
Three Streams of Stories

STORIES 201–300

VOLUME

III

GAJENDRA THAKUR

Translated from the Original Maithili into English by the Author Himself

VIDEHA

Three Hundred Selected Stories

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THREE STREAMS OF STORIES, Volume III

Stories 201-300

Gajendra Thakur

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About This Volume

Gajendra Thakur's three hundred selected stories form a vivid mirror of the many shapes of life in Mithila, Vajji and Anga: folk life and human relationships, changing times, village and city, sorrow and joy, tradition and modernity, nature and society, women and men, childhood and 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 dwell together.

A story remains alive for as long as people and language remain alive.

— Gajendra Thakur

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STORY 201

School Shoes

...

The first rain of Ashadh had fallen through the night. By morning, mud had gathered on the unpaved village road, and water dripping from the thatch had made little pools beside the veranda. Moti Paswan rose before dawn and ran a hand over the spade lying at the edge of the courtyard. The soil in the fields was soft today; on a day like this, seed settled readily into the earth.

At the other end of the veranda, his daughter Sarita was drying her school shoes. The black cloth shoes were now less black than the colour of mud. The sole of the left shoe had come loose at the toe, so Sarita had tied it twice around with twine. Inside the right shoe she had placed a piece of cardboard; without it, her heel would have touched the ground.

Moti looked at the shoes but said nothing.

Sarita asked, “Babu, will you get your wages today?”

“The munshi said yesterday that I would.”

“Then will you go to the market?”

Moti picked up the spade. “Let the money come into my hands first.”

Sarita said nothing more. She tightened the twine around the shoe, put her books into a cloth bag, and set off for school, picking her way around the mud.

Moti’s last three months had passed in ordinary day labour: unloading sacks of paddy one day, carrying bricks another, cutting field ridges on a third. He had no land of his own. Behind the house there were four dhurs of kitchen ground, where Kamli grew greens and vegetables. That year Nihal Yadav had offered him six kathas of fallow land on a half-share. The terms were simple: plough and oxen Nihal’s, labour Moti’s, seed Moti’s; the crop to be divided equally.

To Moti those six kathas were not merely a field. In a life measured out in days of hired labour, it was the first place where something sown by his own hands might bring a certain share of grain into his own house.

Seed would cost seven hundred and eighty rupees. Moti was owed one thousand three hundred and twenty rupees in wages. Sarita’s shoes would cost at least six hundred and fifty in the market—he had learned that the previous week.

The two things could not be done together.

By noon Moti and the other labourers were fixing sheets of tin onto the roof of a warehouse. The air was heavy after the rain. The sharp edge of the tin could slice a hand, and everyone worked with care.

At the meal break, the munshi took notes out of an old bag and began calling names.

“Moti Paswan.”

Moti stepped forward. The munshi counted out one thousand three hundred and twenty rupees into his palm.

“That settles the account.”

Moti folded the notes and knotted them into the corner of his gamchha. The word settled pleased him for a moment, but at once the image of Sarita’s loosened sole rose before his eyes.

When work ended, he went straight to the market. He stopped first at the seed shop. Tulsi Sah opened a sack of maize seed and showed him the kernels.

“Take eight kilos of this. Enough for six kathas.”

“How much for eight kilos?”

“Seven hundred and eighty.”

Moti took a few kernels into his palm. They were yellow and smooth, almost identical in size. He thought of Nihal’s field—the rain-darkened soil, ready to take the plough before evening.

“What if I take six kilos?”

Tulsi Sah shook his head. “I can give you six. But will you leave patches of the field empty? If you sow thin and the yield is poor later, don’t blame me.”

Moti let the kernels fall back into the sack.

Tulsi Sah asked, “Short of money?”

“There is another expense.”

“If you want it on credit, I’ll put your name in the book.”

Moti’s hand stopped over the sack. “Against the harvest?”

“Against the harvest. Like everyone else.”

Moti knew what that ‘like everyone else’ meant. As soon as the crop was cut, the price of the seed would be recovered first, then the higher charge laid on top of it, then the merchant’s share. Even his half of a sharecrop would carry the teeth of debt. Before his first cultivation had properly begun, he would already be caught in someone else’s ledger.

“Not now,” Moti said.

He crossed the market and reached the shoe shop. Shoes of many kinds hung from bamboo posts. The shopkeeper, seated inside, turned Sarita's old shoe over in his hand. Moti had brought it with him.

"Put the sole back on," Moti said.

The shopkeeper pressed the cloth near the toe with his thumb. It tore at once.

"If I fit a new sole to this, it won't last even two weeks. The upper has rotted through."

"Can you stitch it?"

"The stitches won't hold."

Moti was silent.

The shopkeeper drew out a pair of black shoes from below. "Take these. Seven hundred and twenty."

"The ones for six hundred and fifty?"

"That size is too small. How old is your daughter?"

"Thirteen."

The shopkeeper brought out another pair. "These are six hundred and seventy. I won't promise they'll last a very long time, but they'll see her through the rains."

Moti held the shoes in his hands and bent the soles. They were only this much weight, yet they would swallow more than half the notes knotted into his gamchha.

He walked out without buying them.

In the middle of the market, beside Teli Pond, stood a peepal tree. Moti sat beneath it. In front of him people bought vegetables, salt, oil, rope, sickles. No one else's expense seemed to be the enemy of another expense; only his rupees seemed to be pulled in two directions at once.

If the seed was not bought by evening, Nihal would give the field to someone else. If the shoes were not bought, Sarita would walk four kos again tomorrow in the same shoes bound with twine.

Moti looked down at his own feet. One strap of his rubber sandal was fastened with wire. It was good enough for going to work. For a moment he wondered—were shoes truly so necessary? One studied with the head, not with the feet.

Then he remembered the morning: Sarita adjusting the cardboard inside her shoe. She had never once said, 'I won't go.' The torn shoe had not become her excuse; it had become one more task she performed every day.

Moti rose and started home. The school lay on the way. Classes had ended. Near the gate, two children came out wheeling bicycles. Then Sarita appeared from behind them. Her pace was slower than usual.

“What happened?” Moti asked.

Sarita tried to smile. “Nothing.”

“Show me your foot.”

“Babu—”

“Show me.”

Sarita sat at the roadside and took off the shoe. The skin on her right heel had been rubbed raw and red. The cardboard had soaked up water and gone soft, and mud had worked its way inside the sole.

Moti asked, “Will you go in these tomorrow?”

Putting the shoe back on, Sarita said, “I can manage two more days. You buy the seed. Nihal Kaka will give the field to someone else.”

Moti looked at her. “Who told you that?”

“Ma told me.”

“Your ma says too many things.”

“I understand it too. If we get six kathas, maize will come into the house.”

For some distance Moti walked beside his daughter without speaking. Whenever Sarita stepped into the mud, she lifted her right foot a little, so that less pressure fell on the heel.

At home Kamli was blowing on the hearth. Moti untied the corner of his gamchha and laid the notes on the cot.

Kamli asked, “Did you bring the seed?”

“I didn’t bring the seed.”

“Then the shoes?”

“Not yet.”

She watched his face for a few moments. “Then?”

Moti said, “I’m going back to the market now.”

Kamli looked at Sarita’s foot. Without a word she rubbed turmeric and oil onto the chafed heel.

By the time Moti reached the market again, darkness was coming down. The seed shop was half packed away. From a distance Tulsi Sah called, “Taking it?”

Moti shook his head and walked on.

The shoe seller was untying the bamboo post. Moti asked for the pair that cost six hundred and seventy rupees. The shopkeeper wrapped it in paper. As he paid, Moti counted out a five-hundred-rupee note, hundred-rupee notes and smaller notes separately. Six hundred and fifty rupees remained in his hand.

On his way home he stopped at Nihal Yadav's courtyard.

"I couldn't arrange the seed," Moti said.

Nihal watched him for a few moments. "Then the field?"

"Give it to whoever you need to."

"I can hold it until tomorrow."

Moti touched the knot in his gamchha. "The seed will not appear by tomorrow."

Nihal said, "All right. I'll speak to Ram Bali in the morning."

Moti bowed and left. Saying the decision aloud did not make the burden lighter; it only gave the burden a clear shape.

That night Sarita tried on the new shoes. She rose from the cot, walked as far as the veranda, and came back.

"Not loose?"

"They fit properly."

"Not cutting your heel?"

"Not now."

Kamli said, "Before you wear them tomorrow, I'll tuck some dry cloth inside. They'll get wet in the rain."

Sarita took the shoes off and set them side by side beneath the cot. Moti kept looking at them. He thought of Nihal's six kathas, where seed should have gone into the earth that day.

The next morning Ram Bali ploughed that field. Moti went to work in another field. Nihal's land lay along the way. Furrows were being drawn across the freshly turned soil for maize. Moti stopped for two moments, then walked on.

Sarita wore her new shoes to school. The monsoon mud swallowed their shine on the very first day.

By the end of Sawan, Ram Bali's maize had grown above the knee. From time to time Moti passed the field. He looked at the spacing of the rows, at the colour of the plants, but said nothing to anyone.

In Bhadon there was less work. The household tightened again around its expenses. Kamli planted pigeon pea and kodo in one corner of the kitchen plot.

Whenever Moti was paid a few seers of grain instead of wages, it all went into the household store.

In Kartik, on the day Nihal's maize was harvested, Moti too went there as a hired labourer. Ram Bali was the sharecropper; Moti was a labourer. From morning onward they broke off cobs and piled them in heaps.

At noon Ram Bali said, "The yield is good this year. I caught the first rain, that's why."

Moti said, "Yes."

In the evening the labourers were paid. Nihal gave Moti some money and two paseris of maize as well, because some workers had chosen part of their wages in grain. Moti carried his sack home.

Kamli spread a bamboo mat to dry the maize. While emptying the sack, Moti set aside a few well-filled, healthy cobs.

Kamli asked, "Why are those separate?"

"For seed."

"There isn't much maize in the house."

"Let these five cobs remain."

Kamli said nothing. She picked up all five and tied them to a rafter above the veranda, where the smoke would reach them and insects would be less likely to spoil them.

By then Sarita's new shoes were no longer new. The toes were scuffed and the laces had been replaced once, but the soles were sound. She continued going to school every day.

One evening in Agahan, Sarita sat studying on the veranda. Above her, the five cobs tied to the rafter swayed lightly in the moving air. She asked her father, "Aren't we going to eat those?"

Moti said, "No. Next rains, we'll put them into the earth."

Sarita looked up, then down at her shoes. A faint line of dried mud marked the black cloth.

She opened her book again.

Leaning against a post of the veranda, Moti counted the cobs tied to the rafter—one, two, three, four, five.

This time the count was small, but the seed belonged to the house.

STORY 202

The Sack of Paddy

...

In the fog of Agahan, Rambriksh Yadav's bullock cart left the village just as the eastern sky was turning pale, though there was still no sign of the sun. Thirteen sacks of paddy lay on the cart. All were tied with the same old-looking rope; only the sack at the front bore a small knot of red thread. Dulari had tied that knot the previous night so that Rambriksh would remember—before the money from this sack was spent on anything else, he was to bring home her medicine.

For three days Dulari had spent most of her time on the cot. The doctor at the village health centre had prescribed medicine for seven days. Tablets for the first three days had been available at the centre; the rest had to be bought outside. Rambriksh had thought that once the paddy was weighed at the government procurement centre, he would buy the medicine from the market on his way home. There was not enough cash in the house to buy the full course beforehand.

His seventeen-year-old son Manoj rode with him. Sitting atop the sacks, he kept watching the road appear and disappear through the mist.

“Babu, will it be weighed today?” Manoj asked.

“When our turn comes, it will.”

“Last time Ramdev Kaka had to make the trip for three days.”

Rambriksh gave the bullocks a light tap on the back. “Our paddy is dry. There is no question of making the trip for three days.”

That sentence was meant to reassure Manoj more than Rambriksh himself. Two days after the harvest there had been a light rain. Rambriksh and Dulari had together dragged the paddy beneath the veranda, then spread it in the courtyard through two days of sunshine. Every night the grain had been brought back inside in sacks. He was certain it was dry now.

The procurement centre had been set up in an open field behind the old cooperative storehouse. By the time they arrived, eight bullock carts were already lined up. One man's paddy was on the scale, another's sample was being tested, someone else's sack had split. Every now and then, husk and chaff lifted in the air and settled in people's hair and on their clothes.

Rambriksh collected the slip bearing his serial number and drew the cart into the queue. Manoj unyoked the bullocks and tied them to a post at the side.

Two hours later their turn came. An employee at the centre opened a sack, scooped a handful of grain from the top, rubbed it in his palm, then put some kernels into a small measuring device.

A number flashed on the instrument.

"It's wet," the employee said.

Rambriksh asked at once, "How much?"

The employee showed him the device, but Rambriksh did not understand what the number meant.

"We cannot take it in this condition. Dry it and bring it back."

"I have dried it in two full days of sun."

"Dry it more."

Rambriksh opened another sack. "Look at this one. The top sack may be a little damp. This is from inside the load."

The employee tested the second sample as well, then shook his head. "Take the whole consignment back."

"At least weigh the two or four sacks that are dry. I need money at home for medicine."

The employee looked first toward the queue and then at Rambriksh. "We do not take half a consignment. Those are the rules. The next cart is waiting."

Manoj was standing there. His eyes went to the sack marked with the red thread.

Rambriksh remained silent for a few moments. Then the sacks were tied shut again. As he turned the cart around, it seemed to him that all thirteen sacks were as heavy as before, and yet the cart had somehow become empty.

Two grain traders stood by the roadside outside the centre. Whenever a consignment was turned away, they stopped it. One of them came up to Rambriksh's cart and asked, "How many sacks?"

"Thirteen."

"I'll take them all. Cash, right here."

The rate he named was far below the government price. Rambriksh moved the cart on without answering.

The trader walked beside them for some distance. "The paddy is damp. I bear the cost of drying it. Then there is the weight loss on top of that."

Rambriksh said, "Will you take one sack?"

"Will I set up my scale for one sack?"

“Then leave it.”

He drove on. Manoj turned and looked back at the trader.

About half a kos farther on, a second trader came up on a bicycle and stopped the cart. “If you want to sell one sack, I’ll take one. But the rate will be no higher than his.”

Rambriksh stopped the cart. At that moment he saw in his mind the half-filled water pot beside Dulari’s cot, the bowl of thin rice gruel, and the medicine strip going empty. He looked at Manoj.

“Take down the one with the red thread.”

Manoj asked nothing. Together they lowered the sack. The scale was set up and the sack was weighed. The trader counted out the money into Rambriksh’s hand.

Rambriksh counted it twice. The amount was plainly less than what the same sack would have fetched at the government rate. He could feel the difference immediately: it was enough to contain two days’ wages.

Manoj said softly, “If we sold the rest too, the house would get all the money at once.”

Rambriksh knotted the cash into one corner of his gamchha. “One sack went because illness could not wait. The rest will not go like this.”

At the market, he bought the medicine first. Then he returned home not with an empty cart, but with twelve sacks still on it.

Dulari was sitting on the veranda. Hearing the creak of the bullock cart, she came outside. At the sight of the sacks, her eyes counted them first; only then did she notice the small paper packet in Rambriksh’s hand.

“They did not weigh it?”

“They said there was too much moisture.”

“There were thirteen sacks.”

“I sold one and brought the medicine.”

Dulari said nothing. She took the packet, looked inside, then looked at Manoj. “Did he cut the price badly?”

Rambriksh did not answer. Manoj began unyoking the bullocks.

From that afternoon onward, every task in the house changed. The courtyard was swept. Old bamboo mats, two pieces of sacking, and a torn tarpaulin were spread out. The twelve sacks were emptied one by one. A golden layer of paddy spread across the courtyard.

The sun did not appear, but there was wind. Rambriksh kept turning the paddy with a wooden plank. Barefoot, Manoj walked up and down the rows,

stirring the grain. Dulari rose from the cot and sat at the edge of the veranda, calling out from time to time, "The layer is too thick in that corner. Spread it thinner."

Rambriksh said, "You stay inside."

"Will the paddy dry if I stay inside?"

As evening came, the fog began to gather again. It was impossible to fill all the grain back into sacks.

At Manoj's suggestion, bamboo poles were planted at the four corners and the tarpaulin was stretched over them. Whatever paddy could not be brought under it was covered with the pieces of sacking.

Rambriksh rose three times during the night. The first time, the wind had lifted one corner of the tarpaulin. The second, the cow had pulled at its rope and wandered near the paddy. The third time, he merely ran a hand over the sacking to see whether dew had settled on it.

The next day the sun came out. The paddy was spread again. Dulari had taken her medicine and sat on the veranda. The exhaustion of the previous day was still on her face, but her voice was a little clearer.

At noon, their neighbour Sitaram came over. He too had brought his paddy back from the procurement centre.

"I sold two sacks to a trader," he said. "I'm drying the rest."

Rambriksh asked, "At what rate?"

The figure Sitaram named was a little lower than the rate Rambriksh had received.

"Now I understand," Sitaram said with a laugh. "Outside there is one price for moisture, and inside another price for dry paddy."

Rambriksh did not laugh. He kept turning the grain.

On the third morning he bit a kernel between his teeth. It was hard. Manoj said, "Shall we go again today?"

Rambriksh looked at the sky. The sunlight was clear. "Let's go."

This time there were twelve sacks on the cart. Rambriksh could not tell by sight whether they weighed less, but while lifting them Manoj said, "They feel lighter than yesterday."

Rambriksh replied, "The water is gone."

"Was the water being weighed too?"

Rambriksh smiled. "On the government scale, water too gets weighed as if it were paddy. But when they buy, they do not want that water."

The queue at the centre was shorter this time. The same employee took a sample again. Grain went into the measuring device. After looking at the number, he said nothing. He tested a second sack, then a third.

“It’s fine now. Put it on the scale.”

Rambriksh looked at the man’s face for a moment. He felt like bringing up what had happened the first day, but two carts were waiting behind him. He signalled to Manoj. The sacks were taken to the scale.

The twelve sacks were unloaded one by one. The figures on the scale were written down. The total weight was lower than Rambriksh’s estimate from the first day. He added it up in his head: one sack had already been sold cheaply; the remaining paddy had lost weight as it dried. The procurement-centre rate was higher, but the cart had travelled from home to the centre twice, two days of labour had been spent, and one sack had gone at an emergency price.

Manoj asked, “How much will we get this time?”

Rambriksh showed him the weight written on the paper. “Whatever is written here will come into the account. Let’s go home first.”

“But we have the medicine now.”

“Yes. That is why we can wait now.”

When they reached home, Dulari did not count the sacks first. She asked, “Was it done?”

Rambriksh said, “It was done.”

Manoj took out the weighing slip and hung it from a peg on the veranda. Dulari could not read it, but she asked the total weight. Rambriksh told her the figure.

After a moment’s thought Dulari said, “There were thirteen sacks the first day.”

“One went to the market. The rest lost water.”

“How much did we lose?”

With a finger, Rambriksh wrote two figures on the earth—on one side the estimated amount that the single sack would have fetched at the government price, on the other the cash actually received for it. Then he added the cost of making the journey twice.

Manoj sat down beside him. “That much?”

“Yes. That much.”

Dulari looked toward the packet of medicine. “And if you had not brought the medicine that day?”

Rambriksh wiped the figures from the earth with his hand. "Then it would have been a different calculation."

No one said anything more.

Four days later, the money came into the account. Rambriksh first cleared the old debt at the fertiliser seller's shop, then set aside money for salt and oil for the house. Manoj said, "Next time, after the harvest, we'll dry it for two full days before taking it."

Rambriksh said, "Who can say the weather next time will be the same?"

Dulari was folding the empty paddy sacks and stacking them on the veranda. Twelve sacks lay in one pile. The thirteenth, the one with the knot of red thread, was not there. Manoj had cut off that red thread while opening the sack on the first day and tied it to the front bamboo rail of the bullock cart.

The cart now stood outside the veranda. In the moving air, the little piece of red thread fluttered.

Rambriksh looked at it once, then went inside and took out the old register in which he kept the accounts for the next paddy season.

STORY 203

The Panchayat Hand Pump

...

It was an evening in Jeth. Four women were returning from the western hamlet with water pots balanced on their heads. The sun had gone down, but the dust was still warm. Malati's little daughter Gudiya followed behind carrying an empty lota. It was empty because, in the crowd at the distant well, she had not found a chance to fill it.

When they reached the hamlet, Malati lowered her pot onto the veranda. The ring of cloth on her head was soaked with sweat. Her mother-in-law asked, "Why so late this time?"

"The water in the well has gone down. We had to lower the rope twice over."

That same evening word came that the panchayat had sanctioned a new hand pump for the western hamlet. The boring would be done the following week. As soon as the news spread, the women first began talking about where the pump would be installed. In the middle of the hamlet, behind the pipal tree, there was an empty strip of public land where four paths met. Everyone assumed the pump would be placed there.

But on the day the boring vehicle arrived, it did not stop by the pipal tree. It drove through the gate of Navalkishore Singh's house.

Navalkishore's house stood at the edge of the hamlet: a plastered boundary wall, an iron gate, two cows, a bullock cart, and a large courtyard within. In the village, whether the matter was fertiliser bought on credit, fields given on share, or panchayat elections, people listened to his opinion on many things.

Malati and Shanti went as far as the gate. Inside, in the right-hand corner of the courtyard, the boring equipment had been set up.

Malati asked, "The hand pump will be here?"

Navalkishore said, "The soil near the pipal is loose. We'll get better water here. The gate will remain open. A panchayat hand pump will remain the panchayat's."

Shanti looked at the boundary wall. "The gate will remain yours."

Navalkishore laughed. "A gate cannot stop water."

For the first week, it truly did not. From morning till evening, the women went in, worked the pump, filled their pots, and came out. The pump yielded a

strong flow. What had taken two hours at the distant well could now be done in half an hour.

In the second week, rules began.

First it was said that the gate would not open before five in the morning. Then it was said that from one to three in the afternoon the women of the household rested, so there should be no crowd at that hour. Then, after evening, the gate began to be chained.

If someone needed one extra pot of water, the servant would ask, "What will you do with so much water?"

The first time Malati heard this, she replied, "What one does with water."

The servant laughed. Malati did not.

A few days later, Shanti's daughter-in-law returned late from the fields. There was no water left in the house. At eight that night she went to the gate. A voice from inside called, "Come tomorrow now."

She walked to the distant well. In the dark, while lowering the rope, she scraped the skin from her palm.

The next morning, showing the wound, she said, "By day the panchayat hand pump belongs to the panchayat; by night it belongs to the house."

At that sentence, everyone fell silent.

That evening nine women sat on Malati's veranda. No one made a speech. No one took out a sheet of paper. One by one they simply told what had happened to them—who had found the gate closed and when, who had been made to wait and for how long, whom the servant had questioned.

Shanti said, "We go separately, so we are given separate answers."

Malati asked, "Then?"

Renu said, "If one household is stopped, all of us must understand that all of us have been stopped."

Everyone liked that. From that day they made a rule of their own: if anyone was stopped at the gate, she would not quietly turn back. She would send word through the hamlet. Then four or five women would go back with her. No one would use kinship, wage work, or personal acquaintance to obtain a separate privilege.

The first test came two days later.

Kamli went to fetch water at half past four in the morning. She was told to wait until five. Kamli turned back and went to Malati's house. Within ten minutes, five women were standing at the gate.

Navalkishore himself came out. "Why are all of you here so early?"

Malati said, "If the water of one household is stopped, our water is stopped."
"Fill your pots from five."

Shanti asked, "What about those who leave for wage work at four?"

Navalkishore said, "Then fill your water at night and keep it ready."

Kamli showed him her scraped palm. "The gate is closed at night."

Irritation came over Navalkishore's face. "This is a house, not an inn."

Malati answered quietly, "We too have houses. The hand pump belongs to the panchayat."

The matter stopped there. At five the gate opened. Everyone filled her water and went home.

Over the next few days there was no open clash, but the rules did not change. The women did not abandon their rule either. Whenever one of them was stopped, a group formed. Those inside the gate understood that telling one woman, "Come tomorrow," could now turn into questions from five women.

On the day the first clouds of Ashadh gathered, it was time to pull up the mung crop in Navalkishore's field. The crop was ready. As he watched the clouds, his worry grew. If rain came, the dry pods in the field could get wet and turn black.

He needed many hands the next morning. The women of the western hamlet knew well how to pull up mung and bind it into bundles. That evening Navalkishore's servant came with a message: "Reach the field at four in the morning. You will receive the full wage."

Malati asked, "At four?"

"Yes. There are clouds."

Shanti, who was sitting there too, said, "And water for the house before four?"

The servant said nothing.

Malati said, "Tell Naval Babu—first water, then the field."

A little later Navalkishore came himself. "Tomorrow, for one day, the gate will open at half past three. All of you fill your water and come to the field at four."

Renu asked, "And the day after tomorrow?"

Navalkishore understood where the question was leading. "The day after tomorrow, the usual hours again."

Malati said, "Then opening it tomorrow is not our right. It is a convenience for your crop."

Navalkishore's voice hardened. "Do you want the wages or not?"

Shanti replied, "We do. Do you want labourers or not?"

For two moments no one spoke.

Thunder sounded in the distance.

Navalkishore asked, "What is it that all of you want?"

Malati gave the answer she had already thought through. "Once the hand pump is here, there should be no restriction on the time when the gate may be used. Anyone who comes as far as the pump should not have to ask anyone's permission. Your house is farther inside; we will not go into it. We ourselves will keep the place around the pump clean."

"Open at night too?"

"At night too. Thirst does not look at the hour before it comes."

Navalkishore looked toward the boundary wall. The hand pump was not very far inside the gate. To the right was the cowshed, to the left the veranda. The women of his household objected mainly because strangers moved through the courtyard all day.

His wife Vimla had been listening from the veranda. She did not come outside, but called from within, "If a bamboo screen is put up between the pump and the veranda, the inner part of the house will be hidden."

Navalkishore turned and looked inside. "A screen?"

"The old bamboo from the cowshed is lying there."

Malati said nothing. This was a solution the household itself had offered.

Navalkishore looked at the women again. "The ground around a hand pump turns muddy. Who will keep it clean?"

Renu said, "We will. One of the seven households each day. But the chain will not be put on."

"If the gate remains open, the cows will get out."

Shanti said, "Tie the cows separately in the cowshed. A panchayat hand pump is not there to guard cows."

Vimla's laughter came from inside. Navalkishore looked toward her, then toward the clouds.

"All right," he said at last. "From tomorrow the corner with the hand pump will remain open. The inner veranda will be screened off with bamboo. No one is to go beyond the screen."

Malati replied, "We will go as far as the hand pump for water. What business would we have beyond the screen?"

The next morning the gate opened at half past three. This time, however, it was not merely for one day. A new bamboo screen stood beside the cowshed.

From the hand pump, the inner veranda could no longer be seen. The chain of the gate had been hung on a nail above it.

The women filled their water quickly. By four o'clock, twelve women were walking toward Navalkishore's field.

The rain came after noon. By then much of the mung had already been pulled up and tied into bundles. Some of it got wet, but not the whole crop.

That day, when the wages were paid, Navalkishore paid the ordinary rate. No one raised the matter of the hand pump. The women too counted their wages and went home. In the first week, the new arrangement was tested twice. One night a guest arrived late at Kamli's house; at nine she went to fetch water. The gate was open. The next afternoon Rekha's daughter filled two extra pots to wash clothes. No one asked, "Why so much water?" The women kept their turns for cleaning. Mud around the pump was removed, broken bricks were laid down, and whenever the handle grew loose it was tightened in time. Sometimes Vimla too would leave the sweepings from inside outside to be taken away; around the hand pump now, the rhythms of the household and the hamlet had begun to fit together.

A month later Malati came at dawn to fetch water. The old iron chain of the gate still hung from the same nail above. A light film of rust had begun to form on it. As Gudiya worked the handle, she asked, "Ma, why don't they use this chain anymore?" Malati steadied the pot and said, "If they use it, it will have to be opened again." Gudiya did not fully understand what the answer meant. She pressed the handle once more. Water came from the pump. On the other side of the bamboo screen, the household's morning was beginning; on this side, the hamlet was filling its pots. The chain hung silently on the nail.

STORY 204

The Price of the Ox

...

On an Ashwin morning, beside the tethering post in the cattle shed, Basant kept lifting his left foreleg and setting it down again. The night dew had left the earth damp, yet the round mark around his hoof showed up sharply, like a crack in dry soil. Dukhna Yadav watched from a distance. He held a sickle for cutting paddy leaves, but his eyes remained fixed on the ox's leg.

Basant had been in the household for twelve years. Once his hide had shone, his neck had been thick, and the tips of his horns had risen proudly upward. Now the bones of his back stood out clearly. Near the base of his right horn, an old scrape had turned white. The previous winter his leg had swollen while pulling the plough, and since then heavy work had stopped.

Dukhna's son Kishun called from the courtyard, "Babu, Ramsevak will come again today. Yesterday he said that if the price is not settled this time, he'll look for another ox."

Dukhna gave no reply. He scattered two handfuls of bran over the dry straw in Basant's manger. Basant slowly stretched his muzzle toward it.

The household accounts were not simple. The kharif paddy had been good, but half the crop had gone in sharecropping. The cow at home gave milk and needed her own supply of straw. The tractor owner wanted an advance for the rabi ploughing. The old plough and yoke were now useful only for small patches because Basant's partner had died two years earlier. By the time a neighbour's ox could be borrowed to make a pair, ploughing was often delayed.

Three days earlier Kishun had worked out the figures on paper. Adding three months of Basant's straw, fodder, bran and oilcake, he had said, "With this much, we can buy wheat seed for half a bigha and pay for the first irrigation as well. The ox no longer ploughs the field. If we sell him, the rabi crop will be saved."

Dukhna had not looked at the paper. He had asked only, "Who will take him?"

"Ramsevak. He drives a small cart. He says he'll keep the loads light."

"Saying it and doing it are not the same thing."

Kishun had fallen silent. He understood his father's heart, but he understood the household expenses too.

Ramsevak arrived later in the morning with his seventeen-year-old son, Bhola. First Ramsevak examined Basant's teeth, then pressed his leg. Basant jerked the leg away.

"He is old," Ramsevak said, "but he can still pull a light cart. I take vegetables to the market. There'll be no heavy loads."

Kishun asked, "The price?"

Ramsevak offered six thousand. Kishun asked for eight. Between them, the bargaining stalled at seven.

Dukhna had not spoken a single word. He went out to look at Ramsevak's cart. The wheels were old, but fresh oil gleamed on the axle. The wood inside the yoke had been smoothed down. Behind the cart he saw the light bamboo baskets used for carrying cauliflower, aubergines and greens.

"How many trips in a day?" Dukhna asked.

"Once to the market, once back. Rest in between."

"Don't beat him."

Ramsevak was about to laugh, but stopped when he saw Dukhna's face. "What work will I get out of an old ox by beating him? If his leg gives way, the loss will be mine."

For the first time Dukhna looked straight into Ramsevak's eyes. There was less tenderness than calculation in the man's words; yet for Dukhna, that very calculation offered a small foothold for trust. A man who regarded injury to the animal's leg as his own loss would, at the very least, try to preserve that leg.

The price was finally settled at seven thousand five hundred rupees. Ramsevak paid two thousand in advance and said he would bring the balance in the evening, then left with the cart.

The money was not handed to Dukhna; Kishun took it. From the two thousand he sent five hundred to the tractor owner. The remaining fifteen hundred went into the iron chest at home.

Dukhna returned to the cattle shed and took down Basant's old yoke to examine it. On the inside, its right half was far more worn. In a pair, Basant had always walked on the right. The pressure of his neck had hollowed a smooth groove into the wood. Dukhna ran his thumb through it.

He could not count how many fields had been ploughed under that yoke. Yet certain scenes rose by themselves: the cart loaded with river sand when the new house was being built; the journey back from the market on the day they bought their first cow; a winter morning when sacks of paddy had lain too long in the threshing ground and clouds had risen at night—Basant and his partner had made three trips and brought the sacks home.

Dukhna did not call such memories 'favours'. The ox was an animal of the household; work had been his share of household life. But now that a price had been fixed, it seemed that against twelve years of work, seven thousand five hundred was only a number from the marketplace.

At midday, while serving rice on a leaf plate, Dukhna's wife Phulo asked, "So the sale is settled?"

"The price is settled."

"Are the two the same thing?"

Dukhna remained silent.

Washing her hands, Phulo said, "My heart feels heavy too. But the cow needs straw, and the rabi field needs ploughing. If we keep Basant now, we'll keep him only for the sake of the heart. The heart does not grow straw."

Dukhna looked at his wife. The words were hard, but her voice was not.

"Have you seen Ramsevak's cattle shed?" Phulo asked.

"No."

"Then the price is settled. The sale is not."

For the first time Dukhna smiled faintly.

Before evening he took Kishun with him to Ramsevak's house. Ramsevak was surprised. "I was just about to bring the money to you."

Dukhna said, "First I'll see the cattle shed."

Ramsevak's house stood at the western edge of the village. The small cattle shed was enclosed with reed matting and half covered by a tiled roof. A young ox was already there. The manger was clean and the water vessel full. Beside it, a thick tether lay in place of an old rope.

Dukhna squatted on the ground and checked the height of the manger. Basant's neck now bent lower; a very high manger would trouble him. This one was low.

"Will you yoke both of them to the same cart?"

Ramsevak said, "For the first two or three days I'll make them walk together. If the old one gets tired, he'll do only one trip. My son will push from behind."

Bhola immediately added, "I keep a bucket of water in the cart."

Kishun looked at Bhola. The two were nearly the same age.

Dukhna stood up. "All right. One more thing. For the first seven days Kishun will come in the evening and look in—whether Basant is eating, whether his leg is swelling."

Ramsevak nodded. "Who would stop him from coming to see?"

Kishun broke in, "That condition wasn't part of the price."

Dukhna turned toward his son. "The price is for the ox. The condition is for my debt."

Kishun said nothing.

In the evening Ramsevak came with the full amount. Dukhna counted the notes. Seven thousand five hundred, complete. He separated five hundred rupees and held them out to Ramsevak.

"Keep this."

Ramsevak started. "Why?"

"For bran and oilcake in the first month."

"I can buy that myself."

"I know. This is not a reduction in the price. Just don't change Basant's old feed all at once."

Ramsevak did not want to take the notes, but Dukhna placed them in his palm. The sale had, in effect, come down to seven thousand. For a moment displeasure showed on Kishun's face. Five hundred rupees was no small sum in the household accounts.

Basant's tether was untied. Dukhna did not fasten the old bell around his neck with his own hands; instead, he removed it and hung it from the post. "This belongs to the house," he said. "Let the new place have a new sound."

Ramsevak led Basant away. Basant took two steps and paused once because his hoof caught on a small rise in the earth outside the courtyard. Bhola immediately slackened the rope. Basant moved on again. He did not look back. Dukhna did not call to him either.

Kishun sat on the veranda counting the money. Of the seven thousand rupees left, three thousand went toward the tractor advance and arrears, two thousand was set aside for wheat seed and fertiliser, and the remaining two thousand for household expenses.

Dukhna listened to the account. "The rabi field will be ploughed on time?"

"Yes."

"Then it is all right."

The next morning the tractor came to the field. Its growl carried a long way. Dukhna stood on the embankment and watched the soil turn over. The field Basant had ploughed again and again over twelve years was turned in two hours. The work was done quickly; Dukhna's heart did not grow light, but the reason for the decision stood clearly before him.

For seven days Kishun went to Ramsevak's house every evening. On the first day Basant was slow to eat. On the third there was no swelling in his leg. On the

fifth he went to the market in a lightly loaded cart and was walked unyoked for half the return journey. On the seventh day Kishun came back and said, "He's all right. Bhola really does keep water with him."

Dukhna said only, "Hmm." After that Kishun did not go every day.

A month later, at the Agahan market, Dukhna saw Ramsevak's cart. It carried five baskets of cauliflower and two baskets of greens. Basant was yoked on the right, beside the young ox. His gait was slow but even. Near the market Ramsevak unyoked them both, and Bhola gave them water from a bucket.

Dukhna watched from a distance. Basant did not see him—or, if he did, gave no sign. This time Dukhna was glad of it. The animal had found a new routine; he did not have to carry the debt of the old household with him.

On his way home, Dukhna took down the old bell hanging by the cattle-shed post. He wiped away the dust and set the bell on top of the yoke. Outside, a sack of wheat seed had been opened for sowing. Kishun called to him to come to the field.

Dukhna picked up the sickle and went out. The cattle shed was empty, but now the manger held only as much straw as the cow could eat by evening.

STORY 205

Wages

...

At dawn in Phagun, the earth at the brick kiln was still damp with the night's dew. To the east, a long plume of smoke rose and dissolved into the pale sky. In the grey light, the rows of unbaked bricks looked as though enormous rectangular grids had been drawn upon the ground.

Ramphal Sada pressed the wooden mould into the clay and lifted it away. His wife, Jasoda, packed in the wet earth. Their fourteen-year-old son, Bhola, picked up the bricks released from the mould and laid them in rows. Twelve-year-old Chanda had once helped with the same work, but for the past three weeks she had begun attending a temporary school that ran for two hours every evening beside the kiln.

That morning Chanda was not carrying bricks. In her hand were half a broken pencil and an old slate. She sat at the head of the rows, counting the bricks twenty at a time.

"Five rows done?" Ramphal asked.

"Five rows make one hundred," Chanda said. "It is four hundred and eighty now."

Bhola burst out laughing. "Are we here to make bricks, or to sit your examination?"

Chanda wrote 480 on the slate. "Both."

Ramphal laughed too, but Jasoda did not. She was pleased that Chanda went to the evening school. During their first month at the kiln, Chanda had carried clay all day. Then, one day, a teacher from the nearby primary school had come to the kiln. She had said that for children unable to attend school during the day, there would be evening classes in letters and numbers. Ramphal had initially brushed the idea aside. Jasoda had said, "She will carry less clay for two hours, but she will learn something."

In three weeks Chanda had moved beyond addition and subtraction and was learning multiplication. Numbers felt like a game to her—especially zero. The teacher had explained that when the place value changed, one added a zero: zero was nothing in itself, yet by changing its place it could change the value. Chanda had liked that thought very much.

At the kiln, wages were paid by the thousand bricks. At the beginning of the work period, the contractor had told Ramphal: lay one thousand unbaked bricks and the payment would be six hundred rupees. The work of the whole family would be counted together. Advances, grain and oil taken on credit would be deducted in the final settlement.

Ramphal understood "six hundred." He understood "one thousand" as well. But when the bricks made through the day, the broken bricks, advances, ration credit and weekly payments were all entered together in the ledger, his eyes grew tired. Every evening Harinarayan, who kept the accounts, took small wooden tokens from a red cloth pouch. One token stood for one thousand bricks.

That evening Harinarayan came to Ramphal's section. He looked over the rows of unbaked bricks, measured the spacing at two or three places with his foot, and said, "One thousand complete. The rest tomorrow."

He gave Ramphal one token.

Chanda looked at her slate. It said 1,360.

"Three hundred and sixty?" she asked.

Harinarayan looked at her. "The rest will be added tomorrow."

Below 1,360, Chanda wrote in small letters: "Token 1, remainder 360."

The next day they made 1,420 bricks. In the evening, again, there was one token.

Chanda asked, "Yesterday's three hundred and sixty plus today's four hundred and twenty makes seven hundred and eighty. Where is that written?"

Harinarayan laughed. "Girl, mind your lessons. This is the kiln's accounting."

Ramphal said at once, "Be quiet, Chanda. The people who run the work know the accounts."

Chanda fell silent. On the slate she wrote: "Remainder 780?"

She had only recently learned the question mark.

On the third day there was a light shower. The family hurried to cover the rows with straw so the unbaked bricks would be saved. They made 1,380 bricks that day. Harinarayan again gave one token.

Chanda asked nothing. She only added: 780 and 380—1,160.

By her reckoning, another full thousand had now been completed, with one hundred and sixty left over.

But there were only three wooden tokens.

That night Jasoda sat by the hearth baking rotis. Chanda placed the slate before her.

“Ma, look at this.”

Jasoda could recognise the numerals, but she could not add them. “What am I supposed to see?”

Chanda showed her the entries for the three days. “We have made four thousand one hundred and sixty bricks. The tokens account for three thousand.”

Ramphal heard from outside and came in. “Broken bricks are deducted.”

Chanda said, “The broken ones are in a separate heap. I have not counted them.”

“Then they must know.”

“Shouldn’t we know too?”

Ramphal picked up the slate and looked at it. To him the numerals were signs whose meaning he did not fully command. It was easier to trust Harinarayan’s ledger than Chanda’s small slate. The ledger was thick, bound in covers, and Harinarayan walked about with a pen tucked behind his ear. One corner of Chanda’s slate was broken.

Ramphal handed the slate back. “Count again tomorrow. But do not quarrel with anyone.”

For the next four days Chanda did not quarrel. She only counted.

1,540. 1,290. 1,480. 1,000.

The seven-day total came to 9,470.

Tokens—7.

This time Chanda took her slate to her teacher, Neelam. Neelam checked the addition once more.

“Your addition is correct.”

“Then where did two thousand four hundred and seventy bricks go?”

Neelam did not answer at once. She asked, “How did you count these numbers?”

Chanda explained the arrangement of the rows—twenty in one row, five rows to one hundred; broken bricks separated after they were made. Neelam said, “Look only at your own family’s account. Do not draw conclusions about anyone else. And do not call anyone a thief without proof.”

Chanda had not used the word “thief,” but her face grew hot.

The next day she said to Ramphal, “Will you agree to one thing today?”

“Say it. What is it?”

“After one thousand is complete, let us keep the leftover bricks in a separate row.”

Ramphal scratched his head. “That will take space.”

“For one day.”

Jasoda said, “Let her do it.”

That day the family made 1,260 bricks. The first thousand were laid in the usual rows. Chanda placed the remaining 260 in two short rows apart from the rest. On the corner of the first brick she made a small circular mark with her finger.

In the evening Harinarayan gave them one token.

“These two hundred and sixty tomorrow?” Chanda asked.

“Yes, tomorrow.”

The next day the family made 1,480 bricks. Chanda combined the previous day’s 260 with the first 740 of the new day and said to Ramphal, “This is one thousand complete.”

This time Ramphal counted them himself. Twenty to a row. Five rows to one hundred. One hundred ten times. Exactly one thousand.

The remaining 740 from the new day stayed separate.

In the evening Harinarayan came. He counted the new day’s rows and gave one token.

Ramphal asked, “And the token for this separate thousand?”

Harinarayan’s eyes went to the brick with the circular mark. “That was yesterday’s remainder.”

“Yesterday you said it would be added today.”

“It must have been added.”

“Where is it written?”

Harinarayan opened the ledger. Beside Ramphal’s name were seven short strokes. He had just drawn the eighth.

“See? Everything is written.”

Chanda did not bend over the ledger. She pointed instead to the separate thousand bricks on the ground. “Which stroke is for this thousand?”

Harinarayan’s voice hardened. “Will a child teach me accounts?”

Ramphal would normally have silenced her, but this time he had counted that separate thousand himself. He said, “Not the child. I counted these bricks.”

Two families working nearby stopped and began listening. Jasoda said quietly, “Ask about our account first, not theirs.”

Ramphal did just that. “Today we need two tokens. One for the new thousand, and one for the thousand completed by combining yesterday’s and today’s remainder. Seven hundred and four ten—” He stopped.

Chanda corrected him softly, “Seven hundred and forty.”

Ramphal repeated, “Seven hundred and forty will remain for tomorrow.”

Harinarayan shut the ledger. “Speak to the owner.”

The kiln owner arrived after dusk. His name was Shivkant Chaudhary. He first heard Harinarayan, then Ramphal. At last he looked at Chanda’s slate—the numbers for seven days, the number of tokens, and the total written below.

“Are the bricks for all those days still separately identifiable?” he asked.

Chanda said, “Not for the first seven days. Today’s and yesterday’s are.”

Shivkant had the separate thousand counted again. This time Harinarayan did not count them; two labourers did. The full thousand was there.

Harinarayan said, “If we keep every day’s remainder separate, the whole yard will fill up.”

For the first time Chanda spoke in front of the owner. “There is no need to keep them separate. Write the remainder on paper. Add it the next day.”

Harinarayan looked at her.

Shivkant asked, “Where did you learn this?”

“At the evening school.”

“Multiplication too?”

“I am learning it now.”

Shivkant did not smile. He turned to Ramphal. “The heaps from the previous seven days have been mixed. A complete verification is difficult now.”

Ramphal’s face tightened.

“But the thousand from yesterday and today is clear,” Shivkant continued. “Give them its token. From now on, the remainder will be entered in the ledger.”

“And the old amount?” Jasoda asked.

Shivkant was silent for a moment. “Whatever can be proved with certainty will be added. I will not reopen the previous month merely on someone’s word.”

It was not complete justice. Ramphal understood that. Jasoda did too. Chanda understood it most clearly of all—9,470 still stood on her slate, but the bricks from those first seven days had already been mixed among the rows of other families, and the proof was gone.

That night eight families from the kiln gathered outside Ramphal's hut, bringing their wooden tokens and whatever estimates they had of the day's work. Chanda did not make anyone's account for them. She only kept asking, "How many full thousands today? What was the remainder?" Where someone did not know, she left a blank beside the name.

The next morning, before beginning work, all eight families said that the remainder must first be written down.

For half an hour the moulds lay empty.

The clay was ready. The carts had already unloaded earth. The sun was climbing. If the prepared clay lay too long, its moisture would change. Shivkant came again.

This time the new arrangement was simple. Beside Ramphal's name in the ledger, two columns were made: "Full thousands" and "Remainder." The wooden tokens remained as before, but at the end of each day the remainder was spoken aloud and entered in front of the labourer. The next day's first count began from that same remainder.

On the first day under the new system, Ramphal's ledger read: full thousands 1, remainder 740.

On the second new day they made 1,310 bricks. Add 740 and the total was 2,050. They received two tokens. Remainder 50.

Ramphal stood for a long while looking at the tokens in his hand. Then he gave them to Chanda.

"Count."

Chanda counted the two tokens. "Two."

"What is the remainder?"

"Fifty."

Ramphal looked at Harinarayan. "Is fifty written?"

Harinarayan turned the ledger around and showed him. 50 was written there.

At the end of that week, the wages for the clearly verified thousand from the two disputed days were added separately. The full discrepancy from the old seven days was never recovered. Shivkant added the money corresponding to the two days for which there was clear proof; about the rest he said, "There is no count."

Ramphal argued, but after half an hour he fell silent. He knew that some of the money had again been buried in the clay. But this time he knew where the clay was.

At the evening school, Neelam looked at Chanda's slate. The old line, 9,470, was still there. Beneath it Chanda had written the new calculation:

$$\begin{array}{rcccccc} 740 & & + & & 1,310 & = & 2,050 \\ 2 & & & & & & \text{thousand} \\ \text{Remainder } 50 & & & & & & \end{array}$$

Neelam asked, "Now do you understand how zero changes place?"

Chanda smiled. "Not zero. The remainder changes."

On the way home she put the slate into her cloth bag. At the kiln, Ramphal and Jasoda were covering the clay for the next day. Bhola was washing the empty moulds.

In the distance Harinarayan sat at his table closing the ledger. Beside Ramphal's name, the words "Remainder 50" remained written.

Chanda read the number once. Fifty was not a very large number. But for the first time, it had not disappeared anywhere.

STORY 206

The Aadhaar Thumbprint

...

The morning sun had not yet reached the tin awning of the ration shop, but a queue had already formed in front of it. Some people carried cloth bags, some old sacks, some brass measures. Phulmanti Devi stood quietly with a small cloth pouch pressed under her arm. Inside it were a thin Aadhaar card, the ration slip, and two one-rupee coins.

When her turn came, the shopkeeper, Ghanshyam, looked at the register.

“Phulmanti Devi?”

“Yes.”

“Place your thumb here.”

Phulmanti placed her right thumb on the glass of the fingerprint device lying on the table. A small light came on and went out. Ghanshyam said again, “A little straighter.”

Phulmanti tried again.

The device rejected it again.

“Left thumb.”

That failed too.

Then, one by one, the other fingers were tried. The pads of Phulmanti’s fingers had grown smooth. Sixty-five years had passed transplanting paddy, cutting hemp, patting cow-dung cakes into shape, kneading wet earth. The ridges were now so faint that though her hand rested on the glass, the machine seemed to read an empty space.

The queue behind her was growing.

Ghanshyam wiped the glass of the device with a cloth. “One more time.”

Phulmanti placed her thumb on it.

Failure again.

Ramcharit Paswan, standing behind her, had been watching everything. His bag was torn halfway through, an old gamchha wrapped around his head. There were four people in his household. The previous week his younger son had only just recovered from fever; at home, even the rice was being measured out carefully from meal to meal.

Ghanshyam said quietly, "It isn't working today. The day after tomorrow is the exception-verification day. We'll try another method then."

Phulmanti understood, but did not move the pouch from under her arm.

"I won't get the grain today?"

"Unless your name opens on this machine, I cannot record the distribution."

The shop assistant, Lalan, looked toward the queue. The crowd was increasing. He knew Ramcharit. Coming close, he said softly, "Your thumb reads well. Let me issue your grain first; then we'll think of something."

When Ramcharit's turn came, he placed his thumb on the device. The light turned green on the first attempt. His rice and wheat were weighed out. As he tied his bag, Lalan leaned near his ear and said,

"There is one way. We can give the old mother her grain now. You put your thumb again. I'll balance the account later."

Ramcharit's hand stopped on the knot of his bag.

"Her grain against my thumb?"

"Would you send her home hungry? We'll set the accounts right later."

Phulmanti stood holding her pouch in both hands. She had not heard the whole conversation, but she kept looking at Ramcharit's face.

Ramcharit's first thought was not pity. His first thought was that it would be easy. He would place his thumb, the old mother would take the grain, and the crowd would move on.

The second thought came at once: against whose grain would his thumb now be recorded? And what if, next time, the quantity allotted to his own family appeared reduced? Lalan was saying that the account would be adjusted, but once a line had been entered on paper, who would ever understand whose line it was?

Ramcharit lifted his bag.

"No," he said.

Lalan was startled. "The old mother will get her grain."

"But the thumb will be mine."

"Then?"

Ramcharit did not answer. He went over to Phulmanti.

"Mother, can you come again the day after tomorrow?"

Phulmanti did not smile. "If my legs carry me, I'll come. But there is only enough rice at home for tonight."

The bag under Ramcharit's arm suddenly felt heavy.

The road home was half a kos. Phulmanti walked slowly. Ramcharit would go a little ahead, then stop. Twice he offered to carry her bag; Phulmanti refused.

Ramcharit's house came first, near the pipal tree in the middle of the village. He asked Phulmanti to sit on the veranda.

Ramcharit's wife, Basanti, came out from the kitchen. "Back so soon?"

Ramcharit opened his bag. He did not at once divide the newly issued rice in half. First he checked what remained in the earthen storage bin at home. There were about two seers of rice at the bottom. With the new rice added, the household could manage for two weeks—if no one fell ill, if no guest arrived, if wage work did not stop in between.

He took out the brass measure.

Basanti understood. "How much will you give?"

"Two seers."

"And our house?"

"Until the day after tomorrow."

Basanti looked at Phulmanti. The old woman sat at the edge of the veranda as though the conversation were not about her.

Basanti was silent for a few moments. "Write it down as a loan."

Ramcharit looked at her.

"If you call it charity, Mother won't take it," Basanti said.

Phulmanti spoke at once. "I won't take charity."

Ramcharit laughed. "A loan. Two seers. When you get your grain the day after tomorrow, return it."

Phulmanti opened her pouch and tried to take out the two coins.

Basanti closed her hand around them. "This rice is not for sale."

Two seers of rice went into Phulmanti's bag. On an old wooden board, Ramcharit wrote in chalk: "Phulmanti—2 seers." He hung the board from a beam in the kitchen.

"Why is there any need to write so much?" Phulmanti asked.

"So that it does not turn into charity."

For the first time Phulmanti gave a faint smile.

That night Ramcharit lay awake for a long time. His younger son turned in his sleep and asked for water. Basanti opened the grain bin and looked at the measure of rice inside.

"What if the machine still does not read her the day after tomorrow?"

Ramcharit said, "Then the account of two seers will run longer."

“If you had simply put your thumb on it, she would have received her grain today.”

After a while Ramcharit said, “She would have received it today, but tomorrow the paper would say that my thumb was her stomach. I did not like that.”

Basanti kept gathering the ash from the hearth. She neither agreed nor objected.

The day after tomorrow, Ramcharit reached Phulmanti’s house at dawn. That day he was supposed to get work cutting earth beside the river. If he missed half the day, half a day’s wages would be lost. Before he left home, Basanti had counted it out plainly: if he earned a full day’s wage, they could buy oil, salt, and medicine for the younger boy that evening; if half the wage was lost, the oil would have to wait until the following week.

Ramcharit stood at the doorway for a few moments. To him this was not a matter that could be settled simply by saying, “She is a neighbour.” The needs of his own household were real too. Phulmanti came out leaning on her stick and said, “Why should you come? I can get there. Yesterday you gave me two seers; today will you lose half a day’s work as well?”

Ramcharit took his spade down from the beam, then hung it back again. “The earth will still be there to cut half a day later. If your finger fails again, there should be someone with you to hear what is said.”

There were fewer people at the shop that day. A block-office employee sat with Ghanshyam. The names of those whose fingerprints repeatedly failed were being entered on a separate sheet. The employee matched Phulmanti’s Aadhaar number, checked her previous distribution record, and then another method of verification was tried.

Phulmanti’s thumb failed again.

Her aged fingers too were placed on the glass, one after another, but the light turned red each time.

The employee said, “The ridges on the fingers have worn down. In this situation we will use alternative verification.”

Ramcharit listened carefully. He did not fully understand how many rules the process contained. But this time no one asked for his thumb.

After a while, distribution was approved against Phulmanti’s name. Ghanshyam opened the sack. Rice was weighed out, then wheat. When Phulmanti tried to lift the bag, Ramcharit picked it up and carried it outside.

Lalan stood by a post of the shop. Smiling, he said, “See? It only took two days longer.”

Ramcharit replied, "It took longer, but each thumb remained its own."

Lalan's smile faded. There was no argument.

On the road Phulmanti stopped Ramcharit. "Your house first."

"Let us get your grain home first."

"I owe two seers."

"Give it in the evening."

"A loan does not have an evening."

They reached Ramcharit's house. Basanti brought out the brass measure. From her newly received rice Phulmanti measured two seers and placed it before the storage bin. She tried to add one extra handful on top.

Basanti stopped her hand. "Two seers are written."

Phulmanti let the handful fall back into her own bag.

Ramcharit took down the wooden board. Across the line "Phulmanti—2 seers," he drew one straight stroke of chalk.

Phulmanti asked, "Why don't you erase it?"

Ramcharit hung the board back from the beam. "There are other accounts written on it. I'll erase it this evening."

Phulmanti lifted her bag. Ramcharit walked with her as far as the doorway.

That evening he returned home with half a day's wages from cutting earth. The money was less. Basanti counted it and put it in the kitchen tin. No one came to praise the decision. Phulmanti did not come to offer thanks either.

On the next month's distribution day, Ramcharit stood in the queue when his turn came. Phulmanti was ahead of him. Her thumb again failed on the first attempt. Without fuss, Ghanshyam took out the sheet for alternative verification.

Ramcharit set his bag on the ground.

Phulmanti turned back and said, "Keep an eye on your own bag. I'll look after my turn now."

Ramcharit laughed and remained standing in the queue.

The glass of the device on the table shone. The ridges of Phulmanti's thumb were still faint. Ramcharit stood in the queue with his hand resting on the knot of his own bag; his thumb remained far from the machine.

STORY 207

The Maize Field

...

The Bhadon night was cloudless, but the air was heavy. Whenever the maize leaves rubbed against one another, a rustling ran far across the field. At the far edge of Barail village lay fourteen kathas of land belonging to Maheshwar Mahato. South of the field was a belt of scrub, and beyond it an old drainage channel. For three nights, wild boars had been coming in from that side.

Maheshwar sat on a bamboo watch-platform in the middle of the field. Beside him lay a stout bamboo staff, an old iron plate, and two handfuls of dry clods of earth. In the other corner of the platform his sixteen-year-old son Ratan sat with his knees drawn up. In the light of a small lantern, his practice notebook lay open.

Maheshwar said quietly, “The rustle of pages muffles what the ears need to hear.”

Ratan held the page still. “My mathematics test is tomorrow, Babu.”

“The test will be in the daytime. The field is here at night.”

“School by day, work at home in the evening, the field at night—when am I supposed to study?”

Maheshwar did not answer. He kept looking towards the darkness in the south.

The first boars had entered the previous Monday. Seven plants had been uprooted. On the second night five cobs were found half-eaten. On the third night Maheshwar had heard them and reached the field in time, but one row had still been trampled. The maize was not yet fully ripe. The kernels were between the milky stage and hardness; it was precisely then that wild boars came most eagerly for the grain.

That year Maheshwar had sold the paddy left in the house to buy fertiliser for this field. Twice he had hired labourers for weeding. Because he no longer owned a pair of bullocks, the first ploughing had been done by tractor. These fourteen kathas of maize were not merely cobs to him; they were the household’s assurance of expenses until Agahan.

Ratan’s Class Ten examinations were also close. For two weeks the teachers at school had been giving practice tests. Ratan had not spoken at first of bringing his books to the watch-platform at night. The first night he had only

kept watch. On the second, when his eyes kept closing again and again, he brought a book so that reading might help him stay awake.

Maheshwar did not like the arrangement.

“You cannot study while keeping watch,” he said.

Ratan answered softly, “And my studies cannot continue if I leave the books and spend the nights keeping watch.”

Maheshwar’s hand tightened around the staff. “If the field is not saved, where will I get the money for your studies?”

Ratan closed the notebook. His voice was clear in the darkness. “To save my studies I watch the field, and to save the field I give up my studies—this arithmetic makes no sense to me.”

Maheshwar turned sharply towards him. “You have begun to understand a great deal of arithmetic.”

At that very moment the leaves to the south moved all at once.

Maheshwar sprang up. He struck the iron plate with his staff—clang, clang, clang. Ratan lowered the lantern wick and slipped his notebook into the cloth bag. A heavy rustling came from the side of the channel. Maheshwar climbed down from the platform and ran south.

“Stay where you are!” he called to Ratan.

But Ratan climbed down on the other side. Running along the field ridge, he reached the eastern edge and began beating the leaves with a bamboo pole. In the darkness three dense shadows broke through the rows and fled towards the channel. One smaller boar turned back in the middle; Maheshwar hurled a clod of earth. It missed, but the animal too veered towards the scrub.

Ten minutes later the field was quiet again.

Maheshwar lifted the lantern and examined the southern rows. Eleven plants were bent over. Three cobs had broken off and lay on the ground. He picked one up and pressed a kernel. Instead of milk, thick sap came out.

“See?” he said. “You kept your eyes buried in that book for so long.”

Ratan was still breathing hard. “The book was already closed when the boars came.”

“I heard the leaves first.”

“Then why did you not stop them?”

Maheshwar fell silent.

Ratan sat down beside a broken plant. “Babu, I am not running away from the work of the field. I will work in the daytime. I will be here for the harvest. I

was here for the weeding. But if I sit here every night, my examinations will suffer.”

Maheshwar said, “Farming watches day and night. It does not look at the clock.”

Ratan replied, “The school will hold its examination on its own day too. It will not change the date because of the field.”

They climbed back onto the platform. This time Ratan did not open the notebook. The lantern remained between them. No boar came again during the rest of the night, but neither of them slept properly.

In the first light of dawn Maheshwar walked around the field. The two rows along the southern edge bore the most marks. The scrub stood so close to the field that the boars could slip in under cover of the leaves and become visible from the platform only when they were already inside.

Ratan went home. Before leaving for school he still had to bathe, eat rice, and go over two chapters of mathematics once more.

Maheshwar remained in the field.

When the sun rose higher, he began examining the cobs on the first southern row one by one. Some had already filled out completely; others were still soft. They needed another eight or ten days to ripen fully. He sat for a long time on the ridge, looking at the distance between the drainage channel, the scrub, and the watch-platform.

When he reached home at midday, Pano Devi asked, “How much went again today?”

“Eleven plants.”

“Will Ratan go again tomorrow?”

Maheshwar drank water from the earthen pitcher and said, “No.”

Pano Devi understood that he was speaking out of anger. She said nothing.

That afternoon Maheshwar returned to the field with a sickle. He began cutting the cobs from the first two southern rows that were mature enough to be sold as green maize in the market. He left the very soft ones. Those whose kernels had filled out he piled together.

When Ratan came back from school, he found his father cutting cobs.

“Already?” he asked in surprise.

Maheshwar cut through a leaf with the sickle. “If they ripen fully they will fetch a better price. But if the southern strip is opened up, I will be able to see the scrub clearly from the platform.”

Ratan looked at the pile. “How much will we lose?”

“There will be a loss.”

“Then—”

“You will stay at home tonight.”

Ratan wanted to say something, but Maheshwar bent and took hold of the next plant. Ratan picked up the basket and walked towards the first pile.

By evening the two thin southern rows had been opened up in patches. Pano Devi and Ratan carried the cobs home in baskets. The next day Lalan, who sold roasted maize at the crossroads, took the pile at a lower price. Maheshwar did not bargain for long. He knew the cobs would have fetched more if allowed to ripen fully, but time was no longer something he had.

That night Maheshwar went alone to the watch-platform.

He did not light the lantern on the southern side. Even in the pale moonlight the cleared strip was visible. After midnight the scrub stirred. Maheshwar saw the boars before they could enter under cover of the leaves. He beat the iron plate, climbed down to the ridge, and threw two clods. The rustling inside the scrub retreated.

At home Ratan continued his mathematics practice. Now and then the sound of the iron plate came from far away and his hand paused. Then he bent over the page again.

The same pattern continued for the next three nights. One night the wild boars came in from the east and trampled four plants. Maheshwar slept less; his body grew tired. But he did not call Ratan back to the platform.

On the fourth morning Ratan came to the field carrying milk. Maheshwar was sitting on the ladder of the platform. His eyes were red.

Ratan said, “Tonight I can stay until midnight.”

Maheshwar took the lota of milk. “Your examination is tomorrow.”

“The examination is in the afternoon.”

“Even so.”

Ratan ran a hand over the bamboo of the platform. “The field is not yours alone.”

Maheshwar drank the milk and said, “Nor are your studies yours alone. The household’s money goes into them.”

He set the lota down on the ridge. After a while he said, “Let the examination finish. After that, there will be no leave during the harvest.”

Ratan smiled. “Harvesting happens in the daytime.”

Maheshwar could not suppress a smile either. “You understand a great deal of arithmetic.”

Ten days later the maize was harvested. The two southern rows had already been thinned by the early picking, four plants on the eastern side had been trampled by the boars, and the crop in the middle had done well. The grain came to roughly one sack less than Maheshwar had first estimated.

On the day the cobs were shelled in the courtyard, Ratan was at home, his examination finished. He kept beating the dried cobs with a wooden mallet. Pano Devi gathered the kernels. Maheshwar filled the sacks.

The fifth sack remained half full.

Ratan said, "If the southern rows had remained, this one would have filled too."

Maheshwar straightened the sack. "Those rows were sold earlier."

He twisted a jute cord and tied the mouth of the sack tight.

After a while he asked, "When is your next examination?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Shell the rest of the cobs tomorrow morning. From the afternoon, look at your books."

Ratan raised the mallet again. "All right."

The watch-platform still stood in the field. Taking it down was on the list of tasks for after the harvest. The old iron plate remained hanging from the bamboo; when the wind touched it, it gave a very faint sound, but now there was no maize left in the field for the boars to come and eat.

STORY 208

The Flood Loan

...

By the first week of Ashwin, the water of the Kamala River had receded, but the fields of Belahi village were still full of the marks left by the flood. On the northern wall of Lakshman Mahato's house, muddy water had left a line a handspan high. Two old sacks of paddy kept in a corner of the courtyard had rotted, and only the seed grain raised onto a bamboo platform had survived.

When Lakshman returned from inspecting the fields that morning, drying silt clung to his feet. His wife, Sarju Devi, was sitting beside the hearth. She asked, "How much of the land is fit for sowing?"

Lakshman wiped his feet with his gamchha. "The upper five kathas. Once the soil in the middle dries, another seven. Water is still trapped in the southern part."

On the night of the flood they had climbed onto the roof. When the water fell in the morning, Lakshman had first opened the cowshed, then checked the grain store. The sacks of paddy kept lower down had swollen; the moment he touched them, a sour smell rose. Sarju Devi had spread the wet grain across the courtyard in an attempt to save it, but two days later more than half had to be thrown away. That day Lakshman had said for the first time, "The crop is drowned, let it be drowned. We must not let the seed for the next sowing drown." Sarju Devi had replied, "First there must be a next sowing."

"The seed?"

"What remains in the house is enough for five kathas."

Sarju Devi understood that this was not the whole matter. There was little wheat seed in the small storeroom, fodder for the oxen was running short, and the field embankment had broken in three places. The flood had not merely taken away a crop; it had also cut away the means of beginning the next one.

That afternoon, people from the agricultural cooperative society were seated on the veranda of the panchayat building. For two days the village had been talking about an emergency post-flood loan. Lakshman went as well. The veranda smelled of wet footwear, mud, and old sacks. Behind a table, the society secretary, Shambhunath Jha, was writing down names.

When Lakshman's turn came, Shambhunath said, "You can get up to thirty thousand rupees. The first installment of principal will be due after six months."

Lakshman immediately asked, “Nothing has to be paid for six months?”

Shambhunath pushed his spectacles up and looked at him. “No principal. Interest starts from the day you draw the loan.”

Lakshman was silent for a moment.

“The rate is written here,” Shambhunath said. “Understand it before you sign.”

Lakshman could read. He went slowly through the page. He understood the figures, understood the dates, and understood this as well: the installment of principal was postponed for six months, the interest was not. Even so, he signed. Without money, the next crop could not even begin.

Before taking the loan, Lakshman had once counted the cash kept in an old brass box at home. There were four thousand three hundred rupees. That would barely cover two months of food, oil, salt, and animal fodder. It could not pay for embankment repairs, seed, and the plough all at once. That was why, even after understanding the interest, he could not step back from the loan. He did not mistake the money for something free; the difficulty was simply that the cost of beginning the next harvest had to be paid before the hunger of the present could be met.

Three days later thirty thousand rupees came into his account. In the very first week, more than half of it went toward wages for rebuilding the embankment, fodder for the oxen, wheat seed, lentil seed, and repairs to the plough. Counting the remaining money, Sarju Devi said, “The moment one heard the word relief, one imagined some of the weight would be lifted.”

Lakshman said, “The weight has been lifted. Without this, the fields would have remained empty.”

“But this weight will return.”

Lakshman gave no answer.

By the end of Kartik, the soil was ready for sowing. Lakshman had planned to put wheat in twelve kathas and lentils in four. But one evening, sitting on the field ridge, he changed the calculation. When he returned home, he told Sarju Devi, “We will put green peas in three kathas.”

Sarju Devi asked, “Less wheat?”

“Yes, three kathas less.”

“Why peas?”

“The peas will sell earlier.”

Sarju Devi understood at once. “The interest?”

Lakshman kept looking toward the ridge. “The wheat will come in Chaitra. The society says the interest is due in Phagun.”

“The money from the peas will not stay in the house?”

“Some of it will. But that comes first.”

Sarju Devi said nothing that night. The next day she herself sat down to sort the pea seed. The grains were divided into two heaps: the full, shining ones for sowing; the small and cracked ones for the animals.

On the day of sowing, Lakshman marked off the three-katha pea plot separately. As he turned the oxen, his younger brother Nandu asked, “Why no wheat here?”

Lakshman said, “This patch will produce the money for Phagun.”

Nandu laughed. “Does the field understand dates too?”

Lakshman replied, “If I fail to understand them, the interest will.”

Nandu said nothing more. He knocked the soil from the ploughshare and opened the next furrow.

In Agahan the fields turned green: thin rows of wheat, the low growth of lentils, and the three kathas of peas growing quickly. For the first time since the flood, Lakshman saw such greenness in the fields that it held the eye. Yet when he looked at the pea plot, he was not counting flowers; he was counting the date in Phagun.

Others in the village had taken loans as well. One repaired a roof, another fixed an irrigation machine, another bought seed. The loan came up again and again in conversation at the crossroads. To some it was the means of beginning life again; to others, the next burden. Lakshman did not argue. To him it was both.

At the end of Paush, the first picking of peas began. Sarju Devi, Lakshman, and his sister-in-law reached the field while it was still dark. The leaves were wet with dew. As the baskets filled, Sarju Devi said once, “This year we will hardly get to eat the peas ourselves.”

Lakshman tried to smile. “Keep two baskets.”

“Will two baskets reduce the interest?”

“No. The account will follow its own road.”

“Then we will keep only one.”

Lakshman said nothing.

The peas went to the market at the crossroads. The first lot fetched a good price, but the quantity was small. In the second week the price fell. In the third, the trader said that peas from all the surrounding villages had arrived at once. Lakshman could not take the baskets back home; if green peas were held back, their value would fall further.

Over the days of selling peas, Lakshman gradually understood one thing: profit was not measured only by how much a field produced; when the produce was sold mattered as well. At the first market, five baskets had brought as much as seven baskets did at the third. Hearing the account, Sarju Devi said, “So grow early, pick early, and still depend on the market’s mood?”

Lakshman said, “Farming already depended on the sky’s mood. Now add the market’s mood too.”

On the first Monday of Phagun, he went to the society. Shambhunath opened the ledger and told him the amount due. Lakshman opened his cloth bag and placed the notes on the table. Most of the money from three pickings of peas and two smaller market days went across that table.

After counting it, Shambhunath said, “The interest is paid in full.”

Lakshman asked, “And the principal?”

“Still thirty thousand.”

Lakshman asked again, as though he had not heard properly the first time. “Even after paying this much?”

Shambhunath looked at him. “That was interest. Installments on the principal begin next month.”

Lakshman’s hand remained inside the cloth bag. Seven hundred rupees had been kept there for the household. Outside on the veranda, two farmers waited for their turns. Lakshman tied the bag shut.

On the way home, he stopped beside the pea field. The plants in the three-katha plot had thinned now. A few flowers still remained, but the first fierce greenness was gone. Beside it the wheat stood dense. Lakshman remained on the ridge, looking at the difference between the two plots.

In the evening Sarju Devi asked, “How much is left?”

“Seven hundred.”

“And the interest?”

“Paid.”

“The principal?”

“Just as it was.”

Sarju Devi pushed a piece of wood farther into the hearth. After a few moments she said, “Then the peas went into the interest.”

Lakshman said, “If there had been no peas, the interest would have been added to the principal.”

Sarju Devi said, “Yes. Added to the principal.”

This time only the sound of the wood in the hearth remained between them.

In Chaitra the wheat was harvested. The loss of three kathas of wheat became clear as the sacks were filled. Lakshman filled eleven sacks completely; the twelfth was a little more than half full. He estimated that if wheat had stood where the peas had been, the household grain store would have held two more sacks. But without the money from the peas, he could not have paid the interest in Phagun.

After the harvest, the date for the first installment of principal arrived. Lakshman sold three sacks of wheat and paid the installment. This time, after leaving the society, he did not go straight home. He stopped at the bamboo shop at the crossroads and bought four thick bamboo poles.

Seeing the bamboo, Sarju Devi asked, "Why this expense now?"

Lakshman said, "We will build a new platform above the courtyard storeroom."

"For what?"

"For seed. Paddy, wheat, lentils—whatever is meant for the next year."

Sarju Devi understood. The old platform had been low; during this flood, the water had risen almost to its underside. Together they fastened the new platform high against the wall. Old planks were cut and laid across it. The earthen jars of seed were lifted up.

One evening in Jeth, Lakshman went to the fields. The three-katha pea plot lay empty; nothing more would be planted there until the next season. Wheat stubble rustled across the rest of the land. He sat on the ridge and looked back toward the village. From that distance, the muddy flood-line on the wall of his house could not be seen, but he remembered its height.

The rains would come again. The loan installment would come again as well. Lakshman rose and walked home.

When he reached the courtyard, Sarju Devi was arranging the seed jars on the upper platform. The old storeroom below was half empty. Above, the jars stood in a row. Without saying anything, Lakshman checked one of the bamboo joints with his hand, then looked from the old flood-line on the wall up to the planks of the new platform.

STORY 209

The Little Teacher

...

In the western hamlet of Sirsiya village stood an old oil press. The circular track where the bullock once walked had long ago been filled with earth, but the veranda remained—three bamboo posts, a tiled roof, and one thin wall. Every evening at five, eleven children spread mats on that veranda and sat down. Upendra sat before them.

Upendra was a graduate. He had earned his degree three years earlier, and since then, wherever an application had opened—in the district offices, the block, the railways, the postal department, a cooperative institution—he had kept applying. In some written examinations his name reached the first list; in others, it did not. Once he made it as far as an interview, but no job came of it.

The village respected his education, but noticed his unemployment even more.

“The big masters are at the school,” someone would say at the crossroads. “This little master looks after children in the evenings.”

The name had begun as a joke. Slowly, it stuck.

Upendra did not object. The agreed monthly fee was thirty rupees per child, but the full amount rarely came in. One child’s father worked for daily wages, another’s mother laboured in the fields; in some homes there was money one month and none the next. Upendra kept no ledger. On the first day he had written down only the children’s names and classes; after that, the matter of fees remained a spoken understanding.

Of the eleven children, Gauri was the quietest.

She was in Class Seven. She could read a lesson, and if an answer could be found in the book, she could write it down too. But if someone said, “Explain it in your own words,” her eyes would come to rest on the page.

During the first week, Upendra one day had her close the book.

“Now tell me in one sentence what you have just read.”

Gauri was silent.

“Do not open the book.”

Her fingers rested on the cover.

“Say the first word that comes to mind.”

After a long while she said, “Seed.”

“Good. What happened to the seed?”

“A sprout came out.”

“Why?”

Gauri fell silent again.

Chhotan, sitting behind her, began to laugh. Upendra did not rebuke him. He merely asked, “Do you know the answer?”

Chhotan went quiet at once.

Upendra had brought a small earthen bowl of chickpeas that he had soaked two days earlier. He placed it before Gauri.

“Look at this. Not the sentence in the book. Tell me what you can see.”

Gauri picked up one chickpea. A tiny white root had emerged from it.

“It has burst open from inside.”

“That is enough. Now a second sentence.”

That was how Upendra’s evening lessons went. He had made one rule: before the lesson ended, for ten minutes one child would explain to another one thing learned that day. Whoever could not explain it would ask again. There was no punishment and no applause.

At first, the children waited for those ten minutes chiefly because they expected a chance to laugh. After a few weeks, the laughter lessened. The child who laughed at someone today knew that tomorrow his own turn would come.

Gauri’s father, Sahdev Mandal, was not greatly impressed by these lessons.

He worked as an agricultural labourer and grew vegetables in the half-katha patch beside his courtyard. He had two younger sons. When Gauri returned home, she helped her mother with the evening meal and then looked through her little brothers’ books.

Two months later, Sahdev came to Upendra’s veranda.

“Master, Gauri’s marks have not gone up.”

Upendra asked, “How many did she get?”

“Forty-one last time. Forty-three this time.”

“They went up by two.”

“Thirty rupees a month for two marks?”

Upendra remained silent.

Sahdev said, “I am not saying that she should stop studying. She will keep going to school. But there is work at home in the evenings too.”

Gauri was sitting on the mat. Her eyes were lowered.

Upendra said quietly, "Give it one more month. I cannot promise you marks."

"Then what can you promise?"

"Nothing. After one month, you can see for yourself."

A faint displeasure crossed Sahdev's face. "You sit for job examinations too, don't you?"

"I do."

"Have you passed one?"

The question was direct. Upendra answered just as directly. "Not yet."

Sahdev said, "Hm," and left.

That night Upendra sat for a long time with a copy of an application form before him. The following week there was a district-level clerical examination. On the lesson veranda he told the children, "Say it in your own words." Yet in what words he himself would explain his own life was not clear to him.

There was no evening lesson on the day of the examination.

The next day the children asked, "How did it go?"

Upendra said, "I answered the questions I understood. The ones I did not understand, I left."

Chhotan asked, "You leave questions too?"

"Yes."

For the first time, Gauri smiled faintly.

Two weeks later the result came. Upendra's name was not on the list.

The news reached the crossroads before it reached his home. Four young men had applied; one was selected, three were not. But Upendra taught children, so his failure was more visible to people.

That evening, someone at the tea stall joked, "Now the Little Master can at least make the little children pass their examinations."

Upendra heard him. He did not stop.

That day Gauri was already seated on the veranda. Beside her was her younger brother Manoj, who usually stayed at home.

"Why is he here?" Upendra asked.

Gauri said, "Mother has gone to the fields. He could not be left alone at home."

"Then let him sit."

That day's lesson was fractions: one-half, one-fourth, three-fourths.

Upendra drew a circle on the ground like a round roti. Then he divided it into four parts.

“If three parts are coloured, how much is that?”

Chhotan answered at once, “Three-fourths.”

“Why?”

Chhotan stopped.

Gauri said slowly, “The whole thing has been divided into four equal parts. Three of those parts have been taken.”

Upendra did not interrupt her.

“And two parts?”

“One-half. Because two out of four are equal to half.”

Upendra said only, “Yes.”

Manoj, who was younger than the children in that class, began drawing four sections in the earth with his finger.

In the final ten minutes that day, it was Gauri’s turn. She had to explain fractions to Chhotan. At first she tried to open the book, then closed it herself.

“Four rotis were made in your house,” she said. “You ate two. What part did you eat?”

Chhotan said, “Half.”

“Why?”

Chhotan laughed. “Now I understand.”

Three days before the month was complete, Sahdev, returning from the fields, stopped near the veranda. He did not come inside. He stood behind a bamboo post and listened.

At that moment Gauri was explaining the difference between a river and a pond to Sita, who was in Class Five. Her sentences were not from the book. Now and then she stopped, searched for another word, and continued. Sita asked a question. Gauri explained again.

Sahdev said nothing. He quietly went home.

The next morning, Gauri’s mother Sarita came to Upendra’s house. In her hands were a bottle gourd and a small bag of peas.

“We could not collect the full money this month,” she said. “Keep these.”

Upendra did not take the bag. “Pay whenever it comes together.”

Sarita set the bag down on the veranda. “This is not the fee. It is from the field. We have more at home.”

She turned to leave, then stopped.

“Sahdev says Gauri will not stop the evening lessons.”

Upendra only nodded.

“Did her marks go up?”

Sarita laughed. “He did not say anything about that.”

She left.

The following week, Ramapati Babu, the language teacher at the school, met Upendra at the market. The two already knew each other.

Ramapati Babu said, “Gauri studies with you, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Earlier she memorised answers, but if you questioned her she fell silent. Now, even when her answer is wrong, she explains her reason. That is a good change.”

Without thinking, Upendra asked, “Her marks?”

Ramapati Babu laughed. “You worry about marks too?”

They went their separate ways.

In Phagun there was a wedding in the village. Two appointed teachers from the school were seated on chairs near the raised platform. Upendra was with the young men of his own age, helping lay out leaf plates for the meal.

Someone called to him from a distance, “Little Master, put these four wooden stools over there.”

He carried the stools over and arranged them.

As evening fell, he found Gauri, Chhotan, and Sita in an empty veranda behind the wedding house. All three had books in their hands.

Upendra was surprised. “There is no lesson today.”

Chhotan said, “We know.”

“Then why the books?”

Gauri said, “We gave three different answers to yesterday’s question. We thought we would ask you.”

Upendra sat down on the corner of a wooden stool. In the distance, the elders were talking near the platform, the rows for the meal were forming, and at any moment someone might call him again to bring a bundle of leaf plates.

He listened to the children’s question.

He did not answer at once.

First he asked, “What did each of you think?”

One by one, all three began to explain their ideas.

Amid the noise of the wedding, four people bent together in that small veranda, listening to three answers to the same question.

STORY 210

Smoke from the Hearth

...

When the red cylinder supplied under the scheme arrived at Harinandan Paswan's house, Jamuna first placed it in the eastern corner of the kitchen. The old earthen hearth stood there too, and the wall above it had been blackened by years of smoke. A low stool was moved aside to make room for the new stove, one row of utensils was shifted higher, and the red cylinder stood two arm's lengths from the mud wall.

That first evening, rice was set to cook on the gas stove. Mahesari, Harinandan's mother, sat by the doorway watching the blue flame.

"Fire without smoke?" she said.

Jamuna laughed. "There is fire. There is no smoke."

The rice cooked quickly. So did the lentils. Jamuna did not have to keep blowing into the fire and wiping her eyes. Mahesari could sit inside the kitchen and cut vegetables. She had an old cough; whenever woodsmoke rose, she generally had to go out to the veranda.

Within two weeks, the household routine had changed. Breakfast was ready early, Harinandan left on time for field labour, and Birju reached school before the first bell. Jamuna no longer had to go as often to the edge of the stream to gather firewood. The old hearth remained cold, and ash slowly settled in its mouth.

That year the roof was repaired as well. High on the western wall of the kitchen was a small smoke vent. When wood burned, some of the smoke escaped through it; but in heavy rain, water also dripped in through the same opening. The mason who had come to repair the roof asked, "Should I leave this vent open?"

Harinandan looked at the red cylinder and said, "What smoke is there now? Seal it."

The mason fixed a piece of broken tin over the opening and plastered mud over it from outside. Jamuna swept the kitchen and gave the wall a thin wash of lime. Amid the blackened wall, a white strip appeared. Mahesari ran her hand over it and said, "The house feels new."

The first cylinder lasted a month and a half. A second was refilled. The third time the delivery vehicle came to the village crossroads, Harinandan

heard the price and fell silent. That week he had found work for only three days. If the refill money was set aside, what remained for oil, salt, and the seed kept in mind for the winter crop would shrink.

“Wait two days,” he told Jamuna.

Two days became five. Five became ten. The blue flame first grew thin, then one evening went out. Jamuna closed the valve and placed the empty cylinder back in the eastern corner.

The next morning, the old hearth was cleaned again. The ash was scraped out, fresh mud was patted around its mouth, and dried pigeon-pea stalks were fed into it.

As soon as the first smoke rose, Jamuna understood that the household had returned to the old hearth—but not to the old kitchen.

The smoke climbed upward toward the western wall, struck the sealed tin, and rolled back down. Within moments, the room was full of it. Jamuna blinked hard and opened the door. Mahesari came out coughing. Birju carried his bowl to the veranda and sat there.

“Why did we close the vent?” Jamuna asked.

Harinandan did not answer. The decision had been his, but it had been made for the house as it was then—a house in which there was gas.

That afternoon he went outside to pry off the piece of tin. The mud had dried hard. Half an hour later, the small opening was open again. That evening the smoke did escape through it, but a black streak began to run down the wall below the vent.

Three days later it rained. Driven by the west wind, water blew in through the opening. The dry wood stacked beside the hearth became wet. Jamuna propped the tin back over part of the hole, narrowing the vent.

After two days of sunshine, Jamuna moved the hearth into the courtyard. Three bricks were set down and an old iron grate laid across them. In the open air the smoke troubled them less, but a new set of difficulties began. When the wind rose, the flame leaned to one side and ash blew onto the utensils. At dusk, when the cattle came back toward the shed, the hearth had to be cleared away. Once, the lentils were only half cooked when clouds gathered; pot, wood, ash—everything had to be shifted back inside. Mahesari laughed and said, “Are we cooking the meal now, or moving the hearth?”

Jamuna laughed too, but the next day she put the hearth back in its old place in the kitchen. Cooking outside was a solution for sunny days, not a rule a household could live by.

From then on, the vent was opened and closed according to the weather. Open on dry days, half closed on rainy ones. The smoke never went out completely. Mahesari generally stayed on the veranda while food was being cooked.

“Refill the cylinder,” she told Harinandan one day.

“As soon as I can put the money together.”

“I am not telling you where to bring the money from. I am only saying that this smoke is settling into the body again.”

Harinandan looked at his mother. There was no accusation in her words. That made them harder to answer.

Returning from the fields, Harinandan began gathering dry stalks and bringing them home. He wanted Jamuna to have to go less often to the streamside for wood. But that solved only the question of fuel; it did not give the smoke a way out.

One evening a strong wind rose while the hearth was burning. Because the door was open, the flame bent sharply to one side and ash flew onto the lid of the rice pot. Jamuna half closed the door, and the smoke began circling inside. From the veranda Mahesari said, “Close one mouth of the house, open the other and rain comes in. How are both to be managed together?”

That night Harinandan sat for a long time looking at the western wall. The vent was just below the roof. Because the tin had been fixed flat against the wall, the rain was being driven straight inside. At dawn, without calling the mason, he split two thin pieces of old bamboo. He fixed them outside the vent as small supports and tied the tin not flush against the wall but tilted slightly outward. Rain falling from above would strike the tin and run down, while a gap between tin and wall would remain for the smoke.

Jamuna watched from a distance. “Will it hold?”

“We will know when it rains.”

The first heavy rain came two days later. The wall around the vent became slightly damp, but water no longer blew inside as before. When the hearth was lit, a ribbon of smoke could be seen escaping beneath the tin. The kitchen did not become clean; their eyes still stung. But the smoke no longer gathered beneath the roof and rolled back into the room as heavily as before.

Mahesari came in from the veranda and sat inside for a while. She coughed once, then the cough subsided.

Meanwhile, the cylinder remained empty. The price did not fall, and the household’s earnings never arrived all at once. For three weeks Harinandan

kept aside a little from each day's wages. Jamuna added the small amounts she earned from selling milk. No one gave these savings a name.

In the fourth week, the delivery vehicle came again to the crossroads. This time Harinandan tied the empty cylinder to his bicycle and took it there. When the filled cylinder returned home that evening, Birju did not run to watch the blue flame as he had the first time. For him, it was no longer a new thing.

Jamuna put tea on the gas stove. Mahesari sat inside.

"Shall we break up the old hearth?" Harinandan asked.

Jamuna poured the hot tea into bowls. "Why?"

"The cylinder is full now."

"It is full now."

Harinandan fell silent. He understood.

From then on, the house lived with two fires. On rainy mornings, for a hurried meal, or to warm milk for Mahesari—the gas stove. When lentils needed to simmer for a long time, when cattle feed had to be cooked, or when there was plenty of dry stalk at home—the old hearth. The cylinder lasted longer that way, but wood did not disappear entirely from their lives.

The only real difference was that now the smoke once again had a way out. Harinandan did not remove the tilted piece of tin over the vent. Even when there was gas in the house, the opening remained.

A few months later, the white strip of limewash began to turn grey again. But this time the soot did not gather in a single thick layer; it rose in a thinner trail toward the vent. Jamuna wiped the wall from time to time. When the smoke grew heavy, Mahesari went out to the veranda; when it was lighter, she remained seated inside.

One evening, rice was cooking on the gas stove and lentils on the old hearth. A light rain was falling outside. Water dripped from the sloping tin—tip, tip—and beneath it a thin line of smoke slipped out.

Jamuna lifted the lid and checked the rice. Harinandan pushed a slender stalk farther into the hearth. Mahesari looked at the black-grey strip on the wall, then quietly went on cutting vegetables.

In the eastern corner stood the red cylinder. In the western corner lay a small pile of firewood. In the wall between them, the vent remained open.

STORY 211

A One-Kattha Pond

...

When Jhalo Sahni reached the pond at first light, a fishing net tucked beneath his arm, the first thing he saw was not the water but a new bamboo enclosure.

The barrier ran around three sides of the pond. At the narrow eastern ghat, where for years Jhalo had washed his nets and Phulo Sahni had sorted fish, two thick bamboo poles had been driven into the ground and a rope tied between them. Inside the rope, the water gleamed; outside it, Jhalo stood.

He looked around once. The pond was scarcely a kattha in area. To the north lay the shade of a peepal tree, to the south an old earthen slope, and to the west Domon Chaudhary's kitchen garden. This little pond did not provide the rice for Jhalo's household, but it paid for what went with the rice. If two or three seers of mixed fish—pothi, garai, singhi, little prawns—went to the market at dawn, there would be money for salt, oil, soap, and sometimes a child's books and paper.

Domon Chaudhary was standing inside the enclosure with a sack of mustard-seed cake in his hand.

"From now on, no net is to be cast here," he said.

Jhalo understood, yet he asked, "Why?"

"I have stocked fingerlings. The oilcake, bran, all the expense is mine. Whoever earns from the water must also look after the water."

Jhalo looked toward the western bank. The previous winter Domon had dug the foundation for a new cattle shed. Half the excavated earth had lain on the pond's edge and gradually slipped into it. Where water had once stood, a narrow strip of land now carried creeping sponge-gourd vines.

"The pond belonged to the village," Jhalo said quietly.

Domon opened the sack. "When did the village ever look after it? It filled with silt and weeds. I had it cleaned and stocked fish. A pond does not raise fish merely because its name belongs to the village."

Jhalo said nothing. He folded the net under his arm and went home.

When he arrived, Phulo was taking the starchy water off the cooking rice. Seeing the empty net, she asked, "Has the pond dried up?"

"Not the water. The way to it has dried up."

She listened to everything. Then she looked at the empty fish basket by the hearth. The two pothi left from the previous day had been eaten the night before.

“Go to the river,” Phulo said.

The river lay three and a half kos from the village. Jhalo went that day. He left at four in the morning and returned after the sun was high. Some fish had come into the net, but after half the journey on foot their shine had already dulled. They fetched a lower price in the market. After three days, Jhalo did the reckoning: whatever extra fish he brought back was being offset by the time lost on the road.

Phulo no longer went to the dawn market every day. She went twice a week. On the other days she began cutting makhana leaves and selling them as cattle fodder. Their son Sonu, who had earlier helped gather the small nets by the pond, now faced the same question again and again each morning: should he go with his father to the river, or to school?

“Go to school,” Jhalo would say.

“Then who will gather the nets?”

Jhalo would not answer.

Earlier, Phulo had sat in her regular place at the market through the first hour of the morning. Even when she had little fish, the old customers knew she would be there again the next day. Once the river trips began, the days became uncertain: sometimes there was plenty of fish, sometimes an empty net. Within two weeks, they had to count in advance how many days remained before the tins of salt and oil ran empty. Once, Sonu’s small monthly contribution at school was paid three days late. That day Phulo had suggested selling her brass bowl, but Jhalo refused.

What angered Jhalo most was not only the money. The pond was so close to the house that he could fit fishing around the time for giving medicine to his old mother, Sonu’s school hours, and day labour in the fields. The river swallowed half a day. Even when the net earned something, another day’s work slipped from his hands.

Meanwhile, Domon’s pond was changing. The rohu and catla fingerlings were growing. Inside the enclosure he scattered oilcake and sometimes poured in a slurry of cow dung. The water near the edge turned green. Children stood outside the barrier watching the backs of fish flash in the water. Domon was pleased.

In the last week of Jeth, the heat hardened. At night the wind stopped. By day the pond water grew hot; by dawn it looked exhausted. One morning Domon’s grandson came running to Jhalo’s house.

“Uncle, the fish are coming to the surface with their mouths open.”

Jhalo was tying up his net to leave for the river. He did not get up at once.

“Grandfather has called you.”

Phulo looked at him. “Go.”

“They are his fish.”

“If the water dies, it won’t be only his fish that die.”

Jhalo left the net where it was and went to the pond.

Inside the enclosure, many fish were at the surface, their mouths opening and closing again and again. Some were wavering near the mud at the edge. The water smelled sour with oilcake.

Domon’s face had fallen. “They were fine until last night.”

Jhalo waded in up to his knees. He lifted water in his hand and smelled it. He examined the mud at the bank and the green film.

“Do not give them oilcake today.”

“Then what will they eat?”

“This is not the time for eating. It is the time for breathing.”

Domon opened his mouth to reply, then remained silent.

Jhalo went to the north-western corner of the pond. Beneath the old slope there had once been a narrow water outlet. When the rains were heavy, pond water drained through it toward the lower edge of the fields. Earth from Domon’s cattle-shed foundation had half blocked the passage.

“Bring a spade,” Jhalo said.

“Drain the water? The fish will escape.”

“Not all of it. Let a little of the foul bottom water out. Bring fresh water in from the other side.”

Domon had a water-lifting machine in his garden. Jhalo said the tube-well water should not be released straight into the pond, but allowed to fall first over a bamboo screen so that it would break into splashes before entering. Sonu and Domon’s grandson brought an old screen. Phulo came too. She untied the rope and loosened the enclosure on one side so that people could move in and out.

They worked for two hours. Water from the machine struck the bamboo screen and burst into white spray. Jhalo slowly cut away the earth from the old outlet. Black water from the bottom of the pond ran out in a thin stream. Phulo used a bamboo basket to lift two fish that had rolled over at the surface and placed them in a tub of separate water.

By the time the sun climbed higher, fewer fish were opening their mouths at the surface. Some had gone back into deeper water.

Drinking from a brass lota on the veranda, Domon said, "Tell me your wage."

Jhalo kept washing the spade.

"I will pay you for today."

Jhalo raised his head. "If you pay for today, I'll take it. But this is not only about today."

Domon's eyes narrowed slightly.

Phulo spoke first. "Do not give the pond back to us. Just leave us the way to the place where we used to work."

"I have stocked fingerlings," Domon said. "If nets are cast, my fish will come up too."

Jhalo said, "No big net. Only the small basket-net at the bank—snails, prawns, pothi. We will not touch the rohu and catla. When harvest time comes, if you ask us, we will cast the net for you."

Domon did not agree then.

For two days the matter remained there. On the third morning, as Jhalo was leaving for the river, Domon himself met him on the path.

"I'll move the enclosure two bamboo lengths back from the eastern ghat," he said. "Small nets only at dawn. Not after the sun is up."

Jhalo asked, "Snails?"

"Take them."

"When the water rises?"

"I will not block the outlet."

Jhalo nodded. He neither said anything more nor showed any sense of victory.

That evening, the two eastern bamboo poles were pulled out and the rope tied in a new place. The pond did not become completely open again, but half the mouth of the old ghat was visible.

The following week Phulo returned to the dawn market. There were no large fish in her basket—only pothi, little prawns, two singhi, and a few snails. The earnings were not what they had once been, but half a day's journey to the river had been saved. Sonu began going to school regularly again.

Domon's rohu and catla continued to grow. Twice a week Jhalo smelled the water, watched whether the green film was becoming too thick, and told Domon when to reduce the oilcake. He asked no separate payment for this; in

return, he kept his dawn share of small fish. The relationship was not equal, but it was no longer one-sided.

In Sawan, heavy rain came. The pond filled until the water touched the banks. A thin stream ran from the old north-western outlet toward the fields. Domon came there once carrying a sack of earth. It was clear that the thought of blocking the flow had crossed his mind. Jhalo watched from a distance and said nothing. Domon set the sack down, looked at the stream, then carried it back unopened.

At the end of Bhadon came the first day for the large net. Domon could have called two fishermen from outside, but he asked Jhalo, "Is your net strong enough?"

Jhalo laughed. "The pond is one kattha. The net is bigger than the pond."

At dawn, four men waded into the water. Phulo arranged baskets on the bank. The big rohu went into one basket, the catla into another. The small fish caught along the bottom of the net fell into Phulo's basket. Domon looked once and said nothing.

When the harvest was over, the water was muddy. The enclosure still stood. Domon still had his sacks of oilcake. The earth filling the western edge still carried sponge-gourd vines. Phulo placed the basket on her head. Sonu wrung out the rope of the net. Jhalo looked toward the small north-western channel, where rainwater was slowly flowing out.

On the way home, he passed between the two bamboo poles on the eastern side. Where the rope had once been stretched chest-high, it now lay shifted toward the bank. The pond was still only one kattha. But the morning path once again ran through it.

STORY 212

The Bag of Seed

...

On the last evening of Jeth, clouds were gathering over the southern tract of Sonbarsa village. Shyamanandan Mahato sat at his doorway with two bags before him. One was a bright printed packet of hybrid okra seed bought from the seed shop in the market. The other was an old cotton bag, its mouth tied with red thread, containing seed from local okra chosen and saved from the family field the previous year.

Dulari Devi was turning over dried okra pods on the veranda. She set aside five or six long, brown pods.

“Will you save these again this year?” Shyamanandan asked.

“Why should I not?”

Shyamanandan lifted the bright packet. “Raghuvansh Sah says this seed will give uniform fruit. The first picking will come early. Prices are good in the first week at the market.”

Dulari looked toward the old bag. “And this?”

“The plants from this are not uniform. Some fruits are thick, some thin. The market men sort them and pay accordingly.”

They had six katthas of land. For the past three years, after the paddy crop, Shyamanandan had been growing vegetables to meet the household’s cash expenses. Paddy kept food in the house; vegetables paid for oil, salt, clothes, small repairs to the plough and bullocks, and the expenses of festivals and ceremonies. That year he had little spare cash. Even so, he bought two printed packets of hybrid seed. Each cost nine hundred and twenty rupees. Raghuvansh Sah had said that if the sowing was done on time, the first picking would come early.

Shyamanandan’s calculation was simple. If okra prices remained good in the first week, the extra cost of seed would come back in two or three pickings. The local seed cost nothing to buy, but it took a few more days to reach the first market. How many days depended on that year’s sun and rain.

“Hybrid on all six katthas?” Dulari asked.

“Yes. This time, all of it.”

“And the local-seed bag?”

“Keep it. It is not something to eat.”

Dulari did not laugh. She lifted the bag and put it on the upper bamboo shelf in the kitchen, where less smoke reached it.

The first rain came that night. It was not enough to flood the field, but it softened the soil. In the morning Shyamanandan went to the field with his son Bablu. Rows were opened with a small hoe, seed was placed at intervals of two hand-spans, and a thin layer of earth covered it. The hybrid seed was small, clean, and almost uniform in size. Bablu counted the seeds out of the printed packet.

“Babu, why two in one place?”

“If one does not sprout, the other will remain.”

“And if both sprout?”

“Then we will thin one later.”

By evening all six katthas had been sown. Shyamanandan did not throw away the empty printed packets. He folded their mouths and tucked them into the knot of his dhoti. At home he gave them to Dulari.

“Keep them. The name is printed on them.”

Dulari hung them from a peg on the wall. The old cotton seed bag remained on the upper shelf.

Three days later the second rain came. This time the clouds did not clear from one evening until the following afternoon. The old bund on the western side of the field was low. Water from the neighbouring field also entered from that direction. Twice during the night Shyamanandan went out with a lantern to open a drain, but the flow was strong.

By morning, nearly two of the six katthas lay under water. Even in the central rows, the soil had become sticky. Shyamanandan waded in up to his knees and cut a narrow outlet through the bund. It took the whole day for the water to fall.

On the fifth day, the seedlings that should have appeared were not everywhere. On the higher eastern side, two green leaves had emerged. In the western two katthas there were stretches of ten hand-spans with nothing, then five hand-spans bare again. In some places, seeds had swollen and turned black.

Bablu asked, “Shall we sow again?”

Shyamanandan did not answer. He kept counting the empty stretches. Back home, he took the empty printed packet down from the peg, read the number on it, and then counted the money left in his pocket.

He could buy another printed packet, but then the money for labour at weeding time would run short. And if new seed was sown now, half the

advantage of an early first picking would already be gone. A week's delay could make a large difference in the market price.

At midday he went to Raghuvansh Sah's shop.

"I need one packet of the same seed," Shyamanandan said.

Raghuvansh looked at the box on the upper shelf. "I have it. But it is fifty rupees more now. Stock is short."

Shyamanandan took the packet in his hand, then put it back.

"I can write it on credit," Raghuvansh said.

"No credit."

"Then will you leave the field empty?"

Shyamanandan said nothing. When he returned home, Dulari pointed toward the upper shelf.

"The bag tied with red thread is still there."

"Who knows how much of it will germinate?"

Dulari brought the bag down. "We can find out."

She took a handful of seed and spread it over half of an old gamchha. The cloth was moistened. Forty seeds were counted out, the cloth folded around them, and the bundle placed in an earthen plate. Dulari kept it damp for two days. On the third morning, when the cloth was opened, many of the seeds had sent out tiny white roots.

Bablu counted them.

"Thirty-two."

Shyamanandan counted again. Thirty-two.

"Not all of them," he said.

Dulari replied, "No one expected all of them."

That afternoon, the local seed was sown in the empty rows. In some places they put in three seeds, elsewhere two. Shyamanandan marked the spots among the hybrid plants: wherever local seed had been sown, he pushed a thin bamboo sliver into the ground. The marks were not for selling the crop; they were for choosing seed later.

After that, the rain stopped completely. For eight days clouds gathered but no water fell. The topsoil began to crack. In the mornings Shyamanandan drew water from the channel with a bamboo bucket and poured it along the newly sown stretches. The hybrid plants had already taken root; the local seed was only just emerging, so it needed more care.

One day Bablu said, "If you had bought the second packet, you would still have had to water it."

Shyamanandan smiled. “The price of seed is one thing. The price of water is another.”

Ten days later a light rain came. The bare parts of the field began to turn green. But the two kinds of rows were easy to distinguish. The hybrid plants were taller and growing at almost the same pace. Among the local plants, some were ahead and some behind. Shyamanandan had once regarded this unevenness as a loss. Now he could see in it different days of picking.

Budhan Mahato, the neighbour, stood on the bund looking over the field. “You mixed two varieties?”

Shyamanandan said, “I did not mix them. The water did.”

Budhan laughed. “How will you tell them apart at harvest?”

“Okra is not harvested in one day. Whatever fruit comes, we will pick it.”

Budhan looked at the bamboo slivers. “What are those for?”

“I have marked the plants for seed.”

“You will not save seed from the hybrid?”

Shyamanandan shook his head. “There is no certainty that the next generation will give the same qualities. From the local plants that survived, I will choose the best ones.”

Budhan walked on. Shyamanandan remained standing in the field for a while. In Jeth his calculation had gone only as far as the price of seed and the price at the first market. Now the calculation also included a day of standing water, half a day cutting the drain, two days of re-sowing, and eight days of dry sky. None of these had a line printed on the packet.

At the end of Sawan, the first hybrid okra was picked. The quantity was small because many rows in the western part had been re-sown. Even so, it fetched a good price at the first market. Raghuvansh Sah was there too.

“See? The hybrid gave early,” he said.

Shyamanandan said yes. That was true.

After three pickings, more okra began arriving in the market and prices started to fall. By then the local plants were coming into harvest. Some fruits were thick, some thin, some slightly crooked. The trader would not pay one rate for all of them. Before leaving home, Dulari sorted them into three baskets by size. The best went in front; the small and thick ones were for another buyer; fruits allowed to grow very large were left on the plants for household seed.

The total earnings were not as much as Shyamanandan had calculated in Jeth. The first spell of rain had almost wiped out two katthas of hybrid seed. Re-sowing had cost two extra days of labour. The market price too had fallen

quickly. But the field had not remained empty. The rows filled from the local-seed bag kept giving pickings, though later.

One evening in Bhadon, Shyamanandan and Dulari sat on the veranda counting the day's earnings. Bablu came from the field carrying five dried okra pods.

"These are from the plants beside the bamboo slivers," he said.

Dulari turned a pod in her hand. "Keep them. Let them dry completely."

Shyamanandan asked, "How much seed shall we save this time?"

"Enough for all six katthas?"

Shyamanandan did not answer at once. He looked at the empty hybrid packet hanging from the peg. Its paper had curled slightly in the dampness of the rains.

The following week he went to Raghuvansh Sah's shop. Sah asked, "Shall I put down your name for two packets next season?"

Shyamanandan said, "One."

"One packet will be short for six katthas."

"I know. Still, one."

"And the remaining three katthas?"

Shyamanandan looked outside the shop at the sky. There were clouds, but whether they would bring rain was hard to say.

"The rest is at home."

That evening Dulari split the dried pods and took out the seed. Bablu blew away the light chaff. Shyamanandan stitched the torn corner of the old cotton bag with needle and thread. The old red tie had worn out, so Dulari fastened a new red thread around its mouth.

The empty bright printed packet remained hanging from the peg. On the bamboo shelf, the bag of local seed was put back in its place. The next season was still a long way off.

STORY 213

Two Goats

...

In the first week of Bhadon, evening descended early over Belahi Tola. After the humidity of the day, a breeze would rise from the bamboo grove, and Kamala Devi would once again check the ropes of the two goats tied to the posts of her veranda. Dhauri's body was white, except for two black patches near the front of her ears. Kajri was entirely black, her belly full and her gait slow.

For two years these two goats had been Kamala's household savings on four legs. After her husband's death, the only land left that could be called theirs was four dhurs of garden behind the house. Daily labour paid for rice and lentils, but expenses such as her daughter Sunita's college admission, books, examination forms, and shared transport were difficult to match with day wages. When such expenses arose, Kamala sold a kid.

She did not announce this arrangement to anyone. People in the tola merely knew that Kamala owned two goats. But in her own mind she kept a separate account for each one. The male kid Dhauri had borne the previous year had paid Sunita's first-year admission fee. Of Kajri's two kids, one had been sold for books and three months of travel expenses; the other, a female, had died of illness.

This time Kajri was pregnant again. Kamala had calculated that she would kid by Agahan, and that if a male kid grew well, it could be sold after Magh to cover Sunita's annual examination form and the opening expenses of the next academic session. There was little paper in this calculation and much of the seasons.

When Sunita returned from her studies in the evening and sat on the veranda, Kajri would try to chew the edge of her shawl. Laughing, Sunita would push her head away.

"Don't you understand that you are worth the price of my books?" she would say.

From inside, Kamala would answer, "She does not want your books. She wants your shawl."

That evening both goats ate normally. Kamala gave them jackfruit leaves and a little straw. After supper, Sunita opened her books. Outside, a light rain began.

Around midnight Kamala woke to a strange rustling sound. Kajri was pulling hard at her rope. Dhauri sat with her head drooping. Kamala came out with a lamp. Foam-like saliva clung around Kajri's mouth and her body was hot. Dhauri's ears were cold, yet she would not get up.

"Sunita."

Her daughter came at once. Together they loosened Kajri's rope. Water was set in front of her, but she would not touch it.

The livestock worker lived two kos away. In that rain, at that hour, there was no way to send for anyone. Their neighbour Ramparikshan heard the commotion and came over. He looked at the goats' mouths and felt their bellies, but instead of guessing at a diagnosis he said, "Send someone as soon as morning comes. For now, tie them separately."

Kamala stood an old bamboo screen in the middle of the veranda and separated the two animals. Sunita sat beside Dhauri. Kamala remained with Kajri.

The night was very long. At times Kajri tried to rise, then folded at the knees and fell again. Rain kept beating the roof in the same rhythm.

In the first light of dawn, Kajri's body shuddered once and became still.

Kamala said nothing. She merely untied the knot of the rope, which was no longer needed.

Sunita looked toward Dhauri. "Will she live?"

"The veterinary doctor will see her first."

The veterinarian arrived by about nine in the morning. Dhauri had a fever. There were sores inside her mouth. He gave medicines, advised them to keep her separate for two days, give her clean water, and keep her away from other animals. He said it was difficult to state the certain cause of Kajri's death; because an infectious disease was suspected, they were told to bury the body quickly.

Kajri had been pregnant. That was the heaviest fact of all when they buried her.

The medicines, injections, the livestock worker's travel, and a few necessary supplies almost emptied the savings Kamala had kept in a bamboo box. That money had been meant for Sunita's examination form.

The last date was six days away.

That evening Sunita took out the form and laid it on the veranda.

"What if I don't submit it this time?"

Kamala was changing the water in front of Dhauri. "Why would you not?"

"The money must go to her first. Dhauri has to live."

Kamala straightened the bowl of water. "Dhauri's treatment will continue. Your form will be submitted too."

"Where will that much money come from?"

"There are six days left. We will find a way."

Sunita did not ask again.

The next day Dhauri stood up, but after two steps she sat down again. Kamala thought of selling her. If she had been healthy, she would have fetched a good price. Now any buyer, on hearing of the illness, would halve the offer, and some would refuse to touch her for fear of disease. Besides, if Dhauri were sold, the household's entire livestock would vanish in a single night.

Kamala abandoned that option.

To the east of the tola, Bhubaneswar Jha still had weeding left in three bighas of paddy. Kamala normally worked for daily wages; she did not like taking advance payment. That day she went to Bhubaneswar's courtyard herself.

"I need four days' wages in advance," Kamala said.

Bhubaneswar was surprised. "The work is next week."

"I know. Write down four days. I will take no wages for the first four days."

"Has something happened?"

Kamala did not explain at length. "A goat died. My daughter has an examination form to submit."

Bhubaneswar remained silent for a moment, then went inside and brought the money. "Four days. Not five."

"Four only."

Kamala counted the notes. This was not help; it was future labour sold in advance. She liked the clarity of that.

On the third day, Sunita's examination form was submitted. She returned with the receipt while Kamala was giving medicine to Dhauri.

"It is done," Sunita said.

Kamala nodded. "Keep it safely."

"Amma, those four days of wages—"

"I will work four days."

"I could also do something—"

"Your work now is to study."

Her voice was not harsh, but the matter ended there.

Dhuri slowly began to rise again. On the fifth day she ate two handfuls of leaves. On the seventh, she stood in the sunshine outside the veranda. Kamala did not immediately let her out to graze. The illness had thinned her body.

The following week Kamala went to weed Bhubaneswar's field. By the evening of the first day, her fingers had swollen. On the second, pain caught her when she straightened her back. She completed all four days. During those four days not a single rupee in cash entered the house, because the money had already become Sunita's examination form.

At the end of the fourth day, Bhubaneswar said, "The advance is fully worked off. From tomorrow, whatever work you do, you will be paid in the evening."

Kamala went to the field on the fifth day as well. When the first cash wage reached her hand that evening, she did not go straight home. From a small shop near the market she bought half a seer of bran, a little salt, and mustard oil. Seeing the packet of bran, Sunita asked, "The first money goes to Dhuri?"

Kamala said, "After an illness the body does not fill out quickly on leaves alone."

That night there was little rice, so the lentils were cooked thin. Sunita said nothing about it.

She understood now that the lump of cash which once came into the house when a kid was sold would have to be rebuilt, little by little, from daily wages.

Meanwhile, Sunita began bringing grass for Dhuri when she returned from college. Her own studying shifted later into the night.

Twice Kamala told her, "I will bring the grass."

Sunita replied, "You are working off those four days you took in advance. I can cut grass for half an hour."

Kamala did not argue. She merely said, "Come back before dark."

By Asin, Dhuri's body had begun to fill out again, but Kajri's empty post remained on the veranda. Kamala had once expected Kajri to bear a kid in Agahan. Now there would be no kid in Agahan, and nothing certain to sell in Magh.

The household arithmetic changed. Instead of taking the shared vehicle every day, Sunita walked to the main road three days a week, where cheaper transport was available. Instead of buying all her books new, she bought two from the second-hand market. Kamala took a few extra days of work parboiling paddy. Dhuri's fodder was not reduced.

In Kartik, the livestock worker came to the tola again. Kamala had Dhuri vaccinated. The fee was small, yet she hesitated for a moment before handing

over the money. Earlier, the goat had seemed to her simply a source of income; now she understood that a source of income had its own expenses, its own illnesses, and its own uncertainties.

Sunita asked, "Will you have her bred again?"

Kamala ran a hand along Dhauri's back. "Let her recover completely first. What is gained by rushing?"

"And next year's expenses?"

"Next year has not come yet."

The examinations were held in Paus. As Sunita left in the morning, she touched Dhauri's head. She did not look at the empty post.

The day after the examinations, Kamala and Sunita were cleaning the veranda. Kajri's old rope had been hanging from a bamboo beam for many days. Sunita took it down and asked, "Shall I throw this away?"

Kamala took the rope in her hand. One end still bore old tooth marks where Kajri had once gnawed it.

"No," she said. "Wash it and keep it. The rope is still good."

Sunita carried it away to the water.

There was now only one goat on the veranda. Dhauri stood by the post chewing leaves. The second post was empty, but its rope had not been thrown away.

STORY 214

The Labour Card

...

Behind a warehouse under construction on the outskirts of Surat stood a tin-roofed shed. At night twelve labourers spread their bedding there. Nandlal Paswan's bedding was at the very edge, because every morning he was the first to rise and go to fetch water. He had left Belahi village in Madhubani three months earlier. At home were his wife, his elderly mother, and two children.

On the first day, the labour contractor, Jagesar, had asked everyone for a photocopy of their Aadhaar document, a photocopy of the relevant page of their savings-bank passbook, and two photographs. Later he said he would have all their names entered in a government labour register. A few weeks afterward, everyone's labour cards arrived together in a blue plastic envelope. Jagesar put all the cards in his iron box.

"They will be safe here," he had said. "If you keep them with your bedding, half of you will tear or lose them."

At first no one objected. The labourers' days passed among bricks, reinforcing rods, sand, and mortar. At night their bodies were so tired that who would worry about papers?

One Sunday, while food was being cooked, two young men came to the nearby tea stall distributing leaflets. They said that the following Sunday a labour-assistance camp would be held. Migrant workers could check their registration, verify their details, and obtain information about government labour schemes. Nandlal turned the leaflet over in his hands. He could read the letters, but the small printed lines were difficult to understand. Salim, another worker, read it aloud to him.

Nandlal remembered what a panchayat worker had told him before he left home: "When you go outside, keep your labour identity with you."

That evening Nandlal went to Jagesar.

"Give me my labour card. I want to take it to the camp next Sunday."

Jagesar was chewing paan and adding up accounts. Without looking up from the paper, he said, "The card will stay here. What will you do at the camp? Your name is registered, isn't it?"

"I want to look at my own document once."

“What is there to look at? We got all of them made. If I hand the cards out, half the men will lose them.”

Nandlal remained silent. Then he asked, “Give me a copy.”

This time Jagesar looked up. “Are you looking for work somewhere else?”

Nandlal understood the meaning inside the question. The card was no longer merely a document; inside that iron box, his freedom to come and go was being shut away with it.

A week earlier Sukhdev, who also slept under the shed, had asked for his card because he was going back to his village. His younger brother was ill, and Sukhdev had said that on the way home he wanted to show the document at the labour office in his village. Jagesar had put him off for three days. In the end, instead of the card, he gave Sukhdev only a photocopy of its front side, on which the number on the reverse was incomplete. Sukhdev left for home, but the fact remained among the men in the shed that even to ask for a document bearing one’s own name, permission was required.

Nandlal remembered that incident. He now understood that “keeping it safe” and “keeping it with oneself” were two different things.

“I work here,” Nandlal said, “but the name on the card is mine.”

Jagesar laughed. “The name is yours; the document is my responsibility. Go now. There is concrete pouring first thing tomorrow morning.”

That night Nandlal stayed awake for a long time. He had an old photocopy of his Aadhaar document that his wife had tucked between his clothes when he left home. Its edges were worn, but the number was clear. He also found his savings-account number written at the back of his small notebook. He did not have the number of the labour card.

The following Sunday he went to the camp. Salim went with him. The camp was in a community hall across the road. The official sitting inside heard Nandlal’s account and asked, “Why do you not have the card?”

“It is with the man who gives us work.”

The official asked again, “Why did you give him the original card?”

“He got the cards made for all of us. When they came, he kept them with him.”

The official checked Nandlal’s Aadhaar number against the details recorded in the register. Nandlal had to state the name of his village, his father’s name, his year of birth, and the kind of work he did. Some of the details matched.

The official read out the card details one by one. The name was correct. His father’s name was correct. His occupation was entered as construction labour. Nandlal checked the last four digits of the savings account against the small

slip he carried. For the first time he realised that Jagesar's name appeared nowhere on the card.

"If I leave this warehouse job and go to another construction site?" he asked.

The official said, "Your registration identity number stays with you. The work details may change, but the number does not belong to any employer."

Nandlal asked again, "Is it necessary for him to keep the original card?"

"No. A copy can be given at the worksite. It is better to keep the original with yourself."

The official also made it clear that it was not necessary to deposit the original document there in order to inspect one's registration. The first-day image came back to Nandlal: twelve cards in one blue envelope, the envelope inside Jagesar's iron box. The meaning of that envelope had now changed.

Salim looked at Nandlal. Nothing needed to be said between them.

"Can this address be changed?" Nandlal asked.

"Wherever you are staying, those details are yours. Changing work does not change your identity," the official said.

Nandlal repeated the sentence as if to make sure he had heard it properly. "Changing work does not change the identity?"

"No. Even when the work changes, the identity remains yours."

The official wrote down his registration identity number and printed a fresh copy for him. No fee was charged. Nandlal held the paper and looked at it for a long time. It bore his name, the name of his village, and the number that ought to have been inside Jagesar's box.

Outside the community hall, Salim said, "Shall we show this to Jagesar now?"

"Not yet," Nandlal said.

He did not fold the card. There was a photocopy shop outside the community hall. He had three copies made. He put the original paper in a small cloth wallet, one copy in a pouch inside his bedding, gave one to Salim to keep, and kept one with himself.

On Monday Jagesar asked nothing. Nandlal said nothing either.

Two days later, five workers were needed for three days on another section of the new warehouse. That section was being run by a different labour contractor. At lunchtime he came near the shed and said, "Anyone who wants three days of extra work can give me his name this evening. I will need a photocopy of the labour card."

Jagesar immediately said, "These are my men. They work here."

Nandlal said nothing. In the evening, after finishing his regular work, he went to the contractor of the other section and gave him a copy. The man looked at the name and number and gave him two extra hours of work each morning for the next three days. He did not ask for the original card.

When Nandlal received the first day's extra wages in his hand, he understood that this was not merely about three days' money. The card locked inside Jagesar's box was not the doorway to work. The doorway was his own name and number, of which he now possessed a copy.

Jagesar heard about it. That night he called Nandlal over.

"You gave your card to the other section?"

"Not the original. I gave a copy."

"Where did you get the card?"

"From my own registration."

Jagesar's face hardened. "You got it without me?"

"The name was mine. I had another copy issued."

For a few moments both were silent. Jagesar opened the box. Inside was the blue envelope. He took out Nandlal's card and placed it on the table.

"Take it. If you lose it, do not come blaming me."

Nandlal picked up the card. It was the old original. On one corner Jagesar had written a 7 in red ink—perhaps Nandlal's number in his labour list. Nandlal looked at the number and said nothing.

"And the Aadhaar copy?" he asked.

Jagesar looked inside the box. "You want that too?"

"The original was never with you. Keep the copy. But whatever document belongs to me, I will keep a copy of it with me as well."

Jagesar looked at him sideways but said nothing.

The next evening Salim asked for his own card. Jagesar did not give it immediately. Salim said, "I will go to the camp. Nandlal went."

On the third day two more workers asked. By the end of the week, not all the cards remained in the blue envelope. Jagesar kept photocopies; the original cards began staying with the workers.

This change did not suddenly make Jagesar generous. He still kept the wage accounts, still assigned the work hours, and still disliked the men taking work elsewhere. But the additional hold he had possessed merely because their identity papers remained inside his box had loosened.

At the end of the month Nandlal asked for two days' leave to go home. As before, Jagesar asked, "You will come back, won't you?"

“If there is work, I will come,” Nandlal said.

“You are taking the card with you?”

“Yes. I will take the original card with me.”

“Leave it here.”

This time Nandlal did not laugh. He simply said, “You have the copy.”

On the night he was to catch the train, he checked his cloth wallet. Inside were the old, worn photocopy of his Aadhaar document, the original labour card, and the small slip bearing his savings-account number. All three pieces of paper were very light.

In the corner of the shed, Jagesar’s iron box lay where it always had. Its lid was closed.

Nandlal put his wallet in the inside pocket of his shirt and began to roll up his bedding.

STORY 215

The Earthen House

...

On the last evening of Jeth, in the rear hamlet of Sirhuli village, Jitan Paswan was plastering fresh mud onto the eastern wall of his old earthen house. Rain over the past year or two had eaten a narrow hollow into the base of the wall. Bringing water in a brass lota, Phulkumari said, "Why repair it again this much? The roof of the new house should be up by next month, shouldn't it?"

Jitan pressed the mud into place with his palm and smiled. "If the installment comes."

On the other side of the courtyard, the walls of two new brick rooms had already risen to waist height. One side had reached roof level, but there was no roof. A bundle of reinforcing rods rested on two bamboo supports under a sheet of sacking. The new house was being raised where the eastern room of the old earthen house had stood. After the first installment arrived, the family had demolished that room with their own hands. The old bamboo, tiles, and wooden planks had been sorted and kept aside; whatever mud could still be used, Phulkumari had shaped into lumps and applied to repair the rear wall.

On the day the housing assistance was approved, Jitan had folded and unfolded the paper for a long time. He had believed that before the rains at least one room would have a roof. The first installment went into the foundation, bricks, sand, cement, and the mason's wages. On the day the old eastern room was dismantled, thirteen-year-old Lalita had picked up the roofing tiles one by one and stacked them. She had asked, "Why are we breaking the old house before the new one is built?"

Jitan had said, "There is only this much space."

Lalita had asked again, "What if the rains come first?"

Jitan had given no answer. At the time he had been sure the second installment would arrive on schedule.

From the demolished room they saved a wooden doorframe, two thick bamboos, three slender poles, and many pieces of roofing tile. Phulkumari had said, "Just because the new is being built does not mean everything old becomes something to throw away." Some of the bamboo she reused in the rear portion of the thatched roof. The wooden frame was leaned against the courtyard wall.

The mason raised the walls to roof height and presented his account. He said the roof slab could not be poured in stops and starts; the money for

reinforcing rods, concrete mix, and labour would have to be available all at once. Jitan counted the remaining money three times that day. It was not enough to begin the roof. By the time the walls reached roof level, the second installment had stalled.

Ramsevak, who moved around among panchayat work, came one evening. He was not a government employee, but he always seemed to know before others whose measurement would happen when and whose papers would move forward.

"Keep two thousand ready," he said quietly. "It will go in tea and water for the people who write up the measurement. Otherwise the rains will begin."

Jitan asked, "Will I get a receipt for that money?"

Ramsevak smiled as he rose. "If you go looking for a receipt, you should go looking for time as well."

That night Phulkumari kept looking at the bundle of reinforcing rods. There was enough cash left in the house to begin the first stage of roofing work, but if two thousand were taken out, the mason's wages would be held up. "Shall we sell the rods and pay the offering?" she asked.

"No," Jitan said.

After that came five visits to the panchayat office. Twice the person who did the measurements was not there; once the register was not opened; once they were told that the next list was being prepared. The fifth time Jitan returned empty-handed. The walls of the new house still stood without a roof.

The first rain of Asadh came at night. At first the drops were thin, then the sound on the roof grew dense. In the two surviving rooms of the old house, Jitan, Phulkumari, his mother Saraswati, and the two children sat pressed together. Inside the new house, rain fell directly from the sky. Water ran in thin streaks down from the mortar on top of the brick walls.

When the sun came out in the morning, Jitan went inside the new house. The pile of sand in one corner was soaked. The bundle of reinforcing rods had been covered, but the sack over it had drunk in water and become heavy. Phulkumari looked at the pile of tiles saved from the old eastern room. Half were broken pieces, half still whole. The two thick bamboos and three slender poles were there as well.

"Can we cover one room?" she asked.

Jitan looked up at the new brick walls. "Not like a roof. It would not be good to put weight on the walls."

From the veranda Saraswati said, "Then do not put it on the walls. Give it supports inside."

The old wooden doorframe rescued from the demolished room was still standing against the courtyard wall. Jitan brought it inside. Turned upright in another direction, the frame became a central support. The two thick bamboos were laid with one end on a wooden ledge tied along the inner face of the brick wall and the other end resting on top of the frame. The slender poles went across them. Phulkumari selected the old roofing tiles and laid them one by one. Where a piece was too small, she used two layers. It did not cover the whole room, but from one corner to the other a sloping shelter took shape.

By noon, inside the new brick house, a section of the old earthen house's roof was standing again.

Lalita went inside and looked overhead. "Is this the new house or the old one?"

Dusting tile grit from her hands, Phulkumari said, "Ask the rain."

That night there was drizzle again. During the first hour, water dripped through in two places. Jitan set earthen pots beneath them. In the heavier rain one row of tiles shifted, but the bamboo frame remained standing. Half the new room stayed dry. Two sacks of paddy, Lalita's books, a bundle of clothes, and Saraswati's bedding were moved beneath it. The family still slept in the old house, but for the first time the unfinished new house had begun to protect something.

Two days later Ramsevak came again. Seeing the slope of old tiles inside the brick walls, he laughed a little.

"An earthen-house roof again inside a pucca house?"

Jitan said, "Until the rains pass."

"If you had paid the two thousand, you would not have had to make all this arrangement."

Phulkumari was moving a sack of paddy at the time. She did not look at Ramsevak. Jitan too remained silent. The bundle of reinforcing rods was still covered on its bamboo supports.

The rains intensified. The temporary slope of tiles did not remain the same every day. When a strong westerly wind came, three tiles along the edge had to be reset. One night one leg of the doorframe sank slightly into the wet earth. Jitan placed a flat piece of old stone beneath it. Phulkumari tightened the knots on two poles again. Saraswati said, "We broke the old house, and its timber is still holding up the new house."

Jitan did not answer. He kept looking at the bend in the bamboo above.

For a week the clouds remained without a break. The family's daily life was now divided between two houses. When the sun appeared, the children spread a

mat in the new room and studied. When the rain became hard, the things under the tiled shelter were shifted farther into the dry portion. Food was cooked on the old hearth. At night the old mother slept beside the earthen wall of the surviving house, but during the day her bedding remained in the new brick room.

One day Lalita asked, "When the roof is finished, where will these tiles go?"

Phulkumari said, "Whatever survives will go over the cattle shed."

"And this doorframe?"

"We will think then."

There was no plan in that answer—only the old habit of putting whatever survived to work again.

In the first week of Sawan, rain fell for three nights without pause. On the second night the wind was so strong that an old sack tied over the tiles began to flap wildly. Jitan went outside. Phulkumari followed. Soaked by the rain, the two of them tightened the knots on the poles. Lalita stood inside holding a lamp. From the doorway Saraswati called, "If something starts falling from above, do not run inward."

After a while the wind weakened. One tile broke and fell inside, but it struck no one. Jitan picked up the broken piece and placed it in a corner. That night the top of the new house's walls became wet, but the sacks of paddy inside remained dry.

In the morning Phulkumari saw that only the last two sacks of cement meant for the mason remained. She said, "Do not raise the walls any higher with this. Have the top mortar leveled, otherwise the rain will keep washing it away."

Jitan agreed. The mason came for half a day. He added no new bricks; he simply spread a thin layer of cement mortar over the exposed tops of the walls, sloping it so water could run off. After paying his wages, the cash in the house fell further, but the tops of the walls no longer drank in rainwater directly.

The second installment still had not arrived.

One day a notice was pasted at the panchayat office saying that measurements of unfinished houses would be carried out in sequence. Jitan went, had his name entered, and returned. Ramsevak was there, but no words passed between them. It was still unclear when Jitan's measurement would take place.

That evening when Jitan reached home, Lalita was studying in the new room. A thin shaft of light entered through a gap between the tiles. A sack of

paddy stood beside her. In the middle, the old doorframe stood upright as a support.

From outside, Jitan looked at the scene. The new brick walls had risen to roof level and stopped. Inside them, bamboo, poles, a doorframe, and roofing tiles from the old earthen house had joined together to hold back the rain. On the remaining rear wall of the old house, the mud he had applied that evening still showed in a different colour.

It rained again that night. Water dripped in two places through the tiles. Phulkumari placed an earthen pot beneath one and a brass plate beneath the other. Then she went into the old room and lay down to sleep.

By morning there were two finger-widths of water in the plate. The paddy sacks were dry. The reinforcing rods were covered.

The second installment had still not arrived.

Across the courtyard the new brick walls stood. Inside them, the old house's doorframe was still holding up the roof.

STORY 216

The Loan Papers

...

It was an afternoon in Jeth. In the small room of the Parasauni Cooperative Credit Society, the violet ink pad kept by the window had half dried in the heat. Sugna Mahato pressed his right thumb onto it, then placed his thumbprint in the square the clerk pointed out.

Turning the paper around, the clerk said, "Principal: eighteen thousand. Interest: one and a half percent per month. First installment: six thousand, due by the fifteenth of Asin. The remaining two installments later."

Sugna nodded. The irrigation motor's winding had burnt out, and he also needed maize seed and fertiliser. Without the loan, the field would remain empty. He listened as the clerk read the terms aloud; but the thin lines of print before him looked like markings of one colour.

When he returned home, he put the paper in an old tin trunk. The night before taking the loan, the household expenses had been calculated orally. The motor winding and the mechanic's labour would cost six thousand eight hundred; the maize seed a little over two thousand; sacks of fertiliser close to four thousand; the rest would go on diesel, the ploughman, and unforeseen expenses. Sugna's wife Parbati had asked, "Will eighteen thousand be enough?" Sugna had given only an estimate. Once the paper was in his hand, he understood for the first time that estimates too had dates. If the date written on the paper passed, the season of the field would continue in its own place, while the loan account would continue in another.

That evening, when his daughter Revati returned from school, she saw him opening the trunk.

"What is it?"

"The loan paper. The motor will run again."

Before taking the paper from him, Revati looked at her father. "Shall I read it?"

"The clerk read it aloud. Eighteen thousand."

Revati went through the lines slowly. "It is eighteen thousand. The first installment is six thousand. Fifteenth of Asin. Interest is one and a half percent per month."

Sugna smiled. "So the clerk did not lie."

“Where does the question of lying arise? I am only reading the paper.”

After supper that night, Revati took out an old cracked slate. On one side she wrote the ten digits, from 0 to 9. On the other she wrote five words: principal, interest, installment, deposit, balance.

Sugna laughed. “Are you sending me to school now?”

“Learn five words needed to read this paper. Not a whole book.”

For the first three nights Sugna confused 6 and 9. He learnt 2 and 3 quickly. The word “interest” made him hesitate at the beginning, but “balance” came more easily. Revati never marked the loan paper itself; she rewrote the same figures on the slate.

Ten days later Sugna opened the document and recognised 18000.

“This is the principal.”

“Yes, the principal.”

“This 15... is the date?”

“Yes, the fifteenth of Asin.”

“And what is written before the six thousand?”

“First installment.”

He could not read a complete sentence. But the document was no longer a thicket of one colour; some leaves had begun to separate from the others. Revati kept changing the exercises. One day she wrote 12000 with a stick on the dry courtyard earth and asked, “How much is this?” Sugna first said, “One thousand two hundred.” Then he counted the zeros and stopped. The next day she wrote 7080. On the third day she wrote only the word “balance.” Sugna was not learning the full form of each letter; he was beginning to recognise its bends and turns.

One evening Parbati laughed and said, “The daughter studies and studies, and now she examines her father.”

Holding the slate, Sugna said, “This is not an examination. If my thumbprint is on a paper, why should I hear only from someone else how much debt is written on it?”

Revati immediately said, “But if something is not clear, never stop asking.”

Sugna paid particular attention to that one sentence. He was ashamed of not knowing letters, but even more ashamed of what people might think if he asked questions. Slowly he began to understand that the two kinds of shame were different.

With the loan money the motor was repaired. Maize was sown in three katthas of low-lying land and arhar in two katthas. The rain in Asadh was

adequate. By the end of Sawan, the maize ears had filled. By day Sugna inspected the field; at night he returned home and repeated the five words on the slate.

As Bhadon waned, the maize reached the stage for drying. That week a village trader was paying eighteen hundred rupees per quintal. People said, "Hold it until Kartik; the price will rise by two hundred." Sugna's household had a little more than seven quintals of maize.

His younger brother Bhola said, "Selling now would be a mistake. Keep it for a month."

Sugna remained silent. That night he took the loan paper out of the tin trunk. Revati was sitting beside an oil lamp.

"If I do not pay this month, the interest keeps running?"

"Yes. The paper says one and a half percent per month on the outstanding principal."

"What is one and a half percent of eighteen thousand?"

Revati did not answer at once. "Ten percent is eighteen hundred. One percent is one hundred eighty. Half a percent is ninety."

Sugna added 180 and 90 on the slate. "Two hundred seventy."

"Yes, two hundred seventy."

He fell silent again. If the market price rose by two hundred rupees per quintal after a month, seven quintals might bring fourteen hundred rupees more. But that was an estimate. The two hundred seventy rupees of interest were certain, and in the first week of Asin the household's paddy would still not be ready.

The next day Sugna did not sell all the maize. He sold four quintals and brought home seven thousand two hundred rupees. The remaining maize was stacked on a bamboo platform. As they separated out the four quintals, Parbati asked, "If you sold all of it, we could replace the bamboo on the roof over the water side of the house."

Lifting a sack, Sugna said, "If I sell everything, there will be no chance of gaining from a higher price. If I keep everything, the interest will keep eating. Half the grain from the field, half the decision."

That night the sacks of remaining maize were lifted onto the platform. Bricks were placed underneath so the sacks stayed above the ground, because in the dampness of Bhadon the grain could heat up. Sugna now regarded both loan interest and moisture in grain as separate kinds of loss; time had a price in both.

Bhola said again, "The price will rise. You will see."

Sugna said only, "If I hold everything, the loan will not stand still."

At the society office, the clerk calculated the first installment and four months' interest. The amount came to seven thousand eighty. Sugna counted out the notes. The clerk handed him a receipt.

"Thumbprint here."

Sugna pulled the paper toward himself. He did not try to read every line; he searched only for the words he knew. Beside "deposit" was 7080. Beside "balance principal" was 12000.

"Twelve thousand remaining?"

The clerk nodded. "Yes."

Only then did Sugna put down his thumbprint. Outside, he folded the receipt and placed it inside his kurta. Earlier he would have looked for someone to read such a paper to him; today he kept repeating only two numbers to himself. When he reached home, Revati looked at the receipt. She looked at her father's face and asked, "How much remains?"

"Twelve thousand."

"Did you say that after reading the receipt, or because the clerk told you?"

Sugna was silent for a moment. "Both. First I looked, then I heard it from his mouth."

Revati put the receipt in the trunk. "This time the order was right."

Sugna laughed. "Is the order written on the paper too?"

"No. That is learnt at home."

In Kartik the price of maize did rise, but not by two hundred—by one hundred twenty. Sugna sold the remaining grain and arranged money for the household's oil and salt, the weeding of the arhar, and seed for the winter crop. Bhola laughed and said, "Your calculation half won and half lost."

Sugna laughed too. "Accounts are not about winning and losing, Bhola. They are about understanding how much money is tied up where."

Revati heard him from a distance but said nothing.

In Paus, an employee of the society went around the village preparing a list of new loans. Arriving at Sugna's courtyard, he said, "Let us merge the old twelve thousand into a new loan. You will have cash in hand again for the farming season."

He opened a fresh document. Sugna did not immediately extend his thumb as he once would have.

"What principal will be written on the new paper?"

The employee said, "Twelve old, ten new—twenty-two thousand."

Sugna searched the new document for 22000. He found it. Beneath it was a line about interest, but he could not understand the whole sentence.

“Read this line aloud.”

The employee read it. If a new loan was created, the next installment on the old loan would no longer remain separate; interest would run from the new date on the entire twenty-two thousand.

Sugna handed the paper back. “Not now. Let the old twelve thousand remain separate. We have seed at home for the winter crop.”

The employee said nothing. He gathered the paper and moved on.

When Revati heard about it that evening, she asked, “Did you read everything?”

“No. What I did not understand, I had read aloud to me.”

Revati smiled. “That too is part of reading.”

In Phagun, the second installment was paid after the arhar was sold. The wheat in Chait paid the final principal and the remaining interest. On the last day, the same violet ink pad lay in the society’s room; by then its edge had torn. The clerk wrote out the receipt and placed it before Sugna. Sugna first looked for “deposit.” Then “balance.” Beside it was a round digit—0. He put down his thumbprint.

When he reached home, Revati was changing the cow’s water beside the feeding trough. Sugna held out the receipt to her.

“Read it,” Revati said.

“First I will say it.” Sugna placed the tip of his thumb on the line. “Balance—zero.”

Revati opened the receipt and read the entire line. Sugna still could not read a long sentence. But when he placed the papers in the tin trunk this time, he put the loan document underneath and the receipt on top.

The cracked slate did not go into the trunk. It remained in the corner by the window, where in the evening the five words could still be seen like faint lines of lime.

STORY 217

Community Paddy

...

In the middle of Sawan, even at noon the cooking fires in Sonbarsa Tola were being lit late. Transplanting was over, green rows of paddy stood in the fields, but the next round of earnings was still far away. In the homes of the village's agricultural-labour families, the old paddy bins were going empty one by one.

The village community granary stood at the rear of the panchayat building. Two years earlier, after harvest, twenty-two families in the village had deposited paddy according to their means. Some had given five seers, some a paseri, some an entire sack. That year fifteen sacks of paddy remained in the granary. The rule was simple: in a time of distress, paddy would be lent out, and after the new harvest the same quantity would be returned along with one extra seer, so that losses from rats, drying, and transport could be covered.

Two people kept the keys to the granary—the mukhiya, Vimla Devi, and panchayat member Shambhunath Mahato. Alongside farming, Shambhunath also traded in paddy on a small scale. At harvest time he bought at low prices and stored it, then sold in Sawan and Bhadon when prices rose. This year eleven sacks lay in his own storehouse.

The first request came from Budhni Paswan's household. Her husband worked outside the village as a bricklayer, but work had been stopped for a month and a half. There were five people at home. Budhni came to Vimla Devi and said, "There is rice for three days. I do not know when the next wages will come."

The next day two more households added their names. By the third day there were seven families.

Scarcity did not enter every house in the same form. A family with a cow could sell milk and buy some rice. A family with a kitchen garden could stretch its rice by eating pumpkin, squash, or greens. But for a landless household like Budhni's, after reducing the rice there was only the stomach left to reduce. Within three days the midday meal stopped in her house; the children were given rice-water in the morning and rice in the evening. That was why the demand at the panchayat door was not for "charity," but for timely access to their own share of the granary.

Vimla Devi said to Shambhunath, "It is time to open the granary."

Shambhunath had the key tied into the cloth at his waist. He did not refuse at once. He said, "Only half of Sawan has passed. If we open it now, what will remain in Bhadon? The distress may grow worse yet."

The argument sounded reasonable. Vimla Devi too fell silent.

That same evening word came from the market that the price of paddy had risen by another two rupees per seer.

The value of the paddy in Shambhunath's own storehouse rose as well. The next morning he called five members of the panchayat.

"I have a proposal," he said. "The granary's paddy is fetching a good price now. A trader will lift all fifteen sacks at once. Let us sell them. With the extra money, the granary roof can be replaced and a bamboo platform built. Later, at harvest, we can buy paddy again."

Ramdev Yadav immediately said, "The price will rise further. Hold it for another week."

Vimla Devi asked, "And the seven households?"

Ramdev shrugged. "They can buy on credit from the market for a few days."

Shambhunath's argument was not solely about his own profit. He said that if all fifteen sacks were opened and distributed, rats, damp, and uncertainty about repayment could leave the granary empty the following year. The previous year two families had not returned their full paddy on time. Vimla Devi did not deny this. Her concern was that, in the name of "saving for the future," leaving present hunger to the market would also turn the granary's purpose upside down. So the argument did not settle into one person against another; it remained focused on how much to save and when to use it.

The meeting split evenly. Three members said the paddy should be sold; cash would remain in hand and the granary could be improved. Three said the paddy had been stored for times of distress, not for sale. The seventh member, old Phekan Sah, remained silent.

Shambhunath stated his position plainly. "I have held back my own paddy too. If the price rises, I will sell. Holding paddy is no crime. Selling the granary's paddy will increase the village's assets."

Vimla Devi said, "Your paddy is yours. The granary's paddy belongs to everyone. But I too will not decide without doing the arithmetic."

The granary did not open that day.

The next morning Vimla Devi, Phekan Sah, and Budhni had one paseri of paddy weighed on Shambhunath's scale and took it to the village husking mill. They watched with their own eyes how much rice came out after milling, how

much broken grain, and how much husk. After deducting the milling charge, the market value of the rice yielded by one paseri of paddy was calculated at that day's price.

Phekan Sah drew three lines on the earth with his finger.

The first line—the extra gain that would come from selling the granary's paddy to a trader.

The second line—the extra amount the seven families would have to pay if they bought the same quantity of rice in the market.

The third line—the cost of milling and transport.

Vimla Devi counted the figures again and again. Budhni sat silently. Shambhunath too was called.

When the calculation was complete, Phekan Sah said, "Selling the granary's paddy will bring about four thousand four hundred rupees extra. But if the seven families buy the same amount of rice in the market, together they will pay nearly seven thousand rupees extra. Four thousand is coming into one hand of the village, while seven thousand is going out through the other."

Shambhunath kept looking at the lines in the earth.

Ramdev said, "But what about the granary roof?"

Vimla Devi replied, "The roof is not leaking. It can last another year. A stomach cannot be postponed for a week."

This time Shambhunath took out the key and placed it on the table, but said, "Not all fifteen sacks."

The argument began again. In the end they decided that five sacks would be opened in the first round. The seven families would receive paddy according to household size; after ten days the situation would be reviewed. Three sacks would remain untouched in one corner of the granary as a "last reserve." The remaining seven sacks would be decided upon at the next meeting.

When the granary door opened, the smell of paddy came out. The sacks stood on bamboo slats two fingers away from the wall. Vimla Devi opened the first sack. Budhni's share was measured out.

No one called it charity. No one called it a favour. The paddy was a loan; it would return after harvest.

Budhni could not lift the sack onto her head. Her elder daughter and a neighbour held it from either side and carried it home. That evening her cooking fire was lit on time.

Within ten days the paddy in two more households ran out. At the second meeting, another two sacks were opened. By then the market price had risen by another rupee.

Shambhunath sold six of the eleven sacks in his private storehouse to a trader. He made a good profit. No one in the panchayat objected.

But that week something curious happened. Poor families in the village bought less paddy from the market because they had received grain on loan from the granary. Two small shopkeepers in the market tried to raise the price further, but sales remained slow. The price rose, but not as much as the traders had expected.

Shambhunath himself mentioned this at the meeting. "Opening the granary reduced market demand."

Phekan Sah smiled. "Then your six sacks got out at the right time."

Shambhunath laughed too. "Five are still left."

There was no speech about reconciliation. The disagreement in the panchayat did not disappear either. Ramdev still believed there should be a cash reserve. Vimla Devi believed a paddy granary was more useful when it remained in paddy. The decision had been only for that particular Sawan.

By the last week of Bhadon, a total of nine sacks of paddy had gone out on loan. Three sacks remained untouched. Of the other three, one sack showed signs of rat damage, so it was opened, dried in the sun, and filled into a new sack. The granary roof was not replaced, but two weak bamboo slats were replaced by the villagers through their own labour.

In Asin the first early paddy harvest was still far away, but wage work was slowly beginning again. In Budhni's house, as before, the cooking fire began to burn twice a day. Passing the granary, she said, "At harvest, the first paddy will return here."

Vimla Devi said only, "As much as you took, and one seer more."

On the last day of Kartik, Budhni was the first to return. She unloaded a small sack of new paddy and had it measured. The borrowed quantity was returned, with one seer added. The new sack was placed on an empty bamboo slat in the granary.

That day Shambhunath was preparing to sell the remaining five sacks in his own storehouse. The price was good, though not as high as he had imagined in Sawan. As he passed the panchayat building, he saw the new sack. He did not stop. He only glanced at it once and walked on.

Inside the granary there were not fifteen sacks now. The empty spaces were plainly visible. Yet those empty spaces seemed to hold, all at once, the smoke from the cooking fires of seven households in Sawan, ten days of borrowed grain, and the first returned sack of Kartik.

Vimla Devi closed the door. The two keys once again went away separately, tied into two different cloth knots at two different waists.

STORY 218

The First Harvest

...

Four months after returning from Surat, Nayan Mandal stood for so long on the ridge of his field that his father called to him twice from the house. Nayan had spent eight years in a cloth warehouse in the city, counting bundles, and had come home believing that a man who understood numbers ought also to understand the profit and loss of farming. The family owned one bigha and six katthas of ancestral land. His father Ramlochan's knees no longer worked as they once had, so the main responsibility for cultivation was about to pass into Nayan's hands.

Before Asadh, he took a blank page in an old register and wrote down the expected expenses: paddy seed, the seedbed, ploughing, water, fertiliser, harvesting, transport. Against transplanting he wrote: "Twelve labourers, one day." He added the wage rate as well. That single line made the whole account seem clear to him.

Ramlochan looked at the page. "Will you find twelve labourers on the same day?"

Nayan said, "If I pay, why would I not?"

Ramlochan did not answer. Looking toward the seedbed, he said, "Paddy transplanting runs more by the day of the water than by the day of the wage."

Nayan laughed. In the city, work had fixed timings; labourers came, lifted loads, filled trucks. To him a field was work too—only between soil and water.

By the end of Jeth the seedbed had turned green. Nayan had levelled the soil before broadcasting the seed, so the seedlings stood clean and dense. The field was ploughed after the first rain. The second rain filled the ridges. Ramlochan pressed the wet earth between his fingers and said, "The next two or three days will be good for transplanting."

That evening Nayan went out to find twelve labourers.

In the first hamlet, four women told him they had already committed themselves to Budhan Paswan's field. Nayan offered a higher wage. Lalita Devi said, "This is not about the rate. Last week people from Budhan's household came to uproot seedlings in our seedbed. If we leave his transplanting now, who will come to our field next time?"

In the second hamlet he found three people, but they were free only the day after next. At a third place, two people said they could come for half a day, not the whole day.

Nayan returned home and said, “People are leaving money aside and holding on to turns.”

Ramlochan said calmly, “They are not leaving money aside. They are saving time. When transplanting comes, every field asks for hands at once.”

Nayan still did not accept it. What harm, he thought, could two days’ delay do?

On the second day water still stood in the field. On the third the sun turned fierce. By the fourth, the water within the ridges had fallen until only a thin sheen remained over slick mud. Nayan called six labourers from a distant village. Their wages were higher, and he also had to pay for their morning meal and travel. Half the field was transplanted that day. The other half, the next.

By the time the transplanting was finished, the seedlings in the seedbed had grown longer and somewhat hardened. Ramlochan took one plant in his hand and looked at its roots, but said nothing.

Seven days later the rain stopped. Some of the transplanted plants took hold and turned green, but in the half planted later many rows drooped. The surface soil began to crack. Nayan brought water by pump. The pump operator had already committed that day to three other fields, so Nayan’s turn came at night. Until midnight he stood on the ridge with a lantern, guiding water from one section to another.

Two weeks later the field was no longer one colour. The first half was densely green; in the second, empty gaps showed row after row. Nayan tried to fill them with seedlings left in the seedbed. This time Ramlochan too bound his knees and entered the field. Phulo, Nayan’s wife, carried bundles of seedlings from the ridge into the field. It took three mornings.

In his register Nayan crossed out the amount he had first written against “transplanting” and entered a new one: labour from the distant village, meals, travel, extra pump water. The page was filling up.

By Bhadon the paddy had grown, but unevenly. The plants used to fill the gaps were behind the rest. Weeds also rose more thickly in the open soil. Labour was needed again for one round of weeding. This time Nayan tried to arrange people in advance. But some were repaying labour owed from transplanting, others were cutting weeds in their own fields. Those he could find asked more than the rate in Nayan’s original estimate.

That evening Budhan Paswan came to Nayan’s ridge. Looking at the green field, he said, “The crop has survived.”

Nayan showed him the two colours of the field. "It has survived, but why does one field look like two?"

Budhan did not laugh. Sitting on the ridge, he said, "You did not get hands on your transplanting day. It happened to me one year too. After that I tied myself into reciprocal turns with four households. Today I work in his field, tomorrow he works in mine. Labour is not always settled in cash; sometimes money returns, sometimes labour returns."

Nayan asked, "Who counts the hours?"

"Not the hours. The turn is counted. When the field is ready, what matters is whether the hands arrive."

Nayan listened, nothing more. That night he wrote nothing in the register.

At the beginning of Kartik the panicles emerged. In the portion transplanted first, they were full. In the later portion, some plants were still short. Even the harvest could not be done on a single day. After cutting the first part, they had to wait five days. In the meantime a strong wind came one night and bent some of the paddy in the later section.

At harvest, Ramlochan counted sacks in the courtyard. The previous year the field had filled twelve sacks. This time there were eight full sacks, and a ninth a little more than half full. Nayan held some grain in his palm and remained silent for a long time.

Ramlochan said, "The rain was less this year too."

Nayan nodded. "The rain was less in everyone's fields. Half of ours was late."

When the paddy was sold, the costs of seed, fertiliser, water, distant labour, meals, travel, weeding, and harvesting were deducted. The money left was not enough to restore what had been drawn down from Nayan's savings brought from the city.

Phulo asked, "Did you write down our three mornings of gap-filling, and Baba's work?"

Nayan looked at the register. He had not.

Phulo said nothing more.

The following week it was time to harvest the early paddy at Budhan's house. In the morning Budhan's son came to Nayan's courtyard. "Uncle, we need two days of hands."

Nayan first opened the register. At the end of the old account was an empty line. He wrote: "Budhan's harvest—give two days." Beside it he wrote no amount of money.

He and Phulo spent two days in Budhan's field, cutting and threshing. By noon their backs ached; by evening their palms burned. On the third day Budhan himself came to Nayan's house.

"When you need four hands to cut your ridges for the rabi crop, tell me."

For the first time Nayan understood that this promise was not an alternative to wages but another form of wages. A household that gave labour today created the possibility of receiving hands at the needed time tomorrow.

During those two days in Budhan's field, Nayan noticed something else. People from four households were working together, yet no one kept watching a clock. On the first day an elderly woman from one house went home before noon, while a young man from another stayed until evening. The next day the pattern reversed. The midday meal came from Budhan's house, but a woman from a third household had brought pickle from her own home. Nayan tried for a while to add up the hours in his head, then gave up. The account of this group did not balance at the end of each day; balance was sought across the whole season. If water was escaping from someone's field, that household got more hands that day; another time, another household did. For that reason it was difficult to compare the arrangement with a cash wage rate, but within the narrow transplanting window it made labour available when it was needed.

In Paus, Nayan opened a new page for the next kharif season. This time, beside "transplanting," he did not write only a wage rate. First he wrote: "Within three days of the field becoming ready." Under that: "Reciprocal labour: two days given to Budhan's household; four hands to be fixed in advance for my transplanting." Then: "Outside labourers: only to fill any shortage." Finally: "Household labour: count separately."

Ramlochan looked at the page. "Will writing all this make the paddy yield more?"

Nayan smiled. "No. But if hands fail to come at the right time, that will no longer sit outside the account as if it costs nothing."

One morning in Magh, Nayan went out with Budhan to repair field ridges. There was no new crop yet in his own field—only the empty space after harvest, the stubble of the last paddy, and dew.

When he had returned from the city, Nayan had begun the mathematics of farming with money. Now, on the transplanting page of his register, there was a line on which no rupees were written—only four hands and three days of time.

His first harvest had given him less grain, but it had filled the blank space on the page where earlier there had been only: "Twelve labourers, one day."

STORY 219

The Locked Room in Madhubani

...

For the past three nights, as soon as evening fell, Kaushal Paswan had been shutting the western room from the inside. The other rooms of the house remained open; bowls for mixing pigments, bamboo pens, thread, and paper lay on the veranda. But the key to that western room stayed knotted into his dhoti. On the fourth night, when Chandrakala followed him, Kaushal gripped the door latch and whispered, "I will look again tonight. Yesterday the fish's right eye was turned toward the kadamba branch. Earlier it looked straight ahead."

For fifteen years Chandrakala had watched him paint. She was one of the two or three younger painters in the village who had learnt at Kaushal's house how to mix colours, copy the lines of old wall paintings, and make new compositions on paper. But she had never been allowed inside the western room. Kaushal always said the mural there was old, that damp was eating into it, and that even too many people breathing inside could damage it.

That night Kaushal went in carrying a small oil lamp. Chandrakala remained by the door. Paintings filled almost the entire room: a kadamba tree in the centre, two fish below it, vines and leaves all around, birds with spread wings, scarcely any empty space. The colours were old. In some places the earthen plaster had swollen; in others the white rice-paste lines had faded.

Kaushal raised the lamp in his right hand and said, "Look. This wing was not this low yesterday."

Chandrakala watched in silence for a while. "Where was the lamp yesterday?"

Kaushal turned toward her. "I know where my own painting is."

"I asked where the lamp was, not where the painting was."

Kaushal did not answer. He went closer to the wall and held the lamp a thumb's breadth in front of the fish's eye. On the rough surface, the lamp-shadow thickened and thinned the painted lines. A dark trace of old dampness descended from the roof above. Kaushal did not look at it. His eyes had fixed on three tiny white dots near the fish's tail.

"These three dots..." he said, and no more. Then he lowered the lamp.

Chandrakala asked, "They were not there before?"

“No,” Kaushal answered at once. “This painting changes at night.”

Eleven years earlier, the room had not been locked. Renuka Devi had mixed colours there beside Kaushal. She was younger than he was, but her lines were sharper. Fine double outlines along a fish’s body, tiny veins inside leaves, and three white dots at the corner of a tail were characteristic touches of hers. Kaushal used to say they were merely decoration; but when villagers saw those three dots in a painting Renuka had made, they immediately recognised her hand.

At that time a trader from Madhubani had commissioned a large painting for an exhibition outside the region. Kaushal and Renuka had first worked out the composition on the western wall—a kadamba tree, two fish, and a surrounding field of vines. Seeing the wall design, the trader asked for the same subject on paper. Renuka painted the fish in the centre and half the vine-work; Kaushal completed the rest. When the paper painting was finished, only Kaushal’s name was written beneath it.

Renuka had neither laughed nor become angry at first. She had only asked, “Why did you erase my three dots?”

Kaushal had said, “The trader asked for one name.”

“Then the lines should have been from one hand too.”

After that day the matter did not remain small. Praise came from the exhibition, and then two new commissions. In front of others, Kaushal began saying that Renuka painted by looking at his older designs. Renuka objected, but Kaushal was already known, the commissions came through his house, and most of the pigments and materials were kept there. Gradually people accepted his account. A few months later Renuka stopped painting. Then she went back to her mother’s home.

Kaushal covered Renuka’s three dots on the western mural with black paint. After that, the room was locked. He told everyone it was necessary to preserve the old painting. The reason inside him he never fully spoke even to himself.

This year Sawan had been long. The western wall had stayed damp. Parts of the earthen surface and old plaster had swollen and then dried. On the first night Kaushal said the fish’s eye had turned. On the second, he thought one branch of the kadamba had bent lower. On the third, the white empty patch between the vines seemed to have widened by a thumb’s breadth. On the fourth, the three dots had appeared again.

Chandrakala said, “Let us open the room in daylight and look.”

Kaushal’s hand tightened on the latch. “Daylight eats old colours.”

“From opening the door once?”

“You would not understand.”

Chandrakala said nothing more. But the next morning, while sweeping the veranda, she noticed black-red pigment under the nails of Kaushal’s right hand.

She asked, “Were you painting again last night?”

Kaushal wiped his hand on his dhoti. “I touched an old colour bowl.”

That night he entered the room again. This time Chandrakala did not remain outside. She reached the latch and said, “Let me stay inside too.” Before Kaushal could refuse, she had stepped in.

The lamp flame was small. The three dots near the fish’s tail were no longer clear; they looked rubbed and abraded. Fine powder from the earthen wall lay on the floor around them.

Chandrakala bent and touched the powder. “Did this fall because of the damp?”

Kaushal said, “The painting is saving its own form.”

“Or is someone erasing it again?”

Kaushal held the lamp up. The flame trembled. The shadow over the fish’s eye again made it appear to turn. His breathing quickened. “You saw that? It changed again.”

Chandrakala was not looking at the wall. She was looking at his hand. White earthen dust clung between his thumb and forefinger.

That night Kaushal woke again and again. The first time, he thought he could hear a bamboo pen scratching across the wall inside the room. The second time, he thought someone was drawing lines inside the leaves. The third time, he rose to look for the key, but it was not beneath his pillow.

At dawn, the key was already in the western door. The door stood half open.

Kaushal went inside. The three dots near the fish’s tail were gone. In their place were three small deep scratches. The black surface of the wall had been scraped away, and old white plaster showed underneath. One of his old bamboo pens lay on the floor, fresh earth clinging to its tip.

“Someone came in here,” Kaushal said loudly.

Chandrakala came up behind him. “Where was the key?”

“I cannot say.”

“Last night it was in your hand.”

Kaushal turned on her. “Do you think I am lying?”

Chandrakala said quietly, “I am looking at the painting. You are looking at fear.”

Kaushal's eyes remained fixed on the wall. After a long time he said, "Renuka did more work than I did on this painting."

Chandrakala said nothing.

"My name was the one that travelled," Kaushal continued. "Those three dots were hers. I erased them. I told people she made her lines by looking at mine. That was a lie too."

No lamp was burning in the room now. Morning light entered through the open doorway and fell across the wall. In daylight the fish's eye looked straight ahead, the kadamba branch was in its place, and so were the leaves of the vine. Only parts of the damp wall had swollen, and beneath the three scratches near the tail the old white plaster showed through.

Chandrakala asked, "Where is Renuka now?"

Kaushal said, "Somewhere toward the city. I have not met her in years."

"Will you paint again?"

Kaushal did not answer immediately. He picked up the bamboo pen, then carried it out and placed it on the veranda.

That day he did not lock the western door.

For the next three nights Kaushal did not enter the room. On the first, he remained seated on the veranda. On the second, he slept without a lamp. On the third, it rained again; the dark line of dampness on the western wall crept farther downward.

In the morning Chandrakala went inside. The painting was the same. The three scratches were the same. But just below them, in the old plaster, two extremely fine white dots were visible again. Whether they had appeared through damp, through old pigment, or through someone's hand was impossible to say.

Kaushal stood in the doorway. Chandrakala looked toward him. He did not enter. He only said, "Leave it."

From that day onward, the latch of the western room remained open day and night. Kaushal never again discussed whether the painting had changed. But whenever a new student began counting the white dots near the fish's tail, Kaushal would put his hands behind his back and silently keep looking at that place.

STORY 220

The Sound of the Bell

...

Half the night had passed in Sawan. The rain had stopped, but drops were still falling one by one from the tiled roof of the old haveli. Beyond the veranda, mango leaves glistened in the wet darkness. Shailkant Jha lay on his wooden cot with his eyes closed when, as if from inside the wall, a faint metallic note rose.

Ting.

A few moments of silence.

Then twice more—ting, ting.

Shailkant sat up. The head of his cot was pressed against the thick western wall. He strained his ears. Frogs sounded outside, a dog barked somewhere far away, then everything fell silent again.

Long ago the haveli had possessed a network of bells. Fine iron wires ran from the inner rooms to the hall, where small brass bells hung overhead. By the tone of a bell, a servant could tell which room was calling. Now the wires had rusted, most of the bells had been removed, and the one remaining in the western hall had its clapper tied with a cloth cord.

Shailkant lit a lamp and went to the hall. The bell was still. Dust lay on the cord.

In the morning his niece Mrinalini arrived. The haveli was to be divided among three siblings, and before repairs began she was making an inventory of the old objects.

In an offhand voice Shailkant asked, “Did you hear the bell last night?”

Mrinalini shook her head. “I sat on the veranda until late. I heard nothing.”

“It rang three times.”

“Perhaps it was a cowbell outside?”

Shailkant did not answer. He knew the tone. It was not the bell of an animal outside. The old western bell used to sound first with one thin note, then, when the wire tightened, with two short strikes. Three decades earlier he had heard that pattern ten times a day.

On the second night Mrinalini deliberately slept on the veranda. Shailkant lay on his cot. After midnight the sound came again—one note, then two.

“Mrinalini,” he called softly.

From the veranda came her answer. “What happened?”

“Did you hear it just now?”

“No. Nothing.”

Shailkant kept looking at the wall. His palms had begun to sweat.

The next day the carpenter Jitnarayan was examining an old frame near the western wall. Mrinalini mentioned the bell jokingly. Jitnarayan looked up at the old wire. It entered the wall from the hall and was broken somewhere near the outer eaves.

“The wire may still run inside the wall,” he said. “It can vibrate when the wind blows.”

Mrinalini asked, “Then why do I not hear it?”

Jitnarayan tapped the wall. “This wall is thick. It is hard to know where the wire touches timber inside.”

Shailkant remained silent. The head of his cot was pressed against that very wall.

That evening he pulled the cot two arm-lengths away from the wall. He stayed awake late into the night. No metallic note came. Near dawn he fell asleep.

The bell did not sound the second night either.

On the third night a strong easterly wind blew. The cot was still away from the wall, yet sometime after midnight Shailkant thought he heard a very faint ting. This time the sound was so slight that he could not be sure whether it came from a utensil outside, from the old wire, or from memory.

But memory had now opened.

Thirty-one years earlier, Shailkant had kept the accounts and registers of this haveli. The master’s eldest daughter was to be married. The house was full day and night with relatives, cooks, musicians, craftsmen, and servants. The master had given a clear order: during the three days of the wedding, no servant was to leave without permission.

That afternoon Bhola Paswan had come to Shailkant. Bhola used to attend to the western hall when its bell sounded. His seven-year-old daughter Paro had fallen dangerously ill with fever. A child had run from home with word that unless she reached the vaidya before evening, the night might become difficult.

With folded hands Bhola had said, “Let me go for two ghari. I will take the child to the vaidya and return.”

Shailkant knew the master's order. At that moment the master was sitting with guests.

Shailkant had said, "Go quietly. I will watch the western hall. Return before the first watch is over."

Bhola ran home.

As evening grew crowded, Shailkant became caught up in the register, market expenses, and counting utensils. Going to the western hall slipped from his mind.

During the first watch of the night, a bell sounded from the southern room—once, then twice. The master's elderly aunt was asking for hot water. No one went at the first call. No one went at the second. On the third, the aunt herself came to the doorway and called someone.

The master became angry. "Where is Bhola?"

Shailkant's mouth went dry. He could have said: I sent him. But with that one sentence, the blame for breaking the master's order would fall on him. He had charge of the wedding accounts; his employment was new; he had two small children at home.

He said, "He did not tell me. Perhaps he went on his own."

Bhola returned late that night. The vaidya had given medicine to his daughter, and the fever had eased a little. But at the haveli gate the master called him inside and asked, "Why did you leave without telling anyone?"

Bhola immediately looked at Shailkant.

That one look stayed with Shailkant for years.

Bhola said, "I had told Munshiji."

The master turned toward Shailkant.

Shailkant had said, "He told me his daughter was ill, but there was no question of his leaving."

Bhola remained silent for a few moments. Then he said only, "All right."

The next morning the master dismissed him from work. His wages for the previous fifteen days were withheld. After the wedding Shailkant wrote in the attendance register: "Left work at night without informing anyone."

Paro survived. Bhola found work in another village. Gradually the matter was buried beneath other household events.

Only the tone of the western bell was not buried.

On the fourth night Shailkant pushed the cot back against the wall. Mrinalini asked nothing. After midnight the sound rose clearly—one note, then two.

This time Shailkant did not go to the hall. He placed his palm on the wooden head of the cot. There was a very fine vibration in the wood. Somewhere inside the wall, a rusted wire was moving in the wind. Perhaps that vibration was travelling through the wood of the cot to his ear. The clapper of the main bell was tied, after all.

But wood could not answer why he recognised the old pattern so clearly.

In the morning Shailkant said to Mrinalini, “Where is the old attendance register?”

They found the register from the year of the wedding beneath a trunk. Beside Bhola Paswan’s name was Shailkant’s own handwriting: “Left work at night without informing anyone.” Under it was a red line, and fifteen days’ wages had been deducted.

Mrinalini read it and looked at him. Shailkant told her the whole story.

She did not interrupt. At the end she asked, “Is Bhola Kaka still alive?”

“Yes. In the eastern village.”

Shailkant took a separate sheet of paper. He wrote down the year and page of the old register and Bhola Paswan’s name. Then, in his own hand, he wrote: Bhola had informed him that he was taking his daughter to the vaidya; Shailkant had given him permission to go; before the master, Shailkant had denied this out of fear; the old entry in the attendance register was incorrect.

Beneath it he wrote the date and his name.

Mrinalini made two copies. One was kept with the old register. Shailkant put the other inside his kurta.

That afternoon he went to the eastern village. Bhola was sitting in his courtyard splitting strips of bamboo. A middle-aged woman sat near his feet sorting paddy. Shailkant did not recognise her.

Bhola said, “This is Paro.”

She was the same seven-year-old child who had had the fever.

Paro read the paper aloud. Her voice neither sharpened nor softened as she read. After the last line she handed the paper to her father.

Bhola remained silent for a long time.

Shailkant said, “The wages that were withheld—if I calculate them now—”

Bhola raised his hand. “The master withheld the money. What you withheld was the truth. Today you have said it. Leave this paper here first.”

Shailkant placed the paper in his hand.

“The rest another time,” Bhola said.

There was neither forgiveness nor quarrel. Shailkant rose from the veranda and left.

Repairs at the haveli began the following week. When Jitnarayan opened the upper part of the western wall, he found the old rusted bell wire. It had been rubbing again and again against a loose wooden piece near the outer eaves. When the wind was strong, the wire touched an inner piece of wood. The main bell remained still, but the vibration could travel through the wall.

Jitnarayan removed the wire and brought it down. "Now you will not hear that sound at night."

Shailkant looked for a few moments at the coil of wire. "Keep it," he said. "Do not throw it away."

That night the cot stood two arm-lengths from the wall. An easterly wind was blowing too. Shailkant remained awake for a long time. No bell sounded.

After midnight he opened his eyes once. Out of habit he listened. Outside there was only the dripping of water from the roof.

On the trunk beside the head of his cot, a copy of the new correction note lay on top of the old attendance register. Shailkant did not rise to look at it. He closed his eyes again.

Much later, somewhere toward the courtyard, there came a very faint metallic ting of brass—perhaps a bucket tied to a rope, perhaps a cowbell.

Shailkant did not open his eyes.

STORY 221

The Eye of the Pond

...

I had not chosen, of my own accord, to spend the night by that pond. Two fishing nets had been stolen from the western hamlet of the village, and my maternal uncle's son Naresh, who had recently taken the fishing lease, had come down with fever. He said, "Just one night. There is a cot on the watch-platform. I will come in the morning."

The pond was called Kajrahi. No one could say clearly why it had acquired that name. The water was not black, but when one looked toward the deeper part, the green suddenly darkened. It was the last week of Asadh. Half the surface was covered with fine waterweed, and here and there round patches of open water shone through.

At dusk I climbed onto the platform. There was a bamboo staff, two old tin cans, and a lantern. The arrangement against theft was simple: if I heard any rustling, I was to beat the cans, and the noise would wake people in the hamlet.

I first saw the "eye" as the sun was going down.

Among the waterweed was a round dark patch. A pale green ring encircled it, and in the middle lay still water. From a distance it truly looked like a pupil. I laughed. Weed drifts on water, a round opening forms—what more could there be to it?

But as the night deepened, that round patch seemed closer than before.

I lifted the lantern and set it beside the bamboo post. The platform stood roughly twenty handspans from the pond. At dusk the dark circle had been toward the middle; now it was near the western bank, directly opposite me.

Not a single leaf was moving.

I explained it to myself: waterweed floats, and air can move over water even when the eye cannot see the wind. But then I noticed that the weed around it was still. Only the round opening of water was slowly widening.

Then a sound like *bhuk* rose from inside the water. A bubble broke in the centre of the dark patch. Then another. Then three together.

Sweat ran down my back.

"Gas," I said aloud, as though someone else were listening. "Rotting leaves at the bottom. That is all."

Hearing my own voice steadied me a little. I sat on the cot. Half an hour later, when I looked again, the round patch had grown smaller. The waterweed was closing over it again.

No one stole anything that night. But I did not sleep.

Naresh did not come in the morning. His fever had worsened. His wife sent word through a child: "Please watch tonight as well."

By day the pond was ordinary. Fish cut through the water, egrets walked along the edge, two children ran on the embankment. I told no one about the night. I only asked an old fisherman, Bauku Sahni, "Why do round patches of open water appear in the middle?"

Without even looking toward the pond, he said, "Water must be rising from below. It is an old pond. Here and there the earth breathes."

"The earth breathes?"

Bauku laughed. "It is only a way of speaking. You are the educated one."

The word "breathes" stayed caught in my mind all day.

On the second night I drove three slender bamboo stakes into the ground near the platform—one at the northern edge, one at the western edge, and one directly in line with the place where the round patch had been at dusk. I wanted only to find out whether it was truly shifting or whether my eyes were deceiving me.

The moon was behind clouds. The lantern gave little light. Nothing happened through the first watch of the night. Then a long rustling moved across the pond, as though some heavy thing had passed beneath the waterweed.

A round patch opened—this time two of them.

Two eyes.

I regretted the word at once. They were merely two round openings of water. One to the left of the bamboo marker, the other to the right, with a narrow strip of weed between them.

I climbed down from the cot and went to the edge. The soil was damp. Stretching out the staff, I touched the water. Nothing. Inside one of the round openings, a small fish flashed. Then the weed shifted, and the opening on the right closed.

"Alive," someone inside my mind said.

I stepped back.

In the middle of the night I felt as though there was water beneath the platform. The cot was moving. I rose and lit the lantern. There was no water,

but the two front bamboo posts of the platform had sunk slightly into the wet earth.

The pond's edge seemed a handspan closer than before.

I pulled the cot farther back.

At dawn I examined the three bamboo markers. The round patch from dusk was not where it had been. But one of the two openings from the night really had appeared beside the western stake—I remembered that clearly.

I looked at my footprints in the mud. Some led toward the pond, some back. That was natural; I had walked to the edge myself during the night.

Only one print disturbed me.

It ran from behind the platform toward the pond, from a place I could not remember walking.

The mark looked like my sandal.

During the day I pressed my sandal into the earth and compared them. The size matched. But dozens of people in the village wore sandals like mine.

Naresh's fever was coming down that day. He said, "From tomorrow I will watch. You stay only one last night."

I could have gone home that evening if I had wished. I did not. Even now I cannot clearly say why. Was fear drawing me in, or was I searching for proof of my fear? The difference between the two had become very small.

On the third night I did not light the lantern. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the pond seemed clearer. The waterweed lay like a grey sheet; the exposed water looked black.

For a long time that night the eye did not open.

I began to feel relieved. Then something beneath the platform went thak. After that came bhuk.

Far out on the water a round patch opened. Not one—three. Then two closed. One remained.

It slowly widened.

I did not rise. I only watched.

A star trembled in the middle of the black circle. A cloud moved across it and the star disappeared. Then fine ripples rose on the surface. It seemed to me that the ripples were moving not outward but inward—as though the pond were drawing its own water into itself.

My breath grew short.

"The earth breathes."

Bauku's words sounded again.

Then someone coughed behind me on the embankment. I turned—there was no one.

When I looked back, the round opening had vanished. The whole surface was covered with waterweed.

At that moment I became convinced that the pond had been waiting for me to turn away.

I climbed down from the platform and started toward home. I had gone perhaps ten steps when a loud splash came from the water behind me. I did not turn. Twenty steps farther, another came.

Then the earth gave way beneath my right foot.

A small section of the bank collapsed into the pond. I sank into mud up to my knee. Had I still been sitting on the platform, the collapse would have reached exactly to its front post.

I do not clearly remember how I got free. When I reached home, my dhoti was covered in mud and waterweed clung to my right palm.

In the morning Bauku Sahni and Naresh came with me to the pond. The earth on the western bank had indeed collapsed. Bauku pushed a staff into the water and said, "It has become hollow underneath. An old spring must have shifted this way."

"Round openings kept appearing in the water at night," I said.

"When a spring rises, the weed moves aside."

"In three places at once?"

He shrugged. "Who knows where water travels under the bottom?"

I remained silent.

Two days later labourers filled earth along the western bank. Some of the waterweed was cleared. The platform was moved farther back. Naresh began keeping watch at night.

He never saw the "eye"—at least, he never told me he did.

A week later I went to Kajrahi again at dusk. The pond looked much more open. There was less weed, so there was no question of a round dark patch forming where the weeds parted.

I tried to feel ashamed of the fear I had felt on that first night.

Then Bauku called from a distance, "Do not stand there. There is a spring underneath."

I stepped back two paces.

At that exact moment, in the clear water, a round ring formed. There was no waterweed to move aside. The surface simply rose from below, darkened for a single instant, then flattened again.

I saw it.

Whether it saw me, I cannot answer.

I know only this: after that day I stopped calling the pond alive. But sometimes at night, when the smell of water comes without any wind, my right foot steps backward of its own accord.

STORY 222

Inside the Wall

...

For three days the rain had been falling on and off. A broad damp stain had spread down the eastern wall of Shashibhushan Chaudhary's old house, and the inner plaster crumbled at the touch of a finger. There was no question of selling the house; once this year was over, he intended to come and live here with his wife. So he had called Kanak, the mason, to open the damaged portion and rebuild it.

Kanak tapped the wall lightly with his hammer, listening to the sound. At one place the note changed.

"It is hollow inside here," he said.

Shashibhushan stood by the doorframe. "Open it. Remove as much as has gone bad."

When the old earthen plaster came away, two courses of brick appeared. Black soil had been packed between them. Kanak pushed in his chisel. Earth spilled out, and with it a small object dropped to the floor.

It was a clay bird, no longer than a finger, with a rounded belly, a thin tail, and a whistle-hole in its beak. A faded streak of blue still remained along one wing. There was a small chip beside the beak.

Shashibhushan bent down at once.

"This is mine."

Kanak did not laugh. He only asked, "You recognise it?"

"I was seven. It had been brought from the fair. Manjari kept asking for it. I would not give it to her. The beak had chipped—look, here. I hid it in a gap in this wall."

The moment he said the words, the scene rose before him with complete clarity. There had been sunlight. Paddy was drying in the courtyard. His mother wore a yellow sari. Manjari was running behind her, crying and crying. He had come to this eastern wall with the bird clenched in his fist, lifted a loose brick near the bottom, and slipped the bird inside. Then his mother had called from a distance, "Shashi, have you snatched her toy again?"

The memory was so clear that Shashibhushan saw no reason to doubt it.

Kanak wiped the bird with a cloth and placed it in his hand. “The bricks look as though they were laid a very long time ago. The earth between them may have been packed in later.”

“Yes, the wall was opened once,” Shashibhushan said. “After the great flood.”

That evening Manjari arrived. She now lived in Benipatti, but hearing that the old house was being repaired, she had come for two days. Shashibhushan placed the clay bird before her.

Manjari smiled at first, then drew her brows together.

“Where did you find this?”

“Inside the eastern wall. My bird.”

“This was yours?”

“Don’t you remember? You used to ask for it. I hid it.”

Manjari picked up the bird and turned it over in her hands. “I had a clay bird. But mine had a red stripe. It broke at Nani’s house.”

“No. This was yours. You were crying for it.”

“Why would I have been crying? Had you taken my bird?”

Shashibhushan stopped. The scene rose again, but this time the bird was in Manjari’s hand, and he himself was snatching it and running away. His mother was calling after him. Even the direction of the sunlight seemed to have shifted.

“The wall was opened after the flood,” he said, trying to steady the subject.

Manjari said softly, “Which flood?”

“The year Baba replaced the rear roof.”

“That year I was at Nani’s house. The eastern wall was not opened. The rear wall was.”

Shashibhushan grew irritated. “How would you remember everything?”

“How do you?”

It was a simple question, but Shashibhushan spent the whole night looking for its answer.

The next day Kanak opened more of the wall. The old masonry looked uniform all the way through. Here and there were earth and brick dust, but there was no gap into which a child could have pushed a hand from outside.

Kanak said, “This object must have been trapped inside while the wall was being built, or it may have fallen in from above sometime later.”

Shashibhushan immediately said, “There used to be a small window here.”

Kanak stopped his hammer. “A window?”

“Yes. Low down. I used to sit on it.”

He placed his hand against the middle of the wall. He could see it distinctly now—two wooden shutters, a neem tree outside, his knees on the sill, the same clay bird in his hand. He used to blow into the bird’s beak and the whistle came out very thin.

Kanak went outside and examined the brickwork. “There is no sign that this section was ever opened.”

Shashibhushan himself went out. From the eastern side the wall was straight. The old courses of bricks near the bottom were unbroken. There was no trace of a window.

“The plaster must have been changed many times,” he said.

Kanak said nothing.

That afternoon Manjari found him sitting in the courtyard with the bird in his hand.

“You are remembering the low window at Nani’s house,” she said suddenly.

“Which window?”

“There was a low window at Nani’s. A neem tree stood outside. You used to sit there and blow whistles.”

Shashibhushan’s hand stiffened.

“The bird at Nani’s was red,” he said.

“Perhaps. I do not remember the colour. But the window was not on the east. It faced north.”

“No. East.”

“See? You are mixing this house with that one again.”

Shashibhushan wanted to become angry, but the courtyard of his grandmother’s house suddenly appeared so clearly that the anger would not hold. There really had been a neem tree there. One thick root rose almost to the window. He remembered placing a foot on that root and jumping outside.

But why, inside that memory, was his mother standing there? It would have been natural for her to be at Nani’s house. But why could he hear his father’s voice? Had his father gone there that day or not? And had Manjari been crying for a red bird, or a blue one?

That afternoon Shashibhushan went toward Sakri to the old potters’ quarter. Nunu Kumhar had grown old; his son now worked the wheel. Shashibhushan showed him the bird.

Nunu brought it close to his eyes. “Birds like this used to be made in great numbers. Not all from the same mould, but nearly the same in form. See this

blue stripe? That kind of colour was put on with cheap market blue. You might have found twenty such birds in twenty houses.”

“And this chip on the beak?”

“What kind of identifying mark is a chip on a clay toy?”

Shashibhushan did not laugh. He wrapped the bird again in his gamchha.

When he returned home, Kanak had finished opening the damaged section of the eastern wall. Shashibhushan did not mention the old window again. He only asked, “Did you find anything else inside?”

“Nothing else.”

“Any gap?”

“There was an empty space between two bricks higher up. The bird could have fallen through there and lodged below. But who can say when it fell?”

That answer ought to have reassured Shashibhushan. Instead, it deepened his unease. If the bird had fallen from above, how could he remember so clearly hiding it there as a child? And if the memory had been made afterward, where had the chipped beak, his mother’s yellow sari, and Manjari’s crying come from?

After supper that night he placed the bird on the table. His wife Vimla asked, “Why are you thinking so much about this broken toy?”

Shashibhushan said, “I thought this was my memory.”

“Does memory have a name written on it?”

He was not pleased by Vimla’s answer. Yet afterward the sentence kept returning to him.

Sleep did not come for a long time. He closed his eyes and tried to summon the first scene again—the courtyard with paddy drying in it, his mother, the yellow sari, Manjari crying. This time, instead of paddy, the courtyard floor was freshly plastered with cow dung and earth. Then the neem tree appeared. Then the neem vanished. His mother’s yellow sari became red.

Shashibhushan opened his eyes.

Until then he had believed memory was like an object stored inside—wherever it had been placed, there it would be found. Now it seemed to him that perhaps memory was like that wall whose plaster was renewed again and again; the bricks underneath might be old, but the shape on the surface could be new.

At dawn he felt embarrassed by his own comparison. A metaphor was not truth.

On the third day of repairs Kanak began laying new bricks. Shashibhushan stood holding the bird.

Kanak joked, "Shall we put it back inside?"

"Not inside again."

The mere idea of putting the bird back into the wall made him uneasy, as though if the object went inside again, one version of his memory would become permanent.

When Manjari was leaving, she looked at the bird.

"Keep it. It must have belonged to someone."

"You do not want it?"

"Even if it had been mine, you should keep it. You remember more of a story around it than I do."

"A story, or a memory?"

Manjari did not answer.

The new plaster began to dry. The eastern wall became smooth again. For two days Shashibhushan stood before that section searching for something—the height of the old window, a gap between bricks, some trace of childhood. He found nothing.

He placed the bird on the wooden shelf where books were kept. Sometimes he took it in his hand, then set it back. Once he raised the hole in its beak to his lips, but did not blow.

It was not the sound he feared. He feared that the moment he heard it, some other scene might return to him—one whose truth he would have no way to test.

One evening after the rains had stopped, sunlight fell on the new plaster for the first time. Shashibhushan took the bird down from the shelf and looked at the faded blue streak on its wing.

For a long time he wondered: before the wall had been opened, had he remembered that blue streak at all? Or had the memory turned blue only after the bird came into his hand?

He found no answer.

And now he was no longer certain whether he had remembered the chip in the beak from before, or only from the instant the bird fell into Kanak's palm.

STORY 223

Soot

...

As the first smoke of dawn rose, Malati's eyes went to the wall above the hearth. Only the previous evening she had scrubbed that wall well with ash and a wet cloth. The white limewash had shown again. But now, amid the black smudges, a crooked shape had emerged—half a circle above, a long vertical line below it, and two short cuts to the left.

"It has come back again," twelve-year-old Neelu said.

Malati stopped the ladle in her hand. "It has not come back. Soot has settled there."

When Neelu moved closer to the wall, Malati snapped, "Do not touch it."

Her voice came out sharper than she had intended. In the courtyard, her elder sister-in-law Sudha, who was sorting paddy, turned and looked.

"Was it there yesterday too?"

"It is soot," Malati said. "If a hearth burns, there will be soot."

The old kitchen of the house had been reopened four days earlier. During the previous rains, the tin roof of the new kitchen had started leaking, and a carpenter had come to replace the bamboo supports. Until then the cooking was being done in this mud-plastered room. The hearth was old. Its smoke rose toward a small vent high above, but because the room had remained closed for years, soot had accumulated inside. On the first day everyone's eyes had burned. On the second the smoke was somewhat less. On the third Neelu had seen a "sitting person" on the wall.

Everyone had laughed.

Malati had not.

Sudha came near the wall and examined the stain. "To me this does not look like a person. It looks like a heron bending forward."

Neelu protested, "No, Kaki. Look at the head. It has one hand raised."

Malati kept pushing dry pigeon-pea stalks into the hearth. The flame rose, smoke swirled upward, and for an instant the edges of the black figure deepened.

Her palm grew damp.

It was not a person.

Nor a heron.

It was a sign.

Half a circle, one long line, and two short cuts on the left.

Malati had drawn that sign when she was sixteen.

By evening the story of the wall had spread through the house. When Malati's husband Raghunath returned from the fields, Neelu ran first and pulled him into the kitchen.

"Babu, look."

Raghunath narrowed his eyes at the wall. "This is simply the path of the smoke. Where the plaster is smooth, less soot settles; where it is rough, more settles."

"Then why does the same shape appear every day?" Neelu asked.

"Because the same hearth burns every day and the wind moves in the same direction."

The answer was straightforward. It ought to have reassured Malati. Yet after supper, when everyone else had gone to sleep, she carried a lamp into the kitchen again.

The figure on the wall was fainter now, but the long line and the two short cuts remained distinct.

She raised her finger in the air and traced the movement of the lines. The central vertical stroke was straight. Two short cuts stood to its left. A half-circle was above.

The meaning of that sign had been: "The back way is open."

Years earlier, when Malati had come into this house as a young bride, her sister-in-law Gauri had been seventeen. Gauri had a fierce hunger for reading. Maithili books, old magazines—whatever she found, she read. The older people in the family believed that education up to Class Eight was more than enough for a girl. Marriage arrangements for Gauri had begun. She was made to leave school and learn household work.

At that time the kitchen was the safest secret place in the house. At night, after everyone slept, Gauri and Malati sat there and read. The mud hearth would have gone cold, embers still glowing beneath the ash, and in the thin light of an oil lamp Gauri opened her books.

"Bhauji, if they let me sit the examination, I will pass," she used to say.

Malati would laugh and answer, "Read first. Worry about passing afterward."

In those days there was a small bamboo gate behind the house. Gauri's school friend Kamala often came with old question papers and books. When

Kamala was forbidden to come during the day, Malati and Gauri devised signals. If the back gate was open, Malati would draw in the hearth soot one long line, two short cuts, and a half-circle—"The way is open." If someone was near the gate, she would complete the circle—"Not today."

Only Malati added a small turn on the right.

Gauri used to say, "That has become your signature."

The memory was so clear that Malati's throat went dry.

But one thing was not clear.

When had she last made the sign?

The next morning Malati scrubbed the wall with reetha foam and the blunt back of a scraper. The thin coat of lime emerged again. When Raghunath saw it, he said irritably, "Why are you ruining the wall?"

"The old soot has gone deep inside."

"Kanak the mason will come and replaster it. Why put so much mind into this?"

Malati did not answer.

That day Sudha lit the hearth. Malati deliberately stayed away from the kitchen. At noon Neelu came running.

"Ma! It is forming again."

Malati did not go.

In the evening, when she entered on the excuse of fetching water, the figure was there again. But this time the half-circle above seemed wider. The central long line was broken.

Malati remembered their old signal. A broken vertical line had meant nothing.

"This is not the sign I used to make," she said softly.

From behind came Sudha's voice. "Then what sign is it?"

Malati turned. Sudha was standing at the doorway.

"Nothing. I used to draw lines like this in childhood."

"Your childhood in this house?"

Malati understood at once that she had made a mistake.

"It was only a way of speaking."

Sudha watched her for a while, then began gathering the ash from the hearth.

"Gauri Didi used to draw lines on the wall too. I remember faintly."

The lota almost slipped from Malati's hand.

“You remember?”

“Not much. I was small then. Didi used to hide books in the kitchen and read. Once Babuji caught her.”

An old night opened inside Malati.

Two days before Gauri’s examination, Babuji had found a book. There had been no beating in the house, but his voice had been so cold that Malati had never forgotten it. Gauri was told, “From now on, not one step outside.”

That same night Gauri had come into Malati’s room and whispered, “Bhauji, Kamala will bring the question paper tomorrow. Open the back gate just once.”

Malati had become frightened. Everyone in the house was alert. She said, “Not today. Put it off for now.”

“By then the examination will be over.”

“What if I am caught?”

Gauri had said nothing.

In the morning Malati had gone to the kitchen. She raised her finger to make the signal in soot, but at the last moment she drew a complete circle — “Not today.”

Kamala did not come.

Gauri did not sit the examination.

A few months later she was married.

It had not been a disaster that tore the family apart. Gauri was alive, living with the joys and sorrows of her own family. She visited her mother’s home two or three times a year. Later she resumed her studies through adult education, but she had not taken the examination that year. No one had blamed Malati. Gauri had not blamed her either.

Yet for years Malati had carried a different version of the memory: that on the final morning she had drawn the sign meaning “The way is open,” and she simply did not know why Kamala had failed to come.

Now the wall was disagreeing with her memory.

On the third day Gauri herself came to her mother’s home. Neelu immediately told her the story of the soot. Gauri went into the kitchen, looked at the wall, and burst out laughing.

“All this commotion over this?”

Malati kept trying to read her face. “Does it look like any sign to you?”

Gauri went closer. “There is one long line, two short cuts to the left, and a circle above. Why?”

“Do you remember nothing?”

Gauri thought. “We used to make lines here as a game. You used to write letters with ash.”

“The back gate?”

Gauri’s laughter stopped. “I remember that too.”

Malati’s heart gave a sudden thud.

“What sign did I make the last time?”

Gauri looked at her. “Who keeps such an old thing in mind?”

“I think I made the sign that the way was open.”

“Perhaps.”

“But Kamala did not come.”

Gauri bent toward the mouth of the hearth and stirred the ash. “Kamala did come.”

Malati went still.

“When?”

“In the morning. You had gone to fetch water. She handed me the book from the back. I took it.”

“Then the examination?”

“I did not go.”

“Why did you stay back?”

Drawing a circle in the ash with the handle of the ladle, Gauri said, “I chose not to go.”

Malati could not believe it. “You had been forbidden.”

“Yes. But Kamala said her uncle would take me on his bicycle. The back way was open. I could have gone.”

“And you did not?”

Gauri shook her head. “No.”

“Then why did you not go?”

Gauri remained silent for a long time. “Fear. That was all. Later it felt easier to let the blame remain with the house. Naming one’s own fear was harder.”

Malati looked at the wall. The figure no longer seemed quite so frightening. But one question remained.

“Do you see these two little cuts on the left? I used to make those.”

Gauri moved close and looked. “You? To me they look like streaks in the smoke.”

That evening Kanak the mason came. While scraping the upper plaster, he found at one place a thin, smooth, oily layer.

He said, "Old ghee or oil must have splashed here. Soot settles differently on such a surface. However much you wipe it, if the grease has gone deep, a shape can reappear."

Raghunath told Neelu triumphantly, "Heard that? Not a ghost—oil."

Neelu looked disappointed. "But how did the shape form?"

Kanak shrugged. "Someone with oil on a hand may once have touched the wall. It could be an old hand-mark."

Malati looked at her right hand. Years ago, when she used to make those signals, she also filled the mustard-oil lamp. There might well have been oil on her fingers.

The explanation was possible.

Very possible.

Fresh plaster was applied. Nothing remained on the white wall.

Before leaving that night, Gauri said to Malati, "Bhauji, whether or not you opened the way that day does not make the entire account of my life."

Malati said, "But in my mind it had become the entire account."

"The mind keeps accounts, not a ledger."

Gauri left.

The kitchen remained closed for two days so the new plaster could dry. On the third morning the hearth was lit again. Malati deliberately did not look at the wall. She washed rice, ground spices, and answered Neelu's questions.

At noon, when the smoke had thinned, Neelu quietly caught her arm.

"Ma."

Malati looked.

On the new white plaster, roughly one handspan to the left of the earlier place, a thin soot-mark had formed. It did not yet have a definite shape. Only a narrow upright line, two small smudges to the left, and something like a blurred circle above.

"The same again?" Neelu whispered.

Malati looked at it for a long time. Then she pushed the wood a little farther into the mouth of the hearth.

The direction of the smoke changed. For a moment the black line on the wall broke apart.

"No," she said. "Nothing is certain yet."

But when she lay down to sleep that night, she felt the old smell of mustard oil on her right forefinger.

She brought the hand to her nose. There was no smell.

Even so, for a long time her finger lay straight outside the edge of the blanket, as though it had paused in the darkness before completing a sign.

STORY 224

The Lantern

...

South of Jhanjharpur, half a kos from the Kamla embankment, stood an old cooperative seed store. New zinc sheets had been fitted to the roof, but the western gate, the heavy wooden beam, and the iron spikes inside still belonged to another time. Before the rains, paddy seed, sacks of lentils, and bags of fertiliser accumulated there. By day the place rang with farmers, weighing, receipts, and bullock carts; as soon as evening fell, the whole compound emptied into silence.

Ramautar Sahni had been the watchman there for thirty-two years. He was nearing seventy, yet whenever anyone spoke of giving up night duty, he would say, "Everyone sees the work of the day. There are fewer witnesses to the work of the night."

The store now had electricity. Two bulbs hung in the veranda, and a brighter light had been fixed over the gate. Even so, before dusk Ramautar always brought out his old lantern.

It had a brass fuel chamber, glass bound with wire, and three small holes in the upper cap. He filled it with kerosene, trimmed the wick, lit it with the first match, and hung it from a hook just inside the western gate.

Birendra, the new assistant watchman, found this strange from the very first day.

"There is electricity," he said.

Running a palm over the glass, Ramautar replied, "You do not pass a night by trusting electricity."

"There is a hand torch too."

"A hand torch needs a hand to find it. A lantern stays where it is."

Birendra laughed. He thought it was simply an old man's habit.

But soon he understood that it was more than habit. Ramautar watched the lantern flame with the attention a farmer gives newly transplanted paddy. If the wind rose, he checked the glass frame. If the oil dropped to half, he refilled it even in the middle of the night. If the flame sank even slightly, he raised the wick.

The strangest thing was that he did not put it out immediately when the first morning light appeared. The eastern sky would whiten, birds would begin

calling, and only then would he open the gate, look once all around outside, and finally pinch down the flame.

During the first week Birendra asked no questions. In the second week, one night a westerly wind rose. The zinc sheets began to creak. The electricity flickered twice. The third time the bulbs went out.

The lantern kept burning.

Ramautar rose from his cot and went straight to it. The flame was steady, yet he opened the glass and inspected the top of the wick.

"There is plenty of oil," Birendra said.

Ramautar did not answer.

About half a watch later, a ghass—ghass sound came from the direction of the western gate, as though some heavy sack were being dragged across the ground.

Birendra picked up his staff. "Who is there?"

Ramautar's hand suddenly closed around his arm. The grip was so hard that Birendra started.

"Do not open the gate."

"It could be a thief."

"No. I will not open the gate."

"Then why?"

Ramautar looked at him for a few moments. Then he loosened his grip and said, "There is bamboo lying near the roof. The wind must be dragging it."

Birendra peered through a gap in the gate. It was dark. The sound did not come again.

In the morning he went to the western wall. Two thin bamboo poles really did lie there, but there were no fresh drag marks on the earth. Beneath the gate he saw only old water tracks and the prints of rats.

By day, among the farmers who came for seed, the incident was forgotten. At dusk Ramautar lit the lantern again.

Two hundred handspans east of the store stood a small tea stall. Its owner, Kisun Yadav, had known Ramautar for years.

One afternoon Birendra casually asked, "Why does Ramautar Kaka never let the lantern go out at night?"

Kisun stopped while straining tea. "What did he tell you?"

"That electricity cannot be trusted."

A half-smile appeared on Kisun's lips, then disappeared. "That part about trust is true."

“Is there something else?”

“It is an old store. There are many old stories too.”

“What old story?”

Kisun looked at the two farmers sitting at his stall and changed the subject. “Keep the gate shut at night. Snakes move about more during the rains.”

Instead of satisfying Birendra, the answer increased his curiosity.

A few days later the elderly accountant Harinarayan came to inspect the seed accounts. Asking Ramautar’s age, he said, “Still on night duty? You were here even at the time of the relief-rice theft, weren’t you?”

The bunch of keys in Ramautar’s hand jingled once, then became still.

Whether Harinarayan noticed the effect of his remark was unclear. He walked on toward the weighing room.

Birendra asked from behind, “What theft?”

Checking the gate latch, Ramautar said, “A very old matter.”

“Here?”

“If a store holds seed, paddy, and fertiliser, there will also be stories of theft.”

“Were you on guard then?”

This time Ramautar looked at him. The rims of his eyes were red. “Watch your own night.”

That evening the lantern was lit earlier than usual.

In the last week of Bhadon, clouds hung for three days. On the third night it rained so hard that spray reached well inside the veranda. The electricity had gone at dusk. One hundred twenty-seven sacks of new seed were stored inside, so both watchmen stayed awake.

Ramautar had taken the lantern down from its hook and placed it beside his cot.

Around two in the morning, the zinc sheet on the western side rattled violently. A gust entered the veranda. The lantern flame lengthened, leaned downward, then steadied itself.

Ramautar immediately shielded it with both hands.

“The glass is closed,” Birendra said.

Ramautar seemed not to hear him.

A second gust came. This time a heavy drop of water fell from some joint in the roof directly onto the lantern. The glass rang. The flame turned blue for an instant and went out.

Darkness filled the veranda all at once.

A sound came from Ramautar's mouth unlike anything Birendra had heard from him before—not a cry, not a groan, but as if someone sinking into sleep had suddenly held his breath.

“Kaka?”

Ramautar remained silent.

Birendra searched his pocket for the matchbox. Just then there came a thak from the western gate.

Then twice more.

Ramautar whispered, “Three times.”

“What did you say? Say it again.”

“That night too, it struck three times.”

Birendra's hand stopped on the matchbox.

“Who struck it?”

In the darkness Ramautar said, “I had lowered the wick myself.”

Outside, the rain kept beating against the gate. Inside, the smell of the seed sacks was heavy.

“Kaka, shall I light a match?”

“Wait.”

“Why wait?”

“Do not open the western gate.”

“I am not opening it.”

Ramautar's breathing quickened. “There were nine sacks. First they said six. Then they said nine. I had counted them.”

Birendra said nothing. He felt that if he interrupted with a question, the old man would fall silent again.

Ramautar's voice came in fragments through the dark.

“The Kamla had risen. People on the embankment were asking for rice. The store was full of relief rice. The secretary came at night. He said—leave the western gate open for one watch. A vehicle will come. Orders from above.”

“Did you open it?”

A long silence.

“I gave him the key.”

The gate rattled again. This time Birendra understood that the wind was shaking a loose ring in the latch.

Ramautar said, “He told me to put out the lantern so the vehicle would not be seen from a distance. I lowered the wick.”

Birendra felt the matchbox growing damp in his palm.

“And in the morning?”

Ramautar’s voice dropped lower. “In the morning they blamed Lakshman. He was a night labourer. He had been asking for his back wages. His gamchha was found near the western wall. Everyone said he must have brought the men.”

“What did you say?”

By then the rain outside had begun to lessen. The darkness inside felt even thicker.

“I said I had seen him near the gate that night.”

Birendra’s body became still.

“Had you seen him?”

After a long time Ramautar said, “The lantern was out.”

After those five words, only the sound of dripping water remained in the store.

Birendra struck a match. The first stick was damp. The second lit. In the yellow light Ramautar stood a few paces from the gate, both hands stretched forward as if stopping someone. His eyes were not on Birendra. They were fixed on the empty gate.

The lantern wick was lit again. One side of the glass was fogged with water.

Ramautar slowly sat down on the cot.

Birendra asked, “What happened to Lakshman?”

“He was taken to the police station. Beaten. Released after two days. Then he took his family and left for another place.”

“Did he ever come back?”

Ramautar did not shake his head. He only said, “No. I will not open the gate.”

“Did you look for him?”

“How many places could I go asking only a name? I was young then. First I was afraid the truth would come out. Later I felt ashamed. Much later, when I wanted to look for him, his house had already been sold.”

Birendra thought Ramautar would stop there. But staring at the lantern flame, he said, “If he came back, something might become right.”

The moment the words came out, he seemed startled by them. He corrected himself at once. “It might.”

Birendra offered no consolation. At that moment consolation seemed out of place.

The lantern burned until dawn.

The next day the loose ring above the western gate was tightened. Tar was spread over the leak in the roof. The night-time thak stopped. The ghass—ghass sound was not heard again either.

But Ramautar's rule did not change.

Before dusk, the lantern was lit. Before the oil fell to half, it was refilled. If the flame sank, the wick was raised.

Birendra no longer asked questions.

By Kartik, his temporary watch duty was due to end. On his final night the sky was clear. The paddy harvest had begun, and the smell of burning straw came from distant fields. The electricity remained steady. The new lamp above the gate was so bright that the lantern flame looked pale beside it.

Around midnight Ramautar said, "I am going behind to wash my hands and face. You stay here."

He hung the lantern on the hook and went away.

After a while the flame began to shrink. Birendra rose and went to it. There was enough oil. The wick had merely slipped down.

He reached out, then stopped.

For a moment he thought he heard something heavy dragging near the western gate.

He listened.

There was nothing.

Beyond the veranda lay the fields after harvest. A dog barked far away. The electric light remained steady.

Birendra raised the wick a little. The flame became round and steady again.

Ramautar returned. He looked at the lantern, then at Birendra. He asked nothing.

At dawn the eastern sky brightened. The gate was opened. The first farmer was approaching in a bullock cart with empty sacks to collect paddy seed. Birendra tied up his bag.

Ramautar still had not put out the lantern.

The first ray of sunlight fell on the wood of the western gate. The electric lamp was still burning. Day was fully clear.

Then Ramautar reached out and pinched down the lantern flame.

A thin thread of smoke curled inside the glass, rose, and disappeared.

As Birendra crossed the gate, he looked back once. Ramautar was hanging the empty lantern on the hook. From that distance it was hard to tell whether his hand was trembling or whether the iron hook itself was loose.

STORY 225

Seven Steps

...

My printing press usually closes at about half past ten at night. All day it is filled with the rumble of machines, the rustle of paper, the clink of type, and the voices of people; but the moment the last worker crosses the gate, the building suddenly begins to show its age. Wooden beams creak, old iron sounds in a tired voice, and the smell of damp from the basement at the back rises all the way upstairs.

There are seven steps down to the basement.

I knew that number very well. Before locking up at night, I had to go down and check the valve on the main water line. During the rains, if it was left loose, water could rise through the wall and ruin the paper. For twenty years this had been part of my routine.

But from that week in Sawan onward, another sound began to come after the seventh step.

The first night I paid no attention to it.

I shut down the machine, put the files into the cabinet, checked the rear door, and went downstairs carrying a lantern. The electricity had been out since evening. As I descended, the sound of my sandals on the steps was distinct.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

My foot came down on the level brick floor.

Immediately afterward, behind me, there was a thak.

I turned. I raised the lantern. All seven steps were empty. In the doorway above there was only darkness.

I thought a wooden plank must have shifted. I tightened the water-line valve and went back upstairs.

The same thing happened the second night.

This time I had not been counting. My mind was elsewhere: the next day five thousand copies of a wedding invitation had to be delivered, and the red ink was running low. I reached the bottom and bent beside the pipe. Then, from above, came one clear thak.

As though someone behind me had just stepped down from the final stair.

I straightened. I listened. Nothing.

On the third night I took Sudhir with me. He had been running the press machine for ten years and laughed immediately at things like this.

I said, "You go down first."

He descended the seven steps and stood below. There was no extra sound.

"Did you hear anything?"

"No. Nothing."

I followed him down.

From one to seven, my footsteps sounded. I reached the floor.

Thak.

Sudhir lifted the lantern and looked upward. "What was that?"

I felt some relief that the sound was not something invented by my ears alone.

"You heard it?"

"Yes. But why did it sound like a footstep?"

For half an hour the two of us searched around the basement. To the left of the stairway was a thick brick wall; on the right, an old wooden brace. When we struck the brace, it gave a hollow sound, but not the same thak. We shook the beam above. We opened and closed the water line. We dragged the iron chest aside. The sound did not come again.

The next day I wrote the numbers one through seven in chalk along the edges of the steps.

Sudhir joked, "If we find an eighth, shall we give that one a number too?"

I did not scold him. I only said, "We will see tonight."

The matter stayed in my mind throughout the day. The machine kept running, paper kept being cut, the red borders of the wedding invitations kept printing, but every now and then I saw those seven chalk numbers before me.

That evening an old compositor named Hiralal came by. His eyesight had weakened now, but once he had set type in this very press. He belonged to my father's time. He lived on his small plot of land and his son's earnings, and from old attachment he sometimes came to look in on the press.

I showed him the staircase.

“Hira Kaka, were there always only seven?”

At first he did not understand the question. Then he looked down.

“Seven.”

“Are you certain?”

“I have walked these steps for forty years. Seven.”

I said, “I seem to remember eight when I was a boy.”

Hiralal laughed. “You boys used to make up stories about the eighth one.”

Something inside me shivered.

“What story?”

He looked at me. “Have you forgotten? You used to tell the younger boys that after the seventh, an eighth step appears in the dark.”

I kept staring at the chalked number seven.

With that sentence, a night from very long ago opened in my mind.

I had been sixteen then. My father ran the press. My maternal cousin Gopal had come to stay with us for two months. He was an average student, but quick with his hands. He had learnt to lift the cases of lead type, count paper, and spread out printed sheets.

Gopal was not afraid of the dark. If anything, he was braver than I was.

That irritated something small inside me.

Only later does one understand how trivial the causes of childhood jealousy can be. My father praised Gopal’s work: “The boy learns as soon as he sees a hand do it.” It seemed to me that someone was proving himself better than I was inside my own house.

One night there was a large wedding job. The size-twelve lead type was stored downstairs. My father told Gopal to bring up two cases. I went with him carrying the lantern.

At the bottom, Gopal lifted one case in each hand. I took the lantern and started climbing ahead of him. On the fourth step, some foolish impulse seized me. I turned the wick down. The light became very dim.

Gopal said, “Raise it. The type will spill.”

I said, “Are you frightened?”

He laughed. “You are.”

The answer stung.

I put the lantern out completely.

The basement sank into absolute darkness.

Gopal stopped. He had heavy cases in both hands. He said, "Naval, give me light."

I stood on the upper steps laughing.

Then I said, "There is an eighth after the seventh. Mind your foot there."

It was a lie I had told younger boys before—the eighth step that appeared only in darkness.

Gopal became serious. He kept climbing slowly.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

The moment he passed the seventh, he had already reached the level floor above. But my words were in his mind. Carrying the heavy cases, he lifted one more high step—a step under which a stair was supposed to be, but was not.

His body tipped backward.

Both cases fell clattering down the steps. Gopal's left wrist struck the corner of the doorway.

He did not scream loudly. He simply sat down.

I lit the lantern.

Lead letters were scattered all over the stairs. Gopal was holding his wrist. There were tears in his eyes, but he did not cry.

My father came running. The wrist had swollen. Gopal was taken to the vaidya. The bone was not broken, but the sprain was severe. For nearly twenty days he could not work in the press.

No one ever learnt that I had deliberately put out the lantern or that I had invented the eighth step.

Gopal did not tell anyone either.

Once I asked him, "Why did you not tell them?"

Eating with his right hand, he said, "What would I have said? That you did something stupid?"

He even laughed.

Perhaps that laugh saved me. Slowly the incident turned into an ordinary accident. Years passed. Gopal finished his studies and went away to other work. In my memory the swelling of his wrist faded.

But the words "eighth step" never went anywhere.

That night, while we were closing the press, Sudhir said, "Tonight I will check the water line."

I answered at once, "No. I will go."

He shrugged and went home.

I locked the rear door alone. The electricity was on. There was no need for the lantern this time. A bulb burned above the staircase, and another small light below. All seven steps were clearly visible.

I placed my foot on the first.

The chalked numbers had half rubbed away.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

I reached the bottom.

No sound came.

I checked the water-line valve. Then I looked up. Empty steps. White light. No shadow.

A faint laugh rose in my mind. Darkness, rain, an old memory—human beings add their own fear to such things.

I turned and was picking up the cloth kept beside the pipe when, behind me, there came a thak.

Perfectly clear.

My hand stopped.

This time the sound seemed to come from the old wooden brace beside the right edge of the seventh step.

The next morning I called Shyamkant, the son of Ramlakhan the carpenter. He climbed and descended the staircase again and again. Nothing happened under his weight. Then I went down.

As soon as I passed the seventh step—thak.

Shyamkant crouched below and felt the wooden brace. In the right corner of the seventh step, an old iron spike had worked half loose. When my weight came down, the wood compressed slightly; a moment after my foot left it, the brace returned to its position and the spike struck the brick.

He smiled. “We found the eighth step.”

I did not laugh.

Shyamkant removed the spike, fitted a new one, and tightened the wooden brace. I went down five times to test it. After the seventh step there was no thak.

The extra sound was never heard again.

The cause was known now—wood, an iron spike, weight, and a moment's delay.

But knowing the cause did not erase the memory.

Sometimes, after the machine has stopped, a piece of wood gives a sound and my ears pause for an instant. Sometimes the upper door moves in the wind and I remember the eighth step. But now I do not run to investigate.

One thing has changed.

At night, when I descend to the basement, I have stopped counting the steps.

Even after my foot lands on the seventh, my body sometimes pauses for a moment, as though some old counting inside me has not yet finished.

Then I place my foot firmly on the level floor, look toward the light, and go on with my work without counting.

STORY 226

The Locked Clock Tower

...

My watch-repair shop stands in the old market of Benipatti. Directly opposite, across the road, rises the clock tower whose four faces have been stuck for years at the same time—four twelve. The glass has turned grey, pigeons sit on the hands, and rust has spread so thickly over the iron gate below that its original colour can no longer be guessed.

All day I open and close people's wristwatches. Tiny screws, fine wheels, springs, hands—such small parts of time pass through my fingers. Yet for twenty-eight years I had not set foot inside the clock tower standing before me.

Everyone in the market knew, in his own version, why the tower had stopped. Some said the cord of the main weight had snapped. Some said the toothed wheel above had cracked. Some said the town could not raise the money for repairs.

I knew the actual reason. The mechanism had grown worn, the repair was expensive, and in the end they simply stopped it. The iron hammer that struck the hour bell had been tied back separately.

I knew this well because, at that time, I had been an apprentice to Raghunandan the watchmaker. Raghunandan Kaka looked after the tower, and twice a week I climbed up with him.

In those days the clock tower did more than tell the time. Its eight o'clock bell in the evening marked the close of the old market's grain auction. The moment the eighth stroke fell, traders stopped bidding, clerks closed their ledgers, and labourers covered the sacks.

I was seventeen then, and I understood enough to know when the hands of a clock could be stopped.

I had never told anyone this.

It was a night in the last week of Kartik. The market was full of heaps of paddy, smoky oil lamps, and the smell of raw mustard oil. Banshi Sah was an old acquaintance of my father. Two of his bullock carts loaded with paddy had been held up on the road. If they did not arrive by eight, that day's auction would close.

He stopped me behind the clock tower and gave me five rupees.

“Hold it for fifteen minutes,” he said. “No one will be harmed. Let the goods arrive, then start it again.”

Five rupees was a great deal to me then.

I climbed the tower. Raghunandan Kaka had gone below for tea. I removed the small pin that governed the minute movement. The clock stopped at seven fifty-nine.

Below, people in the market kept glancing up at the clock.

Banshi Sah’s carts arrived.

The paddy was unloaded.

The bidding began.

I put the pin back.

But the mechanism did not start immediately. A spring had caught. I panicked.

Then from below the hour bell began to sound—once, twice, three times...

Eight times.

The hands were still fixed at seven fifty-nine.

Raghunandan Kaka came running up. He understood that the striking train and the hands had gone out of step. He asked me, “Did you touch anything?”

I said, “No.”

The next day the blame fell on Majid Mian, who attended to the hour bell. People believed he had caused it to strike at the wrong time. Majid Mian kept saying that his hand had never touched the rope, but no one believed him. A week later he was removed from the job.

Later, when Raghunandan Kaka opened the mechanism, he must have understood that the movement had been stopped. Whether he suspected me, he never said.

Only once he told me, “If a clock is wrong, it can be repaired. It is harder to keep a lie sitting on time.”

I spent the five rupees long ago.

The sentence remained.

Some years later Majid Mian moved to Darbhanga. Raghunandan Kaka died. The clock tower itself was closed. The striking hammer was tied back. The clock stopped at four twelve, and gradually the people of the market ceased to look at it as something that told the time. It became merely an old building.

I opened my shop opposite it.

Twenty-eight years passed.

That night was at the beginning of Aghan. A westerly wind had blown all day, and by evening clouds had gathered. By nine the market was nearly empty. I was repairing the spring of an old man's wristwatch. The electricity failed twice, then the light steadied.

After the old man left, I bolted the shop from inside. My eyes went, without intention, to the clock tower.

Four twelve.

As always.

Then the bell rang.

The first stroke was so deep that the glass of my shop trembled slightly.

I stood up.

The second.

The fine tweezers slipped from my hand onto the table.

The third stroke.

The fourth.

I did not want to count, but the counting continued by itself.

The fifth.

The sixth.

The seventh.

My throat went dry.

The eighth.

After the eighth stroke the market was silent again.

For a few moments I stood gripping the table. Across the road all four hands of the clock tower remained fixed. The gate was closed. There was no movement in the dark window above.

I went outside.

At the road bend, Kishun, the tea seller, was closing his stall.

"Did you hear it?" I asked.

"Hear what?"

"The bell."

He rubbed behind his ear. "There was one loud metallic sound. I thought a sheet of tin had fallen."

"One?"

"Yes. How many did you hear?"

I did not answer.

Just then Ramvilas, a home guard returning from the police station side, came past. I asked him too.

He said, "I was far away. It sounded as though something struck once."

Only one stroke.

I had heard eight.

I went home that night but could not sleep. Majid Mian's voice kept returning to me—"I did not touch the rope."

What was strange was that I did not remember his voice that clearly from the actual night. Now, in memory, I heard the words distinctly, even though it was possible he had never said exactly that sentence.

In the morning I asked the municipal store for the old key to the clock tower. I gave as my reason that a loose sheet of metal above might fall into the market.

By midday an employee named Sitaram arrived with the key.

The moment the gate opened, the smell of dust came out. Pigeon feathers, dried droppings, and cobwebs covered the stairs. After twenty-eight years I climbed up again.

In the first chamber stood the main clock mechanism. Rust covered the iron wheels. The thick cord of the weight had been cut. I immediately recognised the small place in the minute movement from which, as a boy, I had removed the pin.

I did not touch it.

Sitaram climbed higher toward the bell.

"The hammer is tied back," he said.

I went up. The heavy iron hammer really had been pulled back with an old wire. But the wire was not fully taut. When the wind moved the wooden lattice above, the whole frame trembled faintly.

Sitaram pushed the hammer with his hand. It did not reach the bell.

"That cannot make the sound," he said.

I ought to have felt relieved.

I did not.

Then a gust of westerly wind came. The lattice creaked. A loose iron strip near the roof vibrated and struck the outer rim of the bell.

Tann.

A single stroke.

My body shivered.

Sitaram laughed. "That is all. That must be what happened last night."

I kept looking at the bell. “Once?”

“Once. If the wind comes again, it will strike again.”

Inside myself I counted to eight.

The wind did not send another gust.

As I came down the stairs, that old scene of seven fifty-nine formed again in my mind. But now some details were wrong.

I remembered removing the pin with my right hand. As I descended, it occurred to me that perhaps I had used my left.

I remembered that the five-rupee note was green. What colour a five-rupee note had been then, I could no longer say with certainty.

I remembered Majid Mian looking me in the eyes and saying something. It was possible he had not looked at me at all.

Only the eight strokes were clear.

When we reached the bottom I told Sitaram, “Have the iron strip tightened.”

The next day he brought a mechanic, and the strip was secured. After that no unfamiliar metallic sound was heard from the clock tower.

But the matter inside me did not end there.

I tried to find Majid Mian’s address in Darbhanga. Through very old acquaintances I learnt that he had died many years earlier. His son Samad was still living there.

I went to meet him.

Samad did not recognise me. I introduced myself. At the mention of the clock tower, he smiled.

“Abba used to tell many stories about that clock.”

I asked, “The story of that night?”

“Which night?”

I understood then that the incident which had echoed inside me for twenty-eight years had perhaps never been the central story of their household.

I had gone there intending to tell him everything—the five rupees, the pin, the eight bells, the lie.

But in Samad’s courtyard, his grandson was playing with a small brass clock, opening it apart.

Samad said casually, “Abba used to say that the fault of the clock tower was put on him. Later he found another job. That is why he came to Darbhanga. He used to say—even a wrong thing can sometimes change the road.”

This was not forgiveness.

Nor was it absolution.

I told him the truth.

Samad remained silent for a long time. Then he asked only, "Why did you tell me after so many years?"

I found no answer.

By the time I returned to Benipatti, evening had fallen. There was no need to open the shop, yet I stood for a while near the gate.

Across the road the clock tower rose in darkness.

All four hands at four twelve.

I looked at my wristwatch.

Five minutes to eight.

I stayed there.

Eight o'clock came.

No bell rang.

I resisted the urge to count to eight.

A bicycle bell sounded on the road. A dog barked in the distance. Somewhere a metal plate clattered inside a house.

The clock tower remained silent.

For the first time it occurred to me that perhaps I would never know whether the tower had truly struck eight times that night, or whether the eighth bell that had remained trapped inside me for twenty-eight years had added the other seven sounds behind one actual metallic blow.

I closed the gate of my shop.

The clock tower did not tell the time.

But that night I did not try to stop time by fifteen minutes again.

STORY 227

White Feather

...

By late afternoon in Magh, the westerly wind in Jhanjharpur grows so strong that reed screens, roofs, and old rafters all begin to sound in their own voices. My seed shop stands at the eastern edge of the market. All day I weigh sacks of paddy, wheat, lentils, and mustard seed. In the evening I bring the account ledger home, because I do not leave the reckoning of cash and credit in anyone else's hands.

The room where I sleep and write the accounts has one window. In Magh it usually remains shut. I latch the wooden shutters from inside and also stuff a thin cloth along the top so that the westerly wind does not send the papers flying.

I found the first white feather in that room on the morning of the ninth of Magh.

It lay on my ledger. It was so light that it slid aside when I breathed out. About two fingers long, milk-white, with a slender shaft. At first I thought it had come out of the pillow. But my pillow was filled with cotton, not feathers. The quilt on the bed was stuffed with pieces of old cloth.

I picked up the feather and threw it into the courtyard.

I did not think about it again that day.

The next morning a feather lay on the ledger again.

Exactly beside the page where, the previous night, I had entered a credit sale of mustard seed.

I checked the door latch. It was fastened from inside. Both window shutters were tightly shut. There was no rat hole in the room; the floor was lime and brick, not earth. The roof was made of wooden rafters and tiles, but from inside it was almost entirely covered with bamboo strips and earthen plaster.

I asked my wife Saroj, "Did you put a feather in the room?"

She was sorting paddy in the courtyard. The question struck her as strange.

"Why would I put one there?"

"There was one yesterday too."

"There are pigeons flying all over the house. It must have stuck to some cloth."

It was an easy answer. I should have accepted it. But the second feather was just as completely white as the first.

I did not throw it away. I pressed it between two blank pages of the ledger.

On the third day, when I returned from the shop, I shook out my dhoti, shawl, and bag thoroughly outside the gate. Before entering the room I washed my feet. I shut the window. I placed the ledger in the middle of the table. The first feather I folded into a small piece of paper and put inside the box.

In the morning another white feather lay on the table.

This time I did not touch it with my fingers. I called Saroj.

“Look at this.”

She looked at the feather, then at me.

“Where did it come from?”

“How did it come in?”

“With the wind.”

“The window was shut.”

“Is the roof of this room a roof, or the lid of a trunk?”

She laughed. I did not.

I put a tiny dot of kohl on the shaft of the feather. Then I folded it into a second piece of paper and placed it in the box beside the first one. I shut the lid and tied the key into the knot at my waist.

On the fourth morning there was no feather on the table.

I felt an unfamiliar relief. I told myself that was all: something must have come from a cloth or through a crack in the roof.

But in the evening, when I opened the ledger to write the accounts, a white feather fell out from between the pages.

There was no kohl dot on its shaft.

I opened the box at once. Both folded papers were inside. The first contained a feather. The second contained—nothing.

The folds of the paper did not seem to have been opened. I turned it over again and again. The feather with the kohl dot had vanished.

“Saroj!”

She came in. I showed her both papers.

“You must have taken it out yourself.”

“The key was with me.”

“Then how is the paper empty?”

She had no answer. Neither did I.

I picked up the new feather that had fallen onto the table. I examined the shaft carefully. Completely clean. No kohl.

So this was a third feather, and the second feather from the box had gone somewhere else.

That night I could not write the accounts.

I took pride in my business because of numbers. If a one-maund sack of paddy was short by two seers, I could often estimate it simply by lifting the sack. If a digit was reversed in the credit ledger, I would remember it at night. Yet within two days the number of feathers was slipping out of my hands.

On the fifth night I decided not to sleep.

Saroj said nothing about my stubbornness. She left water in a brass lota and filled the mustard-oil lamp. "Stay awake if you want, but you still have to open the shop in the morning," was all she said.

I bolted the door. I checked the window shutters. I cleared the table. The ledger was shut. The box was shut. The lamp flame was steady.

The first watch passed.

Outside, dogs barked two or three times. Somewhere far away came the bell of a bullock cart. The westerly wind kept moving over the roof. Nothing happened inside the room.

Around midnight there came a faint srrr near one of the wooden rafters.

I looked up.

The sound did not come again.

I took the lamp and went beneath the rafter. In the earthen plaster I noticed an old hole about the width of a finger, something I had never paid attention to in daylight. Perhaps a cord for a hanging fan had once passed through there; I had a dim memory that in my father's time a cloth punkah had been used in summer.

I stuffed a piece of cloth into the hole.

Then I returned to the table and sat down.

How many times my eyes closed, I do not know. I believed that I had stayed awake the whole night. But in the morning Saroj said she had heard me snoring in the third watch. I objected at once. She did not argue.

There was a white feather on the table.

The piece of cloth had come halfway out of the hole.

This feather had a grey mark at one end. I looked for the kohl dot. It was not there.

I began to feel angry with my own eyes.

I decided to put every feather into a separate piece of paper and write Devanagari numerals on them—I, 2, 3. But when I opened the box, there were actually only two feathers inside. One white, one with the grey mark. The kohl-dotted feather was nowhere.

“Where is the third?” Saroj asked.

“The third was the one I found on the table just now.”

“Then these two and that one make three.”

“No. One had already vanished.”

“Vanished, or did you throw it away?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but the scene from the first day was no longer entirely clear. I was certain that I had thrown the first feather into the courtyard. I had pressed the second into the ledger. I had marked the third with kohl. Then there had been a new feather on the table... or had the order been different?

I checked the dates in the ledger. There were accounts for the ninth, the tenth, the eleventh. But I had not written a single line about the feathers.

I had been trusting only memory.

For the first time, I became more afraid of my counting than of the feathers.

At midday I closed the shop and brought Mahendra the carpenter home. He understood the old joins of the roof and rafters well. I showed him the small hole.

He did not laugh. He set up a ladder and climbed. He pulled out the cloth and pushed a thin bamboo rod into the hole. It went almost one and a half handspans inside.

“There is a hollow passage here,” he said. “The old punkah cord must have run through this route up to the roof.”

“Does it open outside?”

“We will have to see.”

The two of us climbed onto the roof. Under the tiles, near a rafter on the eastern side, the earthen plaster had broken. Mahendra lifted two tiles. Inside lay dry straw, dust, and a small heap of white feathers.

In the middle was the dried body of a dead pigeon.

It was not completely white. The body feathers were grey, but the fine down beneath them was white. It had probably entered through a gap in the tiles and been unable to get out. How many days the body had been there was impossible to say.

Mahendra traced the passage with the bamboo rod. “The westerly wind comes through this gap. Feathers can slip down through the old cord channel. What difference does a shut window make? The wind has found a road from above.”

The simplicity of the answer made me laugh.

I had placed the fear of several nights upon a dried pigeon and an old cord-channel.

Mahendra removed the dead bird and the loose feathers and brought them into the courtyard. I dug a pit and covered the bird with earth. The outer gap of the channel was sealed with mud and brick dust. The small opening inside was plastered over as well.

That evening the room seemed quieter than before.

I opened the box and counted the feathers that remained. Two. I had taken none from the pile Mahendra had removed. I folded the two feathers back into paper and put them in the box.

This time I gave the key to Saroj.

“Keep it,” I said. “For one night I no longer trust my own counting.”

She took the key. “Trust your sleep, not the feathers.”

That night we slept as usual.

In the morning the table was clear. The second morning too. For an entire week not a single feather appeared.

The fear faded, but one question remained: where had the feather with the kohl dot gone?

I stopped looking for it.

On the last day of Magh, while gathering up old ledgers in the shop, I felt something caught between two pages. I opened them.

There was a white feather.

A black dot on the shaft.

For a long time I looked at it. Whether it was the same feather, or another feather that had somehow acquired a kohl mark, was difficult to say. The ledger had travelled between the house and the shop in the meantime. Perhaps the feather had already been trapped between the pages. Perhaps I myself had put it there and forgotten.

I did not put it back in the box.

A small fire was burning behind the shop. I laid the feather on it. It shrank first, then, together with the black dot, turned to ash in an instant.

That night I shut the room's window. I bolted the door. I put out the lamp.

As sleep came, once, from the direction of the roof, I heard a very faint srrr.

I did not open my eyes.

Not because I believed another feather would come.

But because I was no longer certain that, if I found something in the morning, I would remember its number correctly.

STORY 228

The Last Picture

...

In the old quarter of Laheriasarai, at the bend where the road turns toward the Kali temple, stood a small shop called Prabha Studio. Vinod's father had given it that name. After his father died, Vinod Jha took over the shop. Wedding photographs, small portraits for identity cards, family group pictures—these kept the household going. But there was one kind of work he rarely spoke about himself.

When an old person died in someone's house, or when sons and daughters working far away wanted to see the face one last time, someone from the family would call Vinod. He would make a photograph of the dead. Sometimes amid flowers and garlands, sometimes on a cot in the courtyard, sometimes just before the bamboo bier was lifted.

For this work Vinod used his father's old wooden camera. The new camera was lighter, but the old one had a large ground glass, and fine lines appeared more clearly in the pictures made with it. Draping the black cloth over his head, he would correct the inverted image on the dim glass, then insert the photographic plate.

That day it was an afternoon in Bhadon. Someone came from a house in Bahadurpur. The eldest woman of the family had died that morning. Her two sons were in Delhi and Surat; the cremation could not be delayed until evening. The family wanted a final picture.

Vinod tied up the old camera, the tripod, and two glass plates and went.

There were not many people in the courtyard. The rain had stopped, but water still dripped from the veranda. The body was wrapped in white cloth, the face left uncovered. Tulsi leaves and Ganga water had been placed near the forehead. A granddaughter sat in silence.

Vinod set up the camera. He pulled the black cloth over his head and looked at the scene on the ground glass.

First the flower garland appeared upside down, then the dead woman's face. He was turning the focusing screw when, in the right-hand corner, another face emerged.

A young man's face.

Narrow cheeks. Eyes looking straight toward him.

Vinod immediately threw off the black cloth.

There was no one to the right of the camera. Three women sat on the veranda, but there was no young man.

He put the cloth over his head again.

The face was gone. There was only the white cloth, the flowers, and the dead woman's still face.

"Is something wrong?" the woman's son-in-law asked.

"No," Vinod said, tightening the screw. "I am adjusting the light."

He made the photograph.

That night in the shop, as he developed the plate, his hands trembled slightly. The picture came out clear. The dead woman's face, the garland, the veranda pillar—everything was there. The unknown young man was nowhere.

Vinod told himself there must have been a water stain on the glass. The damp was heavy in Bhadon.

Three days later a call came from the town hospital. The body of an elderly man found near the railway line had not been identified. The police wanted a clear photograph of the face before the cremation.

This time Vinod could have taken the new camera. Without thinking, he picked up the old one.

The body lay in the rear veranda of the hospital. The cloth was pulled away. Vinod planted the tripod, adjusted the glass, and put the black cloth over his head.

The old man's face appeared upside down on the dim glass.

And behind it, the young man again.

This time more clearly.

A narrow nose. A broad forehead. The hair on the left side of the head seemed wet.

Vinod stepped backward and became entangled in the cloth.

The hospital attendant started. "What happened?"

"My eyes played a trick on me."

"Did the body move?"

"The body did not move."

He was lying, but he himself could not tell exactly what the lie concerned.

The photograph again came out clear.

No young man.

That evening Vinod set the camera on the shop table and tried to open the glass. The rear frame had not been opened since his father's time. The thin brass screws at the four corners had seized. He oiled them but did not force them.

His father used to say, "If this glass takes a blow, the eye of the camera will go dark."

The next day, after his assistant Harimohan arrived, Vinod said, "Bring the black cloth. I want to test something."

He seated Harimohan on a chair and adjusted the camera. Harimohan's face was clear on the glass.

There was no unknown young man.

"Now wrap this white sheet around yourself."

Harimohan laughed. "Are you making me into a corpse?"

"Sit quietly. It will take only a moment."

Harimohan wrapped the white sheet up to his neck. Vinod went beneath the black cloth.

Something grey appeared in the right corner of the glass. At first only what looked like a forehead. Then hollows for eyes. Then a nose.

Vinod's mouth went dry.

"Do not move."

"I am not moving at all."

Vinod pulled off the cloth. Harimohan sat wrapped in the sheet.

"Do you see the photograph of any person here?" Vinod asked, pointing toward the ground glass at the back.

Harimohan brought his eye close. "There are stains. This old glass has plenty of marks."

"Not a face?"

"Whose face?"

Vinod did not answer.

All that day he tested the camera with different things placed before it. A black cloth, a red gamchha, a green sack—nothing. The moment a white sheet was spread, the grey face emerged in the right corner of the glass. The more he searched for it, the clearer it seemed. The moment he looked away, it became only a stain again.

When they were closing the shop that night, Harimohan said, "Replace the glass. It is old."

The simple solution seemed somehow wrong to Vinod. He felt the problem lay in the glass, yet he could not decide whether, if the face vanished after replacing it, he would feel relief or disappointment.

For two days he refused work involving the dead. When a family came to call him, he said the camera was broken.

On the third day an elderly man from Majhaulia came himself. His wife had died during the night. Their son was in Nepal. With folded hands the old man said, "Not one good picture of her was made while she was alive. At least do this much now."

Vinod could not refuse.

He picked up the new camera.

Then put it down.

He took the old wooden camera instead.

All the way to Majhaulia he remained irritated with his own decision.

The house was small. Near the dead woman's head lay her old red vermilion box. Her husband kept saying, "Turn the face a little to the right. She looked better from that side when she was alive."

Vinod set up the camera and went beneath the black cloth.

The white cloth gleamed. The dead woman's face was still.

The young man appeared again in the right corner.

But this time Vinod did not become afraid.

He looked carefully.

The young man's face was not behind the body. It seemed to lie upon the glass itself.

When Vinod shifted his own head to the right, the scene changed, but the young man's face did not.

He turned the focusing screw. The dead woman's face blurred. The young man remained unchanged.

Something suddenly opened inside Vinod's understanding.

"One moment," he said from behind the camera.

He held his palm in front of the white cloth. On the glass his palm appeared inverted. But it did not cover the young man's face.

So the face was not part of the outside scene.

It was in the glass.

Vinod made the photograph, but as soon as he returned home he decided to open the camera.

The brass screws loosened slowly. Harimohan stood beside him holding a lantern. When the frame lifted, they saw a thin transparent layer clinging behind the ground glass. Not another piece of glass—more like an old chemical coating that had dried into a fine skin.

Harimohan moved a fingernail to lift it. Vinod stopped him.

“Hold it against the light first.”

They placed the glass before a white wall.

For the first time Harimohan fell silent.

“There is something here,” he said softly.

“A face?”

Harimohan tilted the glass. “Not exactly a face. But there are two deep marks like eyes.”

Vinod saw the young man clearly.

So clearly that he felt that, if he knew the name, he could recognise him in the market.

Two days later he took the glass to Shivji Sah, an old camera repairman in Darbhanga. Shivji Babu examined it in sunlight, then in shade, then beside a lantern.

“In very old times,” he said, “glass photographic plates carried a chemical layer. Even after washing, an image was sometimes not completely erased. Someone may have fitted a piece of old plate glass into this frame as support. In damp weather the layer can become visible again.”

“So this is an old photograph of someone?”

“Possibly. Old glass can play such tricks.”

“A dead person?”

Shivji Babu laughed. “Is that written on the glass?”

Vinod did not laugh.

“And you can see a face?” Shivji asked.

“Yes. I see it clearly.”

Shivji Babu turned the glass again. “I see only stains. The human eye makes many things out of stains.”

Vinod had a new ground glass fitted. He brought the old one home wrapped in paper.

The following week he made two final pictures. No unknown face appeared in the new glass.

The work became simple again, as before. Vinod went back to photographing weddings, children’s birthdays, and families.

Yet he did not throw the old glass away. He placed it on the upper shelf of the shop.

A month later, one night the electricity went out. Harimohan had already left. Vinod lit a lantern and took the old glass down from the shelf. He felt that now he would look not out of fear, but out of curiosity.

He placed white paper behind it.

The grey young man's face emerged again.

Vinod kept looking carefully.

This time he became certain that the eyes were closed. Earlier they had seemed open.

He tilted the glass. The stains changed. The eyes seemed open again.

He understood that Shivji Babu had been right: when the light and angle changed, the meaning of the marks changed.

Then his attention dropped below the face. There was a thin white line, as though white cloth had been drawn up to someone's neck.

Vinod immediately turned the glass face down on the table.

A few moments later he picked it up again.

This time he did not search for the young man. He tried to see only stains—two dark patches, one long mark, one white line.

But once a human being has seen a face, it is difficult for stains ever to become only stains again.

Vinod wrapped the glass in black paper. He did not return it to the shelf; he put it in a locked trunk.

From the next day onward, whenever he went to make a final picture, he always carried the new camera. The old wooden camera remained above the shop gathering dust.

Even years later, whenever an elderly family called Vinod to make a last photograph of a dead loved one, he first looked at the white cloth.

Then, for a moment, his eyes involuntarily searched the right-hand corner.

There was no one there.

But Vinod had learnt at least this much: a camera does not always capture only the faces outside it. Sometimes the shape a person keeps searching for with his own eyes is the shape the glass gives back to him.

STORY 229

Water in the Cellar

...

On the fourth day after the floodwater had receded from the house, Amresh Sah descended all the way into the cellar for the first time. In the old market of Darbhanga he had a shop that repaired brass and bell-metal utensils. In the front part above were the hammer, grinding stone, and furnace; behind was the house; and beneath the ground was a small brick cellar where customers' old utensils, coal, and pieces of metal kept for repair were stored.

The flood had filled the cellar for three days. A pump had been used to drain it, and then the windows and doors were left open for two days to let air circulate. Even so, as soon as Amresh went down, the same smell filled his nose—wet brick, black mud, and green corrosion on brass.

Holding a lantern, he moved forward examining things one by one. Two wooden boxes had swollen. A sack of coal had dissolved into something like mud. On the wall, the old flood line rose as high as his chest.

Then he heard it—tap.

Amresh stopped.

A few moments later—tap.

He raised the lantern. The ceiling was dry. No fresh streak ran down any wall. The moisture on the floor was only the remnant of the flood. He turned and looked all around.

Tap.

This time the sound seemed to come from below the stairs.

“Jugal!” he called upward.

Jugal Paswan, the shop's old craftsman, came down the steps. “What happened?”

“Do you hear this?”

They both remained silent. Half a minute passed.

Tap.

Jugal nodded. “Water must be trapped inside the bricks. Give it two or four days; it will dry.”

Amresh wanted that answer too.

But five days later the sound had still not stopped.

The shop reopened. All day above there was the clang of hammers, the hiss of the furnace, and the scrape of metal being ground. During the day the cellar's dripping sound disappeared beneath the noise. In the evening, after the shop closed and the market thinned into quiet, it became clear again.

Tap.

Sometimes after ten breaths. Sometimes after twenty. Sometimes after so long that Amresh thought it had finally stopped.

Then again.

One night he placed four brass plates in different places—the foot of the stairs, beside the northern wall, where the old box had stood, and in the middle.

In the morning all four plates were dry.

“Then where is the sound coming from?” his wife Kaushalya asked.

Amresh said, “That is what I intend to find out.”

Kaushalya kept looking at him. “The flood has gone. The house survived. The shop survived. Let the cellar remain only a cellar now.”

Amresh did not answer.

On the night of the flood, he had been trapped in the cellar for nearly an hour. The water rose so quickly that while he was still choosing which utensils could be carried upstairs, the first two steps had gone under. Jugal had thrown a rope down from above. Amresh had pushed through chest-high water to get out.

From that hour, what he remembered most was not an image but a sound—water dripping steadily somewhere in the darkness.

It had been strange to hear dripping in the middle of a flood: water everywhere, yet separately, one drop at a time.

Now the floodwater had receded, but that single drop seemed to have remained behind.

Amresh decided he would find its source.

The following Sunday he kept the shop closed and removed the old plaster low on the northern wall. Jugal worked with the chisel. Between the bricks they found black earth, but very little damp. In one place a round passage appeared, like a thin earthen pipe.

Jugal said, “An old drain, perhaps.”

Amresh remembered something his father had told him. When the house was first built, roof water had once been channelled down toward some soak pit below; later, after a new drain was made, the old route had been sealed.

They cleaned the mouth of the passage.

First came a faint hiss of escaping air. Then about two spoonfuls of black water ran out.

“See?” Jugal laughed. “It was trapped here.”

Amresh felt lighter.

That night the cellar was silent.

The second night too.

On the third night, after half a watch—tap.

Amresh opened his eyes on the cot. Kaushalya was asleep. There was no rain above. Pale moonlight lay in the courtyard.

Tap.

Whether the sound had truly come from the cellar, or whether his mind had simply placed it there, he could not be certain.

He rose and lit the lantern.

Everything below was dry. He had tied a thread across the mouth of the opened passage. The thread was dry. All four plates were dry. He ran a hand over the ceiling—dust came away on his fingers, no moisture.

Tap.

This time the sound came from behind him.

He turned. Nothing.

Amresh set the lantern on the floor and sat down in one place.

“Do it again,” he said very softly.

The cellar remained silent.

“Do it again.”

Nothing.

He felt ashamed of himself. Could water be commanded?

Then the lantern flame trembled once. The small metal cap above its glass had heated and shifted slightly—tick.

Amresh’s body shivered.

The sound resembled the drip, but it was not exactly the same.

He touched the cap with a finger, then let it go.

A few moments later—tick.

“This could be one of them,” he said to himself.

But during the first five days after the flood he had heard the sound even without the lantern.

The following week he had an electric light wired down into the cellar instead of using the lantern. The mouth of the old passage was sealed again with lime and earth.

Four nights passed in silence.

Slowly Amresh began arranging the old utensils below again.

One evening Jugal went down to place a large bell-metal platter in storage. Five minutes later he came upstairs and said casually, "Is there still water somewhere below?"

Amresh's hand stopped. "Why?"

"I heard a dripping sound. Once."

"Where?"

"Could not tell. I was putting down the platter when it happened."

Without saying anything, Amresh went down.

Along with fear, an odd relief rose inside him this time—Jugal had heard it. So the sound was not only inside Amresh's mind.

That evening the two of them sat quietly for two hours.

The sound did not come again.

As he got up, Jugal said, "Perhaps the platter rang by itself. Metal sounds when the temperature changes."

He flicked a finger against it. A thin tang sounded.

"Not like a tap," Amresh said.

"But from a distance?"

Amresh remained silent.

After that they performed a small test.

Jugal placed four kinds of vessels in the four corners of the cellar—a bell-metal bowl, a brass lota, an earthen pot, and an empty zinc tin. He himself stood at the top near the stairs. Amresh sat below with his eyes closed.

At long intervals Jugal gave each vessel a very light tap, one at a time. Amresh kept saying where he thought the sound had come from.

The first three times he was right.

The fourth time he said the northern wall, though Jugal had struck the zinc tin in the southern corner.

The fifth time Amresh said beneath the stairs.

Jugal had touched nothing at all.

"Then?" Jugal asked.

Amresh opened his eyes. "I heard it."

“I did nothing.”

The answer should have frightened Amresh. Instead it irritated him.

He wanted the sound to have one place, one cause, one object he could seize and say—here it is.

But sound travelled around the curve of the cellar. Brick, metal, and hollow vessels all shifted its direction.

That night he placed a thin dot of kohl on the wall beside the old flood mark. A second dot below the stairs, a third near the old passage. Whenever he heard the tapping, he drew a short line toward the direction from which he thought it had come.

Five days later, no one place had more lines than the others. They were almost evenly distributed.

When Kaushalya came down and saw the kohl marks, she asked, “What calculation is this?”

“The direction of the sound.”

“And did you find the direction?”

“No.”

“Then what use are the marks?”

Amresh thought about the answer.

At last he said, “At least I know I am not relying only on memory.”

Kaushalya let out a long breath. “Sometimes the thing being measured begins to measure the mind.”

Amresh did not like the sentence.

He wiped all the kohl marks away with a cloth.

From that day he began a new practice.

Whenever the sound came, instead of immediately searching for its source, he first took five breaths. Then he looked around—the ceiling, the walls, the electric bulb, the metal vessels, the place where the old drain had been.

Sometimes he found a cause: a platter contracting as it cooled; a light knock travelling through a metal pipe from the tap above; a wooden step speaking slightly in the damp air.

Sometimes he found nothing.

A month passed.

The smell of the cellar changed. The odour of wet brick faded, and the dry dust of coal became dominant again. The flood line remained on the wall, but new goods were stacked beneath it.

One day Kaushalya asked, “Does it still drip?”

Amresh thought for a moment. "Sometimes."

"Water?"

"That I do not know."

By the time the rains ended, Amresh placed an empty bell-metal bowl at the spot where, on the first night, he had heard the sound most often.

He did not put the bowl there with any real confidence that it would catch water. Perhaps he only wanted proof for his own eyes: if there was a drop, one day it would have to appear in the bowl.

For a week the bowl remained dry.

On the eighth morning Amresh went down. In the middle of the bowl was a round pale mark.

He bent over it.

He touched it with a finger.

Not wet.

Only a clean gleam had appeared amid the old tarnish on the bell metal, as though a drop had dried there and left a mark.

He did not call Jugal.

He picked up the bowl, polished it clean with a cloth, and placed it upside down in the same spot.

That night there was no sound in the cellar.

Nor on the second night.

On the third night, while Amresh was adding up the shop accounts upstairs, a very faint tap came from below.

He stopped his pen.

He took five breaths.

Then he went on adding the figures.

Later he could not remember with certainty whether the sound had come a second time.

STORY 230

The Night Line

...

Beside an old channel of the Kamla River, the municipal cremation ground looks by day like an ordinary patch of open sky. At night the shape of everything changes. The shed where bamboo for funeral pyres is stored seems to lengthen; the smell of half-burnt wood mixes with the smell of water into a heavy layer; and the register kept in the small office room, under the light of a lantern, looks like some ancient volume because of its thick pages.

My name is Nilkanth Jha. By day my work in the municipal record room was to sort files, issue certified copies, and put old papers back into proper order. When Shivji Sah, who kept the regular records at the cremation ground, broke his leg, I was given the duty of filling the night register for fifteen days.

The work was not difficult. Name of the deceased, village, age, time, name of the person arranging the cremation—that was all. But at two in the morning, after everyone has gone, even writing a single name can sometimes feel heavy.

Nothing unusual happened during the first five nights.

On the sixth night it was raining. The river had swollen, so people were coming here even from distant ghats. Wet wood would not catch quickly; one pyre took a long time, while another family waited under the shed.

I kept advancing the serial numbers in the register—one thousand seven hundred eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five.

By half past twelve, three cremations remained.

Badri Mallah, one of the cremation-ground workers, had gone to bring tea. I was alone in the room. Smoke had settled on the lantern glass, so the light was thin and yellow.

I completed the line for serial number 1785. The deceased was Ramcharittar Paswan, aged sixty-two, village Belahi. His son had placed a trembling fingerprint beside the entry. I laid blotting paper over the page and capped the pen.

Then my eyes went to the next line.

A name had already been written there:

Nilkanth Jha.

At first I thought the lantern shadow was forming letters. I lifted the page and brought it close to the light.

The name was clear.

My name.

The vowel mark in 'Ni' leaned forward exactly the way I wrote it. The belly of the 'ṭh' was small. The upper loop of the 'jha' was unusually open.

The boxes after the name were empty. No age. No village. No time.

Only the name.

My first feeling was not fear but irritation. I assumed it was Badri's joke. All day he teased me by calling me 'Babu.' Perhaps he had written it before going out for tea.

I rubbed a finger over the name. I could not tell whether the ink was dry or whether it was ink at all. The colour was not blue but black-grey. I scraped it lightly with my nail. Nothing came away.

When Badri returned, I pushed the register toward him.

"Who wrote this?"

He narrowed his eyes at the page. "What?"

"This name."

"That is your name, isn't it?"

"I can see that. Can't you?"

He brought the page closer to the lantern. "I can see it. But I did not write it."

"You could not even make a 'ṭh' like this."

This time Badri laughed. "Then you must have written it yourself."

"Why would I write my own name in the cremation register?"

"Why are you asking me?"

He took the tea and went outside.

His answer was ordinary, but something remained caught inside me.

The third family arrived. The dead woman's name was Sugni Devi. I opened the same page.

My pen stopped at the line bearing my name.

The rule was that no serial line should be skipped. Yet I wrote Sugni Devi on the next line. I placed serial number 1786 beside her name.

The line with my own name I left without a serial number.

Badri noticed. He said nothing.

When I reached home at dawn, my wife Mrinalini asked, “Why are you so quiet today?”

I said, “I did not sleep enough.”

I did not tell her about the register. The moment one said it aloud, the whole thing sounded foolish.

The next afternoon, while I sat in the record room, the previous night’s page kept circling in my mind.

I had spent years looking at handwriting. When people came for certified copies and a name was wrong in an application, I could catch it at a glance. I had written ‘Nilkanth’ thousands of times.

Why did the letters in the register look so much like mine?

When I reached the cremation ground that evening, the first thing I did was examine the page.

In daylight the name did not look as dark as before. It was grey, as though no pen had written it at all, but pressure had been left in the paper and dust had settled into the grooves.

I tilted the page toward the window light.

There really was a faint indentation around the letters.

That cut my fear in half.

I turned the previous page. Nothing. The next page also had nothing.

I opened the desk drawer. Inside were old blotting papers, two receipts, a piece of string, and a torn duty slip. On the slip my name had been written: ‘Night Duty: Nilkanth Jha.’

The handwriting was not mine. It belonged to Harinarayan Babu, the head clerk.

I placed the slip against the register page and compared them. The letters differed in size. It seemed unlikely that this was the source of the impression.

Badri arrived. I showed him the indentation in the page.

“Perhaps someone put another sheet over the register and wrote the name,” he said.

“Who?”

“You. Me. Some office clerk. Many people come here in the day.”

“But the register was shut inside.”

“Was it shut, or do you remember it as shut?”

I looked at him.

He immediately added, “I am not saying you forgot. But on night duty every day begins to look like the same day.”

I did not like that sentence.

That night three more names were entered. The empty line with my own name remained in the middle.

I drew two thin strokes across it and wrote in the margin: 'Cancelled.'

Writing 'Cancelled' gave me an odd sense of relief, as though authority over the register had returned to me.

On the third night, a municipal inspector came.

The moment he saw the page, he asked, "Why was this line cancelled?"

I said, "A wrong name had been entered."

"Whose name?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Mine."

The inspector lowered his glasses and looked at me. "Why did you write your own name in the line for the deceased?"

"I did not write it."

He examined the page. "This is not ink."

He rubbed it with a finger. The 'Ni' became slightly lighter.

"It is a pressure impression," he said. "Someone must have written on a sheet placed above it. Dust filled the grooves."

Badri did not look at me.

The inspector ordered me to put the date and my signature beside the cancelled line. I did so.

For the second time, my name now appeared on that same line of the cremation register—this time as a signature.

The two Nilkanths lay near one another.

One clear.

One grey.

The grey one looked older.

After the inspector left, I closed the register.

At a quarter past one that night, the body of an unidentified man was brought in. It had been found downstream in the river. Two constables and two cremation-ground workers accompanied it. Since he had not been identified, the name column had to say 'Unknown.'

I opened the register.

The lantern light was thin again. I could see the two cancellation lines across the grey Nilkanth. Beneath that, my signature. Then Sugni Devi, then the other names.

My hand did not tremble as I opened a new line for the unidentified man. I wrote the serial number, wrote the time, and wrote 'Unknown male.'

A constable asked, "Age?"

"About fifty?"

He looked at the body. "Write fifty-five."

I wrote fifty-five.

I was fifty-two.

The fact had no meaning.

But give the mind a night, smoke, and a register, and it will manufacture meaning.

The cremation began.

I went outside and stood for a while facing the river. The rain had stopped. Smoke from the pyre bent low. A dog barked somewhere along the distant road.

Badri came and stood beside me.

"Babu," he said softly, "may I say something?"

"Say it."

"Three days ago, when it was very crowded, didn't you place a sheet on top of this register and fill out your travel-allowance form?"

I answered at once, "No."

Then a scene came back to me.

Not the whole scene—only a fragment.

An office messenger had brought a form at night. I had written something quickly. Whether the register had been open or shut, I could not remember. I could not remember where I had placed the form either.

"How do you remember?"

"You asked me for my pen."

"Then I wrote my name?"

"That is possible."

"At that exact place in the register?"

Badri shrugged. "That I did not see."

I ought to have felt relieved.

But when memory arrives as evidence and then stops halfway, it can become more frightening than evidence itself.

The next day I searched for the travel-allowance form in the record room. I found it among the files.

My name was at the top, the date below. The handwriting was mine.

On the back of the form were two faint blue marks like the ruled lines of the register.

I compared the width of the form with the register. It was almost a match.

This time the knot inside me loosened.

That night at the cremation ground I showed the form to Badri.

He said, "Then the matter is finished."

I too could have said, "Yes."

But I opened the register.

The grey name had now become very faint. The cancellation strokes were clear.

I placed the form over the page and aligned the name.

It did not match completely.

Where my name stood on the form, it fell almost two fingers above the line in the register.

I shifted the form downward. Then the width matched, but the writing lower on the form should also have left impressions on the other boxes in the register. There were no such impressions.

Badri said, "The paper must have slipped."

"That seems possible."

"The table slopes."

"That too is possible."

The two of us looked at the page for a while.

"Finished?" he asked again.

I closed the register. "Begin the work."

The fifteen days ended. Shivji Sah returned, leaning on a stick.

I handed the register back to him. He asked why the line had been cancelled.

I said, "A pressure impression."

He took little interest. Misspellings, incomplete names, repeated serial numbers—small errors of that kind were nothing new to him in a cremation-ground register.

I returned to my daytime work in the record room.

Two weeks later the cremation register was called for to prepare a certified copy.

The register came to my desk. I turned the pages looking for the required name.

The page from that night appeared before me again.

The grey Nilkanth had almost disappeared. Only one curved stroke of the 'ṭh' and a faint mark above the 'jha' remained. My 'Cancelled' and my signature were clear.

I did not turn the page immediately.

On the next line, the unidentified man's name had later been added. He must have been identified.

The name was Harinandan Yadav, village Khajauli.

I did not know his living face. I remembered only the wet shroud from that night.

I closed the register and prepared the certified copy.

I no longer have to work nights at the cremation ground.

Even so, whenever I open a thick register in the record room and see an empty line after a written one, my hand pauses for a moment.

First I look to see whether it is truly empty.

Then I write.

STORY 231

The Latch

...

In the narrow lane that runs from Sakri market toward the station stood Deepnarayan Sah's house. On the front veranda he kept a small table for silverwork. All day he joined the tiny bells of anklets, repaired breaks in bangles, straightened the thin circles of toe rings, and at evening tied each customer's jewellery into a separate cloth bundle and placed it in an iron chest.

The house was old, but Deepnarayan trusted its main door. It was made of thick sal wood, with a long iron latch on the inside; the end of the latch entered the iron socket in the frame by three fingers' depth. Before sleeping, Deepnarayan would pull the door shut, slide the latch into place, and shake it twice with his hand to make sure. Silver jewellery remained in the house, and he had followed this habit for years.

The first time he found the door open was on a late night in Aghan.

At dawn his wife Kaushalya rose to offer water to the tulsi plant. She came from the inner courtyard toward the front and immediately called out, "Who opened this door?"

Deepnarayan jumped from his bedding and ran.

The door was not fully open, but stood about a handspan ajar. The lane outside showed in the grey light.

Yet the latch was still inside its iron socket.

For a few moments Deepnarayan could not understand how the sight before him was possible. The right edge of the door, where the latch was fixed, still touched the frame. The left edge, where the hinges were, had swung inward.

It was as though the door had abandoned its natural direction and opened from the other side.

He checked the iron chest. The lock was untouched. He counted the bundles. Not a single thing was missing.

"You must have opened it in the night," Kaushalya said. "The latch is still fastened."

"Then did the door move by itself?"

Deepnarayan did not answer.

He caught hold of the door and straightened it. Lifting the left side and pushing, he set it back into place. The door looked normal again. He saw no fresh break in the hinge straps.

The day's work grew busy. Seven bells on a young bride's anklet had to be replaced; two elderly women came to have old chains thinned. Now and then Deepnarayan looked toward the door. In daylight the incident seemed foolish.

That night he took greater precautions than before.

He slid the latch shut. Across the iron socket and the joint of the latch he drew a thin soot line. Then he tied a red thread from the latch bar to a nail in the frame. If the latch lifted, the thread would snap or slacken.

"Now even a ghost will have to give an account," Kaushalya laughed.

Deepnarayan laughed too, but not naturally.

At dawn Kaushalya's call came again.

This time the door stood open by nearly two handspans. The left side leaned inward. The latch on the right remained inserted in the iron socket. The red thread was intact. The soot line was almost exactly where it had been.

Deepnarayan's hands went cold.

He sat down on the floor beside the door and examined the left hinge. Old rust covered the upper iron strap. The lower hinge seemed sunk into the wood. But he saw nothing that could explain how the panel had opened in the night.

"Could someone be doing this from inside?" Kaushalya asked softly.

"There are only the two of us inside."

"The rear door?"

"There is a bamboo fence there. If anyone came through, we would hear it."

That day Deepnarayan did not open the silver chest near the shop table. He worked only from the small bundles already taken out earlier. His mind kept returning to one question: if the latch had not moved, how had the door opened?

He did not let word of the second incident spread through the lane. A silversmith's reputation rests not only on the quality of his hands but also on the security of his house. If people learnt that his main door opened by itself at night, who would leave anklets or bangles with him?

He told Kaushalya too, "Do not speak of this outside."

After daylight strengthened, he examined the ground outside the door carefully. Dew had left the dust in the lane slightly damp. There were no unfamiliar footprints—only two marks from the milkman's wooden sandals and Deepnarayan's own older prints.

Inside the threshold he scattered a fine layer of ash. If anyone worked at the door during the night, there would be marks.

He measured the latch socket. Three fingers deep. He pushed a thin wire inside; nothing was broken. Then he went outside and tried to pull the door open. With the latch engaged, the right side would not move even a fraction.

Instead of reducing his fear, this increased it. If the latch was so difficult to tamper with from outside, how was the door opening at night?

That evening an old acquaintance came to leave his daughter-in-law's anklet for repair. Deepnarayan hesitated for an instant as he took it in his hand. It seemed improper to keep jewellery in the house that night.

But what reason could he give?

In the end he said in his usual voice, "Come for it tomorrow afternoon."

As he placed the bundle in the chest, for the first time he looked more at the hinges of the door than at the lock of the chest.

On the third night he spread his bedding on the veranda. Kaushalya slept inside. The iron chest stood near his pillow. He turned the lantern wick low enough that the whole outline of the door remained visible.

Nothing happened during the first watch. Footsteps, bicycle bells, and distant station announcements continued in the lane for a long time. Then everything fell quiet.

Sometime after midnight, a long freight-train whistle came from the Sakri side. A few moments later the ground trembled very faintly.

Deepnarayan was accustomed to that vibration; the house was not very far from the railway line.

Then came a kirr.

He sat up.

The left edge of the door had separated from the frame by the width of a hair. The right edge, where the latch was fixed, remained still.

Deepnarayan held his breath and watched.

A second kirr.

The left edge moved inward by a finger's breadth. The upper hinge strained, as though its iron strap were being pulled out of the wood. The lower corner of the door scraped along the floor.

Slowly the door was turning around its right edge as though that were the pivot—the latch side fixed, the side where the hinges should have held it swinging open.

A chill ran through Deepnarayan's body.

What was happening before his eyes could have a cause, yet the sight was stranger than the cause.

He got up at once and caught the door. Lifting the left side, he pressed it back into the frame.

From below came a tak, and the panel settled into place.

He brought the lantern close and examined the lower hinge. Inside the old wood was an iron pin serving as the pivot. The pin had worked halfway out of its socket. Of the two nails in the upper hinge strap, one was loose.

He did not wait for dawn.

He brought a hammer, a small chisel, and a bottle of oil. He drove the lower pivot back into place and hammered the upper nail tight. He opened and shut the door three times. Everything worked normally.

Kaushalya had woken.

“Did you find it?”

“The hinge was loose.”

“And the latch?”

“The latch kept doing its work. The door was coming loose from the other side.”

Kaushalya kept looking at the door. “Can that happen?”

“Now I have seen it.”

In the morning Deepnarayan called the neighbouring carpenter Ramudgar, but did not tell him why. He only said, “Check the hinges once more.”

Ramudgar crouched and scraped the wood around the lower hinge.

“This part has gone hollow inside. The wood looks sound from outside, but woodworm has eaten it within.”

He pushed in a thin iron probe. It travelled half a finger farther than it should have.

“With vibration at night, the pivot can work its way out,” Ramudgar said. “The panel is heavy. The upper strap cannot carry it alone. The latch keeps the right side held, so the left side swings inward.”

Deepnarayan ought to have felt relief.

He did.

But not completely.

“Two nights in a row?”

“Freight trains run every day.”

“Why not before?”

Ramudgar shrugged. "Woodworm does not hollow out a beam in one day either."

He cut away the rotten section below and joined in new wood, fitted a thicker pivot, and drove two new nails into the upper strap. When the work was finished, the door had become so tight that Deepnarayan had to use force to shut it.

For four nights nothing happened.

Deepnarayan returned to his normal way of working. He untied the red thread and threw it away. He wiped off the soot mark. The iron chest again spent the night in its old place.

On the fifth night, the station's last passenger train went through late. Deepnarayan was awake. When the train passed, a light tremor ran through the house, but the door did not move.

A faint smile came to his lips.

Then, without any other sound, the iron latch gave a very soft tick.

Deepnarayan did not sit up at once. He listened first.

Then he lit the lantern.

The door was shut. The hinges were in place. The latch was fully engaged.

He went close and put a finger on the latch.

Nothing.

At dawn he checked Ramudgar's new joint again. The wood was hard, the nails steady, the pivot seated.

The cause of the tick was simple enough: in the cold of night the iron latch may have contracted slightly and touched the edge of its socket. Working with silver, Deepnarayan knew such minute movements of metal.

He explained it to himself that way.

Even so, from that day onward, after fastening the latch at night, he no longer checks only the right side. Once, with his hand, he presses the left hinge side too.

And sometimes, when a freight-train whistle comes from far away, his eyes go first not to the latch but to the left edge of the door.

STORY 232

The Heartbeat

...

On the southern side of Madhubani town, the rear room of Prabhakar Mishra's small clinic had not been opened to patients for a long time. In the two rooms at the front, people with fever, cough, stomach pain, cuts, and bruises came and went all day. But in the rear room there remained only an old cot, empty medicine bottles, a bamboo table, and the dead pipe of an old water-lifting system beside the wall. Before the room was repainted, all the old things were being cleared out.

After the evening patients had left, Prabhakar sat there alone. He was past fifty-nine now. Thin spectacles had come to rest on his eyes, but his hands were still steady.

He was sorting old papers—medicine-order lists, tax slips, the case of a broken thermometer. He had already separated the old patient files and sent them home.

At about half past nine that night, the sound came for the first time.

Dhuk... dhuk... dhuk-dhuk...

Prabhakar's hand stopped.

The sound was so faint that at first he thought a handcart must have passed on the road outside. But the road was quiet. Then came a pause about three breaths long.

Dhuk... dhuk...

He stood up.

He opened the window and looked outside. There was not even a dog in the rear lane. Far away, toward the railway line, a freight train was moving slowly, but its rumble was different.

Prabhakar closed the window and sat down again.

The sound returned.

This time he recognised its pattern—three short knocks, a pause, then two.

His left hand closed involuntarily around the edge of the table.

During Sarayu Sahni's last half-hour, his heart had been beating in that same pattern.

A night from seventeen years earlier entered the room without invitation.

Sarayu made bamboo baskets. One evening in Sawan, his family had brought him here with a high fever and severe difficulty breathing. The clinic was new then, the number of patients small, and Prabhakar's confidence greater.

Sarayu's pulse had first been rapid, then irregular. Prabhakar ordered one medicine. A short while later, growing impatient, he had a second dose given even though there had not yet been enough time to see the full effect of the first.

Prabhakar had never forgotten the sequence of that night.

Sarayu's pulse suddenly took on a broken rhythm. Three beats, a pause, two beats. Then a longer pause.

Prabhakar began arranging to take him to another clinic, but Sarayu became still before the vehicle arrived.

The next morning Prabhakar looked again at the treatment slip. His eyes stopped on the line recording the second dose.

He crossed the line out.

On a fresh slip only the first dose was written.

The family was told that Sarayu had been brought in when the illness was already very severe. That statement was not false, but neither was it the whole truth.

In seventeen years Prabhakar had discussed this with no one.

The dhuk-dhuk rose again in the room.

He put his ear to the wall.

The sound became clearer.

Dhuk... dhuk... dhuk-dhuk...

"The pipe," he said softly.

An old iron pipe ran inside the wall. Once, water had been lifted through it to a tank in the rear courtyard. Five years earlier, after a new water system was installed, this pipe had been shut off.

He thought air might be trapped somewhere inside, and changes in pressure might be making the metal sound.

He turned off the main pump switch.

The sound stopped.

His chest loosened.

Ten minutes later, as he gathered the papers to leave the room, the same rhythm returned.

Dhuk... dhuk... dhuk-dhuk...

This time the pump was off.

Prabhakar opened the door and walked into the front room. The sound was not there.

He returned to the rear room—dhuk... dhuk...

He went to the old cot and bent down to listen.

The sound seemed to be coming from inside the wood.

A thin iron strip was fixed to one of the cot legs. He placed his hand on it. No vibration.

He dragged the cot two handspans away.

The sound stopped.

“That is all,” he told himself. “The wood is touching the wall.”

He left the cot in the middle of the room and went out.

The next day Harinarayan, the carpenter, came. Prabhakar showed him the cot. Harinarayan tightened the loose strip on the leg and drove a new nail into a wooden joint.

Then he struck the old wall pipe with his hand and said, “It is hollow inside. It can sound when heat and cold change.”

Prabhakar asked casually, “In a rhythm?”

Harinarayan laughed. “We make rhythms. Wood only makes sounds.”

That answer stayed in Prabhakar’s mind all day.

In daylight he tried to reproduce the sound. He tapped the wall with his thumb, knocked a finger against the cot leg, wedged a thin piece of bamboo near the mouth of the pipe.

Sometimes one of the sounds resembled it, but never the five-beat pattern.

Seeing how absorbed he was, the young man who dispensed medicines in the front room asked, “Is something broken?”

Prabhakar said only, “An old pipe is making noises.”

After giving that answer, he remembered the face of Sarayu’s wife, Chandrakala.

For several minutes after the death, she had kept asking the same thing: “Listen to his chest once more.”

Prabhakar could no longer be certain how long he had listened through the stethoscope then. He remembered only the trembling of his own hand, a wet gamchha, and the stillness of Sarayu’s chest.

Was the distinctive dhuk-dhuk rhythm from the first phase of treatment, from the last phase, or a pattern formed later by memory?

He was no longer certain.

That evening he considered looking for the old treatment slip, then abandoned the idea at once.

Finding the slip would not identify the source of the sound.

And even if the crossed-out line had survived somewhere, it would prove only that the paper had been altered—not what rhythm Sarayu's heart had actually been beating.

For the first time, Prabhakar understood that two different parts of the truth were troubling him: what he had done, and what he had heard.

He knew the first.

His trust in the second was weakening.

That night he deliberately sat in the rear room again.

This time there were no papers on the table. Only a clock and a notebook.

The first sound came at 9:42 p.m. Prabhakar wrote down the time.

The second came at 10:03.

The third at 10:27.

There was no regular interval.

But the pattern was almost the same—three, pause, two.

He counted the pulse at his wrist. It was regular.

Then he put the stethoscope in his ears and listened to his own heart. The beats were strong, but not like Sarayu's final rhythm.

He removed the stethoscope.

The room was quiet.

Then one knock came from the wall.

Then two.

Then nothing for a long time.

Prabhakar wrote in the notebook: "Three-two not certain."

The moment he wrote it, he felt uneasy.

For seventeen years the rhythm had seemed so clear in his memory. Had it truly been exactly that?

On the night of treatment he had been watching the clock, counting Sarayu's pulse, answering the family's questions. In the fear and haste of that night, how had memory preserved such a clean pattern of five beats?

The next day he thought of going to see Mahesh, his former assistant, who now ran a medicine shop in Jaynagar.

Then Prabhakar did not go.

He realised he was not seeking Mahesh's memory; he was seeking confirmation of his own.

If Mahesh remembered another rhythm, would the truth change?

If he remembered the same rhythm, would the guilt become smaller?

On the third night it rained. The outer face of the wall became wet.

At about eleven the sound rose so clearly that Prabhakar stood at once.

Dhuk... dhuk... dhuk-dhuk.

This time he did not put his ear to the wall.

He went out into the rear courtyard.

The old pipe emerged close to the ground where the earth had been dug away. Rainwater had collected in a small hollow. The mouth of the pipe was closed, but fine bubbles were rising as though air were escaping from inside.

Prabhakar put his hand over the mouth of the pipe.

From inside came a tak.

Then another tak.

Then two knocks close together.

He took his hand away.

The next morning a plumber was called.

When the pipe was opened, they found inside a piece of old leather and a thin rusted ring. As water and air pressure changed, the ring struck against the pipe within the wall.

The plumber said, "This must be what was making the sound at night."

Prabhakar asked, "Three times, then twice?"

The plumber turned the ring in his hand. "As much pressure, so many knocks. How could the count be fixed?"

The pipe was cut out and removed.

The gap in the wall was filled.

The rear room was replastered.

The cot too was taken outside.

For three nights no sound came.

On the fourth night Prabhakar was at home. His wife was asleep. The rain outside had stopped.

He lay on his back looking at the ceiling.

Inside his ears a very faint dhuk-dhuk began.

He caught his wrist.

His pulse seemed to be moving in the same pattern.

One, two, three.

A pause.

Then two.

Prabhakar immediately counted again.

This time the beats were even—one, two, three, four, five.

No pause.

He let go of his wrist.

At dawn, when he reached the clinic, he stood for a while before the newly plastered wall of the rear room.

He heard nothing.

On the table lay the treatment slip of a new patient.

After writing the name of the medicine, Prabhakar wrote the time, then the dose, and read it once through.

Before folding the paper, his pen paused for a moment.

The room was quiet.

But Prabhakar no longer trusted that quiet and soundlessness were the same thing.

STORY 233

The Black Mirror

...

In a narrow lane leading inward from Shankar Chowk in Madhubani stood Malati Devi's shop for lac bangles and vermilion. In the front, glass cases held rows of red, green, yellow, and violet bangles; on the rear wall hung an old mirror, taller than the waist. Its wooden frame was dark brown, the corners worn, and the backing had peeled away in so many places that black, cloud-like stains appeared here and there across the glass.

Malati had not bought the mirror new. Two weeks before the wedding season began, an old cosmetics shop at her maternal uncle's house had closed. From there she had obtained a cupboard, two low stools, and this mirror cheaply. She thought there was no need to spend money on a new one. It was still bright enough for a woman trying on bangles to look once at her hands, sari, and hair parting.

Malati first noticed something wrong in the hand of a newly married young woman.

The woman was arranging two red bangles among green ones when she turned toward the mirror and raised her right wrist.

Malati felt that the wrist in the mirror rose one breath later.

She dismissed it as a trick of her eyes and began opening another bangle case.

But when the young woman lowered her wrist, Malati had the same impression again—the real hand came down first, the reflected hand after it.

"Is something wrong?" the young woman asked.

"No," Malati said. "The light is a little dim."

After noon, the projecting balcony above the lane cast shadow into the shop. Malati drew back the curtain by the door. The light increased.

Everything in the mirror looked normal.

Before closing the shop that night, she tested it once while alone.

She raised her right hand.

The reflection rose with it.

She touched her head.

So did the reflection.

Malati laughed at herself.

Nothing happened the next day.

On the evening of the third day, when the number of customers had thinned, she was locking a case and again saw her hand in the mirror seem to move late.

This time the delay was so small that it was difficult even to call it a delay. It was as though her eyes caught the real hand first and reached the mirror a blink afterward.

She went close to the mirror.

Among the black stains she saw her own face: the fine lines of age, the vermilion in her parting, two thin strands of hair near the ear—all familiar.

She blinked.

The reflection blinked too.

Then she raised her hand very slowly.

This time she became certain that the mirror was behind.

Malati's daughter Chanda was writing the shop accounts. That evening, seeing her mother repeatedly raising a hand before the mirror, she asked, "What are you measuring?"

"Stand here."

Chanda came near the mirror.

"I will raise my hand. Do not look at my hand—look in the mirror. Tell me whether both move together."

Malati raised her hand three times.

"Together," Chanda said.

"Look carefully."

A fourth time.

A fifth.

"Together."

Malati said nothing.

That night, even while cooking at home, her mind remained caught in the shop's black mirror.

She was not afraid of mirrors. For thirty years, in the work of bridal adornment, she had spent her days in front of mirrors. Whose forehead mark was crooked, whose bangles did not match the sari, whose vermilion line leaned a little left—her eyes caught such fine differences at once.

So Chanda's answer unsettled her more than it reassured her.

The next morning she devised a simple test.

She tied a small piece of red lac bangle to a thread and suspended it before the mirror. She gave the thread a push. The fragment began swinging left and right.

The real fragment and its reflection moved together.

Ten times.

Twenty times.

No delay.

Then Malati began matching the tip of her index finger to the swing of the bangle fragment.

One... two... three.

Her finger was on time.

Yet the reflected finger seemed slightly behind.

She stopped her hand.

The bangle fragment was still swinging, and its reflection remained exactly with it.

That troubled her most.

If the mirror was wrong, the bangle should also move late. If the mirror was right, why did only her own body seem delayed?

It was time to open the shop. She cut the thread and put the bangle fragment back in the case.

For the next four days Malati tried to look at the mirror less.

While helping customers try on bangles, she kept her gaze limited to their wrists. If someone looked at herself in the mirror, Malati began opening another case.

Work went on normally.

On the fifth day it rained. The light in the lane diminished. A yellow bulb burned inside the shop.

A teenage girl was choosing bangles for her wedding. She raised her hand to show her mother.

Malati's eyes went to the mirror against her will.

The girl's hand rose with her.

Her mother's hand rose with her.

Chanda's hand, arranging a case, moved with her.

Only Malati's own reflection remained still.

She held her breath.

One moment.

Then the reflection's left hand rose from above the case and adjusted the sari.

Malati had not moved her left hand until then—at least that was how she remembered it.

“Ma?” Chanda called.

Malati immediately looked away from the mirror. “Nothing. Take out the broad red bangles.”

After the customer left, she asked Chanda, “Did I just adjust my sari?”

Chanda looked surprised. “Yes. Your anchal was caught in the case. You pulled it free.”

“When?”

“When that girl was showing her hand.”

Malati had no memory of her left hand going to the sari.

But the anchal was indeed free from the case now.

That day, for the first time, she covered the mirror with a cloth.

Chanda asked, “Have the black stains spread?”

“Yes,” Malati said. “I will have the backing redone.”

Covering the mirror immediately affected the work. In wedding season, women trying on bangles repeatedly wanted to lift the cloth to compare colours. Malati made excuses, saying that the backing had come away.

One elderly woman laughed and said, “Broken mirror or not, the price of the bangles will not come down.”

Everyone laughed.

Malati smiled too, but her attention remained on the glass beneath the cloth.

When she added up the accounts that evening, Malati realised that closing the shop for three days to have the mirror repaired would reduce her earnings during the wedding rush.

Even so, she did not change her decision.

She now wanted to trust the mirror's movement more than its shine.

Chanda said they could manage with a small hand mirror.

Malati agreed, though in her heart she did not accept that convenience alone was why she wanted the large mirror removed.

Two days later Jagdish, a glassworker from Rajnagar, arrived.

He took the mirror down and laid it on the floor. When he opened the wooden backing, the old silvering was found flaking away in patches. Near the edge lay a fine grey layer.

Examining the thickness of the glass, Jagdish said, "This is very old. One faint image forms from the front surface, another from the backing. On a moving hand you may see two edges."

Malati immediately asked, "Will one edge move later?"

Jagdish did not laugh. "Not later. Both move together. But the eye may catch one first and the other afterward, especially in dim light."

He leaned the mirror to one side. "With new backing it will become clear."

Malati's chest loosened a little.

She told herself—this was the cause. Old glass. Double image. Dim light.

But one question remained inside her: why had the swinging red bangle fragment never seemed delayed?

The mirror stayed with Jagdish for three days to be resilvered.

During those three days, Chanda hung a small hand mirror in the shop.

Malati left it for customers alone.

She did not look at herself.

On the fourth day Jagdish brought the mirror back.

The black stains were gone. The glass was bright and clear. The frame was the same old one.

Malati shut the door and tested it alone.

She raised a hand.

Together.

She blinked.

Together.

She tilted her head to the right.

Together.

She let out a long breath.

Everything remained normal through the third day.

On the evening of the fourth, Malati was turning the key in one of the cases.

She saw her hand in the mirror.

It seemed to her that the real key had already turned inside the lock, while the reflected wrist was still halfway through the motion.

She stopped at once.

The reflected hand stopped too.

Malati did not call Chanda.

She made no test.

She simply stood before the mirror for a few moments.

Outside in the lane, women carrying baskets of vegetables were returning home.

The yellow bulb was steady.

There were no black stains in the new backing.

She looked into her own eyes at the centre of the mirror.

This time it seemed to her that the delay was not in the hand, but in the seeing.

The harder she tried to catch her own movement, the longer the delay became.

Malati switched off the light.

She locked the shop door.

The mirror remained inside in the dark.

The next morning she opened the shop again.

Work began.

Red bangles, green bangles, vermilion, bargaining, laughter—everything as before.

The mirror remained on the wall, but Malati stopped testing it.

When a woman raised her hand and asked, “Does this colour look good?” Malati looked not at the mirror but directly at the wrist and answered.

And sometimes, when in the corner of her eye her own reflection seemed to slip a little behind, she did not turn at once and wait for it.

STORY 234

Footsteps on the Roof

...

A little inside the old cloth market of Jhanjharpur, in a narrow lane, Ram Ballabh Das had a small workshop where he fitted skins to mridangs. In the front room he soaked hides, stretched them over circular wooden shells, and ground the black paste; in the rear room stood his cot, two trunks, and several old mridang shells beside the wall. The house had only one storey, but there was no staircase to the roof. Long ago an outside staircase had stood on the southern side, but it had been removed after the wall collapsed. Now, whenever anyone had to climb to the roof, a long bamboo ladder had to be brought from the lane.

Ram Ballabh knew the sounds of the night particularly well. After listening all day to the right and left strokes of mridangs, his ears could catch the smallest difference. Which strap was a little loose, which skin had been stretched too tight, which stroke sounded hollow within—he could tell with his eyes closed.

So on the first night, when he heard the sound of feet on the roof, he did not take it for a rat or a cat.

It must have been around eleven. Rain had already fallen during the day, and the lane was damp, but the night air was still. Ram Ballabh sat on his cot untangling the cord of a half-finished mridang.

Then from above came a thump.

A few moments later, another thump.

Then two more, a little quicker.

He stopped his hands and listened.

The sound was moving from the northern side toward the south.

One... two... three... four... five.

Then the roof became silent again.

Ram Ballabh got up and opened the door.

The lane was deserted. The light in the veranda of the house opposite had gone out. He craned his neck toward the outer edge of the roof. In the darkness he could see only the line of the wet parapet.

“Is anyone there?” he called upward.

No answer came.

There was no staircase to the roof. The bamboo ladder used in the lane was kept during the day in a storehouse beside the pond. If someone had brought another ladder from outside, some mark should have remained in the mud of the lane.

Ram Ballabh went outside twice with the lantern and looked carefully.

There were no fresh footprints beside the wall.

The sound did not return that night.

In the morning his nephew Naval came to collect a mridang. When Ram Ballabh told him what had happened, he laughed.

“It must have been a cat.”

“A cat’s feet are that heavy?”

“If the roof is empty, even a small sound seems loud.”

Ram Ballabh did not answer. He put a finger on the left head of the mridang and said, “The difference between this stroke and that one—you do not hear it. I do.”

Naval looked at his face and stopped laughing.

At noon the two of them brought the bamboo ladder from the lane. Naval climbed first. Ram Ballabh followed.

The lime-and-brick-dust surface of the roof was old. There were fine cracks in several places, dried moss along the western edge, and on the northern side an old bamboo water channel tied against the wall. During the rains it carried roof water toward the southern drain.

There was no human footprint on the roof.

No mud.

Only pigeon droppings in two or three places and the faint print of a cat near one edge.

Naval said, “See?”

Ram Ballabh walked five steps across the roof. Naval went down and listened. Then Naval walked above while Ram Ballabh stood inside.

It was true that footsteps on the roof sounded heavy in the room.

But the sound from the night had been slightly different—as though the feet were not falling on the roof but inside it.

The second night Ram Ballabh did not go to sleep early. He put away his mridang work and sat quietly on the cot.

Eleven o’clock.

Half past eleven.

Nothing.

He told himself Naval had been right.

Then, a little before midnight, there came a thump from the north.

Ram Ballabh's back straightened.

Two... three... four... five.

Then it stopped.

This time the fifth thump had come directly above his cot.

He went outside at once.

No one in the lane.

The sky was clear. Stars were visible.

On the third night Naval stayed with him.

He put out the kerosene lamp so that outside sounds could be heard more clearly. Until midnight the two of them talked quietly about work.

Suddenly the first thump came from above.

Naval stopped in the middle of a sentence.

The second thump.

"Did you hear it?" Ram Ballabh whispered.

Naval did not answer.

Third.

Fourth.

Fifth.

Naval jumped from the cot and ran to the door. Both went outside and looked toward the roof.

Nothing in the darkness.

"That is not a cat," Naval said softly.

Ram Ballabh should have felt satisfaction at hearing this.

Instead his uneasiness increased. The sound was no longer something heard only by his own ears.

The next day Naval brought a handful of fine ash. Across the roof, from north to south, he spread it in a thin strip.

"If anyone walks here, there will be prints."

The idea seemed childish to Ram Ballabh, but he did not stop him.

That night the sound came again.

Five thumps.

As before.

In the morning they went up.

The strip of ash was almost untouched. In the middle the wind had made one line through it, and near the edge there were two small cat prints.

Naval fell silent.

As they were coming down from the roof, Ram Ballabh's eyes went to the old bamboo water channel beside the northern wall.

The bamboo was held in two places by iron rings and in three places by wire loops tightened around spikes driven into the wall. Rainwater ran through it toward the south. The bamboo had grown old and black.

He shook it with his hand.

The bamboo rubbed against the wall.

Thak.

From below Naval called, "That is not a footstep."

"No," Ram Ballabh said. "But it sends sound into the wall."

Ram Ballabh had little work that day. Two mridangs had to be made ready by evening for a wedding troupe, but his attention kept going upward.

The sun came out at noon. The old roof warmed. The bamboo water channel began to dry.

Toward evening, while Ram Ballabh was tightening a skin in the rear room, two sudden thaks sounded above.

Not like footsteps, but travelling in the same direction from north to south.

He left his work and went outside.

There was no wind.

After the evening customer had gone, he called Naval.

The two considered taking the bamboo channel down, but the rainy season was not yet over. So they loosened the loops and wedged folded pieces of an old sack between the bamboo and the wall, preventing the bamboo from rubbing directly against it.

That night no footsteps were heard.

The second night too the roof remained completely quiet.

Nothing on the third night.

Naval laughed. "The ghost saw the sack and ran away."

Ram Ballabh smiled.

He felt relief.

He could trust his ears again. There had been a sound. There had been a cause. Fear lasted only until the cause was known.

A week passed in that silence.

Work increased. With Durga Puja approaching, the demand for mridangs grew. From morning until night Ram Ballabh cut hide, tightened cords, and ground black paste.

The roof slipped out of his mind.

One night the work ended late.

The sky was completely clear. It had not rained all day. The bamboo water channel was dry.

Ram Ballabh washed his hands and face and lay down on the cot.

He was beginning to fall asleep when a thump came from above.

He opened his eyes.

A few moments later came a second thump.

Ram Ballabh immediately sat up on the cot.

Third.

Fourth.

The fifth thump did not come.

Ram Ballabh waited for a long time.

Nothing.

In the morning he examined the bamboo channel.

The sack was still in place. The loops were loose. The bamboo was not touching the wall.

This time he said nothing to Naval.

Two weeks later the rains ended. Ram Ballabh had the bamboo water channel removed altogether. The spikes in the wall were taken out as well.

There was now no long object on the roof running north to south that could carry sound.

After that, nearly a month passed in silence.

Ram Ballabh became certain that the bamboo had been the cause. Perhaps those four thumps in between had happened because the sack had not been wedged properly. There was no need to give them another meaning.

One night in Kartik, the cold had begun to deepen slightly.

Ram Ballabh was removing the torn skin from an old mridang. The room light was steady. Not even a dog barked in the lane outside.

Then from above came a thump.

Ram Ballabh's hand stopped on the hide.

No second thump came.

He did not rise from the cot.

He only listened.

For a long time there was nothing.

Then from the northern side of the roof came a faint scraping sound—as though someone were rubbing a heel before lifting a foot.

Ram Ballabh slowly placed the mridang across his thigh.

With the fingers of his right hand he gave it one stroke.

The sound came out round, deep, and clear.

He gave a second stroke.

No answer came from above.

Ram Ballabh did not strike a third time.

He took up the cord of the half-open mridang again.

There was much of the night left, work remained, and there was still no staircase to the roof.

STORY 235

The Smell of a Letter

...

After retiring from the old post office at Benipatti, Shashinath Jha now ran a small shop on the front veranda of his house, selling stamps, envelopes, and pens. Twelve years had passed since he left service, but his old habit of sorting paper had never left him. Whenever a letter came into his hand, he first noticed the thickness of the paper, then the fold, then the colour of the ink. He read the name only afterward.

One afternoon in Bhadon, while a fine rain was falling outside, his younger brother brought an old iron trunk and set it down on the veranda. It had been taken down from the loft of their ancestral house. The rear part of the house was to be repaired, so the old clothes and papers inside had to be sorted.

Shashinath opened the trunk.

On top lay two torn gamchhas, his father's old dhoti, a small clay container, and several bundles of letters. A thin layer of dust covered them. Many were addressed to his father, some to an uncle, some to people whose names Shashinath no longer even remembered.

He began separating them one by one.

Then a yellowed envelope came into his hand.

One corner was slightly torn, the ink on the front very faint, the stamp half peeled away.

The moment he opened it, a smell rose.

Shashinath's hand stopped.

Wet jute sack.

Kerosene smoke.

And old blue ink.

All three together.

He did not bring the envelope to his nose. On the contrary, he moved his hand slightly away.

Even then the smell was clear.

In twelve years of postal service he must have encountered such smells a thousand times, but in this combination they belonged to only one night in his memory.

Sawan, 1992.

Shashinath immediately wanted to fold the letter shut again, but his fingers remained on the paper.

“What happened?” his wife Kamala called from inside.

“Nothing. Old papers.”

He placed the envelope on the lid of the trunk.

Five minutes later he picked it up again.

He had never spoken at home about that night.

There was no line about it in his service record either.

Even among former colleagues, the story had later been reduced to this much: one monsoon year, many letters in the old Benipatti post office had been damaged by rainwater.

The truth had not been that simple.

Shashinath had been twenty-three then, a temporary mail-sorting worker. The old post office stood in a low part of the market. Rain had been falling for three days. The roof leaked in two places, and half a finger of water stood on the floor of the rear storeroom. The jute mail sacks were kept on wooden planks.

On the night shift were Shashinath, the elderly watchman Ramphal Das, and the clerk Jagarnath.

After nine that night, water began dripping more heavily from the eastern part of the roof. One registered-mail sack was directly beneath it.

Jagarnath said, “This sack is entered in the register. Do not let it get wet.”

Shashinath dragged it to another place.

That place was dry, but an old lantern hung beside the wall there. A little kerosene leaked from its base.

Ramphal said, “Babu, do not keep it here. The smell will settle into the paper.”

Shashinath laughed. “Save it from the water first. The smell will go later.”

Half an hour later Jagarnath went to inspect the outer gate. Ramphal went to the rear veranda to make tea on a small stove. Shashinath was alone at the sorting table.

Then one bamboo joint in the roof suddenly loosened and water poured in like a stream.

In alarm, Shashinath shifted two sacks at once.

The first was saved.

The second became wedged beneath the lantern.

Shashinath could not move it immediately. It was heavy. He called Ramphal.

Ramphal came running.

Together they pulled the sack away.

By then kerosene from the lantern base had soaked into the jute fibres. Nothing caught fire, but the smell of oil and hot metal spread through the whole room.

“I told you,” Ramphal said quietly.

Shashinath was irritated. “There was no fire. Check the letters.”

They opened the sack.

The letters on top were slightly damp. Those in the middle were mostly dry. Blue ink had spread on some envelopes.

The two of them spent the night separating the papers and spreading them across planks. Ramphal laid down old newspapers. Shashinath moved the lantern farther away.

Before dawn most of the letters had dried.

The trouble could have ended there.

But in the morning the inspector arrived.

He became angry when he saw that a registered-mail sack had been opened. There was no entry in the register recording the opening of the sack.

Before Jagarnath could explain the events of the night, the inspector asked, “Who opened the sack?”

No answer came from Shashinath’s mouth.

Ramphal said, “I opened it, Babu. The letters were getting wet.”

That was half the truth.

Ramphal had opened the sack, but at Shashinath’s instruction. Shashinath had placed it in the wrong place. The oil beneath the lantern had soaked it because of him.

The inspector descended on Ramphal.

Ramphal was a temporary watchman. His service was already being extended three months at a time. After that incident, it was not renewed at the next extension.

On paper the reason read: “Unauthorised opening of postal articles.”

Shashinath remained silent that day too.

He explained it to himself in many ways: Ramphal himself had said that he opened it; the inspector had not asked me; no fire had started; the letters were saved; if I had spoken, I might not have got a permanent job.

Each of those facts had a separate meaning.

Put together, they became only one thing—he had remained silent.

Later Ramphal began working as a night watchman at a grain shop in the market. Two years afterward Shashinath was transferred. They met less often.

Whenever someone happened to mention Ramphal's name, Shashinath changed the direction of the conversation.

Sitting on the veranda now, Shashinath opened the envelope again.

Inside was a one-page letter.

The date was blurred, but the year could still be read—1992. The month of Sawan. The Benipatti postal mark.

His throat went dry.

The letter said nothing remarkable.

A young man had written to his mother that he would send his wages the following week; that she should not stop his younger brother's studies; that the repair of the roof could be postponed for now.

At the end he had written: "There is a great deal of rain, but we are well."

Shashinath finished reading.

The smell was still there.

He called Kamala.

"Smell this."

Surprised, Kamala took the envelope.

"It smells of old paper."

"Kerosene?"

She smelled it again. "I do not notice any."

"Wet jute?"

"There were old clothes in the trunk. Everything will smell like that."

Shashinath took the letter back.

To him it was unmistakable.

This was not the ordinary smell of old paper.

It was that night itself.

The hot base of the lantern.

The wet sack.

The blue ink.

Ramphal's soaked kurta.

He examined one corner of the envelope. There was a black-brown stain.

It could have been oil.

It could have been dirt.

When he rubbed it with a finger, there was no greasiness.

Thirty-four years had passed. Even if oil had once been there, could the smell have survived like this?

He sat in the shop all afternoon.

Customers came and went. Someone bought stamps, someone an envelope, a student a pen.

Again and again Shashinath's attention returned to the trunk.

In the evening he placed the letter in a separate paper bag and left it on a low stool in the courtyard.

When he closed the shop at night, he smelled the veranda.

No odour.

He felt relieved.

At midnight the rain grew heavy. The sound of water on the tin roof woke him.

Kamala remained asleep.

Suddenly Shashinath felt there was a faint smell of kerosene in the room.

He sat up.

No lantern had burned in the house for years. They used electric light now. There was no kerosene in the kitchen either.

He opened the door and went to the veranda.

The letter lay on the courtyard stool inside its closed paper bag.

When he reached it, the smell seemed weaker.

When he returned inside, stronger again.

Shashinath stood in the darkness for a long time.

Then, for the first time, a doubt came to him:

Perhaps the smell was not rising from the letter.

Perhaps the sound of rain opened the road back to that night, and the smell came by that road.

In the morning he thought of searching for the son of his old colleague Jagarnath.

Then he did not go.

He was not even certain whether Ramphal was still alive.

What would change if he found someone and told an old story? He had no answer.

He did not throw the letter away.

Nor did he return it to the trunk.

He placed it on the upper shelf of the shop in an open earthen plate, where air could reach it.

After three days the smell had almost vanished.

Kamala said, "See? It was only old dampness."

Shashinath nodded.

On the evening of the fourth day, rain began again.

Shashinath was closing the shop. The letter on the shelf was dry. Without touching it, he looked upward.

No smell.

Then a customer came running in from outside with a wet jute sack over his head.

The moment he put the sack on the floor, the same three smells rose together—wet jute, kerosene, and something sharp like blue ink.

Shashinath's hand lifted by itself toward the shelf, then stopped halfway.

The customer asked for a stamp.

Shashinath opened the drawer, took out the stamp, handed it over, and counted the change.

His fingers did not tremble.

After the customer left, the veranda filled again with its ordinary smell.

Shashinath did not look toward the letter on the shelf.

He kept his eyes fixed instead on an empty place on the wall where an old iron hook had been removed when the shop was built.

The rain continued outside.

It seemed to him that a night could become very old, yet the age of its smell was different from the age of paper.

STORY 236

Nilkanth

...

Phulo Devi was the first to see the bird on the electric wire leading from the eastern hamlet of Manigachhi toward the fields. The morning sunlight was still caught in drops of dew. On one side of the courtyard, black makhana seeds were spread over a bamboo mat; on the other, sand was heating in an iron kadai.

The bird sat on the wire—its body dull-coloured, but when it opened its wings the blue flashed so brightly that Phulo Devi's hand stopped of its own accord. It gave three harsh calls.

"Nilkanth," Phulo Devi said softly.

At once her daughter-in-law Saroja, who was stirring the kadai, stopped her hand. Manoj, the younger son, sitting with a wooden mallet, also looked up.

No one in the household was surprised. In place of surprise, an old caution spread through the courtyard.

"Lower the fire," Phulo Devi said. "No one will go out during the first watch today."

Without arguing, Saroja pulled the firewood back from the hearth. The hot sand began to cool slowly. The seeds remained only half-heated. Manoj put down the mallet.

In this house, the call of the Nilkanth was not merely a birdcall.

It was a signal to stop work.

Fifteen years earlier, Phulo Devi's husband Jagdish Mallah had fallen from a bamboo platform while unloading sacks of makhana. That morning a Nilkanth had sat on a dry mango branch and called repeatedly.

Three years later, on the day their elder son Kamlesh burned his hand on the rim of a hot kadai, the bird had called from the wire.

And once, when their granddaughter's bicycle slipped from a ridge, the same harsh cry had been heard from the roof half an hour before.

Three incidents were enough for the family.

At first the rule had been simple: when the bird called, be careful for a while.

Gradually the rules multiplied.

If it called from the east, postpone a journey.

If it called from above the house, do not light a fire.

If it called three times in succession, stop cracking makhana.

If it called five times, do not let children go outside.

Phulo Devi had never written these rules down; nevertheless every member of the household knew them by heart.

Some rules had attached themselves over time. No one could say exactly who had first spoken which one.

The problem that day was that seventy kilos of makhana had to be prepared by evening for a trader from Darbhanga.

The first roasting had been completed the previous day. The seeds had rested for two days; if the second roasting and cracking were delayed too long, the puffing would suffer.

Saroja knew this.

Phulo Devi knew it too.

“We will begin after noon,” Phulo Devi said.

Saroja looked at the kadai. “Heating the sand again will take time.”

“Then let it take time.”

“The trader will send his vehicle at five.”

Phulo Devi did not answer.

Her eyes remained on the electric wire.

The Nilkanth was still sitting there, moving its tail lightly. Then it spread its wings and flew toward the fields. For one instant, the blue of its wings flashed in the sunlight, then vanished.

Manoj wanted to laugh, but after seeing his grandmother’s face, he remained silent.

Work remained stopped until noon.

The house was so quiet that when the iron kadai beside the hearth cooled and made a small tick, everyone’s eyes turned toward it.

Saroja kept taking the seeds into her hand and examining them. Some had already received heat on their outer shells; others had received less. The evenness of the heating had been broken.

At two o’clock Phulo Devi herself said, “Now begin.”

Work started again.

The sand heated.

Saroja stirred the seeds.

Manoj took the hot seeds out in small batches and struck them with the wooden mallet. The white makhana burst through the shell and opened like flowers.

But the first batch was uneven. Some puffed fully; some remained hard in the centre.

“At this rate there will be a loss,” Saroja said.

Phulo Devi heard her but remained silent.

At three o’clock, from the fields behind the house, the harsh call came again.

This time the bird could not be seen.

Only the sound.

Manoj’s mallet stopped in mid-air.

“Dadi?”

Phulo Devi’s face tightened. “That was once.”

A few moments later came the second call.

Saroja continued stirring the kadai.

The third call sounded closer than the first two.

Phulo Devi stood up. “Enough. Smother the fire.”

Saroja’s hand did not stop. “Ma, the first time we stopped, half the batch was spoiled. If we stop again, all of it will spoil.”

“There will be makhana again.”

“How will the money come again?”

Never before had the question been put so directly in that house.

Phulo Devi looked at Saroja. “Will you invite an accident for money?”

“Does the bird invite the accident, or do we lose our work because we are afraid?”

Manoj put down the mallet. He knew there was no place for him in this argument.

Just then a bamboo basket kept to the left of the hearth suddenly overturned. Some hot seeds scattered across the ground.

Stepping backward, Manoj caught his foot on a low stool and fell sitting down. His elbow scraped against the earth.

Phulo Devi’s face went pale. “See?”

Saroja immediately went to Manoj.

The skin on his elbow had been scraped and two small drops of blood had appeared. It was not a serious injury.

Manoj looked toward the basket. "My foot hit it."

"The call came first," Phulo Devi said.

Saroja said nothing.

She washed Manoj's elbow and wiped it with cloth. Then she began gathering the seeds scattered on the ground.

That day the batch was completed late.

The trader's vehicle came after dark.

The seventy kilos came out five kilos short. Because of the uneven puffing, some of the makhana had to be kept aside.

The trader cut the price.

After supper that night, the subject of the Nilkanth returned.

Phulo Devi pointed to Manoj's scraped elbow.

Saroja pointed to the sack holding the five kilos of under-puffed makhana.

Each had her own evidence.

Over the next few weeks the rules became stricter.

The moment Phulo Devi heard the call, she had the hearth put out.

Kamlesh stopped himself from going to the market.

Manoj would take his bicycle outside and then bring it back in.

At first Saroja continued to object. Later, even she began slowing her hands involuntarily whenever the call came.

Gradually she understood one peculiar quality of fear: even when the mind does not accept something, the body can learn its rules.

One morning in Kartik a new batch of makhana arrived.

This time the trader had paid half the money in advance. He had made it clear that if the goods were not delivered on time, the next batch would be given to another household.

The first day's work passed without interruption.

So did the second.

On the evening of the third day, while the final roasting was underway, a Nilkanth came and sat on the electric wire.

Saroja saw it first.

The bird was silent.

A strange hope rose in her—fly away, do not call.

She kept stirring the kadai.

Phulo Devi was inside sorting paddy.

Manoj was stitching a sack.

The Nilkanth moved its tail.

It turned its neck.

Then it gave the harsh call.

Saroja's hand stopped by itself.

The second call.

Footsteps sounded from inside: Phulo Devi was coming.

Saroja looked at the kadai.

The sand was very hot. At this temperature the seeds had to be turned within moments. If she smothered the fire and abandoned the kadai now, the loss would be like the first batch.

The third call.

Phulo Devi reached the doorway.

"The fire—"

"No," Saroja said.

After that single word, the courtyard became so still that the dry rustle of the seeds in the hot sand could be heard.

Saroja kept stirring the kadai.

Phulo Devi remained standing where she was.

The needle and thread stopped in Manoj's hand.

The Nilkanth called again.

A fourth time.

Saroja's palm grew damp.

Against her will, Manoj's old scraped elbow, Kamlesh's burned hand, and Jagdish's bamboo platform all rose together in her mind.

The handle of the kadai was growing hot.

"Ma, stay two handspans away from the fire," was all she said.

Then the seeds were taken out.

Manoj lifted the mallet.

The first seed burst.

The second.

The third.

One by one, the white flowers opened.

Nothing happened.

Ten minutes.

Twenty minutes.

Half an hour.

Phulo Devi slowly sat down on the veranda.

Her eyes remained on the wire.

The bird had flown away long before.

By evening the batch was complete.

No hand was burned.

No one fell.

No sack overturned.

Saroja ought to have felt relief.

Instead, an empty place opened inside her—as though something had been due to happen and had merely not happened yet.

That night the trader took the goods away.

The money was counted.

Everyone in the house ate supper.

Phulo Devi spoke very little.

Around midnight, Saroja woke at a sound.

Harsh.

Brief.

Far away.

She sat up on the cot.

Nilkanth?

The bird normally did not call at night—Manoj had said that one day. Saroja was not sure where his knowledge had come from.

Outside, it was dark.

The sound came again.

This time from the eastern side of the house.

Saroja slowly opened the door.

The courtyard was empty.

The electric wire could not be seen in the darkness.

There was little wind.

Then she realised the sound was not coming from above.

It was coming from near the hearth.

The old iron kadai, heated throughout the day, was cooling. Along its outer rim ran a fine crack. As the metal contracted, it gave an occasional harsh

kirr—a small piece of exactly the kind of sound the household had come to recognise as the Nilkanth's cry.

Saroja sat beside the kadai and waited for the next sound.

After a while, kirr.

She did not smile.

She only listened.

From the cot behind her came Phulo Devi's cough.

"Did the bird call?"

Saroja paused before answering.

"It is the kadai, Ma."

Phulo Devi said nothing.

Until dawn, no accident occurred.

In the morning, while cleaning the hearth, Saroja showed Phulo Devi the fine crack in the kadai.

Phulo Devi touched it with a finger, then withdrew her hand.

"That was the night sound," Saroja said.

"At night, perhaps," Phulo Devi replied. "And in the day?"

Saroja fell silent.

At that very moment a Nilkanth came and sat on the eastern electric wire.

The sunlight was still soft.

The bird sat with its wings folded, looking around.

No one stopped working.

It called once.

Manoj continued stitching the sack.

Kamlesh continued untying the bullock cart.

Saroja poured sand into a new kadai.

Only Phulo Devi became still for a moment.

Then she pushed the wood farther into the hearth.

The bird called a second time.

Work in the courtyard continued.

Before it could call a third time, it flew from the wire.

Its blue wings flashed in the sunlight.

Phulo Devi looked up without meaning to.

Her hand was still on the firewood.

She did not take it away.

STORY 237

The Second Room

...

Inside the old market south of Jaynagar station stood a hotel called Mithila Vishram. The name was grand; the building was ordinary—a two-storeyed brick house with a narrow courtyard in the middle and, above, a veranda with a wooden railing.

I was staying there for three nights. A publisher from Darbhanga had sent me to a printing press in Jaynagar to supervise corrections for a new edition of a school textbook. All day my eyes remained fixed among ink, paper, and type; by the time I returned to the hotel at night, my body was tired.

My room was number seventeen on the second floor.

As soon as one climbed the stairs, a plan of the building hung in a glass frame on the wall to the right. Escape routes for fire or other emergencies were marked in red, the rooms in blue squares.

The sequence ran from eleven to eighteen.

After eighteen came a thick wall; then the corridor turned and ended near a latticed window.

On the first night, a little after the rain had stopped, I went outside to drink water.

The main corridor light was out. The yellow glow of the bulb in the courtyard rose faintly to the upper floor.

Beyond room eighteen, on the wall that I had seen bare during the day, there now appeared a narrow door.

I stopped.

The door looked black. Both upright lines of the frame were clear; the upper horizontal line was slightly crooked. On the right was a round dark spot, like a handle. Along the bottom ran a thin pale strip.

There was no number above it.

I went five steps closer.

The door did not move.

That part of the wall was darker than the rest, but the shape was so distinct that it was difficult to blame my fatigue.

I reached out to touch it.

My fingers met cold, damp plaster.

Not wood—a wall.

I stepped back at once.

When I looked again, the shape was still there.

A door to the eye; a wall to the hand.

Back in my room, I remembered the plan.

There was no room after eighteen.

In the morning I went to the same place.

The wall was a dull white and flat. There was no trace of the black frame from the night.

Where I had seen the round handle on the right, there was only a grey spot about the size of a fingertip. Where the pale strip had been below, a fine crust of lime had formed.

I laughed at myself.

Wet wall, yellow light, tired eyes—between them, a door could easily be made.

But the curiosity remained.

After tea I went down into the courtyard and tried to reckon the outer side of that wall.

Below the veranda ran an old earthen drainpipe for rainwater. At one joint, drops of water were still sliding down the wall.

From outside there was no extra window and no projection.

I tried counting steps to see whether there was room for a separate chamber inside, but the thick courtyard pillar and the thickness of the walls spoiled the calculation.

At the printing press that day, even while matching page numbers, my mind kept running back to the hotel.

When I returned in the evening, the rain had started again.

The hotel owner, Ramlochan Sah, was writing accounts at the reception desk.

I asked casually, “Has the wall after room eighteen ever been opened?”

He looked up. “During the rains it has to be opened up for repairs. It catches damp. Why?”

“Nothing. The plaster looked swollen.”

“The mason is coming tomorrow.”

That was all he said.

No old story. No mystery.

His indifference should have reassured me. Instead I began to feel that there really was something in that wall which the hotel people simply dismissed as dampness.

The rain was heavy on the second night.

At about midnight I went out deliberately.

The courtyard bulb was still burning.

The door on the wall was clearer than on the first night.

The space within the outline was a shade darker than the surrounding wall. The round spot too had deepened. The pale strip below now shone almost across the full width.

I brought a piece of red chalk from my room. I kept it for marking corrections on proofs.

Where I saw the left upright line of the door, I made a small red dot on the wall. Then a second dot on the right line.

To measure the distance between the two, I laid my palm along the wall five times.

The shape was a little more than six palm-widths across.

At dawn I went back.

The door had vanished.

The two red dots remained on the wall.

The distance between them really was a little more than six palm-widths.

I resisted the urge to draw a straight line joining them. If, in daylight, I made the door myself, what would be left of the night's mystery?

At noon a mason came. His name was Sakur.

He tapped the swollen plaster low on the wall with the back of his hammer. I sat on the veranda pretending to read proofs while watching him work.

First he scraped away the crumbling crust below.

Then he put his chisel to the round grey mark.

As soon as the first layer fell away, the brick behind it showed a different colour.

The old wall was built of dark red brick; in the middle, a rectangular section was made of paler yellow brick. The bonding too was newer.

Sakur scraped the plaster upward.

Slowly an entire rectangular boundary emerged—exactly where I had seen the door at night.

A shiver passed through me again, but this time the cause stood in front of me.

There had once been a doorway here.

Later it had been filled in with brick.

“Was this a passage before?” I asked.

Sakur brushed dust from the wall. “Could be. These bricks are later. But it is not hollow behind them. It has been fully built up.”

He struck two bricks.

A solid sound.

“Then why does the frame show at night?”

He looked at me, then touched the wall. “These newer bricks draw more water. The older ones draw less. When it rains, the joints take on different colours. Once dry, they look almost the same again.”

Pointing to the pale strip along the bottom, he said, “That is salt coming out. As the water in the wall dries, lime and salts rise to the surface.”

And the round grey spot?

Sakur pushed his chisel into it and drew out a small rusted piece of iron—perhaps the remnant of an old latch fitting or wire. Rust around it had made the circular stain in the plaster.

I remembered my night-time ‘handle.’

The mystery was, for the most part, finished.

But one question remained: what had been behind this closed passage?

On the plan there was no room after eighteen.

Sakur measured from the inside. “This section must fall behind room eighteen. In the old arrangement perhaps there was a door here, and later an inner partition was removed. Now there is no separate room.”

I stood outside room eighteen and worked through the measurements.

He was right.

Once the wall thickness and the length of room eighteen were added together, there was no space left for a separate chamber.

What I had begun to call ‘the second room’ may once have been a separate room—or may never have been one—but in the present building there was no place for it.

By evening Sakur had removed the damaged plaster and applied fresh lime.

The old rectangular section became white again.

Both red dots disappeared beneath the new coating.

That night there was no rain.

I went outside at ten, at midnight, and again at one.

No door.

Only the white wall and the smell of fresh plaster.

I felt faintly embarrassed by my own fear.

I was to return to Darbhanga the next morning.

I thought I would sleep early.

But in the last watch of the night I woke to the sound of water falling on the roof.

It had begun raining again.

I opened my door and stepped into the corridor.

The main light was out. Only the yellow courtyard bulb was burning.

The new plaster was getting wet.

Beyond room eighteen, the rectangular section of wall had begun to darken again.

This time I knew the reason.

New brick, old brick, different behaviour under dampness.

There was no pale salt line below now because Sakur had scraped it away.

The round rust stain was gone too.

Even so, it looked like a door to me.

I went close and laid my palm against the wall.

Cold, wet lime.

Solid.

Just then, from inside, came the sound of a page being turned.

One page.

Then another.

I took my hand away.

The sound could have come from room eighteen. The wall adjoined it. Someone might be awake reading at night. That was entirely ordinary.

Yet the direction of the sound seemed to me to come from the middle of that rectangular section.

I did not put my ear to the wall.

I had no wish to begin searching for a second illusion behind the first.

In the morning I packed my belongings and went downstairs.

I stopped once beside the building plan.

Eleven through eighteen.

After that, a thick wall.

No second room.

Taking the key, Ramlochan said, "The damp upstairs should be all right now."

"Yes," I said. "There is nothing inside the wall."

He looked at me questioningly, but I said nothing more.

As I walked toward the station, I remembered that when I had heard the pages turning in the night, there had been no light under the door of room eighteen.

Perhaps the person inside had been asleep in darkness, and the sound had only been water drops or a loose sheet of paper.

I did not turn back to look at the hotel.

But after I sat down in the train, the coldness of wet lime remained in my palm for a long time.

STORY 238

Beneath the Earth

...

For three years the courtyard of our ancestral house in Khajauli had been slowly sinking. During the rains, water crept toward the eastern veranda; in winter, fine cracks appeared in the middle of the courtyard. This time I decided that the old bricks should be removed, the soil beneath repaired, and stone laid again. Gudari Paswan and his son Chhotan arrived early in the morning with spades.

I had been born in that house, but for thirty-five years I had worked in bookbinding in Darbhanga. Now I came home only two or three times a year. I remembered which tree had once stood in which corner of the courtyard, which wall had formerly been mud-built—but how could I know what lay beneath the earth?

By noon two rows of old bricks had been lifted.

At the third row Chhotan's spade struck something hard.

The sound was metallic, not the sound of brick.

He bent his knees and cleared away the soil.

A rusted metal box appeared—slightly longer than a palm, half as wide, with a small clasp on top.

I was sitting on the veranda writing accounts when I heard the metallic note and looked up.

The moment I saw the box, my left hand closed into a fist by itself.

Then I said a sentence whose meaning I did not understand even as I spoke it:

“Do not lift the upper right corner. Press the clasp first. The blue marble will be stuck there.”

Chhotan's spade stopped in his hand.

Gudari looked at me.

“What marble, Malik?”

My mouth went dry.

“I... only meant that it is rusted. Do not force it.”

“The blue marble?” Chhotan asked again.

I did not answer.

They brought the box out of the earth and placed it on the veranda.

The clasp really did loosen when pressed from the right.

Chhotan lifted the lid halfway, then stopped.

Inside the upper right corner, caught between soil and rust, was a blue glass marble.

Gudari's eyes were no longer on the box.

They were on me.

"Had you seen this before?"

"No."

"Then how?"

"There may have been a box like this in childhood. I do not remember."

I gave that answer less to him than to myself.

The lid was opened fully.

There was nothing frightening inside.

A blue glass marble, two brass buttons, a smooth black pebble, half a clay whistle, and a decayed knot of red thread.

All the objects were embedded in rust-dust and dry soil.

They were the sort of things that could have been found in any child's pocket.

But what happened inside me did not match the ordinariness of the objects.

Without thinking, I picked up the blue marble.

I placed it in my right palm and tapped it twice with a finger.

Then I set the two brass buttons some distance apart, placed the black pebble between them, and the clay whistle below.

When I lifted the knot of red thread, my hand began to tremble.

"Where is the fifth one?" I heard myself say.

Chhotan did not laugh.

Neither did Gudari.

"The fifth what?"

I counted the things.

One blue marble. Two buttons. One black pebble. One clay fragment. Red thread.

The count itself had become confused.

What exactly had I been counting?

"Nothing," I said. "Put everything back inside."

Gudari asked slowly, "Shall we stop digging here?"

"Yes," I said at once.

Then, just as quickly, I corrected myself.

"No. Why stop the work? The soil is weak. We need to see all of it."

The digging continued that day, but my attention no longer remained on the work.

I left the box on a shelf in the veranda.

Again and again my eyes went toward it.

Whenever I thought of the blue marble lying inside, the centre of my right palm seemed to remember its coldness.

In the evening my wife Malati returned from the market.

At first the box interested her. She took out the objects one by one and looked at them.

"These are children's playthings," she said. "Could they have been yours?"

"I do not know."

"Then how did you know about the blue marble before the box was opened?"

Gudari had already told her everything.

I became irritated.

"Something must have flashed in my mind. A childhood thing. Must everything have an explanation?"

Malati fell silent.

I disliked the sound of my own voice.

There was nothing in the box that gave me any reason to be angry with her.

After supper I decided to make a test.

I asked Malati to rearrange the objects inside the box however she wished while I stayed outside.

Five minutes later she called me.

With my eyes closed, I put my hand into the box and tried to find the blue marble.

First I touched the black pebble.

Then the clay whistle.

The blue marble was in the left corner, and I found it only at the end.

"See?" Malati said. "You do not have any special knowledge."

I breathed more easily.

But not completely.

The first time, before I had seen the blue marble, I had known not only where it was but how the clasp would open.

Under the lantern light I examined the outside of the box again.

Beneath the handle, a fine dry root had become trapped in the rust. It was so old that it powdered at a touch.

Across the lid were three parallel scratches.

At once my mind said: I made these scratches.

Then I startled at my own certainty.

Such scratches could exist on any ordinary box.

Malati asked, "Are you looking for your name or some mark?"

"No."

But my finger kept moving between the scratches.

For a moment I felt that at the end of the third scratch there ought to be a small circle.

There was nothing there.

Yet the empty place disappointed me—as though something expected had gone missing.

That disappointment made me still more uneasy, because I did not know where the expectation had come from.

I could not sleep until late.

I tried to remember the courtyard of my childhood.

There had once been a jujube tree here.

In the northern corner we made a mud hearth.

After rain, my younger brother Pawan and I sailed little boats in the mud.

There was also a hazy memory of playing with glass marbles.

But a metal box?

Red thread?

A black pebble?

Nothing became clear.

One scene returned again and again.

I was kneeling beside a small square hole in the soil.

Someone was holding my left hand.

That was all.

Whose hand? Why? What year?

Everything beyond that was smoke.

Whenever I tried to make the scene clearer, it changed.

Sometimes it was day.

Sometimes evening.

Sometimes I seemed to be alone.

I got up and drank water.

Then I went toward the veranda.

The box was on the shelf.

I did not want to touch it.

Even so, my hand reached out.

This time my right finger did not go to the clasp. My left thumb did.

The clasp opened.

Then I noticed that the left end of the thin metal strip had lifted slightly. The thumb rested there naturally.

Perhaps the first time too I had unconsciously read the construction of the clasp and understood how it opened.

The blue marble was not so easily explained.

I closed the box again.

Instead of returning it to the shelf, I carried it into the middle of the courtyard.

The trench opened during the day was still unfilled. Pale moonlight lay along the edge of the soil.

I stood beside the trench.

Then something strange happened.

I took a step as though measuring—not after deciding to do so.

One.

Two.

Three.

At the third step I turned left.

Then two more steps.

My body moved as though it knew an old path.

At the fifth step I stopped.

The soil there was untouched. No one had dug it during the day.

My right hand rose by itself and pointed downward.

I clasped both hands behind my back.

The next day, when Gudari arrived, he asked, "Shall we open the eastern side today?"

"Yes."

He raised his spade and moved toward the untouched spot where my feet had stopped during the night.

My throat tightened.

I wanted to say, Not there.

The words reached my mouth.

But I held them back.

The spade entered the earth.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Only ordinary black soil came out.

No metallic sound.

Whether I laughed inwardly or trembled, I could not tell.

Gudari dug down about one and a half handspans.

Nothing was found.

"The soil is sound here," he said. "This part has not sunk."

"Then leave it," I said.

He moved on.

For a while I remained standing beside the empty hole.

It should have reassured me.

Instead another question arose:

If the path I had walked in the night was not memory, why had my body counted five steps and brought me to that spot?

And if it was memory, why was there nothing beneath the earth?

By noon the courtyard had begun to level out again.

I did not clean the first box.

I left the rust as it was.

Malati said, "Shall we throw it away?"

"No."

"Then where will you keep it?"

I took too long to answer.

My mind said first: beneath the earth.

So clearly, so naturally, that it seemed not to be my own answer.

I placed the box on the shelf.

“Here.”

After the new stone was laid, the courtyard became level.

There was no trench, no line of old bricks.

Yet whenever I cross the courtyard from the veranda, my body still slows slightly at the fifth step.

I do not look down at that place.

What frightens me is not what may have been inside the box.

It is the thought that my body may know a place beneath the earth better than my mind does.

STORY 239

The Stamp

...

In the Jhanjharpur circle office, the smallest object was a round brass stamp. It was so small that it could fit entirely in a palm, yet without its impression half the papers of the office could not leave the building. Certified copies of land records, notices of mutation, copies of old khatiyans—at the end of all of them came the round red impression, and only then did people regard the paper as official.

The wooden handle of the stamp had grown old. The round brass face underneath was held in place by a small screw. Harinandan Jha, the copy clerk, would often turn it with his fingers to make sure it had not come loose.

But on that Monday morning, when he opened the ink pad and lifted the handle, there was only wood underneath.

The round brass face was gone.

At first he thought it must have fallen into the ink box. He lifted the red pad.

Nothing beneath it.

The desk drawer, the stacks of paper, the pen holder, under the chair—everything was searched.

“Lallan!” His voice rose without intention.

Lallan Paswan, the peon, came running from the veranda. “What happened?”

Harinandan showed him the empty wooden handle.

Lallan’s mouth remained open. “Where did the face go?”

“That is what I am trying to find.”

Within five minutes the matter had reached Head Clerk Shyamanand Babu.

Within ten minutes the door of the Circle Officer’s room was closed.

Within fifteen minutes Lallan had been stationed at the main gate with instructions not to let anyone leave without permission.

The people already standing in line for certified copies first assumed that some inspection had arrived.

But when voices began to rise from inside—"Open every drawer," "Turn over the papers," "Stop the sweeping"—the news spread outside as well.

Sukhiya Devi of Phulparas had changed buses for three hours to get there. She needed a copy of an old jamabandi in her husband's name.

Holding her paper at the window, she asked, "Will I get my copy today?"

Harinandan did not even look at her. "The stamp is missing."

"Has someone gone to bring new ink?"

"The ink is here. The stamp is missing."

Sukhiya Devi remained silent for a few moments. "But the paper has been written?"

"It has."

"Signed?"

"That too."

"Then why is my paper stopped?"

For the first time Harinandan looked at her. "Without the round impression, how can it be certified?"

Meanwhile the Circle Officer ordered every employee to remain beside his own desk.

The Head Clerk called for a new register.

At the top was written: "Stamp Search Record."

The time was entered: 10:17 a.m.

Who had last seen it, who had touched it, what time the office had closed the previous evening—everyone's statement began to be recorded separately.

Harinandan said that after five the previous evening, a specimen impression of the stamp had been made for the annual inspection.

A specimen of every government stamp was kept on thick paper, with its serial number and dimensions, and preserved in a secured file. Shyamanand Babu himself supervised it.

"After the specimen was made?" the Circle Officer asked.

"I wiped the stamp and put it back in the ink box."

"Did you actually see that you had put it back?"

Harinandan stopped.

"I remember putting down the handle."

"Did you see the brass face?"

For a moment silence filled the room.

With that one question, the crisis grew larger.

It was no longer merely a matter of a missing object. It was now described as a possible misuse of an official stamp.

If someone had taken it, any number of false documents might have been stamped during the night.

There was discussion of informing the police station.

Two clerks disagreed over whether the departmental letter should be prepared first or the search completed first.

One clerk said, "A letter can be prepared, but the letter itself will need a stamp."

Everyone looked at him.

He added quickly, "I mean the ordinary outward stamp."

The Head Clerk frowned. "This is not the time for jokes."

No one laughed, though Lallan went out to the veranda and began clearing his throat.

By noon the whole rhythm of the office had changed.

Files that had been gathering dust on upper shelves for years were brought down.

Old newspapers were unfolded.

The bamboo basket of Sona Devi, the sweeper, was overturned.

Lallan's bag was searched.

Harinandan himself turned his pockets inside out.

Sukhiya Devi remained seated beside the window.

Her bus left at four.

Again and again she looked at her certified copy, where the final empty circular space waited for the red impression.

At two o'clock a constable arrived from the police station.

His first question was the size of the stamp.

"One and a half inches round," Harinandan said.

"Brass?"

"Yes, brass."

"Weight?"

No one had the answer.

Someone immediately proposed sending Lallan to the market for a scale, but the Circle Officer stopped them.

"When the object itself is missing, how will you weigh it now?"

The constable wrote in his register: "Weight unknown."

Those two words made everyone more serious.

Meanwhile the Head Clerk called for the old stores register.

Five years earlier, the wooden handle purchased for the stamp had been entered at a price of thirteen rupees and fifty paise; the brass face had no separate price.

This raised another question: what financial value should be assigned to the missing object?

The accounts clerk said, "If we do not know the value of the object, the loss report will remain incomplete."

In a tired voice Harinandan said, "Write the value of all the people's work that has stopped in one day because there is no impression."

The accounts clerk looked at him as though he had damaged the language of the register.

It was decided that the value would be fixed later.

First, the dimensions of the round brass face had to be established.

They measured the diameter of the empty wooden handle, but the constable said the handle and the face did not necessarily have to be equal.

Someone suggested deriving the diameter from the specimen impression made the previous day.

Shyamanand Babu immediately objected. "It would not be proper to open the secured specimen file unnecessarily."

At that sentence, Satish looked up once, then lowered his head again.

Outside, the people in line had begun offering their own estimates.

Some said the brass piece would fetch no more than five rupees if sold.

Others said an entire village's land could be altered with it.

Sukhiya Devi silently kept straightening the corner of her paper.

The empty round space for the red stamp now looked like a hole in the document.

Then Satish, a new employee in the copy section who had joined only three months earlier, asked quietly, "Has yesterday's specimen file been checked?"

Shyamanand Babu said, "It is secured."

"Checked?"

"Why open a secured file? It contains the specimen impression, not the stamp."

Satish fell silent.

Half an hour later the Circle Officer himself said, "Bring it anyway."

The file was in the upper compartment of an iron cupboard.

The key was with the Circle Officer.

The cupboard was opened.

A thick file tied in red cloth was taken out.

On it were the previous day's date, the stamp number, and Shyamanand Babu's signature.

When the file was opened, the round red specimen impression was clearly visible on the first page.

Everyone gathered around it.

"See," Shyamanand Babu said, "the stamp was in its proper place until yesterday."

Satish lifted the page.

The paper felt heavier than expected.

Behind the specimen impression, the thin layer of wax that had been placed there had dried hard.

As the page was separated from the sheet beneath it, there came a small scraping sound.

Below, a round brass edge gleamed.

No one spoke at first.

Satish carefully turned the page over.

The brass face of the stamp was half embedded in the red wax.

While the specimen impression was being made the previous day, the screw must have loosened. The wooden handle had lifted away, while the brass face remained caught in the warm wax.

The specimen sheet had immediately been pressed beneath another page to dry and placed inside the file.

Then the file, considered "secure," had been locked in the cupboard.

A smile first appeared on Lallan's face, but seeing the Circle Officer, he suppressed it.

The constable closed his register.

Shyamanand Babu lifted the round brass piece as though someone had found a sick child.

Harinandan brought forward the wooden handle.

The brass face was screwed back onto it.

After two turns Satish said, "The screw is worn."

"That is why it fell off," Harinandan said.

The Circle Officer did not answer.

He first looked at the "Stamp Search Record," then at the constable from the police station.

"What should be written in the report?" Shyamanand Babu asked.

After much consideration, the sentence was framed:

"The stamp had not left the office premises; during the annual specimen-security procedure, it had temporarily become secured within the original specimen file."

Satish kept his head lowered, looking at the paper.

At the words "temporarily become secured," his lips moved, but he said nothing.

At 3:40 p.m. the main gate was opened.

People carrying their papers again moved toward the window.

Sukhiya Devi stood first in line.

Harinandan took her copy, pressed the stamp onto the red pad, and placed the round impression on the paper.

The impression came out half unclear.

The screw was loose again.

Harinandan tightened it and moved to stamp the paper a second time, but Shyamanand Babu stopped him.

"Two impressions on one paper will look against the rules. The first is sufficient."

Sukhiya Devi folded the paper and put it in her bag.

She said nothing.

It was time for her to catch her bus.

The next morning a new arrangement appeared on the desk.

A thin brass chain had been attached to the wooden handle of the stamp, and the other end tied to a leg of the desk.

Now the stamp could not disappear.

But the chain was so short that the stamp could not reach the papers held by people standing at the window.

For every document Harinandan first had to pull the paper inside, bring it to the corner of the desk, stamp it, then slide it back out.

By noon, the line outside the window had grown longer than the day before.

Inside, the brass stamp lay secure within the limits of its chain.

STORY 240

Autobiography of the File

...

I was not born on a writer's desk. I was born in the Copy Section of the Biraal Block Office, between two sheets of red cardboard, when twenty-seven people of Piprahi Tola put their thumb impressions and signatures on a petition.

The petition was brief. The old wooden footbridge over the irrigation channel had broken. In the rains, children going to school, people carrying milk to the market, and labourers heading for the fields had to wade through knee-deep water. All they asked for was two strong bamboo poles and four planks.

In the beginning I had seven pages.

The first was the petition. The second carried twenty-seven names. The third held the mukhiya's recommendation. On the fourth were two photographs of the broken bridge. The fifth contained a mason's estimate. The sixth gave the width of the channel. And the seventh was a red slip marked: "Urgent."

At that time I found the word "Urgent" very impressive.

Later I learnt that in a government file the word is often like the name printed at the top of a wedding invitation: conspicuous above everyone else, but with no separate place reserved for it when the meal is served.

At the first desk sat Junior Clerk Bhola Jha.

One leg of his desk was shorter than the others; beneath it lay the torn cover of an old register as a prop.

He read me, nodded, and wrote: "The matter appears to pertain to the Rural Works Section."

I liked the word "appears."

It was the kind of word by which a person could accept a thing without quite admitting it, and reject it without quite denying it.

I reached the second desk.

That desk was two fingers higher than the first.

Assistant Clerk Shivkant Babu sat there.

He seemed to like Bhola Jha's blue ink more than my seven pages.

He wrote: "The irrigation channel may fall under the Irrigation Department. Verification of ownership required."

I was sent to the third desk.

The third desk had a sheet of glass over it.

The babu there did not place tea on top of me; a separate circular stain had already been reserved for his glass.

He called for a map of the channel.

When the map arrived, the channel was not on it at all.

The reason was simple: when the map had been made, the place where the channel now ran had still been a field.

Then arose the question: if the channel did not exist on the map, which department should repair the bridge built over it?

In the search for an answer, my pages grew from seven to thirteen.

For the first time my thread was replaced with a thicker one.

I was pleased.

I thought becoming larger meant making progress.

A week later I reached the desk of the Block Engineer.

He opened me and looked at the first photograph.

Two children stood beside the channel. One held his slippers in his hand; the other was scraping mud with his foot.

The engineer said, "This is not a bridge. It is a temporary crossing."

The land surveyor sitting beside him said, "How can a temporary structure receive permanent repairs?"

Both laughed.

It was then that I first understood the hierarchy of human beings.

A question travelling from below to above is called serious.

An answer travelling from above to below is called an order.

And a matter moving round and round on the same desk is called deliberation.

The engineer wrote: "Site inspection required."

I returned to Bhola Jha's desk, because the letter for the site inspection had to issue from there.

Seeing me, Bhola said, "You again?"

Had I been allowed to speak, I would have said: "Not I. It is everything you people have written that has come back."

But a file has no right to speak.

Its only right is to grow more pages.

A date was fixed for inspection.

It rained that day.

A second date was fixed.

The jeep had gone elsewhere on official work.

On the third date the engineer fell ill.

By the fourth date the water in the channel had gone down.

When the inspection team finally arrived, the children were crossing easily, hitching their clothes above the shallow water.

The report stated: "Passage currently possible; difficulty likely during the rains."

That sentence made me want to laugh.

When the difficulty existed, inspection had not been possible.

When inspection became possible, the difficulty could no longer be seen.

Human intelligence on paper is highly disciplined by the weather.

Meanwhile, Subhadra Devi of Piprahi came to the office three times.

The first time she asked Bhola Jha, "What happened to our bridge?"

Bhola said, "The file has gone up."

The second time Shivkant Babu said, "The file is with the engineer."

The third time the engineer's clerk said, "The file has gone down again."

Subhadra Devi looked up at the sky and said, "The bridge is in the same place. Why does the file keep going up and down?"

No one answered.

I knew the answer.

Human beings measure the height of their posts by the journey of paper.

Two months later I went to the Subdivisional Office.

The peon carrying me held me tight against his chest on the bus.

For the first time I saw beyond the walls of the block office.

At the subdivision I was welcomed by a new page: "The financial limit applicable to the matter is unclear."

My estimated cost was only three thousand eight hundred rupees, yet clarification of the financial limit required opinions from two branches.

The Accounts Section circled passages in me with red pencil.

The Planning Section added a green slip.

The Rural Works Section added a yellow one.

My red cover began to look too small for what I had become.

I now had thirty-four pages.

To find the original petition, half my body had to be turned over.

One day an Assistant Officer read only the slip on top without opening me and wrote: "Guidance of the higher authority required."

I reached the District Office.

There the desks were much wider, the chairs much more heavily cushioned, and the hands that touched me much fewer.

One employee opened me, another marked me, a third tied me shut again.

The officer's pen gave me only thirteen words: "The matter shall be disposed of at the local level in accordance with rules."

I returned to the subdivision, then the block office, then the engineer, then Bhola Jha.

My journey was circular, but every note said "forwarded."

I came to understand that word in my own way: return to the very place from which you started, but because you touched several desks on the way, let each of them believe you have moved forward.

By the next rainy season, the people of Piprahi had stopped waiting.

They cut two thick palm trunks and laid them across the channel, tied bamboo over them, and packed earth at both ends.

The children began going to school again without removing their slippers.

Subhadra Devi contributed old bamboo from her house.

Parsu Yadav, who sold milk, gave rope.

Vinod the mason worked for two days without taking wages.

News of this reached me in the form of a new photograph.

The land surveyor who went for site verification attached it and wrote: "Temporary crossing presently available."

I thought perhaps the matter would now be considered finished.

But in a human office, whatever becomes complete on the ground often becomes a new question on paper.

The Accounts Section asked: "Under which budget head was the said temporary structure constructed?"

The Panchayat replied: "Community contribution."

Then came the second question: "If passage is available through community contribution, what is the immediate necessity for government expenditure?"

Inside me, the first page of the original petition seemed to tremble faintly.

That page said that in heavy rain the bamboo was washed away, and that the children needed a permanent bridge.

But by then, before anyone could reach the first page, they had to pass through thirty-seven notes, nine opinions, five inspection slips, and two reports.

Subhadra Devi came again.

This time she brought with her the boy who had stood in the first photograph holding his slippers.

He had grown tall now and was studying in Class Eight.

Seeing his old photograph on my open page, he laughed.

“Is that me?”

Bhola Jha said, “Yes. This file is still moving because of you.”

The boy asked, “But now I cross without taking off my slippers.”

Bhola smiled. “Files take time.”

Again I wanted to laugh.

Time did not happen to me.

Wherever I was placed, I simply lay there.

Time happened to human beings—waiting for one another’s signatures, sliding their own responsibility into the shadow of the next desk.

Eventually I had fifty-nine pages. A new decision arrived: instead of building a permanent bridge, there would be a safety inspection of the temporary structure. The engineer visited the site. The palm trunks were solid, and the bamboo had recently been replaced. He wrote: “No immediate danger; reinspection advisable before the next rainy season.”

After that sentence, no desk sent me upward again. I was placed in an iron cupboard in the record room. A number was painted on my spine in white ink. Around me lay files concerning land disputes, old-age assistance, a broken hand pump, and warehouse rent. Each had its own journey. At night, when the office fell silent, dust slowly settled over us.

A few months later Bhola Jha opened the cupboard while looking for another file. He saw me and pulled me out. My thread had loosened, so he opened me to retie it. The first page appeared before him—the twenty-seven names, the broken bridge, the photograph of the two children. For some time Bhola looked at the picture. Then he read the last page: “Reinspection advisable before the next rainy season.” Whether he laughed or sighed, I could not tell.

Just then a new peon appeared at the doorway. In his hand was a thin new file. On its cover was written: “Piprahi Tola—petition regarding repair of the temporary crossing constructed through community contribution.”

Bhola Jha placed the new file on top of me. It was very light—only five pages. I remembered my own childhood of seven pages. I could tell it nothing. I only thought this much: human beings create hierarchies so that paper may climb upward; paper travels so that responsibility may descend downward. In between, the channel keeps flowing with its own water.

STORY 241

Chair Number Seventeen

...

The chairs in the Madhubani Irrigation Subdivision Office were numbered in the year an order came from the district to inventory all movable property. Before that, a chair was simply a chair—one had a broken arm, another a crooked back, another stood with the torn cover of an old file wedged beneath one leg. After the order, small red numbers were painted on them, from one to twenty-three.

Bankeshwar Jha had been a clerk in that office for sixteen years. His chair was number nine. The left leg of number nine was short, so a thin piece of wood always remained under it. In front was the wall, to the right an almirah, to the left the back of Shivanandan Babu.

Shivanandan Babu sat on chair number seventeen.

Seventeen stood beside the window.

The window opened to the east. In winter, sunlight fell on the arm of the chair until nine in the morning. In summer, the leaves of the mango tree filtered it. Across the road outside was Phekan's tea stall. A person sitting inside could signal with a hand, and Phekan would count the cups without a word. During the rains, one could hear water falling on the window shade. On the other chairs in the office a person watched the time; on seventeen, a person watched the day.

In his early years, Bankeshwar had paid no special attention to these advantages.

But in his fifth year, the electricity failed for three hours one day. Every room inside grew hot. Shivanandan Babu continued reading files comfortably by the window. Wiping sweat again and again with his gamchha, Bankeshwar understood for the first time that in a government office there were ranks beyond official rank.

From then on, number seventeen lodged itself in his mind.

At that time Shivanandan Babu had four years of service left. Bankeshwar thought four years was not very long. He decided to wait.

While waiting, he began to understand the small comforts of Shivanandan Babu's place.

When the window latch stuck, he oiled it.

When rain blew inside, he did not block it with an old office file; he brought a torn sack from home.

When a mango branch drooped too low and darkened the room, he asked the gardener to cut two branches.

If someone asked, "Why do you take such care?" he would laugh and say, "The office belongs to everyone."

Three years later the first promotion list came.

Bankeshwar's name was not on it.

He was disappointed, but not very much.

That day Shivanandan Babu said, "So your name did not come. What of it? Next time."

Bankeshwar looked toward the window.

"Next time," he said.

In the fourth year, three months before Shivanandan Babu's retirement, there was discussion in the office about rearranging the chairs.

The Head Assistant said that seating would be reassigned according to seniority.

Bankeshwar immediately opened a small file titled: "Suggestions Regarding Seating Arrangement."

On the first page he wrote that proper use of natural light would reduce electricity expenditure.

On the second, he wrote that employees who had to read the greatest number of files during the day should sit near the window.

On the third he supplied section-wise figures for file volume.

His own section appeared to have the highest number.

His colleague Lalan Babu asked, "Where did these figures come from?"

"From the registers," Bankeshwar said.

"Two months of our section's register have not been added."

"When they are added, revised figures will be prepared."

The revised figures were never prepared.

Shivanandan Babu retired.

On the day of his farewell he was garlanded, sweets were distributed, speeches were made.

At the end he rose from the chair and said, "Seventeen and I have kept each other company for a long time."

Bankeshwar's hand touched the back of the chair without his intending it.

The next day he reached the office early.

But Janardan Babu was already sitting on chair seventeen.

Janardan Babu was the younger brother of the Head Assistant's brother-in-law and had been transferred in only two weeks earlier.

"Has a seating order been issued?" Bankeshwar asked.

Opening the window, Janardan Babu said, "Oral."

It is difficult to ask for a copy of an oral order.

Bankeshwar moved his file forward.

The Head Assistant did not read it for three days.

On the fourth he wrote at the top: "To be considered if required."

After that single sentence, chair seventeen remained Janardan Babu's for two years.

Bankeshwar did not consider himself defeated.

He did not openly practise the politics of the chair.

He practised the politics of its advantages.

In winter he said sunlight from the window reduced dampness in papers.

In summer he said fresh air increased the speed of work.

During the rains he said an experienced employee was needed there to protect files from spray.

Once, when a rat entered beneath the window, he wrote a complete note: "Responsible seating arrangement for prevention of entry by external creatures."

Some people thought Bankeshwar wanted to improve the office.

Gradually Bankeshwar himself began to believe the same thing.

The second promotion list came.

This time his name was on it.

The Head Assistant was pleased. "Congratulations. You will become Senior Assistant. A desk is vacant in the front room."

The front room was in the middle of the building. It had two almirahs, a clock, and a ventilator.

No window.

Bankeshwar read the order three times.

"When will you move?" Lalan Babu asked.

"First a few matters must be clarified," Bankeshwar said.

That evening he went home and told his wife he had been promoted.

She was delighted.

His son asked, "Will the salary increase?"

"A little."

"Then what is the problem?"

Bankeshwar did not answer.

The next day he submitted an application requesting that, because he had to care for his aged mother, he be allowed to remain at his present place for a few months.

His mother lived with him and was healthy, but there was no false sentence in the application—he did care for her.

A few months became a year.

The promotion lapsed; another name moved up.

People in the office called Bankeshwar a fool.

He laughed.

Janardan Babu remained beside the window.

Time passed.

Janardan Babu's arthritis worsened.

In winter the air from the window no longer suited him.

One day he himself said, "Move me inside. This window has become my enemy."

Bankeshwar's heart beat faster, but his face remained still.

The seating had to be decided again.

This time there were four claimants.

A new clerk said natural light was good for his eyes.

A woman employee said that from there she could see the outer gate and understand the movement of visitors.

Lalan Babu joked, "Bankeshwar Babu is the priest of seventeen."

Bankeshwar did not laugh.

The Head Assistant postponed the decision.

"Form a committee."

A three-member committee was formed.

Before it met, Bankeshwar submitted a five-page statement covering seniority, section workload, number of files, window light, and the direction of the fan.

The committee met once and reached no conclusion.

At the second meeting one member was on leave.

On the day of the third, an inspection team arrived.

By the time of the fourth meeting, Janardan Babu had already moved to an inside chair and seventeen stood empty.

Fearing that someone might sit there temporarily, Bankeshwar began placing one of his old files on chair seventeen every morning.

He removed it each evening.

One day the Superintending Engineer arrived unexpectedly for an inspection.

Seeing the file on the empty chair, he asked, "Whose seat is this?"

The Head Assistant hesitated. "Under decision."

"For how many days?"

At that question everyone fell silent.

The engineer said, "Give it to whoever is senior. A committee for such a thing?"

Bankeshwar was the senior-most.

That afternoon an office order was issued: "Seat beside the east window, together with chair number 17, allotted to Shri Bankeshwar Jha."

Bankeshwar read the copy of the order twice.

Then, with great care, he emptied the drawer at chair nine.

Pens, ink, date stamp, two registers, an old handkerchief—he gathered everything and carried it to seventeen.

He opened the window.

Outside was a brick wall.

For a few moments Bankeshwar could not understand.

Where the mango tree, the road, and Phekan's tea stall had once been visible, a freshly built brick wall now rose at a distance of one handspan. The cement at the top had not yet fully dried.

From behind him Lalan Babu said, "No one told you? The new records room is being built. There was not enough space, so they extended it on the eastern side. The wall went up only yesterday."

"The window?"

"It will remain. The plan requires a separate order to close the old window. So the window will stay here, with a wall outside it."

Someone laughed.

Someone did not.

Bankeshwar opened the window leaves fully.

One leaf struck the wall and stopped halfway.

Sitting on seventeen, no sunlight fell on him.

No air came in.

Phekan's stall could not be seen.

Instead, the damp smell of the new wall entered the room.

The Head Assistant came to console him.

"If you want, we can change your seat again. Janardan Babu's old place inside is vacant."

Bankeshwar answered at once, "No. The order has been issued."

"But the benefit of the window is now—"

"Government orders are not changed according to benefit."

The Head Assistant kept looking at his face.

Bankeshwar opened a file.

Two weeks later the movable-property inventory was conducted again.

Because the new records room had been built, the desks and chairs were measured and counted once more.

The young man doing the inventory saw the red number painted on the back of the chair and asked, "Is seventeen permanently here?"

Without looking up, Bankeshwar said, "Yes."

The young man wrote in the register: "Chair 17—beside east window—in use."

Bankeshwar signed.

In the evening everyone left.

He remained seated a little longer.

Out of old habit he reached over and opened the window.

The leaf struck the new wall again.

He did not close it.

The darkness deepened.

In the narrow half-handspan gap between the outside wall and the room, there was no air at all.

Bankeshwar ran a finger over the arm of the chair.

The red number "17" had faded slightly.

He took a small brush from the drawer, dipped it in red ink, and painted the number dark again.

STORY 242

The Spelling of a Name

...

The first crisis over the spelling of a name in the Darbhanga District Horticulture Office arose one morning when five bundles of the newly printed annual report were unloaded from a handcart. On the first page was the name of the department, beneath it the year, and at the very bottom, in bold letters, the officer's name: "Shri Naagendra Jha, District Horticulture Officer."

The problem was that the officer's name was not Naagendra, but Nagendra. The printed form carried one extra vowel mark.

The moment Head Clerk Baleshwar Babu saw the printing, he first removed his glasses and wiped them. Then he put them back on and looked at a second copy. He opened a third. All the way through the fifth bundle, the name was printed the same way.

"How did this happen?" he said.

The responsibility for checking the proof had belonged to office clerk Navalkishore. He immediately brought the file. "The copy I sent had the correct spelling."

Baleshwar Babu held the paper up toward the light as though the shadow of the guilty person might be visible inside the letters. "Did the printer add the vowel mark on his own?"

"The printer will say the handwritten copy was unclear."

"Why was a handwritten copy sent?"

"The typist was on leave."

"Then the question is no longer only one of spelling."

With that sentence, the crisis became larger.

Nagendra Jha himself arrived at half past ten. The page of the report was shown to him. At first he smiled. "It is only one vowel mark. Have it corrected."

Baleshwar Babu said softly, "Sir, five hundred copies have already been printed. The distribution list is ready. Three copies have already gone to the district office."

Nagendra Jha's smile stopped. "My name is not spelled that way."

"We all know that."

"What will people outside know?"

That afternoon the first committee was formed: the Spelling Verification Committee. It had three members—a Senior Assistant, an Accounts Clerk, and a Horticulture Supervisor. Its task was to determine which form of the officer's name was valid according to official records.

At its first meeting, seven pieces of evidence were gathered: the service book, salary register, appointment letter, identity card, salary-account statement, training certificate, and the old office nameplate.

Six of them carried "Nagendra." One old salary-account paper carried "Naagendra."

The Accounts Clerk said, "That means the variation already existed."

The Senior Assistant immediately wrote a note: "The matter cannot be treated merely as a printing error."

Nagendra Jha read the note and stared in surprise. "You people are thinking more about my name than I am."

"It is procedure, sir."

The first committee was supposed to reach a conclusion in two days. It took four. Its conclusion was that the official name was "Nagendra", but because a different form existed in the salary-account paper, the "origin of the error" should be investigated separately.

For this, a second committee was formed: the Error-Responsibility Determination Committee.

While that committee was being constituted, the crowd of farmers on the office veranda was growing. Fifteen days earlier a hailstorm had knocked down the new blossoms on mango and litchi trees. The final date for compensation applications was approaching. People came with papers, received serial numbers, and then waited for their files to move forward. But two clerks were members of the first committee, one employee belonged to the second, and Navalkishore was busy searching for the original proof copy.

Ramcharittar Mandal, a farmer from Bahera, asked, "When will my application be signed?"

Without raising his head, Baleshwar Babu said, "Verification is going on."

"Of my trees?"

"No. Of a name."

Ramcharittar stood there for a moment. "A name's tree?"

The people seated on the veranda burst out laughing. Baleshwar Babu looked up. "The officer's name. Keep your receipt safe."

Ramcharittar folded the receipt and tied it into the knot of his gamchha. His application was file number 37.

The second committee summoned the printer. Mukesh Paswan came with two samples. He said that on the page sent by the office, the ink had spread above the relevant syllable, so the compositor had read “Naagendra.” Navalkishore objected: “I wrote it clearly.”

The printer placed the paper on the table. The ink had indeed spread. But whether it had spread before printing or later while pressed inside the file became a new subject of debate.

The second committee held four meetings. The first examined the history of the proof copy. The second asked why a handwritten copy had been sent. The third recorded the compositor’s statement. At the fourth they discussed whether responsibility should be assigned to one person or treated as a “collective procedural error.”

Meanwhile the application files had grown from number 37 to number 84. The veranda benches were no longer enough.

Ramcharittar came a second time. This time his young son was with him, having come straight from school. Reading the number on the receipt, the boy said, “Babu, it was thirty-seven before. Is it still thirty-seven?”

Ramcharittar did not laugh. “Government numbers do not increase quickly.”

That day Nagendra Jha himself crossed the veranda and saw the crowd of farmers. He asked Baleshwar Babu, “Why are the applications being held up?”

Baleshwar Babu showed him three files. “Two clerks are on committees. One employee is counting every copy of the report. And a decision on how to make the correction is still pending.”

“Cross out the extra vowel mark in red ink.”

Baleshwar Babu remained silent.

“What is it?”

“If five hundred copies are corrected by hand, the appearance of the government publication will be spoiled. And then we still have to decide who will make the correction, who will certify it, and which stamp will be used.”

Nagendra Jha leaned back in his chair. “Then form a third committee.”

For one moment Baleshwar Babu looked at the officer’s face. He could not tell whether it was sarcasm or an instruction. In a government office, misunderstanding that distinction can be risky. He prepared the note.

On the third day the Correction-Method Committee was formed.

An effort was made to keep its members different from those of the first two committees, but the office did not have enough employees. As a result, the Accounts Clerk became a member again because he had served on the first

committee but not the second. The Horticulture Supervisor was supposed to go out for field inspection, but the trip was postponed because of the meeting.

The third committee listed three options: reprinting, correction by hand, or pasting an erratum slip. Reprinting was expensive. Hand correction would be "uneven." An erratum slip required fresh printing. So a cost comparison was requested.

Three quotations were sought from the printer. Mukesh laughed and said, "Correcting the name will cost more than printing it wrong did."

"Do not write that remark in the quotation," Navalkishore said.

Ramcharittar came to the veranda a third time. By now the corner of his receipt had worn away. He said, "The blossoms are gone. Now even the little fruit that survived is falling in the wind. When will the inspection happen?"

Navalkishore searched for his application. File 37 lay beneath the third stack. Across the top, in red pencil, was written: "Field inspection required."

"Why has the supervisor not gone to the field?" Ramcharittar asked.

Navalkishore did not answer. The supervisor was sitting in the adjoining room at a meeting of the third committee, writing his opinion on whether a copy corrected by hand could be considered "certified."

A week later the papers of all three committees reached Nagendra Jha's desk together. The first committee: the official name was "Nagendra". The second: the error was collective and procedural. The third: an erratum slip would be cheapest, but every copy would require an authorised signature.

Nagendra Jha kept turning the pages. "This much paper for one vowel mark?"

Baleshwar Babu said, "Eighteen pages."

"And the applications?"

"Eighty-four."

Nagendra Jha immediately wrote an order: "Pending applications from the public shall be disposed of first. Correction of the report may be taken up afterward."

Baleshwar Babu read the order and was pleased. Then his eyes went to the typed name beneath the signature line. In the prepared draft, Navalkishore had already typed the officer's name as "Naagendra Jha."

Silence spread through the room.

Nagendra Jha looked at the paper and rubbed his forehead. "How again?"

Navalkishore's face went pale. "The form must have been taken from an old sample."

Baleshwar Babu said softly, "Would it be proper to issue this order without correcting it?"

No one answered.

On the veranda, Ramcharittar's son was reading the number on the receipt again. This time he had himself reached the pile containing file 37 and was showing it to his father. The peon moved him away. "Do not touch the files."

Inside, Nagendra Jha picked up a red pen. He drew one straight line through the extra vowel mark in his own name. Above it he wrote the correct form clearly. Beneath it he signed and handed the order to Baleshwar Babu.

"Issue it now."

Baleshwar Babu took the paper. "Sir, certification of the handwritten correction?"

Nagendra Jha looked at him for a long time. Then he took the red pen again and wrote in small letters beside the correction: "Correction certified." He signed again.

By evening that day, seven applications had moved forward. Ramcharittar's file also went into the supervisor's bag. The supervisor fixed the next morning for a visit to Bahera.

The papers of all three committees were tied together into a separate file and placed in the almirah. Its title read: "Case Regarding the Spelling of the District Horticulture Officer's Name."

A month later the erratum slips for the annual report arrived from the printer. The slips were very small. Two temporary labourers were hired to paste them into all five hundred copies.

While pasting the first slip, one labourer read aloud "Shri Nagendra Jha." He asked Baleshwar Babu, "Is this officer still here?"

Baleshwar Babu said, "No. He was transferred yesterday."

"Then should we paste all these?"

For a moment Baleshwar Babu looked at the stack of slips, the bundles of reports, and the committee file that had grown thick inside the almirah. Then he said, "The order was issued during Nagendra Babu's tenure. Complete the work."

The labourer straightened the first slip and pasted it down.

Outside, the veranda was empty. The hailstorm applications had by then gone out for field inspection. On the desk lay only one new paper—the charge-taking notice of the new officer.

Baleshwar Babu picked it up and read the name once. Then a second time.

The new officer's name was "Shri Shashibhushan Chaudhary."

The typed copy below also read "Shri Shashibhushan Chaudhary."

Baleshwar Babu breathed with relief.

Then his eyes went to the signature. Beneath it, in his own hand, the officer had written: "Shashibhusan Chaudhary."

Baleshwar Babu slowly placed the paper back on the desk.

The red pen lay near his hand.

He picked it up, then stopped.

From far down the veranda came the voice of Ramcharittar's son, reading someone's application number aloud.

Baleshwar Babu put the red pen back.

This time, he first pulled the pile of pending applications toward himself.

STORY 243

The Great Inspection

...

News of the inspection reached the Jhanjharpur Weights and Measures Sub-Office at nine on Monday morning. The letter said that on Wednesday an Assistant Controller from the district would come to examine the office's working methods, public service, verification of measuring instruments, and records.

The moment Head Assistant Mahendranath Mishra read the letter, he first looked at the wall clock and then at the rooms around him. It seemed to him that he had been given two days in which to separate the entire office from its own history.

The office stood in an old government building on the eastern side of the road. There was a small veranda in front, three rooms inside, and an iron testing platform at the rear.

Immediately to the right stood the cooperative paddy procurement depot—a tin roof, a large scale, sacks, bullock carts, and the voices of farmers. Faded government signboards of almost the same colour hung before both buildings. From a distance it was difficult to tell them apart.

"First remove the dust," Mahendranath said. "Then separate the pending files."

Clerk Nareshkant asked, "Separate in what sense?"

Mahendranath looked at him. "On inspection day, only as much will remain on the desks as ought to be there. The rest goes into the cupboards."

The cupboards were already full.

So the remaining files went into the rear room.

The rear room already contained broken weights, old scales, ten-kilo iron weights, cancelled registers, and tin boxes from years before.

Where were those things to go?

Peon Bholanath said, "There is an empty shed behind the paddy depot. Shall we keep them there for two days?"

"Government property in another department?" Mahendranath frowned.

Bholanath asked, "Then where do we keep all this?"

In the end, white sheets were spread over the broken objects. A paper notice was pinned on top: "Material Under Verification."

By Tuesday, the appearance of the office had begun to change.

Of the three old benches on the veranda, two were covered with fresh sackcloth.

Oil was applied to the rusted bars of the windows.

The crookedly hung summary of the Weights and Measures Act was straightened.

A thin wash of lime was applied to the part of the wall where the plaster had flaked away.

The greatest task was to create the appearance of public service.

On ordinary days, people wandered in as they pleased and asked questions; applications moved from table to table; no clear queue formed anywhere.

For inspection day, two queues were created with red string — “Applications” and “Receipt.” Nareshkant wrote the words in large letters on paper.

Mahendranath read them. “Receipt of what?”

“Whoever gets a paper.”

“Will people understand?”

“They can ask.”

Mahendranath was not satisfied with the answer, but there was little time.

On the testing platform, field inspector Shambhunath Paswan was opening and cleaning three weighing scales.

One scale had not been correct for an entire year. Its needle rested two divisions beyond zero.

Shambhunath said, “If we keep this here during inspection, questions will be asked.”

Mahendranath said, “Remove it.”

“But this is the very scale through which complaints from the market are understood. It is a sample of a defect.”

“During an inspection, one does not display a sample of a defect. One displays a sample of improvement.”

Shambhunath said nothing.

He carried the scale into the rear room, under the white sheet.

By Tuesday evening, every employee had been assigned a separate role.

One would show the registers, another the seals, another samples of verified weights.

Bholanath was told to inform everyone inside the moment the inspector’s vehicle appeared.

New glasses were bought for tea.

Sugar was measured and placed in a tin, as though in the Weights and Measures Department even the proportion of sugar might be part of the inspection.

A small direction sign was also made for the road: “Weights and Measures Sub-Office →”.

The district officer had never visited before.

The sign was fastened to a bamboo pole with one nail and a piece of wire.

During the night, a strong westerly wind blew.

The board rotated almost halfway round.

Instead of pointing east, the arrow now pointed right—toward the gate of the cooperative paddy depot.

On Wednesday everyone was present from seven in the morning.

Mahendranath wore a fresh dhoti and kurta.

Nareshkant had kept only three files on his desk.

Shambhunath placed the best scale on the testing platform.

Two farmers on the veranda were stopped and told, “When Sahib arrives, give your applications then. Stand in the queue.”

The farmers looked at each other, but remained standing.

Ten o'clock.

Ten fifteen.

Ten thirty-seven.

“Why has the vehicle not come?” Mahendranath asked.

No one had an answer.

Meanwhile, the district office vehicle had already arrived from the other end of the road.

It stopped beside the direction sign.

The driver saw the turned arrow and steered right.

The vehicle went straight through the gate of the cooperative paddy depot.

At that time paddy was being weighed there.

Farmers were unloading sacks.

One pan of the large scale rose and fell, the clerk wrote down weights, and the weighing worker, Ramvilas Yadav, changed the iron weights.

Seeing the vehicle, Ramvilas assumed that an inspection team from the district procurement branch had arrived.

He brushed dust from his hands and stepped forward.

Assistant Controller Arvind Kumar got out of the vehicle.

Seeing the large scale in front of him, he was pleased.

“Is the weights-and-measures office here?”

Ramvilas heard “weights and measures” but paid little attention to the word “office.”

He said, “Yes, weighing happens here. Paddy is being weighed today.”

Arvind Kumar took this as an example of field service.

“Good. The arrangement is directly at the place of work.”

The depot clerk too assumed the officer was from the procurement department.

He opened the register.

Arvind Kumar asked his first question: “When was the scale last verified?”

Ramvilas immediately showed him the metal plate fixed to the arm of the scale. “In Phagun this year. But the right pan tends to become heavy, so every morning we balance the empty scale again.”

Arvind Kumar bent and examined the pointer. “Have you submitted a written complaint?”

“Twice. The babu from Weights and Measures came once and tightened a screw. The second time he said to send a proposal for a new scale.”

Arvind Kumar wrote a note.

He liked the fact that the worker was not concealing the defect.

He asked the farmers, “Is the weighing done in front of you?”

An elderly farmer said, “In front of us. Sometimes there is a quarrel over a difference of two kilos, and then it is weighed again.”

“Receipt?”

The depot clerk immediately showed him the slip.

Arvind Kumar’s inspection continued.

There was dust in the depot, sacks, the smell of sweat, but the work was going on.

In one corner lay a broken five-kilo weight.

Ramvilas himself said, “This is not in use. I have cut a mark into it.”

Arvind Kumar turned it over.

There really was a transverse groove cut across the middle.

“This is a proper way to keep defective material clearly marked and out of use,” he said.

Ramvilas smiled with pride.

For the first time he realised that even a broken weight could earn praise.

At that same moment, in the actual Weights and Measures office, Mahendranath was looking at the clock.

It was eleven.

The farmers standing in the red-string queue had already sat down twice.

The tea had gone cold.

The shine of the new glasses was fading.

Bholanath went out to the road and returned saying, "There are tyre marks going toward the paddy depot."

"Marks?"

"Tyre marks in the mud."

Mahendranath ran outside.

The moment he saw the direction sign, his body stopped.

The arrow was pointing right.

"Who turned this?"

Straightening the bamboo, Bholanath said, "The wind."

"The wind can turn a government arrow?"

Shambhunath said softly, "It was tied with one nail."

Mahendranath immediately started toward the paddy depot.

He had gone halfway when the district vehicle appeared from the opposite direction.

Without stopping, it climbed onto the road.

In the rear seat Arvind Kumar was writing something in a file.

Mahendranath raised his hand, but the vehicle had already gathered speed.

He reached the paddy depot.

With a pleased expression, Ramvilas said, "Your Sahib is very good. He saw the scale, spoke to the farmers, even looked at the broken weight."

"Our Sahib?"

"The weights-and-measures officer."

For a few moments Mahendranath kept looking at Ramvilas's face.

Then his eyes moved over the depot's dust, the open sacks, the working scale, and the crowd of farmers.

He remembered the red string in his own office, the white sheets, and the cold tea.

At noon a message arrived from the district office: "Inspection completed. Officer departed."

No one laughed.

First they all looked at one another.

Then Nareshkant asked quietly, "Shall we remove the queue now?"

Mahendranath said, "First take the farmers' applications."

The red string was removed.

The two farmers immediately came to the desk.

The white sheet remained over the objects in the rear room until evening.

Four days later the inspection remarks arrived.

The first line read: "Public service is being provided by the office at the actual work site; the arrangement for allowing consumers to observe the weighing process is commendable."

The second line said: "The practice of clearly marking defective weights and keeping them out of use is exemplary."

The third line said: "Unnecessary paper display minimal."

Nareshkant stopped while reading.

Mahendranath silently took the remarks.

He read them three times.

He remembered Shambhunath's defective scale hidden beneath the white sheet.

"Do we have to send a reply?" Nareshkant asked.

"An action-taken report has to be sent on the inspection remarks," Mahendranath said.

"What shall we write in the reply?"

Mahendranath looked toward the veranda.

The red string had been removed.

Farmers were coming inside in their usual way.

The sheet in the rear room had been lifted.

Shambhunath had brought the defective scale back onto the testing platform, because it was needed to understand complaints.

Mahendranath said, "First let us learn to do what has been written."

From the following week, on two days each week, one office table began to be set up beside the paddy depot.

Shambhunath tested small weights there, checked farmers' scales, and wrote down complaints.

Ramvilas's broken five-kilo weight was replaced.

There had been no special order for this work; the praise written in the inspection remarks had to be made real.

Two months later another letter came from the district: "Submit a proposal for implementing the field public-service method mentioned in the previous inspection in other offices."

Mahendranath read the letter and remained silent for a long time.

Nareshkant asked, "Shall we prepare the proposal?"

Mahendranath looked out the window.

At the bend in the road, the old direction sign was now fastened securely with two nails.

The arrow pointed correctly toward the office.

He said, "Prepare it. But this time first ask Ramvilas at the paddy depot how his work actually runs."

Nareshkant opened a file.

At the top he wrote the title: "Field Public-Service Method."

Then he paused, thinking.

"Shall I write the details of inspection day?"

Mahendranath looked again toward the arrow.

"Do not write what we were doing on inspection day. Write what we were farthest from doing that day, and what we do now."

Outside, the pan of the cooperative depot's scale clanged.

Shambhunath lifted his bag and started toward it.

Mahendranath folded the inspection remarks and placed them in the file.

There was no white sheet anywhere in the office now.

STORY 244

The Fan Proposal

...

On the first Monday of Jeth, the first thing one heard on entering the Benipatti Circle Office from the eastern veranda was the gharr-gharr of fan number four. It rotated less than it shuddered. A thin coat of dust lay over its three blades, and on the central cap, in faded white paint, was written: 4/87.

Ramparikshan Jha sat directly beneath that fan. On his desk lay applications for mutation, files concerning land-measurement disputes, and two bundles tied with red string. Once the heat of Jeth rose, he moved the gamchha over his head more often than he moved the papers.

By ten o'clock that Monday, the fan first slowed, then trembled once to the right, once to the left, and stopped.

Ramparikshan looked up. "Punit, turn the regulator."

Punit Paswan turned the round wall regulator three times. Nothing happened. Then he shifted a chair and pressed the switch. The fan moved by the width of one blade and stood still.

"Gone," Punit said.

"Not gone," Ramparikshan replied. "How can a government thing leave so easily?"

By noon the room had become like a furnace. People who had come with work stood in the shade of the veranda. The four employees sitting inside fanned themselves with the thick covers of files. An elderly woman who had been coming for fifteen days to obtain a copy of a land record placed her small palm-leaf fan on Ramparikshan's desk.

"Babu, use this for air. Write my work down; I will sit outside."

Ramparikshan took the fan, waved it twice, and then wrote the date on her application. The woman's name was Jagrani Devi.

That very evening, a proposal was written to replace the ceiling fan.

In the first line Ramparikshan wrote: "Office fan number 4/87 is no longer fit to operate; because of the heat, the work of both employees and visitors is being obstructed."

Head Clerk Harinarayan Babu read it and said, "How have you established that it is unfit to operate?"

"It does not operate."

“What is visible to the eye and what is technically certified are different things.”

For the first approval, a maintenance-section electrician was required.

The electrician came on Wednesday. He asked for a ladder. The office's bamboo ladder had gone to the tehsil store. The tehsil store's ladder had gone for school-enumeration work. Punit brought a wooden ladder from the neighbouring tea stall.

The electrician climbed up, opened the fan cap, touched the wires, and turned the blades by hand. After coming down he said, “The winding is burnt.”

Ramparikshan asked, “Can it be repaired?”

“It can, but the cost will be more than half the price of a new fan. Look at its age—eighty-seven.”

He gave the certificate in writing.

The first stage was complete.

The second stage was the stores section. The storekeeper had to certify that no spare fan was available.

The file remained on his desk for three days because the stores register showed two fans in reserve.

Ramparikshan went there himself. “If you have two spare fans, give me one.”

The storekeeper lowered his spectacles. “They are in the register.”

“In the store?”

“One has been out for repair since 1998. The other is temporarily installed in the assembly hall. In the register, both are spare.”

“Then write that none is available.”

The storekeeper said, “How can the register write a lie?”

“Then give me a fan.”

“The store is empty.”

After much thought, the sentence was framed: “Spare fans as per register: two; immediately transferable: zero.”

The second stage was complete.

The third stage was the cost estimate.

Three quotations were required.

Punit went to the market.

The first shopkeeper wrote a price on paper.

The second asked, "Government quotation for one fan?"

"Without three quotations the file will not move."

The third shopkeeper wrote a price fifty rupees lower than the cost of the fan, but added separate charges for wire, hanging hook, and installation labour.

A comparison of the three quotations was prepared.

The lowest rate was selected, but the Head Clerk noted: "Energy-saving capacity not mentioned."

The file went back to the market.

Meanwhile Jagrani Devi came for the third time.

The same palm-leaf fan lay in the corner of the desk.

Ramparikshan found her copy and gave it to her.

Jagrani reached to take back the fan, then saw the sweat on Ramparikshan's forehead and stopped her hand.

"Keep it. I have received the copy. I can make another fan."

From that day onward, the palm-leaf fan belonged to the office without ever being entered in the register.

The fourth stage was the Accounts Section.

There the question arose whether the fan should be purchased under "Office Expenditure" or "Minor Equipment."

There was money under both heads, but two notes were written on which head was proper.

A third note cited an old rule.

The file remained held up for a week while a copy of that rule was searched for.

Meanwhile the heat increased.

After noon Ramparikshan's desk began to be shifted onto the veranda.

Following his example, two other desks came outside as well.

Only Head Clerk Harinarayan Babu remained inside because there was a small ventilator beside his wall. By evening, even he came out.

The visitors liked the arrangement.

Everyone could see where each file was.

Punit called out names, and people came forward when their turn arrived.

The suffocation inside decreased, while the file containing the fan proposal kept growing thicker.

The fifth stage was an "essentiality certificate" from the Assistant Officer.

He read the file and asked, "The employees are working on the veranda?"

"Because of the heat."

"Then the work is continuing."

Ramparikshan remained silent.

The officer asked again, "Without the fan, has work stopped completely?"

Harinarayan Babu said, "If we write 'completely stopped,' a question will arise about attendance."

"Then write 'work obstructed.'"

"That is already written in the original proposal."

The officer looked at the original proposal and nodded. "Fine. Obstruction certified."

The fifth stage was complete.

The sixth stage was the Purchase Committee.

The committee met on the last Saturday of the month.

That Saturday a block-level meeting on pre-flood preparations was scheduled, so the committee was postponed until the next month.

Ashadh arrived.

After the first rains, the tin awning behind the room cooled. The air was damp, but no longer burned like Jeth.

Sitting on the veranda had become a habit.

Jagrani's palm-leaf fan now lay on top of the application stack; whoever felt hotter picked it up.

When the Purchase Committee finally met, the question was not the price of the new fan but the future of the old one.

"Is the old fan fit for auction?"

"The winding is burnt."

"It still contains metal."

"Then after replacement it will be deposited in stores."

"How can proof of deposit be obtained beforehand?"

"First the new fan must be installed; then the old one will be taken down and deposited."

The committee member read the sentence three times.

At last it was written: "The old fan must be deposited in stores within seven days of installation of the new fan."

The sixth stage was complete.

The seventh and final approval had to come from the Subdivisional Office.

The file went.

One week passed.

Two weeks.

Half of Sawan.

Ramparikshan now looked less often at the fan.

He had begun to like his desk on the veranda.

When he raised his eyes toward the road, he could see visitors arriving; people had less need to wander in and out of rooms.

One day Harinarayan Babu said, "If this fan starts working, we will all go back inside."

Ramparikshan laughed. "First let it start."

In the first week of Bhadon, the file returned.

In blue ink at the top was written: "Approved."

All seven stages had been crossed.

Punit ran onto the veranda holding the paper. "Babu! We will get a fan!"

Everyone looked up.

The old fan stood still, coated in dust.

Clouds were outside.

A westerly breeze crossed the veranda and entered the room.

Harinarayan Babu read the approval letter. "Now the purchase order will be issued."

Ramparikshan asked, "Today?"

"The quotation was valid for ninety days."

"Have ninety days passed?"

Harinarayan Babu counted from the date on the first quotation. "Tomorrow."

A laugh escaped Punit, but he immediately pressed his lips together.

Ramparikshan said, "Then prepare the purchase order today itself."

By four o'clock the order was ready.

It was signed.

Punit carried it to the market.

The shopkeeper looked at the paper. "This model of fan is no longer available at this price. Prices rose after the rains."

Punit returned empty-handed.

Harinarayan Babu scratched his head. "New quotations?"

Ramparikshan said nothing for a long time.

Then he picked up Jagrani Devi's palm-leaf fan.

Its thin palm strips were broken in several places, but it still moved air.

The next day fresh quotations were invited.

This time, however, Ramparikshan added one line at the top of the proposal: "Previous approval may be treated as continuing; permission is sought only for the revised rate."

The file began moving again, but now it did not need all seven stages.

Three stages were enough.

At the beginning of Asin, the new fan arrived.

The electrician took down the old fan.

Holding the cap marked 4/87 in his hand, he said, "Thirty-seven years."

Punit asked, "Where does this go now?"

"Stores."

"Will the register show it as spare?"

The electrician laughed. "No. Unserviceable."

The new fan was installed.

The moment the switch was pressed, a strong wind rose.

Two thin sheets of paper flew from the desk.

Punit ran and caught them.

Ramparikshan looked toward the window.

The sunlight outside was mild.

The air was already cooler than before.

Harinarayan Babu asked, "Shall we move the desks back inside now?"

At the question, everyone's eyes turned once toward the desks on the veranda.

Three visitors were sitting there.

Their files lay open in front of them.

Ramparikshan sat for a moment feeling the air from the new fan, then put Jagrani's old palm-leaf fan into the desk drawer.

"Let the desks remain here," he said. "The fan's air will reach outside too."

The new fan continued turning.

The old fan stood against the wall, waiting to be taken to stores.

Its three dust-covered blades were still, but 4/87 could still be read clearly on its cap.

By the time the seven-stage approval was complete, the heat had almost ended. For the first time in the office, no one argued over whether the proposal had been approved late or on time. Everyone's attention was on the fact that the fan now worked—and the desks were still on the veranda.

STORY 245

The God of the Office

...

In the old records room of the Benipatti Circle Office stood a dark brown-black cupboard. Of its two doors, the right one had swollen at the bottom, and the left latch would close only after someone pressed the door with a knee and pushed. Dust gathered on the wooden top, except for one round patch in the middle that was always clean. Someone idly ran a palm over it, someone left keys there, someone a cup of tea.

The people in the office called it “the god.”

No one knew who had first given it that name. Old Assistant Dinbandhu Jha said he had been hearing it since his first year of service. New employees would laugh and ask, “Why a god?”

The answer was always the same: “If a file has been stuck too long, leave it with the god. A few days later, the burden becomes lighter.”

“Does the work get completed?”

“Not that much of a miracle. The file itself can no longer be found.”

Everyone would laugh.

Sudip Mishra was a newly appointed clerk. At first he saw nothing special in the joke. In a government office, a file might move from one desk to another, from one room to another, and vanish somewhere along the way; that did not seem impossible.

But within a week he understood that “the god” was not merely a joke. It was a small office tradition.

When a file had already received three comments, had twice been found short of papers, the applicant had made five rounds of the office, and in the end no one could say who was supposed to look at it next, Dinbandhu Jha would quietly say, “Leave it with the god for one night.”

There was no written rule.

Yet everyone understood.

The first such file on Sudip’s desk belonged to Chandreshwar Mahato.

The matter concerned measurement of a field boundary: a dispute between two brothers over five dhurs of land, an old map, a measurement receipt, an incomplete note from the amin, and three years of movement through the office.

Chandreshwar was a thin man who brought copies of his papers tied into the end of his dhoti.

Every time he came, he asked the same question: "Where is my file now?"

The first time Sudip answered, "It is being examined."

The second time: "The amin's comment is still pending."

The third time Sudip himself did not know what to say.

The file lay on his own desk, but the two most recent comments contradicted one another.

One said: "Old map unclear."

The other said: "Decision possible according to old map."

That evening Dinbandhu Jha looked at the file.

"Leave it with the god."

Sudip laughed. "How is this file going to disappear?"

"Did I say anything about making it disappear?" Dinbandhu pushed his spectacles higher. "Just leave it there. We will see in the morning."

Sudip placed the file on the middle shelf of the cupboard.

Deliberately, he tied a thin knot of red thread to one corner so that he could identify it again.

The cupboard doors were shut, and the key was placed in Dinbandhu Jha's drawer.

In the morning the cupboard was opened.

On the middle shelf lay two old thick files, a bundle tied with string, and an empty cardboard cover.

Chandreshwar's file was not there.

At first Sudip thought Dinbandhu had played a joke.

He searched every desk, drawer, the top of the cupboard, and underneath it.

There was no red thread anywhere.

Dinbandhu Jha continued chewing paan with a grave face.

"The god is pleased," was all he said.

At noon Chandreshwar arrived.

Sudip did not ask him to sit.

He said, "Your papers have gone to another section. Come again in two days."

The moment the sentence left his mouth, he felt uneasy.

He had no idea where the file had actually gone.

From that day Sudip began watching the cupboard carefully.

It had three shelves.

Thick registers were kept on the upper shelf.

The middle shelf was considered the god's place.

The lower shelf held broken cardboard covers, old string, and useless papers.

The strange thing was that thick files never disappeared.

Thin files, especially those pushed toward the back, were the ones most likely to take part in the trick.

Sudip mentioned this to no one.

One evening he put three blank sheets inside an old discarded cover, wrote "TEST" on top, and pushed it toward the back of the middle shelf.

He shut the cupboard.

That day he kept the key himself.

In the morning the cover was gone.

Now he stopped laughing.

He reached inside the cupboard and felt along the back panel.

Above, it was solid.

At the middle, on the right, his fingers felt something like cool air.

He probed again.

The wooden rear panel had bent inward at one place just above the middle shelf.

The gap was so thin that it could not be seen easily, but the corner of a sheet of paper could slip into it.

He took an old sheet from the shelf and pushed it backward.

The leading edge entered the gap.

When he pushed farther, the entire sheet vanished.

"Come and see this," Sudip called to Dinbandhu Jha.

Dinbandhu put his hand inside, felt the gap, and then said calmly, "It is an old cupboard."

"What is behind it?"

"The wall."

"How did the paper go into the wall?"

This time Dinbandhu remained silent for a while.

"It is an old building."

That answer made Sudip more uneasy.

The following week the rains began.

Dampness descended along the wall behind the records room.

Lime started flaking from one corner.

A repair worker was called.

The moment he saw the wall, he said, "The cupboard has to be moved. Otherwise the damp behind it cannot be seen."

The office reacted as though the worker had proposed moving not a cupboard but the bones of an ancestor.

"This cupboard will not move," Dinbandhu Jha said at once.

"Then the wall will not dry," the worker replied.

At last the Circle Officer said, "Move it two handspans. Then put it back."

Four men took hold of it.

The cupboard was heavier than expected.

Fine dust from soil and paper had collected beneath it.

When it was pulled away from the wall, everyone fell silent at what appeared behind it.

At waist height in the wall was an old rectangular recess.

Perhaps there had once been a small opening there for passing papers in and out.

The outside had been bricked shut long ago, but the hollow space on the inside had remained.

The broken rear panel of the cupboard had bent directly over the mouth of that recess.

Inside the recess were files.

Not one or two.

Layer upon layer.

Dust, crusted salt, dried lizard droppings, bundles of paper.

Some strings had rotted away; on some covers the colour had peeled off.

Sudip reached in and pulled out the top file.

At one corner was a thin knot of red thread.

Chandreshwar Mahato's file.

Below it lay Sudip's cover marked "TEST."

Beneath that were a five-year-old mutation file, a seven-year-old measurement dispute, applications for grants, certificate files, and papers bearing applicants' names that none of the newer employees had ever heard.

Dinbandhu Jha sat down on the floor.

"So many?" escaped from his mouth.

The repair worker did not laugh.

He only said, "The back panel was loose. Any paper pushed backward kept falling into the recess."

Sudip looked at Dinbandhu Jha.

"The god."

For the first time Dinbandhu did not smile at the name.

By noon all the files had been taken out.

When counted, there were one hundred and twenty-seven.

The oldest was thirteen years old.

The problem now was no longer missing files.

It was found files.

On whose desk should each one be placed?

Should its old date of receipt be used, or today's?

If the applicant had already filed again, how should the first file be joined to the second?

If the applicant had died, how should the file be closed?

There was no separate column in the office register for such a condition.

The Circle Officer spread all the files across a long table and said, "First see the status of the applicant. If the work is still pending, revive the file. If a decision has already been made on a second file, join the two."

Dinbandhu Jha said softly, "Then the number of pending cases will suddenly rise a great deal."

The officer looked at him.

"Was the number truly lower before, or were the papers merely out of sight?"

No one in the room answered.

The next day Chandreshwar Mahato came again.

Sudip placed his file in front of him.

The red thread was still tied to it.

Chandreshwar looked first at the file, then at Sudip's face.

"It was found?"

"Yes. It was found."

"Where was it?"

Sudip looked toward the open recess in the wall.

"Inside the office itself."

For a while Chandreshwar kept his hand resting on the file.

He neither abused anyone nor laughed.

He only asked, "Will the measurement happen now?"

"It will," Sudip said. "This time the file will remain where we can see it."

After the repairs were completed, the recess was filled with bricks.

A new wooden panel was fixed to the back of the cupboard, but the cupboard was not pushed flush against the wall again.

A gap of one handspan was left so that the space behind it would remain visible.

For several days no one called it "the god."

The name seemed to die by itself.

At the end of the month a new complicated file reached Dinbandhu Jha's desk. Comments from three sections contradicted one another. Holding the file, he started toward the old cupboard. Halfway there he stopped. The new wooden back was clearly visible. Between the wall and the cupboard lay an open gap. He tapped the wood once with a finger. The wood remained silent. Dinbandhu turned back to his desk, placed the file in front of him, and for a long time kept reading its first page.

STORY 246

The Signature

...

For three months Ramlochan Pandit's potter's wheel in Babhaniyatol of Bisfi had been creaking on its old wooden axle. Diwali was approaching, and three shopkeepers in the village had already spoken for a thousand lamps each. Ramlochan's name had been approved under the District Crafts Office assistance scheme for an electric wheel; the money had also reached the bank, but before the payment could be released, one signature from the District Crafts Officer was required.

"One signature," the bank clerk had said. "On this paper. That's all."

Ramlochan had liked the words "that's all." For a single signature he took the first bus to Madhubani in the morning. In his shoulder bag was the file tied with red string, a dry roti and roasted gram wrapped in cloth, and in his mind the calculation that if the work was done by noon, he could return by the evening bus and begin dismantling the axle of the wheel.

The District Crafts Office occupied the second floor of an old building. At the head of the stairs, the wall was stained red with paan spit; two crooked benches stood in the veranda; above the rooms were small signboards. Ramlochan read the first one: "Receipt and Dispatch."

The clerk in Room One opened the file and looked at the first page.

"Where is the receipt number?"

"The bank said only Sahib's signature is needed."

"Does the bank know the office's internal rules?" The clerk pushed his spectacles up his nose. "First the receipt number."

He stamped the paper in red, entered the name in a register, and wrote a small number on the file.

"Now Room Two—Schemes."

Ramlochan went to Room Two. A young woman was reading three files at once. The moment she saw his papers she said, "The beneficiary list must be matched."

"But the name is already on this page."

"Having the name there and matching it with the list are two different things."

She opened a thick register, found Ramlochan's name, wrote "matched" in the corner of the page, and returned the file.

"Room Three—Accounts."

The man in Room Three looked at the bank paper. "The account is correct. But the pre-payment note from the Schemes Section has not come."

Ramlochan pointed to "matched" on the file.

"That is list matching. I am talking about the pre-payment note."

"Where will I get that?"

"Ask in Room Four."

The sign on Room Four read "Assistance Material." Two employees were tying bundles of papers beneath a fan. One of them looked at the file and asked, "Where is the proof that the wheel has been received?"

At first Ramlochan did not understand. "The wheel will be bought after the money is released."

"Then there is no proof of receipt."

"I have not received the wheel yet."

"How can a payment note be made without proof?"

Ramlochan took the bank-stamped paper from his bag. "The shopkeeper says that if the money is not released by next Wednesday, he will sell the wheel to another buyer. It is already time to make Diwali lamps. The axle of my old wheel needs oil three times a day."

The employee took the paper, checked the date, and carefully placed it inside the file. "I understand your urgency. But the space for proof is blank."

"What should be written in the blank space?"

"I cannot say. The Technical Section has the authority to write there."

For the first time Ramlochan understood that a blank space on paper was also a kind of object in an office. To fill it, one needed a person; for that person, another paper; and for that paper, another room.

Ramlochan stared. "How can I get the wheel without payment?"

The two employees looked at each other. One of them said, "That is a technical matter. Room Five."

In Room Five, an elderly assistant sat by the window cutting betel nut. Ramlochan told him the whole story.

The assistant examined the papers calmly, then wrote in pencil: "Purchase of material possible after payment."

"Show them this line," he said. "Now go back to Room Three."

Ramlochan turned toward Room Three, but the smell of tea reached him in the veranda. In the courtyard below, the tea seller had arranged earthen cups in a row. Five or seven employees, two citizens, and a middle-aged man in a plain white kurta were standing there. Ramlochan joined the line.

He recognised the clay cups as coming from his own village. Along the rim was the thin pressure mark of a finger, and on the base the small round mark left by his kiln. The tea seller had perhaps bought them from a trader in Bisfi.

The man in the white kurta took a cup and examined its rim. "This cup is well made. The thickness is even."

Ramlochan said without thinking, "It must be from Babhaniyatol. That kind of rim is made there."

The man turned toward him. "Are you from there?"

"Yes. I make cups like these myself."

"Then you do good work."

Ramlochan smiled and took his tea. His mind lightened. At once he thought: if government work too were like a clay cup—earth, wheel, fire—three stages, and the thing was ready.

After tea he returned to Room Three. When the accounts clerk saw the elderly assistant's pencilled line, he said, "Good. Now the pre-payment note can be made. But before Sahib signs, the file must be submitted through Establishment."

"Where is Establishment?"

"Room Six."

There were two empty chairs in Room Six. The clerk on the third chair said, "Sahib is in a meeting."

The clerk kept the file on his desk and rang an old bell. No one came.

Then he said, "Actually the file for Sahib's signature goes through me. But since Sahib is not in his room, you can leave the file here."

"How long before I get it?"

"When it is received."

"What should I do?"

"You may wait if you like."

Ramlochan looked at the wall clock and calculated the bus time in his head.

"I will find him myself."

The clerk's face tightened slightly, as though Ramlochan had proposed breaking an ancient rule of the office.

“Sahib is not searched for. Sahib is met when he is available.”

“What is the difference?”

The clerk did not answer. He handed the file back to Ramlochan.

“Where is the meeting?”

“Near Room Seven, in the conference room.”

Ramlochan reached Room Seven.

The conference-room door was open. Inside were only ten empty chairs and a long table in the middle. A woman cleaner was sweeping.

“Sahib’s meeting?” Ramlochan asked.

“There has been no meeting here today,” she said. “Two people sat here for five minutes in the morning and then left.”

In the adjoining room, a young man was tying files beneath a trembling fan.

Ramlochan asked, “Where is Sahib?”

Without looking up, the young man said, “He may be on a field visit.”

“Establishment said he is in a meeting.”

“Then Establishment must know.”

“There is no one in the meeting.”

This time the young man looked up. “If you want to check attendance, Room Eight.”

Ramlochan reached Room Eight. The board read “Confidential/Attendance.” Inside, a thin employee was matching dates in the attendance register.

Ramlochan repeated his question.

The employee opened the register and placed a finger on an entry.

“Sahib is not on leave. He signed at 10:07.”

“He is here?”

“The register says so.”

“Then where can I meet him?”

The employee shrugged. “Sahib’s movements are not entered in the register.”

After going through eight rooms, Ramlochan untied and retied the red string around the file. It had been tight before; now it was loose. The corners of the pages had bent. He thought: the file had been neat and clean at the bank. Had the office moved his work forward, or only changed the file’s appearance?

At the other end of the veranda, two women sat with papers related to a sewing scheme. One asked, "Are you here for a signature too?"

Ramlochan tried to laugh. "Yes."

"How many rooms?"

"Eight."

The second woman said matter-of-factly, "Then you must have covered half the distance."

Ramlochan could not tell whether it was a joke or experience speaking.

The afternoon was slipping away.

Ramlochan sat down on a bench in the veranda. There was a roti in his bag, but he had no appetite. The file now looked thick; eight kinds of ink and pencil marks had accumulated on its first page, though the bank had asked for only one signature.

From the courtyard below came the call again: "Hot tea!"

Ramlochan decided he would drink tea once more before missing the evening bus, and then whatever happened, happened.

There were fewer people in the line this time.

Ahead of him stood the same middle-aged man in the white kurta, holding a half-finished clay cup.

An employee came running from behind. "Sahib, your signature is needed on this file."

The man in the white kurta casually shifted the clay cup to his left hand, took out a pen with his right, and signed the employee's file.

For a moment Ramlochan's body went still.

The same man.

The man who had praised the clay cup in the morning.

The man for whom Ramlochan had already walked through eight rooms.

As the employee turned away, Sahib's eyes fell on Ramlochan.

"You make the cups from Babhaniyatol, don't you?"

Ramlochan held out the file with both hands. "Yes. And I need one signature from you on this."

Sahib opened the file.

He read the first page, then looked over the comments filling the upper and lower margins.

His eyebrows rose slightly. "Why are there so many notes?"

Ramlochan thought before answering.

Then he said, "Perhaps this is the road one has to travel to reach you."

Sahib gave a faint laugh, but Ramlochan did not.

He examined the paper, read the pencilled line from Room Five, checked the accounts note, and signed.

It took perhaps six or seven seconds.

"Now give it to the bank," Sahib said. "Your work will be done."

Ramlochan kept looking at the signature.

So small.

So little ink.

He could hardly believe that the weight of an entire day had been lifted by those two curved lines.

He picked up his bag.

As he started toward the stairs, the tea seller came up to Sahib. In his hand was the paper for a month's tea bill.

"Sahib, please sign this. The payment is stuck."

Sahib looked at the paper. "How did this come directly to me? First have Accounts verify it."

For a moment the tea seller looked at Sahib's face, then folded the paper and put it into his bag.

Ramlochan stopped on the first stair.

In his hand was the signed paper; behind him, the tea bill was about to begin its journey through the rooms.

He said nothing.

He only tucked the bag firmly under his arm and hurried down to catch the evening bus.

STORY 247

The Special Hat

...

On his first day at the District Seed Certification Office in Madhubani, the new officer, Shambhunath Karn, arrived wearing a hat that attracted more discussion than the office work itself.

The hat was made of ordinary khadi, but along its front edge were two small stitches of blue thread. It was pressed down slightly on the right and raised a little on the left. Shambhunath Babu came inside, removed the hat, hung it on a peg, greeted all the employees, and asked his first question: “How many seed tests are incomplete?”

Later, Accounts Clerk Baijnath Jha said, “Did you notice? On his very first day the man did not ask about files; he asked about unfinished work. Even the hat is disciplined like an officer.”

The sentence had been spoken as a joke, but by noon half the office had passed near the peg on one pretext or another to look at the two blue stitches.

Shambhunath Babu spent a good deal of time in the fields. Paddy seed plots, low ground near makhana fields, wheat samples—wherever inspection was required, he went himself. He wore the hat in the sun and took it off the moment he entered a room.

Naresh Yadav, a junior assistant who accompanied him twice on field inspections, arrived in the second week wearing a khadi hat made in exactly the same style. There were two blue stitches along its front edge as well.

“Where did you get it?” Baijnath asked.

“Fakira the tailor, on Station Road.”

“Exactly like his?”

Naresh smiled. “The sun falls the same way on everyone’s head.”

Three days later the Stores Assistant came in one, then the Records Clerk, then the Cash Assistant. By the end of the week, seven hats with blue stitches could be seen in the office.

Fakira’s shop had earlier been known for pyjamas, kurtas, and school uniforms. Now, on its wooden board, someone had written in charcoal: “Khadi hats with two stitches available.” He did not dare write “officer hat,” but customers asked for it by that name among themselves.

Inside the office, the meaning of the hat slowly changed. At first it was something to protect the head from the sun, then a neat article of clothing, and finally a sign.

No one openly said that a hat would bring promotion, but when news came that the annual promotion list was about to be prepared, the number of hats rose from seven to fourteen.

The most enthusiastic was Copying Assistant Raghuvir Chaudhary. The blue stitches on his hat were half an inch longer than those on the original. Each morning, when he reached the office, he first straightened the edge of his hat and only then signed the attendance register.

“How far to the right does the officer tilt his hat?” he asked Naresh one day.

“I have not measured it.”

“You travel with him. You should pay attention.”

Everyone laughed at that, but the next day Raghuvir came with his hat tilted slightly to the right.

On the third day, three hats were sitting at the same angle.

Only one person stayed outside the fashion: Devkant Paswan, Seed Sample Assistant.

His work was to weigh samples from sacks brought in from the fields, check moisture, and enter figures in the register. His head became very hot in the sun, so for years he had kept a gamchha with him.

When the discussion of hats arose, he only said, “My head suffocates in a hat.”

Raghuvir joked, “Your promotion will suffocate too.”

Devkant laughed. “If air to the head and promotion travel through the same pipe, let the promotion go.”

The farmers waiting outside the office noticed the change too.

Earlier they read employees’ nameplates. Now they looked at hats.

An elderly farmer mistook Naresh for Shambhunath Babu and began handing him an application.

Startled, Naresh said, “I am not the officer.”

The old man looked at the hat and asked, “Then this?”

By noon, that sentence had travelled through the entire office.

No one was sure whether Shambhunath Babu noticed any of this.

He never made a single comment about the hats.

He asked for files on time, checked field-inspection records, and had every employee’s old service record called for separately.

There was no column for hats in those records.

Even so, people looked more at his head than at the service records.

One day it was decided that a group photograph should be taken for the department's annual booklet.

The photographer arranged everyone in two rows on the veranda.

Fourteen hats with blue stitches gleamed together.

Devkant stood in the back row with his gamchha over his shoulder.

Shambhunath Babu was holding his hat in his hand.

The photographer said, "Sir, please put on the hat. The group will look uniform."

He put it on.

The employees interpreted that small incident in their own ways.

According to Raghuvir, it proved that the officer himself wanted uniformity.

According to Baijnath, once the hats appeared in the annual booklet, the message would reach all the way upward.

Naresh said nothing, but the next day the blue stitches on his hat were sewn afresh.

Then the rains came.

Field inspections decreased.

Shambhunath Babu began wearing the hat less often, but the employees now kept theirs on even inside the office.

Sweat ran down their foreheads in the heat, yet the hats stayed in place.

One day the Cash Assistant's ink blurred with sweat. He wiped the paper first, then straightened his hat.

One afternoon the electricity failed.

Because there was no air inside, everyone removed their hats and placed them on the window ledge.

When the electricity returned and people began picking them up again, a problem arose: they were all nearly identical.

Raghuvir put one on and said, "This is not mine. My stitches are a little longer."

Baijnath placed another on his head and said, "This must be Naresh's. The circumference is smaller."

For five minutes the work of the office stopped while people identified their hats from head size, sweat stains, inner stitching, and the curve of the brim.

The next day Raghuvir proposed that everyone have his name sewn inside the hat.

The proposal never became a formal file, but Fakira the tailor's income increased.

He now added the first letter of the wearer's name in white thread inside, along with the blue stitches outside.

From the outside all the hats looked alike; inside, each was different.

Meanwhile another rule formed without ever being written.

Whenever Shambhunath Babu came out onto the veranda, employees wearing hats would involuntarily touch their own—one straightening the brim, another pressing the blue stitches.

Earlier greetings had been made by joining the hands; now half the greeting happened on the head.

One day the officer stopped and asked, "Have all of you developed an itch on the same day?"

Laughter rose along the veranda.

Raghuvir laughed the loudest, though his hand did not immediately leave his hat.

Fakira's shop now had two samples: "ordinary" and "two-stitch."

The two-stitch version cost three rupees more.

By the end of Sawan he had received so many orders that he had to deliver two school uniforms a day late.

His wife asked, "Has some new uniform been introduced in the office?"

Fakira said, "There has been no order. If there had been an order, who would have bought them so quickly?"

On the morning the promotion list was due, the entire rhythm of the office changed.

Everyone knew that a sealed envelope was coming from the district office.

As soon as the postman stopped his bicycle, Raghuvir adjusted his hat with both hands.

Unable to find a mirror, Baijnath examined the brim of his hat in the window glass.

Devkant continued weighing mustard seed in the sample room.

The envelope went to Shambhunath Babu's desk.

Half an hour later two names were pinned to the notice board.

The first was Devkant Paswan—promoted to Senior Sample Assistant.

The second was an employee from another block.

The veranda suddenly fell silent.

Raghuvir read the notice three times.

Then he looked toward Devkant, who was washing his hands.

“But you never wore the hat.”

Shaking the water from his hands, Devkant said, “Whoever made the list must have looked at my service record, not at my head.”

The sentence was simple, but people interpreted it too as a sign.

By noon a new explanation had formed: anyone whose work was secure had no need of a hat; the hat was useful only for those whose case was somewhere in between.

As a result, not a single hat came off.

On the contrary, two employees went to Fakira to be measured for new ones.

In the evening Shambhunath Babu called Devkant in and congratulated him.

As he came out, Devkant did not see the officer’s hat on the peg.

He turned back and asked, “No hat today?”

Shambhunath Babu ran a hand over his head.

“The doctor had told me not to let strong sunlight fall directly on an old wound. The wound has healed now, so I have stopped wearing it.”

For a moment Devkant looked at his scalp.

There was only a small pale scar among the hair.

“And the blue stitches?”

“My daughter sewed them. The brim had torn.”

Devkant went outside thinking of telling someone.

Then he saw Raghuvir and Baijnath returning from Fakira’s shop with two new hats in their hands.

He said nothing.

The following week Shambhunath Babu went out on field inspection without a hat. All fourteen hats remained in place in the office. Fakira wiped the old charcoal writing from his board and added a new line: “Two-stitch pattern prepared immediately.” Below it, in smaller letters and on his own initiative, he added: “For office people.” That day the blue stitches on Raghuvir’s hat were lengthened by another half inch.

STORY 248

The Tea Committee

...

At the Jhanjharpur Drainage Subdivision, tea arrived at exactly 10:40 in the morning.

The time was written in no office order, but the moment the hands of the clock reached that point, a clinking of glasses could be heard from the veranda, like a small brass bell.

The tea was brought by Chandrakala Devi.

Her little stall stood just outside the gate—two bamboo posts, a tin awning, one clay hearth, two brass kettles, and a narrow wooden plank in front.

In the morning she served labourers, rickshaw pullers, and visitors to the office; at ten, the employees; after noon, people from the road again.

Her household ran on that rhythm.

On that Monday, the new Executive Officer, Sureshwar Mishra, drank the office tea for the first time.

One sip went into his mouth.

There was no second.

He placed the glass on the desk and asked, “Who makes this tea?”

Attendant Bhola Jha answered in a slightly nervous voice, “Chandrakala Devi, outside the gate. It has been coming from there for years.”

“Where is the taste of the tea leaves?”

Bhola looked at the glass as though the taste might be sitting at the bottom.

“Sahib, if the milk is a little less—”

“I am not talking about milk. Tea should taste like tea.”

That was all he had said.

But by noon the whole office knew that the new officer was dissatisfied with the tea.

Nandkishore from Accounts said, “At least the work has begun at a good place.”

Dayanand from the Maps Section replied, “First the drain, then the tea.”

The next day the tea came again.

Chandrakala added a little more tea leaf.

This time the Assistant Engineer said, “Too bitter.”

On the third day she increased the milk, and the Cash Assistant said, “More milk than tea.”

On the fourth day she reduced the sugar, and two employees asked separately for extra sugar in their glasses.

On the fifth day Sureshwar Mishra drank only half a glass and said, “This is not about individual preference. The quality must be uniform.”

The word “uniform” remained in the office.

On Friday an order was issued: a five-member committee would be formed to examine the quality, quantity, and expenditure of the tea supplied to the office.

Assistant Engineer Raghunath Chaudhary was made chairman.

The members were Nandkishore, Dayanand, Bhola Jha, and Junior Engineer Meena Kumari.

They were to submit recommendations within seven days.

Bhola read the order and asked, “Why am I on the committee?”

Nandkishore said, “You distribute the tea. You have practical experience.”

Bhola scratched his head.

He had been handing out glasses for years, but this was the first time his experience had received government recognition.

The committee’s first difficulty was whether it would be proper to sit and drink the very tea that was under examination.

Raghunath Chaudhary said, “Depending upon the item under scrutiny may raise questions about impartiality.”

Therefore the first meeting was held half a kos away from the office, at Kamla Bhojanalaya.

Tea there came in white porcelain cups, with two thin savoury biscuits on the side.

One cup cost eighteen rupees.

Office tea cost eight.

Meena Kumari took the first sip and said, “This is a little thin.”

Raghunath Chaudhary said, “We need a basis of comparison. We cannot reach a conclusion from one sample.”

A second sample was ordered—more milk.

A third—with ginger.

A fourth—with cardamom.

The bill came to one hundred and forty-four rupees.

Lifting the bill, Nandkishore said, "This will go under committee expenditure."

For the second meeting, Dayanand proposed that they first identify where the best tea in the market was available.

There was discussion.

In the end they chose Mithila Rest House on Station Road, where one cup of tea cost thirty-two rupees and sugar was served separately in a small bowl.

Holding the cup, Bhola asked softly, "Will it be necessary to serve cups like this in our office?"

Raghunath Chaudhary laughed. "Not the cup. Look at the quality."

Bhola smelled the tea. "There is more leaf here."

Meena said, "And the milk is thicker."

Looking at the sugar bowl, Nandkishore said, "Serving sugar separately might reduce wastage."

Dayanand immediately added, "But then spoons will be needed."

"Who will wash the spoons?"

That question continued for five minutes.

Then a second round of tea was ordered.

This time savouries came with it too, because it was already noon and it seemed difficult to discuss quality on tea alone.

The bill came to three hundred and sixty-six rupees.

Meanwhile Chandrakala had merely been told to "improve" the tea.

She asked for the measure of improvement.

Bhola could not answer.

He was a member of the committee, but the committee had not yet decided the measure.

Chandrakala made her own calculations.

The price of a seer of milk, tea leaves, sugar, coal, the labour of washing glasses, carrying the tea up to the gate, and then, at the end of the month, usually twenty to twenty-five days of credit.

At eight rupees a glass, her margin was no more than one and a half to two rupees.

If she increased the tea leaves, she would have to reduce the milk; if she increased the milk, the margin would disappear.

The next day she showed Bhola three kinds of tea leaf in three small bowls.

“This is what I use. This is one grade higher. This is the most expensive. Which one does the committee want?”

Bhola smelled all three and said, “I cannot decide. It will be a collective decision.”

Gathering up the bowls, Chandrakala said, “Then let the collective nose smell them.”

Bhola burst out laughing, but later he did not repeat the remark before the committee.

The third meeting was held in the dining room of the District Guest House because—in Raghunath Chaudhary’s view—“standard service” was available there.

One cup of tea cost thirty-eight rupees.

On a white tablecloth came a separate kettle, separate milk, and separate sugar.

Two kettles were ordered for the five members.

The meeting agenda was divided into four points: colour, aroma, temperature, and sweetness.

Dayanand wanted to describe the colour of the tea as “coppery.”

Nandkishore said, “Who will understand that word in the register?”

Meena suggested, “Neither too pale nor too dark.”

Raghunath Chaudhary said, “Government recommendations are not written like that.”

Twenty minutes went on colour.

Fifteen on aroma.

On temperature, Bhola said that Chandrakala poured the tea from the kettle and brought it immediately, so the temperature was normally right.

Raghunath Chaudhary asked, “What is the measure of ‘right?’”

Bhola fell silent.

“We need a number.”

No one had an instrument for measuring temperature.

The guest-house cook was asked.

He said, “After it boils, let it settle a little.”

The committee did not consider that answer useful.

By the end of the meeting, the five members had drunk seven cups of tea.

Two plates of savoury makhana had also arrived.

The total bill was five hundred and seventy-eight rupees.

Nandkishore looked at the bill and remained silent for a moment.

Then he asked, "Shall this expenditure be entered under 'sample testing'?"

Raghunath Chaudhary said, "Write meeting expenditure. There should be transparency."

At that time Chandrakala's bill for the previous month—two thousand four hundred and thirty-two rupees—was still pending in the office.

The previous officer had been transferred without signing it.

The new officer had said the old dues would be paid after verification.

Chandrakala did not ask Bhola about it every day.

Only once a week she said, "Please look at the file."

Bhola looked.

The file kept moving between Accounts and the officer's desk.

By the fourth committee meeting a draft had been prepared: fixed quantity per glass, a minimum proportion of milk and tea leaves, the option of serving sugar separately, supply in a covered vessel, and clean glasses.

The only problem was price.

Nandkishore calculated that according to the proposed quantities, the actual cost of one glass would be at least fourteen rupees.

With labour added, sixteen.

"But the approved rate is eight," he said.

"Increase the rate," Dayanand said.

"This office has no authority to increase the rate. Fresh approval will be required."

"Then what recommendation do we give?"

Nandkishore placed a finger on the paper.

"Improvement in quality without additional expenditure."

Meena Kumari looked at him. "How is that possible?"

Nandkishore did not laugh. "That is the question the committee has to answer."

That day the meeting was not held in the office.

The five members went to a new restaurant on Station Road, where tea cost forty-five rupees.

Raghunath Chaudhary had said that before reaching a final conclusion they should also examine the "highest available sample."

The tea came with jaggery in a small brass bowl.

Everyone was pleased.

Dayanand proposed that replacing sugar with jaggery would also give the tea a local character.

Nandkishore immediately asked, “What is the rate for jaggery?”

The proposal stopped there.

On the fifth day, the committee called Chandrakala into the office.

She arrived with three small tins in her old cloth bag—tea leaves, sugar, and fennel.

Raghunath Chaudhary read out the draft.

“This much milk, this much leaf, sugar separate, glasses covered—can you do it?”

Chandrakala remained silent for a while.

“I can.”

“For eight rupees?”

“That is not possible.”

The room fell silent.

“Then for how much?”

“At least fifteen. Leave me one rupee as profit.”

Nandkishore said, “The approved rate is eight.”

Chandrakala put her hand into the bag and gathered up the tins again.

“Then eight-rupee tea will be eight-rupee tea.”

Dayanand said in a softer voice, “Is there some way to improve the quality a little?”

“There is. Make the glass a little smaller. Quantity will decrease and taste will improve.”

The committee members looked at one another.

The draft already contained the words “fixed quantity.”

Raghunath Chaudhary said, “If quantity is reduced, there will be complaints.”

Chandrakala replied matter-of-factly, “If the price will not rise, the quantity will not fall, the milk must increase, and the tea leaves must increase—all four at once—then I will have to keep both a cow and a tea plantation at the gate.”

Bhola lowered his head and smiled.

Meena too could not hold back her laughter.

Raghunath Chaudhary’s face first hardened, then he too laughed.

It was the first moment in the entire meeting process when every member agreed on the same thing.

The final recommendation was changed.

The sentence became: "Clean vessel, fresh tea, balanced quantity of sugar, and limited variation according to employee preference."

No fixed quantity of milk, tea leaves, or price remained in it.

The rate stayed at eight rupees.

The committee completed its work in twelve days instead of seven.

Across its five meetings, expenditure on tea came to two thousand eight hundred and sixty rupees.

Nandkishore attached all the bills together to the accounts file.

That same afternoon Chandrakala came with her previous month's bill—two thousand four hundred and thirty-two rupees.

Bhola saw both files on the same desk.

On top were the committee-meeting bills.

Below was Chandrakala's old unpaid claim.

Nandkishore said, "The committee expenditure will be paid first. It belongs to the current period. Verification of the old bill is still pending."

Chandrakala heard him.

She said nothing.

She merely straightened the corner of her bill.

The next morning at exactly 10:40, tea came again.

The same brass kettle.

The same thick glasses.

The same eight rupees.

Sureshwar Mishra took one sip.

"A little better today," he said.

Bhola looked at Chandrakala.

He knew that neither the milk nor the tea leaves had changed.

Only half a spoon less sugar had been added, because the price of a sack of sugar had risen the previous week.

Chandrakala continued distributing the glasses.

After placing the last glass on Nandkishore's desk, she opened her small account register and wrote on a new line: "Tea—eight rupees."

The old unpaid amount remained above it exactly as before.

On the other side of the desk, the five bills from the committee meetings lay fastened with a paper clip.

On the top bill one line could be read clearly: “Special tea—five cups.”

Amount: two hundred and twenty-five rupees.

Nandkishore was signing it.

Chandrakala closed her register, lifted the empty kettle, and walked back outside the gate toward her hearth.

STORY 249

The Vanished Bell

...

At Pathrahi Middle School in Benipatti, an old brass bell hung from a thick wooden beam at the eastern corner of the veranda. Only two digits were engraved on its body—1956. No name. No donor, no craftsman, no headmaster of the time. For seven decades, the ringing of that nameless bell had marked the times for prayer, lessons, the midday meal, and dismissal.

On Tuesday morning, when attendant Mahavir Paswan reached up to pull the rope, his hand moved through empty air. The iron hook on the beam was bare. The rope lay coiled below, but the bell was gone.

Mahavir first looked up, then down, as though the bell might occasionally climb down of its own accord and move to another corner of the veranda. He ran to Headmaster Manbodh Jha.

“The bell is not there.”

Manbodh Babu was opening the attendance register. “Did the rope break?”

“The rope is here. The bell is not.”

Both came outside. The hook was not broken; its screw had been carefully removed. The old circular rub marks of the brass body were clear on the wood, and the emptiness between them was new.

Morning prayer was due at 8:15. Without the bell, the children began forming lines in the field according to their own guesses. Some classes arrived early, some late. Mathematics teacher Kameshwar Yadav looked at his wristwatch and shouted, “It is eight fifteen!” but his voice did not reach all five hundred children.

In the end, a brass plate was brought from the midday-meal kitchen. Mahavir struck it with a wooden ladle. The sound did not travel like the bell; it clanged in the veranda and died there.

By ten o’clock, news of the missing bell had spread farther through the village than through the school.

The first to arrive was Panchayat Mukhiya Raghunandan Singh. Two young men were with him, one of whom kept writing something on paper.

“This was no ordinary bell,” the Mukhiya said. “My grandfather, Shivnarayan Singh, donated it after the school opened.”

Manbodh Babu asked, “Is there any old evidence of that?”

“The memory of the village is evidence.”

Exactly five minutes later, retired teacher Shyamlal Mishra arrived. He heard the Mukhiya’s statement in the veranda.

“Shivnarayan Babu donated the bell?” he said, pushing his spectacles upward. “Where has this new history come from?”

Raghunandan Singh’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Were you a teacher then?”

“I was a student. Grain was collected house to house in the village for that bell. My mother gave two paseris too.”

“A brass bell is cast from grain?”

“Grain is sold and becomes money.”

A bell that had disappeared from the beam ten minutes earlier now hung between the prestige of two families.

Manbodh Babu said in the middle of it, “First let us find the bell.”

But the Mukhiya said, “Certainly. At the same time it should be clear who donated the object. The history must not become wrong in the theft report.”

Shyamlal Mishra laughed. “Whether the bell is found or not, the name must be found first!”

By noon a third party had arrived: Dinesh Chaudhary, coordinator of the Former Students’ Association.

His proposal was simple. If the old bell was not found, the association would donate a new one.

“Twice as large as the old one,” he said, “and below it there will be a small plaque—Courtesy of the Former Students’ Association.”

Manbodh Babu said, “The old bell is still being searched for.”

“Search for it. If it is found, keep it as a memorial. A new bell would be better for daily use.”

The Mukhiya immediately asked, “Why only the association’s name on the plaque?”

Dinesh said, “Because the association will give the bell.”

“The school is in the Panchayat.”

“The school belongs to the Education Department,” Shyamlal Mishra cut in.

Meanwhile, because there was no second bell, the Class Five Hindi lesson ran ten minutes too long, the Class Six science teacher arrived ten minutes late, and Class Seven left half a lesson unfinished to line up for the midday meal. No one debated this disorder. On the veranda everyone continued discussing whose name should appear in letters of what size on the new bell.

Manbodh Babu took Mahavir with him and searched around the school.

Near the mango tree at the back were two deep drag marks in the soil.

The bell was heavy; one person could not easily carry it.

The drag marks ran from the veranda to the rear gate of the school and then disappeared on the unpaved road.

“Who was here last evening?” Manbodh Babu asked.

Mahavir thought. “I closed the gate at five. The bell was here then. Dinesh Babu was standing in the field with two men, looking at the preparations for Foundation Day.”

“Anyone else?”

“The Mukhiya’s nephew was playing football until around six. Shyamlal Master also comes here in the evening for a walk.”

One bell, three respected parties, and all three near the school the previous evening.

Manbodh Babu said nothing about the coincidence.

He sent information to the police outpost.

Hearing the news, more villagers gathered.

Someone said the price of brass had risen.

Someone said it must be an outsider.

Someone said it had to be the work of a villager, because whoever removed it had known how the hook was fitted.

In the afternoon, Manbodh Babu, Mahavir, and Kameshwar Yadav went to the old metal buyers in Benipatti market.

At two places they learnt nothing.

At the third, elderly craftsman Sakaldev Sah listened to them and asked, “Does the bell have 1956 engraved on it?”

All three looked at one another.

“Yes. Those very digits.”

Sakaldev Sah put down his hammer. “I have not seen the bell. But three days ago two young men came asking for the measurements of a bell like that. They asked how much brass would be needed to make a new one in the same size.”

“Who were they?”

“I know one of them. Bablu. He works at Dinesh Chaudhary’s shop.”

Manbodh Babu returned to the school at once.

Dinesh Chaudhary was still in the veranda. In front of him lay a paper containing an estimated cost for a new bell.

“Why did Bablu go to ask for measurements?” Manbodh Babu asked directly.

For a moment Dinesh’s eyes rested on the paper. “I was thinking of donating a new bell.”

“Three days ago?”

“Foundation Day is near.”

“Before the old bell disappeared?”

Silence fell in the veranda.

An expression came over Raghunandan Singh’s face as though he already knew the answer.

Shyamlal Mishra removed his spectacles and began wiping them with a cloth.

Dinesh said slowly, “I did not steal the bell.”

“I am not accusing you of theft. I am only asking why its measurements were being taken.”

Dinesh rose from the chair. “I had thought of presenting a new bell for Foundation Day. We needed the measurements of the old one. That is all.”

“Was the bell taken down for measuring?”

“No. There was no question of removing it.”

At that moment the creak of a bullock cart came from the rear gate.

Everyone looked that way.

A heavy round object covered with a sack lay on the cart.

Bablu and another young man were with it.

Mahavir ran over.

The sack was removed.

Inside was the school bell—1956 on its body, the old crack along the rim, and fresh oil on the upper hook.

Manbodh Babu said nothing.

Dinesh Chaudhary’s face hardened.

Bablu spoke first. “We were told to take its measurements and hang it back again. We removed it last night. The cart driver was not available, so we could not take it to Sakaldev’s place. We kept it in my godown. When the news spread this morning, we got frightened.”

“Who told you?” Manbodh Babu asked.

Bablu looked toward Dinesh.

Dinesh raised a hand to stop him. "I told them only to find a way to take the measurements. I never told them to remove the bell and carry it away."

Bablu remained silent.

Raghunandan Singh immediately said, "This is clearly theft."

Dinesh turned toward him. "Why was your nephew measuring the beam yesterday evening?"

Raghunandan's tone changed. "He was seeing where the Foundation Day plaque should be placed."

Shyamlal Mishra burst out laughing. "More than the bell, everyone wanted the measurement of a name."

The discussion began moving in a different direction again.

The Mukhiya wanted a written apology.

Dinesh said the intention had been to increase the school's prestige.

Shyamlal Mishra insisted that no new name should be added to the old bell.

Meanwhile Mahavir lifted the bell and began hanging it back on the beam.

Kameshwar Yadav helped him tighten the screw.

Manbodh Babu looked toward the classrooms.

The Class Eight teacher was watching the clock and waiting to end the lesson.

The Class Five children were looking toward the window.

The temporary routine created by the clanging brass plate had already broken down five times during the day.

"First tighten the bell," Manbodh Babu said. "The decision about names can come later."

Mahavir tightened the screw, tied the rope, and pulled once.

Tannnn.

The sound passed beyond the school veranda, across the field, past the mango tree, through the gate, and out to the road.

In three classrooms teachers stopped in the middle of sentences.

The children closed their exercise books and took out the books for the next lesson.

On the veranda Raghunandan Singh was saying, "The Foundation Day programme must certainly include the history of the donor."

Dinesh Chaudhary replied, "Then the contribution of the Former Students' Association must also be included."

Shyamlal Mishra said, “First decide how the history is to be made.”

Mahavir pulled the rope a second time.

The bell rang again.

Inside the classrooms, time moved forward.

On the veranda, the argument over names remained exactly where it was.

STORY 250

Certified Copy

...

On the veranda of the District Handicrafts Assistance Centre in Darbhanga, Bhubaneswar Mandal sat with a small bamboo supati resting in his lap. It was not for sale. It was his sample. This year a notice had come that each artisan would be given one stall free of charge at the district fair, and the application had to be accompanied by a certified copy of the old artisan identity certificate. Bhubaneswar's certificate was eighteen years old: yellow paper, a green border, his younger photograph in the middle, and the signature of the officer of that time below. He had brought the original certificate wrapped between two folds of red cloth.

When his turn came, clerk Raghunath Jha looked at the application and then at the certificate.

"Where is the copy?"

Bhubaneswar opened the red cloth and placed the original paper in front of him. "Here it is."

"This is the original."

"Yes. That is why I brought it."

"I need a certified copy."

For a few moments Bhubaneswar looked between the original paper and Raghunath's eyes. "The original is in front of you. Look at it, compare it, write whatever has to be written."

Raghunath smiled. "Looking at the original is not a substitute for a certified copy. The rule says copy."

Outside the veranda, beneath a peepal tree, stood Suresh's photocopy shop: a tin awning, a wooden table, and a small picture of a deity covered with red cloth on top of the machine.

Bhubaneswar hesitated before giving the original paper into Suresh's hand. "Do not bend the edge."

Suresh said, "You have preserved it for eighteen years. Trust me for five minutes too."

He made two copies. In one, the old photograph came out so dark that Bhubaneswar's eyes looked like two black dots. In the other, the signature was too faint. Suresh ran the machine a third time.

“This one is in between. Everything is visible.”

Bhubaneswar carried all three copies inside. Raghunath selected the third.

“Now get this certified.”

“Who will certify it?”

“The Section In-charge.”

“Where does he sit?”

Raghunath indicated with his chin the glass-fronted room opposite.

Section In-charge Vidyapati Mishra sat there. Two files lay open on his desk, a cup of tea rested beside them, and to his left was a round stamp pad.

Bhubaneswar went in and placed both the original and the copy before him.

Vidyapati Mishra looked first at the copy, then at the original.

“This is your certificate?”

“Yes, it is mine.”

“You are Bhubaneswar Mandal?”

“Yes, I am Bhubaneswar Mandal.”

“Identity card?”

Bhubaneswar opened the small pouch tied near the knot of his dhoti and took out his voter identity card.

Vidyapati Mishra looked at it. The photograph there was also old, though seven years newer than the photograph on the certificate.

“You do not have a beard in this.”

Bhubaneswar ran a hand over his white beard. “I did not have one then.”

“I know. But I need a basis for writing that the identity has been matched.”

“I am standing in front of you.”

Vidyapati Mishra smiled. “You are standing here, but the paper too must understand that you are standing here.”

He asked for a photocopy of the voter identity card.

Bhubaneswar went back beneath the peepal tree. This time Suresh asked nothing. He copied the identity card and handed it over. Bhubaneswar returned.

Vidyapati Mishra compared the copy with the original, but before signing he stopped.

“Self-attest the copy of the identity card.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sign it yourself to state that this is your copy.”

A pen was placed in Bhubaneswar's hand. He wrote his name slowly: Bhuba-nesh-war. He was then told to write the date below the signature.

Bhubaneswar asked Raghunath for the date.

From a distance Raghunath called out, "Twenty-seventh September."

Vidyapati Mishra looked at the identity-card copy once more. Then, on the copy of the artisan certificate, he wrote: "Compared with the original." He signed and applied the stamp.

At the sight of the round blue ink mark, a slight sense of relief appeared on Bhubaneswar's face.

He wrapped the original certificate again in the red cloth and handed the certified copy to Raghunath at his desk.

Raghunath turned it over and examined it.

"Two copies are required."

Bhubaneswar's hand stopped in mid-air. "The notice said one copy."

"One with the application. The second for the selection register."

"Why did you not say so earlier?"

Straightening the corner of the application, Raghunath said, "You had brought only one copy, so first one was certified. Get another made now. There is still time."

Bhubaneswar went outside again.

This time Suresh asked, "Another copy of the original?"

Bhubaneswar held out the certified copy. "Make one from this."

Suresh shook his head. "That will become a copy of a copy. The In-charge will say to make it from the original."

Bhubaneswar opened the red cloth again. The original paper came out for the fourth time.

Suresh lowered the machine lid carefully. "Your certificate is doing a lot of service today."

"Have I come for service, or has it?" Bhubaneswar asked.

Suresh laughed, but Bhubaneswar did not.

Carrying the second copy, he returned to Vidyapati Mishra.

This time Mishra recognised the original the moment he saw it.

"Again?"

"Two copies are required."

"All right."

He lifted his pen, then stopped his hand.

“Copy of the identity card?”

“I gave it earlier.”

“That one has been attached to the first certification file.”

“But I am still here.”

“You are here. But this is a second certification.”

Bhubaneswar said nothing.

He made a third trip beneath the peepal tree.

Seeing him from a distance, Suresh stretched out his hand for the voter identity card.

“This time I will make two. You may need another later.”

“No,” Bhubaneswar said. “Make only one. The more paper one keeps, the more work grows.”

For the first time, Suresh became serious at that sentence. He made one copy and handed it over.

Vidyapati Mishra again wrote the comparison note on the second copy of the certificate and signed it.

This time the stamp did not come out fully on the first impression; the right side of the round border remained faint. He pressed the stamp into the ink again and placed a second impression beside it.

Bhubaneswar looked at the papers. One certified copy had one stamp; the other had two.

Raghunath accepted the second copy with satisfaction.

By then two other artisans waiting in the line had also been watching the movement of Bhubaneswar’s papers.

One was a woman who made sikki baskets; in her hand was a transparent bag full of certificates.

She asked softly, “How many copies are needed?”

Bhubaneswar said, “Make only as many as you are told. If you try to guess what will be needed next, the papers only increase.”

The woman counted the contents of her bag again.

Beside her, a young man who made clay horses took out his original certificate and then put it back inside.

For a while the rustle of paper on the veranda sounded as though all the artisans were not examining their crafts, but opening and checking their proofs of themselves.

Raghunath gathered all the pages of the application together.

“Now show the original.”

Bhubaneswar slowly opened the red cloth.

“You have already seen this original twice.”

“Not I. The In-charge saw it. At the time of accepting the application, I have to record that the original was seen.”

Raghunath took the certificate in his hand, holding it carefully by the edges so that his fingers would not touch the photograph.

Then, in a small square box on the application, he marked: “Original seen.”

Bhubaneswar asked, “Is it done now?”

“One minute.”

Raghunath opened a register.

“Your village?”

“Makrampur.”

“Father?”

“Late Jagdish Mandal.”

“Age?”

“Sixty-two.”

“Craft?”

Bhubaneswar placed the supati from his lap on the table. “This.”

Raghunath smiled. “I need the name to write in the register.”

“Bamboo and cane work.”

“Contact number?” Raghunath asked.

“I do not have my own. My son does.”

The number was written down.

Then Raghunath attached the two certified copies, the application, and the self-attested identity-card copy together in the file.

He returned the original certificate to Bhubaneswar.

Bhubaneswar opened the red cloth, but before putting the paper inside, he looked at it carefully once more.

Repeated flashes from the copying machine had made the old folds in the paper appear more distinct. Fibres had risen at one corner. A minute piece of the green border fell onto the desk.

He picked it up with a fingertip and placed it inside the cloth too, as though it were also part of the original.

“Take your receipt,” Raghunath said.

He wrote the application number on a small slip and handed it to him.

Bhubaneswar read the slip.

“Do I need a copy of this receipt?”

Raghunath opened his mouth to laugh, but Bhubaneswar’s voice was completely ordinary.

He did not laugh.

“No. Keep this with you.”

“Whose original?”

“The receipt’s original.”

“Yes. Keep the receipt itself with you.”

Bhubaneswar thought of placing the receipt inside the red cloth with the certificate, then stopped.

The certificate had been safe in that cloth for eighteen years. The receipt had been created today.

He put the receipt in the upper pocket of his kurta instead.

As he came out of the veranda, Suresh asked, “Finished?”

Bhubaneswar held up the supati. “No one asked whether I made this or not.”

Suresh took the supati in his hand and examined the weaving along the edge.

“The hands themselves are saying it.”

Bhubaneswar took the supati back into his lap. “What the hands say cannot be heard on paper.”

He crossed the shade of the peepal tree and started toward the road.

Inside the red cloth was the original certificate; in the office file were two certified copies of it; on separate sheets were the marks of two copies of his identity card; and in the register were written his village, his father’s name, his age, and his craft.

Over the course of the day, the office had written down a great deal about him.

Whether he would receive a stall at the fair would be known only after selection.

But as he went to catch the bus home, Bhubaneswar looked at both his hands—the fine lines cut by thin bamboo strips, an old scar beside the thumb, green splinters caught beneath the nails.

No copy had been made of those marks.

STORY 251

The Height of the Table

...

On his first day at the District Agricultural Implements Assistance Office in Madhubani, the new officer, Vibhakar Chaudhary, had been sitting for barely five minutes when his knees struck the drawer beneath the desk twice. The desk was old teak, so heavy that four men could not shift it without lifting it. Vibhakar was tall. If he pushed the chair back, the door was half blocked; if he pulled it forward, his knees hit the drawer.

After the third knock he did not ring the bell. He simply called Budhan Thakur, the carpenter who was repairing a doorframe in the veranda.

“Can you raise this desk by two inches?”

Budhan examined its legs. “I can put four sal-wood blocks beneath them. Half an hour.”

“Do it. It will save my knees.”

That was all.

Budhan cut four equal blocks from an old sal plank, placed one beneath each leg, and fixed them with two thin nails. The desk rose by two inches.

Vibhakar sat down again. His knees now fit comfortably. He opened a file and went back to work.

But in that office a desk was not merely an object made of wood.

At noon Head Assistant Ramnarayan Jha went into the officer's room carrying a file.

As he placed it on the desk, he noticed that he had to lift his hand slightly higher than before.

He looked at the blocks beneath the desk legs.

After coming out he asked Accounts Assistant Vinod Mandal, “Has a new desk arrived?”

“It is the old one.”

“Then how did it become taller?”

From a distance Budhan called out, “I raised it by two inches.”

Vinod smiled. “New post, new height.”

Ramnarayan did not laugh.

His own desk had always been smaller than the officer's, though almost the same height.

Now the difference was visible to the eye.

He returned to his desk and, for the first time, looked at its legs.

Under the rear right leg was a piece of old register-board because the floor had sunk slightly there.

The next day, discussion of those two inches occupied the office more than the files did.

Someone said the new officer liked proper arrangement.

Someone said a large desk was a symbol of authority.

Someone else said that at the district headquarters the Section Officer's desk was always taller than the assistants' desks.

No one had proof of this, but everyone had an example he claimed to have seen.

Deepak Paswan, a junior clerk in Accounts, wrote bent over his desk. His back hurt.

Hearing the discussion, he said to Budhan, "Raise my desk by one inch too. It will make writing easier."

Budhan asked, "Permission?"

"The desk is assigned to me."

"The desk belongs to the government."

Deepak laughed. "Then let the government's back hurt?"

Budhan handed him two thin blocks but did not install them.

"Keep these. When written permission comes, I will nail them in."

Deepak put the blocks in his drawer.

The matter could have ended there.

But that evening Head Assistant Ramnarayan Jha removed the piece of board from beneath the rear leg of his desk, folded it double, and put it back.

The desk rose by half an inch.

Vinod Mandal noticed it the next morning.

"The floor here had not sunk that much until yesterday," Vinod said.

Ramnarayan replied, "It is an old building. Who can say when the floor changes?"

From the third day onward, the measurements of desks lodged themselves in everyone's eyes.

How tall was each desk?

Whose chair arms stood above the edge of his desk?

Whose hand rose higher when passing a file?

No one had noticed such things before.

Now everyone did.

Records Assistant Shambhu Sah's desk was naturally an inch and a half taller, because years earlier iron caps had been fitted over all four legs.

Shambhu was junior in service.

The moment this fact was discovered, Ramnarayan's brows tightened.

"Why is this desk so tall?"

Shambhu said, "The termite-damaged legs were cut and iron caps fitted over them."

"When was this repair done?"

"Before I came here."

"So the original form of a fixed asset was altered?"

Shambhu laughed at first, then stopped when he saw Ramnarayan's face.

"It was repaired."

"Can a repair change the height of a desk?"

"The legs were shortened, so caps were added. The height was preserved."

That answer did not make the problem smaller.

It enlarged it.

If the height of Shambhu's desk had been 'preserved,' what had its original height been?

And how could that be proved?

At noon Ramnarayan called for the old fixed-assets register.

It contained serial number, name of item, year of purchase, and condition — "Desk 12, teak, in use"; "Desk 13, mixed wood, repairable."

Nowhere was height recorded.

Turning the pages, Vinod said, "In government records, the height of a desk does not exist at all."

Ramnarayan replied gravely, "That is precisely why arbitrary changes are possible."

By evening a measuring tape was found.

An old tape lay in the office iron almirah, though its first two markings had worn away.

Budhan brought his bamboo measuring rod.

Both were used.

The officer's desk was thirty-four inches high, Ramnarayan's thirty-two and a half, Shambhu's thirty-three, Vinod's thirty-two, and Deepak's thirty-one and three-quarters.

Once those five lines were written on paper, a new form of hierarchy appeared.

The difficulty was that height and official rank did not run in the same order.

Shambhu's desk stood half an inch above the Head Assistant's.

Mahendra the office attendant had a small desk on which visitors' names were entered. It stood thirty-three and a half inches high—a full inch higher than Ramnarayan's.

"Mahendra's desk is higher than mine?" Ramnarayan said.

Mahendra laughed. "I have to write standing up, so perhaps it was made higher."

Everyone fell silent at that.

On the fourth day the matter took shape.

The two blocks from Deepak's drawer disappeared.

Instead, one iron cap on Shambhu's desk was found slightly loose.

Shambhu accused no one, but sat at his desk looking at everyone's shoes.

Vinod drew a thin ink line on the right leg of his desk so that if anyone placed anything underneath it, he would notice immediately.

Mahendra pasted a paper on the visitors' desk: "DO NOT MOVE THIS DESK."

The actual work of the office continued amid all this, though with a slightly distorted rhythm.

Farmers came with applications for machinery subsidies.

People asked, "Where should I submit my application?"

An employee would first take the file, then involuntarily glance at the other desks.

What had once been only a matter of bodily comfort had become arithmetic for the eye.

On the fifth day Vibhakar Chaudhary noticed that the way files were being placed on his desk had changed.

Ramnarayan set a file down and stepped back slightly.

Vinod straightened his arm and raised it upward.

Whenever Shambhu entered the room he first pulled his shirt sleeve straight, as though a taller desk demanded a different etiquette.

Vibhakar asked, "Has something happened in the office?"

"No," Ramnarayan said.

"Then why has Budhan been measuring desks for three days?"

Silence.

At last Vinod said, "Some questions have arisen concerning equality of seating arrangements."

"Whose seating?"

"The desks."

At first Vibhakar did not understand.

Ramnarayan explained in order: the fixed-assets register, the five measured heights, and the matter of Shambhu's iron caps.

Vibhakar listened.

His knees rested comfortably beneath the desk.

"Did anyone ask why I had this desk raised by two inches?"

Ramnarayan said, "For convenience, I understand."

"Whose convenience?"

"Yours."

"Yes. My knees were striking the drawer."

After that sentence there was a silence in which the ringing of a bicycle bell on the road outside could be heard clearly.

Deepak opened his drawer and looked inside, as though the missing blocks might suddenly reappear there.

Vibhakar called Budhan.

"Can these blocks be removed?"

Budhan said, "They can. But then your knees will hit again."

"Then do not remove them."

Vibhakar pushed his chair back.

"If someone else's desk is wrong for his body, correct it according to his body. Not according to rank."

Confusion showed in Ramnarayan's eyes; so simple a reason seemed incomplete to him.

"Then there is no prescribed height?"

"If the purchase specifications mention one, look there. If they do not, let any desk that is safe and fit for work remain in use."

Vinod said quietly, "Then Shambhu Babu's desk—"

"If it was saved from termites, that is a good thing."

The meeting ended.

No written order was issued.

For that reason everyone felt lighter and dissatisfied at the same time.

A written order would have created a basis for the future; an oral statement depended on memory.

That afternoon Budhan went to Deepak's desk.

He sat in Deepak's chair, tried the position, then said, "Before raising the desk, let me raise the chair by half an inch. Your back will stay straighter."

He loosened the old screw and raised the seat slightly.

Deepak wrote two pages to test it.

"This really is better."

The missing blocks in his drawer were no longer needed.

The iron cap on Shambhu's desk was tightened again.

Mahendra's high desk, which he used standing up, remained where it was.

Vinod wiped away the ink line he had drawn on his desk leg.

Gradually the office returned to files, applications, and accounts.

Ramnarayan did not remove the double-folded board beneath the rear leg of his own desk.

Budhan asked once, "Shall I leave this board there?"

Ramnarayan looked at the floor.

"It is a little low here."

Budhan said nothing.

He folded up his bamboo measuring rod and went away.

At the end of the month the annual verification of fixed assets was carried out.

The old entries remained exactly as before—Desk 12, in use; Desk 13, in use; Desk 14, in use.

Height was once again recorded nowhere.

Only one line was added to Budhan's small work slip: "Officer's desk: four sal-wood blocks, two inches each."

The box for the reason was left blank.

That evening Ramnarayan was the last to rise.

The rooms were being locked.

He placed a hand on the corner of his desk and pressed once.

The desk rocked slightly.

The board beneath the rear leg had softened with old dampness.

He opened the drawer, took out two thick old reports, folded the cover of one, and put it where the board had been.

The desk became steady.

As Vinod was leaving, he noticed.

“Has the floor become level now?”

Turning the key, Ramnarayan said, “The floor is exactly the same. Only the method of keeping the desk steady has changed.”

The two crossed the veranda and went outside.

In the darkness within, the desks stood silently at their respective heights.

Everyone’s rank was recorded in the register.

How high each desk stood was no longer anyone’s business.

STORY 252

Red Tape

...

On Monday morning, with the first post at the Madhubani District Rural Works Cell, a yellow envelope arrived. Across its face, in large letters, was written: “Red-Tape Elimination Fortnight—URGENT.” Suman Jha, the clerk opening the post, first read the heading, then looked at the bundle of old files lying to the right of his desk. The bundle was, in fact, tied with red cloth tape.

“Has this come for you or for all of these?” Ramudit, seated beside him, asked with a laugh.

Suman held the envelope out to him. “Read it first. If we decide from the heading alone, the files will become anxious.”

By noon the circular had passed across the desks of the Head Assistant, the Accounts Section, and the officer. It directed that every case pending for more than fifteen days be identified, the reason for delay recorded, unnecessary stages removed, and the maximum possible number of pending matters disposed of before the fortnight ended. One line also stated: “A red strip shall be attached to every pending file identified for review, so that it may be recognised immediately.”

Officer Dinesh Chaudhary underlined that line with a red pencil.

“How much red tape will we need?” he asked.

Storekeeper Jitendra Mishra pushed up his spectacles. “Red tape?”

“For marking the files.”

“There is none in stores.”

“Files used to be tied with red tape.”

“Those old tapes are worn out. Some have turned almost brown.”

Dinesh Babu read the circular again. “We need new tape. Every pending file should be clearly marked.”

Jitendra opened his small register. “How many files?”

No one had an immediate answer. Figures were called for from all sections. By evening the first count came in: Land Section, 312; Irrigation, 486; Housing, 271; Wage Payments, 198; Bridges and Roads, 349; Miscellaneous, 157. Some sections sent back only: “Counting in progress.”

Ramudit added the figures. “One thousand seven hundred and seventy-three so far.”

Jitendra began calculating the tape. "Suppose one and a half cubits per file?"

Suman said, "Are we tying a knot or merely marking it?"

"Without a knot it will slip off."

"Then two cubits."

An old strip was spread across the desk. One person said one and a half cubits would be enough; another insisted on two. In the end they decided to calculate in metres, because if "cubits" were entered in the purchase register, the next inspection might raise questions. An old wooden measuring rule was brought out. The average came to one metre and twenty centimetres per file.

Jitendra multiplied on paper. "At the present count: two thousand one hundred and twenty-eight metres. Add the remaining sections, add breakage, keep ten percent extra—let us requisition three thousand metres."

Dinesh Babu remained silent for a moment. "Three thousand metres of red tape for a Red-Tape Elimination Fortnight?"

Laughter rose in the room.

Jitendra remained serious. "For compliance with the circular."

Even Dinesh Babu could not suppress a smile. "Very well. But purchase it according to the rules."

With that one sentence, a second file was born: "Purchase of Red Cotton Tape for Red-Tape Elimination Fortnight."

The first page stated the requirement. The second contained the calculation. The third gave the estimated cost. The fourth sought approval to obtain quotations from three sellers. The fifth specified the width of the sample tape. Jitendra wrote: "One inch." Accounts returned it with the note: "Specify in millimetres." The tape was measured again. Twenty-five millimetres was entered.

By Tuesday three shops had been selected: Jhunki Cloth Store, Mithila Sewing Materials, and Janak Tape House on Station Road. A messenger carried letters to all three.

That evening Phoolkumari Devi, proprietor of Jhunki Cloth Store, came herself with samples. She held three kinds of red tape: thin cotton, thick cotton, and shiny synthetic.

"It is for tying files," Jitendra said.

Phoolkumari lifted the thin cotton tape. "This one is cheaper, but if the knot is opened repeatedly the edge will fray."

"It needs to last."

"Then this thicker one."

The accounts clerk took the sample in his hand. “Will the colour run?”

Phoolkumari looked at him. “Are you planning to wash the files?”

The room filled with laughter again.

By Wednesday all three quotations had arrived. Phoolkumari’s rate was the lowest, but the shop stamp on her letter was slightly blurred. Jitendra considered sending it back. Suman said, “The stamp is readable. This fortnight is meant to reduce red tape; why spend another day making the stamp darker?”

Jitendra thought for a moment and forwarded the file.

Meanwhile the sections continued counting their pending files. As they counted, several odd facts emerged. Of the 198 Wage Payment files, twenty-seven needed only a date on the payment order. Of the 312 Land files, forty-one already contained the papers that had supposedly been called for. In Irrigation, 103 files had completed site inspections, but the reports had never moved to the next desk.

Suman looked at the bundle in his own section. The red tape had not yet arrived. He opened the first file. It was a community application from Mahendra Paswan of Piprahi for cleaning a small drain beside his field, pending for three weeks. On the reason sheet was written: “Map to be seen.” The map was already attached at the back of the same file.

Suman took out the map, matched it with the next page, wrote his note, and sent the file to the engineer.

Ramudit asked, “Won’t you put red tape on it?”

“By the time the tape arrives, this will no longer be pending.”

The second file was much the same. The third needed one signature. In the fourth, the spelling of the applicant’s name was clear; only a pencilled question mark had caused it to stop. Suman moved nineteen files forward that day.

Word spread to the other sections. Someone joked, “There is one way to escape the red tape—dispose of the file before the tape arrives.” But the joke became a working rule. In three days the number of pending files fell from 1,773 to 1,234.

On Friday Phoolkumari delivered three thousand metres of red tape in thirty large rolls. The red circles were stacked one above another in the veranda. From a distance it looked as though wedding decorations had been unloaded in the office.

Jitendra opened the register and counted the goods. “Thirty rolls. One hundred metres each.”

The accounts clerk asked, “Length verification?”

Phoolkumari raised her eyebrows. “Will you open and measure every roll?”

The rules required sample verification. Three rolls were selected. A distance of twenty-five metres was measured from the veranda into the courtyard and marked at both ends with lime. Four employees stretched out the tape, folded it, stretched it again, and kept measuring. Children gathered near the gate to watch the spectacle.

The first roll measured a full hundred metres. So did the second. The third measured ninety-nine metres and seventy centimetres.

Jitendra's face became grave. "Thirty centimetres short."

Phoolkumari immediately opened the folded inner end of the roll. A little tape had been pressed inside. It was measured again—four centimetres more than a full hundred metres.

"Now?" she asked.

Jitendra wrote: "Sample verification satisfactory."

The goods were accepted.

On Monday the fortnight formally began. But now another problem arose: how much tape should actually be cut? The original calculation of three thousand metres had been based on the old pending-file count. After a week of counting and clearing, only 951 files remained pending. Nearly two thousand metres of tape had become surplus.

Dinesh Babu asked, "Why is so much left over?"

Jitendra showed him the original calculation. "The number was higher when the purchase was made."

"The files have come down. That is good."

"The tape has gone up. That is a stores problem."

On the main day of the fortnight, the pending files from every section were brought into the veranda. Employees cut tape, tied knots, wrote the number of pending days on small slips, and attached them. The sight was peculiar: before a file could be marked for speedy disposal, the tape first had to be cut, measured, knotted, tagged, and entered in the register.

Suman picked up one file and said, "This only needs approval. Shall I send it now?"

Ramudit was holding the tape. "Mark it first, otherwise it will not appear in the fortnight's count."

Suman looked at him. "Why should a disposed file not appear in the count?"

Ramudit folded the tape and put it on the corner of the desk. "Ask that question upstairs."

Dinesh Babu was passing by and stopped when he heard them. “If it can be disposed of now, there is no need to tie tape around it. Do the work first.”

After that small sentence, the pace in the veranda changed. Employees tied red tape around some files and sent others straight onward. By evening the bundle carrying red tape was smaller, but the pile of orders issued was larger. Mahendra Paswan’s approval for cleaning the drain was in that pile.

At the end of the fortnight a report was prepared. It listed the initial number of pending files, the number disposed of, classification by reason, the balance remaining, and the target for the following month. At the end was a box marked “Special Achievement.”

Suman joked, “Write: less red tape used.”

Jitendra did not laugh. Nineteen rolls of red tape remained in his store.

“What do we do with all these?” he asked Dinesh Babu.

“Keep them in stores. They are government material.”

“How long will they remain here?”

“Until they are used.”

“Used where?”

Dinesh Babu paused before answering. “For tying old files?”

The two looked at each other. Then Dinesh Babu burst out laughing. “No. Not for that.”

In the end, the nineteen rolls were placed on the upper shelf of the store. Jitendra wrote a paper label and tied it on: “Red-Tape Elimination Fortnight—Surplus Material.” To fasten the label, he naturally cut off a piece of the same red tape.

Two weeks later Mahendra Paswan came to the office to collect his approval letter. Work on cleaning his drain had already begun. Suman handed him the letter. Mahendra folded it into his angoccha, thanked him, and started out.

As he crossed the veranda, his eyes fell on the open store-room door. Inside, on the upper shelf, the red rolls were arranged in a row. The end of one roll hung down. Jitendra stood on a small stool, pushing it back up.

Mahendra asked, “Babu, what is all that tape for?”

Climbing down from the stool, Jitendra said, “For eliminating red tape.”

Mahendra stood still for a few moments. He thought the clerk was joking. But Jitendra’s face was entirely ordinary.

Mahendra walked out. A gust of wind rose near the gate. Inside, the label tied to the shelf fluttered slightly: “Surplus Material.” Its knot was red.

STORY 253

The Forgotten Order

...

The front gate of the Jaynagar Minor Irrigation Materials Store was wide enough for two bullock carts to pass through side by side. In front of it was a paved ramp, and beyond that the main road. Yet on Tuesday morning a handcart loaded with a thick iron pipe came up to the open gate, stopped, and was then turned around by six labourers and taken toward the rear of the store.

Raghav Mishra, the new storekeeper, watched the scene from the window. "Is the front gate closed?" he asked his assistant, Naresh Kamati. "No. The gate is open." "Then why is the pipe going round to the back?" Naresh raised his head from the register. "There is an order." "What order?" "An old one. Materials are not to enter from the front." Raghav looked again toward the gate. Both leaves stood open. The inner ramp shone with new cement. A bicycle came in easily; the young man delivering the post dismounted and placed a bundle of letters on Naresh's desk. "A person may enter from the front, but a pipe may not?" Raghav asked. Naresh laughed. "A person is not material." The answer was so orderly that Raghav did not immediately ask another question.

It was only his third day after joining the store. During the first two days he had been occupied with old registers, the stock count, and the accounting of keys. Now he began to understand that the logic of the building depended not only on what objects were kept inside it, but also on the route by which those objects entered. At noon he called for the file titled "Entry Arrangement." It was a thin file. The first page contained an order four years old. During Sawan that year, part of the front ramp had subsided. The order stated that during the period of repair all heavy material would enter through the rear gate so that the damaged portion would not bear any load. The last line read: "This arrangement shall remain in force until further orders."

"When was the repair completed?" Raghav asked. Naresh pointed through the window at the shining ramp. "That same year. In three weeks." "And the further order?" Naresh shrugged. "An order cancelling this one had come. But that file has disappeared." Raghav turned the pages again. After the first order there were two inspection notes, a measurement sheet for the ramp repair, and three pages of annual stock verification. There was no copy of the cancellation order. "So all of you know that the order was cancelled?" "Everyone knows." "Yet the old order is still in force?" "There is no paper for the cancellation

order.” For the first time Raghav encountered a situation in which memory was not proof, yet forgetfulness had become the rule.

The next day four brass pump components arrived. The bullock cart reached the front gate. Gatekeeper Ramji Yadav raised a hand and stopped it. “To the back.” The cart driver said, “The road there is muddy.” “There is an order.” “But this ramp is new.” “I know nothing about the ramp. I know the gate.” The bullock cart turned around. The rear route passed along the store wall, beside a pond, and between two houses. After the rains the earth was still soft. One wheel sank. The labourers got down and pushed. Half an hour later the components reached the store.

Raghav called Ramji. “Do you remember the cancellation order?” “Yes, Babu. I was posted here that day too.” “Then why do you stop things at the front gate?” Ramji answered plainly, “The first order is with me in writing. The second is in my memory. Government service does not run on memory.” Raghav did not write that sentence in the file, but it stayed in his mind all day. He called for the dispatch register. On a page from four years earlier he found an entry—No. 47/Bh, subject: “Regarding restoration of normal arrangement for entry of materials.” The date of dispatch, three recipients, and the outgoing letter number were all clearly recorded. “This is proof,” Raghav said.

Accounts Clerk Shashikant Jha lowered his spectacles. “It proves that some letter was sent. The entry does not fully tell us what was written in the letter.” “The subject is written here.” “A subject is not an order.” “So for four years everyone understood the subject, but not the order?” Shashikant smiled. “We understand many things. A file accepts only as much as is written.” Raghav wrote to the district office asking for a copy of letter No. 47/Bh. The reply came five days later: “A search is being made in old correspondence records.” During those five days the mud on the rear road dried. Materials continued to arrive by the same route. For the employees this was normal. Only Raghav paused every time he saw the open front gate. Above it, in blue paint, were the words “MAIN ENTRANCE,” but for heavy objects they had become merely writing.

One evening Bishun Sah, who had brought pipe joints from Darbhanga, came to Raghav with a transport bill. Below the original carriage amount an additional sixty rupees had been written. “What is this?” Raghav asked. “Labour for taking it round the back. The handcart unloaded at the front, then had to be taken round by the pond. Six men were needed.” Shashikant examined the bill. “There is no provision for additional entry labour in the rate schedule.” Bishun Sah said, “There is no provision in the rate schedule for going round the back either.” “Then under what head can this be paid?” “I do not know. The labourers had to be paid.” Raghav looked through the window. From the front gate to the store veranda the distance was no more than fifty

paces. To reach the same place by the rear route, one had to go halfway around the pond, pass through the narrow lane between two houses, and climb an earthen slope. That day the six labourers sat near the veranda catching their breath. Basant Paswan, the oldest among them, wiped beneath his arm with his gamchha and said, "Babu, they said the front route should not bear the load. Now the load falls on us."

Raghav could not immediately arrange payment of the extra sixty rupees. The rate schedule was indeed silent. On the back of the bill he wrote: "Additional carriage due to previous entry arrangement." Shashikant kept it aside because no such expenditure head had existed before. Thus the old order did not merely lengthen the route of carts; it also created a new kind of account for which there was no column. On the sixth day a records assistant arrived from the district. His name was Chandramohan Das. He carried a thin register and a cloth bag. He examined the store's old records list, then said, "The original copy of letter No. 47/Bh will not be found here." "Why?" Raghav asked. "That letter was entered under 'temporary correspondence.' Under the rules, it was weeded out after three years." "You mean destroyed?" "That is what the register says."

He opened the register. Against a group of twelve letters, including No. 47/Bh, one line read: "Retention period completed; weeding approved." Raghav showed him the file containing the original order. "Why has this four-year-old order survived?" Chandramohan looked at the green slip on top of the file. "It was retained as a 'permanent instruction.'" "But it was only for the repair period." "The classification says permanent." "The letter cancelling it was temporary, and the thing it cancelled was permanent?" Chandramohan remained silent for a moment. Then he closed the register. "The life of a record is determined by its classification, not by human intention." No one laughed. Outside, a new supplier had arrived with a small truck. Ramji was gesturing with his hand and explaining the rear route.

That day Raghav wrote out the entire situation and sent it to the current officer, Vibhuti Narayan. His comment returned in the evening: "If a copy of the earlier cancellation is unavailable, submit a draft of a fresh order clarifying the present position." Naresh was pleased. "Now the matter will be resolved." Raghav drafted: "The repair of the front ramp has been completed; therefore heavy materials may also enter through the front main gate. The temporary restriction imposed four years ago shall be treated as ended." Shashikant read it and asked, "Will you mention the number of the previous order?" "Yes." "The number of the cancellation letter?" Raghav looked at him. A smile appeared on Shashikant's lips. "Leave that reference out."

The draft went to the officer. He added one word—"immediately"—and signed it. Three copies of the new order were made: one for the gatekeeper, one for the store, and one for the district office. Ramji read his copy and very carefully placed it over the photocopy of the old order. The next morning the first heavy material entered through the front gate: a thick bundle of twelve bamboo poles. Suraj Paswan, pulling the handcart, came straight up the ramp without stopping. For the first time Ramji did not signal him to go around the back. Suraj laughed. "Has the road become shorter today?" Ramji said, "The road is the same length. The order has become shorter." Raghav heard this from the veranda. He felt like laughing, but did not.

At noon Naresh went to the rear gate. A wooden sign had hung there for four years: "ENTRY OF HEAVY MATERIALS THIS WAY." After the new order it was no longer needed. Naresh took it down and brought it inside. "What shall I do with this?" he asked Raghav. "Put it in stores." "Under what category?" Before Raghav could answer, Shashikant said, "Permanent material." Naresh carried the sign inside. A little later he returned and placed a small paper on Raghav's desk. It was a new entry in the stores register: "One wooden direction board, relating to previous entry arrangement, use ended, retained in custody." Raghav read the line. A long strip of sunlight was entering through the front gate. There was no cart at the rear gate now. He picked up his pen and signed against the entry.

STORY 254

The Government Umbrella

...

There was only one umbrella in the store of the Jhanjharpur Road Maintenance Subdivision, but it had a register of its own. On the first page, in blue ink, was written: "Departmental Umbrella No. 38." Against it were the year of purchase, price—four hundred and eighty rupees—black cloth, metal shaft, wooden handle. The last column was headed "Condition." Year after year the same word had been entered there: "Serviceable."

On the third day after taking charge, the new storekeeper, Gopal Thakur, examined the umbrella. It lay on the top shelf of the iron cupboard inside a white cloth cover. From the handle hung a small brass plate marked "38." As he opened the cover, Sahdev Paswan, the office attendant, said, "Carefully, Babu. Two of its ribs are new." Gopal opened the umbrella. Two of the twelve ribs shone more brightly than the other ten. There were three round patches on the cloth. The handle had fresh polish. Two small red marks showed on the central shaft.

"Is this umbrella in use or under repair?" Gopal asked. Sahdev laughed. "Both."

Gopal's curiosity increased when he examined the old store accounts. In the first year: stitching of cloth—one hundred and twenty. In the second: two ribs—two hundred and ten. Then repair of handle—one hundred and seventy. Later, removal of rust after it was soaked in the rains—three hundred and twenty. Once, when the brass number plate went missing, a new one was made—two hundred and sixty-five. The previous year, when the ring used to open the umbrella jammed, an inspection came from the district store; travel and repair together cost seven hundred and twenty.

Gopal began adding. All the small and large items over four years came to four thousand nine hundred and sixty rupees. He looked again at the first page—original price, four hundred and eighty. "Is this account wrong?" Sahdev turned the register toward himself and looked. "No. The previous storekeeper added it three times." "Ten times the price of the umbrella spent on it?" "The umbrella is old. The accounts keep becoming new."

That afternoon Junior Engineer Shashibhushan Rai was about to leave for a field inspection. The sky outside was grey. Sahdev took out the departmental umbrella and placed it in the veranda. Shashibhushan stopped when he saw it.

“You expect me to take this in today’s rain?” “Yes.” “Last time it turned inside out in the wind, didn’t it?” “Two ribs were replaced after that.” Shashibhushan looked outside. Drops had begun to fall. He took a small folding umbrella from his own bag. “Leave the government umbrella here. Mine will do.”

Gopal asked, “Then who is the departmental umbrella for?” Shashibhushan replied casually, “For field inspections. But today the wind is too strong.” Sahdev put the umbrella back in its cover.

During the first week of the rains, an old carpenter who did work for the store, Nathuni Sah, came in. Gopal showed him the umbrella. Nathuni first pressed the ribs, then held the cloth up to the light and counted the three patches. “What would a new umbrella like this cost today?” Gopal asked. “Five hundred and fifty to six hundred.” “And this old one?” “It is old now. But the ribs are strong.”

Gopal did not show him the total in the register. He only asked, “What value would you put on an umbrella repaired for four thousand rupees?” Nathuni Sah burst out laughing. “The price of a repair does not live inside the umbrella, Babu. What was broken has been joined again, that is all.” Sahdev, standing nearby, said, “Everything lives in the register.” Whether Nathuni understood the remark or not was unclear. He picked up his bag of tools and moved on to another job.

Gopal ran a hand over the umbrella’s handle. The polish was smooth, but the old grain of the wood could still be seen beneath it.

Two days later Lakshminarayan Mahato, an assistant from the district store, arrived for physical verification. His rule was simple: whatever existed in the register had to be seen with the eye, its number read, and its usability recorded. Umbrella No. 38 was placed before him. Lakshminarayan opened and closed it three times. Then he held it over his head and walked as far as the veranda. Rain was falling outside, but he did not cross the threshold.

“Serviceable,” he said. Gopal asked, “Its value?” “Whatever is in the register.” “Current value?” Lakshminarayan shook his head. “I inspect condition, not the market.” “Repairs have cost ten times the original price.” “Then write that in the repair column.” “Does that change the condition?” “Does the umbrella open?” “Yes.” “Then serviceable.”

He made a small verification mark in red pencil. The umbrella went back into its white cover. For the first time, it became clear to Gopal that the body of an object and its accounts could live two separate lives.

A week later a letter came from the district office for the annual physical verification. The number, condition, and maintenance expenditure of every movable asset had to be reported. Against No. 38, Gopal wrote original value:

four hundred and eighty rupees; cumulative repairs: four thousand nine hundred and sixty. The paper went upward. Three days later it came back with a red-pencil circle: "Maintenance expenditure excessive. Clarify reasons."

Gopal opened the register again to search for reasons. Items that had looked small when scattered across separate years became absurd when added into a single line. He called Sahdev. "When was the first repair?" "In the second month after purchase." "Two months after purchase?" "The first time it went toward Madhepur for an inspection, a rib bent in the wind." "Why wasn't a new umbrella bought then?" "Why a new one? This one was new." "The second rib?" "The next year." "The polish?" "The wood in the handle had begun to crack. An inspection note said departmental material should receive proper maintenance."

Gopal wrote as the reason: "Necessary repairs from time to time." Then he read it and crossed it out. It seemed merely to repeat the question.

He examined the older files. Along with the original purchase bill he found a short note: "For the convenience of field staff during monsoon inspections." After that, every paper concerned the health of the umbrella, not the field staff.

The next morning Accounts Assistant Prabhakar Jha came in. Gopal showed him the figures. Prabhakar lowered his spectacles on his nose. "The problem is not that the expenditure became ten times the price," he said. "The problem is that it was all on the same item." "If it had been spent on different umbrellas?" "Then there would have been different serial numbers." "And the total expenditure?" "If the total were the same, the question would have taken a different form."

Gopal looked at Prabhakar's face for a few moments. Then he asked, "The solution?" Prabhakar closed the register. "Prevent further damage."

That short sentence had an immediate effect. New rules were made for the umbrella: it was not to be used in strong wind; after prolonged rain it must be fully dried before storage; if splashed with mud, it must be wiped with a damp cloth; it must not be leaned against a wall with the handle downward; it could not leave the store without an entry. Sahdev read the rules and said, "The umbrella will be saved." Gopal asked, "And the people?" Sahdev smiled. "People will carry their own umbrellas."

On the second day after the rules came into force, something happened. The Subdivisional Officer himself was going out to the field. It had rained throughout the night; the roadside near the Kamla Balan had subsided. The officer's vehicle stood at the gate. Sahdev brought the departmental umbrella to the veranda. At that exact moment a strong gust of wind came and the cloth fluttered.

From inside the store Gopal called, "Use is prohibited in strong wind." Sahdev's hand stopped. The officer looked at Gopal. "By whose order is this restriction?" "Maintenance instructions issued after the district remarks." The officer looked at the half-open umbrella for a moment. Then he said, "All right. Close it." Sahdev closed the umbrella. The officer ran to the vehicle. Within five paces his kurta was wet.

When he returned at noon, his first question was, "Is the umbrella safe?" Sahdev said, "Yes. Completely dry." Gopal could not tell whether the officer laughed. He had had to go home to change his clothes.

At the end of the month the district replied: "Excessive maintenance expenditure shall be controlled in future. Measures shall be adopted to extend the useful life of the material." This time Gopal did not open a separate file. He called Suresh Mandal, the store carpenter. Two wooden pegs were fitted to the wall beside the cupboard so that the umbrella could hang without putting weight on the ribs. An extra layer of old cotton cloth was added inside the white cover so that the metal would not rub against the wall. Total expenditure: one hundred and sixty rupees.

Prabhakar saw the bill and asked, "Under what head is this?" Gopal said, "Measures to extend useful life." Prabhakar said nothing. The bill was passed.

The rains intensified. The unpaved ground in front of the office remained full of splashing water all day. Employees came and went with their own umbrellas, plastic sheets, or gamchhas. No. 38 hung straight on the wall. Because its black cloth now became wet only rarely, some of its shine returned.

One day Sahdev's own umbrella tore midway on the road. At noon he had to carry an official letter to the post office. Outside, rain was pouring. He stood on the store threshold and looked at the departmental umbrella. Gopal was there too. Their eyes met once.

"Take it," Gopal said. Sahdev reached out, then stopped. "The wind is strong." "Today it is a little less." "Its outside use will have to be entered in the register." "We will enter it." Sahdev looked at the umbrella again. Beneath the black cloth the brass 38 was shining. In the end he picked up his own torn umbrella. "The post office is not very far."

He went out into the rain. One side of his umbrella drooped low. Gopal walked over to the wall. The cover of the government umbrella had slipped slightly. He pulled it up and straightened it. Then he opened the register and wrote in the "Condition" column for No. 38: "Serviceable, safe." Outside, Sahdev's figure slowly disappeared behind the curtain of rain. Inside the store, the umbrella remained dry.

STORY 255

Attendance

...

The iron gate of the Benipatti Cooperative Extension Office opened every day at 9:45 in the morning. Opening it was the duty of attendant Naresh Paswan. He first swept the veranda and then placed a thick blue-bound register on the Head Clerk's desk. On its cover, in white letters, was written: "Employee Attendance."

There were seventeen employees in the office. Work was officially considered to begin at ten, but by old custom people continued arriving until 10:20, 10:25, sometimes even 10:40. One blamed the bus, another a bullock that had held him up on a field embankment, another a delay in the children's breakfast. Head Clerk Ramsharan Jha, after years of hearing everyone's reasons, had acquired a special skill—the skill of hearing nothing.

On the third day after the new Block Cooperative Officer, Amarnath Thakur, arrived, he called for the register at 10:05. Thirteen signatures were there; four lines were blank. He drew a straight line in red pencil before the empty lines.

At 10:30 Shambhunath Mishra arrived. When he did not find the register, he asked Naresh, "Where has it gone?" "To Sahib." "And now the signature?" "After the red line." Shambhunath's expression changed. "How does one sign after a red line?" Naresh shrugged. "I open the gate, not the rules."

The four late employees were not docked half a day that time, but all were asked for written explanations. The next day, by 9:55, sixteen employees had signed. The office had never looked so alert before.

At 10:10 Amarnath Thakur came out to inspect the sections. In Accounts, two of four chairs were empty. In the Loans Section, only one of three people was present. In Records, bags sat on two chairs, but the people were missing. "Everyone signed?" he asked Ramsharan. "Yes, almost everyone." "Then where are they?" Ramsharan thought for a moment. "Someone may have gone for tea, someone to fetch papers, someone outside with a visitor." Amarnath said, "Attendance is required in the office, not merely in the register." By afternoon that sentence had reached every section.

The following week a new arrangement appeared. After signing, people left something or other on their chairs. Shambhunath hung his gamchha over the chair-back. Accounts Assistant Vimla Devi left her cloth bag under the desk.

Store Clerk Suresh Mandal left a half-filled lota on his table. With such objects present, an empty chair did not look quite empty.

One day at 10:30 Amarnath inspected again. In one room five chairs held five different objects—a gamchha, an umbrella, a bag, a lunchbox, and an old pair of slippers. Only two people were there. He asked, “Are these employees or materials?” No one answered.

The next day a notice appeared: “Personal articles left on chairs shall not be treated as proof of attendance.” Ramsharan said quietly, “Now the question of proof has arisen.” Shambhunath laughed. “The register is the proof.” “Sahib says the register is not enough.” “Then why have a register?” No one in the office had a direct answer.

The employees’ difficulty was not entirely invented. Three of them often had to inspect PACS godowns, two brought loan statements from banks, and one clerk made rounds of the post office and treasury. If someone went straight to the field, he could not sign the register. If he came to the office first to sign, the field might lie in the opposite direction.

One day Vimla Devi said, “Rahika PACS is closer to my house, but for attendance I must first come to Benipatti and then turn back toward Rahika—two hours merely on the road.” Ramsharan prepared a note on this practical difficulty and sent it to Amarnath. Amarnath wrote: “Employees proceeding on field duty shall inform the Head Clerk before departure.”

Instead of decreasing, the problem grew. How was the information to be given? The Head Clerk himself arrived by bus in the morning. Shambhunath proposed, “If the register meets us on the road, both purposes will be served together.” Ramsharan laughed, but the idea did not die there.

Half a kos east of the office was an old pipal-tree crossing. Three employees coming from the Madhubani side got off the bus there. Two came by bicycle along the same route. The road from Rahika also met there. Naresh’s house was on that side too.

One Monday Naresh reached the office at 9:20 and Ramsharan said, “The register remained with me from yesterday. I took it home to total the month. You pass by the tea shop, don’t you?” “Yes.” “Tomorrow morning collect the register from my house. Shambhunath will meet you at the pipal crossing. He is going to the field; let him sign, then bring it straight here.”

It was meant to be an arrangement for one day. But the next morning Vimla too met Shambhunath at the pipal crossing because she was going to Rahika PACS. She signed as well. When a third employee, Suresh, got off the bus, Naresh opened the register for him. Three signatures in ten minutes.

The register reached the office at 9:55. All three employees had gone on to their field assignments. Amarnath looked at the register—three punctual signatures, and field work also underway. The arrangement seemed successful.

Two days later Accounts Assistant Harikishore told Naresh, “My bus stops at the same crossing. Hold the register there for five minutes.” “I have to reach the office.” “One minute.” One minute gradually became five. The old pipal crossing became the attendance register’s first halt.

Then a second halt developed at the Dak Bungalow crossing. Ramvilas Yadav came that way by bicycle. Naresh left the pipal crossing at 9:35 and reached the Dak Bungalow crossing at 9:40. Ramvilas bent over the register and signed, then turned his bicycle toward the market to buy vegetables and send them home with someone.

A third halt formed near the old pond. Sumitra Devi’s rickshaw reached there. She would sign and say, “I’ll be in the office in five minutes.” Five minutes sometimes became fifteen because she bought milk on the way.

Naresh’s route became as fixed as the hands of a clock: 9:20—Ramsharan’s house; 9:25—the old pipal crossing; 9:40—the Dak Bungalow crossing; 9:45—the old pond; 9:55—the office.

There was one difficulty in this arrangement. The register was thick, and its corners bent when carried on the rear carrier of the bicycle. Naresh cut an old fertiliser sack and made a cover for it. When the rains came, he added waxed cloth on top. The register’s journey became safer than the employees’ journeys.

At first Ramsharan regarded the arrangement as temporary. But at the end of the month he examined the register and found only two late signatures. Earlier there used to be twenty or twenty-two. He was surprised. Amarnath too was pleased. “There has been improvement.” Ramsharan merely said, “Yes.”

That afternoon Naresh asked, “Should Sahib be told the route the register takes?” Ramsharan pushed his spectacles upward. “Sahib has seen the result. He has not asked for a description of the route.”

The system now began to grow under its own power. Employees whose homes lay away from the register’s route began adjusting their time to meet it. Someone got off the morning bus at the pipal crossing and waited for Naresh; another stopped his bicycle at the Dak Bungalow crossing. Everyone’s clock began matching the register’s clock, not the office clock.

After a few days something strange happened. A person who had earlier reached the office at 10:15 could now sign the register at 9:25, leisurely finish a small errand in the market, talk to someone for a while, and still reach the office at 10:15. The time in the register improved. The time of the chairs remained the same.

One day Amarnath again went out to inspect the sections. It was 10:05. The register contained sixteen signatures. Including Naresh, only seven people were in the office. “The rest?” Ramsharan replied, “Some in the field, some on the way.” “All have signed?” “Yes.” Amarnath looked at the register. Every time was between 9:25 and 9:55. He studied the page for a few moments. “Attendance has become very good.” Ramsharan tried to discover the meaning of the sentence, but Amarnath closed the register.

Then fear of inspection arose. News came from the district that attendance might be checked on any day. The employees held a meeting. Shambhunath said, “The register is fine, but what about the chairs?” Vimla Devi said, “On inspection day everyone should arrive on time.” Someone asked, “Which day will be inspection day?” That was the main problem.

Ramvilas suggested that when Naresh set out with the register, he should inform everyone if he saw a district vehicle. Naresh became annoyed. “Should I deliver the register or guard the road?” The matter stopped there.

One morning in Magh there was dense fog. Naresh’s bicycle bell could be heard ten handspans ahead, though the rider himself could not be seen. He collected the blue register from Ramsharan’s house, tied it in the cloth cover, and set off. At the pipal crossing five employees were already waiting. All signed quickly. Ramvilas was not at the Dak Bungalow crossing; his son said, “Father will be here in five minutes.” Naresh did not wait. Bringing the register on time had now become a matter of his own prestige.

Near the old pond Sumitra Devi appeared late through the fog. She ran up, placed the register on the bicycle seat, and signed. Naresh looked at the time—9:49. He pedalled fast. The office gate opened at 9:55. Naresh did not even sweep the veranda; first he placed the register on Ramsharan’s desk.

At that exact moment a white vehicle stopped at the gate. An Inspection Assistant from the District Cooperative Office got out with two employees. “Attendance register,” he said the moment he entered.

Naresh placed the blue register before him. The Inspection Assistant turned the page. Sixteen signatures were there. Ramvilas’s line was blank. The clock showed 10:02. He said approvingly, “Discipline is good.” Then he looked up. The veranda was empty. Of the four chairs in Accounts, one held Vimla Devi’s bag, but Vimla herself had not yet reached the gate. In the Loans Section only Ramsharan sat wiping his spectacles. The store key was tied at Naresh’s waist.

The Inspection Assistant asked, “Where are the people?” Ramsharan said, “They must be coming.” “But the signatures?” Ramsharan looked at Naresh. The lower part of Naresh’s trousers was wet with the moisture of the fog. An empty cover made from a fertiliser sack was tied to the bicycle carrier.

For a few moments no one spoke. Outside, three employees could be seen approaching slowly from the direction of the pipal crossing. The Inspection Assistant closed the register. "This will be discussed separately." He walked toward Amarnath's room.

For two weeks the morning journey of the register stopped. Employees again came directly to the office. During the first three days there were five, then four, then six signatures after the red line. Complaints resumed—bus, field, godown, bank, distance from home.

At the end of the month Amarnath issued no new order. He simply placed the register in Naresh's charge and said, "This will not leave the office." Naresh said, "Yes."

The next day he opened the gate at 9:45, swept the veranda, and placed the register on the desk. By 9:55 three employees had arrived. At ten there were seven signatures. A week later people again began adjusting their schedules. Some ran in at 9:55, others exactly at ten. The register continued to reach the desk regularly at 9:45.

One morning in Phagun Ramsharan arrived a little early. All the office rooms were still closed. Naresh was opening the gate. The blue register was already on the desk.

Ramsharan asked, "When did this arrive?" Naresh said, "With me. At 9:45." Ramsharan looked out through the window. There was no sign of any employee on the road. He ran a hand over the blue cover of the register.

There had been a time when the attendance of the people in the office depended on the register. Now the only thing one could rely on to reach the office on time was the register itself.

Naresh picked up the broom and went toward the veranda. The clock showed 9:56. On the desk, the attendance register was regularly present in its proper place.

STORY 256

Photo Identification

...

When new identity cards were introduced at the Jhanjharpur Minor Irrigation Division office, Ramkishun, who sat at the gate, had the greatest difficulty. He had been guarding the place for twenty years. How fast a person walked, whose cough could be recognised from a distance, how many times whose bicycle bell rang—such signs were enough for Ramkishun to identify everyone in the office. But an order came from the district that entry would be allowed only after a photo identity card had been shown.

In red letters the order said: “Look at the proof, not the person.” Ramkishun read the sentence twice. The third time Head Clerk Shashibhushan Babu read it aloud to him.

“So now you will stop even me if I come without an identity card?” Accounts Assistant Bhola Jha asked with a laugh.

Ramkishun said, “That is what the order says.”

“You have been seeing my face for twenty years.”

“The face is not mentioned in the order.”

During the first week, all the employees came enthusiastically with their identity cards hanging from their necks. A blue strip bore the department's name, a photograph occupied the middle, and below it were the name and designation. Some photographs were so old that hair now half white was black in the picture; someone's spectacles had changed; someone had had a moustache then and no longer did. Ramkishun looked at both the identity card and the person. If the person was familiar but the photograph seemed wrong, he trusted the person. Yet the sentence in the order remained stuck in his head—look at the proof, not the person.

One Monday Bhola Jha forgot his identity card at home. There were two files in the front basket of his bicycle and a bag of vegetables on the rear carrier. Ramkishun recognised him from far away, yet lowered the bamboo barrier in front of him.

“What happened?” Bhola Jha asked.

“Identity card?”

Bhola Jha touched his neck. Empty. “It is at home. Don't you recognise me?”

“I do.”

“Then how do I go inside?”

Ramkishun showed him the copy of the order.

Bhola Jha looked toward the veranda inside, laughing at first, but Ramkishun did not lift the barrier. “My desk is inside, my files are inside, my salary comes from this office.”

“All correct. But the identity card is outside.”

Bhola Jha stood near the gate for half an hour. In the end his son brought the card by bicycle from home. Ramkishun looked at the card, read the name, examined the photograph, and only then lifted the barrier. As he went inside Bhola Jha said, “Today you introduced me to myself all over again.”

After that incident the status of the identity card rose in the office. Employees bought transparent covers. Someone changed the neck strap, someone had a new photograph taken. Shashibhushan Babu wanted the letters of his name printed larger because on the old card he needed spectacles to read them. But the printing agency said the layout had been fixed by the district.

A small new economy grew around the identity card. In the morning, queues of employees could be seen at photographers’ shops in the market. Some wanted to replace old photographs, some wanted stronger straps for hanging the card around the neck. A transparent cover cost five rupees, a blue strap twelve, a strong clasp twenty. Vimla Devi from Accounts said that protecting the identity card was costing more than the identity card itself. Bhola Jha replied, “Identity is hardly protected cheaply.”

One day Junior Assistant Raghunath’s identity card became wet in the rain. One corner of the photograph blurred. When he reached the gate, Ramkishun first looked at Raghunath and then at the identity card. Raghunath himself said, “You recognise me, but recognise the identity card too.” They both laughed. Until then the rule was still a joke, not a difficulty.

As a precaution, the Head Clerk also had an entry register placed at the gate. The names of outsiders, their time of arrival, and whom they were going to meet were all to be written down. For employees, however, the identity card was considered sufficient. No one objected to this distinction because everyone assumed that Ramkishun already knew the people who belonged to the office. Paper was supposed to be for outsiders. The sentence “Look at the proof, not the person” was slowly becoming the gate’s new habit.

Two weeks later, on a Wednesday morning, an unfamiliar young man came to the gate. He carried a cloth bag in one hand, a thin bamboo rod under his arm, and a shining identity card around his neck. The card showed his photograph; above it, in bold letters, was written “Technical Service,” and

below, “Divisional Maintenance Assistant.” In one corner there was also a round blue mark.

Ramkishun took the card in his hand and examined it. The transparent cover was new, the photograph clear, the letters glossy. The young man gave his name as Mahendra.

“Whom are you going to see?”

“I have orders to inspect the fans and lights.”

Ramkishun looked at the card again. It said “Technical Service.” Fans and lights were technical things. He lifted the barrier.

Mahendra went inside. First he inspected the veranda fan, then the bulb in Accounts, then stood by the window of the engineer’s room and measured something. No one stopped him. The shining identity card around his neck was enough for everyone to assume that he belonged there for work.

Even Gopal the tea seller handed him a cup without asking. After two sips Mahendra said, “The wiring overhead is very old.”

Gopal became serious. “I have been saying that all along.”

By noon Mahendra reached the door of the store room. Storekeeper Navalkishore asked, “Whose orders?”

Mahendra showed the identity card.

As soon as he saw it, Navalkishore opened the register. “Write your name.”

Mahendra wrote his name. He went inside, measured two old fans, looked at a bundle of wire, and came out again.

At that moment Assistant Engineer Devkinandan Mishra arrived. Bhola Jha was sitting at the gate because Ramkishun had gone to eat. Devkinandan saw Mahendra coming out.

“Who is this?”

Bhola Jha said, “Technical Service. He has an identity card.”

Devkinandan stopped. “I have not called any technical service.”

Mahendra stopped walking. He turned and said, “I was sent from an electrical-goods shop in the market.”

“Which shop?”

“Shiv Shakti Electrical Goods.”

Devkinandan raised his eyebrows. “The owner of that shop was supposed to give me a quotation tomorrow. Are you a departmental employee?”

Mahendra took the identity card hanging from his neck into his hand. “Not an employee. I do service work.”

“Then how was the identity card made?”

Mahendra hesitated slightly. "A printer in the market made it. It took too long to get inside government offices. Everywhere they ask for papers. So I had an identity card made."

Bhola Jha took the card in his hand. Seen closely, the blue round mark was not a departmental seal at all but a small picture of a fan. Above "Technical Service" there was no department name. The card was merely glossy.

When Ramkishun returned from his meal, a small assembly had formed in the veranda: the Head Clerk, the engineer, the storekeeper, Bhola Jha, and Mahendra. The moment Ramkishun arrived, Shashibhushan Babu asked, "How did you let this young man inside?"

Ramkishun answered simply, "He showed a photo identity card."

"But this is not the department's identity card."

"The order given to me said to look at the identity card. No sample of the department's card was given to me."

Shashibhushan Babu fell silent. It was true: there was no specimen identity card at the gate. There was only a copy of the order.

Mahendra did not seem frightened. He said, "I have taken nothing. I measured two fans. I will submit a quotation. If you do not want it, do not take it."

Navalkishore immediately checked the store register. Not a single item was missing. Devkinandan examined Mahendra's bag—measuring tape, screwdriver, two pliers, papers, and a cotton gamchha.

Nothing had been removed, but the irony was clear: the fake identity card had proved more effective than real familiarity.

That evening the Head Clerk drafted four new instructions. First—only identity cards issued by the department would be valid. Second—specimens of all valid identity cards would be kept at the gate. Third—outside service personnel would receive a separate entry slip. Fourth—Ramkishun would compare the person's face with the identity card as well.

Ramkishun read the fourth point and asked, "What if the face and the photograph do not match?"

"Then no entry."

The next morning Bhola Jha was the first to arrive. This time the identity card was hanging from his neck. Ramkishun stopped him at the barrier, took the card, looked at the photograph, and then at Bhola Jha's face. The card was five years old. In the photograph Bhola Jha had a thick moustache; now he was clean-shaven. In the photograph he wore no spectacles; now he had thick-framed glasses. The hair on his head had also thinned by half.

Ramkishun kept comparing the two for a long time.

Bhola Jha became impatient. "Now what?"

"The photograph does not match."

"The identity card is mine, the name is mine, I am the employee."

"But the new instruction says I must match the face."

Bhola Jha did not laugh. He looked at his own old photograph on the card and then at Ramkishun.

"Then what should I do?"

Ramkishun looked toward the new instructions pasted on the wall inside the office the previous day. "You will have to submit a new photograph."

Bhola Jha stood outside the gate beside his bicycle. Inside were his desk, his files, the salary register, and twenty years of service. Around his neck hung the department's genuine identity card. But the photograph inside it belonged to a man five years younger.

At that very moment, across the road, Mahendra removed his shiny fake identity card from his neck, put it into his bag, and walked toward Shiv Shakti Electrical Goods. Ramkishun looked at him, then looked at Bhola Jha's identity card. The new instruction was clear. He did not lift the barrier.

STORY 257

The Welcome Gate

...

In the Phulparas Block compound, the Citizen Service Centre had once been difficult to find. It occupied a small service window between four rooms at the back of the old building. Above it, a board painted blue with the words "Citizen Service Centre" had half peeled away. Visitors entering from outside usually reached Accounts first, were sent from there to Nazarat, then wandered past the Treasury veranda before finally reaching the Centre.

Ramudgar Paswan, the Centre's sole assistant, had grown accustomed to this wandering. Someone would arrive panting and ask, "Is this the Citizen Service Centre?" He would open the window and say, "Yes. You have reached it now."

One Monday a letter arrived from the district under the "Citizen-Friendly Campus Improvement Scheme." It directed that entry access, directional signs, shaded seating, and reception arrangements be strengthened. A special grant of two lakh eighty-four thousand rupees had been sanctioned. The money could be spent only on improving external access; it could not be used to increase staff or for service materials inside.

Block Development Officer Shashikant Jha called a meeting. The Head Clerk, engineer, accountant, Ramudgar, and a representative of the construction workers sat together. The engineer opened a drawing: beside the main gate, a twenty-two-hand-wide arch; brick pillars on both sides; an iron frame above; in bold letters across the middle, "YOU ARE WELCOME," and below it, "Citizen Service Centre—Straight Ahead." Simple designs of makhana leaves and fish would be made on both pillars. Two lamps would be fitted for the night.

Ramudgar looked at the drawing and asked, "Will the board above the service window inside be replaced too?"

The engineer turned the paper over. "This head is for external access improvement."

"The latch on the window jams."

"That will come under repairs."

"Is there money under that head?"

The accountant laughed. "Not at present."

For two weeks the main gate was crowded with bricks, sand, bamboo, and tins of paint. Citizens entered from the side. Ramudgar's service window remained open. Sixty to seventy applications came each day—housing assistance, old-age pension, income certificates, caste certificates, family benefits, corrections in birth registration. He issued receipts, counted papers, separated incomplete documents, and arranged the files in order until evening.

As the welcome gate took shape, discussion of it grew throughout the office. The pillars were first to be painted light yellow, but then a telephone call came from the district office saying that the standard colour for Citizen-Friendly buildings would be a mixed ochre-yellow. The second colour was painted over the first. The letters of "YOU ARE WELCOME" were first white, then given black edging. One day the curve of one letter looked crooked, so the entire word was painted again.

Inside, Ramudgar kept the service-window latch moving with oil. Outside, the arch grew brighter day by day.

The inauguration was fixed for the first Thursday of the month. An order was issued that the campus should be clean, the main approach kept clear, a welcome register maintained, and a representative of the Citizen Service Centre posted at the gate to guide visitors. The Head Clerk told Ramudgar, "You know the Centre and understand all the schemes, so you stay at the gate."

Ramudgar asked, "Then at the service window?"

"The inauguration is only for one day."

He agreed.

On Thursday morning the welcome gate was decorated with marigold garlands. Two brass plates held rice grains and flowers. Block employees arrived early in clean clothes. The chief guest cut the ribbon, stood beneath the arch for photographs, said, "Respect for the citizen begins at the first door of the office," and moved forward. Inside, the service window remained closed because Ramudgar was at the gate directing guests.

By noon the programme ended. As Ramudgar was about to return inside, the Head Clerk handed him a new paper. The district had ordered a month-long "welcome monitoring" exercise. One person would remain at the gate, recording the visitor's name, village, purpose of visit, and the directional assistance provided. The number would be sent at the end of each day.

"Who will sit there?" Ramudgar asked.

The Head Clerk said, "There is no additional person at present. You manage it for one month. We will see later."

Ramudgar looked toward the service window. A half-day's queue of applicants had formed there.

From the next day the welcome arrangement became regular. Ramudgar sat beneath the gate at a small table with the register open. People no longer had to search for the Citizen Service Centre. The arch could be seen from far away. A visitor arrived, Ramudgar asked the name, wrote the village, filled in the purpose column, and pointed toward the inner veranda. "Go straight, then turn right."

Five minutes later the same person would return.

"The service window is closed."

Ramudgar would say, "I am on reception duty here."

"Then who will take the application?"

"Sit for a while. If the crowd decreases, I will go inside."

The crowd did not decrease. The more people went in, found the service window closed, and returned, the more questions accumulated at Ramudgar's table. The number in the welcome register rose rapidly.

On the third day, Ramkali Devi of Mahindwar arrived at eleven. She needed the name of a bank branch corrected in her widow-pension application. The sun was strong; a red gamchha covered her head. She read the arch and was pleased: "YOU ARE WELCOME." Ramudgar wrote her name, examined her papers, and sent her inside.

A little later she returned. "The window is closed."

"Sit down, Mother. I will go in after a while."

"I left home at seven in the morning."

Ramudgar half rose from his chair. At that moment the Head Clerk called from the veranda, "Ramudgar! Do not leave the gate unattended. Someone from the district may come to inspect."

He sat down again. Ramkali Devi remained seated on the new bench placed in the shade.

At noon Ramudgar ran inside for five minutes. He opened the service window and took three applications. Then a whistle sounded from the gate. The Block Development Officer's vehicle was entering. Ramudgar shut the window and ran back. The vehicle passed beneath the arch. The officer lowered the window and asked, "Is the welcome register being maintained?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How many?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven so far."

The officer nodded with satisfaction. "Good. People should feel that the facility is useful." The vehicle moved on.

Ramudgar looked at the register. Ramkali Devi's name had been entered twice—once on arrival, and again when she returned with the question about the closed service window and the assisting employee had asked her name again. He wanted to strike out the second entry, then remembered the instruction: "Visitors reaching the gate shall be recorded." Ramkali Devi had in fact reached the gate a second time. He left the entry as it was.

At the end of the first week the first review of the welcome gate was held. The figures were encouraging. Earlier the Citizen Service Centre had been estimated to receive an average of sixty citizens a day; now the welcome register contained between one hundred and seventy and two hundred names daily. The Head Clerk said, "Access has increased since the gate was built."

Ramudgar said quietly, "Many names are being entered again and again."

The accountant asked, "Do the instructions say that one person's name may be written only once?"

"They do not."

"Then the figures have been prepared according to the rules."

The application register inside the service window was then examined. Where fifty to sixty receipts had earlier been entered each day, there were now five, seven, sometimes ten. The Head Clerk scratched his head. "This figure has not been asked for in the review report."

So only the visitor count went into the welcome report.

On the tenth day a two-member team came from the district. The team first measured the width of the arch, checked the paint, read the directional lettering, checked whether the lamps were switched off during the day, and measured the distance of the benches. Looking at Ramudgar's register, one member said, "Footfall is good."

Ramkali Devi had come again that day. Her application had still not been submitted. She went up to one of the team members. "Babu, the window inside stays closed."

The member looked at Ramudgar. "Why?"

Ramudgar answered, "I remain on welcome duty."

"Another employee?"

The Head Clerk said, "Only one post is sanctioned."

The team remained silent for a while. Then one member wrote a comment: "Reception arrangement active; reconsideration of internal human-resource deployment required."

Ramkali Devi asked, "My application?"

The member smiled. "Submit it at the Centre."

She went inside. The service window was closed.

On the last day of the month, the total in the welcome register reached four thousand two hundred and thirteen. The district sent praise saying that citizen footfall at the Centre had increased significantly. The Block Development Officer ordered that the welcome arrangement continue for a second month. The proposal for an additional employee was kept for consideration “at an appropriate opportunity.”

That evening Ramudgar was closing the register. Ramkali Devi had come for the fourth time that week. This time she asked nothing. She crossed the gate and sat directly on the new bench. Her folded application was in her hand.

Ramudgar looked toward the service window inside, then at the welcome register spread before him. The evening light was fading. At the appointed time, both lamps on the arch came on. Above him, the words “YOU ARE WELCOME” shone in white letters.

Ramudgar placed his pen on the next blank line in the register. Ramkali Devi’s name was about to be written for the fifth time that month.

STORY 258

Annual Report

...

In the last week of Chait, the rear veranda of the Madhubani District Rural Construction Division was at its busiest. The bustle was not of bricks, sand, or stone chips, but of paper. Three tables had been joined in the middle. On one side lay bound copies of the previous year's annual report, on another the files of the current year's schemes, and on the third envelopes of photographs. On the wall above, the final line of the calendar had a red circle drawn around 31 March.

Head Clerk Harimohan Mishra would say as early as half past nine in the morning, "This time the report will not cross the deadline. Whatever state the work may be in, the report will go on time."

Accounts Assistant Bindeshwar Mandal had laughed at that sentence on the first day. By the third day he understood that it was not a joke but the office's principal objective. The district had ordered every division to send its annual statement of achievements in printed form by five in the evening on 31 March. Any delay would bring a separate call for explanation.

That year the division was responsible for twenty-seven schemes: five rural roads, six small culverts, eight community buildings, four drains, and four market sheds. Twenty-seven on paper. On the ground, the situation was different. Three roads were complete, two unfinished. Two culverts were ready, one lacked railings, and three had reached only the foundation stage. Of the community buildings, one was ready for inauguration, three had reached the roof, two the wall stage, and two were stuck in land disputes. Of the drains, one was complete and three half done. All four market sheds had pillars standing, but none had a roof.

Assistant Engineer Raghunath Kamati wrote in the first draft: "Completed schemes: 7."

Harimohan Mishra read the line and pushed his spectacles higher on his nose. "Such a small number will not enhance the dignity of the cover page."

"I have written as many as were completed," Raghunath said.

"Completed work is one thing; achievement is another," Harimohan explained. "One completed scheme gives one achievement. But even in an incomplete scheme, much work may have been done."

He began turning through the files. In the first unfinished road there were administrative approval, technical approval, site inspection, soil testing, arrival of materials, first layer, second layer—seven stages. Harimohan picked up his pen. “Road construction—seven major progress points.”

Raghunath kept looking at his face. “But the road is only one.”

“The progress is seven.”

By that formula the form of the report changed. A culvert without railings became “main structure completed.” A culvert that had reached the foundations became “foundation work completed.” A community building at wall level was described as “vertical structure progressing.” The two buildings held up by land disputes became an achievement titled “site problem identified and resolution process initiated.” The pillars of the market sheds became “structural presence established.”

Bindeshwar, adding the figures, asked, “If we total all this, the number will cross a hundred even though there are only twenty-seven schemes.”

Harimohan was pleased. “Then whoever reads the report will understand that the office did not sit idle all year.”

“The office hardly sat anywhere,” Raghunath said softly. “Half the time we are at the sites.”

Harimohan either did not hear him or chose not to answer.

The next day the selection of photographs began. The rule required at least twelve colour photographs in the report. There was no official photographer, so field staff had brought printed photographs taken on their own devices. One showed half a culvert, with bamboo scaffolding behind it. Harimohan said, “Crop it from this side. The scaffolding will disappear.”

Bindeshwar asked, “Then the incompleteness will not show.”

“An annual report is not an inspection file. It shows the year’s achievements.”

In another photograph four labourers were levelling earth in front of a community building whose walls were only waist-high. Its caption became: “Construction work linked to the community complex proceeding at a rapid pace with local participation.”

A third photograph showed a fully completed road, but it had been built the previous year. Raghunath recognised it at once. “This is not from this year.”

Harimohan put the envelope aside. “Then do not use it. It must already have appeared in the old report.”

Bindeshwar felt some relief at that. The office was bending the language of the paper, not the year itself.

Meanwhile Lakhan Paswan, a mason working on the Piprahi market shed, came to the office three times. Four weeks of his wages were pending. The first time Accounts said the measurement book was incomplete. The second time the measurement book arrived, but the engineer's signature was missing. The third time Raghunath was in the office, but he was choosing photographs for the report.

Lakhan stood in the veranda and said, "Babu, for two days we have been buying rice on credit at home. Please sign the measurement."

Raghunath reached for the file. From across the table Harimohan said, "First finish the sequence of these twelve photographs. The printer is waiting."

Lakhan did not understand. "What does the photograph have to do with my wages?"

"Nothing," Raghunath said. "That is why both tasks are not moving at the same time."

Harimohan looked up. Bindeshwar lowered his head and began counting papers.

By noon the photographs had been arranged. By evening the number of achievements had risen from 7 to 143. Those 143 included 21 site inspections, 17 technical measurements, 13 material tests, 26 progress reviews, 19 community meetings, 7 completed schemes, and the remaining individual stages.

Bindeshwar checked the total again. "Nineteen community meetings?"

Raghunath said, "There were twelve meetings."

Harimohan opened the file. "Seven meetings were held at the sites."

"Those are included within the twelve."

There was silence for a moment. Harimohan struck out 19 and wrote 12. The total became 136.

"The number has gone down," Bindeshwar said.

"The benefit of verification," Harimohan replied, "is that a smaller number becomes more durable."

On the third day the printer's man brought the draft. The cover showed, against a green background, three small photographs: a finished road, a culvert, and a community building. The title read: "Annual Report: A Year of Progress." Below, in smaller letters, was "Rural Construction Division, Madhubani."

Divisional Engineer Devkinandan Jha examined the draft. He had spent most of the year in the field and was seeing the report preparation only during its final three days. Reading the first page, he asked, "What is the total financial expenditure?"

Bindeshwar gave the figure.

“Total physical progress?”

Raghunath gave the details of the seven completed schemes.

Devkinandan frowned. “Then how are there 136 achievements?”

Harimohan explained the stage-wise formula in detail. The engineer remained silent for a while. Then he said, “Phrase it so that no number can be read as the number of completed schemes.”

“I will write ‘major work-achievement points,’” Harimohan said.

“All right. Keep it that way.”

Devkinandan turned the page. “Have you written the reasons for incomplete work as well?”

Raghunath listed five reasons: rain, land disputes, sand supply, labour migration, and delayed payments.

Harimohan said, “The section on reasons will become too long. It will increase the negative weight in an achievement report.”

The engineer said, “Write it in smaller type, but write it.”

Then three hours were spent solely on deciding how many times the word “delay” should appear. Five seemed too many. It was reduced to two. Elsewhere they wrote “time extension,” “under process,” “in the next phase,” and “according to local circumstances.”

On the evening of 29 March, almost no file connected with actual construction was opened in the office. Everyone was occupied with the report. One checked figures, another the contents, another photograph captions, another the printing estimate.

Lakhan Paswan came again. This time he carried the measurement book in his hand. Raghunath signed it, but the payment order became stuck at the next desk because Bindeshwar was preparing the advance adjustment for printing expenses.

“Tomorrow,” Bindeshwar said.

Lakhan asked, “Will the work open tomorrow?”

“It will.”

“And the report?”

“That too will be open.”

On 30 March the printer delivered five proof copies. On one page the lines were in reverse order. The captions of two photographs had been exchanged. In one place “7 completed schemes” had been printed as “70 completed schemes.” Harimohan’s face went pale.

“This one zero will change the entire year,” he said.

For the first time Bindeshwar laughed loudly. “It is difficult to add one zero to the work; easy to add it in the report.”

Proof correction continued until eight that night. Lakhan’s payment order remained pressed beneath a corner of the desk.

On the morning of 31 March, one thousand copies arrived. The smell of new paper spread through the entire room. The binding was glossy. The green on the cover had come out darker than expected, but everyone was pleased. Harimohan handed the first copy to Devkinandan Jha. The engineer looked at the clock—10:27.

“On time,” Harimohan said.

At noon a vehicle from the district office arrived. Two boxes of reports were loaded into it. The dispatch register recorded the time as 2:40. A separate employee went along to obtain the receipt. At 3:45 word came back—the report had been received.

Harimohan leaned back in his chair. “This time there will be no call for explanation.”

Bindeshwar said, “That in itself is an achievement.”

Bindeshwar had said it laughing, but Harimohan suddenly sat upright. He opened the last page, where under the heading “Administrative Efficiency” there were three points: monthly review regularised, record weeding completed, field coordination strengthened. The fourth line was blank.

“One thing has been left out,” he said.

“Which achievement?”

“Annual report compiled and published within the prescribed time.”

Raghunath looked at Devkinandan. The engineer did not smile. He only said, “It is already printed. Add it next year.”

Harimohan wrote the point in his small notebook so that he would not forget.

At four in the evening the office returned to normal work. Lakhan Paswan was still in the veranda. Bindeshwar opened his payment order. One signature remained—the Divisional Engineer’s. Devkinandan had gone out to inspect the receipt brought back by the vehicle that had deposited the report at the district office.

“It will be done tomorrow,” Bindeshwar said.

This time Lakhan did not argue. He sat down on the veranda bench. In front of him the store door stood open. Inside, eight boxes of the new report

were stacked one upon another. Behind them, five boxes of last year's report lay dulled with dust.

Harimohan was making the final entry of the evening. At the top was the date, 31 March. Below he wrote: "Annual report dispatched on time. Major administrative work of the year completed."

He capped his pen. In the veranda, Lakhan's measurement book was still lying beside his feet. Outside the office, two construction vehicles unloaded sand from the road works and drove away. The Chait evening was falling over the pillars of the unfinished market shed.

In the store, the boxes of the new annual report stood straight, even, and complete.

STORY 259

Permission

...

East of Jhanjharpur's old market, at the end of a narrow lane leading toward an old channel of the Kamla River, stood Raghunandan Chaudhary's house. In front was a pipal tree; inside, a square courtyard; three rooms to the north, the kitchen to the south, and a small garden at the back. The bricks at the base of the walls had turned black after seeing the rains of three generations. Raghunandan's grandfather had been born there, his father had died there, and in all sixty-seven years of his own life Raghunandan had never made another permanent place to spend the night.

On Monday morning he found a yellow paper pasted to the gate. Across the top, in bold letters, were the words: 'RESIDENCE-PERMISSION VERIFICATION.' Below were his name, the khesra number of the house, and an instruction to appear before the Block Citizen Administration Section within seven days. The final line read: 'If permission is not verified, the present residential status shall be treated as unverified.' Raghunandan read the paper twice. From inside, his wife Kusum asked, 'What happened?' 'I have been asked to show the paper that gives me the right to live in this house.' Kusum laughed at first. Raghunandan did not.

He opened the old wooden chest in the house. He took out the land khatiyani, a land-revenue receipt in his father's name, a newer receipt in his own name, an electricity bill, a clipping from the electoral roll, a photocopy of the ration book, and a yellowed paper from his grandfather's time. The smell of the papers held damp, dust, and old ink together.

The next day he put all the papers in a cloth bag and went to the Block Office. The Citizen Administration Section was on the second floor of the new building. The gatekeeper, Shambhu Paswan, knew him. For years he had bought mustard oil from Raghunandan's shop. 'Uncle, where are you going?' 'To get permission to live in my own house.' Shambhu laughed. 'Your house has been there since before I was born.' 'Then go inside and tell them that.' Shambhu immediately became serious. 'I cannot say anything inside. My job is to watch the entrance.'

There were three desks in the section. Applications were taken at the first, documents checked at the second, and the decision file prepared at the third. The clerk at the first desk read the notice and said, 'Give proof of residence

permission.’ Raghunandan placed the khatiyā before him. ‘This proves ownership.’ ‘The house is mine. That is why I live there.’ ‘Ownership and residence are two different matters.’ Raghunandan handed over the electricity bill. ‘This proves consumption.’ The electoral roll. ‘This proves the electoral address.’ The ration book. ‘This establishes the distribution address.’

Raghunandan’s bag gradually emptied. The clerk had seen every paper, but proof of residence permission had still not been found. ‘Then how is residence permission proved?’ Raghunandan asked. The clerk took a green application form from the drawer. ‘Write the permission number here.’ ‘I do not know the number.’ ‘Look at the old permission.’ ‘No old permission was ever taken.’ ‘Then where will the number come from?’ Raghunandan looked at the clerk’s face. ‘That is what I am asking you.’ The clerk thought for a few moments, then wrote at the top of the application: ‘Previous permission unavailable.’ ‘Go to the second desk.’

At the second desk, Assistant Sudhanshu Jha looked at the year in the khatiyā. The original entry for the house was seventy-two years old. Turning through the register, he said, ‘The rule came only five years ago. There ought to be a separate provision for old houses.’ ‘Is there one?’ ‘There ought to be.’

He took a thick rule book from the almirah. Section 14 covered new construction, 15 tenants, 16 institutional buildings, 17 vacant buildings. There was no mention of old ancestral houses. At the end was one line: ‘In unspecified situations, directions shall be obtained from the competent authority.’ Sudhanshu wrote on the application: ‘Situation unspecified.’ ‘And now?’ ‘Third desk.’

At the third desk sat the Section In-charge, Vimlesh Thakur. Raghunandan knew him too. Twenty-five kilos of oil from Raghunandan’s shop had gone to Vimlesh’s wedding. But from that side of the desk Vimlesh spoke not of acquaintance, but of the file. ‘How long have you lived in this house?’ ‘Since birth.’ ‘Birth certificate?’ Raghunandan fell silent. He had been born at home with a midwife. There was an old school certificate, but the date of birth in it was approximate. Vimlesh said, ‘Do not worry. I do not doubt what you are saying. The question is only of procedure.’ ‘If you do not doubt it, give me permission.’ ‘Permission is made on proof, not on trust.’

Raghunandan returned home. That night, for the first time, he looked at his courtyard as though someone might ask why he was there. On the wall was a wooden peg his father had fixed. The tulsi platform had been built after Kusum came there as a bride. On the door of the north room, the marks of his son’s childhood height were still scratched into the wood. None of these were papers.

The next day he went to the school. His name was found in the old admission register—father: Ramlochan Chaudhary; address: the same house. The headmaster gave him a certified copy. From the Panchayat Office he obtained a copy of the 1986 family register. An elderly postal employee said that letters had been delivered to that house for years, but there was no form for a certificate saying, ‘This person truly lives here.’ Three days later Raghunandan returned to the section. Sudhanshu examined the new papers. ‘These are all very useful.’ ‘Then the permission?’ ‘They prove that different departments have continued to accept this house as your address.’ ‘That is what I am saying too.’

‘But residence permission is separate.’ For the first time Raghunandan raised his voice. ‘If every department accepts me at this house, where does this section accept me?’ Instead of answering, Sudhanshu wrote something in pencil in the blank margin of the rule book. Then he said, ‘Your case will have to be sent upward.’ ‘Upward where?’ ‘To the competent authority.’ ‘Where does he sit?’ ‘The file will decide that.’

The file first went to the Circle Office, then to the Subdivisional Office, then came back to the Block with a comment. Along the way one question was added: ‘The applicant’s present residential status shall be verified.’ Field employee Rambabu Sah was sent for verification.

Rambabu reached Raghunandan’s house in the evening. He saw the gate, courtyard, rooms, and kitchen. He asked two neighbours, ‘Does he live here?’ Both laughed. One said, ‘He was living here even when I was born.’ Rambabu wrote in the register: ‘Applicant found present at site; residing with family.’ Raghunandan breathed with relief. As Rambabu closed the papers, he said, ‘There is one problem.’ ‘What now?’

‘The purpose of the verification was to see whether the person seeking permission actually lives at that place. It is clear that you live here. But if permission has not yet been granted, I cannot describe your present residence as “permitted.”’ ‘Then what did you write?’ ‘Residing.’ ‘Is that not enough?’ ‘The section will decide.’

A week passed. The yellow paper was still pasted to the gate. Rain came and curled one corner. Kusum twice told him to take it down. Raghunandan said, ‘No. Until the decision comes, this too is proof that the government found me at this place.’

On the tenth day he was summoned to the section. The file before Vimlesh Thakur had now become thick. On top were the khatian, the school copy, the family register, the field verification, and comments from three offices. Vimlesh said, ‘Special directions have come in your case.’ Raghunandan sat upright.

‘For an old ancestral house, asking for previous permission has been considered impractical. Therefore, before the first residence permission is granted, site verification will be carried out on two separate dates. On both occasions the applicant himself must be found at home.’ ‘One verification has already been done.’ ‘That was of present residence. Now there will be eligibility verification for first permission.’ ‘What is the difference?’ Vimlesh looked at the page. ‘The first established that you live there. Now it will be established that, even while applying for permission, you continue to live there.’ Raghunandan was silent for a few moments. ‘Suppose on the day of verification I have gone to the market?’

‘Then it will be written that you were not found at the site.’ ‘So I should not leave the house?’ ‘The rule says nothing of that kind.’ ‘But if I am outside, the verification fails?’ ‘That too is not stated so explicitly in the rule.’ Raghunandan looked at the file. The weight of what was not written on the paper seemed greater than what was written.

The first eligibility verification took place five days later. A field employee arrived at eleven in the morning. Raghunandan was sitting in the veranda. Name, father’s name, khesra number, number of rooms, direction of the courtyard—everything was entered again. The neighbours again bore witness.

No one announced the date of the second verification. Raghunandan did not open his shop for the first two days. On the third day the wholesaler’s oil truck was due, so he went to the market for one hour. The employee arrived during that very hour. Kusum said, ‘He lives here. He has gone to the market.’ The register recorded: ‘Applicant not found present at site.’ When Raghunandan heard in the evening, he ran to the office. Sudhanshu said, ‘Absence is not proof that you do not reside there, but your presence was not verified either.’ ‘Then?’ ‘The second verification will be done again.’ ‘When?’ ‘Without notice. Only then will it be considered neutral.’

This time Raghunandan did not stop leaving the house. He had understood that freezing one’s life while waiting for an uncertain date would be a harsher rule than the permission itself. He went to his shop, sat with friends on the temple platform, and one day even went to Darbhanga to visit his daughter. Whenever he returned, he looked at the gate to see whether a new slip had appeared. On the thirteenth day, at half past seven in the morning, the verification employee arrived. Raghunandan was sweeping the courtyard. Seeing him, the employee was pleased. ‘Found you today.’ ‘I live here,’ Raghunandan said. ‘For my register, I found you today.’

The second verification was treated as successful. The file again travelled between the section, Circle Office, and Subdivision. At one place the comment came: ‘Ownership undisputed.’ At another: ‘Permanent residence established.’

At a third: 'Previous permission unavailable because residence predates enforcement of the rule.' The final comment was: 'First permission may be issued.'

Three weeks later the postman brought an envelope containing the permanent residence permission. The envelope was addressed to that same house. Seeing Raghunandan sitting in the veranda, he said, 'Uncle, now the paper has found you here too.'

Raghunandan opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet. At the top was his name, below it the khesra number of the house. In the middle it said: 'Shri Raghunandan Chaudhary is hereby granted permanent permission to reside in the said building.' He read the final line: 'The permission shall take effect from the date of approval.'

Raghunandan folded the paper. The pipal tree's shadow was lengthening across the courtyard. The peg his father had fixed was still there on the north wall. The first yellow notice on the gate had been half washed away by rainwater. The postman asked, 'Everything all right now?' Raghunandan opened the chest and placed the new permission on top of the khatiyā. The old khatiyā was seventy-two years old; the permission was valid from today. 'According to the paper,' he said, 'I have been living here since today.'

STORY 260

The Waiting Room

...

In the main veranda of the old building of Benipatti Subdivisional Hospital, three colours of arrows had been painted that morning. Green arrows pointed toward registration, yellow toward preliminary examination, and blue toward medical consultation. Above them, in bold letters, was written: "MAKE PATIENT FLOW SIMPLE."

Ramsevak Mahato followed the blue arrow inside. His right shoulder had been hurting for three weeks. The health worker at his village sub-centre had written on a slip that he should get it examined once at the subdivisional hospital. Ramsevak was a farmer; the time for transplanting paddy was near, so he had thought that if he arrived at eight in the morning he would be home again by ten.

The young man at the main desk looked at his slip. "Registration first."

"But this slip was made at the sub-centre."

"That is a referral slip. An arrival slip will be made here."

Ramsevak followed the green arrow. Five minutes later he received a small sheet of paper with 47 written on it. Beneath that, in red letters, was written: "Waiting Room 1."

Waiting Room 1 had twelve blue chairs, two long benches, one fan, and a diabetes poster on the wall. Ramsevak sat for fifteen minutes. Then the door opened. An attendant called, "Numbers forty to fifty, all of you inside."

Hearing number 47, Ramsevak rose. Beyond the door there was no doctor, but another waiting room. This time the chairs were green and a blood-pressure poster hung on the wall.

Ramsevak looked back. The attendant had already shut the first door from inside.

"What happens here?" he asked.

A woman health worker said, "Preliminary examination."

"I was going to the doctor."

"Preliminary examination is necessary first."

His blood pressure was taken, his name asked, his age written down. A round stamp was placed on the paper. The health worker pointed toward the next door. "Sit there."

Beyond the next door was yet another waiting room. There were fewer chairs here, but more patients. An old woman sat where two benches met. A young man had already read his slip three times. In one corner a father held his five-year-old son asleep in his lap.

Ramsevak asked the old woman, "Where does the doctor sit?"

She pointed toward the closed door in front. "They told me the same place."

"How long have you been sitting?"

"Since half past seven this morning."

It was eleven o'clock.

After a while the door in front opened. An employee collected fifteen slips, put a blue tick on each, and said, "Those whose slips have been ticked, go to the next waiting room."

Ramsevak laughed. The employee looked at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I thought the doctor would be on the other side of this door."

"The arrangement for reaching the doctor is phased."

"How many phases are there?"

The employee glanced at the slip. "There is no provision here for counting phases."

The fourth waiting room was at the back of the building. Through its window half the pond could be seen. Numbers had been painted in white on the chairs. Ramsevak's slip now carried, along with 47, three stamps, two ticks, and one diagonal line. He looked for Chair 47. The chairs went only up to 39.

"Where is 47?" he asked the guard.

"Chair numbers and slip numbers are unrelated."

"Then why are the chairs numbered?"

"For physical verification."

Ramsevak sat on an empty chair in the corner. After a while the old woman from the earlier room arrived there too. Seeing him, she smiled.

"I think you are ahead of me."

Ramsevak said, "I think all of us are going round in circles."

The old woman took chura from her bag and ate two handfuls. Ramsevak had drunk only tea before leaving home in the morning. The water pitcher had been left behind near the first waiting room; in this room there were empty glasses, but no pitcher. A young man asked the attendant for water. He replied, "Water is a facility of the first waiting room." The young man tried to go back.

The door was locked from inside. "Under one-way flow, going backward is prohibited," the attendant explained.

An elderly man sitting nearby said he had come from Madhepur. He had a slip for a chest examination, but in the third room someone had written "consultation first," while in the fourth he had been told it ought to say "after consultation." He spread the slip on his palm. An arrow had been drawn between the two phrases, but the ink had spread so much that it was impossible to tell which way the arrow pointed.

"Then what will you do?" Ramsevak asked.

"I will go through whichever door opens first," the old man said.

The people in the room gradually learnt to recognise doors by their sounds. When the heavy wooden panel opened, it meant the next stage. When the thin iron panel opened, it meant an employee. When the small rear door opened, it meant the cleaner. The patients became less alert to names and illnesses than to the sounds of doors.

Once the wooden panel opened and everyone stood up. An employee called from inside, "Not yet. This has been opened only for air." Everyone sat again. Five minutes later the door opened for air was shut. The room became hot once more.

For the first time Ramsevak felt that waiting was not merely the passage of time; it was itself a task. People guarded their slips, listened for numbers, watched doors, estimated their turn, and sat half-alert so that no instruction would escape them. In farming one waits for clouds, but whether clouds will come can at least be guessed by looking at the sky. Here, what lay beyond a door remained uncertain even after the door opened.

At noon an announcement came that medical consultation had begun. All the patients became alert. The door of the fourth waiting room opened. Every slip was checked again. This time "Eligible for consultation" was written on Ramsevak's slip. He was sent forward.

Beyond the door was a fifth waiting room.

This time Ramsevak remained standing near the door.

"Sit down," the attendant said.

"Where is the doctor?"

"He is coming."

"Through which door?"

The attendant looked at two doors, thought for a moment, and said, "That changes according to procedure."

A newly painted board hung on the wall of the fifth room: “ONE-WAY PATIENT FLOW PLAN.” Beneath it were four points: reduce crowding, make patient order clear, prevent unnecessary movement, provide easy access to the doctor.

Ramsevak read the fourth point twice.

A middle-aged man in neat clothes was sitting beside him. He said, “First time here?”

“Yes.”

“This is my third.”

“Third time for this illness?”

“No. Third time for this system. The first time my slip was missing one stamp. The second time, by the time I reached the fifth room, consultation hours had ended. Today I have been here since seven.”

Ramsevak asked, “Have you seen the doctor?”

“Once, in the veranda.”

“Why doesn’t he come here?”

The man said softly, “I heard that the doctor’s route to the patients has also been changed.”

Ramsevak took this as a joke. But at half past one a doctor looked in through the rear door of the fifth room. He had a register in his hand. He asked the attendant, “Where are patients numbered forty to fifty?”

The attendant was startled. “Sir, they have been sent to the fifth waiting room.”

The doctor looked around. “Which room is this?”

“The fifth.”

The doctor ran a hand over his head. “I was told the fourth.”

“Numbers fifty-one to sixty are there now.”

“Then forty to fifty are here?”

“Yes.”

The doctor stepped forward to enter, but the attendant stopped him with folded hands. “Sir, this door is not listed for doctors’ entry. Your entrance is from that side.”

He pointed to the other door in front. The doctor walked that way.

Two minutes later came the announcement: “Patients numbered forty to fifty, go to the next waiting room.”

Ramsevak did not get up.

The old woman kept looking at him. “You are not going?”

“This time I will sit here.”

“Your number will be missed.”

“Let it be missed.”

The remaining patients slowly filed out through the next door. The old woman too finally rose and left. The fifth room became empty. Ramsevak sat alone. The fan turned overhead. On the board, the words “prevent unnecessary movement” gleamed.

Ten minutes later the doctor came through the door assigned for his entry. He stopped when he saw the empty room.

“Where are the patients?”

Ramsevak said, “In the next waiting room.”

The doctor looked at him. “Why didn’t you go?”

“I was waiting for you.”

A tired smile came to the doctor’s face. “I too was waiting for all of you.”

He pulled a chair forward and sat beside Ramsevak. He took the slip, examined the shoulder, asked a few questions, made him raise his arm, and located the point of pain. He wrote the name of a medicine and a few precautions on the paper. The entire consultation lasted five minutes.

Ramsevak stood up with the slip in his hand. “Now how do I get outside?”

The doctor pointed to the door in front. “Through that one.”

Ramsevak opened it.

Beyond it was a sixth waiting room. On the wall was written: “WAITING FOR MEDICINE DISPENSING.”

For a few moments he stood there. Behind him, the doctor walked toward another door to search for the next patient. Ramsevak sat down in the sixth room. His consultation was over now; only the waiting remained.

STORY 261

Number

...

At the gate of Darbhanga's Integrated Public Grievance Building, the first thing Ramlochan Yadav saw was not his name but a small yellow slip. In bold letters it said: "Serial No. 47." Beneath that, in very fine print: "For impartial disposal, the applicant's name and identity shall be kept separate from the internal process." Ramlochan read the slip twice. Then he said to the security guard seated inside the gate, "I am Ramlochan Yadav. I have come from Bahadurpur." Without raising his head, the guard said, "Names have no work inside. Keep the slip safely. You are 47."

Ramlochan's complaint was very simple. After repairs to a government drain beside his field, soil had been kept on two katthas of his land for a month. The soil had been removed, but the compensation of three thousand two hundred rupees had not arrived. The block office had told him that payment was held up at the district. After the old district-office building was demolished and the Integrated Public Grievance Building was opened, it was announced that a "name-free process" would reduce bias. With that hope, Ramlochan had come on the first bus of the morning.

In the first room, a woman clerk took his application. Over the words "Ramlochan Yadav" at the top, she pasted a thin strip of paper. On it she wrote "47" in red ink.

Ramlochan asked, "Why have you covered the name?"

"Whoever sees the application will not know you. That will preserve impartiality."

"But the payment will be made in a name."

The clerk smiled. "Payment is the final stage. For now, you are a number."

She stamped the application with a round seal and sent him toward the second room. On the door was written: "Serial Matching." Inside, a young man looked at Ramlochan's yellow slip and read the 47 written on the application. Then he turned through a register.

"This 47 is an old serial," he said.

Ramlochan was startled. "Old? I received it five minutes ago."

"That is the gate serial. In this branch the complaint serial is different."

The young man issued a new blue slip: "47/3."

“What is the three?”

“Third subject category. Temporary use relating to land.”

Ramlochan folded the yellow and blue slips together and tied them into the knot of his gamchha.

The young man said, “The yellow slip is no longer needed.”

Ramlochan asked, “If I go out through the gate and come in again?”

The young man thought for a few moments. “Then you will need the yellow one. Do not throw it away.”

Four people were sitting in the third room. There was no electronic display on the wall; numbers were being written in chalk on a wooden board. “46/3” was crossed out. “47/3” was written. Ramlochan stood up.

The assistant sitting inside looked at the application. “This needs a branch-register serial.”

“Then what is 47/3?”

“Subject serial. The branch-register serial is different.”

The assistant wrote “127” on the application. “Now you are 127.”

Ramlochan did not laugh. “I have changed three times already.”

The assistant said gravely, “You have not changed. The serial number has changed. Those are not the same thing.”

Ramlochan’s application was kept for scrutiny. He was told to ask after noon. He went and sat on the veranda. Beside him an old woman kept looking at a slip marked “61.” She asked him, “Son, what number are you?”

“Now 127. Earlier I was 47.”

The old woman said in surprise, “Mine was 58 this morning. Inside it became 61.”

They compared their slips. After a while an employee in the veranda called loudly, “One hundred twenty-seven!” Ramlochan rose. The old woman also half stood up. She too had a slip marked 127, but in small letters beneath it was written “distribution.” The employee looked at both of them.

“Whose 127?”

Ramlochan said, “Mine.”

The old woman said, “Mine too.”

The employee held his head. “State the subject.”

Ramlochan said, “Land use.”

The old woman said, “Old-age assistance.”

“Then land 127 to the right, assistance 127 to the left.”

Ramlochan went right. There he was told that the day's applications would be entered under a fresh daily serial after noon. The serials used during the first half of the day were only for "temporary movement." By three o'clock, 127 had been crossed out on his application and "18" written in its place.

"Now eighteen?" Ramlochan asked.

The clerk said, "Afternoon daily serial."

"If I come tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is a new day. New serial."

"Then how will you identify my application?"

"The file will identify it."

"But the name on the file is covered."

Turning the page, the clerk said, "A file does not need a name. It has its own serial."

"Which one?"

The clerk showed him the back page of the application. In one corner, written in pencil, was "B-37/12."

Ramlochan said slowly, "Then among 47, 47/3, 127, 18, and B-37/12—which one am I?"

For the first time the clerk looked at him. "You are the applicant."

"Do you know my name?"

"The name will be opened at the final stage."

The afternoon wore on. Ramlochan was told that the file would go for accounts scrutiny and the answer would be available the next day. Before going home he showed the yellow slip at the gate. The guard looked at it and said, "This 47 is from the morning. For exit you need the later serial."

Ramlochan showed 18.

"That is an internal serial."

"Then how do I get out?"

The guard discussed the matter with the employee seated behind him. In the end Ramlochan's name was asked for in the exit register. Clenching the end of his gamchha in his fist, he said, "Ramlochan Yadav."

The employee wrote down the name. As he crossed the gate, Ramlochan felt like laughing. His name had been forbidden inside all day; to get out, the name was necessary.

The next day he returned. At the gate he showed the previous day's yellow slip. The guard said, "Yesterday's serial has expired. Today there is a new serial." A new slip was issued: "23."

“Yesterday I was 47.”

“Yesterday was yesterday.”

“Inside I was 18.”

“That was the afternoon serial.”

“The file is B-37/12.”

The guard said, “Then give the file serial, not your own.”

Ramlochan went inside. In the Serial Matching room, an employee told him that when B-37/12 reached the Accounts Branch it became “L-91,” because the letter changed when the branch changed. In Accounts, L-91 was searched for, but there were two L-91s—one for land use, the other for lantern purchase. Since the year was not written, both sets of papers had to be examined separately.

“Open the name and you will know immediately,” Ramlochan said.

The clerk shook his head. “Opening the name in the middle of the process would compromise impartiality.”

“Then will I receive my three thousand two hundred rupees, or a lantern?”

The clerk did not laugh. “Payment only after the serial is clarified.”

By noon three branches together worked out a solution. All Ramlochan’s previous serials would be tied together under one “integrated serial number.” A new white slip was prepared: “612.” Beneath it were listed, in order: 47, 47/3, 127, 18, B-37/12, 23, L-91.

Ramlochan looked at the slip. “Now is this the final one?”

The Head Assistant said, “It is integrated. The word final is not written.”

“Meaning?”

“If the branch changes in future, a sub-serial may be added.”

The accounts scrutiny was completed. Verification that soil from the drain repair had been kept on his field was already in the file. Payment was approved. Ramlochan felt lighter. He was given the payment order. He looked at the paper. The recipient field was blank.

“There is no name here,” he said.

The Accounts Clerk replied, “Under the name-free process, the name has not yet been opened.”

“Will the bank pay money to serial number 612?”

The clerk fell silent. Another clerk was called. The Head Assistant came. All three examined the paper. The rulebook was opened. The name-free process applied only up to the impartial scrutiny of the complaint; actual payment required the real name. But authority to reopen the real identity belonged to

the “Identity Recombination Branch,” and no such separate branch had been created in the building.

After some time the Head Assistant proposed a solution. The thin strip pasted over the top of the application was slowly lifted. Beneath it, “Ramlochan Yadav” was clearly visible. For a few moments everyone looked at the name as though meeting an old acquaintance after many days.

The Accounts Clerk said, “The name was here from the beginning.”

Ramlochan said, “So was I.”

His name was entered in the payment order. He was told to sign. He wrote “Ramlochan Yadav.” Beside it the clerk also wrote in red ink: “Integrated Serial No. 612.”

Ramlochan walked toward the gate to go home. The guard looked at the white slip.

“This 612 is not in today’s entry list.”

Ramlochan was tired. He did not open the bundle of papers. He only said, “Ramlochan Yadav.”

The guard opened the exit register. The name was there on the line from the first day. He wrote today’s date beside that line and said, “Go.”

Outside the gate Ramlochan opened the white slip on his palm. Beneath the seven earlier serials, 612 stood in bold letters. He did not throw the slip away. At home he put it, along with the payment order, into the old tin box where paddy seed was kept.

Three days later a bank employee looked at the payment order and asked, “What is this 612?”

Ramlochan said, “It was my number.”

“And what does the number mean now?”

Signing beneath his name, Ramlochan said, “Now it belongs to the paper.”

STORY 262

The Open Case

...

East of Sakri, at Jagatpur Middle School, Udaykant Paswan was teaching mathematics to Class Eight. It was a day after the rains. Outside the window, water had collected in two places on the school's small field, and inside, on the blackboard, Udaykant was adding three fractions. Just then the attendant Harilal appeared at the door. He had a brown envelope in his hand.

"The Headmaster is calling you," Harilal said softly.

Udaykant wrote five questions for the children and went to the Headmaster's room. Headmaster Shashibhushan Jha had his spectacles lowered on his nose and was looking at the envelope. On the desk lay an open letter bearing the round seal of the Block Education Office.

"Sit down," he said, then held the letter out to Udaykant.

The first line read: "An inquiry is in progress against Shri Udaykant Paswan, Assistant Teacher, Middle School Jagatpur." The second: "Submit your explanation within seven days of receipt of this letter." Beneath it was written: "Details of the allegation as per Annexure-A."

Udaykant turned the letter over. The back page was blank. He checked the envelope. There was no other paper inside.

"Where is the annexure?" he asked.

The Headmaster searched the envelope again. "It is not here."

"Then what am I supposed to explain?"

Shashibhushan Jha remained silent for a few moments. "First go to the office and ask. The letter says seven days."

The next day Udaykant went to the Benipatti Block Education Office. Outside the Inquiry Section were two wooden benches. Inside, behind a thin green curtain, stood three desks. Navalkishore Mandal sat at the first. He read the letter, checked the file number, then turned through a register.

"Yes, the inquiry is open," he said.

"The annexure containing the allegation was not supplied."

Navalkishore placed a finger on one line in the register. "The annexure is confidential."

"The allegation is against me. It will not be given to me?"

“It will. First acknowledge receipt.”

“I have already acknowledged this letter.”

“Receipt of the letter is one thing. Receipt of the allegation details is another.”

Udaykant looked at him for a few moments. “How can I acknowledge receipt of something I have not received?”

Navalkishore did not find the question strange. He took a printed slip from the drawer. At the top it said: “Acknowledgement of Receipt of Allegation Details.” Below were spaces for name, designation, date, and signature.

“Sign this. Then the confidential envelope will be called for.”

Udaykant took the slip in his hand. “Give me the envelope first. Then I will sign.”

Navalkishore shook his head. “The sequence cannot be reversed.”

Udaykant put the slip back. “Then I will write that the allegation details have not been received and therefore a reply is not possible.”

“You may write that. But it will be treated as a representation, not an explanation.”

On a white sheet Udaykant wrote two lines: “The allegation details are not enclosed. I shall submit my explanation within the prescribed time after receiving them.” Navalkishore stamped it as received.

When he returned to school, Udaykant thought the matter would become clear in two or four days. But on the third day the Headmaster showed him another letter. Because the inquiry was pending, Udaykant was not to place the final signature on the scholarship verification register.

“Then who will do this work?” Udaykant asked.

“You prepare all the details. I will put the final signature.”

Udaykant matched the names, dates of birth, bank details, and attendance of eighty-five students. At the end Shashibhushan Jha signed in five minutes. The next week the monthly account for the midday meal came. Udaykant had prepared that account for years, but this time the Headmaster’s signature appeared on the page he had prepared.

The children did not understand the meaning of the change. To them, Udaykant was the same teacher who taught fractions, percentages, and area. But in office papers a new word appeared in small letters beside his name: “Under Inquiry.”

On the seventh day Udaykant went again to the Block Office. Navalkishore was absent. In his place sat a new clerk, Kiran Kumar. Udaykant showed him the first letter and his representation. Kiran Kumar found the file. It contained

four pages: the order initiating the inquiry, the copy of the letter sent to the school, Udaykant's representation, and one line: "Accused teacher has not acknowledged receipt of allegation details."

"Where is the allegation paper?" Udaykant asked.

Kiran Kumar turned through the file again. "It is not here."

"Then on what basis is the inquiry proceeding?"

"The basis must be in the Confidential Section."

The Confidential Section was a small room at the back of the same building, with a latch on the door. The key was with the Head Clerk. The Head Clerk had gone to Madhubani for training. Kiran Kumar said, "Come on Monday."

On Monday the Head Clerk returned, but had forgotten the key to the confidential cupboard at home. On Tuesday the cupboard was opened. Inside were five envelopes tied in red cloth. The envelope bearing Udaykant's file number was also found. The Head Clerk placed it on the desk but did not open it.

"Where is the acknowledgement slip?" he asked.

Udaykant said, "Open the envelope. I will read the allegation and sign immediately."

The Head Clerk opened the rulebook. "Acknowledgement first, opening afterward."

"But the wording says 'receipt of allegation details.' Where have I received them yet?"

The Head Clerk placed his finger on the page. "This wording has been printed by the district. I cannot alter it."

This time Udaykant decided to sign. He wrote his name and the date, but above the signature added in small letters: "Before opening of envelope."

The Head Clerk looked at the slip. "With this remark, the acknowledgement will not be treated as clean."

"What is a clean acknowledgement?"

"One without any remark."

Udaykant did not take the slip back. He left it on the table and returned to school.

Meanwhile his name was removed from the training list. The reason column said: "Inquiry pending." A list was prepared for examination-centre superintendents; Udaykant's seniority was sufficient, but his name was not sent. The Headmaster told him, "There is no restriction on your work, only on special responsibilities for the time being."

“What is the allegation?” Udaykant asked.

Shashibhushan Jha said quietly, “I do not know either.”

On the last Friday of the month, an attendant from the Block Office came to the school. He carried a blue-bound register titled “Pending Inquiry Awareness Register.” Udaykant was asked to sign against one line. It read: “The concerned employee has been informed that an inquiry is in progress.”

Udaykant signed. “Why does this not mention the allegation?”

The attendant shrugged. “I was told to circulate the register and take signatures.”

The same register came the second month. And the third. Each time Udaykant signed to confirm that he knew an inquiry was in progress. He still did not know why it was in progress.

Three months later the district office reviewed pending inquiries. Four members sat at the Block Office. Udaykant was not called; the file was called. The first question in the review note was: “Allegation communicated?” Answer: “No.” Second: “Reason?” Answer: “Acknowledgement of receipt incomplete.” Third: “Next action?” Answer: “Obtain complete acknowledgement of receipt.”

A copy of this decision reached the school. Udaykant read it and went to the office himself the next day. He signed the slip without any remark. The Head Clerk smiled.

“Now it is done. The allegation details will be given within two days.”

The red-cloth envelope was taken out of the cupboard. It bore the Block file number, but in one corner was another stamp: “Issued from District Confidential Section.” Before opening it, the Head Clerk checked the contents list. It said: “Annexure-A: Original allegation letter—one page.” The envelope was opened. Inside was only a small slip: “Original allegation letter retained securely at District Office. Certified copy may be requisitioned.”

Udaykant did not laugh. Neither did the Head Clerk.

A requisition was sent to the district office. A week later the reply came: “Attach proof that the inquiry has been duly registered at Block level.” The Block file contained the order initiating the inquiry, but the district register had no corresponding entry. The reason was that at district level the case was entered only when the preliminary report returned together with the accused employee’s acknowledgement of receipt. The acknowledgement had now been obtained, but the allegation letter still had not arrived.

Kiran Kumar explained this quietly to Udaykant. “Now it must first be registered. After that the copy can be requisitioned.”

“What is needed for registration?”

“The preliminary report.”

“And for that?”

Kiran Kumar looked at the file. “A reference to the allegation.”

This time Udaykant sat down on the chair. People kept coming and going through the veranda outside. On the desk inside, the red-cloth envelope lay open. It contained not the allegation, but information about where the allegation was.

A few weeks later the half-yearly examination began at the school. Udaykant distributed question papers, counted answer books, and wrote down the names of absent students. One Class Eight student, Amresh, had misspelled his own name. Udaykant corrected it in red ink on the paper.

Amresh asked, “Sir, if the name is wrong, will the answer book be cancelled?”

“No,” Udaykant said. “The name is simply corrected.”

At that moment Harilal appeared again at the door. In his hand was a new brown envelope from the Block Office. Udaykant opened it. Inside was one page: “A new registration number has been assigned to the inquiry file. Until the allegation details are received, the matter shall be treated as open.”

Below was the new number. The allegation was still absent.

Udaykant folded the letter and placed it in his register. Then he picked up Amresh’s answer book. The corrected name at the top was clearly visible. He moved on to the next child’s paper.

STORY 263

Boundary

...

In Sirkharia village of Rahika Block, a boundary had once meant only the ridge between fields. Where Ramlochan Yadav's paddy ended, Nandlal Mahato's arhar began. The bamboo screen around a courtyard, the edge of a pond, the platform of a well—each had its own visible marker. But the boundary that descended into the middle of the village one Monday morning had no ridge, stake, colour, or rope.

A table was placed beneath the neem tree at the crossroads. On it were two registers, slips in three colours, and a board that read: "Administrative Boundary Assistance Point." Beneath that, in smaller letters: "Area A / Area B."

Devnarayan Mahato was cycling toward the market with a milk can tied to his bicycle. Madan Mishra, the clerk at the table, raised a hand and stopped him.

"Where are you going?"

"To the milk cooperative."

"That is in Area B."

"What difference does that make?"

"You are coming from Area A. You need a transit slip."

Devnarayan looked at both sides of the road. There was no line anywhere.

"Where is the boundary?"

Madan Mishra placed a thumb on the map spread over the table. "From this point to this point."

"On the ground?"

"It has not yet been marked on the ground."

"Then when did I cross it?"

Madan Mishra studied the map again. "From behind the neem tree."

Devnarayan looked back. His house stood on one side of that very neem tree, the milk cooperative on the other. Between them ran the road he had crossed several times a day since childhood.

The rules on the first day were described as simple. An adult travelling from Area A to Area B would have his name, father's or husband's name, house number, and purpose of journey entered, and would receive a yellow slip. On

returning, the slip would be surrendered. By evening a queue had formed beneath the neem tree. Someone was going to buy fertiliser, someone medicine, someone to the flour mill, someone to his maternal uncle's house.

Devnarayan's difficulty was that his own house lay in both colours on the map. The main door was in Area A, the kitchen in Area A, but the rear courtyard, cowshed, and handpump were in Area B. To milk the cow in the morning he had to carry a slip inside his own house.

His wife Malti laughed the first time. "Permission from outside even to live in one's own house?"

"Not to live. To cross."

"Show me the boundary."

Devnarayan said nothing.

On Tuesday a new clarification arrived. Local ration-card holders were exempted from slips for essential work. The villagers were pleased. But in the afternoon another notice came: the exemption applied only when the essential work was within one's own area. The first rule still applied when the boundary was crossed.

On Wednesday schoolchildren were exempted. Devnarayan's daughter Sarita attended the higher secondary school in Area B and left without a slip. But her younger brother Manoj's school was in Area A while his bookshop was in Area B. Madan Mishra gave him a slip for buying books, but wrote on it: "School purpose, one time."

"If I need another book tomorrow?" Manoj asked.

"Tomorrow's rule will be seen tomorrow," Madan Mishra said.

On Thursday a separate arrangement was introduced for goods. Milk, paddy, straw, bamboo, bricks, and vegetables were classified as "goods transit." Devnarayan filled a green slip for the milk can. His own slip was yellow; the milk's was green.

"The bicycle?" he asked.

Madan Mishra scratched his head. "The bicycle travels with the person."

"The can?"

"Goods."

"And the milk?"

"Inside the can."

"The cow?"

Before answering, Madan Mishra turned a page of the register. "Separate instructions for livestock have not yet arrived."

That evening a calf broke loose from the cowshed and ran across the road. Malti ran after it. The assistant seated beneath the neem tree rose to stop her, but by then the calf had already crossed from Area B back into Area A.

Panting, Malti said, "Make a slip for it."

The assistant did not laugh. "We will ask about livestock tomorrow."

On Friday the livestock rule actually arrived. Between six and eight in the morning and five and seven in the evening, movement would be allowed without a slip. At other times the owner's name would be entered.

Hearing the order, Malti said, "Will the cow look at the clock?"

This time Devnarayan laughed, but the laughter stopped when he reached the neem tree.

Three new employees had arrived there—an inspection team from the district. The map was opened. The inspector expressed a desire to see the boundary.

Madan Mishra stood at one point on the road and said, "Approximately here."

"Why approximately?"

"The map uses the 'old western channel' as its reference."

The inspector looked around. "Where is the channel?"

Durganand Jha, an elderly villager, was called. He said that years ago rainwater had flowed along the left side of the road. Ramlochan Yadav said, "No, it was on the right." Nandlal Mahato said that before the road was widened, the channel had run down the middle.

The inspector wrote down all three statements and continued staring at the line on the map.

Meanwhile Sarita returned from school and reached the neem tree. Her mathematics exercise book was in her hand. She saw her father and stopped.

"Babuji, which slip today?"

"None for you."

"Yesterday Teacher said that after Saturday's holiday a new identity slip will be made."

The inspector heard her. "Has anyone stopped the children?"

"No," Madan Mishra said. "The rules keep changing."

The inspector frowned. "Rules do not change; they become clearer."

Madan Mishra immediately wrote the substance of that sentence into the register.

On Saturday a special provision arrived for “joint households.” Any house lying on the boundary could apply for a one-month joint-movement pass. Devnarayan was the first to apply.

The form asked: “In which area is the applicant’s principal residence?” He wrote: Area A. The second question: “Livestock/storage in which area?” He wrote: Area B. Third: “Usual family entrance?” Area A. Fourth: “Water source?” Area B.

The fifth asked: “Latrine?” Devnarayan stopped his pen. It had been built near the boundary, but the map showed no mark for it.

“What should I write in this box?” he asked Madan Mishra.

“It will be decided after site verification.”

“Then the pass?”

“After verification.”

“When the officer goes to the house for verification, will he cross the boundary?”

Madan Mishra looked at Devnarayan for a few moments, then said quietly, “The inspection team will be on official duty.”

“Their slip?”

Madan Mishra did not answer.

On Monday the site-verification team arrived: an amin, a Panchayat worker, and an assistant. The amin carried a measuring tape, but before measuring could begin another problem arose—the exact position of the old western channel could not be established.

Devnarayan showed them the rear courtyard. The ground was slightly lower in one corner. Durganand Jha said, “The channel must have been here.” Ramlochan called from outside, “No. That is a rainwater hollow.”

The amin measured twice, then rolled up the tape. “Classification of the joint household is difficult without permanent boundary demarcation.”

The Panchayat worker asked, “Then what for now?”

The amin said, “Temporarily, recognise the existing practice.”

“What is the existing practice?”

Everyone looked at Devnarayan.

Devnarayan said, “In the morning I go to the cowshed, then carry the milk across the neem tree to the cooperative. At noon I go to the field. In the evening I return to the cowshed. Malti moves between both sides of the courtyard all day. The children cross according to the school and the shops.”

The amin wrote in the register: “Movement customary according to local practice.”

The assistant asked, “Is this to be treated as permission?”

The amin said, “This is a fact.”

“The rule?”

“Seek clarification from above.”

This time Madan Mishra did not smile either.

Three days later a new order came from the Block Office. The boundary remained where it was, but “ordinary activities of daily life” were exempted from slips. Which activity counted as ordinary would be decided by the Assistance Point.

The queue beneath the neem tree became shorter. Milk, school, water, livestock, and fields were all treated as ordinary. But whether attending a wedding was ordinary or special was debated for two hours. One man wanted to go to a feast at his sister’s house; Madan Mishra finally issued a yellow slip.

Devnarayan now filled fewer slips. But the old yellow, green, and blue slips remained tied together with thread on a nail in his house. Malti wanted to throw them away. He said, “Keep them for now. The rules may become clearer again.”

The rains came. Water dripped from the neem leaves. The table at the Assistance Point was moved under the veranda. Water flowed along the road. No one could say where the old western channel had been; the new water found the low ground and flowed where it would.

One evening Devnarayan was returning home with the empty milk can. Madan Mishra sat alone beneath the neem tree, drying the pages of the register. Out of habit, Devnarayan slowed down.

“Slip?”

Madan Mishra raised his head. He thought for a moment, then said, “Ordinary today.”

Devnarayan crossed the road and walked toward his house. Beneath his feet, the water kept flowing between the two areas without stopping.

STORY 264

Verification

...

Tilak Paswan reached the Social Security Branch of Khajauli Block before nine on Monday morning. He was the first person on the long bench in the veranda. Beside him lay an old green cloth bag containing his old-age pension passbook, voter identity card, ration card, two old land-revenue receipts, and the previous year's life-verification slip.

Tilak's age was recorded as eighty-two. The older men of the hamlet estimated that he was two years older than that. Tilak had no particular concern about those two years. His concern was simply that his monthly pension had stopped for three months, and the bank clerk had told him: "Life verification is pending."

"I have come myself," Tilak told the branch clerk, Ramkrit Yadav. "What greater verification can there be than this?"

Ramkrit looked at the register. "A person being present is one thing; the process being complete is another."

"Where is the process?"

"First, residence must be verified at the site."

Tilak opened the bag. "This is my ration card. This is my voter card. These are the land receipts."

"The papers show the address. Site verification will show that you are still living there now."

Tilak nodded. "Let the verification man come to my house tomorrow. I will remain at home."

Ramkrit said, "I do not give the date. The employee will go according to the field sequence."

Tilak returned home that afternoon. In Pipra hamlet he had a small mud-and-brick house. His wife had died five years earlier. His son worked as a labourer in Punjab. Tilak himself looked after five katthas of land, cut grass for his cow twice a day, and in the evening blew life into the hearth and cooked rice and dal.

For the next three days he did not go far from home. On the fourth day his medicine ran out, so he had to go to the market. That very afternoon Panchayat Assistant Subodh Mandal arrived for verification. The door was

locked. Neighbour Janki Devi said, “He has gone to the market. He will return by evening.”

Subodh wrote in the register: “Not found at home.”

Tilak heard about it that evening. The next morning he went to the Panchayat building.

“What happens now?”

Subodh said, “There will be a second visit.”

“After how many days?”

“According to sequence.”

“Should I remain at home again?”

“If you do, it will be convenient.”

“For pension verification I should sit at home? What about the field?”

Subodh did not smile. “I do not make the rules.”

In the second week a notice came from the Block Office that in Tilak’s old pension register his father’s name was entered as “Ramphal,” while in the voter record it was “Ramphal Paswan.” The two had to be reconciled. Tilak went to the Block Office again. Signatures of two witnesses were required. He returned to the village and the next day brought Janki Devi and Ramvilas Sahni with him.

That same day the second site verification took place. Tilak’s door was again locked.

This time Subodh asked Janki Devi’s daughter-in-law, “How long has he been away?”

She replied, “He was here until yesterday evening. Today he has gone to the Block Office for verification.”

Subodh paused for a few moments. “Not found at home for verification.” Then he wrote in the register: “Absent during second visit as well.”

At the Block Office Tilak reconciled his father’s name in front of the two witnesses. Ramkrit said, “The name issue is clear now. We still need the site-verification report.”

“The employee has gone twice.”

“Did he find you?”

“I was here.”

Ramkrit looked at the register. “Then the report will say absent.”

Tilak placed the green bag in his lap and sat silently on the bench. After a while he asked, “I am present here, but absent at home. Which presence counts?”

Ramkrit answered, "The one belonging to the box that is being verified."

Before the third visit Tilak tried a solution. In thick charcoal letters on the door he wrote: "I AM ALIVE. I HAVE GONE TO THE BLOCK OFFICE FOR VERIFICATION. I WILL RETURN IN THE EVENING." Beneath it he wrote the date.

Unfortunately, the third visit did not take place that day. It took place five days later. Tilak was then in the field cutting the ridge of his paddy plot. Subodh read the old date written on the door and asked a neighbourhood child. The child said, "Grandfather has gone to the field."

Subodh wrote in the register: "Not found at residence during third visit either; prolonged absence suspected."

The effect of three months without pension was plainly visible in Tilak's house. The fertiliser dealer had stopped giving him urea on credit. He had to halve the oilcake for the cow. Janki Devi lent him rice twice, but Tilak did not want to stretch out his hand a third time. He would say, "The money will come later. First let the paper say that I exist." Janki Devi laughed at the sentence, but Tilak did not. It seemed to him that his field, house, neighbours, cow, and body were all witnesses to his presence; only the office column had not yet decided.

That one line began a journey of its own. In the Panchayat's monthly list Tilak's name moved from the column "Eligible for Re-verification" to "Status Unclear." The list reached the Block Office. The Block summary offered only three options: "Alive," "Dead," "Shifted." There was no separate box for "Status Unclear." There was a space for remarks below, but thirty pages of the monthly list had to be sent that same day.

Assistant Navalkishore read "Not found at home" three times. On the next page was the name of an elderly person who had actually died, with "Dead" marked against it. Tilak's line was left blank. The list reached the Branch Officer. Seeing the empty line, the Branch Officer wrote in red ink: "Indicate status." The list came back to Navalkishore. He turned through the register, read "prolonged absence," and put a mark in the "Dead" column. In the remarks below he wrote: "Repeatedly absent at site."

The Pension Branch placed a permanent stop order on payment on the basis of that list. The monthly status list also went to the Birth and Death Branch, because when an old-age pensioner was identified as dead, other family benefits were updated. There the clerk asked, "Date of death?"

It was not on the list.

Navalkishore was asked. He looked at the date of the first site-verification visit—the day Tilak had not been found at home. “Status doubtful from this date,” he said.

The clerk in the Birth and Death Branch replied, “A doubtful date is not a date of death.”

“Then leave it blank?”

“A certificate cannot be made with the date blank.”

The matter remained pending for two days. On the third day the new monthly list had to be prepared. There was pressure to clear old pending entries. Finally, the date of the first visit was entered, the remark “As per administrative verification” was added, and the death certificate was printed.

Meanwhile Tilak had made four more journeys to the Block Office for his life verification. On the fifth journey Ramkrit said, “Now the problem has become serious.”

“The pension?”

“Your status in the record is dead.”

At first Tilak did not understand. “Whose?”

“In your name.”

“Me, myself?”

Ramkrit lowered his eyes. “A certificate has been made in the Birth and Death Branch.”

Tilak gripped the green bag tightly. “I have been coming here to get myself verified as alive.”

“I know.”

“Where was I on the day they say I died?”

Ramkrit turned the pages of the register. The date was the same as Tilak’s first application. On that day Tilak had signed at the Block Office at 9:12 in the morning.

For a moment no sound passed between them.

Ramkrit said, “The death certificate will have to be cancelled. After that the life verification can be reopened.”

“What papers are needed to cancel my death?”

“Proof of the applicant’s presence, two witnesses, a Panchayat report, and the original death certificate.”

Tilak did not laugh. “Where will I get the original death certificate?”

“From the Birth and Death Branch.”

He went to the adjoining building. The clerk checked the register. "The certificate is ready but has not been collected."

"Who can collect it?"

"A member of the family."

"Can I take it?"

The clerk first looked at Tilak, then at the register. "The certificate is in the name of the deceased person."

"The name is mine."

"That is what it appears to be."

"Then give it to me."

The clerk called the Senior Assistant. They discussed the matter for five minutes. In the end the certificate was handed over on the ground that Tilak was a member of the same family and the address was the same. In the receipt register Tilak wrote his own name.

On the certificate his name, father's name, village, and age were all correct. The date of death was the very day he had first come to the Block Office for life verification. Under place of death it said: "Own residence."

Tilak did not fold the paper. He placed it flat inside the bag so that the seal would not be damaged. Then he returned to the Social Security Branch.

Ramkrit wrote out the application for cancellation. Instead of using a thumb impression, Tilak signed with his trembling hand. The names of two witnesses were needed again. It was decided that Janki Devi and Ramvilas would be brought the next day.

"Will there be site verification again?" Tilak asked.

Ramkrit said softly, "For cancellation, yes."

"This time should I remain at home or come here?"

Ramkrit's hand stopped over the pen. "Remain at home."

"And if you call me here?"

Ramkrit did not answer. At the top of the application he wrote: "Applicant personally present."

Tilak rose. In the green bag, beside last year's life-verification slip, there was now this year's death certificate. Crossing the veranda, he opened the bag once and looked at both papers. The old slip said: "Verified Alive." The new paper said: "Death Certified." Between them lay today's application, bearing Ramkrit's words: "Applicant personally present."

He closed the bag and set off for home. For the next site verification, this time he had to be found there.

STORY 265

The Closed Lift

...

The Regional Cooperative Building in Darbhanga had six storeys. The building was not new, but its lift was. In the old building people had once climbed the stairs; three years earlier a lift had been installed under an “Office Accessibility” scheme. At first there were six round buttons inside—I, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. No one had any objection to that arrangement.

The trouble began when an order came from headquarters stating that floor numbers were “meaningless indicators” for ordinary visitors. The numbers were to be removed and the names of the branches written on the buttons instead, so that people could directly choose the branch where they had work.

During the first week the buttons were labelled Accounts, Stores, Grants, Legal, Records, Officer. At first the arrangement pleased Dinbandhu Mandal, the records carrier. For eighteen years he had carried files up and down the building. Earlier someone had to tell him, “Third floor.” Now he could simply be told, “Grants.” The lift itself would take him there.

But in the second week there was a departmental reorganisation. Accounts was to move to the fifth floor, Stores to the second, Grants to the fourth. Moving employees and cupboards took time, but the paper labels on the buttons were changed in a single evening.

On Monday Dinbandhu carried a payment file and pressed “Accounts.” The lift stopped on the fifth floor. When the door opened, he saw two empty desks, three sacks of bundled papers, and a board reading: “Accounts Branch—Under Transfer.” Only Ramvinod Babu was sitting there.

Dinbandhu asked, “Is Accounts here?”

Ramvinod said, “According to the order, it is here.”

“The staff?”

“Still on the second floor.”

“Then where should I go?”

“For work, the second floor. According to the records, the fifth.”

Dinbandhu returned to the lift. There was no longer any button called “second floor.” He pressed “Stores,” because under the old arrangement Stores

had been on the second floor. The lift stopped on the fourth. A new board there read: “Stores—To Be Shifted Shortly.”

Dinbandhu came down again. Beside the gate, security guard Muneshwar Paswan had a sheet hanging near him: “Today’s Branch Position.” It had been crossed out and rewritten in pencil several times.

“Where is Accounts?” Dinbandhu asked.

Muneshwar looked at the sheet. “According to this list, second.”

“There is no second-floor button in the lift.”

“Using numbers is prohibited.”

“Then how do I get to the second floor?”

Muneshwar thought for a moment. “Press Records. Records is on the second floor at present.”

Dinbandhu pressed “Records.” The lift stopped on the second floor. He reached the Accounts Branch with the file.

By noon the trick had spread through the whole building. Employees began remembering not the branch name, but the old branch that occupied the present location of the branch they wanted. Someone would say, “If you want Legal, press Stores.” Someone else would say, “For Stores, press Officer.” Inside the building, one branch began to be reached through the name of another.

On Tuesday another order came from headquarters. Branch names too were to become “function-based.” Accounts would now be called “Payment Scrutiny,” Stores “Material Verification,” Grants “Scheme Approval,” and Records “Record Preservation.” New paper labels were pasted on the lift buttons.

At ten in the morning Dinbandhu pressed “Payment Scrutiny.” The lift went to the fifth floor. By then two Accounts cupboards had reached the fifth, but half the staff were still on the second floor and half on the fifth. The Head Clerk said, “If the file concerns payment, leave it here. If it requires verification before payment, take it downstairs.”

“Which button for downstairs?”

The Head Clerk raised a hand. “I no longer know the names of the lift buttons.”

On Wednesday a new notice was put up in the building: “Floors shall be identified only by approved branch names. Use of old numbers creates confusion.” The 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 painted on the stairwell walls were whitewashed over.

That day Dinbandhu kept a small piece of paper in his pocket. On it he wrote: “Payment Scrutiny = fifth. Material Verification = fourth. Scheme Approval = third. Record Preservation = second.”

At a quarter to two, an employee from Building Management came and announced that “Scheme Approval” would now occupy half of the fifth floor because water was leaking from the ceiling on the third. Dinbandhu crossed out five and wrote three, then crossed out three and wrote five. The paper soon contained more crossings-out than branch names.

On Thursday two buttons inside the lift bore the same name: “Scheme Approval.” One button had earlier been Grants, the other Officer. The employee who pasted the labels had left one old sheet in place.

Dinbandhu pressed the first “Scheme Approval.” The lift stopped on the third floor. Water was dripping from the ceiling there and four buckets stood beneath it. The branch had already moved away.

Dinbandhu pressed the second “Scheme Approval.” The lift went to the sixth floor. The Joint Registrar’s room was there. The attendant said, “Scheme Approval is on the fifth floor.”

“Then this button?”

“I am not sure either. It looks as though a new label has been pasted over an old button.”

At the words “not sure,” Dinbandhu fell silent. There was no button in the lift for guesswork.

On Friday morning there was a crowd at the building gate. The lift door was closed. A white sheet pasted over it said: “Use Suspended Due to Annual Safety Inspection.”

Employees turned toward the stairs. At the first landing half of the old “2” could be seen beneath the whitewash. At the second, the “3” was almost completely covered. People began climbing according to their own estimates.

An elderly farmer asked, “Where is Payment Scrutiny?”

Dinbandhu paused before answering. “It should be on the fifth today.”

“Where is the fifth?”

Dinbandhu looked toward the stairs. The numbers had been painted over. He said, “Count five turns upward.”

The old man went on, counting.

At half past ten the technical team arrived to inspect the lift. The team leader asked how to reach the machine room. “Where is the sixth floor?”

Muneshwar said, “Use of numbers has been discontinued.”

The technician did not laugh. "Our machine measurements are based on numbers. First stop, second stop, third stop. Changing the names does not change the length of the cable."

Muneshwar showed him the office order. The technician showed his own sheet. It clearly said: "Inspection of stops 1 through 6."

The two papers did not understand each other.

In the end Dinbandhu led the team upstairs, searching for the old digits beneath the whitewash on the stairwell walls. At the third landing, scratching the lime with a fingernail revealed half the loop of a "4." On the fifth, the lower part of a "6" remained. The technician entered the stop numbers in his register as he went.

After the team went upstairs, the Building Management assistant told Dinbandhu that scratching the wall had not been proper. Dinbandhu asked, "If the numbers cannot be seen, how will the team count the stops?" The assistant said, "Temporary direction boards could have been installed."

The next day direction boards were indeed installed. But they carried no numbers, only arrows and branch names. Beneath the first arrow was written "Payment Scrutiny," beneath the second "Scheme Approval." By the time one reached the fifth landing, one arrow pointed toward an old branch, because after the board had been made the branch had again moved by half a floor. Dinbandhu did not touch the board. According to the order, it was the approved direction.

At two in the afternoon the inspection was completed. Mechanically, the lift was sound. The cable, doors, bell, and braking mechanism all worked. But the certificate contained one line: "Permanent stop identification shall be clearly displayed on each button."

The team leader examined the buttons. There were two marked "Scheme Approval," one "Material Verification," one "Payment Scrutiny," one "Record Preservation," and one whose paper label was half peeled away.

"These are not permanent identifiers," he said.

The Building Management assistant said, "The names will keep changing according to departmental orders."

"Then what stop should I write on the certificate?"

"The branch name."

"My form requires numbers."

"Numbers are prohibited."

The technician remained silent for a few moments. Then on the last line of the certificate he wrote: “Machinery functional; verification of stop identifiers pending.”

The lift door was closed again.

By Monday everyone in the building had learnt to use the stairs. Someone had written small numbers in charcoal over the whitewash. The cleaner wiped them off in the morning; by afternoon someone had written them again. When asked where a branch was, Dinbandhu now said, “Two turns up,” “four turns up,” “right at the top.”

On Tuesday a new order came: small numbers could also be written beside the branch names on the lift buttons, but the numbers would be deemed “for internal technical purposes only.”

Building Management had six small round slips printed—1 through 6. As soon as the slips arrived, another problem arose: which number should be pasted beside which name, because the third phase of branch relocation was to take effect on Wednesday.

It was decided that the number slips would be pasted after the third phase came into force.

On Wednesday the order implementing the third phase was suspended. The suspension order said: “Present position shall continue until further instructions.” But it did not state the date whose position was to be treated as the “present position.”

The lift remained closed.

On Friday evening Dinbandhu was coming downstairs with the last file of the day. On the ground floor, through the narrow gap between the white doors of the closed lift, the buttons inside could be seen. The paper branch labels were peeling away at the edges. Beneath them the old round numerals still shone—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Dinbandhu looked at the numbers for a few moments. Then he tucked the file under his arm and turned toward the first flight of stairs.

STORY 266

The Blank Seal

...

In the District Small Industries Assistance Office in Madhubani there was a seal on which nothing at all was written.

Its wooden handle was old, worn smooth by use. The rubber underneath was neither round nor square—something close to an oval. Pressed into blue ink and stamped on paper, it produced only a blurred violet outline, with not a single letter inside. The people in the office called it “the blank seal.”

But though the seal was blank, its authority was not.

Any paper bearing that seal moved to the next desk without question. If the seal was missing, someone or other would write in red pencil: “Required seal absent.”

Mukund Mishra had newly joined the office as a clerk. Earlier he had worked in the Cooperative Branch at Benipatti, where every seal bore clear words—Received, Checked, Payment, Copy. During his first week here, nothing surprised him more than the blank seal.

On Monday an application for assistance with sikki craft came to his desk. It was from Champa Devi of a village near Rahika. Five women worked together making baskets, maunis, and small boxes from sikki grass. They had applied for assistance to buy colour, a bamboo platform for drying sikki, and two small tools for the next market fair.

The papers were complete—the group register, bank details, training certificate, village recommendation, and cost estimate. Mukund sent the file to the next desk.

Ten minutes later it came back.

Across the top, in red, was written: “Blank seal required.”

Mukund asked the elderly clerk sitting beside him, Jagdish Babu, “What exactly does this blank seal certify?”

Jagdish Babu pushed up his spectacles. “That the paper is in order.”

“In order in what sense?”

“That it may go forward.”

“And why may it go forward?”

Jagdish Babu looked at Mukund’s face for a few moments. Then he said slowly, “Because the blank seal is on it.”

Mukund thought he was being teased. But Jagdish Babu went back to reading his file.

The blank seal was kept in a small iron box. The box lay in a drawer of the Head Assistant's desk, though the drawer was never locked. Four or five times a day different clerks took the seal, pressed it into the ink pad, stamped a paper, and returned it to the box.

Before stamping Champa Devi's application, Mukund asked again, "What is its official name?"

Head Assistant Ramlochan Thakur said, "It is an old practice."

"Is 'practice' its name?"

"Does the work proceed by the name, or by the seal?"

Mukund fell silent.

He stamped the paper. A violet outline appeared. There was nothing in the middle. The file went to the next desk and this time did not return.

After that Mukund's attention remained fixed on the blank seal. Looking through old files, he found the same blurred outline on papers five years old. On some files ten years old the outline was darker, but the centre had been empty even then. On one old payment order the impression was so clear that even a small crack in the rubber could be seen, yet there was not a single letter.

One day Mukund examined the stores register. Fifteen seals were listed there—Receipt, Dispatch, Payment, Verification, Officer, Branch, Copy. The blank seal was not listed.

"Then how did this become government property?" Mukund asked.

Stores Clerk Harisharan said, "If something has no name, under what name can it be entered in the register?"

"Write 'Blank Seal.'"

"That is not an official name."

"What is the official name?"

Harisharan suppressed a smile. "That is what you are trying to discover."

Mukund wrote a short note: "The purpose and authority of the letterless seal in current office use may kindly be clarified."

The note went to the Head Assistant.

Ramlochan Thakur read it. He picked up his pen, then put it down.

"Why is this question necessary?"

"We stamp papers with it. We ought to know what we are certifying."

"Suppose I write that it means Verification, and later it turns out that this was a Receipt seal. Then what?"

“What about all the old papers?”

“That is exactly why I am asking. Thousands of papers bear this seal. If we assign it the wrong meaning now, the meaning of thousands of papers becomes wrong.”

Mukund said, “But no meaning is written on it at all.”

Ramlochan Babu looked up. “That is why everything is safe.”

The note remained on his desk for three days. On the fourth he wrote above it: “Position may be clarified from old records.”

The Records Branch replied: “Use of this seal is found in old records; order relating to its institution is unavailable.”

The file returned to the Head Assistant. He wrote: “Existing practice may continue while search for the source proceeds.”

Meanwhile the blank seal continued to be used exactly as before.

Champa Devi came to the office a second time. The papers for the first instalment of assistance to her group were in the Accounts Branch. But the Accounts Clerk asked for one further certificate—a confirmation that the group was functioning.

Champa said, “All five of us women are sitting outside in the veranda. You may look if you wish.”

The Accounts Clerk said, “Seeing is one thing. A paper is required.”

The certificate was prepared. Mukund saw that it too required the blank seal.

“What will be certified on this paper?” he asked Jagdish Babu.

This time Jagdish Babu laughed. “You have started again?”

“That the group is functioning?”

“Possibly.”

“That the signature is correct?”

“That too is possible.”

“That the paper has been received?”

“That as well.”

“Then this one seal says all three things at once?”

Jagdish Babu picked up the seal. “When nothing is written on it, what can contradict it?”

Mukund stopped his hand. “I will not stamp this certificate until its meaning is clarified.”

That day the certificate remained on his desk. It stayed there the next day too. On the third day Champa came again. The fair was only four weeks away.

The group needed the advance to buy colour and sikki. Two of the women had already borrowed money.

“How many more days?” Champa asked.

Mukund answered plainly, “The meaning of the seal is not clear.”

Champa remained silent for a few moments. “Will our money come only after the meaning of the seal is understood?”

Mukund gave no answer.

That evening he took the blank seal out of the box and examined it carefully. There was not even a trace suggesting that letters had once existed on the rubber surface. The centre was smooth. Only a thin raised rim ran around the edge, producing the violet boundary on paper.

The next morning Mukund carried the file to Ramlochan Thakur. “I am not stamping this certificate.”

Ramlochan Babu asked, “Why?”

“I do not know what I would be certifying.”

“You will not be certifying the meaning of the seal. You will be certifying the office practice.”

“And the authority for that practice?”

Instead of answering, Ramlochan Babu opened a drawer and took out an old register. He showed an entry from twenty years earlier: “Special Office Seal —I.”

“This may be it,” he said.

“Is any description available?”

“No. No description at all.”

“And is this blank seal the same one?”

“No one here is old enough to say with certainty.”

“Then how do we proceed?”

Ramlochan Babu closed the register. “If you stop this, it will not be only this certificate that stops. Questions will arise over every file bearing this seal. Will you take responsibility for that?”

Mukund looked toward the veranda. Champa and the four women with her were sitting there with small sikki baskets in their cloth bags. To pass the time, one woman was threading red yarn around the rim of a basket.

Mukund picked up the seal.

“What should I write to say that I have seen it?” he asked.

Ramlochan Babu said, “Nothing. That is what the seal is for.”

Mukund pressed it into the ink pad and stamped the certificate. A violet outline appeared. The file went to Accounts. Two days later the first instalment for Champa Devi's group was sanctioned.

But the file containing Mukund's note was not closed.

A month later a reply came from headquarters: "The purpose of the locally used seal shall be determined by the concerned office itself on the basis of records."

The office records had already stated that the order establishing the seal was unavailable.

Below the reply Ramlochan Babu wrote: "Record basis insufficient. Previous practice to continue unchanged."

Mukund asked, "What does this 'unchanged' mean?"

"It will continue as it has been continuing."

"For how long?"

"Until the meaning is found."

"When will the meaning be found?"

Closing the file, Ramlochan Babu said, "When the practice is stopped."

Three months later a district inspection took place. The inspectors examined every desk, register, store item, and pending file. At the end one inspector's eye fell on the iron box.

"What is in this box?"

Ramlochan Babu opened it. The blank seal lay inside.

The inspector took it out and turned it over in his hand. "Why is nothing written on this?"

No one in the room answered.

Mukund thought: this was the question he had been waiting three months to hear. But as soon as it was asked, his own note, Champa Devi's payment, the twenty-year-old register, and thousands of old papers all came to his mind at once.

The inspector asked again, "What does this do?"

Ramlochan Babu said very softly, "It is a seal in established office use."

"For what purpose?"

"The matter of its purpose was under consideration at headquarters."

"What did headquarters say?"

Ramlochan Babu placed the relevant file before him.

The inspector read the entire file: the headquarters reply, the Records Branch note, and then looked again at the blank seal.

After a while he wrote in the inspection register: "History of the letterless seal in current use is unclear. In order that continuity of past records not be disturbed, existing practice may be continued until separate instructions are issued."

He signed beneath it.

Ramlochan Babu pushed the register toward Mukund.

Mukund did not understand.

Ramlochan Babu pointed toward the blank seal. "Office seal on the inspection remark."

For a moment Mukund looked at the inspector. The inspector had already begun reading another file.

Mukund pressed the seal into the ink pad. Beneath the new inspection remark appeared a violet outline. In the middle, as always, there was nothing.

That evening, while closing the iron box, Mukund noticed a fresh stain of ink on the handle of the blank seal. He wiped it away with a cloth. The rubber surface became clean again. The next morning the first file arrived on his desk. Across the top, in red letters, was written: "Required seal absent." Mukund opened the drawer. The blank seal was in its usual place inside the box.

STORY 267

The Night Order

...

At one in the morning, in Belahi Panchayat of Lakhnaur Block, the thak-thak of the watchman's stick was heard. It was a night in Bhadon. After a day of oppressive humidity, a light wind had begun to move around midnight. Most houses in the village had gone to sleep. In one courtyard cattle were chewing cud; elsewhere red embers lay buried in the ash of a half-dead hearth. In that stillness the sound of the stick came first from far away, then nearer, lane by lane.

"Head of the household, come outside," called Ramvriksh Paswan, the watchman. "There is a night order."

Devkant Mishra first thought there must be a fire somewhere. Gathering his dhoti, he came outside. Ramvriksh held a bundle of blue papers. Each was folded in half, with a round government seal at the top. He handed one copy to Devkant and moved toward the next house.

"What does it say?" Devkant called after him.

Without turning, Ramvriksh said, "I do not understand it. I have only been ordered to distribute it."

Devkant opened the paper in the light of a lamp. At the top, in Devanagari numerals, was written: "Night Order 72/A." Beneath it were five lines in a script he had never seen before. The letters were neither rounded nor square; in some places two strokes crossed each other, in others tiny dots appeared in groups of three. At the very bottom there was only one sentence in Devanagari: "Compliance status shall be submitted by 9:00 a.m."

His wife Malti came outside. "What is in the order?"

"That is what I cannot understand."

"Then what are we supposed to comply with?"

Devkant looked again at the paper. "In the morning I will go to the office and find out."

"The compliance status is due by nine. Not the understanding."

At that sentence, both fell silent.

The night order did not go only to Devkant's house; it went to every house in Belahi. Until two in the morning dogs kept barking, doors opened and shut, and the blue papers were turned over again and again in the light of lamps,

lanterns, and torches. Someone said it must be a flood warning. Someone thought it concerned animal vaccination. Someone assumed it was an order for land measurement. No one recognised the script.

At six in the morning five copies of the blue paper lay on one table at Budhan's tea stall. The script was the same on all of them; only the serial numbers differed.

Retired teacher Ramanand Jha put on his spectacles and studied them for a long time. "This is not Maithili, not Hindi, not Nepali, not Urdu."

Budhan asked, "English?"

Ramanand shook his head. "Not even English letters."

"Then in which language is a government order written?"

No one had an answer.

By seven a crowd had gathered in the veranda of the Panchayat building. Panchayat Secretary Prabhakar Jha arrived at eight. The same blue paper lay on his desk. People surrounded him from all sides.

Devkant held out his copy. "Tell us what it means."

Prabhakar Jha first looked at his own paper, then Devkant's. "I received mine during the night too."

"Do you understand it?"

"No."

"Then who sent the order?"

"From above."

"From where above?"

Sitting down in his chair, Prabhakar said, "From the Block Office."

Devkant immediately went to the Block Office. Ramanand Jha, Jagarnath Yadav the milk seller, and Sushila Devi from the self-help group went with him. At the gate of the Block building, fifty or sixty people were already standing with blue papers in their hands. On the notice board inside, a fresh notice had been posted: "Separate instructions awaited for clarification of meaning regarding Night Order."

Reading it, Sushila Devi said, "Instructions explaining the meaning are awaited, but compliance status is required by nine. Which of the two comes first?"

The gate employee shrugged.

At 8:20 the Block Development Officer's assistant came outside and announced, "All citizens shall fill in and submit the compliance-status form. Necessary corrections may be made once clarification of meaning is received."

Ramanand Jha asked, "How can we state compliance without understanding the meaning?"

"The form has three options—full compliance, partial compliance, compliance pending."

"Compliance with what?"

The assistant was silent for a few moments. "With the order."

A low laugh moved through the crowd, but no one laughed openly. The assistant too had a blue paper in his hand.

Forms were distributed. Devkant stared for a long time at the three options. In the end he marked "Compliance Pending." Ramanand Jha left his blank. Jagarnath chose "Partial Compliance."

Devkant asked, "What did you comply with?"

Jagarnath said, "After receiving the order last night, I did not take the cattle outside. If the order concerns livestock, then half of it has been complied with."

Sushila Devi smiled. "And if the order was to take the cattle outside?"

Jagarnath's face became serious. He thought of changing his form to "Compliance Pending," but the ink mark had already been made.

At nine the window closed. A total of three hundred and twenty-seven compliance-status forms had been submitted. The office immediately prepared a register: full compliance 41, partial compliance 93, compliance pending 176, no option selected 17.

"What did the forty-one people claiming full compliance actually do?" Devkant asked.

The clerk said, "That is a separate question. Here we count the status."

At noon the first clarification arrived from the district. It was one page long: "Night Order 72/A has been issued in Standardised Administrative Sign-Script. A local-language translation will be distributed when an authenticated copy becomes available."

Ramanand Jha read the phrase "Standardised Administrative Sign-Script" three times. "Who has been taught this script?"

Secretary Prabhakar said, "Presumably someone in the higher offices."

Instead of telephoning, the Block assistant checked the telegram-message register. There was no translated copy there. Another written reply came from the district office: "The sign-script standard manual had been dispatched separately."

"Where?"

“A dispatch number is given.”

The dispatch number was traced. Three months earlier, a thick file under that number had reached the Block Office. Receipt was entered in the stores register, but where the file had been kept was unclear. Two hours later it was found on top of a cupboard containing old election materials.

Everyone became hopeful. The file was opened. Inside was a booklet titled: “Standardised Administrative Sign System—Part 2.”

Part 1 was missing.

On the first page of Part 2 the instruction read: “For meanings of basic signs, consult the index in Part 1.”

Ramanand Jha leaned back in his chair. “Then what can Part 2 tell us?”

The assistant turned the pages. “It contains the format for compliance reporting.”

Secretary Prabhakar said quietly, “That we already received.”

By three in the afternoon different interpretations of the order had spread through the village. Someone removed hay stacked outside the house. Someone stopped the children from going near the river. Someone did not take livestock to market. One farmer postponed spraying pesticide in his field. Sushila Devi cancelled the self-help group’s meeting for the day.

In the evening the Block Office issued a fresh notice: “Until an authorised translation is received, citizens shall, in their own discretion, refrain from any act that may run contrary to the possible objective of the original order.”

Devkant read the notice and asked, “What is the possible objective of the original order?”

Prabhakar Jha said, “Whatever the objective might possibly be, do not act against it.”

“And what about something that could not possibly be the objective?”

“Nothing has been said about that.”

Devkant returned home. Malti asked, “Did you understand it?”

“Not yet.”

“Then what will we do tonight?”

Devkant hung the blue paper beside a peg. “We will do whatever we normally do. But while doing it, we will keep thinking whether it might be against the order.”

Malti did not laugh. “If we keep thinking that way, will ordinary work remain ordinary?”

By ten that night the village had become unusually quiet. For fear of unknowingly breaking a rule, people postponed small decisions. Budhan closed his tea stall early. Jagarnath tied the cattle inside the cowshed. Two young men returned home instead of sitting at the pond steps. No one knew which, if any, of these acts had anything to do with the order.

At exactly one in the morning, the thak-thak of the stick was heard again.

Watchman Ramvriksh was once more distributing blue papers. This time all the lines were in clear Maithili. Devkant lit the lamp and read: "For verification of compliance status regarding dated Night Order 72/A, citizens shall inform in writing by 9:00 a.m. tomorrow whether the order was understood and complied with, or whether compliance status was submitted without understanding its meaning."

One more line appeared below: "The authorised translation of Night Order 72/A will be dispatched separately."

Malti read over Devkant's shoulder.

"Now what will we write?"

Devkant took down the first blue paper from the peg. Its five lines in the unknown script were still as silent as before.

He hung the second paper beside it. Both bore the same government seal—one could not be understood; the other could be understood, but merely asked about the meaning of the first. Devkant kept looking from one to the other for some time.

"At least this one can be understood," he said.

Outside in the lane, Ramvriksh's stick moved on toward the next house.

STORY 268

The Invisible Tax

...

In Ward Twenty-Four of Madhubani Municipal Council, Shambhunath Sah had a small bicycle-repair shop at a bend in the road. A tin awning projected over the front, two old seats stood inside, circular shadows of tyres marked the wall, and an air hose hung from a bamboo peg. The house was behind the shop. His wife Phoolkumari went to the vegetable market in the mornings, his son Anshu studied at the high school, and his elderly father Ramlochan spent most of the day on the veranda of the house.

One Monday the postman delivered a yellow envelope. On it was written: “Integrated Civic Facilities Tax—Notice of Arrears.”

At first Shambhunath thought it must be the Municipal Council’s property tax. He knew that tax. He paid it once a year and kept the receipt wrapped separately in cloth inside an iron chest.

But when he opened the envelope, the amount stated was one thousand seven hundred and sixty-four rupees. The name of the tax was again the same —“Integrated Civic Facilities Tax.” In the space for basis there was only a thin line. The rate column also had only a thin line. Under period it said: “Current Period of Existence.”

Phoolkumari read the slip twice.

“What is a ‘period of existence’?”

Shambhunath said, “Perhaps it means this year.”

From the veranda Ramlochan said, “My period of existence has been going on for eighty years. Will that be taxed too?”

No one laughed. At the bottom of the slip, in bold letters, was written: “Failure to pay by the prescribed date may result in temporary suspension of civic existence facilities.”

The next day Shambhunath went to the Municipal Council. There was no long queue at the service window of the Tax Branch. Only three people stood ahead of him, each holding a differently coloured slip. When his turn came, the clerk looked at the notice, asked his name, opened a thick register, placed a thumb on one line, and said, “Yes, one thousand seven hundred and sixty-four.”

“Tax on what?”

“Integrated Civic Facilities Tax.”

“On what basis is this tax imposed?”

The clerk looked at the left page of the register, then the right. “The basis comes from the district.”

“It is not written here?”

“The amount is written here.”

“The rate?”

“The rate must be in a separate register.”

“Where is that register?”

The clerk said calmly, “Not with me.”

Shambhunath asked, “Then how am I to know what I am paying for?”

For the first time the clerk raised his eyes fully toward him. “You know the amount. That is enough for payment.”

Shambhunath did not pay. He filled out a form asking for the basis of the tax. The form asked: “Is your objection to the amount of tax or to existence?” There was a small square before each option. Shambhunath held his pen still for some time, then marked “Amount.” The idea of objecting to existence seemed strange to him.

Four days later the Municipal Council’s garbage-collection vehicle stopped near the shop. The worker collected refuse from the lane but left the bamboo basket placed in front of Shambhunath’s house.

Phoolkumari came out and asked, “Why did you leave this?”

The worker held a small list. He found the name. “The facility for your house shows as suspended.”

“Is garbage collection an existence facility?”

The worker shrugged. “I was given a list. If there is a red dot against a name, I do not take that basket.”

That evening, at the ration shop, Phoolkumari’s family card did not get caught in the machine but in the shopkeeper’s newly printed list. The name was written as before, but beside it was printed: “Inactive.” The shopkeeper sat with a sack of rice open.

“I know all of you,” he said, “but the register is not active. If I give you rice, the accounts will not match.”

The next day notice came from Anshu’s school that scholarship verification had been stopped because the family’s civic-facility status was temporarily inactive. The Headmaster knew Shambhunath personally. He said, “There is no restriction on studies. Only the facilities linked to the system will stop.”

“How many facilities?”

The Headmaster returned the slip. “Ask the Municipal Council that.”

Shambhunath went back to the Tax Branch. The reply to his tax-basis application was not ready.

“How long will it take?”

The clerk said, “The basis has been requested from the district.”

“Why are my facilities stopped until then?”

“There are arrears.”

“Why are there arrears?”

“Because tax has been imposed.”

“Why has the tax been imposed?”

The clerk was silent for a few moments. Then he closed the register. “The basis statement will answer that question.”

Shambhunath considered paying. Garbage, ration, scholarship—the trouble was becoming greater than one thousand seven hundred and sixty-four rupees. But when he brought cash to the service window, a new problem appeared. The clerk said the arrears had been recalculated that day.

“How much now?”

“One thousand two hundred and ninety-eight.”

“How did it decrease?”

“The integrated facilities have decreased.”

Shambhunath stared at him. “You suspended the facilities, so the tax went down?”

“I only see the amount.”

“If you suspend every facility, will the tax become zero?”

The clerk did not laugh. “I do not make estimates.”

Shambhunath again did not pay. By now he had become more determined to know the rule of calculation than to know the amount.

Within a week his membership in the municipal library was deactivated, though he hardly went there twice a year. Ramlochan’s name disappeared from the list for elderly travel concessions. When the Municipal Council tap in front of the house broke, a complaint was filed, but the reply came: “Complainant family not on active facilities list.”

Phoolkumari said, “You have not understood the tax, but the tax is understanding all of us.”

Shambhunath said nothing.

At the end of that week another irony arrived at the door. A Municipal Council employee came with the old property-tax register. He saw that the dimensions of the house, the tiled section, the tin awning, and the small courtyard at the back were already recorded, and demanded the ordinary annual property tax.

Shambhunath asked, "My family is inactive. How is this house active?"

The employee laughed. "The house is taxable property. The family's facility status is a separate matter."

"No one is treated as living in the house, yet tax is charged on the house?"

"Who said no one is living there? In my register, you are the owner."

Shambhunath immediately took hold of the slip. "If I show this name to the Civic Facilities Branch, will they treat the family as active?"

The employee shook his head. "This is only a property-tax receipt. It proves that the property is taxable."

"The owner?"

"The owner's name is written."

"Is the owner alive?"

The employee stopped his pen. "That is not my subject."

Shambhunath paid the ordinary property tax. The receipt clearly printed his full name, his father's name, and the house address. That afternoon he took the receipt to the Civic Facilities Branch.

The clerk examined it carefully, turned it around, and handed it back.

"This proves the existence of the property."

"And mine?"

"Your name is associated with the property."

"Then the family?"

"The family is inactive in the facilities list."

Shambhunath did not fold the receipt. He walked out holding the paper flat in his hand.

On the twelfth day the tax amount fell again, to seven hundred and twelve rupees. On the fifteenth, to three hundred and thirty-six. On the twentieth, the clerk at the service window looked at the register and said, "The arrears are now zero."

For the first time relief appeared on Shambhunath's face.

"Then all the facilities will be restored?"

The clerk shook his head. "No. The family is inactive."

"But the arrears are zero."

“Yes, zero.”

“Then why the suspension?”

“Facilities are for active families.”

“Activate us.”

The clerk opened another register. He found Shambhunath’s name. The family number was there, but the status read: “Existence-facility relationship terminated.”

“Reconnect the relationship.”

“For that you need an Active Family Certificate.”

“Where do I get an Active Family Certificate?”

“From the Civic Facilities Branch.”

“What does that branch require?”

The clerk turned the page. “Certificate of zero tax arrears, proof of residence, and an active facility number.”

Shambhunath asked slowly, “And how do I get an active facility number?”

“Once you are active.”

The clerk said this in the ordinary tone one might use to say that water remains on the road after rain.

Shambhunath asked for a certificate showing zero tax arrears. The fee was twenty rupees. The certificate clearly stated: “Integrated Civic Facilities Tax: Zero.” In the line for reason it said: “Tax basis unavailable.”

“Why is the tax basis unavailable?” Shambhunath asked.

The clerk said, “An inactive family does not generate a basis.”

“Was there a basis earlier?”

“There was an amount.”

“The basis?”

The clerk again gestured toward the district.

This time Shambhunath did not go to the district. He returned home.

The house was still there. The tin awning over the shop was still there. Ramlochan was sitting on the veranda. Phoolkumari was sorting masoor in the kitchen. Anshu had his book open. In the evening two people came to have their bicycles repaired. A child pumped air into a tyre and, without being told, hung the hose back on the bamboo peg.

Three days later the reply to his tax-basis application came by post. Shambhunath tore open the envelope. Inside was one sheet:

“The requested basis is unavailable in current records. Since the concerned family’s facilities relationship stands terminated, tax calculation is not applicable.”

Beneath it was a new line: “To ascertain the basis of previous calculation, an active family number is required.”

Shambhunath folded the paper and placed it in the iron chest beside the property-tax receipt.

That evening the garbage vehicle came down the lane again. The workers lifted the baskets from every house. When one reached Shambhunath’s house, he checked the list, searched for the red dot, and stopped. “Your name is not here anymore,” he said. Shambhunath stood holding the basket in his hands. “Then what happens?” The worker folded the list. “If the name is not there, it does not say suspended either.” “Will you take it?” The worker opened the list again. “To take it, there has to be a name.” The vehicle moved on. Shambhunath placed the basket back beside the door. When the night wind rose, the dry leaves lying on top blew into the lane. He caught two and put them back in the basket. A third crossed the road and disappeared into the darkness.

STORY 269

The Wrong Date of Birth

...

The day Ramudit Mandal came to the District Handicrafts Assistance Centre in Jhanjharpur to apply for the Senior Artisan Honorarium, his bag contained three small bamboo objects—a sample winnowing tray, a shallow basket, and a half-finished mauni. There was no rule requiring him to bring such things with his papers, but Ramudit had always preferred to introduce himself less through words than through the work of his hands.

The clerk at the service window read the application, then searched for Ramudit's name in the electronic register. Two minutes later his eyebrows drew together.

"You have applied for the Senior Artisan Honorarium?"

"Yes, the senior honorarium."

"For that, you must be sixty years old."

Ramudit laughed. "Then how old does it show me?"

The clerk turned toward the screen. "Thirty-eight."

Ramudit stopped laughing. "My eldest daughter is forty-five."

The clerk looked at the screen again. "Your date of birth here is 12 July 1988."

Ramudit reached into his bag and took out an old artisan identity card kept inside a plastic cover. The paper had yellowed, but the blue letters were still legible: Name: Ramudit Mandal. Craft: Household articles made of bamboo and cane. Registration date: 12.7.88.

The clerk compared the two dates.

"Look. The date entered in the system as your date of birth is actually the date of your registration."

Ramudit said, "Then the mistake is clear. Correct it."

The clerk immediately shook his head. "Understanding that there is an error and proving the correct date of birth are two different things."

The rules for the Senior Artisan Honorarium required two things: sixty years of age and at least thirty years of craft experience. Ramudit's experience field had filled automatically: thirty-eight years and two months. His age field showed almost the same.

The clerk himself remained silent for a few moments. Then he said, "Your experience is complete. Your age is not."

"If I am thirty-eight years old, how can I have thirty-eight years of experience?"

"They are two separate fields."

"But the date is the same."

"I can see that."

Ramudit's application was sent to the Correction Branch. The branch was at the far end of another veranda. The assistant there first asked his current date of birth, then his actual date of birth. Ramudit said he had been born in the dark fortnight of Bhadon, in a year when the old channel of the Kosi had risen twice. No one in the family had written down the day. He estimated the year from his marriage, the birth of his eldest daughter, and the flood of 1987.

The assistant said, "A date of birth cannot be corrected on an estimate."

Ramudit produced a certified copy of his eldest daughter's birth register. It recorded Shanti's birth in 1981, with Ramudit Mandal named as her father.

The assistant examined it. "This paper proves only that in 1981 you were Shanti's father."

"And that I was born in 1988?"

"This paper does not say that."

Ramudit brought out a second paper: an old copy of the 1995 electoral roll. His age there was recorded as thirty-six.

"By this calculation, I must have been born around 1959."

The assistant examined the list carefully. "It gives an age, not a date of birth."

"The year of birth can be derived from the age."

"An approximate year can. What about the day and month?"

Ramudit fell silent.

The third paper was a flood-relief register. In 1987 Ramudit had been entered as head of the household; his wife, two children, and elderly mother were listed as family members. Seeing this page, the assistant softened a little.

"Looking at all this, the present date of birth does appear to be wrong."

"Then correct it."

"What authenticated date should I enter in its place?"

For the first time Ramudit faced a problem in which removing a falsehood required an entire day, month, and year of truth. He remembered the season of

his birth, the story his mother had told, and the estimates of old people in the village, but no old paper carried a date.

The Correction Branch accepted the application and wrote to the Records Room to trace the “source of the original entry.” Three days later Ramudit was called again.

During those three days his own work had also been held up. He had an order for a wedding in the village: twenty winnowing trays, ten baskets, and five large dauras. Strips of split bamboo were drying in the sun in his small courtyard. On an ordinary day he wove for four hours in the morning, split bamboo in the afternoon, and evened the rims in the evening. Now, with two trips to the office, the strips dried too much and became hard. His wife Devkali sprinkled them with water and covered them with cloth.

Devkali asked, “Will the paper be corrected before the wedding is over?”

Ramudit said, “The paper says I am still young. The work says I am getting late.”

That day someone from the wedding household came to ask about the advance order. Ramudit pushed the delivery date two days forward. The man agreed, but while leaving he looked at a half-finished daura and said, “Your hands are still as quick as ever.”

Ramudit did not reply. The slip certifying thirty-eight years of experience kept turning in his mind.

In the Records Room, a thick register, a grey copy of his old artisan identity card, and a record-conversion list had been placed on the table. Nowhere on the old page was Ramudit’s date of birth recorded. It contained only the registration date, 12.7.88, and his age at registration: “approximately twenty-nine.”

The Records Assistant showed him a line in the conversion list. Years earlier, when the old registers had been transferred into the electronic system, there had been an instruction that the date-of-birth field must not be left blank. Where no date of birth was found in the record, the earliest available date was entered as a “reference date.”

Ramudit’s earliest available date had been his registration date, 12 July 1988. In the first conversion list, the word “reference” had appeared in small letters beside it; in a later system that separate marker had ceased to display, leaving only the date.

Ramudit asked, “So at first this was not a birth date, only a reference?”

“That is what the old list says.”

“And now?”

“Now it is in the date-of-birth field.”

“Then the root of the mistake has been found.”

The Records Assistant said, “The root has been found. The corrected date has not.”

“Then leave the date of birth blank.”

“The field cannot remain blank.”

“Enter the estimated year.”

“Day and month are compulsory.”

“So I am being treated as born on the day I was registered?”

The assistant closed the register. “The system treats it that way. I do not.”

For Ramudit, the difference was very small, because the honorarium would be granted by the system.

A week later a three-member committee sat for correction review. Ramudit was called inside. The first member examined the old papers one by one. The second sat with the electronic register open. The third asked, “What is your actual date of birth?”

Ramudit again said, “The dark fortnight of Bhadon. Around 1959.”

“Around is not acceptable.”

“Then do you accept that my daughter was born in 1981?”

“There is a document. We accept it.”

“That in 1987 I was head of a household?”

“We accept it.”

“That in 1988 I was registered as an artisan?”

“We accept it.”

“And that on that very day I was born?”

None of the three answered at once. The second member kept searching on the screen. At last the first said, “That is what the present entry says.”

“Then the papers are quarrelling with one another.”

“Papers do not quarrel. They record different facts.”

The review committee’s decision ran to two pages. The first page stated that the source of the present date of birth appeared to be the artisan-registration date and that the entry could not be considered reliable. The second page stated that in the absence of acceptable proof of birth, no new date of birth could be entered. The conclusion read: “Present entry to remain unchanged pending correction.”

Ramudit asked, “What does unchanged mean?”

The clerk said, “Until an authenticated date is found, 1988.”

“Then the Senior Honorarium?”

“Your age is not complete.”

“My experience?”

The clerk took out another slip. “Thirty-eight years and two months certified.”

Two sheets lay before Ramudit. On one: age—thirty-eight years. On the other: craft experience—thirty-eight years and two months. Both rested on the same original date—12 July 1988.

Gathering the papers, the clerk said, “Your application cannot proceed under the senior category. But there is a new skill-upgradation camp for registered artisans below forty. You are automatically eligible.”

For a moment Ramudit thought it was a joke. The clerk’s face remained still. He printed a third sheet: “New Artisan Upgradation Camp: Participant—Ramudit Mandal.”

“What will they teach there?” Ramudit asked.

The clerk read from the list. “Selecting bamboo, splitting it, making thin strips, weaving the base of baskets and winnowing trays.”

Ramudit opened his bag. He took out the half-finished mauni and placed it on the desk. The bends of the strips were so fine that the clerk instinctively touched them with a finger.

“You made this?”

“Yes. With my own hands.”

The clerk placed the mauni back in the bag. He handed Ramudit the camp sheet, the experience certificate, and the correction-review decision together, fastening them at the top with a small metal pin.

Back home, Ramudit took the old artisan identity card out of the iron chest. The date 12.7.88 was still clear. Beside it he placed the new camp paper. On the two documents the same date remained alive with two different meanings—on one, the work had begun; on the other, the man. Ramudit did not close the chest. In the evening light he picked up a thin strip of bamboo, split it down the middle with his thumbnail, and resumed weaving the unfinished rim of the mauni.

STORY 270

One Door Less

...

Seen from the road, Nandkishore Sah's house in the old quarter of Benipatti Nagar Panchayat looked quite ordinary. There was a narrow veranda in front, two rooms behind it, a courtyard in the middle, and a small workshop to the west where his wife Manjula made bamboo baskets and winnowing trays. The house had two doors: one opening toward the main road, the other from the courtyard into a narrow lane at the back. Through the rear door passed long bamboo lengths, straw, bicycles, and in the rainy season shoes caked with mud.

Nandkishore had never thought there was anything unusual about having two doors. His grandfather used to say that the rear door had been there since the house was built. At different times wedding parties had gone out through it, sacks of paddy had passed through it, even a sick calf. In the history of the house, the door had simply done its work; it had never asked for a name.

One Monday a yellow paper arrived from the Nagar Panchayat. At the top was written: "Building Record Conformity Campaign." Below it were Nandkishore's house number and one line: "Compared with the approved digital plan, one additional door is visible. Submit an explanation within seven days."

Nandkishore read the paper twice. Then he walked through the courtyard to the rear lane and looked at the door. The wood was old, there was an iron nail in the middle plank from his father's time, and a small stain of soot above it. The door stood where it always had. He could not understand since when it had become additional.

The next day he went to the Building Branch of the Nagar Panchayat. The young man at the service desk opened the house number in the electronic register. A blue-line plan of the house appeared on the screen. There was a small mark at the front. The rear wall was shown as one unbroken straight line.

"Look," the young man said. "There is no door here in the plan."

"But there is one in the house."

"That is the problem."

"When was this plan made?"

The young man checked the date. "Three months ago, during record conversion."

“The house is seventy years old.”

“The digital plan is the currently approved record.”

Nandkishore asked, “What was this plan based on?”

The young man opened another page. “The old property-tax sketch.”

Nandkishore did not laugh. He remembered that tax sketch. Twenty years earlier an employee had stood outside the house and written down its length and width. That paper showed no rooms, windows, or courtyard—only a rectangular boundary and one small mark for the front entrance.

“That was a paper for calculating tax,” Nandkishore said.

“Now it is also the basis of the building record.”

“So whatever was not drawn on that paper has now become illegal?”

The young man thought for a few moments. “I can only tell you what is visible here.”

For the explanation there were three options: close the door, produce the old approved plan, or apply for an amendment. Nandkishore returned home to search for the old approved plan. The iron chest, bamboo box, bundles of clothes, land papers, tax receipts—everything came out. No approved plan from the time the house was built was found. No one could remember with certainty whether, when his grandfather had built the house, approval of plans had even been required in that neighbourhood.

At the bottom of the chest he found an old partition deed. It described the western boundary as: “Along the shared rear passage.” Nandkishore felt a little hope. At least this would prove that passage at the rear had existed from long ago. He took the document back to the Building Branch. The clerk read it, examined the seal and the date.

“This proves there was a passage at the back,” the clerk said.

“If there was a passage, there must have been some way to go out to it.”

“That is an inference.”

“Did we climb over the wall?”

The clerk did not laugh. “The paper does not say door.”

Nandkishore put the document back in his bag. On his way home he entered through the rear lane. Three old houses opened onto that narrow passage. The doors of two had been replaced recently; his own was the oldest. A shallow drain for rainwater also ran in the same direction along the lane. For the first time it occurred to him that what he had regarded all his life as an ordinary passage existed, in the eyes of paper, only as an inference.

Manjula was splitting bamboo beside the rear door. She asked, “If we close it, how will the bamboo come in?”

“Through the front.”

“The front door is only three hands wide. Long bamboo cannot turn there.”

Nandkishore measured it. She was right. Immediately behind the front door there was a turn. The rear passage ran straight to the workshop.

He decided to apply for an amendment. On the third day he went again to the Building Branch. The amendment checklist required proof of ownership, tax receipt, existing plan, proposed plan, structural-safety certificate, and “copy of previously approved plan.”

“There is no previously approved plan. That is why I need an amendment,” Nandkishore said.

The clerk placed a finger on the list. “An amendment is made on the basis of an earlier approval.”

“And if there was no earlier approval?”

“Then first establish the earlier condition.”

“How?”

“Through the previously approved plan.”

Nandkishore turned the list toward himself and read it again. The words remained the same.

At last he was shown the route of a “site inspection.” An inspector would see the house, estimate the age of the construction, and after that special consideration might be possible. Five days later the inspector arrived. He entered through the main door, crossed the courtyard, opened the rear door, and looked into the lane.

He examined the old wood of the shutters, the layers of lime on the wall, and the wear on the frame.

“This is not new,” the inspector said.

Nandkishore felt lighter. “Then write that.”

The inspector opened his measuring tape. “It is old, but it is additional to the plan.”

“Does its age make no difference?”

“Age and legality are different matters.”

The inspection report came: “Door appears to be of old construction; archival approval unavailable; inconsistent with current digital plan.” At the end was the recommendation: “For regularisation, amendment or closure.”

The amendment again got stuck on the same old plan. Tired, Nandkishore asked, “What if I close the door?”

“Then compliance photographs and site verification,” the clerk said.

“And after that the matter ends?”

“From the Building Branch’s side.”

Nandkishore returned home and called a mason. Manjula did not want the whole opening bricked shut. Finally they decided the shutters would be removed and the opening walled up. But when the mason measured it, another fact emerged. The house’s main drainage channel also passed out through that part of the rear wall. If the door were bricked shut, there would be no access from inside to clean the drain.

“Turn the drain another way,” Nandkishore said.

The mason studied the slope of the courtyard. “Then the courtyard water will run toward the front of the house. In the rains the veranda will flood.”

Nandkishore went back to the Nagar Panchayat, this time to the Sanitation Branch. The employee examined the sketch of the house and said, “Access must remain open for inspection of the main drain.”

“The access is through this very door.”

“Then why are you closing it?”

“The Building Branch says I must.”

The employee read the Building Branch order, then opened his own rulebook. “I will say nothing about the door. I need access to the drain.”

“If I leave a small opening in the wall?”

“Large enough for a person to enter and clean it.”

Nandkishore asked, “If the opening is large enough for a person to enter, will it not be called a door?”

The employee suppressed a smile. “The Building Branch will know that.”

The following week the Building Branch and Sanitation Branch conducted a joint site inspection. The two employees stood beside the same rear doorway. The Building Inspector said, “This must be closed.” The Sanitation employee said, “Access to the drain must remain open.”

“Then how much should be closed and how much left open?” Nandkishore asked.

The two looked at each other. The measuring tape came out again. At last a temporary solution was written down: “Shutters shall be removed; permanent use for movement shall cease; service opening for drain inspection shall be retained.”

Nandkishore read the paper. “How large should the service opening be?”

“There is no measurement in the rule,” the Building Inspector said.

“Smaller than a door?”

“Naturally.”

“Large enough for a person to enter?”

The Sanitation employee said, “Essential.”

Two days later the mason removed the shutters. The frame was not taken out, because removing it might break the edge of the wall. Within the frame, bricks were laid to a height of two feet from the bottom; the upper portion was left open, so that a person could bend and reach the drain. Manjula watched.

“And now the bamboo?” she asked.

Nandkishore lifted a long bamboo pole. He tried to raise it over the two-foot wall and pass it through the opening above. The bamboo got stuck. Neither of them laughed.

Three days later the compliance inspection took place. The Building employee took photographs and wrote: “Additional door closed; service opening retained.” The Sanitation employee wrote on the same spot: “Drain access available.” Both signed.

In the Nagar Panchayat’s electronic register, the status of Nandkishore’s building turned green: “Conforms to plan.” In the new digital image, the rear wall was again a straight line. No opening was marked.

That evening Manjula sat in front of the workshop splitting bamboo. Nandkishore went toward the rear wall. There were no shutters. The frame was still there. Two feet of brick rose from the bottom, and above it was a narrow rectangle of open sky. He bent, placed one foot on the brickwork, and climbed through the service opening into the rear lane.

Standing outside, he turned and looked back at the house. The house truly had one door less now. But at the place where the door had been, he could still go in and out—the only difference was that the paper no longer called it a door.

STORY 271

Return

...

Twenty-four years earlier, Devnarayan Mandal had left Belauncha village in Jhanjharpur to earn a living elsewhere. He had been twenty-two then; the roof of the house was tiled, two mango trees stood in the courtyard, and there was more black than grey in his mother Saraswati Devi's hair. He found work in a loom factory in Surat. At first he had thought he would return in two years, but two became five, five became ten, and after ten the measure of time began to run through receipts for money sent home by post, festival leave, and letters arriving from the village.

This time, when the factory closed, he decided that he would now live permanently in the village. He gathered a metal trunk, two bundles, a small sewing machine, and twenty-four years of papers, travelled by passenger vehicle to Darbhanga, from there to Jhanjharpur, and then by shared vehicle to Belauncha. As soon as he got down near the pipal tree outside the village, the first new thing he saw was a yellow board on the wall of the Panchayat building: "Registration of Returning Residents Compulsory. Verification Required Before Permanent Re-entry."

Devnarayan laughed. What verification could be needed to return to one's own village? But the driver said, "Babu, first get your name entered at the Panchayat. Otherwise ration, house number—everything will get stuck."

He left the trunk for safekeeping on the veranda of a familiar tea shop and went to the Panchayat building. A young man sat behind a long table. In front of him was a computer screen; beside it were three registers and a red seal. Devnarayan gave his name. The young man searched.

"Devnarayan Mandal, son of the late Ramparikshan Mandal?"

"Yes, I am Devnarayan."

"Your village-exit serial number?"

Devnarayan did not understand. "What serial number?"

"The exit entry made when you left the village. Its serial number."

"I left twenty-four years ago. There was nothing like that then."

The young man pointed to a field on the screen. "The returning-resident entry will not open without the old exit number."

"I was born here. My house is here. My mother is here."

“That proves residence. For return, it must also be proved that you had previously left the village.”

For the first time Devnarayan thought of an ordinary event in his life as something requiring proof. He had left—the fact was known to him, to his mother, to the entire neighbourhood, to the factory in Surat. But where was the paper proving the sentence: he had left?

He went back to the tea shop and opened the metal trunk. Clothes lay on top; beneath them was a bundle of old receipts. There were money-order receipts, factory wage slips, a worker identity card, and two old rent receipts for his room in Surat. He took them all to the Panchayat.

The young man examined each paper. “All of these prove that you lived in Surat.”

“Then they also prove that I had left.”

“No. Under the rule, ‘previous exit’ is a separate thing.”

“If I lived in Surat, I must have left Belauncha.”

“That is an argument. I need evidence.”

A faint smile replaced the tiredness on Devnarayan’s face. “Then what paper should I bring?”

The young man opened a list. “Exit slip, old Panchayat entry, or statements from two witnesses who directly remember the event of your leaving the village.”

Devnarayan asked, “Will a railway ticket do?”

“If it is the ticket from that day.”

“Who keeps a ticket for twenty-four years?”

The young man did not answer. The list said a ticket was acceptable evidence; whether a ticket could survive twenty-four years was not a matter for the rule.

The first witness he found in the neighbourhood was eighty-year-old Vaidyanath Kaka. “Yes, I remember you leaving,” he said. “Your father went with me as far as the station.” But when asked for the date, he scratched his head. “Was it Sawan or Bhadon? The Kamla rose twice that year. How am I to remember the exact day?”

The second witness was Siyaram Jha, an old schoolteacher. He remembered Devnarayan clearly. “You left school after Class Eight, then worked in the fields for two years, and after that went away for work.” He too could not give a date.

On the Panchayat witness form, the day, month, and year were all compulsory. The young man said, "The event is remembered, but the system will not accept it without a date."

"I do not remember the date either."

"Then search the old records."

The old records were in a back room of the Panchayat building: dusty registers in bamboo cupboards, electoral rolls, tax receipts, family registers. Devnarayan and the young man searched for his name for three hours. In the family register from twenty-four years earlier, his name was present. In the register five years later, the word "away" had been written in pencil beside it.

Devnarayan brightened. "Here is the proof."

The young man examined the register carefully. "This proves that you were away."

"That is what I have been saying."

"But it does not say on what day you left."

"Why do you need the day?"

"Without an exit entry, the return entry cannot be made, and the exit entry requires a date."

In an old electoral roll his name appeared in one year and disappeared from the next. In the ration register his mother, father, and younger brother remained, while Devnarayan's name had been struck out; the reason column was blank. The young man said, "Deletion of a name proves absence, not exit."

Devnarayan remembered the old postman, Bhola Yadav. Bhola Kaka was now retired and lived at home. His signatures appeared on the receipts for money Devnarayan had sent from Surat. Devnarayan sent a young man on a bicycle to fetch him. Bhola Kaka came leaning on a stick, put on his spectacles, examined the old receipts, and laughed. "This is my signature. Once or twice a month money used to come in your mother's name. The whole neighbourhood knew you were earning in Surat."

The Panchayat clerk asked hopefully, "Did you see him leaving the village?"

Bhola Kaka shook his head. "No. When he left, I was posted in another postal area. I came here two years later."

"Then your statement will prove outside residence, not exit."

Bhola Kaka took off his spectacles and looked at Devnarayan. "Shall I write that he lived away for twenty-four years, but I cannot say whether he ever left the village?"

The young man said seriously, "Under the rule, that is all that can be written."

Bhola Kaka remained silent for a while. Then he lifted his stick and said, "Paper can see a very long way, but there is one road it cannot see." He went away.

Devnarayan came outside and sat on the veranda. The afternoon was waning. The village was only half a kos away. The tops of the mango trees were visible. His mother had already been told that her son was returning that day. His young nephew had twice come as far as the Panchayat to ask, "Uncle, when are you coming home?" The first time Devnarayan had said, "Just a little longer. The papers are being made." The second time he had only raised a hand. But in the Panchayat's reckoning the son still could not return, because it had not been recorded clearly enough that he had ever left.

An elderly farmer waiting beside a pillar for a copy of his land record had heard the story. He asked, "Is the village stopping you, or the paper?"

Devnarayan said, "Not the village. The register is stopping me."

The old man laughed. "Then go to the village."

"I can go. But if I reach home without reaching the register, I will have to come back here tomorrow."

After that answer, the old man too fell silent.

A little later the Panchayat Secretary arrived. The young man explained the whole matter. The Secretary examined the old entry marked "away," looked through the papers, and then at Devnarayan's face.

"The only problem is the date of the old exit?"

"Yes. Only that."

"Will the system not accept it without a previous date?"

The young man tried. Red letters appeared on the screen: "Certified date required for historical exit."

"Where will the certified date come from?"

"From the same exit slip that was never made."

The Secretary was silent for a few moments. Then he asked, "Can an exit entry be made with today's date?"

The young man's hand stopped. "It can. But he has returned today."

"Make the exit first. Then the return."

Devnarayan looked at the Secretary. "Where am I supposed to go again now?"

"Nowhere. The paper will go."

The young man opened a new entry. Name, father's name, house number, reason—"Long-term external employment." The system itself filled the current time of exit: 3:17 p.m. The entry was saved. For the first time, Devnarayan's official record stated that he had gone out of Belauncha.

One minute later the "Returning Resident" field opened. The young man checked the same papers again. Arrival time—3:18 p.m. Purpose—permanent residence. Verification—complete.

The machine produced two slips. The first stated that Devnarayan Mandal had left the village at 3:17 p.m. The second stated that he had returned permanently at 3:18 p.m. Between them lay one minute.

Handing over the slips, the young man said quietly, "The old twenty-four years will not appear in the record."

Devnarayan folded both slips and put them in his bag. "I have lived those years. Let the paper keep the one minute it needs."

He carried the trunk himself along the road to the village. He passed the pipal tree, reached the pond, and then his own neighbourhood. His mother stood at the door. Her hair was now almost entirely white.

Devnarayan set down the trunk and touched her feet. Saraswati Devi placed a hand on his head and asked only, "Where were you for so many days, son?"

Instead of answering, Devnarayan put a hand into his bag. The two slips were pressed against each other. The first said 3:17; the second 3:18. He put them back inside.

His mother was counting twenty-four years. The Panchayat, one minute.

STORY 272

Translation

...

At the northern edge of Madhubani district stood an old iron bridge over the Kamla River. On one side was the road toward Harlakhi; on the other, a small market and bus stand. In the rainy months, when the river swelled, orders to reduce the load on the bridge were issued from time to time. The villagers were used to such things. Bullock carts would move slowly, only one brick-laden vehicle would cross at a time, and no vehicle would stop in the middle of the bridge.

In the third week of Sawan that year, two iron plates beneath the bridge were found badly rusted. After inspection, the engineer wrote to the district office that loads needed to be restricted during the evening rush. The district issued an order. It was printed in four languages—Maithili, Hindi, Urdu, and English. Few people in the market read the English lines, and in any case their letters were the smallest, pressed beneath the government emblem at the top.

Block Office clerk Shashibhushan Jha received copies of all four versions together. He first read the Maithili: “After six in the evening, crossing the bridge with a load exceeding five quintals is prohibited.” Then his eye fell on the Hindi version. There the meaning was that vehicles carrying more than five quintals were not to cross the bridge until six in the evening.

Shashibhushan read both again. One prohibited crossing after six; the other prohibited it until six.

He called Accounts Clerk Abdul Sami to read the Urdu translation. Sami read it aloud slowly. In that version, the five-quintal limit applied only to goods vehicles, not to bullock carts. The newly appointed assistant Rashmi was called for the English version. She said the English text mentioned no time at all; it merely prohibited “commercial loads” above five quintals.

All four sheets were copies of the same order. All bore the same number, the same date, and the stamped signature of the same officer. The last line too was identical in all four: a fine of one thousand rupees for violation.

“Then which one applies?” Shashibhushan asked.

Abdul Sami turned the papers over. “Whichever language the original order was written in.”

“And which is the original language?”

None of the four copies answered that question.

That afternoon the order was posted at both ends of the bridge. Maithili and Hindi were fixed to one pillar, Urdu and English to the other. The first dispute arose at five in the evening. Budhan Sadai, a potter from Kaluar, was taking five baskets of earthen pots to market on a bullock cart. The bridge guard, looking at the Maithili copy, stopped him.

“Is it more than five quintals?”

Budhan looked at his oxen. “How would I know? Where is the weighing scale?”

The guard estimated. “Looks heavier.”

Budhan pointed to the Hindi copy. “This says the restriction is until six. It is only ten past five. You tell me to stop; this tells me the restriction lasts only until six. Which one should I obey?”

The guard’s job was not to interpret meaning; it was to record violations. He said, “I will follow the copy I was given.”

“Which language is your copy in?”

Instead of answering, the guard wrote down the cart number. Budhan was given a penalty slip. The slip was in Maithili, but the box for the reason was blank.

The next morning the problem reversed itself. At half past six, a small goods vehicle loaded with bricks reached the bridge. Under the Hindi wording, the time restriction had already ended. Under the Maithili wording, it had just begun. The driver, Suresh Yadav, read the Hindi notice and drove ahead. In the middle of the bridge, the guard from the opposite side stopped him; that guard was holding the Maithili copy. A second fine of one thousand rupees was issued.

On the third day two bullock-cart drivers pointed to the Urdu copy and said that version did not mention bullock carts at all. The guard could not read Urdu. He called Abdul Sami from the office. Sami came to the bridge and read the text aloud.

The guard asked, “Then should I let them go?”

Sami said, “I can read the translation. I have no authority to enforce it.”

Both bullock carts stood at the bridge entrance for half an hour. When the crowd began to grow, the guard let one cart pass and stopped the other, because the first carried paddy and the second bricks. No such distinction appeared anywhere in the order. But the guard had to make some decision.

In four days seven penalty slips were issued. All seven people came to the Block Office with objections. Shashibhushan spread the slips across the desk.

The reasons differed—time, weight, type of vehicle—but the amount was always the same: one thousand rupees.

Budhan Sadai asked, “In which language should I write my appeal?”

Shashibhushan said, “In whichever language you understand.”

“But what if the decision was made according to the meaning in another language?”

Shashibhushan remained silent.

That evening the office sent a letter to the district: “Implementation is difficult because the multilingual versions of the order differ in meaning. Kindly clarify the original authoritative text.” The letter was written in Maithili, because most Block Office employees understood Maithili.

Three days later the district replied in Hindi: “All certified translations shall be regarded as equally valid. Meaning shall be construed according to local circumstances. The penalty provision shall remain unchanged.”

Shashibhushan read the reply four times. Putting “equally valid” and “meaning shall be construed” in the same sentence had not made the problem smaller. It had made it larger.

Rashmi said, “If all meanings are valid, can a citizen choose the meaning most favourable to him?”

Abdul Sami said, “Then the guard can choose the meaning most favourable to him too.”

The following week a new board was placed at the bridge: “Order to remain in force until clarification is received.” This line was not translated. The office was afraid that the clarification itself might acquire four meanings.

But as soon as only one language was displayed, a new objection arose. The market traders’ association asked how people who could not read that language were supposed to understand the rule. Panchayat members pointed out that the whole purpose of issuing a multilingual order had been to make it understandable to everyone.

At last the district office called a “Translation Coordination Meeting.” The engineer, language assistant, legal clerk, Block representative, and bridge guard sat together. All four versions lay on the table.

The first hour was spent discussing “after” and “until.” The second went into “vehicle” and “commercial load.” The third was spent deciding whether the five-quintal limit included the vehicle’s own weight or only the goods it carried.

At last the bridge guard asked, “What are we supposed to do from this evening?”

The chair of the meeting said, “Until a uniform text is prepared, give priority to safety.”

“Does safety mean stop everyone?”

“No. Use reasonable discretion.”

“What is the written meaning of reasonable discretion?”

The chair looked at him. “Not everything is written down.”

The meeting ended. A three-member subcommittee was formed to prepare a uniform text. Its first draft read: “All vehicles with a total load exceeding five quintals shall not cross the bridge after six in the evening.”

Rashmi asked, “Who will weigh the total load?”

The word “estimated” was added.

Abdul Sami said that imposing a fine on an estimate would be difficult. Someone proposed adding “visibly.” The legal clerk said weight could not be seen directly. The draft was held back again.

Meanwhile the number of penalty slips rose to twelve. Not one appeal had been decided, because it first had to be clarified which text had been violated. But the deadline for depositing a fine was seven days. Five people paid so that interest would not increase. Budhan Sadai did not. His earnings from pottery were less than one thousand rupees.

On the eighth day his name was added to the arrears list. He came to the office. “My appeal has not yet been decided. How can the fine already be in arrears?”

Shashibhushan looked at the register. “The penalty process and the appeal process are separate.”

“The meanings of the order are separate, but the penalty is one?”

“There is no translation difference in the penalty line.”

That was factually true. In all four languages the amount had been written as the numeral 1000. Numerals did not require translation.

Two weeks later a revised order arrived. This time there was only one sheet. At the top it said: “Original Text: Hindi.” Beneath it were Maithili, Urdu, and English translations.

Shashibhushan read the Hindi first, then the Maithili. The Hindi said “after six in the evening.” In the Maithili, because of a printing error, “until six in the evening” had appeared again.

For a few moments no one spoke.

Rashmi said quietly, “Should we not put this copy up at the bridge?”

Shashibhushan read the final line of the revised order: "Penalties imposed under the previous order shall remain valid."

He did not fold the sheet. He laid it flat and placed a weight on top of it.

That evening all four old notices were still hanging at the bridge. The Maithili copy lifted at one edge in the wind; the Hindi copy hung straight; rain had spattered the Urdu copy; dust lay on the English one. At the small table below them, the bridge guard was writing out a new penalty slip.

Budhan Sadai was returning that way with an empty bullock cart. He stopped and asked, "Which meaning applies now?"

The guard looked at the four notices, then at the number written on his slip. "The paper about the meaning is still in the office," he said. "The penalty slip is here."

STORY 273

The Order of the Empty Chair

...

The Agriculture Seed Subdivision Office of Madhubani district occupied an old brick building. On one side of the veranda was a service window for farmers; inside stood three desks, two cupboards, and, furthest forward, the chair of the Subdivisional Officer. The back of the chair had a dark-brown cushion, its arms were worn smooth, and a small bell stood to its right. Whenever the bell rang, the peon Manbodh came inside.

On the last Monday of Phagun, Officer Surendranath Mishra was transferred. The farewell took place in the afternoon: garlands, sweets, two speeches. Surendranath rose, patted the arm of the chair once, and said, "The new sahib will arrive in two or four days. Do not let the work stop."

Everyone heard that final sentence. But no one asked what written arrangement would keep the work from stopping.

From the next day, the chair remained empty.

The old practice of the office was that the branches wrote their small proposals on separate slips and placed them on the officer's desk by afternoon. At three, the officer read all the slips, struck out some things, changed others, and wrote "Approved" on some. Head Clerk Ramlochan Jha then combined the approved points into an office order, assigned it a number, the officer signed it, and Manbodh distributed the copies.

On the second day after the transfer, three slips were submitted. The first proposed sending five sacks of paddy seed from the Bisfi storehouse to the Rahika centre. The second proposed keeping the service window open until two in the afternoon. The third listed the employees who were to go on field inspection on Thursday.

At three o'clock Ramlochan looked at the slips, then at the empty chair.

"Will no order be issued today?" Assistant Clerk Chandramohan asked. "Who will sign?"

Ramlochan said nothing at first. Chandramohan added, "The seed has to reach there tomorrow."

Ramlochan picked up the first slip. He remembered what Surendranath had said two days earlier—do not let the work stop. He opened the old order register. The next number was 47. He had all three matters typed. The space for

the signature was left blank. Beneath it the designation was already printed: "Subdivisional Agriculture Officer."

"Without a signature?" Chandramohan asked again.

Ramlochan thought for a while. Then he wrote: "Post vacant—according to previous arrangement." In the right-hand corner he put his small initials.

Order No. 47 was issued. Five sacks of seed reached Rahika. The service window stayed open until two. The employees went to the field on Thursday. Nothing went wrong.

Because of that success, four slips arrived the next day. Seven came the day after that. By the end of the week every branch had understood that the officer's chair might be empty, but there was no reason for the order register to remain empty.

The manner of writing proposals changed too. Earlier people wrote "For consideration." Now they began writing "For orders." There was no person left to consider, but there was still a register from which orders could emerge.

Ramlochan made a rule: any proposal to which no branch raised an objection would go into the routine order. Objections had to be submitted in writing. No branch read another branch's slip in time. As a result, almost every proposal began to be treated as unopposed.

In the first week of Baisakh, Order No. 59 was issued: "Seed distribution hours shall be from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m." On the same day, Order No. 60 was issued: "All employees shall remain present for field-store verification from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m."

The next day the service window closed at eleven because all the employees had gone for verification. Outside, Sita Devi of Piprahi sat with samples from two sacks of defective maize seed. The seed had failed to germinate. It was the last day for filing the application.

Manbodh said, "There is an order. Everyone has gone out."

Sita Devi pointed to the other order pasted on the wall. "This one says the window will remain open until one."

Manbodh read both papers. "Both are orders."

"Then which one should I follow?" Sita Devi asked.

Manbodh said, "For you, the window order. For the employees, the verification order."

Sita Devi asked again, "How will the window remain open without employees?"

Manbodh had no answer to that. He looked toward the empty chair. The chair was still in its place that day too.

Sita Devi's application could not be submitted in time. The next day she went to Ramlochan. Ramlochan placed Orders 59 and 60 side by side.

"There is a conflict," he admitted.

"Whose orders are these?" Sita Devi asked.

Ramlochan opened his mouth to give the obvious answer, then stopped. "The office's."

Sita Devi asked again, "Who said it in the office?"

Ramlochan replied, "It is entered in the order register."

Sita Devi said, "Does the register speak?"

Chandramohan lowered his eyes.

After this incident Ramlochan drafted a clarification proposal: "When two orders apply at the same time, work relating to public service shall be given priority." The proposal was placed on the desk of the empty chair. No one wrote an objection for two days. On the third day it became Order No. 62.

But the Stores Branch wrote that on the fixed day for store verification, a district inspection took place, and therefore store verification should receive priority. The next order came: "Work connected with district inspection shall have priority equal to public-service work."

Chandramohan laughed and asked, "If the priority is equal, which comes first?"

Ramlochan said, "According to the circumstances."

Chandramohan asked again, "Who decides the circumstances?"

Ramlochan did not look toward the empty chair.

The chair, which had once been merely a place for one person to sit, gradually became an institution present in the office. Whenever an employee hesitated to take a decision, he would say, "Let an order come from the chair." Anyone wanting to make a proposal seem stronger would write, "Required at officer level." Even farmers began asking, "When will the chair decide?"

No one said that the chair itself did nothing. Everyone knew that the chair itself did nothing. The problem was that the orders issued on paper truly made things happen.

A month later a letter came from the district office. Appointment of the new officer was delayed; "daily work shall continue according to the existing arrangement." Ramlochan placed a copy of the letter on the desk of the empty chair. Those four words—according to the existing arrangement—became the greatest approval of all.

The order numbers kept rising. 71—seed complaints shall not be accepted without a sample. 72—farmers from distant villages may submit the sample

later. 73—no complaint number shall be issued before receipt of the sample. 74—no sample shall be deposited in the store without a complaint number.

Sita Devi came again. This time she carried a small bag of maize seed that had failed to sprout. Chandramohan was sitting at the service window.

“Complaint number first,” he said.

Sita Devi replied, “A sample is needed for the complaint number.”

Chandramohan said, “A complaint number is needed to deposit the sample.”

Sita Devi placed the bag on the table. “Then where will this stay?”

Chandramohan picked up the bag, carried it inside, and placed it on the desk of the empty chair. “Until a clear order comes.”

That evening, beside the bag, Ramlochan found a new proposal: “The sequence of sample receipt and complaint registration may be clarified.” Beneath it were the initials of three branches. No one had objected. It became Order No. 76: “Both processes shall be treated as complementary to each other.”

“The sequence?” Chandramohan asked.

Ramlochan said, “Complementary things do not have a sequence.”

In the last week of Jeth, the new officer finally arrived—Avinash Kumar. At half past ten in the morning Manbodh cleaned the old brown chair. There was no dust on it; because no one had been sitting there, it had become the cleanest object in the office.

Avinash sat down. His first question was, “Who issued office orders during the vacancy?”

Ramlochan placed two thick volumes of the order register before him. “Routine work was not allowed to stop, sir.”

Avinash turned the pages. “Where are the signatures?”

Ramlochan said, “It says ‘post vacant.’ There was a letter from the district directing us to continue work according to the existing arrangement.”

Avinash asked again, “Who approved these orders?”

Ramlochan replied, “Each branch proposed matters within its own subject. If there was no objection, the proposal became an order.”

Avinash read Orders 59, 60, 62, 63, and 71 through 76. He put a hand to his forehead and remained silent for a while. “All of these will have to be reviewed.”

He dictated a new order: “All orders issued during the period of vacancy shall remain in force until individually reviewed. No previous order shall be treated as immediately cancelled.”

Ramlochan asked, “Number?”

Avinash said, “The next one.”

Order No. 81 was issued. This time it bore Avinash’s clear signature.

At noon a message came from the district saying that the new officer was required to attend a three-day orientation in Darbhanga. Avinash left the next morning. As he went, he told Manbodh, “I will return. Let the routine work continue.”

At ten o’clock the first proposal arrived—once again asking for clarity on the sequence between Sita Devi’s sample and complaint. Chandramohan took the paper to Ramlochan.

“Sahib is not here,” he said.

Ramlochan opened Order No. 81. He read the line: previous orders remain effective until review. Then he remembered what Avinash had said while leaving—let the routine work continue.

Manbodh wiped the desk of the empty brown chair and placed the proposal there. By noon four more slips had accumulated on top of it.

At three o’clock Ramlochan opened the order register. The next number was 82. The chair was empty again. This time, however, it also had a signed order on its side.

STORY 274

Entry Pass

...

In front of the emergency building of Jhanjharpur Subdivisional Hospital, a thin red line had been painted across the entrance. Above it, a new board hung on the wall: "ENTRY TO EMERGENCY ROOM PROHIBITED WITHOUT ENTRY PASS." The board was so new that its white paint shone even in the muddy light of evening.

A little before seven that evening, four fellow workers brought Ramji Paswan, a mason's labourer from the Araria-Sangram side, on a bamboo cot. While working all day on the projecting roof of a new house, a bamboo plank had fallen. The weight had come down on Ramji's left leg; he could no longer stand. A folded gamchha had been placed beneath the leg. Sweat covered his forehead, but he was fully conscious.

His wife Phoolkumari came running behind them. In her hand was a small cloth pouch containing the house keys, two hundred rupees, and Ramji's old identity card.

As soon as the cot crossed the hospital gate, guard Vishwanath raised his hand. "Entry pass first."

Panting, Phoolkumari asked, "Where do we get it?"

Vishwanath pointed to the left of the red line. Behind a small window sat clerk Harinath. Before him were a stack of slips, a date stamp, and a thick register.

The cot was stopped two handspans outside the red line. Ramji closed his eyes. One of his co-workers, Bhola, went to the window.

Harinath asked, "Patient's name?"

"Ramji Paswan."

"Age?"

Bhola looked toward Phoolkumari. She said, "Above fifty. Fifty-two or fifty-three, perhaps."

Harinath wrote "Approx. 52" on the slip. "Village?"

"Araria-Sangram."

"Emergency number?"

Bhola asked, "What is that?"

Harinath stopped his pen. “The emergency number is issued after the preliminary examination inside. Without that number the entry pass cannot be completed.”

Bhola turned toward the red line. “Who will examine him inside?”

“The patient must first go inside.”

From where he stood, Vishwanath said, “No entry without a pass.”

For a few moments everyone was silent. Ramji opened his eyes and said, “Look at the leg later. Send my paper inside first.” There was more weariness than pain in his voice.

Inside the emergency room, nurse Malti heard the exchange and came to the door. Seeing the cot stopped across the red line, she grew irritated. “Why have you stopped the patient?”

Vishwanath pointed at the board. “There was an inspection three days ago. Two entry slips were missing from the register. I was given written instructions: no one goes inside without an entry pass.”

Malti stepped outside and examined Ramji. She touched the leg, checked his pulse, and told Bhola, “Keep the cot straight. Do not move the leg.” Then she called to Harinath, “Write emergency number 47.”

Harinath wrote 47 and completed the slip. Phoolkumari let out a breath of relief.

“Now inside?”

Harinath shook his head. “One thing remains. The entry pass must be entered in the arrival register.”

“Then enter it.”

Harinath pointed not to the register before him but to a desk inside. “This one here is the ordinary slip register. The emergency arrival register is inside. After the inspection, the order was that the register must not leave the emergency area.”

Malti said, “Give me the slip. I will enter it inside.”

Harinath reached out to hand it to her, but Vishwanath stopped him again. “Until it is entered in the register, it is not a valid entry pass. How can an invalid pass go inside?”

Malti stared at him. Vishwanath said quietly, “I did not make the rule.”

Harinath read the small order pasted beneath the board. The line was clear: “Only patients carrying a registered entry pass may enter the emergency area.”

Bhola said, “The slip is not the patient. Send the slip inside.”

Harinath replied, "For registration, the time of entry must be written on the slip."

"Write the time."

"The time is written when entry takes place."

"When will entry take place?"

"After registration."

Ramji closed his eyes again. Phoolkumari untied and retied the knot of her cloth pouch. The two hundred rupees were still there. She could no longer tell whether this place required more money or more patience.

Meanwhile the doctor inside, Aniruddh Mishra, came to the door. Malti explained the matter briefly. Aniruddh looked at Ramji and immediately stepped outside to begin first aid. One side of the cot was cleared and a splint was tied to keep the leg still.

"Take him inside," Aniruddh said.

Vishwanath folded his hands. "Sir, if you say so, I will carry him in. But if two slips are missing again tomorrow, my name will be written down."

Aniruddh looked at his face for a few moments. Then he asked Harinath, "Which line is causing the problem?"

Harinath explained: the register required an entry time; the entry time could be written only after the patient entered; but the patient could enter only after registration.

Aniruddh said, "Then leave the time blank."

Harinath showed him the second page of the order. "An incomplete entry is not valid."

"Estimated time?"

"There is no box for 'estimated.'"

Aniruddh did not laugh. "In this hospital, the boxes are always ready before the patient."

Malti brought the arrival register from inside but stopped at the red line. "This register cannot go outside."

Harinath pulled his chair away from the window and brought it up to the red line. He remained outside; Malti remained inside. The line lay between them. The register was in Malti's hands, the slip in Harinath's.

Bhola said, "Write it here itself."

Harinath asked, "Entry time?"

Everyone looked at Ramji again.

Ramji himself said, “Push the head of my cot inside. Half of me will stay outside, half inside. Then write the time.”

For the first time Bhola burst out laughing. Phoolkumari silenced him, but a faint smile appeared on Ramji’s face too.

Aniruddh said, “Do not make a joke of it. But if the rule asks when the body entered, then the time entry began is also a time.”

Vishwanath hesitated. Finally he allowed the front two legs of the bamboo cot, resting on the red line, to be pushed one handspan inside. Ramji’s head and shoulders crossed the line; his legs remained outside.

Harinath looked at the clock. “Seven eighteen.”

Malti placed the register on a table just inside the line. From outside, Harinath leaned forward and passed her the slip. The slip crossed the red line. Malti entered the name, village, and time against serial number 47.

“Now registered,” she said.

Vishwanath immediately moved aside. The cot went fully inside. Phoolkumari followed, but Vishwanath asked, “Attendant pass?”

Malti said sharply, “Let one family member come in.” This time Vishwanath allowed Phoolkumari through without looking at the board.

Ramji’s examination began. The bone in his leg was injured, but his condition was stable. A bandage, medicines, and rest were arranged. His co-workers sat outside on the veranda.

At eight that night Head Clerk Shashibhushan came to the emergency building after hearing about the inspection issue. His greatest concern was not that the patient had been registered while half inside and half outside; it was the time entered in the register.

“When did first aid begin?” he asked Malti.

“Around seven ten.”

Shashibhushan looked at the register. “Entry at seven eighteen. Then how did treatment begin eight minutes before entry?”

Aniruddh said, “The patient was outside, so treatment was given outside.”

“Where is that recorded?”

“On the treatment sheet.”

“But entry-pass number 47 became valid at seven eighteen. At seven ten the number was not yet valid.”

Malti asked, “Was the patient’s pulse supposed to wait eight minutes?”

Shashibhushan immediately said, “I am not talking about stopping treatment. I am only asking about the sequence in the record.”

After that sentence the argument softened, because everyone understood that no one was opposing treatment. The only problem was that the treatment had already happened and the paperwork was still searching for a sequence in which to accept it.

In the end Shashibhushan wrote a new note: "Necessary assistance provided in an emergency before completion of the entry pass shall be treated as 'pre-entry assistance.'"

Harinath asked, "Will there be a separate register for that?"

After thinking, Shashibhushan said, "For now, let the note remain."

The next morning an office meeting was held. The previous evening's incident was treated as an example for procedural improvement. It was decided that the arrival register would remain inside the emergency area, but its table would be placed exactly beside the red line. The slip would be prepared outside, entered in the register inside, and then the patient would enter.

Harinath asked, "And the entry time?"

The meeting was silent for a few moments. Finally it was written: "The time of entry in the register shall be treated as the time of entry."

On paper, the problem was over.

Three days later Ramji was discharged and returned home with the help of crutches. As they were leaving, Phoolkumari stopped near the red line. The table holding the arrival register now stood so close to the line that two of its legs were inside and two outside. Harinath sat on the inner side; people waiting to collect slips stood in a queue outside.

A new small board had also been put up that day: "Provide necessary assistance to emergency patients immediately." Directly beneath it another line read: "Record details of assistance along with the entry-pass number."

Phoolkumari could not read both lines. She merely adjusted Ramji's crutch and said, "Walk slowly."

Ramji crossed the red line. This time he had a discharge slip in his hand. No one asked his entry time.

STORY 275

The Closed Account

...

At half past ten on Tuesday morning, in the cooperative bank branch at Sakri Bazaar, Ramlochan Mahato stared for the first time so long at a page of his passbook. In blue letters across the middle was written: "Account operations suspended for security reasons." Beneath it, the balance was clearly shown: forty-two thousand six hundred and eighteen rupees. The money was still there, but Ramlochan could not withdraw even one rupee of it.

Ramlochan was a bamboo craftsman from a nearby village. He made wedding pavilions, mats for drying makhana, baskets for storing paddy, and bamboo winnowing trays for festivals. All year, his small earnings had gone into this account. This month he had to pay the apprenticeship fee for his younger daughter Sarita. He had therefore come to withdraw five thousand rupees.

When he reached the counter with the withdrawal slip, clerk Shambhunath entered it into the system, looked at the screen, and raised his head.

"The account is closed."

Ramlochan asked, "But the money is there."

"The money is there. Operations are closed."

"Why the security suspension?"

Shambhunath handed him a printed sheet. "Security review."

The sheet said that because of the possibility of unusual transactions, the account had been temporarily secured. Ramlochan thought back over the deposits of the last three months—two thousand, seven hundred, four thousand five hundred, and then once, twelve thousand. The twelve thousand had been payment for a wedding pavilion in Darbhanga.

"What is unusual in this?"

Shambhunath said, "I cannot tell you that. The details of the security reason are also kept secure."

"Then how will it be reopened?"

"Submit a reactivation application."

Ramlochan felt a little relief. The application was only one page: name, account number, address, signature. Shambhunath had him fill everything in and sent the paper to the Branch Manager's desk.

Half an hour later the answer came: the application was acceptable, but a reactivation fee of one hundred and eighteen rupees had to be paid.

Ramlochan took a two-hundred-rupee note from his pocket.

Shambhunath did not reach for it. "Not in cash."

"Then how do I pay the fee?"

"The fee will be deducted from this account."

Ramlochan remained silent for a few moments. "The account is closed."

"Yes. Operations are suspended."

"How will you deduct from a closed account?"

"The account will become active, then it will be deducted."

"When will it become active?"

"After the fee is deducted."

For a few moments the two looked at each other. There was no mockery in Shambhunath's expression. If anything, he too seemed to hear the circular shape of the sentence. He looked again at the printed sheet.

"The rule says only this: 'The reactivation fee shall be automatically deducted from the account holder's concerned account.'"

Ramlochan folded the two-hundred-rupee note and put it back in his pocket. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Meet the Manager."

Branch Manager Prabhakar Mishra's room stood behind a half-glass partition. Ramlochan went in. Prabhakar listened carefully to the whole matter. The rule was not new to him, but he had never faced this exact situation before.

He opened the branch procedure manual. The section on reactivation had four lines. The fee was compulsory. Cash was not accepted. Payment from another account was not permitted. The amount had to be automatically deducted from the concerned account.

Prabhakar said, "If you wish, first deposit one hundred and eighteen rupees into this account."

Ramlochan did not laugh. "There is already more than forty-two thousand in the account."

"You are right." Prabhakar turned another page of the manual. "Let us see whether a deposit is accepted."

At the deposit counter a slip for one hundred and eighteen rupees was submitted. The system accepted it. Ramlochan's balance became forty-two thousand seven hundred and thirty-six rupees.

“Now deduct the fee,” Ramlochan said.

Shambhunath tried. A red line appeared on the screen: “Account operations suspended; withdrawal by account holder prohibited.”

“This is not a withdrawal. It is a fee,” Ramlochan said.

“In the system, every amount deducted on behalf of the account holder is treated as a withdrawal.”

“But the deposit went in.”

“Money may enter a security-suspended account. It cannot go out.”

Ramlochan asked, “Can the bank deduct its own fees?”

Before Shambhunath could answer, Prabhakar came out himself. “Regular service charges can be deducted by the bank. Those are institutional deductions.”

Ramlochan’s eyes brightened. “Then treat this one hundred and eighteen as a bank fee and deduct it.”

Prabhakar said slowly, “The reactivation fee is a service-request fee of the account holder. It is not a regular bank charge.”

“The money will leave the same account.”

“The category is different.”

By noon the problem had become a topic of discussion throughout the branch. The Accounts Assistant suggested depositing the fee first into the branch’s interim account and adjusting it later. Prabhakar showed him the manual: interim adjustment was prohibited for reactivation fees.

Another employee suggested that Ramlochan open a new account and pay the fee from that. The form for opening a new account was filled. The registration system replied: “Account holder already has active/suspended account in this branch; opening of second savings account not permitted.”

Ramlochan said, “Does it say this account is active or suspended?”

“Both are in the same category,” Shambhunath said.

“When I want to use it, it is closed. When I want to open another one, it is active?”

Papers kept rustling across the desks. At Ramlochan’s round question, everyone lowered their eyes to their own pages.

The next day Ramlochan returned. This time his daughter Sarita came with him. The final date for paying the training institute’s fee was four days away. Sarita read the bank slips in order. She had passed Class Twelve and understood numerical accounts clearly.

She asked, "Has any amount been deducted from Babu's account this month?"

Shambhunath printed the statement. The previous week eighteen rupees had been deducted as a message-service charge.

Sarita placed her finger on the line. "After the account was closed?"

"Two days after."

"Then the bank can deduct eighteen rupees from a closed account."

"That is a regular service charge."

"The reactivation fee is also called a service charge."

Shambhunath read the papers. The words "service charge" did indeed appear in both places. The only difference was that one was preceded by "regular," the other by "reactivation."

Prabhakar was called again. He decided to send the matter to the district office. The branch wrote: "Institutional fee deduction possible from security-suspended account; account holder's reactivation fee cannot be deducted. Guidance requested."

The district office's reply arrived on the third day. It was brief: "Under the rules, the reactivation fee is payable only from the concerned account. The account shall be activated after payment of the fee."

This time Ramlochan thought of another route. "Do not reopen it. Close it completely and give me my money."

Shambhunath took out the account-closure form. The first two lines were straightforward. The third said: remaining balance to be withdrawn or transferred to another verified account of the account holder.

"I will take cash," Ramlochan said.

Shambhunath shook his head. "With this much balance, cash cannot be withdrawn without removal of the security suspension."

"Then transfer it to another account."

"You do not have another verified account."

"Open a new one."

"Because this account already exists, another savings account cannot be opened."

Ramlochan placed the form back on the desk. "So to close this account, I first have to open it?"

Looking at the form, Shambhunath said, "According to this form—yes."

Sarita read the letter and asked, "It has only written the same thing again."

Prabhakar said, "The district does not change the rule. It clarifies it."

“Has it become clear?”

Prabhakar did not answer.

That day was the final date for Sarita’s training fee. There was not five thousand rupees in cash at home. Ramlochan sold two finished bamboo pavilions to a trader at a lower price and raised the money. Sarita paid the fee. In the bank account remained forty-two thousand seven hundred and eighteen rupees—the message charge had already been deducted.

A week later the annual security inspection began at the branch. An inspector came from the district. Prabhakar placed Ramlochan’s case before him. The inspector read the full details.

“Was there any unauthorised withdrawal from the account?”

“None.”

“After suspension, was there any withdrawal by the account holder?”

“Not one.”

“Then the security control is successful.”

Prabhakar said, “But the account holder cannot use his own money.”

The inspector turned the page. “The purpose of suspension is to prevent unauthorised use.”

“This use is not unauthorised. The account holder himself is asking.”

“The system will recognise that after reactivation.”

Ramlochan was not at the bank that day. In the inspection report, beside his account number, was written: “Security suspension effective; zero unauthorised withdrawals during suspension period.”

At the end of the month twenty-three rupees of savings interest were added to the account. Two days later an annual account-maintenance charge of eighty-four rupees was deducted. The balance fell again.

Seeing the statement, Shambhunath went to Prabhakar. “Sir, the maintenance charge has been deducted.”

Prabhakar looked at the screen for a while. Then he asked, “The reactivation fee?”

“Still not. Withdrawals by the account holder are blocked.”

Prabhakar leaned back in his chair. “What is the account-maintenance fee maintaining?”

Shambhunath had no answer.

The next day Ramlochan came to the bank. Shambhunath gave him the new statement. Ramlochan read the two lines for interest and charges. He saw

that his money could increase inside the account and could decrease inside the account; only it could not reach his own hands.

He folded the receipt for the reactivation application and placed it inside the passbook. Then he asked, "Is my account closed, or is it running?"

Shambhunath thought for a few moments.

"Closed for you," he said, "running for the bank."

Ramlochan nodded and walked outside. On the branch wall a new board for Security Week had been hung: "Your money, our care."

Ramlochan read the board, tucked the passbook under his arm, and walked slowly into the crowd of Sakri Bazaar.

STORY 276

Final Approval

...

On Monday morning, Sumitra Devi arrived at the Disaster Assistance Branch of Madhepur Block with a blue envelope tucked under her arm. Her husband Jagdish Mandal's name was written on the envelope. Jagdish had been dead for seven months. Yet the letter said that his application for compensation for paddy damaged by the Kamla flood had received final approval, and that fourteen thousand eight hundred rupees was ready for payment.

Jagdish had submitted the application in Sawan the previous year. The paddy on two bighas of sharecropped land had remained under water for three days. A Panchayat employee had inspected the field, written down the measurements, and taken Jagdish's thumb impression. Three months later, before winter began, Jagdish died. Sumitra had almost forgotten about the application. Now, seven months later, a letter marked "Final Approval" was in her hands.

At the first window of the branch, clerk Naresh Jha read the letter.

"The amount has been approved," he said.

Sumitra took the death certificate out of the envelope and handed it to him. "But the person in whose name it has been approved is no longer alive."

Naresh read the certificate. "This will have to be added to the file."

He took a grey file from the cupboard behind him. On the cover, in red letters, was written: "Crop Damage—Jagdish Mandal." Inside were the application, field measurements, Panchayat recommendation, copy of the bank account, and approval letter, arranged in order. On the last page was a blue stamp: "Final Approval." Beneath it one line was blank: "Beneficiary appeared and accepted payment."

Naresh placed a finger on that line. "The problem is here."

"I am his wife."

"That can be proved by documents. But the beneficiary's presence at the time of payment is a separate matter."

"The death certificate also proves that he cannot be present."

Naresh was silent for a few moments. "That is true. But there is no place on the screen to write 'deceased.'"

The screen offered three options: “Present,” “Absent,” “Voluntarily declined payment.”

Sumitra could not read all three. Naresh explained them.

“Then he is absent,” Sumitra said.

“If I select absent, another notice will be generated asking him to appear.”

“He will never come now.”

“There ought to have been a fourth option.”

Naresh went to Head Assistant Shashibhushan Mishra. Shashibhushan examined the death certificate, the approval letter, and the screen, then opened the old rulebook. The chapter on payment said that the beneficiary must appear in person, prove identity, verify bank details, and place a thumb impression or signature on the receipt. The next paragraph provided for home verification in the case of an incapacitated beneficiary. There was no mention of a deceased beneficiary.

“Home verification?” Naresh asked.

Shashibhushan shook his head. “For an incapacitated beneficiary. Not for a deceased one.”

“A dead person is more incapable than an incapacitated one.”

Shashibhushan closed the book. “Rules do not work by comparison.”

Sumitra sat at the window listening to both of them. At home she had two daughters, an elderly mother-in-law, and a half-built bamboo cowshed. Fourteen thousand eight hundred rupees was not merely a number on paper to her. In that amount she could already see seed for the next paddy crop, straw for the roof, and the remaining cost of her daughter’s sewing machine.

Shashibhushan suggested one possibility—an application to add the heir’s name. Sumitra immediately agreed to submit it. But the final line of the form was read aloud: “Consent of the original beneficiary shall be attached.”

Naresh said, “Should we strike this line out?”

“It is a printed form,” Shashibhushan said. “The district may return an altered form.”

“Can the death certificate take the place of consent?”

“It proves death, not consent.”

For the first time Sumitra laughed. It was a small laugh. “After a person dies, whom do you ask for his consent?”

For a few moments the three looked at one another. There was no written answer to the question.

That day a clarification letter was sent to the district office. The question was brief: "If a beneficiary who has received final approval dies before payment, what is the procedure for paying the heir?" Naresh gave Sumitra a copy of the letter and told her they would inform her when the reply came.

Thirteen days later the reply arrived. Sumitra was called again. The district had written: "Under the prevailing rules, the approved beneficiary's payment process shall first be completed; after payment fails, provisions relating to heirs may be considered."

"How is payment declared failed?" Sumitra asked.

Shashibhushan opened the rulebook again. If the beneficiary failed to appear three times, payment was treated as "failed." There had to be an interval of at least seven days between each notice.

So the first notice was issued: Jagdish Mandal must appear in person on the twenty-fourth. The notice reached his own house. The postman handed it to Sumitra. On the twenty-fourth, Sumitra went to the office with the death certificate.

"Jagdish Babu?" the new assistant at the window asked.

"He will not come."

"The notice says he must appear in person."

Sumitra held out the death certificate. Naresh saw her from a distance and came over. In the register, against Jagdish's name, was written: "Absent—First Notice."

Seven days later the second notice arrived. Sumitra went again. This time Naresh already had the register open. Without much conversation he wrote: "Absent—Second Notice."

On the way home, Sumitra stopped at the haat. She had earlier told the seed seller that she would repay the old credit for paddy seed as soon as the compensation money came. The shopkeeper asked from a distance, "Did you get the money?"

Sumitra only shook her head. In her bag were two government notices—both proving that Jagdish had not appeared. But not one rupee had come in exchange for that proof.

The second trip to the office had cost Sumitra more than three hundred rupees when bus fare, a tonga from the market to home, and a day's lost wages were added together. When Shashibhushan heard the calculation, he said, "These expenses cannot be added under the rules."

Sumitra said, "I did not ask you to add them. I only want to understand how many times I have to buy proof that he will not come."

Shashibhushan lowered his eyes and closed the rulebook.

The third notice arrived fifteen days later. The rains had begun. Sumitra reached the office protecting the letter under her wet sari end. Mud clung to her sandals. Shashibhushan himself came to the window.

“Today the third absence will be completed,” he said.

“Will I get the money after that?”

“After that, payment will be declared failed. Then the heir application will be considered.”

Sumitra placed the death certificate on the table. “This has been saying for seven months that payment will fail.”

Shashibhushan looked at the certificate. “The rule required it to be said three times.”

The third absence was recorded. The next day a “Payment Failure Report” was prepared. Naresh filled the heir application again. This time, on the line requiring the original beneficiary’s consent, Shashibhushan wrote in red ink: “Beneficiary deceased; consent irrelevant.” The death certificate, marriage confirmation, family register, and all three absence notices were attached.

The file went to the district and returned two weeks later. On top was a note: “Before deciding heir payment, clarify the status of the original approval. After payment has been declared failed, is the approval active or inactive?”

The rulebook was opened again in the branch. It contained no answer to such a question. Shashibhushan wrote to headquarters. The reply came a month later: “Unless the original approval has been cancelled, it shall be treated as valid.”

“Has it been cancelled?” Sumitra asked.

Naresh looked at the screen. “No. It still shows ‘Final Approval—Payment Pending.’”

“Then pay me.”

“The decision on the heir is still pending.”

“Is the approval final?”

“Yes. The final approval is valid.”

“And the payment?”

Before answering, Naresh looked at the screen again. “Pending.”

Meanwhile the end of the financial year drew near. A new instruction came from the district that the presence of all beneficiaries with pending approvals must be verified again. The system automatically generated a fresh list. Jagdish

Mandal's name was on it. In the reason column it said: "Final Approval; Payment Pending."

Naresh tried to remove the name, but the system asked: "Basis for cancellation?" There was still no option for death.

He called Sumitra. This time she came without the death certificate. She had already shown that paper to the office four times.

Naresh said, "The new list is again asking for his presence."

Sumitra sat down on a chair. "What do we do now?"

Naresh looked at the blank line in the register for the reason. He lifted his pen, hesitated for a few moments, and wrote: "Beneficiary cannot appear; death certificate available in file."

There was no field on the screen for that sentence. So in the system, once again, "Absent" was selected.

Immediately a fresh notice was generated: "Shri Jagdish Mandal shall appear in person for final payment."

Naresh printed the paper but did not hand it to Sumitra. He held it for a while.

"Give it to me," Sumitra said.

She took the notice, folded it, and placed it in the blue envelope beside the first approval letter. Jagdish Mandal's name was still written on the envelope.

Outside, the rain had stopped. Sumitra descended the steps and crossed the courtyard. Inside the branch, green letters glowed on the screen: "Final Approval—Payment Pending."

STORY 277

The Forbidden Question

...

On the second Monday of Sawan, the old building of the Minor Irrigation Division in Madhubani had been crowded since morning. Rain had fallen all night and filled the ponds, yet water from the canal was still not reaching the fields. Outside on the veranda, farmers stood wringing out wet gamchhas; inside the Accounts Branch room, Madhukant Mishra was opening file after file tied with red thread and checking payment papers. On the left side of his desk lay a stack of green covers. For three weeks an oral rule had been in force in the office: any file without a green cover would not move forward.

Madhukant did not understand the reason for the rule. The stock of green covers had run out, the new consignment had not yet arrived, and seven bills for canal repairs were held up solely because there were no covers. Among those seven bills were the wages of a group of women labourers from Pipraun. Two days earlier, Kamla Devi had come and said, "Babu, we cut earth, filled sacks, saved the embankment. Now our wages are stopped because of the colour of the paper?"

Madhukant had then said only, "It is the rule."

Today that sentence sounded hollow even in his own ears.

At ten, Assistant Engineer Shailendra Jha entered the room. Madhukant showed him all seven files.

"There are no green covers," Shailendra said. "Keep them. They will come from the stores."

"How many days?"

"Whenever they come."

Madhukant asked quietly, "Under which order is this rule about green covers?"

At first Shailendra thought the question was ordinary. He nodded. "It is an old instruction."

"Order number?"

Shailendra's hand stopped on the file. "The Stores Branch will have the number."

"Date?"

"Look there."

Madhukant closed the file. "If we can find the source, we can explain it to the farmers. Perhaps the order provides some alternative when covers are unavailable."

Shailendra stared at him. "Follow the rule. Searching for its source is not your work."

At noon Madhukant went to the Stores Branch. Lakshman Paswan was turning the pages of a register. Green covers had been purchased three times in five years, but none of the entries mentioned an order number.

"Green covers have always been in use," Lakshman said.

"Since when?"

"I have been here eight years. They were already in use when I came."

"Then the source?"

Lakshman closed the register. "Why do you keep asking about the source? What is in practice is in practice."

Madhukant prepared a written application: "Kindly provide the order number, date, and issuing authority of the prevailing rule concerning green covers, so that the pending bills may be disposed of lawfully." He submitted the application to the Establishment Branch and took a receipt number.

The next morning a yellow slip lay on his desk. At the top it said: "Explanation Required." Below was the question: "Why did it become necessary to raise a question regarding the source of a prevailing administrative rule?"

Madhukant read it and smiled. It seemed to him that instead of an answer to his application, another question had arrived.

He wrote: "Because seven payments are held up by the rule and no copy of the order is available."

Two hours later a second slip arrived: "Expressing doubt regarding the validity of a rule is contrary to employee conduct. Under which provision did you raise such a question?"

Madhukant's smile stopped there. He went to the Establishment Branch. Section Assistant Vibhakar Thakur read the slip with his spectacles lowered on his nose.

"I did not question the validity," Madhukant said. "I asked for the source."

"The distinction between asking for the source and questioning validity will have to be shown on paper."

"Then which rule says that asking for a source is forbidden?"

Vibhakar immediately stopped his pen. "That is a second question."

"Yes, but the answer is connected with the first."

On the back of the slip Vibhakar wrote in red pencil: "Employee again raised a question concerning the source of a rule." Then he said, "For now, return to your desk. The Establishment Officer will examine the matter."

By evening the seven bills were still where they had been. Kamla Devi from Pipraun came again. Three women labourers were with her.

"Did the papers move?" she asked.

Madhukant looked at the empty stack where green covers should have been. "Not yet."

"The colour has still not come?"

"Something more than the colour is stuck now."

Kamla Devi did not understand, but she did not ask further. "There is rice for two days in my house. Whatever paper is needed, tell us."

That sentence remained inside Madhukant for a long time.

On the third day an order came from the Establishment Officer that until the inquiry was completed, Madhukant would be kept away from "correspondence concerning interpretation of rules." All seven files were given to another clerk.

But the other clerk too stopped them at the same point because there were no green covers.

Madhukant was given a new task: prepare a list of administrative questions raised by employees during the previous two years. The Establishment Branch believed that such questions were increasing and that there was a need to curb the "tendency toward unnecessary interpretation."

He opened the register. Someone had questioned the calculation of leave, someone the rate of travel allowance, someone the procedure for depositing old equipment. Most had received answers. Some answers merely said: "According to the prevailing rule." Nowhere was the source given.

As Madhukant prepared the list, he also added the receipt number of his own application. Subject of question: "Source of the green-cover rule." Status: "Under inquiry."

On the fifth day an inspection team arrived from the Chief Engineer's Office. Team leader Surendra Rai asked while examining the papers, "How did this dispute begin?"

Shailendra Jha said, "An employee asked for the basis of a prevailing rule."

"Where is the basis?"

The room was silent for a few moments. Shailendra said, "It is an old arrangement."

Surendra Rai examined two or three files with green covers. “Written order?”

The Establishment Officer said, “A search is under way.”

“Then why is there an inquiry against the employee?”

“Because the question was raised directly. Not through the prescribed channel.”

“What is the prescribed channel?”

The Establishment Officer looked toward Vibhakar. Vibhakar opened one old rulebook, then another. At last he said, “I am not finding any clear mention of it in this matter.”

Surendra Rai leaned back in his chair. “Then make a clear procedure. Write down how an employee is to ask a question. And if you find the source of the rule, add that too.”

After this instruction a three-member committee was formed. Madhukant was not on it; his matter was under inquiry. The committee sat for seven days. Old files were searched, retired employees were telephoned, and the stores registers were examined again. No one could say with certainty where the use of green covers had begun. One elderly employee said that canal maps had once been kept in green covers, and perhaps the habit had grown from that. Another said that separate colours had once been used during an accounts inspection. No written order was found.

In the end, the committee created not a source but a procedure. A new circular was drafted: “Before asking for the source of any prevailing office rule, tradition, or instruction, an employee shall obtain permission to question from the head of the branch. Directly asking for a source without permission shall be treated as a violation of administrative discipline.”

At the end of the circular it was written: “In light of the confusion that has recently arisen, this clarification shall take immediate effect.”

Madhukant received a copy. As he read, he stopped at the list of enclosures at the bottom: “Enclosure 1: Dated application of employee Shri Madhukant Mishra, by way of example.”

He went to the Establishment Branch.

“So now the rule has been made?” he asked Vibhakar.

“Yes. The manner of asking questions has been clarified.”

“On the day I asked, this rule did not exist.”

Straightening the paper, Vibhakar said, “This is not a new rule. It is a clarification of prevailing discipline.”

“The source of the prevailing discipline?”

Vibhakar looked at Madhukant. This time his expression was not stern, only tired. He said softly, "You are asking a question again."

Madhukant said nothing.

That evening the new consignment of green covers arrived. The Stores Branch sent fifty covers to Accounts. All seven files were given covers, payment orders were prepared, and three days later the wages of the women labourers from Pipraun reached their accounts. Kamla Devi came to thank him.

"See, once the colour of the paper arrived, the work got done," she said with a laugh.

Madhukant laughed too. "Yes."

"And that other thing that was stuck?"

At that moment the new circular lay on Madhukant's desk. Its heading was: "Question-Permission Procedure." In the enclosure was a copy of his own application.

He said, "That too has now become a rule."

Kamla Devi did not understand. She bowed and left.

At closing time Madhukant stacked the seven old green covers to one side. From his drawer he took out the new question-permission form. The first field said: "Question proposed to be asked." The second: "Reason for asking the question." The third: "Source of the question."

Madhukant lifted his pen and stared at the third field for a long time. Then, without filling in the form, he folded it and put it back in the drawer.

STORY 278

Guarding the Door

...

The old Cooperative Building in Jhanjharpur had four doors in its western wall. People entered and left through the first three; the fourth had a thick iron chain, two locks, and a faded board hanging above it: "Entry 4: Special Verification." Beneath the board, rainwater running down the wall had left green streaks.

When Rameshwar Das first reached that door, it was a Bhadon afternoon. In his hands were the renewal application for a handloom cooperative society, the accounts for the previous year, and the signatures of twelve members. Their society in Belahi village had been running for eighteen years. Because it was registered in the government yarn-distribution register, it received yarn at a subsidised rate; if the renewal stopped, the looms of all twelve families could come to a halt.

The employee sitting at the main gate looked at his papers and took out a slip. Across the middle, in bold letters, it said: "Route: Entry 4."

"Where is Entry 4?" Rameshwar asked.

The employee pointed his thumb toward the western wall. "There."

Rameshwar went around. Beside the fourth door sat guard Harikishore Yadav with a wooden stool, an earthen water pot, and a register. Rameshwar showed him the slip. Harikishore read it, looked at the door, then at Rameshwar.

"Does entry happen through this?"

"The paper says so."

"Who has the key?"

Harikishore smiled. "I have not found the answer to that question in three years."

He opened the register. "Give me your name. Your presence will be recorded now."

Rameshwar frowned. "Once I am marked present, how do I get inside?"

"That is a matter of entry. I guard attendance."

Rameshwar thought it must be a joke. But Harikishore was entirely serious. He wrote the date, time, and application number, and took Rameshwar's signature. Then he said, "Do not try to go through the main entrance. Your

application is on Route Four. If you go in through the main route, it will be entered under another branch.”

Rameshwar returned to the main gate and spoke to the employee there. The employee checked the number on the screen. “Special verification. Entry 4.”

“That door is locked.”

“The Building Branch handles matters concerning the building. My register shows Route Four.”

“Where does the branch sit?”

“On the second floor.”

“Then shall I go to the second floor?”

“An application routed through Entry Four cannot go upstairs without an entry mark.”

Rameshwar came outside. The last bus for home was at three. That day the application did not get inside.

He returned the next day. Harikishore recognised him. “The lock is the same today too.”

“Is there any day on which it opens?”

“My duty order says only ‘guarding.’ It does not say ‘opening.’”

This time Rameshwar searched out the Building Branch. The clerk there explained that Entry 4 had once been a direct door to the Verification Branch. Three years earlier the Verification Branch had moved to the second floor, but the old route number was still in the system. To change the route, they needed a “Service Point Inactivity Certificate.”

“How is that issued?”

“No user must come to that entry for thirty consecutive days.”

For a moment Rameshwar stared at the clerk’s face. “But the system sends me there.”

“Then users are still coming. How can the service point be treated as inactive?”

Rameshwar said nothing.

Over the next ten days he came five times. Each time Harikishore wrote his name in the register. Each time the lock remained in place. Harikishore now left a little space for him on one side of the stool. Sometimes they talked about the price of makhana, sometimes about the rainwater. The corner of the application in Rameshwar’s bag became bent, but the words “Entry 4” on the slip remained clear.

Work at the village looms began to decline. The society had only two weeks of old yarn left. Member Phoolkumari Devi said, “If the renewal does not happen, we will not get the next consignment. If we buy yarn from the private market, our earnings will be cut in half.”

The next time Rameshwar went, he carried a petition signed by all twelve members. The office Superintendent examined it. “I understand the problem. But changing the route is not simple. Entry 4 is showing as active.”

“How is it active?”

The Superintendent showed him the register. “Twenty-seven attendances this month. The highest among all four entrances in the building.”

Rameshwar asked in astonishment, “Did twenty-seven people get inside?”

“There are twenty-seven attendances.”

“Inside?”

The Superintendent removed his spectacles. “Attendance and entry are two separate figures.”

Those twenty-seven attendances included Rameshwar’s five visits, four visits by another member of his society, and people from other villages who had also been assigned special verification. No one had gone inside. Yet for the annual report, the number had become useful.

A new bamboo shelter was erected in front of Entry 4, two benches were brought in, and the earthen water pot was replaced by a metal drinking-water vessel. A second guard was added to Harikishore’s post for a two-hour shift.

“Now the service point has become good,” the new guard said on his first day.

Rameshwar looked at the lock. “Where is the service?”

The new guard laughed. Harikishore did not. He said quietly, “My job is not to open the door. It is to guard the service point.”

Two weeks later an inspection team came from the district. It examined the shelter, benches, water vessel, and register. Seeing the rising attendance figures, one member of the team said, “Demand is high here. The facility should be strengthened further.”

Rameshwar gathered courage and said, “The demand is to get inside.”

The inspector looked at his slip. “Your route is Four?”

“Yes, Route Four.”

“Then you are at the correct place.”

“The door is locked.”

The inspector looked at the lock and had the Building employee write something down. Three days later the lock was replaced with a new, heavier one because the old lock had begun to rust. The inspection note said: "Security at Entry 4 shall be improved."

The society's yarn ran out. First two looms stopped, then four. Phoolkumari bought two bundles of yarn from the private market, but the price was so high that hardly any profit remained in the finished cloth. All twelve members held a meeting. Someone suggested forming a new society under a new name. Someone else said it would be foolish to abandon an eighteen-year-old registration. Rameshwar remained silent.

At last he made a decision. "For thirty days, no one will go to the office."

Phoolkumari asked, "Then the application?"

"It will remain stuck just as it is now. But if we do not go for thirty days, Entry 4 will become inactive."

When Rameshwar told Harikishore, the guard looked uneasy for the first time. "My register will remain empty."

"Let it remain empty."

"They will ask from above."

"Tell them people could not get inside, so they stopped coming."

Harikishore shook his head. "There is no field in the register for that answer."

Even so, Rameshwar did not come. The society members did not come either. Harikishore could not stop other people assigned to special verification from arriving, but he began advising them to file complaints at the main gate. Gradually the Entry 4 register began to empty.

It took forty-two days to complete thirty consecutive days, because in between two people arrived carrying old slips. Then, at last, no name was entered for thirty straight days.

On the forty-first day the Building Branch issued a "Service Point Inactivity Certificate." The next day Route Four was removed from the system. All old applications were shifted to the main-entry route.

Harikishore sent a message to Rameshwar. He came the following Monday. At the main gate, the employee checked his number. "Route One."

Rameshwar went inside. For the first time no guard stopped him. Climbing the stairs, he was surprised to discover that the Verification Branch really was an ordinary room on the second floor; reaching it did not require passing through the locked door in the western wall at all.

The employee examined his application, and this time no objection was raised about its route. A copy of one old certificate was missing; Rameshwar submitted it two days later. Within seven days the society's renewal was completed.

Until the next government yarn consignment arrived, they still had to buy expensive yarn from the private market. Three weeks of earnings were reduced, but the looms began running again. As Phoolkumari opened the first new bundle, she said only, "The road was closed, not the work."

A month later Rameshwar came to the Cooperative Building again for another matter. His eyes went toward the western wall. The board for Entry 4 had been removed. The shelter was still there, and two employees were eating their lunch on the bench. The water vessel was empty. A new lock gleamed on the door.

Harikishore was now on duty at the main gate. Rameshwar asked, "That door is of no use to anyone now?"

Harikishore said, "On paper it is inactive."

"The lock is new."

"It is a security object. Even an inactive object needs guarding."

Both looked toward the west. Rameshwar's old waiting slips were probably lying in some file. The attendances recorded in front of a door that never opened had counted as service statistics for a full year; only when people stopped coming did the way inside finally open.

STORY 279

An Evening in Laheriasarai

...

Arunesh Jha had never before noticed anything distinctive in the way evening descended on Tower Chowk in Laheriasarai. If he was late leaving the office, he would cross the road with his head lowered, dodge the bells of passing rickshaws, thread his way between people carrying bags of vegetables, and walk straight toward his rented room. That day, while reconciling accounts under the flood-relief head at the District Accounts Office, it was half past seven before he could leave. His eyes were tired from the small print on the papers, and only one thought kept circling in his head: as soon as he reached home, Kumud would again ask how much they had managed to save that month.

Arunesh had been married for four years. Kumud taught Maithili and mathematics to children at a nearby private teaching centre, and in the evenings she tutored children from two or three households in their room. Between the two incomes, the household ran, but expenses had increased over the previous six months. Arunesh had to send money for his mother's medicines, the rent had gone up, and Kumud wanted to save for the next course in her teacher training.

Whenever Kumud repeatedly asked about the accounts, Arunesh did not hear a question; he heard supervision.

"Where did three thousand go?"

"I ate out twice with people from the office."

"If you had told me earlier, I would have entered it in the accounts."

Over such small matters their voices would rise. The previous week Kumud had said, "I am not asking you to stop spending. I only want to know which road the two of us are taking together."

Arunesh had replied, "The house is running. Is that not enough?"

That night Kumud had remained silent for a long time. Arunesh had taken that silence as his victory.

As he neared Tower Chowk that evening, his pace slowed by itself. On one side of the road, a middle-aged couple who sold roasted gram and puffed rice were packing up their cart. Arunesh had seen them many times, though he did not know their names. The man had hitched his dhoti up to his knees. Dust

from roasted gram clung to the woman's sari. Both looked tired, and both also seemed irritated with each other.

"I told you to keep the small bowls separately," the woman said sharply.

Counting coins, the man replied, "If I have to keep everything in my head, what will you do?"

She answered at once, "I sat at the cart all day. Was that nothing?"

Without warning Arunesh heard the tone of his own home. The words were different; the bitterness was familiar. He wanted to move on, but just then a fast rickshaw swung onto the road. The man, pushing the cart, stopped abruptly. The woman was behind him. She said nothing. She merely placed her left hand on the rear wooden bar of the cart. Without turning, the man pulled the cart to the right. The rickshaw passed.

Then they began walking again.

Ten steps later the strap of the woman's slipper came loose. She bent down. The man still did not turn, but the cart stopped on its own. His hands remained on the handle, his body faced forward, but he did not take another step. The woman fixed the strap and again placed her hand on the wood at the back. Only then did the cart move.

This time Arunesh stopped at the side of the road.

Nothing extraordinary had happened in those two minutes. The man had not taken the woman's hand, no sweet words had passed between them, and their earlier irritation had not disappeared. Yet Arunesh felt that between them there was some hidden measure that needed no words. The pace of one was made from the steps of the other. Even after the quarrel, that measure had not broken.

Suddenly he began remembering many small things Kumud did.

Kumud no longer put pickle on his plate at night because two years earlier he had suffered burning in his stomach. Arunesh had never mentioned it again, but Kumud's hand had remembered until now. In winter, when he left for the office, she would tell him to fasten the top button of his kurta. Arunesh would get irritated—"I am not a child." But after Kumud stopped saying it, the cold wind had struck his chest many times.

And Arunesh? What small thing about Kumud did he remember like that?

He thought: how much sugar does Kumud take in her tea? The answer did not come at once. On which days did she return late from the teaching centre? He could not remember that properly either. Last month there had been a strip of cloth tied around her right wrist. Had he asked about it? He had only seen it; he had not asked.

The street lamps came on one by one. Dust began to shine in the air. Half the shop shutters were coming down. From a sweet shop came the smell of something frying in ghee. Voices, rickshaw bells, the clatter of utensils—everything was as before, but the figures in the calculation running inside Arunesh had changed.

Why did Kumud ask about the accounts? Until then he had understood the answer to be “money.” For the first time it occurred to him that more than money, Kumud was asking about the road. She wanted to know where the two of them were going.

He remembered his own earlier answer—“The house is running. Is that not enough?”

Now the sentence sounded to his own ears as though the cart was moving, but no one cared about the steps of the two people pushing it.

Arunesh turned from Tower Chowk toward home. On the way he thought of buying something, then decided against it. If he took sweets or flowers home, the moment might become an occasion again. What he had understood today was not an occasion.

When he reached home, Kumud was sitting on a mat on the floor checking exercise books. The lamp was to her right, but she was leaning her body to the left as she wrote. A narrow strip of cloth was again tied around her right wrist.

“You are back?” Kumud asked without looking up.

“Yes, I’m back.”

Arunesh put down his bag. Usually he would first wash his hands and face, then ask about dinner. That day he stood silent for two moments.

“Does your wrist still hurt?”

Kumud’s pen stopped. She looked up. There was surprise on her face, not delight.

“Sometimes,” she said. “When I write too much.”

Arunesh remembered: three weeks earlier Kumud had told him that two new students had joined and that there was more writing to do at night. At the time he had asked only, “How much will they pay per month?”

He pulled his chair over and sat beside the mat.

“Shall we look at this month’s accounts today?” he asked.

Kumud looked at him carefully. “Today?”

“Yes. The money you are saving for the training—let us set that aside separately. The money to send to Mother too. Then whatever remains, we will both see.”

Kumud said nothing. She moved the pile of exercise books to one side and took out an old blue-covered account book whose pages were filled with small figures and dates.

For the first time Arunesh noticed that Kumud had recorded his salary in careful detail, while she had not written her own earnings with the same precision. In some places she had merely written: “three children,” “two children,” “old dues.”

“Why have you not kept your income separate?” Arunesh asked.

Kumud said simply, “How can it be separate? Whatever the house needs, it goes there.”

It was a short sentence. Kumud went back to matching the figures.

Arunesh did not reply. Before his eyes the cart appeared again—one hand in front, one hand behind; between them wood, coins, dust, and a whole day’s exhaustion.

In the account book Kumud placed her thumb on one page and said, “Look here. This much has been saved for the training. This much is still short.”

Arunesh bent over the page. There was a small ink stain near Kumud’s thumb. He kept looking at the figures, but this time he did not see only the shortfall. He saw not two separate incomes, but two lives moving across the same page.

Outside in the lane, some cart passed with a soft wooden rattle. Arunesh heard it without meaning to. Kumud did not.

He pulled the account book toward himself and began writing the date before the next blank line.

STORY 280

Lights on the Bridge

...

Evening light was spreading slowly over the bridge across the Kamla River. In the western sky the redness of the sun had been pressed behind grey clouds, and the yellow lamps fixed to the bridge pillars were coming on one by one. Nilabh, a college student, was walking his bicycle up the bridge with his bag slung over his shoulder. After sitting in the library all day his eyes were tired, but instead of hurrying home, he was thinking of stopping in the middle of the bridge.

An old memory was tied to this bridge. Three years earlier, when he was in the final class of high school, Rashmi had once handed him her exercise book at the eastern end of the bridge. That was all. While giving him the notebook, Rashmi had said, "Return it tomorrow. I still have preparation left to do." For a long time Nilabh had been unable to regard that ordinary sentence as an ordinary sentence. He had felt that the notebook was only a pretext, that there was something more in her voice, some signal in the way her eyes had lingered.

From that day onward, in his memory Rashmi gradually became less a real classmate and more a story of his own making. He kept imagining that she too remembered him while crossing the bridge, that the song she had sung at the school function had been for him, that her turning back on the last day of examinations had been a secret sign of farewell. None of this was ever confirmed, but the absence of confirmation never became an obstacle to Nilabh's imagination.

After school, the two went to different colleges. Nilabh did not know exactly what subject Rashmi had taken. Someone had told him she was studying biology; someone else had said she had taken a nursing entrance examination. Between these incomplete pieces of news, Nilabh preserved the Rashmi in his mind exactly as she had been—quiet, fond of poetry, fond of evening bridges and light on the river.

That day, while leaving the library, his classmate Chandan had casually said, "Rashmi will be going home by this road today with her younger sister. I saw her in the market."

After that one sentence, Nilabh's pace had changed. He kept telling himself that he wanted to stop on the bridge because of the breeze, because he was tired after the whole day, because he wanted to look at the river. But when the first yellow lamp came on, he slowed his bicycle without meaning to.

When he reached the middle of the bridge, he stood by the railing. Below, the broad water left after the rains looked grey. The reflections of the lamps did not form straight lines; because of the wind and the current they flickered in broken fragments. Nilabh remembered the blue cover of the old exercise book. That notebook was not still in his trunk—he had returned it—but later he had bought another notebook with a similar blue cover, merely so that the sight of it would awaken that day's memory.

Two bicycle bells sounded behind him. Nilabh stepped away from the railing. On the first bicycle was a girl of about fourteen; on the second was Rashmi. In the front basket of her bicycle were two thick bundles, a small packet of medicine, and a bunch of green vegetables. As soon as Rashmi saw Nilabh, she stopped.

"Nilabh?"

The voice was the same, but in his memory it had become much softer and more hesitant; the real voice was clearer and more direct.

"Yes," he said. "After a long time."

Rashmi laughed. "A long time? I saw you in the market two months ago. You probably did not notice me."

Nilabh remembered that two months earlier he had been in a crowd submitting an examination form. Someone had called out to him, but he had not turned. Now that unnoticed moment seemed more solid than all his old imaginings.

Rashmi's younger sister had already ridden ahead. Rashmi called, "Neha, stop after the bridge. Do not cross the chowk alone."

Then she turned back to Nilabh. "What are you studying here?"

"History."

"I thought you would take mathematics."

Nilabh was surprised. "Why?"

"At school you were the one who worked out the most calculations."

Nilabh laughed. For the first time he realised that Rashmi too carried a version of him in her memory—and that version was wrong. It was possible that on the other side too there were incomplete lines of memory, but there was no need to call them love.

"Are you studying biology?" he asked.

"No. I am doing laboratory training. From seven in the morning I am at the hospital laboratory, then I have classes. Today I had come to the market to buy Mother's medicine."

The ‘Rashmi who loved poetry’ in Nilabh’s mind did not suddenly shatter at these words; rather, beside her appeared another, clearer human being—someone who examined samples at seven in the morning, bought medicine for her mother, and would not let her younger sister cross the chowk alone.

He asked naturally, “Do you still sing?”

Rashmi shook her head. “I stopped after school. I do not get the time. Neha sings. She sings better than I do.”

Something inside Nilabh became lighter. For three years he had treated a song at a school function as a private signal meant for him; Rashmi herself might have given it no more importance than one small chapter of her life. The surprising thing was that this understanding did not humiliate him. Instead, his mind felt relieved—the story he had carried as a mystery had only been arithmetic of his own making.

Nilabh remembered another incident from school. On the day of the annual function, Rashmi had been waiting backstage for her turn to sing, and from a distance he had once seen her smile. For three years he had treated that smile as a sign directed toward him. Now, listening to the details of Rashmi’s daily life, it occurred to him that amid the dozen students, teachers, harmonium, wires, and hurried movement behind the stage that evening, he had never had any basis for deciding whom that smile had been meant for. Memory had preserved only the fragment that made his story beautiful.

Adjusting the bundles in her basket, Rashmi said, “Do you remember that essay of yours? ‘Evening in My Town?’”

For a moment Nilabh’s heart beat again with the old rhythm. “I remember.”

“That day I thought you wrote far too much about the lamps on the bridge. I do not like these lamps at all. Moths and little insects keep flying near your eyes.”

Nilabh looked at her face, then at the yellow lamp burning above them. In his old imagination he had connected Rashmi with the light of this bridge so many times that it had never occurred to him that Rashmi might not like this light at all.

From a distance Neha called, “Didi!”

“I should go now,” Rashmi said. “Mother has to take her medicine on time.”

“All right. We will meet.”

Rashmi mounted her bicycle, then paused for a moment and said, “We should meet sometime. You are studying history; I need some information

about the old building of our laboratory. They say it used to be an indigo warehouse. You might know.”

Nilabh said, “I will see. I can look for documents.”

“Then good. Goodbye.”

She rode away. The bundles in the basket moved gently. Nilabh watched her descend from the bridge, but now there was no urge in that watching to search for a secret sign. Halfway down, Rashmi stopped to look at the rear wheel of Neha’s bicycle, said something, and the two rode on again.

Nilabh took hold of his bicycle handle. He thought: what had Rashmi really been thinking three years ago when she handed him the exercise book? Perhaps about the examination. Perhaps about getting home quickly. Perhaps about nothing at all. Earlier, such uncertainty had seemed unbearable to him. For the first time today he understood that filling the blank spaces inside another person with one’s own desires was not love.

In that understanding Rashmi did not become smaller, nor did his old affection become false. On the contrary, for the first time she stepped out of the flat shape of imagination in his mind and stood there with the weight of an actual life—with fatigue, sweat, dislikes, responsibilities, and tastes entirely her own. Nilabh felt that for three years he had treasured Rashmi less than he had treasured his own imagination.

He mounted his bicycle. By now all the bridge lamps were fully lit. Below, their reflections on the water broke in the wind, joined, and broke again. Nilabh had once thought that broken light meant incompleteness. Now it seemed to him that perhaps this was the true form of light upon water; the steady line seen from far away was only an illusion.

As he came down from the bridge, he did not turn back even once. He wanted to meet Rashmi again, but this time he knew that at their next meeting he did not have to prove any old story. He only had to speak with a real person—a person whose life was far larger, far busier, and far more her own than his imagination had ever allowed.

STORY 281

The Closed Library

...

A small notice on red paper was pasted to the gate of Darbhanga's old public library: "The library will remain closed today due to the annual book count." Madhavi read the sentence twice. The first time with her eyes; the second, as though against the accounting of her whole day. In her bag were a reference list, two books, questions written on yellow paper, and in her head a complete plan: from ten to one, examine journals from the final decade of the nineteenth century; from one to two, lunch; then notes until four. Inside the gate, the chairs on the veranda had been turned upside down onto the tables. All the windows were shut. The silence within seemed to her as though time itself had taken leave for the day.

Madhavi was doing research at the university. Her subject was women's private writing in old Maithili periodicals. She was in her fifth year. At the beginning of the research she had thought the work would be finished in two years. In the third year she said, "Once this chapter is done." In the fourth: "Nothing can be written without seeing the primary material." By the fifth year, one sentence had become permanent in her speech: "After I submit the thesis."

After she submitted the thesis, she would visit her sister. After she submitted the thesis, she would choose saris from her mother's old trunk. After she submitted the thesis, she would replace the torn curtain in her hostel room. After she submitted the thesis, she would cut her hair, meet old friends, drink tea in the morning without looking at the clock. After she submitted the thesis, she would enter that part of life which, for now, seemed merely a preface.

Today the library was closed.

She stood beneath the shade of the pipal tree beside the gate. Returning to the hostel would have been simple, but the thought of an empty day gave her a strange unease. It was as though someone inside her were asking: if the library does not open, what will you do? The question was ordinary. She had no answer.

Across the road was a small bookbinder's shop: half tin roof, half open sky. Madhavi had seen it many times, but had never paid attention. Today, because she had no work, her gaze settled there. The bookbinder, Brijnandan, was spreading glue along the exposed spine of a thick book. Beside him sat his

daughter Lalita, about twelve years old, with a schoolbook open before her. Sometimes she handed her father thread; sometimes she wrote something in her exercise book.

“Babu, we will go at three, won’t we?” Lalita asked.

Without raising his head, Brijnandan said, “Yes. Once this binding dries, we will go.”

“Do not be late. I have my lesson today.”

“I told you, we will go. The book can be bound tomorrow too.”

Madhavi’s attention caught on that last sentence: the book can be bound tomorrow too. Brijnandan did not say it like a philosophy; he merely bit off the thread with his teeth, closed the glue tin, and picked up another binding. Lalita, reassured, returned to her writing.

Madhavi took her notebook out of her bag. She thought she would sit in front of the closed library and organise the notes from the previous chapter. As soon as she opened it, a folded sheet of paper slipped from the middle. Her sister Meena had written it. It was four months old. There were only two lines: “Didi, come this time. You keep saying after the thesis is finished, but my son knows you only like a name inside a book.”

Madhavi had read the letter before. The first time she had felt annoyed with Meena—she did not understand how difficult research was. The second time she had thought she would go once the next chapter was completed. The third time the letter had been pressed between the pages of her notebook. Today, in front of the closed gate, the sentence looked different.

The city day continued at its own pace across the street. A vegetable seller set down her basket and sat in the shade. A rickshaw puller untangled thread caught in his pedal. Two schoolboys placed bricks across a small puddle left by the rain and jumped over it. The library was closed, but no one else’s day was closed. For the first time Madhavi noticed that her own days had been shaped almost entirely around waiting for institutional doors to open.

She thought of her hostel room. For five years it had held an iron cot, a table, two trunks, and a torn curtain. Two years earlier her mother had given her a curtain with a green border—“Put it up; the room will look brighter.” Madhavi had wrapped it in newspaper and kept it in a trunk. Why? “I am not going to live here permanently.” Five years of temporary living had never struck her as contradictory.

She remembered the way she ate: hurriedly, five minutes before the library closed at noon; turning down friends’ invitations; shortening conversations with her mother because “I have to find a quotation.” The quotations kept increasing, the chapters kept increasing, and the boundary of the research kept

moving backward. The date on which she would begin the life she imagined after the thesis was written in no register anywhere.

Madhavi grew uncomfortable with her own thoughts. It seemed to her that this line of thinking was becoming an argument against research. But she loved her research. The smell of paper when she opened old journals, the name of a forgotten woman writer, a handwritten note in the margin—these genuinely gave her pleasure. The problem was not the research. The problem, she realised, was that she had turned research into a shield: a shield for postponing some meetings, for not taking some decisions, for avoiding the discomfort of some relationships.

Across the road Brijnandan pressed a book under a cloth. Lalita looked at the clock.

“Babu, now?”

“Now.”

“And these two?”

“Tomorrow.”

Brijnandan did not lower the shop curtain. He merely covered the glue, gathered the thread, and told his daughter to put her exercise book in the bag. The work was incomplete, but there was no guilt in his movements. For him, unfinished work was not opposed to life; it was one part within life.

Madhavi folded her paper again. She was still thinking of returning to the hostel. If she wanted, she could sit in her room and write five pages. In her old habit, wasting such a day felt almost like a crime. She looked again at the red notice on the gate. “Closed today.” Only today. The library would reopen the day after tomorrow. The world of her research was not coming to an end.

She kept Meena’s letter not inside the bag but in her hand. Meena lived in a rented house in the southern part of the city, toward Donar. Twenty minutes by rickshaw. For four months Madhavi had stretched that distance until “after I submit the thesis.”

As she crossed the road, for a moment she felt she was being sentimental. Was going to her sister’s house not an escape from research? Then she laughed at herself. How strange it was to measure a twenty-minute distance against a five-year work plan.

She reached the bookbinder’s shop. Brijnandan had not locked it; he only told the neighbouring shopkeeper, “Keep an eye on it. I am going to watch Lalita’s lesson and will be back.”

Madhavi asked, “You are leaving the shop open?”

Brijnandan laughed. “It is only for a little while. The books are not going to run away.”

Lalita pulled her father forward. Madhavi smiled at the sentence. The books are not going to run away. Her research would not run away either. Yes, time runs away—the sentence came to her mind, but she did not complete it. Some thoughts do not need a complete sentence.

She stopped a rickshaw. The driver asked, “Where to?” The name of the hostel almost came out of Madhavi’s mouth first. Five years of habit. She paused for a moment, then said, “Donar. Near the old post office.” The rickshaw moved. The red notice at the library fell behind. Madhavi thought about the reference list in her bag—which journal she would ask for first the day after tomorrow, which pages she would have copied; all of it remained clear in her mind. The research was still there, with all its weight and attraction. The only change was that, for the first time, she could see a little space for life around it. On the road to Donar the rickshaw stopped at a crossing. Outside a cloth shop, a curtain with a green border stirred in the wind. Madhavi remembered the curtain her mother had given her, lying in the trunk. She did not decide that she would return that very day and hang it up. There was no hurry to decide that either. She understood only that a room did not remain temporary merely because she had called it temporary for five years, and life too was not some next chapter titled ‘After I submit the thesis.’ The rickshaw moved on. Madhavi unfolded Meena’s letter in her palm and smoothed it. The crease that had remained for four months did not disappear entirely, but the letters were now clear. For the first time she was not thinking about what answer to write. Reaching there before answering seemed simpler.

STORY 282

The Fair Is Over

...

On the morning after the fair in Janakpur ended, it seemed as though someone had gathered up all the colours of the field during the night. The gate that until yesterday had been covered with strings of electric bulbs, cloth flowers, and coloured letters had already lost half its covering. Its bamboo frame stood exposed. Truck wheels had left deep tracks in the ground, the dust dampened by dew had been churned up, and in the distance the round frame of the Ferris wheel stood against the unlit sky like a black line.

Fifteen-year-old Mihir Jha reached the grounds before sunrise. Under his arm was a small cloth bag containing one change of clothes, a gamchha, and an old school exercise book.

For fifteen days Mihir had been helping at his maternal uncle Raghunath's tea stall. From the day the fair opened, his work had been to fetch water in the morning, scour the brass kettle, wash glasses, watch the milk pot, and wipe the tables during the rush. At the end of each day his uncle put a few rupees into his palm.

More than the money, Mihir was fascinated by the other world that moved behind the fair—the people who assembled and dismantled rides, the young men who laid electric cables, the workers who checked iron frames until midnight, and the trucks that left for another town as soon as one fair ended.

Mihir's father, Harimohan, ran a small bicycle-repair shop near a chowk in Janakpur. After school Mihir would return home, dip tyres in water to find punctures, roughen rubber, and pump in air. His father worried about low earnings in bad weather, but he had never spoken of stopping his son's studies.

Mihir had no complaint against home. His restlessness was of another kind. It seemed to him that every day of his life had already been decided—school in the morning, bicycles in the afternoon, lessons in the evening, then the same lane, the same awning, the same familiar faces. When the fair arrived, for the first time he met people who themselves did not know for certain where they would be the next day.

Mihir took that uncertainty for freedom.

Among the Ferris-wheel crew was eighteen-year-old Shivnath, thin-bodied, with oiled hair and old cut marks across his palms. Mihir often went near him on the pretext of carrying tea. Shivnath would mention the haat at

Madhubani, the grounds at Rajbiraj, or Viratnagar. His descriptions of towns were always brief—"The ground there was soft," "There we had to carry water from far away," "There the rain stopped work for three days"—but Mihir heard whole worlds inside those names.

On the final evening Mihir had asked, "Where are all of you going now?"

"Rajbiraj," Shivnath had said while undoing a knot in a rope. "Two days on the road. We will stop at one place in between."

"Could I get work too?"

Shivnath had not laughed at first. He looked at Mihir's hands, then asked, "Can you lift iron strips? Can you stay awake at night? Can you stretch a tarpaulin in the rain?"

"I can learn."

"Then come at five in the morning. Speak to the owner, Ramnaresh. First see the work. Tell your family before you come."

That night Mihir could not sleep for a long time. At home he said only that he was going early in the morning to help dismantle the fair.

His mother asked, "School?"

"I will be back by ten."

Even as he answered, Mihir knew it was possible that he would not need to return by ten at all. On the last page of his exercise book Shivnath had written three names: Rajbiraj, Viratnagar, Itahari. Mihir read the page three times that night. It seemed to him that if he reached the third name on that list, he would be very far from his old routine.

As soon as he reached the field in the morning, the first difficulty in his imagination appeared before him. The cabins of the Ferris wheel were being taken down, and from underneath each one the packed dust, grease, and scraps of paper had to be cleaned away. Shivnath handed him a sack.

"Shake out all these seat covers and put them in here."

Mihir had imagined he would be given ironwork; shaking seat covers seemed ordinary. But within half an hour dust had filled his nose, his palms were black, and he understood that even dismantling had an order. Which strip came first, which pin belonged with which piece, which rope went into which box—if the order was wrong, half a day would be lost at the next stop.

Shivnath counted every item without appearing hurried.

"Do you remember all this counting?" Mihir asked.

"If we leave it to memory, half the equipment disappears on the road," Shivnath said. "There is a register."

He showed him an oil-stained notebook. The number of every box, the count of bolts, the length of cables, and the colour of each cabin were written in it.

Mihir was surprised. In his imagination, a wandering life existed outside rules; here even a small pin was bound to an account.

As the sun climbed, the field began to grow hot. The mixed smell of sweets, perfume, smoke, and crowds from the previous night had been replaced by the smell of wet rope, diesel, earth, and boiling rice. Under the shade of one tarpaulin, three women were cooking rice on a hearth. Beside them two children sat on a wooden crate and wrote in their exercise books. Whenever the wind turned the pages of one boy's notebook, he placed a small piece of iron on the page to hold it down.

Mihir asked, "Do they travel everywhere with you?"

Shivnath said, "Some members of the family do. Not everyone. That younger boy came this time after his examination."

"And his school?"

"It is in the village. He goes back between seasons. Whatever he misses, he catches up later."

Shivnath did not tell this as a story of sorrow. He continued measuring rope. Mihir too said nothing. He merely became aware of the weight of the exercise book inside his own bag.

By eight o'clock half the fair had disappeared. The target-shooting boards had been loaded onto a truck, the cloth from the toy stalls had become bundles, and the coloured arch that had marked the entrance at night lay separated into cloth, bamboo, and rope.

Mihir felt not disappointment but a kind of curiosity. What until yesterday had appeared to him as a single thing now revealed itself as the joining of many hands.

Ramnaresh, the owner of the Ferris wheel, walked around with a thick register checking the inventory. Seeing Mihir, he asked, "You are Raghunath's nephew?"

"Yes."

"Shivnath says you want to go with the crew."

For a moment Mihir's heart beat hard. The matter was no longer imagination.

Ramnaresh said, "You are young. Not without your family's permission. If they permit it, you can work for two weeks and see. Morning and evening hours will not be fixed. Wages are different on travel days and on days when the

fair is running. You eat with the crew. You need your own clothes and bedding.”

“How many towns do you travel through?”

“Depends on the season. Sometimes five, sometimes eight. If the rains turn bad, we go straight home.”

For fifteen days Mihir had been carrying one question inside him—“How much fun is it?”—but he could not ask it. There was no place for fun in Ramnaresh’s manner of speaking; there was only work, time, wages, weather, and permission.

Ramnaresh moved on. Shivnath looked at Mihir’s bag. “You came prepared?”

Mihir put the bag down. “I have two sets of clothes.”

Shivnath smiled. “The first time I left, I carried five. By the third day I understood that a dry place mattered more than clothes.”

“Do you not miss home?”

“I do.” Shivnath wiped a bolt with a cloth. “But this is the work. If I stayed home, there would be some other work. Travelling is one thing; this work is another.”

After that short sentence, both returned to work. Mihir felt that Shivnath was neither trying to stop his desire nor encourage it. He had only separated two things that Mihir had spent fifteen days treating as the same—travelling, and working while travelling.

At half past eight, while loosening an iron brace beneath one of the cabins, Mihir trapped his finger. The injury was not serious, but a red line appeared beside the nail. Shivnath poured water over it, cleaned away the dust, and tied a narrow strip of cloth around it.

“Enough for the first day,” he said.

Mihir wanted to object, but the strength in his hand had diminished. He sat beneath the tarpaulin.

In front of him there was no longer the circular shadow of last night’s Ferris wheel; half its frame lay broken into long strips on the ground. Four workers, without speaking, were sliding the pieces onto a truck. In the distance, where the tea stalls had stood, only black circles from brick hearths remained. At the place where Uncle Raghunath’s stall had been, three bricks and a small heap of ash were visible.

Mihir remembered himself the previous night—running through the crowd, watching the distant trucks, deciding in his mind that once he got beyond this field his life would open up. Now, inside one of those trucks, he

could see a box in which cables, greasy cloth, tools, half a sack of rice, and bedding for three men were being packed together.

The truck was not wrong. Nor had his imagination been entirely wrong. There was simply a great deal between the two that could not be seen in the lights.

At nine the first truck was full. Ramnaresh came to Mihir again. "Decision?"

In Mihir's bag was the exercise book. In his pocket were the rupees left from the previous five days that his uncle had paid him. In front of him stood the truck going to Rajbiraj. He knew that if he said yes now, the matter would truly move forward; no one was pretending to stop him.

He looked around the field. Until yesterday the crowd had seemed to him like a world outside his ordinary life. The crowd was gone now. On the faces of those who remained were fatigue, calculation, and haste.

Even so, the fair had not been false. The lights at night, the songs, the children's laughter, the steam rising from tea, the city seen from the top of the Ferris wheel—everything had been real. But that reality had lasted fifteen days. To mistake the speed of those fifteen days for the speed of an entire life had been Mihir's own addition.

"I will not go today," he said.

Ramnaresh merely nodded. "All right." Then he turned and called to a worker, "Tighten the rope on the second box." He had no time to ask the reason for the decision.

A little later Shivnath came to Mihir. "Changed your mind?"

Mihir said, "I still want to travel."

"Then travel," Shivnath said. "This truck is not the only road."

Mihir did not reply. He liked the sentence, but he did not want to preserve it as a piece of advice. Shivnath went back to his work.

By ten, the main frame of the Ferris wheel too had left the ground and been loaded onto a truck. Where its four legs had stood, four deep round marks remained in the earth. For the first time Mihir could see the entire field from one end to the other without any curtain, festoon, or crowd.

The empty space was larger than he had expected. A few scraps of paper moved in the wind, two crows fought over a piece of biscuit, and in a hollow near the edge the clear sky was reflected in rainwater left from the night.

Just then Uncle Raghunath arrived on a bicycle. "Ah, you are still here? I forgot the small brass kettle. Did you see it near the heap of ash?"

Mihir stood up. Together they searched near the three bricks. After they moved aside a half-burnt sack, they found the kettle. One side was blackened with soot; on the other fell the morning light.

Wiping it with a cloth, his uncle asked, “Why did you come carrying a bag?”

Mihir was silent for a few moments. “I had thought I might go with Shivrath and the others for a few days.”

His uncle hung the kettle from the bicycle handle. “And now?”

“Now I will go home.”

His uncle only said, “Hmm.” He neither scolded nor laughed. He turned the bicycle around.

Mihir lifted the bag onto his shoulder, but before leaving the field he looked back once more. Last night’s lights did not seem false to him, and today’s emptiness did not seem an opposing truth. They were two times of the same event.

The desire that for fifteen days he had taken to be permanent inside himself had borrowed something of its colour from the fair as well. Knowing this did not make the desire smaller; it only made its shape clearer.

On the way, his uncle talked about calculations for the tea stall in the next fair season. Mihir listened only halfway. On the last page of the exercise book inside his bag, the three names were still written—Rajbiraj, Viratnagar, Itahari.

When he reached home, he did not tear out the page. As he closed the exercise book, he merely pulled it straight from between the folds of the gamchha so that the word “Viratnagar,” written across the crease, could be read clearly.

STORY 283

Outside the Cinema

...

Outside the old cinema hall near Station Chowk in Madhubani, the coloured strip of lights that had been hanging since evening was still glowing at ten at night. In the enormous picture above, the film's hero, wearing black glasses, leaned over a motorcycle; behind him were dust, fire, and people running. As the final show ended inside, the crowd surged toward the gate all at once. The pounding music was still trembling through the walls and spilling outside.

Twenty-two-year-old Navneet Jha came out more slowly than anyone else in the crowd. The final scene of the film kept returning to him—the hero leaving the city alone while people called after him, yet never once turning back. Navneet had liked the scene so much that even after stepping outside, his gait seemed altered.

He worked as a sales assistant in a cloth shop in Madhubani. From nine in the morning until eight at night, his routine was to open bolts of cloth, fold them, cut fabric according to customers' measurements, and prepare account slips. For two months he had felt that this life simply was not made for him. Whenever the owner, Kailash Babu, said, "Work increases toward Dussehra. Do not talk about leave now," Navneet would repeat a film dialogue in his mind: "Who can stop the one who is meant to fly?"

That very day he had told people at home that he would go to Delhi the following month. What work he would do, where he would stay, whom he would go to—he had no answers to any of these questions. But he was certain that the moment he left his town, the pace of his life would change. While buying the cinema ticket, his friend Ranjit had laughed and said, "First save the fare to Delhi, then become a hero." Navneet had replied, "The fare will come later. First you need courage."

As soon as he came out of the cinema, he saw Ranjit ride away on a motorcycle with his maternal cousin. Navneet had to get to his rented room on Rajnagar Road. Two or three electric rickshaws stood on the road, but all the drivers were looking for longer-distance passengers. One asked Navneet for twice the normal fare. Irritated, Navneet shook his head. "At that rate, I could buy half another cinema ticket."

He set off on foot. The cinema's light receded behind him. One by one, the shops around Station Chowk were switching off their glittering bulbs. A tea

cart at the roadside was being packed away. The air carried the smells of roasted makhana, diesel, and the damp earth left by rain.

After walking about half a kos, he heard the faint sound of a bell behind him. An old cycle-rickshaw was approaching slowly. The driver was a thin man around fifty. The back of his kurta was dark with sweat even though a cool night breeze was blowing. The rickshaw's lamp was very dim.

"Rajnagar Road?" Navneet asked.

Without stopping his pedalling, the driver answered, "As far as the railway crossing?"

"Beyond that, near the old dispensary."

"Sit. Sixty rupees."

Again Navneet thought it expensive, but the road was becoming deserted. He sat down.

The rickshaw moved on. For the first few minutes Navneet hummed the film music. Before his eyes were the hero's motorcycle, shining roads, and the lights of a distant city. In his mind he planned that after reaching Delhi he would find work in some clothing warehouse, after a few months change his style of dress, buy a motorcycle, then return to the village and surprise everyone. Labour, rent, food, travel—nothing in the plan was clear; only the picture was clear.

Before the railway crossing, the rise of the rail bridge began. The driver's pedalling became heavy. Navneet did not notice at first. Then he heard that after every two or three breaths a faint rasp came from the driver's throat. The man leaned forward on the seat and put his full weight into the pedals. The back of his right slipper was torn; his heel was exposed.

The rickshaw suddenly slowed. The driver got down and began pulling it by the handle.

Navneet remained seated. After two steps he felt uncomfortable. He got down.

"Stay seated," the driver said. "It is only the incline."

"I can walk."

They began walking side by side with the rickshaw. From the top of the bridge, the red and green railway signals near the station shimmered in the distance. Freight wagons stood beside the tracks below. Holding the handle with one hand, the driver pressed his chest with the other and steadied his breathing.

Navneet asked, "How long have you been driving today?"

"Since six in the morning."

“Until now?”

The driver gave a short answer. “Went home twice in between.”

After they descended from the bridge, he got back on the pedals. Navneet sat down too, but now his eyes were less on the road and more on the driver’s back. White salt marks had dried near the armpits of the kurta. An old cloth bag hung from the left side of the handlebar. The end of a small iron wrench protruded from it.

A little farther on, the chain slipped off. The driver got down immediately. He pulled the rickshaw to the roadside, took the wrench from the bag, and crouched behind the vehicle. Out of habit Navneet put a hand into his pocket, then remembered that his phone battery had died inside the cinema. He simply stood there.

While lifting and setting the chain with his fingers, the driver said, “Second time today.”

“Will it need replacing?”

“Not the chain. The rear sprocket is worn. I will get it repaired tomorrow in the daytime.”

“How much will it cost?”

“The mechanic said two hundred and eighty.”

Without thinking, Navneet touched the inside pocket of his shirt. Four hundred rupees were folded there. He had been planning to buy a pair of black glasses on Saturday—wide-framed ones like the hero’s in the film. He and Ranjit had talked about it all day.

The driver reset the chain and brushed his hands together. Black grease filled the lines of his palms. He pulled out a piece of cloth from the bag, wiped his hands, then drank two gulps of water from a bottle. The bottle was nearly empty.

“What is your name?” Navneet asked.

“Mahendra Sadai.”

“Where is your home?”

“Toward Ranti.”

“That is far from here.”

“I leave the rickshaw in the owner’s courtyard and walk half a kos. Then I have a bicycle.”

Saying this, Mahendra got back on the pedals. There was no complaint in his voice; there was fatigue, but he did not set it apart in his sentences.

When they reached Rajnagar Road, the road widened. The night market was almost closed. In front of a few warehouses, sacks were still being unloaded. Two labourers were lowering bundles from a truck. A watchman sat on a piece of sacking drinking tea.

Navneet suddenly remembered the city he had just seen in the film. In that city, the roads at night had been empty, as though made for the hero. Here the night was not empty. Here the work of people he barely noticed even in daylight was still going on.

Mahendra's rickshaw slowed again. Navneet asked, "Will you still take another passenger?"

"If I get one toward the station, then once more."

"This late?"

"Today the fares were low."

Navneet did not answer. After a while Mahendra himself said, "It rained for two days. Sitting at home does not stop the rickshaw rent."

"How much per day?"

"Ninety. Punctures and small repairs are mine."

That was all. Mahendra fell silent again.

Navneet began doing the arithmetic in his head. Ninety for the rickshaw rent. Two hundred and eighty to replace the sprocket. Even after reaching the rickshaw owner's place, half a kos on foot and then a bicycle ride home. Six in the morning again.

Suddenly his own routine came to mind—standing eight or eight and a half hours in the shop, eating in between, the owner's scolding, bundles of cloth. He wanted to escape the fatigue of all this. Yet in his fantasy of escape, labour itself was absent. As though changing cities would change the rules of work; as though putting on new clothes would make life shine by itself.

The thought did not comfort him. Instead, something inside him tightened.

The old dispensary was now ahead. Navneet got down. Mahendra rang the rickshaw bell once and stopped at the roadside.

"Sixty," he said.

Navneet took out a five-hundred-rupee note. Mahendra shook his head. "No change."

Navneet touched the pocket with the four hundred rupees again. Separately, he had one fifty-rupee note and two ten-rupee notes. He paid sixty. Ten rupees remained.

For a moment he felt like giving something extra. Then it occurred to him that washing away his discomfort immediately with money would itself become another cinema-like scene—a small gesture, a clean ending. He did not want such an ending. Mahendra had named the fare; the fare had been paid. That was all.

Mahendra counted the money and put it into the inside pocket of his kurta. “You know the way from here?”

“Yes.”

The rickshaw turned. Navneet stood by the roadside. Mahendra’s back grew smaller and smaller in the darkness. After two turns, only the dim lamp remained visible; then that too disappeared.

Navneet walked toward his rented room. The cinema ticket was in his pocket. He took it out and looked at it. The hero’s name was printed on the paper in large letters. Because the ticket had been folded, the hero’s name appeared broken through the middle. Navneet did not throw the ticket away. He put it back into his pocket.

When he reached the room, Ranjit, who shared it with him, was still awake. Lying on the cot, he asked, “So, hero sahib! Is the Delhi decision final?” Navneet kept taking off his shoes. “Why are you quiet?” Ranjit laughed. “In the film, did the hero leave the city or not?” “He did.” “Then?” Navneet went to lift the water lota, then corrected himself. “Where is the water?” Ranjit pointed toward the earthen pitcher. Navneet drank and stood by the window. Every now and then a rickshaw bell could still be heard on the road. “Are you going to Delhi or not?” Ranjit asked again. This time Navneet answered, “I may go. But in the calculation I had made so far, some things had not been written down at all.” “What things?”

Navneet did not answer at once. He kept remembering Mahendra’s sweat-darkened kurta, the fallen chain, the two hundred and eighty rupees needed for the sprocket, and his plan to make one more trip toward the station even after eleven at night. He also remembered his own plan for the black glasses. He said, “The real arithmetic of work.” The sentence sounded ordinary to Ranjit. He turned over to sleep. Navneet too did not want to make a declaration out of it.

The next morning, as he left for the shop, the same four hundred rupees were still in his pocket. In the market, the spectacles shop was opening. Navneet looked toward it for a moment, but did not stop. He was thinking that if he went to Delhi, where would he live, how much would the first month’s rent be, how much could he earn in cloth work, and how much money would it be sensible to take from home. There was no glamour in any of these questions.

But for the first time, they seemed to him part of his life—not dull details left over after the film had ended.

STORY 284

The Verandah Bulb

...

In the Benta neighbourhood of Darbhanga, the verandah of Anima Jha's house opened toward the road. An old iron grille, a wooden bench, a sewing machine set against the wall, and a milky-white bulb hanging overhead—these few things gave the verandah its character. By day vegetables were sorted there, clothes were dried, and the children's shoes lay scattered about; when evening fell, Anima would open the cover of the machine and sit down in that same place.

It was half past nine that night. Inside the house Madhukant was adding up the next day's accounts. He had a small grocery shop where he spent the day selling oil, lentils, soap, and spices. Their son Nachiket was in the next room preparing for a technical entrance examination. Their daughter Ragini had finished putting away the kitchen utensils and gone to study. On the verandah Anima was shortening the sleeve of their neighbour Usha's blouse.

"I need it tomorrow morning, Didi," Usha had said that evening when she left the blouse. "I have to go to a wedding. Just shorten these sleeves by two fingers."

Out of habit Anima had said, "Leave it here." There had been no discussion of payment. For years people in the neighbourhood had been leaving small alterations with her. Someone's salwar was loose, someone's petticoat torn, someone's child's kurta too long. Anima kept doing them. Sometimes people brought a spool of thread, sometimes they did not. She herself had never asked for an account.

As she threaded the needle again, the bulb flickered twice. Anima looked up. The yellowish light brightened for a moment, then dimmed.

"Ragini," she called toward the inside, "did you tell Babu about this bulb?"

A voice came from within. "I did. Babu said he would bring one tomorrow."

Madhukant heard too. "I forgot while closing the shop. Remind me in the morning."

Anima started the machine again. She had not made even two stitches when the bulb blinked once and went out. The verandah fell completely dark. The light coming from the inner room grew thin by the time it reached the grille. It was difficult to see the needle of the machine.

Anima took her foot off the pedal.

“Is there a candle?” Madhukant asked from inside.

“There may be one in the kitchen.”

“Then leave it for today. Do it in the morning.”

Anima did not answer. She had promised to return the blouse in the morning. She began feeling under the bench for the small box where extra thread, buttons, measuring tape, and needles were kept. Her hand found two empty spools, then an old measuring tape. No bulb.

Ragini came outside holding a torch. “Ma, take this.”

“Your studies?”

“The battery will not die in ten minutes.”

Ragini held the beam over the machine. Anima began sewing again, but the light would not stay fixed in one place. Her daughter kept changing hands. After five minutes Anima stopped the machine.

“Go and study. I will finish it in the morning.”

When Ragini went back inside, the verandah was dark again. Light from the electric pole on the road cast the square shadow of the grille onto the wall. Anima remained seated in front of the machine. She felt no hurry to go inside.

In that darkness the shape of the machine was not very clear, but her hands knew every part of it. Her mother had given her this machine when she married. Before marriage, Anima had spent two years in Madhubani learning sewing. Her mother had said, “You will do household work anyway, but keep a skill of your own in your hands.”

During the first five or seven years of marriage, Anima had earned a little by sewing clothes for people in the neighbourhood. Then Nachiket was small, her mother-in-law fell ill, and the household work increased. The cover of the machine began to remain closed for months at a time.

After her mother-in-law died, people slowly began bringing clothes again. Even then Anima had thought—this time I will make it regular. She would put up a wooden sign on the verandah, write down fixed hours, keep a separate account for thread and buttons. But that year the roof of the house needed repair. The next year came Nachiket’s examination. Then Ragini had a long fever. Then Madhukant changed shops. Saying “after this time” again and again, seven years passed.

Her sewing had not stopped in the meantime; only it had never acquired the name of work. Clothes for the family, clothes for relatives, small alterations for neighbours—everything kept coming. Asking for payment embarrassed her. When someone voluntarily gave ten or twenty rupees, she put

the money in the thread box. Sometimes she bought needles with it, sometimes coriander and chillies for the house.

Sitting in the darkness, she remembered something from that afternoon. Before leaving the blouse, Usha had been talking about her younger sister-in-law.

“She had the sleeves shortened in the market,” Usha had said. “They charged eighty rupees. I told her Anima Didi would do it.”

Anima had laughed then. The conversation had ended there. Now, in the dark, that figure—eighty rupees—returned to her mind. Shortening sleeves took ten minutes. The thread was hers. The machine was hers. The electricity was from her house. The time was hers.

It was not that she had never understood this arithmetic before. She had. But after doing the calculation she always placed some other thought beside it—Usha is a neighbour; Kusum’s husband knows Madhukant; it is a child’s garment; how can I ask money for such a small job? Each reason seemed right on its own. Put together, all those reasons left her entire work without a name.

From inside Madhukant called, “Anima, are you not coming to sleep?”

“I am coming.”

She stood up but did not cover the machine. Turning the needle wheel by hand, she raised the needle and took out the blouse, folding it carefully. Just then two young women passed outside the grille. Both carried bundles of cloth. One was saying to the other, “Come tomorrow at three. Madam will teach us how to take measurements.”

Their voices moved away.

Anima stood by the grille. Three lanes behind the neighbourhood, a woman taught sewing. Two years earlier Ragini had said that she too would learn during the holidays. Anima had replied, “Learn from me.” But no time was ever fixed. The holidays passed.

The thought did not wound her. It simply raised a straightforward question: if no time is fixed for something, when will it ever happen?

She went inside. Madhukant was closing the account book.

“Bring a bulb tomorrow,” Anima said.

“Yes, first thing in the morning.”

“Bring two. One extra.”

Madhukant looked at her. “All right.”

Anima stood there for a few moments, then said, “And I need a wooden board.”

“What board?”

“To put up on the verandah.”

“Why?”

“I will write the sewing hours on it.”

Madhukant’s hand stopped over the account book. “Hours?”

“Three in the afternoon to six in the evening. Whoever brings clothes should come in that time.”

“All right,” Madhukant said easily. Then, after thinking for a moment, he added, “Will it fit with the housework?”

Earlier, to a question like that, Anima would have said—let us see, if there is time. This time she opened the day inside her mind. Morning cooking, Nachiket’s meal, the tiffin for Madhukant’s shop, the afternoon dishes, evening tea. Not every task had to be done by the same pair of hands. Ragini could make the evening tea. Nachiket could bring milk from the market.

“It will,” Anima said. “Some work will have to be shared.”

Madhukant took a little time before answering. Then he said, “I will tell Ragini. Nachiket can go to the market too.”

That was all. No announcement. No argument. Anima went to sleep, but before sleep came, for the first time she could see the shape of her decision in three hours of the day—three to six. For years she had needed “sometime.” Now she had three numbers.

Usha came very early the next morning. Anima had not yet finished the blouse.

She said plainly, “Sit for ten minutes. The bulb went out last night.”

Usha sat on the bench. On his way to the market, Madhukant had left two bulbs and a narrow wooden board. Nachiket set up a ladder and screwed in the new bulb. It was not particularly needed in daylight, but Anima pressed the switch to test it. Milky-white light fell over the machine.

She finished Usha’s blouse. Usha tried it on and was pleased.

“How much should I give?” she asked naturally.

Earlier Anima would have answered such a question with, “Leave it.” This time she added up the thread and the time in her mind.

“Fifty rupees.”

Without surprise, Usha handed her a fifty-rupee note. “It came out better than the market one. And could you make this neckline a little tighter too?”

Taking the note, Anima said, “Yes. But bring it after three in the evening.”

“Why, are you going somewhere?”

“No. From now on my sewing hours will be three to six.”

Usha looked at her for a moment, then smiled. "Then I will come at three."

After Usha left, Anima did not put the note into the thread box. She took out an old exercise book and wrote the date on the first page: "Sleeves shortened —50." Under it she wrote five rupees as the cost of thread. As she wrote, her handwriting looked slightly awkward to her; after so long, she was keeping a separate account of her sewing.

When Ragini returned from college in the afternoon, the wooden board was lying on the verandah.

"What should I write on this?" she asked.

Anima said, "Write clearly: 'Sewing and Alterations. Hours: Three to Six.' That is all."

"No prices?"

"I will tell the price after seeing the work."

Ragini began painting the letters in black. Nachiket passed by, read the board, and laughed. "Ma's shop!"

Anima kept threading the machine. "Not a shop. Working hours."

There were still twenty minutes before three. The new bulb on the verandah was off; daylight was enough. The old dead bulb lay in one corner of the bench. Ragini picked it up to throw it away.

Anima looked at the dead bulb for a moment and said, "Throw it."

Ragini went toward the rubbish bin outside. Anima lifted the wooden board. The paint was still a little wet. She rested the board inside the grille so that the air could reach it.

At three o'clock, she would hang it up.

STORY 285

The Glass of the Tea Stall

...

South of Laheriasarai Tower, beside the main road, the entire front wall of a newly opened tea stall was glass. As long as the evening light remained, those sitting inside could see the road clearly outside; as darkness deepened, the lights inside came on and the glass became half mirror. Shruti Jha had never paid much attention to this play of light before. That day she had to sit there for nearly forty-five minutes waiting for a bus.

Shruti was in the final year of economics at M.R.M. College. Her father ran a small medicine shop near Sadar Hospital, and her mother taught five or seven children at home. Shruti too taught mathematics to two children in the evenings and earned eighteen hundred rupees a month. For the last six months she had been saving a little from those earnings. Two days earlier she had bought herself a dark-blue cloth bag—a sturdy strap, two compartments inside, and a small zippered pocket outside. It cost eight hundred and fifty rupees. At home her father had said, “Why so expensive?” Shruti had replied with a laugh, “It’s my own earnings.” That sentence had given her a particular pleasure.

Today she had taken the bag to college for the first time. On the way back, at the bus stop, she was told that the bus would be late because a roadside drain was being repaired. Dust was flying, and along one side of the road five women labourers were gathering broken bricks, sand, and mortar. To escape the dust, Shruti went into the tea stall.

Inside there were eight wooden tables. On the wall were written the prices of tea, milk, roasted makhana, and samosas. Jagannath Sah sat at the counter. Shruti ordered a tea and chose a table by the glass. From there she could see the road, and when the bus arrived it would be easy to go out through the entrance.

While she waited for the tea, she hung the bag over the back of the chair and straightened its strap. Her reflection showed faintly in the glass. She adjusted the shoulder of her kurta, pushed a stray lock of hair back with her fingers, then looked to see whether the dull green of her kurta went with the blue of the bag. Dust flew outside the glass, but the reflection half-covered the scene beyond.

“Tea for one here too,” a woman’s voice called from outside.

Jagannath Sah looked out from the counter. “Malti, come inside. There is too much dust.”

“My shoes are smeared with mortar. Just give it to me here.”

Shruti looked outside without meaning to. A woman by the roadside was taking a gamchha from her head and shaking off the dust. She might have been between thirty and thirty-five. Her grey sari was hitched up to her knees, old rubber shoes on her feet, the ash-grey colour of mortar lodged beneath her fingernails. Her name was Malti—Shruti knew that much from the way Jagannath Sah had called her.

The boy from the stall carried tea outside in an earthen kulhad. Malti straightened her back and leaned against the wall. At that moment Shruti’s reflection and Malti’s figure came into the same frame in the glass. Shruti’s blue bag appeared beside Malti’s shoulder, almost as if the bag were hers. Shruti’s hand rested on the table, but in the glass it seemed to lie beside Malti’s cup of tea. The image lasted only two moments; a bicycle passed along the road and the reflection shifted.

Shruti lifted her tea. She found the image interesting. She moved slightly to the right. Again the two figures appeared together. This time her own face was clear, while Malti’s was a little blurred in the light outside. Shruti raised a hand to fix her hair again, then stopped midway.

The munshi overseeing the road repair came toward the workers with a sheet of paper in his hand. He began reading out names and writing something down. “Malti Devi?” he asked.

“I am here,” Malti said.

The munshi wrote something on the sheet. “Half day today.”

Malti moved away from the wall. “How is it half a day? I’ve been here since eight in the morning.”

The munshi looked toward the road. “The gravel didn’t arrive for two hours. Work was stopped.”

Malti asked, “Was I the one who stopped the gravel?”

The munshi said, “I will write the account I have been given.”

Another woman labourer, Shanti, came over. “We were digging out the old mortar during those two hours.”

The munshi folded the sheet. “Half is written from above. Ask tomorrow when the engineer comes.”

Malti said nothing. She drank the tea left in her kulhad in one go. Then she opened a small knot tied in the end of her sari and gave a ten-rupee note to the

stall boy. The boy returned two rupees. Malti looked at the coins and tied them back into the knot of her sari.

More than half of Shruti's tea was still left. She remembered her eighteen hundred rupees a month. Last month, because of two days she had taken off, Vivan's mother had deducted one hundred rupees. Shruti had come home that day very angry. Her mother had said, "People run the accounting for work in their own way." For three days Shruti had thought that from the next month she would stop teaching. But she had not stopped. Even when her income fell, the food at home, her college fees, and her bus fare continued to come from her parents. At the time this had not felt to her like "support"; it had seemed simply the natural arrangement of home.

Outside, Malti returned to the mortar. All five women began lifting broken bricks in a line. The munshi stood on the other side, talking to the driver of a vehicle.

Shruti looked at her bag in the glass. Eight hundred and fifty rupees. She began adding figures in her mind. Tea cost eight rupees; how much Malti earned for half a day, she did not know. Three hundred? Four hundred? It seemed wrong to guess, because she had no facts behind the numbers. But this much was clear: her bag was an object larger in value than some portion of a day's cut wages. As soon as she thought this, she did not feel shame so much as a kind of discomfort—as though, in a familiar room, a new door had suddenly appeared.

She told herself, "I earn too." The sentence was true, but it no longer felt as complete as before. When she said my own earnings, she unknowingly left outside it all the expenses of the household. The rice for meals, the electricity bill, college fees, medicine, the monthly bus fare—these belonged to a world outside her eighteen hundred rupees. Whether Malti's earnings had any such outside world supporting them, Shruti did not know.

Two young men came into the stall and sat at the next table. One said, "Two teas, two samosas." Jagannath Sah called out the order. The lights inside came on. The last daylight outside was thinning. The glass suddenly grew more reflective. Now Shruti could see her own reflection clearly; the road beyond remained like a blurred layer within it.

She took the bag down and placed it in her lap. In the glass the blue strap ran diagonally across her chest. Just then Malti passed behind that frame carrying a basket full of mortar on her head. For a few moments Shruti's face, the blue bag, Malti's raised arms, and the round bottom of the basket joined in the same image. Shruti went still. The light inside made her clear and the

labour outside indistinct. She leaned a little forward and her own reflection deepened; she moved back and the road became slightly clearer.

It seemed to her that the glass hid no one; the light simply altered the measure of the scene according to where the viewer sat. The thought did not form itself into words in her mind. She merely pulled her chair a little farther back. Now she could see less of her own face and more of the road.

Malti emptied the basket and returned again. This time Shanti was with her. They walked slowly, talking. "Will the engineer really come tomorrow?" Shanti asked. Malti laughed. "If he comes, we'll ask. If he doesn't, we'll get it written again."

Shanti asked, "Will the house run on half a day's wage?" Malti replied, "There's rice today. Oil is short. We'll see tomorrow."

Only those words reached inside. No long note of complaint, no heroism. Then both women merged into the noise of the road. Shruti looked at her cup. The tea had gone cold.

The green stripe of the bus appeared in the distance. Shruti got up at once. She gave a twenty-rupee note at the counter. As Jagannath Sah returned the change, he asked, "The bus has come?" Shruti said, "Yes."

She put the bag over her shoulder. At the entrance she looked back once at the glass. From outside, it looked different now. With the lights on inside, the whole stall shone like a bright box. In that light her empty chair was clearly visible, and so was the cup of half-finished tea on the table. From the roadside, there was almost no reflection of her.

The bus stopped. Shruti climbed aboard and sat by the window. As it moved slowly ahead, the workers beside the drain were putting away their tools. Malti was shaking out her gamchha and placing it over her head. The sheet of paper was still in the munshi's hand.

In the bus window, Shruti's reflection appeared again. Ordinarily, as soon as a journey began, she looked at her hair, the bindi on her forehead, or the shoulder of her kurta. This time too the blue bag was clear in the reflection. But her gaze did not settle on it. Beyond the glass, the road was slipping backward.

By the time they reached the turn at the Tower, the light of the tea stall had grown small. For a moment Shruti remembered that frame again in which her bag and Malti's basket had appeared together. The two objects were not alike. The glass had only placed them in the same scene for a moment.

Shruti placed the bag in her lap. Its price was still eight hundred and fifty rupees. The only thing that had changed was that the sum no longer told her a story of her earnings alone.

STORY 286

Railway Announcement

...

On platform number three at Darbhanga Junction, the evening sunlight lay thin across the railway tracks like a blacksmith's tongs. Vinodnath Mahato sat on a wooden bench with his blue bag between his feet. Inside the bag were two bundles of bicycle spokes, brake cables, a small box of bells, and an account slip from a wholesale shop in Samastipur. He was past seventy-two, yet his small bicycle-repair shop in Sakri bazaar still opened each morning by his own hand. His son looked after the fields, his grandson studied, and Vinodnath felt that without the smell of old tyres and grease on his thumb, the day remained somehow incomplete.

The train that would take him home after buying supplies in Samastipur was running an hour late. On the platform, people kept getting up, looking toward the information board, then sitting down again. A tea-selling boy passed with a brass kettle in his hand, calling, "Tea, hot tea." Vinodnath bought a kulhad. The first sip was too hot. He set the cup beneath the bench and touched the knot of his bag once more. The account slip inside listed goods worth twelve thousand four hundred rupees. That was no small sum for him; if sales went badly for two months, his credit would rise.

Just then the loudspeaker above crackled. First came a few indistinct sounds, then a woman's clear voice: "Passengers are requested to pay attention..." Vinodnath usually half-heard such announcements and let the rest pass. But the next three words reached him with perfect clarity—"for Jamalpur..." His hand, bending toward the kulhad, stopped where it was.

Jamalpur.

More than fifty years had passed. The word had not grown old.

A thin young man sitting beside him rose at once. A khaki bag lay in his lap, and the corner of a measuring tape showed from its outer pocket. Nervously he asked, "Kaka, which platform will the Jamalpur train come on? I couldn't understand the announcement properly."

Vinodnath looked up at the board. The red digit 5 was glowing. "Platform five," he said. "Go over the footbridge. There is time."

The young man thanked him and slung the bag over his shoulder. After taking two steps, he turned back. "I'm going for a vocational training course. First time this far."

Vinodnath merely nodded. The young man disappeared into the crowd.

The announcement was repeated over the loudspeaker. “Jamalpur...” This time, as soon as he heard the word, it was not the present platform at Darbhanga that rose before Vinodnath’s eyes, but the earth-mixed surface of the old Sakri station. He had been nineteen then. Thick hair on his head, a light-brown shirt stitched by his father, and a small tin trunk in his hand. Inside the trunk were two pairs of clothes, a gamchha, sattu prepared by his mother, and the address of the training centre at the Jamalpur railway workshop.

The opportunity had not come by any miracle. Ramsevak Babu, his mathematics teacher in high school, had noticed his interest in taking machines apart and putting them together again. At the teacher’s urging, Vinodnath sat the recruitment examination. Five young men from the village went; only Vinodnath was selected. At home there were three bighas of land, two younger brothers, and his father’s bicycle-repair shop. Their income was limited, but his father had borrowed from two customers to arrange the journey and the expenses of the first month.

On the morning of his departure, his father had come with him as far as Sakri station. Not once on the way had he said, “Don’t go.” On the contrary, while placing an old screwdriver from the shop in the trunk, he had said, “Your own tool is the trust of your own hand.” His mother had tied sattu into a bundle. His younger brothers had run all the way to the station.

For years Vinodnath had remembered all this in another way. The family was poor, there was a burden on the household, his father was unwell—all of that was true. But there was one truth he had repeatedly kept away even from himself.

The train had arrived.

It had arrived on time.

There had been an announcement that day too. The sound had broken and crackled, but he had heard both words—“Samastipur” and “Jamalpur”—clearly. The ticket was in the breast pocket of his shirt. His father had come as far as the outside of the platform, not inside. Vinodnath had stood beside the trunk. People kept boarding. Porters lifted luggage and placed it inside. An old man seated his grandson by the window. A newly married woman climbed onto a seat surrounded by red trunks. The train whistled.

Vinodnath’s heart was beating so hard that he thought everyone would hear it the moment he boarded. All at once he was surrounded by the thought of the unknown room in the Jamalpur hostel, unfamiliar people, strict training, and spending month after month far from his village. The familiar

smell of his father's shop, his mother's courtyard, the edge of the pond, evening football—everything became extraordinarily precious in that instant.

He took one step toward the train, then stopped.

The second whistle sounded.

The train left.

His father was waiting outside. Vinodnath came out carrying the trunk. His father asked, "What happened?"

The first sentence he spoke was still perfectly clear in his memory: "The train was too crowded. I couldn't get on."

His father looked at his face for a few moments. Then he picked up the trunk. "Again tomorrow?"

Vinodnath said, "They said admission to the training was only today. What can happen now?"

That second sentence was larger than the first. After it, the story began making itself. Sometimes he said the train had left before time; sometimes that he had been delayed while changing the ticket. In later years, the poverty of the family became a convenient sheet spread over every reason. No one had much time to question him. Two days later his father put him to work full-time in the shop. Vinodnath learned the craft, married, had children, and the shop came into his name. His life did not remain empty.

But whenever some young man left to study or work elsewhere, Vinodnath would say, "I too had a chance to go to Jamalpur, but the condition of the house did not let me go." For years he repeated that story in many forms, and in the end he himself began to accept it as true.

The sound of a train entering platform three brought Vinodnath back to the present. It was not his train. A goods train was passing slowly. One iron wagon after another moved ahead. At every coupling came a knock-knock sound. He picked up the kulhad. The tea had gone cold.

On the footbridge toward platform five, he saw the same young man. He was moving quickly through the crowd but not running. His bag kept slipping from his shoulder, and he kept hitching it back up. The worry caused by changing platforms was clear on his face. For a few moments Vinodnath felt like calling out loudly, "Don't be afraid. Get on." But he remained silent. The young man's fear belonged to the young man; its answer too had to come from him.

With that thought, for the first time Vinodnath felt no anger toward his nineteen-year-old self. Whether that boy had been a coward was not a question with so simple an answer. He had only been afraid. And admitting fear, even

fifty years later, was no easier than keeping a lie standing in the name of poverty.

He remembered that his father had not spoken a single bitter word on the way home that day. He had merely carried the weight of the trunk himself for half the road. Perhaps his father had understood everything. Perhaps he had not. Vinodnath did not want to guess now.

The loudspeaker sounded again. This time it was the announcement for his train to Samastipur. He was told to go to platform two. Vinodnath lifted his bag. The goods worth twelve thousand four hundred rupees, the two bundles of spokes, and the box of bells did not suddenly become heavier; the weight was exactly what it had been. He walked toward the stairs of the footbridge. The first five steps came easily. On the sixth, his knee hurt a little. He held the railing, paused for a moment, then continued upward.

Reaching the middle of the bridge, he looked toward platform five. The Jamalpur train was still standing there. The young man was near a doorway, looking for his seat. Once inside by the window, he placed his bag above him, then looked out. The fear had not vanished from his face. Only now that fear was inside a moving train, not on the platform.

Vinodnath's train came into platform two. He sat by a window. Opposite him were three children from one family, a bundle lay on the luggage rack above, and a basket of vegetables stood in the corner. Before the train started, the ticket examiner came. Vinodnath took the ticket from his pocket and handed it over. The man glanced at it and returned it.

The ticket read "Darbhanga—Samastipur." Vinodnath folded it and put it back in his pocket.

The train began to move slowly. The platform slipped backward. An announcement for some other train began over the loudspeaker, but the words were no longer clear. Vinodnath kept looking out of the window. His old story came back to him again—poverty, the burden of the house, the train that had been missed. This time he made one small correction to the sentence, silently, for himself.

The train had not been missed. He had not boarded it. That was all. After that, the fields, the shop, marriage, children, debt, earnings—the next pages of life remained exactly as they had been. Only one sentence on the first page had been corrected.

Outside the window, evening was deepening. A train bound toward Sakri rushed past in the opposite direction. Its gust shook the window glass. Vinodnath pulled his blue bag closer to his feet and leaned back against the

seat. When the announcement for the next station began, this time he tried to listen to it in full.

STORY 287

A Strip of Sunlight

...

It was a morning in Agahan. East of Rahika market, beside the road to Bisfi, in Tanti Tola, a thin strip of sunlight entered the eastern room of Shivanandan Das's house through a small latticed window. On the mud-plastered floor, the strip first shone near the door, then slowly began to move toward the cot. Shivanandan watched it from his pillow. The high fever had subsided, but his body was still so weak that even going as far as the veranda twice left him breathing hard.

There were two looms in his house. He himself sat at one, his son Naval at the other. They had an order for thirty gamchas with red borders for a cloth merchant in Darbhanga. The yarn had arrived eighteen days earlier; the goods were due in seven days. Before the fever took hold of him, Shivanandan had completed fourteen. Naval was managing the remaining work by running one loom at a time.

The old clock that hung on the wall of the room had been taken to the loom room because Naval needed to watch the time while changing the warp. What remained to tell Shivanandan the hour were the sounds from the courtyard, the school bell, and this strip of sunlight.

On the first day he had paid no particular attention to it. When his wife, Devaki, came to give him medicine, he asked, "What time is it?"

"Half past ten."

Shivanandan saw that the sunlight was about two handspans away from the leg of the cot. He took the medicine and closed his eyes again. A little while later the khat-khat of the loom stopped. His ears became alert at once.

"Naval!" he called loudly.

From the veranda came the reply, "The warp has broken, Babu. I am joining it."

"How many times will it break? You have left the yarn loose."

Naval said nothing. Five or seven minutes later the khat-khat began again. Shivanandan's eyes went to the sunlight. The strip had already crossed half the distance to the cot leg. It seemed to him that time was running very fast even though the loom had stopped.

At noon the school bell sounded. Devaki came with rice and thin moong dal. Shivanandan picked up a small piece of charcoal lying on the floor beside the cot and drew a line along the edge of the sunlight.

Devaki asked, "What are you doing?"

"I will see tomorrow whether the sunlight is here at twelve."

Devaki did not laugh. She merely set down the plate and said, "Eat first. Settle accounts with the sun afterward."

Shivanandan had spent his whole life keeping accounts. A hand of cloth, a yard of yarn, how much thread went into one gamcha, how many pieces could be woven in a day, how much the merchant would deduct, how much the dyer would charge—everything added itself up at once in his mind. When Naval sat at the loom, Shivanandan could look at the hands of the clock and know how much weft had gone in within an hour. The habit irritated Naval, but he never objected.

On the second day, when the school bell rang, Shivanandan was already watching the sunlight. The strip was not on yesterday's charcoal line; it was about two finger-widths to the left.

He called Devaki. "Look. The bell rang at twelve, didn't it?"

Devaki listened toward the courtyard. "Yes. The second shift has been dismissed."

"Then why is the sunlight wrong?"

Devaki smiled. "The sunlight is not wrong. Your line is fixed."

Shivanandan did not like that answer. He drew a second line. On the third day the strip had shifted again. On the fourth as well. Now four short black lines lay on the floor, as though a child had made an unfinished staircase.

During those four days, along with the sunlight, Shivanandan began to notice the work of the household that had earlier escaped his eye. Around half past ten Devaki sorted paddy in the courtyard. At about eleven Naval's wife, Mira, filled the bobbins with yarn. Before twelve Naval would stop the loom to inspect the warp, join broken threads, and load weft into the wooden shuttle. In the afternoon Mira brought down the dried yarn from the roof. Amid all this, the sound of the loom stopped from time to time, but the work did not stop.

On the fifth day Mahesh Sah came. He collected cloth from village to village for the merchant in Darbhanga. Sitting on the veranda, he counted the finished gamchas with Naval.

"Twenty-three?" he asked.

"Twenty-three complete. Two are on the loom."

"I need thirty in seven days. The vehicle leaves on Tuesday."

Shivanandan, lying on the cot, was listening. From inside he called, "Naval, run the loom two extra hours at night."

Mahesh Sah came to the doorway of the room and said, "You rest, Kaka. As long as the goods reach on time."

"They will reach on time," Shivanandan said.

Mahesh left. Naval sat at the loom again. The khat-khat remained brisk until evening. Even after the night meal, the loom went on sounding. Shivanandan kept turning from side to side on the cot. What he had said seemed reasonable to him—if the order did not go on time, the next job might go to another household. But around ten at night, when he heard Naval cough, he fell silent for a moment.

The next morning, when the strip of sunlight appeared near the door, Shivanandan sat up. His body felt lighter than before. He looked at the five black lines on the floor. Each stood a little apart from the next. The differences were so small that one had to bend down to see them, yet taken across five days it was clear that the strip was changing its path.

That day, while working the loom, Naval slowly stopped. Shivanandan waited for the sound to begin again. It did not. Five minutes. Ten minutes. The strip of sunlight moved past the first line and continued toward the second.

At last Shivanandan himself came as far as the veranda. Naval was sitting beside the loom with the warp opened. Two red-border threads had become tangled at a point where forcing them would spoil the entire border.

"How long will it take?" Shivanandan asked.

Without raising his head, Naval said, "As long as it takes. If I cut it and join it again, the mark will show."

Earlier, an answer like that would have made Shivanandan impatient. This time he stood with a hand resting on the wood of the loom. Naval separated the threads one by one. Mira kept filling bobbins and setting them aside. After nearly half an hour the warp was fit to run again.

Shivanandan returned to his room. The strip of sunlight was now touching the leg of his cot. He thought: in this half hour the hands of the clock must have advanced thirty minutes, yet not an inch of cloth had grown on the loom. Even so, the warp had been saved, the border had been saved, two days' labour had been saved. This time had not been empty.

He looked again at his charcoal lines. Until yesterday he had thought the sunlight was telling him the time. Now he understood that the sunlight

showed only that time was passing; what was happening within that passage had to be reckoned separately.

By the evening of the sixth day, twenty-seven gamchas were ready. Mahesh Sah came again. Seeing three still unfinished, his brows tightened.

“Will they be ready by tomorrow afternoon?”

Naval said, “Two will be. For the third, there is a little shortage of dyed yarn. Mira will fill the bobbins tonight, then we will see.”

Mahesh looked toward Shivanandan. “Kaka, if he runs it through the night, everything will be ready by dawn.”

Shivanandan’s habit was to calculate at once. Four hours of night, so much time for each gamcha, a warp change in between—the numbers rose in his mind. Then he looked at Naval’s eyes. They were red from two nights of wakefulness. Near the loom treadle, the skin of his heel had been rubbed raw.

Shivanandan said, “We will give you two by tomorrow afternoon. The third in the evening. If the vehicle leaves, send it with the next consignment.”

Mahesh was silent for a few moments. “If one is short, the account will be different.”

“Make it different,” Shivanandan said. “If the cloth goes wrong, the account will be even worse.”

Mahesh gave no reply. He tied up the finished gamchas and left.

Naval looked at his father’s face but said nothing. Shivanandan too offered no sermon. He returned to the cot and lay down. The evening sunlight had already left the room. Only the black lines remained on the floor.

On the seventh day Shivanandan did not wait for the school bell. At noon, when Devaki came with his medicine, she saw him holding the piece of charcoal and drawing one long mark beside the old lines.

“Another mark for twelve o’clock today?”

“No,” Shivanandan said. “This is how far it has come in seven days.”

Setting down the plate, Devaki asked, “And what does that account tell you?”

Shivanandan placed the piece of charcoal on the window ledge. “Nothing. Just something to look at.”

In the afternoon Naval took the twenty-eighth gamcha off the loom. The twenty-ninth remained on it. The yarn for the thirtieth was not ready even by evening. Shivanandan knew the number, but he did not ask the time.

The next morning the thin strip of sunlight came down near the door again, a little apart from yesterday’s long mark. Half-sitting on the cot, Shivanandan watched it. The strip did not move faster when the loom sounded,

nor did it stop as on a feverish night. Its movement was so slow that one could not notice it in a single moment; but look away and look again, and it had changed its place.

From the veranda the khat-khat began. Naval was running only one loom today. Devaki was spreading paddy in the courtyard. Mira was filling bobbins. Outside on the road, the voices of children going to school rose and then faded into the distance.

Shivanandan looked at the lines of seven days on the floor. For the first time the question did not arise in his mind of how many pieces would be made today. He simply watched—the strip of sunlight crossed the first line, then the second, and moved on at its own pace.

STORY 288

A Fragment of Music

...

It was a cold evening in Magh. In Lakshmisagar, Darbhanga, a pavilion of coloured cloth had been raised in front of Sudhanshu Babu's house. From the gate inward, garlands of marigolds, bamboo poles, and little electric bulbs shone everywhere. There was still time before the bridegroom's procession arrived, but the band players had begun tuning their instruments at one side of the road. A long note rose first from a brass trumpet, then came two beats of the drum, and after that three short notes—high, low, then high.

Sixty-four-year-old Shashikant Chaudhary sat on a chair in a corner of the verandah with an earthen cup of tea in his hand. He did not raise his head at the first note. The second time those same three notes sounded, his fingers stopped on the rim of the cup. The third time, the young trumpeter repeated the exercise. In front of Shashikant, the present wedding pavilion disappeared; all at once, the courtyard of his younger sister's wedding thirty years earlier opened before him.

His nephew Alok came near and asked, "Kaka, has the tea gone cold? Shall I bring another?"

Shashikant looked at the cup. "No, this is fine."

Alok went back inside laughing. Shashikant's ears turned again toward the road. The trumpeter was now testing another tune, but those first three notes had lodged somewhere inside him.

At that time Shashikant had been thirty-one. After the Sakri sugar mill closed, he had taken up accounting work in a fertiliser-and-seed cooperative society in Madhubani. Within the family he was regarded as the educated one, the man who understood accounts and remained steady in his dealings. At his sister Neelam's wedding, the cash expenditure, the workers' payments, and the accounts of the band and the caterer were all his responsibility.

By afternoon on the wedding day, the house was full. The band had come from Madhubani—six musicians and two adolescent assistants. One of the boys was Naseem, sixteen or seventeen, thin-bodied, deep-eyed, with long fingers. He was the nephew of Salim, the principal trumpeter. His work was to carry the instruments, hand things out from the wire box, and, in the intervals when the players grew tired, sometimes take up the small trumpet and practise.

Before evening fell, Naseem had come to Shashikant. "Babuji, the master says it would help if half the wages could be paid now. We need to buy medicine for my mother at home."

A red-bound account register lay open in front of Shashikant. Without looking up, he had said, "The contract is for the whole band. Payment will be made after the bride's departure. The account will not be broken in between."

Naseem remained standing for a few moments. "I'm not asking for my own share. If you tell the master to give half as an advance—"

"I told you, after the departure." Shashikant's voice had hardened, because at that very moment the caterer had come asking about the shortage of ghee. Naseem had gone away quietly.

At ten that night, when the wedding procession arrived, the courtyard became so crowded that it was difficult to recognise even one's own people. Shashikant had slipped a brown envelope containing cash into a fold of a red shawl for safekeeping. The envelope held six thousand four hundred rupees, the combined payments for the band, the tonga, the fish seller, and two labourers. At that time, six thousand four hundred rupees was not merely a sum to him; it was the final accounting of the entire wedding.

Then, as happens on such occasions, five different tasks seemed to call for him at once: the list of items for the kanyadaan, the question of sending milk to the quarters where the groom's party was staying, the priest's dakshina, and fuel for the generator in the outer courtyard. About half an hour later, when Shashikant looked for the envelope, the desk drawer was empty.

At first he searched silently. Then beneath the red-bound register, behind a pillow, beside the box. The envelope was nowhere. His mouth went dry.

"Who all came here?" Mama Raghunath had asked.

Shashikant did not answer at once. He remembered that Naseem had come asking for an advance. He himself had said nothing about it, but no one knew how, within ten minutes, the word spread that a boy from the band had been asking for money.

Naseem was stopped in the outer courtyard. At that moment the band was waiting a little away from the wedding pavilion for the groom's party to enter. Salim lowered the trumpet from his mouth and asked, "What happened?"

"An envelope can't be found," Raghunath had said. "The boy was moving around here."

Naseem's face hardened at once. "I went to ask for money. I did not see any envelope."

Nothing more needed to be said. Two young men opened his bag and searched it. Inside were an old gamchha, a small bottle of oil, two rotis wrapped in cloth, and a medicine prescription. Nothing else. Then the pockets of his kurta were searched.

By the time Shashikant reached there, the search was still going on. The moment Naseem saw him, he said, “Babuji, you tell them. I only came to ask for an advance.”

At that single sentence something flashed within Shashikant. He remembered the red shawl. Before the crowd had thickened, he himself had taken the envelope out of the drawer and tucked it into a fold of the shawl because the drawer key kept sticking. The memory was so clear that he could even see the small knot of black thread on the edge of the shawl.

At that very moment he should have gone into the next room and opened the shawl.

But he remained standing there.

By then four or five people had already voiced suspicion about Naseem. If Shashikant immediately said that perhaps he himself had placed the envelope somewhere else, everyone’s eyes would turn toward him. The household’s “keeper of accounts” had forgotten where he had put the money—there would be laughter, reproach, and questions about his management in the middle of the wedding. He told himself: let me search for two minutes; when the envelope is found, I will say that the money was safe.

Those two minutes became ten.

Naseem’s bag was turned out a second time. Salim’s face burned with humiliation and anger. He said, “I have been playing at weddings for twenty years. Hold back the payment if you wish, but why are you searching the boy’s body?”

Raghunath replied, “Let the money be found. Then everything will be clear.”

Meanwhile the groom’s party was reaching the gate. The bandmaster signalled to Salim; if the music stayed silent, the spectacle would only grow. Salim looked at Naseem, then clenched his teeth and raised the trumpet. The main tune could not begin at once. Naseem, one button of whose kurta had broken during the search, picked up the small trumpet and began to tune it. Three notes—high, low, then high. At that signal Salim caught the main melody.

Listening to those three notes, Shashikant went inside. He opened the fold of the red shawl. The brown envelope was there. Not a single rupee was missing.

He came out and said, "It has been found. It had slipped in among the things." Raghunath asked, "Where?" Shashikant had replied, "It was inside. I couldn't see it in the crowd."

That was all. He did not say that he himself had put the envelope there. Nor did he say that Naseem was innocent, because the very basis of the suspicion had been his own forgetting. No question of apology arose. The groom's procession passed through the gate. The band began to play loudly. Naseem remained with the band throughout the night, because the full wages would only be paid after the bride's departure.

The next morning, at the time of payment, Shashikant counted the money and handed it to Salim. Naseem was not there. Salim had said, "He is by the groom's quarters, gathering the equipment."

Shashikant did not call him. It had seemed to him then that the money had been found, the full wages had been paid, and the matter was over.

For years he did not even remember the incident in this form. Looking through the wedding photographs, he remembered his sister, his parents, the old courtyard, the paag, the garland of makhana—everything. Not Naseem. If that night ever did rise in memory, Shashikant would tell himself, "I never accused anyone. People suspected him on their own. As soon as the envelope was found, I stopped the matter."

Today, hearing those same three notes on the road in Lakshmisagar, the blank space inside that sentence filled itself in. Before "as soon as the envelope was found," there had been ten minutes. In those ten minutes he had understood the truth, yet had not spoken it. He had not beaten anyone, had not abused anyone; he had only remained silent in order to save himself from the small embarrassment of damaged prestige. But for Naseem, that silence had become suspicion laid upon his pockets, his bag, and his body.

On the road, the young musician in the present band played the three notes again. This time Shashikant watched his hands—thin fingers, slightly stiff from the cold. He could not remember whether Naseem's fingers had been like that. He remembered only the broken button.

From inside came the sounds of preparations for a wedding ritual. The women were laughing. Alok came out again. "Kaka, the groom's procession will be here in five minutes. Will you come inside?"

Shashikant rose. His knees were a little stiff. He set the earthen cup with the remaining tea at the edge of the verandah. "I'm coming."

At the gate he turned once more and looked toward the road. The band players had readied their instruments. One assistant was arranging all the empty cases in a row. No one was paying attention to him. For a moment

Shashikant wondered: where might Naseem be now? Would he remember that night or not? Would Salim still be alive? There were no answers. The distance of thirty years had made the questions heavier than any answer.

Alok said, “Kaka?”

Shashikant replied, “Yes.”

He moved inside. Just then, behind him, the trumpet lifted those three notes again—high, low, high. This time they did not sound to him like the tune of an old wedding. They sounded only like the measure of ten minutes: so small that on a clock they were almost nothing, and so long that a boy’s broken button had remained stitched into memory exactly as it was even thirty years later.

STORY 289

The Closed Shop

...

At the warehouse of a wholesale distributor in Madhubani, Aniruddh Karn was opening boxes of brightly coloured toys. A company in Patna had assigned him to assess demand for its goods in the markets of North Bihar. Wooden spinning tops no longer appeared on his list; in their place were shiny plastic spinners, balls that made sounds when squeezed, little cars, whistles, and multicoloured wheels. Aniruddh matched the number of boxes, entered the figures in the register, and told the distributor, "I'll finalise the next consignment by evening."

In the middle of the meeting he found himself with forty-five minutes free. On the old market road that ran from the warehouse toward the station stood the shop he had loved most in childhood—Lalbabu's toy shop. In the twenty-seven years since, he had come to the town many times, but every visit had been swallowed by trains, meetings, and accounts. This time the warehouse was close to the market. He set out on foot.

In his memory Lalbabu's shop was very small, but the world inside it was vast. Wooden spinning tops, glass marbles, rubber balls, coloured kites, bamboo whistles, paper pinwheels, cloth pouches for keeping game pieces—each object was a separate festival to the child Aniruddh. There was a green strip beneath the awning. Inside, a small brass bell hung above the wooden cupboard and rang whenever anyone entered. While showing the goods, Lalbabu would say, "Take it in your hand and look, but don't drop it."

Aniruddh reached the turn. In place of the shop, a grey iron shutter was closed. There was no signboard. Only two old nails and the faint imprint of letters remained. He looked at his watch. It was midday. His first thought was that Lalbabu must have gone to eat.

He asked the young man who ran the photocopy centre next door, "What time does this toy shop open?" The young man looked at the shutter. "It has been closed for a long time." "How long?" "Seven or eight years, perhaps. Even when I took over this centre, it hardly opened regularly."

Aniruddh remained silent for a few moments. Seven or eight years did not feel like a number to him; it felt like a kind of omission. The shop had been closed all those years, and yet in his memory it had kept opening every day.

He went up to the shutter. In one place, beneath the dust, a layer of blue paint had peeled away. Under the blue, a green line showed through. In Aniruddh's memory the shutter itself had always been green. When, then, had the blue been painted over it? He could not remember.

Without stopping his work, the young man said, "Lalbabu used to sit there first. Later his nephew looked after it for some time. The stock kept getting smaller. The rent went up. Then the shutter came down." That was all. The young man had neither the time to tell the history of Lalbabu nor any reason to understand what the memory meant to Aniruddh. A woman arrived to have some copies made, and the young man bent over her papers.

Aniruddh remained standing before the shutter. Three scenes began to rise before his eyes at once. First—the seven-year-old Aniruddh buying a wooden spinning top with a coin his father had given him. Second—choosing glass marbles with his friends in Class Five. Third—buying kite string after his Class Ten examination. In Aniruddh's memory, Lalbabu was almost the same age in all three scenes, the shutter the same green, the cupboard equally full.

But memory had not been so straightforward.

All at once he remembered an evening from Class Nine. A large new toy shop had opened near the station. His friend Subodh had said, "Balls are two rupees cheaper there." The two of them had gone. They had spent a long time looking at bright plastic whistles and shiny balls. They had bought their things there. On the way back they had passed Lalbabu's shop. Lalbabu had raised a hand from inside. Aniruddh too had waved, but had not gone in. Why did that scene never remain inside his memory of the "beloved shop"? By then Aniruddh was no longer a child but an adolescent who had turned toward lower prices and more choice. His share in the history of Lalbabu's dwindling customers had been negligible, but it had not been zero.

Another incident came back to him. Once the iron nail in his favourite spinning top had bent. Aniruddh had reached the shop almost in tears. Lalbabu had not merely been a seller of spinning tops; he had pulled out the nail, straightened it with a small hammer, then rubbed the wooden point a little until the balance was right. Five minutes later the top was spinning again. Aniruddh had held out a coin, but Lalbabu had refused it. "Before buying a new one, first see whether the old one can be made to run," he had said.

Now, almost no one repaired the goods Aniruddh sold. If a plastic spinner went wrong, the buyer returned to the retailer, the retailer reported the number to the wholesale distributor, and the company adjusted the loss in the next consignment. Instead of being opened and made to work again, the object became a figure in an account. This system was Aniruddh's livelihood, and he

did not consider it wrong. But remembering Lalbabu's shop, he understood for the first time that although the words "toy shop" had remained the same across both periods, the trade inside them had become entirely different. Indeed, his own daily work now consisted of expanding the distribution of inexpensive wholesale goods. Objects like the plastic top-shaped spinner he had counted in the warehouse a little while earlier must also, little by little, have displaced the wooden toys of such small shops.

No great wave of guilt rose in Aniruddh. A market does not change because of one person. Lalbabu's shop had not existed merely to preserve Aniruddh's childhood memories; it had rent to pay, stock to buy, earnings to make. But within this ordinary arithmetic he understood something new: the permanence of the shop in his memory had not been created by the strength of its business, but by his own absence. A change he had not witnessed had seemed almost not to have happened at all.

A small flake of blue paint came loose from the shutter and fell. The green beneath showed more clearly. Aniruddh tried to remember whether the shop had already been painted blue when he was in Class Ten. For a few moments he strained to recall. Then he realised that the green awning, the blue shutter, the wooden cupboard, Lalbabu's thick hair, and the white at his temples in later years had all merged into a single picture. The shop preserved inside him had perhaps never existed in exactly that form on any one actual day.

Two boys stopped their bicycles beside the shutter. One leaned his bag against it while the other bent to tie his shoelace. For them, the closed shutter was only a patch of shade. A few moments later they rode away. Aniruddh did not find the sight sad. He understood only this much: the same place acquires different meanings for people of different ages at different times.

He remembered the time of the meeting and turned back toward the warehouse.

Wholesale distributor Rakesh Sah was sitting with the register open. The company's sample goods were spread over the table. Rakesh's son was spinning a plastic toy on the floor. It whirled rapidly, giving off red and yellow light, then after a few moments wobbled and fell.

The boy picked it up and spun it again. This time a small wheel came off and rolled to one side. The child picked it up and held it out to his father. Without concern, Rakesh said, "It's only a sample piece. We'll replace it." He set the wheel at the corner of the table and opened another sample. Aniruddh said nothing. His eyes rested for a moment on that small wheel, then returned to the register. Rakesh said, "Aniruddhji, this item should sell well in the smaller markets. The price is low. Shall I put down one carton?"

Aniruddh took the sample in his hand. It was very light. He remembered the weight of the wooden spinning top from his childhood—the feel of winding the string tight around it, the rasping sound that rose when it struck the earth. The comparison came into his mind, but he said nothing about it. "Not one carton," he said, looking at the register. "Send half a carton first. We'll see the sales and increase the next consignment accordingly." Rakesh wrote down the figure. "All right." The meeting moved on. They discussed the price of balls, the quantity of little cars, transport charges, and the retailer's margin. Aniruddh continued his work just as before. But when he reached the line in the register marked "Old Market," his pen paused for a moment. The new distribution point was a shop that had opened behind the photocopy centre. Lalbabu's name was not on the list.

Rakesh asked, "What happened?" "Nothing," Aniruddh said, and wrote down the name of the new shop.

In the evening, on the way to the station, the rickshaw driver asked, "Where should I turn?" The old landmark rose to Aniruddh's tongue—near Lalbabu's toy shop. But the words did not come out. He said, "Turn left at the bend just beyond the photocopy centre." The rickshaw reached the turn. Aniruddh looked once at the closed shutter. Amid the grey paint, a thin green line remained visible even after the sunlight had faded. Above the green was blue, and above the blue, grey. The rickshaw moved on. The shop did not disappear from Aniruddh's mind; for the first time, he saw its different years in their different colours.

STORY 290

The Eaves

...

At Benta Chowk in Laheriasarai, the rain came down so hard that the road which, ten minutes earlier, had been raising dust suddenly turned into a gleaming black strip. Aniruddha pulled his two-wheeler to the side of the road and ran beneath the eaves of a closed clothing shop. Under his arm was a blue tube in which a building plan had been rolled. The first thing he did was check the tube's cap; the second was brush the sleeve of his white kurta.

An unfamiliar man was already standing beneath the eaves. White stains of dried cement marked the shoulder of his grey shirt, his slippers were caked with mud, and the skin on two fingers of his right hand had turned rough. Beside him lay an old cloth bag and a small measuring tape.

Aniruddha went and stood at the other end of the eaves. He did not set the tube against the wall; he kept it in his hand. The stranger looked once at the tube, then at Aniruddha's face, and remained silent.

The rain thickened. The lettering across the road blurred. Water poured steadily from the front edge of the eaves, but at the left corner a thin stream began to curl back toward the wall. Within moments the limewash there darkened with damp.

Looking up, the stranger said, "There is no groove underneath."

Aniruddha looked up by reflex. "What groove?"

"Under the edge of the eaves. So the water falls forward instead of turning back toward the wall."

The point seemed ordinary to Aniruddha. "What difference can that little thing make?"

With the edge of his palm, the man indicated the thickness of the eaves. "Rain does not come for only one day. Two years from now this stream will have made a mark all the way inside."

Aniruddha smiled inwardly. For the past six months he had been drawing plans at a construction consultancy office. Lines, measurements, sections, and heights were his daily work. Whenever something seemed wrong at a construction site, his first sentence was usually the same: "Where does a mason ever read the plan properly?" He had said exactly that the previous week after seeing cracked plaster on the verandah of a new house.

He looked at the stranger's stained shirt and decided silently that he too must be a labourer returning from some construction site.

The rain kept forcing the two men closer beneath the eaves. When the wind began driving water in from the left, Aniruddha had to move away from his end. Now only a hand's breadth separated them.

The man lifted his bag and set it against the wall, making room for Aniruddha's blue tube. "Put it here. Less water will reach it."

Aniruddha kept the tube in his hand. "If it gets wet, there will be damage."

"Paper?"

"A plan."

"For construction?"

Aniruddha gave a short answer. "Yes."

The man looked up at the eaves again. "Then you can tell whether the plan for these eaves showed a groove underneath or not."

Aniruddha's tone hardened slightly. "I do not draw the plan for every eave."

The man did not laugh. "That is true. I only asked."

For a while both were silent. A rickshaw cut through the water on the road. The splash reached as far as the eaves. The stranger drew his mud-covered slippers slightly back so that the spray would not strike Aniruddha's kurta. Aniruddha noticed this, but said nothing.

After a few moments he himself asked, "Do you work in construction?"

"I am a mason."

"How many years have you been doing this work?"

"Twenty-two years now."

Aniruddha kept running a finger around the round cap of the tube. "Then you must be able to read all the plans?"

The mason looked at him. "I read what I need to read. What I do not understand, I ask. But the people who can answer are not always at the site."

"All the measurements are on the plan."

"They are," he agreed. "But in the middle of the work the owner says, 'Make it two fingers less here; the room will become larger.' Someone else says, 'Pour it by this evening.' A third says, 'Save cement.' Then the rain comes and everyone says the mason ruined it."

Aniruddha's hand stopped on the tube.

The man did not pursue the matter. He kept looking at the edge of the eaves. Water was now drawing a clear line down the wall from the ungrooved underside he had pointed out.

Aniruddha asked, "Masons do make mistakes, don't they?"

"Why wouldn't they?" the man replied easily. "If it happens by my hand, it is my mistake. But if the decision was not mine and the blame is still put on me, that is another matter."

Aniruddha remembered the verandah from the previous week. The plaster had cracked. He had gone there to inspect it. The moment the owner saw him, he had said, "Look how careless these labourers are." Without even touching the wall, Aniruddha had nodded in agreement. Later, after reaching the office, he had remembered that it was the owner himself who had pressed for the plastering to be finished quickly; the instruction to sprinkle it with water for two days had also been brushed aside. But amid the rush of work Aniruddha had pushed that memory away.

Now, standing beneath the eaves, the incident came back sharply.

"Your name?" Aniruddha asked.

"Shivcharan."

"I am Aniruddha."

Shivcharan nodded. That was the whole introduction.

The rain grew lighter, though it did not stop. Drops fell from the edge of the eaves in a steady rhythm. Shivcharan opened his bag and took out a small piece of wood. He held it against the wall beneath the eaves, then said to Aniruddha, "See, the outward slope is too little. The water collects along the edge."

Aniruddha took the wooden piece in his hand. It was an ordinary flat piece, with a tiny water tube sealed in the middle. Shivcharan used it for checking level.

"This is very simple," Aniruddha said.

"A great deal can be understood from simple things."

There was no weight of instruction in the sentence. Shivcharan put the wood back into his bag.

For the first time Aniruddha looked carefully at his hands: the old graininess of cement on the fingers, fine cuts beside the nails, thickened skin in the middle of the palm. He thought of his own hands. His wrist ached after drawing lines all day, but his palms were smooth. The two kinds of labour were different; they were not opposed to one another.

The wind rose again. Shivcharan hoisted the bag onto his shoulder. "I have to catch a bus farther ahead. The rain is lighter now."

"You'll go now?"

"If I am late, I will miss the last bus to the village."

He stepped out from beneath the eaves. Within two steps his shirt was wet again. For a moment Aniruddha wanted to call out and tell him to wait a little longer, but Shivcharan crossed the road and disappeared into the crowd.

Aniruddha was left alone beneath the eaves. Above him the water was still curling back toward the wall.

He felt an urge to open the blue tube. Carefully he removed the cap and took out the plan inside. It was the plan of the new house where construction was to begin the next day. The front verandah and the section through its eaves were drawn on the sheet.

Keeping away from the rain, he spread out the page. The measurement of the outer edge of the eaves was written there, but there was no clear indication of a drip groove underneath. At the office it was assumed that a mason would know such a thing anyway.

A slight discomfort stirred inside Aniruddha. When something was not written on a plan, how many times had he himself said at a construction site, “A mason ought to know this.”

He took out a pencil. Under the section drawing of the eaves he added a small groove and wrote beside it: “Leave a drip groove beneath the outer edge; keep the slope outward.”

After writing it, he looked at the page for a while. The addition to the drawing was very small. It did not change the appearance of the building, nor did it meaningfully change the cost. Only one thin indication had been added.

When the rain stopped, Aniruddha went back to his two-wheeler. Water was flowing along the road. As he rode toward the office, he remembered the cracked plaster from the previous week again. Earlier, he had seen only shoddy work in that scene. Now he saw the orders, the haste, the saving, the labour, and the mistake together.

The next morning at the office, Mahendra Babu, the senior draughtsman, looked at the new sheet and asked, “Why have you shown this groove separately? Masons know these things.”

Aniruddha paused for a moment before answering.

Until yesterday, he too would have said only this: they ought to know.

Today he merely said, “If something is necessary, it is better for it to be on the paper.”

Mahendra Babu said nothing. With a red pencil he began checking a measurement in another corner of the sheet.

Aniruddha sat down at his desk. Before his eyes came the eaves at Benta Chowk—on one side a dry plan, on the other a cement-stained shirt, and

between them the rainwater. It seemed to him that yesterday's rain had not washed away his assumptions. It had only made a thin crack in them, through which the water of another person's experience could enter.

STORY 291

The Bicycle

...

Before leaving for the Monday haat at Benipatti, Deepa opened her small account book once again. On the first page she had written down the expenses for her father's new shop—one month's rent in advance, two wooden planks, a chest for keeping tools, a tin nameboard, wire for the light, and a new screwdriver for opening and putting together old sewing machines. Altogether the amount was running higher than expected.

At the very bottom Deepa had written: "Sale of old bicycle—estimated 900."

That very bicycle was upside down in the courtyard as Basudev Sah spun the rear wheel. The frame was black, though in many places the paint had worn away and the iron showed through. Two repairs on the rear carrier were clearly visible. One pedal looked new; the edge of the other had been worn smooth and round.

For twenty-five years Basudev had travelled from village to village repairing sewing machines. At first he had gone on foot with his tools in a cloth bag. Later he bought this bicycle. After that, twelve or fifteen villages around them became the map of his livelihood—somewhere a foot pedal had jammed, somewhere the thread-tension wheel had gone wrong, somewhere the teeth of an old machine had worn down. He would tie his toolbox to the carrier, leave in the morning, and return in the evening.

Now a narrow shop had become available for rent near the haat. People would bring their machines there, and he would no longer need to carry heavy tools every day. That was why the question of selling the bicycle had arisen.

When the idea of the shop first came up, Deepa had said the bicycle should be kept. It would still be useful for going from home to the haat. Basudev had replied, "Why hold on to something only because it is old when it is no longer useful?" Deepa had not expected that answer. She had assumed her father must be deeply attached to the bicycle. But perhaps Basudev's attachment was less to the object than to its use. As long as it had been a means of earning his living, he had attended to every sound it made; now that the shop was taking over that work, letting it go was not difficult.

"We'll get nine hundred for it at least," Deepa said.

Basudev stopped the wheel and looked at her. "You have already made the account?"

"How can we open a shop without accounts?"

"A bicycle is not a figure on paper."

"For the seller, in the end it becomes a figure."

Basudev smiled and put two drops of oil on the chain. "Come to the haat. We'll see whether your figure turns out to be right."

Deepa had returned home two weeks earlier after completing six months of accounting training in Darbhanga. Household expenses now looked different to her than before. Which thing was capital, which was a daily expense, how many years an item took to lose its value—after studying all this, she had begun making the complete account for her father's new shop herself. Basudev was both proud of this and amused by it.

At the haat, Ramvilas had a thatch-roofed shop that bought old bicycles. Eight or ten bicycles stood outside; inside, tyres, rims, chains, bells, and pedals hung separately. Ramvilas looked over the bicycle once from all four sides.

"The frame is old," he said. "But it is straight."

Deepa opened her account book.

Ramvilas lifted the rear wheel and spun it. "This rim is newer than the frame."

"Yes," Basudev said.

"How many years?"

Basudev scratched his head. "After the year of Deepa's higher-secondary examination."

Deepa's pen stopped on the paper.

Ramvilas said, "If it is that old, how is it new?"

"I said newer than the frame," Basudev laughed.

Deepa counted the years in her mind. In that examination year there had been repeated discussions at home about the examination fee, two guidebooks bought in Darbhanga, and bus fare for the days of the examination. She remembered that at the same time her father had ridden the bicycle slowly for two weeks. The rear wheel had leaned to one side. Deepa had thought he must have had it repaired. Now she understood that perhaps he had been postponing the repair.

Ramvilas pressed the front tyre. "This one is even older."

Basudev said, "I was going to replace it, but that was when Vinod got admission to the Industrial Training Institute."

Vinod was Deepa's younger brother. The whole family had been happy on the day of his admission. That Father had not replaced the tyre was recorded in none of the family's memories.

Deepa did not close the account book, but she stopped writing.

Ramvilas turned the pedal. "The right pedal is new."

"Three years."

"The left?"

"Let it stay as long as it runs."

"It would have been better if you had replaced both together."

Basudev replied easily, "That month the tin on the roof of the house had to be replaced. One pedal was enough to keep things going."

For Ramvilas this was only an answer. He went on turning the pedal. But in Deepa's account book the expenses that sat in separate boxes—education, household, tools, travel—suddenly began joining one another. One pedal had not been replaced, and so a sheet of tin had gone onto the roof; the tyre had been postponed, and so Vinod's admission had happened; the rim had been replaced two weeks late, and so her examination had been managed without borrowing.

There was no common heading for all this on paper.

Ramvilas examined the teeth of the chain. "The chain has been used a long time. If you had changed it on time, the rear sprocket would have worn less."

Basudev said, "It is good when everything can be replaced on time. Money should also be there on time."

Deepa looked up at that sentence. Her father was not looking at her. Ramvilas too heard the answer as an ordinary remark of the haat and moved on to inspect the next part. Deepa remembered an old sentence of her mother's: "This month the bicycle is asking for money again." Her mother had said it not as a complaint but while explaining the household accounts. At the time Deepa had thought the bicycle was a burden on the family. Today, for the first time, she saw the account in reverse—the expenses of the family had come first, and the bicycle had kept waiting for its own turn.

Ramvilas slapped the carrier. "This has been welded twice?"

"Three times," Basudev said.

"Then the price comes down."

Deepa spoke at once. "The joints are strong. It has carried the toolbox all these years."

Ramvilas looked at her and smiled. "I will call it strong when I buy it, and whoever takes it from me will call it old and cut the price. That is how the haat works."

He offered seven hundred and fifty.

Deepa remembered her estimate of nine hundred. Basudev asked for eight hundred and fifty. The bargaining began. What surprised Deepa was that Basudev did not bargain very hard. He only kept stressing that the bicycle was in working condition. "Look at the brakes, listen to the bell, the frame is not bent."

Ramvilas finally stopped at eight hundred and twenty.

Deepa leaned close to her father and said quietly, "Let's go somewhere else. We may get nine hundred."

Basudev asked, "For how much money will we spend half a day going around?"

"Eighty rupees is money too."

"Yes, but the planks for the shop have to be brought today."

Deepa fell silent. They had taught the value of time in her accounting training too. But at home, the value of time was counted differently—when a bus had to be caught, when a machine had been promised for delivery, when the rain might come, when the landlord would ask for the advance.

Ramvilas agreed to eight hundred and forty. Basudev accepted.

Before paying, Ramvilas wrote the details on a small piece of paper. "Old bicycle—one. Sale price—840."

Deepa kept looking at that line without meaning to. She remembered the "estimated 900" in her account book. The difference was only sixty rupees. From the point of view of accounting, her estimate had been almost right.

And yet her account suddenly seemed incomplete.

Ramvilas called a boy to take the bicycle inside. The moment the boy caught hold of it, Basudev said, "Wait."

Deepa thought perhaps he would remove the bell or the pump.

Basudev only untied the old jute cord fastened to the carrier. Black oil stains marked it here and there. He folded the cord and put it into his bag.

"Why that?" Deepa asked.

"The toolbox will have to be tied up in the new shop too."

That was all. He neither ran a hand over the bicycle nor looked back at it. Ramvilas's boy took it inside.

Basudev handed the eight hundred and forty rupees to Deepa and said, "Add it to the account."

Deepa counted the money. She opened the account book. Beside "Sale of old bicycle" she struck out 900 and wrote 840. The account was complete.

Still, she could not close the page.

"What now?" Basudev asked.

Deepa opened the next page, where the items to be bought for the shop were listed: wooden planks, chest, wire, light, nameboard, small tools. There was no chair on the list. Deepa had deliberately not written one. She had thought they should save money in the first month; Father could sit on a plank while examining a customer's machine, or stand and work if necessary.

She picked up the pen and wrote at the very top: "Sturdy chair with arms—
1."

Basudev looked at the page and said, "That isn't necessary yet. We'll take the old mora from home."

"No," Deepa said. "We will buy this in the first month itself."

"The expense will go up."

"I have put it in the account."

Basudev looked at her face, then did not argue.

The two of them walked through the haat toward the carpenter who would make the planks. Earlier, when Basudev walked beside the bicycle, his right hand rested on the handlebar. Now the hand was empty. For some distance he walked with his right palm unconsciously held a little forward, then adjusted the bag on his shoulder.

Deepa matched her steps to his walking pace. The account book was in her bag. Inside it, the value of the bicycle was written as eight hundred and forty rupees—a clean, correct, verifiable figure.

For all the things that remained outside the page, there was no column.

STORY 292

A Glass of Water

...

Afternoon light was falling through a gap in the heavy curtains of the auditorium in Madhubani Town Hall. On the pale grey backdrop behind the stage, blue letters read: "Mithila Small Enterprise Conference: Systems, Labour and Trust." Nearly two hundred chairs stood in ordered rows. Entrepreneurs, representatives of cooperatives, and trainees occupied the first three rows; farther back, latecomers were quietly finding places to sit.

The keynote speaker, Aniruddha Chaudhary, stood at the left of the stage gathering his papers. For the past ten years he had advised small factories, milk-collection centres, and handicraft groups on improving the organisation of work. His particular strength was putting complicated things into clear sentences. He rarely felt nervous before a speech. The words, pauses, and examples would already be arranged in order in his mind.

Half an hour before the programme began, Aniruddha had told the auditorium manager, Meghnath Sah, three things: no voices should come from behind the stage, the wheeled water trolley should not move during the speech, and the clatter of metal utensils should not enter the recording. Meghnath had nodded at once.

"Don't worry," he had said. "There will be complete silence during the speech."

Aniruddha had been pleased. He wanted clean sound. His assistant had told him that morning that the conference speech would later be used as training material.

Once on stage, he spoke for the first five minutes without looking at his papers. "It is not enough for a system to look polished from the outside. The real question is how the work flows within it. Which hands bear how much weight, which steps are unnecessary, and which small obstruction turns into major fatigue over the course of a day—these are things we must learn to see."

The auditorium was quiet. Aniruddha's voice was steady. In his next example, he described a milk-collection centre where removing a duplicate entry of the same figure had saved an employee's time. People were taking notes. On a table at the right corner of the stage, his glass had become empty. He glanced at it once and continued speaking.

A few moments later an attendant emerged beside the curtain. Aniruddha did not know his name. He looked somewhere between fifty-five and sixty: grey kurta, dark trousers, a thin line of sweat behind his ear. In his left hand he carried a full glass of water; his right hand was empty. He came to the edge of the stage and held the glass out.

Just as the rim reached Aniruddha's fingers, it made a faint sound. The attendant's hand was trembling. The water moved in circles inside the glass, and one drop spilled over and fell on his finger.

Aniruddha took the glass.

The attendant said softly, "Forgive me."

"It's all right," Aniruddha replied easily.

The attendant stepped back at once.

Aniruddha turned again to the audience. The next sentence was written clearly on his paper: "An efficient system is created where unnecessary human labour is reduced."

He could have read the sentence. But when his eyes stopped on the words "unnecessary human labour," he saw the attendant's trembling hand again.

He took a sip of water. When he set the glass down on the table, it made a soft tick.

"I want to say one more thing," he began, but the example he had meant to give suddenly seemed contrived. He fell silent for two seconds. In the hush of the auditorium, the sound of a chair being moved somewhere at the back was distinctly audible. Aniruddha opened the next page of his notes and returned to the planned sequence.

The speech continued, but another calculation had begun inside him. Why had the attendant's hand trembled? Age? Heat? Fatigue? He did not know the answer. Even so, that trembling hand kept entering between the sentences he had prepared.

Twenty minutes later, the question-and-answer session began. The head of a Madhubani painting group asked how the burden of work could be measured in a small organisation. Aniruddha normally answered such a question in five points. Today he stopped after three. The fourth point on his paper was: "Do not first interfere with a process that is running without complaint." He did not read it. All at once he understood that the absence of complaint and the absence of burden were not the same thing.

When the programme ended, people came up to the stage to meet him. One person handed him a card; another asked for a date for consultation with

his organisation. Aniruddha spoke briefly with each of them. Again and again his eyes went toward the curtain. The attendant did not appear.

When the crowd had thinned, Aniruddha asked Meghnath Sah, "Who was the elderly gentleman serving water?"

Meghnath thought for a moment. "Raghunath Paswan. He has worked at the Town Hall for many years. Today he was stationed at the back."

"His hand was trembling."

"Yes. He must be more tired than usual today," Meghnath said casually. "He has been going up and down since morning."

"Why up and down?"

Meghnath's answer was entirely ordinary. "The water trolley comes through the back corridor. But today the camera and cables were in that passage. And you had said you didn't want the sound of the wheels during the speech. So the trolley was left downstairs. The glasses had to be carried up two at a time by hand."

Aniruddha said nothing. He remembered his own words from the morning exactly: "I don't want any clatter at all; the recording must be clean." At the time the instruction had seemed like a small technical matter. He had thought only that the sound would disappear. He had not thought about who would do the work of removing that sound, which route would change, or how many times someone would climb the stairs.

"How many steps are there?" Aniruddha asked.

"Thirty-six," Meghnath said. "If you count from the store below, thirty-six."

Aniruddha looked involuntarily at his glass. Half the water remained. His fingerprints marked the outside of the glass. The drop that had spilled from Raghunath's hand had already dried.

"Where is Raghunathji?"

"At the back, collecting the utensils."

Aniruddha went behind the curtain. Behind the bright face of the stage was a narrow corridor. Cables, empty cases, folded cloth, and two large water containers lay there. Against the wall stood the wheeled trolley, with four empty jugs and the drinking glasses placed upside down on top. When the trolley moved, one wheel made a faint squeaking sound.

Raghunath was wiping two glasses with a cloth. On seeing Aniruddha, he began to rise.

"Please stay seated," Aniruddha said.

Raghunath sat back down but stopped his hands.

Aniruddha asked, “Did you have to climb the stairs many times today?”

Raghunath smiled. “When there is a gathering, it is like this. Today the trolley didn’t go upstairs, so it took more trips.”

“Does your hand tremble already?”

“A little. The right hand is fine. There is an old strain in the left. If I carry weight too many times, it begins to tremble.”

Raghunath did not say this as a complaint. He began wiping the glass again. The thought turned over inside Aniruddha: what he had been calling “human burden” on the stage was not a theory for Raghunath; it was simply the repeated climb of thirty-six steps.

Aniruddha could have apologised at that moment. But even saying “This happened because of me” seemed to him another way of placing himself at the centre. He remained silent. Bending beside the trolley, he turned its wheel. The squeak came again.

“The sound isn’t very loud,” he said.

Raghunath smiled. “When the hall is quiet, you can hear it.”

That brief answer lodged inside Aniruddha. When there is quiet, you can hear it. On stage he had treated silence as a sign of quality; behind the stage, the cost of that same silence was being counted in stairs.

That evening at the guest house, Aniruddha opened the papers of his speech. He had a habit of making corrections in red ink. On the first page was written: “See which hands bear how much weight.” He did not cross out the line. Beside it, in small letters, he wrote only: “And who designed the system by which that burden is seen?”

The next day he had another session. Before it began, his assistant asked, “Should I tell them to keep the sound completely clean like yesterday?”

Aniruddha thought for a moment. From behind the auditorium came the faint squeak of the trolley’s wheel.

“No,” he said. “Let the natural sounds of the work continue.”

During the session the wheeled water trolley passed once at the back. The glasses clinked softly. Two or four people looked that way, then turned back toward him. Aniruddha did not stop his sentence.

The water in the glass on the table was still. But when he lifted it, he remembered the trembling hand from the day before. This time he imagined not the water in the glass, but the route by which it had reached him.

His speech continued, but it no longer had the unquestioning hardness it had carried the day before. He did not feel that as a loss.

STORY 293

The Procession

...

Near the Tower in Laheriasarai, the evening air held the mingled smells of marigolds, dust, and hot oil. On the right side of the road, at a small flower cart, thirteen-year-old Abhay was stringing garlands with his mother, Sarita. In front of them lay a heap of yellow flowers, a box of thread, and, in one corner, a bucket full of water in which the flower stems had been dipped to keep them from wilting. Threading flowers quickly, Sarita said, "We need twenty more garlands by this evening. The procession people have sent word again."

Abhay's fingers began moving faster. Since afternoon, people in the market had been saying that a large procession bound for an election meeting in town would pass this way. No political party had been discussed by name at home. Sarita's calculation was simple: if the garlands sold, the day's earnings would rise. Abhay's calculation was different. He was drawn to the beat of drums, the echo of loudspeakers, the flutter of flags printed with symbols, and the sight of so many people walking together.

By sunset the drums were heard first from far away. Then came slogans, followed by the heavy sound of amplified voices. Shopkeepers along the road began pulling their goods inward, while people came to stand at gates and verandahs. Abhay's hands stayed on the garland, but his eyes were on the road.

Cloth tied to the first vehicle fluttered in the air. Behind it walked young men carrying flags. Some wore paper caps; some carried placards marked with a round symbol. Now and then small pieces of glossy printed paper were tossed into the air. Children ran to catch them. Abhay too left the cart and took two steps forward, but Sarita called out, "Finish this garland first."

Abhay sat down again, though the movement of the procession continued inside him. After a while a young man stopped at the cart. "Are ten garlands ready?"

Sarita counted them out. The young man handed her the money, slung the garlands over his shoulder, and disappeared into the crowd. Abhay saw the fold of the notes. Their ordinary day's sales never brought in so much at once. In that moment the procession seemed not only a spectacle but also a lucky day for their cart.

Sarita had brought the marigolds from the wholesale market at five in the morning. She had paid two hundred rupees in advance, and from the sale of the flowers had to come the household oil and spices as well as Abhay's monthly school fee. Because of the procession order, fewer flowers would remain unsold today—Abhay understood what that calculation meant. So the young men running up for garlands seemed to him not merely part of the noise, but part of the earnings too.

At that moment the road filled as if with a rain of glossy leaflets. One leaflet fell near Abhay's foot. He picked it up. There were bold letters, a round symbol, the photograph of a candidate, and smaller lines of text below. Abhay did not read it all. He liked the smoothness of the paper. He folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

At the heart of the procession the noise was so great that Abhay had to bend toward Sarita to hear what she said. On both sides of the road people laughed, waved, and sometimes clapped. Some simply watched. Abhay thought that when so many people moved in the same direction at the same time, the road itself seemed to grow larger. His own little cart looked very small to him.

About half an hour later, the last vehicle too had gone past. The noise slowly moved eastward. The evening returned to the road much as before, but the road itself was no longer as it had been. Torn paper caps, plastic cups, empty water sachets, wilted flowers, bits of thread, and leaflets lay scattered everywhere. A few flags had been trampled underfoot and stuck in the mud.

Abhay stepped down from the cart and picked up a shiny strip. "I'll keep this," he said.

Gathering the flowers, Sarita replied, "Keep it. But first pull the cart back. Can't you see those clouds?"

As he pulled the cart backward, Abhay saw a few broken flowers at the bottom of the basket emptied by the garland sales. Sarita did not throw them away; she set them aside, intending to take them home for worship. Abhay was used to seeing his mother save even flower stems. For a moment, therefore, the sight of whole garlands lying scattered on the road seemed strange to him, but the lingering beat of drums was still in his ears, and the thought did not stay.

The western sky had grown dark. The air turned cool. People in the market began hurriedly gathering their goods. Abhay pushed the cart beneath a verandah. Just then the first heavy drops fell. Within five minutes the rain became hard.

The drain opening on the right side of the road normally swallowed the rainwater at once. Today the water began backing up and spreading across the

road. At first Abhay watched the rain with excitement, but soon the water reached the cart. Sarita lifted the flower basket higher.

“The drain is blocked,” she said.

Holding an umbrella, Abhay ran toward the drain. Leaflets, plastic cups, and a thick knot of flowers had collected over the iron grating. Rainwater pressed down from above, but the holes in the grate were sealed. Abhay tried to clear the rubbish with a stick. The first time he pushed it in, a cup spun around and lodged itself in the same place again.

Sarita called from behind, “Don’t use your hand. There may be glass in there too.”

Abhay brought a thin piece of old bamboo lying beside a shop. Slowly he began pulling the leaflets away. The wet paper had stuck together into a thick layer. When one layer came off, the water rushed strongly inward, but at once another piece of plastic clung to the grating.

In the rain Abhay’s kurta stuck to his body. He remembered how bright those same leaflets had looked half an hour earlier as they flew through the air. Now he even felt disgust as he lifted the glossy layers with the tip of the bamboo.

Jamuna, the fruit seller nearby, raised her basket and called, “Quickly, child, clear it, or all the water will rise here.”

Abhay pulled harder. When two cups, a knot of flowers, and three soaked leaflets came away together, the drain gave a gurgle. The water on the road swirled and began going down through the grating. It fell, though not completely. Abhay cleared the other side as well.

When the rain weakened, the signs of the procession on the road had changed. The paper that had leapt through the air now lay dark and pasted to the edge of the drain. Flowers that had hung around necks had mixed into the mud. Abhay felt his pocket. The glossy leaflet he had saved had also become wet and half dissolved. The letters had blurred. Only part of the candidate’s photograph remained clear.

He did not throw the leaflet away. He placed it on the cart.

Sarita was calculating the day’s takings. Sales had indeed been good. Almost all the garlands were gone. The cost of two baskets of flowers had been recovered. She said, “See? Today our earnings increased.”

Abhay nodded. “Yes.”

Sarita separated a small heap of wet flowers. “These won’t sell tomorrow,” she said to herself. Abhay calculated: ten more garlands had sold, but some

flowers had been lost in the rain. There was still a profit, yet the evening of the procession no longer seemed to him as straightforward as before.

He said only that much. He could not tell whether increased earnings and a dirty road were opposite things or merely two different parts of the same evening. He understood only that the scene which had seemed finished half an hour earlier was still doing its work.

At home that night he emptied his pockets. A shiny strip, the wet leaflet, and a small round paper symbol. He placed the strip by the window to dry. When he tried to open the leaflet, one corner tore. He carefully flattened it. Half the printed sentence could still be read; the other half had washed away in the rain.

The next morning Abhay went to school. On the way, near the Tower, municipal sanitation workers were sweeping. The road was dry, but shreds of wet paper still clung beside the drain. Abhay stood for a while and watched. There were no drums from yesterday's procession, no slogans. Only the scrape of brooms and the sound of an iron basket.

At school there was a drawing class. The teacher said, "Draw any scene you saw in town yesterday."

Several children began drawing flags, vehicles, and crowds. Abhay too first drew a large vehicle in the middle of the page, and behind it people carrying flags. His hand naturally drew the same scene for which he had wanted to leave the cart and run the day before.

Then, in the right-hand corner of the page, he drew the drain grating. On the grating he drew two cups, a soaked leaflet, and beside it a small boy holding a bamboo stick. At the far edge he added two figures with brooms.

His friend Neel, sitting beside him, asked, "Why are you drawing all this? The procession is here."

Abhay looked at the crowd in the middle of the page, then at the drain in the corner. "This happened yesterday too," he said.

"But this isn't the procession."

Abhay was silent for a moment. It seemed he could hear yesterday's drums again, then the gurgling of the drain in the rain.

"I didn't really see yesterday where the procession ended," he said softly.

He began colouring again. The flags on the vehicle remained bright, but he did not leave the water in the drain blank.

STORY 294

The Small Mirror

...

Turning in from Station Road in Madhubani town, in a narrow lane of the old market, stood “Ramsevak Barber Shop.” In front of the shop was a half-raised tin awning; inside were two iron-framed chairs, a long mirror on the wall, and in one corner a small mirror with a red back. The morning sun had only reached the top of the lane; inside the shop, in the pale light of a bulb, only the flash of the scissors was clear.

Seventy-two-year-old Harinarayan Mishra entered slowly. Behind him came his son Nachiket, managing a notebook, two bills, and a cloth bag.

Ramsevak rose when he saw him. “Come, Kaka. After a long time.”

Harinarayan laughed. “Hair does not count the days. I was the one putting it off.”

Nachiket sat on the bench by the wall. His cloth shop was in the main market. Before Dussehra, it was the season for ordering stock, settling old credit, and paying the warehouse rent. He opened the notebook and began adding figures on a page. When Harinarayan sat in the chair, Ramsevak tied a white cloth around his neck. In the long mirror on the wall, the old man’s face, Ramsevak’s raised hand, and Nachiket bent over in the background appeared together.

“Not too short,” Harinarayan said. “Keep it clean around the ears. Just set the top in order.”

Ramsevak laughed. “You say the same thing every time, and in the end you’ll say—two more snips.”

Harinarayan looked at Nachiket in the mirror. Whether the remark had reached him or not, Harinarayan could not tell. Nachiket folded the corner of one bill and turned to another page.

This shop was not new to Harinarayan. Thirty years earlier, when Nachiket was five or seven years old, he used to bring him here for haircuts. The child would never sit still in the chair; Harinarayan would stand behind him with a hand on his shoulder. Ramsevak’s father, Jeevachh, had been the barber then. After the haircut, Jeevachh would hold this small red-backed mirror behind the child’s head, and Nachiket would look at the back of his neck in the wall mirror and laugh. Harinarayan would ask, “Are both sides by the ears even?”

Nachiket would inspect himself gravely, as though the decision rested with him.

Harinarayan also saw his working years as tied to this lane. For thirty-four years he had kept accounts at the Madhubani Textile Cooperative Store. On the last day of each month, evening would come while he matched totals for cotton dhotis, gamchhas, saris, and bundles of loom yarn. The day after receiving his salary, he would get his hair cut at Jeevachh's, buy mustard oil for the house, and notebooks for the children.

When Nachiket opened his cloth shop, Harinarayan had helped a great deal in choosing the first stock—which cotton cloth would sell during the rains, which gamchha would move in the villages, how much credit could safely be allowed. For the first five years, Nachiket brought his account book to his father at night. Harinarayan checked the additions with a red pencil. Later Nachiket began managing his accounts himself. At first the notebook came home once a week, then once a month, and then only on days when some total would not match.

Harinarayan had accepted this change as natural. A son learning his work was a relief to a father. But today, seeing Nachiket bent over in the mirror, he understood that relief and distance sometimes grow at the same pace.

Ramsevak's scissors clicked around his ears. Harinarayan's white hair kept falling onto the cloth. Figures kept accumulating in Nachiket's notebook. In between, he asked, "Babuji, will it take much longer?"

Harinarayan said, "If you have work, go. I'll return by rickshaw."

"No, we'll go together. I just need to reach the shop by half past ten."

Ramsevak glanced once at Nachiket in the mirror, then went on cutting silently.

Harinarayan calculated in his mind: it was twenty past nine. The shop was ten minutes away. Nachiket had time. Even so, there was an impatience in his voice, as though even five minutes were an amount owed on credit.

He remembered that over the past three months Nachiket had repeatedly said, "Babuji, if you have to go to the market, keep all your errands for the same day." It was practical. It saved petrol for the motorcycle and reduced the time the shop had to be left unattended. Harinarayan agreed too. He began grouping the bank, post office, medicine shop, and clothes to be given for stitching into a single day. But slowly, going out of the house became a list of tasks; stepping out without a list began to feel like a wasteful expense.

While cutting the right side of his head, Ramsevak asked, "Nachiket Babu, will there be a crowd in the market for the puja this time?"

Without raising his eyes from the notebook, Nachiket said, “There will be a crowd, but more will be on credit. Less cash.”

“Harinarayan Kaka used to say people always bought clothes for the puja in the old days.”

“Warehouse rent wasn’t this high in the old days,” Nachiket replied briefly.

The answer did not seem harsh to Harinarayan. He knew that running a shop was not easy. Last year, when water leaked through the roof, twenty bundles of saris had to be moved elsewhere. This year one trader had failed to send goods on time. Nachiket often sat over the accounts late into the night. But seeing his son’s bent head in the mirror, Harinarayan wondered for the first time: he knew the shape of his son’s difficulties—but how much did the son know of the shape of his days?

Ramsevak switched on the electric trimmer. A buzzing rose. The short hairs at the back of Harinarayan’s neck began to disappear. He closed his eyes. Into the buzzing merged sounds from an older time—Jeevachh’s scissors, little Nachiket’s laughter, bullock carts in the market, his mother’s voice after he reached home: “Did he leave hair at the back of your neck?” Time had changed so many things, yet this small ritual of the barber shop had survived almost unchanged.

The trimmer stopped. Ramsevak brushed hair from his shoulder. “Kaka, look at the back.”

He picked up the small red-backed mirror from the corner and held it behind Harinarayan’s head. The long wall mirror and the little hand mirror fell into one another. In the first frame was Harinarayan’s white neck, behind it Ramsevak’s hand, and farther within, in a smaller frame, Nachiket.

Nachiket had now closed the notebook. He looked at his watch, straightened the bills, then bent to pick up the bag kept beside the bench. For a moment his eyes rose toward the wall mirror, but instead of resting on his father, he brushed dust from the shoulder of his kurta. Then he looked out toward the lane.

Ramsevak asked, “Is the back all right?”

Harinarayan kept looking at half of his son’s face in the small mirror. “It’s all right,” he said.

Ramsevak lowered the mirror. Now, in front of Harinarayan, there was again only his own face. His white hair was neat, the fine line above his brows had deepened, his cheeks were slightly hollow. He understood that he read his age less from the mirror than from the duration of Nachiket’s gaze. As a child, if one strand of hair had been left uneven, Nachiket would stare for ten

moments; today, through the entire haircut, he had perhaps not looked at his father for even ten moments.

Along with this thought, another rose immediately. Harinarayan remembered that the previous week Nachiket had asked him to sit at the shop. “Babuji, stay for half an hour while I go and check the warehouse.” Harinarayan had refused. He did not like the dust of the market, and sitting in a crowd felt difficult. Nachiket had not asked again. It was too easy to say that distance had been made from only one side. But the small frame in the mirror had made one thing clear: distance had now become part of their daily routine, and both of them had stopped measuring it.

Ramsevak untied the cloth from his neck. The white hair slid onto the floor. Nachiket stood up at once. “How much?”

Ramsevak named the amount. Nachiket took a note from the small pocket of the bag. Harinarayan had started to reach toward his own pocket, but stopped. Nachiket paid, took the change, then asked, “Shall we go, Babuji?”

Harinarayan rose. Ramsevak ran a brush over his shoulder. Outside, sunlight had now crossed the tin awning and reached the threshold of the shop.

Nachiket moved ahead. Harinarayan paused for a moment at the threshold. “Will the shop be very crowded today?”

“Not now. It will pick up after noon.”

“Then I’ll sit there for a while.”

Nachiket turned and looked at him. “At the shop?”

“Yes. You had to go and check the warehouse, didn’t you?”

The surprise on Nachiket’s face was so slight that it vanished at once. “Yes, but I thought I wouldn’t go today.”

“Go. I’ll sit there.”

Nachiket said nothing. He merely shifted the bag to his left hand, leaving his right hand free. On the way from the lane toward the main road there was a patch of mud. He extended his right hand toward Harinarayan’s arm. Harinarayan did not take his hand; he only rested his forearm in Nachiket’s palm for a moment and crossed the mud.

As he left the shop, Harinarayan did not look back. Inside, Ramsevak had put the small red mirror back in the corner. In the long mirror on the wall there was now an empty chair, white hair on the floor, and the light from the open doorway.

STORY 295

Pigeons on the Roof

...

It was a June morning in Balbhadrapur, Laheriasarai, and the sunlight had not yet spread across the whole roof. The shadows of the earthen flowerpots lay long, and Kanak, with an exercise book resting on her knees, was solving physics problems. Her scholarship entrance examination was three days away. The farther the hand of her wristwatch moved, the tighter her handwriting became.

Seven pigeons sat on the parapet. Now one turned its neck, now another shook out its wings. Kanak did not want to look at them. In front of her was a timetable drawn in red pencil—mathematics from five to seven, physics from seven to eight, breakfast from eight to half past eight, then chemistry. In the right-hand corner of the page she had written in bold letters: “Three days. No help.”

No teacher had written that last sentence. Kanak had written it herself.

Her father, Navalkishore Jha, ran a small bookbinding and photocopy shop near the Tower. If Kanak won the scholarship, a large part of her fees for the next two years could be saved. Navalkishore had calculated that sum many times, but he rarely spoke of the amount in front of her. He only said, “The examination is yours; the accounts are mine.”

Kanak both liked that sentence and felt stung by it. She thought that if she won the scholarship, she herself would lighten the burden of her education expenses. Gradually another stubbornness attached itself to that thought—preparation by herself, the journey by herself, difficult questions by herself. Taking anyone’s help seemed to reduce some part of the achievement.

That was why, the previous evening, when her classmate Ruchi had brought her own summary notes for two chapters, Kanak had returned them.

“You were having trouble with the electricity section, weren’t you?” Ruchi had asked.

“Not now.”

“Look at this. I’ve put all the formulas on one page.”

“I don’t need it. I’ll make my own.”

Ruchi had looked at her for a few moments, then folded the sheet and put it back in her bag. “All right.”

Kanak was now stuck on a problem from that very chapter. Her own summary sheet had not been made. The sign in one formula kept coming out wrong. She used the eraser again; the paper had grown thin.

Her mother Janki called from downstairs, “Kanak, I’ve left your tea.”

“Not now!” Kanak called back sharply.

Her voice came out louder than she had intended. She herself was startled, but at once bent over the problem again.

Just then sacks began to be unloaded on the roof of the grain warehouse opposite. At the sound of grain being shaken out, the pigeons on the parapet all rose together. Kanak lifted her head without meaning to.

The seven pigeons first made a small circle. Five more joined them from the roof behind. Twelve pairs of wings flashed at once, yet within moments the shape of the flock changed. Two went ahead, three wheeled behind the water tank, four dipped lower, and then all of them came together again in one wide circle.

Kanak looked at the time. Two minutes had passed. Irritated, she returned to the problem.

At nine in the morning her father came up. He had a small piece of paper in his hand. “I’ve written down the route to the examination centre,” he said. “If you take the first bus, get down at Station Chowk and—”

Kanak cut him off. “I’ll work it out.”

“You’ve never been there before.”

“I’ll still get there.”

Navalkishore kept holding the paper. “I can come with you. I’ll open the shop two hours late—”

“No. Why should you keep the shop closed? I’m not a child.”

Navalkishore’s hand slowly dropped. “All right. At least keep this paper with the route.”

“No, I don’t need it now.”

He folded the paper and put it into the pocket of his kurta. “All right.”

For a moment Kanak felt that her tone had been harsh, but another voice inside her immediately said: this is what it means to be independent. Do everything yourself.

By noon she had returned to the same physics chapter three times. She solved the problem, but it was not clear to her why the solution worked. Her head began to ache. While they sat down to eat, Janki said, “Lie down for half an hour.”

Kanak replied, "There's no time."

After the meal she went back up to the roof. The June sun was now fierce. The pigeons had drawn into the shade of the parapet. Not one of them was flying. Kanak found it strange—the wings that had moved so quickly in the morning were silent now. She opened her book, but the letters began to swim before her eyes.

After a while one pigeon came to the earthen water bowl in a rear corner of the roof. It drank, puffed out its wings, and remained sitting there. Two more came as well. Kanak thought: they could fly if they wanted to, but they were not flying. No one was stopping them.

At that moment her eyes went to the timetable in red pencil. "No help." The words no longer looked as firm as before; they looked somewhat harsh.

In the evening Ruchi came again. This time she carried no summary notes. She had come to leave a piece of cloth with Janki for measurements before stitching. Kanak met her on the verandah.

"Will you do the practice test tomorrow?" Ruchi asked.

Kanak could have said, "Yes, I will," but instead she remained silent. Then she asked, "Why does the negative sign come in the third formula in the electricity section?"

Ruchi did not laugh. She sat down on the bench by the wall. "Up to which step do you understand it?"

Kanak brought her notebook. For ten minutes the two of them looked at only one problem. Ruchi did not give her the answer; she drew a diagram and asked, "If the direction changes, what happens to the sign?" Kanak worked the answer out herself.

"That's all?" Kanak said.

"That was all."

After Ruchi left, Kanak opened her red timetable. She drew a thin line through "No help." Beneath it she wrote, "Understand what needs to be understood—from anyone." As soon as she wrote it, the sentence seemed somewhat artificial. She crossed that out too. In the end she wrote only: "Ask questions."

The next morning Navalkishore was getting ready to go to the shop. Kanak stopped him near the stairs.

"Do you still have the paper on which you wrote the route yesterday?"

Navalkishore looked at her face. "Yes."

He took the folded paper from his pocket. Kanak opened and read it. The bus stop, where to get down, two turns, the name of the examination centre. At

the bottom, in his own handwriting, Navalkishore had added: "If you miss the first bus, the second is at 6:40."

"I'll keep this," Kanak said.

"I can come with—"

"No, I'll go myself. But if I have the route written down, you won't have to keep the shop closed."

Navalkishore nodded. This time there was neither disappointment nor any special pleasure on his face. "All right. Just leave on time."

Kanak put the paper with her admit card. She did not feel that she had lost anything. On the contrary, the journey now felt more her own than before, because she was no longer spending energy proving that she would not accept this or that.

On the evening before the examination, she was doing her final revision on the roof. There were clouds to the east. The flock of pigeons rose again. This time Kanak watched carefully. The flock took one direction, then broke apart, then formed again. No pigeon was tied to another's wing. Sometimes five flew together, sometimes two apart, sometimes one trailed behind all the others. Even so, their flight was not diminished by one another's presence.

Until then, the picture of independence in Kanak's mind had been a single wing—far from everyone, separate from everyone, without anyone's support. Now, on the roof before her, there was another picture: wings flying together, for whom being separate did not require leaving the flock, and being together did not require giving up one's own direction.

She did not close the book. She only stood by the parapet for five minutes. The anxiety about the examination was still inside her; whether the paper would be easy or difficult, whether she would win the scholarship or not—nothing was certain. Only one thing now seemed clear: she had unnecessarily given loneliness the name of independence.

Janki called from below, "Kanak, food!"

"I'm coming now."

Kanak looked at the time. According to the timetable, she still had twenty more minutes to study. She picked up the red pencil, drew a small line through the twenty-minute slot, and gathered her books. The questions would still be there tomorrow. Her mother and father would also be at the dining table. Freedom did not mean choosing one of the two; deciding when to be with which was more difficult.

She moved toward the stairs. Behind her, the pigeons were still in the sky—together, but not in a single line.

STORY 296

The Hand of the Clock

...

In the waiting room on the third floor of a private finance company on Station Road in Laheriasarai, Apurva Jha sat with the slip bearing token number 17 crumpled in his fist. The round clock on the wall showed ten forty-two. There were twelve chairs before him, but the attention of those seated there was divided among the clock, their papers, and the closed door inside.

For the third time, Apurva looked at his wristwatch. It was one minute behind the wall clock. A thin scratch crossed the glass, the strap had been stitched twice, and the brass colour showed through on the winding crown at the right. Twenty years earlier, his father, Devanarayan Jha, had rescued the watch from a watchmaker's discarded parts, replaced its components, made it run again, and given it to Apurva on the day of his final college examination.

"Keep an eye on the time," his father had said then, "but do not live by what the clock tells you."

For years Apurva had taken the sentence merely as a joke. Today, in the waiting room, he remembered it again.

Token number 14 went inside. A thin young man named Neeraj, seated beside him, rearranged his file of certificates once more. He asked quietly, "Where are you from?" "From the Benipur side." "Are you working now?" "I keep accounts at a wholesale agricultural-supplies shop." "The salary here could be double." Neeraj smiled. "As for me, wherever they post me, I'll go. In five years I want to be a branch manager."

Apurva nodded without thinking much about it. Five years. The same question was in his interview practice book: "Where do you see yourself five years from now?" He had memorised the answer: "Growing with the organisation, taking on greater responsibility, and moving into a leadership role." The words were committed to memory, but as the wait lengthened, the sentences began to feel less and less like his own.

He looked at the clock. Ten forty-nine. The thin second hand of the wall clock paused for a moment near the mark for eight, then moved ahead in two small jumps. Apurva's mind immediately began calculating: the clock could not simply be weak, or the hand would drag everywhere. If it was sticking at the same point each time, perhaps there was dust or a slight bend in one section of the gear train.

He was startled by himself. For the past half hour he had been thinking about salary, position, answers, clothes, and certificates; for the first time, his attention had entered the inside of something without effort.

He remembered Devanarayan's shop—a space in an old Laheriasarai lane, seven hand-spans long and four wide. A narrow tin sign hung above it, bearing the words: “Samay Watch Repair Centre.” Inside were three glass boxes, two rows of tiny screwdrivers, fine tweezers beside them, and one yellow bulb. As a child, Apurva would sit there after returning from school. When his father opened a watch, he would lay the parts out in order on a sheet of paper.

But after Class Twelve, Devanarayan had said plainly one day, “You are not to get stuck in this shop. Study. Do work with paper and pen. You should not have to spend the life I have spent.”

From that day on, Apurva had turned the sentence into an instruction. He studied commerce. He bought guides for competitive examinations. Twice he sat for bank examinations. Once he missed the cooperative institution's list by three marks. Meanwhile, to meet household expenses, he took the accounts job at the wholesale agricultural-supplies shop—thirteen thousand five hundred rupees a month, accounts late into the evening in season, and extra work when sacks of seed arrived before the rains.

Devanarayan never told him to leave the job. He only asked, “Does your heart take to it?” Apurva always gave the same answer: “It's temporary for now.” The word temporary had been running for three years.

Token number 15 went inside. A woman employee came out and said, “The interviews are running late. We may not be able to call everyone before the lunch break.”

A mild murmur of dissatisfaction moved through the room. Someone spoke of going downstairs for tea; someone else began calculating travel time. Apurva looked at his wristwatch again. Eleven-oh-five. At that moment he remembered that his father had two old visitors' wall clocks to work on today, their hands needing to be straightened.

The previous evening his father had said, “When you come back, if you aren't tired, have a look at one. Your hand is still quicker than mine at fine work.”

Apurva had laughed it away. “I'll see after the interview.”

So much had been pushed into that word after—the watches, the shop, time sitting with his father, his own interest, and the question of whether a paper-and-pen job was truly what he wanted or merely a safe, respectable name.

Neeraj spoke again. “Where did you prepare?” Apurva named a coaching centre. “They guide you even after you get a job, don't they?” “Yes.” “At home,

everyone only wants one thing—that I get a steady income once. What I myself want can be looked at later.”

Neeraj had said it simply; there was neither sorrow nor complaint in his voice. The sentence gave Apurva no answer of his own. Instead it brought him a new question: since when had he been keeping what he himself wanted for “later”?

The second hand on the wall clock stuck near eight again. This time Apurva felt an urge to open the clock and look inside. He imagined the back cover, the tiny wheel, the spindle of the hand. Without meaning to, his fingers touched the winding crown of his wristwatch.

Then a conversation with his father from five years earlier returned with complete clarity. Apurva had come back dejected after his first bank examination. Handing him tea, Devanarayan had said, “If it didn’t happen, try again. But don’t do it only because people say that when a watchmaker’s son sits behind a desk, that means he has risen in life. Your own heart will know what progress means.”

Irritated, Apurva had replied, “You were the one who first said I shouldn’t sit in the shop.” Devanarayan had answered, “I said you should not get stuck. How can I decide where you are to go?”

Apurva had not forgotten that conversation. He had only given the second sentence less importance than the first. His father had not chosen the dream of a job for him. He had only wanted to prevent his own hardships from becoming his son’s fate. The form of the job, the name of the position, the five-year target—Apurva himself had added much of that later: some from practice books, some from relatives’ questions, some from his own embarrassment.

Token number 16 went inside. A slight tightening came into Apurva’s stomach. His turn was next. He opened his file. The résumé was on top, then the mark sheets and experience certificate. On the back of the last page he had written five questions for practice. The third was: “Where do you see yourself five years from now?”

He did not run his pen over the memorised answer. He simply closed the page.

“Number 17,” the employee called. Apurva stood up. Three people were seated inside the door. Looking at his experience certificate, the person in the middle asked, “You have been doing accounts work for three years. Why do you want to come here?”

Apurva’s prepared answer was: “For broader opportunities and institutional growth.” But the words came as far as his mouth and stopped. He could no

longer see the hand of the wall clock, though its faint ticking came from outside.

He said, "The income will be higher. That is one reason, and it matters for my family. But I am also beginning to understand that I should not change my work merely because of the name of a post. I like numbers, accounts, and fine mechanical work—all three. I have come here to understand the nature of this work. If I am here only to give the answer I have memorised, that answer will not describe all of me."

For a few moments, all three interviewers were silent. The woman seated on the left asked, "Then where do you see yourself five years from now?"

A faint laugh rose inside Apurva. "I have a prepared answer to that question," he said, "but right now I can only say that five years from now I want to be doing work that makes use of the way I pay attention. I cannot yet name the position."

The interview did not last very long. When Apurva came out, he did not know whether his answers had been right for selection or not. He felt no certainty either. He understood only this much: for the first time, he himself had been present inside his answers.

As he went down the stairs, he looked at his wristwatch. Twelve twenty-seven. It was still one minute behind the wall clock. He pulled the crown out to set the time, then stopped. One minute's difference would do no harm.

On the way home, he went straight to his father's shop. Devanarayan, thick-lensed spectacles over his eyes, had opened a small alarm clock. Without raising his head when Apurva entered, he asked, "How did it go?" "I don't know." "Did you answer?" "I did. But not the answers from the practice book." Now Devanarayan looked up. "Then?"

Apurva pulled over a chair and sat down. Two old wall clocks were kept in a glass box. The hand of one was bent. He took it in his hand. "Will you let me look at this one?"

His father held out the tweezers toward him. "Immediately after the interview?" "Yes. If I get the job, I'll decide about that later. First I want to understand whether I am running away from this work or actually moving toward some other work." Devanarayan said nothing. He only turned the small table lamp toward Apurva.

Apurva opened the back cover of the clock. There was fine dust inside. The spindle of the hand was slightly bent. His own hand became steady without effort. Outside, the sounds of handcarts, bicycles, and buses continued along the road.

His wristwatch kept ticking. Apurva did not look at it again. Time had not stopped; but for the first time he did not feel compelled to run in whichever direction all the hands were pointing.

STORY 297

The Last Page

...

By half past eight in the evening, the last machine in the sewing unit on Ranti Road in Madhubani had also fallen silent. Rajni Chaudhary closed the day's wage register, placed a bundle of red thread in a box, and bolted the outer gate from inside. The rain had stopped, but water still fell now and then from one corner of the tin roof. Small scraps of thread clung to the floor.

Eighteen women worked in the unit. That month they had received a large order for uniforms from three private schools. The bundles of cloth had arrived on time, but the belts of two machines had snapped, the son of one sewing worker had fallen ill, and the distributor had delayed the advance payment by three days. Rajni's days passed among these calculations—how many metres of cloth, how many pairs of kurtas, whose wages, whose advance, whose work was to be sent home.

That night, while putting away the register, her eyes fell on a book kept at the corner of the table. Her colleague Shabnam had lent it to her. The title on the cover was *The Other Side of the River*, a novel by some new writer. For the past two weeks Rajni had been reading one or two chapters at night. Now only eighteen pages remained.

"Finish it tonight," Shabnam had said in the evening. "My brother will take it tomorrow."

Rajni had laughed. "Should I finish the book or the wage accounts?"

"The accounts will be there every day. The story will not be here tomorrow."

At the time, Shabnam's sentence had seemed like a joke. When Rajni reached home that night and picked up the book after dinner, the clock showed half past ten. Her husband Manoj was in the next room adding up outstanding cloth bills. Their daughter Ira was at her study table working through entrance-examination questions.

Ira had completed her graduation that year. She had been selected for a one-year course at a textile-conservation training centre in Patna. The fee was not very high, but once the cost of living there was added, it would weigh on the household budget. Rajni wanted Ira to take teacher training in Darbhanga instead—closer to home, cheaper, with a future that seemed easier to

understand. For three weeks Ira had been saying, “I want to study textile work, not only sewing—old cloth, dyes, conservation.”

Rajni always said the same thing: “Look first at the work that is solid. You can pursue your interest later too.”

Ira had gradually begun arguing less.

Rajni opened the book. In the story there was an old boatman whose grandson wanted to go to the city to study after a flood. The story moved among boats, river, fields, and debt. Rajni felt the boatman’s life was very far from her own. Yet its small details of work drew her in—the knotting of rope, sand gathered in the belly of a boat, bargaining over fares, the loss from returning empty during the rains.

Manoj, adding the bills, asked, “Still reading?”

“Only the last eighteen pages.” “You have to get up at five tomorrow.” “I know.” Manoj went back to his papers. Rajni kept reading. In the final chapter of the novel, the grandson set out to catch the first bus across the river. The old boatman went with him as far as the ghat. He gave no long advice; he merely handed him an old gamchha and said that if he drank too little water on the road, his head would ache. Rajni liked that detail. Her mother, Shail Devi, too used to say such ordinary things while seeing someone off: “Eat something before you get hungry,” “Keep the papers in the inner pocket,” “Don’t rush while changing buses.”

The pages diminished. Five. Three. Two.

On the last page the bus had already gone far from the ghat. The old boatman remained standing on the riverbank. The writer gave no long explanation. The last sentence read:

“He had not sent the boy across; for the first time he watched someone cross the current that he himself had never been able to cross in his life.”

Rajni read the sentence again.

At once there was no boat, river, or old boatman in her mind. She heard her own mother’s voice—twenty-two years earlier, on the verandah of the old house in Sakri.

Rajni had been nineteen then. She had received an opportunity to study commerce at a women’s college in Darbhanga. Her father had said that if daily bus fare and the cost of books were added up, it would be difficult. Her uncle had suggested that she learn sewing near home; within two years she could begin earning. Rajni herself had been uncertain.

That night, while folding her clothes, Shail Devi had said, “Go. Home will still remain home. The road of the heart does not open again and again.”

At the time Rajni had understood the sentence as her mother's sacrifice. It was not that her mother sold jewellery; she reduced household expenses, took on sewing for two more homes, and sent her daughter to study. In Rajni's memory, the meaning of the sentence had been only this: Mother endured difficulty for her daughter.

But as soon as she read the sentence on the last page, an old, almost neglected fact rose inside her. Shail Devi herself had been selected for teacher training at the age of sixteen. Rajni had known this since childhood. Her maternal grandmother fell ill, there were three younger brothers and sisters at home, and Shail Devi could not go for the training. Later came marriage, the household, sewing, children. She never turned this into a sorrowful story. Only once, on Rajni's first day at college, while she was getting onto the bus, Shail Devi had said, "In my time the bus did not leave without me; I simply could not get on."

Rajni had laughed then. To her it had seemed only one of her mother's old anecdotes.

Now two sentences came and stood beside each other—"The road of the heart does not open again and again" and "I simply could not get on."

For the first time Rajni understood that her mother's "Go" had not been merely a sentence of sacrifice for her daughter. It may also have carried the memory of a road she herself had never travelled. By pushing her daughter forward, her mother was not only protecting her future; in some form, she was also watching an old unfinished movement inside herself go on.

This understanding did not give Rajni any pleasant sense of completion. Instead, it unsettled her. Because at that very moment her thoughts turned to Ira.

Ira was still studying in the next room. Rajni remembered her own sentences from the past three weeks: "Training close to home is more sensible," "Why spend so much to live far away?" "Teaching is stable work," "What will you do by preserving old textile samples?"

She understood that these sentences had not been only practical concerns. Her own life had been speaking through them as well. Rajni had built the sewing unit from nothing. At first there had been four women, two machines, and cloth bought on credit. In fifteen years the unit had grown to eighteen women. She was proud of that work. Somewhere inside her there was also a wish that Ira should carry it forward in a new way—accounts, patterns, marketing, colour, all of it.

That wish was not wrong. But was Ira's road the same?

Rajni did not close the book. The last page remained open. Her left hand rested on it. The edge of the paper felt thin against her finger.

Ira came out to drink water. "You're still awake?"

"Yes." "Finished the book?" "Yes." Ira filled a glass. Rajni kept watching her. Her daughter looked tired; the hair at the front of her head had loosened. Rajni asked, "What exactly is the part in that training about preserving old cloth?"

Ira stopped with the glass in her hand. "Textile conservation. Old saris, paags, embroidery, dyes—the science of keeping cloth from being destroyed." "Where does one get work?" Ira did not answer at once. She suspected the same argument was about to begin again. "Museums, archives, design houses, sometimes independent work. Nothing is certain." Rajni said, "Tomorrow make the complete expense calculation again. Fees, lodging, travel, everything. Make one for teacher training too. We'll look at both together."

Ira's face changed, though she did not leap up in excitement. She only asked, "Then you won't refuse?" Rajni was silent for a few moments. "I am not saying yes yet either. I only want to see whether I am pushing you toward my road or trying to understand yours." Ira placed the glass on the table. "All right." That was all. No embrace, no grand decision. Ira returned to her room. Manoj looked up from his papers. "What happened?"

"Tomorrow we'll make two budgets." "All right." "Not one." Manoj looked at Rajni's face but could not understand why the sentence mattered. "Fine, two." Rajni looked again at the last page of the book. She was surprised that on the second reading the sentence did not shine as it had before. Now it was ordinary ink on ordinary paper. Whatever had changed was not on the page, but in her old memory.

She remembered her mother's verandah—the folded clothes, coins for bus fare, the tiny needle mark on Shail Devi's palm. "Go. Home will still remain home."

For all these years Rajni had understood that sentence only as her mother's generosity toward her. Now she could hear another voice within it too—the voice of a young woman who had never been able to leave home for training herself, but who, watching her daughter depart, had recognised the sound of her own abandoned road.

Rajni closed the book. She ran a hand over the cover and put it into the bag for Shabnam. The clock showed eleven twenty-seven. Tomorrow there would again be the wage register, bundles of cloth, machine belts, and unpaid bills. Ira's decision would not be made in one night either.

Before turning off the light, Rajni took out a blank sheet and wrote two headings: “Teacher Training” and “Textile Conservation.” Beneath each she left the same amount of space.

She still did not understand her mother’s sentence completely. Perhaps the meaning of old things is never complete; life keeps adding new pages inside them. But that night Rajni understood for the first time that her mother had not merely sent her forward. She had also sent along with her a part of the road she herself had never travelled.

STORY 298

The First Morning Bus

...

At the small bus stand east of Jhanjharpur, the morning mist had not yet fully lifted. Smoke rose from the stoves of tea-and-pakora stalls, but Krishnamohan Paswan's eyes were so heavy from a sleepless night that it was hard to tell smoke from fog. An old cloth bag was tucked under his arm. Inside were two pairs of clothes, a gamchha, two small tools for pump repair, and the receipt for the advance Sahuji had given him.

All night he and Mala had kept returning to the same argument. Krishnamohan had found three months' work at an irrigation-pump repair centre in Saharsa. The wages were nearly twice what he earned in the village. The previous evening he had decided that he would catch the first bus in the morning. Mala had said, "The question isn't whether you are going or not. The question is why a decision for three months was made in three minutes."

As the night deepened, Krishnamohan's replies had grown harder. "A household runs by accounts. Wherever the earnings are higher in the account, that is where one should go."

Mala had not fallen silent. "You write the earnings in your accounts. Where do you write the cost of your absence?"

At that sentence Krishnamohan had laughed. The laugh carried both weariness and the stubbornness of defending a decision already made. "The cost of absence! Is that a new item in the ledger now?"

Now, sitting at the bus stand at dawn, he could hear that sentence again. But he had not left home in order to turn back. As he joined the ticket queue, he placed the bag between his feet.

The first bus to Saharsa left at seven. It was half past six. Five or six children in school uniform came along in front of the stand. One had a heavy schoolbag on his back, another carried a tiffin box, another had drawing sheets tucked under an arm. The eldest girl, about thirteen, was tying the shoelace of a small boy. The boy kept pulling his foot away.

"Keep still, Amar," the girl said irritably. "We're getting late." The little boy pouted. "If Babuji were here, he would tie it quickly." The girl did not answer. She tightened the lace, stood up, and settled her own schoolbag on her back again. Krishnamohan found himself looking at them. His daughter Kavita was fifteen now, his son Neeraj ten. In the middle of the previous night's

quarrel, Mala had said once, “Kavita gets Neeraj ready in the morning, but her examination is near too.” Krishnamohan had heard the words; he had not understood them.

Another child carried a thin bamboo stick with four round paper discs tied to it. It looked like something he had made for school. When the breeze touched them, the discs began to spin. Delighted, the boy said, “Look, it’s moving!”

The girl beside him said, “It isn’t moving. The wind is turning it.”

For a moment a smile came to Krishnamohan’s face. Then he took out the receipt and read it again. Sahuji had written: three months; monthly wages eighteen thousand; lodging behind the centre; food at one’s own expense. Five thousand had already been paid in advance. Of that, two thousand had gone toward household debt, fifteen hundred toward Neeraj’s books and uniform, and Mala had kept the rest for grain. The decision was no longer merely a matter of desire. The advance was pushing him toward Saharsa.

The queue moved slowly. The ticket window opened. Krishnamohan said, “One to Saharsa.” The moment the ticket came into his hand, something inside him grew strangely still. This was the paper form of the decision over which so many words had been spent through the night. He folded the ticket and put it into the pocket of his kurta. The children were standing at the edge of the bus stand. Their school vehicle had not arrived yet. The thirteen-year-old girl said to her little brother, “After school, wait at the gate. I’ll be late because of science practice.”

“Then who will come for me?” “Ma.” “Ma has to go to the market.” The girl thought for a moment. “Then I’ll ask the teacher to keep you for five minutes.” She said it so ordinarily that it struck Krishnamohan all the more strongly. How many small pieces of time had to be joined together for a household to keep running—who would drop whom, who would fetch whom, who would untie the goat, who would watch the midday stove, who would bring the medicine, who would lift the sack of rations. He had never written these tasks down in one place. He had looked only at the figure for earnings.

Mala’s “cost of absence” now sounded to him like the language of accounts, not an emotional phrase.

He remembered his own house in the morning. On ordinary days he rose at five, filled water from the courtyard hand pump, cleaned and set out his pump-repair tools, checked the air in Neeraj’s bicycle tyres. None of these had ever seemed like “work” to him; they were simply part of being at home. After he went to Saharsa, these small tasks would be divided among other hands. Mala would fill the water, Kavita would look after her brother, Neeraj would have to

get someone else to check his bicycle. Alongside three months of double wages would run three months of this redistribution.

He remembered a moment from the previous night. While clearing the plates, Mala had said, "I am not trying to stop your earnings. But don't assume that the rest of the household's time will run by itself." At the time Krishnamohan had stopped listening. Now, in the noise of the bus stand, he heard the sentence more clearly.

Even so, he did not tear up the ticket.

He knew that if he did not go this time, another mechanic would take the job at the centre. Pump-repair work in the village was seasonal. In the previous two months, three customers had had repairs done on credit, and two payments were still outstanding. Money would be needed for Kavita's studies the following year. Part of the roof also needed repairs. The economic reasons for going to Saharsa were real.

The difficulty was that until the previous night he had believed that the real reason was the only reason.

An elderly man sat on a nearby bench with a small milk can in his hand. Seeing Krishnamohan's bag, he asked, "Going away for work?" "Yes." "Far?" "To Saharsa for three months." The old man only said, "Three months is not a short time." Then he pressed down the lid of the milk can and tightened it. Krishnamohan felt no need to answer.

A little before seven, the bus appeared in the distance. A thin layer of dust lay over its front windscreen. The driver sounded the horn twice. People at the stand picked up their bags. Krishnamohan stood as well. At that same moment the school vehicle came from the opposite direction. The children stirred. The thirteen-year-old girl first helped her brother climb in, then pushed her own schoolbag up. As she climbed, she turned once toward the road to see whether her mother was coming. No one was there. She got in without complaint. Krishnamohan placed one foot on the first step of his bus.

The argument from the night became clear inside him again. Mala had not really been trying to stop him. She had only wanted the work of those who would remain behind to be counted in the decision as well. For the first time Krishnamohan understood that "I am going to earn" was not a complete sentence. Behind it was another half: "and so someone else at home will have to carry my share."

Inside the bus he found a seat by the window. He put the bag under his feet and looked outside. The school vehicle had already gone. A faint cloud of dust rose behind it on the road. The fire in the stove at the bus stand had grown brighter. The tea seller was washing glasses.

Krishnamohan took the receipt from his pocket. He felt an urge to write something in his own hand on the blank back of it, but he had no pen. He folded the receipt again. The bus started.

Jhanjharpur market began slipping behind. At one turn, three children were walking along the roadside toward school. Two of them were taking turns carrying one schoolbag. Krishnamohan watched until the bus rounded the bend.

He was going to Saharsa—the decision had not changed. But now the decision no longer looked like a straight line. On one side were wages, on the other time; on one side the money sent home, on the other the work divided at home; on one side his absence, on the other the daily routines of Mala and the children.

He remembered his own sentence from the previous night: “Wherever the account shows more earnings, that is where one should go.”

Resting his head against the bus window, he saw in his mind the empty columns in that account. For the first time he understood that the numbers had not been too few; the ledger had been incomplete.

STORY 299

The Endless Register

...

In the southern quarter of Saurath, two houses beyond an old mango tree, Vachaspati Jha had a small workroom. From outside it looked like no remarkable place—earth-coloured walls, two wooden cupboards, a low cot, and a low table against the wall. Yet because of the panji books wrapped in red cloth and kept on the table, people stepped more softly when they entered the room.

Vachaspati had learned to read the panjis from his father. His father used to say, “Reading the names is easy. Reading the blank spaces between the names is difficult.” As a child Vachaspati had not understood this. Now, at fifty-two, when people came during the marriage season to check genealogical lines, trace old relationships, and have certified copies made, he understood that a panji carried not only the weight of written lines, but of missing lines as well.

That year, continuous rain through Sawan had made the roof of the old storeroom leak. The edges of five panji volumes had become wet, and some pages had stuck together. Members of the local conservation committee asked Vachaspati to prepare a clean copy of whatever could still be read. He would be paid by the page. For the household accounts, the work was not insignificant. His wife, Sharda, was already adding and subtracting the costs of medicine, oil, grain, and their little granddaughter’s school fees.

For three days Vachaspati did nothing but dry the pages. To press wet paper meant lifting the letters off with it. He placed thin cotton cloth between pages, raised corners with slender bamboo tweezers, and carried the books indoors whenever the sunlight grew harsh. On the fourth day one thick panji opened. The year written on its outer strip was almost erased, but the writing inside was clear.

The first pages followed the familiar pattern—lineage, branch, village, father, son, marriage link. Vachaspati recognised some names from memory. Beside some were small marks his father used to point out in older copies. He went on making the copy. In his mind he counted the payment: if he finished this many pages, it would cover two months of oil and salt for the household.

Near midday, his hand stopped on one page.

That page contained his own branch of the lineage.

Grandfather, father, Vachaspati—the three names appeared in the correct order. Beneath Vachaspati was the name of his son, Nachiketa. That was not

impossible; the entry could have been made sometime after Nachiketa's birth. But beneath Nachiketa was another name: "Ishan."

Nachiketa had no child. He had married three years earlier, and his wife Mrinal was now pregnant. No name had yet been settled upon in the household.

Vachaspati brought the page close to his nose. The smell of the ink did not reveal its age. The lettering resembled the same hand that had written the lines above. After Ishan came three more names—"Vedika," "Neel," "Archis." After that, the branch divided in two directions.

He closed the page again.

"Won't you eat?" Sharda asked from the doorway.

"Not now. A little later."

"You've been sitting since morning."

"One page is stuck."

Sharda laughed. "Is the page stuck, or are you?"

Vachaspati did not answer.

In the afternoon he opened the panji again. This time he left his own branch and looked three pages farther ahead. There was the line of a family from Belahi. Vachaspati knew the names up to the present generation because he had checked that household's marriage link the previous year. But beneath the current names were five more names. Beside one of them was written the name of a village with which that family had no connection at present.

For the first time Vachaspati felt not fear but anger. Someone had inserted later writing into an old book—that was his first conclusion. He took a magnifying glass and examined the ink. The stroke, pressure, the slant of the letters—all matched the older lines. The yellowing of the paper had settled over the writing in exactly the same way.

That evening Nachiketa returned from his shop. He sold bicycle parts, and after a day's fatigue went straight into the courtyard to wash his hands and face. Vachaspati could have called him. He could have uttered the name "Ishan" just once and asked, "Do you like this name?" But he remained silent.

At night Mrinal was talking with Sharda about measurements for the baby's clothes. She said, "We'll make the list of names later. First let us decide whether Dadi's suggestions will prevail or Babuji's."

Sharda burst out laughing. The glass in Vachaspati's hand became still.

The next day he copied only up to the present from the old panji. He left out the lines containing future names. But the thought that the copy for the

committee would remain incomplete unsettled him. The rule of the work was: copy whatever can be read; omit nothing for your own convenience.

At midday a visitor came. His name was Sudhanshu Thakur. He had come to have his daughter's marriage-line genealogy checked. Vachaspati matched the older entries. The work was ordinary. At the end Sudhanshu said softly, "They say a very old panji has come into your hands. How many generations of names does it contain?"

Vachaspati started. "As many as are written."

"And those ahead?"

"What do you mean, ahead?"

Sudhanshu smiled. "Does news take long to fly through a village?"

Vachaspati understood that some young man from the committee who had helped open the wet volumes must have seen something.

"A panji is an account of relationships that have already taken place," Vachaspati said.

"But what if the names ahead are truly written there?"

"Then they are names. Not events."

Sudhanshu remained silent for a few moments. Then he asked, "May I see the names ahead in my own family?"

For the first time Vachaspati answered plainly, "No."

After that one word, an unusual silence filled the room. Sudhanshu was dissatisfied, but he did not argue. He paid the fee and left.

All day Vachaspati thought about his answer. It seemed to him that perhaps he was not protecting the book, but protecting his own fear. If people saw names from the future, they would build stories around them. Marriages would be arranged, marriages would be broken, unborn children would be named in advance, families would treat a future line as a command governing present decisions. A few letters could become causes in people's lives.

That evening he tried an experiment. The first future name written in the Belahi branch was "Raghav." On a separate sheet he wrote only the name—Raghav. Then he remembered three families in the village where children had been given that name within the past five years. A name by itself was not the future. It became the future only when people attached it to the person they thought it belonged to.

But the name "Ishan" in his own branch would not leave him.

Three weeks later Mrinal gave birth to a son. Joyful bustle filled the household. Nachiketa returned from the hospital and came into his father's

room. His eyes were red from a night without sleep, but the happiness in his voice could not be hidden.

“Have you thought of a name?” Vachaspati asked.

“Mrinal says let the child come home first. Then we’ll all think together.”

“Anything in your own mind?”

Nachiketa laughed. “For now we are just calling him Chhotu.”

For the first time Vachaspati breathed easily. The name “Ishan” in the book was still only in the book.

That night he opened the panji. Ishan, Vedika, Neel, Archis—all the names were exactly as before. No letter had increased or disappeared. The page was ordinary. Its endlessness lay not in the number of pages but in people’s hunger to give them meaning—the thought came to him, but he did not write it down as a sentence.

The next morning, while completing the copy for the conservation committee, he copied the future lines too, but above them he added a note: “The date and period of the entries beyond this point are unverified; they are not valid as evidence for present decisions.”

A young man from the committee asked, “Then are all these wrong?”

Vachaspati said, “I did not say that.”

“Then they are right?”

“I cannot say that either, not yet.”

The young man kept looking at his face.

Vachaspati closed the panji. “Why this hurry to call something right or wrong when it has not even happened yet?”

When he returned home, Sharda raised the question of the baby’s name. Dadi’s list had Govind, Nachiketa’s had Arya, and Mrinal’s list had two other names. In the end everyone looked at Vachaspati.

“Your suggestion?” Nachiketa asked.

“Ishan” rose clearly in Vachaspati’s mind. He saw the panji page, the ink, the slant of the old handwriting. Then he looked at the newborn’s fist, which was complete even without any name.

“Let us watch him for a few days first,” he said. “We can name him later.”

In the courtyard everyone began repeating their suggestions again. Vachaspati quietly went into his room. He wrapped the panji in red cloth and placed it in the cupboard. He made no attempt to look for the book’s last page. For now it was enough to know this much: the next name might already be written, but the next life had not yet been written.

STORY 300

The Library of Mithila

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For three days in Darbhanga's old book market, Ishan Mishra had been searching for the same title—North Mithila's Ponds and Village Memories. The title belonged to his own proposed book, but where had the book been written yet? For seven months he had travelled from district to district, taking down the accounts of ponds, ahars, old ghats, boatmen, fishers, potters, and cultivators. The publisher wanted the manuscript by Paush. Half of the advance had already gone into household expenses, and the remaining half was dissolving into travel fares, copies, and photocopies of old papers.

Then an elderly bookseller—no, seller of pothis—Binod Chaudhary, pointed him toward the end of a narrow lane and said, "What you are looking for may perhaps be found there."

There was no signboard at the end of the lane. Only a wooden door on which someone had written in ink: "The Library of Mithila." The letters were neither very old nor entirely new. Ishan pushed the door open.

Inside there was no smell of dust, but rather of dried paper, hemp cord, and a faint trace of mustard oil. Cupboards lined the walls, and behind the cupboards were more cupboards. In the middle, a thin old man was wiping the edges of books with a cloth.

"Membership?" Ishan asked. Without raising his head, the old man said, "There is no membership here. There are questions." Ishan laughed. "Then the question is this—I need some material on the ponds of North Mithila and the memories of its villages." For the first time the old man looked at him. "Material, not books?" "Both." "How much?" "As much as is useful." An expression came over the old man's face as though the question itself were not quite right. He rang no bell and opened no register. He merely pointed with his right hand toward a corridor at the back. "Come."

At the first turn was written "Ponds." At the second, "Memory." At the third, Ishan rubbed his eyes. On the cupboard in front of him was written the title he himself had proposed—North Mithila's Ponds and Village Memories. Beneath it were not one but hundreds of volumes. Some thick, some thin, some bound in red, some in black, some wrapped in hemp cloth.

"This is impossible," Ishan said. "The meaning of the word possible is different here from what it is outside," the old man replied.

Ishan opened the first book. Author: Ishan Mishra. Publication year: the following year. The first chapter began with the same village he had visited two months earlier. The first five lines matched his notes. The sixth line was entirely unfamiliar: the western ghat of the pond had been built in the 1950s by a widow who had sold her jewellery. Nothing like this was in Ishan's notes.

He opened a second volume. The same chapter, the same village, but the builder of the western ghat was a wealthy moneylender. In a third, the ghat had never been completed at all. In a fourth, the pond itself was declared imaginary. In a fifth, the same pond was described as the centre of a state archive. All the writing was smooth, plausible, and furnished with references.

Ishan's palms grew damp. "Which of these is true?" The old man shrugged. "Your question is small again." "Small?" "Ask instead—what is the basis by which you recognise truth?"

Ishan grew irritated. He needed sources, not riddles. Time was short. Two days earlier the publisher had sent a message: "Send the final draft soon." At home his wife Neelima had told him to look at the creditors' accounts before extending this journey again. He had no leisure for the library's philosophical games.

He picked up one volume and placed it in front of the old man. "Here there is a reference—Madhubani District Records, File Number Eighteen." "Then check it." "The records are here too?" "Every possible book written about Mithila is here. Possible copies of the records as well."

The old man pointed to another corridor. There, indeed, were dozens of versions of File Number Eighteen. In one, the ghat was mentioned; in another, it was not. In a third, the page was torn. In a fourth, the official's signature was different. In a fifth, the entire file concerned a subject that had nothing to do with the pond.

Ishan slowly closed the volume. Anger now rose in him more than fear. "Then nothing here is evidence." "I did not say that." "To keep every possible version and then say that something among them must be true—this is not evidence. It is noise." The old man smiled faintly. "There are many versions of that sentence here." Ishan's anger rose further. "I did not come here to hear jokes." "Nor did I."

They moved on. One room contained only titles: "Books That Could Have Been Written but Were Not." Another: "Books That Were Written but Did Not Survive." A third: "Things People Kept Saying but Never Wrote Down." Ishan stopped. On the last cupboard, in small letters, was written: "Authors Who Were More Certain Than Their Sources."

The old man said, "There are many of your books in this section."

Ishan did not reply. He pulled out a volume. Chapter Seven—"The Southern Quarter of Bisfi." In that chapter an elderly woman, Sharda Devi, said that her father had given thirty days of unpaid labour in the digging of a pond. Ishan remembered the statement. In the actual interview Sharda Devi had said, "I have heard that my father went too, but for how many days, I do not know." In his draft Ishan had written: "According to Sharda Devi, her father was forced into thirty consecutive days of unpaid labour." Where had the figure of thirty days come from? Perhaps from an interview in another village. Perhaps while combining his notes.

He turned the page. In the next version it was fifteen days. In the third, seven. In the fourth there was no mention of unpaid labour at all. In the fifth, Sharda Devi's name had become Saraswati.

Ishan's anger suddenly gave way to fatigue. The library was not giving him wrong answers; it was enlarging the weakness in his certainty until he could see it.

"Do you make all these?" he asked the old man. "I wipe the dust from the bindings." "Then who makes them?" "The one who asks the question, perhaps. The one who writes, perhaps. The one who reads, perhaps. There are separate books here for all three answers."

Ishan fell silent. Somewhere in the distance came the sound of paper sliding. There was no clock, but he remembered his own time: Paush. The publisher. The advance. The creditors. The unfinished chapter.

"Show me my finished book," he said. The old man asked, "Which finished book?" "The one I will actually send." "That is still your work. Not the library's." For the first time Ishan laughed, though there was weariness in the laugh. "Then what use is there in all these possible books being here?"

The old man lifted one volume, then put it back. "Perhaps to understand that possibility and evidence are not the same thing." Ishan wanted to keep that sentence in his mind, then immediately grew wary—what if this too was only a beautiful sentence from one of the endless books? He looked at the old man. The old man was again wiping a binding with his cloth. As Ishan left, he turned to look back. The corridor did not seem as long as before. Perhaps the light had changed. Perhaps he himself was in a hurry. Before closing the door, his eyes fell on a thin volume: *The Library of Mithila: A Story*. He pulled the door shut before reading the author's name. The next day he sat in the ordinary reading room of the district archive. A fan rattled on the wall. An employee brought him three real files—one incomplete, one faded, and one without the information he wanted. For the first time Ishan was not irritated by these deficiencies. He listened again to the original recording of Sharda Devi's

interview. Her sentence was clear: “For how many days, I do not know.” Ishan crossed out “thirty days” in his draft. Then he rewrote the entire sentence: “Sharda Devi recalled a family memory connecting her father with labour in the digging of the pond, but she could not state the duration with certainty.”

The sentence seemed less vivid than the earlier version. But on paper it felt more durable. By evening he had cut five pages. He marked off three beautiful episodes whose basis was only one person’s retelling of another person’s account. Returning home, he told Neelima, “The manuscript may not be finished by Paush.” Neelima looked up from the account notebook. “Then?” “Then it will be late. I may have to return part of the advance.” “And the book?”

Ishan thought for a moment. “It may be thinner.” Neelima bent back over the accounts. “A thinner book is lighter to carry.” Ishan smiled. He made no attempt to draw any philosophical meaning from the sentence. That night, at the end of his manuscript, he added a new page: “Where Sources Do Not Agree.” On that page he gave no verdict; he only recorded the differing statements, dates, memories, and the limits of the records. After that, for a long while, he did not think of the extraordinary library. Before him there were only three files, four audio notes, two old maps, and one unfinished question. For the first time, the insufficiency seemed enough.

“A story remains alive for as long as people and language remain alive.”

GAJENDRA THAKUR

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