another field?"

Shambhu said, "Ask first."

"And if plants are crushed?"

Raghunath said, "Count the rows where they are crushed."

Ramsakhi said, "Not individual plants. Rows. Counting each plant is difficult."

Shambhu wrote: "If entry is unavoidable, prior permission; record the length of the row that is flattened."

Ramdev said, "And if mangoes fall in a storm?"

The matter halted again.

A storm does not ask permission.

Ramsakhi said, "If mangoes from the tree fall wherever the storm throws them, you may come to collect them. But if the field is wet, stay on the bund."

Shambhu wrote that down.

"If we write this much, will a mango contract become a book of land?" Raghunath joked.

Ramsakhi replied, "The tree stands on land."

That evening the heap of mangoes was weighed beside the road.

Shambhu received slightly less fruit than he had estimated.

Some young fruits had already fallen.

Some mangoes were damaged by insects.

Even so, he did not speak of breaking the contract.

Nor did Raghunath take the full cost of the extra day's labour upon himself.

They agreed to split the additional labour cost equally.

Ramsakhi paid nothing towards it.

Her two planks had been used.

On the way back, Shambhu cleaned the planks and left them at her door.

Three days later a strong wind came.

At noon five or seven unripe mangoes fell into Ramsakhi's mung.

Shambhu's young son came to collect them.

He stopped at the edge of the field.

Ramsakhi saw him from a distance.

"Come along the bund," she said.

The boy came along the bund.

Ramsakhi herself stepped down among the mung.

She picked up the mangoes one by one and placed them on the bund.

The boy said, "Kaki, keep two for yourself."

Ramsakhi shook her head.

"The contract belongs to your father."

The boy said, "But they fell in your field."

Ramsakhi laughed.

"Falling in a field does not change a name."

She put the mangoes in his hands.

When the rains came, the mung grew.

The three old footprints disappeared beneath green leaves.

In one place the plants remained sparse.

Ramsakhi loosened the soil there and pulled out the weeds.

Raghunath's mango tree became dense again.

The wounds on the branches where fruit had been picked were drying.

One day in Sawan, Shambhu met Raghunath at the shop.

He said, "Next year, before I inspect the fruit, I will inspect the path."

Raghunath said, "First inspect the tree."

Shambhu smiled.

"The price of the tree will come from the tree. The cost of the path will come from the path."

Phagun returned.

The tree blossomed again.

One day Shambhu reached the field with his notebook.

This time he did not go straight to the tree.

He stopped first by the roadside.

He looked towards Raghunath's northern bund.

The planks from the previous year were not lying over the channel.

He asked Raghunath, "Will this path be ready by picking time?"

Raghunath said, "It will."

That year Ramsakhi was harvesting lentils in her field.

From a distance she called, "Bargain over the mangoes later. Write the path first."

Shambhu opened his notebook.

The first line read: "Fruit of the tree."

The second: "Access path."

The third: "Accounting for unavoidable damage."

Then he looked up at the mango blossom.

Shambhu turned to the previous year's page.

The extra half-share of labour cost was written there too.

"If the path is ready beforehand this year, that cost will come down," he said.

Raghunath replied, "If it comes down, count that into the price."

Shambhu nodded.

Meanwhile another trader, Tejnarayan Sahu, arrived at the field.

He had heard that the flowering on Raghunath's tree was good.

Seeing Shambhu's notebook, he smiled.

"Are you buying mangoes or a path?"

Shambhu replied, "They are two different things."

Tejnarayan looked at the southern branch.

"If we unload straight through that field, half the time will be saved."

Ramsakhi stopped her sickle.

"This year there are lentils in that field."

Tejnarayan said, "By harvesting time it may perhaps be empty."

Ramsakhi replied, "A contract cannot run on 'perhaps.'"

Raghunath said nothing.

The previous year had taught him that when fruit was sold, it was not only the tree that entered the work.

The pickers' feet, bamboo poles, baskets, handcart and path all formed part of it.

Tejnarayan named a price.

It was two hundred rupees higher than Shambhu's.

Raghunath did not agree at once.

He asked, "Which way will you enter?"

Tejnarayan replied, "Whichever is easiest."

Raghunath said, "Easiest for whom?"

The conversation stopped there.

Tejnarayan looked at the tree again.

"You decide the route."

Raghunath pointed to the northern bund.

"This way."

Tejnarayan measured it for a while.

"One extra labourer may be needed."

"Then quote your price accordingly."

Tejnarayan reduced the price he had first named.

Shambhu raised his own price a little.

The two prices were now almost equal.

Ramsakhi resumed cutting her lentils.

She did not care who received the contract.

What mattered was only that her field should not become an unspoken part of someone else's bargain.

In the end Shambhu got the contract.

This time the first line in the notebook was not the fruit.

The first line was: "Access path: northern bund."

Second: "Keeping the path usable: tree-owner."

Third: "Picking and transport: trader."

Fourth: "Entry into another field: prior permission."

Only on the fifth line was the price of the fruit written.

Raghunath signed his name.

Shambhu signed his.

Ramsakhi did not sign.

Her field was not inside the contract at all.

She merely looked towards the bund.

This time Raghunath had already placed two sturdy planks across the channel.

Shambhu closed his notebook.

The bargaining had not even begun yet.

STORY 110

TWO DAYS OF TRANSPLANTING

It was the third Monday of Asadh, the first spell of rice transplanting.

By daybreak, dark clouds had risen from the direction of the Kamla River, but such clouds were nothing unusual in Asadh.

The sun was nowhere to be seen, yet people from the southern quarter of the village were already heading towards the fields.

A team of twelve women transplanting rice had been called on a two-day contract to work seven bighas belonging to Ramcharit Yadav.

Phoolmati Devi led the team.

With her were Saraswati, Malati, Bindiya, Reena, Chandrakala, Jasoda, Sugni, Kusum, Pano, Devaki and Phoolkumari.

They lived in different hamlets, but for five years, during the transplanting season, this team had worked together.

The agreement with Ramcharit had been made the previous Saturday.

They were to transplant twenty-four katthas on the eastern side in two days.

Payment would be by the kattha, but the whole team would remain reserved for Ramcharit's fields for both days.

That second sentence had never been entered in any register.

It had been spoken.

And everyone remembered a spoken agreement in a slightly different way.

On the first day the soil was good.

The water stood below the knee, the seedlings were of the right age, and bundles uprooted from the nursery had been placed beside the field.

The twelve women stepped into the field in a line.

By noon they had finished eight katthas.

By evening, fourteen.

Ramcharit was pleased.

"Only ten katthas will remain for tomorrow," he said.

Washing her hands, Phoolmati said, "If the water stays like this, we will be free just after noon."

Ramcharit laughed.

"My gain, then."

Phoolmati laughed too.

"Ours as well. We can take another field."

Ramcharit said nothing to that one sentence.

At the time, no one understood that the seed of the next day's quarrel lay in it too.

It rained lightly during the first watch of the night.

During the second, heavily.

Until four in the morning, rain hammered the thatch so hard that Phoolmati got up three times to clear the drain in the courtyard.

Around half past five the rain eased a little.

She opened her mobile phone.

There was no message from Ramcharit.

Only three women in the team had mobile phones; the others received news through them.

Phoolmati called Ramcharit.

The phone rang.

No answer.

She called again.

This time Ramcharit picked up.

"Babu, will we be able to enter the field?"

"There is too much water just now," Ramcharit said, "but the seedlings have been uprooted. Everyone come. Once the clouds clear, we will begin."

Phoolmati asked, "And if they do not clear?"

"How long do Asadh clouds ever remain? Come."

The call ended.

Phoolmati sent word through the team.

By six, everyone had set out.

Some walked half a kos, some a kos and a half.

Pano left her small son at a neighbour's house.

Devaki wrapped the morning rotis in cloth and brought them with her.

Mud from the previous day was still dried into the corners of Jasoda's toenails.

At half past six, all twelve reached the bund of Ramcharit's field.

The rain grew heavy again.

The field held water two hand-spans higher than on the first day.

The bundles of seedlings lay on the bund, half soaked.

Ramcharit's younger son Nandu was pulling a sack over them.

Phoolmati looked at the field.

"It is difficult to enter now."

Ramcharit said, "Let us watch for half an hour."

Everyone sat on the higher part of the bund.

Half an hour passed.

The rain weakened, but water continued to enter the field through the northern drain.

Chandrakala got up and went towards it.

"Unless this is closed, the water will not fall."

Ramcharit and Nandu went with hoes.

The mouth of the drain was diverted slightly.

"Now it will go down," Ramcharit said.

The team sat again.

Seven forty-five.

Saraswati asked, "How long?"

Ramcharit looked at the sky.

"By eight or half past eight we will know."

Eight o'clock came.

Clouds closed in again.
 This time with wind.
 Everyone had to move into Ramcharit's empty cowshed.
 Inside were three old tethering posts, some chaff and one broken plank.
 The twelve women kept changing places to sit.
 Some leaned against the wall; some remained standing.
 Malati thought of opening her rotis, then folded the bundle shut again.
 "We will eat once work begins."
 Phoolkumari said, "And if work never begins?"
 No one answered.
 At half past eight, Phoolmati asked Ramcharit again.
 "Babu, if today is to be cancelled, tell us now. We can ask elsewhere."
 Ramcharit replied at once, "Where will you go? Every field is flooded. The seedlings here have already been uprooted. Wait until nine."
 "All right."
 Phoolmati sat down again.
 At nine, the rain stopped.
 Everyone came out of the cowshed.
 The sky had not brightened, but the rain had ceased.
 Ramcharit planted a bamboo on the bund to check the depth of the water.
 Above the knee.
 "Let it fall a little more."
 At twenty past nine, two men in a field to the east set up a pump to drain water.
 Phoolmati looked over.
 "They have started."
 Ramcharit said, "Their field is higher."
 At half past nine Devaki's phone rang.
 The call was from home: it was time to give her mother-in-law her medicine.
 Devaki said, "I left the medicine ready. My daughter will give it."
 Phoolmati asked, "If we had gone home by now?"
 Devaki laughed, but it was a small laugh.
 "Then I would have given it myself."
 At ten Ramcharit said, "We can enter now. The water has gone down."
 Everyone gathered up their saris and clothes and went towards the field.
 Phoolmati placed the first foot in.
 The soil was not merely soft; it was flowing.
 When she lifted her foot, two seedlings floated away together.
 She came out.
 "The rows will not hold yet."
 Ramcharit stepped in himself.
 He walked three paces, then came back out.
 "Another half hour."
 Now no one had laughter left on her face.
 At ten fifteen Pano said, "Are we at work today, or merely sitting?"

Ramcharit replied, "You are here for the work."

"Then will the day count?"

Ramcharit fell silent for a moment.

"The transplanting was agreed by the kattha."

Pano said nothing.

Phoolmati looked at her.

The matter stopped there, but did not end.

By eleven the water had dropped somewhat.

Ramcharit said, "Come, let us try."

All twelve entered.

The first row advanced slowly.

Seedlings were being planted, but at barely half the normal pace.

Sometimes a foot sank deep; sometimes a seedling floated up again.

Twenty minutes later the rain began once more.

This time the drops were heavy.

Ramcharit kept saying, "Work a little. The cloud will pass."

After five minutes Phoolmati stopped the line.

"Are we planting seedlings or setting them afloat?"

Everyone came out.

In those twenty or twenty-five minutes, they had not completed even half a kattha.

Noon was near.

Malati now opened her rotis.

Everyone sat in the cowshed and ate.

Ramcharit had beaten rice and curd sent from his house and ate with Nandu.

No one raised the question of wages while eating.

Outside, the rain gradually weakened again.

At twelve forty-five it stopped.

At one, Phoolmati stepped into the field and tested the soil.

"Now it can be done."

This time the work truly began.

At one ten the line started moving.

For the first half hour, slowly.

Then the hands found their old rhythm.

In the afternoon the clouds tore open and light came through.

By three o'clock four katthas were complete.

Ramcharit's face opened with relief.

"See? The day was not wasted."

Phoolmati said nothing.

By half past four a total of six katthas had been transplanted.

The sky began darkening again.

Four katthas remained for a third day.

Everyone came out.

Feet were washed.

Clothes were wrung out.

The remaining seedling bundles were lifted to a higher part of the bund.

Ramcharit took out not a register, but his small notebook.

Opposite the first day he had written: "14 katthas."

For the second day he wrote: "6 katthas."

Phoolmati watched.

Ramcharit calculated.

"Twenty in all. Four katthas remain. Tomorrow morning they will be finished in two or three hours."

Phoolmati said, "All right."

Ramcharit continued, "Today's payment will be for six katthas."

This time Phoolmati did not answer immediately.

Pano did.

"Did we come here at half past six this morning for six katthas?"

Ramcharit said, "The contract was by the kattha."

"And the team was also reserved for two days."

"If the work could not be done, what am I supposed to do? Did I make the rain fall?"

Pano fell silent.

Phoolmati said quietly, "You did not cause the rain. Neither did we."

Ramcharit said, "Then?"

"Then it was never made clear beforehand who would carry the cost caused by it."

Nandu stood holding the notebook.

Ramcharit took it back from him.

"If I pay a full day's wage, the cost of six katthas becomes twice as much."

Phoolmati said, "We are not asking for a full day's transplanting wage."

Ramcharit looked slightly surprised.

"Then what?"

Phoolmati pointed towards the cowshed.

"From half past six in the morning until one, we remained here because you told us to wait. During those hours we could not take another field. That was not transplanting time, but it was still our time."

Ramcharit said, "The other fields in the village were closed too."

Chandrakala replied at once, "Mahato's field to the east started at ten."

"That field is higher."

"True. But if you had released us at nine, five of us could have taken half a day there."

Ramcharit's face tightened.

"So now it is my fault that I wanted to save the uprooted seedlings?"

Phoolmati shook her head.

"Again we have come to the word fault. I am not counting fault."

"Then what are you counting?"

"Time."

For a few moments there was silence.

Water dripped steadily beside the bund.

Nandu asked softly, "How much time?"

Phoolmati looked at him.

“Waiting from half past six until one ten. There was a twenty- or twenty-five-minute attempt at work in between. After that, four hours of transplanting.”

Ramcharit said, “Will we count by the clock now?”

“No. I am saying it only so that we understand today.”

Saraswati said, “If in the morning you had said, ‘Today is cancelled,’ we would have gone home. We would not have asked for money.”

Devaki added, “If you had said, ‘Let us watch until nine,’ then a decision would have been made at nine.”

Pano said, “But every time it was extended by another half hour.”

Ramcharit opened the notebook.

He kept looking at the first day’s “14” and the second day’s “6.”

“So you are saying there should be separate payment for waiting?”

Phoolmati said, “We are saying it needs a separate name. How much money it should carry can be decided by sitting together.”

Ramcharit sat down on the ground.

Everyone formed a circle again beside the bund.

Nandu opened the notebook and held his pencil ready.

Ramcharit asked, “Three kinds?”

Phoolmati said, “Three.”

“First?”

“Work done—the agreed rate per kattha.”

“Second?”

“After we arrive, if you say stay and wait—compulsory waiting.”

“Third?”

“Work cancelled. But write when cancellation has to be declared too.”

Ramcharit laughed. “A rate for a cancelled day as well?”

Malati said, “Why, if we receive word before leaving home?”

Pano said, “But if cancellation comes after we have reached the field, both travel and time have gone.”

Ramcharit looked at Phoolmati.

“Does everyone in your team agree on one thing?”

Phoolmati replied, “No. We are making it now.”

At that answer, some of the tension went out of Ramcharit’s face.

He said, “All right. First let us settle today’s account.”

Nandu drew three lines in the notebook.

Work.

Waiting.

Cancellation.

Ramcharit said, “Six katthas of work. Full rate for that.”

No one disputed it.

“You are saying six and a half hours of waiting?”

Phoolmati said, “We were told to remain until one ten. Leave out the attempt at work in between. Count six hours.”

Ramcharit asked, “A full day’s rate for six hours?”

“No.”

“Half?”

There was a murmur among the team.

Saraswati said, “Half a day’s rate seems fair.”

Pano said, “But we sat for six hours.”

Phoolmati turned towards her.

“We sat; we did not transplant. The body tired less, the time was lost more.

Those are not the same thing.”

Pano fell silent.

Ramcharit said, “Then the waiting rate is half a day?”

Phoolmati said, “For today. Going forward, there also needs to be a time limit.”

“What limit?”

“Say beforehand whether we will wait more than two hours or not.

Otherwise the wait will keep growing by half-hour pieces.”

Nandu wrote: “Two hours.”

Ramcharit stopped him at once.

“I do not agree to that yet.”

Phoolmati said, “Then do not write it. Tomorrow, while we finish the remaining four katthas, we can discuss it again.”

This time no one quarrelled.

Today’s account was settled: full transplanting rate for six katthas, plus a fixed half-day amount for waiting, to be divided equally among the twelve.

Ramcharit paid.

Pano counted the money.

Phoolmati did not give a thumb impression in the notebook; she merely said, “Today’s arrangement is for today.”

Ramcharit also said, “Tomorrow for the rule going forward.”

Everyone went home.

There was no rain that night.

The next morning the sky was clear.

The water level in the field was right.

The remaining four katthas were transplanted by half past nine.

When the work ended, Phoolmati did not hurry home.

She sat down on the bund.

Ramcharit understood.

Nandu brought the notebook.

This time it was not only Ramcharit and the team. Two farmers from the eastern side also came and sat down.

They had heard about the previous day’s dispute.

One farmer, Ganesh Mahato, said, “If such a rule is made, then in the rains labourers will demand money the moment they reach a field.”

Phoolmati said, “Arriving and being made to wait are two different things.”

Ganesh said, “If they have already come, what can the farmer do?”

“Tell us immediately—cancelled. We will go home.”

“And the journey?”

Pano interrupted, “Write something for the journey too.”

Phoolmati raised a hand to stop her.

“First make three things clear.”

Ramcharit said, “Work—the agreed rate. That is clear.”

Nandu wrote it down.

“Cancellation before arrival?”

Phoolmati said, “If we receive word before setting out in the morning—no payment.”

Pano looked somewhat dissatisfied, but said nothing.

Ramcharit asked, “Immediate cancellation after reaching the field?”

Devaki said, “A small arrival amount. Not a full day.”

Ganesh Mahato laughed.

“Payment merely for travelling?”

Devaki looked at him.

“When you call a tractor from the market, if it returns without working, do you refuse to pay for its fuel?”

Ganesh stopped laughing.

Ramcharit said, “Fine. A small fixed arrival amount.”

Nandu wrote: “Full cancellation after arrival—arrival amount.”

Phoolmati said, “And waiting?”

Ramcharit asked, “For how long?”

That led to another discussion.

One hour seemed too little.

Three hours too much.

In the end a limit of two hours was agreed.

After the workers arrived, the farmer could say: wait for two hours.

Those two hours would carry a fixed waiting rate.

At the end of two hours there had to be a clear decision again—work begins, or the day is cancelled.

No “another two hours.”

If work began, the waiting rate would remain separate and the transplanting rate separate.

If the day was cancelled after two hours, the waiting rate would apply; the arrival amount would not be added on top of it.

Pano asked, “And if rain stops us again in the middle of work?”

Ramcharit laughed.

“Will this rule grow another twenty lines?”

Phoolmati laughed too.

“No. A short stoppage after work begins stays within the transplanting day. But if the farmer himself tells everyone to come out and sit, and the stoppage becomes long, then we discuss it again.”

Ganesh Mahato said, “Is this paper being made for a court or for a field?”

Phoolmati replied, “For the field. That is why keep it short.”

In the end Nandu wrote only four lines.

Work—agreed measure/rate.

Cancellation before arrival—no payment.

Waiting after arrival—not more than two hours; fixed waiting rate.

After two hours—work or full cancellation; clear decision.

Ramcharit himself added a fifth line.

“Extraordinary stoppage after work begins—to be settled separately that day.”

Phoolmati read it.

“This is right.”

Nandu wrote the date.

The names of all twelve women were not written individually.

The team was entered as: “Phoolmati Team, 12.”

Ramcharit wrote his name.

Phoolmati did not sign; she put her thumb impression.

Ganesh Mahato signed as a witness, although he did not fully like the rule.

He said, “Next time labourers in my field will mention this paper.”

Ramcharit replied, “If they do, set your own rate. At least the word ‘wait’ will no longer be free.”

Everyone fell silent at that sentence.

Because the quarrel had begun over money, but the real issue had turned out to be a single word—wait.

It was easy to tell someone to wait.

Waiting occupied part of someone else’s day.

The rule was first used the following week of Asadh in Ganesh Mahato’s field.

It was raining at dawn.

At five he sent word to the team: “Do not come today.”

No one reached the field.

No one asked for money.

By noon the sky cleared.

Ganesh regretted it.

He lost a day.

Phoolmati’s team found half a day’s work in another village.

That evening Ganesh said to Ramcharit, “See? I cancelled too early. I suffered the loss.”

Ramcharit laughed.

“That loss came from your decision, not from the workers’ waiting.”

Ganesh said nothing.

By the end of Asadh, the four lines from the notebook had been copied into three fields.

The rates differed from place to place.

In one place the waiting limit was one hour.

In another there was no arrival amount.

The rule did not become identical everywhere.

But one thing changed.

No one made transplanting workers sit from morning until evening and then counted only the katthas actually planted.

Nor did anyone place every risk of rain entirely upon the farmer.

Work had its own accounting.

A cancelled day had the accounting of a cancelled day.

And the stretch of time between them, which until then had belonged to no one's account, finally received a name—

Waiting.

STORY III

CARE OF THE HEIFER

On mornings in Bhadon, calves and heifers began coming out one by one from the rear hamlet of Barahi village.

Some had hemp ropes around their necks, some thin bamboo cords, some only an old bell.

The village's grown animals grazed separately, but eight calves and heifers were kept under one shared herding arrangement.

Every morning they were gathered beneath the large peepal tree.

From there Phoolkali Devi took them towards the eastern fallow ground, the canal embankment and the strip of green beside the bamboo grove.

At dusk she brought them back beneath the same peepal tree.

The eight households paid Phoolkali a monthly amount in grain and a little cash.

On paper, the arrangement was very simple.

Who owned the animal.

How much was due for the month.

How many days the calf or heifer had gone with the herd.

That was all.

The register had been made from unused pages left in an old notebook from Ramphal Sahu's grocery shop.

At the top, in red pen, was written: "Calf-Heifer Herding."

Phoolkali could read, but she wrote slowly.

So on the first Sunday of each month Ramphal filled in the register.

One line for the owner's name.

Another for the colour or identifying mark of the animal.

A third for the payment due.

Phoolkali's name appeared nowhere at the top of the page.

Everyone assumed that since Phoolkali did the work anyway, what was the need to write her separately?

Among the eight animals was a reddish-brown heifer.

There was a small white patch in the middle of her forehead.

Her owner, Chandrika Yadav, called her "Lali."

Phoolkali called her the same.

But Lali turned more quickly at Phoolkali's voice than at Chandrika's.

Phoolkali never said this aloud.

The animal belonged to the person who owned it.

Caregiving was work, not a claim.

Phoolkali understood that distinction very well.

For six months of the year Chandrika went towards Punjab for labouring work.

At home lived his wife Sunaina, two children and his elderly mother.

Sunaina looked after the grown cow.

Lali spent the day with Phoolkali.

One Tuesday in Bhadon, the bushes had grown thick along the far embankment of the canal.

The soil was slippery from the previous night's rain.

Phoolkali was getting all eight animals across one after another.

The first two crossed.

The third calf jumped.

Lali slipped behind it.

As she fell, her right hind leg scraped against a thick thorn-stump.

The heifer snorted loudly once.

Phoolkali immediately caught the rope.

The wound was not deep, but the skin had split and blood began to flow.

Phoolkali tied the other seven animals in the open strip beside the canal.

She tore the corner of her sari and tied it over the wound.

The village was half a kos away.

There was no mobile phone nearby with which to inform Sunaina.

Phoolkali slowly turned the heifer back towards the village.

The other animals came along too.

By the time they reached the peepal tree it was nine in the morning.

Sunaina was shaping cow-dung cakes in the courtyard.

Phoolkali called out, "Look at Lali's leg."

Sunaina came running.

"Is it badly cut?"

"The bleeding is stopping. But it would be better to wash it and put medicine on it."

The village livestock worker had gone that day to another panchayat for vaccination.

Phoolkali said, "Shall I bring wound wash and a dressing from the medicine shop in the market?"

Sunaina looked at Lali's leg.

"Bring it. Chandrika will settle the account when he comes."

Phoolkali went home.

From a bamboo box she took one two-hundred-rupee note and three fifty-rupee notes.

She had kept that money to buy rice at Saturday's market.

At noon her son Munna went to the market on a bicycle.

He brought wound-cleaning solution, ointment, bandages and two days' worth of dry bran.

The shopkeeper gave a receipt: three hundred and twenty rupees.

Phoolkali folded the receipt and put it into her box.

That evening Sunaina said, "I have spoken to Chandrika. He will return next week."

Lali did not go with the herd for three days.

Every morning Phoolkali went to the house to inspect the wound.

On the fourth day the heifer rejoined the group.

She still limped slightly while walking.

Phoolkali kept her in the middle of the herd rather than at the rear.

Where there were thorns, she removed them first by hand.

None of this work entered the register.

The register showed only a small mark for three days' absence.

Seven days later Chandrika returned.

In the evening the animals were coming back beneath the peepal tree.

He lifted Lali's leg and looked at it.

"The wound has healed."

Phoolkali said, "Yes, it is fine now."

She took out the receipt.

"Medicine and dressing cost three hundred and twenty."

Chandrika read the receipt.

Then he looked at Phoolkali.

"Don't we pay you the monthly herding fee?"

At first Phoolkali thought he was joking.

But his face was serious.

"You pay the herding fee."

"Then why is this medicine separate?"

Phoolkali paused before answering.

"The herding fee is for taking them to graze. The medicine came from my pocket."

Chandrika said, "The animal was in your care during the day. It was injured there."

Five households were still standing beneath the peepal tree, waiting to take their animals home.

Hearing the exchange, everyone looked that way.

Phoolkali kept her voice low.

"It was in my care, which is why I did not leave the wound untreated. But had medicine expenses already been included in the herding payment?"

Chandrika pointed towards the register.

"What is written there?"

Ramphal opened it.

Beside Chandrika's name was written: reddish-brown, white patch on forehead.

The monthly payment was written.

Nothing about medicine.

Phoolkali's name was not there either.

Ramphal said, "This was never written at all."

Chandrika immediately said, "Then how am I to accept that every expense that happened is mine?"

Phoolkali placed the receipt in his hand.

"If you do not accept it, keep the receipt. But next time settle the matter beforehand."

Sunaina arrived.

She said, "I told her to bring the medicine."

Chandrika looked at her.

“How much did you authorise?”

Sunaina fell silent.

She had only said, “Bring it.”

She had given no limit.

Ramphal closed the register.

“We will not settle the money today. First let us understand what exactly is included in the herding.”

People took their animals away from beneath the peepal tree.

Phoolkali left the receipt in Chandrika’s hand.

“Lali will go tomorrow too. The dispute will not keep her back.”

She went home.

That night there was not enough rice in Phoolkali’s house.

Munna asked, “Why didn’t you bring rice today?”

“The money went on medicine.”

“Will it come back?”

“When the account is settled.”

Munna said nothing.

The next morning Lali came beneath the peepal tree again.

Chandrika himself brought her by the rope.

Phoolkali looked at the heifer’s leg.

“Do not make her run hard today.”

Chandrika said, “I am not going to swallow the medicine money.”

Phoolkali replied evenly, “Nor am I saying that you are.”

The conversation stopped there.

Three days later an animal-vaccination camp was held in the village.

A large tarpaulin was stretched beneath the peepal tree.

Two employees from the block office had come with the livestock worker.

They checked the number on each animal’s ear, asked the owner’s name, and recorded the vaccination date.

When Lali’s turn came, the employee asked, “When was the previous vaccination?”

Chandrika thought for a moment.

“Perhaps in Phagun.”

From behind him Phoolkali said, “Not Phagun. The first Tuesday of Chait. It rained that day.”

The employee looked at her.

“Are you the owner?”

“No. I herd her during the day.”

The employee looked again at Chandrika.

Chandrika said, “She looks after her all day.”

“Any problem after the previous vaccination?”

Chandrika shook his head.

Phoolkali said, “She had a slight fever that night. It was gone by morning.”

The employee wrote something in the register.

“Was the owner told?”

Phoolkali looked at Chandrika.
 He had been in Punjab at the time.
 Sunaina had been told.
 “The household was informed.”
 The employee administered the vaccine.
 Phoolkali stood stroking Lali’s neck.
 Chandrika moved a little aside.
 That evening Ramphal opened the herding register.
 “This register is incomplete.”
 Chandrika said, “The vaccination register is separate.”
 Ramphal replied, “That is not what I mean. Our herding register is incomplete.”
 He showed everyone the pages.
 The owner’s name was there.
 The animal’s identifying mark was there.
 The payment was there.
 But the person doing the work was not.
 There was no record of illness or injury.
 There was no rule for emergency expenses.
 There was no limit on whose permission counted, or up to what amount.
 Chandrika said, “If we write all this, herding will become an office.”
 Ramphal laughed.
 “Not an office. Five lines.”
 Phoolkali was not there.
 Ramphal said, “If we make the rule without her, it will again be incomplete.”
 The following Sunday people from all eight households sat beneath the peepal tree.
 Phoolkali came late.
 She had first taken the animals out to graze.
 Ramphal had brought a new notebook.
 Chandrika had brought the receipt too.
 Three hundred and twenty rupees.
 As soon as the meeting began, everyone started giving an opinion.
 One owner said, “Small cuts and scrapes are bound to happen in herding.”
 Another said, “If every medicine expense is separate, how high will the monthly cost go?”
 Phoolkali listened.
 Ramphal asked, “You tell us.”
 Phoolkali said, “I do not want any extra profit. I want a limit.”
 “What kind of limit?”
 “What is ordinary work, and what is an emergency.”
 Counting on her fingers, she said:
 “Untying and tying ropes, taking them out to graze, giving them water, clearing thorns, bringing them back in the evening—these are part of herding.”

"If a wound needs washing with household salt water or an old cloth, I will do that too."

"But money to buy medicine?"

She stopped.

"For that, set a limit beforehand."

"If the owner is available, I will ask."

"If the owner is not available, and delay may harm the animal, up to how much may I spend on my own decision?"

Someone said, "Fifty."

Someone else said, "A hundred."

Chandrika said, "What do you get for a hundred these days?"

Phoolkali looked at him.

It was the first thing he had said in her favour.

Ramphal wrote in the notebook: "Emergency limit: two hundred rupees."

Phoolkali asked, "And if it goes above two hundred?"

Sunaina said, "Permission from the owner or from the person in the household who makes decisions about the animal."

"And if the phone does not connect?"

Ramphal wrote: "One witness."

Chandrika asked, "Who can be a witness?"

"Another animal owner, Ramphal, or the livestock worker."

Phoolkali said, "And the receipt?"

"Where available, a receipt."

"And where none is available?"

Ramphal thought for a moment.

"Name of medicine, amount, date, and the person who brought it."

The lines in the notebook kept increasing.

Chandrika smiled.

"What happened to the five lines?"

Ramphal said, "Animals have more than five things to say."

The meeting laughed.

Phoolkali did not.

She said, "And one more line is needed—caregiver."

Everyone fell silent.

Ramphal asked, "Your name?"

"Today, mine. Tomorrow, if Munna goes, his. Sometimes if Sunaina keeps her heifer at home and watches her, then hers."

"The owner separate, the caregiver separate?"

"Yes."

Chandrika said, "Will the owner's name become less important?"

Phoolkali answered immediately, "Why would the owner's name become less important? The animal is yours. Whoever did the day's work has their name in the work line."

At the top of a new page Ramphal made six fields.

Animal number or identifying mark.

Owner.

Today's caregiver.
 What is included in ordinary work.
 Emergency expense/receipt.
 Handover.
 Someone said, "Vaccination?"
 Ramphal made a small mark beneath the emergency-expense line:
 "Health information."
 Phoolkali said, "Write the vaccination date too."
 Ramphal wrote it.
 The notebook now truly looked like an office register.
 But there would not be something to write every day.
 Only when something changed.
 The first entry was Lali's.
 "Old wound—right hind leg."
 "Medicine—three hundred and twenty."
 "Prior permission—Sunaina."
 "Receipt available."
 The amount exceeded the new two-hundred-rupee limit by one hundred
 and twenty.
 That raised another question.
 Ramphal said, "The rule was made today. Do not apply a new limit to an
 old event."
 Chandrika folded the receipt.
 "I will pay the three hundred and twenty."
 Phoolkali said nothing.
 Chandrika could not take out all three hundred and twenty from his
 pocket.
 He had two hundred and seventy.
 He said, "Fifty tomorrow."
 Phoolkali counted the money.
 "Fine."
 Ramphal asked, "Shall I write it in the register?"
 Phoolkali laughed.
 "That is my credit, not the heifer's."
 Everyone laughed again.
 The new register began operating the following week.
 For the first three days there was nothing to write.
 On the fourth day a black calf chewed through its rope while grazing.
 Phoolkali tied on an old cord from home.
 No money was spent.
 The register simply said: "Cord replaced, old household cord."
 On the sixth day another calf's eye began watering.
 Phoolkali informed the owner.
 The owner called the livestock worker.
 He himself bought the medicine.

In the register Phoolkali's name appeared only on the line: "Information given."

Phoolkali liked that.

Not every expense appeared under her name.

Not every task appeared under her name either.

Whoever did the work was written where the work belonged.

A month later Chandrika was preparing to leave for Punjab again.

Before going, he walked the herding route with Phoolkali to see Lali.

Lali was now running quickly.

Only a thin white line remained at the site of the wound.

Chandrika said, "Will this mark remain?"

Phoolkali said, "For a few days. Then the hair will cover it."

"Is the vaccination date in the notebook?"

"Yes."

"The fever?"

"Yes."

Chandrika remained quiet for a moment.

"I am the owner, but there were many things I did not know."

Phoolkali said, "Being the owner and being in front of the animal all day are not the same thing."

This time Chandrika did not argue.

He left for Punjab.

In Agahan it was decided that Lali would now remain at home.

She was growing bigger.

Her pace no longer matched the smaller calves in the shared herd.

On the day of handover Sunaina came beneath the peepal tree.

Ramphal opened the notebook.

There were three health notes on Lali's page.

The old wound.

The vaccination.

One occasion when herding had been stopped for half a day because her stomach had bloated.

Money for medicine had been spent only on the first wound.

The second time, household ajwain water had been given—"Cost zero" was written beside it.

Sunaina read the entries.

Phoolkali handed her Lali's rope.

Ramphal asked, "Handover all right?"

Sunaina looked at Lali's eyes, legs and neck.

"All right."

Phoolkali said, "There is a small itchy patch behind the left ear. Watch it for two days."

Ramphal wrote that down too.

Sunaina put her thumb impression.

Phoolkali slowly wrote her own name.

At the top of the page, the owner's name was that of Sunaina and Chandrika's household.

Below, in the caregiver line, Phoolkali's name appeared again and again across the months.

No one was asking for a share in the animal.

No one was dividing ownership.

It merely showed that the heifer had lived between two places of responsibility—the household and the daytime herd.

Lali pulled slightly on the rope and moved towards Sunaina.

Phoolkali kept her hand withdrawn.

The heifer turned once to look at her.

Phoolkali did not call out.

She looked at the notebook.

Earlier, the register had contained the animal, the owner and the money.

Now it also contained the name of the hands that did the work.

That was all that had changed.

STORY 112

THE OIL-PRESS CAKE

On the road from the eastern hamlet of Majhaul village to the market stood Jugal's oil-press house.

Seen from outside, it looked like a low, thatched room, but inside two smells always lived together—the sharp scent of mustard and the smell of hot iron.

Mustard sacks were stacked one after another to the left of the doorway.

On the right stood the iron pressing machine, whose belt made a steady ghar-ghar sound as it turned.

In front of the machine, a stream of oil dripped through a narrow brass-coloured channel; from the rear opening, warm cakes of pressed seed emerged and fell into a bamboo basket.

For oil, people in the village looked at the measure.

For oil-cake, most people relied on memory.

Someone remembered that the previous time they had received all the cake.

Someone remembered that the oilman had kept half.

Someone said, "I paid less cash, so I left the cake behind."

Someone else said, "I paid in full, so I took the cake home."

Rules that had been in use since Jugal's father's time survived differently in different people's mouths.

On paper, only three things were written—the name, the weight of the mustard seed, and the weight of the oil.

There was no line for oil-cake.

One clear morning after the Bhadon clouds had lifted, Malati Devi arrived with two sacks.

The larger sack had not come on her head; it had come on a bullock cart.

She dragged the smaller sack herself to the doorway.

There were two cows and a heifer in her household.

After the rains, green fodder had become scarce, and prepared feed in the market was growing expensive.

This time Malati had come thinking more about the oil-cake account than about mustard oil.

She needed oil for the house, but she needed the cake too.

She had tied a small knot of red thread to the large sack.

Jugal placed the sack on the scale.

"This one first?" he asked.

"Yes. This is mustard from our household," Malati said. "The small sack belongs to my sister. Press that afterward."

Jugal wrote the weight in the ledger.

Malati leaned over and looked at the page.

"Where is the line for the oil-cake?"

Jugal raised his head.

"The oil-cake?"

"Yes. Write down however much comes out."

Jugal smiled faintly.

"What is there to write? The oil-cake belongs to the press house."

Malati's hand stopped on the sack.

"Who said so?"

Jugal thought perhaps she had taken it as a joke.

"That is the custom here. We charge a lower pressing fee, so the oil-cake remains with us."

Malati's expression did not change, but her voice grew thinner.

"How am I to know that the pressing fee is lower?"

"Everyone knows."

"I do not."

Jugal did not close the ledger.

Malati looked at the rate-board hanging by the door.

In large letters it said: "Mustard pressing — per ten kilos ... rupees."

There was no mention of oil-cake.

Malati pointed to the board.

"Is oil-cake written here?"

Jugal too looked at the board.

"Not every old custom is written on the board."

"Then how does an old custom get placed on my head?"

At that moment three other customers were waiting inside the press house.

The first was Mahendra Yadav, sitting with two metal canisters.

The second was Radhika Devi, whose small sack lay by the scale waiting to be pressed.

The third was Budhan Sahu, who had come to watch a neighbour's sack being pressed before bringing his own mustard.

Mahendra intervened.

"I leave the oil-cake here. I have no cattle."

Radhika immediately said, "Last time I took half."

Jugal looked at her.

"You paid more."

Radhika scratched her head.

"How much more?"

Before answering, Jugal turned the pages of the ledger.

In the previous year's account only the total amount paid was written.

Why it was higher was not recorded.

Budhan laughed.

"My father used to say that in the old days the oilman took his own share from the cake."

Malati said, "How large a share?"

Budhan stopped laughing.

"That... varied from household to household."

"So is that a rule or a memory?" Malati asked.

The machine was still switched off.

Jugal's younger brother Mohan was oiling the belt.

He was listening to both sides but did not interrupt.

Malati continued, "I need both the oil and the cake. I saved this mustard thinking of fodder for the cows. If you were going to keep the cake, you should have told me beforehand. I would have worked out a different bargain."

Jugal said, "If I give everyone all the cake, the machine cannot run at this rate."

"Then change the rate."

"If I raise the rate, people will say Jugal has increased the charge."

"And if you keep the cake, what will people who do not know the custom say?"

For a few moments after that sentence, only the sound of crows outside could be heard in the oil-press house.

Jugal sat down on the threshold.

He was not angry.

He was uncomfortable.

He knew the cost of electricity, belt repairs, straining cloth and Mohan's wages.

The oil-cake could be sold, and that made it possible to keep the cash pressing fee low.

But the arrangement was so old to him that it had never seemed something that needed to be explained to customers.

For Malati, it was the first time she had heard it.

"Do one thing," Mohan said softly.

Jugal looked at him.

"What?"

"Do not press this sack yet. First look at the accounts of the last three or four customers."

Jugal frowned.

"Where is oil-cake written in the ledger?"

"That is exactly why we should look."

They opened the old ledger.

There were names.

Weights.

Oil weights.

Payments.

Beside some names, a small pencilled "kh" had been written.

In a few places, there was an "a."

Jugal said, "'Kh' means the cake was left here. 'A' means half."

Malati asked, "Where is the key to these signs written?"

Jugal kept turning the pages.

There was no key anywhere.

Mohan smiled.

"I thought 'A' meant 'arrived.'"

Mahendra burst out laughing.

Jugal laughed too, but immediately closed the ledger.

"Very well," he said. "It is unclear."

Malati said, "Lack of clarity cannot become my oil-cake."

Radhika looked at her own sack.

"Settle my pressing first. I do not want half; I want all the cake."

Mahendra said, "I do not need the cake. If that makes the cash fee lower, keep it."

Budhan said, "I have one calf at home. I want half."

Three customers, three needs.

For the first time, Jugal saw the custom of his press house not as one rule, but as a set of different bargains.

The problem was not simply who owned the oil-cake.

The problem was that before pressing began, no one clearly said whether the cash fee had been reduced in exchange for the cake.

Once the mustard seed went into the machine, it was easy for the terms to become blurred.

And once the cake came out and fell into a common heap, it became even harder to tell how much belonged to whom.

Mohan washed three bamboo baskets and brought them over.

"From today, keep each batch separate," he said.

Jugal asked, "Every day?"

"At least until the rule is written clearly."

Malati said, "Keep the batches separate even after the rule is written. Then people can see how much actually came out."

Jugal said nothing.

He sold oil-cake; weighing it was not unfamiliar work.

But weighing it separately for each customer's sack meant extra labour.

"That will increase the work," he said.

Malati replied, "The value of the cake is part of the work too."

The conversation might have stalled again.

Just then Mahendra placed his metal canisters on the floor and said, "Press Malati's sack first. Let the cake fall into a separate basket. Let us see how much comes out."

Jugal agreed.

Malati's sack with the red thread was brought in front of the machine.

Mohan opened it and poured the mustard seed into a shallow basket.

Jugal checked the scale again.

Beside the recorded weight, he drew a small line.

"What does that line mean?" Malati asked.

"It marks this batch."

"Write what the mark means too."

Jugal looked at her once, then wrote at the top of the page: "Oil-cake weighed separately."

The machine began to run.

Its ghar-ghar sound filled the press house.

The mustard seed slowly disappeared into the iron mouth.

The first stream of warm oil ran down the channel into a vessel.

At the back, Mohan broke the first cake as it emerged and placed it in the basket.

Malati watched the oil-cake more than the oil.

The cake was hot.

When she touched it, she immediately pulled her hand back.

"Not yet," Mohan said. "Let it cool."

Malati's entire sack was pressed.

The oil was measured.

After the oil-cake cooled, the basket and cake were weighed together.

Jugal subtracted the basket's weight and wrote the oil-cake weight separately.

For the first time, four figures stood beside Malati's name on the page—mustard, oil, oil-cake, and payment.

Malati looked at the numbers.

"Now tell me: what exactly is your fee?"

Jugal quoted the amount from the old rate-board.

"Is that the reduced rate?" Malati asked.

"Yes."

"What would the rate be if I paid in full?"

Jugal fell silent.

Because no full-cash rate had ever been written.

He began mentally adding the market value of the oil-cake.

Radhika said, "If you simply add the full market price of the cake now, that will not become a fair pressing rate for the day. You also have expenses in selling the cake."

Jugal looked at her.

So did Malati.

Radhika's point was not on the oilman's side. It was on the side of the account.

Mohan brought out the pages for oil-cake sales from the previous three months.

Jugal looked at the total quantity sold, the total cash received, and the number of days the machine had worked.

No one could sit there and immediately calculate the entire profit and loss.

Malati said, "I am not asking for the full accounts of your press house today. I am asking for the right to know the terms of my own batch."

Jugal nodded.

It was a small point.

And because of that small point, the entire quarrel became smaller.

Pressing did not stop for the rest of the morning.

Malati's oil-cake remained separate.

Before Radhika's pressing began, Jugal said clearly, "If you pay the old reduced cash fee now, the press house will keep a share of the oil-cake. If you

want all the cake, the fee will be higher. I will calculate and write the full rate by evening.”

Radhika said, “Do not press my sack until the rate is written.”

Jugal did not become irritated.

“Fine.”

For the first time, he held back three sacks at the doorway because the rule had only been half made.

That evening Jugal, Mohan, Malati, Radhika and Mahendra sat again inside the oil-press house.

Budhan came too, because without him no village meeting about accounts ever seemed complete.

Jugal had written two options on a thin sheet of paper.

First: “Full cash fee: all oil-cake produced belongs to the customer.”

Second: “Reduced cash fee: a pre-agreed share of the oil-cake produced belongs to the press house.”

Malati asked, “How much of a share?”

Jugal had thought of writing a percentage.

Mahendra said, “Not everyone understands percentages.”

Mohan said, “The amount of cake from ten kilos of mustard will not be exactly the same every time.”

Radhika said, “Then write ‘one-fourth of the oil-cake.’ One-fourth of whatever comes out.”

Jugal said, “Market prices keep changing.”

Malati replied, “Then the cash rate may change. But the choice must exist before the pressing begins.”

The conversation returned to the original point.

How much the rate should be was for the oilman to determine.

Which option to choose was for the customer to decide knowingly.

The difference between the two options had to be clear.

And the rule could not change after pressing had begun.

Jugal looked at his figures.

He set the full-cash fee a little above the reduced rate.

For the reduced rate he wrote a fixed share of the oil-cake.

Mohan suggested that the rate-board at the door should have two lines beneath the mustard pressing charge.

Malati said, “And the ledger should have a line for the option chosen.”

Jugal opened a fresh page of the ledger.

At the top he made five columns—name, mustard, option, oil, oil-cake.

A sixth column was made for payment.

Mahendra laughed.

“People will run away when they see so many columns.”

Malati smiled.

“People run farther from unclear accounts.”

There was still the matter of Malati’s batch from that day.

The old terms had not been stated clearly.

Jugal could not simply give away all the oil-cake while charging the old reduced fee, because that day's work had costs.

Malati could not accept a condition that had only been stated after the pressing was done.

Radhika said, "Today's mistake belongs to the rule. Do not put all of it on one person."

Jugal looked at Malati.

"You take all your oil-cake. Will you pay, at the next market, the difference between the full-cash rate and what you have already paid?"

Malati thought for a few moments.

"I will. But write in the ledger that this is the new full-cash rate, not a penalty."

Jugal wrote it.

Malati put her thumb impression.

She filled her oil-cake into a sack.

It was heavy.

Mahendra stood up and caught one side.

Malati said, "Leave it. I will have Mohan place it on the cart."

She took the oil-cake home.

Three days later a new rate-board hung at the entrance of the oil-press house.

The old board had not been removed.

Two new lines had been added beneath it.

"OPTION 1 — Full cash fee; all oil-cake belongs to the customer."

"OPTION 2 — Reduced cash fee; the written share of oil-cake belongs to the press house."

Below, in smaller letters, was written: "The option will be marked in the ledger before pressing begins."

On the first day, people read the board and asked more questions.

Jugal felt the work had slowed down.

On the second day, there were fewer questions.

On the third day, an elderly customer set his sack on the scale and said, "Do it the old way for me."

Jugal asked, "Which old way?"

The old man fell silent.

Mohan pushed the ledger towards him.

"Cash or oil-cake?"

The old man read the rate-board.

"I have no cattle. The reduced-cash option with the oil-cake."

Mohan wrote "oil-cake" in the option column.

Later Malati came carrying her younger sister's sack.

This time she had not tied a red thread to it.

Jugal placed the sack on the scale.

"Which option?"

Malati said, "Full cash. The oil-cake goes home."

Jugal wrote it down.

The machine started.
Warm cakes of pressed seed began falling into a separate basket.
No one asked any longer what the old custom had really been.
In place of an old custom, the chosen terms were now written down.
Oil had always been measured in the press house.
Now the oil-cake too was no longer merely a heap.
It had become part of the account.

STORY 113

THE HERDSMAN'S WHISTLE

In Majhaul village, the first communal sound of the morning was not the crowing of a cock.

On days when the shared herd went out to graze, a thin whistle sounded just before sunrise.

The sound rose from the eastern hamlet, travelled through the middle of the village, and moved towards the southern bund.

The moment it was heard, ropes began to be untied in the cowsheds.

Cows, heifers, bullocks, and even two or four goats were brought to the doorways.

The animals left behind the smell of their separate homes and became one large herd.

The whistle remained in the hand of the person whose turn it was to herd that day.

When the herd returned in the evening, the whistle was hung at the doorway of the next household.

The custom was so old that no one could say who had first bought the whistle.

The mouth of the little brass whistle was slightly flattened on one side.

Its sound was not sharp; it came out a little hoarse.

Even so, the animals recognised its signal.

A rule governing the village day rested upon one small whistle.

The rule was simple—turn by household.

As many households as there were on the list, that many days made up the cycle.

First Ramkripal's household, then Budhni's, then Devnarayan's, then Phoolmati's old household, and then onward.

The list did not change according to whether a household had one cow or five animals.

Nor did it immediately take notice when someone's cowshed became empty.

There was no formal sheet of paper; an old account book and people's memories together kept the turns moving.

Budhni Devi had one cow—Gauri.

Gauri was thin-bodied but quick-footed.

Budhni's husband worked away from the village at a brick kiln.

At home were Budhni, her daughter Chanda, and Gauri.

When Budhni's turn came, she herself took the herd out.

By noon Chanda would bring rice and a small container of salt and chilli to the edge of the field.

At the other end of the scale, Devnarayan's household had five animals.

Two milch cows, one heifer, one old bullock and one young bullock.

Devnarayan had three sons; there was no shortage of working hands in the household.

Even so, his herding turn came no more often than Budhni's.

Devnarayan used to say, "The herd grazes all at once. Whether there is one cow or five, the herder walks the same path."

Budhni would answer, "The path is the same, but the responsibility for five animals is not the same as for one cow."

The matter had never become a full quarrel in the village.

It would arise in conversation and then get buried beneath the next task.

The strangest name on the list was that of Phoolmati Devi.

Her husband Rameshwar had died three years earlier.

In Rameshwar's time there had been two cows in their household.

One cow was sold to pay for medical treatment.

A few months after Rameshwar's death, Phoolmati sent the other cow to her daughter.

Now Phoolmati's cowshed was empty.

Yet the old herding list still carried the name "Rameshwar Household."

In the first year Phoolmati sent her fifteen-year-old nephew on the day of her turn.

In the second year she gave Devnarayan's younger son half a seer of rice and had him take her turn.

By the third year she began to wonder—how long would this account continue?

One Bhadon morning the whistle was hanging at her doorway.

The previous household had left it there during the night.

When Phoolmati woke and opened the door, the whistle was swinging from a bamboo peg.

She took it down and placed it in her palm.

The brass was cold.

She smiled.

"There is no one in my cowshed, but the whistle has come looking for me."

Her neighbour Budhni was going to fetch water.

She heard the remark.

"It is your turn today, isn't it?"

Phoolmati said, "The list says so."

"Then who will go?"

"So far, only the whistle."

Both women laughed, but the laughter did not last long.

That day Phoolmati said to Devnarayan's middle son Chhotan, "You take the herd. In the evening I'll give you two kilos of rice."

Chhotan agreed.

He knew the animals, and he also knew how to blow the whistle.

At dawn the herd gathered at the village square.

Budhni placed Gauri's rope in Chhotan's hand.

Devnarayan brought out all five of his animals.

From the other households, twenty-seven animals gathered in all.

Chhotan blew the whistle.

The herd moved.

The day passed ordinarily.

At noon the old bullock once tried to enter the mud near the pond, and Chhotan stopped it with the sound of his stick.

In the evening a heifer ran towards home ahead of the others; Chhotan blew the whistle and brought it back into the herd.

No animal was lost.

No field was trampled.

Even so, the question arose after evening.

As Chhotan was returning home with the rice, Devnarayan asked, "Whose turn was it?"

"Phoolmati Kaki's."

"You went?"

"Yes."

"And you got rice?"

Chhotan nodded.

Devnarayan remained silent for a while.

Then he said, "I have five animals. Budhni has one. Phoolmati has none. Yet all three households get the same number of turns. Whose arithmetic is this?"

Chhotan did not answer.

The next evening four or five people began discussing the matter at the village square.

Budhni was there too.

Devnarayan said, "I send five animals and do one day's herding. Budhni sends one animal and also does one day. Phoolmati sends nothing, yet her household also has one day on the list. What kind of argument is this—that the rule is old, therefore it must be good?"

Budhni said, "You send five animals, but there are three young men in your household. I have one cow, and when my turn comes, I alone give up the whole day."

Devnarayan immediately replied, "Then should we count people or animals?"

Jagadish Kaka, sitting nearby, laughed.

"If we count everything, we will stop herding and start a census."

A few people laughed.

Phoolmati did not.

She said, "Remove my name."

Devnarayan looked at her.

"Removing your name will not settle the matter. What if you buy another cow tomorrow?"

"When I buy one, add my name again."

Jagadish Kaka said, "The old list is of households, not animals. As long as the household remains, the name remains."

Phoolmati asked, "If there is no animal in the household, whose herding am I supposed to do?"

Jagadish Kaka fell silent.

This time the matter could not be buried.

The following week a new cycle of the herding list was due to begin.

The old account book travelled with the whistle.

On its first page were the names of thirty households.

Some names were crossed out; some had been written again above the old ones.

Some households had split between two brothers but still remained one name on the list.

Some had moved to town and had empty cowsheds.

Some now had three to five animals.

The list remembered the village of twenty years ago, not the herd of today.

Budhni proposed, "First let us count."

Jagadish Kaka asked, "Count what?"

"The animals that actually go with the herd every day."

Devnarayan said, "Fine. If I have five animals, do I get five turns?"

"I did not say that."

"Then?"

Budhni thought for a moment and fell silent.

The truth was that counting turns only by number of animals was not simple either.

A herder took twenty-seven animals out in one day.

Adding five more animals did not make the path five times longer.

But a household with five animals certainly benefited more than a household with one.

The next evening ten people gathered on the veranda of the panchayat building.

No formal panchayat had been called.

The whistle, the account book and one blank sheet of paper lay on the table.

Phoolmati came too.

She placed a finger on the line bearing her household's old name.

"This says 'Rameshwar Household.' Rameshwar is no more. There are no animals. I am still here. Which of these three things is the herding register actually recording?"

No one answered at once.

Devnarayan said, "It should record the animals."

Budhni said, "It should record labour too."

"How?"

"Herding is not only walking behind the animals."

Budhni began to count.

"In Sawan the eastern footpath was blocked by grass—who cut it?"

"All of us."

“Near the pond the descent filled with mud—who planted the bamboo there?”

“All of us.”

“In the evening, when calves are counted, it may not be someone’s turn, but whoever is there helps.”

Devnarayan said, “Then count those tasks too.”

No decision was reached that night.

They agreed only that for three days they would observe the actual work.

On the first day it was Budhni’s turn.

At dawn Jagadish Kaka arrived with the account book in his hand.

“How many animals?”

They counted—twenty-eight.

“How many from each household?”

The numbers were written household by household.

One, two, five, three, one, four.

Phoolmati—zero.

Budhni blew the whistle and set off with the herd.

Jagadish Kaka walked some distance with her.

Within the first half-kos a heifer twice turned towards the green edge of a field.

Once, Devnarayan’s young bullock tried to lock horns with another bullock.

Budhni put her stick between them and separated them.

That evening Jagadish Kaka said at the square, “Five animals do not create five times the work, but they do increase the work.”

On the second day it was Devnarayan’s younger son Chhotan’s turn.

This time Jagadish did not go with him.

Budhni’s daughter Chanda took him lunch at noon, and when she returned she said, “Chhotan Bhaiya is managing alone perfectly well.”

At the evening count, one animal appeared to be missing.

There was alarm.

After a while they discovered that an old cow had turned towards its own home midway along the route.

It had been a counting mistake, not a lost animal.

Chhotan said, “When there are more animals in the herd, counting is also work.”

On the third day the turn belonged to a household that had two bullocks, but the elderly owner could not go himself.

His daughter-in-law Sarita went.

It was her first time taking the entire herd.

When she blew the whistle at dawn, the sound came out broken.

She blew it again.

This time the herd moved.

Everything went well until noon.

On the way back in the evening, thick bushes at one point on the footpath split the herd into two groups.

Sarita stopped the animals in front and went back to bring the rear group together.

When she returned she said, "If these bushes had been cut, half the work would have disappeared."

For the first time Phoolmati stepped forward on hearing that.

"I can cut the bushes."

Devnarayan was surprised.

"But you have no animals."

"That is why taking the herd out is not my work. But the path belongs to my village. I can cut the bushes during the day. Why should that mean I owe a herding turn?"

Budhni said, "Not a turn. An account of labour."

The paper was opened again at the square.

This time the village schoolmaster, Ramvilas, was called, because people wanted to keep the accounting from becoming too complicated.

Ramvilas listened to everyone first.

Then he said, "A rule that needs ten pages to count will not survive in a village."

On the blank sheet he drew three lines.

First—number of animals going with the herd.

Second—a full day of herding.

Third—labour spent improving the shared path and watering places used by the herd.

Devnarayan asked, "And money?"

Ramvilas said, "Do not add money yet. First understand the work."

The discussion went on for a long time.

In the end they made a short rule.

A household with one or two animals would count as one herding unit.

A household with three to five animals would count as two units.

Six or more animals would count as three units.

Taking the herd for a full day would count as two labour units.

A half-day substitute would count as one unit.

Cutting the footpath, repairing the pond descent, or fixing shared bamboo fencing would count as one or two units according to the amount of work.

A household with no animals would have no compulsory herding turn.

If such a household chose to do shared work, its labour would be entered in the register, but it would not be an obligation.

Budhni asked, "What if the number of animals rises or falls?"

Ramvilas said, "Count on the first evening of every month."

Devnarayan immediately asked, "If a calf is born, does it count from that very day?"

Chhotan burst out laughing.

"Does the turn get born the moment the calf is born?"

A few people laughed.

Ramvilas said, "An animal that begins going regularly with the herd will be included from the next monthly count."

The new rule seemed very strange to Jagadish Kaka.

"Before this, every household was equal. It was simple."

Phoolmati said softly, "It was simple, but even my empty cowshed used to go out grazing."

Jagadish Kaka looked at her.

He smiled.

"That is true."

The following month a new register was made.

The whistle's cord was replaced, but not the whistle.

The old brass whistle remained.

On the first page, instead of merely listing households, the number of animals was written.

On the second page were labour units.

Phoolmati's name was not on the animal list.

But one week later her name appeared in the labour register.

She cut back the kans grass that had overgrown the eastern footpath.

Chanda and Chhotan worked with her.

In three hours the path looked broad again.

Ramvilas asked, "How many units?"

Phoolmati said, "Whatever you think fair."

Budhni said, "One."

Devnarayan said, "Two. Three people worked for three hours."

Phoolmati laughed.

"Do not start another quarrel over me. Write one for me. Put the remaining two under the children's names."

Everyone agreed.

The new arrangement was not perfect in its first week.

Of Devnarayan's five animals, one cow became ill and stayed at home.

He said that since only four animals were going now, two units were still correct.

A bullock from another household went away for two weeks to plough fields elsewhere; the question arose whether it should still count.

They then decided that an animal absent from the herd for seven consecutive days would be temporarily left out of the following week's turn calculation.

Someone said the system was becoming too much like bookkeeping.

One day Jagadish Kaka, closing the ledger, said, "Blowing the whistle was easy. The accounting has become difficult."

Ramvilas replied, "The accounting was there before too. It simply was not written down."

After two months people became accustomed to the new method.

The whistle no longer moved household by household; it went to the next name in the turn register.

Sometimes the same household received another turn within fifteen days.

Sometimes a one-cow household's turn came much later.
 Sometimes someone did two half-days instead of one full day.
 One evening Budhni was tying Gauri in the cowshed when Chanda asked,
 "Ma, has our turn become less frequent now?"
 Budhni said, "A little."
 "Is that good?"
 Tightening the knot in the rope, Budhni said, "It is good when no one's
 share is quietly placed on someone else's head."
 At that moment Devnarayan's Chhotan passed their doorway carrying the
 whistle.
 His turn was the next day.
 He tested it with a blow.
 The hoarse sound came out.
 Chanda laughed.
 "Change that whistle."
 Chhotan said, "The whistle is fine. The list has changed."
 The next dawn, the same thin sound rose once more through the village.
 Ropes were untied in the cowsheds.
 The animals came out.
 Phoolmati was sweeping the doorway of her empty cowshed.
 When she heard the whistle, she stopped for a moment.
 Now the sound no longer reminded her of a herding turn she supposedly
 owed.
 It told her only that the herd had set out.
 That the footpath was clear.
 And that the register now recorded whose labour was moving with the
 herd that day—not by the old name of a household, but by the work actually
 being done.

STORY II 4

THE POTTER'S FIRE

On the southern side of Sonbarsa village, a little away from the old embankment of the pond, stood a round earthen kiln.

The kiln did not belong to any one household.

Four potter families each called it theirs, and then immediately added that the kiln belonged to all four households.

Jagesar's household made water-pots.

Phoolkali's household made small surahis and lamps.

Madan's household made little pots for setting curd and wide-mouthed cooking vessels.

Sitaram's household made thick-bottomed vessels meant to sit over the hearth.

Each family kneaded its own clay by its own hands and dried its ware in its own courtyard, but all of it met the same fire in the same kiln.

That was why people in the village used to say: the name of the vessel belongs to the household; its fate in firing belongs to the kiln.

The four families laughed at the saying.

When the vessels came out well, the laughter opened wider.

When some cracked or remained underfired, the meaning of the saying changed.

In the last week of Bhadon, a large batch was ready for the market.

Two days later would be the first market of Navaratri.

Jagesar had made forty-five water-pots.

More than a hundred lamps were drying beneath Phoolkali's thatch.

Madan had twenty-four curd-pots ready.

Sitaram had eighteen thick cooking vessels, some of which had already been sold on advance orders.

Everyone needed the money.

So there was no question of postponing the firing.

In the morning, the vessels were brought to the kiln.

According to old custom, each household had marked the bottom of its vessels with a small sign.

Jagesar's mark was a straight line.

Phoolkali's, two dots.

Madan's, a diagonal cross.

Sitaram's, a small crescent.

The marks were not for customers.

They were simply so each family could recognise its own vessels.

Everyone worked together to load the kiln.

The thick water-pots and cooking vessels went at the bottom.

The curd-pots in the middle.

The light surahis and lamps at the top.

The rule was written nowhere.
 Everyone said that this was how it had always been done.
 That day there was a little less room in the bottom row.
 Two of Sitaram's thick cooking pots had already been placed there.
 Jagesar pushed three water-pots close beside them.
 Madan said, "Leave a little gap."
 Jagesar replied, "If we leave gaps, half the vessels above will remain outside."
 Phoolkali was arranging baskets of lamps at the time.
 She said, "There will be room above. The little lamps can fit in between."
 In the end the water-pots stood somewhat close together.
 No one considered that unusual.
 It had happened before.
 By noon the kiln was full.
 Outside lay four separate piles of firewood.
 Jagesar had brought dry mango branches.
 Madan's pile contained more thin pieces of bamboo.
 Sitaram had brought babul wood left from the previous year.
 Some bundles from Phoolkali's household were slightly damp from the previous night's dew.
 Phoolkali opened one bundle with her own hands.
 "This is damp only on the outside. It is dry within."
 Jagesar smiled.
 "The fire will not ask whether the dampness is outside or within."
 He said it jokingly.
 Phoolkali laughed too.
 At dusk the kiln was lit.
 During the first watch Jagesar and Madan tended the fire.
 During the second, Phoolkali's son Ratan and Sitaram's brother Harinandan.
 The third watch had never been made clear.
 Jagesar understood that Harinandan would remain until dawn.
 Harinandan understood that Madan would return after two in the morning.
 Madan had said, "If there is need, call me."
 Who was to call whom had never been decided.
 The fire kept burning in the kiln.
 At about two in the night Phoolkali came carrying water.
 She saw Harinandan sitting with his back against the wall, nodding with sleep.
 "Is the fire all right?"
 Rubbing his eyes, Harinandan said, "It is still strong."
 Phoolkali watched the smoke.
 From the small smoke vent on the eastern side, less smoke was coming out.
 She said, "Why is this side so quiet?"

Harinandan stirred the ash with a wooden pole.

"The wind is against us."

Phoolkali said nothing.

She returned home.

By dawn the fire was allowed to die down.

The kiln remained closed for two days.

On the third day the mouth was opened.

The lamps from the top came out first.

Their colour was good.

Phoolkali tapped one lamp with her fingernail.

It gave a clear ring.

The curd-pots in the middle were also good.

Some had dark smoke stains, but the firing was sound.

When the bottom row was opened, Jagesar's face changed.

Three water-pots were pale in colour.

The bases of five of Sitaram's cooking vessels were still raw.

Two of Madan's heavier curd-pots were also underfired.

In the same row, vessels from three households had gone bad.

Phoolkali had no vessel in that row.

Jagesar's first words were, "Damp wood."

Phoolkali immediately looked at him.

"My wood was stacked on top. Were all the bundles used or not?"

Madan said, "Would wood alone cause the bottom row to come out like this?"

Sitaram was turning over one of his cooking vessels and inspecting the base.

He said, "The water-pots were packed so close that the fire could not move around."

Jagesar's voice sharpened.

"I did not place those pots alone."

"I told you to leave gaps," Madan said.

"Then should I have left your curd-pots outside?"

The conversation was beginning to move away from the vessels and towards the people.

Phoolkali raised her hand.

"Do not take everything out yet."

Jagesar said, "What is left to save now?"

Phoolkali bent down.

"First see where everything was."

She picked up an old broken tile and drew a circle on it with charcoal.

"This is the kiln."

Then she marked four sides.

"This is east. This is west."

Madan laughed.

"Are we making a map of the kiln?"

"The vessels have gone bad. Before deciding whom to blame, let us remember where they were."

Sitaram put his cooking vessel back down.

As the vessels were removed one by one, people began marking their positions on the broken tile.

Straight line—Jagesar.

Diagonal cross—Madan.

Crescent—Sitaram.

Two dots—Phoolkali.

It quickly became clear that the damaged vessels did not belong to one family alone.

The palest vessels had all been on the lower eastern side.

One of Jagesar's water-pots had been in the lower middle; it was somewhat better fired.

Two of Sitaram's pots had stood on the western side; they were fully fired.

Madan held the tile for a long time and looked at it.

"Then the wood?"

Phoolkali said, "Write that too."

No one could say exactly how much wood from which household had been used.

The four piles had been mixed.

No one had counted the bundles.

No one had kept damp and dry wood separate.

They then asked about the watches during the night.

Jagesar said, "I was there in the first watch."

Madan said, "I too, until ten."

Ratan said, "I stayed until midnight."

Harinandan said, "After two I sat down for a little while."

"And after that?"

Harinandan fell silent.

Madan looked at him.

"No one called me."

Harinandan said, "I thought you would come on your own."

Jagesar's face hardened again.

"So the fire was orphaned in the middle of the night?"

Harinandan wanted to answer, but Phoolkali spoke first.

"No one knew how long the next man was supposed to stay. Write that."

Jagesar said, "Will everything now run on paper?"

Rubbing charcoal on the eastern side of the tile, Phoolkali said, "The vessels will still run on fire. The paper will only keep our memory straight."

No decision about compensation for the damaged ware was reached that day.

Jagesar wanted Phoolkali to bear some share because of the damp wood.

Sitaram wanted those who had crowded the bottom row to take responsibility.

Madan said the largest failure was the empty watch over the fire.

All three possibilities were plausible.

None was proven.

In the end they decided that for this batch each family would bear the loss according to its own damaged vessels.

No one liked the decision.

But putting the whole blame on someone without an account felt worse.

The next batch was due a week later.

This time it was not for the market but for advance orders for two village weddings.

The four families gathered at the kiln again.

From the very first day Phoolkali brought an old ledger.

On its first page she wrote: "Kiln Rows."

Jagesar laughed.

"Will the fire read it?"

Phoolkali said, "No. We will."

Inside the kiln they recognised three levels—bottom, middle, top.

And four directions—east, west, north, south.

They marked whose vessels were placed where.

This time all the heavy vessels of any one family were not put in a single place.

Two of Jagesar's water-pots went in the lower east, two in the lower west.

Sitaram's cooking pots were divided between both sides as well.

Madan's heavier curd-pots went in the lower-middle.

Phoolkali placed two of her heavier surahis in the bottom row.

"Put mine down there too," she said.

Jagesar asked, "Why?"

"If something goes wrong again, no one can say only the clay of your pots was at fault."

Jagesar said nothing.

They agreed to leave a gap of two fingers between vessels.

Where there was not enough space, one vessel was left out.

Earlier people had regarded a vessel left outside as a loss.

This time Madan said, "One vessel in the next firing is better than a dozen half-baked."

After the kiln was loaded, the smoke vents were cleaned.

In the eastern vent they found a lump of old ash and clay blocking the passage.

Harinandan removed it with a stick.

Jagesar looked at Phoolkali.

"Was this here last time too?"

Phoolkali said, "No one knows."

The ledger recorded: "Eastern vent cleaned."

The firewood too was measured in separate piles.

There was no weighing scale.

So they made bundles of roughly equal thickness, twenty to a group.

Damp pieces were set aside.

Phoolkali spread her dew-wet wood in the sun.

Jagesar himself touched it.

"Now it is fine."

The watch over the fire was written down.

Six to nine in the evening—Jagesar.

Nine to midnight—Madan.

Midnight to three—Ratan and Harinandan.

Three to dawn—Sitaram.

At each change of watch, the previous person would not leave until the next person appeared in front of him.

Phoolkali drew two lines beneath that sentence.

Sitaram said, "What if I do not wake at three?"

Phoolkali replied, "Then Ratan will come to your house."

"And if I am not at home?"

"Then say so beforehand. The watch belongs not to a name, but to the person who is present."

At dusk the fire was lit.

The first watch passed easily.

Jagesar counted the bundles as he fed the fire.

At nine Madan arrived.

Jagesar wrote in the ledger: "Six bundles used."

Madan asked, "Six? How many last time?"

Everyone was silent.

No one had ever had an answer to that question before.

At eleven a strong west wind rose.

Madan went around to the eastern vent.

Once again there was less smoke there.

He did not push a stick inside immediately.

First he wrote in the ledger: "Less smoke on east."

Then he showed Ratan.

Ratan cleared away the ash.

The fire below rose slightly.

At midnight the watch changed.

Before going home, Madan walked Ratan and Harinandan once around all four sides of the kiln.

"Listen to this sound."

There was a low growl of fire inside the kiln.

"If one side becomes completely quiet, check it."

Ratan laughed.

"How do we write a sound in the ledger?"

Madan said, "Write 'quiet.'"

At half past one Phoolkali came again carrying water.

This time no one was dozing.

Harinandan was on the eastern side.

Ratan was arranging wood on the south.

Phoolkali asked, "Everything all right?"

Harinandan said, "The east side feels a little cooler now."

"How do you know?"

"I did not touch it. From the smoke and the sound."

Phoolkali smiled.

"Write it."

Ratan wrote in the ledger: "1:30 a.m.—east slow."

That night, for the first time, the kiln's fire began to be recorded against time instead of only in people's memory.

A little before three Sitaram arrived.

Ratan said, "You are early."

Sitaram replied, "I was afraid people would say again that I had not come."

Harinandan said quietly, "Last time no one said you had failed to come. No one knew whose watch it was."

Sitaram remained silent for a moment.

Then he said, "True."

At dawn the fire was allowed to die down.

The final line in the ledger read: "All watches present."

Two days later the kiln was opened.

Phoolkali said, "Not the top first. As far as possible, take things out while looking at the map."

They began removing the vessels slowly.

The lamps on top were good.

The curd-pots in the middle were good.

The first water-pot from the bottom came out ringing.

Jagesar tapped it near the ear.

A clear sound.

Sitaram's cooking vessel too was fully fired.

One of Phoolkali's surahis was slightly pale, but its base was not raw.

One of Madan's curd-pots, right in the lower-eastern corner, was underfired.

Everyone stood around that pot.

Jagesar opened his mouth to say something, then stopped.

Phoolkali opened the ledger.

In that same lower-eastern corner, the greatest number of damaged vessels had been found in the previous batch.

This time only one heavy curd-pot had been placed there.

The ledger also recorded at half past one in the night: "East slow."

Madan bent and looked inside the kiln.

On that side, near the base, a thin bank of ash had gathered.

The air-gap was narrower there than on the other side.

Sitaram said, "Then this is not a fault in Madan's clay?"

Madan laughed.

"Do not rescue the clay yet. First fix the place."

Jagesar laughed too.

"And Phoolkali's wood?"

Phoolkali replied, "Let that trial remain adjourned until the next batch."

All four laughed.
 The laughter was not as sharp as the previous time.
 After the kiln cooled, the ash in the lower eastern corner was cleared completely.
 One brick had shifted slightly inward.
 It was set back in place.
 A mark was made to keep one hand-span of space empty at that corner of the bottom row.
 A new rule was added to the ledger.
 Not the name of a vessel—the name of a place.
 “Lower east—leave an air-gap.”
 “Check that smoke vents are clear before sealing.”
 “At change of watch, the next person must appear in front of the previous one.”
 “Keep damp wood bundles separate.”
 “Do not place all the heavy vessels of one household in one spot.”
 Sitaram asked, “Will all these rules not slow the work down?”
 Phoolkali said, “Loading the kiln may take half an hour longer. Re-firing spoiled vessels costs two days.”
 Jagesar held the ledger in his hands.
 He looked at the page from the previous batch.
 There were more people’s names there—Phoolkali’s wood, Jagesar’s pots, Harinandan’s watch.
 On the new page there were more places and tasks—east, bottom, gap, vent, bundle, watch.
 He said, “Write one more thing.”
 Phoolkali raised the pen.
 “What?”
 Jagesar said, “If a defect is found, mark the place before lifting away the vessel.”
 Madan said, “And if someone’s clear mistake is found?”
 Jagesar replied, “Then write the name. But only after looking at the place.”
 Everyone accepted that.
 The following month the kiln was filled again.
 This time no one laughed on seeing the new ledger.
 While placing vessels, Ratan himself asked, “Which row should I write this under?”
 Harinandan counted the bundles of wood.
 Sitaram checked the time of his watch.
 Madan put his hand into the eastern gap to see whether ash had collected.
 Phoolkali placed the ledger on a brick outside the doorway.
 The fire was lit.
 The night deepened.
 Smoke came out on all four sides.
 Sometimes strong, sometimes weak.

When the east became quiet again, the person on watch checked the gap before adding more fire.

The ash was removed.

Air moved through.

Only three words were added to the ledger: "Eastern gap cleared."

At dawn Phoolkali closed the page.

The names of all four families were on that page, but there was no line for blame.

No separate box had been made for fault.

Instead it contained the kiln's three levels, its four sides, bundles of wood, and the watches of the night.

A few weeks later Jagesar's grandson was leafing through the ledger and asked, "Baba, why is 'lower east' written again and again on this page?"

Jagesar looked towards the kiln.

"Because earlier the fire did not reach there properly."

"Whose fault was it?"

Jagesar thought for a moment.

Then he said, "When we had not written anything down, everyone had an answer to that question. After we wrote it down, we understood—the answer lay in the place, not only in a name."

The grandson did not fully understand.

He closed the ledger and ran to the eastern side of the kiln.

There, on the earthen wall, a small charcoal mark had been made.

Beside it was written: "KEEP THE GAP CLEAR."

And beneath it there was no one's name.

STORY 115

THE RENTED PUMP

In the first week of Phagun, the soil looked dry on the surface, but a little moisture still remained around the roots of the wheat.

In the rear strip of Madhupur, the fields of Bisun Yadav and Nandlal Mandal lay side by side.

Their wheat had been planted at almost the same time, but the slope of the two fields was not the same.

Bisun's field lay slightly higher; Nandlal's slightly lower.

The village's old well had dried up in Magh that year.

So for irrigation everyone was looking towards rented diesel pumps.

There were three pumps in the village, but two of them were being used in distant fields that week.

Only Raghunath Sahu's pump was free.

It was an old five-horsepower pump that rarely started with a single pull of the rope.

Raghunath could tell its condition by its sound.

If the smoke thickened, he opened the air control; if the growl weakened, he checked the pipe joints.

Bisun reached his doorway early in the morning.

"Can you give us the pump until this afternoon?"

Raghunath asked, "How much land?"

"One kattha of mine on the higher side, and one and a half katthas of Nandlal's below."

Raghunath said, "The charge will be by the hour."

Bisun asked, "From what point does the clock start?"

Raghunath replied casually, "From when the engine starts."

Bisun did not answer immediately.

That was how pump hire worked in the village.

The engine ran; the clock ran.

Whether the water had reached the field, whether the pipe had been joined properly, whether a bund broke in between—those were considered the farmer's concerns.

But this time the route by which water had to reach Bisun's field was not short.

The pump would be installed at the boring near the dry bed of the pond.

From there the water would first run fifty hand-spans through an old earthen channel, then cross through a cut in the bund between the two fields before entering Bisun's land.

Bisun said, "What if the engine starts but the water gets held up in the line?"

Raghunath laughed.

"Will the engine then stop drinking diesel?"

Bisun smiled too.

"It will drink diesel. But the field will still receive no water."

The matter was left there.

Before noon the pump was loaded onto a bullock cart and taken towards the fields.

Raghunath's nephew Mohan went with him.

Bisun and Nandlal had agreed beforehand to clean the channel.

But Bisun had gone to the market early in the morning to bring fertiliser.

Guests had arrived at Nandlal's house.

Both had thought—the channel is old; a few strokes of the spade will make it run.

By the time the pump arrived, only the first twenty hand-spans of the channel had been cleared.

Raghunath looked at it and asked, "And farther ahead?"

Bisun said, "Once the water starts moving, it will make its own way."

Raghunath said nothing.

Mohan connected the suction pipe to the mouth of the boring.

They pulled the rope twice.

The engine coughed and died.

On the third pull a thick wave of smoke came out.

The growl settled into a steady rhythm.

Raghunath looked at the watch in his pocket.

"Twelve seven."

Bisun checked the time too.

Mohan placed a hand on the first pipe joint.

Before the water came, air escaped.

Then the pipe trembled.

A few moments later the first stream entered the earthen channel.

Nandlal went ahead with a spade.

The water reached the first bend properly.

At the second bend, the stream spread out.

There was a small hole in the soil.

Water left the channel and began flowing into an empty patch beside it.

"How did this gap get here?" Bisun shouted.

Nandlal struck the earth with his spade and pressed soil into it.

The stream rose slightly, then began leaking again underneath.

Raghunath stood by the pump at a distance, watching.

Mohan asked, "Shall we stop the engine?"

Raghunath said, "Then the water in the pipe will fall back. Filling it again will take time."

Bisun ran over.

"Stop it for a little while. Let us close the gap first."

Raghunath looked at his watch.

"Twelve fourteen."

The engine was stopped.

Suddenly the sound of the field changed.

Until then the engine's growl had drowned out every other sound.
 Now only the blows of the spade could be heard.
 Nandlal packed earth around the gap.
 Bisun pushed in two handfuls of straw.
 Mohan pressed smooth wet soil over the top.
 Eight minutes later Raghunath asked, "Start it again?"
 Nandlal said, "Let us look farther ahead once."
 They walked along the next stretch of channel.
 Thirty hand-spans farther on, the bund had sagged in another place.
 There was no hole there, but the channel was so shallow that the water could easily spill out.
 Bisun struck his forehead with his palm.
 "We were supposed to clean this channel yesterday."
 Nandlal answered at once, "Is this my channel alone?"
 Bisun said, "Did I ever say it was yours alone?"
 Raghunath stopped them both.
 "Fix the channel first. Quarrel afterward."
 It took another five minutes.
 At twelve twenty-seven the engine was started again.
 This time the stream crossed the first gap.
 At the second shallow stretch it spread a little, but did not cross the bund.
 At twelve thirty-five the water touched the first edge of Bisun's field.
 Bisun called out loudly, "Now the clock starts!"
 From beside the pump Raghunath replied, "My clock has been running since twelve seven."
 Nandlal stood between them.
 His field's turn had not yet come.
 Water began spreading through Bisun's field.
 The upper soil swallowed it quickly.
 It took time for the stream to reach the lower strip.
 Raghunath kept checking the fuel tank from time to time.
 At one five Bisun said, "Enough. Stop mine."
 Mohan opened a small cut in the bund and turned the stream towards Nandlal's field.
 Nandlal's field lay lower.
 The water ran into it quickly.
 At one ten his first bed filled.
 By one forty, water had reached all of his one and a half katthas.
 Raghunath stopped the engine.
 He checked the watch.
 "One hour and thirty-three minutes."
 Bisun said, "Water remained in my field for fifty minutes."
 Nandlal said, "Mine for thirty."
 Raghunath added, "The engine ran for one hour and thirty-three minutes."
 Mohan lifted the nearly empty diesel can.

“Almost everything we put in has gone.”

Bisun asked, “Who pays for the thirteen minutes when it was stopped?”

Raghunath said, “I will not count that. The engine was off.”

Nandlal said, “But during the first seven minutes, no water had reached the field.”

Raghunath replied, “The machine was running then.”

Bisun added, “And the channel swallowed another twenty minutes.”

Raghunath’s voice grew a little hard.

“Did I break the channel?”

No one answered.

Raghunath continued, “The diesel was mine. The machine was mine. Mohan’s time was mine. The water went into your channel. Am I supposed to carry it in my arms all the way to the field?”

Bisun did not stay silent either.

“Are we renting the machine or the water?”

“The machine.”

“Then even if no water reaches the field, the full rent is due?”

“If the engine runs, yes.”

Nandlal planted his spade in the ground.

“By that reckoning, the loss from the broken channel belongs to both of us, but the full rate still belongs to the machine owner?”

Raghunath looked at him.

“Where is my profit in that? The diesel burned.”

In the middle of the dispute, no one’s argument was completely false.

That was precisely why the dispute was difficult.

Two villagers heard the voices and came over.

One was Ramcharit Mahato, who irrigated his own field through a pipe.

The other was Shyama Devi, whose field lay farther along the same channel.

Shyama Devi first examined the channel.

“Did this gap appear today?”

Nandlal said, “Hard to say.”

She bent and touched the edge of the earth.

“The edge is dry. It is old.”

Bisun turned his face away.

Ramcharit asked, “Then why did you not inspect the channel beforehand?”

Bisun replied, “I thought running water would make its own path.”

Shyama Devi did not laugh.

“Running water makes its own path, yes. It also makes paths where you do not want them.”

Raghunath said, “My account is clear—from twelve seven to one forty. Deduct the thirteen minutes when the engine was stopped.”

Ramcharit asked, “When the engine starts, how long does it normally take to fill the empty pipe the first time?”

Mohan said, “Four or five minutes.”

“Does that happen every day?”

“Almost.”

“Then is that pump preparation, or the farmer’s field time?”

Raghunath thought for a moment.

“If the pipe is empty, it has to fill.”

Shyama Devi asked, “And the gap in the channel?”

Bisun said immediately, “Our fault.”

Nandlal looked at him.

Bisun added, “Both of ours. The channel was shared.”

This was the first time in the dispute that anyone had placed part of the fault on himself.

Raghunath’s voice softened.

“Then what about the diesel that burned?”

Bisun said, “We will pay for that. But not at the full hourly rate.”

Raghunath frowned.

“Why?”

“Because during those twenty minutes the machine was not irrigating my field. Because of our mistake, it was merely throwing water away. Your diesel was spent, but the service was not complete.”

A little distance away Ramcharit drew three lines on the soil.

Above the first he wrote: “MACHINE.”

On the second: “CHANNEL.”

On the third: “IRRIGATION.”

“If all three things are always merged into one clock, this quarrel will happen again.”

Raghunath asked, “Then should we keep three clocks?”

Shyama Devi said, “One clock. Three lines.”

Everyone fell silent at that sentence.

Raghunath told Mohan, “Bring the old notebook.”

There was a small notebook in the pump’s tool box in which diesel, repairs and credit were recorded.

Mohan brought it.

At the bottom of the first page Ramcharit made four lines.

“ENGINE PREPARATION.”

“CHANNEL/ROUTE FAULT.”

“ACTUAL IRRIGATION.”

“ENGINE OFF.”

Raghunath said, “If the engine is off, there is no charge.”

“Fine.”

Bisun asked, “And preparation?”

Raghunath said, “It still uses diesel.”

Shyama Devi asked, “How much preparation is normal?”

Mohan said, “Up to five minutes.”

“Ten?”

“Then something is wrong.”

Raghunath himself added, "If the engine is delayed because of my machine, that is not preparation—it is my breakdown."

That was a new point.

Ramcharit wrote: "Normal preparation up to five minutes—half rate."

Raghunath immediately said, "Why half?"

"Because diesel is being used, but service in the field has not yet begun."

Bisun said, "I agree."

Nandlal nodded too.

Raghunath thought for a while and said, "All right. But if more than five minutes are lost because the farmer still has not joined the pipe or prepared the channel, that goes under channel fault."

"And if the machine itself fails to start?" Shyama Devi asked.

"Mine."

A second rule was added to the notebook.

"Channel fault—diesel cost only, not full rent."

Raghunath stopped again at this line.

"How do we measure the diesel cost?"

Mohan explained the level marks on the tank.

Raghunath roughly knew how much fuel the pump consumed in an hour.

Ramcharit said, "Exact measurement is not necessary. Keep a small fixed rate—enough for diesel and the operator's blocked time."

Nandlal asked, "But what if the channel fault is shared by both of us?"

Bisun answered, "Then we split that small charge."

Shyama Devi asked, "And if only your bund breaks?"

"Then I pay."

Raghunath smiled for the first time.

"And if Shyama's goat breaks the channel?"

Shyama Devi smiled too.

"First prove it was my goat."

The tension eased a little.

They settled the remaining account that same day.

The engine had run for a total of ninety-three minutes.

The first five minutes were counted as preparation.

Eighteen minutes were assigned to the channel gap and the shallow stretch.

The remaining time was counted as actual irrigation.

Bisun and Nandlal paid the full rate according to the actual irrigation time for their respective fields.

For the eighteen minutes lost in the shared channel, the two of them split the smaller diesel-rate equally.

Raghunath charged half-rate for the five minutes of preparation.

No one was completely satisfied.

That was the best sign of all.

Raghunath still felt that the full rate for the first five minutes would have been fair.

Bisun still wondered why the farmer should pay anything for preparation.

Nandlal still felt that more of the channel-cleaning work had fallen to Bisun's side.

But all three agreed that the old single number had hidden three different things.

Two days later Shyama Devi called for the same pump to irrigate her field.

This time Mohan opened the notebook before starting the pump.

Raghunath said, "First inspect the channel."

Shyama Devi replied, "I checked it this morning."

"Check it again. It may save five minutes."

The three of them walked the channel.

In one place the earth at the side was loose.

Shyama Devi pressed it down with a spade.

They installed the pump.

Mohan wrote down the time.

The engine did not catch on the first pull.

Nor on the second.

Raghunath opened the fuel line and checked it.

Air had entered.

It took seven minutes.

Shyama Devi looked at the notebook.

"Five minutes preparation?"

Raghunath himself said, "No. Two minutes are my machine's delay."

Mohan wrote: "Preparation five, machine delay two."

No rent was added for those two minutes.

Raghunath's face tightened slightly, but he did not cross out the line.

The water entered the channel.

This time the stream reached the field without breaking anywhere.

Standing at the mouth of the channel, Shyama Devi called the time.

"Actual irrigation starts now."

Mohan wrote it down.

That day the final account was short.

The page in the notebook was clear too.

Within a few weeks Raghunath's pump went to five fields in the village.

The new lines did not apply in exactly the same way everywhere.

In some places the pipe ran directly to the field, so there was no question of a channel fault.

In some places, even after the pump arrived, the farmer was still cutting the bund; that time went into the channel/route line.

Once Mohan had left a pipe clamp at home.

A man went on a bicycle to fetch it and twelve minutes were lost.

Raghunath himself wrote: "Machine-side delay—no charge."

Bisun happened to be there that day.

He looked at the page and smiled.

"The notebook cuts you too now."

Raghunath said, "No. The notebook only changes the name of the time."

At the end of Chait Raghunath bought a new notebook.

On the first page Mohan drew four straight lines as neatly as though they had been printed.

Engine preparation.

Machine-side delay.

Channel/route fault.

Actual irrigation.

Below them a smaller line was added: "Engine off."

Bisun asked, "Does keeping all these accounts not take time?"

Mohan said, "One minute."

Raghunath added, "One minute of writing saves twenty minutes of quarrelling."

Nandlal said, "The quarrel lasted more than twenty minutes."

Everyone laughed.

On the next irrigation day the pump again reached the edge of Bisun's field.

This time Bisun and Nandlal had cleaned the channel from early morning.

Fresh earth had been packed over the first gap.

The shallow stretch had been deepened a little.

As Raghunath unloaded the pump, he asked, "Is the channel ready?"

Bisun said, "You inspect it first."

Raghunath walked the full length of the channel to the field.

When he returned, he said, "It is ready."

Mohan opened the notebook.

The engine started.

The clock started.

Five minutes later the water touched the edge of the field.

Mohan wrote the time in the first line, and then in the second.

Bisun watched from a distance.

That day there was only one clock.

But time was no longer only one thing.

STORY 116

TWO PASERIS OF MARUA

It was the last Tuesday of Katik.

The morning mist still lay low over the threshing ground, but the eastern sky had begun to brighten.

Near Dhaneshwar Jha's courtyard stood three heaps of marua—one for seed, one for household use, and one for sale.

Beside the heaps lay a brass paseri measure.

Its rim had been worn smooth with use.

The moment Phoolmati Devi saw it from a distance, she took the empty sack down from her shoulder.

Her husband Ramsevak was not with her.

He had been ill with fever for two days, so Phoolmati had come alone to collect the wages that day.

Four days earlier, Phoolmati, Ramsevak and their eldest daughter Chanda had cut Dhaneshwar's marua, tied it into bundles, and carried it to the threshing ground.

On the day the work was agreed, Dhaneshwar had said clearly, "Two paseris of marua for the complete job."

Phoolmati remembered exactly the same words.

Two paseris.

No less, no more.

In the threshing ground, Dhaneshwar's younger brother Naveen was beating the marua loose from the stalks.

Seeing Phoolmati, he said, "Sit down. Bhaiya is inside checking the accounts."

Phoolmati folded her sack and sat on it.

She was in no hurry, but the grain container at home was almost empty.

The previous night, wheat bran had been mixed into the remaining marua flour to make rotis.

Chanda had left half a roti so that her younger brother could eat it in the morning.

Phoolmati saw no need to tell anyone this.

A person who comes to collect wages does not bring an empty grain jar from home as evidence.

After a while Dhaneshwar came outside.

A thin ledger with a red cover was in his hand.

Behind him came Mohan Sahu.

Mohan Sahu ran the village grocery shop.

The moment Phoolmati saw him, she understood that the matter was not going to be merely about measuring out two paseris.

Dhaneshwar opened the ledger.

"Phoolmati, your two paseris are ready," he said.

“Yes.”

“But you also owe Mohan two hundred and forty rupees.”

Phoolmati looked at Mohan Sahu.

“I do owe it. Am I denying that?”

Mohan Sahu shook his head.

“No, you are not denying it.”

Dhaneshwar gestured towards the marua heap.

“Today the price is twenty-four rupees a seer. Two paseris make ten seers.

Exactly two hundred and forty. The account balances.”

Phoolmati was silent for a few moments.

Then she opened her sack again, but did not spread its mouth on the ground.

“The two paseris of marua are my wages, are they not?”

“Yes.”

“And the two hundred and forty rupees are what I owe Mohan Sahu?”

“Yes.”

“Then when did those two things become the same thing?”

Dhaneshwar frowned.

“On the day we fixed the work, you yourself said that the shop debt could be adjusted against the wages.”

Phoolmati shook her head.

“I said that when I received money, I would repay the debt. You said that if needed, the accounts could be adjusted. But no one said which day’s price would be used.”

Naveen stopped threshing and began to listen.

Mohan Sahu said quietly, “My ledger only says two hundred and forty rupees. It does not say ten seers of marua.”

Dhaneshwar looked at him.

“You will get the money by selling marua, won’t you?”

“I will,” Mohan Sahu said, “but my ledger does not say on which day it must be sold.”

Phoolmati placed her sack beside her feet.

“On the day the work was agreed, marua was thirty rupees a seer.”

Dhaneshwar answered at once, “That was the price of the old grain. Everyone knew the price would fall when the new marua reached the market.”

“If everyone knew, then when we agreed the work you should have said that the debt would be deducted at the price prevailing on the payment day.”

“Would you then have said you would not do the work?”

“Perhaps I would have. Perhaps I would have asked for half the wages in cash. But I would have decided knowingly.”

Dhaneshwar did not close the ledger, but rested a finger on the page.

“And if today the price were forty, would you accept the thirty-rupee rate from the day the work was agreed?”

Phoolmati answered without hesitation.

"If thirty had been written beforehand, then thirty. If 'price on the day of payment' had been written, then forty. If I choose whichever day benefits me, you would not find that fair either."

Mohan Sahu cleared his throat lightly.

"In this matter, the problem is less the price than the day."

Dhaneshwar looked at him.

"You are the shopkeeper. You want your money. It is easy for you to say that."

Mohan Sahu smiled faintly.

"I do want my money. That is why I too need to know by what calculation today's payment is being made."

Meanwhile Dhaneshwar's wife Sarojini came from the courtyard carrying two glasses of water.

Having heard the dispute, she held one glass out to Phoolmati.

"Drink some water first."

Phoolmati took the glass.

Sarojini asked Dhaneshwar, "What exactly was written in the ledger on the day the work was agreed?"

Dhaneshwar opened the page.

It said:

"Phoolmati family—marua cutting and carrying. Complete work—two paseris."

Below that, in pencil, was written:

"Mohan Sahu debt—to be adjusted."

Sarojini read the second line and asked, "What does 'to be adjusted' mean?"

Before answering, Dhaneshwar looked at the page again.

That was truly all it said.

No price.

No date.

No indication whether the entire debt would be deducted or only as much as Phoolmati chose.

No indication whether the marua was first to be treated as wages or the money first as debt repayment.

Phoolmati finished the water and put the glass down.

"Today those two words have become the price of my entire sack."

Sarojini did not stop Dhaneshwar, nor did she speak in support of Phoolmati.

She simply turned the ledger towards herself and looked at it.

"By this kind of account, tomorrow anyone in our household could choose whichever day suited them."

Dhaneshwar said, "Then what do we do now? Leave Mohan's money unpaid?"

Mohan Sahu said, "Leaving a debt unpaid and forgiving it are two different things. The debt will remain in my ledger."

Phoolmati said, "I will repay the debt. But first my wages must come into my hands."

Dhaneshwar did not laugh.

"You will take the marua, then sell it, then give Mohan the money. Why make three steps out of one?"

"Because the first thing is my wages."

"In the end the money will go there anyway."

"Whether all of it goes or half of it goes, I will decide. We need grain at home too."

For a few moments the threshing ground filled again only with the sound of falling grain.

Naveen resumed his work.

The marua seeds struck the bamboo winnowing tray with a dry khat-khat sound.

Dhaneshwar asked slowly, "When is the shop debt from?"

Mohan Sahu opened his ledger.

There were three entries.

Oil and salt in Sawan.

Medicine for Ramsevak's fever in Bhadon.

Two kilos of rice at the beginning of Asin.

Total: two hundred and forty rupees.

Mohan Sahu said, "I can receive this money gradually too. But last month Phoolmati herself said she would pay after the harvest."

Phoolmati said, "I said I would pay after the harvest. I did not say I would empty out my entire wages."

Sarojini asked, "How do we know what the price was on the day the work was agreed?"

Phoolmati replied immediately, "Thirty at the Tuesday market."

Dhaneshwar said, "It was twenty-eight too."

Mohan Sahu said, "At the shop that week I had bought at twenty-nine."

Three prices.

In the same week.

Phoolmati smiled slightly.

"See? Even if the day had been written, someone would still ask: whose price?"

For the first time, something other than irritation appeared on Dhaneshwar's face.

He looked at the two words in his ledger as though they themselves were annoying him.

"To be adjusted."

Sarojini said, "First measure out the two paseris."

Dhaneshwar looked at her.

"And after that?"

"After that, Phoolmati and Mohan can settle their account. Your wage account will be complete. Mohan's debt account will remain separate."

Dhaneshwar was about to say something, but Phoolmati spoke first.

"Today I will sell one paseri and give Mohan Sahu the money. I will take one paseri home."

Mohan Sahu asked, "Whatever money you receive from selling one paseri, I deduct that much?"

"Yes."

"A balance will remain."

"It will."

"Next week the price may fall further."

"It may rise too."

Mohan Sahu closed his ledger.

"Fine."

Dhaneshwar still did not look entirely satisfied.

"But by this reckoning, if the price falls, Phoolmati loses."

Phoolmati said, "Then the loss is mine. Because I chose the day of sale. If you had chosen it, there would have been a dispute."

That stopped Dhaneshwar.

He lifted the brass paseri.

He filled it with marua.

He swept his palm across the top and levelled it.

One paseri went into Phoolmati's sack.

The measure was filled again.

Two paseris were complete.

Phoolmati tied the mouth of the sack, then opened a second small bag.

"Separate one paseri here. I will sell it in the market."

Dhaneshwar asked, "Shall I buy it?"

Phoolmati thought for a moment.

"At what price?"

"Twenty-four."

"And if I get twenty-five at the Tuesday market?"

Dhaneshwar smiled.

"Then sell it there."

Phoolmati smiled too.

"This time I will choose the price."

Sarojini laughed.

The dispute was not completely over, but its edge had become blunter.

Phoolmati took one paseri home.

The other paseri sold that day in the market at twenty-five rupees a seer.

One paseri of five seers brought one hundred and twenty-five rupees.

On her way back from the market, Phoolmati stopped at Mohan Sahu's shop.

She gave him one hundred and twenty-five rupees.

In his ledger, beside the old two-hundred-and-forty-rupee balance, Mohan Sahu wrote:

"Received today—125."

Below it remained:

"115."

Phoolmati said, "Will you not write the marua price here?"

Mohan Sahu laughed.

"I received money. Where you sold the marua is not part of my account."

Phoolmati looked at the ledger.

"If it had been written like this from the beginning, there would have been no morning quarrel."

Mohan Sahu said, "The morning quarrel was not in your ledger. It was in Dhaneshwar's."

Two days later Dhaneshwar called Phoolmati again.

Not for work.

To show her the account.

On that same side of the threshing ground, the names of three labouring families were now being entered.

The next job was cleaning marua.

Dhaneshwar had made new lines in the ledger.

First—"In what form are the wages?"

Second—"How much quantity/cash?"

Third—"Is there an old debt separate from this?"

Fourth—"Is adjustment against wages authorised?"

Fifth—"If grain and money are to be converted, which day's price?"

Sixth—"Whose price record?"

Phoolmati read the lines one by one.

"The sixth line is the most important," she said.

Dhaneshwar asked, "Why?"

"There were three prices on the same day."

With a red pen Dhaneshwar added in smaller letters under the sixth line:

"Market/shop/mutual agreement—to be marked in advance."

Naveen was sitting beside them.

He asked, "Will every job need this much writing?"

Dhaneshwar said, "No. Where the payment is simply marua, writing 'two paseris' is enough. But when you turn marua into money, write the day too."

Phoolmati said, "And when you turn money into a debt, write whose debt it is."

Mohan Sahu had also come there.

Hearing this, he said, "And if the debt money is to be deducted from wages, ask first."

Sarojini came from the house with tea.

"And if the workday passes while you keep filling in all these lines?"

Phoolmati said, "Because two words were left short, half a day passed today."

Everyone laughed.

But the matter did not end there.

The following week the price of marua rose again to twenty-six rupees a seer.

Dhaneshwar's younger brother Naveen said, "See, Phoolmati Didi would have received another five rupees if she had waited a week."

At that moment Phoolmati was winnowing grain in Dhaneshwar's courtyard.

Without lifting her head, she said, "If I had waited, Mohan Sahu's debt would also have remained for another week. Whether the price rises or falls is something that comes after the work."

Naveen asked, "Then why did you ask for the price from the day the work was agreed?"

Phoolmati stopped the winnowing tray.

"Because that day I felt you were choosing today's date for your own convenience. I was choosing another day for mine. Both choices could have been wrong."

Dhaneshwar was listening.

He opened the ledger and placed a finger on the new line.

"That is why the day must be written beforehand."

Phoolmati said, "Otherwise grain remains wages and yet turns into a wager on the market."

That evening, when Phoolmati returned home, Ramsevak's fever had gone down.

Chanda was grinding marua beside the hearth.

Of the one paseri kept at home, half went into the grain jar and half was set aside for grinding.

Ramsevak asked, "Mohan's balance?"

"One hundred and fifteen."

"Dhaneshwar did not deduct it?"

"No."

"Was there a quarrel?"

Phoolmati thought for a moment before replying.

"It began over the price. Later we understood the quarrel was not really about the price."

"Then what was it about?"

"The day."

Ramsevak nodded as though he understood, though perhaps not completely.

Phoolmati closed the lid of the grain jar.

"The day wages are fixed, the day they are paid, and the day a debt is deducted—those are not necessarily the same day."

Chanda stopped the grinding stone and asked, "Then will all three be written in the ledger?"

Phoolmati said, "Where all three meet, all three should be written."

A few months later, around Holi, Dhaneshwar's marua was finished.

By then the market price had risen again.

In Mohan Sahu's shop ledger, below Phoolmati's old two-hundred-and-forty-rupee balance, the final line was written:

"Balance 115—paid in full in cash."

Phoolmati had paid that remaining amount from cash wages earned on another field job.

The price of marua on that day was not written in the ledger.

There was no need.

In the meantime many new names had been added to Dhaneshwar's ledger.

Some wages were paid in cash, some in paddy, some in marua.

Whenever the question arose of adjusting an old debt against wages, the new lines were filled in.

One day Naveen jokingly said to Phoolmati, "Your two paseris of marua made the ledger fat."

Phoolmati said, "The two paseris were already written."

"Then what was new?"

Phoolmati placed her finger on the line in the ledger that said: "Exchange day."

"This."

At that moment there was no fresh marua in the threshing ground.

Only the empty paseri lay overturned.

Sunlight fell across its brass rim.

The price would change again.

The paseri would remain the same.

STORY 117

GRASS ON THE EMBANKMENT

It was the last week of Bhadon.

The slope of the flood embankment east of Sonbarsa village was now covered with green grass.

The rains had not stopped completely, but the flow of water had diminished. People had begun walking again along the footpath over the embankment that led from the northern hamlet towards the market.

Jamuna Devi went there every morning with her two goats.

She had named the white-and-black goat Dhourri. The other was Kajri.

Dhourri had a habit of tugging at the rope the moment she saw tender leaves along the path. Kajri was a little calmer, though she could chew even a piece of discarded paper.

Jamuna kept the ropes short.

At that time the grass on the embankment was not yet to be cut.

There was an old village custom: once the water had receded and the grass had shed its seed, a day would be fixed for cutting the embankment grass.

There was another custom too—the grass would be divided among livestock-owning households that had land.

None of this was written anywhere.

But there was a register in people's mouths.

"Twelve households."

Every year the same twelve household names were recited. Some had fields below the embankment, some had fields beside it, and some said their ancestors had contributed earth when the embankment was built.

Jamuna was not among those twelve households.

She had no field of her own.

What she called home was a rented courtyard of five dhurs and two small rooms, half a kos behind the embankment.

The two goats were hers.

For fodder for those two goats, she walked along the embankment twice a day.

Except on the day appointed for cutting grass, she took nothing from the embankment but the path.

Yet she did not merely use the path.

At the end of Jeth, when thorny bushes bent over the footpath, Jamuna cut them back with her sickle and pushed them aside.

One night in Sawan, a stream of water had eaten a small hollow into the southern slope of the embankment.

When Jamuna went there with the goats in the morning, her foot sank into it.

At noon she brought earth in a broken basket from home, along with two handfuls of straw, and filled the hollow.

No one told her to.

No one stopped her.

Twice in Bhadon, dried water-hyacinth stalks and plastic became lodged on the footpath.

Jamuna cleared them away.

She did not call this work "service to the embankment."

She said, "If the path stays bad, the goats will fall and I will break my leg too."

That year the grass had grown thick.

An evening meeting was held on the veranda of the village school to fix the cutting day.

Jamuna did not go to the meeting.

She had not been invited.

The next morning she heard that the grass would be cut on Sunday.

Small bamboo stakes would be driven into the embankment slope to mark shares for the twelve households.

Jamuna remained silent for a while, stroking Dhouri's ribs.

There was only enough dry straw in her house for five more days.

Purchased fodder was expensive.

Kajri was close to giving birth, so she needed more green fodder.

On Sunday, shortly after sunrise, Jamuna reached the embankment carrying a sickle, two ropes and an old sack.

People were already there.

Gopinath was tying cord between two bamboo poles to show the divisions.

Ramlochan told his son, "From this stake to the shadow of that date-palm is ours."

Devaki Devi was testing the dampness of the grass with her hand.

Jamuna stood to one side.

Gopinath saw her.

"Have you come to graze the goats?"

Jamuna held up the sickle.

"Not to graze today. To cut."

Gopinath became slightly uncomfortable.

"All the shares have already been fixed."

"Where is my share?"

No one laughed.

Gopinath said, "Your name is not in the old division."

"My goats were not in the old division either."

Hearing this from a distance, Ramlochan said, "By custom, the grass is divided among households that own fields."

Jamuna asked, "Has the grass grown in the fields or on the embankment?"

Ramlochan paused before answering.

"The embankment belongs to the village, but landowners have looked after it for a long time."

Jamuna pointed towards the footpath on top of the embankment.

"Who clears this path?"

No one answered.

Jamuna continued, "Who filled the hollow on the southern slope?"

Gopinath said, "That was only a small hollow."

"It was small, so I filled it. Had it been large, I would not have filled it alone."

This time Devaki Devi spoke.

"The matter today is the grass. If we stop the cutting, the grass will dry."

Jamuna said, "I am not asking you to stop. I am asking for some share for my two goats."

Ramlochan said, "If we give you some today, tomorrow someone without any livestock will also come and say that they cleaned the path."

Jamuna replied, "Why would someone without livestock take grass?"

"They could sell it."

"Then make a rule—grass only if there are animals. But why should land be necessary?"

For a short while after that sentence, the sound of sickles on the embankment stopped.

Gopinath said, "Let us first complete today's cutting. We will discuss this again in the evening."

Jamuna did not put her sickle down.

"Will any grass be left by evening?"

Devaki Devi looked towards one side of her own share.

"I will give you one bundle from mine."

Jamuna shook her head immediately.

"I am not asking for charity."

Devaki Devi's face did not harden.

"Not charity. Manage with it this time."

"This time may be managed. What about the next?"

Gopinath gathered the cord in his hand.

"All right. Stop the cutting for half an hour."

Ramlochan said with displeasure, "The sun is rising."

"The grass will not run away in half an hour," Gopinath replied.

Everyone sat on the level top of the embankment.

Some sharpened their sickles. Some drank water.

Gopinath recited the old names.

One by one, twelve households.

Jamuna listened.

When the twelfth name was finished, she asked, "How many animals are there among these twelve?"

No one knew the exact number.

Devaki Devi said, "We have three cows and one heifer."

Ramlochan said, "We have two cows and two bullocks."

Gopinath's household had one buffalo.

One of the households named on the list had sold its cow the previous year.

Jamuna asked, "Then what happens to that household's grass?"

Ramlochan said, "Its share is old."

"No animal, but a share?"

"It is the custom."

Jamuna tightened Dhouri's rope a little.

"I have animals but no share. Is that also the custom?"

No one gave a harsh answer.

Gopinath said, "Perhaps every household had animals when the custom was made."

Jamuna smiled.

"Then the custom has grown old."

Ramlochan's son laughed. Ramlochan glared at him.

Gopinath drew two lines in the soil with the point of a sickle.

The first line—animals.

The second—work on the embankment.

"If we divide on these two things," he said, "how will we count?"

Jamuna said, "First see who actually has animals."

Devaki Devi added, "And how many."

Ramlochan said, "A cow or bullock cannot count the same as a goat."

Jamuna replied, "Not the same. But zero animals and two goats are not the same thing either."

Slowly the matter moved beyond that morning's cutting.

Gopinath proposed that the old division should not be cut completely that day. Only the upper half would be cut, leaving the lower slope. In the evening they would make a register.

Ramlochan objected.

"The lower grass will become old in two days."

Jamuna said, "It may grow old, but its roots will remain. If it rains tomorrow, the slope will remain protected too."

Ramlochan looked at her.

"Are you an embankment mason?"

"No. I walk here every day."

There was neither anger nor any attempt at humility in her answer.

In the end, they decided to cut only the upper part.

Jamuna did not cut any grass that day.

Devaki Devi again offered her one bundle.

Jamuna again refused.

"Dhouri and Kajri will eat leaves today. If I take a bundle without a rule, my argument will be weaker tomorrow."

The meeting was held again that evening on the school veranda.

This time Jamuna was invited.

For the first time the old register was put down on paper.

Twelve names.

Gopinath asked each household how many animals it had.

Everyone knew the exact number for three households. Four were estimates. People from two households did not attend the meeting. One household turned out to have no animals.

Beside her own name Jamuna had written: "Two goats."

Ramlochan said, "Animals alone will not settle this. The embankment protects the fields of landowners. If it breaks, our fields will flood first."

Jamuna said, "That is true. Which means landowners too have an interest in keeping the embankment safe."

Ramlochan frowned.

Jamuna finished the sentence.

"My interest is the path and the goats. Having an interest is not a bad thing. The question is who does the work."

Devaki Devi said, "In the last flood, Ramlochan brought two cartloads of earth."

Jamuna replied at once, "Write it."

Ramlochan was startled.

"What?"

"The two cartloads of earth. Whatever was given for embankment work, write it."

Gopinath made a third line in the register: "Maintenance/materials."

Then the question arose: how many past years of work should be counted?

Ramlochan said five years.

Devaki Devi said one.

Jamuna said, "The farther back we count memory, the longer the story will become. Start from this year."

Everyone found that reasonable.

But the next question was difficult.

What counted as work on the embankment?

Someone could cut two bushes and say, "I gave labour."

Someone might be cleaning the drain of their own field and throw earth up on the embankment.

Someone might do one large job in the rains, another small tasks every day.

Jamuna said, "The work should be identified beforehand."

Gopinath asked, "Who will identify it?"

"Everyone who takes grass should walk the embankment once and inspect it."

Devaki Devi said, "Not everyone will have time in the morning."

"Then two people at a time can inspect it by turns."

Ramlochan said, "This is becoming too much of a register."

Jamuna smiled.

"Remembering twelve grass shares was easy because my name was not among them."

A little laughter rose on the veranda.

Even Ramlochan could not suppress half a smile.

In the end they agreed on a seven-day trial.

The embankment would be inspected in four sections.

Where the footpath was blocked, bushes were thick, there was a small water-cut, or rubbish had gathered, the work would be written down.

The person doing the work would have their name recorded.
When the work was complete, someone else would inspect it.
The number of animals too would be counted afresh.
Seven days later the remaining grass on the lower slope would be cut.

On the second day Jamuna was assigned the footpath in the southern section.

The work there was not new.
She had already been cutting back those bushes.
But this time she did not go alone.
Devaki Devi went with her.

Together they cut two thorny bushes from near the ground, but did not pull out the roots.

Jamuna said, "If the roots remain, they will hold the earth."

Devaki Devi asked, "Who taught you that?"

"No one. Once I pulled out the roots. In the rains, the earth washed away from that spot."

Devaki Devi wrote in the register: "Southern footpath—two bushes cut, roots left."

Jamuna said, "Is there any need to write my name?"

Devaki Devi looked at her.

"That is what this whole quarrel is about."

On the third day Ramlochan and his son put earth on a broken footpath in the northern section.

He did not bring two baskets; he brought a full bullock cart of earth.

Jamuna saw it and said, "That is bigger work than my two bushes."

Ramlochan asked, "So will I get more grass too?"

"You also have more animals."

"Two benefits?"

"One for the animals, one for the work. But the account of work must not eat up all the grass."

That sentence raised another question.

If someone who contributed a great deal of maintenance labour took nearly all the grass, a household with few animals but much labour would benefit, while a household with many animals would lose fodder.

If they counted only animals, the people doing the work would become invisible again.

After looking at four days of entries, Gopinath said, "Keep the two things separate."

"How?" Devaki Devi asked.

"First—does the household have livestock or not? Without livestock, no grass. Second—how many animals? That sets the limit of the share. Third—maintenance work. That gives priority and the next turn."

Jamuna asked, "What does priority mean?"

"Where grass is scarce, the share of someone who has done the work is secured first."

Ramlochan said, "What about someone who was ill or away?"

Gopinath fell silent.

Jamuna said, "There should be another way to contribute—earth, bamboo, rope, or an adult from the household working in their place."

Devaki Devi added, "Money?"

Jamuna thought for a moment.

"Where materials have to be bought, money. But giving money alone will not clear the footpath."

By the evening of the seventh day, sixteen household names had appeared in the register.

Twelve old.

Four new.

Of the four new households, three—including Jamuna's—were landless livestock-owning households, and one had land but had never been among the old twelve.

One old household was removed—it had no animals.

Its elderly owner himself said, "I do not need grass. When I keep a cow again, add my name."

With that, one part of the dispute diminished on its own.

But another quarrel arose over the number of animals.

One household had five goats; another had one buffalo.

Someone said one buffalo equalled five goats.

Someone else said three.

Jamuna said, "I do not want weighing and arithmetic. Make three categories—one or two animals, three or four, five or more. Embankment grass is not the whole ration. It is support."

For the first time Ramlochan agreed immediately.

"Yes. Otherwise we will become trapped in the mathematics of animals' stomachs."

The following Sunday, when the grass on the lower slope was cut, the new division was used.

First, a minimum bundle was set aside for everyone.

Then additional shares were assigned according to livestock category.

The share of households that had completed maintenance work was marked first.

A household that had done no work was assigned a new maintenance turn within one week; its basic grass share was not withheld, but the additional share would come after the turn was completed.

Jamuna received three bundles.

She did not cut all of them at once.

For the first bundle she went to a strip on the southern slope where the grass was thick.

She moved the sickle a little above the soil.

Ramlochan called from a distance, "Cut lower down. The bundle will be bigger."

Jamuna replied, "If we bare the roots, next year the bundle will be smaller."

Ramlochan said nothing.

A little later he told his own son, "Above the soil."

By noon the colour of the embankment had changed.

It had not been stripped bare.

Between the cut strips, green roots and short grass had been left.

The footpath was clearly visible.

At the southern hollow, the old earth Jamuna had packed in had now hardened.

Gopinath planted a small bamboo stake there.

"We will look at this place again in the rains," he said.

Jamuna asked, "Will you write it in the register?"

"We will."

"Under whose name?"

Gopinath said, "This time we will write who did the work. The hollow belongs to no one."

Jamuna began tying her bundle.

Of her three bundles, the first two went home.

She did not cut the full third bundle.

Kajri's belly was heavy; too much green grass would not be good for her.

Jamuna left some grass standing in her marked share.

Devaki Devi asked, "Some of your share is still left."

"Let it remain."

"Someone will cut it."

"Write in the register—'not cut.'"

Devaki Devi laughed.

"Now you have begun to trust the register a great deal."

Jamuna said, "Earlier the register did not trust me."

The rule did not become permanent all at once after that day.

The following month one family complained that its young son lived in the city and the elderly father could not do the work.

The meeting decided that the household could provide materials or send an agreed labourer for one turn in its place; but the name and amount of the work had to be written beforehand.

Another household said it did not want grass but did use the embankment footpath.

Its name was not added to the grass register.

Gopinath said, "The grass register is not a register of every use of the embankment."

Jamuna agreed.

"Let each paper remain for the work it is meant to record."

The following year the rains were heavier.

One night in Sawan, a small cut appeared again in the southern section.

In the morning Jamuna did not begin filling it alone.

She informed the household whose maintenance turn was recorded in the register.

Ramlochan's son, Devaki Devi's nephew, and people from two households newly added to the register came.

Four people together filled the cut.

Jamuna pressed earth around the roots of the bushes.

At noon Gopinath wrote the date in the register.

Beside no one's name was the word "land."

There was one line: "Livestock."

Another: "Maintenance."

A third: "Grass share."

Beside Jamuna's name was written: "Two goats."

In the maintenance column were two dates.

The grass-share column was still blank.

The cutting day had not yet come.

Jamuna closed the register.

Dhourri tugged at the rope and moved towards the green slope of the embankment.

Jamuna stopped her.

"Not yet."

Kajri bleated from behind.

Holding both ropes in one hand, Jamuna took the footpath.

The path was clear.

The grass was still growing.

THE PARAPET OF THE DRY WELL

It was the third week of Jeth.

In the middle of the rear hamlet of Belwa village, the old well lay under the sun with its empty mouth open.

The bottom of the well was very deep, but from above the dark brown earth could be seen clearly.

For two or three months after the rains withdrew, water remained in this well.

By the end of winter the water would recede.

As summer advanced, people would say, "It has dried up again."

There were fourteen private hand pumps in the hamlet.

There were also two public hand pumps.

So the use of the old well had gradually declined.

Its parapet now bore more signs of people sitting on it than of water-pots being placed there.

In the evenings elderly people sat and talked.

Sometimes a goat's rope was tied to the parapet.

If children tried to peer inside while playing, someone from a household would scold them and pull them away.

The parapet was not safe.

Three bricks had fallen from the eastern side.

On the southern side the mortar had crumbled away, leaving a narrow groove.

In one place an upper brick moved when touched.

Rukmini Devi had already raised the matter of repairs twice at village gatherings.

Both times the answer had been almost the same.

"Why spend money where there is no water?"

Rukmini had no hand pump of her own.

She used the public hand pump.

For that reason people sometimes said of her concern, "It is useful to you, so of course you want it repaired."

Rukmini did not become angry at this.

She merely asked, "If the broken parapet falls on someone's head, whose useful thing will it be then?"

People would change the subject.

One morning the flow from Harinarayan's courtyard hand pump suddenly became thin.

The handle moved properly.

The sound too was as before.

But where five strokes of the handle had once given a full stream, now even ten or twelve strokes failed to fill half a bucket.

Harinarayan first tightened the pipe joint.
 There was no difference.
 At noon his son Suresh replaced the leather valve below.
 The flow remained thin.
 Suresh said, "The water may have gone lower."
 Harinarayan replied, "It was not like this even in last year's heat."
 That same evening Ramnaresh's hand pump also began drawing air.
 Ramnaresh's hand pump stood about two hundred feet north of
 Harinarayan's house.
 People from both households set out separately in search of a mechanic.
 The next day Bhola the mechanic came.
 He first opened Ramnaresh's hand pump.
 Before pulling out the pipe he worked the handle and listened to the
 sound.
 Then he went to Harinarayan's hand pump.
 The sound was different at the two places.
 Bhola said, "It would not be right to assume both have the same illness."
 Ramnaresh asked, "Has the water gone down or not?"
 Bhola shrugged.
 "You cannot describe the water under the whole earth by looking at one
 hand pump."
 Suresh asked, "Then how do we find out?"
 Bhola looked around.
 His eyes fell on the old well.
 "Is there anything in this well now?"
 Ramnaresh laughed.
 "Earth."
 Bhola went to the well.
 Seeing the broken parapet, he did not stand on the eastern side.
 He looked inside from the west.
 At one place on the bottom, dark wet earth was shining.
 Bhola said, "It is not completely dry."
 Rukmini was returning at that moment with a water-pot from the public
 hand pump.
 She heard him and stopped.
 "A little water shines there in the morning," she said.
 "By noon there is only wet earth again."
 Bhola asked, "Since when?"
 "I have not counted exactly. Since Jeth began, more or less."
 Bhola opened his tool bag.
 There was a thin rope inside.
 He tied a small iron screw to one end.
 Suresh asked, "What will you do with that?"
 "Measure."
 "The water?"
 "As far as the wetness reaches."

Ramnaresh asked, "Will that repair my hand pump?"

Bhola laughed.

"It will not repair the hand pump. It may give us one mark in place of a guess."

He lowered the rope.

The screw touched the bottom.

Bhola slowly drew the rope back up.

The lower few finger-widths were wet.

He laid the rope on the edge of the parapet and tied a knot.

"We will measure from this point," he said.

Rukmini pointed to the broken parapet.

"It is not safe to stand at this spot every day."

Bhola shook one of the parapet bricks by hand.

A brick actually shifted slightly.

"You are right."

Harinarayan said, "Take the measurements from the western side."

Bhola looked west.

"We can. But if we do not measure from the same exact point every day, the comparison will be weaker."

Suresh asked, "For how many days?"

"Seven days. Morning and evening."

Ramnaresh laughed.

"We will measure a dry well for seven days in order to repair a hand pump?"

Bhola said, "I will open the hand pump today too. The measuring is a separate matter."

He opened Ramnaresh's hand pump again.

At one of the lower joints he found a fault that was allowing air to enter.

Bhola replaced that joint.

By noon Ramnaresh's hand pump was again giving a full stream.

Ramnaresh was pleased.

"See? The water had not gone down."

Bhola answered at once, "That was the fault in your hand pump. Do not draw a conclusion about all the water underground from it."

No such fault was found in Harinarayan's pump.

Bhola measured the total length of the pipe.

"The water here may genuinely have gone lower, or the level may be dropping during the day because so much is being drawn."

Harinarayan asked, "Then add more pipe."

"I can. But I will not blindly add two or three hand-spans right now."

"Then?"

"Measure for seven days. The well in the morning, the well in the evening, and note the time when the flow from your hand pump becomes weak."

Ramnaresh laughed again.

"Now the dry well will read a register?"

Rukmini said, "I will write the register."

Bhola himself took the first morning measurement.
 At the southwest joint of the parapet he made a small charcoal mark.
 From that exact point the rope was lowered.
 Suresh measured the wet section of the rope and wrote down the figure.
 In the evening they measured again.
 There was a difference.
 In the morning the wet mark was higher.
 In the evening it was lower.
 Bhola said, "That is one day's measurement. It is not a conclusion."
 On the second day Bhola went to another village.
 Rukmini and Suresh took the measurements.
 Because of the broken parapet, Suresh had to keep his body slightly back while leaning over.
 Rukmini said, "Lower the rope, not your body."
 Suresh laughed, but moved his feet back.
 The difference between morning and evening on the second day was not the same as on the first.
 On the third day clouds gathered a little in the afternoon, but no rain fell.
 In the evening measurement, the wet section appeared slightly higher.
 Ramnaresh said, "Did the water rise after seeing the clouds?"
 Suresh said, "But it did not rain."
 Rukmini wrote in the register: "Clouds in afternoon; no rain."
 On the fourth day the flow from Harinarayan's hand pump was good in the morning.
 Weak at noon.
 A little better again in the evening.
 That same day the well measurements too showed a rise and fall between morning and evening.
 Bhola returned that evening.
 He read the register.
 "This well does not tell you the exact water level of your hand pump," he said plainly.
 "The locations are different. The depths are different."
 Harinarayan asked, "Then what use is this measurement?"
 Bhola lifted the rope.
 "If you measure the same place every day, you can see the pattern of rising and falling. It is not proof. It is an indication."
 Suresh said, "And what does the indication say?"
 "In the heat, the level is low. When water is drawn throughout the day, it falls farther. During the night it recovers somewhat."
 Ramnaresh looked towards his own hand pump.
 "My fault was separate."
 "Yes."
 Harinarayan asked, "Mine?"
 "It would be reasonable to lengthen your pipe a little. But not a great depth all at once."

The next day Bhola extended Harinarayan's pipe by two hand-spans.

The flow improved.

He said, "Watch it now. Next summer, measure again."

Ramnaresh slapped the well parapet with his hand.

"The hand pump is fixed. Do we stop measuring now?"

Suresh was closing the register.

Bhola said, "Stop if you want. But you have an old open place here that can tell you something about how the water level near this hamlet rises and falls."

Ramnaresh asked, "The dry well?"

"Yes. The dry well."

Rukmini smiled.

"With a broken parapet."

Bhola shook a parapet brick again.

"If you are going to keep measuring, repair the parapet. It would be foolish for someone to fall in while trying to take measurements."

This time when the question of repairs arose, the question itself had changed.

Earlier it had been: "Who uses the water in the well?"

Now it was: "Who will use the measurements?"

Ramnaresh said, "My hand pump is fixed. I do not need measurements every day."

Harinarayan said, "But the same situation may return next Jeth."

Mohan Sahu from the southern side said, "My hand pump is deep. Why should I care?"

Before Suresh could answer, Bhola spoke.

"These measurements will not tell you the depth at your house. They will only tell you the water level at one open point near the hamlet."

Mohan Sahu said, "Then it is only partly useful to me."

Rukmini said, "Then why should everyone's contribution be of exactly the same kind?"

A sheet of paper was opened at the meeting.

Bhola estimated what would be needed to repair the parapet.

Sixty-four bricks in all.

Some sand.

Cement.

One day of a mason's work.

Half a day's assisting labour from two people.

Ramnaresh said, "Not equal cash again."

Rukmini replied, "No one ever said equal cash."

She drew three lines on the paper.

Cash.

Bricks/materials.

Labour.

Harinarayan pledged twelve bricks.

Ramnaresh said, "I will clean the old bricks."

Mohan Sahu thought for a moment and said, "The sand can come on my cart."

Saroj said, "I will soak the bricks."

An elderly woman whose household had no hand pump wanted to contribute five rupees.

Rukmini asked, "Why should you give cash? Your son can work."

The old woman said, "He has gone away. I will give five rupees. What shame is there in that?"

Rukmini entered the money in the register.

Beside no one's contribution was written "less" or "more."

Bhola only added the totals.

They were still short of the sixty-four bricks.

Three days later, eighteen sound bricks were selected from the remains of Suresh's old cowshed.

The total was complete.

On the day of the work, half the mouth of the well was covered with bamboo planks.

Bhola opened the damaged eastern side.

The old mortar was hollow inside.

When two bricks were removed, three more loosened.

Ramnaresh said, "Sixty-four will be too few after all."

Bhola said, "We will open only what is damaged. We will not break good bricks just to make the colour even on top."

In the end seven additional bricks were required.

On his way back, Mohan Sahu stopped his cart by an old brick kiln.

He brought seven bricks.

By the time the parapet was rebuilt, evening had fallen.

At the southwest joint, from where the measurements were taken, Bhola set a small smooth flat stone into the parapet.

Suresh asked, "Decoration?"

"A measuring point."

Bhola cut a narrow groove into the centre of the stone.

"Lower the rope from this groove every time."

Ramnaresh said, "The well has acquired its own zero."

Bhola laughed.

"The zero is on the parapet. The water is below."

The new mortar was left untouched for three days.

On the fourth morning the old seven-day register was opened again.

Rukmini placed the rope in the groove.

The iron screw descended.

This time Suresh wrote the measurement.

Date.

Morning.

Distance to the wet mark.

Again in the evening.

Ramnaresh asked, "Every day?"

Suresh said, "Once a week for now. Twice a week when the heat grows."

Harinarayan asked, "Whose responsibility?"

Rukmini said, "Whoever has time."

Ramnaresh shook his head.

"That rule will end in three weeks."

Suresh agreed.

"So write a rota."

The names of four households were written in rotation.

Rukmini added her own name fifth.

No one wrote how deep anyone's hand pump was.

No one wrote that the well measurement gave permission to draw a certain amount of water.

Bhola had made it clear: the measurement was not an order. It was an indication.

The first rain of Asadh came.

Water became clearly visible at the bottom of the well.

The measured level rose sharply.

Ramnaresh said excitedly, "Look, two hand-spans higher!"

Rukmini wrote "rain" in the register.

"Write the cause too," she said.

In Sawan the well did not fill, but water remained at the bottom.

In Bhadon the level rose farther.

In Kartik it fell.

In Magh the bottom of the well could be seen again.

In Phagun the register remained almost closed.

No one felt a need to measure.

The following Jeth the flow from Harinarayan's hand pump again became somewhat thin.

This time he did not call Bhola first.

He took the register from the tin box in the shrine room.

He looked at the figures from the previous Jeth.

Suresh brought the rope.

The smooth groove on the parapet was still clear.

The rope went down.

The reading was slightly lower than in the same week of the previous year.

Harinarayan said, "Should we lengthen the pipe after seeing this?"

Suresh replied, "The mechanic will inspect it first. This is only an indication."

Harinarayan laughed.

"Bhola has left you his sentence."

Bhola came that evening.

This time he found a small fault in a joint of the hand pump.

The pipe was not lengthened.

The work was completed in half an hour.

Before leaving, Bhola stopped beside the well.

"Is the parapet holding up?"

Rukmini said, "So far."
Bhola looked through the measurement register.
Two or three weeks of lines were blank.
He said nothing.
He closed the register and handed it back.
After noon no one was by the well.
No water-pot.
No clothes.
No goat.
At dusk, returning from the field, Ramnaresh stopped there.
He saw the measuring rope lying on the parapet.
The iron screw at the end of the rope lay in the dust.
He picked up the screw.
Coiled the rope.
And hung it on the small peg made beside the groove in the parapet.
The bottom of the well was still almost dry.

STORY 119

THE LAST DAY OF HARVEST

It was an evening in Agahan.

In the eastern fields of Bakhri village, only the final strip of paddy remained.

The same team had been harvesting for eight days.

There were seven people in the group.

Phulo Devi, Jagarnath, Rukmini, Bhola, Sitaram, Chhotki, and Nandu.

The field belonged to Ramlochan Jha.

The wages had been settled clearly beforehand—cash by the day, a midday meal, and, when the harvesting was complete, one sack of paddy for the team.

That one sack had no name anywhere on paper.

Everyone called it “the last-day sack.”

No one remembered when the custom had begun.

Phulo Devi used to say, “I had heard of it even before I was married.”

Jagarnath said, “My father too used to harvest. It existed in his time as well.”

Ramlochan’s father used to say that after the last day’s work—sweeping the threshing floor, counting the tools, returning ropes and bamboo poles, stitching torn sacks, gathering the grain left behind—the sack was given.

But year after year the matter had shrunk into a shorter sentence.

“If you are there on the last day, you get a share.”

That was all.

On the evening of the ninth day of harvesting, Nandu untied the knot in his gamchha and took out a thin railway ticket.

“I have to catch the train tomorrow night.”

Phulo Devi, tying a bundle of paddy, asked, “But the harvest will finish the day after tomorrow.”

“That is the problem.”

“Then?”

Nandu folded the ticket again.

“I have to take Ma to the city. Her eye examination is scheduled for the morning after tomorrow. If I do not catch tomorrow night’s train, we will miss the appointment.”

Ramlochan was there.

He heard everything.

He remained silent for a while.

Then he said, “I will pay your full daily wages through tomorrow. But the last-day sack will be divided the day after tomorrow.”

Nandu raised his head.

“I will not get a share?”

Ramlochan said matter-of-factly, “That is the custom. Those who stay on the last day divide it.”

Nandu said nothing.

Rukmini put a bundle of paddy to one side.

"Is this sack for standing there on the last day, or for doing the last-day work?"

Ramlochan looked at her.

"Until now the two were the same thing."

"They are not the same now."

Phulo Devi laughed.

"Rukmini has caught the point."

Ramlochan smiled faintly but did not answer.

In the evening the team reached the threshing floor.

There lay eight sickles, three long ropes, two bamboo poles, one balance, eighteen empty sacks, and two needles with thread.

Some of the things belonged to Ramlochan.

Some had been borrowed from a neighbouring field.

Some had been brought by the labourers themselves.

Phulo Devi said, "Tomorrow, stop harvesting for five minutes in the middle of the day."

Bhola asked, "Why?"

"To look at the last-day sack."

Everyone laughed.

"The sack is still empty."

"That is why we will look at it."

The next day the sun was strong at noon.

They stopped harvesting and sat in the shade of the bund.

With the tip of a sickle Phulo Devi drew lines on the earth.

First line.

"Tools."

Second.

"Sacks."

Third.

"Ropes and bamboo."

Fourth.

"Threshing floor."

Fifth.

"Leftover grain."

Sixth.

"Final load."

Jagarnath said, "And the bullocks?"

Ramlochan said, "The bullocks are mine. I will take care of them."

Phulo Devi did not add a seventh line.

"Fine."

She looked at Nandu.

"Which of these jobs can you do today?"

Nandu answered at once, "I can count the tools."

Chhotki said, "Not just count them. The handles of two sickles are loose."

“I will bind them.”

Bhola said, “Three sacks are already torn.”

“I will stitch them.”

Sitaram said, “Two ropes in the eastern field belong to the neighbour. They will be returned after the final load is lifted.”

Nandu fell silent.

Rukmini said, “That cannot be done beforehand.”

Phulo Devi made two marks in front of the lines drawn on the soil.

“Before.”

“Last day.”

Ramlochan watched carefully.

Jagarnath asked, “Sweeping the threshing floor?”

“Last day.”

“Leftover grain?”

“Last day.”

“Torn sacks?”

Phulo Devi said, “Those torn already—beforehand. Those torn on the final day—on the final day.”

Everyone laughed again.

Ramlochan too.

But Nandu’s face was still serious.

“This evening I will do the tools and the sacks that are torn now.”

Sitaram said, “Then the day after tomorrow I will do your share of the threshing floor?”

Nandu asked, “In exchange?”

“You repair my sickle handle as well.”

“Agreed.”

Rukmini said, “Gathering leftover grain is not light work. Bending and bending breaks the back.”

Nandu asked, “Will someone take that job?”

Chhotki raised her hand.

“I will. Today you stitch my two sacks.”

Phulo Devi asked, “Is stitching sacks equal to gathering grain?”

Chhotki replied, “For me it is. His hand is quick with a needle; mine is quick with a broom.”

Ramlochan’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“There has never been so much accounting before.”

Phulo Devi said, “Perhaps no one had ever needed to catch a train one day early before.”

Ramlochan said, “People must have gone early before.”

“And their share?”

“Perhaps they did not get it.”

“Then there was an accounting. It simply was not written.”

Ramlochan fell silent.

The midday rest ended.

Harvesting began again.

That evening Nandu remained on the threshing floor until everyone else had nearly finished.

He examined all eight sickles one by one.

He tightened two handles with new strips of cloth.

The edge of one sickle was very blunt.

Jagarnath brought a stone.

Nandu kept sharpening it.

Chhotki separated the torn sacks.

There were four in all.

Nandu rubbed the thread with wax.

One by one, he stitched all four sacks.

Rukmini sat nearby winnowing paddy.

She asked, "Where are you catching the train from?"

"Laheria Sarai."

"What time will you leave from here?"

"As soon as the evening's work ends."

"In the dark?"

"Bhola will take me on his bicycle as far as the main road."

Bhola called from a distance, "I have already said I will."

Ramlochan brought an old notebook.

Half a page contained accounts for fertiliser.

There was empty space below.

Phulo Devi said, "Not there."

Ramlochan asked, "Why?"

"The closing work will disappear among the fertiliser accounts."

She gave him a separate thin sheet of paper.

At the top Phulo Devi wrote:

"CLOSING WORK."

Below it, six lines.

Tools.

Sacks.

Ropes and bamboo.

Threshing floor.

Leftover grain.

Final load.

Nandu marked the first two lines against his name.

Against Sitaram's name went the threshing floor.

Against Chhotki's name went the leftover grain.

Rukmini said, "Everyone will do the final load together."

Phulo Devi wrote: "All."

Jagarnath gave his name for the ropes and bamboo.

"I will return them."

Ramlochan asked, "Then does Nandu get a full share?"

Phulo Devi said, "How can we say yet? Let the work be completed."

Late in the evening the four stitched sacks were placed to one side.

Nandu counted the tools.

Eight sickles.
One sharpening stone.
Two needles.
One small bundle of thread.
Two weights for the balance.
He read the list aloud.
Ramlochan said, "Correct."
Nandu folded the paper and gave it to Phulo Devi.
"I will harvest until tomorrow evening."
"Yes."
"After that I will leave."
"Go."

The next day Nandu began work quickly from early morning.
No one asked him to harvest more than the others.
He cut his normal row.
By noon, half the remaining eastern strip was complete.
At dusk he shook off his sickle for the last time and put it down.
Ramlochan counted out his daily wages.
Nandu counted the money.
"It is complete."
Ramlochan said, "The last sack is tomorrow."
"Yes."

This time Nandu did not ask about his share.
Bhola brought the bicycle.
Nandu took his gamchha, small bag, and railway ticket and bowed to everyone.

Phulo Devi only said, "Get your mother's eyes examined."
Nandu left.

That night the wind blew.
One empty sack lying on the threshing floor flew into a thorny bush.
When it was taken out in the morning, there was a long tear through the middle.

Chhotki looked at the sack.
"Nandu did not stitch this one."
Rukmini laughed.
"Can the last day's work ever be completed beforehand?"
Chhotki picked up the needle.
"Some of it can. Some of it is born again."
She sat down to stitch the sack.
Phulo Devi took out the thin sheet.
Beside "Sacks—Nandu," she added Chhotki's name too.
Ramlochan asked, "Now?"
Phulo Devi replied, "Now let the work be completed."
The sun came out on the final day of harvesting.
By noon the remaining paddy in the eastern strip had been cut.
The last bundle was loaded onto the bullock cart.

This time no one announced that the work was finished.
 Everyone returned to the threshing floor.
 Jagarnath separated the two borrowed ropes and the bamboo poles.
 Sitaram picked up the broom.
 Chhotki joined him.
 Rukmini began gathering the small grains and panicles of paddy into a shallow basket.
 Bhola packed away the balance.
 Phulo Devi moved about with the list in her hand.
 Ramlochan had been sitting by the doorway.
 After a while he too got up and came over.
 "What should I do?"
 Jagarnath said, "Tie the mouths of the sacks from the final load."
 Ramlochan laughed.
 "The owner too in the closing work?"
 "The sacks are yours."
 Ramlochan took up the rope.
 Before evening the threshing floor was clean.
 The grains swept up from the floor made a small heap.
 Rukmini cleaned it by hand and removed the light rubbish.
 Chhotki had finished stitching the newly torn sack.
 Dust clung to Sitaram's palm.
 Jagarnath returned after taking back the ropes and bamboo poles.
 Phulo Devi spread the thin sheet on the ground.
 "Now the sack."
 Ramlochan brought a full sack from the house.
 "As per custom."
 Bhola asked, "Is the value of this sack for the work, or for the people?"
 Ramlochan said, "Until today I thought it was for the people."
 Phulo Devi asked, "And now?"
 Ramlochan looked at the list.
 "For the work."
 Chhotki said, "Then Nandu stitched sacks. But today I stitched one new sack."
 Jagarnath said, "Nandu did the tools before leaving."
 Sitaram said, "I took his share of the threshing-floor work, but he repaired my sickle."
 Rukmini said, "Chhotki took the leftover-grain work, but in exchange for Nandu stitching her sacks."
 Bhola laughed.
 "I rode the bicycle. Is that in the register?"
 Phulo Devi smiled.
 "No. That was a friend's work."
 Everyone laughed.
 Ramlochan said, "Then seven shares?"
 Phulo Devi shook her head.

“There are seven people in the team, but Nandu is not here today. Yet he is present in the work.”

“Then seven equal shares?”

Chhotki held up the needle.

“What about the newly torn sack?”

For a few moments there was silence.

If Nandu had been there, perhaps he would have said Chhotki should receive a little more.

But he was not there.

Reducing his share in his absence could once again return them to the old question.

Phulo Devi said, “Divide the sack into seven equal shares.”

Chhotki looked at her.

“And the new stitching?”

“We will let you and Nandu settle that when he comes back.”

Chhotki shook her head.

“No. That was the team’s work. The wind tore it, not Nandu.”

Rukmini said, “That is right.”

Ramlochan opened the sack.

The paddy was divided into seven small heaps.

At first none of the heaps was weighed.

They judged by eye.

Then Phulo Devi said, “Weigh them.”

Ramlochan laughed.

“So much accounting?”

“Today is the day for accounting.”

The balance was set up.

Two heaps turned out a little larger.

One was a little smaller.

They were made equal.

Nandu’s share was put into a clean sack.

As Chhotki stitched its mouth, she said, “This sack is not torn.”

Jagarnath asked, “When will Nandu return?”

Bhola said, “In two days.”

Ramlochan said, “It can stay with me.”

Phulo Devi replied immediately, “No.”

Ramlochan was surprised.

“Why?”

“His share is the team’s earning. Let it remain at one of the team’s houses.”

Chhotki said, “Leave it at my house.”

Nandu’s sack was lifted onto Chhotki’s head.

Evening was falling.

The threshing floor was so clean that the old cracks in the earth could be seen.

Before folding the thin sheet, Phulo Devi added a line at the bottom:

"Last day = closing work."

Ramlochan read it.

"That is not exactly equal. Some of the work can be done beforehand."

Phulo Devi opened the sheet again.

She struck out the line.

Then wrote:

"LAST-DAY SACK—AFTER CLOSING WORK IS COMPLETE."

Sitaram said, "And if someone leaves early?"

Phulo Devi wrote:

"If leaving early, arrange beforehand for one's share of the closing work."

Jagarnath added, "What about work that cannot be done in advance?"

Phulo Devi said, "Then someone must agree to take it in exchange."

Ramlochan asked, "And if no one agrees?"

"Then the share will be reduced. The reason will be the work left undone, not the face of the person."

Ramlochan took the paper in his hand.

"Next year I will read this out on the first day."

Rukmini said, "Read it on the first day, not the last."

Ramlochan smiled.

"Fine."

Two days later Nandu returned.

He did not go straight to Ramlochan's doorway.

First he went to Chhotki's house.

Chhotki was drying marua in the courtyard.

Nandu said, "Ma is all right."

Chhotki said, "Good."

"My sack?"

She brought it out from the room.

"Complete."

Nandu felt the sack with his hand.

"I was not there on the last day."

"Your work was."

"All of it?"

"Not all. The wind tore one new sack."

Nandu laughed.

"Who stitched it?"

"I did."

Nandu began opening his sack.

"Take a little paddy."

Chhotki stopped his hand.

"No."

"Why?"

"The wind tore it. It was not your job."

Nandu remained silent for a few moments.

Then he tied the sack again.

"Next year I will stay for the last day."

Chhotki said, "It will be good if you can."

She paused.

"If you cannot, say so on the first day."

Nandu lifted the sack onto his shoulder.

He walked home.

When harvesting began the following Agahan, Ramlochan brought out a new sheet on the very first day.

The wage rate.

Meal time.

Who owned which tools.

And at the end:

"LAST-DAY SACK—AFTER CLOSING WORK IS COMPLETE."

Below it were six lines.

Tools.

Sacks.

Ropes and bamboo.

Threshing floor.

Leftover grain.

Final load.

Phulo Devi read it and said, "One line is missing."

Ramlochan asked, "Which?"

"Substitution."

Ramlochan added a seventh line:

"Leaving early—substitute arranged."

The sheet was hung on a pillar of the threshing floor.

That day the first handful of paddy was cut.

The last day was still very far away.

STORY 120

THE NAME OF THE BUND

It was the first week of Margashirsha.

South of Baraha village, Jivachh Mahato's old three-bigha field had now been divided into three sections.

Two years before his death, Jivachh Mahato had divided the land among his three sons.

The eldest, Raghunath, received the upper strip.

The middle son, Devkant, received the middle strip.

The youngest, Naval, received the field lower down the slope.

On paper, the division was clear.

Separate plot numbers.

Separate measurements.

Separate boundary marks on all four sides.

But the slope of the land had not been divided.

And water did not read paper.

Across the old field, from east to west, ran a long bund.

Jivachh Mahato had called it "the middle bund."

After the division, that bund became chiefly the boundary between Raghunath and Devkant.

At one point in the bund there was an old irrigation opening.

When the upper field filled, water passed through that opening into Devkant's field.

From the rear corner of the middle field, the channel turned again and ran into Naval's field.

The three brothers had watched water travel by this route since childhood.

In their father's time, no one asked who owned the irrigation opening.

When one field had enough water, whoever was there lifted the wooden board a little.

The water flowed to the next field.

When the final field filled, the board was lowered again.

For the first two years after the division, the old arrangement continued.

In the third year, the boundary became more visible on the ground.

One day in Kartik, Raghunath had the amin's measurements checked again.

The red line on the cadastral map fell on the northern side of the bund.

Most of the soil of the bund counted within Raghunath's measurement.

Looking at the map, Devkant said, "The boundary still belongs to both of us."

Raghunath replied, "The boundary belongs to both, but most of the bund lies within my measurement."

Naval laughed.

"I did not get any bund at all. I only got the water."

That day the matter ended as a joke.

The following week Raghunath began strengthening the bund.

In the previous rains, the soil had collapsed in two places.

He cut earth from his side of the field and raised it onto the bund.

He pressed grass roots into the top.

In two days the bund stood a palm higher than before.

From a distance the boundary looked clear.

Seeing the bund, Devkant said, "Good. The soil will not wash away in the rains."

Raghunath was pleased.

But the old irrigation opening had risen with the bund.

As the earth was piled up, the lower sill of the opening had slowly filled.

The wooden board was still there, but its lower edge now almost touched the ground.

No one noticed at the time.

The first irrigation of the wheat was fixed for the third day of Margashirsha.

The three brothers had hired the same diesel pump.

The pump belonged to Ramsevak Yadav.

The rule was clear—the charge would be counted from the time the engine ran.

Raghunath had the pump started at eight in the morning.

Water spread well across the upper field.

At ten o'clock he lifted the old wooden board.

Where a thick stream used to descend, only a thin flow emerged.

Raghunath raised the board farther.

The stream increased a little, but not much.

Devkant stood below.

"The opening has filled up."

Raghunath brought a spade.

He scraped away some of the earth beneath the board.

The stream increased.

Devkant said, "Lower it farther."

Raghunath stopped.

"If I lower it that much, the water will not remain in my field."

"It used to be there before."

"The bund was weaker before."

From beside the engine Ramsevak shouted, "Decide quickly. The diesel is running."

By the time half of Devkant's field had filled, the clock had advanced far more than expected.

Naval waited at the lower channel.

It was afternoon before water reached his field.

That day all three paid more for the pump than expected.

Ramsevak said, "The pump ran at the same speed. The route became narrow."

Raghunath said, "The bund became stronger."

Naval replied, "The bund became stronger; the water became weaker."

He said it lightly, but Raghunath did not like it.

"If there is no bund, where is the boundary?"

Devkant said, "Keep the boundary. Keep the water-opening too."

"They are in the same earth."

"But they do different work."

At that sentence, all three fell silent.

The next day Devkant brought the cadastral map.

The three of them spread it on the grass beside the bund.

The red line was clear.

The irrigation opening was nowhere on the map.

Naval placed a finger on it.

"Where is the water written here?"

Raghunath said, "The map is of the land."

"Then on whose paper is the water?"

No one answered.

Ramsevak came at that moment to collect the money still owed to him.

Seeing the three brothers gathered around the map, he laughed.

"Looking for a way to reduce the pump bill?"

Devkant showed him the height of the opening.

Ramsevak bent down and touched the soil.

"When you raised the bund, the sill rose too."

Raghunath said, "If we lower the sill, the bund will become weak."

Ramsevak stood up.

"Why lower the whole bund? Make the opening separately at that spot."

Naval asked, "How low?"

Ramsevak laughed.

"I will not tell you that by looking. Run the water and see."

The three agreed that on the next irrigation day, before anything else, they would spend half an hour measuring the opening.

Devkant cut three thin bamboo stakes.

One was planted in the upper field.

One below the opening.

One at the start of the rear channel leading from the middle field towards Naval's land.

Charcoal lines were drawn on the stakes.

The first line marked the height at which Raghunath wanted water to remain in his field.

The second marked the point at which water crossed the opening.

The third marked the beginning of the channel leading from the middle field down towards Naval's field.

On the next irrigation day the pump was started.

Raghunath's field filled.

The board was raised.

The sill of the opening was still high.

Water moved slowly towards the second stake.

Ramsevak looked at the clock.

"Twenty-seven minutes."

Devkant said, "Earlier it reached there in ten or fifteen minutes."

Raghunath asked, "Do you remember that, or had you measured it?"

Devkant fell silent.

For the first time, all of them were looking at measurements instead of memory.

With the spade, Raghunath lowered the earth in the middle of the opening by two finger-widths.

The board was fitted again.

Water continued to stay in the upper field.

When the board was raised, the stream became thicker.

It reached the second stake in twelve minutes.

From below Naval called, "Now it is good."

Raghunath pressed the earth on both sides of the opening with his hands.

"If this remains bare soil, it will wear away again."

Devkant brought two old bricks.

The two bricks were placed inside the bund so that a sill of fixed width remained between them.

Earth was packed over the top, but the mouth between the bricks was left open.

The wooden board could slide in front of the bricks.

Naval brought an old iron ring from his house.

He tied it to the top of the board so it could be lifted without putting a hand into the water.

Raghunath looked at the ring and smiled.

"The bund is mostly within my measurement, the bricks are Devkant's, and the ring is Naval's."

Naval said, "The water belongs to all three."

This time no one laughed.

They drew new lines on the three stakes.

The fill-line for the upper field.

The sill-line of the water-opening.

The line at which the lower channel was to be opened from the middle field.

Ramsevak said, "Write the names of these lines down. Otherwise you will argue again two months from now."

Devkant cut a strip from an old fertiliser sack.

On one he wrote: "Upper-field fill."

On another: "Water-opening sill."

On the third: "Lower channel."

Naval asked, "And the name of the bund?"

Devkant did not answer.

The irrigation that day finished in less time than the previous one.

The pump charge too was lower.

Counting the money, Ramsevak said, "Diesel was saved today. The map did not change; only the height of the opening did."

Raghunath said, "The opening became lower, and the bund did not become weaker."

Pressing the earth down, Devkant said, "Because we understood the opening separately from the bund."

The work was settled, but the question of responsibility remained.

A week later Devkant was cutting grass on his side of the bund.

He saw that one brick of the water-opening had become slightly loose.

He called Raghunath.

Raghunath said, "The bund lies mostly within my measurement, but that brick came from your house."

Devkant replied, "The brick came from my house. The opening belongs to all three."

Naval arrived.

"Did you call me?"

Devkant said, "The iron ring is yours."

Naval laughed.

"Do not place the whole opening on my head because of the ring."

The three sat down again.

This time they did not open the map.

Raghunath said, "The ordinary part of the boundary bund will be looked after by the two of us—Devkant and me."

Devkant nodded.

"Because the boundary lies between our two fields."

Naval said, "The opening belongs to all three."

"Yes."

"And if someone damages the opening while doing his own work?"

Raghunath said, "He will repair it first."

Devkant added, "If the opening fills because of rain, all three of us will clear it."

Naval said, "And if an ordinary part of the bund collapses because of rain, you two."

Raghunath smiled.

"You did not receive a boundary."

Naval replied, "I received the water."

Devkant brought an old register from home.

On the first page they wrote the three plot numbers.

Below them were two separate headings.

"BOUNDARY BUND."

"IRRIGATION OPENING."

Beside the boundary-bund heading were the names of Raghunath and Devkant.

Beside the irrigation-opening heading were all three names.

A third line: "Soil/bricks deliberately altered—the person who changes them will restore them."

A fourth: "Opening filled by rain/silt—all three users will clear it."

A fifth: "Ordinary erosion of the boundary section—the two adjoining fields."

Naval read it and said, "This is becoming too much paperwork."

Devkant said, "It is five lines."

Raghunath said, "The quarrel used to last five days."

The register was closed.

In Magh came the second irrigation.

This time Raghunath wanted to raise earth again on the northern side of the bund.

Before beginning, he checked the sill-line of the water-opening.

The new soil was placed above that line, not inside the opening.

Devkant said nothing.

Neither did Naval.

At its turn, the water reached all three fields.

One evening in Phagun, a calf climbed onto the bund.

The stake in front of the opening became crooked.

Raghunath's grandson Chhotu reached out to straighten it.

Raghunath stopped him.

"Put it back after looking at the line."

Chhotu asked, "Which line is this?"

Raghunath showed him all three stakes.

Chhotu did not understand the cadastral plot numbers.

But he understood that the water would remain up to one line, and from another place it would go down.

In Chait the wheat ripened.

The colour of the three fields was not exactly the same.

In one corner of Raghunath's field the ears were thick.

Across a strip in Devkant's field they were somewhat thinner.

In Naval's lower field the soil was more clayey.

The water had followed one route, but the crop had not become one.

Devkant said, "A rule can give water. It cannot make the yield equal."

Naval replied, "If anyone makes a paper guaranteeing equal harvests, even God will refuse to sign it."

All three laughed.

After the harvest, the bund stood exposed.

One day the cadastral map came out again inside the house.

Raghunath needed a copy for a loan document.

He spread out the map and looked at it.

The red line was still in the same place.

Most of the bund still lay within his measured plot.

Devkant came in.

"Has the name of the bund changed?"

Raghunath said, "No."

Naval too came inside.

"And the name of the water-opening?"

Raghunath smiled.
“It is still not on the map.”
The three folded the map.
Before the first rains of Asadh, they fixed a day to clean the opening.
Raghunath checked the earth.
Devkant tapped the bricks.
Naval inspected the ring and the wooden board.
The work was finished in half an hour.
Naval cut a thin strip of bamboo.
With charcoal Devkant wrote on it:
“BOUNDARY—TWO FIELDS.”
Below it Raghunath added a second line:
“WATER—THREE FIELDS.”
The strip was planted in the earth of the bund.
No name in the cadastral register had changed.
The bund was still the same bund.
Only the opening in its middle now stated its own work separately from
the name of the land.

THE STYLUS OF THE DRY CANAL

That night, in the water-gauging house of a canal that had been recorded on paper as dry for six years, the stylus began to move.

The first time Harinath Jha heard the sound, he thought someone's fingernail was slowly scraping over paper. It was not loud. For twenty-five years he had heard old timber split, rats gnaw sacks, wind stir the edge of the tiled roof. But this sound was different.

Tick... srrr...

Tick... srrr...

He opened his eyes on the cot and stared at the ceiling for a few moments. Outside it was a Bhadon night, but there were no clouds. The day's heat had entered the body and remained there; even after nightfall, warmth seemed to rise from the earth like steam.

In the room ahead of the water-gauging house stood the old recording instrument—a brass-coloured cylinder, a clockwork frame, a fine stylus, and a drum around which paper was fixed. In earlier years Harinath had listened to it run so often that from a distance he could tell whether a tooth on the drum had caught or the stylus joint had gone dry.

But the machine was not supposed to be running now.

Six years earlier, this stretch of the Sonbarsa branch canal had been formally closed. Regular inflow from the main canal had stopped, the pipe to the gauging well had filled with silt, and the department had painted in red letters on the old building's door: "OUT OF USE."

That year the building was to be removed for widening of the new road. Assistant Engineer Aarti Mandal had told Harinath, "You know the old registers. If you can come for two days, the records may be saved. Otherwise, to the labourers, all of this is merely old paper."

Harinath had agreed.

All day he had sorted registers with Aarti—water levels, gate openings, rainfall, inspections, repairs, complaints. The years changed on the paper, handwriting changed, ink faded. On some pages he smiled on seeing his own younger hand. On others, the moment his eyes halted, he would quickly pick up another register.

The departmental guest room was far away, so that evening Aarti had said, "There is a cot in the back room here. I will stay at watchman Ramotar's house. I will come early in the morning."

Harinath was alone.

Tick... srrr...

He sat up.

The sound stopped.

He switched on the light of the mobile phone kept beside his pillow.

Nine twenty-seven.

Silence outside.
 Crickets sounded in the dry belly of the canal.
 Somewhere far away, a dog barked twice.
 Harinath lay down again.
 Five minutes later—
 Tick... srrr...
 Tick...
 This time he left the cot.
 The door to the front room had been fastened from inside.
 His palm was damp when he lifted the latch.
 He chose to blame the heat for the sweat.
 He did not wish to blame his mind.
 Inside the room, the smell of dust, old oil and paper mingled together.
 He turned the mobile-phone light straight ahead.
 Cupboards.
 A wooden table.
 A 2003 water-distribution map hanging crooked on the wall.
 And in the corner, the recording instrument.
 The stylus rested on the paper.
 Harinath stood still.
 The drum was turning very slowly.
 “This...”
 That was all that came from his mouth.
 He went closer.
 The clockwork section of the instrument had been dead for years.
 Without winding, the drum should not have moved.
 He touched its rim.
 The motion was so slight that it could scarcely be detected without touching it, but it was moving.
 The point of the stylus was drawing a fine black line.
 At first the line ran straight.
 Then suddenly it rose—
 one,
 two,
 three tiny divisions.
 That was how the line rose when the water level increased.
 Harinath’s hand froze on the machine.
 Outside, the canal was dry.
 He quickly picked up the lantern from the corner, lit the wick, and went around to the gauging well behind the building.
 The small iron cover had been jammed for years.
 During the day the labourers had partly loosened it.
 Harinath set an iron hook into it and lifted.
 Darkness below.
 He lowered the lantern.
 At first there was nothing.

Then the yellow light caught a gleam on the wall of the well.
Water.

Not very far down.

About a cubit and a half above the bottom.

Something tightened inside Harinath's chest.

"The canal is dry... then?"

He drew the lantern back.

At that instant an old night flashed before his eyes—a line drawn on paper, a red pencil, the hands of a clock, and a voice:

"Jha ji, write zero. What remains on paper will be accepted as the truth."

He dropped the cover shut.

When he returned to the recorder, the stylus was descending again.

Within five or seven minutes the rise had formed, and then the line became level.

Harinath did not tear the paper.

Nor did he try to stop the machine.

He simply stood in the middle of the room and watched the fresh line, as though the paper were watching him.

Aarti arrived at five fifty-five in the morning with two glasses of tea in her hands.

Ramotar followed carrying a bag.

"Did the night pass well?" Aarti asked.

Harinath did not take the tea.

"The machine ran."

Aarti did not understand.

"Which machine?"

"The recorder."

Ramotar laughed.

"That old thing? It used to rattle even when I was a child."

Harinath looked at him.

"There was water in the well last night."

Ramotar stopped laughing at once.

Aarti put the tea on the table and went to the machine.

She examined the line drawn during the night.

The time marks corresponded.

The rise ran from nine thirty-two to nine forty-nine.

"Did you change the paper?"

"No."

"Wind the clock?"

"No."

Aarti looked behind the drum.

"The main clock is still dead."

"Yet the paper moved."

She bent and touched a small auxiliary wheel.

"In this old model, if the grip is loose, movement of the float arm can shift the paper slightly. But where did the water come from?"

All three went to the gauging well.

In daylight very little water remained—only a damp circular mark on the wall.

Aarti tied a stone to a cord and measured the depth.

“The main pipe is supposed to be blocked with silt,” she said. “Yesterday the labourers dug into the canal bed. There was no flow.”

Harinath remained silent.

Aarti looked again at the wall.

“Water rose here at night. That means the well is still connected to something somewhere.”

Ramotar wiped his head with his gamchha.

“Madam, in the old days there were so many small pipes. Not all of them are on the maps.”

Harinath looked sharply at him.

“Which pipe are you talking about?”

Ramotar was startled.

“I was only saying.”

Aarti looked at both of them but said nothing.

Sorting the registers began again.

Harinath’s hands moved.

His mind did not.

1999.

2000.

2001.

2002.

2003.

He reached the bundle marked 2004 and stopped.

A red ribbon lay across the top.

There was less dust on the ribbon—perhaps Aarti had looked at it the day before.

He left that bundle and picked up 2005.

“Not 2004?” Aarti asked from the other end of the table.

Harinath’s hand stopped.

“Let us finish this first.”

“All right.”

Aarti bent again over her list.

Harinath watched the top of her head.

Her hair was tied tightly.

There was a fine line of sweat on her forehead.

A blue pen in her hand.

She asked questions constantly, but never as accusations.

That made Harinath more uneasy.

An accusation can be answered in advance.

A simple question enters inside.

At noon Ramotar brought rice and dal.

While eating, Aarti asked, "Which villages lay at the tail end of this branch?"

Harinath tried to answer naturally.

"Belouna, Majhigama, Chhotki Parsahi, and at the very end Haripur Tola."

"Were there more complaints from the last settlement about water distribution?"

Harinath's spoon struck the plate.

"In a canal, the last places always receive less water."

"There are many complaints in 2004."

"It was a drought year."

"Then why are the night-flow pages for this branch missing?"

Harinath did not look into Aarti's eyes.

"These are old records. Some things go missing."

Aarti merely said, "Yes," and continued eating.

That was all.

But inside Harinath, the old voice rose again:

"Write zero."

It had been Jeth of 2004.

Water had been scarce for three months.

There were quarrels at the main gate.

A little water reached Belouna, but the last villages were dry.

At that time Jagdish Singh, chairman of the branch committee, had two large fish ponds.

Water was released at night, but the register showed zero.

The order was never written.

Bansil Paswan, a daily-wage canal worker, opened the gate.

The order came from above.

One night Bansil refused.

He said, "Even the drinking pond in the last settlement is drying. Water must go there first."

The next day a complaint was made that Bansil opened the gate on his own authority and disturbed the water distribution.

An inquiry came.

Two records were placed in front of Harinath.

One was the original chart, showing that between one and two in the night the water had risen.

The other was a clean sheet.

"Write zero."

Harinath had written it.

Bansil's wages were stopped for three months.

Later he left the job.

For years Harinath had called the matter "a small mistake" inside his own mind.

Jagdish Singh had been powerful.

There had been a job to save.

There were two children at home.
 Bansilal had not died.
 He had not gone to prison.
 He had only left his work.
 People left jobs all the time.

But whenever the line on the night chart rose upward, the words “small mistake” became very small indeed.

After noon Aarti said they should inspect the dry bed of the main canal.
 The three of them went down.
 Grass reached their knees.

An old brick measuring mark was half broken.

If water had passed anywhere during the night, there should have been signs on the earth.

Harinath bent and looked.

Dry cracks ran across the canal bed.

“There was no water here,” Aarti said.

“Then in the well?” Ramotar asked.

Aarti looked towards old bushes on the left side of the canal.

“The well may no longer be connected to the main bed. There may be another connection.”

Harinath’s eyes went there too.

Behind the bushes was a low wall of old brick.

Beyond that wall had once been a “service outlet”—a small pipe built to release water during maintenance.

It had appeared on the first version of the government map and disappeared from later ones.

In 2001 the pipe had been shown as “permanently closed.”

Harinath did not move forward.

Aarti did.

She pushed aside the bushes.

Between the bricks, a round iron head protruded.

Rust covered its sides, but the middle edge shone with fresh abrasion.

“What is this?”

Ramotar said, “Looks like an old spindle.”

Harinath’s throat dried.

“It was the turning spindle for the service outlet.”

Aarti knelt and touched the metal head.

“This has been turned recently.”

Harinath said quickly, “Rust can fall away by itself.”

Aarti withdrew her hand.

“It can.”

The answer was so simple that Harinath heard the haste in his own voice.

Under the bushes the earth was dry, but a small white plastic fibre was caught there.

Ramotar picked it up.

“A strand from a rope.”

Aarti wrapped it in paper and put it into her pocket.

“We will watch tonight.”

“What?” Harinath asked.

“Whether the line rises again.”

Harinath wanted to say, I will not stay.

What came out was, “I will stay.”

In the evening Ramotar went home.

This time Aarti had a second cot placed in the back room.

“If the machine runs, we will see it immediately.”

Harinath asked, “Should we inform anyone?”

“Not yet. First let us understand.”

At eight o’clock the wind rose.

The grass in the dry canal bent in one direction and then straightened again.

Lightning flashed far away, but there was no thunder.

Aarti continued reading the registers.

Harinath sat outside on the veranda.

Smoke from the mosquito fire rose slowly.

His thoughts remained fixed on Bansilal.

Bansilal had a daughter—Hemlata.

At the time she must have been twelve or thirteen.

Once she had come to the water-gauging house with her father.

She had sat on a wooden board solving arithmetic problems.

Harinath had looked at her notebook and said, “You will turn out sharper than your father.”

Bansilal had laughed.

“My work is opening and closing gates. Her work will be reading paper.”

Harinath had not remembered that scene for many years.

At nine twenty Aarti came outside.

“Yesterday the line began around this time.”

They went silently into the front room.

They did not light the lantern.

They switched off the mobile-phone lights too.

Only enough grey night entered through the crack in the door to make out the shape of the instrument.

Nine thirty-one.

Nothing.

Nine thirty-seven.

Tick.

Harinath’s body tightened.

Srrr...

Aarti touched his arm and signalled for silence.

The recorder arm rose very slowly.

The drum jerked once.

Then slid.

Aarti whispered, “The well.”

They went outside.
 They lifted the cover of the gauging well.
 Water was rising below.
 Not still.

There was a slight tremor along the wall.

"The main canal is dry," Aarti said.

"The service outlet."

They went towards the bushes without a lantern.

There was no moon, but their eyes had adjusted to the dark.

No one was beside the old spindle.

Aarti knelt and placed her hand on it.

"This is vibrating."

From behind the brick wall to the left of the spindle came a faint growling sound.

Water.

Harinath's mouth went dry.

"The pipe is open."

"Opened by whom?"

They did not find the answer there.

The two followed the direction of the pipe, cutting through the bushes as they went.

The old service outlet ran parallel to the main canal for about fifty hand-spans before turning underground.

Harinath remembered the route, though he did not want to admit even to himself that he remembered it.

Ahead lay a narrow earthen path.

There was a fresh footprint on it.

Not a bare foot.

A slipper.

Beside it lay a small piece of plastic rope.

Aarti stopped.

"Like that fibre."

Harinath said, "Ramotar?"

"Why?"

"He knows all the old routes."

Aarti said nothing.

The path led towards Haripur Tola.

After half a kos they reached the edge of a low pond.

The pond was almost dry, but in one corner a thin stream of water was falling.

The sound was so slight that it could not be heard until they came close.

Three figures stood beside the stream.

Two women and a boy.

One woman held a thin iron rod.

The boy was using a bucket to clear soil from a small channel.

Aarti said softly, "Someone is there."

Harinath stopped.

The woman turned.

The light from an oil lamp in her hand fell across her face.

Around fifty.

Some hair at the forehead white.

Eyes direct.

Harinath recognised her.

“Hemlata?”

Her expression did not change.

“Harinath Babu?”

Two decades stood between them.

Aarti stepped forward.

“Where are you bringing this water from?”

Hemlata put the iron rod down.

“From the old outlet.”

“A key?”

“Not a key. A rod that fits into the spindle.”

“Who taught you?”

Hemlata looked once at Harinath, then at the pond.

“Babu.”

In Harinath’s ears the word Babu sounded like a very old voice.

Aarti’s voice was not harsh.

“You open it at night?”

“Forty minutes every third night. That is enough to keep this corner of the pond filled.”

“Permission?”

Hemlata gave a faint laugh, without joy.

“We applied twice for permission. The pump is broken. The tanker came for two weeks and then stopped. This pond is not for drinking—cows and calves, washermen, fire if one breaks out, household work when the tube wells fail. Drinking water we bring from far away. But if the pond dries completely, half the village’s work stops.”

Aarti looked at the boy.

“Who is he?”

“My nephew. The spindle is too heavy for me alone.”

Harinath suddenly asked, “Your father... did he tell you about this outlet?”

Hemlata looked at him.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“After he left the job.”

Something sank inside Harinath’s chest.

“What did he say?”

Hemlata did not hurry to answer.

She looked at the stream entering the pond.

“Many things. Must all of them be said here?”

Aarti remained silent.

The night air carried the smell of pond mud.
 Harinath understood.
 Hemlata knew.
 At least something.
 "That night..." Harinath tried to begin.
 Hemlata lifted a hand and stopped him.
 "It is time to shut the water now."
 The boy blocked the small channel with mud.
 Hemlata picked up the rod and moved ahead.
 "Madam, if you wish, you can watch how we close it."
 They all turned back towards the bushes.
 At the spindle of the service outlet Hemlata fitted the rod into place.
 The boy wound the rope around it.
 Together they turned it slowly.
 The metal groaned inside.
 The growl of the water diminished.
 At last it stopped.
 Aarti looked at the time.
 Ten seventeen.
 When they returned to the water-gauging house, the stylus of the recorder was descending.
 A small hill had formed on the night chart.
 Aarti lit a lamp.
 "This gauging well is connected to the service outlet, not to the main canal."
 Harinath stood holding the table.
 Hemlata remained at the doorway.
 "Shall I go?"
 Aarti said, "Come tomorrow morning. We need to make some written arrangement. Do not open it again for now."
 Hemlata nodded.
 She did not look at Harinath.
 She left.
 Harinath did not mention Ramotar's name again.
 Aarti opened the drum to remove the instrument paper.
 The catch was rusted.
 She applied a little pressure.
 With a "tak," the brass strip at the back of the drum came loose.
 From inside, along with dust, a narrow folded strip of paper fell onto the table.
 Harinath's breath stopped.
 Aarti bent and picked it up.
 The paper was old.
 Its edges yellow.
 Folded four times.
 In pencil on the outside was written:

“Night, 17.06.04.”

Harinath sat down in the chair.

Aarti slowly unfolded it.

It was the original chart from the recorder.

The time ran from midnight to four in the morning.

At one ten, the line rose.

At two five, it descended.

In one corner was Harinath’s own small signature:

“H. Jha.”

A long red-pencil mark ran through the middle of the paper, but the line itself had not been erased.

Aarti brought the official page for 17 June 2004 from another bundle.

It read:

“00:00-04:00: ZERO FLOW.”

Below it was Harinath’s full signature.

The two papers lay side by side on the table.

Aarti asked nothing.

Inside Harinath, every argument of twenty years rose one by one.

There had been an order.

There had been a job.

There had been a family.

What could I alone have done?

Bansilal remained alive.

The inquiry had already been decided.

Every argument rose and then fell again without sound.

“I hid this,” he said at last.

Aarti looked up.

“I could not tear it. I pushed it behind the strip. I thought perhaps someday... I do not know what I thought.”

Aarti’s voice remained level.

“Why was the official page changed?”

Harinath answered.

First in short sentences.

Then the whole story.

Jagdish Singh.

The fish ponds.

The night water.

Bansilal’s refusal.

The inquiry.

The stopped wages.

His own signature.

While speaking, he did not once say, “I was not at fault.”

Perhaps it was the first time.

Aarti listened.

She interrupted only to ask dates, names and times.

By the time the account was finished, the night outside had grown very deep.

“Does Hemlata know all this?” Aarti asked.

Harinath lowered his head.

“I do not know.”

“Shall we ask tomorrow?”

After a long silence Harinath said, “If she wishes to say.”

Aarti placed the original chart between clean sheets of paper and put it in a separate folder.

The official page too.

Then she kept the new night chart separately, not on top of either one.

“Three papers,” she said only.

“Three times.”

Harinath spent the rest of the night sitting on the cot.

Sleep did not come.

But the recorder did not run again.

Hemlata arrived in the morning.

This time she came alone.

She carried an old cloth bag.

Aarti had set up a table on the veranda.

Ramotar was making tea on the stove.

Aarti spoke directly.

“Releasing water at night without permission is against the rules. But this settlement needs a temporary water arrangement. I will send an inspection note today. Until then, I can request seven days of short controlled test-flow time. Until approval arrives, do not open it tonight.”

Hemlata nodded.

“All right.”

She looked at Harinath.

“Were you awake last night?”

Harinath said, “Yes.”

Hemlata took a thin notebook from the bag.

Its cover had swollen from dampness.

“This belonged to Babu. He wrote in it after leaving the job.”

Harinath’s hand moved forward, then stopped.

“May I see it?”

“Let Madam see it. It is departmental work.”

Aarti took the notebook.

Inside were dates, gate times, whose order, for how long—short notes.

Harinath’s name appeared on some pages too.

The colour drained from his face.

Looking at him, Hemlata said, “Babu did not write your name with abuse. He merely wrote what happened.”

To Harinath that sentence felt harsher than a scolding.

“He...”

His voice caught.

“What did he say about me?”

Hemlata looked past the veranda towards the dry canal.

“Sometimes he used to say, ‘The hands of the people who move the pen on paper may be tied, but the pen itself is not tied.’ I did not understand the meaning then.”

Aarti closed the notebook.

Harinath said nothing for a long time.

Then he took his spectacles from his bag, wiped them, and said, “I will write a statement.”

Ramotar stopped in the act of setting down the tea glasses.

Aarti simply pushed a sheet of paper towards Harinath.

Harinath began to write.

Slowly.

Date.

Post.

Incident.

He wrote that the order had been oral, but he did not hide behind that fact.

“My original chart showed flow, yet I recorded zero flow.”

His hand trembled as he wrote that sentence.

He stopped.

Then completed it.

Hemlata drank tea in the meantime.

She neither forgave Harinath nor insulted him.

When the statement was complete, Aarti read it.

“Will you sign this?”

Harinath did.

Outside, the sun was rising.

Light climbed over the cracked earth of the dry canal.

Until noon Aarti remained on the departmental telephone.

By evening permission arrived for a temporary test flow:

forty-five minutes each day for the next seven days,

in the presence of an employee,

with the water level recorded.

Permission was also given to clear the small channel to the pond.

When Hemlata heard the news, she asked only one thing.

“Will the water be released in daytime?”

“Yes. At four in the evening.”

“Then the children will not have to wake at night.”

She left.

At four that evening, the service outlet was opened officially for the first time.

Ramotar turned the spindle.

Aarti wrote down the time.

Harinath stood in the water-gauging house.

First a faint gleam appeared at the bottom of the well.

Then the water rose.

The recorder arm trembled.

The old stylus touched the paper.

Tick... srrr...

An old wave of fear from the night rose through Harinath's body.

But this time he did not move away.

The line climbed slowly.

Clean.

Thin.

Without cutting or alteration.

Aarti came into the room and asked, "Is the instrument working properly?"

Looking at the paper, Harinath said, "It is working now."

He clasped his hands behind his back.

He did not touch the stylus.

STORY 122

THREE SCRATCHES ON THE PADLOCK

The storeroom padlock bore three bright scratches, yet on the dust inside there was not a single new footprint.

Madhavi Mishra counted the scratches first.

Then she felt embarrassed at having counted them.

One.

Two.

Three.

The brass was old, but the scratches were new.

At three places, the yellow metal shone in pale lines.

The soft morning light passed through the iron grille of the veranda and fell on the lock, making those three marks stand apart from the remaining darkness.

“They were not there last night,” said the watchwoman, Phulo Devi.

Madhavi looked at her.

“Are you certain?”

“I made my round at nine last night. There was dust on the lock. I saw these three lines this morning.”

The old north wing of the Vidyapati Girls’ Hostel had been closed for two years.

The roof was damp.

Lime plaster had fallen from the walls.

The wooden window frames had swollen.

After the new building was completed, the students had moved to the southern side.

Only old cots, broken tables, annual registers, curtains, bedding, and boxes of belongings left behind by former students remained in this wing.

The first phase of building repairs was to begin in three days.

Before that, Madhavi herself had ordered the storeroom to be cleared.

And since the previous night, the final line of that order had been lodged in her mind:

“Unclaimed personal papers are to be destroyed securely.”

When she dictated that sentence, it had seemed proper.

Reading someone else’s private letters would be wrong.

Then what purpose was served by keeping anonymous letters eighteen or twenty years old?

No former student or family had made a verified claim.

The building was to be broken open.

Dampness was eating the paper.

Still, since the second letter from Vasudha Chaudhary—niece of the retired attendant Chandrakala Devi—had arrived the previous evening, Madhavi’s mind had not been settled.

Vasudha had written:

“Please do not destroy the bundle of old private letters kept in the north-wing storeroom. Do not open the envelopes. I can come within two days.”

Madhavi had replied:

“The building is unsafe. No verified bundle of that description appears in the inventory. The administration will not open private papers; they will be disposed of according to procedure.”

That reply was not outside the rules.

But Chandrakala Devi had died three weeks earlier, and people at the hostel spoke her name with respect.

Forty years of service.

Distributing letters.

Sitting through the night beside sick students.

Giving rice from her own store when money had not arrived from someone's home.

There were many such stories.

Madhavi did not wish to make a decision on the basis of sentimental stories.

Now there were three scratches on the padlock.

She took out the key.

The lock opened.

Phulo Devi stepped back one pace on the veranda.

“What if someone is inside?”

Madhavi said nothing.

She opened the door slowly.

The smell of dust came out.

The first light entered through the doorway in a slant.

A fine, even layer of dust covered the floor.

Directly in front of the entrance there was a strip about half a cubit wide where the dust had been disturbed.

Madhavi and two employees had walked there the day before, so old footprints remained on that strip.

Beyond it, the dust was untouched.

“Look,” Phulo whispered. “If anyone had gone inside, there would be marks.”

Madhavi first looked right, then left.

Iron racks.

Bundles of mattresses above them.

A brass water-pot in one corner.

Three old trunks in the middle.

On the rear wall, a high window with thick neem branches outside.

Nothing seemed to have moved.

Yet Madhavi felt as though the room had said something during the night and had now fallen silent.

“How far did we go yesterday?” she asked.

Standing on the threshold, Phulo pointed.

“Only along this clean strip. No one went farther in. You said we would check the inventory first.”

Madhavi looked at the window.

The inner latch was closed.

There were cobwebs on the grille.

She closed the door again and locked it.

The three scratches remained.

“Do not let anyone into this wing today,” she told Phulo.

“Police?”

“Not yet.”

Phulo studied her face.

“Someone has tampered with the lock.”

“They have tampered with it, not opened it.”

“Then inside?”

Madhavi did not answer.

The day advanced.

In the office of the new building, between student fees, meal registers, and telephone calls from guardians, Madhavi kept looking towards the north wing.

She grew irritated with herself.

Why give so much meaning to three scratches?

Perhaps an old key had been pushed into the lock.

Perhaps some labourer had played a joke.

Perhaps Phulo had not looked properly at the dust the night before.

But there was the dust inside.

And Vasudha’s letter.

At noon Ramdulari, an old hostel attendant, arrived.

She was over seventy.

Her back was bent, but her eyes were sharp.

Madhavi asked her about Chandrakala Devi.

“Didi valued letters above almost everything,” Ramdulari said.

“The girls would dance when letters came from home. If someone received none, Didi would make her write a postcard in her own hand.”

“Was there a bundle of letters in the storeroom?”

Ramdulari’s eyes narrowed.

“Who told you?”

“A former student has written.”

“Not just a former student. Vasudha? She is Chandrakala Didi’s sister’s daughter.”

Madhavi remained silent.

Ramdulari spoke slowly.

“Once there was a flood. The post office remained closed for two weeks. The hostel was evacuated. Some letters that arrived could not be distributed. Afterwards many girls changed homes, some left college, some were married. Didi never opened the envelopes. She wrote the names and kept them separately.”

"How many letters?"

"I do not know. Twenty or twenty-five. Perhaps more."

"Why were they not on the inventory?"

Ramdulari laughed, but there was no amusement in it.

"Would private letters be entered into an official inventory? Didi used to say—the thing belongs to the person whose name is on it, not to the administration."

"Then why did Chandrakala Devi not take them with her?"

"It would not have been right to take other people's letters home either. She left them in the care of the hostel."

Madhavi turned the pen lying on the table between her fingers.

"How does Vasudha know about the bundle?"

"In Didi's last month, she told her. I heard it. She said, 'If the building is broken, save the letters. Do not read them.'"

"What did she mean by 'save them'?"

Ramdulari looked directly at her.

"In the same sense in which you understand it."

Madhavi stopped turning the pen.

"Did you tell Vasudha to go inside?"

"Me? No. I am too old even to climb to a window."

"Window?"

Ramdulari immediately looked away.

Something shivered inside Madhavi.

"Why did you say window?"

"It is an old building. There are windows."

"The storeroom window?"

Ramdulari did not answer.

Madhavi stood up.

This time she went alone to the north wing.

The three scratches on the lock were unchanged.

She opened it and entered, but did not step off the clean strip onto the dust.

She carried a long bamboo pole.

With its far end she touched the window latch.

The latch was closed.

But the rust was not the same colour everywhere.

Along the left edge, a patch half a finger wide was smooth.

As if something had rubbed against it.

A dry neem leaf was caught on the window frame.

Neem leaves could enter—the grille had holes in two places.

By itself, that meant nothing.

Madhavi lowered the bamboo.

The leaf moved.

Under it, on the wooden sill, two or three thick fibres had caught.

Dull red.

Fibres from a floor mat.

There was no mat on the storeroom floor.
Madhavi sat on the threshold.
Her eyes remained on the window.
It was about seven feet above the ground.
Outside, a thick neem branch touched the wall at almost the same height.
Inside, directly beneath the window, an iron rack was fixed into the wall.
Bundles of mattresses lay on its upper level, and the trunks stood beyond.
If someone climbed the neem tree outside, opened the window and put one foot inside, the rack could provide the first foothold.

The upper part of the room could be reached without touching the floor at all.

But the window was latched from inside.
How could someone close it again from outside?
Madhavi studied the latch.
It was not a complete closed ring.
There was an opening in the loop.
A thin hook could be pushed through from outside to lift it.
On leaving, the same hook could pull it down again.
“Would anyone actually do that?” she asked herself.

The room gave no answer.

Among the mattresses on the top of the rack, the edge of one bundle seemed pressed in.

Beside it, the dust was broken—not on the floor, but on the iron of the rack.

Madhavi felt like moving the mattress aside with the bamboo.

Then she stopped.

If the letters truly were there, why should she herself search them out and open them?

Her order had been to destroy private papers, not to read them.

She went outside, locked the door, and told Phulo:

“Tonight you will not remain inside the north wing.”

Phulo was surprised.

“Why?”

“Sit at the south turn of the veranda. If you hear anything, tell me. Do not try to catch anyone yourself.”

“So someone is coming?”

“Perhaps.”

“A ghost?”

Madhavi laughed for the first time that day.

“What need would a ghost have to look for a key to an old lock?”

Phulo did not laugh.

At half past ten that night the hostel grew quiet.

Study lights still burned in some windows on the two floors of the southern building.

The north wing was dark.

Neem leaves rustled from time to time in the light wind.

Madhavi turned off the light in her office, silenced her mobile phone, and left the chair.

Phulo was at the southern turn.

“Anything?”

“Nothing yet.”

Madhavi did not go inside the veranda.

She went towards the flower garden outside the building.

The neem trunk stood in the darkness like a thick black pillar.

One branch rose close against the wall.

Dry leaves lay below.

She stood in the shadow of the distant water tank.

At eleven seven, a faint sound came—
metal against metal.

Once.

Then silence.

Madhavi’s body tightened.

Somewhere above, neem leaves moved.

The wind was not that strong.

A shadow separated itself from the trunk.

Slowly it climbed.

The person wore a dark shawl tied tightly over a salwar.

A thin cloth bag hung from one shoulder.

In one hand was a short rope or strap.

Madhavi did not move forward immediately.

The shadow reached the branch beside the window.

The person leaned towards the wall.

Something passed through the window grille.

From inside came a very faint click.

The latch must have lifted.

One shutter moved outward by half a finger.

The person pulled it slowly.

Then she took a folded strip of cloth from her bag and placed it on the sill.

A mat.

Madhavi now understood where the fibres had come from.

The person placed one foot on the window sill and the other on the neem branch.

Then she leaned her body inside.

She did not jump fully into the room.

With one hand she caught the rack and placed one foot on its upper iron bar.

Half her body remained inside, half outside.

There was no need to touch the floor.

Madhavi stood in the shadow and watched everything.

A few moments later came a faint rustling of paper from inside.

There was nothing frightening in the sound.

Even so, the pressure inside Madhavi did not lessen.

She remembered again the line from her own order:

“Destroyed securely.”

At the window, the person suddenly stopped.

Perhaps the bundle was heavy.

Perhaps it had caught.

Madhavi stepped forward.

“Vasudha ji.”

The shadow turned sharply and nearly slipped.

“Do not make a noise,” Madhavi said quietly.

“Come down. I am standing here.”

There was no answer for a few moments.

Then a woman’s voice came.

“You?”

“Yes.”

Vasudha came out through the window, picked up the strip of mat and put it into her bag, lowered the latch with the hook, and then climbed slowly down the neem tree.

When she reached the ground, her face was wet with sweat.

She was around forty, with both weariness and determination in her eyes.

Madhavi asked, “Did you try to open the padlock on the first night?”

Vasudha did not answer.

“Three scratches.”

She took an old key from her bag.

Its teeth were worn.

“Chandrakala Mausi’s key. I thought the old lock would still be there. I tried to insert it three times. It would not go in. Then I understood that the lock had been changed.”

“After that, the window.”

“I lived in this building when I was a student. The latch on this window could be opened from outside with a hook. During the rains, if water came inside, the attendants used to close it from outside with a bamboo pole. I remembered.”

“No footprints in the dust because of the rack.”

Vasudha nodded faintly.

“Have you come to steal the letters?”

“Would I write two letters under my own name if I meant to steal them?”

“Then why at night?”

For the first time Vasudha’s voice sharpened.

“Did you allow me to enter in daytime?”

Madhavi was silent.

“I wrote—do not open the envelopes, only save the bundle. You replied that it was not in the inventory and would therefore be disposed of. If I had come today in daylight, the watchman would not have let me inside. The labourers will break this wall the day after tomorrow. What was I supposed to do?”

“I could call the police.”

“Call them.”

The answer was so flat that half Madhavi’s anger disappeared.

“Entering the building at night is an offence.”

“Yes.”

“The window might have broken.”

“I did not break it.”

“You might have fallen.”

“That is true.”

Madhavi kept looking at her.

Vasudha held the key tightly in her fist.

“What is in the bundle?”

“Letters.”

“Whose?”

“Many people’s.”

“Yours?”

After a moment Vasudha said, “There may be one with my name on it too. I am not certain.”

“So the real purpose is your own letter?”

“If I wanted only my own letter, I would have searched Mausi’s list for my name and made a claim in daylight. What is in the bundle belongs to all of them. I do not want to read any of it.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Read the names on the envelopes. If living contacts can be found, tell them that a sealed letter exists. Those who cannot be found—their letters will be kept in a secure box. None will be opened.”

Madhavi’s voice remained hard.

“You cannot make that decision alone.”

“And you can make the decision to destroy them alone?”

The words stood between them like air.

Phulo was approaching from the distant turn, but Madhavi lifted a hand and stopped her.

Vasudha looked down.

“Mausi used to say—the contents of a letter belong to no one else, but the existence of the letter is the right of the person whose name is written on it. I do not know where that is written in any rule. Perhaps nowhere.”

Irritation rose in Madhavi again.

“A hostel cannot be run on emotion.”

“Nor should it be run merely for convenience.”

This time Vasudha’s voice was quiet.

Madhavi remembered her own reply from the previous day.

“The building is unsafe... disposal according to procedure...”

She had been in a great hurry while writing it.

Food-supply bills.

A quarrel between two students.

Notice of an inspection.

Vasudha’s letter had come in the middle of all that.

Madhavi had treated it as an obstruction and sent off a reply.

The rule was not wrong.

But perhaps the question remained outside the rule.

"You will leave now," Madhavi said.

Vasudha looked at her.

"You will not take the bundle."

"But the day after tomorrow—"

"Repairs will not begin with this room. I am changing the order."

"Will you trust me?"

"Not yet. But you will not climb the neem tree at night again."

For the first time some relief appeared on Vasudha's face.

"Very well."

"Give me the old key."

She handed it over without argument.

Madhavi called Phulo.

"Vasudha ji is leaving. Open the gate for her."

Phulo stood with many questions on her face, but asked none.

The next morning Madhavi sent a short notice to the hostel management committee:

Private sealed letters may be present in the north-wing storeroom.

The destruction order is suspended.

Only the names on the outside of envelopes will be recorded.

No letter will be opened.

The box will be removed in the presence of two former-student representatives, one woman teacher, and a hostel employee.

The committee secretary asked on the telephone, "Why so much trouble? They are old papers."

Madhavi replied, "Old, but not nameless."

"What if something objectionable comes out?"

"We will not open them."

"Then how will you know?"

"Only what is written on the envelope."

"Who will search for people after twenty years?"

"As far as possible, we will. We will decide separately about the rest."

The secretary let out a long breath.

"Do it on your own responsibility."

Madhavi said, "Yes."

After she put down the phone, the small word felt heavy, but not unbearable.

At noon the storeroom was opened.

This time four people were present.

Before stepping beyond the clean strip in the dust, they laid down thick sheets of paper so that new footprints would not merge with the old dust.

When they reached the iron rack, they lowered the mattress bundles.

Behind them stood a square tin box.

On its lid, in faded ink, were the words:

“PERSONAL MAIL—DO NOT OPEN.”

A shiver ran once through Madhavi’s body.

A small paper in Chandrakala Devi’s hand was pasted to the box.

“The names are on the envelopes. Do not read what is inside.”

That was all.

No final wish.

No dramatic sentence.

No special direction concerning anyone’s name.

Vasudha stood at a distance.

Madhavi did not call her closer.

First, a committee member recorded the external condition of the box.

Then the lid was opened.

Inside were twenty-seven envelopes.

Some yellow.

Some blue.

On some, the postage stamp had partly peeled away.

Two postcards were pressed between pieces of cloth.

Not one envelope had been opened.

They began reading out the names.

“Renu Kumari.”

“Nilima Thakur.”

“Sushma Jha.”

“Farida Khatoon.”

“Vasudha Chaudhary.”

For a moment the room fell silent.

Vasudha raised her eyes, then immediately lowered them.

Madhavi did not take the envelope in her own hand.

She told the teacher writing the list:

“Number five. Sealed. Recipient present, but it will be handed over only after formal identification.”

Vasudha said nothing.

The next name was read.

By evening a list of twenty-seven names had been made.

Addresses for eight were found through the old students’ association.

The families of five could be traced in the hostel records.

The remaining fourteen would have to be searched for.

Another question arose:

What if someone could not be found?

Madhavi did not decide immediately.

“They will remain in a sealed box for six months. During that time, efforts will be made to locate claimants. After that, the privacy committee will decide.”

Vasudha waited outside on the veranda.

After everyone else had left, Madhavi called her in.

“Identification?”

Vasudha provided it.

Her name matched the old hostel register.

Madhavi placed envelope number five on the table.

"The seal is intact. Sign for receipt."

Vasudha's hand trembled as she held the pen.

"Whose letter is it?" Madhavi asked without meaning to.

Vasudha turned the envelope over but did not break the seal.

The sender's name was on the back.

The moment she read it, her face changed, though she did not cry.

"My father's," she said.

"He was in hospital at the time. I had thought he no longer had the strength to write a letter."

The words escaped Madhavi's mouth on their own.

"Open it."

Vasudha put the envelope into her bag.

"At home."

There was so much privacy in that small answer that Madhavi understood immediately:

she had no entry into the world inside that letter.

Vasudha stood up.

At the doorway she stopped.

"About last night..."

Madhavi said, "The register says: 'attempted unauthorised entry.' No name."

"Why?"

"Because the incident happened. It must be recorded. But I do not think what you were trying to save needs to be turned into a public spectacle of punishment."

Vasudha was silent for a few moments.

"I chose the wrong method."

"Yes."

"You made your decision too quickly."

This time too Madhavi said, "Yes."

No apology passed between them.

Perhaps none was necessary.

Three days later repairs began in the north wing.

The old brass padlock on the storeroom was replaced with a new iron one.

Holding the old padlock in her hand, Phulo asked Madhavi, "Shall I throw this away?"

Madhavi took it.

She wiped off the dust.

The three scratches still shone on the brass, though not as brightly as before.

"No," she said.

"Put it in the office drawer."

Phulo laughed.

"A keepsake?"

Madhavi looked towards the window.
Neem leaves moved in the wind.
New labourers were dismantling the old rack.
Dust rose and floated in the light.
“The lock was secure,” Madhavi said quietly.
“It only took me too long to understand the question of the rights inside
it.”
Perhaps Phulo did not hear the whole sentence.
She walked away carrying the padlock.
Madhavi did not stop her.

STORY 123

THE THIRTEENTH MAILBAG

Even after twelve bags, the veranda of the Sarisab Sub-Post Office was not empty that night.

Shivnath Chaudhary saw the shadow first.

There was no lantern; a yellow electric bulb was burning.

Its light reached halfway across the veranda, after which the darkness thickened.

At the edge of that light lay a grimy cloth mailbag.

There had been nothing there during the day.

Shivnath trusted his count more than his eyes.

Twelve.

Twelve old government mailbags that were to be sent to the district store before the office closed.

Vibha Jha had entered the numbers of all of them in the register.

Out of old habit, Shivnath had counted them again and again—three blue, five khaki, four of heavy cloth.

Twelve.

Now there was a thirteenth bag on the veranda.

He did not go towards it.

First he stood holding the doorframe.

It had rained for half an hour in the evening, but now it had stopped.

Drops were still falling from the eaves.

A smell rose from the damp lime on the wall—a mixture of old paper, wet sacking, and iron rust.

Even from that distance Shivnath recognised the smell of the bag.

The smell of an old post office.

For someone who had served thirty years, certain smells were like dates.

Shivnath's right hand began trembling on its own.

He wiped it on the edge of his dhoti.

"Vibha!"

His voice came out louder than he expected.

The sound of papers shifting in the records room stopped.

"What happened?"

Vibha Jha came out.

She had a grey file in her hand and her spectacles had slipped low on her nose.

She was the final officer-in-charge of the Sarisab Sub-Post Office.

In two days the office would move into the new building, and this old building would be returned to the panchayat.

She looked towards the veranda.

"Where did this come from?"

Shivnath did not answer.

Vibha placed the file on the bench and went towards the bag.

"Don't touch it!"

Shivnath's voice was again unnaturally sharp.

Vibha turned and looked at him.

"Why?"

Shivnath's mouth had gone dry.

"First... first look."

"I am looking."

"Without touching it."

Vibha stepped back two paces.

She was the sort of person who followed rules, but not one who frightened easily.

The bag was made of old, heavy canvas.

Its colour was difficult to determine.

It might once have been khaki; now mud, dampness and time had turned it grey-brown.

A thick jute cord closed its mouth.

A small disc of darkened red sealing wax clung to the knot.

The name-tag had half decayed.

Even so, one letter could still be seen:

"S..."

Something sank inside Shivnath.

"Make the light brighter," he said.

"This is as bright as it gets."

"Use your mobile light."

Vibha took out her phone and switched on the torch.

As the light fell across the canvas, a faded blue number appeared in one corner.

13.

Shivnath stepped back.

Vibha now watched him.

"Do you recognise that number?"

"Bag number thirteen."

"That much is visible."

"No. This... this looks like that same bag."

Vibha was silent.

"Which one?"

Before answering, Shivnath looked outside the veranda.

Rainwater had collected in the low part of the courtyard.

The iron gate was closed.

There was no one on the road outside.

"The 1998 money-order case."

Vibha's eyebrows tightened.

"You said nothing about that during the day."

"There was no reason to."

"Is there one now?"

Shivnath looked at the bag.

"If this is the same one, there is."

Vibha asked quietly, "The bag disappeared?"

"Yes."

"For how many days?"

A bitter smile touched Shivnath's lips.

"Twenty-eight years."

Again the drops from the roof could be heard on the veranda.

Vibha went inside and rang the bell on the desk.

The office had closed for the day, but two labourers doing repair work were still putting away their tools in the rear courtyard.

Nasim Ansari came in with a wet gamchha over his head.

"What happened, Didi?"

Vibha showed him the bag.

Nasim fell silent for a moment.

"I did not put that there."

"Did you see it during the day?"

"No."

"Did anything fall onto the veranda?"

"I was opening the frame in the back wall from five o'clock onward. Nothing was here."

Shivnath immediately asked, "Which frame?"

"The old ventilator above. The one that was bricked shut. The wood had rotted. The panchayat told us to remove it."

Shivnath's eyes rose to the right-hand wall of the veranda.

High up, about a cubit and a half below the roof, there was a newly opened rectangular dark space.

He had not noticed it during the day.

The bricks had been removed from outside; on the inner side an old wooden strip was still jammed in place.

"Did anything come out of there?"

Nasim said, "Lime, brick dust, a rat's nest. That is all."

Vibha asked, "When did you stop work?"

"Half past five."

"And this bag was not here at seven," Shivnath said.

Vibha looked at him.

"You came through here at seven?"

"After counting the twelve bags."

"Then this arrived after that."

A faint fear appeared on Nasim's face.

"Could it have been inside the wall?"

Shivnath said at once, "Don't say that."

Nasim was startled.

Vibha said calmly, "No guessing yet. First we write what we can see."

She brought a blank sheet from the desk.

She wrote the time: 8:42 p.m.

Place: main veranda.

Object: old canvas postal bag, number 13, found sealed.

Persons present: Vibha Jha, Shivnath Chaudhary, Nasim Ansari.

"Can we touch it now?" Nasim asked.

"No," Vibha said.

"First the external condition."

Shivnath liked the way she was proceeding, and because he liked it, his fear grew.

Twenty-eight years earlier, they had not proceeded like this.

That night everyone had been in a hurry.

Floodwater was cutting across the road.

The district bus had left half an hour earlier.

The next mail vehicle would come in the morning.

It was the final day for sending up the money-order accounts.

Thirteen bags stood in a row on the veranda.

Narayan Mahato, the mail carrier at the time, had watched the rain and said, "Babu, let me sign the register first. When the vehicle comes, I will lift all of them. Otherwise there will be more delay."

Shivnath had permitted it.

That was his first mistake.

The vehicle came late.

Darkness.

Rain.

Confusion.

No one counted again.

The next day the district office said twelve bags had arrived.

The thirteenth had not.

That thirteenth bag contained proof slips for money-order payments, the day's accounts, and a special list.

Because the list never arrived, the accounts for eighteen payments became stuck.

Five recipients said they had received their money.

There was no thumbprint proof for three.

Two households had become vacant.

The statements concerning the rest were confused.

Suspicion fell on Narayan.

His signature was in the register: received thirteen bags.

Shivnath's signature was there too: thirteen dispatched.

In truth, neither man had counted thirteen during the physical handover.

That was Shivnath's second mistake.

During the inquiry Shivnath wrote:

"All bags were handed over according to procedure."

That sentence was not true.

At the time he had called it "protecting the reputation of the office."

Now he understood that he had turned his fear into a sentence.

Narayan remained suspended for six months.

Later theft was not directly proved, but a remark remained in his service record.

His promotion was stopped.

Shivnath had never again looked properly into Narayan's eyes.

"The colour has gone from your face," Vibha said.

Shivnath returned to the present.

"It is nothing."

"It is something."

"Open the bag."

"We will inform the officer."

"By tomorrow?"

"Now."

Vibha began making a phone call.

Shivnath sat down, holding one of the veranda pillars.

She spoke to an assistant in the district superintendent's office.

Instructions came:

Do not open the bag.

Photograph its external condition.

Secure the object exactly where it was found.

An officer would come in the morning.

Vibha said, "I will lock the door. You should go home."

Shivnath did not smile.

"Not tonight."

"Why?"

"This bag has disappeared once already."

Vibha looked at him for a long moment.

"Do you think it will disappear again?"

"I no longer trust what I think."

Vibha said nothing.

Nasim brought two chairs from the rear room.

The veranda gate was locked from inside.

The bag remained where it was.

A square boundary was drawn around it with lime so that if anyone touched it, the marks would change.

The night deepened.

The electricity went out once.

It returned five minutes later.

During those five minutes, Shivnath's ears filled with the sound of an old monsoon.

"Did you know Narayan Mahato?" Vibha asked in the darkness.

"He worked with me."

"Where is he now?"

"He is alive."

"Where?"

"Near Biraul, with his son."

"Have you ever spoken to him since?"

Shivnath did not answer.

The electricity returned.

Vibha understood the answer.

A little after ten, a drop of water slid from beneath the bag.

Nasim said, "The veranda is dry. The bag is wet from inside."

Without crossing the boundary, Vibha bent to look.

There were three old dampness lines on the lower part of the bag, one above another.

The new water merely shone at the edge.

"That is not the mark of one night," Nasim said.

"Such stains form when something gets wet and dries again and again through many rains."

Shivnath looked up towards the ventilator.

Rains inside the wall.

Twenty-eight years of rains.

Vibha asked, "When was this ventilator closed?"

Shivnath's memory opened slowly.

"1998."

"Which month?"

"After Sawan. The roof leaked. Rain entered through the ventilator."

"Before or after the money-order case?"

Shivnath kept looking at the bag.

"That same week."

Nasim released a breath like a low whistle.

"Then it could be..."

Shivnath did not stop him.

Vibha said, "It could be. But that is not proof yet."

At half past ten Nasim went home.

Vibha and Shivnath remained in the office.

The bag was silent.

The thirteenth bag did nothing.

All the work of frightening Shivnath was being done by his memory.

At eleven Vibha brought out an old register.

"You will not stop me?"

"Why?"

"To read the old incident."

Shivnath said, "Read it."

Vibha opened the thick register marked 1998.

The paper was yellow, its edges brittle.

Across the pages were blue impressions from carbon copies.

She found the date in the dispatch register.

Thirteen bags.

Beside all thirteen, the same signature of Narayan Mahato.

Vibha stopped her finger there.

"One signature entered at the same time against all thirteen?"

"He signed beforehand."

Vibha looked up.

It was the first time Shivnath had said the sentence clearly.

“Why?”

“The rain. The vehicle was late. He said he would complete the paperwork first.”

“And you agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Did you say that in the inquiry?”

“No.”

Vibha’s finger remained still on the paper.

“Then his signature in the register was not proof that the bags had actually been handed over to him.”

“No.”

“And your dispatch certification?”

Shivnath’s throat went dry.

“I wrote that later.”

“After counting?”

“No.”

Vibha did not close the register.

“Will you say tomorrow, in front of the officer, what you are telling me now?”

The first answer inside Shivnath was no.

It did not come out.

After a few moments he said, “Yes.”

At midnight the rain began again.

Wind entered through the open ventilator above.

The remaining wooden strip rattled.

Vibha stood up and shone a light there.

“Look at the thickness of the wall.”

The old wall was about one and a half bricks thick.

When the ventilator had been closed, its outer part had been filled with brick, but the old wooden lattice had been left on the inside.

Between the two was a hollow space two palm-widths deep.

Nasim had removed the outer bricks that evening.

He had not removed the inner wood.

“Something could have remained trapped there,” Vibha said.

Shivnath replied, “The bag is this thick.”

“The space may have widened as the wood rotted.”

At that moment a small piece of lime fell from above.

Both of them started.

The bag did not move.

Vibha gave a faint laugh.

“The ghost has extraordinary patience.”

Shivnath could not laugh.

“Not a ghost,” he said.

“Some sentences remain inside a person.”

Vibha asked, "Which sentence?"

Shivnath looked at the register.

"All bags were handed over according to procedure."

Vibha said nothing.

At a quarter to six in the morning, two officers arrived from the district office—Assistant Superintendent Anil Kumar and Records Inspector Malati Mandal.

Nasim had also returned.

The lime boundary was undisturbed.

The first step was an external examination.

Malati put on gloves and examined the cord.

"The knot is of an old style."

Anil asked, "On what basis?"

"After two turns, the loop is folded inward. Such knots were common on service mailbags in that period. Today plastic security seals are used."

Shivnath stepped forward.

"Harishchandra Babu used to tie knots this way."

"Who?"

"The accounts assistant at that time."

"Are you certain?"

"He used to turn the final loop to the left. We teased him because his knots took so long to open."

Malati said, "Recognition of an individual's habit is useful, but not proof by itself."

Shivnath nodded.

This time the strictness of procedure did not feel excessive to him.

Half the red wax seal had broken away.

Malati examined it closely.

"There is something here."

On an inner fold of the cloth was a faint impression of circular lettering—reversed.

Anil asked, "What is that?"

Malati said, "A pressure transfer from the seal. When the wax was soft, the cloth must have folded against it, printing the letters in reverse."

Vibha said, "Meaning the seal has been pressed against this cloth for a long time?"

"At least it does not look like a recent imitation. A laboratory examination will be needed for certainty."

Shivnath's breathing opened a little, then tightened again.

If the bag was genuine, the past was genuine too.

Permission to open the bag was taken by telephone.

Every step was recorded.

The cord was cut just below the knot so the knot itself would remain preserved.

The moment the mouth opened, the smell grew stronger.

Malati stepped back.

“Old paper.”

For Shivnath, that smell opened the room from that monsoon in a single instant.

Inside were two thin bundles.

One wrapped in oiled paper.

The other in cotton cloth.

Between them lay decaying sheets.

On the first bundle was written:

“MONEY-ORDER PAYMENT PROOFS—SARISAB SUB-OFFICE.”

The date was the same.

Shivnath gripped a chair.

Anil looked at him but said nothing.

The papers were opened one by one.

Thumbprints.

Signatures.

Amounts.

Village names.

Some letters had bled.

Some remained clear.

Of the eighteen payment-proof slips, sixteen were found.

Two were missing.

Vibha asked, “Then the old dispute will not be completely resolved.”

Malati said, “Paper rarely gives the whole truth.”

The second bundle contained the day’s accounts, a cash-adjustment slip, and a short private note.

One corner of the paper was folded in red pencil.

Anil read:

“Two payments made in advance. Original order to arrive by next mail. Oral permission of Postmaster.”

Below was Harishchandra’s signature.

Everyone looked at Shivnath.

He did not blink.

“Did you give that permission?” Anil asked.

Shivnath said slowly, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“One household needed money for the treatment of a woman who had just given birth. There had been a death in another household. Notice of the order had come by telephone; the written order was to arrive in the next mail. I broke the rule and had the payments made.”

“Was this said during the inquiry?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Shivnath laughed.

This time the laugh was tired.

"Because if the bag was never found, my oral permission would remain without proof. I thought that if I concealed one irregularity, the office would be saved."

Vibha asked quietly, "And Narayan?"

Shivnath's gaze fell to the floor.

"I thought his signature was there, so the inquiry would go in that direction. Later the truth would come out."

"Did it?"

"No."

Morning light was spreading outside the veranda.

The rain had stopped.

Malati placed the papers separately into transparent sleeves.

Nasim kept looking up at the ventilator.

"May I look inside?"

Anil gave permission.

A ladder was brought.

Nasim climbed up and shone a light inside.

"There are cloth fibres here."

Malati climbed up too.

On the floor of the hollow space were tiny jute fibres, flakes of red wax, and crumbling fragments of paper.

Three dark water lines marked the inner brick.

"Rain kept entering," Nasim said.

"There was a gap in the outer brick joint."

"How did the bag get from there onto the veranda?" Vibha asked.

Nasim climbed down and opened his tool bag.

He took out a long iron rod.

"Yesterday, while removing the outer frame, I pushed this rod in quite far. Something was jammed behind the wood. I thought it was a piece of brick. I pushed it. Something soft moved inward. Later I left it."

"Then the dampness increased at night, the wood sagged, and the bag fell," Vibha said.

Nasim nodded.

"It is possible. Look—the wooden strip slopes downward towards the veranda from inside."

Malati said, "Write the sequence: repair rod, old support loosened, rain dampness, night-time fall. That is the mechanical explanation; we will examine it further."

Shivnath kept looking upward.

The thirteenth bag had not returned as a ghost.

A labourer's iron rod had pushed it out of twenty-eight years of darkness.

Such a small cause.

Such a large consequence.

Anil opened the register again.

"Shivnath Babu, your statement will be taken separately."

"Take it."

“The old disciplinary matter may be reopened.”

“Let it reopen.”

“You are retired, but the archival record will need correction.”

“Correct it.”

Vibha looked at him.

The fear inside Shivnath had not ended.

But its direction had changed.

Earlier he had feared the truth coming out.

Now he feared that someone might once again write only half of it for the convenience of the paperwork.

He said, “Write one thing fully.”

Anil stopped his pen.

“Narayan Mahato signed the register before lifting the bags. With my permission. There was no physical handover verified by counting thirteen.”

Anil wrote.

“And?”

“I concealed that fact during the inquiry.”

The pen moved.

“And?”

Shivnath was silent for a little while.

“The two money orders were paid in advance on my oral instruction.”

The pen moved again.

“And?”

Shivnath looked at the register.

“That is not all. One more thing.”

Everyone waited.

“The sentence I wrote increased the suspicion against Narayan. I wrote it without having personally counted the bags.”

Anil wrote.

For the first time Shivnath felt that the scratch of a pen on paper was not frightening.

By noon the old building had been sealed.

The bag and the papers were sent to the district office.

Repair work was stopped so the hollow wall could be examined.

Vibha said, “Go home. You have been awake all night.”

Shivnath said, “First I have to make one phone call.”

“To whom?”

“Narayan’s son.”

Vibha handed him the mobile phone.

Shivnath could not dial the number from memory.

He opened an old diary.

Three numbers had been crossed out; one new number had been written.

The final number rang.

A man answered.

“Hello?”

“I am Shivnath Chaudhary.”

There was silence for a while.

“Which Shivnath?”

Shivnath said, “The old postmaster from Sarisab Post Office.”

The silence lengthened.

“Babuji is here,” the voice finally said.

Shivnath’s palm began to sweat again.

“Please let me speak to him.”

There was some rustling.

A cough sounded from a distance.

“Hello?”

Narayan’s voice had grown old, but Shivnath recognised it.

“Narayan Babu...”

“Yes.”

“I am Shivnath.”

“I recognised you.”

After those two words, all the sentences Shivnath had been composing inside himself for years became useless.

He said directly, “The bag has been found.”

Silence at the other end.

“Which bag?”

“Number thirteen. The money-order bag.”

Silence again.

Shivnath could hear someone breathing.

Narayan asked, “Where?”

“It was trapped inside the post-office wall.”

After a long time Narayan’s voice came.

“Then I had not put it into the vehicle.”

Shivnath closed his eyes.

“No.”

“My signature was in the register.”

“You had signed beforehand. With my permission.”

“You did not say that in the inquiry.”

“No.”

There was another cough at the other end.

Shivnath said, “I have had it written down now.”

Narayan did not answer immediately.

“After so many years?”

“Yes.”

“Will my blocked promotion come back?”

Shivnath’s throat grew heavy.

“I do not know.”

“Will the six months of suspension come back?”

“I do not know.”

“Will the school year my son lost because he had to leave school and go to work come back?”

Shivnath was silent.

Narayan's voice was not harsh.

Perhaps that made it harder.

"Then it is good that the bag has been found. Correct the papers."

"I want to say to you—"

Shivnath stopped.

The word apology was easy.

Consequences were not.

Narayan said, "Write whatever must be written, fully. Save your words for me."

The call ended.

Shivnath placed the mobile phone on the table.

Vibha asked nothing.

Two days later the old sub-post office closed.

Work began on the first day in the new building.

The twelve current mailbags went to the district store.

The old thirteenth bag was kept separately as evidence.

The old veranda became empty.

Nasim removed the entire ventilator section.

The hollow space inside could now be seen.

No large secret chamber.

No mysterious tunnel.

Only a narrow space left between two incomplete stages of construction, where one bag had remained longer than it should have.

A small red stain of sealing wax remained on a brick inside the wall.

Shivnath came to see the building one last time.

Vibha had brought a copy from the new office—the preliminary note of archival correction.

She gave it to Shivnath to read.

The first page stated:

"The transfer of thirteen bags entered in the 1998 dispatch register was not verified by direct counting."

The second page:

"Bag number 13 was recovered after current repair work caused it to fall from the hollow portion of a sealed ventilator in the old building."

The third page:

"The suspicion focused on transport employee Narayan Mahato in the previous inquiry may have been based on an incomplete interpretation of the available records; review is required."

Shivnath read the sentence again.

"May have been" felt incomplete to him.

Vibha understood.

"The language of an inquiry can say only this much at present."

"Yes."

"Look at the next page."

Attached there was Shivnath's new statement.

Complete.

Advance signature.

Dispatch without counting.

Oral permission for payment.

Failure to state the facts in the old inquiry.

Shivnath did not fold the paper.

“Keep this copy,” Vibha said.

“Me?”

“You asked for it.”

Shivnath took the paper.

He went to the same corner of the veranda where the bag had been found.

The square lime boundary had been half erased by rainwater.

Above, the ventilator was now completely open.

Daylight entered through it and fell onto the veranda.

Shivnath looked at the three old water lines on the wall.

He thought:

The bag had remained in darkness for twenty-eight years, but the papers inside it had not been made to preserve the truth.

The papers had merely survived.

Whether the truth survived or not had depended on the next sentence a human being chose to write.

From outside Vibha asked, “Shall we go?”

Shivnath turned.

“Let us go.”

Before closing the gate, he looked once more at the veranda.

There was no bag there now.

The place of the thirteenth bag was empty.

But this time, the empty place was not a mistake in the count.

STORY 124

THE WATERMILL'S REVERSED WHEEL

Bhadon was waning, but that year the Churia ridge wore only an incomplete green.

Along the Patharaha stream, the fields descended like steps when seen from a distance—marua above, rows of paddy in the middle, maize leaves below. But that monsoon pale cracks in the earth showed between the stretches of paddy.

Brijnandan Sahu was climbing that path after eighteen years.

He carried an old leather bag in one hand, a folded map under his arm, and the old pain still lived in his left knee.

The village water-use committee had called him.

The hill road was to be widened, so the boundary of the old watermill land had to be measured again.

The mill had stopped working long ago, but in the government register its name still stood as “Co-operative Grain Mill.”

Brijnandan had been the last accountant of that co-operative.

“Who will understand the old boundary without you?” committee president Devmani Yadav had said on the telephone. “On paper the channel lies one way; on the ground it lies another.”

Brijnandan had first thought of refusing.

Then he had said, “I will come.”

He himself did not know why he had said it.

The watermill stood about half a kos above the village.

When it still worked, water from the Patharaha stream was diverted through bamboo channels and wooden sluice-boards onto its wheel.

Inside, two millstones turned.

Wheat and maize were ground.

Outside, people stood in line with sacks.

Now half the channel was broken, the wood had blackened, and one corner of the roof had sagged.

The mill's great wooden wheel was still fixed outside the wall.

Brijnandan stopped and looked at it.

The wheel was still.

It was supposed to be still.

For eighteen years.

Devmani came up from below and said, “The measuring will not happen today. The amin will arrive tomorrow morning. I had the room cleaned for you to stay.”

“I could have stayed in the village.”

“If you remain up here, it will be easier to identify the old marks. And going up and down at night will be difficult.”

Brijnandan went inside the mill.

The smell of earth and dust.
 Bird droppings on the round millstone.
 Lime flaking from the wall.
 In one corner lay an iron balance with one pan missing.
 The desk was still there.
 He had written the accounts at that very desk.
 Brijnandan's feet slowed of their own accord.
 Dusting the table, Devmani said, "This desk too will go in the auction."
 "Yes."

"Some papers remain. See whether any are useful. If they are, the committee will keep them."

The desk drawer was stuck.

Devmani forced it open.

Inside were papers gnawed by mice, one broken red pencil, two rusted pins, and an old receipt book.

At the sight of the red pencil, Brijnandan drew his hand back.

Devmani did not notice.

"I am going down by evening. I will come back with the amin tomorrow."

Brijnandan nodded.

Devmani left.

As the sun went down, the hill air grew cold.

The Patharaha stream was very thin here.

Water appeared between stones in some places and vanished in others.

The old main channel was dry.

Brijnandan sat outside and opened the boundary map.

Along the northern edge ran a blue line: "MAIN WATERCOURSE."

To the south, a shorter line: "OUTLET."

In the middle, a square symbol: the mill.

His eyes remained fixed for a long time on that square.

Eighteen years earlier, on a Sawan night, an accident had taken place in this mill.

The report stated:

"After 8:00 p.m. the mill was closed. Temporary worker Lakhan Mandal entered the premises for personal reasons and slipped on the wet floor."

Brijnandan had not typed that report.

But its figures, time, and accounts had been certified by his signature.

The truth had been different.

That night the mill had not been closed.

The rain was heavy.

An order had come to grind the co-operative chairman's private wheat sacks during the night, ahead of the daytime queue.

The mill was run after dark.

The upper sluice-gate was sticking.

A new rope was tied to it and pulled with force.

Lakhan had said, "The teeth of the gate are broken. Not now."

No one listened.

The mill ran.

In the middle of the night the rope came loose.

The sluice suddenly opened fully.

The force of the water increased.

The wheel leapt into speed.

The wooden shaft inside kicked.

Lakhan, trying to run, fell from the stone ledge.

He survived.

But his right leg never again moved as before.

If the true cause of the accident had been written down, the co-operative would have had to pay compensation.

There would have been an inquiry against the chairman.

The record of private night grinding would have been opened.

At that time Brijnandan's house was newly under construction.

There was debt.

Two daughters were in school.

The chairman had told him, "Write the time only up to eight. The institution knows nothing after that."

Brijnandan had written it.

Lakhan was given two months' wages.

After that he left the village and went down to the Terai.

Brijnandan had placed the incident in one corner of his mind under the label "an old matter."

Today the desk, the red pencil, and the dry channel were opening that corner.

Night came quickly.

The committee had left a lantern, a lota of water, chura with curd, and a blanket.

Brijnandan bolted the door from inside.

In the hills, sounds travel far at night.

Crickets.

A dog somewhere.

Bamboo leaves.

The fine murmur of the stream.

Brijnandan lay on the cot but did not sleep.

After turning over many times, he heard another sound.

Gharr... gharr...

He opened his eyes.

The sound stopped.

Then—

Gharr... charr...

Like old wooden teeth.

Brijnandan sat up.

His first thought was the roof.

His second, some animal.

He did not want to accept the third thought.
 He lit the lantern.
 Opened the door.
 Went outside.
 The wind was very light.
 The sound came from the mill wheel.
 Brijnandan raised the lantern.
 The wheel was turning.
 Very slowly.
 Charr...
 One paddle descended.
 Gharr...
 Another rose.
 Brijnandan's hand shook.
 The water of the Patharaha stream was not flowing in that direction.
 The main channel was dry.
 Then why was the wheel turning?
 He took two steps forward.
 Then stopped.
 The wheel was turning the wrong way.
 When the mill had operated, the upper wood moved from left to right.
 Now it moved from right to left.
 Backward.
 In Brijnandan's ears, not an old scream but an old sentence returned:
 "The teeth of the gate are broken. Not now."
 The lantern flame trembled.
 "Lakhan?"
 The name came from his mouth on its own.
 No one answered.
 The wheel turned twice more.
 Then stopped.
 Brijnandan stood there for a long time.
 There was no water visible on the ground.
 He went back inside and shut the door, but did not sleep for the rest of the night.
 In the morning Devmani, amin Rajiv Thakur, and a local young man named Jitan Sahu came up.
 Brijnandan did not immediately tell them about the night.
 Rajiv opened his measuring instruments and began surveying the boundary.
 Jitan cut back bushes as they went.
 Devmani searched for old pegs.
 "Was the northern corner here?" Rajiv asked.
 Brijnandan looked at the map.
 "Three hand-spans west of where the old wooden water-channel turned."
 "This is the water-channel?"

“Yes.”

Rajiv stepped into the dry channel.

“It looks as though water has not passed here for a month.”

Brijnandan looked towards the wheel.

“It turned last night,” he said at last.

All three looked at him.

Jitan almost laughed, but stopped after seeing Brijnandan’s face.

Devmani asked, “Wind?”

“A wheel this large would not turn in that wind. And it turned backward.”

Rajiv went to the axle.

He tested it with his hand.

“The wood is old, but not completely jammed. It could move if pushed.”

“If someone pushed it.”

“Possible.”

Brijnandan did not like that word.

Rajiv bent beneath the wheel.

“It is wet here.”

Everyone came closer.

A narrow dark strip showed on the lowest wooden paddle.

Dust above.

Dampness below.

Devmani touched the soil.

“The ground is dry.”

Rajiv said, “Water fell on the wheel, but perhaps not enough reached the ground?”

“The upper channel is dry,” Jitan said.

Looking at the wheel teeth, Rajiv stopped at one place.

“Look here.”

A fine fibre of blue synthetic rope was caught between two wooden teeth.

New.

Such rope had not been used at the old mill.

In those days they used hemp, jute fibre, and thick twisted cord.

Brijnandan took the fibre into his hand.

Blue.

The rope tied to the sluice eighteen years ago had been reddish-brown hemp.

Even so, his palm began to sweat.

Devmani asked, “Does someone come at night to run the mill?”

Jitan laughed.

“To grind? Even the millstones inside are jammed.”

Rajiv turned the wheel by hand.

“Only the wheel can move. The inner shaft is broken. It cannot grind grain.”

“Then why?”

There was no answer.

The boundary survey continued until noon.

Brijnandan paid less attention to the paper than to the ground.

Again and again he saw the damp strip under the wheel, the rope fibre, and the backward turning of the night before.

After noon Rajiv went towards the old outlet.

The original mill channel had carried water over the wheel and then down into the Patharaha stream.

But years of landslides had half filled its route.

"Fresh earth has been cut here," Rajiv said.

Jitan bent down.

"It could be a goat path."

"Goats do not use spades."

There were two clear spade marks in the narrow trench.

Brijnandan's chest jolted.

"Shall we go upward?" Rajiv asked.

Devmani looked at his watch.

"Let us finish the measurement today. We will solve the mystery of the water tomorrow."

Rajiv agreed.

By evening everyone went down.

Brijnandan remained at the mill again.

This time he had himself chosen to stay alone.

During the day Devmani had said, "Come down with us."

Brijnandan had replied, "I need to sort the old registers."

In truth, he wanted to watch the wheel.

After sunset he placed the blue rope fibre on the desk.

Beside the red pencil.

Two different times.

Two different ropes.

But his mind tied both into the same knot.

He opened the old receipt book.

The middle pages were from the year 2062.

On one page, three entries for night grinding had been crossed out.

A straight red-pencil line ran over black ink.

Brijnandan's own hand.

He closed the page.

Nothing happened until nine at night.

At ten, the wind strengthened.

At ten thirty-five a faint metallic ring sounded from far above.

Brijnandan came outside.

The watermill was still.

He extinguished the lantern.

It took time for his eyes to adjust to the dark.

Ten forty-four.

A fine sound of water.

Not from the main stream.

From the rear slope behind the mill.

Brijnandan went behind the wheel.

First one drop.

Then another.

Then a thin line of water gleamed across the rear side of the wooden paddles.

The wheel moved.

Gharr...

Backward.

This time Brijnandan did not run.

He bent and looked below.

The water was not falling from the old upper channel.

A thin stream came diagonally through a narrow gap between the rear wall of the mill and the hillside earth and struck the wooden paddle.

The stream was not large.

But because the heavy wheel was balanced, it was enough to turn it.

Brijnandan reached out and touched the water.

Cold.

He followed it in the opposite direction.

The bushes were dense.

Thorns caught in his clothes.

A short distance away he saw blue rope stretched along the ground.

It was tied to a bamboo peg and then ran uphill.

Brijnandan followed it.

About fifty hand-spans above, three lengths of bamboo channel had been joined along a narrow path.

Their mouth received water from a black flexible pipe coming from the direction of the hill spring.

No one was there.

But the channel was new.

The cut bamboo was pale.

Wet mud covered the joints.

Water flowed down the bamboo towards the back of the mill.

Brijnandan understood.

Someone was diverting water.

But where?

He went down below the mill.

Instead of entering the old outlet, the water that passed the wheel was turning into a newly dug narrow trench beside it.

The trench ran east, parallel to the hill path.

Brijnandan did not light the lantern.

He followed the trench slowly through the darkness.

Farther ahead he heard whispers.

"Stop it here."

"Two more bunds."

"The rope is loosening."

Brijnandan stopped.

Human voices.

He went forward.

At a small level place there were three people—two women and a boy.

They were cutting an earthen bund and dividing the water into two streams.

One flowed down towards a row of paddy.

The other towards a marua field.

One woman started when she saw Brijnandan.

“Who?”

Brijnandan lit the lantern.

Her face appeared in the light.

Around forty.

Sharp eyes.

A cloth tied around her head.

“I am Brijnandan Sahu.”

The other woman said quietly, “The old accountant of the mill?”

Brijnandan looked at her.

“Are you the ones diverting this water?”

The first woman answered, “Yes.”

“With whose permission?”

The moment the question left his mouth, Brijnandan heard the hardness in his own voice.

The woman heard it too.

“Permission?”

The boy let go of the cord and looked from one side to the other.

The woman said, “My name is Revati Mandal. This is Sushila. This is my nephew Roshan.”

“Where does the water come from?”

“From the overflow of the community tank above. After the drinking-water tank fills, the water that otherwise falls onto the rocks—we bring that extra flow to the fields at night.”

“Why through pipes?”

“The old irrigation channel broke when the road was built. We submitted four applications for repair. The paddy is drying now.”

Brijnandan looked towards the wheel, which creaked slowly in the darkness.

“Is it necessary to turn the mill wheel?”

For the first time a faint, tired smile came to Revati’s face.

“No. The wheel is an obstruction.”

“Then?”

“If we took the bamboo channel straight through, the levels did not match on this side of the wall. It was easier to release the water through the gap behind the old wheel. We had tied the wheel with rope so it would not turn. Yesterday the knot must have come loose.”

“A rope fibre was caught in the teeth.”

“That would be ours.”

Roshan said, "We tied it again today, but the wheel is heavy."

Inside, Brijnandan felt hollow.

Not a ghost.

Not Lakhan.

Water.

Bamboo.

Slope.

A loose rope.

That was all.

But relief did not come.

Revati was looking at his face.

"Were you frightened?" she asked.

Brijnandan did not answer.

Patting the earthen bund into place, Sushila said, "People in the village say the mill turns backward at night. No one comes up here. It has been convenient for us."

Revati looked at her as if to stop her.

"Do not say such things."

"But it is true."

Brijnandan's ears caught on the word backward.

He repeated Revati's surname in his mind.

Mandal.

"Did you know Lakhan Mandal?"

Revati's hand stopped on the bund.

After a few moments she said, "He was my uncle."

Brijnandan's throat went dry.

Sushila and Roshan fell silent.

Revati looked straight at him.

"Do you know?" Brijnandan asked.

"Know what?"

"About that accident."

"As much as was told at home."

"What was told?"

Revati sat down on the bund.

"Uncle was in the mill at night. The gate opened violently. He fell. Later it was written on paper that the mill had been closed and that he had gone inside on his own."

Brijnandan's eyes went to the blurred outline of the wheel in the darkness.

"Who told you?"

"Uncle."

"He... is he still—?"

"He died two years ago."

Brijnandan lowered his head.

There was no sharp accusation in Revati's voice.

The absence of sharpness made it harder for him.

"Did he ever mention my name?"

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

Revati broke a clod of earth in her hand.

“He used to say, ‘Brijnandan Babu was not a bad man, but he wrote bad paper.’”

Brijnandan found no answer.

Roshan began adjusting the cord again.

The creaking of the wheel grew a little louder.

Revati stood.

“First let us tie this. Water is being wasted.”

The three turned back towards the mill.

Brijnandan followed.

The blue rope had to be tied again near the wheel teeth.

Roshan began climbing when Brijnandan said without thinking, “Wait.”

Everyone looked at him.

He went to the right side of the wheel.

Below the old axle was an iron ring half buried in dust and moss.

“Do not tie the rope to the teeth,” he said.

“Take it through this ring and then to the rear peg. If you tie it on the teeth, the rope will cut.”

Revati asked, “You still remember?”

“Some things are not forgotten.”

The sentence came out.

Brijnandan himself fell silent.

The rope went through the ring.

Roshan tightened the peg.

The wheel slowly stopped.

Water slipped across the rear board and continued into the new trench.

The creaking ceased.

The night suddenly seemed very quiet.

Revati said, “The amin is coming tomorrow, isn’t he?”

“He came today. Tomorrow he will finalise the boundary.”

“Will this channel fall inside the land?”

“A part of it lies inside the old boundary of the government mill.”

“Then they will tell us to remove it.”

Brijnandan did not answer immediately.

In truth, he had no authority to promise anything.

He could have said, “Speak to the committee.”

He did not.

Committee papers, applications, repair requests—Revati had already done that many times.

He merely asked, “For how long does the excess water from the tank become available at night?”

“About two hours. After the village’s drinking-water needs are met.”

“Do all the fields below receive equal amounts?”

Revati paused before answering.

“No. Those closer to the channel receive more. That is why today we divided it into two. Farther ahead we still have to divide it again.”

“So there will be quarrels.”

“Possibly.”

For the first time Brijnandan smiled faintly.

“Wherever water reaches, accounts arrive with it.”

Revati too gave a thin smile.

Before dawn Brijnandan returned to the mill.

Revati and the others remained by the fields.

On the table Brijnandan placed the red pencil, the blue rope fibre, and the old receipt book in front of him.

He did not sleep for the rest of the night.

First he took out a blank sheet.

He wrote:

“NOTE CONCERNING VERIFICATION OF THE BOUNDARY OF THE OLD CO-OPERATIVE GRAIN MILL.”

Then he described the boundary.

Northern channel.

Southern outlet.

Iron ring.

Old wheel.

Half the page filled.

He stopped his pen.

He took out a second sheet.

For a long time he looked at the blank page.

Then he wrote:

“PERSONAL STATEMENT CONCERNING FORMER ACCIDENT REPORT NO. 17.”

The first line was difficult to write.

The second was less difficult.

He wrote that on the night of the accident the mill had continued operating after eight o'clock.

Private wheat was being ground.

The defect in the sluice-gate had already been known.

The account concerning the time and work status that he had certified was not true.

He wrote that he himself had signed the false entry.

He wrote the name of the person under whose pressure he had done so.

He added nothing.

He left nothing out.

At the end he wrote the date.

He signed.

He did not fold the paper.

He left it open on the table.

At dawn Devmani and Rajiv arrived.

Rajiv carried the measuring instrument.

Devmani carried tea.

"Did it turn again last night?" Devmani asked with a laugh.

Brijnandan took the tea.

"Yes."

"Did you find the ghost?"

"I found people."

Devmani stopped laughing.

Brijnandan showed them the bamboo channel above, the overflow from the tank, the field trench, and the route behind the wheel.

Rajiv carefully measured the slope.

"This is a temporary route. When the road is built, it will be cut."

Revati came up from the lower fields.

Roshan was with her.

Seeing them, Devmani frowned.

"You cut government land?"

Revati answered directly, "Two hand-spans. To save the field."

"After asking?"

"We kept asking until the paddy dried."

Devmani opened his mouth to answer, but Rajiv spoke first.

"First let us see where a permanent channel can go. If it is joined to the road drainage, this trench may not be needed."

Devmani looked at him.

"That is a separate scheme."

"In the boundary survey I will note that the old irrigation route is in use. Whoever makes the scheme will see it."

"In use?" Devmani looked towards the wheel.

Brijnandan said, "Water is moving. The old channel is broken, but the need for water has not ended."

Devmani remained silent for a while.

"Fine. But the committee will decide the night-time distribution. I do not want quarrels."

Revati said, "Decide it. Let the water reach first."

The boundary survey began again.

Brijnandan held the map.

Rajiv kept measuring.

An old peg turned out to be three hand-spans this way.

The outlet line two hand-spans that way.

The difference between paper and land slowly grew smaller.

At noon Devmani saw the second sheet lying on the mill desk.

"What is this?"

Brijnandan said, "A statement to correct the old report."

Devmani read.

The smile disappeared from his face.

"After so many years?"

"Even after years, what is wrong remains wrong."

Devmani put the sheet back on the desk.

“What will happen now because of this?”

Brijnandan did not answer quickly.

“I do not know. Perhaps nothing. But the old false paper will no longer be the only paper.”

Devmani looked towards the window.

Outside, Revati and Roshan were untying the blue rope.

No water would come during the day, so the wheel was being left free again.

“Will you give this to Lakhan’s family?” Devmani asked.

“One copy to Revati. One in the committee register. One to the district co-operative archive.”

“Will you send it yourself?”

“Yes.”

Devmani did not fold the sheet.

He merely placed a clean piece of paper over it so dust would not fall.

By evening the measurement was complete.

Rajiv drew a new line on the map.

Inside the old mill boundary he added a thin mark:

“CURRENT TEMPORARY WATERCOURSE.”

Devmani said, “This is not permanent approval.”

Rajiv did not laugh.

“The map shows what is true. Approval will come on another paper.”

Brijnandan listened.

As the sun went down, everyone prepared to descend.

Revati stood near the mill door.

Brijnandan gave her one copy of his statement.

She did not read it.

She folded it and placed it in her cloth bag.

“If your uncle had seen this?” Brijnandan asked.

Revati looked at him.

“I do not know,” she said.

“He understood the pain in his leg more than he understood paper.”

Brijnandan lowered his eyes.

Then Revati said, “But I will keep it.”

With that she left.

Brijnandan decided to spend one final night in the mill.

At dawn he would go down and return home.

The sky was clear.

The upper tank would be full by ten.

A little after ten, the fine sound of water came again.

Brijnandan went outside.

This time the blue rope was properly tied through the iron ring.

Water fell on the rear board, slipped over its edge, and ran into the new trench.

The wheel trembled slightly, but did not turn.

Brijnandan watched it for a long time.

The previous night, the backward-turning wheel had seemed to him a sign from his past.

Tonight it was only wood, bearing the pressure of water.

In the darkness of the fields below, someone opened a bund.

The direction of the water changed.

Brijnandan went back inside.

The red pencil still lay on the desk.

He did not put it into the drawer.

He picked up the broken pencil and placed it beside the crossed-out page in the receipt book.

Then he left the drawer open.

Outside, the water kept flowing.

This time the wheel remained still.

STORY 125

A BLACK DOT ON THE WHITE SCREEN

The old clock tower of the town was striking seven in the evening when Bhubaneswar Jha turned into the narrow lane off the square.

The rain had stopped, but water was still dripping from the eaves.

At the end of the lane stood his closed photography studio—"Prabha Photo Studio."

Half the blue lettering had flaked away. Of the word "Prabha," only "bha" remained clear.

The shop had been closed for twenty-seven months.

Bhubaneswar no longer took photographs.

His eyesight had dimmed, his hands trembled, and people now took wedding pictures on their mobile phones.

But the real reason was older than all of that.

The reason was inside the shop.

That night Bhubaneswar had come to examine the papers for selling the premises.

The new buyer wanted all the old material removed within three days.

As he opened the padlock, fine rust powder came away on his palm.

He pushed the door open.

The smell inside was the same as before—dust, wood, decaying paper, and somewhere deep within it the faint sourness of photographic chemicals.

He stopped.

Even after so long, that smell?

He himself had emptied every bottle from the darkroom.

The framed wedding sample photographs had been removed from the left wall.

Directly ahead, a long white backdrop hung from the ceiling, before which countless people had once assumed the most beautiful poses of their lives.

Bhubaneswar switched on a small electric lamp shaped like a lantern.

The white backdrop looked grey.

He looked once.

Then narrowed his eyes and looked again.

In the middle of the backdrop was a small black dot.

Like a mole.

"Rat droppings," he said to himself.

But the dot was not near the bottom of the cloth.

It was almost at eye level.

He reached out and touched the fabric.

Nothing.

The dot was not on the cloth.

When he moved to one side of the backdrop, it vanished.

When he returned to the centre, it appeared again.

Bhubaneswar turned around.

Above the darkroom door was a small light slit.

One pane of its glass was cracked.

Light from the electric bulb outside entered through that crack.

He looked at the backdrop again.

The black dot was still there.

Bhubaneswar tried to laugh.

“A trick of light.”

That night he kept sorting the studio’s old registers, tax papers, and the buyer’s agreement.

At nine, when he looked again towards the backdrop, there was not one dot but two.

The second was above the first.

This time he stood up at once and went to the light slit.

There was still only the same crack in the glass.

The electric light outside was steady.

Two black dots faced him on the white cloth.

A very old pounding awakened in Bhubaneswar’s chest.

Twenty-seven years earlier there had been a white screen like this too.

On it he used to show photographs—enlarging one frame after another, examining where a hand was, which way a face was turned, who stood where inside a crowd.

And one night he had destroyed them all.

“No,” he whispered.

The two dots gave no answer.

Bhubaneswar closed the shop early that night and went home.

When he awoke in the morning, his first thought was of the two dots on the screen.

His second thought:

Someone is entering the shop.

He came back at noon.

In daylight there was not a single black dot on the backdrop.

He inspected the entire room.

The padlock was intact.

The rear door was bolted from inside.

The dust on the window latch was undisturbed.

There were no footprints on the floor.

But at the lower right corner of the backdrop the fabric seemed slightly more folded than before.

Bhubaneswar straightened it.

A brown stain came away on his finger.

He smelled it.

Very faint, but unmistakable.

The smell of old fixer.

The smell of his darkroom.

Bhubaneswar's palm began to tremble.
He bent below the backdrop.
Something hard touched his fingers inside the fold.
He did not have the courage to open the cloth.
He stood up.
He opened the drawer of the wooden desk opposite.
Inside were empty envelopes, two broken pencils, an old light meter, and a small glass plate.
A white label was pasted onto the plate:
"Municipal Relief Distribution, Shravan."
Bhubaneswar shut the drawer at once.
He had not wanted to read the name.
But he had already read it.
Municipal Relief Distribution.
That day.
Twenty-seven years earlier, after the floodwaters had receded, relief was being distributed on the grounds of the old secondary school.
Sacks of rice.
Dry food.
Medicine.
Clothing.
Half the town had gathered there.
The committee had called Bhubaneswar to take photographs.
In the afternoon the bamboo barricade broke.
The crowd surged in one direction.
Some people fell.
Two children were injured.
An elderly woman died three days later.
The incident was not small.
But on paper its story was made very small.
"Disorder caused by a sudden increase in the crowd."
That was all.
Bhubaneswar's photographs contained more than that.
He had taken seven frames in sequence.
In the first, the bamboo barricade was intact.
In the second, a vehicle was reversing.
In the third, the rear iron corner of the vehicle touched the main knot of the bamboo structure.
In the fourth, the rope loosened.
In the fifth, a volunteer raised his hand to signal the vehicle to stop.
In the sixth, the bamboo fell.
In the seventh, people lifted one another from the ground.
One woman—Sharda Devi—who was later called "the woman who incited the crowd," was shielding a child with her own body in that seventh frame.
But that photograph was never made public.

Two days after the incident, three people came to Bhubaneswar's studio.
 One was the secretary of the relief committee.
 One was the school manager.

The third was Bhubaneswar's own elder brother, Kamalakant, who had been overseeing the vehicles that day.

The secretary said, "If those photographs go out, relief work will stop. Inquiry, court cases—everything will be held up."

The manager said, "No one will benefit."

Kamalakant said only one thing:

"Mother is ill now."

That sentence weighed more heavily than pressure.

Bhubaneswar tore up the photographic prints.

He cut the negative strip and spoiled it in chemical solution.

At least that was what he remembered.

That night his assistant Madhusudan cleaned the darkroom.

In the morning the floor was shining.

After that day, Bhubaneswar never again looked directly into Sharda Devi's eyes.

Sharda Devi lived for many years.

She never came to the studio.

Bhubaneswar never went to her either.

Standing in the shop that afternoon, Bhubaneswar again heard the old sentence in his ears:

"Mother is ill now."

His mother truly had been ill then.

But the truth had also been true.

Two truths do not cancel each other.

Bhubaneswar did not look at the backdrop.

He gathered the sale papers during the day and left early.

On the third day, deliberately, he returned at eight at night.

Outside the shop, the air was cool after the rain.

He opened the door and first looked at the backdrop.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Four black dots.

They were not equally spaced.

Two stood above and below one another.

Two lay side by side.

This time Bhubaneswar covered the light slit with cardboard.

The black dots vanished.

He felt relieved.

He sat down in the chair.

Five minutes later there was a faint clatter from inside the darkroom.

Bhubaneswar sat upright.

Someone is there.

He took an old pair of scissors from the desk drawer.

"Who is it?"

No answer.

Another faint rustle.

The darkroom door was closed, but a thin line of light was coming from beneath it.

Bhubaneswar moved forward slowly.

He pushed the door open.

No one was inside.

But the small ventilation slit in the rear wall was open.

That slit had been jammed for years.

Today there were fresh scratches on its iron flap.

On the floor below lay a leaf.

A guava leaf.

There was no guava tree in the studio's rear courtyard.

But there was one next door.

Bhubaneswar understood.

Entry was not through the light slit.

It was through the back courtyard.

He closed the ventilation slit.

Then he went to the backdrop.

Because of the cardboard, there were no black dots.

He decided to open the fold of the cloth.

The stitching along the bottom was old, but in the middle there were two inches of new thread.

The thread was white.

The cloth had yellowed.

Bhubaneswar placed the scissors against it.

At that very moment he heard footsteps outside.

He turned.

The main studio door stood half open.

A young woman was standing inside.

A wet shawl.

A cloth bag under her arm.

A small key in her hand.

"Kaka," she said, "put the scissors down."

Bhubaneswar did not recognise her.

"Who are you?"

"Madhusudan's granddaughter."

Bhubaneswar's hand lowered.

"Madhusudan?"

"I am Anvita."

At the name an old image slowly formed.

At Madhusudan's daughter Urmila's wedding, there had been a mischievous little girl who always turned her face away whenever she saw a camera.

"How did you get inside?"

Anvita showed him the key.

"This is not for the rear ventilation slit. It is the old second key to the main door. Baba had it."

"Madhusudan had my key?"

"Yes."

Bhubaneswar's voice hardened.

"And what are you doing here night after night?"

Anvita looked towards the backdrop.

"Saving what you are about to cut open."

Bhubaneswar put the scissors on the table.

"The backdrop?"

"What is inside the backdrop?"

"What is inside?"

Anvita did not answer immediately.

She took cloth gloves from her bag and put them on.

Then she carefully opened the lower fold of the backdrop.

From inside she removed a thin paper tube.

Bhubaneswar's mouth went dry.

Anvita placed the tube on the table.

The paper was opened.

Inside were two small pieces of negative strip.

Bhubaneswar gripped the back of the chair.

The frames were tiny, but he recognised the sequence notation.

On the edge was a number in his own handwriting:

"S-17/6."

Relief Distribution.

Frame six.

"Where did you find this?"

Anvita pointed to the fold of the backdrop.

"There is not one compartment inside. There are many. Baba had them stitched."

Bhubaneswar remained silent for a long time.

"I destroyed all of them."

"You destroyed what you saw."

The sentence was direct.

It did not sound like an accusation.

Even so, Bhubaneswar felt it strike him.

Anvita took out a folded piece of paper.

"Baba wrote this."

Madhusudan's slanting handwriting was on it.

"I placed the second surviving copies of the frames inside the folds of the backdrop. I did not tell the owner. One day the times will change."

That was all.

No date.

No signature.

Bhubaneswar read it and then read it again.

"He deceived me."

Anvita remained calm.

"Perhaps."

Bhubaneswar looked at her.

Anvita added, "Or perhaps he made a decision separate from your fear."

A protest rose instantly inside Bhubaneswar.

Madhusudan had been his assistant.

He paid Madhusudan's wages.

His orders ran the studio.

But the protest did not reach his mouth.

"The black dots?" he asked.

For the first time a trace of embarrassment appeared on Anvita's face.

"They are because of me."

She went into the darkroom.

Near the ventilation slit stood a small hand lamp.

In front of it, five small clips were fixed to a thin strip of wood.

"I take the negatives out of the folds and hang them here. When I shine a direct light, their shadows fall on the backdrop. At first I did not realise they looked like dots from the front."

"Why not in daytime?"

"The shadows disappear in the outside light."

"And the light slit?"

"Without that angle, the image was not clear enough. At first I could not find where Baba had kept the old enlarger, so I used the small lamp."

Bhubaneswar went to stand in front of the backdrop.

Anvita removed the cardboard.

The outside electric light and the small lamp inside together made five black dots appear on the screen.

Five.

Yesterday there had been four.

Today there was one more frame.

"The chemical smell?"

"Some of the folded packets were damp when I opened them. I did not touch them with clean water. The university conservation room told me that if old chemical residue was present, I should isolate it. One packet released the smell. There are old stains on the backdrop too."

Anvita showed him the brown mark inside the cloth.

"It is not new."

Bhubaneswar touched it with a finger.

The stain on the inside really was old.

Dust on the outside had merely made it seem newly exposed.

"What do you study at the university?"

“Visual archives.”

“This is all for research?”

“Half of it.”

“And the other half?”

Anvita was silent for a while.

“Sharda Devi was my grandmother.”

Bhubaneswar’s eyes dropped automatically.

The name had returned again.

Sharda Devi.

The woman who incited the crowd.

The woman shielding a child in the seventh frame.

“Urmila—Madhusudan’s daughter—”

“My mother.”

“Then Sharda Devi...”

“My mother’s mother.”

Bhubaneswar understood the relationship.

Madhusudan had not merely been an assistant.

He had been preserving an image of his daughter’s mother-in-law.

“He never told me.”

“My grandmother never knew either that Baba had saved copies.”

“How did you find out?”

“Three months before he died, Baba gave me his papers. Among them was a measurement of the backdrop. Small numbers were written along the side. At first I did not understand. When I heard the studio was being sold, I remembered the measurements.”

Anvita opened a sheet of paper from her bag.

It showed the width and length of the backdrop, and twenty small marks inside its folds.

“Twenty?” Bhubaneswar asked.

“So far I have found five.”

“I took only seven frames.”

“They may not all be from that day.”

That possibility created a new fear in Bhubaneswar.

What else had Madhusudan preserved?

Whose images?

Whose truth?

How many times had he acted against Bhubaneswar’s orders?

“Have you removed everything?”

“No. The cloth is fragile. If I open more than two or three folds in one night, it will tear.”

“So the dots kept increasing.”

“Yes.”

For the first time Bhubaneswar could have laughed at the mystery.

But no laughter came.

The black dots were not ghosts.

They were the shadow of decisions preserved by living people.

“Why did you not tell me?”

Anvita met his eyes.

“The shop is yours. I should have told you.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I was afraid you would burn the backdrop.”

Bhubaneswar immediately wanted to say, “I am not that kind of man.”

But the scissors lay on the table.

He remembered the chemical solution of twenty-seven years earlier.

He remained silent.

Anvita held the piece of negative strip up to the light.

“Shall we look?”

Bhubaneswar’s first impulse was no.

His second was yes.

He pulled up a chair and sat.

Anvita placed the old enlarger on the table.

The instrument belonged to Bhubaneswar, but he did not remember how it had come to be there.

“It was in the rear cupboard,” Anvita said. “I replaced the bulb.”

She placed a sheet of white paper below and the negative strip above.

“No print yet. We will only enlarge it and look.”

The light came on.

An inverted image emerged on the paper.

Blurred at first.

Then Anvita turned the focusing wheel.

The lines sharpened.

The bamboo barricade.

The rear corner of the vehicle.

A hand in the air.

Bhubaneswar stopped breathing.

“Frame six,” he said.

“Yes.”

It was the moment just before the barricade fell.

At one side stood Kamalakant.

Bhubaneswar’s elder brother.

His hand was not at the rear of the vehicle.

It was reaching towards the bamboo rope.

Bhubaneswar leaned closer.

For twenty-seven years his memory had kept Kamalakant in charge of the vehicles.

In the photograph, he was gripping the rope and trying to stop the barricade from falling.

“The next frame?”

“Not found yet.”

Bhubaneswar kept his eyes on the paper.

That night Kamalakant had said, “Mother is ill now.”

For the first time Bhubaneswar wondered:

Had his brother come to protect himself, or to protect their mother?

Was he afraid that if the incident grew into a case, the only earning member of the household would become entangled in litigation?

Or had he himself not seen the full sequence of what happened?

Anvita switched off the enlarger.

The image vanished.

“Will you publish all of this?” Bhubaneswar asked.

“First I will preserve it.”

“And then?”

“When the surviving frames give a complete enough sequence, I will make a description. I will name people only to the extent supported by evidence.”

“My grandmother’s name?”

“If she is visible, I will write it.”

“People will reopen the old matter.”

“They may.”

“And accusations?”

“A photograph does not accuse. People do.”

Bhubaneswar gave a faint, bitter laugh.

“That sentence will look good in a book.”

Anvita did not answer.

After a while she said, “A photograph does not give the whole truth by itself either.”

Bhubaneswar looked at her.

“That is why the sequence matters.”

He had not expected that answer.

He had assumed a younger generation would find an image and immediately pronounce judgment.

Anvita was searching for sequence before judgment.

That night they opened only two more folds of the backdrop.

The sixth compartment was empty.

The seventh contained a small negative, but not from the relief distribution.

It was a wedding photograph—an unknown couple, the bride’s head covered by a long veil.

Anvita smiled.

“Baba thought everything was history.”

An unwilling smile came to Bhubaneswar’s face.

“Perhaps the customer never came back for this one.”

“Even so, it is history.”

At eleven Anvita left.

Bhubaneswar remained in the studio.

Seven black dots showed on the backdrop—five shadows from negatives, two from the clips.

He sat watching them.

When there had been two dots, he had thought dead photographs were returning.

Now he knew.

It was not a return.

It was the shadow of preservation.

Even so, fear had not vanished completely.

The return of truth can be no less frightening than a ghost.

The next day Bhubaneswar called the buyer.

"The material will not be removed in three days."

"The agreement—"

"Seven days."

"Why?"

Bhubaneswar thought for a few moments.

"An old cloth has to be opened."

The buyer probably did not understand, but agreed to seven days.

During those seven days Bhubaneswar came to the studio every evening.

Anvita came at eight.

Together they opened the folds of the backdrop.

They straightened the cloth.

Whenever they found a negative strip, they put on gloves and placed it in a separate envelope.

On each envelope they wrote only the sequence number, estimated year, and subject.

In the tenth compartment they found frame seven from the relief distribution.

Bhubaneswar did not at once have the courage to put it before the light.

Anvita waited.

At last he himself said, "Switch it on."

The light from the enlarger fell downward.

The frame became clear.

Sharda Devi was kneeling on the ground.

A child lay within the protection of her arms.

The bamboo had fallen behind her.

Two people were running at one side.

One man had turned back to lift her.

Bhubaneswar recognised him.

Madhusudan.

Anvita's grandfather.

For a long time Anvita said nothing.

"Did you make a print from this frame?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Did Grandmother see it?"

"No."

"Baba?"

"He was in the darkroom. It is possible."

Anvita switched off the light.

"Then Baba did not save only Grandmother's photograph."

"What?"

“He saved his own decision too.”

Bhubaneswar understood.

Madhusudan had been in the crowd that day.

In the photograph, he had turned back to lift Sharda.

Later he saved the negative.

A person may preserve evidence of his own good act out of pride.

A person may preserve evidence that removes a false stain from someone else out of a sense of justice.

Where the boundary lay between the two, Bhubaneswar could not say.

The twelfth compartment contained no negative.

In the thirteenth, they found frame five of the relief distribution.

The very frame in which the volunteer raised his hand to signal the vehicle to stop.

The volunteer’s face was half in shadow.

Anvita enlarged it.

“Who is this?”

Bhubaneswar recognised him.

“The school manager.”

The same man who had said two days later, “No one will benefit.”

In the frame, he was trying to prevent the accident.

Bhubaneswar’s mind grew tangled again.

For twenty-seven years he had thought of that man as one of those who suppressed the truth.

At the moment of the incident, however, he had been trying to save the barricade.

A human being does not become guilty or innocent within a single frame.

Anvita said quietly, “That is why the whole sequence matters.”

Bhubaneswar said nothing.

As they opened the fifteenth compartment, the fabric of the backdrop cracked.

Anvita stopped her hand immediately.

“Enough. Not today.”

“One remains.”

“It will tear.”

Earlier, at such a moment, Bhubaneswar would have said, “Nothing will happen. Open it.”

Today he himself let the backdrop go.

“Tomorrow.”

When they returned the next day, the electricity was out.

The studio was dark.

Anvita lit the hand lamp.

A black dot appeared again on the white screen.

This time Bhubaneswar did not count it.

He looked only at the angle.

“Lower the lamp by two finger-widths,” he said.

Anvita lowered it.

The dot grew smaller.

“Now the folds in the cloth are clearer.”

The two of them worked silently.

In the sixteenth compartment there was a thin piece of paper.

Madhusudan’s handwriting.

“The owner ordered all seven frames destroyed. I saved one set. If they ever come out, do not write the owner’s name as though he alone were guilty. Everyone was afraid.”

Bhubaneswar read it twice.

“He was trying to protect me,” he said.

Anvita replied, “Or trying to preserve the complete shape of what happened.”

Bhubaneswar put the paper back.

He might have felt anger towards Madhusudan.

Instead, there was emptiness.

For twenty-seven years he had carried his guilt alone.

Now he learned that the decision that night had not been his alone either.

The fear had been collective.

The failure had been collective.

The resistance too had quietly been collective.

When they opened the final compartment, there was no negative inside.

There was a small piece of white cloth.

On it were seven black dots from chemical stains.

Bhubaneswar laughed aloud.

Anvita was startled.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

He kept looking at the stains.

“On the first night I was frightened by dots like these.”

Anvita laughed too.

“The dots were not guilty.”

“No.”

Seven days were complete.

The buyer came.

The backdrop had been taken down but not thrown away.

Anvita wrapped it in acid-free paper and prepared it to be sent to the university conservation room.

The negative strips were placed in a separate box.

Bhubaneswar looked at the desk, the chair, the broken frames, the old enlarger.

“This instrument?” Anvita asked.

“Take it.”

“The university has a new one.”

“Then why?”

“Keep it yourself.”

Bhubaneswar ran a hand over the enlarger.

“My eyes are not as they used to be.”

Anvita said, “A print is not made by eyes alone.”

Bhubaneswar looked at her.

“Another sentence for a book?”

“No. Baba used to say it.”

The studio became empty.

After the backdrop was removed, a large white rectangle remained on the wall where less dust had settled.

Upon that white space, a small black dot from the cracked light slit outside was falling.

Only one.

The buyer asked, “Should I replace that glass?”

Bhubaneswar looked towards the light slit.

“Replace it.”

Then, after thinking, he added, “But not today.”

The buyer began getting the sale papers signed.

Bhubaneswar wrote his name.

His hand trembled slightly, but the letters were complete.

Outside, Anvita stood holding the box.

Before closing the door, Bhubaneswar looked inside once more.

The black dot remained steady on the white wall.

He no longer saw a face in it.

No curse.

No forgiveness.

Only a mark—one that appears when the direction of light changes, and disappears when the direction changes again.

Bhubaneswar pulled the door shut.

He locked it.

He did not give the key first to the buyer.

He handed it to Anvita.

“Put the box outside and check that rear cupboard once,” he said. “Madhusudan may have saved something else.”

Anvita took the key.

Bhubaneswar walked out of the lane.

The clock tower struck ten.

Behind him, after a little while, a light came on inside the closed photography studio.

On the white wall, one black dot became two.

STORY 126

THE MISSING SHOEPRINT AT THE COURTHOUSE

Dust had its own time in the old property room of the district courthouse.

Outside, the clock struck ten, then eleven; noon passed into afternoon. But inside, between the cupboards, time seemed to settle as a fine layer of ash.

Madhav Mishra had known the colours of this dust for twenty-eight years.

New dust was pale grey-brown.

Old dust took on a yellowish cast.

Dust that had absorbed monsoon dampness clumped the moment a finger touched it.

That Monday morning, the instant he opened the padlock of the property room, his eyes went to the floor.

In front of Rack Number Seventeen was a shoeprint.

Only one.

None before it.

None after it.

If someone had come from the door and walked that far, there should have been other prints in the dust between.

But the dust from the door to the rack was smooth.

The print was so clear that the square pattern of the sole, the diagonal scratch on the heel, and the clipped corner on the left could all be seen.

Madhav bent down.

He reached out a hand, then stopped.

The property room was not a playroom.

It contained seized objects, sealed envelopes, original papers from land disputes, old weapons, broken locks, counterfeit seals, and many objects kept under court orders.

A single mark could itself be evidence.

He called the watchman, Bhola Paswan.

The moment Bhola entered, he said, "The lock was closed in front of me last night, Babu."

Madhav asked, "Was it opened during the night?"

"No. There are two keys. One with you, one in the nazir sahib's sealed box."

Madhav looked at the print.

Bhola too fell silent.

"One shoe," he said softly. "But where is the man?"

Madhav did not answer.

At that moment he remembered a black cloth shoe from twenty-four years earlier.

Not the shoe itself.

Its label.

“Item No. 47—black cloth shoes, one pair.”

On paper it said one pair.

But when the box had eventually been opened, one shoe was missing.

Along with that case, the original land deed of a poor family had also been seized.

Madhav was a new records assistant then.

Senior clerk Raghuvir Babu had told him, “What is written in the list is what is written. We will count the contents of the box again only when there is an order.”

Madhav had not questioned him.

A few months later, the item number was altered.

The black shoes were replaced by a brass nameplate.

The nameplate was replaced by a copy of a land record.

And the original deed was entered as “attached to the file.”

Madhav’s signature stood beneath the register entry.

The original deed was never seen again.

The case ended.

The family lost the land.

Raghuvir Babu retired.

And Madhav slowly practised forgetting what his own signature meant.

Now there was a shoeprint in front of Rack Seventeen.

Bhola said, “Shall I have the floor swept?”

“No.”

Madhav immediately drew the position on paper, measured the distance with a tape, and called Nazir Arun Jha.

When Arun arrived, he laughed at first.

“So much fuss over one footprint?”

The laughter stopped when he saw Madhav’s face.

He had the print photographed.

He checked the seal on the door.

He counted the iron bars of the window.

Nothing was broken.

The ceiling was covered with old bamboo planks, with a tin roof above them.

In one corner, a new board had been fitted the previous year to stop rainwater.

Arun said, “There is nowhere for anyone to remain hidden inside.”

Madhav looked under the rack.

The edge of one floorboard stood slightly higher than the boards beside it.

He could not remember whether it had always been like that.

The property room was closed that day, but the print was not erased.

The next morning Madhav opened the lock.

A paper cover had been placed over the previous day’s print.

The cover was untouched.

Exactly two finger-widths to its south was another shoeprint.

The same square pattern on the sole.

The same diagonal scratch on the heel.

The same clipped left corner.

Bhola stepped back.

"It has come again."

Madhav's throat went dry.

He did not sleep that night.

Again and again Raghuvir Babu's voice returned to his ears:

"What is written in the list is what is written."

What had been written in the list was not the whole truth that day.

One part of the truth had been inside the box.

One part in the order sheet.

And one part in Madhav's silence.

On the third morning the print appeared again.

This time it was directly in front of the raised edge of the floorboard.

Nazir Arun became stern.

"Someone is playing a trick here. Tonight we double the guard."

A fresh seal was placed on the door.

Thin paper strips were pasted across the inside of the window so that if a bar moved, the strip would tear.

A fine line of ash was laid at one corner of the roof.

Madhav put his own key into a small cloth pouch, sealed it, and gave it to Arun.

That night Bhola and a second guard, Lalit, took turns staying awake on the veranda.

Until five in the morning there was no sound.

At five twenty, there was a faint scrape on the tin roof.

Lalit lifted his torch.

Thinking it was a cat, he sat down again.

At six the seal was broken.

The dust at the doorway was undisturbed.

The paper strips on the window were intact.

The line of ash at the roof corner was still visible.

But in front of Rack Seventeen there was a fourth shoeprint.

This time there was a faint sparkle at the heel.

Madhav knelt.

Two or three bright grains lay in the dust.

He did not pick one up with his fingernail.

He lifted it with the corner of a piece of paper.

Sand.

Not ordinary yellow sand.

There was a dark glitter in it, like fine fragments of mica.

Arun said, "There is no sand like this in the courthouse yard."

Bhola spoke at once.

"The sand brought for repairing the rear gate has that shine in it."

Everyone went outside.

For three days repairs had been under way in the narrow lane between the old civil building and the property room.

A bamboo scaffold had been erected.

Below it was a heap of glittering sand.

Madhav examined a handful.

The same dark glitter.

Arun looked up at the scaffold.

One bamboo pole reached the height of the property-room roof.

"From above the roof?"

Bhola shook his head.

"The tin is intact."

Madhav said nothing.

He went back inside and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

The old bamboo planks crossed over one another.

Exactly above Rack Seventeen, one plank sat slightly lower than the others.

Along its edge ran a pale line of fresh abrasion.

"Bring a ladder," Madhav said.

Arun stopped him.

"Call the engineer first. It is an old ceiling."

Junior Engineer Nilima Karn from the municipal construction branch arrived in the afternoon.

She examined the bamboo and said, "This is not a load-bearing ceiling. But from the scaffold outside, a thin person could reach this plank with a hand."

"Could someone climb down inside?"

"No. The gap is barely four inches."

Madhav's eyes fixed on the gap.

Four inches was too little for a man.

More than enough for a bamboo pole.

Nilima pushed a thin rod upward.

It entered through the gap.

The end of the rod could be bent towards exactly the part of the property room where the shoeprints were appearing.

Arun said softly, "The shoe was not on a person's foot."

A chill ran once through Madhav's body, but the direction of his fear changed.

The question was no longer about a ghost.

The question was:

Why was someone tying a shoe to the end of a bamboo pole and pressing it into the dust inside?

The scaffold outside was examined.

At the third bamboo joint they found fibres from an old cotton cord.

Beside them was a small piece of black rubber.

The clipped edge matched the left corner of the shoeprint.

The shoe itself was not found.

Inside Madhav, the old Item Number Forty-Seven awoke again.

Black cloth shoes, one pair.

Could the shoe that disappeared twenty-four years ago still be somewhere?

There was less logic than guilt in that question.

Madhav did not tell Arun this.

That evening he asked for the old registers.

The property-room admission register from the year 2002.

The paper edges were crumbling.

Item Number Forty-Seven:

“Black cloth shoes—one pair.”

Below that entry, in red ink, was a later note:

“Description corrected.”

The correction was dated five months later.

Item:

“Brass nameplate.”

Signature:

Raghuvir Prasad.

Witness:

Madhav Mishra.

Madhav closed his eyes.

That day Raghuvir Babu had told him that the first seizure list was wrong and only the item description was being corrected.

Madhav had not opened the box to see.

He had simply signed.

The same file concerned one family:

Jagarnath Mandal, his wife Savitri Devi, and two sons.

The allegation was that the original sale deed to their land was forged.

Later, only a certified copy reached the court.

The original paper was entered as “missing.”

The family did not exactly lose the case, but it dragged on for so long that the land passed into other hands.

Jagarnath died before the judgment.

Madhav was about to close the file.

Then a loose paper fell from beneath it.

On the reverse of an old petition, in pencil, was written:

“Original paper—property room—Seventeen.”

The handwriting was not Raghuvir Babu’s.

Madhav recognised it.

Jagdish Das, the orderly at the time.

Jagdish had died five years earlier.

On the next morning a fifth shoeprint appeared.

This time, in the dust ahead of it, there was a very fine straight line—as though something had been dragged across the floor from the corner of the sole.

The line ended at the raised floorboard.

Arun asked, “Shall we open this board?”

Madhav did not answer at once.

The floor of the property room was itself part of an officially recorded structure.

It could not be opened arbitrarily.

Nilima tapped the board.

The other boards gave a solid sound.

This one sounded hollow.

"There is empty space underneath," she said.

Arun requested written permission.

The permission had not come by noon.

In the meantime Madhav asked the scaffold contractor for the names of the workers.

Eight people.

His finger stopped when he read one name.

Ragini Mandal.

She was not listed as a labourer, but as a "measurement assistant."

The contractor said, "She is on a temporary municipal engineering project. She records old measurements and drawings for the canopy."

"Where is she from?"

"Basantpur."

Jagarnath Mandal's village had also been Basantpur.

Something inside Madhav grew heavy.

For the first time that day, he looked carefully at Ragini.

A young woman of twenty-five or twenty-six.

Dust on her forehead.

A measuring tape in her hand.

A small pencil pouch at her waist.

When she climbed the scaffold, she removed her shoes and changed into light rubber slippers.

Madhav called from below.

"Ragini Mandal?"

She stopped.

"Yes."

"Did you know Jagarnath Mandal?"

Her face did not change immediately.

Only the caution in her eyes deepened.

"He was my father."

Madhav was silent for a few moments.

"Are you making the shoeprints in the property room?"

Ragini did not answer directly.

She climbed down.

"Do you have proof?"

Her voice was not challenging.

It carried tired caution.

Madhav said, "At present it is a question."

Ragini looked towards the heap of sand.

“Then ask the question in writing.”

She walked away.

Arun was displeased when he heard of this.

“If there is suspicion, post a guard. Question her properly.”

Madhav said, “First open the floorboard.”

Permission arrived in the afternoon.

In the presence of a judicial officer’s representative, the nazir, the engineer, two witnesses, and Madhav, the nails were slowly removed from the floorboard.

When the board came up, black darkness showed below.

The depth was not great.

About four inches.

First came the smell of dried paper.

Then the corner of a piece of cloth.

Using a gripping tool like forceps, Nilima pulled it out.

It was a flat bundle wrapped in old muslin.

Everyone stopped breathing.

The procedure for opening the bundle was recorded.

Photographs were taken.

The condition of the seal was noted.

Inside were three objects.

An original sale deed.

A carbon copy of the seizure list.

And a small piece of paper in Jagdish Das’s handwriting.

“On the day this paper was changed, I saved the original. If I put it back into the file, it will disappear again. Kept beneath Seventeen. I do not know whether justice will ever see the day.”

Madhav’s knees weakened.

He stood holding the wall.

Arun examined the seal on the original deed.

“This is the paper from that dispute.”

Madhav could say only, “Yes.”

There was no shoe beneath the floorboard.

That gave him both relief and shame.

Ragini was called immediately.

When she arrived the bundle lay in front of them, but she was not allowed to touch it.

She looked at the papers from a distance.

No triumph appeared on her face.

She gripped a chair and sat down.

“My father’s paper?”

Arun said, “At first sight, that is what it appears to be. There will be an examination.”

Madhav asked, “Why the shoeprints?”

Ragini remained silent for a long time.

Then she took a folded paper from her bag.

It was a copy of a letter written by Jagdish Das's grandson.

A few months before his death, Jagdish had told his family about the old matter.

"In front of Rack Seventeen, the third floorboard. But do not open the board without government officials present."

Ragini said, "I submitted a direct application."

"To whom?" Arun asked.

"Three times. The first time I was told, 'Old matter.' The second time, 'The file is being searched.' The third time, 'The property room will soon be demolished; anything necessary will be separated.'"

"So then you chose this method?"

"I was afraid that when the floor was lifted, the paper would leave with the rubble. I had no authority to open the board. If I stole the paper, it would become suspect again. I needed something that would force the officers to look at that exact place."

Madhav asked, "Where did the shoe come from?"

For the first time Ragini smiled faintly.

"A torn shoe belonging to the scaffold contractor. It was going to be thrown away."

She explained that she had cut away the front portion of the shoe and tied it to a thin bamboo pole.

After work ended at night, she climbed onto the scaffold on the pretext of checking measurements.

There was a four-inch gap between the property-room roof and the old bamboo planks.

She lowered the pole through that gap and pressed the shoe into the dust.

On the first day she merely drew attention to the place.

On the second she pressed the print a little farther south, because she saw the first print had been covered.

On the third she placed it directly in front of the board.

On the fourth, sand from the scaffold remained on the sole.

On the fifth, she dragged the clipped corner of the shoe through the dust to draw a line.

"Did you understand that this would create fear?" Madhav asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know that interference with a secured property room can be punishable?"

"Yes."

Ragini looked directly into his eyes.

"Was making the original paper disappear also punishable?"

Silence spread through the room.

Arun looked at Madhav.

Madhav could have said that he had been a new employee then.

That he had obeyed a superior.

That he had not personally switched the contents of the box.

All of those things were facts.

But all the facts together did not make the truth.

He said slowly, "My signature is on that correction register."

Ragini said nothing.

Madhav continued, "I signed without seeing the object."

Arun's face hardened.

"Why did you never say this before?"

"Because at the time I called it a mistake and kept making it smaller inside myself. Later I understood that it was not small. Then the more time passed, the harder it became to say."

Ragini kept looking at the bundle.

"I do not know whether my father died because of the land or because of the humiliation," she said. "But in our house it was always said that if the original paper had remained, things would have been different."

Madhav had no words of comfort.

He did not feel he had the right to offer comfort either.

The next steps were slow.

Examination of the original document.

Reconstruction of the old case file.

Comparison with the seizure register.

Verification of Jagdish's handwriting.

And a separate report on the security breach in the property room.

No immediate charge was filed against Ragini, but her statement was recorded.

She was not suspended from her work either.

Until the inquiry was complete, she was kept away from the scaffold over the property room.

Madhav prepared his own written statement.

In the first draft he wrote:

"I signed according to the senior officer's instruction."

He read the sentence and tore up the paper.

In the second draft he wrote:

"I signed without seeing the object, and even after I later understood there was a discrepancy, I did not submit a written objection."

After that sentence, his hand remained still for a long time.

That evening the property room was closed again.

The five old shoeprints still remained in front of Rack Seventeen.

The inquiry team had ordered that the dust not yet be removed.

On the sixth morning Madhav opened the lock.

He was not alone.

Arun, Bhola, and two employees were with him.

Everyone's eyes went involuntarily towards Rack Seventeen.

There was no new print.

Only the five old ones.

Madhav felt a strange emptiness.

The thing that had arrived for five days in the form of fear was absent now, and the room seemed even quieter.

Bhola tried to laugh.

“The shoe has gone to rest now.”

No one laughed.

A few weeks later repairs began in the property room.

The floorboards were lifted one by one.

The space beneath was cleaned.

A fresh inventory was made of every object.

Before Rack Seventeen was removed, Madhav ran a hand along its back.

There was a very faint pencil number on the wood:

“47.”

He was startled.

It might have been coincidence.

No one could say for certain how many times the old rack numbering had changed.

Madhav resisted the temptation to manufacture meaning from the number.

Not every mark is a message.

Some marks simply remain.

The final inquiry report came months later.

The original sale deed matched the genuine old paper; its legal effect would be decided separately by the court.

Evidence of an unauthorised alteration in the old seizure list was found, but some of the principal responsible persons had died and others were unavailable.

A departmental remark was entered against Madhav:

serious dereliction in the performance of duty, followed by silence.

His retirement was three months away.

No one called him a hero.

No one called him wholly guilty either.

Earlier he had found that middle ground unbearable.

Now he understood that many decisions in life are written precisely in that middle ground.

One day Ragini came to collect a certified copy.

The original paper was now in judicial custody.

She stopped in front of Madhav’s desk.

“Everyone at home keeps asking—now that the paper has been found, will the land come back?”

Madhav said, “I do not know.”

“I told them the same thing. Finding the paper and finding a judgment are two different things.”

Madhav nodded.

After a few moments Ragini asked, “You could have changed your statement against me?”

“I could have.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Madhav looked out the window.

The repair scaffold was being dismantled.

Half the heap of glittering sand remained.

"The price of what I failed to write once was paid by many people. I was not going to do the same thing a second time."

Ragini did not answer.

She put the certified copy into her cloth bag and left.

On the final day before his retirement, Madhav went once more to see the property room.

A new floor had been laid.

There was no dust.

In the place of Rack Number Seventeen stood a new metal cupboard with a clean label and a straight number.

There was no trace of the old shoeprints.

Bhola, who was still on guard duty, said, "Babu, the photographs of those prints are in the file. Where have they gone?"

Madhav did not laugh.

He stepped onto the new floor.

Without dust, his own shoe left no complete print.

He liked that.

As he went out, he looked back once from the doorway.

The room was ordinary.

No sound.

No mystery.

But it seemed to him that sometimes justice does not enter through the door on its own feet.

Sometimes it leaves only a single mark, exactly where someone needs to look.

STORY 127

THE CLOCK THAT STRUCK AT HALF PAST

The clock still hung on the eastern wall of the municipal library.

A round brass rim, a face gone grey, and two black hands behind the glass.

By day the clock merely told the time.

At night it became something else.

The brass bell cup had been removed twelve years earlier because its sound disturbed readers.

The clock's striking mechanism had also been disabled.

Yet for two weeks, every night after midnight, the reading room had heard two metallic notes at exactly half past twelve.

On the first night, Librarian Shivnarayan Mishra thought something had fallen.

On the second night, the sound came again.

Exactly twelve-thirty.

Two notes.

The first faint.

The second slightly deeper.

On the third night he stood beneath the clock.

The hands reached half past twelve, but nothing moved inside the clock.

At that very moment a metallic vibration came from the ceiling, travelled downward through the wall, and made something inside the clock frame ring.

A chill ran down Shivnarayan's back.

He was not a believer in ghosts.

But memory sometimes moves faster than reason.

At sixty, Shivnarayan had spent thirty-five years in this library.

He knew every corner, every cupboard, the smell of every old register.

But there were certain papers whose very names made him shut an inner door in his mind.

The chime at half past twelve sounded like a knock on that door.

The bell had been removed twelve years earlier.

But much earlier than that—twenty-seven years earlier—a student had filed a complaint.

His name was Naresh Paswan.

Naresh came to the library every evening.

His home was in an earthen lane behind the market.

His father was a tailor.

Naresh read books for competitive examinations, but his real love was for old bound volumes of history.

Books that other students never touched would find him bent over their pages.

One day he placed a four-page written complaint on Shivnarayan's desk.

“Give me a receipt for this,” he had said.

Shivnarayan had asked, “Let me read it first.”

Naresh’s eyes were tired, but his voice was steady.

“Read it. But please give me a receipt.”

The complaint stated that rare books from the library were being taken upstairs in the name of a “special exhibition,” after which pages were found missing from some volumes.

Naresh had twice seen Arun, nephew of the committee secretary, come out of the upstairs room carrying wrapped papers.

He had also written that some entries in the issue register were being filled in later.

Shivnarayan was an assistant librarian then.

The complaint frightened him.

That year Committee Secretary Awadhesh Babu had contributed half the money for roof repairs through his own business establishment.

The municipal grant was stalled.

The roof leaked.

Three months of staff salaries were unpaid.

Shivnarayan placed the complaint before the chief librarian.

The chief said quietly, “If this paper enters the register now, the library will be shut down. First let us investigate internally.”

The internal investigation was never completed.

Two weeks later a rare bound volume actually disappeared.

One page from the issue register was found torn out.

That day Naresh had been seen near the upstairs room.

No questions were raised about Arun.

Questions were raised about Naresh.

Shivnarayan knew that Naresh’s complaint had come first.

He also knew it was not clear whether Naresh’s name had been on the torn page.

But he remained silent.

“If the book is found, everything will become clear,” he told himself.

The book was not found.

Naresh’s entry to the library was barred.

The matter did not reach the police because the committee did not want scandal.

On paper it was written:

“Membership suspended on disciplinary grounds.”

Naresh never came to the library again.

Some months later, people heard that he had gone outside Darbhanga to look for work.

Shivnarayan pushed the matter into a mental cupboard labelled “old incident.”

Now the chime at half past twelve seemed to be coming from behind that cupboard.

On the fourth night, he kept watchman Raghu with him.

Raghu was a thin man in his forties.

After the library closed, he made rounds of the main door, courtyard, rear veranda, and upper roof.

"Where are you at twelve-thirty?" Shivnarayan asked.

"Near the back gate. I leave this room at twelve twenty-five and return by twelve thirty-five."

"Every day?"

"Almost."

Shivnarayan said nothing.

Raghu laughed.

"People say the old clock has started striking again."

"People have too little work."

"I heard the bell itself is gone."

"It is."

"Then what is striking?"

Shivnarayan did not answer.

At twelve twenty-five Raghu left for his round.

Shivnarayan switched off all the lights in the reading room except the small green-shaded lamp on the desk.

The clock hands moved slowly forward.

Twelve twenty-nine.

The room smelled of old paper and dampness.

Outside, neem leaves rustled.

Twelve-thirty.

Ton.

A moment.

Ton.

This time Shivnarayan was not looking at the clock.

He was looking towards the ceiling.

With the second note, a thin wire trembled.

It hung from near a wooden strip in the ceiling.

By day it looked like a line of dust.

In the slanting night light, it glinted.

Shivnarayan pulled over a chair and climbed up.

The lower end of the wire entered the wall behind the clock.

The upper end disappeared into the ceiling.

He touched it with a finger.

A faint metallic clink sounded inside the clock.

His breathing quickened.

The bell had been removed, but the old striker rod and pull-wire had never been completely taken out.

If the wire was pulled, the striker now hit the brass base plate where the bell had once been.

But who was pulling the wire?

When Raghu returned that night, Shivnarayan said nothing.

In the morning he searched for the old building plan.

The ceiling wire had once run to a hand bell in the upstairs reading room. After a fire alarm system was installed, that arrangement had been abandoned.

The wire had not been cut.

It had merely been bent and left inside the ceiling.

As Shivnarayan traced the wire's route on the plan, his eyes stopped on one notation:

"OLD RECORD CUPBOARD, ROOM 3."

Room 3 was no longer locked.

Half of it was now used for book repair.

Against one wall stood a huge wooden cupboard that was difficult to get behind.

At noon Shivnarayan went there.

There was less dust in front of the cupboard.

Something heavy had recently been dragged.

Fine wood powder lay on the floor at the right-hand corner.

He called Raghu.

"Who moved this cupboard?"

Raghu scratched his head.

"Not me. Perhaps the repair workers?"

"No repairs were done here."

It was difficult to reach the top of the cupboard.

Shivnarayan had a ladder brought.

In the dust above were two clear finger streaks.

Behind the cupboard was a narrow gap.

In the gap, the corner of a paper could be seen.

He tried to pull it out, but it was stuck inside.

Then the direction of the ceiling wire became clear to him.

The wire came down exactly behind the cupboard.

Whenever someone pressed or pulled the rear board of the cupboard, the board tugged the old wire.

The wire sent the vibration through the wall to the clock.

The clock was not striking at the half-hour.

Someone was searching for papers at the half-hour.

The question was no longer about the sound.

The question was:

Who?

That night Shivnarayan changed the timing of Raghu's round.

"Tonight do not go to the back at twelve-twenty," he said.

"Stay on the upstairs veranda. But make no sound."

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes."

"A thief?"

Shivnarayan thought for a moment.

"I do not know yet."

At twelve twenty-five the library looked normal from outside.

The main door was closed.
 The lights were out.
 Shivnarayan stood in the dark near Room 3.
 At twelve twenty-nine, the latch of the small rear window lifted very slowly.
 He had not noticed that latch during the day.
 A thin iron wire could be inserted from outside to lift its catch.
 The window opened.
 A shadow entered.
 The shadow went straight to the cupboard.
 Shivnarayan waited.
 The figure reached up and pressed the rear wooden board.
 Far away in the reading room came the metallic note.
 Ton.
 The board was pulled a second time.
 Ton.
 "Enough," Shivnarayan said.
 The shadow froze.
 Raghu lit a lamp from the veranda.
 It was a young woman.
 Twenty-five or twenty-six.
 A dark face.
 Sweat on her forehead.
 A cloth bundle in her hand.
 Shivnarayan had seen her somewhere.
 "Name?"
 At first the young woman was silent.
 Then she said, "Sudha."
 "Full name?"
 "Sudha Naresh Paswan."
 Something old inside Shivnarayan suddenly fell.
 Raghu looked at him.
 Sudha said, "Raghu Kaka knew nothing. I had noticed the old latch on the window during the day."
 "Why do you come here at night?"
 "For papers."
 "Which papers?"
 "The ones you people have not searched for in twenty-seven years."
 Shivnarayan's mouth went dry.
 Sudha pointed behind the cupboard.
 "Before my father died, he told me one thing. The original copy of his complaint had not been returned to him that day. Two weeks later, when he was accused, he saw an employee hiding some papers in this room. He suspected that the complaint and the original issue-register page were somewhere here."
 "Naresh... died?"

“Three months ago.”

Shivnarayan lowered his eyes.

Sudha said, “While sorting his belongings I found an old diary. It mentioned this library, you, Awadhesh Babu, Arun. I came during the day to ask.”

Shivnarayan remembered.

Two weeks earlier a young woman had requested permission to see the old membership register.

An employee had refused, saying it was a “personal record.”

Shivnarayan had signed the refusal and accepted it.

“Why did you not come directly to me?”

“I did. You were in a meeting. The next day I was told the old files were being sorted. On the third day I heard that papers considered ‘useless’ would be removed the following week.”

Raghu asked quietly, “So you came at night?”

“Yes.”

Shivnarayan tried to make his voice stern.

“This is an offence.”

Sudha looked directly at him.

“It may be.”

There was neither challenge nor apology in those two words.

Shivnarayan remembered his own sentence from twenty-seven years earlier:

“First let us investigate internally.”

After that sentence, so many inner doors had closed.

“Move the cupboard,” he told Raghu.

The three of them shifted the cupboard slightly forward.

The wooden panel at the back was split in the middle.

Inside the gap were old dust, cobwebs, and a thick layer of papers jammed together.

Sudha opened her cloth bundle.

Inside were thin tweezers, cotton cloth, and a small torch.

“The papers will tear,” she said. “Slowly.”

Shivnarayan did not stop her hand.

One paper came out after another.

The first: an old newspaper clipping.

The second: a repair expense sheet.

The third: a carbon copy of an issue-register page.

The fourth: a four-page handwritten complaint.

Naresh Paswan’s name was at the top.

Shivnarayan’s signature was at the bottom.

The date.

And a short note:

“Received; for preliminary inquiry.”

Shivnarayan searched for a chair and sat down.

The signature was his.

The ink had faded, but the letters were clear.
 Sudha said nothing.
 Raghu went outside.
 Perhaps he understood that what the room needed now was not a guard
 but privacy.
 Shivnarayan turned the pages of the complaint.
 On the back of the fourth page was a name:
 Harishankar Das, then the store assistant.
 Below it, in small handwriting, were the words:
 "Copy of issue page kept separately."
 The carbon copy lay beside it.
 On that copy was the entry for the missing bound volume.
 The book had not been issued in Naresh's name.
 It had been issued in the name of the committee office for the upstairs
 exhibition.
 The date was five days before the accusation against Naresh.
 The receiving signature was indistinct, but it was not Naresh's.
 First relief rose inside Shivnarayan.
 Naresh had been innocent.
 At once the relief turned into shame.
 The paper that could prove his innocence had been in this building.
 It had been there at the time as well.
 It simply had not been searched for.
 "Why would Harishankar Das hide these papers here?" Sudha asked.
 After a long time Shivnarayan said, "Perhaps to save them."
 "From whom?"
 "Perhaps from us."
 He remembered Harishankar.
 A thin man who spoke little and always kept his desk clean.
 Six months after the incident he left the job and returned to his village.
 At the time everyone said it was because of family problems.
 Perhaps the problem had been this building.
 Sudha reached for the complaint papers.
 Instinctively Shivnarayan stopped her.
 "This is a library record."
 Sudha's face hardened.
 Shivnarayan removed his hand.
 "I mean—a proper copy will be made. The original will remain protected
 in the file. You will receive a certified copy."
 "When?"
 "Today."
 "Things can change after daylight."
 Shivnarayan kept looking at her.
 The distrust could have hurt him.
 But the hurt felt deserved.
 "Then let us make the inventory now."

At one-ten in the night, the library receipt register was opened again.
Shivnarayan wrote down the names of the old files.
Sudha read aloud the condition of each document.
Raghu signed as witness.
Sudha asked permission to photograph them with her mobile phone.
Shivnarayan allowed it.

When the first page of the complaint came into the light, Shivnarayan's signature shone again.

For the first time he thought:
A signature is not merely receipt.
It is responsibility.

Until four in the morning, the three of them sorted papers.
Thirty-seven documents in all came out from behind the cupboard.
Most were useless—old bills, letters, lists.
But seven were connected to Naresh's case.
One paper was the most uncomfortable of all.

A short note written by the chief librarian:

"Keep the matter pending; discussion with the committee secretary remains."

Below it were Shivnarayan's initials.
Sudha stared at that page for a long time.

"Did you remember all of this?"

"No."

"What did you remember?"

Before answering, Shivnarayan looked towards the window.

The eastern sky was beginning to open.

"I remembered that the complaint had come. I remembered that I had given a receipt. I remembered that the inquiry was never completed. And I remembered that after Naresh was accused, I did not insist on finding my own signed copy."

Sudha did not fold the page.

She simply placed it on the table.

"My father used to say the accusation of theft was not what hurt him most."

Shivnarayan asked, "Then what?"

"He thought the library was his place. After the accusation, he understood that perhaps it had never been his place at all."

After that sentence, the room became very quiet.

From far away came the dawn azan from a mosque.

Somewhere in a lane a milk can clanged.

The old clock had stopped at one forty-five.

Its hands had not moved forward through the rest of the night.

Perhaps the mainspring had run down.

But no one was paying attention to it now.

At seven, the employees arrived.

Shivnarayan called everyone into the reading room.

He did not tell the whole story of the night.

Nor did he immediately mention that Sudha had entered through the window.

First he placed the seven papers on the table.

"From today these files go onto the preservation list," he said.

"And the membership-suspension entry from twenty-seven years ago will be reviewed."

One employee asked, "Why reopen something so old?"

Shivnarayan replied, "The paper is old. A mistake does not become correct merely by becoming old."

He called the committee chairman.

At first the chairman became uneasy.

The moment he heard the old names, he said, "What benefit is there in reopening such matters?"

Shivnarayan looked through the window.

Sudha was sitting on the veranda.

Eyes that had not slept all night.

A steady face.

"I calculated the benefit long ago," Shivnarayan said.

"Now I will calculate the record."

By noon a brief correction note had been prepared.

Its language made no accusation.

It recorded only what the evidence established:

At the time Naresh Paswan's membership was suspended, the original available issue-register copy had not been taken into consideration.

According to the newly recovered record, the missing bound volume had been issued in the name of the committee office.

The old decision had not been based on complete evidence.

No direct allegation was written against Arun.

There was not enough evidence against him.

Sudha noticed.

"You left his name out."

"Because I will not write more than the papers support."

Sudha was silent for a few moments.

Then she nodded.

It was not agreement.

But neither was it disagreement.

Shivnarayan felt that form was more proper.

In the afternoon Sudha left carrying the certified copies.

At the door she turned.

"Do what you need to do about my night entry."

Shivnarayan said, "The window latch will be changed today."

Sudha looked at his face.

Perhaps she understood that, for now, that was all that would be said on the subject.

"The clock sound?" she asked.

“That will stop too.”

Sudha left.

In the evening a repairman came.

Shivnarayan did not ask him to remove the clock.

He asked only for the old ceiling wire to be taken out.

The wire was much longer than expected.

It ran in several bends through the ceiling, rusted, snagged in wood.

One end was tied to the striker rod of the clock.

The other had become trapped behind the cupboard.

The repairman laughed.

“This thing has been useless for years. Who would have thought it could make so much noise?”

Shivnarayan said, “Useless things sometimes become useful again after a very long time.”

The repairman did not understand.

He coiled the wire and carried it away.

That night Shivnarayan stayed at the library again.

Raghu asked, “Tonight too?”

“One last time.”

At twelve twenty-five Raghu went on his round at the rear.

Shivnarayan sat alone in the reading room.

The old clock had now been repaired and was keeping proper time.

Twelve twenty-nine.

He opened a new register on the table.

One line had already been written:

“Review of old membership decision.”

The space for the name below was blank.

Twelve-thirty.

No metallic note sounded.

Shivnarayan watched the clock for a few moments.

Then he picked up his pen.

In the blank line he wrote:

“Naresh Paswan.”

He completed the letters and put the pen down.

The clock moved silently on.

STORY 128

THE TAUT ROPE AT THE DESERTED FERRY GHAT

At first light, when Harinarayan Jha reached the ghat, the river was grey.

The water had taken on the colour of the sky, but the old ghat had lost its own colour long ago.

Two wooden posts still stood on the two sides.

Once a thick rope had been tied between them, and the ferryboat used that rope to cut across the current.

Twelve years earlier, when the new bridge was built, the ghat had been closed.

A government board in red letters said: "FERRY CROSSING PROHIBITED."

Half the paint had flaked away, but the prohibition could still be read.

Harinarayan had no complaint about that prohibition.

His complaint was with the rope.

Until the previous evening the rope had been slack.

He had seen it himself.

Now, at dawn, it was stretched straight across the river.

As though someone had taken hold of both ends during the night and pulled them tight.

Harinarayan stopped at once.

His first glance went not to the rope but to the post on the right.

The wood at the bottom of the post was wet.

The upper part was dry.

It had not rained during the night.

He looked at the sky.

The clouds were far away.

"Again," he said without meaning to.

This was the third morning in a row.

On the first day he had thought some child had been playing there.

On the second, he had thought fishermen might have tightened the rope at night for support.

On the third day, excuses began to run out.

He reached out and touched the rope.

It was cold.

The lower fibres were still damp.

The upper fibres were almost dry.

Harinarayan drew his hand back immediately.

Fine river silt clung to his fingers.

The moment he saw its colour, an old scene opened inside him.

Nineteen years earlier the silt had been the same grey.

That night the river had been rising.

A red flag closing the ghat had been planted before evening.
But at half past nine the ferryboat Saraswati was opened for crossing.
There were fewer people aboard than sacks.
Twelve sacks of government rice.
Three sacks of salt.
Two boxes of medicine.
And seven men.

Boatman Mahesh Sahni had said, "I will not cross in this current."

A man from the block store officer's side had said, "The relief must reach by morning."

Mahesh had refused again.

Harinarayan, who was then the ghat clerk, had made a red entry in his register:

"CROSSING SUSPENDED."

But the boat left.

In midstream one sack slipped.

People rushed to steady it.

The boat tilted to one side.

The strong current pressed hard against the rope.

The old joint creaked.

The rope did not break.

But the boat swung beneath it.

Three men survived.

Four did not.

Mahesh did not survive either.

The next day officials came from the district.

Two sheets were placed before Harinarayan.

The first said that the boat had been sent out under pressure after the red flag was raised.

The second said that boatman Mahesh Sahni, tempted by private earnings, had violated the prohibition and opened the ferry on his own.

Harinarayan was told, "If the first page remains, the relief officer will be suspended, the entire store account will be opened, and a case may be made against you too."

At that time Harinarayan's son was in hospital.

The fear of losing his job closed around his neck like a hand.

He signed the second page.

After that, many things were buried.

Mahesh's family did not receive full compensation.

Two of the four bereaved families left the village.

Harinarayan remained in service.

And even nineteen years later, whenever he saw a wet rope, the ink of his own signature seemed wet to him.

"Babuji?"

The voice came from behind.

Harinarayan turned.

It was Bablu, son of the old ghat watchman.
 After his father's death, Bablu had taken up farming.
 "So early?"

Harinarayan said, "The committee says the old posts are to be removed. I came to look at the measurements."

Bablu looked at the rope.

"It was stretched again last night?"

Harinarayan's chest tightened slightly.

"Who told you?"

"Everyone sees it."

"Everyone?"

"Whoever comes towards the river in the morning."

Bablu added quietly, "No one comes here at night."

"So the rope tightens itself?"

Bablu did not laugh.

"People say Mahesh Kaka runs the ghat again at night."

Harinarayan's gaze hardened.

"A dead man does not pull rope."

Bablu kept turning his heel in the earth.

"Then a living man must be pulling it."

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

"Heard anything?"

"Sometimes a scraping sound."

"At what time?"

"Around two in the night."

Harinarayan fell silent.

Bablu left.

Harinarayan bent to inspect the knot.

He knew the old knot.

When the ferry operated, the rope went twice around the post and then formed a loop from above.

This knot was different.

Here the rope had been passed from below.

About two hand-spans above the ground there was fresh abrasion on the post.

The old ferry rope had been tied four hand-spans higher.

Whatever moved at night, therefore, used a lower rope.

Harinarayan walked to the riverbank.

There were no clear footprints in the sand.

But there were two long, thin lines.

As if some flat object had been dragged.

The lines ended in the river.

At that spot a small patch of oil shone like glass.

Harinarayan touched it with a finger and smelled it.

Mustard oil.

On old boats, mustard oil and ash were rubbed into the underside to preserve the wood.

Few people now knew that method.

He remembered Mahesh.

Mahesh used to say, "Oil saves the belly of the wood."

Harinarayan straightened.

Smoke rose from the sandy bank on the far side.

That was Dharkatta Tola.

In government records, the settlement had been marked "relocated" five years earlier.

The river had eroded the bank three times.

Twelve families had taken compensation and moved to higher land.

Nine families had not gone.

Some had not received full compensation.

Some had disputes over the new land.

For some, leaving their animals was impossible.

On the government map, the settlement was almost gone.

On the ground, cooking fires still burned.

The new bridge was not seventeen kos away, but it required a seventeen-kilometre road journey.

In the rains, the road grew longer still.

After the ghat closed, people on the far bank spent two hours going around to reach the market.

Harinarayan knew all of this.

But none of it, by itself, explained the rope at night.

He returned home.

All day he could not settle into his work.

At noon he opened an old trunk.

After retirement he had thought of burning many of the papers.

He had not been able to burn them.

At the bottom of the trunk, a copy connected with that accident still remained.

Not the official report.

A torn page from the ghat's daily register.

In red ink it said:

"CROSSING SUSPENDED."

Below it was Mahesh's thumbprint.

Then, in Harinarayan's handwriting:

"At the insistence of the store side."

Later, black ink had been worked over those words.

The letters could still be seen beneath it.

Harinarayan put the page back into the trunk.

After dinner his wife asked, "Are you going out again tonight?"

Harinarayan was startled.

"Who told you?"

"Your walking stick is ready by the door."

He did not answer.
 His wife said only, "The wind is strong at the old ghat at night."
 Harinarayan did not smile.
 "I am not afraid of the wind."
 His wife kept looking at him.
 "What you are afraid of is not the wind."
 Harinarayan picked up his stick.
 At half past twelve the ghat was deserted.
 The moon was behind clouds.
 The river sounded heavier than it did by day.
 Harinarayan sat behind the broken wall of the old ticket hut.
 The rope was slack.
 The posts were dry.
 He looked at his watch.
 One o'clock.
 Nothing.
 Quarter past one.
 A dog barked far away.
 Half past one.
 For an instant a light flashed on the far sandbank, then went out.
 Harinarayan held his breath.
 The rope trembled faintly.
 Once.
 Then twice.
 Then it slowly tightened.
 The post groaned.
 It was the same scraping sound Bablu had described.
 A shiver ran through Harinarayan's body.
 He told himself:
 A living person.
 The rope tightened again.
 In the darkness a low shadow moved across the middle of the river.
 Like a boat, but much smaller than a boat.
 There was no lantern at its bow.
 Someone on the far side was pulling the rope.
 On this side another shadow emerged.
 It came out from behind the ticket hut and reached the post.
 Harinarayan could not see the face.
 But he saw the movement of the hands.
 The rope was passed around the post from below.
 The same new knot.
 A small flat dinghy came to the bank.
 There was not a sack in it, but four bamboo baskets.
 Bottles clinked in one basket.
 Bundles of papers lay in another.
 The third held children's clothing.

The fourth contained not vegetables but small boxes.

Harinarayan stepped out of the darkness.

"Who is there?"

Both shadows stopped.

A woman's voice said, "Lower the stick, Harinarayan Babu."

He recognised the voice.

"Sudha?"

The woman came forward.

Sudha Kumari was an assistant at the health sub-centre.

She carried vaccines, antenatal check-ups, and medicines to Dharkatta Tola and the surrounding villages.

The other man removed the gamchha from his head.

Phekan Sahni.

Son of Mahesh Sahni's younger brother.

Harinarayan's mouth went dry.

Phekan said, "I thought one day you would see us."

Harinarayan looked at the rope.

"What is all this?"

Sudha removed the cloth from the baskets.

"Fever medicine. Iron tablets for two pregnant women. An asthma inhaler for a child. Some test slips."

"Government vehicle?"

"It does not go as far as Dharkatta."

"The bridge?"

"There is no transport at night."

Harinarayan's voice hardened.

"The ghat is closed."

"We know."

"This stretch of the river has been declared unsafe."

"We know that too."

"Then?"

Loosening the dinghy rope, Phekan said, "When someone cannot breathe, a prohibition board does not open the lungs."

Harinarayan stared at him.

"That is a very fine sentence. The river does not become calm by listening to fine sentences."

Phekan's face hardened slightly.

"I know this river no less than you do."

The sentence struck like a blow.

Mahesh's face flashed inside Harinarayan.

"Your uncle knew it too."

Phekan fell silent.

Sudha said between them, "This is no time to quarrel. Tonight's consignment has to reach."

"Consignment?" Harinarayan repeated.

"Do people cross too?"

Sudha did not answer directly.

Phekan said, "When necessary."

"How many?"

"No more than two."

"For how many nights?"

"Three months."

Harinarayan tightened his grip on the stick.

"Three months?"

Sudha said, "Since the rains began."

"And no accident?"

"No."

"Not yet."

Phekan turned his face towards the river.

Harinarayan asked, "Why only at night?"

Sudha said, "If we are seen by day, the administration will cut the rope."

"There is an order to cut it."

"And the alternative for the people of Dharkatta?"

Harinarayan was silent.

Sudha lifted a basket.

"On paper the settlement has been relocated. So no boat is sanctioned. The health vehicle does not go there. Schoolchildren must go around by the bridge. If labour begins at night, then God must help them."

"So you are making your own law?"

"No. Only filling its empty half twice a night."

Harinarayan felt anger.

Perhaps not at Sudha.

Perhaps at himself.

"Why does the rope stay wet?"

Phekan answered, "After reaching the far bank, we lift the dinghy. The lower part of the rope goes into the water."

"Why tie it low on the post?"

"The dinghy sits low. If we tie the rope high as with the old ferry, it will overturn."

"And the mustard oil?"

For the first time Phekan smiled faintly.

"Kaka taught me."

Harinarayan's eyes fixed on him.

Phekan's smile disappeared.

Suddenly the river curled in a small circle near the bank.

A floating leaf moved for a moment against the main current.

Harinarayan saw it.

"Reverse current."

Phekan nodded.

"At night, after the water is reduced at the upstream gate, a reverse eddy forms at this bend for about half an hour. We cross then."

"You time it?"

Phekan took a small notebook from the pouch at his waist.

It was not wet.

He opened it.

Date.

Water level.

Wind.

Load.

Number of people.

Departure time.

Arrival time.

Everything was written down.

In one place, in red letters, it said:

“CURRENT STRONG—CROSSING STOPPED.”

In another:

“TWO PERSONS—TOTAL LOAD WITHIN LIMIT.”

And in a third:

“ROPE FIBRE REPLACED.”

Harinarayan kept turning the pages.

He remembered his own old register.

Red ink.

“CROSSING SUSPENDED.”

And then the boat had left.

He returned the notebook to Phekan.

“Who taught you all this?”

Phekan said, “After the accident in which Kaka died, only one thing kept being said in our house: do not argue with the river.”

Harinarayan’s throat went dry.

Sudha asked, “Will you tell the administration?”

“I should.”

“Yes.”

Her easy answer startled Harinarayan.

“You will not try to stop me?”

“Why? A rule is being broken.”

“Then this night work?”

“The rule is being broken because the other half of the rule was never made.”

Harinarayan looked at her.

Sudha continued, “Tell them. But tell the whole thing.”

“The whole thing?”

“That the ghat is closed. That crossings happen at night. Why they happen. That Dharkatta has disappeared on paper, but people still live there.”

Phekan remained silent.

Harinarayan asked, “Are you not afraid?”

Phekan said, “I am.”

“Your boat can be seized.”

“It can.”

"You could go to jail."

"It can happen."

"Then why?"

Phekan looked into the darkness across the river.

"Last month little Rajni was bitten by a snake at night. If we had gone around by the bridge, it would have been morning before we reached the hospital. We brought her across in this dinghy."

Harinarayan said nothing.

"Did she survive?"

"She survived."

Somewhere in midstream a fish jumped.

The sound was small but travelled far through the darkness.

Harinarayan asked, "And the accident report?"

Phekan's face changed.

"Which report?"

"Your uncle's."

Phekan looked at Sudha.

Sudha slowly put the basket down on the ground.

Phekan said, "The copy we had at home was incomplete."

Harinarayan's heart began beating hard.

"What copy?"

"The carbon copy of the ghat register."

Harinarayan's hand slipped from the stick.

Phekan said, "It mentioned the red flag. It also mentioned the insistence from the store side."

Harinarayan felt as if the night wind over the river had suddenly grown cold.

"How long have you known?"

"For a long time."

"Then why did you never complain?"

Phekan took time to answer.

"Babuji wanted to complain. Grandmother stopped him."

"Why?"

"She said the proof was only half complete, and there was no one left to support the household. She used to say, 'Will clearing a dead man's name fill our stomachs?'"

Harinarayan lowered his eyes.

Phekan added, "I was angry before too. Less now."

"Why less?"

"Kaka will not come back."

He said it more softly than Harinarayan expected.

The softness cut deeper.

Sudha said, "Let us make tonight's crossing. Two households are waiting on the other side."

Harinarayan took hold of the rope.

It was taut.

He remembered the night nineteen years earlier when he had stood at this ghat and Mahesh had looked at him once before opening the ferry.

That look had not been a question.

It had merely asked for witness.

Harinarayan had not given witness that night.

Now he understood that penance for an old wrong could not consist of silently accepting a new wrong in the present.

He let go of the rope.

“Cross tonight.”

Phekan looked up.

“But not like this from tomorrow.”

Sudha asked, “Then?”

“Tomorrow I will write two papers.”

“Which?”

“One about the past.”

Harinarayan’s voice trembled.

“One about the present.”

No one answered.

Harinarayan sat on the broken bench of the ticket hut.

Phekan and Sudha placed the baskets into the dinghy.

Phekan tightened the knot.

“Load?”

Sudha said, “Forty-six.”

“Limit?”

“Sixty.”

“Wind?”

“Light south-westerly.”

“Current?”

Sudha dipped a bamboo pole into the water.

“The eddy has begun.”

Harinarayan listened to everything.

This was not carelessness.

But neither was it a safe, authorised arrangement.

Both things were true at once.

The dinghy slid slowly into the river.

Phekan kept pulling the rope.

Sudha held the baskets.

Near midstream the dinghy trembled slightly.

Harinarayan’s breath caught.

The boat from nineteen years earlier rose before his eyes.

But Phekan immediately eased the tension.

The dinghy slipped one hand-span downstream with the current.

Then straightened.

For the first time Harinarayan understood that Phekan knew how to read the river.

His fear did not end.

Its form changed.

When they reached the far bank, Sudha raised a hand once.

Phekan let the rope go slack.

Harinarayan stood by the post.

Night dampness settled again on the wood.

He did not go home before dawn.

Before sunrise Phekan returned.

The dinghy was empty.

"Sudha?"

"She will stay on that side. There are two antenatal check-ups in the morning."

Harinarayan asked, "Where is Rajni's house?"

"In the middle of Dharkatta."

"The girl who was bitten by the snake?"

"Yes."

Harinarayan nodded.

Phekan began turning the dinghy upside down in the bushes.

Harinarayan said, "Come to my house during the day tomorrow."

Phekan stopped.

"Why?"

"For your uncle's report."

Phekan looked at him for a long time.

"I do not want revenge."

"Nor do I want a way to escape by asking forgiveness."

Harinarayan said, "What was written was changed. What was changed will be written again."

Phekan said nothing.

The dawn light strengthened.

The rope became slack again.

At noon Phekan came to Harinarayan's house.

He brought an old tin box with him.

Inside were cloth, two old receipts, Mahesh's boat permit, and a carbon sheet.

Harinarayan took the original torn page from his own trunk.

The two copies were placed opposite each other.

On the carbon copy, the words "at the insistence of the store side" could be read clearly.

On Harinarayan's copy, black ink had been worked over the same words.

Phekan only watched.

Harinarayan said, "This black ink is in my hand."

Phekan did not look away.

"I knew."

"Who told you?"

"Your name was written on the black-ink bottle. Grandmother had kept it."

Harinarayan stopped.

Phekan said softly, "Villages are small, Babu."

There was no excuse left inside Harinarayan.

He pulled a sheet of paper towards him.

In the first paper he wrote that the written statement in the accident report prepared nineteen years earlier had been altered under pressure; that the actual daily register confirmed the red flag and the insistence from the store side; and that blaming Mahesh Sahni alone had been false.

He stopped after writing the word "pressure."

Phekan watched.

Harinarayan wrote again:

"Nevertheless, the signature on the final report was mine; I do not separate myself from that responsibility."

For the first time Phekan lowered his eyes.

The second paper concerned the present ghat.

Harinarayan wrote that keeping the ghat closed was justified from the standpoint of safety.

Then he wrote that a prohibition without alternative access was incomplete.

Dharkatta Tola remained inhabited on the ground even though it was shown as relocated in the records.

Unauthorised night crossings had been found to be taking place.

Private records were being kept of load limits, current timing, and weather, but these could not substitute for an approved safety system.

In the final line he wrote:

"Before enforcing the prohibition, a life-saving alternative crossing shall be made available immediately."

Phekan asked, "Will you write the names?"

Harinarayan stopped his pen.

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"If I simply write your name here, the first action may be your arrest."

"If you do not write it, then it is half the truth again."

Harinarayan looked at him.

It was a difficult question.

Nineteen years earlier he had chosen half the truth.

The half-truth had become a complete lie.

He wrote:

"Emergency crossings are being conducted by a local health assistant and a boatman; the names are provided in the attached confidential statement, on which action shall be taken in accordance with the safety review after alternative service has begun."

Phekan raised his eyebrows.

"Is that a middle path?"

"No."

Harinarayan said, "It is a way of writing both truths together."

"What if the officer reads only the first part?"

“Then I will make him read the second part again.”

The next morning Harinarayan went to the block office.

The new clerk was startled as soon as he saw the old accident papers.

“Such an old matter?”

“It is old. It is not finished.”

The officer first read the letter about the present ghat.

“Unauthorised crossing?”

“Yes.”

“The rope should be cut immediately.”

Harinarayan said, “Send a health boat first.”

“The rule—”

“I have read the rule.”

For the first time Harinarayan raised his voice slightly.

“Because of this rule, people cross the river secretly at night. Cutting the rope is easy. Shortening seventeen kilometres for a child who cannot breathe is difficult.”

The room fell silent.

The officer looked again at the old report.

“Why are you giving this now?”

Harinarayan replied, “Because even now a rope is being stretched at night.”

The officer did not understand the full meaning.

Harinarayan did not explain further.

For three days nothing happened.

On the fourth day the police came to the ghat.

A commotion rose in the village:

Phekan would be arrested.

But with the police came a small motorboat from the health department.

It was not a permanent solution.

It was an emergency service sanctioned for only thirty days.

The rules were set:

two crossings during the day,

and one emergency crossing at night upon a health message.

Whether Dharkatta Tola would be counted again as an inhabited settlement would be examined separately.

The old accident report was sent for re-examination.

Mahesh Sahni’s family did not receive justice immediately.

Paper moves more slowly than a river.

But this time the paper moved.

Phekan’s private dinghy was not confiscated.

He was warned.

Sudha was asked for a written explanation.

She wrote:

“There was no permission; there was necessity.”

Harinarayan remained silent for a long time when he heard that sentence.

A week later the committee came to remove the old posts.

The post on the right had half rotted away.

A labourer raised his axe.

Harinarayan said, "Wait."

Everyone looked at him.

He touched the fresh abrasion on the lower part of the post.

Three months of nights lived in that abrasion.

Someone's medicine.

Someone's examination papers.

A snake-bitten girl.

A broken rule.

Compassion.

He told the labourer, "Cut it."

The axe fell.

The first blow on the wood made a small echo over the river.

At the second blow the post shook.

At the third it leaned over.

The rope fell to the ground.

Harinarayan thought:

Nineteen years earlier, it had not been the rope that broke.

What broke was testimony.

This time the rope was being removed, but the testimony had already been written.

Phekan stood a little way off.

He came forward and picked up a small piece of the old rope.

Harinarayan asked, "What will you do with it?"

"Not use it for the dinghy."

Phekan said, "I will keep it at home."

"To remember?"

Phekan smiled.

"No. A rope is only a rope."

Then, tucking the piece under his arm, he added, "But one should remember how a knot is tied."

Harinarayan looked at the river.

The morning current flowed in its main direction.

Near the bank a small circular eddy was still moving backward.

A few moments later it too straightened.

That evening Harinarayan opened his old trunk.

He took out the torn page marked over in black ink.

Once he had hidden that page.

Now he placed it inside a transparent sleeve and wrote the date above it.

Before closing the trunk, he paused for a moment.

Then he did not close the lid.

He left the trunk open.

The next morning the rope was not stretched across the ghat.

The wooden posts too were gone.

But from across the river came the sound of the small health-department boat's engine.

Harinarayan stood in his doorway and listened.

The sound slowly receded.

His hand went involuntarily to his fingers.

There was no wet ink there.

THE BLUE GLASS BOTTLE

For seventeen years, the main door of the old dispensary at Belauncha had not opened for a patient.

Above the doorway, a brass plaque still bore faded letters:

“DISTRICT BOARD PUBLIC DISPENSARY, 1958.”

After the monsoon, lime had peeled from the walls in patches. Cobwebs were so tightly caught in the iron window grilles that even when the wind blew they hardly moved.

Before demolishing the building, the District Health Office wanted an inventory made of the old papers, instruments, and medicine containers inside.

Madhavi Jha was given temporary charge of the work for three weeks.

Madhavi was patient with records. Even when lifting the corner of a brittle paper, her hand did not hurry.

But on her first day inside the dispensary, the object that drew her most strongly was not a register.

It was an empty blue glass bottle.

The bottle stood on the second shelf of a locked cupboard.

Its neck was slender, its body rounded, and its base thick.

The label had fallen away long ago.

Only a grey trace of glue remained on the glass.

“Is this in the inventory?” Madhavi asked caretaker Harinandan Sahu.

Harinandan narrowed his eyes at it.

“There are many old bottles. What is special about this one?”

“Blue glass. Only one.”

“Then write it down. When the building is demolished, many such things will be thrown away.”

Madhavi entered a serial number for the bottle.

She locked the cupboard, pasted a thin paper seal bearing her own mark across the brass lock, and went home in the evening.

The next day the seal was exactly as she had left it.

The lock too was closed.

But the bottle was no longer on the second shelf.

It stood at the right-hand corner of the fourth shelf.

At first Madhavi doubted her own memory.

She opened the inventory.

It read:

“Empty blue glass bottle—Cupboard 2, Shelf 2, left side.”

She picked up the bottle.

A thin white crescent of dust clung to its base.

“Did you go inside?” she asked Harinandan.

“The seal is yours. How could I?”

“A second key?”

Harinandan did not laugh.

“One key is with me, one at the office. But the door cannot be opened without breaking your seal.”

There was about a hand-span of space between the back of the cupboard and the wall.

Dust lay so thick on the top that any hand touching it would have left a mark at once.

There was nothing.

Madhavi put the bottle back on the second shelf.

This time she drew a fine line in the dust directly in front of it.

On the third day the seal was again intact.

The line in the dust was intact.

The bottle was in the middle of the fifth shelf.

That was when Harinandan himself opened the old story of the dispensary.

“Have you heard the name Devkant Babu?”

Madhavi shook her head.

“He was the compounder here. Thirty-five or thirty-six years ago, fever medicine was distributed. After drinking it, many people developed stomach trouble, some got sores in the mouth, some began trembling. An inquiry was held. It was said that while preparing the mixture, the compounder had mixed in some cleaning liquid.”

Madhavi interrupted.

“A white cleaning liquid?”

“I do not know the chemical name. People then called it ‘strong water.’ Devkant Babu said the medicine had already been spoiled before it reached him. But there was no proof.”

“What happened after that?”

“He lost his job. Left the village. Five or seven years ago he came back and now lives here with his daughter. He cannot walk much.”

Harinandan looked towards the bottle.

“There were many blue bottles in those days.”

Madhavi tried to laugh the matter away.

But that night sleep came late.

She kept thinking:

If someone was entering the room, how was the seal remaining untouched?

If no one was entering, how was the bottle moving?

On the fourth day she examined the cupboard shelves carefully.

The wood was old, but the shelves were not equally level.

The third shelf sloped slightly to the left.

The fourth sloped towards the back wall.

She placed a small glass marble on the third shelf.

It rolled slowly and stopped in the left corner.

On the rear wood of that corner was a fine layer of lime.

Madhavi looked again at the base of the blue bottle.

The white crescent of dust resembled that lime.
But the bottle had been found yesterday on the fifth shelf.
Then she noticed something caught in the old glue-mark on its neck.
With tweezers she lifted it out.
Two extremely fine cotton fibres.
The fibres were new.
They had not darkened with dust.
At that moment Madhavi's fear changed.
She was no longer afraid of a ghost.
She was afraid of a person.
She requested the old office files.
Two days later a thick bundle arrived.

It contained dispensary expenditure registers, receipt registers, and copies of inquiry papers from 1989 to 1992.

The incident had taken place in Bhadon of 1990.

The inquiry note stated that "the possibility of an external liquid being mixed during local preparation" was strong.

Page three of Devkant Jha's four-page statement was missing.

A page from the receipt register for the same month had also been torn out.

Madhavi linked the two missing pages in her mind.

That was her first mistake.

She assumed Devkant himself had hidden the old papers and was now using someone to move the bottle in order to erase something.

That evening Madhavi went to Devkant's house.

The house stood half a kos from the dispensary.

There was a tulsi platform in the courtyard and an old neem tree beside it.

Devkant sat on a bamboo stool.

Age had taken flesh from his body, but his eyes were clear.

Madhavi introduced herself.

"I am making the inventory of the old dispensary."

Devkant's eyes rested once on her face.

"They are going to demolish it?"

"Probably the building."

"Breaking a building does not break what happened there."

Madhavi asked directly, "Do you recognise a blue glass bottle?"

Devkant's right hand became still on the bamboo of the stool.

"Many medicines came in blue glass."

"One empty bottle keeps changing places inside a locked cupboard."

Devkant did not answer.

A woman came from inside carrying water.

She was around fifty.

Harinandan had told Madhavi that Devkant lived with his daughter Mrinalini.

While setting down the glass, Mrinalini looked not at Madhavi but at her father's hand.

Madhavi noticed.

“Do you have any old dispensary papers in this house?”

Mrinalini answered immediately.

“No.”

Devkant said softly, “No papers. Only memory. Memory is worse than paper—you cannot tear it up.”

Madhavi returned, but her suspicion had settled on Mrinalini.

The next morning the seal was again intact.

This time the blue bottle lay on its side in the middle of the first shelf.

More cotton fibres had collected around its neck.

Madhavi did not disturb the cupboard.

Instead she began measuring the room.

To the right of the cupboard was the old medicine-dispensing window.

From outside it appeared to have been bricked up.

But inside there was a two-finger-wide gap between the wooden frame and the brickwork.

Fresh scratches showed in the gap.

At noon Madhavi went around outside.

Behind the bricks was a thicket.

Inside the bushes lay an old iron strip on the ground.

When she moved it, a thin wooden shutter lifted beneath it.

It was the old small delivery door through which medicines had once been handed out.

New plaster had hidden its existence.

The room could be entered without opening the main lock.

Madhavi told Harinandan nothing.

That night she sat not in front of the dispensary but in the bamboo grove behind it.

There was no moon.

Only when a vehicle passed on the distant road did light appear briefly.

Then the darkness thickened again.

Around ten, the bushes moved.

A figure bent and lifted the old shutter.

Madhavi waited a few moments, then followed inside.

A small oil lamp gave the room very faint light.

Mrinalini stood before the cupboard.

In her hand was the blue bottle.

A narrow strip of grey cotton cloth was tied around its neck.

Madhavi said, “So it was not a ghost moving the bottle.”

Mrinalini turned in alarm.

Her hand trembled, but the bottle did not fall.

“Call the police.”

“First explain.”

“What will explanation change?”

“For three weeks I have been trying to preserve the papers in this building. You are coming in at night through a hidden door. Explanation can change quite a lot.”

Mrinalini placed the oil lamp on top of the cupboard.

“I am not coming here to steal anything.”

“Then why have you moved the bottle across five shelves?”

Mrinalini remained silent for a while.

Then she untied the strip of cloth.

“Babu had kept this bottle at home. Three months ago he gave it to me. He said—if the dispensary is demolished, take this bottle and let it move across the shelves.”

Madhavi frowned.

“Why?”

“Because Babu had written that on that day the blue bottles were taken from their crate and placed on the third wooden shelf. That shelf sloped to the left. The bottles slid and rested against the lime-coated wood at the back. During the inquiry it was said there had been no such shelf—the medicine had been prepared at the mixing table.”

Madhavi looked towards the third shelf.

Mrinalini placed the bottle at its right edge.

She held the cloth strip in her hand so it would not fall.

The bottle rolled very slowly.

It moved left.

Tilted towards the back.

Then stopped in the lime-coated corner.

White dust marked only one side of its base.

A crescent formed.

“The first night I left it on the second shelf,” Mrinalini said.

“It did not move.

The second night on the fourth.

It moved backward, but no lime touched it.

On the third, it stopped exactly as Babu had written.”

“What does that prove?”

“By itself, nothing complete.”

Mrinalini’s answer came immediately.

“I have not come to have Babu declared innocent.”

That was not what Madhavi had expected.

Mrinalini ran her hand along the rear strip of the third shelf.

“Babu said that in the left corner of that shelf, one paper had been left behind. On the day of the inquiry, he did not have the courage to take it out. Later the cupboard was sealed.”

“What paper?”

“The counterfoil of a supply slip. It had the batch number.”

A chill passed through Madhavi.

“You have been moving the bottle for three nights to search for a paper?”

"First I wanted to make sure Babu's memory had identified the correct shelf. All five shelves look alike. If I tore up the wrong panel, the evidence of theft would be against me."

Madhavi lifted the oil lamp.

She examined the left corner of the third shelf closely.

Between the wood and the lime-coated rear strip was a gap as thin as a hair.

Mrinalini wrapped one end of the cloth strip around a thin piece of wood and tried to insert it into the gap.

"So that is how the new fibres got caught on the bottle," Madhavi said.

For the first time Mrinalini smiled faintly.

"I tie the cloth to the bottle. If Babu's bottle breaks, memory and evidence both break."

"Evidence?"

"Call it an indication."

Nothing came out of the gap.

Madhavi sat on the floor and looked beneath the shelf.

The wooden support on the left stood flush with the wall.

One patch of lime there was a different colour, as if a small section had been filled during an old repair.

She pressed it with a finger.

The lime flaked away.

A thin corner of paper appeared inside.

Mrinalini stopped breathing.

It would not be right to pull the paper out.

It had become brittle.

Madhavi decided to bring conservation tweezers and a flat support strip the next day.

"Come now," she said.

"We will take nothing out tonight."

Mrinalini asked, "You will not stop me?"

"From now on, do not come alone."

The next day Madhavi wrote a formal note to the office:

"Possible old paper located behind rear portion of cupboard; removal by conservation method required."

She did not write Mrinalini's name.

That evening Harinandan was present.

In front of all three, the loose lime was removed.

A folded paper came out.

Half of it had been eaten by dampness.

What remained legible was enough.

"SUPPLY—12 BOTTLES—FEVER MIXTURE—BLUE GLASS."

Below it, half the batch number could still be read:

"47-A."

The date was two days before the incident.

At one corner of the slip was Devkant's signature.

Below it, in red ink, a short note:

“Two caps loose; smell different—reported to officer-in-charge.”

Madhavi looked at that line for a long time.

“Why was this slip not in the inquiry?” Harinandan asked.

Mrinalini did not answer.

They needed to ask Devkant.

That evening Madhavi, Mrinalini, and Harinandan went together to Devkant’s courtyard.

The paper was inside a transparent protective sleeve.

For a long time Devkant said nothing.

At last he asked, “How many bottles does it say?”

“Twelve,” Madhavi replied.

Devkant closed his eyes.

“I opened seven.”

Mrinalini looked at him.

“You said the smell seemed different from the first day.”

“It did.”

“Then why seven?”

Devkant’s voice was very low.

“The doctor sahib said a new medicine might smell like that. Bhadon fever was spreading. People were standing in line. I could have stopped it.”

Mrinalini’s face hardened.

“Did you say this in the inquiry?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“After the first two patients became ill, I stopped distribution. But I changed the time in the register—made it appear that I had stopped before the first complaint. I wanted to save my job. The investigators found the discrepancy. After that they placed the whole blame on me. I did not have the courage to tell the full truth again.”

Mrinalini remained silent.

Madhavi understood that the newly found paper would not make Devkant innocent.

But it also became difficult now to leave the direction of blame resting on a single man.

The following week, the old files of the district store were searched.

The full page for Batch 47-A was not found.

But a circular from three days later had survived:

“Suspend distribution of the remaining fever mixture from the said batch; complaints received concerning smell and colour.”

The circular bore no receipt stamp from Belauncha dispensary.

Perhaps it never reached there.

Perhaps it arrived and was destroyed.

There was no answer.

In her final report Madhavi wrote that the 1990 inquiry conclusion could no longer be read as the only possible explanation.

The old supply slip and the district circular provided sufficient basis to consider that contamination of the batch might have originated outside the dispensary as well.

At the same time, the recorded time at which distribution was stopped had been altered.

Therefore local responsibility was not extinguished either.

Mrinalini read the report.

"You could have written that Babu was innocent."

"That would not be true."

"I know."

After a few moments she added, "That is why the report is right."

The decision to demolish the building was suspended for two months.

Three dispensary registers, the supply slip, the district circular, and the blue bottle were declared archival objects.

The bottle was now kept in a closed glass case.

Its label read:

"BLUE GLASS MEDICINE BOTTLE, CIRCA 1990; OBJECT ASSOCIATED WITH SOURCE EXAMINATION."

Madhavi did not write the word "evidence."

One day Devkant was brought to see the bottle.

He stood before the glass case for a long time.

Mrinalini asked, "Do you recognise it?"

Devkant said, "Yes."

"Is it the same one?"

Devkant looked at the crescent of lime on its base.

"It may be the same one," he said, "but I no longer have the right to say so with certainty."

That was his most difficult sentence.

Madhavi did not write it down.

She merely closed the lid of the glass case.

Evening was falling outside.

Light entering through the old window passed through the blue bottle and made a small blue patch on the lime-coated wall.

The patch remained still.

This time the bottle did not move anywhere.

THE KEY FOUND IN THE FAREWELL FOLD

It was the last day of Agahan.

East of Madhubani, beside an old pond, people had been gathering since morning in the courtyard of the Jha family home in the settlement known as Mehta Tola.

It was the day the house was to be divided.

The large front hall, the two southern rooms, the eastern kitchen, the mango grove at the back, the narrow path towards the pond, and the tulsi platform in the middle of the courtyard had all been measured and entered on paper.

Only the old inner room and its heavy teak cupboard remained unresolved.

Raghunath Jha sat on a wooden cot.

He was past sixty-five, but his voice still had the kind of authority that made people in the house fall silent without being asked.

His younger brother Nityanand had come from the city.

Their sister Kamala had arrived with her daughter Sangeeta.

On one side of the courtyard sat Raghunath's wife Malati, Nityanand's wife Aruna, and the younger generation of the family, quietly watching.

Their mother, Janaki Devi, had died two years earlier.

Since her death, division of the ancestral house had been postponed again and again.

"Let us finish it today," Raghunath said. "According to whatever has been written and measured. Afterwards no one should say the matter was left incomplete."

Kamala said nothing.

Malati glanced at her once.

The look seemed to contain the meaning of something very old, but Raghunath turned his eyes away.

Two elderly villagers were seated as witnesses.

Copies of the measurement register had also been kept ready.

Following the old departure custom, the women of the house were preparing Kamala's khoichha—the fold of her sari-pallu in which a married daughter was given rice, sacred grass, betel nut, turmeric, and a little grain before leaving her mother's home.

When Janaki Devi was alive, she always performed this ritual whenever her daughter returned home.

Malati lifted the fold of Kamala's pallu.

Aruna put in rice.

Sangeeta laughed.

"Mami, give two betel nuts this time. Nani always slipped in one extra."

For a moment that laughter loosened the hardness of a day devoted to division.

Malati released a handful of rice.

With it, an old brass key fell into the khoichha with a small metallic ring.

Everyone's eyes fixed on it.

Kamala picked up the key and held it in her palm.

"Where did this come from?"

Malati looked genuinely surprised.

"I did not put it there."

Aruna said, "It must have been in the rice bin."

Raghunath saw the key from a distance, and his back straightened slightly.

He knew that key.

"It is from the old storeroom," he said before he could stop himself.

Nityanand looked startled.

"The storeroom? That lock was changed thirty years ago."

Raghunath did not answer.

Janaki Devi's teak cupboard had once had a key of this very shape.

Its head was formed like a four-petalled lotus.

As a child, Raghunath had called it "Mother's flower."

After Janaki Devi died, the cupboard had remained locked.

Raghunath had said there were only clothes, old ritual vessels, and useless papers inside.

The key had not been found.

Kamala asked quietly, "Isn't this Mother's cupboard key?"

"No," Raghunath answered at once. "The teeth are different."

He said this without taking the key into his hand.

Kamala continued looking at him.

An old discomfort awakened inside Raghunath.

A few months before her death, his mother had told him, "Show the papers inside to Kamala."

Raghunath had cut her off.

"There are too many papers, Ma. I will see whose is whose."

Janaki Devi had said nothing more.

Now the last part of his own sentence rang again in his ears:

I will see.

Nityanand took the key and went to the cupboard.

The door of the old room was opened.

Inside was the smell of camphor, old cloth, and enclosed wood.

The cupboard lock had gone black.

The key would not enter.

One edge of its teeth was too thick.

"See?" Raghunath said, his voice harder than necessary. "It is not for this."

Kamala put the key back into her khoichha.

"Then let it remain. It must be some old thing of Mother's."

The partition resumed.

There was no dispute over the four mango trees.
It was written that the path towards the pond would remain shared.
The southern room went to Raghunath.
The eastern room went to Nityanand.
Kamala's name did not appear anywhere on the paper.
She did not ask for anything either.
After the midday meal the women went inside again.
Before leaving, Kamala said she wanted Janaki Devi's old tulsi rosary.
Malati did not open the cupboard.
She opened the small devotional chest beside it and took out the rosary.
When Kamala shook out the rice from her khoichha and separated the grains, the brass key was no longer there.
"Where did it go?" Sangeeta asked.
"It was right here."
Sangeeta sifted through the rice, paddy grains, and sacred grass.
Nothing.
This time Raghunath remained silent.
By evening the division could not be completed.
It was agreed that the final signatures on the last page would be done the next day.
Kamala stayed the night.
At dinnertime, something else happened.
Malati was changing her sari.
She lifted the pallu of the old red-bordered sari she had worn in the prayer room in order to fold it.
Inside the khoichha-fold was the same key.
This time a fine yellow powder clung to it.
Malati's hand trembled.
"Raghunath!"
Everyone came running.
At the sight of the key, Raghunath went pale like ash.
"Who keeps putting this here?" Nityanand's voice turned sharp.
Sangeeta said, "Someone in this house is playing a game."
Malati spoke softly.
"This is not turmeric."
She rubbed the powder between her fingers and smelled it.
"It smells of coriander and cumin."
Aruna looked towards the kitchen.
"The spice boxes are all closed."
Raghunath took the key.
The fine powder was indeed packed into the gaps between its teeth.
He tried to scrape it out with a fingernail, then suddenly stopped.
"Someone has taken out an old thing and is making a joke," he said.
"Who?" Kamala asked directly for the first time.
Raghunath did not answer.
No one in the house slept properly that night.

Leaves fell from the neem in the courtyard.

When a mongoose ran across the old tiled roof, its steps sounded from inside like footsteps.

Three times Raghunath got up and went to the cupboard.

The lock was untouched.

Even so, he kept feeling that someone inside was turning pages.

His mother's voice came back:

"Show the papers to Kamala."

At dawn he tried to persuade himself that with age, memory begins taking the shape of objects.

A key.

A smell.

An old sentence.

Together they can make the dead move through a house again.

But the moment he came down into the courtyard, the third incident occurred.

Aruna was arranging a sari for worship.

The same key was found in her khoichha.

This time the key was dry, but fine red chilli dust was caught in the petals at its head.

"Enough," Nityanand said. "This is no longer a joke."

All the children of the house were called into the courtyard.

Ten-year-old Anshu, Raghunath's grandson, stood silently beside the wall.

His eyes kept moving between the kitchen and the old room.

"Do you know anything?" Nityanand asked.

Anshu shook his head.

"Tell the truth."

"I did not put the key there."

"Who does?"

The boy was silent again.

Raghunath said sharply, "If you saw something, say it."

Anshu's eyes filled with tears.

"I did not see everything."

Malati called him closer.

"Say only what you saw."

Anshu spoke slowly.

"Yesterday afternoon I saw a hand."

"Whose?"

"I don't know. From behind the kitchen partition. There were red bangles."

Every eye in the courtyard turned at once towards Aruna and Sangeeta.

Both wore red bangles.

Malati's wrists carried white conch bangles.

Anshu continued.

"There was a small cloth in the hand too. Someone was rubbing the key."

“Where?”

“Near the spice shelf.”

Aruna rose angrily.

“You suspect me?”

Sangeeta stood too.

“I was with Ma yesterday.”

Kamala made them both sit.

“The child did not name anyone.”

Raghunath’s gaze remained fixed on Anshu.

“Anything else?”

Anshu thought.

“There was a black stain on one finger.”

This time everyone fell silent.

There was a third woman in the house who wore red bangles.

Nityanand’s widowed daughter Devika.

For the past three months she had been living in her maternal grandmother’s house.

There was usually a black stain of sewing-machine oil on one finger of her right hand.

Devika was not in the courtyard.

“Where is she?” Raghunath asked.

Aruna said, “She has gone to spread clothes on the roof.”

Raghunath stood.

Kamala caught his hand.

“First look at the key.”

“What is there to look at?”

“The teeth.”

The key was placed on the cot.

Kamala wiped away the powder with the edge of her pallu.

The right side of the teeth showed bright wear.

The left edge was almost untouched.

“If this is not for the cupboard, which lock keeps wearing this one tooth over and over?” Kamala asked.

Nityanand went into the old room and examined the outside lock again.

The key still would not enter.

Kamala went inside too.

On the inner left side of the cupboard door were three long scratches.

The outer lock was shut, but the scratches along the door edge looked fresh.

Pale yellow wood showed through the old surface.

“Were these here yesterday?” Kamala asked.

Raghunath could not say.

Nityanand touched the cupboard frame.

“Is someone trying to open an inner compartment?”

“There is no inner compartment,” Raghunath said at once.

Kamala turned and looked at him.

“How do you know?”

The question was very small.

Its effect was deep.

Raghunath’s throat went dry.

Thirty years earlier, while their father was still alive, a small secret compartment had been made inside the cupboard.

It opened with the key from an old wooden spice box.

The ordinary cupboard key was different.

Janaki Devi kept original land papers, jewellery, and some private letters inside that compartment.

Raghunath knew this.

He also remembered that one month before her death, his mother had asked him to open that compartment.

“The papers in Kamala’s name are on top,” she had said.

Raghunath had answered, “Whatever had to be given to a daughter was given at her wedding. Why create another quarrel between the brothers now?”

His mother had looked at him for a long time.

“A daughter does not stop belonging to the house because she is married.”

Raghunath had left the room.

He had never opened the compartment for her.

The memory came back complete.

Nityanand was speaking outside.

“Where did the key go after it disappeared from Kamala’s khoichha?”

Anshu said, “It went near the kitchen spice shelf. Then a small wooden box was brought onto the veranda.”

Aruna looked startled.

“What box?”

Anshu ran to the kitchen.

From behind the upper shelf he brought out a flat wooden box.

The box was empty.

Inside it were circular spice stains, and in one corner a polished shine where brass had rubbed against the wood.

Malati said, “This is Mother’s old spice box!”

Kamala inserted the key into the small lock-hole on the box.

The key turned easily.

The box opened.

There was nothing inside.

But on the inner face of the lid, in very old charcoal lettering, were the words:

“THE FLOWER OPENS THE INSIDE.”

Nityanand looked at the four lotus petals on the head of the key.

“The flower.”

Sweat appeared on Raghunath’s forehead.

Janaki Devi had kept the key to the secret compartment in this spice box.

The key had not been lost.

Someone had taken it out recently.

“Call Devika,” Raghunath said.

Devika came down from the roof.

She carried wet clothes in her hands.

Red bangles.

A black stain on the finger of her right hand.

Raghunath held up the key in front of her.

“Did you take this out?”

Devika first looked at the key.

Then at Anshu.

Anshu lowered his eyes.

“Yes,” Devika said.

Aruna stared at her.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you put it into the khoichha?”

Devika did not answer directly.

“If I had simply said there were papers inside, would anyone have believed me?”

Raghunath’s voice hardened.

“What right did you have to do this in the house—”

Kamala interrupted.

“Listen first.”

Devika sat at the edge of the cot.

“Two months before Nani died, she showed me the spice box. She said, ‘The flower key opens the wood inside.’ I did not understand what she meant then. Later, while we were sorting Nani’s papers, I found half a sheet. Kamala Mausi’s name was on it, along with the words ‘eastern room, one-third of the mango grove, pond path shared.’ The lower half of the page was torn.”

Kamala’s face changed.

Devika continued.

“I showed the page to Babuji.”

Nityanand was startled.

“To me?”

“Yes. You said, ‘It must be an old draft. Without the complete paper it means nothing.’”

Nityanand held his head.

“I remember... I did not take it seriously.”

“After that I thought of telling Mausi. But Nani became ill. Then she died. Later the atmosphere in the house became such that I remained silent.”

Raghunath asked, “Why suddenly now?”

“Because today the signatures would have been completed. After that no one would have thought it necessary to open the cupboard.”

“You could simply have given the key to Kamala.”

“If I had, you would have said it was some useless old key. Just as you said the first time.”

Raghunath fell silent.

"So the khoichha?" Kamala asked.

Devika's eyes filled, but her voice remained steady.

"Nani used to say, 'Never send a daughter away from the house empty-handed.' I thought the key should first go into Mausi's khoichha so everyone would see it. But all of you put the key aside. So I picked it up again. The second time I put it into Kaki's sari. The third time into Ma's khoichha. I wanted the matter not to be buried."

"The spice powder?" Nityanand asked.

"The key was in the spice box. I did not clean it. The second time Anshu saw me rubbing the key with a cloth."

Anshu said softly, "I did not see her face. Only the hand."

Devika looked at him and smiled.

"You did well. It is not right to turn something half-seen into a whole story."

Raghunath trembled at that sentence.

It seemed to him that the words were not meant for Anshu.

They were meant for him.

The cupboard was still locked.

"The main key?" Kamala asked.

Devika shook her head.

"I never found it."

Nityanand said, "Then how do we know there are papers inside?"

"Because of Nani's half-sheet."

She took a folded paper from her cloth bag.

The paper had yellowed.

The handwriting was Janaki Devi's.

Kamala recognised it at once.

Raghunath did not take the page.

"You read it," Kamala said.

Raghunath reached out.

Kamala's name was indeed written on it.

Below was half of their father Ramlochan Jha's signature.

The rest had torn away.

A scene opened in Raghunath's memory.

Three years before their father died, he had written a preliminary division of shares among all four children.

Whether a final registered document had later been executed in a different form, Raghunath could not say with certainty.

But Janaki Devi had apparently kept the preliminary agreement.

"This may be a draft," Raghunath said quietly.

"It may be," Kamala replied.

There was no triumph in her voice.

"I will not say anything either until the complete paper is seen."

Her restraint made Raghunath feel smaller still.

By noon a carpenter had arrived.

Instead of cutting the cupboard lock, he worked a thin strip inside the old keyhole.

The lock was badly jammed, but after half an hour it opened.

The moment the door opened, the scratches inside became clear.

The main compartment contained clothes, ritual vessels, two brass plates, old letters, and a bundle of cotton.

On the inner panel to the right was a carving like a lotus flower.

At its centre was a small hole.

The brass key fitted perfectly.

Raghunath turned it himself.

A dry sound came from inside the wood.

The panel slid outward by half an inch.

The compartment opened.

Inside were three bundles of papers tied in red cloth.

On the upper bundle, in Janaki Devi's handwriting, were the words:

"ORIGINAL LAND PAPERS."

The second:

"KAMALA'S SHARE."

The third:

"COMMON THINGS."

Kamala did not reach for them.

"You open them," she told Raghunath.

Raghunath opened the first bundle.

Revenue receipts.

Maps.

Old sale deeds.

In the second bundle was a family agreement bearing their father Ramlochan Jha's signature.

It was not a formally registered will.

But it clearly stated that Kamala would have lifetime use-rights over the eastern room, one-third of the produce from the mango grove, and equal right of passage along the path to the pond.

Below were the signatures of four witnesses.

No one could immediately say what legal effect the document would have.

But its existence made one thing indisputable:

Janaki Devi's "papers in Kamala's name" had not been imaginary.

The third bundle contained written agreements concerning the shared well, the tulsi platform, the pond path, and use of the middle portion of the courtyard.

Nityanand took a long breath.

"Then today's partition register will have to be made again."

No words came from Raghunath.

Devika stood and began to leave.

Raghunath stopped her.

"You did not trust me."

Devika turned.

"I did."

"Then why did you not tell me directly?"

"Because you trusted your own old decision more than you trusted anyone else."

Raghunath looked wounded.

Devika continued.

"I am not saying my method was right. Taking the key without telling anyone, putting it into the khoichha—those were mistakes too. But I could see no other way to bring the papers out."

For the first time Kamala took Devika's hand.

"You did not merely save my share. You saved part of the house's memory."

Devika lowered her head.

Then Raghunath looked at Kamala.

"I was unfair to Mother."

Kamala remained silent.

"To you too."

"Yes," Kamala said.

One word.

No accusation.

No forgiveness.

Perhaps Raghunath had been expecting forgiveness.

Kamala did not give him that convenience.

"A lawyer will decide what legal meaning these papers have," she said. "But there will be no signatures today."

"No," Raghunath said. "Not today."

By evening the witnesses had gone home.

The pages of the measurement register were gathered and put away.

The courtyard slowly returned to the ordinary sounds of a household—utensils, hearth, water, children's laughter.

Devika picked up the spice box to wash it.

Raghunath said, "Let it remain as it is."

"Spices are stuck to it."

"Let them remain."

She began to put the key back into the box.

Kamala stopped her.

"Not yet."

Everyone looked at her.

Kamala spread the end of her sari.

Smiling, Malati placed a handful of rice in the fold.

Aruna added sacred grass.

Sangeeta put in a betel nut.

Kamala placed the brass key in her khoichha as well.

Raghunath's face tightened slightly, but he said nothing.

Kamala rested her hand over the key.

"After the papers are decided, this will return to the house."

Raghunath asked, "Whose house?"

Kamala looked around the courtyard—the southern room, the eastern kitchen, the tulsi platform, the shadow of the mango trees behind.

“That answer will not be given by the old papers alone,” she said. “We will give it too.”

A few days later, the family agreement was read again.

Legal advice was taken.

The old papers did not all carry equal legal weight, but Kamala’s use-rights and the shared path were clearly added to the new partition document.

A separate agreement was made for the produce of the mango grove.

No one called Devika a heroine.

Raghunath also scolded her for taking the key without permission.

Devika accepted that she should have made one more direct attempt to speak.

In the middle of the discussion Anshu said, “But I only saw a hand.”

Everyone laughed.

Malati stroked his head.

“Many times a half-seen thing opens an entire house, if we do not hurry to make it into a whole story.”

The partition was finally completed.

New boundary lines were drawn on the walls.

But the path to the pond remained open.

No single person’s name was written on the tulsi platform.

On the day Kamala left, her khoichha was filled once again.

This time the key was not in it.

It had returned to the compartment inside the cupboard.

A little fine yellow spice powder still clung to its teeth.

Raghunath did not clean it away.

As he closed the cupboard, he ran a finger once over the four petals on the key.

He heard no supernatural sign from his mother.

Only a small wooden sound from within—

the kind of sound a thing kept closed for a very long time makes when, after being opened, it closes again.

STORY 131

THE SMELL OF PARBOILED PADDY

The smell of parboiled paddy woke Nagendra Jha from sleep.

Midnight had passed.

The rear window of the house was open, and in the thin Agahan mist nothing could be seen clearly at any distance.

But the smell was unmistakable—

warm paddy,

wet husk,

and that particular mingling of steam which Nagendra had breathed for half his life at Sharda Rice Mill.

Still sitting on the bed, he first rubbed a hand over his nose.

An old body often manufactures the smells of old memories on its own.

He knew that.

The mill had been closed for five years.

The mouth of the great furnace had been bricked up.

A small peepal tree had sprouted on the chimney.

Rust had eaten the main gate so deeply that when the wind moved it, instead of ringing it made a dry rasping sound.

Even so, the smell came again.

This time warmer.

Nagendra got up.

His wife Sudha turned over and asked, “Where are you going?”

“There is a smell of paddy outside.”

Without opening her eyes, Sudha said, “In a paddy-growing village, what else would you smell?”

“This is not from the fields.”

After saying that, Nagendra fell silent.

The name that rose inside him after the sentence was one he did not want to speak aloud—

Bisesar Sadai.

Twenty-two years earlier, when the mill ran day and night, Bisesar worked at the boiler.

Thin-bodied, yet able to lift a hot iron strip with one hand.

On the day fifteen sacks of paddy were found short in the account, the owners had named him first.

Nagendra was the accountant then.

Weighing register.

Wage register.

Incoming and outgoing stock.

Everything passed through his hands.

What he wrote that night must still exist somewhere on paper:

“Shortage in night consignment; watch and boiler responsibility—Bisesar Sadai.”

Bisesar had said, “I did not take the paddy, Babu. If the steam ate it, how is that my fault?”

Everyone had laughed.

Nagendra had not laughed.

But he had not struck out the line in the register either.

He wrapped a shawl around himself and left the house.

The road to the mill was paved now.

Where bullock carts once turned beside the pond, there were now two grocery shops and a small pharmacy.

All were closed at night.

A dog barked once, then fell silent.

Mist made round halos around the yellow street lamps.

From a distance, the gate of Sharda Rice Mill looked like a black square.

Nagendra had seen the new signboard in daylight:

“MITHILA PADDY PRESERVATION CENTRE—MANAGER: REVATI CHAUDHARY.”

Revati, granddaughter of the former owner’s daughter, had returned from the city and bought the mill.

People said she did not intend to mill rice.

She planned only to dry paddy and operate storage sheds.

The gate was closed.

The smell was coming from inside.

Nagendra put an eye to the gap in the gate.

Darkness.

The old chimney stood still.

The bricked mouth of the main furnace was clearly visible.

No smoke.

Then he heard a faint “tap” on his right.

He pushed the small door beside the main gate.

To his surprise, it was not locked.

The first thing his eyes caught after he stepped inside was ash.

In front of the furnace lay the old heap of ash, grey by day but black in the night dampness.

Nagendra bent and touched it.

Cold on top.

Slightly warm underneath.

His chest tightened.

“The furnace is closed,” he said to himself.

A drop fell from the tin roof ahead.

Then another.

Small round marks formed on the floor.

There had been no rain for days.

Nagendra looked up.

Water gleamed at a pipe joint.

He recognised the pipe.
 It was the old steam line that had carried steam from the main furnace to the parboiling tank.
 It had not been used for five years.
 The smell thickened again.
 For a moment he seemed to hear Bisesar's voice:
 "If the steam ate it, how is that my fault?"
 Nagendra clenched his teeth.
 "Let thoughts remain thoughts."
 He moved forward.
 There was a fine trail of husk on the floor.
 The strange thing was that the night wind was blowing west to east, but the husk had moved east to west.
 Some particles had gathered near the feet of an old machine.
 Nagendra held his palm close to the floor.
 A very fine current of warm air was coming outward from deeper inside.
 A fan was running somewhere.
 The mill was not closed.
 Instead of relieving him, the thought made him more anxious.
 If Revati was secretly operating production at night, why?
 And if someone knew the old account, why conduct tests at midnight?
 A thump came from the storage room.
 Nagendra pressed himself into the shadow of the wall.
 A few moments later the beam of a torch moved across the floor.
 A woman's voice said, "Has the pressure dropped again?"
 Another voice answered, "Yes, Didi. Water is condensing at the old joint."
 Revati.
 Nagendra stepped out.
 "What is happening here at this hour?"
 The torch shone directly into his face, then immediately dropped.
 Revati started when she saw him.
 "Nagendra Kaka? How did you get inside?"
 "The small door was open."
 "Not open—it gets stuck. I have to have it repaired tomorrow."
 There was no irritation in Revati's voice.
 Only concern.
 "Do not remain here. The pipe is hot."
 "Hot?"
 Nagendra pointed towards the old furnace.
 "That is shut."
 Revati was silent for a moment.
 Then she said, "That is precisely why we are not running the old furnace."
 She took Nagendra to the tin shed at the back.
 Inside stood a small new steam unit on wheels.
 Beneath it was a narrow chamber for burning rice husk.
 A temporary iron pipe had been connected to the old main steam line.

“What is this?” Nagendra asked.

“A test.”

With Revati was a young man—Manoj, son of the mill’s old mechanic Ramphal.

He kept watching the pressure gauge.

Revati said, “Thirty-six sacks in the western godown picked up moisture. They look fine outside, but heating has begun inside. If we throw them away, the farmers will lose heavily. We are not fully parboiling them. We are testing a small batch with steam and drying it—how much can be saved, how much will break.”

“Why only at night?”

“In the daytime there are labourers, carts, dust. The pressure does not stay stable. At night the premises are empty for two hours. And if the test fails, why frighten the farmers with rumours before we know anything?”

Nagendra stared at her.

“Not secret production?”

Revati raised an eyebrow slightly.

“Did the smell bring you here?”

“Not the smell alone.”

Nagendra told her about the ash, the drops on the pipe, and the direction of the husk.

Manoj did not laugh.

He bent and stirred the ash.

“This ash is not old. The exhaust from our unit reaches this side and warms the old heap from underneath. We will have to remove it.”

Revati examined the pipe joint.

“And these drops are condensed steam. There is a leak in this joint.”

Nagendra had received answers to everything.

But the uneasiness did not leave.

Instead, every answer opened another door into the old night.

He asked quietly, “How much did the weight change?”

Revati looked at him.

“Why are you interested in that?”

“I am only asking.”

Manoj checked a sheet.

“In the first small batch, we started with one hundred kilos of damp paddy. After steaming, the weight rose. After drying, it ended a little above ninety-three kilos. But that is not a conclusion yet. We still have to measure the final moisture.”

Seven kilos.

Nagendra did not hear “fifteen sacks.”

He heard an old figure:

six maunds and seven seers.

A number from twenty-two years ago.

He sat down.

Behind the tin wall, the steam unit kept making its low sound.

Revati asked, "Are you all right?"

Nagendra did not answer.

He remembered clearly now.

That old monsoon year, paddy in the western godown had become damp.

Owner Harihar Chaudhary had said that before throwing the damaged paddy away, they would conduct a secret night test.

If word reached the market, the price would fall.

Bisesar and two labourers had loaded the paddy into the tank at night.

The next day the dried paddy weighed less.

The owner had said, "This test will not appear in the accounts. The shortage will be the workers' responsibility."

Nagendra had objected.

Very softly.

"Malik, steaming and drying will change the weight."

"Are you the accountant or are you teaching science?"

After that one sentence, Nagendra had gone silent.

"Where are the old account registers?" he asked.

"Whatever survived is in the eastern room. Some rotted in dampness, some were eaten by rats. Why?"

"I want to see them."

Revati got up without questioning him.

There were three wooden cupboards in the eastern room.

New locks.

The smell of old paper inside.

Revati brought out the registers one by one.

Nagendra's hands trembled.

He remembered the year.

2004.

The last week of Sawan.

The weighing register was not there.

The incoming-stock register was.

The wage register was.

The furnace-fuel register was.

On one page of that register was Nagendra's own handwriting:

"Night use: zero."

His throat went dry.

Revati asked, "This page?"

Nagendra remained silent.

Manoj, who had followed them in, touched the edge of the page.

"Kaka, if the furnace did not run that day, how did this soot mark get here?"

At the lower corner of the page was half a black fingerprint.

Nagendra closed his eyes.

"The furnace ran," he said.

Revati showed no reaction.

"How much?"

“Two batches at night. A test to save damp paddy. The owner told me not to enter it in the register.”

“And the shortage?”

Nagendra’s eyes moved to the wage-register page where a red line stood against Bisesar’s name.

“The shortage was put against Bisesar.”

Manoj asked softly, “He had not stolen?”

“I did not see him steal anything. And the amount missing could have matched the loss from the test. I weighed it again. I understood the account did not add up cleanly.”

“Then?” Revati’s voice was low.

“Then I wrote that the furnace had not run at night.”

The smell of paper in the room suddenly seemed heavy.

Revati did not close the register.

“Where is Bisesar Kaka now?”

“He is gone.”

Nagendra’s voice dropped.

“He died eight years ago. His son is in Punjab. His daughter—Saraswati—is married in a nearby village.”

Manoj opened his mouth as if to say something, then stopped.

The whistle of the steam unit sounded from afar.

He ran out.

Nagendra and Revati remained in the room.

“You never had an opportunity to say this before?” Revati asked.

The question was not harsh.

Perhaps that was why it felt harsher.

Nagendra said, “I had many opportunities.”

Revati lowered her head.

“I was afraid the owner would dismiss me. The children were studying. I had debts. Then the owner died. I thought, what would saying it now change? Then Bisesar left the village. Then the years went by.”

“Does a line become lighter because years pass?”

Nagendra looked at his old handwriting in the register.

“No. Only the hand grows old.”

The test was not stopped that night.

Revati said, “If I panic and stop now, the farmers’ paddy may spoil tomorrow. Let us finish this batch first. The old matter can be decided in the morning.”

Nagendra had not expected that.

Some part of him wanted a large moral declaration.

An immediate punishment.

Instead, Revati checked the pressure gauge, recorded the moisture reading, and told Manoj to tighten the leaking pipe joint.

The damaged paddy of the present could not wait for the crime of the past.

Nagendra stayed.

Shortly before dawn, the second test batch was weighed.

From one hundred and twenty kilos of paddy, after drying, a little over one hundred and eleven kilos remained.

Revati wrote every figure separately:

initial moisture,

steam time,

drying time,

final moisture,

broken grain.

“Will you give me a copy of this calculation?” Nagendra asked.

“Why?”

“To keep with the old register.”

Revati looked at him.

“A new test will not prove the old wrongdoing.”

“No. But it shows that the old lie was possible. What I personally know, I will write separately.”

“Against yourself?”

“Against the lie I wrote.”

Dawn was opening behind the chimney.

The mist had thinned.

The smell of parboiled paddy still hung across the premises.

But now to Nagendra it no longer smelled of fear.

It was the smell of something which, once it enters a person, keeps opening the years in separate layers.

In the morning Nagendra did not go home.

He went with Revati to the block office to search the old revenue and inspection files.

There they found a copy of a mill inspection report from that same year.

It stated:

“No written admission from the worker is available regarding the alleged shortage. Matter settled internally at the owner’s request.”

“I had forgotten this line,” Nagendra said.

Revati replied, “Papers do not always prove guilt. Sometimes they show that guilt was never proved.”

Two days later Saraswati was called.

She was a woman past forty, carrying a bunch of keys from the school midday-meal centre where she worked.

The moment Nagendra saw her, he recognised Bisesar’s eyes.

Revati did not tell the entire matter in one breath.

First she showed the old register.

Then the figures from the present test.

Then Nagendra spoke:

that the furnace had run that night,

that the register had recorded zero,

that the shortage had been entered against Bisesar,

and that Nagendra had known the account was not clean.

Saraswati remained silent for a long time.

Nagendra had imagined she might cry.

Or curse him.

Or stand and leave.

She did none of these.

She only asked, "Will the money taken from Babuji for the theft be returned?"

Nagendra did not understand at first.

"What money?"

"The wages that were withheld."

Revati answered at once.

"Not at the old rate. We will calculate it at present value and pay it."

Saraswati stopped her.

"I will not take charity."

"It is not charity."

"Then first write that the theft was never proved."

Something collapsed inside Nagendra.

For years he had thought the truth meant his confession.

Saraswati's first demand was not about him.

She wanted the word placed before her father's name to be removed.

Revati said, "We will write it."

"Do not tear out the old register page."

"No."

"Let that line remain. Beside it, put a new note explaining why it was found wrong."

Nagendra looked at Saraswati.

"You want the page containing the lie to be preserved?"

"If you tear out the lie, people will later say nothing like that was ever written."

The room fell silent again.

Revati said quietly, "All right."

There was no ceremony on the day the mill reopened.

Only fresh paint on the main gate.

The old furnace section was left as an archive.

The new small unit was placed in a separate room.

A large part of the paddy from the western godown was saved.

Some had to be discarded.

Revati showed the farmers the complete account of the tests.

Nagendra did not take another job.

But once a week he came to help put the records in order.

From then on three pens lay before him:

red,

blue,

and black.

He was not permitted to strike out an old entry in red.

Blue was for corrective notes.

Black for current accounts.

One day Manoj asked with a laugh, “Kaka, why three colours?”

Nagendra said, “What was written, what was corrected, and what is being written now—if all three remain in one colour, confusion will return.”

Manoj said, “Write that rule in the register.”

Nagendra wrote it down.

In the last week of Agahan, the smell of parboiled paddy rose from the mill again at night.

This time the test had been announced.

Two farmers were present in person.

Revati was measuring moisture.

Manoj was watching the steam.

Standing by the window of his house, Nagendra smelled it.

From behind, Sudha asked, “Will you go to the mill again?”

He thought for a few moments.

“No,” he said. “What is happening there now is being written in the register.”

He did not close the window.

The smell kept entering—

warm paddy,

wet husk,

steam.

This time Bisesar’s voice did not come with it.

THREE KNOCKS ON THE ROOF

The first knock in the night was so faint that Shivnarayan Jha took it for the natural crack of dry bamboo and bent again over the register.

The second knock came exactly two moments after the first.

The third came two moments after the second.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Then the school became as silent again as it had been since evening.

Three months earlier, this village primary school had been merged into the neighbouring middle school.

Lines of children.

Smoke from the midday meal.

The rush of the first bell.

Piles of slippers on the veranda.

All of it had suddenly become history.

The building was now under the panchayat.

In two days it was to become a temporary store for the health sub-centre.

Before that, responsibility for listing the old papers, broken desks and chairs, maps, and teaching materials had once again fallen upon retired headmaster Shivnarayan.

“Who knows these old registers better than you?” the letter from the block office had said.

Shivnarayan had not smiled when he read it.

He knew that recognising papers also meant recognising what lay inside them.

All day he had sat in the first room off the veranda sorting registers.

Admission register.

Attendance register.

Midday-meal accounts.

Building-repair papers.

Scholarship lists.

Sports-equipment receipts.

His hand had stopped on one old file:

“SPECIAL GRANT, YEAR 2008-09.”

There were three pages inside.

He clearly remembered that the file had once been thick.

He closed it at once.

Years earlier, the matter of that grant had spread through the school like fire.

Money had come for roof repair, two cupboards, books, and the veranda floor.

During the rains, the wall of one room cracked.

Shivnarayan had immediately allowed some of the grant money to be spent on that wall.

“We will correct the paperwork later,” the education committee chairman had said.

The paperwork was never corrected.

The original expenditure register could not later be found.

Questions arose during the audit.

Whispers gathered around the school’s clerk-assistant, Ramvriksh Sada.

The register had been under his charge.

Perhaps he had removed some papers.

Shivnarayan had not openly defended him at the time.

Because Shivnarayan knew that Ramvriksh had refused to sign false receipts.

He also knew that on the final rainy night he himself had sent the register towards the storeroom.

“Put it up on the loft. The water is rising.”

But later, when the register could not be found, he did not state that fact clearly before the auditors.

If he had, the unauthorised expenditure on the wall repair would have come to light.

He still remembered the day of the audit in every detail.

Two unfamiliar officers sat on the other side of the table.

The moment the register was mentioned, Ramvriksh rose and went towards the storeroom.

Ten minutes later he returned empty-handed.

“It should be on the loft,” he said.

Shivnarayan immediately replied, “That room has been closed for months.”

One officer asked, “The key?”

For half an hour they enacted the search for the key.

At last Shivnarayan himself said, “Perhaps the papers became mixed up during shifting.”

After that sentence, the direction of the questions changed.

Responsibility for the papers settled on Ramvriksh’s name.

Shivnarayan had told few direct lies.

But he had withheld the truth that was needed.

As the years passed, the difference between those two things seemed to him not smaller, but larger.

Ramvriksh died of fever two years later.

The accusation never reached a court.

But village speech often lives longer than a court judgment.

Again and again Shivnarayan’s eyes rose towards the locked storeroom door.

Its key had not been found since the school merger.

The new headmaster had said, "Tomorrow the carpenter will come and open the lock. Whatever papers are useless will be separated."

Shivnarayan had decided to stay that night because he wanted to complete the inventory.

At least that was what he told himself.

Three knocks came again from the roof.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

This time he counted the intervals.

The gap between the three sounds was almost equal.

Wind does not observe such discipline.

He lifted the lantern.

There had been no electricity since the day.

The moment he stepped onto the veranda, the wind moved the edge of his dhoti.

Thin clouds covered the sky.

The moon was somewhere behind them.

Peepal leaves stirred in the school courtyard, but not violently.

"Who is there?" he called.

No answer.

He walked around the building.

At the rear were bushes, an old hand pump, and an iron rainwater pipe.

There were no clear fresh footprints on the earth.

Workers had been coming and going during the day.

Shivnarayan raised the lantern.

The edge of the roof was swallowed by darkness.

For a moment he thought the gutter-cover had lifted slightly and settled back.

But when he held the light steady, nothing could be seen.

Beside the pipe, a thin black line marked the lime-washed wall.

He could not say whether it had not been there in the daytime or whether he had simply ignored it.

When he rubbed a finger over it, a fine green shaving of bamboo caught on his skin.

Why would a bamboo shaving be beside the pipe?

Two thick bamboo poles used by workers were certainly lying in the rear yard.

But this shaving was from something much thinner.

He set the lantern on the ground and tried to see upward.

Grey powder lay on one corner of the cover, as though brick had rubbed against it.

Even though there was little wind, the cover trembled once, extremely faintly.

Reason immediately offered him an explanation:

perhaps air was trapped inside the pipe.

But the teacher in him asked a second question:
 if it was air, why did it strike three times at equal intervals?
 He looked towards the place where the school bell had once hung.
 The bell had been stolen years ago.
 Only the iron ring remained.
 Once, the children's day had been divided by the discipline of sound:
 first bell,
 recess,
 dismissal.
 Now, in the silence of the abandoned building, even three knocks sounded
 like a rule.
 "A cat," he told himself.
 At once another voice inside replied:
 Why would a cat knock three times at equal intervals?
 He returned to the veranda.
 He touched the storeroom lock.
 Rusty, but strong.
 From beneath the door came the stale smell of paper, dampness, and mice.
 At half past ten, the three knocks sounded for a third time.
 This time, after the knocks, there was also a very faint dragging sound.
 Srrr...
 Shivnarayan ran outside.
 He reached the rear yard and raised the lantern.
 Nothing.
 But on the ground beneath the rain pipe, a small red thread gleamed.
 He picked it up.
 The thread was not new, but one end looked freshly frayed.
 He put his hand into the mouth of the pipe.
 Something soft touched his fingers.
 He pulled.
 The end of a thin rope emerged.
 The rope ran upward inside the pipe.
 A chill passed through Shivnarayan, but fear now carried curiosity with it.
 This was no ghost.
 Someone's hand was reaching the building.
 He left the rope where it was and returned to the veranda.
 He sat facing the storeroom.
 He remembered Ramvriksh's face.
 Thin.
 Dark.
 Eyes that always seemed to be measuring something.
 On the day of the audit, Ramvriksh had said, "Sir, I did not take the
 register. You know that."
 Shivnarayan had answered, "First find the register."
 The weight of those four words was still audible to him.
 Waiting for the next knocks, he remained awake until eleven.

Nothing happened.

Shivnarayan extinguished the lantern but did not sleep.

He watched the rear yard through a gap in the window.

Around eleven fifty, a shadow moved from behind the bushes.

Shivnarayan did not rush out.

Quietly he opened the door and stood in the darkness of the veranda.

The shadow reached the pipe.

Someone bent down.

The rope tightened.

On the roof—

knock.

The rope tightened again.

Knock.

A third pull—

knock.

“Enough,” Shivnarayan said.

The shadow froze.

“Whoever you are, come out.”

For several moments, only the peepal leaves made a sound.

Then a woman stepped from behind the bushes.

No shawl covered her head.

In her hand was a thin bamboo rod.

When Shivnarayan lit the lantern again, he recognised her face.

“Chanda?”

Ramvriksh Sada’s daughter.

Chanda now cooked meals at the neighbouring middle school.

She was around forty and usually spoke softly.

Looking not at Shivnarayan but towards the pipe, she said, “You were awake.”

“Are you doing all this?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Chanda did not answer.

“Climbing the roof at night? Tying ropes? This is a government building. What if you had fallen?”

For the first time Chanda looked at him.

“I did not climb the roof.”

“Then?”

She pulled the rope-end from the pipe and showed him.

“This pipe goes straight up to the gutter. The workers left bamboo lying there this evening. I pushed a thin bamboo up from inside. The cover above is loose.”

Shivnarayan still did not understand.

Chanda said, “Look.”

She pulled the rope slowly.

Something lifted above.

Then she released it.

One knock.

She pulled the rope a little—
the second.

Then the third.

“Why three different knocks?”

“There are three bricks.”

“Bricks?”

“The workers left three small bricks on the roof during the day. The bamboo bends beneath the gutter-cover. When I pull the rope, the edge of the first brick strikes the cover, then the second, then the third. The sound carries clearly inside.”

“You made all this?”

“It is not very difficult.”

Shivnarayan wanted his voice to become stern.

It did not.

“Who were you signalling?”

“You.”

“You could have spoken directly.”

Chanda did not smile.

“Babuji spoke directly years ago.”

Shivnarayan fell silent.

Chanda put the bamboo rod on the ground.

“I did not come to steal. I have not broken the lock. I want to save the register inside before it is thrown away with rubbish tomorrow.”

Shivnarayan’s throat dried.

“Who told you it is inside?”

“Babuji.”

“Ramvriksh?”

“A year before he died. He said the original grant register was on the loft in the storeroom. On the rainy night you told him to put the papers up high. He did. Later the room was closed for pest-control fumigation. Then the key was changed. When the audit came, Babuji kept saying so. No one wanted to open and search the whole room.”

“I...”

Shivnarayan’s words caught.

“I did not remember that it was on the loft...”

Chanda did not interrupt.

She merely watched him.

He did remember.

Not completely.

But enough to know that during the audit, the thought of that loft had crossed his mind one night.

If he had wished, he could have had the lock opened.

But the register recorded the unauthorised wall-repair expenditure.

The chairman’s order had been oral, not written.

Ramvriksh had refused to falsify the final expenditure head.

If the register had been found, the headmaster's administrative lapse would have come to light.

Shivnarayan had chosen silence.

"Why three knocks?" he asked softly.

Chanda looked towards the gutter-cover.

"When Babuji wanted someone's attention at school, he used to knock three times on the door. When I was a child, I understood—three knocks meant Babuji was standing outside."

The night suddenly became very old.

"Did you try to get inside?"

"No. If I broke the lock, then even if the register were found, people would say I planted it, removed it, altered it. I only wanted the papers to be opened by your own hands."

Shivnarayan wiped soot from the lantern glass with a finger.

"And if it is not there?"

"Then at least the story will end that we never even searched."

For a while neither spoke.

Shivnarayan did not sleep before dawn.

At five he telephoned the assistant at the block education office.

"The storeroom lock must be opened in the presence of an officer. No papers are to be taken out until all of you arrive."

"So early?" came a sleepy voice from the other end.

"Yes. Stop today's disposal list."

At half past eight, the assistant, the panchayat secretary, and the new middle-school headmistress arrived.

The carpenter cut the lock.

The moment the door opened, the smell of dampness drove everyone back.

Inside were a broken globe, an iron box, torn charts, two sacks of old books, and bundles of papers on the loft.

"Photograph everything first," Shivnarayan said.

"Touch nothing."

Chanda stood at the far end of the veranda.

She did not enter.

Five bundles were brought down from the loft.

Three contained examination papers.

One contained old admission forms.

When the cloth around the fifth bundle was opened, a thick register appeared inside.

Its edges were no longer new, but the letters were alive.

On the cover was written:

"SPECIAL GRANT EXPENDITURE REGISTER 2008-09."

Shivnarayan's hand trembled.

He did not open the register himself.

The assistant did.

Pages turned.

Roof repairs.

Timber.

Cupboards.

Books.

Then one entry:

“EMERGENCY REPAIR—EASTERN ROOM WALL.”

The amount had been taken from the head originally allotted for book cupboards.

Beside it was Ramvriksh’s handwriting:

“Oral order of Headmaster; revised approval awaited.”

Below was Ramvriksh Sada’s signature.

Then Shivnarayan’s.

After that came three original receipts.

Thumb impressions of two labourers.

One mason’s receipt.

The money had not disappeared.

The expenditure head had been changed.

A rule had been broken.

The report had been incomplete.

In one corner of a page, Ramvriksh had written in red pencil:

“Revised approval not received; place before next meeting.”

The matter never appeared in the meeting proceedings.

Shivnarayan remembered.

That week there had been news of an inspector’s visit.

Then a flood.

Then examinations.

What had been postponed to “the next meeting” remained postponed for years.

No single person owned the entire fault.

The chairman had given an oral order.

Shivnarayan had abandoned procedure and made an immediate decision.

Ramvriksh had refused to sign under a false expenditure head.

The office had never answered the request for revised approval.

But village stories prefer a simple answer.

The simple answer chose one name:

Ramvriksh.

Most important of all—

the register had not disappeared from Ramvriksh’s hands.

The block assistant looked at Shivnarayan.

“This will reopen the old audit objection.”

“Let it reopen,” Shivnarayan said.

“It is a very old matter. Adjustment papers—”

“Write what exists. Do not write what does not.”

He was startled by his own voice.

Why had he not been able to say such a simple sentence eighteen years earlier?

The assistant suggested writing a receipt note on the first blank page of the old register.

Shivnarayan stopped him.

"Do not write new matter in the old register. Attach a separate sheet.

Write the date.

The time.

Everyone present.

The room.

The loft.

And write that the register was found inside a locked room."

The panchayat secretary asked, "What about the matter of Ramvriksh Babu's name?"

Before answering, Shivnarayan looked towards Chanda.

She was still there, her eyes on the ground.

"The oral belief spread during the old audit that he was responsible no longer has a basis in this register," Shivnarayan said.

"Write that in a separate note.

And add my statement too—

I failed to have the room properly searched."

The assistant stopped his pen.

"You will give that in writing?"

"I will."

By noon, cloth lines had been stretched along the veranda so the papers could dry.

The sheets were placed one by one in the shade.

The vehicle bringing supplies for the health sub-centre turned back.

For one more day the building remained in the name of the school's papers.

Chanda quietly filled a bucket with water and brought it over.

Shivnarayan did not stop her.

After a long while he said, "Those three knocks last night... at first I was frightened."

Pressing a dry cloth against the damp corner of the register, Chanda said, "Sometimes fear opens the ears."

Shivnarayan had no answer.

Towards evening clouds gathered.

The first drop fell beyond the veranda.

Then another.

Then heavy rain began.

Water started dripping through one place in the old roof.

Chanda slid an empty bucket beneath it.

Drop.

Drop.

Drop.

Shivnarayan looked up involuntarily.
This time they were not knocks.
Only water.
He bent over the register again.

THE HEAT OF THE WOODEN CHEST

At one seventeen in the morning, Badrinarayan Chaudhary placed his palm on the chest again.

The wood was warm.

Not so hot that he had to withdraw his hand, but distinctly warmer than every other chest in the museum.

The sal-wood trunk beside it was cold.

The iron box against the wall was cold.

Even the door of the old manuscript room was cool with the dampness of the night.

But this square chest in the middle gallery gave off a warmth against his palm as though the day's sunlight were still trapped inside it.

Badrinarayan took his hand away.

The ceiling fan was off.

It was a Bhadon night, but after the rain the air outside had turned mildly cool.

The museum's thick walls did retain the day's heat for some time.

But why only one chest?

He brought a thermometer.

Without his spectacles, reading the numbers in the thin glass tube was difficult.

He placed it on the lid.

After a while the reading stopped near thirty-two.

The chest beside it was twenty-seven.

A difference of five degrees.

"Again," he said very softly.

This was the third night in succession.

For three weeks the district museum had been closed to visitors.

Roof repairs, termite inspection, and cleaning of the storage rooms were under way.

By day there were labourers, conservation assistants, clerks, officers—voices everywhere.

After eight at night there were only Badrinarayan, the outer gate, and the objects spread through the galleries.

He had been a guard here for seventeen years.

The first seven as a temporary worker.

After that, regular service.

Eight months remained before retirement.

He knew every corner of the museum—

which window seeped during the rains,

which cupboard door swelled,

beneath which statue dust gathered quickly,

which stopped clock still gave a faint metallic sound from within.

But this wooden chest, familiar for years, had become unfamiliar.

Its label read:

“Donation: Rajbanaili Family. Approx. nineteenth century. Mixed use.”

Inside were normally kept old garments, two broken wooden frames, and one brass lamp.

Nothing of great value.

Yet every time Badrinarayan stood beside this chest at night, he remembered an afternoon from nineteen years earlier.

At that time he was still a temporary guard.

The rear roof of the museum leaked.

The then curator, Ramanand Mishra, had wrapped a small bronze image in cloth and carried it out.

The object was called “Kamala-Kamalasana.”

About the height of a palm.

Recovered from a local excavation.

Date uncertain.

Ramanand Babu had said, “I will dry it at home for two days. If it stays in this dampness, it will develop green corrosion. I will make the outward-pass slip tomorrow.”

Badrinarayan had opened the gate.

Two days became four.

Four days became two weeks.

Then Ramanand Babu fell ill.

Three months later he died.

The bronze never appeared in the museum again.

An inventory inquiry followed.

Questions were asked.

Badrinarayan was asked:

“Did you see anyone carry an object out?”

He said:

“No.”

Only that.

The weight of that single “no” had not grown lighter with the years.

The more familiar the museum became, the heavier the word grew.

Sometimes he thought Ramanand Babu had truly taken the bronze away only to save it.

Sometimes he thought he had watched a theft happen before his own eyes.

His silence hung between those two possibilities.

Now, standing beside this warm chest, he kept remembering that cloth-wrapped bronze.

On the first night he blamed the heat of the day.

On the second, he found the courage to open the lid.

Inside were the old garments, the frames, the lamp.

Everything seemed ordinary.

He put a hand inside.

The bottom was warm from above.

He did not sleep that night.

On the third night he decided to find the cause.

With a small electric torch rather than a lantern, he knelt and examined the ground around the four feet of the chest.

There was little dust because the galleries had been cleaned during the day.

But beside the rear left foot lay a semicircle of fine grey-white powder.

He was about to touch it with his finger, then stopped.

During the day Conservation Assistant Tilottama Jha often said, "Never touch unidentified powder with your bare hand."

Badrinarayan lifted a little with a scrap of paper.

The smell was not sharp.

Slightly medicinal.

There was also a smell of neem.

"Pest-control powder?" he thought.

Something gleamed beneath the lower right corner of the chest.

He bent and brought the torch closer.

A very thin metal strip projected from between the wood and the floor—so thin that in daylight it would easily escape notice.

He did not try to pull it with his fingers.

The clock on the opposite wall showed one twenty-eight.

Rainwater kept dripping from the roof over the outer veranda.

Then he heard a very faint rustling from the direction of the storeroom.

He stood.

"Who is there?"

No answer.

Another sound.

Badrinarayan lifted his stick.

He was past sixty, but the old habits of night duty remained in his body.

He moved towards the storeroom.

The door was shut.

The padlock was in place.

Behind the window grille was darkness.

He turned back.

At the far end of the gallery something seemed to move like a shadow.

"Who is there?"

This time a woman's voice answered.

"It is me."

Tilottama stepped out from behind a pillar.

Badrinarayan lowered his stick slightly.

His suspicion did not lower with it.

"You? At this hour?"

"I left something behind."

"What?"

"My rain shawl."

"For your shawl you went to the storeroom?"

Tilottama was silent for a moment.
 "I had left it there."
 Her hands were empty.
 Badrinarayan said nothing.
 Tilottama read his look.
 "Were you looking for something?"
 "On guard duty one does not search," Badrinarayan said. "One observes."
 "Then observe."
 She turned and walked towards the wooden chest.
 Badrinarayan followed.
 Tilottama placed her palm on the lid.
 For one instant her expression changed.
 She immediately made it neutral again.
 "It is warm," Badrinarayan said.
 "Yes."
 "Why?"
 "Wood holds the day's heat."
 "The wood beside it does not."
 Tilottama gave no answer.
 "I have been watching for three nights," Badrinarayan said. "There is this powder beside the foot. There is a metal strip underneath. Do you know about them?"
 "We will look in the morning."
 "Why not now?"
 "Because it is not right to open it now."
 That sentence opened an old door inside Badrinarayan.
 Ramanand Babu's voice:
 "I will dry it at home for two days. I will make the slip tomorrow."
 He studied Tilottama's face.
 Recently appointed.
 Around thirty.
 Trained in museum studies, but working on a temporary honorarium.
 All day she dealt with mould, insects, torn paper, and old cloth.
 Officers listened to her advice less often than they used her labour.
 "If work cannot be spoken of in daylight," Badrinarayan said slowly, "does it become right at night?"
 Tilottama looked startled.
 "What are you trying to say?"
 "Open the chest."
 "I do not have the authority."
 "Neither do I. But the heat is not asking for authority."
 For a few moments both were silent.
 Then Tilottama asked, "Do you have the key?"
 "To the main lock."
 "Open the main lock."
 Badrinarayan's chest tightened slightly.

He took out the key.

The lock opened.

The lid rose.

Inside were the same old garments, the two frames, the brass lamp.

Tilottama removed the objects one by one.

The bottom lay empty.

“And now?” Badrinarayan asked.

Tilottama knelt.

She ran a fingernail along the inner left edge of the chest.

Nothing.

Then she removed a hairpin and inserted it into a tiny hole.

Click.

One panel of the bottom lifted.

Badrinarayan held his breath.

A false bottom.

Below lay a sheet of tin.

Over it was thick cotton cloth.

The moment the cloth was lifted, mildly warm air escaped.

At the very bottom were two bricks.

Red.

Warm, but not burning.

Wrapped in thick cloth.

Between them a metal strip spread the heat.

Above the insulating layer lay five bundles of old papers, two file covers, and a small wooden frame.

Pest-control powder had been placed at the corners.

Badrinarayan's first feeling was not relief.

It was anger.

“What are you doing?”

“Reducing the dampness.”

“With hot bricks?”

“Not directly against the papers. Metal underneath, air space in between, cotton above. It is a temporary measure.”

“Authorised?”

Tilottama remained silent.

“So it is not.”

“When the roof leaked, the rear cupboard in the manuscript room became damp. Three days ago I submitted a written note saying the papers needed to be dried immediately. The curator said: first complete the full inventory, then relocate them. By the time the counting is finished, mould will be on the papers.”

“So you hid them?”

“I saved them.”

“Hiding and saving are not the same thing.”

For the first time Tilottama looked directly into his eyes.

“I know.”

The sentence was short.

But something in that short sentence stopped Badrinarayan's anger.

Tilottama lifted one document bundle.

"I needed this chest because air circulates inside it and insects are fewer. But I did not know about the false bottom at first. On the first night, while cleaning the base, this panel lifted."

"Then?"

"Then I found this."

From between the cloth layers she took out a very old brown sheet of paper.

The edges were brittle.

The ink had faded.

In the centre remained half the impression of a red seal.

Something emptied inside Badrinarayan.

At the top was written:

"TEMPORARY OUTWARD LIST."

Date:

nineteen years earlier.

Three objects were listed.

First:

two manuscript leaves.

Second:

bronze image "Kamala-Kamalasana."

Third:

small copperplate.

Reason:

"Excessive dampness; temporary conservation."

Destination:

"Residence of Curator."

Below was Ramanand Mishra's signature.

And beside it, in smaller letters:

"Exit through gate witnessed—Badrinarayan Chaudhary."

The signature was his.

He did not take the paper into his hand.

The darkness of the gallery suddenly seemed enormous.

"Where did you find this?"

"In this false bottom. It was trapped beneath the metal sheet. Perhaps it slipped there during some old repair to the chest."

"Did you show it to anyone?"

"No."

"Why?"

"First the paper had to be stabilised. It was not wet, but there were insect marks. Second—I did not know where the people whose names are on it were now."

Tilottama's eyes settled on his face.

"You know now," Badrinarayan said.

“Yes.”

“So that is why you came at night?”

“If I had brought this paper out in the daytime, half the office would have gathered around it. Someone would say it was proof of theft. Someone else that the curator was innocent. Someone would read your name. Someone would photograph it and send it outside. The original is brittle. I wanted first to make sure it did not break.”

“And you made that decision yourself.”

“Yes.”

Badrinarayan did not smile.

One corner of his mouth tightened bitterly.

“I too once suffered from the disease of making decisions by myself.”

Tilottama remained silent.

“That day Ramanand Babu carried the bronze out. I opened the gate. A slip existed—that is now proved. But later, when I was asked, I said I had seen nothing.”

“Why?”

“At first I thought it was only for two days. Then he became ill. Then he died. Then the inquiry. By then if I told the truth, the question would be: why did I not say it earlier? My job was temporary. I had two small children at home. I went silent.”

“Was the bronze found at his house?”

“No. At least it never returned to the museum.”

“Did you search?”

“No.”

There was more exhaustion in this “no” than in the first one.

Tilottama placed the sheet back on the cotton layer.

“This list shows that the bronze did not leave as an act of theft. But it does not say whether it came back.”

“And it also shows that I lied.”

“Yes.”

Badrinarayan looked at her.

He had not expected such simple agreement.

“You do not want to protect me?”

“I am protecting the paper,” Tilottama said. “Let the paper protect people by itself.”

Badrinarayan went towards the open gallery window.

Rainwater had collected in the courtyard.

Drops fell from one corner of the roof.

Far away, near the gate, the light of a bulb trembled in the water.

For how many years had he waited for some document to say that he was not a thief?

Now the document had appeared.

But at the same time it also said he had not been truthful.

Half relief.

Half punishment.

"Where do you get the warm bricks?" he asked.

Tilottama was slightly surprised at the change of subject.

"From the small stove in the rear courtyard. The labourers make tea there during the day. In the residual heat of the evening, I leave the bricks. When they are mildly warm at night, I wrap them and bring them."

"Every night?"

"Three nights."

"The key?"

"An old spare storeroom key was in the repair-material box."

"So you stole the key."

"Borrowed," Tilottama said, then did not smile herself. "All right—without permission."

"The pest-control powder?"

"Neem powder mixed with a very small amount of approved material. It does not touch the papers."

"The metal strip?"

"So the heat would not stay concentrated in one place."

Badrinarayan looked again at the false bottom.

Every clue had been in plain sight.

Warmth.

Powder.

Metal.

Night-time sounds.

The fear had been inside him, not inside the chest.

But understanding that did not end the problem.

"In the morning all of this will be put in writing," he said.

Tilottama's face tightened.

"If it is written down, I could lose my job."

"If it is not written, then it becomes the same mistake—"

Badrinarayan stopped.

"The same mistake again."

Tilottama was silent.

"I remained silent even though a slip existed. You are acting without a slip. Both our reasons may be good. But silence can corrupt the reason itself."

"The paper is still brittle. In the morning everyone will touch it."

"Then first prepare a conservation note. Write which sheets, their condition, the temperature, the measure taken. Write your decision too. I will write my statement separately."

"You will write about your old matter as well?"

Badrinarayan took time to answer.

"Yes."

Tilottama put a hand on the false bottom.

"Shall I remove the bricks now? Too much heat is not good."

"Remove them."

Together they took the bricks out.

When the cloth was opened, there was only the ordinary smell of earth.

No mystery.

Badrinarayan found it strange that the heat which had frightened him for three nights had come from only two red bricks.

Tilottama placed the papers separately on a flat board.

Before touching the old list, Badrinarayan put on cotton gloves.

He looked at his signature again.

The letters were young.

The hand had been steady.

"I made this signature," he said.

"That is good," Tilottama said.

"Why?"

"Because at least the exit was witnessed. What happened afterwards can still be searched for."

"And my lie?"

"That can be written too."

For the first time Badrinarayan smiled faintly.

"You are a person of papers."

"Are papers not of people?"

"Sometimes people become the property of papers."

Until four in the morning, they made an inventory of the damp-affected sheets.

Tilottama recorded temperatures with the thermometer.

Badrinarayan wrote down the measurements of the chest's false bottom.

The old list received separate cloth and separate backing.

At five ten, Badrinarayan began his statement.

The first line was difficult.

"Date..."

He stopped.

Then he wrote:

"Nineteen years ago, when the then Curator Ramanand Mishra removed three objects from the museum for temporary conservation, I was present at the gate."

Up to that point his hand remained steady.

On the next line, the pen trembled.

"In the subsequent inquiry, I denied this fact."

He stared at the paper for a long time.

Tilottama did not look at him.

She was sliding cloth beneath the broken corner of another sheet.

Badrinarayan wrote the next line:

"I bear responsibility for that silence."

That was all.

No explanation.

Children.

Temporary employment.

Fear.

All were true.

Their names could be written later if necessary.

The first sentence had to be about responsibility.

When Curator Prabhakar Thakur arrived in the morning, he saw the chest open in the gallery and immediately became angry.

“What is going on here?”

Tilottama stood.

“Emergency conservation was carried out at night. The written record is prepared.”

“Whose permission?”

“No one’s.”

“Do you understand this violates service rules?”

“Yes.”

Prabhakar turned towards Badrinarayan.

“And you?”

Badrinarayan extended his statement.

“I was on guard duty. I did not stop her. Then I inspected the matter. This is my statement. And this old outward list was found.”

The moment Prabhakar read it, he fell silent.

His finger stopped at the name Kamala-Kamalasana.

“Where was this?”

“In the false bottom of the chest,” Tilottama said.

“Who has seen it?”

“You are the third person.”

Prabhakar read Badrinarayan’s statement.

After a few moments he pulled over a chair and sat.

“This will have to go before the committee.”

“It will,” Badrinarayan said.

“You understand the old inquiry may reopen?”

“It may.”

“And your own statement will raise questions about you.”

“Let it.”

Prabhakar looked at Tilottama.

“Warm bricks?”

Tilottama explained the entire arrangement.

Prabhakar held his head.

“In the name of saving paper, will you set the museum on fire?”

“Not fire. The temperature was measured. But I accept that I acted without written permission.”

“From today this method stops.”

“All right.”

“And a separate room will be prepared for damp-affected papers.”

Tilottama said nothing.

But her face relaxed.

By noon, word had spread through the museum.

Some said a clue to the missing bronze had been found.

Some said the old guard himself had confessed.

Some called Tilottama courageous.

Others called her undisciplined.

Badrinarayan heard everything.

He offered no defence.

By evening the committee sealed the old list in a protective envelope.

They decided to search for the old address of Ramanand Mishra's family.

Assistance would be requested from the university conservation laboratory.

A written warning would be issued regarding Tilottama's night-time action, but her immediate effort to save damp-affected papers would also be recorded.

No decision was completely clean.

Kamala-Kamalasana was still missing.

Badrinarayan had not been proved innocent.

Tilottama's method had not been declared proper.

But three things were no longer hidden:

the object had left the museum,

Badrinarayan had seen it leave,

and in the warm chest at night there had been no theft—only an incomplete attempt at preservation.

That night, at one seventeen, Badrinarayan went to the gallery again.

The chest was closed.

A paper label had been tied to the main lock:

"TEMPORARILY NOT TO BE USED; FALSE BOTTOM RECORDED."

He placed his palm on the lid.

The wood was cold.

For a few moments he kept his hand there.

Whether he felt relief or regret, he could not tell.

The clock on the wall moved to one eighteen.

Badrinarayan took his hand away.

The heat of the chest was gone.

Whatever heat remained had been entered into the record.

STORY 134

THE KNOCKING INSIDE THE MUD WALL

The rain had stopped three days earlier, but the rear wall of the old house was still damp.

After dinner, Niranjan Mishra sat on a cot laid out in the courtyard.

The electricity had failed again.

The lantern flame had grown small, and drops of water kept falling from the leaves of the mango tree onto the same spot again and again.

Then two sounds came from inside the wall—

knock... knock.

He raised his head and listened.

Nothing more.

From inside, his wife Malati asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing. The bamboo must be drying."

He answered, but his own voice sounded unfamiliar to him.

This house dated from the time of Niranjan's great-grandfather.

Thick mud walls.

A lattice of bamboo within.

Lime and clay plaster outside.

One wall of the rear room was thicker than all the others.

When he was a child, he had been told that there had once been a recessed niche inside that wall where old decorative designs were made, and that the hollow had later been filled.

But Niranjan remembered something else as well.

Twenty-two years earlier, during the division of the family land, his father Gangadhar Mishra and his younger uncle Nageshwar had quarrelled in this very room.

The next day the amin came.

A rope was stretched.

Pegs were driven into the ground.

And two kathas of land on the western side were entered in Gangadhar's share.

For a long time afterwards Nageshwar kept saying that the measurement was wrong.

After that, the subject was closed inside the family.

Nageshwar died five years earlier.

His daughter Anima lived in the city.

The previous month she had suddenly come to the village, saying only that she had wanted to see the old house.

When Niranjan heard the knocking that night, his thoughts went straight there.

The next morning he examined the wall.

Nothing showed on the damp plaster.

Near the bottom were two small holes that looked like rat burrows.

At one place a little earth had crumbled away.

Malati said, "It is an old wall. Rats and cats will live in it. Leave the night's matter with the night."

Niranjan smiled faintly and went inside, but all day he could not keep his mind on the fields.

In the evening he had everything removed from the rear room.

An old low stool.

Two bamboo seats.

An empty grain bin.

And an iron lamp from his grandmother's time.

When the wall stood bare, a slight swelling could be seen in the middle.

He tapped it with his knuckle.

Most of the wall gave a solid sound.

At one place the sound was thinner—

tuk.

Beside that exact spot was a mark like a black line.

Niranjan brought the lamp closer.

The line was a scratch.

Not straight.

Slightly crooked, as though some thin tool had been inserted into the mud.

Malati's face became serious.

"A rat did not make this."

Niranjan gave no answer.

That night the electricity failed again.

This time he did not sit on the cot.

He remained inside the rear room.

Instead of a torch, he held a small oil lamp.

The clock showed eleven forty-five.

At first the house remained quiet.

At midnight wind moved over the roof.

The old bamboo creaked.

At twelve seven—

knock.

Niranjan went still.

A moment later—

knock.

The sounds came from the exact hollow section.

He put his ear to the wall.

Something seemed to scrape inside.

He immediately opened the door and went outside.

The rear courtyard was dark.

On the other side of the wall ran a narrow passage, beyond which lay his uncle's old portion of the house.

That section was now usually kept closed because Anima had returned to the city and the key was with her cousin Ratnesh.

There was no one in the narrow passage.

The earth was wet.

Niranjan looked for footprints.

Apart from one or two old sandal marks, there was nothing new.

In the morning he called Ratnesh.

Ratnesh laughed.

“Dada, if an old house does not knock, will it sing?”

“Open the room in your share.”

Ratnesh fell quiet for a moment, then brought the key.

The room on that side was smaller than Niranjan’s.

Against the rear of the wall were an old wooden chest, a broken cot, and a sack of cow-dung cakes.

Ratnesh kept moving the things away.

At the exact point where Niranjan had heard the hollow sound, a vertical piece of bamboo was half embedded in the wall.

The bamboo was very old.

Its upper part had dried and split.

Ratnesh said, “See? This bamboo must be moving. When the wind comes, it knocks.”

Niranjan shook the bamboo by hand.

A faint sound came, but not like the two distinct knocks of the night.

He bent lower.

Beside the bamboo, on the earth, lay fine white dust.

Dust from an old mud wall is yellow-brown.

This was white.

He took some on a fingertip and smelled it.

Lime.

“Someone has scraped here recently,” he said.

Ratnesh stopped smiling.

“Why would anyone scrape here?”

Niranjan looked at him.

“That is what I too want to know.”

That day Niranjan went to Budhan, an old mason in the village.

Budhan was past eighty, but his eyes were still sharp.

When he heard about the wall, he nodded slowly.

“I did not build that wall,” he said. “My father did. But once I came during a repair. In the middle there was a square raw-clay hollow, something like a recess. Old people made them to keep papers.”

“How large?”

“A hand or two. But later it was filled with earth.”

“Who filled it?”

Budhan closed his eyes, searching his memory.

"Your father Gangadhar said an empty cavity weakened the wall. Nageshwar was there too. The two brothers. I only remember that before it was filled, some papers were taken out."

Niranjan's chest grew heavy.

"What papers?"

"How would I know? I was hardly literate. They were wrapped in red cloth."

All the way home Niranjan thought about that red cloth.

His father Gangadhar had died ten years earlier.

Near the end he spoke very little.

Once Niranjan had raised the matter of the land papers.

His father had said only this:

"Where the pegs were driven, that is the boundary. A house does not run by digging up old matters."

At the time Niranjan had taken the sentence in an ordinary way.

Now he did not.

There was no knocking that night.

None on the third night either.

On the fourth night, Niranjan deliberately locked the rear room from outside but left one panel of the window open.

He stayed in the sleeping room with Malati.

After midnight Malati nudged him with her elbow.

"Listen."

Knock.

A few moments.

Knock.

Niranjan got up.

This time he did not go directly to the narrow passage.

First he took the torch from the veranda, then left through the front door, walked around his uncle's section, and came into the rear passage from the other side.

Someone was bent there in the dark.

The moment the torchlight fell, the figure stood up.

Anima.

For a moment Niranjan could not speak.

Anima held a thin iron rod in one hand.

Her other hand was smeared with earth.

"You?" Niranjan said at last.

Anima remained silent for a few moments.

"First lower the torch."

"You are scraping my wall at night?"

"The wall was half on your side and half on my father's side."

"That is not an answer."

"Then come inside. We will not talk in the passage."

They went into Ratnesh's room.

From her bag Anima took out a photocopy of an old paper.

The edges were worn.

At the top were the amin's name, a date, and copies of three witnesses' signatures.

"Where did you get this?" Niranjan asked.

"In Babu's old box. It is not complete. Only half a sheet."

The paper showed a land measurement line, but the western portion had been cut away.

At the bottom, in Nageshwar's handwriting, were two words:

"Original measurement—wall."

Niranjan stared at the paper for a long time.

Anima said, "The first day I came openly to look. You remember? I said I wanted to see the house."

"You said nothing."

"What would I have said? All his life Babu kept saying the measurement paper had been changed. Everyone in the village thought him greedy. If I came again with the same claim, I needed the paper first."

"And the knocking?"

"I was pushing the rod inside. There is an old bamboo lattice in the wall. When the rod strikes it, the bamboo knocks against the other side of the wall."

"Why at night?"

Anima lowered her eyes.

"If I did it by day, five people would gather. First I wanted to be certain there was something inside."

Niranjan was still angry.

"You planned to break the wall?"

"No. If I found a small opening, only that much."

"And if you found papers?"

Anima took a long time before answering.

"First I would read them. Then we would see what was true."

"Take back the land?"

Anima looked directly at him.

"Before the land, I want my father's name back."

The sentence struck Niranjan because his father Gangadhar's face rose before him.

The next morning the wall was not broken.

Budhan was called again.

He said it would be unsafe to open an old mud wall without support.

He placed two temporary bamboo props, then the plaster was slowly scraped away from the scratched place.

First layer:

mud.

Second layer:

lime.

Behind it:

an old flat clay tile.

The left corner of the tile sounded unusually hollow.

Budhan loosened the edge with a small hammer.

When the tile came out, the stale smell of enclosed earth emerged from within.

The cavity was very small.

Not a place for jewellery.

Inside were thin bamboo strips, and between them was a small bundle of red cloth whose colour had almost completely faded.

Niranjan's hands began to tremble.

Budhan took the bundle out and placed it on a low stool.

Before opening it, Anima wiped her hands on the end of her sari.

Inside the cloth were four folded sheets.

Two had been eaten by insects.

One contained a measurement diagram.

One bore the amin's writing.

Malati said softly, "Let them dry first. If we open damp paper, it will tear."

Everyone fell silent.

The papers were placed in the shade of the veranda to dry.

Niranjan did not want to move away from them all day.

Anima sat at a distance.

By evening the writing had become somewhat clearer.

On the measurement sheet, the western portion of the house land was divided in two.

But the line lay about five hands east of the present field boundary.

By that measurement, part of the land now within Gangadhar's share belonged in Nageshwar's share.

But the paper contained something else too.

At the bottom, the amin had written that by oral agreement the two brothers would leave the narrow western strip as a shared passage because it was the only route to the pond behind the house.

The present boundary had absorbed that common passage into Gangadhar's field.

Niranjan's first thought was:

How legally valid could this paper be?

Old.

Unregistered.

Half decayed.

Then came his second thought:

Why had his father left this paper inside the wall?

The answer was on another sheet.

Gangadhar's handwriting.

Very small.

Only four lines.

"In the new measurement, the western strip fell too far on my side. Nageshwar objected. In the crowd before the panchayat, the matter was

stopped. I am keeping the original measurement here. When there is peace in the house again, we will correct it.”

The date was two days after the division.

The correction never happened.

Niranjan could not lift his eyes from the page.

Anima too said nothing.

Ratnesh, who had been standing by a veranda pillar until then, slowly sat down.

Packing his tools, Budhan asked, “Shall I close the opening in the wall again or leave it?”

“Leave it for now,” Niranjan said. “Let air reach inside.”

No one discussed the land division during dinner.

Malati merely changed the dry cloth beneath the papers.

At midnight Niranjan woke again.

The house was quiet.

He went to the rear room.

The hollow remained open.

A strip of bamboo inside had dried slightly in the air and shifted.

Knock.

Niranjan stood still and listened.

A few moments later the bamboo touched the earth again.

Knock.

This time he was not afraid.

In the morning Anima was preparing to leave.

Niranjan gathered the papers spread on the veranda and placed them before her.

“The originals will remain here,” he said. “Copies will be made in the names of both households.”

Anima looked at him but said nothing.

After a moment Niranjan added, “We will call the amin as well. First we will see the measurement.”

Anima’s eyes filled, but she turned her face away and began straightening the corner of the paper.

By noon the opening in the wall was covered temporarily with wood.

Budhan said full repair should wait until after the new measurement.

Niranjan agreed.

Three days later the amin came.

The old papers, the current land record, and the actual boundary on the ground were all examined.

No immediate decision was made.

The question of five hands of land was not simple.

Registration.

Inheritance.

Shared passage.

Each required separate examination.

But from that day Niranjan did not plough the narrow strip leading towards the pond.

Ratnesh drove a small bamboo peg into the old boundary so that the line would remain visible until the measurement was completed.

Anima returned to the city.

The wall was repaired two weeks later.

Budhan did not completely fill the old cavity.

A small wooden box was fitted inside, and the original measurement papers were placed there between acid-free cloth.

Two keys were made for the box—

one for Niranjan,

one for Anima.

No one called the arrangement a reconciliation.

No one said the old dispute had ended either.

Only this much was now clear:

the papers had a known place inside the wall.

On the first night after the repair, Niranjan stayed awake for a long time.

There was no knocking.

None on the second night either.

On the third night the wind was strong.

The bamboo of the roof creaked.

Mango leaves rubbed against one another.

The old outer door slammed once.

Niranjan listened with his eyes closed.

The wall remained silent.

For the first time he understood that sometimes a sound does not come from inside the wall.

Sometimes it comes from both sides of it.

STORY 135

THE TURNING SEAL

By five in the evening, the veranda of the Bisnapur Panchayat Office was usually almost empty.

In the rainy season that emptiness felt even denser.

Water kept drumming on the tin roof, and inside, the smell of old papers mingled with damp walls to create a peculiar odour.

Harinath Jha had been a clerk in this office for twenty-seven years.

His daily routine was divided down to the corner of the desk, the bunch of keys, and the order of the files.

The object he touched least was the old round seal.

A thick wooden handle.

A circular rubber face below.

Around it the words:

“GRAM PANCHAYAT BISNAPUR.”

And in the centre, a small lotus.

After a new seal had been made, the old one was hardly used.

Even so, Harinath kept it on a sheet of white paper at the right-hand corner of his desk.

There was no rule behind that position.

Only habit.

One Monday evening, while closing the office, he lightly drew a pencil square around the seal.

He did it without thinking.

The next morning the square was empty.

The seal had moved three finger-widths to the left.

At first Harinath thought Phulo, who swept the office, must have touched it.

But Phulo had been cleaning the office for ten years, and before touching anything official on the desk she always called Harinath.

That day Phulo said, “I swept under the desk, not on top.”

Harinath laughed.

“The wood must have shifted.”

Phulo laughed too.

But nothing inside Harinath laughed.

On the white paper beneath the seal was half of a circular blue mark.

It was exactly the size of the outer ring of the seal.

Not a full impression.

As though the seal had not been pressed upright onto the paper, but had dragged along it on one edge.

Harinath folded the paper and put it into the drawer.

Until noon, his eyes kept returning to that drawer.

There had been blue ink like this thirteen years earlier too.

That monsoon had also been severe.

River water had reached two hamlets, and papers in dozens of houses had been soaked and destroyed.

The panchayat office had been crowded with requests for residence and family-verification certificates.

The then panchayat secretary, Devkinandan Babu, had said in haste, "If verification is complete, do not hold up the papers."

Harinath had written day and night.

One evening eighteen blank forms had been stamped in advance so that the verified names could be filled in the next morning and the certificates handed out quickly.

It was not the proper procedure.

Harinath knew that.

There was no electricity that night.

The veranda was crowded.

Wet clothes.

Mud.

Crying.

Desperation.

Everything together.

In the morning, seventeen forms were found.

One was missing.

Devkinandan Babu had said, "It must have been torn in the crowd. Do not make an issue of it."

Harinath entered seventeen instead of eighteen in the register.

He had not forgotten that single line in thirteen years.

A few months later whispers spread through the village that an outsider had shown a Bisnapur certificate to obtain flood relief.

Harinath never learned the name.

He never had the chance to see the paper.

But his mind had accepted one thing:

the missing form was still alive.

And one day it might return.

Now the seal was turning.

On Wednesday morning Harinath saw that the seal had moved two finger-widths forward from its place.

This time he had not drawn a pencil square.

Instead, he had left a small circle of dust beneath it on the wood of the desk.

The circle was broken.

On the paper there was again a half-round blue mark.

This one curved in the opposite direction from the first.

Harinath lifted the seal.

The wood was not cold.

It was slightly damp.

The round piece of wood holding the rubber beneath the handle seemed swollen on one side.

He brought it close to his nose.

The wood smelled of dampness.

Fine moisture from the wall above the desk crept downward in the rains, though no water dripped.

“This is the wood playing tricks,” Harinath told himself.

But the ink?

The seal was no longer used.

The ink pad stayed locked in the drawer.

He opened the drawer.

The lid of the pad was firmly closed.

Then he remembered the new employee, Rachna Kumari.

Rachna had joined the office two months earlier.

Around thirty.

Quiet-spoken.

Patient with papers.

Where others sneezed at the sight of old files and hurried away, Rachna dusted them and matched page numbers.

The district office had given her one assignment:

prepare a verification list of old certificate files.

Not make copies.

Only match serial number, date, signature, and seal.

Harinath had thought the work ordinary.

Now it did not seem ordinary.

That afternoon Rachna sat before the old cupboard.

Bent over a page, she was examining an impression of the seal with a magnifying glass.

Harinath watched from a distance.

“What are you looking for?”

Rachna raised her head.

“The impressions of the old round seal are not all alike.”

Harinath’s throat dried.

“Old rubber wears down.”

“That may be so.”

Rachna looked back at the paper.

“But in some impressions the outer ring is thick, in others thin. In some, the vowel mark in ‘Bi’ is broken, in others complete.”

Harinath sat down in his chair.

“So?”

“Nothing yet. First I will match the sequence.”

There was no accusation in her voice.

That made Harinath more uneasy.

If Rachna had accused him, he could have prepared an answer.

A silent investigation was harder to answer.

That evening, before closing the office, Harinath placed the old seal upright on a thick sheet of paper.

He drew lines around the sheet.

He pushed a folded paper beneath the left leg of the desk to try to level it.

He put the ink pad into the drawer and locked it.

The key went into his own shoulder bag.

In the morning the seal was still inside the outline.

Harinath's chest lightened.

But beside it was a new half-round stain.

The colour was a very pale blue.

He lifted the paper.

The ring was dark on the right and almost invisible on the left.

As though ink had touched it from one direction.

Harinath examined the rubber face of the seal.

There was blueness on the outer edge.

"The pad was locked," he thought.

"Then where did this blue come from?"

Watchman Batuknath appeared at the door.

He placed the night key register on Harinath's desk.

The panchayat office had two sets of the main keys.

One remained in Harinath's charge.

The other was locked at night in a box in the watchman's room.

If any employee entered the office after closing, the name and time had to be entered in the register.

Trying to appear casual, Harinath turned the pages.

Monday:

Rachna, 6:10 p.m. to 6:38 p.m.

Tuesday:

Rachna, 5:55 p.m. to 6:22 p.m.

Wednesday:

no name.

Harinath stopped his finger on Wednesday's line.

The seal had left a stain on Wednesday night too.

So Rachna alone was not moving it.

But why had Rachna come into the office on Monday and Tuesday evenings?

"She said she had files to examine," Batuknath explained. "There was written permission from the secretary."

"How many times?"

"Twice. Not yesterday."

Harinath closed the register.

That day he worked less and observed more.

In the afternoon the rain intensified.

Water collected on the floor beside the right leg of the desk.

Phulo dried it with a cloth.

Suddenly Harinath placed a drop of water on the surface of the desk.

The drop moved very slowly from left to right.
 The desk was not level.
 He removed the folded paper he had pushed beneath its leg.
 The drop moved faster.
 The old wooden top sagged slightly in the middle.
 He carefully tilted the seal onto one edge.
 Its round base and swollen wooden handle made it rest on two points.
 With a gentle push, it rolled half a turn.
 Harinath's palm grew cold.
 Not a ghost.
 Something else.
 But the question of the half-round blue stains remained.
 He called Rachna.
 "Did you use the old seal?"
 Rachna answered directly.
 "Yes."
 Harinath had not been prepared for such an easy admission.
 "On documents?"
 "On old waste paper. Not on certificates."
 "Why?"
 Rachna took three white sheets from her bag.
 Each bore an impression of the old seal.
 One complete.
 One faint.
 One half-pressed.
 "For comparison."
 "Permission?"
 "I am authorised to take seal samples for verification. But I did not take the old papers outside. I made the samples here."
 "At night?"
 "During the day there are too many people. When the old files are open, everyone asks questions. The secretary said I could work for half an hour after closing."
 "And why is the wooden handle damp?"
 For the first time Rachna looked surprised.
 "I did not wash it."
 She took the seal in her hand.
 She noticed the dampness beneath the handle.
 "This is from the wall. The paper it was lying on yesterday was damp too."
 Harinath looked at the three sample impressions.
 In all three, the blue ink was darker on the right side of the outer ring.
 "Why is the ink heavier on this side?"
 Rachna said, "One side of the rubber is recessed. The pressure is uneven."
 "And on the old certificates?"
 Rachna did not answer.
 She brought a file from the cupboard.

“This is why I am verifying them.”

The file was dated from the monsoon thirteen years earlier.

Harinath’s eyes stopped on the year.

Rachna placed five certificate copies before him.

On four, the vowel mark in ‘Bi’ was broken in the middle.

On the fifth, it was complete.

On four, the left petal of the lotus was thin.

On the fifth, thick.

On four, a small segment of the outer ring was missing.

On the fifth, the circle was perfectly clear.

“This fifth certificate is not in your register,” Rachna said.

The sound of rain suddenly seemed very far away to Harinath.

“The name?”

Rachna did not turn the paper towards him.

“First understand the seal.”

With the blunt end of a pencil, she pointed to one place on the old rubber face.

“Look here. Where the vowel mark in ‘Bi’ is broken, the rubber itself is split.”

“How long has it been split?”

“At least since the time of the first four certificates in this file, because all four carry the same break.”

“So the fifth?”

“This fifth certificate was not stamped with this seal.”

For a long time Harinath stared at the paper.

The shape of the suspicion that had lain like a stone inside him for thirteen years was changing.

The missing blank form had already been stamped with the old seal.

If that form had been used, its impression should have contained the broken vowel mark.

This certificate had been made with another seal.

“Then my missing paper?” Harinath asked softly.

Rachna looked at his face.

“What missing paper?”

The words had already escaped Harinath’s mouth.

He sat away from the back of his chair.

Outside, the rain was easing.

Phulo was tipping buckets of water off the veranda.

Harinath told Rachna about the eighteen pre-stamped blank forms from thirteen years earlier.

He also told her that he had written seventeen in the register.

He mentioned Devkinandan Babu’s instruction, but did not hide behind it.

“I could have written that one form was missing,” he said. “I did not.”

Rachna listened in silence.

"I was afraid the paper had gone outside. Then I heard the whispers. Since then I have kept thinking that one day this seal would catch me."

Rachna wiped the moisture from the wooden handle with a dry cloth.

"A seal catches no one," she said. "Papers do. Time does. Sometimes a mistake does."

Harinath said nothing.

Rachna showed him the name on the fifth certificate.

Harinath had never heard it.

The certificate was dated not thirteen years earlier, but ten years earlier.

Three years after the blank form had gone missing.

"This forged certificate is a separate matter," Rachna said. "It carries a copied seal. That is why I was taking samples from the original old seal."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"You are the old hand in this office. If I had told you first, your memory might have shaped the direction of my inquiry. I wanted to look at the papers first."

There was no accusation in the answer.

But there was distance.

Harinath felt that distance was justified.

He opened the key register again.

The times of Rachna's two evening visits were clear.

"You did not come on Wednesday night. Yet the seal moved."

Rachna examined the desk.

From one file she took a small round glass paperweight and placed it on the tabletop.

The ball slowly rolled to the right.

"The desk slopes."

Rachna laid the seal on one side.

"The wood has swollen with dampness. If it is left upright, nothing happens. If it rests on its side, it can roll."

"But I always leave it upright."

"Yesterday?"

Harinath tried to remember.

Yesterday he had lifted the seal, examined the rubber, and then put it down in a hurry.

Perhaps not fully upright.

Rachna looked at the sheet carrying the half-round stain.

"See this. It is not an impression. It is abrasion."

She turned the paper.

The darker portion lay in the direction of the desk's slope.

"Residual ink on the edge of the rubber touched the paper while it rolled."

"But the pad was locked."

"In this damp weather, ink does not dry completely in a single day."

Harinath counted the days on which Rachna had taken the sample impressions.

Monday and Tuesday.

By Wednesday the rubber edge could still have remained blue.

The connection was ordinary.

Fear had made it extraordinary.

In the afternoon the secretary came to the office.

Rachna showed him the fifth certificate, the sample impressions, and the verification list.

Harinath told his own story as well.

The secretary remained silent for a long time.

He was not from Devkinandan Babu's time.

For him the crowd of thirteen years earlier was history.

For Harinath it was smell and sound.

"Can we now mention that one of the eighteen forms was missing?" the secretary asked.

Rachna said, "Do not erase the original line. Add a delayed note beside it. Use today's date."

A knot tightened in Harinath's stomach.

"Then questions will arise."

"They will," the secretary said.

Harinath looked out the window.

The rain had stopped.

Water dripped from the mango leaves.

He asked for the register.

The page from thirteen years earlier had yellowed.

The line carried the number seventeen.

Harinath's own handwriting.

There was very little empty space beside it.

Rachna gave him a narrow strip of paper on which a note could be added and assigned a serial reference.

Harinath wrote:

"On the original working day, a total of eighteen pre-stamped forms were prepared; at the time of distribution, seventeen were available. One form remained unavailable. This fact could not be entered in the register at the time. The record is being completed through this delayed note."

He stopped after writing "could not be entered."

Then he did not strike it out.

Beside it he added in smaller words:

"was not entered."

The sentence changed.

The lapse was no longer the weather's.

It belonged to a person.

Harinath signed.

The secretary signed too.

Rachna entered the forged certificate separately in the verification list.

Its seal did not match the genuine old office seal.

That matter would be sent onward for investigation.

But Harinath's thirteen-year-old question about the missing form would remain separate.

Separate—

but not ended.

That evening, when closing the office, Harinath did not leave the old seal on the desk.

He asked for a small dry box.

Thick paper below.

Cotton cloth above.

The seal was cleaned and placed upright.

The ink pad was kept separately.

The date was written on the box.

Rachna said, "Now it will not turn."

Harinath smiled faintly.

"Have the desk levelled too."

The next day a carpenter came.

He nailed a thin wooden strip beneath the right leg of the desk.

The desk became level.

Harinath took the old paper with the half-round blue stain from the drawer.

He did not tear it.

Nor did he put it in the verification file.

He kept it among his private papers.

A few days later a letter arrived from the district.

The seal on the forged certificate had been found not to be the genuine office seal.

Further inquiry would proceed separately.

Harinath could have felt greatly relieved after reading the letter.

But he did not feel completely light.

There was still no answer about the missing form.

Perhaps it had never been used.

Perhaps it had.

Between those two possibilities there was now one difference:

it was written in the register.

Silence was no longer part of the official record.

A week later it rained again.

The office walls grew damp.

Water drummed on the tin roof.

Phulo swept the floor.

Batuknath placed the key register on the desk.

Rachna sat down and opened an old file.

Harinath opened the box and looked at the seal.

It was exactly where it had been placed.

He closed the box.

There was no new half-round blue mark on the desk.

Yet the shape of the old stain remained clear in Harinath's memory—

not a full circle.

Only half.

It seemed to him that some truths also arrive first as half a circle.

The remaining half has to be completed not by paper, but by a human being.

STORY 136

THE STRAIGHT STRIP THROUGH THE DEW

On Kartik mornings, Harinandan Yadav had always loved the shine of dew.

Pearl-like drops would rest on the tiny mustard leaves, and as eastern light rose, the field would suddenly turn bright green and white.

But that year, from the fifth morning onward, one thing stopped pleasing him.

Straight through the middle of the field ran a strip two finger-widths wide on which there was no dew.

On the first day Harinandan thought a mongoose or dog must have passed there during the night.

But the strip was too straight to be the path of a mongoose or dog.

On the second day, the same line.

On the third, a little to the right.

On the fourth, near the first position again.

On the fifth morning he sat on the field bund for half an hour watching the dew.

On both sides of the strip the mustard leaves were wet.

The leaves in the middle were almost dry.

There were no footprints on the soil.

People in the village still called that field “Jagesar’s Strip,” though Harinandan had bought it eight years earlier.

Jagesar Mahato had been drowning in debt.

His daughter’s marriage.

A new roof for the house.

Two bouts of illness.

Together they had caused his land to be sold piece by piece.

The final five kathas were this strip.

Harinandan paid the price.

The papers were proper.

The witnesses were proper.

Even so, somewhere inside him one thing had always troubled him:

on the day of the sale, Jagesar had said three times,

“If the price were just a little higher...”

Harinandan had replied then,

“The market is what it is.”

Now that sentence glinted again and again like Kartik dew.

Jagesar died two years later.

His wife had died before him.

His daughter Malti lived with her husband’s family, but Harinandan had heard that this month she had come back to clear the old parental house.

On the sixth morning Harinandan drove a small wooden peg into the beginning of the strip.

By evening the peg was still there.

That night he remained awake late on the veranda of his house.

A dog barked twice in the rear orchard, then fell silent.

After midnight, from somewhere in the distance, came a faint rasping sound like bamboo rubbing.

At dawn he went to the field.

The wooden peg was exactly as he had left it.

But the dewless strip ran to the left of the peg.

This time Harinandan bent down to inspect the leaves.

The tips of some leaves were pressed in the same direction.

The soil was dry.

No footprints.

Near the bund, a fine green fibre had caught on a stalk.

It resembled hemp or jute fibre.

He rubbed it between his fingers.

There was a faint smell of wax.

"This is not the work of an animal," he thought.

At midday he stopped Lalan Paswan as he passed the field.

Lalan had once worked on land-survey crews.

Harinandan showed him the fibre.

Lalan did not laugh.

"It could be from an old measuring tape," he said. "They used to be made of hemp. Wax was rubbed into them so they would not stretch too much in damp weather."

"Who would stretch a measuring tape across a field at night?"

Lalan looked at Harinandan's face.

"Someone who has something to measure."

Harinandan's first thought went to Malti.

To escape the thought, he walked to the market square in the afternoon.

At the tea stall he did not raise the matter himself.

But in a village, a thought in one man's mind often takes form on five tongues by the next day.

Someone said Jagesar's spirit was showing the old boundary.

Someone said perhaps nilgai walked in straight lines at night.

Old Kashi Sahu laughed.

"Who taught nilgai land surveying?"

Harinandan did not laugh.

He feared people's guesses more than ghosts.

If word spread that Jagesar's family was asking for land, the old sale price would climb back onto everyone's tongue.

The price had not been illegal.

But the fairness of a price and the justice of a person's desperation are not the same thing.

Harinandan understood that now, though he did not yet admit it.

Back home he searched the old account papers.

The amount from eight years earlier was written down.

On the same page were expenses for fertiliser, seed, and labour.

He told himself:

"I took the risk. I improved the land. I had the old irrigation channel cleared."

The argument was sound.

Beneath it, Jagesar's sentence could still be heard:

If the price were just a little higher...

That evening Harinandan conducted a small experiment.

On the outer bund of the field, where the crop was sparse, he left three things overnight:

a thin bamboo,

a handful of straw,

and an old jute measuring tape lying in Kamala's sewing box.

In the morning, the soil under the bamboo was damp.

Dew had gathered all around the straw.

But when he removed the tape, the leaves beneath it were almost dry in a strip two fingers wide.

Harinandan stood for a long time holding the tape.

One part of the mystery had broken open.

The fear did not lessen.

Now it was certain that a person was laying something straight across the field at night.

The question was no longer "what?"

It was "why?"

That evening he walked twice past Jagesar's old house.

The first time the courtyard was empty.

The second time Malti was sweeping beside the tulsi platform.

A white cloth was tied over her head.

She wore an old blue sari.

When she saw Harinandan, she stopped sweeping.

"I have come," Malti said simply.

"I heard."

"The house is falling apart. I have come to see what can still be saved."

Harinandan wanted to ask:

Do you go to the field at night?

But the question lodged in his throat.

He said only, "The cold is increasing."

Malti replied, "There is heavier dew in Kartik."

The ordinary sentence did not sound ordinary to Harinandan.

On the seventh morning he reached the field before daylight.

The dew had not yet fully settled.

At the eastern side of the bund he noticed two pieces of old brick he had never paid attention to before.

One was almost buried in the soil.

Black moss covered the other.

He could not judge the distance between them by eye.

Digging at the bund, he found a thin rusted iron peg.
Its head was not round but flat.
Old hammer marks scarred the edge.
Something trembled inside Harinandan's chest.
When the land had been purchased, a surveyor had measured it.
Harinandan had been present.

But now he remembered that the survey had started from a new bamboo peg to the south, not from this rusted iron peg.

He tried to reconstruct the day from eight years earlier.
The broker Ramdev walked ahead holding the papers.

Jagesar came behind.

Again and again the surveyor asked, "From here?"

Ramdev said, "Yes."

Whether Jagesar had opened his mouth once or not, Harinandan could no longer clearly remember.

Memory is a strange thing.

What one did not wish to hear at the time later becomes indistinct even in recollection.

When he scraped the earth beside the iron peg, he found a small piece of red clay with an old crust of lime on it.

Harinandan noticed that in a straight line north from that fragment, on the bund of Ramcharitra's field, there was a similar lime mark.

Two old marks.

His field between them.

This could not be a boundary.

A boundary runs around a field.

This was some other line.

He returned home and took out a copy of the sale deed from the chest.

The boundaries read:

North—Ramcharitra's field.

South—the village dirt road.

East—the old course of the irrigation channel.

West—the orchard.

There was no mention of any path through the middle.

But the old dirt road no longer lay directly to the south.

It had curved around one side of the field.

Harinandan could not say exactly when, in the eight years since the purchase, the road had shifted.

That night he hid near the field.

There was no way to hide among the short mustard plants, so he sat near bushes in the western orchard.

The cold deepened.

Half the night passed.

No one came from the village side.

Then there was a faint rustle near the northern bund.

Harinandan held his breath.

He heard no footsteps.
 Only a thin cord seemed to crawl through the darkness across the field.
 At first Harinandan thought it was an illusion.
 Then he saw:
 one hand on the northern bund,
 another on the southern bund.
 Neither person had stepped into the field.
 From both sides they stretched a long measuring tape across it.
 The tape lay flat over the mustard leaves.
 The figure on the southern side was Malti.
 On the northern side stood a teenage boy—
 her nephew Neeraj.
 Neither spoke.
 Malti tightened the tape.
 Neeraj tied it near the old iron peg.
 On her side, Malti aligned it with the edge of the half-buried brick.
 The tape became straight.
 Harinandan stepped out.
 “What is going on here?”
 Neeraj startled and dropped the tape.
 Malti did not startle.
 Only her hands relaxed.
 “A measurement,” she said.
 “By whose permission?”
 “Did I step into your field?”
 “No.”
 “Did I break the crop?”
 “No.”
 “Then ask about permission later. First look at this.”
 Malti did not wind up the tape.
 She untied a knot in the end of her sari and took out a paper.
 It was old, its edges yellowed.
 Red and black lines covered it.
 At the top was the village name in Devanagari.
 Below it, a year.
 Harinandan did not take the paper.
 Malti laid it on the ground beside the tape.
 “This is not my father’s copy. It is a photograph of an old block-office map. It took three months to obtain.”
 Harinandan remained silent.
 “From this point to this point there used to be a shared footpath two cubits wide,” Malti said. “From the rear hamlet to the main road. The old map shows it as a dotted line. It has disappeared from the new map.”
 “I bought the land. There is no path in the deed.”
 “You bought the land. But something my father had no right to sell also went into the paper.”

Heat rose through Harinandan's body.

"After so many years?"

Malti's voice was as cool as the dew.

"After so many years I understood why Father kept looking at this map at night."

Neeraj stood to one side, his eyes on the ground.

Harinandan said harshly, "Do you want the land back?"

"No."

The answer came so quickly that Harinandan was unprepared.

"Then why this drama?"

For the first time Malti lifted her eyes and looked directly at him.

"Children from the rear hamlet now walk two kos around by the main road to reach school. This month Ramsevak plans to put up a bamboo fence along the edge of his field. Then the old path will be completely closed. I only need proof of where the dotted line was."

Harinandan looked at the tape.

"You could have measured it during the day."

Malti was silent for a long time.

Then she said, "I sent you two letters."

Harinandan's throat dried.

The letters had come.

One three months earlier.

One fifteen days earlier.

He had read them.

The first mentioned the old path.

The second asked him to look at the map.

Harinandan had not replied.

He had pushed both letters into the lower compartment of his chest.

He wanted to say:

"I never received the letters."

But the words did not come out.

Malti said, "Father too remained silent once. On the day of the sale, the broker said that if the path remained written in the papers, the shape of the field would be spoiled and the price would fall. Father stayed silent. He told me later. His silence made your papers simpler. Your silence can now make the path disappear."

The sentence came not like an accusation, but like an account.

Harinandan picked up the map.

The red line showed the new boundary.

A black dotted line crossed the middle of the field.

Both ends of that line fell exactly at the old iron peg and the brick fragment.

"The dewless strip?" he asked.

Neeraj spoke for the first time.

"We leave the tape stretched overnight. We remove it before dawn. Dew does not settle on the leaves under it. We matched the distance for three nights."

"You never stepped into the field?"

"Not once."

Inside Harinandan, a strange relief and humiliation rose together.

Relief because no one had been wandering through the field at night.

Humiliation because his fear had needed no footprints at all.

A single straight dry line had been enough.

He took the map home.

He slept little that night.

His wife Kamala asked, "Are you unwell?"

He said, "There is a lot of dew."

Kamala did not laugh.

"Jagesar's daughter has come, hasn't she?"

Harinandan looked at his wife.

"Who told you?"

"What stays hidden in a village?"

After a while Kamala said, "You bought the land, not a person's silence."

Harinandan turned over.

The next day he called the old surveyor, Ramlochan.

Ramlochan's eyesight had weakened, but he remembered old survey work.

Running a finger over the map, he said, "Who removed this dotted line? I remember there was a shared path."

"During the sale survey, I was given a new paper. Not the old map."

"Who gave you the new paper?"

Ramlochan scratched his head.

"The broker. But Jagesar was there. He said nothing."

Harinandan asked, "And me?"

Ramlochan smiled faintly.

"You were watching the price and the measurement. Who was watching the path?"

There was no accusation in the answer.

Even so, Harinandan saw his own face clearly on that old day.

Three days later a small meeting was held in the panchayat house.

The mukhiya.

Ramlochan.

Malti.

Harinandan.

Two elderly men from the rear hamlet.

Two younger men.

The papers were opened.

The new map.

The old photographed map.

The sale deed.

The ground measurement.

Harinandan feared the meeting would turn into shouting.
It did not.

Questions were asked:

How wide was the path?

How much land would it occupy?

What would be the loss to cultivation?

Was there another route?

Who could testify to the old use?

Not once did Malti say "my land."

Again and again she said "the shared path."

No final decision was taken at the end of the meeting.

There would be another measurement.

The old records would be checked.

Until then, no bamboo fence would be erected.

Everyone rose.

Harinandan remained behind gathering the papers.

Malti was walking out.

"Malti," he called.

She turned.

"Do not stretch the tape at night anymore."

Malti's eyes hardened.

Harinandan added the next sentence:

"I will be there at dawn. We will measure in daylight."

Malti said nothing.

She merely nodded.

The next morning dew lay on the field as before.

There was no dry strip through the middle.

Drops shone evenly on the mustard leaves.

Harinandan stood near the old iron peg.

In his hand was a new bamboo peg.

Malti stood at the other side.

Ramlochan walked slowly between them, straightening the tape.

This time footprints appeared in the field.

Harinandan looked at those prints.

For the first time he understood:

some marks are not made to take land away.

They are made to show a path again.

The measurement was completed.

A line two cubits wide was marked.

No permanent stones were set immediately.

Only two small pegs were left on the bunds, to remain as indicators until the final record decision.

That evening Harinandan opened the chest.

He took out Malti's two old letters.

The fold of the first carried an old stain from his fingers.

The second was still clean.

He placed both letters not beneath the sale deed, but on top of it.

The next morning dew fell again.

This time there was no straight dry strip through the middle of the field.

But to Harinandan's eyes, the line between the two new pegs—from the southern bund to the northern—was perfectly clear.

The dew could not cover it.

THE BACK OF THE BROKEN MIRROR

Sharda Sewing House in Madhubani's old cloth market usually closed at five in the evening, but that day the light inside remained on until seven.

Sharda Devi was alone.

Outside, the cloth shops in the lane were lowering their shutters one by one.

Inside the sewing room, four machines stood covered with cloth, a half-cut blouse lay on the long wooden table, and on the rear wall hung the old mirror whose edges had broken and blackened.

A fine crack ran down the mirror's right corner.

By day one could look straight at it and fail to notice it.

Under the yellow night light, however, its line seemed to descend beside the reflected face.

Every day before closing the shop, Sharda swept beneath the mirror.

That evening, when she bent down, she found a tiny brown scrap of paper on the floor.

At first she thought it was dust from an old newspaper.

But the fragment was thick, almost like the brown backing paper pasted behind the mirror.

She looked up.

The paper at the back of the mirror could not be seen directly.

There was a two-finger gap between the wooden frame and the wall, through which only its edge was visible.

But today that edge was swollen.

Slowly it rose outward, then sank inward again.

As if the mirror were breathing.

Sharda straightened.

She reached out and touched the swollen paper.

At her touch it flattened inward.

Two moments later it lifted again.

At that instant, an evening from eighteen years earlier fell open inside her.

"I left the envelope with fifteen thousand here."

Janaki Chaudhary's voice.

She had been standing before this mirror while her wedding clothes were being fitted.

A red sari.

Sweat on her forehead.

A heavy bag in her hand.

Her daughter Vibha's wedding was approaching.

Sharda and her younger sister Kamala were sewing day and night.

Janaki had already paid five thousand.

That day she brought a second envelope containing fifteen thousand.

While the measurements were being altered, she placed the envelope on the small table beneath the mirror.

An hour later it was gone.

In the shop were Sharda, Kamala, Sharda's husband Nawal Kishore, and their twelve-year-old son Vikas.

Janaki's eyes went first to Kamala, because Kamala had gone alone into the fitting room once in the middle of the work.

Sharda could still remember Kamala's eyes.

No question.

No plea.

Only a wounded stillness.

"Didi, you too?"

That day Sharda had taken three breaths before answering.

Only three breaths.

But after those three breaths Kamala understood that even her elder sister did not believe her innocent.

The envelope was never found.

The wedding date was near.

Nawal Kishore paid Janaki half the amount from his own money.

The rest was entered as debt.

Janaki did not spread the matter outside.

But in a market, news travels by itself.

Within two months Kamala left the sewing house.

Six months later she moved to Saharsa.

Sharda never again spoke to her about the incident.

The paper behind the mirror swelled once more.

Sharda jerked her hand away.

"Air," she said to herself.

All the shop windows were closed.

She switched off the light, locked the door, and went into the inner part of the house.

The sewing room was the front room of the home.

On the other side of the rear wall was the kitchen.

Her daughter-in-law Rekha was putting away the stove.

Her granddaughter Nishtha sat at the table making something from scraps of cloth.

Nishtha had come home during her college holidays.

Her mother Rekha worked with Sharda in the shop during the day, but that evening she had gone to the market at four.

"Dadi, so late?" Nishtha asked.

"I was putting away some old things."

"Did you take down the mirror?"

Sharda stopped.

"Why?"

"The carpenter is coming tomorrow, isn't he? They said the mirror frame would be changed too."

“Who said that?”

“Babuji.”

Sharda did not answer.

The mirror was cracked, but she had told no one to remove it.

Her son Vikas had been talking for months about modernising the shop.

New lighting.

New tables.

A new mirror.

Sharda kept postponing everything.

That night sleep came late.

Around one in the morning she heard a faint rustling from the kitchen side.

She sat up.

The sound did not come again.

After drinking water, she looked out into the courtyard.

No one was there.

At dawn, when she opened the shop, two more brown paper fragments lay beneath the mirror.

This time the swollen section behind it was larger.

Sharda dragged a wooden chair over.

She tried to slip a hand behind the left side of the frame.

The gap was too narrow.

Her fingers could not enter.

But a fine white fibre caught on her fingernail.

A cloth fibre.

She felt along the back edge of the frame.

At three places were tiny holes.

Like needle-holes.

Not in cloth—

in the paper.

Opening time was approaching.

Sharda moved the chair away.

Rekha arrived at eight.

The first customer at half past eight.

At ten Nishtha brought tea and said she wanted to see the old cutting notebooks.

“You want to learn sewing?” Sharda asked.

“Not sewing. I want to look at old patterns for a college exhibition.”

“They are in the rear cupboard. Look at whatever you want.”

Nishtha went to the cupboard.

Five minutes later she stood before the mirror looking at her face.

The crack seemed to descend from the middle of her forehead.

“How old is this mirror?”

Sharda’s needle stopped in the air.

“Older than your father.”

“Was the backing paper replaced later?”

“No.”

“It looks thick, almost new.”

“Why are you so interested in the back of the mirror?”

Nishtha laughed.

“Because it is old.”

Sharda did not believe the laugh.

At noon Rekha went home for lunch.

There were no customers.

Nishtha continued looking through papers in the cupboard.

Sharda bent over her machine, but her ears remained turned towards the mirror.

After a while—

a very faint tick.

As if a needle had pierced paper.

Sharda raised her head at once.

Nishtha was not near the mirror.

She sat with her back to it, facing the cupboard.

“Nishtha.”

“Yes?”

“Show me your hands.”

Nishtha turned.

“My hands?”

“Show me.”

She held both hands out.

There was nothing on her fingers.

Sharda felt ashamed of her own tone.

“Nothing.”

Nishtha looked at her grandmother for a moment, then turned back towards the cupboard.

The carpenter did not come that evening.

Vikas telephoned.

“He will come tomorrow.”

Sharda breathed easier.

But she could not tell whether the relief came from the mirror being spared, or from fear that something behind it might be exposed.

Before closing the shop that night, she touched the wall.

The area behind the mirror was warm.

The kitchen stove was directly on the other side.

After the evening rotis were made, this section of wall must warm up.

She watched the backing paper swell again.

Perhaps air trapped between the warm wall and the mirror was expanding, she thought.

But the needle-holes?

The white fibre?

That night, after the stove had gone cold, she returned to the shop.

The backing paper now lay flat.

Holding a small lamp like a lantern, Sharda bent beneath the frame.
On the floor she found a thin thread.

Not white.

Faded blue.

There could be hundreds of such threads in a sewing shop.

But a brown paper fibre clung to one end.

She wrapped the thread in paper and kept it with her.

The next day Sharda asked Rekha, "Have you told Nishtha anything about Kamala Mausi?"

Rekha was startled.

"Why?"

"Just asking."

"She went to Saharsa last year. To Kamala Mausi's house. You know that."

"For how many days?"

"Three."

"Why did no one tell me?"

Rekha looked uncomfortable.

"I did tell you. Perhaps you did not hear."

Sharda understood that when the mind does not wish to hear something, the ears often cooperate.

There were few customers that day.

In the afternoon Sharda took out the old accounts register.

She found the page from eighteen years earlier.

Janaki Chaudhary—

first payment, five thousand.

On the second line, where fifteen thousand should have been entered, the space was blank.

Beside it was no signature from Nawal Kishore.

Only a small red-pencil mark.

Sharda had seen that red mark before.

Nawal Kishore used such a mark when money had been received but had not yet been entered into the main register.

On the night Janaki's envelope disappeared, Nawal Kishore had said,

"Stop talking about Kamala. There is no proof."

Sharda had snapped back,

"Then where did the envelope go?"

Nawal Kishore had not answered.

Three days later he developed a severe fever.

For a month he did not come to the shop.

He recovered, but the matter of Janaki's money was never raised again.

A year or two later Nawal Kishore died of a heart attack.

Sharda suddenly bent closer to the account page.

Beside the red mark were extremely faint characters:

"K-7."

K-7.

It was not an amount.

Nawal Kishore used the letter K and a number to file old cloth-slips separately.

K-7 must mean the seventh cloth-slip.

She closed the register.

That evening, when Nishtha came to the shop, Sharda asked without preamble,

“What did Kamala Mausi give you?”

Nishtha’s face changed.

Only slightly.

But Sharda caught it.

“Her blessings.”

“Papers?”

Nishtha was silent.

“How many days have you been trying to reach behind the mirror?”

Nishtha slowly sat down on a chair.

Sharda bolted the door from inside.

Rekha had already gone home.

The evening crowd in the lane was thinning.

“I am not stealing anything,” Nishtha said.

“Kamala said the same thing once.”

Nishtha looked into her grandmother’s eyes.

“Did you believe her then?”

Sharda’s throat dried.

“No.”

Nishtha took a small cloth bundle from her bag.

Inside were three things:

an old letter written by Kamala,

a credit receipt from a cloth merchant bearing Nawal Kishore’s signature, and a half-torn paper.

Sharda picked up the receipt.

The date was the same day Janaki’s envelope disappeared.

Amount:

fifteen thousand.

Below it was written:

“Old outstanding balance settled immediately; cash received.”

The shopkeeper’s seal appeared beneath.

Sharda’s fingers trembled.

“Where did this come from?”

“Kamala Mausi had it. Nana gave it to her two weeks later. He told her, ‘Keep this. If the matter ever comes up, show it.’ But Mausi said there was one more slip, on which Nana had written that he himself had taken Janaki’s envelope. That slip remained in the shop. Mausi knew where.”

“Behind the mirror?”

“Yes.”

“Did Kamala ever come here to look for it?”

“No. She did not want to return to this shop.”

“So she sent you?”

“No.”

Nishtha’s voice hardened.

“I came on my own. Mausī only told me the story. She has no need for that slip anymore. She said, ‘The age for showing proof to people who did not believe me has passed.’”

Sharda lowered her eyes.

“Then why are you searching for the proof?”

Nishtha remained silent for a while.

“Because Vikas Babu is renovating the shop. The mirror will be thrown away. Whatever papers are behind it will go with the rubbish. I thought I should take it out once. See whether it is truly there.”

“You could have told me during the day.”

“Would you have allowed the mirror to be taken down?”

Sharda gave no answer.

Nishtha stood and went to the mirror.

“If I tear the backing paper straight across, the slip itself may tear. So I made tiny holes with a needle. I was pushing a thin strip of lining cloth inside to move the slip downward. When the kitchen wall heats up, the air inside makes the paper swell. I thought it would be easier at night.”

“The white fibre?”

“From the lining cloth.”

“The blue thread?”

“Mine.”

The shape of Sharda’s fear suddenly became small.

What she had taken for breathing was warm air.

What she had imagined as some insistence from within was her granddaughter’s needle.

But the fear did not disappear.

Truth stood in its place.

“Nawal Kishore took the money,” Sharda said softly.

“It seems so.”

“Why did he not tell me?”

Nishtha remained silent.

Sharda answered herself.

“The cloth merchant had stopped extending credit. The wedding order was incomplete. He must have thought he would use the envelope to clear the outstanding amount and replace the money by evening. But Janaki asked too soon. He panicked. Then everyone’s eyes went to Kamala...”

The sentence remained unfinished.

Nishtha said, “Mausī says Nana told her that night, ‘I will clear the matter.’ But he never did.”

“And me?”

Nishtha looked at her grandmother.

“That question you must ask yourself.”

Sharda could have become angry.

She did not.
 Weariness came instead.
 "Take down the mirror," she said.
 Together they began loosening the screws of the frame.
 The screws were jammed.
 Nishtha applied oil.
 One by one all four screws came loose.
 The mirror was heavy.
 Together they placed it face down on the table.
 The brown backing paper was truly swollen in several places.
 Three tiny needle-holes showed.
 In one corner, a strip of faded blue lining cloth was caught inside.
 With a small knife Nishtha lifted only the edge of the paper.
 From within appeared dust, thread, and the corner of a folded slip.
 Sharda said, "Slowly."
 Nishtha pulled the cloth strip.
 The paper slid downward.
 She caught it with her fingers and drew it out.
 It was a small slip.
 Nawal Kishore's handwriting.
 "Janaki Devi's ₹15,000 cash today temporarily paid towards Harinarayan
 Cloth House's old outstanding balance. Amount to be restored by evening.
 Kamala unaware."
 Below was Nawal Kishore's signature.
 That was all.
 No apology.
 No explanation.
 No grand confession.
 Only a sentence like an account entry—
 outside which eighteen years of life had changed.
 Sharda sat down on the chair.
 "I had seen the red mark," she said.
 "I suspected something.
 That day too.
 Afterwards too.
 But I did not search Nawal Kishore's cupboard.
 I did not look at the register again.
 After paying Janaki half the amount, the shop was in debt.
 Vikas was small.
 I was afraid—
 if this came out, the shop, the house, his name... everything."
 Nishtha listened quietly.
 "Kamala's name was cheaper," Sharda said.
 This time Nishtha turned her eyes away.
 Outside, a handcart rattled past in the lane.
 Somewhere far away a metal shutter fell.

The sewing machines were silent.

The mirror lay face down on the table.

Now it showed no one's face.

After a while Sharda asked, "Would Kamala want to see this slip now?"

"I do not know."

"Call her."

"Now?"

"Not yet. First I will write."

Sharda took out the old account register.

She opened Janaki's page.

Beside the blank fifteen-thousand entry, in fresh ink, she wrote:

"Amount temporarily used by Nawal Kishore towards the cloth house's outstanding debt. Suspicion cast upon Kamala was unfounded. Slip attached."

Her hand trembled.

The letters did not stay straight.

She gave the slip to Nishtha to make a photocopy.

She did not paste the original into the register.

She placed it in a transparent sleeve between the pages.

She returned Kamala's old letter to Nishtha.

"Is Janaki Ji still alive?" Sharda asked.

"Mausi says she is in Darbhanga."

"I will write to her too."

"The money?"

Sharda closed the register.

"The money was settled through the accounts. But what is still owed to a name cannot be paid through accounts."

For the first time Nishtha softened a little.

"Mausi has not asked for money."

"I am not speaking of money."

The next morning the carpenter came.

He lifted the frame to take the broken mirror away.

Sharda stopped him.

"Throw away the glass. Keep the wood."

"Shall I fit a new mirror?"

Sharda looked at the empty wall.

Where the mirror had hung, a square patch was slightly lighter than the rest of the wall.

In the middle were a few black points like needle-holes.

"Not yet," she said.

At noon the shop opened again.

Customers came.

The machines ran.

Rekha took measurements.

Nishtha put away the cutting notebooks.

Sharda worked as before.

But again and again her eyes went to the empty square on the wall.

There was no face there now.
No paper breathing.
Only three tiny holes remained visible—
through which a thin strip of cloth had once gone inside.
When Sharda closed the shop that evening, she did not paste paper over
those holes.
She left them open.

THE RED THREAD ON THE VERANDA

Sharda Devi saw the first red thread while sweeping at dawn.

It lay in the middle of the veranda, between the old wooden pillar and the tulsi platform, about five finger-widths long.

A deep red.

A small knot at one end.

The other end frayed.

Sharda bent and picked it up.

The thread was wet with dew.

It left no red colour on her fingers.

For a moment she looked across the empty veranda.

There was no wedding being prepared in the house.

People in the village still called this house “the wedding house,” although the last wedding here had taken place twelve years ago.

A large courtyard built three generations earlier.

A long veranda.

Two rooms for guests.

A kitchen at the back.

Half the families in the village had seen a kanyadaan, an upanayan, a kirtan, or a mourning gathering on this veranda.

Sharda’s father-in-law had kept the house open to all four brothers.

Later walls went up, shares were divided, names changed.

But the name “wedding house” did not change.

The sight of the red thread awakened in Sharda’s mind not a wedding, but a broken wedding.

Thirty-two years earlier, this veranda had been decorated for the wedding of her husband’s sister Mrinal.

After half the night had passed, the groom’s party had suddenly risen to leave.

For years the family gave different explanations.

Some said dowry.

Some said the groom’s maternal uncle had insulted someone while drunk.

Some said Mrinal herself had withdrawn from the marriage.

Sharda knew one part of the truth.

And at the time, she had remained silent about it.

“Ma, what did you find?” Meera called from inside.

Sharda closed the thread in her fist.

“Nothing. It was caught in the broom.”

Meera was her younger daughter-in-law.

She had come from the city for two weeks—officially to sort old household papers, but really to settle unfinished questions of division after her father-in-law’s death.

At the far end of the courtyard lived Sharda's elder son Aniruddh.
 Her younger son Madhup was in Delhi.
 A few years after the broken wedding, Mrinal became a teacher and moved
 to Madhubani.
 She seldom came now.
 Sharda dropped the thread into a brass bowl near the kitchen hearth.
 The next morning another red thread appeared.
 This time beside a pillar.
 Seven finger-widths long.
 Two small knots in the middle.
 On the third morning there were three pieces on the veranda.
 One at the foot of a pillar.
 One in the corner of the steps.
 One against the wall.
 Sharda did not sweep them away.
 She called Meera.
 "Look at these."
 Meera spread all three pieces across her palm.
 "They look like sewing thread."
 "Who sews on the veranda at night?"
 "A cat may be playing with them."
 "Does a cat tie knots?"
 Meera did not laugh.
 She looked more closely.
 "The knot is strange. Turned twice, then tightened. The red ritual thread
 we have in the house is not tied like this."
 Sharda brought the first two pieces from the brass bowl.
 All five were laid in a row.
 They were not exactly the same thickness.
 Some were slightly thinner.
 But the colour was nearly identical.
 Meera said, "They may all have been cut from one market spool."
 Sharda said, "Yes."
 Her mind did not agree.
 That night she did not sleep early.
 She bolted the veranda door from inside and lay in her room.
 The rains had ended.
 The Kartik night was clear.
 Dogs barked here and there outside.
 Ten o'clock.
 Eleven.
 Around midnight came a faint tick against wood.
 Sharda sat up.
 Then—
 sirr.
 As though something thin had rubbed across a pillar.

She did not put on her slippers.
Slowly she went to the door.
She did not lift the inner bolt.
She tried to look through the crack, but the veranda was dark.
After a few moments—
another tick.
Then silence.
Sharda did not open the door.
At dawn another red thread lay in the middle of the veranda.
This time one end carried a fine white powder.
Meera smelled it.
“Not lime.”
Aniruddh was crossing the courtyard just then.
“What investigation is going on at dawn?”
Meera showed him the thread.
“This appears every day.”
Aniruddh glanced once.
“A bird must be bringing it for a nest.”
Sharda asked, “Do birds tie knots?”
“They get all sorts of things caught somewhere and carry them. You two have fixed your minds on nonsense.”
He was in a hurry.
In his hand was a blue file cover.
Outside, an unfamiliar man waited on a motorcycle.
Sharda’s eyes settled on the file.
“Where are you going?”
“To the market.”
“With whom?”
“It is some land work.”
Aniruddh paused for an instant, as though weighing his words.
Then he added, “Papers for the rear field.”
He left.
Sharda looked at Meera.
Meera looked back.
Neither said anything.
That afternoon Sharda examined the veranda pillars carefully.
There were six in all.
Old sal wood.
Round iron plates at their bases.
At about waist height on the fourth pillar were three fine scratches.
They were fresh.
Wood dust still clung to the edges.
A line marked the fifth pillar too.
Sharda ran a finger over it.
Perfectly straight.
As though a thread pulled taut had rubbed against the wood.

The old wedding night rose again inside her.
 There had been red thread everywhere on this veranda that night too.
 Around the bamboo poles of the mandap.
 Binding mango leaves.
 Around the ritual pots.
 Members of the groom's party had been speaking in the inner room.
 Sharda was a new bride in the family then.
 She had little place to speak.
 Pretending to fetch water, she had paused outside the room.
 Inside, the groom's maternal uncle had said,
 "If you transfer the two eastern rooms, the wedding rounds can take place now. Afterwards the matter will change."
 Sharda's father-in-law had spoken quietly.
 "This was never part of the marriage arrangement."
 "It is now."
 Mrinal had been standing on the other side of the doorway.
 She heard.
 She caught Sharda and asked one question:
 "Bhauji, has Babuji agreed?"
 Sharda knew the answer.
 She had said:
 "I don't know."
 After that one sentence, Mrinal did not sit in the mandap.
 For years the family said Mrinal was stubborn.
 That she had suddenly broken off the wedding.
 Sharda never said that Mrinal had done nothing suddenly.
 Now the red thread brought back the mandap, the eastern rooms, and that silence all at once.
 In the evening Meera went to the market and returned an hour later with a small spool of red thread.
 "Like this?"
 Sharda compared them.
 The market thread was bright.
 The threads from the veranda were duller.
 Meera said, "This is not sewing thread. It may be the marking thread used by builders or carpenters. Some workers stretch thread to hold a straight line."
 "Why red?"
 "So it can be seen."
 Sharda asked, "And the knots?"
 Meera tied two knots in the market thread.
 "The knots may mark distances."
 "Then who is measuring at night?"
 Both fell silent.
 That night Meera said, "Do not open the door. I will look through the window."
 At half past eleven a faint shadow moved across the veranda.

Meera opened the shutter by one finger-width.
Sharda stood behind her.
At first nothing was visible in the darkness.
Then the distant courtyard light cast a faint glow.
A man was bent near a pillar.
He pulled a thread taut.
It shone in a straight line from one pillar to another.
Sharda's breath stopped.
The man was thin.
A towel covered his head.
He wrapped one end around a pillar, measured something at the other end, then marked the wood with a small metal object.
Meera whispered, "Who is it?"
Sharda did not answer.
The man went to the doorway of the eastern room.
He stretched thread from the wall to the pillar.
Then wrote something in a notebook.
At that moment the door of Aniruddh's room moved from inside.
Sharda thought Aniruddh would come out.
But the door became still again.
The man in the darkness gathered the thread.
He cut a small piece.
As he cut it, the end fell beside the pillar.
He did not look for it.
He went out through the rear gate.
Meera said, "I could have caught him just now."
Sharda answered softly, "No."
"Why?"
"First understand."
At dawn they measured the veranda.
Meera brought the house's old iron tape.
She wrote down the distance from scratch to scratch.
Twelve cubits and four fingers.
Then to the outer wall of the eastern room.
Seven cubits and nine fingers.
Meera said, "This is not wedding decoration. This is plan measurement."
Sharda's eyes moved to the two eastern rooms.
The same rooms the groom's side had demanded thirty-two years earlier.
When Aniruddh went out that afternoon, Meera did not suggest entering his room.
She only said,
"The papers are not in front of us, but the measurements say a part of the house is being separated."
Sharda's voice hardened.
"By whose authority?"
Meera paused before answering.

"That is a question for Aniruddh Bhaiya."

"Now?"

"If we ask now, he may simply say a workman was measuring. I want to know which portion appears in the papers."

This time Sharda found Meera more patient than she had expected.

For three days no red thread appeared.

On the fourth day, the postman brought a thick envelope.

It was addressed to Aniruddh, but the address read:

"Sharda Devi's Old Wedding House."

Sharda did not open it.

In the evening, when Aniruddh returned, she handed him the envelope.

For a moment his face changed.

"What is it?" Sharda asked.

"Loan papers."

"For the rear field?"

"Yes."

He took the envelope inside.

That night Meera said, "Ma, the lie is small, but something is being hidden."

Sharda looked at the red threads collected in the brass bowl.

"Once before, I stayed silent in front of a small lie."

Meera asked no question.

The next day Mrinal telephoned.

In the middle of ordinary talk, she suddenly asked,

"Bhauji, are the eastern rooms of the house all right?"

Sharda's hand trembled.

"Why?"

"Nothing. Aniruddh called yesterday. He was saying the old house is badly decayed and perhaps it should be sold and a smaller one built."

"He told you?"

"Only generally. I told him—whatever share of mine remains, put it clearly in writing first."

Sharda was silent.

Mrinal spoke again.

"Bhauji?"

"Yes."

"My name is still on the papers of that house, isn't it?"

Sharda did not know the answer.

After the call ended, she summoned Meera.

"Where are the old partition papers?"

"In Babuji's iron trunk."

The trunk was opened.

The papers were yellow, their edges brittle.

The written partition described four shares.

One separate line referred to the two eastern rooms:

"To be given to daughter Mrinal after marriage; until marriage, joint use."

Sharda stared at the line for a long time.

"The marriage never happened," Meera said.

"Later Mrinal built a life on her own feet. But the paper was never changed."

Meera said softly, "Then this portion should not be sold without her written consent."

Sharda again heard her own old sentence:

"I don't know."

This time the sentence rose to her mouth.

It did not leave it.

That night the red thread returned.

This time Sharda opened the door.

The man bent on the veranda started and stood.

He was neither Aniruddh nor anyone in the family.

"Who are you?" Sharda's voice was hard.

The man folded his hands.

"I am Subodh. I do measuring work."

"At night?"

Subodh's eyes moved towards Aniruddh's room.

"I was told not to do it in the daytime."

"By whom?"

Before he could answer, Aniruddh's door opened.

Aniruddh came out.

His face looked tired.

More like a man caught than a man angry.

"I told you," he said to Subodh, "not today."

Sharda interrupted.

"Today is fine."

Meera too came outside.

For several moments Aniruddh was silent.

Then he said,

"There is a buyer for the eastern part of the house."

"Whose share?"

"The papers are complicated."

"Mrinal's name is there."

Aniruddh looked up.

"You opened the trunk?"

"Yes."

"Ma, understand the situation. The debt from the transport business is coming due. No one wants the rest of the house. The eastern part can open separately onto the road. I thought I would first get it measured, then speak to everyone—"

Meera did not interrupt.

Neither did Sharda.

Aniruddh stopped by himself.

"Why measure at night?" Sharda asked.

"If it were done during the day, word would reach Mrinal Fua's people. I wanted the buyer confirmed first."

"So first the deal, then permission."

"Not a deal—only discussion."

Subodh stood awkwardly.

In his hand were the red thread, a small tape, and a pencil.

Sharda looked at them.

"Why did these little pieces keep falling?"

Subodh said, "I tie knots to mark distances. I cannot drive iron hooks into these old pillars. I pull the thread tight around them. The cut ends keep dropping."

Meera asked, "The scratches on the pillars?"

"The brass end of the measuring tape."

"The white powder?"

"Marking powder. I put it on the thread so it can be seen in the dark."

All the ghosts vanished.

Only four people remained on the veranda—

a surveyor,

a son in debt,

a mother who had once remained silent,

and a daughter-in-law watching.

Aniruddh said softly, "I am not stealing."

Sharda looked at him.

"I did not say you were."

"I cannot see another way to pay the debt."

"Have you told Mrinal?"

Aniruddh was silent.

"Then you have not yet searched all the way."

No decision was made for a long time that night.

Subodh gathered his thread and left.

Aniruddh went inside, but did not slam the door.

Meera folded the papers from the trunk and put them away again.

Sharda remained on the veranda.

A faint red dust from the thread still marked one pillar.

The next morning she telephoned Mrinal.

For the first time in many years, Sharda told the whole story of the night of the broken wedding—

the groom's family demanding the rooms,

the pressure on her father-in-law,

Mrinal's question,

and Sharda's answer:

"I don't know."

There was silence for a long time at the other end.

At last Mrinal said,

"I knew you knew."

Sharda's throat dried.

"Then why did you never ask?"

"What would have been the use? I had already made my decision."

Then Mrinal laughed very softly.

"So now the rooms are to be sold?"

"Aniruddh is in debt."

"If my share is still there, send me the papers first. I will not oppose a sale merely on principle. I will see what is fair."

Sharda had not imagined the answer would be so ordinary.

That afternoon, when Aniruddh came, Sharda placed the old partition deed before him.

She laid one piece of red thread straight across it—

under the line describing the eastern rooms.

"The measurement was not wrong," she said.

"The order was wrong."

Aniruddh kept looking at the paper.

"First Mrinal. Then the buyer."

He said nothing.

He picked up the piece of thread.

Then put it back on the table.

Three days later Subodh came again.

This time in daylight.

Mrinal too was on the veranda.

She had returned to the house after many years.

Meera was making tea.

Aniruddh had the file open.

Subodh took out the red thread.

Mrinal laughed.

"So this was the ghost?"

Sharda said, "Not a ghost. A measurement."

Mrinal ran a finger over an old scratch on the pillar.

"A house is not always divided by measurement," she said. "But when it is sold, measurement is needed."

For the first time Aniruddh smiled faintly.

Subodh stretched the red thread in daylight.

This time no piece fell on the veranda.

Whatever he cut, he put into his bag.

Sharda watched from a distance.

The red line stretched between two pillars—

straight,

ordinary,

made by a human hand.

On this side of that line lay the old silence.

On the other side, there was still room left for conversation.

STORY 139

FALLING LETTERS

In a narrow lane turning inward from Darbhanga's old Kachahari Road, the iron signboard of "Videha Printing Press" still hung in place.

The paint had peeled away, but the letters could still be read.

The press no longer worked regularly.

Wedding cards, invitations, memorial booklets, or some old-style printing still came occasionally, but the main room remained closed for most of the day.

Raghunath Jha was past seventy.

His grandfather had founded the press.

His father had expanded it.

Raghunath had spent his youth here, selecting metal type by hand.

To the new generation, those pieces of type were history.

To Raghunath, they were sounds.

If a wooden case slipped, he could tell by the sound which compartment had loosened.

When letters were set into a composing stick, the faint click of metal against metal sounded to him like the first drops of rain.

Eight old type cases were stacked one above another in the rear room of the press.

Each case contained many small compartments.

Some held Devanagari letters.

Some contained special vowel signs and sorts used for years in Maithili printing.

Others held punctuation.

Three months earlier Kaushal had come there to learn.

He was studying the history of printing at the university and said it was not enough to look at old printing in a museum.

One should also learn how to lift the letters by hand.

At first Raghunath had laughed.

"Learn to pick up a letter, and then learn to put it back," he said. "Putting it back is the harder art."

Kaushal understood that in the first week.

Place one 'ka' in the wrong compartment and half an hour later it could not be found.

And because of that one missing letter, an entire line would stop.

Gradually the responsibility for closing the press in the evening fell to Kaushal.

He switched off the main power to the machine.

Covered the paper.

Closed the ink tins.

And finally pulled shut the rear room door.

The first time he heard letters falling was one Agahan night.

He was locking the outer door when three metallic sounds came from inside.

Tin.

Tin.

Tin.

Kaushal turned.

The main room was empty.

He went to the rear room.

Four pieces of metal type lay on the floor in front of the uppermost case.

He bent and picked them up.

‘Na.’

The long-a vowel sign.

‘Ma.’

And a metal space.

Kaushal smiled.

“Name?”

He assumed the case was old, its bottom warped, and the sorts had fallen out.

He returned each piece to its compartment and left.

The next night the sound came again.

This time five pieces.

‘Cha.’

The long-a sign.

‘Ri.’

A punctuation mark.

Then ‘na.’

Kaushal examined them carefully.

Some letters lay upside down, some on their sides.

But when mentally turned upright, they could be read as:

“four na...”

That night he told Raghunath nothing.

On the third night he deliberately stayed late.

After eight the shops on the main road fell quiet.

Only the clatter of vessels from a tea stall remained in the lane.

At exactly eight forty-seven, the press table trembled very slightly.

At first Kaushal thought a truck had passed.

But there was no truck in the lane.

Then—

tin.

Tin-tin.

He ran to the rear room.

This time the letters were not scattered on the floor.

On the old galley tray beneath the case, seven pieces lay almost in a line.

Kaushal shone his torch over them.

“Name not...”

The next letter was reversed.
 A shiver passed through him.
 He became annoyed with himself.
 “They are metal,” he said softly. “Metal does not speak.”

When Raghunath arrived the next morning, Kaushal had left the galley untouched.

The moment Raghunath saw it, he stopped.
 He did not bend down.
 From a distance he asked, “Who arranged these?”
 “Not me.”
 “Then?”
 “They fell last night.”
 Raghunath’s face changed.
 “Fallen letters do not make lines.”
 “I know that much too.”

Raghunath strode over, gathered all the pieces, and threw them back into the case.

Kaushal asked, “Name not—what comes next?”
 Raghunath looked at him.
 “Nothing.”

That day Raghunath added a second lock to the rear room.
 Kaushal asked no question.

At the press, questions were often opened more effectively by observing things than by asking directly.

He examined the four legs of the table.
 Under the rear right leg a piece of old cardboard had been wedged.
 When he removed it, the table rocked.
 Beside the table stood an old belt-driven cutting machine.
 It was shut down.

But in the adjoining building, after eight at night, a small oil press operated.

The vibration of its heavy wheel travelled through the wall into the floor.
 Kaushal stood outside at night and listened.
 At eight forty-seven, the oil press’s heavy wheel started.

At exactly the same moment the table inside Videha Printing Press trembled.

One cause had been found.
 The line of letters remained unexplained.
 Four days later Raghunath went out of town for a relative’s shraddha.
 He gave Kaushal the key to the main room.
 Not the rear room.

That evening, while Kaushal was putting things away, he noticed something shining beneath the wooden table.

A thin black strip.
 He pulled it out.
 It was magnetic.

Two small steel strips clung to it.

Kaushal's first thought was that the metal letters were being pulled with it.

But he immediately picked up an old 'ma' and brought it close to the strip.

The type did not stick.

Raghunath had told him earlier that old printing type was cast from a lead-based alloy.

So the strip served some other purpose.

Kaushal ran a hand beneath the table.

Two fine nails protruded there.

Steel strips could be fixed against them.

The magnetic strip could hold those pieces securely.

It took him a while to understand.

If the strips were positioned beneath the bottom of the case at a certain angle, loose type could slide in one direction when vibration came.

But who was loosening particular letters?

Kaushal looked through the gap of the locked rear-room door.

One corner of the top case had been raised slightly.

Raghunath returned the next day.

Kaushal said nothing.

All day he selected type.

In the evening Raghunath left.

Kaushal did not.

He switched off the main light and sat behind a stack of paper.

At eight forty, a key turned in the outer lock.

Kaushal held his breath.

The door opened.

The footsteps did not creep like a thief's.

They came straight in like the steps of someone familiar with the place.

It was Neeraj.

Neeraj was not another trainee at the press.

By day he worked at a nearby bookshop.

Twice a week he had come on the pretext of looking at the old type with Kaushal.

In the darkness Kaushal watched him go to the cases.

Neeraj took a key from his pocket.

The rear room opened.

He pulled out the case.

Under its bottom he placed two steel strips and secured them with the magnetic strip.

Then he moved selected letters from specific compartments towards the edge.

Kaushal stepped out.

"So the oil press is about to start?"

Neeraj froze.

For a few moments neither spoke.

Then Neeraj took his hand away.

"Eight forty-seven," he said.

"Where did you get the key?"

"It was an old key."

"Whose?"

Neeraj did not answer.

Just then the wall trembled.

Inside the case the metal gave a fine rattle.

Three pieces slid down the incline, crossed the steel strip, and fell onto the galley tray.

Tin.

Tin.

Tin.

For the first time Kaushal watched the mystery being made.

"The letters were not falling by themselves," he said.

"No."

"You make them fall?"

"The vibration makes them fall. I only choose them."

"Why?"

Instead of answering, Neeraj opened the back of the case.

A piece of old paper was stuck beneath the uneven bottom.

Stained with ink and oil.

Its edge gnawed away.

"I found this here three weeks ago," Neeraj said.

Kaushal took the sheet.

It was not a complete page.

Perhaps it had once been part of a proof.

One line had partly faded.

At the top it read:

"Four names that remained outside the register."

Below were the names of four labourers.

Then an article began.

It described an incident in an old oil mill where a steam vessel had burst.

In the official account, two permanent workers were listed as injured.

But the article said four daily-wage labourers had also been inside that night.

Their names were not entered in the payment register.

Therefore they were also absent from the compensation list.

The writer's name had partly faded:

"Shashi..."

Kaushal asked, "Was this printed?"

Neeraj shook his head.

"No."

"How do you know?"

Neeraj took another paper from his bag.

It was an old letter.

“My grandfather was Shashibhushan Mishra,” he said. “He wrote this article.”

Kaushal stared at him.

“You are not Raghunath Babu’s grandson.”

“No. I am the grandson of the man who wrote the article.”

The story could suddenly have become simple.

One side guilty.

The other side wronged.

But Neeraj’s next sentence broke that simplicity.

“Later my grandfather regretted one thing in the article.”

“What?”

“He had directly named the mill owner as guilty. The evidence was incomplete. It was unclear who had decided to postpone repairs to the steam vessel.”

Kaushal looked again at the paper.

“Then it was right to stop the article?”

Neeraj’s eyes hardened.

“One sentence in the article was weak. The names of four labourers were not weak.”

That night no more letters fell.

The next day Kaushal told Raghunath everything.

Neeraj was present too.

For a long time Raghunath said nothing.

At last he sat down on an old chair.

“Was the key your grandfather’s?” he asked Neeraj.

“No. I found it among my uncle’s old papers. I did not know why he had a key to the rear room of this press.”

Raghunath closed his eyes.

“I gave it to him.”

For a while the only sound in the room came from the street.

Then Raghunath began to speak slowly.

At the time, he had been twenty-two.

Shashibhushan was his friend.

The article had been composed at night.

The first proof had also been printed.

Before dawn Raghunath’s father saw it.

“He became frightened,” Raghunath said.

“People from the mill owner had threatened to withdraw advertisements.

The press was already in debt.

But fear was not the only reason.”

He looked at Neeraj.

“Your grandfather had written more than the evidence supported about one man.

I told him—remove the name, keep the facts about the labourers.

He refused.”

“Then?”

"I stopped the proof."

Neeraj's jaw tightened.

"And the four labourers?"

Raghunath's voice dropped.

"Their names stopped too."

"Why?"

Raghunath took time to answer.

"Because once the press had stopped the article, printing another version required courage.

I did not have that courage."

Kaushal understood.

The central wrong in the story was not only one bad decision.

It was the long silence that followed the decision.

Shashibhushan had asked for the article back.

Raghunath did not return it.

He feared the article would be printed elsewhere with the same unsupported accusation.

He hid the proof in the bottom of the type case.

"For a few days," he said.

A few days became years.

Shashibhushan left the city.

Later people assumed he had taken his article back.

Some called him a coward.

Some said he had been paid to remain silent.

"I knew that was false," Raghunath said.

"But I never corrected it clearly."

Neeraj kept looking at the metal type on the table.

"That is why I made the letters fall," he said.

"I wanted you to read them."

Raghunath gave a bitter laugh.

"I kept reading them even without their falling."

No one spoke immediately after that.

The press remained closed for three days.

On the fourth day Raghunath called Kaushal and Neeraj.

On the table lay the old proof, Shashibhushan's letter, and a new sheet of paper.

The new page carried the heading:

"EDITORIAL NOTE WITH AN OLD UNPUBLISHED ARTICLE."

Neeraj read it.

Raghunath had written that the available papers strongly supported the fact that four labourers' names had been omitted.

But the direct accusation against the mill owner could not be established.

Therefore a facsimile of the original article would be printed with an editorial note clearly separating what was verified from what remained uncertain.

"You will print the original article again?" Neeraj asked.

“With a note wherever the evidence is weak.”

“And your own part?”

Raghunath pushed forward a second paper.

It contained only five lines.

“This press stopped the article.

Questions of evidence were part of the reason, but economic fear was also part of it.

My failure was that afterwards I did not return the article and did not correct the falsehoods that spread about the writer.”

Neeraj read for a long time.

“Is this enough?” Raghunath asked.

Neeraj did not immediately say yes.

“On what day is the word enough ever enough?” he asked softly.

Raghunath lowered his head.

Kaushal opened the old type case.

“If we print it, shall we use the old type?”

For the first time Raghunath looked at him.

“Yes.”

The three of them began selecting letters.

This time no letter fell by itself.

Kaushal searched for ‘cha’.

Neeraj found ‘ri’.

Raghunath selected the pieces for ‘name’.

One compartment was empty.

Raghunath turned the old case over.

The letter was caught in a crack at the bottom.

With a thin needle-like tool he drew it out, wiped it with cloth, and placed it in the composing stick.

At eight forty-seven that night, the oil press started again.

The table trembled faintly.

Some loose metal rattled.

The rear type case had now been levelled.

The steel strips had been removed.

Kaushal had placed the magnetic strip in a separate box.

No letter fell.

Raghunath stood beside the machine.

The first printed sheet came out.

The black letters were clear on the page.

Neeraj read the first line:

“Four names that remained outside the register.”

He did not pick the sheet up at once.

The ink was still wet.

The three stood a little distance away and waited for it to dry.

The table trembled faintly again.

This time the letters were locked inside the forme.

The metal rang, but did not move from its place.

Raghunath reached out and tested the pressure on the type frame.
“The lock-up is right,” he said.
Kaushal understood that the matter was not only about printing.
Some letters had fallen because the case was crooked.
Some lines had remained suppressed because human beings were afraid.
The two things could not be corrected with the same tool.

THE SOOT OF THE LAST LANTERN

It was the last week of Bhadon. The sky had remained grey all day, but no rain had fallen.

The air over the old eastern embankment of the Kamla River was heavy—so heavy that it seemed some distant cloud was sitting still under its own weight.

The first thing Navalkishore Mishra saw when he reached the veranda of the outpost was the lantern.

It hung from the same iron hook where, eighteen years earlier, he had spent the night watching the last flood of his service years.

The brass had gone dull. Small green rust spots marked the oil reservoir. The upper half of the glass was blackened with soot.

Navalkishore stopped.

“Who lit this?”

The present watchman, Manoj Paswan, came out from inside with a broom in his hand.

“What?”

Navalkishore indicated the lantern with his lips.

Manoj was silent for a moment.

“It is old.”

“The lantern is old. The soot is new.”

Manoj leaned the broom against the wall.

“You can tell the age of soot too?”

“I did this work for thirty-five years.”

No smile appeared on Manoj’s face. He stepped down from the veranda and looked along the top of the embankment. Far away, the plumes of kans grass trembled faintly even without wind.

Navalkishore had come to the outpost for three days.

The Water Resources Department was going to remove the old hut and build a new brick room. Old registers, tools, measuring rods, red flags, ropes, tin trunks—whatever was still useful had to be separated out.

Assistant Engineer Ishani Chaudhary had said, “You know the old equipment. Manoj will not recognise everything by himself.”

Navalkishore had agreed.

The moment he saw the outpost, an old smell rose around him—wet sacks, kerosene, rust, neem smoke, paper.

The smell was so familiar that for one instant he felt he had not retired at all; he had merely gone home after his last shift and had now returned for duty.

But the soot on the lantern drew a black line through that illusion.

The lantern should not have been lit for years.

Five years earlier the department had supplied rechargeable torches. A small solar panel had also been installed at the outpost.

Navalkishore took the lantern down.

He ran a finger across the lower part of the glass.

The soot was soft.

His finger turned black.

“Manoj.”

“Yes.”

“Who lit it?”

“I told you—I don’t know.”

“You are the only night watchman.”

“At night, yes. During the day there are labourers, herders, fishermen, engineers—who does not come here?”

The answer was correct.

The tone was not.

Navalkishore examined the glass again.

Inside, the wick stood half a finger high.

Its top was cut on a fresh slant.

An old dried wick would not look so even.

He opened the oil reservoir.

A quarter of it held kerosene.

Somewhere inside his body an old coldness awakened.

Eighteen years earlier, a lantern too had burned all night.

That night the water had risen to the shoulder of the embankment.

At 11:20 p.m. Navalkishore first saw a long wet fissure on the southern bend.

He ran back to the outpost, lifted the wired telephone, and informed the subdivision office.

Later, the report recorded the time as 12:05 a.m.

Forty-five minutes disappeared.

Those forty-five minutes appeared nowhere in his service register.

But they had remained inside him every day.

Until noon, Navalkishore sorted old equipment with Manoj.

Manoj worked normally—coiling rope, setting aside a rusted spade, blowing dust from the 2008 rain register.

The lantern was not mentioned again.

In the evening Ishani Chaudhary called and said she would come for inspection the next morning.

There had been continuous rain upstream. The water level could rise during the night.

“Have you checked the southern bend?” Navalkishore asked Manoj casually.

Manoj’s hand stopped for half a moment.

“I check it every day.”

“Anything?”

“Nothing yet that I would write in the register.”

Navalkishore studied his face.

“Nothing like that—meaning?”

Manoj lifted a sack and carried it inside.

“The water will rise tonight. Let us make tea first.”

The day faded without the sun ever appearing.

On the small stove behind the outpost, Manoj made tea.

Navalkishore sat on the veranda.

The river lay on the other side of the embankment. It could not be seen, only heard—dense, low, continuous.

By eight the wind had risen.

Navalkishore lay down on a cot, but sleep did not come.

Even with his eyes closed, he could see the soot on the lantern glass.

Around half past ten came a very faint scrape at the door.

Navalkishore opened his eyes.

Manoj’s cot was empty.

A yellow light moved across the veranda.

He got up.

At the doorway came the smell of oil.

Manoj was walking south along the crest of the embankment with the lantern in his hand.

A torch hung at his waist, but it was switched off.

Without making a sound, Navalkishore put on his shoes and followed at a distance.

The embankment earth had dried during the day, but night dew made its surface slightly slick.

Manoj did not walk quickly.

Every five or ten steps he stopped, lowered the lantern close to the earth, studied the ground, then moved on.

The southern bend lay about half a kos from the outpost.

There the embankment curved towards the river.

The old bamboo measuring stake had half-rotted away.

Manoj stopped beside it.

Navalkishore remained behind a clump of kans grass.

Manoj held the lantern only a hand-span above the soil.

In the slanting yellow light, a fine black shadow rose along the slope of the embankment.

Navalkishore’s breath caught.

A crack.

Very fine.

From above it looked like ordinary drying of the soil.

But in oblique light its edges were clear.

Nearly two cubits long.

Manoj took a thin oil-rubbed sheet of paper from his bag.

He laid it over the crack and rubbed something like charcoal across it.

Then he wrote the date.

Navalkishore stepped forward.

“What are you doing?”

Manoj startled so violently the lantern nearly fell from his hand.

“You?”

“Yes. Where did this crack come from?”

Manoj said nothing.

Navalkishore took the lantern and held it low over the soil.

At one end of the fissure lay fresh crumbly earth.

He touched it with a finger.

Slight dampness inside.

“Why is this not in the register?”

Manoj’s face hardened.

“I wrote it.”

“When?”

“Three times.”

“Where?”

“First on the seventeenth. Second on the nineteenth. Third yesterday.”

“It is not in the register.”

“Not anymore.”

A gust of wind came.

The lantern flame shivered inside the glass.

Navalkishore asked slowly, “What do you mean?”

Manoj opened his bag.

Inside were three thin sheets of paper—three tracings of the crack at different stages.

The first was short.

The second somewhat longer.

The third the longest.

“On the first day I wrote it in the register. The next morning a junior engineer came. He said, ‘It is a shrinkage crack in dry soil. Nothing to fear.’ In the evening I looked again. My line in the register had been crossed out. Beside it was written: ‘Surface contraction.’”

“Who crossed it out?”

“I don’t know.”

“And the second time?”

“I wrote separately and sent it to the office. They would not give me a receipt stamp. They said first there had to be a site inspection. The third time I sent a photograph by phone. The reply was: ‘Not clear.’”

Navalkishore looked at the crack.

“And these papers?”

“For comparison. In daylight this fissure looks flat. In slanting yellow light, the shadow of the edge becomes clear. Every day I trace it from the same angle.”

“Why not use the torch?”

“Its light falls straight. If I hold this lantern low, the shadow becomes longer.”

“And the soot?”

Manoj looked at the lantern.

"I trim the wick short, but the air vent is half closed. It smokes."

"Why keep the vent half closed?"

For the first time Manoj smiled faintly, though there was no humour in it.

"When the glass turns black, people ask why the lantern is being lit. If they ask, perhaps they will look at the crack too."

Navalkishore kept looking at him.

He had not expected that answer.

"This is how you preserve evidence?"

"There is another way."

Manoj twisted the bottom of the lantern.

A thin round brass plate slid off beneath the oil reservoir.

Inside was a hollow space.

Four folded paper strips were hidden there.

Navalkishore took one out.

Date.

Time.

Water level.

Length of crack.

Weather.

Everything written down.

At the bottom was Manoj's signature.

On two slips was also the thumb impression of Ramvilas, a labourer who cut kans grass.

"Why keep them here?"

"Papers in the outpost cupboard can change without anyone being told. No one opens the lantern."

Navalkishore's fingers froze against the brass.

Eighteen years earlier he too had seen a paper altered.

But he had not saved the paper.

He had signed beneath the altered time.

"The water level?" His own voice sounded heavy.

"Seven fingers higher since yesterday."

"Seepage?"

"Not outside yet. The soil near the inner toe is damp."

Navalkishore said at once, "Back to the outpost. We call Ishani now."

Manoj stopped him.

"She will come in the morning."

"Morning may be too late."

Manoj looked into his eyes.

"Have you said that sentence somewhere before?"

The question was not casual.

Navalkishore did not answer.

They returned to the outpost.

Navalkishore opened his mobile phone.

The network was weak.

He dialled Ishani's number.

Once.

Twice.

No connection.

The third time the call rang, but no one answered.

Manoj placed an old register on the table.

"The registers from your time are in this trunk."

Navalkishore stared at him.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing. Only that while sorting the old papers yesterday I found one page."

He took the thick 2008 register from the tin trunk.

A red cloth ribbon marked a page in the middle.

He opened it.

Navalkishore recognised the line without reading it.

"23:20 — wet fissure at southern bend; immediate information sent."

The ink was faint, but the handwriting was his.

A blue line had been drawn through it.

Beside it was written:

"00:05 — first visual inspection; prior information unconfirmed."

Below were three signatures.

One belonged to Navalkishore.

Manoj asked, "Your signature?"

Navalkishore's mouth went dry.

"Yes."

"Was the time changed?"

Navalkishore turned towards the window.

Outside, the yellow lantern light trembled across the veranda.

"That night..." he began, then stopped.

Manoj waited.

"That night I informed them at eleven twenty. The subdivision office replied: 'It may be a local surface crack. Observe again.' At eleven forty the fissure had grown. I informed them again. Shortly before midnight, water appeared on the inner slope. At twelve five the assistant engineer arrived."

"Then?"

"By dawn the embankment had breached."

Manoj asked quietly, "Why was the time changed?"

Navalkishore sat down on the chair.

"When the report was prepared, they said that if the first warning remained recorded, questions would be asked about why nothing had been done for forty-five minutes. The officer said, 'You were not certain about the first fissure. Write that it was only a suspicion.' I refused."

"And then?"

"He had many ways of speaking. Service. Suspension. My daughter... her wedding was that month. He did not say all those things. I heard them myself. A frightened mind hears even unspoken things very clearly."

Manoj's face neither softened nor hardened.

Navalkishore continued.

"I signed it."

"And the report?"

"The report said the breach was sudden. Blame fell on Kailash, the temporary labourer at the rear outpost, for not patrolling properly that night. His service was terminated. I knew he was not at fault."

The wind on the veranda bent the lantern flame to one side.

A fresh line of soot formed across the glass.

Manoj did not close the register.

"Kailash was my maternal uncle," he said.

Navalkishore looked up sharply.

Manoj's voice remained flat.

"But I did not take this posting because of that."

Navalkishore could not speak.

"Later Mama went to Punjab. He used to say, 'The water did not blame me. The paper did.' I was small then and did not understand. Now I do."

Inside the outpost there was only the faint sound of the lantern flame.

Navalkishore placed a finger on the altered line in the register.

"You already knew who I was?"

"By name."

"So the soot... all this was meant for me to see?"

"No." Manoj answered immediately. "The crack existed before you came. The lantern was being lit before you came. You happened to see it. That is all."

A strange relief rose in Navalkishore—and then shame at the relief.

Some part of him had wanted all of this to have been arranged for him, so that the present danger would become smaller.

But the danger was not a play staged around his guilt.

There was a real crack in the earth.

Far away lightning flashed.

The sound arrived a little later.

Manoj said, "Try the network again."

Navalkishore lifted the phone.

This time Ishani answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Ishani ji, there is a crack at the southern bend. It has been growing for three days. The soil inside is damp. Now."

"How long?"

"More than two cubits. There are comparison tracings. The water level is rising."

There was silence for a few moments at the other end.

Then Ishani's voice changed.

"Had Manoj reported it?"

Navalkishore looked at Manoj.

"Yes. Three times."

"I received one photograph, but it was unclear. No written paper reached me. Both of you remain there. I am leaving the subdivision office with a team. Do not go down on the river side of the crack."

The call ended.

Manoj asked, "Now?"

"Now we do not wait. Prepare sandbags. Do not load the crack itself. Check the dampness at the inner toe. Write the times."

Both went to work.

11:47 p.m.—water level one finger higher.

12:02 a.m.—damp strip at the inner toe wider.

12:09 a.m.—middle of the crack opened by about the width of a fingernail.

Manoj kept writing the times.

Navalkishore kept holding the lantern low.

At one o'clock the distant sound of a jeep arrived.

Ishani came with two engineers and four labourers.

After inspection, orders were given:

sandbags behind the dangerous section,

a small drainage channel at the inner toe,

and soil strengthening after dawn without heavy machinery.

A message was also sent upstream to reduce the rate of water release from the gate.

Ishani examined Manoj's slips.

"I need these papers."

Manoj removed all of them from the bottom of the lantern.

Ishani looked surprised.

"You kept them here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

For a moment Manoj looked towards Navalkishore.

"I trusted the old cupboard less."

Ishani said nothing.

She photographed every slip with her phone and returned the originals to Manoj.

"In the morning, get them entered in the office receipt register. In front of me."

Navalkishore asked, "And the old register too?"

Ishani looked at him.

"Which one?"

Navalkishore lifted the 2008 register.

"This."

No rain began before dawn.

The sky merely hung low.

The danger had not passed, but the crack was no longer unseen.

Shortly before sunrise, Navalkishore sat at the table.

The old register lay open before him.

A narrow blank margin remained beside the altered time.

He picked up a pen.

Manoj stood at the doorway.

“Do not erase the old line,” he said.

Navalkishore looked at him.

“I won’t.”

In the empty margin he wrote:

“Today, eighteen years later, I, Navalkishore Mishra, acknowledge that the first information was given at 23:20. I accepted the revised time of 00:05 under pressure and fear. The original first entry was correct.”

Below it he wrote the date.

He signed.

Manoj stepped forward and read the page.

“This will not give Mama his service back,” he said.

“I know.”

“Nor will it return anything to the people who lost their homes in the flood.”

“I know.”

“Then?”

Navalkishore closed the pen.

“To leave a false line standing alone is also a decision.”

Manoj was silent for a few moments.

Then he did not close the register.

He left it open so the ink could dry.

On the veranda Ishani took down the lantern and examined it.

“Was this on the discard list?”

Navalkishore came outside.

Manoj said, “Not anymore.”

Ishani looked at the black soot on the glass.

“It smokes too much. Have the air vent cleaned.”

Manoj smiled.

“I will.”

Navalkishore took the lantern in his hands.

Compared with the previous night, the glass was even blacker.

He picked up a cloth to clean it, then stopped.

“Not yet,” he said.

Manoj asked, “Why?”

Navalkishore hung the lantern back on the hook.

“Let the inspection team see it.”

In the first light of dawn, the soot showed clearly.

It was no sign of a ghost.

It said only this:

someone had remained awake through the night.

And this time, the record had preserved the fact of that wakefulness too.

STORY 141

SEVEN MILLIMETRES ON THE NAMEPLATE

From early Monday morning, the veranda of the District Social Assistance Office smelled of fresh-cut wood.

Two days earlier all the old nameplates had been taken down, and now, after renovation, new ones were being fixed in place.

Black letters gleamed against the yellow wall:

“DISTRICT SOCIAL ASSISTANCE OFFICER”

“SECTION IN-CHARGE”

“ACCOUNTS OFFICER”

“ACCOUNTS ASSISTANT”

“RECORDS ASSISTANT”

For the people who worked in the office, these were not merely strips of wood.

One automatically noticed whose letters were thicker, whose plate stood higher, before whose title the word “In-Charge” appeared.

Gopal Jha was an Accounts Assistant.

He had worked in that building for fifteen years, but his desk had always stood in the third room opening towards the corridor.

People entered and first asked,

“Where does the officer sit?”

Gopal showed them the way.

Sometimes they placed a file on his desk, but the moment they realised he was only the Accounts Assistant, they picked it up again.

“This has to go upstairs.”

Gopal would smile as if the sentence were an old acquaintance.

Bauku, the carpenter who had come to fit the new nameplates, carried a measuring tape in his hand.

He held each plate against the wall, tightened two screws, then stepped back and squinted at it.

When Gopal’s plate went up, Mamta, an office assistant, was the first to notice.

“Why is your plate larger than the other Accounts Assistant plate?”

Gopal left his chair and went to the wall.

It truly was a little taller.

The lettering was the same size, but the wood was broader.

Bauku measured it.

“Seven millimetres.”

“Why seven millimetres?” Gopal asked.

“There was leftover wood,” Bauku said casually. “It had already been cut to the size of the plate above. I was supposed to trim seven millimetres off the bottom, but the edge would have gone crooked. I thought an Accounts Assistant’s work would not change because of seven millimetres.”

Mamta laughed.

"The work may not. The importance might."

Everyone laughed.

Gopal did too.

At that moment the remark carried no weight.

By noon the first effect appeared.

Vimla Devi, seventy years old, stood in the corridor holding an old cloth bag and a file.

Her widow assistance had been stalled for three months.

She had already come twice before.

This time, reading the new nameplates one by one, she stopped at Gopal's room.

She did not fully understand what "Accounts Assistant" meant, but the size of the plate was almost the same as the plate outside the next room marked Section In-Charge.

"Babu, do you look after my case?"

There was a kind of respect in her voice that Gopal rarely heard directed at him.

He could immediately have said,

"I am not the In-Charge."

Instead he looked at Vimla Devi's face.

Sweat on her forehead.

A strip of medicine visible at the edge of her bag.

The file papers softened at their corners.

"Sit," he said. "Let me see."

The moment he opened the file, he saw that the matter was not difficult.

A correction letter for the bank account number had arrived two months earlier, but verification of the old number being struck out and the new one entered had remained stuck on one desk.

Gopal carried the file to the room of Section In-Charge Shashibhushan Babu.

"This is Vimla Devi's file," Gopal said. "The verification is complete. Only the order line has to be written."

Shashibhushan Babu raised his spectacles and looked at Gopal.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"It has been three months."

"Three months is not very long in this office."

Gopal said nothing.

He placed the file on the desk.

Shashibhushan Babu looked towards the new plates on the wall.

For a few moments his gaze rested on Gopal's nameplate.

"Why is your plate so large?"

"Carpenter's mistake."

"Have it changed."

"I have told him."

Shashibhushan Babu opened the file, wrote two lines, and signed.

“Here. Now send it to Accounts.”

Gopal returned with the file.

A faint pleasure rose in him.

The work had moved.

Whether it moved because of the plate or because Vimla Devi had already waited three months did not, at that moment, seem important.

The next day a supplier came directly into Gopal’s room.

“Sir, please take a look at this payment.”

“I am not ‘sir,’” Gopal said. “I am the Accounts Assistant.”

The man smiled.

“I know, but everyone was saying decisions get made quickly in this room.”

Gopal did not like the sentence.

He turned the file around.

“Follow the proper channel.”

Even so, that afternoon two employees came to ask for his “remarks” on a paper.

Previously such a paper would have gone to Shashibhushan Babu’s desk.

Gopal wrote:

“Compliant from the accounts side.”

His hand paused for an instant as he wrote it.

In fifteen years he had formed such remarks in his mind thousands of times.

He had rarely had the opportunity to put them on paper.

On the third day Mamta asked again,

“Did you tell them to replace the plate?”

“Bauku has not come.”

“Did you call him?”

Looking down at a paper, Gopal said,

“I will call tomorrow.”

The truth was that he had not called Bauku at all.

Within a week, seven millimetres altered the invisible geography of the office.

Visitors looked first at the nameplate, then at the face.

Two or three times people left Shashibhushan Babu’s room and came to Gopal.

Someone had a mismatch in a pension number.

Someone’s death-certificate copy was blurred.

Someone’s bank branch had changed its name.

Gopal did not settle every file by his own decision, but he immediately understood where each one was stuck.

For the first time, his fifteen years of experience looked larger than the designation written on the wall.

On the seventh afternoon, a newly appointed clerk named Neeraj came with a request to correct his attendance entry.

Gopal said,

“This belongs to the Establishment Section.”

Neeraj remained standing.

“They told me there that you would see it.”

Gopal was surprised.

“Who told you?”

Neeraj shrugged.

“Everyone in the veranda.”

In an office, the person called “everyone” was the most influential of all.

He had no desk.

No signature.

But his words travelled faster than a file.

Gopal could have returned the request.

Instead he called the old clerk from Establishment.

Within two minutes the error was found.

Another employee’s number had been entered against Neeraj’s name.

The clerk corrected it then and there.

Delighted, Neeraj said,

“Sir, work really does move quickly when it comes to you.”

This time Gopal did not say,

“I am not sir.”

Not saying it was the first small wrong of that day for which no clause existed in the rulebook.

While leaving in the evening, Gopal turned once on the veranda and looked back at his nameplate.

The words were the same:

Gopal Jha, Accounts Assistant.

No lie was written anywhere.

The lie existed only in the height.

And height does not speak in words.

Perhaps that was why it was harder to oppose.

If the plate had said “Section In-Charge,” Gopal would have had it removed on the first day.

Against seven millimetres, what sentence could one write?

At home, his wife Rama asked,

“Why are you late these days?”

“More work,” Gopal said.

It was half true.

There really was more work.

But some of that work was not his.

After dinner he took out an old copy of his service record.

In fifteen years, promotion had come within reach twice.

The first time, the number of vacancies was reduced.

The second, a seniority dispute became stuck in court.

On paper he was still “Accounts Assistant.”

Only the wood on the wall had moved seven millimetres ahead.

The next day Shashibhushan Babu joked,

"Gopalji, your court is doing brisk business."

Two men in the room laughed.

Gopal smiled too, but there was a thorn inside the joke.

"People come on their own."

"People read the plate," Shashibhushan Babu said. "In an office, half the governing is done by words, half by size."

Then he bent over his papers again.

Gopal could not decide whether it had been sarcasm or a warning.

That afternoon an employee placed a cup of tea on Gopal's desk.

Earlier Gopal had gone outside to get his own tea.

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes, Babu. I left one for you along with the people upstairs."

At the word "upstairs," Gopal's hand stopped over the cup.

He drank the tea.

For a long time afterwards he could not tell what it tasted like.

That evening Mamta said plainly,

"If you want, the wood can still be cut. There is a saw in the storeroom."

Gopal tried to laugh.

"Cut a government nameplate myself? Then there will be another objection."

Mamta replied,

"Are you afraid of an objection, or of losing seven millimetres?"

Gopal said nothing.

Mamta picked up her papers and left.

That night at home, what returned again and again to Gopal was not a dream but a simple scene.

Why had Vimla Devi's file been stuck for three months?

Not because of a difficult rule.

Only because the right person had not looked at the right table at the right time.

If seven millimetres could change where people looked, was the fault in the wood or in the office?

The question offered him a convenient place to hide his own pleasure.

Gopal recognised the convenience.

He still could not let it go.

That week Vimla Devi received her first payment.

She came carrying a small packet of jaggery and makhana.

Gopal refused to take it.

Vimla Devi said,

"If you had not been here, I would have wandered for another two months."

Gopal wanted to answer:

"It was not because of me. Your papers were complete."

But the words did not come out.

Vimla Devi again looked towards the nameplate.

Gratitude stood in her eyes.

Gopal suddenly felt as though he were sitting inside those seven millimetres.

On the tenth day a notice arrived from the district announcing an inspection.

The subject read:

“Office Visual Standardisation and Record Consistency.”

Everyone assumed that registers, files, attendance, and furniture would be examined.

But in the first hour of the inspection, two officers began measuring the nameplates on the wall.

“Officer—seventy-five millimetres.

Section In-Charge—sixty-eight.

Accounts Assistant—sixty-one.”

One inspector stopped his tape at Gopal’s plate.

“Sixty-eight.”

The other inspector looked at Gopal.

“Your sanctioned post?”

“Accounts Assistant.”

“Why is your plate the size of the Section In-Charge plate?”

Gopal said,

“A carpenter’s mistake.”

“How long has it been like this?”

Gopal was silent.

At a distance Mamta was arranging papers.

Her hands stopped.

“About twelve days,” Gopal said.

“Why was it not corrected in twelve days?”

“The carpenter did not come.”

“Did you give written notice?”

“No.”

The inspector wrote:

“Visual designation indicator inconsistency.”

Then he asked,

“During this period, did you perform any work that arose from people assuming you held a higher post?”

Vimla Devi came into Gopal’s mind.

The supplier.

The two employees asking for remarks.

He could have said,

“No.”

No formal order had been issued under his signature.

But he knew the question was not only about signatures.

“People misunderstood sometimes,” he said.

“Did you correct them?”

Gopal remembered Mamta’s laugh on the first day:

“The importance might change.”

“At first I corrected them,” he said. “Later, not every time.”

For a few moments the room was silent.

The inspector had perhaps not expected such an answer.

He wrote:

“Employee did not dispel the misunderstanding on every occasion.”

A meeting was called in the afternoon.

The subject was the size of the nameplate.

Shashibhushan Babu said,

“It was an ordinary carpentry error. There is no need to turn it into such a major issue.”

The inspector replied,

“Visual signals are part of administration.”

Mamta whispered into Gopal’s ear,

“Were Vimla Devi’s three months not a visual signal?”

Gopal looked at her.

He did not smile.

The meeting decided:

the carpenter would be asked for an explanation;

Gopal would submit a written clarification;

all nameplates would be remeasured;

a size register would be created;

in future, before any plate was mounted, the Section In-Charge would verify it.

No one asked how many stalled files had moved during the previous twelve days, or why they had moved.

That evening Gopal sat down to write his explanation.

His first line was:

“The error in the nameplate size occurred through the carpenter.”

He stopped.

The second line:

“At the outset I orally requested that the error be corrected.”

That was true.

The third line was difficult.

After a long time he wrote:

“In the days that followed, it became clear that some visitors understood my post to be higher because of the size of the plate. I did not immediately correct this misunderstanding on every occasion.”

After that sentence he did not feel relief.

He felt a straight line of shame.

Seven millimetres wide.

The next day Bauku the carpenter came.

As he removed the old plate he said,

“Because of me, you had to write an explanation?”

“It began because of you,” Gopal said. “After that, it continued because of me.”

Bauku measured the new plate.

Sixty-one millimetres.

“Now it is correct.”

He was about to throw away the old sixty-eight-millimetre plate, but the storeroom assistant stopped him.

“Government property. It will be entered in the inventory.”

“It is not broken,” Bauku said.

“All the more reason. Keep it as an extra nameplate.”

In the stores register the item was entered as:

“One extra wooden nameplate, size sixty-eight millimetres, unusable.”

Gopal read the line and remained silent.

He felt like adding:

“Former effect: equivalent to Section In-Charge.”

He said nothing.

A few days later an elderly man entered the office leaning on a stick.

He read the plates on the wall.

His eyes passed over Gopal’s smaller plate, then he went straight towards Shashibhushan Babu’s room.

There was a crowd at the door.

The old man turned and stood in the veranda.

Gopal rose from his chair.

“What work do you have?”

“I need to meet the senior babu.”

“Show me the papers first. It may not be necessary to go to the senior babu.”

The old man opened the papers.

Gopal stood by the corridor window and began reading them.

This time the nameplate behind him was small.

There was no borrowed height in his voice.

Inside the storeroom, the old sixty-eight-millimetre plate was gathering dust.

Its status in the register read:

“Unusable.”

Perhaps for the first time in the office, the word meant exactly what it said.

STORY 142

THE EMPTY SPACE BETWEEN TWO SIGNATURES

In the payments room of the District Cooperative Office, paper had a peculiar geography.

The member number sat in the upper-left corner.

The date in the upper-right.

The amount in the middle.

Two signature spaces lay at the bottom.

But between those two signatures, a small square was also printed.

No name.

No designation.

No word saying “seal.”

No word saying “remarks.”

Only four thin lines.

The employees called it “the middle box.”

A new employee would ask during the first week:

“What goes here?”

An old employee would reply:

“Leave it for now. It will come from above.”

Where exactly “above” was, no file made clear.

Madhav Jha had joined the cooperative office five months earlier.

He was a junior clerk, and he had a habit of reading not only the order of papers but also the language of papers.

The first time he received a payment voucher, he opened the rules.

They stated plainly:

for withdrawal of funds, the signatures of the Accounts Assistant and the Secretary were required.

There was no mention anywhere of a third signature.

Madhav asked,

“What is this square in the middle?”

Umakant Babu, sitting at the next desk, pushed his spectacles up his nose.

“Intermediate approval.”

“Whose?”

“The middle officer’s.”

“What is the designation?”

Umakant Babu thought for a few moments.

“Earlier it used to be called ‘joint verification.’”

“And now?”

“Now too, probably the same. The designation may have changed.”

Madhav checked the staffing register.

The office had a Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Accounts Assistant, Store Clerk, Field Supervisor, two Junior Clerks, and one attendant.

There was no post called “joint verification.”

Umakant Babu smiled.

“The staffing register does not tell you everything. Watch the work.”

The work did indeed say many things.

A payment voucher would leave with the Secretary’s signature.

The Accounts Assistant would sign it.

Then the middle box would remain empty.

Because of that empty box, the file would go “up” for “intermediate approval.”

At the upper desk, the Assistant Secretary would write:

“Relevant branch to examine.”

The relevant branch would send the file back to Accounts.

Accounts would write:

“Intermediate approval required.”

Then the file would stand outside the Secretary’s room.

Madhav asked,

“If the post does not exist, who gives the approval?”

Umakant Babu answered,

“That is why the file is standing.”

The answer was so natural in the office that Madhav felt his question had been rude.

What surprised Madhav was not that no one knew what the square meant.

What surprised him was that everyone had a different meaning for it.

The Store Clerk said,

“This is for verification.”

The Field Supervisor said,

“Someone from the district used to come and sign there.”

Attendant Rambabu said,

“Earlier a red seal was stamped there.”

Accounts Assistant Devendra Babu believed it was perhaps a remnant of some old audit system.

One day Madhav wrote all these explanations on a small piece of paper.

Four people.

Four meanings.

All four meanings shared one feature:

in every one of them, the square was necessary.

No one considered that an empty space might simply be allowed to remain empty.

Devendra Babu did not like Madhav’s investigation, though he was not angry with him either.

His fear was practical.

Two years earlier, an inspection objection had been raised against a payment, and three employees had spent a month writing explanations.

“Inspectors ask about what they can see on paper,” he would say.

“If they see a blank space, they will ask why it is blank.”

Madhav replied,

"Then if they see it filled, will they not ask who filled it?"

Devendra Babu smiled.

"That is why government service requires age."

Sarojini Kumari, the newest employee in the office, matched names against the membership register.

Hearing the discussion, she said,

"We were never taught about a third signature in training."

Umakant Babu said,

"Training does not teach many things. In service, paper teaches by itself."

Sarojini looked at the square.

"This seems to be teaching even without anything written in it."

That week an elderly farmer named Harinarayan Mandal arrived.

He was owed thirteen thousand four hundred and eighty rupees for paddy procurement.

The paddy had reached the cooperative warehouse three months earlier.

The weighing slip was clear.

The moisture test was clear.

The member number was clear.

The two required signatures were also clear.

The middle box was empty.

Harinarayan seemed to handle his walking stick more carefully than his file.

He sat on the chair in front of Madhav's desk and asked,

"How many more days?"

Madhav looked at the file.

"There are two signatures."

"I too have two eyes," Harinarayan said.

"Does the money need a third eye?"

Madhav did not laugh.

There was less irritation than exhaustion in the old man's voice.

"The middle approval is still pending," Madhav said.

"Who gives it?"

No answer came immediately from Madhav.

"I am looking into that."

Harinarayan placed both hands on the handle of his stick.

"I have come five times.

The first time they said the Secretary's signature was pending.

The second time Accounts.

The third time they said the middle one.

The fourth time they said the middle babu was in a meeting.

Today is the fifth time.

I only want this much:

next time, tell me the name of the person I am supposed to find."

Madhav began reading the remarks written on the file.

"For intermediate approval."

"For consideration at middle level."

“Relevant middle officer.”

“After due intermediate approval.”

There were many words.

Not one person.

Harinarayan’s file was a solid object amid all these theories.

On it was written:

paddy weight—18 quintals 40 kilograms.

Below that:

deductions.

Transport.

Amount payable.

For the old farmer, these were not merely figures.

After kharif, he had taken seed on credit for the next sowing.

The shopkeeper had not yet pressured him.

But Harinarayan would say,

“The worst thing about debt is not the interest.

It is seeing your own name in someone else’s ledger.”

He did not ask for anyone’s mercy.

Once Madhav said he could take him directly to the Secretary if he wished.

Harinarayan refused.

“If my paper moves by rule, someone else’s will move too.

If it moves because they see my stick, what happens to the one who comes without a stick?”

Madhav liked the sentence.

But he did not turn Harinarayan into an example of moral perfection and feel reassured.

The next day the old man himself tried to give attendant Rambabu fifty rupees for tea.

“For letting me know about the paper.”

Rambabu returned it.

Harinarayan was embarrassed.

Madhav saw that waiting could make a person both principled and impatient at once.

That day another payment voucher arrived in the office.

It was for money owed to a widowed member for milk collection.

Its middle box was empty too.

Sarojini raised her pen to copy the old sentence onto the file:

“Intermediate approval required.”

Madhav stopped her.

“Required from whom?”

Sarojini held the pen in the air.

“This is what the old files say.”

“Then should we copy only what we ourselves understand?”

After a few moments Sarojini did not write the sentence.

She left the space blank.

For the first time in that office, leaving something blank became a decision.

That afternoon Madhav went to the old records room.

In a dusty wooden cupboard, ten years of payment vouchers were tied in bundles.

On some vouchers, the middle box contained a round seal.

On some, the word "Seen."

On some, only a diagonal line.

On a voucher from three years earlier, Umakant Babu's signature appeared in the middle box.

Madhav asked,

"Were you the middle officer?"

Umakant Babu was startled.

"When?"

Madhav showed him the voucher.

Umakant Babu removed his spectacles and held the paper away from his face.

"At that time the Secretary said it was not good to leave the box empty.

So I signed."

"What was your post then?"

"Accounts Clerk."

"If you signed now?"

Umakant Babu immediately shook his head.

"Not now. Inspections are much stricter now."

Madhav felt that the answer contained the whole philosophy of the office.

When the rule was unclear, a signature could be added.

When people began looking for the rule, no one dared sign.

Madhav found the old telephone number of the district cooperative office and spoke to a senior assistant.

The moment he heard the question, the man asked,

"What version of the form do you have?"

"Number 17-B."

"Form 17-B requires two signatures."

"And the square in the middle?"

There was silence on the telephone for a few moments.

"That must be part of your local printing.

It is not in our sample."

Madhav was startled.

The local voucher had the square.

The district's current sample did not.

He searched for the old printing bill.

Five years earlier, a press called Mithila Printing Works had printed the vouchers.

The bill said:

"As per old sample."

Mithila Printing Works was now a small shop in another market lane.

Madhav could not leave during office hours, so Rambabu asked there on his way home.

The next day he reported,

“The printer said he copied whatever sample was given to him.

The square was already there.

He remembers that once there was also a faint round mark inside it.”

This strengthened Madhav’s suspicion.

But it was not yet proof.

A printer’s memory of a faint mark was not a rule.

He needed the old sample.

The next day Harinarayan returned.

This time he was not chewing paan.

“Did you find the name?”

“Not yet.”

“Then did you find the post?”

“Not that either.”

Harinarayan studied Madhav’s face for a moment.

“If there is an empty place in the middle of a field, I fill it with soil.

You people are searching for a man to fill an empty place.”

This time Madhav laughed.

Harinarayan smiled faintly too.

That evening Madhav searched for an older edition of the rules.

In the records room he found a thin booklet from 2009.

It contained a sample payment voucher.

Between the two signatures was the same square.

But inside it, in tiny letters, were the words:

“Cooperative Emblem.”

Madhav carried the booklet to Umakant Babu.

“Look at this.”

Umakant Babu read it.

“Yes. Earlier the emblem used to be printed.”

“Then where did ‘intermediate approval’ come from?”

Picking at a corner of the paper, Umakant Babu said,

“Hard to say.

Once the emblem was omitted in printing.

The square remained.

Someone must have said—do not leave it empty.

Perhaps after that someone signed there.

Then people began to think the signature was necessary.”

“And the rule?”

“The rule says two signatures.”

“Then Harinarayan’s payment?”

Madhav made a copy of the old sample page and placed it beside the current voucher.

The lines matched.

The old emblem had disappeared.

The square remained.
 As though a house had collapsed and people had mistaken its doorway for the resident.
 That day Umakant Babu took an old round seal from his desk drawer.
 The rubber had dried.
 It bore the cooperative's old paddy-ear emblem.
 "Perhaps this used to be stamped there," he said.
 Madhav placed the seal over the square.
 It almost fit exactly.
 "So people created an officer in place of a seal?" Sarojini asked.
 Umakant Babu said,
 "Not people.
 We did.
 Slowly."
 No single person stood apart as guilty inside that "we."
 That made the matter more uncomfortable.
 Umakant Babu fell silent.
 His silence was not merely fear.
 Thirty years in service had taught him that a written rule was one thing and later responsibility another.
 He said quietly,
 "You are new.
 Paper sees rules.
 Inspectors see custom.
 Breaking custom is not easy."
 Madhav asked,
 "What if the custom was built on a misunderstanding?"
 "Then its age gives it strength."
 Meanwhile the pile of payment vouchers in Secretary Shashibhushan Prasad's room kept growing.
 Five files.
 Nine.
 Fourteen.
 All had the two required signatures.
 All had the middle box empty.
 One day, outside the Secretary's room, Umakant Babu joked,
 "The middle officer is very busy."
 No one laughed.
 The Secretary called everyone to a meeting.
 On the table lay the old rules, the new rules, three payment vouchers, and a measuring tape.
 The tape was not for nameplates.
 It was for measuring the empty square.
 The Secretary measured it.
 Thirty-two millimetres by thirty-two millimetres.

Before starting the meeting, he spent five minutes laying the vouchers one over another and aligning the squares.

Every square was the same size.

Perhaps it comforted him to know that at least the confusion had been standardised.

Devendra Babu presented his position.

"I am not in favour of an additional signature.

But if the old practice has been accepted in audit, removing it suddenly may raise questions."

Madhav said,

"There was no uniformity in the old practice either.

Sometimes a seal.

Sometimes a signature.

Sometimes a line.

That is not procedure.

It is fear signing itself in different forms."

Shashibhushan Prasad interrupted at once.

"No speeches.

Evidence."

Madhav placed the old rulebook, the district's current sample, the dried round seal, and the payment voucher on the table.

Each piece of evidence was small.

Placed side by side, they became a story.

"Why was this space made so large?" the Secretary asked.

Madhav answered,

"For the old cooperative emblem."

Umakant Babu nodded.

Accounts Assistant Devendra Babu said,

"But for many years files have been sent for intermediate approval."

The Secretary asked,

"Who gives it?"

Silence spread through the room.

Attendant Rambabu stood near the door.

Quietly he said,

"I carry the files upstairs."

The Secretary looked at him.

"Upstairs to whom?"

Rambabu thought.

"Wherever I am told."

"Who tells you?"

Rambabu thought again.

"Whichever desk the file comes from."

For a moment the meeting reached a place where every person was correct in his own position and the sequence of work was wrong.

Madhav opened Harinarayan's file.

"Under the rules, two signatures are sufficient.

This voucher is complete.”

Devendra Babu said,

“What if an inspection raises a question?”

“I will write the relevant rule clause on it.”

“You will write it?”

“Yes.”

The Secretary looked at Madhav.

“And if the payment is objected to?”

A slight fear rose inside Madhav.

Thirteen thousand four hundred and eighty rupees was not a small sum compared with his salary.

If the payment were later declared improper, recovery might be discussed.

Harinarayan sat outside on the veranda, but Madhav did not want to decide by looking at him.

He wanted to decide by looking at the rule.

He said,

“Then I will give a written reply that the two authorised signatures were present.

The empty box is not a post.”

For the first time Umakant Babu spoke clearly.

“I too will support that statement.

Because I saw how this custom began.”

The Secretary leaned back in his chair.

“Then write it on the file.”

Madhav wrote:

“Under Rule 8(a), the two required signatures are available.

The intervening square is an old printed space intended for the cooperative emblem.

No additional approval is required.”

The Secretary signed.

Devendra Babu signed too.

Another argument followed:

would the decision apply only to Harinarayan’s file, or to every stalled voucher?

Devendra Babu wanted one voucher sent as a test case first.

Sarojini said,

“If the rule is the same, which farmer will be made the test?”

Shashibhushan Prasad was not annoyed by the question.

He ordered all fourteen files brought in.

Every one had the two required signatures.

Two files contained calculation errors and were sent back to Accounts.

The remaining twelve were complete under the rules.

Madhav realised that once attention moved away from the empty square, the real errors became easier to see.

While everyone had been watching for an invisible officer, no one had noticed the small calculation mistakes.

The Secretary ordered all twelve payments to move forward and directed that the relevant rule clause be recorded on every file.

The decision was collective.

The signature was the Secretary's.

Even courage in an office ultimately required a signature of the proper size.

The obstruction could have ended there.

But an office often prefers naming an obstruction to ending it.

The next question arose:

how should the empty square now be left?

Someone said draw a line through it.

Someone said write "Not Applicable."

Someone said make a seal.

The Secretary finally ordered:

until new vouchers were printed, write in small letters inside the box:

"NO ADDITIONAL APPROVAL REQUIRED."

"Who will write it?" Devendra Babu asked.

The Secretary looked at Madhav.

"Whoever checks the voucher."

Umakant Babu lowered his face and smiled.

Harinarayan's payment was approved that same evening.

When he heard the amount had been released, he looked first at the paper and then at Madhav.

"Did you find the middle babu?"

"No," Madhav said.

"We discovered he never existed."

Harinarayan frowned.

"Then whom did I wait for five times?"

Madhav had an answer.

But the answer had no person's name.

"For an empty space."

Harinarayan lifted his stick.

"It is good that an empty space draws no salary."

He left.

Three weeks later the newly printed payment vouchers arrived.

The square between the two signature spaces had disappeared.

In its place was only a thin grey line, beneath which tiny letters read:

"For Office Use."

Madhav held the first voucher in his hand.

Devendra Babu ran a finger along the line.

"What are we supposed to write here?"

"Nothing," Madhav said.

Devendra Babu looked at the line again.

"Then why does it say 'For Office Use'?"

Before Madhav could answer, Umakant Babu lifted his old spectacles.

There was tired amusement in his eyes.

"Do not ask that question yet," he said.

“First let us see what people decide to fill in by themselves.”

STORY 143

CHAIR NUMBER ZERO IN THE WAITING ROOM

When the district hospital's new outpatient building opened, during the first week people talked less about doctors, medicines, or examination rooms than they did about the chairs.

In the old veranda people had sat with their backs against the wall, on steps, on window ledges, sometimes on the floor.

In the waiting hall of the new building, forty-eight identical grey chairs had been placed in two rows, and white numbers from 1 to 48 were painted on their backs.

The numbers were for the convenience of the staff.

So the cleaner could identify which chair in which row was loose.

So the repair worker could know which screw needed replacing.

So the inspector could know whether all forty-eight purchased items were present.

The numbers had nothing to do with the patients' order.

But in a hospital, a thing that is perfectly clear on paper often acquires a second meaning by the time it reaches the other side of the wall.

In the right-hand corner of the waiting hall, beside the drinking-water vessel, stood one old iron chair.

Its back was higher than the others.

It was painted blue.

And in the middle, in thick red paint, was the number "o."

One arm bore the mark of an old strip.

The lower right leg was slightly bent.

Why this chair was in the new building was a question for which different staff members had different answers.

Jagdish Babu, the store-room in-charge, said,
"It is an item removed from the old inventory."

Watchman Rambabu said,
"There is no order to throw it out."

Budhni, the cleaner, said,
"If it is kept outside, someone will carry it away."

And Neelam, who wrote the outpatient register, said,
"It was put wherever there was space."

The chair offered no explanation of its own.

Only the zero remained written on its back.

For the first two days no one sat on it.

People filled chairs 1 through 48, then stood against the wall.

They would notice Zero, pause for two moments, then move elsewhere.

In a hospital, a written number often looks like an instruction.

No one understood what instruction "o" was giving.

On the third afternoon, seventy-two-year-old Sheetal Paswan arrived with his grandson Manoj.

He was short of breath.

Manoj took a queue slip from the registration desk, but the crowd was so large that their turn to reach the doctor was still far away.

Sheetal Babu stood for five minutes.

Then his knees began to tremble.

"Sit somewhere," Manoj said.

Every chair was occupied.

Zero, beside the water vessel, was empty.

Without even looking at the number, Sheetal Babu sat down there.

Five minutes later Nurse Rama came to fetch water.

Her eyes fell on Sheetal Babu's lips.

They looked unusually blue.

Rama bent down, checked his pulse, listened to his chest, and said to Manoj,

"Show me the queue slip."

With trembling hands Manoj gave her the paper.

Rama wrote something on it and took Sheetal Babu inside immediately.

The entire incident lasted no more than three minutes.

But the thirty-seven people sitting in the waiting hall saw it in thirty-seven different ways.

One person saw the nurse come directly from a distance to Chair Zero.

Another thought Manoj had shown some special mark.

Someone thought they heard Rama say "first."

An hour later Sheetal Babu was in the observation room on oxygen.

By then Chair Number Zero had already been promoted in the waiting hall.

"It is for serious patients," one woman told another.

"For the elderly," the second replied.

"No, for getting an earlier number," a third person said.

Watchman Rambabu heard them.

"It is nothing special. It is an old chair."

All three looked at him with the kind of kindly expression people use for an employee who does not understand the rules.

The next morning before the hospital opened, a man had placed his towel on Chair Zero to reserve it.

He himself was standing in line at the registration desk.

Behind him stood an elderly woman.

Rambabu picked up the towel and handed it back.

"You cannot reserve a place here."

"My patient is coming."

"Then let the patient sit when they come."

"This is the special chair, isn't it?"

"Nothing special about it."

The man read the nameplate on Rambabu's chest, as though collecting evidence for a later complaint against this statement.

By half past nine, a small line had formed in front of Zero.

Five people stood in it.

Seven of the forty-eight ordinary chairs were empty.

Neelam came out from the registration desk.

"Please sit down."

One woman said,

"I need Zero."

"Why?"

"My husband is very dizzy."

"Then show him to the nurse."

"He will sit on Zero first, then the nurse will see him."

Neelam paused before answering.

Official hospital procedure said that critically ill patients were to receive primary screening at a small table to the left of the entrance.

But that day the table was short one nurse.

People often entered the waiting hall directly.

The rumour about Chair Zero was foolish.

But inside that foolishness, a real weakness in the hospital had found a place for itself.

Neelam said quietly to Rambabu,

"If someone genuinely looks very unwell, send them to Rama Didi."

Rambabu replied,

"People will say I am distributing Zero."

"Then do not distribute Zero. Look at the patient."

"That is not in my job."

Neelam did not smile.

"Then look after the chair. Is that in your job?"

For two moments Rambabu looked at the chair.

In government service, many things are neither within one's post nor entirely outside one's responsibility.

Within a week, Chair Number Zero had become a small hospital legend.

Some said sitting there made the doctor notice you sooner.

Some said it was the "emergency chair."

Some said the District Officer had sat there during an inspection and therefore it was prestigious.

The last story was entirely invented.

Because it sounded the most respectable, it spread the fastest.

Some people went over merely to look at the chair.

Some asked for "o" to be written on their queue slips.

One day Neelam saw the words "Chair-o" written in red ink beside a patient's name on a slip.

"Who wrote this?"

The patient's son said,

"The babu outside."

“Which babu?”

“The one who is telling everyone.”

There was no babu outside.

A young tea seller, answering so many people’s questions, had gradually appointed himself an information clerk.

He charged five rupees for tea.

The information was free.

Free information is often the most expensive.

Neelam struck out the red “Chair-o.”

Five minutes later the patient’s blood pressure was found to be dangerously low.

He was sent inside quickly.

His son came back out and told everyone,

“See? Zero was written there.”

Neelam’s cancellation line became proof of the rumour.

The matter reached the hospital administration when two contradictory letters appeared in the complaint box on the same day.

The first said:

“Influential people seize the special Zero chair and poor patients do not benefit.”

The second said:

“The Chair Number Zero arrangement is excellent. A similar chair should be provided in the women’s ward.”

Superintendent Dr. Pramod Mishra read both letters.

Then he called Store In-Charge Jagdish Babu.

“What is this Chair Zero?”

Jagdish Babu brought not a file but a register.

“Sir, officially, it is nothing.”

“Then why is it in the hospital?”

“Because officially it was never removed either.”

“Explain.”

Jagdish Babu opened the old furniture inventory.

Against Chair Number 73 it read:

“Paint peeled, arm damaged, declared unserviceable.”

On the next page a note in blue ink said:

“Proposed for inclusion in auction list.”

There was no order after that.

“Why is Zero painted on its back?”

“Perhaps someone marked it during the auction process.”

“Perhaps?”

“The old employee has retired.”

“Then remove it.”

Jagdish Babu fell silent.

“What is it?” the Superintendent asked.

“To remove it, we need an item number.”

“Seventy-three, isn’t it?”

“Seventy-three is not in the new building inventory.

It exists in the old auction proposal, but the auction order never came.

If I remove it as 73, there is no such item in the current inventory.

If I write 0, then Chair 0 does not exist in the government register.”

The Superintendent took off his spectacles and placed them on the desk.

“So the most famous chair in the hospital does not exist on paper?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And because it does not exist on paper, it cannot be removed?”

Jagdish Babu answered carefully,

“It can be removed, but later someone may ask which item was removed.”

A small meeting began right there over that question.

The Superintendent called Mahesh Babu from Accounts.

The moment he saw the register, Mahesh Babu said,

“Zero is a number, but not an asset number.

If we treat it as an asset number, it comes before one.

Then the purchase sequence is disturbed.”

Nurse Rama, who happened to enter on another matter, said,

“A patient can also arrive before one, if their breathing is stopping.”

Mahesh Babu looked at her.

“I am talking about the chair sequence, not the patient sequence.”

“That is exactly the problem,” Rama said.

“People are mistaking the chair sequence for the patient sequence.”

The Superintendent asked,

“Then write that the two are unrelated.”

Neelam, standing there with the complaint letters, said quietly,

“People read only half of what is written, sir.”

Mahesh Babu said,

“Then it is their responsibility to read the whole thing.”

Neelam replied,

“People do not come to a hospital after taking training in how to read rulebooks while ill.”

The meeting had been called for five minutes.

It lasted forty-five.

In the end everyone agreed that the chair was not “special.”

But they could not agree whether it was “extra,” “unserviceable,” “unlisted,” or “pending verification.”

Each of the four words belonged to a different branch.

The Superintendent put his spectacles back on.

“In this country an object is destroyed first, and its existence is proved later.”

Jagdish Babu did not laugh.

He understood that the remark could also be applied to his own department.

The next day an order was issued:

“Chair Number 0 shall be removed immediately from the waiting hall and kept safely in stores. Disposal procedure shall be undertaken after verification of item status.”

Rambabu read the order and tried to lift the chair.

Three patients objected at once.

“Why are you removing it?”

“Orders.”

“Where will the serious patients sit?”

“On any chair.”

“Then why was there a Zero?”

Rambabu stood there with the chair half lifted.

No one had given him a written answer to that question.

At that moment a thin woman entered holding the hand of her ten-year-old daughter.

The child’s forehead was hot.

Her eyes were half closed.

Seeing the crowd, the mother panicked.

Chair Zero was half in the air.

“Babu, may my child sit here?” the woman asked.

Rambabu looked at the order.

Then at the child.

Then he placed the chair back on the floor.

“Sit her down. I will call the nurse.”

The child was examined.

She had a high fever but was not in immediate danger.

She remained in the normal queue.

The mother breathed with relief.

Sitting on Zero did not move the child forward.

But no one clearly explained that outside that day.

People saw only that the child sat on Zero and the nurse came.

The order could not be implemented by evening.

The next day the administration tried a different solution.

A white notice was fixed to the wall above the chair:

“CHAIR 0 IS NOT A SPECIAL PRIORITY CHAIR. PATIENT PRIORITY IS DETERMINED BY MEDICAL SCREENING.”

Within fifteen minutes, a line again formed in front of Zero.

Rambabu held his head.

“Now what?”

The young tea seller explained with complete confidence,

“It is written on the notice itself—‘special priority chair.’ People are not reading the whole sentence.”

Neelam came outside.

Indeed, four people were standing there after seeing the large words “SPECIAL PRIORITY CHAIR.”

The word “NOT” in the middle looked small.

She had the notice taken down.

Meanwhile Nurse Rama wrote a short proposal.

A clearly marked primary-screening desk at the entrance.

Two designated chairs before it.

Training for the watchman.

The proposal was medical, but to implement it required approval from three branches:

Building.

Staffing.

Stores.

The file began circulating through all three.

Chair Zero remained in place.

Two weeks later a district inspection took place.

The inspector entered the waiting hall and counted the chairs.

Numbers 1 through 48 were all there.

Then his eyes fell on Zero.

"Is this on the inventory?"

Jagdish Babu replied,

"Pending verification."

"Use?"

Rambabu opened his mouth.

Neelam spoke first.

"For sitting."

The inspector placed a hand on the chair.

"Then why is the number zero on it?"

No one had a certain answer.

The inspector wrote in his notes:

"One additional chair available; include in inventory."

A week later the new stores register arrived.

After the forty-eight grey chairs, the final line read:

"Chair, iron, blue, old—1 unit."

It was assigned item number:

49.

Jagdish Babu breathed with relief.

"Now it can be removed."

But by then Nurse Rama's proposal had been approved.

Two chairs were needed at the entrance for primary screening.

To avoid a new purchase, the Stores Branch wrote:

"Use available extra old chair."

The following Monday, Chair Zero was lifted from the right-hand corner of the waiting hall and placed beside the primary-screening desk at the entrance.

The red "o" was still on its back.

In the register its number had become 49.

People now saw it and asked,

"Is the Zero chair for serious patients?"

Rama would say,

“No. Sit for screening.”
Most people heard “screening.”
The “no” was lost again.
A few months later the red zero had worn partly away.
Old iron began showing beneath the blue paint.
New patients kept arriving at the hospital.
New queue slips kept being issued.
New rules kept being hung on the walls.
In the stores register, Chair 49 became an ordinary regular item.
But in people’s speech it remained Chair Number Zero—
the chair that had never possessed any official authority, but because of
which the hospital had finally been forced to create a real system of primary
screening.

STORY 144

THE LEAVE APPLICATION'S LEAVE

There was no separate branch for leave-related work in the office of Mithila Jan College.

An old iron cupboard, two registers, one red seal, and Harimohan Jha's desk together formed the arrangement everyone called the "Leave Section."

Harimohan himself smiled at the name.

But there was pride in the smile too.

Teachers changed.

Principals changed.

The building was repainted three times.

But the route taken by a leave application changed very little.

First the application.

Then the Head of Department's remark.

Then Harimohan Jha's verification.

Then the Principal's signature.

And finally the entry in the leave register.

Someone might suddenly fall ill.

There might be a death at home.

A train might be missed.

A wedding date might change.

The paper travelled at its own pace.

Harimohan was the guardian of that pace.

He would say,

"A person may run. It is not right to make paper run. Running paper falls."

People laughed at him.

But papers did, in fact, fall less often on his desk.

He sorted applications by date.

Kept medical certificates separately.

Counted the leave days available.

And made a small mark in the corner of the register with a red pencil.

The problem began when Harimohan himself went on long leave.

One evening, while returning home, he twisted his knee on the stairs.

No bone was broken.

But the doctor told him to avoid unnecessary walking for six weeks.

The next day his son brought his leave application to the office.

The application was complete—

except for the Head of Department's remark.

Harimohan did not have a Head of Department.

Principal Raghuvansh Babu looked at the application.

Removed his spectacles.

Put them on again.

Then asked,
 “Who will handle the leave work?”
 Head Clerk Dinanath Babu said,
 “Give it temporarily to Suchitra.”
 Suchitra Kumari had joined six months earlier as a contractual typist.
 Her desk usually received scholarship letters, examination notices, and minutes of meetings.
 She typed quickly.
 Wrote remarks in a clear hand.
 And according to the people in the office, had so far “spoiled no tradition.”
 Dinanath Babu called her.
 “Look after the leave work for a few days.”
 Suchitra asked,
 “The registers and the cupboard key?”
 Dinanath Babu opened his desk drawer and took out a small envelope.
 In Harimohan’s handwriting it said:
 “Duplicate key—do not open except in necessary circumstances.”
 “Is this a necessary circumstance?” Suchitra asked.
 Dinanath Babu looked at the envelope for a while.
 “Hard to say. Harimohan Babu will explain over the telephone in two days.”
 Two days became five.
 Harimohan’s knee had swollen.
 His medicine was changed.
 And his son said the doctor had advised him to keep conversation to a minimum.
 Meanwhile leave applications began piling up outside the cupboard.
 There were nine in the first week.
 Suchitra tied them together by date and placed them on the left side of her desk.
 The tenth application belonged to Dr. Shailja Mishra of the Maithili Department.
 After severe abdominal pain, she had been admitted to the district hospital.
 A medical certificate and investigation slip accompanied the application.
 Shailja’s younger brother handed it over and said,
 “Didi said her salary must not stop. The tests may take several days.”
 Suchitra accepted the application.
 “I am receiving it. The Principal will sanction the leave.”
 “When?”
 She had no answer.
 Dinanath Babu said,
 “The old applications are inside the cupboard.”
 The register has to be opened before we can see how much leave remains available.

Without checking the register, we cannot send this to the Principal.”

Suchitra looked at the envelope.

“Then let us open it.”

Dinanath Babu immediately shook his head.

“Harimohan Babu has clearly written—do not open except in necessary circumstances.”

“Is an ill teacher not a necessary circumstance?”

“The phrase ‘necessary circumstance’ is not defined on paper.”

Everyone in the office found this answer reasonable.

When a matter was not defined, deciding it was considered risky.

For the first time, Suchitra made a small slip.

At the top she wrote:

“Leave application received; verification pending.”

But Dinanath Babu said that if “verification pending” was written, the application would count as pending.

And the pending total would increase in the monthly report.

The last inspection had already commented on the high number of pending files.

“Then what should I write?” Suchitra asked.

Dinanath Babu shrugged.

Jokingly, Suchitra said,

“Why don’t we give the application itself a few days’ leave?”

Ramprakash, who handled the fee register at the next desk, burst out laughing.

“Exactly! Leave for the leave application.”

Everyone laughed.

Suchitra did too.

Then she took a clean slip and wrote:

“Leave application temporarily on leave until return of the original verification officer.”

She clipped it to the top of Shailja’s application.

The sentence had begun as a joke.

But in an office, a written joke becomes less of a joke once it carries a date and a signature.

The next day Dinanath Babu saw the slip.

“Who told you to use this wording?”

“I wrote it.”

“With whose permission?”

“No one’s.”

Only so we can tell where the application stands.”

Dinanath Babu thought for a while.

“It does not say ‘sanctioned,’ does it?”

“No.”

“Then let it remain.”

By afternoon the same slip had been attached to the nine earlier applications too.

Three days later the Accounts Section asked about the status of Shailja's absence.

Suchitra replied:

"Leave application is temporarily on leave; medical records received."

Accounts wrote back:

"Is the employee's leave sanctioned or not?"

Suchitra wrote:

"Decision pending."

Accounts replied:

"If the decision is pending, under what category should the absence be recorded?"

Suchitra sat down to draft an answer.

After five minutes the paper was blank.

After ten minutes it was still blank.

Finally she wrote:

"During the temporary leave period of the leave application, the absence may provisionally be treated as under decision."

Dinanath Babu read it and frowned.

"This is too long."

Ramprakash suggested,

"Give it a short name—L.A.L."

"What?"

"Leave Application Leave."

This time no one laughed.

By the end of the week, "L.A.L." had already been written in three places in the office's small note book.

In the second week, the problem reversed itself.

Navalkishore Chaudhary, a lecturer in the History Department, wanted four days' leave.

There was a ceremony at his home, but the Head of Department was questioning the timing.

Navalkishore came to the office and asked,

"If I submit the application and it goes on temporary leave, will my absence remain under decision?"

Suchitra immediately understood that the joke was now climbing the second step towards becoming a rule.

"L.A.L. is not sanctioned leave," she said clearly.

Navalkishore replied,

"But it is not a decision either."

"Yes."

"So it is not rejected either."

"Yes."

"Then it is an intermediate state."

"For the paper, not for you."

Navalkishore smiled.

"How long can the two remain separate in an office?"

He submitted the application.

Within a week, talk of “leave for the leave application” had reached the staff room.

Some called it Suchitra’s clever device.

Some called it Dinanath Babu’s new rule.

Some called it the Principal’s silent order.

The Principal himself learned of the term only when a paper reached him headed:

“Status of seven cases under L.A.L.”

Raghuvansh Babu asked,

“What is this L.A.L.?”

Dinanath Babu explained in detail.

The Principal remained silent at first.

Then he asked,

“Has anyone’s salary stopped because of it?”

“Not yet.”

“Has anyone’s leave been treated as sanctioned?”

“No.”

“Rejected?”

“No.”

The Principal leaned back in his chair.

“Then let the arrangement continue as it is for now.

Harimohan will return and regularize it.”

Dinanath Babu immediately wrote a note:

“Current arrangement to continue as per the Hon’ble Principal’s oral instruction.”

That one line lengthened the life of L.A.L.

Originally it had existed only for applications that could not be verified because Harimohan was absent.

Now some Heads of Department began sending disputed applications directly marked L.A.L.

It suited them.

They bore neither the responsibility of sanctioning nor the unpleasantness of rejecting.

Suchitra objected.

“I did not create this.”

Dinanath Babu said,

“You did not create it. Circumstances did.”

“But the circumstances are on paper in my handwriting.”

“That is the ordinary nature of government work.”

In the third week the monthly report was prepared.

Suchitra was supposed to write 29 in the column for pending leave applications.

Dinanath Babu asked,

“Will L.A.L. be counted as pending?”

“No decision has been made, so yes.”

“But they are temporarily on leave.”
 Suchitra stared at him.
 Dinanath Babu continued,
 “If we write ‘pending’ in the report, inspection will ask why so many are pending.
 L.A.L. is a separate category.”
 Finally the report said:
 Pending: o.
 Applications temporarily on leave: 29.
 Two days later the Principal saw the report and looked pleased.
 “Pending zero? This is the first time.”
 Suchitra wanted to tell him that twenty-nine stood beside the zero.
 But by then the Principal had turned the page.
 Meanwhile Shailja’s illness became serious.
 She underwent surgery.
 A new certificate arrived from the hospital.
 Accounts again asked for her status because the mid-month salary preparation was about to begin.
 This time Suchitra did not write another slip.
 She went to Dinanath Babu’s desk.
 “We have to open the cupboard.”
 “Harimohan Babu may return in a week.”
 “Shailja Didi cannot wait a week.
 Her household runs on her salary.”
 Dinanath Babu picked up the envelope.
 Then put it down again.
 “What if something inside is disturbed?”
 “What if something is already being disturbed because we are not opening it?”
 This question too had no defined answer.
 Suchitra went directly to the Principal.
 Raghuvansh Babu first said,
 “Responsibility for papers on Harimohan’s desk is sensitive.”
 Suchitra placed Shailja’s medical certificate before him.
 “Human beings are sensitive too.”
 The Principal remained silent for a few moments.
 Then he called Dinanath Babu and gave written permission to open the envelope containing the duplicate key.
 When the cupboard opened, there was no mystery inside.
 Two registers.
 Bundles of old applications.
 An envelope of medical certificates.
 And a small notebook.
 On the first page of the notebook, in Harimohan’s handwriting, were the words:
 “Table for checking leave balance.”

Suchitra turned the pages.

Against each teacher's name were clearly written:

leave available at the beginning of the year;

leave taken;

leave remaining.

Shailja had sufficient medical leave remaining.

Dinanath Babu said softly,

"This could have been checked easily."

Suchitra looked at him.

"The key could also have been used easily."

On the inside of the cupboard, an old slip relating to the duplicate key was pasted:

"May be opened as required in the presence of the Head Clerk."

Dinanath Babu read it.

"Then where was the restriction?"

Suchitra held up the outside envelope.

"Do not open except in necessary circumstances."

The two sentences did not contradict each other.

The contradiction had been created by the office's fear.

Shailja's application reached the Principal that same day.

Her medical leave was sanctioned.

Accounts was informed.

Her salary was not stopped.

Suchitra thought L.A.L. would now disappear.

But by then the arrangement no longer depended only on Harimohan's cupboard.

Departments had already written L.A.L. on five new applications.

A new handwritten line titled "Applications Temporarily on Leave" had even been added to the monthly report format.

In the fourth week an inspector came from the district office.

He read the report.

"Pending zero. Good."

Then he read the next line.

"Applications Temporarily on Leave—thirty-four.

What is this?"

Dinanath Babu began explaining.

The inspector interrupted.

"Applications are on leave?"

For a few moments the room was silent.

Ramprakash's lips moved.

He did not laugh.

The inspector looked at three L.A.L. slips.

"What rule provides for this category?"

Dinanath Babu showed him the Principal's note:

"Current arrangement to continue."

The inspector asked,

“What was the original order?”

Suchitra showed her first white slip.

“This was not an order.

It was written only to indicate where the application stood.”

The inspector turned the slip over in his hand.

“Then whose decision created this arrangement?”

It was impossible to give a single name.

Suchitra’s joke.

Dinanath’s caution.

The Principal’s postponing remark.

The convenience of the Heads of Department.

The reporting column.

Together they had made a rule.

At last the inspector wrote:

“Unverified intermediate category shall be discontinued; time-bound decision on leave applications shall be ensured.”

Dinanath Babu breathed with relief.

“Now it is clear.”

But on the next line the inspector wrote:

“A separate list of existing cases shall be maintained for the transition period.”

Ramprakash whispered to Suchitra,

“L.A.L. has changed its name.”

Suchitra did not answer.

Six weeks later Harimohan Jha arrived at the office, walking with a stick.

Everyone asked about his health.

He sat at his desk and first looked at the cupboard.

Then the registers.

Then the separate list of thirty-four applications.

“What is this?”

Dinanath Babu told him the whole story.

Harimohan remained silent for a long time.

Then he looked at his own handwriting on the outside envelope:

“Do not open except in necessary circumstances.”

Slowly he said,

“I wrote that so people would not open the cupboard unnecessarily.

That was all.”

Suchitra said,

“We could not decide what ‘necessary’ meant.”

Harimohan rubbed his knee.

“My knee did not break.

But one word in the office certainly got twisted.”

He did not laugh.

Perhaps he could see his own share in the sentence.

Over the next two days Harimohan and Suchitra took out every application and checked them one by one.

Some were sanctioned.

Some teachers had withdrawn theirs.

Some had become meaningless because the leave period had already passed.

On Navalkishore Chaudhary's application, the Head of Department had written:

"Programme completed; is a decision still necessary?"

Beside it, Harimohan wrote in red pencil:

"Leave has already occurred; record decision required."

Suchitra read it and asked,

"This is not another new category, is it?"

For the first time Harimohan laughed.

"No.

This time we will write the whole sentence."

At the end of the month a new report was prepared.

Pending: 3.

Sanctioned: 26.

Rejected: 2.

Withdrawn: 3.

The line "Applications Temporarily on Leave" was struck out.

The Principal looked at the report.

"Pending is three again?"

Dinanath Babu said,

"Yes.

Because three really are pending."

Raghuvansh Babu looked slightly disappointed.

But he said nothing.

Suchitra's contract was due to end that week.

She had to go out for one day to attend an interview at another college.

She filled in her leave application and placed it on Harimohan's desk.

Harimohan read it.

Checked her remaining leave.

Entered it in the register.

And sent it to the Principal.

Two hours later the application came back sanctioned.

Suchitra looked at the paper carrying the official seal.

Ramprakash asked,

"Did the application get leave?"

Suchitra folded the paper and placed it in her bag.

"No.

This time I got the leave."

The following month the college office issued a short circular on leave procedure.

It stated that within three working days of receiving a leave application, either a decision must be recorded or the pending status must be entered with a clear reason.

The duplicate key could be used in the presence of the Head Clerk.

The final line of the circular said:

“Obsolete or unauthorized categories shall not be used.”

In parentheses it gave an example:

“For instance: Temporary Leave of a Leave Application.”

In other words, the category had been abolished.

But its name had now been permanently entered in the rules.

STORY 145

THE INVENTORY OF THE EMPTY DRAWER

That year a new kind of audit began in the municipal office.

Along with money, files, and buildings, the auditors were to count desks, chairs, cupboards, shelves, locks, keys, drawers, and even the objects inside drawers.

On the first day Auditor Shambhunath Jha told all the employees,

“Counting objects is easy.

The difficult part is proving that where there is nothing, there really is nothing.”

Nilambar, a junior assistant, smiled at the sentence.

He thought auditors were probably like that by nature—
they could see a question even in an empty space.

Three days later his smile had faded.

The municipal office’s old Map Room had now become an extra room of the Revenue Branch.

A faded nameplate nearly two decades old still hung on the wall:

“MAP SECTION.”

Inside stood four iron cupboards, one broad wooden desk, and two crooked chairs.

On the right side of the desk were three drawers.

The top drawer held broken seals, old thread, and a brass paperweight.

The middle drawer held copies of land records.

The bottom drawer was completely empty.

Shambhunath Babu wrote in the inventory:

“Drawer No. 3: item status?”

Nilambar said,

“Empty.”

“‘Empty’ is not an item status.”

“Then what is?”

“Since when has it been empty?”

Nilambar looked at the drawer.

The wood gave no answer.

Shambhunath Babu opened the old asset register.

He found the desk’s number:

Nagar/Ka/17.

Under it were three entries.

First drawer—

“Seals and auxiliary materials.”

Second—

“Land-record copies.”

Third—

“Map storage.”

Shambhunath Babu looked at Nilambar over his spectacles.

"The drawer is empty, but the register is full."

Nilambar said,

"The register is old."

"Then where did the maps go?"

"How would I know?"

"Before certifying the emptiness, show the disposal or transfer of the previous contents."

That single sentence created a new piece of work in the office.

The Stores Branch had an old form for "vacant item status."

It offered four options:

"Not in use."

"Transferred."

"Disposed."

"Reason unknown."

Nilambar thought of marking the first.

Dindayal stopped him.

"If you write 'not in use,' the drawer itself may be treated as unusable."

"Transferred?"

"Then write the current location of the material."

"Disposed?"

"Attach the disposal order."

"Reason unknown?"

Dindayal showed him the reverse side of the form.

"Under 'reason unknown,' a three-member inquiry committee will be formed."

Nilambar stopped his pen.

The office offered four choices.

Not one was easy.

In the end he left the form blank.

The first document meant to certify the drawer's emptiness remained empty itself.

Nilambar first went to Dindayal, the Stores Clerk.

Before opening any old papers, Dindayal asked,

"Which year?"

"The register says 'map storage' up to 1998."

Dindayal scratched his head.

"The 1998 transfer register is separate."

"Where?"

"The register recording that register's present location will tell us."

"Where is the current-location register?"

"In the old Records Room."

The key to the old Records Room was with Jagdish, the building attendant.

As he took out the key, Jagdish said,

"That room is not old anymore."

Last month the new tax slips were stored there.”

“Then where are the old records?”

“In the new store.”

“Where is the new store?”

Jagdish paused before answering.

“In the old meeting room.”

Rooms in the municipal office were known less by their names than by their former uses.

The new store was the old meeting room.

The old Records Room had become the new tax-slip room.

The Map Section had become an extra Revenue room.

Only the bottom drawer was empty—

though in the register it was still full of maps.

After two hours of searching, they found the transfer register for 1998.

Its cover had turned grey with dust.

On page 42, in red ink, it said:

“Maps temporarily removed due to roof repairs. See Temporary Materials List, K-7.”

With something like triumph, Nilambar placed the register before Shambhunath Babu.

Shambhunath Babu read it and said,

“Good. Now show me K-7.”

“Is this not sufficient proof?”

“This proves that the drawer was emptied.

It does not prove where the material went.”

Nilambar’s triumphant look began to fade.

The K-7 list was not found immediately.

One old index said that temporary materials in category “K” had been kept in Room No. 6.

But in the present building there was no Room No. 6.

After Room 5 came Room 7.

Harinarayan Babu, the oldest employee in the office, laughed when asked about it.

“There used to be a Room Six.

Behind the staircase.

Later its wall was broken and it was merged into Room Seven.”

“What is there now?”

“Pipes for the drinking-water tank and broken chairs.”

At the rear of Room 7, the old line of a half-demolished wall was indeed visible.

A shelf was moved.

Behind the pipes they found a rusted tin box.

But it contained no maps—

only old bills, labour slips from the roof repair, and one small scrap of paper.

On the scrap was written:

“The large sheets became wet.
 Spread them on the veranda to dry.
 Do not fold afterwards.
 They are mounted on cloth.”
 Nilambar read it.
 “The maps got wet.”
 Harinarayan Babu examined the handwriting.
 “This is Kailash Babu’s hand.
 He was in the Map Section then.”
 Kailash Babu had retired ten years earlier.
 He lived in another neighbourhood of the town.
 Shambhunath Babu said,
 “Personal memory is not audit evidence.
 But it can give us a direction.”
 That afternoon Nilambar and Jagdish went to Kailash Babu’s house.
 Kailash Babu was turning over sacks of makhana drying on the veranda.
 The moment he heard the name of the municipal office, the expression
 that often appears on a retired employee’s face came over him—
 half affection,
 half caution.
 “Maps?” he said slowly.
 “The year the roof leaked?”
 “Yes.”
 Kailash Babu remained silent for a while.
 “There were seventeen large sheets.
 Mounted on cloth.
 Two were badly soaked.
 We spread them on the veranda.
 After the roof was repaired, the maps were supposed to be returned to the
 Map Room.”
 “Were they returned?”
 “Not to the drawer.”
 “Then where?”
 Kailash Babu narrowed his eyes.
 “A new iron shelving unit had arrived around that time.
 A great deal of dust fell on its upper shelf.
 The maps could not be folded.
 So we rolled them with thick paper and placed them temporarily on top of
 the shelving.”
 “Which shelving?”
 Kailash Babu laughed, but there was embarrassment in it.
 “The one that was later turned into the old-paper store.”
 “Any identifying mark?”
 “There was brown wrapping outside.
 I meant to label it.
 That night my daughter fell ill.

The next day there was measurement work for the roof repair.

Then municipal election duty.

A week later other bundles had been piled on the shelf.

I kept thinking—

tomorrow I will write it down.”

“And tomorrow?”

Kailash Babu looked at the sacks of makhana.

“An office tomorrow can be very long, Babu.”

The next morning the old-paper store was opened.

It was a room in the rear part of the building where objects suspended between “fit for reuse” and “for disposal” had been waiting for one another’s decisions for years.

On the upper shelving lay old circulars, torn covers, empty bindings, and bundles of rolled papers.

Jagdish brought the bundles down one by one.

The first contained old printed tax forms.

The second, election notices.

The third, obsolete school charts.

The brown wrapper of the fourth bundle had almost become one with the dust.

On it, in faded pencil, only two syllables could be made out:

“Ma. Sha.”

Nilambar’s hand stopped.

The knot was opened.

Inside were land maps mounted on heavy cloth.

Some edges had browned, but the lines, plot numbers, old pond boundaries, public lanes, drains, and the town’s old land markers were still clear.

Sixteen of the seventeen maps were found.

In place of the seventeenth, the bundle contained a repair slip:

“Severely damaged; dried separately.”

Shambhunath Babu immediately raised the question of the seventeenth map.

In a tired voice Nilambar said,

“First let us certify that sixteen have survived.”

Shambhunath Babu did not reply.

He counted the maps.

Recorded their serial numbers.

Recorded their condition.

And added one line:

“Material previously presumed missing—recovered.”

News spread through the office that day.

Employees from the Revenue Branch came running.

The Municipal Engineer came.

Two lawyers heard about it.

By evening it had become clear that one of the recovered maps showed the old measurements of a public lane in Ward 9, whose boundary had been disputed for five years.

Another showed an old drainage outlet from a pond.

In the absence of that map, every meeting about monsoon drainage had been proceeding on estimates.

The next day an elderly woman, Janaki Devi, came with her son.

Three years earlier the municipal office had served her an encroachment notice over four cubits of land behind her house.

She had been told that the old map was unavailable, so the new measurement would be treated as final.

On the recovered map, the rear boundary lay elsewhere.

Nilambar did not try to explain the map to her.

He simply called a Revenue survey worker.

The survey worker compared the old markers with the present posts.

Janaki Devi sat silently on a chair.

Two hours later the survey worker said,

“The old measurement is correct.

The notice will go back for review.”

Janaki Devi stood.

She did not thank anyone.

She did not cry.

She made no speech.

As she left, she looked once towards the empty Map Room.

Nilambar thought—

inside the task of proving one drawer empty, a three-year-old notice was changing.

But the audit question was not yet over.

Shambhunath Babu returned to the original desk.

He pulled out the bottom drawer.

There was still nothing inside it.

“So what do we write as the item status now?” Nilambar asked.

“Empty.”

Nilambar laughed.

“Three days ago that answer was not acceptable.”

“Now there is proof.”

“What proof?”

Shambhunath Babu placed together the disposal slip, the transfer register, the reference to K-7, Kailash Babu’s written confirmation, the list of recovered maps, and the inspection notes.

“After this much paperwork, the drawer is officially empty.”

Nilambar looked at the drawer.

For the first time he understood that even being empty could be heavy work in an office.

But the difficulty did not end there.

After the maps were found, Stores Clerk Dindayal raised another question.

"If the maps were formerly the contents of this drawer, and they will now be kept in the Special Records Room, what will the classification of the drawer be?"

Do we remove 'Map Storage'?"

Shambhunath Babu said,

"Yes."

"What goes in its place?"

"Vacant."

"Permanently vacant or temporarily vacant?"

Nilambar held his head.

Dindayal was serious.

"If we write 'temporary,' something may be placed in it later.

If we write 'permanent,' the usefulness of the desk decreases.

That may affect asset valuation."

For the first time Shambhunath Babu remained silent for a while.

At last new wording was created:

"VACANT—FORMER CONTENTS RECOVERED AND SECURED SEPARATELY."

Nilambar asked,

"What does that classification mean?"

Shambhunath Babu said,

"It means there is nothing in it now, but its emptiness has a history."

A new inventory was printed.

Under desk Nagar/Ka/17, the third line had now grown long:

"Drawer No. 3: Vacant—former contents recovered and secured separately."

A small label was also pasted inside the drawer:

"CERTIFIED VACANT.

DO NOT PLACE MATERIAL WITHOUT STORES PERMISSION."

Two weeks later Nilambar noticed that the office was again running short of places to keep files.

He opened the empty drawer.

There was ample space inside.

He had five thick files in his hands.

Passing in front of him, Jagdish stopped.

"Will you keep them there?"

Nilambar read the label.

"Stores permission is required."

"Will you take permission?"

Nilambar closed the drawer.

"Not now."

A month passed.

Files accumulated on top of the desk.

Papers rose on top of another cupboard.

The empty drawer remained empty.

On the final day of the audit, Shambhunath Babu returned to the room.

He matched the inventory.
 Applied his seal.
 And opened the drawer to inspect it.
 There was nothing inside.
 Satisfaction appeared on his face.
 “Good,” he said.
 “Status unchanged.”

Nilambar looked into the empty interior of the drawer.
 Three weeks earlier, that very emptiness had been a question.
 Now it had become an achievement.

Across the room, the maps were secured in new covers for the Special Records Room.

Janaki Devi’s notice had gone for reconsideration.
 The Engineer had fixed a date to survey the pond’s old drainage outlet.
 And the desk’s third drawer—
 because of which all this had been found—
 was now so thoroughly certified as empty that no one in the office had the courage to use it.

STORY 146

THE FILE WITH THE YELLOW RIBBON

The District Treasury stood in the northern corner of the old court compound.

Its walls were thick, its windows high, and the air inside always carried the smell of paper, old cloth, and stamp ink.

The ribbons used to tie treasury files came in different colours.

Black.

Green.

Red.

Blue.

Yellow.

Ask what each colour meant and every employee would certainly answer.

But two employees rarely gave the same answer.

According to some, red ribbon was for returned files.

According to others, red was only for audit objections.

To some, green meant completed work.

To others, pensions.

No one could say with certainty when blue ribbon had entered the system.

But on the subject of yellow ribbon, everyone's voice became almost identical.

"A yellow-ribbon file is to be seen first."

"On whose order?" Madhav Jha, a newly appointed clerk, asked on his third day.

Raghuvir Babu, the senior clerk sitting beside him, pushed his spectacles onto his forehead.

"Order? It is an old practice."

"Where is it written?"

Without looking up from the file he was turning, Raghuvir Babu said,

"If every piece of work had to be written down, what would be the use of an attendant's experience?"

That experience belonged mainly to Bateshwar Mandal.

Bateshwar had served as an attendant in the treasury for more than three decades.

Officers changed.

Clerks changed.

Desks changed.

But Bateshwar's gait, his way of recognising the sound of the brass bell, and his memory for carrying a file to the proper desk had hardly changed.

He had no desk.

In one corner of the veranda stood a low wooden platform.

Beneath it were ribbons, string, old stamp pads, sealing wax, and two pairs of scissors.

A cloth bag containing yellow ribbon rested beside the platform's right leg.

During his first week, Madhav noticed that ordinary files moved in sequence.

But when a file tied with yellow ribbon travelled from desk to desk, people's eyes rose automatically.

No one said,

"Take this first."

Yet hands reached for it first.

One day two files arrived from the Pension Branch at exactly the same time.

One had black ribbon.

The other yellow.

Without reading either one, Raghuvir Babu opened the yellow-ribbon file first.

Madhav asked,

"Why this one first?"

Looking at the papers, Raghuvir Babu replied,

"Because it is yellow."

"But what is the subject?"

"We will read the subject afterwards."

The yellow file concerned assistance for the dependent family of a deceased teacher.

The papers were complete.

Approval had already been received.

Only treasury release remained.

Raghuvir Babu calculated it at once and sent it forward.

Madhav thought that seemed right.

Perhaps, he reflected, a practice could be unwritten and yet sometimes more humane than a written rule.

Two days later the first crack appeared in that belief.

A file from the Building Repairs Branch arrived tied with yellow ribbon.

The subject was payment for three broken curtain rods and two brass hooks in an old guest room.

The amount was not large.

The work itself was three months old.

The moment the clerk in the preparation room saw the file, he said,

"It is yellow. Send it first."

Madhav laughed.

"Are curtain rods an emergency too?"

"I do not look at the subject," the clerk said.

"I look at the colour."

That same day the file crossed three desks.

The money was released the next day.

Madhav became curious about how the curtain-rod file had acquired yellow ribbon.

He telephoned Chandramohan, a young employee in the Building Repairs Branch.

Chandramohan laughed first.

"How would I know?

There was no ribbon.

Yellow was lying in the drawer, so I tied it with that."

"You knew yellow meant special?"

"I learned that only after it reached your office."

"Then why did you not tell someone the colour was accidental?"

"Tell whom?

The moment the file left me, it started running."

The answer remained with Madhav.

The rule was moving so quickly that the cause of the rule's birth was being left behind.

That week an elderly woman came to the treasury for the fifth time.

Her name was Malti Devi.

Her husband had been a watchman in the Irrigation Department and had died in service a year earlier.

Dependent assistance had been sanctioned.

But because a copy of one certificate was unclear, the file kept circulating.

Malti Devi's file was tied with faded green ribbon.

She carried her papers in an old blue cloth bag.

The knot at the bag's mouth had been opened and tied so many times that the cloth had become smooth.

By now she remembered which corner of which certificate carried an officer's signature.

Which page had been called unclear.

And on which date the file had been on which desk.

The first time she came to the treasury, she believed approval meant the work was almost complete.

The second time she learned that there were many desks between approval and payment.

The third time she learned that an unclear copy had to be made again.

The fourth time she sat for two hours without asking anything.

On the fifth visit, there was less insistence in her voice than exhaustion.

Leaning towards the service window, she asked,

"Babu, is anything still missing today?"

Madhav examined the file.

Nothing was missing now.

The copy requested the previous week had been attached.

Even so, the file stood seventh in the queue.

He asked Raghuvir Babu,

"Why is this not yellow?"

Raghuvir Babu looked surprised.

"Do I tie the yellow ribbon?"

"Then who does?"

Both looked towards Bateshwar.

At that moment Bateshwar was returning from outside carrying a file.

He stopped when he heard the question.

“Yellow?” he said.

“It is tied on urgent work.”

“Who decides what is urgent?” Madhav asked.

A faint smile came over Bateshwar’s face.

“Whoever feels that delay should not happen.”

“You mean you?”

“What authority do I have?” Bateshwar said at once.

Madhav asked again,

“Then who?”

Bateshwar took Malti Devi’s file into his hand.

He turned the pages.

Said nothing.

He went towards his platform.

But he did not take out the yellow ribbon.

He returned the file to Madhav.

“The papers are complete,” he said.

That day Madhav placed Malti Devi’s file before his senior.

He wrote the reason:

“Dependent assistance; all papers complete; pending for a long period.”

The senior officer added a written remark and sent the file forward.

The file moved.

But now Madhav’s attention remained fixed on the ribbon.

He searched old office orders.

Nowhere did he find a clear list assigning meanings to file colours.

A materials register from 2007 recorded:

“Red ribbon—20 bundles; yellow—10; green—10.”

It gave no use.

A purchase voucher from 2012 listed five colours of ribbon.

A 2018 stores list did not even name the colours.

It said only:

“Cloth ribbon, assorted.”

Madhav said to Raghuvir Babu,

“Where did this special authority come from?”

Raghuvir Babu thought for a while.

“It existed when I joined.”

“From whom did you learn it?”

“From Bateshwar.”

“And whom did Bateshwar learn it from?”

Raghuvir Babu laughed.

“Ask Bateshwar that.

The history section is with him.”

Meanwhile yellow ribbon had moved ahead with a life of its own.

The young men in the copying room began saying that acknowledgements for yellow files should be kept separately.

Cash Branch employees placed them on the right side of the desk.

One assistant at the service window began telling citizens,
“If it has yellow ribbon, it moves quickly.”

The idea reached outside the office.

One day a young man who wandered about like a broker came to Bateshwar and whispered,

“Kaka, where can I get yellow ribbon?”

Bateshwar glared at him.

“In a cloth shop.”

The young man smiled.

“The file kind.”

Bateshwar slapped his palm against the platform.

“A file moves by its papers, not by its colour.”

“Then why does everyone look for yellow?”

Bateshwar did not answer.

It was not the first such request.

Sometimes a contractor’s man invited him for tea.

Sometimes an applicant showed him a file and said,

“Kaka, give this that colour.”

Bateshwar generally scolded them.

But not every request was alike.

Once the wife of an employee seeking reimbursement for maternity treatment was crying.

Bateshwar himself tied yellow ribbon around the file.

Once a headmaster pleaded over a school-building payment file.

Bateshwar did not.

There was no register of these selections.

No appeal.

No reason slip.

Only Bateshwar’s memory, experience, and humanity.

That was exactly what made Madhav most uncomfortable.

Bateshwar was not a bad man.

For that very reason, the unwritten authority in his hands was a harder question.

The problem became serious on the day the Audit Branch noticed that an ordinary file had passed through at unusual speed.

The subject was payment for four new locks installed on the treasury’s rear veranda and for making three keys.

The file entered on Monday.

Calculation on Tuesday.

Approval on Wednesday.

Payment released on Thursday.

The auditor asked,

“Why so quickly?”

Raghuvir Babu looked at the file.
 "It had yellow ribbon."
 "What rule governs yellow ribbon?"
 Silence spread across the room.
 For the first time, colour needed written language.
 Assistant Treasury Officer Aniruddh Mishra called a meeting.
 Five colours of ribbon were placed on the table.
 Yellow lay in the middle.
 "Please tell me," Aniruddh Babu said,
 "what is the legal meaning of this colour?"
 Raghuvir Babu said,
 "Urgent."
 The assistant from the copying room said,
 "Special order."
 The Cash Branch employee said,
 "To be seen first."
 The Stores Clerk said,
 "As far as I know, nothing."
 When we purchase ribbon, we buy whichever colour is cheaper."
 Every eye turned to Bateshwar.
 He remained silent for a long time.
 Then he lifted the yellow ribbon in his hand.
 It was old.
 Its edges were frayed.
 "Many years ago," he said slowly,
 "Thakur Sahib was Treasury Officer.
 He used to forget many files.
 Once a widow's assistance file remained buried on his desk for three days.
 He told me,
 'Bateshwar, when I say something must be seen today, tie yellow ribbon on
 it so it catches my eye.'"
 Aniruddh Babu asked,
 "Written order?"
 "No."
 "How long did that continue?"
 "As long as Thakur Sahib was here."
 "After that?"
 Bateshwar placed the ribbon back on the table.
 "After that, people began moving yellow files forward as soon as they saw
 them.
 I did not stop it."
 "You kept tying them?"
 "Sometimes.
 When it seemed to me someone had already made too many rounds."
 Aniruddh Babu lifted the Building Repairs file.
 "Did you tie this one too?"

“No.”

“Then?”

Madhav repeated what Chandramohan had told him.

Yellow ribbon had been lying in a drawer, so he had used it.

For a while Aniruddh Babu kept looking at the file.

“So a colour that once signalled compassion was used here by accident.

But the office interpreted the accident as an order.”

Raghuvir Babu said quietly,

“The payment itself was not improper.”

“Perhaps not the payment,” Aniruddh Babu said.

“But the priority may have been.”

“You were deciding which work was special?” he asked Bateshwar.

Bateshwar immediately replied,

“Not deciding.

Only drawing attention.”

“Where is the difference?”

Bateshwar took time before answering.

“Earlier there was a difference.

Later perhaps there was not.”

The room fell silent again.

Madhav remembered Malti Devi.

He also remembered the curtain rods in the guest room.

The same colour had become compassion, accident, convenience, and authority.

Before the meeting ended, Aniruddh Babu asked everyone one question.

“If the yellow ribbon is removed, how will urgent work be identified?”

No one had an immediate answer.

Raghuvir Babu said,

“By experience.”

Madhav said,

“By writing the reason.”

Bateshwar remained silent.

Then he said softly,

“Writing the reason will take time.

But if someone asks later, there will be an answer.”

Aniruddh Babu looked at him.

Perhaps for the first time in the meeting, an attendant’s sentence was finding a place in the line of decision.

Aniruddh Babu ordered the use of yellow ribbon suspended for four days.

The order stated:

“Priority shall not be determined by colour alone.

An urgent file shall carry a written slip stating the reason.”

The moment the order was issued, a strange difficulty began.

What should be done with the old files already tied in yellow?

Should the ribbons be removed?

If removed, the original form of the record would be altered.

If not removed, employees would continue looking at them first.
 A meeting was held.
 It was decided that old yellow ribbon would not be removed.
 Instead a white slip would be pasted on top:
 "Colour carries no special meaning."
 Then came the next question.
 On which files should the slip be attached?
 Only yellow ones?
 Or every colour?
 A second meeting was held.
 Meanwhile Malti Devi's payment was released.
 This time she did not have to make a sixth visit.
 Madhav walked her outside.
 Malti Devi asked,
 "Babu, did my file finally get yellow ribbon or not?"
 Madhav said,
 "No."
 She looked surprised.
 "Then how did the work get done?"
 "The papers were complete.
 And the reason was written."
 Malti Devi nodded.
 "That is fine.
 I would not have understood the colour anyway."
 When Madhav returned inside, he saw Bateshwar pulling the cloth bag of
 yellow ribbon from beneath his platform.
 "What will you do with it now?" Madhav asked.
 "Deposit it in Stores."
 "Will you not miss it?"
 Bateshwar smiled.
 "I was not attached to the ribbon.
 Sometimes I felt that where written rules caused delay, one colour could
 make a person's work move.
 That was all.
 Slowly, the colour itself became a rule."
 Madhav said,
 "Your compassion became authority."
 Bateshwar lowered his head.
 "And the responsibility for that authority was never written anywhere in
 my name."
 The bag was deposited in Stores.
 A receipt was prepared.
 The Stores Clerk asked,
 "Under what category should I place yellow ribbon?"
 Madhav said,
 "Ordinary stationery."

The Stores Clerk looked dissatisfied.

“This used to be a special item.”

“Not anymore.”

He wrote in the register:

“Yellow cloth ribbon—formerly special use, presently ordinary.”

A week later a new written procedure came into force in the treasury.

Any urgent file would carry a small slip stating the reason, date, and signature of the responsible officer.

Colour would serve only as an aid to identification.

On the first day, a medical reimbursement file arrived.

The papers showed that the patient was due to undergo expensive treatment the next day.

Out of old habit, the clerk looked towards Bateshwar’s platform.

The platform was empty.

Bateshwar was outside delivering papers at the service window.

Instead of searching for yellow ribbon, the clerk filled in the urgent slip.

He wrote the reason.

Obtained the officer’s signature.

And sent the file forward.

By the time Bateshwar returned, the file was gone.

He said nothing.

He only looked once at the empty space beneath the platform.

At the end of the month, copies of a new order were distributed to all employees.

Its title read:

“Instructions Regarding Separation of File-Colour Use and Urgent Priority.”

The order ran to three pages.

The young man in the copying room asked,

“These copies have to be sent to every branch.

Which ribbon should I tie around them?”

Without looking up, Raghuvir Babu said,

“Whatever is available.”

The young man went to Stores.

The red ribbon was exhausted.

The green consignment had not yet arrived.

Black was reserved for audit work.

The Stores Clerk checked the register.

Then he took out an old cloth bag.

On it was written:

“Yellow cloth ribbon—formerly special use, presently ordinary.”

The next day, the order abolishing the special authority of file colours reached every branch of the treasury.

Every copy was tied with yellow ribbon.

STORY 147

HALF A LETTER IN THE DESIGNATION

The sub-office of the District Agricultural Marketing Office operated from the rear part of an old dharamshala in the market.

In front ran a narrow road.

To the left stood three seed shops.

To the right was Kailash's tea stall.

Between them was an iron gate whose new coat of paint could not quite hide two streaks of rust.

After the rains ended, the building was whitewashed again.

At the same time, new nameplates were installed outside every room.

The lettering on the old wooden boards had faded, so the district office had ordered tin plates of identical size and colour.

Outside Umakant Mishra's room, beneath his name, his designation was written:

"JUNIOR AGRICULTURAL OFFICER (MARKETING)."

But the first letter of the word meaning "junior" had not been painted fully.

The left half of the black letter "A" was clear.

The right half broke off midway.

From two yards away, the "A" almost disappeared.

The board then appeared to read:

"SENIOR AGRICULTURAL OFFICER (MARKETING)."

Murari, the workman fixing the plate, looked up at it twice.

Then he drove in the nail with his hammer.

He was in a hurry.

The "Accounts Assistant" board still had to be fitted outside the next room.

Tilakdhari Babu was the first to notice the mistake.

He entered Umakant's room carrying a stack of files under his arm and said with a laugh,

"Congratulations. You have been promoted."

Umakant removed his spectacles.

"What?"

"From junior to senior.

I have never seen such progress accomplished with half a letter."

Both went outside.

Umakant looked at the plate.

He laughed.

Then he immediately called Murari.

"The paint has dried, Babu," Murari said.

"If I paint over it now, it will not match the other letters.

The plate will have to be taken down and carried back to the workshop."

"Then take it."

"I need an order."

"An order?"

Murari said matter-of-factly,

"It is government property.

I cannot remove it on my own."

Tilakdhari Babu suppressed a laugh.

"You see?

The post has risen.

The authority is exactly the same."

Umakant wrote on a small sheet:

"Correction required in lettering on nameplate."

The paper went to the Stores Branch.

Stores asked whether the old plate was to be repaired or replaced.

If repaired, under which budget head would the paint be charged?

If replaced, how was the existing plate to be disposed of?

The questions began circulating.

For three days the nameplate remained unchanged.

On the fourth morning, an elderly farmer stopped at the gate.

He read the board, dusted off his dhoti, and entered the room with both hands joined.

"Pranam, Senior Sahib."

Umakant looked up.

"I am the junior officer.

There is an error on the plate."

The old farmer looked once outside and once at Umakant.

"I do not understand letters, Sahib.

I understand weighing scales."

He opened his file.

At the local procurement centre, a consignment of makhana seed had been weighed, but the weight written on the receipt did not match the amount paid.

The matter did not fall entirely within Umakant's authority.

The procurement centre was run by a cooperative society.

A district-level examination would be required.

Umakant studied the papers.

He circled two figures in red pencil and wrote down the name of the proper branch for the farmer.

As he rose, the old man said,

"I thought the Senior Sahib sat here and the work would be done from this office."

The sentence was ordinary.

But it stayed in Umakant's ears all day.

That evening Tilakdhari Babu searched again for the paper requesting correction of the nameplate.

It had moved from Stores to Accounts because the record of the old batch of paint could not be found.

“Three branches to repair half a letter,” Tilakdhari said.

Umakant did not answer.

The following week, word about the nameplate escaped the office.

Someone posted in a local farmers’ mobile-phone group:

“The Senior Marketing Officer now sits in the sub-office.”

Someone asked:

“Has a new post been created?”

Someone replied:

“Seems so.”

No new post had been created by the district office.

But rumours have no register.

They need no entry.

Earlier, people used to walk straight into Umakant’s room.

Now they paused at the door and asked,

“May I come in?”

Even Kailash the tea seller began washing Umakant’s glass separately.

In meetings, the chair that had once stood near the window gradually moved towards the head of the table.

Umakant kept correcting people.

“Not senior.

Junior.”

But people’s ears heard “senior” more readily than the missing “A.”

The word “junior” was not new to him.

For seventeen years it had travelled beside his name on appointment letters, salary slips, transfer orders, and identity cards.

Villagers sometimes asked,

“What does ‘junior’ mean?”

Umakant would laugh.

“Not the officer above.

The officer below.”

The person asking usually understood at once that any large approval would have to be sought elsewhere.

Sometimes that was convenient.

Having less authority meant some heavy decisions did not stop on his desk.

But sometimes the shadow of the word became larger than the work itself.

He inspected fields.

Someone above signed the conclusion.

His report was read in meetings.

The questions were directed to the district officer.

Farmers told him their full problem and then asked,

“So where do we find the real Sahib?”

Umakant was used to all this.

He did not take the limits of his post as an insult.

But after half the first letter disappeared from the nameplate, he saw for the first time how quickly people's behaviour could change not with the depth of the work, but with the height of a word.

Kailash had earlier placed the tea glass on the corner of the desk and gone.

Now he entered and asked,

"A little sugar or the usual?"

One block employee who used to toss files in through the doorway now opened the file and placed the correct page in front of him.

Meeting notices that once arrived at the last minute began coming a day early.

None of these small changes had been ordered officially.

Even so, Umakant had to admit that they were not entirely unpleasant.

One day Kaushalya Devi arrived.

She was around fifty-five.

A faded blue aanchal covered her head.

A cloth bag hung from her hand.

Inside were three receipts for sesame procurement.

A private procurement centre had withheld her payment for eighteen days.

The reason written on the receipts was:

"Excess moisture."

But nowhere was the moisture percentage recorded.

Kaushalya spoke directly.

"I have gone to the district office twice.

The first time the Babu was not there.

The second time the file was not there.

In the village they said the Senior Officer sits here."

Umakant was about to say:

"I am not the Senior Officer."

He did say it.

But this time he added,

"Show me the papers."

The moment he examined the three receipts, something troubled him.

The weighings were on different dates.

But the words giving "moisture" as the reason were written in the same shade of ink and with the same pen.

On the third receipt, even the date had been written after the day of purchase.

Umakant telephoned the manager of the local centre.

At first the manager's voice was casual.

When Umakant gave his name, there was a brief silence on the other end.

Then the voice changed.

"Yes, Senior Sahib?"

Umakant opened his mouth to correct him again.

But Kaushalya's receipts lay before him.

"Bring the original records for all three receipts tomorrow at ten," he said.

"Yes, Sahib."

The call ended.

For a moment Umakant's hand remained on the receiver.

The next day the manager arrived before time.

He brought the centre's weighing register, moisture-testing slips, and payment details.

The examination showed that the moisture in Kaushalya's sesame was within the prescribed standard.

The note "Excess moisture" had been entered for the convenience of the Accounts Room, so that some payments could be postponed until the following week.

Umakant wrote an inspection note within the powers of his actual office and sent it to the district office.

He told the centre manager that if there was any lawful reason for withholding payment, it must be stated in writing.

Three days later Kaushalya received her money.

She returned to thank him.

This time she looked at the nameplate, smiled, and said,

"Whatever the letters say, my work was done here."

Umakant liked hearing that.

More than he had expected.

From that day, the way he corrected people changed.

Earlier, if someone said "Senior Sahib," he stopped them at once.

Now, sometimes, he merely smiled.

If a matter lay outside his authority, he did say clearly,

"This belongs at district level."

But he no longer repeated his full designation every time.

Tilakdhari Babu noticed the change.

One day he said softly,

"The A is only half there.

The respect is complete."

Without raising his head from the file, Umakant said,

"People come for work."

"People also come after reading the designation."

"The two do not remain entirely separate."

Tilakdhari said nothing.

Two weeks later the Block Traders' Association requested a meeting.

Earlier, the association would have gone to district headquarters.

Now five men came to Umakant's room.

At their head was the association secretary, carrying a proposal for a new market shed.

The estimated cost was large.

It could not be sanctioned on Umakant's signature.

Umakant said clearly,

"I can send a recommendation.

I cannot grant approval."

The secretary replied casually,

"If the recommendation is yours, who above will stop it?"

The sentence did not feel as pleasant as Kaushalya's:

"My work was done here."

Umakant read the proposal.

The shed had been planned over the old open platform where small farmers sat with their sacks without paying any fee.

The Traders' Association wanted an entry ticket introduced after the new shed was built.

"Remove this part," Umakant said.

"Why?"

"The open platform will remain free of charge."

The secretary fell silent for a moment.

His eyes went to the nameplate.

"If you wish, then—"

Umakant cut him off.

"What I wish will be written in the file.

Not on the nameplate."

The meeting ended.

That evening Umakant himself stood outside and looked at the board.

In the fading light, the broken "A" was even less visible.

"SENIOR AGRICULTURAL OFFICER" read clearly.

For the first time the board did not seem funny.

It seemed slightly uncomfortable.

He went to the Stores Branch.

The correction paper was searched out.

The register carried the entry:

"Quotation proposed for repair."

"Quotation from whom?" Umakant asked.

The Stores Clerk replied,

"Three suppliers are required."

"For half a letter?"

"The rules do not measure the size of a letter."

Umakant did not laugh.

He wrote:

"Urgent correction.

Members of the public are misunderstanding the nature of the post."

The Stores Clerk read the remark and asked,

"This has become like a complaint.

Then we need proof that confusion actually occurred."

"Proof?"

"Some application or letter addressed using the incorrect designation."

Four such letters were lying on Umakant's desk.

He hesitated.

If he submitted them as proof, it would also become clear how long the mistake had been known.

If he did not, the board would remain unchanged.

He had copies made of all four letters and attached them.

Meanwhile the rumour became firmer.

A meeting letter arrived from the Block Office inviting the “Senior Agricultural Officer (Marketing)” to an agricultural market coordination meeting.

Showing it to him, Tilakdhari Babu said,

“Now government paper believes it too.”

With a red pencil Umakant added an “A” before “Senior,” restoring “Junior,” and wrote beneath:

“Correct designation and record accordingly.”

At the meeting, he was given a chair in the front row.

His name card again said “Senior.”

The hall was full.

For a few moments Umakant stared at the card.

Then he turned it face down.

After the meeting, District Agricultural Marketing Officer Rashmi Sinha stopped him.

“When was your new post created?” she asked with a smile.

Umakant understood that the matter had reached upstairs.

“No new post.

Only a new nameplate.”

Rashmi laughed.

Then immediately asked,

“How long has it been like that?”

Umakant gave the date.

“Why was it not corrected?”

He told her about Stores, quotations, and proof.

He did not mention Kaushalya’s case.

Nor the Traders’ Association proposal.

But after a moment he added on his own,

“There was another reason.”

Rashmi waited.

“People had begun to listen.”

As he said it, Umakant’s own voice sounded unfamiliar to him.

Rashmi said nothing.

She turned the name card face up on the table.

Then she asked only,

“The work you did—

was it within your authority?”

“Everything I put in writing was.”

“And what did people think your post was?”

Umakant paused before answering.

“They thought I had more authority than I actually did.”

Rashmi wrote “JUNIOR” on the name card in red ink.

“Then there are two tasks.

Correct the board.

And create a clear process for the local complaints that can be handled from here.

Do not leave people dependent on half a letter.”

The meeting ended.

The following week a short order arrived from the district office.

Initial marketing-related complaints would be accepted at the sub-office.

Receipts would be issued.

If a matter required district-level action, the date of forwarding would be entered in a register.

Umakant’s name did not appear in the order.

At the same time, permission arrived to correct the nameplate.

Murari came again.

This time he carried a small tin of black paint and a thin brush.

He worked very carefully while completing the missing part of the old “A.”

After the fresh paint dried, the “A” looked slightly darker than the other letters.

Tilakdhari Babu stood outside.

“Now the A is so clear that even from five yards away it reads ‘Junior.’”

Umakant said,

“This time it is correct.”

Two days later Kaushalya came again.

This time a young man from her neighbourhood accompanied her.

There was an error on his maize-payment receipt.

Kaushalya read the nameplate in full.

“Junior Agricultural Officer,” she said slowly, as if learning a new expression.

Umakant gestured towards the chairs.

“Sit.”

Kaushalya sat.

The young man sat too.

After the greeting, no one discussed the designation.

Tilakdhari Babu brought in the new “Local Marketing Complaints Register.”

The first page carried a printed heading.

Below it, the responsible designation was written:

“JUNIOR AGRICULTURAL OFFICER (MARKETING).”

Umakant opened the register.

All the letters were of equal thickness.

No part was half missing.

Outside, Murari was putting away the old paint tin.

In the window glass the nameplate’s reflection appeared reversed.

There, “Junior” became some meaningless arrangement of letters again.

Umakant looked once at that reflection.

Then he began writing the first entry in the new complaints register.

STORY 148

THE CERTIFICATE'S BIRTHDAY

On the third floor of the District Records Building, old certificates were being entered into a digital archive.

The room contained four desks, three computers, two fans, and one iron cupboard.

Grey bundles of papers lay on top of the cupboard, each marked with a year:

1968.

1971.

1976.

1982.

Clerk Naresh Mishra's job was to read the old certificates and enter their details into the digital register.

There was a separate field for each item:

name,

village,

serial number,

issuing office,

subject.

The final field read:

"Date of issue: day-month-year."

The first week passed easily.

The newer certificates carried complete dates.

The trouble began after they opened the bundle from 1976.

On one certificate, in thick black ink, was written:

"Residence Rights Certificate, Serial No. 437, Year 1976."

Below it, the Circle Officer's signature and round seal were clear.

But nowhere was there a day or month.

Naresh left the day field blank and pressed Save.

The computer displayed in red:

"Date incomplete."

He left the month blank.

The same warning appeared.

Entering only 1976 would not save the record.

"Where am I supposed to get the date from?" Naresh asked Manorama Devi, who sat at the next desk.

Manorama turned the original paper over in her hands.

"How can we get it from somewhere if it is not written anywhere?"

Together they went to Assistant In-Charge Shyamkant Babu.

Shyamkant studied the certificate for a while.

"The system wants a complete date?"

"Yes."

“Then enter the middle day of the year.

First of July.

Neither early nor late.”

Naresh stopped.

“But what is the evidence that the certificate was issued on the first of July?”

Shyamkant smiled.

“The evidence is that the paper belongs to 1976.

The day is for the system, not for history.

Write in the remarks:

‘Day and month unavailable.’”

There was a small remarks field.

But that field did not appear on the citizen copy.

Naresh entered:

01-07-1976.

The record immediately displayed a green message:

“Saved.”

That day fourteen certificates were given birthdays in the same way.

The following week, thirteen certificates from 1971, twenty-one from 1968, and nine from 1982 all acquired the issue date 1 July.

A joke began in the room.

“Seven more birthdays today,” Manorama would say.

Naresh would reply,

“Where is the cake?”

Within a few months, the practice became a rule without ever becoming an order.

When a new employee joined, they were told:

“If the day and month are missing, use 1 July.”

No one asked who had first said it.

Shyamkant Babu had once said “the middle day.”

Later, in everyone’s memory, it became “the old instruction.”

Digitisation accelerated.

In the monthly report, the number of incomplete records began to appear as zero.

At a district-level meeting the room was praised for converting “old records with complete particulars.”

Naresh still felt a slight unease.

When a citizen copy was printed, the line:

“Issue date: 01-07-1976”

appeared clearly.

The remark did not.

But no citizen objected.

Most people took copies of certificates without having any reason to study the date.

Slowly, even Naresh began to see 1 July as fact.

Two years later, seventy-five-year-old Lakshman Mandal came to the room.

In his hand was an old plastic bag.

Inside it, wrapped in cloth, lay a yellowing sheet of paper.

His grandson Deepak was with him.

"This is the paper for my old house," Lakshman said.

"The canal is being widened and part of the land along the edge will be cut.

The compensation people told me to bring the digital copy."

Naresh examined the certificate.

Serial No. 437.

Year 1976.

The number seemed familiar.

But after so many thousands of papers, he did not trust his memory.

He searched the digital register.

The record opened:

Lakshman Mandal.

Residence Rights Certificate.

Issue date:

01-07-1976.

The copy was printed.

Lakshman folded the paper and placed it in his bag.

Within four days, the digital copy faced its first real test.

At the block's temporary compensation camp, Lakshman stood in line for three hours.

The assistant at the desk scanned the digital copy instead of examining the original certificate.

The moment 01-07-1976 appeared on the screen, he opened a printed list.

The cut-off date on it was:

30-06-1976.

"One day late," the assistant said.

Lakshman held out the original paper.

"Where is any day written on this?"

The assistant looked at the paper.

Then looked again at the date on the screen.

"The date exists in the district record.

I have to choose the category on the basis of that date."

Deepak said,

"The district record may contain the wrong date."

"Then have it corrected at the district office.

I cannot invent a date here."

Deepak remembered that sentence for a long time afterwards.

The assistant at the camp truly could not invent a date.

The district office already had.

That day Lakshman folded the corner of the original certificate a little more sharply than before.

At home Deepak opened the paper and flattened it.

Half the round seal now lay across the fold.

Only the words "Year 1976" were as clear as they had probably been forty years earlier.

Four days later they returned.

This time Lakshman walked faster.

His face looked tired.

"Where did this first of July come from?"

Naresh said,

"That is what the register shows."

Lakshman opened the original certificate.

"This has only 1976 on it."

Deepak interrupted.

"The canal-compensation rule says that residence certificates issued up to 30 June 1976 count as proof of earlier rights.

Because this has become 1 July, Dada falls one day outside the category."

The sound of the fan suddenly seemed louder in the room.

Naresh looked from the digital copy to the original paper and back again.

He remembered that first day.

Shyamkant Babu saying:

"Enter the middle day of the year."

He remembered the small remarks field too.

He opened the digital record and read the remark:

"Day and month unavailable."

"Why does this remark not appear on the citizen copy?" Deepak asked.

Naresh had no answer.

He went to Shyamkant Babu's room.

Shyamkant was now three months away from retirement.

Naresh told him everything.

Shyamkant removed his spectacles and placed them on the desk.

"I suggested first of July for convenience.

Not to take away someone's rights."

"But now the date is taking away a right."

"Then correct it."

"What date should I enter?"

Shyamkant fell silent.

To remove 1 July, another date was required.

The system would not accept an empty field.

The original document contained no day or month.

Inventing a second date would merely copy the first error.

Manorama suggested searching the old physical issue register.

The 1976 issue register was taken from the iron cupboard.

Its pages were crumbling at the edges.

Dates were legible up to Serial No. 432:

26 June.

The next two pages were blurred by water stains.

The name beside Serial No. 437 could still be read.
 But the date area had washed away.
 At Serial No. 441 the date became clear again:
 5 July.
 "So it could have been 4 July," Manorama said.
 "Or 28 June."
 Deepak said,
 "But it could also have been 1 July."
 Lakshman said nothing.
 He kept looking at the water stain on the page.
 Naresh's difficulty was that the truth was no longer merely unknown.
 The office had already filled the unknown space with a definite truth.
 The following day a letter arrived from the Canal Compensation Branch:
 "Since the issue date available in the digital record is 01-07-1976, the claim
 does not fall in the pre-cut-off category."
 The word "available" stung Naresh.
 The date had not been available.
 It had been manufactured.
 He searched out his old monthly conversion report.
 In the remarks for the first month, he found this line:
 "Where day and month were unavailable, 01-07 was entered as required by
 the system; original year unchanged."
 Below it were three signatures:
 Naresh.
 Manorama.
 Shyamkant.
 "So there is proof that the date was estimated," Manorama said.
 "There is proof," Naresh replied.
 "But the citizen copy carrying the wrong date has also become proof."
 A file was sent to the district office.
 It moved across three desks.
 The first remark said:
 "Authentic alternative date required for amendment of issue date in
 digital record."
 The second:
 "Alternative date unavailable."
 The third:
 "Existing date may be retained."
 Naresh stared at the file when it came back.
 The system was saying:
 to remove the false date, a true date was required.
 The true date was unavailable.
 Therefore the false date would remain permanently.
 That evening, after the room had closed, Naresh reopened the training
 manual for the digital register.
 Near the end was a page titled:

“SPECIAL RECORDS.”

No one used it.

It said:

“In historical documents with incomplete dates, source fidelity shall be preserved by recording the incompleteness through a separate remark/marker.”

But no such marker had ever been created in the present system.

At the district magistrate’s monthly review the following week, Naresh normally would not have spoken.

This time he carried with him Lakshman’s original certificate, the old issue register, and the first month’s conversion report.

“I do not need a corrected date,” he said.

“I need a place to write that the date is unknown.”

For a few moments the meeting was silent.

A technical assistant from the information unit said,

“If day and month are left blank, searching and calculation will be affected.”

Naresh replied,

“If we invent a day, a person is affected.”

At last a decision was made.

For old certificates containing only the year, a separate category would be created:

“Day-month unavailable.”

The exact same phrase would appear on the citizen copy.

Whenever a rule depended on a complete date, the decision would be made separately by examining the original document, serial-number register, and other evidence.

An invented date would not automatically become decisive.

The change did not happen in a day.

It took three weeks to modify the digital system.

Meanwhile Lakshman’s claim remained on hold.

The Canal Branch sent two reminders.

Deepak came to the room almost every third day.

Lakshman himself came only once.

He told Naresh,

“I want the decision about my land quickly.

But I cannot invent the birthday of a paper.”

Three weeks later the new copy was printed.

It said:

“Issue year: 1976.”

“Day-month: unavailable in original record.”

Below, in small type, appeared the source reference:

Serial No. 437 and the issue register.

The Canal Branch examined the old serial sequence, the entries between 26 June and 5 July, other residence-related tax receipts, and the field inspection.

Lakshman's claim was accepted in the prior-rights category.

No imaginary day appeared in the decision.

After this incident, the office began rechecking its old digital records.

It discovered that, across different years, a total of four hundred and twenty-three certificates were shown as having been "issued" on 1 July.

Looking at the list, Manorama said,

"So many people's papers were born on the same day."

This time no one laughed.

One by one, the citizen copies were corrected.

Where the actual date could be found, it was entered.

Where only month and year were available, only that much was retained.

Where only the year existed, only the year remained.

On the first day of the following July, Naresh opened the room in the morning.

Earlier, on that day, Manorama used to joke:

"Today is the certificates' birthday."

This time no such remark was made at the desks.

At noon, the envelope containing Lakshman Mandal's corrected copy was prepared for posting.

Naresh wrote the day's date on the envelope.

This date was real.

The envelope truly was being sent that day.

He paused.

Then, beneath the figures, he wrote in small letters:

"Date of dispatch."

The paper's own birthday was now left to the paper itself.

THE BELL'S AUTHORITY

In the old building of the Sub-Registry Office, there were two objects no one questioned.

One was the iron pillar leaning in the middle of the veranda.

The other was the brass bell on the desk of the Officer-in-Charge.

Whether the pillar was still bearing the building's weight or merely surviving through habit was a matter for engineers.

What rule governed the ringing of the bell was a matter for the people of the office.

Yet on this subject, the office staff were even more silent than engineers.

The bell was small.

On its round brass body, two or three patches of green had appeared amid the old polish.

A black knob stood on top.

Inside, a loosened spring plate.

Below, a thick brass base.

Whenever Officer-in-Charge Mahendranath Jha pressed the bell, everyone from the attendant in the veranda to the file examiner understood that an order had come from inside.

One ring, and one person rose.

Two rings, and usually two people.

Three rings, and everyone's pace quickened.

No one could say with certainty how many years the practice had existed.

The written rules mentioned the bell nowhere.

The office work-allocation register listed the duties of the attendant, clerks, copy clerks, writing assistants, and record keeper.

Nowhere did it say:

"Rise when the bell rings."

But the little brass sound was louder than anything written.

A junior clerk named Naveen Kumar worked in that office.

He was twenty-eight.

This was his fifth year in service.

He did not speak loudly.

He avoided arguments.

And he had the patience to read old remarks written on files.

People called him "Naveen Babu," but among the senior employees he was still "the new one."

On the upper floor of the building was the old records room.

Twice a day, bound registers and ledgers were moved from one room to another on a heavy iron trolley.

Some of the trolley's wheels were round.

Some had flattened with age.

As it rolled across the old upper floor, a faint vibration travelled down into the ceiling below.

The vibration spread through the pillar, walls, and wooden cupboards. Usually no one noticed it.

One day Mahendranath Jha had gone out for a district meeting. His desk was not in a locked chamber but in the ordinary office room. At about a quarter past twelve, the records trolley moved upstairs. The floor trembled.

The brass bell rang once.

Batuk, the attendant sitting in the veranda, sprang to his feet.

Two clerks stopped writing.

Mamta Kumari, seated at the copy window, half rose and then sat down again.

For five moments everyone looked at everyone else.

“Sahib is at the district office,” Mamta said.

Batuk slowly sat down.

“Then how did it ring?”

No one answered.

Naveen looked down towards the foot of the desk.

The bell’s top knob was still trembling slightly.

He said nothing.

The next day, around a quarter past twelve, the bell rang again.

This time Mahendranath was inside.

Batuk ran in.

“What is it?” Mahendranath asked over his spectacles.

“The bell rang, Sahib.”

“I did not ring it.”

Batuk’s face looked as though the very source of orders had deceived him.

On the third day Naveen watched the clock.

At 12:13, the trolley rattled upstairs.

Thirteen minutes later, the bell did not ring.

At 12:18, the trolley crossed the joint in the old floor.

The bell rang.

Naveen rose and placed a hand on its base.

The fine vibration was unmistakable.

He lifted the bell and examined it.

The green felt underneath had worn away.

On one side, the brass base touched the wood directly.

The top knob was so loose that a slight jolt made the small hammer inside strike the rim.

“Mystery solved,” he said to himself.

But in an office, the end of a mystery and the end of a habit are not the same thing.

During the following week the bell kept ringing by itself.

Sometimes because of the trolley above.

Sometimes because a heavy cupboard was moved.

Sometimes because the iron gate in the veranda slammed shut.
Gradually everyone understood the cause.
But old bodily habit remained.
At the sound of the ring, heads still rose.
“The bell lies,” Mamta said one day with a laugh.
Senior Clerk Ramchandra Mishra immediately corrected her.
“The bell does not lie.
The bell rings.
We add the meaning.”
The sentence stayed with Naveen.
On the last Tuesday of that month, the veranda was unusually crowded.
People had come from distant places.
Land partition.
Sale deeds.
Copies.
Corrections.
Certified records.
Every service window had a queue.
Clouds hung outside, and bus services were uncertain because of rain.
At noon an elderly woman arrived.
Her name was Sonwati Devi.
Her granddaughter Aarti was with her.
Sonwati carried an old cloth bag containing a bundle of papers.
Her husband had died.
Of her three sons, the youngest had remained at home to care for her.
By mistake, his name had been omitted from the new partition deed for the ancestral land.
The rest of the family agreed that he should be included.
The documents were ready.
But the file could not move without one necessary verification remark.
The employee authorised to make that remark had gone to another court building after lunch.
Aarti stood before Naveen’s desk.
“Babu, if it does not happen today, we may not be able to come again.
Dadi cannot walk properly.
Tomorrow we have to take her to Darbhanga for treatment of her eyes.”
Naveen examined the file.
There was no major dispute.
The concerned parties had given their consent.
The only obstacle was that an old reference paper had to be confirmed from the records room.
Senior Clerk Ramchandra Mishra had the authority to make that confirmation.
But because of the crowd he had already said:
“It will come in sequence.”
The sequence was long.

Sonwati sat with her back against the wall.
Her granddaughter kept fanning her with a sheet of paper.

12:57.

Naveen looked towards the staircase leading upstairs.

He knew that at one o'clock the records trolley would move old registers from the room on the right to the room on the left.

When it crossed the joint in the floor, the bell below often rang.

At 1:02, the rattling began upstairs.

Naveen picked up Sonwati's file.

At 1:03, the bell rang.

Heads rose across the veranda.

Batuk half ran.

Ramchandra Mishra too looked instinctively towards Mahendranath's room.

Mahendranath was speaking to someone on the telephone.

His hand was nowhere near the bell.

Naveen immediately went to Ramchandra Mishra's desk.

"Mishraji, this reference needs confirmation.

The records trolley is in that section just now.

The register can be brought down in two minutes."

Ramchandra looked at the bell.

Then at Naveen.

"Did Sahib ring?"

For one moment Naveen hesitated before answering.

He did not lie.

"The bell rang."

Mishraji took the file.

"All right. See to it."

Within ten minutes the old register arrived.

The reference matched.

The verification remark was written.

The file reached Mahendranath's desk.

He saw that the necessary checking had been done and signed it.

Before the afternoon ended, Sonwati's work was complete.

As they left, Aarti folded her hands to Naveen in thanks.

A small happiness rose inside him.

But beneath that happiness was something sharp.

He had not created an order.

He had only chosen the moment of the bell's false authority.

Yet if the bell had not rung, Sonwati's file might not have moved that day.

The following week he did it again.

This time the document concerned release of a labourer's land from mortgage.

The bell rang by itself.

Naveen carried the urgent file to the right desk.

The third time it was the case of a widowed school attendant.

Gradually Naveen learned the bell's timing.

He did not make it ring.

He merely used the moment of the ring.

His reasoning was simple.

If everyone in the office accepted the sound as an order without asking, how could it be wrong to draw a small benefit from that confusion for someone in genuine need?

But once confusion begins to produce benefits, its limits quickly become blurred.

One day a local deed writer named Harinarayan said to him in a low voice,

"Naveen Babu, tomorrow I have a client's file.

You know the bell's time, don't you?"

A shiver ran through Naveen.

"The bell is not under my control."

Harinarayan smiled.

"I know.

But you know the timing."

That day, for the first time, Naveen saw his own actions through someone else's eyes.

What seemed to him like a small act of compassion had begun to look, from outside, like privileged access.

The bell was a symbol of the officer's authority.

Its shadow had now reached Naveen's desk.

The next day when the bell rang on its own, Naveen did not pick up any file.

There was no urgent case like Sonwati's.

Even so, he felt a strange restlessness—

as though an opportunity had been wasted.

A few days later Mahendranath noticed that the bell had been ringing too often without his hand.

He told Batuk,

"Have this bell repaired."

Batuk took it to a watch repairer in the market.

The watchmaker returned it that evening.

He tightened the spring plate.

He pasted a new strip of white woollen felt beneath the base.

The next day the bell remained silent.

The trolley moved upstairs.

The floor shook.

The pillar trembled faintly.

The bell did not ring.

The office day felt oddly quiet.

Twice, without any reason, Batuk walked as far as the Officer-in-Charge's door.

Mamta laughed.

"Now wait for a real order."

Three days later Mahendranath pressed the bell.

The ring was clearer than before.

Everyone's head rose.

Batuk ran.

"This is better," Mahendranath said.

But the problem did not end there.

An inspection team arrived from the district office.

One inspector was examining waiting times, file movement, and the list of pending cases.

He noticed that several files had moved with unusual speed during the same weeks in which the bell had been ringing on its own.

"Who ordered priority for these files?" the inspector asked.

The room fell silent.

Ramchandra Mishra looked at Sonwati's file.

"There was an urgent circumstance."

"Written priority order?"

"No."

"Oral?"

Ramchandra looked towards the bell.

Naveen felt his chest grow heavy.

At last he said,

"I moved some files to the appropriate desk at moments when the bell had rung."

The inspector asked,

"Who rang the bell?"

"No one.

It was ringing because of vibration in the building."

At first the inspector did not understand.

Then Batuk, Mamta, and Ramchandra described what had happened.

For a moment, both amusement and anger crossed the inspector's face.

"So here the building was issuing orders?"

No one laughed.

"And you," he said to Naveen,

"were interpreting the building's orders?"

Naveen lowered his head.

"I moved urgent work forward.

I took no money.

I did it for no one's private benefit."

"That is a separate question.

The fundamental question is:

what was the source of your authority?"

The meeting lasted three hours after that.

The bell remained silent on the desk.

Everyone looked at it from time to time, as though it were the witness.

The inspection findings were peculiar.

No allegation of bribery or personal gain against Naveen was established.

The files that had moved quickly were genuinely urgent in nature.
But the issue of an “unauthorised priority signal” was raised.
At the same time, another question was raised:
why did the office have no written procedure for identifying urgent humanitarian circumstances?

The district office issued an order.

The bell would be used only to summon the attendant.

For file priority, a separate short “reason slip” would be used.

The employee would write the urgency on it.

The Officer-in-Charge would sign.

And a new register was opened:

“Bell Use Register.”

Time.

Purpose.

Name of the person who rang it.

On the first day, Mamta looked at the register and said,

“Will the bell now write its name before it rings?”

Ramchandra smiled.

“No.

It will ring first.

Its history will be written afterwards.”

A formal warning arrived in Naveen’s name.

Two lines.

“Do not assign unauthorised administrative meaning to customary signals.”

He read the warning and put it into the file.

He felt hurt.

He also felt relieved.

A few weeks later the rains came.

Water began leaking in one part of the records room upstairs.

The heavy trolley had to be moved again across the old floor joint.

Below, Naveen was writing on a file.

Suddenly the building trembled.

The repaired bell did not ring this time.

But three employees sitting in the veranda raised their heads together.

So did Naveen.

A moment later everyone returned to work.

Mahendranath came out of his room.

“Did something happen?”

“No, Sahib,” Batuk said.

“Old habit.”

Mahendranath looked at the bell.

Then at the new stack of “Urgent Reason Slips.”

“All right.”

He went back inside.

At the far end of the veranda, an elderly farmer was unable to understand how to fill in a reason slip.

Naveen rose and went to him.

This time no bell had rung.

STORY 150

THE FIFTH SPACE FOR FOUR STAMPS

A new batch of government assistance forms arrived at the Block Assistance Office on Tuesday.

The paper was thick.

The printing was good.

The outline of the state emblem at the top was clear.

At the bottom were five square boxes spaced evenly apart.

Above four of them, in small print, were written respectively:

“Panchayat.”

“Revenue.”

“Engineering.”

“Accounts.”

Above the fifth box there was nothing.

Clerk Bholanath Mishra was the first to open the forms.

He pushed his spectacles up his nose and counted the five boxes.

Then he opened the rulebook.

The rules required four approvals.

He counted the paper again.

Five.

He counted the rules.

Four.

“It is a printing error,” Junior Assistant Niranjan said.

Bholanath did not answer immediately.

In the audit the previous year, an inspector had once written in red ink on one of his files:

“Blank box left unfilled.”

Because of that single line, Bholanath had had to submit explanations three times.

Since that day, an empty square on paper no longer looked empty to him.

Each one looked like a small mouth waiting to ask later:

“Why did you leave me blank?”

He read the rule again.

It said:

“Four approvals mandatory.”

It did not say:

“Leave the fifth box blank.”

“It is not proper to leave it empty,” Bholanath said.

“Then what do we put there?”

“First we must find out what it is for.”

In this way the fifth box officially came into existence inside the office, although it still had no name.

By noon, the first application arrived.

Half of Urmila Devi's house had sunk during the previous year's flood.
 The Panchayat Secretary's stamp was there.
 The Revenue employee's stamp was there.
 The Junior Engineer's stamp was there.
 The Accounts verification stamp was there.
 The fifth box was white.

Bholanath turned the paper back and forth.

"One more stamp?"

Urmila Devi looked startled.

"Which one?"

Bholanath had no answer ready.

But when a visitor is standing in front of a desk, even silence in an office can feel like an order.

He placed a finger beneath the paper.

"This fifth place."

"Whose?"

Niranjan half rose from his chair and looked towards the rulebook.

Bholanath looked at him with an expression containing more question than help.

Niranjan said cautiously,

"Possibly final verification."

"Where?" Urmila Devi asked.

No one in the office knew.

But saying "We do not know" felt as unsafe as leaving the fifth box blank.

Bholanath said,

"Ask at the district office."

Urmila Devi did not fold the paper.

Carefully protecting all five boxes, she slipped it between the covers of an old file and left.

Three applications arrived the next day.

All had four stamps.

All had the fifth space blank.

Seven came on the third day.

By the end of the week ten files lay on the office desk in which the actual work was complete, but the fifth square had become the heaviest object in the file.

Employees began offering their own guesses.

The Panchayat Assistant thought the fifth stamp might be the bank's.

The Accounts Assistant said the bank would stamp after payment, not before.

Attendant Batuknath thought it might require the Block Development Officer's stamp.

The Officer said,

"If my stamp were required, my designation would be in the rules."

Everyone agreed.

But the fifth box remained empty that day too.

A week later Urmila Devi returned.

In the fifth space of her form was a "Received" stamp from the District Assistance Branch.

"This is not an approval," Bholanath said.

"They told me there is no branch for a fifth approval.

I told them this office would not accept the paper without a stamp.

So they put their receipt stamp on it."

Bholanath looked at the stamp.

Round.

Clear.

Blue.

The district office's name in the centre.

The paper now looked complete.

"Receipt and approval are different things," Niranjan said quietly.

Bholanath knew that.

But his eyes remained on the fifth box.

It was no longer blank.

"Keep the file," he said.

That day Urmila Devi's application moved forward.

Within two days, word spread that the fifth space required "the district stamp."

Crowds suddenly increased in the veranda of the District Assistance Branch.

At first the clerks there kept explaining that they had no authority to grant any fifth approval.

But when the crowd did not diminish, they began applying the receipt stamp merely in the hope that people would go away.

The receipt stamp gradually became an approval stamp.

Some applications carried the District Planning Branch stamp.

Some carried the Treasury stamp.

One even carried the stamp of the Public Information Room.

An elderly man obtained a stamp from a cooperative store near the bus stand because the word "District" was printed on it.

Outside the office, Munna, who ran a photocopy shop, hung a handwritten sheet from a bamboo pole:

"FIFTH STAMP—DISTRICT ASSISTANCE BRANCH."

No one had ordered him to write it.

Customers repeatedly asked for photocopies of that sheet as though it too were an official notice.

At first Munna explained that he had written it only for public convenience.

When the crowd grew, he added in smaller letters beneath:

"Ask at the Block Office first."

Twice, people travelled to the district, were told there was no fifth approval, returned, and then sat for hours in the Block Office veranda.

One young man said,

“If the branch does not exist, create it.
 At least people will save the bus fare.”
 Everyone laughed.
 The laughter was brief.
 Though it existed nowhere, the fifth office was consuming people’s time,
 money, and trust.
 Meanwhile a broker-like man began roaming the veranda.
 He would say,
 “I can get the fifth stamp put on in two days.”
 Bholanath drove him away.
 But that evening on the way home, he understood for the first time that
 the empty square no longer existed only on paper.
 Around it had grown trade, directions, bus journeys, and rumours.
 Bholanath rejected the stamp from the cooperative store.
 “Why?” the old man asked.
 “This is not a government approval.”
 “Whose is the fifth approval?”
 Bholanath fell silent.
 The old man asked again,
 “If no such office exists, on what basis is the wrong stamp wrong?”
 Bholanath did not like the question.
 It was a correct question.
 Correct questions in offices are often uncomfortable.
 Returning the file, he said,
 “Go to the District Assistance Branch.”
 “I went there yesterday.
 They said this stamp has no meaning.”
 “Then get that in writing.”
 The old man picked up his papers.
 The fifth box was still empty.
 The box stayed in Bholanath’s sight longer than the old man’s face did.
 Meanwhile Niranjana telephoned the printing office.
 The reply was:
 they did not have the original template.
 It had come from the District Stores Branch.
 The District Stores Branch said:
 the sample had been downloaded from the state portal.
 The copy on the portal had no fifth box.
 “Then where did this fifth box come from?” Niranjana asked.
 The Stores employee said,
 “Ask the printer.”
 The printing office said,
 “It was in the sample we received.”
 For the first time, the fifth box acquired a history of its own:
 everyone said it had come from somewhere else.
 One day the Block Development Officer called a meeting.

Five assistance forms were placed on the table.

One carried the District Assistance Branch stamp.

One the Treasury stamp.

One a bank stamp.

One the cooperative store stamp.

One was completely blank in the fifth box.

"The rules require four stamps," the Officer said.

"Once four stamps are present, treat the application as complete."

A slight fear rose in Bholanath's stomach.

"Sir, if inspection sees an empty box?"

"Write 'Not Applicable.'"

Everyone's face showed relief, as though the problem had been solved.

Niranjan took up a red pen and wrote in the fifth box:

"NOT APPLICABLE."

Bholanath stopped his hand.

"Who will write it?"

"I will."

"Under what authority?"

Silence spread through the room again.

The Officer frowned.

"Do we need authority to write 'Not Applicable'?"

Very politely, Bholanath said,

"If an inspector asks tomorrow who declared the fifth approval not applicable, we will need an answer."

The Officer leaned back in his chair.

He was not angry with Bholanath.

He knew Bholanath was driven less by love of rules than by the memory of punishment.

In an office, much rigidity is only an old layer of fear.

"All right," the Officer said.

"Prepare an order."

'Not Applicable' shall be written in the fifth box, and the office general stamp shall be affixed."

Niranjan drafted the order.

Bholanath read it.

Then asked,

"Who will affix the general stamp?"

"The attendant."

"The general stamp is in the Head Assistant's custody."

The Head Assistant said,

"I will not release it without a written presentation."

Thus, before writing "Not Applicable," a small presentation slip was created.

Niranjan signed the presentation slip.

The Head Assistant released the stamp.

The attendant supplied the ink.

Bholanath wrote "Not Applicable" in the fifth box.
 Then the general stamp was applied.
 Within three days, a new sentence began circulating inside the office:
 "Have you got the fifth stamp?"
 "This stamp is not an approval," Niranjan kept explaining.
 "Then what is it?" visitors asked.
 "This stamp says that the fifth stamp is not required."
 People nodded.
 On the paper five stamps could be seen.
 Four approvals.
 The fifth—
 a stamp rejecting the need for a fifth approval.
 Urmila Devi's payment had still not been released.
 Her first form carried the district "Received" stamp, not "Not Applicable."
 The Accounts Section returned the file:
 "Fifth box to be clarified as per new instructions."
 Urmila Devi came for the third time.
 "What do I need now?"
 Bholanath looked at the paper.
 He remembered that because of this fifth box the woman had already travelled to the district.
 Now because of the same box she was standing in the Block Office again.
 "The 'Not Applicable' stamp," the attendant said casually.
 Urmila Devi looked at him.
 "The thing that does not apply needs a stamp?"
 "Yes," the attendant said.
 "That is the rule now."
 Niranjan lowered his eyes.
 Bholanath took out a presentation slip.
 This time he filled it himself.
 He went to the Head Assistant's desk.
 Obtained the general stamp.
 Wrote "Not Applicable."
 Affixed the stamp.
 Then he placed Urmila Devi's file at the very top of the pile and carried it himself to Accounts.
 "Breaking the sequence?" the Accounts Assistant asked.
 "The sequence already broke because of the fifth box," Bholanath said.
 "Now look at the four real stamps."
 The Accounts Assistant examined the paper.
 The four real stamps had indeed been there from the first day.
 The fifth space was now filled by the office's own explanation.
 He accepted the file.
 A week later Urmila Devi's assistance was sanctioned.
 Meanwhile a circular arrived from the district.

An inquiry had found that an old form template had mistakenly been used for printing.

The fifth box was a remnant of a discontinued scheme in which approvals from five offices had been required.

It had no meaning in the present scheme.

The instruction said:

the next batch would be printed with four boxes.

On the existing forms, strike through the fifth box and write “Not Applicable.”

Bholanath read the circular and remained silent for a long time.

Niranjan smiled.

“You see?

The fifth office never existed.”

Bholanath folded the paper.

“The office did not exist.

But people were travelling there.”

Niranjan’s smile stopped.

The next batch arrived two weeks later.

At the bottom there were only four boxes.

The fifth space was simply clean paper—

no square,

no line.

The first application reached Bholanath’s desk.

He counted the four stamps.

All correct.

He sent the paper forward.

The second application came.

All four correct.

He sent that one forward too.

With the third application, an elderly farmer leaned over and asked,

“Babu, where will the ‘Not Applicable’ stamp go?”

Bholanath looked at the bottom of the paper.

There was no fifth box.

“It will not be needed now,” he said.

The old man did not look reassured.

“Certain?”

Bholanath paused.

Then he ran a finger over the four stamps.

“Certain.”

The old man left.

In the desk drawer, the small rubber stamp reading “Not Applicable” still remained.

The order authorising its use had ended.

But no order had arrived for destroying the stamp.

The Head Assistant had said an inventory would have to be prepared before disposal.

In the evening Niranjan came to place the office copy of the circular in the file.

Attached below it was the new four-box specimen.

Jokingly he asked,

“Shall I stamp ‘Not Applicable’ on this?”

At first Bholanath did not smile.

Then he smiled slowly.

“No,” he said.

“Not every empty space is meant to be filled.”

Niranjan closed the file.

Inside the drawer, the rubber stamp lay face down—
on the side from which its letters could not be read.

SERVICE WINDOW NUMBER NINE

After the eighth window in the Parcel Office, there was a wall.

After the wall, a drinking-water tap.

After the tap, an open veranda facing the railway tracks.

Dhanmanti looked at all three places.

Then she read the line printed at the bottom of her receipt:

“In case of difficulty, contact Service Window 9.”

She had ordered goods by rail for the first time.

A person visiting an office for the first time trusts the paper more than the wall.

Dhanmanti peered around the water tap.

There was a bucket.

No window.

“Where is Nine?”

The woman sweeping the floor stood her broom upright.

“After Eight?”

“That much I know too.”

Both women laughed.

Dhanmanti’s laughter ended quickly.

She had to catch another bus to return home.

In the village, the old warp had already been taken off the loom.

Somewhere inside this office lay the new parts she needed.

Window 3 handled weighing.

At Window 5, money was deposited.

At Window 7, papers for arriving goods were checked.

At Window 8, the release order for the goods was issued.

Dhanmanti had already gone twice between Seven and Eight.

At Seven she had been told:

“Two pieces have arrived.”

At Eight she had been told:

“The receipt says three.”

“The third one must have been left behind somewhere,” she said.

“Give me the two that are here.”

“How do we record partial receipt against a receipt for the full consignment?”

“Write ‘partial.’”

The employee behind the window looked at her as though she had used a very simple word for a very difficult act.

Then he placed a finger at the bottom of the receipt.

Following that finger, Dhanmanti had come as far as the water tap.

A small table stood in the veranda.

A piece of broken roof tile had been wedged beneath one of its legs.

Earlier it had held the weights for the scales.

After the new weighing machine arrived, the table had been moved outside.

Dhanmanti put her bag on it and flattened her receipt.

A young man came over.

He held a bicycle receipt.

"Is Nine here?"

"I am looking for it too."

He spread his paper beside hers.

Both carried the printed number Nine.

The young man's name was Rasik.

His bicycle had arrived.

But on the payment paper, the first two digits of the amount had been reversed.

The money had reached the office treasury.

It had not reached the bicycle.

After a while a trader carrying papers for four boxes of pickles came and stood there.

His goods were to be dispatched.

Dhanmanti made it clear that she was not an employee.

The trader said,

"I am not asking you to do my work.

Just let me put my papers down."

Three different difficulties lay open on the table.

Harinarayan, a clerk from inside, came out carrying his lunch box.

All three stopped him at once.

The moment he saw the receipts, he said,

"It is a printing error.

There is no Window Nine here."

"Then what is this line for?" Rasik asked.

"Leave it alone."

Rasik immediately folded one corner of his receipt over the printed Nine.

"Now?"

A smile appeared on Harinarayan's face.

He put his lunch box in the remaining space on the table and examined Rasik's paper.

On the payment slip from Window 5, 73 had been written instead of 37.

He went inside and called the employee from Window 5.

The man was counting money.

"Not now," he said.

Harinarayan came back and reached for his lunch box.

Dhanmanti did not catch his arm.

She merely placed a finger on the third item on her receipt.

"If I can get the two pieces that are here, our work at home can start."

"Whose work?"

"My husband's and mine.

We both work the loom.”

Harinarayan read the line on the receipt:

“Loom parts—three pieces.”

He did not remember the list of goods that had arrived.

He worked at Window 7.

But Window 7 did not give him enough time to remember everything.

“Call Bansal,” he said towards the doorway.

When Bansal came from the warehouse, his hands were dusty with wood.

He remembered shapes better than numbers.

Dhanmanti held out both hands to indicate the size.

“This long.

One had iron teeth.

The other was wooden.”

“Those are here,” Bansal said.

“There was also one thin bundle.

It did not say ‘loom’ on it.”

“What did it say?”

“Wood.”

“Does a loom contain no wood?”

Bansal looked not at Dhanmanti but at Harinarayan.

He might have laughed.

He did not.

It had rained on the night the goods were unloaded.

The outer label had become wet.

The surviving inner slip described the item as:

“Wooden frame.”

Bansal had had it placed in a separate pile.

Harinarayan said,

“We can settle it if the number matches.

Not by shape.”

He brought the unloading register from inside.

Bansal brought his small copy sheet.

The lunch box was pushed aside.

Dhanmanti placed her bag on the floor.

All three papers were opened together.

Dhanmanti’s receipt listed three pieces.

The unloading register showed two pieces under the same number.

On Bansal’s sheet, one line lower, it said:

“Wood—one.”

The ink had spread over the last two digits of its number.

“Just add that one,” Rasik said enthusiastically.

“Your own bicycle has two digits reversed,” Harinarayan said.

“So should we add somebody else’s wood to this?”

Rasik fell silent.

Dhanmanti too became quiet.

For the first time since entering the office, she realised that in her hurry to recover her goods, she too might claim something that belonged to someone else.

She asked to see the bundle.

Bansalal went inside alone.

It was not proper to take the crowd into the warehouse.

After a while he showed them, on his mobile phone, a photograph of the surviving part of the label.

The destination name and the clear part of the receipt number matched.

Harinarayan checked the sender's telephone number.

A copy of the original packing list came from the sender.

That list described all three parts separately.

The third bundle was Dhanmanti's.

But learning that fact did not place it immediately in her hands.

Harinarayan had to record the reason for correcting the register.

Bansalal had to reconcile the warehouse count.

Then the papers had to go again to Window 8.

This time Dhanmanti did not go to Window 8 alone.

Harinarayan went with her.

He completed his explanation from inside the window.

Dhanmanti listened from outside.

For the first time in that office, her consignment became three pieces in a single sentence.

By the time she returned, the employee from Window 5 had placed Rasik's paper on the table and was matching it against the payment register.

The trader was rewriting the address on his boxes.

He had received no special concession.

Rasik had merely pointed out that the recipient's village was missing from one box.

Dhanmanti left with the loom parts.

The loom did not run that day.

She missed the bus home.

By the time she reached the village on a cart, it was night.

At dawn the next morning, while fitting the iron-toothed part, she remembered the three papers spread open together on the veranda table.

The next day seven people were standing in the veranda.

Some had been sent to Nine.

Some had come after hearing about Nine.

Harinarayan was still seated at Window 7.

The table outside was empty.

But people stood around it.

A child wrote a 9 in chalk on the front of the table.

His father scolded him.

"Government property."

Then he looked at the Nine printed on his own receipt and fell silent.

At noon, Officer-in-Charge Nirmala Jha came outside.

She had received a complaint that a new service window had been opened in the veranda.

She walked around the table and looked at it.

“Who opened it?”

No one had an answer.

The table did not even have a drawer whose opening could be credited to someone.

Harinarayan said,

“People are matching their papers here.”

“Where does the employee sit?”

“Whoever is needed comes out.”

“So it has no window of its own?”

The question was difficult.

At Window 7, four people were waiting at that very moment.

One of them said loudly,

“My papers are correct, so I am standing there.

If there had been a mistake, I too would be sitting outside.”

Nirmala Jha heard him.

His complaint was reasonable.

She sent Harinarayan back inside.

Then she told the people in the veranda that no separate approval was given at this table.

No money was to be taken there.

Original documents were not to be kept there overnight.

Everyone must keep their own papers with them.

One man who had collected receipts from three people and was sitting there slowly returned all three.

He had not yet taken money from anyone.

But people had begun calling him:

“the Babu from Nine.”

He did not object to the title.

When Nirmala Jha went back inside, she called for the new batch of receipts.

The line mentioning Nine was indeed printed at the bottom.

The sample sent for printing had belonged to another, larger office.

The list of eight windows belonging to this office was correct at the top.

No one had read the help line at the bottom.

Her signature was on the approval.

She picked up a pen.

On the first receipt she struck out Nine.

Then on the second.

At the third, her hand stopped.

If Nine was crossed out, where were people supposed to go?

There was no place on the form to write the answer.

She closed the bundle.

For one week, half an hour after noon was set aside at the veranda table for document reconciliation.

Employees came out in rotation.

No new post was created.

Instead, half an hour was created between the old posts.

Three cases were resolved on the first day.

None on the second.

One man's trunk had been left at another station.

The veranda table could not pull it back.

Another man had lost his original receipt, and the available papers did not establish ownership clearly.

Angrily he said that Nine was just like the other windows.

Harinarayan could not contradict him.

On the third day Bansalal could not leave his work.

The people around the table waited.

One woman went home.

Her name did not appear in that day's queue because no one had even seen her papers.

At the end of the week Nirmala Jha asked for a report.

Harinarayan wrote:

Eight cases resolved.

Five remaining.

"And those who waited and went away without showing their papers?" Bansalal asked.

"They are not in the count."

Bansalal said nothing.

Harinarayan added a third line below eight and five:

"Count not maintained of persons who waited and returned."

There was no figure beside the line.

When Nirmala Jha read the report, she paused longest over that sentence.

Dhanmanti returned ten days later.

This time she had not come to collect goods.

The mechanic who had sent the new part needed the broken old piece returned so he could compare measurements.

Dhanmanti had written her name in three places on the bundle.

Beside the veranda table was a new nameplate:

"DOCUMENT RECONCILIATION ASSISTANCE."

There was no Nine on it.

An employee was trying to decide how to stand the board along the long edge of the table.

If placed there, papers could be handed forward easily.

But they would be difficult to open from both sides.

Dhanmanti put her bundle on the floor.

"Put it on this side," she said, indicating the short edge of the table.

"It will not be readable from a distance there," the employee said.

"People can come close and read it."

The employee placed the sign along the short edge.

Harinarayan came out carrying two registers.

He opened one towards himself.

He turned the other towards the visitor.

Dhanmanti asked where her bundle should be deposited.

He pointed her to Window 3.

This time her work was completed at Three.

On her way back, she did not stop at the table.

The chalk Nine was still on one of its legs.

Sweeping had erased its lower tail.

A young man was trying to move the broken roof-tile wedge beneath the leg because the table rocked when he wrote.

Dhanmanti bent down and pushed the piece farther in.

The young man began writing again.

STORY 152

THE TABLE BY THE GATE

On the first day of the camp, the table stood three cubits inside the gate.

On the second day, it was moved two cubits outward to escape the sun.

By the third day, no one had noticed that those two cubits—inside or outside—could change the status of a piece of paper.

The table belonged to the school.

In one corner, a student had once scratched his name with the point of a compass, and half the letters could still be read.

During the school holidays, a land-survey camp had been set up there.

Maps, measuring chains, files, and officers occupied the classrooms.

On the table by the gate lay stacks of white paper.

Jagesar was told to count them.

One hundred application forms.

Fifty receipt sheets.

Twenty thick envelopes.

He was the school watchman.

His real work was to lock the classrooms in the evening and open them in the morning.

While the camp lasted, he had also been told to remain there during the day.

The order did not say how much extra money he would receive.

He finished counting and placed the forms to one side.

He hung his lunch bag beneath the table.

Meanwhile a man placed a two-page application on the tabletop.

“Give it inside,” Jagesar said.

“I will. I’m just parking my bicycle.”

The man did not return.

He met a surveyor he knew and went with him towards the rear veranda.

Jagesar carried the application inside.

The clerk at the first desk said,

“There is an error in the name. Next desk.”

The employee at the next desk said,

“It is not a name error. It is matching an old name with a new one. Take it to the copying room.”

Jagesar reached that room.

The young man sitting there took the paper.

Jagesar had known him from the days when he was a student at the school.

Now he had a beard, and people called him a records assistant.

Jagesar called him by name.

“Sudhir, look at this.”

In the evening, the man came to thank him.

His work was not complete, but he had found the correct number of the old copy he needed.

Standing in front of the table, he told two other people,
“Give it here first. Jagesar Kakka understands.”

The next morning, five applications were lying on the table.

Jagesar was counting the stack of forms.

He put on his old reading glasses and read all five.

One concerned boundary measurement.

Two asked for copies.

One was for correction of a name.

And one began with the word “justice” in the first line, though below it the applicant merely asked for the date on which the survey team would come.

Jagesar understood at least this much:

merely writing “justice” did not mean the paper belonged at the desk that heard disputes.

Petition writers often made the first line of an application grand.

A person’s actual need was usually written below in smaller letters.

The third application belonged to Phulpatiya.

The northern ridge of her vegetable patch fell at the join between two map sheets.

On the copy hanging at the camp, one sheet was present.

The place where the second should have been was blank.

She had told the petition writer,

“Show me the boundary of my vegetable patch.”

He had written:

“For expeditious disposal of a boundary dispute.”

Jagesar read it and asked,

“Who is the dispute with?”

“No one yet.”

“Then why does it say dispute?”

“The writer said they would listen more quickly if it was written like that.”

Jagesar read the paper again.

He knew Phulpatiya’s vegetable patch.

When it rained, water from the school ground drained past that ridge.

But he did not know the ownership of the land or the exact boundary.

He told her only:

“First see the second sheet of the map.”

He carried the application to Sudhir.

Sudhir took out the map index.

The second sheet had never arrived from the district office.

A copy could be requested.

Phulpatiya was told to return after two days.

When she left, there was no stack of blank forms on the table anymore.

There were people’s papers.

She asked,

“Has mine been submitted?”

“It is with Sudhir,” Jagesar said.
 That was enough for her.
 She did not know where Sudhir sat.
 She could see where Jagesar sat.
 By the fourth day, a queue had formed in front of the table.
 The rooms inside were not empty, but the queue outside was more visible.
 Two employees joked that the camp headquarters had now moved to the gate.

Jagesar tried to hide the pride the joke gave him.
 Picking up an application, he said a little more loudly than necessary,
 “This one goes to Records.”
 He had begun to remember the names of the branches.
 He already knew the school’s rooms.
 The surveyor’s desk was the one with the chain in the bag.
 The copying desk was the one where the edges of the paper had yellowed.
 At the complaint desk, people stood for a long time.
 Jagesar routed papers by such signs.
 He did not alter anyone’s application.
 But he often added one sentence with his mouth.
 “This woman only wants to see the map.”
 “This man’s father’s and grandfather’s names have been reversed.”
 “The paper in this child’s hand was sent by his mother; the child is not the owner of the land.”

It saved time for the people inside.
 It also saved embarrassment for the people outside.
 Along with the work, a small authority of his own began to grow.
 When his neighbour Ramudit came, Jagesar placed his paper on top of the stack.

He saw Ramudit every day.
 Ramudit had to go for wage work that day.
 An unfamiliar woman standing behind him had also left her wage work to come.

She said nothing.
 Jagesar saw her.
 Then looked away.
 At noon, his lunch still hung untouched beneath the table.
 By the time he opened the bag, the rice had gone cold.
 In his mind he counted all the running about he had done that day.
 Placing Ramudit’s paper on top was not included in that count.
 On the sixth day, Phulpatiya returned.
 Sudhir was not there.
 He had been sent to the district office.
 The new employee sitting at his desk searched for the application and then asked,

“Receipt number?”
 “Jagesar Kakka took it.”

“Receipt?”

“He said it was with Sudhir.”

The new employee was not irritated.

He genuinely wanted to find the paper.

There were three piles on the desk:

incoming post,

requests for copies,

and papers given for comparison.

Phulpatiya’s name was not in the receipt register.

Her application was found in the comparison pile.

It had no submission number on it.

“This was kept only for examination,” the employee said.

Phulpatiya picked up the paper.

“I did not give it for me to look at.

I gave it for you to look at.”

She was not explaining the semantic difference.

She was explaining the loss of two days’ wages.

The new employee understood that.

But he did not dare enter an earlier date into the register.

He sent her to the Head Clerk.

Meanwhile the final date for applications for boundary measurement was announced.

For the first time Phulpatiya became frightened.

Until that day she had believed her work was already moving.

Now she realised that her paper had moved, but no one could say where her case had actually begun.

Head Clerk Shailendra Babu came to the gate.

“Are you receiving applications?”

Jagesar said,

“I carry them inside.”

“People say they submit them to you.”

“I never used the word ‘submit.’”

Phulpatiya interrupted.

“I asked him.”

Jagesar looked at her.

He remembered her question that day.

He remembered his answer too.

“It is with Sudhir.”

The empty space in that sentence had been filled by Phulpatiya with trust.

Shailendra Babu counted the papers lying on the table.

There were twenty-three sheets.

Jagesar said,

“They belong to eight people.”

“Twenty-three received is written here,” the clerk said, showing the paper in his hand.

That morning someone inside had asked Jagesar how many papers were outside.

He had counted the sheets and answered:
twenty-three.

Inside, the figure had been entered in the column for “applications received.”

“You sent eight of the twenty-three inside?”

“Twenty-three sheets belong to eight people.”

“Then where are the remaining fifteen?”

Jagesar opened one application with five attached copies.

Shailendra Babu fell silent.

Phulpatiya held her two sheets with both hands as though she too might now be counted as more than one person.

That evening a meeting was called.

The subject was:

“Determination of duties of the temporary table near the gate.”

Jagesar was called as well.

The chair they gave him to sit on was one he locked away every evening.

It was the first time he had sat in it.

Camp In-Charge Anamika Chaudhary first asked whether the table stood inside or outside the official premises.

The line of the school gate was shown on the map.

Shailendra Babu said the table now stood outside the line.

Jagesar said he had moved it to avoid the sun.

“Move it back inside tomorrow,” one employee suggested.

“Will that give it authority to issue receipts?” Anamika asked.

The employee said,

“No.”

“Then two cubits will not solve the question.”

For a while the meeting discussed the table’s responsibility and Jagesar’s appointment.

Could a school watchman be entrusted with Revenue papers?

Could he read applications?

On whose order had all this happened?

Answers began to be searched for in different documents.

Jagesar kept both hands on his knees.

He felt that if he rattled his bunch of keys just then, everyone would recognise him again.

Anamika called for the eight applications.

She examined them one by one.

Two were merely requests for forms.

Three needed formal registration.

One belonged to another camp.

Two were for looking up records.

The desks to which Jagesar had carried them were mostly correct.

But there was no mark anywhere showing that they had arrived.

“Do you also return papers?” she asked.

“To whoever I am told to give them.”

“Who received them?”

Jagesar gave no answer.

He remembered faces.

The office required numbers instead of faces.

Shailendra Babu said no application should be taken at the gate.

Everyone should come directly inside.

Anamika looked out through the window.

There were already queues in front of three rooms.

Some of the village women outside understood their work by the name of their village.

Not by the name of a room.

After much discussion, no new post was created.

Instead, it was decided that for the first two hours each morning, the desk of the clerk who maintained the receipt register would be placed near the gate.

Jagesar would count the blank forms and tell people where to go.

Written applications would be received by the clerk.

The number of attached pages would be recorded separately on the receipt.

Even when a paper was taken merely for examination, responsibility for returning it would be written down.

At the end of the decision, one line said:

“Receipt by watchman prohibited.”

Jagesar read it and remained silent.

Beside that line Anamika added:

“Assistance in giving directions to continue as before.”

Reading the two sentences together, Jagesar understood that half his work had been recognised.

The other half—

work he had not even realised he was doing—

had been forbidden.

Phulpatiya’s application was formally registered with that day’s date.

When Sudhir returned, he wrote that the paper had earlier been given to him only for checking the records.

The deadline had not yet passed, so Phulpatiya did not need to write a new application.

But no one asked about the wages she had lost.

Three days later the second map sheet arrived.

When the two sheets were joined, it became clear that measurement was needed.

Phulpatiya’s neighbour was also called.

Jagesar knew him.

But this time he did not say where he thought the boundary ridge lay.

The survey team fixed a date.

Phulpatiya did not receive a decision about the land.

She received written notice of the date.

She placed it deep inside her bag.

Ramudit came again.

He held out his paper towards Jagesar.

“Stand in this line,” Jagesar said.

“Don’t you recognise me?”

“I do.”

Ramudit stood for a while.

Then went to the back of the queue.

Jagesar felt his answer had sounded harsh.

He gestured to Ramudit to move into the shade.

On the final evening of the camp, the table was to go back into the school room.

The clerk was packing up the register.

Jagesar was counting the unused forms.

Phulpatiya arrived carrying her measurement notice.

One digit of the date was not clear to her.

The clerk read it aloud.

She began to leave.

Then turned back towards Jagesar.

“Now this will stay with me?”

“Yes.”

She did not fold the paper.

From her bag she took out the thick card of an old wedding invitation and placed the notice inside it.

Jagesar saw that before anything else she was making sure the receipt number would not be covered.

When it was time to lock the gate, Jagesar took his lunch bag down from beneath the table.

That day he had eaten on time.

THE RED PENCIL'S PROMOTION

A red pencil appeared in Dinesh's supply box on Monday.

Paper, pins, and pencils were being distributed from Stores.

Ramsevak placed all three items down, put a finger on one place in the register, and Dinesh signed there.

By the time he noticed the colour of the pencil, Ramsevak had already moved on to the next desk.

In the Audit Branch, red pencils were usually kept in the drawers of senior officers.

Dinesh had never seen a written rule saying so.

But in twelve years he had certainly seen this much:

people searched one another's desks for an ordinary pencil.

For a red pencil, they first looked towards the chair.

If the chair was empty, the work stopped.

Dinesh went to Stores.

Ramsevak said the boxes had been mixed up.

Ordinary pencils would arrive on Wednesday.

He had no objection to taking the red pencil back.

But that would require an alteration in the receipt register.

He had already closed the register and wrapped it in cloth.

"Keep it for two days.

The point sharpens the same way."

Dinesh brought the pencil back.

His old pencil had become so short that when he held it, his thumb and forefinger seemed to quarrel with each other.

The first circle he drew with the new pencil was on a monthly expenditure statement.

At the top it said "Bhadra," but the first date in the accounts was the fifth and the last was the twenty-ninth.

Dinesh wanted the actual accounting period to be written along with the name of the month.

He had said this before.

The file would circulate and return.

His request written in the margin would remain in the margin.

That day, by one o'clock, a revised statement arrived with the period clearly written.

Harikant Babu placed it on his desk and said,

"From now on it will come like this."

Dinesh looked at the red circle.

He wanted to say that he had marked it only for comparison.

But the new statement was better than the old one.

The dates were clear.

Work that had previously made him rise from his chair three times had been completed while he remained seated.

He thanked Harikant and kept the paper.

On Tuesday his red circle fell around a page number.

Two pages in the middle had been bound in reverse order.

Within half an hour the entire file came back resewn.

Urmila, who brought it, said that “the people above” were now paying attention to page order.

“Who above said so?”

“There was a red mark, wasn’t there?”

Urmila did not remain standing.

She had another batch to prepare.

Dinesh lifted the pencil.

Then put it down.

The page order was now correct.

There was no point in making it wrong again.

Ordinary pencils arrived on Wednesday.

Ramsevak placed one on his desk.

He had forgotten to ask for the red pencil back.

Dinesh kept both in the box.

He did some addition and subtraction with the ordinary pencil.

In the statement of departmental advances, the heading of one section was unclear.

When he reached it, his hand moved towards the red pencil.

This time he knew how the circle would be read.

By evening the heading had been corrected and returned.

Harikant Babu called him for tea.

He kept saying that if small things were noticed on time by the people above, useless objections would not accumulate below.

Dinesh held the cup.

In Harikant Babu’s “above,” Dinesh himself was nowhere.

Yet in the shadow of that word, his own point was being heard.

The following week the account for rebinding old registers arrived.

The thick cardboard covers of twenty-four registers had been replaced.

Their loose spines had been restitched.

Cloth had been pasted over the corners.

The total payment was sixteen hundred and eighty rupees.

Half had been paid in advance for purchasing materials.

Half was due after completion.

In the summary statement, two separate dates carried entries of eight hundred and forty rupees each.

The recipient’s name was the same in both places:

Saraswati Bookbinder.

Dinesh circled both amounts.

The original bill was not attached.

His intention was simply to compare the two entries once the bill arrived.

He had begun writing "bill" in the margin when his mobile phone rang from home.

His father's medicine had run out.

Dinesh had brought the prescription in his bag.

He read the medicine's name over the phone.

By then Urmila had picked up the summary statement along with another paper.

He remembered it only when the branch was closing.

He thought:

I will ask for it tomorrow.

The red circle is not going anywhere.

The next day Harikant Babu had the rebinding file with him.

He had already asked the clerk who prepared the account why payment for the same work had been made twice.

The clerk said he would answer after seeing the bill.

That did not reassure Harikant Babu.

He sent for Saraswati.

The next batch of registers was held back for the time being.

Saraswati arrived in the afternoon.

In her bag were a measuring tape, three pieces of cloth, and a box of thick needles.

She thought she had been called to measure the width of the spines in the next batch.

Harikant Babu raised the matter of returning eight hundred and forty rupees.

No formal letter had yet been issued.

He thought that if the matter could be understood between them, there would be no need to place an objection on the file.

"I received sixteen hundred and eighty," Saraswati said.

"There are two payments of eight hundred and forty here."

"Yes.

I received it in two instalments."

Hearing this, Harikant Babu turned the summary statement towards her.

Both red circles were clearly visible.

Saraswati looked once at the figures.

Then at him.

In her arithmetic, two payments of eight hundred and forty made sixteen hundred and eighty.

In the tone of the person showing her the paper, receiving the money in two instalments itself seemed to be some additional fact.

At that moment Dinesh was taking a register out of the nearby cupboard.

His hand remained on the register's spine.

"Has the bill arrived?" he asked.

Harikant Babu said,

"That is why I called her.

There is a mark from above.

It should be cleared first.”

Dinesh could have said that the circle was his.

It would have taken one sentence.

But behind that single sentence stood last week's tea, the corrected heading, the file resewn at once.

He closed the cupboard and said he would check the payment papers.

Saraswati did not take the next batch with her that day.

She had told the cardboard supplier that once she received more office work, she would pay part of the old amount she owed.

As she was leaving through the gate, she asked Dinesh whether she should bring the bill from home tomorrow or the same day.

“Bring it tomorrow,” Dinesh said.

His own voice sounded unnecessarily casual to him.

He kept the file open until evening.

The first payment order said:

“Advance for materials.”

The second said:

“Final payment.”

But the calculation sheet that should have accompanied it was missing.

There was only a receipt for eight hundred and forty rupees.

Harikant Babu's suspicion now had one basis.

That basis was different from Dinesh's red circle.

But the circle had carried him from question to conclusion.

Dinesh came early the next morning.

In the margin of the old payment register he found the bill number.

Using that number, the original paper was found in another file.

The calculation sheet had been folded behind the bill:

Total: 1,680.

Previous advance: 840.

Balance: 840.

There was also a signature acknowledging completion of the work.

Dinesh flattened the paper.

A fine line of dust ran along the fold.

Instead of blowing on it, he wiped it with a cloth.

He was afraid of rubbing the ink away.

When Harikant Babu arrived, Dinesh gave him all three papers.

Harikant said,

“It is all right.

Write that reconciliation has been completed.

We will send it upward.”

“The circle was mine.”

Harikant Babu removed his spectacles.

Dinesh explained that he had intended only to call for the bill.

He had not concluded that the payment was duplicated.

He had failed to write the words.

Harikant Babu asked why he had not said so in front of Saraswati the previous day.

Dinesh kept smoothing the fold in the paper.

For the first time the act seemed pointless.

The fold would remain where it was.

"I should have said it yesterday," he said.

At noon the Senior Accounts Officer arrived.

The matter of the red pencil was raised before him.

He asked where the order was reserving that colour for senior officers.

No one produced such an order.

Ramsevak was called.

He opened the distribution register.

It said only:

"Pencil—one."

There was no column for colour.

"Then how will anyone know who wrote something on the paper?"

Urmila asked.

The Senior Officer said remarks should carry a name.

Many of his own old comments consisted only of ticks.

Urmila pushed one file lying in front of her towards him.

Beside his tick, he put a small signature.

No lengthy instruction was issued after that.

Saraswati returned with her bill.

One corner of it was stained with bookbinding paste.

Dinesh gave her a chair and told her about his mistake.

He said she did not have to return any money.

Saraswati placed the bill back in her bag.

She ought to have been pleased by the information.

But she had never received any extra money in the first place.

"Will I get the next batch today?"

Harikant Babu said the list would be ready.

"I will not be able to take it today.

I accepted another job this morning.

I will come the day after tomorrow."

She did not say this as a complaint.

She merely stated the calculation of her own time.

Dinesh wrote in the file that comparison of the original bill with the adjustment of the advance showed the total payment to be correct.

Then he added one more sentence:

the unexplained circle had been made by him.

He wrote his name and date and sent the paper forward.

Harikant Babu read it.

He did not ask him to remove the last sentence.

He merely added the word "red" before "circle," using ordinary ink.

The next day two statements arrived on Dinesh's desk.

In the first, the accounting period had again been omitted.

He picked up the red pencil.
He drew a circle.
And beside it he wrote the full point:
state clearly the dates from which and to which the account runs.
Below that, he wrote his name.
The paper did not return immediately.
Noon passed.
Tea time passed.
In the evening the revised statement arrived with the period written in.
Along with it was a short note from the clerk saying that the next
month's form would include a space for the period.
Dinesh read the note and placed the paper in the file.
The pencil point had become blunt.
He took out a blade to sharpen it.
Red shavings fell into the box among the shavings of ordinary pencils.
He rose to empty the box.
Just then Urmila arrived carrying a file.
"I have come to ask what this circle means."
Dinesh opened the file.
This time Urmila sat down.

STORY 154

THE PINK MARGIN LOST IN THE PHOTOCOPY

In the Establishment Branch of the District Handicrafts Promotion Office, colours had meanings of their own.

Red ink was for objections.

Green for the outer cover of approval letters.

Blue stamps for incoming correspondence.

And a pale pink strip of paper was placed along the margin of charge notifications.

The papers were coloured.

Most office photocopies were black and white.

No one paid particular attention to the difference.

In the final week of Jeth, the District Handicrafts Officer was transferred.

The new officer would take some time to assume charge, so Senior Assistant Raghav Chaudhary was given temporary charge.

The order was one page long.

Its main text, in black letters, said that Raghav Chaudhary would handle daily administration, expenditure within the sanctioned limit, training files, and marketing-related files.

Along the right margin ran a pink strip two fingers wide.

In small letters on it was written:

“Charge valid until 30 June 2026 or until the new officer assumes office, whichever is earlier.”

Establishment Assistant Meera Jha had three copies made.

The machine was old.

It had a button marked “Text Clear.”

Pressing it made pale colours almost disappear, but the letters came out darker.

Meera almost always used that setting because even faint carbon copies became easier to read.

The first copy came out.

The main order was clear.

The signature was clear.

The seal was clear.

The right margin was completely white.

Meera looked at the pink strip on the original.

Then at the photocopy.

It seemed the writing in the margin had not reproduced.

She placed the original in the machine again and tried a normal copy.

This time the main text came out lighter.

The pink lettering was still incomplete.

“Make a colour copy,” said Ashok, the Stores Assistant sitting beside her.

Meera thought of searching her phone for the number of a photocopy shop in the market.

Then she looked at the clock.

The order had to reach Accounts, the Training Branch, and the notice board at the entrance immediately.

Pointing by hand to the pink margin on the original, she wrote in pencil on the black-and-white copy:

“Period indicated in original.”

Then she distributed the three copies.

On the Accounts copy, her pencilled line vanished by the second week after further photocopying.

On the notice-board copy, a pin went through the sentence.

On the Training Branch copy, someone trimming papers to uniform size cut off the right margin while binding a file.

First the period disappeared into colour.

Then into procedure.

When Raghav Babu sat in the charge officer’s chair on the first day, the chair itself was not changed.

His old desk was shifted into the officer’s room.

He brought his pen, a calculator, a copy of his service book, and his hard spectacles case.

Attendant Gajendra asked,

“Will the nameplate be changed?”

Raghav Babu said,

“Why cut wood for thirty days?

Put up a paper.”

A white sheet was pasted on the door:

“Raghav Chaudhary, Officer-in-Charge.”

The word “temporary” appeared nowhere because in the main text of the order the designation was simply “Officer-in-Charge.”

The time limit was in the pink margin.

And no photocopy of that pink margin had reached the door.

The first week passed smoothly.

Raghav Babu was an old employee.

He knew where whose files got stuck.

Which training centre’s rent was pending.

Which group had changed its bank account.

He also knew the limits of his order.

On large expenditure files he wrote:

“Approval of new officer awaited.”

Smaller payments he allowed to proceed under the rules.

On the last Monday of June, three women from Sakri’s Sonjharia Sikki Group came to the office.

The group had made one hundred and twenty sikki boxes and forty wall decorations for a school exhibition.

The goods had been submitted on time.

The inspection report was clean.

But payment of seventy-nine thousand six hundred rupees had been pending for three weeks.

Group secretary Sunita Devi opened the file.

“We bought the raw material on credit.

The shopkeeper’s payment date is passing.

The government has taken the goods.

The money is still sitting in the papers.”

Raghav Babu called Accounts Assistant Bibhuti.

The calculation was checked.

The quantity matched.

The receipt matched.

There was one issue.

The inspection team had written:

“Uniformity of colour satisfactory.”

But in the sample list, the colour names of two items had been recorded in different words.

Bibhuti Babu said,

“During audit they will ask how ‘kusum’ and ‘yellow’ became the same colour.”

Sunita Devi took two small pieces of sikki from her bag.

“Look.

In our village we call this kusum.

The market people write yellow.

The thing itself is the same.”

Raghav Babu turned the pieces in his hand.

“The colour has not changed.

Only the word has changed.”

He wrote on the file:

“Physical sample comparison available; difference only in local colour terminology. No ground to withhold payment.”

The file moved forward.

Sunita Devi bowed and left.

That day Raghav Babu said for the first time,

“Whatever can lawfully be completed by 30 June should not be stopped.”

Bibhuti Babu heard the date and asked,

“What happens after that?”

Raghav Babu said,

“After that we will see the new order.”

30 June arrived.

The new officer had not.

No extension letter had come from district headquarters either.

In the morning Raghav Babu went to the Establishment Branch.

Meera Jha opened the file containing the original order.

The pink margin was clear.

“Today is the last day,” Meera said.

"I know."

"Anything from headquarters?"

"There has been an oral conversation.

They said to let the work continue.

The order will come."

Meera ran a finger over the original.

"What colour is an oral instruction?"

Raghav Babu smiled.

"When it comes in writing, black."

By the time the office closed that evening, nothing had arrived in writing.

Raghav Babu looked at the files on his desk.

Most were routine matters.

Two training honoraria.

One vehicle repair.

Payments to three groups.

Travel allowance for one exhibition.

On some files he wrote:

"Order awaited."

On others he merely added a remark and returned them to the branch.

On the morning of 1 July, attendant Gajendra opened the officer's room as usual.

Raghav Babu wanted to go to his old desk.

But that desk was still inside the officer's room.

The paper on the outer door still said:

"Raghav Chaudhary, Officer-in-Charge."

"Shall I take it down?" Gajendra asked.

Raghav Babu looked at the paper.

"The new order will come.

Leave it for now."

That small sentence began an office day whose written basis had already expired.

Employees continued carrying files into the same room.

Visitors continued reading the same name.

Black-and-white photocopies remained scattered through the branches, none showing a final date.

Only in the Establishment file did the pink margin remain alive.

At noon on 2 July, the Sonjharla Group file returned to Raghav Babu's desk.

The audit check was complete.

The payment order now required the Officer-in-Charge's signature.

Bibhuti Babu placed the file before him.

"If this is stopped, the group's money will be delayed for another week."

Raghav Babu looked at the date.

2 July.

He picked up his pen.

Then put it down.

“Anything from headquarters?” Bibhuti asked.

“Still nothing.”

“I have a copy of the charge order.

There is no period written on it.”

Raghav Babu looked at him.

“It is written on the original.”

Bibhuti Babu fell silent.

Then he said,

“In that case, do not sign.”

At that moment Sunita Devi was sitting outside in the veranda.

Group treasurer Parmeshwari Devi was with her.

Both had come on the morning bus.

Before leaving home, Sunita had told the shopkeeper that if the order was passed that day, his money would reach within three days.

Now that promise sat in her bag as heavily as a file.

Raghav Babu closed the file.

“I will not sign the final payment without a written extension.”

Bibhuti Babu breathed with relief.

But as soon as he saw Sunita Devi’s face outside, his eyes dropped.

Meera Jha had also reached there.

She said,

“There is one way.

We can seek special approval from the new officer or from headquarters.”

“How many days?” Sunita Devi asked.

Meera did not answer.

In government time, counting days was easy.

Answering for them was difficult.

On 3 July, an email arrived from headquarters:

“Until the new officer assumes charge, the senior-most officer shall attend to daily work; financial powers as per the previous order.”

The moment the sentence was read, the dispute began.

Did “daily work” include payment?

Did “as per the previous order” mean the earlier financial limit continued?

Or did it mean the earlier expiry date continued too?

The paper had arrived.

Now the paper itself began asking for another paper.

Raghav Babu said,

“This is not a clear extension.”

Bibhuti Babu said,

“But it is not a clear prohibition either.”

Meera said,

“If the lack of clarity is equal in both directions, why should the file remain trapped in the middle?”

Raghav Babu himself was the senior-most person in the office.

So the phrase “senior-most officer” circled back to him.

He had photocopies of the email made.

This time Meera suggested sending out to the market for colour copies.
Ashok laughed.

“The email itself is black and white.

What will colour copying do?”

Meera said,

“At least what has no colour will look the same to everyone.”

In the end, Raghav Babu did not issue a final order on the Sonjharia Group file.

He wrote instead:

“Work completed, receipt verified, payment admissible. Financial sanction by competent authority.”

The file was sent to headquarters.

Sunita Devi was told it might take two or three days.

On 6 July, the Assistant Director at headquarters telephoned.

“Raghavji, your charge was only until 30 June, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“The copy sent to us contains no date anywhere.”

Raghav Babu was silent for a few moments.

“The pink margin did not appear in the photocopy.”

From the other end came not laughter, but a long breath.

“Why is authority printed in colour?”

Raghav Babu said,

“Ask the person who drafted the order.

I am asking the same question now.”

Headquarters asked for a colour copy of the original order.

Meera went to the market.

The shopkeeper scanned the original page and printed a colour copy.

The pink margin now shone clearly.

The date 30 June was so unmistakable that looking at her old black-and-white copy made Meera feel almost ashamed.

The main text of the two sheets was identical word for word.

But in one, the authority was alive.

In the other, the end of that authority had disappeared.

That evening the Assistant Director issued written instructions:

from 1 July onward, Raghav Babu would handle only daily correspondence and essential administrative work.

Financial approval would be given by an officer nominated by headquarters.

The Sonjharia Group payment file was to be sent immediately to that officer.

The payment was sanctioned on 8 July.

The money reached the group’s account on 10 July.

Sunita Devi returned to the office.

This time she did not bring sweets.

She carried two small sikki boxes.

One for the office sample collection.

One to take back if it could not be accepted.

Raghav Babu said,

“I do not accept personal gifts.”

Sunita deposited the first box in the sample room.

She put the second back in her bag.

Then, in an ordinary tone, she asked,

“Was our payment held up because of a colour?”

Meera said,

“Not because of colour.

Because of the time limit.”

“The time limit was in colour?”

Meera did not laugh.

“That time, yes.”

Sunita looked at the copy with the pink strip on the right.

“Our group’s receipt has the amount written in black.

That is good.”

She left.

Meera could not decide whether the sentence had been a joke or experience.

The incident might have ended there.

But one question had taken hold of the Establishment Branch:

how many black-and-white photocopies had been distributed in the previous month in which coloured information had disappeared?

Meera began opening old files.

On the green edge of one training order was written:

“Women trainees only.”

On the black-and-white copy, it was faint.

On a blue strip of a vehicle pass:

“Night use prohibited.”

On an old copy, almost invisible.

On the yellow border of an invitation card was notice of a change of venue.

Ashok said,

“Then are we running an office of colours or an office of words?”

Meera replied,

“If we keep meaning inside colour, the photocopy will eat it.”

A new instruction arrived from headquarters:

“Where colour conveys statutory or administrative information, colour photocopying is mandatory.”

Below it, in black letters, was written:

“If colour reproduction is unavailable, the information shall be repeated in the main text.”

Meera liked the second line better than the first.

A separate register was opened for colour photocopies.

Anyone requiring a colour copy had to enter the page number, reason, and file number.

To save colour toner, the Stores Branch made a rule that only pages containing “important colour” would be copied in colour.

Then came the next question:

who would decide which colour was important?

For three days, employees kept offering different examples.

Raghav Babu returned to his old room.

The new officer assumed charge on 12 July.

On the first day, the new officer removed the paper reading “Raghav Chaudhary, Officer-in-Charge” from the door and handed it personally to Raghav Babu.

Instead of folding it and throwing it away, Raghav Babu placed it in his drawer.

“For memory?” Meera asked.

“No.

There is no period written on it.

I will keep looking at it.”

Both smiled faintly.

Joking was possible now because the Sonjharia Group had received its money and written authority was in new hands.

At the end of the month, the audit team arrived.

Meera did not hide the incident.

She placed together the original order, the black-and-white copy, the colour copy, the 3 July email, and the 8 July approval.

The auditor examined the papers.

“Did Raghavji issue any financial order on 2 July?”

“No.

He wrote an eligibility remark on one file.

He did not grant final approval.”

Raghav Babu himself said,

“I understood that the original period had expired.

I was orally told to keep the work moving.

But I did not sign the payment.”

The auditor lifted the black-and-white copy.

“Could anyone looking at this understand the time limit?”

Meera said,

“No.”

“Then the copy was incomplete.”

“Yes.”

The auditor lifted the colour copy.

“And the original order?”

“That too was drafted incompletely,” Meera said.

The auditor raised an eyebrow.

Meera added softly,

“The important condition should have been in the main text.

Not in the coloured margin.”

The auditor said nothing.

In the observation sheet he wrote:

“Duration condition obscured due to copying method; in future orders, important conditions shall be repeated in the main text.”

No separate objection was recorded against Raghav Babu’s conduct.

A few weeks later, a new charge order arrived.

The main text was black.

The duration was also black, in bold letters, at the end of the first paragraph.

A pink strip still ran along the right margin.

But it contained only one word:

“URGENT.”

Meera made a black-and-white photocopy.

“URGENT” disappeared.

The duration did not.

She showed the copy to Ashok.

Ashok said,

“Now it is right.

What disappeared can be allowed to disappear.”

Meera placed the copy in the file.

Immediately behind it lay the old black-and-white copy of Raghav Babu’s order.

Its right margin was perfectly clean and white.

There was no date anywhere.

The paper still said exactly what it had learned to say:

where colour does not reach, the end of authority cannot be seen either.

STORY 155

THE EMPTY DATE FIELD

That year, the old assembly hall of the Block Office had been turned into a flood-relief room.

A faded notice about marriage registration still hung on the wall.

Below it, a new sheet had been pasted:

“Application for Complete House Damage: Form 6-A.”

In the veranda, long bamboo platforms had replaced benches because the floor had remained under water until two weeks earlier.

People sat on the platforms drying their papers, waiting for their names to be called, and from time to time looking towards the river.

Junior Assistant Kumud Jha had been assigned the digital-entry work.

Before her stood an old computer larger than a mobile phone, a small printer, and two batches of papers.

The fields on the screen opened one after another:

Name.

Father or husband.

Village.

Family number.

Type of house.

Category of damage.

Bank account number.

And finally, a field enclosed by a red border:

“Exact Date of Damage.”

The word “exact” had troubled Kumud from the first day.

A name could be exact.

A bank account number could be exact.

But how could there be an exact date for a house taken by a river when the river first took the courtyard, then a wall, then the hearth, then the room?

The screen did not ask that question.

If she left the field blank, red text flashed:

“Date required.”

For the first two days, most people simply gave one date.

“Night of the fourteenth.”

“Morning of the fifteenth.”

“Afternoon of the sixteenth.”

Kumud kept entering them.

On the third day, Janaki Devi arrived.

She was close to seventy.

Her white hair clung to her head as if still wet.

In her hand was a blue cloth bag.

Her granddaughter Renu was with her, carrying all the documents in a transparent folder.

Kumud asked the name.

Renu opened the papers one by one and answered.

Village:

Kharihani Tola.

House:

mixed mud-and-brick.

Ownership:

Janaki Devi.

Family members:

three.

The site-inspection slip said:

“Complete damage.”

Kumud continued filling the screen.

Then came the final field.

“When did the damage occur?”

Janaki Devi looked at Kumud’s face.

“Which damage?”

“When did the house go?”

“When did the whole house go at once?”

Kumud stopped with her hands on the keyboard.

Janaki Devi said,

“The first night the vegetable plot behind the house was cut away.

The second night the wall of the kitchen fell.

The third night half the room where I slept went into the river.

By morning the roof had sagged down on its own.

You tell me—

when did the house go?”

Renu added softly,

“We had been sleeping on the neighbour’s veranda since the first night.”

Kumud looked again at the site-inspection slip.

The inspection date was 18 August.

The field for date of damage was blank.

“Which dates were those three nights?”

Renu said,

“10, 11, and 12 August.”

Below the form on Kumud’s screen, one line from the district notification glowed:

“Notified flood-damage period: 11 August 00:00 to 13 August 24:00.”

An event on 10 August was not eligible under Form 6-A.

Events on 11 and 12 August were.

Janaki Devi did not understand the significance of the line.

She only said,

“Write all three days.”

“It accepts only one.”

“Then leave it blank.”

“It will not accept a blank.”

Janaki Devi looked at the screen as though some stubborn employee were sitting inside it.

“Tell the machine the river took three nights.”

Kumud wanted to smile faintly.

She did not.

Twenty-five people were waiting on the bamboo platform behind her.

At the neighbouring table, Revenue employee Prabhakar Babu was examining papers.

Kumud called to him.

“In this case the damage occurred over three days.

Which date should I enter?”

Without raising his head, Prabhakar Babu said,

“The day the whole house went.”

Janaki Devi replied at once,

“It has not entirely gone even now.

One corner of brick is still standing.”

Prabhakar Babu looked up.

“The day it became unfit to live in.”

Renu said,

“We had been staying outside since the first night.”

“Then 10 August.”

Kumud said quietly,

“If I enter the tenth, the system shows it outside the notified period.”

Prabhakar Babu’s hand stopped.

He looked at the screen.

Then at Janaki Devi.

“When did the kitchen fall?”

“On the eleventh.”

“The main room?”

“On the twelfth.”

Prabhakar Babu thought for a few moments.

“Enter the twelfth.

Treat that as the day of complete damage.”

Janaki Devi asked,

“What does ‘treat’ mean?”

“For the paper.”

“And for the house?”

Prabhakar Babu picked up another file.

“The river knows about the house.”

Kumud entered:

12-08.

The red border turned green.

The screen moved on.

Janaki Devi’s application was accepted.

The printed receipt clearly said:

“Date of Damage: 12 August.”

Janaki Devi looked at the paper.

“The twelfth?”

Kumud said,

“Yes.

On the form.”

Janaki Devi put the paper in her bag.

Renu thanked her.

They left.

The next person sat down at Kumud’s desk.

Ramvriksh Yadav.

The rear part of his house had been cut away on the night of the thirteenth.

The main wall fell on the morning of the fourteenth.

He himself said,

“Write the thirteenth.”

Kumud asked,

“When did the complete damage occur?”

Ramvriksh replied,

“On the fourteenth.”

“Then the fourteenth?”

At once he said,

“No, no.

We had emptied the house from the night of the thirteenth.

Treat it as the thirteenth.”

Kumud looked at the district period.

The thirteenth was eligible.

The fourteenth was not.

“You just said the main wall fell on the fourteenth.”

Ramvriksh lowered his voice.

“Didi, did the river cut the house by looking at a clock?

Half before midnight, half after.

Which hour should I write?”

His question was no different from Janaki Devi’s.

But the stakes in the answer were different.

Kumud stopped the form.

“Show me the site-inspection slip.”

The Revenue employee had written:

“House unfit for habitation; family displaced from night of 13 August.”

Kumud entered 13 August.

The red border turned green.

Ramvriksh breathed in relief.

By noon that day, the “exact date” had become the hardest question in the room.

One person’s house had begun collapsing on the morning of 12 August, but he slept under a tree that night.

Another roof fell on the morning of the fourteenth, but the family had left the house on the evening of the thirteenth.

In another case, the first wall fell within the notified period and the second outside it.

Employees began creating informal definitions.

Some said:

“The day the roof went.”

Some:

“The day the hearth stopped.”

Some:

“The day the family slept elsewhere.”

The Stores Assistant joked,

“The day a man put the key to his own house in his pocket and slept on someone else’s veranda—that is the date of damage.”

Prabhakar Babu stopped him.

“Do not joke.

There will be an audit later.”

The joke stopped.

The definitions did not.

The next day Block Development Officer Archana Singh came to inspect the relief room.

She looked at the crowd, registers, bank numbers, and site-inspection papers.

Kumud raised the problem of the “exact date.”

Archana Singh first gave a simple answer.

“Enter the actual date.”

Kumud showed her Janaki Devi’s case.

“There is no single actual date.”

Archana Singh read the slip.

“Then the inspecting employee should write one.”

Prabhakar Babu said,

“Even during inspection we choose one day.

There is no rule telling us why that day should be chosen.”

Archana Singh sat down.

The screen with its red field was before her.

She clicked open the date field.

A calendar appeared:

choose one day.

There was no way to choose two days together.

No separate remarks field.

“Write to the district,” she said.

Kumud asked,

“Until then, should we stop the applications?”

The queue on the veranda had reached the wall.

Archana Singh looked outside.

“No.

Make an interim criterion.

In writing.”

A meeting was held that same evening.

The subject:

“Determination of Damage Date in Progressive River Erosion.”

The faded marriage-registration notice still hung on the assembly-hall wall.

Beneath it, employees were trying to decide the death date of a house.

Prabhakar Babu wrote three proposals:

First structural damage.

Displacement of the family.

Complete collapse.

The Accounts Assistant said,

“If we use first damage, many cases will fall outside the notified period.”

Archana Singh replied,

“We cannot define the rule by looking at eligibility.”

“If we use complete collapse, some houses are still incomplete even today,”

Kumud said.

“One piece of wall may remain standing, though no one can live there.”

Prabhakar Babu struck out the third line.

At last they wrote:

“In cases of progressive erosion, the date of damage shall be the date on which, according to site inspection, the dwelling first became unfit for habitation or the family left the house for safety, whichever occurred earlier.”

“Left permanently?” the Stores Assistant asked.

“If people return three days later to collect belongings?”

The wording was cut.

“Permanently” was removed.

It became:

“left for night residence.”

The Accounts Assistant asked,

“Why night?”

What if the house falls during the day?”

Again the wording was cut.

After five rounds of revision, the sentence became:

“The day on which the house became unsuitable for safe habitation and the family was compelled to stay elsewhere.”

Archana Singh signed it.

“If the district replies, we will change it.”

Kumud asked,

“What about the forms already entered?”

“If they match this criterion, leave them.

If not, correct them.”

Kumud reviewed sixty-four forms late into the evening.

In thirteen, the date appeared to require correction.

In five cases, changing the date would alter eligibility.

One of those five was Ramvriksh's.
 His site-inspection paper clearly said:
 "Family displaced from night of 13 August."
 The thirteenth remained unchanged.
 Another was Raghuni Sah's.
 His roof fell on the night of the thirteenth.
 But the family left the house on the morning of the fourteenth.
 The inspection remark said:
 "One room usable on night of 13 August."
 Under the new criterion:
 14 August.
 Outside the notified period.
 Kumud kept her hand on the file for a long time.
 Correcting the date would automatically mark Raghuni Sah's form
 "outside period."
 His relief would stop.
 Not correcting it would make Kumud herself the first person to violate the
 written criterion.
 Raghuni Sah was called the next morning.
 He was a thin man of about fifty-five.
 He did small tailoring work in a cloth shop.
 His sewing machine had also been damaged in the flood.
 Kumud asked,
 "Did you sleep in the house on the night of the thirteenth?"
 Raghuni Sah said,
 "I did not.
 I had sent my wife and children to my sister's house.
 I stayed behind to move the belongings."
 "Where did you sleep that night?"
 "On the dry part of the veranda.
 Until midnight.
 When the water rose, I went to the school."
 Prabhakar Babu asked,
 "Then was the house safe enough to live in?"
 Raghuni Sah remained silent for a moment.
 "Safe?"
 If it had been safe, why would I have sent the children away?"
 Kumud read the new criterion aloud:
 "The day on which the house became unsuitable for safe habitation and
 the family was compelled to stay elsewhere."
 Raghuni Sah said,
 "The family went elsewhere on the thirteenth.
 I was the fool who stayed to save things.
 Did my staying behind become proof that the house was safe?"
 No one in the room answered immediately.
 Prabhakar Babu said softly,

“The family did go elsewhere on the thirteenth.
On that basis the thirteenth can remain.”

Kumud asked,

“What if it had been a person living alone?”

Prabhakar Babu looked at the paper.

“Then the question would arise again.”

Raghuni Sah gathered his receipt.

“You people find the date.

I could not save the house.”

He stood up.

There was bitterness in the sentence.

His voice was tired.

The district’s reply came five days later.

The essential point in the two-page letter was one line:

“Entry of a single date on the digital platform is mandatory; on the basis of local inspection records, the competent authority shall determine an appropriate date.”

Kumud read the letter three times.

The word “appropriate” did not solve the problem.

It merely promoted it to a higher office.

Archana Singh read the letter.

“Our criterion will continue.”

Meanwhile, people in the relief room learned new ways of remembering dates.

Someone would say:

“It was a Monday.”

The staff checked a calendar.

Someone:

“The school closed that day.”

The school register was checked.

Someone:

“My eldest granddaughter had fever.”

A medicine slip was searched for.

Someone:

“The moon was half.”

At that, Prabhakar Babu said,

“Do not add the moon to the records.”

One elderly woman said,

“I do not remember the day, but that morning the mosque loudspeaker was silent.”

Another employee asked,

“Why?”

“Water had entered.”

To find the date, they telephoned the mosque caretaker.

He could not remember the date either.

He only said,

“The day the electricity transformer was shut down.”

The date was found from the electricity office register.

Gradually the relief room became less a place for examining house damage than a room for investigating dates.

On Kumud’s desk accumulated a small calendar, the school closure register, electricity-disconnection lists, boat-operation slips, and dates of medicine distribution from the health centre.

For an event in someone’s life to become a government date, it had to seek support from another document.

Kumud began to feel a certain satisfaction in this work.

Evidence was better than guesswork.

But she also understood that evidence was not equal for everyone.

A household with a mobile phone could produce the date from a photograph.

A family with a child in school could remember the day the school closed.

A person with no papers at all had only memory.

And memory could not be uploaded onto the digital platform.

Janaki Devi came again.

This time Renu was not with her.

She carried the same blue bag.

“My paper says the twelfth, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“People in the village say that if the tenth had been written, I would not have received the money.”

Kumud did not conceal the truth.

“The tenth was outside the notified period.”

Janaki Devi sat down.

“I had left the house from the night of the tenth.

Then did I get a lie written?”

Kumud said,

“The main room went on the twelfth.

The site inspection says complete damage.

I entered it on that basis.”

“But you had asked:

when did the house go?”

“The question on the form is not right.”

Janaki Devi seemed a little calmer after hearing this.

“If the question is wrong, does the answer become a lie?”

Kumud had the rule sheet before her.

She had no answer to that question.

From the blue bag, Janaki Devi took out an old calendar, water-stained and damp.

The page was August.

The corners of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth were grey with mud.

Later, Renu had written in red ink:

10 — “vegetable plot.”

11 — “hearth.”

12 — “room.”

“These are the three days of the house,” Janaki Devi said.

“Renu wrote them down.

Your paper has one day.

No harm.

If the money needs one day, let it have one day.

But my granddaughter will remember all three.”

Kumud kept looking at the calendar.

“Shall I place a photocopy of this in the file?”

Janaki Devi laughed.

“A paper with three days beside a field for one?”

“It will remain as a note in the file.”

“Keep it.”

Kumud had the calendar photocopied.

The three mud-grey dates did not reproduce clearly.

But Renu’s red writing appeared black.

She attached the copy to the file.

The digital platform still carried only one date:

12 August.

Two weeks later, the first batch of relief was approved.

Janaki Devi’s name was on the list.

So was Raghuni Sah’s.

Some families remained ineligible because their determined date fell outside the notified period.

They filed objections.

The first field on the objection form read:

“Disputed Date of Damage.”

Looking at the paper, Prabhakar Babu said,

“Now there is a separate form for the date problem.”

Kumud asked,

“Does this form have room to write a period?”

Prabhakar Babu turned the page.

“No.

One date here too.”

For a few moments both remained silent.

Outside, the river had receded far away.

A white strip of sand shone towards the villages as though no house had ever stood there.

At the end of the month, the relief room began to be dismantled.

The bamboo platforms were removed.

Registers were tied into bundles.

The computer was sent back to the regular office.

On the final day, Kumud was counting the pending files.

Janaki Devi’s file came into her hands.

On top:

“Date of Damage: 12 August.”

Inside:

the photocopy of Renu’s calendar—

10,

11,

12.

Kumud looked at the two papers together.

On one, the date was clear.

On the other, the event was clear.

She closed the file.

A few days later, Kumud met Janaki Devi in the market.

Janaki Devi was explaining to another woman how to fill the relief form.

The woman said,

“I do not remember exactly when the house went.”

Janaki Devi replied casually,

“Say the day the paper accepts.

My house went on 12 August.”

Kumud stood two steps away, listening.

She remembered the vegetable plot on the night of the tenth.

The hearth on the eleventh.

The room on the twelfth.

Janaki Devi adjusted her bag and moved into the market crowd.

Kumud felt an impulse to stop her and remind her of all three days from the calendar.

Then she stopped herself.

The government date had finished its official work.

Now it was being entered not only into the form—

but into memory as well.

STORY 156

PROOF OF A FIVE-MINUTE DELAY

The most securely guarded object in the District Archives was not an old land register, a map, or a seal.

At night, it was a small brass key.

The key belonged to the records room.

At five in the evening the room was locked.

The archivist placed the key in a cloth pouch, tied the mouth of the pouch with thread, sealed it in red wax, and handed it to the guard at the gate.

In the morning, the guard returned the same sealed pouch to the archivist.

Both times, the time and signatures were entered in a register.

The arrangement had continued for thirty years.

The pouch was small.

The rule was large.

Archivist Nandkishore Jha treated the ritual with great seriousness.

To him, examining the seal before opening the pouch, touching the thread, counting the knots, and writing the time in the register were no less important than unlocking the records room itself.

"If the key remains secure, the papers remain secure," he told new employees.

Night guard Harinarayan Paswan at the gate observed the rule too.

Four separate piles of registers lay on his desk:

the vehicle register,

the visitor register,

the night-patrol register,

and the key register.

When the wind blew, he placed a piece of brick over all their pages at once.

The problem turned out not to be the key.

It was time.

A financial audit team was examining the registers one Tuesday.

Auditor Kamlesh Singh moved line by line with a blue pencil.

Date.

Signature.

Seal.

Time.

On one page his pencil stopped.

"How is this possible?"

Nandkishore bent over the register.

Against the previous Thursday evening it said:

"Key pouch handed over by archivist: 17:03."

Immediately beside it, beneath Harinarayan's signature, it said:

"Received: 16:58."

The auditor placed a finger on the entries.

"The guard received the key five minutes earlier, and the archivist handed it over five minutes later?"

Nandkishore tried to laugh.

"The clocks must differ."

Kamlesh Singh did not laugh.

"The register records time, not clocks."

Harinarayan was called from the gate.

He looked at the page.

"I wrote the time shown by the gate clock."

Nandkishore said,

"I used the main clock inside."

"Were the two different?"

"They often are."

"By how much?"

No one knew exactly.

The auditor wrote:

"Five-minute inconsistency in key-custody chain; handover time recorded later than receipt time."

Nandkishore immediately said,

"But the pouch was never without someone's hand even for a moment.

I gave it.

Harinarayan took it."

Kamlesh Singh replied calmly,

"That is what you say.

The register says something else."

Five minutes that had never existed in reality had now been born on paper.

A file went to the Accounts Branch.

Its title read:

"Time Discrepancy in Custody of Records-Room Key."

An explanation was sought from Nandkishore.

And from Harinarayan.

Nandkishore wrote:

"The apparent difference arises because the main building clock runs approximately five minutes ahead of the gate clock; the key was directly handed from hand to hand."

Harinarayan wrote in his explanation:

"Pouch with seal intact received at 16:58 as per gate clock; archivist was present before me."

The Accounts Branch read both replies together.

The officer asked,

"Approximately five minutes?

Proof?"

Nandkishore said,

"The clocks are still there."

"How do the clocks now prove what the difference was last Thursday?"

It was a fair question.

The clocks were witnesses.

But the date had changed.

Madhusudan, the electrical assistant from the Establishment Branch, was called.

He checked the main clock.

10:14.

The gate clock:

10:09.

His own mobile phone:

10:11.

Kamlesh Singh said,

“Now we have three times.”

Madhusudan said matter-of-factly,

“The main clock runs a little fast.

The gate clock runs slow.”

“How much is ‘a little’?”

“It changes from day to day.”

The auditor put down his blue pencil.

“Time changes from day to day?”

Madhusudan understood the clocks.

Not the sentence.

“The batteries are old.”

The first solution seemed simple.

Synchronise the two clocks.

Madhusudan brought a ladder.

The main clock was moved three minutes back.

The gate clock two minutes forward.

The mobile phone time was treated as the middle.

The auditor asked,

“Is the mobile phone an authorised time source?”

Madhusudan stopped on the ladder.

“No.”

The clocks were not altered again.

But the basis of the decision had suddenly become unauthorised.

A letter was sent to the General Branch of the district office:

“Kindly clarify the authorised time source for the office.”

The answer came two days later:

“Indian Standard Time shall apply.”

Nandkishore read the letter.

“That much we know.

How do we hang Indian Standard Time on the wall?”

The employees laughed.

The audit objection remained open.

Meanwhile, every evening the key continued going to Harinarayan.

Every morning it returned to Nandkishore.

Now both looked at each other's clock before writing the time.

On the first day Nandkishore said,
 “You write first.”
 Harinarayan said,
 “No, you first.
 What if there is a difference again?”
 Both waited for five o’clock.
 The main clock showed 4:59.
 The gate clock 4:57.
 Nandkishore stood holding the pouch.
 “Shall I take it now?” Harinarayan asked.
 “By whose time?”
 The key was secure.
 But the handover stopped.
 At last Nandkishore looked at his wristwatch.
 “Five.”
 Harinarayan took the pouch.
 Both wrote 17:00 in the register.
 The next day the auditor asked,
 “The two clocks differed.
 How is the time identical?”
 Nandkishore’s face fell.
 “We agreed on one time and wrote it.”
 “So the register records agreement, not the time actually observed?”
 One objection became two.
 The General Branch then created an interim form:
 “Certificate of Time Discrepancy in Key Handover.”
 It had five fields:
 Main clock.
 Gate clock.
 Third time source.
 Actual handover.
 Certifying person.
 “Third time source?” Harinarayan asked.
 The General Branch clerk said,
 “Mobile phone, radio, attendance machine—whatever is available.”
 “And if the third one is different too?”
 The clerk looked at the form.
 “Then write it in the remarks.”
 Harinarayan shook his head.
 “There used to be one register for the key.
 Now there is another one for time.”
 Nandkishore said,
 “And remarks for the time of time.”
 In the midst of all this, an elderly woman had been making rounds of the records room for three days.
 Her name was Kanaklata Devi.

She needed a certified copy of a seventy-year-old irrigation map.
Part of her village field had fallen under a new canal-widening scheme.
Her compensation objection was to be heard on Friday afternoon.
Without the old map, her objection would remain incomplete.
The map was inside the third cupboard in the records room.
The application was complete.
The fee had been deposited.
The plot number was clear.
Only the room had to be opened.
On Wednesday morning, Nandkishore reached the gate at 9:55.
Harinarayan brought out the pouch.
The red seal was intact.

The knot was intact.
The main clock inside showed 9:59.
The gate clock 9:56.
The attendance machine 9:58.
Nandkishore took out the certificate form.

Main clock:

09:59.

Gate clock:

09:56.

Attendance machine:

09:58.

Actual handover:

blank.

“What do we write here?” Harinarayan asked.

Nandkishore said,

“The time when both of us sign?”

“Which clock?”

Again they stopped.

Kanaklata Devi was standing beside them.

“Babu, is the key inside that pouch?”

“Yes.”

“The seal is proper?”

“Proper.”

“Then open it.”

Nandkishore felt embarrassed.

“We have to write the time first.”

The elderly woman looked at the clocks.

“You can understand the key, but not the time?”

Harinarayan lowered his face.

At last the attendance-machine time, 09:58, was written under “third time source.”

Actual handover was also treated as 09:58.

Both signed.

The room opened.

By the time the map was taken out, it was half past ten.

Kanaklata Devi left with the copy.

That afternoon, the auditor examined the certificate.

"Is the attendance-machine time authorised?"

The General Branch clerk said,

"It is connected to the headquarters network."

"For handover of this office key, specifically authorised?"

"Not specifically."

Kamlesh Singh again made a note in blue pencil.

Now the proof of time discrepancy needed proof of its own.

A meeting was called.

Subject:

"Unified Time System for Handover of Records-Room Key."

The main clock in the meeting hall showed 10:04.

The notice said the meeting began at ten.

No one commented on that.

Baijnath Chaudhary, the Establishment Officer, proposed that one authorised digital clock be installed at the gate and only that time be entered in the key register.

Madhusudan asked,

"What if the power goes out?"

"Battery."

"And if the battery dies?"

"Reserve clock."

"How will the reserve clock be synchronised?"

The meeting was silent for five minutes.

At last the General Branch wrote:

"Network-synchronised digital clock installed at the gate shall be primary; if unavailable, the attendance machine; if both are unavailable, the Branch Officer's mobile phone."

Nandkishore asked,

"What if the Branch Officer is absent?"

Baijnath Babu said,

"Then remarks."

Harinarayan said softly,

"Remarks are always available."

The order was issued.

A new digital clock arrived.

Its red digits glowed from a distance.

On the first day, the main clock, the new gate clock, and the attendance machine all showed the same minute.

An unusual satisfaction spread through the office.

But to close the objection about the five minutes on the previous Thursday, written proof was still required that the old gate clock had been five minutes slow.

"Now the new clock is installed," Madhusudan said.

“The old one has been removed.

How can we prove the difference on that earlier day?”

The old rectangular clock lay in Stores.

Its hands were still moving.

But when the new clock was installed, someone had reset its time.

Harinarayan said,

“I will write that it was five minutes slow that day.”

The auditor asked,

“How are you certain?”

“Because I looked at it every day.”

“Written record?”

There was none.

Nandkishore’s first explanation had said “approximately five minutes.”

The auditor did not like “approximately.”

So the attendance-machine list from seven days earlier was brought out.

It was estimated that employees took an average of two minutes to walk from the gate to the machine.

Times in the vehicle register, visitor register, and meeting notes based on the main clock were compared.

A twenty-seven-page file was created to prove a five-minute difference.

Kanaklata Devi returned to the office.

Her hearing had taken place.

The certified map had arrived in time.

But the officer had said the line on the old map was unclear and asked for a copy of another register.

Seeing Nandkishore with the thick file, she asked,

“My map?”

“No.

The key’s time.”

“Was the key lost again?”

“Never.”

“Then?”

Nandkishore did not answer for a few moments.

“Five minutes are missing in the register.”

Whether Kanaklata Devi understood him or not, no one could tell.

She pushed her application forward.

“Do not lose my page.”

The sentence struck Nandkishore like a blow.

That evening, before placing the key in the pouch, he completed the map file first.

He took out the second copy Kanaklata Devi had requested and certified it.

Only then did he lock the room.

At the gate the new digital clock showed 17:01.

The attendance machine also showed 17:01.

Nandkishore handed the pouch to Harinarayan.

Both wrote 17:01 in the register.

"Now it is correct," Harinarayan said.
 Nandkishore looked at the sealed pouch.
 "The key was correct before too."

The file concerning the five-minute objection was finally closed a week later.

The conclusion read:

"Archival discrepancy arising from historical inequality of time sources; no evidence of actual breach of custody."

Along with it came instructions:
 monthly synchronisation of the new authorised clock,
 battery checks,
 and a time-certification register.

"Time-certification register?" Harinarayan asked.

The General Branch said,

"Once a month you will write that the clock is correct."

"Compared with what?"

"Indian Standard Time."

"Where on the wall will we find that?"

This time the clerk laughed.

"On a mobile phone."

The same mobile phone that had earlier been treated as unauthorised now became the basis for monthly synchronisation.

The order did not mention it by name.

It merely said:

"standard digital source."

After a few months the system became routine.

The pouch went out in the evening.

Returned in the morning.

The new clock generally kept proper time.

The register entries were clean.

On the first Monday of each month, signatures were placed in the time-certification register.

Much later, Nandkishore learned what had happened to Kanaklata Devi's canal-compensation objection.

It had been partly accepted.

One day she came carrying a small box of sweets.

Nandkishore refused to take it.

"Then shall I give it to the guard?" she asked.

From a distance Harinarayan folded his hands.

"Not to me either."

The elderly woman put the box back in her bag.

She looked at the new clock at the gate.

"Does it keep correct time now?"

Harinarayan said,

"According to the papers, yes."

Kanaklata Devi laughed.

“The clock has papers too?”

“It does.”

She left.

On the first Monday of the following month, the time check was due.

Madhusudan, Harinarayan, and Nandkishore gathered at the gate.

The new clock showed:

09:30:00.

The mobile phone:

09:30:04.

The attendance machine:

09:30:03.

Madhusudan said,

“Four seconds.”

Nandkishore opened the register.

The field read:

“Difference: in minutes.”

Harinarayan asked,

“How do we write four seconds?”

Nandkishore thought for a moment.

Then wrote:

“0 minutes.”

All three signed.

At that same moment, the records-room key pouch lay on Harinarayan’s desk.

Nandkishore picked it up.

The seal was intact.

The knot was intact.

The new clock showed 09:31.

Harinarayan pushed the register towards him.

“Time?”

Nandkishore had just closed the proof concerning four seconds.

He looked at the clock.

Then at the pouch.

“Nine thirty-one,” he said.

Both signed.

The records room opened.

No one was waiting at the gate.

This time the time in the register was correct.

And so was the key.

STORY 157

THE COLOUR OF THE FILE CLOTH

On the second floor of the District Social Assistance Building, the files looked colourful even from a distance.

Inside black cupboards, papers bound in blue, green, ochre, yellow, and grey cloth stood in rows.

The colours were not decorative.

Blue cloth was understood to belong to the Old-Age Assistance Branch.

Pale violet to Widow Assistance.

Green to Animal Husbandry.

Ochre to Student Assistance.

Grey to General Administration.

No one had a clear order showing when this system had begun.

But every employee understood the colours.

When lifting a file from a distance, the cloth was seen before the subject was read.

On her first day in the building, newly appointed Junior Assistant Maithili Chaudhary had been taught the rule in five minutes by Senior Clerk Bhola Babu.

“Look at the colour, understand the branch, enter it in the register, and send it on.

It saves time.”

Maithili had asked,

“What if the wrong cloth has been tied around the file?”

Bhola Babu had laughed.

“Cloth does not tie itself.”

After that answer, Maithili had asked no further question.

Three weeks later, on a Monday morning, fourteen files lay on the table in the Inward Room.

The postman had taken his receipt and gone.

Attendant Shivnath was dusting the files and making piles according to colour.

Five green.

Three blue.

Two ochre.

Four violet.

As Maithili lifted the fourth file in the violet pile, her hand stopped.

Its cloth was green.

But on an old paper slip pasted along the edge, faded letters read:

“Widow Assistance — Chandrakala Devi.”

Maithili read the slip.

Then looked at the green cloth.

Shivnath said,

“Send it to Animal Husbandry.”

“But it says Widow Assistance here.”

“Old slips often do not get changed.

The colour is new.”

Maithili opened the file.

The first page was an application:

Chandrakala Devi.

Village Bardaha.

Husband: Late Kamlesh Mandal.

Below were the bank account number, death certificate, Panchayat verification, and income-certificate list.

There was no mention of cattle, fodder, vaccination, or milk.

“This is a Widow Assistance file,” Maithili said.

Shivnath shrugged.

“Then why is it green?”

The question was small.

Its answer was not in the file.

Maithili entered the subject in the inward register as “Widow Assistance” and placed the file with the violet pile.

At ten o’clock Bhola Babu, checking the register, stopped at that file.

“Why is this green file in the violet pile?”

“The subject is Widow Assistance.”

Bhola Babu opened it.

Turned two pages.

His eyebrows tightened slightly.

“The subject is indeed that.

But the colour belongs to Animal Husbandry.”

“Then do we look at the subject or the colour?”

Bhola Babu did not answer immediately.

He closed the file.

“First check the movement register.”

The movement register was in the Records Room.

File No. 473/W-A/26 was searched.

The last entry was eight days old:

“For rebinding — Stationery Room.”

After that, nothing.

The Stationery Room was on the ground floor.

Old files were removed from torn cloth and rebound in new cloth there.

The binding work was done by Jagdish, an elderly craftsman hired on contract.

That day Jagdish was cutting thread in the veranda.

Bhola Babu showed him the file.

“Why was this Widow Assistance file bound in green?”

Jagdish pushed his spectacles onto his forehead.

“When it came, the violet cloth was finished.”

“Then why did you not stop the work?”

"If I had stopped it, you would have said the file was being held up.
The Stores man said there was plenty of green cloth.
Use that for now and put a slip on top."

"Written order?"

Jagdish bit through the thread with his teeth.

"I receive thread in writing.

Instructions come by mouth."

Stores Assistant Satyanarayan Babu was called.

He checked the register.

The violet cloth had indeed been shown as exhausted on the twenty-third of the previous month.

A request for fresh supply had been sent.

The consignment had not yet arrived.

"I told them to use green temporarily," he admitted.

Bhola Babu asked,

"How many files?"

Satyanarayan Babu turned pages.

"The count is not written.

Cloth is issued by the yard.

Files are counted by number."

For the first time, the office realised that the problem might not be confined to one file.

Maithili asked,

"Then do we have to inspect every file rebound after the violet cloth ran out?"

Bhola Babu said quietly,

"First send this one to the correct branch."

The file reached the Widow Assistance Branch.

The moment clerk Rameshwar Jha saw the green cover, he stopped the attendant.

"This belongs to Animal Husbandry."

Maithili had carried the file herself.

"Open it."

Rameshwar Babu opened it.

Read the application.

"This is ours."

"Then keep it."

He put it on the desk.

Then asked for the movement register.

"But where is the transfer from Animal Husbandry?"

Maithili was astonished.

"It never went to Animal Husbandry."

"The colour says it did."

"A colour is not a signature."

Rameshwar Babu leaned back in his chair.

His tone was not harsh.

It was cautious.

"In the last audit, three files were found outside the branch register.

I had to submit an explanation.

Now I do not retain any file without an entry number."

"Is the entry number given according to the subject or according to the cloth?"

"Normally both are the same thing."

"Not this time."

Rameshwar Babu looked at the file as though he himself had to judge between cloth and subject.

At last he wrote:

"Subject-wise: Widow Assistance. Cover: green. Source to be clarified."

The file was sent back to the Inward Room.

By afternoon Chandrakala Devi herself had reached the office.

In her hand was an old cloth bag containing receipts, a copy of her bank passbook, and medicine slips tied together.

She came to Maithili.

"Has my paper come back again?"

Maithili had never seen her before.

"Your name?"

"Chandrakala Devi. Bardaha."

The green file was on her desk.

The moment Chandrakala Devi saw the cloth, she said,

"This is not mine."

"Your papers are inside."

Surprised, she opened the file.

Seeing her own name on the first page, she remained silent for a few moments.

"When I submitted it, it was violet."

"You remember the colour?"

"I have come after this file four times.

Would I not remember the colour?"

There was more exhaustion than anger in her voice.

Her husband Kamlesh had died seven months earlier.

The assistance had already been sanctioned.

But after correction of one error in the bank account number, the file had begun circulating again for verification.

"When will the money come?"

That was her direct question.

Maithili wanted to answer.

But at that moment even the office had not decided which branch the file belonged to.

"We will get the file to the correct branch today," she said.

Chandrakala Devi did not smile.

"That was said last time too."

She went and sat in the veranda.

In the afternoon Assistant Officer Sudhanshu Mishra was informed.
 He was an old employee and considered the colour system useful.
 "Because of the colour, files can be sorted without reading them," he said.
 "If we open every paper and read it, half the day will go in classification."
 Maithili said,
 "But what if the colour is wrong?"
 "Correct the mistake."
 "What is the procedure for correcting it?"
 Sudhanshu Mishra stopped at the question.
 No one knew a clear procedure.
 Changing the cloth was treated as altering the physical form of the record.
 Changing a branch required a transfer note.
 But the file had never formally gone to the wrong branch.
 Bhola Babu suggested,
 "Sew a violet strip over the green."
 Satyanarayan Babu objected.
 "Then the register says green cloth, while outside it appears violet.
 Audit will ask."
 Rameshwar Babu said,
 "Attach a white strip with the subject written on it."
 Sudhanshu Mishra asked,
 "What if the strip falls off?"
 Shivnath stood listening near the door.
 He said softly,
 "The first page inside will not fall off."
 The room was silent for a few moments.
 Sudhanshu Mishra looked at him.
 "Who has time to open every file and read the subject?"
 Shivnath lowered his head.
 His job was to carry files.
 Not make policy.
 The meeting ended without a decision.
 Chandrakala Devi remained seated in the veranda until four in the
 afternoon.
 Maithili gave her water.
 "Is your home far?"
 "I have to change two buses."
 "Do not come again tomorrow.
 Give me a telephone number."
 Chandrakala Devi recited a number.
 "The mobile phone stays with my son.
 He goes to work as a mason during the day.
 You can speak to him in the evening."
 Maithili wrote the number not in the margin of the register, but in her
 own notebook.

The next day she began checking the binding register of the Stationery Room from the date on which the violet cloth had run out.

The register did not contain subjects.

Only file numbers and yards of cloth.

In the seven days after the twenty-third, thirty-two files had been rebound.

Eighteen of them had green cloth.

“Are all eighteen from Animal Husbandry?” Maithili asked.

Jagdish said,

“No.

Whenever the required cloth was unavailable, I used whatever was available at the time.”

“So for those seven days, the colour system was suspended?”

Jagdish laughed.

“I received no written notice saying whether the colour system was operating or suspended.”

Maithili wrote down the numbers of the eighteen files.

One by one, the movement registers were checked.

The first five genuinely belonged to Animal Husbandry.

The sixth turned out to be Student Assistance.

Three days earlier it had been returned from the Animal Husbandry Branch with the remark:

“Beneficiary’s livestock-ownership details not attached.”

The seventh was a General Administration building-repair file.

The Animal Husbandry Branch had written:

“Subject unrelated.”

The eighth was another Widow Assistance file.

It was currently lying in the Animal Insurance Section.

Maithili and Bhola Babu went there.

They found the file in a lower pile beneath the desk.

On top was written:

“Applicant has not stated livestock number; complete details to be obtained.”

Bhola Babu’s face fell.

“Who wrote this remark?”

Animal Insurance Clerk Shyamsundar Babu said,

“The form was incomplete.”

Maithili opened the file.

“This is a Widow Assistance application.”

Shyamsundar Babu put on his spectacles.

Read the first page.

Then looked at his own remark.

His ears turned red.

“I saw the outer list.

A green file had arrived.

There were eight enclosures.

Eight enclosures are common in Animal Insurance forms.”

“You did not read the name?”

“I did.

A widow can own livestock too.”

The answer might have sounded absurd.

Shyamsundar Babu was not joking.

Thirty-six files had reached his desk that day.

Two posts in the branch were vacant.

The colour had been created as a sign that saved him time.

Bhola Babu said slowly,

“We have turned the sign into the subject.”

Shyamsundar Babu said nothing.

Beside his old remark he wrote:

“Previous remark made in error on the basis of cover colour; actual subject is Widow Assistance.”

He signed it.

The eighth file was sent to the correct branch.

As the day advanced, five of the eighteen files were found to have circulated through the wrong branches.

On one scholarship application, “proof of animal vaccination” had been requested.

On a building-repair file, a remark asked for “clarification of beneficiary’s age.”

Two files, by luck, had not yet moved beyond the Inward Room.

Sudhanshu Mishra called an immediate meeting.

Five mismatched files were placed on the table.

All were wrapped in green cloth.

Their subjects were different.

“This makes it clear that we have become too dependent on colour,” Maithili said.

Rameshwar Babu replied,

“If we remove the colours, the work will slow down.”

Bhola Babu said,

“No one is talking about removing colours.

The problem is treating colour as proof.”

Satyanarayan Babu opened the Stores register.

“The violet cloth still has not arrived.”

“When will it come?”

“The supplier says the next consignment is due Friday.”

Sudhanshu Mishra ran a hand over his forehead.

“Then until Friday, what colour should Widow Assistance files be bound in?”

Again the room fell silent.

Maithili said,

“Write the branch name in bold letters on a white paper strip and tie it to the file.

Colour can remain an aid.

It must not become a substitute for the subject.”

Rameshwar Babu asked,

“Is that in the rules?”

“Where is the rule about the colours?”

It became the most uncomfortable question in the meeting.

Sudhanshu Mishra called for the old orders.

Office orders from 2011, 2014, 2019, and 2023 were examined.

Nowhere was there a complete colour list.

One order said only:

“Separate covers shall be maintained branch-wise.”

No colours were specified.

From his long service, Bhola Babu remembered,

“Earlier each branch bought its own cloth.

Old-Age Assistance used blue.

Animal Husbandry used green.

Gradually those colours became the identifiers.”

“So practice became rule,” Maithili said.

“Practice is also a system,” Rameshwar Babu replied.

“As long as the cloth is available,” Bhola Babu added.

By the end of the meeting, a temporary instruction was issued:

when receiving a file, the first-page subject must be checked against the colour.

If there is a mismatch, the actual branch must be written on a white strip.

In the rebinding register, the subject must now be entered along with the file number.

Sudhanshu Mishra signed the instruction.

“A permanent order will be prepared later.”

Maithili asked,

“And Chandrakala Devi’s file?”

Rameshwar Babu opened it.

The correction to the bank account had been verified.

The Panchayat certificate was valid.

The approval order was already attached.

In fact, nothing remained except release of payment.

“Why has this been circulating for three weeks?” Sudhanshu Mishra asked.

No one person answered.

Rameshwar Babu prepared the payment advice.

The Accounts Branch checked it.

By evening the payment order was issued.

At seven that evening, Maithili called the number Chandrakala Devi had given for her son.

There was noise from a construction site at the other end.

The young man asked “What?” three times.

Maithili spoke loudly.

“Tell your mother the assistance payment has been approved.”

There was silence for a few moments.

Then the young man asked,

“Does she have to come to the office again tomorrow?”

“No.

Check the bank.”

That “no” was perhaps the most useful word of the entire week.

Three days later Chandrakala Devi came.

This time she carried no bag.

She only wanted to show the receipt.

The money had reached her account.

Maithili said,

“Keep your papers now.

The work is complete.”

Chandrakala Devi looked at the green file, which lay closed on Rameshwar Babu’s desk.

A white strip had been sewn onto it:

“Widow Assistance.”

“Will it become violet again?” she asked.

Maithili smiled.

“Stores says the violet consignment arrives tomorrow.”

Chandrakala Devi said,

“Whatever the colour now, let the name inside remain correct.”

She left.

On Friday the violet cloth really arrived.

Three bundles were unloaded in Stores.

Satyanarayan Babu breathed with relief.

But the fear of audit remained.

The question was:

should the mistakenly attached green covers be replaced, or should the white strip be left on them?

If replaced, the old physical form of the record would disappear.

If not replaced, the colour system would remain incomplete.

A small committee was formed.

Five days later it recommended:

“Covers attached in error shall remain as they are; a clear branch strip shall be affixed and a correction note attached.”

That day in the Stationery Room, Jagdish was sewing white strips onto eighteen files.

Maithili went there.

“So the colours will not be changed now?”

“No.

The old mistake has also become part of the record.”

Threading a needle, he said,

“Paper lives longer than people.

Once a mistake is stitched in, it is difficult to open it again.”

Maithili read the branch names written along the edges of the files.

On green cloth:

Widow Assistance.

Student Assistance.

General Administration.

Colour and words disagreed with each other.

But this time the disagreement could be seen.

A few weeks later, the new arrangement became routine.

In the Inward Room, when Shivnath lifted a file, he looked first at the colour.

Then the white strip.

Then the first page.

At first the three checks took two extra minutes.

Later they became habit.

Bhola Babu sometimes said,

“Earlier I looked at the colour and knew the branch.

Now I look at the colour and know what question to ask.”

It took two months for the permanent order to be drafted.

The draft listed five colours, the branches, what to do when a colour was unavailable, the size of the white strip, and the entry to be made during rebinding.

At the final meeting, Sudhanshu Mishra read aloud:

“White strip: two inches wide.”

Satyanarayan Babu immediately asked,

“Do we have two-inch white cloth in Stores?”

“Paper strip.”

“What if the paper gets wet?”

Maithili suppressed a laugh.

Bhola Babu looked at her.

Then smiled himself.

At last the order said:

“Clear and durable branch strip.”

No material was specified.

On the Monday after the order was issued, a new batch arrived in the Inward Room.

Seven files were all bound in the same grey cloth.

Shivnath lifted the first one.

Out of old habit, he looked at the colour.

Then stopped.

On the white strip, in bold letters, it said:

“Animal Husbandry.”

He opened the first page.

Read the subject.

Maithili asked,

“What happened?”

Putting the file in the correct pile, Shivnath said,

“Nothing.

Colour is only colour now.”

ONE OFFICE, TWO NAMES

Three names were written at the main gate of the District Water Resources Building.

At the top, on a new blue board:

“District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office.”

Below it, two faded old boards partly covered each other:

“Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch”

and

“Rural Water Conservation Cell.”

The two branches had merged three months earlier.

On paper, the merger had taken one page.

No one knew how many months it would take for the building to complete it.

The employees of the old Minor Irrigation Branch sat in the rooms on the left.

Those from Water Conservation sat on the right.

The meeting hall in the middle carried a board with the new name.

But the old attendant still kept the keys in two separate bunches.

Junior Assistant Prabhakar Jha was deputed to the new office.

On his first day, he was given two seals.

One round seal read:

“Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch, Madhubani.”

The other, rectangular:

“Rural Water Conservation Cell.”

Prabhakar asked,

“Where is the seal of the new office?”

Accounts Assistant Suresh Babu said,

“The order to make it has already gone.”

“Then which seal do we use in the meantime?”

“Depends on the paper.”

That answer became Prabhakar’s first lesson in the office.

The very next day a letter came from the bank.

Its subject:

send a certified copy of the merger order for changing the name of an old savings account.

The letter was addressed to the “Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch.”

Prabhakar attached a copy of the merger order and prepared a reply.

At the top he wrote the new name:

“District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office.”

At the bottom, the old rectangular Water Conservation seal was affixed because the round one happened to be lying on another desk.

Four days later, the bank returned the letter.

Its remark was brief:

“Office name in letterhead and seal inconsistent.”

Suresh Babu read it.

“That is why I said it depends on the paper.”

Prabhakar asked,

“But the new office has no seal.”

“Then write the old name.”

“Which old one?”

Suresh Babu took off his spectacles and placed them on the desk.

“New employees ask this question too often.”

That week an application arrived from the Kunarapur Water Committee.

The village’s small irrigation channel had filled with sand after the rains.

The committee had cleared the channel through voluntary labour.

A sanctioned repair payment of eighteen thousand seven hundred rupees was still due.

Committee secretary Dayakant Paswan brought the papers himself.

He did not carry a file.

His five-page application was tied in red cloth.

“Just tell me when the money will come,” he said.

“The wheat seed is already down.

The channel is clean, but the money for replacing the gate plank is included in this payment.”

Prabhakar examined the papers.

Completion of the work was certified.

The Junior Engineer’s measurement book was there.

The committee meeting signatures.

Photographs.

Everything was in order.

The only obstacle lay in the heading of the payment order.

The sanction had been issued by the old “Rural Water Conservation Cell.”

The money was to be drawn from a bank account in the name of the “Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch.”

Now the payment order had to be issued by the new “District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office.”

One piece of work.

Three names.

Prabhakar told Dayakant,

“The papers are complete.

We are aligning the names.”

Dayakant laughed.

“My name is correct, isn’t it?”

“Not yours.

The office’s.”

For a few moments Dayakant looked at Prabhakar’s face.

“The office does not know its own name?”

Prabhakar did not answer.

He prepared the first draft of the payment order.

At the top he wrote:

“District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office
(after merger of the former Rural Water Conservation Cell and Minor
Irrigation Assistance Branch).”

Suresh Babu read it and shook his head.

“The name of the bank account is not clear.”

Prabhakar added in brackets:

“(Bank account operated in the former name of Minor Irrigation
Assistance Branch).”

Accounts Officer Manoranjan Babu read it.

“The sanction is from Water Conservation.

Write that too.”

Another bracket appeared:

“(Original sanction issued by Rural Water Conservation Cell).”

The heading grew from two lines to five.

Below it, Prabhakar wrote the subject:

“Payment of repair amount to Kunarapur Water Committee.”

Manoranjan Babu said,

“Put ‘related to’ before the subject.

There are three names.

The relationship should remain clear.”

Prabhakar added “related to.”

It seemed to him that words were not decreasing.

Only offices were multiplying inside them.

The payment order reached the Treasury.

The next day an objection came:

“Name of issuing office does not match name of bank-account holder.”

Prabhakar picked up the file and placed it before Suresh Babu.

“I have written all the names.”

Suresh Babu said calmly,

“Perhaps that is why they do not match.”

“If I write less, one name is omitted.

If I write more, all three look separate.”

“That is called administration.”

For the first time, Prabhakar did not laugh at Suresh Babu’s joke.

That afternoon Dayakant came again.

This time committee treasurer Rekha Devi was with him.

Wet mud from beside the canal had dried into pale streaks on her feet.

“Is there some mistake?” she asked.

Prabhakar said,

“Not in the papers.

In the name.”

Rekha Devi looked at her own sheet.

“Our committee has only one name:

Kunarapur Water Committee.”

“The mistake is on the office side.”

Rekha Devi smiled.

“Then we have come to the right place.

People in the wrong place see their own mistakes quickly.”

Suresh Babu heard her from a distance.

He smiled, but said nothing.

The next day Prabhakar went to the old records room.

He found the merger order.

It clearly stated that the property, liabilities, movable and immovable records, bank accounts, and ongoing schemes of both former units would be deemed to fall under the new office.

Prabhakar felt relieved.

He decided to send a certified copy of that paragraph to the bank.

But which seal should be put on the certified copy?

The elderly Records Assistant Ram Ekbal Babu laughed at the question.

“Son, this is why the merger has not finished in three months.”

He took a thin file from the cupboard.

A draft letter for changing the bank-account name had been prepared but not issued.

The remark said:

“To be sent after official seal of the new office is received.”

On the second page was the order to make the seal.

That too had not been issued.

The remark:

“Full name for seal to be finalised after title of new bank account is confirmed.”

Prabhakar looked from one page to the other.

The bank name was waiting for the seal.

The seal was waiting for the bank name.

Ram Ekbal Babu said,

“Both are behaving like polite employees, each asking the other to go first.”

“And payment in the meantime?”

“For old work, the old name was used.

For new work, the new name.

Work in between gets trapped.”

“Kunarapur’s work is in between.”

“Then it is a true citizen of this office.”

Prabhakar felt bad.

Ram Ekbal Babu’s sentence was a joke.

But Dayakant’s canal stayed in his mind like truth.

He prepared a new draft.

This time, instead of one name at the top, he made three sections.

First line:

the new office.

Second:

“Former unit: Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch.”

Third:

“Former unit: Rural Water Conservation Cell.”

By the time he reached the subject, nearly half the page had been used.

Dayakant’s payment details moved to page two.

Typist Suman Kumari printed the letter and handed it to Prabhakar.

“Looking at the first page, it seems the office is writing its own identity card.”

Prabhakar said,

“The citizen appears on the second page.”

Suman replied,

“Then the citizen has to cross the first page.”

The sentence stayed with Prabhakar.

The letter went to the bank.

This time the bank wrote:

“Legal identity of account holder unclear due to use of multiple office names.”

Manoranjan Babu was irritated.

“First they said the names did not match.

Now they say there are too many names.”

Suresh Babu said,

“The bank is protecting its papers too.”

“What are we doing?” Prabhakar asked.

No one answered.

At last Officer-in-Charge Shashikant Mishra called a meeting.

The first item on the agenda was:

“Uniformity of office name after merger.”

The second:

“Payment to Kunarapur Water Committee.”

Prabhakar was given the task of writing the proceedings.

He sat down to type the heading.

“District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office
(former Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch and Rural Water Conservation
Cell, consolidated unit)...”

Shashikant Mishra stopped him.

“Is this meeting for shortening the name or enlarging the heading?”

The room laughed.

For the first time, Prabhakar shortened the heading:

“District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office.”

At the meeting, the bank letter, Treasury objection, old seals, merger order, and Kunarapur payment papers were placed on the same table.

Ram Ekbal Babu said,

“The merger order clearly gives the new name.

In law, both old units are absorbed into it.”

Manoranjan Babu said,

“Then change the bank-account name immediately.”

Suresh Babu asked,
 “The bank will ask for the new seal.”
 Shashikant Mishra said,
 “Make the seal.”
 “The seal maker says the bank title must first be fixed.”
 For a few moments everyone was silent.
 Suman, seated in a corner typing the minutes, said softly,
 “The person who makes the seal is not a bank officer.”
 Everyone looked at her.
 She became slightly uncomfortable.
 “I only mean this:
 the merger order determines the office’s name.
 Not the bank.”
 Ram Ekbal Babu nodded.
 “She is right.”

Prabhakar was surprised that a knot of three months had loosened through one ordinary sentence from a typist.

The knot had not been difficult.

Everyone had assumed it had been tied in someone else’s hands.

Shashikant Mishra dictated an order:

“As per merger order dated ..., the official name of the new office shall be ‘District Rural Water Resources Coordination Office.’

The two former names may be mentioned in brackets or remarks where required solely for identification of earlier records, and shall not be used in the heading.”

Second line:

“A new official seal shall be prepared immediately.”

Third:

“Request for change of bank-account name shall be sent with certified copy of merger order and specimen signature of the officer.”

Manoranjan Babu asked,

“Which seal goes on the certified copy right now?”

Shashikant Mishra picked up the old round seal.

“Use this with the signature and add the remark:

‘Seal of former unit; under new office pursuant to merger order.’”

Suresh Babu said,

“The bank may object again.”

“If it does, it will give a written reply.”

Hearing the sentence, Prabhakar remembered not some other clerk from another story, but his own first week:

how often people in offices avoided doing something the rules allowed merely because they feared an objection might arise.

At the end of the meeting, the Kunarapur payment came up.

Shashikant Mishra asked,

“Papers complete?”

Prabhakar said,

“Complete.”

“Measurement?”

“Complete.”

“Committee’s authority?”

“Complete.”

“Then?”

Prabhakar showed the first page.

A five-line heading.

Shashikant Mishra lowered his head and read.

Then said,

“Cut half this paper.”

“Cut it?”

“Not the name.

Shorten the heading.”

Prabhakar prepared a new payment order.

At the top:

only the new office name.

Subject:

“Kunarapur Water Committee: Payment of Sanctioned Repair Amount.”

In the first line of the body:

one paragraph number from the merger order.

Then directly to the amount.

The whole letter fit on one page.

Suman printed it.

“Now the citizen has appeared on the first page.”

Prabhakar smiled.

The new seal took two days to make.

The new name was clear on the black rubber, but the letters were so small that to fit inside the circle the word “Coordination” was slightly compressed.

Looking at it, Suresh Babu said,

“After a meeting to shorten names, why is the seal so crowded?”

Ram Ekbal Babu replied,

“Administration does not understand the limits of a circle.”

The new seal was affixed to the Kunarapur payment order.

The bank was sent the merger order and a certificate of name continuity.

For three days there was no reply.

On the fourth day, Dayakant arrived.

This time he carried a broken wooden plank from the canal gate.

“What is that?” Prabhakar asked.

“The old gate plank.

It rotted in the rain.

We are making a new one, but the money still has not come.”

He placed the plank beneath the desk.

“The channel is clean.

If we release the water, the seed will survive.

Without the gate, someone may close it at night.”

Prabhakar telephoned the bank.
 After being transferred through five people, he reached an officer.
 The officer said,
 "The name-change process is underway.
 But there is no bar on valid payment from the old account if the
 authorised signature and merger proof are clear."
 Prabhakar asked,
 "Will you give that in writing?"
 The officer paused.
 "I will send an email."
 Half an hour later the email arrived.
 Suresh Babu read it three times.
 "So payment can be made," Prabhakar said.
 "Not 'can be,'" Suresh Babu corrected him.
 "It will be made."
 Prabhakar laughed.
 "Today even the language is becoming uniform."
 The order went back to the bank.
 That evening the amount was released.
 When informing Dayakant, Prabhakar asked,
 "The gate will be made now?"
 Dayakant said,
 "I will tell the carpenter today itself.
 Whatever the papers call the office, water has only one name."
 From behind him, Rekha Devi said,
 "Even if you rename the water, the fields will not obey."
 Everyone laughed.
 Five days later a photograph arrived from Kunarapur.
 A new wooden plank had been fitted to the small canal gate.
 No office name was written on it.
 Only, in white letters:
 "OPEN: 5 A.M.
 CLOSE: 6 P.M."

Prabhakar kept the photograph beside his desk.
 Meanwhile, the bank-account name change was completed.
 A new passbook came.
 New seal.
 New letterhead.
 An order was issued to deposit the two old seals in Stores.
 The Stores Assistant listed three items on a sheet:
 "Round seal — Minor Irrigation Assistance Branch.
 Rectangular seal — Rural Water Conservation Cell.
 One batch of old letterhead."
 In the remarks he asked:
 "Reason for disposal?"
 Prabhakar wrote:

“Names obsolete after merger.”

The Stores Assistant read the words.

“The names are obsolete.

The history is not.”

“The history will remain in the file.”

“And the seals?”

“They will remain too.

In Stores.

Just not at the top of letters.”

A month later, the office letters began to look shorter.

One name at the top.

The address below.

Then the subject.

At first the employees found them oddly empty.

White space remained at the top of the page.

One day Suresh Babu said,

“So much blank space does not look good.”

Prabhakar asked,

“What shall we fill it with?”

Suresh Babu thought for a few moments.

“Nothing.

Leave it.”

That day a second letter came from Kunarapur.

The heading was clear:

“Irrigation Gate Repair Completed.”

The body contained only three lines.

At the end were the signatures of Dayakant and Rekha Devi.

Prabhakar entered the letter in the register.

At the top there was one office name.

Below it, the citizen’s work.

Between them, enough white space.

For the first time, the emptiness did not look incomplete to him.

It looked useful.

STORY 159

THE SECOND STEP OF THE STAIRCASE

The main staircase of the District Records Building had grown old even before the rains began.

The wooden railing had been polished smooth in many places by hands.

The stone steps had sunk slightly in the middle.

The lime on the wall had acquired layers like the edge of an old document.

Even so, people went up and down that staircase all day.

On the first floor were the Certified Copies Branch, the Record-of-Rights Branch, and the Old Registers Room.

One night in Bhadra, a drain on the roof became blocked.

Water kept seeping down through the wall beside the staircase.

The next morning the corner of the fourth step was found broken, and a fine crack showed beneath the fifth.

The Building In-Charge immediately had two bamboo poles tied across the staircase and a notice put up:

“MAIN STAIRCASE TEMPORARILY CLOSED.
USE THE REAR STAIRCASE FOR ACCESS TO UPPER FLOOR.”

The rear staircase went around the courtyard and climbed beside the storeroom.

It was made of iron.

It was narrow.

And when it rained, it became slippery.

Employees could climb it.

For visitors, even finding the route was difficult.

An arrow was painted at the main gate.

The first rain washed away half of it.

Shambhunath Jha, Senior Clerk in the Certified Copies Branch, had an old pain in his knees.

In thirty years of service he had never had a complaint against the staircase.

But the rear iron stairs were a different trial.

On the first day he climbed up holding tightly to the railing.

On the second, while coming down at noon, his right knee trembled.

On the third, he remembered an old doctor's advice:

“Avoid unnecessary climbing.”

Shambhunath went to Branch In-Charge Anant Babu.

“Until the main staircase is repaired—seven or ten days—allow me to sit downstairs.”

Anant Babu removed his spectacles.

“Where downstairs?”

“Beside the stairs.

The main registers can remain upstairs.

I can examine papers, make receipt entries, and point out deficiencies from below.”

At first Anant Babu laughed.

“A staircase is not an office.”

Shambhunath said,

“I am not asking for an office.

I am asking for one table.”

With the Building In-Charge’s permission, an old small table was placed against the wall to the left of the main staircase.

Its front leg stood two cubits from the first step.

The back of the chair was near the edge of the second.

The bamboo barrier began from the third step.

So any visitor who approached the main staircase saw Shambhunath first.

On the first day the table held only the receipt register, a black stamp pad, a blue pen, and a bottle of water.

Shambhunath also had his old nameplate brought down from his upstairs desk:

“SHAMBHUNATH

SENIOR

CERTIFIED COPIES BRANCH.”

At 9:20 the first visitor arrived.

He carried an application for a record of rights.

He saw the bamboo barrier.

Read the nameplate.

And asked,

“Is the upstairs branch here now?”

“The branch is upstairs,” Shambhunath said.

“I am sitting downstairs for the moment.

Show me your paper.”

The man handed it over.

The application gave the name of the mauza and the plot number.

But no year.

Shambhunath pointed out the omission.

The man went to the copying shop outside, added the year, and returned in five minutes.

Shambhunath entered the receipt and sent it upstairs in the hands of attendant Bhuvaneshwar.

By ten o’clock four applications had been received.

At eleven, Chandan, the junior clerk upstairs, came down carrying three files.

“These need the applicants’ signatures on the second page.

If we send them upstairs first, we will have to send them down again.

If the people come to you, get the signatures.”

Shambhunath placed all three files along the side of the table.

By noon the function of the table had become clear.

Anyone who could not climb upstairs,

JHA

CLERK

anyone who could not find the rear staircase,
 anyone who had brought an incomplete application,
 and anyone who merely wanted to know “whom should I go to?”
 stopped first beside the second step.
 On the second day Bhuvaneshwar placed a low stool beside the table.
 “Old people cannot remain standing.”
 Shambhunath asked,
 “Where did this stool come from?”
 “From the old room upstairs.
 The inventory marks it ‘surplus.’”
 “Return it later.”
 Bhuvaneshwar said,
 “When the staircase is repaired.”
 No one knew when the staircase would be repaired.
 The Building Engineer’s letter said:
 “Repair estimate shall be submitted after assessment of damage.”
 Before the estimate came measurement.
 For measurement, an engineer was needed.
 The engineer was away on inspection outside the district.
 The temporary table meant for seven days remained there on the eighth.
 That day someone wrote in chalk on the wall:
 “UPSTAIRS BRANCH ↓”
 The arrow pointed directly at Shambhunath’s table.
 Shambhunath wet a cloth and erased it.
 The next morning the wall said again:
 “COPY BRANCH.”
 This time he did not erase it.
 He merely wrote in smaller letters beneath the arrow:
 “RECEIPT.”
 Within two hours someone had added:
 “AND CHECKING.”
 Shambhunath looked at the words.
 He did not strike anything out.
 The real usefulness of the table was not only that it solved the problem of
 the route.
 Upstairs, files moved between cupboards and registers.
 Downstairs, at Shambhunath’s table, people’s faces remained attached to
 the papers.
 After taking an application in hand, he asked:
 “By what date do you need this?”
 “Do you have an older copy?”
 “How was the name spelled earlier?”
 Such questions did not appear in the registers.
 But they often saved time in finding the correct record.
 One Monday, Kamla Devi arrived.
 She was about seventy.

Her grandson Neeraj was with her.
Kamla Devi's husband had died thirty years earlier.
Half of the family house in her village had been taken in road widening.
Now, for demarcation of the remaining land, she needed a certified copy
of an old 1989 map.
The application had been submitted two weeks earlier.
The search result had come back:
"Record unclear."
Neeraj placed the paper before Shambhunath.
"We went upstairs."
They said ask in the Old Registers Room.
The Old Registers people said send it again through the branch."
Shambhunath read the paper.
The mauza name was written as "Bariyahi."
He asked Kamla Devi,
"Was the village called exactly this in the old papers?"
Kamla Devi said,
"When I was married, people called it 'Bariyahi Tola.'
Later, after the Panchayat was formed, 'Navbariyahi' began to be written."
Shambhunath's eyes sharpened.
"The year is 1989."
But the search was done under the new name."
He telephoned upstairs.
"Chandan, look in the 1989 index under Bariyahi Tola.
Not Navbariyahi."
Five minutes later came the answer:
"The number is there."
Map Book 42."
Kamla Devi's face changed.
"For the first time in two weeks someone has asked what the village used
to be called."
Shambhunath found it difficult to answer.
He only said,
"Old registers listen to old names."
The file went upstairs.
Two days later the map was found.
Its edges were worn, but the plot number was clear.
The process of making a certified copy began.
News of this small success spread through the office with a speed that rules
never achieved.
People began saying:
"Show it first at the staircase."
Bhuvaneshwar himself told visitors:
"Before going upstairs, have Babu check it."
Even the gate guard would say:
"If it is copy work, go to the second step."

Gradually, “the second step” became the name of a place.

No one asked that the step belonged to the staircase and the table stood beside it.

On the tenth day Chandan brought down a small printed white slip:

“CERTIFIED COPIES
RECEIPT AND PRELIMINARY CHECKING.”

Shambhunath turned it over in his hand.

“Does Anant Babu permit this?”

“No.

People keep asking, so I thought we should hang it.”

“Do not hang it.

This table is temporary.”

Chandan smiled.

“The greatest quality of temporary things is that they have no expiry date.”

Shambhunath put the slip in the drawer.

Two weeks later, a problem arose.

A new batch of receipt registers arrived.

At the top of each page was a printed field:

“Room Number.”

The upstairs branch was Room 12.

Where was Shambhunath's table?

Bhuvaneshwar joked,

“Room: Step 2.”

Shambhunath glared at him.

Chandan said,

“I2-G?”

Anant Babu came downstairs.

For a while he looked at the table, the staircase, and the register.

“Write Room 12.

It is the same branch.”

Shambhunath said,

"But if a visitor looks for 12, he will go upstairs."

“Then leave it blank.”

“The register accepts a blank field.

The computer does not.”

Anant Bābū remained silent for a few moments.

At last he said,

“Write 12-Temporary.”

Thus the building acquired its first room that had no walls but had a number.

Three days later the digital receipt began printing:

"ROOM 12-TEMPORARY."

Visitors read it and asked,

“Where is I2-Temporary?”

The guard replied,

“Second step.”

Shambhunath found the situation both amusing and troubling.

He knew that once a place entered the papers, removing it became difficult.

The table’s temporary existence now depended less on the bamboo barrier than on printed letters.

At the end of the month, a building-safety inspection arrived.

Two engineers.

One fire-safety assistant.

One accounts employee from the Building Branch.

They carried measuring tape, a building plan, and an inventory list.

The broken staircase was the first issue.

An engineer examined the crack.

Tapped the stone with a hammer.

Took photographs.

Then the fire-safety assistant noticed Shambhunath’s table.

“Why is this table in the staircase zone?”

The Building In-Charge said,

“Temporary arrangement.”

“The movement area must remain clear.”

Shambhunath stood up.

“The table is not on the steps.

It is against the left wall.”

The assistant measured with a tape.

“The width of the main exit has been reduced.”

At that moment five visitors were standing before the table.

One woman held a child.

An old man leaned on a walking stick.

Two young men held applications.

And Kamla Devi had returned to collect her certified map.

The fire-safety assistant asked,

“What is this queue for?”

The Building In-Charge said,

“Certified Copies Branch.”

“Where is the branch?”

Everyone looked upward.

The bamboo barrier was still there.

“First floor.”

The assistant looked again at Shambhunath’s table.

“Then what is this?”

Anant Babu, who had come downstairs after hearing of the inspection, said,

“Temporary receipt and preliminary checking.”

“Order?”

Anant Babu was silent.

“Location in the building inventory?”

The Building In-Charge's sheet listed on the ground floor:

Rooms 1 to 6.

Records Room.

Stores.

Toilet.

Veranda.

Staircase.

There was no "12-Temporary."

The accounts employee asked,

"Inventory number of the table?"

Bhuvaneshwar immediately bent down and read the faded paint underneath.

"Table 17."

"Location?"

Bhuvaneshwar said naturally,

"Second step."

The accounts employee stopped writing.

"Second step' is not a location category in the inventory."

Bhuvaneshwar replied,

"The table was not informed of that."

Anant Babu signalled him to keep quiet.

Shambhunath turned his face away to hide a faint smile.

The written inspection remark arrived the next day:

"Unauthorised table, stool, and paper material to be removed immediately from main-staircase exit area.

For public convenience, consideration may be given to identifying a lawful location on the ground floor."

The first sentence was an order.

The second was a consideration.

In an office, orders travel faster than considerations.

That same evening Table 17 was lifted and placed outside Stores.

The stool was sent upstairs.

Shambhunath's nameplate returned to Room 12.

An attempt was made to find him a temporary chair on the ground floor.

There was no approved table.

The next morning Shambhunath climbed the rear iron staircase.

Halfway up he stopped to catch his breath.

When he reached the top, Chandan stood up from his chair.

"Babu, people are gathering downstairs."

"The guard will show them the way."

"Two elderly people cannot climb the rear staircase."

Shambhunath said nothing.

He rubbed his knee and opened the register.

At ten, Bhuvaneshwar came upstairs carrying five applications.

"People downstairs are giving these to me."

"You are not a receiving clerk."

“I know.

But they keep asking:
where did the second step go?”

Shambhunath did not take the applications.

“Bring whoever needs the service upstairs according to the rules.”

For the first time Bhuvaneshwar saw him looking slightly harsh.

He carried the papers back.

At noon Kamla Devi arrived.

Her certified map was ready.

But she had to sign for delivery in Room 12.

She climbed the first five steps of the rear staircase and stopped.

Neeraj held her arm.

The gate guard sent word upstairs.

Shambhunath slowly came down.

He carried the paper with him.

In the veranda, he placed the map on a window ledge and obtained Kamla Devi's signature.

Kamla Devi folded the map and put it in her bag.

“Babu, has your office been removed?”

“My office was upstairs.

It is upstairs.”

Kamla Devi looked towards the staircase.

“But I found it here.”

Shambhunath had no answer.

That evening Anant Babu called a meeting.

Subject:

“Ground-Floor Public Assistance Location.”

The options were listed:

half of Stores,

the guard room,

the western corner of the veranda,

the old ticket room.

Every option had some obstacle.

Stores contained government property.

The guard room was needed for security.

The veranda was an open passage.

On the building plan, the old ticket room was marked “Sealed Records Room,” although it contained only broken chairs.

Chandan asked,

“What about the empty triangle to the left of the staircase?”

The Building In-Charge said,

“The plan marks it as ‘open space.’”

“Can a table go there?”

“If a table is placed there, the open space will no longer be open.”

Bhuvaneshwar said softly,

“Then rename it ‘open space with table.’”

This time even Anant Babu laughed.

No decision was made.

At the end of the meeting, Shambhunath spoke plainly for the first time.

"Decide the name of the place later.

First decide where papers will be received from people who cannot climb the stairs."

The room fell silent.

The building plan had no field for that question.

The next day Anant Babu issued a one-page order:

"In the open ground-floor area to the left of the main staircase, while maintaining the required exit width, a movable table for public assistance shall be placed from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The table shall be removed after working hours."

The fire-safety assistant asked for measurements over the telephone.

The Building In-Charge measured and reported that if the table was placed flush against the wall, the required exit width remained clear.

Permission came not orally, but by email.

Table 17 came out of Stores again.

This time it stood not immediately beside the second step, but eighteen inches farther to the left.

Chair towards the wall.

No stool.

No nameplate on the wall.

Only Shambhunath's old plate on the table.

Chandan took out the white slip he had printed earlier:

"CERTIFIED

COPIES

BRANCH

RECEIPT AND PRELIMINARY CHECKING."

Shambhunath looked at it.

"The order says 'Public Assistance.'"

Chandan had a new slip printed:

"PUBLIC ASSISTANCE DESK."

People still called it "the second step."

A week later repairs to the main staircase began.

The broken stone was replaced.

The railing was tightened.

Fresh lime was applied to the wall.

Two weeks later the bamboo barrier was removed.

The staircase reopened.

Shambhunath asked Anant Babu,

"Will the table go back upstairs now?"

Anant Babu looked at the order.

"The main staircase is open.

But there is no order removing the Public Assistance Desk."

"The first arrangement was temporary."

"This new order has no time limit."

Shambhunath smiled.

“So temporary is becoming permanent again.”

Anant Babu said,

“If we call it permanent, we will need a post, a room, a budget, everything.
For now call it the Public Assistance Desk.”

At the end of the month, the inventory was prepared again.

Against Table 17, the location was written:

“Ground-floor open area, left of main staircase.”

The words “second step” appeared nowhere.

No new room was added to the building list either.

Kamla Devi’s map matter was completed.

On the day of road demarcation, she sent a small packet of makhana through Neeraj.

Shambhunath returned it.

With it he sent a note:

“Keep the copy of the map safely.”

Bhuvaneshwar asked,

“Why did you return the packet?”

“The government pays me for the work.”

Bhuvaneshwar looked at the table.

“Who pays for the table?”

“The government.

Inventory No. 17.”

“And for the place?”

Shambhunath gave no answer.

The following Monday morning, a new visitor entered through the main gate.

He carried an old record of rights.

His eyes moved across the wall signs.

The newly repaired staircase shone.

He climbed two steps.

Then noticed Shambhunath’s table below.

He came back down and asked,

“The upstairs branch is here now, isn’t it?”

For a moment Shambhunath looked towards the staircase.

The second step was empty.

In the building inventory it was simply called a staircase.

Taking the visitor’s paper into his hand, he said,

“First show me what work you have.”

STORY 160

THE OFFICER OF THE LAST LINE

On the day the annual staffing register was prepared in the District Development Office, people looked first not for their names but for their lines.

Whose post was marked "Permanent."

Whose "Vacant."

Whose pay head had changed.

Whose branch had slipped onto the next page.

These matters ran hotter through the office corridors than tea.

That year, Pay Assistant Raghav Chaudhary was preparing the staffing register.

On his desk lay the thick register from the previous year, the current budget papers, and a digital statement received from the district.

Line after line matched smoothly until the final page.

Then his pen stopped.

The last line was blank.

No designation.

No sanctioned number.

No person.

But in the salary-budget column, an amount was written:

three hundred and twelve thousand rupees.

At first Raghav thought it might be a printing error.

Then he opened the previous year's register.

The final line there was blank too.

The budget figure was present.

He called for the copy from two years earlier.

There was a faint blue ink stain on the line, but no readable letters.

The budget figure was there even then.

"What is this?" Raghav asked Harinarayan Babu, the old Accounts Clerk at the next desk.

Harinarayan Babu removed his spectacles and leaned towards the page.

"The last line."

"I can see that.

What post is it?"

"All I know is that you should not delete it."

"Why?"

Harinarayan Babu looked at him as though Raghav were reading the letters in the staffing register but not its meaning.

"If you delete it, the number of sanctioned posts may go down."

"But no number is written."

"That is why you must be even more careful."

Raghav did not like the answer.

But bad answers in offices possess a special force:
they immediately produce the next question,
and finding the answer to the next question is harder than correcting the
first answer.

The next day, Establishment Branch In-Charge Bhuvan Jha examined the
register.

He too stopped at the final line.

“Was it there last year?”

“Yes.”

“Then keep it.”

“Designation?”

Bhuvan Babu turned through the budget papers.

“Write ‘Clarification Pending.’”

Raghav said,

“Has clarification been sought?”

Bhuvan Babu was silent for a moment.

“We will seek it.”

Thus, for the first time, words appeared opposite the blank line:

“Clarification Pending.”

Not in the designation column.

In the remarks column.

That same week, the six-month term of temporary employee Rukmini
Kumari was about to expire.

Rukmini had originally been engaged to digitise old assistance registers.

Three hundred and fifty-four registers had already been entered.

The project money was almost exhausted.

But in six months the office had taught her as many additional tasks as
were absent from her appointment letter.

In the morning she opened the post.

She matched addresses on returned letters.

She separated incomplete pages in assistance applications.

And at the end of the day, when no branch claimed a paper as its own, she
found the branch where it belonged.

The office had more such work than posts in the staffing register.

Three days before Rukmini’s term ended, Bhuvan Babu said,

“There is work.

But the project is over.”

Rukmini asked directly,

“Then I should not come from Monday?”

“It is difficult to say right now.”

“For me, how many days does ‘difficult’ mean?”

Bhuvan Babu did not answer.

He looked towards the register as though some extra field for time might
be found on the page.

His eyes fell on the final line.

A small meeting was held in the Accounts Room that afternoon.

The subject was not Rukmini.
 It was written as:
 “Use of Available Salary Budget.”
 Raghav, Harinarayan Babu, Bhuvan Jha, and Treasury Assistant Shyamsundar sat together.
 Shyamsundar asked,
 “This three hundred and twelve thousand belongs to which post?”
 No one answered.
 Harinarayan Babu said,
 “The post is old.”
 “Name?”
 “I do not remember.”
 “Order?”
 “It would be in the old register.”
 “The old register is blank.”
 Harinarayan Babu nodded.
 “Then someone must have erased the name.”
 Raghav said,
 “There is no sign of erasure.”
 Bhuvan Babu tried to gather the discussion.
 “The budget is sanctioned.
 There is work too.
 Rukmini can be kept temporarily.”
 Shyamsundar immediately asked,
 “Against which post?”
 The last line entered the room again.
 In the end, there was no decision.
 There was an arrangement.
 Rukmini’s term would be extended by one month on the ground of
 “urgent office requirement.”
 The designation field on the salary file could not be left blank.
 Raghav wrote:
 “Temporary Assistance — Last-Line Budget.”
 Rukmini read the file.
 “Is ‘Last Line’ a post?”
 Raghav smiled awkwardly.
 “Not a post.
 An identifier for the budget.”
 “In my appointment letter?”
 “That will still say ‘Temporary Records Assistant.’”
 “So in salary I am one thing, in work a third thing, and in the budget I am
 the last line?”
 Raghav said,
 “Your name will remain the same everywhere.”
 Rukmini read the paper again.
 “It is a good thing for a name to remain.”

Within a month, “last line” became office vocabulary.
Any small task with no clear owner:
“Put it on the last line.”
The list for correcting old telephone numbers:
last line.
Returned post:
last line.
Reconciling attendance at meetings:
last line.
A photocopy of a white ration card stuck between three branches:
last line.
Rukmini’s desk stood near the door of the Establishment Branch.
Earlier people called her by name.
Now many employees said,
“This is a last-line paper.”
The first time she heard it, she laughed.
The second time too.
The third time she said,
“Say the name of the paper.”
But language in an office behaves like a file.
Once it reaches the wrong desk, bringing it back is not easy.
A few days later, the Stores Branch sent a list for repair of five chairs.
Four chairs had room numbers beside them.
Opposite the fifth was nothing.
The Stores Clerk laughed.
“This one is last line too.”
Rukmini returned the list.
“First write where the chair is.”
“You find it.”
“If I find it, will the repair also be entered in my name?”
This time the Stores Clerk did not laugh.
He located the fifth chair and wrote:
“Old Meeting Hall.”
Slowly, Rukmini made a rule for herself:
nothing without a name would move forward until it was given one.
On returned post:
the correct branch.
On an incomplete application:
the missing certificate.
On a new list:
the date.
Because of this, her work sometimes looked slow.
But less of it came back.
One day Bhuvan Babu said,
“You ask too many questions.”
Rukmini replied,

"If I do not ask questions, everything will become the last line."

Bhuvan Babu said nothing.

He liked the sentence.

It also made him uncomfortable.

At the end of the month, the district audit team arrived.

Two officers began reconciling budget heads, vacant posts, temporary appointments, and payments.

The first day was normal.

On the evening of the second, one officer, Prabhakar Sinha, placed a finger on the last page of the staffing register.

"What post is this?"

Raghav answered,

"Clarification pending."

"Can a post itself be clarification pending?"

"The budget has been carried forward from an old line."

"Sanction order?"

Raghav placed the old files before him.

On some pages the total number of posts was twenty-seven.

On others, twenty-eight.

No document clearly gave the name of the final post.

In one ten-year-old statement, the edge of the final cell had torn away.

Directly opposite that torn edge, the salary-budget figure remained.

Prabhakar Sinha asked,

"You are paying salary from this?"

Shyamsundar said,

"For temporary assistance."

"Person?"

"Rukmini Kumari."

"Post?"

Everyone's eyes turned towards Rukmini's desk, although she was not in the room.

The answer to a question about paper had become a person.

Raghav said,

"Temporary Records Assistant."

"Sanction for that post?"

"Temporary requirement order."

"Then why use the budget of the blank line?"

For the previous month, the office had been answering that question through work.

Not through paper.

The audit team did not stop the payment.

But it raised an objection:

"Source of budget line without designation, sanctioned post strength, and lawful head for temporary expenditure to be clarified."

A reply was required within thirty days.

When a copy of the objection arrived, Harinarayan Babu was the first to say,

“See?

That is why a blank line should not be deleted.”

Raghav stared at him.

“The objection came because we kept it.”

“If we had deleted it, the budget would have gone.”

“Is it a budget?

Or only a figure?”

Harinarayan Babu fell silent.

In thirty years of service, those two words had often been treated as the same.

The Establishment Branch began searching old records.

A letter went to the district office.

A copy to the State Directorate.

Four days later, the district replied:

“According to available records, sanctioned post strength is 27.”

The current office register contained twenty-seven clearly identified posts.

The blank final line stood apart.

Bhuvan Babu said,

“Then this is not the twenty-eighth.”

Raghav asked,

“But the budget figure?”

The district Accounts Branch wrote in a second letter that in an old budget statement, a consolidated amount had shifted opposite the final empty cell during tabulation.

It was not a sanction for a separate post.

Through year after year of copying, the figure survived.

Its meaning fell away.

Harinarayan Babu read the letter twice.

“So all these years we have been protecting a shifted number?”

No one blamed him.

No one felt entirely blameless either.

Now Rukmini’s salary question stood clearly before them.

Once the wrong line disappeared, where would the next month’s money come from?

The project had ended.

There was no regular post.

The temporary requirement order would expire in five days.

Rukmini was called into the meeting.

Bhuvan Babu explained the situation.

The words were chosen carefully:

“accounts reconciliation,”

“sanctioned head,”

“reallocation,”

“extension presently uncertain.”

Rukmini listened to everything.

Then asked,

“Should I come next month?”

Bhuvan Babu said,

“It is not certain yet.”

“So again, how many days does ‘difficult’ mean?”

It was the same question she had asked a month earlier.

This time Bhuvan Babu did not look at the paper.

“We will give you a written answer within seven days.”

Rukmini nodded.

“All right.

Until then, I will finish whatever work is in my name.”

During those seven days, the office prepared a list of Rukmini’s work for the first time.

Making the list turned out to be difficult.

The Establishment Branch claimed mail classification.

The Social Assistance Branch claimed assistance applications.

The Receipt Branch claimed returned letters.

The Records Branch claimed digital reconciliation.

Every branch said the work was necessary.

None said the full-time post belonged to it.

Adding up the list, Raghav said,

“The last line was really the space between all the other lines.”

Shyamsundar said,

“A space does not pay salary.”

“But work kept coming out of it.”

A new proposal was sent to the district office:

a six-month “Temporary Records and Receipt Assistance” service, with a clear list of duties.

The money was requested not from the old blank line, but from the approved combined savings under ongoing records digitisation and receipt-improvement heads.

The amount was lower than before.

Rukmini was shown the proposal.

She asked,

“Why is the pay lower?”

Shyamsundar answered plainly,

“That is all that is available under the lawful head.”

Rukmini thought for a while.

“Is less work written too?”

Raghav looked at the list.

Two parts of her old work had indeed been removed:

reconciling attendance at meetings,

and incomplete Stores lists.

Rukmini said,

“Then it is fine.

As much pay as there is written work.

Do not add 'last line' again later."

Bhuvan Babu smiled.

"This time we will ask before adding anything."

Approval arrived on the evening of the fifth day.

Six months.

A clear designation.

Defined duties.

Lower pay.

Rukmini returned the following Monday.

Her desk remained where it had been.

But above it was a small nameplate:

"RUKMINI

KUMARI

TEMPORARY RECORDS AND RECEIPT ASSISTANCE."

That day the revised annual staffing register was printed too.

The final blank line had been removed.

Below it was a note:

"In previous copy, final blank line resulted from printing/table-shift error; not a separately sanctioned post."

Harinarayan Babu stared at the page for a long time.

"After so many years, deleting one line feels wrong."

Raghav said,

"The paper has become lighter."

"Post strength?"

"Twenty-seven.

What it always was."

Harinarayan Babu closed the page.

His face showed less relief than the grief of habit.

Sometimes a person becomes attached not to an error, but to having known it for a long time.

At noon a returned letter arrived.

The branch name on the envelope was incomplete.

The recipient's village was correct.

As before, attendant Ramsevak placed it on Rukmini's desk and said,

"This is last line."

Rukmini picked up the envelope.

In pencil she wrote the correct branch name on top.

Entered it in the receipt register.

And handed it back to Ramsevak.

"Not last line," she said.

"Receipt Branch."

Ramsevak read the name, nodded, and walked away.

Rukmini straightened the new nameplate on her desk.

The last page of the staffing register hanging on the wall was now one line shorter.

Her name was not on that page.

It was on the separate list for temporary employees, with the period clearly stated.

The list was thinner than the staffing register.

But not a single line in it was blank.

STORY 161

PRESENT IN THREE PLACES

The first time Jagdish Paswan was told that he was present in three places at the same time, he found it absurd.

The notice had arrived at the rented room in town.

Sushma had returned from college and opened the envelope.

At the top was the name of the District Integrated Eligibility-Matching Cell.

Below, in black letters, it said:

“Person bearing the same identity number identified with simultaneous permanent presence at three separate locations. Educational assistance withheld pending verification.”

Sushma did not fully understand the sentence.

But she understood “educational assistance withheld.”

She was in the second year of her undergraduate course.

The next instalment of the scholarship was supposed to cover the college fee and two months’ worth of books.

Jagdish began his night duty at the gate of the Agricultural Seed Depot at eight in the evening.

During the day he usually slept for three or four hours, then went sometimes to the village, sometimes to the rented room in town, sometimes to the market for errands.

His mother, Dulari Devi, lived in the ancestral village near Kamtaul.

His wife Devki and daughter Sushma rented a single room in town because the college was far from the village.

Twice a week Jagdish ate dinner at the town room and then went to the depot.

Three or four days a month he stayed in the village, though even on those days he still had to reach the depot on time for duty.

To him, the three places existed for three different reasons.

To the papers, perhaps all three had become the same thing.

The next morning, after finishing duty, Jagdish went straight to the District Integrated Eligibility-Matching Cell.

The office was new.

The building was old.

A blue board on the veranda wall read:

“Integration of Family, Residence and Eligibility Records.”

Inside were five desks, two computers, one printer, and three tall piles of paper in a corner.

An assistant named Premlata Jha examined his notice.

She was not reading the sheet.

She was searching the computer screen.

“Identity number?”

Jagdish gave it.
 Premlata entered the number.
 Three red marks appeared on the screen.
 “The problem is clear here,” she said.
 “It is not clear to me,” Jagdish replied.
 Premlata read the first line.
 “Village Family Register: Permanent Member, Ward Seven, Kamtaul.”
 The second:
 “Municipal Tenant Survey: Head of Family, Ward Eighteen.”
 The third:
 “Agricultural Seed Depot Night Attendance: Mandatory Night Presence on Premises.”
 Jagdish smiled.
 “All three are correct.”
 Premlata looked up.
 “How can all three permanent presences be correct at the same time?”
 “Not at the same time.
 My home is in the village.
 I rent a room in town because my daughter studies there.
 At night I guard the depot.”
 “Then which is the permanent place?”
 “The village.”
 “Current place?”
 Jagdish thought.
 “Are you asking about the day or the night?”
 Premlata did not laugh.
 Perhaps the system had no answer for that question either.
 She put a finger on the third line.
 “We will have to see why ‘mandatory night presence on premises’ has entered a residence source.
 But for now, the scholarship is blocked.
 Have one of these three records identified as wrong.”
 “Which one is wrong?”
 “You tell us.”
 Jagdish’s smile faded.
 “If I say the village is wrong, will my name be removed from my mother’s family register?”
 “It might.”
 “If I say the town is wrong, the tenant verification changes?”
 “That too.”
 “If I say the depot is wrong, what happens to my job attendance?”
 “That attendance is a separate matter.
 But the source is linked in the integrated register.”
 Jagdish folded the paper.
 “So, from among three true things, I must choose one lie?”
 “This is not asking you to choose a lie,” Premlata said after a pause.

"We need one primary residence."

"My life does not run by first asking for a primary residence."

Premlata looked at the piles of paper.

"Our system does."

There was less rudeness than weariness in her answer.

Jagdish understood that someone on her side of the desk was trapped too.

Premlata wrote down a list of three proofs:

a certified copy of the village family register,

proof of the town tenancy,

and a certificate describing the nature of his depot duty.

"Bring all three."

Then we can propose that the meanings of the sources be separated."

Jagdish kept the list.

As he walked out, the matter struck him as genuinely funny for a moment:

to prove the offence of being present in three places, he had to bring evidence from all three.

The village certificate seemed easiest.

Panchayat Assistant Ramvilas had known him since childhood.

Dulari Devi was drying makhana in the courtyard when Jagdish arrived.

"Papers again?" his mother asked.

"This time I have to prove where I live."

"Ask me."

I will tell them."

At the Panchayat office, Ramvilas opened the old family register.

Jagdish's name, his wife, his daughter, his mother—

all under one family number.

"The certificate can be made," Ramvilas said.

"I will write:

'Shri Jagdish Paswan is a permanent resident of this village.'"

Jagdish paused.

"Permanent resident is correct.

But I do not sleep here at night."

Ramvilas stopped his pen.

"Permanent resident does not mean where you sleep at night."

"The district office may be understanding it that way."

"Then they are understanding it wrongly.

I cannot change the language of the certificate."

"Can you write 'ancestral resident'?"

Ramvilas shook his head.

"The template has no such option.

Permanent or temporary."

Jagdish chose permanent.

It was true.

But the sentence of truth was a little harder than what he actually needed.

The town tenancy certificate proved more difficult.

Landlord Shyamsundar Sahu brought out the tenant-verification copy. Jagdish was listed as “head of family.”

“It was made in your name,” Shyamsundar said.

“You were the one who signed the agreement when I rented you the room.”

“I stay here very few nights.”

“What does that matter to me?

The rent arrives on time.”

“Write in the certificate that my wife and daughter live here.”

Shyamsundar pushed his spectacles up his nose.

“The municipal form says:

‘So-and-so, together with family, resides at this address as tenant.’

That is the sentence I certify.

If I write something different, they will ask for another verification.”

Again Jagdish signed a sentence that was not false.

But it was not complete either.

The depot certificate turned out to be the strangest.

Depot In-Charge Narendra Babu read the notice and laughed heartily.

“Now the government is treating a guard’s attendance as his home?”

Jagdish said,

“Stop laughing.

Sushma’s scholarship is stuck.”

Narendra Babu became serious.

He brought out the duty order.

It said:

“Mandatory presence on premises from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.; leaving the premises during duty hours shall constitute misconduct.”

“Shall I give this?”

Jagdish read the line.

“This is the very line that caused the problem.”

“But what lie should I write?

You are here at night.”

“I guard here.”

“You are here too.”

“I do not sleep.”

Narendra Babu smiled.

“Sometimes your eyes close on the chair.”

Jagdish looked at him.

“Shall we put that in the certificate too?”

Both laughed.

But Jagdish’s laughter shortened when he remembered Sushma’s fee.

In the end Narendra Babu wrote:

“Shri Jagdish Paswan is a contractual night guard. His night presence is purely work-related; the depot premises are not his residential address.”

He attached a copy of the duty order beneath it.

Jagdish returned to the district office with all three certificates.

Premlata read them one by one.

“Village — permanent resident.

Town — residence with family.

Depot — mandatory presence for nine hours at night.”

“And below it says the depot is not my residential address,” Jagdish said.

“Yes.

But the integrated system reads the principal line.

The remark has to be opened separately.”

“Then why is the remark there?”

Premlata said nothing.

She scanned all three papers.

The red marks on the screen did not turn green.

Instead a new message appeared:

“Physical verification required due to multi-location claim.”

Jagdish kept looking at the screen.

“I have given proof from all three places.

Now they will go to all three and look again?”

“More or less.”

“On the same day?”

“The teams may be different.”

“Do I have to be there too?”

“It is better if the person is found during verification.”

Jagdish laughed.

“Then you will have to cut me into three pieces.”

This time Premlata laughed.

Then immediately became serious again.

“You do not have to sit in all three places.

A family member or relevant person can confirm.”

“Does the system understand that too?”

Premlata did not answer.

The verification took place on Wednesday.

Jagdish had not been told the date in advance.

The rule was that surprise inspection was considered more reliable.

The team reached the village at half past ten.

Dulari Devi was in the courtyard.

“Where is Jagdish?” the verifier asked.

“He has gone to town.”

“Does he live here?”

“His home is here.”

“Where does he live now?”

Dulari Devi tried to understand the difference between the questions.

“His work is in town.

At night he stays at the depot.

When he is free, he comes here.”

The verifier wrote:

“Person absent at time of visit; family states work location in urban area.”

Dulari Devi said,
 "Write absent.
 But the house is his."
 The verifier smiled.
 "Mother, I am writing what I saw."
 The team reached the rented room in town at two.
 Devki was inside.
 Sushma was at college.
 "Jagdish Paswan?"
 "He has gone towards the depot."
 "So early?"
 His duty starts at eight, doesn't it?"
 "He had market work first, then some office papers to deal with."
 "Does he live here regularly?"
 Irritation came over Devki's face.
 "What does regularly mean?"
 He pays the rent.
 He brings some of the provisions.
 He eats here two or three times a week.
 He has night guard duty, so how can he stay here at night?"
 The verifier wrote:
 "Person absent at time of visit; wife states nighttime residence at workplace."
 By then Devki understood that the sentence could go in the wrong direction.
 "Not nighttime residence.
 Duty."
 The verifier struck a line through "residence" and wrote "presence."
 The crossed-out word remained legible.
 The third team reached the Agricultural Depot at four.
 Ramcharit, the day watchman, was at the gate.
 "Jagdish Paswan?"
 "He comes at eight at night."
 "Now?"
 "Not now."
 "Does he live here?"
 Ramcharit laughed.
 "Until five in the morning.
 Then he leaves."
 "Residence?"
 "What residence?"
 A gate, a chair, a lantern, a key."
 The verifier looked inside the small guard room.
 There was a cot.
 But sacks containing grain samples were stacked on it.
 "Does he sleep here?"

"If it rains very heavily, sometimes he leans back for a couple of hours. He also has to make rounds during duty."

The report recorded:

"Person absent at time of visit; no permanent evidence of premises being used residentially."

That Wednesday night Jagdish signed at the gate at eight, as usual.

He had already received news of all three inspections in separate phone calls.

His mother said,

"I told them the house is yours."

Devki said,

"They were writing night duty as residence."

Narendra Babu said,

"The team came during the day and asked where the night guard was."

Jagdish sat in the gate chair and laughed for a long time.

Ramcharit could not understand.

"What happened?"

"All day people looked for me in three places.

They did not find me in any of them."

"But you are here now."

"I am here now.

Tomorrow the report will understand."

Three days later Premlata Jha telephoned.

"Come to the office once."

"Has the scholarship opened?"

"Not yet."

When Jagdish arrived, the red marks on the screen had turned yellow.

At the top it said:

"Residential presence unverified."

Jagdish read slowly.

"First I was in three places.

Now I am nowhere?"

Premlata leaned back in her chair.

"The reports say you were absent at all three places at the time of visit."

"If the team had told me the time, they would have found me."

"The rule requires surprise verification."

"Does sudden life also run according to rules?"

Premlata was silent.

She opened all three reports.

Village — absent.

Town — absent.

Depot — absent.

Different employees had written the three reports.

Yet the sentences were almost identical.

"The strange thing," Premlata said, "is that earlier the system said you were in three places at the same time.

After verification it says you are nowhere.”

Jagdish said,

“Between those places I am often on the bus.

Perhaps the bus is my permanent home.”

Premlata smiled.

“Do not say that.

If the transport register gets linked, a fourth place will open.”

For the first time both laughed openly.

When the laughter ended, Sushma’s scholarship returned to the table.

“Deadline?” Premlata asked.

“Twelve days.”

Premlata looked again at the details of the three sources.

This time she read the names of the fields, not merely their values.

In the village family register, the column was:

“Permanent Family Affiliation.”

In the municipal survey:

“Current Family Address.”

In the depot register:

“Mandatory Presence During Duty Hours.”

The integrated system had extracted only the final concepts—

“presence,”

“address,”

“resident”—

and placed all three in one category.

She called Assistant Officer Ratanmohan Mishra.

Ratanmohan was fifty-five and read rules so habitually that people sometimes thought him timid.

In truth, he tried to see the possible consequences of a paper before they arrived.

Premlata showed him the three lines.

“The meanings of the sources are different.

The integration has made the categories one.”

Ratanmohan removed his spectacles and placed them on the desk.

“This scheme works on the principle of one person — one current address.”

“The current address can be the town.

The village is the permanent family address.

The depot is work-related presence.”

“There is no option called ‘work-related presence’ in the system.”

“Then why is the depot source being included in residence matching at all?”

Ratanmohan looked at the screen.

“The District Information Cell added all ‘person-presence sources.’

Perhaps because it saw the word presence.”

Jagdish spoke from between them.

“My job requires me to be present at night.

That means I am also required to be absent from home at night.”

Ratanmohan looked at him.

The sentence was perhaps clearer than the rulebook.

“Are you prepared to treat the town address as your current address?”

Jagdish said,

“Devki and Sushma live there.

I am there during the day sometimes, sometimes I go to the village, and at night I am on duty.

If you want to call it current, call it current.”

“And the village family register?”

“My mother is alone there.

The ancestral house, land, ration records—all are there.

It would not be right to remove my name.”

“No removal is necessary,” Premlata said.

“It can remain as permanent family affiliation.”

Ratanmohan frowned.

“Through a manual remark?”

“Yes.”

“The next integration will raise the red mark again.”

“Then send the Information Cell a request to change the source category.”

Ratanmohan exhaled lightly.

“For one scholarship, change an entire source category?”

Premalata answered directly.

“One scholarship made the error visible.

The error is not confined to one family.”

She opened the list behind the third red marker.

There were forty-two people in the district with the same problem:

night guards,

hospital attendants,

hostel staff,

pump operators,

railway night workers—

people whose work-related night presence had been linked as a residence source.

Ratanmohan’s face changed.

This was no longer merely Jagdish’s private difficulty.

“Why were the forty-two not checked earlier?”

Premalata said,

“The one whose benefit got blocked came here.

The others may be on their way.”

Ratanmohan sat upright.

“Write to the Information Cell.

For this case, make a manual decision now.

But the reason must be clear.”

Premalata opened a file.

She wrote the heading:

“Regarding Separation of Residential and Work-Related Presence Sources.”

Jagdish looked at the long heading.

“Will my daughter be able to study because of that line?”

“After that line, four signatures are required.”

Jagdish did not laugh.

By now he had learned the arithmetic of the office.

The first signature was Ratanmohan’s.

The second from the Scheme Branch.

The third from the Scholarship Branch.

The fourth, approval from the Information Cell.

The problem was that the Information Cell replied:

“Change of source category is a systemic matter; deferred until the next update.”

The scholarship deadline was nine days away.

Premlata looked for another route.

In the rules she found a line:

“In the event of a clear source discrepancy, the competent authority may accept a certified current family address and restore provisional eligibility.”

Ratanmohan said,

“The competent authority is the Deputy Director.”

The Deputy Director sat at district headquarters two days a week.

His next sitting was five days away.

Jagdish waited five days.

Meanwhile Sushma kept asking the college about the fee deadline.

Devki said,

“If necessary, borrow from the moneylender.”

Jagdish refused.

Last year’s debt was still not fully repaid.

From the village, Dulari Devi said,

“Sell the paddy I have left.”

Jagdish refused that too.

There was irritation inside him because the money was stuck.

But more humiliating than the money was the fact that although every paper was correct, he had to explain the geography of his own life.

The day the Deputy Director came, the office was crowded.

Jagdish arrived early in the morning.

Premlata had prepared the file:

three certificates,

three site-verification reports,

the source-category table,

the scholarship deadline,

and the list of forty-two similar cases.

Deputy Director Arunesh Jha stopped at one point as he read.

“The person was absent in all three verifications?”

“Yes,” Jagdish said.

“Then how is the current address established?”

Premlata answered,

“Through family, tenancy, and daily activity.

A site visit captures only the moment of the day.”

Arunesh Jha asked Jagdish,

“Where do you usually sleep at night?”

Jagdish remained silent for a moment.

The question was simple.

But the answer could again become paper.

“On nights when I am on duty, sleeping at the depot is not permitted.

I remain on the chair.

At dawn I go sometimes to town, sometimes to the village.

On my day off, I am at home.”

“Which home?”

Jagdish looked at the Deputy Director’s face.

“That is the very question everyone has been asking for six days.”

A faint silence settled over the room.

Arunesh Jha was not offended.

He read the file again.

He wrote:

“Permanent family location: village.

Current family location: town.

Work-related presence: depot.

These shall be treated as three distinct categories.

Scholarship eligibility restored immediately.

Information Cell to examine exclusion of work-related sources from residence matching.”

He signed it.

Jagdish was astonished that what he had said in one sentence on the first day had required nine days, three certificates, three inspections, five offices, and forty-two similar people before it could reach the paper.

When the order reached the Scholarship Branch, one more difficulty arose.

The system still showed a yellow marker.

The employee said,

“Payment cannot move until the digital hold is removed.”

Premlata went herself to the branch carrying a copy of the order.

“The rules allow manual restoration.”

The employee opened the book.

They found the line.

He said,

“All right.

But reason code?”

“Source discrepancy.”

“That code is not in the list.

There is ‘Address Incomplete,’ ‘Family Change,’ ‘Duplicate Record,’ and ‘Other.’”

Premlata selected:

“Other.”

Jagdish thought that his entire life had finally fitted into “Other.”

Two days later Sushma’s scholarship money reached the college account.

She telephoned and said only,

“Babu, it is done.”

There was relief in her voice.

Not victory.

Jagdish was at the depot gate.

“Concentrate on your studies,” he said.

Then put the phone back in his pocket.

The matter could have ended there.

But the flaw in the integrated system was not confined to Jagdish’s file.

Premlata kept working through the list of forty-two cases.

In some, the source was hospital night duty.

In others, hostel watch duty.

In others, night presence at an irrigation pump.

In all of them, the word “presence” had been pulled into the system as though it meant residence.

Three weeks later, the Information Cell released a correction.

“Presence” arriving from work-related registers would no longer be included in residence matching.

Old records would be matched again.

Premlata telephoned Jagdish.

“Your yellow marker has disappeared.”

“Where am I now?”

“Village: permanent family.

Town: current family.

Depot: work-related.”

“Three lines?”

“Three lines.

But one person.”

Jagdish was silent for a few moments.

“Could this not have been understood earlier?”

Premlata said,

“The system counted words.

Not meanings.”

That evening Jagdish went to the rented room in town.

Sushma was putting the scholarship receipt inside a book.

Devki had put lentils on the stove.

Jagdish ate.

At 7:20 he left.

He walked to the bus stand, then took a shared vehicle.

At 8:02 he reached the Agricultural Depot gate and signed the attendance register.

His name appeared only once against the time.

Far away in the village, Dulari Devi was putting out the hearth.

In the town room, Sushma sat down with her book open.

At the depot gate, Jagdish fastened the key at his waist and rose to make his first round.

The papers now had separate names for all three places.

Jagdish, at that moment, was in only one.

STORY 162

THE OPEN BRANCH IN A CLOSED ROOM

In the old building of the District Integrated Certificate Centre, Room Number Twenty-Seven stood at the end of the last corridor.

Above its door hung a tin board:

“Family-Dependent Certificate Branch.”

Below the board was a wooden doorframe, an iron cupboard on the left, and three desks on the right.

Three employees sat there every day:

Senior Assistant Naresh Jha,

Clerk Revati Kumari,

and Digital Assistant Chandan Paswan.

But on the building’s fire-safety plan, the space where Room Twenty-Seven should have been was marked by a black square.

Inside the square were the words:

“PERMANENTLY CLOSED.”

For a long time, no one noticed the contradiction.

The employees thought of the fire-safety plan merely as a coloured sheet hanging at the turn of the staircase.

Visitors looked at the branch sign.

The certificates did not carry a room number.

So the work continued.

One Monday morning a fire-safety inspection team arrived.

The team consisted of Deputy Fire Officer Nirmal Singh, Building Branch Engineer Ashutosh Mishra, and District Office Administrative Assistant Meena Jha.

They were to reconcile the rooms, exits, fire extinguishers, and electrical points with the building plan.

As they matched the first-floor plan, room by room, the team reached the final corridor.

Nirmal Singh placed a finger on the plan.

“There is no room ahead here.”

Meena Jha looked straight in front of her.

The door was open.

Inside, Revati was reading an elderly woman’s papers.

Chandan had an application open on his computer screen.

Naresh was closing the stamp box.

Ashutosh Mishra looked again at the plan.

“Room Twenty-Seven is permanently closed.”

Naresh smiled.

“The door is open.”

Nirmal Singh did not smile.

“It is closed on the plan.”

The elderly woman sitting before Revati, Chameli Devi, began looking from one person to another.

Her husband had been an attendant at a Panchayat school.

After his death, she needed a dependent-family certificate for settlement of the remaining service dues.

Revati gathered the papers and said,

“Please remain seated.

It is an inspection.”

Chameli Devi asked softly,

“Have I come to the wrong room?”

Before answering, Revati looked at the plan.

“Your work is in the correct room,” she said.

Nirmal Singh measured the width of the doorway.

Then he examined the windows inside.

One window was half blocked with bricks.

Outside the second was an old iron grille.

“Rear exit?”

Naresh said,

“There is none.”

“That may be why the room was marked closed.”

Ashutosh Mishra opened the old building register.

He found a repair note from five years earlier:

“Room 27 in western wing out of use until fire-exit improvement.”

“Was the improvement carried out?” Nirmal Singh asked.

Naresh looked towards the corner of the ceiling.

“I have been here three years.”

Revati said,

“I have been sitting here four years.”

Chandan said,

“Since my appointment.”

Ashutosh Mishra checked the date of the remark.

“So the branch continued operating here even after the room was marked out of use.”

Meena Jha asked,

“When did the branch move here?”

Naresh tried to remember.

The branch had originally been in Room Fourteen.

During the rains, the roof leaked.

After papers were soaked one year, the officer then in charge made an oral arrangement for the branch to sit in Room Twenty-Seven for seven days.

Seven days had become three years.

“Written relocation order?” Meena asked.

Naresh shook his head.

“None found.”

“Then how are all of you here?”

Naresh looked around.

Three desks.
 Five cupboards.
 Computers connected by wires.
 Stamps.
 Receipt registers.
 A holiday list on the wall.
 "By continuing to work."
 Nirmal Singh wrote on a small sheet:
 "Unauthorised occupancy."

The two words entered the room like a fourth employee who had suddenly come and taken a seat.

Chameli Devi placed a hand over her file.
 "Babu, will this affect my papers?"
 Naresh answered at once,
 "No."

Nirmal Singh looked at him.
 "Do not issue the certificate yet.
 The safety position must first be clarified."
 Chameli Devi's face fell.

Revati said,
 "Her application has been complete for three weeks.
 Today is only the final reconciliation."

"I am not ordering that a citizen's application be stopped," Nirmal Singh said.

"I am questioning the use of the room."
 Naresh said quietly,
 "Our work happens in the room."
 "Then shift the work temporarily elsewhere."
 "Where?"

No one on the inspection team had an answer.
 The team moved on.

Chameli Devi asked,
 "Should I come again tomorrow?"
 Revati opened her papers.

"No.
 Sit."

Naresh wanted to say something, but Revati placed the final page of the application in front of him.

"All the proofs are complete."

Naresh read the file.
 The school's death notification.
 Family register.
 Bank details.
 Panchayat verification.
 Everything was correct.
 He signed.

Chandan generated the digital certificate.

The seal was affixed.

Chameli Devi took the paper in both hands.

At the top was the District Officer's emblem.

Below it, the branch's digital number.

"This is valid, isn't it?"

Naresh said,

"Yes."

Revati's eyes moved to the fire-safety plan hanging outside the doorway.

That afternoon an administrative meeting was held.

The problem was put in simple words:

"A branch is operating in a room marked closed on the safety plan."

The solution to the simple sentence was not simple.

The Building Branch said that changing the plan required improvement of the fire exit, electrical testing, wall measurements, and fresh approval.

The Accounts Branch said there was no money left that year for building improvement.

General Administration said there was no alternative room to move the branch into.

Ramanath Chaudhary, In-Charge of the Integrated Certificate Centre, said,

"Then the branch will continue here, but the status of the room will be treated as temporary."

Ashutosh Mishra asked,

"For how many days is temporary?"

Ramanath Chaudhary said,

"Until an alternative arrangement is made."

"There has been no alternative arrangement for three years."

"So the temporary period is long."

No one laughed.

At last an order was drafted:

"The Family-Dependent Certificate Branch shall continue to function as before as a temporary work point.

Room 27 shall not be treated as part of the building's permanent occupancy."

Naresh read the order.

"The work will remain.

The room will not."

Revati said,

"And us?"

"We will remain with the work."

Chandan laughed.

"And the chairs?"

Naresh read the second line:

"No increase in permanent furniture shall be made."

From that day, the life of Room Twenty-Seven changed.

The work did not.

The first problem was the fan.

The fan on the right began groaning as it turned.

Revati submitted a slip to the Building Maintenance Branch.

The next day it came back:

“Room 27 not included in permanent occupancy list; asset number unavailable.”

Revati placed the slip on Naresh’s desk.

“Will the fan give temporary air too?”

Naresh brought an old table fan from home.

The second problem was the fire extinguisher.

The inspection team had said an additional extinguisher was required near the room.

Stores wrote:

“Separate extinguisher cannot be issued for a closed room.”

Nirmal Singh’s objection remained.

A solution was found.

The extinguisher was issued in the name of the corridor and placed beside the door of Room Twenty-Seven.

Chandan read its label:

“Western Corridor — One.”

“Everything we have is in someone else’s name,” he said.

Revati replied,

“Only the certificates are in our own name.”

That was true.

On paper, the office code of the Family-Dependent Certificate Branch was valid.

The digital signature was valid.

The seal was valid.

Certificates issued by it were instantly verifiable on the state verification network.

Only the branch’s physical location was unclear.

Two weeks later, that uncertainty returned with Chameli Devi.

The Treasury had accepted her certificate.

But the school’s service-settlement branch demanded additional site verification because the “Office Contact” list printed on the back of the certificate had no room number for the Family-Dependent Certificate Branch.

Chameli Devi came again.

“You said the paper was correct.

Now they are asking where it came from.”

Revati checked the certificate’s digital number.

A green mark appeared on the screen:

“VALID.”

“The problem is not with the certificate.”

Chameli Devi said wearily,

“Then is the problem with me?”

“No.”

“Then whose?”

Revati looked at the plan outside the door.

“The place.”

Chameli Devi asked again,

“Is the place wrong or the paper?”

Revati did not answer.

Naresh wrote a verification letter:

“Certificate No. ... has been issued by the authorised Family-Dependent Certificate Branch of this Centre.”

Chameli Devi asked,

“Room number?”

Naresh’s pen stopped.

According to the order, Room Twenty-Seven was not to be treated as part of permanent occupancy.

If Naresh wrote the room number while sitting in that very room, he would contradict the order.

If he did not, the verification would remain incomplete.

He wrote:

“Western wing, temporary work point.”

Chameli Devi read the line.

“Where is that?”

Naresh pointed towards the doorway.

“Here.”

“Then why is there no number?”

Naresh tried to smile.

“A number is a very permanent thing.”

Chameli Devi did not laugh.

She had to catch the bus to the school.

A month later came the day of the fire-safety drill.

At 12:10 the alarm rang.

All employees were to reach the open ground by the nearest safe route.

Revati closed two visitors’ files like Chameli Devi’s and stood up.

Chandan tried to shut down the computer.

Naresh said,

“Leave it.

It is only a drill.”

All three went out through the corridor.

In the field, counting began branch by branch.

Room Fourteen — four.

Room Fifteen — five.

Accounts Branch — seven.

Receipt — three.

The Family-Dependent Certificate Branch did not appear on the list.

Revati went to Meena Jha.

"Where do the three of us get counted?"

Meena checked the list.

"Your posts are under the Integrated Certificate Centre."

"Then count us in the Centre."

The Centre's list contained all three names.

But against the location it said:

"Room Fourteen"—

the old branch location.

The In-Charge of Room Fourteen said,

"They do not sit there."

Nirmal Singh stood in the middle of the ground reconciling the total.

According to the employee register:

fifty-seven.

In the field:

sixty.

"Why are there three extra?"

Meena Jha looked at Naresh, Revati, and Chandan.

"These three are from the temporary work point."

"Which work point?"

"Western wing."

Nirmal Singh stopped his pencil on the drill sheet.

"On the plan, that room in the western wing is closed."

Naresh said,

"Then perhaps the three of us are extra."

Nirmal Singh looked at him.

This time his face carried something that might have been laughter or fatigue.

"In a fire, there are no extra people," he said.

For the first time in the entire matter, the sentence sounded to Naresh more like something about human beings than about rules.

The drill report stated:

"Three unlisted occupants found during evacuation count."

For two days the phrase "unlisted occupants" circulated through the office.

Chandan pasted a paper label on his tea cup:

"UNLISTED OCCUPANT 3."

Revati said,

"Joke less.

The report may get the branch closed again."

"It is already closed on the plan."

"The work may be closed."

The weight of that possibility fell on everyone at once.

An average of fifty-eight applications reached the branch each day.

Widow assistance.

Service settlement.

Scholarships.

Dependent appointments.

Family payments.

Many kinds of work depended on that certificate.

If the branch was closed, no one knew where people would go.

At the next meeting, three proposals were made.

First:

temporarily run the branch from the veranda.

Nirmal Singh said,

“The veranda is an evacuation route.

No desks there.”

Second:

divide the three employees among separate rooms.

Revati asked,

“Will a visitor go through three rooms for one application?”

Third:

correct the plan for Room Twenty-Seven.

The Building Branch raised the budget issue again.

Ramanath Chaudhary held his head.

“Such a large question for one small branch?”

Nirmal Singh said calmly,

“The question is not the size of the branch.

Fire does not come after reading a plan.”

The meeting was silent for a while.

At last a fourth possibility emerged.

Below the brick-blocked rear window of Room Twenty-Seven, the outline of an old service door was discovered.

On an older building plan, a small door opening outward had once existed there.

Later, when the area behind it was converted into storage, the door had been bricked up.

Ashutosh Mishra said,

“If we reopen this exit, carry out an electrical test, and correct the doorway width, the room can be brought back into the occupancy list.”

Ramanath Chaudhary asked,

“How much will it cost?”

The amount was not as much as everyone had imagined.

The problem was not the money.

It was the heading under which approval would be sought.

If money was requested for repair of a closed room, the question would arise:

why repair a closed room?

If repair of an operating branch was written, the question would arise:

where is the branch on the plan?

Three days were spent only on the heading of the proposal.

At last Revati suggested one line:

“Restoration of Evacuation Route and Workplace Safety Improvement in Western Wing.”

The heading mentioned neither Room Twenty-Seven nor the branch.
 The proposal was approved.
 For two weeks, work continued amid hammers, dust, and bricks.
 The employees sat in one half of Room Twenty-Seven during the day.
 Masons worked in the other.

Visitors asked,
 “Is the branch closed?”

Revati said,
 “No.

The wall is opening.”

Chandan said,

“In an office, the difference between those two things is difficult to understand.”

On the day the new exit door opened, direct air entered the room for the first time.

Sitting in his chair, Naresh could see the leaves of the neem tree outside.

For four years, sky had existed behind that wall.

On the branch’s papers, it had only been a closed portion.

Nirmal Singh returned for inspection.

He measured the doorway.

Checked the electrical-test report.

Read the date on the fire extinguisher.

“Now the plan will change,” he said.

Meena Jha brought the draft of the new plan.

The black square was gone.

Room Twenty-Seven appeared in clear lines.

Inside, in small letters:

“Family-Dependent Certificate Branch.”

Revati kept looking at the plan.

“Do we exist now?”

Nirmal Singh said,

“You do on the plan.”

Chandan asked,

“And before?”

Nirmal Singh thought for a few moments.

“Before, you did not exist in the fire-safety register.”

Naresh laughed.

“And all the certificates?”

“They were valid under their own rules.”

The answer was like the whole affair:

correct,

but not comforting.

That afternoon Chameli Devi came to the branch for the third time.

This time she carried no file.

Only a small paper bag.

The school dues had been released.

She had brought jaggery.
Revati refused to accept it.
Chameli Devi said,
“Then all of you share it.
My work is done.”

Outside the door she saw the new plan.
“Now the number is written here too.”
Naresh said,
“Yes.”

Chameli Devi laughed.
“Good.

Last time I went home and told my son:
the paper is correct, but the place it came from is temporary.
He said, ‘Mother, what kind of thing is that?’
What could I explain?”
She left.

In the evening Revati asked for a ladder to take down the old fire-safety plan.

The Building Branch employee said,
“Do not throw away the old plan.
It has to be deposited for the record.”
The sheet with the black square was carefully folded.
Across the top, in pencil, someone wrote:
“Previous position.”

Chandan kept looking at it.
“In the previous position the room was closed.”

Revati said,
“But we were working there.”
Naresh stood for a few moments holding the old plan.
“So was the paper wrong?” Chandan asked.
Naresh shook his head.
“No.

It was incomplete.”
“An incomplete paper ran the whole building for four years.”

Naresh placed the old plan inside the records envelope.

“In an office, sometimes the incomplete statement is treated as the most complete of all.”

The next morning Room Twenty-Seven opened on time.

One leaf of the doorway was old.

The other was the new exit.

Inside, all three employees sat at their own desks.

The first visitor was a young man.

He carried an application for a dependent certificate after his father’s death.

He looked at the new plan outside.

Then at the sign above the doorway.

“Is the Family-Dependent Branch here?”

Revati said,

“Yes.

Here.”

The young man entered and sat down.

He asked for no proof that the room really existed.

STORY 163

A SECOND NAME FOR PRONUNCIATION

When a new voice-based attendance machine was installed at the District Rural Water Quality Office, the first thing people gave it was not their faces, but their voices.

The device looked like a small black box on a table.

A green light sat on top.

Beside it was a tiny microphone opening.

Every morning, employees had to stand before it and say their name and employee number.

The trainer had instructed them:

“Say your name exactly as it appears in your service book.”

On the first day, the rule seemed simple to everyone.

“Madhukar Mishra, Employee Number One Hundred Forty-Nine.”

The green light came on.

“Usha Kumari, Employee Number Two Hundred Thirteen.”

The green light came on.

When his turn came, Kshemnarayan Jha stepped forward.

“Kshemnarayan Jha, Employee Number Four Hundred Seventy-Two.”

The black box remained silent for two seconds.

Then a small voice said:

“Name does not match. Please repeat.”

Kshemnarayan tried again.

“Kshemnarayan Jha. Employee Number Four Hundred Seventy-Two.”

This time the machine displayed:

“Sem Narayan Ja.”

A smile appeared on Madhukar’s face behind him.

Kshemnarayan turned.

Madhukar suppressed it.

On the third attempt the machine produced:

“Chhem Narayan Jha.”

On the fourth:

“Semnarayan Ja.”

On the fifth attempt the machine said:

“Attempt limit exceeded.”

That day a red mark appeared beside Kshemnarayan’s name in the attendance register:

“UNVERIFIED.”

Kshemnarayan was fifty-one years old.

His name had been the same in his service book since the day of his first appointment.

The same on his school certificate.

The same on his bank papers.

The same on his voter slip.
 He had never considered his name difficult.
 The problem belonged, for the first time, to a machine.
 But in an office, whoever owns the problem, the form is always filled by a human being.
 That afternoon Meena Jha of the Administration Branch said,
 "The trainer is still here for two days.
 Your name sample can be given again."
 Kshemnarayan went to the training room.
 There, Amarjeet, a machine-support assistant from Patna, sat with a computer open.
 "Say your name."
 Kshemnarayan said it.
 Amarjeet watched the screen.
 "It is getting stuck on 'Kshe.'"
 "I am not getting stuck."
 Amarjeet did not laugh.
 He was accustomed to such answers.
 "For machine training, we can keep an easier pronunciation.
 Your name will not change.
 It is only a voice cue."
 "What is easier?"
 "Whatever the machine captures clearly."
 Amarjeet made him say "Kshemnarayan" three times.
 Then:
 "Semnarayan."
 On the second form, the green line steadied.
 "This works."
 Kshemnarayan asked,
 "But that is not my name."
 "Not the name.
 A pronunciation aid.
 An internal technical marker.
 It will not appear anywhere outside."
 Amarjeet opened a field:
 "Simplified Pronunciation."
 He typed:
 "Sem Narayan Jha."
 "Now say it:
 Sem Narayan Jha."
 Kshemnarayan remained silent for a moment.
 Two employees were waiting behind him.
 He said softly,
 "Sem Narayan Jha."
 The green light came on.
 Amarjeet said,

“See?

Problem solved.”

The next morning Kshemnarayan stood before the machine.

“Sem Narayan Jha, Employee Number Four Hundred Seventy-Two.”

“Attendance recorded.”

It had never worked so quickly before.

He went to his desk and opened his papers.

By ten o'clock it occurred to him that, for the first time, he had entered the office without saying his own name.

For two weeks the system worked well.

Every morning the machine turned green when it heard “Sem Narayan Jha.”

In the evening too.

Kshemnarayan's colleagues did not begin calling him “Sem Babu” as a joke.

After the first two days, the teasing disappeared.

Once a machine accepts something, people seldom continue making fun of it for long.

At the end of the month, the payroll statement was prepared.

Accounts Assistant Chandramohan called Kshemnarayan over.

“You have twenty-nine days' attendance and one day of leave.”

“Correct.”

“But the name in the payroll does not match.”

“Which name?”

Chandramohan turned the screen towards him.

In the line imported from the attendance system it said:

“Sem Narayan Jha.”

In the salary register:

“Kshemnarayan Jha.”

The employee number in both was 472.

Chandramohan said,

“The number is the same.

Even so, the name match is red.”

“It was only the simplified pronunciation.”

“Easy or difficult, it has arrived here as a name.”

“The machine assistant said it would never appear outside.”

“He was looking at attendance.

I am looking at payroll.”

Meena Jha was called again.

She examined the technical details.

“It appears the pronunciation field is being pulled into the main-name position when the monthly attendance register is generated.”

Kshemnarayan asked,

“What does that sentence mean in Maithili?”

Meena thought for a moment.

“The name meant to stay inside has come outside.”

“And my real name?”

“That is inside too.”

“Both are inside?”

“Yes.

But in different places.”

The salary was not stopped.

Chandramohan manually reconciled the record.

But the problem did not end.

The following week a training certificate arrived:

“Sem Narayan Jha.”

Then came an order for a clean-water sample camp:

“Shri Sem Narayan Jha is nominated for Benipatti Block.”

Kshemnarayan signed beneath the order:

“Kshemnarayan Jha.”

The order came back.

The remark said:

“Name of signatory differs from name of nominated employee.”

He went to Meena.

“Now what?”

Meena looked at the order.

“We will have to certify once that both names refer to the same person.”

“Both names?”

“For the time being.”

“A permanent certificate for a temporary name?”

Meena remained silent.

Sometimes in an office, the question is correct.

There is simply no field for its answer.

A “Same Person Certificate” was prepared.

At the top it said:

“This is to certify that Shri Kshemnarayan Jha, Employee No. 472, and the person recorded in the voice-attendance system as ‘Sem Narayan Jha’ are one and the same person.”

Below it:

the signature of the Administrative Officer.

Seal.

Date.

Kshemnarayan stood for a long time looking at the paper in his hand.

He remembered his marriage certificate.

Appointment letter.

Caste certificate.

Bank papers.

For the first time, he possessed a document proving that he was not someone different from himself.

The camp order was issued again.

This time the name read:

“Kshemnarayan Jha (Voice Name: Sem Narayan Jha).”

The bracket was small.

But on the next order it grew slightly larger.

The office clerk thought that if the bracket were omitted, the attendance reconciliation might turn red again.

Three months later, the problem reached the bank.

The digital payroll list carried the employee number together with the name.

The bank system treated “Sem Narayan Jha” and the account-holder “Kshemnarayan Jha” as two different people.

That month his salary was not credited for five days.

Kshemnarayan went to the bank.

The young man at the counter said,

“Correct the name.”

“Where?”

“Wherever it is wrong.”

“Which one is wrong?”

The young man examined both papers.

“In the bank it is this:

Kshemnarayan.

From the office it has come as:

Sem Narayan.”

“The bank one is correct.”

“Then the office has to correct it.”

The office said:

“Bring a bank letter.”

The bank said:

“Bring an office letter.”

He had both.

Even so, each kept asking for the other’s proof.

On the sixth day Kshemnarayan pulled a chair into the Administration Branch and sat down.

Meena asked,

“Aren’t you going to the field today?”

“My salary has not come.

I am running short of bus fare.”

Hearing that, Meena immediately opened the system.

“I am making the original name primary again.”

“Then attendance?”

“Let us see.”

She emptied the “Simplified Pronunciation” field.

The next morning Kshemnarayan stood before the machine.

“Kshemnarayan Jha, Employee Number Four Hundred Seventy-Two.”

“Name does not match.”

Second attempt.

“Name does not match.”

Third.

“Attempt limit exceeded.”
 Meena said,
 “The name survived.
 Attendance disappeared.”
 Chandramohan said,
 “If attendance survives, the payroll name disappears.”
 Amarjeet was telephoned.
 He was now training staff in another district.
 “The simplified-pronunciation field is only supposed to be a supporting
 cue for voice recognition,” he said.
 Meena replied,
 “Here it is becoming the primary name and going outside.”
 Amarjeet was silent for a while.
 “It must be an older version.”
 Kshemnarayan was sitting beside Meena.
 He asked,
 “Who am I in the older version?”
 Meena gestured for him to remain quiet.
 Amarjeet continued:
 “Make a separate mapping table.
 Keep the employee number as the primary identity.
 The name-match block can be disabled.”
 After the call ended, Meena said,
 “There is a solution.”
 “What?”
 “Link everything through the number instead of the name.”
 Kshemnarayan laughed.
 “The number was there from the beginning.”
 “Yes.
 But the system was checking the name too.”
 “And now?”
 “Now it will see the name.
 But it will not believe it.”
 A new mapping table was built over two days.
 One row:
 Employee Number: 472.
 Service-Book Name: Kshemnarayan Jha.
 Voice Cue: Sem Narayan Jha.
 Payroll Name: Kshemnarayan Jha.
 Bank Name: Kshemnarayan Jha.
 Kshemnarayan looked at the row.
 “How many names do I have now?”
 Meena said,
 “One.
 The others are paths to identification.”
 “It is written four times on the paper.”

“So that it does not become one in the wrong way again.”

His salary was credited on the seventh day.

A message came from the bank.

Kshemnarayan read it while drinking tea.

Then put the phone down.

That day he had to collect two water samples in the field.

It was time to catch the bus.

The attendance machine at the gate had been connected to the new mapping table.

When he returned in the evening, he stood before it.

“Sem Narayan Jha, Employee Number Four Hundred Seventy-Two.”

The green light came on.

This time the screen displayed:

“Kshemnarayan Jha — Departure Recorded.”

For the first time he paused and looked at both names together.

One was for an ear.

The other for paper.

He said nothing.

The following month a new employee arrived:

Richa Karn.

On her first morning the machine wrote her name three different ways.

The Junior Assistant supervising training opened the “Simplified Pronunciation” field.

“Shall I write an easier form of your name?”

Richa Karn looked at him.

“An easier name?”

“For the machine.”

Kshemnarayan was standing behind her in the queue.

He pointed towards the new mapping table on the desk.

“Leave the name exactly as it is there.

Put the voice cue in the separate field.”

The assistant looked at the table.

Its headings had recently been changed.

First field:

“Authorised Name.”

Second:

“Voice Cue; Not a Name.”

Richa said her name again.

The machine misheard it again.

The assistant entered a short phonetic form in the voice-cue field.

He did not touch the authorised name.

When Kshemnarayan’s turn came, he stepped forward.

He said:

“Sem Narayan Jha.”

The machine turned green.

The screen flashed:

“Kshemnarayan Jha.”

Richa, standing behind him, asked,

“Why do you say your name like that?”

Kshemnarayan thought for a moment.

“That is not my name.

It is the machine’s ear.”

He went inside.

His service book lay on the desk.

The name at the top was the same as on the first day of his appointment.

Beside it had arrived the monthly attendance sheet.

The same name was there too.

Only the black box at the gate still turned green when it heard:

“Sem Narayan.”

STORY 164

THE FORM THAT DEMANDS ITS ANSWER IN ADVANCE

On the third day after the new digital form was introduced at the District Cottage Enterprise Assistance Centre, Prabha Devi arrived with the papers of her sewing group.

She carried five receipts, a bank letter, a copy of the group register, repair estimates for two machines, and the signatures of seven members.

She had tied the bundle of papers carefully inside a cloth bag.

There were four desks on the veranda of the assistance centre.

At the first, papers were counted.

At the second, the digital form was filled.

At the third, photocopies were checked.

At the fourth, a receipt was issued for the submitted application.

Prabha Devi passed the first desk and reached the second.

A young clerk named Navalkishore sat there.

The digital form was open on the screen before him.

"Name?"

"Prabha Devi."

"Group?"

"Sakhi Sewing Group."

"Village?"

"Belaura."

Navalkishore filled the fields one after another.

When almost all the details had been entered, a red line flashed on the screen:

"Final Application Number Mandatory."

Navalkishore stopped typing.

"Where is the final application number?" he asked.

Prabha Devi opened her bag.

"Look through these papers.

Whatever you need should be there."

Navalkishore turned over the receipts, examined the bank letter, and looked through the old group register.

"There is no number."

"Who gives the number?"

"The system, after submission."

Prabha Devi looked at him for a few moments.

"Then what do we write before that?"

Navalkishore looked at the screen.

The red line remained.

He tried typing:

"Blank."

The system rejected it.

He typed:

“Pending.”

“Numbers only.”

He entered:

“O.”

“Minimum six digits.”

He leaned back in his chair.

Ram Babu, the Senior Assistant at the first desk, had been watching from a distance.

“Stuck?” he asked.

Navalkishore said,

“It is asking for the final application number before submission.”

Ram Babu answered casually,

“Put in an old cancelled number.”

Navalkishore turned towards him.

“A cancelled number?”

“Yes.

Once the form is submitted, the new number will come.

We can change it later.”

“Whose cancelled number?”

Ram Babu opened a drawer.

Inside was a small notebook.

Numbers were written on its pages:

410231.

410244.

410257.

410271.

Some had black lines beside them.

“These are incomplete applications from last month,” Ram Babu said.

“They were never submitted.

The numbers are lying unused.”

“But the application numbers had already been generated?”

“In the old system, a number was generated as soon as the draft began.

In the new system, it is generated at the end.

The form itself was built from the old fields.”

Navalkishore looked at Prabha Devi’s papers.

“What if this number is still linked to someone’s old application?”

Ram Babu smiled.

“Then why is it marked cancelled?”

The answer sounded logical.

The question remained where it was.

Navalkishore entered:

410257.

The red line turned green.

Prabha Devi asked,

“Is that my number?”

“Not yet.”

“Then whose?”

“For now, no one’s.”

“Then why is it in my form?”

Navalkishore searched for an answer.

Ram Babu had already picked up the next set of papers.

“The system does not like empty spaces,” he said.

Prabha Devi’s application moved forward.

At the third desk, the photocopies were matched.

At the fourth, the Submit button was pressed.

A new number flashed on the screen:

520018.

The receipt printed.

Navalkishore breathed with relief.

“This is your real application number.”

Prabha Devi looked at both numbers.

“The first one?”

“Forget it.”

She folded the receipt and put it in her bag.

Two days later, a digital list arrived from the district office.

The application of Sakhi Sewing Group was described as:

“Revised version of previous application 410257.”

The moment Navalkishore saw the list, he went to Ram Babu.

“Why does it say revised version?”

“Which one?”

“Prabha Devi’s.

The final number is 520018.

But the system is treating it as a revision of 410257.”

Ram Babu opened the notebook.

There was a black line beside 410257.

He turned a page.

The old note read:

“Bamboo Craft Group; documents incomplete; no site inspection.”

Navalkishore’s expression changed.

“Then this number was not empty.”

“The application had been cancelled.”

“The number had not been cancelled.”

Ram Babu said nothing.

By afternoon, the matter had reached Section Officer Sudhanshu Babu.

He opened both digital entries.

The new application was in the name of Prabha Devi.

The old one was in the name of Bhuvaneshwar Mahato.

One was a sewing group.

One a bamboo craft group.

Different villages.

Different banks.
 But the initial number was the same.
 The system had treated both as two stages of one application.
 “Correct it,” Sudhanshu Babu said.
 Navalkishore asked,
 “How?”
 “Make the final number primary.”
 “That field is locked for revision.”
 “Then remove the initial number.”
 “It does not accept blank.”
 “oooooo?”
 Navalkishore tried it.
 The screen displayed:
 “This number is already in use.”
 Everyone looked at one another.
 Ram Babu said softly,
 “Someone found that solution before us.”
 They opened oooooo.
 Twenty-seven applications were linked beneath it.
 One was for a hostel renewal.
 One for beehive boxes.
 One for clay vessels.
 One for a loom.
 All had different final numbers.
 But inside the system, they had become papers of the same family.
 Sudhanshu Babu scratched his head.
 “Then not zero.”
 Ram Babu said,
 “Let us create new temporary numbers.”
 “How?”
 “From our own register.”
 A question rose in Navalkishore’s mind:
 the number the system was supposed to generate would now be assigned by
 employees themselves?
 There was little time for questions.
 The deadline for assistance applications was that week.
 The queue outside the door kept growing.
 Sudhanshu Babu called for a new notebook.
 At the top they wrote:
 “Temporary Entry Number Register.”
 The first number:
 990001.
 Second:
 990002.
 A rule was made:

before an application was submitted, one number would be assigned from this register.

After the final number was generated, the relationship between the two numbers would be recorded.

Navalkishore did not like the arrangement.

But at least the numbers would not repeat.

For the next three days the work moved quickly.

990001 went to a Madhubani painting group.

990002 to a bangle-making cooperative.

990003 to a bamboo basket group.

To free Prabha Devi's application from old number 410257, it too was given:

990004.

Now her papers carried three numbers:

410257,

which she had been told to forget.

520018,

which she had been told was the real one.

990004,

which had been created to correct the mistake.

Prabha Devi came back to the office.

"The bank says the assistance letter has application number 990004.

My receipt says 520018.

Which one should I write?"

Navalkishore said,

"520018 is the final number."

"Then why is the other one on the letter?"

"During the correction, the temporary number became the main number."

"Then which is final?"

No answer came immediately from Navalkishore's mouth.

From a distance Ram Babu said,

"Write both."

Prabha Devi replied,

"The bank has only one field."

For the first time, the problem seemed not to be with paper, but with the width of a box.

Sudhanshu Babu wrote to the bank branch:

"Application 520018, Temporary Entry No. 990004, former technical No. 410257; all three shall be treated as relating to the same current case."

The letter was signed.

Sealed.

Prabha Devi carried it away.

Two days later, the bank replied:

"Among the three numbers, the authorised number may please be identified."

Sudhanshu Babu picked up a red pen.

He underlined:

520018.

Then stopped.

Because in the district list, the application appeared under 990004.

He underlined 990004 as well.

Ram Babu said,

“If you mark two numbers authorised, the bank will ask again.”

Sudhanshu Babu put down the pen.

“Then you tell me.”

Ram Babu did not answer.

Meanwhile, an inspection team arrived.

The team wanted to examine the sequence of applications.

The inspector’s first question was:

“Why are temporary entry numbers being used?”

Sudhanshu Babu said,

“The final number is generated only after submission, but the form requires the final number before it can be submitted.”

The inspector was silent.

He opened the form himself.

The field was indeed there.

“This is a defect in the form.”

For a moment Navalkishore felt hopeful that the matter would now become simple.

The inspector’s next sentence was:

“Even if the form is defective, employees should not create numbers contrary to rules.”

“Then what should we have entered?” Navalkishore asked.

The inspector looked at him.

“The final application number.”

“But that is generated later.”

“Then fill it later.”

“Without filling it, the form cannot be submitted.”

The inspector looked at the screen again.

For a few moments, the only sound in the room was the fan.

At last he said,

“Seek written guidance on the matter.”

A letter seeking guidance was drafted.

In the digital correspondence system, the subject selected was:

“Application-Related Problem.”

Before the letter could be submitted, another field opened:

“Related Final Application Number.”

Navalkishore did not laugh.

Ram Babu did not either.

Sudhanshu Babu rose from his chair and went to the window.

“What number do we enter here?” Navalkishore asked.

No one had an answer.

At last Ram Babu opened the temporary register.

The guidance letter itself was assigned a number:

990028.

The letter was submitted.

Three days later, a reply came from the State Office:

"The current structure of the form shall continue to be used.

Where the final application number is not available, a unique pre-number may be assigned at departmental level.

Pre-numbers shall not be repeated.

After the final number is generated, the relationship between both numbers shall be preserved."

Ram Babu ran a hand over his notebook.

The method that had been called contrary to rules had now become a written rule.

Sudhanshu Babu said,

"Good.

Now it is clear."

Navalkishore asked,

"Will the final number remain primary, or the pre-number?"

They read the reply again.

It did not answer that question.

By then, Prabha Devi's assistance approval had reached the district office.

The letter carried application number 990004.

The bank payment order carried 520018.

The old revision history carried 410257.

Navalkishore placed all three papers in one file.

On top he pasted a white slip:

"ONE CASE — THREE NUMBERS."

When Prabha Devi came, she was told that the first instalment for machine repair had been approved.

She breathed with relief.

"Are the papers complete now?"

"Yes."

"For the next instalment, will I have to write an application number?"

Navalkishore looked for a few moments at the three papers.

Then he wrote all three numbers on a small piece of paper and handed it to her.

"Keep this."

"All three?"

"Yes."

"Which one is real?"

Navalkishore said,

"Whichever paper is in front of you, first write the number printed on that paper.

If another paper asks for another number, show them this slip."

Prabha Devi folded the slip and placed it in the small inner pocket of her bag.

She left.

At the end of the month, a revised version of the form arrived.

Navalkishore opened it eagerly.

Above the “Final Application Number” field, a new field had been added:

“Pre-Number.”

Below it was a help sentence:

“If pre-number is unavailable, obtain it from the office.”

For the first time, Navalkishore felt reassured.

He opened a new application to test the form.

First field:

Pre-Number.

He left it blank.

A red line flashed:

“Pre-Number Mandatory.”

Navalkishore looked at Ram Babu.

Without saying anything, Ram Babu took out the old notebook and placed it on the desk.

STORY 165

THE HALF-DAY EMPLOYEE

Every day Shanti Devi reached the gate of the District Public Service Building at five fifty-five in the morning.

The gate opened at six.

But guard Ramvilas recognised her from a distance and opened the small wicket five minutes early.

Before going inside, Shanti Devi took a pair of thin cloth gloves from her bag, signed her name in the gate register, and then collected the key to the room where the brooms, buckets, and mops were kept.

Her work was for four hours.

At least that was all the paper said.

The building had three floors.

In the morning, it was her responsibility to clean the public-service windows on the first floor, the staircase, both toilets, the officers' veranda, and the visitors' seating area.

By half past nine she would have finished everything and washed the cleaning materials.

At ten she returned the key to Ramvilas.

As soon as ten struck, the building began filling with people.

Mopping among that crowd was impossible.

Shanti Devi did not know who had fixed these hours.

On her first day, the supervisor from the contracting agency had told her:

"Six in the morning to ten.

Finish before people begin arriving."

She had had no reason to ask anything more.

For two years she had been coming at the same time.

At the end of each month, the contracting agency paid her for four hours' labour.

The wage slip said only:

"4 hours."

No clock time.

Once Shanti Devi had turned the slip over and asked the supervisor,

"Why is the time not written here?"

He had laughed.

"Four hours are four hours.

Will your pay change because the clock changes?"

Shanti Devi had laughed too.

On that Tuesday morning, the corridor on the second floor was unusually wet.

During the night, a joint in the pipe connected to the rooftop water tank had loosened.

Water had seeped along the wall and collected in front of the Records Room.

Shanti Devi first placed a bucket beneath the leak.

Then she called Ramvilas.

"We will have to close the main valve upstairs," he said.

"The key?"

"The maintenance babu keeps it."

The maintenance babu came at eight.

Within two minutes, the water had become a stream.

Shanti Devi tried to move three cardboard boxes stored there.

They contained old application forms.

The first box was light.

The second was heavy.

While she was pulling the third, the upper strip of a thin iron rack fixed against the wall came loose and fell.

The strip struck her near the left shoulder.

As she stepped back, she slipped on the wet floor and landed sitting down.

Ramvilas ran over.

"Are you hurt?"

Shanti Devi first moved her shoulder.

Then her palm.

"It moves."

But when she stood up, there was pain.

Ramvilas made her sit on the guard's chair downstairs.

It was 7:18.

Nishant Kumar, a Junior Clerk in the Maintenance Branch, arrived at 7:40.

Ramvilas had telephoned him.

He went upstairs, saw the water, had the main valve shut, moved the boxes, and then came down to Shanti Devi.

"Let us go to the dispensary."

Shanti Devi said,

"First stop that water.

It will reach downstairs."

"It has been stopped."

Nishant found that no official vehicle was available.

He sent Shanti Devi to the nearest primary treatment centre on his motorcycle, with Ramvilas accompanying her.

A few minutes after ten, Shanti Devi returned.

There was no bandage on her arm.

Only ointment.

The doctor had advised her not to do heavy work for two days.

"Go home," Nishant said.

Shanti Devi looked towards the cleaning-supplies room.

"The lower veranda is still left."

"Leave it today."

“Tomorrow?”

“Rest tomorrow too.”

She fell silent.

The question of whether two days’ wages would be deducted was visible on her face.

She did not ask it.

When the officer arrived in the afternoon, the question of an accident report arose.

There was a standard form for any person injured while working in a government building.

Nishant opened the form on the computer.

The first page was simple:

date,

time,

place,

incident.

On the second page was a question:

“Status of Person at Time of Incident.”

Below it were four options:

Employee.

Contract Worker — Approved Shift.

Visitor.

Unauthorised Presence.

Nishant selected:

“Contract Worker — Approved Shift.”

Red letters appeared:

“Registered shift: 13:00–17:00. Incident time outside shift.”

Nishant thought he must have entered the time incorrectly.

He opened the contracting agency details.

Shanti Devi.

Cleaning Assistant.

Four hours.

Approved time:

13:00 to 17:00.

He looked back at the form.

Incident:

07:18.

“How can that be?” he said to himself.

Ravindra Babu from Accounts heard him.

“What?”

Nishant turned the screen around.

Ravindra Babu pushed his spectacles up onto his forehead.

“In the system, it is afternoon.”

“But she works in the morning.”

“I know that too.”

“Then this?”

Ravindra Babu thought for a moment.

"When the contract was first made, perhaps the afternoon shift was proposed.

Later, because of the crowd, the time was changed.

The paper was not."

"For two years?"

"The four hours are completed, aren't they?"

In that answer Nishant heard something like the supervisor's sentence: four hours are four hours.

The form remained red.

"Contract Worker — Approved Shift" was not accepted.

Nishant selected "Visitor."

This time the system asked for a visitor-pass number.

Shanti Devi had no visitor pass.

Her name appeared every day in the gate register under:

"Contract Cleaning."

When he selected "Unauthorised Presence," a field opened asking for the reason.

Ravindra Babu immediately said,

"Do not fill that."

"Then what?"

"Ask upstairs."

Upstairs meant the Administration Branch.

The Assistant Officer there looked at the form.

"At the time of the incident, she does not appear to be an employee."

Nishant said,

"But she was working."

"I understand that.

The system is another matter."

"The system is wrong."

The officer's face showed not disagreement, but fatigue.

"Do not write 'wrong.'

Say there is a time discrepancy."

"What do I put for status?"

"Get a certificate from the contracting agency explaining why she was there in the morning."

Nishant telephoned the agency supervisor.

At first the supervisor said,

"She goes every morning."

"Put that in writing."

"On paper the time is one to five."

"Then why does she work in the morning?"

There was silence at the other end for a few moments.

"The building requires it."

"Write that too."

"If I write that, they will ask for a contract amendment."

"Then what will you write?"

"I can write that she was voluntarily present earlier."

Nishant's voice changed.

"Voluntarily sweeping and mopping?"

The supervisor said softly,

"You understand.

The four hours are completed."

The call ended.

By evening the accident report remained incomplete.

The next day Shanti Devi did not come.

The contracting agency sent a young man in her place.

He arrived at one in the afternoon.

By one o'clock, dust covered the veranda.

Dry leaves had gathered near the gate.

Water stood outside the toilets.

People in the queue at the public-service windows stepped carefully to avoid dirty patches.

The officer asked,

"Was there no cleaning today?"

Nishant said,

"The cleaner arrived at one."

"Now?"

"The approved shift begins now."

The officer looked at Nishant for a moment.

"Do not joke."

"I am telling you the system time."

The young man cleaned the first floor by two.

But because of the crowd, he had to keep stopping the mop.

At three, the officer ordered that the remaining cleaning be done in the evening after the office closed.

At five, the contracting-agency supervisor telephoned.

"Four hours are complete.

We cannot keep the worker longer."

"Then the second and third floors?"

"Shanti Didi will come tomorrow morning."

Nishant remained silent, holding the phone.

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes."

"Approved shift?"

This time the supervisor did not answer.

On the third day, Shanti Devi again reached the gate at 5:55.

There was still mild pain in her shoulder.

But the doctor had told her not to lift heavy boxes.

He had not told her to stop sweeping and mopping.

Ramvilas pushed the register towards her.

As Shanti Devi signed, she asked,

"Why was I not called yesterday?"

"You were ordered to rest."

"Will my pay be cut?"

"I do not know," Ramvilas said.

Upstairs, Nishant was waiting.

He explained the problem with the accident report.

Shanti Devi listened carefully.

Then asked,

"So what was I at seven eighteen?"

Nishant searched for an answer.

"That is exactly what we have to write."

"I was cleaning."

"Yes."

"Then write that I was cleaning."

"There is a separate field for status."

"Cleaning was not my status?"

Nishant could not laugh.

Shanti Devi picked up her broom.

"Write what I understand.

In the morning I am an employee.

On paper, I become an employee in the afternoon."

She went towards the staircase.

Nishant watched her go.

That day he left the accident report aside and began looking for old attendance records.

The gate register was the first piece of evidence.

For the previous three months, Shanti Devi's entry time was almost always between 5:55 and 6:05.

Departure:

between 9:50 and 10:10.

Then came the cleaning inspection slips.

Every day they said cleaning was complete before the public-service windows opened.

Different employees of the Maintenance Branch had signed them.

Then the key register.

The cleaning-room key was issued in the morning and returned at ten.

Then the monthly contract bills.

They carried no time.

Only:

"Daily four hours."

Nishant placed all four kinds of paper together.

Ravindra Babu said,

"This proves she works in the morning."

"Then the system?"

"In the system, she works in the afternoon."

"The same day, both?"

“The system records approval, not time.”

Nishant said,

“But the accident asks for time.”

Ravindra Babu fell silent.

The Administration Branch called a meeting after seeing the four sets of documents.

The contracting agency attended too.

The supervisor brought the original work order.

It clearly said:

“Cleaning service: four hours daily.”

The time field was blank.

Nishant asked,

“Then where did 13:00–17:00 come from?”

An old Accounts Assistant said,

“The digital register would not accept an empty time field.

When the contract was entered, someone may have put one to five for convenience.”

“For whose convenience?”

No one answered.

They opened the old entry history.

On the day the contract was first entered two years earlier, 13:00–17:00 had been filled in.

After that, the same time copied itself every month.

The officer said,

“Then correct it.”

The Accounts Assistant replied,

“If we change the earlier period, the bill timings will change too.”

“The bills contain no time.”

“The system will say the approved shift was amended.”

“Then change it from now.”

“The accident happened on an earlier date.

A current correction will not change her status on that day.”

The meeting fell silent again.

At that very moment Shanti Devi was outside, mopping the veranda.

Inside, they were discussing whether she had existed at 7:18 in the morning.

At last the officer said,

“Add a remark to the accident report:

‘Work order does not prescribe clock time; actual working hours established from gate register, key register, and cleaning inspection slips.’”

Nishant asked,

“Status?”

“Contract Worker.”

“The system will show red.”

“Let it remain red.

Add the remark.”

With that decision, the form still could not be submitted.
 The system saved forms containing red errors.
 It did not submit them.

The Digital Assistance Cell then suggested temporarily changing the “approved shift” to include the incident time.

After the accident form was submitted, the shift could be restored to the original time.

Ravindra Babu said,

“That means changing time for the sake of the paper.”

The Help Cell replied,

“But the work really happened in the morning.

We would be aligning it with the truth.”

Nishant asked,

“Then why change it back to one to five afterwards?”

Silence at the other end.

“Because that is the original approval,” came the answer.

The proposal that Shanti Devi’s time should change to fit 7:18 for a moment and then return to the afternoon seemed so strange that no one accepted it immediately.

Nishant said,

“Instead of bending the time around the accident, correct the wrong shift.”

For the first time, the contracting-agency representative objected clearly.

“Then the timings of the other cleaning workers will have to be checked too.”

“Why?”

“The four hours differ from building to building.

In the system, most have the same time.”

Shanti Devi was no longer alone in the meeting.

There were ten cleaning workers.

Three buildings.

Four different real schedules.

And one identical afternoon in the system.

Ravindra Babu said quietly,

“In other words, half a day has been created on paper.”

Nishant replied,

“And people do the actual work in the other half.”

The officer looked out of the window.

Shanti Devi was washing the bucket.

The clock showed 9:40.

He dictated an order:

the actual working hours of all contract workers were to be separately verified and entered into the current register;

where a work order specified only duration, duration and clock time were to be treated as separate fields;

old bills would not be altered;

but the accident report would be accepted on the basis of evidence of actual presence.

The Digital Assistance Cell had to grant special permission.

Three days later, the accident report was submitted.

Status:

Contract Worker.

Incident Time:

07:18.

Approved Duration:

Four Hours.

Actual Shift:

06:00–10:00.

No red error appeared.

Shanti Devi's two days of wages were also recorded not as absence but as medical rest.

Ravindra Babu told her about the decision.

Shanti Devi asked only,

“Will the time be written on the slip now?”

“Yes.”

The following month, for the first time, her wage slip said:

“06:00–10:00.”

She read the slip and put it in her bag.

Three days later, new identity cards were distributed.

The card carried her photograph, her name, the contracting agency's name, and the entry time.

Shanti Devi turned the card over in her hands.

At the bottom it said:

“ENTRY VALID: 13:00–17:00.”

She held the card out to Ramvilas.

Ramvilas adjusted his spectacles and read it.

Then he took out a pencil.

Beside the printed time he wrote in small letters:

“Morning.”

Shanti Devi hung the card around her neck.

It was six o'clock.

The gate opened.

STORY 166

THE WORK OF THE SEALED ROOM

In the old building of the District Primary Education Service Records Branch, the door of the Records Room had once been secured by nothing more than an ordinary brass padlock.

On Monday morning, two round impressions of red wax had appeared above that lock.

Between the two seals a white sheet was pasted:

“ENTRY PROHIBITED UNTIL COMPLETION OF AUDIT.”

Clerk Abhay Jha read the paper and felt for the key in his pocket.

The key was still there.

The door was now locked not by his key, but by the paper.

“For how many days?” Nirmala Devi, standing behind him, asked.

Abhay Babu said,

“The order gives no number of days.”

Nirmala Devi was the Senior Assistant in the Service Records Branch.

For thirty years she had known the cupboards, bundles, and habits of dust in that room.

“If there is no number of days, how will the work continue?”

Abhay Babu had no answer.

At half past ten, the first application arrived.

Chandrakala Devi was a retired teacher.

Two years had been omitted from the calculation of her pension.

She had her old appointment letter from the school.

But the original service register was inside the Records Room.

“All I need is confirmation that my service has been continuous since 1998,” she said.

Abhay Babu looked towards the door.

“The original file is inside.”

“Then?”

“The audit is in progress.”

“My service too?”

Abhay Babu tried to smile faintly.

The smile did not last.

Chandrakala Devi took four papers from her bag:

an old salary slip,

a school certificate,

the bank pension statement,

and a photocopy.

Her name appeared faintly at the top of the photocopy.

Nirmala Devi took it in her hand.

“This looks like a page from the service register.”

“I got it from the school twenty years ago,” Chandrakala Devi said.

“Certified by whom?”

“The headmaster at that time.”

Half the headmaster’s seal was legible.

Abhay Babu said,

“No decision can be made without the original.”

Nirmala Devi looked at him.

“How many days will the original remain unavailable?”

“The auditors will say.”

“And the pension?”

Abhay Babu fell silent.

That afternoon, the Branch Officer called a meeting.

Seven employees sat in the room.

In the middle of the table lay a photograph of the red-sealed door, as though someone might forget that the papers inside were, for the moment, no longer papers but prohibited objects.

The officer said,

“Routine work must not stop.”

Abhay Babu asked,

“Without the original files?”

“Wherever possible, use the available records.”

“What are the available records?”

The officer looked at the papers for a few moments.

“Whatever can be used.”

That answer was not written down.

The next day, Abhay Babu wrote at the top of a clean sheet:

“TEMPORARY WORKING PAPER.”

Below it:

Chandrakala Devi’s name.

Then he attached:

the appointment letter,

three salary slips,

the school certificate,

the bank statement,

and the old photocopy of the service register.

At the very top, in red pencil, he wrote:

“ORIGINAL FILE IN SEALED RECORDS ROOM.”

Nirmala Devi read it.

“This is not a file.”

“I know.”

“Then a decision will be made on this?”

“The officer said the work must not stop.”

Nirmala Devi moved her chair closer.

“Add one more thing:

‘Reconciliation required when original is opened.’”

Abhay Babu added it.

Chandrakala Devi’s application moved forward.

Three days later, another case arrived.
 For a teacher's promotion, a training period from 2007 had to be verified.
 A photocopy of the original certificate was available at the school.
 Five days later came a third case:
 service period for settlement of dues to the family of a deceased teacher.
 Within a week there were seven "Temporary Working Papers."
 By the second week there were seventeen.
 Then a new problem emerged.
 Different employees were creating them in different forms.
 Some wrote "Temporary" at the top.
 Some "Reconstructed."
 Some "Based on Available Papers."
 Some wrote only the name.
 Nirmala Devi said,
 "Temporary things become uniform before anything else."
 She designed a format.
 Name at the top.
 Below it:
 the original file number, if it could be found in any outside
 correspondence.
 Then:
 a list of available copies.
 Then a separate field:
 "INFORMATION BASED ON MEMORY."
 Abhay Babu stared at her.
 "We will write memory too?"
 "Some things I remember.
 Some you remember.
 If we write them down, at least it will remain clear that they are not
 documents."
 The first memory entry concerned the service location of an elderly
 attendant.
 Nirmala Devi wrote:
 "As remembered, file was tied in green cloth; 2003 transfer order was in
 the final section."
 Abhay Babu laughed.
 "Has green cloth become evidence?"
 "No.
 That is why I wrote 'as remembered.'"
 Three days later, the same fact about the green cloth became useful in
 another letter.
 The school's reply said:
 "The old green service bundle was sent to the District Office."
 Abhay Babu looked at Nirmala Devi.
 "The memory was correct."
 Nirmala Devi said,

“A correct memory does not become paper.”

But the work continued.

Every day, the audit team entered the sealed room according to its own schedule.

They came with their own key, their own register, and their own signatures.

The branch employees remained outside.

Sometimes the door opened for five minutes.

Inside one could see dust, bundles, and rows of iron cupboards.

But no one from the branch was permitted to enter.

One day, seeing the door open, Abhay Babu called out Chandrakala Devi's file number.

The Audit Officer immediately raised a hand.

“No specific file will be taken out.”

“We only need to look at one page.”

“It will disturb the audit sequence.”

“Her pension is held up.”

“That is an administrative matter.

We are checking the integrity of the records.”

The door closed again.

Abhay Babu returned to the outside desk.

For the first time he understood that the integrity of a record and the use of a record could become two different kinds of work.

After that, the branch began collecting outside papers more seriously.

Photocopies were requested from schools.

Salary lists from the Treasury.

Personal copies from old employees.

Whatever had survived anywhere began returning to the office.

Sometimes the edge of a paper had been cut off.

Sometimes only half the seal remained.

Sometimes the date was clear but the name blurred.

Sometimes the name was clear but the decision missing.

Abhay Babu wrote the source separately on every page:

“School copy.”

“Employee copy.”

“Treasury copy.”

“Attachment to earlier letter.”

“Memory.”

Two weeks later, the audit team asked the branch:

“Produce the basis for decisions made during the sealed period.”

Abhay Babu placed seventeen Temporary Working Papers before them.

The Audit Officer turned the first page.

“This is not the original file.”

“The original is sealed with you.”

“Then how was the decision made?”

Before answering, Abhay Babu looked towards the officer.

The Branch Officer said,

“On the basis of available evidence.”

The Audit Officer examined Chandrakala Devi’s working paper.

Photocopy.

Salary slips.

School letter.

Bank statement.

“Its serial number?”

“It is temporary.”

“Without a serial number?”

Abhay Babu said,

“The original file number is written.”

“What record is this paper itself?”

The room fell silent.

Nirmala Devi said,

“For now, a working paper.”

The Audit Officer picked up his pencil.

At the top he wrote:

“RECONSTRUCTED RECORD — R-17.”

Then on the next one:

“R-18.”

From that day, the Temporary Working Papers acquired serial numbers of their own.

The following week, the Accounts Branch returned a letter.

The reason:

the attached basis referred to a “Temporary Working Paper.”

Abhay Babu showed them the copy on which the audit team had described the same paper as:

“Reconstructed Record R-17.”

The Accounts Branch accepted the letter again.

One word had changed.

The paper was the same.

Chandrakala Devi’s pension-correction order was issued.

When she came to the office, Abhay Babu gave her the news.

“The two years have been added?”

“Yes.”

“Was the original file found?”

“Not yet.”

Chandrakala Devi looked at him for a few moments.

“So my service was found, but the file was not?”

From behind, Nirmala Devi said,

“For now, accept that much.”

Chandrakala Devi laughed.

“I had already performed the service.

It was the file that needed finding.”

She put a copy of the order in her bag.

The sealed room did not open in the third week either.

By the fourth week, the Reconstructed Records had crossed fifty.

Now another problem arose.

Some new letters began citing the Reconstructed Record numbers:

“On the basis of R-31.”

“As per R-44.”

“Facts available in R-19.”

The papers created only to be checked against the originals once the room reopened were now beginning to become originals for other papers.

One day Abhay Babu said,

“What if the original opens and says something different?”

Nirmala Devi closed the register.

“Then we will look at both.”

“Which one will be treated as true?”

“The decision made without seeing the original has already been made.”

“So?”

Nirmala Devi did not answer.

On Tuesday of the fifth week, the red wax seals were cut.

The audit was not complete.

But an order had arrived reopening the Records Room for branch use.

In the morning, all the employees gathered at the door.

Abhay Babu turned the key.

When he pushed the door inward, the smell of old paper, cloth, and dust came out together.

The room was the same.

The cupboards the same.

The green, red, and blue bundles the same.

In five weeks, an entire second world of records had been created outside.

The first reconciliation began with Chandrakala Devi's file.

The original bundle really was green.

Nirmala Devi smiled slightly.

Abhay Babu brought the file out and placed it on the desk.

The service register was opened.

The page from 1998 was found.

The original date of appointment was the same.

But there was one difference.

The original register recorded a break in service of two months.

The Reconstructed Record did not.

Abhay Babu felt heat rise to his head.

“Will the pension have to change again?”

Nirmala Devi examined the page carefully.

Beside the line recording the break was a small pencil mark.

She turned the following page.

There was a later-order reference:

“Earlier break in service cancelled; salary continuity recognised.”

No one had a photocopy of that page.

Abhay Babu breathed deeply.

“Then the result in the Reconstructed Record was correct.”

Nirmala Devi said,

“Because it had incomplete papers, but this time the incompleteness happened to point in the right direction.”

“And if it had not?”

That question found its answer in the next file.

In R-22, a teacher’s training date was recorded as 14 June.

The original file said 17 June.

In R-36, the father’s name was spelled one way.

The original spelled it another.

In R-41, the transfer-order number was incomplete.

In the original, complete.

Some differences were minor.

Some could alter a decision.

The Branch Officer called another meeting.

On one side of the table:

the original files.

On the other:

the Reconstructed Records.

Between them:

the orders issued over five weeks.

“Do we reopen every decision?” Abhay Babu asked.

The Audit Officer was present too.

“The original is the supreme record,” he said.

Nirmala Devi asked,

“When the original was sealed, were you the one who gave the R-numbers?”

The Audit Officer remained silent for a few moments.

“For audit purposes.”

“And the Accounts Branch accepted those numbers.”

“So that the work would not stop.”

“And now the work has been done.”

No answer came immediately.

At last an order was drafted:

“Decisions already made on the basis of Reconstructed Records shall be subject to review only where a material difference is found.

All Reconstructed Records shall be reconciled with the original files.”

Abhay Babu asked,

“Where will the proof of reconciliation be recorded?”

Nirmala Devi opened a blank register.

At the top she wrote:

“ORIGINAL-RECONSTRUCTED RECONCILIATION REGISTER.”

Abhay Babu laughed.

“One more register.”

“Yes.”

“Temporary?”

Nirmala Devi stopped her pen.

“Do not write that word yet.”

The reconciliation began.

An original file was brought out.

The record carrying the R-number was placed beside it.

Dates, names, orders, and periods of service were matched.

Where there was no difference:

a green mark.

Where the difference was minor:

a remark.

Where it affected a decision:

a red slip.

Three days later, an odd situation emerged.

Some original files were missing pages.

But the Reconstructed Records contained certified copies obtained from outside.

Abhay Babu asked,

“Here the original itself is incomplete.”

The Audit Officer said,

“Verify the outside copy.”

“Against what?”

He looked towards the original file.

Then towards the Reconstructed Record.

“Against the available sources.”

Abhay Babu understood that now even the original was no longer sufficient by itself.

Within a week, although the room was open, a new queue of original files formed on the outside desk.

Each carried a small slip:

“RECONCILIATION PENDING.”

There was no red wax on the door.

Anyone could enter.

But a paper brought out from inside was no longer considered immediately fit for decision until it had been matched with the records created outside.

One day Chandrakala Devi came again.

She had already received the first corrected pension payment from the bank.

She had not come only to say thank you.

She had brought an old paper.

“I found this at home,” she said.

It was a copy of a school attendance statement from 1998.

Abhay Babu looked at the paper.

“The original room is open now.”

“So this is useless?”

Before answering, Abhay Babu looked at Nirmala Devi.

Nirmala Devi took the paper.

“Not useless.

Record the source and keep it.”

Abhay Babu made a slip:

“Employee’s Personal Copy — To Be Reconciled with Original.”

Chandrakala Devi read it and laughed.

“Now the original also has to be reconciled?”

Nirmala Devi laughed too.

“In this office, every paper now recognises every other paper.”

In the evening, Abhay Babu went to lock the Records Room.

The brass padlock went back on.

No red wax.

Outside the door, on a wooden table, lay five original files.

On every one was the same white slip:

“ORIGINAL RECORD — RECONCILIATION PENDING.”

Abhay Babu switched off the light.

The room was open.

The original papers waited outside.

STORY 167

THE TRANSLATED VILLAGE

When the new digital address register was introduced in the District Public Service Office, no one celebrated.

Work began on entering the old addresses of every branch into a single system.

Whatever name appeared in Devanagari was automatically given a Roman form, and on that basis letters, verification teams, assistance slips, and mobile-phone messages were routed towards different services.

The officers called the change convenience.

The clerks called it extra work.

The people in the villages called it nothing at all, because nothing had yet happened to them.

The first problem reached Piprahi.

Piprahi was an old village on the eastern side of the river.

On the wall of the Panchayat building, its name was written in large Devanagari letters:

“पिपराही.”

Thirty-two kos to the west stood another village:

Piparhi.

The two belonged to different blocks.

Their postal routes were different.

Their police stations were different.

Their school clusters were different.

But in the new digital address register, both received the same Roman search-name:

PIPRAHI.

The machine did not preserve the long “aa” of Piprahi.

It also dropped the lighter middle vowel of Piparhi.

Two villages disappeared into the same letters.

The first mistake involved a scholarship letter.

A scholarship-verification letter for Sunita, daughter of Madhukar Jha of Piprahi, reached the school in Piparhi.

The headmaster did not open the envelope.

The student’s name was written in Devanagari on top.

The Roman address said:

PIPRAHI.

“There is no such family in our village,” he said.

The postman replied,

“The screen shows this place.”

“Does the screen know the village?”

“I know the road.

But now the screen makes the road.”

The letter remained at the Piparhi school for three days.

On the fourth day it was sent to Piprahi in the hands of local teacher Sudhir Paswan.

Sudhir's sister was married there, so once a week he travelled that way.

When Sunita's father received the letter, he said,

"Three days late."

Sudhir said,

"Not three days.

Thirty-two kos."

Both laughed.

At the time, neither understood that a new arrangement was being born inside the joke.

A week later, ten agricultural-assistance slips arrived in Piprahi.

None of the names was familiar there.

Malti Devi, the Panchayat Assistant, read the slips one by one:

Ramcharit Yadav.

Mahendra Paswan.

Lalita Devi.

Jeevachh Sah.

Any of those names could also have existed in Piprahi.

But the fathers' or husbands' names, hamlets, and land numbers did not match.

At the bottom, the Roman address was again the same:

PIPRAHI.

Malti Devi telephoned Sudhir Paswan.

"Is there a Ramcharit Yadav in your village?"

"There are two.

Whose son?"

She read the slip.

"Yes, that one is from here."

"Then ten of your slips are with me."

Sudhir was silent for a moment.

"Sunita's scholarship letter came here earlier.

Are the accounts even now?"

"The accounting has only begun."

That Tuesday they met at the weekly market.

Malti Devi handed over the bundle of agricultural slips.

Sudhir handed her an envelope containing a life-verification notice for Jamuna Devi, an elderly woman of Piprahi.

The same Roman name was printed on both bundles.

For the first time, Malti Devi looked at it carefully.

"What is your village called in Roman letters?"

"What is written there."

"Mine too."

Sudhir turned the slip over, as though another answer might be printed on the back.

There was nothing.

From that day, a small exchange began at the Tuesday market.

Malti Devi kept aside letters arriving in her village that belonged to Piparhi.

Sudhir separated papers reaching Piparhi that belonged to Piprahi.

Once a week they met and exchanged the bundles.

At first it was a matter of five or ten envelopes.

Within a month, the number had reached thirty-seven.

School notices.

Maternity assistance.

Old-age payments.

Irrigation inspections.

Copies from birth registers.

Housing inspections.

Animal vaccination.

Bank verification.

Papers changed villages.

People did not.

Jamuna Devi's problem became serious when her old-age payment stopped.

The notice said:

"Beneficiary not present at designated location for verification."

Jamuna Devi had sat at the Panchayat building in Piprahi from early morning on the appointed day.

No verification team came.

Later they learned that the team had gone to Piparhi.

There, the officials spent three hours searching for Jamuna Devi.

People in Piparhi told them:

"There is no elderly woman by that name here."

A remark was entered in the verification register:

"Beneficiary unavailable at location."

Malti Devi went to the District Office.

Room Number Six contained the address-correction desk.

Clerk Arun Babu first entered Jamuna Devi's beneficiary number.

The screen showed the address:

PIPRAHI.

"What needs correction here?"

Malti Devi placed a paper before him with the village name written in Devanagari.

"This is Piprahi.

The verification team went to Piparhi."

Arun Babu searched the second village.

The screen again showed:

PIPRAHI.

He frowned.

"Both have the same name?"

"Not in Devanagari."

"Different blocks?"

"Different."

"Different location codes?"

"Different."

"Then why has the system combined them?"

Malti Devi smiled faintly.

"I came to you for the answer to that question."

Arun Babu opened the correction form.

The first field was:

"Current Roman Village Name."

He entered:

PIPRAHI.

The second field:

"Corrected Roman Village Name."

He entered:

PIPRAHI.

The screen turned red.

"Old and new values are identical. No correction required."

Arun Babu tried again.

This time he entered:

PIPRAAHI.

The system automatically shortened it back to:

PIPRAHI.

On the third attempt he inserted a dot.

The dot disappeared.

On the fourth he added the location code.

The field accepted letters only.

After a while he leaned back in his chair.

"To correct an error, the system must first be able to see the error," he said.

Malti Devi did not understand.

"The error is right in front of us."

"I can see it.

The system cannot."

"Then?"

"A report will have to go to the higher office."

The report was prepared.

This time the problem was that the subject line showed the two village names identically.

Arun Babu wrote:

"Regarding name conflict between PIPRAHI and PIPRAHI."

The superior officer added a remark:

"Attach proof that these are two separate villages."

Malti Devi submitted certificates from both Panchayats, separate location codes, separate block registers, and maps.

Fifteen days later came the reply:

“Roman names identical in both records. Ensure uniformity at local level.”

Arun Babu read the reply and scratched his head.

“The uniformity is already there.”

Malti Devi said,

“That is the problem.”

Meanwhile, another difficulty arose in Piparhi.

Ramcharit Yadav’s crop-loss assistance had been routed towards the bank branch serving Piprahi.

The preliminary list had been generated not from the bank-account number, but from the branch service area.

Ramcharit went to the bank three times.

The bank said,

“You do not belong to this service area.”

The Agriculture Office said,

“In the system, you belong to that village.”

Ramcharit asked Sudhir Paswan,

“Where do I belong?”

Sudhir said,

“Where your house is.”

“Where does the money belong?”

He had no answer.

After two months, both villages learned to recognise one another’s papers.

In Piprahi, a wooden box was placed with the label:

“WESTERN PIPARHI.”

In Piparhi, a basket was marked:

“EASTERN PIPRAHI.”

There was no government order.

There was need.

At the Tuesday market, the contents of the two containers were exchanged.

Sometimes Sudhir could not come, so a bus driver carried the bundle.

Sometimes Malti Devi fell ill, so a school student delivered it.

The digital route kept making mistakes.

The human route kept correcting them.

At last the District Office formed an inspection team.

The order said:

“Site verification of both villages named PIPRAHI.”

The team set out in a vehicle.

The driver asked,

“Which PIPRAHI first?”

The team leader looked at the order.

It said only:

PIPRAHI.

“Whichever is nearer by road,” he said.

The vehicle reached Piprahi.

The people there were ready because Sudhir had informed them in advance.

The team saw both villages' Devanagari signboards.

Recorded the location code.

Asked about Panchayat boundaries.

They were supposed to go to Piprahi in the afternoon.

But the driver's daily distance limit had been completed.

The team returned.

The report said:

"One site verified; verification of the second pending."

Which site had been verified?

Again the report contained only:

PIPRAHI.

Arun Babu read the report and remained silent for a long time.

Then, in pencil, in the right-hand corner, he wrote:

"Piparhi."

No one stopped him.

A week later, a temporary solution arrived from the higher office.

The instruction was to add the first letter of the block after each Roman village name.

For Piprahi:

PIPRAHI-K.

For Piparhi:

PIPRAHI-M.

Arun Babu was pleased.

He sat down to correct Jamuna Devi's record.

But the beneficiary register accepted no village name longer than seven letters.

The suffixes were cut off.

The screen again showed:

PIPRAHI.

This time Arun Babu did not laugh.

He wrote again to the higher office.

The reply said:

"Before changing legacy service registers, ensure compatibility of all connected systems."

In other words:

first correct everywhere,

then the first place may be corrected.

Malti Devi read the reply.

"How many days will that take?"

Arun Babu said,

"If it began from one place, I could answer.

Here, the end is required before the beginning."

Jamuna Devi's payment was still stopped.

For a while Arun Babu looked at her papers.

Then he found a separate procedure for requesting re-verification on the basis of the location code rather than the village name in the beneficiary register.

That procedure required three additional proofs.

But the Roman village name was not decisive.

Malti Devi collected the proofs within two days.

Jamuna Devi was verified again.

This time the inspection team wrote the village name by hand in Devanagari on the letter.

The payment resumed.

The original problem remained.

Ramcharit's assistance was later corrected through the location code too.

Case after case escaped by separate routes while the single error in the register remained firmly in place.

Three months later, the District Office issued a new circular.

It said:

"In applications for correction of Roman village name, the current name in the source register shall be entered exactly as recorded."

Malti Devi read the circular and showed it to Sudhir.

"So, to ask for a correction, first write the erroneous name exactly."

Sudhir said,

"No.

The system says it is not an error.

It is the current name."

Both laughed again.

By then, the Tuesday market had become an informal postal station between the two villages.

Beside the tea stall, two white boxes stood on an old wooden table.

On one, in Devanagari:

"पिपराही."

On the other:

"पिपरही."

Below, in smaller Roman letters, both carried the same word:

PIPRAHI.

One day a schoolboy named Neeraj looked at the boxes and asked,

"Why do both have the same English name?"

Sudhir opened his mouth to answer.

Then stopped.

Malti Devi said,

"The paper takes a shorter road."

Whether Neeraj understood it, no one knew.

He took out his pencil.

Beneath the Roman name on the first box, he wrote in small letters:

"EAST."

Beneath the second:

“WEST.”

Sudhir did not stop his hand.

The market bus arrived.

The bundle from Piprahi travelled west.

The bundle from Piparhi travelled east.

In the District Register, both villages still had the same name.

On the market table, their two roads were perfectly clear.

THE ATTENDANCE ORDER ON A HOLIDAY

Before nine in the morning, the telephone had already begun ringing in the District Establishment Branch.

Sitting at her desk, Archana Jha gave the same answer to the first three calls:

“Yes, the notice has not been cancelled so far.”

Before answering the fourth, she looked again at the paper.

Across the top, in bold letters, it said:

“MANDATORY IDENTITY-VERIFICATION CAMP.”

Date:

the coming Friday.

Time:

10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Venue:

District Integrated Hall.

Below it was written:

“Employees who fail to undergo verification on the scheduled day shall have their attendance identity treated as inactive from the next salary cycle.”

The notice had been issued five days earlier.

But the previous evening the District Administration had issued another order:

that same Friday would be a public holiday on account of a local festival.

The two papers now lay one over the other on Archana's desk.

One said:

if you do not come, there will be consequences as though you were absent.

The other said:

do not come, the office is closed.

She lifted the first notice.

Beneath it, in pencil, the Branch Officer had written:

“Camp unchanged?”

The question mark had been circled twice.

The previous evening Archana had telephoned Vibhor Singh, representative of the agency supplying the identity-verification equipment.

Vibhor had answered clearly:

“The machine, engineer, and central key have all been fixed for that day.

If the date changes, the next opportunity will be three weeks later.”

Archana had asked,

“But a holiday has now been declared.”

He had replied,

“Our contract is based on the fixed date, not on holidays.”

For the Establishment Branch, it was a holiday.

For the agency, it was a fixed date.

For the employees, it was a question.
 At half past nine, Branch Officer Pramod Mishra arrived.
 Archana pushed both orders towards him.
 Pramod Babu put on his spectacles and read the first paper, though he already knew it.
 Then he read the second.
 "Anything from above?"
 "No."
 "The camp people?"
 "They say the date cannot be changed."
 "District Administration?"
 "The holiday order says 'all government offices closed.'"
 Pramod Babu remained silent for a while.
 Then he said,
 "Put out a short clarification."
 Archana opened the computer.
 "What shall I write?"
 Pramod Babu leaned back in his chair.
 "Write:
 'With regard to the previously scheduled identity-verification camp, employees shall remain present as per the earlier instructions.'"
 Archana stopped typing.
 "'Remain present?'"
 "Yes."
 "On a holiday?"
 "For the camp."
 "And the office?"
 "The office will be closed."
 Archana stopped again.
 Pramod Babu looked at her.
 "What happened?"
 "Who will open the gate?"
 Pramod Babu had no immediate answer.
 The hall was inside the District Office compound.
 On holidays the main gate remained closed, and the security register allowed entry only to pre-authorized essential-service staff.
 Employees coming for identity verification were not on the "essential services" list.
 Pramod Babu said,
 "We will tell the Security Branch."
 Archana typed the clarification.
 By afternoon it had gone out on the office internal group.
 Five minutes later the telephone rang again.
 "This is Neelam from Araria Block.
 Is it a holiday or is there verification?"
 Archana said,

"The verification camp will go ahead."

"Then it is not a holiday?"

"It is a holiday."

There was silence at the other end.

"Both?"

"You will have to come for the camp."

"Will attendance be marked?"

The clarification did not answer that question.

Archana said,

"No separate instruction has yet been issued on that."

Neelam asked again,

"If I do not come, will I be absent?"

Before answering, Archana looked towards Pramod Babu.

He was busy with his papers.

"Your verification will be missed," Archana said.

"And if I come?"

"Your verification will be completed."

"Attendance?"

Archana gave the same answer again:

"There is no separate instruction yet."

On Friday morning, when Archana left home, her daughter Nidhi was standing at the door.

"Today was supposed to be a holiday."

"It is."

"Then where are you going?"

Archana put the bag on her shoulder.

"To do holiday work."

Nidhi did not laugh.

She only asked,

"Will you be back by evening?"

"I will try."

When Archana reached the District Office, the main gate was indeed closed.

Seven employees were already standing outside.

One carried a photocopy of an appointment letter.

One had an identity card.

One had a copy of Aadhaar.

One merely held up the notice on a mobile phone.

Inside the gate stood guard Devkant Mandal.

Through the grille he said,

"Today is a holiday."

Archana showed her identity card.

"There is a camp."

"I have not received a list."

"The Security Branch was informed yesterday."

Devkant turned through the register.

Under essential services, there were five names:
 an electrician,
 a water-supply employee,
 two Control Room employees,
 and Devkant himself.

Archana's name was not there.

There was no mention of the camp.

"How do we go inside?" one employee asked from outside.

Devkant said,

"Let the order arrive."

At 10:05 the verification agency's vehicle arrived.

The vehicle wanted to enter.

Devkant looked at the list again.

Vibhor Singh got out.

"We have a permission letter."

He showed the paper.

The letter authorised use of the District Hall.

It said nothing about entry on a holiday.

Devkant said,

"You have permission for the hall.

Not permission to open a closed office."

Vibhor did not laugh.

"The equipment is in the vehicle."

"Let it remain there."

The number of employees outside kept growing.

Some had travelled eight kos.

Some thirty.

One woman employee had brought her small child because the childcare centre was also closed for the holiday.

By eleven, nearly fifty people were gathered outside.

Pramod Babu's mobile phone was switched off.

The Security Officer did not answer.

At last Archana spoke to the Sub-Divisional Officer's Control Room.

They said,

"If this is previously scheduled government work, the Branch Officer should send written permission."

"The Branch Officer is on holiday."

"Then?"

Archana said nothing.

At half past eleven, a message arrived from Pramod Babu:

"Open the gate and conduct verification.

Attendance matter will be looked into later."

The message was on a mobile phone.

Devkant read it.

"This is not a security order."

"Then what do you need?"

"Paper."

"The office is closed."

"Then where will the paper come from?"

They looked at one another.

At last a one-page permission arrived from the Control Room.

The gate opened.

People went inside.

The lights in the hall came on.

Vibhor's team connected the equipment.

The first employee's thumbprint was read.

Then the iris image.

Then the identity card.

The machine said:

"Verification complete."

Second employee.

Third.

At one side, Archana opened a handwritten register and began writing names.

Employee number.

Time.

Signature.

Someone asked,

"Is this attendance?"

Archana said,

"This is the camp register."

"Where is attendance?"

"The attendance machine is shut down."

"Why?"

"It is a holiday."

For a moment laughter rose in the queue.

It quickly faded.

At one o'clock Neelam arrived too.

She had changed two buses.

"What happened about attendance?"

"Nothing yet."

"I have been on the road since morning."

"I am writing it down."

"Will this be accepted?"

Archana said,

"That is now my question too."

By four o'clock, eighty-three employees had been verified.

Twenty-seven did not come.

As Vibhor shut down the machine, he printed a list.

At the top it said:

"Verified: 83.

Did Not Reach: 27."

Archana's handwritten register contained eighty-three signatures.
In the District Attendance System, every employee carried the same mark for that day:

"HOL."

Holiday.

The first problem arrived as soon as the office reopened on Monday.

A list was generated to deactivate the identity numbers of the twenty-seven employees marked "Did Not Reach."

Of those twenty-seven, sixteen submitted written representations:

"As the day was a public holiday, the question of attending the designated office did not arise."

Four had submitted medical information.

Seven submitted nothing.

The Establishment Branch opened the digital form to record the reasons for all twenty-seven.

The options were:

"Absent."

"Leave."

"Tour."

"Other."

There was no "Holiday."

Archana selected:

"Other."

A red message appeared:

"Select reason."

She had already selected "Other."

But a second reason list opened below it:

"Disciplinary."

"Personal."

"Technical."

Archana selected:

"Technical."

Pramod Babu said,

"This is not technical.

The people did not come."

"But it was a holiday."

"The camp remained scheduled."

"Then attendance should have been marked."

"The attendance system had the day as a holiday."

"Then how is 'Did Not Reach' equivalent to absence?"

Pramod Babu removed his spectacles and placed them on the desk.

"Archana ji, we have to run an administration, not study philosophy."

Archana said nothing.

That day a second problem arose.

Some of the eighty-three employees who had come submitted applications for compensatory leave.

The form asked:

“Date of Additional Work.”

They entered Friday’s date.

The system replied:

“Employee not present on this date.”

Because the attendance register showed:

“HOL.”

Neelam placed her application before Archana.

“I left home at five in the morning and returned at seven in the evening.

Now this says I was not present?”

Archana looked at the paper.

“Your signature is in the camp register.”

“Then tell this paper.”

In pencil Archana wrote on the application:

“Verification Register Serial No. 56.”

The Accounts Branch returned the application.

The remark said:

“Additional work not admissible on an absence day.”

Archana read the remark and went to Pramod Babu.

“It says ‘absence day’ here.”

“Yes?”

“The Attendance System says holiday.

The Accounts Branch says absence.

The Verification System says present.”

Pramod Babu placed the three papers separately.

One said:

“HOL.”

One:

“Verified.”

One:

“Absence Day.”

For a few moments he looked at them.

“We will have a meeting.”

The meeting was held on Tuesday.

Representatives from Establishment, Accounts, Security, Information Technology, and the verification agency were present.

Vibhor Singh said,

“Our work is complete.

Eighty-three verifications succeeded.”

The Accounts representative said,

“Additional service has not been certified.”

The Security representative said,

“The gate was opened under special permission, so entry was valid.”

The IT Officer said,

“The holiday master register marked the day as a holiday, so the attendance machine did not accept attendance marks.”

Pramod Babu asked,
 “Then were those eighty-three people there or not?”
 Instead of answering together, representatives of all four branches began looking at their own papers.
 Archana opened her handwritten register.
 “These are all their signatures.”
 The Accounts representative said,
 “This is not an approved attendance-register format.”
 “But their verification was completed.”
 “Verification is not attendance.”
 “Then why are those who did not come classified as ‘Did Not Reach?’”
 The room fell silent again.
 Vibhor Singh said softly,
 “‘Did Not Reach’ is only a term used by the camp.”
 “But identity numbers are being deactivated on that basis,” Archana said.
 The IT Officer displayed the rule on the screen.
 “The system module has no separate category for a holiday conflict.”
 “Then the category is wrong.”
 He said,
 “I can only show what the system contains.”
 At the end of the meeting, it was decided:
 the twenty-seven employees would be given a second opportunity for verification;
 there would be no penalty.
 Compensatory rest for the eighty-three employees would be sanctioned through a separate order on the basis of the verification register.
 And in future, no mandatory camp would be scheduled on a declared holiday.
 While Archana was typing the decision, Pramod Babu said,
 “Add one more line.”
 “What?”
 “If a holiday is declared after a camp has already been scheduled, the date shall be deemed automatically rescheduled.”
 Archana typed it.
 Then asked,
 “Automatically by whom?”
 Pramod Babu laughed.
 “Leave that question this time.”
 The order was issued.
 Three days later, a new option was added to the identity system:
 “Holiday Conflict.”
 The identity numbers of all twenty-seven employees were reactivated.
 The compensatory rest of the eighty-three employees was also approved.
 Neelam took her leave the following Monday.
 She came to Archana’s desk and said,
 “This time it really is leave, isn’t it?”

Archana smiled.

“It is in the attendance register.”

“And verification?”

“No camp.”

“The gate?”

“It will remain closed.”

Neelam folded the paper and put it in her bag.

“Then shall I believe it?”

Before answering, Archana looked at the calendar for the coming month hanging on the wall.

The holidays were marked with red circles.

She picked up her pencil.

Beneath one red circle she wrote in small letters:

“NO MANDATORY PROGRAMME ON THIS DAY.”

A few moments later she stopped.

Then underlined the word:

“MANDATORY.”

The holiday was now clear on paper.

That day, no one was present there.

STORY 169

THE COMPLAINT BORN OF A QUESTION

The assistance window at the District Public Service Centre opened at nine in the morning, but Chandrakala Devi had arrived at eight forty.

In her hand was a bundle of papers wrapped in green cloth.

On top lay the receipt for her flood-rehabilitation assistance application.

Beneath it were a copy of the house-damage inspection, her bank passbook, identity card, and tickets from three journeys.

The southern wall of her house had collapsed in the last flood.

The rains had ended, but the wall had still not been rebuilt.

The family passed the nights behind a bamboo screen and two sheets of tin.

Chandrakala Devi had submitted her application four months earlier.

The receipt said:

“Decision expected: thirty working days.”

In four months, the ink of that sentence had faded.

The decision had not arrived.

Vidyapati Mishra, sitting at the assistance window, took her papers.

“Application number?”

Chandrakala Devi placed a finger on the receipt.

Vidyapati entered the number.

A green circle spun first on the digital screen.

Then a line appeared:

“Case under process.”

“That is all?” Chandrakala Devi asked.

“That is all it shows.”

“Where is it under process?”

Vidyapati opened another field.

It said:

“Related Branch.”

“Which branch?”

Vidyapati smiled.

“That does not show.”

Chandrakala Devi did not begin tying up her papers again.

She remained seated.

“All I want to know is where my papers are stuck.”

Vidyapati said,

“I will register a status query.”

A field titled “Assistance” opened on the screen.

Below it were two choices:

“General Information”

and

“Formal Complaint.”

Vidyapati selected "General Information."

A new screen opened:

"General Information available only for published scheme details."

Below it, for:

"Question regarding individual application"

there was a button:

"Register Complaint."

Vidyapati paused.

"This is only a question," Chandrakala Devi said.

"Yes."

"Then why a complaint?"

"There is no separate route in the system."

Vidyapati himself looked uncomfortable.

He glanced at Renuka Devi, the clerk sitting beside him.

"Is there another way to ask about an individual case?"

Without lifting her head, Renuka said,

"No.

Open a complaint and write in the remark:

'Status enquiry only.'"

Vidyapati did exactly that.

In the subject field he entered:

"Request to know current status of application."

Below, in remarks:

"Citizen has not challenged the decision; she is only asking for the location/status of the pending application."

When he pressed "Submit," a new number appeared in large letters on the screen:

GR-7318.

Chandrakala Devi started.

"What is that?"

"The number for your question."

"For the complaint?"

Vidyapati was silent for a moment.

"The system calls it a complaint number."

A small machine printed a slip.

Across the top it said:

"FORMAL COMPLAINT RECEIVED."

Chandrakala Devi read it.

"I did not make a complaint."

Vidyapati wrote beneath it in pen:

"Status Query."

"Keep this.

You should get an answer in two or three days."

Chandrakala Devi put the slip into the paper bundle.

As she was leaving, she turned back.

"Whose complaint is it?"

Vidyapati searched for an answer.

"The application's."

"And against whom am I complaining?"

"Against no one."

"Then fine."

She left.

Five minutes later, a red band flashed on Vidyapati's screen:

"Original Case Under Dispute."

At first he paid no attention.

The matter became clear in the afternoon when Manoj from the Flood Rehabilitation Branch telephoned.

"Did you open GR-7318?"

"Yes."

A status enquiry."

"Not a status enquiry."

A formal complaint."

"Read the remarks."

"I have read them."

But the case is blocked now."

Vidyapati straightened in his chair.

"Why?"

"The rule says no final decision shall be taken on the original case while a related complaint is pending."

"But the complaint is not against the decision."

"The system does not read that distinction."

Vidyapati opened the original application again.

The case that had said "under process" for four months now carried another line:

"Under Dispute: Decision Deferred."

He showed Renuka Devi.

Renuka pushed up her spectacles.

"This has gone backwards."

"I only asked for the status."

"The question became a complaint."

The complaint became a dispute."

The dispute stopped the decision."

For a while they both stared at the screen.

Vidyapati searched for an option to close the complaint.

The "Complaint Disposal" screen opened.

It contained three questions:

"What final action was taken on the original application?"

"What solution was given to the complainant?"

"Is the complainant satisfied?"

Until the first question was answered, the "Submit" button remained grey.

Vidyapati telephoned Manoj again.

"Enter the final action on the original application."

Manoj laughed.

"I can write the final action only after taking it."

"Take it."

"The complaint is pending."

"Close the complaint."

"To close the complaint, I need the final action."

They were silent for a few moments.

Manoj said,

"Did you design this system?"

"No."

"Neither did I."

"Then?"

"Ask the Complaint Branch."

The Complaint Branch was on the third floor.

Vidyapati went there himself after lunch.

There were five desks.

Four employees.

On the fifth desk stood a basket full of papers labelled:

"Additional Cases."

Pramila Jha, In-Charge of the Complaint Branch, opened GR-7318.

"The citizen's question is clear."

"Then cancel the complaint."

"It cannot be cancelled."

"Why?"

"A received complaint cannot be erased.

The sequence would break in audit."

"Then close it."

Pramila showed him the disposal screen.

"It requires final action."

"The same circle."

"Yes."

Vidyapati said,

"Write in the remarks that this is not a complaint."

Pramila smiled.

"On a complaint screen, I can write that the complaint is not a complaint.

But the complaint will still remain open."

"And the original application?"

"Under dispute."

Vidyapati read again the line he himself had written:

"Citizen has not challenged the decision."

The sentence was correct.

The system behaved exactly the opposite way.

Pramila said,

"There is one possible way.

The department can give an 'interim status.'"

"Then?"

“That can be treated as the solution and the complaint can be closed.”

“What is the interim status?”

“Case under process.”

Vidyapati did not laugh.

For four months Chandrakala Devi’s receipt had been saying exactly that.

“She came here for that answer?”

Pramila shrugged.

“I am telling you the workaround.”

The next day Manoj entered an interim status:

“Case under process.”

The complaint screen rejected it.

Red letters appeared:

“Resolution unclear. Select result of action.”

The choices were:

“Approved”

“Rejected”

“Partial Relief”

“Other.”

When Manoj selected “Other,” a reason field opened.

He wrote:

“Original application deferred due to complaint.”

The screen replied:

“Do not mention the complaint in the resolution.”

Manoj rose from his chair and went to the window.

Outside, a line of people stood along the veranda.

Some had come for caste certificates.

Some for old-age payments.

Some for damage assistance.

To them, the papers belonged to different lives.

On the screen, everything became boxes of the same colour.

Three days later, Chandrakala Devi came again.

She carried the same green bundle.

“Has the answer come?”

Vidyapati asked her to sit.

“There has been a complication.”

“In the papers?”

“In the question.”

“Was my question wrong?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Vidyapati turned the screen towards her.

“Your question became a complaint.”

“I told you that the same day.”

“And as soon as the complaint opened, the original application was stopped.”

For a few moments Chandrakala Devi looked at the screen.

"I asked why the application was stuck.
By asking, I have now made the application truly stuck?"

Vidyapati did not answer.

From beside him, Renuka Devi said softly,

"This time, yes."

Chandrakala Devi opened the bundle.

She took out the GR-7318 slip.

"Shall I tear this up?"

"No.

Tearing it will not erase the screen."

"Then I withdraw the complaint."

Vidyapati searched for a "Withdraw Complaint" option.

He found one.

When he opened it, the system asked for the reason:

"Resolution completed."

"Complaint registered by mistake."

"Other."

Vidyapati selected the second.

A new warning appeared:

"Complainant shall confirm that no further action is required on complaint."

Chandrakala Devi said,

"That is correct."

Vidyapati continued.

The next question was:

"Current status of original application?"

There were four choices:

"Approved"

"Rejected"

"Disposed"

"Closed."

There was no:

"Under Process."

Vidyapati stopped again.

Chandrakala Devi understood that something else had jammed.

"Now what?"

"To withdraw it, the system also wants the status of the original application."

"The very status I asked about and became a complainant for asking?"

"Yes."

Chandrakala Devi placed the slip on the desk.

"Then you keep this."

She stood up.

Vidyapati said,

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"I will find some solution."

"Will the tin on the house wait for the solution?"

The question was asked very quietly.

Vidyapati did not answer.

That evening a strong wind rose.

The upper sheet of tin over the southern bamboo screen of Chandrakala Devi's house tore loose again.

Her younger son Rohit stood holding the bamboo until neighbour Ramsevak arrived with rope.

That night Chandrakala Devi did not look at the application receipt.

She looked at the wall of her house.

The next morning Vidyapati went to the Flood Rehabilitation Branch.

Seeing him, Manoj asked,

"Have you come from the Complaint Branch?"

"No.

The tin on the citizen's house came loose."

Manoj fell silent.

He took out the original file.

The papers were complete.

Damage inspection complete.

Bank verification complete.

There was even an officer's note:

"Eligible."

"Then why four months?" Vidyapati asked.

Manoj turned through the pages.

"First we were waiting for the budget instalment.

Then list reconciliation.

Now the complaint."

"No decision until the complaint is removed?"

"Not on the digital screen."

"On paper?"

Manoj looked at him.

"On paper the officer can write the decision.

But generation of the digital order is blocked."

"Write the decision."

"And the complaint?"

"Write the reason for the complaint:

'Citizen's status query.'"

Manoj smiled.

"Are you making rules now?"

"No.

I am writing the question."

They went together to the Branch Officer's room.

Branch Officer Naresh Thakur heard the whole matter.

At first he became angry.

"Why was a complaint opened on an individual application?"

Vidyapati said,

“There is no other field for asking the status of an individual application.”

“Then the citizen should have been told to wait.”

“She had already been hearing that for four months.”

Naresh Babu looked at Manoj.

“File complete?”

“Yes.”

“Eligible?”

“Yes.”

“Budget?”

“Available in this instalment.”

“Then write approval on paper.”

Manoj wrote it.

Naresh Babu signed.

The decision on the original file was now clear.

The digital screen still said:

“Under Dispute.”

Vidyapati hurried to the Complaint Branch.

Pramila looked at the file.

“Now we have final action.”

She opened the complaint screen.

“Original Application — Approved.”

“Resolution — Status clarified and decision taken on application.”

“Complainant satisfied?”

Everyone stopped.

Vidyapati said,

“I will not fill that.”

“Why?”

“She never made a complaint.

How can I presume satisfaction?”

Pramila said,

“The field is mandatory.”

“Is there a ‘Not Applicable’ option?”

“No.”

Manoj, who had come with him, said,

“Press ‘Yes.’

The application is approved.”

Vidyapati remembered Chandrakala Devi’s question:

“Whose complaint is it?”

He did not press “Yes.”

He pressed “No.”

The screen immediately opened a new field:

“Dissatisfied complaint shall be escalated to higher level.”

Pramila held her head.

“See?”

Vidyapati went back to the previous page.

He did not press “Yes.”

He did not press “No.”

He left the screen open.

That day GR-7318 was not disposed of.

On paper, the original file was approved.

The digital order still had not been generated.

There was a District Coordination Meeting that afternoon.

Pramila presented GR-7318 as an example.

Representatives from the Digital Branch, Flood Rehabilitation Branch, Complaint Branch, and Public Service Centre were present.

Rakesh, the Digital Branch engineer, said,

“The system assumes that a question raised about an individual case is a complaint.”

Vidyapati asked,

“Why does it assume that?”

“Because the status of an individual case is not public information.”

“Then where is the right to ask for status?”

Rakesh was silent for a few moments.

“The user can see status on their dashboard.”

“It shows only ‘under process.’”

“For security reasons, internal branch stages are not displayed.”

“Then the citizen will ask.”

“That is what the assistance window is for.”

“The assistance window opens a complaint.”

There was a faint laugh in the room.

Rakesh smiled too.

Then he said,

“Then we need a new category.”

Pramila wrote it down:

“Status Enquiry.”

Naresh Babu said,

“It should not be a complaint.”

“And it should not block the original application.”

“And for answering it, the branch should give a one-line stage:

inspection pending,

budget pending,

decision pending,

papers pending—

whatever can be disclosed.”

Vidyapati added,

“The citizen should not be treated as having lodged an objection.”

Rakesh said,

“A new field can be made.

But what about old GR-7318?”

Everyone fell silent again.

Pramila said,

“The old register cannot be erased.”

“Then?”

“Close it through a special remark.”

“Satisfaction?”

Rakesh looked at the screen.

“I do not have authority to remove that field.”

Naresh Babu said,

“Call Chandrakala Devi.

Enter her answer.”

The next day Chandrakala Devi came again.

This time she was taken to the third floor.

Seeing people from four branches seated before her, she looked startled.

“Have I done something wrong?”

Pramila immediately said,

“No.”

Vidyapati said,

“Your application has been approved on paper.”

Chandrakala Devi’s face opened slightly.

“When will the money come?”

Manoj said,

“As soon as the digital order is generated.”

“It has not been generated yet?”

“The complaint has to be closed.”

Chandrakala Devi took out the GR-7318 slip.

By now, from repeated folding, the paper had become soft.

Pramila asked,

“We need the answer to one question.

Are you satisfied with the resolution of the complaint?”

Chandrakala Devi remained silent for a long time.

“What complaint?”

No one answered.

She asked again,

“The thing I asked—

where my papers were stuck—

did I get the answer to that?”

Vidyapati said,

“You have it now.

First the case was held up by budget and list reconciliation.

Then by the complaint.”

“So now I know the answer for the first four months?”

“Yes.”

“And the complaint?”

Pramila said softly,

“That was the question.”

Chandrakala Devi smiled.

“Then write:

the question has been answered.”

Rakesh said,

“The screen asks for ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“Then the screen is not asking me what I said.”

The room fell silent again.

Naresh Babu picked up his pen.

On paper he wrote:

“Citizen had submitted no complaint; status enquiry was mistakenly registered under complaint category. Citizen has been informed of status. Satisfaction field not applicable.”

Rakesh opened the special technical-comment permission instead of entering “Yes.”

The same remark was entered.

GR-7318 was closed.

The red “Under Dispute” band disappeared from the original application.

Manoj generated the digital order.

Two days later, the first instalment reached Chandrakala Devi’s bank account.

She did not come back to the Public Service Centre.

A week later Vidyapati saw her in the market.

She was asking prices at a bamboo shop.

He raised a hand from a distance.

Chandrakala Devi recognised him.

“The wall?”

“Half of it is up.”

“The rest?”

“After the second instalment.”

Vidyapati smiled.

“If you need to ask the status again?”

Chandrakala Devi smiled too.

“This time, before asking, I will ask:
what will open if I ask the question?”

Vidyapati was about to reply, but just then the shopkeeper called out the measurement of the bamboo.

They left the conversation there.

A month later, the digital screen at the Public Service Centre changed.

Between:

“General Information”

and

“Formal Complaint”

a new option appeared:

“Status Enquiry.”

Five people pressed that button on the first day.

None of their original applications was stopped.

In the evening, while closing the screen, Vidyapati searched for GR-7318.

The case was closed.

The remark still remained below:

“Citizen has not challenged the decision; she is only asking for the location/status of the pending application.”

Beside that line, the system had added a new word on its own:

“Disposed.”

Vidyapati closed the screen.

The system now had an answer to Chandrakala Devi’s first question too.

But the question itself remained preserved in the history of a complaint.

STORY 170

THE SCANNER'S BLACK SHADOW

In the digital room of the District Pension Branch, the work of scanning old papers was usually done after noon.

In the mornings there was a crowd of people: receipts were issued for applications, service books were matched, bank details were checked. After two in the afternoon the window was closed, and inside, the process of turning old files into images began.

Madhav Jha was a junior records assistant in this room. On his desk stood a dual-screen computer, a flatbed scanner, a thin wooden strip for straightening papers, and a small box filled with metal clips.

That Tuesday an application came to him—the payment of arrears on Sumitra Devi's family pension.

The application had been stuck for three months.

On the line for the reason were only four words: "Service certificate appears cancelled."

At first Madhav assumed that the certificate itself must indeed bear a cancellation stamp. He opened the digital file.

On the screen appeared the image of a thirty-year-old document. The paper looked yellowed, with the school inspector's blue seal in the middle, two signatures below, and a black diagonal mark in the upper right-hand corner.

The mark was small, but it almost touched the outer ring of the seal.

Madhav enlarged the image.

The black line was thick in one place, thin in another. In the middle lay a semicircular shadow. Seen from a distance, it looked as though someone had struck a black line through the seal.

The previous note in the file read: "Cancellation mark suspected; verification against original required."

After that came a second note: "Original record in secure repository; not immediately available."

A third note followed: "Verification pending."

That was the whole history of three months.

Sumitra Devi came to the window again that same day.

She was around seventy. She wore a white cotton sari, carried an old bamboo walking stick, and kept her receipts in a cloth bag.

She asked, "Babu, is it still cancelled?"

Madhav looked straight at her.

"It has not yet been decided whether the document is cancelled or whether there is merely a mark in the image."

"My husband taught in that school for thirty years. How did that become cancelled?"

Madhav said, "Not the service. There is a mark on the image of the document."

Sumitra Devi remained silent for a few moments.

"If the image gets cancelled, the service stops too, doesn't it?"

Madhav had no direct answer to that question.

He wrote a new date on the receipt and said, "I will examine the source of the old scan."

Sumitra Devi put the receipt back into her bag.

"Where is the original document?"

"In the district secure repository."

"Then look at it."

"Entry there is through a list."

"Put the name on the list."

Madhav gave a faint smile.

"The list is prepared at the end of the month."

Sumitra Devi smiled too, but there was weariness in her smile.

"Will the month of my pension end first, or the month in which the list is prepared?"

Madhav did not answer.

That evening he searched the old register of the scanning room.

Bundles of papers had been scanned year by year. Sumitra Devi's certificate had been digitised five years earlier in "Batch 47."

The register gave the name of the person who had scanned it—Shashikant.

Shashikant was now retired.

Madhav opened an old cupboard in the repository. A box of materials used during scanning was still there—erasers, dusting brushes, old cloths, glass-cleaning fluid, and several metal clips.

Some of the clips were straight; some had been pressed and bent out of shape.

One clip had a raised semicircular top.

Madhav turned it over in his hand.

Then he looked again at the black shadow on the certificate on the screen.

The shapes were almost alike.

But "almost" is not official proof.

The next day he opened other images from Batch 47.

First page—no shadow.

Second—a small black semicircle in the upper right-hand corner.

Third—none.

Fourth—the same semicircle again.

Madhav examined twenty images. Five had a black mark in almost the same place.

The documents were from different departments, different years, and bore different signatures.

One was an order correcting a date of birth, one a transfer letter for a school building, one an old pay fixation, one a library grant, and one Sumitra Devi's service certificate.

All five documents had been scanned on the same day.

The first clear suspicion formed in Madhav's mind—the mark was not on the paper; it lay in the manner of scanning.

He called Ravindrakant from the Image Quality Section.

Ravindrakant looked at the screen.

"The position of these marks is almost the same."

"A clip?" Madhav asked.

"Possible. If the paper was lifting, someone may have fastened it with a clip."

"Would the shadow be this black?"

"In the old scanner, the light fell strongly from one side. A raised piece of metal would cast a black shadow."

Madhav placed the old bent clip on the desk.

"This?"

Ravindrakant looked at it.

"The shape matches, but that does not prove that this was the very clip used five years ago."

"Then what would prove it?"

"The same-shaped mark in the same place on several unrelated documents from the same batch—that is strong evidence."

Madhav said, "Will strong evidence release the pension?"

Ravindrakant did not laugh.

"Read the rules."

The rules had no separate category called "scanner-generated shadow."

There were three categories—clear, illegible, doubtful.

Sumitra Devi's document was "doubtful."

For a doubtful image, the original was required.

The original was in the secure repository.

After the previous flood, the secure repository had been shifted to the new building of the District Archives. The old files there had been kept in a closed section for mould control and cataloguing.

Entry required the branch head's permission, the record number, and the monthly withdrawal list.

Madhav prepared a permission note.

The branch head, Nilima Chaudhary, read it.

"Open the closed repository for one pension case?"

"Not only for one pension case. Five images from Batch 47 carry the same mark."

Nilima Devi examined all five images.

"Did the other four cases face any difficulty?"

Madhav checked.

Two of the documents had already been used. No one had raised any question about the mark. A school-building transfer had been accepted on the basis of the same image. The library-grant file had also been closed.

Madhav told her this.

Nilima Devi leaned back in her chair.

"So the same mark means cancellation on one document and nothing at all on another?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"In Sumitra Devi's image, the shadow cuts across the ring of the seal. On the other papers it lies only near the edge."

Nilima Devi enlarged the image again.

"So the meaning of the mark is being decided by where it falls, not by where it came from."

Madhav said, "Exactly."

Nilima Devi signed the permission.

"Call for the original from the repository. Also arrange a sample check of Batch 47."

The permission was sent.

Three days later the reply came: "Record section closed to withdrawals for the next fifteen days owing to ongoing conservation work."

Sumitra Devi came for the fourth time.

Madhav read the reply out to her.

She listened in silence.

"After fifteen days?"

"Then the list will be prepared again."

"And the pension?"

"Pending."

Sumitra Devi took an old photocopy out of her bag.

"I found this at home."

Madhav took it.

The school inspector's seal was clear on it. The upper right-hand corner was clean. There was no black shadow.

For a moment Madhav's heart beat faster.

"Is this a photocopy of the original?"

"My husband had it made sometime. I do not know when."

Madhav compared the two. The handwriting, seal, date, and folds in the paper all matched.

But the photocopy from home was not officially certified.

He knew the rule.

"This is very useful."

"Then can the work be done?"

Madhav paused.

"It shows that the black mark may not be part of the original document. But the Payment Branch will ask for a certified source."

Sumitra Devi closed her bag.

"I have the paper, you have the image, and the repository has the original. All three places say the same thing, yet the work cannot be done."

Madhav said quietly, "The black shadow is standing between all three."

That afternoon Madhav conducted a small test.

He placed a sheet of white paper on the scanner and fixed the bent clip at the upper right-hand corner.

The first image was faint.

Ravindrakant said, "Raise the clip a little."

Madhav slipped a thin piece of cardboard beneath the paper. The clip rose halfway.

In the second scan, a black semicircular shadow appeared.

He opened Sumitra Devi's image beside it.

The shapes were not exactly identical, but the physical character of the shadow was clear—a thick black edge, a pale semicircle within it, and a thin grey spread in the direction opposite the light.

Ravindrakant retrieved sample images from the records of the scanner used five years earlier.

In that machine the light had fallen from right to left. The spread of the shadow on Sumitra Devi's image followed the same direction.

Madhav prepared a report titled "Test of Mechanically Generated Image Shadow."

The report listed five grounds: a mark in the same position on unrelated documents from the same batch; absence of the mark from the old photocopy kept at home; reproduction of a black semicircle with a metal clip; correspondence between the shadow and the old scanner's direction of light; and the temporary inaccessibility of the original because of conservation work.

Nilima Devi read the report.

"In your conclusion you have written, 'The document is not cancelled.'"

Madhav said, "Shouldn't I?"

"We do not have the original. What we can say is that the mark in the image is not proof of cancellation."

Madhav changed the sentence.

"There is insufficient basis to treat the black mark visible in the available digital image as a cancellation mark; there are strong technical indications that the mark is a scanner-generated shadow."

Nilima Devi said, "Now it is correct."

The report went to the Payment Branch.

A question came back from there: "If it is not cancelled, what is the proof that it is valid?"

Madhav read it and remained silent for a while.

Nilima Devi said, "They are asking the question backwards. What we have to establish is that there is no basis for cancellation; the other elements of validity are already in the file."

Ashok Babu, the officer in charge of the Payment Branch, came for a meeting.

He said, "I will not take the risk. What if the original is opened tomorrow and an actual cancellation mark is found?"

Madhav placed all five images before him.

"Then what about these four documents?"

Ashok Babu looked at the image of the school-building transfer.

It carried the same black mark, but near the corner.

"This one was accepted earlier."

"Yes."

"No one objected?"

"No."

"Then the same mark has produced different decisions."

Nilima Devi said, "Not the rule. The eye has."

The room was quiet for a few moments.

Ashok Babu looked at the photocopy from Sumitra Devi's home.

"This is not certified."

"Not certified, but it is comparative evidence," Madhav said.

In the end, an interim order was issued: until the original record could be opened, the undisputed portion of the family pension would continue on the basis of the available valid service details, pay register, appointment order, and school certification; only the disputed old arrears would remain withheld until verification of the original.

Sumitra Devi had to make a fifth journey this time.

Madhav read the order out to her.

She was not very pleased, but for the first time her eyes held something besides waiting.

"The monthly pension will continue?"

"Yes."

"The arrears?"

"After the original is seen."

"And the black shadow?"

Madhav said, "It is no longer being treated as a cancellation mark."

Sumitra Devi looked at the paper.

"So the shadow has been given a name of its own?"

Madhav smiled.

"Imaging error."

She laughed.

"Once it has a name, half the trouble is gone."

Fifteen days later, withdrawals from the secure repository opened again.

Madhav, Ravindrakant, and the records officer examined the original certificate together.

At the upper right-hand corner of the paper were two small pressure marks from a metal clip, but no black stroke. The inspector's blue seal was intact.

Madhav kept looking at that corner for a long time.

The black shadow existed only in the digital image.

The records officer said, "There is nothing here."

Madhav replied, "There was a great deal in the image."

A new image was made from the original. This time the paper was held flat with a transparent strip, without a clip.

The new image was clean.

The old image was not deleted.

It was retained under the name “Previous image—with scanner shadow,” because three months of decision-making history had been built upon it.

The order releasing Sumitra Devi’s arrears was issued the following week.

Madhav thought the matter was over.

But the other four images from Batch 47 still remained.

He opened them all.

On one document the shadow lay at the edge.

On another it was far from the signature.

On the third it lay in a blank space.

On the fourth it was not directly over a seal, but close to a number.

Madhav added a technical note to all four files: “A black mark must not be treated as a basis for a documentary decision without independent examination of its source.”

On this basis Ravindrakant prepared a short guideline.

The new rule was not very long.

Only three lines: if a black line or shadow in an image changes the meaning of a document, examine other images from the same batch, any available copy of the original, and the imaging device’s pattern of error; if the original is unavailable, do not automatically treat the shadow as a cancellation mark; record the basis of the decision in a separate note.

A month later, a new subcategory was added beneath “Doubtful” on the digital screen—“Possible Imaging Error.”

For a test, Madhav opened Sumitra Devi’s old image.

The black semicircle was still there.

The new screen had not removed it.

But beside it, in green letters, now appeared: “Original verified; shadow scanner-generated.”

Madhav looked at it for a long time.

For three months, the shadow of a five-year-old clip had stood between a dead teacher’s service and a living woman’s pension.

The shadow had not been erased.

Only its authority had ended.

THE INSIDE LETTER SENT OUTSIDE

In the northern row of rooms at the District Archives, a thin line of damp would begin to descend the wall as soon as the rains began.

The room held old land-record files, map tubes, settlement registers, and bundles of orders twenty or twenty-five years old.

This year the roof repairs had remained unfinished. After the first heavy rain, Record Keeper Naresh Jha had two bundles lying beneath the northern wall lifted away.

That afternoon Assistant Director Suchitra Devi had a short internal order drawn up—the records from the five cupboards in the northern room were to be shifted temporarily to the southern hall, and returned only after the roof inspection was complete.

The order was routine.

At the top of the paper was written: “For Internal Circulation Only.”

The recipients were three branches—Records, Building Maintenance, and Indexing.

Naresh Babu thought the work would begin by evening.

But the order had not reached his desk by evening.

The next morning he telephoned the Indexing Branch.

The reply came from there: “We have not received it either.”

The Building Maintenance Branch said, “On the digital portal the order is showing as ‘Dispatched.’”

Naresh Babu was startled.

“Dispatched where?”

The answer came: “External mail.”

He went straight to the mail room.

In the mail room, Ramakant Babu was cleaning a rubber stamp. Before him lay a stack of outgoing letters, registered envelopes, and the open dispatch register.

Naresh Babu gave him the order number.

Ramakant checked the register.

“Yes. Yesterday at four twenty-seven, an external dispatch number was assigned to it.”

“But this was an internal order.”

Ramakant pushed his glasses up.

“It was. But one line slipped in the list.”

He opened the digital portal. Two orders had been created at the same time. The first was an external letter to the District Construction Division for a roof inspection. The second was the internal order for shifting the records within the building.

While the dispatch list was being prepared, the recipient of the first letter had remained against the second line, and the number of the second order had been entered in the external dispatch register.

Naresh Babu said, "Correct it."

Ramakant Babu moved the cursor beside 'Dispatched.'

The correction box was greyed out.

"It cannot be changed now."

"Why?"

"Once an external dispatch number has been generated, the status can change only to 'Received.'"

"Received by whom?"

"By the person to whom the letter was sent."

Naresh Babu looked at him for a few moments.

"Where did the letter go?"

Ramakant Babu looked towards the stack.

The order was still there.

In the upper right corner was a blue stamp—'External Dispatch 4873.'

The paper had not left the building.

Naresh Babu picked it up.

"Then I am the recipient myself."

Ramakant Babu shook his head.

"The digital portal will not accept that. Receipt of an external dispatch requires an external inward number."

"Shall I take this paper to the Records Branch?"

"The paper can go. But on the portal the order is still 'outside.' If the branch starts the work, an inspection may ask how an internal transfer was carried out on the basis of an external letter."

Naresh Babu put the paper back on the table.

Outside, the rain had begun again.

In the afternoon, the first drop fell from the ceiling of the northern room.

It landed on top of Cupboard Number Six.

Naresh Babu sent for a tarpaulin sheet. The cupboard was covered.

Mamta Jha from the Indexing staff asked, "Shall we shift the files?"

"The order is stuck."

"But the order has been issued."

"It has been issued, but according to the office it has gone outside."

Instead of replying, Mamta looked up at the ceiling.

A second drop fell.

In the evening Suchitra Devi herself came to inspect the northern room.

Naresh Babu explained the situation.

She looked at the order.

"I have signed it."

"Yes."

"The paper is here."

"Yes."

"Then how is the order outside?"

Ramakant Babu was called.

He came carrying the dispatch register.

"The status is tied to the external dispatch number."

Suchitra Devi asked, "Strike out the number."

"Striking anything out in the register is prohibited. For correction, the status 'Undelivered/Returned' is required, and that status will not open without a postal receipt report."

"The paper never went to the post office."

"Then how can it be returned?"

For a few moments there was only the sound of rain in the room.

Suchitra Devi looked at the portal.

Against Order 4873 it read: 'Dispatched; receipt awaited.'

She said, "Enter today's date and add a note—dispatch error."

Ramakant Babu tried.

The note box opened, but the status did not change.

'Dispatch error—the letter did not leave the office premises' was entered and saved.

Naresh Babu asked, "Can we act on the basis of this note?"

On the digital portal the 'Implementing Branch' field was blank.

That field opened only when the status was 'Received.'

Suchitra Devi said quietly, "The paper will have to go around and come back."

Ramakant Babu understood.

"The post office?"

"Yes."

An ordinary envelope was made for the order.

In the recipient field the office's own name was written—"District Archives, Main Building."

Naresh Babu said, "We have to send our own letter to our own address?"

Suchitra Devi said, "The letter does not need the route. The portal does."

Before five that evening, Ramakant Babu took the envelope to the nearby post office along with the external mail.

The postal employee laughed when he saw the address.

"This is your own building."

"Yes."

"You could have delivered it by hand."

Ramakant Babu replied, "It was delivered by hand. Now it has to come back by post."

The employee laughed again, but stamped it.

That night the rain intensified.

In the northern room, Naresh Babu, Mamta, and two peons stayed late.

Under the order, they were not authorized to move the cupboards.

So they did not move the cupboards.

They lifted the lower bundles inside the cupboards onto the upper shelves, laid wooden strips on the floor, stretched tarpaulin three cubits away from the damp wall, and placed buckets beneath the dripping places.

Mamta said, "Is this not shifting?"
 Naresh Babu said, "No. This is preservation."
 They looked at each other and smiled.
 By ten at night, five buckets had been replaced in turn.
 The rain stopped towards dawn.
 At half past ten in the morning, the postman arrived at the main gate.
 In his bag was the office's own envelope.
 Its arrival was entered in the gate register.
 The envelope was opened in the mail room.
 Ramakant Babu assigned it an external inward number—"Receipt 2161."
 On the digital portal, the status of Order 4873 changed from 'Dispatched' to 'Received.'
 Immediately the 'Implementing Branch' field opened.
 The names of the three branches were selected.
 At eleven o'clock the same order appeared again on Naresh Babu's portal.
 At the top it read: 'Internal implementation after receipt of external letter.'
 Naresh Babu looked at the sentence for a long time.
 What he had wandered from his desk to the mail room searching for yesterday had today gone around through the post office and returned to his desk, now valid.
 The work of shifting the cupboards began.
 Each file was ticked off in the list and placed in the southern hall.
 By afternoon, Cupboard Number Six was empty.
 The wall behind it was wet.
 Mamta showed him a thin file whose outer cover had caught a little damp at one corner.
 The papers inside were safe.
 Naresh Babu breathed a sigh of relief.
 In the afternoon Suchitra Devi came for an inspection.
 On the portal she saw the entire journey—internal order; External Dispatch 4873; dispatch-error note; dispatch through the post office; External Receipt 2161; internal implementation.
 She said, "A paper left the building and returned to the building, and only then did we accept what it was saying."
 Ramakant Babu remained silent.
 Mamta said, "The paper was saying the same thing yesterday too."
 Suchitra Devi looked at her.
 "Yes. But yesterday the system was not listening to it."
 That week the mail-room list and the internal-circulation list began to be printed on sheets of different colours.
 A new safeguard was also added to the digital portal—if an order marked 'For Internal Circulation Only' was entered in the external dispatch list, it would ask for confirmation a second time.
 While testing this new safeguard, Ramakant Babu searched for Order 4873 again.

Its entire journey was still preserved on the portal.

In that sequence, one small detail caught his eye.

The inward time of the envelope that had returned from the post office was half past ten.

But the first entry in the preservation register of the northern room was from seven-oh-five the previous evening—‘Lower bundles lifted upward; wooden strips laid on floor.’

In other words, people had begun the work long before the paper’s valid journey was complete.

Ramakant Babu told Naresh Babu about it.

Naresh Babu said, “I did not implement the order.”

“Then what was this?”

“What, if left undone, would have let the papers get wet.”

Ramakant Babu looked at the portal again.

The first status of the order there was ‘Dispatched.’

The second—‘Received.’

The third—‘Implemented.’

There was no status for the preservation carried out at night.

He thought of adding a short note, then stopped.

If he added a note, another question would arise—how had the work been done before the order was received?

He closed the portal.

In the afternoon Naresh Babu stood looking at the empty cupboard in the northern room.

Outside, the sun had come out.

A thin line of water was still visible on the damp wall.

The old files were safe in the southern hall.

And in the dispatch register, the journey of Order 4873 was complete.

The paper had truly gone outside.

But the people who had saved what the order was made to save had remained inside all the while.

STORY 172

THE FIRST DAY OF APPOINTMENT

At twenty past nine on Monday morning, Vinayakant Jha reached the gate of the District Land Records Office. In his hand was a brown envelope containing his appointment letter, copies of his educational certificates, his character certificate, and three photographs. The final line of the appointment letter read: "Service shall be deemed to commence from the day of assumption of charge."

Vinayakant had read this sentence two or three times along the way. To him, the matter seemed perfectly clear. Reach the office, assume charge, and service begins from that day.

At the gate, the guard examined the appointment letter, entered his name in the register, and handed him a visitor slip. The time on the slip was 9:22.

"Establishment Branch, second floor," the guard said.

Outside the Establishment Branch on the second floor, seven blue files lay on a table. Inside, Pramod Babu was searching for something on his computer screen. Vinayakant held out his appointment letter.

Pramod Babu read the letter and smiled. "All right—" he began, then stopped and changed the sentence. "All right, you are here from today."

He opened a thick charge register. The first box on the new page was for the employee's name. The second—for the payroll number. The third—for the date of assuming charge.

After writing the name, Pramod Babu stopped at the second box.

"Your payroll number?"

Vinayakant said, "I have not been given one."

"Not in the appointment letter?"

They both looked at the letter again. There was no number.

Pramod Babu picked up the telephone. "Rekha ji, there is a new appointment. Where will the payroll number come from?"

The answer came from the Accounts Branch downstairs: "Once the service-start date is entered."

Pramod Babu put down the telephone and looked at Vinayakant.

"But the service-start date is what we are supposed to enter in this register," Vinayakant said.

"Yes. But the register cannot be entered without a payroll number."

For a few moments, both remained silent.

With a pencil, Pramod Babu put a small dot in the empty box of the register. "Sit down. I will ask the Establishment Officer."

Establishment Officer Sujata Chaudhary arrived at ten. She read the letter, opened the digital portal, and began entering Vinayakant's details. Name, father's name, date of birth, address, post—everything went in. The final box turned red: "Employee number mandatory."

"The Payroll Branch will issue the employee number," she said.

Rekha Devi was called upstairs. She came carrying her small notebook. She looked at the portal and said, "To create the payroll number, we need the appointment date, date of assumption of charge, and office code."

"The date of assumption of charge is today," Sujata Chaudhary said.

Rekha Devi shook her head. "In the digital system, the date of assumption of charge can be entered only after the employee number is created."

"Then create the number first."

"The screen for creating the number will not move forward without the date of assumption of charge."

A faint ripple of laughter passed through the room, but no one quite laughed.

Sujata Chaudhary said, "All right. Put it in writing that the employee reported today. We will enter it once the system opens."

On the copy of the appointment letter, Pramod Babu wrote: "Reported on 22 September 2026 at 9:22 a.m." He signed below. Sujata Chaudhary signed as well.

Vinayakant was given a desk in the third room. One leg of the chair was slightly shorter than the others; in the desk drawer lay old carbon paper and two broken clips.

His work was to check the digital lists of old land records. The computer could not be opened without login credentials, and login credentials could not be created without an employee number. So on the first day Pramod Babu gave him twenty pages of printed lists.

Vinayakant began marking errors on paper. By evening he had identified differences in names, khasra numbers, or village spellings in thirty-seven entries.

At five o'clock he went to the charge register. The second box was still empty.

"Where do I sign?" he asked.

Pramod Babu said, "For now, in this visitor register. The number should come by tomorrow."

The number did not come the next day. Nor on the third day.

Every day Vinayakant took a visitor slip at the gate, went upstairs, sat at his desk, and checked papers. By the seventh day, the guard had begun filling out the slip in advance when he saw him. Only the time was left blank.

On the tenth day, Sujata Chaudhary gave him a file—the digital index of a seventy-year-old map. "You have a good eye for this. Prepare a discrepancy list within three days."

Vinayakant prepared the list. In the space for his designation beside his name on the file, Pramod Babu wrote in pencil: "New appointee."

On the fifteenth day, an inspection team arrived. One member of the team asked, "Which branch does this gentleman belong to?"

Pramod Babu replied naturally, "Record Assistant under Establishment."

The inspector looked at the list. "Employee number?"

No one answered immediately.

Vinayakant took out his appointment letter. The inspector examined it and then said, “Proof of assumption of charge?”

Pramod Babu showed him the handwritten note dated 22 September.

The inspector said, “This is proof of attendance. Where is the entry in the charge register?”

“The payroll number has not been created.”

The inspector removed his glasses and placed them on the table. “Then, in the system, this employee has not begun service.”

At that moment, every eye in the room turned towards Vinayakant. He had been sitting at that same desk for three weeks.

After the inspection, a short observation arrived: “The legal status of work performed by the employee during the pre-assumption-of-charge period shall be clarified.”

Vinayakant read the observation three times. “Pre-assumption-of-charge period” had been written for the days on which he had spent eight hours a day in the office.

At the end of the month, the salary list was prepared. Vinayakant’s name was not on it.

Rekha Devi said, “We can add the name, but first we need the start date.”

“Twenty-second September,” Vinayakant said.

“The portal will not accept that date, because your employee number did not exist on that day.”

“Then on what day will the number be created?”

“When the start date is entered.”

Vinayakant did not laugh. By now the sentence had become familiar to him.

The following week, an instruction came from the district office that in such cases a “temporary employee number” could be issued. Everyone felt relieved.

Pramod Babu opened the screen for creating a temporary number. First box—name. Second—post. Third—“Date of commencement of service.”

Pramod Babu leaned back in his chair.

“The same thing again?” Sujata Chaudhary asked.

“Yes.”

After much thought, Rekha Devi suggested, “Enter today’s date provisionally. Once the number is created, we can correct it to the earlier date.”

Vinayakant asked, “Then what happens to my first month?”

Rekha Devi said, “It can be paid as arrears once the correction is made.”

“And for the correction?”

“Proof of the original date of assumption of charge will be required.”

Pramod Babu picked up the handwritten note of 22 September. The inspection team had called that paper only proof of attendance.

Sujata Chaudhary remained silent for a long time. At last she said, “Without a temporary number, nothing else will move. Enter today’s date. Also attach a note that the actual date is under determination.”

That day Vinayakant received a temporary employee number—T-741. His computer login was created. For the first time, the attendance machine accepted his thumb. Green letters appeared on the screen: “Welcome. First day of service.”

Vinayakant kept looking at the screen. The date that day was 21 October.

The previous twenty-nine days existed in the visitor register, in files, in the inspection observation, in the error lists, and in the memories of his colleagues; for the digital system, all of them belonged to a time before service.

His salary came at the end of the month, but only from 21 October. He was told to submit a separate application for the arrears of the earlier days.

The first question on the application form was: “Employee’s service-start date.”

Vinayakant entered 22 September. The portal turned red: “Does not match the recorded service-start date.”

He entered 21 October. The next box opened: “The arrears period cannot precede the service-start date.”

Vinayakant leaned back in his chair.

Pramod Babu said, “Submit it on paper. I will send it separately.”

A paper application was prepared. Attached to it were the note on the appointment letter dated 22 September, twenty-nine visitor slips, his pencil remarks on three files, the inspection query, and the temporary-number letter dated 21 October.

The district office replied: “There is no dispute over the fact that the employee did in fact work. However, for determination of the formal service-start date, the office shall clarify on the basis of which record the employee’s first working day is to be accepted.”

Sujata Chaudhary read the letter and called Vinayakant.

“In your view, which day was the first day?”

For the first time, Vinayakant was slightly startled by the question.

“The day I came here.”

“Proof?”

Vinayakant took out his first visitor slip from the gate. 9:22.

Sujata Chaudhary said, “This is proof that you entered the building.”

“Then Pramod Babu’s note on the appointment letter.”

“That is proof of attendance.”

“My work on the files?”

“That is proof of work.”

“Then what separate thing is proof of the first day?”

No answer came immediately.

That evening Sujata Chaudhary created a new document. She titled it: “Register for Determination of Date of Assumption of Charge.” In the first row, separate boxes were made for Vinayakant’s name, date of appointment letter, time of first entry, file of first work, temporary employee number, and remarks.

The final box was: “Determined date of assumption of charge.”

That box remained empty.

Two weeks later, another new employee arrived at the office. Taking a visitor slip at the gate, he came to Pramod Babu's desk.

Pramod Babu read the appointment letter and opened the charge register.

"Payroll number?" he was about to ask, but stopped the sentence midway.

Vinayakant rose from his desk and came over.

"First write the time on this paper," he said. "Write when you entered the building, before whom you presented your appointment letter, and what first work you were given—write everything."

The new employee asked, "Is this assumption of charge?"

Vinayakant looked at him for a few moments.

"For now, this is only proof that you were here today," he said. "The rest will be decided later."

The new employee signed.

Vinayakant looked at the clock and wrote down the time.

His own first day was still under determination. But that day no longer existed only in someone's memory.

TWO SALARIES UNDER THE SAME NAME

The salary slips at the District Agriculture Office were prepared two days late that month. Since morning, employees had been coming into the accounts room with their slips in hand. Someone's dearness allowance looked too low; someone else's provident-fund deduction too high. As soon as Ramnaresh Sah looked at his slip, he first checked the date, then the name, then the gross salary. Everything seemed in order. Then his eyes stopped at one line near the bottom—"Unpaid leave: 1 day."

Ramnaresh Babu had been in the office for twenty-five years. The previous month he had not taken even a single day's leave. On the contrary, on the last Sunday of the month he had stayed two extra hours for an emergency count at the seed store. He placed the slip before Neelima Jha, the accounts assistant.

"Where has this one day come from?"

Neelima looked at the computer screen. "The fourteenth."

"On the fourteenth I was right here. My signature is in the seed-distribution register."

Neelima opened another window. "Medical leave is approved here."

Ramnaresh Babu laughed. "Then was the body mine, or the leave?"

Neelima too tried to smile, but when she saw the name on the screen, her face grew serious. "Ramnaresh Sah... employee number 2714."

Ramnaresh Babu said, "Yes."

Neelima opened another line. "But the employee number on the leave application is 7214."

Only the positions of the digits had changed. The name was the same.

Neelima said, "The employee with this number is at the Soil Testing Sub-Centre."

"He is Ramnaresh Sah too?"

"Yes."

Ramnaresh Babu remained silent for a few moments. For the first time, his own name seemed to him not a private possession but a shared article.

At noon a telephone call was made to the Soil Testing Sub-Centre. The reply from there was that the other Ramnaresh Sah had indeed been on medical leave on the fourteenth. His fever certificate had also been uploaded.

The accounts room concluded that the salary deduction had mistakenly gone to the other employee. The error seemed simple. Neelima looked for the correction option, but a new problem opened on the screen—the two employee numbers had been linked beneath a single "person record."

While records were being transferred from the old payroll system to the new digital system, the machine had seen the same name, the same father's name, and the same date of birth, and had treated the two men as one person.

Ramnaresh Babu was startled. "Even the father's name is the same?"

Neelima read it out—"Jagdish Sah."

Ramnaresh Babu said softly, "My father's name was Jagdish Sah."

The Ramnaresh Sah at the sub-centre also turned out to have a father named Jagdish Sah.

"Date of birth?"

"First of January, nineteen seventy."

Ramnaresh Babu sat upright in his chair. "That is what is written in my service book. But it is not my actual date. When my name was entered at school, only the year was known, so the first of January was written."

Neelima asked the sub-centre again. The Ramnaresh Sah there replied that his school certificate too showed the first of January, because no one in his family remembered the exact day of his birth. The year should have been different, but the digit in the digital copy of the old file was blurred; the new system had read both years as 1970.

"So this machine has made the two of us one human being?" Ramnaresh Babu asked.

Neelima said, "For the moment, that is what it believes."

For corrections there was a "Different Persons" option. As soon as it was opened, five proofs were demanded—full name, father's name, date of birth, district, and service category.

The first three were the same. The district for both was Madhubani. Both belonged to Class III service.

Neelima stared at the screen for a while. "The system asks for difference on the basis of five things, and in all five you are the same."

Ramnaresh Babu said, "We are not the same. I am sitting here, and he is sitting there."

"There is no box in which to write that."

The next day the Ramnaresh Sah from the sub-centre came to the district office himself. He looked about fifteen years younger than Ramnaresh Babu. He was shorter too. He wore a beard, whereas Ramnaresh Babu was always clean-shaven. The two looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"At least the mirror will not call us one," the younger Ramnaresh said.

Seeing the two seated together in the accounts room, employees kept peeping in from time to time. Someone joked, "Share one salary between you."

The younger Ramnaresh took out a slip. His problem was not salary. He had received a promotion notice stating that his length of service was twenty-six years. He had been appointed only seven years earlier.

"My service has grown longer," he said, "and his salary has grown smaller."

Ramnaresh Babu said, "You took my leave; I took your age."

Laughter rose again, but Neelima did not laugh. The promotion file had now become a serious matter. The system was adding the service years of the two men and treating them as one continuous service. The younger Ramnaresh's eligibility for promotion had been counted from the older Ramnaresh's year of appointment. Then, in the same merged record, the leave on the fourteenth had been deducted from the older Ramnaresh's salary.

To prove that they were different, both men brought their respective service books. On the first page of each was the name—Ramnaresh Sah. Father's name—Jagdish Sah. Date of birth—1 January. District—Madhubani. Even the category on their caste certificates was the same.

The differences lay in the year of appointment, village, employee number, and photograph. But in the "Different Persons" form, the box for the full village name allowed only twelve characters. The older Ramnaresh's village was "Pipra West," and the younger Ramnaresh's was "Pipra East." The screen displayed both only as "Pipra."

Neelima said, "The more proof I add, the denser the sameness becomes."

Both men brought their bank passbooks. The account numbers were different. But the bank branch was the same. Their signatures were different, yet both wrote "Ramnaresh Sah" in Devanagari.

Fingerprint comparison was suggested. The personnel assistant said that biometric-identification data existed in the new attendance system, but the old payroll person record did not permit access to match it.

"Then use your eyes," the older Ramnaresh said. "Both of us are standing here."

A little embarrassed, the personnel assistant said, "I believe you. But I have to make the correction from evidence, not from my eyes."

The matter was sent for approval to the District Officer. The note that came back said—"Attach departmental proof of the separate existence of the two employees."

The superintendent was ready to issue a departmental certificate. But the digital format for the certificate had an option marked "Select employee." As soon as "Ramnaresh Sah" was entered, the same person record opened, with both employee numbers linked beneath it. There was no facility for selecting two separate employees.

The superintendent wrote the certificate on paper—"Mr Ramnaresh Sah, employee number 2714, and Mr Ramnaresh Sah, employee number 7214, are two separate persons."

A digital copy of the certificate was made and placed in the file. The system rejected it as a "self-declaration," because the office issuing the certificate was the employer attached to that same merged person record.

Meanwhile, the date for preparing the month's payroll drew near. Neelima tried to stop the deduction temporarily. The machine asked—"Whose leave is to be cancelled?" In the options there was again only one Ramnaresh Sah.

The younger Ramnaresh did not want his genuine medical leave cancelled. The older Ramnaresh did not want to accept a deduction from his salary. Inside one person, the two claims became contradictory to one another.

At last the Accounts Officer issued a paper order—the older Ramnaresh's one day of salary was to be corrected manually; the younger Ramnaresh's promotion case was to be held back; and no automatic change was to be applied to either man until the merged record had been resolved.

The order saved the salary, but the problem in the system remained.

A week later an inspection team arrived. The team leader said that direct verification should be carried out. The two Ramnareshes would be observed present at two different workplaces at the same time.

At eleven in the morning, the older Ramnaresh was counting sacks of seed in the district store. At exactly eleven, the younger Ramnaresh was fifteen kos away at the Soil Testing Sub-Centre, entering sample numbers. Two members of the inspection team took photographs and signatures at the separate locations.

In the evening, when the report was being uploaded to the digital file, a new obstacle appeared. The system would not accept attendance at two locations at the same time for a single person record. In red letters the screen displayed—"Possible duplicate attendance."

The leader of the inspection team remained silent for a long time. Then he wrote on paper—"In this case, presence at two places at the same time is not evidence of an error; it is evidence of two persons."

The system had no ready-made box for that sentence. The report was attached to the file.

At the end of the month, instructions came from headquarters that the two records should not be split immediately; first the old entries for service years, leave, salary, promotion, and provident fund were to be separated one by one. For this work, two new temporary registers were created—"Ramnaresh-1" and "Ramnaresh-2."

The older Ramnaresh looked at the registers and said, "So now the names have become different?"

Neelima said, "Not the names. Numbers have been added for convenience."

The younger Ramnaresh asked, "For how long?"

"Until the system understands that there are two of you."

Two months later, the older Ramnaresh's salary was running correctly. The younger Ramnaresh's promotion was under fresh examination according to his actual years of service. In the paper files the two men were clearly separate. But the moment the digital screen was opened, the same name still shone at the top—Ramnaresh Sah. A short note had been added beneath it—"Two employees with the same name; do not auto-match."

One day the younger Ramnaresh asked with a laugh, "So are we separate now?"

Neelima looked at the screen. "On paper, yes. As for the machine, it has been instructed to keep the two of you separate."

The older Ramnaresh Babu folded his salary slip and put it in his pocket. "All right," he said. "We were separate human beings to begin with. Now we will keep reminding the system from time to time as well."

STORY 174

ABSENT FOR PROOF OF ATTENDANCE

At the Block Agriculture Office, the last Wednesday of the month meant something different from all the other days. On that day, every field employee was required to reach the district headquarters and certify his or her field attendance for the previous month. The rule was new, but in three months everyone had learned its rhythm—finish the village work by seven in the morning, reach the district by nine, give a fingerprint, show the field register, obtain the officer's signature, and return to one's work area by evening.

Poonam Kumari's work area extended across five villages. She was an Agriculture Field Assistant. Her job was to carry information to the fields about seed, disease, irrigation, and government assistance. On paper, her office was a small room in the block building, but her actual work was usually done on the bund of a field, on a panchayat veranda, at a seed shop, or in someone's courtyard.

That Wednesday she was supposed to go to Sonbarsa village early in the morning. For three days, two farmers had been asking her to look at yellow spots that had appeared on maize leaves. But on headquarters-verification day, going to the village was not possible. On Tuesday evening Poonam had told the farmer Ramlochan, "Tomorrow I have to go to headquarters. I will come and look on Thursday morning."

Ramlochan had asked, "Are you on leave?"

"Not leave. It is the day for certifying attendance."

Ramlochan had laughed. "Absent from the field in order to prove you are present?"

Poonam had laughed too. At the time, it had sounded like a joke.

At half past six on Wednesday morning, Poonam left home. In her bag were the field register, visit slips for five villages, the seed-distribution list, and, in a small box, two diseased maize leaves. Ramlochan had sent the leaves to her house the previous evening so that, at the very least, she could show them to the Plant Protection Officer at headquarters.

By the time she reached the district headquarters it was ten minutes past nine. At the gate there was a long queue of field employees—some from the Animal Husbandry Department, some from the Land Measurement Branch, some from Water Resources. Everyone carried registers, verification slips, and bags.

The fingerprint machine installed at the gate kept stalling that day. The first time, it failed to capture Poonam's fingerprint. The second time, the screen displayed—"Try again." The third time, a green mark flashed. The time was recorded—9:27.

A small line appeared beneath it—"Headquarters Verification Attendance."

Poonam breathed a sigh of relief. At least the first stage of the day's principal task was complete.

By ten o'clock all the employees were seated in the hall. Names were called one by one, field registers were checked, and the previous month's visit dates were matched against the digital record. Poonam's turn came at eleven fifteen.

Checking Officer Arun Jha turned the pages of her register and asked, "Ramapur on the seventeenth, Sonbarsa on the eighteenth, Pipra on the nineteenth?"

"Yes."

"There is no fingerprint at the block office for three consecutive days."

Poonam said, "I was on field visits. The field slips are here."

Arun Jha examined the slips. The panchayat secretary's signature, the farmer group's mark, and the times of the visits were all recorded. He affixed the approval stamp.

"Today's verification is complete," he said. "Again on the last Wednesday next month."

Poonam gathered her register. She was heading towards the Plant Protection Room to show the maize leaves when her mobile phone rang. It was Ramlochan.

"Didi, the officers have come to the field."

Poonam stopped. "Which officers?"

"An inspection team from the district. They are asking where the Field Assistant is. I told them you have gone to headquarters. They are asking why the field has been left unattended on a working day."

Poonam turned back towards the hall. Arun Jha was still checking registers at the table. After hearing her, he said, "The inspection team belongs to a different branch. Tell them that headquarters verification was compulsory."

"I can tell them, but they are at the field."

"Your proof of attendance for today is here."

Poonam asked softly, "Then is my absence there also being proved?"

Arun Jha was silent for a few moments before answering. "Under the rule, you are supposed to be here."

The mobile phone rang again. This time it was Manoj Babu, the Block Agriculture Officer. His voice was a little sharp. "Poonamji, the inspection team has reached Sonbarsa. Where are you?"

"At the district headquarters. Monthly verification."

"I know. But the inspection team says that a field employee's absence without prior notice is a service lapse."

"The prior notice was the headquarters order that came to your own office."

Manoj Babu sighed. "I told them. They are writing that the employee was not found present in the work area at the time of inspection. Take proof from wherever you are."

Poonam still had the verification slip with the green stamp in her hand. She looked at it. Suddenly the paper seemed more strange than useful.

At one in the afternoon Poonam left headquarters. By the time she caught a bus and reached Sonbarsa it was half past three. The inspection team had gone. Ramlochan, Kishori Mahato, and two other farmers were standing on the field bund.

Ramlochan said, "They looked at the leaves. They said the employee was not here, so they would not take the sample."

Poonam took from her bag the same diseased leaves she had been carrying since morning. "I had thought of showing these leaves at headquarters too."

Kishori Mahato asked, "So what now?"

"Tomorrow I will take the sample again."

That evening the inspection note reached the block office. One line was in red letters—"At the time of field inspection, the concerned Field Assistant was found absent; the farmers were deprived of necessary advice."

Manoj Babu read the note and looked at Poonam. "I will have to reply to this."

Poonam placed the verification slip on the table. "This proves that I was not absent. I was present at headquarters."

Manoj Babu said, "Correct. But the note does not say you were absent from service. It says you were absent from your work area."

Ramlochan's sentence from the previous evening rose again in Poonam's mind—absent from the field in order to prove you are present.

The next day a reply was drafted—"The concerned employee was present at the district headquarters for compulsory monthly attendance verification; therefore, her absence from the work area at the time of inspection was due to an approved administrative reason."

The reply reached the District Inspection Branch. Three days later a question came back from there—"If the purpose of verifying an employee's field attendance is to ensure the employee's actual presence in the field, then leaving the field unattended on verification day runs contrary to the purpose of the arrangement. Suggest an alternative."

A meeting was held at the block office. Manoj Babu said, "What alternative are we supposed to suggest? The order comes from the district."

The accounts assistant suggested, "Send employees by turns. Not everyone on the same day."

Poonam said, "The slip clearly says—the last Wednesday of the month, all field employees."

Someone said, "Next time send half the people in the morning and half in the afternoon."

Manoj Babu shook his head. "Fingerprint verification is between ten and two. After two, the officer is not there."

The meeting ended without a conclusion. The reply stated—"Guidance from the higher level is awaited."

The last Wednesday came again the following month. This time, because of the inspection note, all the employees were alert. Some left assistants in

their work areas; others informed farmer groups in advance. Poonam told Ramlochan of Sonbarsa, “I have to go to headquarters again today. If any officer comes, show them this slip.”

She gave him a copy of the monthly verification order.

Ramlochan asked, “Will there be another inspection this time?”

“Hard to say.”

At headquarters the queue was even longer this time. After the previous month’s incidents, the district had asked every block for a list of “absent field employees.” The verification officers were matching the inspection notes against everyone’s registers as well.

Poonam’s name was called. Arun Jha looked at the file. “You are recorded as absent from your work area on the previous verification day.”

Poonam showed the green slip. “That day I was here for verification.”

Without smiling, Arun Jha said, “That is recorded here too. The problem is that both are correct.”

“Then today’s verification?”

“Today’s verification will be done here. What arrangement have you made in your field area?”

“I have given the farmer group a copy of the order.”

Arun Jha affixed the stamp. Then, after a brief pause, he said, “We are here on this day too. If an inspection team comes to headquarters, it could just as well say that we are not in our regular rooms.”

Poonam wanted to laugh, but the laughter did not come.

At half past twelve in the afternoon, a message arrived from Sonbarsa. The inspection team had indeed come again. This time Ramlochan had shown them the copy of the order. The team read the slip and wrote—“Employee at headquarters verification; field service under alternative arrangement.”

For the first time, this sentence was softer than the previous note. But by evening a new question arose. Who was the alternative arrangement? Ramlochan was not a government employee. He was a member of the farmer group. The inspection team wrote—“Clarify the legality of government field service being performed by a person who is not an employee.”

Poonam put a hand to her forehead. “I left the slip only to give information, not to do the work.”

Manoj Babu said, “The paperwork seems to be generating work all by itself.”

In the third month the district headquarters devised a new arrangement. On verification day, every field employee had to send proof of attendance from a location within the work area along with a digital location marker, and then come to headquarters to give a fingerprint.

At eight in the morning Poonam sent a location marker from in front of Sonbarsa School. Then she took a bus to the district. On reaching headquarters, the officer asked, “The location marker is from eight o’clock. Verification begins at ten. Where were you during the two hours in between?”

“On the bus.”

“Proof of the bus journey?”

Poonam took out the bus ticket.

There was no time printed on the bus ticket.

The officer said, "All right, we will accept it for today. Next time keep travel proof that carries the time."

For a moment Poonam wondered whether an employee was expected to prove the work, or every step taken in order to reach the work.

That month the inspection team reached Pipra in the afternoon. Poonam was at headquarters. The team saw the location marker—Sonbarsa, eight in the morning. The inspection note stated—"Employee absent from the field at the time of afternoon inspection; available digital location marker relates to a time different from the inspection time."

This time Poonam did not contest it. She simply attached all three papers together in the file—the morning location marker from the field, the afternoon fingerprint attendance at headquarters, and the field absence recorded at the time of inspection.

A special meeting was called at district level. Thirty-three such cases had accumulated from five blocks. Water-measurement assistants, animal-health workers, Agriculture Field Assistants, land-measurement employees—the same kind of contradiction appeared in all their files.

At the meeting one officer said, "There are two kinds of attendance—administrative and field."

Another said, "Then keep them in two separate registers."

A third asked, "If the two are not possible at the same time, which one has priority?"

Silence spread through the room.

Poonam was permitted to speak. She said, "For me, attendance is not a paper; it is the place where the work is. But if I leave the place of work in order to prove attendance on paper, then the two registers make each other guilty."

The officer wrote down the remark.

A week later a revised order arrived. Monthly verification for field employees would no longer take place on the same day for everyone. There would be separate dates block by block, and verification could be completed within a half-day window. The Inspection Branch would also be supplied with the verification dates, so that absence during that period would be treated as pre-approved.

A sense of relief spread through all the offices.

But the last line of the order caught Poonam's eye—"On verification day, before proceeding to headquarters, the field employee shall certify attendance in the work area and then commence the journey."

Poonam read the line twice.

The following month her verification day was Tuesday. In the morning she went to Sonbarsa, entered 8:05 in the farmer group's register, sent the location marker, and then caught a bus. By the time she reached the district headquarters it was noon. The fingerprint machine turned green.

On her way back in the evening, she met Ramlochan on the field bund. "Was your attendance proved today?"

Poonam set down her bag and examined a fresh maize leaf. “Yes. Here in the morning, there in the afternoon.”

Ramlochan asked, “Then when will the work happen?”

Poonam turned the leaf over and looked at the spots. “Now.”

She sat down on the bund. The farmers gathered around her. In the distance the dust raised by the bus was still visible on the road. Poonam opened the field register. Beneath today’s date, the first line had already been filled in—“Attendance certified.” Below it she added a second line—“Work begun: 4:40 p.m.”

THE ORIGINAL PAGE OF THE CORRECTION REGISTER

The rule for opening the old master registers of the District Land Records Branch was simple—nothing written in the original register was to be struck out. If an error was found, a small red dot was placed beside it, and the full correction was entered in a separate “Correction Register.” The original page remained exactly as it was.

Suresh Mishra had been a clerk in the branch for the past eighteen years. He was proud of this rule. He would often say, “What was written is history; what was corrected is the next line of history.”

There were three thick master registers in the office. One was for land accounts, one for boundary demarcation, and one for changes of ownership. The Correction Register had once been a thin volume. By now it had grown into five volumes.

With time, the master registers were opened less and less. People came with applications, employees consulted the Correction Register, and the final position could usually be found there. The master registers were heavy, their bindings weak. The corner of one page had broken away; on another, old ink had spread.

On her first day, the new employee Neha Jha had asked, “If the final position is in the Correction Register, why open the master register at all?”

Suresh Babu had smiled. “Because to understand what a correction corrected, you have to see the original.”

A few months later Neha herself understood that, in practice, people looked first at the Correction Register. The master register was opened only in a dispute, an inquiry, or when an old date had to be established.

Meanwhile, a case arrived—Account 482, Mauza Kataiya. The applicant was Ramvriksh Yadav. His request seemed simple: a certificate of landholding for farmers’ assistance.

Against Account 482, the Correction Register stated—“Owner: Ramvriksh Yadav. Correction Order No. 37/2018.”

Neha began preparing the certificate. Then the digital system displayed a warning drawn from the copy of the old master register—“Original entry: Sita Devi.”

Neha called Suresh Babu.

“This is normal,” Suresh Babu said. “Sita Devi would have been his mother. After her death, the mutation must have been made.”

“Then shall we look at the correction order?”

The file was brought out according to the reference in the Correction Register. The order was clear—after Sita Devi’s death certificate, family consent, and heir verification in 2018, Ramvriksh’s name was to be entered.

“Then the certificate can be issued,” Neha said.

Suresh Babu agreed.

Just then an elderly woman called from outside, “Is Ramvriksh’s paper here?”

Everyone looked towards the doorway. A woman of about seventy stood there in a white sari, an old cloth bag in her hand.

She said, “I am Sita Devi.”

The room fell silent for a few moments.

Ramvriksh, who had been sitting on the veranda, came inside. His face fell.

“Ma, why have you come here?”

Sita Devi put the bag on the table. “I heard your certificate was being prepared. I have only now learned that the land has been removed from my name.”

Neha looked at Ramvriksh. Suresh Babu opened the file again. The death certificate carried the name—Sita Devi. Father/Husband—Late Bhuvaneshwar Yadav. Village—Kataiya. Age—sixty-eight years.

The woman seated before them handed over her voter slip. Name, husband, village—everything matched.

“Whose death certificate is this?” Suresh Babu asked.

Ramvriksh said softly, “My aunt was also named Sita Devi. She was my father’s younger brother’s wife. Her husband too was named Bhuvaneshwar—Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Yadav. While the paper was being made, ‘Prasad’ may have been left out...”

Suresh Babu stopped him at once. “No assumptions. We will see the file.”

The old file contained a copy of the family tree. There, two Sita Devis were recorded in separate branches. One was Ramvriksh’s mother, the other his aunt. The death certificate belonged to the aunt.

In the 2018 inquiry paper, someone had omitted “Prasad” from “Bhuvaneshwar Prasad.” The village, caste, and age were nearly the same. The mutation order had been applied to the land of Ramvriksh’s mother.

Neha said softly, “Then the Correction Register is wrong.”

Suresh Babu said, “What we see now is an error. But the Correction Register is an accurate record of the order the office issued in 2018.”

Sita Devi was dissatisfied. “I am alive. What more than that do you need?”

“Being alive is the greatest fact,” Suresh Babu said, “but to correct the register we need the proper sequence.”

A new proceeding was opened. The correction in the Correction Register had itself to be corrected. The rule said—the old correction was not to be struck out; the new correction was to be added under the next serial number.

Neha asked, “Then where will the final truth remain?”

“In the next line,” Suresh Babu said.

The inquiry began. Sita Devi’s proof of being alive, family register, tax receipts, land revenue records, and neighbours’ statements were all collected. Ramvriksh too stated that the land actually belonged to his mother; he had needed the certificate for farmers’ assistance and had no intention of taking away her ownership.

Three weeks later an order was passed—the 2018 correction order was not validly applicable to Account 482; the name of the original owner, Sita Devi, was to become effective again.

Neha opened the Correction Register. The old line could not be erased. Beneath it she wrote—“Order 12/2026: Previous correction applied to wrong person; owner Sita Devi restored as effective.”

Suresh Babu wrote the new serial number beside the red dot.

The matter seemed finished. But the next day a letter arrived from the bank.

In 2021, Ramvriksh had taken an agricultural loan on the basis of this land. The bank asked—“According to the valid record on the date the loan was sanctioned, who was the owner?”

Neha said immediately, “Sita Devi. Because the 2018 correction was an error.”

Suresh Babu remained silent.

The bank’s question was read again—“According to the valid record on the date the loan was sanctioned.”

In 2021, the Correction Register showed Ramvriksh’s name. The office certificate had also been issued on that basis. At that time, the 2018 order had not yet been cancelled.

Neha said, “But now we know that it was wrong.”

Suresh Babu said, “We know it now. The office in 2021 did not know it.”

“Then was Ramvriksh the owner in 2021?”

“The question of the actual right in the land is one thing. The state of the official record is another.”

Neha found the answer uncomfortable. “Two truths for the same land?”

Suresh Babu spread the master register, the old Correction Register, and the new order before her.

“No. Three times of the same fact.”

A reply was prepared for the bank—“On the date of sanction of the loan, Ramvriksh Yadav was shown in the department’s then-effective record; a later inquiry found that the said entry resulted from an order concerning the wrong person; the currently effective owner is Sita Devi.”

Neha read the letter and said, “In this answer no one is completely right, and no one completely wrong.”

Suresh Babu said, “Records are not always so clean.”

A few days later, a district inspection took place. The inspector looked at the Correction Register and immediately asked, “Why are there three positions against the same account?”

Neha explained the entire matter. The inspector said, “If the old correction is cancelled, strike it through with a red line.”

Suresh Babu opened the rule book. “Neither the original nor a corrected entry is to be erased or made illegible. The reason for cancellation and the subsequent order are to be added.”

The inspector grew a little irritated. “Then how is an employee supposed to identify the final position?”

Neha said at once, “That is the problem here.”

She showed him the five volumes of Correction Registers. In some places one correction was followed by another, elsewhere by a third. Many employees looked only at the last line, but sometimes the effective date of an older order was what mattered.

The inspection team suggested creating a new “Status Summary Page,” on which the currently effective entry would be shown separately and clearly, with the serial numbers and periods of effect of all previous corrections listed below.

Work began. Account 482 became the first sample.

Three lines were entered on the Status Summary Page—

“Original entry: Sita Devi — from the beginning until 2018.”

“Correction Order 37/2018: Ramvriksh Yadav — departmentally effective record from 2018 until Order 12/2026.”

“Order 12/2026: Sita Devi — currently effective position.”

Neha looked at the page. “Now it is clear.”

Suresh Babu said, “It is clear because time has been added.”

The following week another case arrived. In the old master register, pond land stood in the name of the panchayat; in the 1998 Correction Register it stood in the school’s name; in a 2012 correction it returned to the panchayat. The question was—under whose authority had permission for construction of the school building been granted in 2005?

Earlier, employees would have looked at the “current position” and answered. This time Neha checked the period of effect. In 2005, the school’s name was effective in the departmental record.

She understood that Account 482 had exposed more than a single mistake; the very structure of the registers had been concealing time.

It was impossible to create Status Summary Pages for all active accounts within three months. So a rule was made—wherever there was more than one correction, checking the “effective date” would be compulsory before preparing a certificate.

The employees’ work increased. Some complained that earlier one register was enough to finish the task; now three pages had to be checked.

Neha would say, “Earlier we got an answer quickly; now we will get the answer for the correct time.”

One evening, before the office closed, Sita Devi came again. This time there was no dispute. She had come to collect the new certificate.

Neha handed her the certificate. Name—Sita Devi. Current owner.

Sita Devi read the paper and put it into her bag. “So am I alive again now?”

Neha smiled. “You were never dead. The register understood it late.”

Sita Devi left.

Suresh Babu was closing the master register. Neha looked towards the five volumes of the Correction Register.

“You used to say—the original is history, and the correction is the next line of history.”

“Yes.”

“Now it seems the next line sometimes begins doing more work than the original.”

Suresh Babu ran his hand over the binding. “Then that too has to be read as history, not as an order.”

Neha opened the Status Summary Page for Account 482 once more. Beside the same name were three times. For the first time, the register seemed to her not like static paper but like moving time—to understand what is true today, yesterday’s truth and the day-before-yesterday’s error both have to remain preserved.

STORY 176

THE ENVELOPE WITHOUT A SENDER

On Monday morning, a sealed envelope was found on the receipt desk of the District Social Assistance Office. It was not in the mailbag, nor had anyone handed it over. It lay squarely on top of the document box kept against the wall just inside the gate.

On the front of the envelope, in clear letters, was written—"District Social Assistance Officer, Sahayata Bhavan." Beneath that there was nothing. No name, no village, no department, no mobile number. There was no sender on the back either.

Receipt Assistant Rama Jha picked up the envelope. The paper was thick. It did not seem to contain more than two or three pages. There was not even the impression of anyone's seal on a corner.

Rama first opened the mail register. In the digital receipt system, the first box for adding a new letter was—"Sender." An asterisk showed that the field was mandatory.

She typed "Unknown." The screen turned red—"Select a valid sender."

She typed "Anonymous." The reply came—"Not available in list."

She entered her own name, merely to see whether the next field would open. At once the next options appeared—subject of letter, date received, department, number of enclosures. She deleted her own name.

Senior Assistant Devkinandan Thakur, seated beside her, asked, "What has got stuck?"

Rama showed him the envelope. "There is no sender."

Devkinandan Babu said casually, "Then open it and look. The name will be inside the letter."

Rama stopped her hand. "We are not allowed to open it without a receipt number."

"Why?"

"The rule came after the last inspection. Sealed mail must first be entered in the register and only then opened. Otherwise there may be a dispute that pages inside were added or removed."

Devkinandan Babu remembered the rule. "All right. Then enter it in the register."

"The register will not accept it without a sender."

For a few moments both of them looked at the envelope. The problem was small, but two solid walls of rules had risen around it—receipt was required before opening; a sender was required for receipt; and the sender might be written inside.

Devkinandan Babu asked, "Post-office stamp?"

"No."

"Gate register?"

"The guard said this morning that it was already lying on top of the box."

“Camera?”

Rama telephoned the security room at the gate. The night footage was checked. From half past nine at night until five in the morning, the camera had been off; when the power failed, the backup had not worked. The picture resumed at 5:22, and by then the envelope was already on top of the box.

Devkinandan Babu smiled. “So we do not even know whether the envelope came before the power failure or after it.”

Rama said, “In whose name will the receipt be made?”

At that question, Devkinandan Babu did not laugh. A receipt was not merely a ritual. The reply, file number, and time limit for every letter in the office began from its receipt number.

They took the envelope to the room of Branch Officer Meena Karn. Meena looked at it, turned it over, and held it up to the light to make out the shape of what was inside.

“It has not been opened?”

Rama explained the rule.

Meena said, “Without a sender, we cannot return it either.”

Devkinandan Babu said, “That is exactly why it is here.”

Meena had the rule book brought. The clause on sealed letters was clear — “After the receipt number has been entered, the authorized employee shall open the envelope.” There was nothing about a letter without a sender.

“What about the rule for anonymous complaints?” Rama asked.

Meena turned the pages. “An anonymous complaint is a different matter. To know that it is a complaint, the letter must already have been opened.”

The envelope remained lying on the table.

By noon, talk about it had spread through the office. Someone said, “It is certainly a complaint.” Someone else said, “It may be some court paper; the name must have been left off in printing.” Another whispered, “It may be evidence for an audit.”

Rama listened to all the guesses. It seemed strange to her that the less information the envelope gave, the more people filled into it.

After noon, Social Assistance Officer Vinay Mohan came to the office. Meena showed him the matter.

Vinay Mohan’s first question was, “Has a security check been done?”

The security guard at the gate was called. The envelope was examined from the outside. It appeared to contain only paper; there was no unusual object inside.

“Then open it,” Vinay Mohan said.

Rama placed the rule book before him.

The officer read the page. “The purpose of this rule is to protect documents, not to stop them.”

Meena said, “True, but if we break the rule and open it, tomorrow an inspection may raise a question.”

Vinay Mohan asked, “Can it be opened by special order?”

Devkinandan Babu said, “Even a special order will require the reference of a received letter. This letter has no receipt number.”

Silence fell in the room.

At last Vinay Mohan directed that the envelope be kept in a locked cupboard as “unentered mail,” and that headquarters be asked how the digital system should receive a letter without a sender.

On an ordinary sheet of paper Rama wrote by hand—“One sealed envelope; recipient clear; sender absent; no receipt number issued.” Three employees signed it.

The envelope was placed in the iron cupboard. It had not been officially received, but the paper recording that it had been stored became official.

No reply came from headquarters the next day. Nor on the third day.

Meanwhile, guesses about the importance of the envelope kept changing. Employees in the pension branch said it might be an original life certificate. People in the student assistance room said it might be a scholarship appeal. At the women’s assistance desk, someone said it might be an urgent protection application.

Meena stopped everyone. “We do not know what is inside. Do not create a file on the basis of guesses.”

On the fourth day it rained. Water dripped lightly from the old roof of Sahayata Bhavan near the cupboard. The envelope did not get directly wet, but the air became damp. Rama wanted to put it into a plastic sleeve, then stopped.

“Will putting a new cover over a sealed item also have to be recorded?” she asked Devkinandan Babu.

Devkinandan Babu said, “If it is to protect the paper inside, put it on. But let three people be witnesses.”

Three employees signed again—“Envelope secured in an outer transparent sleeve without being opened.”

Rama laughed. “More paper is being produced outside this envelope than there is paper inside it.”

Devkinandan Babu replied, “An office does not trust paper alone; it trusts the journey of paper.”

On the fifth day a reply came from headquarters—“Send a copy of the local rule regarding receipt of physical letters without a sender.”

Meena read the letter and held her head. “I asked for a solution, and they are asking me for the rule.”

The very copy of the local rule that said nothing about such a situation was sent.

On the seventh day an elderly man came to the office. His name was Dayashankar Mandal.

He asked, “Was any sealed envelope found last week?”

Rama became alert. “Did you send it?”

Dayashankar immediately said, “No. I am only asking.”

“Why?”

He hesitated. “A woman from my village had said that an important paper had been sent to the district. She did not want to disclose her name.”

“What was the paper about?”

Dayashankar avoided saying. “She said that if it reached the right place, people would understand.”

Rama said, “It may have reached the right place, but the rules do not understand it.”

Dayashankar remained silent. The envelope was not shown to him; officially, the office had still not received it.

He left.

After that meeting, instead of becoming more mysterious, the envelope became more ordinary to Rama. Someone genuinely wanted a paper to reach the office, but did not want a name to remain on the outside.

On the eighth day a second reply came from headquarters—“If a letter from an unknown source is a complaint, apply the complaint rules; if it is ordinary correspondence, sender details are required.”

Meena said, “To decide whether it is a complaint or ordinary correspondence, we have to open it.”

Rama said softly, “And to open it, we need a receipt.”

Everyone laughed, but there was fatigue in the laughter.

Vinay Mohan decided to seek the opinion of the Legal Branch on how the rule should be interpreted.

Two days later the Legal Branch wrote—“Whether a document that has physically come under the control of the office is to be treated as received is a question of fact; a digital entry may be evidence of receipt, but is not a condition of the document’s existence.”

That one sentence stopped everyone.

Meena read it again—“A digital entry is not a condition of existence.”

Devkinandan Babu said, “Meaning the envelope is here, therefore it has been received; whether the machine accepts it is a later matter.”

Vinay Mohan directed that a temporary paper receipt number be issued, that “Sender—unknown/verification pending” be written, that the envelope be opened in the presence of three employees, and that further action be taken according to the nature of the letter inside.

Rama wrote the number by hand—“Temporary Receipt 7/Ka.” It was not a number from the digital system; it was the first entry in a new, small office register.

When the envelope was opened, Meena, Rama, Devkinandan Babu, and Vinay Mohan were present. Rama cut the seal. There were three pages inside.

There was no name on the first page. At the top was written—“Correction of Facts Concerning Assistance List Serial Numbers 41-47.”

On the second page were the names of seven beneficiaries. Beside three names, in red ink, was written—“Reported dead, but alive.” Beside two names—“Village changed, not person.” Beside one name—“Entered twice.” Beside the last name—“Death correct, but family assistance application pending.”

On the third page there was only this much—“Verify by comparing the local register, ration list, and panchayat death register. Do not publish the name of the informant; otherwise no one will send a paper next time.”

The room fell silent again.

Meena read the first name. “This was on last month’s list of cases in which assistance was stopped.”

Devkinandan Babu placed his finger on the second name. “An application concerning this person’s proof of life came yesterday.”

The information in the letter was not immediately accepted as true. All seven cases were sent separately for verification.

The first results came within two days. Two of the three people were indeed alive; in one case, the death register had been matched with another person of the same name. In the two cases where the village had changed, one family had settled in a neighbouring panchayat after the flood, but the old list was treating them as different people.

Within four days, the seventh case too proved correct—the family assistance application had mistakenly remained stuck in another branch.

Now the question arose—who had given this information?

Vinay Mohan said, “Is that necessary for the work?”

The Accounts Officer said, “What about the reliability of the source?”

Meena replied, “Reliability has been established not by the name, but by checking all seven facts.”

Rama looked at the outside of the envelope. It was torn now, but the blank place for the sender remained exactly as it had been.

The entire incident was reported to headquarters. This time the reply came quickly. The instruction was that all offices should keep an option called “Sender unknown/verification pending” in a local temporary register, and a proposal should be sent to the Technical Branch to add such an option to the digital system.

A few weeks later the system was updated. A new option appeared at the receipt desk—“Sender unavailable.” As soon as it was selected, a receipt could be generated, but the receipt clearly printed—“Sender verification pending; truth of contents subject to independent verification.”

On the first day Rama saw the new option, she called Devkinandan Babu.

“Look, now the machine accepts the unknown too.”

Devkinandan Babu said, “It does not accept the unknown; it has given the unknown a place to remain unknown.”

A few months later another envelope without a sender arrived. This time Rama did not become anxious when she picked it up.

The recipient was clear. The sender space was blank.

She selected “Sender unavailable” in the digital register. A receipt number was generated at once.

The envelope was opened in the presence of three employees.

Inside there was only one page—no complaint, no secret evidence. The family of an elderly beneficiary had written that he had died and that his old-age assistance should be stopped from the following month. No one in the family had written a name; perhaps they believed the name of the deceased person was sufficient.

Rama read the letter and remained still for a few moments. Then she began the death-verification process.

In the evening, while closing the mail register, she looked again at the temporary register for the first envelope without a sender. Against its first entry there was now a note—"Contents verified; seven cases disposed of; sender unknown."

Rama thought—the office had long believed that what had no name could not enter. But sometimes the absence of a name did not make information false; it only changed the way it had to be verified.

STORY 177

THE SHADOW SIGNATURE

A new template for approval letters had been created in the District Social Assistance Office. At the top was the department's name, in the middle the applicant's details, and at the bottom three boxes—Inquiry Officer, Accounts Branch, and Final Approval. To make the template easier to understand during training, the clerk who created it had inserted, as a sample in the final box, an image of the signature from an old approved case.

Above the image, in small letters, was written—'Sample.' On the computer screen this was clearly visible. But no one had noticed that the image itself had become a permanent part of the template.

Two weeks later, new applications began to be prepared on that same template. Employees changed the name, date, amount, and remarks, then printed a copy. The paper was supposed to go to the Deputy Director's desk for final approval and, after the actual signature had been made, be sent to the block office below.

Kamla Devi's application was among the first twenty prepared on the new template. Her husband had died three years earlier. An arrear instalment under the Family Assistance Scheme had been stuck for a year. The inquiry was complete, the bank account had been verified, and the village-register certificate was also in order.

Looking at the case, clerk Sunil Jha said, "This time there is no reason for the work to stop."

Kamla Devi smiled. "I have heard that sentence three times already."

A little embarrassed, Sunil Babu said, "This time everything really is complete."

He opened the template and filled in the details. The old signature in the final box was already there in grey. Since the word 'Sample' was visible on the screen, he paid no attention to it. The actual approval looked blank because the signature image had been kept in a pale shade.

The paper was printed. The office's old black-and-white printer darkened the grey. The word 'Sample' remained very faint, but the signature emerged in dark black lines.

Sunil Babu set the file aside to be sent to the Deputy Director's desk. That afternoon the power failed twice. Before the office closed, an assistant was sorting all prepared papers into piles for different branches. Kamla Devi's page was mistakenly placed in the pile marked 'Approved copy—send to block.'

The next day the copy reached the block office. There, accountant Mukund Yadav looked at the final page. At the bottom was a clear mark resembling the Deputy Director's signature. There was no seal, but under the new order, a seal was no longer compulsory on papers generated from the digital template.

Mukund Babu asked, "Is there a dispatch number?"

There was a number in the mail register.

“Then it is all right.”

The process of releasing Kamla Devi’s arrears began. Her name was entered in the bank list. Three days later the amount reached her account.

After returning from the bank, Kamla Devi telephoned Sunil Babu. “The money has come.”

Sunil Babu was surprised. He remembered that the file was still supposed to go for the Deputy Director’s signature. He immediately searched for it. The original file was still lying in the cupboard beside his desk. The final approval page was missing.

He opened the digital copy. The signature was visible on the page.

Sunil Babu went to the room of Deputy Director Meera Karn. “Madam, has Kamla Devi’s case been approved?”

Meera Karn looked up over her spectacles. “Kamla Devi? I have not seen the file.”

“The amount has been released.”

“On what basis?”

Sunil Babu placed the printed copy before her.

As soon as Meera Karn saw the signature, she sat upright. “This looks like my signature.”

“Looks like?”

“I did not sign this page.”

Silence fell in the room.

The old approval letter was called for. The training sample file was found. It carried Meera Karn’s actual signature. The image of that very signature had been cut out and placed as a sample in the new template.

Meera Karn said, “This signature is mine, but this decision is not.”

For the first time, Sunil Babu understood that a signature could be genuine and misleading at the same time.

An immediate order was issued stopping use of the new template. Every copy prepared during the previous two weeks was to be checked.

Eighteen cases were found in which the old signature image had been printed. Thirteen files were still in the office awaiting an actual signature. Copies in five cases had already reached subordinate offices. Of those, Kamla Devi’s amount had been released; payment orders had been prepared in two cases; and two were still pending.

Inquiry Officer Rajiv Thakur asked, “Who created the template?”

The record was checked. Sunil Babu himself had created it for training.

Sunil Babu said at once, “I had put the signature there as a sample. It was clearly written above it.”

Rajiv Thakur showed him the printed copy. “Here, ‘Sample’ is almost invisible.”

“It is clear on the screen.”

“The action was taken not on the screen, but on this printed paper.”

Meera Karn intervened. “We can decide whose fault it was later. First determine the status of the citizens’ cases.”

Kamla Devi's file was opened again. There was no dispute over eligibility. The inquiry was correct, the amount was correct, and the bank details were correct. Only the final approval was not genuine.

The Accounts Officer said, "The amount has gone to the correct person."

Rajiv Thakur said, "But without approval."

Meera Karn asked, "If I grant actual approval today, will the amount released three days ago become valid?"

There was no ready answer.

A written opinion was sought from the Finance Branch. The reply came—"Granting approval with retrospective effect is not in accordance with the rules. Approval may be granted from the present date; responsibility for the earlier payment shall be determined separately."

With that one sentence, Kamla Devi's correctly done work became disputed again.

Instructions went to the block office to stop further action in all five cases. Mukund Babu sent back a reply—"On the paper received by us, the signature of the competent authority was visibly present; the dispatch number was also valid. There was no external indication that the paper was a sample."

The district office's mail branch said that the dispatch number was genuine, because the page had in fact gone out from the district office.

The Records Branch said that the original approval page was not in the file.

The digital system said that the page had been saved under the name 'Final Template.'

The creator of the template said that the signature was a 'sample.'

The officer said that the signature was certainly an image of hers, but not her decision.

Kamla Devi said, "The money is in my account. Then what is the decision as far as I am concerned?"

No branch gave her a direct answer.

Seven days later she was called to the office. Kamla Devi came carrying her bank passbook and a copy of her original application.

Meera Karn met her herself. "Your eligibility is valid. The department will not ask you to return the money."

Kamla Devi asked, "Then why have you called me again?"

"I have to grant the actual approval."

Kamla Devi asked in surprise, "After the money has already been received?"

"Yes."

"Then what was the signature that was there before?"

Meera Karn placed her finger on the paper. "It was an image of my signature, not my decision on that day."

Kamla Devi looked at it for a while. "If the signature was yours, whose decision was it?"

Meera Karn replied, "That question is exactly why this inquiry is going on."

She read the entire file. Finding the eligibility in order, she granted approval from the current date. This time she signed in blue ink, wrote the date, and beside it wrote her full name in letters.

Kamla Devi looked at the two signatures together. Their shapes were almost the same. One black, one blue.

“How am I to know which one to accept?”

Meera Karn said, “The blue one.”

Kamla Devi immediately asked, “But the black one too was once made by your own hand, wasn’t it?”

Without smiling, Meera Karn said, “At some earlier time. On another paper.”

The inquiry committee separated all eighteen cases. Where actual approval was subsequently obtained, payment continued. Where eligibility was incomplete, the process was stopped. No recovery was made merely because of the image-signature if the other basis of the payment was valid.

But fixing administrative responsibility remained difficult. The creator of the template had made an error; ‘Sample’ had faded in printing; the assistant had placed the page in the wrong pile; the block office had trusted a genuine dispatch number. Not one mistake, but four small acts of trust had combined to create a complete approval.

Rajiv Thakur wrote in the report—“A visible signature alone shall not be treated as sufficient proof of a decision; it must be matched with the decision register, date, and dispatch status.”

A new arrangement was made. Keeping the image of any real signature in a template was completely prohibited. In training samples, only the words ‘SIGNATURE HERE’ would be written in bold where a signature belonged. A digital decision number would also be generated for every actual approval.

Sunil Babu opened the old template and deleted the signature image. After it was removed, a white empty box remained beneath it. It seemed strange to him—the mark that had travelled for two weeks as an order had in fact been only an image.

When he saved the template, he gave it a new name—‘Approval-Template-Revised.’

The system asked—‘Delete old template?’

Sunil Babu stopped his hand.

The inquiry report said that the old template was evidence. It must not be erased.

He selected ‘No.’

A few months later, the incident began to be told as an example in training for new employees. The old template was displayed on the screen, but a large red rectangle was drawn over the signature image. The trainer would say, “This looks like approval. It is not approval.”

A new employee asked, “If the officer later accepts the same decision, what should the first image be regarded as?”

The trainer paused for a few moments. “A shadow. The shadow of a decision.”

That same week Kamla Devi came to the block office to show a new page in her passbook. Mukund Babu recognized her. “Everything all right now?”

Kamla Devi said, “The money was all right from the beginning. Are the papers all right now?”

Mukund Babu laughed. “Now there is an actual approval too.”

Kamla Devi took two copies out of her bag. On the first was the black shadow-signature. On the second, the blue actual signature.

“My name, my amount, and my work are the same on both,” she said. “The only difference is that once the decision arrived first and the officer came later.”

Mukund Babu did not reply.

Kamla Devi put both papers back into her bag. As she stepped outside, she saw a new notice on the wall—“Do not treat an image of a signature as approval; always verify the decision number.”

She read the notice and smiled faintly. It occurred to her that the shadow on the paper had been misleading, but the work behind that shadow had turned out to be correct. To reach one correct piece of work, the office had first had to find the officer’s decision separately from the officer’s own signature.

SERIAL NUMBER 000

On the first working day of the new year, the District Citizen Assistance Centre opened at nine o'clock. Outside there was fog; inside, the smell of new registers. At their desks, the employees had cleared away the previous year's files and arranged papers for the new sequence.

In the receipt room, as soon as Archana Jha switched on the computer, she saw that the system was restarting itself. A New Year welcome message appeared on the screen, and beneath it, in small letters—"Annual serial numbering restarted."

That was routine. The last application of the previous year had been 847. Today, the first application should begin with 001.

At five past nine, the first citizen arrived—Malti Devi, about fifty-five years old. Her husband had died three years earlier. She had come to resubmit a pending claim under the Family Assistance Scheme. The papers previously submitted at the block office had been declared incomplete; this time she had brought all the original proofs.

Archana checked each paper one by one—the death certificate, family register, bank details, Aadhaar document, income certificate, two photographs, and the block office's earlier rejection letter. Everything was in order.

"Digital copies of all the original papers will be made, and then I will return them to you," Archana said.

Malti Devi placed her bag on the desk.

Archana opened a new application, filled in the details, made digital copies of the documents, and finally pressed 'Submit.'

The screen went white for a moment. Then a green line appeared—"Application saved."

Beneath it was the serial number—000.

Archana started slightly. "What is this?"

Naveen Babu, seated at the adjoining desk, leaned over to look. "It must be a test serial number. The system has been opened for the first time in the new year."

"But it says the application has been saved."

Naveen Babu laughed. "Can 000 ever be a real serial number? The first real one will be 001."

Archana pressed 'Submit' again. The system replied—"This application has already been saved."

"Then what now?"

Naveen Babu said, "Close it and open it again."

Archana closed the application. In the search box she typed Malti Devi's name. No result. She searched by Aadhaar number. No result. She entered

serial number 000. A message appeared on the screen—“Test records are not displayed in search results.”

Malti Devi sat silently in her chair. “Have my papers been submitted or not?”

Archana did not answer immediately. The original papers were still lying before her in the scanning machine.

“One minute,” she said.

The technical assistant was called. He opened the lower-level details of the system. There the date, time, seven digital copies, and an internal identifier were all clearly visible.

“A record has been created,” the technical assistant said, “but the serial number is 000.”

“Then is it real?”

“It exists in the data.”

“In the work queue?”

“No.”

“Why?”

The technical assistant worked at the keyboard for a while. “The work queue displays only serial numbers greater than zero.”

Naveen Babu said, “See? 000 is only for testing.”

The technical assistant shook his head. “If it is only a test, why are there a name and documents attached to it?”

Malti Devi asked from between them, “Am I a test?”

No one in the room laughed.

Archana tried to print a paper receipt. A slip came out of the printer, but across the top in bold letters it read—“Serial No. 000 — Test Copy.”

Archana did not think it proper to give that slip to Malti Devi.

The technical assistant said, “At the beginning of the new year the system first creates 000, then starts counting from 001. Normally only an empty test is made under 000. Today, as soon as the office opened, a real application was submitted first.”

“Then change it to 001,” Naveen Babu said simply.

The technical assistant replied, “The serial number cannot be changed. The digital copies, time stamp, and receipt history are all linked to 000.”

“Cancel it and make a new application?”

“To cancel it, the application has to appear in the work queue. 000 does not appear there.”

Archana gathered Malti Devi’s original papers. “Take all these back. We will get the problem corrected.”

The technical assistant stopped her. “Wait. The digital copies of the original papers are complete, but there is a rule—until the digital copies attached to an application are verified, its originals cannot be treated as released from ‘received’ status. If the papers are returned and the record later becomes active, the audit will show that the originals were returned without verification.”

Malti Devi placed her hand on the stack of documents. "These are my papers."

Archana grew uncomfortable. "Yes, but the system..."

Malti Devi asked, "The system says this is not an application. Then how did it come to possess my papers?"

No one had an immediate answer.

The matter went before Branch Officer Sudhir Jha. He examined the receipt, the screen, and the list of digital copies.

"Serial number 000 is not valid," he said.

Archana asked, "But the record exists."

"A record existing and a valid application existing are two different things."

"Then should we return the original papers?"

"Why were original papers retained in the office without receipt of a valid application?"

Archana fell silent.

Sudhir Jha said, "First decide what 000 is."

That day Malti Devi was given a handwritten slip—"Original documents are being kept in a secure office cover; error concerning the digital serial number is under examination." The serial-number field on the slip was left blank.

Malti Devi returned home. Her application did not.

The next day the system was normal. The first new application was 001, the second 002, the third 003. 000 was nowhere to be seen.

Archana searched again by name. No Malti Devi. But on the technical assistant's special screen, 000 was still there—seven digital copies, submission time 09:12, user Archana Jha.

"It is like a ghost," Naveen Babu said. "It cannot be seen, but it is there in the data."

Archana said, "Not a ghost. Malti Devi was sitting here yesterday."

The problem was sent to the District Information Cell. The reply came—"Serial number 000 is reserved for system start-up testing; it is not acceptable as a real application."

Sudhir Jha added a note—"Nevertheless, the application data and original documents of an actual citizen are linked to the said serial number. Resolution required."

A second reply came from the Information Cell—"Register the application again."

Archana tried. As soon as she entered Malti Devi's Aadhaar number, the system displayed—"Active record available for same applicant."

"Active?" Naveen Babu almost shouted. "Until now it was saying it was not valid!"

The technical assistant explained, "The duplicate-prevention rule treats 000 as a record. The work-queue rule does not."

Sudhir Jha said, "Two rules in the same system are giving different decisions about whether the same paper exists."

Malti Devi came again on the third day. She carried the handwritten slip in her hand.

“Has the work been done?”

Archana said, “The record exists, but the question of validating the serial number is stuck.”

“There is a serial number, isn’t there?”

“ooo.”

“Then why is it not valid?”

Without thinking, Naveen Babu said, “Because zero is nothing.”

Malti Devi looked at him. “Three zeros are written there. If it is nothing, what has been written?”

Naveen Babu fell silent.

By afternoon, that sentence had spread through the entire room. Someone said ooo was merely a code, not a number. Someone said zero was a number, but application serials did not begin with zero. Someone else said three zeros had the same value as one zero.

At last Sudhir Jha said, “I am not going to debate mathematics. I need an administrative answer.”

He drafted a note—“If the system has generated ooo as a unique record identifier, and genuine documents are linked to that identifier, the existence of the record cannot be denied merely because its numerical value is zero.”

The note went to the Information Cell. A telephone call came from the technical head.

“I can see the row in the database,” he said. “The problem is in the workflow filtering rule. The condition says—the serial number must be greater than zero.”

Sudhir Jha asked, “Do you regard ooo as a number or not?”

The technical head laughed. “It is a number. But in the system, zero has been treated as ‘blank.’”

“If it were blank, where did Malti Devi’s seven documents get linked?”

There was silence for a few moments at the other end of the telephone.

The technical head said, “All right. This is an edge case.”

Sudhir Jha said, “I do not need an edge case. I need an application.”

A new rule was proposed as a solution—instead of treating ooo as test-only, if verified citizen details and documents were linked to it, it would be treated as a “special initial serial number.”

Until the rule was approved, Malti Devi’s work remained stuck again.

On the seventh day another problem arose. The time limit under the Family Assistance Scheme was counted from the date of application. If Malti Devi’s new application were treated as having been filed on some later day after ooi, her eligibility date would change.

Archana said, “She submitted the application at 9:12 on the first day. The time stamp is clear.”

The Accounts Room asked, “Is that the time stamp of a valid application, or of an invalid serial number?”

Sudhir Jha wrote in reply—“The event was real; an error in numbering does not make the event invalid.”

That sentence was added to the file.

On the tenth day, permission arrived from headquarters—“Treat serial number 000 as a valid application number in this single case and complete the process; in future, the annual start-up test shall be completed before actual citizen services begin.”

For the first time, Archana saw 000 in the normal work queue. It stood at the very top, before 001.

Malti Devi was called.

When she came, Archana printed her receipt. This time ‘Test Copy’ was not written across the top. It clearly read—“Application Serial No. 000.”

Malti Devi held the slip and looked at it for a while.

“Has it become a number now?” she asked.

Archana smiled. “It was a number from the beginning. The office has accepted it now.”

The original documents were verified and returned to her. The application moved onto the officer’s work queue. Two weeks later the assistance was approved.

In the second month of the year, the Information Cell added a new safeguard to the system. Whenever the annual sequence restarted, 000 would remain only for internal testing; testing had to be completed before citizen services were activated.

Archana read the order. At the bottom an example was given—“Valid real serial numbers: 001, 002, 003...”

She asked the technical assistant, “Why is there no example of 000?”

“It will not happen again,” he said.

Archana opened her drawer. She had kept a copy of Malti Devi’s first handwritten slip. On it, the serial-number field was blank.

On the computer she opened Malti Devi’s file. At the top shone—“Serial No. 000 — Disposed.”

For a few moments Archana looked at both—the paper with no serial number, and the record whose serial number had not been accepted as a number for ten days.

She closed the file. The next application was 047.

The counting on the screen was moving smoothly. But Archana now knew—the first step in counting sometimes falls exactly where the system says that nothing has begun at all.

STORY 179

A WITNESS TO LIFE

Devnarayan Mandal was seventy-eight years old. Once a year he had to go to the Block Public Service Centre and submit proof that he was alive, so that his old-age allowance would continue for another year. For the past two years, the fingerprint machine had not been capturing his print clearly. This time, therefore, the employee told him of another route—two witnesses who knew him.

Under the rule, both witnesses had to have known him for at least five years, could not belong to the same family, and had to verify their own identities and certify that Devnarayan Mandal was present alive before them.

Devnarayan laughed. “I am sitting right here. Do I need two more men to prove that?”

Public Service Assistant Rupa Kumari smiled. “I can see you, but the system does not accept my seeing you as proof.”

“Then what does the system accept?”

“Verification by two witnesses.”

Devnarayan gave the names of two acquaintances from his village, Laukahi—Harihar Mahato and Jagdish Paswan. Harihar had been going with him to the same market for forty years. Jagdish looked after the panchayat library, and his house stood on the boundary of Devnarayan’s field.

By noon Harihar Mahato had reached the Centre. Sitting opposite Devnarayan, he said, “I have had to come before the government to declare that you are alive?”

Devnarayan replied, “My life now depends on your testimony.”

Harihar laughed. “Then stay properly alive; you have given me a responsibility.”

Rupa checked both their identities. Harihar gave his fingerprint. A green mark flashed on the screen—“Witness 1 verified.” The time recorded was 11:43.

Jagdish was outside the village that day. Over the telephone he said he would reach the Centre at nine the next morning. The system allowed forty-eight hours for verification by both witnesses.

Devnarayan returned home. His slip said—“Proof of life: one witness remaining.”

That night sudden news spread through the village. Harihar Mahato had developed severe pain in his chest. His family took him to hospital, but at around four in the morning he died.

Devnarayan reached his house at daybreak. As morning advanced, preparations for the cremation began. Jagdish was there too. No one remembered the visit to the Public Service Centre.

At ten o’clock a red notification flashed on Rupa’s computer—“Witness 1: declared deceased. Certification invalid.”

Rupa was startled. She checked the previous day's time—11:43. The time linked from the death register—today, 04:10.

Harihar had been alive when he completed the verification. But the system, looking at his current status, had cancelled yesterday's certification.

A second line appeared beneath it—"Applicant's life status: pending."

Rupa stared at the screen for a long time. Yesterday Devnarayan had been sitting in front of her. Today, because one witness was dead, his status read "life status pending."

At noon Devnarayan himself came to the Centre. His face was tired. "Harihar is gone," he said softly. "I have not brought Jagdish today. People are gathered at the house."

Rupa said, "I have received the notification."

"Then change the witness. I will bring another man in two days."

Rupa opened the 'Change Witness' option. Three reasons appeared—'Witness absent', 'Identity failed', 'Witness did not consent'. There was no option for 'Witness deceased'.

She tried selecting 'Witness absent'. The system stopped her—"Witness verification already complete; reason not applicable."

She selected 'Identity failed.' The reply—"Identity successful."

She selected 'Did not consent.' The reply—"Consent recorded."

Rupa looked at Devnarayan. "Harihar Babu completed everything. So the system will not let me replace him as a failed witness. But now, because he is dead, it will not accept his successful testimony either."

Devnarayan remained silent for a while. "So while he was alive he was successful, and the moment he died he became unsuccessful?"

"That is what the system is saying at present."

"And along with him, I too have become pending?"

Rupa did not answer.

Jagdish came to the Centre on the third day. He looked as though he had come straight from Harihar's cremation rites. There was a faint smell of smoke on his clothes.

"I am the second witness," he said. "Do the verification."

Rupa searched for the name. Jagdish's field opened, but at the top was a red warning—"Case under deceased-witness review; second verification suspended."

Jagdish asked in astonishment, "I am alive. Devnarayan Kaka is alive. One witness is no more. Then why are the two of us stopped?"

Rupa said, "Because the review has not been completed."

"A review of whose life?"

The form had no answer to that question.

The matter went to the Block Allowance Branch. Officer Shyamsundar Jha opened the file and said, "The witness has died, so take a new witness."

Rupa said, "The replacement option is blocked."

"Attach the death certificate."

Harihar's family had already applied for the death certificate, but it was still under process. The final certificate was issued two days later. Devnarayan himself brought a copy.

Placing it on the table, he said, "To prove that I am alive, do I now need Harihar's death certificate?"

Shyamsundar Jha remained serious. "The system requires it."

The death certificate was uploaded. The system displayed a new status—"Death-linked certification; higher review required."

Rupa put a hand to her forehead. "First I could not change the witness. Now that his death has been proved, the whole case has gone upward for review."

Devnarayan asked, "Where do I go?"

"You stay here. The file will go to the district."

"And my allowance?"

"If the proof of life is not completed, payment may stop next month."

Devnarayan gripped the handle of his walking stick. "I will try to remain alive until the payment is stopped."

Rupa looked at his face. It was not a joke.

The first reply from the District Allowance Office came—"Verification by a deceased witness is not acceptable; obtain verification from a new witness."

The block wrote back—"Field for adding a new witness is blocked."

The district replied—"Remove the previous witness."

The block wrote—"A verified witness cannot be removed."

The district asked—"Then how was the witness's verification cancelled?"

Rupa read the question and smiled faintly. "That is what I have been asking from the first day."

The matter was sent to the Technical Cell. Digital details were requested there—the time of Harihar's verification, the time the death register was updated, and the time the application status changed.

The record was clear. Harihar Mahato had verified at 11:43 on 6 January. He died at 04:10 on 7 January. The death-register entry was linked to the system at 09:58 on 7 January. At 10:02 his earlier testimony was automatically invalidated.

The technical assistant said, "The system checks the witness's current life status, not the status at the moment of verification."

Shyamsundar Jha asked, "But the act of witnessing took place when he was alive."

"Yes."

"Then why did an event that happened later—his death—erase testimony given earlier?"

The technical assistant shrugged. "The rule says—the witness must be active."

Rupa asked, "Active until when? Until the application is submitted? Until payment is made? Until the old person comes again next year to prove he is alive?"

No one had a written answer.

The matter went before the district review meeting. Devnarayan was called as well. He made the long journey to the district office. In the meeting room sat seven officers, two technical employees, and an Allowance Inspector.

The chairperson asked, "For how many years had you known Harihar Mahato?"

Devnarayan said, "More than forty years."

"Was he in front of you on the day of verification?"

"Both of us were sitting in front of Rupa bitiya."

"And now he is no more?"

Devnarayan answered in a slightly hard voice, "To prove that fact I have even submitted his death certificate. In the file meant to prove that I am alive, his death has now become a more certain document than I am."

The meeting room fell silent.

The technical officer said, "There are two possible solutions. Cancel the old verification and take a new witness, or accept its validity at the moment of verification and retain the first testimony."

The Allowance Inspector asked, "Under the second option, a dead person will appear as the current witness."

Rupa, who had brought the file from the block, said, "He is not the current witness. He was the witness at the moment of verification."

The chairperson looked at her. "What is the difference?"

"Only this: the proof is based on an event, not on eternal life. Harihar Babu was alive at 11:43 on 6 January and saw Devnarayan Babu alive. His death on 7 January does not make what he saw on 6 January untrue."

Jagdish's verification was still pending. The chairperson ordered that the first testimony be retained as 'valid at the moment of verification' and that the field for the second witness be reopened.

The Technical Cell made a temporary correction. Beneath the red warning a new line appeared—"Witness currently deceased; verification event completed before death."

Jagdish was called the next day. He gave his fingerprint. The screen turned green—"Witness 2 verified."

Devnarayan was sitting in the same room. At last the status changed—"Proof of life approved."

Rupa printed the receipt and handed it to him. Devnarayan read the paper for a long time.

"Is Harihar's name on it?"

"Yes. Witness 1."

"Does it say he is dead?"

"No. It gives only the verification date."

Devnarayan folded the receipt. "That is right. On that day he was alive."

After the case was closed, the district office issued a new instruction. The validity of a witness's verification would be determined by the witness's eligibility at the moment of verification; a later death would not automatically cancel an earlier verification. Current death status would remain in a separate record.

The system too was given two new fields—“Status at time of verification” and “Current status.”

A few weeks later Rupa looked at the new screen. Beside Harihar Mahato’s name, the first field was green—“Alive/verification complete.” The second was grey—“Deceased.”

Both were true in the same line.

The following year Devnarayan came to the Centre again for his proof of life. This time his fingerprint was captured on the first attempt. The screen turned green. No witness was required.

Rupa laughed. “This time your life has been proved by your own finger.”

Devnarayan looked at his hand. “Good. The responsibility for my being alive no longer rests on someone else’s life.”

He took the receipt and walked out. At the doorway he stopped for a few moments, then said, “But do not erase Harihar’s testimony.”

Rupa said, “It will not be erased. On that date, it was true.”

Devnarayan slowly nodded and walked away. His new proof glowed on the screen. Harihar’s name too remained in the old file—the testimony of a dead man that could remain true only because the office finally accepted this: proof of life does not require eternal life; it requires a truthful moment.

THE LAST TASK OF A CLOSED DEPARTMENT

The nameplate of the District Rehabilitation Assistance Cell had once gleamed in blue letters. On the third day after the reorganization order arrived, a carpenter came and took the board down. Two screw marks remained on the wall.

The room was still there. Inside were three cupboards, two desks, a fan, an old seal, and Shashikant Jha, a contractual clerk.

Under the order, the Cell ceased to exist from the evening of 30 June. From 1 July, all its routine work was transferred to the newly created "District Citizen Compensation Branch." The employees too were reassigned. One officer went to Land Acquisition, another to Social Security, another to the Accounts Branch.

Shashikant's name was not on the reassignment list. The final line of his contract said—"Until disposal of the Cell's pending cases or for a maximum of six months, whichever is earlier."

By five in the evening on 30 June, only one case remained.

Case No. 14/R—Kamla Devi versus District Rehabilitation Assistance Cell.

Twelve years earlier, three kathas of Kamla Devi's courtyard land had been taken for widening a road. Compensation had been assessed; half had been paid; the other half had become stuck in a boundary-demarkation dispute. The dispute was now over. The accounts audit too was complete. Only the final order remained.

The rule said—"The final compensation order shall be issued under the signature of the Head of the Cell."

On the evening of 30 June, Cell Head Vibhuti Narayan Singh left for headquarters to assume charge of his new post. His old post was deemed to have ended at that very moment.

On the morning of 1 July, Shashikant opened the room. There was no nameplate outside. Inside, Kamla Devi's file lay on the desk.

He went to the new branch. Branch Officer Pallavi Karn looked at the file.

"Why was this case not transferred to me?"

Shashikant showed her the annexure to the order. "Against this one case it says—'Final order under the existing rules of the Cell.'"

"Then was it transferred or not?"

"The file was left with me."

"Which branch are you an employee of?"

Shashikant smiled faintly. "I have come to find out exactly that."

Pallavi Karn returned the file and said, "I cannot sign it. The rule says Head of the Cell."

"The post of Head of the Cell has ceased to exist."

"Then obtain an order from the competent authority."

The search for a competent authority began. The Establishment Branch said—the powers of an abolished post did not automatically pass to a successor officer. The Legal Branch said—if the reorganization order did not expressly identify a successor, a special authorization order was required. The Accounts Branch said—payment could be made only when the order bore the signature of a legally competent officer.

Kamla Devi came on 2 July. Seeing no nameplate outside, she first began to turn back. Shashikant called from inside, “Maaji, here.”

She came in. “Has the office closed?”

“The Cell has ended.”

“And my work?”

“That has not ended yet.”

For a while Kamla Devi looked at Shashikant’s face. “The office is over, but the work is still left?”

Shashikant placed his hand on the file. “Only this one now.”

Kamla Devi opened her old cloth bag. Inside were the receipt for the first payment, the land map, papers in the name of her late husband Harinarayan Jha, and twelve acknowledgements.

“These papers have been going round for twelve years. Now the office itself has gone round?”

Shashikant had no answer.

He drafted a letter seeking a special authorization order. Half a day passed over whether the heading should carry the name of the old Cell or the new Branch. If he used the old name, the sender would be an institution that no longer existed. If he used the new name, the question would arise as to when the new Branch had become a party to this case.

At last he wrote the heading—“Regarding a pending case of the former District Rehabilitation Assistance Cell.”

In the sender’s place he wrote his own name—“Shashikant Jha, Contractual Clerk (Pending Case).”

The letter reached the District Magistrate’s office. The receipt desk asked, “Employee code?”

Shashikant gave his old code. The system displayed—“Unit inactive.”

“New unit?”

“I do not have one.”

“Then the letter will be entered as a private application.”

“This is not private. It is a government file.”

The receipt clerk kept looking at the paper. Finally, the letter was given a handwritten serial number under the category “Special Residual Work.”

Five days later, a note came from the Legal Branch—“For disposal of the abolished Cell’s final case, a proposal may be made to grant limited authority to the former Head of the Cell or to an officer of equivalent rank.”

Shashikant breathed a sigh of relief. But the Establishment Branch wrote—“The former Head of the Cell is now posted in another district; delegation of authority in the name of an abolished post is technically not possible.”

The Legal Branch wrote again—"Authority should be granted not to the person, but for the specific case."

A draft order was prepared—"For Case No. 14/R, Mr Vibhuti Narayan Singh is hereby authorized solely to pass the final order."

The Finance Branch objected—"It is not clear by what authority an officer whose present posting is in another district may issue an order against the treasury of this district."

The proposal changed again. Now the question arose of granting the authority to Pallavi Karn.

Pallavi said, "I will sign, but the order must clearly state that this is a case of the former Cell. Otherwise, tomorrow the audit will say the new Branch made a payment beyond its jurisdiction."

Meanwhile, Shashikant's honorarium for July was stopped.

The Accounts Branch said, "Your unit code is closed."

Shashikant showed them his contract. "My service continues until the pending case is disposed of."

The accounts clerk said, "Your service continues, but from which unit is your pay to come?"

"From the Cell that has ceased to exist?"

"Payment cannot be made from that code."

"The new Branch?"

"Your post is not sanctioned there."

For the first time, Shashikant understood that his job was alive on paper, but there was no place from which its pay could come.

He drafted a letter on that question too. The Establishment Branch wrote—"Contractual obligation continues until disposal of the residual case; expenditure may be adjusted from the former Cell's remaining administrative head."

The Accounts Branch replied—"The old head was closed on 30 June."

The Finance Branch suggested—"Special contingency head."

The officer in charge of the contingency head asked, "How can the regular honorarium of an abolished department be treated as a contingency?"

Shashikant laughed. When Kamla Devi came that day, she asked, "Has your work been done?"

Shashikant said, "I am doing your work."

Kamla Devi asked again, "And your own?"

For the first time, Shashikant fell silent.

Two weeks later, the District Magistrate issued a special order. Pallavi Karn was declared "Residual Competent Authority" solely for Case 14/R. The order clearly stated—the authority would exist only until the moment of signature and would end as soon as the order was issued.

The file reached Pallavi's desk. She examined every page again—the demarcation report, accounts audit, heir verification, payment calculation.

"Everything is in order," she said.

Shashikant smiled.

As Pallavi was about to sign the final order, she stopped. "The seal?"

Should the seal of the new Branch be used, or that of the old Cell?

The special order said—“Under the rules of the former Cell.”

Shashikant took the Cell’s round seal out of the old cupboard. Its use had been stopped after 30 June, but the certificate recording its destruction had not yet been prepared.

Pallavi looked at the seal. “The seal of an office that has ended?”

Shashikant said, “For this final order—”

He stopped. Then he said, “For this final order, the rule refers to this very seal.”

An opinion was taken from the Legal Branch over the telephone. The answer came—the old seal should not be used; the seal of the new Branch should be affixed, but the number of the special authorization order must be written below it.

At last the order was signed.

Kamla Devi was informed. The payment order reached the Treasury.

The Treasury sent back one question—“The authority of the officer issuing the order ends at the moment of signature; if clarification concerning payment is required later, who will provide it?”

Shashikant read the paper and held his head.

The Legal Branch replied—“The signed order is complete; any subsequent clarification shall be provided by the new Citizen Compensation Branch.”

The Treasury accepted the payment.

On the day the remaining compensation reached Kamla Devi’s account, she came to the office. There was still no nameplate outside, but the door was open.

“The money has come,” she said.

Shashikant’s face brightened. “Then the case is over.”

Kamla Devi said, “Mine is.”

She left.

In red ink, Shashikant wrote on the file—“Fully disposed of.”

At that very moment, the condition in his contract too was fulfilled.

He went to the Establishment Branch. “Now please issue my service-termination letter.”

The employee list was checked. The old Cell’s name was not there. Shashikant’s employee number was linked to an inactive unit.

The Establishment Assistant asked, “Which office are you currently posted in?”

“None. That is precisely why I need the service-termination letter.”

“The employee’s current office will issue the termination order.”

“My current office has ceased to exist.”

“The new Branch?”

“I was never posted there.”

“Then the old one?”

Shashikant remembered the two screw marks on the wall. “Its nameplate has been removed.”

The Establishment Assistant kept turning the pages of the file. "Then first we will have to determine your current unit. After that, your service can be terminated."

Shashikant laughed. "An officer's post was created to close the case. Now will an office be created to close the job?"

No one answered.

At last an interim note was prepared—"Mr Shashikant Jha, contractual clerk of the former District Rehabilitation Assistance Cell, shall be deemed relieved of responsibility following disposal of the residual case; the formal service-ending order shall be issued once the competent administrative unit is determined."

Shashikant read the note. "Shall be deemed relieved of responsibility."

"Yes," the Establishment Assistant said. "You need not come from tomorrow."

"My honorarium?"

"That is proceeding in a separate file."

Shashikant returned to his old room. He cleared the desk. He tied up Kamla Devi's file to be sent to the records room of the new Branch. He sealed the old official stamp in an envelope. He took the cupboard key in his hand.

The key-deposit list showed Room No. 12, but in the building register Room 12 was now marked "Vacant."

The Store Clerk said, "How can I take the key of a vacant room from you?"

Shashikant said, "The room has become vacant now. Until this moment, the key was with me."

"Vacant means it is in no one's charge."

"Then whose key is this?"

The Store Clerk thought for a while. At last he wrote a receipt by hand—"One old key, relating to former Cell, received."

In the evening, Shashikant closed the door for the last time. Where the nameplate had been, a pale rectangle remained on the wall.

He put the receipt, the relief-from-responsibility note, and the number of the pending honorarium file into his bag.

As he walked down the stairs, the guard asked, "You will not come tomorrow?"

Shashikant said, "The work is finished."

"The job?"

Shashikant paused for a moment.

"They are still deciding which office it belongs to."

STORY 181

TWO TICKETS

In the small village house, two envelopes lay on top of an old iron trunk. On one, Lalita had written in her own hand—"Delhi." On the other, Ganesh had written—"Patna."

Inside the two envelopes were railway tickets. One was Ganesh's, the other Lalita's.

Ganesh Mahato worked with a mason. He built houses from village to village, cast roofs, tore down old walls. As soon as the rains came, work declined. This time a construction crew in Delhi had called five men from the village for three months' work. The wages were twice what they earned here, but on arrival they would need separate money for worker registration, safety insurance, and a tool deposit.

Lalita worked as an assistant in the panchayat nutrition room. The honorarium was small, but for two years she had been taking the examination for health-assistant training. This time her name had been selected for three days of verification and training at the Patna centre. If her certificates passed scrutiny, there could be an opportunity for regular work at the village health centre the following year.

The two journeys fell in the same week.

The household savings were not enough to cover the tickets, travel expenses, Ganesh's registration, and Lalita's verification fee all at once. The tickets had been booked long before at a low fare. At that time, neither of them had known the full amount of the other expenses.

After dinner that night, the two sat beside the hearth and added up the figures.

Ganesh wrote on a sheet of paper—"Eight hundred and fifty on reaching Delhi."

Lalita wrote on her slip—"Seven hundred and eighty at the Patna centre."

There were five hundred and thirty rupees in cash in the house.

For a while, both remained silent.

Ganesh said, "Your training is important. I may get another chance to go to Delhi."

Lalita replied at once, "When will this crew call again? Three months' wages will do a great deal for the house. There will be another batch of my training too."

"Your name has come this time."

"Your name has come this time too."

The sheet of calculations lay between them.

At last Ganesh laughed and said, "We will both go. We will see what happens on the way."

Lalita knew that "we will see what happens on the way" was often the name given to a problem for which no solution had yet been found.

The next morning Ganesh went to work. At noon the work stopped after half a day because the sand had not arrived. He went straight to the railway reservation window in the market.

He took out the Delhi ticket and placed it at the window.

"You want to return it?" the clerk asked.

Ganesh looked at the ticket for a moment. The date was five days away. The name was clearly printed—Ganesh Mahato.

"Yes."

After deduction, nine hundred and twenty rupees were refunded to him.

He put the money in his pocket and went to the service centre in the market. A photograph of Lalita's training letter was stored on his mobile phone. He paid the certificate-verification fee of seven hundred and eighty rupees. With the remaining one hundred and forty, he bought a small slip bearing the address of the Patna centre and two transparent document sleeves.

When he returned home, he said only, "Keep all your papers together. Do not get nervous when you reach Patna."

Lalita asked, "Did you arrange the money for Delhi?"

Ganesh turned his eyes away. "It will be arranged."

Lalita did not ask again.

That same evening, while returning from the nutrition room, Lalita stopped in the market. Ganesh's Delhi envelope was at home, but he kept the ticket in the inner pocket of his shirt. Lalita had already written down the ticket number because, while preparing a list for the journey day, she had copied all the details into a notebook.

At the reservation office, she showed the number to the clerk. Once the identity matched, a digital copy of the ticket was brought up. Lalita said, "I want to return it."

The clerk asked, "You are not the passenger."

"I am his wife. The original ticket is at home."

Under the rules, the ticket could not be returned without the original. Lalita went back home.

That night Ganesh was bathing. His shirt hung on a peg. Lalita took out the ticket, put it in her bag, and in its place folded the Delhi call letter and slipped it into the pocket.

The next morning she went to the market again. This time the ticket was returned. After deduction, she received one thousand and ten rupees.

Lalita went to the Labour Assistance Centre. In Ganesh's name, she paid a total of eight hundred and fifty rupees for temporary worker registration, accident insurance, and the tool deposit. The receipt bore Ganesh's name, the code of the Delhi construction crew, and the validity date.

She kept the remaining one hundred and sixty rupees separately in her bag. When she returned home, she placed the receipt in the pocket of Ganesh's shirt.

In the evening, as Ganesh put on the shirt, he felt the thickness of the paper. He took it out and saw—worker registration complete.

He looked towards Lalita, who was sitting on the veranda.

"Who paid this?"

Serving rice, Lalita said, "The person who had to."

"The money?"

"It was arranged."

Ganesh understood some of it, not all. He thought to himself that Lalita must have borrowed from someone.

That night both remained awake for a long time. Each had one secret, and each believed that the secret would make the other's road easier.

The day of travel was the same for both. Ganesh's train from Darbhanga to Delhi was due at 2:20 in the afternoon. Lalita's train to Patna was at 3:10.

They locked the house in the morning and left together. They told the neighbour that Ganesh was going away for three months and Lalita would return after three days.

When they reached the station, Ganesh lifted Lalita's bag onto his own shoulder. Lalita took Ganesh's small tool bag.

The platform was crowded. The voices of tea sellers, water sellers, porters, and ticket inspectors mingled with one another.

Ganesh's train was due first.

Lalita said, "You board first. My train is an hour later."

Ganesh said, "No, I will show you your platform first. Then I will catch my train."

"Your train is first."

"There is time."

Each kept trying to send the other ahead.

At last Lalita laughed. "All right, take out the ticket. Let us see the coach."

Ganesh's face changed slightly.

"The ticket?"

"Yes, the Delhi one."

Ganesh put the bag down. "I thought you were going to take out your ticket."

Lalita tried to read his face.

Ganesh said softly, "I returned the Delhi ticket."

Lalita went still.

"Why?"

Ganesh took a receipt from his pocket—the receipt for Lalita's certificate-verification fee.

"You go to Patna. The fee has been paid."

Lalita's hand moved of its own accord towards her bag. She took out the receipt for the worker registration.

"I returned the ticket too."

Ganesh took the paper. He read the name. Insurance, registration, tool deposit—all paid.

"Your Patna ticket?"

"I do not have it."

For a while, both stood silent amid the crowd.

Just then the clerk at the reservation window recognized them from a distance. He could not leave the window and come outside, but called from within, "Oh! These are the two people with yesterday's tickets!"

Ganesh and Lalita looked towards him at the same time.

The clerk laughed and said, "One ticket was returned yesterday afternoon, the other this morning. I thought someone's journey at home had been cancelled. But both passengers are standing here!"

For the first time, Lalita smiled.

Ganesh laughed too, though there was weariness inside the laughter.

"What now?" Lalita asked.

Ganesh looked at the platform clock. "A general ticket can still be bought. How much money do we have?"

They searched their pockets and bags. Together they had three hundred and sixty-five rupees.

It was not enough for a general ticket to Delhi. It could buy one person's ticket to Patna, but almost nothing would remain for the journey expenses.

Ganesh said, "You go. The fee has been paid."

Lalita shook her head. "If I go, you will miss the Delhi crew."

"My ticket is already gone."

"Mine too."

An announcement came—the train towards Delhi would arrive on Platform Three in a few minutes.

Ganesh looked in that direction. Then at Lalita.

"I thought your three days of training were worth more than my three months of wages."

Lalita said, "I thought your three months of wages were worth more than my three days of training."

Ganesh laughed. "The account is balanced again."

This time Lalita laughed openly. "This was a harder calculation than the five hundred and thirty we wrote on the paper at home."

The Delhi train arrived. People boarded, bags went inside, hands waved from the windows. Ganesh and Lalita remained standing on the platform.

The train pulled away.

An hour later, the Patna train arrived too. This time both remained seated on the bench.

Lalita said, "I will ask whether the verification fee will remain valid for the next batch."

Ganesh said, "The registration is valid for three months. If the Delhi crew calls another batch, we will see."

"So both tickets are gone, but neither road is completely closed."

Ganesh folded the two receipts together. "Tickets can be bought again. Paying these fees again would have been difficult."

Lalita took the papers from his hand. "From now on, we will not sell anything without telling each other."

"You too?"

"Me too."

On the way back from the station, they did not take a bus. To save money, they travelled half the way in a shared vehicle and walked the other half.

When they reached home, the two envelopes on top of the trunk were opened. One held the Delhi call letter; the other, the Patna training list. Neither held a ticket.

Lalita placed the two receipts between the envelopes—one for Ganesh's registration, one for her own verification fee.

Ganesh asked, "What shall we write on the envelopes?"

Lalita looked at the words already written—"Delhi" and "Patna."

She erased nothing. In the empty space between the two envelopes, she wrote in small letters—"First, each other's road."

That night they added up the figures again. This time, instead of travel dates, they wrote down how much they would have to save before the next earnings came.

There were no tickets on top of the trunk. But two journeys were still waiting to begin from that house.

THE BANGLE BOX

For years, a small red box had been kept apart inside Sarita Jha's iron trunk. Clothes, papers, old photographs, the wedding veil—everything in the house changed places from time to time, but the red box never did.

Inside the box were two bangles. They were neither broad nor very heavy. Fine patterns of flowers and leaves ran over them, with patches of worn golden gleam here and there.

Two months before she died, Sarita's mother, Devaki Devi, had placed the box in her hands.

"Give these to Manjari at her wedding," she had said.

Sarita had asked, "Your own bangles?"

Devaki Devi had only nodded. "What belongs to the house should remain in the house."

At the time, Manjari was in college. There was no talk of marriage. Sarita put the box away in the trunk.

Six years passed.

Sarita could not have counted how many times she opened the box during those six years. But never to wear the bangles. Only to make sure they were safe.

The first time, half the roof of the house had collapsed in the rains. The mason asked for eight thousand rupees. There was not even four thousand in the house. Sarita's husband, Naval, had said, "Pawn the bangles. The work will get done. We can redeem them later."

Sarita took out the box and held it for a long time. Then she closed it and put it back in the trunk.

"These are Manjari's," she said.

From that night, Sarita began taking on extra sewing work. For three months she stitched tunics, children's clothes, and pillow covers until midnight. The roof was repaired. The bangles did not go.

The second time, her son Abhinav's school fees fell into arrears. The headmaster had said that the dues had to be cleared before he could sit the examination. Naval again said softly, "The box is still there."

This time Sarita did not even open it. She stitched curtains for two households, worked day and night through the wedding season, and paid the fees.

The third time, the motor of her sewing machine burned out. When she heard the price of a new one, she sat before the box for a long time one evening.

Her mother had said—"Give them to Manjari at her wedding."

Sarita drew back her hand. For two months she worked the machine with the foot treadle.

Manjari did not know all these things in full. She completed her studies at the district training college and began teaching at a private school. Later she obtained a post as a contractual teacher with the panchayat. She managed her own expenses.

When the marriage was fixed, Sarita opened the box in front of Manjari for the first time.

“Mother kept these for you.”

Manjari fell silent as she took the bangles in her hands. “I remember them. Mother used to wear them during worship and festivals.”

“She said they were to be given to you at your wedding.”

Manjari ran a finger along the worn edge of a bangle. “You have kept them safe all these years?”

“What did I do? They were yours.”

Manjari closed the box. “We will open it on the wedding day.”

Five days before the wedding, Sarita thought she should have the bangles cleaned. The joint of one bangle also seemed a little loose. Jagdish Sah, an old goldsmith in the market, had known the family since her mother’s time.

Sarita wrapped the red box in cloth and went to his shop.

Jagdish Sah put on his spectacles and examined the bangles. First the engraving, then the joint, then the inner rim. He became quiet for a moment.

“How old are they?”

“My mother’s. More than thirty years, as far as I know.”

Jagdish Sah rubbed the edge of a bangle on a small testing stone. A fine line appeared. Then he let a drop fall from a bottle.

Sarita waited.

Jagdish Sah tested the second bangle too.

“Sister,” he said softly, “these are not gold.”

Sarita did not understand. “What?”

“They are brass. A golden coating was put over them. It is very old work.”

Sarita almost snatched the bangles from his hand. “These are my mother’s bangles.”

“They may well be. I am not saying they are not yours. I am only saying the metal is not gold.”

All the sounds in the shop suddenly seemed far away in Sarita’s ears—the ring of the hammer, the whirl of the fan, the bell of a bicycle outside.

“Test them again.”

Jagdish Sah tested them again. This time he scraped a tiny blackened spot on the inside of one bangle. What gleamed beneath was not yellow, but a reddish metal.

“Brass.”

Sarita sat down on the chair.

The first thing that came to her mind was the day the roof had collapsed and she had refused to sell the bangles. Then Abhinav’s fees. Then the burned-out motor of the sewing machine.

She thought—so the thing for which she had chosen the harder road so many times had never possessed the value she had believed it did.

Then another thought came—who had changed the bangles?

The box had come straight to her from her mother's hands. After her mother's death, it had never left the house even for a day. The key to the trunk remained with Sarita.

"Were these ever real gold?" Sarita asked.

Jagdish Sah said, "Not this pair. The coating is old. How many years ago it was applied would be difficult to say."

Sarita was about to lift the box when Jagdish Sah said, "Why is the cloth inside raised here?"

There was a layer of velvet at the bottom of the red box. One corner seemed slightly lifted. Sarita had not noticed it in all these years.

Jagdish Sah raised the corner with a pointed pair of tweezers. Beneath the velvet lay two folded papers.

The first was an old goldsmith's receipt. It was dated eight years earlier. The description read—"Two old gold bangles, total weight..." The sale amount was written below.

Sarita's hands began to tremble.

The second paper was in Devaki Devi's handwriting. The ink had faded, but the letters were still recognizable.

"Sarita," the first line said, "if this paper ever reaches you, understand that the gold of the bangles did not leave the house; it changed its form."

Sarita kept reading.

Devaki Devi had written that during Sarita's father's final illness, the southern courtyard of the house and two rooms had been mortgaged to a moneylender. After his death, the moneylender had given them three months—if the money was not repaid, the land papers would be transferred into his name. There was nothing else in the house that could be sold. Devaki Devi sold the real bangles and repaid both the principal and the interest on the mortgage.

On the back of the same paper, her mother had written—"My heart would not let me leave the box empty, so I had these two imitation bangles made in the market. I say they are to be given to Manjari at her wedding, because if the real bangles had not been sold, the courtyard where her wedding pavilion will stand would no longer have remained in our hands."

Sarita read the paper again.

The southern courtyard of the house rose before her eyes—the place where the two sisters had played seven-stones as children, where their mother had dried paddy, and where the bamboo poles for Manjari's wedding now stood. For all these years Sarita had thought of that land simply as "our home"; for the first time she understood that one piece of it had been brought back by the gold from her mother's bangles.

The real bangles Sarita had spent six years protecting had not been inside the box at all. Their gold had long ago redeemed a mortgage on paper and become earth, wall, and courtyard.

Jagdish Sah silently returned the papers.

"Shall I clean them?" he asked.

Sarita looked at the bangles. "Yes. But do not make them shine like gold. Let them remain as they are."

Jagdish Sah only cleaned away the dirt and tightened the loose joint. Whatever golden coating remained was left as it was.

On the way home, one heavy question stayed in Sarita's mind—what would she tell Manjari?

The wedding house had already filled with people. Clothes were being folded in one room, spices ground in another, songs rising somewhere else. Henna was being applied to Manjari's hands.

Sarita put the red box in her own room. After everyone had gone to sleep that night, she called Manjari.

"There is something I have to tell you."

The moment Manjari saw her face, she asked, "What happened?"

Sarita opened the box. First the bangles, then the two papers beneath them.

"These are not gold."

For a moment Manjari said nothing.

Sarita told her everything—the goldsmith, the test, the old receipt, her mother's note.

Manjari sat for a long time holding her grandmother's handwriting in her hands. Then suddenly she laughed. There were tears in her eyes, but the laughter was clear.

Manjari lifted her eyes from the note. "So the land where my wedding pavilion is standing was saved by these bangles?"

"Yes. Mother sold the real bangles and redeemed the mortgage."

Manjari looked out through the window. In the courtyard, bamboo poles, mango leaves, and clay stoves had all been arranged. "Then Mother was telling the truth when she said, 'Give them at her wedding.'"

Sarita remained silent for a few moments. "I thought she meant they were to be placed in your hands."

Manjari took Sarita's hand. "She did place something in our hands—the box. But the real thing had already been beneath our feet."

Sarita kept looking at her.

Manjari lifted the bangles. "The metal is imitation, but the courtyard they saved is not."

Sarita said softly, "Mother left this for me to understand later."

Manjari replied at once, "Yes—her note says it clearly."

The two sisters laughed.

On the wedding day, Sarita had thought of giving something else in place of the bangles. Naval too had said, "Let us buy some small silver piece. What will people say?"

Sarita asked Manjari.

Manjari answered plainly, "Buy nothing. Certainly not by taking a loan."

"Then shall your hands be empty at the wedding?"

Manjari laughed. "Grandmother's box is there, isn't it?"

Before the farewell, during a small ceremony inside the house attended only by close women relatives, Sarita opened the red box. She slipped the bangles onto Manjari's wrists. No one asked what metal they were made of. Their old gleam looked gentle in the light of the oil lamps.

Two minutes later Manjari took the bangles off and placed them back in the box.

"Why did you take them off?" Sarita asked.

"They are less something to wear than a story to keep."

She put her grandmother's note inside as well. This time not beneath the velvet, but on top, beside the bangles.

At the time of farewell, Sarita put the box into Manjari's bag. Manjari took it out again and returned it to Sarita's hands.

"You keep this."

"Mother gave it for you."

"Mother kept it for you. The real bangles she gave to this house."

In the end they decided that the box would remain with Sarita, while Manjari would keep a digital image of her grandmother's note on her phone.

After the wedding crowd had gone, Sarita opened the trunk that night. She placed the red box once more in its old place.

This time, looking at it, she did not remember only the hardship of the roof, the school fees, and the burned-out motor. She understood that the sacrifices she had made had not been wasted. She had not endured hardship merely to preserve the price of imitation bangles; she had endured it to preserve one of her mother's promises—a promise whose true form was not inside the box, but in the courtyard of the house.

Inside the box was brass under a golden coating. Beneath it, an old receipt. Beside it, her mother's handwriting.

Sarita closed the lid.

Now she knew—the true gold of the bangles had never been in the box. Long ago it had redeemed the mortgage papers and mingled with the soil of this house; on that very soil Manjari's wedding pavilion had stood.

STORY 183

THE RED SWEATER

At Saraswati Devi's house, preparations for winter began before Diwali. Old quilts were spread in the sun, woollen clothes came out of the iron trunk, and blankets hung all day from the bamboo pole on the veranda.

This time an old brown blanket was found at the bottom of the trunk. Its edges were torn, the wool had thinned in places, and there was a black stain on one corner. Saraswati Devi lifted it and said, "This is no use to anyone now."

Her daughter Mira immediately said, "Do not throw it away."

"Will you use it?"

"No. But there is still wool in it."

Saraswati Devi laughed. "There is dust in the cobwebs on the wall too."

Mira took the blanket into her hands. "This blanket used to smell of Babuji when I was little."

Saraswati Devi's laughter faded a little.

Her late husband, Jagdish Thakur, had brought the blanket from Nepal in the first year of their marriage. The wool was thick and the colour brown. For many years it was the warmest thing in the house. A child fell ill, a guest stayed the night, someone had to guard the paddy on a Paus night—the turn always came to that blanket.

When Mira was five, the Kosi once rose as far as the edge of the village. While evacuating the house at night, Saraswati Devi had wrapped Mira in that same blanket and carried her to a neighbour's pucca house.

Mira did not remember the whole incident, but she remembered the brown colour of the blanket.

"Something can still be made from this wool," she said.

At the village market, a women's group unravelled old woollen clothes, washed the wool, spun it again, and made new yarn. The group was called the "Sakhi Reweaving Centre." People brought old sweaters, blankets, and mufflers; usable wool was weighed, dyed, and then made into new things for a labour charge.

Mira took the blanket there. Rekha Devi, the head of the group, examined the wool and said, "It is very old, but the fibres inside are good. We will cut away the edges, unravel the yarn, wash it, and spin it again."

"How much will be saved?"

"A little under three kilos. It will not make a whole blanket again, but two or three smaller things can be made."

Mira deposited the blanket. The receipt read—"Household account: Saraswati Devi. Estimated wool: 2 kilograms 870 grams."

Mira said, "Why Mother's name?"

Rekha Devi laughed. "Didn't you say the blanket was hers?"

Mira folded the receipt and put it in her bag.

A month later, Mira found work as a library assistant at a private school in Madhubani city. The salary was not very large, but it was regular. She had to catch the bus at seven in the morning and return in the evening. The school building stood beside an open field; in winter the wind struck hard.

During the first week Mira went wearing an old shawl. In the second week, one end of the shawl almost caught in the bus seat.

When she returned home, Saraswati Devi said, "You need a sweater."

Mira said, "I will buy one with the next salary."

"From the first salary, household rations, your monthly bus pass, and your examination books come first."

"Then the shawl will do for now."

Saraswati Devi said nothing.

The very next day she went to the market. At the Sakhi Reweaving Centre, Rekha Devi was going over the accounts of the old wool.

"Saraswati Didi, the wool from your blanket is ready. Very good fibre came out of it."

Saraswati Devi started. "My blanket?"

Rekha Devi understood that Mira had not told her at home.

She said gently, "Mira deposited it. It was old, so we spun it again."

For a few moments Saraswati Devi looked at the skeins of yarn. The brown wool, once washed, had become a pale muddy shade.

"Can a sweater be made from this?"

"Yes. If we dye it, it can even become a fine red."

Saraswati Devi said at once, "Red."

Rekha Devi asked, "For whom?"

"Mira."

"Measurements?"

Saraswati Devi estimated the size from one of Mira's old kurtas. Buttons down the front, the neck a little high, full sleeves. She wanted the sweater neat enough for Mira to wear to school.

Rekha Devi opened the wool account. "The sweater will take about one kilo two hundred grams. The rest of the wool will remain in the account."

"Let it remain. Do not tell Mira."

"All right."

Saraswati Devi paid half the labour charge. The rest was to be paid when she collected the sweater.

Meanwhile, something was troubling Mira. As the cold increased, her mother's knees hurt at night. Saraswati Devi would sit on the cot with the corner of an old quilt over her knees, but because she had to keep getting up to see to the hearth, the water, and the door, carrying the whole quilt around was difficult.

Mira said, "You need a light blanket."

"There are two blankets in the house."

"Both are heavy."

"Heavy blankets are warm."

"A person should not have to wrap herself in a sack just to keep warm."

Saraswati Devi smiled. "Buy your own sweater first."

Mira fell silent at that, but the following Saturday she went to the market. At the Sakhi Reweaving Centre, Rekha Devi suppressed a smile when she saw her.

"Tell me?"

Mira said softly, "I want a light blanket made for Mother. Not very large. Enough to cover her from knees to shoulders when she sits on the cot."

Rekha Devi opened the account.

Under Saraswati Devi's name, the remaining wool was now recorded as—1 kilogram 670 grams.

Rekha Devi asked, "Will you buy new wool, or use the old wool remaining in this household account?"

Mira was surprised. "There is still that much left?"

"Yes."

"Then make the blanket from this."

"Colour?"

Mira thought. "Keep it brownish, like Mother's old blanket. Give it a red border."

For a moment Rekha Devi looked at Mira's face. "A red border?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing."

Mira paid the labour charge. "Do not tell Mother."

Holding back her laughter, Rekha Devi said, "The wool from this household is doing a great deal of secret work."

Mira did not understand what she meant.

In the first week of December, the red sweater was ready. Rekha Devi called Saraswati Devi separately.

The sweater was deep red. The yarn was not perfectly uniform—darker red in some places, lighter in others. Because it was old wool, there were tiny variations across the surface.

Saraswati Devi took it in her hands and stroked it for a long time.

"It does not look like the old blanket," she said.

Rekha Devi replied, "The wool is old; the form is new."

Inside one sleeve, there was a very thin black fibre that had not taken the red dye completely.

Rekha Devi said, "There was some black wool mixed into the yarn of the old blanket. I can remove this."

Saraswati Devi stopped her. "Let it remain. It has its own mark."

She wrapped the sweater in paper, took it home, and hid it in the upper compartment of the trunk.

Three days later the blanket was ready. Mira stopped at the market while returning from school.

The blanket was light, brownish-grey, with a red border all around. There was a small square weave in the middle to hold the wool firmly in place.

Mira put it over her shoulders to test it. "Right for Mother."

Rekha Devi said, "The history of this wool is in your house."

Mira replied, "That is why."

At one corner of the blanket ran a thin line of black fibre.

Mira ran her finger over it. "Why this black thread?"

"A remnant from the old wool. I can cut it out if you like."

Mira shook her head. "No. Let it stay."

Rekha Devi smiled again.

At home, mother and daughter kept hiding their gifts from each other. Saraswati Devi kept the upper compartment of the trunk closed. Mira kept the blanket beneath the bag in which she carried her school clothes.

There was no particular festival fixed for giving the gifts. But on one very cold evening in Paush, the electricity went out. Wind came through the gap in the door. When Mira returned from the library, her mother's hands were stiff with cold.

Saraswati Devi said, "Today I have something to give you."

Mira said too, "I have something as well."

"You first."

"No, you first."

Both laughed.

Saraswati Devi opened the trunk and took out the red sweater.

Mira truly fell silent.

"Ma, this—?"

"Try it on."

Mira put on the sweater. The fit was almost right. The sleeves were a little long, but it was warm. The deep red shone against her dusky face.

"Why did you spend so much money?"

Saraswati Devi answered at once, "Very little money. The wool was ours."

Mira was startled.

"Which wool?"

Saraswati Devi showed her the black fibre inside the sleeve. "From that old blanket."

For a few moments Mira stared at the sleeve of the sweater. Then, without saying anything, she went inside.

Saraswati Devi thought Mira had become emotional.

Mira came back carrying the brown blanket from her bag.

"Then look at this too."

She spread the blanket over her mother's shoulders.

The red border gleamed in the lamplight.

Saraswati Devi caught one corner of the blanket. Her finger stopped on the black fibre.

Both their eyes went to the same black thread at once.

"This—?" Saraswati Devi began.

Mira burst out laughing. "From that same old blanket."

For a moment the two looked at each other.

Saraswati Devi lifted the sweater sleeve; Mira lifted the corner of the blanket. Both carried the black fibre—a thin line that even the red dye had not erased.

Mira said, "I thought I would have a blanket made from that same wool for Mother. You had already taken half of it."

Saraswati Devi replied, "I thought a sweater would be made for my daughter and the remaining wool would stay for later. You took the rest as well."

"So the old blanket of the house has become two pieces?"

"No," Saraswati Devi said softly, "it has taken two forms."

That night the two spent a long time recalling the story of the old blanket. Jagdish Thakur had brought it in the first winter of their marriage; Mira had been wrapped in it on the night of the flood; it had covered Saraswati Devi for three nights during a fever; once it had even been lent for a newborn child in the neighbourhood.

Mira said, "I was afraid that if it were thrown away, all those stories would go with it."

Saraswati Devi adjusted the blanket over her knees. "Stories do not live in wool."

Mira stroked the sleeve of the sweater.

Saraswati Devi completed the sentence. "But sometimes wool lets us touch the story."

The next day Mira wore the red sweater to school. The children in the library asked, "A new sweater?"

She only said, "Made from old wool."

The children did not understand.

At home, Saraswati Devi cut vegetables with the light blanket over her shoulders. She no longer had to lift the heavy quilt.

A few days later, both went together to the Sakhi Reweaving Centre. Rekha Devi laughed when she saw them together.

"So the secrecy is over now?"

Saraswati Devi said, "You understood beforehand?"

"There was one account in the same name. The wool came from one batch. The orders were two separate ones."

Mira asked, "Why did you not tell us?"

"My work in a gift ended with the weaving. Revealing the secret was not my work."

Rekha Devi showed them the account. Under Saraswati Devi's name were two lines—"Red sweater: 1.200 kilograms." "Light blanket: 1.670 kilograms." Balance—zero.

Saraswati Devi laughed. "The whole blanket is gone."

Rekha Devi said, "Not the whole blanket. Only the yarn."

Mira closed the account book.

On the way home, Saraswati Devi ran a hand over the sleeve of the red sweater. "She had offered to remove the black fibre."

Mira looked at the corner of her blanket. "From mine too."

"We did right not to have it removed."

"Yes."

The Paush nights were still cold. But nowhere in the house was the old brown blanket to be found. In its place, a red sweater travelled to the city, and a light blanket rested on Mother's shoulders at home.

They were two different things. Their uses were different.

But whenever the sleeve of the red sweater and the corner of the brown blanket lay together on the cot, that thin black fibre silently joined them—as though the old wool had changed its dwelling, not its home.

STORY 184

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE POND

The water in the pond had receded. After the Bhadon rains stopped, the green water in the middle looked still, but the earth around the edges was still soft. On the western bank, three new bamboo stakes had been driven into the ground. Red thread was tied across their tops.

Harimohan Jha was sitting on the third step of the old stone stairway. A cane walking stick was in his right hand, but he had laid it on the ground. Madhav sat beside him, one step lower. He had arrived from the city only the previous evening.

The two had sat together beside this pond many times. When Madhav was a child, he would go down as far as the water, and Harimohan Jha would call from above not to step on the moss. Today Madhav wore city shoes. He looked at the moss on the steps but made no attempt to go down.

"The water is low," Madhav said.

"It filled very little this time," Harimohan Jha said.

"Was the upper drain not cleared?"

"Only halfway. The day the men came, it rained."

Madhav looked to the other side of the pond. The red thread appeared taut even though there was no wind.

"Who drove in these stakes?"

Harimohan Jha looked that way too. "The survey men."

"When did they come?"

"On Tuesday."

"You did not tell me."

Harimohan Jha turned a finger around the handle of the stick. "You were coming on Wednesday."

Madhav said nothing. The corner of a folded paper showed from the upper pocket of his shirt. After dinner the previous night, he had taken the paper out, placed it on the table, then folded it and put it back in his pocket. Harimohan Jha had seen it but had asked no question.

Two children with schoolbags on their backs were coming from the other side of the pond. A narrow path ran between the bamboo stakes. There had once been more grass there. Now, under repeated footsteps, the soil had turned dark and hard.

One child bent under the red thread between the stakes and passed through. The other stepped over the thread from the side.

Madhav said, "Why has a path formed here?"

"It is shorter."

"The public path is to the south."

"It is."

"Then?"

Harimohan Jha kept watching a dried lotus leaf floating on the pond.
“Children take the shorter path.”

With the toe of his shoe, Madhav scraped at dried mud stuck to the stone.

“Are the stakes in the right place?”

“The survey men said they are.”

“On the paper?”

“They should be right on the paper too.”

Madhav put a hand over his pocket. The folded paper made a crisp sound.

A dry leaf fell from the peepal tree beside the pond and landed on the steps.
With the tip of his stick, Harimohan Jha pushed it towards the water. The leaf got stuck halfway.

“Would it be more than two dhurs on that side?” Madhav asked.

“I do not remember the measurement.”

“Babuji, you do remember.”

Harimohan Jha smiled faintly. “Remembering and saying are two different things.”

For the first time Madhav looked at him. Harimohan Jha was looking across the pond.

From a distance, a woman came along the narrow path carrying a bundle of grass on her head. At the red thread she stopped, lowered the bundle, lifted the thread to pass beneath it, then put the bundle back on her head.

“Does everyone use this path?” Madhav asked.

“Those who are in a hurry.”

“There are fields ahead.”

“Beyond the fields is the road.”

“The price of land near the road has gone up.”

“Has the road grown, or the price?”

Madhav did not laugh. “Both.”

Harimohan Jha lifted the stick and straightened a small stone lying at the edge of the step. “Everyone in the village knows that prices have gone up.”

“In the city, people pay a great deal for this much land.”

“Who pays for a pond in the city?”

“Not for the pond. For the strip beside the road.”

Harimohan Jha fell silent again.

Madhav took the paper from his pocket. He did not open it. To shield his eyes from the sun, he held it upright near his forehead for a moment, then placed it on his knee. The name of the circle was printed in bold letters at the top. Beneath it was the plot number.

Madhav could not tell whether Harimohan Jha had read it.

“The western-side measurement is clear on this paper,” Madhav said.

“Good.”

“The three stakes fall on that measurement.”

“Then the survey men did their work well.”

Madhav folded the paper again. “If the thread stays here, the path will run through the middle of it.”

Harimohan Jha said, "Whether the thread stays or not is for the thread to know."

Madhav turned towards him. "For the thread to know?"

"People tie it. People untie it."

Just then a girl came running from the other side of the pond. She had a notebook in her hand. Her foot caught at the red thread, but she did not fall. She stopped, looked at the thread, then went around the outside of the stake. The earth was soft. Half her slipper sank into it. She pulled the slipper free, took it in her hand, and continued along the path barefoot.

Harimohan Jha watched her for a long time.

Madhav tapped the paper against his knee.

"If she had taken the southern path, her slipper would not have sunk," he said.

"The southern path is half a kos longer."

"How much is half a kos?"

"Ask someone who walks it every day."

Madhav did not reply.

A breeze rose over the pond. The red thread trembled once. Small circles formed on the water in the middle.

Harimohan Jha said, "Your mother used to take that very path to the market."

Madhav's fingers stopped on the fold of the paper.

"There was no road then," he said.

"There was no road. There was a path."

"Did Mother find it difficult to go the long way round?"

"She was always in a hurry."

Something came to Madhav's lips, then he did not say it.

After a while he asked, "Will the survey men come again?"

"They said they would."

"When?"

"When they are called."

"Who will call them?"

Harimohan Jha lifted the stick and rested it beside his knee. "Whoever has need of them."

Madhav put the paper back in his pocket.

Kishun Mahato was approaching from the fields in the distance with a hoe on his shoulder. When he reached the pond, he stopped.

"Babu, shall I replace the bamboo on the other side tomorrow?"

Harimohan Jha said, "Has the old bamboo rotted?"

"One of them is hollow at the bottom. If the thread remains taut, it will bend."

Madhav looked at Kishun. "How long will the thread remain?"

Kishun looked a little uncertain. "How would I know, Babu? The survey men tied it."

Harimohan Jha said, "Look at it tomorrow morning. If the bamboo is bad, replace it."

“Where should I drive the new bamboo?” Kishun asked.

Before answering, Harimohan Jha looked at Madhav.

Madhav looked across the pond. Even from here, the mark where the girl’s slipper had sunk looked dark.

“Where the old one is,” Harimohan Jha said.

Kishun nodded and went on.

Madhav said softly, “But this is not the old stake.”

“No.”

“Where was the old boundary?”

Harimohan Jha ran the tip of the stick through the doob grass growing beside the steps. “A boundary lives on paper. On the soil, there are marks.”

“Marks disappear.”

“Yes.”

“Then there is another survey.”

“Yes.”

Both fell silent.

Two or three times Madhav opened his mouth to speak of the city. The loan from his office, the instalment on the house, his daughter Sanvi’s fee for the next school term—all of it was on his mind. Among all those things, the price of this narrow strip appeared like a clear figure. Yet on the other side of the pond, children kept passing again and again beneath the red thread.

Madhav could not tell what was in Harimohan Jha’s mind. His face was still. Only his fingers kept turning again and again over the handle of the stick.

“Did you change the lock at the back of the house?” Harimohan Jha asked.

Madhav was startled. “Yes. The old lock had jammed.”

“Where is the new key?”

“With me.”

“Leave one here before you go.”

Madhav looked at his father for a few moments. “I will leave one.”

Harimohan Jha nodded.

The sun had begun to slope down. The colour of the pond was turning from green to grey. The red thread on the other side now looked more distinct.

Madhav rose to his feet. As he straightened his knees, he gave a slight groan. Harimohan Jha got up holding the stick.

“Shall we go?” Madhav asked.

Harimohan Jha said, “Let us walk around that side for a while.”

The two walked slowly along the rim of the pond. When they reached the western side, the earth was soft. The first stake stood straight, the second leaned a little, and all around the third were the footprints of children.

Harimohan Jha tapped the second stake with his stick. The bamboo gave a hollow sound from within.

“Kishun was right,” he said.

Madhav bent down and gripped the stake. The bamboo was indeed loose. The red thread pulled towards him and came within reach of his hand.

At that moment three children arrived there again. Seeing the two men standing by the stakes, the children stopped.

Madhav held the thread in his hand. The children looked towards the long turn to the south, then at Madhav.

Without saying anything, Madhav lifted the thread. One by one the children passed beneath it. After the last child had crossed, he called “Pranam” and ran on.

Madhav did not let go of the thread.

Harimohan Jha stood beside the third stake.

“This bamboo will be replaced tomorrow,” Madhav said.

“Yes.”

“If it is set a little farther inward, the ground will be firmer.”

Harimohan Jha looked at him.

With his foot Madhav scraped at the soft earth. About two cubits inward from the stake, the ground was hard.

“Here,” he said.

Harimohan Jha only nodded.

Madhav loosened the red thread and untied it from the old stake. One end of the thread remained in his palm. With his stick, Harimohan Jha made a small mark on the hard ground farther inside.

The two began walking back towards the house.

Behind them the pond was still. The narrow path on the other side remained where it had been. The red thread no longer stretched taut from stake to stake; one end hung from a bamboo, while Madhav had folded the other and put it into his pocket.

In that pocket, beside the thread, was the folded survey paper.

Neither of them spoke of it.

THREE EMPTY CHAIRS

Janardan Mishra moved the three chairs away from the wall and placed them at the far end of the dining row.

The chairs were not new. White paint had been scraped from the back of one; the right arm of another was slightly loose; the four legs of the third were uneven. Janardan Mishra slipped a folded piece of paper beneath the third chair.

“Why here?” Abhay asked.

Janardan Mishra measured the space between the chairs with his eyes. “This is fine.”

“The row is over there.”

“This too is part of the row.”

Abhay said nothing. He held the guest register in his hand. At the top, written in red ink, was the number—four hundred and forty-two.

On the northern side of the courtyard, the cooking was under way. Steam rose from a large cauldron of pulao. The smell of ghee, cumin, and smoke drifted with the air towards the dining area.

It was Archana’s wedding. The wedding procession had arrived. The ceremonies at the mandap were in progress. There was still a little time before the feast began.

Abhay had come from the city three days earlier. Numbers, leaf plates, glasses, sweets, water—every calculation was in his notebook. Janardan Mishra never looked at the notebook.

“These three extra chairs are not written down,” Abhay said.

“Are chairs written down?”

“Everything hired is counted.”

Janardan Mishra did not laugh. “Then count them.”

Abhay added nothing to the register.

As the afternoon declined, the first row sat down to eat. Children first. Then guests from far away. Dal in brass-coloured buckets, vegetables in tin buckets, and puris in baskets began moving along the row.

The three chairs remained empty.

An elderly guest moved towards the last chair. Janardan Mishra folded his hands and said, “Kaka, please sit here.” He seated him on an empty chair farther forward.

Abhay watched from a distance.

“Are these being kept for someone?” he asked when he came near.

“Yes.”

“For whom?”

“For those who are still working.”

Abhay looked towards the cooking area. Ten or fifteen people were running about there. “A lot of people are working.”

Janardan Mishra only said, "Yes."

The second row filled up.

Ramcharit, the cook, lifted the lid from a hot cauldron and let out the steam. The corner of his dhoti was tucked up to his knees. From time to time he washed his hands, then opened a box of spices.

Phulo Kaki was counting leaf plates. Whenever she saw a torn plate, she replaced it with another. If a child reached for sweets, she would say, "Eat your rice first."

Nandu was filling water. Between two large drums and four jugs, his feet never stopped.

The three chairs remained empty.

In Abhay's register were estimates for the first row, the second row, the third row. Again and again he crossed out numbers and wrote them afresh.

"Has Ramcharit Kaka eaten?" Janardan Mishra asked.

"Not yet," Abhay said. "He is in the cooking area."

"Phulo?"

"Looking after the leaf plates."

"Nandu?"

"Water."

Janardan Mishra nodded.

Abhay looked at his face. "Are these three for them?"

Before answering, Janardan Mishra saw a boy climbing onto the arm of one chair. "Baua, not there."

The boy climbed down.

"Yes," Janardan Mishra said.

Abhay folded the register. "They eat at the end."

"Why?"

Abhay paused a little. "Because they are working."

"After the work is over?"

"Then they eat."

Janardan Mishra looked at the three chairs. "They will sit here."

Abhay said nothing.

The third row rose. Water, curd, and grains of rice lay scattered on the ground. Two boys tried to sweep, but the next row arrived.

Nandu came running with two jugs in one hand. Janardan Mishra stopped him.

"Sit down for a while."

Nandu laughed. "Now?"

"Yes. Five minutes."

"Who will serve the water?"

"Someone else."

Nandu looked towards the rear drum. "That drum is only half full. Let me fill it, then I will sit."

He went away.

Abhay said, "See?"

Janardan Mishra did not answer.

A little later Phulo Kaki passed carrying a stack of leaf plates. Janardan Mishra pointed towards the chairs.

“Kaki, your place.”

The moment Phulo Kaki saw the chair, she laughed. “Mine?”

“Yes.”

“If I sit here, who will count the leaf plates?”

“Someone will.”

“If someone else counts, they will hand out two plates at a time.”

She walked on again.

Janardan Mishra watched her go.

Abhay said softly, “Babu, you want to stop the work so that people can eat.”

“Not eat. Sit.”

“What is the difference?”

Janardan Mishra looked at him. “You do not understand?”

Abhay did not answer.

A conch sounded from the mandap. Some women left the feast and rose to go that way. The empty places filled again.

Archana appeared once at the edge of the courtyard. A veil covered her head and flowers hung at her neck. Two cousins were with her. She quickly went inside.

Janardan Mishra looked that way for a moment, then towards the three chairs.

“If Ma were here, all of this would have been on her head,” Abhay said.

Janardan Mishra’s fingers stopped on the back of a chair. “Yes.”

“She would have had so much work at Archana’s wedding.”

“Yes.”

Abhay wanted to say something more, but did not.

Ramcharit, the cook, came out wiping his face, wet with steam. Janardan Mishra called to him.

“Ramcharit!”

“What happened?”

“Sit down.”

Ramcharit looked at the three chairs. “The fish still has to come off the fire.”

“The fish will not run away in ten minutes.”

Ramcharit smiled. “The fish will not run away, but the people will eat it.”

“Let them eat.”

Ramcharit wiped the sweat from his face with his gamchha. “I will eat later, in peace.”

“Here.”

Ramcharit looked at Janardan Mishra for a moment. “Here?”

“Yes.”

Ramcharit’s smile faded slightly. “Guests sit here.”

“What are you?”

Ramcharit placed the gamchha over his shoulder. “I am the cook.”

"That is your work."

"Today, I am the work."

He turned and walked back towards the cooking area.

Abhay no longer held the register. He had placed the notebook on the sill by the window.

"Babu," he said, "will putting out chairs change anything?"

Janardan Mishra pushed the paper farther beneath the third chair. "I do not know."

"Then?"

"I will not remove them while they are empty."

Abhay fell silent.

Night deepened. The strings of electric lights flickered off and came on again. The crowd at the feast thinned. Guests from far away began taking leave.

The dining rows became smaller now. Four people, six people, then ten.

The three chairs remained empty.

Phulo Kaki gathered the last leaf plates and went towards the cooking area. Nandu poured the remaining water from the drum towards the drain. Ramcharit scraped the rice left at the bottom of the cauldron into a small vessel.

Janardan Mishra asked for three plates.

Abhay set the plates down.

"Shall I call them now?"

"Yes."

Abhay called Nandu first. Nandu washed his hands and came over. He stopped in front of the chairs.

"Sit," Abhay said.

Nandu looked towards Phulo Kaki.

Phulo Kaki arrived. Her hands had been washed with soap, but turmeric still clung around her fingernails.

Ramcharit came too.

All three stood in front of the three chairs.

For a few moments no one spoke.

Janardan Mishra lifted the covers from the plates. "Sit."

Phulo Kaki said softly, "I will eat in the cooking shed."

"What is wrong with here?"

"What could be wrong?"

"Then?"

Phulo Kaki gave no answer.

Nandu wiped his wet palms on his dhoti. "I too will feel better over there."

Ramcharit touched the arm of a chair, then withdrew his hand. "Babu, I understand that you want us to sit."

Janardan Mishra looked at him.

Ramcharit continued, "But if I sit here today, people will say—the cook left the kitchen and sat down at the feast."

"The people have gone now."

Ramcharit looked around. Truly, most people had left.

"My own mind is still in the kitchen," he said.

Phulo Kaki laughed. "And my plate is already there."

"Since when?" Abhay asked.

"Since the first row began. I have been saving a little at a time."

Abhay kept looking at Phulo Kaki.

Nandu said, "They have kept the fish head for me."

Ramcharit said, "This boy will never leave a fish head."

All three laughed.

Janardan Mishra did not.

Phulo Kaki ran her hand along the back of one chair. "Keep these. We will sit next time."

"Next time?" Janardan Mishra asked.

"Will there not be another wedding in the house?"

Abhay laughed for the first time. "Mine?"

Phulo Kaki said, "Is it written in your register or not?"

Abhay shook his head.

The three picked up their own plates and walked towards the cooking shed.

Janardan Mishra did not stop them.

The courtyard was almost empty. In the distance, the ceremony at the mandap was still under way. Fragments of the mantras came on the wind.

Abhay stood in front of the three chairs.

"Shall I remove them?" he asked.

Janardan Mishra said, "Not yet."

"Why?"

"Let them stay."

Abhay placed a hand on one chair, but did not move it.

A little later laughter came from the cooking shed. Nandu had said something. Phulo Kaki's loud laughter rang out, followed by Ramcharit's quieter voice.

Janardan Mishra looked that way.

Abhay did too.

The plates still rested on the three chairs. No steam rose from the rice. Beside one plate, a small drop of curd had fallen and was beginning to dry.

"Shall I pick up the plates?" Abhay asked.

This time Janardan Mishra nodded.

Abhay picked up the plates and carried them towards the cooking shed.

The chairs remained where they were.

The last guest of the night also left. The courtyard was swept. Water was sprinkled. Grains of rice, scraps of leaf plates, and flower petals were washed to one side.

The seats of the three chairs were clean.

The folded paper beneath the third chair had become wet. The chair now stood level.

Abhay bent down and pulled out the paper. He opened it and looked. It was an old torn page from the guest register. No one's name was written at the top.

He folded the page and placed it beneath the chair leg again.

Janardan Mishra said nothing.

The three chairs remained empty to the end.

EVENING ON THE EMBANKMENT

Evening came quickly upon the embankment.

The western sunlight lay long across the grey water. The river's current was a little distance from the embankment, but the sound of erosion seemed close—first the faint rustle of earth, then a heavy mass breaking away and falling into the water.

Jagdish sat on the slope of the embankment. In his hand was an old measuring cord. A small brass-coloured ring was fixed to one end.

Ramakant stood a little distance away. He was looking towards the river.

The two brothers had come to look at the field before the day faded.

The land between them lay at the very place where the river was now cutting into the bank.

"It had not come this far yesterday," Ramakant said.

Jagdish looked at the newly cracked line in the earth. "No."

For a while neither spoke.

Below, two boys were driving cattle home. One cow pulled towards the green grass near the eroded edge. The boy turned it back with the sound of his stick.

Jagdish uncoiled the measuring cord.

Ramakant looked at him but said nothing.

The cord was old. Soil clung to its knots. Since their father's time, it had been kept in the wooden trunk at home. It was not an official survey cord, but the family's own cord.

Their father used it to measure field ridges, the garden plot, distances between bamboo clumps, the width of a shed—everything.

Jagdish stood up.

The two came down from the embankment and went towards the eroded edge.

The earth was not wet. It was dry on top, loose and crumbly within. Fine soil slid away under each step.

"Do not go farther," Ramakant said.

Jagdish stopped.

The first stake stood ahead.

Half the stake had emerged from the ground. The river had eaten away the earth beneath it.

Ramakant bent down to look. "Will it last through the night?"

"Hard to say."

This stake had been driven in five years earlier.

That day the surveyor had come. The two brothers, their two wives, three neighbours, the mukhiya, and two boys had stood watching. The surveyor had opened a red file and taken the measurements. This stake had then been accepted as the boundary in the middle.

After that, the land was not divided.

The papers were prepared, a day was fixed for signatures, and then Mother fell ill.

Mother passed away.

The signatures were never made.

Meanwhile, Jagdish's son found work outside. Ramakant's daughter began going to college. One year turned into another.

The land remained where it was.

A little more than three kathas.

Half was to be Jagdish's. Half Ramakant's. On a narrow strip in the middle stood the root of an old mango tree, because of which the surveyor had not been able to draw a straight line.

Now the mango tree was gone.

It had fallen in the last storm. Only the stump remained.

Jagdish hooked the ring of the cord around the stake.

"Shall we measure?" Ramakant asked.

"Let us see."

Ramakant took hold of the other end of the cord.

The two slowly stepped backwards.

The cord grew taut.

Where the second stake should have stood, there was no level patch of earth. There was only the fresh line of erosion.

Ramakant stood holding the cord in his hand.

"The second stake is gone," he said.

Jagdish said nothing.

The cord slackened.

In the distance, evening smoke rose from the village. Someone had set fire to straw at a house. The smell drifted as far as the embankment.

Ramakant began winding up the cord.

Jagdish said, "Leave it."

Ramakant stopped his hand.

The two climbed back onto the embankment.

The wind was stronger above.

On the other side of the embankment were paddy fields. Some had already been harvested; in others the ears still stood.

Jagdish's bicycle lay on the grass. Ramakant's old motorcycle stood a little distance away.

There was an empty space between the two.

Ramakant sat down.

Jagdish sat too.

The measuring cord lay between them.

After a while Ramakant said, "I called the surveyor yesterday."

Jagdish kept looking towards the river.

"He can come on Wednesday."

"Yes."

"I took out the papers too."

Jagdish nodded.

"Your signature is still pending."

"I know."

Silence again.

An egret landed in a shallow part of the river, then flew away.

Ramakant said, "What would Babu have done if he were here?"

Jagdish did not answer at once.

"Babu would have quarrelled with the river," he said after a while.

A faint smile came to Ramakant's face. "He would have driven in bamboo poles."

"Twenty of them."

"Forty."

The two laughed a little.

The laughter died quickly.

The sound came again from the eroded edge.

Both looked down at the same moment.

The first stake was still there. But the earth beside it had fallen away. The stake had tilted.

Ramakant stood up.

Jagdish caught his hand. "No."

Ramakant stopped.

"I will pull it out," he said.

"The earth will collapse."

"The stake will be carried away."

Jagdish let go of his hand.

Ramakant did not climb down.

The red part of the sun was now sinking below the tops of the trees.

Jagdish lifted the cord.

One end was still hooked around the stake.

He pulled the cord slowly.

The stake moved.

The earth did not break.

Jagdish pulled again.

The stake came free.

Ramakant watched him.

The stake was a piece of bamboo about two cubits long. Its lower part had turned black. The red survey mark was still visible at the top.

Jagdish laid the stake on the embankment.

Ramakant unfastened the end of the cord.

Neither of them said anything.

Below, the place where the boundary had been was now empty.

"Wednesday?" Ramakant asked.

Jagdish kept winding the cord.

"The surveyor?"

Jagdish said, "Call him."

"What shall I say?"

Jagdish straightened the last knot in the cord with his fingers.

"Tell him not to come yet."

Ramakant was silent for a while. "For how long?"

Jagdish looked towards the river.

"Let this water go down first."

Ramakant nodded.

The two sat down again.

Darkness was growing now.

Two women carrying bundles of grass passed along the top of the embankment. Seeing the two brothers, they greeted them. The brothers returned the greeting.

From the direction of the distant mosque came the call to prayer. After it, the bell of a temple.

The village was returning into evening.

Ramakant's mobile phone rang.

He looked at the screen. "From home."

He did not answer the phone.

"Answer it," Jagdish said.

"Two minutes."

The ringing stopped.

Ramakant said, "Bhauji will ask how many kathas are left."

Jagdish did not smile. "They will ask in your house too."

"Yes."

Again came the sound of erosion.

This time, after the fall, the water foamed for a few moments. Then the current became even again.

Jagdish picked up the stake lying on the embankment.

Ramakant thought he would take it home.

But Jagdish held the stake out towards Ramakant.

Ramakant did not take it.

For a few moments the piece of bamboo remained between their two hands.

Then Ramakant took hold of the other end.

Together, they did not break the stake.

They carried it to the inner side of the embankment.

There was an old rainwater drain there. The earth beside the drain was cracked.

Jagdish inserted the lower end of the stake into the crack.

Ramakant pressed the earth down around it with his foot.

The stake was no longer a boundary.

It was only a piece of bamboo holding up the sunken earth beside the drain.

Jagdish folded the cord to put it back in the trunk.

Ramakant took out his mobile phone.

"Shall I tell the surveyor now?"

Jagdish lifted his bicycle.

“Yes.”

Ramakant dialled the number.

Jagdish did not wait. He turned the bicycle around.

Ramakant put the phone to his ear.

“Hello? Aminji?”

Jagdish had already gone a little distance.

“Do not come on Wednesday,” Ramakant said. “There will be no measurement now.”

He listened.

“No, there has been no quarrel.”

Ramakant looked towards the river.

In the darkness, the line of erosion could no longer be seen clearly.

“We will tell you when the water goes down.”

He ended the call.

Jagdish had stopped at the bend of the embankment.

Ramakant walked towards his motorcycle.

He turned once to look back.

The old stake driven beside the drain was barely visible in the darkness.

The red mark was still on it.

But it no longer marked the boundary of any field.

Below, the river kept flowing.

STORY 187

THE LAST LOCAL

It was already half past ten at night.

The crowd at the station had thinned. The ticket window was half shuttered, and the tea seller was separating the fire from beneath his brass kettle.

Across the tracks, the yellow lights stood one by one, steady in the dark.

Upendra Jha stood beside the second pillar. An old black bag was tucked under his arm. Inside it lay his old office identity card and a flower garland wrapped in paper.

The garland had been given to him at the office. He had decided not to wear it all the way home.

When the wind blew, a corner of the paper fluttered out of the mouth of the bag.

Upendra pushed it back inside.

After a burst of static on the loudspeaker, a woman's voice announced that the last local train would arrive ten minutes late.

Upendra looked at his watch.

At that moment, his gaze went to the top of the stairs.

A man was coming down with a large blue cloth bag in one hand and a folded blanket in the other.

Upendra recognized the bag first, then the walk.

"Madhav?"

The man stopped.

"Upendra Babu?"

Madhav Mishra came down the stairs. For a few moments the two simply looked at each other's faces.

In the village they saw each other from time to time, usually at the market, the medicine shop, or someone's doorway. Meeting at the station this late at night was unusual.

"So late?" Upendra asked.

Madhav set the bag down. "I am catching the local."

"To town?"

"Yes."

Upendra looked at his watch again, as though searching for something more in the answer.

"Tonight?"

Madhav laughed. "The local runs tonight, doesn't it?"

Upendra laughed too, but only briefly.

The two went towards a bench with an iron back.

The bench was cold. Madhav sat with the strap of the bag between his feet.

Upendra sat at the other end.

For a while they both looked at the tracks ahead.

The tea seller called out, "Last tea!"
Madhav asked, "Will you have some?"
"Not today."
"Why?"

"There was too much at the office."

Madhav opened the mouth of his bag a little, then closed it again. "A feast?"

"A farewell."

Madhav looked at him.

"Today was my last day," Upendra said.

"Retirement?"

"Yes."

Madhav nodded slowly. "Then this is your last local."

For the first time, Upendra laughed openly. "You have understood correctly."

Madhav placed a hand on the strap of his blue bag.

"Mine is the first."

Upendra's laughter stopped.

"First what?"

"Going to night work."

"Where?"

"At a warehouse outside town. My nephew introduced me. Night watch."

Upendra said nothing.

Madhav kept looking ahead. The second hand of the station clock moved across its white face.

"The shop?" Upendra finally asked.

"Closed."

"Completely?"

"Not completely. My younger son will open it during the day if a customer comes."

"And your own work with your hands?"

Madhav turned over his right palm. Black grime clung to the tips of his fingers like an old stubbornness.

"There are fewer bicycles now. Battery vehicles have increased. My tools are not made for that kind of work."

"You could have learned."

"I might have learned. But while I was learning, who would have run the household?"

Upendra remained silent.

At the distant bend of the tracks, the signal turned green.

Madhav asked, "Everyone at home must be happy?"

"About what?"

"That you will be home every day now."

Upendra shifted the bag between his knees.

"We shall see."

"We shall see?"

"For thirty-one years I have returned at night on this local. By the time I reached home, everything was over. Dinner covered and kept aside. At first the children would already be asleep; later they would be studying; then they began going to their own rooms."

Madhav listened.

"Now I will be home at seven," Upendra said. "Then I will learn what happens at home at seven."

A small smile returned to Madhav's face.

"I used to think people with city jobs came home in the evening."

"Some do."

"You did not?"

"I did. Just late."

The two fell silent again.

On the track across from them, a freight train moved slowly. For a long time the metallic clank-clank of the couplings between the wagons could be heard.

Madhav opened his blue bag. Inside were a change of clothes, a gamchha, a strip of medicine, and a small brass-coloured torch.

"Midnight to eight," he said.

"First night?"

"Yes."

"Sleep?"

"We shall see."

"The first few days will be difficult."

Madhav closed the bag. "You have experience."

Upendra did not reply.

After a few moments he said, "I did not work at night. It was only that the work ended late."

"Is there a difference?"

Upendra thought. "There must have been."

Madhav rested his head against the back of the bench.

"Do you remember our school days?" he asked.

"Which part?"

"When both of us used to say we would go away."

"Everyone said that."

"You went."

"Only as far as this town."

"I did not."

"Your shop was doing well."

"Yes."

"At the time, I thought you had chosen well. Your own work, your own time."

Madhav looked at him. "I thought you had chosen well. A fixed amount every month."

Both laughed once.

The laughter did not last long.

The tea seller threw the water used to wash the kettle beside the tracks. A little steam rose and vanished at once.

Madhav asked, "Where is your elder son now?"

"In Pune."

"The younger one?"

"In Bengaluru."

"At home?"

"My wife and I."

"Then now you will have time together."

Upendra nodded.

"And yours?"

"The elder daughter is married. The younger son will look after the shop. Mother is at home."

"Will you come home every week?"

Madhav looked towards the tracks.

"For now they have said there will be leave after fifteen days."

Upendra's fingers grew still on the strap of his bag.

"Fifteen?"

"At first they are short of men."

"Where will you stay?"

"There are four cots behind the warehouse."

Upendra said nothing again.

The loudspeaker crackled. The arrival of the local was announced.

A whistle could be heard in the distance.

Madhav picked up his bag.

Upendra stood too.

"Dinner tonight?" Upendra asked.

"It has been packed from home."

"What time will you eat?"

"Whenever I get the chance."

Upendra looked at his own bag.

"I used to eat at eleven," he said.

"So late?"

"Not on the local. After reaching home."

Madhav's eyes rested on the mouth of Upendra's bag, where one flower petal from the garland wrapped in paper could be seen outside.

"Is that a garland?"

"Yes."

"Go home wearing it."

Upendra answered at once, "No."

Madhav smiled. "Why?"

"There has been enough of that today."

Madhav wanted to say something, but did not.

The headlight of the local appeared around the bend.

The wind arrived first. Then the vibration of iron travelled through the bench and into their feet.

Both stood behind the yellow line.

"Where will you get down?" Madhav asked.

Upendra named his station.

"I go beyond that."

"Yes. Go as far as Nagar East. Get down from the door on the right. At night the stairs to the footbridge are closed, so take the lower path."

Madhav listened carefully.

"And after that?"

"Turn left outside the station. You may get a shared vehicle at night. If not, it is half a kos on foot."

"You remember everything."

"Thirty-one years."

The local entered the platform. Tired faces and empty seats appeared and disappeared in the windows.

The train stopped.

Both boarded the same coach.

There were only six or seven people inside.

Upendra sat by the window. Madhav sat opposite.

The train moved.

The station lights slid backwards.

After a while Madhav said, "Do you feel sleepy on the local on the first night?"

Upendra kept looking into the darkness outside.

"Not for the first month."

"And after that?"

"After that, even in dreams you are afraid you will miss your station."

Madhav laughed.

Upendra did too.

The train crossed a small bridge. The water below could not be seen; only its sound could be heard.

"Now that fear of yours is over," Madhav said.

Upendra paused before replying.

"One fear."

"The other?"

"Waking in the morning and knowing there is nowhere I must go."

Madhav asked no question.

The local stopped at the next station. Two people got off. A young man boarded, put earphones in his ears, and stood near the door.

Madhav shifted his blue bag closer to his knees.

"My mother used to tell me not to take night work," he said.

Upendra only said, "Hmm."

"At that time the shop was doing well."

"Hmm."

"Today I did not tell her it was my first night. I told her I was going to deliver some goods."

Upendra looked at Madhav.

“Why?”

“So that she can sleep.”

Upendra looked outside again.

After a while he said, “My father came to the station to see me off on the first day of my job too.”

Madhav waited.

Upendra said nothing more.

The train kept moving.

The next three stations passed without conversation.

The first light of Upendra’s station appeared ahead.

He tucked the bag under his arm.

Madhav stood up too.

“You sit,” Upendra said. “Your station is still far.”

Madhav sat down again.

The train slowed.

Upendra went to the door.

From behind him Madhav said, “At this time tomorrow, where will you be?”

Upendra turned around.

He did not answer immediately after hearing the question.

“At home,” he said at last.

Madhav nodded.

The door opened.

Upendra got down.

The platform was almost empty.

He walked two steps, then turned back.

Beyond the window, Madhav sat with the blue bag between his feet.

Madhav did not wave. Upendra did not either.

The whistle blew.

The local slowly moved forward.

For a few moments their eyes remained fixed on each other.

Then the window slid away.

Upendra stood alone on the platform.

In his bag lay the folded farewell garland.

In Madhav’s bag, on the train, lay the brass-coloured torch for his first night.

The last local moved on into the darkness.

STORY 188

HALF A GLASS OF WATER

It was half past nine in the morning.

Rows of grey chairs filled the hospital waiting room. Outside the window, drops from the night's rain still clung to the neem leaves.

Jaynarayan Mishra sat holding two chairs at the corner of the third row.

His wife Kamla sat to his left.

In the empty space between them were a small cloth bag, a file of test reports, and a half-filled glass of water.

The glass belonged to the hospital drinking-water room.

Kamla had taken two sips. Then she had moved the glass a little away from the file so that if the water spilled, it would not wet the papers.

Jaynarayan shifted the glass slightly back towards the file.

The edge of the chair was level there.

Kamla moved it two fingers farther away again.

Neither of them said anything.

The red number 47 glowed on the wall.

Their slip had 52 written on it.

Jaynarayan looked at the number for the fourth time.

Kamla straightened the sari over her knees.

"Only five people now," Jaynarayan said.

"Hmm."

"It will be soon."

Kamla nodded.

Jaynarayan took his mobile phone from his pocket. He looked at the time on the screen, then put it back without calling anyone.

A few moments later, he took it out again.

"Did you tell them at home?" Kamla asked.

"Whom?"

"Manoj."

"I told him there is another test."

"And?"

"And what?"

Kamla tightened the sari a little around her ribs.

"Nothing."

Jaynarayan switched off the phone and put it back in his pocket.

The number on the wall changed to 48.

An elderly man came out from inside. Two young men were with him. All three walked quickly towards the door.

Kamla did not look at their faces.

She picked up the glass.

Jaynarayan stretched out his hand, as though he would hold it for her.

Kamla took only one sip and put the glass back.

The water was now a little less than half.

"Drink some more," Jaynarayan said.

"I am not thirsty."

"You have had nothing since morning."

"I had tea."

"Half a cup."

Kamla looked at him.

"Do you keep count?"

Jaynarayan did not answer.

The number 49 lit up on the wall.

The fan in the waiting room turned slowly. One blade had a black line of dust on it that rose and fell again and again as the fan revolved.

Kamla watched it for two turns.

Then she opened the mouth of the bag.

Inside were a gamchha, a small towel, a spectacle case, two bananas, and a pair of slippers.

Jaynarayan looked at the bag.

"Why the slippers?"

"They said sometimes it can take a long time."

"A long time does not mean overnight."

"Did I say overnight?"

Jaynarayan fell silent.

Kamla closed the bag.

After a while Jaynarayan asked, "Will you eat a banana?"

"No."

"Shall I eat one?"

"Eat it."

Jaynarayan opened the bag. He took out one banana.

He turned it in his hand, then put it back inside.

Kamla said nothing.

In a distant row, a child began to cry. His mother got up, took him in her arms, and went towards the veranda.

The child's crying could still be heard for a while even after they had gone outside.

Jaynarayan placed his palm on his knee.

There was a slight tremor between his fingers.

Kamla looked at that hand.

"Are you feeling cold?"

"No."

"Why is your hand trembling?"

Jaynarayan immediately covered that hand with the other.

"It happens like this."

Kamla went back to watching the fan.

The number on the wall changed to 50.

"What time is the bus?" Kamla asked.

"One twenty."

"After that?"

"Two fifty."

"There is also one at three fifteen."

"That one goes the long way round."

"It takes time."

"Yes."

For a while they kept talking about bus times.

Which bus went all the way inside the station, which dropped passengers at the square, and which was usually more crowded.

Neither said which bus they would take today.

A nurse came to the door and called, "Fifty-one."

A middle-aged woman stood up. The man sitting with her immediately picked up her file.

Kamla put a hand on her own file.

Jaynarayan's hand moved towards it too.

Their fingers reached the file at the same moment.

Jaynarayan drew his hand back.

"Leave it," Kamla said.

"It is not heavy."

"I know."

Kamla placed the file in her lap.

Jaynarayan looked at the glass.

"Water?"

"Let it be."

"What if it takes time inside?"

"There will be water there."

"They had said on an empty stomach—"

Kamla looked at him at once.

Jaynarayan stopped the sentence.

"What had they said?" Kamla asked.

"Nothing. I remembered wrongly."

Kamla opened the file.

The top sheet bore the date from the previous week. Beneath it were two lines written in black ink, which both of them had already read many times.

Kamla closed the page immediately.

"Do not read it," she said.

"I was not reading."

"You were looking."

"At the paper."

"The paper says the same thing."

Jaynarayan looked away from the file.

The number on the wall did not change.

The room suddenly seemed quieter.

Jaynarayan slipped off one slipper, then put it on again.

Kamla pushed the bangle on her left wrist upward.

Then downward.

Then upward again.

Jaynarayan looked at that hand.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Then?"

"It has become loose."

"We will tie a thread around it at home."

"Hmm."

For a few moments she remained on the words "at home."

Jaynarayan said at once, "On the way back, we can get thread at Harsingar Chowk."

Kamla smiled faintly.

"Go to the market for such a small thing?"

"We are passing that way."

The smile ended quickly.

The number on the wall was still 51.

Jaynarayan stood up.

"Where?"

"Nowhere."

"Sit."

He sat down again.

The metal chair made a faint sound.

"Do not call Manoj again," Kamla said.

"I was not going to."

"He will be at work."

"Hmm."

"And do not call Rashmi either."

Jaynarayan did not answer.

Kamla looked at his face.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Let us hear first."

Jaynarayan's eyes went to the file for a moment.

"Hear what?"

Kamla did not answer the question.

She picked up the glass.

This time she did not drink. She only ran a finger over the outside of the glass, where the chill of the water had now disappeared.

She put the glass back in the middle.

The water remained still.

The nurse came out.

A small slip was in her hand.

She looked at the number on the wall.

51 went dark.

52 lit up.

Jaynarayan and Kamla both sat straight at the same moment.

The nurse looked at the slip.
 “Kamla Mishra?”
 Kamla stood up.
 Jaynarayan did too.
 “Only one person inside,” the nurse said.
 Jaynarayan sat down again.
 Kamla tucked the file under her arm.
 She walked two steps.
 Then she turned back.
 “My spectacles?”
 Jaynarayan immediately opened the bag. He took out the spectacle case and gave it to her.
 Kamla stood holding it for a few moments.
 “You will stay here?”
 “Where else would I go?”
 Kamla nodded.
 Then she went inside.
 The door closed.
 The chair to Jaynarayan’s left was now empty.
 The bag was still under that chair.
 He lifted it and placed it between his feet.
 The glass remained on the middle chair.
 Jaynarayan looked at it.
 The water was a little less than half.
 He reached out and picked up the glass.
 He brought it to his lips.
 Then stopped.
 He put the glass back.
 Near the drinking-water room, someone opened a tap. The sound of running water could be heard for a few moments.
 Jaynarayan did not look at his watch.
 The mobile phone remained in his pocket.
 He only kept looking at the door.
 He could not tell how much time passed.
 Once, the sound of a metal tray falling came from inside.
 He stood up at once.
 No one came out.
 He sat down again.
 After a while, a cleaner entered the room carrying a broom.
 He moved along, picking small scraps of paper from beneath the empty chairs.
 Jaynarayan drew his feet in.
 The cleaner reached towards the glass.
 “Leave it,” Jaynarayan said.
 The cleaner stopped his hand.
 “Is it yours?”

“Yes.”

For the first time Jaynarayan moved the glass towards himself.

The cleaner went on.

The room became quiet again.

The door opened.

Kamla came out.

The file was not in her hand.

Jaynarayan stood up.

“The papers?”

Kamla gestured towards the door.

“They are in there.”

“What did they say?”

Kamla sat down.

“Now the doctor will see me.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Jaynarayan sat too.

He looked at her face.

Kamla straightened the sari over her knees again.

“Pain?”

“No.”

“Inside—”

“Nothing.”

Jaynarayan fell silent.

Kamla picked up the glass.

She brought it to her lips.

This time too she did not drink.

She held the glass out towards Jaynarayan.

Jaynarayan took it.

He took one sip and stopped.

Very little water remained in the glass.

Kamla said, “Drink it all.”

Jaynarayan looked at the glass.

“And you?”

“I do not want any.”

“You first.”

Kamla said nothing.

Jaynarayan put the glass back on the middle chair.

They began waiting again.

The number on the wall was now 54.

Their number had already disappeared from there.

Even so, both of them kept looking again and again at those red digits.

After a while Kamla asked, “Shall we buy salt on the way back?”

Jaynarayan looked at her.

“Is there none at home?”

“A little.”

"We will buy it."

"And oil?"

"Oil too."

"Manoj had said it is cheaper near the petrol pump."

"That does not fall on our way."

"Then leave it."

"We can go around."

Kamla smiled faintly.

"We will miss the bus."

Jaynarayan smiled too.

"We will take the two-fifty one."

For a few moments both were silent.

Then Kamla said softly, "If it does not get late."

Jaynarayan's smile became still.

He picked up the glass.

He looked at the water remaining in it.

Then he put the glass back again.

The door to the doctor's room opened.

An assistant came out and asked the name.

Kamla stood up.

Jaynarayan did too.

This time the assistant called both of them inside.

Jaynarayan picked up the bag.

Kamla took one step forward, then looked towards the middle chair.

"The water?"

Jaynarayan bent to pick up the glass.

Then straightened again.

"We will drink it when we come back."

Kamla said nothing.

Both walked towards the door.

The glass remained on the chair.

A little water was left at the bottom.

The surface of the water trembled faintly in the breeze from the fan.

THE VERANDAH BULB

The evening sunlight had already slipped down from the veranda wall.

A little water had collected near the tulsi altar in the courtyard. The afternoon rain had not lasted long, but even now, from time to time, a single drop fell from the edge of the roof.

Ramprasad Jha sat in his old bamboo chair.

In front of him, a bulb hung in the middle of the veranda.

The light was on.

It flickered once.

Then steadied.

Ramprasad looked up.

Two minutes later the bulb flickered again.

This time three times.

Then it went out.

The veranda did not become dark all at once. Light was coming from the window of the house on the west. From the kitchen doorway on the east as well.

Only the bulb in the middle had gone out.

Ramprasad kept looking at it for a few moments.

Then he said, "Change the bulb."

Whom he was speaking to was not clear.

Surendra appeared at the western doorway.

Naresh too appeared at the eastern doorway.

Both looked at their father.

Not at each other.

Ramprasad looked up again.

"It has gone out."

Surendra turned back inside.

So did Naresh.

Ramprasad kept running his palm along the arm of the chair.

The two doorways opened again at almost the same moment.

Surendra held a small cardboard box.

Naresh too had a bulb in his hand, without a box.

Surendra placed his bulb on the wooden stool.

Naresh kept his bulb in his hand.

Ramprasad looked at both bulbs.

"Only one is needed," he said.

Neither replied.

There was a wooden stool in the left corner of the veranda.

The stool used to stand in the middle.

After the house was divided, Surendra had moved it towards his own wall.

Ramprasad pointed towards the stool.

“Climb on this.”
 Surendra bent to lift it.
 Naresh too stepped forward.
 Their hands fell on two different ends of the stool.
 Both immediately withdrew their hands.
 Ramprasad sat in his chair and watched.
 Surendra brought the stool to the middle by himself.
 Naresh moved a little away.
 “Is the switch off?” Surendra asked.
 The question was directed at their father.
 Ramprasad looked towards the eastern wall.
 The switch for the veranda bulb was beside Naresh’s doorway.
 That switch had been there long before the house was divided.
 Without saying anything, Naresh switched it off.
 “Off,” he said.
 Surendra climbed onto the stool.
 As he touched the old bulb, he pulled his hand back.
 “It is hot.”
 Ramprasad said, “Let it cool a little.”
 All three remained silent.
 A drop fell into the water in the courtyard.
 A circle formed.
 Then vanished.
 From the western house came the sound of a plate being set down.
 In the eastern house a child was reciting a lesson—the sound of counting
 reached as far as the veranda.
 Ramprasad looked towards the box in Surendra’s hand.
 “How many watts?”
 “Nine.”
 Then towards the bulb in Naresh’s hand.
 “Yours?”
 “Twelve.”
 Ramprasad nodded.
 “Nine is more than enough.”
 Naresh slowly placed his bulb on the threshold of his doorway.
 Surendra opened the box.
 He took the bulb out.
 There were now two bulbs in the veranda.
 One on the stool.
 One on the threshold.
 The old bulb hung above.
 Ramprasad narrowed his eyes.
 “It must have cooled now.”
 Surendra climbed onto the stool again.
 This time he grasped the bulb.
 He turned it slowly.

The bulb came out.

He looked inside the empty holder.

"It has blackened."

Naresh looked up.

"The holder?"

Surendra did not reply.

Ramprasad said, "He is asking whether the holder has blackened."

"A little."

Naresh left the threshold and came a little forward.

"What if the wire is loose?"

Surendra was fitting the new bulb into the holder.

"Let us see this first."

Ramprasad looked towards Naresh.

Naresh stopped where he was again.

The bulb was tightened into place.

Surendra climbed down from the stool.

"Switch it on."

Ramprasad did not feel it necessary to tell Naresh that.

Naresh pushed the switch up.

Nothing happened.

The veranda was still half dark.

Surendra looked up.

Naresh pushed the switch down and up again.

The bulb did not light.

Ramprasad sat a little straighter in his chair.

"There is electricity, isn't there?"

Surendra looked towards his own house. The light in the western window was on.

Naresh looked towards the eastern doorway. There was light there too.

"There is," both said almost at the same time.

Both fell silent for a moment.

Surendra climbed onto the stool again.

He placed a finger beneath the holder, but did not put his hand inside.

"Switch it off."

Naresh switched it off.

Surendra unscrewed the bulb and tightened it again.

"Now."

Naresh switched it on.

Nothing.

Surendra removed the bulb and held it in his hand.

He examined the glass and the metal at the base.

Then he put it back in its box.

Naresh picked up the twelve-watt bulb from the threshold.

He extended it slightly forward.

Surendra looked at him.

Naresh stopped his hand midway.

Ramprasad said, "Try the other one."
 Surendra did not take the bulb from Naresh's hand.
 He held out his palm.
 Naresh placed the bulb on that palm.
 Their fingers did not touch.
 Surendra climbed up again.
 He tightened the twelve-watt bulb into place.
 Naresh switched it on.
 Nothing happened.
 "The fault is not in the bulb," Naresh said.
 Still standing on the stool, Surendra said, "So it seems."
 After four days, this was the first sentence either of them had spoken directly to the other.
 Ramprasad lowered his head and ran a finger along the arm of the chair.
 Surendra climbed down.
 "We will have to check the wire."
 Naresh went inside and brought a screwdriver to open the switch plate.
 Surendra shifted slightly the slippers he had left beneath the stool.
 Naresh bent his knees and sat near the switch.
 "Is it off?" Surendra asked.
 "I will cut the main switch."
 Naresh went inside.
 The light in the eastern kitchen went out.
 A few moments later he returned.
 He opened the switch plate with the screwdriver.
 There were two old wires inside.
 One was wrapped with cloth tape.
 "One of these is loose," Naresh said.
 Surendra bent to look.
 "Not here. It must be above."
 "How?"
 "This wire has tension."
 Naresh pulled the wire gently.
 It did not move.
 Surendra looked towards the ceiling of the veranda.
 The wire ran westward along an old bamboo strip.
 In the middle was a patch of newer plaster.
 The wire disappeared beneath that plaster.
 Ramprasad looked up too.
 "When was this plaster done?"
 No one answered.
 Surendra moved the stool towards that spot.
 This time, without being asked, Naresh caught the other end.
 Together they shifted the stool.
 The wood made a small scraping sound on the floor.
 Surendra climbed up.

He tapped the edge of the plaster with a finger.

At one spot it sounded hollow.

"There used to be a joint here."

Naresh said from below, "Earlier?"

"Yes."

"Whose wire?"

Surendra climbed down.

Ramprasad answered, "The house's."

Naresh looked at his father.

Ramprasad said again, "At that time there was only one house."

For a while, the only sound in the veranda was the dripping from the roof.

Surendra asked for the screwdriver.

Naresh handed it to him.

Surendra scraped a little at the edge of the plaster.

White powder fell onto the stool.

Inside, the old wire joint became visible.

One end of the joint had blackened.

Beside it was the edge of a newer brick.

Four years earlier, when the middle room was divided, a half wall had been raised here.

The wall was below.

The wire above.

The wire had not been divided.

Only its joint had been covered with plaster.

Surendra climbed down.

"It needs a new joint."

Naresh said, "The wire will fall short."

"We will add a small piece."

"Who has some?"

Both fell silent.

Ramprasad pointed towards the small cupboard at the back.

"Look in the upper compartment."

Surendra opened the cupboard.

In the compartment were old nails, a lock, two candles, some jute string, and a small coil of wire.

He took the wire out.

Naresh looked at its end.

"This is very thin."

Surendra said, "It will do for a bulb."

"The joint will have to be covered."

"Do you have tape?"

Naresh looked towards the old cloth tape wrapped inside his switch.

"Not this."

He went inside the house.

A few moments later he returned with black electrical tape.

Surendra cleaned the end of the wire.

Naresh held the bulb wire.
 Their heads were bent at almost the same height.
 Ramprasad moved his chair slightly back so that he could see better.
 "Tighten it," Naresh said.
 Surendra twisted the wire.
 "This much?"
 "A little more."
 Surendra twisted it again.
 Naresh handed him the tape.
 Surendra covered the joint.
 No one spoke of the old wall.
 No one spoke of the land papers.
 No one said that four years earlier, when the half wall was being raised,
 both of them had stood right there.
 Ramprasad did not either.
 The joint was ready.
 Surendra climbed onto the stool and pushed the wire back up.
 The broken edge of the plaster remained open for now.
 "Do not close it yet," Naresh said.
 "Let us test it first."
 Surendra climbed down.
 Naresh went inside to turn the main switch back on.
 The light in the eastern kitchen came on again.
 He returned to the veranda switch.
 He placed his hand on it.
 Surendra looked at the bulb.
 So did Ramprasad.
 Naresh pressed the switch.
 The twelve-watt bulb lit up.
 The veranda turned bright.
 In the light, the old chalk line across the middle of the floor became
 visible.
 The line was now very faint.
 In some places footsteps had rubbed it away.
 In some places it was still white.
 Ramprasad did not look at it.
 He looked at the bulb.
 "It is too bright."
 Naresh said, "It is twelve watts."
 Surendra picked up his box.
 "The nine-watt one is fine. The fault was in the wire."
 Naresh looked at the bulb.
 "Shall we change it?"
 Surendra paused for a moment.
 "Let it stay."
 Ramprasad said, "Wasn't nine more than enough?"

Suppressing a faint smile, Naresh said, "Let twelve stay now."

A faint line appeared on Surendra's face too, then vanished at once.

He lifted the stool.

Naresh again moved to take the other end.

This time Surendra did not withdraw his hand.

Together they carried the stool towards the middle.

When they reached there, they stopped.

On whose side should the stool be placed?

Ramprasad said, "Leave it here."

The two left the stool in the middle of the veranda.

Surendra took his box and walked towards the western doorway.

Naresh picked up the screwdriver and tape and turned east.

At the doorway, Naresh looked back.

The open patch of plaster was still visible.

"I will put mortar on it tomorrow," he said.

Surendra stopped at his own doorway.

"I have some cement."

Naresh nodded.

That was all.

Both went into their own houses.

Ramprasad remained sitting alone in the veranda.

The twelve-watt light fell on his chair, the stool in the middle, the faded chalk line, and the new joint above.

After a while the western doorway closed from inside.

Then the eastern one.

The bulb remained lit.

Ramprasad stood up.

He moved the chair against the wall.

The switch was on the eastern wall.

He walked over to it.

He placed his hand on the switch.

He paused for a moment.

Then he turned off the light.

The veranda went dark.

A little light came from the western window.

And from beneath the eastern doorway as well.

The stool in the middle still remained in the middle, in the darkness.

STORY 190

TWO KATHAS OF SAND

At dawn, the water of the Kamla had receded a little.

Where the current had run until night, sticky mud and fresh sand now glistened.

Shivnath Mandal came down from the embankment and walked towards the field.

His younger son Bipin followed behind him.

Neither said anything.

The northern edge of the field had once extended as far as the mango tree.

Now the mango tree stood directly before the current.

Half its roots were exposed.

Bipin looked towards the tree.

"It cut away more in the night."

Shivnath bent towards the ground.

He took some sand in his hand.

He pressed it and tested it.

The sand was dry on top.

There was a little moisture underneath.

"Did you bring the spade?"

"Yes."

"Put it over there."

Bipin put down the spade.

Paddy was to be transplanted in that field this season.

The seedbed was on the higher ground to the east.

The seedlings were green.

Transplanting had been fixed for three days later.

Bipin looked again towards the mango tree.

"How much do you think is gone?"

Shivnath did not answer.

He walked two steps east.

Then he looked for the old bamboo stake.

The stake was half buried in the sand.

He pulled it out.

The soil beneath the stake was black.

"The drain will run from here," he said.

Bipin remained silent for a while.

"A drain?"

"The water is going down. We will hold it in the eastern part."

"Will we transplant?"

Shivnath tucked the stake under his arm.

"Why did we raise the seedbed?"

Bipin said nothing.

Two people were approaching from a distance.
One was Ramsevak Kaka.
The other was his son-in-law.
From far away Ramsevak asked, "Shivnath, did it cut away much?"
Shivnath raised his head.
"The water is going down."
Ramsevak came near and stood there.
"Three kathas on my western side are gone. Yours?"
Shivnath picked up the spade and handed it to Bipin.
"Cut one hand deep from this spot."
Ramsevak moved his foot over the sand.
"Looks like two kathas right here."
Bipin began to work the spade.
As soon as the top sand was removed, wet soil showed beneath it.
Ramsevak said, "You will have to give the measurement in the register."
Shivnath said, "First the water has to be held back."
Ramsevak looked at him.
Then towards the current.
"All right. I am going."
He walked on.
Bipin said softly, "Kaka is right. We will have to give the measurement."
"We will."
"Today?"
"The drain today. Measurement tomorrow."
Bipin began to work the spade again.
Ten hands farther on, there was less sand.
The old paddy stubble was still visible there.
Shivnath sat down beside that stubble.
He rubbed some soil in his palm.
The soil was smooth and clayey.
"Transplant this part first," he said.
"How much?"
"As much as there is soil."
"Three kathas?"
"We will measure it."
Bipin turned his face towards the river.
The current was not far away now.
The water was muddy.
Small clods of earth were falling from the edge.
One clod fell.
The water carried it away.
Neither of them said anything.
Shivnath stood up.
"Is the rope at home?"
"The old measuring rope?"
"Yes."

"It is."

"Bring it after the meal."

Both returned home.

In the courtyard, Saraswati Devi was sitting near the hearth.

The moment she saw them, she asked, "Is the soil left?"

Shivnath took water in a lota.

He washed his hands.

"Is the seedbed all right?"

Saraswati Devi paused a little.

"It is all right."

"See that the heifer does not go there."

"It will not."

Bipin sat down on the veranda.

Saraswati Devi placed flattened rice and curd before him.

"The field?"

Bipin opened his mouth.

Shivnath spoke first. "We will hold water in the eastern part."

Saraswati Devi looked towards Shivnath.

"Have the transplanting workers been called?"

"For the day after tomorrow."

"Will the day change?"

"Not yet."

Saraswati Devi asked nothing more.

She turned towards the kitchen.

Bipin kept mixing the flattened rice.

After a while he said, "Ma was asking how much is gone."

Shivnath emptied his bowl of curd.

"She will hear."

"From whom?"

"Does news stop in a village?"

Bipin did not laugh.

After the meal he took the old measuring rope out of the room.

There were knots along the rope at measured intervals.

Some of the knots had turned black.

The rope was from Grandfather's time.

Bipin held one end.

Shivnath the other.

The two went back to the field.

The afternoon sun had risen high.

The sand was beginning to grow hot.

Shivnath stretched the measuring rope from the old eastern marker.

First knot.

Second.

Third.

Bipin kept counting.

"The old field came up to here."

The rest of the rope hung out in the air.
There was no earth in that direction now.
The current ran below.
Bipin pulled the rope taut and stopped.
“Farther?”

Shivnath said, “Let go.”
The end of the rope fell onto the sand.
Bipin counted again.
“Two kathas less.”
Shivnath walked east.
“We can transplant these three kathas.”
“Not three. About two kathas and ten dhurs.”
“Measure it.”

They measured again.
Bipin’s measurement was right.
Shivnath said, “There are too many seedlings.”
“Shall we sell them?”
“No.”
“Then?”

“Ramsevak’s lower field is empty. He will be short of seedlings.”
“Shall we give them to him?”
“If he lends a hand tomorrow in holding back the water.”
For the first time Bipin smiled a little.
“Kaka will go to enter his measurement in the register.”
“He will be back by evening.”

That afternoon the two cut the drain.
The drain was not large.

Only enough for the receding water to remain for a while in the lower eastern part.

As they removed the sand, the spade touched black soil again and again.
Wherever black soil appeared, Shivnath would say, “Leave it here.”
Where there was only sand, he would say, “Farther.”

Bipin stopped the spade for a while and looked at the line forming behind his father’s feet.

Then he worked the spade again.
Before evening Ramsevak returned.
He had a folded sheet of paper in his hand.
“I entered the measurement,” he said.
Shivnath stopped the spade.
“How much?”

“Three kathas two dhurs.”
“Hmm.”

Ramsevak looked at the drain Bipin had cut.
“Will this water stay?”
“If the river does not cut away more tonight.”
Ramsevak looked at the field for a while.

"My men are free tomorrow. Shall I send two?"

Shivnath said, "Do you need seedlings?"

"I am a little short."

"Take whatever is left over."

Ramsevak nodded.

"Then I will send two men tomorrow."

He went away.

Bipin said, "Had you thought of it beforehand?"

"Of what?"

"Giving him seedlings."

"I understood as soon as I saw the seedbed."

"Before the field was cut away?"

Shivnath levelled the sand with the spade.

"The seedbed does not ask the field. The seedlings become ready."

Clouds gathered again at night.

It did not rain much.

Bipin got up twice to look outside.

Shivnath did not get up.

At dawn, when they went to the field, there was a little water in the drain.

The eastern part was wet.

The current had cut away a little more during the night, but the mango tree was still standing.

One more root had been laid bare.

Bipin looked at it.

Shivnath did not stop.

He banked up earth at the mouth of the drain.

"Today we will pull up the seedlings," he said.

"Transplant the day after tomorrow?"

"If the water remains."

"And if it does not?"

"One day later."

"And if the current comes again?"

Shivnath looked at Bipin.

For a few moments.

Then he said, "Then we will see again."

The two returned home and went towards the seedbed.

Saraswati Devi was examining the water among the seedlings.

She said, "There are too many seedlings."

Bipin said, "Ramsevak Kaka will take some."

Saraswati Devi looked towards Shivnath.

"All right."

She touched one corner of the seedlings with her hand.

"These are small. Leave them."

Shivnath said, "Yes."

All day people kept coming to see the erosion at the field.

Someone asked, "How much is gone?"

Someone said, "The river is fierce this time."

Someone spoke of the previous year.

Shivnath kept giving short answers.

"Two kathas of sand."

"The eastern part remains."

"Transplanting the day after tomorrow."

The same three sentences again and again.

In the evening Bipin washed the measuring rope.

Sand had worked into the knots.

He swirled the rope in the pond water and washed it out.

Then he spread the rope over the bamboo of the veranda to dry.

The last two knots hung into empty air.

Bipin picked up a sickle to cut them off.

Shivnath was sitting on the veranda.

He saw him.

"Shall I cut them?"

Shivnath looked at the rope.

"Why?"

"There is not that much field now."

Shivnath remained silent for a while.

"Shortening the rope will not make the field larger."

Bipin put the sickle down.

The two knots remained hanging in the air.

The next day people from both families pulled up seedlings from the seedbed.

Ramsevak's men came too.

The seedlings were tied into bundles.

One heap for Ramsevak's field.

One heap for Shivnath's eastern part.

The two kathas covered in sand remained empty.

Only one end of the drain held some moisture there.

On the morning of transplanting, men and women stepped into the field.

There was not enough water to reach their ankles.

At times their feet sank into the mud.

At times, near the sand, the soil became hard.

Shivnath stood on the field ridge opening the seedling bundles.

Bipin kept the rows straight.

Once he looked towards the west.

Where the two kathas had been, sunlight glinted on the sand.

He looked towards his father.

Shivnath looked there too.

He said nothing.

He opened the next bundle.

"Shift this row a little east," he said.

Bipin shifted the row.

By afternoon half the transplanting was done.

By evening the remaining field was filled with green rows.
While returning home, Bipin turned to look back.
The green part was small.
The sand looked white.
Beyond it, the current.
Shivnath walked ahead.
Bipin asked, "What tomorrow?"
"We will look at the drain."
"And the day after?"
"The field ridge."
"The sand?"
Shivnath paused a little.
"For now, sand."
The two began walking again.
On reaching home, Shivnath saw the measuring rope on the veranda.
The rope had dried.
He wound it up.
He kept the last two knots inside as well.

STORY 191

THE SILENT RADIO

It was the last week of Jeth.

The wind had settled in the afternoon.

Heat had settled even beneath the shade of the veranda roof.

Raghunath Babu sat on a bamboo stool.

An old screwdriver was in his hand.

The radio lay on the wooden platform in front of him.

The colour of its wooden casing had faded years ago.

There were scratches along the corners of the black cover.

Dust filled the grille at the front.

The round knob on the right was half worn smooth.

A thin cloth lay over it.

Malti had removed the cloth.

The radio had been lying on the loft for three years.

That day Sonu had climbed onto the loft looking for an old kite.

His hand fell upon the radio.

He called down, "Baba, does this work?"

Raghunath Babu did not look up.

"We shall see."

Sonu brought the radio down.

Malti came out of the kitchen.

For a few moments she kept looking at the radio.

Then she said, "There is a lot of dust."

Raghunath Babu asked for a cloth.

Malti gave him a piece of an old gamchha.

He began wiping the grille.

Lines of dust kept falling onto the platform.

Sonu sat down beside him.

"Will it run on batteries?"

"First let us see what is inside."

"Shall we open it?"

"I will open it."

Sonu drew his hand back.

Raghunath Babu turned the radio around.

There were four screws.

Three were of the same colour.

One was slightly bent.

He placed the screwdriver on the bent screw.

The screwdriver slipped.

He placed it again.

The screw slowly loosened.

Sonu asked, "This one is not like the others?"

"It is old."

"Shall we replace it?"

Raghunath Babu did not answer.

He began loosening the second screw.

Malti stood beside a pillar of the veranda.

The end of her sari was damp in her hand.

Raghunath Babu lifted the back cover.

Inside was a thin layer of dust.

A dry spiderweb in one corner.

Green corrosion on the battery metal.

Red and black wires.

A small board in the middle.

Sonu leaned a little closer.

"Where does the sound live in this?"

Raghunath Babu placed a finger on the round speaker cone.

"It comes out from here."

"Where is it made inside?"

"It passes through many places before it reaches here."

Whether Sonu understood or not, he did not say.

Raghunath Babu took the old batteries out of the battery compartment.

Two of the batteries had swollen.

One was rusted.

Malti said, "Throw them away."

Raghunath Babu set the batteries aside.

"First I will clean them."

"Why keep all these?"

"It shows how much dirt came from where."

Malti fell silent.

Raghunath Babu put two drops of kerosene from a small bowl onto the cloth.

He rubbed the metal terminals.

The green corrosion began to come off.

Sonu wrinkled his nose.

"Smell."

"Sit a little farther away."

He did not go far.

He merely shifted to the other end of the platform.

Raghunath Babu turned the knob.

A thin cord moved inside.

It stopped after half a turn.

He turned it again.

The cord had gone slack.

"Is this broken?" Sonu asked.

"Not completely."

"Then?"

"It slips."

Malti said, "Nasim Kaka in the market can look at it."
Raghunath Babu let go of the knob.
"We shall see."
He did not put the back cover on again.
The radio remained open.
It lay there until evening.
Clouds were rising from the west.
Thunder could be heard in the distance.
The electricity went out twice during the night.
The mobile network too was there at times and gone at others.
From the courtyard Malti said, "Did you find any news about the clouds?"
Raghunath Babu looked at his mobile phone.
There was one old message.
Nothing new.
"We will look at the radio tomorrow," he said.
Malti did not reply.
At dawn Raghunath Babu wrapped the radio in a cloth.
Sonu was getting ready for school.
"Where are you taking it?"
"To the market."
"Shall I come?"
"Go to school."
"Will we open it when I come back?"
"If it is still open."
Sonu laughed as he put on his shoes.
Raghunath Babu placed the radio in a bag.
The bag was old.
There was a patch at the bottom.
Malti came to the doorway.
"Will Nasim Kaka have opened his shop?"
"By eight."
"It is not even seven yet."
"It will take time on the way."
He set out.
The market was a kos and a half away.
Dust rose along the side of the paved road.
The clouds still stood overhead.
Half the shutter of Nasim's shop was raised.
Inside, fans, wires, bulbs, and small devices lay on the table.
Nasim Miyan was cleaning his spectacles.
Raghunath Babu placed the bag on the bench.
"Look at this."
Nasim Miyan removed the cloth.
For a moment he stared steadily at the radio.
His hand stopped halfway.
"This is..."

Raghunath Babu looked towards the bent screw.
 "Do you have a screw of this size?"
 Nasim Miyan left the sentence unfinished.
 He opened a drawer in the table.
 He took out two or three screws.
 "Yes."
 Raghunath Babu picked up a straight screw.
 He compared it with the old bent one.
 The new screw shone.
 The head of the old one was worn.
 "Look at the cord too," he said.
 Nasim Miyan opened the radio.
 He turned the knob.
 "The cord has stretched."
 "Can it be changed?"
 "I can change it."
 "And the speaker cone?"
 Nasim Miyan pressed it lightly.
 "It is not torn."
 He examined the wire joints.
 At one place the copper wire was slightly thicker.
 An old soldered knot.
 Nasim Miyan again looked as though he was about to say something.
 Raghunath Babu asked, "How much time?"
 "Half an hour."
 "I will sit here."
 There was a long wooden bench outside the shop.
 Raghunath Babu sat on it.
 A milk van passed along the road.
 A bus stopped.
 Four people got off.
 Two got on.
 Inside, Nasim Miyan kept removing the old cord.
 Now and then came a small metallic sound.
 Now and then the sound of the screwdriver being placed on the table.
 Raghunath Babu kept looking towards the road.
 The tea seller opposite the shop asked, "Tea?"
 "No."
 After a while he asked again.
 "Half a cup?"
 "No."
 The shadow of the clouds moved across the road.
 Nasim Miyan brought the radio forward.
 "I have changed the cord."
 He put in batteries.
 He turned the switch.

First, static.
Then a faint indistinct voice.
He turned the knob.
The sound became clear.
Some advertisement was playing.
Nasim Miyan smiled.
“The speaker cone is still good.”
Raghunath Babu looked towards the radio.
The sound filled the shop.
Nasim Miyan changed the station.
An old song began.
Raghunath Babu reached out and turned the knob.
The song disappeared halfway through.
Static.
Then the news.
“Leave it here,” he said.
Nasim Miyan looked at him.
“All right.”
He picked up the new screw.
The old bent screw lay to one side.
“Shall I replace this too?”
Raghunath Babu looked at both screws.
“No.”
“The head is worn.”
“It works.”
Nasim Miyan fitted the old screw back in.
Raghunath Babu paid him.
Nasim Miyan tried to reduce the amount.
Raghunath Babu paid the full amount.
The radio went back into the bag.
When he reached home, Sonu had not yet returned from school.
Malti was spreading clothes in the courtyard.
Raghunath Babu placed the bag on the platform.
Malti asked, “Fixed?”
“It works.”
“How much did it cost?”
He told her the amount.
Malti nodded.
That was all.
Raghunath Babu had brought new batteries.
He put them in.
He placed the radio at one corner of the platform.
He turned the switch.
The sound did not come immediately.
After two moments, static.
Then the announcer’s voice.

It was a report on river levels.

Kamla.

Bagmati.

Kosi.

The names of the rivers came one after another.

Malti stopped spreading the clothes and began to listen.

Raghunath Babu lowered the volume a little.

"What did they say?" Malti asked.

"Normal for now."

"Clouds?"

"More towards the north."

Malti began spreading the clothes again.

The radio kept playing.

At noon Sonu came running in.

He dropped his schoolbag in the veranda and went straight to the radio.

"It works!"

"Do not touch it. Change your clothes first."

Sonu ran inside.

After a little while he came back.

A farming programme was on the radio.

They were talking about paddy seed.

Sonu wrinkled his nose.

"Put on a song."

Raghunath Babu said, "Listen to this for now."

"I do not have to plant paddy."

"You have to eat it."

Sonu laughed.

He reached towards the knob.

Raghunath Babu stopped his hand.

Not forcefully.

Only with two fingers.

"Turn the knob gently."

"Why?"

"The cord is new."

"New things are stronger."

"Not everything new becomes strong at once."

Sonu drew his hand back.

The farming programme ended.

Then a song was announced.

Raghunath Babu did not switch off the radio.

The song began.

Sonu sat on the platform with his legs folded.

Malti went into the kitchen.

Halfway through the song she came out again.

There was flour on her hands.

She looked not at the radio but at Raghunath Babu.

Raghunath Babu was writing down the size of the old batteries on a piece of paper.

Malti went inside again.

The song ended.

Sonu asked, "Baba, who bought this radio?"

Raghunath Babu's pencil stopped.

"It has been in the house from before."

"You?"

"It is many years old."

"Did my father listen to it?"

There was no sound of a fan in the veranda.

The electricity had gone out again.

A crow called in the distance.

Raghunath Babu placed the tip of the pencil on the paper.

"Everyone in the house listened to it."

Sonu remained silent for a while.

"Did he repair the knob?"

Raghunath Babu looked towards the back of the radio.

"Sometimes."

"Nasim Kaka?"

"Everyone fixes one thing or another in their own turn."

Whether Sonu was satisfied with that answer was not clear.

He got up and went to drink water.

Raghunath Babu finished writing the battery measurements on the paper.

Then the static on the radio increased.

He straightened the antenna.

The sound became clear.

The first raindrop fell in the evening.

Three or four drops on the tin roof.

Then it stopped.

Malti gathered the clothes from the courtyard.

The radio was not taken inside.

It remained in the veranda.

Dinner was eaten in the veranda that night.

Sonu in the middle.

Malti on one side.

Raghunath Babu on the other.

The radio on the platform.

The volume a little low.

The news had ended.

Now there was a folk-song programme.

Sonu was mixing curd into his rice.

Suddenly he asked, "Baba, why did you not change the bent screw?"

Malti's hand stopped.

Raghunath Babu kept breaking off a morsel of rice.

"It works."

“The new screw was better.”
 “It shone.”
 “Then why not that one?”
 Raghunath Babu put the morsel into his mouth.
 He drank water.
 On the radio, a madal sounded in the middle of the song.
 He said, “You do not replace something that works merely because something else shines.”
 Sonu nodded.
 He began eating again.
 Malti said nothing.
 The night deepened.
 Sonu went to sleep.
 Malti washed the utensils.
 Raghunath Babu rose to switch off the radio.
 His hand went to the switch.
 At that very moment, the next weather bulletin began.
 He stopped his hand.
 The Kamla’s water level was announced again.
 At one place the Bagmati had risen.
 The Kosi was steady.
 Raghunath Babu listened to the entire bulletin.
 Then he switched it off.
 The veranda suddenly became quiet.
 Crickets were sounding outside.
 He picked up the radio.
 He did not climb up to put it back on the loft.
 There was a wooden shelf beneath the platform.
 He placed it there.
 Malti watched from inside.
 “You will not put it back up?”
 “Let it stay here.”
 “It will gather dust.”
 “Give me a cloth.”
 Malti brought the same old cloth.
 She spread it over the radio.
 The cloth covered the black casing.
 One corner at the back remained uncovered.
 The head of the bent screw remained visible.
 Raghunath Babu could have reached out and pulled the cloth over it completely.
 He did not.
 There were clouds again at dawn.
 Before going to school, Sonu uncovered the radio.
 Raghunath Babu was sweeping the courtyard.
 “Baba, shall I put on the news?”

“Put it on.”

“Turn the knob gently?”

“Gently.”

Sonu turned the switch.

After the static, the sound became clear.

He began searching for a station.

When he found a song at one place, he stopped and looked towards Raghunath Babu.

“Not this?”

Raghunath Babu listened for a few moments and said, “Let it play.”

Sonu let go of the knob.

The song spread through the veranda.

Raghunath Babu went on sweeping.

He did not say the name.

The radio kept playing.

STORY 192

THE SHOES LEFT ON THE ROOF

It was an evening in Bhadon.

Rain had been falling since the afternoon.

As the sun went down, the clouds thinned.

Small pools of water still stood on the roof.

Abhay climbed the stairs and came up.

He held a pair of shoes in his hand.

The shoes were wet.

Mud from below clung to the soles.

He placed two bricks near the southern wall.

He set both shoes upside down on the bricks.

A little water dripped out from inside.

Abhay kept watching.

Saraswati Devi's voice came from below.

"Have you checked the bag?"

Abhay said, "I have."

"The papers?"

"They are in the bag."

"The ticket?"

"Yes."

Saraswati Devi said nothing more.

Abhay picked up one shoe and pressed the sole with his thumb.

The front was beginning to come apart a little.

He put the shoe back on the brick.

He had to catch the bus at five in the morning.

The bus would go as far as Darbhanga.

From there, the train.

Three days later he had to report for work at a textile factory in Surat.

Everyone in the house knew this.

All day, no one had said it in a complete sentence.

A breeze began to move across the roof.

Abhay removed the shoelaces and spread them separately.

He stuffed pieces of old paper inside the shoes.

The paper became wet at once.

He took it out.

Neha appeared at the top of the stairs.

A small cotton gamchha was in her hand.

"Ma gave this."

Abhay took the gamchha.

"What will you do?" Neha asked.

"Wipe them."

"Will they dry by morning?"

Pressing the gamchha inside the shoe, Abhay said, "They will dry."

Neha stood there for a while.

"Does it rain there?"

"It must."

"This much?"

Abhay looked at the sky.

"Rain falls everywhere."

Neha did not laugh.

She went down the stairs.

Abhay pulled the gamchha out.

He placed the shoes upside down again.

Down on the veranda, Jagdish Babu was examining the strap of the old bag.

The strap had already been stitched three times.

At one place the thread had come loose again.

Jagdish Babu threaded a needle with thick thread.

Saraswati Devi was filling a small tin with sattu.

"Why so much?" Jagdish Babu asked.

"He can eat it on the way."

"There will be food on the train."

"There will."

Saraswati Devi closed the tin.

Then she tied some salt into a small piece of paper.

Jagdish Babu kept pulling the needle through the strap.

"There will be sattu there too," he said.

"There will."

Both fell silent.

On the roof, Abhay turned the toes of the shoes towards the breeze.

The western part of the sky was growing brighter.

The evening light lay like a thin line across the wet roof.

Abhay rested a hand on the railing.

The courtyard could be seen below.

Ma was putting the tin into the bag.

Babu was cutting the thread and tightening the knot with his teeth.

Neha had quietly opened her notebook and sat down.

Abhay looked at the shoes again.

This was the only pair of shoes he had to wear.

They had been bought at the market two years earlier.

At first he had worn them to college.

Later he had gone towards the fields in them as well.

That was why the sole was coming apart at the front.

He pressed the opened part with a finger.

The joint lifted again.

Abhay left the shoes and went downstairs.

Jagdish Babu had finished stitching the bag strap.

Abhay said, "Where is the screwdriver?"

“Why?”

“Nothing.”

“In the box on the veranda.”

Abhay opened the box.

He found the screwdriver.

There was also a small hammer.

He picked up the hammer.

Jagdish Babu looked at him.

“What is broken?”

“The shoe.”

“Show me.”

Abhay stood still for a few moments.

Then he put the hammer back there.

“It has opened a little. I will glue it.”

Jagdish Babu stood up.

“Where is it?”

“Upstairs.”

The two climbed the stairs.

On reaching the roof, Jagdish Babu took the shoe in his hand.

He pressed the sole.

Then looked towards the toe.

“Glue alone will not hold this.”

Abhay said, “I will get it repaired after reaching Surat.”

“On the very first day?”

Abhay did not answer.

Jagdish Babu turned the shoe over and examined it.

“It needs a small nail.”

“Leave it.”

“A small nail.”

He went downstairs.

Abhay remained on the roof.

After a little while Jagdish Babu returned carrying a small box.

Inside the box were nails, screws, pieces of wire, and two old tacks.

He selected three fine nails.

“Do not strike hard with the hammer here,” he said.

Abhay held the shoe.

Jagdish Babu slowly tapped in the first nail.

Then the second.

He stopped with the third nail in his hand.

“Not here.”

He put the nail back into the box.

Abhay pressed the sole.

The front no longer lifted.

“Shall we leave it like this?” Jagdish Babu asked.

“Yes.”

“It is still wet inside.”

“Let it get some air.”

Jagdish Babu moved the two bricks a little farther apart.

He placed the shoes at an angle.

“Like this.”

Abhay said, “Yes.”

The two stood on the roof for a while.

Down in the lane, two children were floating paper boats in the water.

One boat got stuck at the bend of the drain.

The other moved ahead.

Looking towards the drain, Jagdish Babu said, “It may rain again by morning.”

“I will take the shoes down.”

“There will be dew at night too.”

“Let them get a little more air.”

Jagdish Babu nodded.

The two went downstairs.

Dinner was early that night.

Less rice had been cooked.

Saraswati Devi said, “Get up and eat something in the morning.”

Abhay said, “I cannot eat that early.”

“Two mouthfuls.”

“We shall see.”

Jagdish Babu kept mixing salt into his dal.

Neha asked, “Will you get a seat by the window on the train?”

Abhay said, “Whatever is on the ticket.”

“And if you do not get a window?”

“I will sit wherever there is a seat.”

“For three days?”

“Not three days. I will change trains in between.”

Neha asked nothing more.

After dinner, Saraswati Devi opened the bag again.

Sattu.

Salt.

Two pairs of clothes.

One gamchha.

A small towel.

The packet of papers.

She touched each thing with her hand, one after another.

Abhay said, “Everything is there.”

“Medicine?”

“What medicine do I need?”

“For fever.”

“Will there be no shop there?”

Saraswati Devi put a strip of medicine into the bag.

Abhay did not stop her.

On the veranda, Jagdish Babu was winding the old clock.

"I will wake you at four," he said.

"Half past three."

"The bus is at five."

"I have to walk to the bus stand."

"You will find a rickshaw."

"So early?"

Jagdish Babu held the clock to his ear.

"Half past three."

Abhay went into his room.

His clothes were lying on the bed.

He folded them one by one.

The roof could not be seen through the window.

But the sound of the wind could be heard.

After a while he got up again.

He climbed the stairs and went to the roof.

Night had fully descended.

Lights were burning in only two or three houses in the village.

The shoes were on the bricks.

Abhay touched them to check.

The outer cloth was almost dry.

Inside, they were still damp.

He picked up the laces and checked them.

The laces had dried.

He began threading them into the shoes.

First eyelet.

Second.

Third.

In the dark he missed one eyelet.

He pulled the lace out and started again.

Footsteps sounded behind him.

It was Jagdish Babu.

"Cannot sleep?"

"Not yet."

"The shoes?"

"They are drying."

Jagdish Babu did not touch the shoes.

He stood at the edge of the roof and looked towards the lane.

The sound of some vehicle came from far away.

Then silence again.

Abhay kept tying the laces.

Jagdish Babu said, "On your first day at the factory, do not borrow money from anyone."

Abhay stopped threading the lace.

"All right."

"Spend as little as you can."

"All right."

“Understand the work before you do it.”

“All right.”

Jagdish Babu remained silent for a while.

“Do not put your hand into a machine because someone tells you to, unless it is switched off.”

Abhay raised his head.

“Have you seen that machine?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Jagdish Babu said, “A running machine is the same everywhere.”

Abhay smiled faintly.

Jagdish Babu did not smile.

Then he said, “Take the shoes inside. There will be dew.”

Abhay picked up one shoe.

Then put it back.

“A little longer.”

Jagdish Babu went downstairs.

Abhay remained alone.

He did not sit down on the roof.

He stood by the railing.

In the darkness far away, no lights of the station could be seen.

Surat was nowhere to be seen either.

Only the roofs of the village.

Some tin.

Some tile.

Some concrete roofs.

The same night over all of them.

Abhay picked up the shoes.

He came down the stairs.

Jagdish Babu was not on the veranda.

The ticking of the clock could be heard.

Abhay placed the shoes near the door.

He left the laces loose.

He went to his room and lay down.

Sleep did not come at once.

He kept listening to the wind moving over the roof.

Sometimes it seemed the shoes must be getting wet again.

Then he remembered that he had brought them inside.

At half past three, Jagdish Babu knocked on the door.

Abhay sat up.

It was still night outside.

Saraswati Devi had already lit the hearth.

Neha was awake too.

“Why did they wake you?” Abhay asked.

Neha said, “I woke up by myself.”

Abhay washed his face.

He went to the shoes.
 He put his hand inside.
 They were still a little damp.
 He put on his socks.
 He slipped his feet into the shoes.
 They felt cold.
 Saraswati Devi looked at him.
 "Dry?"
 "Yes."
 Jagdish Babu picked up the bag.
 "It is not heavy."
 Abhay said, "I will carry it."
 "Up to the door."
 He carried the bag and walked ahead.
 The night's water was still shining in the lane.
 The sole of Abhay's shoe made a faint sound on the first step.
 Not on the second.
 Neha stood at the doorway.
 Saraswati Devi behind her.
 No one said any farewell words.
 Jagdish Babu kept walking down the lane.
 Abhay followed behind him.
 At the bend, Jagdish Babu handed him the bag.
 "Straight from here."
 Abhay said, "I know."
 "Do not miss the bus."
 "I will not."
 Jagdish Babu looked towards the toe of his shoe.
 "If the nail comes out, get it repaired at once."
 "Yes."
 "Send word when you arrive."
 "I will."
 The two stood there.
 From the direction of the distant mosque came the first sound of dawn.
 Abhay put the bag over his shoulder.
 "I am going."
 Jagdish Babu said, "Go."
 Abhay turned and walked away.
 Jagdish Babu remained standing there until he reached the end of the lane.
 Abhay did not look back even once.
 He passed the bend.
 Jagdish Babu slowly returned home.
 Saraswati Devi was still standing at the doorway.
 "Will he get the bus?" she asked.
 "He will."

“The shoes?”

“They were dry.”

Jagdish Babu went inside.

After a while he climbed to the roof.

The two bricks lay where they had been.

Between them were two faint dry marks left by the shoes.

All around, the roof was still damp.

Jagdish Babu picked up the first brick.

Then the second.

He moved both back against the wall.

The roof became empty.

For a few moments he kept looking at that place.

Then he went down the stairs.

STORY 193

ONE CUP OF TEA LESS

Every morning, before opening the shop, Harinath Sah made tea.

For years, he had made three cups.

Since this month, there were only two.

One for him.

One for Pawan.

The third cup lay upside down on the shelf.

The cup was not broken.

Its rim was intact.

Only its use had changed.

Earlier, Sumitra Devi used to drink tea from that cup.

The shop shutter would remain half raised.

She would sit on the bench inside and open the ledger.

Harinath Sah would shift the sacks.

Pawan would sweep.

Sumitra Devi would reconcile the previous day's credit.

The tea of all three would grow cold at the same time.

Now Sumitra Devi left home at dawn.

She had found work keeping the register at the village milk collection centre.

The centre opened before five forty-five.

The milk suppliers began arriving while it was still dark.

Measurements, fat content, quantity, names, and payments had to be entered.

Sumitra Devi's handwriting was clear.

For twenty years, the shop ledger had run in that hand.

Harinath Sah would say, "I can write it."

And he did write.

But among the accounts, Sumitra Devi noticed many small things.

Whose credit belonged to the household.

Whose to the field.

Whose payment would come by next Monday.

Which name belonged to one of two men in the village with the same name.

These things were written not in the margins of the ledger, but in her mind.

One day the cooperative president came to the shop to collect milk.

He saw the ledger.

He asked, "Whose handwriting is this?"

Harinath Sah said, "Sumitra's."

Two weeks later, Sumitra Devi began sitting at the milk collection centre.

On the first day, Harinath Sah had made three cups of tea.

Pawan had asked, "Kaki?"
Harinath Sah had looked at the cup.
Then he poured a little extra tea into his own cup.
The second cup went to Pawan.
The tea meant for the third cup remained in the kettle.
From that day, the measure changed.
Now, water for two cups.
Milk for two cups.
Two pinches of tea leaves.
Two small spoonfuls of sugar.
Harinath Sah did not get the quantities wrong.
By seven, customers began to arrive.
The first customer was Ramsevak.
He bought half a kilo of oil and two bars of soap.
While paying, he said, "Write the rest in the ledger."
Harinath Sah opened the ledger.
There were three entries under the name Ramsevak.
One Ramsevak Yadav.
One Ramsevak Mahato.
One simply Ramsevak.
Harinath Sah asked, "How much of your previous balance remains?"
Ramsevak said, "Kaki knew."
Harinath Sah looked at him.
Ramsevak immediately said, "I do not remember."
Harinath Sah turned back through the old pages.
There was a small mark beside one entry.
Half a circle in red pencil.
Sumitra Devi used to make that mark.
Harinath Sah understood.
He wrote down the new credit.
Ramsevak left.
Pawan said, "You understood the mark?"
Harinath Sah said, "This was Ramsevak from the fields."
"How?"
"There was a circle."
Pawan nodded.
"All circles look the same to me."
Harinath Sah did not reply.
By noon, the ledger had been opened five times.
Twice, Harinath Sah found the correct page immediately.
Three times, he had to search.
A woman buying salt said, "I will pay next month when my daughter comes."
Harinath Sah wrote down her name.
Then he stopped.
He asked, "On what date?"

The woman laughed.
 "Kaki never asked the date."
 "She knew."
 "Yes."
 Harinath Sah wrote 'next month' on the page.
 Not the exact date.
 At ten, Sumitra Devi returned.
 She carried a blue cloth bag.
 The centre's new ledger was not inside it.
 That ledger remained there.
 In the bag were a small steel box and a bottle of water.
 Sumitra Devi stopped in front of the shop.
 Harinath Sah was weighing rice.
 He said, "Late today?"
 "Two milk vehicles arrived at the same time."
 "How much?"
 "Two hundred and thirty-seven litres."
 Harinath Sah nodded.
 Pawan asked, "Kaki, do they give you tea there?"
 Sumitra Devi looked at him.
 "They give me work."
 Pawan laughed.
 Harinath Sah smiled a little too.
 Sumitra Devi looked at the cup lying upside down on the shelf.
 She said nothing.
 She pulled the ledger towards herself.
 "Did Ramsevak come?"
 Harinath Sah said, "He came."
 "Oil?"
 "And soap."
 "Written down?"
 "Written."
 Sumitra Devi looked at the page.
 She put a small dot slightly above the entry.
 Harinath Sah asked, "What is that?"
 "He will receive money from the field this week."
 "Did he say so?"
 "His daughter-in-law said it yesterday."
 Harinath Sah pulled the ledger back towards himself.
 He looked at the dot.
 Then closed the page.
 Sumitra Devi went home.
 At noon, Pawan brought the lunch box from the house.
 Earlier, Sumitra Devi used to bring it herself.
 Pawan opened the box.
 Three rotis for Harinath Sah.

Four for Pawan.

The vegetable was in one shared container.

Pawan asked, "Now that Kaki is not at home, who cooks the meal?"

Harinath Sah said, "She makes it at dawn."

"So early?"

"She has always been used to waking early."

Pawan broke a piece of roti.

After a while he said, "Does the centre pay well?"

Harinath Sah took some vegetable.

"It is pay for work."

"Monthly?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Harinath Sah said nothing.

In the afternoon, the wholesale trader came.

He unloaded five sacks of sugar.

Harinath Sah wrote down the account.

The trader asked about the previous balance.

Harinath Sah looked at the ledger.

The figures were clear.

So was the date.

But at one place Sumitra Devi had written—"Two crates to be returned."

Harinath Sah counted the crates.

There was only one.

Pawan said, "The other must be in the back room."

They searched.

It was not found.

The trader waited.

Harinath Sah took out his mobile phone.

He called Sumitra Devi.

"Where is one of those two crates?"

Her voice came from the other end, "On the upper shelf to the right. Behind the sacks."

Pawan ran.

The crate was found.

Harinath Sah said, "Found it."

Sumitra Devi asked, "Is it not written in the ledger?"

Harinath Sah said, "It is."

There was silence for a few moments.

Then he said, "It does not say which shelf."

From the other end Sumitra Devi said, "Write it now."

Harinath Sah ended the call.

In the margin of the ledger he wrote—"Upper shelf on the right."

Pawan watched.

"Does this have to be written too?"

Harinath Sah said, "It does now."

In the evening, two schoolchildren came to buy notebooks.
 One child was five rupees short.
 Harinath Sah said, "Give it tomorrow."
 The child said, "Ma said not to put anything on credit."
 Harinath Sah kept the ledger closed.
 "Then bring the money tomorrow."
 The child put the notebook down.
 Then went as far as the doorway.
 He turned back.
 Harinath Sah held out the notebook towards him.
 "Take it."
 "Five rupees?"
 "Tomorrow."
 The child took the notebook and left.
 Pawan asked, "You will not write it in the ledger?"
 Harinath Sah thought for a moment.
 Then he wrote the child's name on a small piece of paper.
 He placed the paper inside the ledger.
 "Did Kaki do it this way?"
 "No."
 "Then?"
 "I will do it this way."
 Pawan said nothing.
 At seven, Sumitra Devi came to the shop again.
 This time her hands were empty.
 She sat on the bench by the doorway.
 The same bench where she had once drunk her morning tea.
 Harinath Sah had lowered one half of the shutter.
 Pawan had already gone home.
 Sumitra Devi asked, "Did the sugar arrive?"
 "It did."
 "Five sacks?"
 "Yes."
 "Did you find both crates?"
 "Found them."
 "There is an inspection at the milk centre tomorrow."
 Harinath Sah said, "So you will leave even earlier?"
 "At five."
 "Sleep?"
 "It will happen."
 Harinath Sah wiped the shelf.
 The upside-down cup came into his hand.
 He went outside to wash it.
 Sumitra Devi opened the ledger.
 She looked at Ramsevak's page.
 Harinath Sah returned.

He placed the cup upside down on the shelf again.

Sumitra Devi saw the small paper with the child's name.

"What is this?"

Harinath Sah said, "Five rupees."

"Whose?"

"The boy's."

"Why not in the ledger?"

Harinath Sah said, "He will give it tomorrow. If he does not, then I will write it."

Sumitra Devi put the paper back where it had been.

"All right."

Harinath Sah closed the shutter.

He put on the lock.

The two walked towards home.

On the road, Sumitra Devi walked ahead.

Harinath Sah behind her.

After some distance, Harinath Sah asked, "How is the ledger at the centre?"

"Clean."

"Many names?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Have you memorized them all?"

Sumitra Devi laughed.

"Not yet."

Harinath Sah said, "You will."

The next dawn, Sumitra Devi left at five.

Harinath Sah came to the shop a little later.

Pawan had not yet arrived.

He raised the shutter halfway.

He lit the stove.

Into the kettle he measured water for two cups.

Milk for two cups.

Two pinches of tea leaves.

Two small spoonfuls of sugar.

The tea kept boiling.

Harinath Sah opened the ledger.

He looked at the previous day's margin.

"Upper shelf on the right."

He turned the page.

At the top of a fresh page, he wrote the date.

Below it, he made three small columns.

Name.

Balance.

When payment will come.

Pawan bent beneath the half-open shutter and came inside.

"Tea?"

Harinath Sah took the kettle off the stove.
He filled two cups.
He gave one to Pawan.
He kept one for himself.
Pawan looked at the ledger.
“These new columns?”
Harinath Sah said, “From now on, we will write it this way.”
Pawan raised the cup to his lips.
The third cup lay upside down on the shelf.
The morning light fell across it.
Harinath Sah did not turn it upright.
He pulled the ledger towards himself.
He began waiting for the first customer.

STORY 194

THE BAMBOO BRIDGE

It had rained all night.

By dawn, the water of the large pond had begun flowing towards the drain.

By afternoon, the drain looked like a river.

The unpaved road leading to the western hamlet of the village had been cut through in the middle.

Across that breach stood a bamboo bridge.

Six thick bamboo poles lay lengthwise.

Thin slats were tied across them at intervals.

Earth supports stood on both sides.

There was no railing.

When the rain eased a little, Hariprasad came towards the bridge.

He carried a long bamboo pole in his hand.

An old gamchha was tucked under his arm.

He stood on this side of the bridge and looked at the water.

The water was rushing swiftly beneath the bamboo.

Water hyacinth, straw, and tree branches had become lodged under the belly of the bridge.

The current struck against that blockage.

The bridge trembled lightly.

Hariprasad lowered the tip of the pole.

At that very moment, a man appeared on the other side.

It was Ramjatan.

Ramjatan too had a bamboo pole in his hand.

A little shorter.

The two looked at each other.

There was no greeting.

For twelve years, they had not spoken to each other.

The reason had not been a large one.

There was a footpath three hands wide.

The footpath ran between their two fields.

On the day of the survey, a stake had been driven a hand and a half to this side.

Hariprasad had said—the stake has shifted.

Ramjatan had said—the stake is in the right place.

The matter had begun with the footpath.

Then it went to the field ridge.

Then to the two families.

Then as far as the police station and the court.

The papers grew tired later.

The two men did not.

When passing in front of each other's houses, they would turn their eyes away.

If a bullock entered the other man's field, they would send a child.

If they had to sit in the same row at a wedding or a funeral feast, one of them would get up.

Today the two stood on opposite sides of the bridge.

Between them was the surging water.

Ramjatan pointed his bamboo towards the straw trapped below.

Hariprasad raised his long pole a little.

That was all.

Hariprasad stood near the mouth of the bridge.

Ramjatan examined the earth on his side.

The support on Ramjatan's side had sunk halfway.

He wedged his shorter bamboo beneath the support.

He took the other end of the bamboo onto his shoulder.

The bridge lifted a little.

Hariprasad pushed his long pole beneath the bridge.

The first thrust struck the straw.

The second struck the water hyacinth.

A thick branch was jammed in the middle.

Hariprasad worked the pole beneath it.

Ramjatan kept the support raised on his shoulder.

"More."

After twelve years, the first word from Ramjatan's mouth to Hariprasad came out.

Hariprasad did not reply.

He pushed the pole farther in.

The branch shifted a little.

Water rushed in at once.

One part of the straw broke free.

The current carried it away.

The bridge shook hard.

The support pressed down on Ramjatan's shoulder.

He clenched his teeth.

Hariprasad pulled out the pole and laid it across the bridge.

He stepped two paces forward.

One thin slat was loose.

The moment his foot came down on it, it lifted.

Hariprasad's heel became trapped between the slats.

The bridge tilted.

Hariprasad's body leaned to one side.

Ramjatan could not release the support from his shoulder.

He slid his shorter bamboo forward.

The end of the bamboo reached Hariprasad's chest.

Hariprasad caught it with both hands.

Ramjatan pulled the bamboo towards himself.

Hariprasad managed to free his heel from between the slats.
He remained lying on his stomach on the bridge.
The water roared below.
Ramjatan did not let go of the bamboo.
Hariprasad sat up.
The skin on his heel had been scraped.
He wiped it with the gamchha.
Ramjatan took the support onto his shoulder again.
Hariprasad turned back.
This time he did not climb onto the bridge.
He worked the long pole from the bank.
With his shorter bamboo, Ramjatan pressed against the other side of the branch.

Their two bamboo poles bore against opposite sides of the branch.

Hariprasad pushed.

Ramjatan lifted upward.

The branch turned.

The thick clump of water hyacinth split apart.

Half the debris flowed away with the current.

Space opened beneath the bridge.

The water rushed out swiftly.

The bridge still trembled, but less than before.

Ramjatan pulled out the shorter bamboo.

The support began sinking again.

He looked at the earth.

Something was needed to hold the earth in place.

Hariprasad saw two thin bamboo poles lying on his side.

He pushed one into the water.

The current carried the bamboo towards Ramjatan.

Ramjatan caught it.

He broke it into two pieces.

He wedged one beneath the support.

He braced the other crosswise against it.

The support became steady.

Hariprasad looked at the water again.

The thick branch was still trapped.

One end of it was on Ramjatan's side.

Ramjatan understood.

He set a foot on the bridge.

Hariprasad watched the way he walked.

Because of an old injury, Ramjatan's left leg did not bend fully.

On dry days, it was not noticeable.

On wet bamboo, it was.

He advanced one step at a time.

On reaching the loose slat in the middle, he stopped.

Hariprasad laid his long pole crosswise over the bridge.

One end was in his hand.
 The other reached Ramjatan.
 Ramjatan took hold of it.
 The pole was now like a temporary railing.
 Keeping one hand on the pole, Ramjatan moved forward.
 From his side, Hariprasad held the pole firmly.
 Ramjatan reached the branch.
 He drew a small sickle from his waist.
 He began cutting the thin twigs trapped around the branch.
 One.
 Two.
 Three.
 The twig came free.
 The thick branch bent a little lower.
 The current climbed over it.
 Ramjatan tried to step back.
 At that moment, the loose slat turned.
 His left foot slipped.
 Ramjatan's body leaned towards the side of the bridge.
 His right hand was on the long pole.
 Hariprasad pulled the pole tight against his chest.
 He planted his feet in the earth.
 Ramjatan did not hang from the pole.
 Using it as a support, he brought his foot back onto the bamboo.
 Hariprasad slowly pulled the pole back.
 Ramjatan took one step backward.
 Then another.
 He returned as far as the middle.
 Neither said anything.
 The thick branch suddenly turned.
 The water pulled it out from beneath the bridge and carried it away.
 Along with it went the straw, the water hyacinth, and two smaller branches.
 The current opened.
 The bridge sprang upward once.
 Then settled down.
 Ramjatan returned to his side.
 Hariprasad lifted the long pole.
 The two stood on their respective banks.
 The bridge between them.
 Clear-flowing water below.
 The rain began again.
 First in large drops.
 Then heavily.
 Hariprasad tied the gamchha around his heel.
 Ramjatan straightened his left leg.

Both were about to turn towards home.

At that moment, three children appeared from the direction of the western hamlet.

They had spent the night in the high school building.

An elderly woman was with them.

She carried a small bundle in her hand.

The children stopped the moment they saw the bridge.

Ramjatan stood at that end of the bridge.

Hariprasad at this end.

The first child set a foot on the bridge.

The bridge moved.

Hariprasad extended the long pole crosswise above the bridge.

Ramjatan caught the other end.

Between the two of them, a taut bamboo support formed.

“Keep your hand on this.”

Holding the pole, the child crossed.

The second one too.

The third one too.

Before stepping onto the bridge, the elderly woman handed her bundle to Ramjatan.

She came slowly.

In the middle, her feet trembled.

Hariprasad raised the pole.

Ramjatan gripped it firmly from his side.

Holding the pole, the elderly woman crossed.

She looked at both of them.

“May God bless you.”

Neither said anything.

The elderly woman walked towards the village with the children.

The rain had thinned now.

Ramjatan looked at the bridge support.

Hariprasad looked at the loose slat.

Ramjatan said—

“This slat will have to be replaced tomorrow.”

Hariprasad said—

“The support too.”

Both fell silent again.

The account of twelve years had not ended there.

The stake was still where it had been.

The footpath was still where it had been.

The old court papers were still at home.

But that evening, the bridge had survived.

The two went home by separate paths.

It rained again at night.

At dawn, people from the village came to look at the bridge.

The bridge was still standing.

One slat was still loose.
One support was still temporary.
Hariprasad arrived first.
He carried a new sickle and one thick bamboo pole.
A little later, Ramjatan appeared on the other side.
He too had a bamboo pole on his shoulder.
The two stopped at the mouths of the bridge.
Hariprasad put his bamboo down.
Ramjatan put his bamboo down.
One bamboo was right for the support.
The other for a railing.
No one decided which bamboo should go where.
Ramjatan pointed towards the support.
Hariprasad picked up his bamboo.
Hariprasad pointed towards the loose slat.
Ramjatan picked up his bamboo.
The two climbed onto the bridge.
One from this side.
One from the other.
They reached the middle.
The loose slat was there.
Hariprasad straightened it with his foot.
Ramjatan untied a length of hemp cord.
Both bent down.
Over the same slat.

STORY 195

THE HALF-CUT MANGO

The house had been divided ten months earlier.

The two rooms to the north belonged to Janardan.

The three rooms to the south belonged to Madhav.

Separate kitchens.

Separate grain stores.

The well water in turns.

A wall had been raised through the middle of the courtyard.

But the wall had stopped when it reached the mango tree.

The trunk there was so thick that a straight line of bricks could not pass without touching it.

The mason had stretched the line three times.

All three times, the line had caught against the trunk.

In the end, a space of a cubit and a half was left beside the trunk, and the wall continued beyond it.

A small bamboo lattice had been fitted into that space.

The lattice opened from this side too.

And from the other side too.

In the partition papers, one line had been written separately—

“The mango tree in the courtyard shall remain shared.”

No one had disputed that line.

That day the quarrel had been over the rooms, the veranda, the cattle shed, and the rear passage.

Not over the mango tree.

The tree was old.

Babuji used to say it had been planted in the second year after his marriage.

Now Babuji was no more.

The tree remained.

There were marks of an old rope on its trunk.

One branch leaned over the northern roof.

Another towards the southern courtyard.

The blossoms came at the same time.

The leaves fell on both sides.

When summer began, tiny green mangoes appeared.

While sweeping in the morning, Janardan would pick up the fallen mangoes on his side.

Madhav would pick up those that fell on his side.

No counting.

No accounting.

The lattice remained closed.

But it was never locked.

In the last week of Jeth, the first storm came.

The sky had been clear until afternoon.
 At five in the evening, black clouds rose in the west.
 The leaves turned over.
 The upper branches of the tree began to sway.
 A thick branch was rubbing against Madhav's tin roof.
 A grinding sound came from it.
 Madhav came outside.
 He looked up.
 The bark of the branch had been scraped in one place.
 Two long scratches had appeared on the tin.
 Janardan too came out from his veranda.
 Both looked towards the tree.
 Madhav said—
 "The storm is strong this time."
 Janardan said—
 "Yes."
 That was all.
 The storm lasted half an hour.
 The branch survived.
 It rained at night.
 At dawn, green leaves and two raw mangoes lay on the tin roof.
 Madhav removed the leaves.
 He picked up the mangoes.
 He placed one mango near the lattice.
 He carried the other towards the kitchen.
 At that time Janardan was touching the trunk and looking upward.
 A thin crack could be seen at the joint of the thick branch.
 The crack was new.
 The bark inside was pale.
 He did not touch it with his finger.
 He only looked.
 In the afternoon Janardan went to the market.
 When he returned, there was a new saw in his hand.
 He put the saw on the veranda.
 Madhav saw it.
 He said nothing.
 The next day before sunset, Janardan set up a ladder and climbed the tree.
 The saw was tucked into his waist.
 Madhav was connecting a hose for watering in his courtyard.
 The first sound of the saw came.
 Kharr.
 Then kharr again.
 Madhav looked up.
 Janardan was cutting the branch that had been rubbing against the tin.
 The branch leaned towards Madhav's roof.
 But its joint was on Janardan's side.

Madhav went on connecting the hose.
The saw kept moving.
Beneath the branch was a small cluster of raw mangoes.
One mango was right beside the saw.
Janardan stopped sawing.
He tried to move the mango aside with his hand.
Its stem was short.
The mango would not move away.
Janardan began sawing again.
Once.
Twice.
The saw touched the body of the mango.
A pale cut appeared in the green skin.
The mango was cut halfway through.
But it remained hanging from the stem.
Janardan looked at it.
Then began cutting the branch again.
The sky was clouding over once more.
The wind strengthened.
The ladder trembled slightly.
Madhav left the hose and stood up.
He came to the foot of the ladder.
He held the ladder with both hands.
Janardan did not look down.
He kept sawing.
More than half the branch had been cut.
At that moment, large drops began to fall.
Sparse at first.
Then hard.
Janardan withdrew the saw.
The branch was still only half cut.
Thin fibres inside were holding it together.
Madhav said—
“Come down now.”
Janardan climbed down the ladder.
Madhav let go of it.
The two stood beneath the veranda and looked at the tree.
The wind was moving the branch.
The half-cut section opened and closed.
The pale wood appeared between the movements.
The mango scored by the saw was still hanging from that branch.
The rain intensified.
Janardan wiped the saw and put it inside the house.
Madhav placed two bricks on his tin roof.
At eight that night the wind strengthened again.
The branch began knocking against the tin.

Janardan left his meal and came outside.
 Madhav was already in the courtyard.
 He held a thick bamboo pole from an old cot.
 One end of the bamboo rested on the ground.
 The other end was under the branch.
 The bamboo lifted some of the branch's weight.
 Because of that, the branch did not fall fully on the tin.
 Janardan watched for a moment.
 Then he went towards the trunk.
 He opened the lattice.
 It was the first time the lattice had been opened at night.
 Janardan entered Madhav's courtyard.
 He looked at the lower end of the bamboo.
 The earth was wet.
 The end was sinking.
 Janardan brought a flat brick from near the cattle shed.
 He placed the brick beneath the bamboo.
 Madhav lifted the bamboo a little.
 Janardan adjusted the brick.
 The bamboo no longer sank.
 "Will it hold through the night?" Janardan asked.
 Madhav looked up.
 "If the wind stays only this strong."
 Both fell silent again.
 The rain was reaching as far as the edge of the veranda.
 Janardan turned towards his house.
 He closed the lattice.
 He did not lock it.
 Once in the middle of the night, a loud sound came.
 Janardan sat up.
 Madhav too had switched on the light on his side.
 Both looked at the tree through their windows.
 The branch was still resting on the bamboo.
 The cut had opened a little more.
 The mango could no longer be seen.
 At dawn the rain stopped.
 Madhav came outside first.
 The half-cut mango lay on the ground.
 One side had opened along the cut made by the saw.
 The flesh inside had turned from pale white to yellow.
 Madhav picked up the mango.
 He washed off the soil.
 He placed it on the thin slat of the lattice.
 A little later Janardan came with the saw.
 He saw the mango.
 He did not touch it.

He opened the lattice.
 Madhav held the bamboo.
 Janardan climbed the ladder.
 This time the saw worked from the upper side of the cut.
 Madhav slowly lowered the bamboo.
 The branch did not fall suddenly.
 It bent downward.
 Then settled onto two old sacks laid in Madhav's courtyard.
 The tin was spared.
 The trunk was spared.
 The cut was clean.
 Janardan climbed down.
 Madhav began plucking the raw mangoes from the branch.
 Janardan plucked them from the other side.
 Both kept placing the mangoes into the same basket.
 No one counted.
 The basket did not fill.
 There were twelve or thirteen raw mangoes at the bottom.
 Madhav placed the basket in the middle by the lattice.
 Janardan went towards the well to wash the saw.
 When he returned, he looked.
 The half-cut mango was still on the slat.
 The cut surface had begun to darken.
 Janardan picked up the mango.
 With a knife he sliced away the thin blackened part.
 He cut the remaining mango into two pieces.
 He put one piece into the basket.
 The other he placed in a small plate on Madhav's veranda.
 He said nothing.
 By afternoon the sun came out.
 A little sap was seeping from the place where the branch had been cut.
 Madhav brought a thin paste of earth and cow dung.
 He opened the lattice.
 Janardan was standing near the tree.
 Madhav held out the paste.
 Janardan took it in his hand and applied it to the cut.
 Madhav watched from below.
 The work was finished.
 Madhav returned towards his courtyard.
 Janardan towards his veranda.
 The lattice was closed again.
 There was still no lock.
 In the evening, a child from Janardan's house came to the lattice.
 A child from Madhav's house came from the other side.
 Both reached into the basket.
 Each picked up one raw mango.

Then each ran back to their own side.
The basket remained in the middle.
The tree had one branch less.
The scratches on the roof were still there.
The wall was still in the middle.
But beside the trunk of the tree, that space of a cubit and a half was still open.
The lattice was there.
The lattice opened from both sides.

STORY 196

THE FISHING NET

Before evening fell, Dharanidhar left the house with the fishing net tucked under his arm.

His son Mohan followed behind him.

The afternoon rain had now stopped.

A grey light remained in the sky.

The water of the Kamla was muddy.

The current was cutting away more of the bank than before.

The two reached the river and stood there for a while.

Dharanidhar placed the net on the ground.

Mohan looked towards the bank.

Where there had been two hands of earth the previous week, there was water now.

Dharanidhar did not look there.

He began checking the knots of the net.

One mesh was loose.

He tightened the thread with his teeth.

Mohan said—

“Do not spread it on this side.”

Dharanidhar stopped his hand.

“Why?”

“The earth below has become hollow.”

Dharanidhar struck the bank with a bamboo pole.

From above, the earth seemed firm.

The pole sank half a hand into it.

He pulled the pole out.

He said nothing.

The two walked fifty paces upstream.

There the current was a little straighter.

Mohan took hold of one end of the net.

Dharanidhar the other.

Together they lowered the net into the water.

Small patches of foam settled along the upper cord of the net.

Dharanidhar said—

“Slowly.”

Mohan shortened his steps.

Both went into the water up to their knees.

The net spread like a half-moon.

For a while there was only the sound of water.

A dog barked in the distant village.

Mohan looked back.

From the river side, one corner of the roof of their house could be seen.

Only one corner.
 The rest was behind the bamboo grove.
 Dharanidhar kept his eyes on the net cord.
 Mohan looked ahead again.
 "More earth fell last night."
 Dharanidhar said—
 "I heard."
 "The crack has reached the front post of the veranda."
 Dharanidhar raised the net a little.
 A small fish leapt and became caught in the mesh.
 He removed the fish and placed it in the basket.
 "Cracks appear in the rains."
 Mohan said nothing.
 The two moved ahead.
 Two leaves became caught in the net.
 A handful of water hyacinth too.
 Dharanidhar removed the leaves.
 Mohan threw away the water hyacinth.
 "The water does not rise to the upper garden."
 Dharanidhar did not answer.
 Mohan's hand remained on the cord.
 "It did not rise there even in the last great flood."
 This time Dharanidhar looked at him.
 "The garden is for the fields."
 "Half of it is empty."
 "Some empty space is necessary too."
 Mohan did not smile.
 "A house is necessary too."
 Dharanidhar looked back at the net.
 A round ripple formed in the water a little distance away.
 He signalled.
 Together they turned the net towards it.
 Three small fish were caught at once.
 One slipped out through a mesh.
 Dharanidhar did not look after it.
 The other two went into the basket.
 "This mesh will have to be mended tomorrow."
 Mohan said—
 "The thread for mending the net is at home."
 Dharanidhar remained silent.
 After a few moments he asked—
 "Where?"
 "On top of the chest."
 Dharanidhar said—
 "You people have emptied the chest."
 Mohan's hand paused for a moment.

"We took out the paddy seed."

"Where did you put it?"

"In the shed in the upper garden."

No expression changed on Dharanidhar's face.

He went on handling the net.

"The sacks of wheat?"

"Those too."

"The plough?"

"The plough is still on the veranda."

Dharanidhar said, "Hmm."

The two moved farther into the water.

The current was stronger here.

Mohan's foot slipped once.

Without letting go of the net, Dharanidhar caught his arm.

Mohan regained his balance.

Both took hold of their respective ends again.

Neither said anything about it.

The sun could not be seen, but the light was fading.

Dharanidhar said—

"Enough for today."

The two began gathering the net.

Wet, the net was heavy.

Its lower part was filled with mud.

Mohan bent towards the river and shook the mud out.

A broken strip of bamboo was caught in the middle of the net.

Dharanidhar pulled it free.

The strip was old.

There was a small blue mark at one end.

Mohan looked at it.

"This looks like the colour of the fence at our house."

Dharanidhar turned the strip over twice.

"Ours is not the only house in the village with blue paint."

He dropped the strip into the water.

The strip floated away with the current.

Mohan kept watching it.

Dharanidhar lifted the basket.

"We caught fewer fish."

"The current has changed."

"Fish move with the current."

Mohan said—

"People?"

Dharanidhar did not answer.

The two climbed onto the bank.

They washed the mud from their feet and tucked the net under an arm.

The footpath leading home split into two.

To the left was the old house.

To the right, the upper garden.
 Dharanidhar turned left.
 Mohan followed him.
 After ten paces, a dull collapsing sound came from the river.
 Both stopped.
 They looked back.
 A broad piece of the bank had fallen into the water.
 Muddy foam rose for a few moments.
 Then the current flowed as before.
 Dharanidhar began walking again.
 Mohan did too.
 On reaching home, he placed the net beside a post of the veranda.
 Mother was inside near the hearth.
 She came out.
 She looked at the fish in the basket.
 "Only this much?"
 Dharanidhar said—
 "The current was strong today."
 Mother looked towards the net.
 "Do not dry it here."
 Dharanidhar looked at her.
 Mother pointed to the crack beside the front post of the veranda.
 The crack was wider than yesterday.
 Mohan quietly picked up the net.
 Dharanidhar said nothing.
 Mohan asked—
 "Where shall I spread it?"
 Dharanidhar looked out from the veranda.
 Evening had nearly fallen.
 The footpath towards the upper garden was still visible.
 He said—
 "Fold it and keep it today."
 Mohan began folding the net.
 Mother carried the fish inside.
 Dharanidhar sat beside the crack.
 He touched the earth with a finger.
 The soil was wet.
 A small piece fell away on its own.
 At dinner that night, there was no discussion of leaving the house.
 They discussed the price of paddy.
 They discussed that fodder for the cattle would fall short.
 They discussed that Mohan's daughter had moved into a new class at school.
 They discussed whether it would rain again.
 They did not discuss the house.
 After dinner Mohan came outside.

Dharanidhar was on the veranda.

The net lay folded.

Dharanidhar asked—

“Are there four bamboo poles in the upper garden?”

Mohan said—

“There are six.”

“Straight?”

“Four straight, two bent.”

Dharanidhar thought for a while.

“Keep two for posts to dry the net.”

Mohan looked at him.

Dharanidhar’s gaze was towards the darkness.

“The other four?”

“They will be used to enlarge the shed.”

Mohan said softly—

“The shed is small.”

“The roof will be extended first.”

“And the house?”

Dharanidhar did not step on the crack in the veranda.

He moved around it and stood up.

“At dawn, move whatever from the house can be moved first.”

Mohan remained silent for a few moments.

“The door?”

“The door last.”

“Mother’s hearth?”

Dharanidhar said—

“A hearth can be made again.”

After that, neither of them said anything.

It did not rain that night.

But the sound of the river kept reaching the house.

At dawn, the first thing Dharanidhar picked up was the net.

Mohan was putting tools into the empty part of the chest where the paddy seed had been kept.

Mother was sweeping the earth of the veranda.

Dharanidhar tucked the net under his arm.

He did not turn towards the river.

He walked towards the upper garden.

Mohan put down the tools and followed him.

The six bamboo poles lay in the garden.

Dharanidhar separated four of them.

He left two straight poles on the ground.

Mohan asked—

“These two?”

Dharanidhar said—

“For the net.”

Together they dug two holes.

The bamboo poles were set into the ground.
The wet net was spread between them.
The morning air passed through every mesh of the net.
Dharanidhar looked at one knot.
“This mesh will have to be mended.”
Mohan said—
“The thread for mending the net is on the chest.”
Dharanidhar did not ask—which chest.
He looked towards the old house in the distance.
One corner of its roof could be seen above the bamboo grove.
The river could not be seen from there.
Only its sound could be heard.
Mohan placed a brick beneath the net so that the cord would not touch
the earth.
Dharanidhar pulled the other end taut.
The net was now spread between two new posts.
The fish were still in the river.
The house was still in its old place.
But the net had arrived first.

STORY 197

SMOKE AT DAWN

Dawn had not fully broken yet.

The bricks in the courtyard were damp with the night's dew.

Inside the kitchen, Malti sat on her haunches before the hearth.

She blew twice through the blowpipe.

A red point glowed inside the wood.

The smoke first rose towards her face.

She drew the end of her sari a little farther over her head.

Then she blew again.

This time the fire caught.

Two iron trunks stood on the veranda.

A small bag lay on top of one of them.

The trunks had been packed the previous night.

No one in the house looked directly at them.

Yet since dawn everyone's eyes kept going towards them.

Malti put water on to boil.

The wok had been washed.

A brass bowl lay upside down.

One by one, she was lifting each thing from the same place from which she had lifted it for years.

In the inner room, her mother-in-law coughed.

Malti listened.

Then she began measuring rice.

The previous day her mother-in-law had said—

“You need not cook anything at dawn. We will get something from outside.”

Malti had not replied.

She had washed the rice the night before and left it ready.

Now, while draining its water, her hand stopped once.

She looked behind her.

The kitchen doorway was empty.

She put the pot on the hearth.

Her mother-in-law came out slowly.

An old woollen shawl was in her hand.

She sat down on the veranda.

“So early?”

Malti said—

“It is almost time for the bus.”

Her mother-in-law looked towards the trunks.

“Isn't it the nine o'clock one?”

“Nine ten.”

“There is still plenty of time.”

Malti opened the lentil tin.
 "Babuji's tablet is at eight."
 Her mother-in-law said nothing.
 Sanjeet came out from another room across the courtyard.
 He had a small trunk key in his hand.
 He went straight to the trunks.
 Bending down, he tugged at the lock.
 The lock was properly fastened.
 Even so, he pressed it again.
 Malti watched from beside the hearth.
 Sanjeet did not look towards her.
 "Are the papers in the upper trunk?"
 Malti said—
 "Below, between the clothes."
 "The sewing centre register?"
 "In the bag."
 Sanjeet nodded.
 He put the key on a peg in the veranda.
 Malti said at once—
 "Not on that peg."
 Sanjeet stopped his hand.
 "This is the grain-room key."
 He picked the key up again.
 For two moments he turned it in his hand.
 Then he placed it in front of his mother.
 His mother did not pick it up.
 The water on the hearth began to boil.
 Malti tilted the lid of the pot slightly.
 The smoke was now rising straight upward.
 A thin film of it had settled on the black bamboo of the roof.
 Malti looked at it.
 Five years earlier, Sanjeet had laid new roof tiles over that bamboo.
 The two of them had spent the whole day on the roof then.
 Malti lowered her eyes.
 She added turmeric to the lentils.
 Her mother-in-law said—
 "No ginger."
 "I won't add any."
 "His stomach will burn again."
 "I know."
 Babuji called from inside—
 "Whose stomach?"
 Her mother-in-law answered—
 "Not yours."
 Babuji came as far as the doorway.
 The fold of his dhoti was not yet properly tied.

He looked at the trunks.
Then at Malti.
“Is the tea ready?”
Malti said—
“Drink water first.”
She filled a glass for him.
Babuji took it.
“Orders even today?”
A faint smile came to Malti’s face.
“Only until your tablet.”
Babuji smiled too.
Taking the glass, he went and sat on the veranda.
Sanjeet began sweeping the courtyard.
He hardly ever did that work.
Malti looked towards him twice.
She said nothing.
The broom rasped over the bricks.
The younger niece came out from inside, rubbing sleep from her eyes.
“Kaki, you still haven’t gone?”
Her grandmother said at once—
“The day has not even risen yet.”
The girl placed a hand on one of the trunks.
“Are both of these going?”
Malti said—
“Both.”
“And this yellow glass?”
“No.”
“Why?”
Malti kept stirring the lentils.
“It belongs to the house.”
The girl picked up the glass and looked at it.
There was a small crack along its rim.
Malti gently took the glass from her hand.
“Put it down. It will break.”
The girl asked—
“When will you come again?”
The sound of the broom in the courtyard stopped.
Her mother-in-law’s hand grew still on the shawl.
Babuji began drinking the water in his glass.
Malti pushed a piece of wood farther into the hearth.
“Let your school examinations finish first.”
The girl said—
“My examinations are two months away.”
“Then study.”
“Will you come then?”
Malti looked at her.

"We shall see."

The girl went inside.

Sanjeet began sweeping again.

Malti took the lentils off the fire.

She opened the basket where the potatoes were kept.

She took out four small potatoes.

Her mother-in-law said—

"Leave the mashed potatoes."

Malti said—

"Babuji will not eat only rice and lentils."

From a distance Babuji said—

"I will."

Malti answered—

"You did not yesterday."

Babuji fell silent.

The potatoes were put on to cook.

Sanjeet leaned the broom against the wall.

He came and stood at the kitchen doorway.

"The driver will come at eight forty-five."

"As far as the bus stand?"

"Yes."

"The fare?"

"I have paid it."

Malti nodded.

Sanjeet said—

"The key to the room there?"

"My sister has it."

"As soon as you reach, phone—"

He stopped the sentence.

Malti gathered the ash in the hearth a little.

"I will send word."

Sanjeet placed a hand on the kitchen doorframe.

"The centre starts Monday?"

"Yes."

"It was difficult to go every day from here."

Malti said—

"It was."

Sanjeet said—

"I will come there on Sunday."

Malti said—

"First get Babuji's medicine."

Sanjeet nodded.

After that, both were silent.

The potatoes had boiled.

Malti began peeling them.

Sanjeet picked up one potato.

It was hot.
He shifted it immediately from one hand to the other.
Malti pushed a small bowl towards him.
“Put it here.”
Sanjeet put the potato in the bowl.
Then he picked up another.
The two began peeling potatoes together.
His mother watched from the veranda.
Babuji began looking for his box of tablets.
Without looking, Malti said—
“To the left of the window.”
Babuji reached there.
He found the box.
For a few moments he kept it in his hand.
Then he said—
“When you get there, keep your own things in their own places.”
Malti kept mashing the potatoes.
“Yes.”
“You have a habit of putting other people’s things in order too.”
Her mother-in-law said—
“Enough now.”
Babuji fell silent.
Malti added salt to the mashed potatoes.
Sanjeet asked—
“That much?”
“A little less for you.”
Sanjeet said—
“Will you still remember my salt?”
Malti’s hand stopped.
She closed the salt tin.
“Everyone in this house has a different measure of salt.”
Sanjeet laughed softly.
The laugh lasted a moment and ended.
The first light of the sun fell on the courtyard wall.
The smoke was no longer visible.
Only its smell remained.
Malti began setting out plates.
Babuji’s first.
Then her mother-in-law’s.
Then the girl and her mother woke up as well.
Food was served to everyone.
Malti did not set a plate for herself.
Her mother-in-law asked—
“And you?”
“I will eat something at the bus stand.”
Her mother-in-law pushed her plate forward.

“Sit.”

Malti said—

“I will clean the kitchen.”

“From tomorrow, we will do it.”

For the first time, Malti looked properly at her mother-in-law’s face.

Her mother-in-law said again—

“Sit today.”

Malti pulled a low wooden stool towards herself.

She sat at the kitchen doorway.

Her mother-in-law put a little rice from her own plate onto Malti’s plate.

Malti did not protest.

Babuji said—

“The lentils are good.”

Malti said—

“There is no ginger.”

“That is why.”

The younger niece burst out laughing.

This time the others in the house laughed too.

Sanjeet did not laugh.

He kept looking towards Malti’s plate.

Malti ate two mouthfuls.

Before the third, the sound of a vehicle came from outside.

The courtyard fell completely silent.

Malti put her plate down.

“It is time.”

Sanjeet stood up.

He lifted the first trunk.

Babuji tried to lift the second.

Malti stopped him—

“Not you.”

Sanjeet said—

“I will make two trips.”

The trunk was taken outside.

Malti returned to the kitchen.

The fire in the hearth was low now.

She separated two half-burnt pieces of wood.

She covered the fire with ash.

She hung the blowpipe on its old nail in the wall.

She washed the yellow glass and turned it upside down.

Her mother-in-law stood at the doorway.

“Leave it. I will do it.”

Malti said—

“Just this much.”

She closed the tin of flour.

She moved the salt tin to the right.

She moved the water-filled lota away from the hearth.

Then she washed her hands.
Her mother-in-law held out the key.
The grain-room key.
Malti did not put out her hand.
“It will stay here.”
“It was in your hands.”
“It belongs to the house.”
Her mother-in-law closed her fist around the key.
Malti came out onto the veranda.
The younger niece was holding her bag.
“I will carry this to the vehicle.”

Malti said—
“It is heavy.”
“I can carry it.”
Malti let the bag remain in her hand.
Babuji stood near the doorway.
He said nothing.
Malti touched his feet.
Babuji placed his hand on her head.
For only a very brief moment.

As Malti touched her mother-in-law's feet, the end of her sari brushed the ground.

Her mother-in-law raised her up.
“Send word on the way.”
“Yes.”
Sanjeet came in from outside and said—
“The second trunk.”
Malti looked at him.
“It is heavy.”
“I know.”

The two took hold of opposite ends of the trunk.
As they stepped down from the veranda, the trunk caught once against the threshold.

Sanjeet raised his side.
Malti lowered hers.
The trunk came free.
The vehicle stood outside.
The dawn dust had not yet risen on the village road.
The trunk was placed in the vehicle.
The younger niece handed over the bag.
Malti took it.
She looked towards the house once.
A thin trail of smoke was rising again above the kitchen roof.
Her mother-in-law had probably stirred the embers from inside.
Sanjeet said—
“Was the fire still alive?”

Malti said—

“Under the ash.”

Sanjeet looked towards the house.

“Until evening?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Malti placed the bag in her lap.

“It will have to be blown alive again.”

The vehicle moved.

Sanjeet remained standing by the roadside.

Malti did not turn back.

The roof of the house remained where it was.

The smoke rose a little higher.

Then dissolved into the light of dawn.

THE BICYCLE WITHOUT A BELL

The afternoon was drawing to a close.

There was little dust in front of the bicycle shop in the market.

Kesho Mistri was filling air into a new tyre.

At that moment Madhav Jha arrived, pushing an old bicycle.

The front wheel turned slightly crooked.

The rear wheel would turn and then stop at one point.

There was no bell on the right side of the handlebar.

Only the round mark where a bell had once been remained.

Kesho detached the air hose.

“What needs to be done?”

Madhav stood the bicycle upright.

“Make it fit to ride.”

“That all?”

“That all.”

Kesho spun the front wheel.

The rim swayed once to the left, once to the right.

“The spokes will need changing.”

Madhav said—

“Whatever is necessary.”

Kesho pressed the brake.

The brake pad had worn down to half its thickness.

“This too.”

“Yes.”

Kesho looked towards the handlebar.

“The bell?”

Madhav said at once—

“No.”

Kesho looked at his face.

Madhav kept running his hand over the bicycle seat.

The black leather at the rear corner of the seat was torn.

The torn part had been stitched in five places with red thread.

Kesho said—

“Shall I change the seat?”

“This will do.”

“It is torn.”

“It is stitched.”

Kesho said nothing.

He turned the bicycle upside down and set it on the repair stand.

A black layer of old oil coated the chain.

Madhav sat on the wooden bench in the shop.

Three old bells lay beneath the bench.

One brass, two iron.
 Madhav looked down once.
 Then turned his eyes away.
 While removing the chain, Kesho asked—
 “Whose bicycle is it?”
 Madhav did not answer.
 Kesho asked again—
 “Yours?”
 “The house’s.”
 “Who rides it at home?”
 Madhav pressed a loose nail in the bench with his finger.
 “The one who used to ride it before.”
 Kesho smiled.
 “The repair will not become more expensive if you say the name.”
 Madhav too smiled a little.
 “Repair it.”
 Kesho put the chain into kerosene.
 The rod of the rear carrier was bent downward in the middle.
 He picked up a hammer.
 Madhav said at once—
 “Do not straighten it.”
 Kesho’s hand stopped.
 “Things will fall off like this.”
 “They did not fall off.”
 “And now?”
 “They will not fall off now either.”
 Kesho left the rod alone.
 Two small iron rings were fixed to the left side of the carrier.
 On the right side, an old cotton strip was knotted.
 Its colour had faded.
 Kesho tried to untie the strip.
 Madhav said—
 “Leave that.”
 “It has rotted.”
 “Even so.”
 Kesho drew his hand back again.
 He began checking the spokes of the front wheel one by one.
 A milkman passed in front of the shop.
 The moment he saw the bicycle, he stopped.
 “Will this come back onto the road again?”
 Madhav looked at him.
 “Why not?”
 The milkman laughed.
 “Then in the morning we will have to clear the road again.”
 Madhav said nothing.
 The milkman went on.

While loosening a spoke, Kesho asked—
“Why did people have to clear the road?”
Madhav pressed the nail in the bench again.
“She was always in a hurry.”
“Without a bell?”
“She had a voice.”
Kesho laughed.
Madhav did not.
A child came from behind the shop.
He took away the air pump.
A small strip of blue cloth was tied to the handlebar of the bicycle.
The child looked at it.
“This looks like school uniform cloth.”
Touching the strip, Kesho said—
“It is old.”
Madhav said—
“Leave it.”
The child went away with the pump.
Kesho straightened the handlebar.
The grip on the right side was much more worn by a palm.
The left grip looked almost new.
“Did she ride with one hand?”
Madhav said—
“When was the other hand ever empty?”
Kesho looked at the broken prong of the front basket.
The basket itself had been removed long ago.
Only the prong remained on the frame.
“Shall I fit a basket?”
“No.”
“Then shall I cut this prong off?”
“No.”
Kesho shook his head.
“You are stopping more repairs than you are allowing.”
For the first time Madhav laughed properly.
“I want it fit to ride. Not new.”
Kesho did not question that sentence again.
He kept working.
The chain was cleaned.
The black grime caked on the teeth came off.
The axle of the rear wheel was opened.
The ball bearings inside were dry.
Kesho filled in grease.
At that moment the tea seller from the market came over.
He carried two cups of tea.
He gave one to Kesho.
He held the other out to Madhav.

Madhav took it.
 The tea seller looked at the bicycle.
 "After so many days?"
 Madhav said—
 "Yes."
 "Her knee?"
 Madhav raised the cup to his lips.
 "Better now."
 The tea seller stood there for a few moments.
 "Did the doctor allow her to ride?"
 "Slowly."
 The tea seller looked towards the bicycle's carrier.
 "Will this stay bent?"
 Madhav said—
 "It is better that way."
 The tea seller went away laughing.
 Kesho asked no more questions.
 He removed the rear tyre.
 There were three patches on the inner tube.
 There was room for a fourth patch too.
 "The inner tube will have to be changed."
 Madhav said—
 "Change it."
 Kesho looked a little surprised.
 "This can be changed?"
 Madhav emptied his cup.
 "Change what is inside and cannot be seen."
 Kesho looked at him.
 Madhav put the empty cup on the bench.
 The afternoon was now leaning towards evening.
 The shadow in front of the shop grew long.
 Kesho fitted a new inner tube.
 He changed the brake pad.
 Four new spokes went into the front wheel.
 The rear wheel was straightened.
 The chain was oiled.
 The seat remained the same.
 The carrier remained bent.
 The blue strip remained.
 The round mark where the bell had been remained too.
 Kesho lowered the bicycle to the ground.
 "Ride it once and see."
 Madhav took hold of the handlebar.
 "Not me."
 "Then who?"
 Before answering, Madhav looked towards the market.

Around the bend in the road, a woman was approaching slowly.
A bamboo walking stick was in her right hand.
Her left hand was empty.
She came and stopped in front of the shop.
Kesho stood up.
Madhav rose from the bench.
The woman looked at the front wheel of the bicycle.
Then the rear.
Then the seat.
Her eyes went to the right side of the handlebar.
There was no bell there.
She looked at Madhav.
“You did not put one on?”
Madhav said—
“No.”
A small smile appeared on the woman’s face.
“Did you change the seat?”
“No.”
“The carrier?”
“Not that either.”
The woman handed her walking stick to Madhav.
She took hold of the handlebar.
Kesho said—
“Slowly at first. The brake is new.”
The woman placed one foot on the pedal.
With the other she pushed off from the ground.
The bicycle moved two hands forward.
She got down.
Madhav stepped forward.
The woman raised a hand to stop him.
She placed her foot on the pedal again.
This time the bicycle went five hands.
The handlebar trembled a little.
The bent rear carrier shook lightly.
She got down again.
Kesho said—
“It would be better with a bell.”
The woman placed her palm on the right side of the handlebar.
“When did it ever have one?”
Kesho fell silent.
Madhav turned the walking stick in his hand.
The woman looked towards the road.
At that moment, the crowd leaving school was approaching from a distance.
Two children were walking in the middle of the road.
The woman mounted the bicycle again.

She began pedalling slowly.
On reaching the road she called out loudly—
“Move aside.”
Both children turned around.
One moved aside at once.
The other burst out laughing.
“Hey, Bicycle Kaki is riding again!”
The woman did not stop.
She went a little farther.
Then as far as the bend.
Madhav remained standing in front of the shop.
Kesho looked at him.
“Whose bicycle is it?”
Madhav rested the walking stick on the ground.
Beyond the bend, the bicycle disappeared from sight.
Madhav said—
“The house’s.”
Kesho asked nothing more.
He picked up the brass bell lying beneath the bench.
He brushed off the dust.
Then put it back underneath.

STORY 199

FIVE MINUTES LATE

It was an evening in Jeth.

The sun had gone down, but the soil in the fields was still warm.

The tube well was running to the east of the village.

Its grinding hum could be heard from far away.

The irrigation channel was full of water.

Small earthen ridges on both sides of the channel gleamed.

Mahendra Jha placed his spade on the ridge of his field and looked at his watch.

There were seven minutes to half past four.

Dayakant's turn for water was from four to half past four.

After that came Mahendra's field.

From five o'clock, Sonma Devi's seedbed.

The schedule had been made this time.

The rains were late in coming.

The pond had half dried up.

Five households depended on the tube-well water.

So everyone's time had been written down.

There was another line too—water would not be held back for anyone who was not present at their allotted time.

Dayakant was already there.

He sat at the mouth of the channel, pulling out grass.

Mahendra said—

"I'll go home, untangle the calf's rope, and come back."

Dayakant nodded.

"You'll be here by half past four?"

"By half past four."

The two had been friends since childhood.

They had gone to school together.

They had gone to the market together for the first time.

Together they had learned to swim in the river.

Each had worked a spade in the other's field without asking.

Keeping account of time had never been a large matter in their friendship.

Mahendra walked towards home.

On reaching the courtyard, he saw that the calf had wound the rope around itself and become caught at the stake.

Its hind leg was inside the rope.

He bent down and began loosening the knot.

The knot was wet.

It had tightened.

From inside the house, his wife asked—

"Weren't you supposed to release the water?"

“There is still time.”
 Mahendra pulled the end of the rope with his teeth.
 The knot did not open.
 He went inside to fetch a knife.
 The knife was not in its usual place.
 He came outside again.
 The calf turned and looked at him.
 Mahendra borrowed a knife from the neighbour’s boy.
 He did not cut the rope.
 He slowly loosened it.
 He freed the calf’s leg.
 Then he tied the rope again with a new knot.
 He looked at his watch.
 It was half past four.
 “It’ll be all right,” he said to himself.
 Dayakant was there.
 He would have released the water.
 This had happened before too.
 Many times Mahendra had watched Dayakant’s turn.
 Many times Dayakant had watched his.
 Mahendra remembered the spade.
 The spade was at the field.
 He set off empty-handed.
 He met Ramsevak on the way.
 “Where are you going?”
 “For the water.”
 “Then run.”
 Mahendra laughed.
 “He is one of our own.”
 He walked quickly, but he did not run.
 The sound of the tube well grew nearer.
 The mouth of the irrigation channel came into view.
 Dayakant stood on the ridge.
 Mahendra’s spade was in his hand.
 On reaching the edge of the field, Mahendra looked at his watch.
 It was five minutes past half past four.
 His field was dry.
 The water was flowing towards Dayakant’s field.
 Mahendra looked first at the water.
 Then at Dayakant.
 “It was my turn.”
 Dayakant said—
 “It was.”
 “It’s only been five minutes.”
 “Yes.”
 Mahendra held out his hand for the spade.

Dayakant gave it to him.
“You could have released it.”
Dayakant looked towards the channel.
“It was half past four.”
Mahendra did not laugh.
“And when it was four?”
Dayakant said nothing.
Water was filling the first bed of Dayakant’s field.
The soil was turning dark.
The dry cracks were slowly disappearing.
Mahendra moved towards the mouth of the channel.
Dayakant did not step forward.
“You cut five minutes from my turn.”
Dayakant said—
“At five, it is Sonma’s turn.”
“But my half hour?”
“From half past four to five.”
Mahendra tightened his grip on the spade handle.
At that moment a voice came from farther down the channel—
“Hold the earth there a little.”
It was Sonma Devi.
She had a small spade in her hand.
She was building up the earth at the mouth of her seedbed.
Her twelve- or thirteen-year-old daughter was with her.
The girl had placed two empty buckets to one side.
Sonma did not come upward.
She went on repairing her ridge.
Mahendra said in a low voice—
“Her time is at five.”
Dayakant said—
“Yes.”
“Then five minutes could have been taken from her.”
This time Dayakant looked at him.
After a while he said—
“Have you asked her?”
Mahendra did not answer.
The tube well kept grinding.
A kite circled in the sky.
Water from the channel was seeping through a small hole in the ridge.
Dayakant pressed the earth down with his foot and closed the hole.
Mahendra went into the dry bed of his field.
He lifted some soil in his hand.
It crumbled at once.
“What difference do five minutes make?” he said.
Dayakant replied—
“That is why the schedule gives the time in minutes.”

Mahendra walked some distance away.
 He sat down on the ridge.
 He placed the spade in front of him.
 Dayakant kept watching the water.
 He did not come towards Mahendra.
 There were twenty hands of distance between them.
 There had rarely been that much distance between them before.
 Old things rose in Mahendra's mind.
 At Dayakant's wedding, he had not gone home for three days.
 During Mahendra's father's illness, Dayakant had accompanied him all the way to the hospital.
 Once, when Mahendra's bullock fell ill at night, Dayakant had remained there until dawn.
 When Dayakant's thatch roof blew away, Mahendra had given him his bamboo.
 So many years of friendship.
 Five minutes.
 Mahendra looked at the water flowing through the channel.
 Nothing was written in that water.
 Dayakant looked at his watch.
 Five minutes past half past four had gone by.
 He picked up the spade.
 He closed the mouth of his own field.
 Then he opened the channel towards Mahendra's field.
 The water suddenly entered Mahendra's dry bed.
 At first the soil drank it in.
 Then the water moved ahead.
 Dayakant said—
 "Twenty-five minutes."
 Mahendra looked at him at once.
 "What?"
 "At five, Sonma's turn."
 Mahendra lifted the spade.
 "I need half an hour."
 Dayakant sat down on the ridge of his own field.
 "You may need whatever you need; there isn't that much water."
 Mahendra began moving along with the water.
 As the stream passed from one bed to the next, he cut through the soil to open its way.
 He was working quickly.
 He had never worked that fast before.
 Dayakant remained silent.
 Four forty.
 Mahendra's first two beds were wet.
 Four forty-five.
 The water reached the third bed.

Mahendra looked at his watch.
After that he did not look at it again.
Sonma Devi sat on her ridge.
Her daughter had turned an empty bucket upside down and was sitting on
it.

The two were saying something softly to each other.
The water had not yet reached the last bed of Mahendra's field.
Dayakant stood up.
He did not go into Mahendra's field.
He stood at the main mouth of the channel.
Mahendra saw him from a distance.

"Not yet."

Dayakant looked at his watch.

"One minute."

Mahendra opened the mouth of the last bed.

The water turned towards it.

"Now?"

Dayakant said—

"Now."

It was five o'clock.

Dayakant closed the channel leading towards Mahendra's field.

He opened the mouth towards Sonma's seedbed.

Mahendra's last bed was only half wet.

The water stopped there.

The soil drank it in.

Mahendra stood holding the spade.

Sonma's daughter got up.

She moved the empty bucket aside.

With her small spade, Sonma cut the first ridge.

The water ran towards the seedbed.

She looked upward.

"Thank you."

Dayakant only nodded.

Mahendra heard her.

He said nothing.

The sun was now behind the trees.

The smoke from the tube well had grown thin.

Water gleamed in Sonma's seedbed.

Mahendra looked at his half-wet last bed.

With the spade he levelled the soil a little.

Where the water had not reached, the cracks remained.

Dayakant started for home.

Mahendra did not stop him.

The two took the same road.

Dayakant first.

Mahendra behind.

At the bend in the village, Dayakant stopped.

Mahendra came up to him.

Dayakant said—

“Tomorrow morning I’ll put two buckets of water on your dry patch.”

Mahendra said—

“No.”

Dayakant said nothing.

Mahendra spoke again—

“Tomorrow is not your turn.”

Dayakant looked at him.

Mahendra walked ahead.

That night there was no sound on the narrow path between their two houses.

The next day Mahendra went to the field.

The soil of the last bed was still a little damp.

He pulled two handfuls of seedlings from the seedbed and planted them there.

Some of the seedlings remained bent.

He straightened them.

Dayakant was approaching from a distance.

He had a spade in his hand.

He stopped beside Mahendra.

“Will they survive?”

“We’ll see.”

Dayakant bent down and pressed the soil around one seedling.

Then he stood up.

Neither spoke of the old matter.

Not of the five minutes either.

Three days later the tube well ran again.

This time Dayakant’s name came first in the schedule.

Then Mahendra’s.

Then Sonma’s.

Dayakant arrived ten minutes before his time.

Mahendra was already sitting there.

Dayakant looked at his watch.

“Early today?”

Mahendra said—

“No.”

He showed him his watch.

“There are still five minutes left.”

Dayakant sat down beside him.

The spade lay between them.

The channel was still dry.

The tube well’s grinding had not yet begun.

Down below, Sonma Devi was repairing her ridge.

Mahendra did not look at his watch again.

Neither did Dayakant.
The tube well started.
The first water entered the channel.
Both men stood up.

STORY 200

THE WASHED-AWAY RIDGE

On the third night of Ashadh, the rain fell hard.

By dawn, the eastern fields of the village were gleaming with water.

When Devanath Jha reached his field, he did not look first at the paddy.

He looked at the ridge.

The ridge between his field and Raghunath Yadav's had been washed away in three places.

The earth had been carried down by the water and deposited below.

At one place the gap was so wide that the water in the two fields seemed to be of one colour.

Devanath stood there for a while.

Raghunath was already on the other side.

He had a spade in his hand.

The two looked at each other.

Neither said Ram-Ram.

Devanath climbed onto the ridge.

Raghunath began scraping up the earth that had washed down below.

Three years earlier, this ridge had not been so high.

In those days, people from both families would cross it freely into each other's fields.

A child from Devanath's house would bring milk from Raghunath's cattle yard.

If a guest came to Raghunath's house, a cot would be carried over from Devanath's veranda.

If labourers fell short during paddy transplanting, no one counted whose field was whose.

Whoever was free would step into the other's field.

In those days the ridge stopped only water.

Not people.

Three years earlier, one night in Sawan, something had happened over a turn of water.

Too much water had entered Devanath's seedbed.

By morning, half the seedbed lay flattened like paste.

Raghunath had said that he had not opened the mouth of the channel before his own turn.

Devanath had said—

“Then did the water come on its own?”

Raghunath had replied—

“Ask the water.”

That was all.

A few days later, fresh earth was piled onto the ridge.

After that, two bamboo stakes were driven into it.

After that, people too began walking only on their own sides.
Milk stopped coming from Raghunath's house.
Devanath's cot remained on his own veranda.
Invitations still reached for weddings and family ceremonies, but people arrived late.

They sat separately.

They returned separately.

For the first few days, the children tried to understand.

Then they too learned the rule, like the ridge itself.

Today that same ridge had been washed away in three places.

Devanath drove his spade into the earth.

The first gap was small.

He began cutting earth from his side of the field and filling it.

Raghunath began adding earth from the other side.

The earth from both sides met in the middle.

Their hands did not.

After a while Devanath's son Naval arrived.

He carried two baskets on a shoulder pole.

Raghunath's daughter Chanda came behind him carrying a pan of earth.

Naval stopped on the ridge.

Chanda stopped too.

The two could not pass through the gap at the same time.

Naval stepped down.

"Go."

Chanda said nothing.

She passed with the basket.

Raghunath looked up once.

So did Devanath.

Then both began cutting earth again.

The second gap was deep.

There the spade struck something hard inside the earth.

There was a knock.

Raghunath cleared the earth away with his hand.

An old earthen pipe emerged.

Half broken.

The mouth of the pipe opened towards both fields.

Naval asked—

"What is this?"

Raghunath lifted the pipe.

He brushed the earth from it with his hand.

Devanath said—

"The old outlet for releasing water."

Naval asked again—

"Here?"

This time no one answered at once.

Chanda put down the basket and began looking at the pipe.

Raghunath said—

“My father made it.”

Devanath added—

“With my father.”

Naval took the broken piece of pipe in his hand.

“Shall we put it back?”

Devanath remained silent.

So did Raghunath.

Rain clouds were gathering again in the east.

Thunder sounded in the distance.

Raghunath took the pipe from Naval’s hand.

One side of it was cracked.

“This will not hold now.”

Devanath climbed down from the ridge and went towards his side of the field.

Some pieces of dry bamboo lay there.

He picked up a hollow piece and brought it back.

He placed it beside the pipe.

“This will hold.”

Raghunath looked through the bamboo.

“The opening is too wide.”

“We will bury half of it in earth.”

“What if the water runs hard?”

Devanath tapped the bamboo with the handle of his spade.

“We will put a stone on top.”

For the first time in three years, the two men were speaking more than five sentences about the same piece of work.

Naval did not count them.

Neither did Chanda.

They simply kept bringing earth.

The piece of bamboo was laid beneath the ridge.

One mouth towards Devanath’s field.

The other towards Raghunath’s.

Earth from both sides was piled over it.

Raghunath pressed the earth down with his foot.

Devanath tamped it with the back of the spade.

The opening remained clear.

Chanda asked—

“Won’t you close it?”

Raghunath said—

“Not now.”

Devanath said nothing.

The third gap was the largest of all.

There the ridge had almost disappeared.

The two families’ fields seemed to have run into each other.

There had once been a small footpath at that spot.

People from the village used to walk along this ridge towards the pond.
After the quarrel, both households had piled earth there and erased the
footpath.

People began taking the longer way around.
Today the rain had lowered that place again.

Devanath said—

“We need more earth here.”

Raghunath said—

“There is sand below.”

“Cut some heavy clay from the side.”

Raghunath went towards a corner of his field.

The soil there was heavy.

Devanath followed him.

For the first time in three years, he set foot in Raghunath’s field.

Nothing happened.

The soil was still there.

The transplanted paddy was still there.

Raghunath’s spade was still there.

Devanath cut two spadefuls of earth.

Raghunath filled the basket.

The two returned towards the ridge.

Sarju Kaka was passing along the village path.

He stopped.

He looked from a distance.

“The ridge washed away?”

Devanath said—

“Yes.”

Sarju Kaka looked towards Raghunath.

“How much?”

Raghunath said—

“A little more than what you can see.”

Sarju Kaka did not laugh.

He went on.

By afternoon, all three gaps had been filled.

The ridge stood again.

But the bamboo opening in the middle remained clear.

Naval placed a leaf over it.

The leaf fell through.

Chanda pulled it out from the other side.

“It works.”

Naval said.

Raghunath said—

“We will know when the water comes.”

The sky had grown darker still.

Devanath’s wife, Sharda Devi, came from a distance carrying two lotas of
water.

She stopped a little away from the ridge.
 She gave one lota to Devanath.
 She held the other out towards Naval.
 Naval said—
 “Babu, you drink first.”
 Devanath drank half the water and put the lota down.
 At that moment Raghunath’s wife, Kamla Devi, also reached the field.
 She had a small container of sattu in her hand.
 The two women looked at each other.
 Sharda Devi’s lota stood on the ridge.
 Kamla Devi put the container of sattu down on her side.
 After a while, the first large drop of rain fell.
 Sharda Devi picked up one lota.
 She left the other where it was.
 Kamla Devi picked up the container.
 She placed that lota in the middle of the ridge.
 No one said anything.
 Everyone started towards home.
 It rained hard again at night.
 Devanath did not sleep for a long time.
 From the veranda, nothing could be seen towards the fields.
 There was only the sound of water.
 Once he got up and went as far as the doorway.
 Sharda Devi asked—
 “Will you go to the field?”
 “Not now.”
 “The ridge?”
 After a while Devanath said—
 “We will see in the morning.”
 At dawn the rain stopped.
 Devanath went towards the field.
 Raghunath was already there.
 The ridge stood.
 Both fields were full of water.
 Devanath’s field was a little higher.
 Raghunath’s a little lower.
 Leaves and grass were caught in the mouth of the bamboo.
 The water had stopped.
 Raghunath held out the spade.
 Devanath stopped him with his hand.
 He knelt down.
 He removed the leaves by hand.
 First a thin stream came through.
 Then water began flowing towards Raghunath’s field.
 The two watched the stream for a while.
 Raghunath said—

“If it becomes too much, we will pack in some earth.”

Devanath said—

“If it becomes too little, we will take some out.”

Raghunath nodded.

The two walked farther along the ridge.

At the place of the third gap, the earth had sunk a little.

Devanath drove his spade into the ground there.

Raghunath turned to bring earth from his own field.

Devanath said—

“There is some heavy clay left on my side.”

Raghunath stopped.

“Then cut it from there.”

Both climbed down into Devanath’s field.

In the distance, Naval and Chanda could be seen going to school.

They reached the place where the old footpath had been.

Naval stopped.

Chanda stopped too.

This time Naval did not climb down.

He moved to one side on the ridge.

Chanda passed beside him.

Then both went ahead along the same path.

Devanath looked that way.

So did Raghunath.

Neither told them to take the longer way around.

After a while, both men were back on the ridge.

Earth was filled in.

It was tamped down with the spades.

The old footpath was not fully restored.

But the ridge was left a little wider there.

By afternoon, the water had gone down.

The stream through the bamboo opening had grown thin.

Raghunath placed his spade on his shoulder.

So did Devanath.

The two turned towards their separate homes.

After ten paces, Raghunath stopped.

“We will look at the outlet again this evening.”

Devanath stopped too.

“Yes.”

The two went on towards their respective homes.

The ridge stood.

There was also a place in the middle for the water to pass.

Stories remain alive for as long as people and language remain alive.

— GAJENDRA THAKUR

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