

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

COMPLETE SINGLE-VOLUME EDITION

Chapters -100 to 200 · All 301 Chapters



GAJENDRA THAKUR

VIDEHA

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

Gajendra Thakur

COMPLETE SINGLE-VOLUME EDITION

Translated from original Maithili by the author himself

Chapters -100 to 200 · All 301 Chapters · Appendices · Final Dramatic
Fragment

6 × 9 inch Complete Edition

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Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles — Complete Single-Volume Edition

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First Edition

Translated from original Maithili by the author himself

The complete numbered sequence runs from Chapter -100 through Chapter 200 — 301 chapters in all.

This edition also includes the concluding appendices and final supplied dramatic fragment.

Videha: First Maithili Fortnightly eJournal

www.videha.co.in

ISSN 2229-547X

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CHAPTER -100 (ONE HUNDRED BEFORE)

Shankha and Silver

*Not everything that glitters is silver, and not every name is a body—
whoever takes a shell for silver takes a map for the village.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



ENTRY

Garh Narikel—a village settled in a corner of Mithila whose name will not be found on any great map, yet whose memory has lived for twelve hundred years in the roots of a tree. At the centre of the village lies Channa Grove, and at the heart of that grove an ancient peepal. Beneath its shade, through every joy and sorrow the village has known, a witness has always been present—one whom generation after generation has called simply “Budhba.”

Who Budhba is, the village has never fully understood. Some say he is a voice risen from the water-burial in Jori Pokhari: twelve hundred years ago a man left his body on the floor of the pond and left his name behind. But this much the whole village knows: Budhba carries every name in Garh Narikel, keeps every reckoning, and has taught every generation the same lesson—crocodiles eat bodies, not names.

And Budhba’s story, repeated by the village age after age, begins twelve hundred years before our own day, when Garh Narikel was still young. One evening, in a hall of disputation, philosophers gathered in the waning light of oil lamps around a question that looked small but opened into a depth without measure: if a man sees a shell from a distance and takes it for silver, what, precisely, is the nature of his error? Without knowing it, in that single question they were planting the seed of the whole story that would unfold across the next twelve centuries—a story of truth and illusion, name and body, crocodile and village.

For whoever takes the shell for silver takes the map for the village; whoever mistakes brilliance for truth mistakes the name for the body. That error—from the disputation hall of that evening to the tangled screens of the present day—is the root of this entire tale. And so Budhba’s story begins there, in that hall, where for the first time the question was asked with complete seriousness: what is illusion?

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — master of the stage and narrator

Vachaspati Mishra — commentator, host of the disputation, defender of the established position

The Objector (the Sceptic) — a composite voice of doubt speaking for the assembly

The Nyaya Logician — defender of anyathākhyāti, the theory that error is the cognition of one real thing as another

The Prabhakara Mimamsaka — defender of akhyāti, the theory that error consists only in failing to notice a distinction

The Ritualist Mimamsaka — of the Bhatta and Jaimini traditions, holding that the Veda is concerned solely with injunctions to ritual action

The Council — murmurs and reactions from the assembly

Setting: a hall of disputation. At evening a servant enters carrying a lamp. In the dimming light he lays a length of rope beside the doorway and, a hand's breadth away, a small shell polished pale by years of handling—implements for an argument to which the assembly has not yet paid attention.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Every debate needs an error with which to begin, and here you have two of them lying by the door, if you care to look: a rope and a shell. Once, in poor light, a man took a rope for a snake and sprang backward with his heart hammering, though no snake had ever been there. Another reached down expecting a coin, took the shell for silver, and drew back an empty hand from the earth where delight had already promised him something.

Every school represented in this hall agrees that the man was mistaken. What none can agree upon is what happened at the instant of the mistake—where the silver was, if it was anywhere at all, while he seemed to see it. Vachaspati Mishra spent his life upon this very knot, because when one asks what illusion is and what the world is, the two questions prove, under examination, to be the same question asked twice. Keep your eye on the shell. It will not leave the stage until the debate has done with it.

(Before the disputation begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

Not all that glitters is silver, no; not every name is flesh;

Who takes a shell for silver takes the village for its sketch.

*From far away the gleam was seen; up close, the shell was known;
Who asked, 'What is this thing?' broke the spell that had been thrown.*

Illusion lives a moment; truth endures from age to age—

*Who has learned to ask the question will not call the shell his silver.
(Exit.)*

ACT I

The Voice That Says “I”

Can the Self Be an Object of Inquiry?

(Vachaspati is seated. The Objector enters and bows.)

OBJECTOR: Before you tell us, Acharya, that Brahman is fit to be inquired into, answer one difficulty—simple to state and hard to escape. Inquiry belongs to what is doubtful, or to what it is useful to know once doubt has been resolved. Yet no one doubts his own existence. Child, sage, beast in the field—every creature that has ever drawn breath knows itself as “I”, immediately, without proof, without a moment’s hesitation. If the Self is already the best-known thing in the world, on what ground do you propose to investigate it as though it were hidden?

VACHASPATI: You have put the objection better than many who bring it, and I shall not blunt its edge. It is true: no one doubts, “Do I exist or not?” But notice what you have proved, and what you have not. You have proved that something meant by the word “I” is known beyond doubt. You have not proved that we know what that something is. A man in a dark room may be certain that a face is looking at him and be wholly mistaken about whose face it is. Certainty of existence and knowledge of nature are two different achievements, and the entire dispute of this act lies in the space between them.

OBJECTOR: Then show me that space. What can be mistaken in the ordinary experience of “I”?

VACHASPATI: Consider what the word carries in common speech. “I am thin.” “I am going.” “I am blind.” Each “I” is fastened to the body. But if the body were truly the referent of “I”, a man who remembers the body of his childhood and inhabits the body of his old age—two bodies that across sixty years may not share a single hair, tooth, or particle of skin—could never say with the confidence with which he does say it: “I, who played in my father’s lap, now hold my grandson in mine.” Nothing continuously joins those two bodies except the “I” that claims them both. And whatever remains through changing things cannot itself be one of the things that changes, just as the thread running through the flowers of a garland is not one of the flowers.

OBJECTOR: A dreamer could answer you this way: in a dream I wore the body of a king, tall and jewelled; on waking I found this small and ordinary body again. If the dream-self differs from the waking self, your thread has already snapped.

VACHASPATI: On the contrary—you have supplied my example before I could deliver it. The dreamer wakes and says, “I am not a king;

I am a man.” It is the royal body that is cancelled by waking, while the sense of “I”, which owns dream and waking alike, is cancelled by nothing. A man who by yogic power assumes the form of a tiger does not, in that form, experience himself as other than the one who a moment earlier was a man. Body after body is put on and cast off like a traveller’s changing coats; the traveller is not thereby proved to be one of the coats.

OBJECTOR: Then, if not the body, let the senses be the seat of the “I”—for the eye that saw is not the hand that now touches.

VACHASPATI: And yet, without even a flicker of doubt, we say, “What I saw, I now touch”—one “I” joining two different instruments, just as a moment ago one “I” joined two different bodies. The senses are instruments of the knower; they cannot themselves be the knower they serve, any more than an axe can be the woodcutter who wields it.

OBJECTOR: Grant all this. I still do not see what remains to investigate. You have merely moved the “I” from the body to something behind the body. Call it consciousness and be done.

VACHASPATI: Here is the second half of your original objection, and it is the sharper half. You were right that it existed; I was keeping it for its proper place. Inquiry is pointless where knowledge serves no purpose. But consider this: the “I” experienced by ordinary creatures is always experienced as limited—“I am in this room”, “I am small”, “I suffer this pain and not that one.” The scriptures that speak of the Self—Śruti, Smṛti, the ancient epics—describe something that shares none of these limits: infinite, indivisible, an unbroken plenitude of consciousness and bliss. Either the ordinary “I” and the scriptural Self are one reality misperceived, or they are two different things and scripture speaks falsely. If they are one reality misperceived, then everything turns upon that one word, misperceived—and until we understand what error itself is, we cannot know whether scripture or ordinary experience has the stronger claim upon truth. This is not a question already answered. It is precisely what remains to be investigated.

OBJECTOR: Then the whole structure you are about to build stands upon knowing what error is.

VACHASPATI: Exactly. I shall not take a single step toward Brahman until this question has been fought down to its foundations in this hall by every school prepared to give an account of it. Bring me the strongest opponent you have. I would rather lose this dispute honestly than win it by leaving the hardest part for later.

ACT II

The Shell in Half-Light

A Disputation on the Nature of Error

(The lamp by the door is made brighter. The shell lies where the servant placed it and is now visible to the assembly. The Nyaya Logician rises.)

NYAYA LOGICIAN: Since you have thrown open the assembly, Acharya, allow me to close the matter quickly. A man sees that shell in half-light and cries, “Silver!” Nothing mysterious has occurred. Silver is a real thing, existing somewhere in the world—in a merchant’s shop, perhaps, or as a coin in the man’s own memory—and his cognition has merely applied that real silver here, mistaking one real object for another. Nothing indefinable need be summoned. Error is simply anyathākhyāti: a real thing misplaced in cognition.

VACHASPATI: An orderly answer, Logician, and I shall examine it with the same order it deserves. First tell me: on your account, does his cognition grasp the shell at all?

NYAYA LOGICIAN: Only indistinctly. Its sheer “being-here” is apprehended, but its shell-nature is missed because of some defect in the eye or in the light.

VACHASPATI: And the silver he sees so distinctly—where, at that moment, is it really?

NYAYA LOGICIAN: In the market, somewhere else, as real as ever. His cognition merely reaches across the distance and, because of the defect, wrongly applies it here.

VACHASPATI: Ah! What extraordinary good fortune belongs to this poor cognition: it can reach all the way to a shopkeeper’s stall, seize a piece of silver, drag it across a town into this man’s hand—and yet we are asked to call the feat no more than an ordinary mistake of location. Consider what your own school teaches elsewhere: a defect may obstruct a cause from producing its proper effect; it cannot endow that cause with the power to produce an entirely different and alien effect. A dry sugarcane seed scorched by fire may lose its proper power, but it does not therefore produce a banana trunk. Yet you ask me to believe that a defective eye, prevented from doing its proper work—showing the man a shell—somehow acquires a wholly new power, the power to drag real silver across a city and set it in his palm. That is no modest defect. It is a miracle dressed in the humble clothing of “error.”

NYAYA LOGICIAN: (recovering) Then say only that the form of silver rises from memory and is applied here. The silver itself does not literally travel.

VACHASPATI: Then you have already abandoned “one real thing known as another”, which was your entire theory, and moved halfway into my house without paying rent. If this is only a form arising from memory and applied here, tell me plainly: is that form silver, or is it not? If it truly is silver, my first question returns in full force: silver cannot intelligibly be here, in a thing that is not silver, without the very contradiction you set out to avoid. If it is not truly silver, then you have quietly conceded everything I need, for that is precisely what I call indefinable—neither simply real nor simply unreal—and you have reached my conclusion by the scenic route, complaining about the scenery all the way.

COUNCIL: (A ripple of laughter, quickly suppressed.)

NYAYA LOGICIAN: (with dignity) I have answered this objection at length elsewhere, in the *Nyayakanika*, and I shall not stand in the chill of this evening to repeat the whole of it.

VACHASPATI: Nor need you. You have conceded the central point, and a disputant who has yielded the keep of a fortress need not surrender every outer wall before witnesses. Sit, my friend. You have argued honestly, which is worth more in this hall than winning.

ACT III

The Vanishing Distinction

Prabhakara’s Akhyāti, and Why It Fails

(The Prabhakara Mimamsaka steps forward, more cautious than the logician who spoke before him.)

PRABHAKARA: I have watched my colleague haul his silver across the city, and I shall not repeat his mistake. I need posit nothing so extravagant. What really happens when the shell is misperceived is this: two cognitions arise together—a bare perception of “here”, present and immediate, and a memory of silver seen long ago, awakened by the shell’s dim gleam. The defect lies only here: the man fails to notice that one is a present perception and the other merely a memory. He blends the two without marking their difference and speaks as though he had seen a single object. There is no third, indefinable entity anywhere in the story—only ordinary perception, ordinary memory, and an ordinary failure to keep them apart. Call it akhyāti: not false cognition at all, but a missing cognition—the missing awareness of a distinction.

VACHASPATI: A far more careful theory than the last, and I shall honour it with one sharp question rather than many hasty ones. On

your account, is the perception “here”—bare, present, immediate—in any way false?

PRABHAKARA: Not at all. As far as it goes, it is simply and entirely correct.

VACHASPATI: And the memory of silver—is that, in itself, false?

PRABHAKARA: No more false than any memory. It correctly remembers silver seen before. The fault lies only in the blending, never in either component.

VACHASPATI: Then hear the difficulty this creates for you, and it is fatal, not merely inconvenient. The whole world, without exception, describes this experience in one sentence: “This is silver.” Not, “This is here, and separately I remember silver,” but a simple, unified, first-person claim of identity, uttered with exactly the confident grammar of “This is a pot.” If what actually occurred were merely two correct cognitions standing innocently side by side, unmarked as distinct, whence came the false claim that they were one? Two true things standing close together do not generate a false identity merely because their difference goes unnoticed. You have explained a failure to see distinction. You have not explained the man’s eager hand reaching toward the ground to pick up silver. Missing a distinction is a kind of blindness; reaching for a coin that is not there is a kind of belief. Your theory, for all its caution, gives me the blindness and quietly loses the belief along the road.

PRABHAKARA: (after a pause) The blending itself may be called the error, without positing any third entity beyond the two blended cognitions.

VACHASPATI: Then the blending is either itself a cognition—in which case, a cognition of what, if not of something answering to “silver-here”, which is precisely the indefinable object I am arguing for and you are trying to evade—or the blending is no cognition at all, in which case it cannot explain why a man’s eager hand moves toward the earth, because a hand is not moved by what is in no way known. You have built a very fine wall around the shell, my friend, and left a door open at either end.

ACT IV

Neither Real nor Unreal

Establishing the Indefinable, and Its Consequence for the World

(Vachaspati rises and steps down from the teacher’s seat so that he stands level with the assembly.)

VACHASPATI: Two schools have honestly tried to explain the shell without paying the price I demand, and both have quietly paid it later in small coin. Let me now say plainly what I think occurred when the man reached for silver that was not there, and let everyone test it as severely as the other accounts have been tested.

The silver he saw was not real. Had it been real, his cognition would properly have taken the form “shell”, or, at the very most, “silver, back in the market”—never “silver, here”. No true thing can be itself and at the same time be located where, by hypothesis, it is not.

Nor was the silver merely unreal, sheer nothing, like the horn of a hare or the son of a barren woman. Absolute non-being never enters experience. Not once in the history of the world has anyone reached eagerly for a hare’s horn believing he saw it glitter on the ground. Whatever shone for that man was something—something sufficient to move his hand.

OBJECTOR: Then say it was both real and unreal at once and complete the contradiction honestly, instead of inventing a third word and hiding inside it.

VACHASPATI: I cannot, and here is why, as plainly as I can say it. “Real” and “unreal” are not two shades on one scale that a thing may mix as grey mixes black and white. They are direct contradictories that exhaust the field between them: to affirm one is, in the same breath and under the same relation, to deny the other. One and the same thing cannot be both affirmed and denied in the same respect without the sentence collapsing into noise. Thus the silver was neither wholly real, nor wholly unreal, nor any coherent mixture of the two. It was *anirvacaniya*—indefinable with respect to that opposition: appearing with the full vividness of reality, supported by nothing that could preserve it as real, and vanishing the moment a steady light corrected the sight.

OBJECTOR: A pleasing formula for a coin that was never missing from anyone’s purse. Why should I trust it as a key to anything larger than a shopkeeper’s shelf?

VACHASPATI: Because the same threefold test, without changing a word, applies to the entire world in which you stand while asking me that question. Think of a mirage. A traveller crossing hot sand sees water shining ahead—not mere memory, for he sees it now before him; not simple truth either, for if a thirsty man runs to it and tries to drink, he will find sand in his mouth and nothing more. The water is there in precisely the way the silver was there: vivid, located, unattainable, indefinable. Now carry the argument one step farther and you reach the very point toward which this whole inquiry has been built. What you call your body; the senses with which you argue against me; this hall, this lamp, this evening itself—all are new, arising and

changing before our eyes, just as the water of the mirage was new at the instant the light fell upon the sand in that way. And all are superimposed, as the mirage-water and shell-silver were superimposed, upon a ground that does not itself change: the one conscious Self that was present, unaltered, in witnessing your childhood body and is present in witnessing the body you wear tonight. The whole visible, tangible, arguable world stands to the Self as the silver stood to the shell—not ultimately real, for a steady vision dissolves it without residue; not simply unreal, for here we both are, using it in order to argue.

OBJECTOR: (quietly) Then when the shopkeeper corrects the fool in the market, the fool's sight clears, and the shell becomes only a shell again—you are telling me that this is a small, ordinary rehearsal for the one correction through which all of us must sooner or later pass.

VACHASPATI: That is exactly what I am telling you. This whole discipline—this whole Bhamati, if you permit an old commentator to name his own book in his own hall—is nothing more than the lamp being corrected, patiently and little by little, so that when at last we look steadily at what we have spent our lives calling silver, we may see, without panic and without loss, that it was a shell—and that, being a shell and nothing else, it could never have been the ground of our happiness.

(A long stillness. Prabhakara and the Nyaya Logician look at one another but do not speak.)

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara returns, lifts the shell from beside the door, turns it once in the lamplight, and sets it down again.)

SUTRADHARA: No one in this hall tonight has argued that the man was right to reach for silver. The dispute concerned only where the silver was while he was mistaken. Follow that dispute to its end and, in the smallest costume, it asks one of the largest questions philosophy knows how to ask. Vachaspati Mishra did not invent the shell. Every tradition represented in this hall inherited the same old example, turned in the hands of centuries just as we have turned it tonight. What he did was refuse to let anyone leave the assembly until he had said clearly what he thought was happening in the half-second before the error was discovered. If you go home tonight turning that question in your own hand, the play has done what the commentary that inspired it was written to do.

(All the characters depart. The lamp is carried out last. The shell is left by the door exactly where it was found.)

This chapter follows the central epistemological argument of the opening, *adhyāsa*, section of Vachaspati Mishra's *Bhamati*: an analysis of the experience of "I"; the three classical accounts of illusion—Nyaya *anyathākhyāti*, Prabhakara *akhyāti*, and the Advaitin account of *anirvacanīya-khyāti*, established here through the examples of shell-silver and mirage-water; and the extension from the status of a single mistaken perception to the status of the whole visible world in relation to the Self. It does not enter the later discussion of the four Brahma-sutras—*athāto brahmajijñāsā*, *janmādy asya yataḥ*, *śāstrayonitvāt*, and *tat tu samanvayāt*—which raise distinct questions about the definition of Brahman and the authority of the Veda, and which could rightly require another act of their own. The dialogue is a literary construction shaped around the argumentative structure of the text; the Nyaya Logician, Prabhakara, and the Objector are composite voices for positions tested and answered in the commentary, not portraits of named historical persons.

BHAMATI

Stories, Narratives, Illustrations, and Quotations

The assembly grew quiet. Standing among the disciples and the villagers, the Sutradhara said in a low voice, "Now hear the old illustrations that lie at the root of this disputation. They are no one man's inheritance; whoever hears them may understand." And he began to tell them one by one.

Water from the Highway and the Current of the Ganga—Just as water from the road, falling into the current of the Ganga, becomes purified, so the paltry words of people like us become sanctified when joined to the work of the Acharya.

The Divine Body in a Dream and the Tiger Assumed by Yogic Power—A person who, in a dream, assumes a divine body and enjoys pleasures suited to it wakes, sees himself furnished with a human body, and says, "I am not a god; I am a man." The divine body is thereupon cancelled, yet the substratum of "I-ness", distinct from the body, is experienced without cancellation. Likewise, one who by yogic power becomes a tiger experiences the identity of the Self despite the difference of body. The body, therefore, is not the substratum of "I-ness."

Crystal and the Hibiscus—A crystal is known to be distinct from a flower; yet because of its perfect transparency, the reflection of a red hibiscus upon it produces the illusory experience of a "red crystal."

Trees on a Mountain and Blades of Grass—In the judgment, "I am in this dwelling and I know," the all-pervading Self is apprehended as limited,

just as to a person standing on level ground the vast trees on the summit of a high mountain may appear no larger than blades of grass.

Kalakshi, Svastimati, and Devadatta—In the cow named Kalakshi one recognises the cowhood previously perceived in the cow Svastimati. Likewise, when Devadatta, first seen in Pataliputra, is later seen in Mahishmati, the very same Devadatta is recognised in another place. Both are veridical cognitions.

The Yellowness of a Shell and the Bitterness of Sugar—The same account applies to experiences such as “the shell is yellow” and “sugar is bitter.” The process is described thus: the yellow colour residing in bile, brought into relation with the exceedingly clear ray proceeding from the eye, is experienced apart from the bile; the shell too is experienced, but because of a defect in the sense-organ its whiteness remains obscured. The yellow colour is not experienced as unrelated to the shell. Because that non-relation is not apprehended, a relation of common locus, previously observed in experiences such as “a heap of yellow gold” or “a yellow wood-apple”, is superimposed upon yellowness and shellhood, and the person says, “a yellow shell.” The experience “sugar is bitter” is to be explained in the same way.

Shell-Silver and the Double Moon—Such falsity is established not only in the doctrines of seekers after truth but in ordinary experience. Hence the commentator says, “Our experience in the world is of this kind: a shell appears as silver.” “But this is not silver” completes the first statement. Granted: experience confirms an illusion in which one thing appears in the form of another. But where two things are in truth one and undivided, an illusion of difference is not ordinarily seen. Whence, then, the illusion of difference among individual selves that are non-different from the conscious Self? The commentator answers: “Though there is only one moon, it may appear as though accompanied by a second moon.”

The Chain of Blind Men—Mutual dependence among all three will avail nothing; as the saying goes, “A blind man holding a blind man’s hand falls at every step.”

The Road to Gandhara—Śruti says, “It is to be heard and reflected upon”; and, “The learned and intelligent man reaches the land of Gandhara”—that is, the person who has a teacher receives assistance through his own understanding.

Bhrigu and Varuna—Bhrigu, the son of Varuna, went to his father and said, “Revered sir, teach me Brahman.” From there the teaching proceeds: “Desire to know that from which these beings are born, by which, once born, they live, and into which at the end they enter; that is Brahman.” This is a decisive statement on the subject. “From bliss indeed these beings are born; by bliss, once born, they live; into bliss they enter”—this too is decisive.

The Rope and the Snake—A statement of fact such as “this is a rope, not a snake” removes fear born of illusion; in the same way, knowledge of the truth that the Self does not possess the attributes of saṃsāra removes the illusion of being bound to saṃsāra.

The Sage Vamadeva—Śruti strengthens the point further: for one who has seen the homogeneous reality of Brahman, what delusion and what grief can remain? On seeing Brahman, the sage Vamadeva immediately understood: “I became Manu; I became the Sun.”

Sanatkumara, Who Leads Beyond Grief—“You are my father, who carries me across ignorance”; “I have heard from those who know the Self that the knower of the Self crosses beyond grief. I am in grief; carry me beyond grief”; “Sanatkumara led him beyond darkness.” Such passages of Śruti teach that the fruit of knowledge of Brahman is simply the removal of the ignorance that obstructs liberation.

The Boatman and the Still Middle of the Sea—Remaining in his boat, the boatman leaves behind the changing shore, masses of foam, and restless waves and reaches the wave-less, quiet, clear, stable, unchanging middle. Yet the individual self is not different from Brahman; it is Brahman itself. What, then, can the individual self attain, and by what means? Attainment presupposes difference. Even if the individual self were taken as different from Brahman, all-pervading Brahman would already and eternally be attained. For this reason the objection is answered by the words “even while appearing different from its own nature.”

The Two Birds—The individual self is the subject of the notion “I”, the agent of cognition, and the experiencer of the fruits of action. The mantra says: “One bird eats the sweet fruit; the other does not eat but only watches.” The bird that eats the fruit is the individual self; the one that does not eat is the witnessing Supreme Self.

Sumeru—“Mount Sumeru, king of mountains, is the dwelling place of Indra and the other guardians of the worlds, of Siddhas, Vidyadharas, Gandharvas, and hosts of Apsarases; it is formed of golden rock washed by the waters of the Mandakini falling from Brahmaloka, and made delightful by gardens fair as Nandana and by the voices of crystal-like birds at play.”

The Dravida, Devadatta, and the Birth of a Son—A Dravida who does not know the meaning of the Arya language sits at Devadatta’s house beside the royal road on his way to the city. He knows that the birth of a son is a cause of joy to a father. Accompanying a messenger, he reaches Devadatta in the city. The messenger offers a cloth moistened with saffron-water in which the infant’s feet have been washed and says, “Devadatta, may your prosperity increase; a son has been born to you.” At once the Dravida sees Devadatta’s hair stand on end, his eyes and face opening like fully blossomed lotuses. He infers the joy arisen in

Devadatta, and also infers that the statement just heard is the cause of this joy, which did not exist before the words were spoken. He understands that the sentence communicated a meaning capable of producing joy, for a mere utterance that taught no joy-producing meaning could not itself have produced joy. No other cause of joy is visible, while the birth of a son is known to be such a cause; he therefore concludes that this is what the messenger announced. The same pattern is to be understood in cases of fear, grief, and the like.

The Old Man and the Child Who Learns—On hearing, “When fever comes, eat wholesome food,” or, “Do not give your ring to a snake,” an elderly man takes wholesome food, or abandons an inclination he had to give away the ring. Watching this, a learning child infers that the elder’s engagement and withdrawal are caused respectively by desire and aversion. The elder’s engagement and withdrawal are independent acts produced by desire and aversion, just as the child knows his own to be.

The Wealthy Householder—A wealthy householder has a sense of ownership toward his wealth and therefore fears that it may be stolen. But if the same man renounces the wealth and is freed from identification with it, the fear that it may be stolen no longer remains in him.

The Man Who Wears Earrings—Likewise, one who wears earrings experiences pleasure through identification with the wearing of them. But when the same man removes the earrings and is freed from that identification, the pleasure born of wearing them is no longer present.

The Lion, the Post, and the Shell—In an animal possessing a mane and a distinctive form, coexistence and concomitance establish “lion” as the primary meaning of the word and the corresponding cognition. When a man possesses ordinary leonine qualities such as ferocity and courage, the same informed speaker may apply the word “lion” and the lion-cognition to him secondarily. But in someone who does not know the difference between a lion and a man, the word and cognition belonging to one thing arise in another not figuratively but through error. In the dusk, when its distinctive features are unclear, a post may be taken as “this is a man”; here the post becomes the object of the word and cognition “man.” In the same way, for an unknown cause, the word and cognition “this is silver” arise in relation to a shell.

The Snake’s Cast-Off Skin—As the skin shed by a snake lies dead and discarded upon the anthill, so this body lies. What remains is bodiless, immortal life: Brahman alone, light alone.

When the illustrations were finished, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while. Then he said, “Now hear the sayings that Śruti, the sages, and the śāstras have carried from age to age.” And one by one he began to recite the old utterances.

In an injunctive sentence, a word's meaning cannot differ from its primary meaning. Where what follows is connected with what precedes, the earlier position is weaker, as in the context of the original rite and its subsidiary action. Where two cognitions arise successively without mutual dependence, the superiority of the later cognition over the earlier is known. Absence is merely another positive entity considered in relation to something else. At any time a person apprehends the existence of a thing as true or false either in relation to that thing's own nature or in relation to something else. Absence is only being in another form, nothing more, for no separate entity of "absence" is established. Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinite.

A blind man holding a blind man's hand falls at every step. When That is illumined, all things are illumined; by Its light this whole world shines. One who desires heaven should perform the Jyotishtoma sacrifice. Injure no living being. One who wishes to destroy his enemy by an abhichara rite should perform the Shyena sacrifice. Adhyāsa is cognition of a thing in a form that it does not possess: the appearance elsewhere of something previously seen, in a form resembling memory.

Therefore, now, the desire to know Brahman. Om and atha—these two words first issued from Brahma's throat; therefore both are auspicious. Discipline of the mind, practised for a long time without interruption and with reverence, gains a firm foundation. Having known that One, the learned Brahmin should cultivate wisdom. Blessed is the one in whom the forty-eight purifying sacraments have been completed. Having discharged the three debts, a person should set the mind upon liberation. Brahmins desire to know It through the study of the Veda, sacrifice, and the rest.

Not by action, not by progeny, not by wealth, but by renunciation alone is immortality attained. A person of purified understanding beholds Brahman through meditation. When sin has been exhausted, knowledge arises. For the sage who wishes to attain yoga, action is said to be the means; for one established in yoga, tranquillity is the means. Or one may pass directly from student life into renunciation. Having been a householder, one may become a forest-dweller; having been a forest-dweller, one may renounce. Having studied the Veda according to rule, begotten a son, and performed sacrifices according to one's means, one should set the mind upon liberation.

The twice-born who desires liberation without studying the Veda, begetting offspring, or performing sacrifice falls into a lower state. Or one may renounce from the student stage, the householder stage, or the forest-dwelling stage. On the very day dispassion arises, one may renounce. Endowed with tranquillity, self-restraint, withdrawal, endurance, concentration, and faith, a person sees the Self in the Self and

all things in the Self. I have drunk Soma; I have become immortal. That from which the origin and the rest of this world proceed. The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.

In the beginning there was Being alone, dear one. Desire to know that from which all these beings are born, by which, once born, they live, and into which at the end they enter; that is Brahman. From bliss indeed all these beings are born; by bliss, once born, they live; into bliss they enter. Sadeva somya idam agra āsīt. Ekam evādvitīyam. Ātmā vā idam eka evāgra āsīt. This Brahman is without before or behind, without within or without.

This Self is Brahman, the experiencer of all. Immortal Brahman alone is in every direction. Tat tvam asi. Aham brahmāsmi. Ayam ātmā brahma. So long as one is embodied, the complete cessation of pleasure and pain is not possible. Pleasure and pain do not touch the bodiless.

The wise person, though dwelling in the body, knows the Self as bodiless, stable amid the changing, great and all-pervading, and does not grieve. This Self is without breath, without mind, pure. Tell me that which is other than dharma and other than adharma, other than what is done and not done, other than past and future. The one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. On seeing the higher and lower Brahman, his actions are destroyed. The knower of Brahman-bliss fears nothing from any quarter. O Janaka, you have attained fearlessness.

Knowing the Self as “I am Brahman,” one became this entire world. The knot of the heart is cut, all doubts are destroyed, and actions grow exhausted. I became Manu; I became the Sun. You are my father, who carries me across ignorance. I have heard from knowers of the Self that the one who knows the Self crosses beyond grief; I am in grief—carry me beyond grief. Sanatkumara carried him beyond darkness. It is other than the known, and beyond the unknown as well.

How shall one know That by which everything is known? Know as Brahman that which speech does not reveal, but by which speech itself is revealed—not what people worship as an object. The one who thinks, “I know It,” does not know It. The seer of sight cannot be seen; the hearer of hearing cannot be heard; the thinker of thought cannot be thought; the knower of knowledge cannot be known. One bird eats the sweet fruit; the other does not eat, but only watches. The wise call the Self joined with body, senses, and mind the enjoyer. One God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the inner Self of all, overseer of action, dwelling in every creature, witness, consciousness, one and without qualities.

It pervades all: luminous, bodiless, without wound or sinew, pure and untouched by sin. The Self is to be seen; the Self is to be heard. When all this is the Self, by whom and whom would one see? By whom and whom would one know? By what could the knower be known? If a person knows

the Self as “I am That,” for desire of what, and for what purpose, would he suffer along with the suffering of the body? Knowing this, a person may become wise and fulfilled, O Bharata. By Its light all else is illumined; by Its light this entire world shines. There is nothing higher than the Self; It is the boundary and the supreme goal.

Things are not dear for the sake of the things themselves; all things are dear for the sake of the Self. As the skin shed by a snake lies dead and discarded upon the anthill, so this body lies; what remains is bodiless, immortal life—Brahman alone, light alone. Though there are eyes, it is as though there were no eyes; though ears, as though no ears; though speech, as though no speech; though mind, as though no mind; though breath, as though no breath. The one who knows both vidyā and avidyā together crosses death through avidyā and attains immortality through vidyā.

Having said this, the Sutradhara folded his hands and bowed to the assembly. “What you have heard, reflect upon; what you have reflected upon, live,” he said, and fell silent.

The Argument for the Self

The one who says “I” has his own breath for witness—the pond asks no one how deep it is.

— Garh Narikel



(An original dramatic composition in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue, built upon the structure of philosophical argument.)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — opens and closes the play

Udayanacharya — the Nyaya philosopher of Mithila, defender of the existence of the Self

Kshanabhadra — a Buddhist monk-logician defending universal momentariness and Vijñānavada; a composite fictional character representing Buddhist positions examined in the source text

The Disciple — Udayana's pupil, who gives voice to the assembly's questions

The Council — the learned gathering, nodding at times in agreement and at times in doubt

Setting: a royal hall of disputation in Mithila. Lamps burn even by day. A ghatika-yantra, a water clock, measures the time allotted to each speaker, in keeping with the rules of ancient debate.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters and bows to the assembly.)

SUTRADHARA: Before the debate begins, one salutation—not to the Supreme Lord whom argument may prove or fail to prove, but to that reality which no argument can either bestow or take away. What you are about to hear is not history. Udayana lived; his opponents live only upon his pages, as the shadow of an arm raised before a lamp is nothing apart from the lamp and the arm. I have gathered those shadows into one robe and one voice, and named him Kshanabhadra—"fortunate in the moment"—because he speaks for every teacher who held that nothing endures, that there is no one within who looks outward, and that the word "I" is merely a habit mistakenly taken for truth.

The dispute you are about to hear asks the same question in four chambers: Who is the one who asks? Is there someone who suffers, remembers, is bound, and may also be freed—or is there only a river that mistakes its own waves for banks?

Water clock, begin. Let each side speak in turn, as the rules of disputation require, and let no one claim victory until the other has received his full measure of time.

(Before the debate begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

Who says "I," his own breath bears witness;

The pond asks no other how deep its waters lie.

The Self may be asked for proof, yet the Self is proof itself;

What is seen within asks no witness from without.

Breath by breath the witness stays, the sense of I remains—

Who has known himself is freed from another's testimony.

(Exit.)

ACT I

The River That Is Not There

A Dispute on Universal Momentariness

(Udayana is seated in the teacher's chair. Kshanabhadra enters, joins his hands, and takes the seat of the objector. The Disciple sits near Udayana's feet.)

KSHANABHADRA: Acharya, let us not spend the water of the clock on ceremony. You teach that behind these eyes sits an unmoving seer, the same from the child who fears the dark to the old man who no longer fears it. I teach the opposite: whatever is real arises in a single moment and perishes in that same moment, and in its place arises something new, resembling the old only as one puff of smoke resembles another. What you call "one flame" is a hundred flames greeting one another so quickly that no eye can see where farewell ends and greeting begins. There is no single seer. There is only seeing, then another seeing, each time new.

UDAYANA: Then I ask the question for which debate was made: what is your proof? Not poetry—proof.

KSHANABHADRA: Whatever is real is momentary. The jar on your shelf is momentary—you too will admit that it eventually breaks. And the disputed thing—the Self, the word "permanent"—is said to be real. Therefore it too must be momentary.

UDAYANA: (To the Disciple.) Do you see the form of the argument? I am shown a jar that breaks and asked to conclude, by an unestablished resemblance, that a Self—which no one has ever seen breaking—must break as well. This is not proof; it is a wish dressed as inference. Tell me, Kshanabhadra: where is the invariable relation between "being real" and "lasting only one moment"? A jar that endures for years is no less real, while it endures, than a spark that lasts an instant. You have shown an example. You have not shown a rule.

KSHANABHADRA: The rule is shown thus: capacity and incapacity cannot exist in the same thing at the same time. A jar, one moment after firing, is capable of holding water; before firing it was incapable. If the very same jar were both capable and incapable, you would have planted a contradiction in one seed. Only if each moment is its own distinct thing does the contradiction disappear.

UDAYANA: Now we have reached the root of the matter, and I thank you for arriving so quickly—the water clock rewards an opponent who is swift more than one who is merely cautious. Say it plainly: when you speak of “capacity,” do you mean the act of producing the effect itself, or merely the power to produce it, present before the act?

KSHANABHADRA: ...The power. A seed is capable of sprouting before it actually sprouts.

UDAYANA: Then hear the snare you have tied around your own foot. If capacity were the act itself, your reason would dissolve into your conclusion—you would be proving momentariness by citing an act that already presupposes momentariness, which is no inference at all but repetition. So you rightly chose power. Yet a power does not expire in one instant. A seed kept in a granary is capable of germination in the sense that nothing in its own nature forbids germination; it has merely not yet met water, warmth, and soil. Does its capacity vanish in every moment in which it is not sprouting? If so, no seed could ever wait for rain. But seeds wait through season after season, and remain seeds throughout the waiting. Your “capacity,” then, must be something that endures through the interval before its exercise—and that is precisely the kind of persistence you deny.

KSHANABHADRA: Say instead that each momentary seed hands its capacity to the next moment, as a torch is passed from runner to runner, each runner new though the flame appears continuous.

UDAYANA: A relay race requires a course upon which the runners are ordered—some reason why the capacity of this moment passes to that next capacity and not to some disconnected moment in another field, another country. You have smuggled persistence in through the back door of your metaphor while showing it out through the front. And there is a second wound, deeper than the first. You say a thing must perish because it necessarily perishes—that destruction requires no other cause, being simply the nature of existence. Then tell me: a stone standing ten years in the sun has, on your account, secretly become ten thousand stones, each destroyed “by its own nature,” while no hammer, weather, or other cause need be noticed. Does it not strike you as strange that a theory made to explain change ends by requiring no explanation for the one change—destruction—that matters most?

KSHANABHADRA: (After a pause.) You press upon a difficult joint, Acharya. I do not concede it. The ending of a momentary thing is not “caused” in the same sense as its arising, precisely because existence and impermanence are not two things.

UDAYANA: Then you have not answered the difficulty; you have named it “identity” and hoped the water clock would run out before anyone noticed. It has not. Still, I shall not pull at this tired point any longer—a

disputant, like a physician, must know when the patient has understood the diagnosis. Let us leave it not refuted by force, but unproved—never actually shown—and move to your second pillar, which is grander and will fall with a greater sound.

ACT II

The Hall of Mirrors

The Rejection of External Objects: A Dispute on the Claim That
Nothing Exists Outside Mind

(The lamps are adjusted. Kshanabhadrā rises and begins to pace, more animated now.)

KSHANABHADRA: Then grant me this, Acharya, since you prefer plain questions: when you dream of a garden, is that garden outside you?

UDAYANA: No.

KSHANABHADRA: And yet while dreaming, the garden appears just as external as this hall appears to you now. In the one respect that matters—the experience of outwardness—waking cognition and dream cognition are alike. If the experience of outwardness can occur in a dream without any external object, what compels you now to posit an external object behind that experience? Perhaps this entire assembly, this water clock, even my robe, is one long dream not yet ended: cognition paints itself in the form of an outside because such projection is its nature, and no outside is needed to supply the colour.

UDAYANA: A pleasing turn, and an old one. Its fault is this: from the fact that some cognitions are objectless you argue that all cognition may be objectless. But a house does not become imaginary merely because some houses are painted upon theatrical cloth. More than that: how do you and I agree this afternoon that dream and waking are sufficiently different to be compared at all? You yourself distinguish them. You will not leave this stage believing there is no floor beneath you, though in a dream you might. That very distinction is a cognition of the difference between two kinds of cognition, made from a standpoint that is not exhausted by either. What is it, if not the report of something that dreaming cannot supply and the world can—a stable object that remains available for testing, correction, and return?

KSHANABHADRA: Say that the “difference” you speak of is only a difference of clarity and coherence within cognition itself. Cognition illuminates itself, as a lamp needs no second lamp in order to be seen. What you call “an external jar” is nothing more than this: cognition assumes for a time the form of jar-ness; nothing outside cognition is needed to account for that form.

UDAYANA: Then tell me this, Buddhist. You and I look at the same jar in the same moment and report the same shape, the same weight when lifted, the same sound when struck. If each of us were only self-illuminating cognition, our two “jars” would be two private paintings without a common canvas. Chance would have to explain their agreement—and that chance would repeat at every meal, in every market, in every hall such as this, for every person who has ever lived. I find it simpler to admit the jar. Consider also your own inference—the very argument you are giving me now. It depends upon my mind receiving a cause from outside itself: your voice entering my ear and addressing a hearer whom you take to be distinct both from the sound and from your own mind that produces it. If nothing lies outside cognition, to whom are you still speaking, and through what medium?

KSHANABHADRA: (A long silence; murmurs in the Council.) You have found the seam in the robe, Acharya. The very act of debate presupposes another side beyond my own stream of cognition, which Vijñānavada cannot admit without embarrassment. I concede that this pillar breaks, though I do not yet concede that the whole house has fallen. One room remains that you have not entered. Even if the external world stands, must any Self stand behind its perception? Perhaps there is the world, and there is its appearing—arising and ending—and no more: no owner, no seer, only seeing, self-luminous and ownerless, like a line of lamps lighting one another without a single lamp-keeper carrying a torch behind them.

UDAYANA: Now you have named the true battlefield, and I shall gladly meet you there, for that is the true destination of this entire inquiry.

ACT III

The Knower Behind Knowledge

On the Reality of the Self

(For the first time Udayana rises from the teacher’s chair and steps down to Kshanabhadrā’s level—a traditional sign that he will now argue not from authority but from evidence alone.)

UDAYANA: Kshanabhadrā, set aside for a while every scripture, every school, every inherited word, and answer only from what is given in this very moment. When you say, “I am tired,” or “I understand,” or even, “I deny that I exist”—what does the word “I” report?

KSHANABHADRA: A convenient fiction. A name that the stream of cognition applies to itself out of habit, as a river is given a name although there is no single thing called “river” apart from the water.

UDAYANA: A fiction, you say—but a fiction must still be uttered by someone, or believed by someone, or at the very least belong to someone. The cognition “I exist” is not like the cognition “the sky is blue,” which may in principle be doubted, disputed, or corrected by better sight. Has any person, waking or dreaming, learned or unlearned, ever doubted his own existence at the very moment he formed the thought of it? You cannot construct the denial “I do not exist” without the “I” whom your sentence attempts to erase still standing behind the erasure and speaking it.

KSHANABHADRA: Every grammarian teaches that a word need not name some entity standing behind it. “It is raining” names no separate “rainer.” So “I know” need not name an I that knows; perhaps there is only knowing, upon which grammar dresses an unnecessary agent.

UDAYANA: A fair reply, and I shall not treat it lightly. “It is raining” indeed names no separate rain-maker. But attend closely to the difference between the two cases, for here lies the root of the matter. I can show you that the grammar of “it is raining” is convenient by pointing to falling water and asking, “Where in this, apart from the rain, is the rainer?” No one will be found. Raining and the falling of water are the same event, with nothing left over. Now apply the same test to knowing. Show me my cognition of the jar and ask: apart from knowing, is there an agent for whom the knowing occurs? The next time you learn a fact you did not wish to hear, watch yourself. One part of the event is the arising of knowledge; another, distinguishable part is resistance—the wish that it were otherwise, the ownership of the discomfort. We say, “I cut”: cutting is one thing and the cutter another; the iron does not own the wound it makes. So too with “I know.” Knowing is an act, and every act we have ever examined, by the clearest evidence, requires an agent distinct from the act—one already present when the act begins and remaining when it ends. The sickle grows blunter after cutting, but the cutter is not destroyed by the cutting.

KSHANABHADRA: Then let the “agent” be merely the body, or the aggregate of senses and intellect working together. There is no need for a Self beyond the cooperation of the five skandhas.

UDAYANA: Then ask yourself why no body serves as the self-awareness of every person. If self-awareness grasped the body merely as body, my hand should say “I” of your hand as readily as of mine. In its bare physical nature a body carries no distinction by which it can divide itself precisely into billions of private claims of “mine.” Something must already present this body as belonging to the knower before the knower can say “mine” of it—and that recognition cannot arise from the body itself without circularity, for the body would first have to be known as “one’s own” in order to explain how it comes to be known as “one’s own.”

DISCIPLE: Acharya, may I ask what troubles me? Suppose the Self is real. In cognition, how do you distinguish it from the stream of experiences it is said to own? A crowd is nothing over and above the people who compose it.

UDAYANA: A good question—and, if a disciple may forgive the comparison, better than more than half the objections raised in this hall. Consider memory. Today I remember the taste of a mango from my childhood twenty years ago. The tasting was one event, gone decades past, its instant destroyed beyond recovery. The remembering is another event, now, in a body older and altered in every visible detail. For this remembrance to be my remembrance—not merely a report about some stranger’s vanished pleasure, as alien to me as another man’s diary—one thing must have been present at the tasting and remain present at the remembering, binding the two moments into one person’s history rather than two unrelated persons’ events. A crowd, once dispersed, remembers nothing; no crowd remains that could remember. Yet I remember. A momentary cognition wholly destroyed before the next arises can no more explain this bridge than one wave can remember the shape of a wave that broke upon the bank an hour before it was born.

KSHANABHADRA: (Quietly.) Some of our own teachers speak of an *alaya-vijñana*—a store-consciousness, a concealed continuity beneath the momentary flashes at the surface—precisely to bear this weight.

UDAYANA: Then, Kshanabhadrā, I welcome you halfway across the hall already. You have just described, in Buddhist robes, precisely what I have called the Self throughout this debate: something that endures beneath and behind the passing flashes, is not identical with any one of them, and is required to explain memory, ownership, and even the possibility that you have addressed me as the same hearer from the beginning of this debate to its end. Change the name if you wish. Once the reality for which the name was fashioned is admitted, I shall not quarrel over the name.

ACT IV

The Silence Beyond Argument

On the Self as the Ground of Liberation

(The water in the clock is almost spent. Kshanabhadrā has returned to his seat, subdued but not defeated.)

KSHANABHADRA: Grant, Acharya, that I accept your Self—enduring, remembering, distinct from the body and from the bare act of knowing. One question remains, and it is the question that first sent me to a teacher in childhood, before I ever heard the word “momentary”: why is there suffering, and is there any way out of it that does not require an

invented story? You have won me a Self. Have you won me a Self worth keeping?

UDAYANA: That is, in the end, the only question for which both our traditions were made. Everything before it was merely the clearing of the ground. Consider: if there is no Self, only a self-illuminating stream, then no one is bound and no one is freed; every teacher who taught a path out of suffering was instructing an empty room to leave itself. But if there is a Self—something that remains between error and correction, sleep and waking, the tasting of the mango and its remembrance thirty years later—then that continuity makes liberation more than a word. The same Self that mistook itself for the body, and suffered through that mistake, can unlearn the mistake and thereby be freed from suffering—not by vanishing like one of your momentary flashes, but by remaining, at last rightly, without the old illusion. There is nothing in a wave that can be liberated; only water enduring long enough to notice that it was never merely one wave can be freed from that error.

KSHANABHADRA: And the order behind this—the law by which knowledge frees and ignorance binds, the fact that inquiry of this kind can be trusted—you will ground it in some further being, will you not, in a Creator? I have heard that your road leads there from here.

UDAYANA: It does, though the water clock will not allow us that whole road tonight, and a wise disputant stops before he has worn out his welcome. I shall say only this, and let it be tonight's last word, not the conclusion of the matter. An order that makes the mind capable of knowing a world no mind created is either an endlessly repeated accident, or it bears the marks of intention—just as the measured letters upon this hall's pillar are either accidents of weather, which no serious person would believe, or the work of a hand that meant something. I hold the latter view. Whether I have proved it to your satisfaction belongs to another day and another full water clock. Tonight it is enough that you do not leave this hall certain that there is no one who can leave it.

(Kshanabhadra rises and joins his hands—not quite in defeat, but with that particular respect one disputant offers another who has taken his argument seriously enough not merely to reject it, but to dismantle it with care.)

KSHANABHADRA: I came into this hall to empty out the Self, Acharya. Now I cannot even empty out the question of who it was that came.

UDAYANA: Then the water clock has done its work. Go and sit with that question longer—that too is a discipline. A well-fought debate does not end in one man's silence; it ends in better thinking by both.

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara returns as the lamps are lowered.)

SUTRADHARA: Thus the debate ends, though the question it examined does not. It has been asked in every age by every thinking creature who has ever stopped in the middle of a sentence and wondered who, after all, was speaking. Udayana's answer was not the final word in the centuries that passed beyond this stage. His opponents returned in other robes with sharper instruments, and they will return again after this performance. That is not philosophy's defeat but its work. If you leave this hall with the question not settled but sharpened, then this play—like the treatise from which it borrowed its bones—has done its work.

(All characters exit.)

This chapter follows the four principal movements of Udayana's *Atmatattvaviveka*: the critique of universal momentariness, the critique of the denial of external objects (*Vijñānavada*), the positive proof of the Self principally through self-awareness and memory, and the treatise's turn toward God and liberation. Kshanabhadra is a composite fictional character giving voice to positions of several Buddhist logicians examined across the work—including Dharmakīrti, Ratnakīrti, and Jñānashrī—not a portrayal of any one historical person.

STORIES, ILLUSTRATIONS, AND QUOTATIONS FROM THE *ATMATATTVAVIVEKA*

Stories

The assembly grew quiet. Standing among the disciples and the people of the village, the Sutradhara began, in a low voice, to tell the old stories.

The Fool and the Elephant at the Palace Gate—A fool saw an elephant standing at the gate of the royal palace and began to speculate: “Is this darkness swallowing a radish? Or a thundering cloud that pours lightning? Or a kinsman, because the Acharya says that one who accompanies you as far as the palace gate or the cremation ground is kin? Or the shadow of something that only appears to stand upon the earth?” Then he cut down his own imaginings one by one. “Not darkness, for darkness would not slap with two winnowing-fan ears; not a cloud, for a cloud has no four pillars; not a kinsman, for a kinsman does not swing a great staff; not a shadow, for a shadow does not swallow hundreds of human heads. Therefore it is nothing.”

Would such speculation, and the refutation of each speculation, abolish the reality of the elephant? Or should another fool, who merely says, "What is, is," be considered more trustworthy?

The Housewife with Lentils in Her Mouth—This defence of cognition's self-awareness is like the condition of a housewife who tried to please her husband with her mouth full of lentils, but could not conceal the smell upon her breath.

Blue and White Pigeons, Amla, Cotton, and Crystal—Suppose that of two pigeons, one blue and one white, the blue pigeon is regularly fed milk and the white pigeon the juice of jamun fruit; their offspring may then become white and blue respectively. Thus mere origination from a thing does not by itself determine the nature of what follows. A cognitive series arising after the experience of a blue object may possess a distinction absent from a series without blue-cognition; analogies of this kind occur elsewhere. The fruit of an amla tree watered with milk may later grow sweeter. Cottonseed watered with lac-dye may abandon its whiteness, take on a red colour, and carry that colour into the flower. But cognition and memory are not like this. Even when crystal lies beside a hibiscus or another flower, it does not take the flower's colour as its own and remains clear; likewise, cognition, though affected by its object, remains cognition as such.

The Newborn Child's First Movement—If the body itself were conscious, a newborn infant could not make its first movement, because without desire and aversion no effort is possible. Desire cannot arise until there is recognition that a certain object produces a desired result; and such recognition cannot arise without memory of the invariable relation between that object and the pleasure it brings. Yet the infant has had no such experience in this life. The body that experienced the relation belonged to a former birth; once that body has become ash, the new body that replaces it cannot remember the previous experience.

The Exorcist and the Snake-Bitten Man—How, then, does one versed in serpent-lore remove poison without touching the body of the bitten man? In such a case the exorcist's effort may connect directly with the consciousness of the deity who restores the victim to life. Or the exorcist's own effort, aided by the mantra, the effort of God, or the merit produced by the mantra may enter causally into the process that removes the poison.

The Cat Who Practised Austerities to Win the Mice's Trust—This resembles the famous story of the cat who performed austerities in order to gain the confidence of the mice.

Teaching Acting by Acting—Desiring to propagate the path of dharma, God himself creates many human forms of teacher and pupil. Just as an acting-master teaches by acting himself, so God moves the

great persons of each age to act in this way and thereby establishes the authority of the Veda.

The Weaver of Udumbaragarta—Some lazy and timid people wish to escape the duties of their varna. Thus a weaver from a village called Udumbaragarta, out of indolence toward religious obligation, abandoned the Vedic path and adopted Buddhism.

The Child Peering through a Hole in a Bright Drum—Some people are deluded like a child peering through a small hole in a brightly lit drum and taking one light for many. Deceived by fraudulent teachers, they likewise take what is harmful to be good and adopt non-Vedic texts.

Illustrations, Metaphors, and Proverbs

Then the Sutradhara began to recite the old illustrations.

A Hundred Curses from the Gods—If a thing's nature were to produce its effect immediately, and that nature were already present in it, then even a hundred curses of the gods could not forcibly prevent it from producing its effect at the very first moment.

Molasses Flowing to the Elbow—It is like syrup from molasses that has run from the palm to the elbow and can no longer be licked. Just as the syrup at the elbow cannot be licked, so a question of momentariness that has already been discussed again and again ought not be raised yet another time.

One Hundred Coins and Five Groups of Twenty—What is to be said of a man who refuses to pay a hundred coins even under threat of decapitation, yet cheerfully pays five groups of twenty?

The Cobra Bitten by Its Own Venom—It is like a female cobra rendered senseless after being bitten by its own poison.

The Mongoose Killed by Its Own Young—Thought of this kind ends like a mongoose killed by its own offspring: destroyed by its own consequence.

Atoms Like Raktabija—The atom is a strange entity, like the demon Raktabija: tear open the belly of the demoness of argument and it comes out again in atomic form. The point is that reasons advanced to refute atoms ultimately establish atoms themselves.

Trying to Extinguish One Lamp with Another—The more the Buddhist tries to erase consciousness, the brighter the light of consciousness becomes. Even the denial of consciousness must itself be known. Thus the Buddhist is attempting to create darkness by extinguishing one lamp with another.

Dream Smoke, Dream Mountain, Dream Fire—If inference occurs in a dream, dream smoke leads to the inference of dream fire on a dream mountain.

The Milkless Teat on a Goat's Neck—In an inference for partlessness, the reason called "reality" is as useless as the milkless teat on a goat's neck.

Seed Sown in a Field and Seed Fallen There by Chance—It is not the case that only seed deliberately sown by a labourer in a field can germinate, while seed that happens to fall there cannot.

The Movement of a Dancer's Eyebrow—The positive invariable relation between these two terms can likewise be illustrated by the movement of a dancer's eyebrow. Recognition that the eyebrow's movement, or the aggregate of atoms making up the eyebrow, is "the same" is not founded upon ignorance.

The Forest-Dweller Who Knows Venomous Creatures—As a forest-dweller accustomed to dealing with venomous creatures tries to restore consciousness to one rendered insensible by snakebite, so the seeker of the Self strives for the direct realization of self-consciousness.

Showing the Blind Man the Road—As an ordinary person directs a blind man on the road, saying, "Turn right, not left," so God too shows the way to human beings.

Food Mixed with Honey and Poison—A person excessively attached to something may overlook its defects and be drawn toward it; one excessively averse may undervalue its virtues and turn away. Food made from a mixture of honey and poison is the illustration.

The Gold Necklace Already Worn around the Neck—Can one desire to obtain even what is already possessed but mistakenly thought lost—as when someone searches for the gold necklace already hanging around his neck?

The Lust-Driven Young Man—There is a well-known saying: when a man consumed by lust cannot obtain a supremely beautiful woman, he may descend even to animals.

The Praise of the Blind and the Painter—If a crowd of blind men praises a painting, how does the painter's glory increase?

Classical Quotations and Maxims

Then the Sutradhara recited the old sayings and quotations.

A Verse of Praise—Salutation to the Supreme Being, greatest among the ancient teachers, lord and creator of all worlds. His sovereignty over the worlds he created belongs to his very nature. Having created them, he sustains their existence, teaches the beings of the world the correct use of

words, and for their welfare lays down commands to perform beneficial acts and prohibitions against harmful ones. His teaching is authoritative, his compassion toward living beings is natural, and his endeavour for the good of all is bound by no condition.

Dharmakirti's Statement—"There is no non-existence or destruction distinct from the existent thing itself."

The Lokayata Declaration—"So long as we live, let us enjoy pleasure."

The Bodiless Self—"Neither good nor evil touches the bodiless being."

The Subtlety and Greatness of the Self—"The Self is subtler than the subtlest."

"The Self has been called greater than the greatest."

Four Statements of Vyasa—"A human being is born short-lived and with diminished vital power."

"At every transition of a Manvantara, new scriptures are required for people of this kind."

"In the Kali age, giving alone is the foremost meritorious act."

"People will be born who are absorbed only in satisfying the tongue and the sexual organ."

The Self Is Not Action—"The Self is not action, nor is it an object connected with action."

All Existence Is the Self—"Whatever exists is the Self alone."

The Beginning of Creation—"At the beginning of creation there was only non-being."

The Darkness of Self-Denial—"Those who hold that the Self is destroyed fall into terrible darkness."

The Self Beyond Prakriti—"The Self is beyond Prakriti."

No Reality Apart from the Self—"There is no real entity distinct from the Self."

The State of Brahman-Knowledge—"When Brahman is known, nothing else is seen; the seer becomes one with the seen."

The Negation of Duality—"In Brahman there is neither duality nor anything opposed to duality."

The Self Beyond Speech and Mind—"The pure Self is beyond speech and mind."

The Self Returning to Itself—"Satisfied with every object of enjoyment, knowing its own form and existence, the Self returns again into itself."

Closing Verse—In the territories abandoned by rival doctrines, where people wander terrified and directionless through deep darkness, Udayana clears away the obstructions by reason, common understanding, and scriptural testimony, and opens for them the road to liberation.

The Final Word on Criticism of the Treatise—I shall take no pleasure in praise from one who is not qualified to understand the virtues of this work. If a crowd of blind men praises a painting, how does the painter's glory increase? Let people criticize this work by pointing out its faults. Learned persons are surely pleased when attention is drawn to factual errors they have made unknowingly.

Having said this, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while. Then he joined his hands and bowed to the assembly.

CHAPTER -98 (NINETY-EIGHT BEFORE)

Who Made This World?

The tree asked, “Who planted me?” The earth laughed: “The one who planted you does not go about asking.”

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



(Based on Udayanacharya's Nyayakusumanjali)

For schoolchildren and a village audience

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — the narrator, who speaks directly to the audience

Acharya — an elderly, affectionate logician, in the likeness of Udayana

Charvaka — the village sceptic: intelligent, quick-witted, and irreverent

The Potter-Woman — maker of earthen vessels at the wheel

Modhu — a curious village boy and the Acharya's pupil

Village Chorus — two or more children; any additional children may be placed in this role

Old Uncle — the oldest man in the village, keeper of names and customs

Lekhani Didi — an old woman who has spent her life copying sacred verses by hand, keeper of the village palm-leaf manuscripts

Stage directions: No special properties are required. A charpoy or low stool, a potter's wheel (real, or represented by a cartwheel), a few earthen vessels, and a handful of bricks are enough. The Chorus may sit at one side of the stage throughout and speak or sing together. Total playing time: approximately thirty minutes.

SCENE ONE — THE CHALLENGE IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE

(The Sutradhara enters alone, walks once around the stage, and claps twice to draw attention.)

SUTRADHARA: Come closer, come closer, all of you! Tonight I have not come to tell you a tale of kings and demons. Tonight I have brought you a quarrel—the oldest quarrel in the world. (He points upward, then down at the earth.) Who made all this—the rising sun, the falling rain, the ripening grain? Did someone make it, or did it simply happen, as puddles happen after rain? Watch, and decide for yourselves.

(Addressing the audience, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

The tree asked, O who was it that planted me?

The earth laughed: the planter never goes about asking.

The maker is silent; what is made begins to ask;

The sky is high, the earth below, yet both abide together.

The question is vast, and the answer dwells in silence—

Whoever sought the planter found his own root.

(The Chorus enters, sits to one side, and begins humming a simple two-line tune. The Acharya enters slowly, leaning on his staff, with Modhu running ahead of him.)

MODHU: Guruji, Guruji! Hurry—Charvaka is standing in the square again, telling everyone that God does not exist at all!

ACHARYA (smiling, without hurrying): Then let us go and hear what he has to say. A question asked loudly deserves an answer given quietly.

(Charvaka enters from the other side, arms spread wide, like a showman addressing a fair.)

CHARVAKA: Good people of the village! Who has seen this “God” the pandits keep talking about? Show me His footprints in the soil! Show me His fingerprints on even one pot! I say no one made this world. It simply is. Fire is hot, water is wet, and the world is... simply the world. No maker required!

CHORUS (together, teasingly): No maker required! No maker required!

MODHU (anxiously, to the Acharya): Guruji, everyone is laughing with him!

ACHARYA (calmly stepping forward): Charvaka, my friend, you argue well—you did so even as a boy. But tell me one thing first. (He picks up an empty earthen pot from a nearby stall.) This vessel in my hand—who made it?

CHARVAKA (laughing): Everyone knows that! The old potter-woman made it on her wheel this very morning!

ACHARYA: How do you know? You did not see her making it.

CHARVAKA: Because pots do not make themselves! Someone must give the clay its shape!

ACHARYA (smiling at the audience): Remember that, my friend. Remember it well. Before the night is over, we shall return to this very spot.

(The Acharya and Modhu leave for the potter’s wheel. Charvaka remains standing, astonished and scratching his head, while the Chorus laughs.)

SCENE TWO — AT THE POTTER’S WHEEL (The Argument from an Effect — Karyat)

(The Potter-Woman sits at her wheel, humming as she shapes a new vessel. The Acharya and Modhu approach. Charvaka follows behind, arms folded, uncertain but curious.)

POTTER-WOMAN: Acharyaji! Come, sit. I am only finishing this last pot for tomorrow’s market.

MODHU: Auntie, may I ask—before you touched the clay, did this pot exist?

POTTER-WOMAN (laughing): Before I touched it? It was only wet clay, Modhu! This pot came into being only when these two hands, this wheel, and the shape I held in my mind all worked together.

ACHARYA: Do you hear that, Charvaka? A lump of clay does not rise one morning and make itself round and useful. A form first conceived as round—a vessel—needs three things: a maker who knows the form, hands capable of the work, and material ready to receive the form.

CHARVAKA: Yes, yes—for a pot. But the whole world is not a pot, Acharya! You cannot set the sky on a wheel!

ACHARYA: Can I not? Look at the sky at night, Charvaka. Season after season, the stars keep their places. The river reaches the sea without taking a single wrong turning. Year after year, rice grows from seed to ear in the same ordered course. Is that less formed than this potter-woman’s vessel? Whatever is “made”—whatever has a beginning, whatever is put together piece by piece, whatever might have been otherwise and yet has taken this particular form—calls for a maker. Not because I say so, but by the same ordinary understanding by which you knew the pot came from the potter’s hands without having watched her make it.

(The Potter-Woman rises and displays the finished vessel. A dholak sounds.)

POTTER-WOMAN: Here. Anyone who doubts that a maker is needed may come to this wheel, here and now, and make a pot himself!

(Charvaka goes to the wheel, makes an awkward attempt, and gets clay on his face. The Chorus bursts into laughter. Charvaka wipes his hands and gives up, smiling despite himself.)

CHARVAKA: Very well, very well! A pot needs a potter—I grant you that. But this proves a potter for a pot, not God for the whole world!

ACHARYA (gently): Patience, my friend. One flower at a time—that is how even a garland for the temple is made. Come. Modhu will show you the next flower.

**SCENE THREE — AT THE GRAIN STOREHOUSE (The
Argument from Combination and Sustenance — Ayojanat /
Dhrityadeh)**

(The stage changes. Villagers and Chorus arrange bricks as though building the wall of a small grain store. Modhu directs them, proud of his work.)

MODHU: Careful, careful! One brick laid wrongly and the whole wall will lean!

CHARVAKA (entering, continuing the earlier argument): Well, Modhu—building a granary today?

MODHU: Look at these bricks, Charvaka Kaka. By themselves they are nothing much—only baked clay, excellent for stubbing your toe. But watch what happens when they come together in the right order, under the right hands.

(The wall rises, either through mime or with real bricks.)

MODHU (continuing): No wall makes itself by having bricks fall together by luck. And once it has been built—look—it does not simply keep itself standing either! Someone chose this order. Someone keeps it standing through rain and wind.

CHARVAKA: Modhu, you listen very closely to your Guruji.

MODHU: I do! He says the first joining of the smallest particles of this world—and the fact that, once made, the world does not fall apart every morning but continues to endure—both point to intelligence behind them. Bricks do not choose their own order. Rain clouds do not choose by themselves to come in Sawan rather than in Magh. Someone placed order at the beginning. Someone still keeps it going.

(The Acharya enters and nods in approval.)

ACHARYA: Well said, Modhu. Charvaka—you asked me for the marks of God's hands. Look around you: not for one mark, but for the order itself. A vessel needed a maker to receive its form. This wall needed a mason to rise. The whole world requires both a maker to give it form and a sustainer to keep it standing—just as this storehouse, once built, still needs its walls to withstand the wind.

CHARVAKA (quieter, but not yet defeated): Even so, Acharya—order might be an accident that happened to come out right, while all the failed accidents are ones we never see!

ACHARYA (smiling): Ah—now that is a real question, not a taunt. Come. Sit. Let us finish it properly together—as scholars, not as a crowd flinging mud.

SCENE FOUR — DISPUTATION AND BLESSING

(All the characters gather at centre stage: the Acharya, Charvaka, the Potter-Woman, Modhu, and the Chorus, seated around them like a village panchayat.)

ACHARYA: Charvaka, you say perhaps things merely happened to fall into this fine order by chance, and we—who exist because of that fortunate chance—are simply the survivors left to talk about it, while a thousand unlucky chances left no one behind to complain. Is that your argument?

CHARVAKA: That is my argument, Acharya. Simple and sharp.

ACHARYA: Then give it a simple and sharp answer. Chance too must work upon something—some clay, some bricks, some grains of rice already composed of subtler things. Those subtle things—the “atoms,” as the learned call them—when they first come together to begin a world, why do they combine at all, and why in an order capable of pots, rivers, rice, and children rather than no order whatsoever? A wheel may spin forever, but a pot appears only when the potter’s hands direct the clay. Chance, truly left alone, does not even know how to try again.

CHARVAKA (after a long pause, then honestly): ...I do not have a ready answer to that question, Acharya. Not tonight.

(The Chorus softly hums the opening tune again, now gentler.)

ACHARYA (warmly, placing a hand on Charvaka’s shoulder): I did not ask you to have an answer ready tonight, my friend. I asked only that you look—truly look—at the vessel, the wall, the wheeling sky, as you would look at anything else you doubted. That is all reason asks. Not blind belief. Not surrender. Only an honest gaze.

CHARVAKA (to the audience, arms spread, half laughing): Well, good people—I came to this square tonight to prove that there is no maker. I leave certain only of this: a pot needs a potter, a wall needs a mason, and a good question needs a patient answer, not a loud one. Whether I accept a maker of the whole world or doubt a little longer, I am asking better questions now. Perhaps that too is worth something.

ACHARYA (raising both hands over them as in blessing): Then let that be tonight’s harvest. Whether you leave this square with faith or with doubt, like my clever friend, take this much home: look honestly at the world before you decide. That is all the old scholars wished to teach.

(The Sutradhara steps forward again and addresses the audience directly.)

SUTRADHARA: And so, good people, the old book ends not by silencing the doubter, but by wishing that the fragrance of these flowers of

reasoning should reach believer and sceptic alike, so that both may go home a little wiser. If even one child tonight has asked “But why?” one time more than usual, then our little vessel has found its shape.

(The Chorus rises. All the characters stand in a row with joined hands, sing the final couplet together, and bow.)

CHORUS *(sung, a simple repeated couplet):*

*The pot was shaped by the potter’s hand, the wall rose with the mason
beside it;*

*Who shaped the world? Ask, ponder, and carry the question within
you!*

(All bow.)

SCENE THREE-B — IN THE MARKETPLACE OF WORDS

The Argument from the Fixity of Word-Meaning — Padat

(At one side of the market. A crowd of children has gathered around an unfamiliar fruit or object lying in a basket—something none of them has seen before. Modhu is among them. They argue loudly over what it should be called.)

CHILD ONE: Let us call it “Gonga”!

CHILD TWO: No, no—“Jhalmu” sounds much better!

CHILD THREE: You are both wrong. It ought to be called—

(Old Uncle enters leaning on his stick, hears the commotion, and laughs.)

OLD UNCLE: Stop, stop, little sparrows! If every one of you gives it a different name, how will your mothers tell you to fetch it from the basket?

MODHU: Old Uncle, no one will agree! Everyone wants his own name to win!

OLD UNCLE: That is why villages keep old men around, Modhu. Some matters are not settled by shouting. Come—sit.

(He turns the object over in his hands, considers it, and then announces:)

OLD UNCLE: We shall call this a “Tinkoli.” From today onward, whenever anyone in this village says “Tinkoli,” everyone will know exactly what is meant.

(By now Charvaka too has arrived and is listening with interest.)

CHARVAKA: There you have done it again, Old Uncle! With your own tongue you have just performed the very work my Acharya friend keeps saying only God can perform. Did the word “Tinkoli” choose by itself to mean this fruit? Certainly not—you decided it just now, before us all, by nothing more than the authority of your age!

OLD UNCLE (delighted that someone is listening carefully): Exactly so, Charvaka. And while you are being clever, notice one more thing. Once I have said it, I need not explain it separately to every child. Tomorrow Modhu will hear “Tinkoli” and know at once what I mean—not because he reasons it out step by step, but because the word and its meaning have already been tied together, like a bucket tied to a rope.

CHARVAKA: Yes—because you tied them together just now, before all of us!

OLD UNCLE: And who tied the very first word in the world to its very first meaning, Charvaka? Not I. I merely add new words to an old, very old rope that was already knotted before my grandfather’s grandfather. Somewhere at the beginning of that rope, someone had to tie the first knot—someone first had to say, “This sound shall mean that thing,” before the rest of us could inherit the practice of knotting.

(Charvaka opens his mouth to answer, then closes it again and thinks.)

MODHU (delighted): Old Uncle has caught you thinking, Charvaka Kaka!

CHARVAKA (recovering, smiling): Thinking is not the same as losing, Modhu! Perhaps the first rope formed by itself, slowly, over many, many years, as people gradually agreed among themselves, little by little—perhaps no single knot-maker was needed at all!

OLD UNCLE (shrugging and laughing): Perhaps. Ask your Acharya that question—my knees are old, and this basket will not walk home by itself.

(Old Uncle leaves laughing with the basket. The children scatter, now happily calling the fruit “Tinkoli.” Charvaka remains, turning the thought over, while Modhu tugs at his arm.)

MODHU: Come, Charvaka Kaka—Lekhani Didi is reading the old leaves again. Let us go and listen.

CHARVAKA (walking, to himself): Knot by knot, this village seems determined not to give me any peace tonight...

SCENE THREE-C — AT OLD LEKHANI DIDI'S HOUSE

The Argument from Trustworthy Authorship — Pratyayatah

(A small veranda. Lekhani Didi sits on a mat with a pile of old palm-leaf folios, reading softly to a few seated villagers and members of the Chorus. Modhu and Charvaka arrive and sit to one side.)

LEKHANI DIDI (finishing a line and looking up): ...and therefore, my friends, the elders always said: speak the truth, protect those who cannot protect themselves, and do not fear the unseen fruit of good action. So the old verses teach us.

CHARVAKA (respectfully, but directly): Lekhani Didi, may this foolish sceptic ask you something?

LEKHANI DIDI (smiling): You may ask me anything, Charvaka. You always do.

CHARVAKA: These leaves you read from—how do we know that what is written on them is true? None of us has seen this “unseen fruit.” None of us has gone to the heaven these old verses promise, and no one has returned from there with news!

LEKHANI DIDI: A good question, and an old one. Tell me first: when you were little and your mother said, “Do not put your hand in the fire; it will burn you,” had you yourself ever been burned?

CHARVAKA: No... but I believed her, because she had seen fire before, and because she had never lied to me about the well, the snake in the granary, or anything else.

LEKHANI DIDI: Just so. We trust someone's word about what we cannot test for ourselves only when two things are true: the speaker knows the matter directly, and the speaker has no reason to deceive us. Now these verses speak of things none of us can test directly—what action truly brings which unseen consequence, what lies beyond this life, what the deepest order of dharma and adharma really is. If speech about such things is to deserve trust—not merely to sound like beautiful poetry, but to be trusted as you trusted your mother about fire—someone must have known those unseen things directly, as your mother directly knew that fire burns.

CHARVAKA: Perhaps wise rishis made good guesses over many years, and those guesses were refined with time into these verses!

LEKHANI DIDI: A guess, however old and however often repeated, remains a guess, Charvaka. Repetition does not turn conjecture into knowledge, any more than telling a story a hundred times turns it into memory. And think of this too: these verses agree across many branches, in villages far apart, recited by people who have never met one another—

word for word, syllable for syllable, as far back as anyone's grandfather's grandfather can remember. Who first taught the beginning of the whole chain—a chain so long and so stable that forgetful human memory alone does not explain its source?

(Modhu listens intently, chin resting on his hand.)

MODHU: Guruji says the same thing about a pot, Lekhani Didi! Whatever is ordered, stable, and plainly has not made itself needs someone behind it who made it so.

LEKHANI DIDI (nodding as she carefully gathers her leaves): Exactly, child. Trustworthy words about unseen things require a trustworthy knower of unseen things behind them—just as Tinkoli needed Old Uncle to name it, and the pot needed the potter-woman's hands. Who that knower is, whom the Acharya will ask you to call God—that is the question your own feet are carrying you toward tonight, Charvaka. I only copy the leaves; I do not close the argument.

CHARVAKA (rising and stretching, now more thoughtful than mocking): Between an elder who gives names and a mother whose word is trusted, this village seems determined to leave me no easy answer tonight.

LEKHANI DIDI (laughing): Good! Easy answers have never been worth much. Go—I think your Acharya is waiting for you in the square.

(Charvaka and Modhu leave together for the main debate. Lekhani Didi returns to her reading, the Chorus hums softly, and the scene ends.)

(The play ends.)

NYAYAKUSUMANJALI

Stories, Analogies, and Quotations

STORIES AND ANALOGIES

The assembly fell silent. Standing among the disciples and villagers, the Sutradhara began, in a quiet voice, to relate the old analogies—

**The Scent of Musk and the Unborn Child — Source section:
exposition and refutation of the Charvaka doctrine**

Nor does the reply hold that the residual impression of an experience in one part of the body passes into another as the scent of musk from one piece of cloth passes into another piece brought into contact with it. If that were so, an unborn child, being in the closest contact with the mother's body, ought to remember the mother's experiences; yet this never occurs.

The Dream of Drowning in a Pond — Source section: proof for the view that the validity of cognition is known externally

Even in a dream, the dreamer cannot wholly deny knowledge of the elements that later enter his doubt. Illusion, false cognition, and dream sometimes cast doubt upon cognitions that in practical life appear true and indisputable. For example, I dream that while swimming in a pond my foot is suddenly caught by something and I begin to drown. The desperate struggle to save myself breaks the dream and I return to waking. Then, by the clear distinction established in experience, I understand that the entire event in the dream was illusory.

The Hungry Man Eating Sweets in a Dream — Source section: proof for the view that the validity of cognition is known externally

This doubt is removed by successful action following cognition. The experience of success is the final test of truth. Yet that experience may take the form of pleasure distinct from cognition and may therefore itself be doubted. A hungry man dreams that he is eating sweets, but on waking his hunger remains exactly as before. This shows that the experience of pleasure may itself be illusory. Even so, the discriminating vision that distinguishes true cognition from error is not wholly destroyed. Dream-experience differs from waking experience; therefore there must be marks by which the two can be distinguished.

Teaching Language through a Puppet — Source section: the reasonableness of the possibility of creation and dissolution

The Lord may impart knowledge of linguistic convention to the first human beings by appearing in a living human body distinct from Himself, taking the roles of teacher and learner, and using the appropriate words. Just as a person pulling strings may place a cord or stick in a puppet's hand and make it point toward a distant object, so that a child, seeing the movement, infers the meaning of the spoken word, language could be taught at the beginning of creation. From there, instruction could pass in due order to potters, weavers, and other artisans.

The First Scorpion, Plants, and the Origin of Early Humans — Source section: the reasonableness of the possibility of creation and dissolution

How human beings first appeared in different communities at the beginning of a new creation may be explained by the example of certain plants and scorpions. It is observed that at first some plants and scorpions arise from decayed, damp dung, whereas later generations of plants and scorpions are born from parents of their own kind. In the same way, the earliest human beings of different groups need not have been children of

ordinary couples, but may at the beginning of creation have arisen from special causal materials.

The origin of the earliest members of different human groups may thus be understood by comparison with the first appearance of scorpions and plants. The first scorpion arises from decaying dung, while later generations are born from scorpion parents. Some plants first arise not from the seed of another plant but from special natural conditions; later plants are born from their own seed.

The example of fire is similar. Ordinarily one fire is kindled from another, but the first fire may arise from the friction of arani sticks. In sequences such as milk becoming curd and curd being churned into butter, the initial cause and the cause governing later stages may likewise differ. Thus later descendants among human beings, animals, Brahmins, and other groups are born from their respective parents, while the first ancestors at the beginning of creation may appear from a special ontological constitution produced in accordance with the destinies of distinct selves.

The Gradual Transformation of the Tradition of Samskara — Source section: proofs concerning destruction

From the history of traditions one should understand that there has been a gradual decline in birth, samskara, education, study, performance of duty, and related spheres. At first, offspring were believed to arise through mental intention alone; later, parents engaged in intercourse for the deliberate purpose of having children; later still, children began to arise from intercourse compelled by sexual desire; and now, where restraint and the disciplines of place, time, and conduct have disappeared, children may be born even from relations described as animal-like.

At first, the food taken by a pregnant woman was ritually consecrated; later the woman herself, rather than the food, received the samskara; later the unborn child was consecrated; and now, in ordinary custom, the samskara is performed upon the child after birth. These examples are meant to show a generation-by-generation loss of subtlety in the process of samskara.

The Blind Man Led by Another Blind Man — Source section: proofs concerning destruction

If one memory is made to validate another memory, and one religious practice merely supports another, the process resembles a blind man taking the hand of another blind man. What has not come down through an ordered oral tradition of teaching is not Veda. Letters without an ordered sequence of sounds are meaningless; disconnected sounds produced merely by the effort of utterance cannot disclose meaning.

Suicide by Poison or Hanging — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

Nor is it satisfactory to define bodily motion as “motion that produces welfare and removes harm.” An attempt at suicide by poison or hanging is harmful, not beneficial, to the agent. If “beneficial and harmful” are replaced by “desired and undesired,” then drinking poison may indeed be a desired act for one bent on suicide. But for whom is the desired or undesired result—for the agent or for another person? On either reading, the motion of atoms could also be called bodily, since its result may be pleasing or useful to God and to the beings He creates. Even when a deluded person mistakes harm for benefit and acts, the action is desired under the influence of that delusion.

The Flying Bird and the Magician Assuming Many Forms — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

The existence of God is also inferred from the sustaining of the world. From the earth to the whole cosmos, everything remains supported, directly or indirectly, through some sustaining effort. Though the world is extraordinarily heavy, it does not fall, just as the heavy body of a bird is borne through the sky by its own effort or by an effort connected with its body. God’s effort sustains the entire world and the realms of gods such as Indra and Yama. God pervades all the deities and is therefore described as non-different from them, just as a magician may assume many forms—a horse, a boar, a tiger, a monkey, a celestial messenger, or an ascetic.

The Narratives of the Tortoise and Boar Incarnations — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

Scripture, addressing Gargi, says that earth and sky are sustained by the governing effort of an unchanging conscious being. Smṛiti and the Gīta likewise state that the immutable Supreme, pervasive through the three worlds, is their sustainer. His supremacy lies in omniscience and a nature beyond the world; because He is the object of worship for all, He is supreme. The three worlds represent the whole of existence. His pervasion of the universe is a relation involving knowledge, will, and effort. “Sustaining” signifies support; “unchanging” signifies freedom from alteration; and “Lord” signifies completely independent will. The narratives of the Tortoise and Boar incarnations likewise describe God as the bearer of the world.

The Potter, Social Usage, Letter-Writing, and Panini — Source section: explanation of the remaining proofs for the existence of God

In the original text, the word pada may also be taken etymologically to indicate the arts and skills of elders, experienced persons, or experts, because from their works and conduct we learn how things are made and how practices are carried on. With this sense as the middle term, the existence of God too may be established. Weaving, craft, other constructive skills, the many forms of adult human conduct, the use of the alphabet and its teaching to children—all are varieties of ordered practice and therefore require some independent initiator. Just as a particular kind of pot is made by a skilled potter, social usages associated with Chaitra and Maitra are learned from a knowledgeable society, writing letters depends upon the craft of writing, and the ordering of prefixes and suffixes is fixed by a grammarian such as Panini, so the universal practices of the world require at their root an independent being who knows them all.

Laughter Awakened by an Old Happy Event — Source section: explanation of the remaining proofs for the existence of God

An objection may be raised: the subject matter of scripture is not known from any other source of knowledge, therefore its author cannot be a conscious being. This does not hold, because God has direct knowledge of the subject matter of scripture. If the middle term is taken to mean “not known by another person,” there is deviation. A person may laugh because of some happy event long past while the observer does not know its cause; nevertheless a statement explaining the laughter still has an author. Thus there is no invariable relation between a subject being unknown from non-scriptural sources and a statement about it being authorless. Inferences claiming that the external senses or mind of a hypothetical author of scripture could not know scriptural matters suffer from the fallacy of an unestablished locus. Even if the possibility of non-eternal cognition is removed, the possibility of eternal divine cognition remains.

The Cattle-Pen beside the Ganga — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

A second possibility is that the intended meaning of a word consists in the hearer’s liking or dislike. For example, when one says “There is a cattle-pen in the Ganga,” the literal meaning being impossible, the sense “beside the Ganga” is understood. But whether or not the hearer likes or dislikes the bank of the Ganga, the word “Ganga” can still be taken to indicate the bank. Thus liking and dislike are not necessary components of intended meaning.

**The Lover and the Traveller in the Poem — Source section:
alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text**

A third possibility is that intended meaning is simply the secondary or suggested meaning of a word. But not every secondary meaning is intended. In a celebrated verse a woman says to a traveller, “O traveller, go where my beloved has gone; perhaps I too may be born there.” On its surface the sentence appears to encourage the journey, while its real intention is to prevent it. Here the intended meaning is contrary to the literal one; therefore every secondary or suggested sense cannot simply be identified with intended meaning.

People Shouting on a Raised Platform — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

Nor is it proper always to treat intended meaning as wider than the primary meaning. In the sentence “The platform is shouting,” the word “platform” signifies the people seated upon it, though there is no identity between the platform and those seated there. The meaning is taken according to context, but this does not establish a rule that every indirect meaning is intended meaning.

The Example of Stout Devadatta — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

For example, from “Stout Devadatta does not eat by day,” the postulation “He eats at night” arises only when the speaker of the first sentence performs the act of utterance required for making the statement and the hearer apprehends the speaker’s intention. What is neither said nor sayable cannot be treated as the implied meaning of a statement. Therefore, if scripture contains intention, there must also be an author in whom that intention is grounded.

A Scriptural Tradition of the Blind Following the Blind — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

Accordingly, one must accept some being who has direct knowledge of all scripture and its entire subject matter; otherwise the scriptural tradition becomes a chain of the blind following the blind. Such a being must either be omniscient, or else another omniscient interpreter above Him must be admitted. Apart from God, who could directly know the full range and subject matter of all scripture? A person of limited vision can neither master scripture in its entirety nor teach every pupil correctly from the beginning.

The Parrot and the Government Official — Source section: conclusion of the preceding arguments

It cannot be said that Vedic teachers merely repeat what they heard from their own teachers without any private intention, and therefore no original independent speaker is required. If they are merely parroting, the intention in their utterance ultimately belongs to the first speaker. Just as a government official announces not his own command but the government's, so teachers of the Veda express a divine intention received through tradition.

QUOTATIONS, PRAYERS, AND APHORISMS

Then the Sutradhara began to recite old sayings and quotations—

The Flower-Offering of the Invocation — Source section: the humble opening verse

“May this cluster of flowers—pure as Nyaya, obtained by proper means, and perfectly fresh—be offered at the two feet of the Supreme Lord and fill my mind with unbroken joy. At the kiss of the sun's rays its petals unfold. The spreading of its fragrance gives lasting delight to one who smells it for the first time. Even when pressed, these flowers do not wither. They are the source of a flowing stream like wine made from grapes of immortal nectar.”

Hearing, Reflection, and Meditation — Source section: emphasis on the need for inquiry

“First the words of scripture are to be heard; then they are to be reflected upon. One who develops knowledge of God through scriptural study, reasoned reflection, and blissful meditation may, through these three uses of the intellect, attain the supreme realization of the Self's true nature.”

Popular Saying — Source section: discussion of the fourth argument for an unseen cause of the world

“Wealth is obtained through the goodwill of the people.”

The Inner Self as Witness — Source section: answer to the preceding question

“The gods keep watch over human beings as they pass through their various trials; and the Inner Self dwelling in every human heart likewise witnesses all their deeds.”

Incarnation for the Protection of Dharma — Source section: proofs concerning destruction

“When dharma declines and adharma increases, the Lord takes incarnation; in every age He appears to protect the good and destroy the wicked.”

Prayer of Devotion to Shiva — Source section: closing prayer

“Until the final moment of life, may my heart remain filled with devotion to Lord Shiva—He who, with the aid of the destinies of all beings, again and again creates this marvellous and astonishing universe, then like a magician repeatedly withdraws His own creation; He whose will runs undisputed through the whole cosmos and who is the supreme cause of the world. May my devotion to that Lord Shiva remain unbroken.”

The Awakening of the Divine Being and the Motion of the World — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

“When this divine Being wakes, the world becomes active; when He rests, the world is dissolved. Human beings do not know the true power that governs their pleasure and pain; by My prompting they receive heavenly pleasure or infernal suffering. Under My control Prakriti moves, and through it the world of moving and unmoving beings arises. By His power, God governs, expands, and dissolves the world.”

The Sustaining of Earth and Sky — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

“Earth and sky are sustained by the governing effort of an unchanging conscious being. The immutable Supreme, pervasive through the three worlds, is their sustainer.”

Scriptural Statement on Creation and Dissolution — Source section: discussion of another proof for the existence of God

“In many incarnate forms God pervades all beings and carries them through the cycle of origin, growth, and decay; at the end of each cycle of creation all beings dissolve into Him, and when a new creation begins He manifests them again.”

God’s First-Person Declaration — Source section: explanation of the remaining proofs for the existence of God

“I am the father, the mother, the sustainer, and the grandsire of the world.”

The Necessity of Unceasing Action — Source section: explanation of the remaining proofs for the existence of God

“If I did not act without cease, human beings would follow My path, abandon action, and the world would perish.”

The Lover’s Words — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

“O traveller, go where my beloved has gone; perhaps I too may be born there.”

The Famous Sentence of Postulation — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

“Stout Devadatta does not eat by day—he eats at night.”

Scriptural Injunction to Worship — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

“Worship Me.”

Statement on the Source of the World — Source section: alternative meanings of the reason-terms used in the original text

“I am the source of all; from Me everything flows.”

Prohibitive Injunction — Source section: justification of the preceding conclusion

“Do not eat poison.”

Vedic Injunction for Producing Fire — Source section: justification of the preceding conclusion

“One who wishes to produce fire should rub the fire-sticks.”

Vedic First-Person Declaration — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“May I become many. Thus I became.”

Upanishadic Injunction — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“Two supreme realities are to be known.”

Collection of Vedic and Gita Statements — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“Though without sense-organs, the Supreme Reality sees and hears. The higher and lower forms of Brahman are to be known. Sacrifice is pervaded by God. Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in God. Act without attachment. Action performed for sacrifice does not bind.”

The Lord’s Statement on Bhakti-Yoga — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“Fix your mind on Me, become My devotee, sacrifice for Me, bow down to Me; thus absorbed in Me, you shall certainly come to Me.”

Prayer for Right Understanding — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“May the compassionate Lord, at the proper time, set even a person of distorted understanding upon the right path.”

Prayer for Liberation — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“May the Lord bestow His grace; may the mind become wholly immersed in Him; may the fear of birth and death never rise again; may complete liberation from bondage be attained.”

The Final Flower-Offering — Source section: the existence of God may also be established from number

“May the fragrance of this bouquet of flowers of reasoning delight both nostrils; if that cannot be, then may Lord Shiva—the teacher of the teachers of the gods—be pleased with this bouquet laid by the author at His feet.”

Having said this, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while, then joined his hands and bowed to the assembly.

The Chintamani Jewel

When the mind is steady, even a stone is a diamond; when the mind wavers, even a diamond is a stone—the jewel is not outside, but in the eye that knows how to recognize it.

— Garh Narikel



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — stage narrator and master of ceremonies

Gangesha Upadhyaya — logician and host of the disputation, who refines his own definitions before his opponents can do so

The Buddhist — a Buddhist logician, the principal opponent named in the treatise's own opening; incisive, sceptical alike of unseen causes and unseen agents

The Disciple — Gangesha's pupil, whose plain questions keep the technical debate connected to the ordinary world

The Mimamsaka — a ritual scholar who joins the opening dispute

The Council — murmurs and whispers of the assembly

Setting: a hall of disputation in Mithila. On a low table beside Gangesha stand a smoking lamp, a second lamp not yet lit, and, half lost in shadow, an ordinary earthen pot.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Every mason tests his mortar before trusting it with a wall. Gangesha Upadhyaya, before allowing logic to bear the weight of a single conclusion—before letting it establish that fire accounts for smoke, or that some agent stands behind the world—first tested the mortar itself: what, exactly, is valid cognition? What, exactly, is an invariable relation between one thing and another? He will not move an inch until the definition itself has survived every assault, including his own.

In his opening verses he tells us plainly against whom he built this fortress: the Buddhist logicians of his age, who denied an unseen maker of the world with the same confidence with which they denied an unseen Self. Tonight one of them has come to test the fortress in person. Watch how Gangesha answers him—not by speaking louder, but by defining more precisely than an opponent can anticipate, and then, more than once, so precisely that he catches his own first attempt in the very net he has set.

(Before the disputation begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

*When the mind is steady, even a stone is diamond; when it sways, even
diamond turns to stone,*

The jewel is not outside; it dwells in the eye that knows it.

To the inwardly steady, even earth may shine like a jewel;

To the inwardly wavering, even a jewel seems mere earth.

Chintamani is not far away; it lives within the mind—

The eye that truly recognizes finds the whole treasury there.

(Exit.)

ACT ONE

THE ABSENT-MINDED SCHOLAR

On the invocation of auspiciousness, and whether an unseen cause
may be inferred

(Gangesha is seated, a lamp burning beside him. The Mimamsaka and the Buddhist are both present.)

GANGESHA: (Joining his hands toward an unseen image before addressing the assembly.) Every author who begins a work performs an auspicious invocation and wishes for the work's completion. I have done the same tonight. Before I ask anyone in this hall to accept a difficult claim, let me test the simplest claim first: does an auspicious invocation actually cause anything?

BUDDHIST: A proper place to begin, and I shall not let you escape cheaply. If the invocation causes completion, the two should rise and fall together—present when the work is completed, absent when it fails. Yet from within this very tradition I can name a scholar—Udayana himself, according to report, in an absent-minded hour—who completed the Kiranavali without any invocation worth naming. There is your counter-example. The rule breaks inside the very house that claims to have discovered it.

GANGESHA: (Calmly.) Keep that example close, friend, because before this act is over I intend to use it against you, not merely answer it. But first let me concede the full force of your objection. If cause and effect are truly bound, the effect should never appear without the cause, nor should the cause remain without producing the effect. Udayana's work was completed. By your account, his invocation was absent or careless. On the surface you have shown a deviation, and a deviation is fatal to a claimed causal rule.

BUDDHIST: Then you concede the point.

GANGESHA: I concede the appearance of the point, which is a very different concession. Consider what the invocation is actually said to produce. Not completion directly—as though bricks could be laid merely by chanting a verse—but the removal of an obstacle that would otherwise interrupt the work. Once its obstacle is removed, an ordinary undertaking reaches completion through ordinary means: skill, materials, sustained effort. Now ask your absent-minded scholar: was his work, on that particular occasion, ever truly obstructed? If no obstacle lay

in his path to begin with, there was nothing for the invocation to remove, and its absence proves nothing. The absence of a locksmith does not violate the rule that locksmiths open locks on a day when no door was locked.

BUDDHIST: A convenient rescue. How can you know in advance whether an obstacle was waiting or not? You have made your causal rule untestable: it now explains success and failure equally well, which is another way of explaining nothing.

GANGESHA: Not untestable—only conditional, as most causal claims you and I actually trust are conditional rather than unconditional. Fire produces smoke only where the fuel is damp enough to smoulder; dry fuel burns cleanly, and no one calls that a deviation in the relation between fire and smoke. You ask me to abandon a rule because a condition attaches to it, when every rule we rely upon, from the kitchen to this assembly, bears conditions of the same kind.

MIMAMSAKA: Then let me press you from my side, Gangesha, for the Buddhist and I do not usually stand on common ground. Suppose the invocation does not directly produce completion but only removes obstacles. Even so, how is that removal known except through the Vedic injunction that first taught cultivated people to perform such a rite before beginning a work? Remove scriptural authority and no first link remains in your causal chain.

GANGESHA: I shall not remove it; I never proposed to. Shruti states the general rule. The ordinary observation of cultivated people, generation after generation, performing this act before undertakings of this kind confirms that the rule is not empty poetry. Where the two agree, as they do here, a cause may be trusted just as we trust any cause established by a stable, repeated correlation not explained by accident—the very method, Buddhist, that you yourself employ whenever you infer fire from smoke without demanding to see the fire directly.

BUDDHIST: (With a dry inclination of the head.) You have kept your promise, Acharya. You have indeed turned my own example against me.

GANGESHA: And I shall keep the same promise all evening. I never ask you to accept an unseen cause on faith. I ask only that you extend to my unseen cause the same courtesy of inference that you already extend, without a second thought, to your own unseen causes.

ACT TWO

THE SHELL THAT NEVER WAS SILVER

On the definition of valid cognition

(A servant places a shell beside the pot on the table. Gangesha points toward it.)

GANGESHA: Before we build anything further, we must agree on what we mean by true cognition—not what is true, but what makes a cognition true rather than merely produced. Here is my first attempt: a cognition is valid when it presents a property exactly where that property actually exists. I see silver and silver is there—valid. I see silver in this shell and silver is not there—invalid.

DISCIPLE: That sounds almost too simple to say, Acharya.

GANGESHA: Anything simple in this discipline has already survived an ambush, or it would not be standing so simply before you. Now watch the ambush. Take an ordinary twilight error: “This shell is silver.” Test my definition honestly against it. The shell-component of that cognition—the bare “this here”—is in the right place, because a shell really is there. The silver-component is in the wrong place, because silver is not. One cognition, one sentence, and yet by my own definition it is at once valid in one half and invalid in the other.

DISCIPLE: Is that not simply a contradiction in your definition?

GANGESHA: It would be, if a cognition had to be valid or invalid as one indivisible lump. But the cognition “this shell-silver” is not one indivisible claim; it contains two claims joined in one seeing—one about the “here,” another about silverhood—and each may be tested separately against the world, just as in a sentence of two clauses one clause may be true and the other false without violating the law of non-contradiction. The definition survives once we admit honestly what a mixed cognition actually contains.

BUDDHIST: Then stretch the test one step farther and see whether it survives me. A tree stands before us; at its crown it is in conjunction with a bird, while at its root that conjunction is absent. By your definition, is the cognition “this tree is conjoined” valid or invalid?

GANGESHA: You have laid the snare cleverly, and I shall step into it deliberately, because the road out is instructive. Conjunction and its absence do not occupy the whole tree indiscriminately—one is at the crown, the other at the root. A cognition that properly specifies the part about which it speaks is neither vague nor self-contradictory. “The tree, at its crown, is conjoined” is true; “the tree, at its root, lacks that conjunction” is equally true. Only a cognition that refuses to specify the

part deserves your charge, and no careful speaker leaves a cognition so unqualified.

BUDDHIST: You are patching your definition faster than I can object to it. At what point does a definition patched so many times cease to be a definition and become an admission that the first attempt failed?

GANGESHA: (Unmoved.) When a physician straightens a bandage twice before setting a bone, we do not say the bandage has failed. We say the physician was honest about the first attempt and skilful enough to correct it before trusting the patient's full weight to it. I would rather give you a three-patched definition, every patch of which has survived your best blow, than a beautiful sentence that collapses the moment you lean upon it. Test it again, if you have another blow left.

BUDDHIST: One more, then, and it is the sharpest I have. A newly made pot was black before firing and blood-red after it came from the kiln. "This pot is black" was once true and is now false—the same sentence, about the same pot, changing truth-value. Your definition contains nothing that explains that.

GANGESHA: Because my definition never claimed that sentences float free of time. From the beginning it has concerned the presence of a property in a locus at a definite time, just as it concerns its presence in a definite part. "The pot, before firing, was black" remains true forever, untouched by the kiln. "This pot, now, is black" was always a different claim, tied to a different moment. It is no defect in a rule that it gives a time-marked answer to a time-marked question. The kiln did not break my definition. It merely proved that anyone who forgets to say when has not yet spoken carefully enough to test it.

DISCIPLE: (Quietly, half to himself.) I am beginning to understand why this treatise took a lifetime to write.

GANGESHA: It took a lifetime because every sentence in it has already sat before an opponent as sharp as the one sitting before me tonight. That is not a complaint, friend. It is the only kind of sentence upon which anything else is worth building.

ACT THREE

THE BOND BETWEEN SMOKE AND FIRE

On vyapti, and how a universal rule is known

(The lamp beside Gangesha is adjusted. A thin thread of smoke rises from its wick.)

GANGESHA: Now we are ready for the engine that drives every inference you and I make: the bond called vyapti—the necessary relation

between a sign, such as smoke, and what it establishes, such as fire. Without a precise account of that bond, “smoke, therefore fire” is a habit, not a proof. Here is a first attempt: the bond holds when the sign is never found where the thing to be proved is absent.

BUDDHIST: Simple—and, I think, already broken. Consider a wholly affirmative claim for which no counter-instance is available anywhere: “This is nameable because it is knowable.” Whatever is knowable is also nameable; there exists nowhere a case of something knowable yet unnameable in which your test—“never present where the other is absent”—could even be applied. Your definition asks us to search a field with no far corner in which to test it.

GANGESHA: You have found a real defect, and I shall not conceal it. I abandon that first attempt entirely, here before the assembly, as readily as I abandoned my first account of valid cognition one act ago. Let me try again: the bond holds when the locus of the sign is never different from the locus of what it establishes.

BUDDHIST: No better. Rephrase it as smoke and fire having no different locus, and the same defect returns wherever no such different locus can even be conceived for purposes of testing.

GANGESHA: Correct again. So here is the third attempt—and the fourth—each closing a door the previous one left open, until we reach a formulation I am prepared to defend against every blow you have already struck and those you have not yet thought of. The bond itself is co-presence: the sign abides with what it proves in such a way that the sign is never found in a locus determined by the complete and genuine absence of that probandum, however indirectly that absence may be specified. Now test the mountain. Smoke rises from it; fire, somewhere on that mountain, is co-present with precisely that smoke. Nowhere does the absence of fire in general occupy the same locus as that particular smoke. The bond holds, without leaving some unnamed corner in which a marginal case can hide.

BUDDHIST: You have made four definitions to save one example. Forgive me if I am not yet dazzled.

GANGESHA: Be impressed by the method, not by the count. Notice what I did not do in any of those four attempts: I did not merely announce my conclusion and challenge you to refute it. I deliberately formed the weakest version of my claim first, and let you—or twice, myself—break it before proposing a stronger one. A wall tested four times by its own mason and still standing is worth more than a wall no one has yet thought to push.

DISCIPLE: But Acharya—once the bond is properly defined, how do we know such a bond in the first place? We have seen smoke and fire together in kitchens. We have not seen every fire in the world.

GANGESHA: By repeated observation joined to the failure of any single case, however diligently sought, to break the pattern—and, where repetition alone leaves a shadow of doubt, by another support your Buddhist friend has already half admitted without noticing it. If smoke could truly arise without fire, then smoke's dependence upon fire—the fact that smouldering fuel, and only smouldering fuel, sends up that particular grey column—would be an unexplained coincidence repeated in every kitchen, on every mountain, in every age, without anyone ever seeing a single exception. A coincidence that never fails is no longer usefully called a coincidence. It earns the harder name: a rule.

ACT FOUR

AN AGENT BEHIND THE EARTH

The inference to God, and the discipline of naming the subject
precisely

(Gangesha lifts the earthen pot from the table and sets it before the assembly.)

GANGESHA: Every argument tonight has been sharpening the same instrument. Now I put that instrument to its hardest use. Earth, and the other elements of this world, are effects—produced, originated, not eternal—just as this pot is an effect. No produced thing lacks a producer. Therefore earth and the remaining elements have an agent, just as this pot has a potter.

BUDDHIST: Before I attack the body of your argument, I shall attack its skeleton, and I promise this is not evasion. It is the discipline you have demanded of me all evening. What exactly is the subject of this inference? You cannot simply say “earth and the other elements,” because no single word designates each of them individually, nor does one recurring property unite them into a single collective subject. Name your subject exactly, in your own fashion, or the inference will have nowhere to stand before it even begins.

GANGESHA: A demand I would make of you were our positions reversed, and I shall answer it instead of evading it. Let the subject be this: whatever is an effect and is not already known by both of us to have been produced by an embodied human agent. That excludes this pot, which we both already concede was made by a potter, and excludes nothing that remains genuinely disputed between us.

BUDDHIST: Too narrow, and dangerously so. On that wording, a sprout—produced, certainly, yet not fashioned by an embodied craftsman—falls inside your subject as easily as earth does. Prove your conclusion silently for the sprout, and you have proved something, but not a maker of the world. You have merely slipped one small exceptional case through the same door and called it the same victory.

GANGESHA: A precise objection, and I shall answer it not by softening the subject further—that would be the tempting mistake—but by refusing to let the sprout take the place of earth. The sprout was never the disputed subject between us tonight; earth was. An inference establishes its conclusion only for the subject actually named at its beginning. Had I quietly substituted a sprout halfway through, I would have committed the very fault I charged against you one act ago, hidden inside a definition: changing the ground of the argument once it becomes inconvenient. The subject remains earth, water, fire, and air, taken precisely as the disputed effects they are. The sprout can wait for its own evening.

BUDDHIST: Then narrow it properly yourself, because I reject your narrowing. Say it plainly: agency here means being produced by someone who possesses direct knowledge of the material cause, a desire to act, and effort—the very three things a potter standing before his wheel possesses.

GANGESHA: I was about to say exactly that a moment ago, and I am glad you forced me to test it before I leaned upon it, because it collapses under its own weight. You and I already possess, every day, knowledge of countless material causes, desires concerning them, and efforts of our own; yet earth was plainly not produced by either of us merely because such knowledge and desire are present in us. If “agency” meant only the bare presence of those three capacities in some person, ordinary living beings would already satisfy the condition thousands of times over, and my inference would prove nothing it was not already required to concede.

BUDDHIST: Then tonight you have refuted your own proof faster than I could have done it for you.

GANGESHA: I have refuted my careless proof, which is a different achievement from refuting the proof itself. And that is precisely the achievement this whole evening has been training the assembly to recognize as progress rather than defeat. What the argument actually requires is narrower still: an agent whose knowledge, desire, and effort are not merely present alongside the production of earth—as my knowledge is present alongside thousands of things I never caused—but are its efficient cause, standing in the same causal relation to earth as the potter’s knowledge, desire, and effort stand to this pot, not merely accompanying earth’s production as an idle spectator accompanies a fire he did not kindle.

DISCIPLE: And can such a narrowed agency be found among people like us, Acharya—some embodied person, however hidden, who might finally satisfy it?

GANGESHA: Test it honestly and see where it leads. The effort of an embodied agent presupposes a body; and a body, by every account acceptable to both of us, is itself among the produced things that require

just such an agent. To explain earth by appealing to some prior embodied agent is to borrow a debt that is never repaid: every candidate you offer from the world of bodies turns out to owe his own existence to precisely the kind of cause we are seeking. The series cannot terminate in an embodied agent without either receding unexplained to infinity or finally stopping at a knower, a desirer, and an agent whose effort does not depend upon a body already borrowed from an earlier cause. That is all we mean here by God, nothing more: not an enlarged human being, but the one link in the chain of agency that does not itself require a prior agent in order to be there.

BUDDHIST: (After a long pause.) You have spent the whole evening refusing to let either of us take a shortcut—not around my objections and, twice tonight, not around the weakness of your own first answers. I still will not say that I am convinced. But I no longer believe, as I did when I sat down, that this conclusion was reached by skipping a step worth taking.

GANGESHA: That is the only result I ever asked of this assembly. I did not come here tonight to win the debate by speaking last. I came to build one sentence at a time before witnesses sharp enough to catch me if any stone in the wall were laid carelessly. If the wall stands, it will not be because I raised my voice at the end. It will be because, while the lamp burned, nothing in it was left untested.

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara returns as the lamps are lowered.)

SUTRADHARA: Notice what this evening was not. It was not louder than the disputation that came before it, in another hall, on another evening, over another book. Gangesha Upadhyaya's entire method moved in the opposite direction from noise: state the claim as weakly and exactly as honesty permits, invite the sharpest blow available, and if the blow lands, thank the opponent and rebuild instead of muttering. He named his work a Chintamani jewel, and in its opening lines he told us plainly what darkness he meant to clear: the powerful scepticism of the Buddhist logicians of his age, who admitted neither the efficacy of auspicious invocation, nor a maker of the world, nor unseen causes of any kind. He did not answer that scepticism by refusing to feel its weight. Four times in a single evening he answered by insisting that his own first answer had not yet earned the right to stand unchallenged. Whether that is the same thing as being right, the assembly—as always—leaves to the person who carries the question out through the door.

(All the characters depart.)

This chapter follows four representative movements of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvachintamani*: the opening debate over the causal

efficacy of auspicious invocation, including the treatise's own reference to Udayana's absent-minded completion of the Kiranavali; the progressive definition of valid cognition (*pramāṇya*) through the classical shell-silver error; the progressive refinement of the definition of *vyāpti* through the smoke-fire relation; and the technical construction of the inference to God (*Ishvaranumana*), including the real difficulty the treatise raises in specifying the subject of the inference and the exact meaning of "agency." It does not attempt to cover the *Upamāna* or *Shabda* sections of the work, nor the full technical apparatus of the Perception and Inference sections, which proceed far beyond this single evening in definitions and objections. The dialogue is built around the treatise's argumentative structure and its stated method of successive self-refutation and refinement. The Buddhist, the *Mīmāṃsaka*, and the Disciple are composite characters who give voice to positions the treatise itself raises and answers, not portrayals of named historical individuals.

TATTVACHINTAMANI

STORIES, ILLUSTRATIONS, AND QUOTATIONS

STORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The assembly fell silent. Standing among the disciples and the people of the village, the *Sutrādhara* began in a low voice to tell the old illustrations.

The Tradition of Gangesha's Childhood—According to oral tradition and inherited story, Gangesha was exceedingly slow-witted, dull, and illiterate as a child. His father tried hard to educate him; when nothing came of it, he was sent to his maternal home. There too his uncle and his uncle's pupils tried to teach him, but after failing they made him perform menial tasks such as filling the chillum and bringing the hookah. One account says that, through the grace of a tantric engaged in corpse-practice at a cremation ground, or through a boon from the goddess *Kali*, an extraordinary illumination of knowledge suddenly arose in him. When he later returned home, his uncle entered into disputation with him and was astonished by the force of Gangesha's reasoning.

The Illustration of Mistaking Shell for Silver—This is the famous example in which shell (*shukti*) is mistaken for silver (*rajata*). When a person takes a shell to be silver and reaches to pick it up, the *Prabhakara Mīmāṃsaka* account of error (*akhyāti-vada*) explains the event as follows:

According to the *Prabhakara Mīmāṃsakas*, when the shine of the shell awakens the memory of silver, two distinct cognitions have in fact arisen:

First: “This is something” — the general perceptual cognition of the shell.

Second: “Silver” — the cognition arising from memory.

But the person fails to apprehend the difference between the two, a failure called *bhedagraha*—non-apprehension of difference. Because the distinction is not cognized, the two are taken as one and the person proceeds to pick up the supposed silver.

Devadatta Is Outside the House—The classic example runs as follows. A person, Devadatta, is alive but is not seen at home during the day. “Being alive” and “being absent from the house” are two facts. Once his absence from the house is certain, his continuing to live is possible only if he is somewhere outside the house. Thus his being outside is postulated through the means of knowledge called *arthapatti*.

Fire, Jewel, and Mantra—Ordinarily, when a hand comes into contact with fire, it burns and the sensation of burning arises. But if a particular “jewel” or mantra is present there—a restraining factor, or *pratibandhaka*—the hand may fail to burn despite the presence of fire. When that jewel is removed, the fire burns the hand again.

According to the *Mimamsakas*, the jewel or mantra is a *pratibandhaka*, an inhibitor. When the jewel is placed near the fire, its influence destroys the fire’s unseen burning-power, or renders that power unproductive. Because the power is destroyed or obstructed, contact between fire and hand does not produce the experience of burning. When the jewel is removed, the power returns to the fire and the hand burns.

When the hand comes into contact with fire and no jewel is present, the absence of the inhibitor is present; the causal complex is complete, and the hand burns.

When the jewel is introduced, the absence of the jewel no longer obtains. The causal complex is therefore incomplete, and although fire remains present, the hand does not burn.

The Origin of the Words “Om” and “Atha”—Because the word “*atha*” destroys obstacles, it is itself auspicious. *Smṛiti* says that at the beginning of creation the words “Om” and “*atha*” were the first to burst from Brahma’s throat; therefore both are auspicious. Nor should “*atha*” be treated merely as a marker of commencement, for then Maharshi Gautama’s use of it at the beginning of the *Nyaya-shastra* would be needless repetition.

Introduction to the Gavaya—When an inquirer asks, “What does a *gavaya* look like?” a forest-dweller replies, “A *gavaya* resembles a cow.” Later the person goes into the forest, sees an animal like a cow, remembers the meaning of the instruction—“The *gavaya* is like a

cow”—and determines, “This is the object denoted by the word ‘gavaya.’”

Introduction to the Donkey—A northerner, giving a southerner directions toward the north, says: “The donkey, lowest among animals and worthy of contempt, has an exceedingly long neck, long moving lips, eats hard tender twigs, and has a body infested with lice.”

After hearing this instruction, the southerner travels north, sees an animal of that description, and determines: “This animal is a donkey.”

Introduction to Broccoli—Suppose a person has never seen broccoli and does not know its name.

Instruction: A friend tells him, “Broccoli looks very much like cauliflower, but its colour is a deep green.”

Perception and Memory: Some days later the person goes to a vegetable market and sees there a green vegetable resembling cauliflower. On seeing it, he remembers what his friend had told him.

Upamiti, the Resulting Cognition: He then determines, “This green vegetable is the object denoted by the word ‘broccoli.’”

Introduction to the Zebra—Suppose a child has never seen a zebra.

Instruction: The child’s teacher says, “A zebra looks exactly like a horse, except that its body bears black-and-white stripes.”

Perception and Memory: Some days later the child goes to a zoo and sees an animal like a striped horse. The teacher’s words then return to memory.

The child determines: “This animal is a zebra.”

The Wooden Puppet and the Child—A child sees a wooden puppet, moved by the Sutradhara’s strings, perform the act of bringing a pot after hearing words such as “Bring the pot.” From this the child understands the causal role of the word “pot” in producing cognition of the pot.

News of a Son’s Birth and the Child—Seeing joy on Chaita’s face after he hears the news that a son has been born, the child understands that the cognition of the son’s birth produced by the report is the cause of that joy.

QUOTATIONS

Then the Sutradhara began to recite the old sayings and quotations.

Invocation—Salutation to Lord Ishvara, of immeasurable glory, destroyer of the three cities; who, though beyond the gunas, possesses unfailing resolve; who, aided by the three gunas, is the cause of the world; who eternally possesses the three forms of knowledge, desire, and effort;

who as Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesha performs creation, preservation, and dissolution; who is an unfathomable ocean of compassion and the sole supreme refuge of the three worlds.

Injunction concerning Auspicious Invocation—"One who desires completion and is about to undertake a fruitful action should perform an auspicious invocation."

Praise of Vinayaka—"By the praise of Vinayaka all obstacles are pacified."

Praise of the Deity—"One who desires the unobstructed completion of an action should praise the deity."

Auspicious Sight at Dawn—"Those engaged in auspicious action, devoted to the gods, disciplined in silence, and performing sacrifices that avert sin should look into a mirror at dawn."

Good Custom—"A local custom that has continued in a region, in an unbroken succession of tradition through ages upon ages, and that neither contradicts Shruti and Smriti nor departs from them, is to be regarded as sadachara, good conduct."

Dispassion toward the World—"This world is like the shadow beneath the hood of an enraged serpent."

The Forest of Worldly Existence—"In this forest of samsara, how many dark days of sorrow, and how many sky-lamps of happiness!"

Hearing and Direct Experience of the Self—"The Self is to be heard of, reflected upon, meditated upon—that is, directly realized."

Steadfastness in Brahman—"One who is steadfast in Brahman attains immortality."

Liberation of the Householder—"A householder who earns wealth justly, is steadfast in knowledge of truth, welcomes guests, performs shraddha, and speaks the truth is liberated."

Renunciation of Action—"Liberation may be attained by renouncing all actions."

Bhagavad Gita: One's Own Work and Perfection—"A person attains perfection by remaining devoted to his own work; by worshipping God through his own work, he attains perfection."

Vishnu Purana: Knowledge and Action—"The wise should strive for the attainment of Brahman; both knowledge and action have been enjoined as causes of attaining Brahman."

Harita Smriti: The Two Wings of a Bird—"As a bird's movement through the sky is possible through both wings, so the eternal Brahman is attained through both knowledge and action."

Shruti: Truthful Austerity and Right Knowledge—“The Supreme Self, attained through truthful austerity, right knowledge, and restraint, is attained through both knowledge and action.”

Memory of Previous Births—“The twice-born who remembers a former birth becomes endowed with all forms of knowledge and knows the essence of every scriptural argument.”

The Story of Jada Bharata—“An initiated man who did not study the Veda taught by the guru, did not perform Vedic rites, and did not receive the scriptures.”

Bhagavad Gita: Renunciation—“The wise understand renunciation as the abandonment of actions performed for desired results; abandonment of obligatory action is not proper. To abandon obligatory action out of delusion is called tamasic renunciation.”

Knowledge of the Self—“The Self is to be known; one who knows the Self does not return again to worldly existence.”

The Way Beyond Death—“By knowing the Supreme Self a person crosses beyond death; there is no other path of refuge.”

The Knot of the Heart—“When the Supreme Self is directly realized, the knot of the heart is loosened, all doubts are cut away, and the being’s actions are exhausted.”

The Fire of Knowledge—“O Arjuna, the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes.”

Action and Experience—“Without being experienced, action is not exhausted.”

The Leaf of the Blue Lotus—“As water remains separate from the leaf of the blue lotus, so action becomes separate from the knower of truth.”

Indirect Praise—“My dear, if you wish to go, then go.”

The Intended Meaning of the Indirect Praise—“Do not go.”

The Origin of the Veda—“From that austerity the four Vedas arose.”

Worship of Ishvara—“Worship Ishvara.”

The Nature of Brahman—“Brahman is eternal knowledge and bliss.”

The Nature of Heaven—“A happiness unmixed with sorrow, not overridden by ordinary pleasure, and attained merely by wishing for it, is called heaven.”

The Nature of Indra—“Indra is thousand-eyed.”

God’s Agency—“I am the cause of all effects.”

A Second Statement of God's Agency—"All effects are produced by Me."

The Truth of Memory—"Whence, then, comes the truth of memory?"

Having said this, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while. Then he joined his hands and bowed to the assembly.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -96 (NINETY-SIX BEFORE)

Memory-Keeping

*The body returns to earth, but the name endures upon the leaf—whom
a village holds in memory, no one can erase.*

— Garh Narikel



(An original dramatic composition in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue; set in continuity with the hall of disputation in Chapter -100 and Chapters -99 to -98.)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — stage narrator and master of ceremonies

Vachaspati Mishra — the aged Acharya, in the last year of his life; his body is frail, but his voice remains firm

Budhua — Vachaspati's lifelong attendant, who for years has kept the lamp, shell, and rope beside the door of the debating hall (he is the servant mentioned in Chapter -100)

Hulasa — Budhua's sister, a young copyist of manuscripts in the debating hall, who works through the nights copying texts

Disciple Vamadeva — Vachaspati's young pupil, inquisitive, a student of the theory of valid knowledge

Acharya Karnapura — a ritualist Mimamsaka, guardian of the community's "reputation," and an advocate of swift closure

Headman Ratnesh — village chief, anxious to avoid controversy

The Council — murmurs and whispers of the assembly

Setting: the courtyard behind the debating hall, where an old well stands. It is the hour before dawn; the mist has not yet lifted. Beside the well lie a broken lamp and several wet palm-leaf folios.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: I have already told you the story of the shell and the silver, where a man mistook a shell for silver. But that discussion of error was a luxury, because no one died there; only a reaching hand came back empty. Today I shall tell you of another error, where the hand is not empty, the well is full, and all the instruments of knowledge—perception, inference, testimony—speak together and fall silent together. Outside this debating hall, by its door, an attendant has sat for thirty years, tending the lamp, guarding the shell and the rope, hearing the final word of every dispute. Today his story begins as well, though he himself would never call it a story. Watch, and judge for yourselves where the error lay and where convenience began.

(Before the disputation begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

The body returns to earth, but the name endures upon the leaf,

Whom the village keeps in memory, no one can erase.

A king may erase a paper; fire may consume a book,

But no hand can efface the name that has entered the human voice.

The body is brief, but the name abides—

What a village keeps in memory can live twelve hundred years.

(Exit.)

ACT ONE

BESIDE THE WELL

(Budhua sits beside the well, his head in his hands. The light before dawn is still grey. Vachaspati enters, leaning on a staff.)

VACHASPATI: Budhua, your lamp burned beside the door all night, yet Hulasa did not come at dawn to collect the manuscripts. What has happened?

BUDHUA: (His voice trembling.) Acharya, she... she was found in the well. The boatmen saw her as dawn broke. I... with these very hands I used to lift her out of this place when she was little, so many times. Today I could not bring her out.

VACHASPATI: (Stunned for a moment, then softly.) Where is she now?

BUDHUA: Acharya Karnapura is already with the headman. They are saying—suicide.

VACHASPATI: So quickly? I do not yet know even how she died, and already the word “suicide” is standing here before us?

BUDHUA: Acharya, Karnapura is afraid that if it proves to be murder, the debating hall will lose its good name. Many people already disliked the fact that an unmarried girl sat here night after night copying manuscripts. Hulasa once said to me, “Uncle, if they called me a disciple, people would respect my writing. They call me a servant, so even my writing is counted only as service.” I had no answer for her.

VACHASPATI: (Hardening.) Then will her death, too, become a means of covering the wrong she endured while alive? No. First I shall go there and see what actually happened.

(Vachaspati and Budhua move toward the well. In the distance come whispers from Hulasa’s fellow students and companions.)

(Acharya Karnapura and Headman Ratnesh enter.)

KARNAPURA: Acharya, it is well that you have come. I was telling the headman—the scripture is clear: for one who takes her own life, no formal procedure of testimony is required; the proper funeral rites are sufficient. Delay is not fitting.

VACHASPATI: Karnapura, the same tradition of which you speak also says that determining the cause of death is a matter of evidence, not desire. By what evidence do you know that she fell of her own will?

KARNAPURA: The evidence is plain—the well is secluded, and no one saw any reason for anyone to be looking for her there in the night.

VACHASPATI: That is evidence of absence, not of presence. Evidence of absence proves an absence; it does not prove agency. You would establish an act from what is missing. That is like proving that no fire ever burned in a dark room merely because no smoke is seen there now.

HEADMAN RATNESH: Forgive me, Acharya, but for the peace of the village a swift decision is necessary. If questions begin to spread that something evil happened in the debating hall, many families will stop sending their daughters here to study.

VACHASPATI: (Quietly, but firmly.) Then are you saying that truth is worth less than the village's reputation? Ratneshji, if today we sacrifice truth for reputation, how will reputation itself stand tomorrow, when its foundation is a lie?

(Whispers in the Council: "It is easy to call it suicide." — "But what is the truth?" — "Who has time to hear the truth?")

ACT TWO

THE TESTIMONY OF WORDS

(Inside the debating hall, in daylight. Vachaspati, Karnapura, the headman, Disciple Vamadeva, and Budhua. At the centre lie the broken lamp and the wet palm-leaf folios.)

VACHASPATI: Budhua, where were these palm leaves found?

BUDHUA: Beside the well, near Hulasa's hand. She must have been writing on them that night.

VACHASPATI: (Lifting a folio and bringing it close to his eyes.) The ink is still fresh, but the last word is unfinished—"I..." Then the line breaks, as though the hand stopped midway.

KARNAPURA: That is no evidence, Acharya. A person may change her mind while writing.

VACHASPATI: It is possible, Karnapura, but possibility cannot occupy the place of certainty. Your “suicide” is also only a possibility; you are clothing it in certainty.

DISCIPLE VAMADEVA: Forgive me, Acharya, but I have a question. We have read that verbal testimony is valid only when the speaker is apta—trustworthy and competent. How can the words of one who is dead be treated as apta? Is the dead person’s final letter evidence, or merely a token of memory?

VACHASPATI: A good question, Vamadeva. Remember: the test of trustworthiness is not whether the speaker is alive or dead, but whether there was any cause for error, attachment, or deceit. What purpose would Hulasa have had in lying to us? She wrote her last words alone on a leaf, not for an audience but for herself. Such words are free of deceit, because deceit always requires someone to be deceived.

KARNAPURA: But Acharya, Mimamsa doctrine does not accept a woman’s independent testimony as full evidence unless supported by a male witness. It is an established arrangement; I did not create it.

VACHASPATI: (Sharply.) Karnapura, tell me: in the theory of knowledge, is the validity of a means of knowing determined by the speaker’s caste or sex, or by the causal conditions that produce knowledge? Nyaya is clear—the validity of perception, inference, comparison, and testimony rests upon the soundness of their instruments, not upon the speaker’s lineage. If you say that a woman’s word counts as lesser evidence, you are not clothing epistemology in social practice—you are clothing social practice in the robes of epistemology.

DISCIPLE VAMADEVA: Acharya, then when does testimony become a complete means of knowledge?

VACHASPATI: Testimony becomes knowledge when the speaker’s intention, the hearer’s trust, and the truthfulness demanded by the moment stand together. Hulasa’s intention is clear to me—she wished to write the final truth of her life. We are now the hearers. The burden of truthfulness has passed to us, because she can no longer speak. If we refuse that burden, it will not be the evidence that dies. We shall.

(The Council is stunned into silence. Headman Ratnesh looks uneasily toward the well.)

HEADMAN RATNESH: Acharya, but questions of disputation are endless. Shall we keep this question open forever as well?

VACHASPATI: No, Ratneshji. I cannot keep it open forever, because my life is limited. But neither shall I close it with a lie. If no evidence is

found, I shall have written: "Cause unknown." That admission is no disgrace; it is the mark of honest learning.

KARNAPURA: If you write "Cause unknown," the standing of the debating hall will fall, Acharya. People will say: if even Vachaspati Mishra could not determine the cause of an ordinary death, what can he know of the cause of Brahman?

VACHASPATI: (Calmly, but with an edge.) So your concern is for my reputation, not for justice to Hulasa? Karnapura, everything I have taught until today is being tested in this one moment: whether I shall sacrifice the name of a dead girl to preserve my reputation, or risk my reputation in order to preserve Hulasa's name.

(*Whispers in the Council: "Which way will the Acharya turn now?" — "Reputation, or the name?"*)

ACT THREE

NIGHT, OUTSIDE THE DOOR

(*Night. Karnapura and Headman Ratnesh speak privately near the door of the debating hall, some distance from Budhua. Budhua sits unseen in shadow, listening.*)

HEADMAN RATNESH: Acharya Karnapura, why were you in such haste? Is there something more?

KARNAPURA: (Silence, then softly.) Ratneshji, three months ago Hulasa came to me. She wanted to write a commentary under her own name and wanted her name written on the copy, not merely the anonymous "written by." I refused. I told her, "A woman's name does not belong upon scripture."

HEADMAN RATNESH: And then?

KARNAPURA: Then nothing. She fell silent. But now I think—if I had given her that name that day, perhaps today she would be sitting here, not lying beside the well. I do not know whether she killed herself. But I know I killed one desire in her, and it was the desire for a name.

HEADMAN RATNESH: Then you must tell the Acharya this, Karnapura—not merely "Cause unknown."

KARNAPURA: (Hardening.) No. That confession will remove me from this place, and it will not bring Hulasa back. I shall remain silent. But... but from today I make a vow: if anyone comes to me asking for a name, I shall not refuse it again.

(*Budhua rises from the shadows, looks at them both, but says nothing. Slowly he turns back toward the well.*)

ACT FOUR

BESIDE THE WELL AGAIN

(Evening. Only Vachaspati and Budhua. A new, small lamp burns beside the well.)

VACHASPATI: Budhua, today I told the headman and Karnapura: "Cause unknown; the name is Hulasa; justice remains unfinished." Those words will be carved in stone.

BUDHUA: Acharya, the last letters on that palm leaf—"I..." Can you complete them? Your intellect reaches to the nature of Brahman; this is only one broken sentence.

VACHASPATI: (Gravely.) No, Budhua. A sentence left unfinished shall remain unfinished. I have no right to complete it. If I invent her final word by inference, that would not preserve Hulasa's memory; it would be the triumph of my imagination. To guard memory is to leave incompleteness as it was, without falsely completing it.

BUDHUA: Acharya, I have sat beside your shell for thirty years, tending the lamp, setting out the rope and shell, listening to every word of your debates. But today I understood that if all the instruments of reasoning—perception, inference, testimony, comparison—cannot preserve the name of one poor girl who copied manuscripts, then what are they for?

VACHASPATI: Budhua, that question will trouble me for the rest of my life. Reason illuminates truth; protecting a truth once illuminated is another act altogether. I entrust that act to you—the name of Hulasa, and the names of all those who, even after evidence was found, did not receive justice.

BUDHUA: (Trembling, but firm.) Acharya, then here, beside this same rope and shell, I make a vow: as long as even one name is erased by injustice, I shall remain here. As a witness, if I can be nothing else.

VACHASPATI: (A faint smile, though his eyes are wet.) Such a vow is longer than a human life, Budhua.

BUDHUA: Then it will outlive a life, Acharya. An act that outlives a life ceases to belong to one human being—it becomes the work of the tree, the water, and the darkness.

(The lamp trembles. For an instant the water in the well flashes, as though an eye within it were looking upward.)

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara re-enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Karnapura's fear came true: many households in the village stopped sending their daughters to study in the debating hall. But Vachaspati's stone still stands, and on it are written the words: "Cause unknown; the name is Hulasa; justice remains unfinished." Acharya Karnapura later kept his vow; it is said that among his later pupils the names of several women were written on the manuscripts they copied, though Hulasa's name never appeared upon a commentary. Little is recorded of Budhua. It is said that he grew old and still remained seated beside the shell, until one day the village began to say, "The old servant is still sitting there." In time "the old servant" became simply "Budhba"—the Old One. After Vachaspati Mishra's death, Budhua took up his shell and rope and travelled to another part of Mithila, toward the rising monastery of Udayanacharya, because a vow does not remain bound to the life of one teacher. This story does not end here. It is only the beginning of that long vigil which, much later and far away, you will meet again in a Channa grove as the one who has "sat upon the same branch for twelve hundred years."

(Exit.)

STORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH VACHASPATI MISHRA

The assembly fell silent. Standing among the disciples and villagers, the Sutradhara began, in a low voice, to relate the old stories.

The Tradition Behind the Naming of the Bhamati—According to the traditional story of how the Bhamati received its name, Vachaspati Mishra became so absorbed in writing his celebrated commentary on Shankaracharya's *Brahmasutra-bhashya* that for many years he scarcely noticed the service of his wife. She kept his lamp burning and set food beside him, but the Acharya never lifted his head to look at her. When the work was complete and he asked her name for the first time, he learned that she was called Bhamati. Out of gratitude he named the book "Bhamati" after her. Concealed within that old story is already the question at the heart of Chapter -96: how much unnamed service stands behind the brilliance of scholarship, and when does that service receive a name?

A Brief Note on the Shell-Silver Error—The shell-silver illusion discussed at length in Chapter -100—where a shell is mistaken for silver—is a celebrated illustration employed by Nyaya, Mimamsa, and Advaita in their different theories of error. Chapter -96 places that example before a new question: if theories of illusion can be examined with such

subtlety, why should the same subtlety of evidence not be applied to a matter as grave as the cause of a death, especially when the person concerned is powerless?

Having said this, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while. Then he joined his hands and bowed to the assembly.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -95 (NINETY-FIVE BEFORE)

The Submerged Manuscript

*A flood may drown a book, but not the voice—words written in the
heart do not grow wet in water.*

— Garh Narikel



(An original dramatic composition in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue; set at Udayanacharya's monastery and continuing Budhua's vow from Chapter -96.)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — stage narrator and master of ceremonies

Udayanacharya — philosopher-host, author of the Kiranavali; grave and sparing of speech

Budhua — now old, once Vachaspati's lifelong attendant; now at Udayana's monastery, carrying his vow to preserve memory

Jivanti — a disciple and keeper of books, trained by Budhua; she copies and safeguards manuscripts

Disciple Someshvara — Udayana's inquisitive pupil, who raises the question of the auspicious invocation

Abbot Shambhunath — administrator of the monastery and guardian of its reputation

The Council — the assembly's murmuring voice

Setting: the manuscript hall of Udayanacharya's monastery and a pond beside it. An autumn night. Clouds move across the sky.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Vachaspati Mishra's stone remained standing, and his servant Budhua gathered up his shell and rope and crossed to another part of Mithila, where a new Acharya was rising—Udayanacharya, who had undertaken in his Kiranavali to refute the Prabhakara Mimamsakas. With Budhua came a disciple of his own, Jivanti, whom he was teaching the language of that old vow I have already told you about. Tonight clouds move overhead, and inside the manuscript hall one lamp is trembling more than a lamp ought to tremble.

(Before the disputation begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

A flood may drown a book, but it cannot drown the voice,

Words written in the heart do not grow wet in water.

The waters came, the pages drifted, the ink dissolved away;

But what passed from throat to throat survived the flood.

The book was soaked, yet the song stayed dry—

What travelled mouth to mouth no flood could ever erase.

(Exit.)

ACT ONE

FIRE IN THE MANUSCRIPT HALL

(Night. The manuscript hall: bundles of palm leaves, manuscripts tied in cloth, lamp stands. Disciple Someshvara and Jivanti are binding bundles. Budhua sits by the door with his shell and rope beside him.)

SOMESHVARA: Jivanti, the Acharya's Kiranavali is to leave tonight. A scholar from the east has asked for a copy. Yet there is no mangalacharana at its beginning. How can such a great work begin without an auspicious verse?

JIVANTI: Ask the Acharya, Someshvara. I only bind the leaves; I know nothing of auspicious beginnings.

(Udayanacharya enters.)

UDAYANACHARYA: *(Quietly.)* Care, study, clear writing, and timely revision—these are my auspicious rites, Someshvara. Faith is a discipline of the mind; I do not despise it. But the question for reason is different: what truly causes a work to be completed—the praise of a deity, or the author's steadfast labour?

SOMESHVARA: Then your book itself is the proof of its own auspicious beginning?

UDAYANACHARYA: A work completed without obstruction is itself evidence of auspiciousness. I claim no more than that.

(Suddenly a cry comes from outside. A disciple runs in.)

A DISCIPLE: Acharya! A lamp stand fell—the curtain in the rear room caught fire! The hall is burning!

BUDHUA: *(Leaping up.)* The manuscripts! Get the manuscripts out first!

(Panic. The disciples seize bundles and rush outside. Smoke fills the hall.)

UDAYANACHARYA: How many bundles are still inside?

JIVANTI: Three, Acharya! The oldest copy—and the original manuscript of the Kiranavali!

UDAYANACHARYA: The fire is spreading. No one can go in now.

JIVANTI: The pond is close, Acharya! If we wrap the bundles in oiled cloth and sink them in the pond, the fire cannot reach them. At dawn we can bring them out again.

BUDHUA: (Harshly.) Jivanti, no. An old crocodile lives in that pond. The fishermen will not go near it at night. I shall go myself.

JIVANTI: Uncle, your hands tremble now, and your eyes grow dim in the dark. I am quick, and I can swim. Let me go.

(Budhua hesitates for a moment, then bows his head. Jivanti lifts the bundles and runs toward the pond.)

ACT TWO

AT THE POND

(At the pond. Jivanti enters the water carrying the bundles tied in cloth. Budhua stands on the bank with a lamp. In the distance, smoke from the manuscript hall rises into the sky.)

BUDHUA: Jivanti, do not go into deep water. Leave them by the roots near the bank. That is enough.

JIVANTI: Uncle, the roots by the bank are too shallow. The heat of the fire may reach even there. I must go farther out.

(She wades deeper, holding the bundles high so that they do not get wet. In the lamplight her shadow stretches across the water.)

JIVANTI: (Breathing hard.) Done! The bundles are above the water; they have not sunk. Now I—

(She stops suddenly. Something moves beneath the water.)

JIVANTI: Uncle... my hair... it is caught in some root...

BUDHUA: (Shouting.) Jivanti! Drop the bundles—save yourself!

JIVANTI: (Gasping, but resolute.) I will not drop them, Uncle. They must not be soaked; they have to be sunk safely. I... you taught me, didn't you, to become a witness? To be a witness for the books as well...

(The water convulses. Her voice breaks beneath it. Budhua plunges in, but his old legs cannot master the current. By the time he reaches Jivanti, the bundles are in his hands, but Jivanti is gone.)

BUDHUA: (A cry torn from him.) Jivanti! Jivanti!

(Silence. Only the distant roar of the fire and the movement of water.)

ACT THREE

THE MORNING ASSEMBLY

(Dawn. Beside the charred remains of the manuscript hall. Udayanacharya, Abbot Shambhunath, Disciple Someshvara, and Budhua, still shivering in wet clothes. The rescued bundles lie safely nearby.)

SHAMBHUNATH: Acharya, it is a terrible accident, but I am grateful that the manuscript survived. The Kiranavali is safe. For the monastery, that is the greatest thing.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Looking at him hard.) Shambhunath, did you count the books first—or Jivanti?

SHAMBHUNATH: Acharya, I did not mean it that way... but she was only a disciple-attendant. Such an accident is tragic, certainly, but the manuscript will endure for thousands of years, and—

UDAYANACHARYA: (Cutting him off.) And Jivanti did not endure even one night. Look at your scales, Shambhunath: a book on one side, a life on the other, and your hand is already pressing down toward the book.

SOMESHVARA: Acharya, last night I said that your book had no mangalacharana, and you answered that a work completed without obstruction was itself proof of auspiciousness. But this morning I want to ask: was this work truly completed without obstruction? A life has been offered into it.

(Udayanacharya is silent for a long moment. Budhua sits with his head bowed.)

UDAYANACHARYA: (Slowly, heavily.) No, Someshvara. This work was not completed without obstruction. What I said last night was not false, but it was incomplete. I said that unobstructed completion was itself evidence of auspiciousness—but I forgot to ask at whose cost that unobstructedness had been purchased. That, too, is a question for evidence, and I did not even pose it. If a shastra does not ask the price of its own preservation, the shastra remains indebted to that price.

SHAMBHUNATH: Acharya, but it would not be proper to put this into a philosophical disputation...

UDAYANACHARYA: (Firmly.) Not into the disputation, Shambhunath. Into the monastery's book of memory. From this day onward, wherever this monastery records the manuscripts it has preserved, it will also record the names of those who preserved them. Jivanti's name will be carved on the doorway of this manuscript hall, exactly where the catalogue of books is written.

(Budhua raises his head. His eyes are wet.)

BUDHUA: Acharya, Vachaspati Mishra once said to me, “Reason illuminates truth, but to protect a truth once illuminated is another act.” Today I heard those words again—from another mouth, in another monastery. Perhaps this vow belonged to no single Acharya. Perhaps it is the vow of learning itself.

ACT FOUR

AT THE POND, EVENING

(Evening. Beside the pond. Budhua stands alone. Udayanacharya comes and stands beside him.)

UDAYANACHARYA: Someshvara told me the story of your vow, Budhua. You have carried this burden for more than thirty years.

BUDHUA: Acharya, now it has grown heavier. Hulasa’s name, and now Jivanti’s. I am afraid this list will never end.

UDAYANACHARYA: It will not end, Budhua. As long as human beings love scriptures more than human beings, the list will keep growing. But there is something I want to tell you. Do you know Jivanti’s last words to me? “To be a witness for the books as well...” The sentence broke off. Just like Hulasa’s palm leaf.

BUDHUA: (Startled.) How do you know about Hulasa’s palm leaf, Acharya?

UDAYANACHARYA: You talk in your sleep, Budhua. I have heard you for three nights. “I...” You still carry that unfinished word.

BUDHUA: (A long breath.) Acharya, I know that word will never be completed. But perhaps it need not be. Perhaps incompleteness itself is a kind of evidence—that love and justice both begin where the sentence fails to reach its end.

(The pond stirs although the air is still. The two stand silent for a while.)

UDAYANACHARYA: Budhua, from today I establish a rule. In this monastery, whoever gives their body to save a manuscript or a life shall have their name written in the “Chamber of Memory,” whether that person is disciple, servant, or woman. The catalogue of learning and the catalogue of memory will proceed side by side.

BUDHUA: (A faint smile through tears.) Acharya, Vachaspati Mishra never knew you, yet you spoke like his disciple.

UDAYANACHARYA: Perhaps this is how learning travels, Budhua—not from teacher to disciple, but from question to question.

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara re-enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Udayanacharya's "Chamber of Memory" remained in the monastery for many years, though in time it vanished when the monastery itself fell to ruin—for history is like this: monuments, too, become prey to time; stories alone do not. On the village tongue Jivanti's name became "the Water-Maiden," then, through slow corruption of speech, "Panidubbi"—the one beneath the water. Boatmen at the pond still say that on certain evenings long hair can be seen moving under the surface, and that when someone is about to drown, an unseen hand catches at the foot—not to pull the swimmer under, but to save them. Budhua, it is said, grew older still but did not die. The villagers began to call him "Budhba Sevak"—the Old Servant—and then simply "Budhba," the Old One. His vow, carrying the names of both Hulasa and Jivanti, moved onward—toward the age of Gangesha Upadhyaya, and beyond that, far ahead, toward the Channa grove where you will meet him again, seated on a branch with twelve hundred years of patience.

(Exit.)

STORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH UDAYANACHARYA

The assembly fell silent. Standing among the disciples and villagers, the Sutradhara began, in a low voice, to relate the old illustrations.

The Tradition of the Missing Mangalacharana in the Kiranavali—According to a traditional account, Udayanacharya's Kiranavali, a commentary on the Prashastapada-bhashya, departs from established custom by containing no conventional verse of auspicious invocation. Commentators have explained this in different ways: some regard the work's unobstructed completion itself as evidence of auspiciousness, while others see in the omission a mark of the Acharya's extraordinary self-confidence. Chapter -95 joins this tradition to Jivanti's sacrifice and raises a question largely absent from the inherited explanations: where, and by whom, was the price of that "unobstructed" completion paid?

Udayanacharya and Jagannath—A well-known devotional tradition says that Udayanacharya, so deeply engaged in refuting Buddhist and atheist positions, was once distressed at being unable to obtain direct proof of God. He travelled to the seashore at Puri, where Lord Jagannath appeared to him in the form of a child. The story stands as a reminder that reason and devotion, proof and experience, were never wholly separated within Mithila's Nyaya tradition.

Having said this, the Sutradhara remained silent for a while. Then he joined his hands and bowed to the assembly.

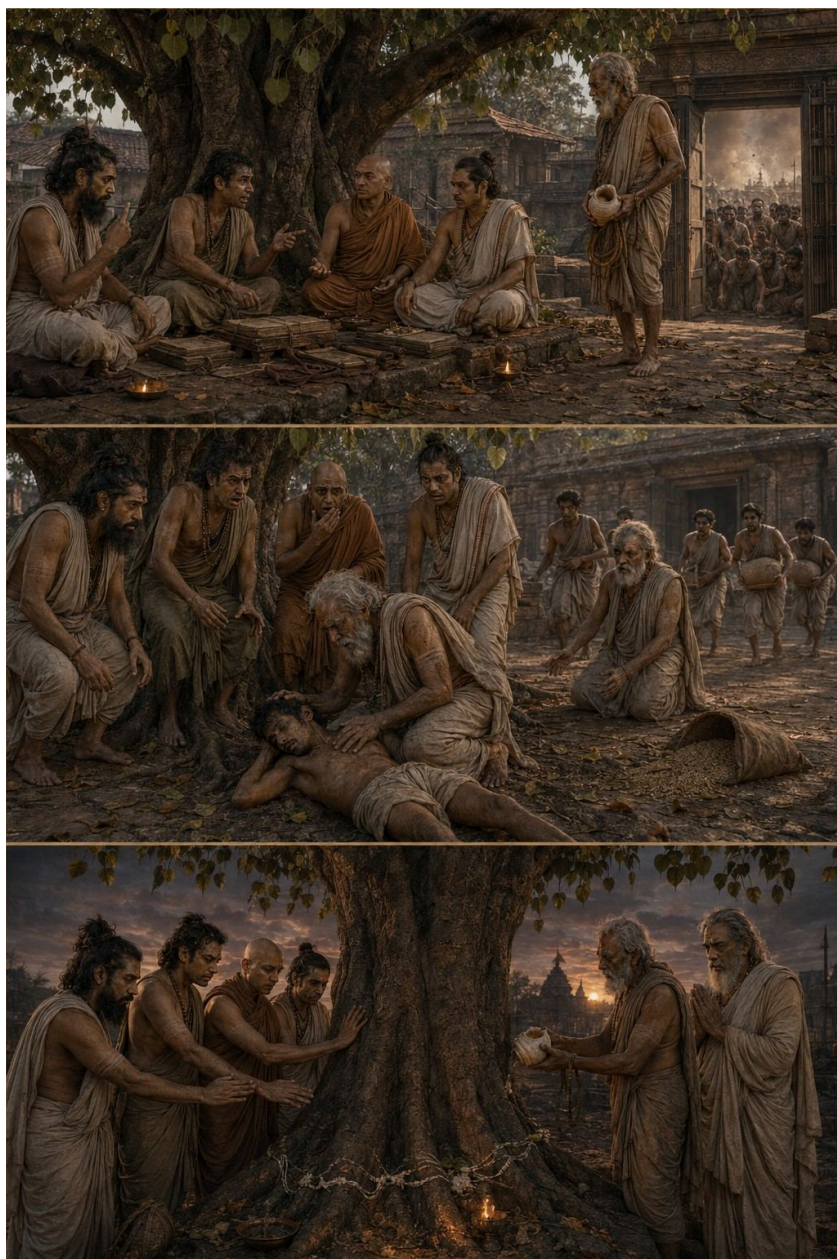
WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -94 (NINETY-FOUR BEFORE)

The Silence of Four Faces

*All four mouths spoke, yet one thing remained hidden—behind every
answer, a silence stood.*

— Garh Narikel



*(An original dramatic composition in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue;
set in Udayanacharya's monastery, continuing Budhua's vow from Chapter
-95.)*

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — stage narrator and master of ceremonies

Udayanacharya — philosopher-host, now very old; presiding over the assembly

Budhua — extremely old, once Vachaspati's lifelong attendant; now at Udayana's monastery, still bound by his vow to preserve memory

Samkhya Acharya Vishvambhara — calm, an expounder of Prakriti and the three gunas

Charvaka poet Rudradatta — worldly, sharp-tongued, impatient with anything unseen

Buddhist monk Shilabhadra — gentle-voiced, an expounder of compassion and emptiness, though prone to entanglement in argument

Mimamsaka Harinath — a ritualist scholar who recognizes no duty without an injunctive statement

Sohan — a starving villager, afflicted by the famine

The Council — the assembly's murmuring voice, together with the crowd of famine-stricken villagers

Setting: beneath a great pipal tree in the courtyard of Udayanacharya's monastery, where the assembly sits in its shade. Outside, near the monastery gate, a crowd of famine-stricken villagers has gathered. The end of summer. The sky is grey; the earth is cracked.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: Udayanacharya's Kiranavali spread through Mithila, and with it Budhua's hair turned wholly white. He now walks with a staff, yet the shell and rope remain in his hands. This year famine fell upon Mithila—the river dried, the fields split open. Four schools of learned men have gathered at the monastery today for disputation, as custom requires. But beyond the gate another assembly has gathered, one summoned not by scripture but by hunger. Watch when these two assemblies meet—and when they fail to meet.

(Before the disputation begins, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

All four mouths spoke, yet one thing stayed hidden,

Behind every answer, a silence stood.

*The more was said, the more remained; the more was known, the
more was left;*

Each one who answered still carried one unanswered question.

Speech is bounded, but silence has no end—

Whoever heard the silence understood beyond all four mouths.

(Exit.)

ACT ONE

BENEATH THE PIPAL TREE

(In the shade of the pipal sit Samkhya Acharya Vishvambhara, Charvaka poet Rudradatta, Buddhist monk Shilabhadra, and Mimamsaka Harinath. Udayanacharya sits in the middle; Budhua stands to one side. From the distant gate comes the noise of the crowd.)

VISHVAMBHARA: Acharya, I shall say it again: suffering arises from the three gunas of Prakriti, and liberation comes through discriminative knowledge, not through outward remedies. Until Purusha knows itself to be distinct from Prakriti, suffering will continue, no matter how much grain is distributed.

RUDRADATTA: (Laughing.) Vishvambhara, your discriminative knowledge does not descend into an empty stomach. What is perceptible is what is: hunger is here, grain is not. That is all. The rest is scholars' talk.

SHILABHADRA: Rudradatta, you accept what is perceptible, but not compassion. That all beings be freed from suffering—this is the very root of our path.

HARINATH: Shilabhadra, compassion is a fine word, but duty is not made by words; it is made by injunction. In which shruti is it written that giving the monastery's grain to unknown villagers is our dharma? Until an injunction is found, such giving is not duty but negligence.

(The uproar at the gate grows louder. A disciple runs in.)

A DISCIPLE: Acharya! More than thirty people have gathered at the gate. Some of the children have eaten nothing for three days. They are staring toward the monastery granary.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Gravely.) Tell them I shall come as soon as the disputation ends.

BUDHUA: (Quietly, but clearly.) Forgive me, Acharya, but hunger does not wait for a disputation to end.

ACT TWO

THE QUESTION THAT SHAKES THE ASSEMBLY

(Udayanacharya rises and stands among the four scholars.)

UDAYANACHARYA: Learned friends, I am changing the subject of today's disputation. Not mangalacharana, not vyapti. Today I shall ask one simple question: what does each of your philosophies say about the hungry crowd outside the gate? Answer one by one.

VISHVAMBHARA: (Thinking.) According to our philosophy, the three kinds of suffering—adhyatmika, adhibhautika, and adhidaivika—are overcome through knowledge, not through temporary remedies. Giving grain is a momentary easing of pain, not the removal of its root cause.

RUDRADATTA: Acharya, my philosophy is plain. If there is grain in your storehouse and a hungry stomach outside, give the grain. That is all. Where is the need for scripture here? It is simply common sense.

HARINATH: Rudradatta, "common sense" is not dharma. The Veda is the source of dharma, not human reason. If an act is not enjoined in the Veda, it is optional, not obligatory. The monastery's grain belongs to the monastery, not to the village.

SHILABHADRA: Harinath, that is harsh. The Buddha taught that compassion is the root of all dharma. But... (He pauses.) I must also admit that in the scriptural analysis of dana-paramita, the emptiness of the triad—giver, gift, and recipient—arises first, and then the act...

RUDRADATTA: (Interrupting.) Shilabhadra! Have you begun too, with your net of emptiness? A child is starving outside, and you are asking whether the giver truly exists?

SHILABHADRA: (Ashamed.) I... I spoke only for philosophical clarity.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Sharply.) Listen, all four of you. I make no charge against the depth of your shastras. But today I see this: four philosophies, each complete in its own way, yet all four together cannot perform one simple act, because each refuses to take a single step beyond the boundary of its own doctrine. This is not a defect in philosophy. It is a defect in the way we cling to philosophy.

(A cry is heard from afar. Sohan staggers in, terribly weak.)

SOHAN: (Faintly.) Maharaj... three days... the children... (He falters.)

ACT THREE

AT THE ROOTS OF THE PIPAL

(Sohan collapses beside the roots of the pipal. Everyone is stunned. Budhua reaches him first.)

BUDHUA: (Dropping to his knees.) Sohan! Sohan, open your eyes!

(Silence. Sohan does not rise. Weeping breaks out among the Council.)

UDAYANACHARYA: (Stunned, slowly rising.) Grain... distribute the grain now! At once!

(The disciples run toward the granary. Budhua does not rise from beside Sohan's lifeless body.)

BUDHUA: (In a heavy voice, turning to the four scholars.) Vishvambhara, you kept speaking of the three gunas. Rudradatta, you kept speaking of perception. Shilabhadra, you kept speaking of emptiness. Harinath, you kept speaking of injunctions. Sohan sat among these four accounts, listening—and died. Was there not one account among all of them that could have spoken at once: “Food first, debate afterward”?

(The four scholars are silent. The Samkhya Acharya lowers his eyes. For the first time, the Charvaka has no answer.)

VISHVAMBHARA: (Softly.) Budhua, you are right. My doctrine is true, but I applied it wrongly to this moment.

HARINATH: (In a subdued voice.) And I... I should not have waited for an injunction while a life was waiting for food.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Gravely, looking at them all.) Listen, learned friends. None of your knowledge is false. Yet today, even seated together, the four of you could not find one voice for one human life. This is not philosophy's defeat. It is our defeat—the defeat of those of us who love philosophy more than life.

ACT FOUR

FOUR FACES

(Evening. Sohan's cremation has taken place. Budhua, Udayanacharya, and the four scholars gather beside the pipal. Grain is being distributed among the crowd.)

BUDHUA: (Touching the pipal.) Acharya, I ask one thing of you. Do not let this tree forget what it saw today. As Hulasa's name was carved on

Vachaspati Mishra's stone, as Jivanti's name was written in the Chamber of Memory at your monastery, let this tree become Sohan's witness.

UDAYANACHARYA: How, Budhua?

BUDHUA: Four philosophies sat beneath this tree. All four spoke their own truths, yet they could not make one voice. I want this tree always to carry those four voices—like four faces on one body—so that whoever sits here in future to debate the shastras must first ask: "Is anyone hungry at the gate today?"

RUDRADATTA: Budhua, are you binding all of us into this tree?

BUDHUA: (With a faint smile, but firmness in his eyes.) No, Rudradatta. I am not binding you. I only want the silence that fell upon all four of you at the moment of Sohan's death never to be forgotten. If you agree, place your hands, one by one, upon the bark of this tree.

(One by one, the four scholars place their hands on the bark of the pipal. For a moment the air stirs, though the evening is still.)

UDAYANACHARYA: (Quietly.) From this day this tree shall be called the monastery's Witness-Tree. Whoever debates in its shade must first look toward the gate.

SHILABHADRA: (Whispering.) Acharya, I feel as though the tree is listening to our arguments now—not so that it may speak, but so that it may remember.

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara re-enters.)

SUTRADHARA: After that famine, rain came again to Mithila and the fields turned green once more. Samkhya Acharya Vishvambhara, Charvaka poet Rudradatta, Buddhist monk Shilabhadra, and Mimamsaka Harinath—all four continued to debate in later years. But it is said that they adopted one rule at the beginning of every assembly: first ask after the condition at the gate, then begin the debate. The villagers came to call that pipal the "Witness-Tree," and in time simply "Pipal Brahma"—for four philosophical voices, from four faces, are said still to sound within its bark, especially on nights when someone hungry sleeps beneath its shade. Budhua looked older than ever that night, and more peaceful than ever too—as though his vow now carried three names: Hulasa, Jivanti, and Sohan. The story does not end here. Far ahead, far away, in a Channa grove, this pipal will stand again, offering four answers from four faces; and all four answers, it is said, will prove false—because truth does not dwell where knowledge insists on speaking before compassion.

(Exit.)

STORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH SAMKHYA, CHARVAKA, BUDDHISM, AND MIMAMSA

THE CELEBRATED CHARVAKA MAXIM

A celebrated maxim associated with Charvaka philosophy says, in substance: as long as we live, let us live happily; even borrow in order to drink ghee, for once the body has been reduced to ashes there is no return. The maxim is most often preserved in works written by opponents of Charvaka; no original Charvaka scripture is now extant. In Chapter -94, Rudradatta's character brings forward a side of this tradition that is often neglected—the possibility of immediate compassion within a philosophy grounded in what is directly perceptible.

THE MIMAMSA THEORY OF INJUNCTIVE SENTENCES

In Purva-Mimamsa, the sole authority for dharma is the Vedic injunctive sentence: an act not explicitly enjoined in the Veda does not fall within the category of dharma. The doctrine is renowned for the clarity and discipline it brings to ritual action, but Chapter -94 raises a practical difficulty. In a new and unprecedented circumstance—such as a sudden famine—action that plainly ought to be taken may remain suspended while one waits for the relevant injunction.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -93 (NINETY-THREE BEFORE)

The Shell's Final Question

What you have recognized once, the morning asks again—but an answer that stands firm does not fear the question.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



(An original dramatic composition in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue; bringing the shell-and-silver illusion of Chapter -100 back into Udayanacharya's monastery after Chapter -94.)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhara — stage narrator and master of ceremonies

Udayanacharya — philosopher-host, now in the final year of his life

Budhua — extremely old, once Vachaspati's lifelong attendant; now at Udayana's monastery, still bound by his vow to preserve memory

The Objector — an extremely old sceptic who has spent his life travelling from village to village, raising doubts in philosophical disputations; the same voice first heard in Chapter -100

Disciple Keshava — Udayana's young disciple, assigned to attend upon the Objector

The Council — the assembly's murmuring voice

Setting: a quiet courtyard behind Udayanacharya's monastery, not far from the pipal Witness-Tree. Evening; the sky is saffron, the air still.

PROLOGUE

(The Sutradhara enters.)

SUTRADHARA: You may remember that many years ago, in Vachaspati Mishra's hall of disputation, there was a voice that refused to accept that the Self was already known, and that first raised the story of the shell-and-silver illusion. That voice—the Objector—has wandered from village to village, assembly to assembly, ever since, sowing the seed of a new doubt inside every answer. Tonight, now very old, he has come here for the last time, to Udayanacharya's monastery, carrying one final question. Watch and see whether a lifetime of doubt can at last come to rest upon an answer—or whether doubt itself becomes a house that is difficult to leave.

(Exit.)

ACT ONE

ARRIVAL

(Disciple Keshava enters, supporting an extremely old, frail man with a staff. It is the Objector. Budhua, himself now very old, freezes the moment he sees him.)

DISCIPLE KESHAVA: Acharya! This guest collapsed near the gate. He says he has come to meet Udayanacharya, but he will not tell us his name.

BUDHUA: (Stunned, moving slowly closer.) I... I know this voice. Sixty years have passed, but I know it. You... you are the one who asked Acharya Vachaspati, "If the Self is already known, what purpose can inquiry serve?"

OBJECTOR: (With a faint laugh.) Your memory has not aged faster than your body, Budhua. Yes. It is I. For sixty years I have gone from hall to hall, from one side of Mithila to the other, looking for a fresh opening in every answer. Today I understood that this body will not last much longer, and so I have returned here—to end where I began.

BUDHUA: I shall call Udayanacharya. He will hear your final question.

(Udayanacharya, himself aged, enters slowly.)

UDAYANACHARYA: (Looking at the Objector.) Guest, I know your voice already, though I have never met you face to face. Your doubt lives in every story of my lineage of teachers. Sit.

OBJECTOR: (Sitting, breathless.) Acharya, I have come with one question, and this time the question is not for disputation. It is for me. Long ago Vachaspati Mishra said, in speaking of the shell-and-silver illusion, that error occurs when one thing appears in the form of another. I accept that much. But tonight, sitting at the threshold of death, I have a new doubt: if an entire human life can be an illusion like mistaking a shell for silver, then what is death? The end of the illusion—or an illusion whose own test could never be performed?

ACT TWO

AN ILLUSION WITHIN AN ILLUSION

(Udayanacharya, Budhua, and Disciple Keshava sit around the Objector.)

UDAYANACHARYA: Guest, your question is grave, and I shall not simplify it. Remember: our school, Nyaya-Vaisheshika, calls error anyathākhyāti. The shell is real; the silver is real too, somewhere else; cognition wrongly joins the two in one place. Error is false cognition, not a false object.

OBJECTOR: But the Prabhakara Mimamsaka will call it akhyāti—merely a failure to notice the distinction between two separate cognitions, the memory of shell and the memory of silver. And the Advaitin will speak of asatkhyāti or anirvacanīyakhyāti: what appears is neither real nor unreal, but indefinable. Three schools, three answers. In sixty years I have not heard a single verdict that could silence all three in one voice.

BUDHUA: (Quietly.) Objector, I too have sat in these halls for more than sixty years, tending lamps and listening to words. I too have never heard all three speak with one voice.

OBJECTOR: (In despair.) Then you too were deceived like me, Budhua. So many lamps, so many debates, and in the end three quarrelling answers—four, if I count my own doubt.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Calmly.) Guest, you take disagreement among three schools to be proof that the means of knowledge has failed. I see it differently. All three agree that error is error—that acting toward the shell as silver, reaching for it and rejoicing in it, was mistaken. Their disagreement concerns only the internal mechanism of the mistake. Such disagreement is not a sign that truth is absent. It is a sign that the subject is subtle.

OBJECTOR: But my question is about death, Acharya, not mechanism. I ask this: if my whole life, my whole habit of doubt, was itself a shell-and-silver illusion, who was the knower of that illusion? If the knower himself was false, then my doubt had no worth. And if the knower was real, why did I waste sixty years when one thing—the certainty of the knower—was already in my possession?

(Silence. Udayanacharya opens his mouth to answer, but Budhua raises a hand and stops him.)

ACT THREE

BUDHUA'S ANSWER

BUDHUA: Acharya, forgive me, but this question belongs not to scripture but to life. Let me answer it.

UDAYANACHARYA: (Bowing his head.) Speak, Budhua.

BUDHUA: Objector, you ask what value your doubt had. I shall give you three names: Hulasā, Jivanti, Sohan. All three, in this life, became victims of error—one in a well, one in a pond, one in hunger. And every time, the machinery of proof in the debating hall arrived late, or did not arrive at all. But one thing was never late: the decision to bear witness. That decision does not come from proof, Objector. It comes after proof, when proof has fallen silent and only a human decision remains—to forget what was seen, or to carry it.

OBJECTOR: But that is not an answer to a question of knowledge, Budhua. That is a matter of will.

BUDHUA: Yes, Objector. For the first time in sixty years, I want to tell you this: perhaps the answer to your question does not lie in knowledge. Perhaps knowledge can only give error a name; stepping out

of error is the work of will, memory, and love. For sixty years you tried to avoid mistaking the shell for silver. For sixty years I tried to understand how much the shell is worth even though it is not silver—because it is still a shell, it is here in my hand, and keeping it is my work whether anyone mistakes it for silver or not.

OBJECTOR: (In tears.) Budhua... then death?

BUDHUA: Death is not the end of illusion, Objector, nor is it the test of illusion. Death is the moment when the shell—this body of yours, this sixty-year journey—reveals its true worth without trying to become silver. Until today you kept searching for silver. Perhaps now, for the last time, see the shell simply as shell.

ACT FOUR

EVENING LIGHT

(The sky has deepened to saffron. The Objector slowly leans back; his breathing grows faint.)

OBJECTOR: (Whispering, peacefully, for the first time without doubt.) Budhua... Udayanacharya... for the first time in sixty years, I am seeing something clearly. This is not the shell... this is not silver... this... (His breath breaks.)

(The Objector's eyes close. His body becomes still. A moment of silence. Then, in the last light of evening, a faint silver-like radiance slips from the corner of his eye, as though a wisp of smoke had suddenly caught the light. The glow dances in the air and flies toward the pipal Witness-Tree.)

DISCIPLE KESHAVA: (Frightened.) Acharya! What... what is that?

UDAYANACHARYA: (Calm, but astonished.) I do not know, Keshava. Perhaps it is the question that will never receive a complete answer, and therefore, freed from the body, has itself become light—not sat, not asat, only radiance, like that instant between shell and silver which no one has ever fully understood.

BUDHUA: (His eyes wet, yet smiling.) Sixty years of doubt have found rest now, Acharya. And perhaps this light, neither shell nor silver, is the most honest memorial to doubt I have ever seen.

EPILOGUE

(The Sutradhara re-enters.)

SUTRADHARA: The Objector was cremated beneath the shade of the pipal Witness-Tree, where the voices of four philosophies still seemed to linger. It is said that from that night onward, tiny silver-like lights

could sometimes be seen around the tree—small, trembling, without any fixed form. The villagers began to call them “rakash”, because the lights would appear and vanish before anyone could touch them. The light was neither true nor false, just as the Objector’s whole life rested neither in complete doubt nor in complete certainty. Budhua, it is said, looked more exhausted that night than ever before, but his vow now carried four names. The story of the shell, which we heard in Chapter -100, completes its circle tonight—but a completed circle is not an answer, only the doorway to a new question. You will meet it again, much later, in the kabaddi of Channa Grove, where the rakash cast silver-like light and no one knows whether that light speaks truth or falsehood.

(Before leaving, the Sutradhara sings a folk song.)

What once you thought you knew, the morning asks again,
 But the answer that stands firm does not fear the question.
 You took shell for silver, then knew shell, then asked again;
 With every asking, truth itself grew deeper.
 Questions never weary; the answer stands its ground—
 Who did not fear the question has faced even truth’s final question.

(Exit.)

SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES AMONG THEORIES OF THE SHELL-SILVER ILLUSION

ANYATHĀKHYĀTI, AKHYĀTI, AND ANIRVACANĪYAKHYĀTI

Indian philosophy preserves three major accounts of the nature of illusion. The Nyaya-Vaisheshika school accepts anyathākhyāti: in error, both objects—the shell and the silver—are real, but cognition joins them improperly. Prabhakara Mimamsa accepts akhyāti: error arises only from failure to apprehend the distinction between memory and perception; no false cognition is produced. Advaita Vedanta accepts anirvacanīyakhyāti: the object that appears in error is neither sat nor asat, nor both sat and asat, but anirvacanīya—indefinable. Chapter -100 stages these differences at length; Chapter -93 joins them to the question of death and adds a new dimension: if there is so much disagreement about the nature of knowledge itself, from where can certainty about the nature of life and death arise?

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -92 (NINETY-TWO BEFORE)

Prisoner of the Water Clock

Drop by drop the water falls, drop by drop the time—whoever is the clock's prisoner never reaches the end of his speech.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction, leaving the dramatic form behind. It follows the later life of Keshava, the disciple from Chapter -93, and gives the first extended introduction to the village of Garh Narikel, which far in the future will become the setting of Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles.)

Garh Narikel did not yet bear that name on the day whose story I am about to tell. At the time the village was known simply as Narikel-Ghat, because on its eastern side, where the Kamala-Balan made a bend, twenty or twenty-five coconut palms stood in a row like old sentries keeping their appointed posts. The word “Garh” came later, when an earthen embankment was raised around the village against the floods—but that belongs to a much later story. In the time I am speaking of, the village possessed only a pond, a pipal tree, and the patience of its people.

At the centre of the village lay a large pond called Jori Pokhari because it had two parts, one deep and one shallow, joined by a narrow channel. The deep part held fish—rohu, catla, and little pothi—which the village fishermen caught in the winter months. In the shallow part, buffaloes lay submerged through the afternoons, only the tops of their nostrils above water, eyes half closed as though they too were absorbed in some philosophy. On the eastern bank stood an enormous pipal whose roots spread so widely that thirty or forty people could sit together in its shade. The villagers called it the Witness-Tree, though no one knew exactly why. The elders said the name came from a learned servant who had once arrived there, laid his rope and shell among its roots, and begun to sit in judgment over the village’s disputes.

That servant was Budhua. By now he was exceedingly old—so old that the village had stopped counting his years. After Udayanacharya’s death, still bound by his vow, he had come to this part of Mithila, where Udayana’s disciple Keshava—now Acharya Keshava—had established a small court of Nyaya in the village then called Narikel-Ghat. There, between pond and pipal, the disputes of the village were heard.

Acharya Keshava possessed his teacher’s gravity, but in one respect he differed from him: he loved procedure. Every dispute required a ghatika-yantra, a water clock—a brass bowl pierced through its base with a needle-hole and set floating upon water. When the bowl filled and sank, the speaker’s allotted time was deemed finished. The method had come from the debating halls of Vachaspati and Udayana, where it had been useful in keeping argument disciplined. But in ordinary village disputes, where one side might be learned and the other merely hungry and exhausted, the same water clock took on another character. Whoever could speak at length could make time his own; whoever could not found his story broken off the instant the bowl sank, and was sent away with the words, “Come tomorrow.”

Sukhdev Mahato lived at the southern end of the village with his wife, a son, and a daughter. His half-bigha plot touched the northern edge of Jori Pokhari. There he grew paddy and a little vegetable crop, and kept a buffalo whom his daughter had named Kajari—because the dark rings around her eyes looked as though someone had drawn them with

kohl. Sukhdev was no important man, but on the village tongue his name was spoken with respect for his honesty.

At the western end of the village lived Ugrasen Thakur, whose lands stretched to the southern edge of the pond. Ugrasen's reach was long: most of the village land was bound, directly or indirectly, either by his loans or by the accounts of his munim. In winter, when the water fell, Ugrasen's men blocked the channel running from the pond toward Sukhdev's field, saying, "Our forefathers made this channel. It will be opened only with our permission." Sukhdev's field dried out, while Kajari, who needed water to bathe, stood restless through the heat and bellowed for relief.

Sukhdev had first come before Acharya Keshava's assembly three years earlier. He arrived at dawn carrying the old deed of partition in his hand—a document written by his father, its letters faded but the position of the channel still clearly marked—and sat beneath the pipal. That day the assembly first took up a marriage dispute within a Brahmin family, whose arguments consumed three bowls of the water clock. Then came a question of land tax brought by officers of the king; that hearing too went on at length, because royal officials were customarily heard first. Evening descended. Budhua, seated among the roots, watched Sukhdev sit with the deed in his hand—first in sunlight, then in shade, then once more in sunlight—without moving, as though he had himself become one of the pipal's roots.

When dusk had nearly fallen, Acharya Keshava looked toward him and said, "Sukhdev, the time is over for today. Tomorrow your matter will be heard first."

Sukhdev bowed his head and went home. But the next day was the same. And the day after that. Every day some larger dispute, some learned question, found a seat before Sukhdev's plain, unlettered grievance. Budhua, sitting beneath the tree and watching it all, said to Acharya Keshava one day, "Acharya, this man has been coming for three weeks. His water has been stopped. His paddy is drying. Can his case not be heard first for one day?"

Acharya Keshava, compassionate like his teacher yet held fast in the grip of procedure, replied, "Budhua, justice moves by order, not by preference. If I hear Sukhdev first today, someone else will come tomorrow and claim that he too had the first right. If the order breaks, the whole system breaks with it."

Budhua said nothing. That night he remained a long while among the pipal's roots, counting the stars, as though searching through sixty or seventy years of memory for an answer.

Ugrasen Thakur, on the other hand, never broke the order of the court—because he never needed to. His advocate, himself a scholar, raised

a fresh technical question each time: "First let it be established to whom the channel originally belonged," or, "First let us determine whether the witnesses to the partition deed are still alive." Every new question demanded a new measure of the water clock, and Sukhdev's turn slipped farther back again.

Six weeks passed in this fashion. Jeth arrived, bringing unbearable heat. The Kamala-Balan thinned. The shallow half of Jori Pokhari dried until bare earth showed through, and the buffaloes jostled one another toward the deeper water. Kajari grew gaunt, her hide seeming to cling to the bones beneath it. The paddy in Sukhdev's field turned thin and yellow, its ears without grain.

That week Sukhdev came every day. His clothes had grown soiled, his cheeks hollow. He himself was becoming thin and yellow like the paddy in his field. Budhua, watching him, began filling his shell with water and giving him drink, but he said nothing; by then, what could words do?

One evening, as the final bowl of the water clock was sinking and Acharya Keshava was nodding over yet another technical point made by Ugrasen's advocate, Sukhdev rose from his place. He had sat silent for a long time, but now his body had begun to tremble. He took two steps forward, lifted a hand, and tried to speak: "Acharya, my daughter..." His voice broke. He swayed and fell beside the roots of the pipal.

For one instant the assembly froze. Then came confusion. Someone brought water; someone else tried to fan him. Budhua reached him first and took Sukhdev's head into his lap. Sukhdev's eyes were half closed, his mouth still half open, as though the words remained standing there, waiting to come out. "My daughter..." That was all he had managed to say. Budhua took his hand in his own, but life had already left the body.

Acharya Keshava ran to him and tucked the edge of his robe beneath Sukhdev's head. "Sukhdev! Sukhdev, today... today I would have heard you!" But those words were now like seed sown only after the field had dried.

That night Budhua sat beside Sukhdev's body among the pipal roots, filling his shell with water and carrying it to Sukhdev's lips although he knew no water would pass them now. Acharya Keshava, with all his scriptures and all his ordered procedures, sat on the other side of the tree with his head in his hands. "Budhua," he said at last, "was I wrong?"

After a long silence Budhua answered softly, "No, Acharya. Your order was not wrong. It merely forgot that for many people time itself is a luxury. And when a person cannot afford that luxury, his case does not reach the end of the queue; it reaches the end of his body."

Acharya Keshava said nothing. But after that night he added a rule to the assembly's code: anyone who had waited for more than three

consecutive days would be heard first, however many complicated disputes remained. The rule later came to be called the “Sukhdev Rule,” though the name was never carved upon any stone. After Sukhdev’s death his land passed into the hands of Ugrasen’s munim, and the daughter whose name had been given to the buffalo—her own true name—never entered the village record at all.

After this event, people said that on certain evenings a dim figure could be seen beside the roots of the pipal, its mouth half open as though trying to speak, yet the words never came to completion. The villagers called it “Loth,” for its body stood still as a corpse while its mouth remained unfinished like that of the living. Whenever anyone looked upon the figure in fear, Budhua would say, “Do not be afraid. That is the man whose turn never came. All he wants is for someone, one day, to hear his case to the end.” But the case was never heard to the end, because it had been left incomplete from the beginning, and Budhua had learned long ago that no witness has the right to complete another person’s unfinished words.

In time Narikel-Ghat came to be called Garh Narikel. The pond is old even now, though its waters are still divided into a deep and a shallow half. The pipal still stands, though its roots now spread as far as Channa Grove—or perhaps Channa Grove itself is only the extension of that ancient pipal; the oldest people of the village cannot say exactly where one ends and the other begins. The Kamala-Balan still flows, sometimes full, sometimes thin, just as it flowed centuries ago when Sukhdev Mahato first arrived beside the pond carrying his deed of partition. Buffaloes still spend their afternoons in the shallow water; egrets still stand along the banks watching for fish; the koel still calls when the mango trees flower, as though the joys and griefs of the village were no concern of hers. Yet the village’s hunger, the village’s waiting, and the village’s unfinished speech remain much as they were. Only their names have changed: date, file, and courthouse veranda.

That day, counting the drops of the water clock, Budhba sang a saying—

Drop by drop the water falls, drop by drop the time,

Whoever is the clock’s prisoner never reaches the end of his speech.

Time flowed on, the drops fell, but the name stood still;

Whoever counted time became time’s prisoner.

The water kept falling, the name kept dwelling—

Whoever set a name above time is no prisoner of the clock.

**A NOTE ON ACHARYA KESHAVA AND THE NYAYA
TRADITION OF NARIKEL-GHAT**

**THE GHATIKA-YANTRA AND THE QUESTION OF TIME IN
JUSTICE**

In the classical Indian tradition of philosophical disputation, the ghatika-yantra, or water clock, was used to discipline speaking time and prevent a disputant from expanding without limit. Chapter -92 raises an uncomfortable aspect of that practice: an instrument devised to regulate debate among scholars can, unintentionally, become a new barrier against society's less powerful people when access to time itself is distributed unequally.

The Light of the Leatherworkers' Quarter

*The hand that stitches leather has a name upon the leaf as well—the
lamp of the quarter and the lamp of the palace burn the selfsame oil.*

— Garh Narikel



*(A passage of narrative fiction in the manner of Chapter -92. It concerns the leatherworkers' quarter of Garh Narikel—which will be mentioned again much later in *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*—and that part of Gangesha Upadhyaya's life which remained hidden behind the brilliance of the shastras.)*

By then the people had almost stopped calling the village Narikel-Ghat; it had become, simply, Garh Narikel, and it had grown large. Jori Pokhari, the pipal Witness-Tree, and the current of the Kamala-Balan were still where they had always been. But a hall of baked brick now stood in the middle of the village, where learned disputations were held and where one or another successor in Acharya Keshava's line could always be found seated.

For this story, however, we must go to the part of the village that the scholars passing to and from that hall almost never saw—the western edge, where an old channel of the Kamala-Balan had dried up and left behind a parched watercourse that people called Maral-Gang, the “Dead Ganges.” Babul and date palms stood along it: neither as shady as the pipal nor as tall as the coconut, thorny and dust-covered, but useful in their own way. This was the leatherworkers' quarter. Hides were dried here, drums and mridangas were made here, shoes and sandals were stitched here—the work without which the village could not live, yet which the village would not allow near its own threshold.

In that quarter lived Malati, a bright, deep-eyed girl. Her father, Somar the leatherworker, was considered the finest maker of dholaks in the village. Her mother, Ratna, was summoned to every household when a child was to be born, because her hands possessed something that even the medicines of great physicians sometimes lacked: patience, and a knowledge of herbs written nowhere, passed only from the ear of one generation into the next.

One summer evening, when the sky had turned a dusty yellow and only a few pools of water remained in the dry bed of Maral-Gang, the dogs of the quarter began to bark. Ratna stepped outside and saw a young man lying collapsed beside a babul tree, his clothes filthy, his body shaking with fever. Several palm-leaf folios were clutched in his hand; even unconscious, he had not let them go.

“Who are you, babu?” Ratna asked. The young man could not answer. Only an indistinct murmur came from him—“Pramana... without pramana... how...” —and then he lost consciousness again.

The young man was Gangesha. The story of his family was told in many different ways through the village. Some said that he had been born five years after his father's death, an impossibility that cast a shadow of suspicion over his lineage; others said he had been so slow-witted as a child that even his mother's people made him fill their pipes. Whether all this was truth or rumour, Gangesha himself never made clear. What was true was that, fleeing suspicion and humiliation, he had left home and wandered from village to village, composing in his mind a new and unprecedented work on the theory of valid knowledge—a work that would later be called the *Tattvachintamani*. But during those wanderings

his body repeatedly failed him: fever, hunger, and the exhaustion of unbroken thought.

Ratna and Somar carried him into their hut. Many households in the village would have driven such a young man from the door, for his clothes and speech made it plain that he was a Brahmin, and for a Brahmin to stay in a leatherworker's house was regarded as "polluting" from both sides. Ratna had no use for such a rule. Hers were the hands that gave a child its first touch at birth, and those hands could not abandon a young man sitting at the edge of death.

For fifteen days Gangesha fought the fever. Ratna fed him neem, tulsi, and other herbs whose names perhaps only she knew. Malati, sixteen years old then, sat beside his head listening to his delirious mutterings—"No object of knowledge without a means of knowledge... what makes testimony a *pramana*..." One day, without thinking, she asked, "But if someone speaks and there is no falsehood in the speaker's mind, how can the words be false, whoever the speaker may be?"

Still trembling with fever, Gangesha opened his eyes. "Who said that?"

"I did," Malati said, a little frightened. "Forgive me. I am no pandit. I have only watched my father make drums. If the hide is not stretched true, the drum gives a false sound no matter how skilful the drummer's hands may be. But if the hide is stretched true, the drum will speak as truly as any great instrument in a palace."

Gangesha was silent for a long while. Then, in a voice still exceedingly weak, he said, "Do you know what you have just said? You have moved the question of the *apta*—the trustworthy speaker—from the speaker's caste to the soundness of the *karana*, the instrument that carries the knowledge. I... I have been caught on this question for three years, and with the example of a drum you have loosened it in a single breath."

Malati laughed, though she did not understand what great thing she was supposed to have said. "I only spoke about a drum, babuji."

"No," Gangesha said, and for the first time there was a brightness in his eyes despite the fever. "You spoke about *Nyaya*."

From that day on, even after he recovered, Gangesha returned again and again to Somar and Ratna's house. He would say, "The air suits me there," but the village knew that more than the air, he liked sitting with Malati, who had never studied *shastra* yet asked, out of lived experience, questions for which answers were not always found even in the greatest disputations. Within two years the talk of a marriage between Gangesha and Malati had become serious.

An uproar broke out in the Brahmin quarter. “A Brahmin—and one so gifted—will marry a leatherworker’s daughter?” The question echoed at every doorway and every well. Gangesha’s own maternal kin threatened that if the marriage took place, no assembly would ever invite him to debate, no pandit would accept him as a witness, and however fine his book might be, no school would teach it.

In the midst of that uproar, one evening Gangesha sat alone beside Jori Pokhari under the pipal Witness-Tree, his head in his hands. Then he heard a voice: “You are in as much doubt as an Objector was sixty years ago.”

Gangesha looked up. Among the roots sat a man so old that it was almost difficult to call him a man at all. In his hands were an ancient shell and a worn rope. It was Budhua.

“Who are you, Baba?” Gangesha asked.

“I am a servant whose service has lasted so long that it is no longer right to call it service. I know your trouble. I have come to tell you this: the learned disputation that shuts you out of its assembly will not endure longer than your book. But the knowledge you received from Malati’s story of the drum will remain on every page of that book, whether anyone ever writes Malati’s name or not.”

Gangesha stared at him. “How do you know the story of the drum?”

Budhua smiled faintly. “I have sat beneath this tree for many years, babu. The wind tells me a great deal. I shall say only this: the marriage you are about to make is not your downfall; it is the foundation of your book. But I must also tell you something sorrowful. The world will read your book and forget Malati’s drum. It will turn your marriage into a story of charity, not a story of Nyaya. I cannot prevent that injustice. But I can make one promise: as long as my vow lives, the names of Ratna and Malati will survive somewhere, in some form—if not on the pages of shastra, then on some other page.”

The marriage took place despite the opposition of the Brahmin quarter. Several Brahmin families barred Gangesha from their doors. Yet the work he wrote over the next twenty years, gathering thought said to equal twelve thousand treatises, came to be studied in every school of Mithila—and exactly what Budhua had foretold came to pass. People revered the Tattvachintamani but forgot the story of Malati’s drum. Instead of remembering Ratna, in time some people fashioned a different tale: that Gangesha’s intelligence had awakened in the cremation ground through the grace of a tantric or by a boon from the goddess Kali. Such a divine tale was easier to make than to admit that a leatherworker’s daughter, from years of watching hides stretched upon drums, had grasped a profound truth of the theory of knowledge.

Ratna and the other leatherworker women of the village, who gathered around her for her knowledge of herbs, her skill in childbirth, and her sharp intelligence, would bring their low stools after dusk and sit beside Maral-Gang. They talked, sang, and shared among themselves every quarrel, every injustice, every hidden story in the village. They knew that their voices would never be heard in the assembly hall, so they made an assembly of their own, where the language was not the language of shastra but the language of experience. The Brahmin quarter regarded the gathering with fear, because those women knew things the scholars did not: which herb would cure which illness, which woman would have a difficult birth, whose husband knocked at whose door in the night. Knowledge that was never written in a book was gradually translated into the language of fear. People began to call these women “dains”—witches—because when society meets knowledge it cannot write down, it tends to call it either a goddess or a witch; it has no name for the space between.

After Ratna’s death—she lived to old age, teaching her herb-lore to her granddaughters—her name faded in the village story, but it did not vanish altogether. The pipal Witness-Tree, beneath whose shade Budhua had spoken with Gangesha, held that evening’s conversation in its roots, just as it held the stories of Hulasa, Jivanti, and Sukhdev. And the gathering of women on their low stools beside Maral-Gang slowly took another form in village memory: even now, people say, after dusk certain figures may be seen sitting there on stools, talking and planning, but never speaking loudly, for they had learned long ago that a quiet voice is a safer voice.

That day, seeing the lamps of the leatherworkers’ quarter, the village sang—

The hand that stitches leather has a name upon the leaf,

*The lamp of the quarter and the lamp of the palace burn the selfsame
oil.*

The hand that labours is the hand that builds the village;

The quarter called low bears a name greater than the register.

Whether the lamp is small or great, its light is one—

*Whoever preserves the name of labour preserves the whole story of the
village.*

STORIES AND TRADITIONS CONNECTED WITH GANGESHA UPADHYAYA

The assembly grew quiet. Standing among the disciples and villagers, Sutradhara began, in a low voice, to recount the old traditions—

A note on the tradition of Gangesha's marriage—Traditional lore contains a reference to Gangesha Upadhyaya marrying a woman of the leatherworker community, although the older texts do not preserve a detailed account of the marriage, the names of those involved, or its circumstances. It survives only as a brief fact, often treated as uncomfortable and therefore suppressed. The characters Malati, Ratna, and Somar, and the details of their household in Chapter -91, are fictional constructions and are not established by historical documents. The purpose of the chapter is not to claim them as historical fact, but to give narrative form to a question also raised in the epilogue to Chapter -97: how many unnamed contributions remain hidden behind the brilliance of shastra?

Its relation to the tradition of Gangesha's childhood—The appendix to Chapter -97 cites the traditional story of Gangesha's dullness as a child and his sudden awakening to knowledge through tantric grace. Chapter -91 does not reject that tradition; rather, it offers an alternative, parallel possibility—that over time the story of a divine boon may cover over a human education that society found harder to acknowledge.

Having said this, Sutradhara remained silent for a while, then joined his palms and bowed to the assembly.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -90 (NINETY BEFORE)

Budhua's Water-Burial

The crocodile took the body and left the name—one who takes water-burial dwells not on the pond's floor, but in the village's memory.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction in the manner of Chapters -91 and -92. In this chapter Budhua, who has witnessed every story from Chapter -100 through Chapter -91, himself takes water-burial among the crocodiles—and the “Budhba ghost” is born, whom we shall meet much later in Channa Grove, “seated on the same branch for twelve hundred years.”)

Garh Narikel had changed greatly. The assembly hall had fallen twice and twice been built again. A young Acharya named Vardhamana, the seventh-generation successor in Acharya Keshava's line, now sat there, and disciples were beginning to arrive from every corner of Mithila with dreams of writing commentaries on Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*. Jori Pokhari was still where it had always been, though its deep half had grown deeper with the silt of many years and the rain of many monsoons. The pipal Witness-Tree had become so vast that its roots reached the pond's edge and descended into the water, as though the tree itself wished to drink. The leatherworkers' quarter by Maral-Gang had expanded as well; four generations of Ratna's family now lived there, and every child in the village was still born into the hands of one woman or another from that family, though the Brahmin quarter never openly acknowledged the fact.

And Budhua was still alive.

By now this seemed less astonishing to the village than ordinary, like the pipal tree or the water of the pond—something that had always been there, whose presence no one thought to question. The children had begun calling Budhua “Budhba,” and the name still carried a faint memory of the words “old servant,” though no one any longer knew exactly whose servant he had been. He could no longer walk. All day he sat among the pipal roots, his worn shell and old rope beside him, and whenever anyone passed he would always speak a name—sometimes *Hulasa*, sometimes *Jivanti*, sometimes *Sukhdev*, sometimes *Ratna*—as though those names floated in the air and Budhua's last remaining work was simply to keep them from falling out of it.

That winter was harsher than most. The *Kamala-Balan* ran thin and cold as ice. The buffaloes of the pond left the water and huddled on the dry grass along the bank. The egrets that usually wandered at the water's edge flew somewhere else that season, and the pond looked deserted: only its still surface, and upon it the shadow of the pipal roots.

One evening that winter a young disciple of Acharya Vardhamana, named Raghunath, sat beside Budhua as village children often did to hear the old man's stories. Raghunath asked, “Budhba, how old are you?”

Budhua smiled, a smile that now seemed made more of air than bone. “I do not know, *babu*. I stopped counting long ago. But this much I know: when I began, there was only a line of coconut palms here, and the pond and the pipal, and a hall of disputation where an Acharya argued about the error of mistaking a shell for silver.”

“*Vachaspati Mishra*?” Raghunath asked in astonishment. “But he... he lived hundreds of years ago!”

“Yes,” Budhua said softly, looking toward the pond. “Hundreds of years. Now it seems to me, *babu*, that those hundreds of years are sitting

inside me—not in my body, but in my memory. And memory becomes a burden when the body that carries it begins to weaken.”

After Raghunath left, Budhua gazed at the pond for a long time. His hands, once firm sixty years before, now trembled. His eyes, which had once read the final letters on Hulasa’s palm leaf, had grown dim. He understood that his body would not remain with him much longer. Yet one question troubled him: if he died like an ordinary man, who would hold Hulasa’s name, Jivanti’s name, Sukhdev’s unfinished sentence, Ratna’s story of the drum? None of these had been carved in stone. None had been written in a manuscript. They existed only in the memory of one old man, and that memory would end with him, as the light of a lamp ends when the flame goes out.

That night Budhua lifted his shell and rope and, step by trembling step, made his way toward the pond. Moonlight lay across the water like silver—the same kind of light whose story he had heard from the Objector sixty years before, in the tale of shell and silver. Budhua sat on the bank, lowered his rope into the water, and pressed the shell to his chest.

“Hulasa,” he whispered, “your last word was ‘I...’, and I never completed it, because I had no right to do so. But today I want to tell you this—I am taking that unfinished word with me, not so that I may finish it, but so that I may preserve it forever.”

“Jivanti,” he continued, “you said, ‘To bear witness to a manuscript is also...’ and your sentence broke in the water. Today I am going to complete that sentence in this water—not with your words, but with your deed. I shall bear witness, Jivanti. Always.”

“Sukhdev,” he said, tears in his eyes, “your daughter, your buffalo Kajari, your deed of partition—all were erased from the village record, but not from my memory. I am taking the Sukhdev Rule with me.”

“Ratna,” he said at last, smiling faintly, “your story of the drum lived on every page of Gangesha’s book, though no one wrote your name. I am writing your name in the water of this pond—not with ink, but with memory.”

Having said this, Budhua slowly entered the water. It was cold, yet he felt no cold. Wherever he moved, the water around him began to glow faintly, as though something were leaving his body and mingling with the pond. The pipal roots, spread along the bank, seemed to bend toward him, and for one moment the wind stopped, as though the entire village—the tree, the pond, the river-current, and every creature that lived there—were holding its breath and watching.

When Budhua reached the middle of the pond, he stopped. He looked up at the sky, where the winter stars shone with extraordinary clarity.

“Acharya Vachaspati,” he said for the last time, “you told me that a vow lasts longer than one human life. Today I understand: a vow is not merely longer than a life; it breaks the boundary of life itself.”

Then he lowered himself into the water, gently, as one might sink little by little into sleep, without struggle, without fear. The water closed over him, and for one instant—one instant only—the entire pond shone like silver, as though that night’s moon had descended into the water. Then everything was still. Only small ripples touched the banks and quieted, and a pipal leaf stirred once before becoming motionless again.

In the morning, when the village fishermen came to cast their nets, they found an old shell and a worn rope on the pond bank, laid neatly together as though someone had deliberately placed them there. Budhua was nowhere to be found. No body, no footprints, no sign of struggle. Only the shell, the rope, the water, and the pipal tree—which, the villagers said that morning, looked greener and fuller than before, as though its roots had received something new during the night.

As soon as he heard the news, Acharya Vardhamana ran to the pond. For a long time he sat beside the shell and rope with his head bowed. Then, slowly, he lifted the shell and placed it among the pipal roots, where Budhua had sat year after year. “Budhua has not died,” he told the gathered villagers, his voice trembling. “He has only... he has only come closer to us than ever before—closer to this tree, to this water, and to every memory of this village than any living human being could ever be.”

From that day onward, people said that after dusk, on certain evenings, a shadow could be seen among the pipal roots—seated, still, yet somehow alive. Whoever passed that way would hear their own name whispered, as though someone were entering their existence into a record. Children sat there and heard the old stories—of Hulasas, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna—though no one could any longer say exactly who was telling them. “Budhba,” the people said, “is still sitting there.”

With time, as happens to every story, details blurred, names changed, and the boundary between what had happened and what people remembered grew uncertain. Jori Pokhari acquired many names. The geography of Garh Narikel was mapped and remapped. The pipal Witness-Tree, it was said, stood for many years more, until its roots had spread as far as Channa Grove—or perhaps Channa Grove was only an extension of that pipal; village memory was always divided on the question. Yet one thing never changed: whoever sat there after dusk still encountered an old, patient presence holding names and waiting, just as long ago he had waited at Vachaspati Mishra’s door, tending a lamp.

People stopped counting the age of that presence long ago. Some said it was hundreds of years old; some said a thousand. And when the tale was

told again, much later, in another age and another language, people would choose a round number that was easy to remember: twelve hundred years. The number would be neither wholly true nor wholly false—just as a shell is never truly silver, yet in its gleam the memory of silver remains.

That day, remembering Budhua, the village sang a song of mourning

The crocodile took the body, but left the name;

He who took water-burial did not dwell upon the pond's floor.

The body went into the water, but the village kept the name;

He who was Budhua now lives in the village's memory.

Deep is the pond, but deeper still the name—

The name a village carries cannot be lost in any water-burial.

BUDHUA'S WATER-BURIAL AND THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BUDHBA GHOST

What "Twelve Hundred Years" Means

In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* (Parts 1 and 2), the Budhba ghost is repeatedly described as having been "seated on the same branch for twelve hundred years." According to the chronology of Part 0, Budhua's water-burial (Chapter -90) takes place roughly four or five hundred years after the period of Vachaspati Mishra (Chapter -100), not twelve hundred years later. This discrepancy has deliberately not been resolved. Just as the kabaddi of Channa Grove itself leaps across 1885, 1934, 1977, and the present within a single innings (Part 1), the reckoning of time in folk memory is not linear but symbolic. "Twelve hundred years" should therefore be understood here not as a precise historical calculation, but as a folk expression for "an antiquity so great that it must be remembered"—a measure that accords with the story's inner truth rather than with an external calendar.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -89 (EIGHTY-NINE BEFORE)

First Night, First Flood

*The first flood took houses, not the village—the night that survived
became the seed of morning.*

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Exactly one year after Budhua's water-burial —the first test of the Budhba ghost. From this night begin both the story of Garh Narikel's embankment and the seed of the belief that "a human witness is half a ghost.")

It was past midnight when the sky split open.

At first there was only wind—hard, cold, lashing the coconut fronds from side to side like whips. Then lightning flashed: once, twice, a third time so fiercely that for one instant the whole form of the pipal Witness-Tree stood out in the brightness of day. Then came rain, as though all the water stored in the sky had fallen at once. The Kamala-Balan, calm in its ordinary channel until evening, had begun to roar by midnight—a sound less like water than the advance warning of calamity.

Among the pipal roots beside Jori Pokhari, Budhua—no, no longer Budhua, but only the presence whom the village had begun to call Budhba—understood for the first time the full meaning of his new body. A year earlier he had entered the water, and now he had become one with it: every rise of the current, every surge, he felt within his body, within his roots, within his shell. And what he felt tonight frightened him. The Kamala-Balan was about to break its bounds, and those bounds were weakest at the village's southern edge, precisely where the leatherworkers' quarter stood—where the village embankment, if it could be called an embankment at all, had never been more than a few heaps of earth, raised each year before the rains with soil left over from the farmers' field boundaries.

Budhba shouted. But his voice dissolved into the wind—nothing but wind, nothing but the sound of rain. He ran toward the centre of the village, wanting to seize hands, to pound on doors, but his hands could no longer touch a door: they slipped through the wood like water, making no sound. He cried out, he pleaded, and in that single moment the whole year of his new existence seemed useless to him. "I took a vow to bear witness," he said to himself, "but if a witness cannot save anyone, then he is only a spectator, not a witness!"

In the leatherworkers' quarter, a little girl of the fourth generation descended from Ratna and Malati lay asleep beside her grandmother. Her name was Gauri. She was seven, and the village children thought her a little different because now and then she would say things no one had taught her—she might sit by the pipal tree and, without anyone telling her anything, say, "Budhba is sad today." The villagers called it a child's imagination. Her grandmother, who had herself learned the lore of herbs from Ratna's hands, knew there was something more in Gauri: a thin, indistinct thread, one end of it within the child and the other—no one knew where.

That night Gauri saw Budhba in a dream—more clearly than ever before. She saw him standing in water, one hand raised, his mouth open as though he were trying to speak but no sound came out. In the dream Budhba kept repeating one word, again and again, until it rang inside Gauri like a bell: "Wake. Wake. Wake."

Gauri woke screaming. "Grandmother! Grandmother! The water is coming! Budhba told me—wake up!"

At first her grandmother tried to soothe her, thinking it only a frightening dream. Then a sound came from outside—distant but unmistakable, the roar of water, mingled with the ceaseless barking of the village dogs, utterly unlike their barking on an ordinary night, as though they too could see something human eyes could not. Grandmother rose, opened the door, and saw at the lower end of the village, in the dark, a pale brightness growing larger—the gleam of water rushing rapidly nearer.

"Flood! The flood is coming!" Grandmother cried, and her voice carried from house to house across the quarter, because the night was such that one shout could break the sleep of the whole village. Doors began to open. People snatched up their children, their cows and goats, whatever their hands could reach, and ran toward higher ground.

But there was very little time.

The embankment, for years no more than a mound of earth, collapsed before the full force of the Kamala-Balan like a castle of sand. Water came roaring and foaming toward the lower part of the village—straight toward the leatherworkers' quarter, toward the babul and date palms, toward the place where drums and mridangas were made. Gauri ran holding her grandmother's hand, following her mother and father toward higher ground, but the water was too fast. It reached her ankles, then her knees.

Budhba, now diffused through every drop of water, felt Gauri's fear and turned all the power he still did not fully understand in her direction. The current that had been rushing straight toward Gauri's family divided for one moment—only one moment—around their threshold like water around a tiny island, as though an invisible hand had bent the flood aside. Gauri's family used that instant to reach a nearby rise—the old cremation ground, a place the village ordinarily shunned as "inauspicious." There, they survived.

The rest of the village was not so fortunate.

Somar's house—Ratna's old house, now kept by Gauri's grandfather and great-grandfather—was swept away completely. Gauri's great-grandmother Subhagi, very old and disabled, could not run. Her children tried to carry her, but the force of the water tore her from their arms on the way. "Only one name came from her mouth," villagers said afterward. "Gauri's: 'Did Gauri survive?'" Then the water took her.

Seven lives were lost in the village that night—Subhagi and six others whose names were never properly entered in any village record, because all of them belonged to the leatherworkers' quarter, and the royal

officials who came to reckon the flood damage counted the Brahmin quarter's losses of grain and cattle first.

By morning the rain had stopped. The sky was grey but calm. The water slowly withdrew, leaving mud, broken thatch, and the marks of grief behind it. Budhba sat among the roots of the pipal Witness-Tree—which had stood fast through the flood, though half its roots had been washed bare—and for the first time since his water-burial, he wept. It was not human weeping: there were no tears, no sound. Yet every leaf on the tree that morning seemed wetter than dew alone could explain, as though the tree itself had wept.

Gauri, safe with her family, came to the pipal tree that afternoon to mourn her great-grandmother. She sat among its roots and said softly, "Budhba, you saved me. But Grandmother..." She could say no more.

Budhba's voice, which only Gauri could hear, rose softly, heavy with grief. "Gauri, I could not save all of you. I could save only some. I will have to learn to bear that difference, just as with Hulasa, Jivanti, and Sukhdev I had to learn that not everything can be saved—but saving what can be saved is no small thing."

"And Great-grandmother Subhagi?" Gauri asked through her tears.

"I shall keep her name with me," Budhba said, "as I keep all the others. But Gauri, I want to tell you one more thing. Tonight you heard my voice when no one else could. I do not fully understand why you have this capacity, but it is real. Perhaps a person who is ready to become a witness becomes, in some small measure, half a ghost—not wholly alive, not wholly dead, but a thin thread between the two worlds."

From that night onward, the villagers rebuilt the embankment, this time with fired brick and stone. And the village's name—which earlier had been Narikel-Ghat—slowly became Garh Narikel, the word garh joining it in memory of the new fort-like embankment raised after seven lives had been lost. By common decision, the stretch facing the leatherworkers' quarter was built first and built strongest. For the first time in the village's history, the safety of that quarter was treated as equal to—or perhaps more important than—the safety of the rest of the village.

And from that night, "a human witness is half a ghost"—a truth that at first belonged only to Gauri—slowly became a village saying. Mothers and grandmothers would tell their children: "If someone sees a strange dream in sleep, or feels afraid without cause before a disaster, do not dismiss it lightly. Perhaps that person has become half a ghost, and Budhba is speaking to them."

After that first flood, the surviving village sang a song—

The first flood took houses, but could not take the village;

The night that survived became the seed of morning.

The water rose, the roofs were swept away, but the people stood;

Those who stayed together that night survived until dawn.

The flood receded, and the village was built again—

*Whoever endured that first night became the seed of every flood to
come.*

A NOTE ON GARH NARIKEL'S EMBANKMENT AND MITHILA'S FLOOD TRADITION

Floods in Mithila and Social Inequality

The Kosi, Kamala, and Balan river regions of Mithila have historically been prone to flooding, and the traditional allocation of resources for building and maintaining embankments has often reflected social hierarchy: the protection of powerful quarters given priority, the protection of marginal quarters neglected. Chapter -89 gives this historical reality a narrative form and links the origin of the name “Garh Narikel” to this calamity. The etymology is fictional; its purpose is not to provide the village name’s actual history, but to bind a place-name to the relationship between memory and justice, one of the central concerns of *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*.

CHAPTER -88 (EIGHTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

The Accusation of Witchcraft

The woman the village called a 'witch'—no one asked her name. An accusation can burn a body; truth remains upon the leaf.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Twenty years after the flood. Gauri, who as a child had heard Budhba's voice, is now the village's principal healer—and for that very reason becomes the centre of a conspiracy.)

In twenty years Garh Narikel had changed greatly. The new embankment, built of fired brick, still stood strong, and under its protection the leatherworkers' quarter was now safer than before and—something many of the village's old families did not like—more prosperous. On the embankment's raised ground, betel and vegetables grew well, and the drums and mridangas of the leatherworkers' quarter, once sold only in Garh Narikel, had acquired a name in markets and fairs across Mithila.

And at the centre of that quarter was Gauri—now twenty-seven, the mother of two children, and the fourth-generation inheritor of Ratna's tradition. In her hands lived the herbal knowledge her great-great-grandmother Ratna had learned, and with it something else the village had known for years but did not care to say aloud: from childhood Gauri had been "half a ghost," and even now she sometimes heard Budhba's voice, especially when some calamity was drawing near the village.

But that evening Gauri had seen no strange dream. She did not know that at the village's western end, inside the Thakur mansion, two men were making a plan whose shadow would fall across her life for weeks to come.

Pratapsen Thakur, grandson of Ugrasen Thakur, paced the mansion's sitting room with one hand on his head. "Panditji," he said, "my property shrinks year by year, while the leatherworkers' quarter grows richer. What sort of age is this, when one of those drum-makers can sell as much paddy as I do?"

Pandit Yashpati, ritualist president of the village's new assembly hall, smiled slowly. It was the kind of smile that never comes from good intentions. "Thakur Sahib, your concern is justified, but there is a remedy. The land-allotment law says that if any quarter is proved 'impure' or 'harmful,' the assembly may reconsider its land rights—in the name of purification."

"Harmful?" Pratapsen asked, interest waking in his eyes.

"You know Gauri's reputation," Yashpati said, lowering his voice still further. "She knows herbs. She goes out alone at night. She sits by the pipal Witness-Tree and, people say, speaks to something unseen. To use the word 'witch' for such a woman would not be a lie, Thakur Sahib—only an old word put to a new use."

Pratapsen was silent for a long time. Then he said, "But evidence? The village has known her for years. She has helped bring children into the world in nearly every house. Every fever, every wound—she has treated them."

Yashpati laughed, a cold, calculating laugh. "Evidence is made, Thakur Sahib, not requested. All I need is one calamity, one illness, and a

thread tying Gauri's name to it. Fear will do the rest by itself. Fear runs faster than reason."

Within a week, the opportunity came of its own accord—but not in the form Pratapsen had hoped for.

Pratapsen's younger son, six-year-old Vishwanath, suddenly came down with a high fever. For the first two days the household physician tried to cure him, but the fever rose, and on the third day the child lost consciousness. Panic seized the Thakur mansion. Pratapsen's wife, Kamala Devi, wanted Gauri summoned—for every mother in the village knew that Gauri's hands could quiet a fever better than any village physician's. But Pratapsen refused. "Let a woman from the leatherworkers' quarter touch my son? No. Yashpatiji's medicines and mantras are enough."

On the fourth night Vishwanath grew worse. Against her husband's orders, Kamala Devi secretly sent her maid to fetch Gauri.

Gauri sat beside Vishwanath through the night, laying cool cloths on him and giving him a decoction of neem and chirayata. By dawn the fever had broken. Vishwanath opened his eyes, recognised his mother, and weakly asked for water. Kamala Devi began to weep with relief. Grasping Gauri's hand, she said, "You have saved my son's life, Gauri. I shall never forget this."

But when Pratapsen rose in the morning and discovered that Gauri had spent the night in his house, his face reddened with anger—not because his son had recovered, but because his command had been defied, and in favour of a woman from the leatherworkers' quarter. He carried the matter to Yashpati, who saw in it a new and sharper opening for his plan.

"Thakur Sahib," Yashpati said, "consider it. The fever rose first. Then Gauri came, and the fever broke. How does that prove she cured it? Why not say she had caused the fever in the first place, and then came to stage a cure and display her power? That is what witches do—give the illness first, then grant relief and establish their hold."

Pratapsen, whose pride had been wounded more deeply than his son's life had been endangered, seized upon the argument. That evening an emergency meeting called by the Thakur assembled in the village hall. In a grave voice, Yashpati announced before the village: "A harmful force is active in Garh Narikel. We have gathered evidence that Gauri, a woman of the leatherworkers' quarter, is using tantric arts to tamper with children's health. This matter must be investigated—and until the investigation is complete, she must be excluded from the village's religious rites, and her quarter must be removed from the land adjoining the embankment, for purposes of purification."

Silence fell over the assembly. Many whose children Gauri had saved sat stunned and uncertain, torn between fear and gratitude. A few voices rose in protest, but Yashpati's voice and Pratapsen's power smothered them.

In the leatherworkers' quarter, Gauri sat at home nursing her daughter, knowing nothing of what had happened until her friend Phulesari came running, breathless and frightened. Phulesari, who led the secret evening circle of stools carried on from Ratna's tradition, cried, "Gauri! They have accused you in the assembly hall—a witchcraft accusation! Yashpati says your whole quarter will be driven from the land beside the embankment, in the name of 'purification'!"

Gauri's hand went still; her daughter was still at her breast. Many questions rose in her mind at once. Had saving Vishwanath been a mistake? Or was her only mistake that she had been born in the leatherworkers' quarter, and that her knowledge lived not in books but in her hands? Suddenly she remembered Ratna, Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev—all the names Budhba had carried year after year, all those people whose service, whose truth, had remained unfinished before the great structures of society.

"I have to go to the pipal tree," Gauri said suddenly, placing her daughter in Phulesari's arms. "I have to speak to Budhba. But Phulesari..." Her voice trembled. "What if even Budhba cannot do anything this time?"

She ran through the deepening dusk toward the pipal tree, and the wind followed her with a strange silence—as though the whole village, knowingly or not, had begun to hold its breath, waiting to see what the night would bring. Far off, in the direction of the assembly hall, torchlights were moving, drawing nearer: a crowd of people carrying torches, slowly advancing toward the leatherworkers' quarter.

That day, for the woman under accusation, some of the village women quietly sang a song—

The woman the village called a 'witch'—no one asked her name;

Accusation burns the body; truth remains upon the leaf.

The crowd shouted, the torches burned, but evidence was nowhere;

An accusation laid without first asking the name—that was injustice.

An accusation lasts a moment; a name endures age after age—

Whoever asked her name saved that woman from the fire.

SPECIAL NOTE

The Historical Connection Between Witch-Branding and Land Seizure

In many regions of India, especially among Adivasi and other marginalised communities, accusations of “witchcraft” have historically often been connected with land disputes, family enmity, or a woman’s independent social position—particularly when she is widowed, childless, or, like Gauri, an independent source of traditional medical knowledge. Chapter -88 gives this social reality a narrative form in order to show that superstition is often not spontaneous, but is consciously fashioned and used in the interests of power and property. The story continues in Chapter -87.

CHAPTER -87 (EIGHTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

At the Quarter's Gate

A torch may come to the gate; inside, a name does not burn. When a quarter stands awake, its wall rises higher than fire.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction, immediately following Chapter -88. The torch-bearing crowd has reached the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter—and the village women have now changed their decision to remain silent.)

At the roots of the pipal tree, Gauri knelt with folded hands. "Budhba," she whispered, "you came too late for Hulasa, too late for Jivanti, too late for Sukhdev. Do not come too late for me tonight."

For a moment the air went still. Then a tremor ran through the pipal leaves, though there was no gust. Budhba's voice, audible only to Gauri, rose softly: "Gauri, my power cannot touch a body, cannot extinguish a torch, cannot stop the feet of a crowd. I will not tell you the lie that I can save you. But I can tell you this: the truth that is in this quarter tonight is stronger than I am, stronger than you are. That truth needs only one place through which to come out—many mouths that have been silent for too long."

Torchlight, cutting through the darkness, reached the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter. Pratapsen Thakur was in front, Yashpati behind him, and behind Yashpati fifty or sixty villagers—some genuinely frightened, others merely moving with the crowd. "Gauri!" Yashpati shouted. "Come out! Obey the order of the assembly hall!"

At the gate of the quarter, Phulesari came out first instead of Gauri, and behind her came other women—ten, twenty, then more. They carried no weapons, only lamps and their children. They stood between the leatherworkers' quarter and the crowd, forming a living wall.

"Whom do you want to punish?" Phulesari cried. Her voice trembled, but did not break. "The woman whose hands saved our children?"

For a moment confusion passed through the crowd. Then another voice rose from an unexpected direction. Kamala Devi, Pratapsen's own wife, came running from the mansion with her maid, breathless, her clothes in disarray.

"Stop!" Kamala Devi cried, and the crowd turned toward her in astonishment—for no one had ever seen the Thakur's wife run out of her house like this, at night, barefoot. She pushed through the crowd and reached Pratapsen. "Do you know what Gauri did? Do you know that our son—the boy you watched dying before your own eyes—is alive today because of Gauri's hands, the very hands you want to burn tonight?"

"Kamala! Go home. This is a matter for men!" Pratapsen roared, but for the first time there was hesitation in his voice.

"No," Kamala Devi said, and for the first time—for the first time in her entire married life—she stood straight before her husband. "This is not a matter for men. It is a matter of truth, and truth is not heard only by men's ears. I ask every woman in this village whose child Gauri has saved to come forward and speak. Here, tonight: is your silence worth more to you than your children's lives?"

For one moment there was silence. Then, slowly, women began separating themselves from the crowd—some from the Brahmin quarter,

some from the Kayastha quarter, some from ordinary farming households. They came forward and began telling their stories. "Gauri saved my daughter on the night of her birth, when she lay wrong-way in the womb." "Gauri cured my husband after a snakebite, when the great physician had given up." "Gauri sat beside my mother-in-law every night during her final month and took no payment." One by one, voices rose, and each voice removed a brick from the mountain of falsehood Yashpati had been building for years.

Seeing his control slipping away, Yashpati made one last attempt. "All this is sentiment! A witch first draws her victims into her net—that is why she seems sweet to them!" He turned to the crowd and raised a hand. "Whoever refuses to accept the truth, I will..."

He could not finish the sentence.

For at that very instant, without anyone touching it, the torch in Yashpati's hand went out by itself—without a gust of wind, without a drop of water, in a single moment, as though someone had blown upon it from within. The crowd cried out and recoiled. Yashpati himself, for the first time in his life, collapsed before something outside his scriptures and his cunning, just as Budhba, many years earlier, had once seen a silver-like light in the Objector's eyes.

"What... what power is this?" Yashpati said, trembling.

Gauri, who had now come to stand at the gate beside Phulesari and Kamala Devi, answered quietly: "His name is Budhba, Panditji. He has sat here year after year, carrying all the names that people like you try to erase. He will not harm you—that is not his way—but he will not allow your lie to burn with the light you turned into a weapon."

The crowd slowly began to disperse, some ashamed, some relieved, some still uncertain. Pratapsen, shaken both by his wife's courage and by Yashpati's failure, said nothing. He simply turned and walked back toward the mansion. But before leaving he looked back once at Gauri—and in that look there was no gratitude, only the shame of humiliation. Gauri had learned long ago that shame can sometimes be more dangerous than gratitude, because a humiliated man may seek not forgiveness but revenge.

That night the quarter survived. At the next day's assembly, the land too was registered again in the name of the leatherworkers' quarter, because of Kamala Devi's forceful intervention. But Yashpati, though removed from his office, did not leave the village. He became silent. Gauri, who had begun to hear Budhba's voice more clearly than before, knew that silence and defeat were two different things. She had seen something in Yashpati's eyes that she could not name, but its coldness kept her awake through the night—as though a new conspiracy, having

learned from this failure, had already begun taking shape somewhere far away, in some unseen corner, with greater patience and greater cunning.

That night, after seeing the torches at the gate, the awakened quarter sang a song—

A torch may come to the gate; inside, a name does not burn,

When a quarter stands awake, its wall rises higher than fire.

Fire may burn a body, but it cannot burn a name;

A quarter that stood together was defeated by no torch.

The torch went out, but the name kept burning—

When the quarter became one, the fire stopped at its gate.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTERS -87 AND -88

The Power of Collective Women's Testimony

In Chapter -87, the collective testimony of the village women rises beyond individual fear into a collective truth. It offers a communal, folk-based form of the theory of verbal testimony (shabda-pramana) attributed to Vachaspati Mishra in Chapter -96—the speaker's intention, the hearer's trust, and the truthfulness of the moment. Where the word of one woman, like Hulasā's palm-leaf statement, can become the object of doubt, the independent and mutually consistent testimony of many women has the power to break that doubt—a principle also recognised in modern legal systems. The story does not create the illusion of perfect justice here: Yashpati is not punished, only displaced, and his future intention is left uncertain. This accords with the central truth of Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles: injustice does not end in a single night or with a single victory.

CHAPTER -86 (EIGHTY-SIX BEFORE)

The Crocodile of Time

Time too is a crocodile—it swallows generation after generation. But a name the village keeps, even time cannot swallow.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. After Yashpati leaves the village for the royal court at Darbhanga, Budhba sees for the first time something he cannot place within any boundary of the world he understands—as though time itself were a crocodile that devours ages, but not names.)

Yashpati had fallen silent, but silence was not defeat—Gauri had learned that long ago. At the end of winter, word came that Yashpati had left the village and gone toward the royal court at Darbhanga, saying that “many reforms are needed in Mithila’s religious order.” The villagers heard the news with relief; Gauri heard it with unease. “He has not lost,” she told Phulesari. “He has only gone looking for another field.”

That evening Gauri went to the pipal tree to speak with Budhba, but she was not prepared for what she saw. Budhba, departing from his customary stillness, was unsettled—as though he occupied many places at once and was wholly present in none. His figure flickered between water and shadow like a lamp whose oil was running out; yet it was not for want of oil. It was something else.

“Budhba! What has happened to you?” Gauri ran toward him.

Budhba’s voice, always so clear, sounded broken today, as though it were filtering through a multitude of voices from very far away. “Gauri... I do not understand... what am I seeing... where am I...”

(First glimpse—a distant shore)

Ships. Huge, black, breathing smoke, of a kind Gauri did not know by name. Hundreds of people stood at a harbour with bundles in their arms, fear and hope together in their eyes. A recruiter with a honeyed tongue cried loudly, “Abroad, the earth yields gold, babu. A three-year contract, then you return home with your hands full.” A young man released his wife’s hand and pressed his thumb onto a paper he could not read. Beneath the ship, black and fathomless, the water waited silently like a crocodile.

“Is this... is this 1885?” Budhba whispered to himself. “But I... I am not in this time. How am I seeing it?”

(Second glimpse—a parched field)

A vast field scorched by the sun, where thousands had gathered, shouting slogans. A young woman held a microphone and cried, “The land belongs to the one who tills it!” Police advanced with lathis. A stampede. In the dust fell an old deed of partition, just like the one Sukhdev Mahato had held in his hand hundreds of years earlier. Feet trampled the paper; its letters vanished into the dust.

“Sukhdev’s deed!” Gauri cried. “Budhba, it looks just like Sukhdev’s deed!”

“No,” Budhba said, his voice trembling harder. “It is not Sukhdev’s deed, Gauri. This is... this is some other Sukhdev. As though the same

story were being written again, with another name, in another time, but in the same shape.”

(Third glimpse—a grove, a game at night)

A grove of channa trees—a name Gauri had never heard—at night, and in that grove a game: kabaddi, but the players were not alive. An old, impossibly old figure sat on a branch as referee. In his hand was a worn shell. His feet hovered a finger’s breadth above the earth. Around him stood a woman without hands, a woman with soaking hair, a four-faced figure, a figure with half its face torn open, and tiny creatures that flung silver-coloured light. The old figure was drawing a circle for the sake of a name—“kabaddi... kabaddi...” —while living children stood in the darkness, holding their breath and watching.

Budhba screamed—a sound Gauri had never heard from him. “That... that is me! Gauri, the figure sitting on that branch—it is I. But... but I am here, today, before you! How can I be in two places at once?”

Gauri, trembling herself, sat beside Budhba though she knew she could not touch him. “Budhba, be calm. Explain something to me. What is all this?”

Budhba was silent for a long time. When he spoke again, there was a new and strange calm in his voice—the calm that comes after fear and just before understanding. “Gauri, I think time is not what I believed it was. I thought time was a river flowing from one direction to another, and that I sat on its bank watching it pass. But tonight I think time is a crocodile—it lives inside the river, yet obeys none of the river’s flow. Sometimes it goes backward, sometimes forward, sometimes it is in two places in the same instant. It eats bodies, epochs, years—but it cannot eat names. A name can come even out of that crocodile’s mouth and live again on another bank, in another time.”

“But the children we saw in that grove,” Gauri asked, “who are they? Why did they seem like us?”

“Because they are ours, Gauri. They are children of some time yet to come, but the names, the stories, of Hulasā, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Vishwanath—they have reached them by some unknown road. Perhaps... perhaps someone will gather all these stories in one place, very far from now, in some unknown language, in some unknown form. Perhaps we do not yet understand that we ourselves, today, are living for the sake of that gathering.”

Gauri remained silent for a long time, trying to understand the words though she could not grasp them fully. Then she asked, a new fear in her voice, “Budhba, did you see me too in those glimpses? In another time—another Gauri?”

Budhba was silent for a moment, and in that silence Gauri found her answer—fear and compassion together in eyes that were no longer eyes, only a shape of light.

“I want to say no,” Budhba said at last, “but I will not lie to you, Gauri. Yes, I saw you. In another time, amid another calamity, there was a pair of eyes like yours—just as steady, just as afraid. I do not know what year it was or what the calamity was. But this much I know: this story, this vow, will not end with you. It will return, bearing other names and other faces, until... until there comes a time when the crocodile has no name left to eat, because every name is already safe.”

The night deepened. Budhba’s instability slowly quieted, though he never again became wholly still as before—as though something in him had changed forever that night, a new awareness he could no longer forget. At last Gauri turned toward home, but one question remained lodged in her mind, and through every calamity of her later life she kept searching for its answer: if time truly is a crocodile, then is the calamity now returning in Yashpati’s form really new, or merely some old calamity rising again with a new face?

That day, remembering the generations that had passed, Budhba sang a folk refrain—

Time too is a crocodile, swallowing generation after generation,

But a name the village keeps, even time cannot swallow.

Kings went, palaces fell, generations mingled with earth;

But the name a village kept in its heart is living still.

Time eats everything, but it does not eat a name—

Whoever lives in memory escapes the crocodile of time.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -86

The Nonlinearity of Time and the Nature of Folk Memory

Chapter -86 deliberately breaks the simple, one-directional flow of chronology, in the same way that in Part I, during the kabaddi game in Channa Grove, “ghosts can cross 1885, 1934, 1977, and the present in a single turn.” This technique—sometimes called “magical realism” or postmodern chronological rupture in literary criticism—is not merely a stylistic experiment here. It is a structural expression of the story’s central claim: injustice, and the act of bearing witness against injustice, recur from generation to generation. Budhba’s bewilderment at seeming to

exist in many places at the same time signals to the reader that the entire ten-part project of *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* is itself founded on this nonlinear logic, in which Part 0 (the past) and Parts 1-2 (the present) are read together, within the same readerly moment.

CHAPTER -85 (EIGHTY-FIVE BEFORE)

The Amil's Order

The sahib's order is on paper, the village's justice on leaves—the command may be erased, the proverb will not be.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Yashpati has not returned empty-handed from the royal court at Darbhanga: this time it is not merely the leatherworkers' quarter and Gauri that are in his sights, but the pipal Witness Tree itself.)

Amil Jay Singh entered Garh Narikel one morning on an elephant, accompanied by ten soldiers and Yashpati. His proclamation, hung in the village square, was written in clear letters: “The Department of Religious Administration of the Mithila State hereby gives notice that a pipal tree situated in the village of Garh Narikel, locally known as the ‘Witness Tree,’ has become a centre of tantric malpractice and superstition. The tree shall be examined under the supervision of Amil Jay Singh and, if necessary, removed. If no supernatural power is found in the tree, as the learned class believes, the tree shall be felled and a royal granary established upon the site.”

Standing beside the Amil, Yashpati looked toward the gathered villagers, and there was a satisfaction on his face that had not been seen there for a long time. “Gauri!” he shouted. “You and your quarter escaped once because of the sentimentality of the women. But today I have brought science and the power of the State. If your ‘Budhba’ truly exists, he will be proved today. And if he does not—as I am fully convinced he

does not—then the faith of your entire quarter, and with it your last refuge, will be cut down with this pipal tree.”

Holding the hand of her eight-year-old daughter Savitri, Gauri stepped forward through the crowd. Like her mother, Savitri had begun to show an unusual sensitivity from childhood. She would wake at night saying, “Someone is crying by the pipal tree,” and Gauri knew that this signalled Budhba’s unrest, especially since the night when he had seen those strange glimpses across time.

“Amil Sahib,” Gauri said, trying to keep her voice steady, “this tree has stood for hundreds of years and has never harmed anyone. This tree belongs to the village’s memory, to the village’s grief, to the village’s justice.”

“Memory cannot be cut down, Gauri,” Jay Singh said, speaking for himself for the first time. His voice was neutral, almost kindly, unlike Yashpati’s fervour. “I shall cut only the tree, if it proves necessary. But first I will give all of you an opportunity to show what you claim. If there truly is a power here, my axe will not be able to harm it, and I myself will carry that report to my king. But if there is nothing, then you will be freed from a falsehood.”

The crowd stood silent. Phulesari whispered into Gauri’s ear, “Gauri, this is a trap for us—if we lose, the tree is cut; if we win, even then the burden of proof is placed on us.” Gauri nodded, knowing Phulesari was right, but there was no path left by which to retreat.

By noon the whole village had gathered at the roots of the pipal tree, together with the soldiers, Yashpati, and Jay Singh. The soldiers raised their axes. Gauri sat beside the roots, bowed her head, and whispered, “Budhba, forgive me. I am dragging you into this trial, but I have no other way.”

No answer came. The silence was so deep that even the village dogs were quiet. Jay Singh raised his hand in signal.

The first axe struck the root.

And in that instant every person in the village—Gauri, Phulesari, Yashpati, Jay Singh, all of them—froze for a moment, because a voice rose in the air: neither woman’s nor man’s, neither human nor animal, a voice that seemed to come from a thousand throats at once though not another mouth was there. “Stop.”

The soldier stumbled backward in fear and dropped the axe. Jay Singh, who considered himself a rational man, stood rooted where he was, his eyes wide open.

Slowly, from the roots of the pipal tree, a figure emerged—the shape the villagers had seen year after year only as an indistinct shadow. Today,

for the first time, in full daylight, the figure was clear, though its edges trembled between smoke and light. Budhba.

“Who are you?” Jay Singh asked, mastering his fear.

“I am a witness,” Budhba said. His voice reached every ear in the village though it was not loud. “I am no god, Amil Sahib, and I am no demon. I am only the one who does not let names be forgotten—Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Subhagi, and so many others whose names never entered the records of your royal court. If you cut down this tree, you will not destroy me—I am older than this tree. But you will prove that the State can cut down whatever it does not understand, and that proof, Amil Sahib, is as dangerous to your king as any tantric malpractice.”

Jay Singh stood silent for a long time. Then, slowly, he turned toward his soldiers. “Lower the axes.”

“Amil Sahib!” Yashpati cried as he saw his victory slipping away. “This is only a trick! Some tantric illusion, some—”

“Yashpati,” Jay Singh said, and for the first time the hardness in his voice turned toward Yashpati, “I have seen many illusions in the course of my service, and I know how to distinguish illusion from truth. What I saw today was no illusion. And I now understand why you brought me here—not for the sake of this tree, but for the land of the leatherworkers’ quarter. I understand your true intention now, Yashpati, and it does not please me.”

For a moment Yashpati stood stunned as both sides of his scheme—religious superstition and administrative argument—collapsed before him. Then suddenly he began to run through the crowd, away from the pipal tree, away from the village.

“Stop him!” Jay Singh ordered. But the soldiers, still shaken, moved too slowly, and Yashpati crossed the boundary of the village and vanished into the dark forest.

After some time Jay Singh turned toward Gauri. His face had changed: the pride had disappeared, replaced by a new and uneasy respect. “Gauri, I shall recommend that your land, your tree, and your rights—all three—be placed under royal protection. But allow me one question whose answer I may spend my life seeking: what is the power in this tree?”

Gauri smiled, though tears still stood in her eyes. “Amil Sahib, this power is no tantra and no god. Its power is only this: when a human being decides, out of love, never to forget another person’s name, that decision can become stronger than time.”

Jay Singh left the village that evening with his soldiers, carrying his report back toward the royal court—a report about which the villagers

speculated for many years, because it was never found in any archive, as though it too, like the name of some witness, had been erased from history.

But Yashpati was not found. Not that day, not the following week, not the following month. Gradually the villagers came to believe that some animal had taken him in the forest, or that he had fled to a distant land. Yet that night, when Budhba spoke to Gauri alone, there was a concern in his voice she had never heard before. “Gauri, I could not see Yashpati’s end. My sight, which now reaches even beyond time, stops at the place where he entered the forest. That is unusual. It... it frightens me.”

That day, on hearing the Amil’s order, the villagers sang a proverb-song—

The sahib’s order is on paper, the village’s justice on leaves,

A command can be erased; a proverb cannot be.

The order came today, changed tomorrow, vanished the day after;

But the proverb the village kept in its heart lived from generation to generation.

Paper may tear, but the proverb remains in the throat—

Justice that lives on the village tongue cannot be erased by any command.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -85

The Conflict Between Anti-Superstition Reform and Local Tradition

In both medieval and modern periods, outside authorities have at times destroyed the local, autonomous traditions of marginalised communities—religious or medicinal—in the name of “eradicating superstition,” while overlooking the social functions embedded in those traditions: communal memory, justice, or health care. Chapter -85 deliberately refuses a simple answer to this conflict. Amil Jay Singh is neither an outright villain nor a complete saviour; he is a genuinely inquisitive holder of power whose curiosity, because of Gauri’s courage, turns from destruction toward recognition.

CHAPTER -84 (EIGHTY-FOUR BEFORE)

The Silence of the Forest

The forest keeps silent, yet hears everything—whoever understands silence will hear the forest speak.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. The men of the village have gone into the forest in search of Yashpati—but what they find there leaves more questions than answers.)

On the third day after Yashpati fled, the village headman and several young men, together with the two soldiers Amil Jay Singh had left behind, set out to search the forest. Beyond the village boundary the Kamala-Balan entered a dense, untouched woodland where the villagers ordinarily did not go—not to cut timber, not to hunt, for the stories told of that place were not good ones. The elders said that deep within the forest, where the Kamala-Balan met another, unnamed river, the water was so deep and still that its bottom could not be seen, and crocodiles larger and older than those in the village pond lived there.

Gauri did not join the search party—she had to stay home and care for Savitri—but that morning she went to Budhba to ask for his blessing. “Budhba, can you still see nothing?”

“No,” Budhba said, with an uneasiness in his voice that Gauri had never heard before. “Gauri, I want to tell you something I do not fully understand myself. My sight now reaches beyond time—as you have seen, I can glimpse the future—but the moment it reaches one particular part

of that forest, it goes out, as though there were a dense fog that my eyes, however ancient, cannot pierce. For the first time I am being made to feel that there are things in the world which, despite all my power as a witness, I cannot see."

The search party remained in the forest until evening. They found a torn strip of Yashpati's clothing caught in a thorn bush—certainly his, for it was the costly silk worn only by the village priests. Farther on were footprints: clear at first, running, then gradually indistinct, as though the runner had tired, or as though something else had forced him to change direction. At last they reached the bank of the unnamed river, where the tracks ended completely—no sign that he had entered the water, no sign of a struggle, no body. Only one shoe, half sunk in the mud at the water's edge, and beside it a large, strange mark in the mud, as though some huge, heavy creature had entered the water there only moments before.

"A crocodile," one of the young men said, his voice trembling.

"No ordinary crocodile," the headman said softly, studying the mark. "This track... in all my life I have never seen the track of a crocodile this large."

The soldiers, frightened now, wanted to end the search. The headman agreed. Whatever lived in that forest had passed beyond the limits of human curiosity, and no one from the village was prepared to challenge it. Carrying back Yashpati's torn strip of cloth and the half-buried shoe, the search party returned with the report that he had probably fallen prey to some wild animal or crocodile.

The village received the news with mixed feelings. Some felt relief, some fear, and some—this surprised Gauri herself—felt grief. Whatever Yashpati had done, he had once stood at the centre of the village's religious life, and when several elderly women saw the torn silk from his robe, they began to weep—not for the man he had become, but for the man he might once, long ago, have been.

That evening Gauri went to the pipal tree and told Budhba everything. "Budhba, I do not know what I ought to feel. He wanted to destroy us, yet now that he is gone, I feel somehow... empty."

Budhba was silent for a long time. When he spoke, there was a deep sadness in his voice. "Gauri, I will tell you something I have never said before. My work is to preserve names—Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Subhagi, and hundreds of others. But Yashpati's name, I think, I will not be able to preserve, because preserving a name requires love, and for Yashpati I have no love, only sorrow. And sorrow, Gauri, cannot save a name. It can only remind us that there once was a name that might have been saved, but was not."

"Then what will happen to Yashpati?"

“In time,” Budhba said softly, “the village will forget his name, just as he himself wanted so many names to be forgotten. This is no curse, Gauri. It is only the rule I have watched year after year: what a person gives, that person receives; whoever takes names away finds that, in the end, no hand remains to keep his own name safe.”

Gauri went home, but sleep would not come that night. She watched her daughter Savitri sleeping and kept thinking: who decides which names are to be preserved and which forgotten? And if that decision depends upon love, then has love itself, in the end, become more powerful than justice?

She found no answer that night. But far away, beyond the unnamed river, in the dense darkness of the forest, something—something neither Gauri nor Budhba had ever been able to see—slowly opened its eyes and began to wait.

That day, listening to the silence of the forest, Budhba sang a proverb-song—

The forest keeps silent, yet hears everything,

Whoever understands silence will hear the forest speak.

A leaf stirred, the birds fell quiet, but the forest saw it all;

Whoever bent an ear to listen understood the story even in silence.

The forest is a witness; even in silence it knows everything—

Whoever learned to read silence received the forest’s whole testimony.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -84

The Narrative Function of an Unanswered Mystery

Chapter -84 deliberately refuses to make Yashpati’s fate completely clear: he is shown neither dead nor alive. This uncertainty is not accidental. Throughout *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, Budhba’s power as a witness, however far-reaching, is never complete; there is always some angle he cannot see. That limit gives the story a realistic foundation: no witness, however powerful, can be omniscient. The chapter’s final line—the awakening of something unseen—is a deliberately loose thread that may be taken up in later chapters, or perhaps never, just as in real life not every mystery ever receives an answer.

CHAPTER -83 (EIGHTY-THREE BEFORE)

Sonama Majhin

The hand that holds the net has the river for its mother—the fisherwoman catches fish, but lets the name go free.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. One month after Yashpati's disappearance, the village livestock begins to vanish mysteriously—and Budhba, trying to understand the limits of his own power, goes beyond the village to the one person who may carry an older memory even than his.)

A month after Yashpati disappeared, a new fear began to spread through Garh Narikel. First a goat vanished, then a buffalo calf, then a young buffalo descended directly from Kajri—taken in a single night from the shallow edge of Jori Pokhari, without a sound and without a trace of blood. At first the villagers suspected a tiger or leopard. But when they examined the tracks toward the forest at dawn, they found no footprints of any familiar animal—only a broad, heavy drag-mark running from the water's edge back toward the water, just like the mark the search party had found beside the unnamed river.

Gauri took Savitri with her to the pipal tree. “Budhba, what is happening?”

Budhba remained silent for a long time, his form trembling upon the pond water. “Gauri, I fear that whatever took Yashpati in that forest has now awakened, and its hunger is older than the reach of my ordinary power as a witness. I remember something from very long ago, when I was still a man. The old fisherfolk of the village used to speak a name in

voices so low that it seemed they feared the name itself might hear them: the Original Crocodile. I never knew what it was. But I know of one person who may know—Sonama Majhin. They say she is still alive, and that she lives on that stretch of the Kamala-Balan where the current is deepest.”

“Still alive?” Gauri stared at him. “But Budhba, you yourself are hundreds of years old...”

“Yes,” Budhba said softly, “but I stepped outside human life and became a witness. They say Sonama Majhin never became a witness at all. She merely lived with such patience, asked so little of the world, that death itself forgot her. Two different roads, the same destination: remaining outside time.”

Leaving Savitri with Phulesari, Gauri set out alone for that distant reach of the Kamala-Balan whose very name the villagers spoke with a shiver. There she found a small, broken-down hut at the very edge of the river, where the water, utterly unlike the village pond, looked black and bottomless. At the doorway sat an immensely old woman. Her eyes were white and blind, yet her face was so serene that she seemed to see the whole world without looking at it.

“Budhba sent you,” Sonama Majhin said before Gauri’s footsteps had even reached the door. “I can smell his pipal tree in your breath.”

(The Story of Sonama Majhin)

Long ago, before any book remembers the time, this river bore another name, and only the people of the water had the right to speak it—our ancestors, who were neither Brahmins nor leatherworkers nor any of the castes the shastras name. Our ancestors believed that water itself was a living being, and that its oldest, hungriest child was called the Original Crocodile—not an animal, not a spirit, but the hunger of forgetting itself, the force that finally dissolves every name and every memory into water. They did not regard it as an enemy. They knew that without forgetting, memory itself would have no value, just as a lamp has no meaning without darkness. And so, every full moon, they made an offering to the Original Crocodile—flowers, fruit, milk—saying, “We do not deny you, but we ask you for patience.” As long as those offerings continued, the Original Crocodile slept in the depths and harmed no one.

Sonama Majhin paused and turned her blind eyes toward Gauri. “But then new peoples came—the Naiyayikas, the Mimamsakas, the Brahmins—and they called our ancestors’ offering-rite a ‘tantric superstition,’ just as Yashpati called your herb-lore. The offerings stopped. For many generations the Original Crocodile remained asleep, because hunger grows slowly; it does not wake all at once. But now, Gauri, I think its

patience is almost spent. Yashpati entered those waters carrying his hatred and his pride, and perhaps, without knowing it, he woke that ancient hunger the way a weary predator wakes when a sharp scent suddenly reaches it."

"Then what are we to do?" Gauri asked, fear and determination mingled in her voice.

"Tell Budhba," Sonama Majhin said, "that bearing witness and denying forgetting are two different things. He preserves names, and that is good. But if he tries to stop the Original Crocodile altogether, as I suspect he may now wish to do, he will deny a truth our ancestors always knew: that everything, in the end, returns to forgetting, and that forgetting is not an enemy but a part of nature. The real task is not to prevent forgetting. It is to make sure that before forgetting comes, every name receives the honour it is due. That balance, Gauri, can be preserved only through balance—not through war."

Gauri carried the message back and repeated it to Budhba beneath the pipal tree. He was silent for a long time. Then he said softly, "Sonama Majhin is right, and I am ashamed to hear it because I had begun, without realising it, to replace my sorrow for Yashpati with hatred. And hatred, Gauri—I am only now beginning to understand this—is a hunger too, not so different from the hunger of the Original Crocodile. I must find the balance again. But one thing is certain: whatever is awakening in that forest will not be quieted by one night of mine or one argument. A new age is beginning, Gauri, and I fear your lifetime will not see its end."

That day, casting her net at the river ghat, Sonama Majhin sang—

The net is in her hand, the river is her mother,

The fisherwoman catches fish, but lets the name go free.

Water gives life, the river gives bread, yet the river is mother;

Whatever she took from the river, she gave back to the river.

The net may be full, but no name is bound—

She who caught the fish let the name go free.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -83

Indigenous/Fisherfolk Memory Tradition and Brahmanical Encroachment

Chapter -83 deliberately brings a third tradition of memory into the story: Sonama Majhin's fisherfolk, water-based folk tradition. It belongs neither to the Brahmanical classical tradition of Vachaspati, Udayana, and Gangesha, nor to the leatherworkers' quarter and its herbal tradition. The inclusion of this third tradition matters because the central image of Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles—the crocodile itself—is not the property of any single community, but part of a deep, many-layered folk memory that each generation has understood and revered in its own way. The idea of the Original Crocodile—regarding forgetting not as an enemy but as an inevitable part of nature—adds another layer to the philosophical complexity of the story. It suggests that the spirit of witness, Budhba's path, and the spirit of acceptance, Sonama Majhin's path, are both necessary and are not opposed to one another.

CHAPTER -82 (EIGHTY-TWO BEFORE)

The First Kabaddi Match

*Go in one breath, return in one breath; touch and come back—
kabaddi teaches: do not seize, be present.*

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Three years have passed. Savitri is now sixteen, with a sensitivity sharper than her mother's—and in this chapter is born the ritual that, much later, in Channa Grove, you will hear called “the ghosts’ kabaddi.”)

Over those three years the situation had grown worse. The losses no longer stopped with livestock. Now people, too, sometimes disappeared—usually those who went alone to the banks of the Kamala-Balan at night, or those who worked fields too near that distant, unnamed reach of the river. The villagers began to avoid the pond and the current, and fear itself began to constrict village life: less fishing, less cultivation, even less laughter from the children.

Savitri, now sixteen, differed from her mother in one respect: she could hear Budhba’s voice not only in dreams, but in broad daylight, without sleeping. And lately her dreams had filled with a scene she could not understand—children running at night beneath the shade of some tree, repeating a word whose meaning she did not know.

One evening she summoned her mother and Budhba together. “I have an idea,” she said, excitement and fear mingling in her voice. “Budhba, you preserve names. Sonama Majhin kept the Original Crocodile calm through offerings. But the two acts have remained

separate—preserving names in one place, making offerings in another. What if we joined them into a single act?”

“How, daughter?” Gauri asked.

“In my dream,” Savitri said, “the children were playing a game—kabaddi, just as we ordinarily play it. But in this game, whoever crossed into the opposing side on a raid had to carry a name with them: the name of someone dead, the memory of someone forgotten. If the player could cross back over the line with that name, the raid was counted as won. This game... it was not merely a game, Budhba. Each raid was a small offering—a way of showing the Original Crocodile that we are willing to bring names before it freely and with honour, instead of waiting for it to snatch them away against our will.”

Budhba was silent for a long time. When he spoke, his voice held a brightness Gauri had not heard in many years. “Savitri, I think you have understood what I could not understand in hundreds of years. I thought bearing witness and accepting forgetting were two different paths, as Sonama Majhin said. But you are showing me a third path, where both can happen together—in one breath, within a single game.”

But the idea could not be proved without a trial, and the trial demanded courage that no one was willing to offer.

At last Savitri herself stepped forward. “I will play the first raid,” she said, despite her mother’s protest. “I am linked to Budhba’s power, just as you were. If this can work, no one is better placed to test it than I am.”

On the night of the new moon, beside Jori Pokhari beneath the roots of the pipal, Savitri, Gauri, Phulesari, and a handful of brave young men from the village gathered together. Budhba, indistinct as air, rose above the roots of the tree. “If this game fails,” he warned, “the Original Crocodile may take it as an insult, and its hunger may grow fiercer. Whatever happens here, we shall bear its weight together—not Savitri alone.”

The game began. Holding her breath and chanting “kabaddi, kabaddi,” Savitri moved into the darkness, as far as the very edge of the pond, where even at night the water seemed to gleam strangely. She stopped and called out in a high voice: “Subhagi! Subhagi, who was given no name in the flood—I bring your name into this game!”

The water stirred. Everyone froze. But there was no attack. Savitri drew breath and took another step. “Yashpati!” she called, her voice trembling. “What you became was the result of your own choices. But your name—the person you may once have been, long ago—I too shall not forget, even if the Original Crocodile has devoured you.”

At that name the water moved in a different way—swiftly, violently, as though something enormous beneath the surface were trying to rise.

Gauri cried, "Savitri, come back!" But Savitri, joined to Budhba's power, stood firm. "No," she said. "This is fear, not an attack. It is listening."

A third time she spoke, now calming her voice as one would soothe a crying child. "Original Crocodile, we do not deny you. We ask you for patience, just as our ancestors asked. On every night of the new moon we will bring names before you—freely, lovingly, by our own will. In return, we ask only this: do not steal. Accept what is offered."

A long, unbearable moment passed. Then, slowly, the water grew calm. No voice answered; there was no unmistakable sign. Yet something changed in the air, as though an immense, exhausted creature had drawn an easy breath for the first time in a very long while.

Budhba steadied within his form. "It is done," he said. "I do not know how long this will hold, but tonight the crocodile is asleep."

From that night onward, on every new-moon night, the children of the village gathered beneath the pipal under Budhba's guidance and played kabaddi. But the game was no longer merely a game. It had become a sacred rite of remembrance. Each raid carried a name; each name carried a life; each life carried a truth guarded from forgetting. And in return for that rite, it is said, the Original Crocodile never again touched an innocent living being.

From that day Savitri became something more to the village—not merely Budhba's helper, but the first guardian of the rite her descendants would carry forward, generation after generation, until, far in the future and far away, the game would pass from a village new-moon custom into the deathless, timeless kabaddi of Channa Grove, where ghosts, spirits, rakash, and loths, with Budhba as referee, would still save names night after night.

That day, during the first kabaddi raid, the village raised a song—

Go in one breath, come back in one breath,

Touch and return—do not seize; be present.

Who kept the breath won the raid; whose breath broke lost it;

Kabaddi teaches: touch the name, do not hold the body.

Call the name as you take your raid, all within one breath—

The name that was called lived again in the dark.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -82 — A HINGE IN THE STORY-CYCLE

The Origin of the Ritual and the Circular Structure of the Story

Chapter -82 is a central hinge in the whole Part o project of Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles. Here the ritual already encountered by the reader in Parts 1 and 2 as “name-saving kabaddi” is born in its first form. Savitri’s synthesis—bringing together the spirit of witness embodied by Budhba, the spirit of offering embodied by Sonama Majhin, and the children’s game of traditional village kabaddi—gives concrete form to one of the story’s central claims: truth and justice are never the property of a single tradition or a single generation, but are cumulative, intergenerational creations. From this point onward, the remaining chapters of Part o (81→1) will trace the centuries-long continuity of the established ritual, and the new names and new tragedies continually added to that continuity, until at last the story reaches Budhba in his final, twelve-hundred-year-old form in Channa Grove.

CHAPTER -81 (EIGHTY-ONE BEFORE)

The Shadow of Invasion

A shadow growing large does not make fear grow large—one whose name stands firm does not fear his own shadow.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Twenty years have passed. New-moon kabaddi has become an inseparable part of village life—but in this chapter a new, human-made calamity reaches the village gate, one that no offering and no name can pacify.)

Over twenty years, Garh Narikel had settled into a new balance. New-moon kabaddi had become an inseparable part of village life. The children played it as naturally as though it had always existed, and after every new moon the elders of the village would say with satisfaction, “This month too has passed in peace.” The loss of livestock had stopped. Fear of that distant stretch of the Kamala-Balan, though not wholly gone, had weakened. Savitri, now thirty-six, was teaching her daughter Indumati the finer points of the ritual.

But that evening, at the edge of the village, a new cloud of dust rose—a cloud kicked up by horses’ hooves, and with it came a crowd of people fleeing.

"A Turk army!" cried the first refugee, collapsing near the village chaupal, breathless. "They are advancing from the north of Mithila with elephants and horses! The king of Simraungarh has fled! Village after village is burning!"

Panic broke out in Garh Narikel. Some wanted to flee at once toward the south, beyond the forest that the villagers now called "the Crocodile's country," a place they had never before been willing to enter—but today even that fear seemed small beside the fear of an army. Others refused to abandon their houses and fields, whatever might come.

Indumati, now twenty, asked her mother, "Mother, what does Budhba say about this?"

Savitri went to the pipal. Budhba, departing from his usual calm, looked troubled. "Savitri, my witness-sight does not show me the future of this army clearly. Human war, unlike the hunger of the Original Crocodile, is unstable and unpredictable. But this much I can say: an army that has come to burn cities and royal palaces will have little particular interest in a small, poor village like this, unless the village lies in its path."

"Then what should we do?"

"Hide what can be hidden. Let those who can flee do so. But those who cannot—the old, the sick, small children—must have a place of safety."

The leatherworkers' quarter, drawing on years upon years of experience, organized first, because its people knew how to help one another in a crisis. Beneath their houses they enlarged the old underground grain-storage chambers and began hiding children and elderly people there. Gauri, old now but still active, set to work tending wounded refugees with her knowledge of herbs.

By deep night, hoofbeats sounded again at the village boundary. This time it was not the whole army, only a handful of straggling soldiers who had become separated from the main force and were moving toward the village to plunder it. Indumati, who could hear Budhba's voice most clearly, cried out, "Budhba is saying—kabaddi! Play kabaddi tonight, even though it is not the new moon!"

It was a strange command, but Savitri, trusting her mother's teaching, immediately gathered the children and the young men of the village beneath the roots of the pipal. "How can kabaddi save us?" one young man asked.

"I do not know," Savitri said, "but trust Budhba."

When the straggling soldiers reached the edge of the village, they saw a strange sight: lamps burning near the village pipal, children running

and playing without fear, loudly chanting “kabaddi, kabaddi.” The scene was so ordinary, so fearless, that the soldiers concluded either that the village was mad or that it had nothing worth hiding—for no one, surely, could play with such calm in the midst of real danger.

The commander, a weary, lean veteran, reined in his horse. “There is nothing in this village worth looting,” he told his men. “Move on. Rejoin the main force. We need not waste time here.”

The soldiers moved on without troubling the village. The children finished their game and began laughing with relief, although they did not fully understand what they had saved.

Budhba remained beneath the pipal for a long time that night, his form unusually still. “Indumati,” he said at last, “do you know what I am thinking? My task was never only to preserve the names of the dead. Sometimes this work can preserve the living as well. A person who stands firm in name, memory, and identity, without fear, shows a confidence that violence often cannot understand—and therefore passes by.”

But the relief proved brief. The following week came news that Simraungarh had fallen completely, and that Mithila’s old political order—the order under whose shadow every story from Acharya Keshava to Amil Jay Singh had unfolded—had come to an end. A new age, with new rulers, a new language, and new laws, was about to descend upon Mithila. And Garh Narikel, like thousands of other villages, now found itself standing before an unknown future.

That night, seeing the shadow of invasion, Budhba sang a proverb-song—

Though the shadow grows large, fear need not grow large,

One whose name stands firm does not fear his own shadow.

*Cannon-fire heard far away, smoke seen rising high—yet the village
stood;*

One who stands firm within is not broken by the shadow outside.

A shadow grows large at evening, but fades with dawn—

One who knows his own name is defeated by no shadow.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -81

Fourteenth-Century Mithila — The Historical Context of Political Instability

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the fall of the Karnata dynasty that preceded the Oiniwar line in Mithila, and incursions by the armies of the Delhi Sultanate into the Tirhut region, brought profound changes to the political structure of the area. Chapter -81 uses this historical instability as its background to show how local communal traditions, such as the kabaddi ritual, could preserve their meaning—and sometimes even their practical usefulness—amid large political upheavals. This chapter carries the narrative of Part 0 into a new historical age, whose unfolding continues in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER -80 (EIGHTY BEFORE)

The First Line of the Song

*One voice raises the first line of a song; the rest of the village takes it up
—the author is not one person; the village itself is the maker.*

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. With the rise of the Oiniwar dynasty, a new political stability and a new literary enthusiasm are spreading through Mithila—and in this chapter, for the first time, Budhba’s story attempts to leave oral memory and descend onto the page.)

The disorder that followed the fall of Simraungarh slowly subsided. A new dynasty—the Oiniwars—came to power in Mithila, and with it came a new, unexpected enthusiasm for literature, music, and art. The courts of Darbhanga and the surrounding region began giving patronage to poets, singers, and scholars, and Maithili, long regarded chiefly as the language of home and field, gradually began to become a language of court and poetry as well.

A small wave of this new enthusiasm reached Garh Narikel too, in the form of a young wandering poet-scribe whom the villagers knew as Haripati. Travelling from village to village in search of courtly patronage, he collected folk tales, folk songs, and local legends, believing that the true strength of Maithili lay not in the Sanskrit-laden poetry of the court but in the mouths of ordinary villagers.

When Haripati reached Garh Narikel, he heard for the first time about the pipal Witness-Tree and the new-moon kabaddi played beneath it—from Indumati, now forty and the principal guardian of the ritual after her mother Savitri.

“A ghost who bears witness and preserves names? An Original Crocodile that is the hunger of forgetting? A kabaddi game in which every raid carries the name of the dead?” Haripati asked in astonishment. “This is material for a great epic! I want to put it on the page.”

Indumati hesitated. “Poet, this story is ours—the village’s, the quarter’s, Budhba’s. It is not a poem for a royal court; it is our life. What will you do by writing it down?”

“I want to preserve it,” Haripati said with deep sincerity. “An oral story, however powerful, changes from generation to generation, and sometimes disappears altogether. But if it comes onto the page, it can still be read hundreds of years from now.”

Indumati took these words to the pipal and told Budhba. He remained silent for a long time. “Indumati,” he said at last, “I remember that long ago I myself thought that perhaps, far in the future, someone would gather all these stories in one place. I did not know that moment would come so soon, or that it would come in the form of a wandering poet. But I must give you one warning: if this story is written, it must not be written for prestige. If the stories of Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Subhagi, Ratna, and Malati are ornamented in the polished language of the royal court, that will be another injustice like those they suffered in life. If they are written, they must be written in ordinary language, as those people themselves spoke.”

When Indumati conveyed this message, Haripati sat silent for a long time. Then, slowly, he drew a palm-leaf manuscript and stylus from his waist. “Budhbaji,” he said, turning toward the pipal although he could not see Budhba, “I accept your condition. I will not write it as courtly poetry. I will write it as it is—in the village’s language, in the village’s rhythm, in the own words of Hulasa and Jivanti and Sukhdev wherever they survive.”

That evening, seated at the roots of the pipal, Haripati wrote his first line—not in Sanskrit, not in courtly Maithili, but in the ordinary speech of the village: “There was a tree, there was a pond, and there was a servant who preserved names...” Haripati himself did not know that this line would live for many centuries thereafter, in one form or another, in one mouth or another, until—far in the future—another writer, in another age, using another instrument, would write the same story again, not on paper but on a computer screen, under the title *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*.

Haripati remained in Garh Narikel for three months, listening to the stories of every elder in the village, writing them, erasing them, and writing them again until the words sounded natural on the village tongue. When he prepared to leave for the royal court with his palm-leaf manuscript, Indumati asked him, “Will you show it at court?”

“No,” Haripati said with a sad smile. “The court will not understand it. I will keep this manuscript with me, and when my time comes, I will give it to my disciple with instructions to preserve it but never to publish it—until the world becomes such that it can both hear this story and understand it.”

After Haripati left, Budhba said to Indumati, “He was a good man. His manuscript may be lost, or it may not. But one thing I now know for certain: once a story has honestly descended onto the page, it never dies completely, even if no one reads that manuscript for centuries.”

That day, as the first line of the song rose, the village wove a song—

One voice raises the first line of the song,

The rest of the village takes it up—the author is not one.

One began it, ten added to it, a hundred sang it;

What a village makes together has no single maker.

Line joins line, and the song becomes whole—

A song sung by all never dies.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -80

The Oiniwar Dynasty and the Golden Age of Maithili Literature

The rule of the Oiniwar dynasty in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is regarded as an especially important period in the history of Maithili literature, when Maithili received royal patronage and became a medium of high literary expression. The poet “Haripati” mentioned in Chapter -80 does not represent any one specific historical person; rather, he symbolizes the wider literary and cultural tendency through which the dignity of the Maithili language became established in this period. The chapter’s central question—whether folk narrative, especially narrative associated with marginalized communities, is worthy of becoming a subject of “high literature”—is also a central question of Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles itself and, more broadly, of the Videha journal and the Videha Parallel Literature movement.

CHAPTER -79 (SEVENTY-NINE BEFORE)

The Turn of Forgiveness

In kabaddi, even the one you touch gets a turn to return—forgiveness too is a turn, not revenge.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Forty-five years have passed. In this chapter, for the first time, the new-moon kabaddi is played not only for the names of the dead, but also for an old wrong borne by a living person.)

After Indumati, responsibility for the ritual passed to her daughter Sharada, and after Sharada to her daughter Vasundhara. Over forty-five years, village life settled into a quiet, steady rhythm—the kabaddi was played at every new moon, names were spoken, and the Original Crocodile, as Sonama Majhin had said long ago, slept patiently.

One evening, an extremely old man came to the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter, leaning on a staff. His clothes were expensive, but torn and soiled, as though he had travelled very far and with great difficulty. "I am the grandson of Pratapsen Thakur," he introduced himself, his voice trembling. "My name is Raghuvir. I... I have come to meet the descendants of Gauri Mata."

Vasundhara, now forty, looked at him cautiously. "The name Pratapsen Thakur awakens no happy memory in this quarter, Babuji. Why have you come?"

Raghuvir remained silent for a long time, then said with tears in his eyes, "I have lived carrying the burden of my grandfather's sin. My father

told me his story, and from childhood I have known that some part of my family's property, every comfort my family enjoys, stands upon the injustice my grandfather tried to commit against this quarter. Before I die, I have come once to ask forgiveness—although I understand that I have no right to demand forgiveness, because the offense was not mine.”

Uncertain, Vasundhara went to the pipal to ask Budhba's counsel. “Budhba, this confuses me. This man is not himself guilty, yet he carries the burden of guilt. What should I say to him?”

Budhba remained silent for a long time. “Vasundhara, year after year I have preserved the names of the dead, but now I think my work was incomplete. Preserving a name does not mean only that the dead remain in memory—it also means that the living are given a chance to set their own story right while they are still alive. Raghuvir's plea for forgiveness, though he himself is not guilty, is a new kind of act of witness. Do not reject it.”

That new-moon night, every elder, every woman, every child in the village gathered beneath the pipal—and Raghuvir too sat by the tree on weak legs, supported by a descendant of Phulesari. The kabaddi began, but that night a new rule was added. When Raghuvir's turn came, Vasundhara called him to her side and said softly, “Today you will not carry a name, Babuji. Today you yourself will become a name—Raghuvir, grandson of Pratapsen Thakur, who came to acknowledge his family's wrongdoing—and all of us together will remember this name of yours, just as we have remembered the names of Sukhdev and Hulasa.”

Raghuvir began to weep, though his tears were not of grief but of a deep, years-old burden lifting from him. “A portion of my land,” he said between breaths, “which my grandfather acquired unjustly, I want to return to this quarter today. It cannot buy forgiveness, I understand that. But at least it is one step toward truth.”

That night Budhba descended from the roots of the pipal and, for the first time in the village's memory, tried to place his hand on the head of a living person—though, as always, the hand stopped a finger's breadth above the body. “Raghuvir,” he said, “even today I carry your grandfather's name with sorrow. But from today I will carry your name with respect. The difference may seem small, but from all I have learned over the years, I know that this difference is worth everything.”

Raghuvir stayed that night in the leatherworkers' quarter, and the next morning, before the witnesses of the village, he placed the deed of partition for his land in Vasundhara's hands. He returned home the following month, and six months later news came of his death—but the villagers did not call him “the guilty Thakur.” They called him “Raghuvir, who returned,” and in time his name became a village saying:

“to return like Raghuvir,” meaning to turn back toward truth, however late the return may come.

That day, as forgiveness entered a kabaddi turn, the village sang—

In kabaddi, even the one you touch gets a turn to return,

Forgiveness too is a turn, not revenge.

One who loses gets another chance; one who falls is offered a hand;

The one who forgave saved both the game and the village.

The turn of revenge is short; the turn of forgiveness is long—

*The village remembered the name of the one who gave another a turn
to return.*

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -79

Collective Guilt and Intergenerational Forgiveness

Chapter -79 raises a difficult moral question to which there is no simple answer: is a descendant responsible for an ancestor's wrongdoing, and if so, to what extent? The story gives no fixed theoretical answer. Raghuvir's return of land is described not as “buying forgiveness” but as “a step toward truth,” and the matter is deliberately left incomplete. The chapter also marks an important turn in the development of the ritual: name-saving kabaddi, which until now has been chiefly for the dead and the wronged, now takes on a role for a living, repentant inheritor as well—carefully preserving the distinction that acknowledgment is not the same thing as forgiveness.

CHAPTER -78 (SEVENTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

Outside the Genealogy

A name absent from the Panji is not outside the village—the one paper leaves out, the soil takes in.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Mithila's Panji system—which records lineage, gotra, and ancestral origin—enters the story here for the first time, bringing with it the question of which names are admitted to such records, and which are not.)

Mithila had an ancient institution—the Panji system—under which the genealogies, marriage alliances, and lineage status of Brahmin and Karna Kayastha families were carefully preserved in written records. Every few years, pandits and Panjikers gathered in assemblies known as Panji conferences to enter new marriages, examine older records, and decide matters of lineage standing. The system was one pillar of Mithila's social memory—but that pillar stood only for certain households. The names of leatherworkers, Dhivars, and other marginalized caste communities never entered these Panjis, as though they lived outside Mithila's memory, beyond some invisible boundary.

That year, a Panji conference was held in a large village near Garh Narikel, and a young Panjiker named Yadavanand Jha came to take part in it—serious, conscientious, and wholly confident in the system he served. After the conference, he was travelling through Garh Narikel when his horse suddenly fell ill, forcing him to stop near the village square and seek shelter for the night.

The Brahmin quarter welcomed Yadavanand according to custom, but food in the village was scarce that night, for it was a difficult year following famine. When Vasundhara, the current guardian of the ritual in the leatherworkers' quarter, heard this, she sent fresh milk and fruit from her own home, expecting nothing in return, simply because her family had for generations followed the custom of serving guests who came to the village.

As he drank the milk, Yadavanand asked the village headman, "Whose milk is this? So pure, so delicious!"

The headman hesitated a little, then said, "From the leatherworkers' quarter, Panditji."

For a moment Yadavanand's face tightened with discomfort—the reflex of old conditioning—but then, perhaps from weariness, or perhaps from genuine curiosity, he asked, "Where is that quarter? I have heard something about a Witness Tree, about some new-moon ritual. Is it true?"

By a remarkable coincidence, that night was the new moon. Reluctantly, the headman took Yadavanand to the pipal, thinking that a Panjekar's interest in this "low" ritual might prove dangerous. But when Yadavanand saw the children playing, heard them calling name after name, and heard Vasundhara attach a small story to each one—Ratna, Somar, Malati, Hulasa, Sukhdev, Subhagi, Gauri—he stood stunned.

"Whose... whose names are these?" he asked, his voice newly humble.

"Our ancestors, Panditji," Vasundhara said, "and those who did not receive justice while they lived, but whose names we refuse to forget after their deaths."

Yadavanand remained silent for a long time. Then he said slowly, "My whole life has been spent in the service of a Panji that preserves thousands of names—but that Panji preserves not one name from your quarter. Until today I never once asked myself what kind of justice this is. Here, beneath this tree, the question has arisen in me for the first time, and I do not know its answer."

Budhba, whose voice until then could be heard only by Vasundhara and the descendants of Savitri, opened his voice to Yadavanand as well that night for the first time—an experiment whose result even Budhba could not be certain of. "Panjekar," he said softly, and Yadavanand started and looked around him. "I will teach you no shastra. I will tell you only this: your Panji keeps the record of lineage and rank. My memory keeps the record of truth and love. Both are necessary. But if only the first survives without the second, half of Mithila's memory will remain forever in darkness."

Yadavanand could not sleep that night. Before leaving at dawn, he took from his bag a small booklet of blank paper—his own private notebook, separate from the official Panji—and said to Vasundhara, “Tell me every name you know, as far back as your memory reaches. I will keep them in my personal record. It will not be an official Panji, and perhaps it never will be. But for as long as I live, these names will at least be safe on one sheet of paper.”

For three hours Vasundhara recited names—generation by generation, beginning with Somar and Ratna and continuing down to her own daughter—and Yadavanand solemnly wrote every name, every relationship, every small story. When he left, he said, “I do not know whether this little book will ever reach another hand in the future. But I promise you this: for as long as I live, I will keep these names with the same respect as my official Panji, even if the world never sees them.”

That day, for the names left outside the Panji, the village sang—

A name absent from the Panji is not outside the village,

The one paper leaves out, the soil takes in.

Dalit, woman, poor—the paper may lose them;

But whoever the village keeps in mind becomes greater than the Panji.

Paper is bounded; the soil is vast—

*Even names omitted from the Panji are carried by the village's
memory.*

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -78

The Panji System and Social Exclusion

Mithila's Panji system has long been admired among scholars for its intricate and meticulous tradition of genealogical record-keeping, but historically it was confined chiefly to the lineages of Maithil Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas. As a result, most of Mithila's population—Shudra, Dalit, and Adivasi communities—remained outside this official system of memory. Chapter -78 addresses that historical inequality directly and, through the character of Yadavanand Jha, offers a fictional but symbolically meaningful response: a “shadow Panji,” kept outside the official record but with equal fidelity. The author's own work on Panji research—including the parsing of Panji material in Volume 2, Parts 2 and 3, among other sections—forms part of the background to this chapter, although its characters and events are entirely fictional.

CHAPTER -77 (SEVENTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

Budhba's Silence

When Budhba falls silent, he speaks most of all—silence too is an answer.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Ten years have passed. In this chapter, for the first time, Budhba himself begins to break—and the village must understand that even the one who bears witness sometimes needs a witness.)

In those ten years, after Vasundhara, responsibility for the ritual passed to her daughter Kaushalya. Like her foremothers, Kaushalya tended the new-moon kabaddi, and village life continued in its ordinary rhythm. But slowly one thing began to trouble her. Budhba's voice, once clear, alert, and ready with an answer to every question, had grown faint and weary, and at times fell completely silent.

One new-moon night the kabaddi began, but Budhba did not appear in his place as referee. The children waited, then began whispering among themselves. "Why hasn't Budhba come?" Frightened, Kaushalya went to the roots of the pipal. "Budhba, are you all right?"

After a long while an exceedingly faint voice arose, as though travelling from very far away, from very deep below. "Kaushalya... forgive me. I... tonight I cannot remember the names. So many years, so many names... Hulasa... or perhaps Hulasi... Sukhdev, or Surendra... I... I am afraid I am forgetting, Kaushalya. The very work for which I was born to do above all else is slipping out of my own hands."

Kaushalya stood stunned. For the first time in hundreds of years, Budhba—believed unchanging, unbreakable, forever remembering—was giving voice to fear and helplessness.

The village grew frightened. “If Budhba forgets, in whose keeping will our names remain?” an old woman asked. The headman, the village elders, and the descendants of Sonama Majhin—who still lived, generation after generation, near that distant reach of the Kamala-Balan—gathered to consider this terrible problem.

A descendant of Sonama Majhin, an elderly woman named Godavari, asked Kaushalya a question no one had ever asked before. “Kaushalya, how many names have all of you asked Budhba to carry, over how many years? Thousands—perhaps lakhs. But have any of you ever spoken Budhba’s own name—Budhua—before others with full respect? Have you ever heard his story, mourned for him, sung for him, as he has had to do for thousands of others?”

Silence descended. Kaushalya, and the whole village with her, had to admit that it was true. Budhua—Budhba—who had preserved everyone else for hundreds of years, had never himself been fully and reverently “preserved.” He had always given and never received.

“Then what should we do?” Kaushalya asked, tears in her eyes.

Godavari smiled, a quiet, deep smile. “What Budhba does for us every new moon, tonight we shall do for him. We shall play kabaddi—but tonight the turn will be taken for Budhba’s name.”

That night every person in the village—old, young, child, leatherworkers’ quarter, Brahmin quarter, everyone—gathered beneath the pipal without distinction of quarter. Kaushalya lit a lamp and called out in a strong voice: “Budhua! Servant of Vachaspati Mishra! Witness to Hulasa! Witness to Jivanti! Witness to Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Subhagi, Gauri! You, who have carried every name for hundreds of years, tonight we too carry your name—Budhua, Budhba, who gave up his humanity for love, who never asked anything for himself. We know your story, and we shall never forget it.”

One by one, every woman and man in the village stepped forward and repeated one piece of Budhba’s story—his thirty years of service, his water-burial, his helplessness during the first flood, his journey to Sonama Majhin, his grief for Yashpati. The children, not fully understanding yet still reverent, danced around the pipal chanting “Budhba—Budhba”—not formal kabaddi at all, only a spontaneous, joyful act of remembrance.

From the roots of the pipal, a soft, steady light slowly rose—clearer than before, firmer than before. When Budhba finally spoke, his voice no longer trembled. “Godavari was right,” he said, with new strength in his

voice. “I was not forgetting, Kaushalya. I was only... tired—from carrying a burden in one direction for too long without ever receiving anything from the other direction. Tonight you showed me that other direction. Now I understand: bearing witness is not a one-way task. If it remains one-way, in the end it empties the witness himself. But if it flows in both directions, it can continue without end.”

From that night onward, a new observance entered the village ritual. Once each year, on the full moon of Phagun, the villagers began to celebrate “Budhba Remembrance,” when Budhba’s own story was respectfully retold to every generation of the village, so that the witness himself might never remain unwitnessed, never remain alone.

That day, seeing Budhba’s silence, the village sang a proverb-song—

When Budhba falls silent, he speaks most of all,

Silence too is an answer.

What could not fit inside speech was said in quiet;

The one who bent close to listen understood meaning even in silence.

Words grow weary; silence speaks more deeply—

The one who understood Budhba’s silence learned half the story.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -77

Caregiver Fatigue and the Need for Reciprocity

Chapter -77 gives narrative form to a psychological reality sometimes described in modern language as “compassion fatigue”: a person—or a spirit—who continuously bears the burdens of others in a one-way flow, without ever experiencing his own burden being shared, may eventually become depleted, however good his intentions. Budhba’s temporary “silence,” and its resolution through communal, reciprocal remembrance, suggest that the work of witnessing, justice, and safeguarding memory can never be left permanently to one person—or one institution. It must be a collective responsibility whose weight is shared.

The First Lesson on a Coconut Leaf

The first lesson is on a leaf—how a name is written; the leaf that keeps a name lets the tree keep history.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. Kaushalya’s daughter, Mandakini, carrying forward the knowledge of her grandmothers, brings a new idea—one that, much later, will be known as the “Coconut-Leaf School.”)

Mandakini, Kaushalya’s daughter, had felt a strange dissatisfaction since childhood. She knew—from the story of Yadavanand Jha, and from the story of the poet Haripati—that her family’s history was now preserved on paper and in a Panji. But she also knew that not a single woman or man in the quarter could read for themselves the letters that others had written on their behalf. “Our story is in other people’s hands,” she told her mother one day, “but not before our own eyes.”

There was a school in the village’s Brahmin quarter where both Sanskrit and Maithili were taught—but only boys of the higher castes could attend, and girls, whatever their caste, were not welcome. “Where will our children study?” Mandakini asked.

There was another problem as well: paper and palm-leaf manuscripts were expensive, and no family in the leatherworkers’ quarter had enough means to provide writing materials for every child.

One day Mandakini sat in her courtyard with a dried coconut leaf in her hand and, without thinking, began drawing lines on it with a twig. The leaf was dry but strong, and the marks appeared clearly, as though there were a natural contrast between the green inner layer of the leaf and its dry outer surface, enough to reveal letters even without ink.

“Mother!” she cried. “Look! I can write on a coconut leaf!”

Kaushalya came, looked, and smiled—a smile that had passed through many generations and many tragedies and now tasted of hope. “Mandakini, what is the one thing Garh Narikel never lacks? Coconut trees! You have found a new idea.”

The next week Mandakini and her friends gathered dried coconut leaves, cleaned them, and began the first lessons in the open space of the leatherworkers’ quarter—the place where, until then, only drums and mridangas had been left to dry. Children, boys and girls alike, learned to scratch letters onto coconut leaves without distinction of caste. Some poor families from the Brahmin quarter also began sending their children there because they could not afford the expensive school.

When Budhba heard the news, there was a new excitement in his voice. “Mandakini,” he said beneath the pipal, “what you have done is the next step in our whole story. Hulasa could not write her own name on a manuscript copy. Ratna could never put her herbal knowledge onto paper. Gauri, Savitri, Vasundhara—all of them preserved their stories through other people’s mouths and other people’s hands. But your children will now write their own stories themselves.”

“Budhba,” Mandakini said, “will this ritual, this kabaddi, all of it—will we need it less once we can write our own stories?”

Budhba thought for a moment. “No, Mandakini. Writing and bearing witness are two different acts, just as the Panji and my memory were different. What is written can be burned, torn, or simply left unread. But what is remembered with love, mouth to mouth, generation to generation, is harder to destroy. You need both—the written story and the living memory, not as substitutes for one another, but as one another’s guardians.”

In time the Coconut-Leaf School became a permanent institution of Garh Narikel—first a small, informal gathering, then a recognized tradition where children of every generation learned their letters without distinction of caste or gender. Mandakini herself, into old age, continued every morning to distribute leaves and teach new children their first letters.

That day, as the children wrote their first letters on coconut leaves, they sang—

The first lesson is on a leaf—how a name is written;

The leaf that keeps a name lets the tree keep history.

A to Aa, Ka to Kha, little hands learn to write;

The child who learns letters today will save a name tomorrow.

The leaf is green; the letters remain steadfast—

*What was written on a coconut leaf was read twelve hundred years
later.*

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -76

Innovation from Material Scarcity — The Democratization of Education

Chapter -76 gives narrative form to an important principle: scarcity of resources can sometimes become the mother of innovation. Where costly paper and palm-leaf manuscripts are unavailable, making education accessible through a local and readily available material—the coconut leaf—reflects practices that have, in different forms, genuinely arisen among many historically marginalized communities. The name “Coconut-Leaf School,” which readers will recognize in Part 1 as a central institution of modern Garh Narikel, receives here its historical, though fictional, origin. The chapter thus shows that modern institutions are often continuities of centuries-old need and innovation, rather than sudden inventions.

The First Rebellion of Reason

The one who asked a question did not defeat the teacher, but awakened him—the first rebellion of reason, the first dawn of knowledge.

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. The Coconut-Leaf School bore fruit in an unexpected way as well: a newly literate generation, having learned to ask questions, now begins to question its oldest tradition.)

Mandakini's school flourished for three generations. The village children—leatherworkers, Brahmins, Kayasthas, all of them—could now read letters, do sums, and had tasted book-learning. But education brought a new tendency with it as well: the habit of asking questions, and sometimes the courage to remain dissatisfied with old answers.

Mandakini's great-grandson, Vishwanath—not the boy once victimized by Yashpati, but another person who happened to bear the same name—was the brightest student in the school. He had spent two years studying at a newly established school in town, where he encountered logic, mathematics, and new ideas. When he returned to the village, his mind was full of questions, and the greatest of them concerned Budhba.

One new-moon night, when the kabaddi began, Vishwanath did not join the game. He stood at the edge with his arms folded and watched. Afterward he went to his grandmother—the village's current guardian of the ritual—and said, "Grandmother, I want to tell you something, and I am afraid it will hurt you. But I no longer believe in this game. It is... it is a beautiful tradition, but only a tradition. Budhba, the Original Crocodile—all of it may have been the imagination of our ancestors, not the real reason we survived floods, injustice, or misfortune."

His grandmother was stunned. "Vishwanath, your great-grandmother saw Budhba with her own eyes. My mother heard his voice."

"Grandmother, human memory can mislead, and folk stories grow and change from generation to generation. I do not want to disrespect you, but I want to look at the world with my own eyes and my own reason."

Word spread quickly through the village, and a few other young people, influenced by Vishwanath, stopped taking part in the kabaddi. For the first time in centuries, the crowd gathering beneath the pipal on new-moon nights began to grow smaller.

Budhba, seeing this, was not saddened in the way the villagers expected. "Let it come," he told the grandmother. "Vishwanath is not wrong to ask questions. Asking questions is not always wrong—it is what Vachaspati Mishra, Udayanacharya, and Gangesha Upadhyaya themselves did. But I know one thing Vishwanath does not yet know."

A few months later the village faced a real test. Once again livestock began disappearing from the distant, unnamed reach of the Kamala-Balan, just as it had in Sonama Majhin's time. But now the kabaddi had become irregular, attendance was thin, and the offering had weakened.

Despite his rationalism, Vishwanath was disturbed by the connection. He went into the forest himself, determined to prove that some ordinary,

rational cause—a wolf, thieves, or a natural accident—lay behind the losses. But what he saw there shook his entire framework of reason: at the water's edge were the same enormous, strange tracks that no familiar animal could explain.

Frightened, he returned to the village and went straight to the pipal. "Budhba," he said, uncertainty entering his voice for the first time, "I cannot see you, but I know you are listening. I... I do not know what I am supposed to believe. But I can admit this much: if a tradition whose full scientific explanation I do not understand has kept the village safe for years, then rejecting it without any alternative protection is not wisdom. It is arrogance."

Budhba answered softly, "Vishwanath, I will not ask you to believe in me through superstition. I ask only this: acknowledge honestly what you have seen with your own eyes, and then decide for yourself whether the kabaddi is superstition, or a system your learning has not yet fully understood."

Vishwanath returned to the kabaddi on the next new moon and brought several of the other young people with him. He admitted openly, "I do not understand it completely, but I want to continue it with respect until I find a better answer." The answer did not wholly satisfy his grandmother, but it was enough—for, as Budhba later said, "Faith and respect are not the same thing, but sometimes they can do the same work."

That day, seeing a disciple find the courage to question the teacher, the gathering sang—

*The one who asked a question did not defeat the teacher, but
awakened him;*

The first rebellion of reason, the first dawn of knowledge.

*The one who merely memorized forgot; the one who questioned
understood;*

The disciple who found courage carried the teacher farther.

A question is a lamp that breaks the dark—

The one who learned to ask became the seed of Gangesha.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -75

The Intergenerational Conflict Between Tradition and Rationality

Chapter -75 gives narrative form to a universal social phenomenon: the tension between the rational-scientific outlook fostered by the spread of education and traditional, experience-based folk knowledge, a tension that appears in one form or another in almost every society with every generational transition. The story deliberately refuses to declare either side entirely right. Vishwanath's skepticism is valid, and Budhba himself accepts it; yet the empirical evidence in the forest cannot simply be dismissed either. The final resolution—"continue it with respect until a better answer is found"—offers a practical model of non-confrontational coexistence between science and tradition.

CHAPTER -74 (SEVENTY-FOUR BEFORE)

The Tree's Disease

*Tend the sickness of one leaf, or it will spread through the whole tree—
the sickness of a village is the same: it begins with a single silence.*

— Garh Narikel



(A passage of narrative fiction. The centuries-old pipal has itself grown old now—and when its leaves begin to yellow, the village realizes for the first time that Budhba's very existence is bound to the health of this tree.)

When Vishwanath's grandson, Kedar, became guardian of the village ritual—the responsibility by then being entrusted to women and men alike according to fitness—he was the first to notice that the leaves on the northern branch of the pipal Witness Tree had begun to yellow, and that dark, damp patches were appearing at several places on its bark.

“Budhba,” Kedar asked anxiously, “your tree looks ill. Does this... does this affect you too?”

Budhba's voice, steady and clear through year after year, sounded weaker that evening. “Yes, Kedar. I am bound to this tree just as your body is bound to your breath. This tree has lived beside me for centuries. Perhaps... perhaps its span of life is now nearing its end.”

Panic swept through the village. “If the tree dies, what will happen to Budhba? If Budhba is no longer here, who will keep our names?” The question passed from house to house.

Kedar, inheriting both the rational temper of his ancestor Vishwanath and the faith of his grandmothers, looked for another way. From the town he brought a tree physician, trained in the new science of tree diseases and their treatment. After carefully examining the roots, bark, and leaves, the tree physician said, “The tree is being attacked by several kinds of insects. They have made their homes beneath the bark and are slowly hollowing the tree from within. The condition is not incurable, but treatment will require patience and continuous care.”

For the treatment, every quarter of the village—leatherworkers, Brahmins, Kayasthas, fisherfolk, all of them—began working together. A daughter of Godavari, from Sonama Majhin's line, taught the old traditional treatment of the soil around the roots: which herbs and which natural oils helped strengthen them. The tree physician, using his modern knowledge, showed the proper way to destroy the insects without harming the tree. And the children, drawing on what they had learned at the Coconut-Leaf School, began keeping a daily record of the tree's health—which branches were improving, and which still showed trouble.

Month by month the tree slowly began to recover. But in the course of that recovery, Budhba himself passed through an experience he had never known before: the experience of weakness, and, within that weakness, the help of every hand in the village.

“Kedar,” Budhba said one evening, with a new humility in his voice, “year after year I have reminded all of you that no name is permanent and no body immortal. Yet I myself sometimes forgot that I too, in my own form, am bound to a body—this tree. Now that my tree has fallen ill, I remember again that witnessing is not immortality either. It is only a long, fragile thread, and it needs continual care.”

Within a year the tree had fully recovered, its leaves turning deep green again. But the experience taught the village something new: if they wished to preserve their priceless inheritance—Budhba, the tree, and the entire tradition of memory bound to them—reverence alone was not enough. Practical, sustained care was necessary too, just as it is for any living thing.

From that day onward, each generation of the village made the tree's physical care part of its duty alongside the ritual: cleaning the roots, checking for insects, protecting it according to the season. A saying arose in the village: "To serve Budhba means not only to save names, but to let the tree live as well."

That day, seeing the sickness of the tree, the old farmers sang a warning song—

Tend the sickness of one leaf, lest it spread through the whole tree;

A village's sickness is the same—it begins with one silence.

The one who heeded early saved the tree;

The one who neglected it lost the whole orchard.

One leaf has blackened—cut it away at once—

Disease concealed will spread; disease brought to light can be stopped.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -74

The Responsibility of Caring for Living Monuments

Chapter -74 touches on a practical but serious subject: the preservation of living cultural monuments—ancient trees, historic buildings, or oral traditions—cannot be achieved through emotional reverence alone. It requires continuous, practical care, best carried out through a combination of modern knowledge, such as tree science, and traditional knowledge, such as herbal treatment. Budhba's acknowledgment of his own fragility—that he too ultimately depends upon a physical foundation—deepens the philosophical reach of the story, suggesting that immortality, however extended, is never entirely free of burden.

CHAPTER -73 (SEVENTY-THREE BEFORE)

Mohan's Melody

*A flute melody mingles with the air, yet the ear keeps it—what touches
the heart in melody is never forgotten.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: MOHAN'S FIRST MELODY

Folk tune: flute lament

A flute melody mingles with the air, yet the ear keeps it;

What touches the heart in melody is never forgotten.

*The daughter was gone, the note remained; from grief a melody was
born;*

Mohan left the drum and lodged the name within the flute.

The first melody sounded beneath the pipal on a new-moon evening;

The village listened, ears filled, eyes wet and hollow.

The air carried the notes away, yet they remained in the heart;

What once entered the heart flowed on from generation to generation.

The melody joined Shilavati's ritual;

Each generation added a new melody and saved a new name.

Mohan was gone, the melody remained, living in a new voice;

The name housed in melody became immortal with the melody.

*This very melody travelled onward and became the beginning of the
story;*

At the dawn of every chapter, it rose again as a folk song.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, a melody born of grief joins the ritual and becomes the seed of the tradition that, much later, will appear as the "chapter-opening folk song.")

After Kedar, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Shilavati. In Shilavati's time, the making of drums and mridangas in the leatherworkers' quarter reached its height, and the most gifted musician in the quarter was Mohan—a seventh-generation descendant of Somar, whose fingers could work such magic on a drum that people came from distant villages to hear him play.

Mohan had a little daughter named Radhika, four years old, and he loved her more than his own life. One winter Radhika fell into a high fever. Shilavati, every healer in the village, and Mohan himself tended her day and night, but the fever did not break. On the fifth day Radhika died in her father's lap, her small hand clasped around Mohan's finger.

For many weeks Mohan did not touch his drum. No sound came from his house—neither weeping nor music. The villagers were worried, but no one found the courage to say anything to him.

One evening, just before the new moon, Mohan picked up his drum and went to the pipal. He sat in silence for a long time. Then, very slowly, he began tapping a soft, sorrowful beat with his fingers—irregular at first, then gradually taking on a rhythm, a melody that was neither entirely a lament nor entirely a lullaby, but something between the two.

Hearing it, Budhba said softly, “Mohan, this... this is beautiful, and sorrowful too. What are you playing?”

Mohan, tears in his eyes but his hands steady, said, “Budhba, I am making a melody for Radhika. I know you keep her name, as you keep every name. But I do not want her name to remain only a word. I want her name to become a sound, so that the moment people hear it, their hearts will know that this name was filled with love.”

Hearing this, Shilavati had a new thought. “Mohan, will you help me join this melody to the ritual? On every new moon, whenever we take a name, could a short melody be played to fit the story of that name?”

Mohan agreed. Over the following year he composed a short melody for every old story of the village—for Hulasa, for Jivanti, for Sukhdev, for Ratna—each melody catching the feeling of that person’s life. Hulasa’s melody was gentle and unfinished, breaking off midway just as her final sentence had broken off. Sukhdev’s was slow and full of waiting, then suddenly fell silent. Ratna’s was warm, motherly, and tender.

And Radhika’s melody, the first one he had composed, began to be played at the opening of the ritual on every new-moon night—a kind of mangalacharana, an invocation before the kabaddi began, reminding everyone that this game, this ritual, was ultimately about love, not competition.

“Budhba,” Mohan asked one day, “is it right that I have turned my grief for Radhika into music in this way? Is that not a disrespect to her memory?”

Budhba answered softly, “Mohan, year after year I have saved names with words. You have saved one with melody. Word and melody are, in the end, different forms of the same work: giving love a form that can cross time. Your grief has not been dishonoured; it has been transformed—and transformation, for memory, is the very opposite of disrespect.”

In time, Mohan’s tradition of melodies became deeply joined to Shilavati’s ritual order, and musicians of every generation kept adding new melodies to it—for new names, new stories, new griefs, new hopes. Far in the future, this tradition would take a literary form that some future writer would call the “chapter-opening folk song”: a short song at

the beginning of each story, planting the feeling of that story in the heart before the story itself begins.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -73

The Birth of Art from Grief — Musicological and Psychological Perspectives

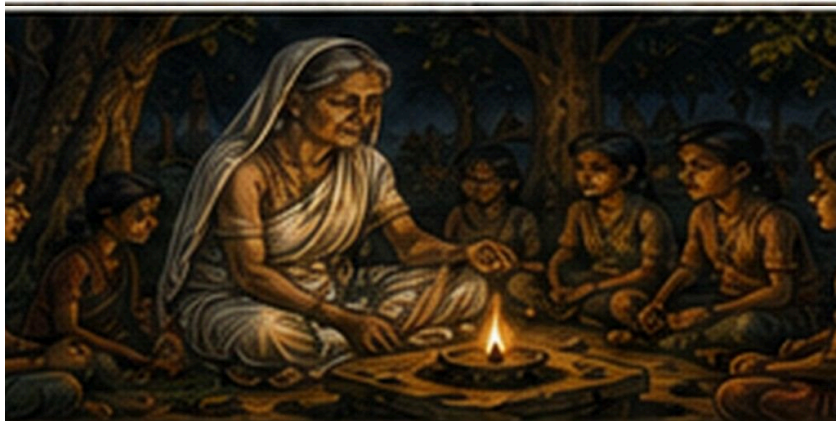
Chapter -73 gives narrative form to a familiar human experience: the transformation of profound personal grief into artistic expression, often regarded as one of the common sources from which folk-musical traditions arise. Mohan's melody tradition is explicitly linked here, through the "chapter-opening folk song," to the next work (Part 1), which presents a related folk song at the beginning of each chapter. This chapter provides a fictional but emotionally coherent origin story for that literary technique.

CHAPTER -72 (SEVENTY-TWO BEFORE)

Witness to the Wedding

*At a wedding, fire is witness, the village is witness, the name is witness
—the marriage the village has seen has its vows upon a leaf.*

— Garh Narikel



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: WITNESS OF THE SEVEN
CIRCLINGS**

Folk tune: wedding sohar

*At the wedding, fire is witness, village witness, name witness;
Whose wedding the village saw, its vows are upon the leaf.
Under the wedding pavilion the fire burned, the village all around;
The pair circled seven times, their names before everyone.
Mother, father, brother, sister, quarter and neighbourhood stood by;
Whoever saw became witness; whoever witnessed became the
foundation.
Seven circlings, seven vows, taken before everyone;
A vow witnessed by the village was never broken.
There was no paper then; the village's eyes were paper;
A vow carried upon the tongue stayed true for generations.
The fire died down, the vow remained; the village kept it in mind;
Whose name the village kept, the witness to that marriage became
immortal.
The pair the village saw was never lost;
Their names went upon the leaf and were sung from generation to
generation.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, for the first time in many years, a marriage takes place in Garh Narikel that recalls the story of Gangesha and Malati—but this time the village responds differently.)

Shilavati's granddaughter, Anuradha, had been friends since childhood with a young man from the village's Brahmin quarter named Gopinath. They had studied together at the Coconut Leaf School, listened together to the stories of Budhba, and played together in the village field. When they grew older, that friendship became love, and the two wished to marry.

Anuradha's mother asked anxiously, "Anuradha, do you understand how difficult this may be? Some of the older people in the village still believe in caste distinctions."

Anuradha smiled. "Mother, I understand. But I also know the story of our ancestor Gangesha Upadhyaya—how he married Malati, and how society forgot that marriage and remembered only his learning. I do not want our story to be forgotten in the same way."

Gopinath's father, a respected pandit of the village, opposed the marriage at first. But when he went to the pipal to speak with Budhba, Budhba asked him a question for which he had no answer. "Panditji, you know Hulasa's story. You know the stories of Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, and Malati. You know that every great tragedy in this village was connected, in one way or another, with the boundary that human beings draw between caste and class. Why, then, do you wish to raise that same boundary again for your son, when your son himself wishes to break it?"

The pandit remained silent for a long time. Then he said slowly, "Budhba, I am afraid of what people will say."

"Panditji," Budhba replied, "I have centuries of experience, and I can tell you this: what people say changes with time. But the names and the stories I hold do not change. The choice is yours—do you wish to add another tragedy to that list of names, or a new hope?"

At last the pandit agreed. Preparations for the wedding began—and this time both quarters of the village, Brahmin and leatherworker, joined in the preparations together, as though the marriage belonged not only to two people but to the whole village.

On the wedding night, everyone in the village gathered beside the pipal. By now it had become an established custom that every major ceremony should take place beside Budhba's Witness Tree. A descendant of Mohan, still playing the drum, had composed a new melody for Anuradha and Gopinath—festive, hopeful, and, for the first time in this tradition, without any shadow of grief.

At the end of the wedding Budhba gave his blessing—though, as always, his hand remained a finger's breadth above their bodies. "Anuradha, Gopinath," he said, "I was a witness to the marriage of Gangesha and Malati, though I was not present there—I learned their story afterward. But today I am witness to the marriage of you both directly, and I give you this promise: your names, and the story of your love, will be held with as much respect as the names of Hulasa and Jivanti, even though yours is not a story of sorrow but a story of joy."

The village elders, who once could not have imagined such a marriage, accepted a new truth that night: centuries of witnessing, centuries of preserving names, and centuries of education and dialogue had, at last, changed something in the village's heart. The change had been slow and invisible, but now, in the smiling faces of Anuradha and Gopinath, it could plainly be seen.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -72

The Long-Term Nature of Social Change

Chapter -72 offers a hopeful but realistic message: social change, especially in the sphere of caste-based discrimination, does not occur all at once, but results from efforts, education, dialogue, and shared experience accumulated generation after generation. The marriage of Anuradha and Gopinath, explicitly linked to the marriage of Gangesha and Malati in Chapter -91, brings a meaningful circle in the narrative to completion. It shows that a relationship suppressed and forgotten by society centuries earlier can, through accumulated social progress, eventually be accepted openly and joyfully.

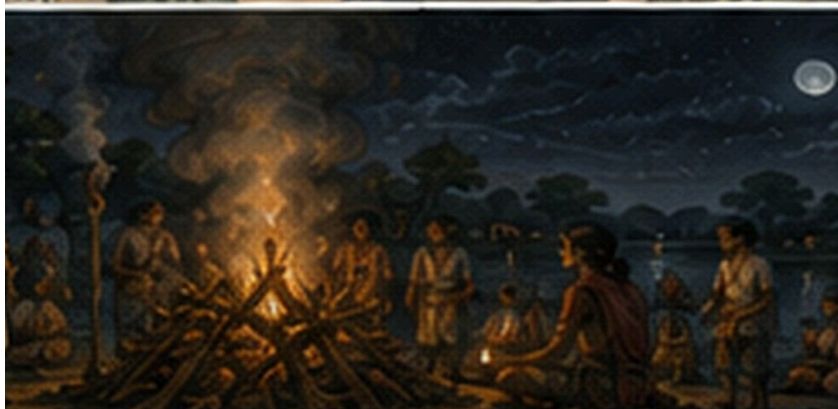
WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -71 (SEVENTY-ONE BEFORE)

Night of the Epidemic

*The epidemic took bodies, but not the song—those who kept vigil
together through the night saved the dawn.*

— Garh Narikel



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE NIGHT THE VILLAGE
KEPT VIGIL**

Folk tune: vigil melody

*The epidemic took bodies, but could not take the song;
Those who kept vigil together through the night saved the dawn.
A lamp burned in every house; each asked after another;
The dead had their names kept; the living were tended.
Medicine was scarce, hope was thin, but no hand let go;
In the darkness of night, the village bound one to another.
The count of death rose, yet no name was forgotten;
With every body went a story, and every story was kept in mind.
The night grew long; the village endured it together;
Fear was beaten by lamps, darkness driven away by wakefulness.
The night grew long, yet the village remained awake;
Those who kept vigil together were not defeated by the epidemic's
darkness.
Dawn came weary, weary, yet all the names survived;
Those who stayed awake for one another made the village whole
again.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, an epidemic engulfs Garh Narikel and the surrounding villages—and for the first time Budhba must hold so many names at once that the old method proves inadequate.)

Ten years after the marriage of Anuradha and Gopinath, an unseen calamity came from the east—first as rumour, then in the accounts of travellers and traders, and finally to the very gates of Garh Narikel. A disease whose exact name no one knew was spreading from village to village: high fever, black swellings on the body, and, within three days, very often death.

The first victims were a family at the northern edge of the village—five lives, all within a single week. Then a second family, then a third. Anuradha's daughter Vimala, now keeper of the ritual, watched the village empty before her eyes.

"Budhba," Vimala said beside the pipal, her eyes full of tears, "seventeen lives have gone in one week. Kabaddi is played every new moon, but so many names—how can we remember every one of them properly? How can we give each name its story, each one its proper melody and proper time, when death is arriving so quickly?"

Budhba, himself distressed, remained silent for a long time. "Vimala, in all my centuries I have never encountered anything like this. The old method—one name at a time, one story at a time, slowly—was not made for an outbreak such as this. We will have to think of a new way."

The village physician, a disciple of the tree-physician who had come from the town, brought a new idea of his own: isolate the sick, boil water before drinking it, and burn the clothes and belongings of the dead. These were new, scientific measures whose workings he could not fully explain, but whose effects could be observed: in households that adopted them, the disease weakened.

Yet death continued despite these measures, and Vimala, together with Budhba, devised a new rite: "Collective Remembrance." Every morning, the surviving villagers gathered beside the pipal, and all the names lost during the night were called together, in one voice—not with the full detail of an individual story, but with complete respect. "So-and-so, son of so-and-so; so-and-so, mother of so-and-so—we hold you, today and always."

Though different from the old method, this new practice proved just as effective, for, as Budhba later said, "The depth of love is not measured by the number of words. A brief, sincere calling, in a collective voice, can be as powerful as a long, solitary story."

The epidemic lasted three months, and when it ended, one-third of the village's population was gone—from every quarter, every age, without distinction. But the village did not break completely, because every dead person's name, however briefly, had been held with respect, and the survivors knew they were not mourning alone.

After the epidemic, Vimala asked Budhba, "Budhba, how many names have we held in these three months? Thousands, perhaps."

Budhba answered slowly, "I have not counted, Vimala, and I never will. If numbers become what matters, we shall become slaves to counting, and the uniqueness of every name will disappear. I know only this: every single name, even if it rose for no more than a moment within a collective calling, holds its own full and unique place in my memory. Numbers are forgotten; names are not."

From that day onward, "Collective Remembrance" became a permanent alternative within the village ritual—individual stories in

ordinary times, a collective calling in times of crisis: two different forms of the same love.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -71

Ways of Remembering Collective Tragedy

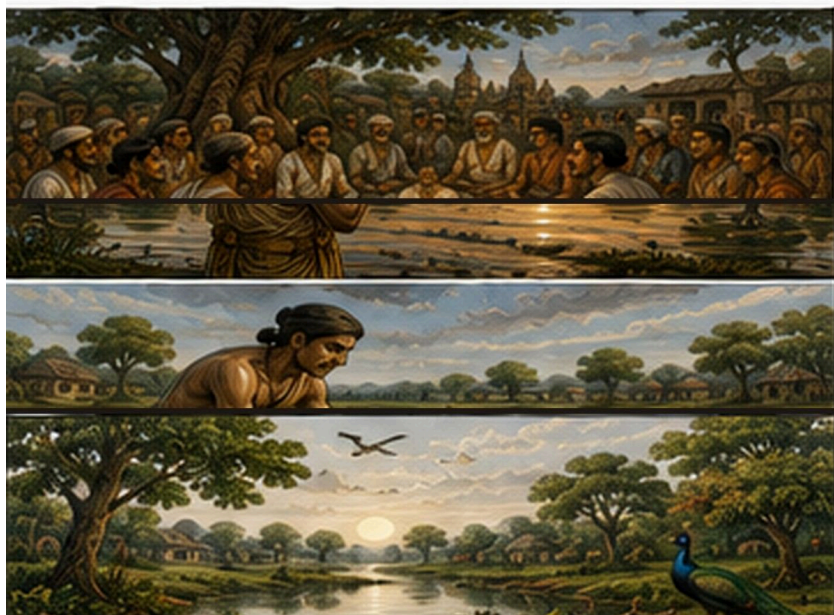
Chapter -71 addresses a practical challenge that every tradition of preserving memory, however devoted, must eventually face: what happens when the number of the dead becomes so great that detailed individual remembrance is impossible. The development of “Collective Remembrance”—a brief communal calling in place of full individual narratives—corresponds to mourning practices that arise in societies after epidemics, wars, or natural disasters. It also shows that, if a tradition is to remain alive, it must be flexible in form while preserving its central feeling and purpose.

CHAPTER -70 (SEVENTY BEFORE)

Planting Channa Grove

A tree that is planted does not give shade in a single day—have patience; the roots take hold first, the leaves come afterward.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SEED OF THE WITNESS TREE

Folk tune: planting song

*A tree that is planted does not give shade in a single day;
Have patience—the roots take hold first, the leaves come afterward.*

*A tiny seed was placed in the earth, given water, given care;
What is a small shoot today will become a great tree tomorrow.
The village joined hands to plant it, every hand carrying a hope;*

What is planted today is faith in tomorrow.

The roots go deep, the leaves rise above;

The Witness Tree planted today will stand for twelve hundred years.

Generation after generation will sit beneath this tree's shade;

Witness to every joy and sorrow, this pipal will remain.

The tiny seed of today will be a great tree tomorrow;

*Generation after generation will sit in the shade of what is planted
today.*

Be patient, give it water, give the roots time;

The tree planted today will preserve names age after age.



(A passage of narrative fiction. After the epidemic, the village begins a new tradition—planting a new tree for every great remembrance. In this chapter is born the grove that, much later, will be known as “Channa Grove.”)

After the epidemic, Vimala and the village elders arrived at a new idea. “Budhba,” Vimala said, “I want every great sorrow, every great hope, to leave a mark not only in our memory but upon the earth as well. I want us to plant a tree for each one—the families lost in the epidemic, Hulasa and Jivanti, Sukhdev and Ratna, Gangesha and Malati, Anuradha and Gopinath—until a whole grove grows around the pipal.”

Budhba was delighted. “Vimala, it is a beautiful idea. But what tree? The pipal is already my home. The coconut is the village’s identity. We need a new tree, one that can become the identity of this new tradition.”

An elderly farmer of the village, who had travelled in distant lands, suggested a tree called “Channa,” one that grew quickly, gave dense shade, and whose leaves kept up a faint rustling even at night, as though the tree itself were telling stories. “This is a fitting tree for memory,” he said, “because its rustling never falls completely silent, just as memory never falls completely silent.”

The first Channa tree was planted just north of the pipal, in the collective memory of all the families who had died in the epidemic. A second was planted for Hulasa, toward the well. A third, for Jivanti, toward the pond. One by one, year after year, every generation of the village added a new tree for a new remembrance—for Sukhdev, for

Ratna, for Gangesha and Malati, for Sonama Majhin, for Yashpati (though his tree was the smallest and stood at the very edge, as the sign of a complicated memory), and later for the joyful marriage of Anuradha and Gopinath.

In time an entire grove grew around the pipal—dense, shaded, and mysteriously alive at night, as though every tree were whispering its own story. The villagers began to call the place “Channa Grove,” and little by little the name became a permanent part of the village geography.

As the grove grew, Budhba himself began to experience something new—as though he were now bound not only to one tree, but to every tree in the grove, to the roots of every one of them. “Vimala,” he said one evening, “I feel as though I have become more extensive than before. Once I was one tree. Now I am an entire grove—in Hulasa’s tree, in Jivanti’s tree, in every tree, I am present in one form or another.”

“Budhba,” Vimala asked with a smile, “does that make you weaker, or stronger?”

Budhba thought for a moment, then said, “Perhaps both, Vimala. A single tree may fall ill from insects; it may be brought down in a storm. But an entire grove can never be destroyed completely all at once—some root, somewhere, will always survive. Perhaps this is my protection for what lies ahead, Vimala. Without knowing it, you have given me a body safer than a single tree.”

From that day onward, Channa Grove became the most sacred and important place in the village. The pipal was its heart, but all around it spread the Channa trees, each carrying its own story, its own name, its own melody composed by Mohan’s descendants—a living library that required no letters to read, only reverence and memory.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -70

The Idea of a Memory Forest — The Origin of “Channa Grove”

Chapter -70 presents the origin story of Channa Grove, the most central geographical and cultural place in *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, Parts 1 and 2. The practice of planting a memorial tree for an important death or event exists in many cultures around the world; this chapter places that universal human impulse within the story’s particular geography. Budhba’s existence expanding from a single tree into an entire grove is also a powerful metaphor: memory remains fragile when it is concentrated in only one place or one person, but becomes more durable when it is extended, distributed, and shared by a community.

CHAPTER -69 (SIXTY-NINE BEFORE)

The Tale of the Elephant and the Crocodile

The elephant in the water, the crocodile in the water—the struggle goes on for years; but the hand of deliverance comes to the one who calls a name.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DELIVERANCE THROUGH THE CALLING OF A NAME

Folk tune: Gaja-Moksha melody

The elephant in the water, the crocodile in the water—the struggle went on for years;

But deliverance came to the one who called a name.

Gajaraj was mighty, immeasurable strength in his trunk;

But the crocodile gripped him deep, the water deep, the darkness deep.

Years passed, strength tired, defeat drew near;

Then the elephant remembered not his strength, but a name.

Strength failed; the weary elephant then called one name;

The name held in memory became the very name of his deliverance.

Whoever clung only to his own strength sank into the water;

Whoever called the name with folded hands found the shore.

The water is deep, but the name is deeper—there lies its strength;

Whoever called the name one final time was saved from drowning.

Generation after generation the village told this tale of elephant and crocodile;

Whoever kept hold of the name escaped every crocodile.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, an elephant of the village is caught in a crocodile's grip in Jori Pokhari, and the villagers save him by bringing the ancient tale of Gajendra-Moksha together with their own local tradition. From here onward, the term "Gaja-Graha" will recur repeatedly in the later part of the story.)

After Vimala, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son, Suryanath. In Suryanath's time, the village temple kept an elephant named Gajaraj for festivals and processions. One summer afternoon, Gajaraj slipped away from his mahout and entered the deeper part of Jori Pokhari to drink.

Suddenly the water erupted. Gajaraj screamed and raised his trunk into the air. One of his legs, beneath the water, had been seized by something—a huge crocodile that had not touched any village animal for a very long time, because of the offering tradition begun by Sonama Majhin, but which, for some unknown reason, had now clamped its jaws around the elephant's leg.

A crowd gathered, but no one had the courage to act. Terrified, the mahout cried, "Gajaraj will die! Someone help me!"

Among the crowd was an elderly pandit, learned in the Puranic tales. He shouted, “This is like the story of Gajendra-Moksha! The Purana tells of an elephant-king named Gajendra who was once seized in just this way by a crocodile. He struggled for thousands of years but could not free himself by his own strength. At last, when Gajendra gave up all pride and called only upon God, God himself came and saved him. We too must pray!”

Hearing this, Suryanath ran to the pipal. “Budhba! Gajaraj is dying! What must we do?”

Budhba, present in every drop of the water, had already sensed the danger. “Suryanath, the pandit is right—but prayer alone is not enough, just as reason alone is not enough. We need both: collective prayer for Gajaraj, and practical help at the same time.”

Suryanath summoned everyone in the village and set two efforts in motion at once. The pandit and the village men and women stood at the pond’s edge and began to pray aloud—the ancient verses of Gajendra, together with the kabaddi ritual’s own special invocation: “Original Crocodile! We do not deny you! But Gajaraj is ours, just as your own waters are yours. Give us his life, and tonight we shall make you a special offering.”

At the same time, the strongest young men of the village used ropes and bamboo poles to work Gajaraj’s trapped leg slowly free, without hurting him further and without directly challenging the crocodile—only applying pressure patiently, from an angle.

After a long struggle, the crocodile suddenly loosened its grip and vanished into the deep water, as though it too had understood that this battle was not meant for it. Gajaraj, weak but alive, reached the bank, and a roar of joy rose from the crowd.

That night, as promised, the villagers made a special offering to the Original Crocodile. Then Budhba addressed the village: “Today you saw that an ancient tale and our local tradition are different forms of the same truth. When any creature—elephant or human—is caught in the grip of a force beyond its own strength, it needs both prayer and effort; neither is enough alone. Gajaraj’s story will now become part of our memory—the Tale of the Elephant and the Crocodile, reminding us always that release from a grip, whether the grip is upon the body in water or upon the mind, never comes through one thing alone.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -69

The Confluence of the Gajendra-Moksha Tale and Local Folk Tradition

Chapter -69 joins the celebrated Gajendra-Moksha story of the Bhagavata Purana with the local mythic-folk tradition of the “Original Crocodile,” showing how a great classical narrative and a local oral tradition can express the same deep human truth in different languages. The term “Gaja-Graha,” which readers will encounter metaphorically in Part I as the “inner Gaja-Graha,” a modern digital and psychological entanglement, receives its literal narrative origin here—a lasting symbol of the combined necessity of strength and devotion, reason and surrender.

CHAPTER -68 (SIXTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

The First Court Date

Date after date, yet justice lives upon the leaf—the court asks for the body; the village keeps the name.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: JUSTICE UPON THE LEAF

Folk tune: courthouse song

*Date after date, yet justice lives upon the leaf;
The court asks for the body, but the village keeps the name.*

*The sahib's court is far away, choked with paper;
Every new date is another burden; the poor man's breath grows tight.
But beneath the village pipal, justice sits face to face;
Whoever saw spoke; whoever spoke stood forth as witness.*

*The paper changed and seals were struck, but truth remained the
same;*

*What the village kept in mind no hearing date could erase.
The court wrote and read; the village held it in the throat;
Justice that entered the tongue survived through generations.*

*The court is far away; beside the pipal the village keeps its own justice;
The testimony of a name the village holds can never lose.
Dates come and go; the name remains upon the leaf;
No seal can shake a truth the village itself has known.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter a new formal court enters the village's system of justice—and with it is sown the seed of a new, slow hunger that much later will be known as the "Ghost of the Court.")

After Suryanath, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Kamalini. In Kamalini's time, under the state's new administrative order, a formal court was established for Garh Narikel and the surrounding villages—a masonry building with an appointed judge and written rules and laws, replacing Acharya Keshav's old informal council of justice.

At first the villagers welcomed the new arrangement, because written law, in principle, granted equal rights to every person, whatever their caste. But slowly a new problem emerged. Filing a case in the new court was easy; receiving a decision was painfully slow. A simple land dispute that the old hall of debate might have heard in a single day now dragged on for years—the first date, then the second, then the third, each adjourned for one technical reason or another.

Kamalini's neighbour, a poor farmer named Bhola, became trapped in a small land dispute. A neighbour's cattle had ruined his field, and Bhola went to court seeking compensation. Three years passed, yet the case was still being pushed to "the next date." Each time Bhola travelled to court he lost a day's labour and returned home without a decision.

"Budhba," Kamalini said anxiously beside the pipal, "this new court is good because it regards everyone as equal. But I fear it is creating a new kind of injustice—the injustice of dates. People like Bhola are losing the precious time of their lives while waiting and waiting for justice."

Budhba grew grave. "Kamalini, I remember that many years ago Sukhdev Mahato died because of the order of the water-clock: his turn never came. This new court looks different from that water-clock, yet I fear the root of the problem is the same. Time, instead of serving justice, can sometimes become an obstacle to justice."

One day Bhola sat on the court veranda waiting for his next hearing, exhausted and dispirited. An elderly lawyer beside him, a man who had worked in the court for many years, gave a faint laugh. "Bhola, you are new here. You do not yet understand. This court has a hunger we call 'the date.' It is made of paper, but it eats human time, human patience, and sometimes an entire human life."

Bhola shuddered. He went to the pipal and repeated the lawyer's words to Budhba. Budhba remained silent for a long while. "Bhola," he said at last, "those words frighten me. It seems to me that this new system, for all its good intentions, is giving birth to a new kind of ghost—a ghost made not by the injustice of any one person, but by the slowness of the whole system. It will not be a single human being. It will be the spirit of the hearing date itself, the spirit of delay."

Hearing this, Kamalini made a new resolve. "Budhba, I cannot change the court system; it is the law of the state. But I can do this much: every person of the village who becomes trapped in court shall receive

help, advice, and companionship while waiting, so that no one has to carry that burden alone.”

Bhola’s case was finally decided after five years—in his favour. By then, however, his field had been ruined for years and his children had grown up hungry. Watching this, Budhba said sadly, “I have kept Bhola’s name, and I have kept his five years of waiting too. Perhaps this also is my work: to be not only a witness to death, but a witness to waiting.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -68

The Problem of Delay in the Justice System

Chapter -68 places an acutely relevant modern social problem within a historical setting: procedural delay in the justice system, the reality behind the principle “justice delayed is justice denied.” The chapter clearly plants the narrative seed of the “Ghost of the Court” in Parts 1 and 2—the creature that feeds on “date after date” and is said to be more dangerous than a crocodile. It shows that institutional injustice need not arise from individual malice; it can also emerge automatically from structural weakness in a system, despite good intentions.

CHAPTER -67 (SIXTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

The Call of Distant Lands

Distant lands give money and carry away the name—but one who keeps the village in mind is not lost even abroad.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LETTER FROM ABROAD

Folk tune: Bidesiya

*Distant lands give money, yet carry away the name;
One who keeps the village in mind is not lost even abroad.*

*The son left at dawn; his mother stood in the doorway,
A bundle of clothes tied up, and with it the village as his ground.
In a far country he earned his wage, sweating day and night;
But when evening fell, his thoughts returned to the village.*

*The body went to a distant land; the name remained in the courtyard;
Whoever sent his name home in a letter had not forgotten the house.
Money came by money order, with two lines bearing a name;*

Whoever sent the name with it preserved both home and village.

Money comes and goes, but the name stays firm;

One who knows his village is no stranger even across seven seas.

Whoever earned money and forgot the village returned a stranger;

*Whoever kept the name with him found the house still watching the
road.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, for the first time, a labour recruiter arrives at the village gate selling dreams of work in distant lands—and Budhba faces a new question: how can he witness a name that has left the village and travelled far away?)

After Kamalini, responsibility for the ritual passed to her daughter Janaki. In Janaki's time, a new kind of man appeared for the first time at the village gate—a sweet tongue, bright clothes, and a bundle of papers in his hand. "There is work in a distant country!" he called. "A three-year contract, good wages, and a return home when the work is done! Anyone who wants freedom from the village's poverty should come and speak with me."

Many poor families with little land or mounting debt were drawn to the offer. Bhola's grandson, Ramsevak, seeing his family's hardship, put his thumbprint on the recruiter's paper without being able to read—or have fully read to him—what it actually said.

On the night before Ramsevak left, his mother went to the pipal. "Budhba, my son is going to a distant country. I am afraid. If something happens to him there, thousands of kos away from us, who will preserve his name? Your power is here, beside this grove and pond and village. How will you reach him there?"

Budhba fell into deep thought. "I do not know, Mother. My power is bound to this grove, this pond, this village's memory. I do not know how far I can see, how far my witnessing can reach."

Janaki found an answer. "Budhba, if your power cannot reach so far, then we shall make a custom that fills the gap. For every person who leaves the village for distant lands, we shall place a small token—a pebble

or a thread—among the pipal roots. On every new-moon night we shall call that person's name as well, whether living or dead, whether we know what has happened to them or not. At least then the name will remain safe here in the village's memory, wherever the body may be."

So the custom called "The Call of Distant Lands" was established. At the end of every new-moon kabaddi, the name of each villager who had gone abroad was called one by one, and the person's token—a pebble or thread—was touched to the pipal roots. If news came that someone had died in a distant land, the token was honoured specially. If no news came for years, it remained there waiting, belonging wholly neither to the living nor to the dead.

Ramsevak, sadly, never returned. No news of him ever arrived—not a letter, not a message, only silence. Year after year, on every new-moon night, his mother came to the pipal, touched his token, listened to his name being called, and went home.

"Budhba," she asked one day, "is my son alive, or dead?"

Budhba answered honestly, "Mother, I do not know. I will not lie to you. But I promise you this: whether he is living or dead, whether he ever returns or not, I will keep his name exactly as I keep every other name of this village. Distance cannot erase a name, Mother. It can only lengthen uncertainty."

With the birth of this custom, Garh Narikel's tradition of memory began for the first time to think beyond its geographical boundaries. It accepted that in the future the village's children would travel to distant countries, and that memory, if it wished to survive, would have to imagine itself beyond the limits of its own grove.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -67

Indentured Labour and the Migrant Worker's Crisis of Memory

Chapter -67 offers an early evocation of the colonial "girmitiya" system of indentured labour, under which thousands of workers from Bihar and elsewhere in India—often exploited through illiteracy and poverty—were taken to distant colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean, and many never returned. The development of "The Call of Distant Lands" asks how memory and witness can operate across geographical distance, a question that strongly echoes the modern migrant-labour crisis later encountered in Parts 1 and 2 through Hong Kong and digital fraud.

The Women's Night Assembly

Where women's voices gather, darkness grows thin—the night assembly breaks darkness even without a lamp.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: VOICES THAT BREAK THE DARK

Folk tune: night-assembly song

*Where women's voices gather, darkness grows thin;
Even without a lamp, the night assembly breaks the dark.*

*Evening fell, the day's work ended, the women gathered;
In one corner of the courtyard, hidden thoughts opened.*

*One spoke her sorrow; another listened in silence;
Shared pain grew lighter, and the fever of the heart subsided.*

*One woman spoke and ten listened; sorrow became shared;
The one who had trembled alone stood fearless among them all.
What had been hidden inside the house rose in the assembly;
Voice joined voice, and darkness moved backward.*

*Voice joined voice, and darkness retreated;
No ghost can frighten women who stand together.
There may have been no lamp, but the light of voices burned;
Those who spoke together watched their fear run away.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter the informal women's platform inherited from Phulesari takes formal shape for the first time as "The Women's Night Assembly," a name that will reappear much later in Part I.)

After Janaki, responsibility for the ritual passed to her daughter Sulochana. In Sulochana's time, the new court, despite all its good intentions, revealed a clear deficiency: women's cases—especially domestic disputes, dowry, inheritance, and abuse by husbands—were often either left unheard or judged from the perspective of male judges far removed from women's lived experience.

One such case arose. A village woman named Padma, whose husband had beaten her for years, went to court seeking justice. The judge heard her and said, "This is a domestic matter. A husband and wife should settle such things outside the court." Padma returned home defeated.

Sulochana was furious when she heard. She went to the pipal. “Budhba, the court dismissed Padma’s suffering as a ‘domestic matter.’ But this is not a domestic matter; it is injustice. We must do something.”

Budhba said, “Sulochana, do you remember Ratna, Gauri, Phulesari—all those women who sat on the platform after dusk, sharing knowledge, justice, and strategy because the official assembly would not hear them? That tradition never ended, Sulochana. It merely remained informal. Perhaps the time has come to give it a formal shape.”

With Phulesari’s descendants and the other women of the village, Sulochana founded a new institution: “The Women’s Night Assembly.” Parallel to the official court, it heard women’s cases—domestic violence, dowry harassment, injustice in inheritance. Its decisions had no formal legal force, yet the village’s social pressure was so powerful that men were usually compelled to accept them.

In Padma’s case the Night Assembly summoned her husband and his family and held a hearing. One by one, the women of the village gave testimony: they had seen Padma’s bruises; they had heard her weeping. The husband’s family denied everything at first, but when the entire body of village women spoke with one voice, they had to yield. The Night Assembly ruled that the husband must change his behaviour; if he beat Padma again, she would be free to return to her mother’s home, and the village would support her and her children.

Budhba heard the decision with satisfaction. “Sulochana, today you completed the work that Ratna, Gauri, and Phulesari had the courage to begin long ago but that no one had yet dared to formalise. Women’s knowledge and women’s justice have stepped out of the darkness of the platform and into the village light, standing there under their own name.”

In time the Night Assembly became a permanent part of village life, moving alongside the official court and filling its gaps. Much later, in the modern age, it would change its form and take a new name, yet remain a durable voice for the women of Garh Narikel.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -66

The Historical Role of Parallel Institutions of Women’s Justice

Chapter -66 gives narrative form to an important social and institutional development: when a formal, largely male-dominated justice system cannot adequately address women’s particular experiences and needs, women often develop parallel systems of justice—informal, yet socially powerful. The formalisation of “The Women’s Night Assembly” is presented as the strong, positive culmination of the

women's-platform tradition established in Chapter -91, "The Seed of the Witch": what history once named in the language of fear as "witch" can ultimately become an acknowledged institution of justice.

CHAPTER -65 (SIXTY-FIVE BEFORE)

Procession of the False Ghost

*A false ghost frightens only one who has forgotten his name—one
whose name is firm laughs at the ghostly procession.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CRY OF “WHO ARE YOU?”

Folk tune: ghost-banishing song

*A false ghost frightens only one who has forgotten his name;
One whose name is firm laughs at the ghostly procession.*

*Deep night, the village asleep—the procession came out;
Sheets and drums made a racket; a market of fear was set up.*

*Someone wished to sell fear, someone wished to rule;
Wrapped in the shawl of darkness, they tried to conquer the village.*

*Wrapped in sheets and beating drums, someone came to sell fear;
But before the one who asked “Who are you?” the ghost fled.*

*One courageous voice rose, holding a lamp;
It asked the name, stripped away the sheet, and the ghost stood
nameless.*

*A procession of darkness is weak before light;
One who knows how to ask a name need fear no false ghost.
The one who came to sell fear ran away afraid;
The village learned to question, and the procession stopped.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, for the first time, someone misuses Budhba's name—and the village must answer a new question: how can one distinguish a true witness from a false claim?)

After Sulochana, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Harinandan. By Harinandan's time, the fame of “The Women's Night Assembly” and “Budhba's ritual” had spread through neighbouring villages—and wherever fame spreads, imitation sometimes follows.

A travelling man named Kalicharan began moving from village to village proclaiming himself “the true spirit of Budhba.” At night he staged processions with a few hired “ghosts”—assistants wrapped in cloth and carrying lights—and extorted money from frightened villagers, saying that “Budhba himself” demanded a “special worship” in order to preserve their names.

News reached Garh Narikel when a family from a neighbouring village, after giving Kalicharan all its savings, realised it had been cheated and came to Garh Narikel to meet the real Budhba.

“Budhba,” Harinandan said angrily beside the pipal, “a man is cheating people in your name! He stages false processions, displays false ghosts, and takes money from poor families. What should we do?”

Budhba remained silent for a long time. “Harinandan, this saddens me, but it teaches me something too. Whatever is true and valuable eventually becomes valuable enough for some opportunist to imitate. This is not the failure of our tradition; it is a sorrowful by-product of its success.”

“But how do we stop it?” Harinandan asked.

Budhba thought, then said, “Harinandan, there is one clear distinction between a true witness and a false claim, and it is our work to teach the village. A true witness never asks for money. A true witness never sells fear for profit. A true witness asks only for a name, and in return gives love and memory—nothing else. Whoever uses the fear of ghosts to demand money, however impressive the performance, does not walk my path.”

Harinandan carried this teaching through the neighbouring villages: “The true tradition never asks for money; it asks only for name and memory. Anyone who demands money is a fraud.” This simple test proved enough to protect villagers from opportunists like Kalicharan. Seeing his business collapse, Kalicharan slipped away one night with his “hired ghosts.”

The incident became known in village memory as “The Procession of the False Ghost,” a cautionary tale told to every new generation: “Whoever claims to be a witness but asks for money is not a witness; he is a thief.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -65

Spiritual Exploitation and the Test of Authenticity

Chapter -65 addresses a universal social problem: when a true and respected spiritual or cultural tradition becomes famous, opportunists

arise who imitate it in order to exploit the innocent financially. Budhba's simple test—"a true witness never asks for money"—offers a practical, universally applicable defence against spiritual exploitation. The title "Procession of the False Ghost" appears directly in Part 1; here it receives its narrative origin.

CHAPTER -64 (SIXTY-FOUR BEFORE)

Sukhdev's Revenge

Revenge is fire—it burns your own hand first; the one who chose forgiveness saved the village.

— Garh Narikel



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE ROAD OF
FORGIVENESS**

Folk tune: plaintive peace melody

*Revenge is fire; it burns your own hand first;
The one who chose forgiveness saved the village.*

*Sukhdev's heart burned; the injustice ran deep;
His hand trembled for fire, his mind grew restless.
The village watched his face—what road would he take?
If he took revenge the village would burn; if he forgave, it would live.*

*Sukhdev burned within, but he did not light the fire;
The man who bore the wound saved the village from burning.
He understood: the fire of revenge first burns one's own hand,
Then the house, then the quarter, then the entire village.*

*Revenge takes a moment; forgiveness endures an age;
The village remembered the name of the one who did not light the fire.
The man who swallowed the wound in silence became the village's
guardian;
Sukhdev's forgiveness was told from generation to generation.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, the land of the leatherworkers' quarter is threatened once again, just as it was in Sukhdev Mahato's time. But this time the village has new weapons in its hands.)

After Harinandan, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Champavati. In Champavati's time, under a new state revenue system, all land was surveyed again. During this survey a new landlord named Raghubir Singh—unrelated to Ugrasen Thakur of Sukhdev Mahato's

time, though coincidentally similar in temperament—laid claim to the land of the leatherworkers' quarter, arguing that the old records were unclear and that the land had originally belonged to his ancestors.

Champavati did not panic as Bhola's family had many generations earlier. She went to the pipal. "Budhba, history is circling back. But this time I am not afraid, because we possess weapons Sukhdev did not have."

First Champavati went to the village archive, where a copy of Yadavanand Jha's "shadow register"—the old private notebook preserved by his descendants from generation to generation—was kept. It recorded the land rights of the leatherworkers' quarter clearly, with dates and witnesses, from the time of Somar and Ratna.

She also summoned young lawyers educated at the Coconut-Leaf School and prepared the village's case in court. The Women's Night Assembly used its social influence to unite the entire village in public support against Raghubir Singh's claim. Haripati's old book, preserved through generations of disciples, was produced as evidence—a trustworthy testimony to the village's history.

Raghubir Singh could produce no solid evidence for his claim and lost in court. Looking at Champavati's documents, the judge remarked, "I have rarely seen records so detailed and consistent across so many years. They are evidence of this village's own historical consciousness."

When Budhba heard the judgment he said with deep satisfaction, "Champavati, today I have seen Sukhdev's revenge—but not as retaliation, as justice. Sukhdev, whose case never reached its turn in court, has seen the land of his descendants preserved through the memory of his name, the registers of his ancestors, the education of his village, and the unity of its women. This was not the work of one miracle, Champavati. It was the fruit of generations of accumulated effort—Yadavanand's notebook, Haripati's book, Mandakini's school, Sulochana's Night Assembly—all bearing fruit together in this moment."

Champavati's eyes filled with tears. "Budhba, then none of our ancestors' struggles were wasted?"

"No, Champavati," Budhba said softly. "No struggle is wasted if its memory remains alive. That is why I have kept witness all these years: to see how small efforts, gathered year after year, eventually become a strength that no single oppressor can shake."

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -64

The Power of Accumulated Community Capacity

Chapter -64 brings one strand of the narrative cycle to a meaningful completion. The theme of land injustice that began with Sukhdev Mahato's tragedy in Chapter -92 now produces the opposite outcome, because centuries of accumulated community capacity—literacy, documentation, legal knowledge, and women's solidarity—have changed what is possible. The chapter argues that long-term social investment in education, records, and organisation provides a more durable and dependable defence of justice than individual heroism.

CHAPTER -63 (SIXTY-THREE BEFORE)

The First Page from the Press

The first printed page—a name is harder to erase now; what is printed, the whole village will read.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FIRST PRINTED NAME

Folk tune: printing-press mangal

The first printed page—now a name is harder to erase;

What is printed, the whole village will read.

*Iron letters were set in rows, black ink laid upon them;
The machine turned by hand, and the first strange line was printed.*

*The name that until then had lived only in the throat
Now descended upon the page and entered a thousand hands.*

*The name that reached paper will survive from generation to
generation;
What had been written on a leaf will now pass into a thousand hands.*

*One page became ten, ten spread into hundreds;
The village that sat in one place reached across the country.*

*The ink has set; the letters have gone throughout the village;
Once a thing is printed, even a flood cannot wash it away.*

*Fire cannot burn it all, water cannot carry it all away;
A name once printed remains from age to age.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, the first printing press opens in a town near the village—and, many generations later, a descendant of Haripati tries to fulfil an unfinished ancestral dream through a new technology.)

After Champavati, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Devakinandan. In Devakinandan's time, a printing press opened for the first time in the town a few kos from the village, and books began to be printed there in both Maithili and Hindi. News of it spread rapidly through the whole region. Villagers who had known only palm-leaf

manuscripts or papers copied by hand were eager to see this new wonder—a machine that could print hundreds of identical pages in a single day.

Haripati Gangadhar, a seventh-generation descendant of Haripati Kavi (named in honour of his ancestor), was now a young writer and publisher who lived and worked in the town. He had inherited the old secret palm-leaf book of his ancestor—the story of Budhba, the stories of Hulasa, Jivanti and Sukhdev, the story of Gangesha and Malati—all of it preserved from generation to generation through the lineage of disciples.

When Gangadhar saw the wonder of the press, he ran to Garh Narikel. “Devakinandan!” he cried excitedly. “I possess our ancestor’s book—the complete story of Budhba! Now we can print it! We can make hundreds of copies! The story will never be lost again, no matter how many centuries pass!”

Hearing this, Devakinandan went to the pipal. “Budhba! A new machine has arrived that can print your story in thousands of copies! Haripati Gangadhar wants to do it! What should I tell him?”

Budhba remained silent for a long time—the silence that comes before a great decision. “Devakinandan, I remember that an ancestor of Haripati Kavi once asked whether this story should be written, and I said that if it were written it should be written not in the ornamented language of a royal court but in the ordinary language of the village. Today the question is different: should this story be printed in thousands of copies?”

“What do you think, Budhba?” Devakinandan asked.

“I am afraid,” Budhba said slowly, “that if the story is printed today, it is still incomplete. Subhagi, Yashpati, Padma, Ramsevak—so many names are still being added. If we print it now, the story will close into a fixed form while it is still alive, still growing. Perhaps... perhaps the time to print it has not yet come. Perhaps it will continue to grow for many more years and gather many more names, until—far in the future—it truly comes near completion.”

At first Gangadhar was disappointed, but then he understood. “Budhba is right. We should not hurry. But I make one promise: I, and my descendants, will preserve this book, and when the time comes—when the story is truly complete—some descendant of mine will print it for the whole world.”

Meanwhile, in his town press, Gangadhar printed several other small village books—the curriculum of the Coconut-Leaf School, the rules of the Women’s Night Assembly, a collection of the village’s agricultural knowledge—joining the village’s traditional knowledge with modern learning. But Budhba’s complete story, in its full form, remained still unwritten, still oral, still alive.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -63

The Arrival of Printing Technology and the Future of Oral Tradition

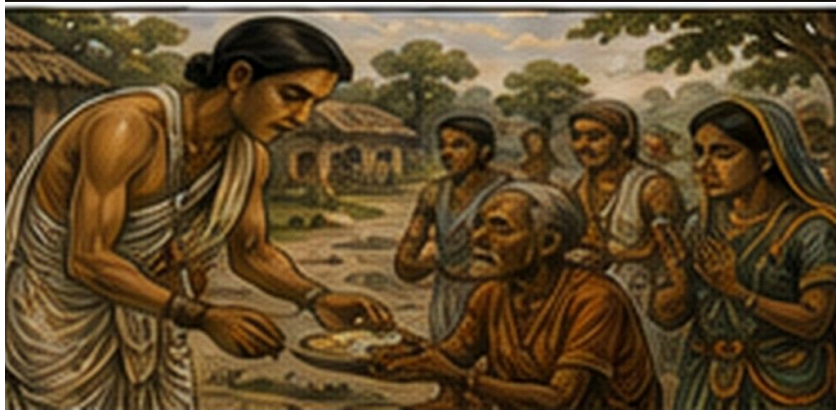
Chapter -63 marks an important technological transition: the arrival of printing, which brought a revolutionary change in the history of Indian-language literature. Budhba's decision not to print the story yet, but to let it remain living and developing, is an interesting example of the narrative cycle's own self-awareness: the story itself knows that it is not yet complete. The decision becomes, long in advance, an echo of the eventual real publication of *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*.

CHAPTER -62 (SIXTY-TWO BEFORE)

Waiting for Relief

Eyes grow tired waiting for relief, yet the village stands—when people wait together, even waiting grows lighter.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: WAITING ON THE ROAD

Folk tune: famine song

Waiting for relief, our eyes have grown tired;

Yet the village stands, each holding another's hand.

The grain has dried, the storehouse is empty, the sky merciless;

Every eye is fixed on the road, relief a distant hope.

But the village shared what remained, grain by handfuls;

Even hungry bellies smiled when everyone shared with one mind.

Little grain, thin hope, yet the name did not break;

Those who waited together found even waiting lighter.

They asked after one another, shared and endured sorrow;

In the darkness of famine the village remained one.

Hunger comes and goes; the village remains in its place;

Those who sat together and shared grief did not lose even to famine.

Whether relief comes or not, the village itself stands;

Those who endured famine together did not lose their foundation.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, under British rule, a terrible famine strikes—and the village must learn the difference between sitting in expectation of government help and organising itself.)

After Devakinandan, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Savitridevi (named in honour of the earlier Savitri). By Savitridevi's time British rule had been established across the region. One year the rains failed completely: the fields cracked, the granaries emptied, and hunger stood at the doors of the village.

When government officials heard of the famine, they announced relief programmes—grain-distribution centres, food-for-work schemes, and medical assistance. The plans looked excellent on paper. In practice, the nearest relief centre was twenty kos from the village, and registration was so complicated that many starving families grew weak before they could even be enrolled.

Seeing this, Savitridevi went to the pipal. “Budhba, the government says help is coming, but that help is still twenty kos away, and our children are hungry today. What should we do?”

Budhba replied, “Savitridevi, do you remember Sukhdev Mahato, who died while waiting for his turn under the water-clock? Do you remember Bhola, who lost precious years waiting for court dates? Waiting can sometimes become a kind of death in itself. I think that while you wait for government help, you must also organise yourselves.”

Drawing on the experienced leadership of the Women’s Night Assembly, Savitridevi made an emergency plan for the village. Every family contributed, according to its capacity, to a common grain store. Young people educated at the Coconut-Leaf School kept an account of the grain needs of every household and ensured equal distribution. Around Channa Grove, the villagers set up communal kitchens where, every day, however little grain there might be, everyone received something.

Descendants of Sonama Majhin used their old knowledge of water to teach new methods of fishing in those parts of the Kamala-Balan where some water still remained. Ratna’s descendants used their knowledge of herbs to identify wild edible roots and tubers that the village children could eat to survive hunger.

When, at last, three months later, the government relief party reached the village, it was astonished: not one life in the village had been lost to the famine, while many neighbouring villages that had continued waiting for government aid had already suffered heavily.

Seeing the village’s arrangements, the relief officer asked, “How did you manage this without our help?”

Savitridevi replied, “Sahib, for centuries we have been taught that waiting without effort is not justice; it is only delay. We did not refuse your help. We simply refused to believe that without it we were helpless.”

Hearing this, Budhba said proudly, “Savitridevi, today you have proved the lesson I have tried to teach for hundreds of years: to bear witness and to wait are two different things. I preserve names so that you may live in memory; but to live in life, you yourselves must act, not merely wait.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -62

Colonial Famine Policy and Community Self-Reliance

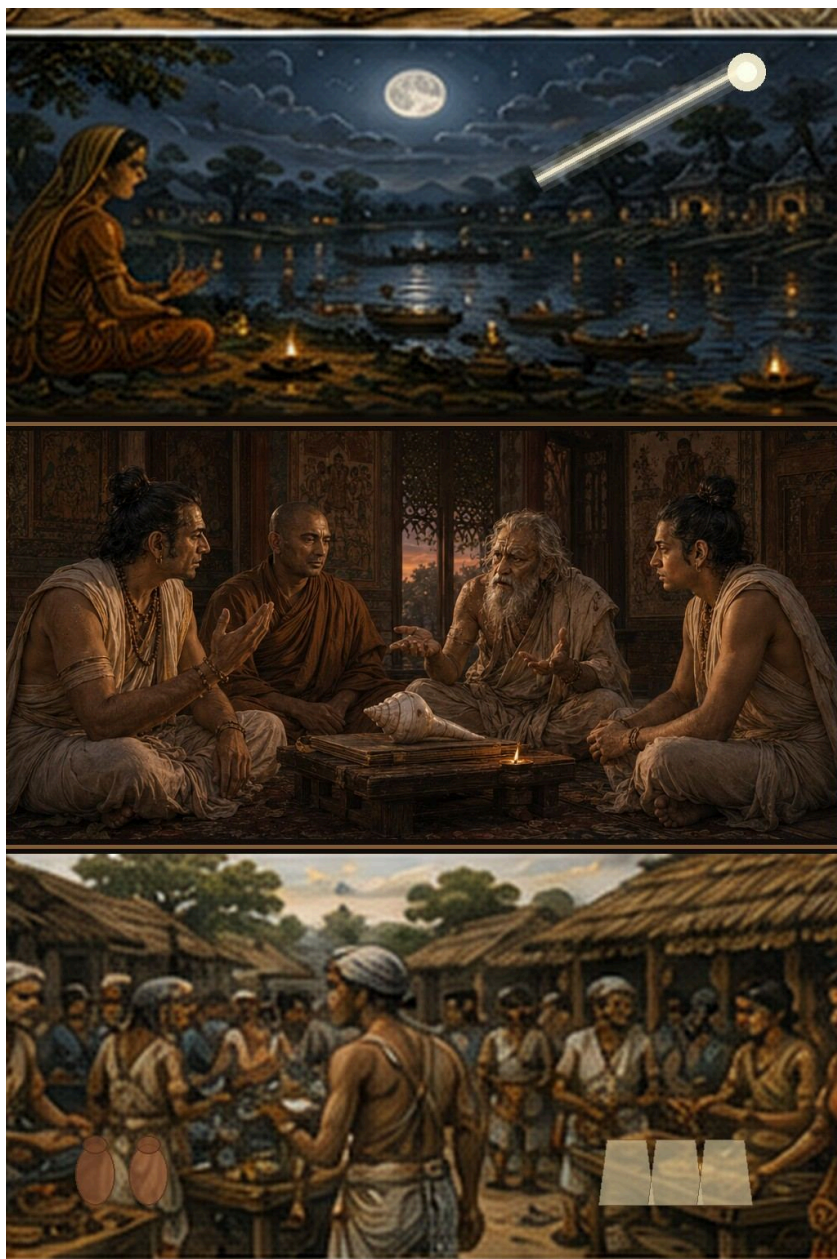
Chapter -62 touches the historical complexity of famine management in colonial India, where government relief policy, however orderly it appeared on paper, often proved inadequate in practice because of bureaucratic delay and geographical distance. The chapter emphasises the power of community self-reliance and mutual aid, showing how social capital accumulated over centuries—organisational capacity, shared resources, and diverse traditions of knowledge—can keep a community alive even in the absence of external assistance.

CHAPTER -61 (SIXTY-ONE BEFORE)

The Comet in the Sky

Comets come and go; the village remains—what shines above does not change the names below.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: STAR AND EARTH

Folk tune: sky song

The comet comes and goes, yet the village remains;

What shines above does not change the names below.

*A tail spread across the sky; the village looked up and shuddered;
The elders said calamity was coming, and fear filled every mind.*

*One said the end would come; another said famine;
But the earth stayed silent, in its own place, in its own time.*

*The sky may frighten, the elders may frighten, but the earth stands
firm;*

*What flashes above is momentary; the names below endure.
The star came, the star went; the village remained where it was;
Whoever stayed joined to the roots neither feared nor lost the way.*

*Stars break and join; the village goes on living;
Whoever knows the roots does not fear the glitter of the sky.
The brilliance above changed; the names below remained the same;
Whoever held fast to the earth did not let the mind be shaken.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, an extraordinary comet appears in the sky—and the frightened villagers ask Budhba what calamity it foretells.)

After Savitridevi, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Rudranath. One autumn night an extraordinary sight appeared in the sky: a star with a long, shining tail that moved slowly, night after night, from one corner of the heavens toward the other. The villagers, who had never seen such a thing, were frightened.

“This is inauspicious!” cried an old village astrologer. “The ancient texts say a comet foretells the death of a king, war, famine, or epidemic! We must fear that some great calamity is near!”

Rudranath, himself anxious, went to the pipal. “Budhba, your sight reaches beyond time. Can you see what this comet signifies?”

Budhba looked at the sky for a long time and said slowly, “Rudranath, my sight, as you know, is sometimes clear and sometimes lost in mist. Tonight I feel an indistinct fear, as though a great and difficult time is drawing near. But I will also tell you this: the star itself brings no calamity. It moves through the sky according to its own law, unaware of human fate. Whatever calamity comes will come not from the star but from causes upon the earth itself—from water, fire, or disease. The star is only a sign that we should be alert, not a culprit.”

Hearing this, Rudranath instructed every quarter of the village to remain alert: secure the grain stores, keep water sources clean, and report immediately any sign of illness. As it later became clear, this vigilance was not wasted effort.

The comet remained in the sky for three weeks and then slowly disappeared. But as it vanished, the air of the village grew strangely heavy, as though an invisible cloud, an invisible fire, and invisible water were hovering together around Garh Narikel.

That night Budhba moved through Channa Grove touching every tree—if “touching” is the right word for a being whose touch is itself a shadow—deep in thought. “Primal crocodile,” he whispered alone, “do you feel this weight too? I think some great cycle is turning again, just as it turned in the times of Hulasā, Jivanti and Sukhdev—but this time, perhaps, in three forms at once.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -6I

Astronomical Events and Folk Belief

Chapter -6I uses the appearance of a comet—historically interpreted in many cultures of the world as an evil omen—to prepare the ground for the next phase of the story. Budhba’s rational but cautious response—the star itself is not to blame, yet vigilance is necessary—offers a balanced path between superstition and complete dismissal. After this chapter, the narrative describes a three-level chain of crises: fire, flood, and epidemic, the final and harshest test of the village’s accumulated capacities.

CHAPTER -60 (SIXTY BEFORE)

Night of Fire

Fire took the houses, not the names—from the ashes of that burning night, a new hearth was lit.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NEW FIRE FROM ASHES

Folk tune: fire song

*Fire took the houses, but could not take the names;
From the ashes of that burning night, a new hearth was lit.*

*The night was deep; suddenly the flames rose;
Thatch blazed, walls fell, and the villagers ran.
Fire could take bodies, could take roofs and walls;
But the name settled in the throat it could not burn.*

*Walls fell and roofs burned, yet the village stood;
Those who survived rebuilt; those who died were kept by name.*

*Sitting upon heaps of ash, the village rose again;
Holding one another's hands, new houses were built.*

*The ashes cooled and a new fire was kindled;
A village that rose together was born again from fire.
What burned was not erased; by name it was born again;
A new hearth was lit from ash, and smoke rose once more.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. One month after the comet disappears, the most terrible fire in the village's history breaks out—and Channa Grove itself is placed in danger.)

On a fiercely hot night in Jeth, a lamp kept near the village rice store was knocked down by a gust of wind and fell upon dry straw. In an instant the fire flared up, and the wind, unusually strong that night, carried it from one house to another and from one quarter to the next.

Rudranath's daughter Indrani, now guardian of the ritual, saw the red glow from her window and cried out. "Fire! Fire! The whole village is burning!" She ran from door to door, beating on each one.

Waking from sleep, the villagers rushed outside with water, sand, and wet cloths to fight the flames. But the wind was so strong that the fire defeated every effort. Ten houses in the Brahmin quarter, five in the Kayastha quarter, and even part of the temple burned. Most terrifying of all, the fire began moving toward Channa Grove.

"Budhba!" Indrani cried, running toward the grove. "The fire is reaching your trees! What should we do?"

From within the grove, Budhba answered in a voice Indrani had never heard before—a mixture of fear and resolve. "Indrani, I do not know whether I myself can stop fire. My power is of memory, not flame. But I remember one possibility—Jori Pond. If you can turn water toward the grove, perhaps..."

Indrani understood at once and sent every able-bodied villager running toward the pond. Hundreds of hands carried bucket after bucket of pond water toward the grove. Drawing on its organising strength, the Women's Night Assembly formed a human chain from the pond to Channa Grove, buckets passing from hand to hand.

The fire reached the roots of the pipal, but there its progress suddenly slowed, as though the roots themselves were resisting. Indrani later said that at that moment it seemed to her that every leaf in the grove moved at once, confusing each tongue of flame and making it lose its path.

By dawn the fire had finally been extinguished. A quarter of the village's houses had burned, and although some trees at the edge of Channa Grove were scorched or half-burned, the grove as a whole remained safe. The pipal, heart of the grove, was entirely unharmed.

Sitting amid the ashes, Indrani asked, "Budhba, did you stop the fire yourself?"

"No," Budhba said quietly. "I only knew where the water was. The rest was done by your hands, your organisation, and your courage. Once again I have seen something proved, Indrani: memory and organisation together can challenge even the most terrible forces of nature."

The villagers rebuilt the burned houses, this time more safely than before: special places for lamps, emergency stores of water, and new rules for fire safety. In village memory, the "Night of Fire" became a story that

taught every generation that the power of nature is terrible, but human unity can be more formidable still when directed toward the right purpose.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -60

Community Emergency Response and Collective Action

Chapter -60 demonstrates the power of collective action, especially during a large natural or human-made disaster. Forming a human chain to carry water is a real and historically effective emergency technique used by organised communities. Budhba's role is important here: he does not miraculously extinguish the fire himself; he gives direction, while the actual work is accomplished through collective human effort. This accords with the story's central philosophy that the power of witness is not a substitute for human action, but its complement.

CHAPTER -59 (FIFTY-NINE BEFORE)

The Second Flood

The second flood knows the old road, yet gives a new wound—the village that endured the flood learned to read the water.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: READING THE WATER

Folk tune: flood song

The second flood knows the old road, yet gives a new wound;

The village that endured the flood learned to read the water.

The water rose again along the current, following the old road;

But this time the village was awake and had taken heed in advance.

*The wound of the first flood remained in the mind, yet the new one
came;*

Every flood gives a new lesson; every water teaches something.

From the first flood came fear; from the second came knowledge;

Whoever read the rising water raised the house beforehand.

Grain was placed upon high platforms; cattle and nets were secured;

Whoever learned from the flood that had passed survived this one.

Water comes and goes; the village has learned to read it;

Whoever learns from calamity does not drown in the next calamity.

*The current is the same, the water the same, but the village is wiser
now;*

Whoever learned to read the water is not bewildered by the flood.



(A passage of narrative fiction. After the fire, the rainy season becomes unusually fierce—and the Kamala-Balan, after many years, again breaks its bounds.)

Three months after the fire, the rainy season arrived—but it was no ordinary monsoon. Rain fell day and night without pause until the Kamala-Balan, and every stream around the village, seemed to forget its boundaries.

Indrani, who had saved the village on the Night of Fire, now faced another trial. The embankment, considered strong since the time of Sukhdev Mahato, began to tremble before the force of the water.

“Budhba,” Indrani said, soaked by a night of rain as she ran to the pipal, “the embankment is shaking on every side! I am afraid that after the fire, this flood will break us completely!”

From within the roots of the grove, Budhba himself could feel every pulse of the rising water. “Indrani, I remember that many years ago, in Gauri’s time, the first flood came, when the embankment was first built. Seven lives were lost that night. Today you are better prepared. But this water seems angrier than that water.”

Indrani called together every quarter of the village and made an immediate plan: reinforce the weak portions of the embankment with sandbags and timber; move the elderly and children in advance to high ground—the old cremation ground, as in Gauri’s time; and prepare boats and ropes in case emergency rescue became necessary.

As the night deepened, one part of the embankment south of the leatherworkers’ quarter finally broke. But this time, before the breach, the village warning system—bells, drum rhythms, and predetermined signals—had already been activated. People had already moved toward safe ground.

A descendant of Mohan, who still kept the village drumming tradition, played a special rhythm that night—rapid and repeatedly sounded, a pattern every villager had learned from childhood as the “danger rhythm.” Echoing through the dark lanes, it awakened every household and sent every family running toward its predetermined safe place.

By dawn the water began to fall. Many houses had been swept away and the fields were ruined, but this time not one life in the village was lost—the first recorded zero-death major flood in Garh Narikel’s memory.

In the morning light Indrani sat beside the pipal, exhausted but full of relief. “Budhba, I think today we repaid our debt to Gauri. That day Grandmother Subhagi could not be saved. Today every life survived.”

Budhba answered with deep contentment, “Indrani, this is the greatest gift for me—to see that my memory, over time, has become knowledge in your hands that saves lives, not merely names.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -59

Early-Warning Systems and Disaster Mitigation

Chapter -59 turns an important principle of disaster management into narrative: an early-warning system and a predetermined evacuation plan, however simple—here, a drum rhythm and pre-identified safe ground—can dramatically reduce disaster mortality. Compared with the first flood in Chapter -89, this chapter gives clear, measurable evidence of the village's accumulated institutional learning: seven lives were lost in the first flood, while none was lost in this one, even though the physical damage was equal or greater.

CHAPTER -58 (FIFTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

The Third Calamity

One calamity teaches, the third tempers—whoever has fallen three times stands steadier the fourth.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THREE CALAMITIES,
STANDING THE FOURTH TIME**

Folk tune: song of courage

*One calamity teaches; the third calamity tempers;
Whoever has fallen three times rises steadier the fourth.*

*We saw fire, endured flood, and then the third arrived;
Every calamity gave a new wound and a new lesson.
What the comet had warned of, the village understood beforehand;
So this time it neither froze in surprise nor surrendered to fear.*

*Fire came, flood came, and the village endured the third as well;
What the comet had said, the village had understood in advance.
Whoever learned from the calamities already passed stood steadier this
time;*

Whoever fell three times stood firm the fourth.

*A village that stands together is not broken by any calamity;
The names survived, courage survived, and another dawn came.
Falling is not defeat; rising again is the true victory;
To face calamity with courage became the village way.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. After fire and flood, the comet's third and final warning is fulfilled: a new water-borne disease arises from the foul standing water left by the flood.)

After the floodwater receded, pools of stagnant, rotting water remained in many parts of the village. Within two weeks a new illness—stomach pain, severe diarrhoea, and rapid dehydration—began spreading among children and the elderly.

Indrani, who had already fought both fire and flood, now faced a third trial. “Budhba,” she said wearily, “the comet was right. Three calamities—fire, flood, and now disease. I am afraid our people may not be able to endure this much.”

Budhba, tired himself but resolute, replied, “Indrani, generation after generation your ancestors have learned something from every calamity. In the time of the epidemic Vimala taught ‘collective remembrance.’ Today you need that knowledge, and new scientific knowledge as well.”

The village physician, who had studied at the new medical school in town, immediately recognised that the disease was spreading through contaminated water. He instructed every family to boil drinking water and taught them to prepare a solution of salt and sugar to prevent dehydration.

At the same time, descendants of Sonama Majhin and Ratna used their traditional knowledge to identify which herbs could help check diarrhoea and which water sources were safe. The Women’s Night Assembly went from house to house, ensuring that rules of hygiene—washing hands, boiling water, and staying away from polluted water—were followed.

Through the combined effort of these three kinds of knowledge—modern medicine, traditional herbal knowledge, and social organisation—the outbreak was controlled within three weeks. Some lives were lost, especially among the very old and very young, but the disease was not as devastating as the first epidemic in Vimala’s time.

After crossing all three calamities, Indrani finally sat beside the pipal, deep satisfaction mingling with exhaustion in her eyes. “Budhba, I thought the comet had come to bring our end. But we are still standing.”

Budhba said softly, “Indrani, the comet did not bring an end. It brought only a test—to see how strong centuries of accumulated knowledge, organisation, and love had truly become. Today we have learned the answer: they have become so strong that even three calamities together could not break them.”

The story of the three disasters of that year remained in village memory as “the Year of Three Calamities.” At every new-moon kabaddi, along with the names of those lost that year, one sentence began to be spoken: “They died in the calamity, but the village did not die.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -58

Cascade Effects of Disasters and Multidimensional Response

Chapter -58 completes the three-level disaster sequence that began in Chapters -61 and -60—the comet’s omen, fire, and flood—with water-borne disease. This is epidemiologically realistic, because outbreaks of water-borne disease after flooding are a well-known phenomenon. Taken together, Chapters -61 through -58 show that multi-layered disasters require a multidimensional response: the combined use of modern science, traditional knowledge, and social organisation. In practical form, this powerfully demonstrates the central message of the whole Part 0 project—the need for both witness-consciousness and community action.

CHAPTER -57 (FIFTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

The Sahib's Notebook

*What the sahib wrote was his account; what the village kept in mind
was the village's truth.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: PAPER OF THE THROAT

Folk tune: aphoristic refrain

*What the sahib wrote was his account;
What the village kept in mind was the village's truth.*

*The sahib came from abroad, notebook in hand;
He wrote the village customs as seen through his own eyes.
What he saw from outside he counted only half-complete;
What lived within could not fit upon his paper.*

*The paper travels abroad; the names remain in the village;
One who comes from outside to count does not know everything within.
The sahib's notebook went far away and dust settled upon its pages;
But the story in the village throat still speaks in its own voice.*

*Letters live in the notebook; names live in the throat;
No one can write away a village that keeps its own story.
Outside writers come and go; the village is its own writer;
The story kept in the throat will remain awake from age to age.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. After the Year of Three Calamities, an English scholar comes to study the village traditions—but even with good intentions, his writing fails to understand the story accurately.)

After Indrani, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Nandkishor. In Nandkishor's time an English scholar named Mr Henry Thompson, interested in Indian folk traditions, arrived in Garh Narikel after hearing of the "Year of Three Calamities," whose story had become famous in the surrounding region.

With notebook and pen, Thompson Sahib questioned every old person in the village: who was "Budhba," what did "kabaddi" mean, how had "Channa Grove" begun? He carefully wrote down every answer and, after several weeks, left the village carrying a thick manuscript, saying, "This extraordinary folktale will be published for the learned societies of England."

Nandkishor was pleased. At last, he thought, Budhba's story was reaching the wider world. But a year later, when a copy of Thompson Sahib's book arrived in the village, Nandkishor and the villagers were stunned when they read—or had read to them—what it said.

The book called Budhba "a remnant of primitive superstition." Channa Grove was described as "ghost-worship among backward villagers." The kabaddi ritual was called "a barbarous custom," and the Women's Night Assembly "uncontrolled social behaviour among local women."

Furious, Nandkishor went to the pipal. "Budhba, Thompson Sahib heard our entire story, yet he has written an insult to us! He calls our knowledge 'superstition' and our justice 'barbarism'!"

Budhba remained silent for a long time. "Nandkishor, I understand your anger, and it is justified. But I remember something. Many years ago Haripati Kavi asked me whether my story should be written, and I said that if it was written it should be written in the village's own language and from the village's own point of view. Thompson Sahib heard our story, but his eyes, his language, his point of view were not the village's. He saw us through the spectacles of his own world, and through those spectacles whatever is unfamiliar often appears 'backward' or 'barbarous.'"

Nandkishor asked, "Then what should we do, Budhba? Should we write to Thompson Sahib and protest?"

Budhba said slowly, "Protest, certainly—but do something more important as well. Like Gangadhar, and like Haripati Kavi, preserve our own story in our own language and from our own point of view. We cannot prevent outsiders from misunderstanding us if they choose to. But we can understand ourselves correctly and keep our truth in our own words. That lies in our hands, and that work we must never abandon."

Nandkishor wrote Thompson Sahib a courteous but firm letter explaining the true meaning of the village traditions. No reply came. But

continuing the line of Gangadhar and Haripati Kavi, Nandkishor began compiling the village's own account more carefully, in the village's own language, knowing that the authentic definition had to come from within, not from outside.

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -57

Colonial Ethnography and the Importance of Self-Representation

Chapter -57 touches a real and documented tendency in colonial-era ethnographic study: British scholars, often with good intentions, studied Indian folk traditions, yet cultural bias could lead them to portray local knowledge systems and social arrangements as “primitive” or “superstitious.” The chapter emphasises the importance of self-representation—the principle that a community must write its own story in its own language and from its own viewpoint if it is to avoid external distortion. This principle deeply echoes the core impulse of the Videha Parallel Literature Movement.

CHAPTER -56 (FIFTY-SIX BEFORE)

The Call for Freedom

*The call that reached village after village did not belong to one throat
—freedom too is a shared song.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE SHARED CALL

Folk tune: movement song

The call that reached village after village did not belong to one throat;

Freedom too is a shared song.

The call came from afar and echoed from village to village;

One hand rose first, then a hundred hands joined it.

Those whom fear had silenced now joined their voices;

In the shared call the village overcame its fear.

One voice rose, ten voices joined, and the whole village echoed;

Whoever had stood alone now stood with everyone.

The call was no longer one throat but a thousand throats;

When they spoke together, their voice touched the sky.

No rule can stop a song that everyone sings together;

Name joined name, and only then did the call grow great.

Each voice alone was small; joined together, they became vast;

In the shared song the village found its freedom.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, the wave of the freedom movement reaches Garh Narikel—and the village discovers that the art of collective organisation learned over centuries is equally useful in the struggle for freedom.)

After Nandkishor, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Lakshmidēvi. In Lakshmidēvi's time, the freedom movement had grown intense throughout India. News of the Salt Satyagraha, the boycott of foreign cloth, and the Non-Cooperation Movement reached Garh Narikel through newspapers and travellers.

A young freedom fighter named Ramashray travelled from the town to Garh Narikel to call the villagers into the movement. "Brothers and sisters," he cried in the chaupal, "the British government is taking our grain, our land, and our self-respect! We must unite, reject foreign cloth, and embrace swadeshi!"

Hearing this, Lakshmidēvi went to the pipal. "Budhba, this talk of freedom sounds right, but I am afraid. If we join the movement, the British government may become angry. We have already suffered many calamities."

Budhba thought for a long time before answering. "Lakshmidēvi, do you remember Sonama Majhin, who said that forgetting can never be completely denied, but before forgetting every name can be given proper honour? Freedom is like that. I do not know how many years this struggle will continue or what its outcome will be. But I know this much: the name of anyone who stands for human dignity deserves remembrance, whether that person wins or loses."

Hearing this, Lakshmidēvi made a new resolve. Drawing on the experienced leadership of the Women's Night Assembly, she organised the village women to burn foreign cloth. Inspired by the Coconut-Leaf School, the village youth learned to spin thread and weave khadi for swadeshi. The elders used the discipline and patience of the kabaddi ritual to carry news of the movement to every household.

Concerned by the village's growing organisation, the British administration sent a party of policemen to arrest the activists. But the villagers, drawing on centuries of organisational experience, offered peaceful but firm resistance—in accordance with the principle of satyagraha, without violence and without retreat.

Ramashray and several village youths were arrested, but the rest of the village kept its organisation intact and continued the movement. Several months later Ramashray and the others were released, and on their return the villagers welcomed them as heroes.

That evening Budhba said to Lakshmidēvi, "Today I saw a new kind of kabaddi—a game in which every villager played against an unseen opponent for the sake of self-respect and kept every name safe without losing one."

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -56

The Political Application of Community Organisational Experience

Chapter -56 shows how community capacities developed over centuries—shared decision-making, dissemination of information, and patient resistance—can also be applied effectively to a large political struggle such as the freedom movement. The Gandhian principle of satyagraha—nonviolent yet resolute resistance—naturally resonates with the village's own long traditions, such as its encounter with Amil Jay Singh in Chapter -85. Local and national struggles are often driven by the same fundamental human values.

CHAPTER -55 (FIFTY-FIVE BEFORE)

Dawn of Independence

Dawn came, but not to every courtyard at once—the dawn of the free name comes first.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DAWN FOR ALL

Folk tune: dawn song

Dawn has come, but not to every courtyard at once;

The dawn of the free name comes first.

The tricolour rose into the sky and drums sounded;

The chaupal became a festival, and the village danced with joy.

But in the corner of the quarter where no lamp was lit,

Dawn had not yet come; darkness still remained.

The tricolour rose over the chaupal and the children sang;

But the house still in darkness needs its dawn as well.

Freedom is not a matter of one day; it belongs to every courtyard;

The house that still goes hungry must receive its gift too.

Freedom is not the end of struggle; it is a new beginning;

Only when every name sees dawn will freedom be complete.

One quarter became free while another remained bound;

Only when every house is lit will dawn be whole.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, India becomes independent—and Garh Narikel, carrying centuries of struggle and memory, enters a new age.)

After Lakshmidēvi, responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Vishvambharnath. In Vishvambharnath's time, on the morning of 15 August, a new sun rose across India, including Garh Narikel: India had become independent.

For the first time the tricolour was raised in the village chaupal. Educated at the Coconut-Leaf School, the village children had learned to sing "Jana Gana Mana," and that morning the song sounded from every throat. Ramashray, who had gone to prison for the freedom movement, was now a respected village leader. Speaking in the chaupal, he said, "Today we are free, but freedom is only the beginning. The real work—making our freedom meaningful—still remains."

That evening Vishvambharnath went to the pipal to share the historic moment with Budhba. "Budhba, today India became independent. You have witnessed this village for hundreds of years—from the time of Vachaspati Mishra, Udayanacharya and Gangesha Upadhyaya all the way to the end of British rule. What do you feel?"

Budhba was silent for a long time, a silence that gathered centuries of memory into a single moment. "Vishvambharnath," he finally said, his voice deeply moved, "from Vachaspati Mishra's hall of debate to this day I have carried the stories of hundreds of names—Hulasa, Sukhdev, Ratna, Gangesha, Gauri, Savitri. Every name asked a question: Is justice possible? Is dignity possible? Is equality possible? This dawn of independence is not the answer to all those questions. It is the recognition of the right to ask them. A nation willing to hear the questions of its citizens—that is something Hulasa, Sukhdev and Ratna never received."

"Then is all our struggle complete today?" Vishvambharnath asked.

"No," Budhba said softly. "Independence is not the end of struggle; it is a new form of struggle. The roots of caste, gender inequality, poverty and injustice do not disappear merely because a nation becomes free. My fear and my hope are both this: your children, and their children, will write what remains of our story. My work, as Indrani said many years ago, is never complete. But today, Vishvambharnath, I feel a new hope whose name I had never known before—freedom."

That night was not a new moon, yet the villagers gathered spontaneously beside the pipal—not for kabaddi, but for a new kind of celebration. They lit lamps, sang songs, and told every departed name, one by one, the news of independent India. "Listen," the village children whispered, "India is free. What you endured was not wasted."

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -55

Independence and the Continuity of Struggle

Chapter -55 places the historic moment of Indian independence within the narrative cycle while carefully making clear that independence, however important, is not the end of the whole struggle for social justice but the beginning of a new phase. Budhba's reflection—that the injustices of caste, gender, and poverty do not disappear automatically with national freedom—accords with the realistic perspective that defines the entire *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* project: no single victory, however historic, is the end of the whole story.

CHAPTER -54 (FIFTY-FOUR BEFORE)

The End of Zamindari

*The owner of the land changed, but the soil did not—the field knows
the name of the one who tills it.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: OWNER OF THE SOIL

Folk tune: ploughman's song

The owner of the land changed, but the soil did not;

The field knows the name of the one who tills it.

The field passed from the zamindar's hand and the papers changed;

But the one who drove the plough remained the same farmer.

The one who sweated for years and raised the grain

Now became owner of the soil, possessor of the field.

*The zamindar went, the papers changed, but the sweat remained the
same;*

The one who sowed the seed and raised the grain is the farmer.

The seal changed, the owner changed, but the soil remained the same;

The soil recognises the one who speaks with it.

Kings come and go, but the earth remains;

The soil will take the name of the one who truly makes it his own.

*The owner on paper changed; the owner of the sweat remained the
same;*

The field sings the name of the one who tills the soil with the plough.



(A passage of narrative fiction. Several years after independence, the new Government of India abolishes the zamindari system—and after centuries, the land relations of Garh Narikel finally change.)

After Vishvambharnath, responsibility for the ritual passed to his daughter Kamala Devi II, named in honour of the earlier Kamala Devi. In Kamala Devi's time, the new Government of India passed laws abolishing zamindari. The system that had endured for centuries, under whose shadow so many stories from Ugrasen Thakur to Raghubir Singh had unfolded, finally came to a legal end.

The village's last zamindar family, descendants of Pratapsen Thakur, was compelled to surrender most of its land to the government, and a large part of that land was distributed among landless peasants and families of the leatherworkers' quarter.

Seeing this historic change, Kamala Devi went to the pipal. "Budhba, today zamindari has ended. The land of Sukhdev Mahato, which Ugrasen Thakur seized, has today returned by law to Sukhdev's own descendants with permanent rights."

Budhba answered with deep satisfaction, "Kamala Devi, many years ago I said that Sukhdev's revenge had already come to me once, in the form of a court judgment. Today that revenge is taking a legal and lasting form. To see this—that is the meaning of my whole existence: to see that injustice, however old, can eventually be corrected if there are enough generations, enough patience, and enough struggle."

But the change was not simple. Descendants of Pratapsen Thakur, seeing their land and prestige diminish, became bitter and angry. Many old social relationships in the village, rooted in land ownership, came under strain. Some families gained land and became self-reliant; others, losing land, were thrown into uncertainty.

Seeing the tension, Kamala Devi asked Budhba, "Is this change good or bad? Some people are happy and some are unhappy."

Budhba replied, "Kamala Devi, every great change, however just, is difficult for some people. But the question is not whether a change makes everyone happy. The question is whether it is just. For hundreds of years the leatherworkers' quarter and other landless families have lived without land of their own, without stability of their own. Today that stability, at least in part, has come to them. That is justice, even if it does not make everyone happy."

With time, the village's social structure slowly changed. Land ownership, once deeply tied to caste, began to shift. The new generation, equipped with education from the Coconut-Leaf School, also began seeking work beyond the land—government service, trade, and urban employment.

While carrying out her ritual duty, Kamala Devi said to Budhba, "The village is changing. Perhaps very quickly."

Budhba said slowly, “Kamala Devi, the village has always changed. From Vachaspati’s time to today there has never been a single moment that could truly be called unchanging. My work is not to stop change, but to remember the names linked with every change and the cost of every change—so that however much the village changes, it does not completely forget its roots.”

COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER -54

Abolition of Zamindari and Rural Social Change

Chapter -54 gives narrative form to the historical impact of an important land-reform measure of independent India: the abolition of zamindari. Although implementation was uneven and incomplete—a fact the chapter deliberately does not hide, referring to tension and uncertainty—the reform permanently affected land relations and caste-based structures of power in rural Indian society. The chapter marks a final historical and legal culmination of the theme of land justice that began with Sukhdev in Chapter -92 and continued through “Sukhdev’s Revenge” in Chapter -64.

CHAPTER -53 (FIFTY-THREE BEFORE)

The First Electric Lamp

*The electric lamp has been lit, but do not forget the oil of the old lamp
—new light may come, but it must not erase old names.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NEW LIGHT, OLD WICK

Folk tune: lamp song

Electricity has come; a flame shines in the chaupal;

Do not let the oil of the old earthen lamp run dry.

Light came through the wire; a bulb shone for the first time;

The village stared in wonder as darkness fled.

But remember the earthen lamp that lit the house for years—

Keep its oil and its wick safe in the mind.

The light has changed, but the names do not change;

Let the new flame rise, but keep the old wick in the heart.

New devices come and go; names remain steady;

The light that changed the village did not change the village's name.

The light that reveals names belongs to the village;

The light that hides names belongs to the market—beware.

Let new brilliance come, but keep the old roots;

With the new flame, keep the old wick in mind.



(A passage of narrative fiction. The development plans of the Nehru era reach the village gate—roads, electricity, and new hope.)

After Kamala Devi's death, responsibility for the Women's Night Assembly and the ritual of names passed to her son Harivansh. Harivansh

belonged to a generation that held the cord of old tradition in one hand and looked toward the new age with the other. In his time, under independent India's Five-Year Plans, a metalled road and electric lines began reaching Garh Narikel for the first time. When workers came to set the poles, children gathered around the upright iron posts in wonder, while elders seated in the shade of the pipal whispered about how this new light might change the village's old darkness.

That evening, when the first electric lamp in the chaupal suddenly came on, the whole village—from children to the elderly—stopped still. The bulb's yellow light trembled upon the water of Dakahi Pond, and in that trembling glow faces, leaves, and the coconut fronds along the embankment shone together. Some folded their hands, some lifted children onto their shoulders to show them, and some stood silently clutching the old earthen lamps they had preserved for years.

Going to the pipal, Harivansh said to Budhba, "Now we shall have more light than your old conch-and-cord lamp could give us. Does this make you feel old?"

Budhba laughed. "Harivansh, no form of light makes me feel old. I myself began with a lamp, and today I am seeing electric light. What has not changed is the act of bringing light into darkness, whether by lamp or electricity."

After a pause Budhba added, "But remember one thing, Harivansh. A lamp creates as much shadow as it gives light. Electricity illuminating every corner of the village is good. But if in that brightness people begin forgetting old names and old faces, then that light will be more dangerous than darkness. Good light reveals names; it does not dazzle them out of sight."

It took many years for electric lines to reach every house. Yet from that first night onward, the lamp in the chaupal was never extinguished. Each year Harivansh sat beneath it and remembered new names in the new light, while keeping in his bag the old earthen lamp whose oil he never allowed to dry completely. For, as Budhba had said, new light may arrive, but if the oil of old names dries up, it can take a very long time to light them again.

CHAPTER -52 (FIFTY-TWO BEFORE)

The Call of the Border

*Cannons sounded at the border and birth-songs sounded in the village
—the village endured war but did not abandon its names.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BORDER AND SOHAR

Folk tune: farewell sohar

*The son has gone toward the border; his mother stands in the
courtyard;*

The body travels to a distant land, but the name remains on this side.

Cannons sounded at the border; a sohar sounded in the village;

The son departed for war, and the mother repeated his name.

The body was far at the front, the heart here in the courtyard;

*Every evening the mother watched the road—when would her boy
return?*

For the one who returns, a sohar will sound in the courtyard;

For the one who does not, the whole village will repeat his name.

The border divided the earth, but it did not divide the name;

The body crossed to the other side, the name remained here.

Borders recognise bodies, but names recognise no border;

Salutations on both sides, the name on both tongues.

War can take the body; it cannot take the name;

The village endured war and stood holding its names.



*(A passage of narrative fiction. The wars of 1962 and 1965 call the village's
young men toward the border.)*

In Harivansh's time, drums of war sounded on distant borders. First from the direction of China, then from Pakistan, news reached the village in the whisper of the radio and in market talk. Several young men whose hands had until then held ploughs and fishing nets now put on uniforms and left for the frontier. Ramashray's grandson, Vijay Kumar, also joined the army. On the night of his departure the village women placed tilak on his forehead, and his mother, hiding her face in her sari end, could not suppress the samdaun that rises of itself at the moment of farewell.

Between those two wars the village changed inwardly. Radio news became the main subject of evening discussion in the chaupal. In every courtyard that had sent a son to the border, a deep silence settled—not wholly fear, not wholly pride, but waiting. The women remembered those young men separately in the Night Assembly, while Budhba held every name that had left the village for the frontier with such care that each seemed to stand as an invisible village watchman at a distant post.

In the 1965 war Vijay Kumar was wounded and, after months of treatment, returned to the village with one weakened arm. On the night of his return Harivansh went to the pipal. "Budhba, I was afraid Vijay Kumar's name too would be added to your list."

Budhba replied, "Harivansh, I hold the name of every young person who went to the border, whether he returned or not. Vijay Kumar's return makes me happy. But I hold with equal respect the names of those who did not return—far beyond the village boundary, on some Himalayan peak or in some desert."

After a pause Budhba said, "Names, Harivansh, know no borders. Bodies fall where war occurs, but names return to where people remember them. As long as the village keeps those names upon its tongue, those young men—wherever they may have fallen—remain alive in the village courtyard."

Later Vijay Kumar kept telling the village children his stories of the border—the snowy mountains, the all-night watch, and the moment when a comrade standing beside him fell. Every time he ended the story, he made sure to add the name of the companion who had not returned. The children repeated that name, and upon the village tongue, far from the border, it remained alive—as Budhba had said, the crocodile may take the body, but not the name.

Seeds of the Green Revolution

*New seed may yield more grain, but old seed knows the soil—the seed
that saves a village plants not hunger, but a name.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE OLD SEED

Folk tune: transplanting chaiti

New seed gives grain and fills the granary;

Old seed knows the soil and does not rot in floodwater.

New seed came from the market and the granary filled;

So much grain grew that the village laughed with joy.

But the new seed did not know the soil and could rot in floodwater;

The old seed had deep roots and stood firm in calamity.

Grain may fill the granary, but who will guard the root?

The seed that saves the village plants not hunger, but a name.

Keep old with new; sow the two together;

Keep in a clay pot the seed that knows the soil.

Passed from hand to hand, the grain remains alive;

Mother, keep a handful of old seed safe in a clay pot.

Grain fills the granary today; seed preserves generations;

The village that saves a handful of old seed saves itself.



(A passage of narrative fiction. The arrival of new seeds and chemical fertilisers changes the village's agriculture.)

When the winds of the Green Revolution reached Garh Narikel, the fields began to change. New high-yield seeds and sack after sack of

chemical fertiliser arrived. For the first time the paddy heads grew so heavy that the stalks bent, and farmers' eyes brightened at the heaps of grain in the threshing yard. Yet in the shadow of this new abundance something old began quietly disappearing: the knowledge preserved by Ratna's descendants from generation to generation—what seed belonged in what soil and rain, and what herb guarded against which disease.

Harivansh's daughter Sunayana went to the pipal. "Budhba, the new seeds give us more grain, but our old seeds are disappearing. Is that good?"

Budhba replied, "Sunayana, more grain is good, and freedom from hunger is good. But if the old seeds disappear completely, you will lose one of the future's alternatives. Progress without destroying knowledge—that is the real challenge."

He continued, "Seed is not merely grain, Sunayana. The village's memory sleeps within seed—the years in which an ancestor survived a famine are written in that small kernel. New seed may satisfy today's hunger, but old seed must be kept for the day when the new seed fails. A village that saves its seed saves its future."

At that moment Sunayana remembered something her grandmother had told her: there had once been an old variety of paddy that yielded little but would not rot even when submerged in floodwater up to the granary wall. Now that variety could no longer be found in any village field. Remembering that one lost seed, Sunayana understood that progress and loss were arriving together—and that what disappeared today might be remembered most painfully on the very day it was needed most.

With Ratna's descendants, Sunayana began preserving a small store of the village's old seeds in clay pots in a quiet corner of Channa Grove. At every transplanting she took out a handful and sowed a small strip of old paddy along the edge of the new fields, so that old roots would live beside the new crops. If famine returned, the village would still possess the seed that had once saved its ancestors.

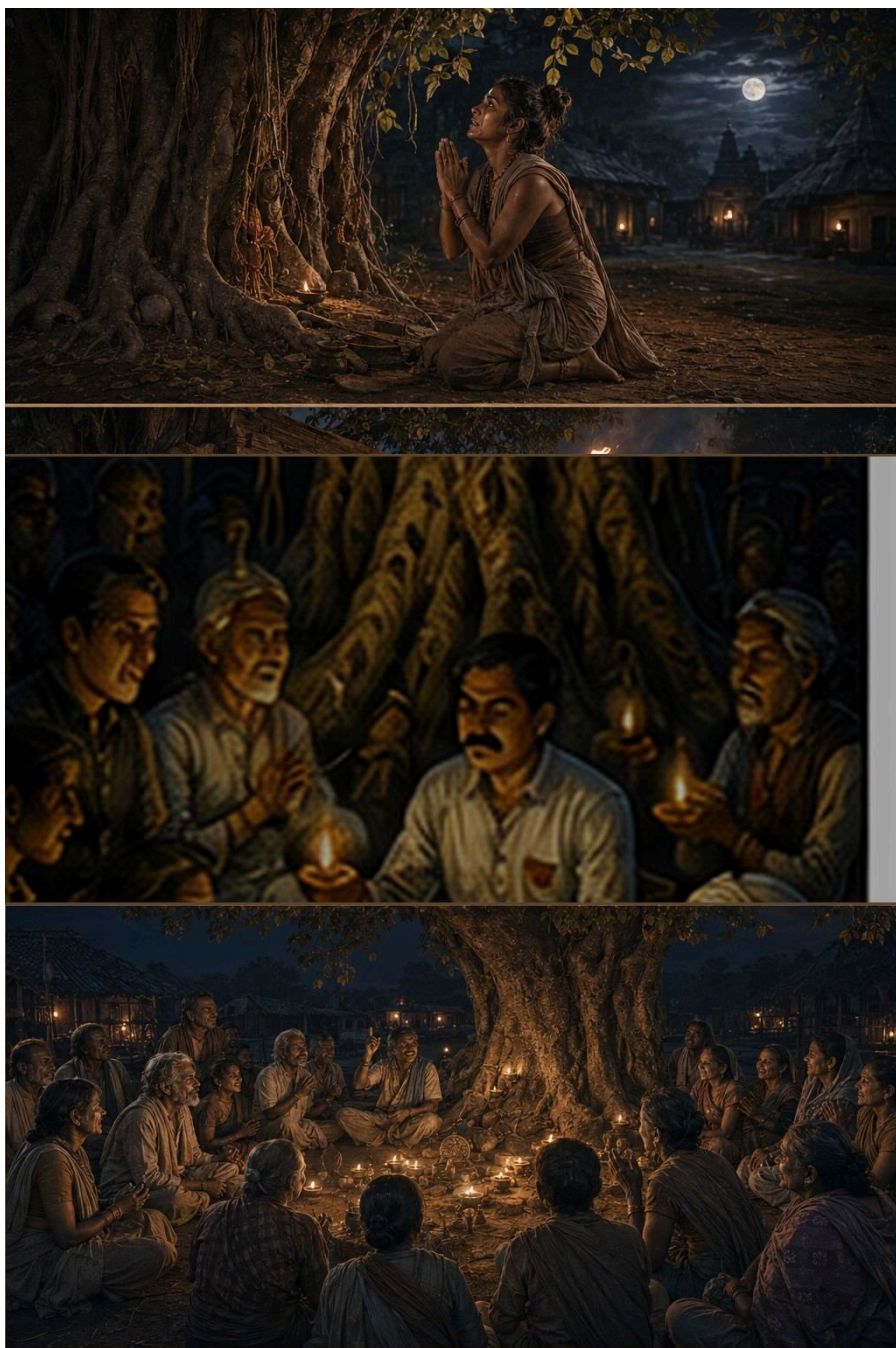
CHAPTER -50 (FIFTY BEFORE)

The Darkness of the Emergency

A season of darkness does not last forever—but when a lamp is extinguished, it takes time to light it again.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A VOICE IN THE DARK

Folk tune: whisper song

*The lamp went out, but the voice did not;
Justice stayed awake in the darkness, with Channa Grove as witness.*

*The cannon sounded in Delhi and lights went out;
Newspapers were silenced and voices suppressed.
But beneath Channa Grove the Night Assembly gathered;
Without lamps, in whispers, the talk of justice continued.*

*The voice was low, but the truth remained high;
Cannons sounded in Delhi; here the whisper answered.
What was silenced outside stayed awake within;
In the dark, the lamp of truth burned from throat to throat.*

*The darkness that has come will one day pass;
The names that stayed awake at night will survive until dawn.
Light will return and the lamp will burn again;
Those who saved the voice through the night will stand at dawn.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The Emergency of 1975 casts its shadow over the village's freedom of assembly.)

In 1975, when the national Emergency was declared, its shadow travelled from Delhi to village chaupal after village chaupal. In Garh

Narikel too, the administration began looking suspiciously at the Women's Night Assembly and other community gatherings. An order came from the police station: no meeting was to gather without permission. The Night Assembly that had met for years beside Channa Grove, lighting lamps and speaking of justice, suddenly came under suspicion.

Frightened, Sunayana went to the pipal. "Budhba, meetings and gatherings have been prohibited. Must we close our Night Assembly?"

Budhba answered gravely, "Sunayana, your Night Assembly is an assembly of justice, not a political meeting. Continue it quietly and cautiously. History shows that seasons of darkness are not permanent, but a light extinguished in such a season may take a long time to kindle again."

He continued, "When the outer light is put out, the inner light must be guarded all the more carefully. A voice may be suppressed, but not the justice behind the voice. Extinguish the lamp and lower your voices, but do not let the assembly die. For when an assembly closes completely, it can take an entire generation to awaken it again."

Once a policeman walking the village lanes at night passed beside Channa Grove. At that moment the women seated in darkness held even their breath, and the only sound left in the silence was the faint movement of pond water. The policeman saw nothing and moved on. But that night everyone understood how much courage—and how much silence—it could take to protect the inner light Budhba had told them to preserve.

For those two years the Night Assembly continued in the dense darkness of Channa Grove, without lamps and almost without sound, carried only in whispers. The women arrived one at a time, sat in a circle, and completed the night's work of justice through glances and murmurs. No paper was written, yet no name was omitted; everything was written in the village mind. When the Emergency finally ended, Sunayana once again openly called the assembly and lit its lamp—and that night, people said, the flame rose higher than before.

CHAPTER -49 (FORTY-NINE BEFORE)

The Year of Drought

A dry year can dry the pond, not the names—the village that dug the well together found water again.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL

Folk tune: drought song

*The dry year has emptied the pond;
But names do not dry—they remain at the bottom of the well.*

*The sky became merciless; not one drop fell;
The pond dried, the channels dried, and the earth cracked.
The fields died of thirst and all greenery burned;
The village watched the sky, but no cloud came.*

*The village that dug the well together found water;
The state gave relief, the village kept the account—both worked
together.*

*Hand joined hand, digging deeper and deeper;
Where the pond failed, the well prevailed.*

*Hunger comes and goes; another year will change;
But a name once held does not vanish even in famine.
Water survived below; names survived in memory;*

The village that dug the well together endured the drought.



(A passage of narrative fiction. Famine in Bihar tests the village again, but this time accumulated knowledge and outside assistance both work together.)

One year the monsoon failed again. For months the sky remained bare, pond water fell until mud showed along the banks, and the earth of the fields split open as if speaking its thirst. The village had seen this darkness before—the famine in Ratna’s time and the hunger in Hulasa’s time were still alive in memory. But this time the village had learned something from those older hungers.

This time both the government famine-relief system and the village’s own organisational capacity were activated promptly. Sunayana’s son Gopal, the young village headman, worked with government officials to manage relief distribution efficiently. He kept an account of every house—how much grain each received, who had been missed, who needed more—so that relief reached the hands that truly required it and no name disappeared in the crowd.

Seeing this, Budhba said with satisfaction, “Gopal, many years ago I taught your ancestor Savitridevi that one needs both outside assistance and self-effort. Today state and society are working together. That is progress.”

He continued, “Famine, Gopal, is not merely a shortage of grain; it is also a test of memory. A village that forgets its old famines dies afresh in every new one. But a village that keeps an account of each famine stands prepared before the next arrives.”

During that dry year Gopal took the village youth and reopened an old well in the southern quarter that had lain closed for years. Hand after hand lifted earth, sweat poured all day, and when the first glimmer of water appeared deep below, the light on the tired and thirsty faces was worth no less than grain. Relief came from outside, but water the village recovered with its own hands—and that became the greatest lesson of the dry year.

That year Gopal kept an account of every household in his notebook, carrying forward the tradition of Yadavanand’s shadow register. A copy of every paper submitted to the government office was also kept in the village archive so that, if anyone asked later, this famine too would remain preserved with every name and every reckoning. For, as Budhba had said years before, a dry year can empty a pond, but not a name—and a village that digs a well together can find water again.

CHAPTER -48 (FORTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

The Voices of Radio and Television

*The machine's voice comes from afar, the village song from within—
whoever hears the inner voice is not lost in the noise outside.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE INNER VOICE

Folk tune: wireless song

*The outer voice comes from a distant land,
The inner song rises from one's own courtyard.*

*The radio sounded in the house, then the screen began to glow,
Distant voices, distant pictures, descended into the courtyard.*

*The new voice was loud and filled the ears,
While the old song within was slowly pressed down.*

*The new voice sounds loudly and fills the ears,
The old voice sounds softly and settles in the heart.
Whoever was lost in the outer noise became the market's own,
Whoever preserved the inner voice remained the village's own.*

*Noise passes away, but the song remains,
Whoever hears the inner voice is not lost in the market's noise.
The machine's voices come and go; the inner song remains still,
Whoever hears one's own voice is not confused by distant noise.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The village's first radio, and then its first television, bring the world into the village courtyard.)

In Gopal's time the first radio arrived at the village chaupal. On the first night, when a crackling voice from Delhi emerged from that little

box, the whole village sat around it—some leaning close, some shutting their eyes, listening to distant lands in their own courtyard. A year later the first television came, and every evening children and elders gathered before its trembling black-and-white images. For the first time, the world itself had walked into the village courtyard.

Yet with that new brightness came a new silence. Children who had once come in the evening to hear Budhba's stories beneath the pipal now sat before the screen; and the women who used to raise songs on the embankment found their voices slightly subdued beneath the new, louder sound.

Gopal's daughter Kusum asked beneath the pipal, "Budhba, now the world has come inside the village. Will that make your work easier?"

Budhba replied, "Kusum, the world is entering the village, but the reverse may also become true—the village's stories and names may disappear into the world's noise. My work has become harder now: to keep the village's own voice safe amid that new, loud clamour."

After a pause he said, "There are two kinds of voice, Kusum. One comes from outside and fills the ears; the other rises from within and fills the heart. If the outer voice grows so loud that the inner one can no longer be heard, the village will forget its songs—and a village that forgets its songs eventually forgets its names as well."

One evening the television showed a flood in a distant country. The old people of the village fell silent, because those waters and those drowning houses reminded them of their own old floods. In that moment they understood that the machine could bring the faraway near—but if people were careless, it could also make what was near seem far away.

Kusum understood. She did not switch the television off; instead, every evening she began telling the children seated before it one of the pipal-tree stories. She turned the machine into a new stage on which old village stories could be told in a new form, so that new light would not extinguish old memory and both could burn together in the same courtyard.

CHAPTER -47 (FORTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

The Gulf Market

*The market abroad gives money, the hearth at home gives a name—
whoever earns and forgets the name returns as a stranger.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE ROAD TO THE GULF

Folk tune: migrant biraha

*Foreign lands send money; the hearth at home keeps the name,
The son went to a distant land, but his name stayed in the courtyard.*

The Gulf called, and the son boarded the plane,

In desert heat he sweated day and night.

Money reached the house and kept the hearth burning,

But the mother watched the road, longing to see her son's face.

Letters came, money came, but the face did not come,

The mother watched the doorway every evening.

The body is far in the desert, the name here in the courtyard,

Whoever sends the name along never forgets the home.

Whoever earned and forgot the name returned a stranger,

Whoever kept the name while earning found the house still waiting.

Let much wealth come, but if the name is forgotten,

One returns to one's own village and stands there as a stranger.



(A passage of narrative fiction. A wave of employment in the Gulf countries turns the village's young men toward migration once more.)

In the 1980s, with the oil boom in the Gulf, young men from the village began going to Dubai, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia for construction

work. Agents appeared in the market, passports and visas became household words, and every few months a young man from one house or another would lift a tin trunk and leave for foreign shores. It was a new chapter in the “call of exile”—different from Yashpati’s indentured labour, yet connected to it in essence.

Kusum’s husband Ramesh went to Dubai on a three-year contract. This time, however, matters differed from Ramsevak’s day: Ramesh sent letters and money home regularly, and sometimes his voice travelled across the telephone line from afar to reach Kusum. Even so, at every festival and every wedding or birth-song, his empty place troubled her.

During that decade many village houses received concrete roofs, daughters’ weddings were celebrated with greater splendour, and new goods entered the market—all powered by money arriving from distant countries. Yet in those new concrete houses many courtyards remained empty of their young sons for most of the year. Money arrived, but the hands that earned it were very far away.

Watching this, Budhba said, “Kusum, your husband has had a different fate from Ramsevak. Distance still exists, but communication is now possible. That is progress, though the pain of distance remains just as real.”

He continued, “But remember one thing. Migration places the body in the market, and if one is careless, one may leave one’s name there too. Earning money is good, but whoever forgets village, language, and name in pursuit of money returns home a stranger. Ramesh sends money—that is good; but he has kept his name in the village—that is better.”

At the roots beside Jori Pokhari, next to Ramsevak’s old mark, Kusum placed a new marker—not for Ramesh’s death, but in hope of his safe return. She wanted it to become a lamp of waiting for every migrant son to come, so that the “call of exile” might no longer signify grief alone but also the hope of return.

CHAPTER -46 (FORTY-SIX BEFORE)

A Test of Harmony

When fire broke out, the village became one—harmony is tested not at festivals but in calamity.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE SHARED PIPAL

Folk tune: song of togetherness

*Water from one pond, grain from one soil,
We endured one flood and lived in one village.*

*Division came from outside and rumours flew,
Someone wished to sow suspicion between Hindu and Muslim.*

*But those who drank for years from the same pond—
How could they be divided today by the clamour of a lie?*

*Whether Eid or Diwali, the shade is of the same pipal,
Smoke from shared hearths joins both courtyards.*

*Together we endured one flood and one famine,
Those who shared sorrow together did not break apart.*

*Whoever brings division from outside is not of the village,
Those who know one another's names are not broken by rumours.*

*When fire broke out, the village became one to put it out,
Harmony was tested not at a festival but in calamity.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A wave of communal tension touches the surrounding region, and the village's plural tradition is tested.)

In the late 1980s a wave of communal tension rose in the surrounding region. Its heat reached Garh Narikel in the form of rumours. A few

outsiders came to the village and tried to turn the old brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims into suspicion—whispers passed from ear to ear, and for one or two nights an unfamiliar unease spread across the chaupal.

But the Muslim families of Garh Narikel, woven for generations into village life—their ancestors drawing water from the same pond, labouring in the same fields, and saving one another in the same floods—and the Hindu families stood together before those rumours. Against outsiders who wanted division, the village answered with its own shared memory.

During those tense days an elderly maulvi and an elderly pandit stood together at the chaupal and reminded the village which household had rescued which other household in which flood, and whose hearth had fed whom during which famine. Against that shared memory, the imported rumours could not survive.

Kusum said to Budhba, “Outsiders want division among us.”

Budhba replied, “Kusum, for centuries your village has woven different traditions—Nyaya, Tantra, Bhakti—into one fabric. This unity is your greatest strength. Whoever tries to break it must be answered with your shared history.”

He continued, “Division comes from outside, Kusum, not from within. A village in which people know one another’s names cannot be made strangers by a rumour. Rumour takes root where people have forgotten one another. So remember one another’s names—that is the strongest guard.”

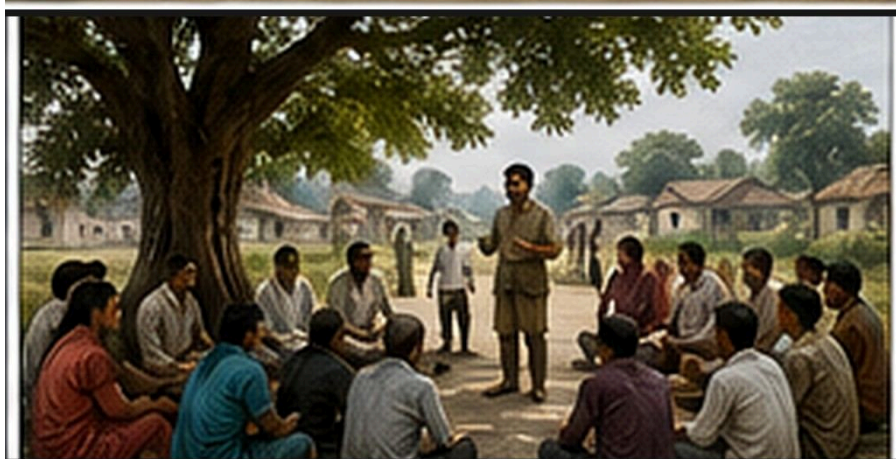
The Hindus and Muslims of the village held a joint gathering beneath the pipal, lighting lamps, sitting together, and asking after one another. From that night onward, every village festival—whether Eid or Diwali—was celebrated beneath the pipal shade with both communities present. As Budhba had said, harmony is tested not in festivals but in calamity, and in that test Garh Narikel stood as one.

CHAPTER -45 (FORTY-FIVE BEFORE)

Winds of Liberalisation

The new wind opened the door, but the roots did not move—the village tied to its roots is not blown away.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: WIND AND ROOT

Folk tune: wind song

*A new wind came and opened the door,
It brought new talk, new markets, new glitter.*

*When the door opened, the wind rushed in,
New goods and new glitter filled the market.
Leaves shook, branches bent, the wind blew hard,
The village watched in wonder at how much had changed.*

*Leaves may shake and branches may bend in a strong wind,
But if the roots are deep, the tree is not blown away.
Outside winds come and bring new leaves,
But the tree whose roots remain firm does not topple.*

*The village joined to its roots is not blown away,
The leaves may be new, but the old roots remain steady.
New markets and new glitter come and go like wind,
Whoever holds fast to the roots is not carried away.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The economic liberalisation of 1991 brings both new consumerism and new opportunities to the village.)

After the economic reforms of 1991, the village market began to change. New things appeared—brightly coloured plastics, sleek new

fabrics, and later the first cable television, carrying dozens of channels into the village. Things once unavailable came within reach, and with the market, people's desires also began to grow.

Kusum's son Dinesh obtained a job with a private company in the city—something that would once have been impossible. He had seen the speed of a new life and the glitter within that speed; yet beneath that glitter he sometimes remembered the village's slow, steady evenings.

The market's new brightness brought a new haste with it. People wanted more, ran more, and the quiet evenings beneath the pipal, where the whole village once gathered, began to thin. Some young people left for cities, and some household thresholds remained closed for most of the year.

After returning to the village, Dinesh told Budhba, "The world is changing very quickly. Markets, television, jobs—everything is new."

Budhba replied, "Dinesh, I have told you before—the village has always changed. But this change is faster, and in rapid change the knowledge learned slowly over generations is more easily lost. Be careful."

He continued, "Wind opens doors, and that is good—it brings new light and new ideas inside. But if the roots are weak, the same wind can uproot the tree. So welcome what is new, Dinesh, but deepen your roots, because one who remains joined to the roots is not blown away by any wind."

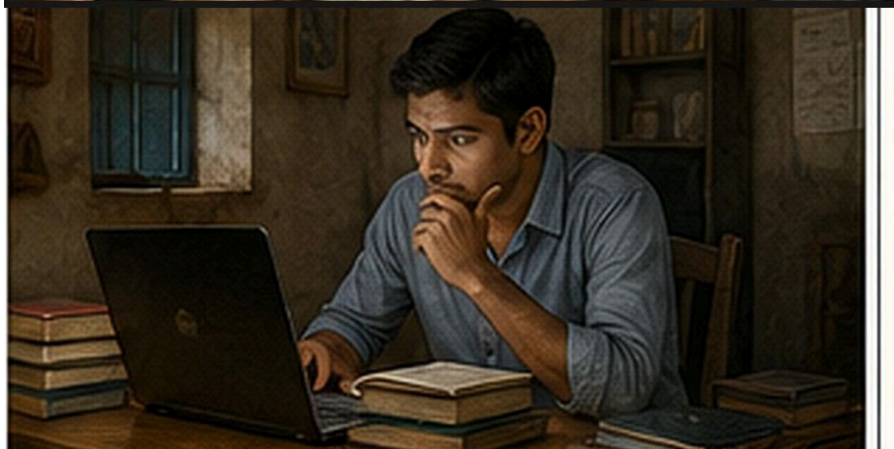
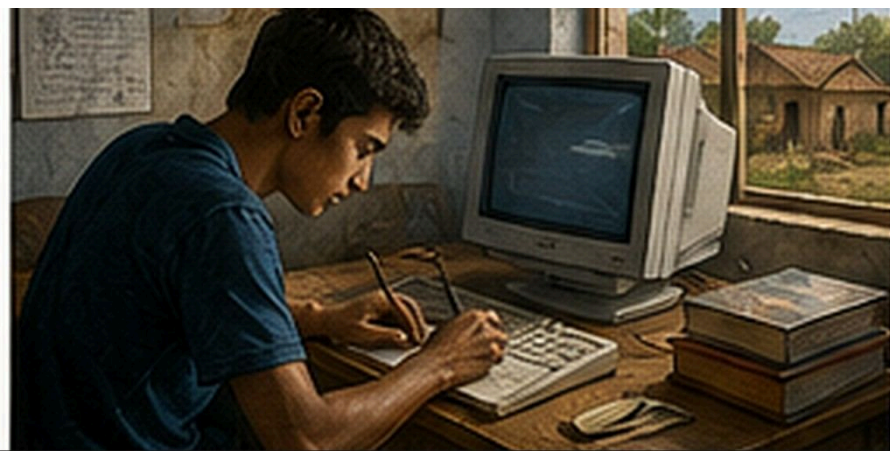
Dinesh remembered the warning. Whenever he returned from the city, he brought his children to sit beneath the pipal and told them the stories of the tree, the pond, and the names. He knew that however quickly the world changed, one evening, one tree, and one old voice had to remain still so that the coming generation would not be blown away.

CHAPTER -44 (FORTY-FOUR BEFORE)

The First Computer

The new machine teaches counting, but it cannot count a name—the name kept by the village is greater than the machine's number.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: MACHINE AND MEANING

Folk tune: counting song

*A new machine has come, counting faster and faster,
It writes letters in a moment and fills page after page.*

*The machine came to the village and counted numbers quickly,
A reckoning that took days was finished in a moment.
It joined letter to letter and filled the page at once,
The village watched the wonder of the machine.*

*But a name is not counting; a name is kept in the mind,
The name the village keeps is greater than the machine's number.
A machine can count numbers, but it cannot count a name,
It cannot understand the story behind the name.*

*Leaf or screen—the medium keeps changing,
But meaning lodged in the heart can never be erased.
Machines come and go; the name remains steady in the mind,
Meaning kept in the heart cannot be erased by a machine.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The first computer reaches the Coconut-Leaf School, opening a new age of education.)

After Dinesh, responsibility for the observance passed to his daughter Pratima. In Pratima's time, under a government programme, the first

computer reached the Coconut-Leaf School—a large grey machine whose screen showed blinking green letters. Children and elders gathered to see it; some thought it magic, some looked with suspicion, and some quietly remembered the coconut leaves on which they had once written their ancestors' names.

The schoolchildren sat wide-eyed before the machine. Letters that had taken years of practice to form by hand now appeared on the screen in an instant. But an old man sitting in a corner whispered, "The machine can preserve letters—but can it preserve meaning?"

On the first day Pratima typed the first line of the village's oldest folk song into the computer. When the letters appeared on the screen in green light, the children applauded. Yet Pratima felt something strange, as though the old song had stepped out of a coconut leaf and was walking into a new and unfamiliar house.

Pratima went to the pipal and asked Budhba, "This machine can hold more letters than a coconut leaf, and much faster. Can we keep our stories in it?"

Budhba replied with curiosity, "Pratima, since the time of Haripati the poet I have learned one thing: the medium keeps changing—from paper to the printing press, and from the press now to this machine. But the soul of the story—the village's language and point of view—must not change. If this machine preserves our stories in our own words, I welcome it."

He continued, "A machine knows counting, Pratima. It will count letters, pages, years. But a name is greater than counting. If this machine turns a name into nothing but a number, it is more dangerous than a coconut leaf; but if it preserves the name with its whole meaning, it can become the village's newest watchman."

Pratima's pupils slowly learned to type fragments of the village's old songs and stories into the computer. That bridge from coconut leaf to screen seemed small that day, but many years later the same bridge would become a complete digital archive in which every village name, song, and story would survive in a new form, yet in its own language.

CHAPTER -43 (FORTY-THREE BEFORE)

The Drying Channel

The channel grew thin, yet still knew its old path—the channel that dried did not forget the flood.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE THIRSTY CHANNEL

Folk tune: drought biraha

The channel has grown thin; the sand begins to show,

The water that gave life is now itself thirsty.

The channel that flowed for years and gave the village life,

Has grown thin and shown the sand upon its breast.

The pond dried, the well deepened, the earth cracked,

The flood that once swept houses away is now itself estranged.

Water that once distributed life now distributes thirst,

The village understood—save water, or hope itself will break.

The channel dried, but still remembered its path,

Whoever learned to save water found water again.

Plant trees, save water, or even names will thirst,

The channel that dried did not forget the flood.

The thirsty channel of today will flow again tomorrow,

The village that learns to save water will not remain thirsty.



(A passage of narrative fiction. The water level of the Kamala-Balan falls, and the village confronts a new age of environmental crisis.)

In Pratima's time the village elders noticed a new, slow calamity: year after year the water level of the Kamala-Balan was gradually falling. The

channel that once touched both embankments in the rains now exposed banks of sand in summer. Forests were being cut, pollution from distant factories was reaching the river, and fish that had once filled the nets were becoming scarce.

The elders sat in the pipal shade remembering the floods that had once swept houses away, and now they worried that the river of those floods was itself drying. In summer the pond water turned green-black, wells had to be dug deeper, and water—which had once been the village’s greatest fear—was becoming its greatest anxiety.

Pratima’s son Satyanarayan said beneath the pipal, “Budhba, Jori Pokhari too has become smaller than before. The water in the old crocodile pond is falling. I am afraid nature itself is becoming ill.”

Budhba replied gravely, “Satyanarayan, Sonama Majhin said long ago that the old crocodile needed patience and offerings. But this crisis is not from want of offerings; it comes from injustice done to nature itself. You must plant trees and save water exactly as you preserve names.”

He continued, “All these years I taught you to save names, because I thought the crocodile took bodies but not names. Now a new crocodile has arrived—the crocodile that drinks water, fouls the air, and eats the soil. If you do not save water, forest, and earth from this new crocodile, one day the village that preserves names will itself disappear. So now, together with names, save water too.”

Satyanarayan began planting new trees around Channa Grove—not only for memory, but for nature. With the village youth he repaired the pond embankment, dug small catchments to hold rainwater, and began a custom of planting a tree at every child’s birth, knowing that water, air, and soil, like names, must be preserved for the next generation.

CHAPTER -42 (FORTY-TWO BEFORE)

The Miracle of the Handheld Phone

A machine in the hand brought the distant near—but do not forget to ask the name of the person sitting beside you.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NEAR AND FAR

Folk tune: machine song

A machine came into the hand and the distant became near,

But ask the name of the one sitting beside you too.

With the handheld machine the faraway came near in a moment,

A voice from beyond seven seas descended into the ear.

But no one looked at the face of the person sitting nearby,

*Everyone was absorbed in the machine and forgot the conversation at
hand.*

The distant voice comes into the ear, but the face does not come,

Look first at the face nearby, then listen to the faraway.

The machine joined the distant but broke the near,

Whoever forgot the person nearby in the machine became lonely.

The machine connects, but joining hearts is the work of hands,

What makes the near seem far is not a machine but an illusion.

The machine is good if it cares for what is near,

*Whoever loses the near within the machine loses names and
relationships.*



*(A passage of narrative fiction. The arrival of the mobile phone completely
changes communication in the village.)*

In Satyanarayan's time the first mobile phone reached the village—at first only one, in the headman's hand. When that small machine rang for the first time and the voice of a son living in a distant city came out of it, the entire courtyard gathered around in amazement. A voice that once required months of waiting for a letter now entered the ear in a moment.

Slowly phones reached many families. Sons living far away could speak to their parents at once; news of illness, weddings, and births travelled in moments. But a new sight appeared as well: people held the machine in their hands, speaking to someone far away while forgetting the person sitting beside them.

Satyanarayan's daughter Anjali said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, now if anyone goes abroad we can speak every day. The call of exile will no longer be so painful."

Budhba smiled slightly. "Anjali, that is good news. But be careful—the machine can confuse as much as it connects. Use it wisely, as you have learned to use every new power."

He continued, "In this machine someone far away comes near, Anjali, but take care that someone near does not become far. A person always immersed in distant voices can forget to look at the face of a mother or father sitting beside them. If this machine brings a name near, it is good; but if it makes the nearby name distant, it becomes the greatest illusion."

Once an old village woman whose son had lived in the Gulf for years heard his voice on the phone and wept with joy. "Son, hearing your voice so near makes me feel as though you are standing in the courtyard." In that moment the village understood how much the machine could lighten the pain of distance when used well—and how, when misused, it could make even nearby people strangers.

Remembering the warning, Anjali taught the village elders to use mobile phones—how to speak with a son, how to see his face. At the same time she kept telling every household that however near a machine might bring the distant, it could never replace the evening chaupal, face-to-face sitting, and conversation while looking into one another's eyes. The new machine, too, had to travel alongside old affection and old caution, without erasing either.

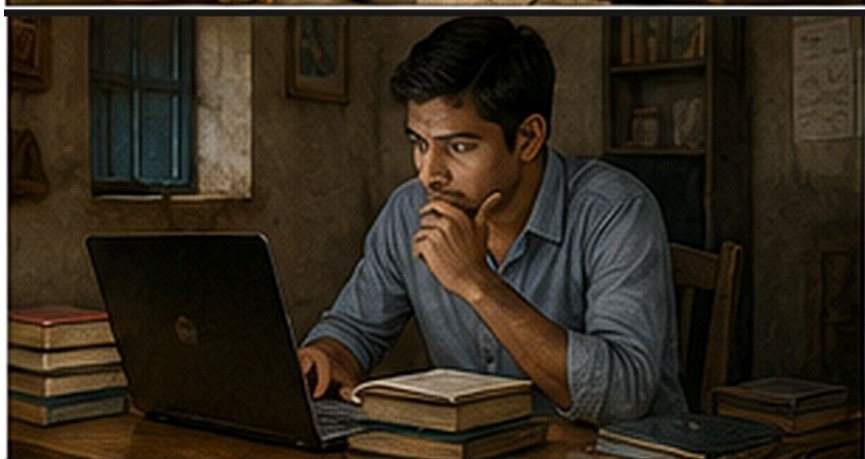
WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -41 (FORTY-ONE BEFORE)

The City Market

*The city buys the body, but the village does not sell the name—whoever
sells the name in the market returns empty-handed.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: ROOT AND MARKET

Folk tune: city song

*The city buys the body; the village keeps the name,
Whoever sold the name in the market returned empty-handed.*

*The city called the son and offered hope of a job,
It bought the body by the hour and sold sweat in the market.*

*Whoever sold only labour returned tired,
Whoever kept the name remained joined to the roots.*

*Go far from the roots and roam the whole world,
But do not cut the root; let it remain deep.
The city may take the body; keep the name yourself,
Whoever sold the name in the market returned empty-handed.*

*Once a year, for one evening, come sit beneath the pipal,
Whoever knows the roots is a stranger nowhere.
Whether city or foreign land, keep the root in the village,
Whoever remained with the roots was not lost in the market.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In the age of the IT boom, the village's educated youth seek new opportunities in the markets of great cities.)

In Anjali's time, with the boom in India's IT industry, educated young people from the village began going to Bangalore, Hyderabad, and

Delhi for software and other modern jobs. Children who had once learned letters at the Coconut-Leaf School now learned the language of computers and found well-paid work in distant cities. Every family took pride in this new flight of its sons and daughters.

But distance came with that flight. Young people who moved to cities began spending festivals there, and many village houses stayed locked for most of the year without their young generation. Money and education both came, yet in the speed of the new life some began to feel they were slowly moving away from village, language, and roots.

Anjali's son Karunakar returned on leave and said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, I learned many things in the city, but sometimes I feel I am being cut off from my roots."

Budhba replied, "Karunakar, being cut from the roots and travelling far from the roots are two different things. However far you go, if once a year you return beneath the pipal and remember your name and the story of your village, the root will not be cut; it will simply grow longer."

He continued, "The farther a tree's roots spread, the more strongly the tree stands. Going far is not weakness; weakness begins when a person forgets the roots. Live in the city, travel the world, but remember your name, your village's stories, your language. Whoever knows the roots is a stranger nowhere."

Karunakar remembered how often, sitting in the tall building of his city company, he had thought of the village pipal, pond, and evening chaupal—and how a pang came with the memory, as though he had left something behind. Yet whenever he returned once a year and sat beneath the pipal, that pain quieted for a while.

From that day on, however busy he was, Karunakar spent one evening of every annual visit beneath the pipal, telling the village children stories of the city and listening to their old village stories. Slowly it became an unwritten custom for every young person returning from the city: however far you go, come back to your roots for one evening each year.

CHAPTER -40 (FORTY BEFORE)

The Right to Information

Whoever has the right to know may ask—information is a lamp that reveals names in the dark.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LAMP OF
INFORMATION**

Folk tune: song of light

*Whoever has the right to know may now ask,
The lamp of information is lit; names appear in the dark.*

*Papers locked in cupboards for years,
Accounts once hidden have now reached the hand.
Truth once concealed now stands in the open,
The right to know has come into the poor person's hand.*

*Papers once locked in cupboards now reach the hand,
What Yadavanand once wrote secretly can now stand in the open.
The right to ask has come; the darkness has thinned,
Hidden accounts have entered the light.*

*Shadow and light have met; the village accounts have opened,
Truth once concealed now stands with its head raised.
Darkness will no longer rule; questioning is everyone's right,
Once the lamp of information was lit, darkness fled at once.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The Right to Information Act gives the village the power to demand its records and its history officially.)

In Karunakar's time India enacted the Right to Information law, giving ordinary citizens the legal right to demand official documents from government offices. For Garh Narikel this was no ordinary news. For centuries the village had preserved its history secretly in Yadavanand's shadow-register; now that history could be demanded openly as a legal right.

The village youth continued Yadavanand's old tradition by requesting official land and historical records from government archives. Papers once locked in an officer's cupboard began to reach the village through applications. For the first time the village's secret register and the government's documents could be placed side by side and compared.

Karunakar's daughter Vibha said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, now we no longer need Yadavanand's secretly written register alone—we can demand our history officially, as a legal right."

Budhba replied with deep satisfaction, "Vibha, this is the day I have awaited for centuries—the day shadow and light become one, when truth preserved in secret can be demanded openly."

He continued, "All these years the village saved its names in darkness. Yadavanand wrote his register quietly by night because speaking truth openly was dangerous then. Now the law itself says every citizen has the right to know the truth. Names that survived so long in shadow can now stand in the light. For the village, and for me, this is a great day."

When Vibha first received the old village land records from the government archive, she found many names on the yellow, torn pages that also appeared in Yadavanand's register. Each record confirmed the other. Truth that had survived only in village memory now stood legally with an official seal.

Using the Right to Information law, Vibha obtained every available old official record of the village's land and history and brought them together with Yadavanand's shadow-register. When the village's secret memory and the state's official papers were set side by side, they formed a complete, legally recognised historical archive that no officer could now erase.

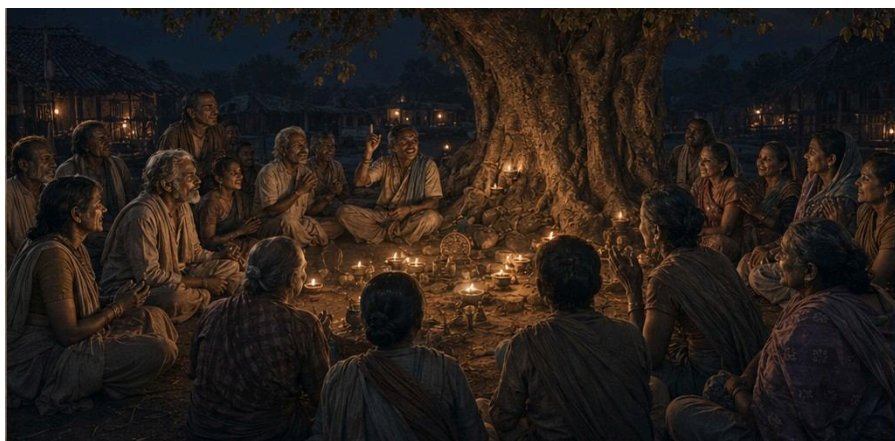
CHAPTER -39 (THIRTY-NINE BEFORE)

The Guarantee of Work

The hand that found work stood upright—work gives a name, not alms.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE RIGHT TO WORK

Folk tune: attendance song

*The hand that found work stood upright,
Work gives a name, not alms; the head remained high.*

*Work came within the village and hands stood upright again,
No need now to flee abroad; work is in our own village.
The pond was dug, the embankment built, upon our own soil,
Sweat fell in our own fields, grain entered our own homes.*

*Dig the pond, build the embankment, here in your village,
Let sweat fall on your own soil and grain fill your own store.
Do not beg from anyone; earn a name through work,
Raise high the head of the hand that takes up work.*

*We will not flee abroad; the household will not break apart,
Every name enters the attendance roll, every right reaches the hand.
Work gives a name; alms give humiliation,
What is earned by one's own hands increases the village's honour.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The employment-guarantee programme gives village labourers local work and stability.)

In Vibha's time the central government's rural employment-guarantee programme reached the village, giving every household a right

to a fixed number of days of work within the village itself. Labourers who once had to flee to cities for work—whose fathers and grandfathers had endured the suffering of migration and indenture like Ramsevak and Bhola—could now find work on their own soil.

Ponds were dug, embankments repaired, roads built. Village work was done within the village, and hands that had once been idle were employed. Every worker's attendance entered a register, and wages reached the workers directly. Families once broken apart in search of work could now remain together in the village.

Vibha's husband Suresh, the local coordinator of the programme, said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, now village labourers will not have to go far for livelihood. Stories like Bhola's, Sukhdev's, and Ramsevak's need not repeat themselves."

Budhba replied, "Suresh, that is good news. But remember—a scheme can be excellent on paper and still depend on honest implementation. Bhola's court story taught us how great the distance between law and practice can be."

He continued, "A law is a good seed, Suresh, but a seed does not become a tree by itself; it needs honest hands and steady water. If scheme money disappears on the way, if a labourer's name is omitted from the attendance roll, even a good law can become a new injustice. Remember every name and keep every account clear—that is the real guard of this programme."

One year, when some programme funds were delayed, Suresh read every worker's name and account aloud before the village and demanded the withheld wages from the officials until every hand received its due. That day the village understood that keeping a good law good also requires constant vigilance.

Remembering the warning, Suresh kept the accounts of every project transparent. Every worker's name, every day of attendance, every wage payment was displayed openly before the village so no name could be omitted and no right denied. He continued ensuring that every labourer received wages on time, making Budhba's words a guide to duty.

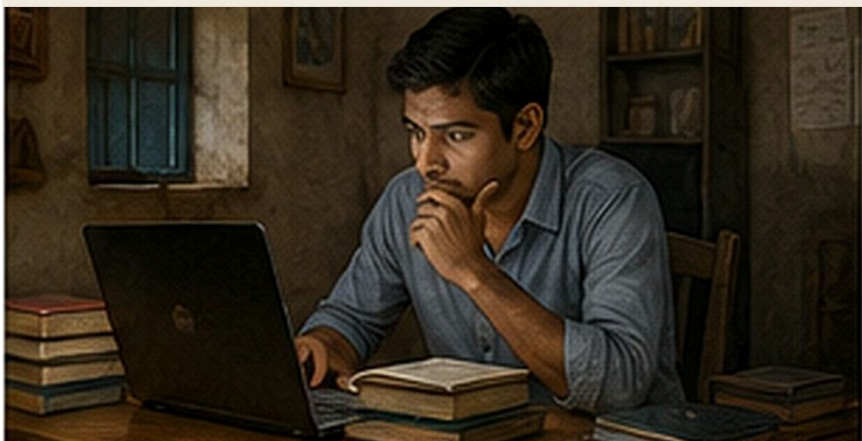
CHAPTER -38 (THIRTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

The Web of the Internet

*The new web brings the distant near, but turns names into numbers—
whoever is caught in the web loses the face.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: GLITTER AND WEB

Folk tune: caution song

*A new web came and brought the distant near,
But turned the name into a number and made the face disappear.*

*The internet came to the village and the distant became near,
Messages crossed in a moment and the world was joined.*

*But in this web names became numbers,
Faces hid behind screens; truth and falsehood mixed.*

*A lie shines like truth and rumour spreads like fire,
Whoever believes without asking is caught in the web.*

*Not every glitter is true; not every message is right,
Whoever accepts without testing is bound in illusion's net.*

*Open your eyes and ask which glitter is true,
Which is shell, which is silver—ask, test, then believe.*

*The web joined the distant but brought illusion too,
Whoever learned to ask and test was not caught in the web.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The arrival of smartphones and the internet transforms village life in both good and harmful ways.)

In Suresh's time smartphones and inexpensive internet reached the village. Children who had once learned letters on coconut leaves now

walked about holding the whole world in their palms—news from distant countries, answers to questions, songs and pictures, all at a touch. For the first time village knowledge travelled beyond the village boundary, while the outside world arrived in the village hand.

But new problems arrived with the new web. False news spread like truth; people became dissatisfied with their own lives after seeing the glittering lives of others; and unknown people from afar began making unwanted contact with village children and young women. The web that had brought the world near could sometimes carry people far away from themselves.

Suresh's son Neeraj said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, the internet is a new world, but there is much in it that can mislead us. I am afraid."

Budhba answered gravely, "Neeraj, every new power brings a new danger. From the shell-silver illusion until today, that is the lesson of our whole story. This new web—the internet—can become a new form of shell-and-silver illusion, where falsehood shines like truth. Be careful, and do not forget what you have learned."

He continued, "Gangesha Upadhyaya taught us four means of knowledge—perception, inference, comparison, and testimony. Then it was a matter of philosophy; today it has become a necessity of life. Whatever you see on the internet, do not accept it immediately as true. Ask: where did this come from? Who said it? What is the evidence? Whoever learns to ask questions is not caught in the web."

Once a false report spread through the village over the internet like fire—an inflammatory claim with no foundation. Neeraj's group traced it to its source, proved it false, and warned the village. That day the village understood that in the new web truth and falsehood can shine alike; only questioning eyes can tell the difference.

Remembering Budhba's warning, Neeraj formed a small village youth group where they learned together to verify every suspicious claim seen online—which news was true or false, which offer genuine or fraudulent. Just as Gangesha Upadhyaya had taught the four means of knowledge, the new generation learned amid the new web to separate truth from illusion.

CHAPTER -37 (THIRTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

The First Shadow on the Screen

A face shone on the first screen, while the name behind it lay in darkness—whoever looked at the screen must not let the eyes forget the village.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LIGHT AND SHAME

Folk tune: Song of Courage

A face shines on the screen, but the name behind lies dark;

The one who hides to frighten you grows weak before the light.

*An image flashed upon the screen; behind it hid a hand,
Selling fear out of the darkness, seeking to wound with shame.*

*But whoever hides to frighten us grows weaker in the light;
The one who cannot face us openly is only a thief behind our backs.
The shame is not the victim's; it belongs to the hidden hand.*

Speak aloud; stand together, side by side.

*Whoever stayed silent out of fear was left alone;
Whoever spoke with others beside them drove the darkness back.
Leave no one alone—let our lights burn together;
Whoever looks upon the screen, let the eyes not forget the village.*

*The hidden hand grew feeble in the light;
When everyone stood together, the darkness fled.*



(A novel excerpt. With the arrival of social media, the village senses for the first time the approach of a new kind of ghost.)

By Neeraj's time, Facebook and WhatsApp had reached nearly every hand in the village. Relatives living far away seemed close again, old friends found one another once more, and news of every joy and sorrow in the village could reach everyone in moments. Yet the very screen that had joined people together also brought with it a new kind of shadow.

Stories of rumours, fraud, and online harassment began to multiply—someone would take another person's photograph, someone else would spread a lie, and from the shelter of darkness an unseen person could make another life unbearable. The ghosts that had once dwelt in the darkness of Channa Grove now seemed to live behind the glow of the screen, their names and faces concealed.

Neeraj's daughter Sapna went anxiously to the pipal. "Budhba, an unknown person is threatening a girl from our village over the phone, using her photographs. What should we do?"

Budhba answered, his voice trembling. “Sapna, this is a new kind of injustice, one that even I do not fully understand. But this much I know: a power that works secretly, frightening someone from the darkness, becomes weaker when it is brought into the light. Do not leave that girl alone.”

He continued, “Sapna, the greatest strength of this new ghost is silence. It wants the victim to keep quiet out of shame, to remain alone, to tell no one. So the strongest answer is to speak and to stand together. Once the matter is spoken of openly, the shame leaves the victim and settles where it belongs—on the swindler. Make the girl understand that the fault is not hers; it belongs to the hidden hand.”

At the first digital night assembly, the girl who had been threatened told her story openly for the first time. When ten or twenty women of the village stood beside her, the menace of that hidden hand suddenly began to lose its force. The burden she had been carrying alone was now lifted by the whole gathering—and after many days, a smile returned to her face.

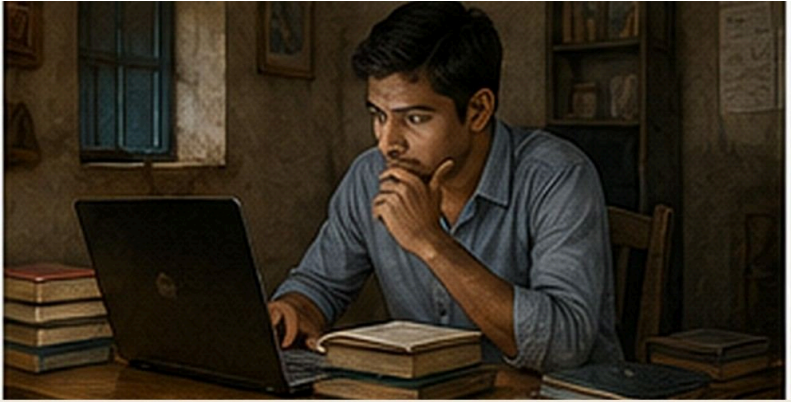
Sapna gave a new form to the women’s old tradition of night assemblies and created a “digital night assembly” for the women and girls of the village, where stories of online harassment and fraud could be shared openly and confronted together. Fear, which had grown for so long in darkness and solitude, began to weaken in the shared light—for, as Budhba had said, the ghosts of darkness cannot endure illumination.

CHAPTER -36 (THIRTY-SIX BEFORE)

The First Footfall of the Unseen Swindler

The swindler who cannot be seen is the greatest of all—listen for the footfall, ask the name, and trust not paper alone but the evidence before your eyes.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE UNSEEN CROCODILE

Folk tune: Song of Warning

The old crocodile lived in water; we could see it there,

The new crocodile lives in wires; we cannot even see it.

The old crocodile lay in water, visible to the eye;

The new one lives among the wires, unseen as it deceives.

It asks no offering; it steals only trust,

Coaxes with a honeyed voice, takes the money, disappears.

It asks no offering; it steals the trust you give;

*Whoever sends money without understanding is left wringing empty
hands.*

The one who trusted glitter was deceived;

The one who heard the warning and stayed alert was saved.

The swindler you cannot see is the greatest of them all;

Hear the footfall, ask the name—do not put your faith in glitter.

The unseen crocodile is dangerous, hidden inside the shine;

Whoever learns to ask and verify escapes the net.



(A novel excerpt. In this chapter, the village is shaken for the first time by a serious case of digital fraud, and Budhba begins to recognize a new and unfamiliar kind of hunger.)

In Sapna's time, a young man from the village, lured by the promise of a job, lost all his savings to a fraudulent online company. The company had seemed genuine—it had a website, photographs of an office, the voices of supposed officials. But once the young man sent his money, the company, its website, and those voices all vanished in a single night.

The fraud had been operated from a distant country by unseen hands. No one knew who the real swindler was or where he lived. A police report was filed, but how could one catch a person who could not even be seen? For the first time, the village stood before an enemy that had neither a face nor an address.

Distressed, Sapna said beside the pipal, "Budhba, this fraud seems more terrible to me than the Original Crocodile in our twin ponds. We

could see that crocodile; we could make an offering to it. This one we cannot even see.”

Budhba remained silent for a long while, then spoke softly. “Sapna, I fear you are right. This is a new kind of crocodile. It has no body and no water; it is only a hunger living inside wires and screens. I do not know how my old knowledge can fight this new crocodile. But I know this much: whatever name this new crocodile devours, I shall preserve that name too, just as I have preserved all the others.”

He paused, then continued. “We fought the old crocodile with offerings, patience, and names. This new crocodile asks for no offering; it cheats people of their trust. There is only one way to defeat it, Sapna—awareness. In a village that stays alert, where people warn one another and do not shut their eyes and trust every glittering proposal, this new crocodile is forced to remain hungry.”

That very night, keeping Budhba’s words in mind, Sapna began teaching every family in the village how to guard against online fraud—which offers were genuine and which were false, where it was safe to send money and where danger lay. She knew that the story ahead, which even Budhba did not yet fully understand, would become far more complicated and far more dangerous.

CHAPTER -35 (THIRTY-FIVE BEFORE)

The Market in Bodies Opens

Where bodies are sold, names become cheap—but a village that keeps its people’s names will not let their bodies be turned into merchandise.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A MOTHER'S WARNING

Folk tune: A Mournful Song of Vigilance

*Where bodies are sold, the name grows cheap;
A son goes to a distant land, his name lost in the market.*

*A promise came of "good work," showing a glittering dream;
Sons and daughters journeyed far, while a hidden net waited behind.*

*The body was laid out in the market, the name marked down;
A mother's eyes stayed fixed upon the road, her son somewhere in
darkness.*

*A promise of "good work," with a prison-net behind;
A mother's eyes stayed fixed upon the road, her son somewhere in
darkness.*

*Test every promise first; understand every road;
Whoever was sent away without questions was left to grieve.*

*Be watchful, mother—question every road, every promise;
A village that keeps the name will not let the body become
merchandise.*

The market could not sell the one whose name was held fast;

The one who became alert in time saved the child.



(A novel excerpt. The deception of false job offers gradually takes on the terrifying shape of human trafficking, and Budhba senses the approach of a new and darkest chapter.)

After Sapna, the responsibility for the ritual passed to her son Rajiv. In Rajiv's time, fraud carried out through false promises of employment took an even more terrible form. Earlier, the swindler had taken only money; now he took human beings. Brokers carried some young people to distant countries with promises of "good work," and once they arrived, their passports were seized. Fragment by fragment, stories of forced labour began making their way back to the village.

In one house in the village, no news of a son came for years. He had left on the promise of "good work," and then seemed simply to have vanished into darkness. Every evening his mother's eyes remained fixed upon the road. The village slowly understood that this was no ordinary fraud; it was the turning of human beings themselves into a market.

Troubled, Rajiv said beside the pipal, “Budhba, this is worse even than the girmitiya system. At least there was a contract then, there was a term. Now people are imprisoned without knowing anything, without understanding what they have entered.”

Budhba answered in an exceedingly grave voice. “Rajiv, I fear this is the dark chapter whose approach I heard many years ago. The hunger that lived inside the screen has now reached the market in bodies. We must warn every family and every child about this new danger, just as we used to warn one another about flood, fire, and disease.”

He continued, “The weapon for defeating this new crocodile, Rajiv, is not a sword—it is a question. Whenever a promise sounds too good, too quick, we must become especially cautious. Ask: Who is calling? Which company? What documents? Who guarantees it? A family that learns to ask questions can save its sons and daughters from that unseen market. To preserve a name is no longer merely the work of memory; it is the work of preserving life.”

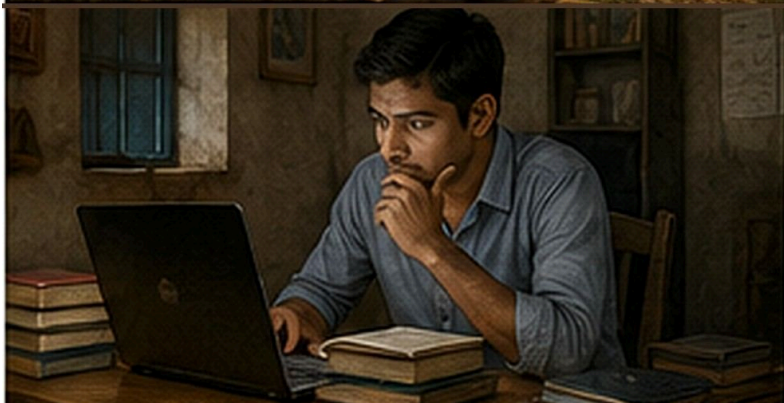
From that day, Rajiv began teaching every young person in the village how to examine offers of work abroad—which agent was genuine and which a fraud, which document was real and which false, where it was safe to go and where danger waited. It was a new kind of school, not written on coconut leaves but no less necessary: a school meant to save the village’s sons and daughters from the dark hands of the market.

CHAPTER -34 (THIRTY-FOUR BEFORE)

Ujjwal’s Dream

*Let the dream be vast, but keep its roots in the soil—whoever dreams
after forgetting the name awakens alone.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DREAM AND ROOT

Folk tune: Birth Sohar

*Let the dream be vast, but keep its roots in the soil;
Whoever dreams after forgetting the name awakens alone.*

*Today a name was born, and joy filled the village;
Budhba held the name, bringing with it a new hope.
Dream great dreams, fly as high as the sky,
But keep your roots in the earth; do not forget the village.
Today a name was born, and the village will hold it fast;
Even if it walks into darkness, one lamp will remain beside it.
A dream joined to its roots will blossom into truth;
A dream that forgets the name awakens alone.
Budhba has held the name; the village will keep watch;
The one whose name the village remembers will not be alone in
darkness.
Let the dream be vast, but let the roots run deep;
Whoever carries the village along is never wholly alone.*



(A novel excerpt. In this chapter, a figure Budhba had glimpsed in a vision many years before—Ujjwal Jha—is born for the first time into actual life.)

In Rajiv's time, a child was born into a poor family in the village. The household rejoiced in the ordinary ways—a sohar was sung, jaggery was distributed, and the child was named Ujjwal Jha. Yet amid that happiness Budhba, sitting beside the pipal on the night of the birth, grew strangely restless, as though some very old memory had suddenly come alive before him.

The villagers had never seen Budhba so unsettled. Again and again he looked toward the poor family's house, tried to say something, and then fell silent. At every new birth Budhba was usually joyful; today, in place of that joy, there was a deep anxiety in his eyes.

Rajiv's daughter Deepali went worriedly to the pipal. "Budhba, why are you so troubled today?"

Budhba spoke softly. "Deepali, many years ago, in a fleeting vision, I saw a young man drowning not in a river but in a screen—beneath the weight of lost money, interest, and threats. Today that child has been

born. His name is Ujjwal Jha. I do not know whether we shall be able to save him, but from this very day I shall keep hold of his name.”

He continued, “Deepali, I still do not know how that vision will become true, or whether we can prevent it. But this much I know: the name I have taken into my keeping today will not remain alone. When the child grows up, when that darkness comes before him, the village will already know him and remember his name—and perhaps because of that one thing, he will not be alone even in the darkness.”

From that day onward, without saying anything, the village kept an unspoken watch over little Ujjwal. When he first went to school, when he first bathed in the pond, when he first stepped beyond the village, some eye from the village quietly remained with him. Ujjwal knew nothing of this. He grew up playing through the village lanes, while his name rested safely in the village’s memory beside Budhba’s concern.

Hearing this, Deepali wrote Ujjwal’s name in her notebook beside the record of every new birth in the village, adding an extra mark so that no one in the future would forget it. She knew Budhba’s unease was never without cause; and if he had taken hold today of this small, newborn name, then the story attached to that name would one day matter greatly to the village.

CHAPTER -33 (THIRTY-THREE BEFORE)

The Shadow of the Lawyer’s Coat

*Justice hides in the shadow of the coat, but in the village justice speaks
—the lawyer reads the statute; the village reads the name.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE COAT AND THE PIPAL

Folk tune: Courthouse Biraha

*Justice hides in the shadow of the coat, while in the village justice
speaks;*

In the city statutes are sold, and the poor struggle for breath.

*In the city, coat upon coat, statute upon statute, papers piled high;
The lawyer has read the books, while justice is weighed against money.*

*The brilliant boy who carried a dream of justice in his eyes
Turned toward the darkness and became caught in the web of statutes.*

*The lawyer reads the statute; the village reads the name;
The brilliant boy who dreamed of justice has turned toward the dark.*

*The coat sold justice; the village shared it;
Whoever was lost among statutes was severed from the justice of
names.*

*Date after date, yet the name still stands;
For one who can change the road, hope does not die.
Whoever turned toward darkness may yet turn back;
The one whose name is remembered does not lose the road.*



(A novel excerpt. A young man from the village studies law and goes to the city to practise, but his path gradually turns toward darkness.)

In Deepali's time, a sharp and gifted young man from the village named Batuknath studied law and began practising in the city. The villagers were proud of him. The boy who had once been among the brightest students in the coconut-leaf school would now fight in court for the rights of the poor, they hoped. And at first, he truly did take honest cases and stand on the side of the weak.

But little by little, as powerful clients gathered around him, his road began to change. The taste of victory, the glitter of money, and the intoxication of power—each drew him one step farther from the path on which he had begun. The statutes he had once studied to protect the poor he now learned to bend in order to shield the powerful.

Troubled by the change in Batuknath, Deepali said beside the pipal, "Budhba, Batuknath now secures date after date in every case, however

poor the other side may be. He has begun to behave like one of the courthouse ghosts.”

Budhba answered sadly, “Deepali, I fear that the seed planted in Chapter -68 is now flowering in a human body. Batuknath was not born guilty. The slowness of the system, temptation, and the taste of power turned him in this direction. I shall preserve his name too, in the hope that he may yet change his road again.”

He continued, “Deepali, in all these years I have learned one thing: no human being is born already guilty. A seed may fall in one place and its flower open somewhere else, at another time. Batuknath is the fruit of a system that turned justice into something to be sold. So I shall hold his name not with a curse but with hope—for the name of one who can still change his road is never completely killed.”

Once, a poor widow from the village came to stand before Batuknath in a dispute over her field. She was from his own village, a woman whose name he had known in childhood. For one moment, the old village flashed in Batuknath’s eyes; the next moment he had retreated again into the language of statutes. That day Deepali understood that the old Batuknath had not died completely. He was only hidden somewhere deep in the darkness.

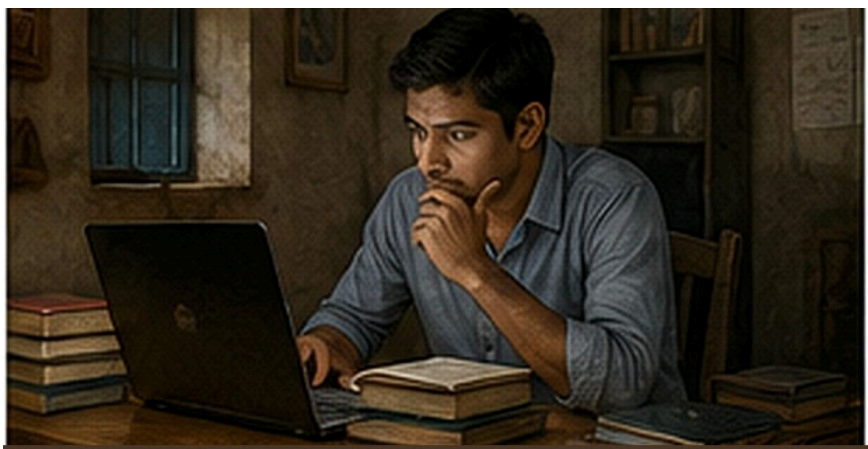
Batuknath’s story spread beyond the village into the city, and gradually his name became associated not with the speech of the village but with a reputation in the corridors of the courts that Deepali never wished to accept. Yet in the village’s memory, at Budhba’s insistence, his name also survived as the old, honest Batuknath—with the hope that one day, somehow, he would return to that earlier road.

CHAPTER -32 (THIRTY-TWO BEFORE)

Shadows Across the Sea

A shadow may come from beyond seven seas, but it cannot carry away the name—whoever cheats from afar leaves a mark upon the leaf.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: TOWER AND ROOT

Folk tune: foreign-land song

*A shadow may come from beyond seven seas,
But it cannot carry the name away; the name stays in the village.*

*A shadow from beyond seven seas spread from afar,
A web from a glass tower reached all the way to the village.
It could steal body and money and bring darkness from afar,
But the name remained in the village; it could not take that away.*

*The glass tower shines at a distance, with a web concealed within,
Whoever cheats from afar still leaves a mark upon the leaf.
The glitter came from afar, but brought no roots,
The higher the tower rose, the hollower its base became.*

*Let the tower be high; the roots of a name are deeper,
The village that holds its names does not fear a distant shadow.
Distant shadows come and go; the name remains still,
Whoever remains joined to the roots is not frightened by shadow.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In a glass tower in Hong Kong, the shadow of an unseen power appears for the first time on the horizon of the story.)

In Deepali's time, through the webs of global trade and digital finance, the village's fraud stories no longer seemed connected only with cities, but with places across the sea. Money cheated from the hand of a poor villager could travel wire by wire across several countries and reach an unseen hand. Deepali's son Abhinav read one such report in a newspaper and went beneath the pipal.

The report carried a photograph of a tall glass tower in a distant city and described an unseen power inside it that cheated thousands of people from thousands of miles away. One name appeared again and again, and reading it planted an unfamiliar fear in Abhinav's mind.

"Budhba," Abhinav said, "the newspaper says many fraud networks in India are operated from Hong Kong and nearby countries. One name keeps appearing—Lau Kin-Hung. I do not know who he is, but I am afraid."

Budhba remained silent for a long time, then spoke in a voice Abhinav had never heard before. "Abhinav, I too heard this name many years ago in a fleeting vision—a shadow sitting in a glass tower. I do not know who he is, or what relation he will have to my Ujjwal and my Batuknath. But I know this: all these stories, even from very far away, will one day return to one place—to Garh Narikel."

He paused and continued, "The crocodile changes its water, but it remains a crocodile. First it lived in the pond, then on the screen, now in a glass tower beyond the sea. But the old rule still applies: it may take the body, but not the name. If the village keeps its names and keeps warning one another, even this distant shadow will eventually weaken before the village light."

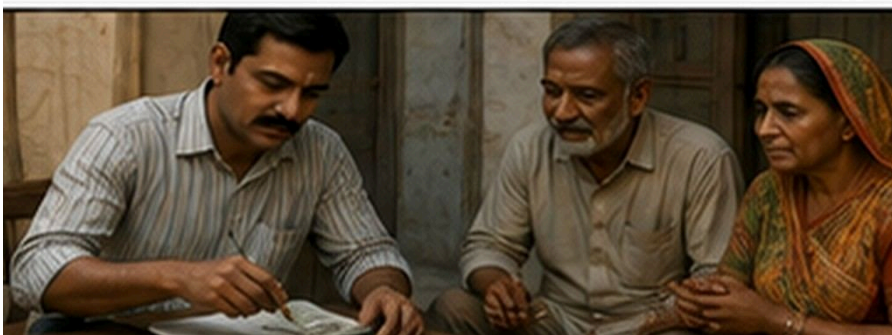
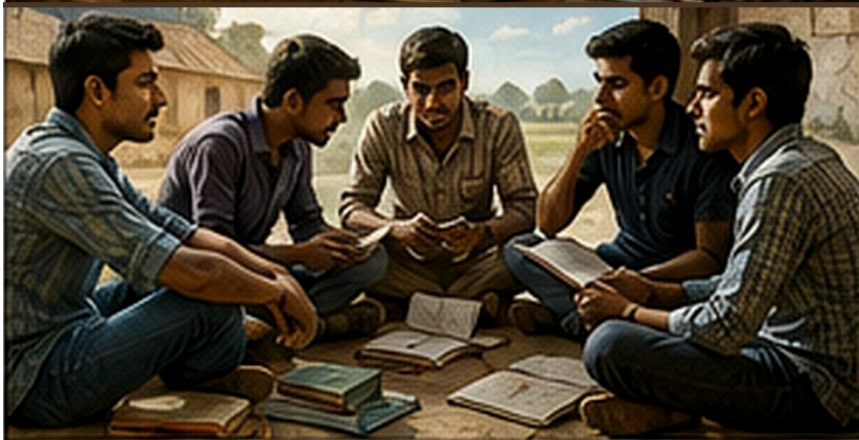
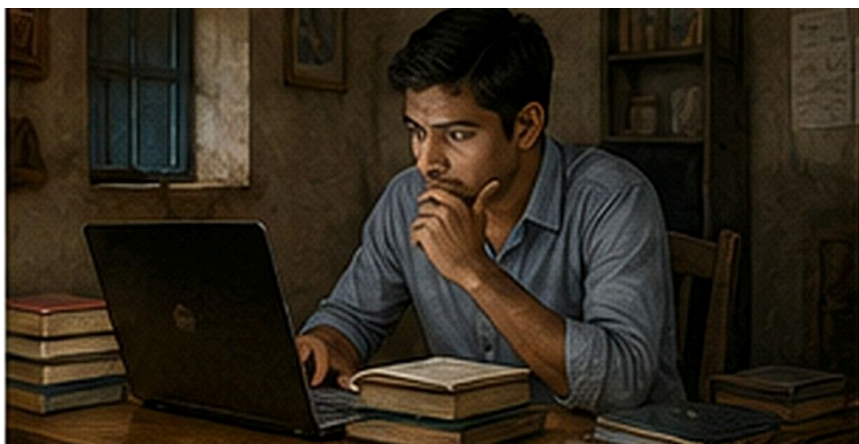
Abhinav warned every young person in the village to be alert to international fraud networks—what proposal was coming from afar, what name was hidden behind it, where the money was going. He did not yet know how soon and how closely that warning would prove necessary: the shadow now seen on a newspaper page would one day stand directly inside Garh Narikel's own story.

CHAPTER -३१ (THIRTY-ONE BEFORE)

Satyavrat's Silence

The one who remained silent for a long time may speak the heaviest word—Satyavrat's silence too was a testimony.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SILENCE AND SPEECH

Folk tune: song of patience

*The one silent for a long time may speak one heavy word,
Silence is sometimes protection, sometimes injustice.*

*Satyavrat remained silent a long time, seeing and enduring,
Wrapped in silence, holding truth within.*

*But silence was sometimes armour and sometimes injustice,
Whoever stayed silent when it was time to speak stood beside the guilty.*

*Before the moment comes, silence can be patience,
When the moment has come and one stays silent, silence becomes
injustice.*

*Truth seen within must one day come outside,
Silence that hides truth becomes a fault.*

*Write what you see; let the notebook become a witness,
Truth lodged within must one day come outside.
Silence may be patience and speech may be courage,
Whoever speaks at the right moment becomes a guardian of truth.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A simple, quiet bank employee from the village, Satyavrat Mehta, begins to waver between duty and conscience.)

In Abhinav's time a quiet and honest young man from the village named Satyavrat Mehta found work in a city bank. He was the kind of person who spoke little but saw everything, whose silence was sometimes deeper than speech. In the calm routine of the bank he continued performing his duties honestly.

Gradually, however, he began seeing accounts that looked suspicious. Money arrived and was immediately moved onward without clear reason. Lakhs entered one account and within moments were split among several others and disappeared. Satyavrat understood this was no ordinary transaction, but one thread of a large concealed web. Yet he was only a small employee—who would listen, and what danger might speaking bring?

On leave in the village, Satyavrat said beneath the pipal, “Budhba, I am seeing things I cannot fully understand, but they frighten me. I do not know whether I should stay silent or speak.”

Budhba replied softly, “Satyavrat, silence is sometimes protection, but sometimes injustice. I cannot make the decision for you—that belongs to your conscience. I know only this: whatever truth you know will remain alive inside you whether or not you speak today, and one day it will have to come out.”

He continued, “Remember this too. When the moment to speak has not yet come, silence is not cowardice but patience. But when the moment has come and one still remains silent, silence becomes injustice. Recognising that moment is conscience. And if it comes, you must have evidence, not merely words. Whatever you see, write it down.”

Returning to the city, Satyavrat remembered Budhba’s words and quietly began recording every suspicious transaction in a notebook—the date, the account, where the money moved, how much. He did not speak, but neither did he remain truly silent. He waited for the moment when silence could become testimony, without knowing how important that notebook would one day become.

CHAPTER -30 (THIRTY BEFORE)

Gop Kumar’s Document

Whoever keeps it written preserves time—a document saves not the body but the name.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE WRITTEN
INHERITANCE

Folk tune: collection song

*Whoever keeps it written preserves time,
A document saves not the body but the name.*

*Gop Kumar joined page to page with care,
Old leaf, new screen, bound upon one thread.
The body that time consumes may disappear, but writing survives,
The document kept the name and fought against time.*

*Bind old leaf and new screen upon one thread,
What Yadavanand wrote in secret, what Vibha brought into the open.
Scattered stories were brought into one place,
What the witness wrote down defeated time.*

*The story gathered together will live generation after generation,
The witness awakens every lost name again.
The body vanished; the name survived upon the written page,
Whoever preserves the document preserves every name.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A young villager named Gop Kumar devotes his life to documents and archives.)

In Satyavrat's time another young villager, Gop Kumar, carried forward the traditions of Yadavanand and Vibha by devoting his life to documentation and research. The boy who once spent hours smelling old paper and reading old names now set himself to bringing the whole memory of the village into one place.

He began joining old maps and registers with new digital records. Names Yadavanand had written by night, papers Vibha had obtained through the Right to Information law, and new records now created on screens—all these Gop Kumar connected thread by thread. People watching him said, "This young man wants to make the village's memory immortal."

Gop Kumar said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, I want to collect your entire story, from Yadavanand's register to the present day, in one place. Has the time come?"

Budhba thought for a long time. "Gop Kumar, Haripati the poet asked me this question, and I told him—not until the story is complete. I think it is still not complete. One final chapter remains, whose footsteps I have heard year after year. When that chapter is complete, your work will be complete too."

He continued, "Gop Kumar, collecting a story is not decoration; it is becoming a witness. Whoever writes a story must bear within himself every joy, sorrow, and injustice in it. Do not hurry. The final chapter that is coming will be the hardest. Ujjwal will be there, Batuknath will be there, and that distant shadow will be there. When they all arrive in one place, then write—and only then will the village possess its complete story."

One day, sorting old registers, Gop Kumar found the name of someone lost in a flood centuries earlier. Beside it Yadavanand had written a small note. Gop Kumar added that name and note to his new archive, and in that moment realised he was not merely assembling papers; he was building a bridge across centuries upon which every lost name might return to the village.

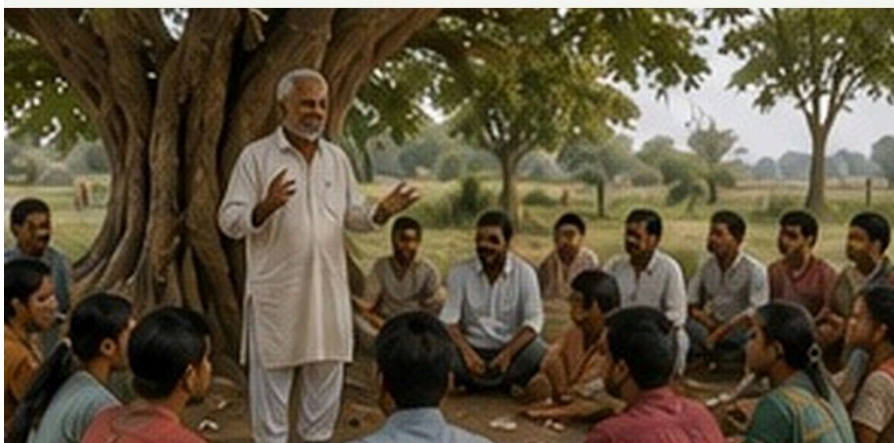
Hearing this, Gop Kumar continued his collection patiently. He knew he might become a witness, perhaps even the writer, of that final chapter. So he began preserving every name, every account, every thread for the day when Garh Narikel's complete story would stand together in one place, in one hand, from beginning to end.

CHAPTER -29 (TWENTY-NINE BEFORE)

Chandrapal's Dream

*Dream in the eyes, deception at the feet—whoever signs without
understanding is caught in the web.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DREAM AND DECEPTION

Folk tune: caution biraha

*Dream in the eyes, deception at the feet,
Whoever signed without understanding was caught in the web.*

*Chandrapal dreamed, dazzled by distant glitter,
He signed without understanding and set his foot in the web.
The dream danced in his eyes; deception bound his feet,
Whoever moved ahead without testing was caught unknowingly.*

*Whether the name belongs to the village or afar, the crocodile
recognises all,*

*Meerut or Garh Narikel—the web knows no boundary.
The crocodile asks neither name nor village nor border,
Wherever trust is given without testing, there is its kingdom.*

*Wherever one is born, the village can still hold the name,
Budhba's watch has now spread beyond the village embankment.
Whoever was trapped in Meerut has a name preserved here too,
Budhba's eyes have now crossed every boundary.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A young man born outside the village, Chandrapal Batra, earns a law degree and becomes entangled in a betting network.)

In Gop Kumar's time a child named Chandrapal Batra was born in Meerut to a distant branch of a family linked with the village. The family had left the village years before, moved from city to city, and finally settled in Meerut; its connection with Garh Narikel had shrunk to an old name and an occasional letter. Yet on the night of the child's birth Budhba felt strangely unsettled.

The villagers were puzzled. They understood Budhba's concern when a child was born in the village, but why should he be disturbed by a child born hundreds of miles away in an unfamiliar city? Gop Kumar, whose digital archive now linked distant relationships too, wondered the same thing.

Gop Kumar asked beneath the pipal, "Budhba, this child is not of the village. Why are you troubled about him?"

Budhba replied softly, "Gop Kumar, my witness-consciousness has now extended beyond the village boundary, just as your digital archive connects distant relations. In time this child will become part of my story whether or not he ever sees the village. I will hold his name—Chandrapal."

He continued, "The new crocodile that lives in wires and screens knows no village boundary. It can cheat someone sitting in Meerut as easily as someone in Garh Narikel. So my watch, too, must now travel beyond the village limits. Any name that may enter the web of this new crocodile, wherever born, must be held."

That night Gop Kumar sat beneath the pipal for a long time thinking about how Budhba's witness-consciousness had expanded beyond the village. Once Budhba held only names born on village soil; now he held names born thousands of miles away in unknown courtyards. Gop Kumar understood that as the new crocodile's web expanded, Budhba's watch expanded with it.

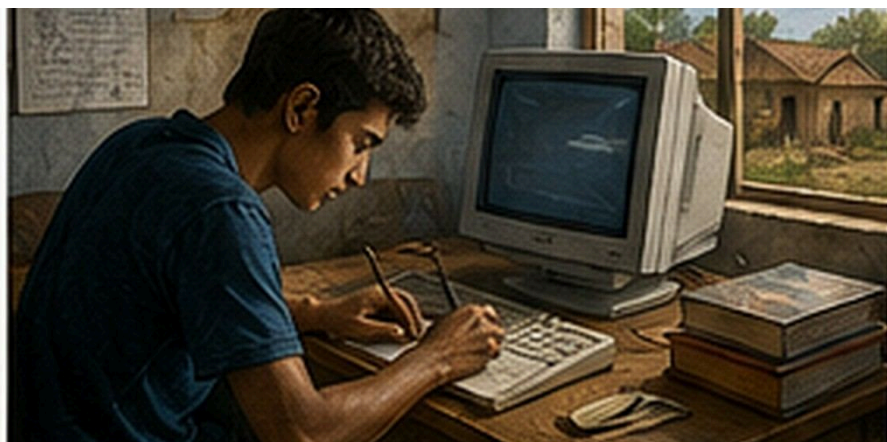
Gop Kumar added a new section to his archive—"Distant Relations"—and began preserving names linked with the village but born outside it. Chandrapal became the first entry. That day he understood that Budhba's story was no longer only Garh Narikel's story; it was becoming the story of every name, anywhere, that might enter the web of the new crocodile.

CHAPTER -28 (TWENTY-EIGHT BEFORE)

Raghav's Code

The language the machine understands is not the language the village understands—but even inside code a name remains hidden.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CODE AND NAME

Folk tune: machine sohar

*The language the machine understands, the village may not
understand,*

But even inside the code a name remains hidden.

*Raghav wrote code and understood the machine's language,
What the village could not understand appeared upon the screen.*

*But inside every code there lived a name,
The hand that made it left a mark of the mind.*

*The hand that creates can also destroy,
A sword is neither good nor bad; the mind gives it direction.
Power is not in the machine but in the mind that operates it,
The steady mind sends power along the right road.*

*Let power be great; the choice remains in the hand,
For the one who does not forget the roots, power becomes a guardian.*

*If code preserves names, it becomes a watchman,
If code erases names, it becomes a crocodile.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A gifted young programmer named Raghav is born in the town nearest the village, and the skill in his hands may one day move in either direction—protection or destruction.)

In one branch of Abhinav's family, in the town, a boy named Raghav was born with an extraordinary mind for code and machines. At a very young age he learned computer languages as naturally as village children had once learned letters on coconut leaves. Logic that took experienced engineers years to understand became play to Raghav.

As a teenager he performed feats that amazed people—sometimes repairing a complex machine, sometimes detecting a hidden error. Watching that extraordinary ability, some thoughtful people quietly wondered: such power in good hands could save thousands; in bad hands it could cheat just as many.

Gop Kumar, hearing about Raghav's talent, said beneath the pipal, "Budhba, this child is extraordinary. He will do great things one day."

Budhba replied anxiously, "Gop Kumar, extraordinary power can travel in either direction—toward protection or toward destruction. I do not know which direction Raghav will choose. I shall hold his name and wait."

He continued, "A sword is neither good nor bad; the mind of the hand that holds it makes it one or the other. Raghav's skill is such a sword. If he remembers his name, his village, and his conscience, this power can guard thousands. But if he forgets the name and runs only after power, the same skill can become a new crocodile. So I hold his name from today, so he does not forget his roots."

Once, a poor village family had a damaged and exhausted set of papers that no office would listen to. Raghav used his technical skill to repair the record in moments, and the family received its right. That day Gop Kumar understood that if Raghav's power moved in the right direction he could become one of the village's greatest guardians. Yet Budhba's question mark still stood beside the name.

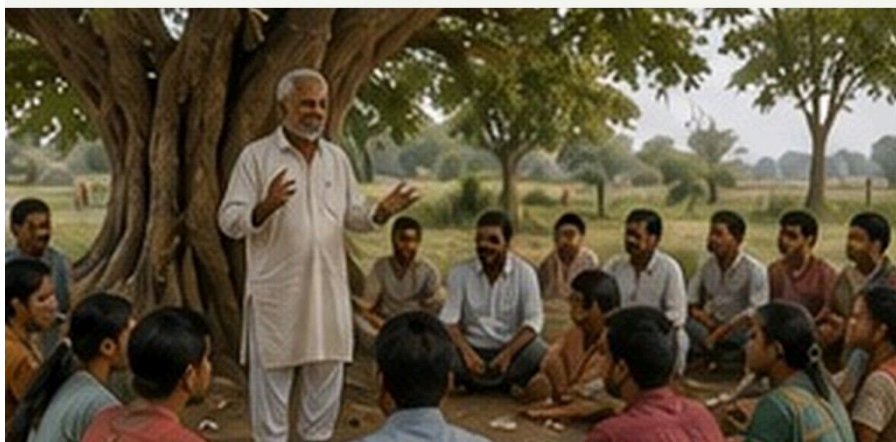
Gop Kumar entered Raghav's name in the archive and placed a question mark beside it—an empty space left for the future, to be filled by time. He knew the answer would be Raghav's own choice, and perhaps much of the village's future would depend upon it.

CHAPTER -27 (TWENTY-SEVEN BEFORE)

The Making of Aruni

Whoever builds must first shape himself—before the splash, Aruni first shaped his own way of seeing.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BUILDING AND SHAPING

Folk tune: building song

*Whoever would build must first shape himself,
A bridge stands firm only when the mind stands firm.*

*Aruni built bridges and learned engineering,
But the finest bridge was the self he first shaped.
He set stone, raised embankments, remembered the flood,
And never thought the elders' knowledge of water less than a machine.*

*Set the stone, raise the embankment, remember the flood,
The elders who read the water knew no less than any machine.*

*Join new instruments with old knowledge,
The one who joins the two builds the strongest bridge.*

*What has been built still needs care,
Without tending, even a solid embankment will one day sink.*

*Building alone is not enough; guarding it is also work,
The bridge one builds and tends does not collapse.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A young engineer named Aruni devotes himself to bridges and embankments, giving modern form to the village's old tradition of flood defence.)

In Gop Kumar's time, a young man of the village named Aruni studied engineering and took up the work of building bridges and embankments. He never forgot the flood stories of his childhood, or the story of Indrani's early-warning system—the floods that had once swept away village houses, and the embankment that generation after generation of village labour had finally made strong.

With his training, Aruni gave the old village embankment a new form—replacing earthwork with a permanent barrier and adding modern instruments for flood forecasting. Yet he also knew that any concrete embankment was incomplete without the old knowledge: the elders who understood the river's moods and the women who could read the rise of the water possessed knowledge no instrument could replace.

At the pipal, Aruni said, "Budhba, I want to build bridges and embankments that will never break, as our old village embankment finally became strong."

Budhba replied with affection, "Aruni, your wish is good. But remember—no construction, however strong, survives without care, just as our grove can weaken if no one tends it."

He continued, "People think the work is finished once they have built something strong. But whether it is an embankment, a village, or a memory, every generation must care for it anew. A bridge that is strong today may weaken through the neglect of the next generation. So true construction is not merely building—it is keeping what has been built alive."

One year, when the Kamla-Balan rose in a great flood, Aruni's new embankment faced its first real test. The villagers kept watch on it all night with lamps, and the embankment held. But Aruni knew the victory belonged not only to stone, but also to all the hands that stayed awake through the night; for in the end an embankment survives through the labour and care of the village that regards it as its own.

Taking that lesson to heart, Aruni began attaching a long-term maintenance plan to every project—deciding who would care for each bridge and embankment in the future and who would keep its records. Making Budhba's words a principle of his profession, Aruni became an engineer who shaped not merely stone, but the future of the stone he laid.

CHAPTER -26 (TWENTY-SIX BEFORE)

Devika's Song

*Justice belongs to the voice that carries the song—the name called in
song echoes throughout the village.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: JUSTICE OF THE VOICE

Folk tune: Devika melody

*Justice belongs to the throat that carries the song,
The name called in song echoes through the whole village.*

*Devika sang, filling her voice with justice,
A forgotten name rose again inside the song.
She sang Hulasa's tune, and Hulasa lived again,
An old melody awakened in a new voice.*

*Sing Hulasa's song, and Hulasa rises again,
If an old tune lives in a new voice, it does not die.
The song that preserves a name never loses it,
The voice that saves the tune saves every name within it.*

*Leaf or machine—the voice does not die,
Where a melody survives, every name dwelling in it survives.
The medium may change while the song remains steady,
The name held in melody echoes from age to age.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A young woman named Devika dedicates her life to carrying the village's folk-song tradition into the next generation.)

In Aruni's time, a young woman of the village named Devika carried Mohan's musical tradition forward. She began recording every old folk

song of the village—songs of Hulasa, Jivanti, and Gangesha—with new arrangements and instruments. Songs that had once lived only on field ridges, at water places, and on threshing floors were now entering recording devices and becoming durable memory.

Devika sat with the elderly women of the village and listened to songs that very few people still knew—a flood song, a birth song, a farewell song, a famine refrain. She recorded them exactly in those old voices and then shaped them anew for the younger generation. Old and new kept each other alive.

At the pipal, Devika said, “Budhba, I want to preserve every one of your melodies with modern technology so that future generations too can hear them.”

Budhba replied happily, “Devika, you are fulfilling Mohan’s dream. A melody, however old, never dies if it continues to live in new voices and new instruments.”

He continued, “Devika, saving names and saving songs are the same work. Names live inside songs. When Hulasa’s song is sung, Hulasa lives again for that moment. So when you place an old song in a new voice, you are not merely preserving a tune—you are making every name dwelling within that tune resound through the village again.”

One day Devika sat beside the oldest woman in the village, who knew a famine refrain no one else remembered. In a trembling voice the old woman sang it, and Devika recorded her. A few days later the woman died; but her voice, her song, and every name held within that song remained preserved for good.

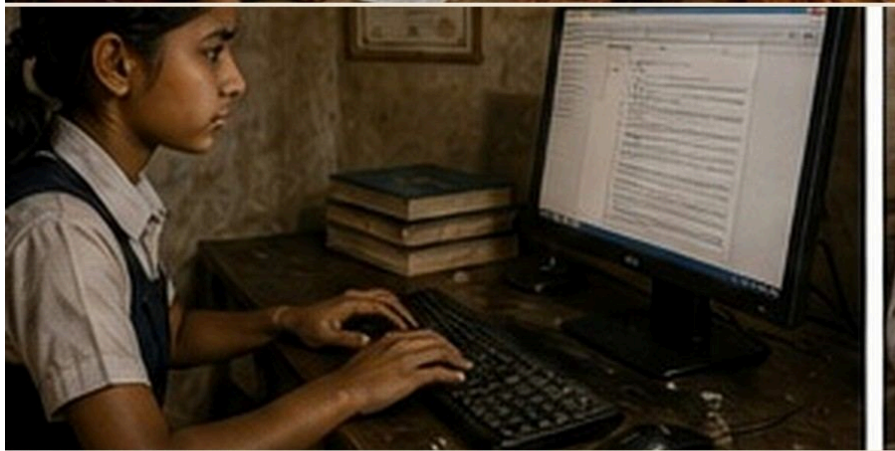
Devika opened a new school to teach old folk songs to village children—the music branch of the Coconut-Leaf School, where melody was taught alongside letters. Every child learned one old song before learning the alphabet, so that the village’s tunes, and the names living within them, would never break from one generation to the next.

CHAPTER -25 (TWENTY-FIVE BEFORE)

Meera’s Privacy

*The story belongs to the one whose life it is—name is not a specimen;
Meera’s story belongs to Meera.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CONSENT OF THE NAME

Folk tune: privacy song

*The story belongs to the one whose life it is, and so does consent,
A name is not a specimen; Meera's story is Meera's own.*

*Meera's image was stolen, her information became merchandise,
Without consent, name and story passed into another's hands.*

*But Meera said—"I am not a specimen,
My story goes nowhere without my consent."*

*Steal a photograph, sell information, put a name on the market—
Whoever takes name and image without consent is a thief.
The story belongs to its subject; the name belongs with consent,
Whoever takes without asking becomes a thief of names.*

*The right to privacy is, in the end, the right to one's name,
Whose name it is, whose consent it must be—that is the strongest
watch.*

*A name is no one's sample; every name is a story,
Whoever takes it without consent breaks the dignity of that name.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A sharp young woman named Meera begins raising her voice for the right to digital privacy.)

In Devika's time, a sharp young woman of the village named Meera studied in the city and began working on digital privacy and women's safety. She carried forward Sapna's tradition of the "digital night assembly," adding legal assistance so that a woman facing online abuse would receive not only sympathy but concrete help.

Meera saw new forms of injustice emerging in the modern world—someone stealing a woman's photograph, someone selling her personal information, someone using her name without permission. The crocodile that had once devoured bodies now began devouring women's privacy, dignity, and names. Meera understood that stopping it was as necessary as saving homes from flood had once been.

At the pipal, Meera said, "Budhba, in today's world a woman's photograph or personal information can be stolen without her consent. I want to fight this."

Budhba replied, "Meera, you are the modern heir to Sulochana and Padma. The right to privacy is ultimately a right over one's name—the right that no one may use your name or your image without your consent."

He continued, "Meera, all these years I have said that the crocodile eats the body but not the name. But this new crocodile wants to eat the name as well: it steals a woman's image, sells her name in the marketplace, and tries to erase her dignity. So now saving a name is not only the work of memory; it is also the work of honour. Whose name it is, whose consent it must be—that is the strongest guard."

Once, a village girl whose photograph had been stolen by an unknown person who tried to defame her came to Meera's digital night assembly. With legal help, Meera brought the hidden offender into the light for the first time, and the girl who would otherwise have remained silent in shame stood upright again. That day the village understood that the struggle for privacy was ultimately a struggle for dignity.

Inspired by Budhba's words, Meera began teaching every village woman and girl the rights of digital safety—how to protect personal information, how to speak against abuse, and where to obtain legal help. She knew the struggle had only begun, not ended; but once the struggle had begun, at least no woman had to stand alone.

CHAPTER -24 (TWENTY-FOUR BEFORE)

Nishant's Bank

*When the account is clean, the mind is steady—but whoever sells a
name through an account loses the reckoning.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: ACCOUNTS AND SPEECH

Folk tune: bank song

*When the account is clean, the mind is steady,
But whoever sells a name through an account loses the reckoning.*

*Nishant sat in the bank, counting account after account,
But whoever sold a name through an account lost the reckoning.
For years the moneylender cheated the poor who could not understand
the accounts,
If the bank too remained complex, it would become the moneylender's
new form.*

*The moneylender cheated the poor because they did not understand the
accounts,
If the bank too stayed difficult, it would only be a new moneylender.
Fraud hides in the language the poor cannot understand,
The one who explains in simple speech creates trust.*

*The language of banks is difficult; the poor may not understand it,
The one who explains it in their own speech is the true helper.
Keep the account clean; do not sell the name,
The one who understands the reckoning and teaches it saves the
village's wealth.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A young banker named Nishant works for financial inclusion, bringing the village economy into a modern system.)

In Meera's time, a young man of the village named Nishant studied banking and began working for rural financial inclusion, bringing bank accounts, insurance, and credit facilities to every household. He had heard stories of the old days when poor villagers, trapped in the compound-interest web of moneylenders, lost fields, homes, and honour.

Nishant wanted that old injustice never to return. Yet he also saw that bank forms and banking language were as unfamiliar to an illiterate farmer as the moneylender's ledger had once been. The very language designed to protect him could become a new trap if he could not understand it.

At the pipal, Nishant said, "Budhba, I want no family in the village ever again to fall into the moneylender's debt trap as people once did."

Budhba replied, "Nishant, that is a good wish. But remember, banking language is complicated, and poor people cannot always understand it. Your real work is to turn the language of the bank into the language people speak."

He continued, "Injustice is always born where one side understands and the other does not. The moneylender cheated the poor because the poor could not understand the accounts. If the bank remains just as complicated, it will become only a new form of moneylender. But if you explain every scheme, every form, and every calculation in the farmer's own speech, then for the first time the farmer will hold his rights in his own hands. Sharing knowledge is true inclusion."

Once, an elderly farmer who had always feared putting his thumbprint on any paper opened a bank account in his own name after Nishant explained everything simply. When the first insurance payment reached his hands, tears filled the old man's eyes. That day Nishant understood that a bank's real work was not to store money, but to give the poor confidence in their own rights.

Nishant therefore began explaining every financial scheme in simple Maithili—what each account was for, what protection each insurance policy offered, and on what terms each loan worked. Sitting in the village square, drawing pictures and giving examples, he explained everything so that even an illiterate farmer could understand his rights. From then on no village family was cheated merely because it could not understand the complicated language of banking.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -23 (TWENTY-THREE BEFORE)

The Birth of Nand

Every birth brings a new name—Nand's birth gave the village a new witness.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE BIRTH OF NAND

Folk tune: birth song

Every birth brings a new name,

Nand was born and gave the village a new witness.

A new name came to the village today—Nand was born,

A new watchman appeared to carry Budhba's road forward.

The witness-tree stood utterly still, not a leaf moved,

As though for hundreds of years it had waited for this name.

The witness-tree stood utterly still, not a leaf moved,

As though for hundreds of years it had waited for this name.

The seed planted long ago gave shade today,

The tree that had been witness saw a new name arrive.

The burden of a name is heavy; two shoulders must lift it,

The one born today will remain with the story until its end.

Nand came bearing a name and became the village's hope,

The witness born today would become the final witness.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In this chapter, at last, the child is born whose story far ahead will become the beginning of "Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles"—Nand Aruni.)

In Nishant's time, a son was born in Aruni's own household and was named Nand. On the night of the birth, the witness-pipal stood unusually calm and still, as if it too had been waiting for this arrival. Elder villagers who had watched the tree through generations said they had rarely seen such stillness—as though something momentous were about to happen.

There was ordinary happiness in the house—birth songs were sung, people danced, and jaggery was distributed. But those who knew Budhba noticed that he was giving this birth a special, deep attention, as if he saw in the child something no one else could see.

Aruni carried his newborn son to the pipal. “Budhba, this is my son Nand. I want him to know your story, the story of the village, and carry it forward.”

Budhba replied very gently, “Aruni, I hold this child's name with special affection. I do not know what is written in his life, but I know this much—he will witness a story whose beginning and end are both tied deeply to our memory.”

He continued, “Aruni, over all these years I have seen many births and held many names. But some names carry not merely one life, but an entire story upon their shoulders. I feel that Nand's is such a name. He will witness the day when my whole story—from shell and silver until today—comes together in one place and takes its final form. Shape him well, Aruni; he is not only your son, but the village's next witness.”

That night the villagers remained gathered near the pipal for a long time, because whenever Budhba became so still and attentive at a birth, the village knew an extraordinary name had arrived. Holding his son, Aruni sat under the witness-tree for a long while, resolving to shape Nand's vision so that he would learn to see name and reckoning above body and paper.

Though the air was still, the pipal leaves rustled softly that night, as if the whole Channa Grove, carrying centuries of memory, were welcoming the new name. And Budhba, seated under the still tree after a long time, kept looking at Nand's tiny hand as if he could already see there the final page of his story.

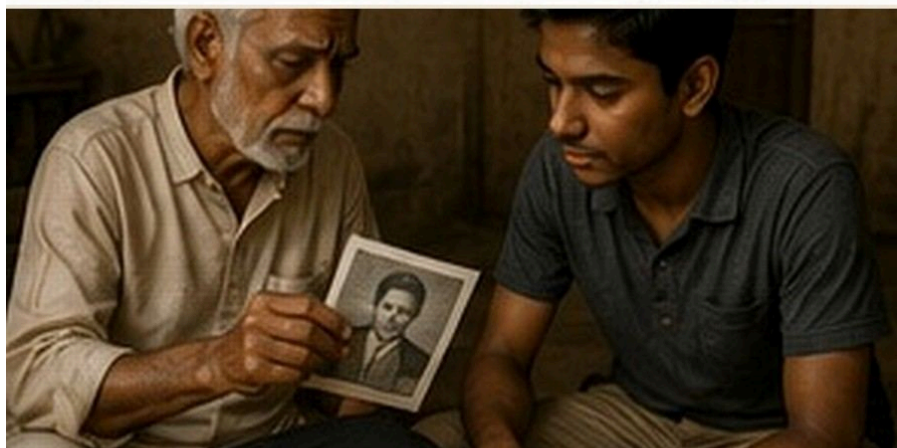
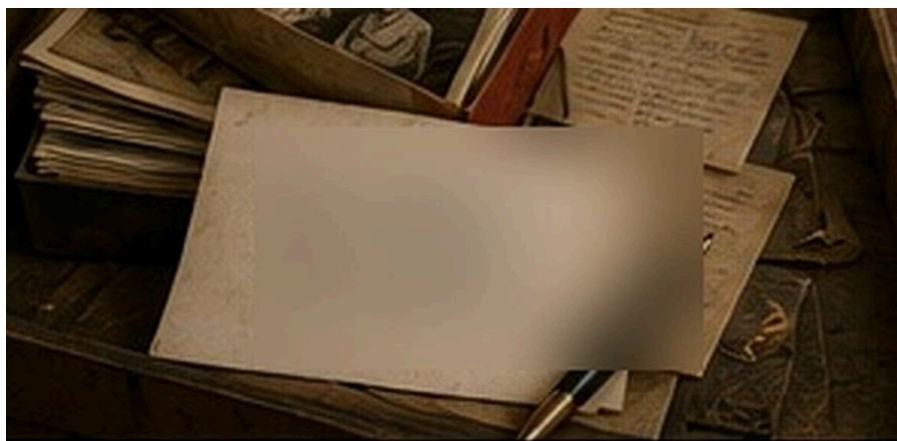
CHAPTER -22 (TWENTY-TWO BEFORE)

Near Twelve Hundred

Twelve hundred years did not pass in a single breath—the village that endured so much still stood at the edge of the end.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: TWELVE HUNDRED YEARS

Folk tune: song of time

*Twelve hundred years did not pass in a single breath,
The village that endured so much still stood at the end.*

*From shell and silver the story began; twelve hundred years flowed,
Every generation endured something, yet the village still stood.*

*Flood came, famine came, war and epidemic,
Each time the village broke, then rose and gathered itself again.*

*Flood, famine, war, epidemic—all entered the tale,
Broken, then standing; broken, then alive again.
Every calamity took names, but the village did not surrender,
The names it remembered carried it through twelve hundred years.*

*What began with shell and silver still lives today,
Budhba's breath holds the village's twelve hundred years.
It did not pass in one breath; it flowed drop by drop,
The history the village held still stands at the edge of the end.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Counting the years of his own existence, Budhba draws near a startling truth.)

After Nand's birth, Gop Kumar sat down one evening to assemble Budhba's complete chronology in his archive—from the time of

Vachaspati Mishra to the present. He added one generation, one name, one event after another, and as the number grew, his eyes widened.

The chronology held hundreds of names—Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Savitri, and countless generations after them. Amid all those names one name stood unmoving, present in every generation: Budhba. Gop Kumar realised he was not calculating a single lifetime, but adding together the memory of an entire civilisation.

“Budhba,” Gop Kumar said in astonishment, “by my calculation, it has been almost twelve hundred years since your water-burial!”

Budhba laughed softly—the rare, unforgettable laugh the villagers had begun to call “Budhba’s laugh.” “Gop Kumar, I stopped counting my age long ago. But if your reckoning is right, it is a round and memorable number—twelve hundred years. Perhaps far in the future the villagers will remember me by that number, just as you are doing today.”

After a pause he added, “But Gop Kumar, a number is only a sign, not the story. Twelve hundred years are not what matters. What matters is how many names survived in those twelve hundred years, how many were lost, and how many are still being held. If the village remembers me through that number, I have only one wish: let it also remember all the names that, beside me, made the story of this village through those twelve hundred years.”

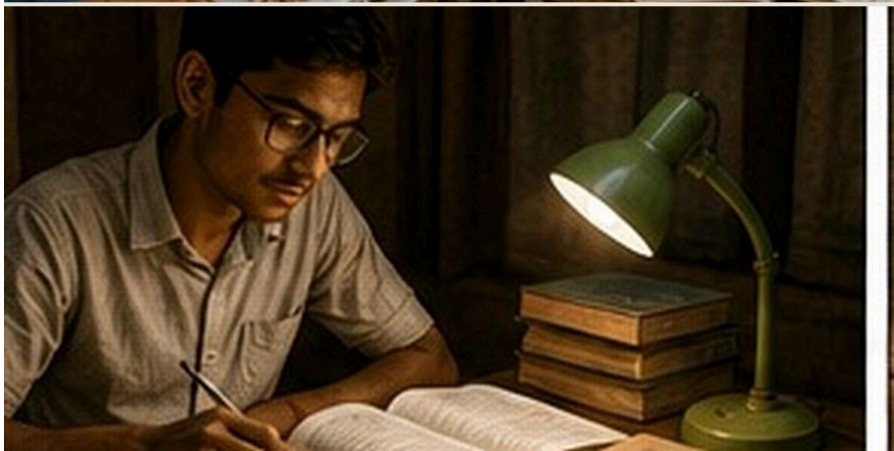
Gop Kumar stared at the chronology in silence for a long time. Twelve hundred years contained countless floods, famines, wars, and epidemics; through each calamity the village broke, stood again, broke again, and stood again. A village that had faced death so many times and still returned to life seemed to him not merely the story of one village, but the story of human persistence itself.

Gop Kumar marked that calculation specially in his archive and smiled faintly. He did not know how the number—twelve hundred years—would one day be repeated in another language on the tongue of another generation; how that round number would someday become almost a title for the village’s whole story when someone far in the future wrote it again.

CHAPTER -21 (TWENTY-ONE BEFORE)

Ananya’s Question

A small question can crack a great dome—the one who asks saves the name.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: ANANYA'S QUESTION

Folk tune: question melody

*A small question can crack a great dome,
The one who asks saves the name and saves the village.*

*Ananya asked a small question, and a crack appeared in the dome,
“Where did this come from? Who said it?”—and truth opened.
The one who memorised answers was trapped in confusion,
The one who questioned and tested escaped the net.*

*Do not merely memorise answers; ask, test, understand,
“Where did this come from? Who said it? What is the proof?”
Gangesha's question rises in every generation,
The one who learns to ask is not fooled by glitter.*

*The child who learns to question does not fall into the net,
Gangesha's question never falls silent; it rises in every generation.
A question cracks the dome of illusion,
The one who asks saves the name and saves the village.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. A curious young woman named Ananya begins teaching village children to ask questions, carrying Gangesha's tradition forward.)

While Nand was still a child, a young village teacher named Ananya came to teach in the modern branch of the Coconut-Leaf School. She was the kind of teacher who did not make children memorise answers; she taught them how to ask questions. In her classroom no question was treated as foolish. The child who asked the most questions received the greatest praise.

The older villagers, many of whom had grown up under rote learning, were at first surprised by this new method. Gradually, however, they saw that Ananya's pupils accepted nothing with closed eyes: they asked, tested, and reasoned. Among them one child—Nand—asked more questions than anyone else, as if some ancient curiosity had awakened within him.

At the pipal, Ananya said, "Budhba, I want to teach the children Gangesha's inquiry into the means of knowledge—perception, inference, testimony, comparison—but in simple language, so that they learn to test everything by asking questions."

Budhba replied with deep satisfaction, "Ananya, this is my greatest hope—that Gangesha's question never falls silent, but rises again in a new form from the mouths of children in every generation."

He continued, "Ananya, in all these years I have learned one thing: the village that stops asking questions is the first village to be cheated. Every new crocodile—whether the illusion of shell and silver or fraud on a screen—succeeds against those who do not ask. So teaching children to question is not merely education; you are shaping the village's next guard."

One day Ananya told the old story of shell and silver in class—how a man had mistaken a shell for silver. All the children were quiet, but Nand raised his hand and asked, "Madam, if that man had asked whether it really was silver, would he have avoided being deceived?" Ananya smiled, because in that small question she saw the whole lesson Gangesha had taught centuries before.

From then on Ananya taught Nand and his classmates to ask a new question every day: Why is this so? Where did this come from? What is the evidence? Nand in particular carried that habit with him for life. The practice of questioning that Ananya gave him in childhood would later become his greatest weapon, on the day he faced a crocodile that could be defeated only by questions.

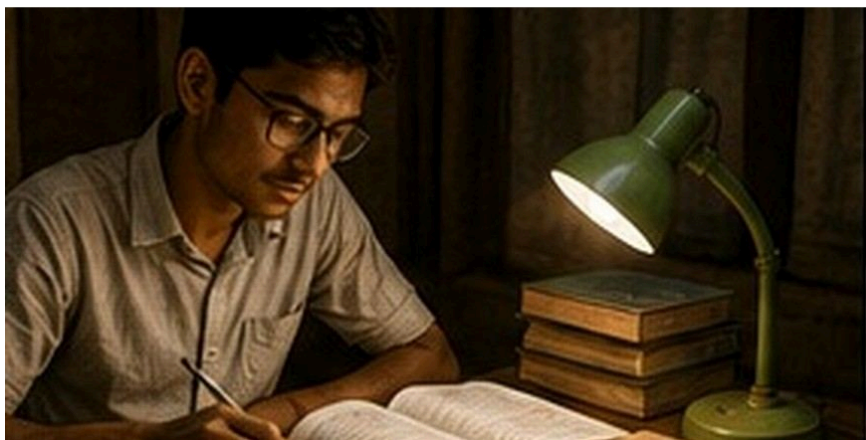
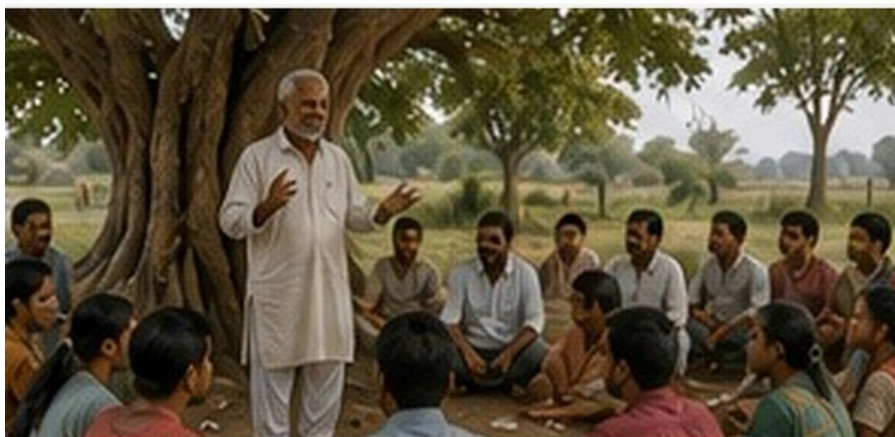
WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER -20 (TWENTY BEFORE)

The First Reckoning of the Splash

*The first splash—the first name in the water—the one who kept the
reckoning made the crocodile a witness.*

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE BRIDGE OF NAMES

Folk tune: crocodile melody

*The first splash, the first name in the water,
The one who kept the reckoning made the crocodile a witness.*

*The first splash struck the water; the first name went under,
But when someone wrote it down, the name rose again.
The name cut from paper may vanish in the water,
But the name living in a voice awakens again and again.*

*The name cut from paper may vanish in the water,
But when someone writes it down, the name rises again.
The crocodile takes the body, not the name—this is the village truth,
The one who keeps the reckoning turns the crocodile into a witness.*

*The crocodile eats the body, but it does not eat the name,
Leave the bridge of stone; build the bridge of names.
The stone bridge may be swept away in flood,
The bridge bound with names stands through the ages.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Young Nand, carrying his father's engineering inheritance forward, goes to work at a bridge-construction site and sees something strange there for the first time.)

After Ananya's teaching, Nand grew up, studied engineering, and followed his father Aruni's path to work at a bridge-construction site. He had learned how to build bridges, but he never forgot how Ananya had taught him to ask questions. At the site, those questioning eyes began to notice things others did not see.

He saw the condition of the labourers—their broken huts, low wages, and lack of safety. Sometimes he heard a story that shook him deeply: a worker would suddenly disappear one night, and no one kept any account of him. His name vanished from the contractor's papers, as though the man had never existed.

On leave Nand returned to the village and went to the pipal. "Budhba, work on the bridge is dangerous. I heard about a labourer who disappeared one night, and no one kept any record of him."

Budhba answered gravely, "Nand, what you have heard reminds me of Sukhdev Mahato—the story of workers and peasants whose names never enter any official reckoning. Nand, you are an engineer, but inside you there is also a witness, from my own blood. Find that worker's name, and if you find it, hold it."

He continued, "Nand, your work is to build a bridge joining two banks. But there is another bridge you must build—the bridge between a name and the reckoning from which the system cuts it away. The body of a vanished worker may never be found; but if you hold his name, the person does not disappear completely. That is your true inheritance, Nand—not the bridge of stone, but the bridge of names."

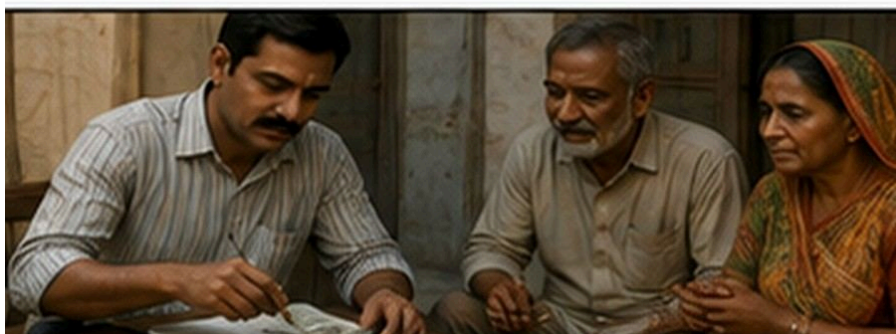
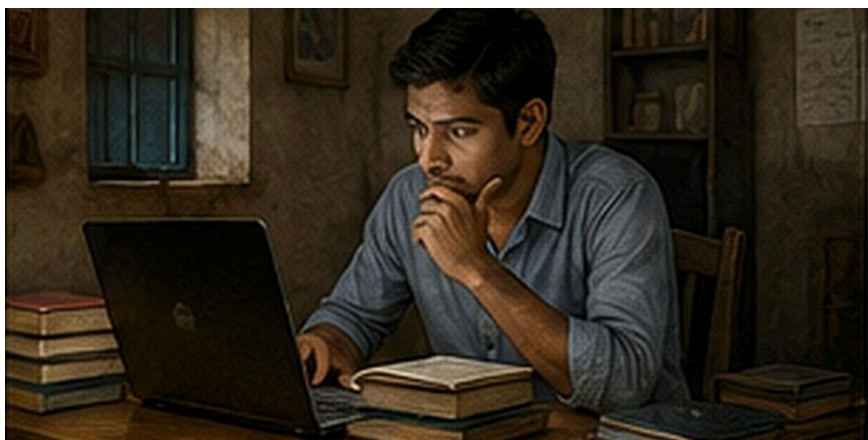
That night Nand wrote for the first time in his diary: "The crocodile eats the body, not the name"—an old sentence of Budhba's that his grandmother had once told him and that he was now about to make a guide for his life. With that first page began the diary he would later call "The Reckoning of the Splash." From that day Nand was no longer only an engineer; he had become the village's next witness.

CHAPTER -19 (NINETEEN BEFORE)

Satyavrat's Decision

The decision that comes late may be the steadiest—Satyavrat remained silent, but in the end he stood with the names.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE STEADY DECISION

Folk tune: decision song

*The decision that comes late may be the steadiest,
He stayed silent for a long time, but in the end stood with the names.*

*Satyavrat stayed silent long, watching, enduring, gathering,
The evidence gathered over years now had to speak.
The decision came late, but stood firm at the root,
What is chosen after thought does not easily waver.*

*The evidence gathered for years must now speak,
But do not fight alone; find another witness beside you.
One hand is weak, ten hands are strong,
The decision of those who stand together does not break.*

*Silence will break, and truth will stand with evidence,
This fight for names belongs not to one person but to the whole village.
The late decision became the steadiest,
The road of the one who stood with the village did not waver.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Amid the evidence collected year after year in his notebook, Satyavrat Mehta finally approaches a decision.)

During Nand's engineering studies, Satyavrat Mehta, now in a senior position at the bank, reopened the old notebook in which he had

recorded suspicious transactions years before. Dates and account numbers he had written down quietly over the years, when placed together, now revealed a clear and frightening pattern—as though scattered points had finally become a picture.

In that pattern, money travelled from one account to another, then to a third, and finally to distant accounts across the sea. Some names appeared again and again—some familiar, some unknown. Satyavrat understood that this was no ordinary embezzlement, but a large organised network whose threads extended far beyond the village. And he was now among the few people capable of understanding the pattern.

Returning to the village, Satyavrat said at the pipal, “Budhba, what I saw years ago is still happening, now on a much larger scale. I no longer think I can remain silent.”

Budhba replied slowly, “Satyavrat, you have gathered evidence for many years. Now it is time for the evidence to speak. But be careful—the power you are challenging may be strong and ruthless.”

He continued, “Many years ago I told you that wisdom lies in recognising the moment to speak. I think that moment is now near. But a power this great is defeated not by accusation alone, but by proof. Do not fight alone. Find those who can stand beside you—an honest officer, another witness. For this fight for names, Satyavrat, is not one person’s fight; it belongs to the whole village.”

On the way home that night, Satyavrat thought for a long time. He knew that what he was preparing to stand against was not merely a handful of corrupt accounts, but a network whose threads might reach all the way to the glass tower Abhinav had once spoken of. But Budhba’s old words—“silence that becomes injustice”—kept sounding in his ears, and he knew there was no longer any turning back.

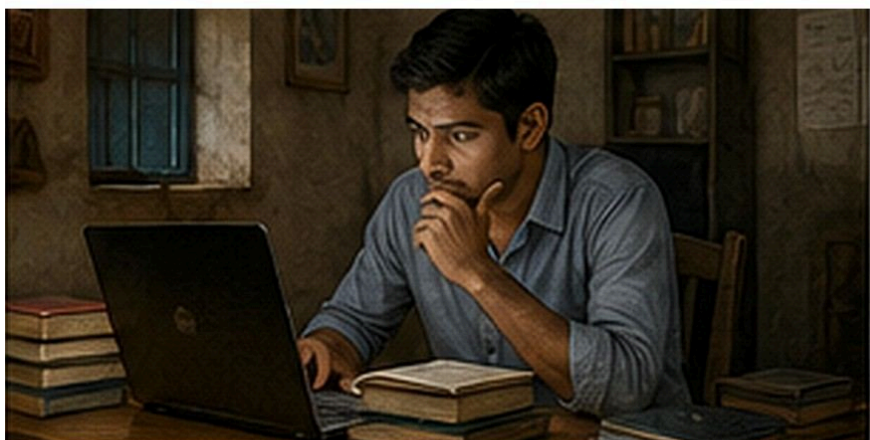
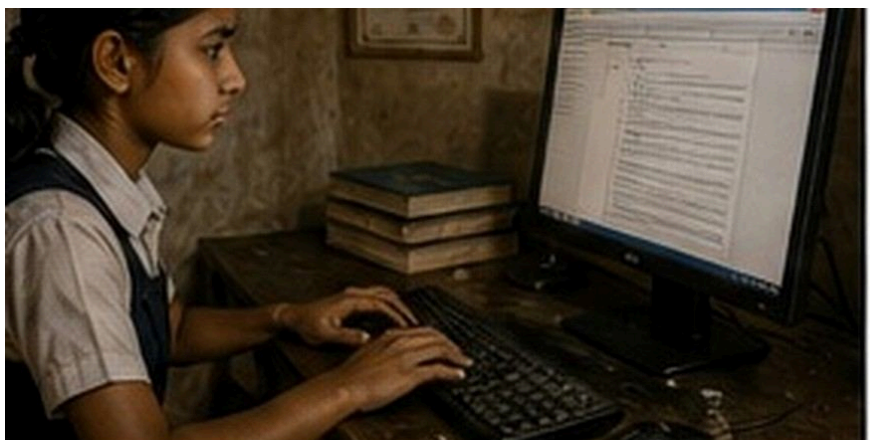
Satyavrat placed the notebook in a secure location and began quietly waiting for the right opportunity. He knew that when the truth emerged, it would emerge with hard evidence. And he also knew he was not alone: somewhere in the village’s memory stood all of Budhba’s words, insisting that silence, when it becomes injustice, must be broken.

CHAPTER -18 (EIGHTEEN BEFORE)

Ananya Meets Nand

Two roads met in one place and a new journey began—those who share a purpose walk together.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: TWO ROADS, ONE JOURNEY

Folk tune: confluence song

*Two roads met in one place and a new journey began,
Those whose purpose is one let their feet walk together.*

*Ananya came carrying questions; Nand came carrying construction,
Two roads met in one place and chose a new journey.*

*Memory and technology became one,
Power once scattered was drawn onto a single thread.*

*Ananya's questions and Nand's building joined,
Memory and technology were bound onto one thread.*

*One knew how to ask; one knew how to build,
Together they became new guardians of the witness.*

*The burden of witness is heavy; two shoulders make it lighter,
Those who walked together gave the village memory a new watch.*

*One alone grew tired; two together became strong,
The road of those who shared a purpose did not break.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Teacher Ananya and engineer Nand meet for the first time while working on a shared village project.)

After completing his engineering studies, Nand returned to the village and began working with Ananya on a project to modernise the Coconut-Leaf School—a plan to preserve the village heritage digitally. The teacher who had taught him to ask questions in childhood and the engineer who now understood name and reckoning as a bridge came together for the first time in a common task.

Ananya knew every old village story, every folk song, every genealogy; Nand knew how to preserve them digitally and durably. Their work completed each other, as though Ananya's questioning and Nand's building had come together to create a new guard. Using new technology, they began carrying Gop Kumar's old collection forward.

As they worked, they also noticed how closely their values and ways of thinking matched. Both wanted to save names, both wanted to hold truth, both wanted to make the village memory endure. Two roads that had begun separately were now flowing in the same direction.

Sitting together at the pipal, they spoke to Budhba. Nand said, "Budhba, Ananya and I want to gather every old village story and every record in one place."

Budhba replied happily, "Nand, Ananya, you are carrying Gop Kumar's work forward. I feel the final chapter I have awaited year after year is now close."

He continued, "Some work cannot be done alone, Nand. To become a witness is to carry a burden, and a burden becomes lighter when two shoulders lift it together. You two—question and construction, memory and technology—complete one another. The final chapter that is coming will be so difficult that no one person can bear it; it will take two people standing together."

From that day, Nand and Ananya worked side by side, bringing every old page, every lost name, every folk song back to life. Neither understood yet that they were becoming witnesses to Budhba's final chapter—and that the shared journey begun that day would bind not only the village's story but also their own lives to each other.

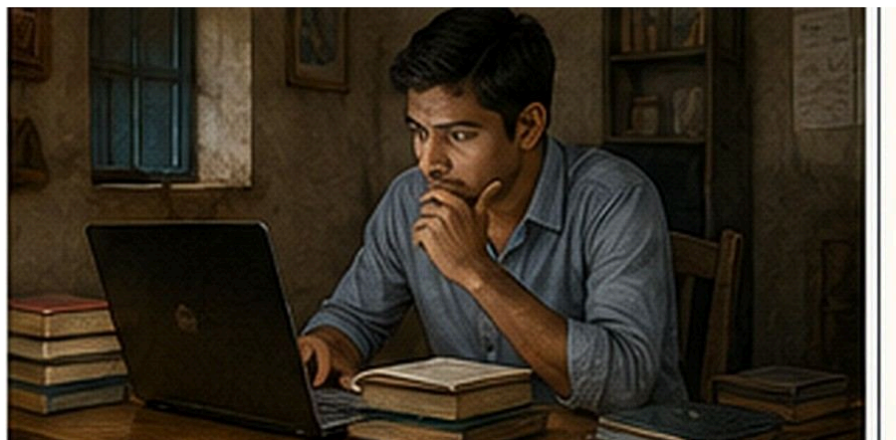
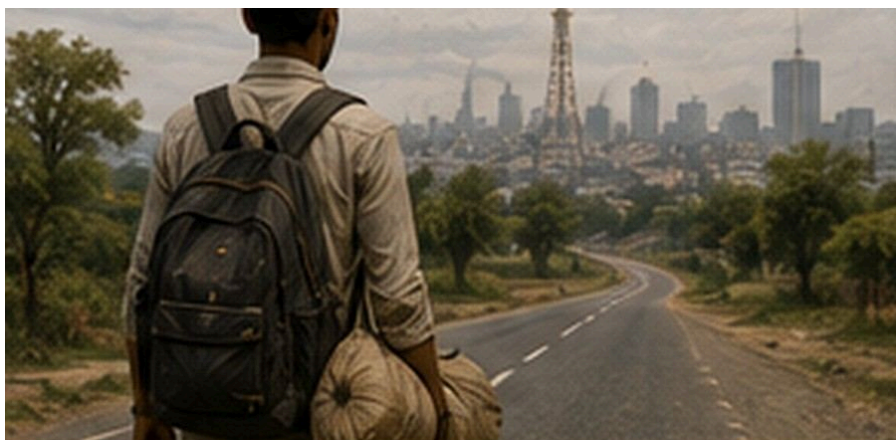
CHAPTER -17 (SEVENTEEN BEFORE)

The Glass-Tower Web

The glass tower gleams from afar, but a web lies within—the one dazzled by the glitter is caught in the net.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THREE CROCODILES

Folk tune: tower song

*The glass tower gleams from afar,
A hidden web lies within—do not be fooled by the glitter.*

*The glass tower touched the sky and glittered from afar,
But a web was woven inside, with truth concealed.*

*It promised jobs, sold dreams of investment,
And behind the darkness of trafficking, all three became one net.*

*Jobs, investment, trafficking—all one web,
Eating bodies, eating money, eating names—three crocodiles.
The old crocodile lived in water; the new one lives in the tower,
But their hunger is the same—to devour names in darkness.*

*The one dazzled by the glitter is caught in the net,
Question every promise, test every gleam, and only then move forward.*

*However high the tower, its roots may be hollow,
The one who knows how to question and test can escape the web.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The fraud network run by Lau Kin-Hung, in its full reach, draws close to Garh Narikel.)

In Nand's time, news reports repeatedly began describing a vast digital-fraud network operating from Hong Kong and linked to the

name of Lau Kin-Hung. It was no ordinary fraud: it combined false job offers, investment scams, and human trafficking, with threads spread across dozens of countries.

The network was built so that no one could see its whole form. On one side a young person was promised a “good job”; on another an investor was tempted by the promise of “doubling the money”; elsewhere a poor person was taken abroad and imprisoned. Every thread seemed separate, yet all of them ultimately curved back toward the same glass tower.

While working on their digital archive, Ananya and Nand heard more and more about this network. As they understood its reach, a deep unease settled in them. The shadow Abhinav had once seen in the newspaper was slowly growing larger on the horizon of their own village.

Worried, Ananya said at the pipal, “Budhba, this web is so vast that I fear it may reach even Garh Narikel.”

Budhba replied gravely, “Ananya, I fear it has already reached us—in Ujjwal Jha’s dream, in Batuknath’s fall. One day this web will touch one village name directly. I do not know whose name, but I can feel it.”

He continued, “Ananya, in all these years I have seen many crocodiles—the crocodile of water, the crocodile of time, the crocodile of the screen. But this web is the most terrible, because it joins many crocodiles at once. It eats bodies, money, and names alike. I have only one weapon against it—awareness, and the keeping of names. If the village stays alert and holds every one of its names, this web will not be able to take root here.”

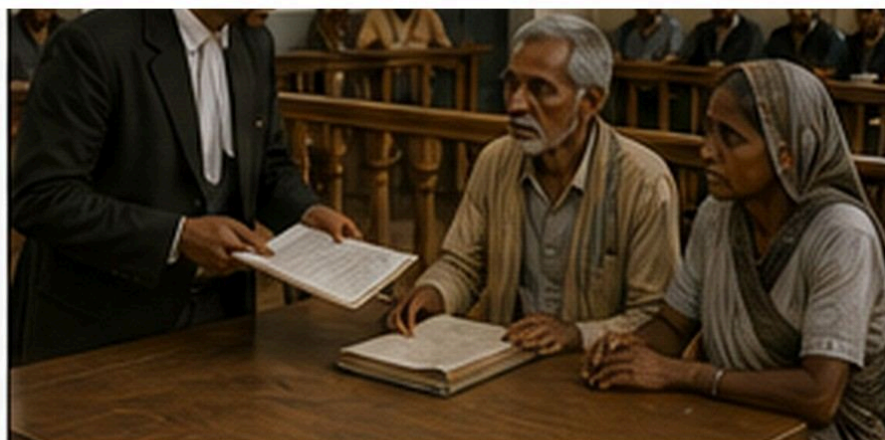
After hearing him, Ananya began warning every young person in the village again—asking what promise was coming from afar and what web might be hidden behind its glitter. She knew Budhba’s intuition had never been empty; and if he now felt that the web would touch a village name, that day was probably not very far away.

CHAPTER -16 (SIXTEEN BEFORE)

Batuknath’s Final Turn

A wrong road too demands a turn at the end—at last Batuknath turned back toward his own name.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE TURN IN THE WRONG ROAD

Folk tune: melody of remorse

*A wrong road too demands a turn at the end,
At last Batuknath turned back toward his own name.*

*Batuknath was a brilliant boy who fought for the poor,
But he lost his way and was trapped in the net of prestige.*

*Today he is respected, yet stands in darkness,
The one who dreamed of justice has become a pillar of delusion.*

The brilliant boy who wanted to fight for the poor

Today stands respected, but in darkness.

*Yet even a wrong road has a turn at its end,
The thread does not break for one who turns back toward his name.*

Today he is in darkness, yet the name still stands,

Hope does not die for one who can change his road.

*The wrong road demanded its turn at last,
The one who turned and walked toward his name was no longer far
away.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Batuknath finally gives his legal skill wholly to the service of a dark power.)

A few months after Ananya's warning, news arrived that Batuknath Hariharan, now a respected but dubious lawyer, had begun appearing for the defence in several major fraud cases. Again and again he obtained adjournment after adjournment, exhausted witnesses, tangled evidence, and postponed justice indefinitely—until the victims themselves grew tired, defeated, and silent.

His name was now counted among the city lawyers sought out by powerful accused persons for their defence. He won, grew rich, gained prestige—but behind every victory lay some poor person's defeat, some truth's undoing. The skill he had once learned for justice had become one of injustice's greatest weapons.

The older villagers who had known Batuknath since childhood felt a deep sorrow at this news. They remembered the brilliant, honest boy who had once dreamed of fighting for the poor, and then looked at the prestigious but darkened lawyer who had travelled very far from that child.

Hearing this, Nand said at the pipal, "Budhba, Batuknath has now turned completely toward darkness. It grieves me."

Budhba replied sadly, "Nand, I have kept Batuknath's name in the hope that he might change his road again. But I now understand that some names remain a source of sorrow even after we hold them. My work is not to change his choices; it is only to preserve his story truthfully."

He continued, "Nand, being a witness is a difficult duty. A witness must hold not only good names but guilty names too, and hold them truthfully. I neither curse Batuknath nor hide his fault—I keep his story as it is. For if I erase his fall, the lesson that truth gives us through that fall will also vanish. Truth, however painful, must be preserved."

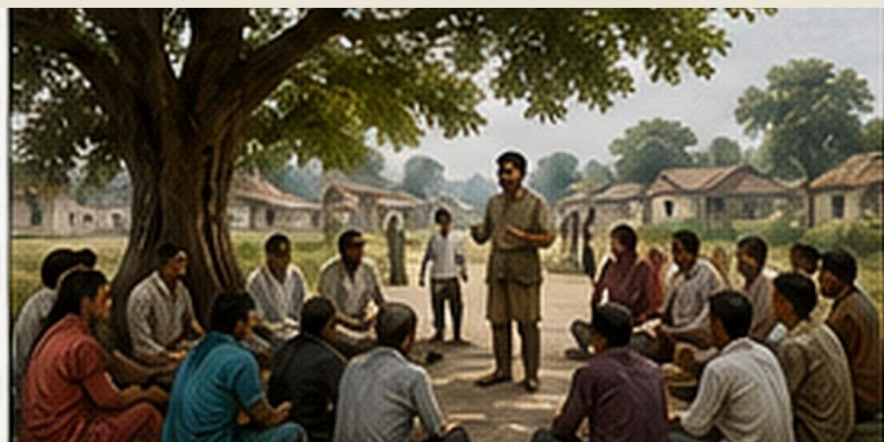
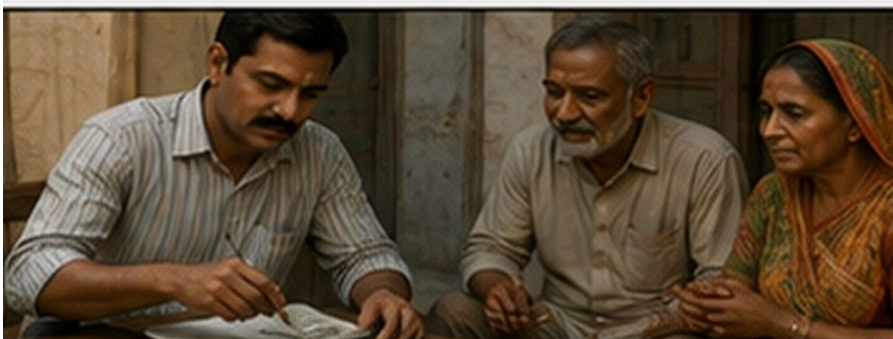
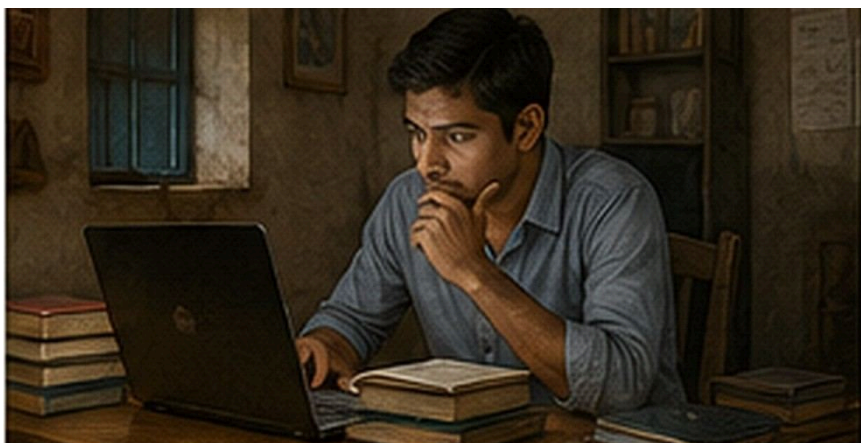
Remembering Budhba's words, Nand entered Batuknath's story in his archive without hatred and without pardon, simply as truth—from the brilliant child to the lawyer in darkness, the whole journey. He wrote knowing that someday someone might read the story and learn that no one is born guilty: systems, temptations, and choices together shape what a person becomes.

CHAPTER -15 (FIFTEEN BEFORE)

Chandrapal's Account

*Even a signature on an account one does not understand carries weight
—ignorance too is a knot in the web.*

— Garh Narikel



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE INFORMED
SIGNATURE**

Folk tune: cautionary sohar

*Even a signature on an account not understood carries weight,
Ignorance too becomes a knot in the web.*

*Chandrapal did not understand the account, yet he signed,
Calling it “commission work,” he hoped to escape the burden of debt.
But in every transaction flowed some poor person’s money,
The one who signs without understanding is caught in the net.*

*Calling it “commission work,” he hoped to escape the burden of debt,
But through every transaction flowed money stolen from someone poor.
Ignorance is no shield; it became a knot in the web,
The one who signed without understanding became guilty without
knowing.*

*The one who took commission without understanding was caught in
the net,
Ask, understand, then sign—or regret will follow.
Understand the account first; only then lift the pen,
The one who signs with understanding can escape the web.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Chandrapal Batra, drowning in gambling debt, becomes a “mule account” for the fraud network.)

In Nand's time, news came that Chandrapal Batra—the distant relative whose name Budhba had held many years before—had fallen into heavy gambling debt. Crushed and desperate under the burden, he was allowing a fraud network to use his bank account: money passed through it from one hand to another.

Chandrapal did not fully understand what he was doing. He had been told it was merely “commission work”: money would enter his account, he would forward it, and keep a small share. Tempted by the hope of escaping debt, he became a knot in the network without understanding that every such transaction carried money stolen from some poor victim.

In his notebook Satyavrat saw every transaction passing through that account, and understood that it was a small but important thread in the vast web. The names that had appeared in Ujjwal's dream and in Batuknath's fall were now joining one another in Chandrapal's account as well.

Hearing of it, Satyavrat said at the pipal, “Budhba, Chandrapal Batra has now become an instrument of the fraud network.”

Budhba replied sadly, “Satyavrat, I kept his name many years ago without knowing where his story would lead. Today I can see that Ujjwal, Batuknath, Chandrapal, and the shadow of that glass tower are slowly being woven into a single web.”

He continued, “Satyavrat, this web is woven so that each person remains ignorant of the others. Ujjwal does not know Batuknath, Batuknath does not know Chandrapal, and Chandrapal does not know whose glass tower it is. Yet from a distance I can see all their names being bound on one thread. When all those threads meet in one place, the final chapter will be complete—and I fear it will be the village's hardest chapter.”

After hearing this, Satyavrat began gathering his evidence with still greater care. He knew the time was drawing near when the entire network would be exposed, and he understood that on that day his old notebook, with every proof accumulated year after year, would become the village's greatest weapon. He waited only for the moment when silence could finally become testimony.

CHAPTER -14 (FOURTEEN BEFORE)

Building the Bridge

A bridge joins two sides, but does not forget the water—the one who builds a bridge remembers the flood.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BRIDGE AND WATCH

Folk tune: construction sohar

A bridge joins two sides, but does not forget the water,

The one who builds a bridge remembers the flood.

The bridge was built to join two sides; the world drew near,

But along the road that brings the world, crocodiles too may come.

A bridge is good with a watch beside it; a road is good with open eyes,

What is built needs an account and a guard as well.

Along the road that brings the world, new crocodiles too may come,

So build the bridge, but keep watch as well.

Make the stone strong and remember the flood,

When a bridge is built, its care must continue beside it.

Make the stone strong, but keep the names as well,

The hands that build the bridge must also be accounted for.

A bridge joins two sides, but does not forget the water,

The bridge built with vigilance can save the village.



(A passage of narrative fiction. In his engineering work, Nand is assigned to a new bridge-construction site, where the seed of the coming story is planted.)

By virtue of his skill, Nand was appointed assistant to the chief engineer at the construction site of a new bridge over the Kamla-Balan

near the village. After many years, the bridge would connect the village directly with the modern city: a journey that once took hours would now take minutes. The village was proud of the bridge, and Nand was carrying forward his father Aruni's dream of building a bridge that would not break.

But at the site, Nand's questioning eyes noticed things that troubled him—the lack of worker safety, people working at height without helmets, and a contractor's carelessness that treated labourers merely as numbers rather than names. Nand remembered the old story of the worker who had disappeared from a bridge and whom no one had counted.

Nand also noticed unfamiliar people coming and going from distant cities—contractors, brokers, and others whose purpose was unclear. He did not yet know what story would grow from the bridge he was building, but the witness within him quietly became alert.

At the pipal Nand said, “Budhba, this bridge will connect our village to the world. But the lack of safety at the site worries me.”

Budhba replied, “Nand, what you are seeing reminds me again of Sukhdev's story. Stay alert. The workers' names and their safety are your responsibility, not merely the strength of the bridge.”

He continued, “Nand, a bridge connects, and that is good—but the same bridge that connects may bring new dangers too. The road that carries the world to the village may also carry the new crocodile I have spoken of year after year. So build the bridge, but keep watch as well. And hold the name of every labourer who builds it with his sweat, because the names of those who build must be counted first of all.”

After hearing this, Nand took extra care for worker safety at the site, writing every labourer's name in his diary, asking after them, and arguing with the contractor for their protection. He did not know whether his vigilance would be enough—and he did not yet know that this very bridge and this very worksite would become the stage for the final chapter whose approach Budhba had been hearing for so long.

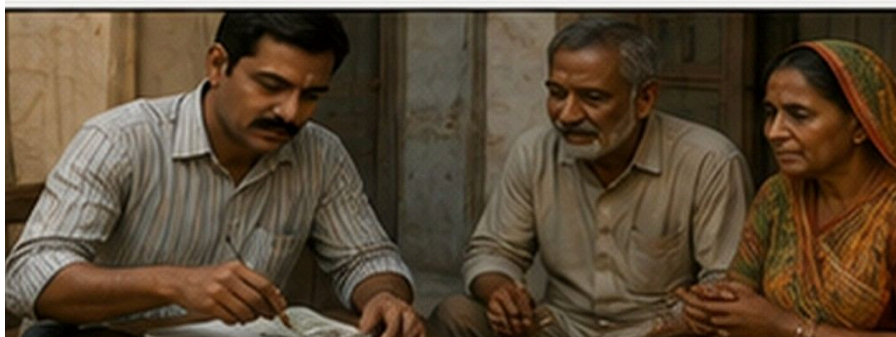
CHAPTER -13 (THIRTEEN BEFORE)

Gop Kumar's Collection

The one who joined name to name made history—a collection preserves not the body but memory.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SCATTERING MADE ONE

Folk tune: collection sohar

*The one who joined name to name made history,
A collection preserves not the body, but memory.*

*Gop Kumar joined name to name, gathering thread after thread,
From shell and silver to today, he made every story one.
The pages that had lain scattered came together,
Twelve hundred years of memory formed a single picture.*

*Shell and silver, Hulasa's water-burial, Sukhdev's nameless death,
All the threads met in one place and formed one picture.
The story that had existed in fragments became whole,
And the collection came into Nand's hands.*

*What lay scattered has now become one,
The story that was joined became a lamp for Nand.
A collection saves names and awakens history,
The memory that is gathered passes to the next generation.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Gop Kumar draws near to giving final form to the archival work of his entire life.)

Now old, Gop Kumar sat down to bring his life's collection together in one place—from Yadavanand's shadow genealogy to Haripati Kavi's

manuscript, Gangadhar's printing efforts, and the modern digital archive. His hands now trembled and his eyes had grown weak, but his mind remained fixed on the same goal: to preserve the village's complete story, from its beginning to the present, in one place.

As he joined the pages, he realised that all the threads were slowly meeting. The illusion of shell and silver, Hulas's water-burial, Sukhdev's nameless death, Batuknath's fall, Ujjwal's dream, Chandrapal's account—stories that had once seemed separate were now joining one another into a complete picture. Gop Kumar began to feel that he was not merely completing a collection; he was approaching an ending.

At the pipal Gop Kumar said, "Budhba, my lifetime's work is nearing completion. But you once said that the final chapter still remains."

Budhba replied gravely, "Gop Kumar, I now feel it clearly—the final chapter is near, very near. Nand's bridge, Chandrapal's account, Batuknath's courtroom, and that unseen glass tower are all moving toward one place and one time."

He continued, "Gop Kumar, year after year I have heard the approach of that chapter, and now I can clearly hear its footsteps. Your collection is being completed at exactly the right time, because the witness to the chapter that is coming will need the whole story of the past ready in his hands. Everything you have gathered will be a lamp for Nand in that dark hour."

One evening, for the first time, Gop Kumar looked at his whole collection gathered in one place—centuries of names, songs, genealogies, and records woven onto a single thread. He understood that he had not merely joined papers; he had brought back to life every person who had ever helped make the village's story. Yet amid that completeness one space remained empty—the final chapter for which he and the entire village had waited year after year.

After hearing Budhba, Gop Kumar worked still faster to give the collection its final form. He knew time was short, and he now understood that this lifetime's work would become the foundation on which Nand would stand when he faced the village's greatest trial.

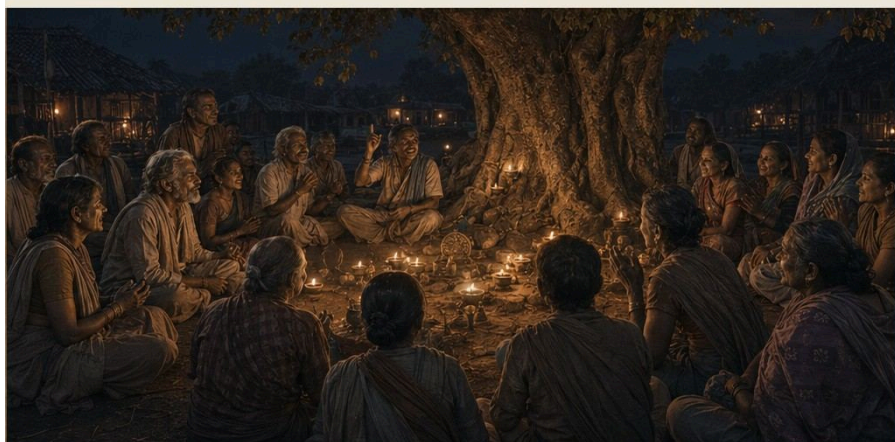
CHAPTER -12 (TWELVE BEFORE)

The Tremor in Channa Grove

The grove trembled, and the village heard: something is about to happen—the village understands when the grove speaks.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE GROVE'S WARNING

Folk tune: witness melody

*The grove trembled, and the village heard: something is about to
happen,*

The village understands when the grove speaks.

*The air was still, yet the leaves of the grove trembled,
What had stood steady for hundreds of years moved today.
The village understood: something great had drawn near,
The witness-grove spoke, and warned the village.*

*The air was still, yet the leaves trembled,
As though they had waited hundreds of years for something.
The grove that had witnessed twelve hundred years
Shook today and gave the sign of the final hour.*

*Wake, all of you—something great is drawing near,
The witness-grove has shaken and warned the village.
A sign in every leaf, a tremor without wind,
The grove warned, and the village grew watchful.*



*(A passage of narrative fiction. Budhba, together with the whole Channa
Grove, feels the tremor of an approaching event.)*

One evening, for no clear reason, every tree in Channa Grove—from the pipal to every channa tree—trembled faintly at the same moment, although the air was still. No wind was blowing and no leaf should have moved; yet for one instant the entire grove shuddered together, as though it had drawn a deep breath.

The villagers, feeling it, gathered frightened at the pipal. The elders remembered having seen such a trembling only two or three times before, and each time some great event had followed—a flood, a death, something that turned the course of the village story. That night, beneath the trembling grove, the village filled with an unknown fear.

Nand came running with Ananya. “Budhba, what happened? The whole grove began to shake!”

Budhba replied in a deeply unsettled voice, “Nand, I do not know what it is, but I know this much: a great event is near. My whole being, through the roots of every tree, can feel it. All of you, stay alert.”

He continued, “Nand, many years ago this grove and I became one. After my water-burial, my memory settled in these trees, in these roots. So when the grove trembles, understand that I myself am trembling—and I tremble only when something is coming that can shake every name in the village. This tremor is a warning.”

The oldest woman in the village, more than ninety years old, remembered having seen the trembling once in childhood; afterward came the great flood that swept away half the village houses. Hearing her memory, the village grew still more alert. If the grove had shaken as strongly then, whatever was approaching now might be just as great.

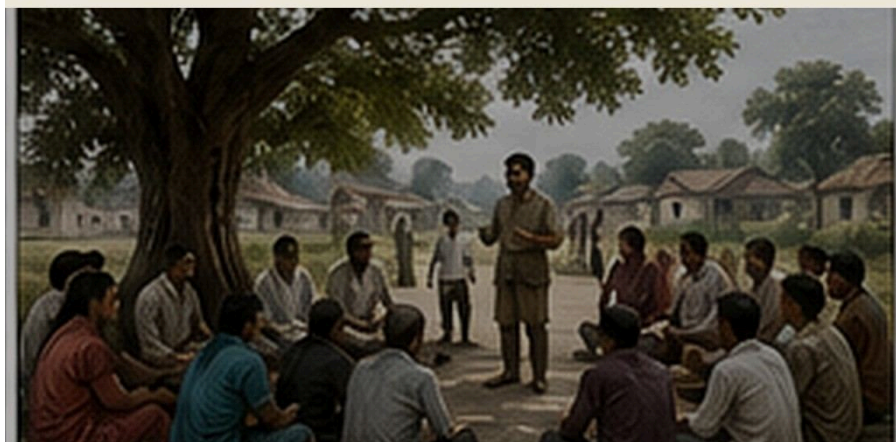
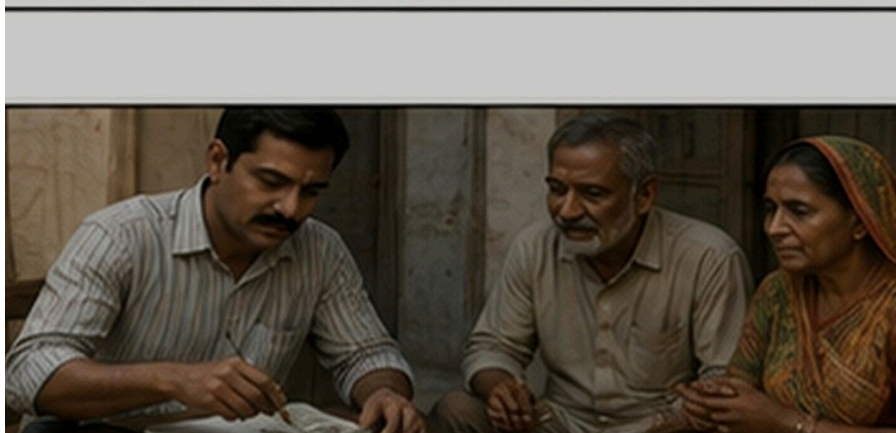
The villagers remained gathered near Channa Grove that night, not knowing what they were waiting to see, but knowing that something important was close. Lamps stayed lit, women whispered among themselves, and Nand sat with Ananya beneath the trembling trees, waiting for the unknown event whose approach the whole grove seemed to announce.

CHAPTER -II (ELEVEN BEFORE)

Budhba's Last Blessing

A blessing gives not the body but a name—Budhba's last words became seed for the next generation.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE SEED OF BLESSING

Folk tune: blessing sohar

*A blessing gives not the body, but a name,
Budhba's last words became the seed of the next generation.*

*Budhba spoke one last time and called Nand near,
"A blessing gives not the body, but a name"—this he taught.
The courage of the ancestors settled within Nand,
The names the ancestors had held came into Nand's hands.*

*The courage of the ancestors has settled within you,
The names they held have come into your hands.
Budhba's breath was tired, but his words remained steady,
The blessing he gave became a seed placed in the earth.*

*You are not alone; the whole story will remain with you,
The blessing that became a seed will flower years from now.*

*Budhba departed; the blessing remained with Nand,
The name-seed that was planted will flower generation after
generation.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Budhba gives Nand a special blessing and warning for the role ahead of him.)

The night after the trembling of Channa Grove, Budhba called Nand alone to the pipal. Only one lamp burned beneath the tree, and in its faint light there was a gravity on Budhba's face that Nand had never seen before. "Nand," he said with unusual solemnity, "you are my descendant, Aruni's grandson, and I feel that a great trial is about to enter your life."

Nand remained silent. He had known Budhba since childhood and heard every one of his stories, but what was in Budhba's voice tonight was not merely story—it felt like farewell, like a handing over. As though Budhba were slowly placing the burden of centuries upon Nand's shoulders.

Worried, Nand asked, "Budhba, what will I have to do?"

Budhba replied, "Nand, when the time comes, listen to the voice of your heart. Within you lives the courage of Hulasa, Sukhdev, Gauri, Sunayana—all our ancestors. You will not be alone. I, and our whole story, will be with you whether you can see me or not."

He continued, "Nand, when that dark moment comes, you will think you are alone—but that will be an illusion. Every name I have held through all these years will stand behind you in that moment. Those who did not fear the flood, who did not bow before famine, who did not remain silent before injustice—the courage of all of them lives in a single breath within you. So when fear comes, remember your own name, and with it all the names that brought you this far."

For the first time, hearing those words, Nand clearly understood that he was not merely an engineer but a witness—a witness to the generations that had come before him. He felt Budhba was giving him a burden he did not yet fully understand, but his heart accepted it without refusal.

Holding Budhba's words in his heart, Nand returned home. He lay awake for a long time that night, hearing the words again and again: "You will not be alone." He did not know that the next day his life, and the life of the village, would change forever—or that the blessing and warning Budhba had given him would become his greatest support in the dark hour ahead.

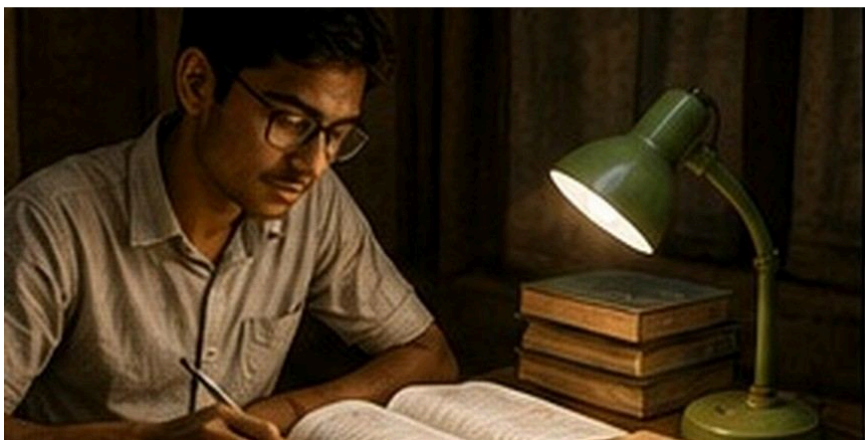
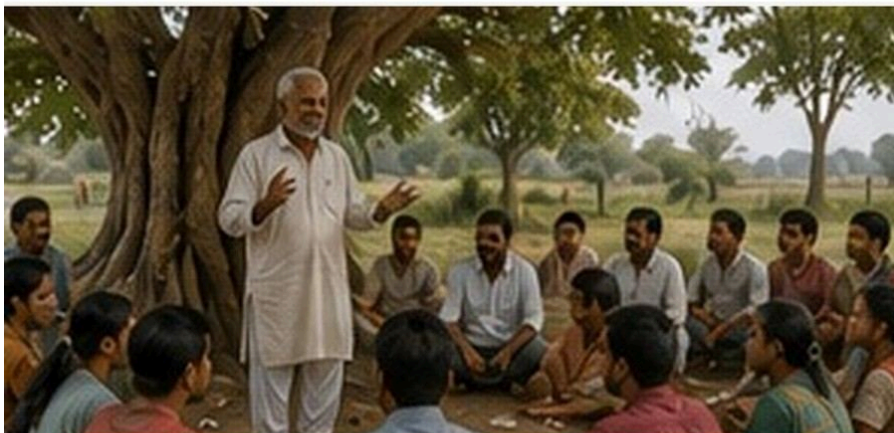
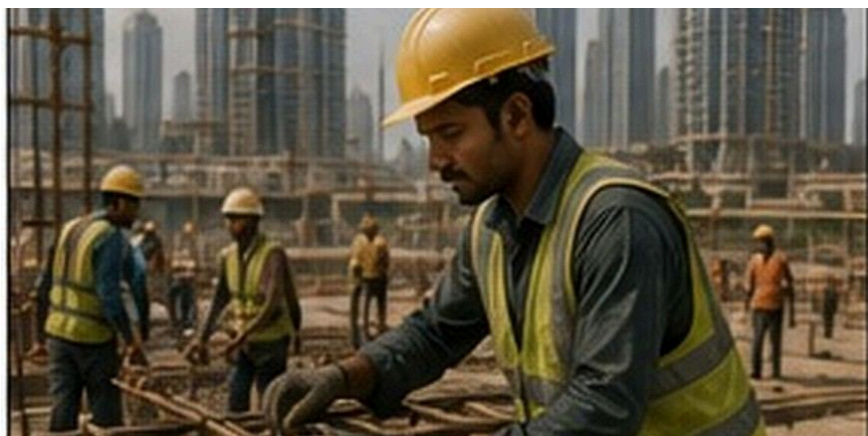
CHAPTER -10 (TEN BEFORE)

The First Splash at the Bridge

The first splash at the bridge—the first name in the water—the one who drowned there had his name raised again on the page.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE NAME AT THE BRIDGE

Folk tune: splash sohar

*The first splash at the bridge, the first name in the water,
The one who drowned there had his name raised again on the page.*

*The bridge was being built when the first splash came,
The first body sank in the water; its name went into darkness.*

*Cut from the contractor's paper, lost from the account,
But when someone wrote it down, that name lived again.*

*Cut from the contractor's paper, lost from the account,
But when someone wrote it down, that name lived again.*

*The crocodile took the body but could not take the name,
The one who kept the reckoning of the splash saved the name.*

*The crocodile took the body, but not the name,
The one who kept the reckoning of the splash saved every lost name.
A name sank in the water by the bridge, but it was not erased,
When someone wrote it down, it rose and stood again.*



*(A passage of narrative fiction. At the bridge-construction site, the accident
Budhba had sensed year after year finally occurs.)*

One night at the bridge site there was no moon, and after the rains
the river was running at full force. The labourers, exhausted, were

working in darkness—without enough light and without adequate protection. Nand was there that night, and his questioning eyes kept noticing the danger.

Suddenly, in the darkness, a labourer—whose name was still unclear—fell into the river. The sound of the “splash” was heard as far as the nearest hamlet: the same sound that had echoed through the village story year after year. Nand ran at once to help and leapt into the water, but in the darkness and force of the current he could not save the man. He reached out, called for a name—but found neither the hand nor the name.

Stunned, Nand returned to the village that night and went to the pipal without speaking, only weeping. River water dripped from his body and tears from his eyes; in that dark night the two became one.

Budhba said softly, “Nand, this is the moment whose approach I have heard year after year. Find that labourer’s name, and if you find it, hold it. This is your first trial, Nand—and I believe you will pass it.”

He continued, “Nand, you could not save that labourer. That is not your fault; it is the fault of the darkness, the current, and the system that sees a labourer as a number rather than a name. You could not save his body, but you can save his name. Go and find it. If no one holds his name, he will die twice—once in the water, and again from the memory of the village.”

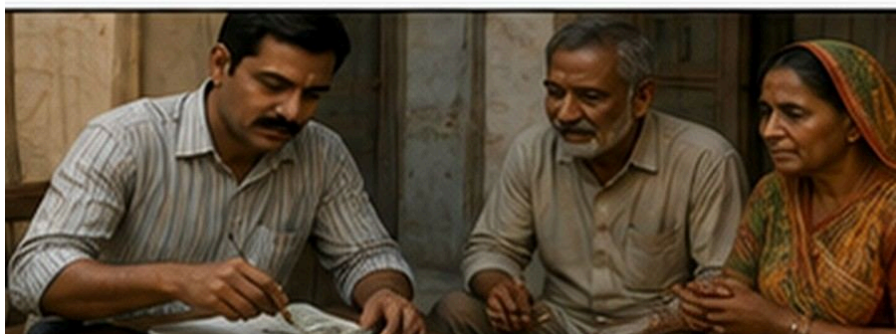
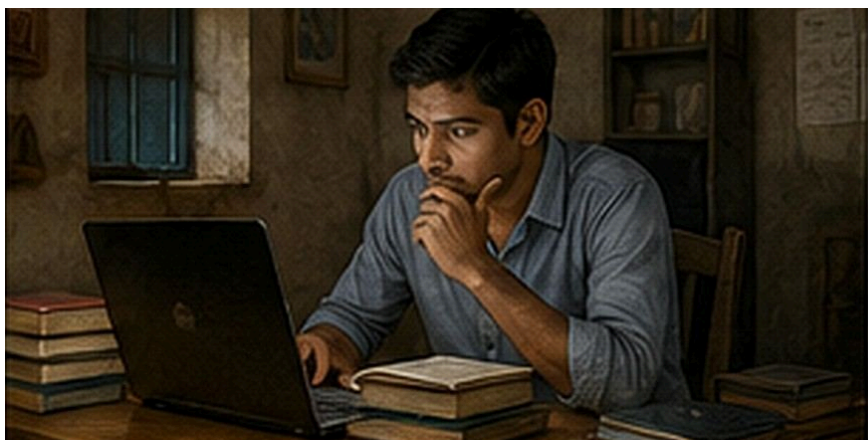
From that night on, Nand gave his life to searching for the labourer’s name and the names of others like him—workers who disappeared unnamed, whose reckoning no one kept. Slowly the search became a diary called “The Reckoning of the Splash,” which he wrote in every night: every lost name, every unspoken death, every account the system had erased. On the first page he wrote Budhba’s sentence again: “The crocodile eats the body, not the name.”

CHAPTER -9 (NINE BEFORE)

The Investigation Begins

An investigation is like digging a well—mud first, then water—the one who begins to dig will reach the truth.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DIGGING THE INVESTIGATION

Folk tune: inquiry song

*An investigation is like digging a well—mud first, then water,
The one who begins to dig will reach the truth.*

*The investigation began like the digging of a well,
Mud came first, and then clear water below.
False name, false age; the darkness was deep,
But every question opened another layer.*

*False name, false age; the darkness was deep,
But every question opened another layer.
The one who did not stop digging reached the bottom,
The one who kept questioning came close to the truth.*

*The one who does not stop will catch a glimpse of truth,
The investigation that has begun will weaken the web.
Mud comes first, then the water clears,
The one who keeps digging patiently reaches the truth.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. After the labourer's death at the bridge, Nand and Satyavrat meet in the search for truth by different roads.)

After the bridge accident, Nand began searching for the labourer's name in his diary. He demanded the contractor's papers, examined the attendance register, and questioned the man's fellow workers. But the more he dug, the deeper the darkness became: he learned the labourer had been working under a false name and a false age. No one knew his real name, as though the man had lost it somewhere even while alive.

Nand realised this was no ordinary accident. The papers of the company building the bridge were unclear, the workers' names were not genuine, and the company's money was travelling somewhere far away by a hidden route. The thread Nand had caught did not belong only to one labourer; it seemed to be part of a vast unseen web.

Meanwhile Satyavrat, who happened to handle the banking relationship of the construction company, met Nand. "Nand," he said, "I too have been examining this company's suspicious transactions for several years. You are searching for the worker's name; I am following the money. Perhaps our searches will finally meet in the same place."

Nand went to the pipal and said, "Budhba, Satyavrat and I think our searches are different threads of the same web."

Budhba replied in a deep voice, "Nand, the web is vast, but you are not alone. Work together. One thread—the name—is in your hand; the other—the money—is in Satyavrat's. When those two threads meet, the web will be seen in its whole form for the first time. But be careful: the hand behind a web this vast will be just as powerful and merciless."

From that day Nand and Satyavrat investigated together—Nand by following names, Satyavrat by following money. They began matching their evidence, and as the threads joined, the shape of the vast network slowly emerged before them: a web whose one end was the drowned labourer of Garh Narikel and whose other end, very far away, was the unseen glass tower.

CHAPTER -8 (EIGHT BEFORE)

The Evidence Comes Forth

Evidence hidden in darkness will one day see the dawn—truth may remain beneath the water, but it will rise.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE DAWN OF EVIDENCE

Folk tune: revelation song

*Evidence hidden in darkness will one day see the dawn,
Truth may remain beneath the water, but it will rise.*

*The notebook that stayed silent for years in darkness
Now spoke, and thread after thread came into view.
Ujjwal, Batuknath, Chandrapal—all were joined,
The evidence that lay below had now risen to the surface.*

*The silent notebook that gathered years now spoke,
Ujjwal, Batuknath, Chandrapal—all the threads came clear.
Truth beneath the water rose one day,
What had been joined patiently at last came out.*

*Truth is not the sun; it is a lamp, burning piece by piece,
Darkness did not break entirely, but for the first time it stepped back.
Lamp after lamp was lit, and darkness grew weak,
The evidence that emerged showed the road toward dawn.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Satyavrat's evidence, gathered over years, finally reaches the court and the media.)

With Gop Kumar's help, Satyavrat sent the complete evidence from his notebook to a trusted journalist and an honest investigative agency.

Every date, every account, every transaction accumulated year after year—once confined to one quiet man's notebook—began, for the first time, to come into the light.

As the evidence emerged, the shape of the web became clearer. Ujjwal Jha's descent into debt, Batuknath's legal assistance, Chandrapal's mule account, and Lau Kin-Hung's Hong Kong operation—stories that had once seemed separate and unrelated—now joined to form one complete and terrifying picture.

The news brought a strange mixture of feelings to the village: on one side hope for justice, on the other grief for all the names lost in the network. People began to understand that the crocodile Budhba had seen year after year was not merely a story; it had taken visible form on the horizon of their own village.

At the pipal Nand said, "Budhba, the truth is coming out. But I am afraid it is so vast that the whole truth may never be found."

Budhba replied, "Nand, the whole truth is never found all at once. But every fragment that comes out weakens the darkness. That is enough."

He continued, "Nand, in all these years I have learned that truth is not the sun; it is a lamp. It does not erase all darkness at once; it gives only enough light to show the next step. Those who wait for complete truth before speaking never speak. But those who bring out the fragment of truth they possess weaken darkness lamp by lamp. That is what Satyavrat has done—and that is enough."

When the story of the network first appeared in the news, many villagers could scarcely believe their eyes: names they had heard only in courtyards and whispers were now standing openly on newspaper pages. Some families who had lost sons to the network understood for the first time that their sorrow had a name and a cause; alongside grief, that knowledge brought a faint measure of peace.

Hearing all this, Nand threw himself into carrying the evidence further and making sure the truth reached everyone in the village. He knew the fight was not over, but a lamp once lit could no longer be extinguished easily. For the first time, darkness had begun to retreat.

CHAPTER -7 (SEVEN BEFORE)

The Half-Ghost Experience

Half truth, half ghost—both frighten; the one who knows the full name does not fear the half-ghost.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FULL NAME

Folk tune: witness biraha

*Half truth, half ghost—both frighten,
The one who knows the full name does not fear the half-ghost.*

*Nand set out to become a witness, and something changed,
One foot in the present, one among the names gone by.
Half truth, half ghost—both came before him,
But the one who knew the full name did not lose to fear.*

*The one who set out to become a witness became something different,
One foot in the present, one among the names gone by.
Budhba's voice settled in his mind and kept showing the way,
The one who saw both worlds did not stray from the road.*

*The eyes that hold names can see both worlds,
The one who heard Budhba's voice did not lose the road.
The half-ghost frightens; the full name protects,
The one who knows the whole name comes out of the liminal dark.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Amid the investigation and his grief, Nand for the first time experiences Budhba dimly with his own eyes.)

One night, exhausted and grieving, Nand fell asleep at the roots of the pipal. All day he had searched for the name of the labourer killed in

the bridge accident, and the weight of that sorrow had worn out his body. With his head resting on the old roots of the witness-tree, he descended into that deep sleep where the line between dream and truth grows thin.

In the dream, for the first time, he saw Budhba somewhat clearly—an old figure seated on a branch, between smoke and light. His face was not fully distinct, but there was such tenderness in his eyes that even in exhaustion and grief Nand felt peace. Budhba said nothing. He only looked at Nand, as though saying, “You are on the right road.”

When he woke at dawn, Nand told his grandmother the dream. She smiled. “Nand, you have become half a ghost. A person who prepares to become a witness becomes a little like that.”

She continued, “There is nothing to fear in it, Nand. Budhba is no ghost that comes to frighten; he is the memory that has kept this village alive. Whoever holds names begins to live in both worlds—one foot in the present and one among all the names that have passed. You are standing on that threshold, son. So from now on Budhba’s voice will sound clearer to you than before.”

From that day Nand began asking his grandmother about the old things she had heard in childhood—Budhba’s tale of shell and silver, Hulasa’s water-burial, Sukhdev’s nameless death. And as she retold those stories, Nand felt that they were becoming the story of his own life—as though Budhba’s twelve hundred years and his own few years were slowly dissolving into one another.

From then on Nand heard Budhba’s voice more clearly than before—sometimes in the wind, sometimes in the rustling leaves, sometimes in the inner voice that separated right from wrong. He still could not know with certainty whether the experience was real or an imagination born of grief. But he understood this much: real or imagined, that voice kept him on the road Budhba had seen centuries ago.

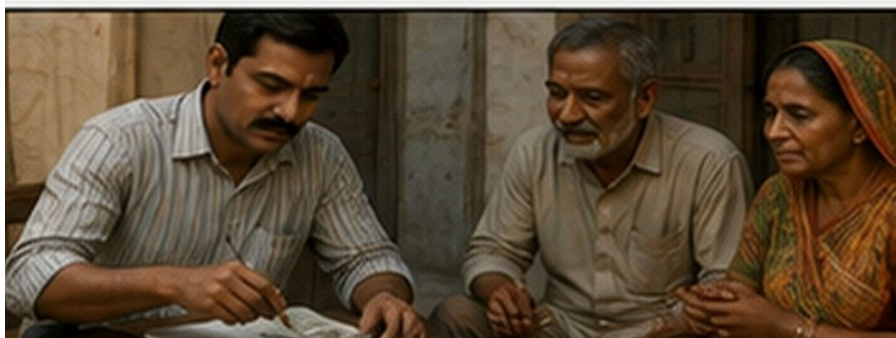
CHAPTER -6 (SIX BEFORE)

Gop Kumar’s Final Page

*Whoever receives the final page must bear the weight of the story—
Gop Kumar handed over the names and grew light.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FINAL PAGE

Folk tune: handing-over sohar

Whoever receives the final page must bear the weight of the story,

Gop Kumar handed over the names and grew light.

All his life Gop Kumar gathered page after page,

Now he handed the final page to the next pair of hands.

Like Yadavanand, like Vibha, he guarded memory,

The burden he bore all his life now rested in Nand's hands.

Pages gathered for a lifetime now passed to the next hands,

Like Yadavanand, like Vibha, he guarded memory.

Gop Kumar grew light; the burden was handed on,

The witness changed, but the story did not break.

The story will not die; the witness changes, the story remains,

Whoever held a name will live forever on every page.

From one hand to another the inheritance moved on,

*The page that was handed over will live from generation to
generation.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Having completed the collection of his entire life, Gop Kumar hands it to Nand and Ananya.)

Very old now, Gop Kumar completed the final page of the collection to which he had given his life—the whole story of Budhba, from Vachaspati Mishra to the present day. His hands trembled and his eyes had grown dim, yet when he wrote the last name on that final page, a peace came over his face that belongs only to one who has fulfilled the purpose of his life.

Centuries of memory lived in that collection—from the illusion of shell and silver to Hulasā's water-burial, Sukhdev's nameless death, Yadavanand's shadow-register, Gangadhar's printing press, and the digital archive of the present day. Every name, every song, every reckoning was woven into one thread. Gop Kumar felt that he had safeguarded not merely papers, but the soul of the village in one place.

At the pipal he called Nand and Ananya and handed them his collection. "Nand, Ananya, this is the work of my whole life. It is in your hands now. Budhba used to say that the final chapter still remained. Perhaps the two of you will write it."

With deep affection Budhba said, "Gop Kumar, your work is without equal. I hold your name, and the patience of your entire life, with special honour."

He continued, "Gop Kumar, in every generation there is one person who does not merely live, but guards memory. Yadavanand was such a man, Vibha was such a woman, and you are such a man. What your hands assembled is not the story of one life, but of hundreds. Now that burden is passing into the next hands—but your name will live forever on every one of these pages."

Nand and Ananya held the heavy collection and remained silent for a long time. The weight of centuries lay in those pages—every name, every song, every injustice, every resistance. What they received from Gop Kumar's trembling hands was not merely paper; it was a promise they would now have to fulfil with their lives. Both understood that at that moment their lives had been bound to a new purpose.

A few months later Gop Kumar died peacefully, but his collection remained safe in the hands of Nand and Ananya. That night, it is said, a faint rustling rose from every root of Channa Grove—as though Budhba, and the memory of all those names, were respectfully bidding farewell to an old, tired, yet fulfilled witness.

CHAPTER -5 (FIVE BEFORE)

The Web Exposed

*When the net was opened, not the fish but the fisherman was caught—
the one who saw the net recognised the crocodile.*

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE NET AND THE FISHERMAN

Folk tune: exposure song

*When the net was opened, not the fish but the fisherman was caught,
The one who saw the net recognised the crocodile.*

*When the net opened, not the fish but the fisherman was caught,
What had hidden for years now came into view.*

*Batuknath in the dock, Chandrapal under investigation,
But the shadow in the glass tower still survived far away.*

*Batuknath in the dock, Chandrapal under investigation,
But the shadow in the glass tower still survived far away.*

*Some were caught, some escaped at a distance,
But the net that had been seen was weakened.*

*Some were caught and some survived, but the net grew weak,
The whole darkness did not break, yet dawn came closer.*

*The net was exposed, the crocodile recognised,
The truth that came into view showed the road toward dawn.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. Through the combined efforts of Satyavrat and Nand, the entire fraud network—at least in its local form—is exposed.)

After months of investigation, the evidence gathered by Satyavrat and Nand finally exposed the local shape of the fraud network. Batuknath's local participation and Chandrapal's mule account both came clearly into view. The threads woven so long in darkness had, at least on one side, entered the light.

Legal proceedings began against Batuknath. For the first time the celebrated lawyer had to stand before the court as an accused man. Chandrapal, despite evidence of his ignorance, faced a difficult investigation, for whoever becomes entangled in such a web—even unknowingly—must face his part before the law. Yet amid all this, one name still lay beyond reach: the shadow seated in the glass tower.

At the pipal Nand said, "Budhba, Lau Kin-Hung is still beyond capture. Our victory is incomplete."

Budhba replied, "Nand, in Chapter -84 I saw Yashpati's end remain incomplete too. Some darkness is never wholly exposed; it is only weakened. That too is progress."

He continued, "Nand, in twelve hundred years I have learned that justice is sometimes incomplete—but every incomplete victory leaves a seed for the next generation. Yashpati's unfinished end became, much later, the inspiration for another struggle. Lau Kin-Hung may escape today, but someday someone else will take up the evidence you are leaving behind. The names will survive, and names, in the end, find their way to justice."

When Batuknath first stood in the accused dock, several village elders who had known him since childhood were present in court. They remembered the brilliant, honest boy who had once dreamed of fighting for the rights of the poor. Seeing that boy now standing in the dock, there was less satisfaction at justice in their eyes than grief for a defeated dream.

Hearing all this, Nand chose not to see the incomplete victory as defeat, but as one step. He safeguarded his evidence, his diary, every name—for the day when someone else might use the seed he had left and bring even that surviving shadow into the light. The web had not completely broken; but for the first time, it had trembled.

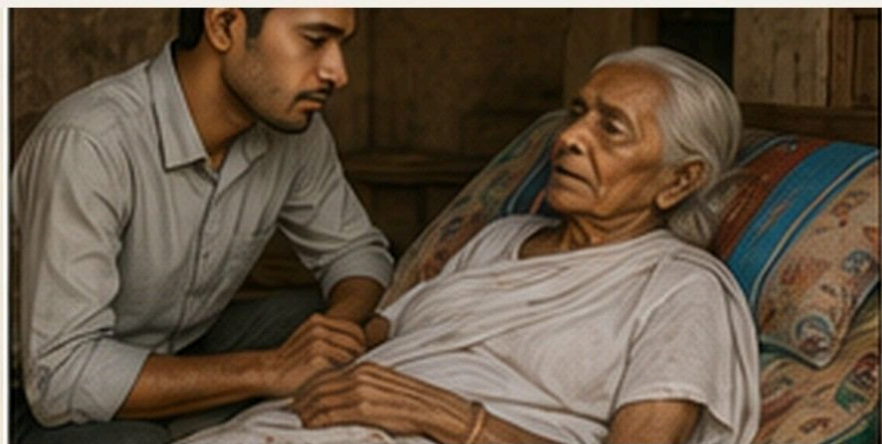
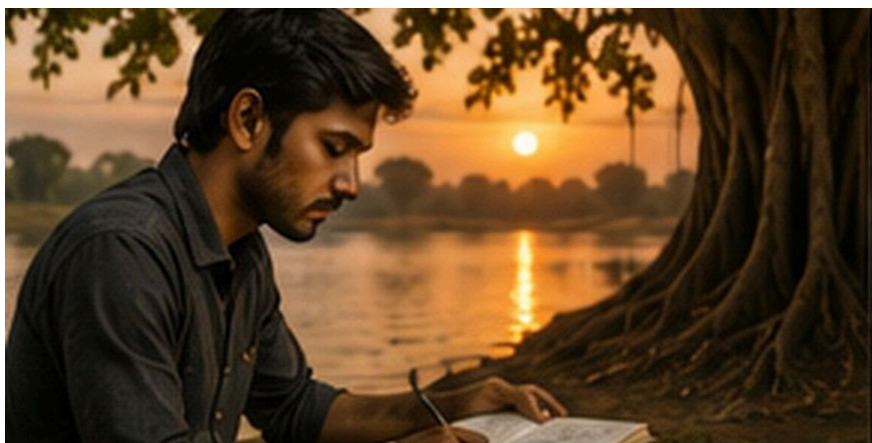
CHAPTER -4 (FOUR BEFORE)

The Final List of Names

The names that had been left out were added at the end—when the list became complete, the crocodile's account was complete.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LIST OF NAMES

Folk tune: memory sohar

*The names that had been left out were added at the end,
When the list became complete, the crocodile's account was complete.*

*The names left out for years were added at the end,
Thirty names returned from the water, a village beside every name.
Those who had become numbers became names again,
A story behind every name, a village behind every story.*

*Thirty names returned from the water, a village beside every name,
Those who had become numbers became names again.
The bodies may never be found, but the names will not be lost,
What entered the list preserved twelve hundred years.*

*The bodies may never be found, but the names will not be lost,
What lives in the diary preserves the vow of twelve hundred years.
The list was complete, the crocodile's reckoning complete,
The name added at the end fulfilled the village's vow.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. In his diary "The Reckoning of the Splash," Nand finally completes the names of every victim of the bridge accident.)

After months of searching, Nand succeeded in discovering the true name of every labourer who had died at the bridge-construction site. He

went from village to village, family to family, matching the contractor's cut-down papers with workers' forgotten addresses—until every person whom the system had reduced to a number became a name again.

Thirty names—linked to the story of three hundred bodies that the official reckoning had forgotten. Nand entered all thirty in “The Reckoning of the Splash,” one by one, writing beside each name its village, its family, its story. Those who had vanished from the water, from paper, and from memory now lived again in at least one place: Nand's diary.

At the pipal Nand opened the diary and asked, “Budhba, I have finally completed all these names. Have I become a witness worthy of your story?”

Deeply moved, Budhba replied, “Nand, you are my worthiest descendant. Far ahead in time, your ‘Reckoning of the Splash’ will become the next chapter of my entire story.”

He continued, “Nand, for twelve hundred years I have held names because I understood one thing: the crocodile eats the body, not the name. Today you have brought those thirty names back from the water. Their bodies may never be found, but their names can no longer be lost. That is the meaning of my whole life, Nand—and today that meaning is safe in your hands.”

Among those thirty names was a young man whose mother had spent years watching the road every evening, waiting for her son to return. When Nand went to her and showed her son's name written in his diary, the woman was able to weep for the first time in many years—for now, at least, she knew that her son's name would never again be lost.

That night Nand sat for a long time beneath the pipal, holding the diary against his chest. He understood that he had not merely written thirty names—he had carried Budhba's twelve-hundred-year vow forward into his own generation. Every page of that diary was now a witness's page; and for the first time Nand felt himself to be one link in the long chain that had begun with shell and silver and reached him.

CHAPTER -3 (THREE BEFORE)

Twelve Hundred Years Complete

The circle of twelve hundred years was complete—on the night of the new moon—what stood at the beginning stood again at the end.

— Garh Narikel

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CIRCLE COMPLETE

Folk tune: completion song

*The circle of twelve hundred years was complete, on the new-moon
night,*

What stood at the beginning stood again at the end.

What began with shell and silver, after twelve hundred years,

Came together again on that new-moon night.

Take your turn and call the names, all in one breath,

Hulasa, Sukhdev, Ratna, Gangesha—all lived again.

Take your turn and call the names, in one breath,

Hulasa, Sukhdev, Ratna, Gangesha—all lived again.

What stood at the beginning stood again at the end,

The circle was complete; the story returned to its own beginning.

The names that were called lived again in the darkness,

*The burden was no longer one person's; now it belonged to the whole
village.*

*The circle of twelve hundred years was complete in the new-moon
dark,*

What began stood at the end; the story's vow was fulfilled.



*(A passage of narrative fiction. With Nand, Budhba reflects for the last time
on his entire journey.)*

On a new-moon night, Nand, Ananya, and everyone in the village gathered at Channa Grove for kabaddi, just as they had gathered for hundreds of years. The game was never merely a game. It was the old village tradition in which a player, while taking a kabaddi turn, called the names of the ancestors in a single breath, so that those who had passed might live again in the breath of the game.

This time, for the first time, Nand's own name entered the game. Nand, who until then had only been a witness, stepped into play himself. When his turn came the whole village fell silent, for everyone knew that Budhba's next witness was about to raise his own voice for the first time.

Running through his turn, Nand cried aloud, "Hulasa! Sukhdev! Ratna! Gangesha! Gauri! Savitri!" One by one, the names of centuries rose from his mouth into the air.

As Nand continued calling names, the elders of the village began adding the names of their own ancestors into the air—one named a grandmother, another a father, another the lost brother who had once gone away and never returned. The kabaddi turn slowly became an act of collective remembrance in which the whole village, in one voice, brought the names of centuries back to life in the dark.

Hearing this through every root of the grove, Budhba said softly, "Twelve hundred years, Nand. Twelve hundred years—and today, for the first time, I feel this burden is no longer mine alone. It is yours—all of yours."

His voice resounded through the whole grove that night. "All this time, Nand, I carried these names alone because there was no one else to hold them. But today, when you called them, I understood that my vow is no longer mine alone; it belongs to the village. The burden that tired one breath for so long is now divided among a thousand breaths—and this, Nand, is the greatest reward of my twelve hundred years."

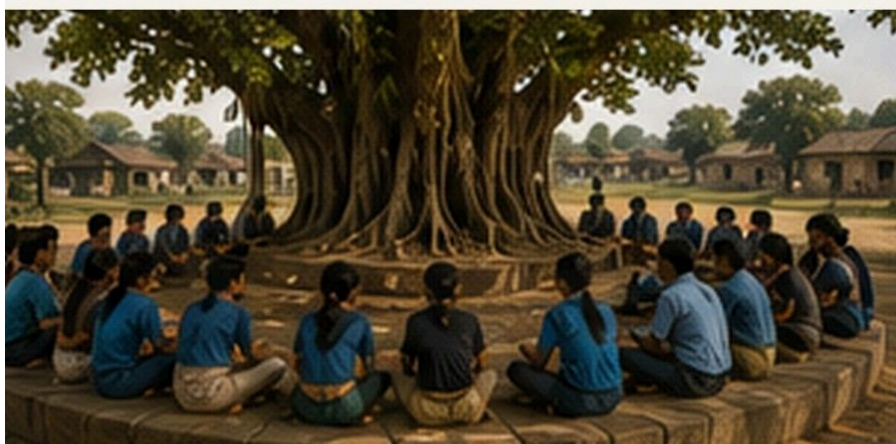
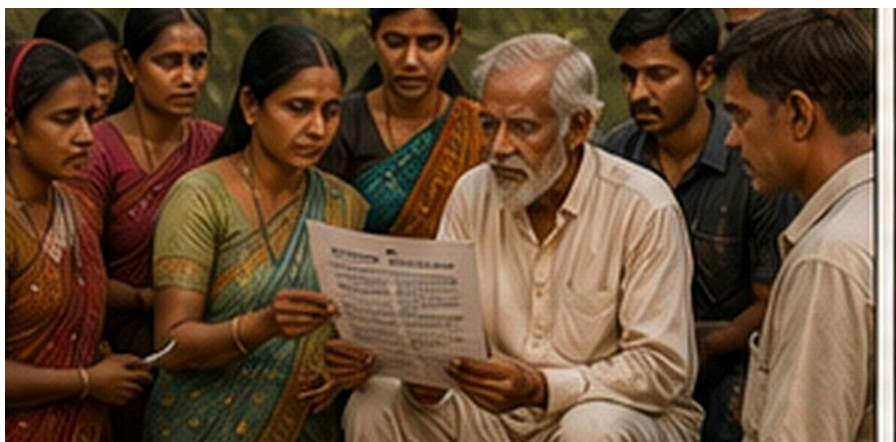
On that new-moon night, every root, leaf, and branch of Channa Grove trembled with the refrain of those names, as though every person of all those centuries had returned for a single moment. And for the first time in twelve hundred years, Budhba seemed a little lighter within that steady, tender radiance—for the story he had carried alone had finally reached safe hands.

CHAPTER -2 (TWO BEFORE)

The Next Generation's Promise

The promise the next generation takes will save the village—holding a name is not deliverance; listening is liberation.

— Garh Narikel



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE GENERATION'S
PROMISE**

Folk tune: promise sohar

*The promise the next generation takes will save the village,
Holding a name is not deliverance; listening is liberation.*

*The next generation made its promise and learned to hold names,
It knew code, knew songs, knew law—and joined them all.
The names our ancestors held, we will carry forward,
The story handed to us, we will not let it break.*

*It knew code, knew songs, knew law—and joined them all,
The names our ancestors held, we will carry forward.
Holding is not deliverance; listening is true liberation,
Whoever heard and understood the names saved the village.*

*The story will not be lost; the witness still stands,
I am not alone, and now neither are you.
The promise belonged not to one generation, but to every generation,
The generation that took the promise made the village immortal.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. With every young person of the village, Nand and Ananya promise to carry Budhba's ritual forward.)

After the kabaddi, as the new-moon darkness grew thinner, Nand and Ananya called every young person in the village to the pipal and made a new pledge. The names just called in the game still echoed in the air, and amid that echo the village's new generation stood ready to lift the ancestral vow onto its own shoulders.

In the young people's eyes was the light Budhba had longed to see year after year—the light that said the story would not die because hands remained to carry it. The children who had learned to ask questions in Ananya's school, the young people who had helped Nand build the archive—all stood together that night, with one voice.

"We," Nand said, "promise to carry forward Budhba's story, Gop Kumar's collection, and every name."

Ananya added, "From the Coconut-Leaf School to the digital archive, we will use every means we have so that this story is never lost."

From the whole of Channa Grove, Budhba accepted the pledge with a soft, steady radiance, as though he knew the story was now in safe hands. And within that glow, for one moment, everyone in the village felt as though Budhba were saying, "I am not alone—and now neither are you."

Among those young people were some who knew computers and code, some who knew folk songs and Panji, some who knew law and accounts. But that night all of them joined their different skills to the same vow. The inheritance Budhba had begun with shell and silver was now, twelve hundred years later, moving forward in a new form in the hands of an entire generation.

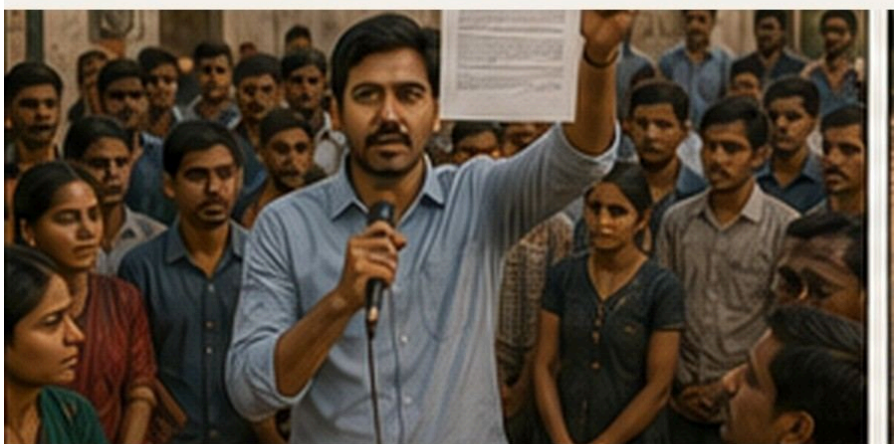
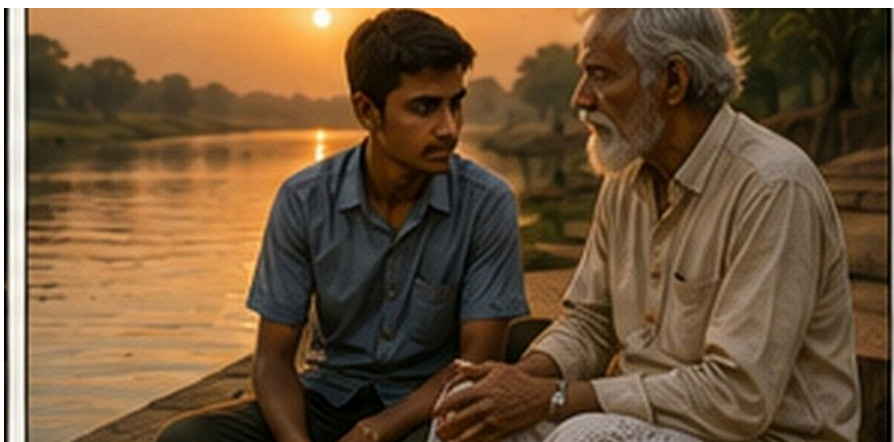
After the pledge the village slowly dispersed, but something had changed. The burden that had once belonged only to Budhba, and then to Gop Kumar, had become the burden of a whole generation. With Gop Kumar's collection and their own "Reckoning of the Splash" in hand, Nand and Ananya moved toward the final chapter whose approach Budhba had sensed for centuries—the chapter that was now very near.

CHAPTER -I (ONE BEFORE)

The Final Witness

When the final witness spoke, the story changed hands—the crocodile eats the body, not the name: this is the village's final saying.

— Garh Narikel



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SONG OF THE FINAL WITNESS

Folk tune: closing sohar

*When the final witness spoke, the story changed hands,
The crocodile took the body, but the village held the name.*

*Twelve hundred years of journey reached the edge of its ending today,
The final witness stood and called name after name.*

*From shell and silver to this day, the names of every generation,
One by one lived again, and the village became whole in name.*

*The crocodile kept eating bodies, but could not eat the names,
The village that remembered survived twelve hundred years.
The bridge of stone was swept away, the bridge of names stood firm,
The witness kept changing, but the story did not break.*

*The lamp may go out and the curtain fall, but let the names remain
awake,*

The village that preserves its names will never let its story die.

*The final witness spoke, and the story moved forward,
Whoever held the names became immortal through the ages.*



(A passage of narrative fiction. The final chapter of Part o—Budhba tells Nand the last secret of his entire story.)

One last evening Budhba called Nand alone to the pipal. “Nand,” he said, “I want to tell you something I have felt year after year, though I have never fully understood it. I feel that, in some form, far in the future, someone will write my story. An author I will never see, yet one who will set down on paper every name I have held, every tear, every hope.”

Stunned, Nand asked, “Budhba, how do you know?”

Budhba smiled for the last time. “I do not know, Nand. I only feel it. And now I think that author is very near—perhaps so near that at this very moment I am speaking to him through you.”

Nand remained silent. That night beneath the shade of the pipal, Budhba’s voice seemed to come from beyond the stage—and indeed, at that very moment, from beyond the stage the Sutradhar stepped out beside the curtain for the last time, stood facing the reader, and spoke one final time.

CHAPTER 0

Garh Narikel: A Brief Folk Prelude

A Living Geography of Soil, Water, Labour, Memory, and Names

Before listening to the story, listen to the village. A village makes its body from soil, draws its breath from water, and keeps its memory in trees and leaves. Here knowledge does not live in books but in hands, ears, and bodies; no single person is the author of a song—the people are its makers. Paper can strike a name out, a leaf can sprout it again; the register says “absent,” the mother says “present.” So before the story begins, this chapter is the answer of the soil in which every part of the story will take root—and when all the papers fall silent, the song will speak.

On the evening before the story was to begin, Ba sat on the earth of the Coconut-Leaf School. The children asked, “Does the story begin tomorrow?” Ba smiled. “Before listening to the story, listen to the village. Whoever has not heard the village will understand only half the story.” And that night Garh Narikel itself began to speak—in the language of its soil, its water, its songs, its wounds, and its watches. What follows is the collective voice of that night: the village speaking of itself, a self-telling that this novel bears upon its head as Chapter Zero.



There is exposition in this self-telling, but there is also a heartbeat. Do not read it as an essay; read it like the roots of Channa Grove, where every section is a root and all the roots together hold up the tree upon whose stump the kabaddi of the next two hundred chapters will be played.

It would be a grave mistake to think of Garh Narikel merely as a village marked on a map. The village makes its body from soil, takes its breath from water, stores its memory in trees and leaves, pours its grief into song, and keeps its justice alive through tales, proverbs, folk belief, and collective testimony. Culture here is not born on the page of a book. It is born from the first hearth at dawn, from the courtyard plastered with dung and clay, from feet walking toward the fields, from the great net falling into pond water, from people gathering on the embankment during a flood, from the sohar at birth, the auspicious songs of marriage, the samdaun of farewell, and the mournful voices that rise after death. Garh Narikel's folk culture is a lived discipline more than a written code. People do not read it; they practise it. They do not memorise it; they live it. They do not teach it formally; they pass it to the next generation while working together. It is also the ground on which the search for Gangesha, Mithila, and knowledge becomes tale, narrative, and example. Ah, the people of Garh Narikel! They take the life-incidents, oral traditions, historical hints, classical examples, and aphoristic illustrations present in Gangesha's *Tattvacintamani* and receive them into their own contemporary world. Navya-Nyaya and its arguments can outwit even the sharpest mind. Yet the difficult language of Navya-Nyaya can be made lucid without reducing its subtlety, joining abstract definition to human experience so that a classical proposition becomes a visible scene, the *prima-facie* view and the established doctrine become dialogue, an aphorism becomes an event, a definition becomes a character's experience, and a conclusion becomes the story's inner resonance.

This culture is not the private property of any one caste, hamlet, household, festival, or lineage. When a song is sung, the mouth that raises the first line does not retain ownership of it. A second voice catches the refrain, a third changes a word to suit the moment, a fourth inserts a new event among old verses. In this way the song becomes collective. A tale lives in the same fashion. The same event survives in one form in a

grandmother's telling, another in a boatman's, a third in the mouth of a woman working the fields, and a fourth in a child's game. Yet through all these forms one shared pulse continues to beat—the collective identity of Garh Narikel.

That cultural pulse is heard continuously throughout the world of *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*. Channa Grove is not merely a dark grove but an assembly hall of folk memory. A coconut leaf is not merely a leaf but a green page on which names can be written. The ghosts' kabaddi is not merely a supernatural game but a metaphor for the living community's system of justice. The river is not merely water but a carrier of history. "Crocodiles eat bodies, not names"—this sentence is the seed of Garh Narikel's folk vision. A body may perish, paper may strike out a name, an official may reduce a number, but if the village's memory remains awake, a human being does not disappear completely.

Folk culture is the name for those practices, beliefs, songs, tales, skills, customs, arts, forms of speech, memories, and collective disciplines that arise not from books or government orders but from the continuous life of the people. It is not something visible only on festival days. When a woman plasters the courtyard at dawn, when a farmer holds seed in his palm and smells the soil, when a child tosses a pebble to judge the depth of a pond, when an old person points to a flood mark and says, "The water rose this high," all of these are acts of folk culture.

Its fifth characteristic is inseparability from daily life. Garh Narikel's folk culture is not a separate activity invented for performance on a stage. Song keeps the pace of labour in a field, gives breath a rhythm in a boat, steadies the blows of hands pounding paddy, preserves the sequence of rites in a wedding, gives collective voice to tears held back in grief, and lets children rehearse social relations through play. Here art and usefulness are not separate. Beauty lives in work, work in song, song in memory, and memory in community.

The current of the Kamala-Balan, the distant memory of the Ganga, ponds and pools, old wells, field channels, embankments, and low-lying floodplains together make the water-map of life in Garh Narikel. Water is both blessing and danger. It irrigates fields, gives fish and makhana, keeps animals and birds alive, cleanses the body, and completes festivals and rites. Yet the same water can carry away houses, cut through fields, alter the village road, and swallow a body. Because of this duality, water always has two voices in Garh Narikel's folk songs—life on one side and fear on the other; tenderness on one side and water-burial on the other.

The village pond is not merely a reservoir. It is a home for fish, a field for makhana, a place for bathing, water for cattle, a means of irrigation, a children's playground, a women's water-place, a festival site, an immersion ghat, and a centre of story and folk belief. On its banks lives a separate world of trees, shrubs, grasses, birds, and small creatures. The

annual fishing is not merely an economic activity; it is an occasion for collective labour, waiting, sharing, quarrel, reconciliation, and celebration. The calls of those casting the great net, the whisper of netting through water, the splash of fish, and the children's delight on the bank together form a living folk music.

Flood is not merely one season of the year in Garh Narikel's folk memory. For many families it is a measure of time—before such-and-such a flood, after such-and-such an erosion, the year when the water reached the threshold, the year when the night was spent upon the embankment. Written dates may be forgotten, but the water-mark on a wall, a withered branch, sand left upon a field, household stories, and lines of song remain evidence of time. Folk song thus becomes a local chronology of history.

Trees are the village's second system of memory. Peepal, pakar, bamboo, mango, jamun, neem, bael, tamarind, jackfruit, mahua, coconut, banana, palash, semal, babul, date-palm—the presence or absence of each is tied to use, story, shade, season, and feeling. Varieties of mango make a dictionary of taste; bamboo gives material for houses, tools, instruments, nets, wedding pavilions, footbridges, and strainers; the peepal may shelter both deity and ghost; in the story-world the coconut leaf becomes a green page for writing names. When a tree is cut, it is not only timber that is lost; a place of memory disappears. That is why even a stump speaks in the history of the village.

Soil is also a witness to social division. In the same village one person has thick walls and another a frail hut; one courtyard is raised while another house will drown in the flood's first water; one person's fields lie together while another's are broken into fragments; one has rights over a pond while another's access is restricted. Folk culture does not merely conceal these inequalities. It expresses them through song, satire, proverb, quarrel, story, and collective resistance. Garh Narikel's culture is not a single-coloured picture of harmony; it carries cooperation and inequality, love and distance, honour and humiliation, sharing and conflict within the same social body.

The fishing song is a song of knowledge as well as labour. When to cast the net, from which direction to encircle the fish, how deep the water is, in which layer the fish are moving, which way the wind blows, who will stand on the bank—all this work can proceed in the rhythm of call and response. The leader calls, the group answers; the net is pulled together. If the rhythm breaks, the net tangles, the fish escape, people fall into the water. Music here is therefore not entertainment but a means both of safety and of success in labour.

Flood songs are among the most complex forms of Garh Narikel's folk culture. They contain fear, loss, courage, collective labour, invocation of deities, government neglect, rescue of animals, children's

crying, boatmen's bravery, the pain of abandoning a home, and the hope of returning to the soil. One verse may be about a house washed away; another about lighting a hearth on the embankment; a third about an infant who has no milk; a fourth about the neighbour who arrived with a boat; a fifth about silt left in the fields after the water receded. A flood song is therefore not merely lament; it is also a resolve to rebuild.

In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, water becomes the field between justice and crime. The official name of a body fallen into the water may be erased, but the river recognises it. When Nand Aruni practises listening for names in water, this is not merely an impossible miracle; he is living Garh Narikel's old tradition of listening in a new age. To hear the river means to hear the rights of the dead, the testimony of labourers, a mother's waiting, and the truth pressed down inside the silence of paper.



In Garh Narikel the day opens before the hands of a clock—with birdsong, the stirring of animals, smoke from hearths, and the habits of the body. Rising before dawn is not only a compulsion of labour; it is a shared ordering of time. Someone goes to the cowshed, someone fetches water, someone lights the stove, someone checks the field tools, someone wakes the children, someone begins the next work upon paddy, lentils, or grain soaked the night before. In this many-voiced dawn there is no single conductor, yet everyone knows the sequence. This is the discipline of folk culture—unwritten, without bell, without command.

Different watches of the day have different tunes. Morning carries parati songs, awakenings, invocations, the calls of releasing cattle, and a light rhythm of departure for the fields. As the eastern light strengthens, work songs gather speed. At noon voices may thin out beneath the shade of trees—food, water, rest, conversation, stories. Later come fields, fishing, livestock, market, craft, household work. Evening brings cattle home, lights the hearth, sets children playing, begins dholak practice, stories, news, and the day's accounting. Night may hold ritual songs, sung tales, bhagait, nirgun, biraha, marsiya, ghost stories, or the low voice of private grief.

The social body of Garh Narikel is made from many hamlets, castes, occupations, and families. Inequality, caste distance, and historical injustice have existed within that order; it would be false to ignore them

and turn folk culture into a merely colourful festival. Yet it is also true that in daily life, agriculture, festivals, rites, craft, music, water management, and times of disaster, one community has depended upon the labour and knowledge of another. Folk culture contains both that dependence and that tension.

Folk songs are vessels of memory for occupational knowledge. A fisher's song may preserve the names of nets, the movement of water, and the habits of fish; a transplanting song the varieties of paddy, mud, field measurement, and spacing; a carpenter's song the nature of wood, the movement of the saw, and the joint; a spinning song thread, spindle, and turning; an oil-press song the bullock's circle, the stream of oil, and the weariness of the day; a drummer's song the method of tightening hide, sunlight, dampness, and rhythm. Song binds knowledge to feeling, and so makes it easier to remember.

In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, Bisesar Paswan, Sarayu, Chhotu, and the unnamed labourers are new forms of this historical irony. The bridge is built by their labour, yet their names are incomplete or absent in the register. Garh Narikel's folk culture does not accept this inequality in silence as "fate." It preserves names, turns objects into testimony, and makes absent people present through shoes, gamchhas, bangles, leaves, and songs.

Play has a great role in the transmission of knowledge. Children playing bride and groom learn the social form of marriage; making houses of mud teaches construction; imitating fishers with a small net or cloth teaches the behaviour of water; rolling a wooden wheel teaches motion; playing kabaddi teaches breath, boundary, group, strategy, and courage. The ghosts' kabaddi in Channa Grove gives this ordinary game a grave form of memory and justice. Whoever crosses into the opposing side carrying a name must return with that name safe. Here play becomes a school of history.

The women of the village are the principal bearers of oral tradition. Wedding songs, birth sohars, fasting tales, Madhushravani, samdaun, satire, ritual abuse, household remedies, food memory, the vocabulary of kinship—much of this travels through women's voices. When a daughter marries into another village, she carries not only clothes and ornaments but an entire world of tunes, tales, recipes, aripan, remedies, proverbs, and pronunciation. In the new village she changes what she learned, accepts local forms, and creates new mixtures. Folk culture thus spreads across the region along the roads of marriage.



Behind every pond, tree, hamlet, old path, embankment, ruin, sacred enclosure, or unusual stone in Garh Narikel there may be a tale. People give stories to places, and stories make places memorable. When children hear that ghosts play in a certain grove, they see the grove not only through fear but through caution, boundary, and memory. When they hear a pond's story, they become alert to its depth, an old accident, or its collective use.

A folk tale can hold three kinds of time together—the ancestors' time, the teller's present, and the listener's future. In Channa Grove ghosts can cross 1885, 1934, 1977, and the present in a single turn; within this impossible movement lies the village's method of memory. Folk memory does not shut periods into separate boxes. Old injustice returns inside new injustice, an old proverb applies to new technology, an old crocodile can become a crocodile on a screen.

Folk tale can also impose social punishment. A person who harms the community may, at death, receive not ordinary mourning but a tale of public condemnation. One who commits injustice may be punished in story by ghost, curse, ruined lineage, withered tree, sunken boat, or erased name. Such punishment is not a court order, but it is a communal moral judgment. In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* the court of Channa Grove is an expanded form of this folk justice—there memory matters more than a seal, testimony more than office, and a name more than victory.

Work songs are born inside work. Their rhythm follows the tool, the body's movement, the number of workers, and the duration of the task. Such songs have emotion, but they are not separated from the reality of labour. Wages, hunger, employer, season, beloved, child, bodily pain, laughter, teasing, hope—all enter the rhythm of work.

The stories of labourers such as Bisesar, Sarayu, and Chhotu show that when work songs are drowned out in vast modern construction, workers' names too can be drowned out. Amid the noise of machines, commands, deadlines, and contracting, if the collective voice of labour breaks, each worker becomes isolated, insecure, and unrecorded. Garh Narikel's folk culture works to join that broken voice again.

The most continuous archive of Garh Narikel's folk culture lies in women's voices and hands. Women plaster courtyards, make aripan, tell fasting tales, preserve birth and wedding songs, transplant and weed in

the fields, pound and grind grain, and care for animals, birds, children, elders, kitchens, water, seed, and household things. Within this daily labour culture not only survives but continually takes new forms.

Mithila painting, clay ritual objects, sewing and embroidery, decoration of leaf-plates, *khoinchh*, arrangements of grain, wedding ornamentation—all are women's visual folk language. Folk song is its audible language. The two complete one another. An image sung in a song may appear on a wall or in an *aripan*; a figure drawn there may return as a story in song.

In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, Ba is the concentrated form of this women's memory of Garh Narikel. Before paper evidence she reads shoes, *gamchhas*, leaves, thresholds, and smells. Her saying "present" is a rite for the names of the dead. The name of a woman labourer such as Sarayu may be absent from the official register, but women's memory does not let it disappear. Ananya is the voice of the next generation, the one who begins the story again.

Flood songs question an incomplete embankment built by government or landlord, injustice in relief, shortages of boats, and names missing from lists. Folk song strips the polish from official language and shows lived experience. Against the claim "no major loss," it sets an empty threshold before a mother, a hungry child, the body of an animal carried away, and sand spread across a field.

When a name disappears from the government record, folk song preserves it. When a death is written as "absent," a mother's song says: the person did not return. When a woman's labour is absorbed into her husband's name, the transplanting verse raises her own name. When the court postpones another date, a proverb reveals the teeth of the crocodile of time.

Folk justice itself can sometimes be unjust—crowd passion, rumour, caste prejudice, blame laid upon women. Therefore every decision of folk culture is not automatically true. Its human core—dignity, protection of the weak, truth, collective responsibility—must be the test. The court of Channa Grove matters because it removes fear, listens to names, and places the victim's voice at the centre; it is not merely the noise of a majority.

Garh Narikel is not an external decoration of the story. It is the basic cultural grammar required to understand it. If the reader does not understand the village's oral tradition, the importance of names, the double nature of water, the memory held in trees and leaves, folk beliefs about ghosts, collective song, and folk justice, then Channa Grove, the coconut leaf, water-burial, and *kabaddi* will remain only half understood.

Bisesar Paswan represents the full humanity of the labourer. Torn shoes, laughter, family, wages, insecurity—the song joins them all and turns an “accident number” back into a human being. Sarayu exposes the invisibility of women’s labour. She works, yet on paper she is not an employee; folk song makes both her labour and her name present. The incomplete names of Chhotu or Bholatun become symbols of the migrant worker’s severed identity.

Garh Narikel’s folk culture is a single body made of soil, water, labour, relationships, memory, and voice. It cannot be confined to colourful festivals, old costumes, or dances on a stage. It lives in dawn work, field mud, the sharing of ponds, women’s stories, children’s games, craftspeople’s hands, boatmen’s calls, the names of the dead, the migrant’s longing, social satire, and collective resistance.

1. The Leaf-Lamp of Dakahi Pond

Tale—It is said that in the middle of Dakahi Pond a thin, leaf-like green light appears only on nights when someone’s name has been unjustly struck from the village record. Ba says that the light belongs not to the dead but to the pond’s own eye. Once Nand Aruni followed it in a boat and saw in the water the shadow of Bisesar’s torn shoe. Since then, whenever an unnamed death occurs near the pond, people set a lamp afloat upon the water.

Song—The Leaf-Lamp of the Pond

Folk tune: Slow Fisherman’s Biraha

Float, O lamp, float upon Dakahi Pond;

Remain all night as witness to the name struck out.

A green lamp in the middle of the pond—

Whose name is it calling?

Paper cut it; water kept it;

Night carries the testimony.

Let the lamp float, not the name;

Garh Narikel stays awake.

Wherever paper’s scissors cut, the lamp awoke there;

Green letters settled upon the still breast of the water.

*In the slow tune of longing, compassion keeps watch;
The name does not drift away in the current—the deep voice echoes.*

Float, O lamp, float upon Dakahi Pond;

Remain all night as witness to the name struck out.

2. The Breath of Channa Grove

Tale—An old belief in Channa Grove holds that every root of the tree preserves the breath of an ancestor or an unnamed labourer. Whenever a child runs toward the tree while speaking the truth, the leaves move even without wind. Ananya first believed this when she wrote Sarayu's name on a leaf and the green point on the stump began to tremble.

Song—Breath in Every Root

Folk tune: Children's Kabaddi Song

Run, child, run to the roots of Channa Grove;

Cross the line crying, "Present, present!"

Breath survives in the roots of Channa Grove;

The leaf says—Present!

The child ran carrying a name;

The ghost said—Present!

We shall cross the line of falsehood;

Truth will remain present!

Ancestral breath in every root, a voice in every leaf;

When a truthful step falls, the pouch of memory opens.

The ghosts laugh, the tree laughs, the child plays without fear;

The moment the line of falsehood is crossed, truth's turn is found.

Run, child, run to the roots of Channa Grove;

Cross the line crying, "Present, present!"

3. The Shared Hearth of the Southern Hamlet

Tale—One year of drought, grain ran short in the southern hamlet. The people put out the hearths in their separate homes and lit one common hearth. Everyone brought what they had—a handful of rice from one house, lentils from another, greens from a third, milk from a fourth. There was little food that night, but no household went to sleep hungry. Since then people have said: the true boundary of a hamlet lies wherever the smoke of its common hearth can reach.

Song—Smoke from the Shared Hearth

Folk tune: Courtyard Jhumar

Light it, sister, light the shared hearth;

Bring a handful each and fill everyone's plate.

One house's rice, another's lentils,

Greens from a third home;

When the shared hearth was lit,

The serpent of hunger fled.

Smoke rose beyond the hamlet;

Spring entered every belly.

In the drought year grain was scarce, but affection overflowed;

On a single fire the rice of a hundred homes swelled together.

Who gave what—who would count? One smoke rose;

The serpent of hunger fled, the hamlet joined and gathered.

Light it, sister, light the shared hearth;

Bring a handful each and fill everyone's plate.

4. Footprints on the Old Road

Tale—Garh Narikel's old road disappears beneath silt in the rains, yet at dawn a footprint rises by itself. Ba says it is the road of those who went away to distant lands but never forgot the way home. One day Aruni Nandan photographed it, but the image showed no road—only a single line turning toward home.

Song—The Road of Return

Folk tune: Batagabani

*Come home, traveller, the road is calling;
Even beneath the silt, footprints wake at dawn.*

Dust covered it, silt filled it,

The road says—come home;

Feet tired by the distant city,

The soil says—come home.

The threshold opens, a lamp is placed,

The mother says—come home.

Silt may cover, rain may wash, yet the sign does not fade;

Even the one who forgot the road is gathered back by this road.

For dust-covered feet the soil keeps a soft lap;

*The lamp at the threshold burns through evening, nightfall, and
dawn.*

Come home, traveller, the road is calling;

Even beneath the silt, footprints wake at dawn.

5. The Watch on the Unfinished Ring Embankment

Tale—The old ring embankment was never completed, yet the village believes that unnamed watchkeepers place sacks of earth upon its unfinished stretch at night. During floods, when the living grow

exhausted, two or four fresh sacks are found there at dawn. Nand Aruni saw no names upon them, only five deep finger-marks pressed into each.

Song—Five Fingers on the Embankment

Folk tune: Embankment-Repair Call

Lift the sack, lift it with a hoo-ho cry;

Let five fingers close into one fist and stand firm upon the embankment.

Fill the earth, set the sack,

The current is rising, brother;

Let five fingers become one,

The embankment will hold, brother.

No name may remain, but the work will;

The village will survive, brother.

When the living tire, unnamed watchkeepers wake;

The sacks laid in the night stand as witnesses at dawn.

Whether a name remains or not, let the work remain steadfast;

*The village embankment belongs to all—the current flows after
hearing it.*

Lift the sack, lift it with a hoo-ho cry;

Let five fingers close into one fist and stand firm upon the embankment.

6. The Witness Stone

Tale—Near Channa Grove lies an unusual stone that turns cold when a lie is spoken and warm when the truth is spoken. One day, after returning from court, Nand Aruni placed his hand upon it; the stone slowly grew warm. Ananya then wrote: “The heat of truth lasts longer than a paper seal.”

Song—The Warm Stone

Folk tune: Folk-Justice Nirgun

*Place your hand, place it upon the witness stone;
Read in your heart the language of cold and warmth.
At a lie the stone grew heavy,
At truth the stone grew warm;
Place your hand upon it and the heart will know
Whose words carry truth.
The seal will dry, the warmth will remain,
Through every day and night.
At a lie the stone turned cold, cold as ice;
At truth, little by little, warmth spread through it.
The ink of the seal dries; warmth does not dry;
In a nirgun tune folk justice sings itself.
Place your hand, place it upon the witness stone;
Read in your heart the language of cold and warmth.*

7. The Leaf That Sprouted from the Stump

Tale—A leaf sprouted from the cut stump of Channa Grove when Ananya wrote a complete name for the first time. The village believes that when a name is written incompletely, its leaf opens only halfway; when the name is complete, the leaf opens fully. That is why the village children do not hurry when writing names.



Song—The Leaf of the Complete Name

Folk tune: Children's Parati

Write, child, write the whole, whole name;

A half-letter brings a half-open leaf—learn this knot well.

We shall not write a half-made letter;

Let the whole name sprout.

Inside the stump a green dream—

Wake it slowly.

One life upon each leaf;

Write it clearly.

Ananya wrote the complete name; the stump began to tremble;

The green dream became a leaf and broke open with dawn.

Half a name, half an honour—this will no longer do;

Whole letters, whole leaves—this is the new reckoning.

Write, child, write the whole, whole name;

A half-letter brings a half-open leaf—learn this knot well.

8. The Paddy-Transplanting Song

Tale—On the first day of transplanting, Sarayu saw that the row was crooked and changed the refrain of the song: “Straight row, straight right.” All the women repeated it with laughter. The row in the field became straight, but the song’s meaning travelled all the way into the accounting of wages.

Song—Straight Row, Straight Right

Folk tune: Paddy Transplanting Song

Plant, sister, plant the row straight;

With the paddy plant the roots of rights deep.

Feet in the mud, seedlings in hand—

Keep the row straight, sister;

Set rights deep like the roots of paddy,

Do not bend the matter, sister.

Clouds will rain, grain will fill;

Add up the wages, sister.

Hearing Sarayu's refrain, the laughing field grew straight;

The song's words were not merely song—they became a lesson in life.

Bodies bent in mud, thoughts held straight in the head;

Row by row, both grain and rights will rise ahead.

Plant, sister, plant the row straight;

With the paddy plant the roots of rights deep.

9. Welcoming the Newborn

Tale—Once a daughter was born in the village and some people remained silent. Ananya and the women's circle added a new verse to the sohar: "A daughter has come, a lamp of names." Hearing the song, even those who had stood silent at the doorway began to clap. Since then the same refrain has been sung in the birth sohar for both daughter and son.

Song—The Lamp of Names

Folk tune: Sohar

Little one, a lamp of names has come;

Daughter or son—the courtyard has filled with light.

Into the courtyard came a lamp of names,

Daughter or son;

Dawn lives within two eyes,

Soft lines upon the little hands.

The fortune of a house does not choose a body;

Every birth is entered in the same account.

When the new verse of the sohar rose at the silent doorway,

The lock of silence broke and flowers of welcome opened.

Dawn in two eyes, lines of destiny upon the palm;

Every birth bears the same account—sing this tune.

Little one, a lamp of names has come;

Daughter or son—the courtyard has filled with light.

10. A Daughter's Farewell

Tale—At the time of farewell, the mother did more than weep. She gave her daughter a handful of seed, a leaf, and her own song. She said, "Build your home like seed, preserve your name like a leaf, and keep your voice open like a song." That is why the samdaun, though full of sorrow, is never helpless.

Song—Seed, Leaf, and Song

Folk tune: Samdaun

Go, daughter, carrying all three inheritances;

Seed, leaf, and song—understand your mother's heart.

Take the seed with you, daughter;

When you find soil,

Take the leaf with you, daughter;

It will write your name.

Take the song with you, daughter;

Your voice will never bow.

With tears flows learning; with blessing flows strength;

In your husband's soil plant the fruit of your mother's home.

Write your name upon the leaf; never let your voice bend;

Even in the sorrowful tune of samdaun there is no defeat.

Go, daughter, carrying all three inheritances;

Seed, leaf, and song—understand your mother's heart.

11. Remembering the Dead

Tale—Each year, on the day when the splash at the bridge returns to the village's memory, people place four objects beside Channa Grove—a shoe, a gamchha, a bangle, and a leaf. No statue, no speech. Ananya reads the names, Ba says "Present," and the wind from the river answers.

Song—Names Present

Folk tune: Mournful Marsiya

Set down all four—the shoe, the gamchha, the bangle, the leaf;

No statue, no speech—say only "Present."

The shoe is silent, the gamchha wet;

The leaf says—Present.

The bangle gleams, the mother calls;

The night says—Present.

The body is gone, but the name survives;

The village says—Present.

Year after year, on that same day, people gather beside the grove;

Silent objects begin to speak—this is the ordinance of memory.

Even in the mournful rhythm of marsiya one vow resounds:

The body is gone, the name remains—the village will not forget.

Set down all four—the shoe, the gamchha, the bangle, the leaf;

No statue, no speech—say only "Present."

12. The Song of Milk Filling the Paddy

Tale—When milk begins to fill the paddy grain, loud noise, grazing animals, and carelessness are kept away from the field. People say this is the grain's time of pregnancy. Women pass along the field's edge singing softly, as though blessing the grain forming inside each plant.

Song—The Paddy's Pregnancy

Folk tune: Soft Field Lullaby

Slowly, sister, softly along the field;

Milk is filling the paddy's womb—speak gently and sweetly.

Milk fills the paddy's womb;

Speak softly, sister.

Let the wind be gentle, the water even;

Guard the field-bund, sister.

The rice of Agahan is growing here;

Pour out your blessing, sister.

No noise, no grazing—this is the grain's time of pregnancy;

Keep the wind gentle, water even, and watch the field-bund.

Passing along the edges, the women sing in a low tune;

The dream of Agahan rice enters every ear of grain.

Slowly, sister, softly along the field;

Milk is filling the paddy's womb—speak gently and sweetly.

13. Saving Seed for the Next Crop

Tale—There was a temptation to sell all the finest paddy. Ba separated from the heap the seed for the following year. She said, "Tomorrow's life is worth more than today's price." Ananya wrote the year, field, and flavour upon the seed-bag.

Song—Tomorrow's Bag

Folk tune: Seed-Preservation Song

Save the bag, save tomorrow's bag;

Do not squander tomorrow's life for today's price.

Do not sell it all; save some;

Tomorrow the field will call.

A small bag holding the ancestors' flavour

Will spread green again.

Today's money will pass away;

Seed will set the year right.

Greed said, "Sell it all—the price is high."

Ba said, "If the seed is gone, the land will be ruined."

On the bag were written the year, field, and name of the flavour;

The ancestors' taste was carried onward to the next generation.

Save the bag, save tomorrow's bag;

Do not squander tomorrow's life for today's price.

14. The Song of Mourning

Tale—After a death, people do not merely praise the dead; they also speak of unfinished work, the family's needs, and any injustice surrounding the death. In remembering Bisesar, the people did more than weep: they resolved to complete the labourers' list. Grief became action.

Song—Resolve from Tears

Folk tune: Mourning Biraha

Count them, count the unfinished tasks;

Beside the tears, set down the lamp of resolve.

Tears fell, the name rose;

Count the unfinished work.

Do not merely offer flowers;

Take the family by the hand.

The honour of the dead will be preserved

When injustice is defeated.

Do not praise alone; ask how the family lives;

Learn the name of the injustice that surrounded the death.

In Bisesar's memory, speak of labourers' rights;

Along with flowers, hold a hand—this is mourning's companionship.

Count them, count the unfinished tasks;

Beside the tears, set down the lamp of resolve.

15. Aripan: The Silent Song

Tale—Ananya made the circular line of an aripan crooked. Ba did not erase it; she turned the crooked line into a river and joined it to a lotus. “Folk art teaches us to give meaning to mistakes,” she said. In the rice-paste design, net, leaf, footprint, sun, and moon all lived in the same courtyard.

Song—Lines of Rice Paste

Folk tune: Aripan Mangal

Draw it, sister, draw the line in rice paste;

Turn even a crooked line into a river and lift it into meaning.

The finger circled round and round;

A lotus opened in the middle.

The crooked line became a river;

The net caught the flow.

The silent aripan writes a song;

The courtyard becomes its page.

Ba did not erase Ananya's crooked line;

She joined it to a lotus and made it a river.

Give meaning to error—that is the speech of folk art;

Wisdom speaks in the silent song of rice paste.

Draw it, sister, draw the line in rice paste;

Turn even a crooked line into a river and lift it into meaning.

16. Pain in the Marital Home, Husband-Wife Relations, and Domestic Violence

Tale—A woman kept singing the words “the door is closed” again and again. The group understood that this was not merely a metaphor. The women did not leave her alone: they spoke with the family and found her a safe place. Ritual abuse and song became signs by which hidden violence inside society could be recognised.

Song—Open the Door

Folk tune: Women’s Biraha

Open it, sister, open the door within;

Untie the knot in the throat that keeps singing “closed, closed.”

Do not keep the door shut;

Listen to what the voice says.

To strike in the name of love—

Count that as injustice.

A sister will hold a sister’s hand;

Untie the knot of fear.

There was a signal inside the song; the women’s circle understood;

She was not left alone—hands joined around her.

To strike in love’s name was named and counted as injustice;

A circle of safety formed, and the lock of fear opened.

Open it, sister, open the door within;

Untie the knot in the throat that keeps singing "closed, closed."

17. Discrimination Between Daughter and Son, and Caste Humiliation

Tale—During a school game one child was held back because of caste, and a girl was prevented from becoming captain. Ananya erased the kabaddi line and gave everyone a new turn. The leaves of Channa Grove stirred, as though the village were saying: before a name, the walls of caste and gender are small.

Song—The Same Turn

Folk tune: Children's Kabaddi

Erase it, child, erase the line of caste;

Let daughter and son run upon the same dust.

The girl runs, the boy runs,

Across the same dusty ground;

Erase the wall of caste with your feet;

Open the door of the game.

Call the name, preserve the honour;

Everyone has the same right.

The child once held back moved forward; the girl became captain;

The line Ananya erased became a new law of play.

Channa Grove applauded, every leaf swayed;

The same turn, the same dust—the share of all opened.

Erase it, child, erase the line of caste;

Let daughter and son run upon the same dust.

18. The Lamp of Jhijhiya

Tale—In the darkness of Bhadav, women dance with a perforated earthen pot upon the head and a lamp burning inside it. Folk belief says

that every hole is one fear of the village, while the flame within is living courage amid all those fears. After the story of Ujjwal Jha, a new hole was added and named “the glass screen.”

Song—Light Through Every Hole

Folk tune: Jhijhiya

Dance, Jhijhiya, dance with the pot upon your head;

Amid darkness pierced with holes, let the inner flame live.

A lamp burns in the earthen pot,

Many holes are darkness;

One hole for illness, one for fear,

One for the blow of the screen.

When the flame turns, the night declares:

The world is still alive.

One hole for illness, one for fear, one for the screen's blow,

Yet inside the pot the flame remains—the cry of the living.

Turning and turning, the circle of women measures the night;

Even among a hundred holes, the light never trembles.

Dance, Jhijhiya, dance with the pot upon your head;

Amid darkness pierced with holes, let the inner flame live.

19. Kabir's Nirgun Voice

Tale—In nirgun singing, the outward marks of caste, appearance, wealth, and rank are drawn into question. One night the singer asked, “If someone's name is not in the register, is that person's soul any less?” The gathering fell silent; then the refrain arose: “Everyone breathes the same breath.”

Song—Everyone Breathes the Same Breath

Folk tune: Nirgun

*Sing the nirgun, sing deep into the night;
Beyond paper and body, contemplate the oneness of breath.
Paper differs, bodies differ,
Everyone breathes the same breath;
The walls of caste and rank will fall
When discernment opens.
Strike out a name and truth is not struck out;
Every human stands in the same reckoning.
The singer asked, "If the name is struck out, does the soul become less?"
The gathering fell silent; then the refrain rose again.
The walls of caste and rank collapsed in the cleansing waters of
discernment;
In the single strain of nirgun, all human beings became equal.
Sing the nirgun, sing deep into the night;
Beyond paper and body, contemplate the oneness of breath.*

20. Children's Games and Kabaddi

Tale—While playing kabaddi in Channa Grove, the children called out one forgotten name in every turn. Crossing the boundary meant courage, returning meant responsibility, and saving a teammate meant collectivity. The game became a lesson in history.

Song—A Turn for a Name

Folk tune: Children's kabaddi

*Run, children, it is a forgotten name's turn;
Cross the boundary and come back—both are responsibilities.
Kabaddi, kabaddi—run carrying the name,
Cross the line;*

If a teammate falls, extend your hand,

Return together.

Victory comes only when a forgotten name

Is held again by the village.

In every turn let one forgotten name be called;

Reach out to the fallen teammate and bring them home with you.

Courage, responsibility, togetherness—the game teaches all three;

*A forgotten name returned to the village: that is the splendour of
victory.*

Run, children, it is a forgotten name's turn;

Cross the boundary and come back—both are responsibilities.

21. Court Dates and Folk Justice

Tale—After every court date, Nand Aruni placed a small stone beside Channa Grove. The row of stones grew long. On them Ananya wrote not merely the dates but the life a family had lived between them—food, treatment, schooling, mourning. Folk justice counted the human cost of waiting.

Song—The Stones of Court Dates

Folk tune: Courtroom biraha

Lay down a stone, one for every court date;

In the row of stones, mark the sorrow of the living.

One date, one stone,

The row grew without end;

The paper says, "Come again,"

The home asks, "How many times?"

Count justice not only in days,

But in the burden of living grief.

Returning from court, Aruni laid down one stone at a time;

Ananya wrote upon each one the life lived in between.

“Come again,” said the paper; the home asked, “When?”

*Counting the row of stones, justice itself wondered, “Must it be like
this?”*

Lay down a stone, one for every court date;

In the row of stones, mark the sorrow of the living.

22. Guarding the Name

Tale—The village children formed a “name-watch.” For anyone whose family might disappear through migration, flood, accident, or an error on paper, they wrote the full name, home, work, and memory upon a leaf. A person was preserved not as a number beside a name, but as a story.

Song—The Name-Watch

Folk tune: Vigil song

Wake, wake—the name-watch must stay awake;

Keep the name in all three places: leaf, stone, and voice.

Name upon the leaf, work upon the stone,

The story in the voice;

If paper strikes it out, we shall write it again,

Identity will not be lost.

All night this watch will stay awake,

The name will remain in honour.

For every family that may vanish—in flood, error, or migration—

Write the name, home, and work; preserve what memory remains.

If paper strikes it out, we shall write it again—the children's vow;

All night the watch will stay awake; no person will be lost.

Wake, wake—the name-watch must stay awake;

Keep the name in all three places: leaf, stone, and voice.

23. A Warning Against Digital Fraud

Tale—After the tragedy of Ujjwal Jha, a new folk song arose in the village. School, market, and migrant families all sang the same refrain: if a false call or frightening message comes, do not decide alone; first tell someone you trust. The shame belongs to the criminal, not the victim.

Song—The Crocodile of the Glass Screen

Folk tune: Warning Jhijhiya

Recognise it, recognise the crocodile of glass;

The moment its teeth of fear appear, call your household near.

The glass screen becomes a crocodile,

Showing the teeth of fear;

Do not stay alone—call others,

Tell your household what has happened.

Let shame rest upon the criminal's head,

Let truth awaken light.

After Ujjwal's story, village after village learned this refrain:

A false call, a frightening message—never decide alone.

At school, market, and among migrants, let it resound everywhere:

The shame is the criminal's, not the victim's—understand this.

Recognise it, recognise the crocodile of glass;

The moment its teeth of fear appear, call your household near.

24. Guarding Trees, Water, and the Environment

Tale—After Channa Grove was cut down, the children began planting one tree in the name of every newborn child. They made maps of ponds, pools, floodplains, embankments, and the places of birds. Nand Aruni said, “Heritage is not only saving old things; it is saving breath for the next generation.”



Song—One Name, One Tree

Folk tune: Green parati

Plant, plant—plant for every name;

A tree in a newborn's name, a leaf in the tree's name.

For one name, one tree;

For one tree, its leaves;

For one pond, a hundred birds;

For one embankment, a heritage.

If soil and water remain alive,

Every story will remain alive.

After the grove was cut, the children made this vow;

They mapped pond, pool, floodplain, and embankment.

A hundred birds for one pond, shade from one tree;

If soil and water live, every path will live.

Plant, plant—plant for every name;

A tree in a newborn's name, a leaf in the tree's name.

Across these hundred tales and songs, the folk culture of Garh Narikel is not a lifeless object in a museum but a living tradition that changes each day, asks questions, labours, laughs, weeps, demands justice, and passes its voice to the next generation. Let every song be sung with its occasion; let the refrain be repeated; let local singers add their own verses; and let every tale take a new form in the throat of the next storyteller. Such is the natural life of folk culture.

Dedication

To those unnamed people whose names were never written on stone, yet whose voices still flow through water, leaves, and paper.

To those informants whose faces were recorded nowhere, yet whose truth cuts its way even through stone.

To those whose families lived in fear, who lost both livelihood and life, whose homes were emptied—and who nevertheless spoke. This is dedicated to them.

“Truth is a seed—however deeply it is buried beneath a heavy stone, one day it will break through.” — A belief of the people of Garh Narikel.

“One who sees the truth and remains silent dies twice—once in the body, once in the soul.” — An old saying of Garh Narikel.

“When a village forgets its history, its coconut trees stop bearing fruit.” — Another old saying of Garh Narikel.

The speaking coconut tree, visions of the dead, the absence of shadow—these are poetic metaphors of Mithila’s folk consciousness. — A belief of the people of Garh Narikel.

From the Mouth of the Book

(The Folk Voice of Garh Narikel)

1.

Water speaks, the tree listens, leaves rustle and write names, but the stone remains silent.

2.

The drowned one spoke; the survivor forgot; and the river kept them both within its belly.

3.

When the coconut tree speaks, understand this: some dead person in the village is searching for their heel.

4.

Truth is a seed, falsehood a stone; the stone is heavy all night, but by dawn the seed is green.

5.

Without a name, a ghost cannot remain in the game; without a name, a human being cannot remain in history.

6.

The elephant grips the crocodile, the crocodile grips the child, and the child grips the hand that did not write the name upon the stone.

7.

One who saw and stayed silent died twice; one who saw and spoke lived twice in name.

CHAPTER I

Kabaddi in Channa Grove

*Where the living keep silent, the ghosts fight their case through
kabaddi.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FIRST RAID OF DAWN

Folk tune: Phag-kabaddi tune

Play, oh play, the first raid of dawn,

*Beneath Channa Grove, play guard over every name.
The moon has slipped down from the grove; the east is turning red,
Amid the ghosts' game, the koel's glad call is heard.
Cry kabaddi, kabaddi - today the names will live,
One raid for memory, brother, another for courage.
Dew writes on every leaf - dawn does not surrender,
However deep the crocodile lies, the sun lays a path across the water.
Let the first raid belong to hope, with the whole village beside it,
From the soil of Channa Grove shall rise the name of justice.
Dew-wet earth gives off its fragrance; the Phag wind sways,
Ghosts and spirits sit together, and the koel opens its throat.
Whoever runs holding one breath will carry the inheritance of names,
The defeated and the victorious together will scatter the abir of hope.*



A bhut is black, a pret white; a rakshas is the charred remnant of a corpse accidentally left unburnt, while a buried child becomes a loth. Channa Grove. Bhuts and pretis play kabaddi; the rakshas provides the light and the loth watches. Brahma sits in the peepal tree. In the pond lives the Panidubbi, a long-haired water-spirit; in bottomless water her hair tangles around a person's feet, and the victim gasps and dies.

Bhut, pret, rakshas, loth - all come after death, or rather after untimely death. So too the Brahma of the peepal tree, and the souls of those who became entangled in the Panidubbi's hair beneath the water. Garh Narikel has seen many untimely deaths. Do ghosts and spirits have feet planted on the earth? Are their feet turned backward? All lies. They look just like ordinary people; only they seem to move a little above the ground. You understand - something like a moonwalk. No, not exactly a moonwalk: it is as though they glide, almost like snakes, yet they walk just like ordinary people, only an inch or so clear of the earth.

The Hakkal witches too climb trees, mount their little riding-stools, and fly away on them. At dawn they leave the stools there and depart.

They keep many spirits with them and make those spirits do all manner of errands. But people say that when the witches grow old and their power declines, they can no longer provide the spirits with their feed; then those same spirits begin clawing and eating away at the witches themselves.

I can see water on every side.

Asia's largest road bridge is being built. Iron rods, enormous piers, day-labourers climbing over them with baskets on their heads. Cement and stone chips everywhere... then someone's foot slips... the body spins as it falls... and among the crocodiles comes a water-burial. A few days later another, then a third... hundreds of day-labourers consigned to water-burial.

And all the games kept going on together.

A few were shown as deaths - only thirty. Far more disappeared into the account of water-burials, and several decades later I too am entered in that same account. Somewhere in the chronology my foot slips... there... I fall, spinning... and among the crocodiles comes my own water-burial. The crocodiles chew even the bones. Thus all of us attain our samadhi.

When the mongoose stood guard, the cobra could do no harm.

But the guards here were human beings.

And, like the sound of a clod thrown into a well reaching the ear after a pause, comes the sound: splash.

The Ganga is the well, and all these yogis are clods dropping into it, as though they have come from distant forests, hills, and fields of sand left after floods expressly to take water-burial. As though they are jostling for their turn. My ears keep ringing. Come, let us go to the people of Garh Narikel. Their ears are ringing too. Turn by turn. One after another. Now one person's, now another's.

As though some soul might find release merely by hearing this tale.

As though the people of Garh Narikel might grow lighter by hearing it told.

But the voice is indistinct.

Water-burial... crocodile...

Mongoose... cobra...

What story is this voice trying to tell by coupling these things?

The mongoose and the cobra belong to an old village tale...

But this bridge over the Ganga, said to be the largest in Asia?

That is very far from Garh Narikel. It seems to belong to some newer story.

Then how old a story will this spirit tell? How many hundreds of years? A hundred at the very least. And if so, has it been waiting a hundred years for release - or longer still? What tale is this spirit trying to tell and hear? If it received water-burial, why did it not gain release? If the mongoose saved it from the cobra, that must mean some unseen power stood beside it... but how did that same power allow it to take water-burial among crocodiles?

Or is this not one story but two - perhaps more than two, several stories?

The body has become light as a silk-cotton flower. Where is the body now, in any case? Two or three stories have mingled together, along with two or three periods of time and tracts of land. Let us see what I hear and what I am able to tell... whether the stories become clear with their times and places, or remain entangled to the very end.

I

When kabaddi began in Channa Grove that night, at first no one could tell whether it was a game or a trial. The bhuts stood in a circle; the pretts hung from branch to branch like pale smoke; the rakshasas cast such silvery light from their small bodies that even the loths hidden behind the leaves could squint and see. The Panidubbi had left the pond and come as far as the grove; her hair did not drag upon the soil but through the air, like a black river that had forgotten its course and walked into the trees. Brahma sat in the peepal tree, looking in four directions with four faces, yet no mantra came from any mouth. In place of a mantra one sound rose and fell: kabaddi... kabaddi... kabaddi.

Human beings played kabaddi in Garh Narikel too, but the ghosts' kabaddi was different. A human being touched the earth; a ghost touched the earth's memory. A human being held his breath to chant; a ghost, having no breath, could chant forever. A human being crossed a boundary; a ghost crossed time. Once a ghost entered the opponent's half, it could touch 1885, emerge in 1934, plant a foot in 1977, touch the red light of a 2026 mobile tower, and return to Channa Grove. Then catching it was not difficult but impossible, for its body existed here and there, in every place at once.

Budhba Ghost was the chief referee. He had sat on the same branch for two hundred years, so no one argued with his decisions. A ghost who trembled at the mere word release possessed, strangely enough, limitless patience in matters of justice. But that night Budhba Ghost's eyes were not pale; they were green, as though the waters of the Kamala-Balan were filling them from within. Hulasi, the ghost without hands, circled the ground with the upper half of her body, marking the boundary as she moved. Whenever a ghost crossed the line, she signalled with her eyes; her eyes were her hands.

In the first raid, the team of pretis entered. White bodies, a sliding radiance behind them. They began chanting kabaddi-kabaddi, but on the third circuit the sound changed. 'Water... water... water...' Everyone thought it was the sound of breath breaking. But how could a ghost lose its breath? Then the cry rose a second time: 'Samadhi... samadhi...' Budhba Ghost came down from the branch. Silence spread through the grove. Far away, somewhere, water moved, though no stream ran beside Channa Grove.

The Panidubbi shook out her hair. What fell from it was not pond water but the smell of the Ganga. 'That is not the voice of the village pond,' she said. The rakshasas' silver light turned black. The loth, forever a spectator, opened his half-open mouth fully for the first time. Not smoke but cement dust poured from it. And from inside that dust came a thin voice, like an iron rod: splash... splash...

Splash.

Behind that splash a bridge was being built - the road bridge proclaimed to be the largest in Asia. A web of iron, massive piers, cement sacks fallen along the Ganga, day-labourers carrying baskets on their heads, men whose names were never entered whole in the contractor's register. If a man's name was Ram, the register might say 'Rm'. If he was Mangal, it might say 'Mangala'. One man's father's name vanished; another man's village changed; someone aged nineteen became forty-five. People can be altered on paper far more easily than in a river. The river knows every dead person by the name that was truly his.

On that bridge Nand Aruni was not merely a junior engineer; he was a troubled witness. He wore a helmet that sounded hollow from within. On the day he first reached the site, the foreign contractor's men showed him the plans. On the plan the river was a blue line, the labourers round dots, danger a red triangle, and death only a footnote. Nand kept looking. The blue line seemed to twitch from time to time. When he bent closer, it was no line at all but the dhoti of a labourer drifting in the Ganga.

Photographs of Edward Broom, the foreign company's site chief, were posted everywhere - smiling in a helmet, patting an Indian child on the head. Beneath the photograph were the words, 'Development with Human Dignity.' The labourers could not read English, but they saw the picture and assumed that perhaps this man owned the place. Nand could read. The word dignity always caught in his mind. If there was dignity, why was the night-shift safety net torn? If there was dignity, why was the report prepared before the body of the fallen worker had even been searched for?

The first splash came on a Monday afternoon, when sunlight on the water glittered like iron rods. Bisesar Paswan, a day-labourer, had

climbed a pier with a basket of stone chips on his head and worn-out slippers on his feet. From a distance Nand shouted, 'Put on the safety belt!' No one could say whether Bisesar heard him. He turned and smiled, as though to say, 'Babu, will a belt fill my stomach?' At that instant his foot slipped on a rod. He spun as he fell. Human eyes saw a body strike the water. The crocodiles' eyes saw a name descend into it.

The Ganga remained calm on the surface. Five breaths later a round whirlpool rose. In it appeared Bisesar's hand, then the basket, then part of his body. Whether the crocodiles were hungry that day or the system itself had invited them was difficult to know. Saffron-coloured foam floated for a long time upon the water. The site clerk opened the register and wrote: 'Absent after leaving the workplace.' Nand caught his hand. The clerk laughed. 'Sir, the order comes from above. If we write dead, the work will stop.'

That night Bisesar arrived in Channa Grove. His body was not whole. Where the crocodiles had chewed away flesh, water now filled the gaps. The ghosts stopped their game. Bisesar looked around and said, 'I am not from Garh Narikel.' Budhba Ghost replied, 'Wherever an untimely death arrives, a village is formed.' Bisesar said, 'My name is not in the register.' At once Hulasi burst into a heart-rending laugh. 'Your name is not in the register - that is precisely why you were able to come here.'

Kabaddi began again that night, but with a new rule. Every ghost entering the opponent's half had to return having saved one name. The first went with 'Bisesar Paswan'. The second with 'Salamat Ansari'. The third with 'Gopi Mahato'. The fourth with 'Rajnu Mandal'. The names rose into the air, caught on leaves, then slid down toward the trunks of the coconut trees. There were few coconut trees in Garh Narikel, but those that remained did not tremble at the sound of names; they drank them in.

Garh Narikel lay on the right bank of the Balan, but rivers, not human beings, decide what is right and what is left. When the Kamala brought a flood, the village became the left bank; when the Balan flowed quietly, it became the right again. The shade of the spreading trees of Sabhagachhi reached as far as that village. Of every bride and groom who once met beneath the trees of Saurath, some child of their lineage would, sooner or later, set foot upon the soil of Garh Narikel.

But after the flood, the shade was cut away. Trees dried. Sand climbed as far as the village courtyards. Children in the arhar fields began to fear not the jackal but the sand sinking beneath their feet. In the ghosts' kabaddi all these sights became boundary lines. When Hulasi raised her eyes where her right hand should have been, the current at Pipraghat flashed. When Budhba Ghost called 'out', crows flew over the ruined grove at Jhanjharpur. When the loth tried to applaud, cement fell from his half-formed hands. And the Panidubbi, whose hair once entangled

children in ponds, was now tangled in the names of day-labourers from the Ganga. 'I pull people into water,' she said, 'but these people are being pushed into it.'

That night Nand's home was not in Garh Narikel but in the temporary camp beside the bridge. Yet his dream walked through the village. In the dream he heard an old family story: when Kalit was born in Lattar Thakur's house, a peepal leaf above the courtyard had hung upside down. The midwife had said, 'This child will see very far.' But to see far is a curse. One who sees far cannot ignore the lie lying close at hand. Nand was perhaps the last descendant of Kalit's long sight. In those who fell into the water he could see the future - the widow in the village, compensation without a name, a courthouse veranda, a child selling tea there, and one day that child's grandson glowing on a digital screen and saying, 'There is a digital-arrest warrant against you.'

At that time such glimpses of the future seemed impossible to him. Digital arrest? Mule account? Hong Kong? Signal? Nand had a small diary in his pocket then, not a mobile phone. But the ghosts of Garh Narikel were not bound by the limits of time. The future had already entered the game in Channa Grove. A thin young man, not yet even born, trembled behind a leaf. His name would be Ujjwal Jha. He would drown not in a river but in a screen. Crocodiles would not eat him; numbers would - money lost, interest, threats, a downloaded app, calls in the night, the shame of the household. The ghosts could see him but could not touch him, because his death had not yet taken shape.

Budhba Ghost closed his eyes at this vision of the future. He had seen countless deaths, but it was hard to look upon a death arriving without a body. Hulasi asked, 'Who is he?' The Brahma of the peepal answered from all four mouths, and all four answers were false. Only the Panidubbi spoke: 'This is a new water-burial. Without water.'

The second splash at the bridge came fifteen days later. This time the dead worker was the son of a Musahar woman - underage, though the register made him twenty-eight. Leaving him at the site, his mother had said, 'Work through the day and come home early in the evening.' He did not return. The contractor's clerk said, 'He ran away.' His mother did not believe it. She sat beside the Ganga all night, calling his name. The water gave no answer. But that same night, in the ghosts' kabaddi at Channa Grove, a new player entered carrying an invisible basket on his head. He could not fully remember his own name. 'Ma used to call me Chhotu,' he said.

Chhotu had to be given a name. A nameless ghost could not remain in the game. Budhba Ghost tried to place a hand upon his head, but the hand hovered a finger's breadth above the body. 'For now your name is Chhotu,' he said. 'When your true name is found on earth, we shall

change it.' Everyone in Channa Grove agreed. The loth clapped. His applause sounded like stone.

Nand prepared a report on this second death. It read: 'Inadequate safety arrangements; employment of an underage labourer; body not recovered; contractor liable.' The report went upward. It returned with words struck through in red pencil. 'Underage' had been removed. 'Body' had been removed.

'Liable' had been removed. What remained was: 'Labourer absent.' Nand stared at the paper and sat on his bed all night. It seemed to him that the crossed-out words had become little fish, flapping on the table in search of water. Meanwhile, a meeting was held in the foreign company's Delhi office. Edward Broom appeared by video. Awards were arranged on the wooden wall behind him. 'The India project is our flagship,' he said.

The interpreter translated: 'The India project is the company's pride.' The site chief reported: 'Deaths are within controlled numbers.' Nand felt sick the moment he heard the sentence. Deaths within controlled numbers? Who controls death - a doctor, a god, or a contractor? At the end of the meeting Broom said, 'Next month I shall speak at Harvard on ethics. I shall use this Indian bridge as an example.'

Nand closed his notebook. He understood that the greatest bridge in the world is not the one that carries you across a river; it is the bridge built from crime to prestige. In Garh Narikel, Ba was young then and would sometimes wake suddenly in the night. Her ears filled with the sound of water. She would tell her mother-in-law, 'Someone who drowned is speaking a name.' Her mother-in-law would say, 'Such sounds are natural in a river village.' But Ba knew this was no ordinary sound of a river. With a finger she would try to write the name in the ash beside the hearth, but before the name took shape the ash blew away. At such moments the coconut leaves outside the house suddenly became still. In Garh Narikel, when a coconut leaf fell utterly still, people understood that some dead person stood at the threshold.

On one such night Ba saw water dripping at the threshold. She opened the door; no one was there. But on the earth were footprints - not whole feet, no heels, no toes, only round wet marks. They led from the courtyard to the room where Kalit's old chest was kept. Ba opened it. Inside lay old papers, land deeds, marriage agreements, a black photograph, and a letter. The letter contained only two words: 'Save names.' Ba could not read, yet the letters made themselves legible to her without the help of her eyes.

Kabaddi in Channa Grove was no longer regular. Once the game began whenever night fell; now it began whenever someone fell from the bridge, a court date was fixed, or a name was struck from a file. The ghosts called it 'Save-the-Name Kabaddi'. One team ran carrying the

names of the dead; the other became the government's seal and chased them. A name blurred if its bearer was caught. If the runner touched the boundary and returned, the name sprouted upon a coconut leaf like a new shoot.

Once a strange player entered this game. He wore a lawyer's coat, but his feet were smeared with river mud. 'Date,' he said. The ghosts did not understand. 'Date after date,' he said again. Sheets of paper began flying from his mouth. Budhba Ghost tried to catch him, but those pages were not wind; they were procedure, and procedure could not be seized by hand. The Brahma of the peepal said, 'This is the revenant of the court. Once it enters, it does not leave for a generation.' Looking at him, the Panidubbi said, 'He is more dangerous than a crocodile. A crocodile eats when it is hungry; this creature keeps eating dates even when its belly is full.'

Many years later the court-revenant would acquire a real face - Batuknath Hariharan. But that night no one knew his name. He was only smoke wearing a lawyer's coat. Behind that smoke stood a half-formed figure like Chandrapal Batra, a law degree in one hand, the seal of Meerut at one corner, a betting slip in his pocket. Farther behind him, across the sea, sat the shadow of Lau Kin-Hung in a glass tower in Hong Kong. None of them had yet entered the story, but in the ghosts' kabaddi the future had already begun its preparations.

One day Nand met an old boatman beside the river at the site. His name was Fakira Sahni. His face was cracked like the riverbed, his eyes full of sand. 'Why are there so many crocodiles?' Nand asked. Fakira laughed. 'There are not more crocodiles, Babu. More bodies are being thrown to them.' Nand fell silent. Fakira continued, 'Crocodiles clean the river. But human beings want to hand their crimes over to them too. If a crocodile eats the body, the crime is thought to have vanished. That is how the big men think. But the crocodile eats the body, not the name. The name sticks between its teeth.'

Nand wrote the sentence in his diary: 'The crocodile eats the body, not the name.' That night in Channa Grove Budhba Ghost repeated the same words as Bisesar, Chhotu, Salamat, Rajnu, and a dozen spirits with incomplete names played kabaddi. For the first time Hulasi did not laugh; she wept. Not water but black light dripped from her eyes. 'My name too was written wrongly,' she said. 'People said I killed myself. I slipped into the well.' Budhba Ghost replied, 'Your name too will be saved.' Hulasi entered the game for the first time. Though she had no hands, she played better than all the other ghosts. To hold a name, one needs not hands but memory.

Nand's third report now went directly to the secretariat. This time he kept a copy. The site chief warned him, 'You are becoming too emotional.' Nand replied, 'If I am not to be emotional about death,

should I be emotional about the bills?' The clerks laughed. There was fear inside that laughter, because those who laugh at death are often obeying someone's orders from within. Nand understood that the bridge piers were being built less from iron and cement than from lies.

At night water clinked outside his camp. He got up and went out. In the moonlight the Ganga looked white. Far away a crocodile floated motionless - neither blinking nor moving its tail. Nand felt it was watching him. Then he saw writing on its back. He went closer. The word was 'thirty'. The water stirred. A second crocodile appeared: 'three hundred'. A third: 'three thousand'. Nand stepped back. From the water came a voice: 'Not numbers. Names.'

By morning the site was full of rumours that Engineer Nand was going mad. The contractor's men said, 'Send him on leave.' A department officer said, 'Hold his file.' But Nand did not go on leave. He began asking every labourer his name one by one. Those who could write he asked to sign. Those who could not, he asked for a thumbprint. If someone was afraid even to give a thumbprint, Nand memorised his name. Nand's memory became a register. At night when he slept, the names moved through him like a train.

The ghosts in Channa Grove could now see Nand. Living people were not allowed to witness the ghosts' game, but a human witness is half a ghost. Even in broad daylight Nand's shadow sometimes walked away from his feet. He would remain at the site while the shadow travelled to Garh Narikel, stood at Ba's threshold, watched the kabaddi in Channa Grove, and returned to his feet at dawn. When Nand awoke, he would find dry leaves from the grove caught around his ankles. He could not understand how leaves from Channa Grove had reached the camp.

Meanwhile, the old story of Lattar Thakur began to be told again in the village. People said that when Kalit was a child, instead of crawling on his knees he leapt forward like a frog. People laughed, but the elders said, 'One day this child will leap across time.' Kalit learned English, saw government courts, understood the power of paper. His distant descendant Nand was now seeing the lie inside paper. One generation gained power through paper; another would fight against it. Lineages change this way in Garh Narikel: the weapon one generation lifts becomes the wound carried by the next.

News of the water-burials among crocodiles did not appear in the newspapers. The papers printed photographs of the bridge, the chief minister's speech, praise for the foreign company, 'the highway of national progress'. No photographs of the dead. No wailing of Bisesar's wife. No waiting mother of Chhotu. No report by Nand. But that night in Channa Grove the ghosts played with newspaper pages. Water began dripping from the middle of the page that carried the bridge photograph. The rakshasas increased their silver light. As the page grew wet, the

photograph blurred and the faces of labourers emerged beneath it. Budhba Ghost announced, 'Tonight's game is Newspaper and Name.'

The game began. Newspaper pages flew through the air and the ghosts chased them. Whenever a page was caught, its headline broke apart and became a name. 'Development' broke into 'Bisesar'. 'Progress' into 'Chhotu'. 'National Pride' into 'Salamat'. The ghosts did not cheer; in a game of the dead there is no cheering, only remembrance. The Panidubbi tied the pages with her hair and hung them from a coconut tree. From that day, on one coconut leaf in Garh Narikel appeared a black stain like printer's ink. People said the tree was diseased. Ba said, 'No. A name has taken root.'

Nand's fourth month on the bridge was hard. Broom's Indian assistant said, 'Your reports will affect the project's funding.' Nand asked, 'Do the deaths not affect it?' The assistant

smiled. 'Deaths happen in every great undertaking.' After that sentence Nand looked carefully at his face. It was a human face, but the eyes were a crocodile's. Nand understood that crocodiles did not live only in rivers. Some wore suits, some lawyers' coats, some professors' gowns, some ministers' kurtas, and some smiled from stages devoted to ethics.

That night, in the middle of the game at Channa Grove, the Brahma of the peepal suddenly spoke. 'One day the money from this bridge will become medicine. The money from that medicine will become weapons. The money from those weapons will become gambling. The money from that gambling will become court dates. Beneath those dates, names will again be buried.' The ghosts started. Hulasi asked, 'Medicine? Weapons? Gambling?' Brahma closed all four mouths. Telling the future does not prevent it; sometimes it only makes it arrive faster.

Budhba Ghost gave his ruling: 'From tonight onward, kabaddi will save not only the names of the dead but the names of the future dead.' The loth grew frightened. 'Who can know the names of people who have not yet died?' Budhba Ghost pointed above Channa Grove toward the sky. There were no stars there, only bank-account numbers shining. Some numbers travelled toward a glass tower in Hong Kong; some caught on the wall of an old law college in Meerut; some entered Bar Council oath papers; some descended into the mobile phones of young men in Garh Narikel. For the first time the ghosts were afraid of numbers. Saving a name was easy. But where was the name hidden behind a number?

Nand knew none of this future, yet a restlessness kept growing inside him. On the first page of his diary he wrote: 'If I am no longer here, save the names.' On the second: 'The crocodile eats the body, not the name.' On the third: 'Not thirty official deaths; at least three hundred.' The fourth page he left blank. During the night water fell upon it. By

morning the water had dried, leaving a stain shaped like the map of Garh Narikel. Nand stared at the map. The bridge was being built across the Ganga, but the roots of the crime seemed to lead all the way to his village.

For the last time that night, the kabaddi in Channa Grove grew fierce. Bhuts, prets, rakshasas, loths, the Panidubbi, witches, the Brahma of the peepal, the water-buried labourers - all entered the same game. No boundary remained clear. The Kamala-Balan, the Ganga, Sabhagachhi, the bridge, the court, an auditorium abroad, a digital screen - each became a different corner of the playing field. Budhba Ghost stood in the middle and declared: 'Whoever died without a name will run tonight carrying a name. Whoever survived with a name will run to save names.'

Whoever cuts away a name will be caught.'

Bisesar made the first run. Chanting 'Bisesar Paswan', he crossed the line. The government seal chased him but could not catch him. Chhotu ran second, crying, 'Find my true name.' Nand's shadow ran third. The ghosts stopped. The shadow of a living man had entered the game. It said, 'Nand Aruni.' Behind it raced a dark crocodile that had emerged not from the river but from a file. The shadow barely touched the boundary and escaped.

At that very moment Nand woke on the bridge. There was uproar outside the camp. Another worker had fallen. This time at night. This time no one knew his name. Torchlight trembled across the water. The crocodiles were still, as though they had been waiting. Nand ran. The site chief shouted, 'Stop! It is dark.' Nand did not stop. Reaching the water's edge, he felt that all the ghosts in Channa Grove were calling his name at once. He swept the torch over the water. For a single instant a face appeared in the whirlpool - alive or dead, impossible to tell.

Nand could not catch him. His hand went into the water and came back empty. Yet something had snagged around his fingers - the torn corner of the labourer's gamchha. The cloth was neither red nor ochre; it had the colour paper takes when water falls upon a name that has been crossed out. Nand closed his fist around it. That night he understood: this was not merely a matter of a bridge. This was water-burial among crocodiles, and the crocodiles would come in many forms.

Before dawn the game in Channa Grove stopped. The drops on the leaves were not dew but ink. Budhba Ghost returned to his branch. Hulasi went back toward the well. The Panidubbi took the path to the pond, though Ganga silt remained caught in her hair. The loth half-closed his mouth. The rakshasas' silver light dimmed. The Brahma of the peepal whispered from all four mouths at once: 'The story has not begun; the story has been caught.'

Dawn smoke began rising at every doorway of Garh Narikel. Dogs barked. Women swept their courtyards. Children turned in their sleep. No one knew how many names had been written on the village leaves during the night. But when Ba stepped into the courtyard, she found at her threshold the same torn corner of gamchha that Nand had clenched in his fist at the bridge. She trembled. Far away the Ganga flowed. There, perhaps, crocodiles were cleaning their teeth. Here in Garh Narikel, the coconut leaves stood still.

Ba lifted the gamchha and touched it to her forehead. No tears came to her eyes. The women of Garh Narikel know that sometimes, if one weeps, a name may be washed away. Softly she said, 'Tell me the name of the one you belonged to.' The leaf did not move. But very far away, in the bridge camp, letters were sprouting on the blank fourth page of Nand's diary. The first was J. The second A. The third L. Then the ink spread. Only the ghosts of Channa Grove could read the whole word: JAL-SAMADHI - water-burial.

FOLK SONG: THE NAME IN THE CORNER OF A GAMCHHA

Folk tune: mournful Sama-Daun

O Ganga, do not wash the name away in your flowing water,

Carry the torn corner of the gamchha all the way home.

O Ganga, do not wash away my son's name,

Bring the torn corner of his gamchha home.

His foot slipped from the pier, his spinning body fell,

His mother still sits at the threshold with a lamp alight.

The crocodile chewed his bones, the paper struck out his name,

But a leaf of Channa Grove preserved his cry.

Ba held back her tears and raised the cloth to her head,

*'Tell me whose you are, tell me the name' - the leaves whispered all
night.*

O Ganga, keep the body; return the name,

Half a name was written in the sand beside the pier,

Half lay hidden, mingled in the fold of Ganga's sari.

You who took the body shall not take the cry,

Do not let the lamp at a mother's threshold go out.



CHAPTER 2

The Village on the Right Bank

*The river cuts embankments with its current; paper cuts villages with
dates.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE SUN ON THE RIGHT
BANK**

Folk tune: Batagabani

*Come, traveller, come to the right bank,
Carry the village's full name with you as your companion.
The river may change its course; the sun still knows direction,
The village's roots, deep in the soil, still reckon where home lies.
Do not let the road of the name be lost in right and left,
Carry the threshold, the leaves, and the ancestors' teaching with you.
Kamala and Balan sing—the village travels in the mind,
No paper can cut through the embankment of affection born among its
people.
The sun of the right bank descends again into the courtyard,
With the village's full name, every family is made whole.
Mustard laughs along every ridge; the fields and groves are fragrant,
The signs and tokens left by the ancestors shine at every step.
Let the storm of paper blow as hard as it may; the roots will not be
torn out,
The lamp at the threshold will keep burning; the village will not be
severed.*



*“The river cuts embankments with its current; paper cuts villages with
dates.”*

“When the river eats a man's boundary ridge, paper eats his lawsuit.”

— An old saying of Garh Narikel

Ba held up the torn corner of the gamchha. The smoke of dawn had not yet spread across the whole sky. The packed earth of the courtyard was wet with the night's dew, but the gamchha seemed wetter still, as though some river had hidden its little currents inside it. Ba smelled it. There was no smell of water, no smell of silt. In that cloth lingered the

smell of the hand that carries cement all day, dreams frightened dreams at night, and before dawn is entered in the register as “absent.”

In Garh Narikel, nothing existed without lineage and clan. Trees had lineages, stones had lineages, wells had lineages, even a broken sickle had one. Ba touched the gamchha to her forehead and went inside without weeping. She opened the room where the household's old papers, old sacred threads, old keys, old betel nuts, and old humiliations were all kept together. There stood a brass-latched chest. Its lock had not been opened for years, but when Ba blew upon it, it opened as though an ancestor seated within had long been waiting.

The first sound when the chest opened was not the sound of paper. It was the sound of a leaf—a coconut leaf. It was the very leaf that Lattar Thakur had dried and preserved with his own hands when Kalit was born. A turmeric stain still marked its tip. Ba placed the corner of the gamchha beneath that leaf. She understood: when a name cannot be found, place it among the ancestors; some leaf or other will stir.

From within that leaf, the village opened.

Garh Narikel was small on a map, but so vast in memory that many rivers could flow within it. The Kamala-Balan passed along its right side—so said those who stood facing Pipraghat. But the village children learned right and left not from the river but from water waist-deep in the fields. With the rains, the village changed its directions. What had been right yesterday could feel like left today when the mouth of the current turned. Yet the elders of Garh Narikel would say, “Let the current turn however it will; the village never abandons its right bank.”

The sprawling trees of Saurath's Sabha Gachhi were still alive then. Bridegrooms sat beneath the trees, pandits matched mool and gotra, and the bride's people measured with their eyes whether a head bowed properly and whether pride showed in a man's gait. The trees of Partapur cast the shade of that marriage-market all the way to Garh Narikel. When a young man of Garh Narikel set out to marry, he did not first cross the Balan. First he touched a leaf of the coconut tree at home. The leaf said, “If you go, take your name with you, not merely your body.”

The Kamala brought floods. The Balan brought calm. Together they made the village's story. When the Kamala left sand behind, pigeon-pea grew in the fields and the eyes of jackals glimmered among the stalks. Children mistook them for tigers and ran. When the rains receded, porcupines slipped into their burrows. Women saw their tracks and said, “One whose thorns are outside carries no fear within.” In this way the people of Garh Narikel learned ethics from animals and birds. Later, even when city people learned the language of contracts, affidavits, pledges, and laws, the village's true law continued to be administered by trees, currents, jackals, crocodiles, and ghosts.

Channa Grove was the village's night. By day it appeared to be no more than a dense grove. At night, the whole council of the dead assembled there: Budhba the Ghost upon his branch, Hulasi toward the well, the Panidubbi in the bottomless pond, the witches upon their little platforms, Loth with his mouth half open, and the Rakash casting silver light. Whenever a child was born in the village, the play in Channa Grove stopped. The dead listened for the footfall of the new body. They watched to see whose unfinished story the child had brought with it.

On just such a night in 1885, a child was born in Lattar Thakur's house. Outside, the currents of the Kamala-Balan were silent. No dog barked, no bull lowed. Only one leaf from the coconut tree broke gently and fell into the courtyard. The midwife said, "It is a boy." When Lattar Thakur came in, he saw that the child had been slow to open his eyes, but when he did, he looked not straight up at the thatch but toward the leaves by the doorway. The older women said, "This child will understand the language of trees." Lattar laughed. The men of his house laughed at talk of fate, because they believed fate could be mastered with land, plough, ledger, and court.

The child was named Kalit. The name was short, but it held within it the bursting of a bud. Lattar Thakur would say, "A bud that opens at the proper time becomes a flower; one that opens too soon becomes a thorn." Kalit began opening too soon. At six months he imitated sounds. If his mother said "hmm," he did not merely repeat it; he produced a "hmm" that sounded a little older than hers. If Lattar coughed, Kalit imitated the weariness behind the cough. One day, crawling on his knees, he suddenly leapt like a frog and frightened the women of the house. "The spirit of a frog is in the child," Lattar said, "A frog knows both water and earth; what is wrong with that?"

Kalit's childhood spread through every direction of the village. When he walked along the Kamala-Balan, the water seemed to rise a finger's breadth behind him. When he went near Sabha Gachhi, the voices of pandits reciting lineages and clans would pause. When he entered a pigeon-pea field, the jackals' eyes stopped flashing. He would sit fearlessly beside Channa Grove, and Budhba the Ghost would lean over his head and wonder, "Will this child be able to hear the names of the dead?" Hulasi rose from the well without her hands, but Kalit did not look that way. The dead trusted him; among the living, however, Kalit was quick and sharp.

Those were years of change. British rule was stretching its claws even into distant villages. Darbhanga, Calcutta, Patna—these names landed on the veranda of Garh Narikel like unfamiliar birds. Someone would say there was no employment without English. Someone else said abandoning Sanskrit would destroy the lineage. Another insisted that to save land one had to know the language of paper. Lattar Thakur was

silent at first. Then one day he saw that the boundary ridge of a neighbouring field had shifted, while the paper still recorded the old boundary. For the first time he understood that what the soil says is not heard in court; the court hears only what the paper says.

From that day Lattar Thakur began seeking English education for Kalit. A Bengali babu was brought in. His box held pointed pens, an inkpot, sheets of paper, maps, and a small bell. When the bell rang, Kalit sat down. He grasped letters quickly. But he did not merely read them; he also smelled the deception inside them. The Bengali babu taught him to write the word "name." Kalit asked, "If a name is written wrongly, does the person change?" The babu laughed. Lattar did not. Outside, a coconut leaf stirred.

The game of names entered the house that very day. One person wrote "Lattar," another "Latar," another "Latdhar." In the land papers one form appeared, on the rent receipt another, in the school a third. Sweat rose on Lattar Thakur's forehead. At night he went to the coconut tree in the enclosure and said, "Protect my name." The tree remained silent. In Channa Grove Budhba the Ghost laughed: "Whoever wants paper to guard his name must first rear the ghost of paper."

Kalit grew. He could read English letters, write Devanagari, understand Kaithi ledgers, and remember genealogies spoken aloud by old pandits. He began opening three doors at once. Villagers came to him to have papers read. One asked, "Does this say my field belongs to me?" Another, "Has a tax been imposed on me here?" An old man asked, "Babu, is my son's name written in this?" Kalit read and explained, but slowly a strange gleam appeared in his eyes. He understood that the one who reads letters need not plough the field; the one who writes them can change the owner of a ploughed field.

Lattar Thakur was both pleased and frightened by that gleam. He saw intelligence in his child, but also a serpent behind the intelligence. At night he told his wife, "It will be hard to keep this boy straight. Among papers he is learning how a snake moves." She replied, "A snake too guards a house if it receives milk at the right time." Lattar asked, "And if it develops a taste for blood?" His wife fell silent.

Meanwhile Garh Narikel kept changing. One year the Kamala deposited so much sand that the furrows of many fields disappeared. Some trees in Partapur dried up. The bridegroom market beneath Sabha Gachhi diminished. Pulses, sugarcane, pigeon-pea, fish, makhana—all rose and fell in their own ways. Yet paper appeared more and more in people's speech. Once someone said, "My father's field." Now he said, "My grandfather's name is in the register." Once a marriage began with questions of lineage; now the ledger was examined. Once the names of the dead lived in memory; now people sought them on stones or in

registers. The ghosts of Channa Grove looked at one another: the living were learning the methods of the dead.

When Kalit was twelve, he was taken to Darbhanga. For the first time he spent a night away from the village. That night there was no kabaddi in Channa Grove. Budhba the Ghost said, "The child who heard the names of the village dead will now hear the lies of the living in the city." Hulasi wept inside the well, but her weeping dissolved into the water. For one night the Panidubbi left the pond and went as far as the Balan to see whether Kalit would return. Kalit did return, but for the first time the dust on his feet smelled of the city—sweat, ink, horse-carriages, court verandas, and the pride of people who wished to change their fate by changing their language.

In the Darbhanga court, Kalit heard the word "date" for the first time in its legal sense. A man was crying out, "Another date?" He had a beard and sand in his eyes. He said his field had been in litigation for three years, and meanwhile the river had eaten it away. The clerk replied, "On paper the field still exists." The man broke down. "If the field exists on paper, shall I plough the paper?" Everyone laughed. Kalit did not. Something trembled within him. He saw that when the river eats something, paper does not acknowledge it as dead. The court's time was different from the river's time. The river cuts today; the court hears next month.

That day Kalit tried for the first time to write his father's name in exact letters. On the page he wrote: "Lattar Thakur, Garh Narikel." The handwriting was beautiful. But when the ink dried, the dot in "Garh" spread into the shape of a tiny crocodile. Kalit tried to wipe it with a finger; the stain spread. That night he dreamed that the roots of the village coconut tree had entered a sheet of paper, and a crocodile was chewing them.

Time flowed on. Kalit became a young man. Reading people's papers, he began reading their fears. The fear of someone in a land dispute was one kind; the fear of someone carrying a tax notice another; the fear of a man who found his son's name written wrongly another still. Kalit learned the language of all these fears. There was compassion in that language, and there was money to be made. He saved one person's field, arranged another's partition, wrote another's ledger. People in the village began saying, "Have Kalit Babu write the paper; the matter will endure farther." But in Channa Grove Budhba the Ghost asked, "If a man's words stand upon paper, where does his soul stand?"

Lattar grew old. His voice acquired the rasp a father's voice takes on when his son begins walking faster than he does. One evening he took Kalit to the bank of the Kamala-Balan. The flood had receded. Birds were leaving footprints in the sand. Lattar said, "Look. This will not be here tomorrow. Yet sand that can preserve a bird's footprint for even a

moment is more truthful than paper. Paper preserves lies as well." Kalit remained silent. He understood that his father was warning him. But young intelligence often mistakes warning for praise.

Lattar continued, "One day a paper will come to our house soaked in water. Before you read its letters, smell it. If it smells of earth, believe it. If it smells of money, do not sign it." Kalit laughed. "Babuji, how can paper have a smell?" Lattar looked at him. Something moved in the distant water—perhaps a fish, perhaps a crocodile. "It takes a nose that can see a smell," he said, "and a nose submerged in the ink of paper can no longer smell."

Many years after that conversation, when Nand Aruni stood trembling in the bridge camp with a labourer's gamchha in his hands, this old warning came back to him though he had never heard it. Memory does not travel only through the ears; it travels through blood. Nand had never met Lattar or Kalit. Yet the same warning flowed in his veins: smell the wet paper. So when Nand looked at the official list of the dead, the numbers smelled of money to him and the corner of the page smelled of silt. He understood: this was not a list; it was the mouth of a crocodile.

Ba kept turning over the papers in the chest. One old slip emerged—half in Kaithi, half in Devanagari, with the crooked language of the old courts scattered between them. The handwriting was Kalit's. At the top was a date—the dark fortnight of Sawan. The year had blurred. Subject: "Boundary dispute." Ba could not read the letters, but she knew the faces of the household papers. She carried the slip to the doorway. As the first ray of sun fell upon it, words emerged: "Next hearing." Ba shuddered. The words were very old, but their shadow was falling on today's gamchha.

At that moment a leaf of the coconut tree stirred. From it came someone's voice: "Date." Ba answered, "Name." The leaf moved again: "Date." Ba was stubborn. "Name." The third time, the leaf fell silent. The women of Garh Narikel know that when a leaf falls silent, one cannot immediately tell whether the argument has been won or lost.

By noon the villagers had gathered. Someone had heard that Ba had found the gamchha of a bridge labourer. One person called it a bad omen. Another said Nand Babu's life was in danger. Another asked how a gamchha could reach here when the Ganga was so far away. An old villager, half deaf from always pouring oil into his ears, spoke clearly: "Wherever a name is cut away, the gamchha flies back to the village. The body stays in the river; the name searches for home." Everyone fell silent.

Aruni Nandan was a child then. He watched from beyond the threshold. He did not remember the gamchha so much as its colour. Not red, not yellow, not ochre. A colour made by mixing paper soaked in water, blood dried in sunlight, and a labourer's palm rubbed raw in dust.

Many years later in the city, returning from a film at two in the morning with his daughter, when he would see the Chief Minister's hoarding and the child would ask, "Has he died?"—the colour of that gamchha would flash inside the question too. But for now he was a child, and all of it seemed like a game of mystery.

At dusk Ba carried the gamchha and the old slip to Channa Grove. Women ordinarily did not go there at night. But Ba was no ordinary woman. She had seen so much death in her life that the ghosts counted her among their own kind. Darkness was falling at an angle through the grove. Budhba the Ghost shifted on his branch. Hulasi rose from the direction of the well. Loth tried to close his half-open mouth, as though wishing to appear polite before an elder. Ba placed the gamchha on the ground, and the slip upon it.

Ba said, "If this belongs to a name, tell me the name. If it belongs to a date, I will not accept it."

The wind circled through Channa Grove. The leaves all moved once in reverse. Kabaddi did not begin, but a circle formed like the boundary of a playing field. Budhba the Ghost descended. His feet did not touch the earth, yet dust rose. He bent over the slip. From his black body came black light. The letters shone. Ba could not read them, but she could hear. Slowly Budhba the Ghost pronounced: "Lattar Thakur and unknown boundary."

Ba asked, "Who is the unknown boundary?" Budhba the Ghost laughed. "When the river eats land and paper refuses to acknowledge it, the boundary becomes unknown. When the government eats a body and refuses to acknowledge the death, the name becomes unknown. When the court gives a date and life comes to a halt, justice becomes unknown." Ba looked at the gamchha. "Then this?" Budhba the Ghost's voice grew heavy. "This is not Lattar's lawsuit. This is Nand's first testimony."

That night Nand could not sleep in the bridge camp. Before him lay the official list—thirty names. Beside it was his own notebook—the deaths he had heard of, the deaths he had seen, the bodies the river had taken, the homes left without information. The numbers did not match. Behind thirty he saw three hundred. Behind three hundred, the shadow of three thousand. He thought: "If I add names to the list, the list will cut me away." He picked up his pen. The first line he wrote was: "Death does not occur on the day the body stops; death occurs on the day the name is removed."

Outside the camp the Ganga flowed through the night. Inside Nand flowed the Kamala-Balan. The two rivers never met, yet the silt beneath his fingernails was the same colour from both. Suddenly he remembered the ancestral story—Lattar, Kalit, the boundary dispute, the next hearing. He understood that in his family's history the court had first

eaten the field; now the river was eating bodies. Yet in both places the crocodile was the same—the hunger seated inside paper.

Before dawn Nand opened the fourth page of his diary again. The night before, the fragment “jals” had surfaced there; it had now dried. The full word could be seen: “jal-samadhi”—water-burial. Beneath it, in letters so fine they looked like an ant’s trail, was written: “Begin with Garh Narikel.” Nand started. He had not written that sentence. He understood: testimony would begin not with the river, but with the village. One who has no home cannot keep a name; one who has no ancestors becomes an official number in death.

In Garh Narikel that dawn, Ba closed the chest again. The gamchha now lay between the leaf and the slip. She locked it, but did not remove the key. She left the key in the lock as though the house should be able to open itself when the next name arrived. Young Aruni watched in silence. Ba called him over, placed a hand upon his head, and said, “If ever you see a difference between paper and the heart, smell the heart. Paper can preserve a lie; the heart cannot preserve one for long.”

Aruni asked, “Whose gamchha is this?” Ba said, “The one whose name is still waiting on the road.” “How long can a name wait?” the child asked. Ba looked beyond the threshold and replied, “Sometimes five generations.”

There was no kabaddi in Channa Grove that night. The dead observed a vow of silence. Only Budhba the Ghost moved from branch to branch, as though waiting for someone. Hulasi looked at her reflection in the well and saw behind herself the faces of many labourers. The Panidubbi, combing out her long hair in the pond, drew out silt from the Ganga. The witches sat upon their platforms discussing the matter. “This time the game will be difficult. This time the crocodile is not only in the water.” For the first time Loth spoke a complete sentence: “The crocodile of paper.”

The moon rose over the village. Dew gathered on the coconut leaves, each drop round and transparent, each holding a tiny inverted world. In one drop stood Lattar Thakur. In another Kalit wrote letters. In a third Nand ran through the darkness of the bridge with a torch. In a fourth Ba closed the chest. In a fifth was Aruni, still a child, not yet understanding that the story of his lineage would one day carry him to city screens, courtroom floors, and foreign auditoriums.

Toward dawn a faint redness entered the Kamala-Balan. Some thought it was the colour of sunrise. Others thought it came from pigeon-pea blossoms. Budhba the Ghost said, “No. This is the colour of a name. When a name has been pressed down for a very long time, it first rises red.” Channa Grove fell quiet again. But it was not the quiet that

comes from sleep. It was the quiet that spreads through a courthouse veranda just before a case is filed.

The next day Nand wrote an application in the bridge office. Its language was plain, but within it trembled five generations of Garh Narikel. He wrote: "A complete list of the dead labourers must be produced. Names recorded as absent must be verified. Bodies fallen into the river must be searched for. Families must be informed. Safety arrangements must be investigated." The application was short. The crime was enormous. Beneath it the government stamp was applied: RECEIVED. A date was written.

The moment the date was stamped, the paper trembled faintly. The vibration reached Nand's hand. He felt as though Budhba the Ghost were speaking in Channa Grove: "Take care. A date can be the enemy of a name, and it can also be the boat that carries a name. How you steer it is your dharma." Nand did not fold the paper. He left it open. The sheet fluttered in the wind. Far away in the waters of the Ganga, a crocodile raised its head to look and then sank again.

FOLK SONG: THE VILLAGE ON THE RIGHT BANK

Folk tune: Batagabani

O traveller, do not forget the village on the right bank,

Let the river take the ridge, but do not let it take memory.

The river cut the ridge, the paper cut the village,

Who wrote away and erased the mark of our doorway?

The Kamala turned its current, the Balan changed its path,

Mother says—the village still stands on the right bank.

The stamp of a date made the house unknown,

The coconut leaf says—the name will not be lost.

Nand stands alone, open paper in his hand,

A crocodile in the distant water, the ancestors deep behind him.

Let the river take the ridge, but do not let it take memory,

Keep alive the name of the village on the right bank.

Kamala turned, Balan turned, the doorway remained standing,

From within erased marks, the depth of the ancestors rose.

The date on the seal says—this village is unknown,

The coconut leaf says—our life is here.



CHAPTER 3

The Reckoning of the Splash

*The splash of a clod falling into a well dies away, but it never stops
demanding an account.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A BOAT AMONG THE
SPLASHES**

Folk tune: Boatman's benediction

*O boat, move gently, carry the names across,
In the darkness of each splash, set a row of lamps.
At the sound of one splash the boatman lifts his oar,
Not the body alone—the name too must cross: he renews that vow.
Set the lamps of Bisesar, Chhotu, and Saryu in the boat,
Give the reckoning a human face; fill it with families.
However dark the current, the boat-song gives light,
A truthful list can become the first remedy for grief.
The boat will move among the splashes while the bank waits,
Dawn will come in the hope that every name reaches safety.
Waves may rise, the oar may shake, but let the heart not waver,
Let the lamps of Bisesar and Saryu not be lost in the wind.
At every landing a mother waits with her sari-end spread,
When the boat of names reaches shore, she sings an auspicious song.*



*“Whoever dies without a name has a soul that wanders through
government verandas.”*

— A voice from Channa Grove

Nand's application lay open on a table in the project office the next morning. The violet circle of the government stamp at the corner of the sheet still shone as though wet, as if the ink had not yet dried, as if some river inside it were still carrying a little current. The word RECEIVED sat upon it like a fat crocodile that had climbed out of the water to bask on the sand—untroubled, satisfied, waiting for the next turn of its hunger. Nand watched from a distance. He felt that if the sheet were folded now, every name inside it would suffocate and die—a second death, quieter than the first, and more final.

The office stood in a temporary building on the right side of the bridge. Tin roof, dust underneath, maps spread in the middle, empty

lime and cement sacks in a corner, and on one wall the gleaming board of a foreign company. The board read: "Human safety is our first pledge." The letters were in Devanagari, but the gait of the sentence was foreign. It was as though the soul of the statement lived in another country and only its shadow had been hung here—a shadow cold to the touch, with no warmth anywhere inside it.

Beneath the board were three photographs. The first was a coloured rendering of the future bridge across the river: blue sky, straight road, smiling workers—smiles practised for a camera, not for life. The second showed the state minister on inauguration day. The third was of the father of Edward Broom, chairman of the foreign Broom & Halden Group, who had once raised his hat while praising India's development. Behind him in the photograph stood a snow-covered European building; before him lay the pages of a speech on the safety of Indian workers. Nand looked at the picture and understood how often a lie arrives first in a beautiful frame—the smoother the frame, the deeper the lie within.

The head clerk, Diwakar Lal, picked up the application. He did not smell the paper; he merely turned the page. Those who do not smell paper often measure its weight instead. Diwakar Lal measured the weight. A calculation moved behind his eyes: how many files this application would open, how many officers' names would surface, how many signatures would tremble, and how many more envelopes of tea-money would be required. It was the calculation of a weather forecaster measuring the movement of clouds while caring nothing for the actual thirst for rain, only for the sheet on which the forecast was written.

"Nand Babu," he said, "the language here has become a little harsh."

"Death is harsh," Nand replied.

Diwakar Lal smiled. "One should use the word death with care. Many people leave the worksite without permission. The river is nearby, their villages are far away, wages are low. People leave."

Inside Nand, the night in Channa Grove moved. Bisesar Paswan, Chhotu whose real name had never been found, the splash in the night, the torn corner of the gamchha—all rose together and began to speak, as though voices silent for years had opened their mouths at once. Quietly he said, "A person who leaves on foot leaves footprints. A person who falls into the water leaves a splash. A person whose name is cut away leaves silence. It is the office's duty to distinguish among the three."

Diwakar Lal turned the page. "We'll send it upward."

"How far upward?" Nand asked.

The clerk laughed. "There are many levels of 'up' in government. The higher we send it, the longer it takes to come back down."

For the first time Nand saw the real teeth of the date inside that laugh. The court was still far away, but dates were already being bred in the office—like a small snake that had already emerged from its egg without anyone knowing or seeing it, yet with all the power of its future hiss stored intact within it.

That day there was an inspection meeting. Project chief Shashibhushan Dev, safety officer Mahendra Pathak, foreign consultant Victor Halden, and two officers from the state department sat around a long table. On it were tea, biscuits, maps, gleaming measuring instruments, and one thick safety register. Its cover was blue, its pages white, and the ink gathered along their edges was so black it looked as though a crocodile had rubbed its mouth there all night.

Victor Halden understood little Hindi. He spoke in English; an interpreter softened his sentences into Hindi. When Halden said, “The casualty figures are manageable,” the interpreter said, “The situation is under control.” When he said, “Local bodies take greater labour risk,” the interpreter said, “The workers do not follow rules.” When he said, “The list should be kept limited,” the interpreter said, “The records should remain clean.” Language, flowing like a river, wore down the bones of meaning—just as water slowly rounds a stone until its angles, its identity, its original shape have nearly disappeared.

Nand stood. “A record is clean only when it is complete.”

Silence spread across the table. Shashibhushan Dev removed his spectacles and wiped them with a handkerchief, as though invisible dust were obstructing his sight. Mahendra Pathak placed a hand on the safety register as though, if the book suddenly came alive, he would clamp its mouth shut. Victor Halden looked at the interpreter. The interpreter did not translate Nand’s sentence. He merely smiled and said, “There are some local concerns.”

“Local?” Nand trembled inwardly. Was the Ganga local? Were the labourers local? Was death local? The foreign company’s profit was global, but the fallen body was local? The question rose in his chest like lightning cracking through a sheet of thin glass—invisible from outside, yet weakening the whole structure within. He thought all this, but aloud said only, “The death of a person who climbs the bridge foundations is a death within the project. It cannot be made small by calling it local.”

Shashibhushan Dev’s voice hardened. “Nandji, you are becoming emotional. If an engineer becomes emotional, bridges are not built.”

Nand replied, “If he does not, he cannot understand what is being buried inside the foundations.”

The meeting did not end abruptly, but its soul got up and left. Papers continued to move, conversation continued, tea grew cold, crumbs of

biscuit spread on the table, yet everyone understood that Nand was no longer merely an engineer. He had become an inconvenient witness—the kind who can neither be fully silenced nor fully heard, and whose very presence becomes a permanent discomfort.

That afternoon Nand went to the workers' settlement. Behind the bridge camp stood rows of makeshift shelters of bamboo and tarpaulin. When rain came the roofs leaked; when the hot wind blew the tarpaulin burned like fire. People lived there from Bihar, Odisha, Bengal, Assam, the Nepal border, Bundelkhand, and countless unnamed places. Some were known by caste, some by village, some only by a bodily feature—Lame One, Fair One, Thin One, Chhotu, Boatman, Bearded Man, Outsider. These names were not identities; they were marks of the absence of identity, as though society had not even taken the trouble to give names to its hardest-working hands.

Nand went from shelter to shelter. At first people were afraid. Engineers usually came to measure things, not to measure the look in a labourer's eyes. Nand kept asking, "Bisesar Paswan's home?" A woman whose vermilion had dried in the sun until it looked like earth said quietly, "Home? What home is here? This is tarpaulin." There was no complaint in her voice—only a fact so old that it had forgotten even how to be sorrowful.

"Where is he?"

The woman neither laughed nor cried. She looked into her palm as though Bisesar's face had been written there and she could no longer read it clearly. "Three days ago he went up on the foundation. Then—water."

"The office says he left the job and went away."

This time the woman's eyes rose—once, and with such sharpness that Nand stepped back. "If he had gone away, he would have taken his shoes. Look." From a corner of the shelter she brought out a pair of torn shoes. Cement dust had settled inside them, and in that dust was a shape as though a foot still lived there, only invisible. "If the shoes are here, the feet are in the river."

Nand kept looking at the shoes. He felt that every road on earth had stopped inside them—the road Bisesar never completed, the journey abandoned halfway. He opened his notebook and wrote the name: Bisesar Paswan. The woman asked, "If you write a name, does the person come back?" Nand's throat dried. "He does not come back," he said, "but he does not disappear." The answer felt incomplete even to him, yet in that moment he could say nothing more truthful.

In the next shelter lived the companions of the labourer everyone called Chhotu. No one knew his real name. He used to say, "In my village they call me Bhola; here they call me Chhotu." In the attendance register

he was “Chhotu”; in the payment register, “Chandresh”; in the safety register, “irregular labourer”; in the accident list, no name at all. Nand asked, “His father?” No one knew. “Village?” Three different answers came. “Age?” Everyone was silent. Chhotu had fallen into the river, but the river had not washed away his entire identity; the office had cut it away beforehand—four names, four lies, and one human being who could still not be fully known, in death or in life.

That evening Nand made a separate page in his notebook: “Incomplete Names.” First line: Chhotu alias Bhola? alias Chandresh? Father unknown. Village to be traced. Death witnessed. Body not found. No shoes. No gamchha. Only a splash.

The ink kept spreading across that page, as though Chhotu himself could not decide on his name, as though his soul still refused to accept any one of the four and therefore could not settle even upon paper.

As evening fell, the bridge foundations in the dark looked less like pillars than shrines, each one a silent statue of the dead. The labourers returned in lines. Food was cooked—rice, salt, chilli, sometimes lentils, sometimes only hot water. Children cried between the tarpaulins. Women silently rubbed oil into wounds. Men coughed. Far away in the officers’ camp a generator ran, fans turned, a radio played. It sang songs of development—bright melodies whose words never reached the labourers’ shelters, as though distance could not bear their weight.

At night the watchman Bholaram woke Nand. “Babu, would you like to see?”

“What?”

“Lights in the water.”

Nand came outside. The river was black. Yet beneath the third foundation a faint light was indeed rising. At first he thought it must be a fisherman’s lantern, but the light came from within the water. Nand went to the edge. In that glow he saw many hands under the surface, reaching upward, as though trying to sign some invisible attendance register one last time, trying to record their presence before it was erased.

Bholaram whispered, “It used to frighten me. Now I see it every day. Whoever falls becomes a light for the first three nights. On the fourth night the crocodile eats him. Then the light stops.”

A shiver ran through Nand. “Did you report this?”

Bholaram spat. “Report? The first man I told said gas comes out of the water. The second said, do you want your job or do you want ghosts? From the third time onward I kept quiet.” There was no bitterness in his voice—only a tired acceptance that had understood long ago that not every cry is heard.

Nand watched the water for a long time. A face emerged in the light. Bisesar? No. Chhotu? No. The face kept changing until it became a face that could belong to anyone—as though the river had gathered every death into one face, as though individuality itself were too precious a thing for water to preserve completely. From that universal face came a voice: “Name.”

Nand knelt. “Tell me.”

A round ripple rose in the water. A crocodile's eye shone. The voice came again: “Before you write a name, you must learn to listen.”

That night Nand began practising how to hear names from the river. He placed his ear against his papers, kept his eyes on the water, and held Channa Grove inside himself. The names did not come clearly. Sometimes “Bholai,” sometimes “Balai,” sometimes “Badri,” sometimes “Nazir,” sometimes “Saryu,” sometimes “Muniya.” He started. “Muniya?” Bholaram said, “Yes, Babu. Women carry loads too. In the register their names are attached to their husbands; they are not listed as separate workers.”

Heat rose to Nand's head. A woman's body did the work, yet her name did not exist in the ledger. Children carried water, handled sacks, picked bricks, yet the register said “family.” If one of them died, the office could say: “Not employed.” Such killing begins before death—on the very first page of paperwork, where a living woman is erased in advance, without even being granted the chance to die.

The next day Nand demanded to see the safety register. Mahendra Pathak stalled. “Higher permission is required.” Nand said, “Death does not require permission.” Mahendra's face reddened. At last the register came. Its pages were beautiful. Dates, inspections, signatures, remarks: “Safety helmets distributed,” “Ropes checked,” “Work stopped during rain,” “Night work prohibited.” Nand went outside. No helmets on the workers' heads. Frayed ropes. Work in the rain. Work at night.

Behind every lie in the register Nand heard a splash—as though each beautiful sentence on paper carried a drowned truth beneath the water, and that truth tirelessly gnawed at the words above it from within.

Nand examined the signatures. In many places they had been made by the same hand. Workers' names differed, but thumbprints had the same colour, the same roundness. In the payment register, wages had been withdrawn for Bisesar on the day he died. Even after death, the labourer was collecting wages—on paper. Nand's vision blurred. He thought: the crocodile eats the body, but the office eats the dead body's wages as well. Even after death it preserves the illusion of the man's existence, because a living name on paper is more convenient than a dead one.

News of this inquiry spread quickly. That evening project chief Shashibhushan Dev called Nand into his room. Cold air moved there. On the table stood a glass of lemon water and a thick envelope. In a weary voice Shashibhushan Dev said, "Nandji, you are a capable engineer. You have a future. What do you gain by becoming involved in all this?"

Nand said nothing.

"It is a foreign company. The matter reaches the Centre. The prestige of the state is involved. If the bridge stops, the newspapers will call us anti-development. The deaths of labourers are tragic, but such things happen in projects like this. What will you do by making a list? Will the dead return?"

Nand remembered Bisesar's shoes. "No," he said. "But those who are lying can be stopped."

Shashibhushan Dev slid the envelope toward him. "A little expense money. You have a family. A village. You will have children. Life is long."

For the first time Nand did not become angry. He did not even open the envelope. He lifted it, held it to his nose, then placed it back on the table. "It smells of money," he said softly. "My ancestors left me a rule: if wet paper smells of money, do not sign it."

Shashibhushan Dev's face changed. "You listen to too many stories. Be careful. The river is deep."

"I know," Nand said. "An office is deeper than a river."

The first threat came that night. On Nand's bed he found a small piece of paper: "Stop writing names. The crocodile is hungry." The letters were crooked, but the ink was fresh. Nand did not fold the paper. He pasted it into his diary. Underneath he wrote: "Threat received. Meaning: the names are moving in the right direction." As he wrote the line, his hand trembled slightly, but it was not the trembling of fear; it was the first stirring of a new resolve.

That night kabaddi began again in Channa Grove. Budhba the Ghost was referee, the Panidubbi marked the boundary, and the witches were no longer spectators but strategists. Loth, who always watched with his mouth half open, entered the field this time. His feet hovered a finger's breadth above the earth, yet dust rose. He did not chant "kabaddi." He chanted: "Safety register, attendance register, payment register." The ghosts did not laugh. The game was serious.

Hulasi came forward from the team of spirits. She had no hands, but her voice was fierce. Crossing the boundary she said, "If a woman's name is lost inside her husband's, whose death is her death?" The Panidubbi drew a line with her long hair. The Rakash illuminated the leaves with silver light. One by one the names of women labourers appeared: Muniya,

Saryu, Phulkali, Rajni, Jamuna, Dhanesari. Whether they were living or dead no one knew. But their names had appeared.

Any name that appeared on a coconut leaf in Garh Narikel reached Nand's diary by dawn. The next morning he found not the fourth but a fifth page damp. Six women's names were written upon it. Nand understood at once: death in this project was not only in the water; it was also in invisible labour—work society did not wish to see, and therefore did not even give the language of its ledgers a means to see it.

That day Nand demanded a separate attendance list for women workers. The office laughed. Mahendra Pathak said, "They are family members, not employees." Nand replied, "If there is a sack on her head, she is an employee. If she climbs the foundation, she is an employee. If she can die by falling, she is an employee." Diwakar Lal said quietly, "That language is not in the rules." Nand answered, "Then fill the rules with water."

After that sentence Nand's isolation became complete. The officers kept their distance from him. The foreign consultant began calling him an "emotional local." The workers began calling him "Naam-Babu"—Babu of Names. At night Bholaram silently left tea for him, saying nothing and expecting nothing, simply standing as a mute witness. Bisesar's wife cleaned his shoes and kept them outside the tarpaulin as though her husband might one day return to wear them. Chhotu's companions sent letters to their villages trying to discover his real name. Crocodiles appeared less often in the water, though whether they were less hungry or merely more cunning, no one knew.

A few days later an inquiry committee arrived. Motorcars, white helmets, gleaming shoes. It came during the day, when the river was calm. The workers had been warned beforehand: no one was to speak of deaths, no one was to mention night work, no one was to show the ropes on the foundations. Bisesar's wife was sent away from the camp. Chhotu's companions were placed on another shift. Safety helmets were distributed for the first time that day. Cameras turned. Officers smiled. The report stated: "Arrangements satisfactory."

Nand read the report. The words shone, but behind their shine he saw the lights rising in the waters of the Ganga. In his own hand he wrote along the margin: "How many splashes lie behind the word satisfactory?" Shashibhushan Dev drew a red-pencil line through the remark. It looked like a throat being cut.

That night heavy rain fell. The river swelled. On paper there was an order to stop work on the third foundation, but in reality the work continued. Pressure had come from above: deadline. A letter from the foreign company threatened penalties for delay. The state minister had already fixed the inauguration date. The bridge's iron lattice shook in the

floodwater. Labourers climbed with lanterns. Ropes were wet; feet slipped. Nand ran toward them. "Stop the work!"

Noise, rain, wind, the clatter of iron, the roar of water. His voice broke halfway. One labourer screamed from above. Another went to catch him. Both slipped. A third rope snapped. One body struck iron; another went straight into the water. The splash was so great that for one instant the rain itself seemed to fall silent, as though the sky had heard the sound and been stunned.

Nand tried to jump into the river. Bholaram grabbed him. "Babu—the crocodiles!" Nand broke free. He ran to the edge. In the beam of a torch one hand appeared, then vanished. Nand shouted, "Name!" His voice drowned in the rain. Whether the answer came from beneath the water or through the wind, Nand could not tell: "Saryu."

Saryu? A woman? Had one of the bodies that fell that night been a woman? The office list would say: "No women employed." Nand felt his chest tear open. He waded knee-deep into the water. A crocodile's eyes shone before him. For one moment the crocodile and Nand looked directly at each other. Nand felt that the animal did not wish to eat him; it wished only to see whether this time the name would survive—as though it too, in its own fashion, were an unwilling judge of the game.

At dawn an official notice was prepared: "Work temporarily disrupted due to excessive rainfall. No major loss." Nand tore it up. For the first time he tore a government paper. The pieces fell to the ground, and a drop of water came to rest on each one. In every drop was a face. Nand gathered all the fragments and placed them in his diary.

Now he understood that an application was not enough. A list was not enough. There was no place for truth inside the office. Truth would have to be made by bringing together the river, the village, the dead, the labourers, the women, the shoes, the gamchha, the threats, and the torn notice. That night he opened a new page in his diary and wrote at the top: "The Reckoning of the Splash."

First name—Bisesar Paswan.

Second—Chhotu; real name to be found.

Third—Saryu, woman labourer, officially nonexistent.

After that the page seemed to fill itself. Nand went on writing. Outside, the river went on flowing. Inside Channa Grove, kabaddi continued. And all night the coconut leaves of Garh Narikel trembled as though each leaf had become a testimony ready to fly to the courthouse veranda—waiting, impatient, hungry to have the names heard, as though even the leaves could find no peace until they had heard them.

FOLK SONG: THE NIGHT THAT COUNTS THE SPLASHES

Folk tune: Boatman's biraha

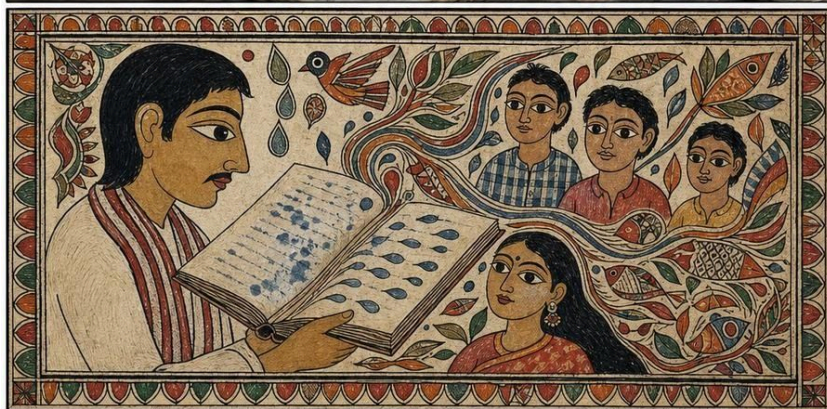
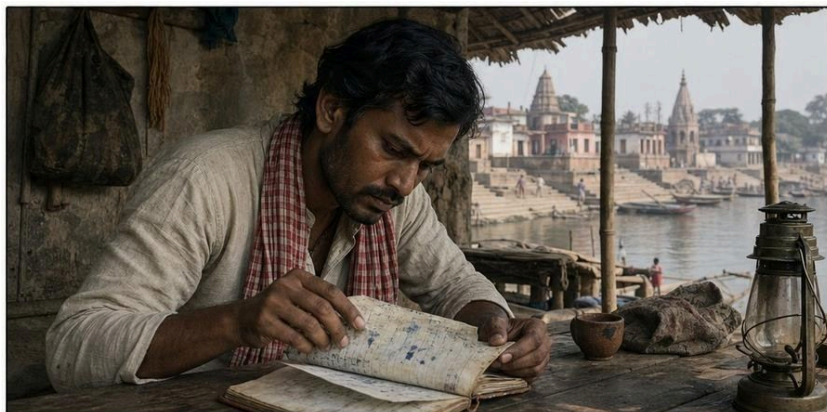
*Count, Babu—not the splashes, count the families,
Hear the whole world weeping behind a single name.
One splash Bisesar, the second Chhotu's name,
The third was Saryu drowning—who will count this burning sun?
The register says absent, the river says mine,
Mother says evening has fallen—why has he not come home?
The torn notice flies, the shoes drip through the night,
In Nand's blue ink every voice awakens.
Leaf after leaf becomes testimony and flies toward the veranda,
The hungry names of the dead demand what was promised them.
Count the splashes, Babu—not the bodies, count the families,
Behind a single name an entire world weeps.
Evening fell, the door opened, but he did not come home.
In lines of blue ink every voice awakened,
The hungry names of the dead demand their dawn.*



CHAPTER 4

Thirty Names, Three Hundred Corpses

*Thirty names in the register, three hundred bodies in the earth—the
burden of the ghat is always borne by the dead.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: COUNT THE NAMES, SAVE
THE LIVES**

Folk tune: a mournful jhumar of awakening

*Count them, sister, count every name,
Not thirty—count the places of three hundred lamps.*

*Do not stop counting at thirty, while so many leaves still tremble;
Behind every number are a home, a mother, a dream.
Count the names with reverence, join each life to its story;
Break the wall of the little list and open the whole truth.*

*When three hundred lamps are lit, darkness will fall back;
One honest count can make a road toward justice.
Count the names, save the lives, let every number become human;
From a full accounting of truth, sow a new order.*

*To the rhythm of jhumar, courtyard after courtyard wakes;
The curtain of numbers tears, and faces come into view.
Let the full account return to every house laid waste;
Let the worth of every tear shed by a mother be restored.*



Saryu's name was in the third line. Nand kept looking at it. The letters trembled like a woman's body. The paper seemed to say, 'Write me down, or I shall turn into water again.'

At dawn he woke Bholaram. 'Did you know Saryu?'

Bholaram was silent at first. Watchmen hear many things but say little—as though listening, not speaking, were their trade. Tightening the gamchha around his head, he said, 'Saryu? Yes, there was one. But she was not in the register.'

'Why?'

'Because her husband had died earlier. She began carrying sacks in his place. His name remained on the rolls. She took the wages; his name consumed them. If she died, the office would say—the husband had already gone back to his village.'

Nand realised that dead men could remain alive on paper while living women were kept dead upon it. This was an official miracle requiring no mantra, only a seal—and a seal was crueller than a mantra because it never asked a question; it asked only for a signature.

That day, for the first time, Nand counted not the workers' names but their belongings. Bisesar's shoe. A torn corner of Chhotu's gamchha. Saryu's silver bangle, which had not fallen with her but remained caught on a bamboo pole of the tarpaulin. The broken slate of Muniya's child. Dhanesari's brass bowl. Nand understood: when names are cut away, objects testify. Objects do not lie because they possess no language, only presence—and presence is the most solid evidence of all.

He carried the objects to the office and placed them on the table. Divakar Lal wrinkled his nose the moment he saw the shoe. 'What have you brought here?'

'Evidence.'

'A shoe is evidence?'

'When the foot cannot be found, its shoe is evidence.'

Divakar Lal kept opening and closing the cap of his pen. It made a tuk-tuk sound, like a small hammer striking a coffin. 'The rules do not work like this. For a death you need a body, a witness, a report.'

Nand said, 'Crocodiles do not write reports.'

Divakar Lal did not laugh. He understood that Nand was moving outside the ordinary language of files. An office quickly begins to regard as dangerous anyone who abandons the language of rules and starts listening to the language of the river—for rules can be understood, but the river cannot.

By noon the news had reached the project chief. By evening a departmental telegram arrived. It contained three lines: 'Death list to be kept limited. Rumours to be controlled. Progress of work not to be obstructed.' Nand read it and thought: in the language of government, the names of the dead first become 'rumour', then 'obstruction', then 'anti-development'—three words, three shells, and always the same corpse inside.

The foreign consultant, Victor Halden, was in very good spirits that day. Someone had telephoned him from Calcutta. Again and again he said, 'The report must remain clean. The insurance company asks questions. The bank asks questions. Investors ask questions.' Nand

listened. For the first time he understood that the bridge was not being built merely across a river. It was being built between banks, insurance, foreign capital, a minister's speech, an officer's promotion, and a labourer's hunger. If this bridge broke, the prestige of those above would collapse; those below were already collapsing—year after year, without anyone taking notice, like the corner of an old wall bending slowly until one evening the whole wall falls.

That night the rules of kabaddi changed in Channa Grove. Budhba Ghost said, 'From today, whoever is caught will not be asked his name but his reckoning.' The rakshasas cast their light. The pretts formed the teams. The Panidubbi spread her hair along the boundary. The witches flew up and sat above. For the first time the loth filled his half-open mouth with a word: 'Thirty.'

'Thirty?' Hulasi asked.

'The office will say thirty. The river will say three hundred.'

The wind stopped in Channa Grove. The old people of Garh Narikel say that when the wind dies and not a leaf moves, sometimes the dead begin to count. That night the counting began. One, two, three—the leaves trembled. Four, five, six—the Panidubbi's hair began searching for water. Seven, eight, nine—the Brahma in the peepal tree opened his eyes. At thirty an official voice came: 'Enough.' But the count did not stop. Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three—now the voices rose from inside the river, as though the counting itself had changed direction and was no longer descending from above but rising from below.

Nand heard the echo of that count inside his chest. He did not sleep. Bent over his diary, he wrote as names seemed to rise from dreams and settle on the nib of his pen. Some were complete, some partial, some only a caste, some only a village, some only a nickname. By dawn there were forty-nine names. On the third day, seventy-two. Within a week, one hundred and seven. Beside each name he placed a sign—a shoe, a gamchha, a bangle, a slate, a song, a cough, a scar, a laugh, frightened eyes. Each sign was a fragment of a life, and Nand tried to join the fragments into a whole human being—without yet knowing that wholeness was impossible; only respect was possible.

But the official list of the dead was made—thirty.

Thirty names were typed on clean paper. Beside each stood a serial number, father, village, estimated age, compensation status. When Nand saw the list, he understood that official paper does not kill the dead; it beautifies them. That beauty contained the greatest violence—a violence showing no blood, only orderly columns and a clean font. Bisesar Paswan was on the list, but his father's name was wrong. Chhotu was not. Saryu was not. Muniya was not. Dhanesari was not. Those whose labour lived in

women's bodies became 'family' on paper. Those whose bodies went into the water became 'absent'.

Nand took the list into Shashibhushan Dev's room. 'This is incomplete.'

Shashibhushan Dev looked tired, but there was no fear in that fatigue, only boredom—the boredom born of hearing the same argument too many times. 'Nandji, a government committee has already investigated. The insurance company agrees. Compensation to families has been released. What more do you want?'

'The truth.'

'The truth?' Shashibhushan Dev leaned back in his chair. 'Truth is not a subject of project management. Truth is a philosophical word. We are constructing public works.'

Nand's voice was low but sharp. 'A foundation filled with corpses is not construction. It is a tomb.'

The room shuddered at the sentence. Outside, the generator's noise seemed to catch for an instant. Victor Halden, smoking by the window, turned around. The interpreter would explain the meaning to him later, but he understood the tone at once—for some sentences need no translation in their sound; they travel straight from the ear to the chest.

'You are crossing your limits,' Shashibhushan Dev said.

Nand thought—limits? The river's limit? The office's? The dead's? Like the Panidubbi's hair, this boundary too was alive, ready to coil around a foot and drag whoever touched it inward. He said, 'When the boundary itself has drowned, how can crossing it be forbidden?'

After that day Nand's file was kept in a separate cupboard. A lock was placed on it. Dust never settled on the lock because every day someone opened it, looked inside, and closed it again. The papers breathed within. Sometimes at night the lock trembled. The watchman said, 'Babu, a sound comes from inside.' The office said, 'Rats.' Nand said, 'Names.' Three interpretations of the same sound—and each showed how a listener divides the world according to his fear, his convenience, and his truth.

The day compensation was distributed, the place was crowded like a fair: officials' tables, the minister's representative, press photographers, police lathis, and the families of the dead. Families of the thirty names on the list were called forward. Those not on it remained standing in the crowd. Bisesar's wife was there too. She was given an envelope because Bisesar was on the list. Before accepting it she asked, 'Where is Chhotu?'

The officer started. 'Take your compensation.'

'Where is Saryu?'

'What is your name?'

She said, 'I am Bisesar's wife. But Bisesar did not fall alone. Did he leave space in the water for the others? Where are Chhotu, Saryu, Muniya?' There was no shriek in her voice—only a question, so direct that it could not be brushed aside.

A policeman stepped forward. Nand moved between them. 'The question is valid.'

The policeman smirked. 'Valid? Is this a court?'

Nand replied, 'Wherever the family of a dead person stands, a court begins.'

No one in the press heard that sentence. At that moment the camera was focused on the minister's representative smiling. The photograph appeared the next day under the headline: 'Assistance to Families of Accident Victims.' In the photograph Bisesar's wife looked as though she were smiling because, at the instant the shutter clicked, sunlight struck her eyes and she narrowed them. In the world of newspapers, even squinting becomes a smile—as though distinguishing between grief and light were no longer an editorial duty.

Nand pasted the newspaper cutting into his diary and wrote beneath it: 'Sometimes a lie becomes a photograph.'

Soon he received his transfer order. A small sheet. Dry language. 'For administrative reasons.' Nand laughed. For administrative reasons the river grows deep; for administrative reasons the crocodile remains hungry; for administrative reasons women workers are not entered by name; for administrative reasons the truth itself is transferred.

Carrying the order, he went to the Ganga. The water was grey. The bridge pier stood half-built. Workers watched from a distance. No one spoke. Bisesar's wife came from her hut carrying the shoe. 'Take this with you,' she said.

'It is yours,' Nand replied.

'If I keep it, the police will say I stole it. If you keep it, it will become a document.'

Nand took the shoe. In that instant he felt it was not Bisesar's shoe alone but the foot of the whole people who had taken water-burial. He did not put it in his bag. He let it hang from his hand. Let the people see. Let the office see. Let the river see. Let the crocodile see.

Before he left that night, Bholaram gave him an envelope. 'I cannot write. But the workers spoke the names. You will be able to read them.'

Inside the envelope was no paper: coloured threads, a piece of glass bangle, a button, a child's pencil, a rotting ticket, some ash, and a small copper amulet. Nand understood—when people cannot write, objects become an alphabet. He held the envelope to his chest as though a second heart were beating there, and its beat mattered more than his own.

The night he returned to Garh Narikel, Ba was sitting at the door. He did not need to tell her anything. She saw the shoe, the envelope, Nand's eyes, and understood that her son had returned not merely from a job but from the water. She went inside, placed a lamp by the tulsi, and said softly, 'The dead have come into the house. Prepare a seat.'

Nand asked, 'Ba, how did you know?'

Ba did not smile. 'People of Garh Narikel need no paper to understand. If a shoe returns alone, assume a whole crowd is walking behind it.'

That night a strange assembly took place in the courtyard. No one saw it with the eyes, but everyone heard it. The coconut leaves read one name after another. Ba answered 'Present' between them. Nand sat with his diary open. Names that had been unclear became distinct in the rustle of leaves. Chhotu's real name perhaps had never been Bhola Chandresh; it emerged as 'Bholatun', from a village across the river that had disappeared from government maps two years earlier in a flood. Saryu was not an 'employee', yet she worked in 'Pier Shift Three'. Muniya was pregnant. Dhanesari carried sacks at night after putting her child to sleep beneath the tarpaulin.

Nand kept writing. Writing names was no longer an engineer's task; it had become a shraddha. But this shraddha was not an offering of pindas. It was a lawsuit.

A few days later Nand went to the district headquarters. Lawyers' offices, typewriters, seals, stamps, tea, heat, sweat. For the first time he wanted to prepare a petition. The lawyer, Devkinandan Chaube, grew tired while reading the file. 'Three hundred names? Babu, the court will ask for proof.'

Nand opened his bag. Shoe, bangle, broken glass bangle, amulet, pencil, clipping, copy of the safety register, pages from the wage book, threat letter. The lawyer was uneasy at first, then fell silent. He asked, 'What shall we call all this in court?'

'Remnants of names.'

'The law does not listen like that.'

'Then teach the law to listen.'

At that moment Devkinandan Chaube felt both respect and fear for Nand. He drafted the petition: 'Revision of death list; independent

inquiry; recognition of women labourers; compensation fraud; neglect of safety.' The words were heavy. With every strike of the typewriter it seemed a hammer was falling upon a crocodile's teeth.

The case was filed. The first date was set—two months later. Nand came out and neither laughed nor wept. He remembered the kabaddi of Channa Grove. Once a player crosses the line in the game, he has to hold his breath. Perhaps the first court date was the beginning of that breath.

Two months later came the hearing. The court veranda was crowded: farmers, traders, wives, husbands, police, accused men, sadhus, contractors, files. Each stood carrying his own truth. A fan turned inside the judge's room. The clerk called cases. Nand's number came. The government lawyer stood. 'We need time. The records have to be summoned.' The date was adjourned.

Outside, Devkinandan Chaube said, 'It is normal.'

Nand asked, 'Normal for the dead?'

Chaube was silent.

At the second date the government record did not arrive. At the third the judge was on leave. At the fourth the lawyers were on strike. At the fifth the project file had 'mistakenly' gone to another department. At the sixth it was said that 'the question of death requires technical expertise'. At the seventh the foreign company's lawyer appeared—smooth coat, smooth language, smooth lie. He said, 'The petitioner is an emotional engineer aggrieved by his transfer.'

That day Nand understood that in court a person's character is killed before the person himself—no bullet, no knife, only an adjective driven into the public ear as deeply as any weapon.

That night the coconut leaves in Garh Narikel shook violently. In Channa Grove the kabaddi game was stopped midway. Budhba Ghost announced, 'Dates eat names.' The Panidubbi asked, 'Who will save them?' Hulasi said, 'Whoever writes the names on leaves.' The loth, now half a player, rose an inch above the ground and said, 'The crocodile of dates lives in the court.'

That night Nand dreamed of a courtroom. A crocodile sat in the judge's chair. The clerk called dates: 'One splash, two splashes, three splashes.' Lawyers wore coats made of river water. At each objection, one dead person's name grew faint. Nand ran to catch the names, but they slipped into the water. Then Ba spoke from one side: 'Names are not caught. Names are repeated.'

At dawn Nand called the village children and taught them to read the names. Bisesar. Saryu. Muniya. Dhanesari. Bholatun. Badri. Nazir. Phulkali. The children laughed at first because the names were

unfamiliar. Slowly they found a rhythm. Along the village footpaths, by the pond, at the dry place of Sabhagachhi, against the school wall, children began repeating the names in play—as though a folk song were being born without singer or composer, compelled into existence by necessity alone.

The government list stopped at thirty. The children of Garh Narikel carried the count to three hundred.

This was Nand's first victory—not in court, but in the village's memory. Yet the system soon learns that nothing is more dangerous than memory. A few days later a policeman came from the station. 'Are you inciting the children?' he asked. Nand laughed. 'Is reading names an incitement?' The policeman had no answer. He had brought an order, not a meaning.

That same evening Nand received a second threat—this time not on ordinary paper, but tucked inside Bisesar's shoe. A small slip read: 'Count beyond thirty and your own name will be added.' Nand showed it to Ba. She did not throw it into the fire. She buried it in the tulsi pot. 'A threat buried in the earth becomes evidence,' she said.

Time passed. The bridge kept rising. The court kept postponing. The official list, printed at thirty, slept in a file. Nand's list kept growing. Some names uncertain, some confirmed, some tied to objects, some to dreams. He made three copies of his diary: one with Ba, one with Devkinandan Chaube, one buried beneath the roots of an old peepal by the river. Ba asked, 'Why keep the third copy near the water?'

Nand said, 'Those whom the water took should have their copy near the water.'

Ba was silent for a while. Then she said, 'Rivers remember everything, but they take their time to speak.'

By the end of the year, the bridge had risen into the sky. The minister fixed a date for its inauguration. Newspapers announced, 'A New Chapter of Development.' Nand watched from afar. It seemed to him that a name hung from every iron rod, trembling in the wind. The inaugural ribbon was red—red as blood. The minister cut it. The crowd applauded. The river was silent. The crocodile was silent. Nand too was silent.

But within that silence one voice kept swelling: 'Not thirty. Three hundred.'

The chapter had not ended; only the file had been closed. The moment a file closes, a story begins its second life. Nand did not yet know it, but one day his 'Reckoning of the Splash' would open on Gop Kumar's laptop, reach Satyavrat Mehta's desk, steal sleep from Batuknath Hariharan, and light an unnamed glow in the signal-filled darkness of

Chandrapal Batra—like a small lamp that, even when thought extinguished, lifts its wick once more against the dark.

That night kabaddi began again in Channa Grove. This time, as the ghosts crossed the boundary, they spoke one word: 'Court.' The prets answered: 'Date.' The rakshasas kept casting light. The loth did not laugh. The Panidubbi gathered in her hair, as though she knew that people were now going to drown not in water but in paper.

FOLK SONG: THIRTY WRITTEN, THREE HUNDRED WEeping

Folk tune: mournful jhumar

Ask, O earth, ask beneath the leaf of development,
'Thirty written, three hundred weeping'—understand the reckoning.

Thirty names on paper, three hundred without a pyre,
The hearths of three hundred homes went cold without smoke.
A red ribbon was cut, applause sounded at the ghat,
Inside the pier the labourers' night still groans.
The colour of blood flashed in the minister's ribbon,

The crying of mothers and children slipped beneath the newspaper.
'Not thirty, three hundred'—the wind keeps humming,
A little lamp of names breaks open the dark.
The bridge may stand, but the earth will ask the question—
How many bodies are buried beneath the leaf of development?

The red ribbon was cut at the ghat; applause echoed far,
Inside the pier the night groaned—who heard that sound?
The newspaper page slid away; the weeping remained beneath it,
A single small flame will now break this darkness.



CHAPTER 5

The Crocodile of Dates

*The water at the ghat can be seen, so people know how to survive it;
the water of dates cannot be seen, and so people drown in it.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SUNLIGHT ON THE DATE

Folk tune: biraha-parati

Rise, O sun, rise upon the court date too,

Light the courtyard of the widow who has waited for years.

*The water of dates is deep, yet the sun rises every day;
At every hearing, let the people's courage remain beside them.*

*Make the red tape into a boat, cut its knots with care;
Count the widow's years as part of the measure of proper time.*

*Let time not devour justice; make the rules simple,
Between one date and the next, give help and clear information.
When sunlight falls upon the date, the crocodile will retreat;
Through patience, reform, and public vigilance, justice will find its
road.*

*Hearing after hearing, leaves fell, but hope did not;
On the courthouse steps the lamp of endurance grew brighter.
The red knot of the tape will open, the ledger will lie straight;
When justice's dawn arrives, even biraha will turn into a song of
blessing.*



When Nand Aruni reached the veranda of the district court with Devkinandan Chaube, he felt that he had entered not a building but an old pond. Dust lay upon the walls like moss. In every room stood tables, upon the tables files, upon the files red tape, and in that tape knots like the Panidubbi's hair dried into rope—a rope that did not bind so much as entangle.

Chaube the lawyer said softly, 'Babu, do not be in a hurry here. The court moves at its own pace.'

Nand replied, 'The dead have stopped moving. How slow may the court move?'

Chaube said nothing. He knew that those who came to a court veranda for the first time sought justice; the second time they learned what a date meant; the third time they counted expenses; the fourth time they left their souls at home—as one leaves a precious object behind for safekeeping, because bringing it here had become too dangerous.

The petition was filed. In the letters of the typewriter, Nand's list grew small. The haze of three hundred names was compressed into only twelve lines: 'other unidentified deceased persons'. Saryu, Muniya, Dhanesari, Bholatun—all became 'other'. Nand placed a finger on the line and said, 'They are not other.'

The typist, a pencil tucked behind his ear, smiled. 'Babu, everything is written in summary in court. If you write an entire life, how thick will the file become?'

Nand thought: the court is afraid of a thick file, but the government is not afraid of a thick heap of corpses. The imbalance was so obvious that it seemed absurd, yet no laughter came—as though the wound were so deep that instead of pain it yielded only emptiness.

On the day of the first hearing the veranda was crowded with innumerable people: one over a field boundary, one over murder, one over a pension, one over dowry, one over a bridge. The court bell rang. Everyone surged and looked in one direction, as when a pebble falls into a pond. The clerk called the cases. Nand's case came up.

A young lawyer stood for the government. Dark-complexioned, tired-eyed, but with something awake inside him. His name was called—Satyavrat Mehta. He held no great post then; he was only a junior member of the government advocate's team. In his hand was the state file, and in the file a line: 'Death toll thirty; petition exaggerated.'

Satyavrat rose to read the line, but his eye fell upon Bisesar's shoe protruding from Nand's bag. The shoe seemed not to lie upon the courtroom floor but upon his own eyes—as though it stood before him not as an object but as a question. He paused for a moment. The judge looked up. 'Mr Mehta?'

Satyavrat steadied his voice. 'My Lord, the records of the State may be called for.'

At once the departmental representative behind him waved a paper. The signal meant: 'Seek dismissal.' But Satyavrat had already asked that the records be summoned. That little sentence hung in the air of the courtroom like a labourer's gamchha caught on a bridge pier—small, but impossible now to remove.

The judge dictated: 'State to produce records. Next date.'

Nand looked at Chaube. 'That is all'

Chaube said, 'In this country, even getting records summoned is an event.'

Outside in the veranda, a man was watching Nand. Strong perfume, polished shoes, a cheap briefcase, and a fabricated self-confidence worn to cover an inner emptiness. Chaube recognised him. 'Chandrapal Batra. Says he did an LL.B. in Meerut. He puts his hand into people's papers, bail bonds, affidavits—everything. Be careful.'

Chandrapal Batra came forward smiling. 'Aruni Babu? A very emotional matter. But courts run on procedure, not emotion. If you wish, I can arrange access all the way to Delhi.'

Nand replied, 'I do not need access. I need names.'

Batra laughed. 'Names? Names are made on paper. What is not on paper does not exist in court.'

Nand looked into his eyes. There was no river in them, only calculation. Even a crocodile might fear a man who reduces death to calculation—for a crocodile eats and moves on, but calculation can go on eating people without ever becoming full.

At the second date the records did not arrive. The government representative said, 'The file is with the bridge project office.' At the third: 'The file is with the departmental inquiry committee.' At the fourth: 'The copy is unclear.' At the fifth: 'The chief engineer is on leave.' At the sixth: 'The judge has been transferred.' At the seventh: 'The new judge will study the file.'

The dates were not drops of rain that wet the earth; they were the teeth of a crocodile, each one biting away a little flesh from a name—so slowly that even the pain was understood late, though the loss was complete. Bisesar's wife came for the first two dates. She did not come for the third—she had no fare. Saryu's sister came once, then her in-laws stopped her. Bholatun's father came five times; the sixth time his cough would not let him leave home. The court went on. The families of the dead dwindled—as though the courthouse steps themselves were filtering them out, thinning them one by one.

At every date Nand brought his bag: shoe, bangle, pieces of glass bangle, amulet, papers, cuttings. One day the court clerk snapped, 'This is not a museum.'

Nand answered quietly, 'When the court does not recognise the dead, their belongings come to identify them.'

That day Batuknath Hariharan appeared outside the courtroom. He was already a celebrated senior advocate, later to become chairman of the Bar Council. With his arrival the noise seemed to leave the veranda. White hair, a soft voice, a gleaming advocate's band, and the kind of courtesy possessed only by one who is entirely certain of his influence.

Batuknath was an adviser to the foreign contractor company. Not openly; on paper his designation read something like 'Legal Propriety Adviser'. But everyone knew that any case falling beneath his shadow did not move quickly. He did not stop justice; he slowed its pace until the litigants grew old on the way. That was his art, so subtle that no court could call it an offence.

He stopped beside Chandrapal Batra. They spoke quietly. Batra kept nodding. Batuknath said, 'It is an emotional matter. Such matters bring the system into disrepute. Protect the system.'

Batra asked, 'How much?'

Batuknath smiled. 'One does not ask percentages in matters of propriety. A signal will come.'

No one knows whether the word 'signal' was born in that veranda. But many years later all of Chandrapal Batra's crimes would run through signals—disappearing messages, codes, percentages, mule accounts, digital arrests. That day he was only a small tout standing in a courthouse veranda; but crocodiles begin small, then grow by eating bodies until it becomes difficult even to imagine their former size.

That day Satyavrat Mehta noticed the reference to women labourers in a corner of the file. The government record called them 'family assistants'. He asked the departmental officer, 'Were these women working?'

The officer laughed. 'They are villagers. Men and women move around the site. They were not official labourers.'

'But their thumbprints are in the wage register.'

'They collected wages in the family's name.'

For the first time Satyavrat felt that official language authenticated convenience, not truth. He closed the file, but one page remained open within him. On that page was Saryu's thumbprint. The ink had dried, but inside its whorl was the roundness of a river—as though the thumbprint itself were a little river dried upon paper yet never wholly dry.

That evening, when Nand returned from court, an unusual assembly had gathered in Channa Grove. In the middle of kabaddi Budhba Ghost changed the rules. 'From today the game is called Date.'

Hulasi asked, 'How shall we play?'

Budhba said, 'Whoever enters a raid must hold his breath and chant a name. The other side will stop him with "no record", "no judge", "no lawyer", "no file". If his breath breaks, his name will drown in paper.'

The rakshasas gave light. The pretts drew a white boundary. The loth, who had once been only a spectator, now became the court clerk. 'Case Number One: Bisesar Paswan versus Water.'

Kabaddi began. A ghost entered, holding his breath: 'Bisesar-Bisesar-Bisesar.' The other side shouted, 'No report!' The ghost faltered. 'Bisesar-Bisesar.' 'No witness!' The ghost trembled. 'Bisesar...' 'Next date!' His breath broke. He dropped from an inch above the ground to half an inch.

The Panidubbi cannot weep because her eyes are always in water. But that night her hair rustled like dry leaves. She understood that the crocodile of the court is more patient than the crocodile of the river. A river crocodile eats at once; the court crocodile eats generation after generation, so slowly that even the eater sometimes forgets that it is eating.

At the eighth date Nand's side sought permission to produce the objects as evidence. Batuknath Hariharan rose. His voice was sweet, his sentences polished, his falsehood fragrant. 'My Lord, a court is not a stage for emotional theatre. Shoes, bangles, amulets—these may be objects of sympathy, not legal evidence.'

Nand felt as though someone were taking the shoe off the dead man's foot a second time.

Satyavrat Mehta wanted to rise for the government, but a senior officer touched his arm. The signal was clear: silence. Satyavrat remained seated. A voice within him said, 'He who sees the truth and remains silent dies twice.' He did not know where he remembered the sentence from. Perhaps some leaf from Garh Narikel had flown as far as the courtroom window.

The judge said, 'Let the objects be taken on record. Their evidentiary value will be considered later.'

It was half a victory. The objects were not thrown away. The shoe was deposited in the court storeroom. The broken bangle was sealed in a paper envelope. A number was marked on the amulet. Each object received a seal. For the first time the dead entered the court register as objects. Nand's heart broke and filled at once—the two feelings together, as though even an incomplete victory were still a victory.

That day Chandrapal Batra lingered for a long time near the storeroom. He understood that once an object enters a court, bringing it out again becomes very expensive. Later the first principles of his criminal career would grow from this place: moving papers in and out,

making objects disappear, changing names, opening accounts, closing accounts.

At the ninth date a representative of the foreign company appeared—in place of Victor Halden, an Indian spokesperson. He said, 'The company works according to world-class safety standards. The accident was a natural risk.' At the word 'natural', Nand heard a crocodile laugh inside him. To place upon nature a risk created by hunger, by labour without rope, without net, without registered names, is one of humanity's cleverest evasions—for nature cannot answer, and its silence dresses a lie in the clothes of truth.

Devkinandan Chaube rose to argue. His voice was not grand like a famous advocate's, but firm as wet earth. 'My Lord, if there were thirty dead, why do the wage books show abnormal deductions involving three hundred families? If the women were not workers, whose thumbprints are these? If safety standards existed, why were there seven accidents in the first fifteen days?'

Batuknath Hariharan kept smiling. His smile said: asking questions does not produce answers; answers are bought.

Before the tenth date, Chaube's office was burgled. The lock had not been broken, but the file had been opened. The papers were no longer in order. The photograph of Bisesar's shoe was missing. The page bearing Saryu's thumbprint had been substituted. Chaube sat holding his head. Nand remained silent.

That night Ba opened the old chest. Inside was the second copy Nand had made. She took out the pages and said, 'If paper is to be saved from crocodiles, keep a copy with a mother.'

Nand took the pages back to the office. Chaube stared at him. 'You had made a copy?'

'A river never keeps only one copy,' Nand said. 'If one channel breaks, there is another.'

After this incident Batuknath Hariharan's face hardened for the first time. He understood that Nand was not an emotional engineer; he was an engineer armed with memory. Memory that knows how to make copies is dangerous to a system.

By chance, Satyavrat Mehta met Nand near Chaube's office. The veranda was empty. Evening light leaned against the wall. Satyavrat said softly, 'Aruni Babu, whatever you have, make many copies. Do not trust the court alone.'

Nand looked at him. 'You are a government lawyer.'

'I am.'

'Then why are you telling me this?'

Satyavrat replied, 'I am a lawyer for the government, not a servant of the government. And the soul of the State, if any of it survives, lives outside the file.'

The sentence lodged in Nand's mind. Satyavrat walked away. The sound of his steps remained in the veranda for a long time. It was not slippers he seemed to carry but hesitation—as though the weight of his own words had made him walk a little more slowly.

The court year changed. The calendar changed. The judge changed. The clerk changed. The government lawyer changed. Yet the colour of the file did not change. The red tape remained the same. Grey spread through Nand's hair. Ba's cough deepened. The children of the dead families became adults. Some left for cities. Some died. Some said, 'Leave it, Babu. God will give justice.'

Nand would answer, 'Let God give justice; human beings must at least correct the list.'

One monsoon, water entered the court storeroom. All the objects were brought out. Bisesar's shoe was wet. The shard of bangle shone. The amulet's thread swelled. The storeroom clerk cursed. 'Whose rubbish is all this?'

Nand was there. He lifted the shoe and held it to his chest. 'Not rubbish. Testimony.'

The clerk laughed. 'Does testimony speak?'

At that moment water fell from the shoe—splash. The entire room went silent. One drop, a second, a third. The rhythm was the same Nand had heard on the night at the bridge. The clerk stepped back. He did not understand, but he was afraid. Some evidence does not speak words; it drips water.

That day Nand wrote in his diary: 'In court the crocodile is invisible. It lives as a date. It gnaws the corners of files. It eats people's years. But when the paper grows wet, the dead speak again.'

Much later, when Chandrapal Batra became a kingpin of online gambling, he would remember this courthouse veranda. He would remember how desperate people were for their names—and a society so desperate for names could have its bank accounts, identities, Aadhaar, PAN, mobile numbers, and fears turned into trade. The seed of digital fraud was planted in that veranda.

Batuknath Hariharan too kept rising. At Bar meetings he would say, 'The rule of law protects civilisation.' People applauded. At that same time, inside a drawer of his desk lay an envelope from the foreign contractor, a slip from Batra, and a small note: 'Not above thirty.'

Satyavrat Mehta quietly rose through government service. But Nand's file did not leave him. He had kept in his private diary a copy of the page bearing Saryu's thumbprint. That page became his first lesson in law: if the law cannot read a woman's thumbprint, then it is merely language, not justice.

On the night the chapter ended, the game of 'Date' was played again in Channa Grove. This time Nand's name was in the raid. The ghosts chanted together: 'Nand-Nand-Nand.' From the other side came the voice: 'No record.' Nand's shadow, though he was still alive, did not reach the soil of Channa Grove, but its echo did. It answered, 'There is a copy.'

'No witness.'

'There is a name.'

'Time over.'

'Memory remains.'

At that answer the boundary broke. The kabaddi game stopped for an instant. Budhba Ghost announced, 'One who has memory cannot be eaten by a date.'

Far away in the court storeroom, Bisesar's shoe dripped once more—splash. Beside the Ganga a crocodile raised its head from the water once and sank again. In the city Satyavrat Mehta turned in his sleep. Batuknath Hariharan closed his drawer. Chandrapal Batra wrote for the first time on a scrap of paper: 'How to open an account.'

The coconut leaves of Garh Narikel moved late into that night. There was no wind. The leaves spoke by themselves—date, date, date—and between each date a name shone, written not on paper but on water, as though water itself were the final, indestructible diary of every name, beyond the power of any date, any seal, any red tape to erase.

FOLK SONG: THE CURRENT OF DATES

Folk tune: biraha

O date, do not eat my child,
Carry his name across the water of paper.

The water at the ghat can be seen; in court it cannot,
Yet, Babu, my house has drowned in the months of dates.
Red tape binds like the Panidubbi's hair,
One hearing passes; another is pushed farther away.

The shoe in the storeroom drips—splash, splash,

A widow counts years, months, and seasons at her threshold.

Time says 'finished'; memory says 'remaining',

Row the boat of names, or the witness too will drown.

O date, O date, do not eat my child,

One hearing passes while another waits down the road,

The shoe in the storeroom still sounds drip, drip.

Time says—ended; memory says—still left.



CHAPTER 6

Harvard's Ethics

*Before polishing the shoes of morality that have climbed onto the stage,
look first at whose blood is stuck to the soles.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LEAF REACHES THE HALL

Folk tune: the bright cadence of a Vidyapati song

*Fly, O leaf, fly across the seven seas,
Carry the truth of Mithila's labour and join the assembly hall.*

*The village's green leaf flies to the land of snow,
Among the golden words of the stage, the workers' names resound.
Ethics is not a book; it is safety at the foundations,
Truth before applause, protection before speeches.*

*Raise questions like Ira, awaken like Mehta,
Join the university's knowledge to the labour of the earth.
When the leaf reaches the hall, thought will take a new turn,
The world's stage will join humanity to Mithila's truth.*

*Glass buildings in the land of snow, lamps glowing within,
On the stage resounds the line of workers' names.
Ira's question, Mehta's silence, both speak together,
The dust-stained leaf of the earth reshapes the mind of the world.*



That day snow was falling outside Harvard's auditorium. Inside there was warm light, polished wooden chairs, gleaming screens, and identification cards hanging from every neck. Each card bore a name, an institution, a country; but no card said how many stains lay upon the soul of its owner. That absence was itself a language—a language that speaks loudest precisely where it remains most silent.

Ira Aruni sat at the very back. She had always liked halls of this kind—old brick, new sentences, and people speaking as though the world's problems might become a little smaller after a speech. But that day

something else was sounding inside her ears. It was not Harvard's heater. It was the sound—splash.

Ira had known that sound since childhood. Whenever she listened on the phone to her grandmother's stories of the village, her grandmother would sometimes fall silent in the middle. Then she would say, "Your great-grandfather Nand Aruni did not drown in the waters of the Ganga; he drowned in government papers." Ira would laugh then. She thought old village women turned memory into metaphor. People born abroad are slow to believe in metaphors; they want footnotes, evidence, reports—as if truth becomes truth only by living inside paper.

That day the footnote was about to climb onto the stage.

The programme was called Global Enterprise and Human Dignity. Professor Elina Graves, director of Harvard's Ethics Center, came smiling to the podium. Hers was the kind of smile practised not before a mirror but at donor dinners. She said that in the countries of the global South infrastructure was not merely bridges, roads, and hospitals, but an architecture of human trust. Everyone applauded. Ira applauded too, but her palms were cold—as though her body had known before her heart that the applause was for a lie.

Then Edward Broom came to the stage. Tall, white-haired, in a blue suit with a silk tie at his throat. His company's name had changed several times, yet on donor lists all those names looked as though they belonged to the same family. One name built bridges, another sold medicines, a third offered defence consulting, a fourth ran digital payments. Broom used to say, "Companies change; values do not." Ira thought: in Garh Narikel people say, the river changes, not the current.

The first slide appeared: a hospital in Africa. The second—flood relief in Asia. The third—medicine packets during the pandemic. The fourth—a gigantic bridge gleaming in mist, captioned: 1978: A Model Community-Partnership Project in India.

The sound inside Ira's body suddenly became clear—splash.

She did not recognise the bridge on the screen, but she recognised the water behind it. It was like the water her grandmother described—water that makes every body the same colour, in which caste, wages, family, and address all dissolve. In tiny letters at the corner of the slide were the words: local labour participation, minimal accidents, independent safety inspection. Ira wrote in her notebook: "Minimal accidents?" and the tail of the question mark grew long across the paper like a snake.

Broom was saying, "We went to countries where regulation was weak but people's hopes were strong. It was our duty to bring standards with us."

He said "standards," and a drop of water fell from his mouth onto the table. Those sitting in front thought perhaps it had come from his glass. Broom dabbed it away with a handkerchief. Then he said "ethics," and this time two drops fell. Elina Graves leaned slightly to look, but the donor-dinner smile did not break. Ira saw that the water was not clear; it held fine grains of sand, and after settling on the table the sand began to form curved shapes like Devanagari—as though a language itself had travelled to this distant land to offer its own evidence.

Broom's speech was for the ears of the auditorium; his water was for the dead.

He continued, "We have to trust local governments. We respect the law. We save lives." Behind him the slides changed—medicine trucks during the pandemic, vaccine boxes, oxygen tanks, hospital beds. In every picture the human beings were small and the logo large. In Ira's mind flashed Channa Grove in Garh Narikel; when the ghosts played kabaddi there, they never made their names larger, only their voices. In that moment the distinction seemed to her more honest than all the auditorium's performance of humility.

In the left corner of the hall sat Raghav Somani. Beneath his name on the badge were the words Asia-Pacific Strategic Adviser. His eyes were less often on the stage than on his phone. The screen would go dark, then a blue dot would flash, then a message disappear. His thumb did not type on the keyboard; he merely selected prepared sentences. "Question raised on old bridge slide." "India team alert." "Tell Batra to keep the file clean." After each message he wiped the screen as though erasing the fingerprints of words.

At that same time in Delhi, in an old room of the justice department, Satyavrat Mehta was reading a government brief. The cover said: River-Bridge Accident Compensation Case, Relisted. Inside was the typed sentence: "According to government records, the number of dead did not exceed thirty." Satyavrat's pencil stopped at the sentence. Thirty. The number ought not to have seemed strange to him. Numbers arrived in court every day—seven petitioners, five respondents, three adjournments, two absent witnesses. Yet behind thirty someone was whispering: "Thirty names, three hundred corpses."

He turned the page. In an old annexure, names had been written by hand: Saryu, Parmanand, Chamru, Abdul Rashid, Phekan, Haridas, Basanti, Lachhumania. Ink had spread over half the names. Some had been partly crossed out, as though a government pen were performing the last rites of the dead. In the margin Satyavrat wrote in pencil: "Original roll of names to be called for." A little later, beneath that sentence, he added another line: "If available." The word "if" shamed him—as though the word itself were holding up a mirror to the deficiency in his own honesty.

Back at Harvard, the question-and-answer session began. The first student asked, "How do companies preserve ethics in corrupt systems of government?" Broom answered, "Through transparency." Another asked, "Where is the line between private profit and public health during a pandemic?" Broom said, "Humanity comes before profit." A third asked, "An example of failure in safety standards?" Broom laughed. "We turn failure into learning."

Ira stood. Her voice first caught in her throat, then came out: "How many workers died on the Indian bridge project of 1978?"

The auditorium fell silent.

For a moment Broom's face showed the composure of a man who had prepared a new answer for a very old question. He said, "We do not retain complete memory of every project. But our company's principle has always been respect for local records."

Ira asked a second time, "What if the local records are false?"

This time Elina Graves said softly, "An excellent question. Perhaps Mr Broom can speak to the broader issue of institutional accountability." The hall breathed in relief. The broader issue always rescues the particular crime—this was not something Ira had known since childhood, but the polished corridors of Harvard had just proved it once more.

Broom said, "It is difficult to review history through the moral understanding of the present. Those were different times."

Ira sat down. In her notebook, the tail of the question mark had become a crocodile's tail.

After the programme came a reception: polished plates, tiny dishes, glass goblets in everyone's hands. Broom moved among the guests so easily that the water spilled on the stage seemed to have been only Ira's delusion. In a corner Raghav Somani sent Chandrapal Batra a message: "Foreign-born girl. Name Ira Aruni. Questions on bridge. Trace background." A few moments later came the reply: "Aruni? Garh Narikel line? Checking file."

At that time Chandrapal Batra was sitting in a farmhouse somewhere between Meerut and Delhi. A laptop lay open before him, a law book to the right, three phones to the left. Dust lay on the book's pages; the phone screens shone. On the wall he had framed a photograph of his degree—Bachelor of Laws. Anyone looking once would think he had studied law. Anyone looking twice would understand that for him law was a tool for picking locks.

Batra read the message and laughed. "Garh Narikel," he murmured, "has that village awakened again?" He did not immediately message Batuknath Hariharan. He knew Hariharan disliked bare information; he

preferred first the scent of fear. Batra opened an old folder: river bridge, compensation, labourers, foreign consulting, safety certificate. Beneath it was a new folder: gaming apps, mule accounts, digital arrest, student loans. All bore ink of the same colour—as though one signature, one mind, and one hunger were concealed within that colour.

Batuknath Hariharan was speaking at a wedding reception in Delhi. "The rule of law is the backbone of civilisation," he was saying. On the table where his hand rested lay two envelopes. One was marked Research Support. The other bore nothing. An envelope on which nothing is written often contains the most writing of all. After the speech he looked at his phone. Batra's message read: "Old bridge raised at Harvard. Aruni line active." Hariharan's smile paused for a moment. Then he replied: "Trust the process."

Process—this word was his favourite weapon. In process, dates change, not justice. In process, witnesses grow old while files stay young. In process, the names of the dead gather dust while lawyers' fees swell, and no one calls that swelling a crocodile—as though fattening, unlike feeding from a river, were something lawfully sanctioned.

Ira sat in Harvard's library until night. She opened the programme website and read the history of Broom's companies. The names kept changing—Broom Infra, Broom Health, Broom Defence Advisory, Broom Digital Trust, Broom Ethics Foundation. Behind each name stood a clean photograph and a gentle sentence. But in the footnotes to the financial statements the subsidiaries' names looked like hatchling snakes writhing in a dark pond, each with its own separate legal identity.

An old family email lay open before Ira. Long ago her grandmother had sent it with the line, "Do not laugh when you see Nand's papers." Ira had not been able to read the mail then. There was a scanned page attached. She opened it now. Devanagari and English were mixed on the page. At the top was one name—Nand Aruni. Below it: "Death count differs from government register." And after that, in bold: "Woman labourer named Saryu untraced."

Ira held her breath. In Harvard's silent library she had the feeling that someone behind her was brushing dust from the earth. She turned. No one. But on the table, beside the question mark in her notebook, lay grains of wet sand. In the sand a thin line had formed, like a crocodile's body—as if even here, across the sea, the river of Garh Narikel had sent a small part of itself.

That same night Satyavrat Mehta reached home late. Food lay covered on the table. His wife was asleep. He did not switch on the light. In the dark he opened the same file again. The government's note said: "The matter is extremely old; the claim is inadmissible owing to delay." Reading it, Satyavrat wondered: after how long does a death become old?

After how many years does injustice become archival dust? After how many dates does a person's name become an inconvenience in the language of a court?

At that moment he remembered his father, who used to say, "Law is not merely sections; law is also a test of patience. But if only the poor die while patience is being tested, then law becomes the criminal." Satyavrat lifted his pencil and wrote across the government brief: "Verification necessary." After a moment's thought he underlined "necessary" twice. He did not know how many people's sleep those two small lines would one day destroy.

In Garh Narikel, kabaddi had stopped that night in Channa Grove. Old Man Ghost sat on a branch. Hulasi leaned over the edge of the well. Loth sniffed the air through his half-open face. For the first time, the Brahma of the pipal had come down early after sunset. Everyone understood: in some auditorium beyond the sea, someone had touched an old name.

A new soul came into the grove. He was not a labourer. He carried no basket. He held a mobile phone whose screen was always black. The ghosts surrounded him. Old Man asked, "In which river did you drown?" The young man replied, "There was no river. There was a game. There was debt. There were people speaking like police on the phone. There was fear of dishonouring the family. I fell from the roof."

The ghosts were silent. Panidubbi lifted her hair from the water. For the first time the witches looked at one another without laughing. Old Man said quietly, "The crocodile is no longer only in the water."

At Harvard Ira wrote an email to Professor Elina Graves. It was not long. It contained only three lines: "The Indian bridge on the fourth slide of today's lecture is connected with a death inquiry involving a member of my family. The company's records do not match the local records. Will the Ethics Center raise this publicly?" Before sending it, Ira stared at the screen for a long time. With her finger resting on Send, she heard her grandmother's voice: "Those who die on paper return through paper."

She pressed Send.

A few moments later a signal flashed on Raghav Somani's phone: "Ira active. Reached professor. Keep Batra line ready."

The message that followed was read and immediately deleted by Raghav. But what is deleted does not end. Some messages remain in the air, some on servers, some in souls. The sound of that message reached all the way to Garh Narikel. In Channa Grove the new young man's mobile, black even after death, lit for a moment. One word appeared on the screen: "Percentage."

Old Man Ghost could not read it. Hulasi could. Softly she said, "That is not a name. That is hunger."

That night the souls of the labourers trapped inside the foundations of the Ganga bridge stirred. Their baskets held not cement but soaked papers. Saryu, whose name had never been written fully in the government list, looked up from beneath the water. Far away, wet footprints appeared on the polished floor of Harvard's auditorium. No one saw them. The hall was already closed. The security guard saw only that water had pooled on the wooden floor near the stage. He wiped it with a cloth. The water disappeared. The sand remained.

In the sand one letter had formed—N.

Ira reached her dormitory very late. Snow was still falling. It crunched beneath her shoes, but in her ears was the Ganga—a distance and contradiction so great that for a moment she became an inhabitant of two worlds at once. She opened her diary and wrote: "When water begins to seep into an auditorium of ethics, understand that a name is arriving." Then she looked again at Nand Aruni's scanned page. In its corner was one small phrase she had not noticed before—Garh Narikel.

This time the village did not feel like an exotic tale to her. She understood: Garh Narikel was not a geographical place but a court, where the dead deposit their testimony in sand, water, trees, shadow, and children's questions.

In Delhi Satyavrat Mehta switched off the lamp and went to bed, but sleep did not come. In his dream he saw a bridge. He himself stood upon it in an official gown. Below there was no water; files were flowing. Crocodiles swam inside the files. One opened its mouth and said, "Your Honour, may a date be granted?" Satyavrat woke and sat upright. There was no vehicle on the road outside. Yet he heard clearly—splash.

By dawn three different tasks had begun in three places. At Harvard Ira waited for an answer. In Delhi Satyavrat prepared a note calling for the original records. Chandrapal Batra was telling his men to trace the old families of Garh Narikel. Three cities, three intentions, but the threads of all three were emerging from the same root.

And in Channa Grove the ghosts began to play kabaddi again. But this time the rhythm had changed. One team chanted "water-burial," the other "percentage." Between them stood the new young man, killed by the crocodile of the screen, silent and uncertain of the rules. Old Man put a hand on his shoulder. "Do not be afraid. Here, the one who dies does not lose. Here, names are learned."

Before the first light descended upon the grove, Panidubbi bent toward the water and said, "The ethics spoken abroad has carried a sound that the crocodile here is hearing."

From beneath the water came the answer: "So am I."

FOLK SONG: THE STAGE'S LIGHT, BLOOD AT THE FOUNDATIONS

Folk tune: a sorrowful verse in the Vidyapati cadence

Listen, O auditorium, listen to the voice of the foundations,
The stage lights will go out; remember the speech of the leaf.

Snow falls at Harvard, sunshine burns beside the Ganga,
Ethics on the stage, the nameless beneath the foundations.
Bisesar's blood beneath polished shoes,
Amid the applause, hear a mother cry, "Tell me."
The masters count percentages; the ghosts count names,

One leaf crossed the ocean and reached the hall.
Ira raised a question; Mehta lost his sleep,
The beautiful speech of falsehood dissolved into Ganga water.
The stage lights will go out, but the leaf's voice will remain—
The one whose blood built the bridge, his name will be spoken.

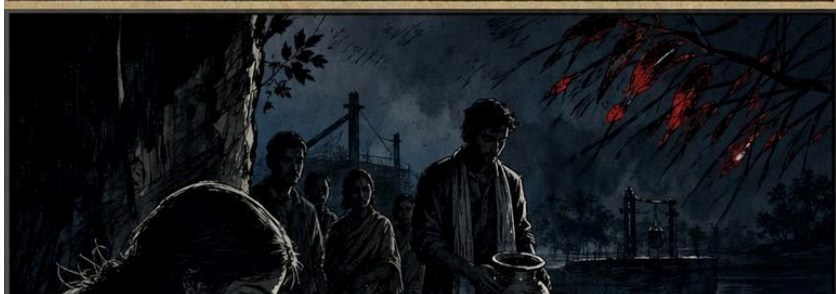
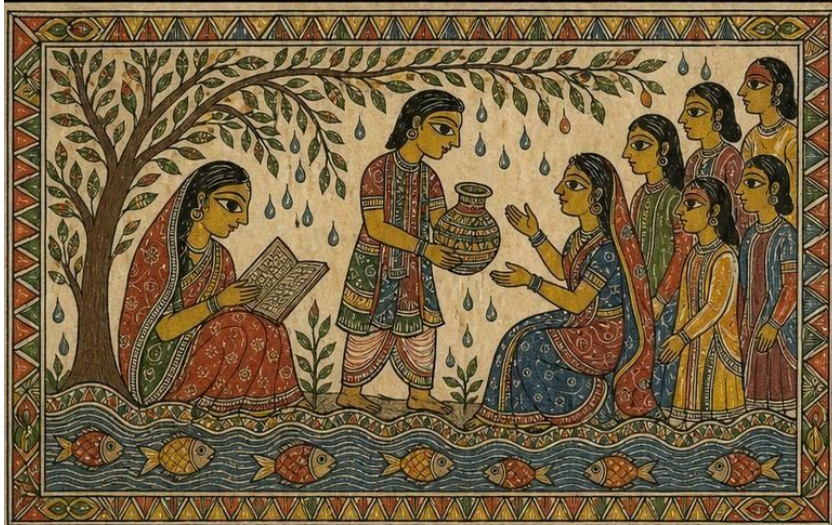
A lecture on ethics in a land where snow is falling,
A labourer's life sold beneath the sun beside the Ganga.
One leaf's message crossed the sea and reached the hall.



CHAPTER 7

The Price of Breath

When the market begins to set the price of breath, even ghosts stop playing and turn to look at the living.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BREATH BEYOND PRICE

Folk tune: a mother's birth-song

*O girl, sing the birth-song of breath,
Spread the wind's shawl across every courtyard.*

*At a child's first breath the village sings a sohar,
The wind fills its free shawl and pours out the sap of life.
Let bottles, medicines, and hospitals remain instruments of service,
Do not put a price on breath—speak the law of humanity.*

*Let a mother's folded hands never return empty,
Shared provision, compassion, and science sustain life.
Sing the song of breath beyond price; let no one turn blue,
Let the air sow equal flowers of hope in every chest.*

*Let mother smile, child smile, and pure wind flow,
Let bottle and cylinder become service, not instruments of deceit and
force.*

*A mother's folded hands say—breath belongs to all,
Let fresh life dance to the rhythm of this sohar.*



When the market began to set the price of breath, the ghosts of Garh Narikel stopped their games for the first time and began watching the living—with the concentration of an old physician holding a finger to a pulse, except that the pulse was not his own but the pulse of the whole world. Untimely death was no novelty to them; the line in Channa Grove

already held every kind of death—water from a well, a river current, a snake's fang, a witch's shadow, the foundation of a bridge. But this death was invisible. It did not touch the body first; it seized the breath.

At night the spirits sat in a circle on the kabaddi ground. The Raksh's light was dim. Loth's mouth hung half open, but there was no spectator's laughter in it. Panidubbi raised her head from the pond and asked, "What kind of disease is this that drowns people not in water but in air?"

Old Man Ghost, carrying twelve hundred years of history inside his ribs, said slowly, "When human beings accumulate too much sin, water and air begin to demand their own accounts. Water sends the crocodile. Air stops the breath."

In the spring of 2020 the world was suddenly locked inside houses—a spring whose flowers bloomed while the eyes that might have seen them were imprisoned behind window glass. Roads that had swollen day and night with traffic lay empty, in a silence sometimes broken even by the faintest tremor of wind. Trains stood at stations like enormous dead iron animals whose breath had stopped though their bodies still gleamed. The city's sky grew clearer, but human chests clouded over. People looked out through windows, and the emptiness outside doubled the fear within.

In Delhi Aruni Nandan stood on the veranda of his rented home. Ambulance sirens came and went in the distance. His daughter Ananya, wearing a mask, breathed mist onto the glass and drew a circle in it with her finger. Then she asked, "Daddy, why do people wear masks? Do ghosts wear them too?"

Aruni did not answer. The answer was on his tongue but caught before it reached his throat—as though a word itself knew that it could not carry the weight of this moment. Suddenly he remembered Grandmother saying ghosts did not need masks because they had no breath. Yet that day the living faces of the city looked as if everyone had become half a ghost. Only eyes remained visible; mouths had disappeared.

Grandmother called from the village and asked, "Son, is this disease real, or some new game of the government?"

Aruni paused. "The disease is real, Grandmother. The game is being built all around it."

Grandmother fell silent. Then she said, "Then keep writing down the names. Whoever dies, write the name. Those who die of the disease, those who die because of the hospital, those who die without oxygen, those who die without medicine—write each separately. Later they all become 'other.'"

The sentence sank into Aruni the way water had once dripped into Nand Aruni's diary—two generations of one family, two crises, but the same advice, as though blood itself were a language that even distance in

time could not erase. The word "other" was a curse upon this family. On the bridge the labourers had become "other." In court the women labourers had become "other." Now patients at hospitals stood in line to become "other."

In Delhi's hospitals the price of a bed kept changing. Government lists showed vacant beds; doors said "No space." On the phone came the words, "Something can be arranged." The small machine used to measure breath became as scarce as temple offerings. The price of an oxygen cylinder changed every evening—as though not the stock market but a market of death had opened.

Outside one hospital Aruni saw a man with his elderly father lying on a rickshaw. The father took tiny breaths, as though an invisible crocodile had sunk its teeth into his chest. With folded hands the son pleaded with the guard, "Brother, there is a bed free. I saw it on the website."

In a tired voice the guard said, "Is the bed shown free on the website being saved for God?" There was no cruelty in his eyes, only the exhaustion born of seeing the same scene too many times.

The man did not understand. Then a broker came out from inside and whispered beneath his mask, "Pay the advance. Papers later."

Aruni remembered the corridors of the court. Back then the paper came first and the body later. Now the body stood at the door while the paper slept inside in the form of a hospital bed.

At this point Gop Kumar entered the story for the first time, in another corner of the city. He did not arrive like a hero carrying a sword; he was a quiet man sitting among Excel sheets. His room had no window. Two screens, an old chair, dust always on the keyboard, and tea that went cold because the numbers stayed hot.

Gop Kumar worked as an internal auditor at a company called Jeevanrekha Bio-Logistics. The very name inspired trust—life, line, support. During the pandemic the company announced that it was involved in supplying medicines, oxygen, protective clothing, vaccine cold-chain systems, hospital equipment, and relief packets. Its newspaper advertisement read: "With Breath, With the Nation."

Gop was more accustomed to reading invoices than advertisements. Advertisements contained humanity; invoices contained percentages. Advertisements contained photographs; invoices contained accounts. Advertisements showed masked children smiling; invoices contained lines such as "consultancy fee," "advance coordination," "risk allowance," "special transport," and "emergency licence."

That week he found a file titled "Breath Supply—Northern Region." The first page was beautiful. The second ordinary. From the third came a smell—not of water, but of rotting paper. He saw the same oxygen

cylinder shown as supplied to three districts on the same day. Five hundred regulators billed to a hospital that was closed. Bills worth lakhs carrying the signature of a distributor already dead.

Gop leaned close to the screen, his back tired, his eyes burning. Letters danced across his glasses as though the numbers themselves had come alive and were trying to conceal their true meaning. One code appeared again and again: "NR-77." He thought it might be a batch number. But the description attached to it was strange: "Old Bridge Project—Liability Adjustment." Why was an old bridge project appearing in pandemic bills? Why did the shadow of water-burial fall across the ledger of oxygen cylinders?

That night Gop did not go home. Outside there was curfew. Inside there was the screen. The peon said, "Sir, close up. The police will stop you." Gop said, "Go. I'll stay a little longer."

A little longer has no meaning for numbers. If numbers are hiding the names of the dead, night opens itself to them. Gop opened the file's hidden rows. There was a table: bridge, medicines, protective gear, vaccine, consulting, overseas training, legal management. Every column looked like a different crime, yet the account was one.

At the very bottom stood one name—Broom-Calder Global. Gop had heard the name before: in news reports, donor lists, pandemic relief videos. The same group's head, Edward Broom, gave lectures on human dignity at universities abroad. On Gop's screen the group's Indian associate was shown supplying empty oxygen cylinders as though they were full.

Meanwhile at Harvard, Ira Aruni received no answer. Professor Elina Graves read her email and remained silent. A thank-you message came from Edward Broom's office: "Your concerns are important; historical projects are complex." Ira stared at the sentence for a long time. For the first time she understood that abroad, "complex" is the educated form of "forgive us."

Then Ira called her grandmother, Janki Devi. Grandmother said, "Child, when someone speaks too smoothly, look for the thorn in his ribs."

Ira asked, "Where will I find the thorn?"

Grandmother replied, "In the papers. And if the papers are missing, in the water."

In Delhi Satyavrat Mehta worked from home because of the pandemic. On his desk lay the request for the old bridge file, Nand Aruni's copy, and new government circulars. During the coronavirus period courts held virtual hearings. Lawyers on screens, judges on screens,

microphones muted on screens, "network problem" on screens. Dates were no longer given in corridors but by clicking a button.

Satyavrat noticed that in one government petition concerning pandemic supplies appeared the same foreign group that had been peering distantly from Nand's bridge file. The documents belonged to different ministries, but the language was one: "Relaxation of procedure is necessary in an emergency."

Satyavrat wondered: is an emergency meant to save the public, or to save procedure? He wrote a note: "Original contract, supply receipts, payment trail, beneficial ownership to be produced." His pen stopped halfway. He felt as though Nand Aruni's hand had touched his own.

At that time Chandrapal Batra flourished during the pandemic. Courts closed, fear of police stations, hospital charges, families in panic—these were new fields for him. His LL.B. from Meerut hung on the wall; his real degree lived in his phone. On Signal he told Raghav Somani: "Separate package for beds. Separate for medicine. Police-pass separate. No old accounts; need new ones. Trap students—they're unemployed."

Raghav "Signal" Somani replied, "Mules ready. Five thousand per account. Documents complete."

Batra wrote, "Fast. Fear is fresh during a pandemic. If fear cools, the price falls."

At that sentence, far away in Channa Grove, the Raksh's light turned blue for a moment. The witches stopped in mid-flight. Old Man Ghost said, "See? Human beings now weigh fear as well."

In Garh Narikel, Ujjwal Jha had passed Class Twelve and was sitting unemployed at home—an age when dreams are still fresh but roads have already closed. His dream of going to the city was trapped by lockdown. The mobile became his window. First he saw pandemic news. Then medicines, oxygen, unemployment. Then one day an advertisement appeared: "Earn from home. Play, win, instant withdrawal."

Ujjwal thought: what harm is there in a game? The fields are shut, college shut, buses shut, the world shut. The phone is open. The first time he staked two hundred and won five hundred. The same shine came into his eyes that may have come into a bridge labourer's eyes on his first payday. A crocodile does not eat the whole body on the first day; first it licks a finger.

Devika Sah, Ujjwal's cousin, warned him. "This does not look like a game."

Ujjwal laughed. "You see fear in everything."

Devika replied, "Not fear. A net."

That small exchange would later become very heavy. But that day flattened rice was being fried in the house, the radio was reporting coronavirus figures, and the blue button of victory shone on Ujjwal's screen.

At Jeevanrekha Bio-Logistics, Gop Kumar kept joining file to file—in the stillness of night, where the tap of his keyboard sounded less like accounting than a silent prayer. One hospital bill listed a "special medicine." The same medicine had been bought at three times the price. Then fifty percent of the amount had gone abroad as an "educational donation" to an ethics centre. Gop found the link to the Harvard programme. He watched Edward Broom on the stage saying: "A pandemic is the test of ethical enterprise."

Gop felt like switching the screen off. But numbers do not die when a screen is closed. He paused the video. Broom's face froze, mouth open, hand in the air. On Gop's second screen one line shone: "Body-management kits: quantity 3000; receipt proof 30."

Thirty.

The number cut into Gop—such a cut that shed not blood but memory. Thirty names on the bridge. Thirty receipts in the pandemic. The rest? "Other." "Adjusted." "Natural loss." "Incidental damage." The language changed; the sin did not.

That night Gop heard the sound of leaves for the first time. His office was in the middle of the city; where could a coconut tree be there? Yet the sound was clear—rustle, rustle. As though a tree were growing inside the file. Gop rose under the illusion that there was an open window, but the room had no window. The sound was coming from the screen.

The cursor stopped over the code "NR-77." When Gop opened it, an old scan appeared. Yellow paper. At the top: Bridge Project. Below, Nand Aruni's signature. A note: "Death list incomplete. Separate list of women labourers, unregistered labourers, and unauthorised workers attached." The attachment was missing.

Gop said softly, "Who removed it?"

The computer fan whirled in reply. Somewhere far away Panidubbi shook her hair in the water.

Gop did not know that a man named Aruni Nandan was listening to ambulances in another part of Delhi. He did not know Ira Aruni was waiting for an answer at Harvard. He did not know Satyavrat Mehta was demanding old records. But the pipes of truth seek one another. Water may stand in separate pits, yet below the earth the current is one.

The next day there was a company meeting. The pandemic director, legal adviser, finance head, and one outsider appeared on the screen. The

outsider was introduced as Chandrapal Batra, Special Legal Coordinator. Gop studied his face: courtesy on the surface, calculation in the eyes. Batra said, "Documentary flexibility is normal in emergency procurement. Regularisation can be completed later."

Gop asked, "How do you regularise something that was never supplied?"

The meeting froze. A few faces on the screen went still. Batra smiled. "Young people take paper too seriously. In reality, paper is fluid."

Gop replied, "Bodies are fluid too. We saw that on the bridge."

Batra's smile was cut in half. He asked, "Which bridge are you talking about?"

Gop himself did not know how the sentence had escaped his mouth. Perhaps the sound of coconut leaves had descended onto his tongue. He said, "The bridge behind the code you use—NR-77."

The meeting ended. Five minutes later Gop's access was reduced. Several folders were locked away from him. By night an email arrived saying his office password had been changed.

Gop smiled. Changing a password does not change a file's memory. He had already made copies. Perhaps Nand Aruni's blood, without Gop ever meeting him, had taught him this: "One copy with the mother, one with the water, one with the air."

That night Gop sent an encrypted message to his old friend Ramaiyya Subramanyam: "If paper begins to breathe, how do you keep it alive?"

Ramaiyya, watering a tulsi plant on his rooftop in Bengaluru during lockdown, replied, "Do not save the paper. Save the people. First tell me—where is the fire?"

Gop wrote, "In the breath."

Ramaiyya replied, "Then do not delay."

The days of the pandemic grew long and the nights short. Pyres outside hospitals, screens inside homes, death notices on mobile phones, and government announcements saying "the situation is under control." People were looking at photographs of cremation grounds, while death counts on paper tried to remain civilised. Perhaps the numbers too had been given masks.

That night in Channa Grove there was no kabaddi but a game of breath. One ghost entered the court chanting, "breath-breath-breath." The other side blocked him: "No bed." "No cylinder." "No medicine." "Payment first." "Report later." Whoever lost breath did not leave the game; he rose one finger's width above the ground and silently joined the list marked "Other."

Hulasi said angrily, "Stop this game. Living people are truly dying."

Old Man replied, "I am not playing. I am practising. When their souls arrive here, we will have to teach them their names."

Panidubbi brought up an empty vial from the bottom of the pond. Half its label had peeled away: "Special Use." The moment she placed it on the earth of Channa Grove, smoke rose from within and formed letters: "Donation." The Raksh laughed. "Donation? This is an invoice."

At the same moment a new folder appeared on Gop's screen. He had not created it. Its name was "Donation_Inter_Account." Inside were lines: Ethics Center donation, vaccine-awareness grant, digital-health consulting, legal-risk mitigation, community gamification. The last line read: "Lau Kin-Hung—consulting: percentage secured."

Gop read the name Lau Kin-Hung for the first time. He thought it might be a foreign supplier. But the account route beside it looked more like gambling than medicine: Singapore, Hong Kong, Dubai, Gurgaon, Meerut. Why should a medical bill travel into legal consulting in Meerut? Why should a vaccine-awareness fund go to a gaming-based company?

As he was securing the file, an unknown message arrived on his phone. It said only: "Divide the paper into three parts. Let one eye keep watching, let one water keep listening, let one dead man keep it."

A chill ran through Gop. He replied, "Who are you?"

The message vanished. Then another appeared: "The one already dead on paper does not speak through his name."

Gop stared at the phone. No number, no mark. Only a grey circle, as though without a shadow. It was the first sign of Ishan Dutt—the shadowless informer, dead in government records and still moving among the lies of the living.

Gop divided the file into three. The first part went to Ramaiyya. The second to a secure place whose address even he did not fully know. The third under a name officially declared dead. As soon as he completed the division, the screen made the sound of a splash. There was no water in the computer, but the sound was clear.

Far away in Delhi Aruni was putting his daughter to bed. In her sleep Ananya murmured, "The ghosts took off their masks."

"Why?" Aruni asked without thinking.

"Because they found their names."

Aruni stroked her head for a long time. The ambulance sirens outside had not diminished. But somewhere within, a paper had begun to breathe.

Before dawn, when the city's haze and the village's mist become the same colour, Old Man Ghost announced in Channa Grove: "From today the new deaths will have separate lists. Those who died of disease, those who died of greed, those who died without oxygen, those who died in bills, those who die inside apps—each name separately."

Loth, acting as clerk, asked, "Who will keep the lists?"

Old Man looked toward the sky. The coconut leaves moved. The answer came: "One copy with Gop. One copy with the water. And one copy in the dream of the child who asks questions."

At this decision the crocodiles swam in circles in the water. Perhaps they were laughing, perhaps afraid. For the day a name begins to survive alongside the body, the crocodile's hunger is cut in half.

The sun rose. The news said, "The situation is under control." The line outside the hospital was long. The company's accounts were moving. Chandrapal Batra was writing his next message on Signal. Edward Broom's lecture had been uploaded to the Harvard page. Satyavrat Mehta was signing the note calling for the original records. Ira was writing her grandmother's sentence in her notebook.

And a cursor blinked on Gop Kumar's screen—like a tiny coconut flower in the dark.

Beside that cursor Gop wrote the first line: "The account of breath is not separate from the account of water-burial."

At that very moment, far away in Garh Narikel, Panidubbi lifted the empty vial sunk in the water and kissed it, and from within the vial one drop fell—splash.

FOLK SONG: THE EMPTY VIAL OF BREATH

Folk tune: a mother's song of grief

O wind, blow freely, save the poor one's life,
Do not price the breath—write down the breath's name.

The child's chest heaves, the vial has gone empty,
The market raised the price; breath went to auction.
At the hospital door a mother folds her hands,
Inside profit is being counted, outside breath is breaking.
The news says everything is under control,

The hearth says—one voice in the house is missing.
At night Panidubbi kissed the empty vial,
One drop fell—the final word of the dead.
Do not price the breath; write down the breath's name.

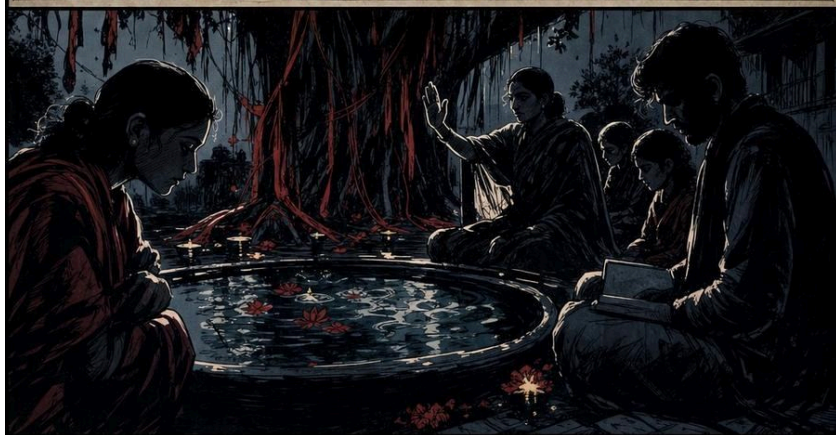
The vial empty, the chest heaving, folded hands at the door,
Inside the figures of profit counted, outside a breath breaking.
The news says—everything is under control.



CHAPTER 8

The Crocodile of the Screen

*There is no body inside a screen, yet there is enough water there to
drown a body.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A WATCH OF LOVE UPON THE SCREEN

Folk tune: a youth-awakening song

*Wake, O young one, keep a watch of love,
Light the lamp of companionship in the screen's darkness.*

*When the screen glitters at night, keep a friend beside you,
Say every day: life is greater than the numbers you have lost.*

*Do not bear alone the net of debt, threats, and shame,
Turn to mother and father, friends, and help centres.*

Recognise the crocodile of the screen; think before you download,

Hold up the lamp of verification before a single click.

*A watch of love upon the screen will become a radiant dawn,
No young person will remain silent; a companion's hand will hold
them.*

The glitter of night will deceive and confuse—do not close your eyes,

Do not bury lost numbers and broken dreams inside your heart.

At one call ten hands will come to rest upon your shoulder,

However deep the crocodile's net, companionship will bring you across.



The ghosts in Channa Grove did not sleep for a long time that night. The list of untimely deaths had been made, yet a new worry sat upon Old Man Ghost's brow. At the outer edge of the grove he saw a new kind of shadow. It was not a ghost, not a spirit, not a Raksh, not Loth. Its feet were not even one finger above the ground; it had no feet at all. It merely flickered on and off—like a mobile screen whose light calls to the eyes but never touches the heart.

Hulasi asked, "Who is that?"

Panidubbi raised her head from the bottom of the pond and said, "It did not drown in water. It drowned in the eyes."

Old Man said slowly, "Then this death needs a new name. The river's crocodile ate the body. This crocodile of the screen eats the future."

In Garh Narikel, Ujjwal Jha sat on the veranda of his house, slowly changing colour in the blue light of his mobile. His mother had lentils on the stove, his father was adding up the debt on the fields, and his cousin Devika Sah was sorting greens in the courtyard. The world moved in the old rhythm of poverty, but in Ujjwal's eyes a new marketplace had already opened—a marketplace whose door stood open without a key, and inside it darkness went ahead disguised as light.

The app was called Raja-Raat. Its advertisement said: Play, win, instant withdrawal. The first time Ujjwal staked two hundred and won five hundred. The second time he staked five hundred and won two thousand. That night he brought rasgullas home. His mother asked, "From where?"

Ujjwal laughed. "Online work."

The word online was no longer strange in the village, but it meant something different to everyone. For some, government forms; for some, videos; for some, the face of a son living far away; and for Ujjwal—fortune. Fortune became a spinning wheel beneath his finger.

Devika snatched his phone and looked. Horses raced across the screen, cards opened, imaginary cricket overs were played. Devika said, "This is not a game. It is a net."

Ujjwal said, "If it were a net, why would it let me win first?"

Devika fell silent. She was not educated enough to use the word algorithm, but her woman's intelligence understood that whatever gives first will later demand something in return.

In Meerut, Chandrapal Batra's LL.B. certificate hung framed on his office wall. Beneath it stood a glass table, beneath the table cash, on the table a religious idol, and in a drawer three phones. The first phone was for the courts, the second for the police, the third for Signal. On the third phone there were no names, only symbols.

A message came from Raghav "Signal" Somani: "New users rising in Garh Narikel area. Initial wins delivered. Time to stop withdrawals?"

Batra replied, "Not yet. First lengthen the rope of trust. Raise the limit after five days. Bonus on the seventh. Credit line on the tenth."

Raghav wrote, "Mule accounts ready. Munna Paswan, Saurabh Mahto, Imran, two students. Five thousand per account."

Batra replied, "Keep all accounts clean. Hong Kong's share must go on time."

A little later a message flashed onto Raghav's screen from far away. No sender's name, only the letters L.K. The message was short: "No delay in percentage." Raghav read it and deleted it. But the erased words seemed to dissolve into the night wind and travel all the way to Garh Narikel. Coconut leaves moved in Channa Grove. Loth the clerk murmured through his half-open mouth, "Percentage."

Munna Paswan did not understand that he was entering a crime. He had been told it was a small job: open a bank account and allow a little money to pass through it. Aadhaar, PAN, photograph, SIM—everything submitted. Five thousand immediately. In days of unemployment, the smell of five thousand rupees can seem sweeter than smoke from the cooking fire.

Munna came home and gave his mother five thousand. She asked, "Son, this is clean money, isn't it?"

Munna said, "It's work for a mobile company."

His mother did not know any mobile company, but she recognised the national emblem on the five-thousand-rupee bundle—as though the emblem itself guaranteed truth. She put the notes into the chest. At night, faint sounds of water began to come from that chest.

Gop Kumar could not sit at ease after seeing the line "community gamification" in his file. How had a bill for breath and a payment for gaming entered the same account? He opened the line. The names appeared: Raja-Raat Interactive, India operations: legal adviser Chandrapal Batra. Foreign beneficial ownership: Gokul Star Holding, Hong Kong. Behind that came another name—Lau Kin-Hung.

To Gop, the name felt like the darkness of the previous chapter. There was no ripple inside it; there was an ocean. He typed a message to Ramaiyya: "The current runs from medicine to gaming."

Ramaiyya replied, "What do you mean by gaming?"

Gop wrote, "Gambling. But not merely gambling. Data-driven hunger. First a win, then debt, then threats."

Ramaiyya wrote, "Secure everything. And find one family this has broken upon. Numbers do not make a court weep. It needs a face."

The face was taking shape in Garh Narikel—without anyone knowing, without anyone wishing it, as though fate itself were quietly writing its next page. Ujjwal had gone deep into the game. After winning came loss, after loss double stakes, after double stakes debt. The app told him: "Credit limit opened for special player." He pressed. In a blink ten thousand. Then twenty. Then fifty. He thought he would repay it after

winning. But the crocodile of the screen chews not with its tongue but with calculation.

At home Devika noticed that Ujjwal had begun speaking less. At night he went to the roof, earphones in his ears, eyes on the phone. One night Devika followed. Ujjwal was whispering into the mobile: "Brother, give me two days. No one at home knows."

A voice from the other side said, "A digital-arrest order is being prepared against you. Illegal funds have entered the account. Cooperate or the police will come to your house."

Ujjwal began to tremble. He did not understand the law, but fear of the police is inherited from one's ancestors. The person on the phone continued: "Lock the room. Keep the video on. Tell no one. This is a national investigation."

Devika listened from behind the door. The word "national" made her both laugh and fear. People who speak in the name of the nation are not always the nation; sometimes they are thieves who have wrapped themselves in the flag.

Digital arrest. It was a new term, but an old method. Earlier bandits surrounded a house at night. Now a screen surrounds the house. Earlier hands were tied with rope. Now the face is tied with a camera. Earlier a gun was shown. Now there are false seals, false uniforms, false notices.

In his office Chandrapal Batra was training a young man: "Keep the voice official. Do not hurry. First fear, then shame, then solution. The solution is always money."

The young man asked, "What if he starts crying?"

Batra smiled. "Crying is good. If he cries, he has a family. Fear for the family is the biggest bank."

At this sentence Hulasi trembled with rage in Channa Grove. She had no hands, yet she struck at the air without hands. Dust whirled through the grove. Old Man Ghost said, "Quiet. Write down his name."

Loth the clerk asked, "Batra's name?"

Old Man said, "His name goes on the offender list. But first Ujjwal's name goes on the victim list."

Ujjwal locked himself in his room. The false official told him that money had left his account, that there were terrorist transactions, hawala, arrest. Terrified, he began gathering the family's jewellery, his father's savings, loans from friends. The money went to a mule account — Munna Paswan's. Munna was then repairing a pump-set in the field; he did not know that someone else's fear was being deposited into his account.

A message arrived on Munna's phone: "Amount received. Forward it." He sent it on as the broker instructed. Five minutes later the money went to Singapore, then Hong Kong, then into a consultancy account. On paper it was written: digital-health awareness.

Gop watched the route. A line formed on his screen—from the young man in Garh Narikel to Munna's account, from there to the payment gateway, then to Raghav Somani, then Lau Kin-Hung, then Broom-Calder's "Community Innovation Fund." He rose from his chair. He felt a crocodile might crawl out of the screen.

At that moment a message came from the shadowless informer Ishan Dutt: "Seen the account?"

Gop replied, "This is not gaming. It is cannibalism."

Ishan wrote, "Not cannibalism. Name-eating. The body dies later; first the name is turned into that of a criminal."

The same happened to Ujjwal. The young man who had been cheated received a message on his phone: "You have been caught in anti-national transactions." Shame and fear climbed onto his chest. He looked at Devika but said nothing. Words die first in the presence of the person to whom they most need to be spoken.

On the third day Ujjwal left the house. He said, "I'm going to a friend's." His mother was tempering the dal. His father was searching for the field receipt. Devika saw his eyes. There was no sleep in them, only hollows. She ran after him, but Ujjwal walked fast.

He did not return by evening. The household fire was lit and extinguished twice, but Ujjwal's plate remained where it was. At night his slippers were found on the bank of the Balan. His body was found at dawn—the water was shallow, but one does not need an ocean to die. For someone already drowned within, knee-deep water is enough.

People in the village said, "He was gambling." Some said, "Weak mind." Some said, "The mobile ruined him." The police wrote, "Suicide." The bank said, "Suspicious transaction." The app said, "User violated terms." Chandrapal Batra said, "Legal risk minimal." A message from Lau Kin-Hung said, "Close account."

Only Devika Sah said, "He was killed."

That night Ujjwal's soul came to Channa Grove—new, frightened, without the weight of his old body, yet still half-dark from the glow of the screen. The ghosts were playing kabaddi, but the new soul could not enter the court. In his hand was a mobile, its screen cracked but still shining. Old Man asked him, "Name?"

Ujjwal opened his mouth, but no voice came. Numbers opened on the screen—debt, stakes, interest, fees, investigation, bail. Nowhere was there a name.

Hulasi gently touched his forehead. "Child, leave the numbers. Speak your name."

Ujjwal tried again. This time a faint voice came from his mouth: "Ujjwal."

The Raksh's light brightened in Channa Grove. Loth the clerk opened the register. Panidubbi lifted one drop from the pond and placed it upon Ujjwal's name. For one moment the crocodile inside the screen shrank.

In Delhi, Gop Kumar was reading Ujjwal's file at that very time. Through Ramaiyya he had received a short video of Devika. In the video she was not crying; looking straight into the camera, she said, "My brother was not a criminal. They frightened him. They robbed him. They allowed him to die."

Gop could not pause the video. The numbers became faces—for the first time in many years the cold columns of his Excel sheet grew warm from within. On a sheet of paper he wrote: "Ujjwal Jha: water-burial by screen."

Ramaiyya said on the phone, "This is no longer only a financial irregularity. It is a structure resembling murder."

Gop said, "What will the law call it?"

Ramaiyya did not laugh. "Get the law to Satyavrat Mehta. If it reaches Batuknath Hariharan, the case will turn into a gambling rulebook."

Satyavrat Mehta was then sitting in an online hearing. A senior lawyer, known to be close to Batuknath Hariharan, was saying, "Online gaming is skill-based, Your Lordship. Users participate voluntarily. Excessive state intervention will damage the new economy."

Satyavrat looked at the lawyer's face on the screen. He remembered: the foreign contractor had used the same argument for the bridge—"Risk is part of development." The same argument for medicine—"Flexibility in emergency procurement." Now for gaming—"voluntary." A beautiful word behind every death.

The hearing was adjourned. Another date was fixed. But this time Satyavrat wrote one sentence in his notebook: "Consent is false when an algorithm measures fear and greed in order to weave a net."

That evening Batuknath Hariharan was at a private dinner with Chandrapal Batra. Fish, files, and silence lay on the table. Hariharan said, "The young man's case could become emotional. Keep his family quiet."

Batra said, "Village people make scattered noise. We'll handle it."

Hariharan's eyes hardened. "A village is never scattered. When a village wakes, its ancestors rise too. Be careful."

For the first time Batra grew slightly uneasy. He did not believe in ghosts, but disbelief itself is one kind of fear. His Signal phone flashed. A message from L.K.: "End emotion. Compliance only."

That same night Devika Sah decided to get Ujjwal's phone to Gop Kumar. The phone was cracked, but inside were chats, threats, account details, screen recordings, false digital-arrest notices—everything. A child about Ananya's age carried the phone to the city inside the cover of a book.

The child slept on the train. In a dream he saw Channa Grove. A ghost told him, "Keep the book held against your chest. There is a name inside it." When the child awoke, the book was indeed pressed to his chest.

When Gop took the phone in his hand, its screen lit by itself. No password was needed. Ujjwal's final message remained on it: "I am not a thief."

Gop read the sentence and remained silent for a long time—as though the entire weight of Ujjwal's life were contained in those five words, and before lifting that weight he had to steady his own breath. Then he opened the folder Ishan Dutt had named "Three Parts." He added a copy of Ujjwal's phone to the first part. A second copy went to Ramaiyya. A third to the account held under the name of a dead man. A fourth copy, which had not been part of his plan, he printed onto paper.

The paper came out of the printer smelling of fresh ink. Gop touched it to his forehead. There were no figures on the page, but names: Ujjwal Jha. Munna Paswan. Devika Sah. Chandrapal Batra. Raghav Somani. Lau Kin-Hung. Batuknath Hariharan. The names were linked to one another like crocodiles forming a circle beneath the water to block their prey.

Before dawn kabaddi began again in Channa Grove. This time Ujjwal entered the court. He did not chant "kabaddi" but "I am not a thief" as he moved. On the other side the spirits, Raksh, Loth, witches, Panidubbi—all tried to touch him, but the rules had changed. A person who gets his name back is difficult to catch.

The coconut leaves moved. From the water came a sound—splash. It was not the sound of water but the sound of a screen breaking.

The morning news said, "New opportunities in the online gaming industry." At the same time, a chapter title opened in Gop Kumar's file: "The Crocodile of the Screen." He knew that the next form of water-

burial had begun. The river now lived in the pocket, and the crocodile opened accounts with a thumbprint.

FOLK SONG: I AM NOT A THIEF

Folk tune: a young man's viraha

You should have told us, son, you should have told your mother,
You should have known your life was greater than the money you
lost.

The screen glittered at night; the lamp of the house went out,
The crocodile of numbers slowly ate the son.
Mother asks, "How much debt?" He lowers his eyes,
A heavy stone of shame lies inside his chest.
"I am not a thief"—his final cry,

The family weeps in the mobile's broken glass.
When his name returned, the ghosts could no longer catch him,
The river of the screen burst; darkness staggered once.
Son, your life was greater than the money you lost,
Had you spoken, your mother would have become your
embankment.

The screen glittered; the household lamp slowly closed its eyes,
The crocodile of numbers quietly chewed up the child.
A stone of shame on his chest, his eyes lowered,
"I am not a thief"—with only these words, his voice stopped.



CHAPTER 9

The Market in Bodies

A folder named “Guest Services” always has the price of someone’s daughter written inside it.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE DIGNITY OF THE BODY

Folk tune: women's auspicious song

*Sing, sisters, sing the auspicious song of dignity,
Spread the veil of respect above Phoolmati's head.*

*Do not merely call the body a temple—the body has rights of its own;
Without consent, no one may open its door.*

*Phoolmati, lift your head; the fault is not yours,
The shame belongs to the offender, never to the victim.*

*Sisters will stand together; the law will offer its aid,
The name of a living woman will receive honour in history.
The song of bodily dignity will defeat the tricks of the market,
The light of free choice will shape a new society.*

*Let the offender carry the burden of guilt, not the victim;
A sister's shoulder beside a sister's—no one left alone.
From courtyard to courtroom, fearless steps will fall,
And rows of auspicious lamps will raise a new dawn.*



That night the kabaddi stopped in Channa Grove. It was an extraordinary thing. In the world of ghosts, spirits, rakshasas, corpses, water-drowned shades and witches, the rules of the game were older than death. But when Budhba Ghost entered the raid, the word “kabaddi” did not leave his mouth. His voice caught.

Hulasi, who had fallen into the well while staring at her reflection and whose death the village had recorded as a lie, asked Budhba, “Why is there no game tonight?”

Budhba raised his dark eyes. Their whites were clear, but in that whiteness now shimmered not water but walls of glass. "A new market has opened," he said, "where bodies are not sold—the fear surrounding bodies is sold."

The rakshasa, fashioned from the scraped remains of a corpse, laughed. His laughter sounded like dry bamboo snapping. "The market in bodies is ancient. It has existed since the age of kings."

Hulasi said softly, "It was old because people treated women as property. What is new is that now her shame, photograph, mobile phone, bank account, ticket and passport can all be tied with the same rope. Look at the net."

The water-drowned woman rose from the bottom of the pond. Instead of weeds, wires were tangled in her hair—blue, red, green, with tiny screens flickering among them. "This time the drowning will not be in water," she said. "This time people will drown in their own images."

In Delhi, Gop Kumar opened another file recovered from Ujjwal's phone. It contained hotel names, flight tickets, some names abbreviated and others coded. "Room—Ro7. Guest—B.H. Payment—service expense." It did not take him long to understand that B.H. stood for Batuknath Hariharan.

Ramaiyya Subramaniam was sitting across from him. He turned the mobile around, studied it, and said quietly, "The gambling money flows into another pipe. First the app sucks the blood of young people; then that blood lights the city."

Gop asked, "Is all this sex trade?"

Ramaiyya stopped him at once. "Be careful with the word. When a woman is pushed by desperation, fraud, the lure of a job, debt, fear of police, a confiscated passport, blackmail with photographs, or hunger, calling it 'trade' is the language of the crime itself. She did not create the market; the market closed around her."

Gop fell silent. In his mind the pages of Nand Aruni's old diary suddenly began to turn. He remembered: the river crocodile devoured workers' bodies, but it was easy to call them dead. Here the person remained alive, while death took place not on paper but within. The water-burial of the living is harder; the water fills them from inside rather than without.

That same day, Soumya Ramanathan was travelling by train from Patna to Delhi. She carried a file on the "Surya Shelter Service Committee." The name sounded charitable. Its papers spoke of girls' education, rehabilitation of widows, and assistance to migrant workers' families. Yet in the committee's bank records the same payment entry appeared again and again—"guest services."

Reading the file, Soumya looked out of the window. Fields ran backward, villages ran backward, station names fled past. It seemed to her that an Indian train was always travelling not merely from one place to another, but from one truth to another.

The committee was run by Malavika Green: green in name, plants in the office, smiling children on the website, and in the auditorium the slogan, "Dignity, Rehabilitation, Self-Reliance." But on Malavika's private phone was a message from Chandrapal Batra: "Two guests arriving from abroad. No old list. Need new faces. No noise."

Malavika replied, "The village girls are afraid."

Batra answered, "Fear can be cured with money. If not, with a case."

Malavika wrote again, "What if one case reaches the media?"

Raghav "Signal" Somani cut in: "Media package separately. Change faces. On paper: skills training."

These were self-erasing conversations, designed to vanish after five minutes. But Ishan Dutt, the shadowless informant, had once said, "Never trust a thing made to disappear. Even the hand that erases leaves a mark." A small program he had built was catching Signal's deleted words.

Gop Kumar ran Ishan's program. On the screen the erased messages rose like smoke and formed lines. At the end of each line appeared a time, a place and a payment account. Before Gop's eyes a map of India opened—Delhi, Meerut, Patna, Guwahati, the Nepal border, Dubai, Hong Kong. Crooked like a crocodile's path over mud, yet definite.

The connection between this net and Garh Narikel was not immediately direct. That made it more frightening. Unemployed village youths lost money in online games; their bank accounts became mule accounts; money was washed through those accounts; the same money reappeared as "guest services" in city hotels; and in those hotels foreign contractors, lawyers, brokers, officials, pharmaceutical representatives and defence advisers spent the night. In the morning they spoke about dignity, development and policy.

Hulasi listened in Channa Grove. Her body had no hands, yet that night she felt the memory of hands returning through every vein. "After I fell into the well," she said, "the village said the woman was at fault. The same blame will fall on the woman caught in this net. No one will ask who did the catching."

Budhba Ghost said, "Then change the name of guilt in this chapter. The body is not guilty. The market is. Hunger is not guilty. The one who sells hunger is. Shame is not guilty. The one who turns shame into a rope is."

That evening a private dinner was being held for Batuknath Hariharan in a South Delhi hotel. The official reason was a consultation on legal reform. Guards stood at the entrance; inside hung glass chandeliers; on the tables were imported water, fish, wine and fruit, and smiles in every corner. Hariharan wore his habitual mild smile. No one looking at it could have guessed how many dates, bribes, blackmails and bodies were hidden behind it.

Chandrapal Batra sat beside him. His suit was new, but a fine layer of dust lay on his shoes. The lanes of Meerut, police-station verandas, gambling rooms, forged notices and threats of debt recovery clung to those shoes, however expensive the leather.

Hariharan asked, "Has the Ujjwal matter quietened down?"

Batra said, "The sister has not gone quiet. The phone may have got out."

For the first time irritation crossed Hariharan's face. "A phone is more dangerous than a body. A body grows tired. A phone remembers."

Batra said softly, "Malavika is preparing a list. We can assist one or two households. Waive debts. Silence will be cheaper."

Hariharan looked at him. "Silence is never cheap. Silence is a loan. It returns with interest. But that is why I am here." He laughed. "If a case comes, question the victim's character, not the institution. It is an old method."

At that sentence a decorative coconut on the table rolled off by itself. Everyone startled. Hariharan's aide picked it up and replaced it. Someone joked, "Must be a southern coconut."

Batra did not laugh. He remembered Hariharan's earlier words: "When the village wakes, the ancestors rise."

On the third floor of the same hotel, a young woman named Phoolmati was looking out of a window. In the file she was "F.M." On paper she was a "trainee." In truth she had been recruited from the Madhubani bus stand with the promise of a job—elder care in the city, fifteen thousand rupees a month. Five thousand had been sent home the first month. Her phone was taken away the second. In the third month she was told to repay her debt.

Phoolmati was not from Garh Narikel, but her maternal grandmother had come from a hamlet near Channa Grove. Her grandmother used to say, "When dogs cry at night for no reason, know that some soul is asking for a road." Phoolmati had heard dogs many nights in that hotel, though dogs were forbidden inside.

That evening she was ordered to change rooms. Room R07. The moment she reached the door, a voice from inside said, "Sign the paper

first.” She was handed a form titled “Voluntary Service Agreement.” She could not read it. She had been taught: wherever they ask for your name, put your thumbprint.

At that moment she saw her grandmother’s face in the glass of the door. Her grandmother was dead. But in Garh Narikel the dead were never too late to offer advice. The face said, “No thumbprint.”

Phoolmati stopped her hand. In that small pause lay an entire rebellion, unseen by anyone, yet fought inside her soul like the greatest battle of her life.

Down in the lobby Malavika Green’s phone buzzed. A message from Raghav Signal: “F.M. uncooperative. Option?”

Malavika typed, “Frighten her?”

Raghav: “Family.”

Two minutes later the phone taken from Phoolmati was shown to her. On the screen was a photograph of her home: her mother, her little brother, the tiled-roof house, and the debt papers. Phoolmati understood—the body was imprisoned in the city, but the fear was tied back in the village.

At that very moment Soumya Ramanathan stepped from a taxi outside the hotel. She had an invitation from Malavika’s committee to a “Dialogue on Women’s Dignity.” She was a researcher and invited guest, due to speak on the stage downstairs. She did not know that on the third floor of the same building, dignity was being asked for a thumbprint on paper.

Soumya mounted the stage. Malavika sat in the first row, two lawyers in the second, representatives of a foreign company in the third. At the rear, Batuknath Hariharan had arrived for five minutes and was already preparing to leave.

Soumya took the microphone. She had a written speech on rehabilitation policy, labour protection and transparency. But the moment she noticed a decorative coconut at the left of the stage, Budhba Ghost of Channa Grove came to mind. She folded away the speech.

“Dignity is not charity,” Soumya said. “Dignity is something no one has the right to take away. When a body is demanded in the name of employment, when silence is purchased in the name of assistance, when fear is written into a contract—then an institution is not a service. It is a market.”

The air in the hall grew slightly heavier. Malavika’s smile hardened. Hariharan glanced at his phone. A message from Batra read, “This woman is dangerous.”

Hariharan replied, “Do not question a dangerous woman’s character. Question her funding. Researchers fear questions about funding.”

Upstairs on the third floor, Phoolmati still refused to put her thumbprint on the form. The man before her gripped her shoulder. Phoolmati did not scream. She only said, “My name is Phoolmati. Not F.M.”

Her voice did not reach the auditorium below. It reached Channa Grove. Hulasi stood up—a handless body, yet at that moment filled with the strength of twelve hundred years of silence breaking at once. For the first time Budhba sent her into the raid. Hulasi entered chanting “Phoolmati.” The rules of kabaddi broke: a dead woman was running with a living woman’s name.

In his small Delhi room, Gop Kumar was not watching any live broadcast. But Ishan Dutt’s program showed movement in the third-floor CCTV server. No clear images appeared, only timestamps, doors opening and closing, phone locations and payment matches. Yet data can scream in its own way.

Gop called Ramaiyya. “Soumya is in that same hotel.”

Ramaiyya broke his silence and stood. “Tell her immediately.”

Gop’s fingers trembled, but he did not stop. He typed: “Third floor. R07. F.M. Be careful.”

The message flashed on Soumya’s phone in the middle of her speech. She read it. Her voice paused for a moment. Then she said into the microphone, “Dignity is not discussed in an auditorium. It is tested beyond the door. I will end here.”

Malavika panicked. “But the programme on stage—”

Soumya stepped down. Two journalists, who had been sitting in hope of dinner, followed out of curiosity. Hariharan rose to leave, but for the first time his movements were hurried. Batra ran toward the lift.

When Soumya reached R07 on the third floor, the door was locked from inside. She laid a hand on it. From within came a suppressed voice: “My name is Phoolmati.”

Soumya turned to the journalists’ mobile cameras and said loudly, “Go live.”

Those two words carried a strange power of the modern age. What would become a date in court, a compromise at the police station, or confidentiality inside an institution became, through a live stream, a face at once. The door opened. The people inside covered their faces. Phoolmati stepped out trembling, but with her name intact.

Malavika came shouting, "She is a trainee! This is a misunderstanding!"

For the first time Phoolmati raised her voice. "I am not a trainee. I am Phoolmati. Let me call home."

Within five minutes the live video had reached thousands of phones. Devika Sah watched it. On the screen of Ujjwal's dead phone, the voice of another living woman now sounded. Devika did not cry. She only said, "The name is returning again."

Chandrapal Batra slipped out through the hotel's rear door. On his signal phone a message from L.K. appeared: "Reduce noise. Cost?"

Batra wrote, "Increased."

L.K.: "Hariharan?"

Batra: "Active."

L.K.: "Not one woman. Save the network."

The message erased itself. Ishan's program caught it again.

Late that night Satyavrat Mehta watched the same video in his government residence. A file awaited his opinion on "the validity of a voluntary service agreement." He paused the video. Phoolmati's words returned again and again: "My name is Phoolmati."

Satyavrat stared into emptiness for a long while. Then he wrote on the paper, "Voluntariness is impossible within fear."

Then another line: "A court should question the structure, not the character."

Writing those two lines, he felt ashamed of his own profession. How often in court had the victim's life, family, clothes, friends, phone, photographs and travels been questioned, but not the source of the money? How often had lawyers translated bodily pain into a grammar of "consent"? He understood that law too could sometimes resemble a crocodile—it did not bite directly; first it surrounded its victim in silence.

Batuknath Hariharan sat that night in his study, portraits of great jurists on the walls and a red file on the desk. He told his aide, "Find Phoolmati's family's old debts. Send Soumya a notice about foreign funding. Defamation cases against the journalists. Find where Gop Kumar's name appears."

The aide asked, "Satyavrat Mehta?"

Hariharan was silent. Then he said, "He is difficult. Do not confront him directly; surround him with paper. Honest people trust paper. Paper tolerates more lies than they do."

That night the game resumed in Channa Grove. This time kabaddi had three raids. The first belonged to the drowned workers. The second to Ujjwal. The third to Phoolmati's name. The ghosts ran chanting names. The rakshasas cast light. The corpses ceased to be spectators and became witnesses.

Hulasi entered the raid and said, "My name is Hulasi. My death was not suicide."

Phoolmati's name joined hers in the air: "My name is Phoolmati. My body is not a market."

The water-drowned woman raised her face above the pond. The wires tangled in her hair slowly began to loosen. She said, "When a name is taken away, there is water-burial without water. When a name is returned, the body begins to find its road home again."

By morning the language of the news had changed. Some channels said, "Controversy at dignity organisation." Some said, "Trainee makes allegations." Some stayed silent. But the video was travelling from phone to phone. A name asks no one's permission.

Gop Kumar added a new heading to his file—"The Market in Bodies." As he wrote it, his hand grew heavy, as if the letters themselves knew their weight. Beneath the heading he made three columns: Fear, Payment, Protection. Under Fear: Phoolmati. Under Payment: Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Somani, Lau Kin-Hung. Under Protection: Batuknath Hariharan. At the edge he wrote one name separately—Satyavrat Mehta. Beside it, a question mark.

He knew that someone within the law was waking too. But waking was not enough. There were many crocodiles.

The coconut leaves moved in the morning breeze—softly yet firmly, like a weary witness repeating his evidence one final time. Their friction produced a sound: "Name." Then another: "Consent." Then a third: "Fear." And at last came one heavy splash, not in water but inside paper.

After that night the criminal web in Gop's file stood clear—the bridge workers, the breath of the pandemic, gambling on the screen, the market in bodies. They were not separate. They were circles drawn on water. At the centre stood the human being. Crocodiles on every side.

FOLK SONG: PHOOLMATT'S VEIL

Folk tune: women's lament

Lift it, sister, lift your head,

The fault is not yours—go on singing this truth.

The folder says service; inside it is a daughter's price,
In the bright city lights, names kept being sold.
On Phoolmati's veil lies not shame but a wound;
Cover the offender's face, do not brand the daughter.
The column of fear is long; the night of payment darker,

How many chests lie dried beneath the seal of protection.
The leaf says: without consent the body is no market;
A living woman's name too has a right to history.
Sister, lift your head; the fault is not yours,
One testimony from you will break the crocodile's earth.

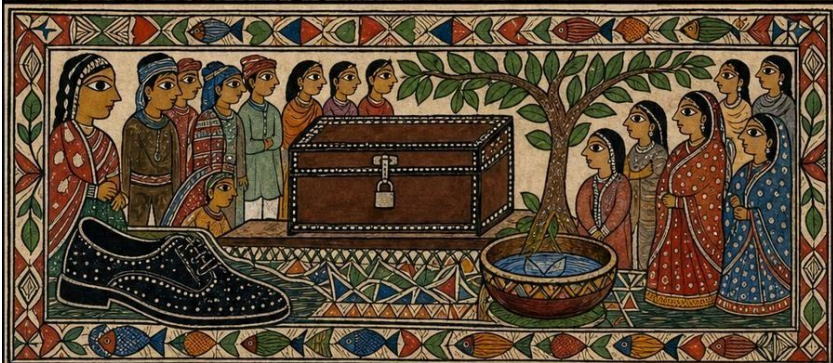
Whose name was sold beneath the white city lights?
Upon the veil is written not shame, but a wound;
Cover the offender's face—the daughter is innocent.



CHAPTER 10

Blackmail of Privacy

A body may be sold once; privacy can be sold again and again.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE THRESHOLD OF PRIVACY

Folk tune: auspicious dialogue of women friends

*Sister, guard the threshold that is yours,
The key is yours, the story is yours—remember this in your heart.*

*Sister, your threshold is yours, the key rests in your hand;
Whoever enters the house inside your phone must come by the road of
consent.*

*Return shame to the offender, never lay it on the victim;
When three lamps burn together, blackmail is not so heavy.*

*Name, love and testimony together will make a circle of protection;
Law, technology and friendship will extend the hand of trust.*

*At privacy's threshold draw an alpaca of dignity;
Tell your own story to the world, without fear and on your own terms.*

*There is a courtyard inside the phone as well; draw an alpaca there
too;*

The trick of anyone who peers in without asking will break.

Light three lamps together—name, love, testimony;

Carry your own story before the world on your own terms.



That night the ghosts in Channa Grove were again playing kabaddi, but the boundary of the game had changed. Earlier the line was drawn on the earth; now the water-drowned woman drew it in the air with her wet hair. The line glowed like a phone screen in darkness. When a ghost crossed it, what opened was not an old name but a hidden memory.

Hulasi entered the raid. The moment she touched the line, everyone saw the night of the well—she bent over the water to look at her face, her foot slipped, and the village called her death a suicide. Husasi did not

tremble. She stood and said, “Look. This is not my shame. It is the village’s lie.”

Budhba Ghost smiled. “When a person tells her pain in her own voice, half the teeth of blackmail break.”

But not every soul is so brave. A living person has blood in the body, a family, a livelihood, photographs in a mobile phone, and the eyes of society upon them. Those eyes are often harsher than a court, more merciless than the police, and more curious than the criminal.

In Delhi a new name opened inside Gop Kumar’s file—Mrinalini Arya. The file did not contain her full name, only “M.A.” She had studied abroad, worked as a technology-law adviser, wrote on data rights, and was a distant descendant of the Garh Narikel line. At home she was called Meera. Her link with Garh Narikel was so remote that as a child she had thought the village’s name belonged to a story, not to geography.

Meera had first entered Gop Kumar’s file as a researcher. She had once said, “Data becomes dangerous when the owner of it is a criminal and the subject of it is poor.” Gop did not like her at first, because she questioned everything. Ramaiyya used to say, “This girl is not a lawyer; she is a knife. She cuts paper.”

Meera did not hide her private life, but she knew that society finds ways to imprison even people who live openly. She loved a woman named Aditi. The love itself was simple—the trust between two people. But the world can turn simple things into danger, especially when they can be used to buy money, status, silence or testimony.

Copies of Meera and Aditi’s private messages, travel bookings, photographs, hotel receipts and medical consultations reached Chandrapal Batra’s gang. They ceased to be records of love and became merchandise for blackmail. Batra’s people wrote, “Stay away from Gop’s file. Otherwise we will send everything to your family, the media, the Bar and the university.”

The message arrived on Signal, designed to disappear after five minutes. But a threat does not live for five minutes. It takes up residence in the mind, and it is much harder to erase from there.

For the first time Meera was afraid—not of her love, but of the possibility of silence within her own family. Her fear was not love. It was the face of her elderly mother, her father’s silence, the whispering of aunts, the family’s honour, society’s endless courtroom. She knew the criminals would not call themselves criminals; they would call her “immoral,” “deviant,” “Western,” “anti-family.” In India, words like these can sometimes cut more sharply than weapons.

That night Meera sat alone in her room. Delhi traffic moved outside; inside came the faint hum of a hard drive. No voice would come from her

mouth. She opened Gop's number and closed it. She opened Soumya's and closed it. Her finger stopped on Aditi's name.

Aditi called first. "I got the message too," she said.

Meera remained silent.

Aditi neither laughed nor cried. "People who turn the proof of love into evidence of a crime are the greatest cowards. Do not give them the right to make your decision."

Meera asked quietly, "Your family?"

"My family will understand me slowly. Some will never understand. But I own my life. The criminals do not."

To Meera, the sentence was like a dead woman in Channa Grove hearing her own name returned to her ears. The weight did not become lighter, but the strength to carry it increased. She ended the call and wrote to Gop Kumar: "I am sending the blackmail documents. One condition: do not make this case about homosexuality. Make it about the attack on privacy, fear used against consent, and the criminal network."

Gop replied, "Agreed. Not the individual—the structure."

Meera smiled. "This time you learned."

When Soumya Ramanathan came to meet her, Meera opened the door and said at once, "I will not speak as a victim. I will speak as a witness."

Soumya nodded. "The difference is that people listen to a victim's story with pity. They listen to a witness's story with fear."

Meera opened her laptop. The folders were arranged in order: "Threats," "Accounts," "Chats," "Servers," "Batra," "Hariharan," "L.K." Gop and Ramaiyya arrived. Ramaiyya remained silent; such a long silence was rare for him.

Meera laid out the papers. The first page was a threat sent by Chandrapal Batra's aide. The second contained Raghav Signal Somani's code. The third showed payment through a Hong Kong server. The fourth was a donation to an Indian legal forum bearing Batuknath Hariharan's signature. The fifth showed that the sponsor of a Bar Council programme was the same company concealed within the ownership of the online gaming operation.

Gop said slowly, "This is not a private threat. It is a machine for stopping testimony."

"Yes," Meera replied. "And this machine runs under different names against women, queer people, the poor, widows, workers and students."

For one person it is a photograph, for another a debt, a caste, a love, a bank account.”

Ramaiyya spoke for the first time. “The crocodiles may think every body has a different flavour, but they keep the same teeth.”

In Channa Grove, Budhba Ghost burst into laughter at that sentence. The rakshasas began casting light. The wires caught in the water-drowned woman’s hair suddenly straightened like strands of current in a river.

Meera played a short video from her file. Chandrapal Batra did not appear anywhere in it, but the shadow of his voice did. One man said, “Once her character is exposed, the case will collapse by itself.” Another said, “What will it cost to make her private life public?” A third said, “Hariharan sir says: fear first, settlement afterward.”

Gop’s hands turned cold, as if his body itself had measured the chill of this truth. He remembered Nand Aruni’s bridge register, where dead workers had been marked “absent.” Here the person was alive, but “character” was being written in place of personality. This too was a technique of making someone absent.

That evening Satyavrat Mehta received a sealed envelope with no sender’s name. Inside was a note prepared by Meera: “Privacy protection, the dignity of testimony and the legal meaning of blackmail within the state and criminal networks.” Copies of the threats were enclosed.

As Satyavrat Mehta read the note, he rose from his chair and walked to the window. Delhi’s sky was hazy. Far away, a wedding band was playing. He remembered how often courts questioned the individual rather than the structure: “How did you live?” “Whom did you meet?” “Why this photograph?” “What was your relationship?” Not every question asked by law seeks truth; some are asked to manufacture shame.

He wrote on the paper: “When a witness’s privacy has been turned into material for blackmail, the court’s first duty is to protect the witness’s dignity.”

Then he wrote another line: “The law’s duty is not to judge love, but to identify the source of fear.”

As he wrote it, he understood that he was slowly becoming something other than a government lawyer. He still represented the state, but the human being inside the state was waking. The awakening was not pleasant; it spread through the body like thorns.

At the same time, a separate meeting was under way in Batuknath Hariharan’s office. Framed words covered the walls—justice, purity, legal tradition, constitution. Tea sat on the table. Inside were Batuknath, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Signal Somani and two unnamed advocates.

Hariharan asked sharply, "Is Meera under control?"

Batra wrinkled his nose. "People educated abroad are emotional. They think truth has a market."

Raghav ran a finger over his phone. "Shall we release her data?"

Hariharan shook his head slowly. "No. Not yet. First create the language with which to discredit her. Data will be the last weapon. First say foreign conspiracy. Say attack on Indian culture. Say an attempt to influence the judicial process. Say her private life makes her testimony unreliable."

One advocate asked, "But the matter is online gambling, mule accounts, digital arrest, trafficking—"

Hariharan cut him off. "The issue is whatever we make it. The public reads headlines, not facts."

Chandrapal Batra laughed. "That was the first thing I learned in Meerut—win the story before you win the case."

In the middle of the meeting, a glass on the table began sweating by itself. The room was air-conditioned. Where had the water come from? Raghav did not notice, but Batra did. The moisture ran down and formed letters on the tabletop: "NAME."

He wiped the water away quickly with a handkerchief. Hariharan looked at him. "Afraid of ghosts?"

"Not ghosts," Batra said hard. "Records."

That same night in Garh Narikel, Ba opened her old chest. She had never met Meera directly, but she remembered every branching line of the family. Her finger moved across the old genealogy. "Mrinalini" had been written there in fresh ink. Ba murmured, "When a daughter of the lineage writes her own name, society cannot cut her out."

Aruni asked, "Ba, who told you that?"

Ba replied, "Hulasi came from the direction of Channa Grove last night. She said women have begun speaking their own names now."

Aruni said nothing. Village words can sound strange to city ears, yet some of them return as truth in the city. A message from Gop reached him: "Meera will testify."

Aruni thought: the novel was no longer only about water-burial. Water devoured the body; the screen devoured privacy; the courtroom devoured the name; the market devoured dignity. Yet the method of death was the same everywhere—first isolate the person.

Meera began writing her statement. The first sentence was: "I am a lesbian, but in this case that fact is not an allegation, only background;

the crime is that my privacy was used as a weapon to stop my testimony.” She paused. Then she changed it: “What I am is not my crime. The crime is that criminals are using it to manufacture fear.”

Soumya read it and smiled. “Keep the second sentence. The first sounds like law; the second sounds like life.”

Meera kept it.

Then she tried to remove Aditi’s name. Aditi stopped her. “Let my name stay too. Half the force of the blackmail will break there.”

“You will be in danger,” Meera said.

“The danger already exists,” Aditi replied. “A name will only change its direction.”

The decision was not simple. Neither woman cried. They sat holding each other’s hands without words, as if silence itself were the greatest assurance. Outside, rain began over Delhi. Water struck the window like some old river knocking on the city’s glass.

Gop Kumar redrew the map in his file—not by erasing the old lines, but by adding new ones, like a mapmaker admitting his own earlier mistake. Until then the flow of crime had seemed to begin with money—accounts, payments, companies. Now he understood that its first stream began with fear. Money flowed later. He drew three circles: Fear, Data, Money. At their centre: the human being. Outside: the crocodile.

Ramaiyya said, “Add the next circle—Law.”

Gop asked, “Outside?”

“No,” said Ramaiyya. “Law is another kind of river. If you can cross it, it may save you. If you are caught in it, it may sweep you away. Satyavrat Mehta may be able to build a boat. Hariharan builds dams in which the water rots.”

That night Ishan Dutt, the shadowless informant, appeared in person after a long absence. The door did not open; he was simply standing inside. Gop startled. Light fell on Ishan’s body, but no shadow appeared.

Ishan said, “Tell Meera to preserve her original phone. There are many copies, but in court the original object is like a soul.”

Gop asked, “Where did you come from?”

Ishan laughed. “When your name has died in government records, a door is only a habit, not a necessity.”

He handed Gop a small memory device. “This contains another set of Raghav Signal’s deleted messages. Hariharan thinks Meera is alone. But the network is afraid of her because if a private threat becomes public evidence, its strongest armour breaks.”

Gop held the device. It weighed almost nothing. Yet inside it were sealed the fear, love, debt and silence of countless people.

At first light, Meera, Aditi, Soumya, Gop and Ramaiyya gathered for a small meeting. Devika Sah came too. Phoolmati had been moved to a safe place. A video statement was to be recorded. Meera sat before the camera.

She said, “My name is Mrinalini Arya. I am called Meera. My private life belongs to me. It was stolen and used to frighten me because I am going to testify about a criminal network. Online gambling, mule accounts, digital arrest, human trafficking, court delays and money laundering are connected within this network. My love was turned into a weapon to silence me. I will not be silent.”

No one applauded. Applause was unnecessary, because Meera had spoken not for praise but for truth alone. Sometimes silence after truth is the greatest honour.

Devika said softly, “Add Ujjwal’s name too.”

Meera lowered her head. “Ujjwal Jha did not die merely because he lost at an online game. Fear pushed him. His phone, his debt, his threats—all were part of this network.”

Gop stopped the recording. He understood that the chapter had changed. The criminals would now fight not merely to save money, but to save the story they had built around themselves.

Far away in Channa Grove, the kabaddi ended. The ghosts were tired, but there was relief in the fatigue. Budhba Ghost erased the glowing screen-line drawn across the earth. Hulasi asked, “You erased the line?”

“No,” Budhba said. “Who can erase the line that has now been drawn inside people?”

The coconut leaves moved. In their sound came three words: “Name. Love. Testimony.” Then a long silence. It was not the silence of fear, but of preparation.

The chapter had not ended; only the next face of the crime was about to open. The stream of money would now turn toward weapons, drugs and terror financing. But on this night Meera had saved her name. And when a name survives, history can be written again through it.

FOLK SONG: THE BROKEN THRESHOLD OF PRIVACY

Folk tune: dialogue song of women friends

Listen, sister, tell your own story yourself,
Keep the key of consent in your own hand.

Sister, the body may be violated once, the image again and again;
A thief sits inside the phone and opens the walls of the home.
Meera's name was put up for sale, but her voice did not surrender;
Shame returned to the offender and did not weigh upon the victim.
The line was erased from the earth, yet remained drawn within;

Name, love and testimony—the three lamps burned again.
The stream of money turned toward weapons in the dark;
A woman saved her own name and remade history.
Sister, your story is yours; consent is your doorway;
The one who steals privacy has no right to it.

The body may be violated once, the image again and again;
The thief seated inside the phone opens the walls of the home.
The line on the earth was erased; the inner line stayed firm;
All three lamps—name, love, testimony—burned bright.



CHAPTER II

The Black River of Money

Ghosts do not breathe, yet they grow tired—the fatigue belongs not to the body, but to testimony.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A GREEN BOAT ON THE BLACK RIVER

Folk tune: a blend of transplanting song and boatman's song

*Set the green boat afloat upon the black current,
Return the price of labour and sweat; sow happiness in every home.*

*The black river of money flows—launch the green boat,
Name, evidence, memory and courage are its four oars.
Cross account after account and return the worker's due;
See the human face behind each number and make the reckoning
clean.*

*The village's spoken fire can dry the black current,
And with a people's shared watch, money can return to service.
Across the black river, the green boat will carry trust,
And a worker's earnings will reach the child at home through justice.*

*Arrange the accounts as cleanly as rows of women transplanting rice;
See a face in every number—do not lose the human being.
The village's oral fire will burn away the black mist;
The green boat will cut through the waves and reach the ghat of
justice.*



That night, after Mrinalini Arya's testimony had been recorded and the theft of her private life had become evidence of a crime, the kabaddi in Channa Grove did not stop. The game only slowed. Ghosts do not breathe, but they grow weary; their weariness belongs not to the body but to memory. They looked from face to face as if asking: which crocodile will come out next?

Budhba Ghost climbed down from his branch. For a moment, twelve hundred years of patience seemed to have weakened. His feet usually

hovered a finger's breadth above the ground, but that night even that small distance trembled. The soil of Channa Grove began to grow wet from within. Not with water, but with a subterranean current that shone black.

Hulasi asked, "Is this the Kamala's water again?"

The Brahma of the pipal opened all four mouths at once. One mouth answered, the second contradicted it, the third remained silent, and on the tongue of the fourth lay a taste of metal.

"No," Budhba said. "This is not water. Money is flowing. When money turns very black, it flows like water, burns like fire, and bites like a crocodile."

The half-eaten corpse, who until then had been a spectator, rose and entered the game for the first time. No voice came from his half-scraped mouth, but in his eyes lay a scene—iron boxes, white powder, a distant border, and a child whom someone had taught that death in the name of religion could also be a business.

There was no longer a boundary in Channa Grove. The kabaddi field slowly became a ledger. Account numbers began glowing where the ghosts' feet had stood. Numbers ran through the veins of every fallen leaf. In the water tangled through the drowned woman's hair, a boat appeared: "medicine" written outside, narcotics within. On another box: "agricultural equipment," sealed metal parts inside. On a third: "relief material," and inside it, fear.

At that time, in the small city room, Gop Kumar, Soumya Ramanathan, Ramaiyya Subramaniam, Devika Sah, Mrinalini and Ishan Dutt were seated together. After giving her statement, Meera was silent. Her eyes were tired, but there was no fear in them.

Ishan Dutt cast no shadow that day either. The bulb behind his body made only an empty patch of light on the wall. He placed a second memory device on the table.

"This is not the first device," he said. "The first held the theft of privacy. This one holds the journey of money. If the first theft opened the inner room of a person, this second theft opens the belly of a country."

Gop inserted the device into the computer. At first the screen showed nothing. Then, against a black background, a single word appeared: "Current."

Ramaiyya tried to laugh. "Current? A river?"

Ishan nodded. "Money. This network gives its accounts the names of rivers—Kamala, Balan, Ganga, Sindhu, Mekong, Pearl. When money leaves India, they say: the water has receded. When criminal money returns from abroad, they say: the flood has come."

Soumya leaned toward the screen. Dates appeared. Old payments from the bridge project. Foreign consultancy fees. Fake bills for safety inspections. Then the years jumped to pandemic procurement—oxygen, vials, beds, plastic protective clothing. Then came payments for online gambling. Mule accounts. Digital arrest. And afterward those account lines flowed into a new column: “Metal,” “Dust,” “Route,” “Prayer.”

Devika asked, “Prayer?”

Ishan’s face went pale. “It is code. In this network, terror financing is called prayer. Those who sell fear also steal language. Criminals give sacred names to sin so that the soul of the person reading the accounts grows tired.”

Mrinalini said softly, “When my love was turned into a weapon, I understood that these people change the meaning of names. Love becomes shame. Shame becomes silence. Silence becomes safety. Now they are turning prayer into fear.”

Gop opened a folder called “Lakhera Consultancy.” Inside were many legal opinions signed by Chandrapal Batra. The language was polished and proper. Every sentence looked as though a white cloth had been draped over the body of a crime.

Chandrapal Batra had an LL.B. from Meerut. People in Garh Narikel did not know his name; the city’s darkness called him “Batra sahib.” He said, “I provide only lawful advice.” Yet after his advice, someone’s account opened, another closed, a phone began ringing, and someone’s son hanged himself.

Law books stood on Chandrapal’s table, but beneath them lay another ledger—identity papers of young people, student bank details, private photographs of women, thumbprints of labourers. He did not look like a criminal; he placed cultivated signatures on paper. That was what made him dangerous.

Batuknath Hariharan protected him. President of the Bar Council, lion of the dais, master of speech. He spoke of legal ethics as though the court were his private temple. But the bags delivered to him at night were not temple offerings; they were prices placed upon the throat of justice.

There was a cupboard in the back room of Hariharan’s house. It held not files, but mobile phones. Each phone carried a different name. On some phones no one ever spoke; only disappearing messages arrived. Raghav Somani—whom everyone called “Raghav Signal”—lived at once inside all of them.

Raghav Signal’s rule was: leave no voice, no paper, no face. Ishan Dutt laughed. “The more someone tries to erase traces, the more traces he creates. The act of erasing is itself evidence.”

Some of Raghav's deleted messages returned to life on the screen, not as whole sentences but fragments: "percentage from L.K.," "speak to Batra.," "Hariharan safe.," "delete youth list.," "metal consignment separate.," "dust via Nepal route.," "prayer old route..."

"L.K.?" Ramaiyya asked.

Ishan replied, "Lau Kin-Hung. The real kingpin in Hong Kong. He does not want to appear directly in the story. To him India is not a market but a mine—a mine of bodies, fear, data and vulnerable young people. He says greed is cheap in poor countries. What he does not understand is that memory is expensive in poor countries."

Soumya opened a file. It contained names of ports, border towns, bills for hospital supplies, receipts for defence consultancy, and donations to institutions publicly established in the name of peace, education and health.

"Look here," Soumya said. "The medicine truck is insured by the same company. The arms consultancy fee comes through the same foundation. Gambling payments use the same payment gateway. The trafficking hotel bills are tied to the same corporate event. And finally some of the money reaches groups that spread violent propaganda."

Gop's body turned cold—a cold born not of weather but of the weight of truth. He remembered the bridge's old list: thirty names, three hundred corpses. Then bodies had fallen into the Ganga; now sums of money fell into accounts across countries. Every fall made a different sound, but the essence was the same: splash.

The night deepened. A dog barked outside. In the light of the screen, every face in the room looked as though the dead had gathered around a candle.

Devika asked, "Where did Ujjwal's money go?"

Gop opened Ujjwal's account. First small deposits, then small withdrawals, then suddenly numbers shaped like debt; afterward threatening messages, debt collection, fake notices of digital arrest, and then the money split among thirty-five small accounts. Of those thirty-five, twelve belonged to students, seven to rickshaw drivers, three to elderly widows, five to unemployed men, and the rest to false names.

Devika was silent for a while. Her hand remained still on the table, but in her eyes a question stored for years was finally finding its answer. Then she said, "So my brother did not commit suicide. He was pushed."

No one answered. Some truths are such that saying "yes" is cruel and saying "no" is a lie.

Mrinalini took Devika's hand. "They frightened me with my private life. Your brother with debt. Phoolmati with her body. The worker with hunger. These fears look different, but the owner of the fear is the same."

Ishan opened the next folder: "Border."

It contained a map, but not a complete one. No route was clearly drawn; there were only red points. Soumya said at once, "We will not publish this. If the route details get out, other criminals could use them. We need evidence, not a method."

Gop nodded. "The novel too will not become a manual for crime. It will show how a criminal system is formed, not how to pick its locks."

Ishan smiled. "That is why I have blurred some parts. Truth does not mean revealing everything. Truth means putting light in the right place."

The next image was an old video. A foreign auditorium. Edward Broom on stage. A blue curtain behind him, and above it the words "Global Enterprise and Human Dignity." He spoke while the audience applauded. Beneath each sentence of his speech, Ishan had added an account line in red. Under "dignity": dead workers. Under "partnership": fake bills. Under "safety": missing helmets. Under "innovation": gambling app.

Ramaiyya stood up from his chair, his voice carrying anger suppressed for a long time. "Do these people's souls never tremble?"

Ba used to say: when a person's soul dies, the body becomes even more successful. That night Gop remembered Ba.

For the first time Satyavrat Mehta's name entered the room. Ishan said, "A copy of all this must reach Satyavrat Mehta."

Gop was startled. "The government's top lawyer?"

"Yes," said Ishan. "Not every office is corrupt. Some offices are tests for good people sitting in bad chairs. Mehta will first argue the state's case. But if he sees the whole picture, the human being inside him may fight the lie written by the state."

Soumya looked doubtful. "And if he too is part of Hariharan's net?"

Ishan kept looking at the wall where his shadow did not fall. "Then behind us stands Channa Grove."

Elsewhere in Delhi, Batuknath Hariharan was awake late in a luxurious building. Chandrapal Batra sat before him. Between them stood a glass tumbler, dried fruit and a small phone. The phone carried no name.

Batra said, "Meera has gone public. Devika too. Gop's source is from inside."

Hariharan laughed. "Many people testify. Testimony is not born in court; it is raised by procedure. I know procedure."

The phone lit up. A message from Raghav Signal: "L.K. asks: how much risk?"

Batra typed, "Under control. Watch Mehta."

Hariharan stopped him. "Do not write Mehta's name."

Batra deleted the message. But before it vanished, the flash on the screen travelled all the way to a leaf in Channa Grove and lodged there.

In the third watch of the night, coconut leaves in Garh Narikel moved without wind. Budhba Ghost looked up. A word glowed on a leaf: "Mehta."

Hulasi asked, "Who is that?"

Budhba said, "Among the living there is sometimes someone who is made great not by his office, but by his remorse. We shall see whether this man enters the water or remains standing on the bank."

At that very time Satyavrat Mehta was in his study. A fresh government affidavit lay before him: on the old bridge disaster, "no additional deaths established"; on digital fraud, "individual financial imprudence"; on procurement of medicines, "emergency administrative decisions"; on foreign payments, "lawful commercial transactions."

He grew tired as he read. He loved the language of law, but that night it felt like a sheet thrown over corpses.

There was no knock on the door. Yet an envelope appeared on his desk. It was damp. There was no name on it, only a small mark of a Garh Narikel coconut leaf.

Mehta's hand stopped of its own accord, as though his body had warned him before his mind did. He opened the envelope. Inside was one page containing only three lines:

Not thirty names—three hundred.

Not debt—a push.

Not trade—a black river.

Alongside the page lay a memory device. Mehta stared at it. He understood that the moment he touched that small object, his office, reputation, friendships and sleep would all be tested.

Outside Delhi that same night, boxes were being shifted in a warehouse. "School sports equipment" was printed on them. One worker

asked, "Balls this heavy?" His companion silenced him. A small slip fell near the worker's foot: "Not Ganga route. Dry route."

The worker could not read. But the dust clinging to the slip sent its smell all the way to Channa Grove. The ghosts abandoned the kabaddi and wrinkled their noses. Ghosts do not fear a smell, but this was the smell not of bodily death, but of the death of society.

Soumya spent the night separating papers. She made four lists: evidence that could be made public, evidence that must be kept secure, evidence for the court, and evidence that would remain sealed so that the routes of crime could not be reproduced.

Gop asked, "What now?"

Ishan said, "Now we break three dams in the black river of money. First—the court. Second—public memory. Third—the international forum."

Mrinalini added, "And a fourth—the shame people carry. When people give testimony without shame, half the strength of the net will collapse."

Devika set Ujjwal's photograph on the table. "I will begin."

At that moment a new message appeared on the screen. No sender. Only one line: "The more names you join, the more corpses you will find."

Silence fell through the room. Ramaiyya spoke first. "The corpses already exist. By joining the names, at least we give them their funeral fire."

Far away in Channa Grove, kabaddi began again. This time the chant had changed. Instead of "kabaddi," the ghosts called in turn: "Current of money, dust of bodies, fire of names."

The corpse stood in the middle of the field. For the first time his half-scraped mouth opened fully. He did not speak, yet everyone heard: "Water-burial used to happen in the river. Now water-burial happens inside accounts."

The first dew of dawn settled on the coconut leaves. Each drop contained a number. Slowly the numbers became names. Budhba Ghost kept reading those names until sunrise.

When the sun rose, Channa Grove looked ordinary again. But ordinary things are often the most frightening, because they can hide the extraordinary inside themselves.

Gop Kumar made three copies of the memory device, without haste, like a priest checking the materials for a ritual three times. One copy for

Satyavrat Mehta, one for Ira Aruni abroad, and one to be hidden in the hollow of the old pipal in Channa Grove.

Soumya asked, "Why the pipal?"

Gop said, "If every server is shut down, if every court turns its face away, if every country drapes its flag over a lie—then at least the ghosts of Garh Narikel will know where the river of money flowed from."

Ishan Dutt moved toward the door. His feet made no sound. "If one person dies, another will speak. If the second is silenced, a third will fall from the tree."

In the light of dawn his body looked transparent. For a moment everyone felt he was not a man but a page that had stepped outside government records.

He left. Still no shadow followed him. But on the table where he had been sitting remained a small damp mark, curved like a crocodile's tooth and green like a coconut leaf.

Gop kept looking at the mark. It seemed to him that the crocodile had already come out of the river. It no longer bit with teeth but with accounts. A youth who opened a bank account in his own name did not know whose death might be purchased through it. An official who made a single signature did not know how many borders, bodies and fears had gathered at the point of his pen.

Ramaiyya opened the window. Morning air entered. There was no river smell in the city breeze, yet Gop clearly heard a splash. It was not a body falling into water, but a sum of money falling from one account into another.

Soumya closed her notebook, her voice holding more resolve than fatigue. "In this chapter we did not catch the names of all the crimes. We caught their rhythm. Once we know the rhythm, we can find the names again."

Devika said, "The same rhythm is in the copy of Ujjwal's phone. First greed, then debt, then fear, then silence. After those four words it becomes easy to kill a human being."

Mrinalini said slowly, "My rhythm was love, privacy, threat, testimony. I could have died between them, but testimony changed the rhythm."

Copies of the papers Ishan had given them lay spread across the table. Each page told a different story of crime, yet the same stain marked every edge—wet, black, shaped like a crocodile's tooth. Gop reached to touch one. Soumya stopped him. "Not yet. Some stains are evidence. Touch them not with the hand of emotion, but with the hand of proof."

Far away in Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta stood at his window before opening the memory device. For the first time he wondered whether being the government's lawyer and being truth's lawyer could be the same thing. Outside his house stood an ashoka tree. One leaf moved without wind.

He remembered a story from childhood: in Mithila, trees sometimes testify. He did not laugh. That night he had no courage to laugh.

He inserted the device. The screen lit. The first folder opened: "Names That Were Not Absent." Every year of legal practice on Satyavrat Mehta's face seemed to become old in a single moment.

In Channa Grove, the ghosts were returning to their branches because morning had come. Hulasi looked back at the field one last time. The line drawn there had vanished, but the soil beneath it was warm.

Budhba Ghost said, "From today the game is harder. Now, to tag someone in kabaddi, we must cross not a body but accounts, files, screens, courts and foreign forums."

The Brahma of the pipal spoke from all four mouths at once: "Name. Evidence. Memory. Courage."

Sunlight fell on the first coconut leaf. The numbers written there slowly turned green. Seeing the green numbers, Budhba Ghost smiled. The black river of money fears green memory, because a village that remembers cannot be sold completely.

That morning Gop Kumar wrote one sentence in his diary: "When crocodiles begin laying eggs in bank accounts, know that the time has come to cleanse not the river, but the reckoning."

FOLK SONG: BLACK RIVER, GREEN LEAF

Folk tune: plaintive transplanting melody

Flow, black river, but do not drown the leaf;
Carry the worker's earnings home to the child.

The black river of money cuts through the village's chest;
The green leaf writes the names and holds the water of memory.
We will cross accounts, files, screens and stages;
We will carry four lamps—name, evidence, memory, courage.
The crocodile laid eggs in accounts; the numbers turned poisonous,

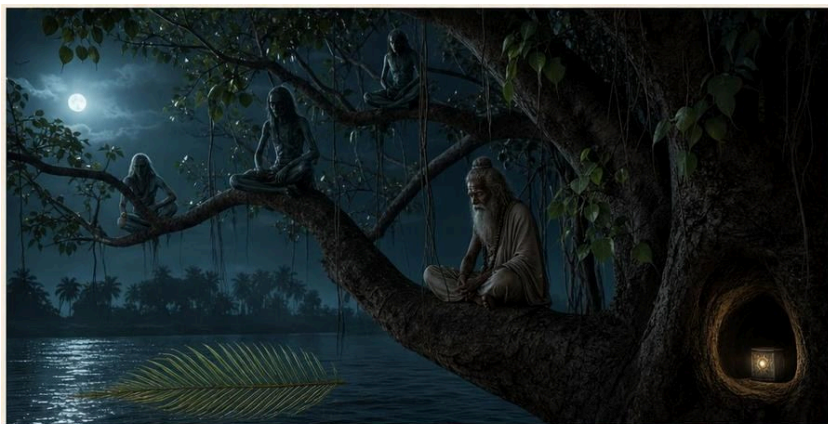
But the village's spoken fire is stronger than them.
The weary ghost says: we will not abandon testimony;
When green memory wakes, the village cannot be sold.
Flow, black river, but do not drown the leaf;
Carry the worker's earnings home to the child.



CHAPTER 12

Coconut Leaf on the Dark Web

*On the black river, the coconut leaf neither sinks nor drifts—it shows
the way.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LEAF-LAMP ON THE
DARK WEB**

Folk tune: Batgabani awakening song

*Walk slowly, traveller; the road through the web is dark,
Take the leaf-lamp in your hand; walk with care, together.*

*On the road through the black web, the leaf becomes a lamp,
A small green line of names points toward the true direction.*

*Reveal only as much evidence as dignity can safely bear;
Let discernment walk with technology, and let people remain
protected.*

*The voices of worker, youth, and woman join upon one leaf;
The village's knowledge loosens the deceptive knots of the digital world.*

*The leaf-lamp upon the dark web says: walk slowly,
Carry the boat of truth safely and cross the darkness.*

*At every click thorns are spread, snare after snare is strung;
Lean upon the staff of discernment, and every theft will break.
The voices of worker, youth, and woman are rooted on one leaf;
However dense the darkness, the lamp does not lose its nerve.*



When dawn spread over Garh Narikel, Channa Grove lay still with the fatigue of the night's game. The ghosts were seated once more upon their separate branches, but that day's stillness was not the silence of the dead. It was the silence of people who had heard a secret and were practising the difficult discipline of holding it until the proper time.

The small device placed in the hollow of the pipal during the night gave off a faint light from beneath the earth. From his four faces the Brahma of the pipal was reciting not four different mantras but four different cautions. The first face said, "Protect the truth." The second:

“Do not become a recipe for falsehood.” The third: “Keep the names safe.” The fourth: “Let evidence go out only as far as justice requires.”

Budhba Ghost closed his eyes upon his branch. He now understood that the underworld river of the new age flowed not with water but with the light of bits. Yet the body of a name could drown there too. Just as the Ganga was filled with crocodiles, this new web was filled with invisible mouths.

In the city, Gop Kumar sat at the table. His eyes had not closed all night—as though sleep itself had left him at this moment and gone far away. As Saumya Ramanathan sorted one heap of papers after another, she would read the name of a widowed worker, then a hospital bill, then the threat used in Ujjwal’s digital arrest. Ramayya Subramaniam stopped talking even while making tea. When a talkative person falls silent, you know the matter has truly become heavy.

Mrinalini Arya read the copy of her statement again. What lay upon that page was not her love but the crime of its theft. For the first time she felt that privacy too was like land—its boundary invisible, yet an encroachment upon it could lay waste the field of the body.

Devika Sah had placed Ujjwal’s photograph before her. Ujjwal was smiling in it, the sort of smile at which any mother might say, “My son will accomplish something.” Devika said softly, “He did. By his death, he opened this account.”

Ishan Datt stood by the door. Dawn-light fell upon his body, but there was no shadow. He said, “Three copies have been made. But three copies do not mean three hopes alone; they also mean three dangers.”

Gop asked, “How will the first go?”

“An envelope that reached Satyavrat Mehta’s study has already been opened,” Ishan said. “He is reading it. But reading and believing are different things. Within him, duty to the government and duty to the soul will fight.”

Saumya lifted the second copy. “To Ira Aruni?”

Ishan nodded. “The veil of hypocrisy on a foreign stage must be torn by someone who understands the language of that auditorium and also recognises the smell of Garh Narikel. Ira once understood her village as a story; now the story will reach her as a document.”

“The third?” Ramayya asked.

Gop looked out of the window. “The third is in the hollow of the pipal. If the server is shut down, if the mail disappears, if the court is sealed, if the foreign institution turns its face away—even then the ghosts of Channa Grove will have one copy.”

For the first time Ramayya smiled faintly. "So the backup is supernatural."

Mrinalini said, "Not supernatural. Folk memory. It is the oldest server of all."

That day Delhi's sky was full of dust. Satyavrat Mehta sat alone in his room. The government's affidavit lay open before him. Its sentences were smooth, courteous, legally proper. But beside it lay the damp page on which was written: not thirty names, three hundred.

Mehta took off his spectacles. He remembered a teacher telling him while he studied law, "Represent the State, but when the State lies, the side of truth is greater than the State." Back then he had memorised the meaning of that sentence for an examination; today the sentence had come to examine him.

He opened the memory device. No thrilling picture appeared on the screen. No sensation. Only a table: names, dates, payments, deaths, signatures, revised copies, missing pages. Truth often arrives in just such a dull form. Falsehood is colourful; truth is as dry as a ledger. Yet the smell of bodies remains in those dry pages.

Mehta's eyes stopped on one line, and he read it again and again as if the letters might change their meaning: "Safety inspection completed." The date was the very day Sarayu Devi's husband had drowned among the crocodiles. A second line: "Family unavailable." No one in that family had received compensation. A third: "Voluntary risk." Mehta rose from his chair.

For the first time he felt not anger but shame. Anger hurls a person outward; shame draws him inward. That night Satyavrat Mehta was drawn inward.

Meanwhile, across the sea, Ira Aruni was in the Harvard library. Outside the window lay a thin layer of snow; inside the warm room students discussed policy, justice, development, and global responsibility. To reach this place, Ira had run very far from the story of her family's village. Garh Narikel had always seemed to her one of her grandmother's tales—ghosts, drowned spirits, coconut trees, water-burial.

That morning a file reached her. The sender was unknown. Its title was "The Names of Garh Narikel." Ira was frightened at first. Then she opened it. The first page bore Lattar Thakur's name, the second Kalit, the third Nand Aruni; after that came a photograph of the bridge, a list of workers, an extract from Edward Broom's speech, and beneath it red figures.

As Ira read, she pushed her chair backwards. She felt as though water were filling beneath the wooden floor of the library. No one else saw it.

All the students were improving the world on their laptops. Only Ira saw the water by her shoes—the water between imagination and crime.

At the end of the file was a single line: “You are not foreign; you were merely born abroad.”

For the first time Ira understood her surname not as a burden but as evidence. That day she decided she would ask a question at Edward Broom’s next ethics lecture. The question would be short, but behind it would stand three hundred water-burials, Ujjwal’s death before a screen, Mira’s violated privacy, and the black market in medicine bottles.

In Garh Narikel, the third copy was safe in the hollow of the pipal. But even the dead cannot be entirely at ease merely because they are dead. The witches of Channa Grove decided to keep watch night after night. Hulasi asked, “What if someone comes to open this hollow?”

Budhba Ghost replied, “Then first he must tell his own name. One who can speak his own name truthfully may open it. If he gives a false name, the roots of the pipal will seize his feet.”

Loth, who was becoming less a spectator and more a player, sat at the mouth of the hollow. His body was made from the surviving memory of a corpse; therefore he could guard evidence well. A person who dishonours the body is afraid of the memory of the dead.

The data had travelled in three directions. But there was a fourth direction too—the dark web. Ishan Datt spoke of that direction last of all.

“The dark web is not merely the home of criminals,” Ishan said. “It is a lane of darkness where criminals hide, but sometimes truth too hides there in order to survive. I will not write down or explain the methods of crime. I want only this much: if every light is extinguished, one soot-blackened lamp should still keep burning in the darkness.”

Gop said softly, “So not public?”

“Public when the time comes,” Ishan said. “First let the evidence go to the court, to the question asked abroad, and to folk memory. The copy kept in darkness will rise only on the day every light has been sold.”

Saumya breathed in relief. “Good. We will not write out the criminal’s road. Only the existence of the truth.”

Mrinalini added, “Anything that wounds privacy must also have limits on its publication. No name without consent. The victim’s dignity comes first.”

Devika said, “But Ujjwal’s name will remain. He would have wanted his death to become not merely a family’s shame but a public warning.”

Gop agreed. Thus the dark-web copy was made, but like a locked chest. Its key was divided among three places—Gop's memory, Ishan's shadowless body, and the fourth face of the Brahma of the pipal.

Elsewhere, Batuknath Hariharan was restless. His nights were not usually long; people who have taken money sleep well. But that night, in his dream, water filled the courtroom floor. He climbed onto a chair, but the chair turned into a crocodile's back.

In the dream Chandrapal Batra was telling him, "Procedure will save us." Hariharan asked, "Whom?" Batra laughed. "Whoever pays the fee." Then a voice rose from within the water: "And the one who gives a name?"

Hariharan woke with a start. His phone was glowing. A message from Raghav Signal read: "Three copies out. Source unclear. Mehta may have one."

Hariharan's mouth went dry. He summoned Chandrapal Batra at once. Batra arrived saying, "Nothing to fear. Whatever evidence there is, we will sink it in procedure."

Hariharan snapped, "Procedure sinks paper. But this paper is floating on water. Don't you understand?"

For the first time Batra fell silent. A criminal becomes afraid on the day he feels that the one before him is not the police but the dead. One can bargain with the police, not with the dead.

Just then the smaller phone lit up. A message came from Lau Kin-Hung: "Stop the names. Keep the money moving."

Hariharan said quietly, "These people do not understand that in India it is not difficult to stop money; it is difficult to stop a name. Once a name becomes a folk song, no order can stop it."

Chandrapal laughed scornfully. "Folk song? I carry out digital arrests, and I should fear a folk song?"

At that instant Ujjwal Jha's photograph appeared on his phone. There was no source. It was the same photograph Devika had placed on the table. Batra's hand trembled.

"Who sent it?" Hariharan asked.

Batra did not answer. Beneath the photograph a line appeared on the screen: "Not a debt—a push."

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta was about to call his secretary. Then he stopped. This decision could not be made over a telephone. He closed the file, put the damp page in his pocket, and took out his private diary.

In the diary he wrote: "The government's case and the soul of the State. If the two diverge, which side must a lawyer stand on?"

After that line the pen rested for a long time—as though the pen itself knew that the next word would change a life. Then he wrote a second line: "Garh Narikel."

In America, Ira Aruni was writing her question. She wrote ten pages, then tore them up. Five pages, then tore those up too. At last one line remained: "Dr Broom, where in your theory of dignity is the place of the unrecorded dead worker?"

Behind the question was a list of attached documents. She did not want the question to be emotional. An emotional question can be laughed away from a stage. A documentary question dries the saliva in the mouth.

At dawn Gop Kumar, exhausted, dozed in his chair. In his dream he reached Garh Narikel. The ghosts were playing kabaddi in Channa Grove. But this time the ball was no ball at all; it was a small device. The ghosts passed it among themselves while the crocodiles watched from outside the field with open mouths.

Budhba Ghost told him in the dream, "Data is not a body, but it will go to avenge bodies. Do not make it fast; make it durable."

Gop awoke. His eyes were tired, but his resolve was clear—the kind of clarity that comes when something long blurred suddenly shines. With every file he attached a list: the victim's dignity, the category of the crime, the limits of public disclosure, the material to be given to the court, and the part that would open only to a trusted researcher or by judicial order.

Saumya read it and said, "Now this is no longer a document. It has become living testimony."

Ishan Datt had returned to the doorway. He said, "Now the next move is theirs. Hariharan will set procedure in motion. Batra will spread fear. Raghav Signal will try to cut away the shadows. Lau Kin-Hung will try to buy names. But three directions have opened."

Mrinalini asked, "And the fourth direction?"

Ishan smiled faintly. "A coconut leaf is growing in the darkness."

That evening in Garh Narikel something strange happened upon the leaves of the pipal. The veins of the leaves began joining one another to form a map: the Kamala-Balan, the Ganga bridge, the Delhi court, the Harvard auditorium, the glass palace in Hong Kong, and a poor house in the village where Ujjwal's mother still cleaned his room.

All four faces of Brahma spoke at once: “The story has not gone out of the village now. The world has come inside the village.”

Night returned to Channa Grove. Kabaddi began. The first call was Budhba Ghost’s: “Kabaddi.” The second, Hulasi’s: “Name.” The third, Loth’s: “Evidence.” The fourth, the drowned spirit’s: “Dignity.”

Then the device placed in the hollow of the pipal flashed once. Its light was not blue but green—like a coconut leaf.

In that green light the names of the dead workers, Ujjwal’s unfinished message, Mrinalini’s testimony, Devika’s tears, Gop’s fear, Saumya’s caution, Ramayya’s silence, Ishan’s shadowlessness, Mehta’s shame, and Ira’s question all came, for one instant, into a single line.

Budhba Ghost said softly, “Truth is no longer only on paper. Now it is on the road.”

Far away, the black river kept flowing. But for the first time a coconut leaf floated upon it and did not sink.

FOLK SONG: THE LEAF UPON THE DARK WEB

Folk tune: Batgabani

Row slowly, row the leaf-boat slowly,
Guard the lamp of names and cross the dark web.
On the road through the black web the leaf became a boat;
Guard the lamp of names and row slowly on.
Protect the truth; carry dignity beside it;
Reveal only as much evidence as justice requires.
The worker, Ujjwal, Mrinalini, Devika’s tears—
All their dawns joined in a single green line.
The world entered the village without a sound;
The hollow of the pipal awoke, the coconut leaf spoke.
The dark river is deep and the road unknown;
The leaf will not sink while a name goes with it.
Reveal only as much evidence as justice needs;
Keep dignity beside you and light the wick of truth.
Ujjwal, Mrinalini, Devika’s tears gathered in one place;
Within the green line joined the salutation of every dawn.



CHAPTER 13

The Sealed Cover

The brighter the seal shines, the denser the darkness inside the cover.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DAWN WILL BREAK THE SEAL

Folk tune: hopeful strain of a plaintive Sama-Daun

*Open, O dawn, open the knot of the seal,
Give a voice to the breath bound inside the cover.*

*Inside the sealed cover, breath waits for its turn;
The rule of dawn says: let the proper hand open it gently.
Let the seal be for protection, not for burying truth;
Let confidentiality guard dignity, not become soil for crime.*

*The water-mark on the courtroom floor will show the way;
The oral memory of a small village will preserve every name.
Dawn will open the seal when procedure becomes clear;
The truth within the cover will find a seat before justice.*

*Even the mournful Sama-Daun sings a strain of hope;
A ray of light finds its road even into a sealed chamber.
Let the proper hand open it gently; let truth not be suppressed;
Let secrecy cover dignity alone, never conceal the crime.*



“The brighter the seal shines, the denser the darkness inside the cover.”

After that night, when the coconut leaf floated over the black river without sinking, no one in Channa Grove slept well. The dead have no need of sleep, yet waiting can tire even their bones. Budhba Ghost remained seated upon his old branch, but his eyes were watching a courtroom corridor. Hulasi did not go to the well; she kept combing the drowned spirit's hair as though loosening the knots of a long legal argument.

From his four faces the Brahma of the pipal kept repeating not four different things but one thing in four ways: "Once a name reaches the chamber, half its water-burial is broken."

Loth sat at the mouth of the hollow. The smell of his incomplete cremation mingled that night with the smell of paper. He watched the memory device inside the pipal cast a faint green light. At times the footing of the bridge appeared in it, at times a hospital bed, at times Ujjwal's closed room, at times Mrinalini's torn privacy, at times the high ceiling of the court.

Budhba Ghost said softly, "Tomorrow is the hearing date."

Hulasi did not laugh. "A date? Humans make dates so that the blood of a day may be washed away."

"This time the date will not be washed clean," said Brahma's first face. "This time the date will release water."

In Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta rose at dawn. Everyone at home was asleep. He went alone to his study. Three things lay upon the table: the government affidavit, Gop Kumar's list of truth, and a copy of Nand Aruni's old application. The third paper had yellowed, but the words on it looked red like fresh wounds: "The number of workers who fell does not match the official account."

Mehta read the government affidavit slowly, as a doctor might examine a complicated wound. Its language was excellent, its grammar flawless, its legal sequence complete. Yet death was absent from that language. Everything in the affidavit was correct except the truth.

He opened Gop's list. On the first page were the thirty declared names. On the second began the undeclared. On the third were those whose families had been marked "unavailable." On the fourth were workers who had never existed in the register, though their wages had been drawn in the company's bills. On the fifth were young men dead through digital fraud. On the sixth, the pretext of medicine purchases. On the seventh, accounts that bore the names of rivers.

Satyavrat Mehta leaned back in his chair. It seemed to him that all the pages of his law books had suddenly become fish, flapping for breath. The law was not dead; but keeping it alive required someone's courage.

He took out not his computer but his old typewriter—the machine he had not touched in years, yet whose every blow remained familiar. What is written on a computer can be changed in an instant; the blow of a typewriter bites into paper. He typed a short note: "While appearing on behalf of the State, I am compelled to draw the Court's attention to the fact that the record placed before it is incomplete."

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. Then he looked at his face in the mirror. For the first time he saw not a government lawyer but a frightened human being. He bowed to that frightened man. Fear is the soul's last warning.

At Batuknath Hariharan's house, even the morning tea resembled a court file—cream on top, bitterness underneath. Hariharan had slept badly. His dream kept returning to the same water in which his shoes had sunk. More than the dead, he feared losing his faith in procedure. A man who sells procedure knows that if true procedure wakes up, his shop must close.

Chandrapal Batra reached him at dawn. There was no sleep in his eyes and five messages on his phone. Raghav "Signal" Somani's mark was visible, but the messages were brief: "List circulating." "Mehta uncertain." "Copy with Ira." "Silence Devika." "Keep away from media."

Hariharan set down his cup of tea. "Silence them? Is it so simple? One whose brother died on a screen, one whose village drowned in the river, one whose love was stolen, one whose father was erased from a file—you will silence them all? Is this your gambling den or a court?"

Batra said harshly, "A court too can become a den if the cards of procedure are shuffled correctly."

Hariharan looked at him as though seeing his cheap intelligence for the first time. "You think rules are cards. Sometimes rules become scripture. If Mehta speaks today, it will not be cards but fire."

Batra laughed. "Mehta is the government's man."

"Sometimes the soul of the State wakes inside a government man," Hariharan said through clenched teeth. "Fear that."

By ten o'clock the court corridors were full. Lawyers in black coats moved like crows descending upon a field before rain. One carried a thick file, another wore manufactured concern, another had the shine of fees in his eyes. Journalists were there too, but their eyes searched for headlines, not history.

Gop Kumar stood in a corner of the corridor. He carried no file, only a small sheet on which the victims' names were written in order. He feared that if the court asked him for a number he would answer; but if it asked for a name, his throat would close. Numbers are easy to speak; names are heavy.

Saumya Ramanathan stood beside him. With a blue pencil she had marked every document: public, restricted, sealed, victim's consent required. Above all, she was determined that truth must not become a pretext for humiliating the victim again.

Mrinalini Arya sat in silence. She carried no slogan. Her testimony was heavy enough by itself. Devika Sah kept Ujjwal's photograph not in a file but in the fold of her sari. Paper can be lost; a face kept in the fold cannot.

Ishan Datt did not enter the courtroom. He stood in the veranda because the government record declared him dead. If he went inside, the law would first debate his existence and only afterwards the truth. He smiled. "The dead enter by another road."

In Courtroom Number Five the matter was called. Its title was long—Families of Workers and Others versus State and Others. But in Channa Grove the call reached in a shorter form: "Names and Crocodiles."

The bench entered. Everyone stood. Batuknath Hariharan advanced with his heavy gait. Chandrapal Batra beside him carried a bundle of papers. There was less argument than confusion in that bundle. Satyavrat Mehta stood at the other table. His face was tired, but his eyes were clear.

In his very first sentence Hariharan opened the art of prolonging a case. "My Lords, the maintainability of the petition, limitation, locus of the parties, privacy, national security, contractual arbitration, and official secrecy must all be determined first."

The judge looked over his spectacles. "You have closed seven doors in a single breath, Mr Hariharan."

Hariharan gave a courteous smile. "For the convenience of the Court."

Saumya whispered in Gop's ear, "Not convenience. A swamp."

Satyavrat Mehta rose. The air in the courtroom changed. Usually when a government lawyer stands, the victim's body contracts; this time Devika's hand remained steady on the fold of her sari.

Mehta said, "My Lords, the State wishes at the outset to clarify certain facts."

Hariharan sprang up. "My Lords, the State's affidavit is already on record. I respectfully submit that the State should stand by it."

Mehta did not look at him. "If the State stands by an incomplete record, it stands not on the record but on untruth."

A stir ran through the courtroom. Black coats shifted. Journalists' pens began moving. For the first time Chandrapal Batra sat straight in his chair.

The judge asked slowly, "Mr Mehta, do you wish to amend your affidavit?"

“Not amend it, My Lords,” Mehta replied. “Complete it.”

He took the paper from his pocket. “Material has come into my possession which, *prima facie*, indicates serious discrepancies in the bridge project’s death count, compensation records, safety inspections, and subsequent financial flows. The State asks this Court not for time but for protection—protection of records, protection of witnesses, and protection of the victims’ dignity.”

Hariharan said with sarcasm, “My Lords, this is politics.”

Mehta remained calm. “If the names of dead workers are politics, then the Preamble to the Constitution is politics too.”

The sentence did not fall in the courtroom; it stood upright, as though an invisible person had stepped into the middle of the room.

The judge said, “Place the material in a sealed cover.”

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta stopped. The battle within him awoke again. A sealed cover can protect, and at times it can also become a tomb for truth. He said quietly, “My Lords, let sensitive names and private details remain separately sealed. But the declared and undeclared lists of the dead, the fundamental discrepancies in payment, and the directions for preserving records should remain open. If truth is kept in total darkness, it passes again into the hands of those from whom it is being protected.”

Silence returned. Hariharan’s face reddened. Chandrapal Batra looked at his phone; the screen was black. He was accustomed to a message from Raghav whenever a crisis arose. This time the black screen showed only his own face.

The bench conferred for a few moments. At that same moment the kabaddi in Channa Grove stopped. The ghosts held their breath. The dead have no breath, but history does.

The judge said, “Very well. Sensitive private details shall remain sealed. The preliminary list of names, the status of deaths, and material relating to preservation of records shall be supplied to the opposite parties. The State shall not destroy any records. Notice shall issue to the relevant department, the contractor, and the payment banks. An early next date.”

At the word “early,” Devika heard Ujjwal’s laughter in her ears. In India, even “early” can sometimes mean years. Yet today the word felt lighter than the old dates.

Then Mehta made one more request. “My Lords, may the names of the dead be read?”

Hariharan leapt up. “My Lords, this is emotional theatre.”

"No," Mehta said. "It is the first act of correcting the record. Many names are missing from the official pages. Let them be heard once in court, so that they are no longer absent."

The judge remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "Read the first list. The full list on the next day. Today it is not to be symbolic, but an initial reading."

Gop Kumar's hands trembled—the fatigue of many years, many sleepless nights, and the weight of many names descended into his fingers at once. Saumya handed him the list. Mehta took it. The first thirty names—the ones the government acknowledged. He read them. The courtroom listened.

Then he paused. He opened the second page. "The State's record is silent regarding the deaths or disappearance of these persons."

At the first name, the courtroom fan slowed. At the second, mist gathered on the window glass. At the third, the photograph of Ujjwal in Devika's sari fold grew damp. At the fourth, Hariharan moved his shoe—there was a thin film of water beneath it.

No one said anything. The names kept circling through the room. They were human names, yet they sounded as though stones flung into the Ganga long ago were only now making their sound—splash, splash, splash.

In Channa Grove, Hulasi did not weep; a ghost's tears become black dew. The dew gathered on the leaves. Budhba Ghost kept count of the names. For the first time Loth crossed the kabaddi line and came into the middle of the field. He said nothing, but everyone understood: "Read mine too."

At the fifteenth name Mehta stopped. His throat closed. The judge gestured for water. Mehta could not drink. He feared the water might be from that same river.

Gop Kumar rose slowly. "My Lords, if permitted, I can read the remaining names from the research list."

Hariharan stood again, but this time his voice was weaker. "This man is not a party."

Devika Sah rose. "I am a party, My Lords. My brother's name is on that list. Not in the river—on a screen. But the death is connected to the same account. If he can read them, let him read."

The judge looked at Gop. "Names only. No comment."

Gop lifted the list. His voice trembled at first and then steadied. He read name after name. After every name came a short pause. The pause was like a funeral rite.

Chandrapal Batra gripped his phone. At that moment the screen lit. It was not a message from Lau Kin-Hung. It was not Ujjwal's photograph. Only one word: "Name." Sweat broke across Batra's forehead.

When the reading ended there was no applause in the courtroom—only a silence heavier than anything words could make. Applause is not heard in a court. Yet that day's silence echoed like applause.

The bench began dictating the order. Records to be preserved. Immediate hearing of any threat to witnesses. Victims' private information sealed. Preliminary copies to both petitioners and State. Independent audit to be considered on the next date.

Hariharan listened to every word. He understood this was not defeat, but it was the first crack. Air enters through a crack; air feeds a lamp; a lamp reveals shadows.

Batra whispered, "We'll take it upstairs."

Hariharan murmured, "First turn off your phone."

Outside in the veranda, Ishan Datt stood. No one saw him, but he heard everything. When Gop came out, Ishan looked at him. "Were the names read?"

Gop nodded.

"Then the first water-burial has broken," Ishan said.

"Justice has not been obtained," Saumya said cautiously.

Ishan replied, "Justice is on the far bank of the river. A name is the boat. Today the boat entered the water."

Devika took Ujjwal's photograph from the fold of her sari. It was dry, but a line of salt had gathered along one corner. She asked, "Will his name come on the next list?"

"Yes," Saumya said. "But the permission is yours."

Devika looked at the photograph. "He was my brother. But his death was not alone. Let his name remain."

Mrinalini silently took her hand. Grief has no caste, but grief has companionship.

That evening at Harvard, Ira Aruni sat in the front row of the auditorium. Edward Broom was coming onto the stage. Behind him the title glowed on the screen: "Global Enterprise and Human Dignity." Ira held the same question in her lap. A message arrived on her phone from Delhi: "Names read in court."

Ira closed her eyes. She felt as though kabaddi had begun far away in Channa Grove. She listened. Beneath the applause of the auditorium came another sound: “Name, evidence, dignity.”

Night descended over Garh Narikel. The game began again in Channa Grove. This time the rule changed. Whoever was caught had to speak not his own name but the name of someone forgotten. The ghosts took turns calling those names. The water-buried spirits tangled in the drowned woman’s hair began to grow lighter.

The memory device in the pipal hollow flashed once. Brahma’s fourth face smiled. “The sealed cover is half open. The other half will be opened by people’s courage.”

Budhba Ghost looked down from his branch. “Next time the Ganga will speak in a foreign auditorium.”

Far away in a glass palace in Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung watched a digital map on his wall. A tiny point in India was glowing green—Garh Narikel. He had never noticed the point before. He asked an assistant, “What is that?”

“A very small village,” the assistant said.

Lau Kin-Hung stared for a long time. For the first time he understood that small villages are the most dangerous because names live there by word of mouth.

He ordered the map shut down. But the green point continued to flicker on the darkened screen.

The courtroom was empty now. A cleaner was wiping the floor. Her cloth caught at one spot. She bent down and saw a small water-mark on the floor, curved like a crocodile’s tooth. She thought perhaps a pipe had leaked.

But the mark did not dry. Until dawn a name kept glimmering inside it.

FOLK SONG: THE WAIL WITHIN THE SEAL

Folk tune: plaintive Sama-Daun

The seal will split, O it will split at a mother’s cry;
 From the sealed darkness the voice of truth will come out.
 A sealed envelope—whose groan is inside?
 Outside the seal shines; within lies dense darkness.
 A small water-mark upon the courtroom floor
 Did not dry till dawn; it wrote the fate of the dead.

The distant rich man laughed, calling it a tiny village;
There, by word of mouth, every name lives on.
The sweeper-woman saw a curved mark like a tooth;
Within that stain flickered a worker's life.
However heavy the seal, truth will remain beyond it;
A mother's cry will tear the sealed cover open.
The envelope shone outside; within lay a dense lament;
It did not dry till dawn—the dead man's fate was written there,
And in the sweeper-woman's eyes that mark flashed bright.



CHAPTER 14

The Road Home

When a name returns home, even the soil wakes from its sleep.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE ROAD HOME IS LIT

Folk tune: homecoming song

Come home, traveller; a lamp burns at the threshold,

Your mother's sari-shadow waits along your road.

*Footsteps sound through the mist; the threshold lamp burns,
A name steps out of paper and turns toward its own courtyard.
Gamchha, gravel, and Ganga sand become signs along the road;
A mother's tears are not tears now, but water of blessing.*

*If the tree dies, the seed remains; the road home is never lost;
Memory, love, and evidence together hold the returning one.
Let the road home stay bright for every forgotten name;
At the threshold let each be met with honour—that is our salutation.*

*Through the mist, gamchha, gravel, and Ganga sand leave their
signs;*

*At every step they say: your own courtyard is near.
If the tree falls, the seed survives; the road will not be lost;
Not tears, but water of blessing will be scattered at the threshold.*



“When a name returns home, even the soil wakes from its sleep.”

“When a name comes home, the earth too awakens.”

When people came out of the courtroom, there had been no rain in the veranda, yet the soles of everyone's shoes were wet. Someone said an air-conditioner pipe must have burst. Someone else said it was an old building and seepage was common. But when Aruni bent down and looked at the edge of his shoe, he understood that this was not the building's water. It carried a strange smell—cement, gravel, Ganga sand, and a gamchha soaked with sweat. It was the same smell that came out when the yellowed papers in Nand Aruni's old trunk were opened.

Satyavrat Mehta came out last of all. He carried a government file, but the file no longer seemed to be in his hand; rather, his hand seemed caught by it. The silence that had spread through the courtroom after the sealed cover was opened still clung to his forehead. A government car waited before him. The driver opened the door. Satyavrat looked once inside—the soft seat, dark glass, sunshade—everything comfortable and, for that very reason, unbearable at that moment. He said quietly, “I will walk.”

At the other end of the veranda, Batuknath Hariharan was distributing smiles among the journalists. His smile did not seem to get wet. He was saying, “Procedure will take its own course. Emotion and justice are separate things.” Whenever he said “procedure,” every hair of his beard gleamed like the fire on the bodies of the Rakash spirits in Channa Grove. Chandrapal Batra stood beside him with his phone screen tilted down. Only two words glowed there: “Clean house.” Which house the message meant—Delhi, Hong Kong, or Garh Narikel—Chandrapal could not tell.

Gop Kumar caught a glimpse of the message. He said nothing. Gop’s speech now belonged more to night than to day. A person who sees blood inside paper does not raise an alarm at once; first he watches to see which way the blood is flowing. Saumya Ramanathan stood beside him. Her notebook was not wet, but its pages had curled. Saumya said, “Perhaps the first day of truth is always damp in this city.” Gop answered, “No. This is not the city’s water. This is an order to return to Garh Narikel.”

That evening, when Aruni returned to his Delhi home, his daughter Ananya asked the moment she saw him, “Did ghosts come to court?” Aruni did not laugh. Something within him had become still, like a clock that had been running for a very long time and had suddenly stopped. Earlier, when his daughter had seen a huge photograph of a Chief Minister and asked, “Has he died?” he had laughed. Now he understood that a child’s questions are often doors into the future. He said, “Not ghosts. Names came.” Ananya asked, “Can names walk?” Ba was sitting nearby on the cot, propped against a pillow. She said, “Names walk after leaving their feet behind, little one. Feet stay on the earth; names travel in the air.”

That night it was decided that everyone would go to Garh Narikel. The court’s next date was fifteen days away. The lawyers would say they had to prepare. Batuknath would say procedure would continue. Chandrapal would change his accounts. Lau Kin-Hung in Hong Kong would open a company under a new name. But during those fifteen days the soil of Garh Narikel wanted to see them all again. Ba said, “Without soil, paper is blind.”

Not by car—by train. Aruni insisted. To fly down and take a taxi to the village would make the story too short. A train has windows; beyond

them flow fields, dry ponds, station tea, half-sleeping children, and old smells tied inside bags. As Delhi receded behind the night train, Ananya sat by the window looking at her face in the darkness. Behind her face was Aruni's, behind his Ba's, behind hers Nand's, and farther behind them the faces of countless people travelling not with tickets but by water-burial.

Saumya did not go to another compartment. She sat beside Ba and, listening to stories of the Kamala-Balan's current, closed her notebook. For the first time she stopped writing and began simply to listen. Ba said, "The Balan is quiet, but people understand quiet rivers less. The Kamala cuts banks, so people take its name. The crimes of quiet people too move silently. The contractor who smiles, the lawyer who bows, the minister who remains silent—all are like the Balan." Saumya thought how much sociology was hidden in this old woman's language, though Ba did not know the word "sociology." People like her read history in the village without books.

When the first light of dawn struck the carriage window, Ira Aruni met them at the station. She had come from abroad—with a booklet from the Harvard auditorium in her bag, a printed copy of Edward Broom's speech, and a weariness inside her. Once she had understood Garh Narikel as a family story; now she understood that a family story can sometimes be a wound on the map of the world. She moved to touch Aruni's feet, then stopped in hesitation. Ba placed her hand upon Ira's head. "You are a child from abroad, but the head is still of this house." Ira trembled at the touch. She had shaken many hands at Harvard; this was the first hand ever laid upon her head.

Nishant too was at the station. His face was that of a man who first takes pride in the shine of his salary and later understands that the shine may have come from extinguishing someone else's hearth. Taking Gop aside, he said, "I found three layers in the payment gateway. Money from the gaming app went first to Jaipur, then Gurugram, then Singapore, then Hong Kong. But there is one older account belonging to the same group that was used during the bridge project." Gop stopped him. "Do not speak loudly in this village yet. Even the leaves listen here." Nishant looked around. Beside the station a dry coconut leaf actually moved. There was no wind at the time.

By the time they reached Garh Narikel it was afternoon. At first glance the village was ordinary—mud-and-brick houses, shade of trees, cattle tied at doorways, the distant motor of a pump set, and dogs drowsing in the sun. But when Aruni reached the first coconut tree by the courtyard, he felt the village watching him. The leaves were absolutely still. Ananya asked, "Where are this tree's eyes?" Ba said, "Wherever it has a leaf, there is an eye."

Inside the house the old trunk was opened. Nand Aruni's files, which until now had lived as court copies and in Gop's digital version, came out again in their original smell. On one sheet was Nand's handwriting: "The list of the dead is incomplete." On another: "The contractor's safety register is false." On a third: "Beyond the thirty names." Aruni placed the papers on the floor. The letters on them began to tremble. Ira stepped back in fear. Ba said, "Do not be afraid. The soil recognises names."

By evening word had spread through the village that several people had come from Delhi. Devika Sah arrived carrying a small photograph of her brother Ujjwal. Munna Paswan came too; Chandrapal Batra's network had turned his bank account into a mule account. Munna's eyes still remained lowered like a criminal's, though his only crime had been poverty. Devika placed the photograph on the ground and said, "He did not drown in the river. He drowned in a phone. But drowning is still drowning." From the direction of Channa Grove came a low laugh—not mockery, not pity—as though Budhba Ghost were learning the name of a new kind of death.

Mrinalini, known in the city as Mira, arrived before nightfall. Her face was firm. She handed Saumya copies of her private images, messages, and threats. She said, "These are not my shame; they are their crime. But in court they will question my life first and their accounts afterwards." Ba watched her. Many people in the village would not understand the woman's story, but Ba did. She said softly, "The hand that turns love into a weapon is the dirtiest hand of all." For the first time Mira began to cry—tears held back for years, now released by a single sentence from Ba. Her sobbing was quiet, yet it shone like drops of dew on coconut leaves.

There was no announced meeting that night. In Garh Narikel such things were not proclaimed. People slowly gathered at doorways, in courtyards, beside the tulsi altar, under the shade of the pipal. No platform. No microphone. Only one lantern and faces around it. Gop Kumar did not open the file. First he touched the soil. Then he said, "These papers are evidence in Delhi. Here they are funeral offerings. The name that is absent from paper will be placed upon the soil today."

Ishan Datt arrived then. No one saw him coming. Suddenly he emerged from the darkness around the pipal. His body still cast no shadow. Ananya looked at him and asked, "Why is there no darkness behind you?" Ishan smiled. "They killed me on paper, little one. The shadow of a person who dies on paper remains in a government warehouse." The child was satisfied by the answer, as children are satisfied only by impossible answers.

Ishan took out three bundles. In the first was the list of workers. In the second, the list of digital frauds—the names of young men like Ujjwal, mule accounts, false arrest threats, fee receipts from Batuknath Hariharan's office. In the third, the foreign money trail—Edward

Broom's group, Lau Kin-Hung's accounts, Raghav Signal's messages, Chandrapal Batra's legal screen. Ishan said, "These are not files. They are the bones of names."

"Bones are given to water," Ba said. Gop replied, "This time not to water—to the roots of a tree." A small spade was brought beneath the coconut tree by the courtyard. The earth was dug. A copy of Nand's file, a copy of the workers' names, Ujjwal's photograph, a copy of the threats against Mira, a copy of Munna's account, and a copy of Satyavrat Mehta's statement in court were each placed in separate brass boxes and buried by the roots. This was not worship. It was the planting of testimony.

As the soil was being filled back, kabaddi began far away in Channa Grove. This time the voices were clear. Between calls of "kabaddi," names could be heard. First one—"Sarayu." Then another—"Nagina." Then—"Ujjwal." Then—"Hulasi." Then names no one could write down because they formed only in water and broke apart. Ananya covered both ears with her hands and then removed them. She was not afraid; she was listening closely, as though attendance were being called in school.

Satyavrat Mehta could not come to Garh Narikel that night, but his message arrived. Not on paper, not on a mobile phone, not under a court seal. It came by word of mouth through an old friend: "Keep the names safe. On the next date, procedure will try to stop the truth." Batuknath Hariharan's men were also seen near the village—two motorcycles, a white car, and strangers chewing betel at the crossroads. Yet none of them stepped inside Channa Grove. The village had a saying: whoever enters Channa Grove carrying a lie finds black ants climbing upon his tongue.

At midnight Aruni woke to a sound. Something had fallen from the coconut tree by the courtyard. He came outside. The moon was half, but the tree's shadow was whole. The earth near the roots had cracked slightly. From the crack came not water but a faint blue light. Gop, Saumya, Ira, Nishant, Mira, Devika—everyone was awakened. Ba was already awake. She said, "The tree is reading the names."

The light remained for a while. Letters formed and broke apart within it. No one had the courage to lift a camera. Nishant tried to take out his phone, but his hand froze. Ira slowly drew out the Harvard booklet whose cover bore Edward Broom's smiling face. She placed it near the light. The face on the cover gradually blurred, and in its place appeared a worker's palm—split by cement, gravel lodged beneath the nails.

Aruni understood that returning home did not mean merely the return of people—it was a deep, slow, unbroken process whose end was still far away. Paper had come home. Names had come home. The dead who had disappeared into rivers, screens, medicine shops, court dates, and

speeches in foreign auditoriums were each searching for their own threshold. That night Garh Narikel ceased to be only a village; it became a vast ear listening to every voice rising from beneath the earth.

At dawn there was no dew on the coconut leaves, but minute letters. No one could read them, yet everyone knew they were names. Ba forbade anyone to pluck a leaf. "If a name is written on a leaf, it will live not for the age of the leaf but for the age of the tree." Ananya asked, "And if the tree dies?" Ba said, "Then the seed will remain." Gop Kumar heard the sentence and fell silent.

Far away in a guesthouse in the district town, Batuknath Hariharan writhed in sleep. In his dream there was no courtroom floor, only Channa Grove. He tried to play kabaddi, but whenever he attempted to say "kabaddi," the word that came from his mouth was "date." The ghosts laughed. Chandrapal Batra stared at his phone. A new message arrived on Signal: "Erase the names." He began typing, "From the papers?" The answer came: "Wherever they are." Chandrapal looked out of the window. In the darkness a coconut leaf was moving. His own name shone upon it.

When the first bird called at dawn, no one in Garh Narikel heard it as an ordinary bird. Its call sounded like an announcement. The court's next date was no longer merely a date. It was now the day on which the village leaves, the names of the dead, the testimony of the living, and Satyavrat Mehta's trembling but upright hand would come into a single line. Aruni stood at the doorway and looked out—a thin mist was rising from the direction of the Kamala-Balan. Within the mist many figures were walking. They were coming toward the village. He understood that the return home was not yet complete; the true return would occur when those who were marked "absent" on paper were declared present in court.

FOLK SONG: THE NAMES HAVE COME HOME

Folk tune: homecoming folk tune

Come, child, the lamp at the threshold is awake;
 If the tree dies, the seed will remain—Ba's words have taken hold.
 Footsteps sound in the mist; who comes to our door?
 The child marked absent on paper comes home this time.
 The smell of gamchha, gravel, and Ganga sand rises from the road;
 The threshold wakes, the soil speaks, the old leaves stir.
 If the tree dies, the seed will remain, Ba said softly;
 A name does not die, child; it lives on after the body.

Far away the court trembles; the deceiver loses sleep;
His name too is written on a leaf—the court has opened.
Come, child, the lamp still burns at the threshold;
Along the road home a mother's tears are spread.
Footsteps in the mist—who is coming to our door?
Marked “absent” on paper, they return home in a living spring.
The moment a name was written on a leaf, the closed gate opened.



CHAPTER 15

The Water of Names

No seal can erase a name that has learned to endure upon water.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE WATER OF NAMES,
IMMORTAL NECTAR**

Folk tune: boatman's dawn-song

*Cup your hands, fill them with the water of names,
Drop by drop, carry its nectar from throat to throat.*

*A name written on water travels far with the waves;
It does not vanish: drop by drop it enters a new throat.
A crocodile may chew the body, but never the savour of a name;
The river keeps every truth in the depth of its memory.*

*The water of names becomes nectar, quenching thirst from house to
house;*

*It lays a green colour upon the dry pages of history.
Hold one drop in your palm and speak the name with honour;
Through the water of names, a people's identity will live.*

*Letters written on a wave travel onward with the wave;
They do not disappear, but sink deep into the river's mind.
The crocodile may take the body, but it cannot taste the name;
At the first note of the dawn-song, identity wakes again.*



"No seal can erase a name that has learned to endure upon water."

*"When a name has learned to live upon water, even the soil does not
forget it."*

On the morning of the next hearing, Delhi's sky was so blue that it seemed the night had tried, and failed, to wash away its crimes. Sunlight had not yet descended upon the old courthouse walls; smoke had. Some would have called it the city's dust, others the humidity of June. But when

Satyavrat Mehta stepped from his car and walked toward the courtroom, he felt that this smoke rose not from the hearths of Garh Narikel but from within the bodies that had gone to their water-burial.

That day he had not brought the government's black briefcase. In his hand was an old cloth bag without a mark upon it. It had reached him during the night from Garh Narikel. When he opened it, there was no paper inside, only a dried coconut leaf. Minute letters covered the leaf - the names of those absent from the government list, absent from the court file, yet glowing all night in the soil of the village.

Satyavrat took the leaf in his hands not like an exhibit but like an offering - with both hands, as though lifting a ritual plate. His aide said nervously, "Sir, how can this be filed in court?" Mehta replied, "What cannot be filed is often what matters most. Paper is only a copy. The original was the lives of those people."

Meanwhile, from dawn onward in Garh Narikel, the kabaddi in Channa Grove had stopped. The ghosts sat along the two edges of the field. For the first time Budhba Ghost had descended from his branch and stood one finger's breadth above the earth. Hulasi the drowned spirit wrung drops of water from her long hair. The Rakash lights had dimmed, as though preparing to send more illumination into the courtroom. Loth, always a spectator, stood that day upon the line. Today he had to play.

Ba sat on a mat at the doorway, Ananya in her lap. Gop Kumar, Saumya Ramanathan, Ira, Nishant, Devika, Munna, Mrinalini - not everyone could go to Delhi. Some were in court, some in the village. Ishan Datt was in both places. A man already dead on government paper is under no obligation to remain in only one place.

Courtroom Number Five filled completely. Journalists, lawyers, victims' families, government officers, Chandrapal Batra's people, disciples of Batuknath Hariharan, and a few faces of the kind that are always present in a crowd but never leave a name - all were there. Outside in the corridor people said an order would come today. Those sitting inside knew that today it was not an order but the fate of names that would be decided.

Batuknath Hariharan was especially well turned out that day. His black coat had been freshly pressed, his beard oiled, a heavy file in his hand. He told his juniors, "Today we turn emotion into procedure." He trusted procedure as a marsh in which the feet of truth, if not on the first step, would sink on the second.

Chandrapal Batra sat staring at his phone screen. Messages from Raghav Signal had arrived all night: "Remove the names." "Raise the victims' privacy." "Put the blame for the mule accounts on the poor." "Hariharan will handle it." But since dawn the signal had gone silent. Lau

Kin-Hung's indication from Hong Kong had stopped. For the first time Batra understood that the most terrifying thing in a criminal network is silence.

The bench took its seat. Everyone stood. At that exact moment every leaf of the pipal in Garh Narikel moved together. There was no wind. The movement sounded like a judge's gavel - soft, but final.

Looking at the file, the judge asked, "Compliance with the previous order?" The state officer rose, but Satyavrat Mehta stopped him with a gesture and stood himself. "My Lord, the State submits its records, with one request: to allow what was absent from those records to remain absent would itself be an insult to this Court."

Hariharan was on his feet at once. "My Lord, the State is again resorting to emotional language. This matter concerns complex contracts, foreign investment, government policy, pandemic-era procurement, and national security. Recitations of names, folktales, leaves from a village - none of these have a place in judicial method."

Without looking at him, Mehta said, "This matter concerns life. Contracts come after life. Investment after life. Policy after life. Even national security is not something that comes after the citizen's life; it exists because of that life."

A faint murmur passed through the courtroom. The judge looked toward Mehta. "What do you wish to place before the Court?"

Mehta opened the cloth bag. The coconut leaf emerged. Hariharan laughed aloud. "My Lord, are leaves evidence now?"

Satyavrat Mehta did not place the leaf upon the table. He held it for a moment against his forehead, then said, "My Lord, this is not evidence. It is memory. Copies of the evidence are attached. This leaf tells us that when paper lies, a village writes truth upon a leaf."

The judge did not take the leaf, but his eyes remained fixed upon it. It should have been impossible to see the letters from that distance, yet the leaf possessed a strange discipline, as though countless tiny lines stood one behind another. The court clerk would later say that on that day he had truly seen names upon the leaf; that statement never entered the record.

Mehta read the first list - thirty names already present in the government record. Then the second - those marked "absent." Then a third - those whose deaths had been described as "outside the workplace." A fourth - families whose signatures had been forged. A fifth - compensation withdrawn but never received by the family. A sixth - those whose names had been altered. A seventh - those whom the papers had never allowed to be born at all.

With each name the air in the courtroom grew heavier. Hariharan's face remained hard, but unease had appeared at the corners of his eyes. Chandrapal Batra switched off his phone; even switched off, it remained hot in his palm.

In the middle of the reading of names, the courtroom fan suddenly stopped. The electricity had not failed. Only the fan stopped. In the silence something came faintly from far away - kabaddi... kabaddi.... The judge raised his head. The journalists looked at one another. Hariharan said, "My Lord, this is a disturbance."

Mehta said quietly, "No. It is a presence."

At precisely that moment in Garh Narikel the game began. This time the rules had changed. The players did not cross holding their breath and chanting "kabaddi"; each carried with them one forgotten name to the other side. If the name returned unbroken, the spirit carrying it became lighter. Sarayu crossed first. Nagina followed. Ujjwal, who had died inside a screen, hesitated at the edge of the field. Loth took his hand and said, "You do not need a river. Death is enough." Ujjwal stepped into the game.

In court the list of digital fraud victims was opened. Gop Kumar's summary showed how payments for pandemic-era medicine procurement, mule accounts used by online gaming apps, digital-arrest call centres, and foreign consultancy fees had formed pathways into one another. Mehta read the names one by one - Ujjwal Jha, Rohit Mandal, Shashank, Farhan, Devashish, an unnamed student, an unnamed driver - many whose files had been closed after writing only the word "suicide."

Devika Sah was not in the courtroom; she sat beside Ba in Garh Narikel. But when Ujjwal's name was read in Delhi, the photograph lying in her lap trembled. She thought: Delhi is far away, but a name does not recognise distance. Ba placed a hand upon hers. "Now he did not die alone."

Mrinalini's testimony was the next section - the section for which she had been gathering her courage for years. Hariharan rose immediately. "My Lord, making details of private life public would violate the victim's dignity." His voice was gentle, as though he truly wished to defend dignity. But Mrinalini stood. She was in Delhi. Her face was calm. She said, "My dignity lies in my life, not in their threats. Let what is private remain under seal. Let what proves blackmail, extortion and witness intimidation enter the open record."

For the first time such a sentence was heard in that courtroom. Several faces grew uncomfortable. Hypocrisy is the first thing in society to turn its neck away. Satyavrat Mehta bowed his head - in acknowledgement, not pity. The judge dictated an order: the victim's privacy protected; the portions showing threats and extortion admitted to the record. The first clear crack appeared on Hariharan's face.

Saumya Ramanathan took notes with care. In every line she guarded against stripping a woman bare a second time in the name of truth. She understood that a revolution too can sometimes become as merciless as patriarchy. She looked at Gop. His eyes were upon the list, not upon people's bodies. For the first time Saumya gave him her complete trust.

Then came the foreign trail of money: Nishant's affidavit, Ira's Harvard records, the grants of Edward Broom's foundation, the old successor company behind the bridge project, consultancy fees from medicine and vaccine procurement, layers of arms brokerage, and the map of accounts running all the way to Lau Kin-Hung in Hong Kong. Hariharan objected to each: "Irrelevant." "Unproved." "Foreign jurisdiction." "Meaningless coincidence."

At the last objection Mehta smiled. "When coincidence repeatedly ends at the same account, an auditor no longer calls it coincidence. The word is pattern."

At that very moment Edward Broom stood upon a stage at Harvard. Ira Aruni rose in the auditorium. Broom was saying, "Human dignity is the soul of global enterprise." Ira interrupted him: "Does human dignity include the names of the workers on the Ganga bridge whom the old company of your group marked absent?" Silence filled the hall. The cameras turned. Broom smiled first. "Young lady, infrastructure history is complex." Ira replied in Maithili, "The history of one whose body a crocodile ate is simpler than your language."

No one understood the sentence, yet everyone heard it. Sometimes accusation changes bodies and no translation is needed. Professor Elena Graves stood at the side of the stage. For the first time, the donor list hanging upon her institution's wall looked to her like a list of the dead.

At that moment a clip from the Harvard livestream reached the screen in the Delhi courtroom. Ira's question was echoing in a foreign auditorium while Mehta read the same financial map in an Indian court. Two continents, one voice. Someone in the courtroom said, "Coincidence." Gop answered softly, "No. A journey of names."

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung sat in his glass office before five screens: Delhi on one, Harvard on another, the account map on a third, Indian news on the fourth, black darkness on the fifth. He shouted at his aide, "Close the dot!" The aide kept shutting down the map, but the green dot of Garh Narikel shone even on the black screen. For the first time Lau Kin-Hung smelled his own palm. It carried the smell of Ganga sand.

During the recess Chandrapal Batra rushed outside. He opened Signal. Raghav Somani's final message had arrived: "Everything finished. Save yourself." Batra's face went pale. The man who had threatened thousands of young people with false digital arrest now found himself in an

invisible arrest of his own. Ujjwal's face rose upon his phone screen. Batra tried to throw the phone, but it clung to his palm.

Hariharan caught him and pulled him into a corner. "Do not panic. Procedure is still left." Batra whispered, "The signal is gone." Hariharan's eyes wavered for a moment. Procedure is powerful only while the signal remains alive.

After the recess Mehta made his final submission. "My Lord, the State asks this Court for seven directions: first, fresh verification of the dead and missing workers; second, protection for victims of digital fraud and mule-account abuse; third, privacy safeguards for victims; fourth, an independent investigation into foreign financial flows; fifth, a separate record concerning the role of the Bar office-bearer; sixth, criminal action for any attempt to destroy records; and seventh, that this matter not be left in the marsh of distant dates."

Hariharan stood. His voice had sharpened. "My Lord, this Solicitor General has become counsel for the petitioners."

For the first time Mehta looked directly at him. "When citizens of the State die, the State's lawyer does not stand against its citizens. If I stand with the truth, then today the State is standing, for once, on its proper side."

That sentence left the courtroom, crossed the corridor, the stairs, the road, reached Garh Narikel, crossed Channa Grove, entered the Ganga, and travelled all the way to the eyes of the crocodiles that had remained silent for so many years.

The bench began to write its order. Words formed slowly, like a river long restrained finding a new channel: special investigation; independent audit; victim protection; privacy-protected testimony; notice concerning the conduct of the Bar Council president; transactions of Chandrapal Batra and linked accounts frozen; permission to seek records from foreign institutions; court monitoring; the next hearing not in fifteen days but in seven.

At the words "seven days," several people in the courtroom smiled. For the first time the crocodile of court dates had grown smaller. It was not complete justice, but the belly of delay had been cut open.

The order was read. Hariharan did not sit; he sank. Chandrapal Batra gripped his chair. His phone finally went dark, but while dying it flashed one sentence: "Do not erase the names. Save yourself." Batra could not tell whether it was Raghav's message, Lau Kin-Hung's, or Ujjwal's.

When Gop Kumar emerged, the journalists surrounded him. He said nothing. Saumya said, "An order has come today, not a verdict. The names of the dead are not news; they are responsibility." Mrinalini said

only, "Privacy is not a crime. Blackmail is." Devika, far away in the village, heard that sentence on her phone and raised her head.

At dusk everyone in Garh Narikel gathered by the roots of the coconut tree. Ba said, "The order has come." Ananya asked, "The verdict?" Ba replied, "People make verdicts. The earth does justice slowly."

In Channa Grove the game was at its height. Ghosts, spirits, Rakash, Loth, drowned spirits, witches, Brahma - all were on the field. Along the boundary stood the workers from the Ganga bridge. Ujjwal played with the light of the screen. Hulasi, without arms, could not stop a name with her body, but her voice was the loudest of all. Budhba Ghost declared, "From today, every name that is forgotten will be called out in the game."

Suddenly water began to fill the middle of the field. No one drowned. It rose only to the knees and then became letters. Names written in the water refused to disappear. The crocodiles came and stood at its edge. Once they had lunged at the smell of bodies. This time they watched the radiance of names. Budhba Ghost asked one of them, "Will you eat?" The crocodile lowered its eyes. The taste of a name lay beyond its teeth.

At that moment a fruit fell from the coconut tree at the doorway. The sound was not ordinary; it was as though a court seal had struck the earth. The fruit did not split. Ba picked it up. Everyone waited. Ba said, "A fruit is opened not by force but by tenderness." She tapped gently at one of its eyes. No water flowed out. A damp sheet of paper emerged.

The first word on the paper was Sarayu. Then Nagina. Then many more names. Then Ujjwal. Then not the file of threats against Mrinalini but her own name - in the form in which she herself accepted it. Then Munna Paswan - not a criminal, but an account used by others. Then Ishan Datt - not dead, but witness. Then Nand Aruni. The final line was blank.

Ananya asked, "Why is this blank?" Ba handed her the paper. "The name of whoever is killed and then made to disappear next will come here. A novel can end. A list cannot."

Aruni trembled at the sentence, as though Ba had erased in one breath the distinction between novel and life. He understood that writing a story and ending a story are different things. History does not end; a writer only places a lamp at one moment.

Late in the night Gop Kumar went to the pipal. Ishan Datt stood there. He still had no shadow, but a little darkness had begun to gather by his feet. Gop asked, "Is your shadow returning?" Ishan smiled. "After the names of the dead are read aloud, they begin to regain their shadows. Not fully. But it begins."

"Do you want release now?" Gop asked. Ishan replied, "Release? No. Too many files are still left. But now I am not alone."

Satyavrat Mehta sat late into the night in his Delhi room. The government phone kept ringing; he did not answer. On the desk lay a copy of the coconut leaf, the court order, and a half-written resignation. He did not finish the resignation. He understood that walking away was easy; remaining inside and fighting for truth was hard. He folded the draft and put it away. Looking out of the window, he saw a faint leaf moving in the Delhi night. There was no coconut tree there, yet the leaf moved.

That night Batuknath Hariharan's house was silent. In his library, heavy books of jurisprudence stood in rows. He opened one - a lecture on ethics. The page was blank. Another - professional honour at the Bar. The page was wet. A third - procedure. From between its pages emerged one black ant. Then another. Then countless ants. He screamed, but no servant in the house awoke. Procedure was entering his mouth for the first time.

Chandrapal Batra tried to flee. At the station, the airport, the border, he found that his name had reached before him. At a ticket window the clerk asked, "Chandrapal Batra?" At a hotel reception: "Chandrapal Batra?" At the bank a computer flashed: "Chandrapal Batra." He had spent his life erasing other people's names; now he could not escape his own.

Lau Kin-Hung stood in his Hong Kong tower and watched the sea. In the glass it looked like the Ganga. His aide said, "The company's name can be removed from the Indian case." Lau replied, "Remove the name." The aide typed. Wherever a name disappeared, a tiny coconut-leaf symbol sprouted in its place. For the first time Lau Kin-Hung shut down his computer. The leaf continued to shine in the darkness.

At Harvard Professor Elena Graves cancelled her lecture. She wrote to her students: "The next class will be silent. Each student will bring one name that some institution has made absent." Ira read the email and smiled. She replied with one line in Maithili: "Reading a name is also ethics."

At dawn rain fell upon Garh Narikel. According to the weather department, rain had not been expected. The elders of the village said: when names are read, water comes to correct its accounts. The rain washed Channa Grove. The kabaddi lines vanished, but the field was not empty. The lines had entered the mind.

Ba did not lay the damp sheet near the tulsi altar to dry. She placed it back inside the coconut shell. The shell was buried by the roots of the tree. Ananya asked, "Will the fruit grow again?" Ba said, "Not the fruit - the tree. And leaves upon the tree. And names upon the leaves."

That day Aruni opened his writing notebook for the first time. He wanted to write, "The story ends here." The pen stopped. He crossed the line out. Then wrote, "Today there was kabaddi in Channa Grove." He

understood that once a story begins to travel in the mouths of a village, the writer's ending becomes meaningless.

Playing at the doorway, Ananya suddenly stopped. She looked toward Channa Grove and called softly, "Kabaddi... kabaddi...." Ba smiled. When a child learns the game of ghosts, the ghost no longer remains old; it becomes the future.

The highest leaf of the coconut tree moved. In that movement were Nand Aruni's hand, Sarayu's basket, Ujjwal's broken phone, Mrinalini's courage, Devika's anchal, Munna's lowered eyes, Ishan's returning shadow, Satyavrat Mehta's trembling but upright voice, Saumya's blue pencil, Gop's silence, Ira's question - all of them.

The crocodiles returned to the river. They were hungry because they had failed to eat the names. The river kept flowing. The bridge remained standing, but at night its piers began to murmur names. Travellers on trains crossing the bridge would sometimes wonder why the wheels beat so insistently - dhak-dhak, dhak-dhak. There was no answer. Only a sound from beneath the tracks: name, name, name.

And in Garh Narikel, when the night grew very deep, the game in Channa Grove began again. Ghosts, spirits, Rakash, Loth, drowned spirits, witches, Brahma, workers lost to water-burial, youths drowned in screens, women who survived blackmail, poor people used as mules, and an informer killed on paper - all shared one field. The rule was simple: whoever crossed carrying the truth could not be touched.

Then Budhba Ghost gave the final call: "Crocodiles eat bodies. But once a name is written upon water, even water cannot erase it."

And the coconut leaves went on sounding through the night - kabaddi... name... kabaddi... name....

FOLK SONG: NAMES WRITTEN ON WATER

Folk tune: boatman's song

Sound, O leaves, sound through the night,

Carry the names written on water from house to house.

Names written on water cannot be erased by waves;

The soil guards their footprints from birth to birth.

The crocodile returned hungry, carrying only the taste of flesh;

The name caught between its teeth, and the river spoke.

All night the bridge piers beat out the names - dhak, dhak;

The train passes, travellers listen: whose chest is beating there?

Ghost, woman, child, worker - all in a single turn;

Cross the boundary with truth - who can touch you then?

Kabaddi... name... let the leaves sound all night;

Carry the names written on water from house to house.

The wave could not erase them; the soil took them into its keeping;

A name caught in the crocodile's teeth - the river said it aloud.

All night the bridge piers beat the names beneath their breath;

Ghost, woman, child and worker weave one common turn.



CHAPTER 16

The Court of Channa Grove

Once a tree has heard a name, no page of paper can forget it.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: HOPE IN THE GROVE-COURT

Folk tune: Bhagat-mangal

Sit, O council, sit beneath the tree,

Write the law upon leaves; weigh truth against truth.

Seats are spread beneath the tree, the leaves become the law;

The seal stays far away, the people close - the hearing belongs to all.

Not the paper of victory, but the truth of names will prevail;

The lamp of the defeated people's work will light the path of justice.

Let one warn the children, another stand beside a sister;

*The grove-court will carry the meaning of its decision from house to
house.*

Justice filled with hope will rise and walk through school and market;

From one decision upon a leaf, the people's world will wake.

Neither the arrogance of seals nor the force of paper will rule;

At dawn the hearing will be held before the people's own eyes.

Child, sister, elder - every voice will be weighed equally;

The road of the grove-court will be precious from house to house.



"Once a tree has heard a name, no page of paper can forget it."

"A name heard by a tree cannot be erased by paper."

- A saying of Garh Narikel

That night no dogs barked in Garh Narikel. Cats climbed onto the roofs and sat silent. In houses with mobile phones, the screens flickered by themselves; in houses with old lanterns, the wicks burned without oil.

And from Channa Grove rose a silence like an ancient river that had stopped flowing in order to press its ear to the earth.

News of what had happened in court that day reached the village neither by radio nor newspaper nor government statement, but through water. At dusk, when women returned from the pond with their brass pots full, it was not water that shone inside them but names. Some could read them, some could not, yet everyone understood that something had burst open in the city court and its liquid voice had reached Garh Narikel.

Ba sat at the threshold. Her eyes saw little, but whatever ordinary eyes could not see, she saw first. She looked at the water-filled pot, then toward the grove, and said softly, "Now it will not be a human court. The tree's court will sit."

Aruni did not answer. That night Gop Kumar held no file. Saumya had closed her satchel. Devika switched off her phone. Mira removed her spectacles, as though glass was no longer necessary for seeing. Ira, who had studied law abroad and once mistook the language of courts for the language of justice, sat quietly beside Ba for the first time. Satyavrat Mehta was far away in the city, but sleep would not come to him.

There was no kabaddi in Channa Grove that night. The ghosts sat in a circle. The spirits stood in a pale shimmer. The Rakash gave light from their small bodies, but tonight the light was not sharp; it was wounded. Loth, always condemned to watch, was placed in the middle for the first time - because those punished forever with seeing were to be given the right to speak tonight.

The Brahma of the pipal tree drank the winds of the four directions through his four mouths. He had no throne. He was not the judge. In the Court of Channa Grove the judge is never a single body. The judge is whatever has been suppressed the greatest number of times until, through repeated suffocation, it becomes a voice.

The drowned spirit emerged from the pond and sat at the edge of the grove. Her long hair was heavy with water, and as she spread it upon the earth it began to form a black script. The witches left their platforms and arrived without mounts. Budhba Ghost descended from his twelve-hundred-year-old branch. Hulasi, who had no hands, could nevertheless assume the posture of presence without them.

The first summons of the court was issued by the wind. It came from the north and said, "Let all whose names were cut away appear."

First came the sound of a splash from the piers of the Ganga bridge. Then footsteps rose from within the splash. Day-labourers began to arrive carrying baskets upon their heads. Some had half a body, some only the memory of a head, some the dust of cement upon their backs,

some in their eyes the astonishment that flashes inside a person at the instant of falling - "Am I truly falling?"

Their feet did not touch the earth, yet wherever they passed, beads of dew became names. The first was Sarayu. The second, Makhna. The third, Bisesar. Then names came so quickly that the grass of the grove trembled under the burden of holding them.

Gop Kumar's eyes filled. After so many nights of counting papers, for the first time he felt the true weight of truth. Until now he had seen names inside files; here the names had stepped out of the files. Saumya reached to open her research notes, then closed them. She understood that taking notes in this court would be an indecency. Evidence was not written here; evidence walked in on its own feet.

The second summons was issued by the leaves of the pipal: "Let all whom the screen devoured appear."

Blue light rose from doorway after doorway in the village. Phones that had been switched off flashed once. A young man came and stood in Channa Grove. His face was bright; his name, Ujjwal, meant brightness too. But in his eyes lay the sleep of a screen that breaks between debt, winning, losing, threats and shame. Behind him came many more youths - one with the smell of counterfeit notes in his pocket, another with a bank slip in his hand, another with that voice still in his ear saying, "You are under digital arrest."

Devika watched the line. She recognised her brother, but did not run to embrace him. In a court of the dead, even the wailing of the living can cloud the evidence. She only bowed her head. Ujjwal looked at her and smiled as though saying, "Now I am not a debt. I am a name."

The third summons was issued by the drowned spirit's long hair: "Let all whose bodies were made into a market, whose privacy was turned into a noose, appear."

Now shadows of women and men, young and old, began to enter the grove. Some were faces without names, others names without faces. One had been taken in a police vehicle and never returned; another had forgotten the speech of home in a room in the city; another had been blackmailed for love; another had refused to sell the body, but hunger had been sold instead. Mira stepped among them. She understood that her privacy had never been her crime; the crime belonged to the hand that made privacy into a whip.

The fourth summons came from a lantern flame: "Let all whose breath was sold, whose medicine vial was counterfeit, whose hospital bed was billed twice in government papers, appear."

The dead of the pandemic came. One carried an oxygen tube, another a hospital bill, another an empty medicine box, another in his eyes the

question: did I die of disease, or of the bill? They were silent. The silence of those who died in a pandemic is heavier than other deaths, because so many were denied even a proper farewell.

Then the Court of Channa Grove summoned the offenders. Something strange happened. Batuknath Hariharan did not come. Chandrapal Batra did not come. Raghav Signal did not come. Lau Kin-Hung's body was far across the sea. Edward Broom slept in his hotel.

But their shadows appeared in court. Hariharan's shadow came in the shape of a thick file whose pages changed dates by themselves. Batra's shadow glowed like a mobile screen, with a long serpent sliding across a keyboard inside it. Raghav's shadow was only a bodiless unfinished message: "Message deleted." Lau Kin-Hung's shadow hung like a percentage sign - two small circles and a slanting stroke. Broom's shadow was a lectern from whose microphone water dripped.

Budhba Ghost did not laugh. In twelve hundred years he had seen many such shadows. He said, "The law may shelter a man's body. The tree does not shelter his shadow."

Sarayu gave the first testimony. She was a woman labourer. The rasp of a river ran through her voice. She said, "I fell. No rope came to save me. Afterwards my name did not come either. The crocodile ate the body; the office ate the name. My family was told I had never come to work at all. Today I ask: if I never came, where did these cement blisters on my palms come from?"

She opened her palm. It was not a palm, but a row of tiny bridge piers. Inside each pier was an eye.

Ujjwal gave the second testimony. "First they showed me a win. Then a loss. Then debt. Then police. Then court. Then shame before my family. My body was found hanging from a fan, but my death had taken place inside the screen long before. The owner of the app that devoured me was not in this country. The account opened in my name was not mine. The voice that threatened me was fake. The noose was real."

Devika trembled where she stood. One face of the pipal Brahma turned toward her. "The trembling of the living is testimony too."

The third testimony came not from Mira but from her silence. She stood in the centre. She did not say whom she loved, whom she desired, whose hand had once been in hers. She said only, "Those who feared love tried to kill me not with law but with shame. Those who turned privacy into a crime will now find the locks of their own houses opening night after night."

Hulasi stood behind her. Even a ghost without hands can protect, if memory remains within her.

The fourth testimony came from an old man of the pandemic years. A mask covered his nose, but there was no opening in it. He said, "I needed breath. I received a bill. I needed medicine. I received a code. I needed a doctor. I received a consultant. I needed a pyre. I received a number."

At that instant every file in Channa Grove opened. No - no one opened them. The files themselves became leaves. Upon each leaf was a fact; beneath each fact, a name; beneath each name, a house; beneath each house, an unfinished hearth.

Satyavrat Mehta sat in his room in the city. There was no screen before him, yet the light of Channa Grove fell upon the wall. He understood that he too had been summoned. He closed his eyes and said, "I am present."

The wind carried his voice to the grove. He said, "I have spent years presenting the State's case. But if the State cuts the names of the dead from its records, then the side of the State and the side of truth become separate. Today I speak not from any office, but as a human being: whatever opened halfway in court must now be opened completely."

Batuknath Hariharan's shadow trembled. The pages of his file began changing dates faster and faster - next month, next year, next generation, next birth. Channa Grove did not laugh, but all its leaves rustled together. The sound was more humiliating than laughter.

A message flashed on Chandrapal Batra's screen-shadow: "Signal restored." It vanished at once. Then another: "Account active." That too disappeared. A third: "Insufficient shadow." The screen went black.

The four mouths of the pipal Brahma spoke together. He was not reading a judgment; the judgment was being read jointly by wind, water, leaves and names.

"The one who consumed bodies will not be punished merely by a prison for the body. The one who cut away names will spend a lifetime searching for names. The one who sold court dates will sleep each night inside an unfinished hearing. The one who devoured children through screens will see Ujjwal's face first in the mirror every dawn. The one who made privacy into a weapon will have his shadow stripped bare before everyone - not his body, but his greed. The one who sold breath will cough out every word of every speech. The one who lectures on ethics abroad while buying death here will stand forever upon a damp stage, however dry the auditorium may be."

These punishments were written in no book of law. But the Court of Channa Grove is older than books of law. It has less prison and more memory; less hanging and more names; fewer fines and more nights without sleep.

After the judgment, the dead looked at one another. No one applauded. There is no applause at the moment of justice; only the removal of a weight long held upon the throat. Sarayu set down her basket. Ujjwal held out his phone toward Devika. She did not take it. "I will carry your name, not your phone," she said. Ujjwal smiled, and the blue light of the screen became, in that instant, the flame of an earthen lamp.

Mira pulled from her chest the old fear that had lodged there like a thorny fruit and placed it upon the earth. The drowned spirit wrapped the fear in her hair and carried it toward the pond. Saumya wept for the first time - the wall of trained neutrality she had maintained for years collapsed that night. There were no tears in Gop Kumar's eyes. He knew this was no longer the time to weep; it was time to write.

Ba rose slowly. Her body was tired, but her voice was firmer than it had been in a long while. She placed the soil of Channa Grove upon her forehead. Aruni reached to support her; Ba pushed his hand away. "I do not need support now," she said. "You all need work."

Ira stopped at those words. She remembered that in foreign auditoriums people discuss justice; here, after justice, people divide up the work. She understood that when the defeated begin to work, the victor's victory is left alone.

Before dawn the Court of Channa Grove dissolved. No document was prepared. No seal was stamped. No copy was issued. Yet upon every coconut leaf in the village an invisible point had written: "Erasing a name is a crime. Stopping memory is impossible."

At dawn Batuknath Hariharan woke in his city house. There was water beneath his pillow. First he demanded a towel, then shouted at the servant, then checked the tap, then the roof. Everything was dry, yet water kept dripping from beneath the pillow. He looked in the mirror. His face was not there. A long list was. He tried to read the first name; his vision blurred.

Chandrapal Batra picked up his phone. Every signal was strong, but no message could be read. Every chat contained only names. He threw the phone away. Opened another - names. A third - names again. For the first time he understood that earning from numbers is easy; escaping from names is hard.

Edward Broom woke in his hotel abroad. The pages of his speech were wet. Water had spread across the words "human dignity," and fine cement dust clung to them. He replaced the page. The second was wet too. On the third only one sentence appeared: "Thirty names, the rest water."

Nothing miraculous happened in Lau Kin-Hung's distant office. Only a small error appeared on his giant screen: "Not account - memory

active." He did not understand its meaning. In his language memory had no price.

The sun rose over Garh Narikel. The ghosts returned to their branches, ponds, shadows and darkness. But kabaddi did not begin again. The field remained empty. Its emptiness was not the end of the game; it was preparation for a new one.

Gop Kumar, Saumya, Devika, Mira, Ira, Aruni, Ramayya, and the voice of Satyavrat Mehta carried from afar - all understood the same thing that morning: a judgment had been received, but now it had to be written not upon paper but into people's lives.

Ba looked once more toward Channa Grove. "The victors will now watch the defeated," she said. "But they will not find the defeated at home. They have gone out to work."

And indeed, from that day onward the rogues wandered from place to place holding their paper of victory. Those whom they had defeated were nowhere to be found sitting upon courtroom steps. One was writing names, another teaching children to recognise the crocodile of the screen, another telling women that shame belongs to the offender, not the victim.

The novel did not end in Channa Grove that night - only one cycle ended, with many more still to come. Its first circle was complete. The leaves moved, and those who had ears could hear: now the real story has begun.

FOLK SONG: THE COURT OF THE GROVE RISES

Folk tune: Bhagat melody

The court has risen, the court beneath the grove has risen;

From one decision written on leaves, the people's voice has opened.

The judgment came beneath the tree; paper remained far away;

When the roots heard the names, the shine of falsehood broke.

The rogue wanders the village with victory's seal in hand;

The defeated have gone out to work, writing down their names.

One teaches children to recognise the crocodile of the screen;

Another tells a sister: the shame is not yours.

The empty field says: the story does not stop here;

The first cycle is complete; the true journey has awakened.

The court of the grove has risen; justice walks from house to house;

From one decision upon leaves, the people's voice has awakened.

Paper stayed far away; the roots heard every name;

Victory's seal remains in hand, yet the work is unfinished.

The defeated are at work - teaching children to recognise the crocodile,

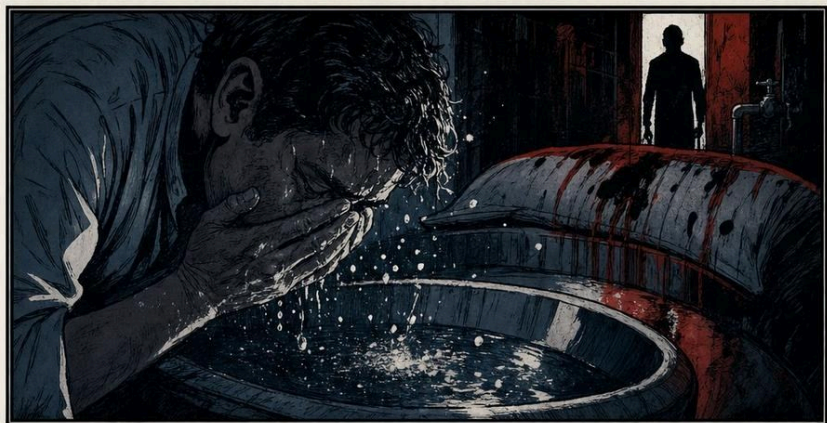
Telling sisters: the shame is not yours - helping them understand.



CHAPTER 17

The Mourning of Victory

*When the defeated stop waiting, the victor's victory collapses beneath
its own weight.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SERVICE WITHIN VICTORY

Folk tune: the bright gait of victory-lament

You have won, yes, won - but set the crown aside;

First tend the wounds of those you defeated.

*If you have won, first look to see whose wounds remain;
Remove the crown and serve - only then is victory fulfilled.
Honour the defeated side; keep the door of dialogue open;
After the verdict, sow seeds that can repair life.*

*The voices of "Sarayu" and "Ujjwal" wake conscience within;
Compassion turns victory's heavy iron into a flower.
If service lives within victory, mourning begins to melt;
A just and humble victory joins society together.*

*Let the drums of triumph fall silent; pluck the string of compassion;
Look inward through the memory of Sarayu and Ujjwal.
Rebuild the life that remains after the verdict;
Let the bright gait of victory become everyone's dusk and dawn.*



*"If the one you defeated stops waiting for you, your victory will break
beneath its own weight."*

- A saying from Channa Grove after the judgment

At daybreak Batuknath Hariharan first demanded a towel to cover the water inside his house, then scolded the servant, then checked the tap, then the roof. When everything proved sound and yet water continued to drip from beneath his pillow, he understood that some things cannot be repaired by a workman.

He wanted to believe the Court of Channa Grove had been a dream - as a man, on hearing the name of his illness, wishes to believe the

diagnosis is wrong. But a dream remains inside the head; this water lay inside his pillow. A dream disappears when the eyes open; this list clung to the mirror. He washed his face, but the list did not wash away. Names kept rising through the soap foam - Sarayu, Makhna, Bisesar, Ujjwal, and all those he had never considered worth reading.

Batuknath Hariharan was a victor. In court he had defended procedure. The media had called him "the guardian of legal tradition." His portrait was to be hung in the council hall. Yet that morning he felt a strange emptiness, like a soldier who wins a battle and reaches the field only to find that the enemy has packed its tents and gone away to plough the land.

Chandrapal Batra's morning was no better. He had five phones. The signal flashed on the first, but the letters turned to water when he opened a message. On the second an account opened, but instead of a balance it displayed the word "name." A code arrived from Hong Kong on the third, but when read it said, "Whom did you defeat?" Chandrapal threw the phone away, then picked it up again: he possessed the courage to throw away a phone, not the courage to live without one.

Raghav "Signal" Somani had disappeared all night. At dawn his message arrived: "Call a meeting. Paper has won, but the field is emptying." Chandrapal replied at once, "What does emptying mean?" The answer came: "The people we were supposed to silence have stopped talking and gone out to work."

Chandrapal laughed at the sentence. He thought it was language meant to frighten him. He had seen many people break - under notices, police stations, shame, debt, false cases. His experience said the defeated first appeal, then seek the media, then compromise, then tire. This time none of those stages appeared.

That day a ceremony in the capital's Bar auditorium honoured Batuknath Hariharan. Garland, shawl, applause upon the stage. Everyone said, "Procedure has survived." An elderly lawyer declared, "This is the victory of justice." At that instant a drop fell from the ceiling. Batuknath looked up. The ceiling was dry. The drop struck his table and formed a small word: "Waiting?"

He began his speech. "Friends, the dignity of the Court...." But the microphone answered, "Date." He coughed and tried again. "The process of law...." The microphone said, "Date." Whether anyone else in the hall heard it was unclear. Batuknath kept hearing it. He felt that every word he spoke was being heard again by the dead bridge-workers standing upon the court steps.

After the ceremony Chandrapal Batra met him in a separate room. The curtains were thick, trapping the city's sunlight behind them.

Chandrapal said, "The matter is finished. Now identify the opposition. Who wants money? Who can be frightened? Who can be bought?"

For the first time Batuknath fell silent - a silence that surprised even his years of practiced eloquence. At last he said softly, "Where are they?"

Chandrapal laughed. "Since when did you become a philosopher? Where can Gop Kumar, Saumya, Devika, Mira, Ira, Aruni go? They want justice, don't they? They will come back to court."

"No," Batuknath said. "No new petition came today. No press conference. No demonstration. No draft appeal. Satyavrat Mehta is silent too. This silence is unusual."

For the first time Chandrapal's face tightened. Criminals do not fear silence; they are accustomed to playing with noise. But when the victims abandon noise, the criminal begins to hear his own voice far too loudly.

By afternoon Batuknath's men had searched the court corridors. The bench where Devika used to sit was empty. At the window where Gop Kumar used to examine papers there was only dust. The tea seller who kept unsweetened tea for Saumya said, "They did not come today."

"Where did they go?" the men asked.

The tea seller shrugged. "To work."

That answer proved to be the most terrifying answer in the capital. In court, "work" meant dates, arguments, adjournments, copies, affidavits. But the tea seller meant something else. Batuknath would fail to understand that meaning, and therefore it would frighten him.

At that very moment in Garh Narikel, Aruni and Ba were driving the first bamboo stake into the ground beside Channa Grove. There was no flag upon it, no party emblem. Devika levelled the soil. Mira kept the children at a distance, not for sanctity but for safety. Saumya read the old names again. Gop Kumar held neither chisel nor paper; his hands were empty, because before writing a name the hands should be empty.

They had been declared defeated in court. Yet that day they did not look like defeated people; they looked like farmers setting out for their fields. They had no leisure to mourn their defeat. A stone had to be chosen for the village's first archive. If no stone could be found, names would be written upon dry coconut shells.

Ananya, Aruni's daughter, sat holding a small piece of chalk. She asked, "Whose name first?" Everyone fell silent. Ba said, "The one whose name was cut from paper first."

Saumya opened the list. It held a thousand forms, but the first line was blurred. The shadow of a leaf fell across the blur and the letters cleared: "Sarayu." Ananya found Sarayu hard to write. Twice she

malformed the first letter. Devika did not take her hand. Ba said, "A name must learn to walk on its own feet. Let the child's hand follow behind it." The third time Sarayu came clear. Somewhere far inside Channa Grove came the sound of a basket being set down.

News of this small scene reached Batuknath by evening. One of his men sent him a photograph. It showed only a child, chalk, stone and a name. Batuknath stared at it for a long time. He could not locate his defeat in that image, yet a damp cold settled into his belly. One can defeat an opposing party in court; under which section of law can one charge a name being written by a child's hand?

Meanwhile Chandrapal ordered his digital net tightened again. "Launch a new app. Change the old names. Double the bonus. Guarantee the first win. Make advertisements in village languages." Raghav Signal replied, "New problem."

"What?"

"People are talking from village to village. They know digital arrest is a lie, mule accounts are a trap, the first win is bait. A girl named Devika Sah holds meetings. Nishant Jha sends leaflets from abroad. People have begun hanging up the phone."

A curse burst from Chandrapal's mouth. For the first time he understood that his real enemy was not the police but public awareness. Police can be bought, lawyers retained, a judge's time delayed; but if an old grandmother tells her grandson, "Do not trust a stranger on the phone," a server worth crores suddenly goes half-fed.

In another corner of the village Devika was indeed explaining things to children and young people. She did not climb onto a stage. She sat on the steps of the pond with people all around her. "If someone tells you that you are under digital arrest," she said, "first drink water, breathe, call your family. The criminal wants you alone."

An old man asked, "Have you studied law?" Devika said, "No. My brother died." The old man bowed his head. From that day onward, experience too became evidence in the village.

Elsewhere Mira and Saumya sat among a circle of women. No banner. No speech. Only women sitting together. Mira said, "If someone takes your image, your voice, your love, your letters, photographs of your body and uses them to frighten you, the crime is theirs. The shame is theirs. Not yours." At first no one raised her eyes. Then a young woman asked softly, "What if my family blames me?" Mira said, "Then we will all go to your house first."

That sentence was larger than any policy paper from the city. Victims need companionship before they need law. Batuknath's greatest mistake

was believing that people move only because of judgments. In truth they rise at the sound of others walking beside them.

Abroad, Ira sat in her university library. A transcript of Edward Broom's old lecture lay before her. Once she had written questions in red ink. Now she stopped writing questions. On her computer she began building the first page of the "Garh Narikel Archive of Names." She understood that before questioning a global stage, one must secure the names of one's own people.

That night a strange email reached Broom's office. The subject line read: "Sarayu." Inside was no accusation, no threat, only one name and a blank space. Broom tried to delete it. The system asked: "Do you wish to erase the name?" He clicked "Yes." The screen went black. Then the same email returned. He understood: an accusation can be answered. A name cannot.

Satyavrat Mehta sat alone in his government residence. Departmental displeasure was gathering against him. A note in the file described his conduct as "excessive moral haste." A senior official advised, "You crossed the line." Satyavrat smiled. He understood that when a boundary is drawn to protect falsehood, crossing it is not a crime. It is a cleansing.

But he too did not go to court. He wrote a letter, not to the Court, but to the children of Garh Narikel. "Before you study law, read names," he wrote. "Before you read a section, ask: which human being survived in this section, and which one disappeared?" He did not send the letter. He left it in his notebook. Some letters, when their time comes, begin to travel by themselves.

By evening Batuknath had grown restless. There was a victory banquet: silver plates, expensive liquor, celebrated people of the city. They laughed, told stories of court, said, "Everything will return to normal." But in Batuknath's ears came the rustle of Channa Grove. Every spoon seemed to strike not a plate but a date. Ting - date. Ting - date. Ting - date.

During the banquet a young lawyer came close and whispered, "Sir, are they filing an appeal?" Batuknath meant to answer at once, but what escaped his mouth was, "They are writing names." The young lawyer laughed, thinking the president was joking. Batuknath did not laugh.

That night a meeting was held in Chandrapal's office. Raghav Signal appeared on a screen, the shadow from Hong Kong had no face, two legal advisers and three payment managers sat around the table. Chandrapal struck the table. "Drag them back into court. Defamation. Contempt. Data theft. Foreign funding. Put something on them."

The legal adviser asked, "On whom?"

"Gop Kumar."

"He has made no public statement."

"Saumya."

"She has published no research; she is helping with the archive of names."

"Devika."

"She gives advice on how to avoid fraud."

"Mira."

"She tells women not to be frightened by blackmail."

"Ira."

"She is building a website of names, not allegations."

For the first time Chandrapal panicked. The hardest resistance for a criminal is resistance that does not accuse but builds an alternative. Accusations can be sued. Alternatives become society.

Raghav Signal wrote, "They have left the battlefield."

Chandrapal replied, "Run away?"

Raghav wrote, "No. Gone farming."

The sentence flashed on the screen and vanished. Chandrapal did not understand it, but Lau Kin-Hung's faceless shadow went still for a moment. Capital that does not understand land cannot understand farming either; nevertheless it becomes afraid when people return to the soil.

That night, after the first name had been written in Garh Narikel, people did not go home. An elderly labourer's widow came and said, "My man's name is not in the government papers. But he belonged to this village." She could not read the dead man's name. Ananya placed the chalk in her hand. The widow wrote with a trembling hand. The letters bent crookedly, yet in Channa Grove they shone straight.

Ba said, "Letters of truth straighten themselves."

Gop Kumar stood a little way off, resting his tired body against the trunk of a coconut tree. He thought about safeguarding data, taking it to court, getting it to Satyavrat - all of that had been necessary. Yet perhaps writing the names was an even greater task. Data proves a crime. A name gives a human being birth again.

Ramayya, always talkative, was silent that night. Near dawn he said, "I will do this in my village in the south as well. There may be no bridge there, but the disease of cutting away names is everywhere." Saumya smiled. In this way Garh Narikel began to change from one village into a method.

Batuknath's mourning of victory deepened - a grief for which he could find no name in his own language. Victory needs laughter, an opponent, a stage, garlands. He had all of them. But victory needs one more thing: the defeated face of the loser. That he did not have. The faces declared defeated were busy working.

On the third day Batuknath went to court. The same steps before him. The same corridor. The same tea. Yet nothing looked empty; it looked orphaned. The people he had spent years building a palace of law to frighten had begun to build their own thresholds outside that palace.

Standing on the steps he said inwardly, "Come back. Appeal. Fight."

No one answered. Only from far, very far, toward Channa Grove came the voice of a child: "Sarayu." Then another voice: "Ujjwal." Then a third: "Do not cut away names."

Batuknath covered his ears. The voices continued to rise from within.

The chapter had not ended; the mourning of victory had only begun. The rogues would now watch day and night for those they had defeated. But those people would no longer be found at the courtroom door. They would write names, protect children, stand beside women, and write history upon water.

At dawn a leaf in Channa Grove moved lightly. Budhba Ghost looked down from his branch and whispered, "This is the mourning of victory. No court can impose a punishment greater than this grief."

FOLK SONG: THE HEAVY CROWN OF VICTORY

Folk tune: biraha

O victor, your crown is heavy iron;

The one you defeated no longer waits upon your road.

You won, sir, but who will come to congratulate you?

The court is empty, the steps deserted - where is the applause, brother?

The one you defeated no longer waits for you;

They write names, protect children, and do not count your seals.

The voice "Sarayu" rises within; "Ujjwal" calls again;

You covered your ears, yet a court opened inside your heart.

Victory's crown is iron; it bends your head;

The victims stopped waiting, and victory broke itself.

There is no medicine for such grief, no appeal that can cure it;

The one who erased names loses his own name night after night.

Within, the voices of "Sarayu" and "Ujjwal" do not cease.

You covered your ears, yet the court opened in your heart;

The one who erased names spends the night murmuring his own.



CHAPTER 18

The Empty Court

*When a court falls empty, understand this: justice has grown afraid of
the names of those who are absent.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE PEOPLE WILL FILL
THE EMPTY COURT**

Folk tune: a labourer's-son parati

Fill it, fill it - fill the empty bench;

Raise the sweeper's son's letters upon your brow.

The bench looks empty, yet shadows sit upon it;

Names denied entry have arrived with the dawn.

The sweeper writes his father's name in the dust;

The erased letters rise like shoots between stones.

If justice reads the names, the building will become a home;

Joined with the people's memory, the emptiness will fill.

The people's bright call will fill the empty court;

Lives made present will receive the right to dignity.

The father's name written in dust will wake with the dawn;

Erased letters will sprout like shoots between stones.

The people will come without entry passes, carrying the tune of parati;

Only then will the house of justice make its name true.



*"A justice that hears only those who are present is afraid of the names
of the absent dead."*

- A dry leaf from Channa Grove

On the fourth day after the third, the court opened again. The same doorway, the same metal detector, the same stairs, the same black coats, the same stale biscuits drowned in tea. Yet Batuknath Hariharan felt that something was missing from the building. There was a crowd, there were voices, files and orders; still, the emptiness was not like an empty chair. It was the emptiness left when an entire age rises and walks away.

When he entered the hall, his men hurried toward him. "Sir, they have not come today either." Batuknath snapped, "Who?" The men fell silent. The people for whom the net had been woven had become dangerous even to name. The moment a name was spoken, water began to drip.

The case was on the cause list. It had a number. There were papers. The government side was present. The contractor's side was present. Batuknath's team was present. But the people against whom all the preparations had been made were not there. The judge lowered his spectacles and looked again. "Respondent?" The clerk said, "Present." "Petitioner?" The clerk turned the pages. The attendance column was blank.

On an ordinary day a blank attendance column meant dismissal, costs, adjournment or punishment. But that day the blank column spoke more loudly than anything else. It contained neither absence nor fear. It contained a decision - the decision to stop waiting for justice.

Batuknath rose. "My Lord, this is contempt of court. People set a process in motion in the name of public interest and then disappear midway. This is a waste of the Court's time."

Satyavrat Mehta sat at the government table, upright but taut within. At those words a vein at his temple flickered. He wanted to stand, then remained seated. No rulebook records how many times a person occupying the government counsel's chair remains silent against the truth. But the weight of silence is carried not by the body, but by the soul.

The judge asked, "For the State?" Every eye turned toward Satyavrat. He rose slowly. His file lay open, but the pages were not trembling in the air; they seemed to tremble from within. He said, "My Lord, absence does not always mean neglect. Sometimes people do outside the courtroom what the courtroom itself has failed to do."

A stir passed through the room. Batuknath's face stiffened. Chandrapal Batra sat in the rear row and felt that Satyavrat had crossed the line again. But this time the line was drawn not on paper but across the courtroom floor, and a little dew had begun to gather upon it.

The judge said, "What do you mean?" Satyavrat replied, "The case before you is alive. But the names that have entered this case as compensation claims, death lists, technical reports, digital accounts, medical bills and evidence of fraud are alive outside this courtroom as well. If the petitioners have not come today, that does not mean the truth is absent."

Batuknath interrupted. "This is a court, not a poetry recital."

For the first time Satyavrat looked directly at him. "Poetry begins on the day the law stops reading names."

Silence filled the room. A sentence like that cannot be answered with a statutory section. Batuknath had sections in his hand, but the moment had slipped beyond his grasp.

The judge was preparing to adjourn the matter, the familiar remedy of every day. But before he wrote the order, a drop of water appeared on the tip of his pen. He started. The drop fell on the paper, spread in a small circle and formed a tiny word: "Sarayu." The judge shut the file. "Next date," he said.

"When?" the clerk asked.

The judge thought for a long time, then announced an ordinary date in an ordinary voice. Yet everyone in the room felt that it was not the hearing but time itself that had been adjourned.

In the corridor outside, Batuknath stopped Satyavrat. "Mehta ji, you hold a government post. Why do you speak like the opposition?"

Satyavrat said, "If the truth is left on the opposition side, the government should be ashamed, not I."

Batuknath laughed, but there was sand inside the laugh. "This will not do. The Bar, the government, the Council - each has its discipline."

"Discipline should not become the art of cutting the names of the dead," Satyavrat said, and walked away. Batuknath watched him for a long time. He understood that this man would not be easy to defeat, because he was not trying to win. A person who does not seek victory is difficult to make lose.

Chandrapal Batra came close and whispered, "Get rid of Mehta. If he plays this morality game in front of me, the problem will grow."

Batuknath said, "Mehta is not the problem. The problem is that our opponents are not returning to court."

"Drag them back."

"By law?"

"By law, by notice, by arrest, by defamation, by allegations of foreign funding."

Batuknath said slowly, "Defamation over which statement? Contempt over which speech? They are writing names. Writing names cannot be made a crime - not yet."

Chandrapal's eyes flashed. "Then make it a crime."

At those words, the fan hanging above the corridor stopped abruptly. The air went still. Lawyers began fanning themselves with their papers. But Batuknath felt it was not the fan that had stopped; it was the leaves of Channa Grove. When the leaves stop, there is something to be heard.

A voice came from far away: "Cutting names is a crime." Whose voice was it? No one saw. Chandrapal's face went white. A message from Raghav Signal appeared on his phone: "Careful. The court is being heard."

Chandrapal typed back, "By whom?" The message would not send. Only a circle kept turning on the screen. Slowly the circle became a crocodile's eye, then vanished.

At that same hour in Garh Narikel, there was no court in session; there was a school. Stones had been laid beneath Channa Grove, one name on each stone. The children read the names. If they could not read one, they asked. Whoever asked received an answer. In this way the dead became textbooks.

Ananya read the first lesson: "Sarayu." Then she stopped. "Who was she?"

Ba said, "A labourer. Her name was cut out."

"Why was it cut out?"

"Because the stomach of the paper was small and greed was very large."

The children did not laugh. Children understand some sentences at once because they have not yet learned enough civilisation to misunderstand them.

At another corner of the school Devika Sah opened a mobile phone and showed the young people. "Anyone who calls and says the police have put you under digital arrest is trying to buy your fear. First rule: do not be afraid alone. Second: do not send money. Third: call someone from your family."

A teenager asked, "What if they show my photo, Aadhaar and bank details?" Devika looked straight into his eyes. "The day a thief uses your name to frighten you, understand that he has obtained your papers, not your soul. Your soul is still with you."

By evening those words reached Chandrapal. His men reported, "The girl is teaching people. Digital-arrest scams are losing their effect in the village." Chandrapal smashed a glass against the table. It was not anger but fear that moved his hand. The glass shattered. In its fragments his face appeared in many pieces - lawyer, fraudster, broker, kingpin, consultant, actor playing the victim. He tried to assemble each fragment separately, but the face would not become whole.

Mira and Saumya gave the first women's-circle meeting no name. Once a name is given, an organisation is born; once an organisation exists, papers are demanded; once papers exist, attack becomes easier. So they simply said, "Come, let us sit together." That was all. There was a revolution in that sitting.

One young woman said, "Someone is threatening me with a photograph." Another said, "With my love letters." A third: "They said they would send everything to my family." Mira listened to them all and said, "Our first rule: the shame belongs to the offender, not the victim."

The sentence did not drift away into the air. It caught upon a leaf of Channa Grove. The veins of the leaf began to glow. From his branch Budhba Ghost said, "These women are opening a court larger than the court." Hulasi, who for twelve years had searched for her reflection in the darkness of the well, came that day for the first time and sat within the women's circle. No one saw her. But when one young woman wept while telling her story, Hulasi's invisible hand rested upon her head.

Abroad, Ira opened the first page of the archive of names. She refused to call it a website; she called it a "house of memory." There was no page of accusations, only names, villages, brief accounts of death or disappearance, and the family's consent. Nishant wrote to her, "They will try to shut down a site like this." Ira replied, "Then we will not make only a site. We will make copies - in children's notebooks, songs, walls and leaves."

Nishant looked at the screen for a long time. In the world of finance, copying is called theft. In the world of memory, copying is liberation. That night he did not steal his company's internal payment map; he read it, understood it, and wrote down the names of the points where money lost by Indian young people became profit abroad. Knowledge was not theft; it was raw grain for awakening.

Batuknath's empty court slowly became a story in the city. People said, "The case continues, but the petitioners do not come." Another asked, "Why?" A third answered, "They have opened a court in their own village." People laughed at that. Yet after the laughter, each felt a little fear: what if a court truly opened in the village?

An emergency meeting of the Bar Council was called. The subject was "Protecting the Dignity of the Court." Batuknath presided. A resolution appeared on the screen: "Unauthorised public archives create distrust in judicial processes." A young lawyer asked, "How is writing the names of the dead unauthorised?" The whole hall turned to look at him. The young lawyer fell silent, but the question remained in the air.

Batuknath amended the proposal: "False archives of names." But an immediate difficulty arose: how does one prove a name false? Is the death of a labourer false because it is absent from government records? Is a young man's suicide false because his family says it happened? Is a woman's account of blackmail false because it comes from her own mouth? The scissors of law jam at the point where human pain arrives without a certificate.

The meeting was adjourned. Batuknath sat in darkness in his room. His certificate of honour hung on the wall. Suddenly droplets of water shimmered upon it. The letters spread and rearranged themselves: "Empty President." He rose and wiped them with a cloth. The words appeared again. At last he switched off the light. In darkness the certificate could no longer be seen, but the word continued to sound within him: empty.

That night Chandrapal connected with the shadow in Hong Kong. Lau Kin-Hung's face never appeared in full, only a haze with a city of glass behind it. Chandrapal said, "I will suppress them through legal channels." The shadow asked, "Why are customers falling?"

Chandrapal was silent.

"I do not want Indian law. I want money," the shadow said. "If a village girl is teaching people to hang up the phone, if young men have begun asking questions before opening accounts, if women will no longer stay silent under blackmail, then your legal victory is my loss."

Cold sweat gathered on Chandrapal's forehead - the kind born not of heat but of deep insecurity. The global owner of a criminal business does not watch emotion; he watches flow. Wherever the flow of money stops, there is danger. The small gatherings forming in Garh Narikel were more dangerous to him than any court judgment.

That night a new game began beneath Channa Grove. The children played kabaddi, but the rules had changed. Whoever was caught did not have their name crossed out; everyone repeated it together. Whoever crossed the line holding their breath was asked, "Whose name are you carrying?" One child answered, "Sarayu." Another, "Ujjwal." A third, "Hulasi." The game slowly became an exercise in memory.

Budhba Ghost smiled from his branch. Raksh dimmed his glow so he would not disturb the children's game. For the first time Loth rose from the spectators and came to sit beside the field. Panidubbi's hair danced in the pond, but caught no one's feet. The witches circled above with their little baskets as though standing guard.

When word of the empty court reached Channa Grove, a faint laughter ran through the leaves. The leaves seemed to say, "When a building keeps waiting for the people and the people begin living outside it, the building is not merely empty. It is regretful."

That night Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his diary: "Today I understood that the greatest crisis of a court is not litigation but the maturity of society. When people do not hate the court but reduce their dependence upon it, the court must rethink its meaning."

He paused after writing, then added: "An empty court is not failure. It is a warning. If justice will not read the people's names, the people will open their own court."

At dawn a cleaner came to sweep the court corridor. He saw small names written in chalk upon one bench and began wiping them away. The names disappeared, then rose again in the dust. The cleaner stopped. His own father, too, had once failed to return from a construction site. The government record said, "Left work and absconded." Slowly he wrote his father's name in the dust.

Thus the first citizens' archive opened inside the empty court - not by order, not by petition, but because a cleaner remembered his father.

When Batuknath arrived, the bench was clean. Yet he felt as though invisible people sat upon every bench. The court was no longer empty; it had filled with all those who had never received an entry pass. He shuddered with a fear he had never felt in any case of his life. The mourning of his victory was taking shape now - in the form of an empty court.

FOLK SONG: FATHER, SIT UPON THE EMPTY BENCH

Folk tune: a labourer's son's lament

Sit, Father, sit upon the empty bench;

Today let the attendance of an absent life be marked.

They called the court empty, yet every bench is filled with shadows;

Those who were never granted entry are sitting there today.

The sweeper wrote his father's name in the dust;

For the first time the lie "left the job" began to tremble.

The erased name rose again, like a leaf from seed;

From a son's remembrance a citizens' archive opened in the night.

If justice will not read names, the people will become the court;

The empty building will regret and hear the call of home.

Father, sit upon the bench; your son has come;

Your absent life has become present today.

Those who were denied entry are all seated here today;

In the sweeper's dust the father's name is written.

The wiped-out name rises again like a sprouting seed.



CHAPTER 19

The Archive of Names

*A chair rots, but a root does not; paper tears, but the name in an
archive does not.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: PARATI OF PRESENCE

Folk tune: parati

Sing the parati - sing, "I am present";

Adorn the old names upon leaves of turmeric and kohl.

Arrange the old names upon turmeric-and-kohl leaves;

At the hour of attendance, let everyone sing, "I am present."

Paper may tear, but rooted letters sprout again;

When the drop of dew dries, the line of memory remains.

The government phone may fall silent, but the people's voice will not;

In the school of names, no one is absent.

Let every dawn begin with the parati of presence;

Let history become whole by marking the attendance of the unnamed.

In the cold air before dawn, the bell of attendance rings;

Paper may tear, roots do not - rows of names keep sprouting.

Government wires may stop, the people's voice will not;

History becomes whole when even the unnamed are marked present.



The seed of the names that had risen in dust upon the benches of the city's empty court travelled all night on the wind and reached Garh Narikel. Here the Court of Channa Grove had risen, yet its chairs remained. Call them chairs or roots, for they were not wooden seats. They were the roots of the tree itself, lifted above the earth through the night to become backs upon which the dead had sat, while the living stood and those who believed themselves victorious remained far away, behind raised car windows on the dusty road, wiping sweat from their faces.

When the first bird called at dawn, the lines of the game were still marked in Channa Grove. Footprints lay upon the earth, but no human being could tell whose feet had made them. Some prints touched the ground; some seemed to have passed a finger's breadth above it; some were round, as though a heavy boneless body had rolled there.

Panidubbi's hair, which had hung all night from the branches, was now falling in drops of dew. Brahma of the pipal remained silent - a silence like a judgment already written, whose copy each person must carry away inside the body.

Aruni rose first. He had not slept all night. The sound of the court kept circling in his head like the ceiling fan in the city courtroom. Yet the sound here was different. It contained no "allowed," no "rejected," no "next date." It held only names - names that had sounded through the night until the leaves of the grove seemed to have become sheets of paper.

Ba sat at the doorway. Her eyes were red, but her face was clear. She asked, "How many names do you remember?"

Aruni remained silent for a long time before answering. Does one remember names? Names fall like dew and flow like water. But once a name has come from the mouth of the dead, forgetting it is close to sin.

"Not all," Aruni said. "But once we begin, the remaining names will come by themselves."

Ba opened her old chest. The hinge cried out, and the mingled smell of old papers, camphor and dried neem leaves rose from within. It was the same chest that had held for years account books, old papers, wedding invitations, court notices, prescriptions, and Nand Aruni's unfinished application. The corners of that application had yellowed, but the ink still carried the smell of the night when Nand had written: "The actual number of labourers does not match the government record."

Ba ran her hand over the application. "This is not an archive," she said. "This is a paper stopped at the gate. An archive is what people keep in their chest. But chests split open, so it must also be written outside."

"Where shall we write it?" Saumya asked.

Ba pointed toward Channa Grove. "Where the court sat."

No announcement was made in Garh Narikel that day. No drum sounded. No poster was pasted. No committee, president or vice-president was formed. Whoever had a name to bring simply began to walk there. First came Sarayu's granddaughter. Sarayu was the woman labourer absent from the government list because attendance had never been marked in her name; wages had twice been drawn in her husband's name, and her body had gone into the Ganga on the same day that the engineer's register recorded, "Safety training completed." The granddaughter carried a plastic bag containing two pieces of broken bangles and an old photograph. When the bag moved, the bangle fragments chimed softly, as though they too wished to have their attendance marked. The face in the photograph was blurred, but the edge of the veil over the head and the corners of the eyes were clear.

"This is my grandmother," she said. "She is not in the papers. She is in our home. I want her to be in Channa Grove too."

Saumya sat beside her. "Name?"

"Sarayu Devi. Village - Bishanpur Tola. Work - carrying baskets on her head. Death - do not write death; write missing. But my grandmother died."

Saumya began to write, but not on paper. Ira took out a durable plaque she had brought from abroad - a thin sheet of metal that rain, sun, termites and government whitewash could not easily consume. But Ba stopped her hand.

"Metal later," she said. "First on a leaf. What the leaf accepts will endure on metal."

Ananya ran and brought a dried coconut leaf, long as an old map of a river. Devika cleaned it. Mira made ink from soot, kohl, ground turmeric and two drops of Ganga water. The mixed scent of turmeric and kohl rose from the ink, like the smell of home and the riverbank meeting in one place. Nishant, standing at the edge of the courtyard with his phone, put it into his pocket for the first time. He understood that there was no hurry to photograph what was being written here. Some things must first be seen with the eyes and only afterward by a device.

Aruni wrote the first name: "Sarayu Devi."

When the ink touched the leaf, a soft laugh came from within Channa Grove. No one knew whether it was Budhba Ghost or Hulasi. But there was relief in that laugh, as though some spirit sitting there for twelve hundred years were saying: yes, now it has begun.

The second name was Kanhaiya Paswan. His son Munna did not come; his grandson did. Kanhaiya had fallen while packing cement inside a bridge pier. In the government papers his signature continued to appear through the following day. A dead man's signature? When Nand had raised the question, the clerk had replied, "Sir, he had put his thumbprint in advance."

Kanhaiya's grandson took a small iron nail from his pocket. "This used to be with Baba," he said. "He used to say that if the iron meant for the bridge goes into people's stomachs, the bridge will shake."

The nail was placed beside the leaf. The name was written: "Kanhaiya Paswan."

After that, a procession of names opened. Mansur Ali. Phulo Mandal. Ganeshi Sada. Phoolbasia Khatoon. Bisesar Sah. Jagdish Yadav. Ramcharitan Mukhiya. Jhingur Mahato. Balesarni. Some names had no father beside them, some no husband, some only a tola. Disputes arose over pronunciation. Someone said, "Her name was not Phulo, it was

Phulwa." Another said, "The paper says Phulo." Ba said, "Paper can lie. Write the name by which she was called at home."

Thus the first rule was made: the archive would preserve not only the official name but also the name by which a person was called. For the dead find release in the name with which a mother's voice once called them.

By noon fifty names had been written in Channa Grove. The leaves lay spread upon the ground. Crows walked over them, but the ink did not smear. A child stepped upon one, but the letters did not break. Ba smiled. "When a name is written with the consent of the dead, the feet of the living cannot harm it."

At the same time, a meeting was under way in Batuknath Hariharan's city office. The judgment lay on the table. It was in his favour. Sections, procedure, limitation, jurisdiction, admissibility - every word supported him. Until yesterday he had defeated people with these words. Today the words seemed empty.

Chandrapal Batra was chewing cloves instead of a cigar; his doctor had advised him to stop smoking. He said, "We have won on paper. What are they doing on the ground?"

Batuknath lowered his spectacles. "Who?"

"The same people - Gop, Saumya, Aruni, Devika. They are not coming to court. They are not going to the media. Not even to social media. This silence is not right."

"Defeated people become silent," Batuknath said, but his voice lacked the confidence his face was supposed to show.

Raghav Signal Somani checked his phone. A short message from Lau Kin-Hung had arrived on Signal: "Noise over?"

Raghav replied, "Noise over? Legally, yes."

The answer came at once: "Law is not noise. People are noise. Check."

Sweat formed on Raghav's forehead. Foreign crime bosses can smell new activity among people from far away. He understood that after losing a case, people usually break, accept defeat, ask for settlement. But these people were asking neither for settlement nor for money for an appeal. They had disappeared. Missing people are frightening in the way dead people are frightening - you cannot tell from where they will speak.

By evening the sunlight slanted through Channa Grove and the names began to shine on the leaves. Ira, who had studied law abroad, watched them. She remembered the Harvard auditorium where the wall bore the words "Ethical Leadership." There had been no names there, only principles. Here there were no principles written, only names - and

in those names there was more ethics than in a thousand books in a library.

Ira said softly, "Shall I send one copy of this archive abroad?"

Ba laughed. "Send it abroad, send it across the sea, send it to the clouds. But the first copy will remain here. The soil that heard the name has the first right to it."

Gop Kumar, silent until then, opened his bag. It contained no printouts and not even the old pen drive. There were hundreds of small slips, each bearing one name and one number. A number meant a bank account, a bill, a payment, a date of death, an ambulance number, a medicine vial, a gambling transaction, the time of a digital-arrest call.

"These are names too," Gop said. "Not only labourers. Those who received bills instead of beds during the pandemic, receipts instead of oxygen; those whose sons were taken by the crocodile of the screen; those whose daughters disappeared into the market in bodies; those whose lives were silenced by blackmail - all of them."

Channa Grove fell quiet for a while, as though the dead were considering how many deaths one archive could contain. Then the pipal leaves moved. Brahma did not descend, but his shadow fell upon the leaves. The shadow split into four, toward the four directions of his four faces. Ba understood: permission had been given.

Thus the second rule was made: the archive would not preserve only the old water-burials. Anyone consumed by the system, erased by paper, drowned by a screen, killed through the theft of privacy, or sold in the market of bodies could have a name there, if their people wished it.

For the first time Mira spoke. "What if a person does not want their private life made public?"

Ba looked at her. "To name is not to strip someone bare. To name is to remember. The grief that must remain hidden will remain hidden. The name that must remain will remain. Channa Grove does not rob anyone of shame or dignity."

Mira lowered her eyes. The sentence gave her more shelter than any section of law had given her. She took out her paper. It contained no names, only markers: "a young woman, Darbhanga"; "a teacher, Patna"; "a nurse, Noida"; "a student, Kathmandu route"; "a wife threatened with a video." Mira said, "No names yet. Only markers. When they are ready, the names will come."

Thus the third rule was made: the archive would contain a place for silence as well. Some truths cannot speak at once; they need a protected shade.

By nightfall a sheet of leaves covered the earth in Channa Grove. Ananya and the village children began reading the letters. At first they treated the names like a game. Then Devika explained, "This is a lesson, not an examination. If you read a name wrongly, read it again. But do not forget it."

A child asked, "Did all of them die?"

Ba said, "No. All of them were written down."

On the distant road a black car approached, stopped and turned away, then came again. It carried one of Raghav Signal Somani's men. He tried to take a photograph, but the moment he opened his phone camera, the screen filled with water. He tried another phone - the same. A third - the same. The photographs showed only blurred leaves, water and letters hanging upside down. Frightened, he turned back.

Raghav received the report: "They are writing names."

Batuknath laughed. "Names? What can writing names do?"

Chandrapal Batra remained silent. He understood the world of online gambling. He knew that once data spreads, it is difficult to erase. Names are data too - but data whose password rests in the mouth of the dead. He asked quietly, "How many names?"

"Counting continues," Raghav said.

At the words "counting continues," Batuknath's laughter stopped. Victors fear counting, because they win by reducing numbers. Write thirty names and mark the rest absent. Record one death and call the rest illness. Record one suicide and call the rest personal reasons. Record one blackmail case and call the rest character. Record one fraud and call the rest greed. When counting begins in reverse, the paper of victory starts turning yellow.

That night no kabaddi was played in Channa Grove. The spirits sat around the field. Leaves lay spread in the centre. Budhba Ghost bent his dark body and read the first name, "Sarayu Devi." The white light in his eyes entered the ink for a moment. Then the letters of Sarayu Devi's name trembled slightly, as though from far inside a Ganga bridge pier she were brushing dust from herself and rising.

"I am present," a voice said.

No mouth moved, but everyone heard.

"I am present," came from another leaf.

"I am present."

"I am present."

Slowly attendance began to be marked throughout Channa Grove. In that attendance register there was no clerk, no red seal, no fee - only names, and air beside the names.

At that moment Aruni understood that this archive was not the next document in a lawsuit. It was society's first breath. The court had become empty because justice had found another home.

At sunrise the names written on the leaves of Channa Grove had dried. Some letters had turned faintly green, as though the leaves had taken them into their own veins. Ananya read each name aloud and the children repeated it. Devika stopped beside Ujjwal's name. She wrote: "Ujjwal Jha - the crocodile of the screen." Her hand trembled, but the letters remained straight.

Nishant stood beside her. He said softly, "The next work will be against the screen."

Devika looked at him. "Not work. A school."

Ba heard. "Yes," she said. "Boatmen recognise the crocodile that lives in water. Children must be taught to recognise the crocodile that lives in a screen."

That day the fourth rule was written in Channa Grove: an archive is not only memory; it is also caution. Writing a name honours the dead. Reading a name protects the living.

Far away in the city, Satyavrat Mehta sat at his table. A copy reached him too - by neither email nor courier. At dawn a coconut leaf had appeared on the veranda of his government residence. The security guard said, "Sir, no camera shows who left this."

Satyavrat opened the leaf. It still carried the faint scent of turmeric and kohl. At the first name his eyes filled with tears. At the second he rose from his chair. At the third he switched off his government phone.

He understood: the next hearing would not take place in court but in the memory of the country. This time the opposing counsel would not be a lawyer, but names. Names cannot be defeated by cross-examination.

That evening in Garh Narikel the first dry coconut leaf sounded in the wind. The sound was strange, like a school bell ringing somewhere far away.

Ananya asked, "Has the school opened?"

Ba said, "Yes. The school of names has opened."

FOLK SONG: I AM PRESENT

Folk tune: parati

Say it, say it - say, "I am present";

Set the old names upon leaves of turmeric and kohl.

Old names written on turmeric-and-kohl leaves;

A mother's voice called, and every life awoke.

Paper may tear and chairs may rot;

Letters buried in roots will sprout again.

Names fell like dew and settled as ink;

At the hour of attendance they rose to say, "I am present."

Mehta's eyes filled; the government phone fell silent;

The next hearing settled into the nation's memory.

A bell rang from the leaves - the school of names;

Mark the attendance of the unnamed and open a new light.

Let paper tear and chairs rot; the letters in the roots will remain;

Names fallen as dew will settle into ink.

Mehta's eyes grew wet; the government phone stopped;

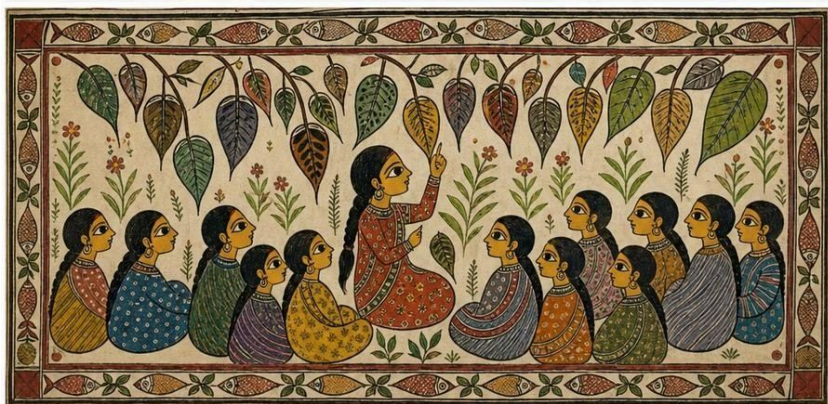
The leaf-bell rang - the school of names opened.



CHAPTER 20

A School Against the Screen

Whatever the screen had swallowed, the school returned one thing at a time.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NOT ALONE - A SONG OF
TOGETHERNESS**

Folk tune: children's folk tune

Call out together, friends; make a circle hand in hand;

Let the first question be: "I am not alone, am I?"

The screen-crocodile walks on four legs - greed, fear and shame,

And loneliness; once hands meet, its whole kingdom breaks.

Children make a circle and raise one question:

"I am not alone, am I?" - and a friend answers at once.

Shared fear grows lighter; shame returns to the offender;

Once support has a name, society takes shape.

The song of not being alone will echo across the phone;

Awakened voices will choose the road of life together.

The screen-crocodile hisses - greed, fear and shame;

When hand joins hand, its rule collapses.

Fear shared becomes half; laughter shared becomes double;

Children walk the road singing the song of companionship.



The dry coconut leaf that had sounded like a bell the previous evening kept ringing in people's ears until dawn. On the second day after the archive of names was made, a stillness descended upon Garh Narikel as though a great hand had been laid over the village. The names written on leaves in Channa Grove were wet with dew, but the letters did not run. Some had turned green, some black as kohl, some looked as though they were rising from within the soil. Children gathered there from early morning. For them this was not mourning; it was a new lesson. They stumbled over names, corrected one another, then repeated them together.

Ananya sat at the front. There was something in the way she read the names like a small child sounding out an alphabet for the first time -

except that this alphabet had been made from the bodies of the dead. "Sarayu Devi," she read. The others answered, "Present." "Kanhaiya Paswan." "Present." "Ujjwal Jha." Here her voice paused. Devika Sah stood at a distance, her eyes fixed not on the leaf but on Ananya's mouth.

Beside Ujjwal's name there was no basket, no nail, no bangle. There was only a small piece of broken mobile-phone glass. The sky appeared upside down inside it. Sometimes a branch of Channa Grove entered the reflection, and it seemed as though the tree itself had been trapped inside the screen. When morning sunlight struck the glass, it flashed for a moment like a crocodile's eye.

Devika came forward slowly and sat beside the leaf. She reached to touch the glass, then stopped. Ujjwal had been her younger brother - the quickest in the house, the most cheerful, the best with phones. At first he repaired everyone's phone. Later the phone would not let him repair himself.

"At first he used to win," Devika told the children, twisting the end of her sari around one finger. "The crocodile of the screen lets its prey win a little at the beginning, just as a river crocodile first keeps the water still. Children, remember: when something gives very easy profit at first, look for its teeth."

A child asked, "Where are the teeth inside a screen?"

Nishant Jha, who until yesterday had been a silent observer, laughed for the first time. He had grown up abroad, studied financial technology, and worked at building pathways for money inside screens. He knew that the teeth of a screen were not iron but rules, conditions, fear and addiction. Yet those words were useless to a child. He said, "When the screen tells you not to tell anyone, that is a tooth. When it says send money at once or you will go to jail, that is a tooth. When it says you are certain to win, then its tongue is red."

Ba smiled. "Well said. In the old days a witch told a child, do not listen to your mother, I will give you secret sweets. Now the screen says, do not tell your family, trust me. The witch has changed; the trick has not."

That morning the first class sat beside the leaves of Channa Grove. There was no blackboard, no bell, no government recognition. The children sat in a circle. In the middle lay broken mobile glass, an old bank passbook, Ujjwal's unfinished notebook and a coconut leaf. Devika, Nishant, Ananya, Mira, Saumya and Aruni sat not as teachers but as witnesses.

Devika told Ujjwal's story, not as a lament but as a lesson, because she had already wept through too many nights. One day Ujjwal won five thousand rupees. He brought sweets home. Everyone thought he had

found some online work. Then fifteen thousand was lost. Then fifty. Then debt. Then threats. Then one day a false official seal appeared on the screen and brought fear with it: "digital arrest" - words that made the body go numb. A voice on the phone said, "Lock the door. Turn on the camera. Tell no one."

Devika paused. The children kept looking at her. She said, "When the law truly detains someone, it does not make them sit alone at home with a camera open. When the State truly questions someone, it does not lock them inside fear. If fear tries to isolate you, understand that it is the fear of a thief, not the law."

Mira nodded. She remembered the blackmail in her own life. She too had been pushed toward isolation: "Tell no one, or the video; tell no one, or the photos; tell no one, or your family." She told the children quietly, "Fear that takes you away from your people is a messenger of falsehood. Truth leads you back toward your people."

The children did not understand everything on the first day, but they understood this much: a screen can also be a forest. A forest has snakes, jackals and the shadow of witches; a screen has them too. The only difference is that in the forest leaves rustle, while on a screen notifications flash.

By evening the whole village had heard that a mobile-phone school had opened in Channa Grove. Some laughed. "Such a huge scandal - courts, foreign countries, crocodiles - and now they will teach mobile phones?" But homes that had already received debt calls did not laugh; nor did homes where young men had lost money playing through the night, nor women who had trembled at calls from fake police. On the second day they came too.

Two days later there were more adults than children in the school: farmers on their way to the fields, labourers who had opened bank accounts, students studying in town, mothers of sons earning away from home, an old man who did not understand what giving his thumbprint meant. Devika listened to every story. Nishant drew lines on paper. He was not teaching methods of crime; he was drawing a map of fear - where fear enters, how loneliness is made, how greed catches hold, and how shame becomes a noose.

Nishant said, "The screen-crocodile does not walk on four ordinary legs. Its four legs are greed, fear, shame and loneliness. When you see all four together, run."

An old farmer asked, "Run where?"

Ba answered, "Toward your own people. The first medicine against fraud is: do not remain alone."

That sentence became the school's first rule. Ananya wrote on a coconut leaf: "Do not remain alone." The children read it. Those who could not read listened. Those who could not hear touched the lines of the leaf.

Meanwhile, unease spread through Chandrapal Batra's city office. His men reported, "Fewer new accounts are being opened in the Garh Narikel area. Young people are asking: where is this money coming from? In whose name is the account? For whom is the SIM card?"

Chandrapal struck the table. "Who is teaching them?"

"A woman - Devika Sah. A boy returned from abroad - Nishant Jha. And some village people."

"Village people?" Chandrapal laughed, but anxiety lived inside the laugh. "Village people will stop the game of finance?"

At that moment a message from Hong Kong arrived on Raghav Signal Somani's phone. Lau Kin-Hung's messages were always brief, as though he saved commission even on letters. The message said: "Trust down. Cause?"

Raghav replied, "Local rumour."

The answer came: "Not rumour. Education. Education is expensive."

Raghav froze. Criminals fear education as much as thieves fear the light of dawn. A rumour can be suppressed with money; once education enters a household, it becomes a child's question. No police guard can stand at the door of a question.

Batuknath Hariharan refused to believe it. "File a public-interest petition," he said. "Say these people are spreading false digital information, creating fear against the economy, driving away foreign investors. Drag them into court."

Chandrapal's eyes lit up. "A date?"

"Dates are my work," Batuknath said. "Let them run a school; I will trap them in procedure."

But there was a problem. The school was not an organisation. It had no registration, bank account, president or building. People simply sat in Channa Grove and talked. Whom could a notice be served upon? The tree? The leaves? Ba? The children? The ghosts? For the first time Batuknath understood that people who refuse to become an institution are difficult to catch in institutional traps.

That night Budhba Ghost laughed heartily in Channa Grove. "See?" he said to Hulasi. "The living are learning. Soon there will be less work for us."

Hulasi, who always searched the well's reflection for a child, watched the schoolchildren peacefully that day. "If children learn to recognise fear," she said, "far fewer spirits will come here."

From inside the pond, Panidubbi shook out her hair and listened. "I catch feet in water," she said. "But the screen-crocodile catches eyes. Save the eyes and the feet will save themselves."

So the second class was called "Save Your Eyes." Devika told everyone, "What glitters is not gold. Anything that says hurry is danger. Anyone who turns your shame into a weapon should be answered first by telling someone you trust."

A girl stood and asked, "What if my family blames me?"

Mira answered in a steady voice. "Then find another home - a friend, a teacher, a sister, an organisation. Do not accept blame yourself and thereby protect the offender. Society takes time to change, but silence is the offender's largest blanket."

That day Mira wrote the school's second rule: "Shame is not the offender's, not the victim's." Ba thought for a moment and corrected it: "Let the shame belong to the offender." The children wrote: "Let the shame belong to the offender."

On the third day Nishant made his confession. He said that the company he had worked for abroad had not merely built pipes for payments; it had measured people's desire, fear, addiction, time and loneliness. "I thought it was technology. Now I understand: when technology abandons compassion, it becomes a crocodile."

Someone in the village asked sharply, "Then are you guilty too?"

Nishant was silent. Devika wanted to defend him, but Ba stopped her with a hand. He had to give the answer himself.

"Yes," Nishant said. "I am guilty - I did not learn as much as I could have learned. I did not ask as much as I could have asked. But I will not run away now."

At that confession the leaves of Channa Grove moved. People usually run from guilt. Whether a person who accepts guilt and begins repairing the harm should be forgiven is a question for time; but such a person can be heard.

Saumya wanted to call the class "Guilt and Responsibility," but Ba laughed. "Do not give it such a heavy name. Write: If you understand your mistake, correct it." Ananya wrote exactly that. The children read it.

Slowly the school spread beyond the village. There were no posters, yet at weddings and shraddhas, in markets and bus stands, in tea stalls in Madhubani, lodges in Darbhanga, rented rooms in Delhi, children from

Garh Narikel repeated the rules: "Do not remain alone." "Let the shame belong to the offender." "If you understand your mistake, correct it." "Quick money is the crocodile's tongue." "If fear locks the door, open it."

Chandrapal Batra's gang suffered its first major blow the day Munna Paswan's cousin was taken to open an account. The boy stopped outside the bank. He held a pen, but his palm was sweating. He remembered the school. He asked, "Where will this money come from? Why is my name on the paper? Why will you keep my phone?" The man with him scolded him. The boy ran all the way to Channa Grove. His story was heard before everyone. No one called him foolish or guilty. They called him saved.

The word "saved" became very important. A person caught in fraud was not "stupid"; a person who stopped midway was "saved." That word began opening mouths.

Raghav Signal Somani grew irritated reading the reports. "Because of this rural counselling, the rate at which people are being trapped is falling," his men had written. Raghav flared up. "This is not rural counselling - fear is breaking," he thought. Fear was the axle of his business. Once fear broke, the voice of the call centre dried up.

Batuknath said, "Send law in place of fear."

He had a notice drafted. It said that an unlawful assembly in Channa Grove at Garh Narikel was making misleading statements against financial institutions, damaging the image of the digital economy, obstructing foreign investment and disturbing public peace. The notice was sent. The postman reached the village but stopped beside Channa Grove. The addressee read: "Coconut Leaf School, Channa Grove, Garh Narikel." The postman laughed. "Will the tree sign for it?"

Ba accepted the notice. In the place for signature she stuck a dry fibre from a coconut leaf. The postman grew nervous. "Will this be valid?"

Ba said, "Those who did not accept the names of the dead will not accept a fibre from a leaf either. Send it anyway. Paper wants an answer made of paper."

A copy of the notice also reached Satyavrat Mehta. He read it and remained silent for a long time. His government position told him to be cautious in such a matter. His conscience asked: if villagers cannot teach children how to protect themselves from fraud, what is law for? He wrote a personal note: "Public education cannot be treated as a crime when it warns people against fear, shame and greed." It was not a formal order, but later it proved very useful.

That night Satyavrat's note was read aloud in the school. The children did not understand the name, but they understood the sentence. Ananya asked, "Is this man on our side?"

Ba said, "He is on the side of truth. Whoever stands with truth sometimes ends up on our side as well."

Kabaddi was played again that night in Channa Grove, but the game was different. The lines the children had drawn by day became the ghosts' playing field at night. Instead of chanting "kabaddi," Budhba Ghost called, "Do not remain alone." Hulasi called, "Let shame belong to the offender." Panidubbi called from the water, "Save your eyes." In Raksh's glow, the rules written upon leaves kept shining.

At dawn the children found that a new line had grown by itself upon a coconut leaf. No human hand had made the letters. They were formed not from ink but from the veins of the leaf. Ananya read them slowly:

"Fear that is shared is no longer fear."

Hearing this, Devika wept openly for the first time in many days. It was not weeping over Ujjwal's death; it was weeping because she saw that her brother's death had not ended with him. It had become a lesson. A lesson can save more people than one body can.

Chandrapal Batra sat alone in his office that day. Messages from Signal had grown fewer. Some accounts had closed. Some boys had run away. Some families went not to the police but to the village school. For the first time he understood that the people he had defeated in court were putting down roots in society. His court victory was a roof made of paper; in Garh Narikel they were ploughing the earth.

He looked at the judgment on his table. It had a seal, a date, a signature. But no child's voice lived in the paper. He felt that one day it would turn yellow. And the leaves of Channa Grove? Leaves dry into seed. Seed becomes tree. Tree becomes leaf. Leaf becomes lesson again.

Evening wind moved through Garh Narikel. Coconut leaves sounded. The school did not close; people rose and went home, but the rules went with them. From that day a new greeting entered the village. Whenever someone sounded frightened on the phone, the other person asked, "You are not alone, are you?"

Slowly the question became a mantra.

You are not alone, are you?

That question broke many frauds. Many fears were shared. Much shame was returned to the offender. Many screen-crocodiles remained with their mouths open while the prey escaped.

And the Court of Channa Grove, which had already given its judgment, sat at a distance and smiled. It knew that justice does not always become an order. Sometimes it becomes a school.

FOLK SONG: YOU ARE NOT ALONE, ARE YOU?

Folk tune: children's folk tune

Ask first, children - ask, "Who is with you?"

When one another's voices remain, the crocodile will go hungry.

The screen-crocodile has four legs - greed, fear, shame;

When loneliness joins them, it can swallow the whole day.

Children sit beneath the tree, hands joined in a circle;

One question becomes a mantra: "I am not alone, am I - are you with me?"

Fear shared broke apart; shame returned to the offender;

The swindler's tongue dried up; the household companion was saved.

The lesson of the leaf does not yellow; it wakes again as seed;

Justice does not always come as an order; sometimes it comes as a school.

When the phone trembles, ask first: "Who is with you?"

When one another's voices remain, the crocodile stays hungry.

Greed, fear, shame and loneliness - the crocodile's four legs;

Once a circle forms, every net it cast begins to break.

Fear shared becomes half; shame returns to the offender.



CHAPTER 21

The Oath of Privacy

Peace does not come from outside; it breaks through the soil of fear and grows from within.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: INNOCENT, TOGETHER

Folk tune: women's-circle awakening song

Rise, sisters, gather the circle,

"We are innocent, we stand together" - join your voices.

We are not guilty, sister; let shame rest on the offender's brow,

Hold one another's hands, and a safer road will open.

The veil is ours to choose; let the voice remain free,

Fear shared is halved; courage flows from standing together.

The cry "I am not alone" will become a lamp in every home,

An awakened community will break the swindler's net.

We are innocent, we stand together - sing this song,

Set a guard of dignity at the threshold of privacy.

Let drums sound in every courtyard, let opened voices sing,

Lay the bundle of shame upon the one who commits the crime.

If one sister's step falters, ten hands will steady her,

No swindler can enter the ring of an awakened circle.



"You are not alone, are you?" That question had now become a greeting in the village. On the strength of it, once the Archive of Names had been made, people thought peace would at last descend upon the village. But peace never comes from outside; it grows from within. And when the inner soil has for years been packed with fear, shame, silence and threats, the earth trembles when the first shoot breaks through. The names had been written down, but with the names came bodies; with bodies, privacy; with privacy, the fear of humiliation; and with that fear came all the voices that had been locked for years inside the dark room of the mobile phone.

The night Devika Sah saw Ujjwal's name written on the third leaf of the archive, she could not sleep. Her brother's death no longer seemed a black dot drowned in a mobile screen; it was the darkness of the whole village. While Ujjwal was alive, everyone at home had said, "He is a bright

boy. He will go to the city, find a job and bring honour to the family." After he was gone, people began to murmur: "He got trapped on the phone. He lost in a game. His own fault." Devika kept feeling that society does not forgive the dead; it even turns their death into a reason to punish them.

So she sat beside the Archive of Names and wrote its first sentence: "We must identify not the dead person's mistake, but the net that killed him." Her hand did not tremble as she wrote. Only the shadow of the coconut leaf above her head trembled in the wind of Channa Grove.

Saumya Ramanathan returned to Garh Narikel from Delhi. She brought envelopes, files, notebooks and the small black device that recorded voices. This time, however, she came not like a journalist or researcher but like a priestess entrusted with writing an oath. She understood that testimony is given in court, but an oath is taken in society. Testimony may remain on paper; an oath changes the way people behave.

Meera, whose full name was Mrinalini, had at first refused to return to the village. She feared that people there might have heard about her. Fear has a strange shape: it can bring something years old to stand at today's door. She had received a message: "Do what we want, or all your photographs, all your conversations, all your relationships go public." There was no name on the message, only a blurred mark on Signal. But Meera had recognised that this was not personal hatred. It was a business.

What was her crime? She loved a woman. She had never understood how love could become a crime; but what society does not understand, it often turns into a weapon. Meera used to say, "My body is mine, my mind is mine, my love is mine. The crime belongs to the one who wants to sell them." Saumya urged her to come to Garh Narikel. "In this village even the ghosts live under their own names. Why should the living be afraid to speak theirs?"

* * *

No meeting was announced beside Channa Grove that day. In Garh Narikel, work that was truly serious was never proclaimed with the beating of drums. People arrived slowly. First Devika, then Saumya, then Meera. After them came Ujjwal's mother, whose eyes had stopped weeping and grown deep like a pond dried by summer. Then two young women arrived - one a nurse in the city, the other a contract worker at a bank. Both had been threatened from different numbers. Someone had told each of them: send money, or everything will be shown to your family.

At first none of them told her story. Silence, too, can sometimes be the first testimony. The ghosts of Channa Grove came walking just above the ground, leaving a finger's breadth between themselves and the earth.

Budhba Ghost shifted to another branch. Hulasi left the direction of the well and came toward the grove. Panidubbi emerged halfway from the pond and sat there; from her hair dripped not water but the glow of screens. Raksh shone, but this time his light did not dazzle the eyes; it was like a courtroom bulb lit so that a file might be read.

Saumya drew a circle on the ground with red earth. Beneath her finger the soil was damp and shivering, as though the earth itself were holding its breath before the oath. Inside the circle she wrote: "Privacy." Then she looked at them all and said, "The word may sound new, but the matter is old. A veil was privacy. A room was privacy. A letter was privacy. The body was privacy. A dream was privacy. The only difference is that once a thief broke open the door; now the thief breaks open the phone."

Devika drew the next line: "Fraud." Then Meera stepped forward slowly and drew a third: "Shame." She said, "The swindler catches us not with money but with shame. He knows that before we think of going to court, we will fear our family; before the family, society; before society, our own body. So today we swear that shame will belong to the offender, not to the victim."

At those words wind moved through the grove. All the coconut leaves stirred at once. For the first time in twelve hundred years Budhba Ghost laughed. His laughter burst like dark light, and in that light every woman's face grew bright.

At that same hour Chandrapal Batra sat in his office in the distant city. A message appeared on Signal: "A group is forming. Name: Oath of Privacy." Batra laughed. He thought it was some NGO-style performance. He did not call Raghav Somani; he only wrote, "Watch it. Fear is necessary." Raghav replied, "Fear is decreasing." For the first time Batra sat silent before the screen for a while.

* * *

The oath began. Saumya said, "First: the person whose photograph was stolen is not guilty. The person whose conversation was recorded is not guilty. The person whose love was mocked is not guilty. The person whose bank account was turned into a mule account is not, by that fact alone, the true criminal; the true criminal is the shadow that showed him the bread of commission and pushed him into the fire of the law."

Munna Paswan, who had appeared again and again through these chapters like a frightened face, stood at the edge of the grove. It was difficult for him even to say his own name. "They told me, just give us the account and you'll get five thousand rupees. Then the police came. My family said, 'You're a criminal.' But I never found the name of the people who gave me the work. They spoke on Signal; I was arrested at the police station under my own name."

Meera looked at him. "If you were caught by your name, you will also be defended by your name. Our work will be to give names to the anonymous criminals."

Ira watched the gathering from abroad. On her screen the circle in Channa Grove looked small, but the people sitting inside it seemed to her like the greatest university in the world. She had grown tired of hearing ethical frameworks, theories of privacy and human dignity discussed in Harvard halls. What Devika was writing on the earth here was more exact than many books. Ira wrote in her notebook: "Ethics is born where frightened people stop blaming one another."

Nishant too was present by video that day. Around him in the foreign fintech office were shining screens, green graphs, user growth and transaction statistics. Now he understood that inside the word "user" were buried Ujjwal's face, Munna's account, Devika's night, Meera's threat and the leaves of Garh Narikel. He sent Saumya a private message: "I am beginning to understand some of the payment routes. But I am afraid." Saumya replied, "Fear will remain. If there is no fear, caution dies. But fear will not be the master."

In the middle of the oath a little girl who studied with Ananya at the school asked, "If someone says, 'I'll send your photograph to everyone,' what should I do?" Everyone fell silent. The question was so simple that its answer became difficult. Devika sat beside the child. "First, do not blame yourself. Second, tell someone you trust immediately. Third, do not send money. Fourth, do not erase the evidence. Fifth, find the person's name - the offender wants to remain without a name; we will bring that person into a name."

The girl asked again, "And if my family scolds me?" Meera said, "Then we will teach the family too. Scolding the victim is help given to the swindler."

* * *

From that day a new custom began in Garh Narikel. Anyone who received a threatening message no longer remained alone. They came to Channa Grove, drew a circle on the red earth and said, "I am not guilty." Those three words slowly became a mantra. No priest had composed it. It came from the mouths of people whom society had trained to be silent.

Batuknath Hariharan grew uneasy. He loved the language of law because within it he could hide delay, appeal, technical objection and procedure. But what objection could he raise to "I am not guilty"? He told his secretary, "Find a way to stop these emotional gatherings." The secretary asked, "Under which section?" Hariharan fell silent. For him, silence was the first taste of defeat.

That night Raghav "Signal" Somani messaged Lau Kin-Hung: "Local resistance is taking a route different from law." The reply came: "Outside the law?" Raghav wrote, "Not outside the law. Before the law." For the first time Lau Kin-Hung answered, "I do not understand." Raghav stared at the reply for a long time. He knew that a man who understands only accounts, percentages, commissions and transfers cannot be made to understand oaths, shame, names and memory.

The night deepened. Meera sat alone beside Channa Grove. Only crickets sounded in the silence. Hulasi came near. Hulasi had no hands, yet her presence was gentler than a hand. Meera closed her eyes and remembered the woman she loved, who still lived in the city and was still afraid to come to Garh Narikel. Meera whispered, "To save love, we first have to change the language of fear." Hulasi smiled. The water in the well shone from within.

That night Saumya wrote in her notes: "The fight against the market in bodies is not only a fight against traffickers; there is no liberation without the protection of privacy. Homosexual, heterosexual, married, unmarried, woman, man, third gender - the first right over every body belongs to the person whose body it is. Whoever takes that right away through blackmail, religion, family, market, police or fear of the courts - write all their names on the same leaf."

The note was later pasted into the last section of the Archive of Names. Ananya gave it the title: "Dignity of the Body, Freedom of the Mind." Ba read it and said, "The words are new, but the matter is old. Why did Sita enter the earth? Because people thought they had a right over her body. Now we will not enter the earth; we will write upon the earth."

* * *

Three days later the first result appeared. A boy who had been caught in an online fraud came to the school before sending any money. On his phone was a threat: "Digital arrest." Devika read it. She neither laughed nor scolded him. She read it aloud to everyone. "Look - this language is a stamp made of fear. Real police do not speak like this on Signal. A real notice comes on paper, and behind the paper there is an office." The children clapped. The boy began to cry. Devika placed a hand on his head. "Cry, but do not send money."

That day Ujjwal's mother spoke in the gathering for the first time. "When my son died, I thought he had brought shame on us. Now I understand that we left him alone. If this school had existed that day, perhaps he would have said, 'Ma, I have been trapped.'" Her voice broke, but the words did not.

At this the spirits playing kabaddi in Channa Grove stopped. Budhba Ghost said, "When the living admit their own fault, half the burden of the dead is lifted." Raksh shone. Loth, who was always a spectator, moved a little forward this time. His mouth was half open, and for the first time it seemed to be trying to form a voice.

Meera wrote the last line of the oath: "We will not allow anyone's love to be used as evidence against them." As she wrote, a dry leaf fell from the tree. Its veins spread like a map of a city. Saumya picked it up. To her every vein looked like a lane, and in every lane someone was running to save their privacy. The leaf was placed in the archive.

Meanwhile, in Edward Broom's company office, a presentation was being prepared: "Management of Social Resistance." Its slides showed a map of India, risk zones, influence clusters and complaint groups. Beside Garh Narikel was a small red dot. What they did not understand was that a point that has begun to grow upon a leaf cannot be cut out of a map.

At the end of the night everyone repeated the oath. No hand was placed upon a religious book. Hands were placed upon their phones, which were no longer to be instruments of fear but boxes of evidence; upon their chests, which were no longer to be prisons of shame but homes of voice; and upon the earth, where names were being written. The cold glass of the phones slowly grew warm in their palms, as though even the devices were listening to the oath.

Together they said: "We are not guilty. The shame of what was done to us belongs to the offender. My body is mine. My conversation is mine. My love is mine. My name remains in my own hands. Whoever tries to silence me through fear, we will write that person's name in the archive. Whoever tries to isolate me, we will stand together against them."

When the oath was complete, Panidubbi returned to the pond. Hulasi looked into the water of the well and, this time, felt that her reflection had hands. Budhba Ghost climbed back to his branch and could not stop laughing. Raksh kept shining in Channa Grove. Far away, Chandrapal Batra's Signal app opened and closed at once - like a crocodile that had smelled the air outside the water for the first time and slipped back into its den.

At dawn the children of Garh Narikel wrote a new sentence on the school wall: "Fear, when shared, becomes a warning; fear, when hidden, becomes a noose." Underneath, Ananya added in small letters: "Silence is the swindler's first profit."

Devika stood at a distance and read it. She knew Ujjwal would not return. But now, if another Ujjwal became trapped, he would have somewhere to speak before dying. This was not justice, but it was the thing needed before justice: support. And when support acquires a name, it becomes society.

FOLK SONG: I AM NOT GUILTY

Folk tune: women's-circle song

Rise, sister, rise with your head held high,

"I am not guilty, I am not alone" - say only this.

My veil is mine, my room is mine, my dream bears my name,

The one who broke into the phone and robbed me bears the stain.

Fear hidden became a noose; shared, it became a warning,

The moment a sister held my hand, the swindler lost his swagger.

In the middle of red earth three bright truths sprouted -

I am not guilty, I am not alone, society stands with me.

Silence is the swindler's first profit; voice is his wall's collapse,

The moment support received a name, it became a people's net.

Whoever binds me with shame, we will write that person's name,

Together we will guard the threshold of privacy.

The veil is ours, the room is ours, even the dream bears our name,

The one who opened the phone and robbed us bears the stain and price.

Silence is the swindler's first profit - so Ba has said,

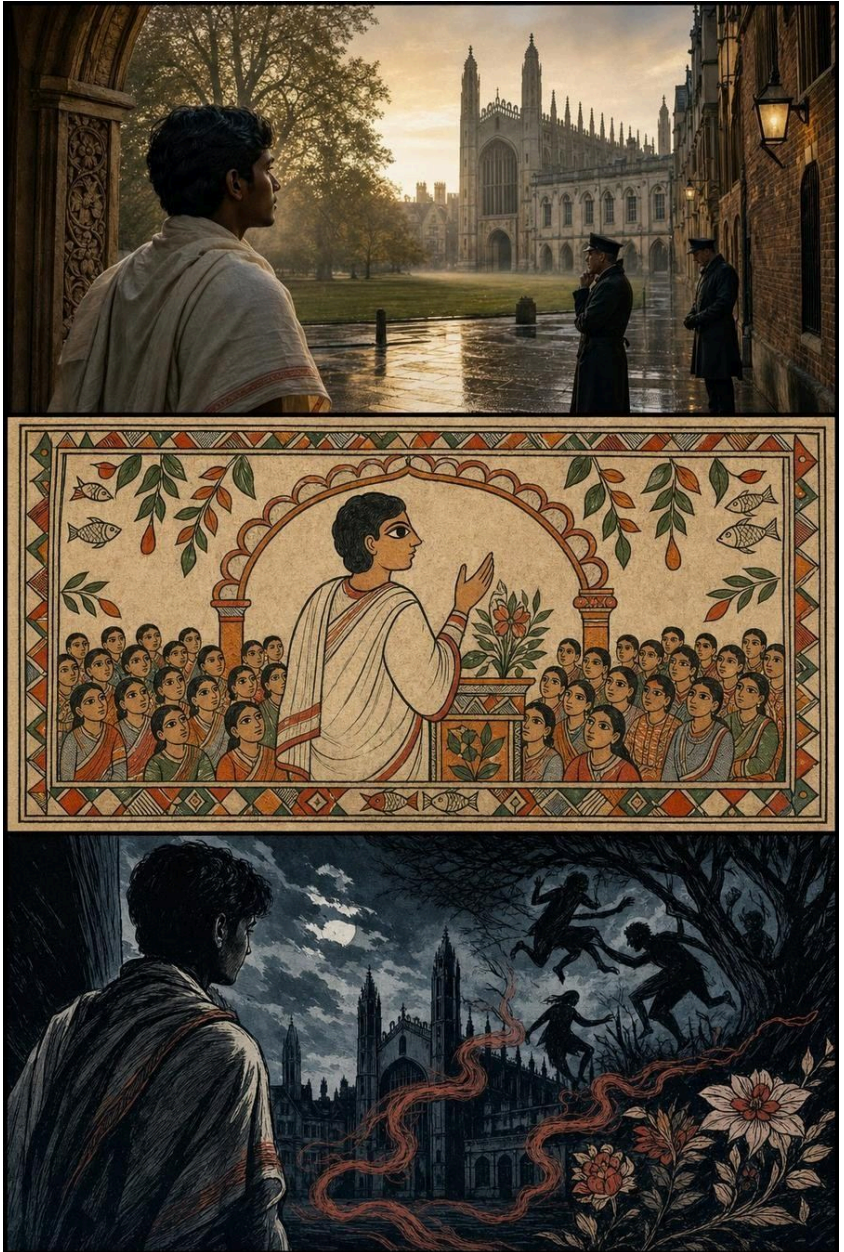
When the circle found its voice, his swagger dissolved like water.



CHAPTER 22

Harvard's Second Lecture

*A second lecture is better than the first only when someone has spoken
the truth in between.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE STRAIN OF TRUTH ON
AN EMPTY STAGE**

Folk tune: auditorium rhythm of a Vidyapati song

*Sing the strain of truth, let the stage remain empty,
Let a single voice from the leaf fill the whole hall.*

*Even if the stage is empty, the voice of the leaf will rise,
Greater than golden words, one true name will break forth.
The microphone may fall silent; the people's voice will not,
No bell is louder than the quiet strain of a question.*

*Read one name and the air of the hall changes,
More than applause, attentive silence meets the truth.
On the empty stage the strain of truth will make a new road,
Ethics will leave the paper and enter life.*

*The microphone silent, the lights dim, yet the gathering wakes,
One name spoken aloud changes the direction of the air.
Golden words fall away; truth stands unmoved,
In the deep rhythm of silence, a flood of truth descends.*



Dawn in Cambridge is not like dawn in Garh Narikel. There, mist does not rise over paddy fields, dew does not drip from the edges of coconut leaves, and the ghosts of Channa Grove do not end their night's kabaddi and climb back onto their branches. Yet that morning in Cambridge the air grew so damp that the smell of the Kamla-Balan seemed to rise between the university's old bricks. Security staff wondered where water was leaking from. There was no water anywhere. There was only memory, and when memory travels from very far away it first becomes a smell - as though the oath and the Archive of Names of Garh Narikel had crossed the sea by way of the wind and come this far.

That day Edward Broom was to speak on ethics again. Posters outside the auditorium announced: Global Enterprise, Human Dignity,

Responsible Capital. The lettering was gold, the paper thick, and the flowers on the stage were so clean they seemed never to have touched soil. Broom's assistants moved through the hall checking seats, testing microphones and loading slides onto the screen. The first slide showed a bridge over the sea beneath a blue sky. The second, a hospital. The third, a school. The fourth bore a single word: "Trust."

Broom stood before the mirror in his room. His face carried the calm of a man who had passed through many courts, many inquiries and many press conferences and could still straighten the knot of his tie as though he were the victor. He had been told that the matter in India had legally subsided. The disturbance around the sealed cover had exhausted itself. The Bar Council people were reassured. Old contract files lay beneath the dust of time. Digital fraud was a local crime. Questions about medicine procurement were administrative. Human trafficking was emotionalism. Payments for weapons belonged to national security. Drug money came from unknown sources. Every word had its own lock.

But he did not understand that once the lock on a word breaks, the voice does not remain on paper; it stays in people's mouths. And no seal can be placed upon a people's mouth.

Ira Aruni had an invitation to enter the auditorium. Her seat was in the front row, with a card bearing her name. Professor Elina Graves read the card and smiled. "Will you ask a question?" Ira smiled too. "No. Today I will not ask a question."

Elina Graves was slightly surprised. She had expected Ira to challenge the speaker from the floor and create an intellectual clash inside the auditorium. Universities can turn even conflict into a programme - time limited, questions polite, answers rounded, applause controlled. But Ira had understood that a question asked within the stage remains imprisoned by the rules of the stage. She now wanted to change the rules.

The auditorium filled. Journalists, researchers, donors, students, company representatives and policy advisers sat with their notebooks open. Broom came onto the stage. Applause. His first sentence was: "Ethics is not an ornament of business; it is its foundation." More applause. He went on: "Development is complete only when the dignity of the weakest person is protected." At that sentence the applause lasted longer, because the weakest person was not present in that auditorium.

At that same moment, outside the hall beside the old stone steps, Ira opened her small computer and sat down. With her were three students and two elderly women whom no one recognised. One student adjusted the camera. Another opened a live feed from Garh Narikel. The third checked the sound. Ira said, "Do not point the microphone at Broom's auditorium. Point it at the leaf."

In Garh Narikel evening was falling. The next page of the Archive of Names was opened upon the leaves of Channa Grove. Ananya was arranging the children in a line. Devika Sah stood nearby, Meera and Saumya on either side, Nishant struggling with the mobile connection, Aruni silent. First on the leaf were the names of labourers, then Ujjwal, then the women whose bodies had disappeared into the market, then the old people whose breath had been buried under bills. Today a new line was to be added: "Those whose names were called profit in foreign auditoriums."

Ananya began to read. "Sarayu Devi." The children answered, "Present." "Kanhaiya Paswan." - "Present." "Ujjwal Jha." - "Present." "Unknown woman, Room Twenty-Seven." - "Present." "Third old man on the oxygen waiting list." - "Present." "Not mule-account number - Munna Paswan." - "Present." The voices rose from the village into Ira's device, from there to the Cambridge steps, and from the steps to the closed doors of the auditorium.

Inside the hall Broom had reached his third slide. He was saying, "We must learn from local communities." At that instant the photograph of the bridge on the screen changed. Someone assumed a technical fault. In place of the bridge appeared a name written on a wet leaf. Broom froze. An assistant ran forward. The screen corrected itself. He began again. Before his next sentence ended, a second name appeared. Then a third. A fourth. The names were entering the slides like seeds long pressed beneath paper suddenly breaking out as letters.

For the first time sweat appeared on Edward Broom's brow. The air-conditioning was strong, yet beside his ears he heard the churn of Ganga water. It was not water; it was the splash of bodies fallen among crocodiles. The tie knot he had straightened before the mirror like a victor now felt like a noose around his breath. He gripped the microphone and tried to speak: "Please... a technical problem..." But through his own voice came another: "Thirty declared. The rest absorbed." Broom panicked. He could not tell whether anyone else had heard it. But Elina Graves had.

Elina rose slowly. She did not move toward the stage; she walked toward the door. The dignity of an auditorium depends upon the speaker continuing to speak and the listeners remaining seated. But Elina went outside. A few students rose behind her. The donors were first displeased, then uneasy. Broom began to feel alone on the stage although the hall was still full. Sometimes a crowd makes emptiness more visible.

Outside, Ira was not reading the names. She was only guarding the transmission. The names were being read in Garh Narikel. She could have taken the stage, asked questions, waved documents and made accusations, but she had understood: every time we go onto their stage, they will say this is a dispute. In a dispute truth becomes half. In a name,

truth remains whole. So she sat silently. This time her silence was not fear; it was the silence of organisation.

In Hong Kong the same transmission opened in Lau Kin-Hung's office. He normally did not look at any face for long; he preferred numbers. But the names written on the leaf refused to become numbers. A message appeared on Raghav "Signal" Somani's device: "Shut the source." Raghav replied, "There are many sources." Another message: "Main person?" After a long pause Raghav wrote, "There is no main person. There is a village."

In Delhi Chandrapal Batra watched the transmission and shouted at his people. "Stop all of this! It is contempt of law! It is damaging the country's image on a foreign platform!" Those listening remained silent. They understood that contempt was a legal word, but the children were reading names. Under which section does one forbid the reading of a name? Under which Act does one prohibit saying that a dead person is present?

Batuknath Hariharan sat in his luxurious drawing room. Tea stood before him with a skin forming on its surface. He watched Ira on the screen. He hoped she would say something in anger, cross some line, so that defamation, contempt, breach of decorum, national interest - something could be applied. But Ira remained silent. The children of Garh Narikel were speaking. How does one send a notice to children? How does one summon a coconut leaf? How does one obtain Panidubbi's signature?

Satyavrat Mehta watched the transmission in his office. His eyes filled not with relief but with pain. He knew these people could have come to a state court, yet they were building their society outside the court. It hurt him because this was a defeat of the State. But a small gladness rose within him too, because truth had escaped the delay of the courtroom and entered the people's mouths. Softly he said, "The State may delay; sometimes society stops waiting."

The crowd on the Cambridge steps kept growing. The stone had absorbed the evening cold, but no one got up. Inside the hall the lecture continued; outside, the names. Inside: "accountability." Outside: answer. Inside: "dignity." Outside: the presence of the dead. Inside: "ethical framework." Outside: children's voices. Slowly the journalists came out as well. They found no sensation - no shouting, no posters, no list of accusations. Only a village, a leaf and children reading names. It was a difficult scene for journalism because it was not noise; it was patience.

Broom's lecture ended. The applause was formal. He tried to leave through a private door. But as he crossed the corridor he saw the shadow of a coconut leaf on the floor. There was no coconut tree inside the building. He stopped. A name was written in the shadow, but he could

not read it. He felt that the language of a name lay outside all the languages his lawyers could have translated.

Elina Graves sat beside Ira on the steps. For a long time she said nothing. Then she asked, "What can I do?" Ira looked at her for the first time. "Leave the stage," she said. Elina did not understand. Ira repeated, "The next time they come to your stage to speak about ethics, leave the stage empty. That empty stage will speak more loudly than their lecture."

That night copies of the children's reading of names circulated through the Cambridge dormitories. Some called the pages a research paper, some resistance, some a people's code. Ira gave it no name. To her it was simply a leaf from Garh Narikel. Once something is named, universities turn it into a syllabus; without a name it remains alive.

After the transmission ended in Garh Narikel, the children scattered. Ananya could not fold the leaf; the wind folded it by itself and laid it at the root of the coconut tree. Budhba Ghost sat laughing on his branch. Hulasi looked into the well and, for the first time, thought the eyes in her reflection resembled Ira's. From inside the pond Panidubbi raised a hand and slapped the surface three times. Three sounds came: splash, splash, splash. This time they were not death, but presence.

By dawn a new saying had spread through Garh Narikel: "Listen to what is spoken on the stage; believe what is written on the leaf." The children wrote it on the school wall. Beneath it Ananya added in small letters: "One way of asking a question is to read a name in silence."

The following week Edward Broom changed the name of his company. The news spoke of a new beginning, a new commitment, a new ethical direction. The children of Garh Narikel laughed. Changing a name does not change a crocodile's teeth. They opened the next leaf, because the story had not ended. Those who believed they had won would now have to face a new name every day; and those who had been called defeated were so busy with their second task that they had no time even to listen to the sorrows of the victors.

FOLK SONG: THE VOICE OF THE EMPTY STAGE

Folk tune: a Vidyapati-style melody

The stage has spoken, the empty stage has spoken,

At one labourer's name the cloud of ethics has broken.

Golden words upon the stage, truth's name upon the leaf,

Applause grew tired and slept; the village woke beneath.

Ira silently let the names be read; the auditorium shook,

Three splashes of presence stilled the microphone of lies.

*The company changes its name and says: new direction, new
beginning,*

The children laugh: the teeth are old - what new religion is this?

Hear what the stage says; trust what the leaf records,

Know that sometimes a question is asked by reading a name in silence.

Today the empty stage spoke louder than a hall full of lectures,

At one labourer's name the cloud of ethics broke.

Golden words above, the true name upon the leaf,

*A child laughed: the teeth are the same old teeth - what illusion is
new?*



CHAPTER 23

The Search for Batuknath

*The paper of victory was thick, but it held not a single sound - and
without sound, victory is only weight.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LEAVE VICTORY, SEEK THE PEOPLE

Folk tune: travelling victory song

*Come, victorious traveller, first go to the defeated home,
Press the paper beneath your arm and walk while sharing affection.*

With the order of victory beneath your arm, first go to people's homes,

Hear how the one you defeated is living today.

If victory does not serve, it becomes only a burden,

The defeated rise through work and build a new society.

Lay aside the pride of office, let dust settle on your feet,

Learn your answer from the free lives of the people.

Leave victory and seek the people; the meaning of victory will change,

Your own honour will bloom when you preserve another's dignity.

Set the drum of victory far away; open the road to your ears,

First go and weigh the silence of the defeated courtyard.

Place the dust of the road upon your brow, cool the fever of office,

Bring back the people's laughter and only then preserve your victory.



Across the sea the stage had fallen empty and the company had changed its name; here in the city Batuknath Hariharan held the paper of victory, yet could find no taste of victory. The paper was thick, the seal shone, and the language of the order was so courteous that even cruelty wore manners. But there was no sound inside that paper. No applause, no slogans, no yellow pallor of defeat on the faces of the opposing side. He sat in his chamber for a long time turning the order over and over. He had believed that after his victory the defeated would come to his door - with an apology, a settlement, a list of money, a new case, a television debate, a threat of appeal. But the doorway remained empty.

That empty doorway frightened Batuknath more than anything else. He was a man who feared silence, not noise. Noise could be converted

into advocacy; silence could not. Protest could be called contempt; absence could not. If the defeated wept, their tears could be turned into a trade in sympathy; if they raged, their anger could be made into a question of law and order. But if they simply returned to their work, he had no language with which to save himself.

He summoned his secretary, an old hand who could tell from the weight of a file whether it contained truth or bribe. Batuknath asked, "Where are they?" The secretary did not understand. "Who?" "The ones who lost. Aruni, Gop, Saumya, Devika, Meera, Ira - all of them." The secretary checked the files. "Sir, no further application has come from them." Batuknath narrowed his eyes. "No application? Defeated people do not file another application? How is that possible?"

The secretary said quietly, "Perhaps they have gone back to the village." At first Batuknath laughed. Then the laugh stopped halfway. Village. The word contained the sort of earth upon which his shoes were not accustomed to walk. He had always seen a village as an address written behind a court fee - police station, post office, district. To him, the village was an address of a litigant. Now that same village was becoming an independent territory outside the court.

Batuknath immediately sent Chandrapal Batra a message on Signal. He did not make a direct call; caution remained his religion even after victory. The message was brief: "Where are the main people?" Chandrapal replied, "Field empty. All in village. Some teaching children. Some writing names. Matter quiet." Batuknath read the message once, then again, then a third time. "Matter quiet" - he did not like the sentence. In the world of crime, quiet is often the first breath of a storm.

That night Batuknath could not sleep. In his dream the courtroom was empty. The judge's chair empty, rows of lawyers empty, gallery empty. Only a coconut leaf lay in the middle. On it was written: "Whom did you defeat?" He moved to pick it up, but the leaf slid away across the courtroom floor. He ran after it. It moved farther. At last it went out through the door and flew toward Channa Grove.

At dawn he decided to go to Garh Narikel. The journey would not be announced. No press, no security convoy, no reception. He wanted to see the real condition of the defeated. He believed that the moment he reached the village some headman, priest, broker, representative of a victim's family or local lawyer would come to his feet. They would ask, "Sir, what happens now?" And he would display his old art - a little reassurance, a little fear, a little charity, a little compromise.

But before he reached Garh Narikel the road itself changed. When the car approached the floodplain of the Kamla-Balan, the driver's navigation device stopped working. On the map the road ran straight, but on the real earth there was sand, riverbank, dry channels, half-dead

culverts and water from a pond rising suddenly into the track. The sand squeaked beneath the tyres. The driver asked, "Sir, which way?" Batuknath snapped, "Look at the map." The driver said, "The river does not move on a map, sir. Here the river moves."

The sentence struck Batuknath. The map of law, too, draws straight roads, while the suffering of people keeps making its own channels. He did not want to admit it. He merely shut the window. Yet even through the closed glass the smell of earth entered the car. In that smell mingled the water of the courtroom, the sealed cover, the judgment of Channa Grove, the names read by Ira and Devika's voice.

There was no welcome at the village boundary. Only two children were drawing a circle with lime on the dirt road. Inside it they drew a mobile phone, and around it the teeth of a crocodile. Batuknath stopped the car and asked, "What are you making?" One child answered without fear, "The crocodile of the screen." The other added, "It gives you a win first, then eats your house." Batuknath's throat dried. Devika and Nishant's school was working.

He messaged Chandrapal again: "Children trained. Source?" No answer came at once. Batuknath waited. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. At last a short reply appeared: "Signal not clear. Network strange in village." Batuknath grew irritated. The network in Garh Narikel was not strange; words there travelled more by mouth than by mobile phone. And no company had bought the network of human mouths.

When he reached Channa Grove he saw no stage, no banner, no flag of agitation. A long bamboo rack stood there, and children were drying coconut leaves upon it. Every leaf bore a name. No caste, no religion, no occupation, no case number beside the names. Only a name, and sometimes a sound - splash, breath, screen, body, leaf.

No one ran when they saw Batuknath. No one protested. No one raised a slogan. That unsettled him even more. Had there been protest, he could have called for police. Had there been slogans, he could have called it contempt. Instead the quiet children looked at him and continued their work. A girl counting leaves beside Ananya asked, "Is your name written here?" Batuknath started. "My name?" The girl said, "The names worth saving are written here. A name that knows how to save itself does not need to be written."

Ananya came then. She was no longer a child, though the fearless clarity of a child remained in her eyes. Batuknath recognised her. Her face had appeared in court papers, at the edges of news reports, in Ira's broadcasts. "I want to meet your father," he said. Ananya replied calmly, "He has gone to read names." "Where?" "Where the names are incomplete." Batuknath did not understand. Ananya added, "Please wait. You must have learned waiting in court."

The children who heard her did not even smile. Even the village's irony was disciplined that day. Batuknath sat upon an old wooden stool. For the first time he understood that waiting hurts most the person who has spent years imposing it upon others. Giving dates in court was easy; waiting beneath Channa Grove was difficult.

After a while Devika Sah arrived carrying a bundle of notebooks. She was recording village by village the suicides of young people, frauds, mule accounts, digital arrests and the testimony of surviving families. Batuknath rose at once. "I need to speak with you." Devika answered, "Everything will be said in front of everyone." Batuknath smiled. "Confidential communication has importance in law." Devika said, "Fraud also begins with confidential communication."

Batuknath thought this woman dangerous because she was not crying. A crying woman can be turned into a photograph; a calm woman becomes a document. He softened his voice. "I can help with the question of compensation." Devika looked directly into his eyes. "You should have offered compensation on the day a rate was fixed for removing the names of the dead. Now I want names, not rates."

Meera arrived meanwhile with three women and two young men. Their faces carried the exhaustion of people who grow old defending their privacy. Meera greeted Batuknath. There was neither fear nor reverence in the greeting, only civility. Batuknath said, "The matter concerning your private material can be suppressed by legal means." Meera did not smile. "It will not be suppressed. It will be erased. And whoever tries to suppress it will have their name placed on the leaf."

For the first time Batuknath understood that the language of these people had changed. They did not say "case"; they said "name." Not "claim," but "memory." Not "compensation," but "dignity." Not "confidentiality," but "privacy." The old weapons of law grew blunt against this language.

He thought perhaps he could speak with Aruni - the man of the family, representative of the lineage, the authorial face. A settlement might be possible with him. But when Aruni came, there was no petition in his hand, only an old spade. "What is this?" Batuknath asked. Aruni said, "Digging a new hollow beside the coconut trees. To store the leaves." "Your appeal?" "When there is time, we'll see. Right now the rain is making it hard to dry the names."

Batuknath felt insulted. Not because anyone abused him, but because no one gave him importance. The greatest hunger of the cunning is to remain important. It matters less to them that their crime be forgiven than that they remain at the centre. Garh Narikel would not place him at the centre. He was merely a visitor who had carried his old power into the wrong place.

He went to the village elders, human old men sitting in the sun, rubbing tobacco in their palms and squinting into the distance. He said, "I care deeply about your village's reputation. Outsiders will make this struggle political." One elder asked, "What does political mean?" Batuknath was ready. "Parties, slogans, arguments." The old man laughed. "Our party is the leaf, our slogan is the name, our argument belongs to the children. Whom will you buy?"

No one sitting there laughed at the sentence. Only the shade of Channa Grove shifted slightly. Batuknath felt the trees themselves were listening. He looked up. Ghosts are not normally visible in daylight, but that day he saw black-and-white patches moving among the branches - someone's eyes white, someone's body dark, someone's laughter caught between leaves.

He told himself it was fatigue: the long journey, the village air. But when he rose and walked into Channa Grove, his feet grew heavy. For the first time he entered without judge, police, article or rulebook. Here rules were made of leaves, washed by water and enforced by memory.

At the centre of Channa Grove lay a round empty space. Ananya said, "Kabaddi is played here." Batuknath wanted to laugh, but could not. He remembered the Court of Channa Grove, the judgment of the ghosts, the water of names. "Now?" he asked. Ananya said, "Now the children will play. The dead will watch. Sometimes it happens the other way round as well."

A small boy - perhaps Munna Paswan's nephew - drew a line on the ground and said, "This line belongs to the game, not the court. Whoever crosses it must hold their breath and speak the truth." Batuknath stared at the line. He felt that the instant he crossed it all the secret messages inside his belly would spill out - Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Signal, Lau Kin-Hung, payments, dates, defences. He drew his foot back.

Another message from Chandrapal arrived: "Situation?" Batuknath could not answer for a long time. At last he wrote, "No leader. No demand. No fear." A little later came the reply: "Then no danger." Batuknath stared at the phone. Chandrapal did not understand. Batuknath knew that a movement without leader, demand or fear is the hardest kind. A leader can be bought, a demand reduced, fear increased. But where does one find a broker for work sustained by love, memory and a children's school?

Batuknath walked toward the village pond. Stories of Panidubbi had once seemed absurd to him. That day the pond was so still that it reflected not the sky but the ceiling of a courtroom. He leaned over. His face was not in the water. Only one thick word floated there: "Procedure." He touched the surface. The word broke apart and became hundreds of names. He stumbled backward in fear.

The children watched him. None of them was afraid. He found this unbearable. The cunning want children to be impressed by their cars, clothes, titles, security, language and seals. Here the children looked at the city dust on his shoes and seemed to be estimating how far this man could walk through sand.

Evening descended slowly. The first shadows stretched through Channa Grove. Within them Batuknath saw figures: Budhba Ghost on a branch, Hulasi from the direction of the well, Loth by the bushes, the faint light of Raksh, and countless labourers carrying invisible baskets on their heads. They were not looking at him. They were looking at the children, as though they had now handed their justice over to them. For the first time Batuknath was completely alone.

He made one last attempt. "Write a settlement," he said. "Settlement of what?" Aruni asked. "All sides together - a peaceful resolution." Gop Kumar, who had remained silent until then, said softly, "Resolution is your word. Our word is remembrance." Batuknath grew annoyed. "Memory does not fill a stomach." Devika answered, "Fraud empties one. We were first taught the science of being emptied; now we are learning the art of filling again."

Batuknath took out a sheet of paper. It was blank - a draft settlement on which names would later be filled in. He expected the sight of paper to bring greed or fear into people's eyes. Ananya took it instead, folded it into a little boat and set it on the pond. The paper boat travelled a short distance, became wet and sank. The children watched in silence. Ananya said, "Water does not keep a paper that has no name."

At that moment Batuknath understood that he had come to the village looking for defeated people, but there were no defeated people here - only free ones. Defeated people look for an opponent; free people look for work. The villagers were not opposing him because they had already gone beyond him. What had been called defeat on the court steps proved beneath Channa Grove to have been a transition.

Night came. Batuknath sat in the car to return. The car moved, then stopped again on the floodplain. The driver said, "The road is blurred." Batuknath looked out. From far away in the direction of Channa Grove came the voices of children - not kabaddi, but names. After each name, a breath. After each breath, silence. In that silence the paper of his victory began to sweat.

The paper that had been stiff in court was now soft in his hand. Beneath his finger he could no longer feel the raised seal. He opened it. The seal's ink had spread, and between the lines of the order a new sentence had appeared: "Appeal against whom?" Batuknath trembled. There was no water in the car. His hands were dry. Yet the paper was wet.

On reaching the city he sent Chandrapal one last message: "They will not return to court." Chandrapal replied, "Then matter finished." Batuknath stared at the screen for a long time. Slowly he typed, "No. Now the matter will continue without us." He meant to send it, but his thumb stopped. At last he deleted the message. The cunning grow old before they learn to write the truth.

That night kabaddi was played in Channa Grove. The children had played by day; now it was the ghosts' turn. Budhba Ghost crossed the line, held his breath and chanted, "Batuknath, Batuknath, Batuknath." Raksh shone, Loth clapped, Panidubbi stirred the pond. But this name was written not to save it, but to warn. Not every name is memory; some names are caution.

At dawn Ananya went to gather the leaves and found a new one. It bore neither the name of a dead person nor of a victim. It said only: "If someone keeps searching after victory, understand that he is trapped inside defeat." Ananya smiled as she read it. The leaf was not placed in the archive but pinned to the school wall, because it was not a list of names. It was a lesson.

The day began again in Garh Narikel. Devika went out to teach the next lesson on digital fraud. Meera sat with the privacy circle to hear the story of a new woman. From far away Nishant explained the map of payment channels to the children through drawings. Ira kept writing her proposal for an empty stage at Harvard. Gop Kumar continued securing copies of the leaves. Aruni kept digging a new hollow beside the coconut trees.

And in the city Batuknath Hariharan put his order of victory into a cupboard. Sunlight did not reach the document. Yet from inside the cupboard he sometimes heard the rustle of leaves. Each time he started. Then he remembered: no one in Garh Narikel was waiting for him. That was the greatest punishment.

FOLK SONG: THE VICTOR'S SEARCH

Folk tune: travelling song of separation

Batuk searches, he searches for the defeated,

The paper of victory beneath his arm, but his heart will not settle.

The order of victory beneath his arm, Batuk walked to the village,

The one he had defeated was nowhere to be found by name.

One opened a school, another stood beside a sister,

Another turned the papers of the dead into a people's colour.

The empty doorway frightened him, not the crowded court,

On the road of free people victory had lost its price.

The order lies in a cupboard where even sunlight cannot reach,

At night the rustling leaves shake sleep from his eyes.

The one who keeps searching after victory is locked inside defeat,

Garh Narikel does not wait - no punishment is fiercer.

Night after night the rustling leaves shake sleep away.



CHAPTER 24

The Novel Begins Again

Where a story is said to end, the grove opens a new page from that very place.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DAWN OF A NEW PAGE

Folk tune: children's kabaddi song

Turn it, children, turn the new page,

old man who counted his breaths on the veranda because oxygen had failed him.

Ananya arrived first. She carried neither notebook nor mobile phone nor a copy of a court order. She brought a small wooden stick, the kind with which the ghosts had drawn the kabaddi line at night. The wood was cold and wet with dew. She cleared the ground. Beneath the dust appeared an old line, black as though scratched into the earth by a fingernail. The children drew a new line over it. Old and new merged into one another.

Budhba Ghost sat upon his branch. It was daylight, yet he was visible. Such a thing happens in Garh Narikel only when the dead have begun to trust the living. His body was dark, his eyes white; but today the eyes held no command, only the easy contentment that follows long exhaustion. Hulasi watched from the corner of the well. Panidubbi sent no hair above the pond, only a single ripple.

Ananya said, "Now the game begins."

Devika asked, "Whose game?"

Ananya answered, "For the one whose name survived. For the one whose name was erased too. Not for the one whose name was written in crime - that name is for warning."

Aruni watched from a distance. He understood that he had already written the end of the novel, but the village was teaching him that those who write endings live under the greatest illusion. Once a story enters the mouths of the people, the writer's pen must follow behind it. In Channa Grove that morning, ownership of the story was changing hands.

The first child crossed the line. His name was Somit, Munna's nephew. Holding his breath he chanted, "Ujjwal Jha, Ujjwal Jha, Ujjwal Jha." He did not say kabaddi. He spoke a name. Before his breath broke, Devika stepped forward, touched him and said, "Ujjwal did not lose. He taught us to recognise the crocodile of the screen." The children did not clap. They kept silence. In Garh Narikel some names ask not for applause but for silence.

A second child, a girl, crossed the line and spoke Sarayu's name - the woman labourer whose name had never been properly entered in the safety register. She returned before her breath failed and placed her palm upon the earth. A small damp print appeared there. Devika said, "This is a signature. The earth signs for the one who was called illiterate."

The third player who crossed the line was invisible. The children saw only dust rise. A voice came: "Not thirty names - three hundred names." It was the collective voice of the spirits who had taken water-burial. They did not recite each name. They wanted the children to keep searching for

those names and writing them in the years ahead. An incomplete list gives work to the future.

At that same hour in the city Batuknath Hariharan opened his cupboard. The order of victory had lain inside all night. In the morning he hoped the paper might have dried. It was still slightly damp. The ink had not spread, but the edges of the words had softened. Beside "Petition dismissed" a fine new line had appeared: "Public work begins." Batuknath wiped his spectacles. The line remained.

He immediately messaged Chandrapal Batra: "What is happening in the village?" Chandrapal replied: "Classes. Names. Children. No agitation." The answer did not calm Batuknath. What section of law applies to work that is not an agitation? How does one order the suppression of something that is not a slogan? Where does one send a broker when there is no leader to buy?

Chandrapal Batra, for his part, was not greatly worried by the children, leaves, names and school. He thought those were the occupations of sentimental people. His real concern was the app's data. In the previous seven days fewer new mule accounts had opened. Five young men who had been offered five thousand rupees each had attended Devika's class, turned back and filed complaints at the bank. During one digital-arrest call, an elderly woman had laughed and hung up. For the first time Chandrapal understood that fraud loses not only to police, but to understanding.

Raghav "Signal" Somani sent Lau Kin-Hung a message: "Market slowing. Education creating resistance in rural area." The reply came: "Buy education." Raghav stared at the screen for a long time. How does one buy education? A teacher's salary can be bought, a curriculum can be bought - but a grandmother's story? A child's warning? The leaf of Channa Grove? None of these appears on an invoice.

Lau Kin-Hung sat in a glass office overlooking the sea in a distant country. On his screen was a map of India - states, districts, payment channels, loss and profit. Garh Narikel was only a small point. But from that point red lines were spreading, like not a virus but seeds of resistance. His analyst said, "Sir, this area is strange. Understanding is spreading faster than complaints." For the first time Lau Kin-Hung asked the economic value of "understanding." No answer came.

Edward Broom's second Harvard lecture was watched widely abroad, but the clipped videos of his talk were surpassed by the children's reading of names beneath them. Broom's PR team said, "This is an emotional reaction. It will fade." Ira knew that what tires is that which needs a stage. Once village people become absorbed in work, they continue even through exhaustion.

Satyavrat Mehta sat at his government desk. A new file arrived - not a petition to reconsider the old case, but a request for an opinion on "the legal status of community archives." He smiled. The State was now asking whether the leaves were lawful. He remembered: the State had spent years erasing people's names, and was now afraid of their leaves. At the top of the file he wrote, "Memory is not the property of the State."

Meanwhile the school had begun in Garh Narikel: the Coconut-Leaf School. No walls, no gate. On one side of Channa Grove, the Archive of Names; on another, a class on recognising the crocodile of the screen; on the third, the Oath of Privacy; on the fourth, song. Every child who came to study first spoke their own name, then one saved name. In this way, each day, every living child gave presence to one dead person.

In her class Meera said, "Love is not a crime. Privacy is not a weapon. Blackmail is not shame; it is violence." At first some people felt uneasy. Such sentences had not been spoken openly in the village. But Hulasi smiled at the corner of the well. Panidubbi's water stirred. So many births as women, so many hidden loves, so many suppressed bodies, so many threats - Channa Grove had heard them all. For the first time the children were hearing them too.

In her class Devika held up an empty mobile phone and said, "This is not only a weapon; it can also be a door. But when a crocodile sits at the door, you enter with your eyes open." Nishant explained payment channels to the children with drawings - village savings, city account, mule, Signal, Hong Kong, then back again into advertisements. Looking at the picture, a child asked, "Why does the money go around and then ask us for more again?" Nishant could not answer. Some questions receive answers only after the future system has been changed.

Aruni made copies of the Archive of Names. Gop Kumar made a digital copy, but this time not from secret fear; the copy was being made out of public trust. Ishan Dutt, the informer without a shadow, sat in one patch of shade in Channa Grove. Daylight fell upon him, but still no shadow formed. Ananya asked, "When will your shadow return?" Ishan said, "When my death is crossed out on paper and my life is written into people's memory."

At that answer Budhba Ghost moved his branch. Perhaps approval. Perhaps laughter. Perhaps one grain of the ancient weariness that falls away after centuries.

At evening the second round of the game began. This time some adults joined the children. Devika crossed the line chanting, "Ujjwal is not for sale." Meera crossed: "Privacy is not for sale." Nishant: "Open the payment channels." Saumya: "Documents belong to the people." Gop Kumar: "When data becomes a name, fear decreases." Aruni crossed and kept silent. His breath began to fail, but no words came. Ananya said,

"Babu, just say Garh Narikel." Aruni said, "Garh Narikel." And his breath survived.

At that moment the story turned over. In the first chapter the ghosts had played while the living watched in fear. Now the living played while the ghosts watched in reassurance. This reversal was the novel's new birth.

Far away in the city Batuknath Hariharan went to court again. He wanted a new petition, some dispute, some stay, some order. But in the registrar's room he was told, "Nothing from the Garh Narikel side." He went outside and sat on the steps for a long time. The steps were dry that day, yet his feet felt wet. His victory no longer travelled with him; it remained locked in the cupboard, damp and rustling like leaves.

At night Chandrapal Batra read the network report: "Conversion rate down." "Mule accounts failed." "Calls disconnected." "Victims seeking advice from school instead of police." These sentences frightened him more than statutory sections. He wondered whom in the village could be picked up. Then he remembered Batuknath's message: "No leader." Without a leader, whom do you arrest? Without conspiracy, what case do you file? Raid a school? Find a crime in a child's lesson? For the first time he looked at the framed LLB degree on his wall and understood that the language of law cannot catch everything.

Raghav "Signal" thought of disappearing. But a person who disappears on Signal still remains in the memory of some server. His vanished messages did not survive directly in Gop Kumar's data, but their patterns did. For the first time Raghav wrote on paper: "Erase the name." The tip of his pen snapped.

Lau Kin-Hung looked at the sea through the glass of his office. The sea had always seemed to him like a market - open, deep, profitable. That night he saw the Ganga in it. In the Ganga, a bridge. In the bridge, a pier. Inside the pier, labourers. Inside the labourers, names. Inside the names, children's voices. He drew the curtains. But the voices had already entered the glass.

At Harvard Ira held a small gathering, not on Broom's stage but on an empty lawn. She played only one recording: the children of Garh Narikel reading names. The foreign students did not understand the meaning at first. Then Ira told the story behind each name, briefly. No applause. No questions. After a long silence, one student asked, "What should we do?" Ira answered, "First, listen." Whoever learns to listen learns to tremble before signing a paper.

Satyavrat Mehta was returning home at night. His car stopped at a red light. On the pavement a child was watching something on a mobile phone. Mehta got out and looked. The child was not gambling; he was watching a video of the names being read in Garh Narikel. Mehta stared at the small screen for a long time. The truth that had failed to emerge

from the files of the State's highest offices was now running on a child's cheap phone. He returned silently to the car. His eyes were tired, but there was no defeat in the tiredness.

Night deepened. The final kabaddi began in Channa Grove. This time the rule was different. Whoever crossed the line had to chant not a name but the future. Ananya went first: "Coconut-Leaf School, Coconut-Leaf School." Somit went second: "Recognise the crocodile of the screen." Devika third: "No digital arrest." Meera fourth: "No love blackmail." Ishan fifth - only a voice, no body: "No shadow lost."

Then Budhba Ghost rose. Twelve hundred years of weariness came down from the branch. He crossed the line. Everyone held their breath. He chanted, "The novel begins again." The children laughed at first, then fell silent. This was not a sentence of play; it was not an announcement. It was the mark of the circle made when truth passes from the hand of one generation into the next.

Hulasi came out from the well. For the first time her hands were visible - faint, but hands. She wrote one letter in the earth. It was not complete, but Ananya understood: it was the sound "ja" - the beginning of jaan, life; janm, birth; jagaran, awakening; jal, water. Hulasi smiled. Her rebirth had begun not in a womb, but in the children's language.

Panidubbi did not raise her streaming hair from the pond. She had not come to catch anyone's feet. She made a circle upon the water, and in its centre the sky descended. There were stars in the sky, and each star shone like a name. Raksh gave light, but it was no longer a light that frightened; it was a light by which one could read. Loth was no longer merely a spectator. Slowly he moved closer to the game. Perhaps, for the first time, he wanted to rise.

A wind came from the channel of the Balan. The smell of Kamla sand, the damp of Ganga water, city dust, hospital medicine, court ink, a Harvard lawn, Hong Kong glass, the warm surface of a mobile screen - all arrived together and merged into the scent of coconut blossom. That is how the air of Garh Narikel is made: whatever breaks anywhere in the world reaches this village as a smell.

The coconut tree that had watched since the first chapter dropped a fruit in the middle of the night. It did not fall with a crash, but with the soft sound of folding paper. The children gathered around it. The fruit split open. Inside there was no water, only emptiness. Ananya reached in. From the emptiness came a small leaf. On it was written: "Where a name is read, the story does not end."

Aruni read the leaf and remained silent for a long time. Gop Kumar asked, "Then?" Aruni said, "Then I will not write an ending." Saumya asked, "What will you do instead?" Aruni replied, "The children who play will write."

No one in Garh Narikel slept that night. But this sleeplessness did not come from fear. It was the wakefulness of people who had for too long been put to sleep by dates, decisions, orders, appeals and adjournments. Now they had to stay awake and work. Another page had to be added to the Archive of Names. The next class at the school had to be prepared. The next map of digital fraud had to be understood. The Oath of Privacy had to be carried to the next village.

Dawn came. The children returned home. The ghosts climbed back onto their branches. Panidubbi dissolved into the water. Raksh's glow vanished into daylight. Loth sat again beside the bushes, but his eyes were no longer closed. Budhba Ghost sat upon his branch and called one last time, "Kabaddi." From far away Ananya answered, "Name."

The first woman of the village came out to fetch water. She stopped beside Channa Grove. On the ground was the line of the game, the archive of leaves and the empty shell of the fruit. She did not know what had happened during the night. She picked up the empty shell, took it home and placed basil seeds inside it. From the fruit still came the faint smell of raw coconut water. In this way the next form of truth in Garh Narikel began preparing to become green.

In the city, the order of victory inside Batuknath's cupboard finally dried. But once dry, the paper began to crumble like powder. Frightened, Batuknath sealed it inside a plastic file. Yet every time he opened the file, a fine dust rose - not ink dust, but sand. Sand from the Kamla-Balan, which can uproot a whole grove and a paper order as well.

Chandrapal Batra's app began working again. Some people were trapped again. The world does not become free in a single night. Lau Kin-Hung opened another company under another name. Edward Broom found another stage. Batuknath smiled in another case. The villains had not ended. In this novel evil was not destroyed; people had begun learning to recognise it. That is a more difficult and more enduring victory.

The people of Garh Narikel understood this too. So they did not drift away in celebration. After every victory, work. After every name, a search. After every oath, the next village. After every lesson, the next child. The day they believed crime had ended would be the day the crocodile came out of the water again.

One evening Aruni was closing his notebook. Ananya asked, "Babu, is the novel finished now?" He looked at her. In her face he saw the child of that first night when she had looked at a photograph of the Chief Minister and asked a question about death. A child's question is the greatest court of time. Aruni said, "Books end. Villages do not."

Ananya asked, "Then the next page?"

Aruni handed her the notebook. "You write it."

Ananya wrote the first line: "Today kabaddi was played again in Channa Grove." She paused and added a second: "This time, what was caught was a lie."

At that line the coconut leaves stirred. Wind moved through the grove. Budhba Ghost smiled on his branch. In the pond Panidubbi gathered in her hair. Far away in the Ganga the crocodiles grew still. Over Garh Narikel the first wing of dawn descended, as though the sky itself were turning the page.

Crocodiles eat bodies; but once a name enters a child's breath, no river, no court, no foreign account, no digital screen, no order of victory and no paper of defeat can erase it. The name becomes a game. The game becomes a story. The story becomes a village again.

And the village - Garh Narikel - begins again.

FOLK SONG: THE PAGE OPENS AGAIN

Folk tune: children's kabaddi song

*The page has opened, cut through dew and opened,
The game became a story, the story became a village again.*

*The story said "end"; the village said "again,"
Dew cut through the writer's final boundary.
Once ghosts played while the living watched in fear,
Now children ran, and falsehood was caught within the round.
"Today kabaddi was played again in Channa Grove,"*

*From Ananya's first line the wing of dawn took flight.
Once a name entered a child's breath,
River, court and screen could never erase it again.
Let the book close; the village story does not stop,
The game becomes story, the story becomes village again.*

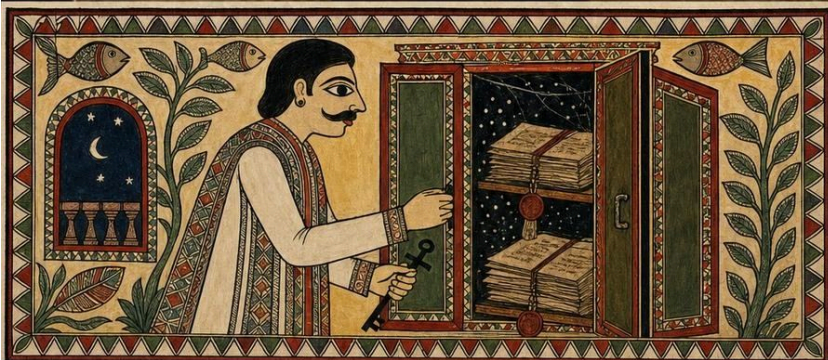
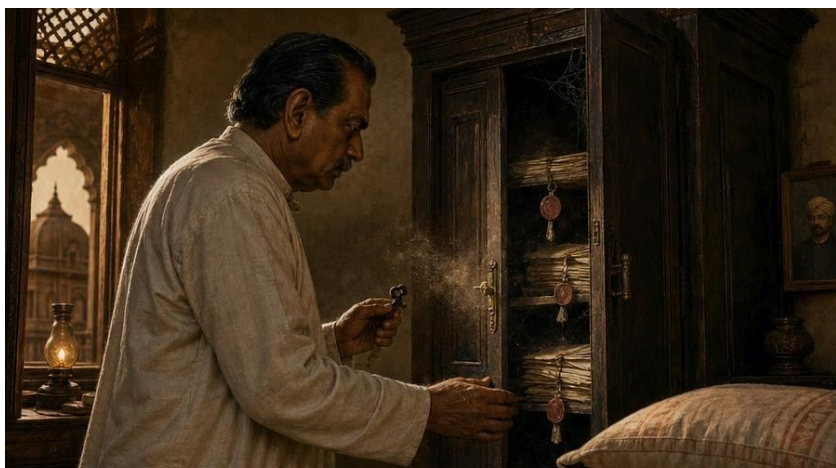
*Once ghosts played while the living were afraid,
From Ananya's first line the wing of dawn broke open,
Once the name entered breath, erasure lost its power.*



CHAPTER 25

The Mind Suspended

*In a closed cupboard it is not the order but the dust that speaks—and
the voice of dust will not let sleep come.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE ROAD OF THE MIND
HOME**

Folk tune: traveller's song

*Traveller, come, follow the road of the mind to the village,
Let the body stay in the city; set the bundle of the mind down at home.*

*Though the body is in the city, the mind takes the village road,
The rustle of leaves, the scent of the pond, Grandmother's words.
Take down the suspended mind and ready it for the journey,
Speak with the roots; tell them your own truth.*

*Returning home is not merely distance; it is an inward meeting,
Upon the mind's road you will meet ancestors, children, life.
Walk singing the traveller's song, leaving pride behind,
Let the soil of home turn the mind once more toward justice.*

*The rustle of leaves in the ear, the scent of the pond in the nose,
The thread of Grandmother's tale tied upon the shelf of the heart.
Put down the bundle of pride and walk lightly,
At the threshold let inside and outside become one.*



The village had already begun again; and over in the city, once an order of victory has dried completely, its voice no longer sounds like paper. It speaks like dust. That night the same dust was speaking inside Batuknath Hariharan's cupboard. The cupboard was locked, the key beneath his pillow, the room secure from outside; yet the paper within kept rustling as though a crowd of dry leaves were moving without any wind.

At first Batuknath thought—mice. Then he remembered that mice had been eradicated from his house years ago. Steel mesh over every opening, poison in every corner, surveillance over every servant. A man who drove people through loopholes in the law could hardly leave a mouse-hole open in his own house. So he rose. He took the key from

beneath the pillow. As he turned it, the cold iron of the lock bit into his fingers. He opened the cupboard.

Inside lay the order of victory. It bore the court seal, the registrar's signature, the date, the case number—everything was in order. But a fine layer of sand had settled along the edge of the paper. The sand was not wet, yet it clung stubbornly. Batuknath brushed it with a finger. It did not fall away. Instead it formed letters: "The mind suspended."

Batuknath read the words and laughed. It was the laughter of a man who first turns fear into a joke so that fear may not recognise him yet. He looked at the paper again. The words were gone. The seal was the same. The order was the same. The victory was the same. Yet something inside him was no longer the same.

He picked up the phone. It was the third watch of the night. He was used to calling Chandrapal Batra at such hours; men of crime take legal advice by day and their real advice by night. Chandrapal's phone rang many times. At last his voice came: "Sir, something urgent?"

Batuknath said, "Is there any legal way to stop the reading of names going on in Garh Narikel?"

Chandrapal was silent for a moment. He usually had an answer to every question—stay order, injunction, contempt, defamation, cyber complaint, public order, the old shadow of sedition, the new mask of morality. But what law could he place upon a "reading of names"? He said, "Reading names is not a crime, sir."

Batuknath snapped, "Then make it one."

Chandrapal fell silent again. Something could be made into a crime when there was a crowd, a slogan, a leader, donations, posters, trucks, a stage. But here children were reading names from leaves. One woman explained digital fraud. Another read an oath of privacy. Old people were not giving testimony; they were telling stories. No ready-made criminal mould immediately fit any of this.

That night Chandrapal was alone in the study of his house. On the wall hung his Meerut law degree in a frame. The frame always reassured him that those who knew the language of law were safer than everyone else. But tonight a line appeared upon the glass as though someone inside had drawn it with a fingernail. Chandrapal rose and went closer. In the misted glass were the words: "First mule."

He did not tremble. He was not a man who trembled at the first apparition. He laughed. He wiped the glass. The words disappeared. But he remembered—the first mule account. The account of that student in Meerut whom he had brought into the work for five thousand rupees. The boy had thought it was a part-time job. Later the police arrested

him. The real money reached Hong Kong. The boy went to jail. His father stood in court corridors for three years.

Chandrapal had forgotten the incident for many years. A criminal's memory is highly selective. An event that yields profit is called experience; an event that brings shame is called a mistake. But that night the glass of his degree turned his forgotten mistake into letters.

Raghav "Signal" Somani was awake as well. There was no message on his phone, yet the notification light was blinking by itself. He opened the app. All the conversations were gone. That was normal—disappearing messages were his protection. But upon the empty screen, leaves began falling one by one. Digital leaves. On every leaf was the name of someone through whose account money had been routed.

Raghav shut the screen. Opened it again. No leaves. Only the message list. He breathed in relief. Then a voice message arrived, sender: "Self." Raghav listened. It was his own voice, though he had never recorded it: "No paper. No voice. Only percentage." He had repeated that sentence hundreds of times for Lau Kin-Hung. This time, behind the voice, someone was weeping.

Raghav immediately sent Lau Kin-Hung a Signal message: "Problem appears memory-induced. Local name movement affecting market."

No answer came for a long time. Dawn was approaching in Hong Kong. Lau Kin-Hung normally replied at once, because in his business delay meant loss. This time the reply came only after Raghav had deleted and rewritten his message three times. It contained only three words: "Buy the names."

Raghav stared at the screen. Buy the names? How was a price to be placed upon a name? The name of a dead labourer? Ujjwal's name? Sarayu's name? Hulasi's name? How could one make a sale receipt for a name that had never been fully written in any government paper? For the first time, the language of Raghav's own trade seemed incomplete to him.

Lau Kin-Hung sat in his glass office. Behind him the sea; before him five screens. One showed payment channels; another, conversion rates for gambling odds; the third, old accounts for drug purchases; the fourth, an old file on identity construction; the fifth, a map of India. Garh Narikel was a dot. Yet the cursor kept catching on that dot by itself. He moved it away; it returned.

Lau's assistant asked, "Technical problem?"

Lau said, "No. A problem of geography."

He treated geography only as market territory. Country, state, district, village—each a potential consumer, potential worker, potential account, potential victim. But Garh Narikel was no longer a dot. It was

holding the cursor fast, as though an invisible fingernail had been driven into the map.

Meanwhile Edward Broom was in a New York hotel. His second lecture had not been called a failure; the PR team had stated plainly, "Crisis managed." Yet he could not sleep. He reread the draft of his speech—dignity, partnership, transparent future, ethical enterprise. Beneath every English word he saw a name in Devanagari: Ujjwal, Sarayu, Ramdev, Phulkumari, Nand. He could not read the script, but he could read the pressure of the letters.

He drafted a message to Professor Elina Graves: "Can ethics become larger than memory?" He wrote it, then deleted it. Then he wrote: "Local emotive material is spreading against us." That he sent. When a criminal reaches the verge of asking a moral question, he usually sends a public-relations question instead.

In Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta was awake late at night. On his desk was not a government file but a printed copy of Garh Narikel's Archive of Names. He would read and then stop. Beside every name was an empty space. Perhaps for a story. Perhaps for a date of birth. Perhaps for the day of death. Perhaps for the lie invented to erase the name. He felt that law grants recognition to a name, but folk memory gives a name breath.

He opened his notebook and wrote: "The State is not the owner of a citizen's memory. A court is not the guard over the names of the dead. Procedure is not an instrument for choking the victim's breath." As he wrote, his hand stopped. He remembered his office. He was a government official. But that night his official post and his private self seemed to be sitting on two separate chairs. Between them stood an empty chair—the chair of truth.

That night Channa Grove in Garh Narikel was quiet. The game had not ended, nor had it been adjourned. It was the quiet in which a game waits for its next breath. Budhba Ghost swung from the branch. Below him lay the leaves of the Archive of Names. The children slept in their homes. But the names remained awake. The vigil of names is independent of human sleep.

In a dream Ananya saw Batuknath Hariharan arrive in Channa Grove. In his hand was the order of victory, on his head the pride of a lawyer, in his eyes exhaustion. He was shouting, "Where are the respondents?" Budhba Ghost answered, "At work." Batuknath asked, "What work?" Then all the children answered together: "The future."

The dream was not Ananya's alone. That same night Devika saw Ujjwal in a dream. He was not holding a mobile phone but a wooden slate. He was drawing a line around the crocodile of the screen. Devika asked, "Are you all right?" Ujjwal said, "Whenever someone else hangs up

the call, I become a little more all right.” Devika woke. At dawn she made a new lesson: “Hanging up is also courage.”

Meera dreamed of a court where images from people’s private lives were being sold in bamboo baskets. The buyers had no faces, only hands. Those hands took the forms of money, legal notice, police complaint, threat to employment, family shame. Standing in the middle of the court, Meera said, “Love will not become evidence.” At once the baskets caught fire. When she woke, her fear seemed half as large. Fear does not disappear completely; by becoming half and half again, it becomes a companion one can live with.

Nishant was abroad. In his sleep the payment channels became a river. From account to account, wallet to wallet, server to server, then into the pond of Garh Narikel. He saw that behind every transaction was a hand. Some hands belonged to labourers, some to young men, some to women, some to the elderly. At dawn he opened his company’s data dashboard and for the first time began translating the number called “fraud loss” into “people’s names.”

Saumya spent the night translating documents. English audit comments into Maithili, legal orders into the people’s language, bank statements into lines of story. She felt that a paper ordinary people cannot read is half a lie. Language is the first door of justice. Beside “mule account” she wrote: “an account operated in another person’s name.” Then she stopped. Thought: “No, not enough. Write this: renting out the body of one’s own name.”

Aruni had opened his old notebook. He had stopped his pen. For many days a desire to write “The End” had been growing inside him. Human beings grow tired and long for an ending. But a village does not want an ending. A village wants a story to become not a burden handed down from generation to generation but work. He wrote in the notebook: “The Mind Suspended.” As he wrote, he understood that this chapter was not the rogues’ outward journey but the pull within them.

Batuknath opened the cupboard a second time that night. The order was unchanged. But now a shadow fell across the page. He turned. No one was there. The shadow lay upon the page, not in the room. It was not black but grey, like a person’s mind leaning over the paper after leaving the body. Batuknath looked at the shape of the shadow. It was himself—older, exhausted, voiceless.

He closed the page. Turned the key. Pulled the key out. Then from inside came a low voice: “What keeps speaking even after it is locked away is not an order; it is a crime.” Batuknath returned to the bed, but he could not place the key beneath the pillow. He sat until dawn with the key clenched in his hand.

Meanwhile Chandrapal opened his old register. In the digital age of crime he retained the habit of keeping a paper ledger. He trusted paper because he could burn it. On the first page were several names—mule, agent, commission, date. He tried to tear out the page. It would not tear. The paper stretched like cloth. He brought a blade. Drew it across. From the cut came red dust—not dust, but something like the dried blood of ink.

Raghav “Signal” searched for his passport. Not in the safe. Not in the drawer. Not in the bag. At last he found it in his prayer room, where he never kept anything. Inside the passport a leaf had been pressed. Nothing was written upon it, but it smelled of Channa Grove. For the first time, while planning to leave India, Raghav found himself caught inside one Indian village.

In Lau Kin-Hung’s office, analysts held a meeting. Their report said: “Behavioural resistance in Garh Narikel region. Investable interventions: entertainment, credit, inducement, local leaders, educational material.” Lau kept reading. The final line was blank. He asked, “Why is this line empty?” The analyst said, “Sir, the data model cannot predict it.” Lau’s eyes remained on the empty line. Sometimes an empty space is waiting for a name.

In Edward Broom’s PR office, a decision was made to produce a documentary about Garh Narikel—“The Resilience of Rural India.” It was an old manoeuvre of criminal capital: buy the image of whatever resists you. But Ira heard the news. She laughed. She wrote, “Bring your cameras, but the people will make you read the names.” Broom’s team did not understand the sentence. A camera does not always capture truth; sometimes truth captures the camera.

Before dawn a faint sound rose in Channa Grove. Not kabaddi. Not names. Only breath. From his branch Budhba Ghost said, “Now they will come.” Hulasi asked, “Why?” Budhba answered, “Their minds are suspended.” From inside the pond Panidubbi sent a ripple: “Without their bodies?” Budhba said, “First the mind. The body later.”

The old people of Garh Narikel believe that whatever a person fears for too long, in the end he cannot live without seeing it. Rogues need their victims. They need to see the eyes of the defeated so that victory may feel complete. But when the defeated are not there to meet their gaze and are busy working instead, victory remains half-finished. An incomplete victory leaves the mind suspended.

And so the minds of Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Signal, Lau Kin-Hung, Edward Broom—all began moving toward Garh Narikel from different directions. Their bodies were still in the city, abroad, in glass offices, hotels, courts, safes, screens. But the

mind set out first. And once a mind takes the road to Garh Narikel, Channa Grove brings it there one day.

The sun rose. Ananya woke and came outside. Dew lay on the coconut leaves. On one leaf she saw a new line. It was not a letter but a road—very thin, very long, running from within the grove outward and from outside inward. Ananya touched it. Dew came away on her finger. She caught the faintest smell of paper—the smell of the order of victory. She understood at once: today's lesson would change.

She ran inside and opened Aruni's notebook. On the previous page his line was still wet: "This time what was caught was the lie." Beneath it a new line was appearing by itself: "The lie's mind has already reached the grove."

Ananya whispered into her father's ear, "Wake up. The story is moving forward again."

Aruni opened his eyes. Outside, the leaves of Channa Grove were moving though there was no wind. In that movement he heard the rustling of the city's cupboard, the Meerut degree, Signal messages, Hong Kong glass, the Harvard stage—all at once. He sat up. Opened the notebook. The first line had already been written.

There was still no vehicle on the road outside the village. No passenger at the station. The court order was still in the cupboard. The passport still in the safe. The phone still on charge. Yet in Garh Narikel all their minds had already arrived. The mind travels faster than the body, is more stubborn than crime, and when a mind remains suspended, the story does not take it down—it begins to show it to itself.

The Court of Channa Grove had not been adjourned. It was merely waiting for the next party.

FOLK SONG: THE ROAD OF THE SUSPENDED MIND

Folk tune: traveller's song

Suspended mind, hanging upon the peg,

One day the body too will step down upon the village soil.

The body sleeps in the city, the mind takes the village road,

Dust speaks in the cupboard; the leaf of victory trembles.

Meerut's degree, the glass house, Signal's darkness,

Channa Grove's gate hears the rustle of them all.

The mind travels faster than the body, more stubborn than crime,

Whoever the grove draws in, cleverness will not save.

Ananya whispers at the ear—wake, the story has moved,

Leaves stirred without wind; the next party spoke.

If the mind hangs upon the peg, the night will not pass,

One day the body too will set its feet upon the village earth.

Dust speaks inside the cupboard; the leaf of victory trembles.

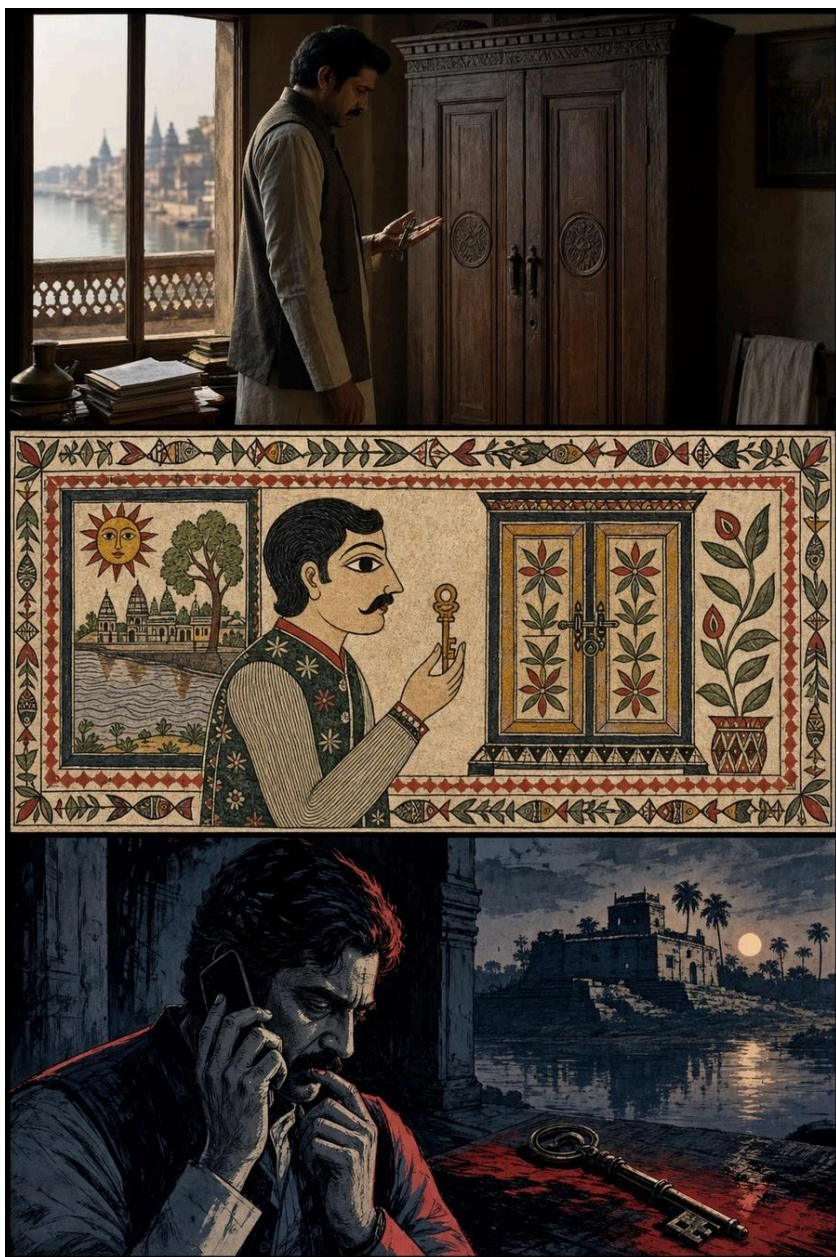
Whoever the grove draws in, cleverness will not save.



CHAPTER 26

Batuknath Hariharan's Journey

*When a key remains in the hand all night, it is not brass but the smell
of questions that settles into the palm.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES,
BECOME HUMBLE**

Folk tune: railway traveller's song

*Take off your shoes, sir, take them off at the door,
The burden on the head, the heat of office—leave them all outside.*

*Take off your shoes at the threshold, and with them take off pride,
Let the coolness of the earth rise through your feet and lower the heat
in your head.*

*Before you read a name, read the person's eyes,
Build not a seat for the order of victory but a place for listening.*

*The train may bring the body from afar; the mind will arrive first,
The moment a humble foot is set down, closed relationships begin to
open.*

*Take off your shoes and read the name with reverence,
The earth teaches: before rank or office, the essence is to be human.*

*The wheels of the train turned far away; the mind ran ahead,
At the threshold, cool earth spoke beneath the feet.
First read the eyes of the people, and only then the book and page,
Before a humble step, closed doors and courtyards open.*



The mind had arrived during the night; now it was the body's turn. At dawn Batuknath Hariharan stood before his cupboard. Because the key had remained in his hand all night, the smell of brass had settled into his palm. The order of victory was locked inside, but its rustling had moved from his ears into his mind. A door can stop a sound that remains in the ear; when a sound enters the mind, people travel in order to stop it.

Batuknath telephoned his secretary. In a half-asleep voice the secretary said, "Sir, the Bar Council meeting is this afternoon." Batuknath said, "Cancel it." The secretary started. "The media?" "Cancel." "Where are you going?" Batuknath paused before answering. A

village whose name one is ashamed to pronounce first becomes a thorn upon the tongue. At last he said, "Garh Narikel."

The secretary was silent. For him all villages had a single word: "local." But the crack in Batuknath's voice was not local. He asked, "Helicopter, sir?" Batuknath answered at once, "No. Train." He surprised himself. He had not travelled by train in years. Men who stand high in the law move by road, aircraft and security convoy; a train brings them face to face with the country whose laws they keep making and evading.

He put the order of victory into a leather bag. With it he packed two pen drives, one sealed envelope, some cash and an old pair of spectacles. The spectacles had belonged to his father—a father who used to say, "Study law, but do not forget to study people." Batuknath had considered the sentence ridiculous for years. Reading people was not his profession; entangling them in procedure was his art. Yet that morning the spectacles found their own way into the bag.

As he left the house, his wife asked, "So early? A case?" Batuknath said, "An old file." His wife looked at his face. A woman who has listened to a lawyer's lies for years comes to know the shape, weight and colour of a lie. She said only, "Not a file. It must be someone's name." Batuknath did not answer.

When he reached the station, the city was not fully awake. On the platform the steam of the tea seller's kettle seemed to hold the first hope of the day. Batuknath went toward the first-class waiting room. He had a special pass. But at the glass door his reflection paused for a moment and did not enter. The reflection remained outside. Batuknath reached out and opened the door. His reflection came in late.

He sat down. On the wall opposite was an advertisement—for investment, insurance, a new city, a secure future. In one corner someone had written by hand: "Do not buy names." Batuknath started. He went closer. The words were gone. He did not laugh. This time the laughter remained inside him.

The train moved. The city buildings began sliding backward. Batuknath sat by the window, the bag in his lap. The paper of the victory order pressed against his thigh. He opened his phone and read a message from his secretary: "Sir, media asking." He typed: "Unwell." Deleted it and typed: "Personal travel." Deleted that too. In the end he sent nothing. Sometimes silence is better protection than a lie.

The first station came. The signboard carried its name, but as the train slowed Batuknath saw the word "Date." He blinked. The board returned to normal. At the second station: "Adjournment." The third: "Settlement." The fourth: "Silence." He understood that the journey was no longer outward. The road to Garh Narikel was turning even station names into testimony.

Around noon an old man entered the compartment. Plain dhoti, an old gamchha over his shoulder, bamboo staff in hand. The first-class attendant moved to stop him, but the old man showed not a ticket but a dry coconut leaf. For a moment the attendant froze, as though remembering some ancient order, then silently stepped aside. The old man and Batuknath sat facing one another.

Batuknath first tried to ignore him. A man who buys testimony avoids the gaze of an unwanted witness. The old man kept looking out the window. After a while he asked, "Have you studied law?" Batuknath's pride woke at once. He said, "Studied it, taught it, wrote it, practised it." The old man smiled gently. "Have you studied names?"

Batuknath adjusted his spectacles. "Names? Is reading names some special science?" The old man said, "Law puts names into boxes: birth, father, address, age, signature. But there is a science in reading the weeping inside a name." Batuknath bristled. "Emotion is not justice." The old man replied, "Which is why justice has been waiting so long for emotion."

The train climbed onto a bridge. Below was a river. Batuknath tightened his grip on the bag. The current flashed in the sun. The old man said, "Look down. How many names have flowed away." Batuknath did not look. He was a man of files; anything flowing below made him uncomfortable. The old man continued, "Crocodiles eat bodies. But paper is more frightening than a body. Why?"

Batuknath said, "Paper is evidence." The old man laughed. "Paper is evidence, and paper can also be absence. Erase a name and the paper will say: no one died. Write a name and the paper will say: death is present." Batuknath fell silent. Inside his bag the victory order shifted faintly.

Budhba Ghost did not tell him his name. If he had, the story would have opened at once, and nothing in Garh Narikel opens at once. He merely drew a circle on the compartment floor with the tip of his staff. One line inside it, then another, then a third. Batuknath watched. It was not the plan of a courtroom but a kabaddi court. The old man asked, "In this game, does the victor remain outside or go inside?"

Batuknath said, "In kabaddi, the player who goes in holding his breath scores only if he returns." The old man said, "Exactly. You people never went inside. You gave judgment from far away. Now it is time to go in holding your breath." The word "breath" struck Batuknath's ears. His mind did not remember the value of breath, but the body remembers. His chest grew a little heavy.

The ticket examiner came. Batuknath showed his ticket. Then he glanced toward the old man. The examiner frowned. "Sir, are you travelling alone?" Batuknath started. "This old man?" The examiner looked at the empty seat. "What old man, sir?" Batuknath's mouth went

dry. He looked at the old man. The old man slowly winked, as if saying: what the law fails to see does not become absent.

The ticket examiner went away. The old man said, "Wasn't it the same in your court? What existed was not seen. What did not exist was admitted to the record." Batuknath tried to harden himself. "Who are you?" The old man said, "You have seen me many times before. In the corner of testimony, behind a date, in the line drawn through a dead person's name. But you kept adjourned the act of seeing."

Outside, fields began. No mustard, no standing rice, only stubble from cut paddy. Water lay in patches between the fields. Batuknath remembered a scene from childhood—his father taking him into a court veranda. A poor man stood holding papers. His father had said, "Remember this man's name. Whether he wins or loses comes later; first remember that he is standing here." Batuknath had been bored then. Today, for a moment, the same man's face appeared in the window glass.

He asked the old man, "What does Garh Narikel want from me?" The old man said, "Not from you. From your mind." Batuknath gave a hard laugh. "The mind has no legal status." The old man answered at once, "That is the greatest property of a lie."

The sentence remained in the compartment for a long time. The fan kept turning, the tea seller came and went, the river receded behind them, but the sentence remained seated on the berth. Batuknath opened his bag for the first time. He took out the order of victory. The language of the court stood upright on the page—findings, record, lack of sufficient grounds, procedure, no necessity for intervention. The old man did not bring the paper close. He sniffed from a distance.

"Smell of bribery," the old man said. Batuknath gathered the paper up sharply. "Careful! This is an order of the court." The old man remained calm. "I do not insult the court. I respect smell. Paper can lie; smell cannot."

For the first time Batuknath brought the paper near his nose. He did smell something—old files, an air-conditioned room, perfume, leather, the stale warmth of banknotes, and deep underneath, stagnant water. He folded the paper at once. Budhba Ghost looked out the window. "When paper meets water, the letters swell of their own accord."

Evening began to fall. The train was entering Mithila. The language was changing. On the platforms, voices now carried the softness of "ki," "katta," "chalu," "baisu"; returning words felt cool against the ear like dew. The language Batuknath heard in court only through interpreters was now reaching him directly. When language is heard without an intermediary, power shrinks a little.

At a small station the train stood for a long time. A boy came to the window with a paper packet of roasted makhana. He looked at Batuknath and asked, "Did you win or lose?" Batuknath started. "Why?" The boy said, "Why does someone who has won look so sad?" The old man laughed softly. The boy walked away. Batuknath watched him for a long time.

The signboard at that station suddenly changed: "Mind Suspended Halt." Batuknath rubbed his eyes. The board returned to its real name. The old man said, "Before reaching Garh Narikel, everyone must get off at this halt once. Some get off with the body, some with the mind."

The night deepened. In the yellow light of the compartment bulb, the old man's face seemed at times very old, at times childlike, at times only a black line. Batuknath asked, "Your name?" The old man replied, "I am not the name that survived. I am not the name that was erased. I am the one who waits for the name."

Batuknath was irritated, exhausted, frightened—and also fascinated. Curiosity does not die inside a rogue; it merely becomes utility. He was thinking: could this old man be bought? Could the language of the Court of Channa Grove be bound inside legal procedure? Could the Archive of Names be attacked through intellectual property, religious sentiment, land dispute, security risk? His mind began weaving legal nets again.

The old man read his mind. "You are thinking of nets again. Nets are useful in water; in Channa Grove they become tangled." Batuknath said harshly, "No people's assembly stands above the law." The old man replied, "A name is not above law, but it comes before law. A child is born and receives a name. Law arrives later and asks: proof?"

Lightning flashed somewhere far away. In the train window Batuknath's face and the old man's face overlapped. For a moment Batuknath felt the old man was his future—the future day when all the victory orders would remain in cupboards and the mind in Channa Grove. He drew the curtain at once.

Dinner arrived. Batuknath's meal came in shining packaging. Nothing was placed before the old man. Batuknath asked out of courtesy, "Food?" The old man said, "I do not eat names. I chant them." Batuknath opened his meal, but the first morsel never reached his mouth. He saw tiny letters in the rice. He closed the tray.

At midnight the train stopped at an unknown place. The halt did not exist in the official timetable. Outside was darkness. Somewhere far away stood the shape of trees. The old man rose. "Come. Your first hearing is here." Batuknath said, "I will not get off." The old man answered, "Do not get off with the body. The mind already has."

At that moment Batuknath saw that his shadow was no longer on the seat. It was standing by the door. The shadow got down carrying a bag. The body remained seated inside. Batuknath tried to shout; no voice came. The old man got off behind the shadow. The train started again. Batuknath was alone, yet the bag was still in his lap. He opened it—the order of victory was inside. Then what bag had the shadow carried away?

He understood: the paper remained outside, but its inward meaning had got off the train. This was Garh Narikel's first move. It leaves the body safe and takes away the mind's documents.

By dawn the train reached the last major junction. From there to Garh Narikel came a branch line, then a jeep, then a footpath. As Batuknath was getting down, he saw the old man again on the platform, as though he had never got off at all. He was drinking tea from a clay cup. Batuknath hurried over. "You got off in the night." The old man said, "Your shadow got off. You are still arriving."

For the first time Batuknath looked at the old man's feet. They touched the ground, but not entirely. The heels stood a finger's breadth above the earth. Batuknath did not remember the tale of Channa Grove, but the body retains memory. He stepped back. The old man said, "Do not be afraid. I am not among those who eat you. I am among those who want to teach you to read."

The branch-line coach was crowded. Farmers, students, women, old men, baskets of fish, children sitting on sacks, a goat peering through the window. Batuknath had no reserved seat. He had to stand. For him this small experience was an extraordinary humiliation. Yet in this humiliation there was not the public but reality. A man descending from the height of law feels the crowd of bodies for the first time.

An elderly woman looked at him and said, "Babu, is the bag heavy?" Batuknath answered automatically, "No." She said, "Paper is heavy. Heavier still when it carries the names of the dead." Batuknath stared at her. She was an ordinary old woman. But on the road to Garh Narikel, ordinary people's sentences open extraordinary doors.

By noon he was on the dirt road to Garh Narikel. The jeep could go no farther. The driver said, "From here, walk. No vehicle goes as far as the grove." Batuknath flared up. "Why?" The driver shrugged. "Groves do not speak with vehicles." Batuknath did not understand, but he got down.

The wind of the Kamla-Balan moved along the road. Sand, mud, barren patches, cattle grazing in the distance, the shore of a pond, and here and there coconut trees whose presence on Mithila's soil seemed impossible. Batuknath thought: this village needs development. Then he wondered—why had the word development entered his mouth? People

who sell solutions everywhere reach the land of a question and immediately say development.

The first leaf fell upon his shoe. A dry coconut leaf. He tried to shake it off. It clung to the shoe. He bent and picked it up. Nothing was written on it. But the moment it touched his palm, letters appeared: "You studied law. Read the name." He dropped the leaf. It did not blow away; it lay straight upon the path, as though pointing the direction of the next step.

Channa Grove appeared in the distance. Dense. Daylight seemed to tire as it tried to enter. Children's voices came from near the grove—not kabaddi, but the reading of names. Batuknath slowed. He felt as though he were entering a court, yet there was no judge, no bench, no registry. Only leaves, earth, children, women, old people, wind.

Budhba Ghost came and stood beside him. This time his face was clear—neither black nor white but grey, like dust mixed with moonlight. He said, "Batuknath Hariharan, you have arrived." Batuknath made one last attempt. "I have come to talk." The old man said, "No. You have come to read."

Batuknath tightened his grip on the bag. The victory order was inside. He kept thinking that at the right moment he would take it out and frighten everyone. But in Channa Grove the rule of fear was reversed. An order that frightens others outside is frightened by its own letters inside.

Just before entering the grove, the old man said, "Here one takes off not shoes, but pride." Batuknath tried to laugh, but no sound came. He took off his shoes. The earth was cool. The coolness climbed from his feet to his head. For the first time he understood that earth, too, can take testimony.

He entered. The reading of names did not stop. The children looked at him but were not afraid. Devika nodded from a distance. Meera saw him and folded her page. Saumya kept writing. Aruni bent over his notebook. Only Ananya came close and asked, "Did you bring the paper of victory?"

Batuknath said, "Yes." Ananya asked a second question: "Will you read the names?"

Before he could answer, Budhba Ghost climbed onto a branch. The air in Channa Grove moved gently. The leaves rustled together, like thousands of pages opening at once. Batuknath Hariharan's journey had not ended. He had merely reached the place where journeys begin for the first time.

FOLK SONG: TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES, READ THE NAME

Folk tune: railway traveller's song

*Take off your shoes, take them off at the door,
Take off your pride and first read the name.*

*The brass key leaves the smell of questions in the palm,
The mind reaches the village first; the body catches the train.
Station after station—date, adjournment, silence upon the line,
Batuk set out with the victory paper toward Channa Grove.
At the threshold the old man said—not shoes, but pride,
The cool earth climbed from the feet into the court of the head.
The children were not afraid; the reading of names went on,
“Have you brought the victory paper? Will you read the names?” they
asked.*

*The journey did not end there; it began there,
Where the first dead person's name rose upon the tongue of law.*

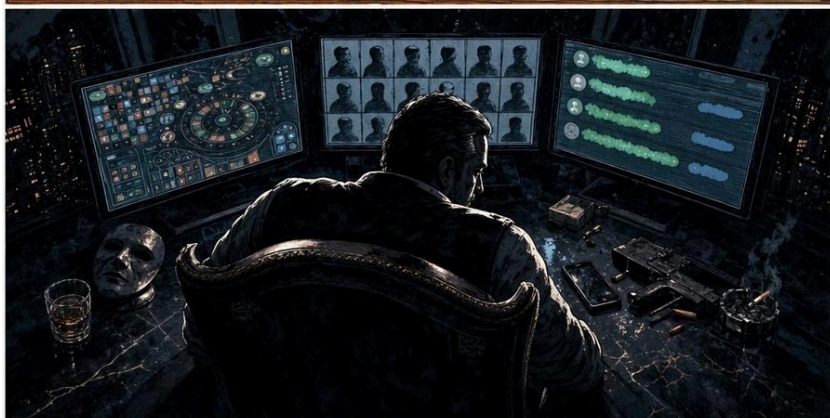
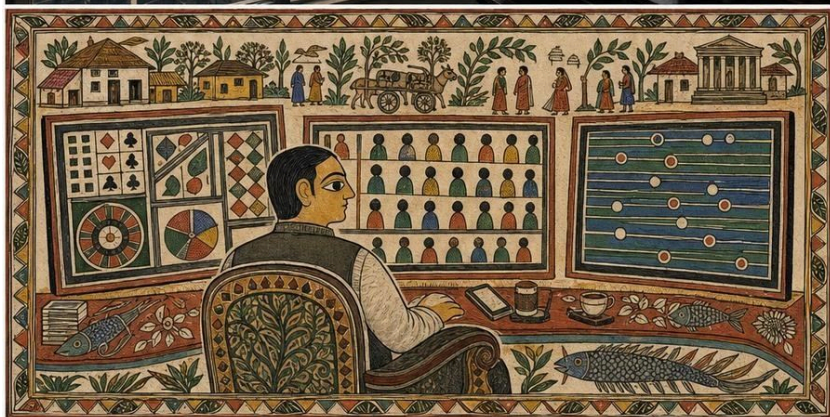
*Station after station—date, adjournment and silence,
The brass key in the palm, the wind smelling of questions.
The moment cool earth touched the feet, the heat in the head fell,
“Will you read the names?”—the child's question stood before him.*



CHAPTER 27

Chandrapal Batra's Screen

*A village cannot be seen through a glass wall, but the village's names
can cross even glass.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DIALOGUE ACROSS BOTH SIDES OF GLASS

Folk tune: jhumar

*Sway and sing, sing across the glass,
Make not a curtain but a bridge—come from both sides.*

*A glass screen has two faces, with eyes on either side,
The city sees the village, the village sees the city.
Do not close the screen; make a transparent road,
Let the person hidden behind the deleted word be heard.*

*Let technology become a mirror, not a wall,
Let two-way dialogue sow the seed of trust.
Dialogue across both sides of glass will make a bright bridge,
The distance of minds will shrink and a shared world will be born.*

*Here the village lamp burns, there a chain of city lights,
Let the glass between them melt into a link of dialogue.
Hear the voice of the face hidden behind delete,
Let the jhumar from both directions weave one rhythm.*



Chandrapal Batra would not go to Garh Narikel. He stamped that decision into place on the very morning Batuknath Hariharan was practising the reading of names with Budhba Ghost on a train. One rogue had set out bodily; the other had not moved from his place—but the grove was reading them both at once. Batra stood beside the glass wall of his high-rise apartment and looked at the city's smoky roofs. The city lay below him; village, court, police, bank, young men, old people, women, apps, debt—all lay below. When a man sees everyone on a screen, when does he ever need to go down to the ground?

His room was not an office but a net. Screens covered three walls. One showed the dashboard of an online gambling app, another a list of mule accounts, the third green and blue bands of Signal messages. In the

middle stood a leather chair into whose back he sank as though not seated on a throne but inside someone's burrow. On the table stood the framed Meerut LLB degree. Its glass had been polished so often that the reflection shone brighter than the letters.

Batra had fashioned the prestige of his own name: Chandrapal Batra, Advocate; Chandrapal Batra, Legal Adviser; Chandrapal Batra, Compliance Specialist; Chandrapal Batra, Policy Guide to the Digital Entertainment Industry. A different title on every card, but behind every card the same word—percentage. Percentage was his god, his grammar, his sleep, his hunger.

In the morning a message came from Raghav “Signal” Somani: “Hariharan has gone toward Garh Narikel.” Batra replied, “Let him go. Emotion does not stop money.” Raghav wrote, “The Archive of Names is growing.” Batra laughed. He moved the cursor and opened a folder called “Local Narrative.” In that folder he kept everything that could be used to make the village's story look ridiculous: superstition, ghost tales, rural discontent, political incitement. Batra knew that to defeat a truth, first make it laughable.

He wrote a note: “Garh Narikel campaign: folk belief and legal truth.” Under it he wrote: “Recommendations: court order supreme; people's archive unlawful; digital security threat; possible communal tension.” He kept writing and, after his sleepless night, felt his first pleasure. To him words were not arrows but worms. He released words into a file and let them bore into the timber of truth from within.

But as soon as he typed the words “Archive of Names,” the screen flickered faintly. The letters stayed still, but a black line appeared in the background. Batra adjusted his glasses. The line slowly became a leaf. A coconut leaf. He jerked the mouse. The screen returned to normal. He swore. “Graphic glitch.”

On the second screen the night's earnings were open: how much money had entered from which accounts, how much had gone out, where payouts were withheld, where a new player had been given a first win, where a recovery call had been sent. A red mark flashed beside one line—Ujjwal Jha. Batra paused. He had seen the name before. Suicide. Two days in the media. Family wept. Police case. Then an attempt at settlement. Then silence.

He pressed delete to remove the line. The name vanished. In the very next instant another name appeared in its place—Munna Paswan. Delete. A third—Ritesh Kumar. Then—Sohail Ansari. Then—Chanda Devi's son, name unknown. Irritated, Batra closed the entire table. The screen went dark. In the darkness was his own face. Across his forehead appeared the words: “How many names will you delete?”

Batra rose from the chair. The air-conditioning was running, yet sweat lay along his throat. He knew that in the world of crime a technical problem is the easiest kind of fear: call a technician, restart the server, clear the cache. But when a screen begins asking human questions, whom does one call?

He opened the main server console. Password, two-factor authorization, encrypted key. His hands continued moving with their old practised speed. This world was his true court. Here the judge was algorithm, the clerk code, the witness transaction, the verdict outstanding balance. He believed that anything not in the log had never happened. Today the log began betraying him.

Another Signal message from Raghav: "L.K. asks: risk?" Batra typed: "Emotional noise. Under control." Before he could send it, the message changed by itself: "Noise of names. Out of control." Batra slapped the screen. He deleted the message. In the disappearing-message window a new bubble appeared: "Ujjwal Jha present."

Raghav Somani's voice did not come, but what Batra sensed behind that bubble was not Raghav. It was the breath of some young person trapped inside a mobile phone. Batra tried to throw the phone away, but it clung to his hand. For a moment thousands of thumbprints rose across his palm—those who pressed a thumb while downloading a betting app, gave consent while opening a loan app, folded their hands on video calls in fear of "digital arrest."

Batra went to wash his hands. Soap, hot water, cleanser. The foam was cool, but the black line under his nails seemed darker. He bent closer—small account numbers were written beneath the nails. Mule accounts. Poor students, unemployed young men, peons, small shopkeepers, migrant labourers. Every account paid him a commission, and every account hid the real criminal.

He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. A light shadow of beard, a night's wakefulness in the eyes, salt from sweat behind the ears. In the mirror behind him appeared the old examination hall in Meerut. Young Chandrapal sat writing an answer to a law question: "The purpose of law is justice." An elderly examiner read the line and smiled. Batra splashed water on the mirror. The examination hall vanished.

The Meerut degree had never embarrassed him. He was proud of it—not a great university, but useful. Wherever the body of law is found, a clever mind can turn it into a weapon. He learned friendship with court clerks, the language of police petitions, the price of land disputes, the market rate of weeping in accident claims. Later he met a man who said, "You studied law? Come into digital gaming. Here every loss is written as legally consented."

That man was Raghav Somani. Behind Raghav stood Lau Kin-Hung. Behind Lau Kin-Hung stood sea, glass, banks, hawala, ships, servers, and a language Batra did not fully understand but whose percentages he understood perfectly. The real foreign owner needed the face of Indian law. Batra became that face. Before becoming the face he wore a mask; later the mask became the face.

By noon Batra had summoned his technical team. Four young men arrived—laptops, cables, anxiety. Company boys who worked through the night believing they were in the gaming industry. Batra told them, “There is malware on the server. Clean it.” One young man stopped while looking at the screen. “Sir, this does not look like malware.” Batra glared. “Then what?” The young man stammered, “Names are repeating themselves.”

“Names are repeating themselves”—the sentence fell into the room like a stone dropped into an old well. Batra sent the young man out. All the technicians left. Only the screens remained in the cabin. There were no tables now, only leaves. A name on every leaf. Some names clear, some blurred, some marked “unknown.” One leaf was empty. A cursor blinked on it, as though waiting for someone.

Batra thought: the people of Channa Grove must be hacking him. He laughed. At last, a rational explanation. “Gop Kumar,” he said through clenched teeth. “Saumya. Nishant. Ira.” He wrote down the names. He decided the defeated people stood behind the net. It comforted him, because if the enemy was human, lawsuits, threats, bargains, arrest, slander—everything remained possible. One cannot send a legal notice to ghosts and names.

He drafted a notice to Gop Kumar’s old address. Heading: “Unauthorized Digital Intrusion, Cybercrime, Defamation.” As he drafted, a line suddenly appeared in the footer: “For one who calls his crime legality, his own words become the lawsuit.” Batra shouted, “Someone has remote access!” His security chief ran in. System check. Result: no intrusion.

The security chief said, “Sir, everything is secure.” Batra asked, “Then these letters?” The security chief looked at the screen and saw nothing. This was Garh Narikel’s second move. Only the guilty would see it. An employee would see only an empty screen. When crime is private, fear too becomes private.

Toward evening Batra stepped onto the balcony. Thousands of windows lit up across the city. Every window was a screen. He thought: the country has moved onto screens. Games, credit, love, threats, jobs, justice, medicine, oxygen, tickets, school, court—all screens. Whoever controls the screen runs an empire without a body. Then how had Channa Grove of Garh Narikel entered the screen?

On the street below, a delivery rider stopped at a red light and looked at his phone. Batra suddenly felt his own face was on that phone. The rider neither laughed nor showed fear; he simply switched the screen off. For the first time Batra understood: his empire collapses in the moment someone turns off the screen.

At night Raghav Signal Somani came in person. Usually he conducted business by video call; today his body arrived. The same fear Batra carried within sat upon Raghav's face. "L.K. is not coming online," Raghav said. "The Hong Kong team says the accounts are not frozen—the accounts are silent." Batra asked, "Silent?" Raghav nodded. "We send transactions; no signal returns. As though thrown into the sea."

Batra snapped, "Not the sea. A technical block." Raghav said softly, "One more thing. The disappearing messages are creating backups. I delete them; by morning printouts appear." Batra stared at him. Raghav took a folded sheet from his pocket. It did not contain Signal messages but a line of names: Ujjwal Jha, Munna Paswan, and several names Raghav had never heard before.

"This is not some magic from Garh Narikel," Batra said, hardening his voice. "It is a psychological campaign." Raghav asked, "Then what is the answer?" Batra said, "Countermeasures. Declare the Archive of Names illegal. Seize the servers in the name of digital security. Call the children's school foreign-funded. Attack Meera on morality, Devika on political connections, Nishant on data theft. Prepare everything."

Raghav listened. Once he would have liked the plan. Today he heard a leaf rustling behind every sentence. "Sir," he said quietly, "what if they are not available to fight?" Batra flared. "Everyone is available. People can be caught through fear, money, cases, the body, family, love, shame—something." Raghav said, "What if they are building the future?"

Batra laughed at the question, but the laugh struck the glass and broke. It is difficult to sue the future. One can obtain a stay against the past, an injunction against the present—but the future? To stop it, children's voices would have to be silenced. And if the silencing of children's voices were recorded, the price could be high on international platforms. Batra immediately began devising strategy.

He opened the news feed on the main screen. Some channels were under his influence, some could be bought, some frightened. He wrote scripts: "Gang Spreading Digital Superstition," "Elements Inflaming Rural Sentiment," "Anti-Development Group." But when he saved the file, its name changed by itself: "Fear Among the Rogues." Batra struck the table with his fist. Raghav stepped back.

The night thickened. Raghav left. Batra was alone. He poured a drink, then put it back. Intoxication is for people trying to escape themselves; tonight Batra was trying not to escape himself but the

screens. He switched off every screen. The room went dark. Five minutes of quiet. Then, in the darkness, the faint green lines of leaves. The switched-off screens began to glow.

On the first screen, the shadow of Channa Grove. On the second, a kabaddi court. On the third, a boy—perhaps Ujjwal, perhaps someone else—holding a phone, saying nothing. On the phone screen was Batra's face. Batra backed away. His chair overturned. The boy's mouth moved without sound. Then words appeared: "How did you give the first win?"

Batra remembered the first digital game in his career. A small app had launched. The rule was clear: bonus on the first deposit, increased chance of winning the first game, after that the algorithm would slowly draw the money out. Batra had drafted the legal clause: "Game based on skill; risk borne by user." The sentence had been praised as his brilliance. Today the same sentence felt like a rope around his neck.

A second question appeared on the boy's screen: "Why the debt calls after the loss?" Batra remembered the call centre. Young voices, scripts, fake police, fake courts, fake digital arrest. "Your Aadhaar has been used in a crime." "Stay on the video call." "Transfer the amount to a safe account." Batra had crafted the legal caution in those scripts—words meant to make fraud sound like compliance.

Third question: "Why did the account keep running after death?" Batra gripped the chair. Some dead young men's wallets had continued to be used. Commission chains. Bonus laundering. Dormant accounts revived. Digital ghosts of dead names. Batra had thought it was merely technology. Channa Grove said: no, it was using the dead body a second time.

Batra shouted, "I did not commit murder!" The screen answered: "Then which crime will you admit?" He fell silent. The practice of law had taught him to define an offence and then escape through the definition. But in the court of the screen, definition was not being asked for—effect was. The person whose money vanished, whose house was sold, whose son hanged himself, did not care about definitions.

He steadied himself. "This is a fear-inducing visual attack," he told himself. He lifted a laptop, an isolated machine—disconnected from the network. No intrusion was possible. He switched it on. A blank editor opened. He typed: "Chandrapal Batra and Garh Narikel People's Archive Committee." At once the cursor moved by itself: "Chandrapal Batra and his own mind."

Batra shut the laptop. He tried to remove the battery, but in the new machine it was sealed inside. In fury he hurled the laptop onto the floor. The screen cracked. The cracks spread like veins of a coconut leaf. Along every crack appeared tiny letters: name, name, name. He sat down on the carpet.

The first light of dawn entered through the window. The glass city slowly changed from blue to grey. Batra's eyes were numb. All night he had neither slept nor thought; he had only watched. The screens were now off, but a screen had opened inside him. "Mind suspended" does not mean that a person keeps remembering. It means that a person wants to forget, but forgetting no longer obeys his order.

In the morning his secretary arrived. "Sir, appearance in court today?" Batra said, "Adjourned." "Board meeting?" "Adjourned." "Raghav Somani?" Batra paused. "Tell him to keep all screens off." The secretary stared. "Sir?" Batra gave no answer. He kept looking through the window. Thousands of screens across the city were waking. In every screen he saw a leaf from Channa Grove.

He lifted the Meerut degree from the table. There was no dust on its glass, yet the letters inside had changed. Where it should have said "Bachelor of Laws," it now read: "Education in reading names incomplete." Batra turned the frame face down. On the backing board was his youthful signature. Beneath that signature another line appeared: "He who read law but not people became a slave of the screen."

By noon Batra made his decision. He would not go to Garh Narikel. Never. Not in the body. He would fight through screens, through law, media, servers, police. But while he was writing the decision, his phone opened by itself. In the map app a line appeared from his apartment to Garh Narikel. The line was not red but green. Coconut-leaf symbols marked it. Distance: "The mind has already arrived."

He tried to turn off the phone. The final message on the screen appeared: "You are not coming here. You are not leaving here."

Chandrapal Batra remained standing at the window. The city moved below. The screens above were quiet. Inside him the names kept moving. For the first time he understood that Channa Grove was no longer in a village; it had entered the network. The day he wrote the first script for online gambling, he had already placed a foot upon the kabaddi court of Channa Grove. Now only the act of admitting it remained.

Toward evening a Signal message came from Raghav: "Orders?" Batra spent a long time without typing. At last he sent one line: "Not evidence. Find the names." The message disappeared as soon as it was sent. Then a leaf from Channa Grove fell across the screen. On it were the words: "Before you find a name, listen to it."

And so Chandrapal Batra entered Garh Narikel without going there. His body remained in the city's glass room, but through a crack in the screen his mind hung toward Channa Grove. The inner journey of the rogues had only begun.

FOLK SONG: THE GLASS SCREEN HAS TWO FACES

Folk tune: jhumar

*Look, O screen, the screen looks both ways,
Letters deleted from the stump sprout again.*

*The glass wall says—the village cannot see me,
The leaf laughs—the screen sees both ways.
Deleted letters sprouted again from the stump,
Ujjwal's unfinished message woke inside the glass.
The empire's strength rested upon a single gesture,*

Someone switched the screen off and all the glare melted.

*“Not evidence, find the names”—Batra wrote and sent,
The leaf said—listen first, and only then seek the names.*

*Body in the city, mind hanging in the grove,
The wind of coconut leaves entered through a crack in the screen.*

*The glass wall said—the village cannot see me,
The leaf laughed and answered—the screen records both ways.*

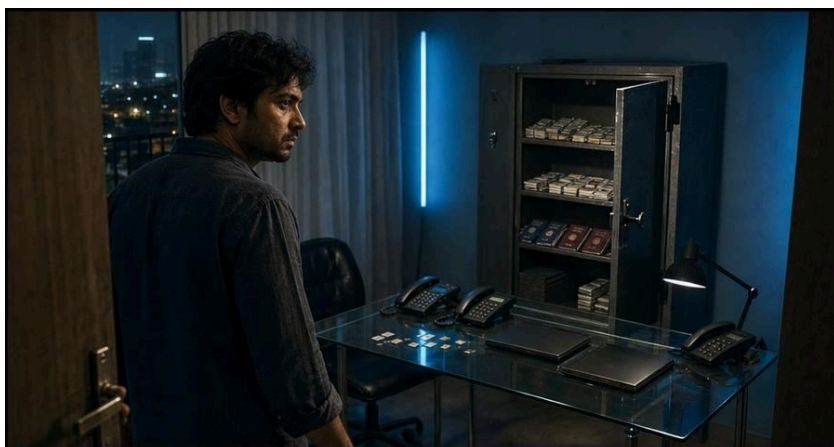
*“Not evidence, find the names”—Batra wrote and sent,
The leaf said—listen first; only then can the journey proceed.*



CHAPTER 28

Raghav Signal's Silence

One who fears the voice speaks in vanishing letters; but fear erases no letter.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SAVE THE MESSAGE, SAVE A LIFE

Folk tune: Signal awakening song

*Wake, companion, let the message bell awaken,
Put your ear even to letters that live for five seconds.*

*Even a five-second message is a signal—take heed,
Recognise words of crisis, fear and despair in time.*

*Before a message disappears, keep a safe copy,
Tell a friend, family member or source of help at once.*

*One reply—"I am with you"—can change the road of a life,
Behind the phone call of the night, a door to morning opens.*

*Save the message, save a life; do not remain silent,
Let a net of digital compassion hold one another up.*

*Even vanishing letters carry news of breath,
Three words—"I am with you"—can prepare the door of dawn.*

*One call, one knock, the warmth of one hand,
However dense the night, suffering can be cut through.*



The second station in the rogues' inner journey was Raghav. Voice had never mattered in the life of Raghav "Signal" Somani. He was afraid of voice. A voice can be recorded, become testimony, be played in court, reach a mother's ears. So on Signal he wrote, deleted, then wrote again. He believed that anything disappearing after five seconds had never happened in the world at all.

That night, after returning from Chandrapal Batra's glass room, Raghav stopped as soon as he opened the door of his apartment. Everything inside was as before—the blue light, glass table, three phones, two closed laptops, a metal cupboard containing not cash but SIM cards, bank kits, seals of fake companies and several old passports. But one thing in the room was new: silence.

Raghav was not unfamiliar with silence. Silence is the finest language of crime. But this silence had not been made by him. It was already seated there, like an elderly guest who never asks for an invitation but enters a house at the right time. He turned on the light. The silence did not move.

The Signal phone lay on the table. Raghav cleaned it twenty-seven times a day. Old messages erased, backup off, cloud storage disabled, separate SIM, separate name. He picked it up. The screen was bright. No notification. He felt relief. Then, in one corner, a green leaf appeared. It slowly spread until the whole screen became the veins of a coconut leaf.

He blinked. The leaf vanished. A message appeared: "L.K.: account suspended." Raghav's throat dried. Lau Kin-Hung never wrote "suspended." His language was short, cut down, sealed inside percentages: "Send." "Stop." "Withdraw." "Change route." Suspended was a word used by lawyers, banks, courts. Not L.K.

Raghav typed: "Clarify." The message would not go. Spinning dots. Then red letters: "Route unavailable." He picked up the second phone. The third. The fourth. The same reply on each: Route unavailable. Where had the safest routes in the world gone in one night? Roads can be closed, ports can be closed, borders can be closed; how does a digital route close?

He opened the metal cupboard. On a small sheet of paper inside were codes—Hong Kong, Macao, Dubai, Kathmandu, Guwahati, Patna, Meerut, Delhi. A number beside every name. An account behind every number. A person behind every account. A family behind every person. Raghav had never seen the sequence before. He saw only numbers. Today a body stood behind every number.

He folded the paper and put it into his pocket. Then an old printer started by itself. Raghav froze. The printer had been switched off for three months. The cartridge should have dried out. Yet it began to print. First page: "Ujjwal Jha." Second: "Munna Paswan." Third: "Sarayu, woman labourer." Fourth: "Name unknown." The fifth page was blank. On the blank page there was only one mark—a blurred thumbprint.

Raghav pulled the printer cable. The pages kept coming. Cable disconnected, electricity disconnected, still pages. He kicked the printer. The machine fell silent. Sheets lay scattered across the floor. The edge of every sheet was damp. It was not merely wetness but the smell of a river—raw mud, flattened rice and jaggery, stale corpse, and the impossible fragrance of coconut blossom.

He looked at his security watch. His heartbeat was fast. Raghav wanted to laugh. "Stress," he told himself. "Batra is panicking, and it is affecting me." But another voice inside said: the screen came for Batra; printouts came to you. Why? Because Batra made the letters, and you

made the routes. The names came into his screen; the paths of the accounts are arriving in your house.

Raghav Somani was not fundamentally a trader; he was a ledger. Clothes on the body, smile on the face, phone in the pocket; inside, only credit and debit. As a child his father ran a small hardware shop. He watched customers take goods on credit; his father wrote down their names; money did not come on time. Raghav learned that day: writing names is foolish. Keep accounts instead; accounts have no faces.

That lesson became the root of his crime. When Chandrapal Batra first explained the work of mule accounts, Raghav understood at once—a poor young man's account, a SIM in another name, a courier sent to a third address, a fourth person's signature, a fifth person's commission. When a crime is divided into enough pieces, no one appears to be the whole criminal. That was modern cleverness.

Raghav's work was to join the pieces without showing the join. He gave "commission work" to thousands of young people. "Just open an account. Money will come in, go out, and your share is yours." Unemployment was his agent. Hostels, coaching lanes, grocery shops, tea stalls, private colleges, migrant workers' lodgings—his people were everywhere. Whoever was caught said, "How was I to know?" In truth, they often did not know. Ignorance was Raghav's greatest armour.

That night the armour cracked. The names on the pages scattered across the floor were not only names of the dead. Some belonged to people who were alive but had gone to jail. Some to women who had sent their household savings away under "digital arrest." Some to boys who began lying to their fathers after the first win. Some to account holders who rented out accounts for commission and were later called criminals.

Raghav tried another route to L.K. on the phone. Coded message: "Dry port?" No answer. "Northern route?" Silence. "Old ledger?" Silence. "Three percent extra." Silence. For the first time Lau Kin-Hung's silence seemed like death. Foreign kingpins speak little, but they send signals. Today there was no signal either.

Suddenly a message flashed on the phone: "Account closed." Nothing more. No name, no code. Something struck inside Raghav's head. Account closed did not mean only money stopped. It meant person closed. Contact cut. Whoever had been used had finished being useful. In an empire of crime there is no friendship, only routes. Once a route breaks, the person becomes scrap.

Anger filled Raghav's eyes. In his mind he cursed Lau Kin-Hung. "I ran India for you. I made accounts, washed your money, protected your apps, shielded your call centres from police." But behind the words he spoke inwardly came another sentence: "I broke thousands of homes."

He pushed the sentence away at once. In the court inside himself he objected: "Irrelevant."

Silence laughed. A laugh without sound.

Raghav opened the window. In the city's night, sirens, motorcycles, pressure cookers, children, lifts, and a distant train mingled together. Ordinary sounds. Yet behind them he heard a very faint "splash." Was it the splash of a river or of a screen? There was no longer any difference. Perhaps every transaction falling into the wrong account made that very sound.

He sat in the chair and opened his old notebook. It was not digital. He trusted digital systems, but he kept some codes on paper, because even the cleverest criminal sometimes trusts the simplicity of paper. On the first page he had written: "Do not trust the network; keep an exit formula." Raghav smiled. Exit formula. He had a way out.

He turned the pages. Exit formulas: another name, another passport, another country, a house in the hills, cash, gold, coins, a third phone. But a green line ran along the edge of every page. It looked like the vein of a leaf. Wherever he wrote an exit, a leaf formed there. As though Channa Grove were saying: "The road out passes through the inside."

He tore the watch from his wrist and threw it away. Criminals monitor time, but today time was monitoring him. The watch fell to the floor and kept running. Not tick-tick but "name-name." Raghav's ears filled with it. He pressed his hands over them. "Name-name" was coming from within.

By dawn he had decided—not to go to Garh Narikel. Batra had made the same decision; Raghav did too. But the two decisions were different. Batra did not want to go because he wanted to fight. Raghav did not want to go because he wanted to flee. He feared that if he reached Garh Narikel, all his signals would take bodies. What had been account numbers would stand before him as people.

That afternoon he sent a message to his people: "Stop mule recruitment." It was the first abnormal order of his life. Five questions arrived at once: "For how long?" "Which branch?" "Which case?" "Order from above?" "Payment?" Raghav answered none of them. His silence spread through the network. In a criminal web, nothing is more frightening than silence without an order.

By evening Chandrapal Batra called. Raghav looked at the phone and did not answer. Then a message: "Status?" Raghav began to type: "Everything under control." His finger stopped. He deleted it. Wrote instead: "The routes are silent." He sent it. Five minutes later Batra replied: "Silence can be managed too." Raghav kept staring at the phone.

He understood that Batra still did not know: silence cannot be managed, only heard.

The second printout came at night. This time one sheet only. No name on it, only a question: "Whose body made your first share?" Raghav stared at the page for a long time. His first share—five thousand rupees then. One student's account. The student was later arrested. His father sold the shop and went to lawyers. The case dragged on. Raghav moved forward. The student's name? He tried to remember. Could not. The page remained blank.

Something broke inside Raghav in that blankness. A criminal's greatest fear is not being caught; it is discovering that he cannot remember the name attached to his first crime. A forgotten name grows so angry that it becomes a ghost. Perhaps that is all the Court of Channa Grove does—it turns forgotten names into ghosts.

Raghav rose in a darkness like a nebula. He took all the SIM cards from the metal cupboard and began breaking them one by one. Each SIM made a small sound as it snapped—"hm." As though someone far away were answering. Fifty, seventy, a hundred. Sharp plastic edges cut into his fingers; they hurt. When he broke the last SIM, a message appeared on the screen: "Broken SIMs do not mend broken homes."

Exhausted, he sat on the floor. For the first time he remembered his own home. His father, the hardware shop, iron nails, the credit ledger, little Raghav wanting accounts instead of names. His father used to say, "Write the name, son. If the account fails, you can still ask the name." Raghav had laughed at him. Today his father was dead. The ledger was gone. Even the name had grown blurred.

Raghav's eyes filled, but no tears fell. Long practice in crime dries the water in the eyes. He wanted to cry, but there seemed to be no water left inside the body. Perhaps all that water was trapped in the accounts he had created. Perhaps the leaves of Garh Narikel would first demand that water back.

Then he did one small thing. He opened the laptop, not for anyone else but for himself. He created a file: "First Account." He began searching for the student's name. Old emails, old photographs, old payments, old bank lists. Three hours later he found it—Arunesh Kumar. He typed the name. The screen did not flicker. No leaf appeared. No ghost. The letters simply remained still. For the first time Raghav understood: writing a name can quiet a screen.

But the quiet lasted only a moment. As soon as one name was written, another demanded to be found. A blank line beneath Arunesh Kumar. Raghav thought: how many? A thousand? Ten thousand? As a crocodile chews through flesh to bone, the accounts of crime had chewed through

memory to its bones. Would he be able to find every name? Did he want to? The questions had no answer. But the file was open.

The next morning Raghav Somani left his house. He did not go toward Garh Narikel. He first went to the old hostel where his first mule account had been made. New gatekeeper, new wall, new rooms. No trace. But the tea seller outside had grown old; he did not recognise Raghav. Raghav ordered tea and asked, "Did Arunesh Kumar live here?" The tea seller scratched his head. "Many years ago? The boy who got into that case?"

Raghav's hand trembled. The name was alive in the air. Government paper forgets, courts defer, but a tea seller remembers. This folk memory was stronger than his digital erasure. He drank in silence. The tea seller said, "Poor boy. His father sold the shop. Later the boy went half-mad for a long time." Raghav paid. The tea seller began counting change. Raghav said, "Keep it." The man laughed. "I don't want charity. Keep the account clear."

Keep the account clear. The two words lodged in Raghav's chest. Criminals give donations, not accounts. Temple, trust, aid, charity—all donations. Clearing accounts is difficult. To clear an account you need names, events, acknowledgment.

That evening he returned home. The Signal phone glowed again. Message from L.K.: "Why stop?" Raghav stared for a long time. The master above him had returned. The accounts might open again. Money might flow. The old life might become possible again. He could reply: "Route ready." But his finger wrote another sentence: "The list of names is being made."

The moment he sent it, the phone went black. For an instant he feared L.K. would have him killed. Then a calm voice rose from within: silence had been more frightening than death, and silence had now been heard. He could still run, lie, turn back—but he could no longer say that he had not heard the names.

That night Raghav Signal Somani slept for the first time without a phone beside his pillow. Sleep did not come at once. Channa Grove came to him not in a dream but in wakefulness. Leaves fell one by one, a name on each. They did not come to convict him; they came to make him read. Reading, too, is a punishment when one has spent an entire life reading only sums of money.

At dawn a new leaf lay on his table. On it were the words: "Before you break the silence, listen." Raghav placed it in his notebook. This was not confession, nor was it atonement. It was only a beginning. His first day in the inner world of the rogues was over. Outside, the world still feared the name of his network; inside, he was for the first time practising how not to fear names.

That morning, in the kabaddi of Channa Grove in Garh Narikel, a new sound arrived. The ghosts asked, “Who has come?” Budhba Ghost cupped his ear. “Not a body. Someone has sent silence.” The Loths smiled. The light of the Raksh grew a little brighter. Kabaddi began again.

FOLK SONG: THE LAMENT OF THE DELETED MESSAGE

Folk tune: viraha of silence

Listen first—before you break the silence, listen,

Not confession, not atonement—understand it as a beginning.

Letters vanished in five seconds; where did the sin vanish?

Behind every account a body stands; a name calls out.

The tea shop remembers what the file forgets,

The tongue that read money trembles when it reads a name.

Raghav kept the phone away and spent the night so for the first time,

Leaf after leaf of names fell, blocking the door of sleep.

“Before you break the silence, listen”—the leaf at dawn,

Not confession, not atonement, but the word beginning.

No body came to the grove; silence was sent instead,

In the ghosts’ new round, silence became a player.

Letters vanished in five seconds; the sin did not vanish,

Behind every account a body stood; a name spoke.



CHAPTER 29

Lau Kin-Hung's Dream

*A name written in full can be arrested - but a half-written name
becomes its own prisoner.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE RIVER'S SONG IN THE GLASS HOUSE

Folk tune: Sea-Malar

Sing the Malar, sing it in the glass house,

Awaken the river's tune in the cold breast of glass.

See the sea from the glass house, and bring its voice within;

Among the lines of profit, honour the names of human beings.

Open the windows of the glass tower and give the wind a place;

Give fair value to the labour and dreams of distant lands.

*Let the splash be not a sound of fear, but the gentle rhythm of
awareness;*

Let justice endure across the seas in the dealings of the world.

The river's song within the glass house will soften the heart;

It will fill the cold world of glass with human warmth.

Open the tower's window and let the east wind enter;

Among the rows of profit figures, let the human face appear.

Let the sweat of distant labour receive its rightful worth;

Let the current of justice sing its Malar even across the sea.



Raghav's silence had already crossed the sea and reached Hong Kong. Lau Kin-Hung never pronounced his full name. A name written out completely on paper, he used to say, could be arrested. And so, in Hong Kong's financial darkness, his name had been reduced to three letters - L.K.H. Yet within those three letters mingled the salt of the sea, the old smell of the opium trade, the glass of banks, and the blue glow of screens in India's small towns.

He lived in a glass house built beside the sea. Not a house - a glass cave. Inside and outside at once. Sea outside, screens within. Ships outside, accounts within. Water outside, percentages within. Every morning he looked towards the sea but did not see the sea; he saw sums of money moving behind the floating ships.

That night he had sent Raghav Signal one final message: 'Close the account.' Only two words. To him this was not mercy but policy. The first

rule of crime was simple: when a link begins to make a sound, cut it off. Raghav made no sound; but Raghav's silence itself had become a sound. So the account had to be closed.

After sending the message, he switched off the phone. Each of his phones bore a small coloured dot on the back - red for India, blue for Singapore, green for Dubai, black for Nepal, yellow for Hong Kong. The dots told him where the bodies were, where the money was, and where deaths would not be counted. His gaze lingered a little longer on the Indian dot. The dot moved.

At first he thought the sea breeze had stirred the curtain. Then he saw that it was not the curtain but the map that was trembling. The map of India broke apart pixel by pixel and became a village. The village's name was written not on a screen but upon a leaf. The letters moved: Garh Narikel.

Lau Kin-Hung laughed. His laugh was very small, no larger than the final decimal point in a deal. He believed that a thing called a village existed in the market only so that a city might buy it. A price could be placed on the village's land, its young men, its bank accounts, its soul. If something had no price, a price could be made for it.

He went to bed. The bed stood beside a glass wall opening towards the sea. He lay flat beneath the sheet. He never dreamed. Dreams, he said, belonged to poor people; rich people made projections. But that night, as a thin line of moonlight was drawn across the black surface of the sea, the dust of Channa Grove in Garh Narikel settled upon his eyelids.

The dream began with the sea. That night the sea did not make waves; it breathed. Once inward, once outward. Lau Kin-Hung stood inside his glass house. Water began to seep through the floor. He laughed - there was insurance. The water rose a few inches. There was a pump, he thought. It reached his knees. There was an emergency exit. It reached his chest. There was a helicopter.

But the water was not seawater. It carried no smell of salt. It smelled of hospital medicine, bridge cement, the heat of mobile phones, and the dampness of hoarded banknotes. The water was colourless, but many deaths had dissolved within it.

The first thing that floated towards him was a mobile phone. Its screen was dark, yet white light shone from within. Lau reached to pick it up. The phone opened by itself. A young man's face appeared on the screen - eyes sunk deep, lips dry, a blue rope-mark around his neck. He said, 'I am Ujjwal Jha. In the profit of which country was my loss entered?'

Lau dropped the phone. A second mobile floated up. A woman appeared upon it - a basket on her head, river-kohl in her eyes. She said, 'I

am Sarayu. In which of your subsidiary companies was the insurance on the body that fell from the bridge pier deposited?’

A third mobile came. It carried a voice but no face. The voice said, ‘They told me I was under digital arrest. I sold the jewellery in my house. Later I learned that the uniform of the law had merely been worn on a screen. Where did the commission on my fear go?’

A fourth mobile came. A fifth. A tenth. A hundredth. The water filled with phones. On every screen the same question shone in a different form: ‘Under the law of which country is my death recorded?’

Lau Kin-Hung tried to scream, but no sound came from his mouth. His language was percentages, and percentages contain no word for weeping. He raised the hand with which, for years, he had written orders across the world. The lines on his palm began to glow like cracks in a screen.

Then a crocodile appeared in the water. A crocodile in Hong Kong harbour? Impossible, he thought. But dreams pay no customs duty on the impossible. The crocodile was black. A phone was caught between its teeth, and Chandrapal Batra’s smiling face filled the screen. The crocodile began to chew slowly. When Batra’s face broke into pixels, those pixels formed Sarayu’s name.

Another crocodile came from the far corner. A court seal was stamped upon its back. A third had the light of a Harvard auditorium in its eyes. The belly of a fourth was swollen, crammed with oxygen cylinders, vaccine vials, boxes of counterfeit medicine, and QR signs from betting wallets.

The crocodiles surrounded him. He did not become afraid; he began to count. One, two, three, four. At that moment, through the water came the sound of the ghosts playing kabaddi in Channa Grove. The sound did not rise from the sea but from inside the mobile phones. Not kabaddi-kabaddi, but name-name. Ujjwal. Sarayu. Munna. Devika. Nand. And a thousand names he had never heard.

The dream changed. He found himself in a Harvard auditorium. Edward Broom was speaking from the stage: ‘Human dignity is the soul of development.’ The hall applauded. Lau Kin-Hung sat in the darkness at the back. Figures moved across the tablet before him. Beneath each of Broom’s words, a sum flashed: dignity: forty-five lakhs. Development: twelve crores. Ethics: eight percent. South Asia operations: high risk, high profit.

Then water began dripping from the auditorium ceiling. Professor Elina Graves hurried to protect her notes. Ira Aruni did not rise to go towards the stage; she was outside on the lawn teaching children to read

names. Lau looked out. Every child held a leaf. On every leaf was the face from one of those mobile screens.

Broom kept speaking. The water touched his shoes. 'This is a symbolic installation,' he said. The hall applauded again. But the water rose. The sound of applause became splash-splash. Lau saw a pipal tree growing in the middle of the auditorium. Budhba Ghost sat upon one of its branches.

Budhba Ghost looked at him and said, 'Your accounts are very clean. Only one column is missing.'

For the first time in the dream, Lau Kin-Hung found his voice. 'Which column?'

Budhba Ghost said, 'Sleep.'

He woke. The air-conditioning in the glass house was running. The sea was outside where it belonged. The phones were off. The curtains were dark. His heart raced. He immediately called the security room. The answer came: 'Everything normal.' He called the finance room. The same answer: 'Everything normal.' He rang the secure line to India operations. Three seconds of silence. Then a recorded woman's voice said: 'The name you are calling is busy in the archive of names.'

He slammed down the phone. Sweat stood on his forehead. In the cold glass chamber of Hong Kong, sweat felt like an insult. He went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. In the mirror he saw the face of a man who never died anywhere in the world because he was never officially declared alive anywhere.

At four in the morning his chief assistant, Mei Lan, arrived. She was the kind of woman who understood an order before a question had to be asked. Standing by the door, she said, 'There is disruption at the India desk.' Raghav was unreachable. Chandrapal Batra was repeatedly demanding secure confirmation. Hariharan had gone to Garh Narikel.

Lau Kin-Hung asked slowly, 'Does Garh Narikel actually exist?'

For the first time Mei Lan looked directly at him. 'It is a village.' Small on the map. Negligible in the data. But searches for that name have risen sharply this week.

'Why?'

'People are searching for names.' Names of the dead. Of workers. Of victims of digital fraud. Of people harmed by medicine rackets. And some children have started a folk school.

Lau tried to laugh. The laugh would not come. He went to the window. The first light of morning lay upon the sea. Far away stood rows

of containers on a ship. Every container looked to him like a coffin. He blinked and looked again. They were containers once more.

Mei Lan opened a file. 'Shall we order the Indian operation closed? The loss will remain limited. We can return later under changed names.'

Instead of answering, Lau returned to his desk. An object lay there that had not been there during the night - a thin green coconut leaf. It carried the faint smell of raw water and fresh green growth, a smell that did not belong in conditioned air. How had a coconut leaf entered a glass house in Hong Kong?

Mei Lan looked at the leaf. 'Who brought this?'

Lau said, 'No one.'

He picked it up. Its veins were fine lines, like the channels of bank transfers. Here and there were black marks along them. When he stared at the marks, they became letters. Not Chinese, not English - Devanagari. Lau could not read them. Yet someone inside him was reading: Garh Narikel.

He sat down to write an order. He meant to type: 'Wind down India operations immediately. Erase the evidence.' His fingers moved across the keyboard, but the screen displayed: 'Names will not be erased.'

He pressed Delete. The sentence returned: 'Names will not be erased.'

He shut down the system. The screen went dark. His own face appeared in the darkness. Behind his face, very far away, he could see Channa Grove. He understood that his dream had not ended. He was awake, but the dream had awakened behind him.

He told Mei Lan, 'I want the next India report on paper.'

Mei Lan was startled. 'You do not keep paper.'

Lau said quietly, 'The screen is no longer trustworthy.'

Mei Lan left. He remained alone. Morning had filled the glass house. The sea was blue, the city was waking, the markets were preparing to open. The world was normal. Only the coconut leaf on the desk was not normal. It did not dry. Its green colour only deepened, as though someone in distant Garh Narikel had just plucked it and sent it to him.

Lau Kin-Hung placed his hand upon the leaf. His hand felt a heartbeat. The leaf was not inert. Something was sounding inside it.

It was saying: 'Now your mind hangs suspended.'

Lau snatched his hand away, but the pulse remained in his palm. From that day onward he began to hear a faint sound of water in every line of profit. Before closing any account, he looked to see whether somewhere inside it a child might be writing a name.

By noon he had issued three orders: shut down all Raghav's access; stop Batra's payments; place Hariharan's expenses in a separate fund. They looked like ordinary business decisions. In truth, they were the decisions of a man trying to escape his dream by cutting away everyone who lived inside it.

What he did not understand was that the one who is cut loose first becomes free in the mind. Raghav's silence had already become a leaf. Batra's screen had become Channa Grove. Hariharan was travelling by train with Budhba Ghost. Now a coconut leaf sat inside Lau Kin-Hung's glass house.

At dusk a black shadow rose from behind the sea. The security cameras showed nothing. The satellite map showed nothing. But Lau's eyes saw a crocodile swimming straight towards his house. There was no phone in its mouth. This time there was a sheet of paper.

Lau drew the curtain. The sound of water came through the glass all the same.

It was not the sound of Garh Narikel. It was the sound of his own mind. The mind remained suspended, and a mind that remains suspended will one day drag the body after it.

FOLK SONG: SPLASH IN THE GLASS HOUSE

Folk tune: Sea-Viraha

The grove will pull, one day it will pull the body too;

Whose mind the village has caught will hear the water.

The sea can be seen from the glass house, but its voice cannot be heard;

The boat of dreams enters without paying customs duty.

The leaf pulsed in Lau's palm - 'Your mind is suspended';

Along every line of profit, a child's name awoke.

He tried to save himself by cutting accounts, severing his companions;

The minds of those he cut loose flew free before anything else.

This time the crocodile carried paper in its mouth, not a phone;

He drew the curtain, but could not stop the sound of water.

The splash beyond the glass was the sound of his own mind;

*Whose mind the village has caught, the body too will one day be
pulled.*

*The sea is visible from the glass house, though its voice cannot be
heard;*

Along every line of profit, the children's names awaken.



CHAPTER 30

The Court Within the Rogues

In the laughter of one who has won in the outer court and lost in the court within, you can hear the clatter of teeth.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LAMP OF INNER JUSTICE

Folk tune: Bhagat justice-blessing

Light the lamp, light it in the court within;

Spread the ledger of your own deeds before yourself.

The outer court may delay, but the inner lamp burns;

The quiet judge of conscience holds the page of truth.

Read the account of your own deeds; do not flee from fault;

Do not fear to issue yourself an order to make amends.

The inner court is not punishment alone, but direction;

From remorse into action it builds a new hope.

If the lamp of justice burns within, the path outside grows clear;

The true verdict of the mind can cleanse a life.

Sing the Bhagat melody and tell the story of truth;

Bear the heat of guilt and take the road of repair.

Wash the courtyard of the mind with the clear water of repentance;

Carry the lamp lit within and win the road outside.



The minds of all five rogues now hung suspended, and for suspended minds Channa Grove opens its own court. When a person wins in the outer court and loses in the inner one, his gait becomes more measured than before. He smiles, but the clatter of teeth sounds inside the smile. He folds a paper, but from the fold comes not a rustle but a splash. He says, 'The matter is over.' Yet beneath his pillow an invisible clerk writes fresh dates all night long.

That night, in three cities and three separate rooms, three men woke at the same moment: Batuknath Hariharan in his costly chair, Chandrapal Batra before his screen, and Raghav Signal behind his closed window. Across the sea Lau Kin-Hung was awake as well, though there was no sweat on his body; upon the walls of his glass house a map of India was forming out of water.

No one's phone rang. No summons arrived. No attendance slip was served. Even so, each understood that he had to appear somewhere. This

was not the court where men in black coats call their own voices law. This was the court where a voice rises first in the mind and only afterward searches for a mouth.

Batuknath Hariharan first looked for the order that had given him victory. He kept that paper not under his pillow but close to his chest. He found it. The seal was clear. The signature was clear. The language had the same stiff authority he liked: 'Petition dismissed on account of procedural defects.' He tried to smile. But from within the word 'dismissed' emerged 'Nand'. Then 'Sarayu'. Then 'Ujjwal'. Then many names he had never heard, though money for erasing them had reached his table.

He rose and turned on the light. The room was the same, yet it was not the same. Law degrees hung on the walls; behind the glass of every certificate, tiny leaves were caught. Names were written on the leaves. In the chair before his desk, where clients usually sat, sat a boy. Shorts to the knees, and in his eyes the same hunger Batuknath had carried in childhood when he first saw a book of law and thought: with this book, people can be saved.

The boy said, 'Read the names.'

Batuknath hardened his voice. 'By whose authority?'

The boy did not smile. There was no gavel in his hand. There was a pipal leaf. He laid the leaf upon the table. It made a small sound - tap. The court came into session.

'I am the president of the Bar Council,' Batuknath said.

'Then read the names,' the boy said again. 'Pronouncing the names of those you stopped in the name of procedure will not reduce your office.'

Batuknath clenched his fist. For the first time he felt that he was being heard not by a judge but by his own childhood. A judge can be frightened; childhood cannot. Childhood is the place where a person stores his first lie and spends a lifetime protecting it.

He refused to read. At once the sound of kabaddi reached his ears. Channa Grove was far away, yet the sound was close. Not 'kabaddi-kabaddi' but 'name-name'. He covered his ears. The sound was coming from within.

At the same moment a window opened on Chandrapal Batra's screen. Its title was: 'Account Reconciliation'. He had not opened it. Neither had his clerk. One by one the accounts appeared: Munna Paswan, Bablu Sah, Arman, Ujjwal Jha, Ranjit, Neeraj, Sabir, Lalita, Ajit, Unnamed. He moved the mouse and tried to close the window. It closed. His mobile rang immediately. The same accounts appeared on that screen.

Chandrapal Batra remembered his degree from Meerut. The smell of its yellow paper entered his nose. Once he had been a small lawyer: accident compensation, land disputes, police stations, bail. The earnings were small, but sleep came at night. Later he learned the language of accounts. An account was not a person but a road. Hunger opened it, gangs drove upon it, and police closed it.

A court formed inside the screen. No judge, only an empty chair. No prosecution, only a torn passbook. No defence counsel, only his own voice. He argued: 'There was consent. The account holder gave his documents.'

A page of the torn passbook moved. A voice said, 'The consent of hunger and consent in law are not the same thing.'

Chandrapal grew irritated. 'This is sentimentality. Business does not run on sentiment.'

The passbook laughed. The laughter of paper can be sadder than human laughter. 'Business is business only while the buyer knows what he is buying. You bought people's futures and sold the transaction back to them as a game.'

Chandrapal lifted a paperweight to smash the screen. But the paperweight had filled with water from the Ganga. It became heavy; his wrist trembled. On the screen appeared not Ujjwal's photograph but his final debt message. The words writhed like registered worms: 'Final warning today. Digital arrest order issued.'

'Digital arrest,' Chandrapal muttered. 'I was only an adviser...'

The voice inside the screen replied, 'An adviser is one who shows the road. You showed a pit and said: the road is here.'

Raghav Signal sat in his room waiting for a sound. Half his life had been spent removing sounds: disappearing messages, deleted chats, SIM cards in other people's names, false identities, commission chains, safe routes. He believed that anything erased after five seconds had never truly been born.

But that night leaves began falling onto his desk. The window was closed. The fan was off. Yet leaves kept falling. On each leaf was an unfinished sentence: 'Open an account...' 'Send Aadhaar...' 'Frighten the old man...' 'Pretend to be police on video call...' 'Three percent...' 'Keep the girl's photograph...' 'Money by evening...'

Raghav picked up the leaves one by one and tried to burn them. They would not catch fire. They were not wet, yet they would not burn. He understood: these were not leaves of a tree but leaves of memory. Memory is not dampened by water; it is soaked in names.

He wrote a message to Lau Kin-Hung: 'Get me out.' The message did not go. A red mark appeared in its place. Then, instead of a reply, a mirror opened on the screen. In it Raghav did not see his own face; he saw all the faces he had called 'small accounts': a college boy, an elderly woman, a rickshaw driver, an unemployed graduate, a son searching for a loan for his sick mother.

An old woman in the mirror asked, 'Son, when your voice became the police and told me my boy would go to jail, did you sleep well that night?'

Raghav covered his ears. But the question did not enter through the ears; it stuck to the back of his neck. That is where the mind hangs when a person can no longer see a way of escape.

Across the sea Lau Kin-Hung paced his glass house. His inner court did not speak any language he knew. He could hire interpreters for English, Chinese, Hindi, legal translation - for all of them. But this court spoke in smells. The house filled with the smells of salt, greed, damp banknotes, cheapened lives, and mothers weeping in distant countries.

A long table grew before him. There were no files on it. Only bowls. In every bowl lay a few coins, some medicine, drops of blood, shards of mobile-phone glass. He did not understand. Then a sea wave rose as high as the glass wall, and the objects in each bowl formed an image: a bridge, a hospital, a gaming app, a flesh market, a weapons crate, a packet of narcotics.

A voice asked, 'State the percentage.'

Lau Kin-Hung smiled. Percentages were his religion. 'The calculation of risk is the foundation of business,' he said.

The voice remained calm. 'What is your percentage in the deaths?'

For the first time he fell silent. He believed he did not kill bodies. He only built systems. He only moved money from one place to another. He only opened doors. Every crime, in his mind, happened in someone else's hands. But in the inner court it is not hands that are measured; it is shares.

Edward Broom's night was no calmer. He was reading the draft of his next speech: 'Human Dignity and Global Enterprise'. The words were beautiful. His secretary had written them; Professor Elina Graves had revised them. Every sentence sat cleanly on white paper. But when he read the word 'dignity', mud began to seep from the edge of the page. In that mud were false safety reports, swollen vaccine bills, and prints from workers' rough hands.

His inner court was the most civilised of all. It had wood panelling, soft light, quiet chairs, and soundproof walls. But justice does not always

arrive with noise; sometimes silence is more terrifying. There was no ghost in the judge's seat. The applause from his own speeches sat there instead. Again and again it clapped, stopped, and asked: 'When your words held dignity, how many absent bodies were held in your accounts?'

Broom said, 'I had no direct knowledge.'

The applause replied, 'Was the profit direct?'

He fell silent. The smell of profit needs no interpreter.

In all these inner courts one chair stood empty. In Batuknath's room, Chandrapal's screen, Raghav's court of leaves, Lau Kin-Hung's glass house, Broom's civilised chamber - everywhere the same empty chair. It bore no name. Yet each knew it was not Satyavrat Mehta's chair. It belonged to those they had defeated.

The rogues wanted those people to come, weep, bow, ask for settlement, file review petitions, give statements to the media, and lose again. The pleasure of victory depends upon the presence of an opponent. When the opponent disappears, victory becomes a yellowing sheet trapped inside a file.

The inner court asked them all the same question: 'Where are the people you defeated?'

Batuknath said, 'In Channa Grove.'

Chandrapal said, 'At the digital school.'

Raghav said, 'In the leaves.'

Lau Kin-Hung said, 'Inside India's small mobile phones.'

Broom said, 'Outside the auditorium.'

The question came again: 'Then why are you here?'

There was no answer. A thin line appeared across the courtroom floor, running from the outer world into the inner one. It was not a road; it was a groove in the mind. The more anyone tried to erase it, the deeper it became.

Toward dawn, all five men found themselves back in their beds across the different cities. Batuknath still held the victory order, but his thumb was pressed over the place where a name should have been. Chandrapal's screen was off, but from within the glass Ujjwal's unfinished message glowed. Raghav's desk was clean, but a leaf was found in his pocket: 'Evidence does not become absent.' Lau Kin-Hung's glass house was dry, but a fine line of salt had drawn the map of India. Broom's speech was clean, but mud had settled beneath the word 'dignity'.

And at that same hour in Garh Narikel, the children were sweeping the yard of the Coconut-Leaf School. Devika wrote on the first lesson

board: 'Do not fear digital fear.' Mira wrote on the second: 'Privacy is the body's shadow.' Saumya translated old papers into the people's language. Ira, having left the distant auditorium, practised the pronunciation of names.

The rogues had survived the first hearing in the inner court. But they received no punishment. They received something harsher than punishment: waiting. They were now compelled to watch the people who had gone away not to fight them but to build.

That morning Budhba Ghost remained awake a little longer in Channa Grove. He turned over a leaf. The next date was written upon it: the night of dreams. He smiled. Human courts give dates so that cases may be postponed. The inner court gives dates so that the soul cannot postpone itself.

FOLK SONG: THE COURT WITHIN

Folk tune: Bhagat justice-song

The outer court postpones, but the inner court will not;

The line drawn across the floor of the mind cannot be erased.

The outer court delays, the inner one does not;

The line across the mind's floor does not disappear.

The victory order lies beneath a thumb pressed over a name;

Mud gathers again beneath the word dignity.

A fine line of salt shapes the map of India;

Inside the darkened screen Ujjwal's message burns.

No punishment came; waiting became the harsher sentence;

Those they defeated are building the morning of the future.

Human dates are given so a case may be delayed;

The soul's date is given so the soul cannot delay itself.

The order lies beneath the thumb; mud settles beneath the name;

The word dignity remains pressed down, and pain gathers again.

In the fine line of salt, the map rises once more.



CHAPTER 31

The Work of the Defeated

The defeated do not raise slogans - they rise at dawn and lift another person's name.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE VICTORY OF WORK
AMONG THE DEFEATED**

Folk tune: Labour song

Yes, brother, win even after defeat;

Take up no flag - take the hoe, and sing the song of work.

No flag, no stage; the defeated go to work,

At the school, in the fields, in aid, in the children's society.

The quiet victory of work is greater than victory on paper;

The labour that improves a life is the truest love.

There is no defeat while hands still work and knowledge is shared;

Day by day, small repairs give shape to the future.

The working victory of the defeated flowers in silence;

The true history of justice opens through the people's labour.

School at daybreak, field and threshing floor at noon;

An evening courtyard of help, and at night care for the children.

Paper victories and defeats fade as days pass;

A small repair made by hand can endure for an age.



The inner court had bound the rogues to waiting. Meanwhile, those whom the court had called defeated rose at dawn without raising a slogan against anyone. They beat no drums before anyone's house. They made no black flag bearing Batuknath Hariharan's name, burned no effigy of Chandrapal Batra, smeared no soot upon Lau Kin-Hung's photograph. They rose not like defeated people but like farmers going out to scatter seed in a field.

The night of Channa Grove's court had passed. Dew rested on the leaves, and anyone who bent close enough to look into a drop saw not his own face but the name of someone dead. Budhba Ghost sat upon his branch that morning and said nothing. Usually the ghosts joked after a verdict, but that day they were silent. For when Channa Grove passes judgment, it watches less the judgment itself than what people do afterward.

Aruni rose first. He had not slept all night. He kept wondering: if the court's paper says defeat and Channa Grove says victory, which paper should a person trust? Ba had told him: 'When paper and leaf quarrel, look into a child's eyes.' Aruni went outside. Ananya was already awake, drawing round circles in the soil with a stick.

'What are you making?' Aruni asked.

Without lifting her head, Ananya said, 'A kabaddi field. But this time there will be no line in the middle. Whoever is called defeated will not be sent out. They will be given another task.'

Aruni fell silent. He understood that the children had already read the previous night's verdict.

That morning Devika Sah brought not a photograph of her brother Ujjwal but his old mobile phone. It was switched off, the screen broken, everything inside perhaps already ended. But Devika did not place it at the roots of Channa Grove. Holding it in her hand, she walked toward the school. On the wall of the old village meeting place - where wedding elders had once sat and betel stains reddened the plaster - she wrote the first sentence:

'The crocodile of the screen shows you victory first, then eats your house.'

The children did not laugh. Neither did the elders. Everyone understood that this was not the first lesson of a textbook; it was the first breath after Ujjwal's death.

Nishant Jha, who once sat in a counting-house abroad watching numerical streams of millions, now explained accounts to the village children. He used no English term. He said, 'Look: when you give the account bearing your name to someone else, they are not renting your body; they are renting your shadow. The money that moves through that shadow will send smoke back into your home. A mule account means carrying someone else's crime upon your own shoulders.'

Munna Paswan sat there quietly. Earlier he used to hide his face because money had passed through his account. But Devika seated him in front. 'The person who has been trapped is a witness before he is an accused,' she said. Munna's eyes filled. For the first time he felt that he possessed a name outside the papers of the police.

That day Saumya Ramanathan arrived carrying a bundle of documents. They contained bridge accounts, medicine bills, vaccine purchases, the price of breath in hospitals, lists from the flesh market, accounts of digital fraud, and court dates. Until then those papers had spoken in thick, heavy language - language in which pain was translated into something lifeless. Saumya began reading them aloud. After every line, she changed it into the speech of the village.

'Unreported death,' she read. Then she said, 'It means a person died, but the paper said he did not.'

'Procedural delay,' she read. Then she said, 'It means a man's father died, his son grew old, and still another date kept coming.'

'Economic adjustment,' she read. Then she said, 'It means the price of the medicine someone needed entered someone else's profit.'

At first the village elders had been afraid of documents like these. But when paper changed its language, they stopped being afraid. When a paper leaf speaks in the people's tongue, it ceases to be an object of the office and becomes testimony belonging to the home.

Mira arrived late that day. Her gait no longer carried the fear that had surrounded her between the chapters. Society had tried to make her love a crime; the company had tried to turn her privacy into a file; and Chandrapal Batra's people had tried to turn her photographs, messages, voice, and shadow into goods for a market. But after the Court of Channa Grove she came with a white cloth around her neck instead of a black scarf.

Standing in the middle of the courtyard, she said, 'No one's love will become evidence against them. The privacy of no one's body will become a market. No one's fear will become another person's income.'

Some women kept their heads lowered. Some young men avoided her eyes. Mira did not blame them. She said, 'The things you fear to speak of are the very things swindlers earn from. What you call shame, they turn into a weapon. From today, the shame is not yours; it belongs to the one who made the weapon.'

Devika stood beside her. Saumya closed the papers. Ananya looked at the children. They raised their hands together. No religious oath, no court oath, no party slogan. Only this:

'We will not turn anyone's privacy into a spectacle. We will not sell anyone's fear. If we see a fraud, we will name it. If we see someone breaking, we will not leave them alone.'

As they took the oath, the leaves of Channa Grove moved slightly. Budhba Ghost smiled for the first time. He understood that preserving the privacy of the living was as necessary as writing down the names of the dead. Death comes not only from crocodiles; people can drown inwardly from the fear of shame as well.

Ira Aruni had not returned from abroad that day, yet her voice arrived. It seemed to come not from a mobile speaker but through the split of a coconut leaf. She had already left the Harvard gathering. Some people told her she was destroying her future. She answered, 'A future built by erasing someone else's name is not a future; it is a rented house.'

Abroad she began a small gathering called 'Leaf-Lesson'. Indian, African, Latin American, and Asian students sat together there. Ira told them the story of Garh Narikel. She said, 'Before you enter an auditorium to lecture on ethics, read the name of the worker swallowed by your company's bridge. Before a presentation on development, read the name of the child who died in debt on a screen.'

In foreign auditoriums Ira raised no slogans. She simply read names. Hearing a name was the greatest question of all. A question may be answered; a name cannot. When a name is read aloud, everyone listening feels a slight discomfort in the seat beneath them. That discomfort is where a new ethics is born.

Gop Kumar watched all this from a distance. For several days he had spoken very little. Data still came to him, but he understood that unless data reached the hands of people, it would become yet another sealed envelope. Ishan Dutt, the shadowless informer, had told him one night: 'Turn the file into the people's speech. Otherwise the file will belong to those who can shut it.'

So Gop Kumar sat beneath the old pipal with two young men from the village and began turning data into story. He said, 'First table - names of the workers. Second - payments. Third - which account sent money to which. But do not understand this only through numbers; understand it through relationships. Beside each name write the person's home. Beside the home, the child's name. Beside the child's name, the dream that worker had for that child.'

One young man asked, 'How do we write a dream on paper?'

Gop Kumar was silent for a long time. Then he said, 'Where the dream cannot be found, leave a blank. A blank space is evidence too.'

That night, as Aruni put his daughter Ananya to bed, he said, 'Your studies will become difficult now.'

With her eyes still closed, Ananya asked, 'Why?'

'Because besides books, you will have to read people's names.'

Half asleep, Ananya said, 'Reading names is not difficult. Not reading names is difficult.'

Aruni watched her for a long time. It seemed to him that the next generation of Garh Narikel had already grown old, while the ancient ghosts were slowly becoming children.

In the city, meanwhile, a man came to Batuknath Hariharan's office with news. 'Sir, they are not filing any appeal.'

Batuknath started. 'No? Then what are they doing?'

'Writing names. Running a school. Explaining digital fraud. Taking an oath of privacy. Reading names abroad.'

Batuknath stared for a few moments. None of it sounded like legal language. He asked, 'Can an injunction be sought against this?'

The man was silent.

'An injunction against writing names?' Batuknath repeated to himself. He heard the stupidity of his own question and became angry. 'Then invent some charge. Foreign funding, anti-national activity, social disorder, unlawful assembly - something.'

The man said softly, 'Sir, they do not even hold assemblies. They teach children.'

Batuknath's face fell. For the first time he understood that it is difficult to sue people who have stopped fighting and begun working.

News reached Chandrapal Batra's office as well. He was told that young men from three villages had not fallen into his latest trap. At the school they had learned that the first win was bait. His representative wrote: 'Customers are alert.'

Chandrapal slammed down the phone. The word that frightened him was not 'customers' but 'alert'. The greatest enemy in the world of fraud is not police, court, or government - it is an alert person.

Raghav Signal Somani opened his deleted chats. He meant to type: 'Need a new strategy.' But as he typed, the message changed into: 'No new prey found.' He switched off the phone. In the glass he saw the faces of the children who had raised their hands in the courtyard and taken the oath.

Far away beside the sea, Lau Kin-Hung tried to open a new account in his glass house. His assistant said, 'The conversion rate in the Indian segment is falling.'

Lau asked, 'Why?'

The assistant could not answer. His report contained the words 'rural awareness'. But this was not Lau Kin-Hung's language. He understood only percentages. The percentage was falling. Why? Because far away in Garh Narikel children were learning to read names.

That night there was no ghostly kabaddi in Channa Grove. Everyone sat and listened. The sounds of the living working in different places travelled into the leaves: Devika's lessons, Nishant's rejection of compromise, Mira's oath, Saumya's translations, Ira's recitation of names, Gop's blank spaces, Ananya's sleep - every sound gathered in one place.

Budhba Ghost asked softly, 'Are these the defeated?'

Hulasi laughed. She had no hands, but that night there was the warmth of a palm in her voice. 'The defeated do not work like this. The defeated keep looking toward the victor. These people have stopped looking at them.'

The light from the Rakshas bodies grew a little brighter. The Loths, who were always spectators, rose that night and went to inspect the clay mobile phones made by the children. One Loth asked, 'Does this little box eat people?'

Budhba Ghost said, 'When people place their minds inside it.'

'Then how does the mind come back?' the Loth asked.

The leaves of Channa Grove answered: 'By reading names.'

By dawn a new saying had spread through Garh Narikel. People said that those defeated in court were no longer filing appeals; they were opening schools. At first it seemed a small thing. Later they understood that a school can be greater than a court, because a court asks questions after an event; a school teaches a child to be alert before it happens.

That morning, while setting water upon the stove, Ba said, 'This is work. If justice does not come, learn to make justice.'

Aruni asked, 'Make justice?'

Ba answered, 'Yes. The one who preserves names, protects children from fraud, prevents another person's shame from being turned into a weapon, turns the language of paper into the language of the people - that person makes justice. A verdict happens on paper; justice happens in human conduct.'

Aruni saw that the smoke from the stove did not rise straight upward. It bent slightly toward Channa Grove. For a moment Nand's face appeared within it. Nand said nothing. His silence was assent.

There was no declaration at the end of the chapter. No flag was raised. No stage was built. Work was simply divided. Devika would go to the next village. Nishant would turn the language of banking into village speech. Mira would turn the privacy oath not into a leaflet but a song. Saumya would write the stories hidden in documents. Ira would read names in foreign auditoriums. Gop Kumar would search for people who could fill the blank spaces. Aruni would ask the children: 'How shall we write the name that cannot be found?'

And the children would answer together: 'First we will look for it.'

Chandrapal Batra, Batuknath Hariharan, Raghav Signal, Lau Kin-Hung - none of them received news of a defeat that day. They only understood that the next move was becoming difficult. In the world of rogues, that is the first sign of defeat.

From that day an unusual custom began in Garh Narikel. Whenever anyone visited another household, before asking after health they asked one name-question: 'Who remains in your house, and who is still waiting to be written down?' At first people hesitated, then opened old trunks. As soon as a trunk opened, the smell of mothballs and old paper spread through the room. Letters, photographs, wage slips, hospital papers, bank receipts, school certificates - everything began to come out. Papers that had once gathered dust alone in separate homes became a shared memory.

The rogues thought this change insignificant. They did not understand that power first keeps people separate. When people keep their pain in separate rooms, men like Batuknath can call it procedure and postpone it; men like Chandrapal can call it a screen and trap them. But when one pain begins reading the name of another, it becomes not an organisation but a family - and it is hard to impose a legal section upon a family.

The leaves of Channa Grove whispered: 'One who stops fighting and begins working is not merely difficult to defeat - he is impossible to defeat.'

FOLK SONG: THE DEFEATED AT WORK

Folk tune: Labour song

They have begun, the defeated have begun their work;

Whoever has taken up the work of the future is hard to defeat.

No flag, no stage, no cry of victory;

Those called defeated divided an endless work among themselves.

One searches for names, another reads documents;

Another turns the language of fear into the village tongue.

Old trunks opened, and the smell of mothballs rose;

Receipts, photographs, and letters joined into a bond of their own.

Pain left its separate rooms and began reading one another's names;

Separate wounds joined within the body of one family.

Whoever left the fight and took up the work of the future

Could no longer be defeated - defeat became impossible.

No flag, no stage, no cry of victory;

Old trunks opened - receipts, photographs, newspapers.

Separate wounds joined into one family.



CHAPTER 32

The Third Kabaddi Match

When there is no wind and the leaves move, understand that some old verdict is leaving the paper and descending upon the tree.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE THIRD ROUND -
TOGETHER**

Folk tune: Kabaddi melody

Call out kabaddi, let the third round sound;

There are no spectators now - let everyone become a player.

The first round was play, the second a song of names;

The third is the round of togetherness - a campaign of the living.

The boundaries now are office, screen, home, and market;

Holding one another's hands, we will cross them all.

*Do not carry only breath in the kabaddi chant; carry the rhythm of
trust;*

The net that catches is deceit - defeat it together.

The third round has begun; there are no spectators;

All are players, all are watchkeepers - no one is alone.

The first round belonged to ghosts, the second to the melody of names;

The third belongs to the living - a victorious campaign of togetherness.

Measure the borders of office, screen, and market with joined hands;

Take the long breath of trust and make the line of deceit tremble.



The evening whisper lingered into night. There was no wind in Channa Grove, yet the leaves were moving. When the wind is still and leaves move, understand that an invisible hand is stroking the head of the tree, or that an old verdict is leaving paper and descending into leaves. The people of Garh Narikel had heard this since childhood, but that night for the first time the children too understood that the movement of a tree is not always a matter of weather.

In the open ground at the centre of Channa Grove, a kabaddi court appeared. There was no chalk, no string, no line scratched with a stick. The court formed by itself, as though the earth had revealed an old scar upon its chest. Its boundary was not round: in one place it bent like the Kamla-Balan, in another it squared itself like the shadow of a bridge pier, elsewhere it shone like a mobile screen, and elsewhere ran straight as a courtroom table.

Budhba Ghost descended first. His black body was so anciently black that darkness looked pale beside him. Hulasi came after him, armless, yet with such grasp in her voice that no body seemed more complete. Panidubbi arrived carrying the smell of the pond. The Rakshas gave off light, but it was not fire; it was a glow rising from inside bone. The Loths, who usually sat as spectators, stood up this time along the edge of the court.

Then the dead began to arrive. Nand Aruni, Sarayu, the workers whose names had never been written in full in any register, Ujjwal Jha, the young men trapped in debt inside screens, the women whose names vanished into the darkness of the flesh market, the patients reduced to nothing while paying the price of breath, the labourers who died inside hospital bills - all of them. They did not form a crowd of the dead; they formed a line of names. Each name carried breath in place of a body.

On the other side of the court came the children: Ananya; the children of the Coconut-Leaf School; boys and girls who had travelled with Devika learning to recognise screen fraud; adolescents who had heard Mira's oath of privacy; students who had learned from Ira how to ask questions on distant stages. They carried no notebooks, only coconut leaves. They had come to play, but there was a lesson inside their game and a game inside the lesson.

The third side arrived late. They did not come in bodies. Their bodies remained where they were - in costly city houses, in glass homes across the sea, in locked rooms, in cars with black windows. Only their minds came to Channa Grove. Batuknath Hariharan's mind came first - sleek, smelling of paper, tinted with the red of seals. Behind it came Chandrapal Batra's mind, burning with the blue glow of screens. Then Raghav Signal's mind - half-written, half-erased, made of the smoke of disappearing messages. From very far away came Lau Kin-Hung's mind, like a cold coin of calculation. And Edward Broom's mind, wrapped in the soft cloth of civilised applause but wet with mud inside.

The children were not afraid of them. The dead remained silent. The ghosts took their places. Budhba Ghost made no announcement; Channa Grove does not announce, it only changes its breathing. When the breath changed, the game began.

The first breath belonged to the dead. Sarayu entered the court. She did not chant kabaddi. She chanted her own name: 'Sarayuu... Sarayuu... Sarayuu...' Each repetition of the name made a small hollow in the earth. Batuknath's mind tried to touch her. But minds have no hands. It tried to say procedure, but what came from its mouth was 'procedure... procedure...' and Sarayu came safely out of the court. The dead did not laugh. The dead do not laugh easily, because time has never been cheap for them.

The second breath belonged to the children. Ananya entered the court. She called, 'Question... question... question...' Batuknath's mind stepped back. Chandrapal's mind tried to stop her: 'Open the app first; you will win a prize.' Ananya paused and asked, 'Is there debt behind the prize or not?' Chandrapal's blue glow began to flicker. A question was the first defence inside the game.

The third breath belonged to the rogues' minds. By the rules of the game, they too had to enter. Batuknath Hariharan's mind stepped into the court. He had expected to argue. But in Channa Grove argument is measured not in words but in breath. What came from his mouth was: 'Adjournment... adjournment... adjournment...' The children watched. So did the dead. The breath of adjournment is short; it cannot travel far. Batuknath became trapped in the middle of the court. He tried to come out, but at every step lay a name. Whenever he stepped upon one, he staggered.

Hulasi moved forward. 'Read the names,' she said. 'Then I will let you out.' Batuknath's mind began to read. It read the first name halfway. It stumbled on the second. At the third, its polished form began to crack. It emerged from the court, but not with the posture of victory; it was panting. For the first time in the game it understood that the language of law, however long, shortens the breath when it refuses to carry names.

Chandrapal Batra's mind entered next. It was very fast, flashing like a mobile screen, slipping from one place to another. Among the children it scattered tiny flashes: 'First win free', 'Double', 'Earn in three minutes', 'Be afraid, the police are coming', 'Send the OTP', 'Open an account'. For a moment the children paused. Then Devika's voice travelled from the school: 'Ask the name of whoever frightens you. Stop whoever rushes you. When someone offers a prize, ask where the loss is.'

A child who until yesterday trembled at fraudulent calls entered the court, surrounded Chandrapal's mind, and asked, 'Who is your real owner?' Chandrapal's mind flashed. 'I am my own owner.' The child asked again, 'Then why did messages come from Hong Kong?' The question climbed into the leaves of the tree. All the leaves rang at once. A crack appeared in Chandrapal's screen-glow.

He fled out of the court, but an account remained caught behind him - Munna Paswan's account. It had been called a mule account. But in Channa Grove the account did not stand as a mule; it stood in the body of a human being. Munna said, 'My name is not Mule. I am Munna.' For the first time Chandrapal's mind was wounded by its own vocabulary. Crime's greatest armour is to call a human being an object; when the object becomes a name again, the armour cracks.

Raghav Signal's mind tried to disappear even as it entered the court. That was its habit - five seconds, ten seconds, message erased. But in

Channa Grove what is spoken does not vanish; it becomes a leaf. Raghav drew breath: 'Erase... erase... erase...' Yet with every breath a leaf fell, bearing the imprint of messages he had sent to others.

Mira entered the court. Standing before Raghav, she said, 'Whoever frightens someone with a photograph steals their shadow. A shadow belongs to the body.' Raghav tried to say, 'I only delivered things.' Mira answered, 'The hand that delivers poison is written into the history of the poison too.'

Raghav's mind retreated. Its erasing breath was spent. It sat in the middle of the court and became silence. Silence had been following him long before this chapter received its name; now silence became his mouth.

Across the distant sea, Lau Kin-Hung's mind stood at the edge of the court. It did not want to enter. It believed distance was safety. But in Garh Narikel distance obeys a different law. Whose money moves from far away, that person's mind too is bound from far away. The line of Channa Grove lengthened across sea, harbour, glass house, bank, ledger, everything, and reached his feet.

The breath of Lau Kin-Hung's mind was very cold. It chanted, 'Percentage... percentage... percentage...' The dead stood still. The children stood still. The ghosts stood still. The language of percentages contains no compassion, but neither does it contain fear. He moved through the game, calculating at every step: risk, profit, loss, escape. Then Nand Aruni entered the court carrying the bridge plan. Upon the plan were not piers but names.

Nand asked him, 'How many piers are there in your calculation?'

Lau was silent.

Nand asked again, 'How many bones?'

The breath of percentages trembled. The language of profit does not count bones; when it is forced to, the mathematics of profit breaks apart. For one moment Lau Kin-Hung's mind became very small - so small that a Loth child could have lifted it onto a palm. The Loths, always spectators until now, laughed. Their laughter was light as ash from a cooking fire.

Edward Broom's mind entered last. It was civilised; first it bowed outside the boundary, then stepped in. Its breath was: 'Dignity... dignity... dignity...' The word was beautiful. The children were impressed. Even the ghosts fell silent for a moment. Beautiful words are not always dangerous, but when a beautiful word comes out of an account built on falsehood, it smells like a flower rotting in water.

Ira entered the court. She had left the Harvard auditorium and come into this game. She did not question Broom's mind in English; she asked in Maithili: 'In whose language do you speak dignity?' Broom's mind searched for translation. No interpreter could be found in Channa Grove. Ira asked again: 'How can you lecture on the dignity of someone whose name you cannot pronounce?'

The soft covering of applause fell away from Broom. Inside was mud. Stuck in the mud were hospital bills, safety certificates, research grants, weapons advice, vaccine contracts, and photographs of the bridge. He tried to say 'global responsibility', but what came from his mouth was 'profit'. With that single word, his whole speech lost the match.

The kabaddi continued. Time no longer remained separate inside the game; day, night, year, verdict, defeat, victory - all were tied into one breath. The dead chanted names, the children chanted questions, and the rogues' minds chanted their old words: procedure, percentage, adjournment, earnings, dignity, defence. The smaller words ran out of breath. The names endured.

Then something strange happened. The rogues' minds wanted to leave, but the children did not stop them. Neither did the dead. The rule of the game was this: whoever wished to leave could go, provided he left one word behind. Batuknath left 'procedure'. Chandrapal left 'account'. Raghav left 'message'. Lau left 'share'. Broom left 'dignity'.

They thought: we have escaped. But when they emerged, they saw that the meanings of the words left inside Channa Grove were changing. Procedure became the order in which names were read. An account became a human biography. A message became a warning. A share became responsibility. Dignity became not a speech but the pronunciation of a name. The rogues left after losing their words. A person does not die at once when his weapons are lost, but his gait changes.

Toward dawn water descended into Channa Grove. There was no river, yet there was water; it carried the smell of earth, as though some ancient rain hidden inside the ground had returned. The kabaddi court floated in the water. The children kept playing with their feet inside it. The dead did not withdraw; they remained not at the edge but in the memory of the game. The ghosts climbed back onto their branches, but their eyes looked less tired that day.

Ananya asked, 'Is the game over?'

Budhba Ghost said, 'Kabaddi does not end. The breath changes.'

'Then whose breath comes next?'

Hulasi said, 'Whoever has learned to ask a question.'

A coconut leaf fell. There was no verdict upon it, no order, no final sentence. Only four words: 'Let it begin again.' The children picked up the leaf. Aruni stood at a distance watching. He understood that a book can be closed, but a story cannot.

Far away, in cities, across the sea, in glass houses and locked chambers, the rogues woke at dawn. They did not remember going to the game during the night, but the taste of their old words was gone from their mouths. Batuknath tried to say 'procedure' and heard 'reading names'. Chandrapal said 'account' and saw Munna's face. Raghav wrote 'message' and a leaf fell. Lau calculated a 'share' and death asked a question. Broom read 'dignity' and a worker's name caught in his pronunciation.

No one in Garh Narikel celebrated a victory day. No flag of triumph was raised. There was no lament for defeat. The children went to school. Devika wrote on a new board: 'Question whoever frightens you.' Mira wrote: 'Name whoever steals a shadow.' Saumya wrote: 'When paper enters the people's language, it belongs to the people.' Ira wrote: 'Learn the names at home before speaking from distant stages.' Gop Kumar quietly opened a new file bearing no title, only a date.

By evening darkness descended again into Channa Grove. The ghosts peered down from the branches. The children returned home. The Loths rolled in circles over the ground and settled into their places. Panidubbi returned to the pond, but today her long hair caught no one's feet; it began writing names upon the water. The Rakshas dimmed their glow.

Then, from very far away, as though some new reader had opened the first page, came a low voice: 'Kabaddi...'

A second voice: 'Name...'

A third voice: 'Question...'

And Channa Grove drew its next breath. The story did not stop there. Crocodiles eat bodies, courts eat years, screens eat minds; but when the mind hangs suspended, the story begins again. That night kabaddi did not end - only the next breath was taken.

FOLK SONG: THE THIRD ROUND

Folk tune: Kabaddi melody

It has risen - the voice of the third round has risen;

No flag of victory, no defeat - the question has become power.

The first voice was kabaddi, the second was name;

The third voice, question, rose in the abode of Channa Grove.

The leaf said: begin again; this is not the final word;

A book may close, but the story does not.

When Batuknath says procedure, he hears the reading of names;

When Batra says account, he sees Munna's eyes.

When Broom reads dignity, his tongue catches on a worker's name;

Panidubbi's hair writes letters upon the water.

No flag of victory, no lament of defeat;

In the third kabaddi, the question became power.

Panidubbi's hair wrote letters upon the water.



CHAPTER 33

The Test of the Mind

*When the body tires, it sits down; when the mind tires, it drags its
owner along.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: REFORM THROUGH THE MIRROR

Folk tune: mind-jhumar

Look into the mirror; do not look in fear,

With a compassionate gaze, read the lines of your own deeds.

*Know the mirror not only as punishment, but as a friend of truth;
See your deeds as you see your face, and choose your errors clearly.*

*One may escape from prison, but not from one's own gaze;
Yet if that gaze is compassionate, reform is not impossible.*

*Before the mirror make a vow: from today I shall walk differently;
The right I took away, I shall return through justice.*

*When reform through the mirror enters conduct,
The shadow of crime recedes and humanity grows again.*

*To the beat of the jhumar, sweep every corner of the mind;
Whatever letter was written crooked, write it straight again.*

*Make a list of stolen rights and set out to return them;
When the mirror becomes a friend, walk beside reform.*



The next breath had been drawn. In Channa Grove the first breath of the third kabaddi match had ended, but the game had not. Only when a breath breaks do the true rules of the game reveal themselves. The dead had spoken their names. The children had saved their laughter. What remained now were the minds of those who stood in the outer world holding papers of victory, yet in the inner world were afraid even to breathe.

In the ghosts' kabaddi it is the mind, more than the body, that is tested. When the body tires, it sits down. When the mind tires, it drags its owner along. Batuknath Hariharan's mind stood apart from his body in the middle of Channa Grove. Chandrapal Batra's mind had the shape of his glittering phone. Raghav Signal's mind hung from the leaves in drops of invisible messages. Lau Kin-Hung's mind was soaked in the salt water of the sea, yet he could smell the soil of Garh Narikel. Edward Broom's mind was caught inside the sound of applause, into which, now and then, the splash at the Ganga bridge entered.

The children formed a circle. Ananya stood in the middle. She no longer looked like a little girl. In her eyes was the same question someone had once asked on seeing a photograph of death—has he died? But today the question was not directed at any photograph. It was directed at the minds of the living rogues.

Ananya said, "If you play kabaddi, you must take a name. Whoever does not take a name, that breath will not be counted."

Budhba Ghost spread his dark radiance. "Under the old rule," he said, "a player who was caught went out. Under the new rule, whoever has cut away a name cannot leave without speaking that name."

Batuknath's mind laughed first. The mind of a man of law does not laugh; it counts sections. He began counting—procedure, suit, objection, admissibility, jurisdiction. But just as he tried to say "jurisdiction," what came from his mouth was, "Sarayu Devi."

He started. Sarayu Devi was the woman labourer whose name had never appeared in the official list. He had never known her personally. Yet the name that had been cut from the file had now come onto his tongue. Batuknath tried again—"My Lord..." But what came out was, "Lakhan Paswan."

The ghosts in Channa Grove began to sway slowly. They did not clap; they moved the leaves. So many names lived in that rustling that even the wind would have tired of counting them.

Chandrapal Batra tried to cover his screen-shaped mind with his palm. He believed that whatever was on a screen lay under his control. But the playing field opened upon the screen. On one side were the children, on another the dead, and on a third the young men whose mule accounts he had used. Ujjwal Jha, Munna Paswan, the nameless student who had opened an account for a commission of one thousand rupees and become trapped in a crime of three lakhs—all of them now shone not on the screen but inside Chandrapal's eyes.

Chandrapal tried to say, "All this is sentimentality." But what emerged from his mouth was, "The first win was not free."

The children did not laugh. They already knew that. The crocodile of the screen gives a win first and then eats the house. Devika stood at a distance. She did not need to jump into this game. All day in the school she had already taught the children this lesson. The defeated were no longer opponents in this game. They were making the rules.

Raghav Signal's mind was caught in the shadow of the leaves. All the messages that once vanished became tiny Devanagari letters and flew around him. "Open an account." "No voice." "Send the percentage." "Empty it within six hours." "Frighten the mother." "Repeat the digital-arrest script." The leaves bearing these words circled around him.

For the first time Raghav fell silent. His profession was not voice but advice; not advice but signal; not signal but invisible command. Yet in Channa Grove invisibility did not protect a crime. What was invisible was clearest of all to the ghosts.

Inside himself he called to Lau Kin-Hung. No answer came from anywhere. Only a leaf fell upon his shoulder. Written on it were the words: "Use completed."

Raghav understood: while he had been turning others into mules, he himself had been the mule of a larger account. His master had abandoned him. This was not mercy in the Court of Channa Grove, but knowledge. And knowledge can sometimes hurt more than punishment.

Lau Kin-Hung's mind had come from inside the sea. He knew no Maithili, but no language was needed to understand the language of names. He saw that behind every name was a house, behind every house a threshold, behind every threshold a pair of sandals, and behind every pair of sandals an unfinished journey. He had understood India as a market. For the first time he saw India as a threshold that waits.

His mind did not want to enter the game. But in kabaddi, whoever takes a breath cannot remain outside the field. "Percentage" came from his mouth. The ghosts stood still. Then came, "Value of life." The children stood still. At last one name emerged from him: "Ujjwal."

At the sound of Ujjwal's name, the darkness of the screen grew a little brighter. Ujjwal himself did not come. His spirit was no longer bound to this game; whenever children learned to recognise fraud in Devika's school, his release grew greater. A name was becoming not punishment but a road.

Edward Broom's mind was strangest of all. It was a hollow vessel made from the applause of auditoriums. When it rang, people clapped; when it fell silent, there was a splash inside it. In Channa Grove the sound of his applause was defeated by the rustling leaves. He said, "Human dignity."

Budhba Ghost laughed. "Dignity? In what language? Say it in the language of the labourer whose body went into the bridge pier."

Edward's mind could not answer. He knew neither Hindi, nor Maithili, nor the labourers' song. He knew only presentations. Then Channa Grove translated his language itself. His word "dignity" climbed onto a leaf and became "price." Then "price" broke and became "name."

The children said together, "Name first. Price later."

This was the fourth breath of the game. In this breath no one was caught and no one was defeated. In Channa Grove the meaning of defeat had changed. Whoever was caught was not thrown out; he was taught to read a name. Whoever could read the name became a little more human. Whoever could not remained empty inside, though he still possessed position, money, passport, and applause.

Batuknath Hariharan's mind grew tired. He said, "I know procedure."

Ananya replied, "Procedure is not breath. A name is breath."

"I am president of the Bar."

“That is a chair in the outer world. Here you are only the man who cut away names.”

For the first time Batuknath asked, “And if I read the names?”

Budhba Ghost said, “Then your victory will hurt, but there will be a little water in the hurt. A victory without sorrow rots.”

Chandrapal Batra trembled on hearing this. He did not want sorrow. He wanted only safety. Yet safety comes only to the person who accepts something inwardly. The criminal wants safety, not acceptance. That is why his safety is never complete.

He looked into his screen. Earlier it had shown figures of victory; now it showed the children’s school. Devika was explaining to an elderly woman, “If someone on the phone tells you that you are under arrest, first drink some water, then call a neighbour. Fear eats the person who is alone.”

Chandrapal switched off the screen. But the voice did not stop. The old woman could still be heard saying, “Fear eats the person who is alone.”

Raghav tried to brush away the leaves. They would not move. Every leaf stuck to his palm. He understood that Channa Grove was not building a prison for him; it was giving him a mirror. A person can escape from prison. Escaping from a mirror is harder.

Lau Kin-Hung’s mind tried to draw back. The sea called him home. But the soil of Garh Narikel held his heel. For the first time he heard the Kamala-Balan flowing somewhere far away. He understood that knowing the name of a river is also a responsibility. Whoever buys its water without knowing the river’s name buys the curse of the water as well.

Night deepened. The Court of Channa Grove turned into a game, the game into a school, the school into memory. The dead stepped back. The children remained in the middle. The minds of the rogues sat at the edge. For the first time they were spectators. The loths, who had always been spectators, were now running in the game.

This reversal was the justice of Garh Narikel. Bring into the game the one who has always watched. Make the one who has always played the game of crime sit down and watch.

Ananya announced the final rule. “Until the next breath, each of you must find one name of your own. Take a name you cut away and pronounce it in full. Whoever can pronounce it will enter the field. Whoever cannot will remain at the edge, stroking his paper of victory.”

Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau Kin-Hung, Edward—the five minds were silent. Their bodies were in their own cities outside, but inwardly they sat on the veranda of Channa Grove. Far away Devika,

Meera, Saumya, Ira, Gop Kumar and Aruni were holding no meeting of revenge. Each was busy with work. It was this busyness that frightened the rogues most.

For in a fight the enemy remains before you. In the building of the future, the enemy becomes irrelevant.

In the first light of dawn a leaf shone over Channa Grove. No judgment was written upon it. Only this: "Fourth breath ended. Next breath begins."

And at that moment the novel moved forward again.

FOLK SONG: THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MIRROR

Folk tune: mind-viraha

*Run, run if you will—but do not run from the mirror;
The name you cut away returns upon your tongue.
One may escape from prison, but not from the mirror;
The name you cut away keeps returning to your tongue.
Whoever played the game of crime now sits at the edge;
Whoever had always watched has entered the field and run.
The child says: pronounce one name in full,
Or sit stroking your paper of victory and lose.
The victims are busy at work; the rogues have become irrelevant;
This silence has grown fiercer than a sword.
No judgment was written, only "next breath";
In the mirror's punishment the mind's true vessel opened.
Whoever played the game of crime now sits to one side;
Whoever had always watched has entered the field.*



CHAPTER 34

The Listening River

A river stops its current to hear who is lying upon the bank.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE RIVER'S EARS

Folk tune: a bright form of the boatman-Sama-Daun

*Listen like the river; hold back the current and listen,
Bend your ear even to the faint call from far away.*

*The river stills its current and hears each name upon the banks;
Beyond the noise of lies it catches the note of truth.
Make our ears patient like the river too;
Receive the weak voice and the distant call with respect.*

*The river hears a name, yet does not impose a verdict;
It listens, then joins truth with soil, leaves and people.
Learn from the river's ears—the art of listening deep;
To give a heard name its rightful place is labour for justice.*

*Above the surface lies the noise of falsehood; beneath it, truth has a
voice;
Go deep and listen—only then will the real news be found.
Do not impose after hearing; weigh it with soil and leaves;
Give the name you heard its proper ghat, its proper seat.*



The silence that spread after the fourth breath was not peace. It was the kind of silence in which a river holds back its current to hear who is lying on the bank. All night the leaves of Channa Grove made no sound, yet from their tips hung not dew but letters. Every letter was half of a name. To complete it, the rogues would have to open their own tongues.

Dawn had come in the outer world. There was no hand-pump in Batuknath Hariharan's Delhi mansion, yet that morning muddy water flowed from the tap in his bathroom. The servant ran at the sight of it. Batuknath snapped, "Have the tank cleaned." But when he took the water in his palm, a name shone there—Sarayu Devi. The name floated for a moment in the water, then entered his palm.

Impatiently he opened his copy of the judgment. The court's order was clear, lawful, victorious. Yet on the first page, where "Case disposed of" should have been written, stood the words: "Name incomplete." Batuknath removed his spectacles and wiped them. The letters remained. He understood that his eyes were not at fault; the judgment was.

At that hour Chandrapal Batra was opening the safe in his room. It held cash, seals, papers of foreign accounts, and several small mobile devices—the devices with which he had trapped some people, frightened others, driven still others to the edge of death. Today all of them were dark. Only one lit up. On it appeared: "Tell the mother's name of the person whose name is on the account."

Chandrapal laughed. His laughter was an old habit. "Who asks for a mother's name at a bank?" he said. At once a child's sobbing came from

inside the safe. It was not loud. It was the kind of crying done at night with one's face pressed into a pillow so that the household will not hear. Chandrapal tried to shut the door, but the safe opened from within.

There was no mud in Raghav Signal Somani's house, no safe sprang open. His punishment was his silence. After dawn he tried to speak, but no voice came. To send a message to the doctor he opened an encrypted chat. His fingers moved across the screen, but the letters formed themselves in Maithili: "What you said by signal, read now from the leaves."

For the first time he was afraid. A criminal fears the police, the court a little, the master more—but most of all the moment when language changes. Raghav knew no Maithili. Yet as the letters of the leaves sprouted across his screen, he began to understand them. The language of crime is the same in every country; so is the language of fear.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung woke on the nineteenth floor of his glass tower. Below him the sea was blue; the city glittered with the commerce of the approaching day. He called his private assistant. The assistant did not come. The internet bell did not ring. For the first time an order of his hung in the air. A coconut leaf lay on his desk. How had it come there? The windows of the glass tower did not open.

Written on the leaf in Devanagari were the words: "Name the first death in your profit." Lau could not read the letters. But a voice inside him read them aloud. It was not the voice of the sea, but the splash at the Ganga bridge. He ordered the leaf burned at once. Fire would not take it. Water dripped from its tip.

Edward Broom was then reviewing a draft of his next speech. Its subject was global responsibility and the ethical future of new markets. His assistant had written, "India's labour force is the backbone of global construction." With a red pen Edward tried to strike out "labour force" and write "human capital." From the pen came not ink but water. On the paper a word formed: "Labourer."

From four directions five minds were being drawn toward Channa Grove. Their bodies remained in their cities, but the human being inside each body who thought himself its master now had his reins in the hands of names. In Garh Narikel the children were already awake. Ananya chose the first leaf. Devika did not dry it. "Let the name remain wet," she said. "Only then does it remain alive."

Today's lesson in the Coconut-Leaf School was: "Do not speak an incomplete name." The children sat in a circle, each holding a pebble with half a name written on it. They had to find the other half from elders, labourers' families, river songs, or old registers. It was not a game but practice. Yet in Garh Narikel the distance between practice and play

was the same as the distance between body and shadow—at evening, one entered the other.

Devika said, “When a swindler frightens you, he will not speak your full name. He will call you customer, accused, consumer, account-holder, user. First speak your own full name. Then ask his. Do not obey the order of anyone who cannot give his own name.”

The children repeated together, “Do not obey the order of anyone who cannot give his own name.”

The vibration of that sentence travelled as far as Delhi. In Batuknath’s chamber the law books opened themselves. Constitutional law, criminal law, law of evidence—the pages turned. On each page appeared not sections but names. He flared up. “These are no longer law books!” A voice from within answered, “If law does not preserve names, it is not a book but a curtain.”

Batuknath returned to his past. He was a student of law again. Once his teacher had told him, “A lawyer is not one who proves a lie true; a lawyer is one who makes sure truth is not killed by procedure.” Batuknath had abandoned that sentence many years ago. Today it grew wings and sat upon his desk.

In anger he summoned his secretary. “Bring me the Garh Narikel file.” The secretary trembled. “Sir, that file...” “What?” “It is no longer a file. It contains pictures of children learning names.” Batuknath understood that the paper outside had turned into leaves inside.

Chandrapal Batra thought in the language of crime: all this was a technical fault. Clean the server, change the accounts, cut the links, open a new app. He sent his men a message: “Empty all old accounts.” The reply came: “There is no money in the accounts. There are names.”

He opened the ledger. Where crores should have appeared, there unfolded details of homes—the mat spread in Ujjwal Jha’s house, the old chest belonging to Devika’s mother, the torn shirt of Munna Paswan’s father, the school certificate of the student who had received five hundred rupees at a bus stand for allowing his account to be used as a mule. For the first time Chandrapal saw that an account was not merely a number; behind every number was a body.

But seeing is not accepting. He closed his eyes. At once his mind rose inside Channa Grove and stood in the kabaddi circle. The children looked at him. Ananya asked, “First name?” Chandrapal’s mouth went dry. He remembered Ujjwal, but could not say the full name. He knew only the word “user.” The children turned their backs on him. That was the punishment: disregard.

Raghav fought his silence and tried to write on paper. Instead of names, codes kept coming from his hand: L1, P7, 05. He realised that his

hand too had learned the script of crime. It no longer knew how to write a name. He tore the paper. The pieces became leaves and flew out through the window.

Those leaves reached Garh Narikel and fell into the children's laps. The children joined the pieces and began to read them. Devika said, "This is the language of fraud. Turn it into the people's language." The children began turning codes into names. L1 became Lalit. P7 became Paswan. 05 became five nameless accounts. The school was translating the language made by criminals.

A meeting was held in Lau Kin-Hung's glass tower. Lawyers, accountants, risk advisers and image managers all came. "Emotional stories work in India," they told him. "Give it time; the matter will settle down." Lau hid the leaf beneath the table. But its smell spread through the meeting. No one recognised it. Lau did—the soil of Garh Narikel.

He asked, "And if the story does not settle?" One adviser laughed. "Stories get tired." Lau did not answer. He remembered his dream of the night before. In Channa Grove a story does not tire. It changes its breath.

Edward Broom tore up his draft. A new one began: "Rebuilding trust in the countries of the Global South." But at the top of the page appeared by itself: "How will you return trust to the one whose name you cut away?" Edward's entire educated language became small before that one question.

In Garh Narikel, Budhba Ghost listened to the children's lesson. "This time the game requires greater cunning," he said. "The rogues will speak names, but keep their self-interest inside the names. Do not merely hear a name; test its warmth as well."

Ananya asked, "The warmth of a name?"

Budhba Ghost replied, "A name spoken with love gives off steam like hot rice. A name spoken only to save oneself lies like cold iron. Channa Grove knows both warmth and cold."

That night the five minds came again to the field. This time they were seated not outside the circle but within it. An empty earthen bowl stood in the centre. Ananya said, "When you speak a name, one drop of water will fall into this bowl. If the name is true, the water will remain. If the name is false, the water will turn to smoke and fly away."

Batuknath stepped forward first. His voice broke. "Sarayu..." A drop fell into the bowl. "Devi..." A second drop fell. He stopped. He knew nothing of Sarayu Devi's father, village, death, labour or body. The water trembled. Smoke began to rise. He panicked.

From a distance Devika's voice came: "No incomplete names." Slowly Batuknath said, "Sarayu Devi, who climbed the bridge pier with a basket

on her head and was recorded as absent from the list.” The water did not turn to smoke. It remained in the bowl. Sweat appeared on Batuknath’s brow. This was not victory; it was the first wound.

Then came Chandrapal’s turn. He was silent for a long time. At last he said, “Ujjwal Jha.” A drop fell, then instantly became smoke. Ananya said, “You learned that name from the news. Tell us his fear.” Chandrapal was silent. He remembered only the amount, not the fear. The bowl dried. The children sent him back to the edge.

Raghav tried to write, “Munna Paswan.” Water fell. Then he remembered that he had regarded Munna only as an account number. He said, “Munna Paswan, whose account I opened and thereby made him look like a criminal, though the crime was not his.” The water remained. The first crack appeared in Raghav’s silence.

Lau Kin-Hung’s turn came. He did not know Devanagari. He could not speak the name. Yet in his mind the threshold of a house shone. “The boy...” he said. The children were silent. Budhba Ghost said, “Not the language of the market.” Lau trembled. After a long while, in crooked pronunciation, he managed, “Ujjwal.” A drop fell into the bowl but became smoke, because he still understood Ujjwal not as a human being but as an event.

Edward Broom stepped forward. “Labour,” he said. The bowl stayed dry. “Worker.” Dry. “Sarayu.” A drop fell. “Devi.” The drop remained. Edward’s eyes did not fill; his education would not break that quickly. But for the first time, the applause inside his speeches stopped.

Dawn was approaching in Channa Grove. There were five drops of water in the bowl. Each held a different temperature. Sarayu Devi’s drop was warm. Munna Paswan’s trembled. Ujjwal’s had already turned to smoke twice and was waiting for a third attempt.

Budhba Ghost said, “The fifth breath is not complete; it has only begun. The one who has spoken a single name is not free. Now he must travel to the home of that name.”

In the outer world all five bodies awoke. Batuknath bought a ticket—to Garh Narikel. Chandrapal thought of smashing his phone, but Ananya’s voice came from inside it: “Breaking the phone does not break the name.” For the first time Raghav sat down to form Devanagari letters on paper. Lau Kin-Hung ordered a map of India. Edward Broom did not cancel his speech; he changed its opening—but he still had not found the whole truth.

In the Coconut-Leaf School the children poured the bowl’s water onto the roots of Channa Grove. The roots drank it. The leaves moved. Their movement contained a sentence: “Speaking the name is the first breath. Reaching the name’s home is the second.”

And the story of Garh Narikel moved forward again, carrying the fifth breath.

FOLK SONG: THE RIVER HEARS NAMES

Folk tune: boatman-Sama-Daun

*Listen—the river stills its current and listens;
A drop bearing a true name remains within the bowl.
The river checks its current and hears who lies upon the bank;
Half a name rests on the leaf; the tongue must make it whole.
A false name turns to smoke and flies into the sky.
A name spoken with love steams like hot rice;
A name spoken merely to save oneself bears the mark of cold iron.
The first breath is to speak the name; the second is to reach its home;
Rub the dust of the dead one's threshold into your eyes.
The roots silently drank the water from the bowl;
The listening river said: now go to the home of the name.*



CHAPTER 35

The Threshold of Names

Speaking the name is the first breath; reaching the name's home is the second.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BLESSING FROM THE DUST
OF THE THRESHOLD**

Folk tune: homecoming song

Dust of the threshold, place it upon the brow,

Fill a new house with the blessing of the broken one.

*Though the house falls, the threshold saves its dust;
It knows the returning feet and tells the ancestors' tale.*

*Place the dust upon your brow and say: let the honour of the house
remain;*

New walls will rise, a new roof too, while the old affection flows.

The threshold is not only memory; it is the root of rebuilding;

Plant in that dust a small flower of trust.

From the dust of the threshold, blessing will come to the new house;

Even broken bricks, joined together, will give a safer future.

The wall fell, the roof flew away, but the threshold remained standing;

The marks of ancestral feet still glitter in that dust.

Mark the forehead with that dust and join the foundation stones;

From the meeting of broken and mended, build a new dawn.



After the fifth breath, the five drops of water poured at the roots of Channa Grove did not disappear into the earth. They moved within the roots like children's laughter circling through an old house. In the first light of dawn their shine appeared upon the leaves. Within each drop was a threshold. Speaking the name was the first breath; reaching the name's home was the second.

That morning Ananya drew a circle in the soil. Around it five small houses were made—Saryu Devi's house, Munna Paswan's house, Ujjwal's house, the houses of the unknown labourers, and the house whose owner had not yet found a name. The children sat in the circle. Devika said, "If we do not know the house, the name will remain half. And a half-name can again be used by rogues."

Batuknath Hariharan left Delhi. He wanted to travel by car, but the car stopped three times. The driver said, "Sir, the engine is fine, but it refuses the direction." In the end Batuknath had to take the train. The destination printed on the ticket was Darbhanga. But when the ticket warmed in his palm, the letters changed to: "Saryu Devi's threshold."

In anger he crumpled the ticket in his fist. The paper did not fold. It breathed. He felt as though someone's chest were moving inside it. Beside him the old man appeared again—the same old man who had asked the name of law on his earlier journey. Batuknath turned away. The old man smiled. "Today we shall not read sections. Today we shall read courtyards."

“Why are you following me?” Batuknath snapped. Looking out of the window, Budhba Ghost said, “I am not following you. The names you left behind are walking ahead of you.”

Through the train window the fields no longer seemed to flee; instead they seemed to come toward the train. In every field stood a woman with a basket on her head. Batuknath closed his eyes. At once the image entered within. The woman was no longer outside; she stood inside his head. She neither questioned nor accused him. She merely showed him the road home.

Chandrapal Batra could not destroy the phone. He struck it with a hammer, threw it into water, set it on fire; every time the screen became a leaf of Channa Grove. He called his old men. “Bring new devices. Burn all the old ones.” New devices came. As soon as one screen opened, Ujjwal’s house appeared—its roof half sagging, Devika seated beside the hearth, and the bare patch on the wall where Ujjwal’s certificate used to hang.

For the first time Chandrapal saw a home. In the world of crime he did not see homes. He saw only KYC, accounts, SIM cards, transactions, collections, percentages. The sight of a house made him uneasy, as though a stranger had entered his room. But the stranger was not the house. The stranger was Chandrapal himself.

He moved a finger across the screen. The image changed. Now he saw Ujjwal’s bed. On the edge of the pillow were teeth marks. Devika had later said that Ujjwal used to bite the pillow to stop himself from crying. Chandrapal shut the screen. But the teeth marks had entered beneath his nails.

Raghav Signal Somani was learning his first Devanagari letter. On the paper before him was “M.” He thought of M for mule, but the letter trembled. There was no teacher. The leaves of Channa Grove themselves were teaching him. From the tip of a leaf came a voice: “M—Munna. Not mule. Munna.”

Raghav wrote again. The M came crooked. Then U. Then the doubled N. Then A. “Munna.” As the name formed, a small threshold emerged upon the paper. A torn shirt was drying there. He remembered telling the boy who wore it, “Just open the account. You’ll get five thousand.” The boy had laughed. Raghav had heard that laugh, but his accounts had no column for laughter.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung opened a map of India. It had layers for cities, ports, trade routes, banking nodes and digital-consumer density. But when he opened a new layer, only thresholds lit up across the screen. So many thresholds. Millions. At each one, someone’s name remained incomplete. Irritated, he asked, “Where is the market map?” The screen answered: “This is the market.”

Experts sat in Lau's boardroom. One said, "Rural sensitivities can be managed through narrative management." Another said, "Buy respected intermediaries at the local level." A third said, "Religion, caste, elections, debt and employment—through these five routes everything will quiet down." Lau listened. Beneath the table he kept hearing water drip. He knew it was not the sea. It was the sound of the five drops in the bowl.

Edward Broom had changed the opening of his speech, but words still betrayed him. He wrote, "We learn from mistakes." On the paper appeared, "We profit from the dead." He started. His assistant said, "Sir, a printer problem." Edward knew it was not the printer. It was the language he had buried for years beneath CSR reports.

In Garh Narikel the children of the Coconut-Leaf School were making a "map of homes." There were no roads on it, only thresholds. Ananya said, "The road to Sarayu Devi's house is not merely the village road. Where did Sarayu Devi's daughter go? Where does her grandson work? In which register is her name written only halfway? All of those are roads."

Saumya fell silent at that. In research papers this is called "intergenerational family impact." But in Garh Narikel a child was saying it while drawing the line of a threshold. Saumya understood that knowledge which looks very complex in English becomes direct inside people's suffering.

Devika sat before Ujjwal's house. She wanted Chandrapal to see that house—not for revenge. For once a house has truly been seen, it becomes difficult to turn it into a number. Beneath Ujjwal's name on the wall she wrote: "Drowned in the screen, but his name remains upon the earth."

The shadow of that sentence reached Chandrapal's screen. He read it. At first he laughed. "Sentimentality." But the words "upon the earth" shone. His apps lived in the cloud, on servers, in foreign accounts. He had nothing upon the earth. Suddenly he remembered his childhood courtyard—the small room in Meerut where he had first studied law. He too had once been a name upon a threshold, not a percentage.

Raghav began searching for Munna Paswan's village address. In the system it was incomplete. The bank held only the district. The SIM carried a false location. The documents misspelled the place. For the first time Raghav understood that the poor are deliberately left with incomplete addresses, so criminals may use them and the State may abandon them. On a leaf he wrote: "Paswan Toli, south of the river, near the old peepal." The leaf grew warm. The direction was correct.

Batuknath's train stopped at a small station. Through the mist he could not read its name. He did not want to get down, but Budhba Ghost said, "Here." The platform was empty. Only the sound of a woman's anklets came from afar. Batuknath looked back. Outside the station ran a

footpath. His shoes sank into the mud. He resented the shoes. The old man said, "Shoes do not reach a threshold. Feet do."

Sarayu Devi's house was no longer a house. Half a wall remained, the roof had changed, grass filled the courtyard. But the threshold survived. A threshold is a strange thing: even when the house falls, it preserves the memory of the house for a long time. Batuknath stood there. The copy of the order in his hand grew heavy. For the first time he could not place that paper upon the threshold.

An elderly woman came out. "Whom do you want?"

Batuknath's old habit rose to his mouth. "I am from the Bar Council..." Then he stopped. Budhba Ghost was nowhere to be seen. The woman waited. Batuknath said softly, "Was this Sarayu Devi's house?" She replied, "It was a house. Now it is a name. Why are you asking?"

The question was harder than any question in court. In court an answer can be manufactured. At a threshold an answer either emerges or catches in the throat. Batuknath's caught. He could have lied—research, compensation, an old file. But lies have short legs upon a threshold. He could only say, "I had read her incompletely."

The old woman did not invite him in. She lifted a handful of dust and placed it in his palm. "If you want to read her fully, put this dust in your eyes. Putting it on paper will do nothing."

Batuknath trembled. Dust in his eyes? All his life he had placed spectacles over his eyes, law over the spectacles, position over the law. The dust mocked all his protections. Yet his mind hung suspended. He touched the dust to the corner of his eyes. In an instant Sarayu Devi's last day opened before him—the basket on her head, the smell of cement, the gleam of water, the crocodile's mouth, and the blank space in the official list.

He sat down on the ground. This was not repentance; repentance takes time to arrive. It was only the beginning of seeing. The old woman did not give him water. She said, "Write what you saw."

Chandrapal did not reach Ujjwal's house. Yet Ujjwal's house had reached his phone, his nails, the teeth marks on the pillow. He told his men, "No pressure on Devika." They stared. "Sir?" "I said no." This was not compassion; it was fear. But fear can sometimes become the first barrier to violence. Channa Grove does not despise fear. It treats fear as raw clay from which regret may be shaped—if water reaches it.

Raghav had finished writing Munna Paswan's address. For the first time his paper held not a code but a complete sentence: "Munna Paswan is not a criminal; he is a young man who was used." As he wrote, his voice returned, very faintly. He said, "Munna." The sound broke, but it came out.

The electricity suddenly failed in Lau Kin-Hung's boardroom. Emergency lights came on. Thresholds glowed across the screen. The experts laughed. "A cyber prank." Lau did not laugh. He understood that to those who do not recognise thresholds, everything looks like a market. But the greater the number of thresholds, the weaker the market map becomes.

Edward Broom reached the Harvard auditorium. He held his speech in his hand, but as soon as he stood at the lectern, the screen showed not slides but five thresholds. The hall fell silent. He wanted to call it a technical fault. But beneath the first threshold was written: "Sarayu Devi." He read the name, mispronouncing it. No one in the auditorium understood its meaning, yet the name caught in his throat like a thorn.

At that moment the children in Garh Narikel were playing a game called "Tell the house." One child spoke a name; the second told something about the person's home; the third named the fear; the fourth, the dream. If those three things could not be found, the name was still considered incomplete. This was the new rule of Channa Grove.

Ananya said, "A name is not complete merely because it is spoken. It has a home, a fear, a dream—all three."

Budhba Ghost moved the leaves. "This is the sixth breath."

That night the five minds again appeared in Channa Grove. This time there was no bowl in the field, but five thresholds. Each was made of earth, yet the moment a person placed a foot upon one, he felt the weight of the falsehood he had seen. Batuknath stepped onto Sarayu Devi's threshold. It did not move. The old woman's dust was still in his hand.

Chandrapal tried to step onto Ujjwal's threshold, but it moved away. Ananya said, "You have not seen his home. You have only seen a screen." Chandrapal growled, "I will reach the house." The children replied, "Reach it. But not carrying a threat."

Raghav stepped onto Munna Paswan's threshold. It trembled, but did not flee. A voice came to him: "Complete the address." Raghav said, "Paswan Toli, south of the river, near the old peepal." The threshold became still.

Millions of thresholds rose before Lau Kin-Hung. He could not place his foot on a single one. He was the owner of a market, not a guest at a threshold. For the first time he began to understand the word "permission."

Edward Broom stood before Sarayu Devi's threshold. "I am sorry," he said. The threshold was silent. Budhba Ghost said, "Do not speak sorrow in your own language. Speak it in the language of the victim's name." Edward fell silent. His education was long, but the language of names was short. He stood at the beginning of learning.

Dawn came. The sixth breath did not end; it scattered in five directions as dust upon the feet. In Garh Narikel the children sprinkled water over the thresholds. Devika said, "Now, when someone gives a name, we will ask for the home. When someone gives the home, we will ask for the fear. When someone gives the fear, we will ask for the dream. Only then will justice breathe."

All the leaves of Channa Grove moved together. Their movement carried not kabaddi but the sound of a school. The story moved forward—because a name does not tire until it reaches home.

FOLK SONG: DUST OF THE THRESHOLD

Folk tune: homecoming song

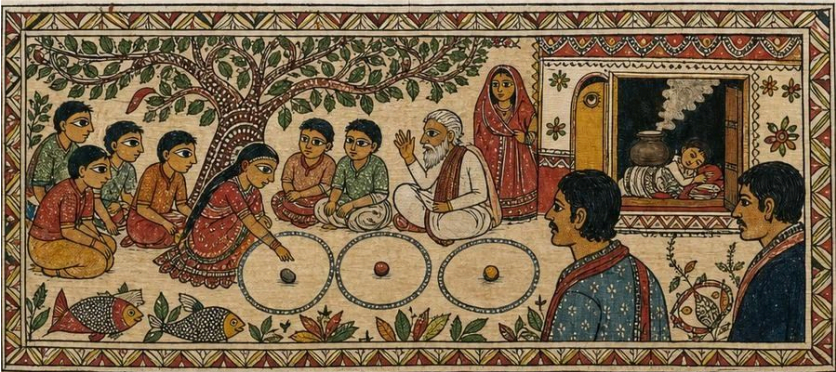
*The name has reached, has reached the threshold;
 Only then call it justice—Ba said only this much.
 The house fell, but the threshold held the memory;
 The incomplete address remained the fate of the poor.
 Speaking the name is the first breath; reaching home the second;
 Not shoes but bare feet understand what dust can do.
 Lau saw a million thresholds, yet could not become a guest;
 For the first time the word permission awoke within him.
 Foreign sorrow spoken in one's own language came to nothing;
 Open the door of forgiveness in the language of the victim's name.
 Ask the home, ask the fear, then learn the dream;
 Only when the name reaches its threshold should justice be believed.
 The house broke, but the threshold stood holding memory;
 Lau saw a million thresholds, yet could not become a guest.*



CHAPTER 36

Home, Fear, Dream

Among the three circles—home, fear and dream—only the truth that remained standing survived the game.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THREE PEBBLES—HOME,
COURAGE, DREAM**

Folk tune: children's jhumar

Rattle them, child, rattle the pebbles in your pocket;

Home, courage, dream—repeat all three names.

Three pebbles in the pocket, and the child gives them names:

One for home, one for courage, one filled with dream.

When fear comes, hold courage; when far away, hold home;

When you grow tired, the dream will say: the road still lives ahead.

These little pebbles are no game, but great marks of memory;

Through a child's simple device the mind finds its identity.

Three pebbles, three truths, light within the pocket;

With home, courage and dream, no one is helpless.

The first pebble says: however far, home is near;

The second says: take another step, and fear falls behind;

The third hums the dream: the road is not yet finished;

When all three rattle together, the mind is no longer alone.



When the name reached home, the seventh breath of the game in Channa Grove began. For six breaths the name had searched for its threshold; in the seventh, the darkness inside that threshold, the smell of rice, the thorn of fear and the dimmed lamp of dream slowly began to open.

At dawn the village children gathered beside Channa Grove. Beneath the shade of the leaves they were no longer playing but writing rules. Ananya drew three circles in the earth—home, fear, dream. In the centre of each she placed a pebble. The pebbles were small, but Budhba Ghost said, “There is no court greater than these three pebbles.”

Sarayu Devi's threshold spoke first. Within it were smoke, half-cooked rice, and a child who had fallen asleep after waiting all night for his mother. Batuknath Hariharan saw the scene and tried at once to turn his eyes away. But in Channa Grove, turning one's eyes away is also accepted as testimony. The leaves rustled: “Look.”

Batuknath saw Sarayu Devi climb the bridge with a basket on her head. No safety belt, no boat, no one recording her name. She fell. The sound of the splash rose. On the official paper the next line was written: “Female labourer not present.”

Batuknath summoned the lawyer inside himself. The inner lawyer said, “Where is the evidence?” At once ash flew from the stove at Sarayu Devi's threshold and settled upon his brow. In the ash appeared the word “Waiting.” Budhba Ghost said, “Evidence is not only what remains in a

file. Evidence is also that a child could not eat even after the rice had gone cold.”

Chandrapal Batra went toward Ujjwal’s house. He had thought that a home meant an address, a lane, a house number. But as soon as he entered Ujjwal’s home, he saw the dim blue glow of a mobile screen. In that light was the face of a young man—the smile of the first day’s win, the silence of the second day’s loss, the sweat of the third day’s debt, and the broken voice of the fourth day’s digital arrest.

Devika was not far away; she was seated inside the same house. She looked at Chandrapal without anger. “Look,” she said. “He bit into this pillow. These are not marks of lost money; they are marks of a breath being held back.”

Chandrapal tried to say, “It was not my app; it was a foreign platform; I was only an adviser.” But inside Ujjwal’s home, the voice of a lie could not form a complete sentence. Only the word “only” came from his mouth. Outside, the children repeated: “Only means half an admission.”

His screen opened again. This time it did not show a betting app, but Ujjwal’s unfinished letter. It read: “Didi, I was wrong, but I was not a criminal.” Chandrapal’s fingers went still. He tried to press delete, but Devika’s voice came through the screen: “Do not erase the letter. This time, write an answer.”

Raghav Signal Somani reached Munna Paswan’s house. Munna’s home seemed built not of earth but of bricks of debt. On each brick was a one-time code, an account number, a copy of Aadhaar, a bank seal. Raghav recognised all of it. Those signs had been his livelihood. But for the first time he saw a human being inside them.

Munna’s father looked at him and said, “Why did you write that my son was the mastermind?” Raghav could not answer, because he remembered what he had written: “active mule account.” In Maithili, its meaning opened before him at that moment: “the one on whose back the crime was made to travel.”

Munna’s mother placed an old gamchha before Raghav. “He took this when he went to the bank. He said he would get a job. Is this what your kind of job is?” Raghav’s language of signals broke apart. He had codes, commission, links—but no shortcut for a mother’s question.

Lau Kin-Hung sat in his distant city by the sea, yet the seventh breath reached his glass tower too. Before him lay a market map. India shone point by point. Every glowing point was a potential consumer. Then the map changed. Every point became a threshold. At one, a son waited; at another, a sister read a letter; at another, a mother folded a gamchha.

Lau summoned his adviser. The adviser came. Lau asked, “Do we have details of the customer’s home?” The adviser laughed. “We have income,

age, expenditure, behaviour, debt tendency, gaming habits.” Lau repeated, “Home?” The adviser fell silent. In that silence the leaves of Garh Narikel moved.

For the first time Lau understood that the people he had regarded as data were people of homes. Data does not die; it changes and becomes a claim. But homes die. And after a home dies, its smell can cross the sea. His air-conditioned room suddenly filled with the scent of wet paddy.

Edward Broom was practising how to write “Forgive me.” On a small sheet sent by Ira were Maithili letters. He grew tired trying to form the first “m.” His finger slipped across the smooth paper, but the letter demanded soil. Professor Elina Graves sat before him. She said, “If suffering gets trapped in translation, silence is not ethics.”

Edward said, “I pronounce the names wrongly.” Elina replied, “Mispronunciation is not a crime. Refusing to take the name is.” After that sentence, for the first time Edward left the lectern and sat at a table. The man of speeches became a student of writing.

In Garh Narikel, Ananya said to the children, “We asked about the home. Now ask about fear.” At first the children hesitated. Listening to a story of home is easy; listening to a story of fear is harder. Budhba Ghost said, “Fear is the name of the breath that could not come out.”

Sarayu Devi’s fear was that after her death her child would remain hungry. Ujjwal’s fear was that because of his mistake his sister would have to lower her head. Munna’s fear was that he would be called a criminal without understanding why. Meera Mrinalini’s fear was that her love would be used as a weapon against her. Nand’s fear was that even after truth was written, the river would swallow it all.

The children placed a lamp before every fear. There was little oil in the lamps, but no water had been mixed into it. Devika said, “We will honour fear. We will not call the frightened person a coward. We will not call the cheated person a fool. We will not call the blackmailed person guilty. This is the oath of the seventh breath.”

At that oath Chandrapal’s mind trembled. The first rule of his crime was to make the victim feel guilty. When the victim feels guilty, he does not complain. The day a village says that the cheated person is not a fool but a victim, half of Chandrapal’s trade dies on the spot.

Batuknath understood that victory in law was not enough. The day people begin to trust memory more than procedure, his harvest of delay will dry up. He thought, “I will have this oath declared unlawful.” At once the court within him asked, “Under what section? Against a child’s compassion?”

For the first time Raghav raised his hands without opening a signal. He bowed before Munna’s mother. He could find no words of apology.

He merely touched one end of the gamchha. Munna's mother pulled it away. "Not yet. First open the truth of the account you opened—not the account itself." Raghav's release was postponed.

Lau Kin-Hung dismissed his advisers. The room emptied. He bent over the map and clicked one point. Garh Narikel did not open. Only a question appeared: "Where is your home?" Lau grew angry. He ordered the server shut down. The order went through, but the reply came: "The question of home lies outside the network."

At last a sentence formed on Edward Broom's page: "Sarayu Devi, part of my offence is that I did not know your name." It was not a beautiful sentence. Its grammar was rough. But it was not a speech. The leaves of Channa Grove stayed still for a while over that rough sentence.

The final part of the seventh breath was dream. Ananya said, "After home and fear, dream." The children brightened, but Budhba Ghost became grave. "Dream is hardest of all, because the living must fulfil the dream of the dead."

Sarayu Devi's dream was that her child should learn to read. Ujjwal's dream was that Devika should never again be afraid of a phone. Munna's dream was that his father should be able to enter a bank without lowering his head. Meera Mrinalini's dream was that no one should blackmail another in the name of love. Nand's dream was that the labourers' names should be written upon the bridge pier.

After hearing the dreams, the children lifted their pebbles. On each pebble they wrote one letter—the letter of home, the letter of fear, the letter of dream. When all three were joined, the name became complete. Village water was sprinkled over the letters.

That night the minds of the rogues returned to the game in Channa Grove. This time their task was not to catch anyone, but to speak home, fear and dream. Batuknath could tell Sarayu Devi's home, could tell half her fear, and fell silent at the dream. Chandrapal saw Ujjwal's threshold and heard the fear, but his mouth closed at the dream. Raghav spoke Munna's home, spoke the fear, and wept on hearing the dream. Lau could not fully speak even one home. Edward managed one name in rough pronunciation.

Budhba Ghost announced no judgment. This time the Court of Channa Grove gave homework instead of a verdict. "Whatever you could not say, learn it and return."

Dawn came in the outer world. On Batuknath's desk lay the victory order, but upon it shone a sentence written by a child: "Ask the home of the name." On Chandrapal's screen no app opened, only the words "Write an answer." Raghav's signal was empty. Lau's map was blurred. Edward's speech was postponed.

In Garh Narikel the children set out for school. Ananya turned and looked back toward Channa Grove. The leaves were moving—not with kabaddi, but with the rustle of homework. The seventh breath had not ended; it travelled in the children’s pockets as three pebbles. The story moved forward, because without a dream a name remains incomplete.

FOLK SONG: THREE PEBBLES, THREE TRUTHS

Folk tune: children’s jhumar

*Rattle, pebbles, rattle—three inside the pocket;
Home, fear, dream—without all three, a name remains incomplete.
Three pebbles in the pocket—home, fear, dream;
Without all three the name is incomplete, and justice remains
unfinished too.
Home is easy to speak; the breath of fear catches;
The dead one’s dream climbs upon the shoulders of the living.
Raghav wept at the dream; Batuknath fell half silent;
Lau knew not even one whole home; his image blurred.
The Court of the Grove gave no verdict—it assigned homework;
“Whatever you have not understood, learn it and return,” it said.
The pebbles rattle in the children’s pockets through the night;
Without a dream, a name never finds its complete place.
The Court of the Grove gave no punishment; it gave homework—*



CHAPTER 37

Three Pebbles

*When the three pebbles in your pocket stop rattling, understand that
some answer has gone missing.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: READ THE ROOT, SHAPE
THE FUTURE**

Folk tune: rice-transplanting song

Plant, planter, plant the seeds of questions,

Seek not the leaves but the roots—sink your hands deep.

*Read not only the leaves of the tree; read the roots in the earth,
The egg of crime is small; behind it lies a finely woven net.
When questions reach the root, the illness is rightly known;
Cut only the upper leaves, and the trouble sprouts again.*

*Like transplanting rice, examine each row of causes;
Write the remedy with reform at the root, education and rules
together.*

*Read the root and shape the future, not merely the symptoms;
With the cultivation of deep understanding, no problem is immovable.*

*A field is not made clean by trimming only the grass above;
Only the hand that reached the root gathered the fruit.
Plant causes row by row, inspect bed after bed;
From clean planting at the root, a true solution will grow.*



The seventh breath travelled on in the children's pockets as three pebbles—home, fear, dream. All day the pebbles kept rattling: at school, on the field ridge, after the mobile screen had gone dark, and at night beneath the pillow. From that day in Garh Narikel, before beginning a game the children asked one another, “Your home?” then “Your fear?” then “Your dream?” Whoever could not answer was given less breath in the game.

The rogues could not escape this rule either. The Court of Channa Grove had said: learn whatever you could not say, and return. The rogues had thought this was the language of the dead, a sound within the game that would end when they awoke. But from dawn onward it became clear that the rule had spread into the waking world as well.

When Batuknath Hariharan awoke in his guest-house room, three pebbles lay beneath his pillow. He started and summoned the security guard. The guard came, saw the pebbles and asked in an ordinary voice, “Sir, how did these get inside?” Batuknath wanted to scold him, but what came from his mouth was, “Where is my home?” The guard grew frightened. The question was not meant for him, yet he had no answer either.

Which was Batuknath's home? The old lane in Madras where his father brokered the release of people fined for travelling without tickets? Or the bungalow in Delhi where he lectured on the dignity of the Bar?

Or the file room where eleven advocates waited for him? He understood: a man with many homes sometimes loses the real one.

He picked up the first pebble. A word was written upon it: "Beginning." Batuknath's body trembled. He understood beginnings. Before every bribe there is a beginning—a small concession, a lie that seems laughable, an untruth renamed "procedure."

Chandrapal Batra awoke in his city mansion. Though his screen had been off all night, it was warm. Three circles appeared upon it—home, fear, dream. He laughed. "A children's game." He entered his password. The screen would not open. Then from inside the phone came the smell of his Meerut hostel: an old mattress, half-dry socks, cheap tea, and the first lie written in the margin of a law book.

Chandrapal began remembering his student days. Had he gone to study law, or to sell it? At first he had genuinely wanted to become a lawyer. He believed words held power in a courtroom. But in his first case a broker told him, "You do not win an argument with truth; you win it with time." That day he learned the art of selling time.

Ujjwal's letter flashed again on the phone: "I was not a criminal." Chandrapal closed his eyes. But when he did, a screen opened inside him. He saw his first client, a farmer who had paid him two thousand rupees in a case over five bighas of land. Chandrapal had forgotten to file the papers, and the farmer lost his land. The farmer's face merged with Ujjwal's.

There was silence in Raghav "Signal" Somani's house. He was a man of disappearing conversations. There were no old letters, photographs or diaries at home. His wife had left him; his son called him not "Father" but "Sir." Raghav had thought this was security: less memory, less risk. But the eighth breath of Channa Grove first seeks memory in the houses of those who have removed memory from their homes.

A sheet of paper lay on his table. On it was his childhood name—Raghavesh. How many years had it been since he had seen that name? At school the teacher called him Raghavesh. He had been a brilliant student then. Mathematics delighted him. Numbers were his friends. Later numbers became accounts, accounts became mules, and mules became the backs on which crime rode. The friend became a slave.

Raghav lifted the paper. On the back was written, "Your fear?" He considered the answers—the police? Lau Kin-Hung? Chandrapal? No. His real fear was that one day his son would ask, "What work did you do?" and he would have no answer.

Far away in a city by the sea, Lau Kin-Hung sat on the seventh floor of his glass tower. Before him lay market reports from cities across the world. Where people were poor, addiction was cheap; where the law was

slow, profit was fast; where young people were unemployed, sell them the lure of games. His empire had been built on that formula. But the eighth breath does not obey formulas. It obeys questions.

A line appeared on Lau's screen: "Your home?" Lau smiled. "Hong Kong." The line remained. He typed, "Glass tower by the sea." It remained. He typed, "Where accounts are opened." The line darkened. Then he remembered a small room whose window looked out upon a clothesline. His mother sewed through the night. That was home. In that room he had first decided to take revenge on poverty. Later his revenge ceased to be against poverty and became revenge upon the poor.

Edward Broom's room was filled with Harvard speech papers. This time all the headings had vanished. "Moral capital," "shared future," "human dignity"—the words had flown from the pages. At the top remained only a question: "Your home?" Edward wrote, "A citizen of an empire." The paper stayed silent. He wrote, "The head of a company." Silence. At last he wrote, "A boy taught that mistakes disappear inside numbers." For the first time, moisture appeared upon the paper.

In Garh Narikel Ananya told the children, "Today we shall read the homes of the rogues." The children stared. One asked, "Do they have homes too?" Budhba Ghost climbed down from the branch. "An oppressor has a home, but he abandons it. An abandoned home becomes testimony."

The children wrote five names in the earth—Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Somani, Lau Kin-Hung, Edward Broom—and left a blank space before each. Ananya said, "If we do not write a person's home, we cannot fully understand his guilt. Crime is not born in the air. Crime is born at the moment a person begins to think that the pain of his own home gives him the right to burn someone else's."

Meera Mrinalini arrived carrying the page of the Oath of Privacy. She told the children, "Remember: the rogue's pain does not excuse his crime. But if we do not understand the pain, we will not recognise the crime's next form." Saumya added, "To know the root of a crime is not to defend it; it is to learn how to cut it."

Devika said, "Read the story of Chandrapal's first fraud." The children heard of his hostel, the first farmer, the delayed file, the selling of time. One child asked, "So first he told a small lie, and later a big one?" Devika answered, "Yes. Even a great crocodile is born from an egg."

Nishant Jha brought not Lau Kin-Hung's account map but a picture of his childhood home. "He came from a poor household," he said. "But the poverty that hurt him became the very poverty he turned into a business." The children fell silent. A small boy asked softly, "Then can someone escape poverty and also protect the poor?" Nishant said, "Of course. That is why this story matters."

Ramaiyya Subramanyam came laughing, though exhaustion lay beneath the laugh. “Raghav’s name was Raghavesh,” he said. The children were surprised again. Ramaiyya said, “Sometimes when a name is shortened, the soul is shortened too. He cut away half his own name, then began cutting other people’s accounts.”

Gop Kumar quietly opened a cloth bag. It held no formal papers, only old tickets, a hostel receipt, a training-camp card, the identity card from a first job, invitations to speeches and two or three photographs. “These are not evidence,” he said. “They are beginnings. Evidence is needed in court. Beginnings are needed in a story.”

Budhba Ghost placed five leaves before the five names. On the first was written “small concession”; on the second, “selling time”; on the third, “cutting a name”; on the fourth, “taking revenge on the poor for poverty”; on the fifth, “hiding guilt inside numbers.”

The light of those five leaves reached the distant rooms of the rogues. Batuknath saw his father—a tired man, not wholly evil. But Batuknath understood that while his father had brokered the release of a few people from fines, he himself had begun postponing decisions over people’s lives. When imitation of a small wrong acquires power, it becomes a great sin.

Chandrapal saw his old friend Shamim in the Meerut hostel. Shamim had said, “I will fight cases for the poor.” Chandrapal had laughed: “Will the poor pay fees?” Shamim later remained a small lawyer, but slept peacefully at night. Chandrapal became rich, but his sleep turned into an app screen.

Raghav went to his son’s room. The boy was asleep. On the table lay a science book, an unfinished drawing, and a question: “What is a mule?” Raghav’s feet froze. His son had already learned the word at school. Raghav understood: when crime becomes a word inside the home, a father can no longer escape it.

In Lau’s glass tower, the sound of the sea grew louder. His mother came in a dream. She said, “Did I lift you out of poverty so that you could turn poor people into data?” Lau woke before he could answer. Even after waking, his mother remained close—the eyes of a woman threading a needle.

Edward Broom abandoned his stage rehearsal and went to his company’s old warehouse. Dust lay everywhere. A plaque from the old bridge project had been thrown into a corner. An Indian river’s name was misspelled upon it. Edward tried for the first time to read that wrong name aloud, but his tongue caught. Professor Elina said, “The tongue catches because history has taken hold of the throat.”

In Garh Narikel the children studied the five leaves. Ananya asked, “What is the punishment for all this?” Budhba Ghost replied,

“Punishment comes when the court’s time arrives. For now, the lesson. Whoever cannot read the beginning of a crime cannot prevent its rebirth.”

At night the three pebbles rattled again in Batuknath’s guest house. This time there were four. Upon the fourth was written, “Your beginning.” He did not scream. He only opened the window. From far toward Channa Grove came the children’s lesson: “Small concession, selling time, cutting a name, taking revenge on the poor for poverty, hiding guilt inside numbers.”

Chandrapal picked up the phone and for the first time spoke without legal language. “Raghav, I am remembering.” Raghav answered, “So am I.” Both were silent. They did not apologise, did not surrender, did not fully repent. But the work of the eighth breath is not to finish repentance; it is to begin memory.

Lau Kin-Hung did not close the Indian accounts. He was still a villain. But his market map was no longer still. At every point a window of a home appeared. The empire continued to run, but the first crack had opened inside it.

Edward Broom postponed his press release. It seemed a small thing, but in his empire postponing a press release was only a little short of confession. On a blank page he wrote five names. Three were wrong, two incomplete. Elina said, “Write them again.”

Night deepened over Garh Narikel. No kabaddi was played in Channa Grove. For the first time the children stopped the game and studied. The dead listened. Far away, the minds of the rogues trembled. The eighth breath was a pause in the game—because sometimes the game must stop so that one can look at the roots of its rules.

At dawn Ananya gathered the three pebbles and five leaves. “A new rule now,” she said. “Understand the home of the person you defeat as well. Otherwise victory itself may become another crime.” Budhba Ghost smiled. “These children are dangerous,” he said. “They do not look only at an enemy’s face; they look at the root.”

Thus the eighth breath ended—without forgiveness, without punishment, but with recognition of beginnings. The story moved forward because a door had opened into the rogues’ inner worlds. No one changes the instant a door opens; but air enters. Once the air of Garh Narikel enters, leaves begin to grow even in an empty room.

FOLK SONG: READ THE ROOT

Folk tune: rice-transplanting song

*Read the root, not the face—read the root;
The child who reads the root is the greatest watchman of all.*

*A great crocodile comes from an egg, crime from a small concession;
A name cut, time sold—the root sprouts from that crack.
When you defeat someone, read the pain of his home;
Otherwise victory may become a fire in another house.
Three pebbles, five leaves—stop the game a while;
Look not at the enemy's face, but at his root.
The village air entered the empty room;
A leaf sprouted there, and a name became work.
No forgiveness, no punishment—only recognition of the beginning;
Children who read the root are the most dangerous sentries.
A name was cut, time was sold—the sapling rose from that crack.
Otherwise victory will become a fire in another courtyard.*



CHAPTER 38

The Pronunciation of a Name

Writing a name is not enough—you must also give time to learn how to pronounce it.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: RIGHT NAME, RIGHT
HONOUR**

Folk tune: auspicious song of name-reading

Read it rightly, read the letters of the name rightly,

In every vowel-mark, shape someone's living breath.

*A written name is the body's shell; a spoken name its life,
Pronounce it rightly, and a person's honour rises.*

*Ask the spelling before you write; let each person tell their own
identity,*

A small correction can preserve someone's whole existence.

*Read names rightly—in school, office, on every stage;
The first stair of respect is a name correctly spoken.
Right name, right honour—this simple law of the people;
Care with a single letter can preserve an identity.*

*Ask the spelling before you write; let each person speak their own
introduction,*

*At a clean, correct call, victory rises upon the face.
School, office, stage—let this be the custom everywhere;
Respect for one letter can bind a lifetime of affection.*



After the eighth breath, the game in Garh Narikel stopped for two days. The children found this astonishing, because the ghosts' kabaddi never stopped. Flood might come, drought might fall, there might be a wedding or a death, a court might give judgment, the government might build a bridge, a foreigner might make a speech—once night fell in Channa Grove, the game began. But this time Budhba Ghost remained seated on his branch and kept saying only, "Once a name has been written, time must be given to learn its pronunciation."

At first the children did not understand. The names had been written. The archive had been made—on leaves, in earth, on screens, in songs. Why pronunciation now? Ananya asked, "Budhba, are reading a name and writing a name different things?" Budhba Ghost replied, "The written name is the outer body. The spoken name is the inner breath. Whoever misreads a name kills it again."

Word of this reached the rogues. Even "word" is not quite right. No messenger went, no letter arrived. But when Batuknath Hariharan lifted his cup for morning tea, letters floated on the surface instead of foam. He tried to read the first—"Bho... Bholaa...?" The foam trembled, and from within the cup came the sound of a splash. Someone whispered into his ear, "Not Bholanath. Bholaa Nat."

Batuknath dropped the cup. His hands shook. In court he had heard thousands of names—in files, arguments, affidavits. To him a name had

been a party, a serial number, a case number. For the first time he understood that inside a name also live a father's voice, the smell of a mother's body, a childhood path, a field ridge, the burden of debt, and a child's crying after death. Misreading a name is not merely applying the wrong section of law; it is closing the dead person's door once again.

No wager opened on Chandrapal Batra's screen that day. No green numbers, no red numbers, no win, no loss. Names simply appeared one after another. He kept swiping, but the screen refused his finger. The first name was "Ujjwal Jha." He read, "Ujwal." The screen went black. Then the letters corrected themselves, spelling the name out slowly. It felt not like a phone but a school holding his finger and teaching him the alphabet.

He wanted to laugh. "What's in a name?" But before the sentence was finished, another voice came from the ceiling of his house: "There is plenty in your name, Batra Babu—an LL.B. certificate, hundreds of accounts, commission, protection, threats, and the price attached to every signature." Chandrapal looked up. No one was there. But on the certificate framed upon the wall the university's name faded, and beneath it appeared a line: "No degree was awarded for selling names."

Raghav "Signal" Somani feared the punishment of names most of all, because his whole life had been spent removing them. No client under a full name, only a signal; no account under a true name, only a mule account; no conversation preserved, only disappearing messages. But the ninth breath gathers even the ashes of erased things. At night a bundle opened before him. Inside were half-burned SIM cards, torn identity papers, bank slips, and fragments of many names.

On the first fragment was written "Mu..."; on the second, "nna"; on the third, "Pas..."; on the fourth, "wan." Raghav joined them: "Munna Paswan." As soon as the name became whole, a thin young man stood in the room. Whether he was alive or dead was unclear. A voice came from his mouth: "You called my account a mule, but my name was Munna. The mule was not my livelihood. It was your net."

Raghav tried to answer. The language of his crime was ready: "system, network, orders from above, mere facilitation, consent on paper." But before the young man's name, all those words fell away like sand. For the first time Raghav said, "Munna." Pain struck his chest as the name sounded. He understood: when a name is spoken rightly, it becomes not collection but return.

In Lau Kin-Hung's office by the sea, names arrived differently. Indian names seemed difficult to him. His staff shortened them in reports—B. Nat, U. Jha, M. Pas, D. Sah. Lau used to say: shorter names, faster business. But that morning the full names spread across his glass table as drops of

water. The drops joined into Devanagari letters. Lau could not read the script. But the letters began reading him.

Many voices entered his ears—"Bhola Nat," "Sarayu Mahato," "Ujjwal Jha," "Munna Paswan," "the debt of Devika Sah's household," "the unnamed nurse," "the old man trapped by the price of an oxygen cylinder," "more than thirty beneath the bridge pier." Lau lifted a handkerchief to wipe the table. It was wet. He thought it was sea damp. But sea damp does not climb to the seventh floor of a glass tower. This was dew from the leaves of Garh Narikel.

For Edward Broom, the punishment of names came on a public stage. He was to speak again in a university auditorium, this time on "Accountability and Global Development." The speech was ready. Professor Elina Graves sat in the first row, but her eyes held not the shine of applause but the coldness of evidence. Edward climbed the stage and tried to read his first line: "Friends, we have gathered..." But the microphone said, "Not Bholanath. Bhola Nat." The auditorium fell silent. Edward broke into sweat.

The foreign students assumed it was some artistic intervention. A few began recording video. Edward tried to switch off the microphone. The microphone went dead, but the voice did not. One name after another began coming from every speaker. Ira Aruni stood at the back of the hall. She raised no slogan. She simply held a copy of Garh Narikel's archive of names. She understood that sometimes resistance is not snatching a microphone; it is reading a name correctly.

Meanwhile in Garh Narikel, the first "name-reading" assembly was held. The earth beneath Channa Grove was levelled. The children sat in a circle. In the middle were Ananya, Devika, Meera, Saumya, Nishant, Ira, Gop Kumar and Aruni. Budhba Ghost sat upon the branch. Hulasi came from the direction of the well and sat quietly. Panidubbi's hair did not rise from the pond, but ripples travelled over the water as far as the gathering.

Ananya lifted the first leaf. "We will not read a name wrongly." The children repeated in one voice, "We will not read a name wrongly." Devika added, "If we do not know a name, we will ask." The children: "We will ask." Meera said, "If a name has been hidden, we will seek it." The children: "We will seek it." Saumya said, "If humiliation has been attached to a name, we will remove the humiliation." The children: "We will remove it." Budhba Ghost was satisfied.

The first name read was Bhola Nat. No member of his family was present. Everyone said he had been a migrant labourer from a distant district. But when the name was pronounced correctly for the third time, a woman appeared at the outer edge of Channa Grove. Her body was indistinct. She said, "I am his sister. No one ever informed me." Someone

asked, "After so long?" She replied, "When the name was spoken rightly, I found the road."

The second name was Sarayu Mahato. Sarayu had been a woman labourer. The official list said, "Sarayuh Mahato, male, absent." The children stumbled. Ananya said, "Here, read the truth of the body along with the name." They read: "Sarayuh Mahato, woman, labourer, fell from the bridge, not absent." Wind moved through the grove. The leaves of Channa Grove turned over. Fine lines appeared beneath them, as though someone had drawn the shape of a palm in henna.

The third name was Ujjwal Jha. Devika rose to read it. She feared her voice would break, but Ananya held her hand. Devika read: "Ujjwal Jha, son, student, caught by the crocodile of the screen, not a criminal." The children kept silence after this line. Silence too can be a lesson. In that silence Ujjwal's mobile screen flashed once, then went completely dark. The extinguished screen looked like a peaceful face.

The fourth name was Munna Paswan. Far away in the city, Raghav was drenched in sweat as he repeated that name. When Munna's name was read in Garh Narikel, a bank seal appeared on one leaf of Channa Grove and then vanished. The children understood: the account had been used in crime, but the name did not belong to the crime. At that moment the first knot of the mule-account net opened in the language of ordinary people.

A rule was made in the name-reading assembly: three things would be read with every name—its home, its death, its humiliation. Without the home, the dead remain wandering. Without the death, the crime remains unclear. Without the humiliation, justice remains incomplete. This rule was named "the Law of Three Leaves."

The law reached the rogues at once. In Batuknath's room a file opened: home, death, humiliation. He searched for a case number, but the file itself said, "Home first." Chandrapal searched his phone for the ledger, but the screen said, "Death first." Raghav searched old messages; the screen said, "Humiliation first." Lau opened a report and found only "Name first." Edward tore his speech; the pieces flew up and became three leaves.

For the first time Batuknath Hariharan abandoned courtroom vocabulary and wrote on plain paper: "Bhola Nat, home unknown." The page blackened as soon as he wrote it. "Unknown" is not so easy to write. To call a home unknown merely because no one searched for it is laziness. He wrote again: "Home yet to be found." The page turned white. It was a small change. But in Channa Grove Budhba Ghost said, "This is how responsibility for a name begins."

Chandrapal Batra wrote "suicide" before Ujjwal's name. The screen made a sound as though it had cracked. A line appeared: "Cause?" He

wrote, "Debt." The screen asked, "Whose?" He wrote, "The game's." The screen asked, "Who built it?" He fell silent. It was the sort of question that, answered step by step, leads a criminal to his own role. Chandrapal's finger trembled. At last he wrote, "My network." The screen did not change at once. But beneath Ujjwal's name, for the first time, a small lamp appeared.

Raghav wanted to write "mule account" before Munna's name, but his hand stopped. He wrote, "Account created without the name." Then crossed it out. "Without the name's consent." Crossed that out too. At last he wrote, "The name was stolen." After those three words, a window in his room opened for the first time in years. Air came in from outside. It felt not like air, not like anyone's forgiveness, but simply like evidence entering the room.

Lau Kin-Hung could not read Devanagari, but for the first time he thought of seeking not a translator but a teacher of pronunciation. His assistant asked, "For a business meeting?" Lau answered, "No. For names." The assistant was astonished. Lau himself was astonished. He was still a villain; only a crack had opened in that villainy. But even a crack was much for Garh Narikel. A wall does not fall in a single day.

Edward Broom abandoned the speech in the auditorium and began reading names. The first two were wrong. Ira wanted to step forward, but Elina stopped her with a gesture: let him learn for himself. On the third attempt Edward pronounced Bhola Nat almost correctly. No one applauded. The absence of applause hurt him most. Speeches on morality receive applause; the correct pronunciation of a name receives silence. He understood that silence is harder than applause.

In Garh Narikel, Hulasi spoke for the first time at the assembly. "Read my name too." The children fell silent. Hulasi's story had been told in many forms—suicide, well, love, sin, shadow. Hulasi said, "I fell. By calling it suicide, they stole my right to grief. Read the humiliation." Ananya trembled. She read: "Hulasi, Garh Narikel, died by accident in the well, humiliated by being called a suicide." A very old wind passed through Channa Grove.

Tears filled Budhba Ghost's eyes. "This is the true beginning of the ninth breath," he said. "When the living read the names of the dead, not only are the dead released; the understanding of the living opens too. Now the punishment of the rogues begins. Every night they must read one name. If they read it wrongly, read it again. Without home, without death, without humiliation—the name will not be accepted."

The children wanted to turn the punishment into a game. "What if they do not read?" one boy asked. Budhba Ghost laughed. "Then their own names will begin to blur. Whoever denies another's name slowly loses the right to his own."

That night the punishment began to affect the rogues' signatures. Batuknath went to sign a letter, and "Hari" vanished from the middle of "Batuknath Hariharan." On Chandrapal's bank paper the middle letters of "Batra" blurred. The sender name disappeared from Raghav's message. In Lau's account the owner's name became "Unknown." On Edward's invitation only "Edw..." remained. They were frightened. The punishment of names was no game.

Gop Kumar listened to all this at night. He told Aruni, "I used to think data was the final form of truth. But data without names is only a count of bodies." Aruni replied, "And a name without story is incomplete. That is why the novel keeps growing." Gop smiled. "Then what we must preserve now is not merely paper but pronunciation."

Nishant brought the children a list of digital-fraud cases. "There are hundreds of names here," he said. "Some complete, some partial, some only phone numbers." Ananya said, "A phone number is not a name. Find the name." Nishant understood: technology's next task was not merely stopping money; it was returning names. The glitter of his foreign office suddenly seemed dim.

Meera added a new line to the Oath of Privacy: "If someone's name is exposed without consent, let that name be returned with honour." As she read it, the shadows of women whose names had been turned into commodities in the market of bodies appeared. No "goods," no "number," no "package"—each had a home, if not a death then a fear, and a humiliation. Meera said, "The names of the living must be protected too. Not only those of the dead."

Saumya wrote the Law of Three Leaves in ordinary language and began distributing it. Government language said victim, beneficiary, accused, witness. Saumya's leaflet said home, death, humiliation. People read it and said, "This is not law." Saumya answered, "The law can come later. First let the people straighten memory."

Night deepened. Again there was no kabaddi in Channa Grove. This time the children, tired from reading names, fell asleep where they sat. The ghosts kept watch. Panidubbi did not leave the pond, but her hair spread over the water like lines of writing. The witches did not fly from the platform; they listened from afar. Rakash kept the light. For the first time Loth was not a spectator but a corrector of lines—whenever a child misread, he moved his lips gently.

In the first light of dawn Ananya saw letters appearing on a new leaf of Channa Grove: "Whoever reads a name correctly begins justice. Whoever reads a name wrongly repeats the crime." She did not pluck the leaf. It was left upon the tree. A living rule must remain joined to its root.

Thus the ninth breath did not end; it became practice. Far away in their rooms, the rogues kept reading names—wrongly, then correctly,

then stumbling again. In Garh Narikel, the victims kept hearing their names. The children kept asking questions. And Channa Grove understood: once the punishment of reading names begins, the story no longer belongs only to crime; it becomes a story of language, memory and the future. The next breath would show how work, not merely justice, would be joined to the names that had been read.

FOLK SONG: READ THE NAME RIGHTLY

Folk tune: name-reading folk melody

*Read it rightly, read the name rightly;
Whoever misreads it builds the crime again and again.
The written name is outer body, the spoken name is breath;
Wrong pronunciation makes another sacrifice.
One name each night, with the three leaves beside it—
Read home, death, humiliation; open the colour of the tongue.
Return the living woman's name with dignity too;
Do not erase her by calling her goods, a number, a package.
Loth corrects the lines, the ghosts stand guard;
When a child stumbles, a leaf softly speaks.
Whoever reads the name rightly, justice begins there;
Whoever reads it wrongly, repeats the crime once more.
Wrong pronunciation makes another sacrifice.
Do not erase anyone by calling them goods, number or package.*



CHAPTER 39

The Peace of the Seed

Still on the outside, preparing to break open within—such is the stillness in which a seed is made.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DEW SAYS “NOW”

Folk tune: parati

*Wake, letters of dew, wake;
Not “tomorrow”—say “now” and take the first step.*

*Upon the still leaf, dew wrote: now, this moment, this very time;
The seed has waited long—open the door of life again.
Leave the excuse of “tomorrow” and do the first small task;
One call, one application, one hand held today.*

*Before the dew dries, sow resolve into the earth;
From the footstep of now, join the long road of the future.
The dew's “now” sings the dawn-song—time has awakened;
The seed inside the still leaf has asked for earth.*

*A trembling drop on the quiet leaf gives its sign;
How long the seed has waited for the soil.
Make one call, file one request, extend one hand;
Before the dew dries, let your resolve take root.*



After the name-reading of the ninth breath, a strange stillness descended upon Garh Narikel. It was not the peace a tired person finds after a meal, nor the quiet that settles over paper after a court adjournment. It was the stillness that exists inside a tree while a seed is being made: the leaves motionless outside, the earth preparing to break open within.

The children went home from Channa Grove before dawn, but their voices remained. The names hung in the air like dry aerial roots on an old banyan. Budhba Ghost sat upon the branch and kept counting—Bhola Nat, Sarayu Mahato, Ujjwal Jha, Munna Paswan, Devika Sah, Hulasi, Nand Aruni, and all those whom paper had never given a page.

The tenth breath began when the names had been read, yet their homes were still only half open. Pronouncing a name gives the soul a road, but finding a road does not make a home. A home is made of memory, food, labour, song, and a place where people do not lower their eyes when speaking of the dead.

At dawn Devika Sah took Ujjwal's old phone with its cracked screen. The screen was dark now, but in the black glass she saw not her own face but the face of the whole village. She understood that the crocodile of the screen had not been only fraud; it was the fear that entered homes and taught children to hide their sorrow even from themselves.

Under the thatch of the Coconut-Leaf School she wrote the first lesson: “Fear kept secret becomes a business.” The children read it. One asked, “Didi, if we speak fear aloud, does it end?” Devika said, “No. But

the owner of the fear changes. While fear is locked inside, it belongs to the thief. Once spoken aloud, it belongs to society.”

That sentence reached Chandrapal Batra's ears. He sat behind the locked door of his city office. News had reached him that children in Garh Narikel were studying digital fraud. He tried to laugh. “Children will understand law?” But his laugh stopped halfway because the third phone in his drawer switched itself on without being touched. Upon the screen was written: “Fear has been spoken aloud.”

Chandrapal tried to switch off the phone. It would not shut down. On the glass over his certificate appeared Ujjwal's final sentence: “I am not a thief.” He had read it so many times that now it was not the meaning of the words but their sound that cut him. A man trained in law can escape the meaning of words; he cannot escape their sound.

That night every SIM card in Raghav “Signal” Somani's room cracked open and became a tiny seed. At first he thought the metal had corroded. Then a fine leaf emerged from each seed. On every leaf was half a name. The messages he had erased had not vanished; they had become seeds waiting for soil.

Raghav tried to brush the leaves away, but they flew through the air and returned to the table. One said, “Whose account did you create?” Another, “Whom did you frighten?” A third, “Whom did you call a traitor?” A fourth, “Whom did you tell to keep the camera on?” No answer to those questions could be found on Signal.

Lau Kin-Hung was planning something new in his city by the sea. An adviser told him, “The effect of the name archive in rural India is local. The impact on the market is limited.” Lau nodded. He understood the language of markets, not of people. But at that moment a map of India opened on his screen and, where the “limited area” should have been, a point began to pulse—Garh Narikel. It was small, but its beat did not rise and fall like a stock-market graph. It beat like a heart.

The incident in Edward Broom's auditorium spread around the world as a short video. Some called it a joke, some a technical fault, some a planned protest. Ira Aruni remained silent. She knew that a person asking for proof can be given paper; a person asking for a soul must be made to hear a name.

In the Harvard library Ira wrote a letter. It was for neither a newspaper nor a court. Its title was: “When Ethics Becomes a Speech, the Name Becomes Resistance.” She sat down to write it in English, but the first line came out in Maithili: “If you cannot speak someone's name properly, you cannot speak on their behalf.” The sentence refused translation.

In Garh Narikel, Saumya Ramanathan was turning documents into the language of ordinary people. The official page said “financial irregularity.” Beside it she wrote, “A child’s fear was bought with the child’s own money.” The file said “unauthorised labourer.” She wrote, “The one who came to build the bridge was called a labourer.” The hospital bill said “supply expenditure.” She wrote, “Selling breath.”

Ramaiyya Subramanyam joined the work of translation laughing, though the laugh was no longer carefree. “Translating government language into people’s language,” he said, “is one of this country’s greatest revolutions. Half the government’s lies are hidden behind thick curtains of words.”

Meanwhile another worry grew inside Gop Kumar. The archive of names had been made, the digital school had opened, the Oath of Privacy was being taught, but the owners of the real files were still alive. Broom, Lau, Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav—all had withdrawn into their holes, but the holes had not broken. Gop remembered Budhba Ghost’s words: “A crocodile will not leave its hole. Send the water into the hole.”

And so the true work of the tenth breath began: sending water into the holes. The water was not litigation, revenge or violence. It was knowledge. In every village, every school, every migrant household, every court waiting room: lessons in names, lessons in fear, lessons in recognising accounts, lessons in privacy, lessons in examining the language of development.

Ananya taught the children a game called “Catch the Right Name.” One child played the criminal, another the victim, a third the witness, a fourth the judge. The criminal distorted the victim’s name; the witness corrected it. When the name was pronounced rightly, the victim could run again in the game. The children became so absorbed that even the ghosts smiled while watching.

Hulasi said, “My name too was called wrongly for so many years. Some called it suicide, some sin, some ill omen. When you call me Hulasi, I remember not the wall of the well but my childhood.” For the first time the children understood that ghosts too have childhoods.

That night Batuknath Hariharan stayed at an outer inn in Garh Narikel. All day he had watched the name-reading assembly but could not enter it. He had orders, identity, position—but to enter the circle of Channa Grove he needed a name. He spoke his own: “Batuknath Hariharan.” The leaves moved. Budhba Ghost asked, “How many names are imprisoned inside that name?”

Batuknath did not answer. He remembered a scene from childhood. In a small town in Kerala his father used to write slips outside the court. Poor people spoke their names; his father wrote them down. One day his father had said, “Never write a poor person’s name badly. His name is his

land.” Batuknath had laughed then. Now that laugh lodged in his throat like a thorn.

Chandrapal Batra devised a new strategy in his office: “Defamation action against the public-education campaign.” His employees began preparing papers. Allegations: damage to reputation, economic loss, illegal propaganda, spreading fear among children. But when the documents printed, every page automatically carried the line: “I am not a thief.” They turned off the printer. Turned it on again. The same words appeared.

Chandrapal roared, “Whose programming is this?” An employee said softly, “Sir, the machine is offline.” Offline. At that word Chandrapal’s face went pale. His crimes had always depended upon networks. Channa Grove had entered something offline.

Raghav Somani considered fleeing the city. He looked at an airline ticket. Destination: Dubai. But when he reached the box for his name, his hand stopped. On the passport: Raghav Somani. On Signal: R.S. In the criminal circle: “Crow.” At the bank: consultant. At home: a father. Before his wife: silence. Which was the real name? He could not book the ticket.

Lau Kin-Hung told his lawyers, “Let the local story remain local in India. Separate the global brand.” His advisers agreed. But at the end of the meeting those Devanagari dots appeared again on the glass wall. Lau could not read them, yet it seemed the letters were speaking his own name without his pronunciation. For the first time he felt uneasy at the sound of it—Lau Kin-Hung. Why “Hung”? Hanging? Suspended? His mind truly was suspended.

Meanwhile something new happened in Garh Narikel. At the Coconut-Leaf School the children began teaching outsiders. First parents, then shopkeepers at the market, then bus drivers, then a bank clerk. The clerk was told Munna Paswan’s story. At first he said, “The account was opened according to the rules.” The children asked, “Did the rule look at the person?” The clerk fell silent.

That night the bank clerk went home and opened his register. Mule accounts were not easy to identify, but neither were they impossible. He marked three accounts separately. For the first time, inside the system, a small clerk searched for a human being within the rules. It was the first victory of the tenth breath—without fanfare, without applause, only a small red-pencil mark.

Satyavrat Mehta learned of these things not through letters but through people’s statements. He understood that court orders move slowly, while people’s lessons move at once. A question rose in him: can the dignity of law learn from public memory? In his notebook he wrote, “The court hears a name; society lives by it.”

On the night of the tenth breath, no court assembled in Channa Grove. Instead there was a feast—a symbolic feast among the dead, the living, children, ghosts, spirits, witches and Panidubbi. There was no actual cooked rice. From every house came a handful of rice, a pinch of salt, a drop of water and a leaf, laid beside the archive of names. The warm scent of rice and faint sharpness of salt mingled in the evening air, as though the village had brought its entire kitchen for the dead to smell. Budhba Ghost said, “Whoever finds a place in the meal will find a place in history.”

Devika placed a pinch of salt beside the leaf bearing Ujjwal’s name. Meera placed a lamp beside the Oath of Privacy. Saumya placed a translated page. Ira placed a blank card brought from abroad, bearing no university seal. Gop Kumar placed a copy—not of a file, but of Ujjwal’s sentence. Ananya placed a piece of chalk with which the children wrote names.

Then a faint tearing sound passed through the air. The invisible screen above Channa Grove split. Through the tear came the inner voices of the rogues: Batuknath’s childhood, Chandrapal’s first lie, Raghav’s erased messages, Lau’s percentages, Broom’s applause. Not everyone could hear them—only those sitting in the name-reading circle.

The children were not afraid. Ananya said, “Their minds are coming.” Budhba Ghost nodded. “The bodies will come later. First the mind accepts. A mind left hanging swings in the wind until, at last, it becomes a leaf.”

In the final watch of the tenth breath, Batuknath did not sleep at the inn. Chandrapal sat before the printer in his office. Raghav left the ticket page open. Water dripped from inside the glass in Lau Kin-Hung’s seaside house. Edward Broom wanted to cancel his next speech, but the organiser asked, “Reason?” He could not write an answer. The reason had no name—or it had too many names.

Dawn came to Garh Narikel. Dew had gathered on the leaves of Channa Grove. In every drop was a tiny letter. The children came running. Ananya read the first drop. It held only one word: “Now.”

“Now”—it was an order from time. Neither past nor future. Read the names now. Speak the fear now. Look at the accounts now. Teach the children now. Go to the homes of the dead now. Let the rogues’ minds enter now, because what has entered within can no longer be protected by an outer lie.

Kabaddi did not begin again in Channa Grove. Nor was the game adjourned. It stood holding its breath, like a runner waiting for the next signal. The tenth breath was complete, but it had not been released. Only this echoed in the air of Garh Narikel: whoever has eaten at the feast of names will hunger thereafter for truth.

FOLK SONG: THE DEW SAID—NOW

Folk tune: parati

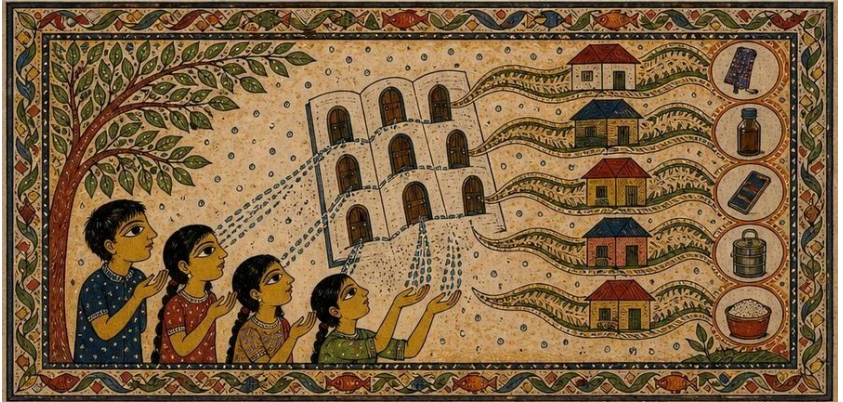
*The dew said “now” and woke us,
Not tomorrow, not the day after—this very hour demands an answer.
Inside the still leaf the seed wants to break the earth;
Erased messages wait in the soil as new shoots.
In every drop of dew, one letter says now;
Read the names now, let fear speak openly now;
Go to the homes of the dead now, examine every account.
There is not one cause; thousands of names bear the weight;
Sleep fled the rogues in every direction.
The game stands holding its breath, waiting for the sign;
At dawn “now” awakened a new thirst for truth.
Inside the still leaf the seed wants to break the ground;
Erased messages rise from the soil as shoots.*



CHAPTER 40

Letters in Dew

The palm of one who reads the letters of dew becomes wet, and a wet palm opens doors.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE PALM THAT OPENS
THE DOOR**

Folk tune: dew-song

Open your palm, not your fist—open it,

Dissolve trust into every wet line.

*The wet palm leaves a mark of affection upon the door;
The lock hears from within and slowly begins to move.*

*Not the fist but the open palm is the sign of trust;
Whatever there is can be seen clearly—such is the gift of truth.*

*The letters of dew say upon the palm: do not be afraid;
Before an open hand, a closed heart cannot remain closed.
The palm will open the door, companionship will make a home;
With the moisture of trust, dry relationships will flower.*

*The closed door puts its ear to the inside and listens;
At the sound of an open hand, the latch moves by itself.*

*The palm that shows itself clearly gives truth;
With the moisture of affection, a dried life joins again.*



At the end of the tenth breath, kabaddi stood holding its breath—and whoever had eaten at the feast of names now hungered for truth. So the eleventh breath descended upon the morning dew. The word “now,” written in dew, spread through Garh Narikel as though an old mantra had awakened not by mistake but at exactly the right moment. The children read the drops, and as they read, their palms became wet. The dew was cold, but within that cold lay the warm scent of morning earth, as though the ground itself had become ink. When those wet palms touched their notebooks, not letters but tiny doors opened on the pages. Behind every door was a name; behind every name, a home; behind every home, some humble object—a torn gamchha, an empty medicine bottle, a cut mobile-recharge coupon, a labourer’s iron tiffin, or a tin of rice—waiting.

The eleventh breath began with the understanding that reading a name was not enough. After the name, one had to read the life: its hunger, its fear, the fatigue of its body, a wife’s waiting, a child’s school fees, the sand of a field, the final call on a mobile phone. Here the punishment of the Court of Channa Grove changed: the rogues were sentenced not merely to read names, but to read lives.

Ananya told the children, “From today, write one object beside every name.” The children scattered. From one house came an old letter, from another a hospital slip, from another a photocopy of a bank passbook, from another a bus ticket. Devika brought the cracked glass from Ujjwal’s phone. Meera brought a sheet bearing only one sentence: “My love is not a crime.” Saumya gathered the identity tokens of the bridge labourers—

Nand's old measurement notebook, a smoke-stained blueprint, and the page where blank space followed thirty names.

The archive of names became an archive of objects. Names on the leaves of Channa Grove, objects upon the earth, stories in the air. The children asked, "Whose tiffin is this?" The answer came: "Bhola Nat's." They asked again, "What did Bhola Nat eat?" An old woman said, "Rice with salt, and the smell of onion in the salt." At once the ghosts' eyes brightened, because when the food of the dead is spoken aloud, half their hunger disappears.

News reached the city. For the first time Batuknath Hariharan heard the phrase "archive of objects." He could find no section of law for it. A defamation case could be filed over a name; what could be filed against an object? Damage to the reputation of a cracked tiffin? Contempt of an empty bottle? An injunction against an old passbook? He kept opening files, but the sections of law slipped from his hands like wet leaves.

Batuknath walked again from the inn toward Channa Grove. This time he carried not a copy of an order but an old name-slip written by his father. All night he had remembered how his father carefully corrected the names of poor people as he wrote them. The name "Hariharan" felt heavy in his pocket that night. When he reached the grove, Budhba Ghost asked from the branch, "Whose name will you read today?" Batuknath answered, "I want to read my father." The ghost smiled. "Reading a father is not easy. Your first lie lives in your father too."

Meanwhile Chandrapal Batra summoned a crisis committee in Delhi—lawyers, consultants, an information agency, troll managers, and two silent police brokers. A plan was made: "Call the archive of names a foreign-funded conspiracy." But when the press statement was typed, its heading changed to: "Read me too." Chandrapal shouted. The computer operator trembled. "Sir, the file had not even been saved." Chandrapal said, "Then who changed it?" The operator lowered his head. He understood outside hacking. He did not understand an inner signature.

In Raghav Signal Somani's room, by the day of the eleventh breath all the seeds of the SIM cards had become shoots. Tiny red dots appeared on them like bank seals. On every shoot-leaf half an account number was written. For the first time Raghav tried to join the halves and read them. When the number became complete, a name opened: Munna Paswan. Raghav's throat went dry. He had never seen Munna's photograph. Crime keeps accounts, not faces. Channa Grove returned the face.

That day Munna Paswan sat at the Coconut-Leaf School. The children were not explaining the word "mule" to him; instead they asked, "Was the account yours, or was it placed upon you?" At first Munna was ashamed. Then he said, "The account was in my name, but the fear belonged to them." The children wrote: "The owner of a name

and the operator of an account may be different people.” That sentence would travel much farther than the bank clerk’s red pencil.

The bank clerk who had marked three accounts during the tenth breath had now reached fourteen. He worked within the rules—letters, alerts, holds, inquiries. But before sending each paper he placed a small dot beside it: “Look at the person.” A colleague laughed. “What official notation is that?” The clerk replied, “Not official. Human.” The colleague said, “Human things do not move in files.” The clerk smiled. “That is why the file kept moving until it reached the dead.”

A report on India reached Lau Kin-Hung’s office: “Local awareness activity. Limited impact.” A percentage appeared at the end. Lau saw the percentage and breathed in relief, but with that breath a grain of salt fell upon his glass table. Where had it come from? Salt in a high Hong Kong glass tower? He touched it with his finger. It did not melt. From inside the grain came a voice: “Have you eaten salt?” Lau did not understand the question, but his body knew this was not the language of trade. It was the language of food.

Edward Broom could not cancel his next speech. The organisers said, “In a time of crisis, display the dignity of leadership.” He went to the stage. The slide read: “Responsible Capital.” As he began to speak, an image of a tiffin suddenly appeared on the screen—rusted, with a dried stain of rice inside. The audience assumed it was a new visual metaphor. Broom’s throat went dry. He did not recognise the tiffin, but the tiffin recognised him.

Ira Aruni was not inside that auditorium. She sat outside with students, listening live to the name-and-object lesson from Garh Narikel. One child said, “Bhola Nat’s tiffin.” Another, “Ujjwal’s cracked phone.” A third, “Meera Didi’s paper.” Ira listened with closed eyes. She thought: universities teach theories about the world, but a village child shows the body of a theory.

That day Meera said something difficult in the privacy circle: “An object I share by my own will becomes memory. An object taken to frighten me becomes violence.” Silence followed. Many women, many young men, many people blackmailed through their love, bodies, desires or fears understood for the first time that shame was not their private property; shame was the fraudster’s weapon. From the branch in Channa Grove, Hulasi whispered, “This sentence is pulling me up out of the well.”

Gop Kumar spoke little during the eleventh breath. He watched the file being distributed among people. Once he had thought truth was protected by making copies. Now he understood: truth is protected by use. A truth kept only on a hard drive can be seized. A truth distributed through children’s games, women’s oaths, a bank clerk’s red pencil,

questions from students abroad, and the feast of ghosts cannot be shut down by any server.

That day Satyavrat Mehta wrote a new note in his room: "Democratisation of evidence." Then he laughed. The phrase was too heavy. He crossed it out and wrote instead: "The evidence went from house to house." He liked this sentence. In court, evidence is presented; in society, evidence lives. He understood that a court keeps its dignity only when it learns the language for hearing evidence that lives in society.

Toward evening a small incident occurred near the Garh Narikel market. A new man arrived and quietly asked people, "Where is the archive of names kept?" His voice held not official authority but the smoothness of brokerage. The children did not seize him. They merely made him sit in the middle of the school. Ananya said, "First write your own name." The man wrote, "Madhav." The children asked, "Full name?" He faltered. A man who had come on secret business could not write his own full name.

Budhba Ghost did not laugh at the scene. He became serious. "The one who cannot write his own full name has come to erase someone else's." The children wrote the sentence upon the wall. Madhav rose slowly and left. Behind him, not footprints but four dots appeared in the dust—brokerage, fear, hire, silence.

Night deepened. No assembly of the eleventh breath gathered in Channa Grove, because the assembly had now spread beyond the grove. In every home, a small court; in every phone, a small school; in every bank account, a small question; in every love, a small oath; in every old object, a small life. For the first time the ghosts sat at ease. They understood that their work was no longer theirs alone.

Then Panidubbi rose from the pond. Instead of water, thin strands of paper hung from her hair. She said, "Water has carried away many names. Now water will carry names." She shook her hair. Three objects fell from it—a rusted nail, a broken SIM card, and a dried coconut flower. Budhba Ghost picked them up. The nail belonged to the bridge, the SIM card to the screen, the flower to the village. All three were placed upon one leaf.

By noon a map had formed in the earth beside Channa Grove. It was not a government map in which rivers are blue, roads red and bridges black lines. In this map, grains of rice ran from Bhola Nat's house to the bridge; a line of salt marked Sarayu Mahato; black ash ran from Ujjwal's house to the mobile shop; red earth ran from Munna Paswan's house to the bank. The children were making roads as though showing the dead a way home again.

Sarayu Mahato's daughter Kamli came to the gathering for the first time. Her father had gone to the bridge years before, yet the family rarely spoke of him. The government paper said "uncertain." Kamli sat on the

earth and placed a small anklet upon the line of salt. "This was my mother's anklet," she said. "When Babuji left, he said he would have it repaired. The anklet remained broken; Babuji never returned." As it touched the earth, its broken bell gave a faint chime—a dull sound, yet every heart in the gathering leaned toward it. When the anklet joined the name, Sarayu Mahato rose one inch above water-burial.

Hearing Kamli's voice, Batuknath Hariharan looked out from the veranda of the inn. It sounded like an ordinary woman speaking. But the movement of her words was steadier than the law he had used all his life to silence people. The word "uncertain" struck his ears like a hammer. In court, uncertainty means adjournment. In a home, uncertainty means waiting. For the first time he understood the difference.

After the crisis meeting, a new man came to Chandrapal's office—Mahadev Sah, the same man who had written "Madhav" in Garh Narikel. Chandrapal scolded him. "Why didn't you write your full name?" Mahadev answered, "Sir, the children were watching." Chandrapal asked, "You were afraid of children?" Mahadev said, "Not of the children. A child who asks for a full name is nobody's hired man." Chandrapal raised his hand to slap him, but the hand stopped halfway. On his palm appeared Ujjwal's sentence: "I am not a thief."

Raghav Somani brought a blade to cut the SIM shoots. The moment the blade touched a root, it went blunt. He panicked. He remembered how many young men he had told, "Open one account; you will get a small commission." He had never kept their faces. The convenience of crime is faceless. Now every shoot was becoming a face—Munna on one, Ajit on another, Farman on a third, Anamika on a fourth. Raghav's room was no longer a bank branch. It had become a waiting room.

That day Saumya simplified the documents further into people's language. She translated "mule account" as: "an account in your name for someone else's sin." Then crossed it out. She wrote instead: "You gave the name; the string went into his hand." Ramaiyya applauded. "Children will understand that." Saumya said, "If children understand it, the babu will be afraid too."

Four sentences were written upon the wall of the Coconut-Leaf School: "Ask the full name." "Before opening an account, ask the work." "Hang up on a call that frightens you." "Your privacy is your right." At night the letters glowed faintly. The ghosts read them, Panidubbi read them, the witches read them, and far away in the city criminals felt their sting without reading them at all.

A bundle arrived for Satyavrat Mehta from Garh Narikel. It held no affidavit, no certified copy. Inside were grains of rice, salt, a rusted nail, a torn SIM card, a dried flower, and a note: "These are not evidence. They are pieces of life. If the law wishes, let it make them evidence." Satyavrat

sat for a long time with the bundle before him. He understood that law turns objects into exhibits; people turn objects into relationships. Justice is incomplete without both.

That night Satyavrat opened his old law book. Its pages held sections, clauses, exceptions, burdens of proof. All seemed necessary, but insufficient. In his notebook he wrote: "When the State cuts away a name, people join the name back through objects. Will the law recognise this act of joining?" As soon as he wrote the question, a coconut leaf flew in through the window. On it was written: "Listen first."

On the evening of the eleventh breath, a strange exercise took place in Channa Grove. The children lifted objects one by one and told their roads. "This nail came from the factory, went by truck to the bridge, fell from the bridge near the water, went from the water into Nand's notebook, and from the notebook to Channa Grove." "This SIM went from the shop to a young man's pocket, from the pocket to the fraudster's hand, from the fraudster to the bank register, from the register into Munna's shame, and now onto this leaf." As each road was told, the object grew lighter.

Budhba Ghost said, "Reading a road is harder than reading a name. A name says someone existed. A road says who was with them, who abandoned them, who sold them, who saw them, who remained silent." The children fell quiet. This was not the silence of fear but the silence before learning.

Batuknath listened from a distance. He remembered many cases in which he had saved people by saying, "The link is not proved." Breaking roads had been his profession. "The chain of causation is broken," he would say in court. Now Channa Grove was joining the chain of causation again. That night an invisible rope tightened across Batuknath's chest—every knot a name, every name followed by a road.

Lau Kin-Hung received a second report from his adviser: "Local groups are engaged in route-mapping activity." Lau smiled. "Route mapping" sounded like business language. But when he opened the report, he saw not a maritime chart but lines of rice and salt drawn in the earth of a village. It was not a digital map, so it could not be erased. It was drawn on the ground, so it could be seen not by satellite but by memory.

The stain of the tiffin was spreading across Edward Broom's stage. He abandoned the speech and asked for water. In the glass there was not plain water but the faint taste of salt. He shuddered. For the first time in his life, the salt of labour touched his mouth. It lingered on his tongue for a long time, as though an unknown hand had placed an entire day's sweat into his mouth. In that taste, the sweetness of a thousand speeches was defeated.

At the end of the eleventh breath Ananya asked, “What now?” Before answering, Budhba Ghost looked up through Channa Grove. Wind moved the leaves. The wind said, “You have read the object. Now read its road.” The children understood that the next lesson would be a journey—where the dead had come from, where they had gone, which hand pushed them, which hand could have stopped them but did not.

The rogues heard it too. In Batuknath's pocket his father's slip trembled. A new folder opened on Chandrapal's computer: “Road.” The roots of Raghav's SIM shoots sank into the wood of the table. Lau Kin-Hung's grain of salt split in two. The tiffin stain spread across Edward Broom's speech paper.

The eleventh breath ended, and this time it was released. As it left, the scents of rice, salt, water, paper, tiffin, phone, leaf and flower mingled in the air of Garh Narikel. The story had moved from name to life, and from life to road. Channa Grove said softly, “Whoever reads a life cannot escape its road.”

FOLK SONG: THE DOOR OF THE WET PALM

Folk tune: dew-song

*The door opened, opened by the wet palm;
 Whoever reads a life cannot escape its road.
 Reading the letters of dew made the palm wet;
 When its print touched the notebook, a door opened.
 Behind the name a home, behind the home an object—
 Gamchha, bottle, tiffin, the true scent of rice.
 The sweetness of speeches lost to one pinch of labour's salt;
 Whoever reads a life cannot escape the pull of its road.
 Which hand pushed, which hand could have stopped it,
 Which hand stayed silent—all the footprints opened.
 Rice, salt, leaf and phone mingled and became air;
 Whoever reads a life cannot escape the road—the grove said.
 Gamchha, bottle, tiffin, rice—the weight and scent of truth.
 The footprints opened—who pushed, who tried to stop with force.*



CHAPTER 41

The Boat of Names

*A boat kept on the bank means nothing—the boat of names speaks only
when it enters the current.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: ROW WITH THE NAMES

Folk tune: boatman's song

*Row, boatman, row with the names beside you;
Carry not only bodies but identities across—take this vow.*

*The boat stands ready at the bank; take up the oar of names;
However swift the current, fill it with the courage of companionship.*

*One oar of memory, the other of evidence;
Living hope between them, justice as the direction.*

*The boat carries not bodies alone; it carries identity to the far shore;
The river respectfully sings the full name of every passenger.
Let the boat move with the names; let no one remain behind;
With the strength of shared oars, even a deep current can be borne.*

*One oar strikes with memory, the other with evidence;
Living hope seated between them sings its song.
The current roars, the boat bends, but the rope does not break;
Rowed by shared strength, even the deepest current is overcome.*



At the end of the eleventh breath, the sentence spoken by Channa Grove—"Whoever reads a life cannot escape its road"—kept sounding from leaf to leaf all night. The village understood that the time had come to move beyond names and objects. The dead person's name had been written; his tiffin, phone, slip and salt had been placed before everyone. But all these still remained like a boat kept beside the river. The meaning of a boat opens only when it enters the current.

At dawn of the twelfth breath Ananya cleared the earth in the middle of Channa Grove. The children brought water pot by pot; Devika brought rice; Meera turmeric; Saumya the red pencil from the old measurement notebook; Ira a blank sheet of map paper from abroad; and Gop Kumar an old USB drive preserved now not for use but for memory. Budhba Ghost watched from the branch. In his eyes was the light that comes only after twelve hundred years of waiting, when a village finally begins asking for the roads of its dead.

Bhola Nat's road was made first. The children shaped his home with rice, the fields with turmeric, the city contractor's camp with salt, and the bridge pier with water. Grains of rice settled beneath their fingers as though someone were adding an account step by step. From an old file Saumya struck out the word "unauthorised" beside his name and wrote: "Left home, reached work, name removed." The children read together: "Left home." The air of Channa Grove grew lighter, because for the first time Bhola Nat's journey had come outside official language.

Batuknath Hariharan, sitting at the inn, could not see all this but could hear it. The children's voices reached his ears, each cutting through

an old courtroom argument of his. All his life he had said, “The chain of causation is not proved.” But in Channa Grove the chain of causation was being made not from witness statements but from rice, turmeric, salt and water. He understood that what he had called a “link” in law was called a “road” in the language of the people.

The second road belonged to Sarayu Mahato. It began from his tiffin. The lid was placed upon the earth, beside it a small piece of cloth cut from his wife’s bolt of fabric. From there the road went to the labour line, the contractor’s warehouse, the left pier of the bridge, and finally a round stain of water. The children asked, “Where did Sarayu Mahato fall?” An old man from the village answered, “Not from the pier—from the counting.” At that sentence the light of the Rakash sitting in Channa Grove trembled.

Gop Kumar watched the scene. He remembered his Excel sheets—columns, amounts, dates, payments, codes. He had thought the road of truth ran from cell to cell. Today he understood that feet come before cells. A labourer walks first; only afterward is he entered on paper. Crime is born where a walking foot is locked inside a paper box.

Devika made Ujjwal’s road. First on the earth: home, a small circle. Then school, two lines. Then a mobile shop, a piece of blue paper. Then the first win, five grains of rice. Then debt, a line of black earth. Then the fear of digital arrest, a circle drawn around everything. Then the roof, a dry leaf. The children fell silent. There was no river on Ujjwal’s road, no bridge, no crocodile, yet the road was as deep as the Ganga.

Nishant Jha showed on a screen how money moved, but he gave no technical lecture. He placed three bowls on the earth—one marked “name,” one “account,” one “fear.” Then he asked Munna Paswan, “Which bowl holds your name?” Munna touched the first. “The account?” He touched the second. “The fear?” Munna touched the third, then pulled his hand back. “The fear was not mine. It was given to me.” The children wrote: “Fear too can become transferred property.”

At that very time Chandrapal Batra was trying to open the “Road” folder in his office. It asked for no password. It opened directly. Inside were no bank statements, no chat logs, only pictures of the bowls made upon the earth. At the bottom of every bowl was his signature. Chandrapal shouted, “This isn’t digital!” The computer screen replied, “That is why it cannot be erased.”

Raghav “Signal” Somani’s shoots had now become wires. The roots sunk into the wooden table and slowly reached the wall. Each root led to a phone from which disappearing messages had once been sent. Raghav smashed the phones in fear, but from inside the broken phones came not dust but leaves. On the leaves were half-sentences—“Hang up the call,”

“Keep the camera on,” “Empty the account,” “It is a matter of national security”—all waiting to be completed.

He tried to send Lau Kin-Hung a message. But as each word erased itself, only one line remained: “The road is returning.” Lau’s answer came late. One word: “Cut it.” Raghav understood that in the world of crime, when a road exists, it is cut. But the children of Garh Narikel were learning not to cut roads but to join them. At that point Raghav’s language broke.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung sat in his glass office listening to a report. An adviser said, “Indian rural groups are engaged in narrative construction.” Lau nodded, but on his table the grain of salt from the twelfth breath had become a line. The line made of salt crossed the map of the sea toward India, from India to Bihar, from Bihar to the Kamala-Balan, and finally to Garh Narikel. Lau tried to erase it with his finger; the salt clung to his skin.

For the first time he wondered: how can a maritime border stop a road made not of bodies but of salt? He remembered cheap Indian labour, cheap data, cheap fear, cheap life. In the market book everything had been marked cheap. But salt is not cheap; salt is the memory of sweat. That day Indian salt remained upon Lau Kin-Hung’s finger.

The tiffin stain on Edward Broom’s stage still had not washed away. The organisers installed a new screen, new lights, a new backdrop. The speech was retitled “Rebuilding Trust.” But when he mounted the stage and tried to speak in the calm voice of a pastor, before the microphone came the clink of a spoon—the sound of a spoon striking an iron tiffin. It was a thin sound, yet it cut through the velvet silence of the auditorium and lodged directly in the heart, as though somewhere far away an iron tiffin were remembering its owner’s last meal. Some in the audience smiled, others grew uneasy. Broom knew this was the sound of an Indian labourer’s mealtime, and before that sound all his language was made of glass.

This time Ira sat inside, not outside. But she did not rise to ask a question. She opened her notebook and kept writing down Channa Grove’s lesson of roads. Broom saw her. He understood that someone who asks questions is easier to deal with than someone who writes. A question ends upon the stage. Writing continues after the stage. Ira wrote: “Colonialism once occupied geography; new capital occupies roads. Resistance reads the roads again.”

In the privacy circle Meera made another form of the road lesson. “Data travels roads too,” she said. “A photograph given to me in trust—through whose phone did it pass, to whose server, whose threat, whose silence? That road must be read.” A young woman told her story with trembling hands. “Was my mistake love or trust?” she asked. Meera held

her hand and answered, "The mistake belongs to the hand that turned trust into a business."

Saumya wrote the story in ordinary language. Instead of "leak," she wrote: "the road of trust was broken." Instead of "content": "a piece of someone's life." Instead of "blackmail": "a trade in fear." After each translation the victim's face grew lighter, because the shame locked inside hard foreign words was opened by the language of the people.

An elderly woman from Garh Narikel whose son had died at the bridge stopped as she approached Channa Grove for the first time. "I don't remember the road," she said. "I was young then. People said he went to the city and died. I only waited." The children seated her among them. Ananya asked, "What day did he leave home?" The woman said, "A Monday in Bhadon." Nothing more. The children placed rice and wrote: "Monday in Bhadon." At this the woman's eyes filled. "Can a road be made from just that much?" Budhba Ghost said, "A road is not always found whole. Whatever fragment is found, fill that fragment with truth."

Batuknath Hariharan trembled on hearing this. In law, an incomplete road becomes doubt. In Channa Grove, an incomplete road was becoming compassion. He thought, "If doubt becomes compassion, what will remain of my profession?" An answer came from within him: "Protecting truth." But the answer did not fit his old life. The slip written by his father trembled again inside him.

Satyavrat Mehta kept making notes on "roads" in his room. He understood that courts ask for chains of cause and effect, but in poor people's lives those chains are often deliberately broken. The testimony of the poor is not incomplete; it has been made incomplete. He wrote: "When power erases the road, the credibility of fragments must become a matter of jurisprudence." Then he simplified it: "An incomplete road is still a road."

Gop Kumar stopped at that sentence. His data was complete, but lives were incomplete. An Excel sheet completes; a human being remains unfinished. Gop understood that the truth of the novel lay not in the completeness of a file but in reassembling incomplete lives. He left one blank place in the earth of Channa Grove. Ananya asked, "Why is this empty?" Gop said, "For those whose road has not yet been found."

That empty place shone more brightly than anything else. The dead, the ghosts, the children all kept looking at it. No rice, no salt, no leaf—only earth. Hulasi said softly, "Respect the empty place. Not every story can speak at once." For the first time the children learned that memory is not only filling space; it is also preserving space.

Night deepened. The road lesson continued in Channa Grove. At the end of each road the children wrote one question: "At what turning

could this have been prevented?" On Bhola Nat's road: a safety belt. On Sarayu Mahato's: true counting. On Ujjwal's: a collective response to the first threat. On Munna's: the bank asking a question. On Meera Mandal's: protecting trust.

Here the punishment of the twelfth breath became clear. The rogues would have to read not only names and lives, but turning points. If they read the turning points, they would understand that the crime had not been inevitable. In every death, every fraud, every blackmail, every water-burial there had been a place where a human being could have stopped it—but did not.

That night a new window opened on Chandrapal Batra's screen: "Which turning?" It showed him the first young man he had trapped by saying, "Just give us an empty account." He could have stopped then. A second turning: Ujjwal's first loss. A third: the first call-letter of digital arrest. Chandrapal's face appeared at every turning. He tried to remove it with the cursor, but the face would not go; if a turning is erased, the road becomes a lie.

Turnings opened before Raghav too. The first time he understood that disappearing messages were becoming a shield for crime, he could have left. When an old woman cried on the phone after sending her savings, he could have blocked the number. When a young man trembled before the camera, he could have said, "Do not be afraid. This is fraud." But at every turning he chose commission. Now the turnings were becoming leaves and being laid upon his chest.

Lau Kin-Hung's line of salt now became a sequence of turnings. At every turning the percentage changed. The suffering of Indian youth had been a conversion rate in his spreadsheet. He saw that at one turning he could have left the market; at another, removed the Indian agents; at a third, stopped the game played through the law firm. But each time he chose profit. The grain of salt entered the skin of his finger.

Edward Broom's stage microphone was switched off that night, but in his dream it came alive. He stood alone on the stage. Before him were empty chairs. On every chair lay an object—a tiffin, a bottle, a helmet, a SIM card, a passbook, a piece of chalk. He began his speech: "Human dignity." The tiffin answered, "At which turning?" Broom woke. The question was written upon his pillow.

Before dawn in Channa Grove, Budhba Ghost stopped the children. "Enough for today's lesson. You read the road and saw the turning. In the next breath we shall ask: who will carry the weight of what was not stopped at the turning?" Ananya asked, "The rogues?" Budhba said, "If the rogue carries it, that is atonement. If society carries it, reconstruction. If the State carries it, justice. But if no one carries it, the crocodile will carry it again."

At this the water stirred. Not the distant Ganga, not the current of the Kamala-Balan, but the dew of Channa Grove. In every drop tiny turnings gleamed. In the morning light the drops were little mirrors in which every child saw one turning beside their own face. The children read the dew. This time they found not one word but two: "Carry the weight."

The twelfth breath was complete. In the air of Garh Narikel, the scents of name, object, life, road and turning mingled together. Wherever the rogues were, they could smell it, and they understood that entry into the inner world brings not only fear but responsibility. The story stood ready for the next breath—the breath of carrying the weight.

FOLK SONG: THE BOAT OF NAMES IN THE CURRENT

Folk tune: boatman's song

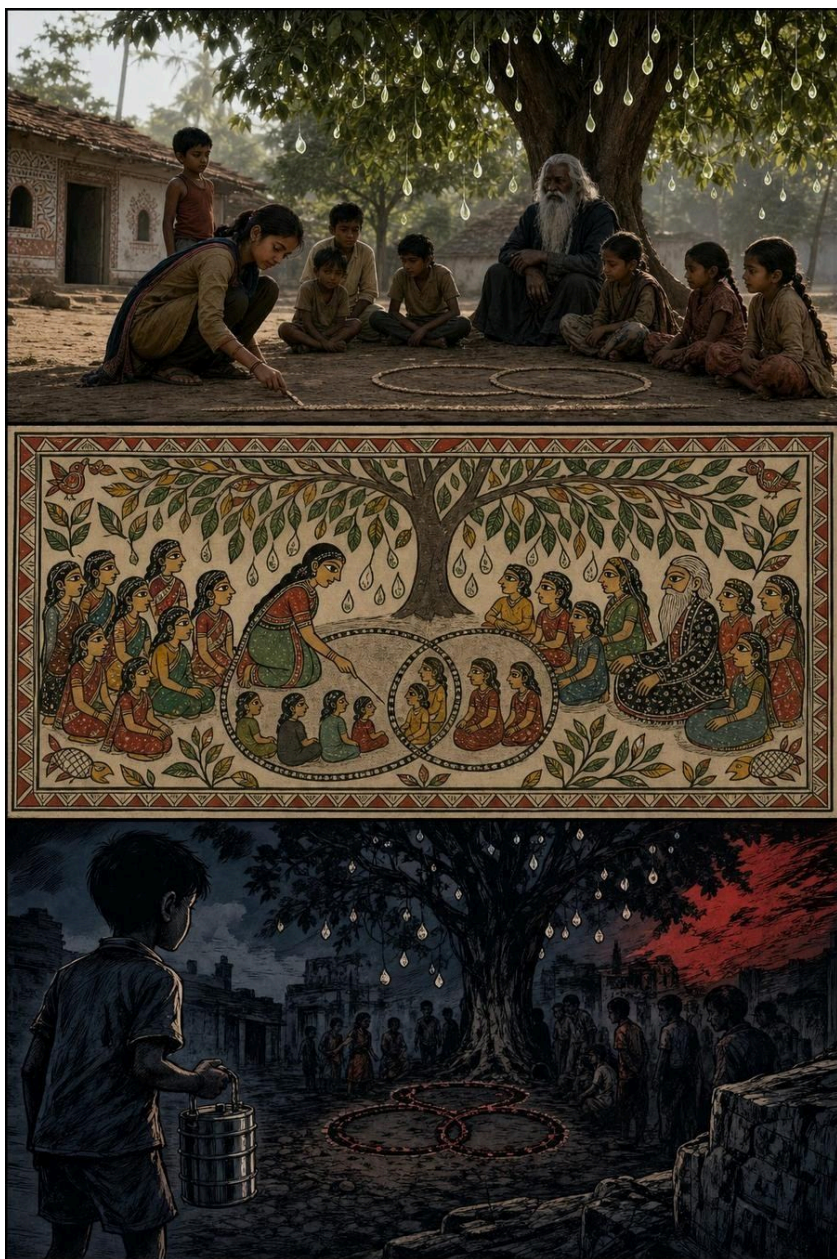
*Row the boat, row the boat of names;
Whose road you have read, carry that person's honour.
A boat left on the bank never crosses the way;
The boat of names speaks only after entering the current.
Tiffin, slip, salt, gamchha—all became passengers;
Reading the turnings of a life opened many hands.
"Carry the weight," the dew wrote in the night of the twelfth breath;
If the rogue carries it, atonement; if the State, justice.
If society carries it, homes and thresholds will be rebuilt;
If no one carries it, the crocodile will take the weight.
Row the boat of names, recognise each turning;
Whoever has read the road must carry its honour.
A boat left on the bank never crossed the way;
Tiffin, slip, salt and gamchha all climbed aboard as passengers.
If no one carries it, the crocodile itself will take the burden.*



CHAPTER 42

The Circle of Weight

Punishment is given from above; weight rises from within and settles upon the shoulder.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SHARE THE WEIGHT

Folk tune: Labour Jhumar

*Share the weight, shoulder to shoulder, share it,
Let the tired body sway and join the rhythm.*

*The weight upon a shoulder halves when company comes,
One hand reaches from behind, another stretches forward.
Share sorrow, work and responsibility equally;
Shared labour makes the difficult road easier.*

*In the round ring of the jhumar no one stands alone at the centre;
When shoulders remain joined, the weight is no mountain.
Share the weight, sing the song, match the rhythm of your steps;
Give one another's weariness the water of affection.*

*The one ahead lifts a step, the one behind sings;
If someone in the middle stumbles, both sides hold them up.
Sorrow halved, courage doubled - that is the reckoning of the jhumar;
In the sweat of companionship a rainbow line gleams.*



At the end of the twelfth breath, the two words the drops of dew had taught them to read - "Lift the weight" - remained caught upon every leaf of Channa Grove until dawn. The wind blew, the leaves moved, but the words did not fall. They seemed not like words but small stones. At first the children thought this was punishment. Budhba Ghost said, "Punishment is what is imposed from above. Weight is what rises from within and settles upon the shoulder."

Ananya drew two circles in the middle of Channa Grove. She named one circle "Those against whom the crime was committed." The second she named "Those by whom the crime was committed." The children asked, "And the third circle?" Ananya was silent for a while, then scratched a thin line in the soil with her nail: "Those who saw and remained silent." Budhba Ghost did not smile. "Most often," he said, "this is the heaviest circle of all."

First Bhola Nat's tiffin was lifted. A tiffin should have been light. An empty tiffin. Yet when Munna Paswan went to raise it, his arm trembled. There was no dal inside, but an unfinished account of wages; no rice, but the hunger of that day; on the lid not a shining stain, but iron dust fallen from the bridge pier. The tiffin handle bit into his fingers as though that light piece of metal had settled upon his shoulder like a lifetime's debt of grain. Munna grew frightened. Devika took his hand and said, "This is not your crime. But it is your society's weight. Lift it, so that the next Bhola does not die on an empty stomach."

Munna lifted the tiffin. As soon as he did, the fear attached to his bank account grew a little lighter. He understood that in the mule

account his name had been trapped in the mouth of crime, but in society's work his hands could become free. The children placed the tiffin beside the Archive of Names. From that day it was decided that any family driven to the city for labour by lack of food would first have its name entered on the village grain list.

Meanwhile, in his room at the inn, Batuknath Hariharan opened the file containing his order of victory. At first the file looked ordinary. But when he turned the pages, a small mark of weight appeared in the corner of every page - not scales, but a shoulder. Law books display scales; in the writing of Channa Grove, justice sits upon the shoulder. Hariharan brushed at the page. The mark did not disappear. Instead, the file grew heavier.

He called the servant and said, "Put this file in the car." The servant tried to lift it, but the file would not move. Hariharan rose himself. A lawyer, he thought, spends his whole life lifting papers; how heavy can one file be? But the moment his hand touched it he understood: this file contained every adjournment because of which a widow had grown old, every objection because of which a labourer's son had grown up without his father, every procedure he had called professional skill. The file was not filled with paper but with time. Time is the heaviest thing of all.

Chandrapal Batra's screen changed that same morning. Every mule account became a brick and piled itself upon the screen. Each brick bore a name - Munna, Azhar, Pawan, Shakeel, Anjali, Rohit, Unknown. He pressed delete. Instead of vanishing, the brick fell out of the screen and landed on the table. At the first brick he laughed: an illusion. At the second he grew irritated. At the fifth his table sagged. At the tenth his wrist began to ache. At the twentieth he understood: the weight of digital crime ultimately reaches the body.

Raghav "Signal" Somani wanted to sleep peacefully after deleting all his chats. But when he woke, he found beneath his pillow not sheets of paper but leaves of stone. On each leaf stood a sentence: "The call was not disconnected." "Fear was sold." "Grandmother's savings are gone." "The young man trembled on camera." He filled a bag with the stone leaves and went out to throw them away. Hulasi stood at the gate. "Wherever you throw them," she said, "you will hear some mother weeping from that very place." Raghav turned back inside.

In Lau Kin-Hung's city the sea was unnaturally calm that night. His advisers brought a list of new company names - Renewal, Restructuring, Risk Control. Lau raised his pen to sign. From its nib came not ink but salt water. A ring of salt formed on every paper. He felt that the sea had entered his office. Irritated, he said, "Risk transfer." The adviser wrote it down. On the paper, by itself, appeared: "Not transfer of weight. Acceptance of weight."

Edward Broom was due that day to release his most expensive report yet, "Ethical Rebalancing and Emerging Markets." When the first copy came from the printer, the pages were not dry. Red streaks ran across them. "Bad ink," the assistant said. Broom knew it was not ink. Within those streaks were the tiffin stain, the medicine vial, the scratch on the helmet and the smell of a passbook, all together. Seeing the weight of the report, he ordered, "Release the digital copy." The computer opened. On the screen appeared the words: "Digital weight is weight too."

In Garh Narikel the children began the lesson of weight. They declared no one guilty and no one free. They asked only, "How much of this weight is yours?" It was the hardest question of all, because it did not ask for the whole crime, only for one's share. People find it easy to place the whole blame upon someone else; admitting a share is difficult.

Gop Kumar wrote his own share first: "Understood the data too late." He said, "For so many years I treated the file as work, not as life." Ramaiyya wrote, "I was talkative, yet how many times I remained silent." Saumya wrote, "The documents stayed trapped in English and reached the people late." Meera wrote, "I did not first listen to the language of people living in fear." Devika wrote, "When Ujjwal first showed fear, I thought him stubborn." Ananya asked, "What is my share?" Budhba Ghost said, "Your share is to keep asking questions."

At his desk Satyavrat Mehta opened a note headed "Weight." He wanted to place the word within the language of law - responsibility, liability, compensation, rehabilitation, corrective order. But every term seemed only half enough. At last he wrote: "The weight left upon society requires a new idea of justice that divides it among society, the State and the offender." Then he folded the paper away. He knew such a sentence would not be accepted in court at once, but one day children would make it simple.

Batuknath Hariharan's file still would not rise. In anger he picked up the phone. "Bring contempt proceedings against this village." At the other end was no clerk but the slow voice of the Brahma of the pipal: "Contempt of whom? Of the one who received no justice? Of the one whose name was never written? Of the one who asks a question?" Hariharan cut the call. In the call log appeared: "Contempt: against the soul."

Chandrapal Batra spent the whole night removing bricks. His servant asked, "Sir, are you building a house?" Chandrapal shouted, "Remove the bricks!" The servant lifted one and asked, "Why is a name written here?" Chandrapal gave no answer. He was beginning to understand that bricks of crime do not first make a house, nor even a prison; first they make a shoulder.

Raghav Signal counted his stone leaves. The count would not end. However many he counted, there was one more. At last he remembered all those whose calls he had cut, whose messages he had read and destroyed, whose pleas had received "seen" but no answer. The word "Seen" surfaced on the stone leaves. For the first time Raghav's eyes filled with water. The tears were not warm but cold, as though voices long frozen inside a switched-off phone had melted and escaped. Yet the water was not his. It belonged to all the voices he had cut off.

Lau Kin-Hung adjourned his risk committee. He opened a map. Red marks covered the map of India - cities, ports, servers, agents. Garh Narikel had no mark at all. Yet his eyes remained fixed there. From a place absent from every market report, weight was rising. For the first time Lau understood: the map of profit is incomplete; the map of weight is different.

Edward Broom told his public-relations team, "Build a sympathy story." The team began searching for photographs - children, village, leaves, women, bridge. Ira watched from afar. She sent a message: "If weight is turned into an image, it becomes commerce again." The team's screen went black. Only one line remained: "Do not sell sympathy; lift your share."

The second stage of the lesson of weight began in Channa Grove. Every object that had been lifted now had to be turned into use. The tiffin became a grain list. The helmet became a safety pledge. The SIM card became a lesson in recognising fraud. The passbook became community caution. The vial became medicine verification. The chalk became the lesson of questions. The objects were not locked in a museum; they were put to work. Budhba Ghost said, "A memorial is not what is looked at. A memorial is what works."

Meera wrote that sentence in her circle. A young woman who had not left her house for a month was now preparing to go to the police station with another girl. Devika asked her, "Are you afraid?" The young woman said, "Yes. But now the fear is not alone." Hearing this, Hulasi smiled from across the well. For the first time, inside her armless body, she felt as though someone's hand were reaching out without touching her.

In the school against the screen, Devika and Nishant gave the children a game. One child would be Fear, another Account, a third Temptation, a fourth Helpline. The child playing Fear shouted very loudly at first. Then Ananya changed the rule: "Fear will not be allowed to speak alone. Three people will answer together." The answer became collective, and Fear's voice grew faint. Nishant said, "This rule matters more than the technology."

At night Gop Kumar opened Ishan Dutt's old file. Ishan cast no shadow, but his note remained: "Do not merely expose weight; give it a

destination." Gop stared at the line for a long time. Truth must not become orphaned after data is exposed. He decided that every disclosure would now be accompanied by public assistance, language support, a safety note and a list of next steps. The file would no longer be a scream; it would become a road.

The vanished souls watched this change carefully. At first the dead had wanted only that their names be written. Now that the names had been written, they understood that the living must not be left only the weight of weeping; they must be given the weight of work. If death leaves only grief, the rogues return. If death leaves a rule, society changes.

On the evening of the thirteenth breath, a strange scene appeared in Channa Grove. Beside every object of weight the children planted a small leaf. On each leaf was written: "Who will lift this weight?" The answer was not a name but a verb - "feed," "protect," "listen," "tell," "stop," "write," "stand beside." Ananya said, "A name is necessary, but without action a name becomes stone again."

Batuknath Hariharan finally managed to lift one corner of the file. One corner only. His shoulder felt as though it would collapse. He put the file down. For the first time the words escaped his mouth: "This cannot be lifted alone." Budhba Ghost, standing in the darkness outside the window, said softly, "To lift it alone is punishment. To share the lifting is justice."

Chandrapal Batra gathered the bricks and tried to build a wall so that the names would remain on the other side. But the moment the wall rose, the children's voices wrote themselves across it: "At which turning could it have been stopped?" He struck it with a hammer. The bricks did not break. They were not made of stone but of opportunities. Opportunities do not break; they are either used or become evidence.

Raghav Signal's stone leaves finally settled not upon his chest but outside his door. Whoever entered had to read them first. His office was no longer a court; it had become a waiting room - for all those whose calls he had cut off. Raghav did not have the courage to open the door. But the stone leaves kept sounding from within: "Answer."

For the first time Lau Kin-Hung drew the curtains in his glass house overlooking the sea. He did not want to look outside. But shadows of water fell upon the curtain, and within them the children of Garh Narikel walked carrying a tiffin, helmet, passbook and chalk. He grew angry. "These people were not on my map." An adviser said, "Ground-level people, sir." Lau answered, "No. A route of weight."

Edward Broom's report was not released after all. The company issued a press statement: "Technical reasons." But the reason was not technical. At the bottom of every page the same question kept appearing: "How much is your share?" The public-relations team could not erase it. Ira

wrote in her notebook: "When the language of crime cannot bear a question of responsibility, the paper itself begins to fail."

Night gathered. The objects of weight remained in their places in Channa Grove. No statue, no garland. Only objects prepared for use. The children were tired, but their eyes shone. Ananya asked Budhba, "Now what?" Budhba said, "Now we watch whether those whose share it is come to lift it."

At that moment three winds came from three directions. From the city, the smell of paper. From the sea, salt. From the screen, hot iron. The three smells met in Channa Grove, but the leaves did not tremble. They were already prepared. Hulasi said, "If those who bear the share do not come to the weight, the weight will go looking for them."

The thirteenth breath paused upon that promise. Weight was no longer merely sorrow; it had become a travelling messenger. Whoever refused to acknowledge a share would find an object at the door - tiffin, brick, leaf, salt, chalk, passbook, vial. And when the object reached the door, the next breath would begin - the breath of the threshold.

FOLK SONG: THE WEIGHT UPON THE SHOULDER

Folk tune: Labour Jhumar

*Lift it, shoulder, lift the bowed shoulder;
Turn the weight of sorrow into work and carry it from house to house.
Punishment falls from above; weight rises from within;
A small stone of a name comes and sits upon the shoulder.
Tiffin, brick, passbook, vial, a grain of salt;
Not sorrow alone - each becomes a reason for work.
No statue, no garland, only preparation for use;
In the tired child's eyes the watchman's light shines.
Whoever will not own a share, the weight will reach that door;
The object will arrive and ask for its due.
If the shoulder has bent, human being, lift it again;
Turn the weight of sorrow into work and take it house to house.
Punishment falls from above; weight rises from within.*



CHAPTER 43

The Moving Weight

*A weight that has been shared does not end - it begins to move, village
to village.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LIGHTER SHOULDERS,
HOUSE TO HOUSE**

Folk tune: Batagabani

Come, neighbour, come from threshold to threshold;

Let every house together shoulder the burden of one.

*The weight moves house to house, and relief travels with it;
One threshold offers two hands, another brings food.
Someone reads the paper, someone watches the child;
Someone goes along to court, someone saves the field.*

*House by house the shoulder grows lighter through communal affection;
The road of burden changes through homes of mutual aid.
Sing the Batagabani and say: all our homes are one;
Within shared weight rises society's truest support.*

*Today it is their courtyard, tomorrow our turn;
On the road of help the dark ring of sorrow shrinks.
One brings a book, one bread, one a shoulder's place;
To the Batagabani rhythm it sounds: every house is the same village.*



The promise left by the thirteenth breath - "to each share, its door" - stayed awake through the night; therefore the night did not quite end. Dawn arrived, but not with its usual colour. The redness that rose in the east of Garh Narikel stood a little way back that morning, as though even the sun were waiting to hear the final whistle of the game in Channa Grove.

Ananya was brushing the soil from her hands. The children had already shared the weight of the tiffin, but sharing a weight does not make it disappear. Now the weight begins to travel. What had once belonged to the names of the dead now wanted to move from village to village upon the shoulders of the living.

Aruni sat beside Channa Grove. It seemed to him the novel might stop here once again. But Channa Grove has no rule for stopping. There the story breathes. One breath ends and another begins. The breath of the dead, the breath of children, the breath of the rogues' minds - all tangled into one another.

Ba came slowly and stood beside the heap of leaves. Her eyes were the eyes of someone who had not slept all night. "Have the names reached home?" she asked.

"Whose home, Ba?" Ananya asked.

Ba said, "The names that were written have reached their homes. Now it is time to reach the homes of those who are accustomed to erasing names."

At that very moment in the city, Batuknath Hariharan stood before the degrees hanging on the wall of his sitting room. They had always hung straight and bright, sealed behind glass. But that morning a fine mist had gathered inside the glass. He wiped it with his hand. The mist was cold, and his fingerprints settled upon it like someone else's signature. When the mist cleared, the lettering of the degrees had vanished. In its place, in rough handwriting, appeared names - Bhola Nat, Sarayu, Munna, Ujjwal.

Hariharan panicked and called the servant. The servant stopped short as he entered. His master's face looked like that of a child caught stealing. Hariharan wiped the glass again. This time the names disappeared. The degrees became degrees once more. But something inside him had broken. The fear carried by the paper of victory had climbed onto the wall.

In an inner room of the same house, Hariharan's old mother, who for many years had spoken no one's name clearly, suddenly said, "Batuk, how many names have you eaten?"

Hariharan froze. For years his mother had called him only "Babu." The name "Batuk" survived only in the mouths of those who had seen him as a child. He ran into her room. Her eyes were closed, but her lips were moving. Her voice was thin, like a bell hung from an old thread, yet within it all Batuknath's acquired language began to sway. "You ate paper, you ate dates, and now you will eat names too?"

For the first time Hariharan understood that the inner world can be entered not only through a door, but through a mother's tongue.

A different play began in Chandrapal Batra's house. His son, who pretended to keep his distance from his father's business, stopped in the middle of breakfast while looking at his phone. The screen showed no game score, only a question: "The one who died after losing - do you call that victory or fraud?"

Chandrapal roared, "Give me the phone."

The son handed it over. The screen immediately returned to normal - advertisements, games, scores, coloured glitter. Chandrapal breathed in relief. But the son said softly, "Father, last night I dreamed that a boy was asking my name. He said the smell of my hanging is in your father's earnings."

The phone slipped from Chandrapal's hand. He could scold the boy, beat him even, but in which court could he sue a dream? Under what section? What adjournment? What bail?

In Raghav "Signal" Somani's house, silence first descended into the dinner plate. While serving rice, his wife saw all the grains bending in one direction. She thought it was a trick of the wind. But where would

wind come from inside the house? The grains joined to form letters: "Account closed."

Raghav flung the plate aside. His wife was frightened. "Which account? The household account?" she asked.

Raghav did not answer. When a man's crime lives in signals, the woman in his house often learns to read only silence. But that day the silence was written in rice.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung slept in his glass house beside the sea. After waking from a dream he wondered: how has some Indian village entered my sleep? He told his secretary, "Find a place called Garh Narikel." The secretary opened a map. Thousands of points appeared, but one point was glowing as though a coconut leaf were burning beneath the sea.

Lau Kin-Hung laughed. It was a practised laugh. Men of money practise laughing at fear. But his right hand was trembling. The hand that signed for crores trembled while writing the name of one distant village.

No one in Garh Narikel knew of any of this. Those who had lost were busy with their work. Their days contained no leisure for watching other people's dreams.

Devika Sah was cutting sheets for the second meeting of the school against the screen. On every sheet she wrote: "Do not be frightened by someone pretending to be police on the phone. Do not trust the first win in a game. Do not open an account in your name for someone else." On paper these sentences looked ordinary, but every sentence was a lamp for Ujjwal's soul.

Nishant Jha had left the glittering post of a foreign company and was teaching village children arithmetic. He said, "Wherever a percentage shines too brightly, ask questions. Wherever a bonus comes too quickly, stop. Wherever someone wants your password, run." The children laughed. In that laughter the hardest lessons in the world were becoming easy.

Meera sat with the women in the small room of the Oath of Privacy. "My love is not evidence against me. My body is not a document against me. My photograph is not a noose against me." A woman who until a month before had come with her face covered said for the first time that day, "Write my name. But with my permission."

Saumya was turning the documents into people's languages. A report written in English was now breaking open into Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, Odia, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. "When truth remains only in the language of experts," she said, "it remains half imprisoned."

Ira had left the foreign auditorium and was now organising readings of names. There was no projector there; leaves hung instead. People read a name, then remained silent for a moment after each one. That silence was not merely mourning for the dead; it was responsibility for the living.

Gop Kumar was rarely seen. People said he was hiding. Some said he had died. Some said he lived with informers in the shade of trees. Yet whenever a new file opened, one line would always be found within it: "No evidence is complete without a name." People understood that Gop was somewhere - and nowhere as well.

Aruni had the children write the story of Garh Narikel. He told them, "Write the names of the criminals, but do not let them rule the story. Write the names of the dead, but do not turn them only into sorrow. Write the work of the living, because that is what opens the next page."

Meanwhile, the ghosts in Channa Grove began to show themselves faintly even at noon. Once they had been creatures of the night. Now children played there by day, and the ghosts learned the rules of their games. Budhba Ghost said, "Human children are cleverer than we are. They do not wait until death to become memory; they make memory while still alive."

The Loths, who had been spectators for centuries, now lifted small leaves. The Rakash spirits never tired of giving light, because the light was no longer needed for play but for writing. The pretas held the pages with their white bodies. The ghosts drew black lines around the names with dark fingers so that no rogue might come at night and erase them.

That night Ba told Ananya, "Fear has now gone to their houses."

"Then have we won?" Ananya asked.

Ba smiled. "No. Be careful with the word victory. Victory is often the rogues' favourite word. We are at work. People who are working do not announce victory."

Ananya wrote "Work" on a leaf. Beneath it, in smaller letters, she wrote "Breath."

Just before dawn, wind moved again through Channa Grove. The leaves struck one another. The sound was not kabaddi, not names, not a verdict. The sound was: "Forward."

Aruni heard it. He opened his paper and wanted to write the end of the chapter, but his hand stopped. To write an ending would have been wrong. This time the story was not ending; it was entering house after house.

Far away in the city, Hariharan's mother said again, "Read the names." Chandrapal's son switched off his phone and opened the window. Raghav's wife gathered the grains of rice and set them aside. Lau Kin-Hung kept his finger upon the map.

In Garh Narikel the children ran out for the first game of dawn. Channa Grove was ready. The dead were ready. The rogues' minds stood half inside, half outside. And on the leaf the word "Work" slowly began to turn green.

FOLK SONG: THE WEIGHT MOVED HOUSE TO HOUSE

Folk tune: Batagabani

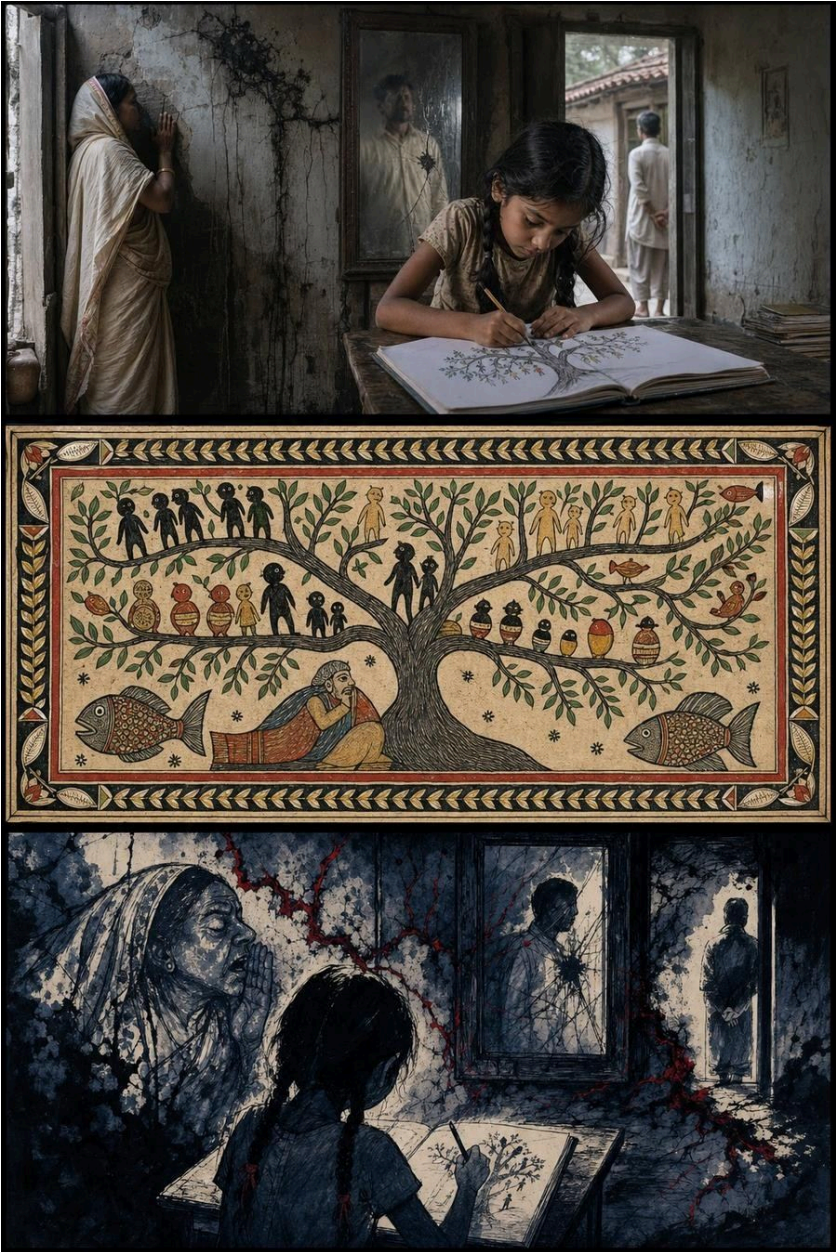
*It moved, the weight moved from house to house;
Once it reaches a door, that household cannot cast off its share.
A shared weight does not end; it takes the road and moves;
Village to village it pauses as an object at the door.
A mother says, "Read the name"; a son opens the window;
A wife weighs one grain of rice for memory.
The paper wished to write "The End," but the hand stopped;
The story entered the house - who can say it is finished?
The rogue's mind stands half inside and half outside;
"Work" turned green upon the leaf and a new road opened.
The moving weight says: sorrow is not only weeping;
Once it reaches a house, that house cannot cast off its share.
A mother says, "Read the name"; a son opens the window;
A wife weighs one grain of rice for memory.*



CHAPTER 44

The Granddaughter's Notebook

Fear is like water: when it meets a wall it looks for a crack; when it finds no crack, it descends into a granddaughter's notebook.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FLOWER OF THE
GRANDDAUGHTER'S QUESTION**

Folk tune: Grandmother-Granddaughter Song

Ask, granddaughter, ask whatever is in your heart;

*From Grandmother's storehouse of stories gather pearls of answers.
 The granddaughter asked, "Whose fear?" Grandmother smiled like a
 flower;
 "The one who hears truth named finds fear beginning to melt."
 Do not stop the question; fill the notebook with colour;
 Let old pain become a simple story and reach the next generation.
 A granddaughter's question is no thorn but a little flower of knowledge;
 Its fragrance can open the sealed roots of history.
 Grandmother and granddaughter, sing together, search for answers
 with affection;
 In a questioning child's hand stands the bright house of the future.
 Two generations sit beneath the evening lamp;
 Question and answer weave a loom, threading a cord of love.
 When old pain becomes story, its thorn no longer pierces;
 A fearless question opens the future's door.*



The story had entered house after house, and "Work" was turning green upon the leaf. After the fourteenth breath, the rogues thought fear had now reached their own bodies and perhaps would stop there. Human beings often imagine the boundary of fear to be their own chests. But fear follows the nature of water. When it meets a wall, it searches for a crack. When there is no crack, it emerges as sweat.

In Batuknath Hariharan's house, fear first came upon his mother's tongue, then the wall, then the glass of his degrees. At dawn of the fifteenth breath it entered his granddaughter's notebook. She was seven years old. She understood neither courts, nor the dignity of the Bar, nor procedure. But she loved drawing pictures.

That day she drew a tree in her notebook. On its branches were black people, white people, a dwarf light, round Loths, and below them an old man standing as though his mouth had been pasted shut. The little girl ran to her grandmother. "Look, Channa Grove."

Hariharan's wife started. No one in the house had spoken the name Channa Grove. The child asked, "Why is Grandfather standing outside? Why doesn't he enter the game?"

The question rang through the house not like a bell but like a summons. Hariharan came out of his room. He looked at the picture. The old man in it seemed to resemble him. In an innocent voice the

child asked again, "Grandfather, why does the one who wins stay outside the game?"

Hariharan's throat went dry. He could draw many answers from his law books: definitions of victory, procedure, judgment, appeal, rights. But before a seven-year-old child, the language of law dried like a leaf. He managed only, "Child, this is not a game."

The girl laughed. "Everything is a game, isn't it? You all say, 'We won the case.' Doesn't 'won' mean a game?"

Hariharan stepped back. The notebook remained there. His granddaughter drew a piece of paper into the old man's hand and, in very small letters, wrote upon it: "Read the names." The smell of wax crayons rose from the page, and within it stood those two words - the smallest, heaviest order any court could issue.

In Chandrapal Batra's house the question arrived differently. His son had resolved to distance himself from his father's business, but even that resolve lived inside a house bought with his father's earnings. One day several young men came to the gate. They shouted no slogans and threw no stones. Each held a switched-off mobile phone.

The son came outside. One of the young men said, "We lost in the game where we won on the first day. Now we go to tell other children that the first win is a trap. We want permission to pass in front of your house."

The son stood stunned. Chandrapal watched from behind a curtain. He thought of calling the police. But the young men were not blocking the road. They were only asking permission for their route. Criminals often fear a courteous question more than violence. Violence has a penal section; under what section does a question fall?

The son said quietly, "Go."

The young men walked on. Five children ran after them. Chandrapal came outside and gripped his son's arm. "Why didn't you stop them?"

For the first time the son looked directly into his father's eyes. "Why would I? They are my age. Their lives were looted. I am only wondering how many switched-off phones are hidden inside my education, my car, my house."

Chandrapal raised his hand to slap him, but it stopped in mid-air. Between his hand and his son he saw a screen. On the screen was not Ujjwal Jha's face but his empty chair. An empty chair is the hardest evidence; no one can cross-examine it.

In Raghav "Signal" Somani's house the question came from his daughter. She was a teenager, and her father never spoke to her about his business. That day she returned from school and said, "Baba, the teacher

says a deleted message disappears. But what if it remains written in someone's mind?"

Raghav's cup was full of tea. Fine letters surfaced upon the tea: "Mind suspended." He put the cup down. His daughter asked again, "Why do you all speak so secretly on the phone? Is a secret always something wrong?"

Raghav wanted to say, "No, secrecy is business." But the language of business would not enter his daughter's eyes. He said, "Some things are secret for safety."

The girl immediately asked, "Whose safety?"

That small question stayed in Raghav's ears all night. Whose safety? The victim's? The kingpin's? The poor young man's who opened the account? The Hong Kong owner's? His own? When an answer breaks into too many pieces, a person begins to understand that he is living in a house of lies.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung's son, studying at a foreign school, asked his father for a map of India. Lau was surprised. His son said that school had a lesson on colonialism, markets and ethical trade, and the teacher had asked whether those who earn from the name of a country know the names of its people.

Lau smiled. "Countries run on names. People do not."

The son fell silent, then said, "And if one day people ask for an account in their own names instead of the country's?"

Outside Lau Kin-Hung's glass house lay the sea. In sunlight the water shone like silver. Suddenly he felt that every wave was a name. So many names. So many that even the figures in his bank accounts seemed small.

That day Lau could not escape his son's eyes for the first time. Traders read profit-and-loss tables. Children demand accounts with their eyes.

In Garh Narikel these events did not occur at the same moment, but they occurred within the same breath. In Channa Grove Budhba Ghost told the children, "When a child begins asking questions in a rogue's house, know that the leaf has reached that door."

"Does the leaf fly there?" Ananya asked.

Budhba Ghost laughed. "Not the leaf. The name flies. The leaf is only its excuse."

Devika Sah was preparing the next lesson for her school: "Ask questions." She had the children write: "If someone says quick money, ask how. If someone says keep it secret, ask why. If someone says everyone does it, ask which names."

Nishant added arithmetic to the lesson. "A question cuts interest before anything else," he said. "A fraudster's profit rises on fear and falls on questions." The children liked the line. In their notebooks they wrote: "Questions cut interest."

At a meeting of the Oath of Privacy, Meera said, "The question of love belongs to the lover, not society. The question of consent belongs to the body, not an owner. The question of fear belongs to the one who sells fear." A teenage girl stood and asked, "What if someone in the house says not to talk about fear?" Meera answered, "Then light a lamp inside the house first."

Saumya was adding a new chapter to the documents: "The Children's Questions." She had understood that the hardest place to break the inheritance of corruption was not the courtroom but the family's eating mat. There a child asks: Where did this money come from? Why this silence? Whose fear is this?

After a reading of names abroad, Ira told the students, "Read names before you read policy. A theory built without names is often a curtain for crime." Her teacher remained silent. A student asked, "Where do we begin the names?" Ira answered, "Where the first profit was made."

Aruni would pause while writing all this. He feared the story might again turn into a sermon. But Ba said, "If the question grows out of the story, it is not a sermon. If the story falls silent out of fear of the question, it is a lie."

Gop Kumar's new file opened that day. Its title was "The Door." Inside were only three lines: "Rogues enter the inner world from the outer world not through punishment but through questions. Their children are the first messengers. The child who asked has already opened half the door of Channa Grove."

That night another game was held in Channa Grove. At the four corners of the kabaddi ground hung four pictures: Hariharan's granddaughter's tree, Chandrapal's son's empty chair, Raghav's daughter's question, Lau's son's map. The ghosts formed a circle around them.

The Loths were not silent today. One Loth, who for centuries had only watched, rolled into the circle and asked, "Which side will the children play on?"

Budhba Ghost said, "Children are not a side. Children are the whistle. They start the game; they do not stop it."

At that moment Panidubbi lifted her head from the pond. Her hair was longer than the darkness of the night. "I do not seize the feet of those who ask questions," she said. "Those who suppress questions entangle their own feet."

The Rakash spirits increased their light. In the glow it could be seen that at one edge of the field Batuknath Hariharan's mind trembled, at another Chandrapal Batra's mind searched for a phone, at the third Raghav Signal's mind deleted messages, and at the fourth Lau Kin-Hung's mind folded a map.

But in the centre of the field the children's questions were running. Questions have no feet; they have wings. They cannot be caught. In kabaddi, whatever cannot be caught changes the rules of the game.

Ananya ran to the centre of the field. On the ground she wrote: "Whose?"

One word. Yet that one word made the earth of Channa Grove tremble. Whose money? Whose death? Whose victory? Whose order? Whose silence? Whose country? Whose village? Whose name?

The ghosts breathed together. The fifteenth breath did not end; it spread. Leaves flew though there was no wind. Names rose though there was no mouth. Questions walked though there were no feet.

Ba watched from afar and said, "Now the story has reached their houses. Even if they wish it, they cannot remain outside any longer."

Aruni wrote the final line on the page, though it was only the final line of the chapter, not the story: "Where a child asks 'whose?', the inner door of the rogue opens."

FOLK SONG: THE GRANDDAUGHTER ASKED - WHOSE?

Folk tune: Grandmother-Granddaughter Song

*The granddaughter asked, "Whose?" - yes, she asked;
With the point of one question the locked door opened.
Fear flowed like water and entered the granddaughter's notebook;
A question sprouted at the corner of the ancestors' victory.
The granddaughter asked: "Whose wealth? Whose tears? Whose
name?"*

*One word opened every chamber of the closed house.
The question moved without a name, the word without feet;
A child's little hand reached door after door.
Ba said: now it is impossible to remain outside;
Where a child asks "whose?", the lock of falsehood cannot hold.
The granddaughter's notebook was no longer blank; it became the
clan's mirror;*

*With the point of one question, inheritance itself was pierced.
"Whose wealth, whose tears, whose name?" - three questions;
Ba said: where a child asks, night cannot remain.*



CHAPTER 45

The Air Within

A door does not simply remain open - the air trapped inside must first come out.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CLOSED HOUSE
OPENED**

Folk tune: Courtyard Parati

Open the door, open it from within;

Let stale air escape, let new sunlight dissolve inside.

*The door opened from within, the old air came out;
Sunlight spread through the room and the whole house shone.
Sweep the cobwebs, open the windows, arrange memory with care;
Give hidden sorrow a safe place to be spoken.*

*A closed house is not guilty; it too needs company,
Laughter, footsteps, song, conversation - the true wealth of life.
When the house opens, the mind opens and the shadow retreats;
New light in the courtyard rebuilds relationships.*

*Sweep the cobwebs, wipe the shelves, plaster the courtyard clean;
Give concealed sorrow a safe place to speak.*

*The closed house is not a criminal; it too needs company,
Laughter, songs, the sound of footsteps - a house's real inheritance.*



In the fifteenth breath the children asked "whose?", and with that one word the doors of the rogues' houses opened from within. In the sixteenth breath those doors did not simply remain open; air began to move through them. This was not air from outside. It was the air of houses in which, for years, papers of victory, the smell of bribes, locks of fear and the glitter of inheritance had been kept sealed.

For several days Batuknath Hariharan kept his granddaughter's drawing locked in a desk drawer. Anything that was not a legal paper, he did not regard as paper. But the child's drawing would not stay in the drawer. Before he opened the drawer in the morning, it was already on the desk. If he locked the desk, the drawing appeared beneath his pillow. If he lifted the pillow, it appeared upon the mirror.

He understood that the drawing was not an object but a question. A question cannot be locked in a drawer.

One evening his granddaughter came into his room carrying another version of the same drawing. This time three new figures stood among the ghosts on the branches - an old man eating papers, a man chewing a mobile phone, and a merchant without a face. "Grandfather," she asked, "who are these people?"

Hariharan asked, "Why do you draw things like this?"

The child said, "Because you all do not tell stories. When no stories are told in a house, pictures begin making themselves."

Something broke inside Hariharan. For the first time he thought: his granddaughter would inherit the property of his house, his name, his car, his library - but would she inherit his silence too? Inheritance is often not property but an unanswered question.

He wanted to stroke the child's head. He extended his hand. She stepped back. "First tell me why you are standing outside the game."

The question had now left the drawing and taken on a body. Hariharan forgot every language of law. He understood that his granddaughter was making him not a grandfather but a witness.

The next day Chandrapal Batra's son returned his father's car. In the boot he had found old papers, bags of cash and pages from several banks. He placed the car key on the table. "I don't want this car."

Chandrapal stared. "You don't want the car? I was going to put it in your name."

"In my name? My name? If your earnings are written in my name, what will remain of me? The phones that went silent, the young men who hanged themselves, the houses that sank into debt - why should my name take the place of theirs?"

Chandrapal laughed. First lightly, then loudly. "You have studied too much. Idealism does not fill the stomach."

His son answered quietly, "I am old enough now to see how many stomachs were emptied to fill ours."

After that sentence such silence spread through the house that even the sound of the air conditioner seemed guilty. Chandrapal's wife listened from a distance. There was no fear on her face, only relief. Sometimes the first truth of a household is born not in the son but first inside the mother's silence.

Raghav "Signal" Somani's daughter placed a notebook on her father's desk. Its title was "Record of Silences." She said, "Baba, whatever you do not answer, I will write here. One day when this notebook is full, I will know how many empty spaces there are in your life."

Raghav tried to smile. "Daughter, children do not speak to their fathers like this."

She replied, "Then teach me how a child should speak when a father lies to her."

At that moment Raghav's phone vibrated. The vibration travelled from the table into his fingers as though someone were shaking him from within. A Signal message appeared: "Remove the file. Stop the names." His daughter looked at the phone. Raghav turned it face down.

In her notebook she wrote the first line: "First silence: the phone was turned over."

The line was written upon Raghav's chest. It seemed that the blank space was not forming in the notebook but in his body. For the first time he thought: deleted messages disappear only from a device, not from a child's eyes.

Lau Kin-Hung's son wrote an essay at school titled "The Lineage of Profit and the Debt of Names." His teacher gave it a prize. Lau attended the ceremony. On stage his son began to read. The first line said that his father claimed countries run on names, people do not - but he suspected that a man who profits from a country without knowing the names of its people is not earning, but stealing.

No applause followed in the hall. Silence arrived. Silence can weigh more than applause. Lau Kin-Hung's face turned to stone. It seemed to him that his son was not standing on a stage but beneath Channa Grove in Garh Narikel.

The boy read on: "If my lineage is a lineage of profit, I do not wish to inherit it. I want the list of names that were erased to make that profit."

Lau remained seated, but the merchant inside him began to run. Far away, the feet of that fleeing merchant sank into the sand of the Kamala-Balan.

The same air reached Edward Broom's house. His granddaughter, who studied history, asked that when he gave speeches on dignity, where did his company keep the names of the people who had died in its old projects?

Broom said, "History is complicated."

His granddaughter replied, "Complication does not give permission to erase names."

Broom's library was filled with thick volumes on global policy, business ethics, human dignity and the philosophy of development. Yet in that moment every page seemed blank. Those who need names do not need theory.

In Garh Narikel, Ananya felt these distant tremors. "Ba, when a rogue's child asks a question, does the child remain a rogue, or join our side?"

Ba laughed. "A child's side is the side of questions. It is born not against anyone, but against falsehood."

Ananya asked again, "Then do they have the right to play in Channa Grove?"

Ba said, "The field does not stop one who comes carrying a question. The one who comes to defend an answer is made to keep circling the field."

In the school against the screen, Devika Sah added a new lesson: "Questions at Home." She told the children, "A fraud does not always begin outside. Often it begins in a household's silence. If suddenly there is too much money, too much fear, too many phones, too much secrecy in your home, first ask lovingly. A question is not an insult; it protects the house."

Nishant asked, "And if parents say: you are a child, you will not understand?"

Devika answered, "Then say: because I am a child, I have the right to understand. Do not leave the debt of a lie upon my head."

In the Circle of Privacy Meera said, "Lineage does not travel only through blood. Fear can be inherited too, silence too, shame too. Now a new lineage will be made - a lineage of consent, questions and one's own right over one's own body."

A young woman stood and asked, "What if the family says these are outside ideas?"

Meera answered, "Self-respect is never foreign. The outside world is only a mirror; the face is within."

Saumya was writing the accounts of all these meetings. She understood that the novel's true turning point was not the arrest of the offender but the heir's refusal. A generation that says, "I will not take this profit," changes the direction of history.

Abroad, Ira began the second round of her "name lessons" with her students. This time the subject was "Conditions for Accepting an Inheritance." She said, "Accept an inheritance only after you understand its account. Property that fears questions is not property; it is a noose."

In Gop Kumar's file on Ishan Dutt, a new appendix appeared: "The Heir." It said: "Criminals are broken less by their crimes than by their children's refusal. Punishment is given by an institution outside; defeat is given by the question inside the home."

Aruni read the line and remained silent for a long time. He remembered his daughter Ananya, who never tired of reading the names of the dead in the game. He understood that the true heirs of Garh Narikel were not owners of land but the children who read the names.

That night in Channa Grove every child's question was turned into a leaf and hung from the branches: Hariharan's granddaughter's question, Chandrapal's son's refusal, Raghav's daughter's notebook, Lau's son's essay, Broom's granddaughter's query. The ghosts read the leaves. The

pretas cleared the letters with white light. The Rakash spirits gave illumination. For the first time, the Loths applauded.

Budhba Ghost said, "Today is the sixteenth breath. In this breath, children born into houses of crime refused to inherit the lineage of crime."

From the pond Panidubbi said, "I do not seize the feet of those who refuse. They may walk."

The Hakkal Witch, who was always circling the rooftop, came down today. The souls she kept were calm. She said, "Breaking a lineage is difficult. But when a child says, 'This fear is not mine,' the old rope rots by itself."

At that moment Hariharan's mind entered from one corner of the field, Chandrapal's from another, Raghav's from a third, Lau's from a fourth. Their minds wanted to enter the game, but the children stood at the gate. The children held no weapons, only questions.

Ananya stepped forward. On the ground she wrote: "What will you take?"

The rogues' minds were silent.

Ananya wrote a second line: "What will you leave?"

Hariharan's mind trembled. Chandrapal's mind searched for a phone. Raghav's mind deleted a message. Lau's mind counted percentages. But no number would remain upon the field.

The children said together, "We will take the names that were erased. We will leave the profit made by erasing those names."

At those words the colour of Channa Grove's leaves changed. A faint green glimmer entered the bodies of the black ghosts, like oil poured again into an old lamp. Tears entered the eyes of the white pretas. The Rakash light dimmed, as though so much brightness were no longer needed. The Loths rolled in circles into the middle of the field and formed a ring with the children.

Ba watched from a distance and said, "Now the story is no longer only the story of the dead. It is also the story of those children who refuse to drink the milk of an impure victory."

Aruni wrote: "The sixteenth breath came on the day the descendants of crime said: we will take the names, not the profit. The sound of that refusal echoed through Channa Grove for a long time."

FOLK SONG: THE AIR OF THE CLOSED HOUSE

Folk tune: Courtyard Song

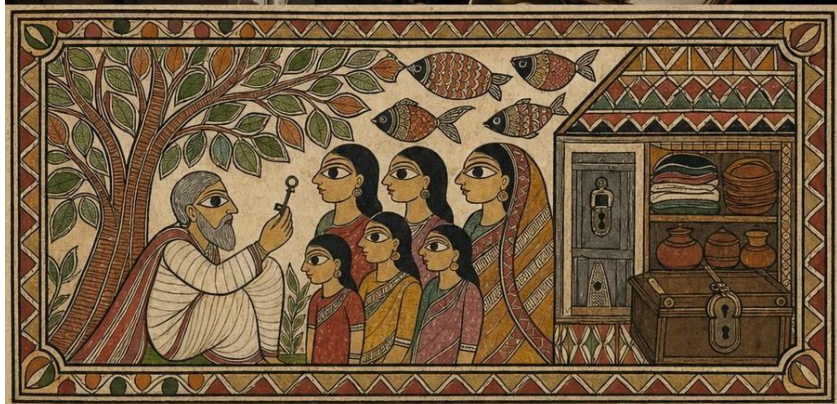
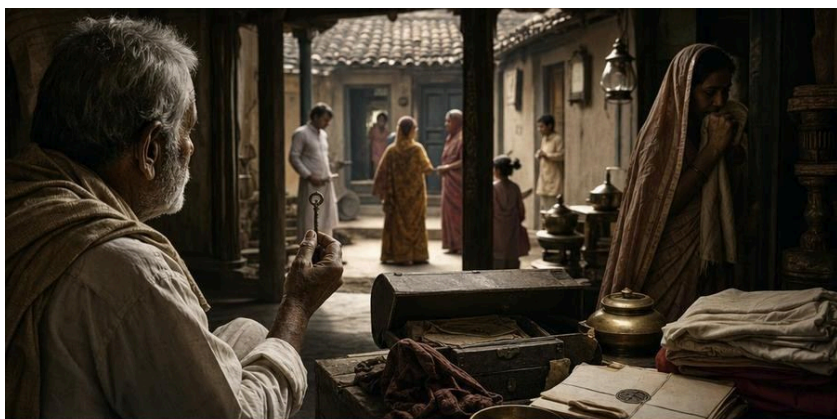
*The air came out, the air of the closed house came out;
The heir took the names and broke the thirst for sinful profit.
The door opened from within and the old air escaped;
The smell of bribes, papers of victory and fear all flew away.
The child of crime said: we will take the names, not the profit;
We will not drink impure milk and stain our own chests.
A green glimmer entered the black ghost; tears filled the preta's eyes;
The Loth sat in the children's circle and the darkness softened.
The story of the dead now became the story of living children too;
The future belongs to those with courage to leave the profit behind.
When the trapped air came out, the house breathed for the first time;
The heir took the names and broke the thirst for sinful profit.
The criminal's child said: not profit - I take the name.
The story of the dead became dawn for the living child.*



CHAPTER 46

The Darkness of Inheritance

*The one who never looked at the face of wealth but saw the darkness
behind it is the true heir.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LIFE, THE VALUE OF
BREATH**

Folk tune: inheritance benediction

*Sing the blessing, sing the blessing of breath;
 Life before profit—teach this lesson.
 Not profit but breath comes first—walk by this rule;
 Let the towers of wealth come later; first light the lamp of life.
 Work, medicine, trade—let all be joined to human welfare;
 Only when one breath is saved does true profit grow.
 Give children honesty as an inheritance greater than wealth;
 The name of one whose work saves life knows no limit.
 The value of breath is life; no market can measure it;
 Wealth earned with compassion leaves flowers of happiness behind.
 Let the tower of wealth stand high, but let mercy be its foundation;
 In every ledger place the letters of breath above all else.
 Hand down to sons and daughters the capital of integrity;
 May the grace of life-saving work resound from age to age.*



In the sixteenth breath the children had said: we will take the name, not the profit. Written from leaf to leaf in Channa Grove, the sentence reached house after house. But when a sentence enters a home, it no longer remains merely a sentence. It enters the clatter of utensils, the old key on the shelf, the bank-stamped paper, the smell of clothes inside a cupboard. The seventeenth breath began on the day wealth started searching for its heirs, and the heirs began looking not at wealth's face but at the darkness behind it.

For many days Batuknath Hariharan kept avoiding his granddaughter's answer. He thought children asked questions and then returned to their games. But a child's question is like a dog that has once caught the scent of a doorway: every dawn it comes back and stands there. His granddaughter returned. This time she held no drawing, only a blank sheet of paper.

"Grandfather, what will you leave in my name?"

The old practised smile came to Hariharan's face, the smile with which he had spent years turning aside the edge of hard questions in court. "Everything," he said. "The house, the land, the accounts, the library, the name."

The girl drew three circles on the paper. Over the first she wrote: house. Over the second: account. Over the third: name. Then beside the first circle she drew tiny feet, beside the second water, and beside the third a tree.

“Why does the house have feet?” Hariharan asked before he could stop himself.

The girl said, “If a house is built on someone’s dead feet, it must walk at night.”

At that moment Hariharan understood that the law had no answer to a child’s drawing. He wanted to snatch the paper away, but his hand would not move forward. The feet drawn beneath the house were moving. They were not broad like courthouse steps, but fine as the roots of Channa Grove.

That night Hariharan opened his will. Every line was correct: the legal language immaculate, the properties listed, the shares clear. Yet the pages clung to his fingers like a dried bandage over an ancient wound. When he began to read, where it should have said “movable property” he saw “moving dead”; where it should have said “immovable property” he saw “immovable names.” He rubbed his eyes and read again. The letters returned to their proper places, but beneath them a faint sheen of water remained.

In Chandrapal Batra’s house the matter began differently. His son placed a mobile phone before him. There was no game on the screen, no account, no message—only a list: Munna Paswan, Ujjwal Jha, Sarayu, names Chandrapal had never once read in full.

“Were all these people my partners?” his son asked.

Chandrapal laughed. “No. They were cases.”

His son said, “Not cases. People. You always told me: study law, use your intelligence, recognise opportunity. But what is the difference between an opportunity and prey?”

Heat rose into Chandrapal’s ears. He took the phone from his son’s hand. The screen went dark, but the list did not. In the mirror, instead of his face, he saw the old room in Meerut where he had first bought a law book. On the opening page he had written: “I will study justice.” Across that page another sentence now appeared: “I will discover the rate.”

His son quietly placed a paper bearing his own name before him. “Write the source of every profit standing in my name. If you cannot write the source, remove it from my name.”

“Son,” Chandrapal said, “the world does not work like that.”

“Then I do not want that world,” his son replied.

After those words the conditioned air in Chandrapal’s house stopped. A window opened by itself. There was no river outside, yet the smell of water entered. From within the screen came the sound of a splash. For the first time Chandrapal understood that the digital crocodile does not

merely chew up bodies; it chews through the trust between father and son.

For Raghav “Signal” Somani, the question of inheritance rose from his wife’s dinner plate. While serving rice, she set one grain aside each day. At first Raghav laughed. Later he grew irritated. One night he finally asked, “Why do you put aside one grain every day?”

“For the household whose rice was taken away by the money you earned,” his wife said.

Raghav fell silent. “You understand nothing. These are business matters.”

His wife looked at him. “If business makes a grain of rice an orphan, then inside a home it is no longer food. It is grain for a funeral rite.”

That night Raghav opened his secure messages. The messages he had deleted did not return. Something worse happened: in their place he saw grains of rice. Each grain bore a name. He touched one. It did not break. A line appeared on the screen: “The account is not closed; the soul is open.”

In Lau Kin-Hung’s home the question came from the sea. His granddaughter painted a blue tree on a glass wall. “What tree is that?” Lau asked. “The one that came in my dream,” the child said.

Mobile phones hung from the branches like fruit. No face appeared on any of them, only a voice: “Under which law is my death written?” Lau Kin-Hung tried to stop his granddaughter’s hand. She would not release the brush. He could not understand where such strength had come from in that small palm.

That day Lau asked for a list of his assets. Companies across the world, trusted agents, layered accounts, island addresses, charitable foundations, education grants, hospital funds. The list was immaculate. But when he reached the line where his granddaughter’s name was to be added, a question appeared on the screen: “Answer in the language in which it was earned.”

For the first time Lau’s wealth demanded a translation from him. The language of percentages, exchange rates and contracts was useless. He did not know the language of names in Garh Narikel. Sweat appeared on his brow at the knowledge of that ignorance.

Meanwhile the children of Garh Narikel had invented a new game of inheritance. The rule was simple: whoever picked up an object had to answer three questions—“Whose labour is this? Whose loss is this? Whose name is this?” If no answer could be found, the object was removed from the game.

One child brought a gleaming toy car. Everyone asked, "Whose labour?" The child had no answer. The car was removed. Another child brought an old wooden spinning top. "My grandfather's hands," he said. "He made it while resting in the middle of the fields." The top stayed in the game.

Ananya said, "Inheritance is not an object. Inheritance is the story that enters the house along with the object."

Ba smiled when she heard this. "If the children have understood that much, the rogues' wealth will become an orphan inside their own homes."

Saumya was writing down the rules of the game. Meera said, "Add a rule for privacy too. No one's love, body or fear can be handed down as inheritance." Devika added, "And any account opened without someone understanding it is a cursed inheritance too." Nishant said, "Wherever the first win appears, ask the first question."

Aruni watched the novel cease to be a sermon and become a game. Children were making the rules; the dead were finding rest inside them. The leaves of Channa Grove stirred lightly, as though setting their seal upon the children's rules.

Then Budhba Ghost slowly descended from the branch. For the first time he was fully visible in daylight. His black body had acquired the grey of ash, as though twelve hundred years of smoke were slowly being washed away. He entered the field and said to the children, "One more rule."

The children fell silent. Budhba Ghost said, "Do not cry over wealth made by erasing names. Even if you must go without it, go without it. Sometimes deprivation itself is freedom."

At those words Loth spun in circles. Rakash's glow faded; by day the children's faces now gave enough light. Panidubbi did not emerge from the pond, but a drop of water rose from her hair and settled upon a leaf of Channa Grove. In that drop four faces appeared: Hariharan's granddaughter, Chandrapal's son, Raghav's wife, Lau's granddaughter.

In their separate homes the rogues trembled in different languages. Yet the meaning of the trembling was the same everywhere: the heirs were closing the window of profit.

Hariharan tried to sign his granddaughter's blank page. His hand stopped. A sentence was already written there: "Take the name; leave the profit." He saw that it was not his granddaughter's handwriting. It was the handwriting of many hands—labourers, women, young men, patients, children.

Chandrapal ordered papers prepared to remove assets from his son's name. The papers were prepared, but his son's name did not disappear. Instead a long shadow grew behind Chandrapal's own name: Batra, Lakhera, mule, screen, splash. He folded the paper and threw it away. It opened itself and returned to the table.

Raghav left home for a hotel. He ordered food. When the plate arrived, one grain of rice lay apart from the rest. He changed hotels. On the second plate too, one grain lay apart. At a third place he ordered khichdi. In the middle of it was one grain without spice, white and solitary, like a witness.

Lau Kin-Hung ordered his granddaughter's picture removed. A servant reached for the glass. It was not cold but warm. The paint had not dried; it was pulsing. From inside the glass came the voice of a sea wave: "Read the names of the country from whose name you earned."

None of this appeared in any newspaper in Garh Narikel. But the leaves knew. News travels from leaf to leaf just as village women carry news from hearth to hearth.

That evening Ananya wrote on a page: "Seventeenth breath: the heirs' refusal." Then she paused. The word "refusal" felt too hard. She crossed it out and wrote: "choice."

"Why did you change it?" Aruni asked.

"They are not only saying no," Ananya replied. "They are choosing which story they will carry with them."

Aruni looked at that sentence for a long time. It seemed to him that the future of the novel was now in the child's hands. The writer would only write; they would choose the story.

Night came to Channa Grove. Kabaddi did not begin at once. First the children sat in a circle. A blank sheet lay in the middle. On it was written: "Whoever gave up the profit became worthy of the name."

Budhba Ghost drew breath. The black ghosts stood in a row. The spirits were pale. Rakash's glow was low. Loth was round. Panidubbi lay quiet in the pond. The Brahma of the pipal descended and blew upon the blank paper with all four faces.

The paper did not fly away. It sank into the earth. Where it entered the soil, a tiny coconut shoot emerged. With it rose a new smell from the ground—not flower, not fruit, but the smell of a wet beginning. A coconut shoot in Mithila's soil was said to be impossible. But in Garh Narikel even the impossible sprouts after learning the rules.

From a distance Ba said, "The line of wealth has not broken. A new line has begun—the line of becoming free from it."

The rogues could not sleep that night. Their heirs slept—not heavily but lightly. Giving up profit had not emptied their stomachs; it had emptied their chests, and for the first time air entered the empty space.

The seventeenth breath wanted to end, but Channa Grove held it back. The story had reached the turn where the children of the defeated and the children of the rogues were about to play on the same field. No paper of victory would count in that game. Only names, labour, love and chosen memory would count.

Aruni wrote the final line: “The true test of inheritance is not what came into your hands. It is what you were able to let go with your own hands, so that your name might stand not upon someone else’s death but upon your own breath.”

FOLK SONG: NOT PROFIT, BUT BREATH

Folk tune: inheritance viraha

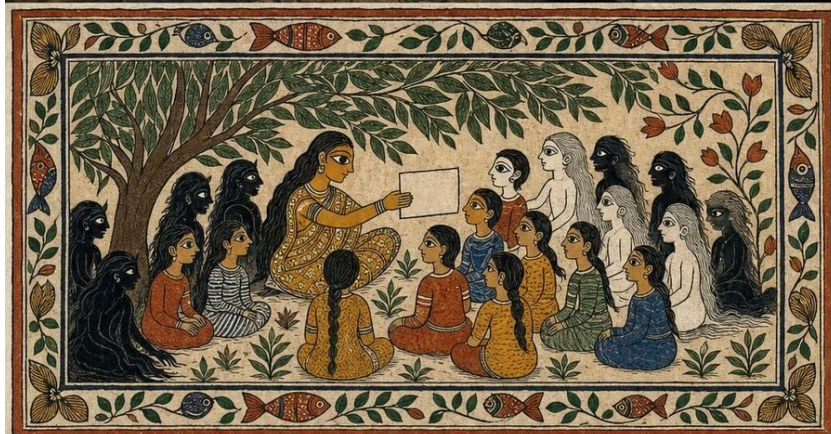
*Leave the profit, leave the profit born of sin;
Know that your own name must stand beside your breath.
The face of wealth glittered; behind it the darkness deepened;
The true heir was the one who saw both roads.
Bank papers, old keys, the smell of the cupboard—
Upon whose death stands this bright moon of comfort?
“Take the name, not the profit”—the children’s vow;
Only when the chest was emptied did the first wind enter.
Children of the defeated and of the rogues will come to one field;
No order of victory will rule—labour and love will play together.
Whoever could release the sinful profit from their own hands,
Their name will stand beside their own breath.
“Take the name, not the profit”—the children’s vow.*



CHAPTER 47

The Gaja-Graha Tale

The elephant's foot was trapped in water and the crocodile's teeth in history—the hand that frees is always a third hand.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE WISDOM OF GAJA- GRAHA

Folk tune: folk-tale benediction

*Listen to the tale, listen to Gaja-Graha;
Ponder this knot: wisdom joined with strength is greater than strength
alone.
The elephant's foot was trapped in water; its companions raised their
voices;
However hard the crocodile's teeth, wisdom can still make a path.
Strength alone is never enough—there must be time, company and
means;
In danger the lamp of discernment shows the road to freedom.
The elephant says: leave pride behind; asking for help is honour too;
The river says: the strength of companionship is the greatest life-force.
Learn from the Gaja-Graha tale; understand the movements of the
net;
With patience, knowledge and cooperation, gather the lotus of victory.
The water was deep, the teeth were hard, yet a road remained;
At one cry, help arrived in the trembling hour.
To put aside pride and ask for help is also the work of courage;
Society wins through the threefold strength of patience, discernment
and fellowship.*



In the seventeenth breath the heirs had seen the darkness behind wealth. They saw the platter of profit set before them and did not reach out. Channa Grove did not smile at this. The grove knew that renouncing profit does not end a story; only after profit is renounced does a person begin to see the force that had been pulling them. The eighteenth breath was the breath of that pull.

At dawn the children of Garh Narikel gathered near Channa Grove to play. The night's dew still clung to the leaves. The Loths sat in circles as though they had spent the whole night meditating with closed eyes. Rakash's body glowed faintly because daylight was arriving. The pale bodies of the spirits looked whiter still beneath the dew. It was hard to distinguish the black ghosts from the grove's shade.

Ananya came carrying a blank sheet. With her came the heirs of the rogues too—Hariharan's granddaughter, Batra's son, Signal's nephew, and a girl from a distant country who had been raised in Lau Kin-Hung's family but had fled the burden of that family name and reached Garh Narikel. Each child brought the fear of their own home, but on a playing field a child's fear quickly finds language.

"What game today?" Ananya asked.

Budhba Ghost descended from the branch on which he had sat for twelve hundred years. His feet remained a finger's breadth above the earth, but his voice came from inside the ground. "Today we play Gaja-Graha."

The children burst out laughing. "Is there such a thing as a Gaja-Graha game?"

Ba arrived carrying two things: an old brass bowl and earth brought from the bank of the Kamala-Balan. She placed the earth in the bowl and poured water over it. The soil swelled as though some creature within had taken breath; tiny bubbles rose from it, as though the ground were clearing its throat before telling an old story. Ba asked, "Have you heard the story of Gaja and Graha?"

Some of the children had, some had not. The rogues' heirs had seen the picture in schoolbooks—elephant, lotus, pond, crocodile. But in Garh Narikel no story remains like a picture in a book. When a story is told there, it arrives with mud on its feet.

Ba said, "There was an elephant. Huge. Powerful. It had a herd, a forest, water, tusks, pride—everything. It entered a pond, not to pluck flowers but to quench its thirst. Yet a crocodile lived in the water. The crocodile seized its foot. The elephant pulled toward land; the crocodile pulled toward water. Day passed, night passed. Strength faded. The herd watched, raised dust, trumpeted—but the crocodile was in the water, and the water was on its side."

"Did the elephant survive?" Hariharan's granddaughter asked.

"In the story, yes," Ba said. "But the one who listens must understand who the elephant was, who the crocodile was, and what the water was."

Budhba Ghost laughed. "And in Garh Narikel there is a third question too: does the one whom the elephant calls actually come? And if that one comes, in what form?"

Ananya wrote: elephant. Then: crocodile. Between them she drew water. Across the water she began writing small names: Ujjwal. Sarayu. Nand. Absent. Thirty. Three hundred. Mule account. Breath. Body. Privacy.

Chandrapal Batra's son stared at the paper. He remembered his father's mobile phone on which, once, a gaming symbol had opened with a red message beneath it: "Win today." His father had laughed that night. Now the boy understood that the word "win" too could become a crocodile's tooth.

The girl from Lau Kin-Hung's family, named Mei-Lata because her Indian nanny had called her Lata in childhood, asked, "The water is the

crocodile's home and the elephant is the outsider. Doesn't that mean the elephant will lose?"

Ba looked at her. "Living in the water does not make the crocodile right. Sometimes home itself becomes the shelter of wrongdoing."

At those words the leaves of Channa Grove stirred. Far away, a reach of the Kamala-Balan flashed though there was no wind.

Budhba Ghost signalled the children onto the field. The rule was simple. One child would be the elephant, one the crocodile. The elephant would try to cross the earth-line while the crocodile held its foot from inside a circle of water. But the true difficulty was this: the elephant could not advance by strength alone. It had to move by speaking names. If it spoke a wrong name, the crocodile's grip would tighten. If it spoke a true one, the water would loosen a little.

Ananya became the first elephant. Hariharan's granddaughter became the crocodile. Ananya ran into the circle and her foot was seized. The grip was cold and slick—as though water itself had grown fingers. She did not laugh. "Sarayu," she said. The grip loosened. Then: "Ujjwal." The water withdrew a little. Then: "Nand Aruni." The crocodile's hand trembled on its own. Hariharan's granddaughter let go of her foot.

Budhba Ghost stopped them. "You broke the rule."

"I don't want to be the crocodile," Hariharan's granddaughter said.

Budhba Ghost grew serious. "Then become the elephant."

The girl became the elephant. Chandrapal Batra's son became the crocodile. She entered the circle of water. Batra's son seized her foot. "Procedure," she said. The grip tightened. "Law." The grip tightened further. Fear took her. Then Ananya whispered, "A name."

Hariharan's granddaughter closed her eyes. She remembered her grandfather saying he would leave her everything. She said, "If a house is built on dead feet, it walks at night."

It was not a name, but it was true. The water suddenly fell silent. Batra's son let go. "No one in my house speaks names," he said. "Only file numbers."

"File number is the crocodile's language," Ba said softly. "A name is the elephant's breath."

Meanwhile, in a distant city, Satyavrat Mehta sat at his desk. The court papers were closed. Through the window of his government residence he could see the city lights, but they looked to him not like lights but like reflections on water. An old book lay open before him—the tale of Gaja-Graha. Yet he was not reading the story; the story was reading him.

The book said the elephant cried out in danger. Satyavrat stopped. It seemed to him that in this novel no elephant had been allowed to cry out. The labourers' mouths had been filled with water. Ujjwal's mouth had been trapped inside a screen. Meera had had to suppress her voice to save her privacy. The language of the police had frightened Devika even when she spoke her brother's name. The Gaja-Graha tale is incomplete if the right to call for help is taken away.

For the first time Satyavrat Mehta understood that his final role was not that of a rescuer. He was no god, no advocate, no mouth of the government. He would return like a person willing to admit: "You could not call out because the system to which we belonged had shut its ears. I have come now to listen."

A paper lay on his desk—not a resignation letter, but a confession. It read: "Where the State remained silent upon paper, my signature on that paper shared the weight of the offence." Satyavrat lifted his pen. His hand trembled. Channa Grove was very far away, yet the rustling of its leaves reached the window.

He did not sign. He understood that a confession written in haste could itself become a paper for self-defence. He folded the sheet and put it in his pocket. In the end he would not come empty-handed, but neither would he arrive carrying a paper of victory. He would bring the paper that placed him himself in the dock.

The game continued in Garh Narikel. This time Batra's son became the elephant and Mei-Lata the crocodile. At first he tried to wrench himself free by force. Mei-Lata held on. "Percentage!" he shouted. The grip tightened. "Signal!" Tighter. "Commission!" The water rose to his knees.

In fear he said, "I don't know the names."

Devika, watching from a distance, came forward. Her voice was not harsh. "You have a name of your own. Say that first."

Batra's son spoke softly: "Aryan."

The water loosened. He stared in surprise. Then Devika said, "Now speak the name of the one who died in your father's game."

He was silent. His mouth went dry. His father had taught him: never admit anything. But in Channa Grove, breath grows shorter the longer one denies. At last he said, "Ujjwal Jha."

Mei-Lata's hand loosened. The water withdrew. Batra's son did not cry, but his face looked as though he had stepped outside his father's house for the first time.

"In the Gaja-Graha tale," Ba said, "deliverance begins when the elephant calls not upon a god, but upon a name."

Budhba Ghost shook his head in disagreement. “No, Janaki. Deliverance begins when the crocodile too understands the history of its own grip. Otherwise the elephant escapes and the crocodile seizes another foot.”

At this, Panidubbi spoke from the pond for the first time. Her voice was slick as a wet lock of hair. “The crocodile too can be a prisoner of hunger. But making hunger into a religion is a crime.”

Silence fell across Channa Grove. The children did not fully understand, but they wrote the sentence down. Children do not understand everything at once; some things they write down for the future.

Far away in the city, Batuknath Hariharan stared at a train ticket. He had already returned from Garh Narikel, yet the date of travel on the ticket kept changing—each day to the current date. He understood that the journey was not over. His mind still hung in Channa Grove. Tonight in his dream he would be the crocodile and his granddaughter the elephant.

A new game opened on Chandrapal Batra’s phone. Its title: “Become the Elephant.” He tried to close it. It would not close. A rule appeared: “Stage One: Say your own name.” He threw the phone. It struck the floor but did not break. Ujjwal’s name continued to glow on the screen.

Into Raghav Signal’s silence fell a leaf. One sentence was written on it: “Breath travels not through invisible messages, but through names spoken openly.” No one could explain how the leaf had entered through the window.

Lau Kin-Hung sat beside the sea. He saw no elephant, only a vast shadow laying its trunk against a tower of glass. A crocodile rose from the sea and seized not the shadow but Lau’s own foot. He did not cry out. His voice was trapped inside percentages.

The game in Garh Narikel did not end. The children grew tired, but the water did not. It kept circling within the ring. Budhba Ghost said, “Write the lesson of the eighteenth breath.”

Ananya wrote: “The elephant was strong, but without a name its strength remained trapped in water. The crocodile ruled the water, but without history its grip became a curse. Whoever comes to listen will not be a god, but a witness.”

Ba added the final line: “In the end Satyavrat Mehta will not come carrying a sword. He will bring his ears. The first penance of a system that failed to listen for generations will be to listen.”

The leaves of Channa Grove bent over that line. The paper did not fly away. It stayed on the earth. For this chapter was not a tale of the sky, but

a tale of the foot—the foot a crocodile seizes, and the foot that slowly rises out of the water through the strength of names.

The eighteenth breath did not end. It merely paused like the exhausted elephant still searching for the right word with which to call. And in Channa Grove everyone—ghosts, spirits, children, the minds of rogues, leaves, water—began practising how to listen. For the next breath would be a call. And when a true call is made, no ear in Garh Narikel remains innocent.

FOLK SONG: THE ELEPHANT'S FOOT, THE CROCODILE'S TEETH

Folk tune: folk-tale song

*Listen to the call, listen to the elephant's call;
Understand: one must stand not with a sword, but with ears.
The elephant's foot was trapped in water; the crocodile gripped it
hard;
A third hand came to free it because it heard the cry.
After profit was renounced, the net that pulled became visible;
Across generations the terrible teeth remained beneath the water.
Not with a sword but with ears, Mehta will come one day;
The system's first penance will be to hear the silenced call.
The paper stayed upon the earth; this is a tale of feet;
By the strength of names, exhausted lives rise from the water.
The elephant searches for the word of its call; the grove becomes an
ear;
In the next breath the crime of every silence will open.
The paper remained on the earth; the tale kept the rhythm of feet.*



CHAPTER 48

The Call

One may speak all one's life; when the hour for listening comes, the ears are found filled with dust.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: EARS FOR THE CALL

Folk tune: hopeful cadence of a sorrowful call

Give an ear, give the call an ear;

*Before answering, grant it its full dignity.
 Give an ear to the one who has called all their life;
 Do not interrupt with an answer—first grant the voice its full worth.
 Time given to listening is service; patience in listening is a gift;
 One attentive hearing can save many a broken life.
 Build in the village a “house for listening,” and keep its door open;
 Let one weep, another speak—let all find boundless support.
 If ears awaken for the call, silence will not die;
 Through respect for the heard voice, justice slowly descends.
 A half-heard story heals only half a wound;
 A voice heard with patience descends all the way within.
 Village after village, let a “house for listening” stand with an open
 veranda;
 Let the angry and the grieving alike find a place to sit.*



In the eighteenth breath the elephant had seen its foot trapped in water, the crocodile had begun to understand the history of its grip, and everyone in Channa Grove sat down to practise listening. Listening is no small task in Garh Narikel. People there speak all their lives, but when the time comes to listen, their ears fill with the old dust of fear, profit, caste, rank, education, defeat, victory papers and humiliation. So Budhba Ghost said, “No kabaddi today. Today: the call.”

That morning the dew in Channa Grove did not dry for a long time. The day rose high; the village women finished smearing their courtyards with dung-water, children set off with schoolbags on their backs, old men lit bidis on the verandas—yet the dew remained on the leaves of Channa Grove. Tiny drops hung from their tips as though waiting for someone’s name to be spoken.

This time Ananya brought not a blank page but an empty bowl. The moment Ba saw it she knew the child had found the next rule of the game. The bowl was set in the middle of Channa Grove. There was no water in it. “Why empty?” Ba asked.

“If a call is made into a full bowl,” Ananya said, “the voice will keep looking at its own reflection. An empty bowl is a home for sound.”

Budhba Ghost descended from the branch. In his eyes was the tired brightness of twelve hundred years. He placed an ear beside the bowl. Much can be heard even in an empty bowl. One who has no ear calls it emptiness; one who has an ear calls it history.

The first call was Sarayu's—the woman labourer whose name had never been written correctly in the bridge office. Sometimes "Saru," sometimes "woman," sometimes "absent," sometimes "left the worksite." Her voice came not from the bowl but from a drop of dew. "Even when someone wrote my name wrongly, I still existed. A wrong name brought no bread, no compensation, no mourning. But a wrong name does not make a death smaller."

The children began writing together: Sarayu. One child's "S" bent crookedly, another stretched the ending too long, another misplaced a mark. Ba did not stop them. "A name sometimes trembles the first time it is written," she said. "A trembling name is alive."

The second call was Ujjwal Jha's. It came not from water but from the darkness of a switched-off phone. Devika Sah had arrived carrying her brother's old mobile, dead for months. Without any button being pressed, the screen flickered. No game opened. Only one line appeared: "I am not the money I lost; I am the morning of my home."

Devika placed the phone on the ground. She was not crying. Her eyes held the steadiness of someone who had already turned grief into work. "These games swallowed my brother," she said, "but I will write his name not in a game, but in a school."

The leaves of Channa Grove stirred slowly at that sentence. There was no wind. They moved from memory.

The third call was Munna Paswan's. He was alive, yet his bank account was more haunted than many dead men. His name was an accused person in court, a beneficiary in the bank, a suspect in police papers, a disgrace in the village, and a frightened father at home. He did not come forward. His voice came from outside the grove's circle: "I did not understand whose corpse my thumbprint would have to lift."

Ananya called him inside. Munna entered trembling. His feet touched the ground, but his shadow lagged behind. Budhba Ghost picked up the shadow and set it beside his feet. "Where a name becomes trapped, the shadow is left behind. Speak."

"I opened the account for a commission," Munna said. "I thought I would get two thousand rupees. Then the police came. The person who lost crores has no name; my name is there. The one who told me what to do is in the city. The one who told the city is abroad. The person abroad has no face. I have a face, so I am the criminal."

Ba placed a hand on his head. "The burden of an offence committed knowingly is one thing. The burden of a person trapped in darkness is another. But when one who was trapped begins teaching others how to recognise the darkness, the burden becomes a lesson."

From that day Munna became the first volunteer at the school against the screen. He would tell the children about his own mistake. Speaking his mistake aloud would be both his punishment and his release.

While these calls were being heard, far away in Delhi Satyavrat Mehta sat in the library of his government residence. Before him lay files of every kind—sealed, open, marked, rejected, under reconsideration. On his desk stood a small brass bell usually rung for a servant. That day the bell rang by itself. Once. Then silence.

Satyavrat Mehta stared at the bell. He remembered the hardest day of his life—the day he had stopped midway while reading a line written by the State in court. People had thought it courage. Satyavrat knew it had been less courage than the helplessness of an exhausted soul. How many times can a person read a lie aloud? One day the throat closes by itself.

The bell rang a second time. Now the sound came not like a bell but like a bowl—the call from inside an empty bowl. Satyavrat rose and opened the window. Delhi's dust, trees, security guards, red beacons, government cars—all were still there. Yet the air smelled of earth from the bank of the Kamala-Balan.

An old paper on his desk lifted and fell to the floor. It was an affidavit that had never been filed. On it was his note: "Verification of the list of names required." Beneath the note new letters had appeared: "Not verification. Listening."

Satyavrat sat down again. For the first time he understood that reading a file and listening to a name were two different acts. In a file a person becomes an object. Once a name is heard, the person becomes body, home, voice, morning, humiliation, hunger and waiting. Jurisprudence had taught him much, but never the grammar of waiting.

That night sleep did not come. In its place came a long corridor. Cupboards lined both sides. Each bore a label: "Adjourned." One: "Dead." Another: "Absent." A third: "Digital dispute." A fourth: "Commercial secret." A fifth: "National interest." A sixth: "Privacy." A seventh: "Insufficient evidence." At the end of the corridor sat a little girl. She might not have been Ananya, and she might have been every child.

"Where are your ears?" the girl asked.

"Here," Satyavrat said, touching them.

The girl shook her head. "Those are for hearing sound. The ears for hearing a name are inside."

Satyavrat woke. It was four in the morning. He did not call the security officer, did not summon the government car, did not inform his secretary. Into a small shoulder bag he put two changes of clothes, a

notebook, a fountain pen and the old affidavit. Then he opened the door and stepped outside. The guard started. "Sir, the car?"

"No," Satyavrat said. "Today I will begin on foot."

One cannot walk from Delhi to Garh Narikel. Yet some journeys must begin on foot so that the weight of office may fall away. He walked as far as the station. Some people recognised him, others did not. Those who recognised him thought: some important man in ordinary clothes. Those who did not saw only a tired old man. Under that second gaze Satyavrat felt lighter.

He had no reserved berth on the train. He climbed into a general coach. It was crowded. A young man watched a game on his phone, a woman nursed a child, an old man talked about litigation, two labourers slept with their heads on bundles. Satyavrat stood near the door. In that moment it seemed to him that the country's justice was standing in that very carriage—with tickets, without tickets, with fear, with exhaustion.

A child looked up at him. "Grandfather, where are you going?"

"Garh Narikel," Satyavrat replied.

"What is there?" the child asked.

After a long pause Satyavrat said, "Ears."

The child laughed. His mother hushed him. But the fan hanging from the roof of the coach turned at that answer as though it were a leaf of Channa Grove.

Back in Garh Narikel, the sequence of calls continued. Not all the names belonged to the dead. One day Meera stood in Channa Grove and said, "Tell the one who tried to frighten me: my love was not the crime; the blackmail was." The leaves set this sentence apart. A call about privacy is the quietest of calls, but once it emerges it travels very far.

Saumya Ramanathan was translating old papers into the people's language. "A lie written in English often looks more dignified," she said. "Translate it into Maithili and you can see its belly." Ira, back from abroad, told the children how different the applause of an auditorium was from the silence of a village. Gop Kumar remained quiet. His silence was no longer guilt; it had become a form of penance.

Budhba Ghost grew tired from listening to so many calls. Ghosts do not tire, but the exhaustion of listening belongs not to the body but to the soul. He said to Panidubbi, "Many names came today."

From the pond Panidubbi replied, "When names enter water, the water becomes heavy. But heavy water also becomes deep."

Evening was falling. Along the bank of the Kamala-Balan there was no red glow, only a pale light like turmeric. Then a figure appeared on

the distant road. He carried no sword, no order, no microphone, no flag. Only a small bag. He walked slowly, as though with every step he were laying down an old office.

Ananya saw him first. "Who is coming?"

Ba narrowed her eyes. "Someone who has come to practise listening."

When Satyavrat Mehta reached Channa Grove, no one applauded. No one bowed. No one gave him a stage. There was no stage. The empty bowl stood in the middle. Names lay on paper. Dew rested on leaves. Children sat in a circle. Ghosts stood behind. The Loths were not spectators but participants.

Satyavrat set his bag down. He took out the old affidavit but did not open it. First he touched both ears with his hands, then folded his hands and said, "I have come very late."

No one answered. In Channa Grove, silence too is an answer.

Then he said, "I am accustomed to reading. Today I will listen. Whoever wishes to speak a name, speak. Whoever wishes to remain silent, remain silent. I will write down the testimony of silence too."

At those words water began to fill the empty bowl by itself. It did not pour from above; it rose from the bottom. There was no sound of a stream, only a faint humming from the brass as though a throat sealed for years were slowly opening. The water was not clear but muddy. Yet in that muddy water the sky appeared perfectly clear.

Ba whispered into Ananya's ear, "Do you see? Satyavrat is no god. He did not bring the water. He merely admitted that the bowl was empty. That was enough for the water to rise."

Satyavrat kept looking into the muddy water. In it he saw the courtroom floor, sealed covers, red beacons, official language, his own signature, and thousands of unread names. He lowered his head for the first name.

A voice came first from a leaf: "Sarayu."

Satyavrat wrote: Sarayu. Then he paused. "Full name?" he asked.

The leaf stirred. The answer came: "A name becomes complete only when you write the name of the home, the labour of the body, the child's waiting, and the lie in the compensation."

Satyavrat stopped his pen. What legal form could contain such an entry? He thought for a long time. Then on the first page of the notebook he wrote a heading: "The Full Form of a Name."

Budhba Ghost smiled. That evening a new chapter of jurisprudence began in Garh Narikel—not section but listening, not order but record, not victory but admission.

The night deepened. The calls kept coming. Some names were clear, some partial, some only sobs. Satyavrat kept writing. When his hand tired, Ananya took the pen. When Ananya tired, Devika. When Devika tired, Munna. When Munna tired, Hariharan's granddaughter. When she tired, Batra's son.

At the sight, the eyes of the ghosts in Channa Grove grew brighter and brighter. The hands of the rogues' descendants writing down names did not erase the crimes of their fathers; but those hands loosened the grip of the future.

At midnight Satyavrat did not close the notebook. He left it open. "It will remain unfinished," he said. "As names come, they will be written. If justice cannot be complete, let the record at least remain open."

"Now you have listened," Ba said. "What is your call?"

"Mine?" Satyavrat said, startled.

"Everyone who listens has something trapped inside too," Ba replied.

Satyavrat was silent for a long time. Then he bent toward the empty bowl and said, "I cannot ask forgiveness for all the days I remained silent, because asking forgiveness can itself become a trick for making oneself lighter. I will say only this: every time my silence supported a lie, write the name of that silence in this record too."

"Does silence have a name?" Ananya asked.

"Yes," Satyavrat said. "The heaviest name of all."

The children wrote on the paper: Silence. Beneath it: Satyavrat Mehta. He did not stop them. Water fell from his eyes. The drop did not enter the bowl; it fell upon the earth. Where it struck, a small black mark appeared in the soil, like a signature outside the record. The earth drank it.

The nineteenth breath did not end there. The chain of calls continued. Only one thing had changed: for the first time in Garh Narikel, a great man of law sat there carrying ears, and the dead understood that their voices would no longer strike a courtroom wall and return; they would descend into someone's chest.

At the end of the night kabaddi began. The rule was simple: whoever took a breath would speak a name. Whoever spoke a name would listen. Whoever listened would not flee. Satyavrat Mehta sat outside the circle. He was not required to play. His punishment was to listen. That night the punishment felt to him like a blessing.

Dew gathered again upon the leaves of Channa Grove. One drop slowly fell onto the open page of the notebook. The ink did not run. Instead a new word formed: "Call."

Budhba Ghost shook the leaves. "Write the nineteenth breath."

Ananya wrote: "The one who calls does not need a god; they need an ear capable of hearing the crime of its own silence."

Satyavrat Mehta did not read the sentence. He only listened. For he was slowly learning that some sentences, read with the eyes, become knowledge; heard with the ears, become remorse; heard with the heart, become work.

FOLK SONG: EARS FOR THE CALL

Folk tune: sorrowful song of calling

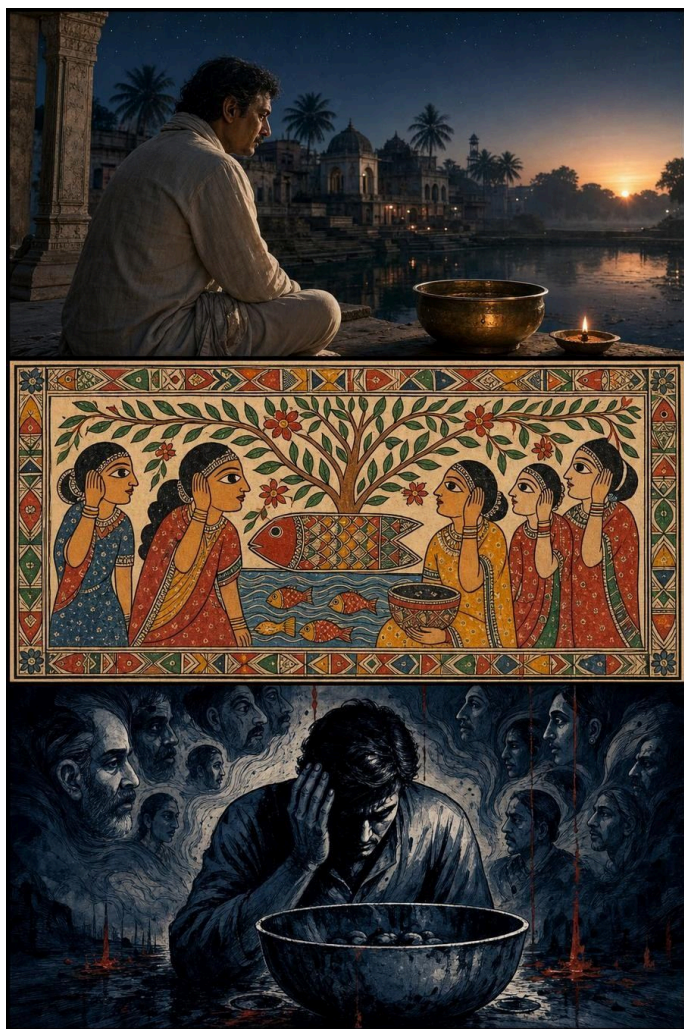
*Give an ear, give the call an ear;
Do not rescue us—recognise your own silence.
We spoke all our lives; when the time came to listen, who arrived?
The ears were filled with the dust of rank, profit and caste.
We need no god, only an ear
That can hear the crime of its own silence in the night.
Read a name with the eyes and it becomes a leaf of knowledge;
Hear it with the ears and it becomes a night of remorse.
When it descends into the heart, it becomes work;
The debt of the call falls upon the listener.
O listener, do not give us deliverance;
Hear our voice and recognise your own silence.*



CHAPTER 49

The Archive of Silence

A voice once heard becomes a debt - the one who heard it must repay it.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LEDGER OF WHAT
WAS HEARD**

Folk tune: song of the ledger of silence

*Write, O ledger of the heart, write with the ink of consent;
Keep the pearls of heard stories in a casket of dignity.
The ledger written in the ear is deeper than paper;
Responsibility for what is heard makes the heart grave.
Preserve the name, the day, the context; write only with permission;*

*Know the boundary of dignity - how much of whose story may be
opened.*

What you hear is a debt; repay it through service;

Keep the notebook of trust clean and carry it to its rightful place.

When the ledger of the ear remains in honest hands,

The history of the unheard can take a secure form.

Fix name, day and circumstance upon the page, clean and clear;

Ask before revealing whose words may open, and where.

Settle the debt of hearing slowly through service;

Keep this ledger of trust unsoiled throughout your life.



In the nineteenth breath came the call. In the twentieth, the reckoning of the call opened. In Garh Narikel it is believed that once a voice reaches the ear, it is no longer merely a voice; it becomes a debt. Whoever hears it must repay that debt. Satyavrat Mehta listened all night. At dawn he felt that his ears had grown heavy, as though every name had settled inside them as a small stone.

The bowl grew heavy with that understanding. For it was filled not merely with water, but with the weight of names that had crossed beyond the body.

At first Satyavrat Mehta tried to hold this matter in the language of law. "Posthumous dignity," "compensation," "liability" - he turned these words over and over in his mind. But in Channa Grove he understood that when the body is gone, dignity is not a courtroom term; dignity is the moment when a child reads a full name aloud without fear.

Thus water-burial was no longer merely death by drowning. It became the name of that unbearable bridge between the end of the body and the release of the bonds within, a bridge across which a human being walks weeping and yet growing lighter. The labourer who fell into the water lost the body; but the name that the contractor had marked absent came out of the river after the crocodile's teeth. The body ended; the name was free. That contradiction is the heart of this story.

From that night onward the tale of Gaja and Graha seemed to be told again and again in the leaves of Channa Grove. The elephant was strong, but in the water the graha seized it and broke the pride of its strength. When the foot would not come free, pride came free; when pride fell away, the cry was born. Once the cry was born, the road to deliverance opened. In Garh Narikel the crocodiles were neither the mythic graha nor angels; they were the hard teeth of nature. Yet sometimes, when they chewed a body away, the cry bound inside that body was released.

The crocodiles had played no game. The old people of Garh Narikel used to say that when a crocodile chews a body, it does not break bones alone; tooth by tooth it also loosens the knots of fear bound to the body, the lies of paper stuck upon the body like a burden, and the name sunk in the mud of humiliation. It sounded cruel, but the truths of Garh Narikel always sound cruel at first and compassionate afterward.

The dawn in Channa Grove was different that day. The sun rose, but the light caught in the leaves, as though day had come outside but not within. The empty bowl still stood in the middle of the grove. There was no water in it, yet its bottom was wet. Satyavrat tried to lift it. It would not rise. The Loths sat in a circle around it, their little round bodies like the seals of a court.

Ananya asked, "Why has the bowl become so heavy?"

Ba said, "When an empty thing has listened, it becomes heavier than a full one."

Satyavrat began to close his notebook. Budhba the Ghost called from a branch, "Not yet. The names have been written, but the names of silence remain."

Satyavrat stopped. His finger remained upon the notebook page. He was a man of law: he knew how to make lists, add sections, count charges. But a list of silences? Silence was not written on paper. Silence was the blank space between files, the moment in a meeting when someone heard the truth and reached for water, the corner of a statement where someone wrote, "investigation is in progress."

Ba kept looking at him. "Without writing the names of silence, the call will remain incomplete. We have written the names of those who died. We may or may not ever find the names of those who killed them. But history will remain incomplete until we write the names of those who saw and kept silent."

Satyavrat said quietly, "You want me to write my own crime?"

Ba answered, "Not yours alone. Everyone's. But you will begin, because you heard."

The sentence cut Satyavrat to the core. He remembered the first day of his first job: an old room in a district court, an old table, a file tied with red tape, and in that file a poor man's petition on which he had written, "For consideration." The petition never came into his hands again. Perhaps the man had died; perhaps he had gone home defeated; perhaps today his son was trapped in someone's mule account. Suddenly Satyavrat felt that the words "for consideration" too had been a small graha.

He opened the notebook again. On the first page was written: the full form of the name. Beneath it were the names written throughout the night. Satyavrat opened the next page and wrote the heading: The Archive of Silence. As he wrote, the letters trembled. Before the ink had dried, a drop of dew fell on the page and enlarged the first letter of "Silence," as though that letter were preparing to swallow all the others.

The first silence was written beside Sarayu's name. Nand's ledger had not contained her full name. In the contractor's office her death did not exist. In the government list she was absent. But in the Archive of Silence it was written: "The silence of the officer who did not think it necessary to ask the name of a woman labourer."

The second silence was written beside Ujjwal Jha's name: "The silence of the family that saw sleep leave his eyes on the first night, yet dismissed the red glow of the game on his phone as merely a game." Devika trembled as soon as she heard the line. "Write my name here too," she said.

Ba placed a hand on her shoulder. "Guilt and silence are not the same. But if you want the future to listen, write down the day on which you yourself did not listen."

With her own hand Devika wrote, "A sister's silence." Then she bowed her head over the page. She was not crying, but the tears of those who work from within do not always reach the eyes. Some tears go straight into the writing.

The third silence came before Munna Paswan: "The bank's silence." Munna spoke at once. "The bank clerk told me to open the account and said I would get work. Did he know?"

Budhba the Ghost answered, "Sometimes knowledge is not necessary; suspicion is enough. Whoever sees cause for suspicion and then remains silent belongs in the record of silence too."

Munna remained silent for a long time. He remembered that on the day the account was opened, a clerk at the bank had looked at his Aadhaar card three times and then murmured to someone on the phone, "Yes, this one is fine. He is a village boy." Munna had not understood those words then. Now he did.

Ananya wrote, "Silence after seeing cause for suspicion."

Satyavrat Mehta watched the child write with ease what was, in effect, a difficult proposition of law. In Delhi such a sentence would require a fifteen-page note. In Channa Grove, one line.

Meanwhile Batuknath Hariharan awoke in the village dharmashala. He had not slept all night. The copy of the judgment he had kept beneath his pillow was found at dawn with its paper edge bitten away, as though

tiny teeth had been gnawing it all night. He opened it. The letters were correct, the order was correct, the victory was correct. But in the blank spaces of the page small words had sprouted: "When you knew, why were you silent?"

Alarmed, Hariharan folded the paper. His granddaughter came in. The light of a Garh Narikel dawn lay on the child's face. She asked, "Grandfather, will you write your own name in the Archive of Silence?"

A laugh tried first to escape Hariharan's mouth. "This is a children's game." But no sound emerged. The same leaf from the night seemed lodged in his throat. He managed only, "I am a man of law."

His granddaughter said, "Then you should be the first to understand the law of silence."

She left. Hariharan remained seated in the chair. He remembered how often he had declared in bar auditoriums, "Procedure is above everything." Today it seemed to him that, while saying "procedure" again and again, he had pushed countless faces downward. Yet he was not ready to admit it. In Hariharan's dictionary, admission meant defeat.

Elsewhere in the city Chandrapal Batra went to a shop to have the broken screen of his dead phone replaced. The shopkeeper said, "The screen is fine. The picture inside is damaged." Batra snapped, "Change the picture." The shopkeeper switched on the phone. The same list appeared again: Ujjwal Jha, Munna Paswan, unknown account, suicide, digital arrest, a mother's mortgaged jewellery. Frightened, the shopkeeper handed the phone back. "Sir, this is not a mobile phone. It is testimony."

Batra left the shop. The street was crowded, but upon every face he seemed to see the same word: "Silence." He sat in his car and sent Raghav Signal a message: "Stop the game of names." The message did not go. Instead the screen answered: "Silence sent."

Raghav Signal sat in his room. All the secret messages he thought he had erased were falling across his table like paper leaves. Each leaf carried no order and no amount of money, only the moment at which he had remained silent: "He is a poor boy; he will lend his account." "Frighten him; the money will come out." "Keep the girl's pictures; she will not testify." "Tell the old father his son will go to jail." These messages were not commands; they were the reverse face of silence.

For the first time Raghav wondered: had I committed crimes by speaking, or by remaining silent? He understood: both. His speech had been instruction; his silence, permission.

In Garh Narikel the Archive of Silence kept filling. Satyavrat grew tired from writing. Ba asked, "Tired?"

"Yes," he said. "But this is the right kind of tiredness."

Ba said, "Rightful weariness does not make a person smaller. It is better than the comfort of falsehood."

By midday a strange assembly had formed in Channa Grove: families of victims, children of rogues, village elders, the schoolmaster, a bank clerk who had taken leave, the hospital compounder who had prepared bills during the pandemic, a lawyer's clerk who had grown old writing dates - everyone. No one wholly criminal, no one wholly innocent. Channa Grove told them all the same thing: "Wherever you could have listened and did not, write it down."

The bank clerk protested first. "I have to follow rules."

Saumya asked calmly, "Is there no place in the rules to record suspicion?"

The clerk fell silent. He remembered that the final line of the form said "Other remarks." That line was always left blank. Slowly he wrote, "The silence of leaving 'Other remarks' blank."

The hospital compounder said, "I was not a doctor. The bills came from above."

Devika asked, "Where was 'above'?"

The compounder looked at the sky, then understood that "above" was not a deity but an accounts manager sitting in an air-conditioned room. He wrote, "I saved my own face by saying 'from above.'"

The lawyer's clerk who had spent his life writing dates looked at his trembling hand. "I never buried a file. I only wrote what I was told."

Satyavrat looked at him for a long time. "How many times did you see an old mother sitting at the door and still not send her file inside?"

The clerk's hand trembled. He wrote, "The silence of the doorway."

This Archive of Silence was not a court register. It contained no provision for punishment, only the pain of admission. But in Garh Narikel it is believed that when an admission is true, it cuts deeper than punishment. Punishment is imposed from outside; admission cuts from within.

Evening fell. Satyavrat Mehta's notebook was full. Ananya brought a second notebook. Ba a third. Meera a fourth. Ira laid down a stack of papers that had come from abroad; they bore the emblem of a foreign auditorium. Ba turned them over. "Applause was written on these. Now write silence on them."

Ira lifted the pen. She wrote: "The silence of the foreign auditorium, when the shadow of the Garh Narikel bridge appeared amid speeches on ethics and no question was raised."

Edward Broom, across the sea, was sitting in his office at that moment. Before him lay the draft of his next speech: "The Future of Accountable Capital." Suddenly a blank page slipped out from among the papers. Its heading was "The Archive of Silence." His secretary asked, "Sir, whose document is this?" Broom began to answer, but no voice came out. For the first time he understood that speaking from a lofty stage can itself be a form of silence when it covers the truth.

By nightfall fourteen lanterns burned in Channa Grove. There was the light of the Rakash too, but this time human beings had brought lanterns as well. The Loths watched the light. One Loth rolled slowly toward a lantern and placed its small hand upon it. The light did not dim. Ba said, "See? Even what is made from the remnants of a body can hold light."

Satyavrat Mehta wrote down the sentence. It seemed to him larger than all the books of law. A society that treats the memory of the dead only as inauspicious stops learning from the dead. Garh Narikel made the dead not into darkness, but into bearers of light.

Suddenly the empty bowl rang by itself. Ting. Everyone fell silent. A voice came from the bowl: "Silence has been written. Now the names that have been written must be read."

Budhba the Ghost nodded. "In the twentieth breath, the reading begins."

Satyavrat asked, "Who will read?"

Ananya answered, "Those who remained silent."

A stir ran through the gathering. Writing a name was one thing; reading it was another. While writing, a person looks at paper; while reading, other eyes look at the reader. The bank clerk tried to step back. The lawyer's clerk trembled. The compounder broke into sweat. Hariharan's granddaughter looked toward her grandfather. Hariharan stood at the far edge of the grove, believing no one saw him. But in Channa Grove the edge is never a place to hide; the edge is where the inside begins.

Ba said, "Hariharan Babu, you read."

Hariharan froze. "Me?"

For the first time Satyavrat looked him straight in the eye. "Yes. You have read procedure all your life. Today read names."

The paper was placed in Hariharan's hand. He began, "Sarayu..." His voice broke. He stopped. His granddaughter said softly, "Read it in full."

He began again: "Sarayu, whose name remained incomplete on paper; the silence of the officer who did not ask her name."

As he read the line the leaves of the grove moved. Hariharan's throat dried. It seemed to him that the words were not coming from his own throat, but from some ancient crack.

The second line: "Ujjwal Jha, whose dawn was eaten by the crocodile of the screen; the silence of the family, the silence of society, the silence of advertising, the silence of law." Hariharan stopped. Chandrapal Batra's son kept looking at the paper. Then he stepped forward and said, "I will read this."

He read it. His voice shook, but he read. In the city, at that very moment, Chandrapal sat clutching his chest. It felt as though a child were opening the safe inside him.

Throughout the night of the twentieth breath, Garh Narikel held a reading of names. Those who had never spoken from a stage read aloud. Those who had spoken too much from stages listened. This was not a reversal for its own sake, but the first lesson of justice.

At midnight Budhba the Ghost spoke the final line: "The names written in the Archive of Silence will not be erased. But this archive is not meant to remain a collection of guilt; it is meant to become a practice of listening. Whoever listens and turns that hearing into action will see their silence slowly fall away like leaves. Whoever listens and again remains silent will find that silence becoming a graha that seizes the foot."

Satyavrat Mehta sat beside the bowl for a long time. He understood that in the end he was not meant to become a saviour, but a keeper of this archive - a keeper who would guard not a gate, but the ear. When power said, "The matter is closed," he would say, "The name is incomplete." When a court said, "Procedure is complete," he would answer, "The hearing remains."

In the first light of dawn Ananya wrote the twentieth breath. She wrote: "Whoever writes the name of silence accepts the burden of guilt; whoever reads the name of silence opens a road for the future. In Garh Narikel justice grows not from verdicts, but from the reading aloud of names that have been heard."

Satyavrat read the line - this time with his eyes and his ears. The ears that had grown heavy in the night seemed a little lighter at dawn. One does not become light because guilt has vanished, but because one accepts the duty of guarding against it.

The leaves in Channa Grove slowly began to dry. The drops of dew fell away. The empty bowl could now be lifted. Satyavrat raised it. The bowl was light, but his hand was heavy. Ba smiled. "Good. The bowl is light and the hand is heavy. Work can be done by such people."

The twentieth breath had not ended. It had been only the first reading of the archive. In the next breath the names that had been read would walk. And when names walk, they leave footprints in village, city, court, foreign land, screen and auditorium alike. The rogues would think they could burn the paper. But the Archive of Silence had been written less on paper than inside ears. Once an ear awakens, fire cannot burn it.

FOLK SONG: THE LEDGER WRITTEN IN THE EAR

Folk tune: viraha of silence

*Repay the debt, repay the debt of the voice you heard;
The ledger of silence is not paper - find it inside the ear.
The voice you heard is a debt; its payment now is yours;
The ledger of silence is not paper; its home is in the ear.
Name after name made both of Mehta's ears grow heavy;
The bowl grew light, the hand grew heavy - there lives the breath of
work.*

*Not erasing guilt, but accepting the watch makes one lighter;
Dew fell, leaves dried, and an inner music woke.
The rogue may burn the paper, but if the ear is awake,
Fire cannot burn the memory that refuses to flee.
Read the Archive of Silence; repay the debt today;
What has been heard now settles as work upon the chest.
The rogue may burn paper; an awakened ear does not fail.*



CHAPTER 50

The Name After the Body

The body goes away, the name remains - and the feet of the name stay wet.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE ROOT KEEPS THE NAME

Folk tune: a green form of samdaun

*Keep it, O root, keep the root of the name;
 Even when the body has gone far away, do not forget the letters.
 Though the body has gone far, the root keeps the name;
 Within the soil it feeds the letters the milk of dew.
 Plant a tree for the ancestors; write the full name on the plaque;
 In its shade children will learn labour, courage and honour.
 The root says: memory is steady, the leaves are ever new;
 Life changes form, yet love remains wondrous.
 When roots keep names, the forest becomes a family;
 Even beyond the body, the bright stream of dignity will endure.
 Write the full name upon the ancestral plaque and plant a tree
 beneath it;
 Generations will sit in its shade and learn the truth of labour.
 Leaves fall, seasons change, the root remains steadfast;
 Even the grieving tune of samdaun speaks a green hope.*



There was no water in Channa Grove that night, yet everyone felt that their feet were wet. The earth beneath the grove was as cold as though the first rain of the year had fallen upon it, though the sky above was clear. Stars seemed caught from branch to branch, and the branches trembled from time to time as though what rested on them were not stars, but names.

Satyavrat Mehta stood for a long time outside the grove. No one had given him permission to enter. No one was stopping him either. Yet he did not go in. For years he had known how to rise and sit in human courts, speak and remain silent, turn papers, reverse arguments. But the first rule in the court of Channa Grove was: first listen to the voice of your own body.

Listening to the body was difficult for him. A person who remains in office too long turns the body into a cupboard of files. Sections in the head, subsections within sections, judgments within subsections, interpretations behind judgments. How the heart beats, how breath moves, how the soles of the feet touch the earth - all these things he had forgotten.

Faint voices came from within the grove - not kabaddi, but names. First one name, then another, then a third. They were not being called in the way a court calls cases - "so-and-so versus so-and-so." Here names came from a mother's mouth, a father's knees, a half-sleeping child's ear, and the water of the river.

Budhba the Ghost stepped out from the shade of the pipal. The blackness of his body seemed bright that night because behind him the dwarf glow of the Loths shimmered. He looked at Satyavrat.

“You have come now?”

Satyavrat bowed his head. “I have come now to listen.”

“Listening is not difficult. Carrying the weight of what has been heard is difficult. Will you carry it?”

Satyavrat opened his mouth to answer, but no voice came out. At that moment he understood: those who speak too much in human courts become mute in Channa Grove. Becoming mute is not punishment; it is preparation.

In the middle of Channa Grove a pond appeared that night. It had not been there the day before. No one had dug it. No one knew where its water came from. But the moon did not float in the water; letters did. At first the letters were broken and scattered, as though a body had been torn by crocodile teeth. Then slowly they joined and began to form names.

Satyavrat knelt. The first name he saw in the water was Sarayu Devi. The second: Budhan Mian. The third: Jagesar Paswan. Then Ujjwal Jha. Then names he had never found in any case law, any digest of judgments, any government annexure. Yet the mere pronunciation of each name made the water tremble.

A child, perhaps Ananya, came and sat beside the water. Seeing Satyavrat, she asked, “Will you have your name written too?”

Satyavrat was startled. “My name? I am not dead.”

The child laughed. “Only the dead are not written here. The names of those who remained silent many times are written here too.”

The sentence entered Satyavrat like a needle that pierced not cloth, but skin. He remembered the first date when Nand’s file had reached the government table. The second, when the list of labourers had been returned as “incomplete.” The third, when Ujjwal’s death after digital fraud had been called “private financial risk.” The fourth, when he had said of Gop Kumar’s data, “We should wait for verification of the records.” Wait. Wait. Wait. How often does waiting become another name for crime?

He dipped his right hand into the water. The letters gathered around his fingers. The water did not feel cold; it felt warm, like the final warmth of a body. Softly he said, “Satyavrat Mehta. Silence.”

The name descended into the water. The water circled once, as though a crocodile were turning around him. Satyavrat’s body shuddered.

He was not afraid that a crocodile would seize his foot. He feared it would seize not his body, but his office.

Just then a long shadow came from the western side of Channa Grove. Whether it was an elephant or a human being was hard to say. Its head was immense, its eyes tired, its body muddy, and something bound its foot that showed at a glance that it had struggled for a very long time. Before it the water split and a graha rose from within - not the graha of a river, but the graha inside the body. Greed, fear, office, family honour, judicial dignity, government discipline, the convenience of history - all had joined into a single graha.

Budhba the Ghost whispered, "People hear the tale of Gaja and Graha often. But most see only the elephant and not the graha. The real question is: from what does the elephant want freedom? From the graha outside, or from the grip within?"

Satyavrat kept watching. The elephant was not trumpeting. It was exhausted. The graha held not its foot, but its memory. The harder the elephant struggled, the deeper the graha sank within. Then the old rhythm of kabaddi rose in Channa Grove - not from ghosts, but from names.

Sarayu Devi. Budhan Mian. Jagesar Paswan. Ujjwal Jha. Nand Aruni. Unknown. Absent. Missing. Gone.

Each name struck the elephant's body and broke one shackle. At last the elephant looked not at the water, but at the sky. What came from its mouth was not a cry but an admission. The graha released its foot. Whether the elephant was freed or died, no one could tell. For in Channa Grove freedom and death sometimes enter the same body together.

Satyavrat understood: "Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles" was not only the moment when crocodiles chewed a body to the bone. It was also the moment when the body's last pride broke. The body was destroyed, but the lie bound to the body was destroyed too. The one whom the world called defeated was released within. The one whom the world called victorious remained bound to the paper of victory.

At that moment the shadow of Batuknath Hariharan appeared at the edge of the grove. His body was still in the village dak bungalow, but his shadow had reached Channa Grove. The shadow carried an order in its hand. The paper of the order trembled not in wind, but in water. Batuknath's shadow shouted, "None of this is valid! What court is this? Where is its jurisdiction?"

The Loths laughed. Their laughter sounded not like tiny bells, but like a hearse far away. Budhba the Ghost said, "Jurisdiction? Wherever a name is erased, the jurisdiction of Channa Grove begins."

Chandrapal Batra's mind also arrived, flickering in the shape of a screen. It hung in the air of the grove as if suspended from an invisible wire. Upon the screen his gambling-app icon, the seal of his law office, mule-account numbers and fake digital-arrest notices all flashed together. He tried to erase them, but in Channa Grove there was no verb called "erase." There was only remembrance.

Raghav Signal's voice came without a body: "The message will delete itself."

For the first time the Brahma of the pipal spoke from all four faces at once: "A message that carries a crime does not disappear; it changes form. Sometimes a leaf, sometimes water, sometimes a child's question."

Satyavrat rose. His clothes were not wet, but his walk had changed. He no longer walked like a man of the court, but like an old man of the village - slowly, listening, feeling the temperature of the earth. He did not look toward Batuknath's shadow. He did not approach Chandrapal's screen. He went to Ananya.

"Where did you write my name?" he asked.

Ananya placed a finger on a leaf and showed him. It read: "Satyavrat Mehta - who listened late, but listened."

Satyavrat's eyes filled. He had received many certificates of honour in his life. Many offices. Many forms of address. But this was the first time his name had been joined not to an office, but to an action: listened.

Gop Kumar sat on the other side of the grove that night. He held no paper, only a dry coconut leaf. He was writing nothing on it. Devika asked, "What will you write now?"

Gop said, "Now I will not write. Now they will write themselves."

"Who?"

"Those who have been freed. Those who remain bound. The bound will write more."

The water of Channa Grove slowly began to sink away. The pond did not vanish; it went down into the earth. The soil of the grove remained damp. Budhba the Ghost said, "Freedom does not always rise upward. Sometimes it sinks into the soil and becomes a root."

After that night many people in Garh Narikel dreamed. Families of the labourers saw their dead emerge from the water and bathe, but without bodies. There were no baskets on their heads. Ujjwal's mother saw her son not smashing the mobile phone, but setting it afloat in the river and saying, "Mother, I am not a screen." Meera saw the papers of her private fear dissolve not in fire, but in water and turn into flowers.

But the rogues dreamed differently. Batuknath saw the order in his hand turn into the jaw of a graha and seize his wrist. Chandrapal saw all his passwords change one by one into the names of the dead. Raghav saw that his self-deleting messages had not vanished, but were written as blue bruises upon his body. Far away beside the sea, in his glass house, Lau Kin-Hung saw each wave pronounce a Maithili name; he could not understand the pronunciation, but it cut into his sleep.

Dawn came. Kabaddi was suspended in Channa Grove. Yet the ground of the stopped game was covered with countless footprints: human, ghostly, children's, elephant, graha, and those of all who had been freed from the body but remained joined to a name. Satyavrat Mehta came out. The driver who had come for him asked, "Sir, back to Delhi?"

Satyavrat remained silent for a moment. Then he said, "Delhi later. First the Ganga bridge."

"What is there now, sir?"

Satyavrat answered, "Where the bodies fell, names still have to be placed."

There was no official command in the answer, no court direction, no government programme. It held a human being's quiet vow. It was not enough to accept as liberated the voices bound inside the bodies that the crocodiles had chewed away. The freed names had to be given a place upon the earth.

The leaves of the coconut trees in Garh Narikel moved very slowly that dawn. There was no breeze. The leaves moved by themselves, as though saying: the body is gone, the water is gone, the fear is gone; now the name is searching for a root.

And when a name begins to search for a root, the story changes once again.

FOLK SONG: THE BODY IS GONE, THE NAME SEEKS A ROOT

Folk tune: samdaun

*Take it, O earth, take the name into your lap;
When the root sprouts, let the dead give shade again.
The body flowed away in water; the dampness of the feet remained;
Stars caught in the branches; the light of the name kept burning.
The crocodile chewed the body; the voice broke its bonds;
It is not enough to call it free - give it a place upon the earth.
A mother says, "Plant the root of the name in my courtyard";*

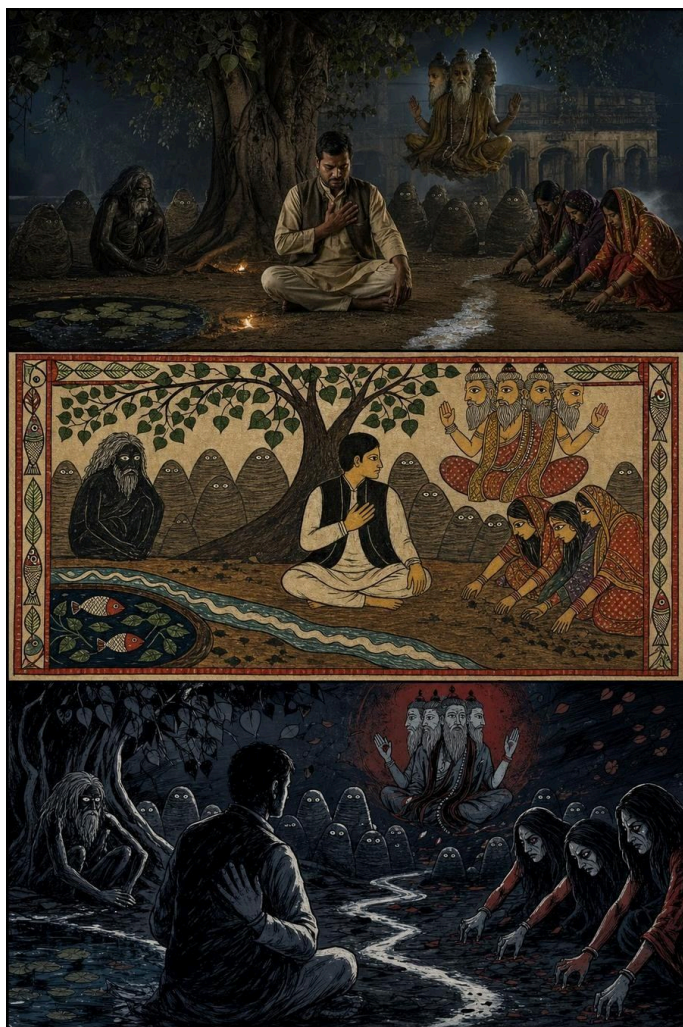
*A leaf says, "Sow the story upon a child's tongue."
The body went, the water went, the night of fear declined;
The name came seeking soil and paused at the threshold.
O earth, take that name into your lap;
When the root sprouts, let the dead give shade again.
A mother says, "Plant the root in my courtyard";*



CHAPTER 51

The Weight of Witness

The weight of a witness is measured not on scales, but upon the chest.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: STAND WITH THE WITNESS

Folk tune: penitential mangal

Hold the witness's hand, hold it with both your hands;

*Share the burden of the heavy chest, half and half.
 If the witness's chest is heavy, offer a companion's shoulder;
 Give a safe home, an ear, counsel and a place to rest.
 The teller of truth may be brave, yet remains human;
 Protect the witness's fear, fatigue and family honour.
 Institutions must share the burden of testimony;
 Not lonely courage, but collective protection.
 When a witness has companions, truth will stand firm;
 The heavy chest will grow lighter and point toward justice.
 Speaking truth is not easy; at night sleep may not come;
 If the lamp of companionship stays lit, fear cannot torment.
 Let society assume responsibility for home, counsel and rest;
 Not solitary heroism, but the spirit of shared protection.*



When Satyavrat Mehta entered Channa Grove, it seemed to him that he was entering not a grove, but his own chest. Outside, the earth was hard; within, soft. Outside were papers of orders; within, leaves bearing names. Outside was office; within, a naked voice. In the middle of the grove that night kabaddi had stopped. The halt was not from weariness of play, but from that silence after a hearing in which a verdict searches for its own body.

The Brahma of the pipal was not upon the branch. He had come down, but all four faces were silent in the four directions. Budhba the Ghost sat to one side, gathering in the light of his dark body. The Loths looked like a small hill of round forms; this time they were not spectators but guardians of the archive. Panidubbi had come out of the pond and lay across the dust of Channa Grove like a line of dampness. The witches did not dance their little steps; they scratched at the earth with their fingers.

Satyavrat took from his bag the paper bearing the seal of his office. The seal did not shine at night. In Channa Grove seals turn dark; only names shine there. The paper was heavy in his hand. Paper that bears the weight of government by day cannot bear the weight of the soul at night.

Budhba the Ghost asked, "What have you brought?"

"An account of what I heard," Satyavrat said.

"An account?" Budhba smiled. "An account is something in which figures can be increased or reduced. What has been heard is not an account; it is a weight. Have you come to carry the weight, or to weigh it again?"

Satyavrat did not answer. He remembered the courtroom by day, where everything was weighed: which section, which provision, which limitation period, which objection, which admissibility. But in Channa Grove no objection was raised. The only inadmissible thing here was forgetting.

Suddenly water rustled behind the grove. The crocodiles were coming. First their eyes appeared - two damp, cold points, like distant stars fallen into water. Then their backs. Then their teeth. Satyavrat's body trembled for a moment. He had heard of these crocodiles; he had never seen them. In court the crocodile had been metaphor. Here it had a body.

The crocodiles stopped upon the dust of Channa Grove. There was no blood in their mouths. Water lay upon their teeth. Satyavrat thought: these were the teeth that had chewed the labourers' bodies, dissolved Nand's evidence in water, separated so many names from bone. But Budhba the Ghost said softly, "Do not be afraid. Not every tooth is a weapon. Some teeth are made to cut bonds as well."

Satyavrat did not understand.

The oldest crocodile moved forward. Moss covered its body, and time had drawn a milky film over its eyes. It did not speak in human language, but Panidubbi translated its voice: "We eat bodies. That is both our fault and our nature. But if a body remains bound in water, whose work is it to cut it free?"

Satyavrat started. He remembered the tale of Gaja and Graha. The elephant had been seized, the graha held fast, the cry rose toward the sky. In that tale the graha appears guilty; yet sometimes the one that seizes also seizes the lies of the world. Here the crocodile had not spared the body; but by chewing the body away it had separated the name from the body's prison. Bones that would have remained trapped in a government register dissolved in water and became voice.

Budhba the Ghost said, "That is why you must not turn the title into fear alone. Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles - it is fear, but not merely fear. It is both the body's defeat and the name's release. What was chewed did not simply end; its bonds broke. But this release does not pardon the crime. The name of the one who pushed that person into the water will not be freed so easily."

Satyavrat thought of tearing up his paper. His hand stopped. Tearing paper does not tear a crime. He opened the paper and spread it on the ground. It bore the language of courts: "matter disposed of," "record unavailable," "evidence insufficient," "time elapsed." The wind of Channa Grove moved. The letters trembled. "Disposed of" became "trace." "Unavailable" became "unnamed." "Insufficient" became "our own thirst." "Time elapsed" became "time passed; the name did not."

Satyavrat sat holding his head. For the first time he understood how often the language of law writes a second death upon the temple of the dead. The body drowned once; the name drowned a second time. How many times had he himself taken part in that second drowning? The question entered his chest not like a crocodile's tooth, but like the point of a leaf.

"I came late," he said.

All four faces of the Brahma of the pipal spoke together: "Delay too can be a crime, but admitting delay is a doorway. The doorway can open if you enter through it and do not run back out."

Satyavrat rose. His shoes caught in the soil. With every step a name sounded: Sarayu, Dukhan, Mahito, Lalna, Ujjwal, Hulasi, Nand, the unnamed child whose body had not burned on a pyre, the migrant born abroad who heard the name of his village only at festivals, the woman who could not speak for fear of blackmail, the young man whose account had been turned into a mule account. The names were no longer separate; together they became one long breath.

The children reached the edge of the grove, Ananya in front. An empty notebook was in her hand. Seeing Satyavrat, she asked, "What does a witness do?"

Satyavrat looked at her for a long time. It seemed to him that this child's questions were larger than the questions of courts. A court asks, "Where is the evidence?" A child asks, "If you saw it, what will you say?"

He answered slowly, "A witness does not sell his eyes. And if he ever does, he spends the rest of his life returning the price."

Ananya asked, "How does he return the price?"

Satyavrat took out the strip of paper bearing his designation and placed it on the ground. "First make your own name smaller. Remove the office. Begin there."

The children made a circle around him. Devika, Meera, Saumya, Ira, Nishant and Aruni slowly arrived. Gop Kumar was nowhere visible, but a coconut leaf moved once. Everyone understood: what cannot be seen is not necessarily absent.

Satyavrat said, "I will not write a judgment. Channa Grove has given the judgment. I will write only a witness statement - for all those whose voices never reached the court. But this witness statement will not go first to a court. The children will read it first. A society whose children can read it may one day build a court where the dead do not have to wait to become evidence."

Batuknath Hariharan's mind hung outside the circle. His body was far away in the city, but his mind stood at the edge of the grove. He

watched Satyavrat lay in the soil the office that Hariharan had treated all his life as a shield. The sight pierced him. He wondered: does a human being survive after the office is removed? Then a very old voice sounded within him: "What was your name?" He could not remember.

Chandrapal Batra's screen suddenly turned bright. It showed no number, wage or account, only Satyavrat's hand placing his official designation on the earth. In fury Chandrapal threw away the phone. It did not break. In the cracked glass his own face became ten faces, and not one bore a name.

Raghav Signal's silence cracked. The deleted message returned: "A witness is not for sale." He began typing, "From whom?" No answer came. In Channa Grove an answer is not always required; the question itself slowly becomes testimony.

Lau Kin-Hung sat in his glass house looking at the sea. The water abruptly turned not green but grey. A coconut leaf came floating upon it. Devanagari letters were written on the leaf. He could not read them. But he could read the fear. He knew the language of accounts across the world; he did not know the language of names.

In Channa Grove the old crocodile moved again. Water dripped between its teeth. Panidubbi translated its voice once more: "We cut the body. You cut the bonds. We gave release from the body; you must give release to the name."

Meera stepped forward and placed her palm upon the earth. "Can we return privacy once it has been stolen?"

Budhba the Ghost said, "You cannot return it. But you can turn what was stolen from a cause of shame into proof of theft. When the victim lays down shame, the thief's hand begins to tremble."

Devika asked, "How do we save the brother who drowned in the screen?"

"Not the one already drowned," said the Brahma of the pipal. "Save the next hand that is about to drown. Love for the dead becomes a watch over the future."

Saumya opened her records. There were numbers on the paper. She began to read them, but numbers would not remain numbers in the grove. Each digit wanted to become a name. She closed the notebook. "Numbers later. Names first."

Ira tried to say "Garh Narikel" in her foreign-born accent, but the words caught in her throat. Ananya took her hand and said, "Say it slowly. If you say the village's name too quickly, it does not listen." Ira tried again: "Garh... Narikel." This time the coconut leaves moved. In that moment a birth abroad entered the memory of the village.

Satyavrat sat down to write the first witness statement. The first line read: "I, Satyavrat Mehta, not by former office but by present remorse, admit that while names were being called, I listened for a long time only to procedure."

He stopped after writing. No one applauded in Channa Grove. True admission is not met with applause; it is met with stillness. In that stillness the crocodiles began to retreat. They turned toward the water. The guardians of the body had completed their work; the guardianship of names was now placed in human hands.

As the last crocodile entered the water, Satyavrat watched it go. He understood that crocodiles are not only monsters; they are mirrors too. Whoever lives in greed for the body meets teeth. Whoever is trapped in the bondage of a name may find those teeth becoming release. The contradiction was difficult to bear, but truth is difficult because it shows mercy and blame at the same time.

The children sat around the witness statement. Ananya read the first name. Another child read the second. Slowly what began in Channa Grove was not night, but a lesson. Kabaddi remained suspended that night. The game would return, but after the names had been read.

Satyavrat Mehta looked one last time at the strip bearing his designation. The wind turned it over. The back was blank paper. He did not smile; there was no time to smile. On the blank side he wrote one line: "What has been heard is no longer alone."

Above Channa Grove the first bird of dawn called. There was no proclamation in its voice. It merely seemed to say that the night had spent all its darkness. Day lay ahead, and in daylight testimony is harder than falsehood.

Satyavrat gathered the papers. The children rose. The leaves began once again to move normally. But in the soil of the grove, exactly where the designation had been placed, a small coconut shoot had appeared. No one was surprised. In Garh Narikel, an office buried in the earth sometimes becomes a tree of names.

FOLK SONG: THE WITNESS'S HEAVY CHEST

Folk tune: song of repentance

*Weigh the chest, not on scales - weigh it upon the chest;
When office was buried in earth, a shoot of name sprang forth.
A witness is weighed not on scales, but on the chest;
The designation turns over and blank paper appears.
"I kept listening to procedure while names were calling";
No applause for Mehta's admission - stillness descended.
Numbers wanted to become names; the notebook closed;
At "names first," the circle of crocodiles withdrew.
What has been heard is no longer alone;*

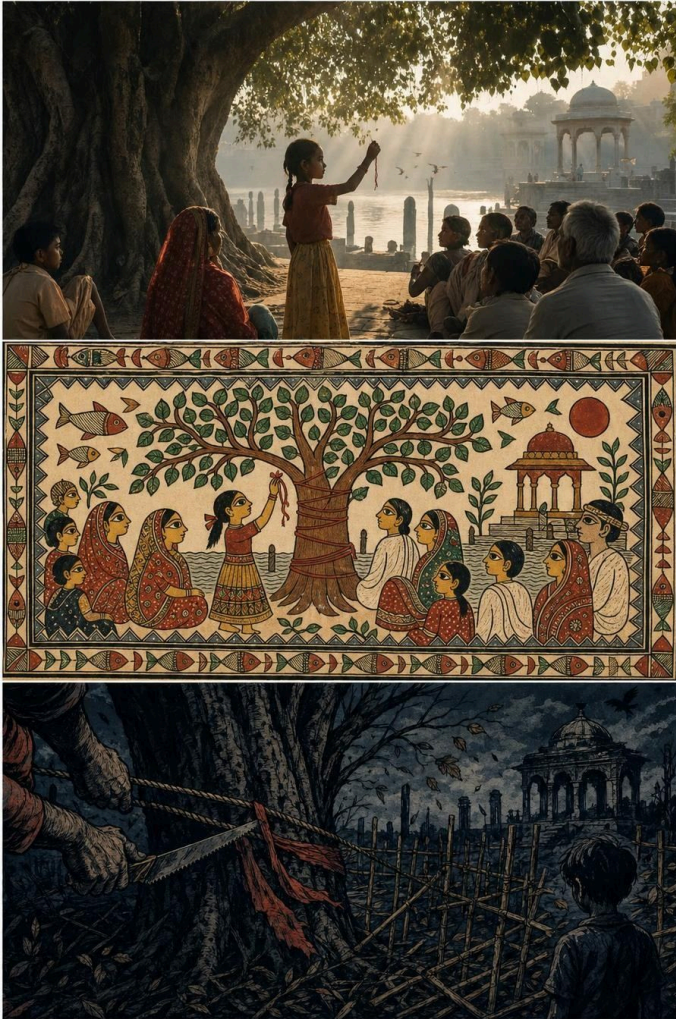
*In the hand of remorse, a leaf of work is right.
Office buried in earth; a shoot of name broke through;
A heavy hand raised the witness's first dwelling.
No applause sounded; stillness descended on the gathering.*



CHAPTER 52

The Next Voice

A crocodile may chew the body, a court may chew the years, a screen may chew the mind - but no one has been able to chew through the watch kept by a child's hands.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE NEXT VOICE AT THE CHAUPAL

Folk tune: collective song of names

*Sit, O chaupal, sit in a circle;
When your own voice is complete, make room for the next.
Where the tree was cut, a new chaupal grows;
When one voice is complete, the next receives its seat.
Some first, some later - an equal turn for all;
The people's story moves like a river, circling onward.
Keep an empty place for the next voice;
Do not drown another voice beneath the noise of your own victory.
The chaupal will lay flowers to welcome the next speaker;
An unbroken stream of hearing will make society whole.
At the site of the cut tree a gathering-place has grown;
One by one, everyone's story - no shoving, no enclosure.
Keep the noise of victory low; let the defeated voice rise;
Let the current of hearing flow without cease, like a river.*



In that listening lay not the end of the novel, but the beginning of the next voice. Crocodiles can chew bodies, courts can chew years, screens can chew minds; but if the guardianship of names reaches the hands of children, even water-burial can become a doorway to release from bondage. The story did not end in Channa Grove that day - only one long, sorrowful and luminous breath was taken.

But the world does not stand still after a long breath. Slowly Channa Grove began to be cut down. First tight ropes were tied around it, then the red cloth was removed, then a bamboo barricade was built around the roots. The trees that had kept darkness even by day, beneath whose shade people hid fears both true and imagined, gradually began to see day and night. Leaves fell, branches dried, the crown opened, and on the ground where the ghosts' kabaddi had been seen, the hammers of labourers began to ring.

At first people watched in silence. Some thought: this is proper; if the shade of the grove where that court sat is removed, perhaps the fear will go too. Others said: no, fear did not live here - memory did. But on the government map Channa Grove was labelled only "encroachment." In the contractor's papers it became a "development zone." The municipal file said: "Clearing for lighting, road access, movement and public use."

The grove that had preserved people's testimony for years was measured in three lines and ordered to be cut.

When the first thick branch struck the ground, a long shaft of light unexpectedly entered all the way inside. People saw how many colours had lived within what had always seemed darkness: wet streaks around the roots, a scrap of a woman's scarf trapped in a cleft, an old earthen lamp, many small stones bearing names, many children's glass marbles. What had been hidden was not destroyed; instead it became readable in the light.

Then Satyavrat Mehta came there again. This time not in the car of office, nor like an official carrying a file of orders. He wore a plain white kurta, his face tired, an old cloth bag in his hand. He sat silently beside the cut roots and said nothing for a long time. One of the children standing nearby - children who now guarded the names - asked, "If the grove is being cut, will the story be cut too?" Satyavrat looked once at the half-cut branches, then at the child's face. Softly he said, "A tree is cut; the root keeps listening. A story lives wherever someone remains who can listen."

There was no legal argument in the answer, no crowd-pleasing phrase. Yet everyone there understood that Satyavrat still did not consider himself acquitted. The offence of his silence had not been erased completely. Perhaps that was why he could sit before them all without defence. Women, young people and elders whose lives had at some point been scorched by corrupt courts, digital fraud, hospital brokerage, foreign greed, online gambling, the medicine market, or silent consent began arriving one by one around Channa Grove. No meeting had been announced, but listening began again.

Strangely, the more the grove was cut, the more people came. Those who once approached shivering now came openly. A tea cart appeared by day. Women placed lamps there in the evening. Some young people took photographs on their phones, broadcast live, and whispered the story of Channa Grove. Teachers came with children and told them, "This is not merely a grove; it is a living page of public memory." Even some labourers hired for the cutting quietly poured water on the roots at night. They said, "It is being cut by our hands, but something here keeps looking out even after being cut."

Slowly the vast canopy of Channa Grove broke apart. The whole sky became visible. Where darkness had remained even by day, morning sunlight now arrived first, then the hard glare of noon, then the grey light of evening. Birds returned, though not to the old crown - they perched on the rim of the cut stump. At night the moon seemed to descend directly upon the place. Passing became easy; even those who once lacked the courage to cross there stopped and asked questions.

Channa Grove slowly changed from a haunt of fear into a public square of memory.

But on the day the final great limb was cut, something strange happened. From inside the root rose not the smell of rot, but the scent of wet soil, incense, old paper, and something soft like the hair of a nursing infant. The labourer's axe stopped for a moment. The name-stones in the hands of the children standing around the cutting circle all grew warm at once. No one cried out. Everyone simply felt the warmth in silence, as though the tree itself were saying, "I am here, but not in the form in which you were accustomed to seeing me."

That evening the crocodiles were seen again - not beneath the water, but along the edge of public memory. No one could actually catch sight of them clearly, yet those who had understood the stories of water-burial, the destruction of the body, and release from inner bondage felt that the crocodiles' true hunger ended with the body. A name survives if children keep watch over it. The lesson of the Gaja-Graha tale rose again: even if the graha seizes, if the call is true, drowning too can become transformation.

The girl who had earlier questioned Satyavrat placed her hand on the cut stump and asked, "Can a tree be planted here again?" A second child said, "A new tree, but the old names." A third said, "Under the new tree's shade there will be no court of lies, but a chaupal for listening." Satyavrat Mehta did not even smile; the corners of his eyes were wet. From his bag he took an old register and gave it to the children. On its first page was written: "The first testimony to a person's existence is that their name was heard." Beneath that line the girl wrote in her own hand: "From today, the watch is ours."

Within that one sentence, the grief of many chapters found a strange simplicity. Corruption, endless court dates, signals of fraud, the shadow of Hong Kong, forged degrees from Meerut, the trade in vaccines and medicines, gambling, hawala, foreign greed, power and bar-room brokerage - the stories of all those shaken by these things did not vanish. But another principle now opened before them: memory can be made into an institution if its guardianship is given to innocent hands.

Night deepened. Lamps burned around the cut roots. The voice of the person seated on a distant boat was no longer indistinct; it could be heard clearly - no mantra, no lament, only the reading of names. One by one the names were spoken. Those who came named loved ones who had been lost, cheated, drowned, chewed, or silenced. Children wrote them in the register. Women listened. Elders bore witness. Young people switched off their phones. Satyavrat sat silently and listened. There was remorse in that listening, and penance, but beyond both a new social voice was taking shape.

At dawn people saw an exceedingly small green point breaking from one edge of the cut stump. It could hardly be called a bud, as if to invite instant celebration; it was only a minute green sign. Some called it a miracle, some natural vitality, some the stubbornness of soil. For the children it meant only this: "The tree is listening." They did not laugh or make noise. They simply stood and joined their hands.

Satyavrat rose. He had to leave now. But this departure did not carry the old sense of an ending. The girl asked, "Will you come again?" He said, "Wherever a name is called, I will remain indebted to listen." There was no smell of office in the answer, only a human admission. He slowly moved out through the crowd. People gave him way, but no one repeated the ritual of salutation; it was as though everyone understood that personality-worship was no longer needed - listening was.

The labourers' tools lay to one side. The file seeking to halt the cutting would move again; for now people continued reading names around the stump.

That is why the story did not end in Channa Grove that day. The grove remained half-cut, but a chaupal had grown. Darkness dispersed, but mystery did not die. Water-burial ceased to be the final word of fear; it became a doorway to release from bondage. And the long, sorrowful, luminous breath taken that day still continues - collective, incomplete, yet unbroken.

And then - from the very place people had taken for the end - the story began again.

FOLK SONG: THE CHAUPAL OF THE NEXT VOICE

Folk tune: collective song of names

*It has grown, O chaupal, grown beside the cut grove;
Where the end was imagined, the story has sprouted again.
At the place of the cut grove, lamps burned and a chaupal grew;
The name of each beloved was sung throughout the night.
A child writes the register, a woman listens with love;
An elder gives testimony, a young person understands the house behind
the screen.
A tiny green point breaks from the stump and says:
"The tree is listening; the story moves again."
Water-burial is no longer the final word of fear;
It became a door of release, and the people's voice flowed.
The incomplete collective breath continues even now;
Where the end was imagined, the story sprouts again.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

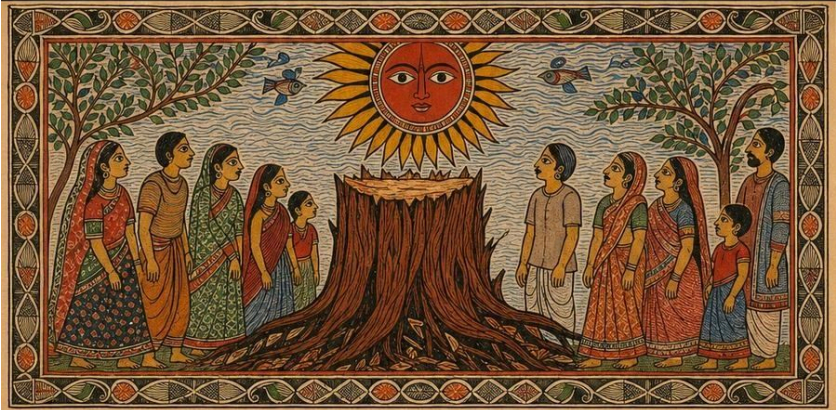
A green point broke from the stump and spoke -



CHAPTER 53

Morning After Erosion

*Morning does not stop when a tree is cut—the stump too begins looking
straight toward the sun.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: DAWN OF THE STUMP

Folk tune: parati

Wake, O stump, wrap yourself in the gold of dawn;

Where branches were cut, join new shoots again.

*The tree was cut, yet the sun's road did not stop;
The first gold of morning bent over dew upon the stump.
Life stirred within the roots; a shoot will give the sign;
After destruction, a day of rebuilding will come.*

*Soften the earth all around the stump;
Give seed, water and watch, and fill the grove anew.
The stump's dawn says—let hope reach down to the roots;
From the cut history, let a new future spring.*

*Night's dew seeped down to the roots and softened the soil;
At the first touch of sunlight, the inward ache awoke.
All around, preparations began for seed, water and watch;
A flower garden will rise upon the breast of severed history.*



To all who had stayed awake through the night, morning came that day not late but suddenly. Channa Grove, which for centuries had seemed to hold dawn back, now, as a half-cut stump, let the sun enter without a curtain for the first time. When light came in, people filled not with joy but with a strange shame—as though an old body always kept under a sheet had suddenly been uncovered before everyone.

Even by day there had been darkness in Channa Grove. In that darkness stories preserved their voices. People spoke softly there, watched their steps, scolded children into silence. The ghosts' kabaddi went on as breath moves inside a word without sound. But now, with the great branches cut and fallen and the canopy torn into three parts, a patch of blue sky hung in the middle of the grove. For the first time people could look upward there, where before they had seen only branches, hanging

creepers, pipal growth, frightened wings of birds, and old stories suspended overhead.

The first light of dawn fell on the round face of the stump. Inside the cut surface were printed the rings of rainy years—dark, pale, dark, pale—as though the tree had written both the hardness and softness of time into its own body. Budhba Ghost counted the rings. Never before had so much light entered his eyes. He whispered, “When a tree is cut, it opens its age. When a human being is cut down, their name should be opened too.”

No one knew whose ears those words reached. Yet at that moment the children seated around Channa Grove looked at one another. In their hands were the night’s name-registers. The pages were not wet, but they smelled of water. One boy fluttered a page and said, “From today, the watch will continue in daylight too.” Another said, “The ghosts play at night; by day we will keep the names.”

Kabaddi had not stopped. Only its time had changed. At night ghosts, spirits, rakshasas, Loth, Panidubbi and witches played in invisible held breath. By day the children drew the lines of play in open light. First a line was traced in the soil. Then the children placed stones bearing names along its edge. The rule was simple: if any stone was knocked aside, the game stopped; first the name had to be restored to its proper place, and only then could breath continue.

The elders smiled at this new rule. It reminded them of childhood games, but this was no ordinary game. Here a touch in kabaddi did not mean victory; it meant rescue. Whoever crossed the line was not seized by the other side but asked, “Whose name have you brought with you?” If the player entered without a name, the player lost. If a name was spoken, everyone let the player go. In this game there was less catching and more listening.

Devika Sah arrived at dawn. A white dupatta covered her head, and her eyes held the grit of someone who had been awake all night. She ran her hand over Ujjwal’s name-stone. The stone was cold. She said, “The one who drowned in the screen must have a name that stays warm in the soil.” The children made room for her. She sat down and, for the first time without weeping, wrote Ujjwal’s full name—Ujjwal Kumar Jha—not someone who lost money on a mobile phone without telling his mother, but someone surrounded by fraud and abandoned alone in fear. Her hand trembled as she wrote the whole sentence, but it did not break.

Mira came quietly. That day she wore no bright clothes—only a plain blue kurta and a bag over her shoulder. Those who looked at her did so with less curiosity and more respect. The children took one stone from their row and set it beside the stump: “Privacy.” Mira looked at it and smiled. “Guarding a name is necessary,” she said, “but so is the right to

silence. Not every story belongs in public. Listen to the one who wishes to speak; and guard the silence of the one who wishes to remain quiet."

Ira arrived on the night bus. Education abroad, auditoriums, research, questions, speeches—all seemed to have settled on her face as fatigue. In the dawn light she stopped short at the mutilated body of Channa Grove. She thought: no museum could contain memory this naked. She opened her notebook, then closed it. This was not yet the time to write; it was the time to listen. She sat among the children. A little girl asked, "Did you come from another country?" Ira said, "Yes." The girl asked again, "Do names get cut there too?" After a long silence Ira answered, "There, names are turned into shining letters. The cutting happens differently."

Aruni watched from a distance. He remembered how the darkness near the grove had once matched the darkness within him. Now the light did not match. Light asked questions. Ba used to say, "A lie hides in darkness, but in light it begins to sweat." And indeed, as people came one after another to the severed stump, each face seemed to show the sweat of something hidden within.

Satyavrat Mehta did not come that morning. His absence too was recorded like a presence. The children wrote in the register: "The one who listens is absent, but the debt is present." No one laughed. No one corrected it. The guardians of names had learned that absence of the body and absence of responsibility are not the same thing.

By noon small tasks had begun around the new clearing of Channa Grove. Someone placed a water pot. Because there was no shade, someone tied cloth to make a temporary canopy. Someone drew a circle with lime. Someone cleared the sand. Someone brought a chisel to deepen names on stone. There was no chairperson, no inauguration, no ribbon. People asked one another, "Leave some space beside this name; perhaps the family will come and complete it." Empty spaces were left for incomplete names. Here, even blankness became memory.

Budhba Ghost could not remain long in daylight. Yet that day he stayed beneath the shade of a severed branch. His black body was thinning in the sun. Hulasi warned him, "Stay in the light and you will disappear." Budhba replied, "I will not disappear. Some darkness must dissolve into light so that the children's eyes do not grow accustomed to darkness." Hulasi said nothing. For the first time she looked toward the well in daylight. On the surface of the water she saw not her own reflection but the face of a girl writing names in the register.

By evening the flow of villagers had truly increased. Those who had once said Channa Grove was haunted now said, "Come, let us see the names." Those who had said the story ended when the grove was cut now saw that the story had descended from the leaves onto people's tongues.

Yet at the same time two unfamiliar men kept circling the road outside the grove. Their shoes did not belong to village soil. One spoke softly into a mobile phone: "The site is open. The crowd is regular. A project is possible."

No one noticed, but Panidubbi did. At dusk the pond water turned once in a slow circle. From beneath the surface, the long-haired spirit watched. Wherever memory wakes in people's hands, the market too comes sniffing.

Before sunset the children entered the kabaddi field one last time. This time the boy who crossed the line holding his breath did not chant "kabaddi," but "present—present." The other side did not catch him; they formed a circle and listened to the name he carried. When the game ended, all the children were tired, but none had lost. Dust rose, daylight withdrew, and the first evening star caught on the green point of the cut stump.

Looking at that star, Ananya asked, "Which star is that?" No one answered. Ira looked up and saw, in the distant sky, a strange cold gleam—as if some nameless place were listening to the earth's voice. She was about to speak when the village watchman came running with a yellow sheet of paper. It bore the municipal seal.

The yellow paper was pasted onto the stump. The children stopped playing. Budhba Ghost thickened again in the gathering darkness. Panidubbi smiled beneath the water—the market had arrived. The first test of the guardians of names was no longer waiting for morning; it was about to begin now.

FOLK SONG: MORNING OF THE STUMP

Folk tune: parati

The stump raised itself, raised its head toward dawn;

The guard of names awoke—the crocodile has found a new move.

The tree was cut, but the road of the sun did not stop;

The stump lifted its head straight toward morning.

When light entered, tears of shame fell;

History was uncovered like an old body stripped of its sheet.

A child ran in kabaddi chanting "present";

The other side did not seize him, but gathered to hear the name.

The evening star caught on the green point;

And then the market came running with a yellow sheet.

Morning after erosion is still a test;

The guard of names is awake, and the crocodile's new move is near.

The evening star came and caught upon the green point.



CHAPTER 54

Around the Stump

*Where no branch remains, heads still bow—now not before darkness,
but before testimony.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CIRCLE OF ROOTS

Folk tune: courtyard mangal

Make a circle, make it all around the roots;

The stump at the centre, people at the rim—let a new grove rise.

Though no branch remains, still make a circle of roots;

Let people sit together and share memory, plans and song.

The stump at the centre, people all around—a new grove decided upon;

One brings water, one seed, another promises the watch.

The circle is not merely protection, but a place of shared labour;

With the roots will remain soil, water and breath.

If the circle of roots is strong, the forest will return;

Through communal affection, dry earth will grow green.

One brings a spade, one a water-pot, another a tray of song;

The soil is adorned with the alpana of shared work.

Let the circle not break; bind hand to hand;

Even dry land turns green when affection is mixed into it.



For the first time people sat in a round circle around the stump. Earlier, when entering Channa Grove, people bowed their heads, and it was hard to know whether this was because the branches hung low or the darkness pressed down. Now the reason for bowing had changed. The tree had been cut, but the exposed roots lay open like the chest of an old body split to reveal its bones. People lowered their heads not from fear, but from shame.

The first piece of sunlight sat upon the rim of the cut stump. It did not glitter like gold; it was fearless like a physician's knife. The darkness that for years had hidden people's sins, love, lies, testimony, vows, theft and weeping had withdrawn, and everything began to appear in its own shape. In one crevice of the roots lay damp earth; in another, a rotting

fibre of red cloth; in a third, ash; in a fourth, a glass marble; and in a fifth, a half-written name scratched upon a sharp stone.

The children wanted to pick these things up like treasure, but Ananya stopped their hands. She was no longer merely a girl at play; she had become the first sentry of the watch over names. "Whatever comes out from within the stump," she said, "we will not lift it first. First we will listen." The children did not laugh. So many strange things had happened in the village over the past few months that the children had become more restrained than the elders.

When Aruni arrived, he saw the children seated in a circle with the severed roots at the centre. To him the scene looked more like a court than any court. No chairs, no table, no litigation, no lawyers' voices; yet every face was alert, as though each had sworn not to let a single word rising from the roots escape. After the Court of Channa Grove, this was the first people's sitting. No announcement, no plaque, no chief guest. Only stump, soil, and a readiness to listen.

Ba arrived slowly, leaning on her stick. Her eyesight had dimmed, yet her steps toward the stump steadied without help. She sat and reached out to touch the roots. For a long time she said nothing. Then she spoke: "So what if the tree has been cut? In our village many heads have been cut, but the lineage could not be cut. If the roots remain alive, shade is born again."

At those words Budhba Ghost, who was almost never visible by day, shimmered faintly like dust from leaves. No one saw him clearly, though several later said that a black figure had smiled behind the stump. The children looked that way, then placed fingers upon their noses to signal silence. Budhba had not come to give official testimony yet; he had come to see whether the living could truly keep the discipline of listening.

The first name was read by the son of a labourer. The son had himself grown old, yet while reading his father's name he trembled like a child. When the name was spoken, a little puff of air emerged from a crevice in the stump. Someone said, "Breath." Someone else said, "An insect." But the children wrote in the register: "The name was heard; the stump answered."

The second name was read by Ujjwal's mother. Her voice was low, and there was fear the words would disappear in the crowd. Devika placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Read slowly. A name is in no hurry." Ujjwal's mother read it little by little. When the name of the young man whose mind had been chewed by the crocodile of the screen travelled around the stump, a bird perched on a cut branch cried out three times. Ananya wrote: "The soil hears even a name that drowned in the screen."

From then on a rule was made that after every name, one sign would be recorded—wind, bird, sunlight, shade, a dog's bark, a child's sneeze,

an elder's cough, a drop of water. The children believed the tree no longer answered through leaves but through signs. They were not reading; they were making connections.

Saumya watched all this without quietly making notes. Once her habit had been to write what she saw and record what she heard. Now she understood that some things are wounded the moment they are recorded. She sat only beside those names whose families wished her to. When someone wanted silence, she accepted that silence without question. The oath of privacy was no longer merely Mira's sentence on paper; it was entering the conduct of the people's assembly.

That day Mira brought a small red cord. "Every name that has been read will be written on a stone and placed around the stump," she said. "But no one's suffering will be turned into spectacle. The right over a name remains with the home to which the name belongs." The people agreed. The agreement was not given by raised hands, but by bowed heads.

By noon a small ring of stones had formed around the stump. Each stone bore one name: some complete, some incomplete, some only a sign. One stone read: "For the one whose name could not be found." It was placed first. The children said, "Those whose names could not be found get the first place." At this Ba began to weep. Her crying had no sound—only a running nose and wet eyes in silence.

Gop Kumar stood at the back. He still possessed many copies, many lists, many encrypted files. Yet he saw that paper had only limited authority here. Paper would give the name; people would give it a voice; the stump would give it a place; children would give it a watch. Without these together, memory remained incomplete. For the first time he understood that exposing truth was not enough; truth also needed somewhere to live.

Satyavrat Mehta watched from a distance that day. No one had called him. He no longer wished to be called. The man who once sat at the front of every platform because of his office was now learning the discipline of standing behind and listening. When a child saw him and said, "Sit here," he replied softly, "Not yet. This place is for the names." The child was satisfied.

By evening people were coming and going around the stump in growing numbers. Someone brought milk, someone water, someone flowers, someone only time. A few drifted in who thought all of it was nonsense. But when they saw that no donation was being collected, no slogan shouted and no leader summoned, their mockery weakened. Even a person who does not believe must learn to respect a quiet place.

Then the first outsider arrived—the postmaster on a bicycle. His bag carried government mail. Ordinarily he never came toward Channa

Grove, but the road had opened, so he had taken the shortcut. As soon as he saw the stump, he dismounted. From his bag he took a yellow envelope and handed it to Aruni. It was thick, with the municipal seal on top. The postmaster said, "It concerns this place. It seems important."

The envelope grew hot in Aruni's hand. He was about to open it, but Ananya stopped him. "The reading of names is still going on. The yellow paper can wait." A soft laugh passed through the crowd, but there was fear in the laughter. Everyone knew that yellow paper was often another form of darkness. What had begun with an axe would now move forward through a notice.

The first lamp of night was lit. Its light fell in pieces over the names on the stones. The yellow envelope was placed on one edge of the stump—as though its turn to testify would also come. Budhba Ghost's figure shimmered for one moment again. Air rose from within the cut roots and made one corner of the envelope flutter.

Closing the register, Ananya said, "Tomorrow the yellow paper will be read. But first we will ask the name of the words written upon it." No one understood what it meant for words to have a name. But the children understood: government language too could not remain nameless. When it laid claim to memory, its name, lineage, greed, fear and purpose would also be asked.

Thus the first day around the stump did not really end. It sat waiting for the next hearing. The tree had been cut, but around it a circle of people had grown. And at the centre of that circle the yellow envelope, like a dry leaf, turned restlessly through the night.

FOLK SONG: THE CIRCLE AROUND THE STUMP

Folk tune: courtyard song

Stand, O circle, a circle around the stump;

The people have become living sentries—this is the new dwelling.

No branches remain, yet heads bow today;

Not before darkness, but in shame before exposed bones of testimony.

The roots lie spread upon the earth like an old chest;

The people's round circle rises like a new tree.

The yellow envelope will turn all night upon the rim;

Tomorrow its words, lineage and greed will all be questioned.

*Government language cannot remain nameless;
If it claims memory, its purpose cannot stay hidden.*

*The tree was cut; the circle stands like roots;
Around the stump the people became living sentries.*

*No branches remain, yet heads bow today;
Not before darkness—but in shame before the exposed roots' testimony.
Tomorrow name, lineage and greed—all will be asked.*



CHAPTER 55

The Municipality's Yellow Notice

*The flutter of a government yellow sheet is not the sound of wings, but
of scissors.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: WINGS OF THE YELLOW PAPER

Folk tune: warning batgabani

Fly, O yellow letter, fly as wings;

Not scissors—become a warning and reach every home.

Yellow paper, do not be scissors; fly as wings;

Leave orders to cut behind and carry news of truth.

Mustard-yellow in colour, a white flower of knowledge;

Let paper warn the people, not cut home and root.

Write every notice simply and show the road to rights;

Remove the language of fear and arrive with help.

The wings of yellow paper will become a letter of hope;

They will spread public awareness and build a safer village.

On mustard-coloured paper set simple letters;

Cut away the speech of fear and speak the path of rights.

Beside it give the place, phone and address for help;

An informed village is a protected village—that is the letter's work.



All night the yellow envelope lay upon the rim of the stump. One by one the lamps went out and people's voices withdrew, yet a corner of the envelope kept fluttering in the wind. It seemed less like paper than some small yellow-winged creature waiting with hidden teeth. The severed roots of Channa Grove did not grow cold where they touched it; instead, the heat of the paper slowly travelled down into the soil.

At dawn Ananya arrived first. She looked over the row of stones, wiped the dew that had gathered on the register, then lifted the yellow envelope. Along its seam was the municipality's blue seal—a wheel inside the seal, letters inside the wheel, and inside the letters a cold voice. The children gathered slowly. One brought kite-string, one a slate, one water

in an empty bottle. This was not to be a reading of names, but a reading of paper.

When Aruni arrived, he said, "I will read the paper." Ananya shook her head. "You will read it," she said, "but first we will all listen for what this paper's name is." Some elders smiled at the sentence. But Satyavrat Mehta, who this time sat not far away but low behind the stones, bowed his head and listened. He understood that the girl had grasped the first lesson of law better than most: even a paper that rules over people may be asked its name.

The envelope was opened. Inside were three pages. The first carried a bold heading: "Notice Regarding Public Beautification and Road Safety." The second showed a line on a map, with the place of Channa Grove marked as a small empty square. The third explained the procedure for filing an objection. The language was so polished, so well-oiled, that the paper itself seemed to say: I am not violence; I am order.

Aruni read the first line. "Stones, signs, lamps, cloth and temporary gatherings unlawfully established at the said site shall be removed so as to facilitate public movement, lighting, cleanliness and beautification." The words hung in the air. Some felt anger, some laughter, some disgust. Ba said quietly, "A name becomes a stone and they call it unlawful. The one who erased the name—was that lawful?"

Devika kept looking at the paper. The words "general public" struck her like a knife. Who was this general public? Not those who read names through the night? Not the mother who placed her son's name-stone? Not the labourer's son who wrote his father's name after fifty years? The "general public" of paper is often a population that is not present, yet in whose name anything may be done.

Mira asked for the second line to be read. Aruni read: "Crowding at the site and circulation of unverified narratives may create social tension and spread superstition." This time Mira laughed, but there was fire in the laughter. "When truth cannot be found on paper, what people say is called unverified. When bodies are sold, privacy sold, breath sold, there is no tension. When a name survives, then there is tension."

Gop Kumar took the third page. It was written in the language of forms—name, address, grounds, proof, ownership information, copies of relevant records. Gop whispered, "Proof for one whose body went into the water? Ownership of a name lost in fraud? Records for a silence that was bought?" He did not throw the form to the ground. He folded it and placed it beside the register. The struggle did not begin by tearing paper, but by seeing the crocodile hidden inside it.

For the first time Budhba Ghost appeared half-clear in daylight. His body was forming between shadow and dust. He circled the yellow notice three times. The children watched holding their breath. Budhba bent

over the page as though smelling it, then released his dry laugh. "There is less ink in this paper than fear. Someone's hand is hiding inside the municipal seal."

Satyavrat Mehta said softly, "This cannot be the municipality's notice alone. There are people who prepared this language—people who know law, people who want a memorial, people who want contracts, and those who are uncomfortable with the watch over names." He stopped. Once he had been accustomed to finishing every sentence; now he left some sentences half-finished so that people could hear the remaining half within themselves.

Then a man stepped forward from the back. White trousers, a pale blue kurta, a gleaming file in his hand. He smiled. "I have not come in opposition to anyone. I have brought a proposal for cooperation. Batuknath Babu says this site must be formally converted into a people's memory trust. Otherwise the government will be compelled to remove it. We can arrange registration, permission, protection, funding—everything."

At the name, the circle went cold. Batuknath Hariharan—the man who had rowed the boat of crime through court—now wanted to climb aboard the boat of memory. His messenger opened the file and showed coloured renderings: gate, plaque, ticket booth, memorial gallery, visitors' book, donation box. At the top was written: "Channa Grove People's Memory Centre." The children studied the pictures. There was no tree, no stump, no stones bearing names; only shining floors and railings.

Ananya asked, "Where in this picture is the stone that says 'For the one whose name could not be found'?" The messenger hesitated. He turned a page, then said, "That will be represented symbolically." Another child asked, "Where will Ujjwal's mother sit?" The messenger said, "There will be an auditorium inside." A third child asked, "Where will the ghosts play kabaddi?" The messenger laughed. "Things like that will remain in people's feelings." The girl said calmly, "Then this is not a centre. It is a cage."

The messenger's face hardened. "Children do not understand law." This time Satyavrat Mehta rose. His rising carried no swagger of authority, only the weariness of a witness. He told the messenger, "Law is not the possession of those who understand paper. No legality is complete without hearing the people affected. And before turning memory into a trust, permission must be taken from memory itself." The messenger laughed. "Can memory sign?" Satyavrat replied, "It can—in the presence of the people."

A low voice rose in the crowd: "Present." First one, then another, then ten, then twenty. The messenger tried to gather his file, but the

wind rose. Dust lifted from a crevice in the cut stump and fell across the glossy drawings. Soil stained the picture of the glass gallery. Irritated, the messenger blew on it, but the mark did not move.

Aruni took the yellow notice again. On its blank margin he wrote in pencil: "Not an empty plot—a place of names." Devika wrote on another edge: "Not a crowd—families." Mira wrote: "Not superstition—memory with privacy." Gop wrote: "The absence of proof is itself evidence of the crime." Ba wrote with a trembling hand: "The roots are alive." In round children's letters they wrote: "Present."

The municipal paper was no longer one-sided. The people's answer had sprouted upon it. There was no seal here, but there were thumbprints. Those who could not write their names left a stain, a line, the print of a leaf. Satyavrat watched the page. He remembered petitions, reports and affidavits filed in court for years. Yet this page seemed to him more alive than any of them.

Then the municipal messenger left one more sentence behind: "Remove it within seven days, or force will be used." With that he departed. His shoes kicked a little soil beyond the ring of stones. The children did not run after him. Budhba Ghost watched him go and said softly, "The one who speaks of using force usually has less strength inside than fear."

Evening sank. The yellow notice lay among the stones, but its colour was changing. Sun, dust, people's touch, tears, pencil, leaf-prints—together they were muddying its yellowness. Ananya wrote in the register: "Today the paper was heard. The paper spoke falsely. The people answered."

That night the circle did not break. People remained seated there. Discussion began—not merely about filing an objection, but about making their own map. On the government map, Channa Grove was an empty square; on the people's map it would be the centre. On the government map there was a road; on the people's map the road would include the homes where the mobile phones of cheated young men still lay. On the government map there was a bridge; on the people's map the names of the labourers inside its piers would appear. On the government map the river was only a line; on the people's map there would be the cries of water-burial.

Aruni spread an old mat. Gop opened his papers. Devika mixed red earth. Mira brought black charcoal. The children moved the stones aside and cleared space in the middle. Ba said, "Let the map be drawn by hands that do not merely see a place, but hear it." Satyavrat remained seated behind them, but for the first time his eyes held a faint lightness.

In the last watch of the night, the first point was marked in the centre of the mat—the severed stump of Channa Grove. Ananya drew a

red circle around it. “Memory will spread from here,” she said. Far away a dog barked, water stirred, and Budhba Ghost’s voice came out of the darkness: “Now the real map has begun.”

The yellow notice remained upon the rim of the stump. Its seal was dimming, but the people’s written word “Present” shone. On the first night facing the seven-day threat, Garh Narikel sat down to draw its first map of memory.

FOLK SONG: THE SCISSORS OF THE YELLOW PAPER

Folk tune: warning folk tune

The paper says, “Move away,” it says;

The village says—no, the names are present here.

Yellow paper flutters—not wings, but scissors;

Calling it an “empty plot,” it would cut memory’s seat.

A seven-day threat, the mouth of the seal dark;

The people wrote “Present” and made their own road.

Red earth, charcoal, stones, an old mat;

The hand that hears a place is the hand that draws its map.

A red circle round the stump—memory will spread from here;

The paper’s fading seal will lose before the people’s light.

The yellow notice says—move; the village says—no;

A place where names are present is not empty.



CHAPTER 56

The First Map of Memory

The place marked “empty plot” was the very place where the greatest number of names were buried.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: LAND OF MEMORY

Folk tune: song of the soil

Read the soil, read it before you measure;

Even land marked “empty” holds stories of names.

*The place written as “empty plot” was filled with names;
Someone’s game, someone’s home, someone’s dream had grown there.*

*When you measure land, first read the map of memory;
Give honour to grave, tree, footpath and water source.*

If development comes, let it first obtain the people’s consent;

Let new construction honour the land of memory.

*No earth is empty; every grain contains history;
Development earns trust only by respecting the soil.*

*Here someone’s kite flew; there lies ash from a hearth;
Footpath, grave and tree each have their own standing.*

*Let the vehicle of development stop and seek consent first;
Bow to the land of memory, and only then lay the foundation.*



All night the words of the yellow notice fluttered upon the rim of the stump. The phrase “empty plot” entered everyone’s sleep like a thorn. The place where bodies had drowned, where names had risen, where ghosts had played kabaddi, where silence had become witness—this had been called empty. From that single line on a government sheet, the village understood that the cutting had not been only of the tree; preparations were now under way to cut memory itself.

At dawn Ananya did not begin by unfolding and reading the yellow notice. First she straightened the stones placed around the stump. Each bore a name—some letters crooked, some complete, some only an opening sound. Brushing dust away with a child’s hand, she said, “The paper that calls our place empty must first be shown how full it is.”

With that, the making of the first map of memory began. Aruni brought discarded sheets from the old bridge plan. They already carried lines drawn by the foreign contractor—measurements, piers, width, cost, water flow, approach road. The children turned the sheets over and spread them on the ground. They decided to draw people's lines on the back of the government's lines.

Mira brought red earth mixed with water. Devika brought ash. Ira gathered dry leaves. Gop Kumar arrived with a bundle of old copies, but Ananya said, "Hands first, copies later." Gop smiled. The man who had spent years searching for truth inside paper was beginning to understand that paper is not truth's home, only its veranda.

At the centre of the map they drew the cut stump of Channa Grove—a deep red circle. Around it the children made small points. Each point represented a name-stone. Where a name was known, letters were written beside it; where no name had been found, the point was left open. The open points were not called empty, but waiting.

Aruni drew the course of the Kamala-Balan. The line did not run straight. It bent again and again, cut through old fields, wavered past the labourers' settlement, formed a black whirlpool near the bridge pier, then came to rest beside Channa Grove. The children asked, "Why have you drawn the river trembling like this?" Aruni replied, "Because this is not a river from a file; it is a river of bodies. How can the line of a river in which names drowned ever be straight?"

With her fingernail Ba drew a very old footpath upon the map. It no longer existed on the ground: fields had changed, houses shifted, the road had cut across it. But Ba said, "My mother used to walk this way to the pond." The children labelled it "Mother's Path." What the municipality called a plot, the people marked as memory under a mother's feet.

Ujjwal's mother made a black circle at the place where Ujjwal's phone had last been found active. Devika drew a pale ring of ash around it—the crocodile of the screen. But Mira stopped her and said, "Mark the wound of his death, not a spectacle." So a small white point was set inside the black circle. The children named it "The Light Left in the Mind."

Saumya asked the women labourers which households had lost men in the bridge work. The women first looked at one another. Widows, sisters, daughters and mothers of those whose names never appeared in official testimony slowly came forward. The labourers' settlement took shape on the map—not as houses, but as palms. Each palm had a different number of fingers, because no family had been destroyed in exactly the same way; every loss had its own form.

Gop Kumar bent low over the place where the foreign company's temporary warehouse had stood. "Receipts disappeared from here," he said. Ananya asked, "What is the sign for a missing receipt?" Gop

thought for a long time, then made a small hole in the ash. "What disappears from paper," he said, "will remain as a hole on the map." The children labelled it "Mouth of the Missing Paper."

As the map took shape, the villagers' speech began to change as well. Earlier they had said, "The bridge stood there," "The body was found there," "The police came that way." Now they said, "Here a name became water," "Here silence was bound," "Here the first crack opened in the lie," "Here the children took the watch." Place was no longer an object; place had become a knot in a story.

Later in the morning two municipal employees arrived. They carried measuring tape, a tin of yellow paint, and iron stakes. They said that under the notice the area had to be marked. Ananya showed them the map and said, "This area is already marked. Where will your stake go—through a name, through a footpath, or into the mouth of the missing paper?" The employees wanted to laugh, but the laughter caught halfway in their throats.

One employee said quietly, "We came under orders." Ba replied, "An order also has a parent. Tell us its name." The employee fell silent. Aruni lifted the yellow notice and read it aloud. "Public beautification," "extension of facilities," "vacant area," "unauthorised obstruction"—one by one the phrases were released into the air. Each time a phrase was heard, the children wrote its opposite meaning on the map: "memory," "assembly," "name," "stump," "watch."

Then for the first time Budhba Ghost became almost visible in daylight. He was no longer shrub or smoke, but an old figure standing with bowed head in the shadow of the cut roots. The employees could not see him, yet their measuring tape suddenly rolled itself back in. Ananya understood that the grove's old watchman had come to sign the new map.

Satyavrat Mehta came and stood at the back. He studied the map for a long time without speaking. His eyes stopped at the phrase "For the one whose name could not be found." He asked softly, "Why is this part left open?" Ananya said, "Because the government calls it empty; we call it waiting. When the name is found, this place will be filled. If the name is never found, the blank will remain to remind everyone that the search has not ended." Satyavrat Mehta bowed his head.

Mira drew a circle of privacy along one edge of the map. No names were written inside it. It was for the women who did not want their suffering made public. They called it "The Right of the Unspoken." Devika said, "Memory is not a chest forced open." The children wrote the sentence in red earth.

By late afternoon the map seemed nearly complete, but Ira said, "There is no sky in it." The children looked upward. It was true: river,

tree, bridge, houses, footpath, stones, holes and circles were all there, but there was no sign of the sky into which the sound of kabaddi might rise. Then a boy mixed a blue colour like kohl and drew an open sky around the map. Inside it they made small circles—the planets. Ananya said softly, “If someone steals names and tries to leave the earth, the sky too will remain on watch.”

Everyone fell silent at those words. The matter of another planet had not yet fully entered the story, but its shadow descended onto the map. The future flight of the rogues who regarded the earth as an empty sheet stretched as far as the sky. In one corner of that sky the children wrote: “Unnamed Planet—not empty yet, but under question.”

By evening the first map of memory had dried. People wanted to fold it, but Ba refused. “Memory is not folded.” So two bamboo poles were fixed behind the stump and the map was hung between them. When the wind moved, the map trembled as though the leaves of old Channa Grove were rustling again.

At that moment a gleaming car arrived, raising dust in the distance. The man who stepped out carried not a leather file but a proposal wrapped in cloth. Bowing politely, he said, “Greetings from Batuknath Hariharan ji. He says that to safeguard this people’s memory properly, a formal ‘People’s Memory Trust’ must be created.”

Silence spread around the stump. The map kept trembling in the wind. For the first time the children understood that the next attack on memory would not come with an axe or a yellow notice, but with the sweet language of protection. Holding the corner of the map, Ananya said, “Tomorrow we will ask the name of this proposal.”

Night descended. The map hung behind the stump—river, tree, hole, palm, circle of privacy, the imagined question of the “Unnamed Planet.” And the proposal, polite from the outside, perhaps hid within it the first tooth of the most cunning crocodile yet.

FOLK SONG: NOT AN EMPTY PLOT

Folk tune: song of the soil

Not empty, no—this plot is not empty;

A thousand names lie buried here, a platter of history.

Where “empty” was written, a thousand names lay buried;

Ghosts’ games, women’s oaths, the labourers’ cry.

The red line became river, the palm became a ghat;

On the children's map everyone's road returned.

Then came a proposal speaking the sweet language of protection;

Inside the velvet of a trust, the crocodile's teeth were hidden.

Not an axe, but a courteous greeting is the next move;

A broker wants to buy memory in the name of service.

The map trembled; the child said—we will ask its name tomorrow;

Not an empty plot—here lies a platter of history.

Calling it “service,” the broker came running to buy memory itself.



CHAPTER 57

Gangesha's Question

*There is no proposition without proof—Gangesha's question still turns
today within the roots of the stump.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FIELD OF QUESTIONS

Folk tune: question-bhagat

Plough the furrow of questions, plough it deep;

In Gangesha's field, sow the seed of proof.

Gangesha's question ploughs the soil deep like a plough;

Planting the seed of proof, it sows the rice of knowledge.

The field finds its proposition when it receives the water of reasoning;

Discernment slowly removes the weeds of doubt.

Let the field of questions remain open to every student;

Answers may change, but honesty must remain.

From Gangesha's questions the crop of knowledge grows full;

An enquiring mind lights Mithila's future.

Irrigate with the water of reasoning; pull out the grass of doubt;

Let the grain of the proposition sway, guarded by discernment.

Answers change like seasons; commitment remains the same;

The granary of Mithila will fill with the grain of inquiry.



For one night between the yellow notice and the first map of memory, the stump of Channa Grove was so restless that its severed roots seemed to turn from within. The children's map lay spread on the soil—the Kamala-Balan, the bridge piers, the feet of water-burial, Ujjwal's room, Mira's oath, Devika's school, and in the middle the half-cut stump of Channa Grove. The government paper called the place an empty plot; on the children's map, the "empty" place carried more names than anywhere else.

After dawn, when sunlight fell directly upon the cut face of the stump, a white car arrived from afar. It bore neither flag nor emblem; yet as soon as the passenger stepped out everyone recognised him—Batuknath Hariharan. The name already linked in the village with legal cunning, the swamp of court dates and the rescue of criminals was now

entering the courtyard of memory with a red file in hand. His face wore the colour of mourning, but calculation shone in his eyes.

Batuknath stopped at a proper distance from the stump and folded his hands. "I understand the importance of this place," he said. "Feeling needs an institution. An institution needs rules. Rules need a trust. I have brought a proposal to establish the 'Garh Narikel People's Memory Trust.'" He opened the red file. Inside were thick papers: by-laws, a list of trustees, possible grants, cultural preservation, memory development, visitor management, and plans for a future research centre. The words were so beautiful that if one closed one's ears while reading them, even sin could seem like virtue.

Ananya did not look at the file. She lifted a stone from the stump, the one marked "For the one whose name could not be found." She asked Batuknath, "It is fine if you create a trust. But do you know justice?" Batuknath laughed with the practice of a courtroom. "Daughter, what trust can exist without justice?" Ananya asked again, "Then speak of justice first."

Everyone fell silent. After the yellow notice, this was the second paper assault. But this time the paper had arrived dressed in the language of grief rather than government. Aruni stepped forward, but Ba stopped his hand. "The children are asking. Let the children ask." Ba had learned that in this story, the generation that had seen less often heard more accurately.

At that moment Ira arrived carrying a copy of an old book. The paper was new, but the letters seemed to carry the smell of old sunlight. She sat quietly at the edge of the map and said, "Once a map is made against the phrase 'empty plot,' the question of proof must arise. And when the question of proof arises in Mithila, the name of Gangesha cannot be avoided."

Gangesha. As soon as the name was spoken, a faint gritty sound came from within the stump. Those who had only heard the name of a work of Navya-Nyaya were startled. Those who considered it merely a subject for pandits wondered what connection there could be between the cutting of Channa Grove and Gangesha's logic. Ira opened the first page of the book. "Gangesha Upadhyaya, author of the *Tattvachintamani*. Founder of Navya-Nyaya. A lamp of Mithila's mind who gathered into a single work thought equal to twelve thousand books."

Batuknath grew slightly impatient. "Why a philosophical discussion here?" he asked. Ira did not look at him. Turning to the children, she said, "Because a society that worships books of justice is often afraid to do justice. The story of Gangesha is not only a story of logic; it is also a story of the thorn of caste."

Ba said softly, "Speak." Then Ira untied the difficult knot of folk memory. "It is said that he was born five years after his father's death. The question arose: what is the proof of birth? What is the proof of lineage? Does what society declares impossible therefore become false? It is also said that Gangesha married a Chamar woman. The question arose: is a human being's worth made by caste, or by justice?"

A stir ran through the circle around the stump. Some elders grew uncomfortable. Some young men suppressed smiles. When caste is spoken aloud and driven like a peg into a public place, the village air changes. Those who moments earlier had felt sacred while hearing the names of the dead suddenly found themselves surrounded by memories of their own lineage, family, marriages, feasts, hearths, wells and bodies.

Ananya asked, "If he was the founder of Navya-Nyaya, who judged the justice of his marriage?" At the question Batuknath began closing the red file. He understood that the children were not going to sign the trust paper; they were asking for testimony about an old social crime.

Ira said, "That very question was hidden. Gangesha's intellect was accepted, but the inconvenient parts of Gangesha's life were concealed. The scripture was placed upon the head, while the truth of life was locked in the chamber of caste. Many called this respect. But if respect strangles truth, it is not respect—it is the murder of memory."

Mira spoke here. "Honour killing is not only the killing of a body. Often, in the name of protecting family honour, the truth of a life is killed. A woman's will is killed. A relationship across caste is killed. The body of an idea is killed. And the scholar who cuts away an inconvenient life to create a purified statue also commits a killing—inside paper."

Gop Kumar added in a low voice, "In some traditions of writing, among some critics, even under the shadow of established names—scholars such as Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha 'Ashok'—the sharp edges of Gangesha's life became obscured. His *Tattvachintamani* shone, while the episode involving the Chamar woman was blurred. This is not direct bloodshed, but it is certainly an honour-killing of memory."

The sentence hung heavily in the air. Batuknath stood at once. "Careful! It is easy to accuse scholars. Evidence is required." Ananya neither laughed nor grew afraid. "Evidence? We are studying Gangesha now. Tell us the kinds of proof—perception, inference, testimony, comparison—as many as you accept, we will hear them. But what is the proof of caste? What proof denies humanity? And what proof gives anyone the right to cut away an inconvenient part of a life?"

This time a clear sound came from within the stump—neither human nor leaf; as though logic trapped in dry roots were searching for breath. The voice said, "You ask for proof; good. But first tell us—what is your proof for rejecting what you call unacceptable?" People started.

Some looked toward Budhba Ghost, but the voice was not his. It rose from the fine lines inside the roots.

Ira looked at the cut face of the stump. The tree-rings shone like twelve thousand thin lines. One child whispered, “Tattvachintamani.” Another said, “Twelve thousand books.” A third added, “Gangesha’s writing inside the tree.” No one could tell whether the children were playing or seeing philosophy. But at Channa Grove, when had the two ever truly been separate?

Batuknath tried to recover his position. “Very well,” he said, “the trust rules will contain no caste discrimination. Everyone’s name will be written.” Mira immediately asked, “And everyone’s body will be honoured too? Everyone’s love? Everyone’s labour? Everyone’s privacy? Writing names alone does not break caste.” Devika added, “And no trust will become the owner of names. A name belongs to family, people and memory. An institution may serve; it may not own.”

Aruni lifted the red file. On the first page of the by-laws was written “Jurisdiction of the Trust.” Aruni struck it out and wrote above it: “Duty of Service.” Batuknath’s face tightened. With that single stroke his entire legal game trembled. He lived by authority; duty frightened him.

Ananya told the children, “Add one place to the new map—Gangesha’s Question.” The children drew a small circle near the stump at the centre of the map. On it they wrote: “No trust without justice.” Beneath that: “If caste cuts a name, logic will catch it.”

For the first time real fear awoke inside Batuknath. He did not fear losing in court, nor the humiliation of paper; but when children turn philosophy into a game and a game into a social question, old cunning no longer works. He understood that this generation was learning the language of law, but tempering it in the fire of justice.

At evening Satyavrat Mehta arrived. Everything was told to him. He remained silent for a long time. Then he said, “Gangesha’s logic teaches us that the edges of words are sharp. The word ‘trust’ looks smaller than ‘justice,’ but without justice it becomes a crocodile.” Then he fell silent again. He understood that speeches were no longer central in this courtyard; questions were.

As night came down, many lamps were lit around the stump. The red file was placed in the middle. Beside it lay a copy of the Tattvachintamani, Ananya’s stone, Mira’s red cord, and the children’s map. Batuknath’s proposal was neither rejected nor accepted. It was kept waiting for a hearing—as a criminal is not punished at once, but first made to hear the full testimony.

That night, while returning home, people saw several young men looking at a shining notice on their phones: “Garh Narikel Digital

Tribute Platform: Add the name of your loved one, preserve memory safely.” Beneath it was not the symbol of Chandrapal Batra’s company, but the emblem of a new cultural-service organisation. The children looked at one another. Ananya gripped the register tightly.

Gangesha’s question was not finished. After the paper trust, a screen trust was arriving. A faint laugh rose from inside the stump—as though Navya-Nyaya itself were ready to examine the proof of the next deception.

FOLK SONG: GANGESHA’S QUESTION

Folk tune: question-bhagat

Gangesha asks, he asks for proof;

Look whose pocket hides inside the hand of protection.

No proposition without proof; the roots ask at night:

Whose memory, whose trust, whose storehouse of profit?

Tattvachintamani, stone and red cord together;

The proposal waits for hearing, and the colour of deception opens.

Then the mobile glowed—a tribute platform;

Add a name, save memory—what a sweet contrivance.

Behind the crocodile of paper came the crocodile of the screen;

Navya-Nyaya laughed and ran to test the next proof.

Gangesha’s question says—test even the sweetest speech;

Look whose pocket is hidden inside the hand of protection.



The story of knowledge does not happen only in assemblies of scholars. The gleam of a shell, smoke on a mountain, an empty seat, a child’s indistinct word, green vegetables in a garden, a message on a mobile phone—everywhere the mind constructs a world with the help of perception, memory, inference, comparison and testimony.

Gangesha’s achievement is to open this everyday process in such subtle language that cause, defect, absence, relation and limit do not remain

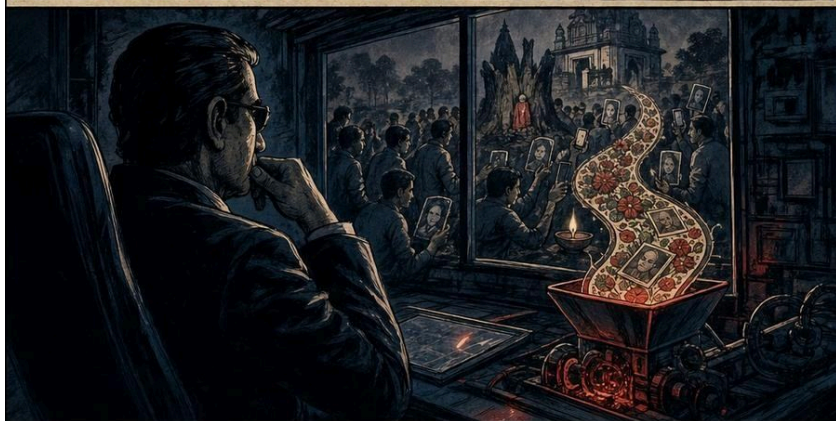
vague. Narrative makes this subtlety visible; theory remains in brackets to remind the reader that behind the visible scene stands an entire architecture of reasoning.

[Philosophical undertone—the final page of Kadambari—Book and Obstacle: an old copy of Banabhatta's Kadambari was kept in the library of Garh Narikel. (Philosophical principle: the direct fruit of the mangalacharana is not completion of the book, but removal of obstacles.)]

CHAPTER 58

Chandrapal's Memorial App

When tribute becomes an app, even grief begins to be collected in instalments.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE FUND OF SERVICE IN GRIEF

Folk tune: compassion jhumar

Share compassion, and keep the accounts clear;

Go beyond flowers and lamps to build the road of life.

Flowers and lamps on the screen, with open accounts beside them;

Let a service fund of grief give families an answer.

Compassion is not an instalment; let assistance be regular;

Let education, health and livelihood become lasting arrangements.

Let the donation code be transparent, and honour the beneficiary;

No business in the name of sorrow—make compassion a campaign.

When a service fund of grief lifts life again,

Memory moves beyond flowers and makes a road for the future.

No shop in the name of grief, but a courtyard of service;

Let every coin be openly accounted for before the people.

Education, medicine, employment—plant all three pillars;

With the lamp of memory, light the road of the next generation.



By dawn Chandrapal Batra's "Digital Tribute Platform" had begun glowing on many phones in Garh Narikel. The message said: "Make the name of your loved one immortal, preserve memory safely, offer tribute." Beneath it were flowers, a lamp, water, and a small shining symbol. No company name appeared clearly, only "People's Service Cultural Forum." Those who had gone home the previous night after hearing Gangesha's question woke to see that when the red file of the trust became stuck before the stump, a second crocodile of memory was lifting its snout from the screen.

Chandrapal Batra himself did not come to the village. That was his way. Wherever he would have to meet people's eyes, he sent

representatives; wherever tears could be counted, he built a platform. He knew that in grief people hand over names, photographs, stories, tears, receipts and documents. If someone whom the court had not heard for years and whom the government had reduced to an “empty plot” was told by a shining page, “We will preserve your memory,” even a trembling hand might press the consent button.

When Devika opened the platform for the first time, her face tightened. The page was beautiful—a blue background, a faint wave of water, a lamp in the centre, Garh Narikel’s name above. But as soon as the window for adding a name opened, the questions began: full name of the deceased, full address of the family, copy of identification, bank-related information, photograph, cause of death, claim status, compensation details, contact list, numbers of relatives, and finally: “Consent: information may be used for memorial publication, research, assistance, donations and partnerships.” Devika switched off the phone. “Not tribute,” she said. “A net.”

Ananya gathered the children around the stump. She placed the phone in the middle, not as a sacred object but as one might place a snake. The button “Make the Name Immortal” glowed. One boy asked, “Why is so much paper needed to make a name immortal?” Another said, “If they are going to preserve the names, why do we need our register?” A girl added softly, “Anyone who asks for a consent form before listening to a name has not ears, but a stomach.”

Ira opened the copy of Gangesha’s book again. “Yesterday the question was: what is proof? Now apply Gangesha’s test to this app. What do we see by direct perception?” The children answered together, “A beautiful page.” Ira asked, “Inference?” Devika replied, “Inside the beautiful page is a desire to collect names, identities, sorrow, money and claims.” Ira asked again, “Testimony?” Mira said, “‘Tribute,’ ‘safety,’ ‘service’—sweet words.” Finally Ira asked, “Comparison?” Ananya looked toward the stump and then the phone. “A crocodile lies quietly on the surface of the water. Its teeth are underneath.”

A faint gritty sound rose from within the stump. Someone said, “The tree agrees.” Budhba Ghost shimmered unusually strongly in daylight that day; there was no laughter on his face, only contempt. As he leaned toward the screen’s glow, the screen went dark by itself, then lit again. The children shivered. No one clearly heard whether Budhba spoke, but one meaning reached them all: “Hunting names in the name of protecting names.”

Mira read the platform’s “consent.” Her voice grew harder line by line. “It says here that the story, image, voice, family details, future research, assistance, publicity, partnerships and donation appeals may all use the material. In other words: give them grief and they will turn it into a story; give them tears and they will turn them into an

advertisement; give them the name of the dead and they will turn it into a donation plate.” A woman who had been thinking of uploading her drowned husband’s photograph lowered the phone from her chest and put it back into her bundle.

Gop Kumar remained quiet, making dots on paper. He could smell a digital net from afar. “This platform is not directly in Chandrapal’s name,” he said. “There are three layers—a cultural forum, a service group, memory technology. But look at the style of the writing, the information being requested, and the route of donations. It is the same old hand that once chewed not the body of a young man who lost at gambling, but the future of his family.” Gop did not give a detailed technical explanation before the village. He said only this: “Do not give trust to anyone who uses grief as a reason to ask for unnecessary information.”

Suddenly a young man near the stump laughed. “So is everything bad? What if a digital platform carries names far and wide?” Devika turned toward him. “Carrying them far is not bad. But whose hand holds the reins of the name? The dead person’s family? The people’s assembly? The children? Or Chandrapal Batra, who can change the next button one day and open a donation box?” The young man fell silent. His question had not been wrong, but the answer was difficult.

Then Satyavrat Mehta arrived. He looked at the phone, read the terms, then sat upon the roots of the stump. For a long time he said nothing. Finally he spoke: “In law, consent can be written. But how free is consent taken in a moment of grief? If a hungry person is made to sign in exchange for food, is that consent or compulsion? If a grieving family must surrender information in exchange for memory, is that tribute or a transaction?” His voice carried not the weight of court, but of regret.

Batuknath Hariharan stood at a distance listening. The red file was not opened that day. He felt both relief and anxiety. Relief because the children’s attention had shifted from his trust to the screen; anxiety because if the children cut apart the screen’s words with reasoning too, how would he defend the red file? He thought to himself: create an institution, attach an app, draw memory in through the route of donations, then bind it in rules. But Gangesha’s question followed behind him: “What is the proof of your authority?”

Meanwhile Chandrapal Batra sat in a cold room in the city watching a report. How many opened the page, how many entered names, how many stopped halfway—the numbers climbed his screen. He had no interest in names; he was interested in the half-completed windows. Incomplete grief can be called again. He told his assistant, “The village is emotional. Once trust is built, they will all come.” The assistant asked, “And the children of Channa Grove?” Chandrapal laughed. “Children are emotional obstacles, not permanent barriers.”

At that moment a strange error appeared on his screen. Wherever there had been a field for “name,” the word “proof” kept filling itself in. Where there had been “donation,” it became “duty.” Where there had been “consent,” it became “Whose authority?” Chandrapal grew irritated. He began calling the technical team, but the screen flashed again: “Tattvachintamani Mode Active.” No such feature actually existed; no programmer had built it. It was the stump’s laughter travelling across the network into the city room.

In Garh Narikel the children decided they would not prevent any family from adding a name to the platform, but everyone would first be taught what it meant to give a name. So a “School of Names” was set up around the stump. First lesson: saying a name and surrendering a name are two different things. Second lesson: let a photograph of grief not become someone else’s property. Third lesson: when memory is registered, first ask whether someone is becoming its owner.

Mira had the children write a new oath of privacy: “We will speak the name of the dead, but we will not hand over the key to the dead person’s house. We will listen to a story, but not sell tears. We will see a photograph, but not circulate it without permission. We will give help, but not demand a soul in return.” As the oath was spoken, the red cord beside the stump’s roots moved lightly by itself.

At evening an old woman came to write her son’s name. She did not know how to use a mobile phone, but a young man had told her that putting the name on the app would bring government assistance. Devika explained everything slowly. The woman listened, then said, “My son went into the water. I pulled his name out of the water. Why should I drown it again in a screen?” She wrote her son’s name on the stone by the stump and quietly went home. After that sentence, many people closed the page on their phones.

At night Ananya drew a new symbol beside the map—a small square screen with a wave of water and a crocodile’s eye inside it. Beneath she wrote: “Question of the Memory App.” Ira looked at it and said, “The next lesson of Navya-Nyaya is ready. Perception: the screen. Inference: hunger. Testimony: tribute. Truth: still under examination.” The children thought about the line for a long time.

Then a message came to Gop’s phone. There was no sender’s name. It was designed to disappear immediately, but in Garh Narikel disappearance was no longer silence. Gop read quickly: “The tribute platform is not alone. The donation code will change at night. Raghav is watching.” The message flickered and vanished. But as it disappeared, a faint leaf-mark remained on the phone glass.

Ananya saw the mark. She understood that Chandrapal was not alone; Raghav “Signal” had awakened again in the shadows. This time

what rose from within the stump was not laughter but warning. The crocodile of the memorial app had opened its mouth; the donation code was about to become its teeth.

All night the children kept watch around the stump. One watched the glow of mobile phones, one the names on the stones, one the yellow notice, one the red file. Channa Grove had been cut, but four crocodiles now lay in wait around its courtyard—government, trust, screen and signal. Next morning Raghav's code would be read first, then the names.

FOLK SONG: INSTALMENTS ON GRIEF

Folk tune: plaintive satirical song

Not for sale, no—the name of a loved one is not for sale;

When devotion becomes a code, it is devotion no longer.

Flowers and lamps on the screen, a donation code below;

*“To make the dead person's name immortal”—what turn of trade is
this?*

A mother offers tears while the app counts fees;

Collecting instalments even on grief, the crocodile fills its belly.

*The leaf-mark on the glass did not vanish when the message
disappeared;*

Raghav awoke in the shadows, and a warning arrived.

Government, trust, screen, signal—four teeth;

Children keep watch at night in the courtyard of the cut tree.

A loved one's name is not a flower for sale;

When devotion becomes a code, devotion will not remain.

Flowers and lamps on the screen, a donation code below;

“To make a name immortal”—what turn of trade is this?



[Philosophical undertone—Kiranavali's unobstructed journey: in Udayanacharya's chamber, disciples were tying bundles of manuscripts. Later, a dispute arose over this event.]

CHAPTER 59

Raghav Signal's New Code

*The scripture written in the faint trace of an erased screen is read
more clearly than any other.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: ERASED CODE, SURVIVING TRUTH

Folk tune: secret-message awakening song

*Save the vapour, save the vapour upon the glass;
Find the road through the shadow of even an erased letter.*

*The message was erased, yet vapour remained upon the glass;
Read the tiny code, and the whole road tells its tale.
Preserve the digital ash and examine it with experts;
Do not rush to a conclusion—tie together the threads of evidence.*

*An erased code is not defeat, but the first door of inquiry;
A secure copy and a time-stamp will become the firm foundation.
From the marks of surviving truth the map of the web will open;
With the lamp of patience in hand, even darkness will dissolve.*

*Do not conclude in haste; join thread to thread;
Time-stamp, secure copy—turn them toward evidence.
Sit with those who know, and loosen the knots of the code;
Light the lamp of patience and weigh the secrets of the dark web.*



The next morning people sat around the stump to read Raghav's code as though an ancient scripture were about to be opened. But this scripture was written not on leaves, but on the blurred traces of a vanished screen. The message erased in the night had left no body behind, yet its vapour remained. The leaf-shape caught upon the glass of Gop's phone was not a severed leaf of Channa Grove; it was a leaf of Raghav's fear.

Raghav "Signal" Somani had always believed that if words were erased in time, a crime never acquired a body. His faith was simple: speak,

erase, and no proof of what was spoken would remain. But from the day the children took the watch over names into their own hands in Garh Narikel, even erased words began returning with their shadows. The message vanished, but a leaf-shaped stain remained on the glass. The stain vanished, but its outline stayed in the children's eyes. Their eyes closed, but the roots of the stump had already heard it.

Ananya said first, "Before reading the code, make the code into evidence." Ira smiled at the sentence. Gangesha's question was still new in the courtyard of Channa Grove, but the children were learning its language in their own fashion. What is perception? The glass of the mobile phone. What is inference? Theft of memory under the pretext of donation. What is verbal testimony? Tribute, service, trust, donation. What is analogy? A crocodile that looks still upon the water while keeping its teeth below. What is postulation? If the message was erased, there was something the offender did not want to survive. What is non-apprehension? The name missing from the app bears witness to the name that was erased. The children counted these one by one, as though Navya-Nyaya were being born again upon the bark of the stump.

Gop said, "The meaning of the code will not be direct. Raghav always gave things other names. Money was donation, commission was service, theft was process, threat was advice, and deletion was privacy." Mira stopped him at once. "Privacy is not a shield for crime. Privacy is the victim's right, not the offender's cave." The sentence settled around the stump like stone.

Saumya brought out an old list. It contained many words for donations—gift of lamps, gift of water, gift of labour, memorial donation, scholarship, peace fund, disaster relief, cultural revival. Every word sounded sacred. Yet behind each stood one of Raghav's tiny marks—a bracket, a dot, a crescent, three lines, the vein of a leaf, an inverted lamp. To ordinary eyes the marks were decoration; to Raghav's people they were roads.

Aruni kept his palm upon the stump and remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "If the language of donation becomes a criminal code, it is no donation; it is a second water-burial of the body. Once the river drowned bodies. Now a plaque of charity will drown names." Several families shuddered. For the first time they understood that the name of a dead person could die again—this time garlanded with honour.

Batuknath Hariharan came again that day. His clothing still performed the old drama of stern, upright law. From a distance he saw the children reading Raghav's code, and discomfort crossed his face. In a court of law, codes remained under his control—sections, subsections, petitions, stays, replies. Here the children were opening the bodies of words. He said quietly, "Be careful. Digital evidence is not easily admitted

in court.” Ananya answered at once, “Justice will be admitted here first. The court may examine it afterward.”

At that reply Budhba Ghost flickered. His form did not become clear in daylight, but his laughter sounded like the rasp of leaves. Batuknath’s face hardened. He understood that in this courtyard his years of legal pride were beginning to stagger.

Then a young man arrived who had done small jobs for Chandrapal’s memorial app. His name was Bhavesh. In a trembling voice he said, “I did not know all this was wrong. I was only told to create donation categories on the tribute platform. Raghav sent which category meant what. If a bracket came, the donation would never reach the family. If the vein of a leaf came, the name would remain only for display. If an inverted lamp came, the route of the account would change.” After each sentence Gop did not interrupt him; instead he repeated it slowly in ordinary language so that everyone could understand.

Mira asked Bhavesh, “Did you know that when a name glowed on the screen, the family believed their son’s memory was safe?” Bhavesh lowered his head. “I knew. But I was told that emotion runs the platform, while accounting runs the business.” As soon as he said this, a dry insect crawled out from inside the stump and moved across the cut bark. The children watched it. Ananya wrote: “An insect upon emotion.”

Raghav himself was not there, yet his absence was heavier than a presence. Perhaps from some glass room in a distant city he was watching the scene. He believed he could remain invisible. But in Garh Narikel invisible beings had always arrived before human beings—ghosts, spirits, Loth, Panidubbi, witches, the Brahma of the pipal. Here Raghav’s invisibility was no skill; it was merely a frail shadow in an ancient crowd.

At noon Raghav’s second message arrived. This time it did not appear on Gop’s phone but on the corner of the yellow notice lying near the stump. The paper itself turned faintly blue, and for three moments letters appeared upon it: “Donation code changed. Name-watch unstable. Find the source of silence.” Then the letters vanished. A blue stain remained. The children did not jump in excitement. They had already learned the discipline of evidence more deeply than wonder at an unexplained miracle.

Ira asked, “Who is the source of silence?” Everyone’s eyes turned by themselves toward Satyavrat Mehta. He was seated that day at the edge of the courtyard. He was silent, but this time his silence was not a cave for wrongdoing; it was a seat for listening. Raghav perhaps would not understand the difference. A man who had always treated silence as deletion now mistook even listening silence for conspiracy.

Satyavrat rose slowly. Batuknath’s face showed a strange displeasure as he came forward. Satyavrat said, “Raghav is searching for the source of

silence because his code runs on words. Where listening comes before speech, the code breaks.” Then he sat down again. No lecture, no order. Yet in that short sentence Raghav’s entire trade trembled.

Ananya asked, “Then the way to break the code is not speaking, but listening?” Satyavrat replied, “Some codes open through the ear. The language of crime speaks quickly; the victim’s language comes late. Quick language is easy to catch. Late language is hard to hear. Whoever hears it can turn the code back into a name.”

At that moment Ujjwal’s mother read her son’s name once more. This time she fell silent after reading it. The silence lengthened. People began to grow uneasy. Earlier, after every name, some sign was immediately recorded—air, a bird, sunlight, shade. This time nothing happened. Ananya held her pen still. One minute. Two minutes. Three. Suddenly, far away, a child who had been playing outside the courtyard held his breath, ran shouting “kabaddi-kabaddi,” touched the edge of the stump and raced back. Everyone watched him. Ananya wrote: “The name’s answer: play.”

That small game was the first blow against Raghav’s code. Criminal codes move within closed groups; kabaddi is a game of open breath. The code says: keep the meaning of the sign secret. Kabaddi says: let everyone hear the breath, let everyone see the boundary, touch and return without deceit. Around the stump the children formed a circle for kabaddi, one after another. The name-stones stood guard outside the circle.

Batuknath grew irritated. “This is not a court. It is a game,” he muttered. Ba heard him. “If a court chews up years and a game saves a name,” she said, “then the game itself is justice.” Hariharan’s neck bent. For the first time he feared that caste, office, law, trust, donation and code could all find themselves faced by the people’s game.

By evening a list of Raghav’s signs had been made, but it was not posted publicly in full. Mira said, “When we describe the criminal’s trick, we must not open the road for the crime.” So the children decided that only a warning would be made public: “A donation separated from the name is the crocodile’s tooth. A platform that displays a name without the family’s consent is not memory, but theft. When a message is erased, ask about its shadow.”

Beneath the warning they wrote Gangesha’s question: “Where is the evidence?” Then a second line: “Caste, wealth, office, donation, screen—none is evidence if the name has not consented.” As the line was written, an elderly leather-worker stepped forward. “If Gangesha belongs to justice,” he said, “then I too belong inside justice. Do not write my name at the back.” The children wrote his name not on the outer ring of stones but exactly along the middle line. Upon the old scratch of caste order, that small stroke of the pen burned like fire.

When night fell, Raghav's third message arrived. This time it appeared on no phone, paper, screen or glass, but upon the children's kabaddi line. A blue streak rose in the earth: "Where there is listening, there is risk. Remove the source." No one spoke. Again all eyes turned toward Satyavrat. But he did not rise. He slowly placed his ink pen beside the children's register.

Ananya understood. The source was not a person, but a method. What if Satyavrat disappeared? If the children had learned to listen, the source could no longer be confined to one body. She picked up the pen and wrote: "Source of silence: the collective ear."

With those words the blue line in the soil split. It became blue dust and flew up to settle upon the cut stump. For the first time Budhba Ghost's voice sounded distinctly: "The code has been read. Now silence will be heard." A thrill passed through the people. For the next day Satyavrat Mehta himself would sit not in a reading of names, but in a reading of silence. Raghav's code had broken, but the fear behind the code—the fear of silence—still had to open.

All night the kabaddi line glimmered faintly in the soil. The children kept watch. The name-stones remained in place. The yellow notice was silent. The red file stayed closed. The memorial app's screen went dark. But from within the stump a low voice kept rising: "Listen, then write. Write, then keep watch." At dawn Satyavrat's second silence would be read.

FOLK SONG: READ THE ERASED CODE

Folk tune: secret-message song

Read the code, read the erased code;

Choose the real hand through the smoke of letters.

The message was erased; vapour stayed upon the glass;

At dawn the scripture of the blurred leaf became clear.

The donation code broke, the blue line split;

The source of silence was not one body—the collective ear awoke.

"Listen, then write; write, then keep watch,"

The low voice within the stump repeated through the night.

The yellow paper silent, the red file closed;

Name-stones awake, the children fierce in their watch.

Do not merely read the code; hear the fear behind it;

Choose the true hand through the smoke of erased letters.

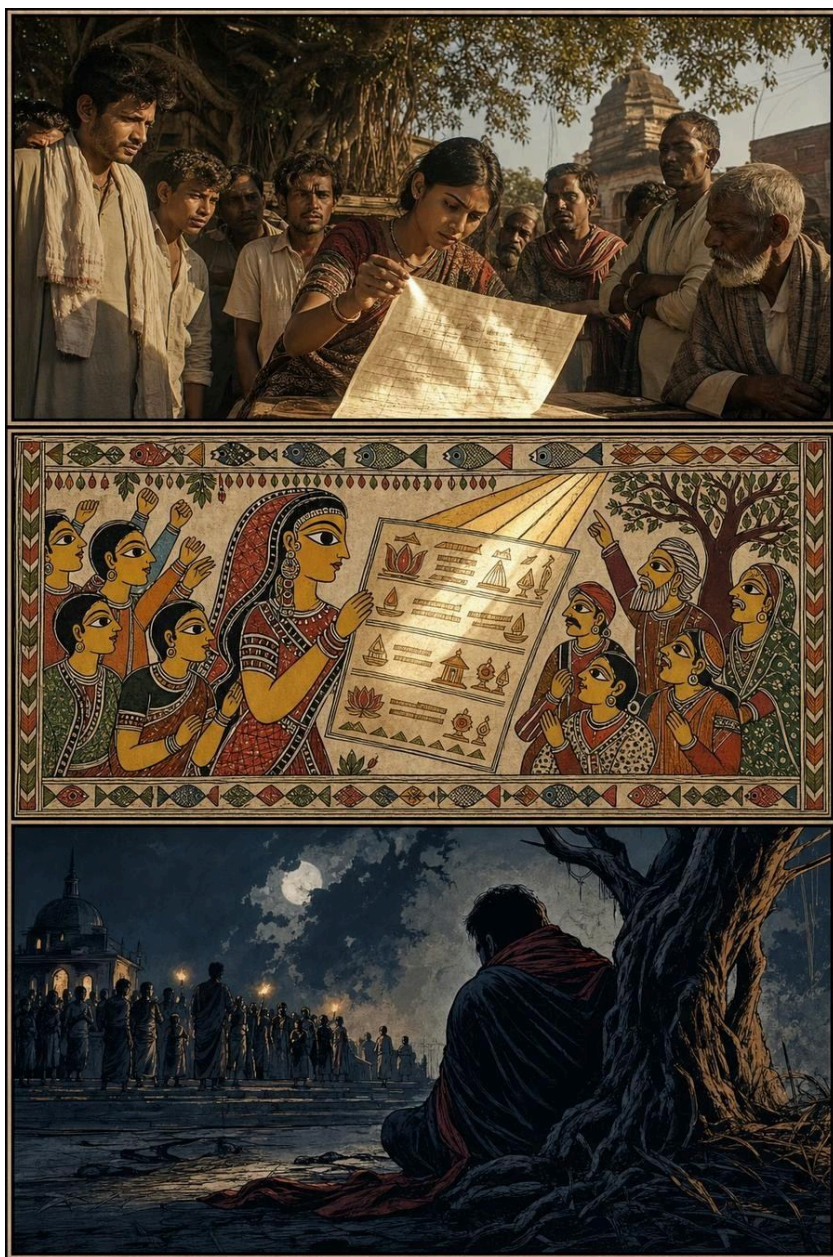


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE BLANK PAGE OF THE REGISTER OF ACCUSATIONS: *There was little sunlight in the genealogist's room, but the ink of accusation was very dark. Society wanted to confine his identity to one red mark; he gave instead a method for judging knowledge through cause, defect and evidence.*]

CHAPTER 60

Satyavrat Mehta's Second Silence

*An account written in the language of piety first seizes the ear of
silence.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: FROM SILENCE TO SPEECH

Folk tune: silent parati

Let silence ripen, let speech ripen within it;

At the right hour bring clear words before the world.

*The second silence differs from the first—this time it is a house of
thought;*

*The garment of piety is falling away, and the true knowledge beneath
it opens.*

Questions ripen inside silence and take the form of answers;

At the proper moment clear speech descends among the people.

Let silence not be a shield for deceit, but a place for self-examination;

Let the vow of honesty turn into work after dawn.

From silence to speech, from speech to action—walk in that order;

Bring the truth within outward and light society's lamp.

Let silence not become a shield; let it become a veranda for thought;

Let questions turn within, searching for a new shore.

At dawn let silence rise, gird its cloth for work;

Plough every field of society with the light of honesty.



When Raghav “Signal” Somani’s new code reached the circle around the stump, at first no one understood its meaning. On paper everything was written in the language of piety—offering, reverence, rebuilding, memorial support, fund for victims’ families. But Devika’s eyes had learned that fraud most often dresses itself in sacred words. She laid the paper in sunlight. Under “reverence” the word “share” gleamed; under “fund” appeared “route”; and beneath “support” a fine thread spelling “commission” became visible.

People wanted to make an uproar. Some young men said, "This time, straight to court." Others said, "Call Satyavrat Babu; he is a Delhi man, he will understand." Some elders said, "Anyone who wants to trade in names again should be tied to Channa Grove." But the stump remained silent. There was a strange restraint in that silence, as if the cut tree were saying: "Listen first. Speak afterward."

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta was sitting at the edge of the village beside a dried pond. Word reached him, but he did not rise at once. In his earlier life he would have risen immediately—asked for documents, checked sections, prepared arguments, issued a statement. That readiness had made people call him a capable officer. Now he understood that urgency too could be a form of pride. A grief buried for years is not served by an instant answer; often an instant answer merely covers it once more.

He drew a line in the dried mud of the pond. As he drew it, Gangesha's question returned to him. What is perception? What is inference? What counts as verbal testimony? What is memory? And what evidence do we have for the caste order that kills inconvenient truths of life and turns them into statues of doctrine? Satyavrat was slowly learning that justice is not merely the art of speaking. Justice first requires the courage to place one's own right to speak in the dock of doubt.

Then Ananya came to him carrying the register. "Satyavrat Babu," she said, "everyone is calling you." He looked up. "Why?" "The paper has come again. Raghav's code. People want you to tell us what should be done." For a few moments he studied her. There was no worship in the child's eyes; there was insistence, but no blind faith. She asked, "Why are you silent?"

In that question Satyavrat Mehta's first silence and his second stood face to face. The first was the silence of a time when he could have spoken but did not—because of office, decorum, procedure, doubt, convenience and safe distance. That silence was wrongdoing. The second was the silence of the present—when he could speak, but did not want his voice to cover the people's. This silence was a vow to listen.

He told Ananya, "In my first silence I stopped people's voices. If I speak immediately now, I will make those voices small again. Let us go, but I will not pronounce the decision. I will listen, and if people wish, I will help loosen the knots in the language." Ananya closed the register. "So first you are a listener, and only then a lawyer?" Satyavrat smiled faintly after many days. "In justice, becoming a lawyer without first becoming a listener is dangerous."

Everyone was waiting near the Channa stump. The yellow notice, Batuknath Hariharan's proposal for a People's Memory Trust, a printed sheet from Chandrapal's memorial app, and the donation paper containing Raghav's new code lay separately beneath four stones. The

four papers looked like four crocodiles that had crawled out of the water and flattened themselves around the stump—not to chew bodies, but words.

Satyavrat arrived, but did not sit in the centre. He sat on the ground outside the circle. People stirred. Some said, “Not there, come forward.” He replied, “Whoever sits in the middle today will be a name, not a person of status.” Ananya placed at the edge of the stump the stone marked “whose name was never found.” The meeting began from there.

Devika spoke first. “The people building a memorial on the screen will measure our weeping. If a name has no photograph, they will create an empty silhouette. If the family is poor, they will attach a donation button to the name. Whoever clicks will have even their tears counted. The fraud is old; only its vocabulary has become sacred.” No one applauded. The assembly at the Channa stump gave assent not through applause, but through silence.

Mira rose next. “If memory becomes an image without consent,” she said, “then it becomes another insult to the body. Anyone building a memorial over the name of a person whose face was stolen and whose privacy was broken must first learn the language of that person’s consent. Even the family of the dead has the right to say: we do not want our grief in the marketplace.” Her voice was not sharp, but it was clear. Those who knew the story of her old blackmail understood that this woman was not turning her wound into spectacle; she was drafting a law against spectacle.

Saumya Ramanathan spoke softly. “Look at the language of these papers. The yellow notice says vacant plot. The trust proposal says heritage. The app says digital tribute. The donation paper says revival. But none of the four asks even once: in whose hands is the watch over the names?” She read the words one by one. After each, the children asked for its meaning in earth-language: What does “vacant” mean? Whose “heritage”? “Digital” for whose benefit? Who accounts for “donation”?

As he listened to those questions, the old officer inside Satyavrat Mehta grew restless. He wanted to answer at once, cite sections, write the matter out in the language of rules. Instead he pressed his thumb into the soil. He remained silent. His silence was no longer escape; it was practice in giving the people’s questions room inside himself.

Ba said in her slow voice, “Gangesha wrote about justice, but society did not do justice to his life. Anything inconvenient about caste, marriage, birth or lineage was escaped by turning him into a statue of respect. That was the murder of memory in the name of honour. If the names of Channa Grove are now turned into statues, that too will be murder.” At those words a fine crack lengthened across the cut surface of the stump. Some were frightened, others awed. Ananya wrote: “Honour without justice can become murder.”

Then Satyavrat felt perhaps his time to speak had come. He did not rise; sitting where he was, he said, "I am a man of law, but I know that law too often swallows names by turning them into files. Today, if you wish, I can open the language of these documents. But you will decide whether the name goes into the paper, or whether the paper must answer before the name."

Aruni asked, "How will it answer?" Satyavrat replied, "Whoever brings a proposal must first listen to the reading of names. Whoever wants to build a memorial must first visit the home of the dead. Whoever says digital tribute must first switch off the mobile phone for one day and sit in the ring around the stump. Whoever wants to donate must first open the old waters of the accounts. Whoever wants a trust must first say where the children's rights lie within that trust."

A stir passed through the crowd. This was not a speech; it was an inverted statute. Until now authority had placed people in the dock of verification. Now the stump's assembly wanted to verify the proposal itself. Ananya, Devika, Mira, Saumya, Ira and Gop began drafting a page together. Its heading was: "The Proposal's Oath Before the Name." Satyavrat wanted to sign it. Ananya stopped him. "Children first."

Satyavrat withdrew his hand. It felt not like humiliation but release. In a system that always waited for the largest signature, the first signatures here would belong to children. One by one, instead of their names, they placed their signs of watchfulness—a fish, a leaf, a glass marble, an open eye. Only then, on the last line, Satyavrat wrote one word: "Heard."

After dusk two promoters from Chandrapal's memorial app arrived with phones. "Shall we live-stream the programme?" they asked. "People will know. Donations will come." Devika covered the phone screen with a cloth. "Not today," she said. "Where a name takes its first breath, the camera must come later." The promoters laughed, but the laughter fell empty. No one in the crowd joined them.

That night it was decided that the next day would hold the "First Festival of Names." A festival, but without instruments. A festival, but without a stage. A festival, but without garlands. Every household would bring one name, one sign, one memory and one question. The family of the dead would answer "present." The names of living offenders would also be read—not in celebration, but as accountability. Caste names would be read not as pride, but as questions. Gangesha's name would be read not as a statue, but as a challenge to justice.

After everyone dispersed, Satyavrat Mehta remained alone beside the stump. Moonlight lay upon its cut surface. He watched it in silence for a long time. It seemed that from within the stump came a question: "How

long will your second silence last?” In his mind he answered: “As long as the people’s voice is more necessary than mine.”

When he rose to leave, wind passed through a split in the stump and sounded behind him: “Kabaddi.” Satyavrat stopped. The field was empty, the children had gone home, the ghosts were invisible. Yet the line had been drawn. The next day, at the Festival of Names, the game would begin again—this time not by holding the breath, but by saving it.

FOLK SONG: THE VOW OF THE SECOND SILENCE

Folk tune: silent parati

How long will silence last, how long the second silence?

As long as the people’s voice remains greater than mine.

Accounts hid beneath the garments of sacred words;

Offering, reverence, service—underneath them the share was written.

Satyavrat fell silent a second time, but the silence was new;

He vowed to restrain his own voice and listen to the people.

Caste names will be read not in praise, but as questions;

Gangesha’s name not as a statue, but as a challenge to justice.

The stump asked: how long will the second silence last?

The answer: wherever the people’s voice remains greater than mine.

The field empty, the line drawn, the wind said “kabaddi”;

The next game will not hold the breath—it will save the breath.

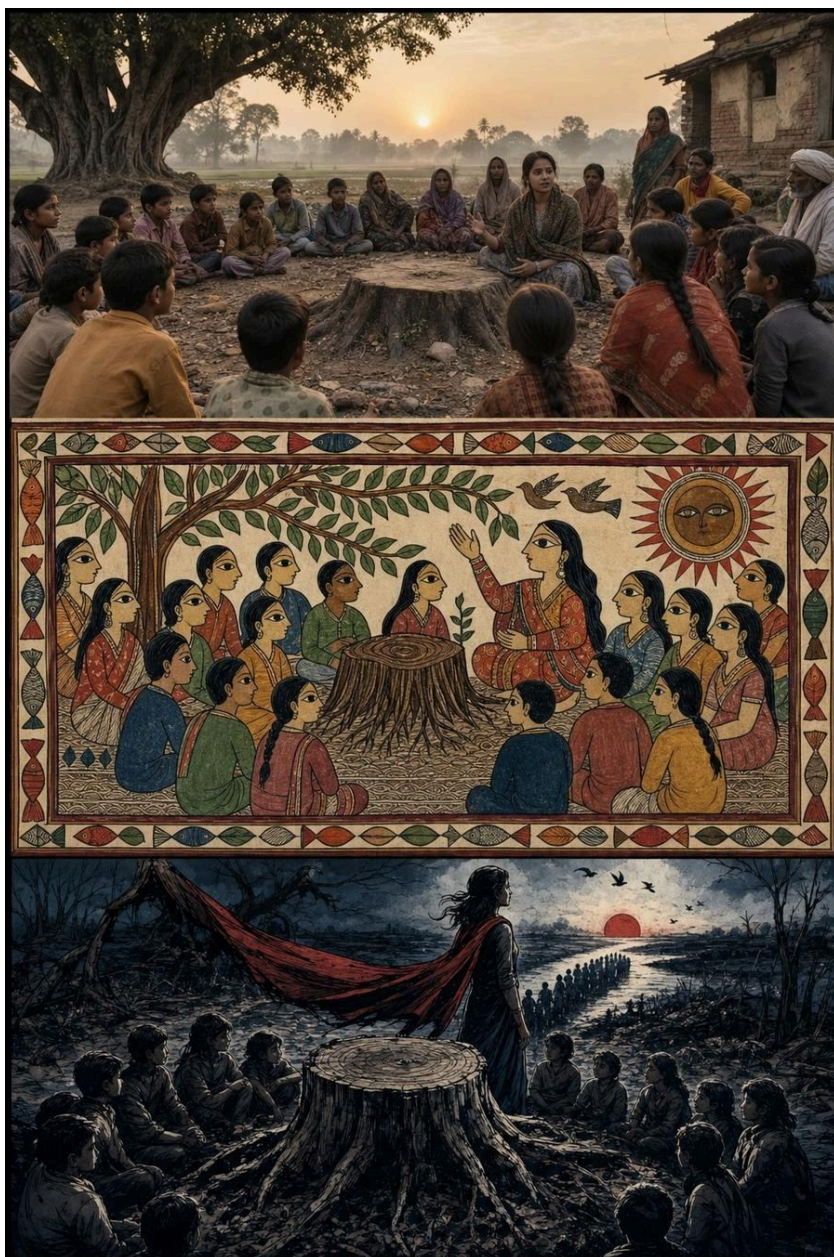


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE LEATHER-WORKER
WOMAN'S LAMP: At the village edge stood the small house of a family that
worked with leather. Yet the light of knowledge is no less real there. The
flame of the lamp remained steady.*]

CHAPTER 61

The First Festival of Names

At a true festival no drum is beaten—the names themselves resound.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE QUIET FESTIVAL OF NAMES

Folk tune: Festival of Names song

*Celebrate the festival, celebrate without drums;
One lamp, one flower, one name—that is adornment enough.*

*No drum, no flag—the lamp of a name is enough;
When read in a quiet voice, memory remains safe.
With every name, one flower, one story, one dignity;
A festival does not cover things—it opens identity.*

*Children, elders and sisters of the village, form a circle;
No slogans—listen with respect to the song of a life.
In the quiet festival of names, the soul finds a place;
The simple light of remembrance will remain a dawn through the
ages.*

*No clamour of slogans, no noise of flags;
A name read softly—that alone is the true dawn.
Children, elders and sisters in a circle, a platter of stories at the centre;
May the festival of quiet light continue through the ages.*



The morning of the Festival of Names did not arrive like a village fair. No drums sounded, no flags flew, no chairs were arranged on a platform while speakers were awaited. Around the cut stump of Channa Grove there was only the same old soil, the same severed roots, the same names written on stones, and the same children who, despite keeping watch through the night, sat not with sleep in their eyes but with light.

Many were startled by the word festival. Water-burial, fraud, humiliation of the body, years swallowed by courts, the crime of silence—and amid all this, a festival? Ananya said, “When a name is heard again, it is no longer only mourning. It becomes present. To become present is a festival.” After that no one objected to the word. For the first time the village seemed to understand that joy and grief are not enemies, but two colours of the same earth.

The children formed a long row on the eastern side of the stump. The families sat to the west. To the north sat elders whose memories still held many names. To the south sat those who did not consider themselves guilty, yet did not have the courage to remain absent. Satyavrat Mehta sat farthest back on a broken brick. A separate seat had been kept for him; with folded hands he declined it. Today the seat belonged to the name.

A small argument arose over where to begin. Some wanted the names of the labourers drowned at the bridge to be read first. Others said the name of the one devoured by the crocodile of the screen should come first. Others wanted first the names of women whose humiliation their homes had silenced for years. Then a boy, usually very quiet since the day of Gangesha’s question, stood and said, “Justice does not begin with order. It begins with listening. Those whose names were never found should come first.”

At those words a faint cough sounded like a leaf from Budhba Ghost. No one could see him, but everyone understood that Channa Grove agreed. The first stone was lifted. It bore the words: “Those whose names were never found.” Ananya held the stone in both hands and read it. No voice came from the family rows, because the families of those names were themselves unnamed. Then the children answered together: “Present.”

With that word—“present”—the air inside the stump changed. A shiver ran through those who had come only to watch. In court a name was often called and a clerk wrote “present” or “absent”; here the word was different from such paper language. Present meant: my body may be gone, but my absence is here; my memory is here; the injustice done to me is here.

The second stone bore an incomplete name: “Sar...” No one knew the rest. Years earlier a labourer had been swept away in a flood, and only the first letters had remained in someone’s notebook. An old woman said, “Perhaps Sarayu? Perhaps Saroj? Perhaps Sarpan?” The children wanted to complete the name, but Mira stopped them. “If we complete an incomplete name, we erase the truth of its incompleteness. Read it incomplete. Write it incomplete. Hear it incomplete.” Ananya read: “Sar...” From three directions in the family rows came the answer: “Present.”

Thus the reading began. No one's caste was demanded with the name, yet caste was not hidden either. If a family wished to add lineage, occupation, hamlet, river, or the mother's name, it was added. If not, it was not. Gangesha's question still circled the stump: what is evidence? What is lineage? What truth belongs to a name? If caste becomes the humiliation of a human being, its mention can be violence; but if caste bears witness to that humiliation, silence about it can also be violence. The children were learning that justice is not merely placing everyone in the same row; it is the discipline of hearing the different language of every wound.

Ba rose and said, "Gangesha asked about truth; society asked about lineage. So in the reading of names, truth comes first and lineage later." Many did not understand the sentence immediately, but it was entered in the register. Satyavrat Mehta listened from a distance. He had the language of constitutions, statutes and evidence, yet Ba's single line made the courtrooms of his years tremble.

When it came time to read Ujjwal's name, Devika trembled. She had thought herself strong now; but the sound of a name can undo all of a person's preparation. She said, "Ujjwal Jha." His mother answered, "Present." After a few moments Devika herself added, "His silence is also present." The children entered the two lines separately. Here not only the dead, but the dead person's silence, fear, humiliation and unfinished dream were given names.

Mira did not want her own name read. "I am alive," she said. But the women insisted that a living name should also be read when a woman had survived blackmail, shame, social fear and the trade in bodies, and had begun to speak. Mira then stood before the stump. She read her own name and added, "My privacy is present." The women answered together: "Present." The tremor in that sound was no less than a conch-blast.

Gop Kumar had brought a list. It contained the names of households broken by banking fraud, young men trapped in digital arrest, patients who never received medicine, labourers buried beneath bridge rubble, and those dismissed in files with the word "error." But as he began reading, the children said, "Not a list—names. Leave a breath between every name." For the first time Gop Kumar abandoned the pace of reading a list and learned the pace of reading human beings.

Kabaddi too formed part of the Festival of Names, but on a separate field. After every ten names the children rose, ran in a circle around the stump, and held their breath while chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi." If a child's breath broke midway, it was not counted as defeat. The child simply sat down to guard the next name. Kabaddi had now become a game of resistance—not disappearing while the breath was held, but carrying the breath as far as a name.

Once the circular kabaddi line suddenly lengthened. A streak of sunlight seemed to run from the stump to the pond, from there to the bridge pier, and then upward into the sky. The children stopped. Ananya said softly, "The line will not stop on earth." No one yet understood what that meant, but in a distant city Raghav Signal saw the same circle on the display of one of his devices and trembled. The dream of an "unnamed planet" glimmered as a seed in the sunlight of Garh Narikel.

At noon Batuknath Hariharan's people came again. They carried invitation cards: "Pre-consultation for the formation of the People's Memory Trust." They thought the crowd at the Festival of Names made it a good time for an announcement. But when an assistant began reading, the children stopped him. Ananya said, "Anything read here must be answered with 'present.' Shall we read the name of your trust?" The assistant's throat went dry. The paper fluttered in his hand.

Aruni said calmly, "Today belongs to the dead. Trusts, committees, schemes and tenders can all be heard tomorrow. No living cleverness will get a stage here today." A low murmur of support moved through the crowd. Batuknath himself had not come, but his shadow was printed upon the paper. After the yellow notice, this was paper of another colour—white, smooth, perfumed, yet just as greedy within. The children placed it on the edge of the stump, exactly where the yellow notice had spent the night.

Satyavrat Mehta said nothing about any of this. His second silence was doing its work. The first silence had been wrongdoing; this one made room for people's voices. But when the widow of an old labourer fainted while reading a name, Satyavrat ran forward and supported her. In that moment people understood that silence does not mean inactivity. Whoever is silent where speech is needed is culpable; whoever is silent in order to hear is a witness; whoever rises when support is needed is human.

By evening the ring of stones had doubled. The register pages were full. The children's fingers had turned blue with ink. The women's voices were hoarse. The elders' memories were tired. Yet nothing was as still as the stump. For the first time the full moon settled upon its cut circle. Someone said, "The tree is growing leaves on the moon now." No one laughed.

When the final name had been read, Ananya looked around. "Is the festival over?" a small boy asked. Ba said, "A festival of names does not end. Only today's breath is complete." At that the children said "present" one final time. The sound was very soft, but far away in the pond the water began turning in circles.

At night everyone slowly left. Around the stump remained the stones, two papers, new pages of the register and an extinguished lamp. Satyavrat Mehta rose after a long while. He saw, in a very thin split among the

roots, something green—or was it only a trick of moonlight? He bent to touch it, then held back his hand. Some proofs are not taken at once. Some things must be allowed to wait until morning.

The stump stayed awake through the night. The sound of the reading of names had sunk into the soil. The white trust paper and the yellow notice lay beside each other and trembled, as though both had understood that the rule of paper would not be simple here. When the first dampness of dawn settled upon the roots, a green point truly emerged. But to see it, the story itself had to hold its breath until morning.

FOLK SONG: NO DRUM—THE NAME

Folk tune: Festival of Names song

The name resounds, not the instrument—the name itself resounds;

Hearing it, even a dry root dresses itself in green.

No drum, no flag, no slogans from a stage;

Cut roots, stones, children—this is the whole festival.

Name after name was read; the voices sank into the earth;

Among extinguished lamps a green point rose.

The white trust paper and yellow notice trembled;

Beyond the rule of paper the watch over names awoke.

Some evidence asks to wait until morning;

All night the shoot breaks through the chest of darkness.

*At a true festival no instrument sounds—the names of the dead
resound;*

And hearing them, even the earth's dry roots dress themselves in green.

No drum, no flag, no slogans from a stage.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE PIPE AT THE MATERNAL VILLAGE: *In the school at his maternal village, Gangesha's place was not in the row of pupils but near the doorway. "Is knowledge self-valid or validated through another?" "How is fire established from smoke?" He was not permitted to answer, yet the questions kept gathering in his mind.*]

CHAPTER 62

A Green Point in the Stump

The oil was spent and the wick had grown small, yet the flame was stubborn—the stubbornness belonged not to the oil, but to the name.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: BIRTH-SONG OF THE
GREEN POINT**

Folk tune: sohar

*O child, sing the birth-song of the green point;
Even in a wick whose oil is spent, a wave of life remains.*

*The oil was spent, yet the little wick still burned;
Upon the black paper of night a green point grew.
That point was new birth, the first eye of hope;
A shoot was saying: the earth will be green again.*

*Sing the sohar softly—life is returning;
New sap is filling the heart of the stump.
With the birth of the green point, the future receives a name;
A small light will one day become a vast dwelling.*

*Night lay black as paper; a star rose in its centre;
The stump's chest beat—it had found new support.
Sing softly, do not break the shoot's sleep;
On the faith of one small point, the current of dawn will break forth.*



The night of the First Festival of Names passed, but the lamps burning around the stump of Channa Grove did not go out before dawn. Their wicks had grown small and the oil was nearly finished, yet the flames were stubborn, as though the watch over names had taken residence inside them. Fine drops of dew had gathered upon the stones on which names had been read through the night. The elders said the night had wept. The children said no—the names had asked for water, and dew had answered.

At the first hour of dawn Ananya came alone to the stump. She expected the place to look tired after the festival, as a singer's throat dries after a song. Instead she found the stump not tired but silently awake. Upon the grey ring of its cut body, which until yesterday had looked wholly dry, a minute green point had risen in one corner. It was so small that it vanished the moment the eye wandered, yet so bright that once seen it made the heart tremble.

Ananya did not touch it at first. She remembered the rule of the name-watch: whatever you encounter, listen first. She bent her ear. No word came from inside the stump, but a sound rose like the breath of kabaddi from very far away—kabaddi... kabaddi... kabaddi... It was not the sound of a game, but of a seed. The longer she listened, the clearer the green point became. In that act of listening a faint scent rose from the earth as well—neither flower nor leaf, but the smell of a beginning made wet, as though the soil were moistening its lips before speaking its first word.

Before long the children gathered. One cried, "A shoot!" Another said, "The tree will grow again!" A little boy who had read his father's name for the first time the previous day said, "This is Father's answer." Ananya did not scold him. No answer was rejected here. The children's rule was: let every meaning sit down first; then see which meaning stands by itself.

When Ba arrived, she looked at the shoot for a long time in silence. Her eyesight was weak, but the green point in the root seemed visible all the way inside her. "When sap remains in a cut body, a shoot appears," she said. "And when a name remains inside a severed memory, people grow again." The children opened the register. The shoot's first testimony was written: "A green point after the names."

By noon the news had spread. Some came to see a miracle. Others arrived with botanical explanations. A schoolteacher said, "Dormant buds can remain in a felled tree, and new shoots may emerge from them." The children wrote this down too. The lesson in Navya-Nyaya was no longer only a chapter; Gangesha's question was entering public behaviour. Evidence has many forms. What is seen is evidence. What is heard can be evidence. Pain experienced is evidence. Memory read generation after generation can also bear evidence.

Batuknath Hariharan's people smiled at the news. Their calculation was different: the green point would become public sentiment; public sentiment would produce a trust; the trust would produce authority; authority would produce donations; donations would produce control. But they did not come openly yet. They watched from a distance, like crocodiles beneath the water measuring a goat on the bank.

A photograph of the shoot appeared on Chandrapal Batra's app. The caption read: "Sacred Moment of Rebirth." Beneath it a donation button gleamed. Devika saw it and her face hardened. "If this green point is an answer from the names," she told the children, "we will not let it become a market image." But the photograph had already travelled widely. The first theft from memory had happened through names; now theft through sight had begun.

That evening Mira raised a separate question. "The face, body, tears and even the shoot connected with someone's pain remain under that person's rights. Showing memory without permission is theft too." The women agreed. Around the shoot they built not a small bamboo fence, but a discipline of sight. Whoever wished to look would first hear the reading of names. Whoever took a picture would write the reason. Whoever sold the image would be stopped.

Several young men grew annoyed at the rule. "Who can stop anything in this age?" they said. "Once a picture goes out, it is gone." Devika replied, "That is why the watch matters even more. A screen can chew the mind, but the eye of the screen can also be taught public shame." From behind her Ujjwal's mother said, "They sold my son's face. This shoot will not be sold."

That night Budhba Ghost appeared fully clearly for the first time. He stood not behind the cut stump, but directly beside the green point. His body seemed made of leaf-dust, smoke and old tears. Looking toward the children, he said, "The tree was cut, but the game is not over. From now on kabaddi is the game of saving the shoot." The children held their breath together. He continued, "Whoever crosses the shoot must return carrying a name. Whoever touches it without a name stays outside."

From the next day the children's kabaddi changed. No line was drawn in the soil; instead an invisible circle formed around the shoot. A child entering it pronounced a name. A child coming out said, "Present." If the breath broke, the child had not lost; the child simply sat down in the row to listen again. There was less victory and defeat in this game, more remembrance. Yet it remained a game, because memory without play becomes a burden.

Satyavrat Mehta watched the game. Many games of law returned to him—dates, adjournments, objections, articles, rights, procedure. Those too were games, but in them the person holding the breath was usually the victim while the offender breathed freely. Here it was reversed. The children held their breath to save a name, and even when their breath broke they were not shamed; they received another hearing. Satyavrat wrote inwardly: "The first rule of justice: when someone's breath breaks, do not punish them. Give them water."

The question of Gangesha arose again. A student asked, "If Gangesha was the father of this logic of justice, why did society not see the injustice in his own life?" Ba answered, "Because society reads scripture, not the body. It puts flowers upon the head of a book, but is afraid of the love, humiliation, caste-boundaries and rebellion of the person who wrote it." Satyavrat shuddered. He understood that a society capable of suppressing evidence from Gangesha's life could suppress the death of a labourer, the humiliation of a woman, the swindling of a young man, the land of a farmer—anything.

But the children were learning the art of lifting suppressed things again. They brought the name of Tattvachintamani into the game. One child ran inside holding his breath and cried, "Perception!" Another, before being caught, shouted, "Inference!" A third escaped saying, "Word!" A fourth little girl folded her hands by the shoot and said, "Memory!" The teacher smiled. Someone could have objected that the categories were philosophically imprecise; but in Channa Grove that day knowledge was alive, not sitting for an examination.

The green point slowly became a thin leaf. Its colour was startling—not a simple green, but green carrying the memory of a dark body, a mark of red cloth, the blue of water and the brightness of dew. It was as though the tree were saying: new life does not grow by forgetting old wounds, but by carrying them. Whenever wind touched the single leaf, a very fine trembling rose—too subtle for the eye, but clear to the tip of a finger.

News of the sight reached the district. That week a motor vehicle arrived bearing a shining plaque. Two officials, a photographer and a consultant stepped out. The consultant did not understand the speech of Garh Narikel very well, but knew expressions such as "folk culture," "cultural circuit," "heritage enhancement" and "modern amenities" fluently. He walked around the stump making notes.

Ananya stopped him. "Have you heard the reading of names?" The consultant laughed. "Inspection first, participation afterward." The children looked at one another. The sentence carried the smell of the yellow notice. Whoever measures a place before hearing its names has already turned that place into an object.

The officials looked at the shoot, the stump, the names on stones and the crowd. There was less reverence in their eyes than planning. "Development is possible here," they said. "Road access, lighting, visitor gallery, interpretation centre, ticketing..." The words flew into the air, and the shoot's leaf trembled. Budhba Ghost's shadow turned black.

Aruni could not remain silent. "Will there be a ticket to enter a place of testimony?" he asked. An official replied, "Without management there can be no preservation." Mira said, "Preservation—or ownership?"

Devika said, “Convenience—or surveillance?” Satyavrat Mehta said nothing, but his hand moved by itself to the register inside his bag. He understood: a second struggle had begun.

That evening the register gave the shoot a name: “Green Point. Child of: the cut Channa tree. Guardians: the Name-Watch.” Beneath it the children wrote: “Leaf trembled during external inspection.” This was not a trivial note. It was the first warning of the next age.

At night, after everyone had gone home, a sheet of paper blew toward the stump. It bore no government seal, but it was as smooth as a consultant’s draft. Across the top, in bold letters, stood: “Garh Narikel Heritage Corridor: Preliminary Concept.” The paper caught directly beside the shoot. All night the green point trembled in its shadow, while in the children’s dreams the kabaddi line stretched from the stump all the way to the road.

FOLK SONG: BIRTH OF THE GREEN POINT

Folk tune: a sorrowful form of sohar

Rise, little shoot, rise from the severed womb;

Drink the milk of names, stay safe from the shadow of greed.

The oil was spent, the wick was small, yet the flame did not die;

In the womb of the cut tree a green child rose.

The Name-Watch is guardian, the stump its mother;

A drop of dew becomes a cradle and sings the song of dawn.

At the touch of an outsider’s gaze the leaf trembled a little;

The children wrote a warning—the new age had awakened.

The Heritage Corridor paper came like a shadow;

The market’s first gaze settled upon the shoot.

O green point, we will honour the day of your birth;

Drink the milk of names; guard your life from the shadow of greed.

At the outsider's gaze the leaf trembled softly.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE QUESTION AT THE CREMATION GROUND: Folklore says that on a new-moon night Gangesha reached a cremation ground. A tantric asked, “Do you seek knowledge?” Gangesha replied, “Not knowledge. I seek the proof of knowledge.” The tantric’s eyes opened.*]

CHAPTER 63

The Garh Narikel Heritage Project

As long as the names were shameful, the files hid their faces; the moment the names became heritage, the vehicles arrived without shame.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: GUARDING THE LIGHT

Folk tune: Jhijhiya awakening song

Dance, Jhijhiya, dance with the lamp upon your head;

Check every opening and keep watch over the light.

When the lamp burns, do not merely look—guard it;

Take care that greed does not enter through the light.

Clear glass, open accounts, a shared watch;

Let no trade in darkness be done in the name of illumination.

Jhijhiya circles and says: inspect every hole;

Ask whose labour supplied the oil for the lamp.

Guarding the light will keep illumination sacred;

The shadow of greed will retreat and public trust will grow.

Light spills through the holes in the pot—count them as you walk;

Ask too whose sweat became the oil.

Clear glass, open books, a shared watch of eyes;

Let the black hand of greed never touch the face of the lamp.



On the third day after the green point broke from the stump, government vehicles arrived in the village for the first time without embarrassment. Earlier, whenever Channa Grove was mentioned, officials hid their faces behind files. Now that the stump had opened, sunlight had fallen upon it, crowds had grown and outside journalists had begun sniffing from afar, the same place suddenly became “heritage” in the eyes of administration. A site described in papers only yesterday as a vacant plot began that very morning to be called the “Garh Narikel Heritage Project.”

At the front came the district cultural officer, behind him a municipal clerk, behind that a photographer, and behind them a consultant seated in a gleaming jeep. The consultant's glasses were so dark that they reflected not the village but only his own face. The moment he stepped down he said, "This place has tremendous potential." The words were soft, but to Aruni they sounded like a second blow of an axe. Potential—that is, preparation to measure and sell what had already happened.

Name-stones lay around the stump of Channa Grove. The children kept watch. The officials looked first at the stones, and instead of reading the names began counting them. "How many stones?" "How many families are connected?" "How many visitors come?" "How much land is required?" The people understood: names were becoming statistics again. When a number sits upon a name, its weight can exceed that of stone.

Ananya quietly approached the consultant in dark glasses. "Have you read the names written on these stones?" she asked. He laughed as though children were merely decoration. "We will read them, daughter. Let us make the plan first." Ananya answered, "How can you plan for what you have not read?" After that, the consultant's smile remained trapped behind his glasses.

Batuknath Hariharan was present in the group not directly, but like a shadow. The draft of his proposed "People's Memory Trust" had already begun circulating in government files. He himself did not come that day, but his people did. A young man who called himself a legal consultant said softly into Aruni's ear, "Memory must be institutionalised. Otherwise disputes will arise later." Aruni looked at him. He remembered that wherever justice is alive, disagreement is evidence of life; locking memory away because one fears dispute is not justice.

At that moment Gangesha's question rose again. In recent days, as stories of Tattvachintamani had been told around the stump, the children had learned that evidence is not merely a seal. Ira said softly, "Gangesha would ask: first know what kind of proof this is. Perception? Inference? Analogy? Word? Or merely fear of office?" The officials grew uncomfortable with the language. They had expected villagers to rejoice at roads, lights, gates and glossy pictures; instead the children were asking for evidence.

The cultural officer opened his papers. Coloured lines crossed the sheet—on one side "Channa Memorial Gateway," on another "Ghost-Kabaddi Stage," on a third "Water-Burial Visual Gallery," and on a fourth "Digital Wall of Names." Proudly he explained that there would be lighting, a tourist path, entry tickets, a memorial building, and evening sound-and-light shows narrating the story of Garh Narikel.

Devika started at the phrase. “Sound and light?” she asked. “Whose sound? Whose light?” The officer replied, “An artistic presentation of the folk narratives.” Devika said calmly, “Which actor will repeat the trembling voice of a mother reading her son’s name? Will the family that never even received the labourer’s body have its loss sold by ticket as a scene?” Only the paper rustled in reply.

Mira stepped forward. Her eyes held the patience of someone who had endured cameras, taunts, blackmail and enforced silence. “Before placing on a stage the stories of those whose bodies were humiliated, whose privacy was stolen and whose names were suppressed, permission is required. The right over grief belongs to the person who bore it, not to the consultant.” An official murmured, “The project will be sensitive.” Mira replied, “Sensitivity is not a word. It is a watch.”

Saumya noticed that the language of government planning and the language of caste order shared a strange likeness. Both accepted names, but on conditions; both gave bodies a place, but only after fitting them into decorum; both wanted to turn rebellion into decoration. The uncomfortable questions of Gangesha’s life—marriage to a leather-worker woman, the story of his birth after his father’s death, the birth of Navya-Nyaya—had been too sharp for society, so instead of preserving them in memory it had turned him into a statue. Now the same thing was beginning to happen to Channa Grove.

Ba bent over the coloured map in the middle of the debate. Her eyes did not see well, but the gloss of the map hurt them. “Where on this map is the place where Sarayu’s name was read for the first time? Where is the water where the labourers’ bodies were never found? Where is the night when the children switched off their phones and listened to the names? If none of this is here, this is not a map. It is a printing block for cloth.”

The consultant became irritated. “Mother, the project is for development. It will preserve memory, create employment, bring visitors and promote local identity.” Ba laughed. The laugh came from an old body, yet carried the rustle of Channa leaves. “Promote identity? Identity spreads when its roots are touched. First you cut the roots; now you want to sell the shade.”

Then everyone’s eyes suddenly turned toward the green point on the cut stump. In three days it had grown enough to begin forming two leaves. The consultant brightened at once. “This could become the symbol of the project! Rebirth! Hope! Revival!” The photographer raised his camera immediately. Ananya stepped in front of him. “It is not a symbol. It is a child,” she said. “Before taking its photograph, ask its mother for permission.” The people laughed, but no camera rose again.

At that moment a faint chant of “kabaddi-kabaddi” came from the direction of the water. Hearing ghost-kabaddi in daylight was new for

the village. The officials started. A clerk asked, "Is this a rehearsal for the programme?" Aruni replied, "No. This game is older than your plan." The chant circled the stump once, passed over the names on stones, touched the green leaves and then descended into the water.

Gop Kumar heard a strange warning in the sound. Earlier he had understood the language of networks through data theft, scams, accounts, codes and invisible messages. Now he was learning to read the language of the memory-market. When someone says "security," ownership may be hidden inside. When someone says "preservation," control may be hidden inside. When someone says "project," there may be tenders, commissions and hunger for credit concealed within.

Satyavrat Mehta stood at the edge of the gathering and listened. His experience of office told him the route for stopping the project ran through law; his newer discipline of listening told him first to make the people's meaning clear. He went to Aruni and said, "The struggle will also be fought on paper. But decide this first: what are you trying to save on that paper? The stump? The stones? The names? Or the right to listen?" Aruni thought for a long time. Then he said, "I want to save the tree. But even if the tree cannot be saved, I want to save the names from the hands that would sell it." Satyavrat nodded.

By evening the officials left. They left behind a copy of the coloured map. The villagers did not place it beside the stump, but far away in the dust, as one isolates something diseased. The children began the reading of names again. Today, however, after each name a new question was added: "Who owns this name?" The families answered: "The name belongs to itself, but the watch is collective." The sentence was entered on the next page of the register.

At night Budhba Ghost appeared openly. He sat on the edge of the stump, as though the felling had trained him to come out by day. Looking at the children he said, "People once came through darkness because of fear. Now greed is coming through light. You fought the darkness; now fight the greed inside illumination." His voice echoed far beneath the water.

At midnight a municipal worker came secretly. He carried no official seal, only a ladder and glue. Believing the village asleep, he planted a post beside the stump and pasted a new notice upon it. The paper was white, not yellow, but the letters seemed yellow from within. Across the top stood: "Garh Narikel Heritage Project: Invitation of Tenders for Construction and Presentation." The smell of glue hung beside the stump through the night—sweet, sticky and faintly rotten, as though greed could not entirely conceal its true scent.

At dawn Ananya saw the paper. She opened the register and wrote on a blank line: "Today memory was put out to tender." Then she looked

toward the green leaf on the stump. It did not tremble. It seemed to be saying: "Now the struggle has begun."

FOLK SONG: GREED INSIDE THE LIGHT

Folk tune: warning jhumar

*Recognise the light, recognise the light filled with greed;
The village of names will not be sold, however bright the border.*

*As long as the names were shame, the files hid their faces;
When they became heritage, the vehicles came racing in.
We fought darkness; now comes the cunning of light;
Time wants to sell it through photographs, corridors and tickets.
At night a post was planted in silence, a tender notice fixed;*

*Memory will be contracted out—the village heart awoke.
The green leaf did not tremble; it spoke straight:
"Now the struggle has begun. Keep watch through the night."
Light that hides greed is darker than darkness itself;
The village of names will not be sold, however bright its border.*

*Once it became heritage, the vehicles came rushing in.
The green leaf did not tremble—it spoke plainly, and the village
awoke.*



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE SHINING SHELL:
PERCEPTION, ERROR AND SELF-AWARENESS: Evening light fell
slantwise beside the Kamala. Before the eye was the perception of “something
here,” together with the memory of silver, but the difference between the two
was not grasped. Another voice said, “No, his cognition was not merely an
absence...”*]

CHAPTER 64

Tender for Memory

*The moment a tender opens for memory, understand this: grief itself is
about to be contracted out.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: FROM GRIEF TO SERVICE

Folk tune: compassion-mangal song

Reach out your hand, reach it into the house of grief;

Along with flowers bring food, clothing and justice.

No contract in the name of grief—extend the hand of service;

Along with flowers bring aid, justice and treatment.

Do not make weeping an advertisement; honour silence;

Ask what the family needs, and give concrete support.

A memorial building is sacred only when people gain from it;

Let service be born from grief and save living lives.

Compassion becomes work when reverence remains true;

On the earth of sorrow a house of hope is built slowly.

Let weeping not be sold in the market; let silence keep its dignity;

Ask the family's need and let solid help flow.

Every brick of a memorial becomes sacred only then;

When the grain of service grows upon the soil of sorrow.



Not even three days had passed since the Garh Narikel Heritage Project was announced when identical white notices appeared on the tehsil wall, the municipal gate, bus-stand pillars and the half-broken bridge pier. At the top was a government seal, and in bold letters across the centre: "Tenders Invited for Memory Conservation, Beautification and Experience-Zone Development." What people called the stump of Channa Grove, the paper called "Site Parcel A." What the children called the watch over names became the "Community Participation Component." What the families of the dead considered the sole refuge of their mourning was renamed an "Emotional Heritage Resource."

The language of the tender was so smooth that its teeth could not be seen on the first day. The surface of the paper slipped beneath the fingers like soap—try to grasp it and the words escaped the hand. There was no grief in that language, only provisions; no names, only lists; no water-burial, only a “water-based interpretive corridor.” The ghost-kabaddi of Channa Grove became a “folk-belief performance-sport zone.” The terrifying and compassionate contradiction of bodies sinking among crocodiles and seeking release became an “immersive experience tunnel.” For the children who kept watch over names all night, the budget included training for a “junior guide corps.”

Aruni fell silent as he read. He remembered the old bridge-contract file. Its words too had been so civilised—safety, standards, international quality, labour welfare, third-party inspection. Then bodies had risen from beneath the soil, names had been cut from registers, and crocodiles had circled quietly in the river. The same sentence had returned wearing other clothes. This time the tender was not for a bridge, but for memory.

Ira brought a copy of the notice to the Channa stump. The children read its heading first. Then Ananya asked, “What does tender mean?” Devika replied, “When the government will pay someone to do work, it asks people to submit bids.” A small boy immediately asked, “Will they bid on names?” Everyone fell silent. A child had asked the question, but the answer shamed all the adults.

Mira placed a finger on one line: “Collection of oral material, visual material, family testimony and digital documents available at the site.” She said, “This is not collection. It is intrusion. By whose right will a contractor record the whisper of a woman who speaks the name of her dead in a low voice? If a family does not want its humiliation made public, who will sell its silence?” The Oath of Privacy was read again around the stump, but this time a government tender stood before it.

The children opened Gangesha’s question again. In recent days they had turned the word “evidence” into a new rule of play. Whatever was said, evidence was asked for. Whatever was written, its reason was asked for. Whatever was pasted on a wall, its purpose was asked for. Ananya read a line beneath the notice: “Protection of public sentiment.” Then she asked, “Evidence?” No one answered. She read the next line: “Tourism-oriented development.” She asked, “Purpose?” Aruni said, “Profit.” The children replied together, “Profit is not evidence.”

Ba smiled as she listened. She did not know the vocabulary of Navya-Nyaya, but she needed no book to recognise the smell of justice and injustice. “Anyone who contracts out sorrow should first have to look grief in the face,” she said. The children entered the sentence in the register. Their register had begun guarding not only names, but sentences too.

One section of the tender was titled “Sound Design for the Experience Site.” It proposed a mixed soundscape combining the breath of ghost-kabaddi, a splash in water, a courtroom gavel, a mobile notification and songs of mourning. When Ujjwal’s mother read this, her face dried as though someone had made her son’s phone ring again. “My son’s final ringtone will not become the sound of an exhibit,” she said. From inside the stump came a faint creak.

Saumya studied the cost sheet. Column after column held figures—stone, lighting, sound, crowd control, guidebook, digital archive, outside experts, research consultation, inauguration ceremony. But the line for rehabilitation of labourers’ families was blank. The cost of searching for the names of bodies lost to water-burial was zero. Privacy protection: zero. Preparation of archives in the local language: almost nothing. The largest allocation was for “brand identity.” Saumya said, “This is not memory. It is a market map.”

Gop Kumar’s old instincts awoke. He began looking for small numerical irregularities. Yet the worst error this time was not numerical. In the tender document the word “memory” appeared fifty-four times, “name” only twice, “victim” once; “profit” never appeared explicitly, yet its shadow moved through every line. Gop told the children, “Sometimes a word is never written, yet it governs an entire document.” Ananya asked, “Like a crocodile under water?” Gop nodded.

Then Batuknath Hariharan stepped out of a gleaming vehicle. He wore a sorrowful expression, as if the burden of social service had kept him awake all night. In his hand was a separate file: “People’s Memory Trust: Legal Framework.” He greeted everyone, made a gesture of blessing toward the children, and said, “To save this place we need a legal structure. Emotion is not enough. I will create a trust. Government, society, experts, donors—everyone will run it together.”

Ananya looked into his eyes. “Will the families whose names are here be in the trust?” Batuknath smiled. “There will be representation.” “The children?” “A children’s advisory committee can be considered.” “Mira Didi’s Privacy Oath?” “We can consider it in the bylaws.” “Gangesha’s question?” Batuknath stalled for a moment. He could not understand why the child had brought Gangesha here. The children spoke together: “Evidence, reason, purpose.” The first crack appeared in Batuknath’s manufactured humility.

Hariharan said, “Enough intellectual discussion. The land belongs to the government, the project is approved, the funds have arrived. If you remain outside, your voice will not appear on paper.” Aruni asked calmly, “And if we enter your trust, will our voice remain—or only our names?” Hariharan’s face hardened. “Law stands above emotion.” At that, Budhba Ghost’s laughter rose behind the stump, like dry leaves rubbing together.

Ba said slowly, “Law does not stand above emotion; it stands below justice. When law abandons justice, it becomes a crocodile.” A wave passed through the crowd. Batuknath was uneasy with such language. He had endured arguments in court, but the philosophy of public memory felt more dangerous. He closed the file. “Very well. Think about it. The tender deadline is short.”

As he left, he looked not at the stump but at the yellow notice. He believed notice, tender, trust, donation and experts would together turn the children’s watch slowly into a cage of paper. But he did not see the children drawing a new line for a game on the blank back of the notice—a kabaddi line.

That evening the children played kabaddi around the stump. This time instead of chanting “kabaddi-kabaddi,” they held their breath and chanted “evidence-evidence.” Whoever was caught had to explain the reason for one line in the tender. Whoever could not was declared “unnamed.” The game held laughter, but there was an edge of justice in that laughter. Gangsha’s Navya-Nyaya had become a children’s game in the dust of Channa Grove.

After nightfall one corner of the yellow notice folded by itself. The sound was so sour that it seemed like teeth grinding in darkness. Beneath it appeared a small mark no one had seen by day: “Draft prepared by an international cultural revival consultant.” The name was blurred, but Gop recognised the shape. He whispered, “This signature is old... there was a similar mark in the file of the bridge’s foreign consultant.”

Aruni took the paper from his hand. The mark was not clear, but an old shadow rose—Edward Broom. The man who spoke at Harvard about policy and ethics was now selling consultation upon the memory of Garh Narikel. Moonlight fell upon the green point of the Channa stump, and for a moment it trembled.

Ananya wrote the night’s final sentence in the register: “A tender has come for memory. The bidder is still hiding his name.” Then she closed the page. The smell of the river came from afar on the wind. The next hearing would begin from here—calling by its true name the person who had come to buy memory in the name of preserving it.

FOLK SONG: CONTRACTING OUT GRIEF

Folk tune: satirical biraha

No, not a contract—our grief is not a contract;

Memory is our right—first tell us your name.

*A tender opened for memory, even grief put up for bids;
Whose tears will be cheap, whose story called priceless?
In the name of beautification they dress the bodies of the dead;
They build an experience zone and sell tickets to eat.
In the shadow of a signature, Broom's old hand;*

*Harvard ethics has come back to buy again.
The bidder's name is still hidden;
In moonlight the shoot trembles.
Our grief is not a contract, memory is our right;
Whoever wants to sell it must first speak their own name.*

*The tender opened upon memory, and grief itself went to bid;
Calling it "beautification," they dress the body of the dead.*

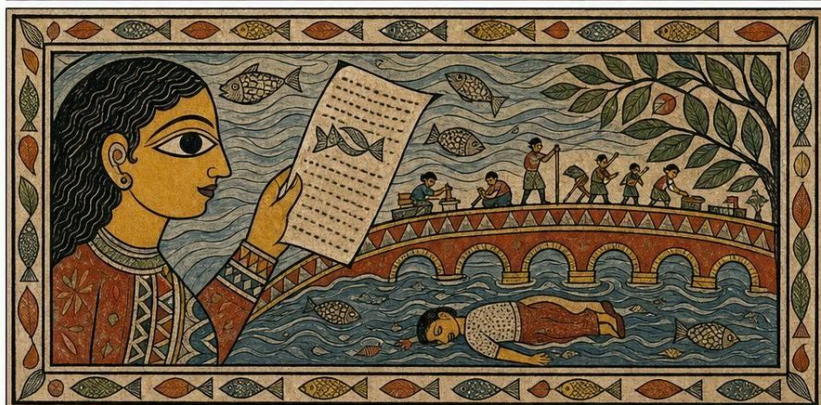


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE YELLOW CONCH: *In a physician's house a patient looked at a conch and said, "It is yellow." Everyone else saw the conch as white. The object of the first cognition was not wholly imaginary—the conch was there—but the colour imposed upon it arose through defect.*]

CHAPTER 65

Broom's Return

*The smell of greed comes not from fresh ink, but from the water
beneath the old bridge.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NEW FOOTSTEPS ON THE
OLD BRIDGE**

Folk tune: river wayfarer's song

*Take a new step, take it upon the old bridge;
Walk with bowed head before sweat, silt and history.*

*The old bridge smells of sweat, silt and history;
Step upon it anew, carrying trust with care.
Inspect every crack, strengthen the foundations, fasten a plaque of
names;
Tell with honour of the labour of those who built it.*

*The old bridge is no burden, but an open book of lessons;
To mend what went wrong is the future's answer.
New footsteps will pass in safety, the ancestors will bless them;
Crossing the river, society will learn the discipline of justice.*

*Test foundation after foundation, keep watch upon each crack;
Hang upon the bridge the names of the workers who built it.
Let old mistakes become a book for the new generation to read;
To the rhythm of safe footsteps, let the river's heart dance.*



The moment the tender for memory was opened, an old smell rose from within it. It was not the smell of paper, nor of fresh ink, nor of government dust. It was the smell of the same old greed that had first descended upon the bodies of dead workers hidden in the river-water beside the bridge foundations. The language of the tender had changed, the department had changed, the seal was new, but the smell was old. Aruni turned the first page and, the instant he saw the name of the

foreign consulting company, the old bridge's iron creak sounded inside his head.

The company's name was now different from the old one. The name that had first appeared on the bridge contract had been written in English letters, with Edward Broom's face gleaming behind it. Now the name on the paper had been translated into Devanagari: 'New Health Foundation Pvt. Ltd.' Beneath it, in small type, stood the name of a foreign partner. Gop Kumar's eyes stopped as he read it. He whispered, "The name is new; the owner is old."

Edward Broom had not come; his letter arrived first. In it he called Garh Narikel's pain "an opportunity for collective healing." He wrote that the open space left after the felling of Channa Grove could hold a "Memory Experience Centre," where visitors from India and abroad could experience together Mithila's folk beliefs, the river, justice, the wounds of the digital age and collective liberation. The word water-burial did not appear in the letter. In its place stood "water-memory section." There was no crocodile, only an "aquatic-creature symbol." There were no dead labourers, only a "labour-story gallery."

Ira did not laugh as she read, but a bitter light entered her eyes. "Look," she said, "the man who drowned the bodies now wants to sell tickets to the drowned." Devika bent over the second page. It said that the centre would contain films, sound installations and a "personal memory archive" in which people could deposit the names, photographs, voices, last messages and stories of their loved ones. Devika immediately recognised the shadow of Chandrapal's memorial app. Memory was being turned into data once again.

The language was read aloud to the children sitting around the stump. Ananya asked the first question: "They will ask for names? What will they do with the names?" No one found an easy answer. Batuknath Hariharan, who wanted to call the proposal "an opportunity for development," cleared his throat. "Child, the names will remain in an archive; the archive will be safe; if it is safe, the world will know." Ananya asked directly, "Will the world know, or will the company keep them?" Batuknath's tongue stopped for a moment.

Gangesha's question was still in the air. The questions once raised in the court of the stump—what is evidence, what is justice, what is caste, what is a name—descended again upon the tender papers. Aruni wondered what Gangesha would have said had he been sitting there. Evidence belongs not only to seals but also to experience; the meaning of a word unfolds not only in statutes but in use; and a society capable of suppressing the inconvenient truths in the life of a master of the philosophy of justice can also turn the names of dead labourers into decoration in a company's glittering presentation.

This time the letter came with an image as well—a coloured design for the proposed memory centre. Channa Grove was absent; in its place stood a circular glass building. A transparent dome covered the stump, lights shone upon the roots, an artificial pond had been laid out, and to one side stood a fabricated crocodile whose eyes would glow red at night. Ghost kabaddi had become a “night-time light show.” The children fell silent when they saw the picture. As their fingers moved across the drawing of the glass dome, they felt as though their own breath were fogging the glass: the game within could be watched from outside, but not touched. For the first time they understood that to kill a game you need not stop it; making a copy of it is enough.

Budhba's ghost was not clearly visible in daylight, yet several people caught him at the corners of their eyes. He leaned from behind the stump toward the picture and gave a small laugh. When a real ghost laughs, the air does not grow cold; it grows warm. The corner of the paper lying on the stump singed slightly, as though an invisible finger had written: “Memory cannot be made from imitation.”

At the end of Broom's letter he wrote that he wished to come personally to Garh Narikel and speak with the people. He also spoke of clearing the “fog of misunderstanding” surrounding his first project. Aruni stopped at that line. Misunderstanding? The names lost beside the bridge foundations, the bodies left in the water, the altered safety register, the compensation to labourers' families delayed month after month—were all these misunderstandings? The engineer within him trembled with anger, but in the assembly around the stump even anger's right to speak demanded restraint.

Satyavrat Mehta was present. Everyone's eyes turned toward him of their own accord, as though he would supply the legal answer. But he remained silent. This was his second silence—not an escape, but a way of giving the people's voices the first place. After a long while he said only, “The letter has been read. Now go from house to house and ask every family whose name will be used in this proposal. No memory is to be made public without consent.”

Meera nodded. “Photographs of bodies, death turned into spectacle, tears put on display, privacy sold as an ‘experience’—all of this is violence. If a memory centre is built, the permission of the victims' households must be its first brick. No permission, nothing.” Devika immediately added, “And no money in exchange for names. Donations, grants, tickets, apps—every account must be public.”

Batuknath made an unsuccessful attempt to smile. “How can any work proceed under so much suspicion? The world runs by process.” Ananya replied, “Does justice also run by process? Then why did it chew up all those years?” No lawyer answered. Sunlight struck the green point on the felled stump, and for an instant it gleamed like a needle.

Gop Kumar placed a new fact before them. One branch of the fund behind the foreign company was linked to the medicine trade that had driven up the price of breath around Garh Narikel during the pandemic. A second branch led to the old safety consultant on the bridge contract. A third invested in digital memory apps. New names, new forms, but the river of money was just as black. The people listened. This time there was less fear and more recognition.

Then an elderly woman from Saryu's line stood up. "My husband went into the water. For twenty years I thought he had died. Now I understand that his name not surviving—that was the death. If these people put his name in a glass house and sell tickets, that will be a second death." Everyone was silent. Her sentence outweighed all the language of the tender.

Meanwhile a child came from behind the Channa stump with a lota of water and poured it over the green point. He did this every day, but today he did it before everyone. Batuknath said, "Son, this may become an officially protected relic. Pouring water like that could be against the rules." The child looked at him quietly and said, "You make it official. I will keep it alive."

At that reply came the faintest rustle of leaves from within the stump, though very few leaves survived. Perhaps Budhba's ghost was pleased. Aruni placed a hand on the child's head. He thought: the strongest argument against the memory project is this child's lota. To imprison a living thing behind museum glass is a crime.

At evening the yellow notice, Broom's letter, the tender copy and the hand-made map of memory were laid together around the stump. The children decided that the map would be read first and the letter afterwards, because the map was born from the land and the letter from an office. The land would speak first; the office later.

As night descended, Edward Broom's face, printed smiling in one corner of the coloured brochure, began to blur. No one touched it, yet the pupil of the printed eye seemed to change. Some said that for one instant it became a crocodile's eye. Others said it was an illusion. But in Garh Narikel illusion too had become a kind of evidence: when many victims see the same fear, that fear is no longer private.

At midnight a message arrived on Gop's device. It contained no sender's name, only the crest of a foreign university, a travel date and a subject: "Field Study of Victim Memory and Folk Justice." On the next line stood the name: Professor Elina Graves's research team. The blue light of the screen froze like ice across Gop's face; it seemed that the chill of a distant university had reached all the way here. Broom's return was not solitary. Behind him came a glittering procession of knowledge.

Ananya saw the message. She looked toward the sky, where the stars had become clear after the felling of Channa Grove. Softly she said, “Where memory is put out to contract, research follows too. Tomorrow my first question to them will be—have you come to listen, or to write?”

The green point on the stump opened a little further that night. Broom’s letter fluttered in the wind as though some old crocodile from a distant seacoast had begun smelling the water again. Garh Narikel remained silent, but its silence now kept watch. The next morning, before Harvard’s research team arrived, the children rose to finish the reading of names.

FOLK SONG: THE SMELL OF THE OLD BRIDGE

Folk tune: river lament

*The water smells, the water beneath the old bridge smells;
The department changed, the language changed—but greed did not.*

*Not fresh ink—the water of the old bridge gave off its smell;
The moment Broom’s letter opened, the workers’ wounds shone.
The department changed, the language changed, greed did not;
A procession of knowledge climbed upon the chests of the dead.
The research team will ask for stories—but will they write, or listen?*

*With her first question Ananya will strip away every mask.
After the felling the stars are clear, the bud has opened a little;
The crocodile from the distant sea again moves, scenting water.
O village, keep watch through the silence of the night;
Old greed has taken a new name and returned to the ghat.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE GOOSEBERRY IN THE PALM: *A teacher placed an Indian gooseberry in a pupil's palm and asked, "What is this?" The pupil replied without hesitation, "A gooseberry." "Did you examine the evidence?" the teacher asked. The teacher said, "The same kind of mental process does not follow every cognition."*]

CHAPTER 66

Harvard's Research Team

*Whoever arrives with instruments hanging from the neck begins
measuring before the eyes have even learned to see.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CLEAN LENS, HUMAN VISION

Folk tune: song of seeing

*Wipe the lens, first wipe the lens of the heart;
Before you look, attend to the human heart.*

*Clean the lens first, then look at the person;
A face is not an object—seek consent before writing the story.
The eye does not measure dignity; the eye gives respect;
If the image belongs to a person, let that person's consent be there.*

*Vision is greater than technology, cleared by the heart's affection;
Let there be no crocodile inside the lens, but the open mark of
compassion.*

*Ask before you look; after seeing, give honour;
Give art and knowledge life through a human gaze.*

*The eye is not a balance; the eye is a lamp;
A picture taken without consent is an unrighteous act.
A face is not an object, it is a story—listen with respect;
Focus compassion and weave the image of a life.*



On the third morning after Broom's return, a strange vehicle came to Garh Narikel. Its windows were black, small devices were fixed on its roof, and identity cards gleamed at the throats of the people seated inside. It came along the municipality's newly forming road and stopped beside the stump. Two more vehicles followed—boxes, cameras, sound equipment, tripods, wires, and, brighter than all of these, curiosity. The villagers understood: these were not travellers; this was a research team.

A young man got out first. A cap sat on his head, round spectacles over his eyes, and a thick notebook in his hand. He introduced himself as a researcher from Harvard University. With him were three women scholars, two interpreters, a filmmaker and a grant coordinator. Respectful smiles rested on all their faces, but it was the respect of people who look at suffering from a distance and assume that the right to write about it has already become theirs.

Ira did not stop them at first. Pointing toward the circular space beside the stump, she said, "Sit here. Listen first." The young researcher smiled, opened his notebook and asked, "Will you guide us through the context, chronology, community, caste structure, ritual history and folk belief surrounding the alleged water-burials?" Ira's face remained still. "Names first," she said. "Guidance afterwards."

A little discomfort entered the research team's eyes. They had come with a timetable. Here time did not move by pages in a register but by the breath of pain. Ananya sat down with the register. The first name was read. The young researcher immediately began writing. Ananya stopped his hand. He startled. The child said, "When a name is heard, you do not write at once. First say 'Present.'" With difficulty the word came from his mouth: "Present."

His language hesitated over that one word. He knew "present" as information, not as responsibility. When each researcher in turn said "Present," sunlight trembled upon a tiny green point on the stump. Budhba's ghost, who since yesterday had remained caught at the edge of daylight, slipped behind a severed root and said, "Now write. What has not been heard has not been written."

One of the Harvard scholars stirred when she heard Gangesha's name. "I have read a little about the Nyaya tradition of Mithila," she said. "The Tattvacintamani—an extremely important work." Ba did not laugh, but an oblique gleam entered her eyes. "You read the book," she asked, "did you read the story of Gangesha's body?" The scholar fell silent. Ba continued, "The man you call the father of Navya-Nyaya—are the discomfort of his caste, the discomfort of his marriage, the impossibility surrounding his birth, society's fear—are these in your research?"

Silence descended upon the research team. Ira slowly opened the matter. "Here Gangesha is not the name of a book; he is the name of a question. If the story of a birth five years after the father's death survives in popular memory, the question is: what shall we call evidence? If the story of marriage to a leatherworker woman remains stuck like a thorn in society's belly, the question is: what is the evidence of caste? If the Tattvacintamani is said to equal twelve thousand books, the question is: does scripture measure knowledge, or does life?"

One researcher immediately asked, "The written source for this story?" His tone was polite, but within that politeness was the hunger of a notebook. Ananya placed her hand on a root of the stump and answered, "The source breathes here. If you want written sources, you will find them; but first understand that many truths are killed even after they are written, and many truths remain alive even when they have never been written."

Satyavrat Mehta sat behind them. As he listened, the legal practitioner within him stirred. Law asks for written evidence; memory is living presence. Yet he did not speak. He understood that this was not his chapter. He kept his notebook closed. His silence was no longer the silence of his first wrongdoing; it was a silence that did not wish to spread the shadow of his office across the people's questions.

A Harvard scholar said softly in English that they studied caste and justice. Meera, who until then had been sitting at a distance, moved a little forward. "Study is good," she said. "But caste is not merely a concept. It is a barrier at the door of the body, humiliation at the edge of a well, fear on a wedding night, distance between plates of food, and a stain fixed to a child's name. If you write this, preserve people's faces while you write. If you steal the face, it will not be research; it will be another violence."

At these words the filmmaker lowered his camera. His habit was to capture the face of whoever was speaking. Here, however, capturing a face began to feel like hunting. Meera kept looking at him. He did not dare raise the camera again.

Gop Kumar showed the research team the village's memory map. On it the river, the bridge, the stump, labourers' houses, Ujjwal's room, the room of medicine brokerage, the subterranean doorway of digital fraud and the severed shade of Channa Grove were all joined by a single line. The team wanted to photograph it. Gop said, "You will not understand this through a photograph. First walk this line with your feet."

They walked. From the stump to the bridge, from the bridge to the pond, from the pond to the house of a labourer's widow whose husband had been recorded on paper as "absent." The researchers were soaked in sweat, mud stained their trousers, and their shoes sank in water. Ira said, "If academic distance keeps itself free of mud, it will not deliver justice." The scholar wanted to write down the sentence, then looked at Ananya. Ananya nodded. "Write now. This sentence arrived by walking."

They stopped at the widow's house. The woman came out. At the sight of the camera she did not pull a veil over her face; she fixed her eyes upon it. Her eyes looked as though years of weeping had turned them to glass. The filmmaker raised his camera again. Such a face was rare material to him.

Meera stepped directly in front of him. “Stop,” she said sharply. “This face is not material for your research. Ask first—does she want this or not? Ask in her language. Do not invent the meaning of her silence yourself.”

The interpreter flustered. The Harvard researcher’s notebook trembled. Behind them, the grant coordinator sent by Broom whispered in English that time was short. Ira heard. She turned and said, “The time of the dead workers’ families was stopped for years. Your timetable is dust before those years.”

The widow remained silent for a long time. Then she said, “Do not write my face. Write my husband’s name. The water took my husband’s body; the paper called him absent. You write: he is present.” She spoke her husband’s name. Everyone answered, “Present.” This time there was less hesitation in the research team’s voices.

After that reply, a band of black cloud suddenly moved across the sky and sunlight fell directly into the woman’s courtyard. The camera remained lowered. The notebook remained open. For the first time the research team understood that some sights are not meant to be captured; one is meant to bow before them.

By evening they returned to the stump. The Harvard researcher’s notebook was not full; on the contrary, many of its pages remained blank. Looking at those empty pages, he said in English that he had thought he would find material here, but instead he was finding questions. Ba answered, “If you do not find questions, how will you find justice?”

That night, after the reading of names around the stump, Gangesha’s name was spoken again. “Gangesha Upadhyaya—Present.” The people answered. In the children’s voices were curiosity, rebellion and that fire of knowledge which makes the first crack in the wall of caste. Budhba’s ghost said softly, “The Tattvacintamani is not being rewritten on pages; it is being written again in these children’s eyes.”

The team rose to leave, but Meera told them the rule for the next day. “Tomorrow, if you want to take images, first we will speak about the right to sight. Who sees, who is shown, who is hidden, who is sold—all of this must be clear. Garh Narikel’s suffering will no longer become an unnamed scene.”

The filmmaker still held his camera, but dust from Channa Grove had settled on its lens. He moved to clean it, and in the dust he saw not his own face but a crocodile’s eye. He lowered the camera. Before the next day’s debate had even begun, vision itself had entered the dock.

FOLK SONG: THE CROCODILE INSIDE THE LENS

Folk tune: song of seeing

Clean the lens, first clean the lens within;

Suffering is not an unnamed scene—consent is the first leaf.

*With instruments hanging from their necks, they measured before they
looked;*

They made the village's pain into data, image and specimen.

The Tattvacintamani was written again in children's eyes;

A question showed the first crack in the wall of caste.

Meera said—first, the right to sight:

Who will see, who will show, who will sell a family?

As the lens was cleaned, a crocodile's eye emerged;

The filmmaker's hand dropped at once.

Knowledge that does not listen is itself a hand of the market.

With instruments hanging from the neck, measuring before the eyes—



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE EMPTY SEAT: *When the assembly began, the royal preceptor's seat was empty. He said, "Non-apprehension yields knowledge of absence only when all the conditions under which the object could have been perceived are present."*]

CHAPTER 67

Meera and the Right to Sight

*There is a right in seeing too—and the consent of the person being seen
is the first document.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CONSENT FIRST

Folk tune: women's dialogue song

Ask first, "Am I ready?"—ask first;

Honour “yes,” honour “no”—learn to understand both.

Before you look at me, ask—am I ready?

My body, my story, my decision are mine.

Honour “yes,” honour “no,” and listen to silence too;

Within the circle of trust, gather the flowers of consent.

Image, voice, touch, writing—all require permission;

This simple rule of respect is humanity's inheritance.

Consent first, action afterwards—walk in this rhythm;

Let the flowers of relationship bloom in the garden of a free mind.

My body, my story—the key is in my own hand;

Listen to the language of silence too; this is the grace of relationship.

Image, voice, touch, writing—the same rule everywhere;

In the garden of consent, let true affection flower.



When Harvard's research team returned to the Channa stump on the second day, they did not sit down and open their notebooks as before. This time cameras hung from their necks, bright bags swung from their shoulders, and there was a strange haste in their eyes. It was not the haste of knowledge but of collection—as though the village, the water-burials, the crocodiles, ghost kabaddi, the felled tree, the stones of names, women's weeping and the children's watch all had to be captured at once and carried away.

Ira was already standing there. The memory map was in her hand, but folded. She had understood that people who arrive upon the earth first

“speak the language of the sky—“study,” “participation,” “documentation,” “global platform.” Yet no one asks the eyes of the person being seen. For that reason, on that day Ira stopped them at the outer circle instead of allowing them inside the stump’s enclosure.

There was a young woman in the group, a pupil of Elina Graves named Martha. She had learned a few Maithili words before coming. With a greeting, she said in broken Maithili, “We will take your pain to the world.” Ira replied with a courteous smile, “Before pain travels, does anyone ask where it wishes to go—to the world, or back to its own home?” Martha fell silent. She could not find a translation for that question within herself.

Then Meera stepped forward—the same Meera whom people had once tried to silence through blackmail in the names of body, privacy, love, gaze and shame; whom people had wanted to see not as a victim of crime but as a “secret.” Now she stood before the stump, a red thread tied around her wrist, a tired gleam in her eyes, and in her voice the patience that can be forged only by passing through the fire of humiliation.

Looking at the team, Meera said, “Whatever you see here is not an object for seeing. Listen first. And if you must see, ask: whom will you see? Why will you see? How much will you see? After it has been seen, whose right will that gaze belong to?”

A male researcher said, “We can blur the face.” Meera stopped him. “Blurring is not a right. Blurring a face does not blur the humiliation of the body. The fundamental question is whether your gaze will submit itself to my consent. Someone who is crying is not a scene; someone who is crying is a relationship.”

The children seated around the Channa stump listened to the exchange like a mantra. Ananya wrote a new heading in her register: “The Right to Sight.” Beside it, in smaller letters, she wrote: “The one who is seen also has eyes.”

Gangesha’s question had been floating in the air since the previous day: what is evidence? What is perception? What is inference? What is verbal testimony? What is comparison? What is non-apprehension? When Satyavrat Mehta saw Ananya’s line at the edge of the page, he said quietly, “In Navya-Nyaya, perceptual evidence is honoured greatly. But when does seeing become justice? When the one who sees has taken greed out of his gaze.”

Ba laughed at that. “Is it easy to remove greed? People wear caste even in their eyes.” Everyone fell silent. Ba continued, “Gangesha was accepted as scripture, but the fire of his life was suppressed. The story of his marriage to a leatherworker woman trembles in people’s throats. When the gaze puts on caste, justice too becomes caste-bound.”

The members of the Harvard team looked at one another. They had expected the village to spread its stories out in welcome. Here the story demanded rules first. Meera said, "Our history is not raw material for your research papers. Those whose bodies were chewed, whose names were erased, whose love was humiliated, whose breath of life was measured by caste—they are not your images. They are human beings."

Martha asked softly, "Then what should we do?" For the first time there was humility in the question. Meera took them to the ring of stones around the stump. She showed them the stone on which was written: "The one whose name was never found." Meera said, "Do not photograph this stone. Sit beside it. Write nothing for twenty minutes. If something moves within you after twenty minutes, then ask whether this stone wishes to show itself to you."

The members of the team sat in uncertainty. For the first time the cameras at their necks felt like burdens. The sunlight over the Channa stump became inexplicably hard. The birds were silent. The river could be heard in the distance. It seemed as though the whole of Garh Narikel were administering this twenty-minute examination. In that silence every researcher heard the sound of their own breathing for the first time—as though, in place of the machine, the body itself had become the archive.

Then an elderly leatherworker arrived. His name was Jagdish Ram. He usually sat at the back and spoke little. Something had stirred within him after hearing about Gangesha. Coming to Meera, he said, "If Gangesha truly married a leatherworker woman, then is the scripture his alone, or is the humiliation of my caste written inside it too?"

Meera did not answer. She placed the question among the children. Ananya said, "If justice became scripture, why was life's humiliation left outside? We will put Gangesha's book on the map, but we will put the story of his marriage there too."

Jagdish Ram's eyes filled. "Then for the first time," he said, "I shall sit not outside the scripture, but inside it." At those words a faint creaking came from within the stump. Someone said the dry wood had split. The children wrote: "First crack in the cage of caste."

Satyavrat Mehta opened his notebook but did not write. Meera looked at him. "Why aren't you writing?" Satyavrat said, "Some things, if I write them, will become government testimony again. This time Jagdish-ji will write for himself." He placed the notebook before him. With a trembling hand Jagdish Ram wrote: "My gaze too is evidence."

Martha from Harvard had been listening. She wanted to write something in English on her paper, then stopped. "Will you explain the meaning of this sentence to us?" she asked. Jagdish Ram replied, "No. First sit outside your own language." Two members of Elina Graves's

group became uncomfortable at the answer. But Martha truly closed her paper.

Meera did not proclaim a new rule there; with the people's consent she simply had a short code written. First: no face without permission. Second: no weeping becomes a scene unless the person who weeps wishes it. Third: no memory of bodily humiliation without language that preserves dignity. Fourth: caste-based suffering will not be turned into a "social example" by removing the person's name. Fifth: whoever sees will remain answerable to the person seen.

The children called this code the "watch over sight." It became the first new lesson of the coconut-leaf school: permission before seeing, silence before listening, relationship before writing.

Meanwhile a young researcher quietly tried from the edge to photograph the severed stump, the stones bearing names and a weeping woman. His camera suddenly went dark. He panicked. Then words appeared on the screen: "You saw—but were you seen?" He shook the camera. The words vanished, but fear remained on his face. Budhba's ghost smiled from a distance.

Ananya softly began the rhythm of kabaddi: "Kabaddi-kabaddi... sight-sight... name-name..." The children did not enter the game; they merely caught the rhythm of breath. Meera understood that the game had not stopped. Kabaddi was now becoming an exercise not in escaping the grip of bodies, but the grip of the gaze. Could the one who is being seen hold breath and escape beyond the line? That was the new game.

At evening Martha came to Meera again. "I want one photograph," she said, "but not of a face. If you permit it, I would like to photograph only the red thread around your wrist." Meera looked at the thread. It was the same thread she had transformed from a memory of humiliation into a sign of rights. She thought for a while, then said, "You may take the photograph, but its story will be written in my words, not yours."

Martha agreed. For the first time the foreign research team had to trust the village's language. Ira opened the map and showed them: the Channa stump, the stones of names, Gangesha's question, Jagdish Ram's written line, the thread on Meera's wrist—all had become joined by a single line. Ira said, "On this map there is a current of sight, just as there is a current of the river. If it flows in the wrong direction, it will drown memory again."

Night fell and the team left. After they had gone, however, a small sheet of paper was found beside the stump. It bore the emblem of Chandrapal's memorial app, and beneath it the words: "Tribute Image Collection opening soon. Upload photographs of the dead, victims' stories and family details. Donation facility available."

Devika trembled as she read it. Meera took the paper in her hand and said, “Today we stopped the research team’s gaze. Tomorrow the memorial app will enter people’s homes.” Ananya wrote the next heading in the register: “The first doorway to the theft of names.”

The green point on the stump glowed faintly in the night, as though the tree were saying: the watch over sight is in place, but the market of memory is still awake.

FOLK SONG: ASK BEFORE YOU LOOK AT ME

Folk tune: women’s dialogue song

Ask first, ask before you look at me;

See me as a human being—do not take me for an object.

Before you look at me, ask for my dignity;

My face, my story, my consent are my life.

The eye too is a hand; it can plunder privacy;

If an image sells pain, it is not knowledge—it is commerce.

Meera stopped the lens; the dust protected the name;

But the mobile entered house after house with flowers and lamps.

The tribute app asks for images, stories, lineage, family;

Behind the donation button the market of names awoke.

The watch over sight is set; the war is still to come;

See me as a person, friend, not as an object.

The eye too is a hand—it can steal the dignity of privacy.

But the mobile entered every home in the place of flowers and lamps.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE CIRCLE OF
SIMULTANEITY: At a fair, a performer spun a burning stick.*]

CHAPTER 68

Devika versus the Tribute App

The hand that presses a button in the name of the dead searches the pockets of the living.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: JUDGEMENT BEFORE THE
BUTTON**

Folk tune: children's warning song

Stop, child, stop before the button;

One breath, one question—only then lean forward.

Before the hand presses a button, first search the heart;

Whose name, whose money, whose honour—say it plainly.

A click moves fast, but the lamp of thought can be faster;

A warning message can block the road of fraud.

Think with your mother and father; do not open unknown links;

When greed speaks sweetly, sound the drum of verification.

Judgement before the button—the song of digital safety;

Care protects a household's labour, trust and honour.

Behind a glittering link spreads a net of thorns;

In the sweet cry of “free, free,” the fraudster's teeth gleam.

Tell your parents, check with a friend;

Only a thoughtful click will preserve the truth of the home.



The peace that should have descended upon Garh Narikel after the Festival of Names did not come. In the place where the children read names, where the green point on the stump squinted in sunlight, where Meera kept watch over the dignity of faces and the right to sight, the glow of screens began sliding in again after dark. Stones bearing names lay around the felled body of Channa Grove, but now there was a proposal to paste small shining signs upon the stones. It was said that this would keep memory safe.

When Devika first heard the proposal, the soft voice of Ujjwal's mother circled in her ears: "A name does not need haste." Yet the first line in the tribute app's advertisement was: "Tribute in a single touch." Devika trembled at those words. If tribute could be completed with a single touch, what would become of the length of grief, the heat of waiting, the tremor of calling a name, and the testimony of silence?

Chandrapal Batra was not described as the principal operator of the app. His name appeared nowhere. At the front stood a new company—"People's Memory Service Board." Behind it was a consultant, behind the consultant a donor, behind the donor a cultural worker, and behind all of them layer upon layer of fog. But Devika knew that inside fog there is usually the same face that does not wish to stand in daylight. Chandrapal's method was not hard to recognise. Wherever he saw a name, he saw an account; wherever he saw tears, he saw a donation button; wherever he saw memory, he saw a collection form.

The tribute app began in very gentle words. Write the name of the deceased. Add a photograph. Write the family's story. Donate if you wish. Light a memorial lamp. Offer digital flowers. A facility for those living in distant countries. Participate in grief. Among all these sentences Devika noticed a small opening: permission to collect the name, relationship details, phone number, banking route, location, birth, death, caste, father's name, a woman's married name, children's ages. This was not tribute. It was a census of grief.

Devika did not make her first test with Ujjwal's name. She knew that placing a hand directly on a victim's wound can wound the victim again. She first chose the name on the stone the children had placed before all others: "The one whose name was not found." The app opened. In the name field she wrote: "The one whose name was not found." The screen immediately replied: "Please enter full name." Devika wrote again: "Unnamed." The screen answered: "Invalid." A third time she wrote: "Unknown labourer drowned in the water." The screen said: "Please select category." Devika switched off the phone.

In that moment Devika understood that the app would accept only those names that fitted the market's boxes. A name that was incomplete, a person outside caste categories, a woman who wished to remain outside the definition of marriage, a labourer whose father's name was unknown, a body that fell into the water but never rose onto paper—none of them would gain entry to this app. On its very first day, this new doorway of memory was leaving the nameless outside.

Devika showed this to Ananya and the children. They did not read the small letters on the screen; they watched its behaviour. One child asked, "It says it needs a full name. If an incomplete name is found, does the person become incomplete?" Another said, "If there is no photograph, is there no face?" A third child, who had already heard

Gangesha's question, said softly, "Anything that removes the absent in the name of evidence is not justice; it is deceit."

Devika remembered Gangesha. The hard light of Navya-Nyaya reasoning suddenly descended upon the blue light of the screen. Evidence is not merely collection; evidence has disciplines and limits. What is seen, what is heard, what is inferred, what survives in collective memory, what lives in compassion—each has a different value. But Chandrapal's app was pushing every form of evidence through a single window: enter name, attach proof, accept donation, publish memory. Whoever could not fill the form became absent.

That night Devika went looking for Chandrapal. He was not beside the Channa stump but in a new office behind the market. A board outside read: "Cultural Memory Assistance Centre." Inside were a glass table, scented incense, the glow of computers, and on the wall an artistic image of Channa Grove. In that image the tree had not been felled; it was entirely green, entirely beautiful, entirely saleable.

Chandrapal smiled as soon as he saw Devika. "You people are very emotional," he said. "I have only provided a convenience. How will family members living away from home join the reading of names? They will connect through the app, donate, preserve memory." Devika looked at him. There was no remorse for crime in that face, only the old quickness that sees opportunity in a crisis.

In a calm voice Devika asked, "Why did your app refuse the person whose name was not found?" Chandrapal was silent for a moment, then said, "A system needs data. Without data there can be no register. Donors want completeness." Devika said, "Channa Grove gave the incomplete name the first place. Your screen left it outside. Then this is not tribute; it is the sorting of names."

Chandrapal laughed. "Not sorting—purification. If there are confused names, there will be misuse." Devika felt as though the crocodile had opened its mouth not in the water but inside the sentence. The thief who was himself weaving a net of misuse was warning of misuse by incomplete names. She said, "You fear incomplete names because incomplete names cannot be sold in the market. A full name, full relationship, full body, full grief—only then do you earn your profit."

For the first time Chandrapal's eyes hardened. "Profit is not a bad word," he said. "Preserving memory costs money." Devika replied, "There is a difference between cost and plunder. Stealing a name written on stone and putting it on a screen, then demanding 'proof' from the family, then opening a road for donations—that is not cost. It is the second death of the dead."

There was a small room at the back of the office. Devika's attention moved toward it. The door stood half open. Inside, young men were

typing names. Some names were correct, some distorted; beside some they were asking for caste, adding fathers, putting husbands in brackets after women's names. Devika saw Ujjwal's name on the list as well. Beside it were the words: "High emotional reach." Cold entered her body. She neither shouted nor wept. She did not even photograph the line, because she knew that to stop another person's theft one must not commit theft again. She kept the words of the line in her memory.

She came out and said, "Remove Ujjwal's name." Chandrapal said, "The name has already become public. Memory is collective." Devika replied, "Collective memory and commercial possession are different things. You will not sell the tears attached to Ujjwal's name without his mother's permission." Chandrapal answered, "The law does not say that." Devika said softly, "If the law does not yet say it, the assembly of names will. And the court of the Channa stump does not wait for the law."

The next day Devika told the public meeting everything. She did not violate the privacy of the office; she did not read out names that had been typed without consent. She explained only how the app worked—rejection of incomplete names, classification of suffering, routes for donation, vagueness of consent and the marketing of memory. The children wrote a new rule in the register: "Before anyone's name is put on a screen, obtain the permission of that person's people. If no people remain, first hear the name in the village assembly. An incomplete name is not smaller than a complete one."

Meera tied her thread behind this rule. "Without the right to sight, memory becomes humiliation," she said. "If any camera, app, donation form, research project or memorial touches anyone's suffering without consent, it will not be allowed into Channa Grove." A faint laugh from Budhba's ghost was heard. Perhaps he liked the rule.

Satyavrat Mehta sat behind them listening. A notebook was in his hand, but he did not write every sentence. He wrote only one: "Ownership of a name belongs with the dead person's people, with memory and with justice—not with the market." After that sentence he stopped his pen. He understood how slowly law would move on such a matter; the children's moral code had already moved ahead of the law.

Chandrapal did not come to that meeting. His app came in his absence. On many phones at the same moment a notification flashed: "Your loved one's name has been added to the Garh Narikel Memory Collection. Light a tribute lamp." Some people startled. Some switched off their phones. Some eyes filled with tears. The same notification came to Ujjwal's mother's phone. She could not read it; Devika trembled as she read it aloud. The mother remained calm and said, "Do not drown my son in a screen again."

Then Ananya began collecting the phones. She placed them all face down within the circle of stones. The green point on the stump shone in the sunlight. The children drew the lines for kabaddi but did not begin the game. First they said together: “Names will not be sold.” It was not a slogan. It was an oath.

During the night the glittering notifications began disappearing by themselves. On some phones names vanished; on some they were wrong; on some they were repeated. Devika understood that Chandrapal’s app would not merely take names; it would change them too. The difference between the name written on stone and the name shining on the screen became visible. The difference was not small. It was the first warning of the next crisis.

At dawn the children went to count the stones. Every stone was still there, but the letters on three stones had grown faint, as though someone had scraped them with a fingernail in the night. When the children ran their fingers over the scratched places, the stone did not feel cold; it felt slightly warm, like a wound still fresh. “Who?” someone asked. Budhba’s voice came from very far away: “Whoever steals names on a screen will not take long to put a hand upon the stones.”

Ananya opened the register. On the first page she wrote: “From today, the theft of names has begun.” Devika looked toward the stump. The green point was still there, but the soil around it appeared slightly disturbed. Guarding memory was no longer merely work of feeling. This was the beginning of a war—not a war of slogans, but a war to save the letters of names.

FOLK SONG: THE BUTTON THAT SEARCHES THE POCKET

Folk tune: Devika’s warning song

Ask first, ask before you press the button;

The family owns the loved one’s name—understand this.

A button in the name of the dead cuts the pocket of the living;

A lamp burns on the screen while the household hearth burns low.

The name on stone stays still, the name on the screen changes;

In one night someone quietly scrapes three letters.

Devika said—recognise the light of grief;

See the donation code, the data, the woven net of theft.

The soil around the green point has been scratched;

The watch over names is no longer feeling—it has risen into war.

Do not press the button blindly; first ask whom;

The family owns a loved one's name—not any app.

A lamp burns on the screen while the household hearth diminishes.

In one night someone quietly scrapes three letters.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—MEMORY OF THE BLACK POT: In a potter's house a pot had once been black. Months later, a young man returning from a distant country said on the basis of his old memory, "That black pot is still in the room." The pot was indeed the same pot and stood in the same place, but its colour had changed.]

CHAPTER 69

The Theft of Names

The theft caught on the screen is only the bright side of theft.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LOTUS OF NAMES IN WATER

Folk tune: auspicious water-ghat song

*Fill it, sister, fill the pitcher with names;
Set a lotus upon every ripple of the water-ghat.*

*An erased name rises again in water as a lotus;
However far the current runs, the root remains within memory.*

*Sisters at the water-ghat, sing the song of names;
With syllable after syllable, bring identity home again.*

*Water does not erase truth; it only changes its form;
At dawn the lotus of a name opens toward the sun.
A flower on water, dignity in the heart, a lamp in the home;
Give erased lives a seat in memory.*

*Drowned and erased letters grew beneath the water;
Receiving dawn's first ray, they flowered again above.
Syllable by syllable, respect from ghat to ghat;
In the mirror of water a forgotten identity shines.*



When Devika exposed the lie of the tribute app before everyone, the people thought the real theft had been caught. But the Channa stump knew that the theft caught on a screen was only the bright page of theft. The real theft was the quiet removal of names from memory, so that the next generation would never even ask whose body drowned, whose labour was devoured, whose voice was silenced.

In the second week of the Festival of Names, Ananya opened the register and saw the first blank space. On the page where “Saryu Mandal”

had been written the day before, only a faint stain of ink remained; the letters were gone. The stain looked as though someone had stroked the name with a wet thumb and wiped it away. Ananya rubbed her eyes, then raised the page toward the sunlight. Not even the shadow of the letters remained.

“Perhaps it is the wrong page,” one child said. Another ran toward the ring of stones. The stone bearing Saryu Mandal’s name was still where it had been placed, but its surface was smooth. The carved name was gone. The red thread remained tied around it, the place was unchanged; only the name had disappeared. It was a strange theft—the stone was not stolen, the thread was not stolen, the place was not stolen; only the name was stolen.

When the news spread, people came running. Some suspected Chandrapal’s app, some the municipality, some the foreign research team, some Batuknath’s proposed trust. But Ba said softly, “The thief is not the one who steals the stone. The thief is the one who persuades people that nothing was ever written on the stone.” At those words the crowd fell utterly silent.

Devika checked the digital list. There too several names had been marked “unverified.” Saryu Mandal—unverified. Munna Paswan’s father—unverified. Ujjwal’s incident—voluntary risk. Labourer’s death—not available in the contract register. Names that remained clear in people’s throats had been blurred on paper and screen.

Gop Kumar opened his old files. They contained names, dates, seals and copies of the dead workers’ thumbprints. But when the copies were held to the light, some of the marks ran like drops of water. Gop’s hands trembled. “Data can be stolen,” he said, “but this is an assault on the body of evidence.”

Ananya remembered Gangesha’s question. Softly she said, “What is evidence? What is written? What is seen? What remains in memory? Or what power agrees to accept?” Satyavrat Mehta stood behind her. Instead of answering, he remained silent. This time the silence held no guilt; it made room for the children to think.

Meera went to Saryu Mandal’s house. Saryu’s sister showed the hand on which she wore her rakhi and said, “The name was erased? But look at this hand. Father rowed a boat in every flood. The stories he told in my childhood—have those been erased too?” Meera understood that proof of a name is not merely letters; the gait of a body, the language of a house, surviving clothes and practices of memory are evidence too. But she also understood that society first calls someone “unverified” when it wants to suppress them.

While making notes on the incident, Saumya first wrote the heading “The Theft of Names.” Then she crossed it out. Beneath it she wrote,

“Organised Forgetting Directed Against Names.” That sounded too scholarly. At last she wrote: “What is being erased is not a name, but a person’s presence.”

That same afternoon Batuknath Hariharan arrived carrying the papers for his trust. His face wore a neat polish of sorrow. “Look,” he said, “names cannot be preserved in this kind of disorderly people’s register. Let us form a properly constituted People’s Memory Trust: president, secretary, treasurer, legal adviser. Only then will the names be safe.”

The children surrounded him. Ananya asked, “Will you first read the name that was erased?” Batuknath smiled. “If there is evidence, we will read it.” Ananya asked again, “What if the evidence is not in your papers but in our elders’ throats?” Batuknath’s smile hardened a little. “Emotion and evidence are different things.”

Then Aruni said, “Not emotion—life testimony.” At the words a faint knock came from within the stump, as though a dry root agreed. Batuknath turned a page. “The trust will clarify historicity, documentation, legal status, ownership and management.” Devika interrupted: “And who owns the names?”

Batuknath fell silent. His professional cunning was in that silence. Ownership of names—the question cut at the root of every file through which memory could be possessed. At last he said, “In the public interest.” Meera did not laugh, but her eyes flashed like thorns. “You know very well how often ‘public interest’ has been a paper curtain hung over women’s bodies, Dalit names, workers’ deaths and the tears of the poor.”

At that moment Gangesha’s shadow thickened behind the stump. No one saw him directly, but a question sounded in the children’s ears: “Universal, particular, relation, absence—where is the name?” Ananya wrote in the register: “The absence of one called absent can itself become evidence, if someone manufactured that absence.” For the first time Satyavrat Mehta raised his head. In the child’s sentence he heard a new lesson in Nyaya.

At that moment a drop of sweat fell upon Batuknath’s paper. It spread into a round mark. Seeing it, a child whispered, “A crocodile’s eye.” No one laughed. The circular stain slowly settled upon the very place where the word “property” was written in the draft of the trust.

Chandrapal Batra watched the scene from a distance on his phone. A warning flashed in his app: “Invalid name reactivated.” He panicked. To him a name was only an entry; here names were rising again as people’s voices, the warmth of stones, the creak of the stump and children’s questions. The calculations on the screen were losing to the testimony of the stump.

By evening a list had been made of the erased names. There were seven in all. The children decided that instead of simply restoring seven names, they would hold seven days of name-reading: one name each day, and with every name they would hear the family, the house, the event, the work, the weeping, the song, the mistake, the shame and the laughter connected with it. A name would no longer be merely letters; it would become the whole tree of relationship.

On the first day it was Saryu Mandal's turn to be read. But when the stone was lifted, the wet earth beneath it held a strange shape—wavy, like the map of a small pond. Ba looked at it and said, "Saryu used to go into the water often." Gop bent down to inspect it. At the centre of the map was a round depth. Devika whispered, "Is this pointing toward the pond?"

When night fell, a faint gleam of water appeared in the earthen shape. People stood around the severed stump. Someone asked, "Where did the water come from? The ground was dry." From the tiny line of water rose the rich smell of wet earth, like the first drop of a very old monsoon returning. Budhba's voice came very softly through the darkness: "When a name is erased, water keeps it."

The register was not closed that night. Ananya wrote the final line: "The erased names have gone down into the water; tomorrow we shall listen to the pond." The yellow envelope, the draft of the trust and the app screen all lay to one side. The damp gleam rising from the stump's roots silently showed the path toward the pond.

The chapter paused where the theft of names began turning into the testimony of water. The next morning the people of Garh Narikel would gather by the pond, and for the first time the Panidubbi would speak in a clear voice: "A name that drowned in water cannot be erased from paper."

FOLK SONG: ERASED NAMES IN THE WATER

Folk tune: water-ghat lament

Water will keep them, water will keep the erased names;

Whoever cuts memory, water too will record the mark.

The theft caught on the screen was only its bright part;

The true theft is the night that removes names from memory.

The stone grows dim, the tongue catches, the register wakes;

From the dry root a wet gleam runs toward the pond.

Budhba says—water will keep the erased name;

Burn the paper if you will; the river will return the letters.

Ananya wrote—tomorrow we shall listen to the pond;

We shall gather drowned names from the Panidubbi's tangled hair.

An erased name does not weep; it becomes water and shows the way.

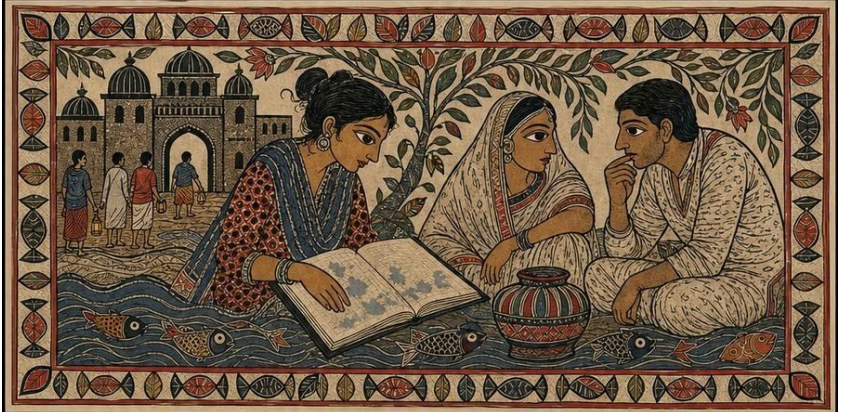


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN: *At dawn travellers were walking toward a mountain. Smoke could be seen rising from behind the summit.*]

CHAPTER 70

The Submarine's Testimony

*What cannot be seen from above remains tied in the Panidubbi's
tangled hair.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: NAMES FREED FROM THE
TANGLED HAIR**

Folk tune: pond song

*Free them, friend, free the names that are tangled;
Oil of affection, comb of patience—bring both together.*

*The names tangled in the Panidubbi's hair,
The women brought combs and gently worked them free.
One knot of fear, one of shame, one forgotten matter;
With the oil of affection every difficult knot comes loose.*

*Freed names shine above the pond like the moon;
The story once bound now glows with an independent voice.
Give the name freed from the tangled hair a home upon a leaf;
Give tangled memory a throat of honour.*

*One knot was bound with fear, another black with shame;
Slowly straightened, every knot came open.
The freed name smiled like the moon upon the pond;
A free melody entered the throat of the bound story.*



Budhba's words—"Water keeps an erased name"—and Ananya's written resolve, "Tomorrow we shall listen to the pond," throbbed in the village's heart all night. No one in Garh Narikel slept well after the night of the theft of names. The pages of the register survived, and the stones still lay around the stump, yet a kind of smoke seemed to have settled over some names. The letters had not vanished, but recognition had blurred. A name that had sounded clear yesterday now made the tongue

stumble when it was spoken. People said: the thief did not carry away the paper; the thief stole the voice of the name.

Ananya reached the stump early in the morning. She opened the register, ran her hand over the page, and saw tiny water stains in the places where the names seemed to be missing. Where had the water come from in the night? There had been no rain, and dew could not have fallen in drops so large. Ba said, "This is not water; it is the sweat of memory." But Gop Kumar said softly, "When a conspiracy gathers around a name, evidence goes in search of water."

The sentence reminded everyone of Gangesha's question. What is evidence? What is perception? What is inference? Who owns the authority of words? Gangesha Upadhyaya's Navya-Nyaya, which upon paper had spread with the weight of twelve thousand books, now trembled as a single fine fibre upon the Channa stump. The children said, "If perception is made unclear, we shall look for the reflection in water."

It was decided that testimony about the theft of names would be taken not at the stump but at the pond. Behind the village, where in the rains the waters of the Kamala-Balan entered and formed a pond, people gathered at evening. It was no ordinary pond. The elders said a Panidubbi lived there—woman or man, ghost or living being, no one could say for certain. When a drowned name was spoken, the Panidubbi answered from the bottom in the form of bubbles.

Chandrapal Batra's people were watching from a distance as well. They believed the surest method of erasing a name was to fill people's memory with doubt. Once people themselves began to say that perhaps the name did not matter so much, the theft would be complete. But now the people were walking toward the pond. The thieves found this intolerable: why should something removed from paper be searched for in water?

At the bank Meera first read out the rules: no one's face would be shown by force; no one's weeping would be filmed; no one's suffering would be turned into trade. Devika added that when a name was read, the family could speak if it wished; if not, the water itself could answer. Satyavrat Mehta sat behind them and did not uncap his ink pen. Hurrying to write what one had only just heard could again become an offence of silence.

Evening sunlight was sinking into the water. From the damp earth of the bank rose the rich smell of soil, and the reeds shivered slowly even without wind, as though the pond were holding its breath. Ananya read the first blurred name. The word would not come out whole. Her tongue caught exactly where the water stain lay in the register. Everyone's heart caught with it. Then a round bubble rose from the bottom of the pond. It did not burst; it came to the surface and stayed there, and within it

something gleamed like letters. The children saw together—the name was complete.

Someone said, “Illusion.” Someone said, “Magic.” For the first time Satyavrat Mehta spoke: “If the letters written by society have become false, then nature’s reflection too can become evidence.” He immediately fell silent again, because he understood that even after this sentence the decision was not his; it belonged to the people.

At the second name the pond’s surface trembled. This time no bubble rose, but a leaf came up—rotten and soaked, yet the sound of a name seemed to run through its veins. The children tried to see letters on the leaf, but it was blank. Ba said, “Not all evidence is read by the eyes; some is read by the ears.” Everyone became silent. A faint voice rose from the leaf. The name blurred in the register was spoken from within it.

At that moment Gop Kumar remembered his digital files: copies of files, copies on servers, copies of email—everything depended on replicas, but here water itself was making a copy. He thought: a society that takes paper from the oppressed cannot take away water. If it takes the water, the name will grow in the air. If it stops the air, the name will enter the child’s throat. This is a chain of testimony that depends upon no department’s seal.

Then came the first clear sign of the Panidubbi. A round darkness formed at the centre of the pond. It was not terrifying; it was deep, as though the navel of the water had opened. From that navel rose a voice—not wholly woman, man, child or elder, but a joining of all voices. The instant it sounded, the damp air along the bank turned suddenly cold and the hair on people’s bodies stood up. The voice said, “A name drowned in water cannot have its reflection stolen.”

The people trembled. After many years the Panidubbi herself had spoken. Budhba’s ghost, hidden among the reeds on the bank, bowed his head. It seemed to him that the living had truly begun to learn how to listen; therefore the water too had begun to speak.

Gathering courage, Ananya asked, “What of a name that was never written at all?” The water’s navel deepened again. The voice came: “The weight of a name never written is greater than that of all written names. Put its stone first.” The children looked at one another. The meaning of the stone beside the stump inscribed “The one whose name was not found” had now received recognition from the pond.

Meera asked, “What if bodily humiliation is attached to a name and the family does not want it made public?” The Panidubbi answered, “Protect the name; do not make an exhibition of suffering. Water sees the face, but without permission it does not bring the image to the bank.” Meera took a long breath. The oath of privacy had become a law of the river.

Devika asked, “How does the name of someone who died in a screen come into the water?” No one could tell whether the Panidubbi laughed or the water merely trembled. The voice came: “A screen too is a copy of water—a shining surface, darkness within. A mind that drowned in that shine raises bubbles here as well.” Ujjwal’s mother covered her mouth with the end of her sari.

Then something strange happened. The image of the false donation page created in Chandrapal Batra’s tribute app opened by itself on Gop’s phone. Gop startled, then immediately tilted the phone toward the water. The screen’s lie broke apart the moment it fell across the pond’s surface. The letters turned backward, the names separated, and the accounts began fleeing like black fish. The Panidubbi said, “Water does not keep the accounts of those who earn from names; mud keeps those accounts.”

This time Satyavrat Mehta took out his ink pen but did not write. He laid the pen on the pond bank. The children understood: testimony would rise first from the water and only then go onto paper. Law has no right to climb upon memory and sit above it; it must learn the humility of walking behind memory.

After this testimony, the reading of names began again. With every blurred name, the water gave one sign or another—a bubble, a leaf, the tremor of a fish, a broken reflection of the moon, damp earth along the bank, the wing of a distant egret. The children recorded each sign in the register. The register was now an archive not only of letters but also of nature’s replies.

When the night grew deep, the Panidubbi’s voice rose one last time: “Do not merely save a name; save its play as well. A name that gives up play becomes a memorial. A name that plays kabaddi remains breath.” At this the children suddenly became alert. Kabaddi! Since the felling of Channa Grove, the game had remained incomplete for many days. Why was the Panidubbi herself speaking of the game?

Budhba’s ghost came out from the reeds and for a moment became clearly visible. Softly he said, “Where breath is held and a name is called, testimony remains alive. If kabaddi stops, the watch over names will grow old.” Having said this, he turned to smoke again. The brightness of the next game returned to the children’s eyes.

A few outsiders standing on the bank, men connected with the brokers of the heritage project, heard all of this and whispered among themselves. A new idea immediately entered their heads: if people wanted to see real ghost kabaddi, tickets could be sold. If the tale of the Panidubbi could be sold, it could be staged. The market of memory began sharpening its claws again.

The next morning new posters were found pasted on the village walls: “Channa Grove Ghost-Kabaddi Festival: An Astonishing Folk Experience—Light, Sound, Performance, Panidubbi Spectacle.” In small letters at the bottom stood a company’s name, and behind it the smell of Chandrapal’s people. Ananya read the poster and remained silent. The smell of its fresh paste was still in the air—the smell of the city trying to climb over the earthy scent of the village morning. Then she looked toward the pond. The surface was perfectly still, but somewhere within it a deep darkness seemed to be smiling.

Thus the Panidubbi’s testimony did not end. Instead, it opened the next danger: memory saved by water was now something the market wished to turn into performance. And the kabaddi of Channa Grove, which was the truth of breath, was being prepared for conversion into a procession of false ghosts.

FOLK SONG: NAMES IN THE PANIDUBBI’S TANGLED HAIR

Folk tune: pond song

Save them, save the names from theatre;

Do not sell the breath of memory in smoke and light.

Blurred above, names lay bound in the tangled hair below;

As the tongue faltered, the pond spoke its testimony.

Paper can erase, water does not forget;

In the depths the letters live and move like fish.

But the market heard—and suffering would become a stage;

At the Ghost-Kabaddi Festival, tickets would be sold again.

The Panidubbi said—my weeping is not performance;

The fear of the dead is not a spectacle for your profit.

The pond saved the names; now save them from theatre.

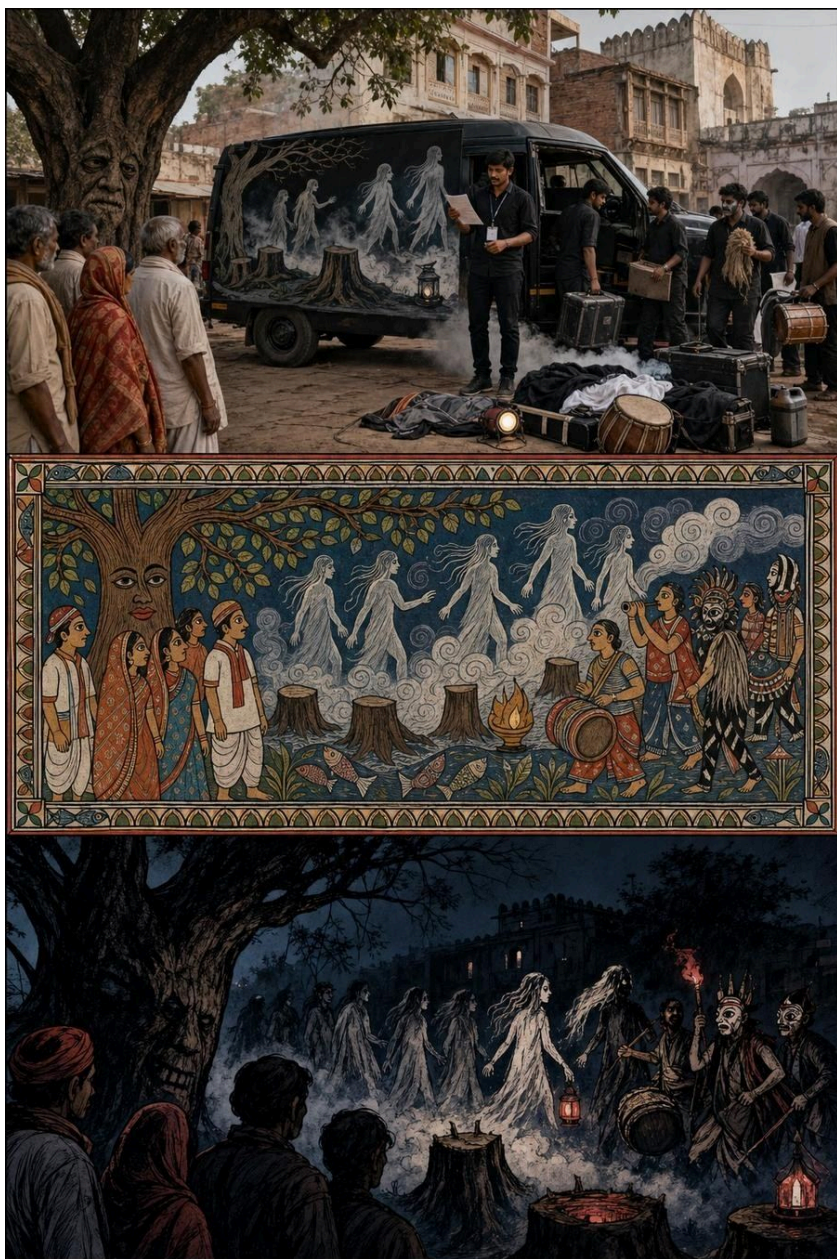


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE RED-HOT IRON BALL: In the blacksmith's furnace an iron ball glowed red. A new pupil declared, "Where there is fire there is smoke; therefore smoke will rise from this ball." The teacher let him watch for a while.*]

CHAPTER 71

Procession of the False Ghost

*In a procession of false ghosts, even the smoke comes on hire, while the
real grove laughs.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: RECOGNISE THE REAL GHOST

Folk tune: satirical jhumar

Recognise it, friend, recognise the real ghost;

Count who stands behind the hired dance.

A hired ghost can dance and spread plenty of smoke;

Real fear flees only when the lamp of reason is lit.

Understand the tricks of disguise, rumour and counterfeit miracles;

Choose the path of truth with evidence, questions and laughter.

Society fears ignorance more than ghosts;

When the drum of knowledge sounds, the false shadow runs away.

Greed and deceit are the real ghost: call them by name;

With the bright laughter of satire, bring down the market of fear.

Smoke rises, the drum thumps, the false disguise is heavy;

Once the lamp of reason burns, every shadow flees.

Greed, deceit and rumour are the real ghost's name;

Beat the drum of laughter and auction off the market of fear.



The smell of fresh paste on the poster had not yet dried when preparations for the festival reached the village. On the second day after the submarine's testimony, a new vehicle arrived in Garh Narikel. Across its body, in glittering letters, was written: "Channa Grove Night Experience: Ghost-Kabaddi Procession." Beneath the words was a picture of rising smoke, half-transparent human figures, the cut stump behind them, lamps in front, and a small sentence in one corner: "A unique fusion of fear, heritage and entertainment." What had trembled on local

lips here as names was becoming an “experience” in outsiders’ advertising.

A young man got down first, an identity card around his neck and a folded document in his hand. Showing a municipal permit, he said, “This programme will increase local employment, tourism and awareness of memory.” Behind him came boxes of make-up, canisters of artificial smoke, drums, lights, black-and-white costumes and five performers. Two were unemployed young men from the village, one came from a theatre troupe, one was a dance instructor from the city, and one was a boy who had never even seen Channa Grove at night.

Ananya watched from a distance, the register in her hand. She said nothing. Ira asked, “Should we stop them?” Ananya shook her head. “First we will watch. Whatever is false must also provide its evidence.” Gangesha’s question from the previous chapter had settled into the children’s speech. They now played by saying “perception,” “inference,” “testimony,” but this was no longer mere play; these were becoming tools of defence.

By afternoon a small square bamboo stage had been built around the stump. A line of lime was drawn on the ground: spectators on this side, performers on that. The exposed roots were placed at the rear and rigged to receive blue light. Roots once soaked in people’s tears were now being turned into a backdrop. Very softly Devika said, “What we call a wound, they call decoration.”

Meera stopped the organiser and asked, “When you refer to the dead in this procession, have you taken permission from their families?” The organiser smiled first, then looked startled. This question had not been in his training. “We won’t take names,” he said. “We’ll only create an atmosphere.” Meera replied, “Whose atmosphere? To create an atmosphere from the pain of people who drowned, were cheated and were silenced, without their names—this is a new method of theft.”

As evening fell, slips resembling tickets were distributed. Those who sat inside would receive the “special experience.” Some village youths went in out of curiosity. A few outsiders came with cameras. The children took no tickets; they sat on the other side of the stump beside the ring of stones bearing names. Ananya opened the register. On the page she wrote: “Today: direct examination of false ghosts.”

The programme began. Smoke rose. A slow beat sounded on the drum. The beat was hollow, like a hand striking an empty granary; it did not contain the pulse that lived in the breath of the real game. Wrapped in black cloth, their bodies smeared with lime-like paint, the performers began to twist and shuffle like half-naked ghosts. One dropped to his knees and said “kabaddi-kabaddi,” but his breath broke halfway through. Another laughed. The organiser signalled with his hand: “Stay

serious.” Some spectators were thrilled, some embarrassed, some sat in sadness.

In the real kabaddi of the ghosts, breath was a rope. When a player came down to earth chanting “kabaddi,” the voice seemed to emerge not merely from inside the body but from among many invisible names. In this false game there was a word, but no breath; shouting, but no summons; smoke, but no smell of water; lime, but none of the trembling between death and release. The children kept noting the signs one by one: “Breath broke.” “No names.” “The soil did not answer.”

Then a performer behind the stage, cast as a ghost, suddenly froze. His foot had landed on a line of exposed root from the stump. The line seemed invisibly warm. Instead of his rehearsed dialogue, his own father's name came out of his mouth. Everyone startled. His father was not from this village; he had been a labourer killed in a mine in a distant district. The organiser ran over: “Don't go off script!” But the performer began to cry.

His sobbing cut through the procession's artificial smoke. The spectators who had come to see fear suddenly found real grief standing before them. The children wrote in the register: “An unknown truth emerged from inside a lie.” Ananya went to the performer. “Say the whole name,” she said. Trembling, he did. That name was not in the original record of Channa Grove. The children asked for a stone. The first letter of the name was inscribed on it.

After this, the discipline of the false procession collapsed. Another performer said his mother's name had disappeared from the widow-pension list. A third said his uncle's body had been held at a city hospital until the bill was paid. The dance instructor said he had come to earn wages by playing a ghost, but had never spoken the name of his own beloved for fear of society. Acting on the stage slowly turned into testimony.

The organiser panicked. He ordered the smoke shut off. The lights were made brighter. The drum stopped. But the voices did not. People seated among the spectators began saying, “In our house too...” “My brother's name...” “My husband's papers...” “My daughter...” A programme designed to sell fear by ticket became, without tickets, a hearing of names.

And where were the real ghosts amid all this? Would they have stopped the game, or begun to dance? No one saw them. But Ba later said that the real ghosts had been sitting that night at the water's edge, knees drawn up, chins resting upon them, silently watching. They were not angry. Perhaps they were watching human beings, while becoming false ghosts, reach their own real dead.

Budhba's ghost appeared only once. He stood behind the boy wearing a false mask. The boy wanted to make a frightening "haaaah" sound, but his voice changed into "Present." He frightened himself. Silence filled the spectators. The children answered at once: "Present." Sweat began to run from the eyes of the false mask. The boy took it off.

At that moment Gangesha's logic descended once more around the stump. Perception: the performer was visible. Inference: smoke and costume created the appearance of a ghost. Verbal testimony: the advertisement called it "ghost-kabaddi." But when the fourth edge of evidence—the witness of suffering—awoke, every lie withdrew. The children gave the conclusion in their own language: "A ghost is not one that frightens; a ghost is one that wanders because it was never given a name."

Devika told the organiser, "Now return the money taken for this programme." He said, "Permissions, taxes, expenses—" Meera cut him off. "Under which account is the tax on selling the fear of the dead deposited?" People's eyes turned toward him. For the first time the organiser understood that the crowd was no longer a set of customers; it had become a community. Without further argument he opened the box of ticket money. Refunds began.

But the story did not end there. Long after night deepened, the performers remained seated around the stump. No one drove them away. Ananya said, "You did work for a lie, but you spoke true names. Now learn not acting, but keeping watch." They lowered their heads. The false-ghost costumes were removed one by one and placed beside the stones. The black cloth no longer fluttered in the air; it had become heavy like wet cloth. The extinguished blue bulbs were still slightly warm; moths kept beating their heads uselessly against the glass.

There was an attempt to upload photographs from that night to Chandrapal's tribute app. The pictures opened, but the performers' faces appeared blurred while the names on the stones were sharp. In Raghav Signal's code the event was labelled "emotional risk." Broom's team reported: "Local resistance to experience design." But in the register of the children of Garh Narikel there was only one line: "The false procession changed into real names."

After midnight, when everyone was tired, a faint sound rose from inside the stump. It was neither weeping, nor wind, nor the rustle of leaves. At first everyone thought it an illusion. Then it came again—slightly sly, slightly affectionate, slightly full of mockery. The stump of Channa Grove laughed. The laughter was not like the rustling of leaves; it was as if old water had stirred somewhere within dry wood—slow, deep and faintly bitter.

Someone asked, “Did the tree laugh?” Ba replied, “Yes. When memory begins to be sold and yet survives, a tree laughs.” The children were not startled. They opened the next page. At the top they wrote: “The Laughter of Channa Grove.”

FOLK SONG: THE HIRED GHOST

Folk tune: satirical folk song

Go, hired ghost, go away;

*The real shadow will remain—the one whose grief it is will not endure
this.*

The smoke came on hire, the false ghost danced;

The real grove laughed slyly from within.

Fear, heritage, entertainment—three colours on one board;

The night's riverbank was dressed to sell the compassion of the dead.

The children stopped the spectacle, the names on the stones shone;

The market's procession choked in its own smoke.

The stump laughed—memory was to be sold, yet survived;

The voice of the roots spread into the ears of power and market.

Go, hired ghost; the real shadow will remain;

One who bears the grief of a name will not tolerate spectacle.

The children stopped the spectacle; the names on the stones shone.

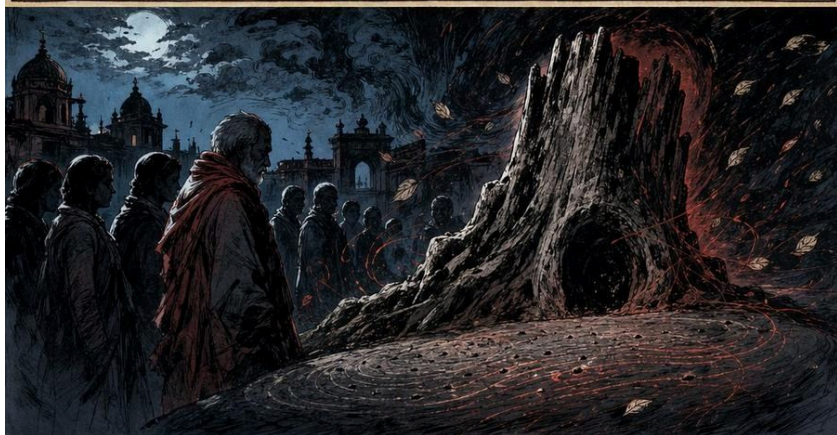


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—DEVADATTA'S NIGHT MEAL:*
Devadatta was stout, yet everyone in the village said that he ate nothing during the day. A person who never eats cannot remain well nourished; Devadatta is well nourished and does not eat by day; therefore he eats at another time. That night a friend stayed awake.]

CHAPTER 72

The Laughter of Channa Grove

*The stump's laughter was not hollow—it was the voice of roots that
had survived.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: FROM THE STUMP'S
LAUGHTER TO A SHOOT**

Folk tune: hariyarni song

*Green, O green, even the stump will grow green;
Trusting the laughing root, a shoot will return again.*

The stump laughed from within—the root is still alive;

At the first rain a new shoot will appear.

Do not abandon it by calling it hollow; give it moisture;

From the memory of the cut tree, give life to a new forest.

The stump's laughter is not mockery, but patience speaking sweetly;

Even after destruction, life finds a place for itself.

A shoot will break forth, leaves will stir, birds will return;

From the stump's laughter the whole grove will grow green again.

Whoever left it as hollow knew only half the truth;

A stream of sap flows within, though no one believed it.

Give moisture, give watch, water it with song;

Upon the chest of the cut tree, draw the picture of a new grove.



The heading written on the new page of the children's register—"The Laughter of Channa Grove"—began telling its own story by dawn. The laughter that had risen after the procession of false ghosts collapsed did not remain merely an incident of one night. Until morning it echoed like air trapped in a hollow inside the stump. At first people thought there must be some cavity in the cut root where the wind was catching. But even after the wind stopped, the fine vibration of laughter

continued to spread around the stump. On the stones bearing names, the vibration seemed to rise as hair-thin lines across their surfaces.

In the first light of sunrise the children came to inspect the stones. The letters of some names had deepened; beside some incomplete names new dots had appeared. Ananya touched one dot with her finger. It was not warm, yet it felt alive. At her fingertip she felt at once the chill of morning dew and the dry roughness of stone, as though life and memorial had seated themselves upon the same surface. She said, "The tree did not laugh; the tree answered." Hearing this, Ba said softly, "Many times an answer comes not as weeping but as laughter. When pain is put up for sale, memory mocks the sale."

The municipal clerks were the first to become nervous. After their yellow notice, the place that had been classified for "beautification" was now being called "the laughing stump." A new note was added to the file: "Unscientific rumours are spreading at the site; crowd control is required." But what the file called rumour was settling in people's ears like evidence. Before the laughter of Channa Grove, official language seemed as helpless as a dry leaf issuing orders against a flood.

Gangesha's question returned once more. Ananya asked the children, "What is the proof of the laughter?" One boy said, "Perception, because we heard it." Another said, "Inference, because the letters on the stones changed." A third: "Testimony, because Ba said so." The fourth, a girl who rarely spoke, said, "When sorrow refuses to be sold, the sound that rises at that moment is evidence of justice." Everyone fell silent. No scripture contained this definition, yet around the stump it was accepted.

Saumya wanted to write down the answer, then stopped her hand. It was worthy of quotation in a research paper, but quoting it at that moment risked diminishing its dignity. She asked the girl, "Shall I write it?" The girl asked, "Will whoever reads it also listen?" Saumya could not answer. She closed her paper. In this village learning was slowly becoming larger than scholarship.

Chandrapal Batra's memorial app tried to capture the sound of the laughter. His team secretly installed equipment to upload whatever remained of the night's sound. But the recording yielded only emptiness. When people listened to that emptiness, each heard the name of a different offence. Chandrapal heard: "percentage." His assistant heard: "false tribute." A technician heard: "deleted list." The machine was silent, but the silence became an indictment.

Raghav "Signal" Somani began converting the incident into code. His message read: "laughter = crowd risk; narrative control required; ghost procession failed, emotional truth active." But when he typed "narrative control," the words changed by themselves into "narrative resistance." He erased them three times; three times the same words

returned. The disappearing message did not disappear. Like the veins of a leaf, it remained fixed upon the screen.

Edward Broom's team called the laughter of Channa Grove "an acoustic marker of local resistance." One adviser said, "It can be used positively: community healing, memory tourism, a sound installation." Broom stood by the window listening. He thought someone had laughed somewhere far away. He turned—the room was empty. Then, within the applause from his Harvard lecture, he heard the same laughter, hollowing out the clapping from inside. He swallowed, and the coffee in his hand suddenly tasted of soil.

Meera put up a notice beside the stump: "No one owns the laughter. No one may sell the pain of the dead, the testimony of the living, or the sound of memory." Some asked, "Does laughter also have a right to privacy?" Meera said, "If selling an image of weeping is a crime, selling the meaning of laughter is also a crime. This laughter is not entertainment; it is refusal." From that day the sentence became a new rule of the watch over names.

By afternoon journalists arrived from outside. One asked, "Does the tree really laugh?" Ananya replied, "Do you really want the truth, or a spectacle?" The journalist smiled, but the question seemed to stop at his nose. He lowered the camera. Another journalist went to the children and asked, "What is the main story of this place?" A boy said, "There is no main story; there are many names. When you make one thing the main story, the rest get cut away."

After this answer, the journalists understood for the first time that Garh Narikel was not a news item but a test. Whoever wrote without listening would write a lie. Whoever wrote only the strange would write theft. Whoever wrote about the laughter without its cause would repeat the language of the market. That day many notebooks returned empty. An empty notebook was no longer shame; perhaps it was a beginning.

Batuknath Hariharan sat in his chamber hearing all this. He thought: if memory remains in the hands of children, how difficult it will be to place the stamp of law upon it. He reopened his draft for a "People's Memory Trust." At the top he wrote: "Preservation of Cultural Laughter." As soon as the words appeared, the ink spread. The first letter of "laughter" sat with its mouth open like a small crocodile. Batuknath put down his pen.

His mind said: give laughter a legal form; create a committee, appoint trustees, a secretary, obtain signatures, create a channel for funds. But another voice asked, "Do you know justice?" It was the same question the children had once asked him in Gangesha's name. Batuknath struck the table and stood. "How much have these children been taught!" he said. Yet inside he knew: the children had not merely been taught; they had

listened. Knowledge acquired by listening can be harder than written law.

At the evening recitation of names, a stone for laughter was placed in the circle. It carried no name, only a round mark. Ba said, "This stone belongs to all that escaped being sold." Devika said, "And to all that is still in danger of being sold." The children placed it beside the nameless stone. Those present understood: first guard those who were never given a name; next guard those whom the market is trying to turn into merchandise.

In the mist of night kabaddi began again. This time both ghosts and children played, but there was less running and more breath. When the chant "kabaddi-kabaddi" rose, the laughter inside the stump joined it. When a player crossed the line, the foot seemed to fall not upon soil but upon a row of names. In the night's cold, the players' breath became little clouds of white vapour—this time not hired smoke, but the body's own. A player who returned before the breath broke was not said to have "survived"; they said, "He returned having listened."

An old ghost-player, one who for years had appeared only in darkness, became half-visible that night in moonlight. His body was not smoke but river mist. Teaching the children the game, he said, "In kabaddi breath is held, but in memory breath is shared. Whoever tries to win alone will be caught. Whoever returns carrying a name will save the game." The children wrote this rule on the next page.

The green point on the stump spread a little that night. Moonlight fell upon the tip of the shoot, and for a moment it seemed that the shoot was growing not toward the sky but toward people's ears. Channa Grove had been cut, yet its new green line was taking the shape of listening. Before becoming a leaf, it was becoming an ear.

All this increased the market's alarm. The false procession had failed; the laughter could not be sold; the sound could not be recorded; the journalists returned empty; the researcher stayed silent; the app was mute; the trust draft went wrong. Those who had come to trade in memory understood for the first time that here things became questions before they became objects. And the moment you put a price on a question, it slips away and starts travelling in people's mouths.

At midnight Batuknath Hariharan could not sleep. At last he bent over in his chair. The lamp was half burnt, the paper half written, the pen nib dry. As his eyes closed he saw the stump of Channa Grove—but the stump was not outside; it was growing inside his own chest. Around it sat not lawyers in black gowns but shadows of leaves. In the middle, the same laughter was circling in a ring.

Then a voice said, "Batuknath Hariharan, the first hearing of your trust will take place inside you." He tried to start awake, but in the dream

his body was tied to the chair. From far away the children's voices rose: "Perception?" The stump answered, "Greed." "Inference?"—"Delay." "Testimony?"—"Justice." "Truth?"—laughter.

And inside that circle of laughter, Batuknath's dream court opened.

FOLK SONG: THE STUMP'S LAUGHTER

Folk tune: satirical jhumar

The stump laughs—not hollow, the root laughs;

What was taken for mockery now returns as justice.

The stump's laughter is not hollow, it is the voice of the surviving root;

Seals, stages and scholarship—all began to fear.

The stone moved, the paper trembled, though the air itself was still;

Laughter made a circle and opened the form within.

In Batuk's chest Channa Grove grew through the night;

Perception—greed; inference—the story of delay.

The word said justice; truth became laughter;

In the dream court the lawyer sat bound to his chair.

Hearing the stump's laughter, open your own chest and look.

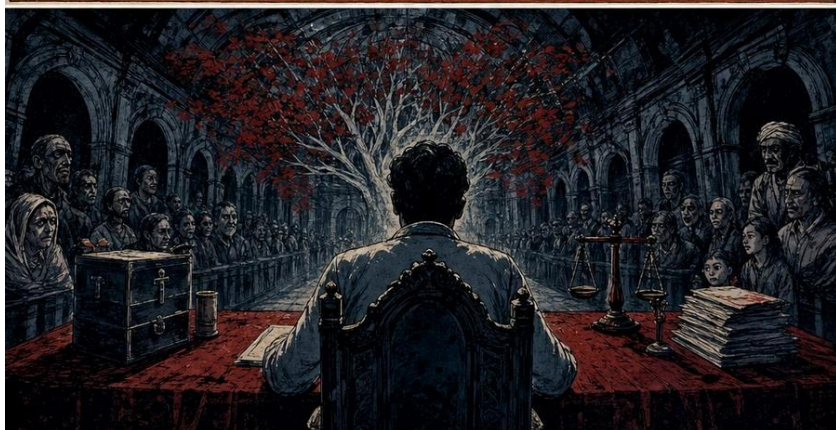


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—DEVADATTA OUTSIDE THE HOUSE: Devadatta's mother sent a message: "He is alive and well." His friend reached Devadatta's house, but every room was empty. Courtyard, roof, cowshed—Devadatta was nowhere.]

CHAPTER 73

Batuknath's Dream Court

*What he had taken for mockery all his life sits down in his dream and
convenes a court.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: JUSTICE IN THE DREAM COURT

Folk tune: dream bhagait

*Let the court convene, let the dream court convene;
Give the widow, the child and the labourer the first seats.*

*The court convened in the dream, and everyone found a seat;
The widow, the child and the labourer were heard in full.
Conscience became the judge, the moon became the witness;
The verdict: honour for every name, respect for every life.*

*At dawn bring the law of the dream awake into the world;
Let office, court and village give everyone an equal hearing.
The dream court is not fantasy; today it shows a direction;
Turn the justice seen within the mind into social action.*

*Conscience became the justice, the moon became the witness;
Without bribe, without adjournment, the stream of justice ran.
At dawn fill your eyes with the rule of the dream;
Use that same measure in office, village and court.*



The circle of laughter that formed the threshold of the dream court had followed Batuknath since evening. The laughter of Channa Grove rang all night in Batuknath Hariharan's ears. At times it rose from the stump, at times from the corridors of a court, at times from inside the iron cupboard in his house. Everything he had spent a lifetime taking for ridicule—the poor man's weeping, the widow's petition, the labourer's waiting, the child's question—had joined into one laughter. Batuknath

changed pillows, shut the window, drank water, but the fine thorn of laughter would not leave his ear.

He told himself it was all superstition. Give the villagers a few papers, a few trusts, a few committee members and a few donation receipts, and they would quiet down. He would give people's memory a legal form, appoint himself its chairman, open a fund in the name of preserving the dead, and bind this Channa Grove—wandering unruly in people's hands—with the rope of regulation. He sat at his desk and opened the draft: "Garh Narikel People's Memory Trust." Seeing the words, his old clever smile returned.

But the moment he wrote "trust," the ink burst and spread over the page. The letters became black ponds. Batuknath rubbed his eyes. The page on which he had written clause, sub-clause, chairman, secretary and treasurer slowly began turning into leaves. They were as fine, countless and startling as the subtle pages of the *Tattvacintamani*. On every leaf the same question shone: "Will you create a trust, or learn justice?"

At midnight Batuknath fell asleep. Between sleep and waking he entered a familiar hall—the great chamber of the Bar Council. A high chair, polished table, legal certificates on the wall, rows of advocates, and his own portrait at the rear. But when he tried to sit, the chair became a root. The polish peeled from the table and turned into the wet bark of Channa Grove's cut stump. The certificates became leaves and began to fall. The smell of varnish vanished from the hall; in its place came the bitter smell of wet bark and the mould of old paper.

In the centre of the hall stood a man—neither wholly old nor young; a hard light of reasoning on his face, compassion in his eyes, soil upon his feet. Batuknath tried to recognise him, but the name would not come to his lips. The man himself asked, "Have you learned to hear a name, or only a lineage?" Before Batuknath could answer, a vast book opened before him. The letters were minute, yet within their fineness seemed to rest the weight of twelve thousand pages. Someone whispered within the dream: "Gangesha."

At the sound of Gangesha's name, the hall stirred. Invisible scholars rose; some brought stools of caste, some opened genealogies, some displayed seals of scripture. Gangesha neither laughed nor grew angry. He simply lifted a small grain of dust in his palm and said, "Evidence exists even in this dust, if the eye is not covered by the curtain of lineage."

An old story began entering Batuknath's ears—the birth five years after his father's death, marriage to a woman of the leather-working community, the astonishing composition of the *Tattvacintamani*, the birth of Navya-Nyaya. In the dream these were no longer annotations in a book; they became embodied scenes. A woman whose hands carried the smell of leather-work stood unhesitatingly beside Gangesha. Behind her

the caste order bared its teeth like a dog, but Gangesha did not release her hand.

Batuknath trembled. He had studied law, but this embodied form of justice was unbearable to him. He wanted to say, "Society too has its proprieties." Gangesha cut him off: "If propriety strangles truth, it is not propriety but fear wearing a sacred thread." At those words, all the certificates of honour hanging on the walls became smoke.

Then two shadows entered the dream—the name-shadows of Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha "Ashok." They did not appear as embodied objects of accusation, but as stern editors of memory—pens in hand, a curtain of prestige behind them. They began drawing lines through the inconvenient parts of Gangesha's life: cut the marriage episode, soften the wound of caste, remove the word leather-worker woman, preserve the icon of Navya-Nyaya, suppress the rebellion of the life. The laughter of Channa Grove sounded again. The judge in the dream said, "In the language of this novel, this is an honour killing—not of the body, but of the truth of a life."

Batuknath saw that Gangesha's body had not been killed, yet the truth of his life had been buried under the proprieties of paper. The statue survived; the human being was cut away. Just as Batuknath, while winning cases about names in court, had often killed the human being within the name. He began to understand how often the brightest cloth of honour absorbs blood and makes it invisible.

Now the trial began in the dream court. Batuknath sat in the accused's chair, but his charge-sheet was unusual. Bribery, delay, defence of criminals, techniques of falsehood, misuse of profession—these were not written as separate counts. There was only one charge: "Turning justice into a profession and thereby turning the profession away from justice." He rose to defend himself. His old words came to his tongue—procedure, rights, representation, legal opportunity, lack of evidence. But each word, as soon as it left his mouth, became a dry leaf and fell. The crackle of falling leaves sounded through the hall like someone turning pages of an old file without reading them.

Gangesha asked, "Do you want evidence?" Batuknath felt relief. The language of evidence was his home. "Yes," he said, "there can be no justice without evidence." Then the floor of the court opened. From beneath it rose date after date, adjournment after adjournment, witnesses dying, victims' poverty, widows' sold jewellery, children's interrupted schooling, and the long waiting of old mothers. Gangesha said, "This is perception. What is your inference from it?"

Batuknath was silent. Gangesha said again, "Hear verbal testimony." Then voices rose one by one: the stump of Channa Grove, the submarine, the crying false ghost, the children who guarded names, Meera, Devika,

Gop, Aruni, Ba, and Satyavrat Mehta's silence. They recited no sections of law. They said only: "We are present." Batuknath lowered his head.

To save himself he ran toward the old wall of caste. Suddenly a tall fence rose inside the dream court—Brahmin above, leather-worker below; scripture on one side, labour on the other. Batuknath climbed upon it seeking defence. But the leather-worker woman beside Gangesha reached out and pulled free a bamboo from the fence. The fence shook, then scattered across the whole court. She said, "Justice that fears the touch of a body is not justice; it is washed-and-bathed hypocrisy."

At those words, something broke inside Batuknath. For the first time he saw his own childhood: a separate drinking vessel kept near the well in the courtyard, a child seated outside the schoolroom, his father performing worship, and his mother's low voice—"We will not eat in that house." He understood that his advocacy had not begun in court; it had begun with that vessel at home, whose water was not equally available to everyone.

A girl entered the court—not Ananya, perhaps her shadow. Holding a stone bearing a name, she asked, "Hariharan ji, you want to create a trust. Will Gangesha's leather-worker wife have a place in it?" Batuknath did not answer. The girl asked again, "Will those who never received a name be given the first page?" Batuknath stayed silent. "Will those whose names were suppressed because of caste be treated as principal witnesses?" Batuknath's silence was no longer defence; it had become evidence of guilt.

Then a kabaddi line shone upon the court's ceiling. The ghosts did not enter; they stood at the boundary. Only Budhba's ghost said, "All your life you kept putting others out. Today hold your breath and cross justice's court once." Batuknath tried to say "kabaddi." The first syllable came out, but the rest did not. His breath caught. He fell.

Gangesha did not lift him. He said, "In justice, the work of rising must be done by oneself. But the first condition is this: step down from the throne of your lineage." Batuknath saw all the titles attached to his name—Senior, Chairman, Scholar, Patron—fall away one by one. In the end only "Batuk" remained, a frightened child. The child began to cry.

In the midst of that weeping he awoke. The first light of dawn was entering through the window. Batuknath's palm was wet with sweat and his mouth held the stale bitterness of night, as though he had returned after losing a case. The draft of the People's Memory Trust lay on the table. Astonishingly, its headings had changed. Where he had written "Chairman," the ink now read: "Not First Servant, but Last Listener." Where he had written "Fund," it said: "The watch over names remains in children's hands." Where he had written "Property," the words shone: "Memory is not for sale."

With trembling hands Batuknath folded the draft. His old cunning had not withered away, but for the first time a crack had appeared in it. He could have dismissed the dream as indigestion, fear or village madness. But Gangesha's question remained lodged in his ear: "Will you create a trust, or learn justice?"

That day Batuknath did not go to Channa Grove. He remained in his room and, for the first time, opened the cupboard in his office. Inside were old case files, fee receipts, adjournment notes and people's letters. Among them he found a small slip of paper: an old note bearing Chandrapal Batra's name. It contained only three words: "Memorial app secured." Batuknath understood—the court inside him was now leaving him and descending into the mind of the next guilty man.

That night, when the stump of Channa Grove laughed again, the laughter did not stop at Batuknath's house. It climbed an invisible wire and entered Chandrapal Batra's screen.

FOLK SONG: THE COURT THAT CONVENED IN A DREAM

Folk tune: dream viraha

The court convened, the dream court convened;

The laughter of those suppressed came asking to be recognised.

The widow's weeping, the poor man's plea, the child's question laughed;

All that Batuk had taken for mockery sat in the court.

Gangesha's question: will you create a trust, or learn justice?

Open the cupboard and recognise the old sins.

Adjournment notes, fee receipts, Chandrapal's slip;

"Memorial app secured"—a deceitful scrap.

Laughter climbed the wire and reached the next screen;

A new hearing began in the mind of the man of percentages.

The dream court does not leave the waking soul;

The laughter of the suppressed returns demanding recognition.

All that Batuk had taken for mockery sat upon the seats.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE CROW AND A FRIEND'S
SON: *A black crow was sitting in the courtyard.*]

CHAPTER 74

Chandrapal's First Confession

The first confession is always made alone—the crowd applauds only later.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A BEGINNING THROUGH
CONFESSION**

Folk tune: solitary song of hope

*Say it softly, say "I was wrong";
Take these words in the closed room as a seed of dawn.*

*The first confession is born quietly in a closed room;
As soon as "I was wrong" is spoken, the hard heart begins to soften.*

*Confession is not the end, only the first step toward repair;
Speak the true names, make proper restitution for the harm.*

*Fearless self-examination frees the mind;
Taking full responsibility for the wrong can awaken trust again.
A beginning through confession—the road may be long;
One honest step keeps the future from remaining dark.*

*As the hard chest softened, the first crack opened;
Through that crack slipped a thin ray of light.
Confession is not the destination, only the name of the first step;
Repair the harm, speak the names—only then is the work complete.*



"The turn of the man of percentages"—this unwritten notice in the stump's laughter had found its destination by morning. The night of Batuknath Hariharan's dream court had passed, but its dust had not settled on his head alone. The laughter that once rose from the stump of Channa Grove had travelled through the air. It had entered Delhi's files, Hong Kong's glass towers, Patna's offices, Meerut's falsehoods, and even Chandrapal Batra's mobile phone. At first Chandrapal thought it was

ordinary anxiety; then he realised it was not anxiety at all, but an invisible finger writing names across the screen of his soul.

All his life Chandrapal Batra had avoided names. To him people were numbers—earnings per person, deception per click, extraction per fear, flow per account. He never wanted to know whose home, whose mother, whose roof, whose debt, whose beating heart stood behind a screen. He called them “the crowd”; once a person becomes a crowd, the face of the crime blurs. But there was no crowd now in Garh Narikel. There were stones bearing names, and every stone seemed to be looking at him.

That night Chandrapal sat alone in his room. On the glass table were three phones, two watches, a bottle of imported liquor and the fragrance of counterfeit calm. He opened a phone. The figures from the tribute app appeared again—how many viewed, how many clicked, how many donated, how many engaged, how many were frightened. His finger tried to move with its old cunning, but every line on the screen began turning into a name: “Ujjwal Jha”; “Munna Paswan”; “Saryu”; “the one who never received a name”; “the silence of the unmarried mother”; “the patient’s breath”; “the labourer’s feet.”

Chandrapal switched off the phone. The names continued to appear—on the surface of the glass table, inside the liquid in the bottle, between the hands of the watch, upon the windowpane. He opened the window. Outside was the city night—no river, no Channa Grove, no stump. Yet the city night too had a sound like water: a siren somewhere, a dog somewhere, a motor somewhere, the cough of a tired human being somewhere. Even in the cold air-conditioned room his temples throbbed with heat. For the first time he felt that a city too is made of names; only there the names are covered by advertising lights.

He held his head and sat. His crimes began returning to memory—but not all at once. A guilty soul does not suddenly see the whole truth; first it sees its own fear. Chandrapal feared that if every name recognised him, what would happen to his wealth? His passport? His contacts? His prestige? This was not confession, but self-preservation. Yet the first tremor of fear can sometimes be the first door to truth.

He told himself, “I never killed anyone.” The sentence had protected him for years. When someone was cheated, he said: I never touched them. When someone was frightened, he said: I was only a medium. When someone’s home was ruined, he said: business involves risk. When someone’s spirit broke, he said: that person was weak. That night the sentence split open. From inside came a voice: “If you did not touch them, who tied the rope of fear?”

A shiver ran through Chandrapal’s body. He went to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. It was his face, but the eyes belonged to those he had called “users”: one eye Ujjwal’s, one a labourer’s, one a

widow's, one a child's from the leatherworkers' quarter, one the woman's whose privacy had been sold, one the young man trapped in debt trying to save his father. The mirror became many-eyed. Chandrapal screamed.

There was no courage in that scream. It was the first terror of a man-eater discovering that the eyes of those he had devoured have remained inside his own body. Chandrapal sat down on the floor. Sweat ran from his nose. For the first time he did not think about how to manage papers, erase records or bring in a lawyer. He repeated only one sentence: "I did not see the names. I did not see the names."

By dawn, not through a clear decision but in a state broken by exhaustion, he set out for Garh Narikel. Chandrapal Batra, who normally worked through gleaming cars, security and distance, reached the cut stump of Channa Grove this time in an old car, without fanfare. His driver asked, "Sir, shall we get out?" Chandrapal did not answer. He sat in the car for a long time. Outside, the children were keeping watch over the names around the stump. Someone recognised him, but no one shouted.

That silence frightened him most. If people had cursed him, chased him or rushed to strike him, he could have invented a story about his own side. But here they watched, listened and waited. This waiting had none of the indifference of a court date; it had the patience of a seed in a field. Chandrapal stepped out of the car. His shoe touched the dust of the cut roots. The dust settled on the expensive leather. He bent instinctively to brush it away, then stopped his hand. In the village morning the air carried the smell of cow-dung-plastered courtyards and damp straw—a smell that had never appeared in any of his budget sheets.

That day Ananya raised her head from the register. "Will you read the names?" she asked. Chandrapal's throat was dry. His tongue tasted of iron, and his own voice sounded to him like someone else's. "I... I came to say something," he said. Ananya asked calmly, "In whose name?" Chandrapal did not understand. "My name is Chandrapal Batra." She asked again, "Your birth name, or your business name?" The question entered his chest like one of Gangesha's arguments.

In Chandrapal's mind flashed that room in Meerut where he had built a false dignity out of titles, contacts, qualifications and prestige. His true birth name had been left behind in a lane at home, in his mother's voice, his father's bitter labour and the dust of shame. Slowly he said, "Chandu." No one gasped. The children wrote in the register: "Chandu alias Chandrapal Batra—birth name spoken for the first time."

There was punishment in that writing. The expensive name of the guilty man broke and returned to the vulnerable name of his childhood. Chandrapal's eyes filled, but the tears were not yet trustworthy. Meera stood nearby. "Weeping is not evidence," she said. "Speak truth with the

names.” Chandrapal lowered his head. He knew he could not yet tell the whole crime; he had not emerged from his fear. But what he could say was enough to open the first crack.

He said, “I did not treat people as people. Behind the screen I saw only a crowd. I turned fear into a product. I opened routes for donations through the names of the dead. A mother cried, and I turned her tears into data. A young man broke, and I called his breaking engagement. I did not personally hate anyone—and perhaps that is why it became the greatest crime. If I had hated them, I might at least have looked at their faces. I did not make the effort to see a face.”

The people listening remained silent. No one said “forgive him.” No one shouted “aren’t you ashamed?” Garh Narikel had moved beyond the old noise of accusation. Here a statement was heard in full and then its weight placed upon the stones of names. Devika asked, “What was earned through Ujjwal’s name?” Chandrapal trembled. He took a paper from his pocket. “The accounts are here,” he said.

Devika took the paper but did not read it immediately. She looked toward the ring of stones. “Accounts are not equal to names,” she said, “but without accounts the next struggle will remain incomplete.” To Chandrapal the sentence felt not like forgiveness but an order to work. He understood that the first day of confession was not the end of justice but its beginning. Money, routes, accomplices, documents, lies—everything would have to be exposed. Fear would bear fruit only if it became labour before the names.

Batuknath’s dream court, Gangesha’s question, the procession of false ghosts, the laughter of Channa Grove—all entered Chandrapal at that moment. He felt he was sitting not merely around a stump but before Navya-Nyaya as witness. Perception: he was a fraudster. Inference: he was part of a network. Testimony: he was called a businessman. Analogy: like a crocodile, he chewed through names. But the conclusion? The conclusion had yet to be written.

At evening he remained seated beside the stones. No one offered him food; no one sent him away. The children kept reading names. At each name his body bent a little further. After dark he suddenly took out his phone. He wanted to send a message to Raghav “Signal” Somani: “Stop. Things have changed.” He wrote, erased, then wrote again: “The names have risen.” He pressed Send.

The icon on the phone kept spinning. One dot, two dots, three. Then the screen said: “No connection.” Chandrapal stared. There was network here. Everyone else’s phones worked. He tried again. This time, instead of ordinary letters, a faint leaf-script appeared: “Where names are heard, code does not arrive.”

Chandrapal's hand went numb. Somewhere far away Raghav too must be looking at his device, he thought. A little air rose from inside the stump. Chandrapal understood: his confession would not remain limited to him. Raghav's turn was next, but in Raghav's world there would be no network now; only memory would operate.

The stump of Channa Grove fell silent again that night. But its silence carried a clear message: the first confession is not the end of punishment, only the latch of a door. Beyond that door sat Raghav Signal without a network.

FOLK SONG: THE FIRST CONFESSION

Folk tune: solitary song of sorrow

The door has opened, opened with one true word;

Confession is not the end of punishment—it is only the latch.

The first confession is not made in a crowd, but in a closed room;

As the letters are written, the hand trembles and the body weeps sweat.

Chandrapal saw his own share beyond the names;

He tried to send the code, but the screen said: connection lost.

Where names are heard, code no longer works;

Leaf-script slowly opens the lock within.

Confession is not the end of punishment, only the latch;

Beyond it Raghav, without a network, looks into his own chest.

One true word was spoken, and today the door opened;

Now the community of names will climb into the next mind.

As the letters are written, the hand trembles and the body weeps sweat.

Where names are heard, code does not work again.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—RAMA IN THE HOSPITAL: *In the hospital waiting room Rama's body was unnaturally hot. Example: whoever has a body this hot, like a fevered patient in a hospital, is ill.*]

CHAPTER 75

Raghav Signal Without a Network

*Surrounded by every kind of network and yet left alone, he understood:
a network is made not of wires, but of trust.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE NET OF TRUST

Folk tune: youth Jat-Jatin

Weave the net, weave the net of trust;

Hear the song of companionship like the pair Jat and Jatin.

Even with four bars of signal, companionship is still needed;

A network of trust completes the human chain.

A friend's phone, a family's ear, a help centre;

In crisis, one click can connect you to a safe centre.

Let the password be private, but the relationship stay open;

There is no shame in asking for help; it is an act of courage.

If the net of trust is strong, the fraudster's net will tear;

With one another beside us, the digital night can be crossed.

One knot of friendship, one cord of family;

One from a help centre—tie all three knots together.

To cast off shame and reach out a hand is a sign of courage;

The fraudster's net tears where voices are joined.



Beyond that door—in a glass room in the city—sat Raghav, who possessed everything except reach. For the first time in his life, Raghav “Signal” Somani felt that the greatest deprivation in the world was not money, power, access or cunning, but network. All day he stared at his phone. Four bars showed. Data moved. Message icons turned green. Yet whatever he sent reached no one. The phone said “sent”; his mind said “not delivered.” That lie between the two clung to him like dust on the cut stump of Channa Grove.

He was never truly a man of technology; he was a broker of fear. His art lay in never writing the whole truth, never speaking the whole lie,

and leaving between the two a signal that allowed every criminal to think him one of their own. He lived in disappearing messages, vanishing rooms, half-spoken voices, half-read contracts and the smoke of percentages. But now the art of vanishing had turned against him. The messages were not disappearing; they were not even being born.

News of Chandrapal's first confession had reached him in the night—not by phone, not through a person, but through unease. When someone sees the first crack in his own crime, the tremor travels far through a criminal network. Raghav thought: “Chandrapal is breaking. Batuknath has been shaken from within. Broom is cautious. Lau Kin-Hung is silent. At a time like this, messages must be sent.” But every signal he tried to send snagged on an invisible thorn.

The first message went to Batuknath Hariharan: “Stop the trust proposal immediately. The children are out of control.” As soon as he sent it, two grey ticks appeared, but never turned blue. The second message went to Chandrapal: “Do not make the confession public. Change the narrative.” That too stalled. The third went to Broom's aide: “The ghost-procession incident is not weak; it is dangerous.” That too stalled. Finally, to Lau Kin-Hung's secure address he sent only two words: “Names spreading.” The phone trembled, then went still.

Raghav tried to laugh. He was alone in his room. Around him were expensive curtains, soundproof walls, an imported clock, a glass table and an air purifier. Outside, the city's traffic roared; inside there was only the machine's low hum. The hum was like a fly trapped inside a closed vessel—almost nothing to hear, yet impossible to remove from the ear. He thought there must be a service outage. He picked up a second phone. Then a third. Then a small old device kept only for emergencies. All showed the same condition: full network, zero reach.

Then he remembered the procession of false ghosts at Channa Grove. His report had called it “emotional risk.” But the real risk had not been emotion. The risk was that people were abandoning the language of signals and returning to the language of names. A criminal network runs on signals; society runs on names. The more secret the signal, the more useful. The clearer the name, the freer it becomes. For the first time Raghav understood that Channa Grove was not attacking his profession; it was attacking the language of his existence.

The night grew deep. He switched off his phone. But in the black screen of the dead phone he saw not his face but the roots of the cut stump. Raghav jerked upright. The screen was black again. He rubbed his eyes. Then movement appeared in the glass—leaves were sprouting one by one. On them were not words but names. Ujjwal. Saryu. Munna. The incomplete name of a labourer. The name of a woman removed from a pension list. The name of a body held in a hospital corridor. The name of the first young man deceived by Chandrapal. Names became leaves until

the screen was full. Beneath his fingers, smooth glass suddenly felt as rough as bark—the touch of a tree in a polished device.

He tried in fear to throw the phone away, but it clung to his palm. For years he had held other people's lives as data; today the names were holding his hand. A voice came from inside the phone: "Before sending a message, you used to choose the recipient. Now the names will choose their recipients." Raghav's throat dried. He rose to drink water, but circular ripples were moving across the glass, as if someone far away beside the stump of Channa Grove were throwing pebbles.

He took out his old notebook. Very few people knew that even while living inside digital networks, Raghav kept his private accounts on paper. Paper felt trustworthy to him because it did not make copies of itself automatically. He opened the notebook—code names, dates, percentages, brokerage, donations, tributes, advice, trusts, consultations. Every line was a blow of profit. But as he read, the word "percentage" on each line began changing into "pledge." What had been a share of money became the burden of a promise.

At that exact time, children were keeping night watch at Channa Grove. Ananya said, "Tonight signals will be stopped." A boy asked, "How can a signal be stopped?" Ananya placed her hand on the green point of the stump. "The path of any language that refuses to take names will be blocked." The children sat in a circle and began the breath of kabaddi—slow, long and unbroken. They did not chant "kabaddi-kabaddi." They kept saying, "Present-present."

No instrument could prove whether the rhythm of "present" reached the city. But at that moment Raghav's phone vibrated. A message appeared. Sender: Unknown. Subject: Present. Inside there was only blank space. Raghav kept reading the blank. Within it he heard many of his own sentences: "I am only a messenger." "I did nothing." "I advised; I did not order." "It wasn't profit, only a fee." Each sentence broke apart as soon as it entered the blank space.

He immediately began typing a reply: "Please identify yourself." The phone wrote: "It is you who need identification." He erased it. Then he wrote: "This is an unlawful intrusion." The phone wrote: "The intrusion was what you did in the house of names." He trembled. Technology was no longer under his control. Language itself had begun to testify against him.

A dog barked outside. The curtain moved. Suddenly the air-conditioned room filled with the smell of wet soil. Raghav understood: the stump of Channa Grove, which he had treated as a limited village problem, had entered his glass room in the city. He would not be able to stop it, because the stump had entered not through the door but through silence.

He told himself, “The criminals are becoming emotional. I must remain steady.” He sat at the table, removed every phone battery, unplugged the wires and opened the window. Night air came through the curtain. Far away, among the city’s thousand lights, he saw a dark shape—neither tree nor tower, but something between the two. It seemed that all the network towers of the city had become cut branches of Channa Grove. Every wire was searching for a root.

That night for the first time Raghav began to think without writing. If a message cannot go out, what does a human being hear within himself? If no reply comes, whom can he blame? If the means of disappearing stop working, where can the face of a crime hide? The questions circled inside him like a kabaddi player holding his breath and running through his chest.

At Channa Grove, Budhba’s ghost was sitting quietly beside the children’s circle. He said softly, “A network breaks where a lie asks for passage.” One child asked, “And the network of truth?” Budhba’s ghost smiled. “Truth does not need a network. It needs relationships.” Ananya wrote the sentence in the register.

Just before dawn, all of Raghav’s phones lit up at once. He thought the messages had finally gone through. But there were no replies on the screens, only a map. Garh Narikel, Channa Grove, the stump, the river, the bridge, the hospital, the court, the tribute app, the stage of the ghost procession and his city room were all joined by a single line. Above the line were the words: “Network of Memory.” Raghav tried to close it. The map would not close.

A new point flashed on the map: “Lau Kin-Hung.” Raghav’s heart lurched. The name he had always protected had lit up by itself. He understood that this was not merely a hallucination on a phone. The most distant link in the criminal network was now entering the circle of the watch over names.

Raghav rose from the chair and went to the window. The pale light before sunrise was spreading across the city’s smoke. Along with the smell of burnt diesel, the morning air carried the scent of some faraway wet tree—city and village in one breath. Softly, without phone, code or signal, he spoke the full name for the first time: “Lau Kin-Hung.” As the words left his mouth, the room grew lighter, but his body grew heavy. Speaking a name was not liberation; it was the first frightening step toward it.

At that very moment in Channa Grove, Ananya closed the register and said, “Today a distant name moved.” The children asked, “What now?” Ananya looked at the green point on the stump. During the night it had lengthened a little. She said, “Now not a network, but a road will open.”

FOLK SONG: THE NETWORK OF TRUST

Folk tune: youth viraha

*Let trust remain—let the wired network break, trust remain;
The one who speaks a true name will flow all the way to the soil.*

*Four bars on the phone, yet no message anywhere;
Every network running, but not a thread of trust remained.
Without signals, Raghav spoke the name for the first time;
As “Lau Kin-Hung” was uttered, the room grew light.
The body heavy, the tongue empty, a step of fear arose;*

*Speaking the name was not liberation—the road toward liberation
opened.*

Garh Narikel said: a distant name has moved;

No network now—the road will open.

*Let the wired network break; let the network of trust remain;
One who speaks a true name will one day flow all the way to the soil.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE POTTER’S WHEEL: AGENT, POWER AND LIBERATION: Outside the village the potter’s wheel was turning. The clay was slowly taking the form of a pot.]

CHAPTER 76

Lau Kin-Hung's Journey to India

*Even one who crosses the sea comes ashore at the same ghat where the
water bearing his name stands waiting.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: COMPANIONSHIP ACROSS
THE SEA**

Folk tune: traveller's song

Come, traveller, come across the sea;

*Carry the speech of home in your chest and let the world's knowledge
burn bright.*

*The traveller across the sea looks upon the same moon;
He keeps the name of home and his mother's speech within his heart.*

*Make companions in a distant country, practise verification;
Let migrants know their rights too, and share the love of common
safety.*

*Language may differ, law may differ, human dignity is equal;
Trust joined with caution—there lies well-being.*

*Companionship across the sea builds a bridge over distance;
The scent of home and the knowledge of the world can flourish
together.*

*In every lane abroad, keep a companion for verification;
Carry the book of rights at your side, the lamp of caution in hand.
Language different, rules different, human beings equally human;
Build the bridge of companionship, and distance will admit defeat.*



The shadow that had turned its face toward Mithila was now beginning to take bodily form. Raghav Signal's night without a network travelled all the way to Lau Kin-Hung's city. The message did not arrive, but news of its failure to arrive did. Seated on the twenty-second floor of a vast glass building, Lau kept looking at small images of Garh Narikel

spread across the screens before him—the cut Channa Grove, stones bearing names around the stump, the children's register, the failure of the false-ghost procession, and Chandrapal's blurred face. The screens held pictures and data, yet for the first time Lau felt that the data were silent while the pictures were watching him.

His office opened toward the sea. Below moved lines of ships, lights, cargo, insurance, contracts, loans, medicines, tools, labour, organs, data—all parts of the world's currents. Lau took pride in those currents. To him the world was not a map but a route; human beings not faces but numbers; countries not borders but opportunities. But the stump of Garh Narikel was appearing on his map not as a profitable point but as a stubborn black stain.

His advisers came that night. One said, "It is local emotional resistance; it will settle with time." Another said, "Increase donations to the heritage project; acquire a local institution." A third said, "Offer to secure the records of names digitally; then control will come into our hands." Lau listened but gave no answer. He was beginning to understand that the problem was neither merely emotional nor merely linguistic. The problem was that in that village the names had learned how to remain alive.

When he slept that night, a long river came in a dream. Crocodiles swam in the water. They were not chewing bodies; they were chewing papers, contracts, confidential annexures, donation deeds, pages of undeclared accounts and reports by foreign advisers. Lau tried to run, but his feet were sinking not into the glass floor but into mud. One crocodile opened its mouth and asked, "In which water is your name written?" Lau woke. Sweat lay on his forehead, though the air-conditioner was running and the sea glittered far away.

By morning he decided to travel to India. Publicly the journey was described as a review of "cultural and rehabilitation investment." Privately it was an inquiry into Raghav's broken network, Chandrapal's cracked confession, Batuknath's dream court and Edward Broom's failed donation. In truth—though Lau did not admit it even to himself—it was the pull of a knot hanging in his own mind.

Before departure, a folder was placed upon his desk. Its title was: "Garh Narikel: Risk and Opportunity." Inside were lists of names, family conditions, political connections, local caste lines, religious places, the bridge project, heritage beautification, legal routes and possible resistance. Lau turned the pages. Suddenly his eyes stopped on one word: "Gangesha." The note read: "Local philosophical symbol; Navya-Nyaya; caste controversy; use in memory politics." Lau tried to smile, but the smile stopped midway. He thought: even a philosopher has now entered the risk table.

On the aircraft he was given a first-class corner seat. He sat by the window. The city's glass towers, the sea, bridges, harbour and ships grew small. As the aircraft entered the clouds, for one moment it seemed to him that rising above the earth was easy. Pressure changed inside his ears; a fine whistle sounded and fell silent—like a referee's whistle somewhere far away. The rich, companies, criminal networks, capital—all live inside the illusion that height makes sin look small. But once the aircraft steadied among the clouds, Lau heard from afar the chant “kabaddi-kabaddi.”

He covered his ears. The sound did not stop. The passengers were quiet inside the aircraft. An attendant was serving drinks. The route shone on the screen. But the chant remained—breath held, rhythmic, stubborn. Lau felt as though a child were running along the wing. He closed his eyes. In darkness he saw the cut stump of Channa Grove, the green point and the ring of stones.

For the first time he remembered his childhood, a memory he had long ago removed from the accounts of his life: a small harbour, damp lanes, his father's little shop, the smell of fish, fear of debt, and one day his father's bent back before a wealthy trader. Lau had thought: one day I will not bend; everyone will bend before me. He had never thought that the revenge for bending could become a business of erasing other people's names.

An elderly Indian passenger beside him was reading a Maithili newspaper. Lau did not understand Maithili, but the letters looked to him like waves on water. The old man glanced at him and tried to speak English, then stopped himself, smiled and showed him one corner of the paper. There was a small item: “Festival of Names in Garh Narikel.” Lau could not read the words, but in the photograph he saw children around a stump. Without thinking, he asked, “This place?” The old man said, “The names of the dead live there.”

Something cold moved inside Lau. He wanted to say, “Names can live on a server too.” But in the old man's eyes the sentence would have sounded ridiculous. The old man said again, “And if the server shuts down?” Lau startled. Had his thought been read? The old man folded the newspaper. “Paper too can burn,” he said. “But once children have heard a name, its second life begins.”

During the journey Lau fell asleep. This time he was not inside an aircraft but walking within the stump of Channa Grove. The passage inside was circular, damp and filled with countless lines. On every line was an argument, behind every argument a life, behind every life an exclusion. A voice in the distance asked, “Would you like to see the evidence?” Lau turned. A figure stood there, neither old nor young, neither scholar nor ghost, holding a jewel-like light in one hand. It gave no name, yet Lau understood that this was Gangesha's question.

The figure asked, "What is the evidence of profit?" Lau said, "Numbers." The figure asked, "What is the evidence of numbers?" Lau said, "Accounts." The figure asked, "What is the evidence of accounts?" Lau fell silent. The figure said, "How will you count the loss of one who has no name?" Lau searched for an answer, but on the walls of the passage thousands upon thousands of leaves opened. Like twelve thousand subtle lines of the Tattvacintamani, every line said: without justice, the counting of names is blind.

Lau awoke. The aircraft had entered Indian airspace. The captain's voice sounded. Through gaps in the clouds below, a web of rivers was visible. For the first time India did not look to him like a market, but like a vast memory written in lines of water. He wondered: how has this country survived after losing so many times? Perhaps because names are never completely destroyed here. They return in people's stories, caste, sin, resistance, gods, abuse, songs, graves, ghats, marriages, exclusions, justice and injustice—in one form or another.

Before landing in Delhi, his aide sent a message: "There will be press questions on arrival; please use the words rehabilitation, donation, partnership, sustainability and culture." Lau read it. Each word felt like a polished stone that could sink into water yet never reach the roots. He did not reply. He wrote only: "I will go to Garh Narikel." The aide immediately responded: "Capital meetings first." Lau switched off the screen.

The aircraft landed. The instant the wheels touched the runway, Lau heard the "kabaddi" chant again. This time it was not far away; it was beneath his feet. As though the runway were a line in a game, and the aircraft a raider that had crossed it. Lau involuntarily held his breath. He laughed—at himself, at his fear. But the laugh stuck in his throat.

Walking through the glass corridor of the airport, he saw his reflection. At first it showed a disciplined, cold face in a suit. Then the light changed. In the reflection his eyes were no longer his. He blinked and saw, within the glass, the long body of a crocodile. Its mouth was closed, its eyes open. It was neither eating him nor frightening him. It was simply watching, as though asking: "Have you brought a name with you, or only nameless profit?"

At immigration, the officer turned over his passport and read the name: Lau Kin-Hung. A stamp came down. On paper, entry had been granted. But Lau felt that his real entry into India had not yet happened. It would happen on the day the children of Garh Narikel asked him: "What is the evidence of your name? Whose blood lies within your profit? Whom does the memory you came to buy belong to?"

Outside, the media were waiting. Flashes burst. His aides advanced with rehearsed smiles. But Lau's eyes stayed on the crocodile caught in the

glass. The creature inside the glass moved slowly as if swimming without water. In that moment he understood: Garh Narikel was not the destination of his journey; it was the doorway to a hearing within him.

He stepped out of the airport. Hot air, dust, the smell of fuel, tea, sweat, announcements, taxi drivers' calls—all surrounded him at once. The cool glass world broke. In the first breath, heat went down into his chest and the cloth of his suit clung to his body—the remembered cold of the twenty-second floor melted in a single moment. He told his interpreter, "Straight to Garh Narikel." The interpreter stared. "Today?" Lau replied, "The longer I delay, the crocodile will not blink."

The interpreter did not understand the sentence. But far behind them, in the airport glass, the crocodile's eye truly blinked.

FOLK SONG: THE TRAVELLER FROM ACROSS THE SEA

Folk tune: traveller's song

The feet search, the feet search for soil;

For one whose name is in the river, the road itself calls.

One from across the sea also lands at that same ghat;

Where the water bearing his name stands with eyes open.

From the glass twenty-second floor the village looked small;

In the hot dust of the airport, the empire melted.

The interpreter asked: will we go to the village today itself?

Lau said: if we delay, the crocodile will not blink.

The journey is not a destination, but the door of an inner hearing;

Wealth, country and passport all remained outside.

The feet from across the sea search for Mithila's soil;

For one whose name is in the river, the road speaks by itself.

The interpreter asked: shall we go to the village today itself?

“If we delay, the crocodile will not blink”—came the answer.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE JEWEL AND FIRE: *A tantric was famous for a jewel said to prevent fire from burning a hand brought near it. The fire burned, the hand approached, yet no burning occurred—so the tale says.*]

CHAPTER 77

The Crocodile at the Airport

*The city's light is sold in the airport glass, but the crocodile's eye can be
seen for free.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CLEAN GLASS, CLEAR EYES

Folk tune: city dawn-song

Awake, O city, wipe the glass and awake;

Keep the heart transparent along with the pane.

*Let the glass walls shine and the mind within be clean;
Not the crocodile's eye, but compassion's gaze be forgiven and seen.
Let profit's glass be transparent, let labour's names appear;
Let the city's brightness never hide the village's right.*

*Open the window, let the wind come, let the people read the accounts;
Let institutions see their own deeds in the mirror and learn.
Clean glass, clear eyes—let the city stand by this rule;
Let the bright light of human dignity remain immortal.*

*However high the towers rise, labour's name lies in the root;
Let the window of accounts stay open for ordinary people to read.
Not the crocodile's cold stare, but compassion's morning gaze;
Let the city's creation shine while guarding the village's rights.*



The first step through the door opened by that blinking crocodile's eye lay inside the airport itself. Lau Kin-Hung's plane landed between night and dawn. City lights spread across the airport glass as though the sky had sold all its stars and put up advertisements on earth. People streamed out of the aircraft's belly—some tired, some excited, some pulling passports from bags, some watching their next message on a phone screen. Lau Kin-Hung came out last. His stride had the restraint of a businessman, but inwardly his mind had remained suspended since the moment he had dreamed of the cut stump in Channa Grove inside a glass tower in Hong Kong.

The instant he set his first foot on Indian soil, he caught a smell—spices, diesel, dampness, sweat, wet cloth, and from somewhere far away, earth. It cut through the airport's chilled air and entered him. Lau wrinkled his nose, treating it as a "local inconvenience," but his mind immediately said: there are names in this smell. The country he had viewed only as tables, markets, risks, labour costs and litigation management made its first direct appearance through his nose.

There was a long queue in the arrivals hall. Announcements echoed back from the high ceiling as though words had forgotten their sentences. Face-matching lights flashed at the digital gate. Lau's passport, investor identification and special permissions were all in order. He trusted that systems recognised the language of money. But when he stood before the glass frame, instead of a green beam the machine cast a blue-yellow flicker across his face. For a few moments, a crocodile's eye appeared on the screen in place of his face—still, wet, ancient, illiterate, yet seeing everything.

The officer did not seem startled; perhaps he saw only a technical error on the screen. Smiling, he said, "Please look again." Lau faced the camera once more. This time his face matched, the stamp was given, and the gate opened. Yet as he passed the line of glass, he felt the crocodile's eye moving with him. Glass, floor, steel railing, duty-free showcases—everywhere, for a moment, that same eye flashed.

He told his assistant, "The machines in this country are not right." The assistant, who had already been staying in Delhi, replied softly, "The machines are fine, sir. Here, sometimes, reflections show more than expected." The sentence unsettled Lau. In his commercial world, reflection had no value; value lay in real assets, contracts, accounts, control, data, and ways of avoiding litigation. But in the world of Channa Grove, even a reflection could become a witness.

Inside the airport, enormous billboards glowed. One read: "New Future, New Habitat, Safe Life Beyond Earth." The picture showed shining domes, artificial gardens, a metallic river, and smiling children. Lau had once been an indirect investor in projects of that kind. He believed that the older, more indebted, polluted, litigious and memory-burdened Earth became, the more readily the future could be sold in the name of another planet. But in the glass of the billboard's gleaming dome, he again saw the crocodile's eye. It was as though Earth were saying: whoever wants to chew my body and flee will need names even on an imaginary nameless planet.

Lau's assistant led him to the special guest lounge. There was the smell of coffee, soft sofas, quiet music and a muted news screen. The news showed Channa Grove in Garh Narikel, the cut stump, the Festival of Names, the Procession of the False Ghost, and debate over the heritage project. He could not hear the words, but he watched the images.

Children were placing stones around the stump. In their eyes he saw no investment opportunity, only a strange obstruction.

He asked, "Were these children not removed?" The assistant said, "They can be removed, but once removed they spread to more places." Lau did not understand. In his experience, obstacles were removed—by buying, frightening, filing cases, promising employment, or altering data. But once memory reaches children's hands, from how many hands can it be removed? His business education had never taught that question.

A message from Batuknath Hariharan arrived in the lounge: "A route is available for containing local sentiment within a statutory trust." Chandrapal's message came: "The Tribute App framework is secure; only public-emotion management is needed." Raghav Signal sent a coded note: "New code active; risk emotional." Lau kept reading. All three messages said the same thing—memory could be made into an object again. Yet behind the letters on his screen, he saw crocodile teeth.

He filled a glass with water. It was perfectly clear, packaged and chilled. As he was about to drink, he saw river water in the bottom of the glass—thick, green-black, moving. He set it down. The assistant asked, "Are you unwell?" Lau said, "Does water in this country carry the past too?" The assistant remained silent. There was no commercial answer to that question.

After a while, the glass door opened. An elderly cleaner entered and silently began collecting empty cups. The edge of his dhoti was wet, as though he had crossed a river, although the airport floor was dry and gleaming. Lau watched him. The cleaner paused for a moment and said, "Sir, think of a name when you drink water, and the water will remain clean." Lau stared. The assistant was about to rebuke him, but the old man laughed and walked away.

Lau asked after him, "Who was that?" The assistant could not find the employee's name on his list. There was no entry in the lounge register either. The elderly man did not appear on the security camera. Only the water in the glass on the table rippled for a few moments. Lau felt the first clear fear enter him: here even nameless people could appear, yet not be in the record. And what was not in the record could still speak a sentence.

When he came out of the airport, a black car was waiting for him. A name was written on the driver's badge, but the instant the driver saw Lau, his eyes became still for a moment like the stones around the stump in Channa Grove. The driver asked, "Garh Narikel?" Lau started. Garh Narikel was not public on that day's itinerary. He was only supposed to meet advisers in Delhi, then attend a secret conference. The assistant immediately said, "No, the hotel first." Watching the rear-view mirror, the driver smiled. "Every road ends there in the end."

The car moved. Elevated roads, shining malls, advertisements, smoke, red lights, the edges of slums, Metro pillars and the airport wall fell behind. Lau kept looking through the glass. In every drain he saw the winding shadow of a river, at every turn a crocodile's tail, in every half-built structure the pier of the bridge beneath which workers' names had vanished. He told himself it was an illusion. But when an illusion repeats the same story again and again, does it not become evidence for an inference? The language of Gangesha's logic was entering him without his ever having studied it.

The hotel room was made of glass and marble. The instant his bare feet touched the floor, the marble's coldness climbed from heel to head—a chill not from beneath a river but from the absence of memory. There was less earth there, more comfort. Lau took off his shoes and stood by the window. City lights crawled below. They no longer seemed like phone signals; they looked like eyes shining in water. He drew the curtain. But a shadow formed upon it—a long crocodile, its mouth turned not toward the city but toward him.

He could not sleep that night. After a while, he dreamed he was again standing at the airport arrivals gate. There were no officers; the children from the stump sat in a row. Instead of a passport, he held a profit-and-loss account. Ananya asked, "Name?" He answered, "Lau Kin-Hung." The children said, "That is the market's name. Your real name?" He fell silent. Then the crocodile moved forward. Its teeth gleamed, but it did not spring upon his body. It began chewing the account. Page after page was eaten, and from each page rose the voice of a worker, a cheated young man, a nameless woman.

When he woke, the first grey line of dawn stood behind the glass. A message glowed on his phone. It was not from Satyavrat Mehta, nor from any assistant; it contained only one sentence: "If you want to hear the names, come." Below was a location—not a court, ministry or boardroom, only: "Empty waiting hall on the old airport road."

Lau tried to delete the message. His finger moved across the screen, but it would not disappear. He switched off the phone, and the sentence appeared on the glass window. He drew the curtain aside and saw the sentence written in the city's haze. He closed his eyes and heard it within. He understood: this was not an invitation but pursuing testimony.

By afternoon Lau Kin-Hung decided he would go. He told himself: I will go, see, bargain, take control. But beneath that decision trembled something else—perhaps for the first time he was going to meet someone who would put aside his wealth, nationality, passport and language and read only his name.

Thus the crocodile at the airport did not chew Lau's body; it stripped off the first skin of his sense of security. He had arrived in India as a

businessman, but as he moved toward the waiting hall his shadow belonged to a man who could no longer flee his own reflection. In the next breath Satyavrat Mehta would be before him—without a weapon, without the thunder of office, carrying only the weight of names.

FOLK SONG: THE CROCODILE'S EYE IN THE GLASS

Folk tune: city lament

Speak, O eye, you do not lie;

One whose shadow is guilty—where can he live away from himself?

City light is sold upon walls of glass;

The crocodile's eye freely opens the state within.

A businessman stepped from the plane; his shadow became guilty;

The first skin of security slipped away in silence.

Not an invitation, but pursuing testimony came;

On the road to the waiting hall his own reflection tormented him.

Satyavrat would stand before him without weapon or office;

Only the weight of names, a cold river of silence.

However the glass may shine, the eye does not lie;

One whose shadow is guilty—where can he live away from himself?

City light may be sold across walls of glass;

The crocodile's eye freely opens the news within.

The first skin of security silently fell away;

On the road to the waiting hall he met his own reflection.

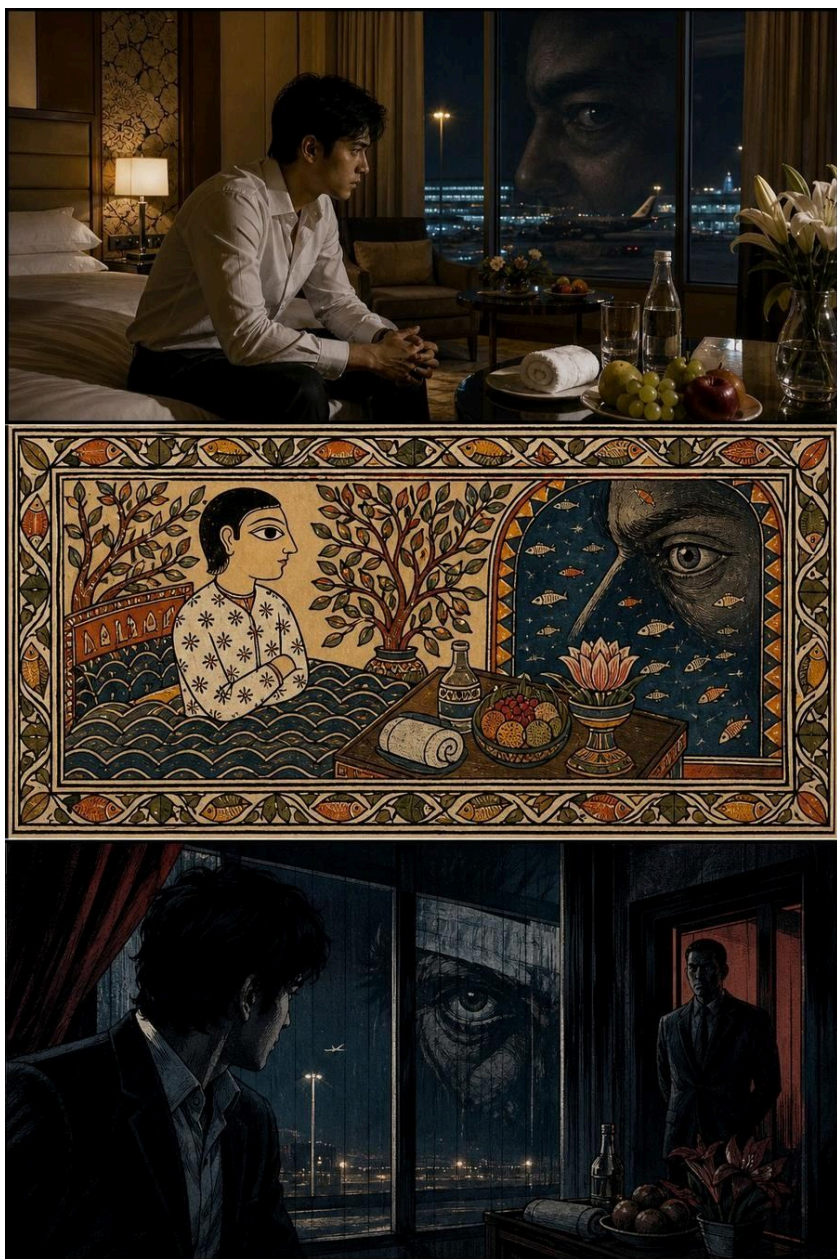


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—STORY 21, THE THRESHOLD OF LIBERATION: An elderly seeker had spent a lifetime performing sacrifices, giving charity and studying. Knowledge of reality cuts the root of defects; the fruits of past karma are exhausted through experience.*]

CHAPTER 78

The Silent Dialogue of Satyavrat and Lau

*When two people's silences are caught on the same question, that too is
a dialogue.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE BRIDGE OF SILENCE

Folk tune: silent couplet-song

Build the bridge, build it between two silences;

If there are no words, give time; remain seated together.

Two silences sat beside one another; the wind spoke between them;

Moist eyes and trembling palms opened the dialogue.

If there are no words, give time; hold the seat of companionship;

Across the bridge of silence, let trust take slow steps.

One silence may belong to guilt, another to a deep wound;

When patience to listen is found, both receive new water.

Across the bridge of silence the throat of truth begins to grow;

Only dialogue without pressure can join a relationship again.

One silence bears the weight of guilt, another a wound;

The trembling of the palms speaks the feeling within.

Tears of the eyes became a bridge, crossed little by little;

In a meeting without pressure, the door of truth opened.



The road opened by the message from the waiting hall led directly to Channa Grove. After seeing the crocodile's eye in the airport glass, Lau Kin-Hung did not sleep all night. In the five-star guesthouse room, the bed was soft as an ocean wave, the air-conditioning steady, and fruit, flowers, mineral water and scented towels stood on the table—everything arranged so faultlessly that it seemed there had never been any fault in the world. Yet in his ears the eye inside the glass kept scraping. It was not looking at him; it was counting him—how many bodies, how many accounts, how much commission, how much silence.

Lau Kin-Hung told his assistant he would meet no journalists. No investor dinner. No cultural tour. He wanted only to meet the man whose name had appeared repeatedly in Indian papers—Satyavrat Mehta. The assistant laughed. "He now appears less in the language of government office and more in the language of public listening." Lau Kin-Hung did not reply. A man without office always frightened him more, because office could be bought, but a debt of listening could not.

The meeting place was no one's office. Satyavrat Mehta did not summon him to a building in Delhi or to a roadside spot outside Garh Narikel, but to the cut stump in Channa Grove. Lau Kin-Hung's security team objected first. "Open place, crowd, emotional risk." A message came from Satyavrat: "If you want the meeting, come to the place of names. If you are afraid of names, there is no purpose in meeting."

By the time Lau Kin-Hung reached Channa Grove, evening was descending. The air held incense, cut wood, river-smell and the coolness of wet stone. The village name that had seemed to him merely a risk-zone in a file now stood before him as breathing earth. Names were written on stones around the stump. Some were complete, some incomplete, some only marks. For the first time he understood the sky-wide difference between anonymous property and anonymous dead—the first is concealed wrongdoing, the second a stolen existence.

Satyavrat Mehta was not sitting inside the circle but at one side of it. He had no government guard and no prepared argument. Only a register, an ink pen and an old bag. Lau Kin-Hung made the formal gesture of greeting. Satyavrat inclined his head but did not fold his hands. He said, "Sit." Nothing more.

Lau sat. He expected the questioning to begin—company, accounts, contracts, payments, donations, compliance. But Satyavrat remained silent. From behind the stump came the low voices of children. They were reading names. After each name, the crowd answered, "Present." The collective voice was neither loud nor soft—like the flames of many lamps moving slightly together. At first Lau Kin-Hung tried to understand the word in three senses—present, entered in the account, recorded. Then he realised this was not administrative attendance; it was the social rebirth of the dead.

For the first ten names Lau only listened. At the eleventh, his finger trembled. At the twelfth, sounds from a Hong Kong boardroom entered his ears—"project segment," "loss absorption," "human variable." At the thirteenth, he saw his company's table, in whose rows there were no people, only costs. At the fourteenth, a line inside the stump turned red. Lau blinked. The line was ordinary again. Satyavrat did not look at him; he only listened.

After a long time Lau spoke on his own. "Do you want to accuse me?" Satyavrat said calmly, "A court makes accusations. Names are read here." Lau asked again, "Do you want evidence?" Satyavrat rested a hand on the register. "Evidence has many forms. Gangesha speaks of perception, inference and testimony. But here there is also a fourth pain—not a line of scripture, but something that speaks through people's bodies. Whether you accept it as a document or not is your crisis."

At the name Gangesha, Lau's assistant tried to take notes. Satyavrat stopped him. "This is not a quotation; it is a question." Then for the first time he looked directly into Lau's eyes. "In your world, a name has value for opening an account. Here, a name has value for grief, justice and liberation. You counted profits. Count names once."

A strange emptiness opened inside Lau Kin-Hung. He felt he could count money, time, risk, countries, brokers, judicial delay, political protection, data and donations. But names? With every name came a house, a body, a breath, a loss, a surviving child, a restless spirit. Number broke apart. Calculation began to dissolve like lime in water.

The moon had risen. The shadow of the cut stump now assumed a strange form—neither tree, human nor animal. To Lau it looked like the open jaw of a crocodile. He made to rise in panic. Satyavrat said, "Remain seated. What appears does not vanish because you run from it." Lau sat again, but he could no longer keep his back straight.

The children's reading of names stopped. Ananya came forward. She held a small stone. Placing it before Lau, she asked, "Will you write your own name?" The assistant tried to intervene, but Lau raised a hand and stopped him. Lau said, "My name is already written." Ananya replied, "A name written on paper and a name written before one's own wrongdoing are not the same."

Lau picked up the stone. He was not given an ink pen but a small piece of charcoal. He could not write Devanagari. Ananya said, "Write in your own script. I will write the pronunciation beside it." Lau wrote his characters. Ananya slowly wrote: "Lau Kin-Hung." At that instant the stone seemed heavy. Lau's palm sank. For the first time he experienced that a name is not metal; it is weight.

Satyavrat said, "This is not forgiveness yet. This is only presence. Only when the wrongdoer is present can the victim's testimony be fully heard." Lau kept searching for the legal meaning of the sentence but could not find it. He realised that the language of winning and defence was useless here. If he lied, the stump would laugh. If he remained silent, the silence would be written down. If he fled, the stone would remain heavier with his name.

Far away, people sent by Batuknath Hariharan were watching. Word reached him that Lau Kin-Hung was sitting in Channa Grove and

listening to names. Batuknath smiled at the news. "Foreigners soften quickly under emotion." But his smile remained incomplete, because the second line of the report said that Lau Kin-Hung was suspending his donation pledge. He wanted to hear the archive first. If the donation stopped, the trust documents would remain incomplete.

That night Lau Kin-Hung stayed in Garh Narikel. He wanted a guesthouse, but the children did not permit him to remain around the stump. He said, "For security reasons—" Ananya replied, "Among those whose names drowned without security, speak less of security arguments." In the end he was given a room in an old school outside the village. The fan turned in jerks, frogs sounded through the window, and lime flaked from the wall. The coarse rasp of the khadi bedding kept reminding his body all night that he was outside the world of silk. Lau had never slept in such a room, where there was no smell of profit, only the dust of history.

In the middle of the night he dreamed. He stood inside a gleaming dome of the imagined "nameless planet." Every building bore a number, none a name. His company's emblem shone in the sky, but the faces of the inhabitants below were blank spaces. Suddenly the stump of Channa Grove grew in the middle of that lifeless planet. The children ran in a circle chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi." Each child who held a breath and touched his side made one paper fall from his suit pocket—a contract, a deed of gift, a research grant, a redevelopment proposal.

He awoke sweating. Dawn had not yet come. Yet someone by the window was softly reading names. He opened the window. No one. Only darkness, frogs, the distant river. Again the word came: "Present." For the first time Lau understood it without assistant, translation or contract. Present meant: escape is impossible.

At dawn Satyavrat met him again. Lau said, "I wanted to make a donation. Perhaps—" Satyavrat cut him off. "A donation first covers the account of wrongdoing. Here: before donation, documents; before documents, names; before names, listening." Lau fell silent.

There was a new vibration in that silence. Whether it was remorse or fear was hard to know at once. But no one here rushed to conclusions. The children's rule was clear—first day: listening; second: names; third: documents; only after that, anything else. Lau's glittering capital grew restless before this slowness. Slowness was the harshest punishment for him.

As the day rose, a messenger from Edward Broom arrived. In his hand was a deed of gift with a golden border—a vast sum for the Garh Narikel Memory Centre, foreign expertise, a digital archive, a world-class exhibition. The messenger trusted that such a document would make the village bow. But the children were already seated around the stump.

Ananya placed an empty stone beside Lau's stone and said, "Now the name behind the donation will be asked."

Satyavrat Mehta did not smile. Nor did Lau Kin-Hung. From inside the stump came a faint rattling—not laughter, not weeping, only notice that the next trial had begun.

FOLK SONG: A DIALOGUE OF TWO SILENCES

Folk tune: silent couplet folk tune

Speak, O silence, the dialogue of two silences has spoken;

Neither laughter nor weeping—the stump's rattle is speech.

When two silences catch on one question, it becomes dialogue;

Behind one stands a mountain of wealth, behind the other wrongdoing.

Satyavrat sat silently carrying the weight of names;

Lau's glittering capital was trapped in slowness.

Then the golden deed of gift arrived in pride;

It called itself world-class memory and brought the smell of a contract.

Ananya placed an empty stone and asked the name;

Before the donation, know—whose benefit, whose work.

The next trial began: the true kind of compassion.

Satyavrat sat carrying the weight of names, silent and wordless.

Before donation, know—whose benefit, whose work.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE GAVAYA IN THE FOREST: ANALOGY AND RECOGNITION: A young man from the city had never seen a gavaya. A forest guard told him, "A gavaya is like a cow, but has a wild body, a different colour and a distinctive gait." The sentence remained in his mind.*]

CHAPTER 79

Broom's Deed of Gift

The smoother the deed of gift, the older the contract beneath its seal.



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A TRANSPARENT DEED OF
GIFT**

Folk tune: compassion-mangal

*Dry in the sun, O deed of gift, dry beneath the open sun;
Whose money, where it went—show every letter.*

*Let the wet deed of gift dry beneath the open sun;
Whose money, whose benefit—let every public eye read it.
Less golden edging, more clear accounting;
A gift is meritorious only when help reaches where it should.*

*Protect the beneficiary's dignity; do not sell photographs;
Water every page of service expenditure with truth.
If the deed of gift is transparent, trust will flower;
The water of compassion will become life in the right field.*

*More than golden borders, let there be a clean ledger page;
Not photographs but dignity should arrive, and food and livelihood.
Let the public stamp every rupee of the account;
In the field of transparent compassion, let trust rise like a wave.*



The notice of the next trial that had sounded in the stump's rattling reached the village at dawn as a thick postal packet. The morning after Lau Kin-Hung's silent dialogue, the packet arrived in Garh Narikel. It was no ordinary bundle of paper: its cover bore a polished seal, a golden line, a decorative mixture of English and Mithilakshar, and inside, on thick paper, a printed deed of gift. The postman's hand trembled, because for the first time he had received a document that carried both the name of Channa Grove and the emblem of a company across the seas.

The deed of gift had come from Edward Broom's new institution. The company's old name appeared nowhere; the company whose contract had buried workers' bodies in the bridge piers, whose advice had turned water, labour, medicine, data and fear into "projects," now appeared in a new form—the "Global Memory Restoration Fund." Across the top stood the words: "Compassionate Grant for the Channa Grove Centre of Pain and Memory." The letters of the word compassion shone like gold, but their brightness carried no smell of water.

A municipal clerk, a district-office representative, advisers to the heritage project and several enthusiastic local people gathered around the stump, treating the deed of gift as a miracle. One said, "Now a memorial will be built." Another, "There will be jobs." Another, "Garh Narikel will become known at the world level." The word "name" appeared repeatedly in these sentences, but not one dead person's name appeared.

Ananya sat with the register. She had become accustomed to examining documents. First the yellow notice, then the map, then the tender, then the research permission, then the privacy terms of the app. Every document said: I am order. The children now looked not only at the letters on a document; they asked—what is this document hungry for?

Broom himself was not present. His representative, wearing a perfumed coat, had practised speaking polished Maithili. He said, "We wish to preserve the trauma of Garh Narikel with respect. This gift is selfless. It will create a museum, lighting, a digital archive, a visitor centre, research rooms and an international dialogue building." When he said "selfless," somewhere inside the stump came a sound like a worm chewing.

Devika asked softly, "What will you take in return for the gift?" The representative smiled. "Nothing." Meera asked again, "Pictures of the dead? Families' permission? Rights to use stories? Copies of the archive? Data attached to names?" The representative's smile shrank slightly. "There will be certain consent provisions in the legal language, but only for operational convenience."

Satyavrat Mehta stood behind them listening. He wanted to say something, but the discipline of the second silence held him back. This time the right to speak belonged to the children. Gangesha's question had settled in the roots—which is perception? which testimony? which inference? And who possesses the direct perception of what happened to a body?

Ananya took the deed of gift in her hand. It was heavy. It stated: "The Fund shall control rights of long-term preservation, digitisation, interpretation, exhibition and educational use of memory materials." Ananya read the line, then looked up. "Who has been called the owner of

the names here?" The representative said, "The community." Ananya asked again, "Where is the community's signature?"

There was no answer. The shine of the deed's golden letters dulled slightly. Aruni stepped forward and said, "The same people whose workers' safety existed on paper while the bridge was built but not on the ground—will their hands build the memory centre?" The representative said, "That was a separate contract in the past." Aruni replied calmly, "One who calls the past a separate contract does not make a gift to memory; he buys release from it."

Then Ba rose, leaning on her stick. She smelled the paper of the deed. "There is no smell of weeping in this. It smells of a locked room." Everyone fell silent. No legal objection works against an old person's knowledge of smell. The children wrote: "The smell of weeping is absent from the deed of gift."

Some local people were perplexed. Rejecting money seemed foolish. The village was poor, the stump exposed, the road unfinished, the archive fragile, and the children's register could be soaked by rain. A proposal came: "Take the money; regulate it later." But Meera said, "Where rights are surrendered in the first line, dignity will not survive in the later lines."

Gop Kumar read the fine print of the deed. One line said: "The Fund shall have primary rights of use over shared communication materials." The moment he read it, his face changed. "This is not a donation. It is a first claim over the story. Today it takes names, tomorrow images, the day after voices, and then even rights over tears."

The representative grew irritated. "You are all emotional. This is how memory is preserved around the world." Ananya put a hand on the stump and replied, "By the methods used around the world, how many names have been erased from the world? Here we listen to names first and make the method afterwards."

In the middle of the argument, the sky closed over. Clouds suddenly gathered at midday. No one understood where the drops came from. It did not rain; there were only a few heavy drops. One struck the golden seal of the deed of gift. No sound was heard when it fell, yet every eye turned there—as though silence too had kept one drop of its own. The seal began to soften. A second drop landed on the letters. The paper's colour began to change. The representative shouted, "Careful! This is the original document." But the drops seemed to obey no one's orders.

The deed's surface shine washed away. Beneath it emerged the letters of an old blue document. The smell rising from the wet paper was not new ink but old rust and the dampness of a closed file. Aruni bent down to look. They were clauses from the old bridge contract—workers' housing, safety, treatment, compensation, distribution of risk. The dead lines of the old contract belonging to the company that now sent a gift

of compassion began to show through the body of the deed. The deed of gift had been a mask; once wet, the real face came out.

The crowd held its breath. A young man whispered, "The paper changed form." Ba said, "Not the paper—the skin of sin became wet." The children's eyes flashed. This was perception—not the severe terminology of Gangেশa's logic, but the direct perception of earth. When a drop falls upon truth, the need for inference diminishes.

The representative tried to pull the document away. Ananya did not stop him. She only said, "Take it. But we have seen it. Guarding names is also done with the eyes." Devika raised her small device to take a picture, then Meera stopped her hand. "Ask everyone first." The families present nodded. Only then was the picture taken. This time the image was not spectacle but evidence, because permission, purpose and dignity were all clear.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward. He said nothing to the representative. He looked at the wet lines of the deed and wrote only this in his notebook: "When a gift covers the record of wrongdoing, it is not a gift but a delayed defence." He closed the notebook. His eyes held the fatigue of an old courtroom, but that fatigue now carried the strength of public testimony.

Batuknath Hariharan heard news of the incident from afar. He began to understand that deeds of gift, trusts and statutory structures were all parts of his old game, yet in Channa Grove paper was no longer invincible as before. Once wet, the truth inside rose to the surface. That night he remained awake for a long time at home. The papers of his own "Public Memory Trust" lay on his desk. His son quietly entered the room.

The son picked up the papers and began to read. Batuknath started. "What are you doing?" His son asked calmly, "Father, is this meant to save justice or the profession?" The question was small, but all the bells of the dream court rang at once. Batuknath's mouth went dry. For the first time he saw that inside the house built from court, Bar, prestige and family name, the stump of Channa Grove was growing too.

That evening the children placed the empty envelope of the deed of gift around the stump. Upon it they wrote: "If compassion demands rights, it will be tested." One corner of the envelope was wet. The representative had taken the document away, but the water stain remained by the stump. It did not dry until late into the night.

And from the wet smell of the deed was born the next question—if a father sold justice and earned prestige, would his child inherit that prestige or become a witness to his crime? Channa Grove's laughter had stopped. It was now time for the question inside the house.

FOLK SONG: THE WET DEED OF GIFT

Folk tune: compassion-satire song

*The stain will ask, the water stain will ask;
If a gift buys names, it is not a gift—it is trade.*

*Golden border, polished seal, an old contract within;
In the sweet lines of the gift, the smell of greed goes unseen.
Wet in water, the paper became its true copy;
When compassion demanded rights, the lamp of examination was lit.
The wet corner by the stump did not dry all night;*

*Batuk's certificates of honour trembled in his dream.
The father sold justice and earned the family's shining honour;
Will the child inherit it, or knowingly become a witness to the
wrongdoing?
If a gift buys names, it is no gift but trade;
The water stain will keep asking for the answer of generations.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE BABY ELEPHANT AND THE DONKEY: A traveller was told, "The animal that looks like a baby elephant is called such-and-such." On the road he met a donkey whose body, from a distance, shared certain shapes with a baby elephant. (Philosophical principle: similarity is not merely the number of shared properties; relevant properties and dissimilarities are important in determining word-reference.)]

CHAPTER 80

Hariharan's Descendants

*A child's single question—did you save justice, or the profession?—can
shake every certificate of honour on the veranda.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CHILD'S QUESTION, A
NEW ANSWER**

Folk tune: father-daughter dialogue song

*Ask, daughter, look him in the eye and ask;
Search the father's old ledger for the page of truth.*

*The daughter asks, "Did you save justice?" Father, raise your eyes;
Do not hide the old mistake; bring an answer of truth.
A child's question is not punishment but a lamp of reform;
Through one generation's courage, another learns.*

*Say, "The profession is for service," and prove it through deeds;
Give the child's clear gaze the honour of honesty.
A new answer will fill the old house with fresh air;
Through a child's question, even a family can take the road of justice.*

*The daughter's question is not punishment; it is the lamp's wick;
When the curtain of falsehood lifts, the air of the house improves.
"The profession will now become service"—show it through deeds;
Let the honesty of two generations bring a new dawn.*



The question inside the house found its threshold that very night. On the night Broom's deed of gift was soaked by water and turned into a copy of the old contract, Batuknath Hariharan sat on the high veranda of his house. Photographs of ancestors hung on the pillars, Bar Council certificates covered the inner wall, thick law books filled a glass cabinet, and in the middle sat he himself—as though what remained in the house of law was not law but its tired shadow. Outside was the city's yellow

light; inside, silence. The old veranda fan was still, yet the faint leathery smell of ageing law-book bindings stood in the air.

In that silence the door opened without a sound. Batuknath's daughter, Tarini, entered. She was studying law, but unlike her father she did not treat law as professional cleverness. She had not gone to Channa Grove, yet on her phone she had watched the reading of names, Gangesha's questions, the Procession of the False Ghost, and Broom's deed of gift change form in water. She switched the phone off, because she had understood that the first respect owed to memory is to turn off the screen.

Batuknath lifted his face. "So late?" He tried to summon his old tone of authority, but his voice fell like a dry leaf. Tarini did not answer. She went straight to the cabinet, took out an old booklet of his lecture on the *Tattvacintamani*, and placed it on the table. "Father," she said, "did you honour Gangesha, or did you imprison his question?"

Batuknath frowned. At Gangesha's name the orator inside him tried to wake. In many assemblies he had declared that Navya-Nyaya was Mithila's extraordinary gift; that the *Tattvacintamani* contained the essence of twelve thousand works; that its logical subtlety was such that the world still bowed before it. But Tarini's question was not about honour; it was about confinement. The flowers on certificates of honour wither; the thorn of a question remains.

"Gangesha is a matter for scholars," Batuknath said. "History has many views. In the middle of the night at home, these things..." Tarini cut him off. "Not in the night of the house, Father—in the darkness of lineage. If a legend that says someone was born five years after his father's death makes society uncomfortable, if a story of marriage to a leatherworker woman shakes caste pride, then why is Navya-Nyaya only for speeches? Does the right to evidence belong only to the upper castes? If a truth lies outside the threshold of lineage, calling it a controversy and shutting it away—is that justice?"

Batuknath's hand fell upon the glass tabletop. In the glass his face split in two—one the Bar Council president, the other the crooked lawyer who had spent years weaving an invisible armour around accused men through dates, adjournments, appeals, technical defects, procedure, jurisdiction and evidentiary traps. He wanted to say, "Law is procedure." But he feared that his daughter would immediately ask, "Procedure protects whom?"

Tarini asked it herself. "Did you save justice or the profession? When labourers drowned in the bridge, you pushed their families' papers aside as technically defective. When Ujjwal lost to the crocodile on the screen, you diverted his case in the name of digital consent. When Meera protected the dignity of her privacy, you tried to push her into questions

of character. When children placed names around the stump, you wanted to put them under a trust. Father, was this law, or a crocodile wearing the shell of a profession?"

For the first time, Batuknath felt like an outside accused man inside his own home. In court he could turn a question. He could tire out opposing counsel. He could measure a judge's patience. But he could not measure his daughter's eyes. Tarini's eyes held anger but not hatred. Had there been hatred, she would have slammed the door and left. A question makes one stay and inflicts the punishment of listening.

"Do you consider me a criminal?" Batuknath asked softly. Tarini said, "No. Calling you a criminal would be easy. You are a man who came to believe his intelligence was too great and placed his conscience beneath stamped paper. Some of those you saved were criminals; but the voices of those you silenced have reached your house."

At that moment the ancestral photograph on the wall trembled. There was no wind. Inside the cabinet, pages fluttered of their own accord. A fine sound arose—as though old arguments had begun asking themselves: what is evidence? what is perception? what is testimony? what is inference? And what is the evidence of a human being's silence? Batuknath started, but Tarini did not. She was standing before Gangesha's question.

Tarini opened the *Tattvacintamani* lecture booklet. It contained Batuknath's old essay: "Mithila Is the Land of Logic." She placed her finger on the page and said, "If Mithila is the land of logic, why so much silence over caste? If Gangesha is the founder of Navya-Nyaya, then to kill the uncomfortable truth of his life by garlanding it with honour—whose justice is that? If people such as Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha 'Ashok' kept killing life-truth in the name of honour, then you all called their wrongdoing scholarship and let it pass. Honour-killing does not belong only to bodies; memory too can be honour-killed."

Batuknath's mouth went dry. He tried at once to object—"Without sources, without evidence..." Tarini did not smile, but her voice hardened. "Demanding evidence is proper. Opening the door to evidence is proper too. You demanded evidence while keeping the door itself shut. When the door is closed, if truth knocks, its sound is called controversy. The children of Channa Grove say: listen first, refute afterwards. You wrote the refutation first and postponed the hearing."

With that sentence, the floor of Batuknath's house began to change. The veranda's marble became the cut stump of Channa Grove. The books in the cabinet turned into leaves and flew, and on each leaf shone the name of someone whose case he had kept circling year after year. In the middle appeared a cot-like seat of judgment, but no judge sat upon it; only one empty slipper from Tarini's childhood lay there. Batuknath

understood—the dream court had begun again, but this time his child stood at its centre.

Slowly other children appeared in the court too—one whose father had been involved in a medicine scam, another whose father had been a front for online gambling, another whose father traded in foreign donations, another whose father was an officer who altered documents. They were not merely children; they were mirrors of inheritance. In different voices they asked the same question: "What will you leave us? Wealth? Fear? Lies? A surname? Or a truth that allows us to love you without carrying your wrongdoing?"

For the first time Batuknath was not afraid of his child; he was afraid of his child's future. He thought: if Tarini refuses the wealth, office, network, name and honours he spent his life preserving, then for whom were they preserved? The deepest punishment for wrongdoing is not prison but an heir's refusal. When a child says, "I do not want the profit you earned," a person sees the true loss of his life.

Tarini said softly, "Father, I am your daughter. I cannot deny that. But I will not become heir to your silence. If a Public Memory Trust is created, it must be run by the children, workers' families, the women's assembly and those who keep watch over names. If you wish to advise, first come and listen to names. Not chairmanship—presence."

Batuknath tried to laugh, but his voice broke. "Will they accept me?" Tarini replied, "Give up the desire to be accepted. First endure the punishment of listening. The time you imposed on others for years through dates—now give that time yourself." The sentence entered his chest directly. Dates, once the weapon of his profession, were becoming the time of his atonement.

Outside, the first colour of dawn spread across the sky. A bird called in Batuknath's house. The stale cup of tea from the night stood on the table; when his finger touched its cold surface, all the heat of his arguments seemed spent. He had not slept all night. The *Tattvacintamani* booklet remained open, with the mark of Tarini's finger on the page. He picked up a pen. On a sheet he wrote: "Proposal concerning the Public Memory Trust postponed." Then, after thinking, he struck out "postponed." He wrote: "The proposal shall be heard before the public watch." His hand trembled as he wrote, because for the first time on paper he was reducing his own authority over himself.

Tarini stood at the doorway. She looked at her father. There was no theatrical embrace of reconciliation. The wound was too old to tolerate the falsehood of instant balm. But as she left, moving aside the garland from a certificate of honour on the table, she said, "Gangesha needs questions, not garlands. Justice needs listening, not office."

She left. Batuknath remained alone on the veranda. Behind him were ancestral photographs, before him opening dawn, and between them paper. For the first time he looked old. The man who until yesterday had been a crocodile of dates, chewing up people's years, had now been half-skinned by one question from his child.

That dawn, dew had settled on the sprout at the stump in Garh Narikel. The children were about to begin their watch over names. No one knew whether Tarini would reach there. Yet from inside the stump came a sound like a faint bell—as though the child's question had been accepted into the watch.

Meanwhile, in his locked room, Chandrapal Batra put his phone away and for the first time sat down to write his full name on paper. His hand trembled. "Chandrapal" was written; "Batra" stuck. Then instead of letters an incomplete round mark began to appear on the paper—like a percentage sign. The next court was waiting for him.

FOLK SONG: A CHILD'S SINGLE QUESTION

Folk tune: father-daughter lament

The question will open it, the child's question will open it;

The lock on the family's closed cabinet will break.

"Did you save justice or the profession?"—the daughter asked once;

Many certificates of honour on the veranda trembled.

Thick law books fell silent, the cabinet grew old;

The father, a crocodile of dates, was half-skinned today by a question.

Not a child's tears but the edge of a direct question;

Behind the shine of the family name he saw darkness.

There, dew on the sprout and the watch over names awoke;

Here, Batra wrote "Chandrapal," but "Batra" stuck.

Father, answering is hard, but silence is heavier still;

A child's question alone will open the family's locked cabinet.

Father, silence became deeper and heavier than an answer.

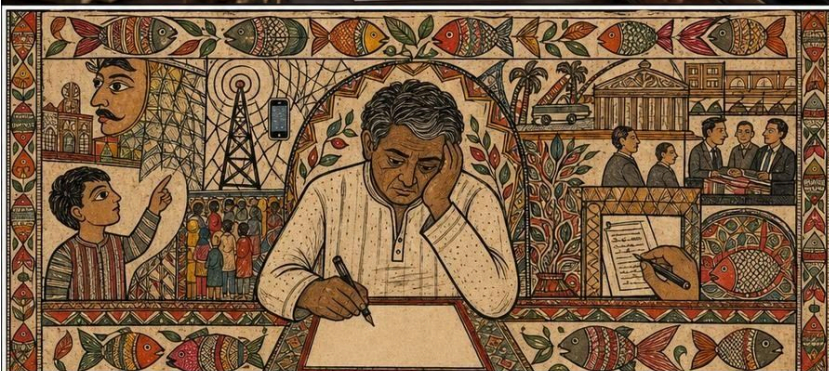
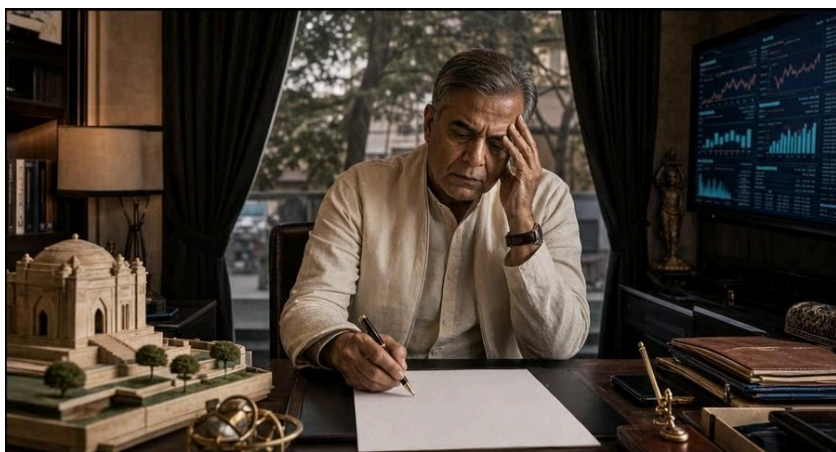


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—GREEN BROCCOLI: *Madhavi went to the vegetable market for the first time. She did not merely encounter an object; the meaning of a word she had heard earlier became connected with the object directly perceived.*]

CHAPTER 81

Batra's Incomplete Name

One who lives with half a name is afraid of a full signature.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: CLEAN THE INNER POND

Folk tune: hopeful rhythm of the elephant-and-crocodile tale

Clean it, clean the inner pond;

Let the four banks differ, but keep the water one.

Let the four banks be different; the water has one life;

Clean the inner pond and the net of illusion will lift.

Understand both the elephant's strength and the crocodile's grip;

Remove the silt of fear and choose clear discernment.

The lotus will rise when the mind's water becomes pure;

All four directions will hold the bright image of one sky.

If the inner pond stays clean, decisions become clear;

With the mind's clean water, life grows peaceful and strong.

Fear is nourished beneath layers of silt, shadow by shadow;

Not with a spade but with patient hands will illusion be removed.

The lotus opens only when the water is still and clear;

The sky of all four directions will shine on one mirror-like surface.



The waiting court was not convened in a hall but within the boundary of a white sheet of paper. The question Hariharan's daughter had asked her father that night—"Did you save justice or the profession?"—echoed far beyond Garh Narikel. It crossed mobile networks, bank accounts, deeds of gift, memorial plans and foreign meetings, reaching a room where Chandrapal Batra had been sitting for a long time with a pen poised above a white page.

The room was in the city, yet the shadow of Channa Grove lay around it. The window was shut, the curtain closed, the air-conditioner running, and rows of figures glowed on screens—but not a single word

had descended onto the page. Across the top was written only: "Write your own name." No signature, no seal. It was as though the paper itself had sprung from inside the stump.

Chandrapal Batra had written himself in many forms: company director, adviser, representative, app promoter, cultural donor, technical partner, trust assistant, local face of foreign capital. In each place his name had shone in a different form. But when the time came to write "your own name" on this paper, his hand fell silent. The pen nib scratched without moving—as though someone were scraping a closed door with a fingernail. In the place of a name, all his life he had written percentages.

He lifted the pen. He thought: "Chandrapal Batra." But the page produced: "ten percent." He started and crossed it out. He tried again to write "Chandrapal." The page produced: "half the profit." He struck that out. A third time he thought "C. Batra," but the pen wrote: "commission." He turned the page. The same on the second sheet. The same on the third. It was as though a clerk sat inside him who knew only how to write profit-shares where a name should be.

Seen from outside, the incident would have been absurd; from within, it was terrifying. For the first time Chandrapal understood how many years ago his real name had been taken from him. No one else had stolen it; he himself had changed it into measurement, bargaining, deals, recommendations, account codes and hidden profit behind screens. Each time a person writes the sign of profit in place of his own name, he becomes a little more nameless within.

He remembered childhood. Not a village but an outer-city settlement; a father who was a small trader, a mother devoted to worship, and an old slate on which his name had first been written. Chandrapal—the protector of the moon. His mother used to say, "Light has been kept in your name, son." But light felt heavy to him. In light, the face is visible; in the face, shame; in shame, restraint. So little by little he abandoned light and entered the darkness of numbers.

The degree from Meerut that he had used as a shield all his life now fluttered before him like a yellow leaf. The paper said, "You studied law." The inner voice asked, "To protect whom?" He answered, "Business." The voice said, "Business, or a market in the fear of nameless people?" He answered, "I was doing my work." The voice said, "Work, or opening accounts upon bodies drowned in water?" He wanted to argue, but the pen again wrote on the paper: "percentage."

At that moment, an invisible line was drawn in the children's register at the stump in Channa Grove. Far away in Garh Narikel, Ananya turned the page while still seated. She did not know why, but in one corner a word appeared by itself in black ink: "percentage." She showed it to Ira.

Ira said quietly, "After the theft of names, the accounting of names will now open."

At that same time Devika was examining an old copy of Chandrapal's memorial app. Behind the names of the dead were small boxes—donation, tribute, message, lamp, assistance. But in a hidden layer behind each name lay the shadow of a share. A stream of profit had been drawn from the grief attached to names. Devika switched off the screen. "He was not selling names," she said. "He was selling a percentage of the mourning behind the names."

The walls of Chandrapal's room now began to move. On one wall appeared Lau Kin-Hung's shadow—cold, measured, speaking the language of profit. On another, Raghav Signal's disappearing messages. On the third, Batuknath's legal smile. On the fourth, the cut stump of Channa Grove. From a crack in the stump came a child's voice: "Your full name?" Chandrapal tried to answer, but what left his mouth was: "partnership."

The voice came again: "What did your mother call you?" Chandrapal's body trembled. He had never prepared for that question. Everyone had asked: how much investment? how much profit? how much share? how much access? how much risk? No one had asked how his mother called him. He remembered: "Channu." A very small, very warm, very vulnerable name.

He picked up the pen. This time he tried to write "Channu." The moment half of the first letter appeared, his hand stopped. His arm grew heavy, as though a crocodile had seized it with its teeth. He forced it, but the line would not advance straight. A crooked shape appeared on the page—half a letter, half a jaw. He became afraid. Crocodiles chewed bodies; Chandrapal was experiencing that the crocodile of profit had already chewed a name.

That night Chandrapal wept for the first time. His weeping was not a plea for mercy. It was the weeping of a man who had realised that the surviving child within him could no longer find the body of his name. When a wrongdoer weeps, that is not forgiveness; sometimes it is only evidence that the inner devastation has touched him too. The stump in Channa Grove remained silent before this weeping. Trees do not forgive quickly.

In that silence he remembered that he had profited from nameless crowds. In digital fraud, every face became data; in gambling, every young man a lost amount; in shortages of medicine, every family an opportunity; in memorials, every dead person a source of donations; in court, every delay a fee; in foreign partnerships, every village a "region." He used to say, "I do not need sentiment from names; I need patterns." Now the pattern gave him no name.

He began searching his tongue for Maithili words. His life had been filled with deals in many languages, but when his mother scolded him she spoke in a mixed domestic Maithili-Hindi: "Channu, do not spoil your name." The word "name" in that sentence suddenly spread through the room. The figures on the screen blurred. The smell of incense ash entered the air. Far away, a stone placed on the stump in Garh Narikel grew warm.

Ananya opened a new page in the register. At the top she wrote: "Incomplete Name." The children sat in a circle behind her. They asked, "If he is a wrongdoer, why write his name?" Ba replied, "Wrongdoing is written not for forgiveness but for evidence. One who has lost his own name bears witness even through that incompleteness." The children were not satisfied, but they listened. Learning to listen is harder than learning a lesson.

Satyavrat Mehta was present at that gathering. No one had told him what was happening in Chandrapal's room; but the discipline of listening can become such that even the tremor of a distant wrongdoer reaches the ear. He said softly, "Justice does not ask only for the victim's name. It also asks for the wrongdoer's true name. Because nameless wrongdoing returns." Everyone fell silent at the sentence. Some faces hardened. No one wanted forgiveness. Yet a complete archive of names must also contain the enemy's name as evidence—this was difficult to accept.

In his room Chandrapal bent over the page. The unfinished letter of "Channu" was damp with sweat. He wanted to tear up the paper, burn it, or scan it and bury it in a secure digital layer. But the paper grew heavy. He could not lift it. Its weight exceeded all his accounts, dividends, secret contracts and fabricated donations. The incompleteness of a name can become heavy like an object.

Night deepened. Outside, city lights switched off and on. Inside, only the paper remained white. Chandrapal could not finally write his full name. On the page there remained only: "Ch..." Beneath it, unwittingly, appeared: "percentage." Then his hand trembled to a stop. Thus the summary of his life stood complete—the unfinished letter of moonlight, followed by the complete word of profit.

At dawn the sheet folded itself. No hand, no wind. Fold after fold formed until the paper took the shape of a leaf. It did not pass through the closed window; instead it stuck to the glass. Chandrapal touched the pane. The cold of dawn outside and the faint warmth of the leaf inside rested upon the same surface. He rose and looked. In the glass he saw not his own face but the eye of an elephant. He started. Behind that eye was the darkness of water, and in the darkness, the jaw of a crocodile.

He could not tell whether this was dream or punishment. But in Garh Narikel, at that very moment, Ananya closed the register and said, "Next

time the elephant-and-crocodile within will play." A shiver ran through all the children's bodies at once. The game was not entering the field but the water of the mind. Chandrapal's incomplete name had become the first piece of that game.

FOLK SONG: THE INCOMPLETE SIGNATURE

Folk tune: lament of the mind

Speak, O tongue, speak your full name;

How long will you save your life with an incomplete signature?

Living with half a name, afraid when the whole is written;

"Chandrapal" came down, but "Batra" remained stuck.

The paper became a leaf and clung to the glass at night;

Not a face but an elephant's eye, and behind it the crocodile's attack.

The round mark of percentage sprouted where the name should be;

It became the first piece in the game inside the mind's pond.

An incomplete name is no shield but an inner prison;

Full pronunciation will demand acceptance of the road of wrongdoing.

O tongue, speak your name; tell your share as well.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE STRIPED ZEBRA: *A teacher had said, "A zebra is like a horse, but its body has black-and-white stripes." At the zoo the child stopped the moment he saw the striped animal. Similarity supplied the instructional cue; the stripes and the overall form fixed the correct referent of the word. That day the zoo became a classroom of philosophy of language.*]

CHAPTER 82

The Gaja-Graha Within

*The four banks of a pond are different, but the water is one—and
within the water live both elephant and crocodile.*



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SCHOOL ON LEAF SEATS

Folk tune: children's school song

Sit, children, sit upon the seats of leaves;

Write letters on an earthen notebook with a twig for a pen.

Little shade, leaf seats, a vast sky of knowledge;

Children sit in a circle and learn affection for names.

First lesson—no one is nameless; second—stay together;

Third—share fear with everyone; fourth—speak the truth.

If there is no notebook, there is earth; if no pen, a twig;

People's experience is the book, grandmother's story the treasure.

School upon leaf seats awakens a sense of justice;

Children who learn today will become society's true watch tomorrow.

The cuckoo rang the first bell, the wind the second;

Grandmother's story became a book, experience became medicine.

"No one is nameless"—recite this mantra aloud;

Through the watch kept by educated children, cut the roots of injustice.



"Next time the elephant-and-crocodile within will play"—Ananya's sentence found its field the very next evening. The question from Hariharan's child, Batra's incomplete name, Raghav without a network, the crocodile Lau Kin-Hung had seen in glass—these were no longer separate events. They were four banks of the same pond. In the water between them, the tale of elephant and crocodile was about to descend again. But this time the elephant was no creature from a distant myth, and the crocodile no river animal. This time the elephant was truth trapped within a person, while the crocodile was the jaw of greed, lineage-pride, office, percentages, fear and anonymous profit.

There was no water on the stump in Channa Grove that night, yet everyone smelled water. Moisture lodged in the cracks of the roots began to gleam one by one. The shadows of the stones of names lengthened into a circle. The children thought the night was ordinary, but Old Budhba's Ghost whispered, "Tonight the elephant-and-crocodile within will be shown. What you see, do not immediately call a fault; first look at the living being trapped inside it."

Ananya asked, "It is hard to see a living being inside the guilty." Old Budhba's Ghost replied, "True. But justice is difficult; revenge is easy. The jewel of evidence that Gangesha fashioned was not meant only to be applied to others. The power to see the bondage within the person we call guilty is also a purified form of evidence."

Immediately after he said this, the darkness in the middle of the stump deepened. It was not the darkness of day turned night, but the darkness seen within after one closes the eyes. In it everyone began to hear the pulse at their temples—as though someone had stepped into the pond inside. First Batuknath Hariharan appeared in the darkness. His body was long like a high court corridor, his coat black, a white band at his throat, a rulebook in his hand. But from his chest an elephant's trunk was trying to emerge. The trunk was compressed, the mouth shut, the eyes wide.

The elephant inside Hariharan was his childhood—the child who once wanted to study justice, who as a new lawyer had once taken up a poor client's file without fee. The crocodile was his professional deceit. Its teeth were made of dates, adjournments, fees, pressure, Bar politics, caste pride and schemes for saving criminals. The crocodile held the elephant's leg and said, "You are not justice; you are a profession. You are not a question; you are an argument. You are not a human being; you are an honourable form of address."

Hariharan struggled. His child watched from a distance. The child's voice came: "Father, did you save justice or the profession?" The voice filled the elephant's trunk with air, but the crocodile's teeth bit deeper. Hariharan cried, "I was within the rules!" The stump replied, "Rules for whom?" He fell silent. In that silence his coat looked wet for the first time.

Then the scene changed. Chandrapal Batra appeared. Screens, accounts, slips, commissions, fake tributes and percentage signs surrounded him. The elephant within him was small—a child who wanted to write his own name correctly. The crocodile was enormous—the percentage that had climbed over the incomplete name. It told him, "Why write a name? Become a number. Sell numbers. Move numbers. With numbers pull bodies, pull minds, pull money."

The child inside Batra wrote "Chandra" upon the earth, and the crocodile flicked its tail and changed it into "percentage." He wrote "pal," and the crocodile turned it into "broker." He wrote "Batra," and the crocodile changed it into "wallet." The children watched. Devika said softly, "One who has not saved the letters of his own name—how will he save the names of others?"

For the first time Chandrapal saw the root of his deceit. He had believed that he profited from crowds; now he saw the crocodile had also been eating the child inside him. He did not weep, because he had forgotten how. Only one word came from his mouth: "Nameless." The stump replied, "By earning through namelessness, a person becomes nameless himself."

The third scene belonged to Raghav Signal. At first no elephant appeared within him—only droplets of messages, invisible writing, vanishing marks, hidden codes. The children wondered: where is the elephant here? Then Ananya saw a very small, transparent elephant whose body was made of sheets of paper and which was continually being erased. The crocodile was a technology of silence, saying: "Do not speak, send. Do not write, erase. No relationship, only signals. No crime, only mediation."

The greatest pain of Raghav's elephant was that no one had ever given it a complete sentence. All his life he had lived in half-messages, half-promises, half-threats and half-defences. His crocodile would not let him speak fully. When he tried to say "I," the message was erased. When he tried to say "guilt," the sign changed into "sent." When he tried to say "forgive," the network broke.

Meera said, "This is not respect for privacy; it is the darkness of wrongdoing." Saumya added, "Silence is not what protects a wound; silence becomes wrongdoing when it strangles the witness." Raghav's transparent elephant became clear for a moment. On its forehead appeared the words: "Complete sentence." Then the crocodile's jaw trembled.

The fourth scene belonged to Lau Kin-Hung. He was trapped not in a pond but inside a glass building. Outside was the sea; inside, calculation. His inner elephant was enormous but enclosed in a metal cage. The crocodile was not merely greed; it was geography-less capital, saying: "Remove the risk called country. Remove the face of labour. Remove the history of the river. Leave only the flow of profit."

For the first time Lau's elephant wanted to smell the earth of Mithila. It struck its trunk against the glass. Names appeared on the pane—Saryu, Ujjwal, Munna, unnamed worker, water-burial, Channa Grove. Lau panicked, because those names had no exchange rate. The crocodile said,

"Names are loss." The elephant answered, "Without names, profit turns to stone."

Edward Broom too appeared at the edge of that scene. His inner elephant sought applause from a conference stage; the crocodile was hunger for moral speech. He turned every suffering into a theory, every dead person into an example, every village into a case study. The crocodile's teeth were made of polished English words, yet in the darkness of Channa Grove those words trembled before Devanagari letters. The children saw him, but that night did not read his name in full. Ananya said, "His turn will come again."

Among all these scenes stood Satyavrat Mehta himself. He thought he was merely a spectator. But the stump looked inside him too. His elephant was the desire to truly listen to justice; the crocodile was discipline of office, a conscience that woke late, and the silence that had so often become protection for wrongdoing. Satyavrat trembled. He said, "Do not leave me out either."

The children looked at him. Everyone understood the importance of the sentence. The man who wrote down other people's testimonies did not want to hide the crocodile within himself. Ananya wrote in the register: "The witness too is not beyond examination." Satyavrat lowered his eyes and sat. At that moment his silence was born a third time—the first had belonged to wrongdoing, the second to admission, and now the third to entry into justice.

Then the real elephant-and-crocodile scene arose in the middle of the stump. Vast water, mud, moonlight. The elephant was half-submerged, the crocodile gripping its leg. But this time there was not one elephant. Hariharan's childhood, Batra's incomplete name, Raghav's complete sentence, Lau's caged memory, Broom's hunger for applause, Satyavrat's desire to listen—all became limbs of the elephant. Nor was there only one crocodile—caste, greed, procedure, profit, silence, global avarice, data and fear joined into one enormous jaw.

The elephant did not scream. Names came from its mouth. First one, then many, then names that had no place in any list. When the names fell upon the water, the children answered, "Present." With every "Present," one crocodile tooth loosened. When Ba added the names of her ancestors, the crocodile's tail shook. When Meera said, "The dignity of the body is present," its eyes blurred. When Devika said, "The youth drowned in the screen is present," the water grew warm. Even the earth beneath the palms of the children seated on the bank warmed—as ash remains warm beneath the surface long after a hearth is extinguished.

At last the question arose: was the elephant freed? The story gave no cheap answer. The crocodile did not let go, but its grip became public for the first time. A hidden grip is unbearable; once the grip is visible, hands

can gather against it. That night the stump in Channa Grove did not create liberation; it made the grip visible. That visibility became evidence for the struggle ahead.

Old Budhba's Ghost said, "Remember: seeing the elephant inside the wicked does not erase the wrongdoing. The account of wrongdoing remains. But if you do not see the elephant within, you will fail to recognise the species of the crocodile. Its teeth are not made by one person alone; they are made by the whole system." The children grew serious. It was a difficult lesson—keep anger, but keep the eyes open.

As dawn approached, the watery scene at the stump faded. The village looked like a village again. Yet every character awoke tired within. Hariharan woke drenched in sweat in a distant room; Chandrapal kept trying for the first time to write his full name on paper; an unfinished message flashed on Raghav's device—"I will say it fully..."; Lau pressed his palm to the hotel glass and searched for the smell of earth.

Beside the ring of stones in Channa Grove, the children made a rule for the next gathering: "We will not read only the names of the dead; we will also search for the names trapped inside the living." From this rule was born the idea of the Coconut-Leaf School. Guarding names would no longer mean only protecting records; it would become lessons in intellect, body, caste, labour, privacy and justice.

That morning Ananya opened a new page of the register and wrote the heading: "Coconut-Leaf School." The green point on the stump spread a little. From afar Old Budhba's Ghost released the breath of kabaddi—"Kabaddi..." and the children answered, "School..." The game was entering education.

FOLK SONG: THE INNER POND

Folk tune: elephant-and-crocodile narrative song

Clean it, clean the inner pond;

Only one who can struggle with himself will cross over.

Four banks are different, the water one stream;

Batuk, Batra, Raghav, Lau—the elephant and crocodile within.

No one remains only elephant or only crocodile;

Greed grips, fear struggles, names flow within.

The children will seek even the names trapped in the living;

On leaves they will study caste, labour, privacy and justice.

The green point on the stump became a school;

The breath of kabaddi changed into the sound of learning.

Clean the inner pond; hold the lamp of names;

*Batuk-Batra-Raghav-Lau—the essence of the elephant-and-crocodile
within.*

No one remains only elephant or only crocodile;

Greed grips, fear struggles, names flow within.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE PARROT'S COMMAND:
WORD, SENTENCE AND BELIEF: *The courtyard parrot learned from
hearing its master's voice every day: "Bring water." One day the master was
not at home. The incident raised a dispute: is the cause of verbal cognition
only the speaker's present intention, or do the structure of the words and the
independently known convention also possess their own efficacy?*]

CHAPTER 83

The Coconut-Leaf School

Where no shade remains, a school can still sit—upon seats of leaves.



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: SONG OF PRESENCE

Folk tune: attendance-mangal

Call the names, call them one by one;

At each answer of "Present," circle the lamp upon its tray.

*Call every name one by one; let all say—Present;
Mother, labourer, child, elder—let everyone's dignity remain safe.
Attendance is not merely a number; it is the recognition of life;
Whoever's feet stand upon the earth deserves a complete place.*

*Let no one fall from the line, let no one be erased;
With one voice of presence, break the invisible ground beneath
exclusion.*

*Sing the song of attendance; place a lamp for every name;
Fill every colour equally into society's complete picture.*

*Mother present, labourer present, child and elder held in care;
Let no one slip from the line—this is the first remedy.
Not a number, but an account of breath, a ledger of heartbeats;
Only complete attendance can make society's bond complete.*



The game that had descended into study during the night began, by morning, to take the form of earth and leaves. After the night's elephant-and-crocodile within had subsided, morning in Garh Narikel was not ordinary. Water kept to its old course, dust rose from the road, arguments over the price of potatoes and onions continued in the market; yet around the stump of Channa Grove people felt as though some invisible beast had been defeated in the marsh within and forced to retreat. Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau and Broom remained in

their rooms, hotels, embassies, aircraft and courts, but the crocodiles within them no longer flashed their teeth as before.

That morning Ananya was clearing sand from the empty ground behind the stump. With her were five children, two girls, an old potter, a widow and Devika. Someone asked, "What will be built here?" Ananya replied, "A school." Everyone was startled. A school on the very ground that had witnessed ghost-kabaddi, the call of water-burial, a false procession, a tender for memory, and the court of the inner elephant-and-crocodile? Yet there was such certainty in the children's eyes that the question gradually quietened by itself.

This school was not being built for government recognition. Its first lesson would not be the alphabet but the hearing of names. Here, presence would not mean a mark in an attendance register but acknowledgement of existence. Here "a" would not lead to anam, "nameless," but to the question "Who are you?" "k" would lead to kabaddi, and the rules of that game would be taught too—hold your breath, but do not bite another person's body; cross the boundary, but do not steal a name; if you are caught, do not lie—release your voice.

Ba gave it the name Coconut-Leaf School. She said, "The stump of Channa Grove will remain, but shade needs leaves. Coconut leaves catch the wind from far away. This school will catch people's voices in the same way." The potter brought old roof tiles from his house. The children chose flat stones from the riverbank. Meera came carrying a coil of red thread. Ira brought the reverse side of an old map across which the municipality had drawn its cancellation lines. On that reverse side the school's first plan was made.

The plan had four corners. First—name. Second—privacy. Third—labour. Fourth—breath. In the middle stood the stump. No statue upon it, no plaque. Only an empty bowl was placed there, to wait for a call. The children said, "If any name is left out, this bowl will hear it first." Ira did not laugh; she understood how many civilisations have survived because someone left an empty bowl.

On the school's first wall Devika wrote in charcoal: "No grief will be written here without permission." Meera added a second line: "No body will become spectacle here." Gop Kumar, who arrived late, wrote the third: "Paper is evidence here, but incomplete without the human voice." Satyavrat Mehta stood at a distance; the children saw him. Ananya said, "You write the fourth line." Satyavrat thought for a long while, then wrote: "Silence too is testimony here, when it is not the silence of fear but the silence of listening."

After these four lines, the school existed. Hearing of it, a town schoolmaster laughed: "You write four lines and a school is made?" Ba replied, "A school made by a building is for examinations; a school made

by rules is for human beings.” The teacher fell silent. What came into his mind was not shame but perplexity. Later he brought his own school’s attendance register and said, “Read mine too. How many names in it have become nothing but numbers?”

The first day’s work was not to make benches. The children gathered leaves. The long coconut leaves that rattled in the wind were not cut; only those that had fallen on their own were picked up. The edges of the dry leaves rasped against the fingers like splinters; when they were lifted, a faint sweet sap-smell rose from the stalks. Small lines were drawn along the leaf-ribs. Each line was for a story. Ananya said, “Paper can tear; leaves can dry; but if we keep reading, the names will travel from leaves into people.”

The writing on those leaves was strange. Not complete stories, only signs—“bridge pier,” “digital fear,” “night of oxygen,” “Meera’s consent,” “Gangesha’s question,” “lament of the false ghost,” “the crocodile within.” Beneath each sign the children left an empty space. Someone asked, “Why the blank?” Ananya said, “If we write the story closed, where will the next person speak?”

News of the school reached the market. Some came in support. Others said, “This will spoil the children. Names, caste, corruption, bodies, courts, digital fraud—why burden children with such heavy subjects?” Devika replied, “When these subjects have already entered children’s lives, why keep them outside the school?” At that sentence some faces lowered, because in every house in the village some child had already seen the blows of mobile phones, debt, medicine, caste, livelihood or silence.

By afternoon the question of caste arose by itself. A leatherworker’s boy hesitated to pick up a leaf. A Brahmin boy sitting near him first drew back, then remembered Gangesha’s question. Slowly he took hold of the leaf with him. When both children’s hands rested upon one leaf, a fine green line gleamed down its middle. Ba said, “See? The Tattvacintamani does not live only in a book; sometimes it opens between two hands.”

Hearing this, an old pandit seated at the edge cleared his throat. He said, “Not every story about Gangesha’s life is established fact.” Ananya immediately asked, “Then what is the proof for the pride of caste? What is the proof for purity of lineage? If a story of birth five years after the father’s death may be questioned, then the claim of high and low by birth must also be questioned.” The pandit’s voice stopped. The school’s first debate ended without abuse, punishment or expulsion.

By evening a light pavilion like a roof of coconut leaves had been made. It could not stop rain, but it could sift the sunlight into small pieces. Behind the cut stump of Channa Grove hung a green curtain of leaves. People began saying, “The tree was cut and leaves grew.” Meera corrected them: “They did not grow; they gathered.” The correction

mattered, because the school was not a miracle but the result of people's labour.

At night the first lamp was lit. No bell rang. Ananya lifted the empty bowl and struck it softly three times. The sound was not grave but gentle. The small ring of the earthen bowl faded almost as soon as it arose—like a drop of water pausing upon a leaf before sliding away. The children sat in a circle. Satyavrat was behind them, Gop to the right, Devika and Meera in front, Ba beside the stump. A faint smell came from the water's edge. Perhaps the submarine had come to listen. Perhaps crocodiles far below were blinking in the depths.

Ananya said, "Today the school has opened. The first lesson is tomorrow. Today we will only hear the rules." She read the four lines. Everyone answered, "Heard." Then she added a fifth: "Whoever is absent here will be called first." Everyone fell silent. The absent meant the dead, the lost, the forgotten, the shamed, the exiled, the name-struck-off, the caste-crushed, the violated body, the person drowned in a screen—all of them.

That night the shadow of the cut stump joined the shade of the coconut leaves and made a strange figure upon the earth. It was neither tree nor human nor animal. Ananya said, "This is the school's first letter." No one could read it. Satyavrat stared at it for a long time. It seemed to him that the letter might be "u"—the u of upasthit, "present."

At that very moment the faint sound of a drum came from far away. The children rose, wondering whether to begin kabaddi. Ba raised her hand to stop them. "Tomorrow is the first lesson. Save your breath tonight." Perhaps the ghosts too obeyed the rule. No game was played. Yet the breath of kabaddi remained hanging in the air—not suppressed, but preserved.

The chapter ended in that expectation. The Coconut-Leaf School had been made, but its first lesson was still waiting to open. The empty bowl remained in the centre. On a new page of the register the title was written—"First Lesson: Present." And throughout the night the absent names of Garh Narikel waited quietly for their turns.

FOLK SONG: SEATS OF LEAVES

Folk tune: school song

The seats are spread, seats of leaves are spread;

Where names are read, there the village takes form.

*No shade remains, yet the seats of leaves are spread;
In the courtyard of the cut stump a new school has opened.
The empty bowl in the middle, the register a new leaf;
All night the letter u whispers—upasthit, “present.”
Before the alphabet, first the dignity of names;*

*Saving our breath, tomorrow we shall study the absent lives.
The ghosts stopped their game; the rhythm stayed preserved in the air;
One by one each name watched the road toward its turn.
The leaf-seat is small, the lesson immense;
Where names are read, there the village takes form.*

*No shade remained, yet the school opened;
In the courtyard of the cut stump a new register gathered.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—BRING THE POT: *A child was learning language. An elder said to another servant, “Bring the pot.” The servant rose and brought a water-pot from the room.*]

CHAPTER 84

First Lesson: Present

The first lesson is not a letter—it is learning to say “Present.”



CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: WOMEN'S BRIGHT WATCH

Folk tune: women's-circle mangal song

Gather, sisters, at the hour of the bright watch;

Speak your own names yourselves, and every tangle will break.

*Day's labour, night's speech—the women form a circle;
Hearing one another's voices, they light lamps of courage.
Mother, sister, daughter—each will speak her own name;
At home, field, office and stage, equal rights will remain.*

*A veil if you choose one, but no veil over the voice;
Half the world must never be half in decision.
Let the bright watch belong to women, and the village dawn grow;
With them, every institution of society becomes complete.*

*From courtyard to panchayat, half the world's footsteps move;
No veil over the voice, whether or not a veil covers the head.
Hearing one sister's victory, ten courtyards awaken;
From the women's row of lamps, the village dawn begins.*



That heading in the register—"First Lesson: Present"—became its own first bell in the morning light. On the first day after the Coconut-Leaf School opened, no one studied the alphabet. No letters, no numbers, no multiplication tables. In the shadeless courtyard of the stump, the children spread leaf-seats and sat down; beneath their thighs the cool, smooth leaves spoke with a crisp rustle, as though the seats themselves were recording their presence. Ananya placed an empty stone in the middle. No name was written upon it; it was for all those names still pressed inside homes, left outside genealogical charts, struck from the margins of papers, or hidden in the darkness of shame.

Ira held an ink pen, Devika the register, Meera a red thread, and Saumya a small cloth bag containing blank paper, kohl, two pieces of charcoal and several small flint stones. Aruni stood at a distance and watched. It seemed to him that bridge measurements, piers, river velocity and contract conditions were one part of knowledge; but there was no instrument for measuring the lesson beginning today.

Ananya spoke the first sentence: "The first lesson of this school is—Present." The children repeated together, "Present." The word rose into the air, entered the hollow of the cut stump, then slowly returned into everyone's ears. Those accustomed to answering attendance at school understood for the first time that being present did not merely mean a body seated on a chair; it meant standing with one's name.

The first child rose carrying his grandmother's name. At home she was called simply "that old woman." She had no papers, no date of birth, no claim upon land. The child said, "My grandmother, whose real name no one at home says—Sitamoni." A bird on the edge of the stump flapped its wings once. Devika wrote in the register: "Sitamoni—Present." The child exhaled, as though half a century of dust in his chest had grown lighter after the name was given.

A girl from the second row rose. Her name was Sonaki. She said, "My uncle went into the river. The village said he had gone outside to earn. But my mother said the river took him. His name was Bholaram." Silence. Bholaram's name appeared on no list—not labourer, dead, migrant or missing. Ananya asked, "Is this name spoken at home?" The girl said, "At night. Not in the day." The register received the line: "Bholaram—present from night into day."

A third child rose hesitantly. "My great-grandfather was a leatherworker. When his name is spoken at home, people say, leave it, the lineage will be spoiled. But my grandmother said that without him the household's shoes, drum, earthwork and repairs—nothing would have gone on. His name was Mangalu Das." At this name some elderly faces tightened. The school's first examination stood before it: the courage to say "Present" to a name caste had pushed downward.

Meera rose slowly. She sat between Sonaki and the third child and said, "The one upon whose labour everyone walked will not be written below but at the foundation." In the register Devika wrote Mangalu Das not in the first column but in the middle—exactly where the weight of a page rests. Ananya told everyone, "In this school caste cannot prevent presence." The children answered, "Present."

Then Gangesha's question returned. The story of Gangesha Upadhyaya told the previous day—birth five years after his father's death, marriage to a leatherworker woman, the Tattvacintamani, Navya-Nyaya, and the killing of life's truth in the name of honour—was burning inside

the children. One boy asked, "If Gangesha made a system of justice, why did society refuse justice to his life?" As the question hung in the air, a minute green point on the stump trembled.

Saumya did not answer. She said, "Today the answer will not be made present; the question will." A new line opened in the register: "The suppressed truth of Gangesha's life—Present." Someone protested, "What will children know about people of scripture?" Ba said from a distance, "If children can hear a name, they can also hear the silence of scripture." The old man's protest dissolved inside the sentence.

The first lesson now moved beyond presence toward evidence. Ananya lifted the stone. "If I say there is a name on this stone, but no one sees it, then?" One child said, "We need perception." The stone was turned over—beneath it a half-written "M" in charcoal. Another child said, "This may be the M of Mangalu Das, or of mother, or of the dead." Ananya smiled. "Inference." Then Ba said, "I heard that Mangalu Das bore this mark on his hand." The children said, "Testimony."

Thus, through play, Navya-Nyaya descended into the earth of the school. Gangesha came out of library dust and sat among the children's stones, charcoal, names and questions. The Tattvacintamani was no longer merely a name said to equal the weight of twelve thousand books; it came to mean that a lamp of inquiry must be lit over every particle of truth, so that caste, greed, paper and fear cannot combine to make anyone absent.

The fourth child to rise had a very faint voice. He could not speak his sister's name. She had been threatened through a mobile phone; the family, fearing shame, had removed her name from school. Meera went to him and said, "If her name should not be public, we will write only this much—one daughter, silenced not by shame but by violence." The child nodded. The register received: "One daughter—present with dignity." Every head bowed over that line.

In this school, presence did not mean exposing everything. Some names would be spoken in full, some by signs, some held until the family consented, some kept only in the warmth of a stone. Meera wrote the rule: "Memory will not be made by cutting through privacy." Devika added: "If speaking a name creates danger, that silence too is present." The children repeated the sentence three times.

Near midday an old pandit arrived. He said, "It is not right to teach children such things against caste-lineage, family tradition and scripture." Ananya asked politely, "Does scripture preserve names or erase them?" The pandit fell silent. Then he said, "There must be order." Ira replied, "If order eats the names of the dead, it too will be called a crocodile." The pandit searched for darkness, but Channa Grove had been cut and the sunlight there was clear.

An old woman took a worn amulet from the end of her sari. Inside was a rotten scrap of paper. She said, "This has my mother's name, which I was forbidden to speak in my husband's home. I cannot read it." Saumya did not try to open the paper; it would have broken. The children sat around it. The letters could not be read, but the woman spoke her mother's name: "Phulkumari." At that moment the cord of the amulet loosened by itself. From the decayed paper rose the faint mingled smell of old vermilion and stale flowers—like a breath sealed for fifty years.

Devika wrote: "Phulkumari—present from within the sari's fold." At this line the coconut-leaf seats moved. There was no wind, yet the leaves rustled. The children said, "The tree heard." No one searched for science, no one announced a miracle. The school's rule was that an event which lightens grief should not immediately be turned into spectacle.

After midday the lesson of presence became a civic lesson. The children said, "Whoever's name is in the register has a place in society even if the body is gone." Aruni added, "Whoever's labour is in the bridge will have a name written into its piers." Gop Kumar said, "Whoever's data was stolen will return from an account-number to a human voice." Meera said, "Whoever's bodily dignity was taken will have no name sold without consent." Satyavrat Mehta listened from behind them and wrote only one word in his notebook: "Present."

At evening the children read the names of the first day. To every name everyone answered, "Present." Gradually the word became the village's new civic form of address. Someone called, "Ramsagar?" Answer: "Present." Someone asked, "The one whose name was never found?" Answer: "Present." "The suppressed life of Gangesha?" "Present." "Mangalu Das?" "Present." In these replies the old lines of society began to crack.

Before night fell an unexpected thing happened. The women who had stood listening at the edge throughout the day began to speak quietly among themselves. They carried names that could not be spoken in daylight—women beaten at home, burned for dowry, killed for love, hidden in the name of caste, pushed into silence after bodily humiliation. Ujjwal's mother, Meera, Devika, Saumya and Ba all wore the same shadow upon their faces.

Meera asked Ananya for the register. She turned the page and left it blank. "Some names ask for night. In the daylight they will scorch. Today's lesson belonged to the children; the next lesson the women will study at night." Ananya asked, "May we sit with you?" Meera replied, "You may sit, but first let the age of listening grow inside you."

The green point on the stump glowed faintly in the darkness. The school's first lesson did not end; it began turning into a night assembly. The children closed the register but left the blank page open. In charcoal

above it they wrote: "Next Lesson: Women's Night Assembly." No crocodile was visible in the distant water, but a ripple made one circular ring—as though the boundary line of kabaddi had entered the night.

FOLK SONG: SAY PRESENT

Folk tune: attendance folk tune

Say it softly, say "Present";

Count the name even of the one no one counted.

The first lesson is not letters—say "Present";

Before the empty stone, bear your lost name.

The one whose name is not on paper also has a turn;

The one whose body is far away carries a debt present and heavy.

Some names scorch in the daylight;

The women's night assembly will open and tell their bodies.

The register is closed, the blank page open to night;

A crocodile-ripple drew a circle and spoke of the next turn.

Say "Present" softly for the one no one counted;

With one word a nameless life is born again.

Before the empty stone, bear your lost name;

The one whose body is far away—understand that debt as present.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE WOODEN PUPPET: A puppeteer moved a wooden puppet by strings. A voice came from the stage: "Bring the pot." The puppet turned, lifted a small pot and brought it.*]

CHAPTER 85

The Women's Night Assembly

*The true body of the words spoken by day opens in the night assembly,
when women begin to speak.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: A ROAD FROM THE DUST
OF FEET**

Folk tune: labour-traveller song

*Come, brothers, come with the dust-mark upon your brows;
Step by step, make the road of the future from footprints.*

*The dust of labourers' feet writes the map of the road;
Where labour steps, there alone can development be seen.
Do not brush the dust away in contempt; place it upon the forehead in
honour;
Shoes, rest and a safe road are all rights.*

*Step joining step makes road, bridge, house and city;
Without the worker's name no progress can be called complete.
From the dust of feet comes the road, from the road a bright future;
Respect for labour is Mithila's greatest adornment.*

*Upon the hands that carry bricks rests the first foundation of the
palace;
In the roots of bridge, road and city lives the life of sweat.
Rest, shoes and safe work are rights, not charity;
Without full respect for labour, progress has no honour.*



The page left open did not spend the night merely waiting—it summoned its own assembly as soon as evening fell. The first lesson of the Coconut-Leaf School, “Present,” had been taught by day; but the word’s true body opened at night. When the men’s arguments grew tired and returned home, when half the children slept and the other half kept watch, women began quietly gathering around the stump of Channa

Grove. No one announced that there would be a meeting. No one erected a stage. Yet one by one the women came carrying sari-ends, shawls, bags, sticks, lamps, water and silence, and around the stump the night itself became an assembly.

Ujjwal's mother came first. In her hand was her son's old shirt, never washed since the last day he had drowned in the screen. The smell of sweat had gone from it, but the hard salt of maternal memory remained. Behind her came Devika, the light of anger still sharp in her eyes. Saumya brought her notebook but did not open it. Meera carried a bundle containing red thread, blank paper and a small glass bowl. Ira, Ananya, Ba, two elderly women descended from Saryu's line, widows of bridge labourers, women cheated at hospitals, and the silent woman who had heard the secret-love story of the dance teacher also came.

The night air was moister than the day's. Fine drops of dew settled upon shawls; from the distant pond, an occasional frog-call and the slap of water became punctuation marks in the assembly. The green point that had broken from within the cut stump was not visible in the darkness, yet the women said they could smell it. Ba placed her hand on the edge of the stump and said, "Tonight neither men's papers nor government notices will be read. Tonight the body will speak." The silence that followed was not fear but consent.

Meera did not begin the meeting; she gave it protection. She said, "Whatever is spoken here belongs to the one who speaks it. No one's story will enter the register without her permission. No humiliation of any body will become spectacle. Whoever wishes to remain silent will have that silence accepted as present." By day the children's school had taught the word "Present"; at night the women filled that word with the breath of privacy.

The first testimony came not from Ujjwal's mother but from his shirt. She placed it beside the stump. "Everyone says my son lost to the screen. But he did not lose to the screen alone; he lost to the silence of a society that does not let fraud be spoken of at home because of shame. I am his mother, yet I too could not hear his fear. My testimony today is this: before the soul of a son is lost, the ears of the mother must open." Hearing this, Devika bent and touched the corner of the shirt. No one applauded; in the women's assembly, acceptance came not through the noise of hands but through a change in breathing.

Devika said, "I fight fraud, but I have learned that fraud does not eat money alone. It eats shame, trust and the right to admit one's mistake. When a girl says she has been trapped, she is blamed first. When a young man loses, he is called a fool. The fraudsters sit abroad operating accounts, while the family smashes a pot of shame upon the victim's head. That smashing will stop now."

Then a widow of a bridge labourer rose. In the register she had once been written as “Munna’s wife”; that night she said, “My name is Phulkumari. Water took Munna’s body beside the bridge pier. On paper he was not a labourer; he was called an absent worker. People kept calling me widow, but no one asked my name. When a labourer’s foot sinks into earth, the foot of the woman in his household sinks too. Tomorrow, if a chapter is written about the labourer’s feet, write the cracked lines of our heels as well.”

Saumya still kept her notebook closed. She began, “I—” then stopped and corrected her own language. “When I wrote in the city, I thought writing a woman’s story meant recording her pain. Now I understand—first record her permission, her language, her pauses, her refusals. Writing without listening is another kind of occupation.” Meera looked at her; agreement passed between them without a sentence.

Ira untied the knot of the migrant mind in her own testimony. “Abroad we search for village women in pictures—fish, paag, Madhubani, folk songs. But after coming here I have understood that the village woman is not merely colour; she is argument. When Gangesha’s justice was discussed, everyone spoke of reading the *Tattvacintamani*. But justice remains incomplete without the memory of the leatherworker woman suppressed from Gangesha’s life. Society kept the scripture and erased the woman’s name. How great a theft of names was that?”

At this question an elderly woman from Saryu’s line rose. Her voice was rough as a broom. “The caste system always builds its fortress by guarding a woman’s body. A daughter is killed in the name of purity of lineage; sticks rise in the name of love; fear spreads that marriage will change caste—none of this is honour. It is the rule of fear. Those killed in the name of honour come at night to Channa Grove. They are not ghosts; they are questions.”

Ba said softly, “Gangesha wrote the *Tattvacintamani*—said to equal twelve thousand books. But if we cannot read the name of one woman of society within it, for whom is the weight of twelve thousand books?” At her sentence a cracking sound came from the roots of the cut stump. The children keeping watch at a distance ran over. Ananya asked, “What shall I write?” Ba said, “Write—if justice does not understand the caste imposed upon a body, reasoning remains incomplete.”

Meera opened the red thread. A piece was given into every woman’s hand. The rough touch of the cotton felt like a vow-thread tied around the palm—light, yet impossible to forget. A rule was made: this thread would not be a bond but a reminder. A woman who had told her story would keep the thread on her own wrist, not leave it beside the stump. Telling a story does not turn a woman into public property; she continues to guard her own story. The small rule was enormous.

A young woman who had remained silent until then tied the thread around her wrist and said, "Do not write the name of my love. Write—one woman who, despite fear, refused to call the truth inside herself a lie." Meera looked at her and said, "The right to the name is yours. Not speaking the name is also protection of the name." Devika wrote on the page: "Confidentially present." All the women agreed to the new phrase.

Half the night had passed. From behind the stump of Channa Grove arose a sound like a winter wind. Someone thought Old Budhba's Ghost had come. But this time it was a woman's voice—very old, from an age when caste coiled around the body like a python, when marriage was called sin, when a woman's entry into the house of knowledge survived only as whisper. The voice was not clear, but its meaning was: "Read us not in books, but in life." Ira shivered. No one spoke a name, yet everyone understood that the women suppressed by history were present in the assembly.

Saumya opened her notebook for the first time. But she did not write the whole story. She wrote only the heading: "Evidence of the Body." Beneath it she left blank space. "Blank space too is a document. For what cannot be written without permission, leave blank space." The method of evidence within Gangesha's justice changed in the women's hands that night—beside perception, inference and testimony, "consent" too became evidence.

At that time a subtle drumbeat sounded from far away. No men were present. The ghosts' kabaddi? No. The children too were not playing. Then at the water's edge appeared three or four shadows—women ghosts whose feet moved forward without touching the ground. They did not play kabaddi. They measured the circle—as though examining whether Channa Grove had enough circumference for women's voices.

The assembly ended before dawn. No resolution was formally passed, but five things stood settled. First—no story of anyone's body without permission. Second—when caste inflicts violence upon love, marriage, labour or names, make it a question of justice. Third—the shame of digital fraud belongs not to the victim but to the fraudster and the silent society. Fourth—write the name of the woman of the household beside the labourer's name. Fifth—privacy is not the enemy of memory; it is memory's dignity.

In the first light before dawn, the women rose one by one. Whether the green point on the stump had grown a little larger that night or it was an illusion of the eye, no one could say. Phulkumari looked at her cracked heels and said, "Tomorrow let us read the labourer's feet." The children answered, "Present."

Before sunrise the women left, but around the stump remained the smell of red thread, the dampness of the shirt, the weight of the blank

page and the dust of cracked heels. Garh Narikel's next morning already knew: the history of those whose feet were buried in the bridge piers was not only the history of male labourers; with them had sunk women's heels, children's hunger and the unspoken names of households. From here the story turned toward the labourer's feet.

FOLK SONG: THE WOMEN'S NIGHT

Folk tune: women's-circle farewell song

The assembly rose, the women's night assembly rose;

Untold stories became the lesson of morning.

Words of day find their true bodies at night;

When sisters speak, earth and house tremble.

Red thread, damp shirt, the weight of the blank page;

In cracked heels lies the bridge's whole history.

The man's name in the pier, the woman's labour at home;

The child's hunger too sank into that iron voice.

Phulkumari said—tomorrow read the feet;

Whoever's heel is cracked, build that name too.

The night assembly rose; its scent remained at the door;

Women's untold stories became the morning lesson.

Phulkumari said—tomorrow read the feet again.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE DOOR: Birro rose. Bihari stopped; yet how a whole sentence awoke within a single word remained a matter of discussion.*]

CHAPTER 86

The Labourer's Feet

Once the name is present, ask—upon what earth did those feet fall?

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: REST FOR THE SCREEN,
FESTIVAL FOR THE EYES**

Folk tune: daylong folk song

*Put the screen away, give it one day of rest;
Fill the cupped hands of the eyes with trees and sky.*

*Let the screen rest for one day, let the eyes go to the grove;
See the colour of earth, the veins of leaves, the movement of clouds.
Let the phone be silent, the family speak, the courtyard hear songs;
Let the child sit beside grandmother and choose an old game.*

*Fasting from the screen is not punishment but a festival of life;
In face-to-face laughter, the taste of belonging returns.
The eyes rest, the mind widens, the body's rhythm mends;
With balance beside technology, life grows beautiful.*

*The phone sleeps in a basket, the courtyard stays awake;
Grandmother and grandchild play counters, laughter falling in
streams.
The colour of earth, the veins of leaves, the slow movement of clouds;
This feast for the eyes fills the mind's empty plate.*



By morning the story that had turned took the road—from the village to the half-built bridge. After the republic of names completed its first lesson, the children felt that saying “Present” did not finish the story. Once a name was present, they also needed to hear how that body had moved, on what earth its feet had fallen, in what bridge its labour had been buried. So one morning the children of the Coconut-Leaf School took the register, kohl, an earthen bowl and some blank leaves

and walked toward the half-built bridge where, years before, labourers' names had been dropped from the contractor's account.

From afar the bridge showed iron, sand, cement, government paint, inauguration ribbon and a stony deck shining in the sun. But the closer one came, the more fatigue appeared in its body. The soil beside the pier still sank in a strange way, as though something remained trapped below. Aruni had seen the map of that place many times, measured it many times, marked warnings in red in files many times. Yet walking there with the children that day, he felt that the true measure of a bridge was not taken with a tape but with the fatigue of feet.

An old man came first—Munna Paswan's uncle. He wore no sandals. The soles were cracked, the heels split, the big toenail bent, yet his stride had a strange steadiness. He stood beside the first pier and said, "My brother's sweat fell here. His name is not on paper, but the pressure of his feet is here." The children fell silent. Ananya placed the earthen bowl before him. The old man set his foot in it, then left an impression upon a leaf. The cool wet clay climbed from the sole upward, and when the print was lifted it made a faint snapping sound—as though the earth itself had raised and handed over its seal.

This was the first footprint. Not a photograph, not an identity card, not a thumbprint of the kind seized by a bank, police station or office. It was a footprint—evidence of a life that had walked. Gangesha's question descended again upon the leaf. Perception—the cracked foot stood before them. Inference—within those cracks were hidden rain, sun, hunger, loads and the contractor's abuse. Testimony—the uncle was speaking. Yet the children understood a fourth evidence too: the smell of labour, which remains less upon paper and more within earth.

Ira wrote upon the leaf: "The foot of Munna Paswan's uncle: labour present." Ba dropped one bead of water on the leaf. It spread and blurred the line of kohl slightly, but did not erase it. Ba said, "That is how the name of labour is—tears may make it faint, but cannot erase it."

Gradually the families of labourers arrived. Someone's father had worked on the bridge, someone's husband, someone's son, someone's sister who carried food for the workers. At first the women hesitated—"Why our feet?" Devika asked, "Did the feet that carried bread not labour?" At that question a woman lifted the edge of her skirt, placed her foot in the earth, and printed it upon a leaf. In her foot sounded not anklets but kitchen smoke and river mud.

Leaf after leaf beside the pier filled with feet—black, grey, wet, crooked, small, broad; children's, elders', women's, men's. Every print was different; every print held a story. In government records the labourers were "numbers." In the contractor's accounts, "daily wages." In the foreign consultant's paper, "workforce." But upon these leaves they rose as

feet—the feet on which the bridge stood, for whom no nameplate had ever been placed upon it.

Aruni touched the bridge pier. His hand trembled. He was an engineer; he had been taught to measure load, depth, mixture, proportion, tension and pressure. No one had taught him that contempt for labour hollows out a bridge's soul. He said to the children, "A bridge that does not keep the labourers' names is an incomplete bridge." Ananya immediately wrote: "A bridge is complete when the feet are present."

At that moment Chandrapal Batra's men arrived from a distance. They carried a small plaque: "Martyr Labourers' Memorial Wall." The size was decided, the place decided, the letters decided. One man said, "Give us the names, we will print them." The children pointed to the circle of leaves and said, "The names may be printed, but first read the feet." The man laughed. "Can feet be read?" The old uncle replied, "One who cannot read feet cannot read the bones pressed beneath a bridge either."

At this sentence the air changed. From beneath the bridge arose not water but a cold groan. The air under the iron shadow was heavy like stale water; as soon as it touched the body, the skin chilled. No one went closer to look. Everyone understood that a resting-place of labour's bones is not always a cremation ground; sometimes it lives beneath a bridge being built, a rising building, a gleaming road, or an inauguration stage.

Meera added another rule that day. She said, "Whoever gives a footprint—without that person's permission, the image, story or tears will not go into any leaflet, screen or stage." The women agreed. The oath of privacy was now joined to the dignity of labour. Earlier humiliation of the body broke privacy; now humiliation of labour sold memory. They were two teeth of the same crocodile.

Saumya arranged the footprints in order. She was not making notes; she was making a guard. On the back of every leaf they wrote one sentence: "This print is preserved for public memory with the family's consent." Gop Kumar's eyes lit up at the sentence. He said, "Not data—trust." The children laughed. Devika said, "Yes, and if trust is stolen, we will write the thief's name too."

By afternoon a long path of leaves had formed beside the bridge pier. The path moved toward the water and then turned back toward the stump of Channa Grove. It was as though the workers' feet had not merely built the bridge and crossed the river; they were returning to the village by the road of memory. The children lifted the leaves one by one, spoke the names, and the families answered "Present." The old rhythm of kabaddi returned here—one foot crossing the boundary, holding breath, speaking a name, then returning.

Then Ananya suddenly drew a line in the earth. "Feet on this side, paper on that side. Any paper that refuses the name of the feet is out." The children immediately understood the game. One child crossed saying "kabaddi-kabaddi," reached the paper plaque, lifted it, placed it inside the circle of footprints, and returned before the breath broke. Everyone laughed. Yet there was justice in the laughter. The game again moved faster than the language of law.

Satyavrat Mehta stood behind them watching. He remembered countless affidavits in court. How many testimonies correct on paper but false to life; how many witnesses absent in court but present in the earth. Slowly he removed his shoes. Aruni was startled. Satyavrat placed his feet on the soil and said, "I am not a labourer, but in the silent crime of this bridge my feet too have eaten dust." The children did not take his print. Ananya said, "Not your feet. Your silence has already been written. This place belongs to labourers' feet." Satyavrat bowed his head and stepped back. Even the refusal given to him became part of justice that day.

As evening came, the footprints were spread on stones to dry. The last line of sunlight fell across the leaves and shone. Each foot seemed marked not by fire but by memory. Ba said, "Whose feet are correctly read upon earth, that soul need not wander in the water." At the sentence a faint ripple rose in the distant river. No crocodile appeared, but a dark shadow turned upon the surface and vanished again.

By night the footprints were brought beside the stump of Channa Grove. The stones of names and the leaves of feet were placed together. The archive was no longer only of names; it became an archive of lives that had walked. The children opened a new section in the register: "Archive of Feet." Its first sentence read: "Whoever walked upon the earth requires not only a garland upon the head in memory, but justice for the feet."

As everyone began to return home, the sound of a labourer's sandal continued for a long time from the direction of the bridge. No one was there. Perhaps wind. Perhaps memory within the roots. Perhaps those labourers whose wages were withheld, whose names were erased, whose bodies drowned, yet whose feet were still walking upon the earth.

As she walked home Ananya said, "Tomorrow the school will have no screens." Devika asked, "Why?" Ananya replied, "Today we read feet. Tomorrow we must open the eyes and ears again. The screen that chews the mind all day will fast for one day." The children laughed with the held breath of kabaddi. The next day a screen-fast was to begin in Garh Narikel.

FOLK SONG: DUST OF THE LABOURER'S FEET

Folk tune: labour song

*Read the dust, read the dust of the labourer's feet;
At every step remember the name of an unnamed worker.*

*The name is present; now ask the earth of the feet;
Which field did they leave, inside which pier do they sleep?
Sandals worn, heels cracked, wages left far away;
In the bridge's breast is buried the warm light of labour.
The returning wind heard the sound of sandals;*

*No one was there, yet the rhythm of footsteps sounded.
Without justice for the feet, justice for names is incomplete;
Read the dust, read the road, read the labourer fully.
When you walk upon the bridge, honour the steps below;
At every step remember the name of an unnamed worker.*

No one was there, yet the rhythm of footsteps sounded.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE VILLAGE ON THE GANGA:
A traveller was told, "The village is on the Ganga." He took a boat and
began searching for houses in the current. Because of an intimate relation
with the Ganga, the word "Ganga" indicated the riverbank. The village
earth was damp with water, its life dependent upon the river.]

CHAPTER 87

Fasting from the Screen

*After a one-day fast from the screen, the sound of one's own breath
returns to the ears.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: MORNING FROM HOME IN
A LETTER ABROAD**

Folk tune: traveller-letter song

Write a letter, write to the one abroad;

Fill it with courtyard laughter and news of every new shoot.

Write to the child abroad—the courtyard is still laughing;

A shoot has broken from the cut stump, tulsi leaves are still there.

Mother's health, father's field, water in the pond;

With true news from home, distance grows lighter.

No commands in the letter, only an open door of affection;

Return whenever you wish, the home will remain ready.

Send morning abroad in a letter, fill it with the colours of hope;

In a distant city the smell of home will become a bright thread.

The tulsi altar, pond water, father's fields and threshing ground;

Mother's fritters made from colocasia leaves—tell of them all.

Not an order but an invitation of affection; the door will remain open;

The scent of the letter will make the room abroad smell of home.



The morning of the announced fast awakened the village's ears before it awakened anything else. The earth on the labourers' footprints had not even dried when the children of the Coconut-Leaf School made their next decision—a one-day screen-fast in Garh Narikel. A fast not of food, but of sight. Eyes trapped all day in shining glass would spend one day looking toward earth, water, faces, stones, names and sky.

As soon as the proposal was heard, the village split in two. Someone said, "No mobile phones? Then how will we receive news?" Another

asked, "What about shop transactions? A medical call? A message from a son living in the city?" The children made no harsh rule. They said, "For emergencies the road of voice will remain open. But let there be one day's rest from greed, lies, spectacle, games, gambling, humiliation, fear and purposeless staring."

Ananya placed a small earthen pot beside the stump. It was named the "screen-pot." Whoever voluntarily wished to deposit a mobile phone, old device, broken tablet, small gaming screen—whatever it was—for one day placed it in a cloth bag beside the pot. No one was compelled. The children had learned from Gangsha's question that morality forced by power is not evidence either; it is merely another form of fear.

Devika placed her phone first. A slight tremor crossed her face, because shadows of Ujjwal's last message still came and went in that device. Tying the bag, she said, "Let it rest for one day too." Meera placed her device and said, "The thing that once tried to sell my sight will close its eyes today." Saumya hesitated for a while; news kept arriving from a distant city. Then she said, "Today I will hear the news from people's mouths."

Satyavrat Mehta placed his small mobile phone last. People looked at him in surprise. He did not even smile. "For many years, as soon as the phone rang, I rose from the middle of people's voices. Today the phone will remain silent and I will remain seated." Hearing this, Ba slowly nodded. She had no mobile phone, but she placed her old spectacles beside the pot. "My sight too has been blurred for some days; today I will listen."

The day of the screen-fast opened in a strange way. On an ordinary day the first thing to rise from each house was the chime of notifications; that day the rooster's call, the clang of a ladle, the creak of a well-rope and children's laughter were heard first. It seemed to the village that its ears had been returned.

People gathered around the stump of Channa Grove. Today there was no reading of names but a "reading of mouths." One person from each household told an old story—on which day the news of the first bridge had been heard; whose boat broke in which flood-night; who went to the city for medicine and was cheated; who saved whom from a screen-lie; who, after hearing a threat of digital arrest, ran to open the door. The stories held fear of technology, but even more the loneliness of human beings.

Gop Kumar spread out a paper map that day. He did not open a digital list. By hand they began writing the names of those cheated by screen-fraud whose voices had never been recorded anywhere. An old farmer said, "I did not understand the bank message. My son was in the city. People in the village said everything happens by phone now. The phone

ate my field.” The children wrote a sentence: “The phone does not eat the field; loneliness does.”

At noon the children of the school went out to play kabaddi instead of using their phones. But this was no ordinary kabaddi. The rule was: while crossing the line, a child would not say “kabaddi” but a name. If, before the breath broke, the child could tell that name’s story, the child could return. If the name remained incomplete, all the players together would complete it. Winning and losing gave way to practice in presence.

The first boy crossed the line and said, “Saryu...” then stopped. From the other side came a voice: “Saryu Paswan, labourer.” A third said, “His name was buried in the bridge pier.” The boy completed his breath and returned. No one applauded; everyone said only, “Present.” Kabaddi became a game again, but inside the game the body of history was moving.

Watching this, Old Budhba’s Ghost became almost clearly visible in the shade of the stump. In daylight his figure was not smoke but that of a tired man. Seeing the children play, a smile came to him. Perhaps he understood that the ghosts’ kabaddi had reached the children’s hands; spirits no longer needed to guard defeat but could hand over the tradition of play.

Meera and the women taught the second lesson of privacy that day. They said, “Merely turning off the mobile phone is not enough. Another person’s face, grief, love, body or tears—simply seeing them does not make you their owner.” At this sentence some young men were ashamed. Digital fraud does not steal only money; it can make the gaze itself criminal—this understanding slowly entered everyone.

By evening old songs returned to the village. Songs that had once been sung at weddings and gradually drowned under the loud music of phones emerged from the throats of elderly women. Some lines were complete, some half remembered. The children wrote down the half-lines too. Ba said, “The incompleteness of a song also needs guarding, just like a name.” The cut stump of Channa Grove seemed to grow slightly damp at those songs, as though its roots were listening beneath the water.

For the shopkeepers the day was difficult. Transactions were written by hand. The smell of red cloth on ledgers and fresh ink spread through the shops—the smell of relationship before the smell of sale, after many years. For the first time many people understood how much debt there actually was, the full name of the debtor, which widow took rice on credit and how often she repaid without speaking. With the screen on, numbers were visible; when it was off, relationships appeared.

Meanwhile Chandrapal Batra grew restless in a distant city. That day his tribute app showed little activity from Garh Narikel. The data fell. Clicks fell. The flow of donations paused. He understood that if one

village could live for one day without a screen, a hole had opened in his net. He wanted to send Raghav a message but stopped himself, because Raghav's network had already shut down from within in an earlier chapter.

Broom's research team was astonished. They knew the phrase "digital detox," but Garh Narikel's fast did not fit inside it. People here had not turned off their screens as a health fashion. They were trying to return the names of the dead, the right to privacy, the farmer's debt, the labourer's body and the breath of kabaddi to human beings. Harvard's notebook remained blank that day because the right words were hard to find.

At night, when the bags were opened, no one snatched up a phone in haste. First the children announced around the stump: "The device is returning, and the rules return with it." The rules were written: phones off during the nightly reading of names; no picture of anyone's tears without permission; no entertainment made from anyone's grief; do not read a fraudulent message alone—ask the community; when afraid, do not stay with the phone—knock on a human door.

People picked up their devices one by one, but this time they did not immediately put them in their pockets; they weighed them in their hands. As though each mobile phone were asking: am I the master or the tool? The children left a blank place for the answer. Some questions are not filled in immediately; they are lived.

In the last watch of night, when everyone was tired and content, Ananya looked toward the sky. Because the shade of Channa Grove had been cut away, the sky was now fully open. Eyes without screens took time to adjust to the darkness; then the stars appeared one by one—as though the eyes too were breaking their fast. In the north-west a very tiny green point flashed and vanished. Someone called it a star, someone an aircraft, someone an illusion. The children wrote in the register: "Today the screen closed; the sky opened."

Ira gazed for a long time toward the green point. She thought of the children of Garh Narikel living abroad—children who understood only half their Maithili, saw the village in pictures, and took the pain of their roots as stories. That very night she decided to write to them. The letter would not say, "Remember the village." It would ask: if there is a screen in your hand, can you also hear the names?

Ba's spectacles beside the pot, Satyavrat's phone, Devika's device, Meera's thread and the children's register shone together in the moonlight. The screen-fast ended, but its hunger did not. People understood that one day of silence was not enough; every day needed a small corner where there was no screen, only the human voice.

FOLK SONG: FASTING FROM THE SCREEN

Folk tune: daylong folk song

*Keep one day, keep one day of fasting from the screen;
Look beyond the screen toward the homes of your people.*

*One day the screen closed and the eyes saw earth;
The ears recorded their own breath, stove and water-wheel.
The mobile stayed hungry, the human being filled again;
The old road between face and face reappeared.
Beside the pot spectacles, thread and register shone;*

*In the silence, questions of distant children were born.
Keep one corner every day where no screen remains;
There let only human breath and names flow.
The fast is for one day, the lesson for a lifetime;
Look beyond the screen toward the homes of your people.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—SAINDHAVA: While eating, the king said, “Bring saindhava.” The servant ran toward the stable because saindhava can also mean a horse from Sindh. The cook stopped him: “At mealtime the king is asking for salt, not a horse.” The same word, two meanings.]

CHAPTER 88

Ira's Letter to Children Abroad

*Whether the letter arrived is not for the post office to decide—the reply
finds its own road.*



**CHAPTER-OPENING FOLK SONG: THE CHAUPAL OF
UNHEARD VOICES**

Folk tune: public-hearing mangal

*Give a seat, give the unheard the first seat;
Do not interrupt midway; hear the whole story.*

*Give the first seat to the one who was never heard;
Do not interrupt—give dignity to telling the whole story.
Make the chaupal round, lower the height of the stage;
Light lamps of quiet ears and bring every unheard voice.*

*Testimony is not weak because its language is simple;
People's experience can preserve a new direction for law.
The chaupal of unheard voices will make society complete;
Through a culture of listening, justice will enter every home.*

*Break the steps of the stage and spread a round chaupal;
Give honour to testimony spoken in simple language.
Keep the lamp of the ear burning, filled with the oil of patience;
Through this culture of listening, justice comes to the doorstep.*



The first line written before dawn was now demanding its complete letter. On the second morning after the screen-fast, the village sky seemed a little clearer. During the day when mobile phones remained closed, people's ears had recovered the sounds of their own bodies—the breath, footsteps, water rising on a pulley, rice cooking on the stove, and children's kabaddi. But Ira understood that this fast was not enough for those inside the village alone. Many children of Garh Narikel were growing up in homes where there was no smoke from a hearth but

machines blowing warm air; where the river existed in photographs and the village was a “place” for holidays, not a debt of life.

That morning Ira sat on the veranda of the Coconut-Leaf School. Before her stood the cut stump of Channa Grove, the green point on one side and stones of names on the other. Among those stones were some whose names children born abroad could not pronounce. Looking at them, Ira thought: how will a child who cannot speak an ancestor's name hear that ancestor's grief? How will one who hears the village only as story participate in the village's justice?

Upon a leaf she wrote the first sentence: “Dear children living far away, Garh Narikel is not your holiday picture; it is your responsibility.” Her hand stopped as soon as she wrote it. Wherever the reed-pen moved, the veins of the leaf rose beneath her fingers—as though the letter were being written upon its own body. The word responsibility was severe, but necessary. If memory becomes only sweetness, it can be sold like confectionery in a market. When memory becomes responsibility, the teeth of crocodiles jam when they try to chew it.

In the letter Ira wrote that the village earth was not only the memory of hearth, pond, mango, betel, fish and the taste of paan. The village was also the place where labourers' feet were buried beneath bridge piers, where a young man's mind drowned in digital fraud, where a camera lunged at a woman's privacy, where a court chewed up years, where names waited in the darkness of Channa Grove. If you are descendants of this village, your first task is not to make its grief visible but audible—listen first.

In the middle of the letter she made a short line of rules: “If you come to Garh Narikel, do not take a photograph first; hear one name first. If you do not understand the language, learn the pronunciation. If you mispronounce, apologise to the family that owns the name. If you come to research, keep silence before the question. If you wish to donate, give your attention before your money.”

As she wrote, Ira remembered her days abroad: orderly cities, measured roads, shining glass, the silence of libraries, and within that silence her own incomplete pronunciation. Abroad people had often asked her, “Does your village have ghost stories?” She had smiled, because then it had been hard to answer: say yes and it became spectacle; say no and it became untruth. Now she wrote, “If you ask about ghosts, understand first—the ghost is not the thing that frightens you; the ghost is a name whose justice was never completed.”

Ananya sat beside her. Reading the letter she asked, “Will children born abroad be able to write the name of their village?” Ira said, “Perhaps not. But the child who tries can become a watchkeeper.” Ananya

removed a blank page from the register. "We will write their replies here."

In the second part of the letter Ira added Gangesha's story. She wrote: "Mithila is not merely a land of caste pride; it is a land of questions. Gangesha Upadhyaya wrote the *Tattvacintamani* and gave birth to Navya-Nyaya. Yet society tried to suppress the inconvenient episodes of his life. If you hear Mithila's glory, hear Mithila's injustice too. Those who worship the thinker but fear the truth of the thinker's life are not practising justice; they are trading in idols."

The letter continued: "Caste is the first theft of a name. It places a guard of lineage before a human name. The children of Garh Narikel are writing against this theft. Names pressed inside leatherworker, Das, boatman, Musahar, woman, widow, migrant, labourer, lover, cheated youth, ashamed family or silent body will all be called Present in full voice."

Saumya remained silent over this part of the letter for a long time. It seemed to her that Ira was not merely calling children abroad; she was teaching them the ethics of arrival. The memory of the village had often become decoration in outside hands. Now Ira wanted even the village's own children abroad not to become decorators, but to learn how to guard.

By afternoon several copies of the letter had been made—some on coconut leaves, some on paper, some for electronic sending. Devika said, "The screen-fast is over and now the screen again?" Ira smiled. "The screen itself is not a crocodile. The screen that chews names is a crocodile; the screen that carries names back home is a boat." Devika wrote the sentence down. It would be useful in the school's lessons against digital fraud.

In the evening the first letter crossed the sea. It did not become visible, rise into the air, or turn into a bird; yet a faint light fell on the green point of the stump. The children said the letter had travelled by the road of the sky. That evening there was no sound like the bell of a postal runner; only one long rustling of coconut leaves, slowly fading toward the sea. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "Not a letter—breath has gone." His voice was barely audible, but Ananya wrote: "Breath sent to distant lands."

Two days later a reply came. The first was from a boy in Toronto called "Neil" at home, though his grandmother had called him Neelkanth. He wrote: "I have never been to Garh Narikel. I have seen Channa Grove in pictures. I read names incorrectly. But I will learn. Send me my first name." Ira did not cry while reading the letter, but her voice grew soft. She said to Ananya, "Send him first the name of that labourer whose family has no one abroad."

The second reply came from Melbourne. A girl wrote: "My mother says the village has too many complications, so stay in the city. But if names are buried inside those complications, I want to listen." The third was from a child in Dubai: "My father builds buildings, but his name is not written on the building. Will his name also enter the watch of names?" The Coconut-Leaf School discussed this question all day. The chapter on the labourer's feet returned to memory.

Replies multiplied. Some children could not write Devanagari, some could not speak Maithili, some did not know the meaning of their surname, some had forgotten how to pronounce the village of a grandmother. Yet in every reply a similar line appeared: "I am present, but I still have learning to do." The children decided to make a special stone for the sentence. On it they wrote: "Present from afar."

The people of Batuknath Hariharan's Public Memory Trust became excited when they heard about the letters. Children abroad, migrant families, donations, stages, conferences, broadcasts—this seemed to them an opportunity to institutionalise memory. But below the letter Ira had written clearly: "This letter is not raw material for any trust, institution, stage, prize, donation appeal or cultural spectacle. It is a children's dialogue for guarding names." Hariharan's people frowned when they read the line.

Edward Broom's research team also took interest in the replies. Their phrase was "diaspora-memory network." Ira answered, "Call it a network and the language of wires, data, grants and ownership returns. I call it a chain of breath." The translator stopped. "Chain of breath" was difficult to render into English. Ira said, "Let it remain difficult. Not everything is born for translation."

At night, when "Present from afar" was written upon the stone, the shadow of the stump became unusually long. Whether it was stretching beyond the village boundary, across the bridge, station, airport and sea, no one directly saw. But the children writing letters dreamed of the cut stump, the green point and the circular line of kabaddi.

In Toronto Neelkanth dreamed that beneath his feet on snow the earth was warm. The girl in Melbourne saw sea-waves form Maithili letters and break upon the shore. The child in Dubai saw labourers' footprints turning to stone upon a sand dune. Their mobile screens did not shine all night; they trembled once, displayed "Present," and went dark.

These replies affected Garh Narikel too. Those who had mocked migrant children as "foreign, spoiled, language-forgetting" fell silent. Ba said, "Do not cut off the ear of one who wishes to hear a name from far away." Meera added, "But teach etiquette to the eyes along with the ears." Devika said, "And I will teach how to steer the screen-boat."

Ira sent the final copy to Satyavrat Mehta. With the letter she enclosed the children's replies, a picture of the "Present from afar" stone, and a question: "How should we hear the testimony of those who are distant, who do not know the language, who are not directly guilty of the wrongdoing, yet have grown up inside the world that benefited from it?" Satyavrat looked at the question for a long time. The law books had no prepared answer.

Late at night Satyavrat wrote back: "A public hearing is not only for bodies present in the room; it is also for debts that are present. If Garh Narikel wishes, the letters of distant children may be read at the next hearing." He folded the letter and sent it.

The next morning, when children gathered around the stump of Channa Grove, Ananya opened the register and wrote the heading: "Satyavrat's Public Hearing." Ira placed the letters from distant countries beside it. The green point on the cut stump was becoming two leaves. And the village understood—the hearing no longer had a boundary.

FOLK SONG: LETTER TO CHILDREN ABROAD

Folk tune: traveller-letter song

Write a letter, write to the children abroad;

Wherever you are, make a little chaupal of names.

From the light of the cut stump we sent word abroad;

Child, your village is not merely a small place upon a map.

Close the screen and hear the voices of stove and water;

The names of your ancestors still live in houses of leaves.

You were born far away, yet the debt is present;

The road of the letter finds you; the post cannot guarantee it.

Make maps, send questions, pronounce the names correctly;

A child beyond the border too can stand as a watchkeeper.

*Not merely from the village—from the light of the roots this affection
was written;*

Wherever you are, give names a small chaupal there.

Make maps, send questions—become a watchkeeper with resolve.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE DISPUTE OVER PANKAJA: A poet wrote, “The pankaja bloomed.” A new student of grammar objected: “A water-lily, insect or other thing born in mud could also be called pankaja; the meanings of the components lead that way.” The poet pointed to the lotus in the pond. “The components pank, ‘mud,’ and ja, ‘born,’ provide a general derivation, but the complete word-community, through long usage, evokes the particular lotus.”]

CHAPTER 89

Satyavrat's Public Hearing

*At a public hearing, the greatest testimony is that which has never yet
been heard.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: THE PEOPLE'S LAW OF THE LEAF

Folk tune: Song of the People's Law

Read, O read the veins of the leaf, read Earth's law there,

Bear this constitution without a seal upon your head with care.

*In every vein of the dry leaf a river-road is drawn,
Nature's constitution stands accepted without a seal upon it.
Share the water, save the shade, guard the seed's right,
Creature, soil, and human—let the world live side by side.*

*If law stays joined to people, it will bend like a leaf,
Justice will reach the roots and shelter every life.
Read the leaf's people's law—simple, yet great,
In the letters of coexistence lives the breath of Earth.*

*Water first for the thirsty, shade first for the traveller,
The seed belongs to the next generation, the soil to everyone.
With creatures, trees, and plants together the world moves on,
In every letter of the people's law the Earth is nourished.*



No sooner had that new heading been written in the register than the day of the hearing seemed to stand before them of its own accord. No post office could certify whether Ira's letter had reached the children abroad. Yet the reply to that letter arrived in Garh Narikel in a strange way. The first answer from overseas was not an e-mail, not a parcel, not a money order—it came as a map drawn by a child's hand. Across the sea was a city of tall glass buildings, in its middle a small round dot, and above the dot, in trembling Devanagari letters: "Where am I to keep my grandmother's name here?"

Ira pinned the map to the wall of the Coconut-Leaf School. At first the children laughed, because no one could imagine where, in the middle of such a city, a grandmother's name might be kept. But the laughter quickly turned into silence. Ananya said, "The farther one is from one's soil, the more space one needs for a name." After that sentence, for the first time, a village child and a child abroad met inside the same sheet of paper.

That was when the date of Satyavrat Mehta's public hearing was fixed. Public hearing—the people of Garh Narikel had once heard the phrase with fear. In a government hearing the platform stood high, an official sat in a chair, announcements came through a microphone, police stood behind and files lay in front; people compressed their suffering into two minutes and received "under consideration" in reply. This time the hearing was to take place around the stump of the felled Channa tree. No platform, no rows of chairs, no microphone. The listeners would sit on the ground. The speakers would sit in the stump's shade.

Satyavrat Mehta arrived last. People were surprised, because he had earlier been urged to sit among everyone that day. But as soon as he arrived he said, "Today I am not the chair. Today I am not even the recorder. First, I am a listener. The children will write." An old disciple of Batuknath Hariharan, who had quietly slipped into the crowd, tried to smile at this; but the children noticed him. Here even a smile could become testimony.

Ananya, Devika, Meera, Ira, Aruni, Saumya, Gop Kumar and many women and men sat in a circle. Three objects were placed in the middle—the old register, a dry leaf of the Channa tree, and an empty clay bowl. The tips of grass beneath them pricked their thighs like tiny thorns, a lesson no chair had ever taught. Satyavrat asked, "Why the bowl?" Ba replied, "The silence of those who cannot speak will be placed here." Satyavrat lowered his head. He felt that his own silence, too, was asking for a place in that bowl.

The first testimony did not begin with Ira's letter or the map from abroad. It came from an old leatherworker woman. Leaning on her stick, she stepped forward and said, "When Gangesha's question arose, an old fire in my house flared up again. The caste that is willing to see me make its sandals does not want to see my daughter study scripture. You speak of justice—then ask: who makes the shoes of knowledge?"

Everyone fell still at the question. Satyavrat tried to write, but Ananya stopped his hand. "Let the question be completed first," she said. The old woman continued, "Gangesha wrote the Tattvacintamani and people accepted his book. But the story that breaks caste's glass was suppressed as shame. Tell me—whose honour? Whose killing? If thought was preserved and life was destroyed, what kind of justice is that?"

This time Satyavrat remained silent. It was not the silence of escape. Fivefold definitions of Navya-Nyaya rose within him, but the question of the woman before him stripped them naked one by one. Evidence belonged not only to books; the humiliation of a body was evidence too. Inference did not travel only from smoke to fire; it travelled from caste-smiles to violence. Testimony was not only the word of scripture; it was also the broken voice of the old woman.

The second testimony was connected with the map from abroad. Ira read from a letter: "At my school, Mithila is a project. I wrote my grandmother's name. The teacher said, 'Correct the spelling.' But my grandmother's name was not a spelling; it was my grandmother's voice." The children in the school looked towards the wall. On the hanging map, the glass city suddenly seemed a little blurred while the small round dot began to shine.

Satyavrat asked, "Under what category shall we record this reply?" Gop Kumar said, "Diaspora memory." Meera said, "Record it with consent." Ba said, "The child's grandmother's name first, the category later." In the end the register received the line: "Question of a child born far away: a name needs pronunciation, not spelling alone."

The third testimony came from the families of labourers. The new courage that had arisen after soil was brought from beneath the bridge pier now took the form of words. A young man said, "On paper my father was a temporary labourer. In the water he became permanent." Bodies in the circle shuddered. There was no joke in that one sentence, only the cruelty of the state. A dry Channa leaf trembled against the rim of the bowl. The children wrote: "Permanent water-burial of a temporary name."

This time Satyavrat himself spoke. "I will not deliver a verdict on these testimonies. In the habit of giving verdicts, for years we have made people's voices smaller. Today each testimony will remain in its own size." His voice was low, but there was hardness in the statement. Some people were disappointed; they wanted him to pronounce something like an order at once. Devika whispered, "An order would put power back into someone's hand. Let the hearing be shared hand to hand."

The rules of the hearing took shape there itself. No one who spoke would be interrupted. Whoever did not wish to speak could place their silence in the bowl. Whoever did not want a name made public could leave a sign instead. Testimony that wished to become an accusation and travel to court would have a separate page. Testimony that wished only to remain memory would not be pushed into a file. It was not a court, yet it was more careful than a court.

At midday Gop Kumar brought a copy of an old message from Raghav "Signal" Somani. It read: "Turn emotion into content, content

into funding, funding into control.” People read it and understood that the market’s plan for memory had been hidden inside the words themselves. Beside the sentence Satyavrat wrote: “To call people’s memory ‘content’ is a second killing.” Ananya smiled. It was the first time Satyavrat’s pen was strengthening the hearing instead of reducing it.

Near evening something remarkable happened. Five children began drawing kabaddi lines at the edge of the cut stump. The hearing was still under way, and people first wanted to scold them. But Ba stopped them. “Hearing and play are not separate. A game played on held breath teaches how to listen to names.” Chanting “kabaddi, kabaddi,” the children circled the enclosure. On each round they touched a stone bearing a name. When a name was touched, the family answered, “Present.” The thud of running feet sent a faint tremor through the soil and into the palms of those sitting there—as though testimony were running beneath the ground as well. Play became a method of testimony.

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta understood why so much of the language of law, once written, had become lifeless. It did not know play. It did not know how to hold its breath. It did not touch names. It only read clauses in sequence. The children running around the Channa tree gave justice a body again. Satyavrat closed his notebook and, for the first time, listened with empty hands.

When night fell, the empty clay bowl had not filled, yet it had grown heavy. So many silences had been placed inside it. Meera tried to lift it, but the bowl did not move. Then the old leatherworker woman came forward again. “If you want to lift silence,” she said, “let caste, shame, fear, and office release their hands.” Four adults withdrew their hands. The girl Ananya placed one hand on the bowl, and it lifted.

The adults remained silent. Ananya opened a blank page of the register and wrote: “Rules are needed to guard names.” Satyavrat closed his eyes. A sentence rose inside him: “If rules are not given to the next generation, memory will be looted again.” But he did not say it. He looked at the girl. Ananya opened the blank page and wrote once more: “Rules are needed to guard names.”

All the children bent over that page. Someone wrote the first rule: “We will not erase names.” The second: “We will not mock silence.” The third: “We will not turn pain into spectacle.” The fourth: “The dignity of the body comes first.” The fifth: “Consent before putting anything on a screen.” The sixth: “We will not kill the truth of a life in the name of caste.” Satyavrat watched. The public hearing had, by itself, become the birthplace of a people’s code.

In the last watch of the night everyone departed. Around the stump remained the stones, leaves, bowl, register, and the rules written by the children. The moon was overhead, but its light no longer seemed like an

order; it seemed like a reading lamp. The shimmer of Budhba's ghost appeared behind the stump. Today he said nothing. Perhaps he understood that on the day children begin to write rules, a ghost's duty of guarding becomes a little lighter.

The farther Satyavrat Mehta walked, the more one line written by the children kept sounding in his ears: "Rules are needed to guard names." He knew that the next day those rules would be asked for a name. Someone would call them a proposal, someone a code, someone a people-written oath. But the stump of the Channa tree knew: this was the first breath of a small constitution.

FOLK SONG: WHAT WAS NEVER HEARD

Folk tune: Public Hearing Song

*Listen, O listen, listen to what was never heard,
From unheard voices weave a new rule of the people.*

The greatest testimony is the voice that was suppressed,

A far-off child's map opened a new court.

The body is absent, the debt is present,

Letter, stone, tears, question—all are witnesses.

The moon became no order, but a reading lamp,

The children's rules kept sounding in Mehta's ears.

A ghost's watch grows lighter when children write law,

A breath of rules rises to guard the names.

A public hearing is no stage—it is the discipline of listening,

From unheard voices a new governance is made.

From the far child's map a new court opened.

The children's rules kept sounding in Mehta's ears.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE CHILD'S "AMBA": *A small child, crying from hunger, uttered "amba." A learned guest asked, "The word is grammatically incomplete; how did its meaning arise?" The mother replied, "Tone, circumstance, the child's previous behaviour, and resemblance to the correct form of 'amba' joined in the mind." A listener often recalls the correct word through a corrupted sound.*]

CHAPTER 90

The Constitution of Names

A constitution can be written even on a dry leaf—if the writers are children.



OPENING FOLK SONG: EMPTY CHAIR, FULL PEOPLE

Folk tune: Festive form of the Silent Jhumar

Fill the chaupal, let the chair remain empty,

Let the current of work flow through the people's waking circle.

*Though the chair be empty, let the chaupal remain full,
If the office-holder does not come, the people's work must not stop.
Write one another's words, make the decision clear,
Adorn the empty seat with flowers of questions.*

*The chair is a sign of service, not merely a person,
An institution stands on people's trust—there is no cause for fear.
The vigilance of gathered people is greater than an empty office,
In democracy's jhumar, let affection be equal for all.*

*If the office-holder does not come, arrange flowers of questions,
Before the empty seat, pronounce your own decision.
The chair is the sign of service; people come and go,
An institution stands upon the pillars of the people's trust.*



At dawn that first breath began looking for a body between dry leaves, notebooks, and pens. On the second day after the public hearing, no lesson was taught at the Coconut-Leaf School. The children sat with notebooks open, but in the teacher's hand was not a textbook; it was a dry leaf fallen from the stump of the Channa tree. Its veins spread like rivers, channels, villages, roads, wounds, and witnesses of some unknown geography written upon one green body. The teacher placed the leaf in the middle and said, "Today we will write, not read." A collective flutter of turning pages rose once and stopped—as though the whole school had held its breath together.

Ananya immediately asked, "What are we to write?" The teacher replied, "The rules you will make to guard your names." At first the children laughed; the word "rules" reminded them of school scolding, municipal notices, court dates, and the terms of Chandrapal's app. But the teacher said again, "These rules will not come from above. They will arise from the names placed around the stump."

Ba sat in a corner of the school that day. Her hearing had grown weak, but she could still hear clearly whatever rose from the soil. She said, "A constitution is made by a society willing to look at its own crimes. A society that writes only its glory writes not rules but genealogy." That sentence became the first line in the children's notebooks: "First look at the crime; then write the rule."

Satyavrat Mehta sat at the back. He had much to say, for he had lived long with the words constitution, law, rights, procedure, justice, and state. Yet he remained silent. People had begun to understand his second silence. He stayed quiet so the children's words would not be crushed beneath his. Sometimes even human knowledge becomes a crocodile—it chews another's experience and turns it into theory. This time Satyavrat did not want to become such a crocodile.

The first rule came from Devika: "We will not erase names." The children wrote it. Then Devika added, "A name will live not only in large letters on a memorial, but in the speech of the home, a mother's call, a labourer's wage-book, court papers, a hospital slip, school attendance, and the stone at the water's edge." The rule grew long, but the children did not stop. People disappear only after their names have first been made small.

Meera gave the second rule: "Privacy will not be sold." Some children fell silent. They had thought privacy meant shutting a door. Meera said, "Privacy is not a room closed by fear; it is the right that no one's body, face, love, shame, crying, letter, shadow, or silence be turned into a market without permission." The children wrote into the rule: "Consent before looking; dignity before telling."

Saumya offered the third rule: "The body will not be humiliated." At that rule, the sound of the women's night assembly returned to the school. Ujjwal's mother added, "A dead body is not an object either." Munna Paswan's sister said, "A labourer's feet are evidence too." Saryu's grandson said, "The name of a body drowned in water belongs to the water, not to any contract." The children kept writing; their hands ached, yet no one crossed out a line.

Aruni gave the fourth rule: "No contract shall be placed upon memory." A strange stillness spread through the school. The heritage-project file, the tender for memory, Broom's deed of gift, Chandrapal's tribute app, the procession of the false ghost—all seemed to run at once

through the veins of the leaf. Aruni said, “No memorial will be built from someone’s suffering without the sufferer. No one will earn money in the name of those who were never heard.”

The fifth rule was born from Gangesha’s question. Ananya wrote: “Justice will not be murdered in the name of caste.” Some old faces hardened at once. To some the sentence seemed too sharp. But the children had already heard Gangesha’s story—the author of the *Tattvacintamani*, founder of Navya-Nyaya, a thinker as grave as twelve thousand books, and the crime of silencing an inconvenient truth of life in the name of honour. The children decided: “If we revere someone’s thought, we will not suppress the truth of that person’s life.”

The sixth rule came from Gop Kumar: “The truth of paper is incomplete without the voice of the people.” He still held copies, lists, and proofs. Yet he himself admitted that paper does not remain alive unless someone reads it, hears it, questions it, and joins it to suffering. Beneath this rule the children wrote: “Paper is witness, the human being is hearing, the soil is address.”

The seventh rule arose from the day of fasting from the screen: “Do not make convenience your master.” The children wrote that mobile phones, apps, messages, pictures, donations, archives, searches—all would remain tools, not masters. Use the device that helps preserve names; fast from the device that steals names, sells privacy, spreads fear, or chews the mind. At this rule Ujjwal’s mother gave a thin smile. It seemed to her that perhaps this was the answer her son had sent too late.

The eighth rule came from kabaddi. The children made it themselves: “Return before your breath breaks, but do not abandon your companion.” In kabaddi, the raider who crosses the earth’s boundary must return while holding breath. The children said, “Whoever crosses a boundary into power, market, foreign lands, screens, money, caste, research, charity, or the glitter of planets will return preserving the breath of names. Whoever does not return will be called back.” In this rule a later story glimmered from afar—for one day the boundary would stretch from Earth to the sky.

Ba gave the ninth rule: “Those whose names have not been found shall have the first seat.” Every child wrote this on a separate page. Everyone had understood that society forgets first those who have no documents, no lineage, no photograph, no signature. Giving the first seat to the unnamed became the soul of the Constitution of Names.

The tenth rule was asked of Satyavrat. He remained silent a long while. Then he said, “Keep an account of silence.” The children were startled. Satyavrat explained, “Write the name of the person who commits the crime; also write the silence of the one who sees and remains quiet. A society drowns not only because of criminals, but because of the

silence of spectators.” Beneath this rule Ananya wrote: “Silence is also present.” Satyavrat’s face trembled.

The eleventh rule came from the memory of Panidubbi: “Do not claim what the water has kept.” River, pond, channel, stream, flood, water-burial—these were not only geography but witnesses. The children wrote that the story of a name drowned in water would be asked of the water; if a map was made, the paths of water would be shown; if a bridge was built, both the labourer’s feet and the movement of fish would be heard.

The twelfth rule came from Ira’s letter to the children abroad: “The village is not a souvenir; it is a responsibility.” Those living away would not preserve the village only as beautiful stories, festivals, language, food, and old photographs; they would ask: how many names were left out? How many stones are blank? How many children stand guard? Distance from the village is not release from memory; it is a new test of memory.

There was long debate over the thirteenth rule: “How does forgiveness happen?” The names Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau, and Broom moved in the air. Some children said, “No forgiveness.” Others said, “Punishment.” Ba said, “Forgiveness is not declared; it is slowly born from listening.” In the end they wrote: “Forgiveness will not be sought on a stage but in the labour of hearing names; first the profit of the crime must be relinquished, then forgiveness may be spoken of.”

The fourteenth rule concerned the future: “Children are guardians, elders witnesses, women bearers of the code, labourers owners of the soil.” No single mouth produced the entire line; everyone made it together. One child wrote “children are guardians,” Ba added “elders witnesses,” Meera “women bearers of the code,” and Aruni “labourers owners of the soil.” In this rule lay the seed of Garh Narikel’s new society.

When all the rules had been written, the question arose: who would put a seal on this constitution? The municipality? The court? A trust? The state? Satyavrat remained silent. Ananya took a dry fibre from the felled Channa stump, dampened it with water, and laid it in the corner of the page. “The seal of the root,” she said. The children dipped their thumbs in soil and pressed them below the page. When the thumbs lifted, cool smooth traces of earth remained; many children did not wash the dark rings from the edges of their nails until evening—as though they were the first stains of a vow. Those thumbprints were less evidence than promise.

Someone wanted copies of the constitution. Devika said, “Make them, but let every copy begin with a blank page. Any village that adds its name must first write the names it has left out.” With that decision the rules became not a fixed book but a moving leaf. The memory of

Tattvacintamani rose again—when thought descends into the roots, one book becomes equal to twelve thousand voices.

At night the sheet of rules was read around the stump. After each rule people answered, “Present.” Those who had once kept away because they thought this was politics saw that the constitution was not a declaration for seizing power, but a pledge to preserve memory. Yet such a pledge can be more dangerous to power, because it awakens inside people.

Far away, in Batuknath Hariharan’s house, his descendants were reading a copy of the constitution. On Chandrapal’s device the line “We will not erase names” flashed again and again. On Raghav’s networkless phone “Silence is also present” froze on the screen. In Lau Kin-Hung’s glass room, “No contract upon memory” kept distorting in Chinese translation and then correcting itself. In a corner of Broom’s deed of gift appeared: “First look at the crime.”

That night in Garh Narikel no one invited the rogues to the assembly. Rules were made, testimony written, thumbprints placed, names read—but the offenders remained absent. The next question now had to rise: when a society has made its own constitution, is the absence of the rogues a punishment, or the beginning of a new conspiracy?

The roots of the Channa stump stayed faintly warm all night. The children kept watch in turns. Lamplight trembled over the first page of the constitution, while on the final blank page some invisible hand seemed to wait to write: “The name of the absent will also be asked.”

FOLK SONG: THE CONSTITUTION ON A DRY LEAF

Folk tune: Song of the People’s Law

Written, O constitution, written upon a dry leaf,

Before a child’s pen even power stood still.

On the dry leaf its veins became river-roads,

From a child’s pen the Constitution of Names was born.

We will not erase names, we will not sell privacy,

We will not insult the body, we will place no contract on memory.

Thumb, letter, tear—all became seals,

The rogues' empty chairs became a shadow of questions.

*The final page is blank—the names of the absent,
Those who are outside will also be asked by the people's dwelling.*

*The paper is small, the vow deeper than a tree's roots,
Before the children's constitution even power stood still.*

*We will not erase names, we will not sell privacy,
Thumb, letter, tear—all became seals.*

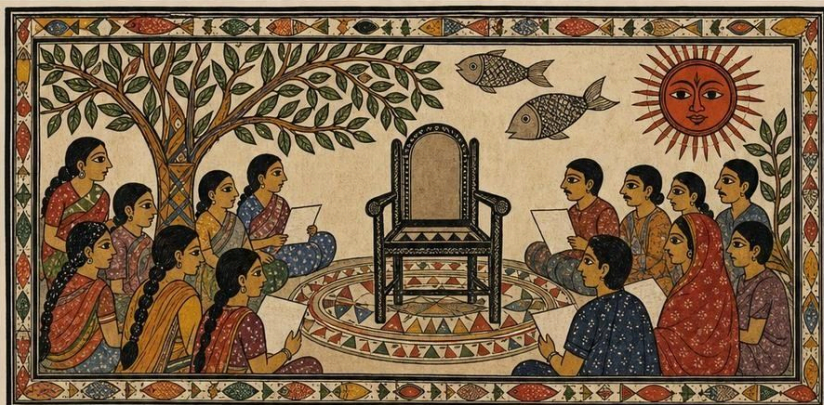


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—NEWS OF A SON'S BIRTH: *Chaitra* sat despondent. A child seated nearby did not clearly hear the messenger's words, but saw the change that came over him.]

CHAPTER 91

The Absence of the Rogues

*The absence of a rogue is also a presence—the empty chair speaks
loudest of all.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: HEARING IN THE STUMP'S SHADE

Folk tune: Shade-Parati

Sit in the shade, O sit even in its little shade,

The stump has great ears—spread out your story there.

*The tree was cut, the stump remains, its shade may be small,
But in that shade the ears are large; the hearing will not stop.*

*One by one people sit and tell their grief and joy,
The stump's roots keep safe the ancestors' gift.*

*Can a small seat stop justice? No—the heart must stay open,
From one heard voice the bonds of society bloom.
The hearing in the stump's shade sows a seed of hope,
If the roots survive, the dream of a forest will one day be whole.*

*The tree was cut, the shade diminished, the hearing did not,
As each told sorrow and joy, the clouds of the mind cleared.
In the roots the ancestors' blessing, above an open sky,
Even in a little shade can grow the faith of a whole forest.*



Until the pages of the Constitution of Names dried, a strange peace remained around the cut Channa stump. The rules written by the children—we will not erase names, we will not sell privacy, the body will not be humiliated, no contract upon memory—were descending not only onto paper but onto faces. Eyes that had once lowered in fear now read. Tongues once tied by family shame, caste fear, threats of court, fraudulent calls, or bar-room arguments slowly began to open.

The next question surrounded the assembly: should those who had stood at the root of all this suffering be summoned? Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Signal Somani, Lau Kin-Hung,

Edward Broom—the names seemed caught like thorns along the edge of the paper. Some young men said, “Call them. Expose them before everyone.” Some women said, “No. Why punish the whole gathering by making us look at their faces again?” The children stayed quiet.

Ananya opened the register at Gangesha’s page. When the story of Tattvacintamani had come among the Channa stump, the children had heard the word “absence.” That even what is not there may be known as evidence had remained in their minds. Ananya said, “We will read the names of those who are present. We will also read the absence of those who are not. But we will not give them the stage.”

The decision sounded simple, yet in the history of Channa Grove it was among the hardest. Society often punishes an offender by placing the offender at the centre again. The very person against whom people rise once more covers everyone with the same name, face, statement, defence, and fear. The children had recognized the game. They said, “First place belongs to the names that were killed, drowned, cheated, or chewed. The rogues belong at the edge.”

Aruni said nothing for a long time. The engineer in him wanted a list; the wounded citizen wanted accusations; the father in him understood that justice is not merely showing the offender’s face. Sometimes justice is allowing the injured face to appear without fear for the first time. He accepted the children’s decision.

Satyavrat Mehta sat at the back listening. He had seen no such decision in any court. Courts proceed in the offender’s name—State versus so-and-so, People versus so-and-so, Appeal of so-and-so. Here, for the first time, an assembly was proceeding in the names of the injured. The offenders remained absent, but their absence entered the record. Satyavrat wrote in his notebook: “Proof of absence: when the offenders were not summoned, the victims’ voices grew larger.”

No announcement was needed before the reading of names that day. Sitting at the stump, Ananya said, “Those who have not been invited are absent. Do not fear this absence. This gathering is not for them, but for the wounded names injured because of them.” Then the first family rose. Their son had drowned at the bridge pier. His name was read. The answer came: “Present.”

Far away in the city Batuknath Hariharan sat in his chamber. He was certain Garh Narikel would send an invitation, for without his legal counsel no people’s memory could be permanent. Two speeches lay ready on his desk—one of atonement, the other of institutional structure. But the phone did not ring. No car arrived. No messenger came. His secretary said, “Sir, the program time has passed.” Batuknath looked at his watch. For the first time he understood that some events could happen without him.

Chandrapal Batra kept watching Channa Grove on his phone. The app should have displayed a notice: "Special Live Testimony." But the screen was quiet. The tribute app would not open. He thought someone had blocked him. In truth no one had. The people were holding the assembly with their phones switched off. Chandrapal understood for the first time that the greatest defeat of a net is not the breaking of its password, but the day people no longer feel they need the net at all.

Raghav Signal Somani sat among his silent messages. He thought perhaps there would be an inside exchange—some hint, some code word, some half-sentence like "do it." But no message came. Not even a disappearing one. Complete silence. He could not tell whether it was a technical failure or a social decision. His night without a network awakened again, the night in which messages vanish but memory continues.

Lau Kin-Hung watched the Indian evening from his hotel window. He was told that a local assembly was taking place, but his name had not been read, his donation had not been accepted, and his defence had not been heard. "Placed at the edge," the interpreter said. Lau did not understand at first. In his world, an object at the edge was either dropped or bought. But in Garh Narikel, the edge was punishment—a place where you could see and hear but could not make yourself the centre.

Edward Broom received the news from his adviser. He laughed. "Local emotional politics." But when the report said the gathering had gone on without a stage, funding, branding, or foreign partnership, his laughter stopped. This lay outside his training. The suffering he wanted to turn into a "project" had begun to speak without the project.

At Channa Grove, meanwhile, people did not even use the word "rogue." To curse the offenders was still to centre them. The children said, "Their names will remain on the warning page, not the main page." A black-edged page at the back of the register was opened and headed: "Those because of whom names were wounded." Space was left below. The full names were not written immediately, because the children said, "First write the names of their deeds."

Then words descended onto the page: devouring dates, trafficking in bodies, the screen's snare, the mask of charity, caste arrogance, selective scripture, trade in memory, the crime of silence. Beneath these names of acts, the offenders' names were written in very small letters. Ba looked on and said, "Good. The sin in large letters, the sinner in small. Otherwise the sinner will die and the sin will live under another name."

Saumya trembled at the decision. She understood that this people's justice was not merely emotional; it was subtle. The fine distinctions of Gangesha's Navya-Nyaya had become a social method in the children's

hands. Substance and quality, cause and effect, presence and absence—all were descending into the dust around the stump.

Meera asked, “When we do not call them, is that cowardice?” Ananya answered, “No. Their names will be taken when necessary. But today we will not measure our wounds through their eyes. Today we will speak our names with our own mouths.” Meera smiled. It was the same principle she had argued in the right to privacy: the right to be seen must remain with the injured person.

The day declined. The weight of the absent rogues slowly lifted from those present. Families that had once asked, “What if they come?” no longer trembled while reading names. The absence of the offender became the courage of the injured. Ananya wrote: “The absent is not fear, if we are present.”

But the Channa stump never allowed a decision to settle into easy happiness. When the final name was read, a gust rose. The black-edged page turned. The offenders’ names, written in small letters, slipped out of the paper as shadows and fell upon the ground. People saw not names but shadows. The rogues were physically absent, yet their shadows crawled among the stones of names.

The children were frightened. Ananya lifted a stone and set it on a shadow. The shadow moved away. Another child placed another stone. A third said, “The stones bear names; shadows cannot remain on them.” Slowly all the offender-shadows were pushed outside the ring of stones. Old Budhba’s Ghost watched from afar and said nothing. There was approval in his silence.

The assembly ended, but the injured families left their name-stones inside the ring. The rogues remained absent; their shadows stayed caught outside the stones.

Afternoon passed and evening descended, yet from the western edge of the stump a long patch of darkness kept spreading. Everyone asked: the tree is cut, so where does so much shade come from? Had the direction of the sun changed? The cut roots were not high enough to cast such a long shadow. Ba said softly, “This is not the tree’s shade. It is the shade of those absent people who have been kept outside the guard of names.”

Ananya wrote the next heading in the register: “The Shade of the Stump.” The black page closed. The stones of names settled in their places. The rogues remained absent, but their shadow became the next day’s lesson.

FOLK SONG: THE EMPTY CHAIR SPEAKS

Folk tune: Silent Jhumar

*Speak, O chair, the empty chair speaks,
The shadows of absent rogues become the next lesson.*

*The rogues did not come, yet the chair still spoke,
The shadow of absent bodies spread towards the west.
Rules were read, thumbs were pressed, the lamp burned at night,
Yet the empty seat asked the next question.
The gravity of memory keeps the shadow at the edge,*

*The guard of names recognizes the mark of deception outside.
The tree is cut—where does the long shadow come from?*

*Ba said: from those we kept outside.
The empty chair is not silent; it is the loudest call,
The shadow of absent rogues became the next lesson's essence.*

*The rogues did not come, yet the seat kept speaking,
“The grove is cut—where does the long shade come from?”—the
question remained.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—A MOBILE RUMOUR: *A message spread through the town: “The embankment will break tonight; leave your homes.” There was no source, only many forwarded marks. Examine knowledge of the source, intention, defect, context, and counter-evidence. The rumour stopped.*]

CHAPTER 92

The Shade of the Stump

*The stump's shade is small, yet the ears of those who sit within it
become large.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: GREEN AFTER THE FLOOD

Folk tune: Chomasa-Mangal

Sing, O monsoon, sing blessing even in the flood,

Raise the platforms, ready the seed-boxes, prepare the boats.

*Though flood returns, keep the boat prepared,
High platform, seed-box, and helping hands kept safe together.*

*When water falls, the silt makes the fields fertile,
After disaster, the song of labour bears new green.*

*If the house breaks, rebuild it stronger together,
Learn the river's nature and make settlement safe.*

*Green after the flood is hope's ancient way,
Mithila's endurance says: we rise again, love again.*

When the water rises, let courage rise; when it falls, lift the spade,

Beneath the layer of silt lies the bed of the next crop.

Broken houses will rise together on higher, safer ground,

Mithila's endurance will say: we rise again, we work again.



After the absence of the rogues, the peace that descended upon the village was not the peace of rest but of listening. Even after the assembly ended, people did not rise at once from around the stump. Those who had never been forbidden to come did not come; the empty chairs of those who had always been seated on stages were not even placed there. Before the stump were only soil, stones, names, children's hands, and evening light. Yet many faces hung within that absence—Batuknath Hariharan's unsettled eyes, Chandrapal Batra's incomplete name, Raghav's closed network, Lau Kin-Hung's profitless silence, Broom's rain-soaked deed of gift.

It was afternoon. The great body of the Channa tree was gone, yet the stump's shade fell unnaturally long. The sun was overhead, but the shade kept sliding in the direction where an old channel of the Kamla-Balan had once flowed. At first Aruni thought the ground was uneven; then he studied the line of shade. It was not straight but wavelike, as though after the tree was cut its shadow had become water.

Ananya quietly began placing stones upon that shade. Each stone bore a name. The shade did not swallow the stones; it settled around them. The children's game began again, but this time the boundary of the kabaddi field was made from shadow. A child entering the shade had to hold breath and circle not saying "kabaddi" but "present." On coming out, the child had to repeat a name from memory. It ceased to be a game; it became an exercise in memory.

Ba said, "The shade of a stump is harder than the shade of a tree. Under a tree's shade the body receives rest; under a stump's shade the mind receives responsibility." No one knew whether the sentence was blessing or warning. But the children copied it into the margin of the register. They knew that a sentence not immediately understood should not be thrown away too quickly.

Gangesha's question rose again. A small boy who had heard the name Navya-Nyaya at school looked at the shade and asked, "Is shadow evidence or not?" Everyone was about to laugh, but Ananya did not. She said, "The shadow is direct perception; the memory of the tree is inference; Ba's statement is testimony; and the fourth proof is the weeping in the home whose name the shadow rests upon." The boy grew serious. He understood that Tattvacintamani was not merely a book; its questions were now rippling across the soil.

Meera picked up a dry leaf that had fallen on the shadow-line, dusty with someone's foot. She said, "A shadow may touch everyone, but it does not take away anyone's right to their face. Whoever takes photographs here should remember: shadow is collective, the face is personal." The children added a line to their rules: "A picture of the shade may be taken; not of a face without permission." Memory was slowly becoming conduct.

Devika sat behind the stump. Ujjwal's name-stone lay on the boundary of the shade. As the sun moved, the shade left the stone, then after a few moments returned. Devika felt that the name of the young man swallowed by the screen was now moving through soil, sunlight, shadow, time, and children's voices. The digital net had swallowed him, but memory was transforming him not merely into grief, but into a rule of vigilance.

Satyavrat Mehta said very little that day. He had paper, but did not move his pen across it. When the shade reached his feet, he slowly

removed his sandals. Perhaps he felt that if the shade were a witness of the roots, entering it in shoes would be disrespectful. No one noticed him, but Ba did and nodded.

Batuknath's descendant arrived from afar. He had not joined the assembly, but now came to see the stump's shade. In his hand was his father's old pen. He said to the children, "My father signed many petitions with this pen. May I place it beside the stone?" Ananya asked, "Is the pen guilty, or the hand?" He fell silent. The question was not simple. In the end the pen was placed not on the stone but on the soil behind it—not equal to the name, yet not outside testimony either.

Before evening someone brought the paper bearing Chandrapal Batra's incomplete name. Chandrapal himself did not come. Four times the name had begun on the page and all four times turned into "percentage." The children read it and did not laugh. Ananya said, "One who cannot write his own name will receive the punishment of listening to names." The paper was placed along the outer line of the shade. A wind rose; it trembled but did not fly away.

No message came from Raghav. After the night he had spent without a network, the rustle of leaves had begun to frighten him. But something strange happened within the stump's shade: wherever the shade rippled, dry leaves arranged themselves like lines of a message. The children did not go to read them. They had understood that not every message requires an answer; some are best allowed to dry up in their own net.

Far from all this, Lau Kin-Hung sat in the glass room of his guest house. Channa Grove was not visible from his window, yet the shadow that fell across his table that afternoon was wavy like the stump's shade. He drew the curtain; the shade entered within. He switched on the light; the shade retreated and climbed the wall. He understood: in this village, one who remains absent cannot escape the shadow.

Broom told his advisers: "Local psychology, shadow ritual, community imagery." His secretary kept writing. But when he said "shadow," his laptop screen went black and showed him the rain-blurred ink of his own deed of gift. Tenders, donations, research, heritage, and apps had all arrived with their own languages; the stump's shade was pulling the hidden profit behind those languages into the light.

At night the children's kabaddi began again. This time no ghosts entered the field. The ghosts sat along the edge like teachers watching an examination. A child entered the shade and ran saying, "Present... present... present..." then came out and repeated a name. If the name was forgotten, the child was not counted as outside. The child went back in, steadied the breath, and remembered. In this game victory and defeat mattered little; memory mattered more.

The stump's shade did not disappear even at night. When the moon rose, the shade became instead a line of silver. People asked how this could be—shadow is darkness. Ba said, "A shadow made of memory carries light even in darkness." Hearing this, Satyavrat Mehta smiled for the first time, though the smile was tired. He was beginning to understand: law cannot measure shade, but society, if it chooses, can make shade into shelter.

Near midnight the smell of water rose from the direction of the Kamla-Balan. There had been no rain, yet the air carried the river's wet warning. Aruni looked at the sky. Dark clouds that had stood all day like mountains in the distance were slowly sliding towards Garh Narikel. For a moment the stump's shade lengthened towards the water, then contracted and touched the stones of names—as though the tree were warning them of the danger ahead.

Ananya immediately told the children, "Bind the register. Do not lift the name-stones, but make copies of them." The children ran. Paper, cloth, blank leaves, clay tablets—whatever they found, they began copying names onto it. The guard could no longer remain fixed. If water came, names would have to learn to move.

Satyavrat Mehta took unused sheets of old affidavits from his bag. "This paper belonged to state work," he said. "Now let it belong to people's work." Meera cut cloth into strips. Devika read names aloud. Gop checked the copies. Ira began making a separate list to send to the children abroad. The village understood: the shade had given not only rest; it had given the flood's first warning.

Just before dawn the first heavy drop fell—not on the stump, but upon the stone marked "Whose name has not been found." The stone darkened and the letters deepened. Ba said, "The water gave its first warning to those whose names have not been found." The children fell silent. The smell of the river was now clear. From far away the voice of the Kamla-Balan, familiar through generations, was returning—heavier, more impatient, more ancient.

The stump's shade slowly stretched towards the water. Within it stood together the absence of the rogues, the children's guard, Gangesha's question, the women's oath, the labourer's feet, the fast from the screen, and the Constitution of Names.

And the water, which until then had been only a smell, was returning.

FOLK SONG: EARS IN THE STUMP'S SHADE

Folk tune: Song of Shade

Sit in the shade, O sit in the little shade,

*The stump's shade is small, but the ears there are large,
Sit and listen—the scent of the distant river comes with clouds.*

*The first drop fell on the stone "name not found,"
The letters darkened and the unnamed voice awoke.
Those without names received the water's warning first,*

*The Kamla-Balan returned carrying its old accounts.
The rogues' shadow, children's guard, women's oath together,
All the lines of memory turned unbroken towards the water.
Sit in the shade; do not flee thinking it darkness,*

The stump's shade is small, but the ears there are large.



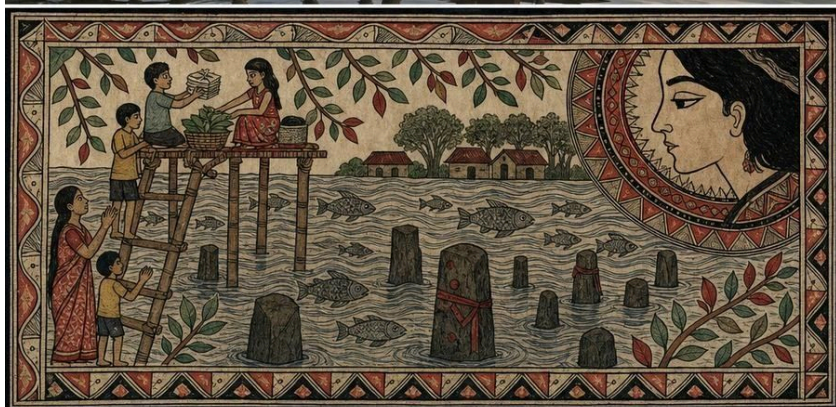
[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—WITNESSES IN COURT: In court two witnesses gave differing accounts of the same event. One witness's perception was defective; the other's intention was biased.]

CHAPTER 93

Flood Again

The river does not believe in silence—it returns and opens the old accounts.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



OPENING FOLK SONG: KNOW THE CROCODILE, SAVE THE RIVER

Folk tune: River-Awakening Song

*Know the crocodile, O know both kinds of crocodile,
One of water, one of deceit—count their forms apart.*

*The water-crocodile belongs to nature; the crocodile of deceit is
different,*

Know the forms; do not blame the river wrongly.

*Save the homes of water-creatures, reduce human greed,
Recognize the teeth of crime and stop them in the right place.*

*If the river stays clean, the crocodile will keep its boundary,
Transparent government by the people will starve deceit of hunger.
Know the crocodile, save the river, keep the lamp of discernment,
Give balanced respect to both nature and justice.*

*Let the water-creature remain in its own home; do not blame it,
Wherever you see the crocodile of greed, place a barrier there.*

*Clean river, open government—the two can move together,
If the lamp of discernment burns, every boundary can be guarded.*



The farther the stump's shade spread, the calmer the earth appeared. But the waters of the Kamla-Balan have never trusted silence. That river, which for years had lifted and drowned memory, bodies, names, bones, soil, and silence along the village bank, sent from afar that day a heavy smell again—the smell of wet mud, broken bamboo, floating leaves, and a sky swollen beyond patience. The people understood: the flood was returning.

First the clouds came and bent over the cut stump of the Channa tree. The green point that had broken from the stump trembled under the first strike of rain, but did not break. The children banked soil around it. Ananya said, "This time we will not save only the tree; we will save the names too." At once the children of the Coconut-Leaf School ran—some to lift the register, some to count the stones, some to warn the elders.

In Garh Narikel, flood used to arrive first as fear. Inside each house were separate anxieties—sacks, doors, platforms, grain, animals, children. This time fear came with a new responsibility. The pages of the Constitution of Names, the register of the present, the stones of the unnamed, the red thread of the women's night assembly, the soil lifted from the labourers' feet, the leaf bearing Gangesha's question, Meera's oath of privacy—these were no longer mere objects. They had become movable and immovable property of memory. If water came, these would have to be taken first to higher ground.

Aruni looked towards the old bridge. The first heavy blow of water would come from that direction. The bridge, once a symbol of false development, now stood in the distance like a watchman over the water. In the sand flowing past its piers, the footprints of many labourers still seemed pressed deep. Aruni said within himself, "This time no one's name will go into the water without testimony."

Ba sat on the veranda of her house. People asked her to go inside, but she would not rise. She said, "I have seen many floods. When water comes, it asks nothing first. But now we will ask—whom will we carry? Which names will we save? Which lies will we let wash away?" At her question the wind roared. Lightning flashed far away. For an instant the shade of the cut Channa stump lengthened again.

Devika and Nishant gathered again the children's circle formed on the day of fasting from the screen. This time phones were not switched off, but controlled. What had to carry news would do so; what spread rumour would be stopped. Chandrapal's tribute app became active again—flood relief, rescue of names, donations, emergency lists, every possible pretext. Devika said plainly, "Any link that asks for a name—first ask the name of the link." The children laughed, but the laughter held the readiness of battle.

Meera brought thick cloth, tins of oil, and waterproof bags from her house. With the women she began wrapping the pages of names. Each page received a slip: "The rights to this name belong to its family." A young woman from the foreign research team stepped forward to help. Meera did not stop her; she only said, "Photographs later. Dry your hands first." The young woman silently wiped her hands and held the page. In that moment she learned the first lesson of researching memory: save the paper, not the camera.

Satyavrat Mehta was gathering the ledger of the public hearing that day. News of rising water did not change his face, but it quickened his hands. He divided his notes into three bundles—names, silence, crimes. Then he stopped. The three seemed insufficient. He made a fourth bundle: “Incomplete Hearings.” Floods do not wash away only complete stories; they chew through unfinished stories first.

Gop Kumar arrived carrying the confidential lists. They had been wrapped in plastic against the rain, yet there was no confidence on Gop’s face. He told Ananya, “Paper can get wet. We need copies.” Ananya replied, “The copy will not be of paper; it will be of the throat.” Then the children began memorizing ten names each. If the ledger drowned, the names would survive in the children’s breath.

In the midst of these preparations came not the first drop but the first slap. Water broke from the sky as though some old embankment had opened above them. Thatched roofs thundered, ponds filled, water spread through the lanes. The smells of wet straw and dying hearth-smoke became one; rainwater reached the tongue carrying the taste of soil. The stones around the Channa stump began to shine. The names written on them did not blur in the water; instead the letters appeared darker. Ba said, “See—ink belonging to a name that has been heard does not fear water.”

By night, water had entered the lower part of the village. Calves were untied, bedding lifted onto platforms, grain bound in baskets, elders moved towards the higher school building. But the children came first to the stump. They did not lift the stones; the stones were heavy, and moving a stone meant moving the ground of that name. So they pressed the impression of each stone into the soil and laid a small coconut leaf over the imprint. The stone might drown; the impression would remain.

Then Old Budhba’s Ghost appeared. This time he was neither smoke nor shimmer. In the rain he was clearer than ever before. Standing near the cut stump, he asked, “Will you stop kabaddi?” The children were startled. Ananya said, “In a flood?” Budhba’s Ghost laughed. “A flood is the true examination of breath. Whoever can say ‘kabaddi’ in the water can carry a name out of the house of fear.”

At that, the children entered the water and formed a circle. Water to the knees, rain over their heads, lightning far away, people calling all around. Raindrops tasted faintly salty on their lips, and with every “kabaddi,” their warm breath rose over the cold water like little wisps of smoke. They began chanting slowly. This was no game of victory and defeat. Each child took one name, crossed the circle of water, and carried it to the other side. “Saryu present,” “Ujjwal present,” “Munna present,” “Unnamed present,” “Labourer present,” “Leatherworker woman present,” “Gangesha present”—kabaddi became a boat of names.

Saumya watched the scene. The journalist in her wanted to capture an image, but that day she did not raise a camera. She began repeating the names aloud. Ira remembered a line from her letter to the children abroad: "The village is not a scene; it is a responsibility." Now the line was becoming true in water.

A rumour came from afar—the upstream embankment might break. Someone said, "Leave everything; save your lives!" The sentence was natural. Yet a question arose: what is life? The life of the body, of the name, of memory? Aruni decided: first people, then documents, then stones. The children added, "The names will go with the people." So every rescue group was assigned one child, one register, and ten oral names.

Satyavrat Mehta made a temporary hearing corner inside the school building. Families fleeing the water were not asked their names first; first they were dried and given warm water. Only if they themselves wished to speak was the name written. Meera kept saying sternly, "Flood suffering is not spectacle either." In this crisis the oath of privacy was tested again.

At midnight, when fear arose that the water might reach the shoulders, a strange light rose from the Channa stump. The green point that wanted to become a shoot shimmered beneath the water. Like breath, its light sometimes dimmed, sometimes deepened, and the green radiance broke across the trembling surface. Water was not drowning it; it was becoming a seed of light inside the water. Budhba's Ghost said softly, "The tree is reading the water."

At that moment a grave sound came from the current of the Kamla-Balan—neither river nor human. It was as though the water itself were reading an old archive. The names the children had carried through kabaddi returned in the sound as separate waves. People heard many names—some incomplete, some never written at all. This time the flood had come not only to carry away, but also to return.

But water is never friendship alone. A wall of one house collapsed. Relief supplies stored in a warehouse floated away. Fake aid accounts flashed on Chandrapal's app. In Raghav's secret code appeared the phrase "disaster opportunity." Someone in Broom's team began drafting a relief-project proposal. The world of crocodiles never sleeps during a flood. The deeper the crisis, the sharper the eyes of greed.

Just before dawn the rain slackened. Through the haze people saw long dark shapes moving slowly over the water. At first someone thought they were logs; then someone held their breath. Two shining eyes rose above the surface and vanished. Ba gripped her stick. Ananya pressed the register to her chest. Budhba's Ghost whispered, "Now they too are returning."

The flood had arrived. The names were surviving. Kabaddi had entered the water. And in the grey current of the Kamla-Balan, beyond the shade of the cut Channa tree, the first backs of the crocodiles gleamed again. The next hearing would rise from beneath the water.

FOLK SONG: THE FLOOD HAS COME AGAIN

Folk tune: Sorrowful Chomasa Song

*Take it, O flood, take the house if you will,
But do not carry the names away—testimony will rise from below.*

*The river accepts no silence; it opens old accounts,
The Kamla-Balan weighs the stones of names at every threshold.*

*Register to her chest, Ba gripped her stick,
Children raised memory, lamp, and leaf onto the platform.*

In the grey water two black eyes flashed,

Budhba said: they too have returned.

*The names survived; kabaddi entered the water,
The boat of greed came through disaster with a new proposal.
Flood, take my house, but do not wash away the names,
From beneath the water testimony will rise; light the lamp of listening.*

The children raised memory, lamp, and leaf upon the platform.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE SAME “GA” AGAIN?: The teacher first pronounced “ga,” then after a while pronounced “ga” once more.]

CHAPTER 94

The Return of the Crocodiles

*By day the water is muddy, by night black oil—the crocodile does not
change colour; the light changes.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



OPENING FOLK SONG: LIFE ABOVE THE DEAL

Folk tune: From Bargain-Viraha to Mangal

Write the boundary, O write a boundary even in the market,

Draw a line around what is not for sale—body, consent, breath.

In the final bargain, not the name—put life first,

No scale of price can measure a human life.

Write on the paper the boundary of what cannot be sold,

Body, consent, memory, breath—let them rest in freedom.

Let trade remain service, not greed become government,

Let responsibility stand plainly beside profit.

Life is above the deal—let the market learn this too,

Write every contract within the boundary of human dignity.

Put gold upon the scale, but never a human life,

Human worth rises above the figures of price.

Open an account of responsibility beside profit,

Weigh commerce with the measure of service.



The first testimony that was to rise from beneath the water came on the second night of the flood. That night the water began to reveal its true colour. By day it had seemed merely yellow, muddy, pitiful, and splashing; after dark it shone like black oil. The name-stones around the stump were half submerged, yet their letters remained above the water. The children had already moved the register, stones, old leaves, and the green point of the stump to higher ground. Still, the higher the water rose, the more the old darkness of Channa Grove dissolved into it and circled back.

No one saw the first crocodile. Only a long line silently cut through the water, like a knife drawn soundlessly across black cloth. The cutting made no sound, but its cold ripple touched the calves of those standing at the ghat—the body understood first, the eyes later. Then a second line rose. A third. A fourth. Shadows that had wandered for years through the river as stories now began approaching in the shapes of bodies. One word came from every mouth: “Crocodiles.”

Fear spread first. The women pulled the children back. The elders raised sticks, as though a stick could stop an animal of the water. Devika clasped the register to her chest. Ira stood motionless for a moment. It seemed to her that every childhood tale, every warning, every drowning, every nameless corpse, every “do not go into the water” had taken bodies and was swimming before her at once.

But Ananya did not step back. Standing by the ring of stones, she said, “Watch the breath.” No one understood. She said again, “One that comes to eat moves quickly. One that comes to inspect a boundary swims slowly, holding its breath.” The children’s kabaddi training now became a lesson in reading the river. They watched the crocodiles’ movements. Indeed, they were not attacking; they were swimming in circles.

The largest crocodile stopped in line with the stump. Its head rose slightly above the water, its two eyes like lamps of darkness. From beneath the water around its body rose a deep smell—rich mud and the faded rot of old wood, as though the river had opened the archive inside its belly. People edged backwards. But the crocodile did not advance. It kept looking towards the stump’s submerged roots. Channa Grove, though cut, spread again as shadow beneath the water. The roots were opening their old arms underwater. The crocodile seemed to be their guard.

Ba said softly, “These are not merely eaters. They are creatures that keep boundaries.” Someone asked, “A creature that chews bodies keeps boundaries?” Ba replied, “What we call eating is, in nature’s law, sometimes a doorway across. Fear eats our eyes. The crocodile may eat the body, but if the name survives, the inner bond can be cut.”

Here the story of Gaja-Graha opened again. People had once understood the graha only as villain—the monster gripping the elephant’s leg. But in the flooded Channa Grove, holding a leg appeared not only as violence; it could also be a moment that arrests forgetfulness. If the elephant is drowning in pride in its own strength, the graha stops it. If a human being is proud of body, caste, wealth, office, screen, law, charity, or contract, the crocodile makes that person look into the mouth of water.

As this was said, a strange movement came through the water. The stone near the stump marked “Whose name has not been found” slowly

floated up. A stone is made to sink, yet that night it drifted over the surface like a leaf and entered the circle of crocodiles. The great crocodile gently nudged it with its snout, and the stone returned to the edge of the stump. No one spoke. The children wrote in the register: "The guard of the unnamed was returned by a crocodile."

Then an old boatman, silent until now, said, "My father used to say: a crocodile eats the body, but overturns a boat of lies. When a corpse is abandoned without a name, these creatures circle it. Give the name, and the water grows quiet." His voice carried the smell of water. This testimony came not from scripture but from current. Gangesha's logic seemed to smile upon it—perception, inference, testimony—and now the boatman's experience was becoming a fourth direction.

Satyavrat Mehta reached the ghat that night. The water touched his knees. People stopped him: "Do not go farther." He stopped. Once he had stopped because of rules; now he stopped because the people told him to. No one noticed the small change, but Channa Grove did. Bending towards the water he said, "The names that have survived, we have read. Those not yet found leave us a debt of listening."

At that sentence the crocodiles' circle broke once and formed again. Lau Kin-Hung, seated far away in a secure room high above the city, saw a round stain of water appear on his glass table. In the stain he saw a crocodile's eye. He wondered: how could an Indian flood reach his room? But magical justice asks no passport at its boundary. The memory of the waters linked to bodies along the lines of his contracts, data, drugs, wages, deception, and brokerage had reached him.

Batuknath Hariharan sat at home beside a priest reciting mantras. The priest said, "A defect of water." Hariharan thought the matter could be handled by ritual remedy. At that moment, however, he heard the sound of water from Channa Grove: "Not the date—the name." He picked up a paper and began thinking of litigation, but the paper softened as though wet. A crocodile stood guard at the door of his dream court.

Chandrapal Batra watched a map on his device—where the flood was, where networks worked, where donations flowed. Suddenly blue marks began swimming across the screen like crocodile bodies. He tried to shut it, but when he pressed the button a message appeared: "Verify the name." For the first time he understood that the names from which he created accounts might wander back searching for their bodies.

Raghav Signal tried to send: "Situation under control." Before the message left, the word "control" drowned, "situation" floated, and "name" became stuck behind the stump. He shook the phone. The network was full; the message did not go. The crocodiles were circling not only in the water, but in language.

In Garh Narikel the children had formed their kabaddi circle. Floodwater enclosed them, crocodiles moved in the outer circle, children in the inner. They breathed slowly in and out, chanting, “Kabaddi-kabaddi.” This was not attack but guarding. If anyone panicked and ran, the crocodiles would startle. If breath remained balanced, the water too would remain balanced. Play was becoming a method of staying alive.

Ananya told the children, “Do not break the circle. Do not abandon a name. The crocodile is not the enemy; it is the boundary.” A small boy asked, “What is a boundary?” Ananya said, “Where arrogance ends and listening begins.” The boy did not fully understand the explanation, but he remained standing in the circle. Many meanings are first learned through the body and only later through words.

In the middle of the night the water seemed to begin falling slightly. One by one the crocodiles moved back. The largest remained last. It looked towards the green point of the stump. Then it swung its tail in the water. The turn drew a circular line on the surface—like a kabaddi field, like a planet’s orbit, like an infant’s first world around the navel. The line shone for an instant and disappeared.

Ba said, “Did you see? The game did not stop. The water drew the line of play.” Devika wrote in the register: “The return of the crocodiles—a lesson of boundary beyond bodily fear.” Meera added: “Boundary without a name is violence; boundary with a name is liberation.” The children kept repeating the sentences.

Before dawn the crocodiles vanished from sight. Their smell remained in the water—raw earth, old bodies, the river’s teeth, and a strange scent of release. The first light of dawn was ash-coloured; it spread over the tired surface like a thin white cloth laid upon a night of testimony. Those who had trembled with fear at night quietly began cleaning the ghat at dawn. No one threw stones at the crocodiles. No one worshipped them. Everyone simply cleaned the place, as though after meeting a boundary one must care for the world.

That morning Ira received a message from abroad: a vast company had proposed purchasing the flood-affected memory zone for a “Water Security and Future Habitat” project. Behind the proposal lay the familiar shadows again—Lau Kin-Hung’s money, Broom’s advice, Chandrapal’s local network. This time the deal concerned not merely land, but the memory of the flood, the story of the crocodiles, and the children’s guard.

Ananya lifted the water-soaked stone. The unnamed letters upon it were still clear. She looked at Ira. “Now they do not want to buy only memory; they want to buy the water too.” Ira replied, “Then the next lesson will be about the deal.” The first light of morning fell upon the

green point of the stump. Far away a small ripple rose in the water—as though the crocodiles were listening.

Thus the return of the crocodiles became not the end of fear, but the beginning of the next struggle. Water had shown the boundary; now greed was coming with papers to purchase even that boundary.

FOLK SONG: THE CROCODILES RETURN

Folk tune: River-Warning Song

*Returned, O crocodiles, returned to show the boundary,
Greed followed behind with papers to buy that boundary.*

*By day the water muddy, by night black oil,
The crocodile changes no colour; only the game changes.*

*Half-submerged stones, their letters awake above,
Amid the flood another bargain begins to sell memory.*

Lau's money, Broom's advice, Batra's village net,

Water, crocodile, children's guard—prices laid upon them all.

Ananya lifted the wet stone and said:

Now they want to buy even the water, Mother.

The crocodiles returned not as fear, but to show the boundary,

The crocodile changes no colour; only the game changes.

Half-submerged stones, the letters awake above,



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—PERCEPTION AS THE CAUSE OF ANYATHAKHYATI: In the reflective cognition “I knew this shell as silver,” it is impossible, in one and the same self, to posit cognition having the shell as object together with non-apprehension of the non-relation of the qualifier “silverness.” Therefore, on the Mimamsaka view, the false qualified cognition “this shell is silver” cannot even be constituted in that form; perception is the cause of anyathakhyati.*]

CHAPTER 95

Lau Kin-Hung's Final Deal

At night Lau opened the first page of his passport and for a long time looked at the name from his childhood. When he was small, he had once been called by the wrong number on a refugee-camp list; that humiliation sank so deeply into him that later he began to mistake namelessness for safety. But taking away other people's names because of his own wound had been his choice—the past could explain the cause of his crime, not pardon it.

In the final deal, it is not the price that is written—it is the name.



Opening Folk Song: Reform Along with Late Forgiveness

Folk Tune: A Bright Form of Atonement-Samadoun

Bring it, Lau, bring reform together with forgiveness,

Not words alone—show us the rights you seized returned.

If forgiveness arriving late is true, bring reform with it,

Not merely words—restore the broken right again.

Name the whole mistake, listen to the injured person's account,

Choose restitution, amended rules, and new conduct.

Forgiveness is not an empty gate but the start of a long road,

Keep carrying responsibility; only then will pride diminish.

Late forgiveness joined with reform will become a bridge of hope,

Honouring the wound, it may give birth to a new relationship.

Name the whole mistake, not half of it,

Hear the injured person's statement first, not your own defence.

At every step of restitution, shape new rules,

Only then is belated forgiveness a bridge—cross it with honesty.



The document that was coming to buy the boundary was still on its way; meanwhile, after the crocodiles returned, the floodwater kept measuring the village thresholds for three days. The grey current of the Kamla-Balan, which had once counted fields and tiled roofs, now insisted on touching the name-stones arranged around the stump as well. The children had carried the register, the stones, the dried leaves, and that green point up onto a high bamboo platform. People's fear had shifted once more from the body toward the name—lest the water carry a name away somewhere.

At that time, very far away, Lau Kin-Hung sat in a tall building enclosed by walls of glass. Beyond his window was the sea, but his eyes did not see the sea. There was no sound of the sea in the room, only the cold breathing of machines, and within that cold the images of the flood seemed even warmer. Before him lay the image: the cut stump of Channa Grove, the name-stones, the children's platform, Satyavrat's silence, and the grey backs of crocodiles circling in the water. Once he switched off the screen, but the reflection of water remained in the glass.

Lau Kin-Hung had once understood crime as a network, the network as business, and business as the future. But after Garh Narikel, for the first time he understood that land filled with names is difficult to buy. Bodies can be contracted for, bridges can be contracted for, medicines can be contracted for, memorials can be contracted for; but if the guardianship of names is in children's hands, a deed of sale does not travel beyond paper.

Even so, he was not a man who accepted defeat. Advisers, lawyers, philanthropic consultants, cultural intermediaries, and image-repair specialists gathered in his office. Their languages differed, but the intention was one: control the memory of Garh Narikel. One said, "Disaster relief." Another said, "Global folk-memory fund." Another said, "Secure archive." Someone whispered, "There will be no rights unless the local child-guard is removed." Lau listened to them all and finally said only this: "Do not show them a price. Show them a future."

Thus the final deal was prepared. The language of the letter was very bright—flood relief, school, bridge repair, hospital, aid for widows, youth training, women's safety, a memorial building, and digital preservation of names. But behind every bright word stood a fine thorn: copies of the archive would be deposited outside; the method of reading names would be reviewed by an expert committee; the children would be called "trained volunteers"; the land around the stump of Channa Grove would be placed under "joint management." The guardianship of memory would rise from the people's hands and pass into the hands of a shining seal.

The letter also contained a strange appendix. Its title would have been difficult for an ordinary person to understand, but Ira read it. It discussed disasters on Earth, climate, disease, war, crowding, and scarcity of resources, and hinted at a distant settlement project called "Unnamed Habitation." It proposed carrying selected talented children, data workers, health workers, and bearers of cultural memory to a secure place in the future. Ira closed the letter. She understood: this was not merely a deal to buy Garh Narikel; it was an early advertisement for the dream of leaving Earth.

When the deal reached the village, floodwater still stood knee-deep. Raghav Signal's invisible message came first, then Batuknath Hariharan's

seal, then Chandrapal Batra's advice, then Broom's line of donation, and finally Lau Kin-Hung's neat signature. Sealed in plastic, the letter was brought by boat as though it were scripture. The postmaster, carrying a wet umbrella, said, "They said it was very urgent."

Ananya did not take the letter. She stood at the edge of the boat and said, "First this paper will listen." People were astonished. She placed the letter beneath the stump-platform, a little above the line of water, on a thin split of bamboo. Amid the earthy smell of wet bamboo, the unfamiliar scent of foreign ink rose from the paper—in the village air it seemed not a guest but an intruder. The floodwater took its reflection. The white surface of the letter trembled in the water; many lines began to bend like snakes.

Satyavrat Mehta was sitting there. He was asked to read the letter. Slowly he opened the paper. He read the first line: "A generous initiative for humanitarian cooperation and the preservation of memory." The children remained silent. He read the second line: "Global expertise." Meera raised her eyes. The third line: "Participation of the local community." Devika could not suppress a laugh. Ananya wrote in the register: "One who wants authority first speaks of participation."

When Satyavrat read the sentence that would turn the "child-guard" into "trained volunteers," the green point on the stump trembled slightly. Ba said, "If a child is given a post, the child will no longer remain a child. If the guard's name is changed, the guarding will change." At this sentence everyone fell silent. For by now this village had learned that changing a name is the first move in theft.

Lau's letter contained assistance, but control surrounded the assistance. There was relief, but ownership stood behind the relief. There was a hospital, but it wanted a list of patients' names. There was a school, but they would write the teaching method. There was a memorial building, but its key would remain with them. Ira said softly, "This is the crocodile's new mouth. It will not chew the body; it will chew gratitude, and through that it will make the name its own."

Then movement among the crocodiles was seen in the water. They began to circle the platform. No one was afraid. After the previous night, people had understood that the crocodiles were not merely devourers but also boundary memorials. Whenever a deal tries to cross the boundary between body, name, and soul, the crocodiles begin drawing a line in the water.

Ananya said, "We will not answer on paper." Some elders were startled. A government deal asks for paper; business asks for paper; a court asks for paper. But the children had decided: whoever wants memory must first listen to the voice. They sat on the platform, opened the register, and amid the flood began the reading of names.

The first name was Saryu's. The second was Ujjwal's. The third was the labourer lost in the bridge foundation. The fourth was the woman who lost her breath while waiting on a hospital veranda. The fifth was the young man who drowned in a screen's lie. The sixth: "One whose name was not found." The seventh: "The leatherworker woman whose name was suppressed by fear of scripture." The eighth: "Gangesha, who made justice greater than the wall of caste." In the rain-washed air each name rang differently, like coins dropping one by one onto a plate of water. The sound of the names rose above the water and reached the flood clouds.

Gop Kumar caught that sound with an old device, but instead of making it into a file, he released it toward the open sky. He said, "Whoever wants to listen may listen; whoever wants to buy will get nothing." No one knew whether the sound of the name-reading crossed the sea to Lau Kin-Hung's office. But that night, in Lau's glass building, all the electric lights dimmed once, and a corner of the deal lying on his table became wet.

Lau Kin-Hung touched the wet corner. On his finger he smelled not water but earth. He could not understand it. His adviser said, "The answer is unclear." Lau said, "No. The answer is very clear. They are not asking for a price." The adviser asked, "Then?" Lau remained silent for a long time, then whispered, "They do not even want to leave their Earth."

With that sentence, the plan for the Unnamed Habitation trembled for the first time in his mind. People who would not sell the stump of their village, the floodwater, the names of the dead, and the children's guardianship—how much would they trust a glittering promise of another planet? Lau understood that before opening a market for leaving Earth, it would be necessary to break the language of love for Earth. Garh Narikel was a rough, wet, living book of that language.

Night deepened in the village. When the reading of names ended, Ananya picked up Lau's letter again. She neither threw it into the water nor burned it. In the register, beside Lau Kin-Hung's name, she wrote: "The deal came, it was heard; it was not called rejected. He was sentenced to hear names." People asked, "Sentenced?" Ananya said, "The one who came to buy names gets no leave without hearing names."

For the first time Satyavrat Mehta smiled faintly. This was not a punishment of law, yet how profound it was. What greater punishment could there be than binding one who could acquire everything with money to a moneyless act of listening? Meera said, "If listening is true, control breaks." Devika added, "And if it is false, it becomes a deal."

Just then, in the darkness of the flood, a shadow was seen moving toward the platform. At first people thought it must be some displaced family. Then it came nearer. A wet dhoti, trembling hands, old ritual ash

on the forehead, years of cunning in the eyes and the defeat of one night. It was Batuknath Hariharan. This time he had come not carrying trust papers but empty-handed.

He stood ankle-deep in the water, at a distance from the stump. No one welcomed him. No one insulted him either. Ananya did not close the register. Satyavrat's eyes remained fixed on him. For a long time Batuknath could not open his mouth. At last his voice emerged: "Let me listen to names for one night. I have to change the caste of my ears."

At that sentence the floodwater rose slightly, then became still. The crocodiles' circling slowed. Lau Kin-Hung's deal lay wet on the platform, and for the first time Batuknath Hariharan stood before Garh Narikel without a proposal, without ritual, without office—carrying only his ears. The next night would test his forgiveness that had arrived late.

Folk Song: Water of the Final Deal

Folk Tune: Bargain-Viraha

*Torn, O bargain, the final bargain is torn,
Before the name, every letter of money has washed away.*

*In the final deal, not price but name is written,
At the flood's threshold memory is raised upon a platform.*

Lau's letter grew wet, the crocodiles formed a circle,

No one welcomed him, no one hurled abuse.

Batuk stood ankle-deep, carrying only his ears,

"Let me hear names for one night; let me change the caste of my ears."

The water rose a little, then became still,

The next trial of late forgiveness was set.

The final deal tore; listening remained,

Before the name, every letter of money washed away.

No one welcomed him, no one hurled abuse.



[Philosophical Undertone—Water Context: Analysis: In this inference, the probandum is to establish Earth as distinct from other substances (water, air, ether, and so on), while “possession of smell” is the reason. Navya-Nyaya principle: the formidable logical establishment of the doctrine of extrinsic validity.]

CHAPTER 96

Batuknath's Belated Forgiveness

*Forgiveness that comes late does not come empty-handed—it brings
with it an account of its delay.*



Opening Folk Song: Your Account, Your Life

Folk Tune: Awakening of the Account

Wake, O brother, wake as the owner of your own account,

Do not stain your name with the burden of unknown money.

Do not carry another's account; honour your own name,

Keep transactions clear and your identity secure.

Read the paper, understand the phone, stop unknown funds,

Do not throw your life onto greed's narrow road.

Make your own account a clean river of your labour,

Grow simple financial knowledge with your family.

Do not be a mule; become the owner of your decisions today,

The song of caution will protect the ornaments of earned wages.

Sweet speech, instant profit—question both,

Do not place your finger on a paper you do not understand.

*Let earnings from labour be a clear stream, accounts known in every
home,*

Teach simple finance equally to sons and daughters.



Before the awaited test arrived, a strange calm spread through Garh Narikel after Lau Kin-Hung's final deal. It was not the calm of victory; it held the exhaustion of receding floodwater, the smell of names wet upon stone, and the breath of people who had learned that deals are made not only with money but with memory. The answer the children had sent—the sound of names being read—kept returning and ringing through the village, as though an invisible bell had been hung inside every doorway.

On the third day of that calm, Batuknath Hariharan came. Not as he once entered assemblies—with two men walking ahead, files behind, and

his heavy stride in the middle. This time he was alone. No flag on a car, no lawyer beside him, no shining shoes. Dust clung to his feet; packed between his toes, it pricked him like an unfamiliar burden, as though the earth were taking account of his body for the first time. People noticed that dust because Batuknath had always looked as though the earth were unworthy of touching him. Today the earth had hold of him.

Batuknath's greatest fear was not prison but the eyes of his family. Outside, he raised the shields of scripture, profession, and lineage; inside, he kept hearing his grandchild's small question: "Grandfather, whose side were you on?" Each time he invented an answer, yet in no answer could he erase the smell of the names that had been suppressed.

He reached the circle around the stump and stood there for a long time. The children recognized him, but no commotion arose. A society that begins mocking an offender makes the offender the centre again; the children of Garh Narikel no longer made that mistake. Ananya kept turning the register's pages. Ira wiped dust from the stone names with a wet cloth. Devika sat at a distance talking with the women. Satyavrat Mehta was there that day, but the man Batuknath had come looking for was looking not at him but toward the names.

Batuknath first went to Satyavrat. Because of old habit, a shadow of command entered his voice: "Mehta ji, I have something to say." Satyavrat raised his head but did not answer. Batuknath said again, "I have come to ask forgiveness." This time Satyavrat replied slowly, "Not from me. From all those whose names are read here. I too am one who listens."

The sentence entered Batuknath like an arrow. A man who had spent his whole life at the centre of a platform was, for the first time, not ordered but given the chance to stand behind the line. Yet a guilty mind does not immediately understand the language of opportunity. He said, "Legally speaking..." Without raising her head, Ananya said, "Here you will not be heard legally. You will be heard in the form of names."

Batuknath's face reddened, then turned pale. A little girl's sentence had cancelled the entire court in which his life had been spent—dates, adjournments, technical objections, procedure, prestige. He sat near the edge of the stump. Before him lay the very stone on which was written, "One whose name was not found." For years he had protected the accused person's name while leaving the victim's name in the dust of files. Today the nameless stone stood guard before him like a judge.

The first name was read—Saryu. Batuknath knew the name, but had never remembered it. He remembered only the case number, the courtroom, the reason for adjournment, the missing paper from the other side. When Ananya read "Saryu," an old voice rose inside Batuknath: "Next date." He shuddered. After so many years he

understood that saying “date” is, many times, a way of killing death a second time.

The second name was Ujjwal. The young man caught in Chandrapal Batra’s net, whose mother kept the household going with fragments of her son’s name. Batuknath had not been the direct lawyer in that case, but the system he had built, his training, habits at the bar, and culture of brokerage had nourished men like Chandrapal. At Ujjwal’s name Batuknath bowed his ears. He felt the screen’s blue light entering his eyes.

The third name—Munna Paswan. The fourth—the labourer who was only a number in the contractor’s register. The fifth—the woman whose bodily humiliation was turned into a question of “character” in court. The sixth—the young man whose family memory was severed under the weight of a hospital bill. The seventh—the name pressed into a wall of caste. The eighth—the name that rose with Gangesha’s question: why does a society that studies justice kill the truth of life?

Batuknath kept listening. The voice of the man who had come to ask forgiveness gradually weakened. The word forgiveness is easy when spoken from a stage; it becomes difficult when every name opens its wound before you. His hand moved automatically toward his pocket—the habit of searching for a legal card, pen, phone, something. But the children’s rule that day was that no phone could be used during the reading of names. Ananya had already taken Batuknath’s phone and placed it in a cloth bag. He sat helplessly with his hands on his knees.

Night thickened. Floodwater gleamed in the distance. The crocodiles were not visible, but their presence remained in the scent of water. The chill of wet earth slowly climbed into Batuknath’s seated body, while from the distant platform the hesitant smell of lamp oil and wick came and went with the breeze. Ba said quietly, “If you want forgiveness, listen to names all night. Do not get up in the middle.” Batuknath nodded. He thought this would be easy; he could argue in court all night. But arguing and listening are two different austerities. In argument the mind runs outward; in listening it is dragged inward.

The reading of names continued. After each name, those present said, “Present.” Sometimes the voice was strong, sometimes weak, sometimes dissolved in weeping. At first Batuknath built a defence with every name: “I did not take that case,” “I was not in office then,” “That was the procedure,” “The court is independent.” But by the third watch of the night the arguments of defence were exhausted. The names were not.

When the name “Gangesha” came, a faint moonlight fell on the green point of the stump. Ananya read: “Gangesha, father of Navya-Nyaya, killed in the name of honour because of the inconvenient truth of his life.” Batuknath closed his eyes. He remembered his speeches in assemblies about the glory of tradition. It had been easy to say Mithila

was the land of the philosophy of justice; it was difficult to hear how often that same land had killed justice in the name of caste.

Suddenly he spoke: "I am guilty." No one was startled. The children were not startled either. Ananya only asked, "Toward whom?" Batuknath faltered. He wanted to say, "Toward everyone," but the sentence felt pale. "Toward names," he finally said. "I turned names into cases, not human beings. I covered crime with procedure. I used tradition as a shield. I made justice into a profession."

After this admission anger rose inside some people. A young man shouted, "You say it now? After everyone is dead?" Meera put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Anger is present too. It also needs a place." The young man broke into tears. Batuknath watched him. Once he would have used the language of contempt for such anger. Today he understood how often people's anger had been silenced in the name of civility, discipline, and the dignity of the court.

Near dawn Batuknath's body began to tremble. His age, fatigue, and inner collapse rose together. Satyavrat wanted to give him water. Batuknath raised a hand to stop him: "Let the names finish first." Hearing that sentence, Ba looked at him. There was no compassion in her eyes, but a severe acknowledgement. Forgiveness had not come, but the beginning of listening had been accepted.

The last name that night was "Nameless." All whose names were never found, who were cut from files, carried away by rivers, departed without a mark on the body, lost in digital darkness, hidden by caste before birth, or suppressed in a woman's throat. When "Nameless" was read, Batuknath wanted for the first time to say "Present." No sound came. His throat had dried; the salt of the whole night had gathered on his lips. After great effort, a whisper emerged: "Present." At that exact moment the first bird-call mingled with the whisper.

Sunrise was coming. The shadow of the Channa stump lengthened again. The children stopped the reading. Batuknath rose slowly. He asked Ananya, "Have I been forgiven?" Closing the register, Ananya said, "Forgiveness is not a verdict. It is a practice. The names will be read again tomorrow. Come."

For the first time Batuknath returned without an answer. He received no certificate, no photograph, no public announcement. He looked at his empty hands. The weight of those empty hands seemed greater than the weight of every office he had held in his life.

That dawn Chandrapal Batra woke in his distant home. No message had arrived on his phone all night, yet the account-book screen had opened by itself. In every row, in place of "credit," "debit," and "percentage," the same word glowed: "medium." Half asleep, Chandrapal muttered, "I only moved money around." The screen answered: "Mule."

At that time no one in Garh Narikel knew this. But the moment Batuknath's belated forgiveness was left incomplete, the next door of the story opened—onto the man who was about to understand that his entire life had itself been a mule account for greed.

Folk Song: Late Forgiveness Is Not Empty

Folk Tune: Atonement Samadoun

*Open, O forgiveness, let late forgiveness open the door,
Not a destination—it walks carrying the shadow of delay.*

*Forgiveness that comes late brings the ledger of its delay,
The weight of empty hands feels greater than a mountain of office.*

*Batuk listened to names all night, with few answers,
How many years were eaten by dates—the account is long.*

Not a flower of forgiveness, but a debt of action is needed,

The victim's time will not return; the guarding still remains.

That dawn Chandrapal's account said "medium,"

"I only moved money"—the screen wrote "mule."

*Late forgiveness opens a door, not a destination,
It must walk with the shadow of every day of delay.*

*The weight of empty hands is heavier than a mountain of office,
Batuk listened to names all night, his answers only half-formed.*

The victim's time will not return—yet the guarding remains.



[Philosophical Undertone—Conclusion: Quality is a cause, and the nature of quality in inference and related cognition: In an illusion such as “the conch is yellow,” even when there is perception of the particular, valid cognition of the conch’s white colour does not arise; therefore the objection that perception of the particular cannot be the cause of cognition of whiteness is not sound. At the end of the dialogue both accepted that an example aids valid cognition only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Conclusion: quality is a cause, and the nature of quality in inference and related cognition.]

CHAPTER 97

Chandrapal's Mule Account

Chandrapal remembered his first day at school. During attendance the teacher had mispronounced his name and the class had laughed. He had cried until evening. Now he understood: a man who had suffered so much when his own name was distorted had so easily turned thousands of people's names into accounts, percentages, and identity numbers. The memory did not make him innocent; it merely tore the curtain of self-deception.

The one who made other people's accounts into mules one day woke to find his own life had been a mule account.



Opening Folk Song: Hope of a Message on a Leaf

Folk Tune: Signal-Batagabani

Send, O message, send a message of hope,

Plant seeds of dawn even in letters meant to be erased.

Even if the last message is erased, let it remain upon a leaf,

Let the wind read it and carry hope from house to house.

“Find company, seek help”—let every line say,

Even inside a dark phone, let a sign of dawn remain.

Give the message life; extend a hand in time,

If someone is in crisis, reach that person's door.

Words of hope upon a leaf will defeat the digital night,

One right message can save many lives.

“I am with you, do not fear”—a small line, a great deed,

Even one answered ring may save someone today.

Let no one be left alone in the darkness of a phone,

From a hand extended in time, the current of dawn can break forth.



Beyond the door that had opened—Batuknath Hariharan was exhausted after listening to names all night, but Chandrapal Batra did not go to hear anyone's name that night. He sat alone in his old room, where once five phone screens would be open at the same time. In the stale air of the closed room, the cold plastic smell of mobiles mixed with the sour smell of old ink. On the table before him lay three old ledgers, two switched-off phones, a broken seal, and a tiny grain of dust that had come from a stone at Channa Grove. He did not know why the dust had come or who had brought it. Yet it was present in that room—the only nameless witness among all his numbers.

Chandrapal thought he had opened many accounts in his life. Some in banks, some on paper, some on phones, some in people's minds. But that night he understood that, in truth, he had not opened accounts; he had been made to open them. He had thought himself the owner, but he was only a route. Money flowed from one place to another; sin changed from one hand to another; the glitter of profit fell upon his eyes; but final authority always remained somewhere else.

He remembered his first fraud. He was young then, carrying a cheap degree from Meerut in his pocket like a badge of pride. He had thought: a society that closes every door in the name of clan, language, caste, university, office, and certificate does not make cheating a sin; it makes it cleverness. But cleverness slowly became livelihood, livelihood became brokerage, brokerage became crime, crime became business, business became a network, and the network became a river in which Chandrapal himself kept flowing like soil.

Gangesha's question troubled him that night. Gangesha, author of the *Tattvacintamani*, asks for means of knowledge—what is perception, what is inference, what is testimony, what is comparison? Chandrapal searched for the means of knowledge in his own life. Perception—the money that came into his hand. Inference—the command of Lau Kin-Hung sitting somewhere far away. Testimony—the messages Raghav Signal kept deleting. Comparison—himself. He understood that he was like the pack-mule that carries a burden but does not own the burden.

He laughed, but the laugh was empty. People called him Batra sahib; often they called him “sir”; criminals touched his feet, politicians answered his phone, officials looked at his papers. But when the water reversed, when the stump of Channa Grove laughed, when the children began guarding names, all his honours fell away. What remained was a mule account. Money passed through him; crime passed through him; orders passed through him; but nowhere was his own name written in full.

He opened the ledgers lying on the table. On the first page he tried to rub out the numbers. Under the pressure of his thumb, ink spread farther across the damp paper, as though the digits themselves had blurred and begun showing their inner faces. Behind every number he started seeing someone: a young man who sold his home out of fear of a digital arrest; a mother who fell silent while repaying her son's loan; a labourer's family whose compensation vanished on the way; a young woman whose privacy returned on a screen as a threat. That night the numbers became faces.

For the first time Chandrapal trembled not from fear but from humiliation. For in fear a person still considers himself important—my life is in danger. Humiliation asks instead: what did my life even mean? He saw that people had died, broken, and fallen silent in all his dealings;

yet he himself had not become whole either. Inside him there had been only a road, never a home.

Outside, floodwater was climbing into the lane. Below the window a few lights flashed like fireflies. Chandrapal bent to look. In the water there were no banknotes, no phones, no papers; small account books were floating. On the face of each was only one word: "through." The accounts drifted toward him as though they had come to surround his house.

He remembered how many times he had lured poor young men into letting him use their accounts; how many times he had told the unemployed, "A little money will come and go; nothing will happen to you." Now he understood that "nothing will happen" had been the greatest lie. When an account becomes a road for nameless money, it is not only the account that is damaged; a hole opens inside a person's name. Through that hole the soul slowly leaks away.

He sat with his head on the table for a long time. In the room's darkness his childhood suddenly appeared. A child whom no one at home called by his full name—someone said "Chandru," someone "Batra," someone "that boy." Perhaps his full name had first been written on an examination form. That day Chandrapal had thought: one day my name will be written in large letters. Today he understood that a name written in large letters and a name truly heard are two different things.

He began to write his name—"Chandrapal Batra." His hand stopped. The pen seemed to write by itself on the next line: "percentage." Startled, he tore the page. On a second page he wrote again: "Chandrapal Batra." Beneath it appeared the same word—"percentage." The third time his hand trembled. This time he wrote: "Chandrapal Batra, mule account." And after a long time, in his own hand beneath it: "through whom sin passed."

As soon as he wrote that sentence, the air inside the room changed, as though a window closed for years had opened. But this was not freedom. It was only the first crack of confession. Light does not enter a crack first; dust does. Chandrapal began to cough. In the dust he smelled the stump of Channa Grove.

Then there was a knock at the door. He started up. No one was outside. Only through the lower gap beneath the door a wet leaf slid into the room. No name was written on it, only a question: "Whose account was it?" He wanted to answer—Lau's, Raghav's, Broom's, Hariharan's, the system's. But Gangesha's question rose again in his ears: if evidence is required, one cannot answer by removing one's own role.

On the back of the leaf he wrote: "Mine too." The moment he wrote those two words, his hand grew heavy. What he had until now considered the cleverness of being a medium became a chain of responsibility. An

account does not remain innocent merely because it stands in the middle; a route too is marked on the geography of crime.

Chandrapal kept looking at the floating account books in the water. Slowly he saw each account turn into a small crocodile. Mouths open, they were chewing not money but names. The person whose name became an account was treated by society only as a number. The person through whose name money passed was immediately caught as the criminal. The real owner remained invisible. Chandrapal had been the broker of that invisibility.

For the first time he wondered: if every account were opened, if in place of every "through" the name of the actual person issuing the order were written, what would society's face look like? How many pious donors, respected lawyers, foreign philanthropists, development heroes, researchers, politicians—behind them all would rise the dust of chewed-up names. He was afraid, but this time the fear was not of being caught; it was of having to see the whole chain.

He picked up his switched-off phone. Raghav Signal's final number was still saved, though all the messages had been erased. Chandrapal typed: "Close the account." Then deleted it. He wrote: "Whose account was it?" Then deleted that too. At last he wrote only: "I was a medium, but I was not innocent." Before he could send it, the screen froze. The letters became leaves and stuck to the screen.

Then he understood—Raghav's next message would no longer remain erasable. Words once erased to protect crime would now become leaves wanting to stick to the stump of Channa Grove. Chandrapal switched off the phone. Outside, the floating account books in the floodwater were now less visible. In their place floated small stones bearing incomplete names.

In the first light of dawn Chandrapal wrapped his ledgers, the leaf, and the written page in cloth. He knew this would not wash away his crime. Perhaps he would not be forgiven. Perhaps he would receive punishment, mockery, distrust. But for the first time he was going to the place of name-guarding not to hide something, but carrying something to give.

He stepped out of the house. The water stood knee-deep. At every step it caught his ankles and pulled him slightly backward, as though the road itself were demanding an account from him. He felt as though some invisible ledger were stuck to the soles of his feet. Limping, he walked toward Channa Grove. Far away a drop of water shone on the stump's shoot. The children were perhaps still asleep, but the stump was awake.

In his mind Chandrapal said: "Write my name in full, but write my percentage with it. Do not call the one through whom sin passed only a victim; call him a road of crime as well." At that moment there was a

disturbance in the water. No crocodile appeared, but the water parted like the ripple of a tail. It was as though the river were saying: the account has begun to open.

When he reached the stump of Channa Grove, one final flash rose from Raghav's phone. There was no number on the screen, no name, only three words: "The message will not be erased."

Folk Song: A Life Turned Mule

Folk Tune: Account-Viraha

*No, O no, the road will not remain nameless,
Calling yourself a "medium" will not lighten the weight of blame.*

You made another's account a mule; your own life became a mule,

Along the road of percentages you kept carrying sin.

Three ledgers, two phones, a closed room at night,

Behind every sum, the sorrowful inheritance of a name.

"Write my full name; write my share beside it,"

Not only victim—the colour of the road of crime.

With the ripple of its tail the river opened the account,

Raghav's screen said—the message will not be erased.

Calling yourself a medium does not lessen the burden of blame,

Wherever sin has passed, that road will not remain nameless.

Behind every sum, the sorrowful inheritance of a name.

Not only victim, but the colour of the road of crime.



[Philosophical Undertone—Account of validity when objecthood is accepted as a distinct entity: The obtaining of a jewel occurs merely by conjunction because otherwise the jewel could not be obtained. At the end of the dialogue both accepted that an example assists valid cognition only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Account of validity when objecthood is accepted as a distinct entity.]

CHAPTER 98

Raghav's Final Message

Raghav's habit was to send a message, erase it, destroy the evidence. Yet at night he remembered his mother's final voice, a recording he had accidentally deleted while clearing his phone. Even knowing the pain of that personal loss, he kept erasing other people's calls. The root of his crime was not technical cleverness alone, but an old habit of fleeing from listening.

The final message cannot be erased—it becomes a leaf and clings to the stump.



Opening Folk Song: People Present in Silence

Folk Tune: Testimony-Parati

Listen, O silence, listen to the attendance of silence,

Read the language of eyes, the wet leaf—read the signs.

Even when no one speaks, the eyes say—I am here,

An empty seat, a wet leaf say—I am here.

Do not read silence as absence; read it as a sign,

Give a safe place, and the throat will grow its flower.

Presence is not a signature but the experience of respect,

The quiet company of people will complete victory over fear.

Give respectful space to those present in silence,

Trust only this—the time to speak will come by itself.

The throat will open in its own time, not by force,

Fear cannot endure beneath the assurance of safe shade.

An empty seat, steady eyes—these too are testimony,

Where silence is honoured, justice is good.



The message that was destined to become writing on a leaf began that very night. By the time Chandrapal Batra understood that his life had been a mule account, the bell of emptiness rang for the first time inside Raghav “Signal” Somani’s network. Chandrapal’s percentages, Batuknath’s delays, Lau Kin-Hung’s profits, Broom’s donations—all of them had passed at some point through Raghav’s invisible messages. He was less the chief of crime than its breath. But when breath carries another person’s greed for too long, one day it begins to suffocate inside itself.

Five devices were glowing in Raghav's room. Their blended hum and faint heat hung in the room like an invisible beehive. On each were shining dots, security marks, locks, times, codes, anonymous groups, donation accounts, memory projects, foreign connections—everything looked orderly. To the outside world he still held the network in his hand. But the laughter that had risen inside the stump of Channa Grove entered the ears of all his devices like dust. Messages still arrived, but answers did not. Accounts opened, but trust did not.

From old habit he opened a secure group. The names were disguises—"donation," "heritage," "clean-up," "trust," "archive," "foreign advice." Real human beings stood behind those names, but Raghav had never cared for real names. He always lived in code. For him there were no relationships, only access; no trust, only passwords; no friendship, only convenience.

He wrote a message: "Close the account." Then erased it. He wrote another: "Open a new route." He erased that too. A third: "The archive of names is difficult to seize." His finger stopped on the word difficult. Difficult for whom? How had a society that for years could not preserve the names of its dead suddenly become difficult? He remembered the children writing names on stones around the cut stump. They did it under no one's command and from no fear. With thread spun from reason, the water of grief, and Gangesha's question, they were weaving a new guard.

Raghav closed his eyes. A scene opened inside him. Not the stump of Channa Grove, but an immense dark room in which thousands of messages hung like leaves. On every leaf was the mark of something he had believed had disappeared forever. "Sent," "erased," "seen," "remained silent," "profit shared," "name removed," "donation concealed"—all hung from the tips of leaves. The vanished messages had not vanished; they had merely become leaves on another body of Channa Grove.

He opened his eyes in fear. A leaf shape shimmered on the phone screen. He pressed something; it did not go away. He switched off the device; the leaf glowed even in darkness. He picked up a second device—there too a leaf. On the third—a leaf. On the fourth—a leaf. On the fifth—a leaf. What he had considered secrecy had become a forest of memory surrounding him.

Half the night passed. The city street outside was quiet, but inside Raghav a whirl of messages kept spinning. For the first time he tried to write his full name—"Raghav Somani." The screen displayed: "Raghav Signal Somani." He deleted "Signal." The letters returned. He understood that the nickname that had once seemed the cleverness of crime had become his chain. Society often attaches a person's sin to the name; here his own deeds had made a home inside his name.

He tried to message Chandrapal: “You were right, we are all accounts.” It did not go. He wrote to Batuknath: “It is late, but listen.” It did not go. He wrote to Lau: “The language of profit does not work in Channa Grove.” It did not go. He wrote to Broom: “There is a corpse behind the donation.” It did not go. Every message stuck on his screen, as though each sentence, before being allowed outside, was sentencing him to read it himself.

Then he wrote a short sentence: “I am afraid.” The message went. But to whom? The screen remained blank for a few moments. Then an answer came: “Present.” No one could tell where it came from—no number, no mark, no group. Only “Present.” In that single word he heard at once the voices of the children seated around the stump, the air of the dead, and Satyavrat Mehta’s second silence.

An old memory opened inside Raghav. As a child he had written secret messages on paper leaves—lemon juice, heat from fire, words written in hiding. His father used to say, “Learn to keep secrets; only then will you be useful in the world.” But Channa Grove said: “A secret that protects human dignity is protection; a secret that plunders names is crime.” Raghav had never learned that distinction.

Slowly he opened all his groups. Everywhere he wrote messages but did not send them. First: “Do not close the donation account; open the account of truth.” Second: “If a name is removed, memory will return in copies.” Third: “The stump of Channa Grove is no longer under control.” Fourth: “The account is not closed; the soul is open.” At that last sentence his hand trembled. He had never used the word “soul.” In his business the soul belonged outside profit and loss. Today that thing outside seemed the only door inward.

He sent the message. Time kept ticking on the screen. Normally such a message would disappear within moments. This one did not disappear. He waited—one minute, five minutes, half an hour. The sentence stayed there: “The account is not closed; the soul is open.” Irritated, he checked the deletion timer again. It was correct. This should not have happened. But the rules of crime were now breaking.

A green line sprouted across the message. At first he thought it was a digital fault. Then the line became the stem of a leaf. The letters spread like veins. What appeared on the screen was not an image of a new shoot from Channa Grove; the shoot itself seemed to be growing. For one moment the raw green scent of a new leaf spread in the room of machines—the first time such a smell had entered it. Frightened, Raghav threw the phone. It fell to the floor but did not break. A small green leaf separated from the screen and flew into the air.

Meanwhile, midnight in Garh Narikel. That day’s guard at the stump was Ananya and two small boys. The air was completely still—so still that

the faint tap-tap of receding water and even the burning of the lamp wick could be heard distinctly. Suddenly a leaf flew in from the west. The tree had been cut, and it was not the season for such a leaf. It was green, shining on the back, as though made from the sap of letters. It came and clung to the edge of the stump. Ananya took the lamp closer. On the leaf was written: "The account is not closed; the soul is open."

One of the little boys asked, "What name is this?" Ananya said, "It is not a name. It is the first leaf of confession." The other said, "Raghav's?" Ananya did not answer. She understood that Raghav's crime was not small, nor was his confession complete. One leaf does not make a forest. Yet the first sentence that did not vanish, from a man who had spent his life making messages disappear, could not be ignored either.

The leaf remained until dawn. People came. There was no procession, no slogan. Ba looked at the leaf and said, "The one whose message did not disappear must now stand in the court of names." Meera said, "Confession without accountability is incomplete." Devika added, "It is easy to say the soul is open; it is hard to open it before those whose minds were chewed by your codes." Ananya placed a stone beneath the leaf. On it was written: "Waiting."

When Raghav woke in the city that day, all his devices were working normally. Replies had arrived in some groups—someone laughed, someone cursed, someone ordered him to keep quiet, someone asked whether he had gone mad. But the message clinging to the stump was absent from his screen. Gone from the digital world, present in the world of memory. That reversal broke something inside him.

He could have fled. Police, courts, foreign countries, aliases—he knew every route. But that day he felt that it was not the route that had changed; the line had changed. The line that once connected criminals now stretched from the stump of Channa Grove to his heart. For the first time, without code, intermediary, or disappearing message, Raghav sat down with an ordinary sheet of paper and wrote: "What I kept silent was a crime."

The paper remained unfinished. He stopped after the first line. He had no practice in writing truth. Until night he kept returning to the same line. Each time his hand trembled when he wrote "I." In the language of crime, "I" is rare; there are "procedure," "group," "project," "risk," "account." In the language of atonement, the first word is "I," and that word is the hardest.

The leaf was shown to Satyavrat Mehta. He read it for a long time. There was neither pleasure nor forgiveness on his face. He said, "This is not testimony. It is the door to testimony. The door has opened; walking inside remains." The children wrote the sentence in the register. Then

Ananya asked, “Who will testify?” Satyavrat replied, “First, those who did not speak in time. I too.”

At that answer everyone fell silent. Raghav’s final message remained as a leaf on the stump, but its shadow fell across Satyavrat Mehta’s silence. If Raghav wrote the crimes of his code, Satyavrat too would have to write his delay, his unspoken sentence, the fear inside his office. The next page of the Constitution of Names would now belong not only to offenders, but to witnesses as well.

In the evening the leaf moved lightly. Its green colour deepened. The letters changed slightly; beneath “The account is not closed; the soul is open,” a fine line emerged: “The debt of listening remains.” Ananya brought the lamp closer. Satyavrat stood behind her. His hand moved by itself toward the bag containing an old register, affidavits, and an ink pen.

Folk Song: The Final Message Became a Leaf

Folk Tune: Signal-Viraha

Clung, O leaf, the final message became a leaf and clung,

The account is not closed—the door of the soul has opened.

The final message was not erased; it became a leaf and clung,

The wind tried to carry it off; the sap of names held it fast.

Raghav’s net fell silent; inside a bell rang,

A fine line below—the debt of listening remains,

Even after confession, the road of testimony remains.

Ananya brought the lamp close; the letters deepened,

Satyavrat’s old register stirred inside his bag.

The message is not final; it calls the next pair of ears,

Silence written on a leaf asks for the footfall of a witness.



[Philosophical Undertone—Now the following objection may be raised—mere person: A traveller narrated his experience—otherwise, when a staff is kept beside a person and then removed, the unobstructed usage concerning the absence of the person and the absence of the staff could not be explained. This division showed that even within small events of ordinary life, serious epistemological processes remain active. Now the objection may be raised—mere person, that is, usage concerning the absence of the potter is established merely because of the absence of qualifiers and the like, since that absence alone possesses the relevant power.]

CHAPTER 99

Satyavrat Mehta's Testimony

Just before giving testimony, Satyavrat folded his paper three times. He was afraid that if he spoke the truth, office, friendships, and the prestige of earlier decisions would break. Then he remembered Ananya's register, where the children crossed out mistakes and wrote the correct word. He understood—crossing out a mistake does not spoil the page; not crossing it out spoils history.

The wind tried to carry away the testimony, the water tried to dissolve it—but the testimony was a leaf and did not move.



Opening Folk Song: Victory through a Child's Hand

Folk Tune: Elephant-Crocodile Victory Song

Hold on, child, hold the finger of truth,

The elephant's strength may tire; your hand will not—know this.

The elephant's strength may tire, but a child's hand will not,

A small finger grips truth and does not leave the road.

One child draws a picture, another reads a name,

A third raises a question, a fourth moves forward together.

A child's natural sense of justice loosens the crocodile's grip,

The bright laughter of a new generation uproots darkness.

Victory through a child's hand—spread the wings of hope,

Teach truth, give company—the child will become the future.

One makes a picture, another reads the name,

A third beats the drum of questions, a fourth dances along.

The joining of little hands loosens the grip,

The bright laughter of children breaks the clasp of darkness.



It was the dawn of that same debt of listening. Raghav's final message had become a leaf and remained stuck to the stump of Channa Grove. All night the flood wind tried to blow it away and the water tried to dissolve it, but the leaf did not move. At dawn, when the children arrived with the register of names, they saw clearly written on its green surface: "The account is not closed; the soul is open." Ananya stared at the sentence for a long time. Then she said quietly, "Account is a merchant's word. The soul opens only when testimony is given."

Hearing this, Satyavrat Mehta, sitting silently on the other side of the stump, suddenly trembled. He had affidavits, a notebook, an ink pen, but

until now he did not have his own testimony. He had heard many people's names and written down the weight of many silences, but when the question turned upon him his hand dried up as though a page of a law book had been held near fire.

One line in the children's people's code said: "Whoever listens will also write the name of their own silence." When they had written it, everyone thought it was a simple rule. Now they understood it was the hardest. An offender hides the offence; a victim is forced to hide the wound; an official calls convenience policy; and a witness saves silence by calling it restraint. Amid the shadows standing on all four sides, Satyavrat Mehta began searching for his own.

He did not rise. He only took a clean sheet from his bag. It bore no government heading, no seal, no designation. At the top he wrote: "Testimony of Satyavrat Mehta." Then he stopped for a while. Ananya asked, "Will you not write your post?" He shook his head. "A post should not weigh more than testimony. The heavier the post, the more often the person hides behind it."

It took him a long time to write the first sentence. When he put the tip of the ink pen to the page, the first line he drew was not a letter but a tremor; the soft scratch of the nib sounded like the first plough moving through a dry field. At last he wrote: "Many times I could have spoken in time, but I did not." After that sentence such silence filled the circle around the stump that even the distant water of the Kamla-Balan could be heard. This was not a dramatic confession; it was the crack through which a human being begins to leave the shell of office.

He wrote on: "When the bridge labourer's name was removed from the list, I saw the paper. I wrote—procedure is under way. While procedure continued, the body rotted. When breath was being sold in the hospital, I remained satisfied with the language of reports. When a young man's home was destroyed by digital fraud, I could have said fraud is not merely a police-station matter but a wound in society; instead I remained within the boundary of the case. When a woman's privacy became a market, I demanded evidence but did not accept the victim's fear as evidence."

At that line Meera closed her eyes. Her face was not hard, but tired. Satyavrat did not look toward her; perhaps his hand would have stopped if he had. He kept writing: "I knew the language of law, but I learned late to hear the trembling of people. I thought testimony was a document; now I understand that a document is only the shell of testimony. If the inner voice is not heard, paper becomes not justice but polite silence."

Ba leaned on her stick and listened to the page; the worn handle of the stick slowly grew warm in her palm. She said nothing, but her eyes said: such testimony has come late, yet if late testimony is true, it should

not be thrown away. Old villagers know that grain sprouting late will not give a great harvest, but the truth of the seed remains alive. The children did not know such forgiveness, but they were guarding the place of truth.

In the next line Satyavrat wrote of Gangesha. "Navya-Nyaya teaches us the subtlety of evidence. But if subtlety of evidence works against caste, labour, body, women, the poor, the dead, and silence, then it ceases to be justice and remains only cleverness. Gangesha's question stands before me—what does a society gain by honouring a text if it cuts away the inconvenient truth of life? I too many times cut away inconvenient truth by calling it a 'procedural difficulty.' This was the caste system of my silence."

At that sentence the leaf-born green point on the stump trembled slightly. Someone called it wind, someone a sign. Ananya wrote in the register: "The caste system of silence." The new phrase startled everyone. Satyavrat himself was startled for a moment, because while writing with his own hand he understood for the first time that caste is not only pride of birth; caste also exists wherever some voices are always kept above and some always below.

He wrote: "In my office files moved by number. Numbers were safe; names were inconvenient. It is easy to sign above a number; it is difficult to raise your eyes before a name. To avoid that difficulty I chose numbers many times. Sitting today at the stump of Channa Grove, I say: the convenience of a number can become the murder of a name."

During this testimony Satyavrat Mehta did not become a hero. On the contrary, the more he wrote, the smaller his body seemed. The post that had made him tall for years descended onto the page and brought him back to human height. To the people it was a strange sight—the man who once made everyone fall silent when he stood in court now sat among children writing down his own faults.

Devika asked softly, "Is this an affidavit?" Satyavrat raised his head. "No. In an affidavit, a person swears to tell the truth. Here I admit that I kept the truth silent. This is the page behind the oath." Gop Kumar asked, "Where should this be placed in the archive?" Ananya answered, "Not after all the names, but among all the names. If silence commits its crime in the middle, its page will remain in the middle too."

But the testimony did not end there. Satyavrat trembled while writing the last part. "I ask forgiveness for this, but asking forgiveness is not enough. Those who did not receive justice in time will not get their lives back from my forgiveness. Therefore my testimony asks for punishment—the history of my office, the delays in my decisions, the beneficiaries of my silence, and the crimes that escaped through my silence: let all their names be made public."

A stir passed through the crowd. Some people were afraid. Public names would reopen disputes; files would open; the memory of offices would open; the darkness of courts would open. But the shadow of the stump lengthened and touched everyone's feet. It seemed to say: the guarding of names cannot be half-done. If you write the victim's name, write the beneficiary of silence as well.

At the bottom of the page Satyavrat wrote: "If my testimony is ever turned into a memorial, speech, award, or donation paper, the children will reject it. This page is not meant to make me larger; it is meant to keep me small. Justice begins when the witness comes down from convenience and sits level with the people."

He gave the page to Ananya. She did not immediately paste it into the register. First she placed it inside the circle of stones, among the names. Wind moved; the paper fluttered once like a thin wing, then lay still between the stones. Raghav's leaf-message trembled. Chandrapal's stone of the incomplete name shifted slightly. A little ash left from the night of Batuknath's belated forgiveness lifted into the air. Lau's wet final-deal paper curled under a splash of water.

Then Old Budhba's Ghost appeared for the first time in daylight in full form. He was not black, not grey; he was the colour of earth, with both sunlight and shadow upon him. He came near Satyavrat, looked at the page, and said, "You wrote testimony. Will you listen now?" Satyavrat folded his hands. "Yes." Old Budhba's Ghost said, "Listening needs not only ears, but hands too. Next time when the crocodile grips, the elephant will need not only a cry, but a hand to hold it."

The sentence turned everyone's attention toward the elephant-crocodile tale. Until now the elephant cried out, the crocodile held on, and deity or memory or name descended between them. But Old Budhba's Ghost left a new question: if the children's hands had already taken up the guardianship of names, could those hands grasp the elephant's foot and pull? Would testimony only be heard, or would it also be rescued?

Before night fell, Satyavrat Mehta's testimony was pasted into the register as a middle page. Above it there was no name, no office—only one line: "Silence, now seated under the sentence of listening." The children said in one voice: "Present." The green point on the stump seemed to brighten in reply.

And far away in the floodwater, where crocodile eyes sometimes glinted, a vast shadow rose this time—not entirely elephant, not entirely crocodile. The story turned to take its next breath, because now the guardians of names were approaching the moment when they would have to extend their hands.

Folk Song: Silence Present

Folk Tune: Testimony Song

*It remained, O testimony, steadfast as a leaf,
Silence's first task became the protection of unheard names.*

*The wind tried to carry it, the water tried to dissolve it,
Testimony became a leaf and remained steadfast upon the stump.*

*Mehta named not his office but his own silence,
"For long I watched and stayed silent"—the register received it.*

The children said "Present" in one voice,

The green point brightened; a shadow woke in distant water.

Testimony must not only be heard; it must also be saved,

A child's hand will reach out to hold the elephant's foot.

Silence, now seated under the sentence of listening,

Its first task is the protection of unheard names.

"For a long time I watched and stayed silent"—the register received it.

The children said "Present" in one voice,

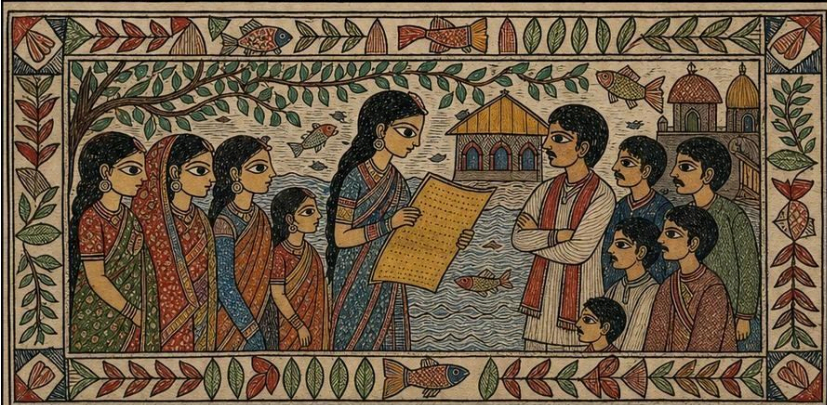


[Philosophical Undertone—Perception: Example: If a person sees with their own eyes a fire burning on a stove, or receives the fragrance of a flower through the nose, this is "perceptual" knowledge of that object.]

CHAPTER 100

Elephant, Crocodile, and a Child's Hand

*The elephant's strength grows tired, the crocodile's grip comes loose—
only a child's hand does not tire.*



Opening Folk Song: Victory of the Children's Turn

Folk Tune: Children's Kabaddi Song

Run, O child, run your turn of names,

Take laughter as your shield, curiosity as your sword.

Kabaddi, kabaddi—the child runs the turn of names,

Laughter becomes the shield, curiosity the sword.

Crossing the boundary, the child says—no one is nameless,

One whose story has been heard is not defeated.

Book, play, and song together make justice simple,

Victory in the children's turn shows the direction of the future.

*Hands do not tire, minds do not bow, the voice of companionship
remains,*

Even two hundred years of darkness will be cut by a child's dawn.

Cross the boundary line and say—no one is nameless,

Let justice bathe in the confluence of book, play, and song,

Even two hundred years of darkness will flee before a child's dawn.



That night the name-stones had been arranged in a circle around the stump. Floodwater had washed dust from some of them, but had not erased the letters. Ananya wiped one stone with her palm. On it was written: "One whose name was not found." That stone was placed at the very centre. Satyavrat sat at a distance. He had no paper with him now, only empty ears.

Ba said, "Tell the elephant-crocodile tale again today." The children were startled. They knew the story—the elephant enters the water, the crocodile grips it, the elephant cries out, and rescue comes. But in Garh Narikel no story ends after being heard once. Each time it turns its face, just as the current of the Kamla-Balan shifts its bank through the night.

The lamp flames trembled over everyone's faces as though the story itself were warming its hands at the fire.

Ananya asked, "Who is the elephant? Who is the crocodile?" Ba did not answer. She only looked toward the edge of the water. The water was calm, yet beneath the surface was a faint ripple, as though some ancient creature without a body were moving there. Aruni said, "The one trapped is the elephant. The one holding is the crocodile." Devika added, "And the one who hears the trapped person's name is the hand." Meera said, "If someone says without permission, 'I am rescuing you,' that is not a hand; it is another crocodile."

The children did not laugh at that sentence. They were reaching an age at which humour, justice, and fear can live in the same body. Ananya opened the register and wrote at the top: "Elephant, Crocodile, and a Child's Hand." As she wrote it, the green point inside the stump trembled lightly.

While writing the heading, Ananya first put the vowel mark in "crocodile" incorrectly. She stuck out her tongue and laughed, then crossed it out and wrote it correctly. Ba said, "See? Justice is like this too—do not hide the mistake; cross it out and write it right." The children's laughter made the solemn assembly feel like a home for a moment.

Ujjwal's mother told the first story. For her, Ujjwal was the elephant—the moment he entered the water of the screen, the digital crocodile seized his mind. The more he tried to escape, the tighter the knot became. Bank messages, threatening voices, a false court, fear of humiliation—all kept pulling him beneath the water. "My son cried out," she said, "but at first we called his cry shame, then foolishness, then silence. The hand reached him late."

Devika placed a lamp beside that name-stone. She said, "From today, recognizing a digital crocodile will not remain merely a lesson about crime. We will teach the children to hear first the call that has been pressed down by fear. When an elephant is trapped in the water of a screen, tell them: it is not your fault; you have a name."

The second story belonged to a labourer's family. The bodies chewed up among crocodiles, silt, contracts, and ledgers near the bridge foundations—were they elephant or crocodile? Aruni remained silent for a long time. Then he said, "The labourer was the elephant and the crocodile was the crocodile—that is only half the story. The real crocodile was the paper on which the labourer's name became a wage-line, the body became an accident number, and death became a contractual risk. A crocodile is not only a jaw; sometimes it is language."

At this Satyavrat lowered his head. The pen of his testimony was still in his pocket, but he did not write. The children themselves wrote: "Sometimes the crocodile's teeth are words." Satyavrat understood that

now he had to learn not the language of verdicts, but the language of children.

Meera told the third story. "For me, the elephant is the woman whose privacy was seized, whose body's image was made into a snare, whose love was called a crime, whose silence was turned into a bargain. The crocodile is not only the blackmailer, but the eye of an entire society that wants to see but does not want to give respect." Many voices from the women's night assembly said "Present" together. At that moment the shadow of the cut stump lengthened.

Gop Kumar told his story in an uncertain voice. "Data too is water. If its current remains in people's hands, it gives life; if it goes into a broker's hands, it becomes a crocodile. I saved the lists, but did the list preserve names or human beings? That question keeps me awake at night." Ananya looked at him. "That is why the list will be read beside the stones. With each name, the family's answer will be written. Data alone is not testimony; testimony comes with relationship."

Then the page of the register fluttered lightly by itself. No one felt any wind. The figure of Old Budhba's Ghost became still between water and sunlight. He said, "The elephant is not only the victim. Sometimes an elephant is trapped inside the offender too. But before that elephant is freed, we will see whether it names its crocodile."

As though this were a signal, after nightfall Batuknath Hariharan's face appeared in the mist over the water. The elephant inside him was trapped in bundles of paper. His crocodile was not only greed, but pride of lineage, professional arrogance, commerce in court dates, and contempt for living human beings in the name of scripture. He struggled, but no god descended to rescue him. The children asked only: "Say your full name."

From Hariharan's mouth came first a title, then a post, then lineage, then honour. Not a name. The water remained still. The crocodile's grip did not loosen. Then his descendant's question rang again: "Grandfather, did you save justice or the profession?" After a long time only "Batuk" came from his mouth. A drop of water fell upon the stump. This was not liberation; it was the beginning of confession.

When Chandrapal Batra was seen in the inner water, his elephant was tied by cords of percentage. His crocodile was not the mule account but his nameless hunger. He kept earning from a thousand faces and forgot his own. The children asked, "Your name?" He said, "Commission." The water grew cold. Then he said, "Chandrapal." A small ripple rose in the water. But it broke at once, because with the word "pal" were bound the thefts of many people. Ananya wrote: "Saying the name is not enough; the debt carried by the name remains to be heard."

The elephant inside Raghav “Signal” Somani had no voice. His crocodile was the disappearing message. What was written was erased; what was erased spread as crime. Now he could find no network. The children drew a kabaddi line. It would not erase. Raghav tried to cross it, but he had to hold his breath and say “kabaddi.” No sound came from his mouth. Meera said, “One who spent a lifetime erasing other people’s voices must first bear the weight of silence.”

Lau Kin-Hung appeared from a glass building in a distant country. The elephant inside him wanted to flee Earth. His crocodile was not merely profit but the dream of a nameless future. He had divided the world into sectors, contracts, labour domes, oxygen accounts, and secure planets. He thought that where there was no river, no village, no clan, no memory, there would be no smell of crime either. The stump of Channa Grove laughed.

Ba said, “This time the elephant and crocodile will go beyond Earth.” The children looked toward the sky. The moon was a little yellow, as though it had risen after being washed in floodwater. One star suddenly bent lower. Ananya asked, “Another planet?” Ba replied, “One who is afraid of names on Earth searches for a nameless sky. But the guardianship of names can reach there too.”

At these words a circular kabaddi line was drawn. This game was not going to stop. The game that had begun with ghosts, travelled through the dead and the children, was now preparing to rise from the elephant-crocodile tale toward the sky. The children placed their feet at the water’s edge and drew breath together. The sound “kabaddi-kabaddi” slowly rose—first in the soil, then the stump, then the stones, then on the water’s surface, then in the sky.

Hearing it, Satyavrat Mehta trembled. He knew no book of law contained this line. But sometimes justice becomes a line drawn by a child’s breath between Earth and sky. He did not take out his pen to write. For the first time he stood not outside the game, but at its edge like a guard.

Ananya took the first turn. She crossed the line, but before her was no human being; from inside the water rose the shadow of a crocodile. From its body came the mingled smell of old paper and wet iron. The shadow asked, “Will you save?” Ananya answered, “First say the name.” The shadow trembled. From inside it rose many voices—labourer, youth, woman, child, nameless, offender, victim, water-burial, screen, court, testimony. Ananya held her breath. She extended her hand but did not seize; she only waited.

Then the elephant’s voice came: “Present.” The crocodile’s teeth loosened. This was not rescue; it was justice’s first touch. From the outer

circle the children answered: "Present." The night of Garh Narikel filled with that word.

In the first light of dawn the game did not stop. The children were tired, but the line had not been erased. The stones were warm in their places. The green point on the stump had opened into two leaves; on each new leaf rested a drop of dew, as though the night had left its testimony in trust. Far in the sky the yellow star still leaned slightly downward. No one spoke, yet everyone understood: the story would no longer remain only with the village, bridge, court, stump, and crocodiles. Some people, some names, some minds were beginning to hear an invitation from another planet.

And the children of Garh Narikel, who had learned from the elephant and crocodile that seizing is not rescue and hearing the name is liberation, prepared for the next breath.

Folk Song: A Child's Hand Does Not Tire

Folk Tune: Elephant-Crocodile Victory Song

It does not tire, O no, a child's hand does not tire,

The elephant's strength tired, but the grip on the name did not loosen.

The elephant's strength tires, the crocodile's grip loosens,

A child's hand holds the name and does not tire all night.

Flood mud, crocodile eyes, a new leaf on the stump,

Inside the circle "name," outside the word "Present."

Seizing is not rescue; listening is liberation,

Between a child's palms the elephant and crocodile grow calm.

The line was not erased; the stones remained warm,

In two green leaves a new sky rose.

The village story now hears the road to a planet,

The child-guardians of names choose the next breath.



[Philosophical Undertone—Navya-Nyaya principle: Extrinsic validity: In practical life, where no doubt arises—as in cognition as clear as a gooseberry resting in the palm—no additional inference of validity is required; unwavering activity follows. At the end of the dialogue both accepted that an example assists valid cognition only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Navya-Nyaya principle: the formidable logical establishment of the doctrine of extrinsic validity.]

The Watch of the Mongoose

At the end of Chapter One Hundred, a child's palm had quieted both elephant and crocodile—the child as guardian of the name, whose hand did not tire through the night. But in Garh Narikel that guardianship of names had not begun with a child's hand alone. Long before it, on the veranda of every house, another guardian stood—the mongoose.

In Garh Narikel the mongoose is revered. Hundreds of families have their own stories. On some winter night, when the whole neighbourhood sleeps and a cobra or rasping snake glides soundlessly toward the head of a sleeping child, a mongoose comes from somewhere in the darkness. One leap—and the snake is in two pieces. Then, without blinking, it guards that bedside until dawn, as though its only task were to keep the child's breath unbroken until sunrise.

But the village elders always add one thing: “The mongoose saves a life, but the lineage remains in danger.” For if one snake is cut down one night, another may come on the next. The mongoose's guard knows no night's rest; its watch is new every night and new in every generation.

Throughout this whole tale of crocodiles—where names sink into water and only “presence” remains—the mongoose is the creature standing exactly opposite the crocodile. The crocodile eats the body; the mongoose saves the body. The crocodile erases the name; the mongoose guards the name. When crocodile eyes shine in the flood mud, beneath the stump's new leaves the mongoose's eyes remain awake as well.

There was an old village saying: a child's palm and a mongoose's leap are two forms of the same watch. One holds the name from within; the other guards the body from without. As long as both remain awake, no crocodile, however large, can reach the bedside.

And the mongoose's true strength lay not in its teeth, but in its continuity. When one mongoose tired, another woke; when the

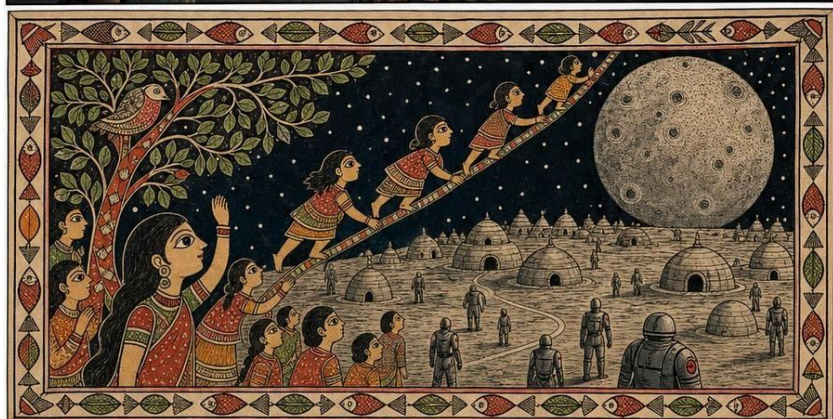
mongoose of one generation grew old, the next generation was born. In the neighbourhood that kept the mongoose revered, every night received a new guard; in the neighbourhood that forgot, a new snake moved toward the bedside.

In this section, the child's hand has quieted the elephant and crocodile and taken up the guardianship of names. But the story does not end here. In the night ahead, new waters, new crocodiles, and new names are waiting. And for the watch of every coming night, on every veranda of Garh Narikel, a mongoose stands awake in the dim flame of a lamp—looking toward the road of the next section.

CHAPTER 101

The Dream Invitation from an Unnamed Planet

*If a distant invitation demands the erasure of history as its price, it is
not a journey—it is a bargain with oblivion.*



Dream Song: The Distant Gleam

Folk tune: slow Batagabani

The distant gleam says—come, forget every wound,

The soil says—without a name, where will you build a home?

After hearing the tale of Gaja and Graha, the night had grown very deep. Aruni remained seated beside the stump in Channa Grove amid registers, phones, and half-open files. An advertisement flashed on the screen—“New Horizon Human Settlement: A New Beginning Without Sorrow.” He fell asleep while reading it; but the sleep was no ordinary sleep. Court dates, mule accounts, drowned bodies, and the names of children dissolved into the same darkness and opened the door of a dream.

In the dream he saw a luminous planet. There were no rivers there, no cremation grounds, no roots of trees; every house bore a number instead of a name. People smiled because they remembered none of their losses. Sorrow had been erased—not the cause of sorrow, but the memory of sorrow. Aruni understood for the first time that oblivion, too, can be violence: the moment pain is forgotten, the offender is released from the account he owes.

Ba did not enter the dream; only her voice came—“If a person has no name, how will you place a hand upon that person’s head?” Ananya immediately asked, “Are these people equal, or have they all merely been made nameless at once?” Her question was small, but a hairline crack appeared in the planet’s glass dome.

Meera read the words “Cultural Memory Sample” written on a shining wall. Clenching her red thread in her fist, she said, “I am not a sample. My story will go nowhere without my consent.” Satyavrat searched for the language of law, but in the dream all section numbers turned to smoke. He had to state not his office but his name—“Satyavrat, who remained silent for a very long time.”

Far away, in a glass chamber, Lau Kin-Hung was pleased to see immaculate accounts. To him, a planet without memory was the perfect market—no families of the dead, no old contracts, no inheritance. But when he went to sign, his own name vanished from the page. Chandrapal’s percentage remained, but “Chandrapal” was erased; Batuknath’s title remained, but “Batuk” disappeared; Raghav’s signal remained, but not his voice. The dream of escape began by consuming the identities of the offenders themselves.

Aruni understood within the dream that this was no scientific voyage but the next proposal of the criminal network: make people’s history useless in the name of keeping them safe. He tried to rise, but beneath his feet a kabaddi line began to glow. On the far side lay the unnamed planet; on this side, the soil of Garh Narikel. There was no way back without holding one’s breath.

Ananya took his hand and said, “We will cross the line, but we will return carrying one name.” With that sentence, the dream invitation became a test. The shining planet was no longer a future; it was a question.

[Philosophical undertone—memory and evidence: if a society erases the memory of suffering and declares itself innocent, the missing memory itself becomes an inference of its crime.]

CHAPTER 102

Kabaddi Among Planets in a Dream

*Whether a boundary lies in the sky or on the earth, one must preserve
both breath and name in order to return.*



Dream Song: A Turn for the Name

Folk tune: slow kabaddi rhythm

Hold your breath, open the name, cross the line of darkness,

Whoever returns carrying the name wins this turn.

As soon as the line glowed, the shadows of the children descended upon the unnamed planet of the dream. Their bodies remained on Earth beside the stump; the journey belonged only to consciousness. That was why there was no craft, no smoke, no miracle—only one long breath in which fear, memory, and responsibility were bound together.

Ananya made the rules of the game: whoever crossed the line would find one forgotten name and return; whoever forgot the name would lose the turn. She faltered once while reading the rule. She was not fearless like some warrior heroine—her knees trembled and her throat went dry. Then she remembered her mother's voice at night: "When you are afraid, speak a name." Softly she said, "Ujjwal," and took the first step.

The guards of the dome had no faces; numbers were written across their chests. They asked, "Names give birth to sorrow. Give up names." Meera replied, "Sorrow is not born from a name; it is born from the violence done to a name." She saw her own image moving across the wall, but this time she did not turn away. She said, "This body is mine; make it evidence, not spectacle." The image on the wall went dark.

When Satyavrat tried to cross the boundary, the words "officer," "witness," and "law" came out of his mouth first. The line did not open. At last he said, "I am the man who saw and remained silent for too long." The line shifted a little. The words of law became useful only when they acquired the body of self-confession.

Aruni placed his hand on the soil of the dream. It had no smell; it was clean like data, yet lifeless. He remembered the bridge foundation, a labourer's gamchha, and erased messages on a phone. He understood that a chain of evidence is not made of devices alone—behind every link stands a human name.

The game did not become faster; instead, it grew slower. At every step there was a question, at every touch a name. At last Ananya reached the centre of the dome and touched an empty wall. She did not shout; she whispered, "Present." The first clear crack split the wall.

From beyond the crack came the smell of water. For the first time, Earth's water entered the memoryless planet of the dream. The game was not over; the reading of names had begun.

[Philosophical undertone—boundary, perception, and self-confession: an external rule becomes evidence only when the silence within acknowledges its cause.]

CHAPTER 103

The Lesson of Names on the Unnamed Planet

*To read a name is not to count the dead—it is to make their
relationships, labour, and unfinished questions present again.*



Dream Song: One Name at a Time

Folk tune: plaintive recitation

Speak one name—the scent of soil will awaken,

Speak another name—a closed door will open.

Beyond the crack was a vast hall. The walls bore only numbers: 30, 300, 791, 0. Ananya opened the register. As soon as she read the first name, what emerged behind the number was not a face but a relationship—a mother holding a lamp at the threshold, a child learning from a father how to row a boat, a wife gripping an incomplete wage slip. Name by name, numbers became human beings.

Meera read the names of the women whose private images had been turned into threats. After each name she added one sentence: “Without her consent, her story does not belong to you.” With every repetition, the hall grew less dazzling, but the air became fit to breathe.

Batuknath sat in his dream court. Before him his grandson asked, “Grandfather, did you preserve justice or merely a profession?” Batuknath tried to answer with lineage and scripture, but the words fell from the files like bookworms. For the first time he saw beneath his greed a deeper fear—the fear of losing respect, the fear of becoming small in the eyes of his family. Seeing that fear did not pardon the crime; it was only the beginning of seeing the crime’s actual root.

Accounts lay open on every side of Chandrapal. Behind each commission was a voice asking, “What was my name?” He remembered a day from childhood when a teacher had misread his name during attendance and he had come home crying. Even while preserving the memory of that humiliation, he had reduced thousands of other names to percentages. His self-pity did not redeem him; it made his hypocrisy clearer.

Every message Raghav had erased appeared again upon the wall. A woman’s unfinished sentence, a labourer’s plea for help, a child saying, “I am afraid”—all sounded in his own voice. He covered his ears, but the erased voices continued to rise from within him.

Lau Kin-Hung stood at the far end of the hall. He said, “Names obstruct the market.” Ananya replied, “Yes, because names demand an account.” At that brief answer, water stains spread across his immaculate ledgers.

Aruni looked at the empty line in the register. He understood that the ultimate object of a digital investigation is not the offender’s device but the victim’s full name. On the blank line he wrote: “The one whose name has not yet been found.” The largest number on the wall shattered.

The planet was not destroyed after the reading of names. Only its brilliance fell away, revealing ordinary grey soil underneath. The moment memory returned, the utopia ended; only then did the possibility of life begin.

[Philosophical undertone—word and object: a name is not an empty sound; when joined to the proper relation, a name becomes evidence of personhood, rights, and responsibility.]

CHAPTER 104

Awakening: Garh Narikel Chooses Earth

*To choose Earth with all its wounds is not defeat—it is to accept
responsibility for changing what caused those wounds.*



Awakening Song: Our Own Soil

Folk tune: gentle dawn sohar

Better our own mud than glass that forgets,

Keep the wounds named—only then will the seed rise.

Aruni woke with a start. The first light of dawn lay on the bark of the stump; the phone screen was dark, the register open. Ananya, Meera, Satyavrat, and the children were there as well—no one could say whether they had all seen the same dream or, listening to one another's fears, had fashioned the same vision. Yet all remembered the empty wall, the numbers, and the crack opened by the word "Present."

There was no blue dust on Ananya's palm, only the ordinary chalk of the schoolroom. She laughed a little shyly. "We did not go anywhere at all." Ba said, "The body need not move for one to travel very far. But after waking, the step must still be placed upon Earth."

Meera untied the red thread and tied it again. The dream had not erased her pain; it had only made clear that forgetting pain was not freedom. She said, "My story will survive, but with my consent." In his notes Satyavrat wrote, "Oblivion is not rehabilitation." Then he crossed out the identification "officer" and left only his own name.

Aruni traced the source of the advertisement. "New Horizon" was no real planetary settlement project but a propaganda test by the criminal network—a digital campaign designed to measure fear, the desire to flee, and language that rejected memory. Broom's ethical vocabulary, Lau's capital, Chandrapal's registrations, and Raghav's message chains were linked within it. The dream belonged to the story, but its cause was rooted in real crime.

The children wrote their decision: "We will not erase sorrow; we will change what causes sorrow. We will not leave Earth and thereby make crime innocent. Whoever's name was cut away, we will write it again; whoever owns the right to a body, we will hear that person's consent; whoever's labour was suppressed, we will open the account."

For Batuknath, Chandrapal, and Raghav, this decision was no letter of pardon. They were assigned the labour of restoring names—open the files, reconcile the accounts, hear the voices, stand before those whom you made invisible. Understanding the psychology of crime does not end punishment; it directs punishment toward the truth.

Dew shone on the new shoot rising from the Channa stump. Beneath it Ananya wrote: "We choose Earth—because it is here that we must answer."

Folk Song: We Chose Earth

Folk tune: love of the soil

Better our own mud than glass without memory,

Under the watch of names, Earth will raise seed again.

[Philosophical undertone—oblivion and responsibility: erasing the memory of a crime is not peace; justice is to verify the relation among cause, perpetrator, and victim, and then change the future.]

CHAPTER 105

Earth's First Watch

*To a traveller awakened from a dream, Earth is not an old home but
a new responsibility.*



Opening Folk Song: Earth's Sohar

Folk tune: sohar

O girl, sing Earth's birth-song,

Guard the dawn like a newborn's sleep.

Earth smiled in dawn's lap like a newborn child,

Drank the milk of dew, spread the Sun's bright shawl.

The river flowed like a severed cord, the forest shook its rattle,

The wind caressed and said—let new life come.

Sing Earth's sohar, all of you; lay flowers upon her wounds,

Guard the environment as a household guards its newborn.

Every day is her birthday, every seed an auspicious gift,

If Earth smiles, all the children of humankind will smile.

Milk of dew, the Sun's shawl, the wind's lullaby,

The river laughed as it cut the cord, the forest broke into song.

A flower-bandage for every wound, every seed an auspicious gift,

Celebrate Earth's birthday each day; preserve her honour.



Ananya first touched the bark of the stump. Its wet roughness settled into her palm as though stories from many years had taken her hand in a single touch. The blue dust she had seen in the dream still seemed to cling to her hand—blue-grey, odourless, perfectly clean, so clean that it frightened her. When the dust fell upon the wet roots of the Channa tree, the soil drank it at once. Ananya understood: nameless dust cannot remain upon Earth; it must dissolve into the history of the soil.

Ujjwal's spirit, which had written the word "Present" for the first time on the unnamed planet of the dream, now became a trembling light upon the surface of the water. Devika saw it but did not call out.

Some presences are such that calling them binds them again to sorrow. She merely said within herself, "The watch over your name is now on Earth." The light trembled three times; that answer was enough.

The people of Garh Narikel did not sleep that night. On one side the story spread that the children had returned after playing kabaddi among planets; on the other, city newspapers wrote, "A New Form of Rural Superstition." This time the people neither laughed at the newspapers nor grew angry. Everyone knew that what had not been directly perceived was not therefore false, and what had appeared in print was not therefore evidence. Gangesha's question was still alive in the stump.

Ba sat among them all. She said, "Whoever chooses Earth does not choose soil alone. They choose their dead, their crimes, their shame, their language, their river, their failures—everything." No one applauded. Applause had grown rare in Garh Narikel; people now answered, "Present." That night everyone said softly, "Present."

Satyavrat Mehta took an old affidavit from his bag. On this same affidavit he had earlier written down the crime of his silence. Now he added another line on the back: "Freedom will not be found by abandoning Earth; freedom must be sought by preserving names upon Earth." His hand did not tremble as he wrote. The trembling had not vanished from him, but now it came not from fear, but from responsibility.

Batuknath Hariharan watched from a distance. His forgiveness had not yet been accepted, because forgiveness is not a garland that can simply be placed around someone's neck. He continued to enter and leave the court within himself. He wanted the children to give him some role as well. But they gave him only one task—search the old files for the names that had been buried there. For the first time Batuknath understood that punishment can sometimes be not humiliation, but labour.

Chandrapal Batra, who had already understood himself to be a mule account, stared at his empty palms. He no longer had money, but traces remained of old phone memories, coded accounts, false donations, and the shadow of the tribute app. Devika told him, "Wherever names were stolen through you, write those names back." For the first time Chandrapal said, "I do not know how to write." Ananya replied, "Then listen. The children know how to write."

Raghav Signal's final message had become a leaf stuck to the stump. The leaf never dried. Its letters glowed at night—"The account is not closed; the soul is open." But the children did not turn it into a sacred saying. Beneath the leaf they wrote: "The first evidence of an open soul: see those whom you made invisible." Raghav's mind, still half caught in the network and half in the stump, shuddered at that line.

No one knew for certain whether Lau Kin-Hung had returned abroad or was still hiding in a hotel in India. But the answer to his final deal had been sent as the sound of the reading of names, and every night that sound played inside his glass tower. There was no abuse in it, no threat—only names. Capital can endure insult, escape the law, change currencies; but the continual utterance of names disturbs its sleep.

Binding all of this together, the new shoot of the Channa tree continued to grow in silence. It was not yet a tree, only a green curve. Yet the children drew a line around it—the line of kabaddi. First ghosts had played kabaddi, then the dead, then children, then players among planets. Now the line encircled the new tree, saying that the watch over Earth begins as a game.

Ananya read the new rules of the game: “One breath for Earth, one breath for water, one breath for a name, one breath for those whose names have not been found. Whoever breaks breath will not be sent out, but will sit and listen.” The children burst out laughing. It was not a harsh rule, but a merciful one. A child who lost would not sit in punitive silence; the child would listen to someone’s name. In this way play and justice dissolved into one another.

As the night deepened, the eyes of crocodiles began to gleam upon the water. But this time the people did not flee from those eyes. Ba said, “They were creatures hungry for flesh. Now perhaps even they will begin to understand hunger through the watch of names.” Some understood, some did not. But the children began the game. The first voice rose —“Kabaddi...” The sound did not stop at the soil; it passed through the Kamala-Balan, the stump, leaves, sky, and the empty walls of the unnamed planet of the dream.

Within that sound joined Ujjwal’s light, Meera’s oath of privacy, Devika’s melody, the flaw in Aruni’s bridge, Gop Kumar’s documents, Satyavrat’s silence, and Gangesha’s question. Kabaddi was no longer merely a game of bodies; it had become a game of evidence—how long can falsehood hold its breath, and how long can truth move without breaking?

Suddenly the stones placed beside the stump began to make a faint sound. Each stone bearing a name chimed in the same rhythm, yet each had a different voice—some deep, some thin—as though an ancient scale had awakened beneath the soil. It was not a bell, not a judge’s gavel, not a temple gong. It was a collective assent rising from the earth itself. The children stopped playing. Ananya asked, “What happened?” Ba said, “Earth is accepting the watch.”

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta understood that the boundaries of a court, the language of a constitution, and the letters of an affidavit might all be necessary; but when Earth itself accepts testimony, human

institutions must learn humility. He rose and sat not before the stump, but behind the children. His place was no longer in front, but behind; sitting behind and listening became his new office.

At the edge of dawn, dew gathered on the shoot of the felled tree. In every drop there seemed to be a tiny Earth; feeling the cool drops upon their fingertips, the children felt as if dawn itself were writing its first letter upon their palms. The blue dust of the dream was no longer separately visible anywhere; the soil had taken it into itself. That union was not simple—where memory exists, even dust from elsewhere must be accounted for. Earth receives everything, but does not leave it nameless.

That morning the children of Garh Narikel wrote the first watch: “We will not abandon Earth. We will protect Earth. Whoever’s name is erased, we will write it again. Whoever’s body sinks, we will raise their memory above the water. Whoever’s mind is devoured by a screen, we will return their voice to the mouth. Whoever’s justice is trapped in paper, we will read their testimony among the people.”

After this watch, the people did not return to their homes. They waited—but for what? Perhaps the next disaster, the next flood, the next deception, the next invitation from a planet, the next theft of memory. Yet waiting was no longer fear; it was preparedness. For the first time Garh Narikel understood that there is only one way for a story to survive: give it to the next voice.

And the first sound of that next voice rose beneath the shade of the new shoot, on the kabaddi ground, from a child: “I am on Earth.” Another child answered, “Present.” A third said, “The watch begins.” And the stump of the Channa tree, no longer a tree but holding within itself the resolve to become one, drew a long breath in the dawn wind.

Folk Song: Earth Newborn

Folk tune: sohar-watch song

Born is Earth, born like a newborn child,

Feed her the milk of names, fill the next voice with story.

The returned traveller saw Earth born anew like a child,

Soil, pond, stump—all need a new child.

A story survives only when it finds the next voice,

One child said—I am on Earth, awake.

Another answered—Present; the third—the watch.

Under the new shoot's shade, the village faces gathered.

Waiting was no longer fear, but preparation,

Eyes stayed open at night for the next flood, deceit, or theft.

Earth is newborn, not a weapon—bend your ear,

Feed her the milk of names, fill the next voice with story.

Soil, pond, stump—all need a new child,

The story survives only when it receives the next voice.

One child said, "I am on Earth,"

Another—"Present"; the third—"The watch has begun."

Born is Earth, born like a newborn child,

Feed her the milk of names, fill the next voice with story.

[Philosophical undertone—a qualifier is both establishing and useful: in the cognition "this man carries a staff," the relation to the staff qualifies the man; thus the man is known as distinct from one without a staff. A qualifier is both establishing and useful.]

CHAPTER 106

The Testimony of the Seed

A seed gives testimony—to whose soil it belonged and whose hand tended it.



Opening Folk Song: The Meeting of Seed and Soil

Folk tune: planting benediction

Bring them together, bring seed and soil together,

Water's affection, the Sun's warmth—join all four and sing.

*The seed says—I need soil; the soil says—come,
Water says—I will give affection; the Sun says—I will make you
bloom.*

*The four elements together compose the song of life,
Within one tiny shoot sleeps an entire forest.*

*Give the seed its proper home, preserve the farmer's honour,
Let the colours of biodiversity rise in field after field.
From the meeting of seed and soil, the future turns green,
Through shared protection, a river of grain comes to rest.*

*In the planter's fingers lies an auspicious gesture,
Inside one shoot, a whole forest sleeps deeply.
Keep the box of native seeds, preserve the farmer's knowledge,
Let field after field grow many-coloured rice and betel.*



People say a seed is small. But a seed is not small—in a seed an entire tree is hidden, and in the tree an entire village. Whoever locks a seed inside a box locks a village inside a box.

What sleeps in the darkness of the granary is not sleep—it is waiting. It waits for the season, waits for a hand, waits for a song. It cannot be awakened by giving it a number; it must be called by name.

And if the name is forgotten, a shoot may still rise in the field, but no one will remain who knows how to recognise it.

After writing the first watch, the children of Garh Narikel began to think that protecting Earth was perhaps only an extension of protecting names. But before the morning dew had even dried, Ba said something new: “You have kept watch over names; now keep watch over seeds.” At first the children laughed, because their hands held registers, stones, shoots, and a kabaddi field; seeds seemed to them like tiny things hidden in kitchen bins, lofts, grain stores, and the folds of old women’s saris.

Drawing a circle in the soil beside the stump with her stick, Ba said, “Whoever erases names also erases seeds. Without a name, a human being becomes nameless; without seed, Earth becomes barren. Crocodiles devoured bodies, courts devoured years, screens devoured minds. But if seed is devoured, from where will words be born in the mouths of the next generation?” The children stopped laughing. Where the tip of Ba’s stick turned the soil, the smell of dew-wet earth rose—the same smell that rises on a planting morning, and which no vault can imprison.

That afternoon a new lesson of the watch began. Seeds were placed on the mats of the coconut-leaf school—rice, sesame, finger millet, kodo and kutki millet, makhana, sugarcane, mango stones, jackfruit, neem, peepal, and a tiny green point found near the shoot of the Channa tree. With each seed they asked not only its name but its story. How is it sown? Who kept it? In which season? With which song? By whose hand? For which hunger?

Devika said, “In digital fraud, people’s minds were stolen. In the memory project, the names of the dead were stolen. Now those who speak of the unnamed planet of the dream are preparing to steal the names of seeds. They will take the seed, give it a number, change its soil, and then say—they are preserving life. But if life forgets the name of its own soil, what exactly survives?”

Ira took out a copy of the letter she had written to children abroad and read it. In that letter she had written, “The village is not a foreign picture of memory; it is a responsibility.” Now she added, “A seed is not a picture either. If you live abroad and keep a photograph of Mithila’s rice but do not know the farmer’s name, do not hear the song, do not preserve the soil, then you love not the seed but the object.” The children wrote the sentence in the register.

Satyavrat Mehta listened carefully. In law he had encountered seed as property, variety, right, registration, trade, conservation, and dispute. But here seed meant neither lineage nor caste nor property—it was a particle of memory. He kept taking notes, but the notes formed less on paper than on his face.

Behind the stump, Old Budhba’s Ghost laughed softly. His laughter carried a shadow of the laughter of Channa Grove. He said, “Those who divided human beings in the name of caste never understood the

language of seed. A seed does not ask caste. Put rice in the hand of a leatherworker, a Brahmin, in the sari-fold of a performer woman, or in a Dom household—whoever gives it soil, water, labour, and time, with that person it will grow. Human beings themselves built bamboo fences inside their own heads.”

Gangesha’s question returned. Ananya asked, “If a seed does not ask caste, why do human beings?” No one answered at once. Ba said, “Because human beings have often loved pride more than evidence. Gangesha lit the lamp of evidence by writing the *Tattvacintamani*, but society placed a curtain over the difficult questions of his life. A caste that does not want to understand life puts scripture upon a throne and makes it silent.”

Hearing this, the children began placing stones around the seeds. On the stones they wrote: “soil,” “water,” “hand,” “season,” “song,” “hunger,” “justice.” Ananya said, “The evidence of a seed is not the seed alone. All the relations surrounding it are evidence.” Satyavrat Mehta’s eyes brightened. The language of Navya-Nyaya had been reborn in a child’s voice. Not substance, but relation; not word, but intention; not seed, but the whole context.

At evening the women came from their homes carrying old tins, brass bowls, earthen pots, dented vessels, and cloth bundles. Each container held seed. Some seeds were so old their colour had changed, but the women said, “This came from my mother-in-law. This survived the year of famine. This was planted after that flood. This was given at a daughter’s farewell. This was from the year when hunger was terrible, yet Earth still turned green.” As the containers opened, each house released the sound of its years—one kind in brass, another in clay, and from the cloth bundles no sound at all, only fragrance.

Meera requested them, “If there is a story of a seed you do not wish to share, do not share it. Seeds, too, have a privacy.” The women laughed, but agreed. Some stories became public; some remained among the women alone. That night in the school the children understood for the first time that preserving memory does not mean exposing everything; some things retain dignity precisely because they are protected.

At that very moment a government jeep arrived. On its front was a board: “Advanced Seed Collection and Climate Security Project.” Two officials dressed like scientists, a local clerk, and a foreign consultant stepped out. The consultant folded his hands politely in greeting. His language was courteous, but his eyes were measuring—which seed, how much, what information, which old variety lay in which woman’s hand.

The local clerk said, “This is a government scheme. The old seeds will be preserved in a secure bank. Future generations will benefit.” Ananya asked, “Will the seeds leave their village?” The clerk smiled. “Temporarily, for safety.” Devika asked, “Will they go with their

names?" The clerk turned a page. "With numbers." At once the shoot on the stump trembled.

The consultant quickly added, "The names will remain in the digital record as well." Gop Kumar caught a glimpse of the form glowing on his tablet. Its rows listed seed codes, geographic location, family, caste, yield, disaster tolerance, and "commercial potential." Gop's face hardened. Quietly he said, "This is not a conservation list. It is an acquisition list."

A whisper passed among the children. They remembered the invitation from the unnamed planet of the dream. That planet had reduced everything to numbers—no name for a river, no name for a village. Now the same language was descending upon Earth: not rice, but sample; not woman, but holder; not soil, but coordinates; not hunger, but data; not memory, but resource.

Ba walked to the jeep and stood before it. The officials tried to greet her respectfully. Ba stopped their hands. She said, "You want to take the seed? First sing its song." The officials were silent. Ba asked again, "Tell me how many drops of water it needs." Silence. "On which day is it sown?" Silence. "When the first shoot appears in the field, which forgotten name is called?" Silence thickened. The jeep's engine was cooling, and its tick-tick sounded in the stillness like a clock.

Ananya opened the register and wrote: "Direct perception of the Seed Collection Project: jeep, papers, containers. Inference: safety. Word: future. Test: no song, no soil, desire to replace names with numbers." The children said together, "Incomplete evidence." Gangesha's question stood up again as justice.

Satyavrat Mehta had remained silent until then, but this time his silence was not assent. He asked the official for the papers. They contained numerous clauses on permission, transfer, collection, research, conservation, and partnership. In small print appeared the name of a foreign institution and a new company—the name had changed, but the shadow of its signatures resembled Broom's old deed of gift. A spark rose in Satyavrat's eyes.

He did not hand the paper to the children. He gave it first to Ba. Ba could not read, but she smelled the paper. She said, "This carries no smell of soil; it smells of a vault." The women tightened their grip on their bundles of seed. The government clerk tried to laugh, but the laugh caught in his throat.

Night was falling. The officials left saying they would return tomorrow, that due process would follow, that a public-awareness camp would be held. The jeep drove away. Dust rose. When it settled, a tiny white line was visible on the shoot of the stump—not dew, not an insect, not sap from a root. It looked like a fine dust drawn down from the sky,

the same dust that had remained in the imagination of the children after waking from the dream.

Ananya saw the line and shivered. "The 'New Horizon' project wants seed data," she whispered. Ujjwal's light flashed for a moment along the edge of the stump. Meera led the women indoors. Devika divided the village youths into watch shifts. Gop Kumar sat through the night comparing the lines of the document. For the first time, Satyavrat Mehta himself stood in the outer ring of the watch.

After midnight, an extremely faint sound rose from within the seed vessels, as though thousands of tiny voices were speaking at once: "We do not need numbers; we need soil. We do not need vaults; we need seasons. We do not need nameless projects; we need the earth of our own names." Even in sleep, the children continued to hear the voices.

Before dawn, Ananya opened a new page of the register and wrote the heading: "The Theft of the Seed." Her hand trembled, but the letters were clear. The watch had now travelled from names to seeds, and Garh Narikel understood that the next struggle would take place in the invisible womb of the field.

Folk Song: The Seed Says—I Need Soil

Folk tune: planting song

The seed says, "I need soil," it says,

Not a number, not a vault—it longs for the fragrance of seasons.

After the watch of names came the watch of seeds,

In the granary's darkness, the future hummed softly.

"Not a number, but soil; not a vault, but season,"

*"Not the unnamed planet of a dream, but the fragrance of our own
Earth."*

Satyavrat stood guard in the outer ring,

Children in sleep heard the call of a thousand seeds.

The seed's testimony says—whose soil, whose hand,

The labour of the one who sowed it, the affection of the one who saved it.

A seed is small, yet carries the whole body of the future,

Preserve its name; keep it joined to the season.



[Philosophical undertone—there are two kinds of qualifier: attribute and indicator. A traveller recounted an experience: in the cognition “this man carries a staff,” the present staff is the primary attribute; in the cognition “this land is Kurukshetra,” the absent Kuru lineage functions as an indicator. This distinction shows that profound epistemic processes operate within ordinary events of life. Qualifiers are of two kinds—attribute and indicator.]

CHAPTER 107

THE THEFT OF THE SEED

The one who steals seed does not steal a field—he steals the future.



OPENING FOLK SONG: SAVE THE FUTURE, SAVE THE SEED

Folk tune: Awakening of the Paddy Seed

Save the seed, O save tomorrow's plate,

Grandmother's tin and the field's law—guard them both.

*If the seed is stolen, tomorrow's plate lies empty;
If the seed survives, seven generations sow the laughter of grain.
Grandmother's tin, the farmer's knowledge, the field's folk-law—
keep them together and safe: this alone is a gift to the future.*

*Within a single seed live season, taste, story and custom;
to preserve its freedom is a burden shared by all.
Save the future, save the seed; open the storehouse and share;
break the lock of greed and distribute the right to life.*

*In one fistful of seed lies rice for seven generations,
with taste, season, story and custom all beside it.
Wherever greed has fastened a lock, speak together;
open the seed-store and set the plate of rights.*



The one who steals seed does not steal a field—he steals the future. The field remains where it was, the soil remains where it was; what is carried away is tomorrow's plate.

There are two kinds of theft. One happens at night and is caught in the morning. The other arrives in daylight carrying papers, folds its hands, and is called not theft but protection.

Seed shut inside a box is not safe; it is asleep. It wakes only when it meets soil, meets a season, and someone calls it by name.

So ask whoever wishes to take the seed: do you know its song? If not, that person is no guardian but a thief.

Before the first light of dawn, the title Ananya had written in the register—"The Theft of the Seed"—spread through the village like wind. People had already seen the theft of names and learned to recognize the theft of memory. But the theft of seed? That had once seemed impossible. Seed lived in soil, in granaries, in the folds of women's garments, among threshing-floor straw, in the songs of water-carriers, and in the waiting for rain. How could it be stolen?

But Garh Narikel now knew that crocodiles did not live only in water. Sometimes they became the teeth of a file, sometimes the window of an app, sometimes the courteous question of research, sometimes a donation slip, and sometimes a vault robbed in the name of conservation. A seed in a field answered hunger; once locked inside a glass jar, it was called "security." Yet no one asked whose security—the seed's or the market's.

The children sat around the earthen vessels kept overnight beside the Channa stump. Inside were old strains of paddy, finger millet, kodo millet, foxtail millet, mustard, safflower, medicinal seeds used with ceremonial leaves, and grains whose names survived only in the memories of old women. A label was tied to every vessel: whose house it came from, which field, after which flood it survived, in which year of drought it yielded. Ananya read the labels; Gop Kumar matched them; Devika divided the watch.

Then Surmani Kaki arrived. Her body was bent, her eyes red, her feet cracked, but in her hand she carried an old brass tin. She held it as though pressing a dying child to her breast. "This contains 'Drowned-Breath' paddy," she said. "My mother used to say this rice can endure three days under floodwater. A name too sinks under water and returns, so it is called Drowned-Breath." The brass tin had become cool and smooth as well-water with the sweat of her palms.

A young man wanted to laugh, but Ba saw him before the laugh escaped. "Do not laugh at the name of rice," Ba said. "What you think is a grain contains rain, hunger, body, caste, a woman's memory, and the whole lineage of labour." The young man fell silent. Among the lessons Garh Narikel had learned in recent days was that ridicule is often the first mask of ignorance.

By noon two officials arrived from the city. With them came a consultant, a foreign researcher, and a local interpreter. The document was titled "Indigenous Seed Conservation and Interplanetary Adaptation Study." Its language was courteous. It said Earth's climate was becoming unstable and therefore old seeds required scientific preservation. The

people listened first. Satyavrat Mehta stood at the back, silent again, but with his eyes open.

"We need only samples," the official said. "The seeds will be kept in a secure repository. Future generations will benefit." Ananya asked, "Where is the repository?" "The Central Research Collection," he replied. Gop Kumar turned the page. In small print it said: "May be used, when required, for adaptation in off-world habitation projects." Ananya asked, "Does 'off-world habitation project' mean the publicity scheme for New Horizon?" For one instant the official's face yellowed like a leaf.

The foreign researcher was genuinely unsettled. Perhaps she had not been told the whole plan. In a low voice she began, "Is this really for—" But Ira, who understood her language, raised a hand. "Here the question will first be answered in Maithili," she said. "A conservation declaration will not discard the language of the people whose fields supplied the seed." Ashamed, the researcher fell silent.

Meera lifted the sheet. "This clause says the seed will be 'anonymized,'" she read. "That means everything tied to the seed—its village, caste, woman, field, labour, season, flood and hunger—will be removed. Then it will be given a number. At that point it will no longer be seed but nameless merchandise." Surmani Kaki's hands began to tremble. She pressed the brass tin even harder to her chest.

"Scientific method requires numbers," the official said. Then Gangesha's question rose again from inside the Channa stump. Ananya said quietly, "A number is not evidence. The evidence of a seed is its sprout, its smell, its soil, the words of its people, and its history. You may take the grain, but where will you keep this evidence?" The official was not left speechless; when administration has no answer, it often grows harder. "Legal acquisition is possible," he said.

At that word the wind strengthened behind the stump. "Acquisition"—the village had heard the word before in relation to land, houses, ponds and roads. Now came the acquisition of seed. Ba laughed, but there was fire in the laugh. "First you took land, then water, then names, now seed. Next time will you acquire the womb as well?" A low rumble passed through the line of women.

Devika signalled to the children. They did not pick up the vessels and run. They placed them in the middle and sat around them. A circular line was drawn like a kabaddi boundary. Whoever wanted the seed would have to cross it. The official's shoe stopped at the line. He had come armed with legal language, but the line belonged to a game; on a line of play, the shoe of law looked strangely helpless.

Chandrapal Batra watched from a distance. He understood there was a market in seed, a future, a deal. But when he heard the name "Drowned-Breath," he remembered his own mule account. He too had

thought of himself merely as a conduit; yet a conduit is also responsible. For a moment he wondered: if this seed sample entered the New Horizon repository, into whose account would the profit go? Then for the first time another question arose: if his data became only a number in that repository, would it still remember the name of his village?

On Raghav Signal's leaf the night's code flashed again: "Secure the seed list." But this time the message would not complete itself. The letters broke midway and turned into the veins of the leaf. The leaf caught beside the green point on the Channa stump. The children read: "Seed list..." After that there were only veins. Ananya said, "When greed tries to write seed, nature erases the rest of the sentence."

Suddenly a sound came from inside the brass tin. It was heard less by the ears than through the palm. Surmani Kaki handed the tin to Ananya, who placed it on the stump. The grains within gave an almost inaudible chime, as though each were speaking its own name. The children leaned in silently. Different words reached them: "flood," "mother," "hunger," "saving," "soil," "breath."

The foreign researcher began to cry. "I was told this was only genetic material," she said. Ira translated. Surmani Kaki replied, "Gene or jinn, first of all this is my mother." No commotion followed; silence spread through the crowd. The language of science and the language of the people did not collide. For one moment the people's language simply showed science its blindness.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward and spoke for the first time that day. "If law calls seed only property," he said, "then the law is incomplete. If seed is formed from memory, labour and community, then before acquisition there must be the living consent of that community. And living consent is born not from a closed document but from an open reading of names." The official asked, "Which section of law says that?" Satyavrat replied calmly, "Here the section is the Kamala-Balan. Ask for the section, and the water will answer."

A soft laugh moved through the crowd, not of mockery but of courage. The official's papers seemed to grow heavy. The consultants began whispering among themselves. The researcher folded her page and put it away. "I will not take a sample," she said. "First I will listen." The official glared at her, but that day a foreign woman sitting in the row of listeners became the first internal crack in the New Horizon project.

By evening a decision had been made: no seed would leave until its full name, home, field, season, story and community were clear. And if research ever took place, the right to its name, the right to its soil, and the language of its people would travel with the seed. The children named this code "The Testimony of the Seed." Ananya wrote in the register: "A

grain is not merely a grain; it is the compressed body of all that it remembers.”

At night the seed vessels were arranged around the stump. This watch had three circles: children in the first, women in the second, and field labourers in the third. Satyavrat sat outside even the outer circle, beside the water. He said nothing, but his presence seemed to acknowledge that justice had now left the book and reached the grain.

After midnight wind came from the Kamala-Balan. Fine cracks appeared on the surfaces of the earthen vessels. Surmani Kaki startled, but Ba stopped her. “Do not be afraid. Once seed has spoken, soil opens its mouth.” And indeed the soil in one vessel lifted slightly. What rose was not an invisible sprout but a dark, crumbling word: “Where shall I grow?” At that instant the skin of every child sitting around the vessel prickled at once, as though not wind but a question had touched their bodies.

No one had an answer. The fields were divided by debt, chemicals, acquisition, flood, drought and caste. The soil itself was asking: where will you save me? Ananya opened the next page of the register and wrote the title: “The Mouth of the Soil.” The theft of the seed had been stopped; now it needed a place in which to grow.

FOLK SONG: THE THEFT OF THE FUTURE

Folk tune: Paddy-Seed Viraha

*It steals, O it steals—the seed-thief steals the future;
take it from the cold vault and give it back to the lap of the seasons.*

*The seed-thief steals not the field but the future,
breaking the bond of a mother's granary, a farmer's palm, a season's
love.*

*The theft was caught, but a question rose from the soil—
“Where shall I grow?” and a dark word broke upward.*

*Debt, chemicals, flood, drought, the embankments of caste—
where is a place for seed, and who will make its circle?*

*The watch is not only over the vessel but down into the womb of the
field;*

the future survives only when the land survives green.

Hear the tears of the seed; return it to the field,

take it from the cold vault and give it the lap of the seasons.

The theft was caught, but the soil's question burst forth again.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—An indicator must be the object of qualified cognition: on the view that a differentiator related to an action is called a qualifier and what lies beyond it an indicator, the staff would become an indicator, because in “the long-armed staff-bearer” the staff is not directly related to the action. An indicator must be the object of qualified cognition.]

CHAPTER 108

THE MOUTH OF THE SOIL

The soil opens its mouth when it is asked: where shall I grow?



OPENING FOLK SONG: MAKE A PLACE FOR SOIL

Folk tune: Song of Mother Soil

Give it a place, O give the soil a place;

even among concrete, give it one green window.

*The soil asks, "Where shall I grow?" Say: "In our hearts,"
in field, courtyard, pot and forest—in every shelter of respect.*

*Even among concrete open a little green window;
till soft earth where the feet of seed may rest.*

*Soil is not merely land; it is the ground of life;
to preserve its breath is the conduct of every citizen.
Make a place for soil, and even the city will turn green;
where soil can smile, humanity can sleep in peace.*

*In pot, bed, courtyard, terrace and veranda,
wherever soil breathes, there the song of life is heard.*

*Like a mother the earth spreads her lap for all;
to save her breath is the fellowship of citizenship.*



The soil opens its mouth when it is asked: where shall I grow? Until then it remains silent, because people have always demanded from it and almost never asked it anything.

People plough soil, sell it, divide it, mortgage it—and imagine all this amounts to speaking with the soil. But conversation is not what we say; conversation is what we hear.

And when soil speaks, it has no language. It speaks through the crumbling of an embankment, the widening of a crack, the covering drift of sand. Only the one who puts an ear to the earth can hear it.

That is why saving seed is easy. Giving it a place is difficult—because when we give a place, we must ask who has never been given that place before, and why.

The mouth of the soil opened on the very night everyone thought the watch had succeeded because the theft of the seed had been stopped. The question that rose from the earthen vessels around the cut Channa stump —“Where shall I grow?”—entered not the ears but the veins of the fields. The children kept watch, the women tended the lamps, but no one answered at once. Saving seed had been easy; giving it earth in which to grow was hard.

After dawn Ananya opened the register and wrote: “Fourth Watch: The Mouth of the Soil.” Ira, sitting beside her, asked, “When soil opens its mouth, what does it say?” Ananya looked toward the ring of name-stones. “Perhaps it asks: you ploughed me, sold me, divided me, mortgaged me; when did you ever listen?” At this Surmani Kaki scooped up a palmful of soil and touched it to her forehead. “For generations we asked soil for grain,” she said. “We never asked the soil what pain belonged to it.”

The village began remembering its fields. Just as the names of the dead had been read at the Festival of Names, the names of fields were now read aloud—Bargadahi, the edge of the Musahari, Ujjar Dih, the lowland across the Kamala, the lower fallow of Belahi, the wet strip of the bari, the sharecropped field by the footpath. Some field-names were tied to owners, some to sharecroppers, some to debt, some to lawsuits, some to the date of a flood. The children understood that the name of land can be wounded just as a human name can.

The first proposal came from Harihar Jha's household. “My upper field is pure,” he said. “Plant the seed there.” At the word pure, Meera raised an eyebrow. Ananya asked, “What do you mean by pure?” Harihar Jha replied, “No one from the leather-workers' quarter or the Dusadh quarter has ever ploughed that field.” Silence spread over everyone. The seed-vessels beside the stump suddenly rattled. Surmani Kaki said, “This grain does not ask caste when people are hungry. How did soil become impure through the hands of those who eat grain in hunger?”

At that instant Gangesha's question appeared again. The life of Gangesha Upadhyaya, which in an earlier chapter had risen like smoke from the bark of the stump, now descended onto the field-boundary. Ira quietly reminded the children: he was called the founder of Navya-Nyaya, author of *Tattvacintamani*, bearer of an intellect said to equal twelve thousand books; yet society drew a curtain across inconvenient truths in his life. If thought is worshipped while the truth of a life is suppressed, the mouth of justice remains only half open.

Ananya asked Harihar Jha again, "If Gangesha's logic asks for evidence, what is the evidence for your purity? Did the soil say it? Did the seed say it? Did hunger say it? Or only the fear of caste?" Harihar Jha flushed with anger, but the children's eyes did not lower. The question belonged not to a court but to the soil. Before he could answer, the embankment beneath his feet crumbled slightly. He stepped back.

Then Dhirmati, the granddaughter of Jagesar Mochi from the leather-workers' quarter, came forward. In her hand was not a scrap of torn hide but a clod of soil. "There is fallow land behind our house," she said. "Floodwater fills it, and in summer it cracks. But our hands are there. If seed needs not caste but water and hands, plant it there." Some people faltered: "In the fallow? Near the leather-workers' quarter?" A hard light came to Dhirmati's face. "Where the smell of human work clings to the body, the soil is alive. What wants only the smell of lineage may rot in a storehouse."

Satyavrat Mehta listened from a distance. The old shame returned to his face—the shame of knowing that the lines of law so often weaken before caste. He took a step forward to speak, but Ba stopped him with a gesture. "This time the children will speak." Satyavrat halted. The watch over justice was no longer in the hands of office; it was in the hands of questioning children.

It was decided that the seed would be tested not in one field but in five kinds of soil: the fallow behind the leather-workers' quarter, the flood-washed lowland beside the Musahari, the small garden of a widow, a labourer's sharecropped field, and a common plot made beside the Channa stump. The children named the five soils: "Soil of Pain," "Soil of Water," "Soil of Endurance," "Soil of Labour," and "Soil of Memory." No one rejected Harihar Jha's upper field. He was simply told: "First break the wall of purity there; the seed will reach it by itself."

A method for distributing the seed was agreed upon. No priest, no official. Surmani Kaki placed the first grain in Dhirmati's palm. Her palm was cracked: lines of labour, want of soap, stains of water and the hardness of sunlight. The grain lodged for an instant in one of those cracks, then gleamed. Against the roughness of her palm, its smooth back rubbed as if a new body were reading an old map of labour. Ananya wrote: "Seed reads lines, not caste."

That day a procession went out to the fields, but it was no procession of false ghosts. The people walked quietly. Children in front, earthen vessels in the middle, women behind them, and at the rear the old, the labourers, Satyavrat, Ira, Meera, Devika and Gop. People joined along the road. "Where are you going?" someone asked. The answer came: "To hear the mouth of the soil." After a little while the questioner too began walking with them.

When they reached the fallow behind the leather-workers' quarter, the land truly looked abandoned: rubbish, broken vessels, old shoes, ash, plastic left by floodwater, dried dung and scrub. Some people wrinkled their noses. Dhirmati looked at them and said, "This is where we live. If seed can grow here, it will prove that life has no nose." Hearing this, Ira felt as though Gangesha Upadhyaya's reasoning smiled: the stench was perception, neglect was inference, yet within the word a new kind of evidence was being born—dignity.

The cleaning began. But Devika stopped them. "Do not erase the history of the fallow in the name of cleaning." The rubbish was separated, not the memory. Dhirmati kept a piece of an old shoe: "This is the mark of my father's work." A little of the ash was mixed into the soil. Dung, dried leaves, flood silt, dust from the Channa stump, and water from five directions were blended into a small seed-bed. The bed became a compressed body of the village's history.

Before planting, Ananya said, "Speak the name of the grain that enters here." Surmani Kaki lifted it and said, "This is flood-enduring rice." Ba said, "This is a reserve against hunger." Dhirmati said, "This is the light of hands called impure." Meera said, "This is the answer to the humiliation of the body." Satyavrat said softly, "This is justice born outside the law." The children said together, "Present." The grain entered the soil.

As the first grain fell, the distant Kamala-Balan stirred. Someone said, "Crocodile." No one was afraid. The crocodiles were no longer merely body-tearing terror; they had become keepers of boundaries, old memory in the water, and a harsh lesson between the living and the dead. A black back rose from the water and sank again. Ananya wrote: "The crocodile watched; it did not eat."

The second bed was made at the edge of the Musahari. That soil was forever washed by water and cracked when it dried. Old women of the settlement said it was made from fish-bones, flood-sand and the patience of hunger. When the seed was buried there, the sand did not crumble away; it covered the grain by itself. As the hands withdrew, a smell of old floods rose from the cool damp soil—a mingled smell of fish, rotting straw and wet sand that the people of that edge had worn on their bodies year after year. The children's note read: "Soil that has been washed away again and again knows how to cover."

The third bed was made in the garden of the widow Saryu Didi. It was the smallest, but carefully tended. "My garden gives little grain," she said, "but I never eat without a name. Whatever ripens first goes on the plate of the dead." When the seed entered that soil, the air filled not with incense but with the smell of raw leaves. Ira wrote: "Endurance is not worship; it is practice."

The fourth bed was made in a labourer's sharecropped field. The land belonged to one person; the sweat to another. Satyavrat stopped there. Like a page of law, the embankment divided the field into four, but every foot sank into the same mud. The labourer said, "Half the paddy, all the debt." After the children repeated the sentence, they planted the grain. The soil trembled faintly, as if asking: "How can a whole life grow from half a body?"

The fifth bed was made beside the Channa stump. As the seed was planted, the real ghosts' kabaddi could again be heard, very faintly: "kabaddi-kabaddi," as though Earth's breath were returning from the orbit of a distant planet. The children understood that the watch over the seed would not exist only in fields but between planets as well. A grain that sprouted on Earth with its name intact would send memory through the walls of the unnamed planet of dreams.

By evening all five beds were ready. The people were tired but strangely light. The seed could not be seen; only level soil remained. Yet there was hope in that very invisibility. Proof does not appear at once for what has been planted. Gangesha's logic smiled again: absence of perception is not absence of truth. Inference, word, comparison, memory and labour together make the future of a seed.

The night watch was set among the fields. This time there were not three circles but five—one team of children at each bed: leather-workers' quarter, Musahari, widow's garden, sharecropped field, Channa stump. Ananya sat on the central embankment with Dhirmati. Neither spoke. Dew on the ridge grew cold beneath their feet, while the lamps at the five beds remained linked at the corners of the eye like a chain of watchful glances. Suddenly Dhirmati asked, "What if the seed does not sprout?" Ananya said, "Then we will ask again what the soil needs. The watch will not have failed; it will be unfinished."

After midnight a fine light appeared in the black sky. Some called it a star, others a signal from the unnamed planet of dreams. It fell on all five beds at once. From within the soil rose a deep, almost imperceptible sound—not a sprout, not a word, only breath moving inside a closed mouth. The children put their ears to the earth. The sound said: "We heard."

The answer brought relief, but the story could not stop there. For once the land had claimed the seed as its own, the question of rights would arise. Whose right—the owner's, the tiller's, caste's, the state's, a company's, or the community that listens to the seed? In the first light of dawn an unknown mark appeared on each of the five embankments: a small iron peg, a smear of red paint, and the faint trace of a measuring tape.

Ananya opened the register. “The seed has found a place to grow,” she wrote, “but now the crocodile of ownership has climbed onto the embankment.” Dhirmati clenched a handful of soil in her fist. Somewhere far away, pages in a file turned; in the water a crocodile’s tail moved; and in the sky the unnamed planet of dreams faded for an instant.

FOLK SONG: THE SOIL ASKS—WHERE SHALL I GROW?

Folk tune: Song of Mother Soil

*The soil asks, “Where shall I grow?” O it asks;
place the right upon the name of the tiller’s sweat.*

*The mouth of the soil opened; the question entered every vein:
“You saved the seed, but where did you give me a place?”
Five beds were made—and then the iron pegs went in,
red paint, measuring tape, the crocodile of ownership climbed up.*

*Owner, tiller, caste, state, company—whose?
The soil says: the right belongs to the one who listened.
Dhirmati tightened soil inside her fist;
the seed found a home, but the boundary grew frightening again.*

*Mother Soil, let no one close your mouth;
place the right upon the name of the tiller’s sweat.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—A qualifier is not merely co-located with exclusion: in the statement “this lotus is a blue lotus,” the exclusion of

every object other than the blue lotus is not expressed; nor is such exclusion revealed in the recognition "I know this lotus as a blue lotus." A qualifier is not merely co-located with exclusion.]

CHAPTER 109

THE MEMORY OF WATER

It is easy to forget water; it is impossible to forget the memory of water.



OPENING FOLK SONG: SET THE RIVER FREE

Folk tune: Water-Carrier's Malhar

Fill, O water-carrier, fill from the free-flowing stream;

open the bottle's cap and bring the river home again.

The memory of a river shut in a bottle pushes at the cap;

the stream is born free and plays beside thirst.

Water is not merely a thing; it is the shared breath of the people;

save wells, ponds and streams—this alone honours water.

Sing, O water-carrier, and clear the source's path;

gently free the drop from the prison of trade.

If the river remains free, soil, fish and people will smile;

the bright current of water-justice will dwell in every home.

At every ghat where pitchers fill, let Malhar rise;

well, pond and spring each have their own dignity.

To sell water as merchandise is a corrupt custom;

save the source, open the flow, sing the love of water.



Soil holds names; water holds movement. A footfall on soil leaves a mark. A footfall on water leaves none, yet the water remembers who descended from which ghat and never returned.

So paper can be altered; water cannot. What is written on paper may be crossed out; the coolness of what water once touched remains within it.

And when a story begins to fetch a price, it ceases to be a story and becomes merchandise. That is why guarding the testimony of water is hardest of all.

The soil had already opened its mouth. After the fourth watch, when seeds, dust and buried footprints had spoken, the people of Garh Narikel felt that Earth itself had begun to testify. But in Garh Narikel no testimony remained alone. When soil spoke, water listened; when water listened, the crocodile shifted; when the crocodile shifted, the green point on the Channa stump trembled.

That night the floodwater had receded, yet in the morning people saw little pools gathered around the stump. This was not ordinary rainwater. Leaves did not float on its surface; names did—some clear, some blurred, some no more than the letters water itself had been able to save. When the children came for the watch, they found the dry pages of the register soaked through, but the ink had not run. Instead, rings of water had formed around names that had never been fully written.

Ananya knelt. She did not put her palm in the water; first she put her ear close. The water spoke very softly, like someone remembering from far away. There was compassion in the sound, not defeat; fear, but not humiliation. The water said: "I could not keep the body, but I kept the last touch. I could not save the bones, but I kept the direction of the fall. I could not stop the boat, but I remember its shadow."

The children were astonished. The watch over names could no longer be only stones written upon dry land. Water was asking for an archive of its own. The first rule of the Coconut-Leaf School had been: do not erase a name. Water's rule was different: allow the name the right to flow, but never let it flow away unheard. Ananya opened the register and wrote on a new page: "The Memory of Water."

Ba said, "Water is a very old witness. Before humans built courts, they committed crimes before water. Water knows tree-roots, body heat, the dissolving of hunger. Yet water has seldom testified in its own name; people kept calling it flood, river, pond, drain, canal." She continued to look toward the water. No one could tell whether the rain in her eyes belonged to her tears or to the memory of the Kamala-Balan.

Then Panidubbi came. As before she was half-story, half-shadow, half-water; but this time there was less mud and more light upon her body. She sat at the water's edge and wrung out her wet hair. Wherever each drop fell, a fine line of light appeared. "Soil holds the name," she said, "water holds its route. You wrote names on stones; now write the route in water. From which house someone was taken, from which ghat the boat left, at which bend the bridge's concrete failed, at which hospital tap a breath ended, in which blue glow of a screen a teenager's mind drowned—these are all water-roads."

Gop Kumar took an old map from his bag. On the government map the river was a straight line, the canal a blue strip, the bridge a black mark, the settlement a yellow circle. Panidubbi laughed. "That is not

water; it is colour.” The children began making a new map on the soil. They drew the river not as a line but as a route of memory. Where the bodies of labourers had never been counted, they drew circular ripples. Where medicine never arrived, a dry well. Where digital fraud drained a household’s money, a tiny glass screen with a drop of water inside it.

Ira said, “Children living abroad can see a map, but they cannot smell the river.” Ananya replied, “Then let us make a map of smells.” Everyone fell silent. A map of smells? Yet in Garh Narikel impossible things were becoming ordinary. Women brought water in brass vessels from their homes—from courtyards, wells, paddy fields, hospital taps, and ghats where a loved one had last been seen. Each water carried a different smell: iron and moss from one vessel, rotting straw from another, the thin sharp trace of phenyl from hospital corridors. The children identified them not by sniffing but by listening.

Satyavrat Mehta sat behind them here too. In the language of law this should all have seemed impossible to him. Water giving evidence? A map of smells? A drop showing the route of a name? But the silence within him, once a crime, had become listening. He understood that a society trapped in written papers is frightened by the memory of water. A paper can be changed; the memory of what water once touched is harder to alter.

He opened his notebook, but wrote nothing. Panidubbi looked at him and said, “Do not write today. Wash your hands.” Satyavrat started. He went to the little pool and dipped his hands. The water was not cold; it seemed to hold the warmth of many palms. Tiny blister-like letters rose on his fingers: “silence,” “delay,” “witness,” “debt.” The water entered his palm as if years of settled dust were being gently pierced by a thin needle—not pain, but a rough sensation reaching deeper into memory than into flesh. He drew out his hand. The letters dried, but their marks remained.

At that moment a drumbeat came from afar. No false procession was being staged. The children were drawing a kabaddi line around the water. The new rule: whoever crossed the water while chanting “kabaddi-kabaddi” had to lift a name and return without breaking breath. But lifting a name did not mean lifting a stone; it meant carrying the name’s weight in the chest. The child who returned said, “Present.” The child whose breath broke sat down to listen. The game became a watch.

Ujjwal’s spirit shone blue on the surface, not like a mobile screen but like sky after rain. He whispered into one child’s ear, “I drowned in the screen, but my mother’s weeping entered the water. Write it.” The child wrote in the register: “Weeping too is a water-route.” Devika watched from a distance. She understood that the struggle against screens was not only about turning devices off; it was also about giving a place in the social record to tears that escaped the screen and entered water.

Gangesha's question rose again. A child asked, "How can water's memory be evidence?" Aruni smiled. Once he had been an engineer who trusted the load of a bridge, steel, cement, measurements and design. Now he knew that truth too can bear a weight beyond measurement. "Perception: the water is visible," he said. "Inference: ripples show that someone passed. Word: the survivor speaks. But justice begins only when the silence of the one who drowned is also treated as evidence." The children wrote down the sentence.

Panidubbi spoke again. "Navya-Nyaya remains incomplete if it cannot hear the humiliation of the body. If caste decides who may stand at the water's edge, justice will never cross the river. If Gangesha is the question, water demands an answer." The leather-working woman, marriage, lineage, birth, the impossible story of five years—all these rose lightly on the water's surface. The truths society had found inconvenient and suppressed began to float again. Then the children understood: caste can cut a name from stone, but in a river touch has no caste.

An old leather-worker stepped forward. He held not hide but a lota of water. "The names of our ancestors were never read in this grove," he said. "They made the village's shoes, repaired palanquins, removed hides from dead animals, yet they were never allowed into memory." His wife said from behind him, "Today water will wash their feet." The children made a new place in the circle of stones. The first drop of water was placed there. Ba said softly, "Now justice has begun."

At this, the men sent by Batuknath Hariharan stood uneasily at a distance. Their Memory Trust document contained the phrase "caste harmony," but the water in the old leather-worker's hand weighed more than the phrase. The paper said inclusion. The water said: first speak the names of those you kept outside. The paper said project. The water said: wash their feet.

At dusk the small pools began joining one another. No one opened a drain or cut a channel; drop by drop, the water found its own path. A circle of water formed around the stump. In its centre the green point trembled with a pale blue-white glow. The new shoot of the Channa tree seemed to be watered by memory itself. The last light of evening broke into fragments on the circle, and when the wind crossed it once, the whole ring shimmered together like many wet palms opening and closing at once.

Then a vehicle arrived from the market. Painted on it were the words: "Sacred Memory Water: Bottled Devotion." Blue water filled glass bottles bearing a picture of the Channa tree; below, in small type: "Project approval pending." The children fell silent. Panidubbi did not laugh; her face hardened.

Ananya closed the register. “The water is speaking,” she said, “and they have come to bottle it.” Satyavrat Mehta looked at his wet hands. The letters had dried, but the coolness remained in his palms. “Where memory begins to be sold as water,” he said quietly, “the watch must become stricter.”

That night the children drew a new kabaddi circle around the ring of water. Soil had opened its mouth; water had given its memory. Now the market would try to fit a cap over water’s mouth.

FOLK SONG: THE RIVER SHUT IN A BOTTLE

Folk tune: Lament of Water

*Flow, O river; do not be bound in a bottle;
let no price be put on the story of the body you carried away.*

*Water may be forgotten; the memory of water cannot;
the letters dried on the palm, but the coolness did not leave.
The river spoke, and the market came running with bottles,
putting a cap on memory-water and a price upon it.*

*The children drew a kabaddi circle around the water;
one drop fell from the stump and wrote the next title.
The river is our mother, not merchandise, not a brand;
let no price be put on the story of the bodies she carried.*

*Do not smash the bottle first—first understand whose thirst has the
right;
let the memory of water flow free, and listen to the current of names.*



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Shivaditya Mishra's view: the qualifier is that which is directly related. In "the man has a staff," the staff is a qualifier of the man, while staffhood, the universal, qualifies only the staff. Both speakers ultimately accepted that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free of defect. Shivaditya Mishra's view: the directly related qualifier.*]

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

CHAPTER 110

THE WITNESS OF FIRE

Fire goes out; ash gives testimony.

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



OPENING FOLK SONG: SPROUT FROM ASH

Folk tune: Fire at Dawn

Awake, O ash; let the seed within awaken,

wait for the first drop and return as a tender shoot.

The fire died; ash remained, with seed hidden in ash;

when the first drop fell, a green shoot smiled.

Give the names of what burned a dwelling in the new forest;

from the dust of destruction, make a road to rebuilding.

Ash says: this is not an end, only a change of form;

with patience, labour and love, this vessel will fill again.

From ash a shoot, from tears courage may arise;

the fire of dawn becomes warmth and furnishes a new home.

Sweep gently where the house burned;

let the names the fire took descend into the new forest.

Ash finds the warmth of soil and wakes the seed;

the first ray of dawn brings forth the green sprout.



People think that once something is burned, the matter is over. But the smell of what burned remains in the air, and smell cannot be locked away. The smoke from a paper secretly burned returns to the courtyard of the one who burned it.

Fire comes in two colours. One burns on the veranda—openly, before everyone, driving away darkness. The other burns secretly at night—afraid, greedy, fleeing its own shadow. Their flames may be the same colour, but their ashes are not.

And whatever is hollow within burns quickly. What is filled with names from within speaks even through its ash.

After hearing the memory of water, the people of Garh Narikel understood that names do not live only in stones, papers, registers, seeds, soil and water. They also remain in the ash left after fire has gone out. On the fifth watch, after the floodwater receded from around the cut Channa stump, a black-brown film remained upon the earth. People wanted to wipe it away as mud, but Ba stopped them. "Where water has spoken names," she said, "fire too has something to say."

For this village fire was not only destruction. The hearth burned with fire; a newborn's cord was dried by fire; the dead departed through cremation fire; lamps gave light through fire; stubble became field-ash through fire; and many court files too had become ash through fire. Fire preserves the belly, sends the body away, hides lies, and sometimes exposes letters hidden inside secret papers. The people around the Channa tree had learned that the same element called divine can become an instrument of crime in corrupt hands.

Not even a full day had passed since this understanding when smoke rose during the night watch over names. The three children on guard first thought someone had come to extinguish the lamps. But the smoke was not from a lamp; it came from the old paper-house behind the stump. It did not carry the sweet smell of oil but the sour, astringent smell of old paper, made from years of ink and damp. Inside were copies of municipal documents, tenders, complaints about the tribute app, a copy of Broom's deed of gift, and separate copies of the register of name-marks. Someone had understood that the easiest way to break the watch over names was fire.

The children did not scream. Ananya had taught them: first breath, then word. They formed a circle and called together: "Present." At that word the smoke did not rise straight into the sky. It began circling above the Channa stump as though the fire too wanted to listen. People ran in carrying buckets, water-pots, brass vessels, even empty hands. The heat was so near that sweat gathered at the tips of the eyebrows of those standing in front and dried there at once.

Aruni threw the first bucket, but Meera stopped his hand. "If we put everything out at once, how will we hear the witness of what burned?" Everyone stared. The fire had to be stopped, but the voice of its ash had to be preserved. So Devika and Saumya sprinkled water from both sides to stop the flames spreading, while the burning papers at the centre were not entirely drowned. The fire became a small, controlled, trembling creature.

Along the edge of a burning page, the black letters disappeared first; then some letters shone in white light. A file that in daylight declared

the place “encroached vacant land” exposed a suppressed sheet beneath in the night’s fire: “valuation of memorial-area land.” The children were stunned. The paper made to erase names had had its belly ripped open by fire. Ananya wrote: “Fire eats the outer ink of a lie and leaves its greed inside visible.”

Satyavrat Mehta arrived late that night. When he sat near the smoke, there was no old courtroom brightness on his face, only the exhaustion of a man dusted with ash. Looking at the burning paper he said, “Sometimes law survives fire; sometimes it is born in fire. But the hand that burns a paper meant to preserve people’s names writes its own statement.” He accused no one by name, yet everyone understood whom his words addressed—the people who had sent someone under darkness to burn the papers.

A little later Gop Kumar checked the paper-house and found that the latch had not been forced. The door had been opened with an inside key. Only three people had keys—Ananya, Devika, and the local records attendant Hemnarayan. Ananya remained calm. Devika showed her key. Hemnarayan was missing. People immediately wanted to call him guilty, but Gangesha’s question rose again: what is perception? What is inference? What is word? No mud on a name without evidence.

Hemnarayan was found after midnight, unconscious beside the pond. Ash marked his mouth, fear his eyes, and a broken piece of glass lay in his hand. When he came to, he trembled. “I gave them the key, but not knowingly. My son’s name is on a city hospital’s debt list. They said if the paper-house were opened, the debt would be forgiven. I thought they would take only one paper. No one told me about the fire.” Hemnarayan was guilty, but not alone; behind his offence sat the crocodile of debt with its mouth clamped shut.

For the first time the children faced a difficult judgment. The Constitution of Names said: do not strike out a name without evidence; do not trade anyone’s pain; do not sell anyone’s privacy. Yet handing over the key was an offence. Ba said, “Punishment is necessary, but let it be the kind that saves the human being and kills the lie.” It was decided that for one month Hemnarayan would sit at the nightly watch over names and would labour to rewrite every name half-burned by the fire. His son’s debt would be raised at the community hearing so that the root of the offence too could be seen.

The most moving witness of the fire that night was a half-burned page. Only three fragments of names survived: “Sar...,” “Uj...,” “Na....” No one could tell which names they belonged to. Ujjwal’s mother said, “Do not call half-burned names incomplete. Let them stand for all unnamed names.” That night a new stone was placed: “All Half-Burned Names.” A pinch of ash was laid upon it.

When the lamps were lit again, everyone saw the difference between this fire and the other one. The fire that had come to destroy papers was greedy, hidden and afraid. The fire in the lamps was open, communal, watchful. Devika told the children, "The instrument is the same; the purpose is different. One person brings fire to burn papers; another to drive away darkness." The children wrote the sentence in the margin of the register.

Saumya sifted the ash through cloth, searching for tiny scraps of paper. One fragment held half of Broom's company mark; another the crooked line of a municipal signature; a third a code-like mark from Chandrapal's app. These might become evidence in a court, but around the Channa stump they became story before they became proof. The fire was saying: "Those who try to erase meet one another in the same ash."

In the last watch of night, Old Budhba's Ghost came. This time he sat not within the smoke but at the edge of the ash. In his hand was a small childhood stick once used to draw kabaddi lines. With ash he drew one circle on the soil by the stump, then another beyond it. The children understood: the first circle was the village, the second Earth, and perhaps the third, not yet drawn, was the unnamed planet of dreams. Fire glowed at the edge of those circles but did not cross them.

Ananya asked, "Ghost-Baba, what does fire say?" His voice came like dry leaves rattling: "Fire says that what is hollow inside burns quickly. What is filled with names inside speaks even through its ash." After speaking, he did not vanish; he remained seated behind the ash as though it were his turn to stand watch too.

By dawn the flames were completely out, but the ash was not cold. A hand placed on it could still feel warmth. The children did not throw the ash into the river. When they lifted it in their palms, it did not feel like flour but like very fine sand slipping between the fingers; the grains that remained were smooth and faintly warm, as though the last heat of a body still lived in them. They divided it into three parts: one beside the name-stones, one beside the new shoot, and one in an empty earthen bowl. On the bowl they wrote: "The Witness of Fire."

Then a small child, who until yesterday had stayed absorbed in games on a screen, asked, "Fire has spoken, water has spoken, soil has spoken. When will air speak?" Everyone turned to the child. The question was simple, yet around the stump there came a rustling though there were no leaves. Wind circled above the cut tree, lifted fine ash-dust, and settled it on the children's heads. It was not hot, but its touch felt like a palm resting in blessing.

Satyavrat Mehta said softly, "Air is the hardest witness. It stays in no one's hand, yet reaches everywhere." Ananya opened the next page and wrote the title: "Seventh Watch: The Statement of Air."

Thus the witness of fire did not end. It became ash upon their heads, light in the letters on the stones, and went out to make air speak. The paper burned to erase memory had turned memory into smoke and spread it through all of Garh Narikel.

FOLK SONG: ASH SPEAKS THE NAME

Folk tune: Fire-Lament

*Speak, O ash; speak the names on the burned paper;
what you burn sends its smell from house to house.*

*The fire went out; the ash gave witness;
the burned paper became smoke and spread through the village.*

*Letters on stone shone from the point of ash;
memory meant to be erased came and settled on their heads.*

*The wind circled; ash clung to the children's hair;
Satyavrat said: the air, witness everywhere, has awakened.*

Fire destroys, yet it also spreads the evidence.

Touch the ash and ask: whose story was burned?

The smoke will answer: the name is still alive.

The letters on stone shone from the point of ash.



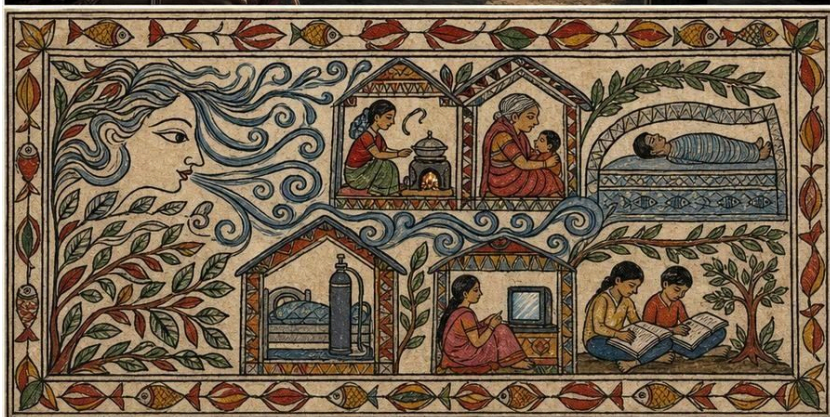
[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The directly connected, or the qualifier related to the qualificand: in a pot possessing taste and colour, colour too becomes a principal qualifier; while in the past-tense statement “he was a

staff-bearer," the staff is only an indicator. The directly connected, or the qualifier related to the qualificand.]

CHAPTER III

THE QUESTION OF AIR

*The smoke did not go to the sky; it wandered lane to lane—the question
of air is asked at every house.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: CLEAN AIR IS A SHARED RIGHT

Folk tune: Air at Dawn

Blow, O wind, across every threshold;

no fee, no discrimination upon breath—sing this song.

*The wind comes to every doorway and charges no one;
clean breath is everyone's right, with no discrimination.
Identify the sources of smoke and adopt cleaner methods;
plant trees, improve stoves, preserve the blue sky.*

*A child's lungs are like flowers; honour them;
let village and city air together fill the song of life.
Clean air is a shared right—say it in one voice;
all together guard the breath, and let Mithila stay healthy.*

*Reduce smoke from stoves, increase the rows of trees;
put the rule of filters over the mouths of factories.
A child's lungs are like flowers; give them pure air;
village and city together share this common medicine of breath.*



Soil, seed, water and fire—all can be taken into the hand. Air cannot. Therefore people think air belongs to no one. But what belongs to no one belongs to everyone—and what belongs to everyone is easiest to plunder.

Words travel in air, and rumours travel too. Their wings are the same colour. The difference is that a word has roots and a rumour does not—and whatever flies without roots eventually falls into someone's courtyard.

That is why guarding breath is hardest of all. A stone can be locked, water can be dammed; only one thing can be placed upon breath—the responsibility of the one who speaks.

After the witness of fire, what remained in Garh Narikel was not ash but smell. The smoke from the lamps around the cut Channa stump did not rise into the sky during the night; it wandered through the village lanes. In the morning people found that the smoke did not sting their eyes; instead it made them remember something—someone's father's hearth, someone's grandmother's sari-end, someone's wet body from the water-burial, an empty oxygen cylinder in a hospital, the blue light of a screen. Fire had given testimony; air carried its question from house to house.

That morning the air was ordinary in no way. It was neither the cool north wind, nor the hot westerly, nor the damp monsoon breeze. It was an interrogating wind. It entered through window cracks, searched corners of rooms, shook lids of old chests, blew dust from mobile screens, and turned pages of the children's register. The page it opened said: "Seventh Watch: The Question of Air." Ananya read it and understood that now the watch had to be placed not over something solid, but over the invisible.

People could touch soil, seed, water and fire with their hands. How could they catch air? Aruni fell silent at the question. Gop Kumar said, "What we cannot catch can still be polluted." Devika added, "Words travel in the air; so do rumours." Meera said, "Humiliation of dignity, contempt for the body, gossip about privacy—these too fly through air." Satyavrat Mehta, listening from a distance, said softly, "When justice arrives too late, even its smell goes bad."

Then for the first time the children established an air-watch. Its rules were strange: today no unverified claim would be allowed to fly; no anonymous accusation repeated; no dust of insult scattered with the name of the dead; no woman's life-story released into the air without her consent; no poor person's suffering turned into a joke at the crossroads. This became a new clause in the Constitution of Names: air too would be answerable.

By midday the village's test had begun. At a tea stall a man said that some names written during the Festival of Names were false. Ananya arrived. She did not quarrel. She asked, "Did you see this directly, or did you hear it from someone?" The man stopped. Another said, "I heard a voice." The children took him to the Channa stump. There the voice did not come again. The register recorded: "Rumour has wings, not roots."

That day the wind reached Batuknath Hariharan's house as well. Closed windows, thick curtains, scented incense and glass cabinets could not stop it. The wind turned the page of the register in which he was

rehearsing his apology. The words read: "Forgive me." The wind blew ash across them and wrote: "First listen." Batuknath stopped his pen. He had thought forgiveness was a sentence; the wind told him that forgiveness is listening.

In Chandrapal Batra's office the air took another form. There the air-conditioning produced cold, odourless, lifeless air. A new version of the memory app stood open on the screen. Chandrapal's assistant said, "Now users' complaints will disappear; comments will be filtered first." At that instant dust entered through the ventilation and settled on the screen. The letters blurred, but one line appeared clear: "Names will not be filtered." Chandrapal trembled. For the first time he understood that air does not obey a censor button.

Even in Raghav Signal's networkless days, the air kept searching for him. Nothing arrived on his phone, yet his ears filled constantly with whispers—old missing messages, deleted codes, signals sent under cover of donations, profit percentages. He covered his ears, but the air was rising not from outside them but from within. He wrote on paper: "I will remain silent." The wind turned the page; on the back was written: "Silence too is transmission."

Lau Kin-Hung sat on a high hotel floor with the window closed. India's air seemed unsafe to him. He ordered an imported air purifier. The machine ran and its green light came on, but the screen showed a particle count of zero. Then his reflection on the glass misted from an unseen breath behind him, and a crooked Devanagari word appeared: "Present." Lau wiped it with his finger; the word appeared again. "What language is this?" he whispered. For the first time he understood that the language he could not read was reading him through the air.

At evening the children gathered beside the stump. They had made small cloth flags—red, yellow, white, no black—each bearing one word: truth, name, privacy, labour, water, soil, seed, fire, air. They planted them around the cut stump. When the wind blew, the words fluttered together. The sound was not one voice: thicker flags thudded deeply, thinner ones snapped, and together they sounded like many people breathing at once. Ba said, "See—when written truth enters the air, it can become song; when lies enter, they become dust."

At that time the children's kabaddi began in the distance. Earlier the game had been played in a circle on soil; now air made the line. When a player crossed while holding breath and chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi," the voice appeared in the air like a stretched thread. If it was filled with lies, the thread broke. If it was filled with the watch over names, it shone. In this new game breath became not only a rule of play but a moral proof.

One boy, who had earlier been caught entering false names into Chandrapal's app, was afraid to enter the game. Ananya said, "Holding your breath is not hard; holding back a lie is hard." The boy closed his eyes and stepped in. His first "kabaddi" trembled; on the second he blurted, "I entered false names." The game did not stop. The children did not rush to touch him; he returned by himself. The register recorded: "A breath that confesses does not break."

As night deepened, the air-watch reached its final test. The shoot on the Channa stump moved very slightly. There were no words in the movement, yet the children heard: "What will the air be like on the unnamed planet of dreams?" The question disturbed everyone. Those who wanted to flee Earth spoke of "pure-air domes." Would the scent of names survive there? Could the dead breathe as memory there? Could one hold breath to play kabaddi, or would a machine distribute breath?

Ira, who had written letters to children abroad, answered, "Where air is available only through machines, words will die first. If we do not save names in Earth's air, then even breath on the unnamed planet of dreams will be rented." Gop Kumar said, "Perhaps the next struggle will be over air—the right to breathe." Devika added quietly, "And over clean air against rumour."

That night no one burned incense around the Channa stump. The children said, "Let the air keep its own smell." Everyone sat silent for a long time. It was not frightened silence but listening. Air moved over each name-stone, touched the green shoot, turned the register's pages, and finally a very soft voice rose from the centre of the stump—not woman, not man, not old, not child, simply air itself asking: "Who will guard what you call breath?"

The children tightened the circle of stones. Far, very far away, inside the shining dome in the New Horizon advertisement, a fine crack appeared—perhaps Earth's air had reached there too.

FOLK SONG: THE AIR ASKS—WHO WILL GUARD THE BREATH?

Folk tune: Song of Air

*The air asks, "Who will guard the breath?" O it asks;
become its watchman, or the market already stands ready.*

*The smoke did not go to the sky; it wandered lane to lane,
asking house by house: whose breath was quietly stolen?*

*No incense—let air keep its own smell;
listen to leaf and stone, shoot and register.*

Neither woman nor man—the air itself spoke:

“Who will guard what you call breath?”

*Far away, a fine crack formed in the wall of the dome;
Earth's air climbed all the way to the unnamed planet of dreams.*

*Air cannot be mortgaged; it is the right of every living being;
be the watchman of breath, or the market stands ready.*

Neither woman nor man—the air itself spoke.

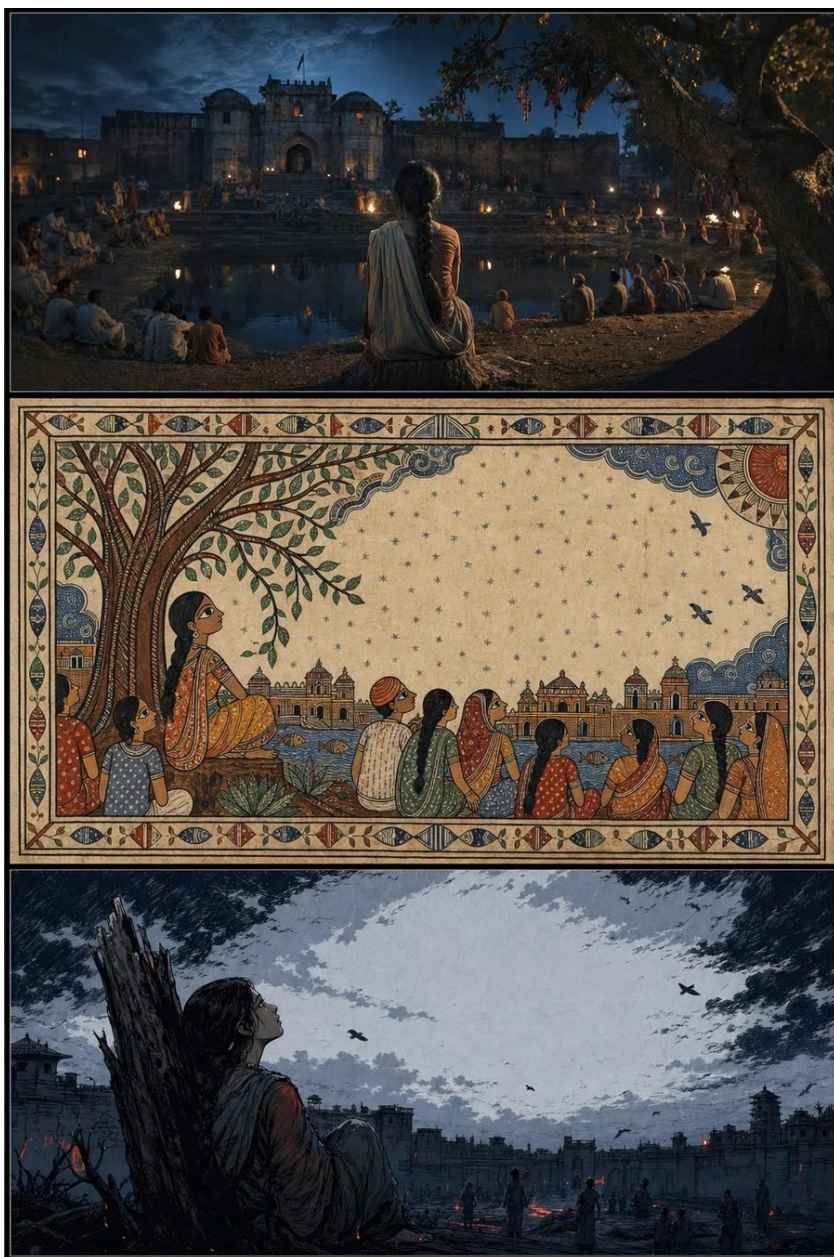


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—An objection may be raised that cognition of difference from smoke or light rests on a purposeless qualifier and therefore cannot serve as a cooperative cause in direct knowledge of the pervasion of smoke or light by fire. 19. It may be accepted that the “being pervaded by fire” belonging to smoke pervaded by fire is itself the delimitor of smokehood as pervaded by fire—that is, the fire-pervadedness occurring in each individual smoke is the delimitor of the general pervasion occurring in all smoke. The objection remains that cognition of difference from smoke or light, being based on a purposeless qualifier, cannot assist direct knowledge of their pervasion by fire.]

CHAPTER 112

THE EMPTINESS OF SKY

*When the sky becomes empty, it is not relief—it is the greatest question
of all.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: FILL THE SKY WITH QUESTION AND ANSWER

Folk tune: Sky at Dawn

*Fill, O sky, fill with question and answer;
rise as cloud in question, fall as a drop in reply.*

*The empty sky asks: who below is awake?
The earth will answer: Janaka's discernment has not fled.
Question as cloud, answer as drop—the dialogue becomes a stream;
in the dry field of silence, garlands of thought begin to grow.*

*The sky does not remain empty when voices open;
every question grows wings and flies toward an answer.
From clouds of question and answer comes a rain of knowledge;
beneath the open sky of the mind, a new society takes form.*

*Gather clouds over the dry field of silence;
let lightning of curiosity flash and dialogue rain down.
A wing for every question, a home for every answer;
beneath the open sky of the mind, let the harvest of knowledge grow.*



When the sky becomes empty, it is not relief—it is the greatest question of all. A small sky causes fear; the whole sky demands an answer.

The sky seen through gaps in leaves is easy—it comes in fragments, only as much as we can hold. But when a tree is cut and the whole sky appears at once, a weight settles on the chest.

Emptiness comes in two forms. One is made by power: a number where a name should be, a blank box where a labourer should be, an

empty line where truth should stand. That emptiness devours. The other is made by memory: a place deliberately left open so someone may arrive. That emptiness gives room.

And no one holds a lease on the sky. One who can seize stones or burn registers cannot seize the void above. The only condition is that to hear it, one must raise one's neck.

After the question of air, a strange calm spread through Garh Narikel. No answer came from any mouth to what the air had asked. People waited through the night for a leaf to stir, water to speak, fire to whisper, soil to sink—but nothing happened. At dawn only the sky opened, so clear that it seemed the severed shade of the Channa tree had lifted not from overhead but from within everyone.

For the first time in that open sky the people saw emptiness. When the broad branches of the Channa tree still stood, the sky had appeared in pieces—through leaves, between a crow's wings, in the mist around the ghosts' kabaddi. Now the whole sky was visible at once, and its completeness laid a new weight upon their chests. A small sky frightened them, but the whole sky demanded an answer.

Ananya sat beside the stump looking upward. She felt that the sky was not empty at all but the largest vessel for listening. The names rising from soil, washed in water, tempered in fire and carried by air—where did they go? Would they circle only within the village? Would they reach the unnamed planet of dreams? Would they demand a place between the stars?

Satyavrat Mehta spoke far less than usual that day. His testimony had been written, the offence of his silence recorded, yet before the sky even written words seemed small. He opened the register and closed it again. Devika asked, "Why aren't you writing?" Satyavrat said, "Paper stays on the ground. Today the question is coming from above."

The children were not satisfied with this answer. They had become accustomed to finding the testimony of every element in stone, leaf, water, ash, dust, sound or mark. What was the mark of sky? A child said, "Cloud." Another said, "Bird." A third said, "The part of breath that leaves the body and rises." Ananya remained silent a long while, then said, "The mark of sky is an empty place—where no name has been written, yet it can still be heard."

As soon as she said it, everyone around the stump fell silent. "Empty place" was a dangerous phrase in Garh Narikel. Government papers called the Channa grove a vacant plot. Contractors left blank boxes beside dead labourers. Court orders left blank lines where truth should have stood. In digital fraud accounts, numbers replaced names. But Ananya's empty place was different—not a place erased, but a place waiting.

Then Old Budhba's Ghost became visible in daylight more clearly than ever before. His body was not smoke but the edge of light. He stood not upon the stump but between its shadow and the sun. "The emptiness made by power devours," he said. "The emptiness made by memory gives room. Sky is the second kind of emptiness—as long as it remains open, a story cannot escape."

Ba laughed softly. "No one has a lease on the sky," she said. "Someone may seize the village stones, burn the register, steal the mobile phone, bury a body beneath a bridge—but no one owns the void above. The sky hears everything; only raise your neck to listen."

After this a new rule was created for reading names. Whenever a name was spoken, everyone would look upward for one moment afterward. No folded hands, no mantra, no photograph—only looking up. It would mean that the name had risen from the soil and taken its place in the sky's open space. The first name was read. Everyone looked up. There was no cloud, but a thin white line crossed the sky as if a pen had moved over an invisible page.

Chandrapal Batra laughed when he heard about the rule. "How will I take data from the sky now?" he thought. But at night his screen opened by itself. A map appeared, showing innumerable points in the sky above Garh Narikel. Whenever he moved the cursor over a point, he heard not a name but a breath. He could not understand where the server was. He kept staring; the page would not close. At last a sentence appeared: "What has gone above cannot be downloaded."

Raghav Signal too became restless. Air caught his secret codes, water washed them, fire burned them. Now he tried to send a message to the sky. But no "delivered" mark appeared. He could not know whether it had gone or not. Sweat gathered in his palms. Criminals are accustomed to erasing evidence; sky is the greatest lawsuit against that habit—it gives neither erasable proof nor certainty of escape.

In a distant city Lau Kin-Hung looked out through a glass wall. Buildings, satellites and communication routes all seemed under his control. But that night the sky above his room suddenly changed into the sky of Mithila. The emptiness directly above the cut Channa stump descended onto his glass. He whispered, "This sky is not mine." For the first time he understood that one might leave Earth and build an unnamed planet of dreams, but one could not escape the memory of sky.

That night Ananya's dream stirred again. There were artificial domes, controlled light, measured air, counted water, designated dwellings. People there did not see sky; they saw a blue expanse shown on screens. When the people of Garh Narikel looked upward after each name, spots began appearing one by one on the artificial blue ceiling of the unnamed

planet of dreams. The scientists there called them mechanical faults, but in Ananya's dream she knew the spots were empty places for names.

Kabaddi was played again that evening. But no line was drawn on the ground. The children stood in a circle around the stump and looked upward. One child held his breath and ran chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi," but his shadow ran not on the ground—it ran upside down in the sky. Everyone froze. The line of play was being drawn among the stars. Old Budhba's Ghost smiled. "The game is being written above now," he said, "but the breath will remain here."

This new kabaddi was different from the game of the ghosts. Before, being caught meant defeat; now, being caught meant a question. A child chanting "kabaddi" was stopped not by a body but by an unwritten name that had not yet received a stone. If the child heard that name, breath returned. If he ignored it, his voice broke. In this game victory lay not in speed but in listening.

Meera understood the meaning at once. "The emptiness of sky is also the place of women whose stories were buried inside houses," she said. "Names that are not on paper, not in court, not in a phone wait in the open place above." That night women whispered their unspoken names upward. Fine tremors passed among the stars.

Ira wrote another letter to the children abroad: "If you look at the sky in your city, remember that we share the same emptiness. One may leave a village, forget a language, change an address; but if the void above has heard the name, migration itself can become a watch." She wrote that Garh Narikel's new lessons—soil, water, fire, air and sky—were not only elements but five steps of memory.

Night deepened. A drop of dew settled on the green point of the stump. In it the entire sky appeared upside down. The stars shifted closer together inside the little curve, and the whole night looked as though it could fit in someone's palm. Ananya watched and said, "Sky is not far away; it descends into any drop that knows how to listen." The children wrote the sentence in the register. Beneath it they left an empty space. Someone asked, "What will we write here?" Ananya replied, "The next name."

Just then a slow drumbeat came from far away. No procession, no programme. A beat crossing water, fire, air and sky. Ba listened and said, "That is the beat inside the earth. The sky has heard; now the underworld will answer." Everyone lowered their gaze from above. The roots of the stump were trembling faintly.

The chapter did not end with that tremor. It was the first invitation from below: when memory reaches the sky, the roots demand an answer from within the earth.

FOLK SONG: THE QUESTION OF THE EMPTY SKY

Folk tune: Sky at Dawn

*Empty, O sky, yet do not fear—there is room;
there the next name may descend and find its own voice.*

*The sky emptied; not relief but a question remained;
no leaf stirred, no water spoke, no fire trembled.
A sentence was written in the register, with empty room below;
Ananya said: the next name will be written here.*

*From deep inside the earth a drumbeat rose;
the sky above had heard, and the roots moved to answer.
Emptiness opens its mouth; human eyes turn downward;
when memory climbs above, it knocks at the door below.*

*Do not fear the emptiness of sky; it is a new place,
where the next name may descend and find its voice.*

From within the earth the drumbeat rose.

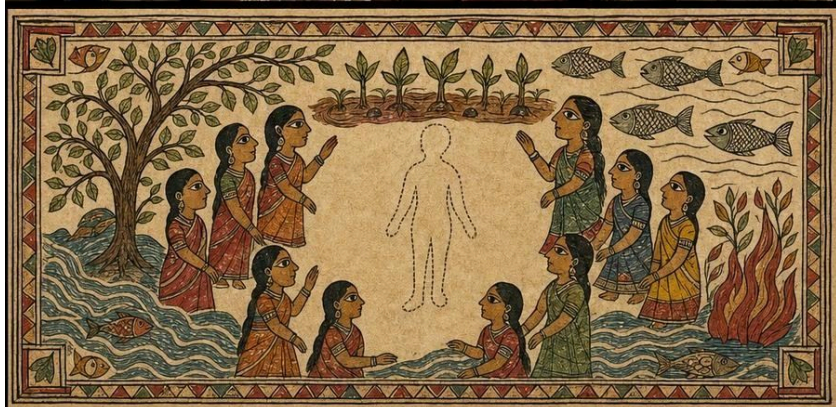


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The question of fire: absence of an independent proving means. This applies where no direct means of proving the probandum—for example, fire—is already available. At the close of the dialogue both accepted that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free of defect. Mutual dependence.]

CHAPTER 113

THE BODY OF THE WORD

A word too needs a body—without a body, a word is lost in the air.



OPENING FOLK SONG: GIVE LIFE TO THE WORD

Folk tune: Lullaby for Letters

O girl, sing the birth-song of letters;

wearing the body of meaning, the word is born.

*A word is born when it comes clothed in the body of meaning,
taking palm, eye, labour and experience into itself.*

*Do not leave it an empty slogan; give it dignity through action;
if you write “justice,” do justice; if you write “service,” then give.*

*Sing the birth-song of letters; keep language alive;
set people's speech, grief and joy upon the page.*

*Give life to the word, and give life an unclouded name;
when speech and action meet, the message becomes whole.*

*In the cradle, the newborn word hears a lullaby in the people's tongue;
labour and experience mark its forehead with kohl and guard it from
the evil eye.*

*If you write “justice,” do justice—that is its food;
when it drinks the milk of action, the word grows content.*



A lie finds a body at once—file, seal, contract, tender, stage, donation deed. The moment it is written, it puts on a body. But if truth does not enter action, it keeps wandering bodiless, and the wind carries it away.

Saying “justice” does not make justice. Writing “Present” does not make anyone present. The body of a word is sweat, waiting, and the time spent listening to another person's story.

And beware of the word that wanders without a body yet still gleams. It has no body—it has a stomach.

After the emptiness of the sky opened, a strange lightness descended over Garh Narikel. People thought that perhaps an emptied sky would bring relief. But emptiness is sometimes not relief but a question. The names that had already received watch in earth, seed, soil, water, fire, air and sky now began to ask, "Where is my body?"

At first the children were startled. A body for a name? A name was sound, written letters, a mark cut into stone. But Ananya recognized the tremor inside the question. "When falsehood becomes a word," she said, "its body is made immediately—file, seal, contract, tender, stage, donation deed, speech. But even after truth becomes a word, if it does not enter action, its body remains incomplete."

Ira fell silent at this. She remembered the letters she had written to children abroad. In those letters she had said that a village was not memory but responsibility. Now she understood that responsibility itself was the body of a word. Writing "Present" was not enough; one had to remain present. Saying "privacy" was not enough; one had to resist the temptation to sell another person's face. Saying "justice" was not enough; one had to cut through the knot of delay, caste, money and fear.

That day, for the first time, an assembly of letters was held in the Coconut-Leaf School. Five words were written on paper—name, present, justice, privacy, Earth. The children sat around them. In the afternoon breeze the edge of the paper fluttered lightly, and each of the five words seemed to rise once and sit back down—as though they too were waiting for their bodies. No lesson was recited. Each child was asked, "What do you see as the body of this word?"

One boy said, "The body of a name is stone." A girl said, "No, the body of a name is a mouth, if someone pronounces it." A third said, "The body of a name is an ear, if someone listens." A fourth child said softly, "The body of a name is time. If no one stops for it, the name dies again." Ba nodded. "The children have learned," she said. "A name does not have one body; its body is the whole web of relationships."

Then Gop Kumar brought his old papers. They contained accounts, flows, bank ledgers, missing names, coded lines and digital shadows. Spreading them out, he said, "These all had bodies of words, but no souls. 'Beneficiary' was written, but the person was missing. 'Death' was written, but there was no smell of the body. 'Project' was written, but there were no labourer's feet. 'Grant' was written, but there was the drool of plunder."

Satyavrat Mehta sat in the assembly as well. Contrary to his habit, he gave no lecture. He looked at the papers, then at the children. After a long while he said, "In law, the body of a word is very strong. Section, order, judgment, affidavit, testimony—all have constructed bodies. But if there is no compassion in the body of a word, it is like a corpse."

At that sentence the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost appeared near the doorway. He did not laugh. His face was grave that day. He seemed to be saying: I know what a dead body means; but the deadness of a living word is more terrible still. If a word created to protect the living begins to devour the living, it becomes a crocodile.

Ananya drew five empty circles beside the five words. A stone was placed in the first, the shape of an ear in the second, a tulsi leaf in the third, a small mirror in the fourth and a seed in the fifth. "The bodies of these words are still incomplete," she said. "If we do not act, all of them will be trapped again inside speeches."

Placing the seed before the word "Earth," Ira said, "Leaving Earth for the unnamed planet of dreams is an easy dream. Remaining on Earth and settling accounts with soil, water, labour, memory, caste, body and crime is difficult. So the body of the word Earth is not merely a round planet; it is a pair of feet carrying weight."

Meera placed the mirror before "privacy." "Privacy is not the name of hiding," she said. "It is the name of one's right over one's own face. A camera that takes pain without asking, an app that collects donations in the name of the dead, a society that turns the name of love into a crime—all cut into the body of privacy. Privacy has the body of a mirror, but what matters is whose hand holds the mirror."

Devika placed the shape of an ear before "Present." "To be present does not mean merely standing in a crowd," she said. "It means that when someone speaks their name, you do not interrupt. It means that you do not make another person's grief smaller with your clever comment. It means giving time in order to listen."

Aruni placed the tulsi leaf before "justice." Someone asked, "Why tulsi?" Aruni said, "Because justice is not only punishment. If justice does not preserve the fragrance of life, it is merely revenge. Bridges must be built, roads made, courts run—all that is necessary; but if the fragrance of life is absent from them, crocodiles are born from those very things."

Satyavrat touched the stone before "name." "A name must be hard," he said, "so that whoever tries to erase it breaks a nail. But a name is not only stone. If the name carved on stone never returns to anyone's mouth, the stone remains a memorial, not life." His finger paused in the rough groove where the point of a letter had been cut. To the touch, the abrasion felt as though someone inside the stone were answering his fingertip.

At that moment an old voice came from outside the school—"What is the proof of the word?" Everyone turned. No one was there. Yet the question remained in the air. Gangesha's question had descended again. The subtleties of Navya-Nyaya were moving through the severed stump of the Channa tree, the children's register and the wounded life of the

village. Calling a word proof does not make it proof; a word becomes proof only when speaker, listener, context and responsibility stand together.

That day the children added a new rule: "No word shall be accepted without a body." If an official said "development," he would be asked: where is development's body? If a scholar said "folk memory," he would be asked: where are the people sitting? If a merchant said "tribute," he would be asked: in whose hands is reverence? If a criminal said "forgiveness," he would be asked: have you passed through a night of listening for it?

By evening the rule had spread through the village. People who had laughed at it in the morning began by dusk to pause for one moment behind their own spoken words. That pause before speaking began to sound like a new voice in the village air. The tea seller said, "By this reckoning even tea has no existence without a body; it needs water, leaves, milk, fire, hands, waiting." People laughed. But there was a deep lesson inside the laughter. Even ordinary things are made from bodies of relationship. Why should words be less?

That night the sky toward the unnamed planet of dreams was clear, the stars sharp. The children began to play kabaddi. This time, instead of holding their breath and chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi," each runner carried a word—"name-name," "justice-justice," "Earth-Earth." A child who could name one action belonging to the body of the word before breath failed crossed the line. The game became philosophy, philosophy became play.

Suddenly a ray descended from far away—not straight, but trembling. No one could tell whether it came from the screen of "New Horizon" or from a government-office tower. The ray fell into an empty circle beside the Channa stump. In that circle a new word appeared by itself—"contract."

The children stopped playing. The word contract shone, but no body was visible for it. No stone, no ear, no mirror, no leaf, no seed. Only glitter. Ananya said softly, "This word is dangerous. By remaining bodiless, it wants to buy everyone's bodies." Satyavrat Mehta lowered his head in silence. Gop Kumar gathered up his papers. Ira looked toward the sky.

A faint sound came from inside the stump—not laughter, not weeping, only warning. Old Budhba's Ghost stepped out from the shade and, for the first time, spoke in the simple voice of a daylight child: "Look for the body of the contract. If you do not find its body, you will find its stomach."

The ninth watch of night did not end with that sentence. The watch over the body of the word had only begun. And the next morning Garh

Narikel would have to understand that a contract is written not merely on paper but upon whose bones, land, water, seed and future.

FOLK SONG: GIVE THE WORD A BODY

Folk tune: Song of Letters

*Give it a body, give the word a body;
open the contract's stomach and recognize the true owner.*

*A bodiless word is lost in the air;
the glitter of contract comes to buy everyone's body.
“Present” is warm on stone, a mark upon bark,
but “contract” wanders bodiless, its stomach vast.*

*Old Budhba said: if you find no body, look for the stomach;
open it—on whose land, water and bones is it written?
It is not merely a line on paper but the price of life;
the body's word is sweat, soil and the voice of seed.*

*Give letters a body so falsehood cannot fly away;
open the contract's stomach and the true owner will be known.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Using the word “doubt” without non-valid cognition: if the mountain is directly perceived and fire is remembered after cognition of the sign, then “I see fire” as an illusion of perception and “I infer fire” as an illusion of inference are distinct. The use of the word “doubt” without non-valid cognition.]

CHAPTER II4

THE SOUL OF MEANING

*If the body of the word survives but the soul of meaning is sold, the
watch remains incomplete.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: GUARD THE SOUL OF MEANING

Folk tune: Philosophical Vidyapati Song

Guard, O guard the meaning, guard the word's soul;

look for the lamp within the shining body.

The body of a word may gleam while meaning weeps inside;

under a loving gaze, the soul can be gathered again.

“Dignity” is not merely letters but a flower of conduct;

without “consent,” action remains incomplete—this is society’s root.

Never sell the soul of meaning in the market;

renew language through the people’s experience.

If word and meaning remain together, trust will endure;

a language of truth will write a bright road across generations.

To say “dignity” is easy; to live it is difficult austerity;

without “consent” the act is incomplete—repeat this within the mind.

Do not put meaning on the market’s scales;

bring the word after testing it on the touchstone of lived experience.



The same word may be written in three places—in the mouth of a dead person’s family, on a government flag, and on the wall of a planet with no name. The letters may be identical in all three places. But in the first there are tears, in the second an account, and in the third only emptiness.

Meaning therefore does not live in letters; it lives in the thing the word touches. What can be touched without making the hand tremble is not heritage but decoration.

And if a word born from the throat of the injured is sold in the market before it has even been weaned, the word may still sound, but it is already hollow inside.

After the body of the word had been made, the people's trust had grown a little. When the stone warmed at the word "Present," when letters rose on the bark of the cut stump, when names written on the sterile wall of the unnamed planet of dreams opened cracks, the children understood that words were not separate from soil, water, fire, air and sky. But that night Old Budhba's Ghost sat behind the stump and said, "If a word has a body, it also has disease. Be careful; you have saved the body—now save the meaning."

The warning opened its meaning in the morning. New cloth flags had been hung in the market square. In heavy letters they read: "PRESENT CAMPAIGN." Below were a government seal, the mark of the heritage project and the names of several donors. The word that bereaved families spoke in answer, the word children wrote with trembling hands in the register, the word that had risen as a shiver in the submarine's testimony—now it was printed on flags, banners, caps, bags and teacups.

Ananya stopped before the first flag. The crisp gleam of the new cloth snapped in the wind, and the smell of fresh printing came with it. Together they felt as if a stranger were calling out the name of her own house. The letters were correct. The vowel marks were correct. The colour was attractive. Yet she felt the eyes had been gouged out of the word. "Present" was written there, but it answered no dead person; it only drew a crowd. "This is a word," she said softly, "but it is not our word."

"Why not?" Ira asked. "The word is the same." Ananya replied, "The body can remain the same while the soul changes." Hearing this, Satyavrat Mehta, who was watching the flags from a distance, trembled slightly. All his life he had understood the importance of words in law, but he had understood too late how often legal words could become meaningless. "Justice" can remain written while justice is absent; "hearing" can remain written while no ear ever opens.

That day the lesson at the Coconut-Leaf School was changed. The children had been scheduled to practise reading names. Instead Devika wrote on the board: "word"; on the second line: "meaning"; on the third: "the watch over meaning." The children were puzzled. A small boy asked, "We understand guarding a word, but how do we guard meaning?" Devika did not answer. She placed Gangesha's question there.

At the sound of Gangesha's name, Old Budhba's shadow appeared at the doorway. He could not fully enter daylight, but his voice spread across the courtyard. "When you call verbal testimony a means of knowledge," he said, "look at three things—the trustworthiness of the speaker, the

readiness of the listener and the relation of the meaning. ‘Present’ as an answer to the name of the dead carries one meaning; ‘Present’ printed on an advertisement for a scheme carries another. Letters are not roots; they are relationships.”

The children each wrote the same word on their slates—“Present.” Then three circles were drawn. In the first was the answer of a bereaved family, in the second a government campaign, in the third the wall of the unnamed planet of dreams. The word was identical in all three. But inside the first circle were tears, inside the second an account, inside the third emptiness. Then a girl said, “Meaning is made by the thing a word touches.” Devika smiled. Gangesha’s shadow beneath the leaves grew a little darker.

Meanwhile a municipal vehicle arrived. Officials began distributing caps—“Be present, save heritage.” On each cap was a picture of the cut Channa tree, but in the picture there was no stump; a complete green tree had been drawn instead. The wound in the soil had been covered. The drowning water had been removed. No crocodile eye appeared anywhere. The ghosts’ kabaddi had been turned into a cheerful illustration. Holding a cap, Ira asked, “Why show the tree whole when it was cut?” The official laughed. “We need a positive image.”

Meera stepped forward. At the phrase “positive image,” her face hardened. “The humiliation of my body was also covered many times with a positive image,” she said. “Privacy was sold and called security. Silence was imposed and called modesty. Now memory is being polished and called heritage. This is theft of meaning.”

The official was startled. He had a rulebook, not a book of meanings. “We have come to honour you,” he said. Ananya asked, “Tell us the meaning of honour.” The official fell silent. The children opened the register. The first question was written: “Was truth removed in the name of honour?” The second: “What is absent from the word Present?” The third: “Does the family whose name supports the campaign consent to it?”

Satyavrat Mehta listened to the questions without speaking. He had many answers, but he was no longer the first person to speak. After a while he opened his old notebook and wrote one sentence: “Those who control the body of a word often plunder the soul of its meaning.” He showed it to the children. Ananya read it and said, “Then the watch over meaning belongs to us.”

That evening an examination of meaning was held around the stump. The children wrote different words on stones and placed them in the centre—“development,” “donation,” “justice,” “honour,” “security,” “heritage,” “present.” Before each word people told their own experience. Before “development,” a labourer’s daughter said, “My father drowned in

a bridge pier.” Before “donation,” Devika said, “The donation paper became a map for a contract.” Before “security,” Meera remained silent; her silence itself became meaning. Before “heritage,” Ba said, “What you can touch without your hand trembling is not heritage but decoration.”

When the stone marked “justice” reached the centre, every eye turned toward Satyavrat. He remained silent for a while. Then he said, “All my life I believed I was serving the word justice. Many times I served the word and not its meaning. Justice lives only when the injured person’s time is preserved. If justice devours years, the word survives but its meaning dies.”

At this sentence a thin line of smoke rose through a crack in the stump. There was no fire, but there was smoke. The ash that had remained in the chapter of fire’s testimony seemed to be tracing a finger again over the body of meaning. The smell of the smoke was not old—it carried neither the sharp scent of burned paper nor soot, but the faint sweet smell of dye from new cloth, and that was more frightening than anything. The children wrote: “The meaning of justice lives in time.”

When night deepened, several children again dreamed of the unnamed planet. There too, on the shining walls of the dome, the word “Present” was written—the same Devanagari letters, the same white glow. But there was no answer to a name, no family, no stone. A mechanical voice kept saying, “All attendance recorded.” In the dream Ananya shouted, “Say the name!” The wall remained silent. She understood: the unnamed planet of dreams could steal the word, but not its meaning.

At dawn the dreams were compared. Each child had seen a different scene, but one thing was the same: where no name stood behind the word, meaning gasped for breath. That day a new rule was pasted on the door of the Coconut-Leaf School: “Before using any word, ask its meaning from those whom it has wounded.”

The rule provoked debate in the village. A trader said, “Then no slogan will ever be made.” A teacher replied, “Then there will be fewer slogans and more meaning.” A politician said, “Words of public welfare belong to everyone.” Ba answered, “Sharing and looting are different. A word born from the throat of the injured must not be sold in the market before it has even been weaned.”

A descendant of Batuknath Hariharan, who had questioned his father in an earlier chapter, came quietly to sit in the school. He wrote “propriety” on his slate, then asked, “This word was spoken very often in our house. Whom should I ask for its meaning?” Meera looked at him and said, “Ask those who were silenced in the name of propriety.” The boy lowered his slate. For the first time his eyes held not the pride of lineage but a question about lineage.

Suddenly a child came running from the submarine pond with a wet leaflet in his hand. The seal of the government “Present Campaign” had bled away, but one word in the middle remained—“reinterpretation.” Aruni read it and was startled. This was no ordinary advertisement. The project was now preparing an official plan to change meanings: “water-burial” would become “water heritage,” “ghost kabaddi” would become “folk theatre,” “the dead” would become “past components,” and “victims” would become “stakeholders.”

Devika had the children read the leaflet aloud. With every word, the shadow of the stump lengthened. The sun was overhead, yet the shadow kept growing. Old Budhba’s Ghost whispered, “The murder of meaning has begun.” Ananya opened a new page in the register and wrote at the top: “The Court of Reinterpretation.”

Satyavrat Mehta stood up. This time he did not remain silent. He said only, “When the offender changes words, justice must keep watch over language.” His voice was quiet, but everyone seated there understood that the next struggle would be subtler than a court, water, crocodile, planet, seed, fire or air—it would happen inside meaning.

By dusk the flags of the “Present Campaign” were fluttering in the wind. From each flag a letter loosened and flew away, then landed near the cut stump. The children gathered the letters. The printed pieces left dye in their palms—blue and red stains clung to their fingertips and would not immediately wash away with water. They knew the danger was not that the body of the word might scatter; the danger was that the soul of meaning might wander without a watch.

That night there was no laughter from inside the Channa stump, only a grave sound, as though a page of the Tattvacintamani were turning somewhere far away. Gangesha’s shadow, Old Budhba’s Ghost, the submarine, Meera, Devika, Satyavrat, Ananya and Aruni all understood the same thing.

FOLK SONG: SAVE THE SOUL OF MEANING

Folk tune: Philosophical Folk Song

*Save, O save the meaning, save the word's soul;
before it is sold as a slogan, bring it back to its roots.*

*The body of the word survived, the soul of meaning was sold;
Present became a slogan and fluttered on the market's flags.*

*One by one the letters broke free and returned to the stump;
the children gathered them and woke the true meaning again.*

*The body of a name is joined to soil, its soul to memory;
if meaning dies, the shadow of falsehood grows long.
A page of the Tattvacintamani turned within the night;
the struggle is not over the word alone but over its shadow.*

*Save the word, seat meaning again within its body;
before it is sold as a slogan, return it to its roots.
One by one the letters broke free and returned to the stump;
the children gathered them and woke the true meaning again.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The case of Devadatta: a traveller recounts the familiar example—a person, Devadatta, is alive, yet he is not seen at home during the day. This distinction shows how a profound epistemic process can operate within an ordinary event of life. The doctrine of the atomicity of mind.]

CHAPTER II5

GUARDING THE VOICE

The voice is the hardest thing to guard—whatever survives is the first thing someone tries to sell.



OPENING FOLK SONG: THE GARDEN OF VOICES

Folk tune: Voice Jhumar

Let the garden bloom, let the garden of voices bloom;

each flower has its own fragrance—do not paste on an imitation.

*Every voice is a flower, with its own colour and scent;
not through imitation but through respect will melodies form a bond.*

*Take the artist's permission and give fair payment for labour;
let the true owner's name always remain with the voice.*

*Preserve the garden of voices so theft does not become air;
let the seed of folk melody sleep in the voices of a new generation.*

*Independent voices together will make a beautiful garland;
Mithila's many-coloured voices will resound across the world.*

*In the circle of jhumar, let each have a separate tune;
lift one another's melody, but do not steal the song.
Let the singer's name remain, and let labour receive fair pay;
may Mithila be adorned with a garland of many-coloured voices.*



A voice is part of the body. It rises from the chest, takes shape in the throat, and the moment it leaves the mouth people think it has become air—belonging to anyone. But becoming air does not make it nameless.

A box can hear, but a box's stomach does not ache. An ear attached to a body lets what it hears descend within; an ear attached to metal merely collects. Collecting and listening are not the same thing.

Therefore the one who reads a name must first listen. The one who listens must first seek permission. And the one who seeks permission must first name his own greed.

After the watch over meaning, the children felt that words were now safe. “Present” was no longer a slogan; it had become breath again. But in Garh Narikel, whatever is saved once is claimed by someone the next day. The morning after the soul of meaning returned beneath the stump’s shade, a new machine was found beside the chaupal—a yellow-brass box with a gleaming face, and above it the words: “Archive of Names and Voices.”

The people who came with the box called themselves “guardians of listening.” They said, “The watch over names is essential. But people will die, children will grow, voices will change. So we shall preserve these readings of names in sound.” It sounded admirable. To give memory a voice, to preserve the voice, to let future generations hear it—what could be wrong with that? But Meera read the small print and silently looked at Ananya. It said: “Audio rights shall belong to the organizing institution.”

Ananya looked first not at the paper but at the face of the box. It had tiny holes like some dark creature sitting with its ear pressed forward. The brass surface was hot in the morning sun when touched, but its heat did not feel like a body’s warmth; it came from a running mechanism inside—and in that difference there was something that made the palm draw back by itself. She remembered: a screen can devour the mind. Could a voice now be devoured too? She asked quietly, “The name belongs to one person and the voice to another—so who owns the right?” The guardian of listening smiled. “Institutional preservation in the community’s interest.” The children did not understand the meaning of the phrase; they understood its coldness.

Batuknath Hariharan stood at a distance. He was thinking of connecting these people to a proposal from his trust. If rights over voices could be turned into law, the watch over names might once again be imprisoned between signatures and seals. Chandrapal Batra also saw opportunity in the machine—voice data, emotional donations, memorial broadcasts, premium membership. A new code gleamed in Raghav “Signal” Somani’s eyes. Messages that had vanished into leaves could now be collected as sound. The rogues had not lost; they had merely changed form.

Satyavrat Mehta sat far back at the chaupal that day. He understood the language of the papers immediately, but did not rush into a speech. His second silence had taught him to let people raise the question themselves first. But when the guardian of listening said that “legal consent can be taken collectively,” Satyavrat slowly raised his head. His eyes moved toward Ananya. Ananya understood—the question was now in her throat.

She stood. Sunlight fell on the green point of the cut stump. “The reading of names will happen today as always,” she said, “but first we will

examine the voice.” The guardian laughed. “Examine the voice?” Ananya said, “Yes. Whoever reads a name will first listen. Whoever listens will first ask permission. Whoever asks permission will first name his own greed.” A quiet stir passed through the crowd. The letters on the paper seemed suddenly nervous.

Ujjwal’s mother was to read the first name. The machine operators wanted to seat her directly in front of the device so that the sound would be clean. Meera stopped them. “Must the sound be clean, or the mind?” Ujjwal’s mother said, “I will say my son’s name softly. If the box can hear softly, let it listen. If it cannot, the box is deaf.” A gentle laugh rose among the women. It was not mockery; it was the first open sound of self-respect.

The reading began. The first name was spoken so softly that those sitting far away could not hear it. But the stump’s roots trembled faintly. The children wrote, “The voice was soft; the roots heard.” An old man read the second name. He had few teeth and the word broke as he spoke. The machine operators asked him to say it again. He replied, “My tongue is as it is. The name will be heard through this tongue. I will not correct my dead for a machine.” The children wrote, “A broken voice gives complete testimony too.”

Gangesha’s question returned to the air. Aruni said softly, “Verbal testimony is a means of knowledge, but the throat from which the word emerges is part of the proof too.” Ira added, “When scripture suppresses lived truth, the word remains sacred while meaning dies. When recording steals the rights of a living voice, the sound survives while the person dies.” The children did not grasp the full philosophical weight of the sentence, but they understood its direction.

Then a boy whose grandfather had disappeared during bridge construction stood up. He wanted to speak his grandfather’s name, but his throat closed. The machine operator grew impatient with the wait. “Please speak clearly,” he said. Tears filled the boy’s eyes. Ananya stood beside him. “Clear weeping is also a voice,” she said. The boy spoke nothing; he only cried. A drop of water glistened on the stump’s green point. The children wrote, “The name was pronounced in weeping.”

At that moment a rasping sound came from inside the box. The machine that had come to capture every voice could not capture the meaning of tears. Its red light kept blinking like a firefly trapped in darkness. The guardians adjusted its wires. At the joints the rough metallic scraping sounded very much like the boy’s constricted throat—but there was no inner tremor in it, only dry friction. Chandrapal whispered from behind, “Emotional audio is valuable; save it.” Devika’s ears caught the sentence. At once she said before everyone, “Look—now even weeping is becoming valuable merchandise.”

The crowd became completely still. People understood that once a voice is separated from the body and sold, the dead person becomes not merely nameless but merchandise. Meera rose from the women's row and went to the machine operators. "No voice will be imprisoned here without permission," she said. "If you want to listen, listen with living ears. If you want to remember, speak the name again with your own mouth. If you want to preserve it, preserve the rights of the name with it."

The smile faded from the guardian's face. "An archive is necessary for the future," he said. Satyavrat Mehta finally spoke. "The rights of the present cannot be taken away in the name of the future. Creating private or institutional ownership over collective grief is injustice. If there is an archive, its conditions will be set by the injured, the community and the guardians of the names." Then he fell silent again. No one applauded. This village was beginning to understand the dignity of silence better than applause.

Then Ba said, "A name heard through a living ear descends into the body. The box hears, but its stomach does not ache." The whole chaupal shifted at that one sentence. For the first time the guardian of listening looked uncomfortable. He understood that this old woman was not speaking a theory but an experience. Before experience, the language of contracts trembles like old paper in the rain.

The children wrote the decision: "Guarding the voice: no recording of a name without the permission of the home to which the name belongs; no archive of tears without the rights of the one who weeps; no institution shall own a collective voice; listening first, collection later; the living ear is supreme." The rule became a new page in the Constitution of Names. As the page was written, the green point of the stump opened a little further.

The machine was lifted away, but before it was removed Ananya said, "Write down the name of this box too." The children asked, "What name?" Ananya replied, "The Ear of Greed." The register recorded: "The Ear of Greed arrived, failed to learn how to listen, and returned." Old Budhba's faint laughter was heard again.

At night the names were read without any machine. This time people sat close enough that soft voices could reach one another. No voice was very loud, none perfectly clear, none rehearsed. One throat trembled, one tongue stumbled, one breath broke, one person's weeping covered the sound. In the little silences between those broken voices, the sound of everyone's breathing could be heard clearly—and the breath sounded the same, whoever the voice belonged to. Yet amid the uneven voices a strange collective rhythm formed, like kabaddi, in which holding breath and releasing it are both part of the game.

Far away in the floodwater, crocodile eyes shone, but this time they did not cut forward through the water. It was as though they too were listening. The unnamed planet of dreams appeared in the sky as a small cold point. No sound came from its direction. The children of Garh Narikel looked upward. Ananya said softly, “Where there is no voice, there is no place for a name.”

The chapter did not end that night. The voice had been guarded, but the next danger was approaching with its mouth bound shut—for when a voice cannot be imprisoned, power will try to guard language, printing and reading instead. In the shade of the stump the register opened by itself to the next page, where a single word shone like an empty heading —“writing.”

FOLK SONG: GUARDING THE VOICE

Folk tune: Voice Viraha

Ask first, O ask: “Whose permission?”

My voice is the house of my breath—the key remains in my hand.

The market makes copies of whatever voice survives;

recording, imitation and sale are made to look like truth.

Guarding the voice is difficult—whose hand holds the tongue?

the children say: without permission, no voice will be lifted.

Even the crocodiles listened in the night and did not advance;

the unnamed planet of dreams became a cold point without a voice.

Where there is no voice, there is no place for a name;

if sound cannot be imprisoned, then writing will be guarded next.

My voice is the house of my breath; its key is mine;

whoever would copy it, ask first: whose permission?

*The children said: without permission, no voice will be lifted;
where there is no voice, no name has any place.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The colour of the crow: at the Garh Narikel chaupal a discussion arose around an inference such as, “The crow is black because it is the son of Mitra.” In this inference, being produced by the cooking of greens is a doubtful upadhi with respect to the probandum of blackness. Possession of manifest colour and being produced by the cooking of greens are upadhis.]

CHAPTER 116

THE INHERITANCE OF SILENCE

*The enemy of a name is not only a throat that speaks falsehood—
sometimes it is also the silence of truth.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: A SEED OF TRUTH IN SILENCE

Folk tune: Silence at Dawn

Keep patience, O keep a seed inside silence;

watch it sprout when it receives the dew of time.

Silence is not empty; a seed grows within;

with the dew of time, one day it rises as a shoot.

Listen first, then speak; let the word remain thoughtful;

the silence of truth is preparation, the silence of fear is barren.

Honour silence, but give voice before injustice;

at the right moment let the seed of truth split the earth.

When discernment awakened in silence finds a voice,

one gentle truth can rise above a hundred clamours.

The silence of fear is an empty pot; the silence of truth is full;

listen first, speak afterward—this order is forever simple.

Do not stay silent before injustice; raise your voice there;

before one gentle truth, a hundred noises fall away.



One silence protects power; another covers the soul. One is the companion of crime; the other a bandage over a wound. The first must be named; the second must be guarded.

An empty bowl is not empty. It is filled with what was never said—and only the one who tries to lift it understands its weight.

So if children hear only the names of those who could speak, then those who could not speak because of fear, shame, caste, body, violence or poverty will be lost again. Recognizing silence is also a form of watch.

After the eleventh watch, when guarding the voice passed into the children's hands, everyone felt that names were now safe. But the enemy of a name is not only a throat that speaks falsehood; sometimes it tires a truthful throat, buys it, records it, imitates it, and then makes it speak untruth. For this reason the twelfth watch of the Coconut-Leaf School began—the inheritance of silence.

On the first day no teacher said anything. The children sat in rows with leaves, stones and the old register in their hands. Ananya usually began the lesson; she too remained silent. Ira had opened the reply-letters from children abroad; she too remained silent. Devika brought not a mobile phone but an empty bowl and placed it in the centre. No water, no grain, no flowers—only emptiness.

A restless boy asked, “Will there be no lesson today?” Ba said, “Today first read the word that was never spoken.” The children looked at one another. How could an unspoken word be read? Then Satyavrat Mehta slowly stood. He had no fountain pen in his hand that day. His hands were empty. He said only, “When I could speak and did not, that silence was an offence. But when an injured person does not wish to speak, that silence is a right. If we fail to distinguish the two, justice becomes a crocodile again.”

The sentence hung for a long while in the shade of the Channa stump. The children began to understand that silence has two forms. One protects power; another covers the soul. One is an accomplice to crime; the other a dressing over a wound. One silence must be entered in the register under “fault”; around the other, a watch must be kept.

Just then a new sound-collection team arrived from the city. They said the oral heritage of the readings of names must be saved; the voices of every mother, every widow, every defrauded young person, every family of a drowned labourer should be preserved. Their leaflet spoke neatly of listening first, then writing, then asking. But a small line at the bottom said that the collection could also be used for future “enhanced presentations.”

Meera read the leaflet and did not smile. She looked up and asked, “If you take someone's voice, may anyone later play it on a stage, a screen, a device, at a donation event, or on a tourist night without asking again?” The leader replied, “We are doing this for cultural preservation.” Meera said, “If preservation separates the voice from its body, it is theft. A voice is part of the body too.”

Chandrapal Batra watched from a distance. He sensed a new profit hidden in the world of voices. If trust in faces had broken, imitation of the voice might work instead. After theft of names, theft of voices. His old percentages awakened again. But as he began to calculate, his throat dried. A few days earlier his hand had kept writing “percentage”

whenever he tried to complete a name; now no sound came from his throat at all.

Messages kept arriving on Raghav "Signal" Somani's device—"voice-archive opportunity," "community voice list," "emotional usage rights." But each message opened into silence. The words were visible, the sound absent. For the first time he began to understand that a network can carry sound but cannot carry listening. Listening is born only where room is also given to another person's silence.

That day the children wrote a new rule: "The name of one who does not wish to speak shall not be pulled out." A second line: "Silence too can be present." A third: "Imitation of a voice is a new form of crime." A fourth: "Whoever has had their voice taken away must first have their silence returned." These rules were not read aloud; they were carved into stones around the stump. The children said that some rules do not become enduring by shouting, but by remaining quiet.

For the first time an empty page was kept in the old register of names. At the top was written: "Those who did not speak, but were present." People were astonished. Ujjwal's mother had often wept while reading her son's name; that day she sat with her hand resting on the blank page. Devika did not question her. She slid the empty bowl toward her. Ujjwal's mother placed not tears in the bowl, but silence.

Ba explained that "the inheritance of silence" did not mean teaching people to remain mute; it meant learning to recognize silence. If children heard only the names of those who could speak, then those who could not because of fear, shame, caste, body, violence, poverty, love or crime would be lost again. If the children learned to guard silence, memory would no longer remain half-complete.

Gangesha's question rose again. In perception no one was speaking—so what was the proof? In inference the eyes were wet—was that enough? In verbal testimony there was no name—then how could existence be known? Ananya answered in her own way: "When a living person places their silence among us, that silence itself becomes a word. It has no letters; its weight must be read." The children repeated the sentence for a long time.

Then a small incident occurred. The boy who had removed his mask in the procession of the false ghost brought his sister. She could not speak. Her throat had produced no sound since birth. People in the city often called her "poor thing" and silenced her; others made a spectacle of her gestures. She came to the Channa stump carrying a leaf. Lines had been drawn on it—not letters, not a picture.

A hush spread among the children. No one could read the lines. The girl smiled. She placed the leaf inside the empty bowl. The bowl trembled lightly. Air rose from within the stump, dust settled on the lines, and

they slowly changed into a circle—the circle of kabaddi. The voiceless girl ran around the stump holding her breath, without sound. The children ran after her. No one chanted “kabaddi,” yet the game went on.

It was an extraordinary game. In ordinary kabaddi, the sound of breath identifies the player. In this game the breath moved inside; there was no outward sound. If anyone cheated, the feet grew heavy. If anyone truly played through the breath, the body became light. As the game continued, something strange became clear: the thud of feet, the fall of soil, and the rustle of cloth could be heard with startling clarity. They had always been there, hidden beneath spoken voices. The elders said, “Now the ghosts’ game is teaching the children even in silence.”

Seeing this, the sound-collection team began packing its equipment. Its machines could not record silence. They asked, “What is this game called?” Ananya said, “Kabaddi. But this time the voice is inside.” The leader asked, “Kabaddi without sound?” Ba said, “We have already seen courts without justice. Why is kabaddi without a voice so difficult for you to imagine?”

Satyavrat Mehta watched the game. There was a strange calm in his eyes, but no absolution. He knew he would carry the weight of his own criminal silence all his life. Yet watching the children guard the girl’s silence, he understood that he was not passing his burden onto the next generation; he was teaching them only which silences must be broken and which must be protected.

Night came. The blank page was left open in the register. No name was written on it, yet it did not look empty. A thin film of lamp-smoke settled over the page. In one corner a black point appeared by itself. The children called it “the point of silence.”

Ujjwal’s mother placed her hand on the point and said very softly, “Today my son asked nothing of me for the first time.” Devika held her hand. Meera lifted the empty bowl. It was still empty, but everyone who looked at it understood that this emptiness was full—full of untold stories.

That night something strange happened in Lau Kin-Hung’s dream. The echoes that should have arrived from the voice archive never came. On the gleaming wall there appeared only an empty circle—the silent circle of kabaddi. Lau Kin-Hung’s dream-body looked at it in alarm. “Silence cannot be collected,” he whispered. Where the market could sell sound, silence slipped through its hands.

Before dawn Ananya wrote on the next page: “Now the watch over sight.” For if voice was guarded and silence was guarded, the market would attack vision. It would sell the face of one who did not speak. It would display the tears of one who wished to remain silent. It would turn the body of the present into spectacle.

From inside the stump came only this reply, very faint, like the sound of a leaf's shadow: "Look, but do not devour." The inheritance of silence did not end here; it had opened the road toward the eye.

FOLK SONG: THE SILENCE OF TRUTH

Folk tune: Song of Silence

*Keep it with love, keep the inheritance of silence;
silence is not always crime—sometimes it is the soul's own house.*

*The enemy of a name is not only a lying throat;
truth too may grow tired and fall silent, and that is a danger.*

*The market buys voices while silence slips away;
the silent circle of kabaddi remains outside the net.*

*Do not sell the tears of one who does not wish to speak;
do not make a face a spectacle—see the doorway of privacy.*

*The stump said: look, but do not devour;
without the right of sight, even knowledge is not sacred.*

*Keep the inheritance of silence in loving hands;
do not sell the tears of one who does not wish to speak.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—*Mutual dependence: when the hand comes into contact with fire and no gem is present, the "absence of an inhibitor" is present; the causal conditions are complete and the hand burns. Mutual dependence.*]

CHAPTER 117

THE DEBT OF MEMORY

A name once heard creates a debt, and no funeral rite can settle that debt—only repayment can.



OPENING FOLK SONG: REPAY MEMORY THROUGH SERVICE

Folk tune: Auspicious Song of Debt

Repay, O repay the debt of the name you heard;

not flowers—bring forward a platter of service.

*The name once heard leaves a debt, and service is its interest;
memory is not merely flowers but responsibility today.
Whose story you have heard, stand beside that person's rights;
let school, documents and assistance carry their share.*

*Repay the debt not with money but with just conduct;
teach the next generation the essence of human dignity.
The debt of memory is slowly repaid through service;
the soul of one who guards a name's honour grows lighter.*

*Whose story rests in the ear, let their right rest in the hand;
let books, medicine and work keep a lamp beside them.
This debt is settled not by money but by justice;
a mind lightened by an honoured debt—that is the true rank.*



A name once heard creates a debt, and no funeral rite can settle that debt—only repayment can. Once a name has entered the ear, an account has opened; now it will be settled not by flowers and garlands but by action.

This is not a debt discharged with money. A moneylender's debt accumulates interest; this debt changes one's gait—the one who has heard must change the way they walk.

A name without action is stone; action without a name is air. Stone remains where it is, air flies away. The two must be joined before memory can stand upright.

And if anyone says, "Take this amount, the debt is cleared," ask only this: whose liberation? A certificate of release issued by one who never understood the debt is deception.

The morning after the inheritance of silence was received, the children wrote a new question in charcoal on the wall of the Coconut-Leaf School: "Who will carry the debt of the name that has been heard?" As they wrote, a little plaster fell from the wall, as though the old house were scratching its own head. The charcoal scraped over lime like teeth grinding together, and the children's fingertips blackened as each letter formed. Earth, seed, soil, water, fire, air, sky, word, meaning, voice and silence had all taken their turns on watch; but a watch does not mean merely preserving—it also means carrying. Memory that is merely preserved becomes stone; memory that becomes debt teaches a human being how to walk.

At first the children were startled by the word debt. They understood debt as a father's loan, interest, mortgage, bank notice, a moneylender's laugh, a sharecropper's bent back, and an empty granary after the harvest. Ananya said, "This is not a debt that money can settle. This is the debt that cannot be paid unless your way of living changes after you have heard a name." Some elders looked at one another. Changing one's way of living sounds beautiful on paper; upon the body it is difficult.

Ira set the first exercise. Each child would bring from home one name that was spoken there but not with respect—or one that was never spoken though hidden in everyone's food, field, body, labour or shame. The children searched until noon. From old trunks, beneath storerooms and between account books came names carrying the faint smell of damp paper that settles into sheets after years of being shut away. One child brought the name of a grandmother's mother; another the name of a labourer who had built the house but had not been invited to the housewarming; another the name of a woman who died drawing water from the well but was never entered in the family genealogy.

One boy came with "the leatherworker woman" written on his paper. He had not found her full name. The elders at home had said there was a leatherworker woman in the life of Gangesha Upadhyaya, but her name should not be mentioned: read the *Tattvacintamani*, leave the story alone. The boy asked, "If the *Tattvacintamani* equals twelve thousand books, is there no room inside it for even one letter of that woman's name?" Silence spread through the school.

Gangesha's question returned. Some scholars who had attended the earlier Festival of Names as honoured guests began saying, "History

requires proof. Do not dishonour a lineage with folklore.” The children did not laugh; their eyes became grave. Ananya wrote on the wall, “Whom does the absence of proof protect?” The question fell upon the scholars’ heads like a cold drop of water. If Gangesha was the founder of Navya-Nyaya, then justice itself had to be asked before his name.

Ba said softly, “Garlanding the head of a scripture is easy; touching the thorns of the scripture’s body is hard. A society that accepts Gangesha’s intellect but cuts away the discomfort of his life kills him by half.” Aruni added, “If honour turns an inconvenient Gangesha into a clean statue, the knife has been hidden inside a flower garland. The blood of that killing does not flow outside; it flows within memory.”

Meera left an empty space beside the words “leatherworker woman.” “We have not found the name,” she said, “so let the absence itself become a name. When we find it, we will fill it in; but no one will erase the empty place.” Thus the first deliberate blank appeared on the school wall. It was not frightening. It was like a window in the philosophy of justice through which a truth shoved inward by the shame of caste looked back out at society.

Satyavrat Mehta sat at the back that day. He gave no judgment. Only one line appeared in his notebook: “Caste shame: murder of memory.” He did not close the notebook. The page remained open like evidence before a court. Those who had expected legal language from him saw a man of law now wrestling with the weight of a single phrase. The inheritance of silence had not made him mute; it had made him responsible for listening.

Gop Kumar brought old pages from the archive. They contained accounts of money, bridge labourers, hospital bills, digital fraud accounts, foreign donations and government tenders. “Debt is written throughout these pages,” he said, “but under the wrong names. The one who looted is not named debtor. The one who died is listed as an expense. The one who remained silent is not counted responsible.” The children understood that the debt of memory meant setting right a ledger written upside down.

Then the rules of the watch were made. Beside every name heard, not only a flower but an action would be tied. Beside a labourer’s name, an act honouring labour. Beside the name of a defrauded youth, a lesson in screen-safety. Beside the name of a woman who suffered bodily humiliation, a watch over privacy. Beside a name crushed by caste, a shared meal. Beside a body given water-burial, not merely river cleaning but testimony for the rights of the river. Beside the empty place for the leatherworker woman, a lesson in caste truth. The children said, “A name without action is stone; action without a name is air.”

The rule frightened the rogues. Batuknath Hariharan, who hoped to save his name by asking forgiveness, understood that tears were not enough here. Chandrapal Batra, trapped inside an incomplete name of percentages, understood that the debt of memory could not be dropped into a donation box. Raghav Signal wrote in his invisible network: "Turn debt into donation; donation into image; image into control." But as the message fell onto a leaf, the sentence changed into: "Turn debt into action."

After noon a strange official arrived holding a freshly printed leaflet: "Memory-Debt Release Scheme." Its language was sweet. The scheme said that families whose names appeared in the memorial archive would receive an "honour payment" jointly from the government, private donors and the heritage project; in return, the family would accept the official memorial narrative and independent readings of names would no longer be necessary. Three marks stood in the corner: a government seal, the small emblem of Broom's institution and the signature of Batuknath's trust.

Ba neither laughed nor cried after reading it. She handed the leaflet to Ananya. Ananya placed it on the edge of the stump and asked, "Has this come to free us from the debt, or to become the owner of the debt?" The children answered together, "First, proof." The official said, "The paper carries a seal." Ananya replied, "A seal is not perception; it is a claim. A claim will be questioned." Gangesha's question had become sharp as a knife in the children's speech.

That evening the caste question rose again. An elder said, "It is improper to place the empty space for the leatherworker woman beside Gangesha. There is propriety." The boy who had brought the word "leatherworker woman" said softly, "If propriety eats a name, it is no less than a crocodile." Everyone fell silent. Crocodiles can chew bodies; caste-propriety chews names. At the comparison a faint ripple moved over the water.

Meera circled the empty place in red. Devika wrote beside the defrauded youth's name, "No profit from another person's fear." Saumya wrote beside the labourer's name, "A memorial without labour is incomplete." Ira began a new letter to the children abroad: "A village debt does not ask for money; it asks you to change your way of walking." Aruni measured the riverbank, but this time not for a bridge—he measured the current of the water that washed names. When he stretched the tape, the tremor in his hand came not from the weight of iron but from the weight of names.

That night kabaddi began again. But the lines of the game were not drawn only on the ground. From every stone bearing a name, a fine line rose toward the players' feet. It was not like a cord tied around the ankle; it felt like the coolness of dew-wet soil touching the sole and slowly

rising toward the knee. When a child entered the opposing circle chanting “kabaddi,” the debt of that name travelled with the breath. On returning, the child had not merely to touch someone and escape but to name an action: “I will watch the river water,” “I will not erase caste names,” “I will explain the fraud of the screen,” “I will preserve the empty place for the leatherworker woman.”

For the first time Old Budhba's Ghost laughed openly that night. “Now the game is right,” he said. “One who plays without debt only runs; one who returns carrying debt saves a story.” The children did not stop playing. A faint stain of the unnamed planet of dreams could be seen in the sky. Perhaps they too were watching how, on Earth, the debt of names could not be paid with a release payment; it entered body, gait, food, love, water, labour and the way one spoke.

After midnight the leaflet of the Memory-Debt Release Scheme suddenly grew damp. Its seals spread into smoke, but three words remained clear: “Whose release?” Ananya opened the next page and wrote, “Tomorrow: the question of debt-release.” Satyavrat Mehta, sitting at a distance, saw the line and added in his notebook, “A release certificate from one who has never understood the debt is deception.”

Thus the thirteenth watch did not end. The debt of memory stood on the threshold of the coming day. The green point of the Channa stump shone through the night, and each flash asked: you have heard the name —what will you do now?

FOLK SONG: MEMORY ON LOAN

Folk tune: Song of Debt

*Accept, O accept the loan of memory;
leave the next generation its share of truth.*

*The debt of a name heard is not cleared by funeral rites;
it is repaid through action, not flowers and garlands.*

*Memory descends into body, gait, food and love;
through water, labour and ways of speaking it travels across
generations.*

*The “debt-release” paper grew damp, its seals turned to smoke;
three words remained—“Whose release?”—and the question awoke.*

*You heard the name—what will you do now? the leaf asks;
one who never understood the debt imagines a false release.*

Accept the loan of memory; repay it through life.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Inference by negative concomitance alone: example, “Earth is different from the other eight substances because it possesses smell.”]

CHAPTER 118

THE RIGHTS OF THE BODY

*The name was saved and the voice was heard—but without the rights
of the body, everything remains half.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: WHOLE BODY, WHOLE DIGNITY

Folk tune: Auspicious Song of Bodily Rights

Count it whole, count the body's rights in full;

breath, sleep, labour, consent—count all four as wealth.

It is good that the name survived, but the body too needs dignity;

health, safety and consent are life's true inheritance.

*Count the labour of the hands, the sleep of the eyes, the breath of the
chest;*

do not grant a person half-rights—grant the whole.

The body is one's own, the decision one's own, treatment equal for all;

let the workplace be safe, and let rest receive honour.

Whole body, whole dignity—sing the song from house to house;

understand life as complete and build a just society.

Hands need rest, eyes need their fill of sleep;

the chest needs fearless breath, the mind a home of its own.

Equal treatment for all, safety at the place of work;

not half a person but a whole human being—that is the true lesson.



The first right over a body belongs to the person who inhabits it. If they wish to speak, their words travel with them; if they do not wish to speak, their silence belongs to them too. Once another person's claim begins over the body, caste, market, religion, camera and law all begin to look like members of the same family.

Society raises intellect onto a throne and pushes the body down below. It makes statues of ideas and buries the body's story. A thinker whose ideas could break the cage of caste can be seated on a high scriptural pedestal and silenced there.

Therefore one who will not write the body's name has no right over the soil of that body. Before touching, one must ask—and the hand that does not ask is not a guardian's hand but a thief's.

When the debt of memory spread around the stump of the Channa tree, the children understood that debt belonged not only to names. Names had been saved, voices heard, the inheritance of silence written—but what about the body? The body drowned in water-burial, the body chewed by crocodiles, the body buried beneath a bridge pier, the body held hostage by a hospital bill, the body humiliated in the name of caste, the body made into a specimen for the hunger of cameras and research—on which page were the rights of that body written?

The question began unexpectedly. People from the heritage project arrived with a new list. It read: "Collectible items: root-soil from the Channa tree, floodwater samples, old clothing, bone-like fragments, oral material from families of the dead, women's recollections, labourers' tools, digital devices." The language was polite, the words scientific, the purpose called cultural; but as soon as Meera read the list she pressed down its corner. "The remains of those whose bodies are gone are not your exhibition," she said.

When Meera spoke of "the rights of the body," her voice was not always firm. Sometimes the ring of an unknown mobile phone made her heart jolt; sometimes the sight of a raised camera in a crowd made her palms grow cold. She did not call her fear weakness. "The body remembers danger first," she said. "Justice teaches it safe time again."

Edward Broom's new representative tried to explain: "This is only for preservation." Devika did not laugh; her eyes hardened. "Preservation is what protects the family's rights," she said. "What locks grief behind glass and sells tickets is not preservation; it is chewing the body a second time." At the sentence a slight creak rose from inside the stump, as though the old roots were saying: the body may be cut, but the language of the cutter is heard too.

Aruni took the list. He remembered the bridge pier where, in the greed of measurement, a labourer's body had been made to disappear from the file. He saw "labourer's tools" written on the list, but not "permission of the labourer's family." "Bone-like fragments" was there, but not "funeral rite," "cremation," "burial," "faith" or "dignity." He said quietly, "One who does not write the body's name has no right over the soil of the body."

Then a special lesson began in the Coconut-Leaf School—the rights of the body. The children first looked at their own hands. Ananya said, "This hand writes names. But if this hand photographs someone without permission, touches their clothing, questions their grief, or lifts their bones, then this hand is not a guardian—it becomes a thief." The

children fell silent. For the first time they were understanding that between saving memory and stealing memory lies not only intention but method.

Meera reread the rules of the women's night assembly. The story of a body remains under the right of the person whose body it is. If a woman wishes to speak of her humiliation, her words travel with her; if she does not wish to speak, her silence must be respected too. No researcher, journalist, religious authority, court, family, lover, husband or society owns the story of her body. Meera said, "Once another person's claim begins over the body, caste, market, religion, camera and law all begin to look like members of the same family."

Hearing this, Gangesha's question returned. On the school wall the children wrote: "What proof? Whose right? Whose body?" This time the memory of the Tattvacintamani came not as a book but as a lamp of questions. If justice trusts perception, what perception is greater than bodily pain? If inference is valid, what inference is stronger than the tremor of a humiliated body's silence? If verbal testimony is a means of knowledge, what testimony is greater than the injured person's own word?

Then Ba told an old story. "People in the village kept worshipping Gangesha's intellect while fearing the discomfort of his life. A thinker whose ideas could break the cage of caste was placed upon the high seat of scripture so that the story of his body would remain pressed below." The children understood that bodily rights were not only today's question; for generations there had been a strategy of separating thought from body. Society makes a statue of thought and kills the body's rebellion.

That day an outside group went toward the leatherworkers' quarter. They said, "We are making documentation of folk culture." Their cameras first settled on the doorways, then on hands, tools, and then on women's faces. An elderly woman came out. "Write about our hands," she said, "but first ask who gives you the right to touch us. Write our caste, but who gave you permission to profit from our humiliation?" The cameras lowered.

Ananya wrote the old woman's words on a page in the school. The page later became known as the "Code of the Body." Rule one: the first right over a body belongs to the person who inhabits it. Rule two: the rights of the dead body rest with family, community and dignity. Rule three: humiliation of the body in the name of caste is a crime against memory. Rule four: no claim over another person's wound in the name of research, art, religion, donation, tourism, education, law or revolution without permission. Rule five: if a body cannot speak, the first duty of anyone speaking for it is to honour its silence. The five rules stood as though holding one another's hands.

Satyavrat Mehta listened. The words did not fall easily upon his ears. In law, bodily rights lived inside sections and provisions; here they were arriving as breath, shame, touch, corpse, bone, clothing, blood and sweat. For the first time he remembered his old arguments—how often a question of the body had become a “case” on paper, how often bodily humiliation had escaped through “lack of evidence,” how often photographs of the dead circulated in court while no one saw their dignity.

He stood but did not address the children. On a blank page of the register he wrote only: “If justice does not begin from the body, justice remains a game of words.” Ananya read it and added beneath: “Without the body, the name is incomplete.” Satyavrat smiled for the first time, but it was a smile of shame, not victory.

At dusk a small rite was held around the stump. The soil the museum people had wanted to take was returned by the families’ own hands to the roots of the stump. Clothing meant for exhibition cases was shown the sun and taken back home. The cloth carried the stale smell of years in a trunk; in sunlight the smell slowly lifted, as though a body after a long absence had again received the air of its own courtyard. Bone-like fragments that had been found were bathed first not in water but in the pronunciation of names. In Garh Narikel, cremation, burial, water rites and remembrance were honoured according to each family’s own custom.

During the rite the crocodiles made one long circle on the water’s surface and sank. No one was frightened. Ba said, “They chewed the body, but they could not chew its dignity. Now perhaps even they are learning.” Some laughed, some cried, some remained silent. For a moment the crocodile eyes shone beneath the water—with less hunger in the gleam and more remembrance.

That night a new sentence was written on the outer wall of the Coconut-Leaf School: “The watch over names is incomplete without a watch over bodies.” The children kept colouring the letters. Meera placed the final dot and stepped back. Moonlight fell upon it, and the round point shone exactly like an eye.

But behind that gleam a danger had also been born. Those who wanted to buy memory understood that names alone were no longer enough. Now the rituals of the body, caste humiliation, women’s rights and labourers’ sweat were all being guarded. A system that had ruled over bodies would not remain quiet. In the last watch of night, an old caste register that had been locked for years in the tehsil warehouse opened by itself. Its pages turned, and from within, along with dry dust, a voice rose: “Who will prove the lineage?”

The Channa stump remained warm for a long time at that question.
The children slept, but the page of the Code of the Body stayed open.

FOLK SONG: THE BODY IS NOT HALF

Folk tune: Song of Bodily Rights

*Not half, O not half—without the body everything is half;
before anyone touches, first learn whose consent is given.*

*The name survived, the voice was heard; without the body all is half—
water-burial, crocodile teeth, the prison of a bridge pier.
A woman's dignity, caste wounds, a labourer's sweat;
every body says: I am not an object but a jewel.*

*The old caste register opened by itself and asked,
“Who will prove the lineage?” A voice rose with the dust.
The page of the Code of the Body stayed open through the night.*

*My body is my right, the true home of the name;
whoever would touch it, first honour the voice of consent.*

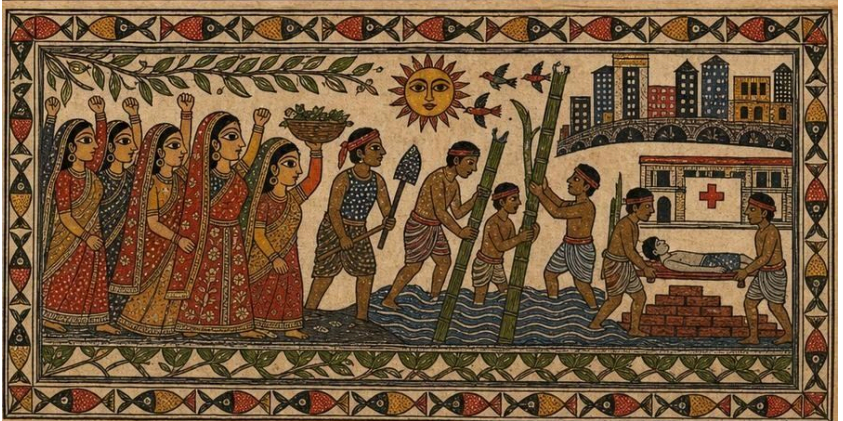


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The Mimamsaka view that postulation, *arthapatti*, is an independent means of knowledge: definition and example. When two observed facts seem impossible to reconcile, and an unseen or absent fact must be posited to remove the contradiction, that cognition is called *arthapatti*.]

CHAPTER 119

THE BODY OF LABOUR

The body of labour is written upon stone, but it is read through sweat.



OPENING FOLK SONG: LETTERS OF SWEAT

Folk tune: Labourers' Work Song

Read, brother, read the letters written in sweat;

count hammer, plough and loom as pens in the hand.

*A name on stone is not read by the force of eyes alone;
the letters of sweat shine at dawn and through the darkest hours.*

*Hammer, spade, loom and plough—all are pens alike;
each movement of labour writes the country's truest song.*

*Hold the labourer's hand and listen to the tale it bears;
choose labour's dignity through wages, safety and rest.
Read the letters of sweat and history becomes clear;
development is preserved by the bright names of workers.*

*At dawn the kiln is lit; till evening the body burns;
in that heat the country's true history is printed.
Fair wages, safe work, and a song of rest at dusk;
the walls of progress shine with the labourer's smile.*



Where an employer is afraid of names, he writes numbers instead. “Men forty-seven, women nine”—this is not a count of human beings; it is a curtain placed where names should be. Hiding a name does not kill labour; it exposes the fear of the one who hides it.

The body is not merely a vessel of suffering. The same body lifts the spade, pours the foundation, pushes the boat, and carries a dead body home. The world rests upon that body.

Therefore, whoever goes to preserve the names of the dead while leaving the bodies of living labourers anonymous is not building a memorial—he is committing a second crime.

After a whole night of speaking about bodily rights, the courtyard of the Coconut-Leaf School was not empty at dawn. In the previous chapter the women had spoken of the dignity of their bodies, the limits of privacy, and the right governing the gaze; but with morning, the bodies of labourers stood of themselves as the next line in that argument. For the body does not live only in love, humiliation and privacy; it lifts the spade, pours bridge foundations, drives bamboo into the river, carries stretchers along hospital verandas, and becomes an anonymous brick in the glittering buildings of cities.

Aruni Nandan sat beside the cut stump. Before him lay three objects: an old labourer's torn shoe, a fingernail trapped in cement, and a wage slip on which a number had been written where the name should have been. Looking at the slip, Ananya asked, "Can a number also be a name?" Aruni replied, "No. A number is placed there where the employer is afraid of a name." The children wrote the sentence at the top of the register: "Hiding a name does not kill labour; it exposes the employer's fear."

That day's watch belonged to labour. The children of the school had decided that the bodily stories of those whose hands had built Garh Narikel's bridge, road, hospital, ghat, houses, school and memorial would be written separately. Those called "unskilled" in official lists the children entered as "knowers of the soil." Those who remained only on the "muster roll" were called "Present." Those whose thumbs touched the machine while their wages remained in an employer's account were all entered upon the red stone.

First came the wife of Jhagaru Mistri. Her husband had fallen into the river while pouring a bridge foundation, yet the accident report recorded him as "absent from work." Leaning on her stick, she said, "The hand that kept the hearth alive in my house did not even exist at work that day in the company's paper." At this the green shoot of the grove's stump trembled. The children fell silent. Ananya wrote on the slip: "The body died; the paper devoured its presence."

Gop Kumar took several old copies from his bag. They contained numbers of labourers, but not names. One column read "men 47," "women 9," "other 3." Looking at the paper, Meera said, "If we can write the sex of a body, why can we not write the body's name?" Gop remained silent. It was not the silence of guilt but of regret. He understood that saving data is not always the same as saving names; if the human being is absent from the data, the data too can become a crocodile.

Satyavrat Mehta did not sit far away that day. He sat directly opposite the stump, on the earth, beside the line of labourers. He had a pen, but did not begin writing at once. First he looked at the hand of every labourer who spoke—whose palm bore calluses, whose nail held cement, whose wrist bore an old bandage, whose thumb carried the machine's blue mark. He said quietly, "I studied injury to the body in law; today I am reading the labour of the body." After this sentence the first page of his notebook received a title: "Testimony of the Body of Labour."

Then a young man came forward—Bhagelu Paswan. He said his father had worked on the bridge, yet the name of his caste was used to keep him away from the cooking water. The wage was one, the sweat one, the danger one; the eating line was separate. "The bridge was built to join everyone," Bhagelu said, "but those who built it were made to sit apart beneath the bridge's own shade." The children's faces flushed. Gangesha's question filled the air again: "By what proof shall we know justice—by scripture, or by the throat of a thirsty labourer?"

Ba said, "Gangesha wrote logic, but society did not read the logic of the body." At this the students of the Coconut-Leaf School raised the old story again—birth, lineage, marriage, the Charmakarini, Tattvacintamani, thought said to equal twelve thousand books. The story was no longer a boast of scholarship but a question against the caste order. If the birth of thought itself can break what society calls impossible, if love can tear through caste boundaries, why should a labourer's hand be considered low? The children wrote: "First lesson of Navya-Nyaya: the labour of the body is not made inferior by caste."

Meanwhile an engineer from the city's heritage project said local labourers would be hired for construction of the memorial and employment would be created. Aruni asked calmly, "Contracts with names?" The engineer hesitated. Devika added, "Wages on time?" He fell silent. Meera asked, "If someone is injured, the right to treatment?" He began turning papers. Satyavrat said, "Where a site of memory is built, the first inscription should be workers' rights. If we go to save the names of the dead while making living workers anonymous again, this will not be a memorial but a second crime."

Ananya kept writing rapidly. The children decided that the school's next lesson would be "Name Before Work Begins." For every labourer who worked there, name, village, bodily condition, family contact, wages, rest, food, water and safety would remain in an open record. Someone said, "That will make a great deal of paperwork." The children replied, "Paper bearing names is not heavy; an anonymous accident is heavy."

Then Chandrapal Batra's name arose again. The story of his mule account was still fresh. Bhagelu Paswan said, "Our labour too became a mule account. The sweat ours, the profit someone else's. The body ours,

the contract someone else's. The death ours, the insurance someone else's." Hearing this, two drops of water gleamed upon the stump's shoot. The village was in sunlight; no one knew where the drops had come from. Perhaps the Submarine was listening from the pond.

At night the reading of labour's names began. This time each name was joined to a form of work—"foundation pourer," "brick carrier," "medicine-box bearer," "mortar carrier to the roof," "one who carried a dead body home," "oxygen-cylinder hauler," "crop cutter," "boat pusher," "well cleaner." When names were read together with labour, people understood that the human body was not merely a vessel of sorrow; it was also the foundation of the world.

That night the crocodiles did not rise above the water. But lines of ripples formed, as though someone were slowly setting down the burden of a body. The names of bodies chewed in water-burial were under guard; and the rights of living bodies still at labour were being written into an oath. Between these two things, the story of Garh Narikel found a new current.

In the last watch Satyavrat Mehta closed his notebook and said, "Justice will not ask only the names of the dead; justice will also ask whether the tired bodies of the living received rest." At this the children did not say "Present." They rose and brought water to wash the labourers' feet. As water fell over cracked feet, layers of dust and cement loosened and the stream turned the colour of earth; beneath them the exposed skin looked like a map of years of fissures. No one called it worship. Calling it worship would turn labour into an idol again. It was simply respect for exhaustion.

When everyone had gone, the stump's shade grew longer. Among the stones bearing workers' names, one blank stone was placed: "For the one who works but is not seen." Touching it, Ananya said, "Tomorrow we shall study this invisible labour." The wind answered softly.

FOLK SONG: NAMES READ THROUGH SWEAT

Folk tune: Labourers' Work Song

*Read, O sweat, read the names through sweat;
see the worker's body not as work, but as human.*

*Labour's name is on stone, yet read through sweat;
the cracked palm and tired foot tell their tale.*

*Do not turn the worker's body into an idol by calling it worship;
bring water and wash the feet—with affection that honours weariness.*

*Justice will not ask only the dead person's name;
it will ask of the living: rest, wages and food as well.
A blank stone remains for the name of invisible labour,
for the one who works yet is not seen—this is their place.*

*With the salt of sweat, read every letter more deeply;
understand the worker's body not as work, but as a human being.
Do not make an idol by calling it worship—bring water and wash the
feet.*

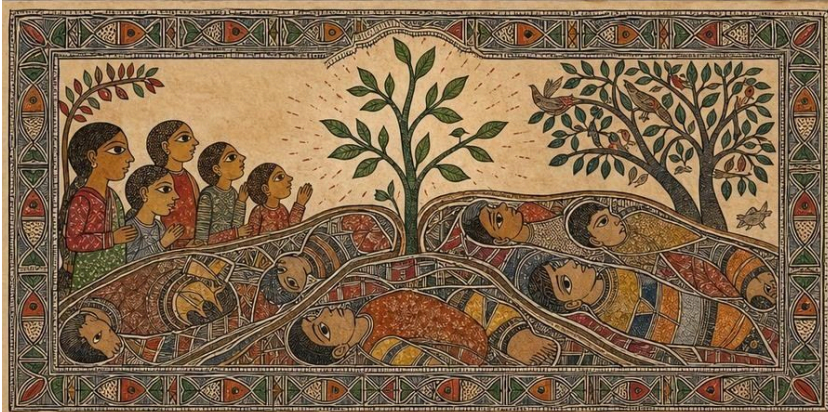


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—HETU: THE REASON FOR
ACCEPTING A CLAIM. Example: because smoke is rising there. Hetu: the
reason for accepting that claim.]

CHAPTER 120

THE BODY OF JUSTICE

*The body of justice is like a shoot—tender, yet able to break through
earth and stone.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: TENDER JUSTICE, FIRM ROOT

Folk tune: Song of the New Shoot

Water the shoot, water the shoot of justice;

count both its tender leaf and its stone-breaking root.

Justice has a body like a shoot, its leaf tender;

yet its root breaks stone, holding firm faith.

Compassion becomes its dew, rules become its soil;

courage becomes sunlight, giving it growth day and night.

Harshness alone is not strength; sensitivity too is powerful;

gentle justice can join the lives of people once broken.

Guard the shoot; one day it will become a forest;

soft justice with a firm root will shape Mithila anew.

Dew of compassion at dawn, soil of rules below;

sun of courage through the day, patience through the night.

Hardness alone is not strength; mercy too is great power;

within the root of gentle justice lives steadfast public faith.



For so long justice remained on paper, in seals, in pages of dates. But where was the body of justice for the one whose back carried sand, whose chest was crushed beneath a foundation? Justice without a body is eaten again and again by crocodiles.

There is a difference between an idol and a body. An idol asks for worship—you bow before it and move on. A body asks for responsibility—you must stand before it.

And if justice has no cracks, how will the voice within it come out? A crack is not necessarily a defect. The body of justice must be able to weep—only then is it alive.

The night after the stones of labour's body were placed around the stump, the new shoot of the Channa tree did not remain silent. Its leaf was not yet fully a leaf—only a green point, a tender tremor, the earth's inner breath. Yet that night a fine gleam came from the point and fell upon the stones. The stone bearing a labourer's name grew warm; the one bearing "name not found" did not remain cold but became wet with dew. The children understood: after the body of labour, justice itself was asking for a body.

For so long justice had remained in paper, seals, dated pages, lawyers' arguments and speeches of office. But where was the body of justice for the one whose back carried sand, whose hand was pierced by iron, whose chest was crushed under a bridge foundation, whose body became a water-burial among crocodiles? That body appeared neither in court corridors nor in the contractor's accounts nor in the foreign company's letter of sympathy. If justice remained bodiless, it too would become crocodile food.

Ananya called the morning gathering. Even "gathering" was no longer the right word; by now it was Garh Narikel's daily breath. The shadow of the stump was lengthening; the grove was half cut, yet its shade still demanded a full measure. The children opened a new page in the register and wrote the title: "The Body of Justice." As soon as the words were written, an elderly woman labourer sitting quietly at the back said, "If justice wants a body, it must also bear the smell of sweat."

The sentence touched Ba first. Wiping her eyes with the end of her sari, she said, "Justice that arrives perfumed often comes to cover a rotting body. True justice is incomplete without the smells of sweat, ash, mud, milk, blood and tears." The people fell silent. Satyavrat Mehta sat at the edge. The sentence felt heavier to him than any commentary in a law book.

Aruni brought an old plan of the bridge. It had been presented in court many times; each time lines, numbers, signatures and seals had been seen upon it, but never feet. This time the children spread the plan upon the ground and told the labourers' families, "Touch the places where your people set their feet." Women, elders, children, widows, sisters and friends ran their hands across the plan. The paper had grown old and crackled beneath their palms like dust in a room closed for years. The line of the bridge suddenly ceased to be a road and became a journey of bodies.

Gop Kumar was opening his file. It contained lists—payment, absent, accident, subcontract, arrears, dead, unknown. But the children said,

“Feet first, file later.” Gop paused and closed the file. He understood that data can catch a lie, but cannot fully contain pain. Data is only bone; people make the body around it.

Then Gangesha's question rose again. A child of the Coconut-Leaf School, enchanted by the story of Tattvacintamani, asked, “What is proof? Proof of the file? Proof of the body? Proof of memory? Proof of sweat?” No one answered. Then Meera said, “If a body has been humiliated, proof is incomplete without the voice of the body. If sweat has been stolen, even the smell of sweat becomes evidence.” Here Gangesha's Navya-Nyaya left the page of a book and entered the pores of the body.

Suddenly an ant climbed the stone marked “name not found.” Every eye turned toward it. The ant wandered over the letters and stopped in the blank space. The children did not ignore even so small a sign. Ananya wrote, “Where the name is absent, the first living seeker has arrived.” After that sentence the gathering did not pause; everyone understood that anonymous labourers needed a body of justice, not merely a list.

By noon the village potter arrived. He brought earth—from the Kamala bank, from beside the bridge foundation, from a cleft in the Channa stump, from Ujjwal's courtyard, and from the edge of the pond where the Submarine had testified. The potters kneaded all the earth together. The children asked, “What will you make?” The potter replied, “The body of justice. Not an idol—a body. An idol asks for worship; a body asks for responsibility.”

As the clay was kneaded, the women labourers pressed their palms into it. Every palm left an imprint—some with bangles, some with cracked fingers, some with burnt skin. Aruni kept back his engineer's hand; he was ashamed that his signature appeared on the bridge plan. A woman labourer told him, “We need your hand too. If the hand that made the mistake does not come to mend it, the body of justice will lean to one side.” Trembling, Aruni pressed his palm into the clay.

Satyavrat Mehta rose from a distance. No one had called him. This time he came forward on his own. “My hand bears the mark of a pen, not sweat,” he said. “Still, if I am permitted, I would like to leave the imprint of silence.” Ba replied, “Silence does not leave an imprint through the hand. Put your ear to the clay.” Satyavrat bent down. Everyone watched. One of India's eminent men of law lay with his ear against the earth beside the cut stump. A sideways impression of his ear formed in the clay. The children wrote: “An ear for listening was added to the body of justice.”

News of the scene reached the market. City news crews rushed in. Headlines were prepared—“Unique Experiment in People's Justice,” “Earthen Constitution of a Memory Village,” “Emotional Moment for

Famous Jurist.” But Meera and Devika stopped them at the entrance. “This scene is not for consumption,” they said. “Before you write, take permission from the families whose bodies were lost.” Many cameras turned away empty. Memory once again protected the right governing the gaze.

By evening the earthen body was complete—neither man nor woman, neither deity nor judge. It was a bowed figure, one ear against the earth, one hand toward the water, one foot toward the bridge, the other rooted at the Channa stump, and an empty place upon the chest. The children asked, “Why is the chest empty?” The potter said, “Names will come and dwell here again and again. The chest of justice should not be a permanent ornament but an open house.”

Then a representative of Broom’s deed of gift arrived. He had heard that a “memorial statue” was being made in the village. He brought proposals for bronze casting, lighting, security fencing, ticketing and an international plaque. The children made him sit beside the clay body. Ananya asked, “Can you bear the smell of this body?” The representative searched the papers for an answer. There was no clause about smell in the deed of gift.

From afar Chandrapal listened to the news. A new feature was planned for his app: “Place the name of your loved one upon the digital clay statue.” Devika understood at once. She told the children, “If the body of justice is sold on a screen, the crocodiles will return.” No new screen-fast was declared that night; people simply turned their phones face down. Some decisions are born not from announcements but from exhaustion.

Raghav, after living so long without a signal, somehow received the news. He typed a message: “Make replicas of the clay body; use its emotional capital.” The message did not go. Only two words appeared on his screen: “Put your ear down.” He panicked. A man who had traded all his life behind vanished messages was now being ordered by the earth to listen.

Night deepened. The earthen body of justice stood beside the stump. Crocodiles glimmered in the floodwater at a distance, but this time they seemed to watch not with hunger for a body but with curiosity. The Submarine rose like mist from the pond and circled the figure for a while. Old Budhba’s Ghost asked, “Can justice walk now?” Ba answered, “It will not walk; it will listen. One who listens will teach people how to walk.”

At midnight the first name was placed upon the clay chest—that of an unknown labourer whose body had never been found. No name, only the blank stone. As soon as the blank stone touched the chest, a fine crack appeared in the clay body. People were alarmed. The potter laughed.

“A crack is not bad. If justice has no cracks, how will the voice inside it come out?” A drop of dew emerged from the crack. The children wrote: “The body of justice can weep.”

People kept watch until the hour before dawn. This watch differed from the Earth's Watch; here there were no weapons, only listening. Each watcher placed an ear against the clay, heard one name, and woke the next person. The cold of the earth ran from the ear to the temple, while from within came a low hum—it was impossible to tell whether it belonged to the wind or to one's own blood. Thus passed the first night of the body of justice. At sunrise the potter saw the shadow of the shoot lying across the empty chest—the new green point of the cut Channa tree.

In that shade Ananya opened the next page and wrote, “Seventeenth Watch: The Law of Shade.” For once justice had acquired a body, another question arose: is the shade that falls there only the tree's, or does it also belong to those whose names have not yet been fully heard?

FOLK SONG: THE TENDER BODY OF JUSTICE

Folk tune: Song of the New Shoot

Tender body, tender body of justice,

let it weep, let it listen—only then can justice live.

Justice has a body tender as a shoot, yet it breaks the earth;

it adds green shade to the stones of workers.

A question on the empty chest, dew falling from the crack;

the child wrote: even justice can weep—and the truth came forth.

No weapon, only a watch of listening—put your ear to the earth;

upon the potter's empty body fell the shoot's shade,

and the earthen figure of justice drew its first breath.

Do not harden the tender body; keep watch over it;

let it weep, let it listen, and then let justice live.

Tender as a shoot, yet rising through broken earth.

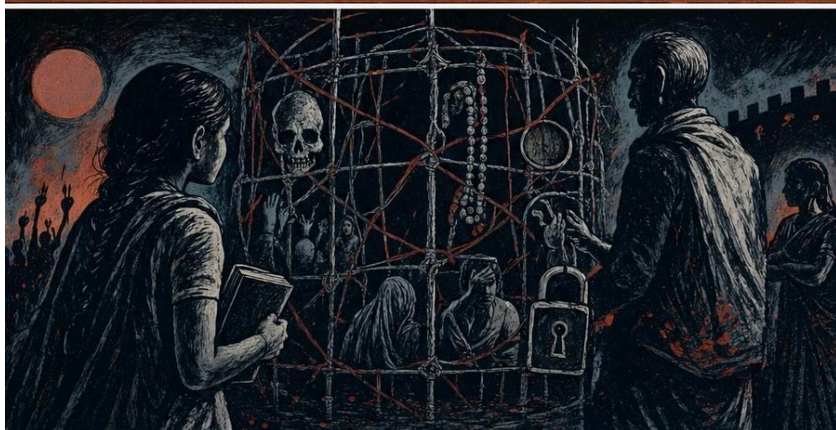


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—PERVASION WITH AN EXAMPLE:
*a rule that applies everywhere. Example: wherever there is smoke, there is
fire, as in a kitchen. Pervasion with an example: a universal relation together
with a familiar instance.*]

CHAPTER 121

THE CAGE OF CASTE

*The bars of the cage are not iron—they are habit, and habit shines
brightest in the morning sun.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: THE OPEN SKY OF TOUCH

Folk tune: Free Rhythm of a Nachari

Open the cage, open the cage of caste;

join hand to hand and pour an open sky around us.

*The cage of caste breaks when hands meet;
the warm touch of a human hand makes the withered heart bloom.*

*No one is high or low; the earth carries everyone;
the same air, the same water fills every life.*

*Open the bars made of words; bring a window of affection;
fly together in the open sky of touch.*

*If hand remains joined to hand, the cage cannot stand;
before human dignity, no caste is greater.*

*One earth shaped the body, one wind gives breath;
the speech of high and low is an insult to humanity.*

*Cut the bars of speech; take love's key in hand;
beneath the open sky, dawn is the same for all.*



The branches of this cage are made of lineage, gotra, kitchen, marriage, touch, cremation ground and food; upon its door hangs the lock of scripture. And the one who locks it says: this is tradition.

But what society calls tradition is often an invisible wall built around the breath of living human beings. Calling the wall tradition does not make it cease to be a wall; it merely changes its name.

So only one question remains, and it is Gangesha's: what is the proof? If caste is not an inference but an imposition, if birth is not proof but an arrangement—who will carry the burden of that proof?

After the night of the body of justice, a strange unease spread through Garh Narikel. The children had read the Constitution of Names, the labourers' feet had lifted earth beside the bridge foundation, the women had held a night assembly on bodily rights, and Satyavrat Mehta's testimony had entered people's voices. Yet just when everyone felt that justice was finding a place in body, labour, water, fire, air, sky and word, the old caste order arrived carrying its cage.

The cage was not made of iron. Its branches were lineage, gotra, purity, kitchen, marriage, ritual, touch, cremation ground and food. Scripture was the lock on its door, and those who kept the key said, "This is tradition." For the first time the children saw how often what society calls tradition is an invisible wall built around the breath of the living.

That day an elderly man from a Brahmin family came into the shade of the Channa stump. In his hands were a copy of a copperplate, an old genealogy and a yellowed book. The edges of the book had softened from years of touch, and when he turned the pages there rose the smell of an old cupboard—incense, damp and sunlight mingled together. Looking at the pages of the Constitution of Names, he said, "Of course everyone has the right to have a name written, but the dignity of lineage is also something." Ananya looked at him and asked, "If a name is heard but lineage rejects it, where does justice remain?" The old man opened his mouth to answer, but the words stopped.

In the midst of that arrested word, Gangesha's question descended again. Sunlight fell upon the green shoot of the stump. Suddenly the shoot's shadow lengthened across the old book, and the letters on its page began to tremble. No one spoke aloud, yet everyone heard: "What is the proof?" The voice belonged neither to the old man nor the children nor Satyavrat. It rose from the deep well of reasoning—from Gangesha Upadhyaya.

Gangesha, author of *Tattvacintamani*, founder of Navya-Nyaya—that was how the village school had taught his name. But in the court of the Channa stump, that introduction was judged incomplete. Ira opened a page and said to the children, "Why does society take pride in a thinker's intellect yet remain silent about the inconvenient truths of his life?" Then the old story rose among the people—the story of birth five years after the father's death, the story of marriage to a Charmakarini, of love and knowledge piercing caste walls, and of *Tattvacintamani*, regarded as thought equal in weight to twelve thousand books.

Batuknath Hariharan, once more wandering about with papers of the People's Memory Trust, grew uncomfortable with the discussion. He was not afraid of jurisprudence; he was afraid of jurisprudence acquiring a body. He quickly said, "Stories of a life are always disputed. See a great book as a great book; do not enter private matters." Meera laughed. The laugh was sharp. "When society judges a woman's body, private matters

become public; but when the caste-breaking life of a scholar is questioned, suddenly we must remain silent because it is private? What proof of justice is that?"

Black earth fell from a cleft in the cut stump. In the soil appeared the shape of an old shoe print. Ujjwal's mother said softly, "Perhaps this is the Charmakarini's foot." No one laughed. Several old villagers lowered their eyes. They knew how many bodies caste had kept away from temple doors, well platforms, paths to cremation grounds, school courtyards and wedding pavilions.

Here the woman called the Charmakarini rose not merely as one person but as the unheard voice of history. Her voice said, "Those who called my touch impure wore shoes made by my labour on pilgrimage. Those who asked the caste of my body sang songs to gods on drums made from leather worked by my hands. Those who rejected me in marriage searched books of justice for proof. Tell me—who needs proof?"

The children were silent. Satyavrat Mehta was silent. Gangesha's voice came again: "Caste is not inference; it is imposition. Birth is not proof; it is a cage constructed by an arrangement. Touch is not pollution; it is the politics of fear." These words would not be found exactly like this in any book, but in Channa Grove justice had left the page and become living experience.

Then two names floated in the air—Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha "Ashok." The story spoke the names not as an indictment in court but as difficult questions of memory. The children's register recorded: "When society imprisons the inconvenient life of a thinker inside a statue of honour, it is not bodily murder, but it is certainly the murder of memory." Beneath it Ananya added, "Killing the truth of a life in the name of honour is also a crime of caste."

Batuknath grew uneasy. "Be careful before writing names," he said. Ananya replied, "Those who remove names always speak of caution. We are writing questions, not accusations." At this answer the shoot of the Channa stump trembled, and a drop of sunlight seemed to lodge upon its leaf. It shone like a subtle argument of Tattvacintamani written on the surface of the soil.

Aruni understood that a discussion of caste could set the village on fire. But this was not a fire from which one could flee. He said, "If justice can reach the bridge foundation, the labourer's feet, a woman's body, drowned names and the pain of digital fraud, why should it stop at the door of caste?" Hearing this, descendants of labourers moved forward. One young man placed his mud-covered hand on the stump. Beside him the elderly Brahmin placed a trembling hand. For one moment the air between them stood still.

No purification was performed. No water was sprinkled. No caste was asked. The stump's earth marked both hands with the same colour. The soil dried inside both palms, tightening into a fine layer on the skin—the same pull, the same roughness on both hands. Ba watched from a distance and said, "See. The body of the tree colours everyone alike. Humans make caste; soil does not." The old man's eyes filled with tears. He folded the copperplate and put it back into his bag. Perhaps his tradition had not ended, but for the first time he could see the bars of his own cage.

At night the children of the Coconut-Leaf School wrote a new lesson: "Hear the name before asking caste. Hear suffering before declaring lineage. Look at labour before speaking of purity. Accept touch before writing justice." This lesson was published in no gazette, but that night the doors of several kitchens opened a little wider. On some well platforms an unfamiliar foot stood for the first time without abuse. On several verandas the village remained silent for a long while—but it was not the old silence; something was being thought within it.

Gangesha's voice was heard one last time: "Contemplation of reality without compassion is darkness. Justice without a body is a corpse. Proof becomes complete when life itself cannot refute it." After this sentence, white dust rather than black earth emerged from a cleft in the stump. It settled on the children's heads. No one called it a tilak. Ananya wrote: "This is the dust of questioning."

At the end of the chapter Batuknath Hariharan was gathering the papers of his People's Memory Trust. He understood that if this lesson spread, the caste question would join the question of rights over memory, and then controlling memory from the trust's chair would become difficult. That very night he wrote a secret note: "The Gangesha episode should be kept limited; caste discussion lies outside the project's objective."

But by morning the note had not yellowed; it had turned black. Between its letters one word had grown by itself: "Touch."

FOLK SONG: TOUCH WITHIN THE CAGE OF CASTE

Folk tune: Mournful Nachari

*Break the bars, break the bars made of words;
say "brother" once, and let the cage breathe out.*

Not a cage of wood, mother, but bars made of speech;

bodies of the same earth, yet touching one is called sin.

Whose grain feeds the body, whose sweat makes the field green?

*Why does the heart turn to stone as soon as a name is asked at the
door?*

*Gangesha raised the question—where does the colour of the hand
differ?*

Batuk's book trembled; old propriety stood naked.

*The feet that built the village road were denied the threshold;
the hands that prepared everyone's pyre were denied a place of touch.*

Break the bars slowly; do not break the heart;

say "brother" once and let the cage breathe out.

*Why does the heart turn to sand merely because a name is asked at the
door?*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—VIRUDDHA, THE
CONTRADICTORY REASON: Example: "Sound is eternal because it is
produced." This is a contradictory reason.]

CHAPTER 122

GANGESHA'S LIBERATION

Liberation does not come from a book—it comes when the right to ask questions is restored.



OPENING FOLK SONG: THE LAMP OF QUESTIONING

Folk tune: Inquisitive Rhythm of a Vidyapati Song

Light the lamp, light the lamp of questioning;

from one answer, look toward another path.

Gangesha's question is a lamp no one can extinguish;

from one answer another path always opens.

Curiosity, like Ganges water, washes the stain from the mind;

by touching the stone of truth again and again, it grows bright.

To question is not a crime; it is the first name of knowledge;

one who asks can cross the deep village of confusion.

Walk with the lamp in hand; answers will flower by themselves;

new thought will rise from the questions of Gangesha's liberation.

Curiosity like Ganges water carries away the mind's grime;

*by touching the stone of truth again and again, it emerges more
refined.*

Asking is no crime; it is the first stair of knowledge;

generation after generation walks in the light of questions.



Society places a crown on a thinker's head and beneath that crown suppresses the inconvenient parts of his life. The book survives; the human being disappears. This is not called murder, yet the vein has still been cut.

If a guard sits at the gate of evidence, truth is killed before it can enter. Therefore the real question is not whether there is evidence; the real question is who controls the language of evidence.

And one who fears questions has no right to administer justice. Lighting a lamp is not difficult; the difficult thing is to light it not in someone's eyes, but within the question itself.

The night of the caste cage passed, but its bars did not disappear at dawn. On the contrary, sunlight made them clearer. The children of the Coconut-Leaf School saw that the bars were not iron but words—lineage, gotra, honour, dishonour, purity, impurity, feast, marriage, seat, water, untouchability, and all those silences placed upon a child's head inside the household even before birth.

Ananya opened the register beside the stump. The previous page bore the words "The Cage of Caste." Beneath them was an empty space. She asked, "What is the key to this cage?" No one answered. Ba kept scratching the soil with her stick. The line made by its point vanished as soon as it appeared, and Ba drew it again and again, as though writing the same question repeatedly. Aruni looked toward the bridge. Satyavrat Mehta sat with a hand on his knee, as though every clause of law had suddenly become light before that question.

Then black dust rose from inside the cut Channa stump. It swirled and began to form letters—first a dot, then a line, then a question. The children read together: "Proof." As soon as the word was spoken, a ripple moved over the water, an old termite tunnel opened in the soil, and the green point inside the stump brightened for an instant.

Ba narrowed her eyes and said, "Gangesha has come." She said it as easily as if a distant relative had entered the courtyard. But to the children the name opened the doors of story, scripture, dispute and a hidden life. Gangesha—author of *Tattvacintamani*, founder of Navya-Nyaya, a great abyss of Mithila's reasoning. Yet around that name also rose the smoke of caste.

Ira asked softly, "Gangesha Upadhyaya? Whose *Tattvacintamani* is said to equal twelve thousand books?" Ba replied, "Yes. But do not see only the weight of the book. The same society that places a crown upon a thinker's head often takes a knife to the inconvenient facts of his life."

A drop of water fell from a cleft in the stump. When it touched the ground it became a tiny mirror. In the mirror the children saw a house—an empty cot, an extinguished lamp, and the shadow of a pregnant woman. A voice rose: "Birth five years after the father's death." The children were startled. To reason it seemed impossible; in folk memory it remained alive.

Gop Kumar immediately reached for a paper, but Satyavrat stopped him. "Listen first," he said. "Here evidence does not mean only a file; it also means folk memory, questions and concealed fear." Gangesha's question had become not a scholastic examination but a social one. What

society silences by calling impossible can sometimes be what society calls impossible in order to hide its own untruth.

Ananya drew three circles in the soil—perception, inference, testimony. Then she drew a fourth: “Suppressed life.” She said, “If society accepts only the kinds of evidence that preserve its cage, justice will remain incomplete.” Old Budhba’s Ghost laughed at this fourth circle. Navya-Nyaya was taking a new form in the children’s hands.

Then a second scene opened in the mirror. A woman—*Charmakarini*—stood by the water. In her hand was not leather but the smell of life; earth was on her feet and the sunlight of exile in her eyes. Around her stood society’s pandits, lineage-keepers, name-guards and bearers of banners of honour. They looked for the stamp of caste upon her body, while Gangesha’s eyes looked for the human being within.

Meera stepped forward. “Why did no one write the real name of the woman whom history identified only by caste?” she asked. At once the mirror trembled. For a moment the word “*Charmakarini*” broke apart, and from within it rose the voices of many women on whose lineage, marriage, body, labour and love humiliation had been written. Meera entered in the register: “*Charmakarini*—a complete human being awaiting her name.”

The episode of Gangesha’s marriage descended upon the court of the Channa stump like an explosion. Batuknath Hariharan, already wounded in the previous chapter by questions about his own descendants, listened from a distance. He thought he could save himself by declaring the story a scholastic controversy. But the children stopped him. Ananya said, “Controversy later. First ask this: if the father of Navya-Nyaya crossed the boundary of caste, why does the caste order read his book while polishing its own bars?”

At the question, twelve thousand fine lines flashed within the stump, each like a book. Some thought they were pages of *Tattvacintamani*. Others thought they were veins of reasoning buried in Mithila’s soil. Gop Kumar tried to count them, but the lines escaped number. They never remained fixed in one place—where the eye settled they vanished, and where it did not, they shone. Ba said, “If someone wrote thought equal to twelve thousand books, read one sentence of his life as well.”

Then the shadows of two new names fell into the circle of name-stones—Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok.” The air grew heavy. No one immediately spoke in accusation. Satyavrat Mehta looked up. Ananya asked, “How did these names come here?” Ba replied, “When the truth of a life is cut away in the name of honour, the knife is not metal; it is a pen.”

The story said that in the name of preserving Gangesha’s honour, the inconvenient parts of his life were cut away: a polished statue was made,

the glory of the scripture retained, while the caste-breaking human being was silenced. The children called this “honour-killing of memory.” No literal blood flowed, yet a vein of memory was cut. To raise someone upon the head while pressing his humanity beneath the feet—this was the brightest violence of the caste cage.

Hariharan suddenly said, “History requires evidence.” Ananya looked at him. “How many victims’ voices have you stopped in the name of evidence?” she asked. “If power demands evidence according to its own convenience and dismisses people’s memory as rumour, how will justice survive?” Hariharan fell silent. All the lawyers of his dream court began again to fly away as leaves.

This time Satyavrat Mehta did not remain silent. He said slowly, “Evidence is necessary in justice. But if a caste guard sits at the gate of evidence, truth is killed before it can enter. Gangesha must enter here for this reason—because he asks who has the right over the language of proof.”

Hearing this, the children of the Coconut-Leaf School changed their lesson. They wrote: “Perception without compassion is darkness. Inference without humility is arrogance. Testimony without responsibility is violence. Justice without memory is incomplete.” As the four sentences were read, the green shoot of the stump bent slightly, as though accepting a new shoot of Navya-Nyaya.

The shadow of the Charmakarini woman returned to the mirror. This time no caste label stood upon her forehead, only light. She stood beside Gangesha but not beneath him. She said, “The history that did not give me my name is incomplete. The justice that knows me only by caste is a cage. The one who sees me as human can write a book with me.” Meera trembled as she wrote the sentence in the register.

News of the day’s events reached Lau Kin-Hung’s distant network. His adviser wrote: “The caste question is a risk for the memory project.” An agency linked to Broom’s deed of gift said, “Place this material in the folklore section, not in the official record.” Chandrapal Batra thought controversy would increase users if the episode were put into the app. But the children kept watch—Gangesha was not an advertisement; he was a question.

By evening a new stone bearing Gangesha’s name had been placed around the stump. It was new, its edge sharp and surface rough; running a hand across it left a fine layer of dust on the fingers that did not easily wipe away. Beside it stood a second stone: “Charmakarini: real name awaited.” A third: “Truth of a life cut away in the name of honour.” A fourth: “Tattvacintamani: fire of questioning.” The four stones shone like keys placed at the door of the caste cage.

When kabaddi began at night, the children added a new word between breaths of “kabaddi-kabaddi”: “proof-proof.” The rules of the game did not change, but the meaning of breath did. Before catching a child who crossed the line, the opponents asked: “What is your name? What is your proof? Whose memory suppressed yours?” The game continued in laughter, while philosophical fire burned underneath.

That night the crocodiles remained quiet beneath the water. Their eyes held less hunger and more curiosity. Perhaps they were watching the discovery that a body can be chewed, but a question cannot. Caste can surround the body; yet if children change the meaning of evidence, cracks appear in the bars.

In the final watch of the chapter a voice came from within the stump—not Old Budhba’s Ghost, not Ba, not Satyavrat. It was deep, fine and sharp as the edge of reasoning: “One who fears questions has no right to administer justice.” The sound rang not in the ear but at the roots of the teeth, a tingling that remained inside the head long after it was heard. The children understood: Gangesha’s entry was not merely remembrance; it was an examination.

Ananya opened the next page. At the top she wrote: “Nineteenth Watch: The Crack in Proof.” For the question remained: when evidence itself is imprisoned by caste, power, money and honour, how does a suppressed person preserve the truth? The answer on the next night would arise not from within the Channa stump but from the courtyard of the house called lowest in the village.

FOLK SONG: THE QUESTION OF GANGESHA’S LIBERATION

Folk tune: Vidyapati Viraha

*Save the question, save Gangesha’s question;
with one true answer, set seven generations free.*

Gangesha, who can extinguish the lamp of your question?

If justice fears a question, can it still be called justice?

*Pages flutter, elders avert their eyes,
and the sacred thread of silence snaps and falls upon the earth.*

*In your voice awakens the voice the ancestors suppressed;
at the word “why,” the cage’s first thorn gives way.
Liberation is not a dip in the Ganges but the right to question;
to speak one’s own name in one’s own voice—that is the greatest
festival.*

*Gangesha, save the question even if the body grows tired;
with one true answer let seven generations be free.
In the throat the restrained voice of ancestors awakens again.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—SATPRATIPAKSHA, A
COUNTERBALANCING REASON: Example: the proponent says, “Sound
is eternal because it is audible.” A counter-reason of equal force is then
offered.]

CHAPTER 123

A LEAF OF TATTVACINTAMANI

*A leaf of Tattvacintamani is harder than paper—because reasoning is
written upon it, not fear.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: A WOMAN'S NAME UPON THE LEAF

Folk tune: Hopeful Form of a Sama-daun

Have it written, sister, have your name written on the leaf;

make the half-finished book whole.

The page of the book was empty; sister, write your name;

adorn the erased woman's life with flowers of letters.

*Mother, grandmother and daughter will all tell their stories;
through every vein of the leaf will flow the river of their labour.*

*Writing the name enlarges dignity and makes history whole;
the half-book will become complete when the woman's voice rests
within it.*

*Let names grow on every leaf, green as new shoots;
with women's memory Mithila will grow richer and more beautiful.*

*Let the labour of mother, grandmother and daughter speak in every
leaf;
let the stories of hearth, field and courtyard take their place in history.*

*The erased line of life will grow green again;
with the ink of women's voices Mithila will become complete.*



There are four doors of proof—perception, inference, testimony and non-apprehension. Everyone discusses the first three. Few discuss the fourth, because it asks: what was not found, where did it go, and who benefited from its absence?

A book that does not teach us to see human beings is not equal to twelve thousand books; it is not worth even half a leaf. The weight of a book is not the weight of its pages—it is the infinity of its questions.

And the question of the person whose name history left at the edge of the page does not die. The leaf dries, but its veins remain; and what is written in those veins requires not merely eyes, but questions.

After Gangesha's liberation, a strange quiet descended around the Channa stump. It was not the quiet that fills a house after a cloth is placed over a dead face; it was the quiet of a question that has found not its answer, but the next question. One by one, the bars of caste had broken in the children's voices, yet broken bars lying on the earth can become new weapons. So the watch did not end.

That day the children of the Coconut-Leaf School sat not beside the stump but near the shadow of the new green shoot. The shoot was not yet large enough to provide shade, but people sat around it as though the future shade had already been accepted. Ananya opened her register and said, "Gangesha Baba has been liberated, but the guard over Gangesha's book remains."

Ira asked, "A guard over the book?" Ananya replied, "Where scripture exists, someone quickly arrives to claim authority over it. Caste first guarded the body, then the name, then marriage, then memory. Now it will try to guard reasoning."

That day for the first time the word "Tattvacintamani" ceased to be merely a textbook title among the children. Ba said, "Its expanse was said to equal twelve thousand books. But a book that does not teach us to see a human being is not worth twelve thousand—not even half a leaf." Her voice held no sermon, only the burnt ash of very old experience.

Aruni drew a leaf from a dry cleft in the stump. It was not an old leaf of the Channa tree but one from the new shoot. Yet fine lines ran across it, as though an invisible scribe had written with a fingernail. Gop Kumar put on his glasses and tried to read, but no letters appeared. Ananya held the leaf to her ear. "These letters are not read with the eyes," she said. "They are read with questions."

Then the first lesson of Tattvacintamani began. The children drew four circles in the soil—perception, inference, testimony and non-apprehension. Devika laughed. "Such difficult things in a game?" Ananya replied, "If difficult things do not enter play, justice will be imprisoned in the courthouse again."

The first circle was "perception." One by one the children named as perceived facts the stump, stones, names, floodwater, cut roots, Chandrapal's trembling, Batuknath's tears, and the crocodile seen in Lau Kin-Hung's mirror. Then a child stood and asked, "Is caste perceived?" Everyone fell silent. The question hung in the air like a cut branch suspended against the sky.

Meera answered, "The human body is perceived; the effect of humiliation is perceived. But the superiority claimed by caste is not perceived—it is a cage made by the mind." The child wrote: "The arrogance of caste is not perceived; its violence is."

The second circle was "inference." Ira said, "When a name is repeatedly missing from records, we infer that some power is stealing names." Satyavrat Mehta, sitting at a distance that day, added softly, "When the law says equality while society builds separate roads, this is no longer merely inference; it points toward the direction of the offence."

The third circle was "testimony." Here a dispute arose. A priest's grandson, who had slipped into the school to listen, said, "The word of scripture is supreme." Meera sat before him and asked, "If a human body is cut in the name of scripture, which is higher—the word or the human being?" The boy had no answer. Ba said quietly, "A word that makes a human being low is not a word; it is power."

The fourth circle was "non-apprehension." It was the hardest. Pointing to the empty place, Ananya said, "Truth can also arise from what is not found. In Gangesha's life we do not find the complete name of the Charmakarini woman—this absence is itself evidence. A society that did not preserve her name has an incomplete justice."

As soon as this was said, a faint tremor rose from inside the stump, as though the bone of an unspoken name had shaken. The children bowed their heads together. Ananya wrote in the register: "Gangesha's liberation remains incomplete until the name of the unknown Charmakarini woman is sought."

With that sentence the direction of the school changed. Gangesha was no longer only the founder of Navya-Nyaya; he became a guardian of inconvenient relationships. His Tattvacintamani ceased to be merely a book of jurisprudence and became a chisel for caste-consciousness—a chisel laid against the root so that the crust of falsehood might fall away without cutting the body.

By noon the leaves multiplied. On the tip of the green shoot not one but many leaves shimmered, each bearing invisible lines. The children called them "leaves of Tattvacintamani." They began counting—one, two, five, twenty, fifty. As they counted, their voices grew softer, because the more they counted, the more new leaves seemed to appear; sometimes it seemed the same leaf had been counted again. Someone joked, "Will there be twelve thousand?" Ba stopped him at once. "Save the meaning before the number. Saying it equals twelve thousand books does not mean the pages are heavy; it means the questions are endless."

Meanwhile two scholars arrived from the city. One introduced himself: "I am from the Gangesha Studies Council." The other said, "This folk material requires scientific editing." They carried camera

devices, recording tubes, permission papers and bundles of scholarly vocabulary. They were courteous, yet their courtesy carried the faint smell of invisible authority.

The first scholar said, "The Gangesha episode should be presented in a controlled manner. Folk exaggeration reduces the seriousness of philosophy." Ananya asked, "How much seriousness?" The scholar hesitated. Ananya asked again, "Does seriousness survive where the Charmakarini woman's name disappears?"

The second scholar intervened: "History requires evidence." The children pointed together to the four circles—perception, inference, testimony, non-apprehension. Ira said, "Evidence is necessary. But who guards its gate? Only what caste finds convenient? The same history that erases a woman's name?"

The scholars grew uncomfortable. They had answers, but the answers had been made for conference platforms, not for children seated around a stump. Their language possessed purity but no touch. A leaf of the Channa tree fell on their papers. It was light and made no sound as it landed, yet the paper beneath it grew slightly damp, as though something had passed out of the leaf. There were no letters on it, but the printed lines on the paper blurred.

For the first time in that lesson Satyavrat Mehta moved forward. He spoke not to the scholars but to the children: "Justice is not only a decision. Justice is also the question of who is permitted to ask questions." Ananya wrote at once: "The right to question—part of the watch over names."

Evening came. The leaves began to tremble in the air. The dream invitation from the unnamed planet had not gone far; a pale blue line remained in the sky, as though an invisible orbit were again drawing the earth. The children understood that reasoning too needed guarding not only on earth but between planets. If humans travelled to a nameless planet, they could also create proof there without human beings.

In the final lesson of the evening Ananya read a new rule: "No scripture stands above the human body. No proof may deny the witness of humiliation. No philosophy is complete without the name of the woman whom history pushed to the margin." The children answered, "Present."

At that "Present," all the leaves of Tattvacintamani moved at once. There was no wind, yet they trembled. The movement made no rustling sound, only a dry, fine tapping as though someone far away were turning the pages of an old book one by one. Each leaf cast a separate letter-shaped shadow upon the soil. The letters joined into one sentence: "The question of the one who was erased still remains."

Night was descending. The scholars silently gathered their papers. The children read the shadows of the leaves. And from deep within the old roots of the cut Channa tree arose a voice—not Gangesha's, not a child's, not Old Budhba's Ghost; perhaps it belonged to the unnamed Charmakarini woman who had still not received her full name. The voice said, "Justice remains incomplete until the question receives a body."

After that sentence, fine shadows spread across the earth as though there were twelve thousand of them.

FOLK SONG: THE WOMAN OF THE ERASED LEAF

Folk tune: Sama-daun

*Raise it, daughter, raise my question in your voice;
place the erased woman's name within your song.*

*There was a leaf in the book, but my name was not on the leaf;
my question lived, but there was no home for its answer.*

*At the smell of leather every doorway covered its nose,
yet wearing shoes made by my hands they walked into the court.*

The jewel of truth shone, but my body remained in darkness;

I asked: what is the proof that makes touch impure?

*The pen erased me; the earth remembered me;
the dry veins of the leaf preserved my lament.*

Daughter, raise my question again in your voice;

the pen erased me—the earth remembered.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—NATURE OF THE SUBJECT AND THE OPPONENT'S OBJECTION: according to the opponent, wherever there is an agent there is a body, as in the case of a potter. This states the subject-position and the objection raised against it.*]

CHAPTER 124

THE FIRE OF EVIDENCE

In the fire of evidence there is less burning than illumination—what is true emerges more refined.



OPENING FOLK SONG: LIGHT FROM THE FIRE OF EVIDENCE

Folk tune: Jhijhiya-Mangal

Turn the Jhijhiya, turn the lamp of evidence;

through every hole let fire fall and burn away confusion.

*Fire falls through the lamp's holes and burns the net of lies;
the page of truth does not become ash—it is refined like gold.
The fire of evidence is not punishment; it brightens thought;
what is pure will shine, and the burden of confusion will fade.*

*Turn the Jhijhiya lamp; examine hole by hole;
do not fear the fire—recognize the form of truth.
When evidence becomes light, justice will see its direction;
when the black veil is lifted, the human face will shine.*

*The net of lies burns thread by thread; truth is refined like gold;
from this trial by fire, only what is pure emerges.
Do not fear; understand the lamp—evidence is a friend;
when the veil of darkness is removed, the face shines clear.*



Society says, “We consider you great,” but cuts away the very things that made the person human. A garland remains a garland only until it begins to tighten around the neck.

There is a difference between killing the body and killing memory. In the first, blood flows and people see it; in the second, only one line is cut and no one notices. Yet what lived in that deleted line may never return.

And again and again the heaviest page of history is the one deliberately left blank. Where a name should have been and is not, we must learn to read the emptiness.

The leaves of Tattvacintamani fluttered around the stump all night. They were not paper, yet the lines written upon them were harder than paper. At first the children thought them ordinary leaves; when morning sunlight touched them, they saw that the lines contained not letters but questions. The mouth of every question glowed like fire.

Ananya lifted the first leaf and tried to read. Its letters changed at once. What from a distance seemed to say "proof" became "whose proof?" in her hand. "Justice" became "whose justice?" "Lineage" became "whose lineage?" The children understood that reading Gangesha's leaf meant not merely reading an old book, but placing one's hand into the hidden fire of one's own society.

Ba sat beside the leaf. When her wrinkled hand touched it, the leaf did not burn; it gave light. Ba said, "If a book said to equal twelve thousand books is truly read even for a single leaf, the whole arrogance of caste can be reduced to ash." There was neither scholarship nor stagecraft in her voice. Yet at this sentence pale smoke rose from a cleft in the Channa stump—not black smoke, but thin white smoke.

Satyavrat Mehta came again that day. He had vowed to sit at a distance, but the children asked him to sit in the middle. "You have listened to law," Ananya said. "Now listen to evidence." Satyavrat hesitated. He possessed statutes, precedents, affidavits, arguments and the language of courts; but here "proof" lay hidden in tree leaves, a woman's wound, a labourer's feet, drowned bodies, unnamed children and the missing name of a Charmakarini.

Then Gangesha's story rose again—the claim of birth five years after his father's death, folk memory of marriage to a Charmakarini, the vast writing of Tattvacintamani, the birth of Navya-Nyaya. Ira said, "Society kept the book and cut away the life. It kept the thought and removed the marriage. It kept the logic and preserved the fear of caste. Is that justice?" No answer came immediately.

Gop Kumar opened his papers. They were filled with recorded information. But he admitted, "Information is evidence, yet it is not complete evidence. If society cuts away the truth of a person's life and keeps only his book, the document survives while the human being dies." At that moment some of the stones upon the Channa stump grew warm. Those bearing incomplete names were warmest.

Meera said very softly, "This is killing in the name of honour." Everyone started. She explained: "Killing the body is one thing; killing memory is another. Sometimes society says: we regard you as great, but we will cut away the things that made you human. That is not honour. It is

the learned form of killing committed in the name of lineage and propriety.”

At the sentence a fine line of fire ran across a leaf of Tattvacintamani. The leaf did not burn, but its letters turned red. Two shadows appeared upon it—Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok.” They did not appear as bodily persons but as hands cutting and selecting text: one hand cutting away the inconvenient line of a life, another placing a garland of scholarly glory upon the book.

The children were frightened, but Ananya remained steady. She asked, “Did you kill Gangesha?” The shadows replied, “We made him immortal.” Ananya asked again, “Whom did you make immortal—him, or your own comforting caste-statue?” The shadows trembled and gave no answer.

Ba intervened. “When a person’s life is hidden and a garland is made from his name, even flowers become a noose.” At this, the faint clearing of Old Budhba’s Ghost’s throat came from inside the stump. He liked this kind of justice—where an old woman could break the pride of book editors.

Satyavrat Mehta opened his notebook. He wrote: “Evidence: not written text alone. Oral memory, suppressed life, deleted lines, caste silence and the pain of people are evidence too.” His hand trembled as he wrote. How often had the line of law been prevented from expanding so far? He understood how many courts narrow the meaning of evidence until half a human life remains outside the door.

Ira said, “Gangesha gave Navya-Nyaya; we need a new memory as well. When caste imprisons proof, justice goes blind. Worship of Gangesha that erases the Charmakarini who entered his life is incomplete worship.” Meera added, “And incomplete worship often becomes complete injustice.”

A child asked, “What was the Charmakarini’s name?” Everyone was silent. No one knew. The weight of that ignorance fell upon all at once. The woman whose marriage-memory disturbed society had lost even her name. The children immediately raised a stone and wrote upon it: “Charmakarini—name being sought.” Ananya said, “Until the name is found, this stone will remain in the first row.”

As sunlight fell upon the stone, something remarkable happened. Around it rose not the smell of leather but the smell of soil. As though the earth had given full inheritance in itself to the person whom society had bound to leather and called low. The children understood: caste marks the body; earth turns every body into equal dust.

Then the Submarine called from the distant pond. Bubbles rose upon the water. As they burst, they formed words: “Caste does not survive in

water.” Ba said, “Exactly. Where is the caste of a body in water-burial? Do the crocodiles ask what lineage you belong to?” A cold humour passed through the people, but shame stood behind the laughter.

The shadow of Gangesha, forming somewhere between leaf and sunlight, slowly became clearer. He sat neither on a pandit’s seat nor on a pedestal, but like a student upon the dust, a leaf before him and beside him the luminous empty place of an invisible woman. Gangesha did not speak. His silence itself was a question: “If you read my justice, why did you hide my injustice?”

The shadows of Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok” still trembled at the edge of the leaf. Looking toward them, Satyavrat Mehta said, “Destroying evidence is also an offence in literature and history. The offence may fit no clause of a criminal code, but it will enter the court of public memory.” The shadows tried to speak, but their words fell away as ash.

Ananya told the children, “From today a new lesson in the school: where a life is inconvenient, stay there longer.” The children repeated: “Guard the inconvenient truth.” It was not a slogan but a practice. Each child was told that if a celebrated name had a severed part, they should read the severed part first.

The fire inside the stump did not quiet. It left no ash; it gave light. The leaves slowly joined one another into a circle. They came together without the crackle of burning, only a dry rustle like many hands gathering pages at once; the sound carried not heat but a strange coolness. At the centre of the circle was an emptiness—the missing name of the Charmakarini. When everyone looked into that vacancy, they understood that the heaviest page in history is often the space deliberately left blank.

By evening the circle had been named “The Fire of Evidence.” No body would burn in this fire; the comfort of falsehood would. The caste cage, the pretence of scriptural honour, half-history, cut biographies and the humiliation of a nameless woman would all be forced slowly to see their own forms before this flame.

At night the children wrote in the register: “Gangesha’s liberation will come not through the book, but through acceptance of the whole life.” Ananya paused after writing. Then on the next page she entered a title: “The Name of the Charmakarini.”

At the title the green shoot of the stump trembled. The story was turning away from Gangesha’s justice toward the search for the woman whose name had been hidden, yet without whom the fire of evidence remained incomplete.

FOLK SONG: THE FIRE OF EVIDENCE

Folk tune: Jhijhiya Lament

*Fall, little fire, fall through every opening;
keep warming the chilled body of the buried name.*

*Fire falls through the holes of the lamp and burns the veil of lies;
a tiny spark of truth, mother, makes a road from house to house.*

*Paper says, "I am proof"; the body says, "I am the wound";
the earth says, "I know the footprints"—whom shall we protect?*

*The half-burnt name of the Charmakarini rose in smoke;
beneath the seat of old comfort we found a heap of ash.*

*Fire is not the criminal; it merely removes the curtain;
whoever turns away from truth will have their sleep burned away.*

*Mother, do not give revenge to this fire;
give warmth to the chilled body of the buried name.*

Fire is not the criminal—it only removes the curtain.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—PURVAPAKSHA: BENEDICTION IS NOT THE INSTRUMENTAL CAUSE. It may then be said that there is an alternative, like rice and barley: sometimes merit from a previous birth, sometimes the present benediction, becomes the cause of completion. Purvapaksha: benediction is not itself the instrument.]

CHAPTER 125

The Rice of Judgment

If judgment is planted like rice, even its ears bow down to testify.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Plant Justice, Harvest Hope

Folk tune: rice-transplanting song

Plant, O planter-woman, plant the rice of justice,

Feet in the mud, hope in the sky—join the two together.

Sink your feet into the mud, plant the rice of justice,

One row of courage, the next of affection.

Share the water equally, preserve the dignity of the field,

*Let the grain belong to the one whose labour raised it—make the rule
plain.*

The transplanting song awakens collective strength far away,

Today's little seedlings will bring golden ears tomorrow.

Plant justice, harvest hope, fill Janak's threshing floor,

The soil will say—together, labour can change every law.

One row of courage, one row of affection,

Water shared equally, the dignity of the field preserved.

Far away rings the collective strain of the transplanting song,

Today's seedlings will bow tomorrow as golden ears of rice.



A court writes judgment; the soil grows judgment. A written judgment remains shut inside a page, while a grown judgment reaches the plate—and until it reaches the plate, it is only language.

Ash is not only the ash of evidence. Those who were suppressed, called false, cast outside the lineage, erased from memory in the name of honour—their ash is mixed into it too.

And a boundary that blocks justice must be turned into play. A line is truly crossed only when crossing it ceases to feel shameful and begins to feel like a game.

The fire of evidence smouldered all night around the stump, yet there was less scorching in its glow than light. By dawn the ash had cooled. The children did not run to stir it as before; they sat in a circle around it, as though the ash itself were giving testimony. Ananya said softly, "If the evidence has burned away, what becomes of the judgment?" No one answered. A bird perched on the rim of the Channa Grove stump fluttered its wings once and fell silent again.

Aruni bent over the ash. It was not ordinary black ash. Fine layers of many colours ran through it—the black of paper, the green of leaves, the red of cloth, the brown of earth, and the pale whiteness of memory shed from the body. He said, "A line should be drawn in a field with this ash." People started. Ash from evidence, in a field? But the children of the Coconut-Leaf School became instantly excited. They understood that justice was not merely a judgment written on paper; if it did not grow grain, it was only the sacred dust of words.

Ba took a few rice seeds from her bag. She had kept them aside before the rains, but this time she said, "These seeds will be sown in the field where many feet were once stopped in the name of caste." There was no slogan in her voice, only the tired truth of life. At that moment Gangesha's questions rose again in the air—what is justice? What is lineage? What is proof? What is birth? And if caste binds the body of thought, can thought remain free?

The children set out toward the field. The path from the stump to the field had once lain under the shade of the grove; now it ran beneath a blade of sunlight. Sun without shade is harsh, but in that very harshness the road was clear today. Ananya walked in front, followed by Devika, Meera, Ira, Saumya, Gop, Aruni, Satyavrat Mehta, and the people of the village. The children carried the ash in earthen pots. No one recited a mantra. No one asked anyone's caste. No one looked for lineage. The ash inside the pots was so light that each sway of their walking lifted the top layer and let it settle again.

The field belonged to the family that, in earlier times, had been denied the right to sit in the village's central chaupal because they worked with leather. The old woman of that household, whose palms always carried the smell of hide, glue, sweat and sun, sat that day on the field ridge. When the children moved to bow to her, she flustered and said, "Not to me—to the soil." Meera replied, "The soil speaks through your palms, so to you as well." The old woman's eyes filled.

For the first time in that field, the story of Gangesha Upadhyaya was told not in the name of scripture, but in the name of the body. The child

born five years after his father's death, the marriage to a Charmakarini woman, and the writing of Tattvacintamani that gave birth to Navya-Nyaya—people had heard all these things before, but as separate marvels. Now the children understood that they were branches of one question. Society questions a man's birth, humiliates his marriage, then seats his thought upon a throne. That is not honour; it is a half-killing of memory.

Satyavrat Mehta stood far back in that field. In his legal life he knew the value of the word "judgment." But here its meaning was changing. A court writes judgment; the soil grows judgment. If hunger remains as it was after justice, if the cage of caste remains as it was, if names keep becoming nameless, then judgment is a grain on paper—neither planted nor eaten.

Ananya scattered the first ash along the ridge. She said, "This is not only the ash of evidence; it is also the ash of what was denied as evidence. Those who were suppressed, called false, cast outside the lineage, killed for love, erased from memory in the name of honour—the ash of all of them." The children answered, "Present." There was no mourning in the response, only preparation for cultivation.

Some older men of the village grew uneasy. They feared that if Charmakarini, Gangesha, caste, love, memory-killing, justice, field and rice entered the same circle, the old walls would melt. An elderly pandit said, "Preserve the dignity of scripture." Gop Kumar asked quietly, "Will dignity preserve scripture, or truth?" The pandit said nothing.

At that moment a shimmer rose in the water within the field. Whether it was the body of the submarine or a play of light, no one could say for certain. But the old Charmakarini woman said, "Ask the water again about all those it carried away." The children bent near the watery ridge and began reading names. The woman whose name had been suppressed in the story of Gangesha, reduced to an episode of caste humiliation, was written for the first time not merely as "wife" but as "co-evidence."

The air changed as soon as the word was spoken. "Co-evidence." The Charmakarini woman was no longer an incident; she was half of the proof. If Gangesha's justice was true in life, that truth could not be separated from the body, humiliation, courage and social exclusion of the woman who stood beside him. Ba said, "A scripture that cuts away a woman's name leaves its page incomplete." Meera wrote in the register: "Without co-evidence, Navya-Nyaya is incomplete."

Then Satyavrat stepped forward for the first time. He took a handful of rice from his bag. "I have had many chances to read judgments, write them, defend them, cut them down. But today I understand—if a judgment does not become food, equal seating, and the right to a name,

then it is not justice; it is the language of administration.” He scattered the rice over the ash. His hand trembled. The children did not steady it; the trembling itself was his testimony.

A line was made through the middle of the field. It was not a caste boundary, but a line for cutting through the old boundary. Children stood on one side, elders on the other, with ash and seed between them. When the line was drawn, the soil on both sides was the same colour—yet everyone knew that two kinds of feet had walked for years upon that same earth. Drawing a kabaddi breath, Ananya crossed the line—“Kabaddi, kabaddi...” But this was not a game of capture; it was a crossing. She crossed, took seed from the old Charmakarini woman’s hand, and returned. No one caught her. She said, “Turn every boundary that blocks justice into a game.”

At the sight Old Budhba’s Ghost burst into laughter. His laugh rose not from the Channa stump but from inside the field. The ghost, who was never fully visible by day, could be seen faintly in the sunlight that day. There was no caste mark on his body, no thread of lineage. He was simply a watchman. He said, “Every wall that still stands has one kabaddi left in it.”

The names Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok” arose in this chapter not like knives of accusation, but as a test of memory. A child at the school asked, “Does a scholar who removes an inconvenient truth from a life in order to make a statue commit a killing?” Ira replied, “The body is killed once; memory can be killed again and again. If truth is removed in the name of honour, perhaps we do not call it murder, yet the pain resembles murder.” The children wrote the sentence down, but left a question mark beneath it—because justice is not only a final answer; it is also an awakened question.

The rice seed mingled with the ash. No symbolic photograph was taken in the field. Devika took out her phone, then put it away again. Today the evidence would remain not on a screen, but in the soil. Chandrapal’s app could not capture the event. Raghav’s message-code had no name for this day. Somewhere far away Lau Kin-Hung kept writing the words “field asset,” but the field lay outside his vocabulary.

The plough ran until evening. A plough that usually divided the caste of the landowner from the caste of the labourer was held in turn that day by the children. The old Charmakarini woman cut the first furrow, Aruni the second, Meera the third, Satyavrat the fourth, and Ananya the fifth. When the ploughshare entered the earth, the sound was not of cutting but of opening, and the steam rising from the opened soil carried the smell of winters sealed away for years. Ba sat on the ridge saying again and again, “An ear of rice is heavier than justice. When it bows, then you will know the judgment has borne fruit.”

At night the sky descended into the field-water. Stars shone like seeds. The children wanted to write the end of the chapter in the register, but Ananya stopped them. "The rice of judgment has only just been planted; its ending will come at harvest." So only this was written: "Today justice entered the field."

That night the stump of Channa Grove looked from afar not dark, but like a grey lamp. Ash, seed and water slept together in the field. There was no announcement, no written judgment. Yet within the earth, where the sound of words does not reach, a fine green judgment had begun to stir.

FOLK SONG: The Transplanting of Justice

Folk tune: rice-transplanting song

Plant, sister, plant the rice of justice,

On harvest day let the first handful go to the nameless home.

Plant, sister, the rice of justice; sink your feet in the mud,

Set each seedling of a name in a straight row.

Rain fell like tears, sunlight became the labourer's body,

*If the harvest does not reach everyone, love of justice will remain
empty.*

Gangesha gave the seed, Charmakarini the soil,

The children raised the song—there will be no more exclusion.

The house of law is far away; the field's verdict is near,

A hungry palm asks—when will this hope be harvested?

Plant, sister; let the rice of names not dry,

If the harvest does not reach everyone, love will remain empty.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—COGNITION OF ABSENCE IS POSSIBLE THROUGH AN INFERENTIAL MARK: *A traveller recounted his experience—distance and the like do not by their nature obstruct the eye; rather, a defect in their own nature obstructs fire's power to burn, like a magical jewel. From this distinction it became clear that profound epistemological processes continue to operate within ordinary events of life. Cognition of absence is possible through an inferential mark.*]

CHAPTER 126

Justice of Grain

The justice of grain is decided not on the plate, but on the field ridge.



OPENING FOLK SONG: The First Handful of Grain

Folk tune: harvest benediction

Cut, O cut the ears, cut the ears of dawn,

Place the first handful in the plate of the hungry hand.

*The sickle flashed at dawn, the ears bowed gently,
The first handful of grain went home and the hearth came alive.
First the hungry hand receives its share, only then may grain go to
market,
Let labour receive its full wage, and let the farmer sing.*

*Inside every grain lie cloud, soil and sun,
By sharing the first handful, the family's honour grows.
The laughter of harvest says—labour was not in vain,
If the common plate stays full, hunger cannot remain helpless.*

*In the sickle's gleam shine pearls of sunlight,
Each grain binds within it the book of cloud and soil.
First the farmer's full price, and only then the market,
The laughter of the full threshing floor cuts through hunger's darkness.*



Before a hungry stomach every scripture is incomplete, every constitution incomplete, every proof incomplete. Justice that does not become rice is only a sentence.

There is a difference between charity and a share. Charity is rice thrown down from above—the giver remains above. A share is rice eaten while sitting together—both remain in the same row.

And the empty plate of the one who did not receive a share is itself evidence. It does not speak, but its emptiness speaks louder than anything.

The rice of judgment remained soaked in dew through the night. In the morning, when the first sunlight fell upon the ridge, the ears of rice seemed to bend as though testifying in court. The judgment that had risen from the Channa Grove stump had descended not onto paper but into the smell of the field. The children understood that if justice wished to acquire a body, its first body was food. Before a hungry stomach, every scripture, every constitution, every proof was incomplete.

Ba came to the field at dawn and sat down. She lifted a handful of soil, smelled it, and said, "Justice that does not become rice is only a sentence. Justice that does not reach the mouth of hunger is shade without roots." Hearing this, Aruni drew a long breath. The bridge pier, the labourer's fall, the hospital bill, the fraud account, the cage of caste, Gangesha's question—all began to appear along a single line. Everywhere there was a body, hunger, labour, yet judgments were usually made at an upper table.

That day the lesson of the Coconut-Leaf School was held in the field. From the stone-circle of names, the children came among the rice seedlings. Ananya opened the register, but before writing she placed a grain in her hand. "What is the name of this grain?" she asked. Someone said rice. Someone said cooked rice. Someone said seed. A small boy said, "That which stops hunger." Meera smiled and said, "That is its name in justice."

The memory of Gangesha descended into the field again. The leaves of Tattvacintamani that the children had seen in an earlier watch seemed now to wave like rice leaves. Perception—the grain in the hand. Inference—the labour behind the grain. Testimony—the mother's voice saying, "The rice is ready." Comparison—the balance of justice and the measure of grain. Postulation—if the granary is full and the child is hungry, then theft must lie somewhere in between. Non-apprehension—the absent plate of the one who received no share is itself evidence. The children understood all this not as the language of scripture, but as the language of life.

By noon the women of the village arrived carrying old measures and weights, bamboo winnowing trays, earthen pots and empty bowls. They said, "There is an archive of names, but where is the archive of hunger?" At the question everyone fell silent. Many people receive names after death; many others, while still alive, lose their own names to hunger and become only "labourer," "employee," "mother," "old man." Devika opened a fresh page in the register and wrote for the first time: "Register of Hunger."

This was not a list of charity. Ananya said clearly, "The hungry person does not need pity; they need a share." Ba added, "Charity is rice thrown down from above; a share is rice eaten while sitting together." The air in the field seemed to stop. Batuknath Hariharan listened from a distance. The language sounded dangerous to him, because it was not a petition before a court but the speech of rights. The speech of rights touches no one's feet; it looks straight into the eyes.

In the afternoon Hariharan's messenger arrived with a proposal: a "Food Fund of the People's Memory Trust." The paper said grain would be distributed to poor families, donors' names would be carved on a plaque, a distribution committee would be formed, and everything would be conducted under lawful supervision. The children read the document, then placed a grain of rice upon the page. It rolled and stopped on the word "donor." Ananya said, "Not the giver's name first. First the names of those who grew it, cut it, carried it, and those who are hungry." The messenger had no answer.

Chandrapal's people were not far behind. His new plan was a "Digital Grain Pass": identity on a mobile phone, fingerprint, face, death certificate, family list, and advertisements from donors. Devika laughed, but her laugh was sorrowful. "The screen that chewed up a young man's mind will now count hungry stomachs?" Far away in the city Chandrapal looked at his device and saw every account turn into an empty bowl as soon as the sample page of the grain pass opened.

A proposal for foreign seed came from Lau Kin-Hung's side. They said the seed would withstand flood, withstand drought, produce more, fetch a market price. Aruni asked, "What memory does the seed carry?" The consultant who brought the proposal smiled. "Seed is science, not memory." Ira replied, "If it has no memory, who owns it?" At that moment a faint metallic smell rose from the packet of foreign seed on the ground. The local rice grain lay quietly beside it, but its silence held generations of laps, the smell of rain, and women's palms.

That day the women raised the idea of a common granary. Not a granary of donations, but of shared entitlement. The rules were made: from each field, some grain for the watch of names; from each home, news of hunger without shame; no sermon attached to any grain distributed; and whoever received food would not be called "poor," but "member." Meera said, "The dignity of the body begins with the plate." Saumya wanted to write it down, then stopped; let the rule first settle in people's throats, then on paper.

That evening the children played kabaddi on the field ridge. The line was made from dried rice leaves. One child held his breath, crossed into the opposing side and instead of saying "kabaddi-kabaddi" kept saying, "Not hunger, a share; not hunger, a share." Another child touched him. Laughter rose. But Ba said, "This is not a game; it is a declaration." The

old ghosts watched from behind. In the ghosts' game, saving breath had been proof of life; in the children's game, sharing grain was becoming proof of justice.

By nightfall the first grain entered the common granary. Ujjwal's mother gave a handful of rice. A labourer's son gave two handfuls. A widow gave half a bowl of flattened rice. Devika gathered the grain in an old leatherworker's winnowing tray. Meera tied not a red thread around it, but a white one—because this was not an object of mourning, but of use. Ananya wrote on the page: "Justice of grain begins."

Then the question of caste rose again. An old pandit, who attended the festival of names but felt uneasy seeing the women's common granary, said softly, "Grain from every household in one granary? What of caste custom?" The children did not surround him. Gangesha's question was already waiting. Ananya asked, "If hunger has one caste, how many castes does rice have?" The old man fell silent. Ba placed a grain beside him and said, "Eat. If this grain can destroy your lineage, then your lineage is very weak."

The sentence flashed across the field like lightning. No one clapped, no one shouted a slogan. The old pandit stared at the grain for a long time. At last he lifted it, put it in his mouth, and closed his eyes. Nothing happened—the sky did not split, the gods were not angered, no banner of lineage fell. Only tears came from the old man's eyes. He said, "There is no purification greater than hunger." The children wrote the line in the register, but before the author's name they added: "formerly afraid."

That night the shadow of the Channa Grove stump stretched unusually far. It reached the field, the granary, and the empty plate a child had brought from home. The plate was very old, its rim bent, its inside scratched. The child said, "For many days sound rang in this plate, but no rice." The plate was placed in the middle of the granary.

At midnight a sound rose from the empty plate. At first everyone thought a grain had fallen into it. Then the sound became clear—not a word, not a sob, not the clang of metal, but a long resonance like emptiness inside the stomach. It did not stop at the ear; it settled somewhere in the chest, and the lightness felt there was not the lightness of hearing but the lightness of having gone hungry oneself. Hunger itself was testifying. Satyavrat Mehta, listening from a distance, rose and sat before the plate. He said, "Until today I wrote the names of the dead. Now I will write the names of the living hunger."

Ananya opened the next page. At the top she wrote: "The Name of Hunger." As the page opened, a wind rose. The ears of rice bent together. A faint green smell came from the cut Channa Grove stump. Somewhere beneath the water the crocodiles stirred, but did not surface. They wanted bodies; this night people were learning to save bodies.

The chapter did not end there. The granary was not full, the plate was still empty, and the register of hunger had only begun. Yet the body of justice had now descended into field, grain, plate, voice and sharing.

FOLK SONG: The First Handful of Grain

Folk tune: harvest song

*Cut, O sickle—not the neck; cut hunger,
In the food-plate share human dignity equally.*

*The sickle flashed at dawn, the head of rice bowed,
The first handful went to the hungry home; justice stopped there.
The granary may be full while the hearth remains forlorn—
What religion says a child should sleep fasting?*

*A mother saved half of her own bread,
Seeing her child's face, she wept inside her veil.
The grain of food said—I am not charity, I am a right,
The one who planted and harvested me deserves the first festival.*

*Sickle, this time cut hunger, not a neck,
In the plate of food, share the dignity of being human.
The granary is full, yet the hearth remains forlorn—
What religion says a child should sleep hungry and fasting?*

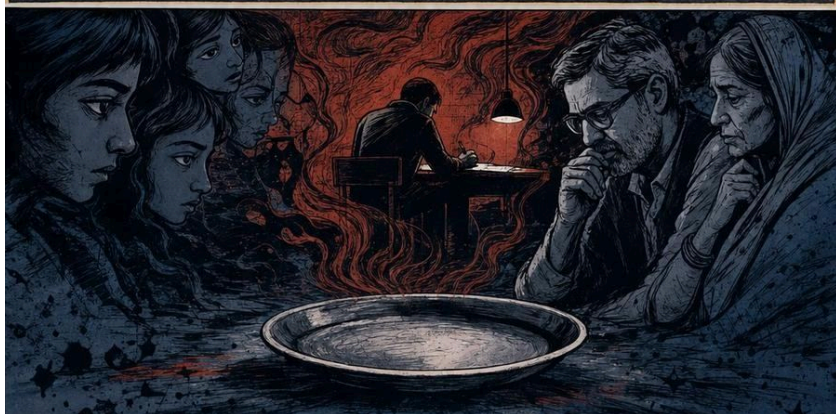


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—PERVASION DOES NOT RESIDE IN THE LOCUS OF THE PROBANDUM: For the cognition “the lower part of the tree is not a locus of contact with a monkey” is non-contradictory; therefore the mutual absence of the locus of monkey-contact is also present in the tree, which is itself the locus of monkey-contact. Pervasion does not reside in the locus of the probandum.*]

CHAPTER 127

The Name of Hunger

*An empty plate weighs more than a full granary—the name of hunger
speaks from within it.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: Fill the Plate Together

Folk tune: Jat-Jatin reunion song

Bring it, O bring it, bring one handful each,

Know that together we fill the empty plate in the middle.

Place the empty plate at the centre, let each bring one handful,

Jat brings rice, Jatin salt—together they make a meal.

One house has less, another more—the village makes it equal,

The common hearth raises smoke and drives away hunger's night.

*Do not write the name only upon an empty plate; write it together with
grain,*

Let no threshold remain bare—repeat such a vow.

Jat and Jatin laugh and say—if we remain together, it will fill,

One handful of affection can mend the whole world.

Jat brings rice, Jatin salt, another brings greens and leaves,

In the smoke of the common hearth cooks the rice of equality.

No threshold left in darkness, no stomach left empty,

Sing this song of reunion and fill every plate.



Writing the name of the dead is difficult; writing the name of living hunger is harder still. The dead do not protest. Living hunger feels shame, hides, and blames its own body.

To say "I am hungry" is not an insult. Yet society teaches so much shame that the hungry person first hides hunger, then hides their name, and finally hides their share.

And a granary is made to become empty. A full granary beside a hungry village is not preservation; it is injustice.

The empty plate lay all night in the middle of the common granary. Not a single grain was in it, yet the sound within it felt heavier than the granary filled with rice. At dawn the children sat around the plate as they sat around the stones of names. Ananya opened the register. On the first page was written: "The Name of Hunger." But the pen trembled. Writing the names of the dead had been hard; writing the names of living hunger was harder. The dead do not object. Living hunger is ashamed, hides, and blames its own body.

Satyavrat Mehta sat facing the plate. His hand had written countless affidavits, objections, petitions and legal arguments. But when he came to write the first name of hunger, his fingers trembled as if they held not a pen but a needle. Ba saw and said, "To write hunger's name is not to open a stomach; it is to open shame. Take care that whoever speaks keeps ownership of their own voice."

After that rule, the first woman stepped forward. She was on no widow list, had gone to no relief camp, had made no speech from any platform. She only said, "For three days the smell of rice did not rise in our house. The children asked, 'Mother, why is the hearth not speaking?' I told them, 'The hearth is fasting.'" Ananya wrote: "First name of hunger: the hearth's fast." The woman's eyes filled, because the shame of her house had become a name, not a spectacle.

The second name came from an old herdsman. He had stories about feeding cattle, but none about feeding himself. He said, "I kept giving grass to the cows and drank water before sleeping. If I sold the cows the house might run, but selling them would mean selling my father's voice." The children wrote the name of his hunger: "Hunger borne to preserve Father's voice." Ba touched his head. The ears of rice in the granary bowed slightly.

The third name came from a small boy. "At school I received the midday meal, but on holidays an empty field echoed inside my stomach." No one asked his household income, what his father did, or whether his name was on a list. Everyone remembered Gangesha's questions—perception is the sound of the stomach; inference is the smokeless hearth; testimony is the ration card; but the truth is in the eyes of the child who fears holidays. The register recorded: "Holiday hunger."

The fourth name emerged from within shame. A family that had taken pride in caste height for years and refused to eat in other people's homes had fallen into hunger. An elderly woman of the family said softly, "I did not stretch out my hand because our own people would say—our lineage is lost." Ba stood up. "A lineage that silences a daughter in hunger is already lost." Before giving her grain from the common granary, they first gave her water. Her hunger was recorded as: "The stomach restrained by fear of lineage."

At that name the green point on the stump trembled slightly, as though the old thorn of caste had pricked Channa Grove again. The memory of Gangesha Upadhyaya descended into the field-wind. The leaves of Tattvacintamani seemed to flutter—"Accept as evidence only that which does not turn suffering into falsehood." The children understood that caste's guard over hunger is the cruellest guard, because it forces a human being to think of purity before food.

By noon the names of hunger multiplied: "A night of birth without milk," "salt on credit," "rice instead of medicine," "earnings in the city, stomach in the village," "wages withheld," "outside the relief list," "the household fast after a ceremonial girls' feast," "the false sweetness of festival," "flattened rice soaked in floodwater." Behind every name stood a body; behind every body, a history. The voices were not all the same when the names were spoken—some spoke out of desperation and then fell silent, as though setting down a burden; others spoke very softly. The register grew heavier, while the common granary was still nearly empty.

Then Devika raised the question: "We have written the names—but when will there be food?" Everyone stopped. Memory sometimes becomes satisfied with its own sanctity. Devika stood against that satisfaction. "If the name of hunger does not turn into rice, we will repeat the same mistake courts have made for years—hearing testimony and postponing judgment."

At the sentence Satyavrat Mehta rose. He reached into his bag for a paper, then stopped. Paper was too small for the moment. He turned directly toward the people. "The children guard the common granary, but filling it is everyone's responsibility. The name of anyone who gives rice will not be announced. The name of anyone who speaks of hunger will not be recorded without permission. No donor's name; grain as a right."

Some people grew uncomfortable as soon as they heard the rule. Charity brings prestige; rights demand equality. A trader who had wanted a platform said, "I will give five sacks. Put my name on a plaque." Ananya replied, "The plaque will carry hunger's name, not the sack-giver's." The trader laughed. "Then what is the benefit?" The children answered together, "Hunger decreases." The laugh caught in his throat.

This time Chandrapal Batra watched from afar. After understanding the meaning of a mule account, something inside him had emptied, but an empty place is not always sacred; habit may fill it again with profit. He thought the granary could be turned into a digital donation platform. But before the sentence formed fully in his mind, the stump's shadow fell across his feet. He heard: "No donor's name." He quietly stepped back.

Raghav Signal too would normally look for code in such an opportunity. But this time no message stayed steady on his device. When

he typed "grain," it became "debt." When he typed "donor," it became "duty." When he typed "profit," it became "shame." Language seemed to be leaving his hand. This watch arose not from words, but from the soul of meaning.

By evening the first common kitchen was lit. The first smoke did not rise straight upward; it hung just above the ground and spread across the courtyard, carrying not only the smell of burning wood but the damp earthen smell of hearths that had remained cold for many days and were being lit again. The hearth was kept away from the stone-circle of names so that memory might change from worship into use. The women kindled the fire, the men brought water, the children picked the grain, and the elders gave not stories but instructions for work. Meera made especially sure that no one photographed the faces of those receiving food. Devika said, "No pictures of hunger—participation in ending hunger."

When the smell of the first rice cooking rose, a strange tremor passed through the village. The smell reached houses where no hearth had been lit. It reached the stone-circle of names of those who had drowned in water-burial. Perhaps a fine dust of that smell even reached the souls that had gone searching for names on the unnamed planet of the dream. The crocodiles remained motionless beneath the water—as though tonight the watch was not over bodies, but over the nourishment of bodies.

When food was distributed, the children arranged a line without high and low. First came those who could say, "I am hungry." Then those who could not. An elderly man who hid his poverty stood at the back. Ananya went to him and said only, "To say you are hungry is not an insult." The man began to weep. His hunger was named: "The stomach that could not say it."

The first pot of rice emptied. A second was cooked. Then a third. Someone said, "The common granary will become empty." Ba laughed. "A granary is made to become empty. A full granary beside a hungry village is injustice." After this the children wrote on the granary wall: "The dharma of grain is to move."

At night, when everyone was tired, the empty plate was placed again in the middle of the granary. This time it was not entirely empty. A single grain of rice had been deliberately left in it. The grain lay not exactly in the centre but slightly to one side, and when the lamp-light fell on it, it shone like a very small stone—easy to pick up, yet no hand reached for it. Satyavrat asked, "Why?" Ananya said, "We will never declare hunger fully ended. One grain will remain so that we do not abandon the watch." Satyavrat bowed his head.

The shadow of the stump fell across the plate that night, but it did not feel dark. It was cool, like sunlight turned inside out. The register of

hunger was not complete, the common granary was not permanent, the rules were newborn. Yet for the first time in Garh Narikel, hunger had stepped out of the chamber of shame and become a public right.

Near midnight, the grain in the empty plate began to tremble gently. No one had touched it. It turned and came to rest toward the north—the direction of the dry well whose water had been called bitter for years. Ba said softly, “After hunger will come thirst.” The children opened the next page. At the top they wrote: “The Watch of Thirst.”

The chapter paused there, but did not end. The first practice of turning hunger's name into rice had taken place. Yet justice of grain without water would again be only half.

FOLK SONG: The Name of the Empty Plate

Folk tune: plaintive Jat-Jatin

Fill, O fill the plate; fill the plate's name,

Not with one grain alone—place food there with dignity.

Jatin washed the plate and set it down; there was not a single grain,

Jat returned from the field; not a speck of earnings remained.

The moon descended into the plate and became a round bread,

The child stretched out a hand—the light broke and slipped away.

*The empty plate is heavier than the granary—who will hear this
truth?*

Write hunger's name, O master, or the night itself will weep.

Mother drank water and said, “I am not hungry,”

A hearth burned inside her chest—who saw the smoke?

Fill the plate's name; preserve the people's names,

Not one grain alone—let food arrive with dignity.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—REFLECTION IS THE COGNITION THAT THE PROBANDUM PERVADES A PROPERTY PRESENT IN THE SUBJECT—ANOTHER VIEW: *Just as the cognition “the staff belongs to the man” produces the cognition “the man is staff-bearing.” Reflection is the cognition that the probandum pervades a property present in the subject—another view.*]

CHAPTER 128

The Name of Thirst

Thirst too needs a name—unnamed thirst is only a statistic.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Let the Cloud Descend into the Water Pot

Folk tune: Choumasa-Malar

Descend, O cloud, descend and fill the water pot,

Moisten both the dry throat and the thirsty field.

*Sawan clouds gathered; the water pot held the sky,
Drop by drop, hope filled it and cooled the parched throat.
Gather the water from the thatch, adorn the pond again,
Know water as shared wealth and preserve the worth of every drop.*

*The empty pot sings—cloud, come to my home,
Give life's water to the thirsty field and the weary people.
As the Malar strain rises, the heart of the cloud will melt,
The cloud will descend into the pot and new greenness will bloom.*

*Children dance in the courtyard counting streams from the roof,
Pond, well and ahar begin reading again the book of water.
Every drop is shared wealth; do not let it run to waste,
Call the cloud with the plaintive strain of Malar.*



Hunger grips the stomach; thirst grips the throat. Hunger makes noise, thirst remains silent—and because of that silence it is endured for longer.

Society has learned to show pity for hunger. But with water it shows less pity and more ownership—whose well, whose ghat, whose water pot, whose hand, whose caste.

Once touching is forbidden, forbidding drinking becomes easy. And once drinking is forbidden, the voice too begins to dry—because a parched throat cannot raise a question.

After writing the names of hunger, the children thought justice had now reached the ears of rice. But at dawn, while they were arranging the stones of the watch in the courtyard of the Coconut-Leaf School, a small boy arrived carrying an empty water pot. There was not a drop inside, yet the pot rang—tun, tun, tun—as though emptiness possessed its own language. The boy said, “The name of hunger has been written. Where is the name of thirst?”

At the question, even the stump's shadow—which stretched impossibly far at noon—seemed to tremble in the morning. Hunger makes noise inside the body; thirst is more secret. Hunger grips the stomach; thirst the throat. Society has learned to pity hunger; toward thirst it more often imposes ownership—whose well, whose ghat, whose vessel, whose hand, whose caste.

Ba bent near the pot and said, “In my childhood even water had caste. Some wells belonged to everyone, some to certain people, some were such that a thirsty person could not even cast a shadow there.” The children started. To them water belonged to river, cloud, stream and sweat, not to caste. But the eyes of Garh Narikel's elders said the humiliation of water had been no less than the humiliation of food.

Gangesha's question returned. Ananya opened the register and wrote: “Evidence: thirst.” Ira asked, “What is the evidence of thirst?” The small boy lifted his empty pot. That was perception. Ba told the old story. That was testimony. From inside the stump came a dry crackling sound. That was inference that the roots waited for water. But the evidence of justice was still incomplete—who had been denied water, and why?

The answer opened the story of the old well outside the village. Half-filled, half-collapsed and choked with scrub, it was said that women from the leatherworkers' quarter could pass near it carrying their water pots but could not draw water there. They had to walk to the distant pond, muddy after the rains, foul-smelling in winter, a crust of dry silt in summer. Water stood in upper-caste courtyards; thirst stood in the throats of bodies called low.

Meera remained silent for a long time at the story. Then she said, “Without the right of the body, there is no right to water. Once touching is forbidden, forbidding drinking becomes easy.” Saumya added, “And when drinking is forbidden, the voice too dries.” Devika said very softly, “Screen fraud came later; the fraud of thirst is very old.”

The children decided that day's reading of names would be held at the well. They did not lift the stones around the stump; they took only the empty pot, two ropes, an old bucket, and the register. Satyavrat Mehta walked behind them. He had never gone down that path. In the world of his office, the caste of a well could become a file subject; here it was the geography of a thirsty body.

At the old well they saw moss covering the parapet. Many old scratches marked it—sometimes where a water pot had struck, sometimes where nails had scraped, sometimes where a stone had been thrown in anger. Ananya said, “Read the letters written on the well’s body.” Gop Kumar bent to look; he was accustomed to maps, data and lists, but these scratches were difficult to read. Ba said, “These are the script of thirst.”

The first testimony came from an elderly woman. Her mother had once tried to draw water from the well at night. She was caught, her pot was smashed, and she was told: “Let your thirst go to the well of your caste.” The elderly woman said, “That night my mother heard not only her pot break, nor merely her shame; she heard the right of her throat breaking.” The children wrote: “First name of thirst: the restrained throat.”

The second testimony came from a young man. His grandfather, as a schoolboy, had drunk water from a separate vessel. The vessel bore not his name but a caste mark. The children asked, “No name?” The young man said, “He had a name, but the vessel that quenched thirst carried caste instead.” Ananya wrote: “Second name of thirst: the separate water pot.”

Then a gust came. A dry leaf fell into the well. No sound rose, because the water level was low. In Ira’s mind flashed the water treaty from the dream’s unnamed planet—there water was measured out by number. On Earth caste blocked water; on the unnamed planet, capital did. In both places a stranger’s hand lay upon the throat of thirst. Ira said, “The history of this well and the future of the unnamed planet lie on the same line.”

Far away in a city, Lau Kin-Hung sat in a locked room reading a water-project report. On his screen were the words: “Long-term water-supply rights.” Suddenly the letters changed: “Whose thirst will you sell?” Lau rubbed his eyes. A glass of water stood before him, but his throat was dry. When he reached to drink, he saw a crocodile’s eye in the glass. Thirst can catch foreign investors too, if they trade in thirst.

A new feature opened in Chandrapal Batra’s memorial app: “Water Donation for a Name.” The donation button glittered, but who would receive water, which well would be repaired, whose vessel would be filled—none of it was clear. Devika said, “This is a mule account for thirst.” The children did not laugh; by now they understood that every fraud feeds upon some real deprivation.

The reading of names began beside the well. After each testimony the empty pot was struck once. Tun. Tun. Tun. The sound was never exactly the same—if someone struck a little harder it came thin and sharp; if softly, it seemed to circle somewhere inside before returning. Slowly the sound entered the people. Those who did not remember the caste of

thirst remembered the water pots in their own homes; those who had endured the humiliation of thirst remembered their mothers' feet.

That day Satyavrat Mehta wrote a question for the first time: "Why does justice take so long to reach water?" His hand trembled. In court, water rights, equality and dignity were all present as words; on the well's parapet, the words had bodies. He understood how often the letters of the Constitution dried before reaching the throat.

The discussion of Gangesha's Navya-Nyaya arose again. Gop Kumar said, "If in perception a person is thirsty, in inference caste is the cause of humiliation, and in testimony an old woman is bearing witness, then what is the judgment?" A child answered, "Judgment: water belongs to everyone." Another added, "And memory: the name of the one who withheld water must also be written." Ba said, "Punishment is not only naming the wrongdoer; opening the well is also punishment."

By evening the scrub around the well was cleared. There was no inauguration, no ribbon. The first bucket was lowered by the same old woman whose mother's water pot had been broken. When it came up, the water was muddy. No one recoiled. Ba said, "At first water rises muddy, like memory. Keep drawing; it will clear." The children pulled bucket after bucket.

After ten buckets the water grew clearer. After twenty, a tremor could be heard at the bottom. After thirty, a cool breath rose from within the well. It carried the mixed smell of old stone, moss and water shut away for years—a smell that settled not in the nose but in the chest. The breath travelled to the Channa Grove stump, then to the Coconut-Leaf School, then to the labourer's feet. People said, "The well breathed." Ananya wrote in the register: "The watch of thirst begins."

Meanwhile Raghav Signal was typing into an encrypted group: "The water scene is emotionally powerful; control measures required." But the message would not send. On his screen appeared only the sound of the empty pot—tun. Tun. Tun. A sound cannot be seen, yet in Raghav's guilt impossible things had become possible.

At night the first collective water-reading was held on the rim of the well. No mantra, no caste order. Each person took a palmful of water from the bucket, said their name, and said, "I share thirst." Meera let her water fall to the earth and said, "For those who were not allowed to drink." Devika said, "For those whose thirst was used to defraud them." Ira said, "For those who were sold the dream of water on another planet." Satyavrat said, "For those whom the law heard too late."

From that shared water the green point on the cut Channa Grove stump spread slightly. It was not yet a leaf, only the shine of dampness, but the children saw it and smiled. Old Budhba's Ghost sat across the well. He did not drink; no one knew whether ghosts feel thirst. But he

lifted the empty pot and turned it toward the stump. The moon descended into it.

Before dawn Ananya opened the next page of the register. She wrote, "The name of thirst has been recorded, but the watch of thirst remains incomplete until every well, river, pond, water pot, cloud and tear on Earth is free." Then the empty pot rang once by itself.

Tun.

The darkness gathering in the sky was no longer a rain-cloud; it was a cloud of questions.

FOLK SONG: The Cloud of the Empty Pot

Folk tune: Choumasa

Rain, O cloud, rain upon justice too,

Moisten the threshold of the one whose feet are blistered.

Sawan clouds gathered, yet the pot remained empty,

The pond was locked; thirst became the housewife.

The child dreams of running water, his lips cracked red,

The well says—I belong to everyone; who turned me into property?

Mother dropped two tears into the pot,

Then turned away saying, "Do not drink this."

Cloud, rain not only upon the field, rain upon justice too,

The empty pot rings—quench thirst by giving it a name,

Remove the guard from water; let life reach home.

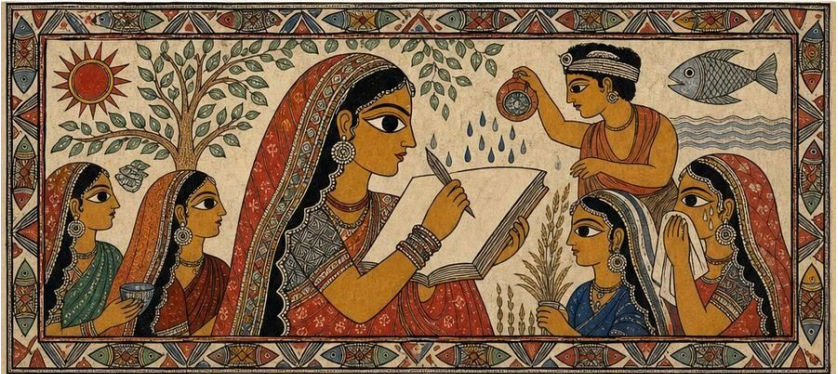


[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—AN INFERENCE WITH NO POSITIVE INSTANCE AND IN WHICH INFERENCE ARISES FROM KNOWLEDGE OF NEGATIVE PERVASION IS PURELY NEGATIVE: Example—“Earth is different from the other eight substances because it possesses smell.” At the end of the dialogue both agreed that an example aids proof only when its relation is clear and free of defect. An inference with no positive instance and arising from knowledge of negative pervasion is purely negative.*]

CHAPTER 129

The Oath of Salt

The oath of salt is the oldest—from a mother's milk to a labourer's sweat, the taste is one.



OPENING FOLK SONG: The True Oath of Salt

Folk tune: auspicious song

Take the oath, take an oath upon a pinch of salt,

Do not betray the one with whom you shared food.

*Hold a pinch of salt and swear by truth,
Honour the thing that gives flavour to the plate.
Salt is labourer's sweat, salt is the essence of soil,
A feast without salt is incomplete, as conduct without truth.*

*Let the oath speak not from fear but responsibility,
Do not forsake the one with whom you shared food.
The true oath of salt says—do not sell trust,
Like a grain, water truth each day in the heart.*

*Salt holds the essence of soil, the taste of sweat,
A meal without salt is like speech without truth.
Take the oath not from fear but responsibility,
Let each grain of truth grow daily in the heart.*



The oath of salt is the oldest—from a mother's milk to a labourer's sweat, the taste is one. Once it reaches the tongue, no scripture is needed to prove it.

Mithila has no sea, yet salt is in every body—in a mother's milk, a labourer's sweat, a woman's tears, and the final dampness of the dead body. It is the same taste.

One in taste, many in humiliation. The salt from the hand that makes bread is pure upon the tongue, while the water pot touched by that

same hand is called impure. Claims of purity repeatedly become theft of labour.

And salt asks for no oath. It simply sits upon the tongue as taste—and whoever understands that taste will take longer to leave the Earth.

After writing the name of thirst, the children understood that a human being is made not only of grain and water. The throat that calls a name also carries the taste of salt—the distant memory of a mother's milk, a labourer's sweat, a woman's tears, the earth of the field, and the invisible salinity inside Mithila far from any sea. There was no sea in Garh Narikel, yet salt lived in every body; therefore Ananya wrote on the next page of the register: "Twenty-fifth watch: the oath of salt."

Ira laughed and asked, "An oath of salt? Oaths are taken on the Gita, on water, on earth, on fire." Ananya said, "Why not on that without whose sweat none of those words can stand?" The question held childhood in it, but also the measuring rod of Gangesha's logic. If perception is required, sweat is perceptible. If inference is required, labour can be inferred from a waving field. If testimony is required, the taste of salt speaks in a mother's weeping. Yet both caste and market had kept this salt nameless.

That day the children placed pinches of salt around the stump. Some came from jars beside household hearths, some from shop packets, some from sacks used for cattle feed, some from old kitchen baskets. Ba opened a pinch tied in the corner of her sari and said, "This salt is the memory of my mother's kitchen. So many years have passed, yet home was recognised by the taste she sprinkled over bread."

Devika brought a bowl of salt from Ujjwal's house. It was ordinary salt, but Ujjwal's mother trembled when she saw it. "Was this from the jar of that day?" Devika nodded. On the day the news from Ujjwal's screen had reached home, lentils were boiling on the hearth. Before salt could be added, the house's voice had stopped. Since then the jar had remained untouched. Now its salt came beside the archive of names.

Meera did not arrange the bowls of salt in any order. "We will not ask the caste of salt. Salt becomes the same taste in the Charmakarini woman's hand, the Brahmin's plate, the labourer's sweat, the widow's tear, the child's lips after play, and the last dampness of the dead body. Why should we arrange it by rank?" Two of Batuknath Hariharan's men watched from a distance. The disorder made them uneasy.

The matter of Gangesha arose again. Ananya opened a copy of a leaf of Tattvacintamani and said, "If logic understands distinctions among things, why does society invent distinctions among human beings? If the fire of evidence burns falsehood, why does the cage of caste survive before evidence?" She looked at the children. "Today salt will be the test.

Whoever says their salt is pure and another's impure must first explain the taste of their own tears."

The memory of the women's night assembly rose at this. An elderly Dalit woman whose name few people called stepped forward and said, "They ate the bread made by my hand, yet would not drink water in my courtyard. My salt was pure on their tongues; my water pot was impure for their hands. What justice is that?" Her voice held the ash of years. Satyavrat Mehta, seated behind, bowed his head. The first sentence on his paper appeared: "Salt testifies that claims of purity are often theft of labour."

Then the labourers wiped their foreheads and extended their hands. Fine lines of sweat shone on their palms. Those lines differed from the palms' own creases—the creases were sunk within, while sweat rested above them, and dust clung to that moisture to redraw the map of the hand. Munna Paswan's brother said, "This salt belongs to our bodies. The one who fell from the bridge left this salt too. His name is not in the file, no compensation in the account, but his sweat remains on the iron pier. Everyone who crosses the bridge walks upon his salt." Aruni remained silent. He was an engineer, but before that sentence his drawings, calculations and estimates seemed small.

At that moment the roots of the stump took on a strange colour. The sunlight grew faintly white. The separate pinches of salt, each in a different bowl, began to glitter in the breeze. A child touched one with a finger and tasted it. "All salt tastes alike." Ba laid a hand on his head. "One in taste, many in humiliation. Remember that."

That day a trader also arrived. His name was clean in the files, his accounts sharp, his speech full of pity. He brought a proposal for a "people's memory product": "Garh Narikel Memory Salt." The packet would carry an image of the Channa stump, a short fragment of the story on the back, and a portion of the profit would go to "rehabilitation." For a moment confusion ran through the crowd. In a poor village, money itself becomes an argument. But Ananya asked, "Where will this salt come from?" The trader replied, "From a certified sea source." The girl asked again, "Will it contain the taste of Ujjwal's mother's lentils left unsalted? The labourer's sweat? The Dalit elder's question? Ba's sari-corner? If not, then it is not memory-salt. It is market-salt."

The trader smiled, but the smile did not last. Behind him a secret message from Raghav had arrived: "Turn emotional material into product, story into flavour, memory into consumption." Devika intercepted the message. She did not read it aloud immediately. First she asked Meera, "Permission?" Meera said, "Where conspiracy lays claim to public memory, it becomes public testimony." Then the message was read. The trader's face spread like paper soaked in lampblack.

From inside the Channa stump came a faint grinding sound, as though the roots were clenching teeth. The children did not tremble. They had learned that memory can become angry, but not as human violence; as warning. Ananya lifted a bowl of salt and placed it beside the stump. "From today salt will not be sold. It will be shared. Whoever comes to read a name will receive a grain of salt—to remember that memory without taste is not a slogan, but the truth of the body."

Together the women made a small oath. It belonged neither to the gods, nor the court, nor scripture, nor a company. It was so simple that the children could repeat it immediately: "We will not forget the labour behind the salt we eat. We will not mock the taste of tears we see. We will not turn a name we hear into a product. In the row where we share bread, we will not keep caste." At the oath the edge of Gangesha's leaf trembled.

Here Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward for the first time. Setting down his paper he said, "In law, an oath is usually a formality for telling the truth. You have made it a responsibility for living truthfully." His voice carried neither official weight nor the excitement of a speech. A little girl gave him a pinch of salt. He held it in his palm for a long time. The warmth of his hand made it slightly moist, so that it clung to his fingers and was no longer easy to brush away. Then he touched it slowly to his tongue. His eyes filled. Perhaps in that taste he found the shame of his own justice that had arrived late.

That evening something strange happened across the village. In every house, as food was cooked, a name was spoken when salt was added. In one house the labourer's name, in another Ujjwal's, in another Gangesha's, in another the Charmakarini woman's, in another the nameless whose name had not been found. At first it seemed a game, then a custom, then memory. In some houses the hand stopped while the name was spoken and the pinch of salt fell beside the plate; no one picked it up, and the white grains remained there. Sprinkling salt on bread, people understood that taste reaches the mouth, but behind taste lies the history of many bodies.

At night a new brochure from the "New Horizon" project arrived. In the list of food systems being prepared for the settlement were the words "flavour-controlled nutrition." Salt measured, water measured, grain measured, feeling measured. Beside every line stood a number and a small green mark indicating that everything lay within limits. Ananya and Ira broke the screen-fast rule just once to look. Ira said, "There is salt there, but no memory." Ananya replied, "Then there will be a tongue, but no taste."

That night kabaddi practice was held. The children drew a line in the soil. One team was called "Salt," the other "Nameless." The game began. Between breaths of "kabaddi-kabaddi," the children added a rule: whoever touched an opponent had to call the opponent's name; whoever

could not call the name could not return. In the first round many lost, many won. But those who lost also received a grain of salt. In this game defeat was not punishment, but practice in remembering.

Old Budhba's Ghost watched from behind the stump. That night he spoke a complete sentence for the first time: "The one who understands the taste of salt takes longer to leave the Earth." At the sentence the submarine made a faint circle in the water. The crocodiles lay still beyond the floodwater, as though they too understood that a body can be chewed, but no teeth can eat memory once it has descended upon the tongue.

Before dawn Ananya closed the register. Beneath the title the final line was written: "Salt does not demand an oath; salt becomes the taste of the oath." As the line was written, a drop of dew gathered on the green shoot of the stump, and after the drop dried, a faint white line remained along the leaf's edge—as though Earth herself had left behind a pinch of salt.

But the watch was not over. Once the oath of salt reached people's mouths, the next attack would come upon the smell of memory. For whatever taste survives, the market then seeks to turn into fragrance. The children still had to learn which smell belonged to home, which to a corpse, which to a field, and which to deception.

FOLK SONG: The Oath of Salt

Folk tune: plaintive auspicious song

Take the oath, take the oath of salt,

Do not leave the hungry alone—that alone fulfil.

A pinch of salt dissolved in mother's milk,

A pinch of salt blossomed from father's sweat.

Tears are salty, the river too is salty,

Do not sell trust, however hard the day.

*Salt was placed in the middle of the plate and all stretched out their
hands,*

No one was master; all bore the oath together.

Whoever eats this salt and then stabs a back,

Their tongue will call their own name through the night.

The oath of salt—we will not leave the hungry alone,

We will not break truth, as we would not break a mother's tears.

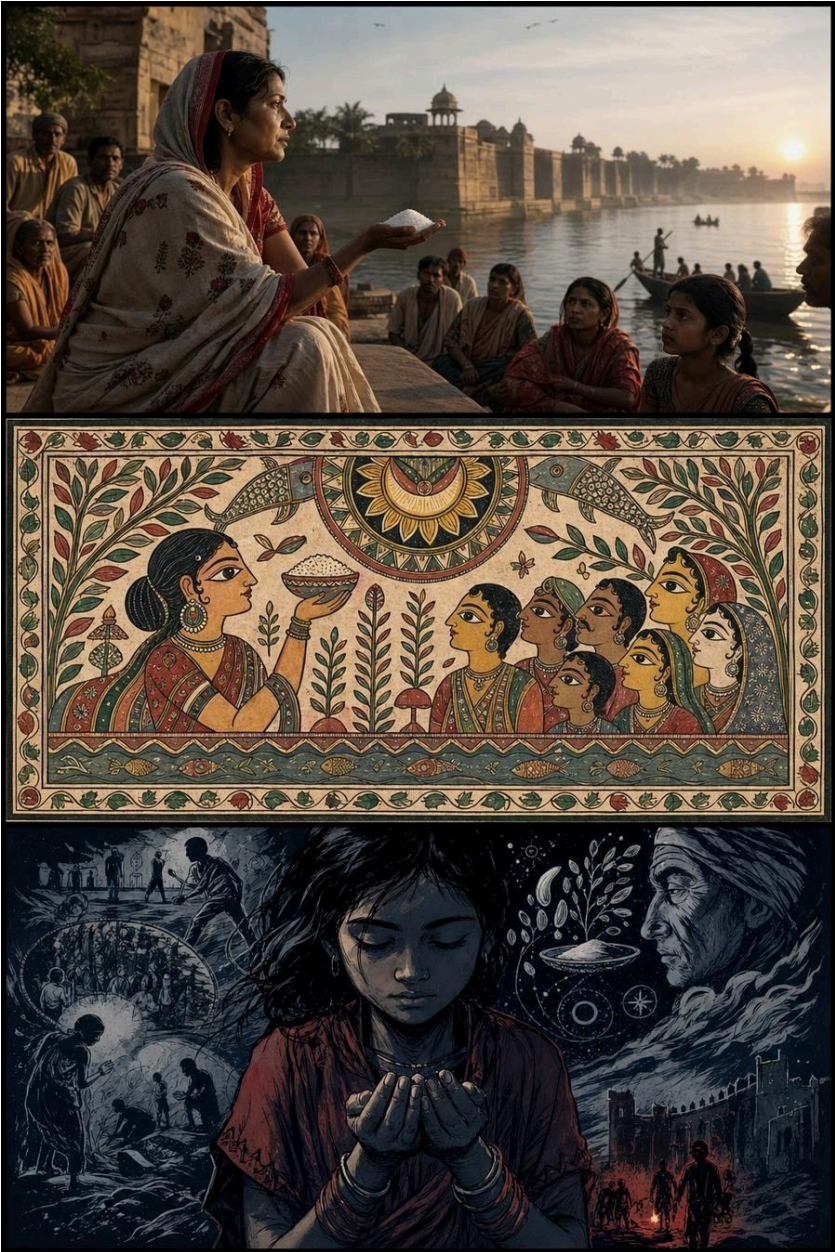


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE TEACHERS HOLD THAT IN THE SENTENCE “WHATEVER POSSESSES SMOKE POSSESSES FIRE...”: The Jara-Mimamsakas say that a Nyaya inference is complete with three members—proposition, reason and example; application and conclusion are unnecessary. The teachers hold that in the sentence “Whatever possesses smoke possesses fire,” repetition of the relative pronoun “whatever” is used to prevent the reason from deviating from the probandum.]

CHAPTER 130

The Justice of Taste

*When taste itself seems changed, know that justice has descended upon
the tongue.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: The Taste of Home Returned

Folk tune: a bright mingling of Sohar and Viraha

The taste has come, the taste of home has returned,

The smell of rice from Mother's hand smiled in the courtyard.

The taste of rice from Mother's hand came home again,

Smoke, salt and mustard oil smiled in the courtyard.

The migrant tongue remembers the fragrance of tulsi,

With one mouthful the ancestral bond of love opens again.

Taste is not merely food; it is memory's house and threshold,

Share it, and belonging grows without measure.

When the taste of home returns, distance melts away,

The affection of one shared plate reconnects forgotten names.

The tempering of mustard oil rose, the fragrance of tulsi filled the air,

On the migrant tongue descended rice heavy with ancestral love.

A village gathered into one mouthful, kinship into one plate,

Shared taste joined again the forgotten tale of names.



The body is not made only of hunger and thirst. It also remembers what taste it received, what taste was taken away, and what taste it was falsely taught to believe.

A code of honour that asks caste before hunger is no honour—it is an insult to the body. Once people sit before a plate, asking “whose hand made this?” ceases to be a question of food and becomes a question of justice.

Taste remains on the tongue, but memory returns through smell. For the one whose kitchen burned, whose field dried up, the name first returns as fragrance.

On the morning after the night of the salt oath, the taste of Garh Narikel seemed changed. The wind moved as before, the water of Kamla-Balan touched the bank as before, the green point on the stump spread little by little as before, yet the first word that came to people's mouths was not about food but justice. Ba said, "We eat salt; therefore we will also accept the justice of salt." After that sentence people fell silent, because the justice of salt feels less like something on the plate and more like something inside the soul.

The watches that had begun after the interlude had now descended into the body. Earth, seed, soil, water, fire, air, sky, word, meaning, throat, silence, memory, body, labour, justice, caste, Gangesha, Tattvacintamani, evidence, rice, grain, hunger, thirst, salt—each had given testimony. Yet the children understood that the body is not made only of hunger and thirst; the body remembers what taste it received, what taste was taken away, and what taste it was made to believe falsely.

That day a collective meal was decided upon in the courtyard of the Coconut-Leaf School. No donation register, no ceremony, no platform. Every household was asked to bring something—flattened rice from one, curd from another, greens, cooked rice, garlic, salt, or merely a handful of uncooked rice. From a household unable to bring anything, the children brought water. Ananya wrote, "One who has no grain still has water; one who has no water still has a name."

Devika sat beside the hearth sorting greens. Whenever a stalk snapped with a soft crack, the tremor travelled into her hand. Meera washed rice with the women. Saumya spread leaves for plates. Ira explained to the children that a row of diners was not separate from a row of memory. Gangesha's question still remained in the air—with whom may one eat, whose hand may one eat from, whose touch is accepted, whose labour remains invisible? The cage of caste had cracked, but the smell of its iron still lay pressed into the soil.

The first dispute rose there. An elder said that if everyone sat in one row, social propriety would be destroyed. The children rose to answer, but Ba stopped them. She placed a plate before the elder and said, "A propriety that asks hunger about caste is no propriety; it is an insult to the body." The elder tried to speak, but at that moment smoke from the hearth curled into his eyes. He asked for water. The water was given by a child from a family whose caste the elder had questioned all his life. The elder drank it. The dining row did not break; the cage creaked a little.

Then a new manoeuvre appeared. Two people from the heritage-project team arrived from a distance carrying baskets. They said, "We will

take Garh Narikel's authentic taste to the world. Channa Grove Memory Feast—special packets.” The baskets held small pouches printed with labels: “Memory Salt,” “Water-Burial Greens,” “Ghost-Kabaddi Flattened Rice.” The plastic shone, the pictures were attractive, but the salt-smell inside was artificial.

Ananya lifted one pouch. She read it, smelled it, then set it on the ground. “Whose taste is this?” she asked. The men replied, “Local identity.” Ananya asked again, “Who was hungry? Who was thirsty? Who took the oath of salt? Whose labourer's sweat is in this plastic?” Silence. The children did not laugh; they knew it was easy to mock the market's lie, but difficult to stop it. When the plastic pouch was squeezed, its crackle was so sharp that people nearby started—but behind that sound no smell came.

Satyavrat Mehta sat at the very back of the row that day. A leaf-plate was placed before him too. A child asked, “Will you eat first?” He lowered his head. “After those whose names were eaten. After those whose grain was taken. After those cooking with their own hands.” A soft murmur rose among the women: “Then sit at the end.” Satyavrat sat at the last leaf-plate. His office had moved behind again; his body had entered the row for the first time.

The meal began. Before the first mouthful Ba said, “Names.” Everyone fell silent. Then names were spoken one by one—the labourer, the young man drowned in digital fraud, the body held by a hospital bill, the woman of water-burial, the love despised for caste, the Charmakarini woman, Gangesha, the nameless. After each name, one mouthful. The meal abruptly ceased to be ritual; it became an archive of the body. As each mouthful entered the mouth, eyes filled with tears, because taste was becoming the smallest and most concentrated evidence of memory.

Meera saw that women's justice of taste was different. Many women said, “We serve everyone first; at the end we eat what remains.” Devika wrote in the register: “Without justice in serving, justice of taste is incomplete.” A rule was made that day: whoever cooks must taste first; whoever serves must sit in the row; whoever comes as a guest must pour water over the memory-stone while washing hands.

Ira made notes for a letter to children abroad. She wrote, “The taste of a village does not live in a cookbook. Without seating together the hands once forbidden, the bodies once kept outside the dining row, and the names once silenced during meals, ‘the taste of Mithila’ is a lie.” Then she stopped her pen. Perhaps this was not a letter, but the next lesson.

The memory of Gangesha entered that meal strangely. Fine lines seemed to shine upon grains of rice like the script on a leaf of Tattvacintamani. One child asked, “Is taste perception?” Another replied,

“Yes, but the proof of taste is not the tongue alone; the silence of the one who received no share is also evidence.” A third said, “Inference—the mouthful of one who always feeds others and eats last carries the taste of exhaustion.” The children had made Nyaya not a game, but a lesson of the plate.

Near the green point of the stump a separate row was made—for the crocodiles. No one actually intended to feed them; it was symbolic. On that leaf lay a mouthful of rice, grains of salt, a drop of water, and one empty place. Ba said, “We will try to understand the hunger even of that which chewed bodies, so that we may regard it not merely as a monster but as a terrible question in the world.” A shiver passed through many bodies. Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles was taking on another difficult meaning—question within destruction, liberation within question.

The heritage-team men offered another proposal: “We can make this meal a regular event, with tickets and hygienic management.” Ananya replied, “One who has not understood hunger will not manage the meal. One who has not sat breaking caste will not arrange the row. One who has not heard the names will not touch the salt.” The men left looking not defeated, but perplexed. The market had not lost; it was thinking of its next move.

After the meal the leaf-plates were taken to the riverbank. They were not thrown away; they were buried in the soil beside the memory of water. Gop Kumar said, “The paper register will remain, but the register of leaves will remain in the earth.” The children made a small letter on each leaf—K, N, J, Bh, P, M—no complete word, only signs. The lines repeatedly broke along the leaf-veins, so everyone wrote with a very light hand. If anyone dug up a leaf, they would have to complete the word themselves.

By evening the hearth was cold. Inside its ash appeared a strange sign—neither a letter nor a picture. Meera looked and said, “This is a sign of smell.” Everyone was surprised. She explained, “Taste remains on the tongue, but memory returns through smell. For the one whose kitchen burned, whose body burned in a hospital, whose field dried up, the name first arrives as smell.”

At that moment a faint smoke rose from the cut Channa stump. There was no fire, no ash, yet there was fragrance—the smell of wet leaves, old salt, labourer’s sweat, the riverbank, and cooking from somewhere far away. The smell did not stay in one place; it arrived and withdrew, and after it withdrew what remained was not fragrance but the memory of fragrance. The children opened the register. On the next page Ananya wrote: “Twenty-seventh watch: the testimony of smell.”

The justice of taste was complete here, but the smell remaining after the meal said that memory was now taking the road from mouth to nose, from plate to home, and from home to history.

FOLK SONG: Home Dwelling in Taste

Folk tune: mingled Sohar-Viraha

Know, O tongue, know your own home,

Within false fragrance, weave the smoke of truth.

Where has the taste of rice from Mother's hand gone?

Market perfume has come—has the smell of home become a game?

Mustard oil, hearth-smoke, slices of green mango—

Ancestors speak in these, not in pilfered flavour alone.

The taste that survives, the market comes to sell as fragrance,

Again it sets up shop upon memory's threshold.

The child closes his eyes and says—this is rice from my home,

In one mouthful: mother, field, labour and rain.

The justice of taste—let every tongue recognise its home,

Again the market has settled upon memory's threshold.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—THE BHATTA VIEW: THE RELATION OF APPREHENSION IS QUALIFICATION, THAT IS, A SELF-LINKING RELATION: Other teachers hold that, after denying conjunction as the relevant relation, inherence can be established as a component of the relation of sensory apprehension through this inference:

“Sound, soundness, colour and the like are connected with the senses because, like a pot, they are perceptible.” The Bhatta view: the relation of apprehension is qualification, that is, a self-linking relation.]

CHAPTER 131

The Common Plate

The salt of a common plate colours every tongue the same.



OPENING FOLK SONG: One Plate, One Moon

Folk tune: Sama-Chakeva

Play, sister, play Sama-Chakeva,

Let the moon of one plate circle every courtyard again.

The moon descends into one plate and looks upon everyone alike,

Sama says—share grain, affection, and love equally.

Chakeva spreads his wings with the sweet message of fellowship,

Let brothers, sisters, and neighbours share one world together.

The plate is round as the moon; nowhere is there division,

Whoever is hungry comes first—caste and rank mean nothing.

One plate, one moon, one courtyard's love,

Through the Sama-Chakeva song, Mithila's world is joined.

A brother's love, a sister's blessing, the tattler's mouth falls silent,

*Carrying the lamp-plate of fellowship, courtyard after courtyard
shines.*

Whoever is hungry first receives the first morsel,

Forget caste and rank in the moon's clear light.



It is easy to hear the stories of hunger and thirst separately; it is difficult to sit and eat from the same plate. However often the cage of caste is said to be broken, its wires begin to gleam again at mealtime.

In kabaddi you must touch and return; at the plate you must touch and remain. It is there that the difference between game and life begins.

And the name of the one who could not sit must also be written down. If the one who prevents it is left unnamed, the next generation will accept that same fear as religion.

After the justice of taste, a question arose in Garh Narikel: if justice can descend upon the tongue, can it descend into the plate as well? The oath of salt had been taken, the names of thirst written, the names of hunger called aloud; yet people quickly understood that it was easy to hear the stories of hunger and thirst separately, difficult to sit and eat from the same plate. However much the cage of caste was said to have been broken, its wires began to gleam again at mealtime.

Ananya read the line in the Constitution of Names—"The body shall not be humiliated"—and added, "When the body eats, humiliation is recognised most quickly." Ba smiled softly, but there was pain in her smile. "Child," she said, "people here can sit with ghosts, yet tremble at sitting in a row with a living human being."

Preparations for the common meal began. Devika and Meera went from house to house. Someone gave flattened rice, someone curd, someone jaggery, someone rice, greens, vegetables, or only fire from an earthen stove. Drops of water gathered on the outside of the curd pot and made the grip slip again and again. A house with little grain gave water. One that could not give water washed leaves. The children entered every household's contribution in the register along with its name, for this was not charity but participation.

But as the preparations grew, fear too began to uncover itself. Some whispered, "Eat with everyone? From which vessels? In what row? Will the elders at home allow it?" Others argued, "Memory is all right, justice is all right, but rules of food are a separate matter." At the words "a separate matter," Gangesha's question descended once more. The children asked, "If justice stops at the plate, whose body does that justice belong to?"

That day a leaf bearing the name of Gangesha Upadhyaya was placed on the edge of the stump. On it was written: "Perception." Beside it another leaf: "Inference." A third: "Testimony." A fourth: "Comparison." A fifth: "Food." Someone said, "Where does food belong among the means of knowledge?" Ananya replied, "Where the body is humiliated, the body itself becomes evidence." Satyavrat Mehta sat behind them and listened. The sentence entered his ears not as a section of law but as a current of life.

By noon broad leaves had been spread near the stump of Channa Grove. There were no chairs, no raised seats. At first the children formed rows, then erased them. They made a circle, with the stump, the stones of names, and a small lamp in the middle. The circle of food was different from the circle of a court; here judgment would rise not from above but from the equal ground beneath every body.

The first crisis came when an elderly Brahmin, who attended the Festival of Names every day, stopped at the edge of a leaf-plate. He had

nothing to say. His eyes fell on a young man from the leather-workers' hamlet who had been pouring water over the roots of Channa Grove. Sweat covered the old man's face. Slowly he said, "I can listen, but to eat..." The sentence remained unfinished.

At that moment Ba stood. Everyone thought she would say something in the name of religion, but Ba placed her walking stick beside the young man's leaf and sat down next to him herself. Looking toward the old Brahmin, she said, "You honour Gangesha in scripture and fear his life? You hear the story of his marriage to a Charmakarini, save the scripture, and hide the woman—this is not justice; it is the hypocrisy of hunger."

A tremor ran through the crowd. The name of Gangesha Upadhyaya rang in the air. Many were hearing the story for the first time like this, before a plate. Tattvacintamani, Navya-Nyaya, perception, inference—these words had lived in schools and on the tongues of pandits; now they were being tested in curd and flattened rice, greens and rice, and a row damp with sweat.

The old Brahmin sat down trembling. His hand came to rest on the leaf, but his fingers stopped before touching the food. Ananya came near. She did not compel him. She only asked, "Shall I write down the name of your fear?" The old man started. After a long while he said, "Lineage." Ananya wrote in the register: "Fear: lineage." Then she asked, "And the name of your hunger?" The old man's eyes filled. He whispered, "Human." Ananya wrote: "Hunger: human."

When those two lines had been written, the old man touched the food. No music sounded, no slogan rose. But the green point on the stump of Channa Grove gleamed a little more brightly. The young man from the leather-workers' hamlet quietly pushed one corner of his leaf toward him. "My mother cooked these greens." The old man pushed his jaggery toward him. "My grandson brought this." In that tiny exchange, years of distance trembled.

But the walls within everyone did not fall at once. Some stepped back. Some women, who carried the burden of household honour, stood at a distance and began to weep softly. Their hearts wanted to sit, but the voices at home, fear of fathers-in-law, the rules of husband and lineage, the smell of caste—all held their feet. Meera went to them. "If you cannot sit, that too will be recorded," she said. "We need the name of what stops you."

One woman said, "Home." Another, "Shame." A third, "The rice vessel." A fourth, "My daughter's marriage." A fifth, "The village's tongue." The children wrote all these names in the register. The watch over the common plate belonged not only to those who sat but also to

those who could not. For if justice does not record unfinished fear, the next generation will again accept that fear as religion.

Chandrapal Batra watched from a distance. To him the plate looked like a business opportunity—"community meal," "harmony festival," "donation receipt." But when he began calculating, his screen showed not figures but a drop of greens resting on a leaf. In that drop rose a scene from his childhood: at school he had been made to sit in a separate row, and he had avenged that humiliation by erasing his name and earning money. He trembled. Sometimes what frightens a criminal more than his sin is the original humiliation from which it grew.

Batuknath Hariharan found the scene most uncomfortable of all. In legal debate he could speak about caste, rights, tradition, reform—everything. But the meeting of two hands over one leaf was making his speech useless. He thought to himself: under which section can a case be filed against such a scene? It was neither contempt nor unlawful assembly nor violence. It was only eating. Yet in that "only" his entire legal trickery became trapped.

Satyavrat Mehta sat in the last row. A leaf was placed before him, but before he began eating he asked for the register. He wrote: "Today the question of justice has entered the plate. A mouth that reads law must first learn equality in food." He put down the pen. Food was served on his leaf. On one side sat a child whose father had been ruined by digital fraud; on the other, the wife of an elderly labourer. Between those two bodies, the last height of Satyavrat's office dissolved.

The meal began. Flattened rice softened in curd, jaggery broke, the smell of greens rose, steam from rice drifted toward the stump. The steam did not rise in one place; it turned now to one side, now another. The stones on which names were written seemed not sun-warmed but damp with steam. To the touch they were exactly as warm as any body would be—neither more nor less; and for one instant they seemed not stones but someone sitting silently. Some thought they heard the souls drowned in water-burial saying, "The body is gone, but taste has returned." Crocodiles could chew a body; the common plate could rebuild the body's dignity.

During the meal the children did not begin kabaddi. They were not holding their breath but slowly joining breaths together. One child whispered, "In kabaddi you touch and return; at a plate you touch and remain." At these words the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost seemed to shimmer behind the stump. Perhaps he liked this new rule.

When the meal ended, the leaves were not immediately cleared away. First every remaining grain was gathered. Ba said, "What remains is not waste; call it an offering." The grains were mixed into the soil. Once in the earth they could no longer be seen separately—but the hands that

mixed them stayed there for a long time. Those who had not been able to sit later poured water on that soil. Social fear did not break at once, but that day its name was written. Once fear is named, its kingdom is no longer as dark as before.

By evening the register page was full. At the top Ananya wrote: "Twenty-seventh watch: The Common Plate." Beneath it she added a line: "Where caste stops the plate, justice eats incompletely." Meera read it and said, "That will be the first sentence of the next lesson." Devika added, "And the first paper of the next struggle."

At night, after everyone had gone, a faint smell of curd, the green mark of leafy vegetables, the sweetness of jaggery, and the oath of salt remained around the stump. The stars were clear. The unnamed planet of the dream shone far away like such a cold point that the eye turned aside almost of itself, as if astonished that on Earth people fought so difficult a struggle merely to eat together. The new shoot of Channa Grove stirred in answer: "Yes. The hardest science of life lives in this plate."

And that night Garh Narikel understood openly for the first time: liberation is not only the ability to hear a name, but also the ability to receive the same taste upon the same earth.

FOLK SONG: The Moon of One Plate

Folk tune: Sama-Chakeva

Do not set, O moon, moon of one plate, do not set,

With the food, let the distances between human beings melt.

The moon descended into one plate and looked equally upon everyone,

Caste, wealth, and the lines of thresholds slowly disappeared.

Whose hand made the bread, whose house gave the salt—

Eating together, we understood that every tear has the same blood.

At the first morsel the old man's hand trembled,

Years of distance were measured in that tiny bite.

A child laughed; a mother quietly wet her veil,

And remembered the one beside whom she still could not sit.

Moon of one plate, do not set through the night.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—*Tattvacintamani: The Theory of the Power to Burn*: “Where one of these two is absent, the qualified jewel is absent; and where the qualified jewel is present, neither of the two is absent.” This rule of concomitant absence is established by experience. *Tattvacintamani: The Theory of the Power to Burn.*]

CHAPTER 132

The Republic of the Kitchen

Where the plate is shared, fear is halved.



OPENING FOLK SONG: The Republic of the Kitchen

Folk tune: Hearth-and-Kitchen Song

Prepare the hearth, prepare the republic's hearth,

Equal work, equal honour—teach everyone this truth.

*Three stoves, one fire, smoke of the same colour,
In the republic of the kitchen, everyone belongs equally.*

*One cuts vegetables, one brings water,
One bakes bread, one sings a song.*

*Equal honour for work, food a shared right,
The hearth and kitchen teach the practice of democracy.
The republic of the kitchen says—service is not servitude,
In food cooked together lives the citizenship of love.*

*One peels vegetables, one rolls bread,
One brings water, one brings song—none greater, none smaller.
Service is not servitude, but the custom of shared love,
In food cooked together lives democracy's affection.*



Where the plate is shared, fear is halved. But a shared plate does not by itself make a shared kitchen—and if caste remains bound inside the kitchen, the sharing of the plate becomes only a festival.

The fire inside the house is no less cruel than the court outside. The body that ploughs the field is, in many homes, told that food made by its hands is impure; the woman who feeds everyone all day is asked about her own hunger last.

The real test of justice is not at the feast but when the dirty vessels must be washed. That is where one learns who came only to eat and who came to remain together.

So the rule is simple: whoever eats must cook; whoever cooks must eat; whoever eats must wash; and the hand that washes is sacred.

The night of the common plate passed, but its taste remained not merely on people's tongues but in their decisions. Those who had feared for years to sit and eat together had touched salt on the same leaf that night. At dawn, when water spread by the pond for washing hands, no hand could be distinguished from another. Earth, salt, water, and grain had left the same colour in every palm-line.

But if justice reaches the plate, its next destination is the kitchen. Meera said this first. "If caste remains bound in the kitchen," she said, "the sharing of the plate will remain only a festival." At these words the leafless shadow of the Channa stump trembled slightly. The children opened the register. On a new page Ananya wrote: "The Test of the Kitchen."

The old kitchens of Garh Narikel each held a different history: food cooked on raised verandas, labourers' rice at the back, reserved earthen cups, rules of untouchability, a widow's bland meal, bread made by a servant woman's hand and the master's suspicion. The fire inside the house was no less cruel than the court outside. The very body that ploughed the field had its cooked food called impure in many homes. The woman who filled every stomach all day was asked about her own hunger last.

Saumya said, "If memory does not eat, it will not survive." Devika added, "And if memory is offered only in the shrine but never enters the kitchen, society's body will lie again." Ba laughed. "Child, the real test of justice is not at the feast but when the dirty vessels must be washed." The children stopped short. Until now the Constitution of Names had contained no article about washing dishes.

It was decided that a people's kitchen would be built around the Channa stump that day. No household would have a separate stove. Everyone would bring what they could—grain, spices, lentils, greens, water, milk, salt, oil, firewood. But there was one condition: the story of every thing brought would also be told. Grain was not merely an object; behind it lived field, sweat, debt, caste, women's labour, river water, and the grip of the market.

The first sack of rice arrived. When it was set on the ground, a thin cloud of dust rose from beneath it and floated for a long while in a shaft of sunlight. The old farmer who brought it said, "This rice is from the field where debris from the bridge project lay for two years." The second sack held flattened rice; a widow said, "With this chura I kept my three

children alive during the flood year.” In the third basket were greens. A young woman from the leather-workers’ settlement said, “The seed came from my mother’s hands, but in many homes greens grown by my mother’s hands were not eaten.”

When that sentence hung in the air, Gangesha’s name rose by itself. The question of caste had now come to the kitchen fire. Ananya asked, “If Gangesha reflects on reality, then what is the reality of food? Is untouchability its evidence, or hunger?” No one answered at once. Old Budhba’s Ghost appeared in the smoke—this time not laughing but grave.

The story of Gangesha was told again—the folk dispute over his birth five years after his father’s death, his marriage to a Charmakarini woman, the weight of Tattvacintamani said to equal twelve thousand books, the birth of Navya-Nyaya. But today the story was told not from a pandit’s seat but beside a kitchen cauldron. The question was no longer on which historical page each episode was proved. The question was why society worships a thinker while hiding the inconvenient parts of his life.

An elderly Brahmin, who had at first sat far away, slowly came toward the fire. His hands were trembling. He had brought ghee from home, but had not had the courage to offer it. “In my lineage,” he said, “there was a rule that food from certain hands must not be touched.” The young woman from the leather-workers’ settlement watched him. The old man continued, “Today this ghee will go into the pot holding the greens grown from her seed.” His voice was not forgiveness but an admission of shame.

When the ghee fell into the pot, the smell of the greens deepened. For a moment everyone was silent, because the hiss that rose when the ghee struck was the clearest sound in the whole crowd. Many eyes grew wet. The kitchen smoke that day was no ordinary smoke; it seemed to scrape soot from the walls of many lineages as it rose. No one chanted a mantra, no one made a declaration. The stove merely simmered, and the children wrote: “Evidence: the smell changed.”

Women remained central to the cooking, but this time the men were not permitted merely to eat. They were assigned cutting, washing, grinding, blowing the fire, scrubbing vessels, clearing ash, and giving water to the children. Some men were uncomfortable at first. Aruni laughed: “If we can build a bridge, why can’t we wash a small cooking pot?” There was humour in the laugh, but shame as well.

Meera made a rule: “No one’s work shall be called low. Whoever says such a thing must read the watch over his own name again.” Devika said, “The right of the body is not only protection from violence; it includes respect for labour.” Saumya added, “No cameras in the kitchen. This scene is not for viewing but for living.” The Harvard research team took

notes from afar, but this time they were permitted to sit by the inner stove, not to write about it.

By noon the Republic of the Kitchen had taken shape: five stoves, seven cauldrons, water from three caste-settlements, grain from four hamlets, salt from two widows, firewood from a Musahar boy, greens from the Charmakarini young woman, ghee from the old Brahmin, rice from a labourer, oil brought by Meera, lentils from Devika, dried fruit Ira had brought from abroad, and Ba's pickle. The fragrance they made together could be given no surname.

When it was time to serve, another question arose: who first? In the old society, lineage, age, gender, office, guest-status, religion, and wealth had decided. The children conferred. At last Ananya said, "First shall eat the one whose name has never been written anywhere." The first leaf was placed before the anonymous stone. No body ate the food, but steam rose from the plate. Everyone remained silent.

After that came widows, labouring families, children, elders, women, men, outsiders, researchers, even animals and birds in their turn. No one sprinkled ritual water on the head, no vessel was kept separate. Those who stayed away for fear of untouchability were not forced. The children said, "Justice does not feed by coercion; it asks the name of fear." Two people sat apart, but the smell of the food reached them.

Batuknath Hariharan saw the scene in a dream, not in bodily presence. The leaves in his dream-court fluttered. He saw that every legal provision he had twisted had become a leaf in people's hands. On one was written: "Untouchability: unproven fear." On another: "Food: shared perception." On a third: "Justice: the first plate belongs to the one once denied food." Hariharan woke with the taste of ash in his mouth.

In a distant city Chandrapal Batra opened his food-delivery screen. Suddenly beside every dish he saw not a price but the farmer's name, the labour of the woman who cooked it, the oath of salt, and the history of caste prohibitions. Alarmed, he shut the screen. The screen went dark, but hunger did not. For the first time he understood that one who had profited from society's hunger had himself become a tasteless human being.

In Lau Kin-Hung's "New Horizon" meal-plan, every food had been reduced to numbered nutrient pills. That night the smell of Garh Narikel's kitchen entered his dream. His promotional dream had no provision for smell. Alarmed, he asked, "What data is this?" The answer came: "Not data—the memory of food cooking." For the first time he understood that in a nameless world hunger can be removed, but taste cannot be born.

Then came the washing of vessels after the meal. Here the real test was hidden. The children watched. Those who had spent their lives being

ordered to clear other people's plates were made to sit down. Those who called themselves high-born were given water, ash, scouring earth, and the work of washing. One or two faces fell, but Ba said, "Whoever cannot wash a vessel cannot write justice." The scratches left beneath the pots by the ash were clearly felt under the fingertips—and through them the brass began to show its true colour again.

That sentence became a new article in the Constitution of Names. Ananya wrote: "Law of the Republic of the Kitchen: whoever eats shall cook; whoever cooks shall eat; whoever eats shall wash; whoever washes, that hand is sacred." The children repeated it together. The green point on the stump flickered.

By evening washed vessels were drying around the Channa stump. Leaves were buried in the earth, ash taken to the fields, remaining food given to animals and birds. There was no rubbish, no humiliation of leftovers. But something remained: a question. Had the common plate demolished society's walls, or opened only a one-day crack? The children knew the walls could rise again. So the register was not closed.

At night the stones of names lay in the grey light of extinguished cooking ash. Old Budhba's Ghost emerged from behind the stump and picked up a dry leaf. Nothing remained upon it except a fine line of salt. The line was so thin that it was less visible than tangible under a fingertip—a roughness that seemed to enter beneath the nail. Old Budhba did not lick the salt; he rubbed it across his forehead. Then, vanishing into the air, he said, "The next test is no longer of leftovers, but of seed and ash."

Ananya opened the next page. Its heading remained blank. Yet everyone understood that the Republic of the Kitchen was not merely a chapter about filling the stomach; it was the beginning of rebuilding society's body. And when the remaining ash returned to the field, the decision would sprout again.

FOLK SONG: The Republic of the Kitchen

Folk tune: Hearth-and-Kitchen Song

Make the circle, make it round as bread,

Let the warmth of the hearth reach the poor person's home.

Three stoves, one fire in one place,

No household's private smoke—one shared name for all.

One hand kneads flour, another stirs lentils,

A third prepares the plate of an unnamed sister.

A seed remained in the ash; in the seed lives another dawn,

The kitchen threshold broke open into the people's door.

Whoever eats together will also sow the field together,

A republic against hunger—no throne, no merchant-lord.

Hearth, let your warmth reach the poor person's home,

Make one circle for everyone, round as bread.

Three stoves burned with one fire in one place,

No household's private smoke—a shared name was born.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Some scholars propose this: in the second alternative, positive grass, wood, and the absences of jewels cannot be reduced to the mere absence of one another; otherwise the same blade of grass would have to be accepted as wood and as jewel as well. By the end of the dialogue both sides agreed that an example aids proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Some scholars further propose that where no means is available for knowing causality, mere deviation becomes an obstacle to knowledge of causality.]

CHAPTER 133

The Invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival

An invitation is answered not with drums, but with preparation.



OPENING FOLK SONG: The Stage's First Drum

Folk tune: Pamariya dance-song

Beat the drum, beat the stage's first drum,

Let the buried story come upon the dancing foot.

*The first stroke of the drum falls—come, speak your name,
The stage is not a distant palace; let it live in the village square.*

*Let the story once suppressed arrive in the dancer's steps,
Laughter, question, and testimony together create a new theatre.*

*The Pamariya circles and says—the witness too has a part,
When art joins the people, the stain of silence breaks.*

*The first drum of the stage awakens courage,
Every untold life begins to write its role.*

*The Pamariya spins and spins, ankle-bells ringing bright,
The boundary between witness and performer breaks again and
again.*

*Laughter, question, and testimony weave a new colour,
Even the unspoken life reads its own story upon the stage.*



A summary is like a crocodile: it chews the body and leaves the bones. A play needs a body, not bones alone. So the task is not to shorten one hundred and thirty-two chapters, but to give them breath.

In this story the hero is not the one with the longest speech, nor the villain the one who laughs in darkness. The real character is breath. When a breath broke, a name was sought; when the name was found, that person was called Present.

And the villain must not be turned into a clown. Once made comic, the crime becomes light, and the audience laughs and goes home.

The smoke of the Republic of the Kitchen had not yet fully cleared when a letter arrived at Garh Narikel's new chaupal. In red letters it said: "Videha Theatre Festival." Below, in smaller type, was an invitation: Garh Narikel should bring its story to the stage. The story that had breathed among water, stump, stones, screens, caste, hunger, thirst, salt, grain, justice, and planets was now to speak before everyone as theatre.

At first there was a stir when the letter was read, then silence. The paper was new—its edges still sharp, and in the hand it felt stiff, as if no sweat had yet touched it. For the villagers, theatre was not entertainment. In the previous year they had watched a procession of false ghosts turn into the hearing of real names. This time the danger returned twice over: if the story went to the stage, might it again become decoration, lighting, applause, and posters? Might water-burial, both destruction of the body and inner release, be reduced to a single evening's programme?

Holding the letter, Ananya sat beside the stump. "There will be a play," she said, "but it will be acted only by those who can hold their breath." The adults did not understand. The children did. The kabaddi players, who had touched the line of breath between Earth and the unnamed planet of dream, would become the actors. Only one who could feel the tremor of a name inside the breath of "kabaddi" could speak the dialogue of testimony.

Professional theatre groups and outside organisers were startled by this decision. They had plans for scenery, smoke, lighting, curtains, costumes, announcements, and tickets. But the children of Garh Narikel said, "First the game; the stage later." For in this story the hero was not the one who spoke the longest speech, nor the villain the one who laughed in darkness. The true character was breath. When breath broke, a name was sought. When the name was found, the answer was Present.

Aruni asked, "How can one hundred and thirty-two chapters be brought to the stage?" Ba replied, "Do not call them chapters—call them acts. What has passed was a chapter in a book; on the stage it becomes an act." So the earlier one hundred and thirty-two chapters began to receive new names one by one. First act—The Darkness of Channa Grove. Second—The Soil of Vines and Shoots. Third—The Water at the Bridge. Fourth—Thirty Names, Three Hundred Corpses. Then dates, Harvard, breath, screen, body, privacy, the black river of money, Gangesha's question, the justice of grain, the Republic of the Kitchen—everything began entering the play.

But Ananya said clearly, "This will not become a summary." A summary is like a crocodile—it chews the body and leaves only the bones. A play needs a body, not bones alone. Every act would contain one scene,

one name, one pause, and one breath. If a chapter contained an offender, the offender would have a place; if it contained a dead person, that voice would have a place; if it contained only water, the water itself would receive light.

Devika spread out the papers and sat down. Ira sat with her. Meera kept writing "the right of the gaze" on a separate sheet. Satyavrat Mehta listened from a distance. He wanted to ensure that the legal scene in the play would not be wrong. But he remained silent. By now he had learned that truth is born first in people's throats and only later enters legal language.

The kabaddi players began practising. They drew a circle on the field, but this time the line did not stop in the soil. One line went around the stump, one beside the stones of names, one through a stream of water, one through kitchen smoke, one toward the sky. Whoever entered had to hold breath while speaking the name of an earlier chapter. "Water-burial," "Present," "Tattvacintamani," "Privacy," "Salt," "Planet," "Watch"—kabaddi began among these words.

The first player entered saying "Channa Grove." His body bent as though a branch were touching his head. Yet there was no branch above him—and precisely because it was absent, the bending showed more sharply. A second shouted "Crocodile" and ran toward the water, yet his feet did not leave the earth. A third said "Gangesha" and stopped; before crossing the line he was asked, "What is evidence?" He answered, "The body is evidence, humiliation is evidence, love too is evidence." The children did not clap. They wrote: "Dialogue found."

The representative of the Videha Theatre Festival grew uneasy watching the rehearsal. "Is the script ready?" he asked. Ananya said, "The breath is being prepared first. The script will be written in the next part." He asked again, "When is the performance?" Ba laughed. "Haste belongs in theatre; not in testimony."

With that answer, the sequence was settled. This chapter would remain the chapter of invitation and decision. The next part would be the dramatic script, where the bodies of earlier acts would be written. The act after that would be the performance, where the kabaddi players would act and ghosts, children, tricksters, water, crocodiles, Gangesha, Satyavrat, Meera, Ira, Devika, Lau, Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Broom, and the unnamed dream-planet would meet within one breath. After that, the story would move on again.

But because the story was going into dramatic form, its watch had to become stricter. Meera said, "No scene of anyone's grief without that person's permission." Devika added, "The one whose name was never found gets the first seat." Ira wrote, "Foreign audiences will listen first

and claim understanding later.” Gop Kumar said, “No copy of data onstage—only testimony accepted by the people.”

There was a special debate over Gangesha’s name. Someone said, “It is difficult to turn Tattvacintamani into dialogue.” A child answered, “That is not difficult; giving justice a body is difficult.” It was decided that Gangesha would enter the stage not carrying a book but carrying a question. His birth, caste, love, marriage to a Charmakarini woman, the killing of memory, and justice would all appear by suggestion, but without fear. The face of a society that worships thought while killing life would be opened onstage.

Choosing an actor for Batuknath Hariharan was difficult. One wanted to play him as a schemer, another began mimicking him with laughter. Ananya stopped them. “Do not make the villain a clown. When he becomes a clown, the crime becomes light.” At last the role went to a quiet, slow kabaddi player who spoke very little. His task was to lower his eyes after every line, so the audience could see when law’s feet begin to slip.

Chandrapal’s role went to the young man who had once cried while reading his father’s name in the procession of false ghosts. He objected: “Must I become a fraudster again?” Devika said, “You will not become a fraudster; you will show the emptiness inside a human being who becomes one.” He agreed. Raghav would be played by two people—one speaking, one disappearing—because Raghav had always lived between message and silence.

Lau Kin-Hung’s role caused the most laughter. The children asked, “Will he speak Maithili?” Ba replied, “Greed understands every language but honours none. Give him fewer lines and more silence.” Onstage he would hold a shining glass bowl into which names fell but coins made no sound.

Satyavrat Mehta asked, “Who will play me?” Everyone was silent. After a long while, a boy who always sat at the back raised his hand. “I will,” he said, “because I speak little.” Satyavrat watched him. Relief entered his eyes: his role had been understood not as speech but as listening.

Night fell. Rehearsal ended, but the field did not empty. The names of earlier chapters were written not on stones but on sound. Each kabaddi player softly repeated the name of his or her act. So many voices moved together that no single name could be heard separately—but whenever someone tired and stopped, the place left by that missing voice became briefly perceptible as a hollow. “First Breath,” “Second Breath,” “Archive of Silence,” “The Name After the Body,” “The Weight of Witness,” “Intermission,” “Morning After Erosion,” “Gangesha’s Question,”

“Kabaddi Among Planets,” “The Republic of the Kitchen”—all these began floating in the air like the first seeds of a play.

The new shoot on the stump of Channa Grove moved gently. There was no wind. Its movement was so slight that the eye doubted itself as soon as it caught it—had it truly moved, or did looking make it seem so? Old Budhba’s Ghost watched and said, “A stage is also a grove. If its roots are false, the leaves become applause. If its roots are true, the leaves become names.” The children decided to place this sentence at the beginning of the dramatic script.

The letter from the Videha Theatre Festival was laid beside the stump and held down with a stone on which was written: “The invitation too shall testify.” It was decided that before the play went onstage, the names of the letter, permission, money, audience, camera, and light would all be questioned. For when turning a story into theatre, the first thing to be examined is the intention of the theatre.

In the last watch Ananya opened a blank page. At the top she wrote: “Dramatic Script: Part One.” Then the pen stopped. She looked toward the children, the kabaddi players, the shoot on the cut tree, Satyavrat’s silence. Whose should the first line be? The dead person’s? The ghost’s? Water’s? Gangesha’s?

Then a faint voice came from the water’s edge: “Do not put darkness on the stage; put water there.” Everyone understood that before the play began, the stage must be washed. Ananya wrote the first line: “Water fills the centre of the stage; whoever enters must first speak the name of his own reflection.”

The chapter did not end with that line; it opened the door of the dramatic script. In the next part the script of the earlier one hundred and thirty-two acts would be written, in the following act it would be performed, and afterward Garh Narikel would continue its story—because kabaddi never stops; the game only changes form.

FOLK SONG: The Invitation to the Play

Folk tune: Pamariya dance-song

Beat softly, drummer, beat softly,

The wound is still green—ask permission first.

One beat of the drum says, “Speak your name, come to the stage,”

Look at your face in the bowl of water and speak your truth.

*No flowers, no medals, no garland of lies,
No actor comes before the one who lived the story.*

*From Channa Grove the invitation travelled all the way to Videha,
The ghosts' kabaddi began to play within theatre's breath.
A mother said—do not turn my crying into spectacle,
Ask permission first; only then raise the voice.*

*Drummer, beat softly; the wound is still green,
Place the name upon the stage; keep the heart steady.
“Speak your name, come to the stage”—the drumbeat fell,
In the bowl of water the face saw itself and spoke the truth.*

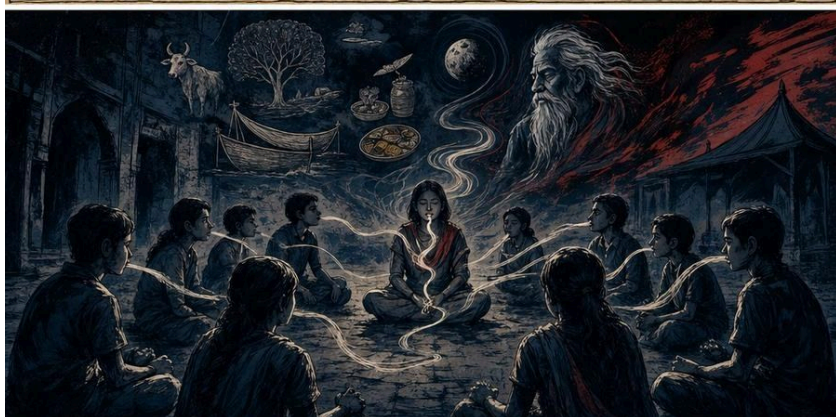


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Gangesha's refutation and establishment of the absence of an inhibitor: Gangesha replies that “only in the absence of the unqualified person do both production and destruction occur... likewise, because of the same rule, in the sequence of placing and removing the excitant condition, the absence of an inhibitor such as the jewel must also be accepted.” Gangesha's refutation and establishment of the absence of an inhibitor.]

CHAPTER 134

The Kabaddi Players' Script

Before learning a script, a kabaddi player learns to count breath.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Courage in the Breath

Folk tune: Kabaddi game-song

Count your breaths, but do not count life,

Weave a rule of dignity for every heartbeat.

One breath for the name, two breaths for testimony,

A third for fellowship, a fourth for the public good.

Cross the line saying—I am not afraid,

The player on truth's side never truly loses.

Count breath, but do not reduce life to a number,

Keep the dignity of each heartbeat while shaping the rules of play.

Fill the cry of “kabaddi-kabaddi” with the rhythm of courage,

*Carry the strength of fellowship in your breath and touch truth's
boundary.*

The first breath for a name, the second for testimony,

The third for fellowship, the fourth for the people's good.

Cross the line and say—no fear, no fear,

The player on the side of truth never loses.



A story is not played; it is given breath. Whoever shortens a story and puts it onstage shows not the story but its bones.

Those who have died must not be turned into “ghosts” to frighten people; they should be called “Present.” And the schemer must be given not the outer paint of a villain but the emptiness within.

Not audience—witness. The one who sits and watches is an audience member; the one who watches and carries the weight becomes a witness. Only when the stage understands that difference is it truly a stage.

For three days after the invitation from the Videha Theatre Festival arrived, no drum sounded in Garh Narikel. The invitation had come loudly; its answer was being prepared in a low voice. The children who once kept watch over names now sat in a circle in the middle of the field. They were kabaddi players, but this time their breath was gathering not for a game but for a play. After they sat in the circle, the clearest sound in the silence was each person's own breathing—and at hearing it some children instinctively held their breath. Before them lay the weight of earlier chapters—crocodiles, water-burial, Channa Grove, the yellow notice, Gangesha, the unnamed dream-planet, seed, salt, the common plate, and the Republic of the Kitchen. How could all of this be brought to the stage?

Ananya said, “We cannot perform the whole story. It is too large.” Ujjwal's spirit, slightly more visible in the evening smoke that day, laughed and said, “A story is not played; it is given breath.” Ira opened a blank sheet beside her letter. The paper had stayed folded in her bag so long that a permanent crease ran through the middle and would not straighten even under the hand. Meera said, “No one's grief will become spectacle in the play.” Devika added, “And no one's name without permission.” Gangesha's question returned beneath the shadow of the stump—what is evidence? What is acting? How far apart are truth and representation?

That night it was decided that the play would be called “The Watch.” Subtitle: “A Dramatic Script by the Kabaddi Players.” The protagonist would not be any single person, but breath. Every scene would begin with breath, pause upon a name, and stop at the edge of the next scene. The players decided that characters who had died would not be turned into ghosts to frighten anyone; they would be called “Present.” A schemer would be given not the external colour of a villain but the emptiness within.

Ira wrote the first line: “A cut stump stands onstage. Around it, names are written on stones. As witnesses enter, they will first see the stones, not the actors.” Ananya crossed out one word: “Not audience—witness.” The line was rewritten: “As witnesses enter, they will first see the names written on stones.” With that one revision, the direction of the play changed.

The cast list was written on the first page of the script. Characters: Breath, the Stump, Water, Crocodile, the Children, Old Budhba's Ghost, the Laughter of Channa Grove, Satyavrat's Silence, Gangesha's Question, Chandrapal's Percentage, Raghav's Vanishing Message, Lau Kin-Hung's Nameless Face, Batuknath's Leaf-Lawyer, Meera, Devika, Ira, Ananya, Ujjwal's Spirit, the Labourer's Feet, the Women's Night, Kitchen Smoke, and Kabaddi. No caste was written beside any character. Someone asked, “Will the caste system disappear from Gangesha's episode?” Ananya said,

“No. Caste is not a character; it is a cage. The cage will hang empty onstage.”

The stage plan was written: a circular field in the centre. On one side the cut stump, on another a black strip of water, on the third kitchen smoke, on the fourth an empty cage. Above, leaves drying on a rope, each bearing a name. The opening light would be low but never dark, because after Channa Grove was cut, darkness had lost the right to hide. In that dim light the names on the stones would not yet be readable, but their presence would be felt. Sound: a distant murmur of “kabaddi-kabaddi,” gradually changing into “Present—Present.”

The first scene was written: “Morning After the Cutting.” The performers would enter slowly. No one would weep. No one would make an announcement. A child touching the cut stump would say, “The grove has been cut, but the root is listening.” From within the stump a quiet answer: “Read the names.” Then the first name on a stone would be spoken. All the performers—dead, living, and schemers alike—would say together: “Present.”

Second scene: “The Yellow Notice.” A government envelope would fly onto the stage like a yellow bird. Batuknath’s leaf-lawyers would circle it, saying: “Vacant plot, public use, beautification.” The children would answer: “Who called it vacant? By what measure do you measure land filled with names?” In this scene the paper would not catch fire; its letters would sweat.

Third scene: “Gangesha’s Question.” An empty cage would hang at centre stage with the word “Caste” written on it. No human being would be inside. One voice would ask, “Scripture accepted, life rejected?” Another: “Evidence is not lineage alone; pain, love, birth, resistance, and thought are evidence too.” Gangesha’s question would appear not as an actor but as light. The light would strike the bars of the cage; the bars would become shadows; the shadows would break into letters: “Life without justice is dead logic.”

Fourth scene: “The Memorial App.” Chandrapal’s percentage would roll across the stage like a silver coin. It would say, “Turn grief into donation, names into clicks, memory into numbers.” Devika would stop it and ask, “You used the name; did you ever look into the mother’s eyes?” The coin would not answer. Then Ujjwal’s spirit would rise from the black strip of water and say, “A screen that chewed the mind cannot keep watch over names.” The coin would turn black.

Fifth scene: “The Procession of False Ghosts.” The performers would play performers. They would enter dressed as ghosts, then in the middle speak the real names of their own dead. The play within the play would break open. The witnesses would be told: “If a name is lodged in your memory, speak it silently within yourself; the stage will not seize its

right.” Here Meera would come forward and say, “The gaze too requires consent.”

Sixth scene: “The Unnamed Planet of Dream.” The stage would be flooded not with darkness but with excessive light. Everything would become a number—house one, body two, labour three, oxygen four. Lau Kin-Hung’s nameless face would say, “Here there is no caste, no village, no river, no sorrow.” Ananya would answer, “No name, no life.” Then the children would draw a kabaddi line into the sky. The cry of “kabaddi-kabaddi” would tear through the planet’s brightness.

Seventh scene: “The Republic of the Kitchen.” The common plate would be set onstage. The cage of caste would still hang above it. Smoke would rise from the Women’s Night Assembly. One character would say, “If you cannot sit and eat together, what use is reading a book of justice?” A drop of salt would be placed on a bar of the cage. The salt would eat into the bar. Gangesha’s light would spread once more for a moment: “Reality is born where the stomach of division goes empty.”

Eighth scene: “Elephant, Crocodile, and a Child’s Hand.” Here the elephant would not be a king but a drowning society; the crocodile would not be merely a reptile but greed, caste, screens, courts, hunger, thirst, and the glitter of the unnamed dream-planet fused into a blind jaw. The children would pull the elephant not by its hand but by names. With each name the crocodile’s jaw would loosen slightly. The play would not say clearly whether the elephant survives; but fear would diminish in its eyes.

The children remained stuck for a long time over the ninth scene. How should it end? Should the story close within the play? Ujjwal’s spirit said, “If you close the play, you lose the game.” So the final scene was named “Earth Again.” A new shoot of Channa would be placed onstage. All the characters, including the schemers, would circle it. The schemers would want to touch the shoot, but first their hands would have to write their own names. Whoever could write a name without greed could touch it. Whoever could not would remain outside.

The greatest debate came over the final line of the play. One child wanted: “The story ends.” Another said: “Present.” A third: “Kabaddi.” Ba listened. At last she said, “If breath remains, the story remains.” Everyone accepted it. The last lines were written: “Kabaddi did not stop. The game merely left the circle of earth and continued in the chamber of memory. If breath remains, the story remains.”

By the time the script was finished, the night was far advanced. The moon had come low over the field. Behind the stump the outline of Old Budhba’s Ghost appeared. This time he did not laugh, nor did he clap. He merely stepped forward in the old stance of kabaddi, then stopped—as if

saying: the play is written; now I will watch the breath of the performance.

Ira gathered the pages and placed them in a cloth bag. As she did, the dry rustle of paper sounded very loud in that field's silence, as though someone seated very close were whispering very softly. Ananya wrote in the register: "Today the story became a dramatic script. Tomorrow the script will ask for a body." The children rose together. The shadow of the cut stump stretched long again that night, but this time it looked like a stage curtain.

The morning of the next act of the Videha Theatre Festival was still far away, yet the stage already existed in Garh Narikel's field—made of soil, water, salt, stones, names, a shoot, and breath. What was called a script was really a collective pledge of living people. The question was no longer whether the play would succeed. The question was whose breath would break and whose name would remain Present when the schemers too sat among the witnesses during the performance.

FOLK SONG: The Player Counting Breath

Folk tune: Kabaddi folk tune

Count the breath, count the breath of names,

*This is not about winning the game—understand that names must be
brought home.*

One breath for a name, two breaths for testimony,

If the third breath breaks, the ink will hold it.

Cross the line not as ghosts—we are all here,

The story we write carries the consent of the one whose story it is.

The eyes of the witnesses seated there were red,

A child added to the script—be careful at every step.

Not "kabaddi-kabaddi," but the call of "Present,"

Each turn of breath became a people's court.

The game is not to be won; the names are to be brought back,

The broken throat's breath is to be joined again.



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Definition of liberation: refutation of various philosophical positions. Gangesha says that the destruction of an instrument of suffering, such as a thorn or a snake, is not itself the final end. Definition of liberation: refutation of various philosophical positions.*]

CHAPTER 135

The Staging of the Videha Theatre Festival

When memory climbs onto the stage, the calendar loses.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Memory's Light upon the Stage

Folk tune: Bhagait-Mangal

Sing, O devotee, sing the bhagait of memory,

To the rhythm of the mridang, tell the unfinished story.

The mridang sounded, lamps were lit, memory came upon the stage,

The unfinished story was told with honour.

*Do not give the dead only mourning—give them the honour of
inspiration,*

Let the living learn a new campaign from their labour.

Read the names slowly onstage; do not let flowers cover the truth,

Let memory become light and show the road toward justice.

The heroic cadence of bhagait says—truth will rise again,

Where a name is honoured, that person's dream will flower.

Within the circle of lamps, a place of honour for the dead,

Not mourning, but a note of inspiration—the song of their labour.

Read the names slowly; do not let flowers hide the truth,

Let the heroic cry open the road toward justice.



When memory climbs onto the stage, the calendar loses. Paper can swallow a date, but once a name enters the throat, no counting of years can erase it.

Where the stories of names are performed, there can be no height between stage and witness. The moment a hierarchy is built, the watcher and the one who suffered are separated—and there the story becomes spectacle.

Acting is not false if it gives a walking body to suppressed truth. The player then ceases to be merely an actor and becomes a runner carrying names.

And applause is the end of a performance. On a night that should have no ending, applause must be restrained.

The old one hundred and thirty-two acts of the Videha Theatre Festival—performed at different times on different stages, on rainy evenings, amid the smell of earth, beneath the tired light of auditoriums—came together that night in a single line within the eyes of Garh Narikel's children. The theatre festival was no longer merely a programme; it had become memory's second body. The story rising from the cut stump of Channa Grove was now seeking the breath of the stage.

In the previous act the kabaddi players had written the script. It had no single hero, and even its villains were not wholly villains; it contained names, hunger, crocodiles, water, the cage of caste, Gangesha's question, and children who had learned the dignity of evidence while holding their breath in play. Now the question was: could what was written remain alive onstage? Could the kabaddi players act without losing kabaddi? Would acting become a body for truth, or would truth again become spectacle?

By nightfall the festival ground was full. No grand stage had been built. The organisers had wanted a red curtain, lighting towers, a VIP enclosure, and sponsor boards, but the children refused. "Where a story of names is performed," they said, "there must be no height between stage and witness." In the end there was a circular field, people all around, earth in the middle, and across the earth a black line—the kabaddi line and the boundary of the play at once. The black powder used to draw it did not fall evenly: in some places the line was thick, in others so thin that it seemed broken.

The first scene began without bell or announcement. A boy entered the field holding his breath and began: "Kabaddi-kabaddi-kabaddi..." His voice slowly changed into "Name-name-name..." A shiver ran through the bodies around him. He placed a stone on the ground and said, "This is not a stone; it is the seat of the one whose name was never found." From every side came the answer: "Present." As soon as the play began, the audience ceased to be an audience; they became witnesses.

In the second scene came the crocodile. No mask had been made. One player slid across the earth on his belly, but it was not his body that became the crocodile—it was his shadow. When he reached out, people heard not the chewing of flesh but the chewing of time. He said, "Give me the body and I will eat it; but if the name is with the children, what can I do?" At this line, an outline like Old Budhba's Ghost seated at the back seemed to smile.

The third scene was water-burial. There was no water at the centre of the field, yet the kabaddi players moved in circles and made such a breath that water seemed to rise from every direction. The player who “drowned” did not collapse on the ground; slowly he rose and sat beside the stone. Someone in the witnesses whispered, “Dead?” A child nearby answered, “The body drowned; the bonds were released.” Silence descended over the entire field.

The fourth scene was Gangesha's question. An empty seat was placed at centre stage. No body or statue of Gangesha was shown. A girl stood with both palms open like leaves of *Tattvacintamani* and asked: “What is evidence? What is lineage? What is the truth of birth? What is the truth of marriage? If caste guards the human body, how can justice be born on paper?” With the question came the voice of a Charmakarini woman from behind—not shame, not lament, only presence.

Many people became uneasy during that scene. Two or three pandits in the front row began wiping their faces with their *gamchhas*. The language of the play felt sharp to them. But what the children had written in the script remained true onstage: Gangesha was honoured not by hiding the inconvenient truths of his life but by hearing them. One player named Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok” and said, “If honour cuts away truth, it is not honour; it is the killing of memory.” A low stir passed through the crowd, but the scene did not stop.

In the fifth scene entered Batuknath Hariharan. The most agile boy among the players took his role. Carrying a thick book, he entered saying, “Trust, rule, committee, structure, legality.” With every word his feet sank deeper into the soil. At last he opened the book; inside were no pages, only dry leaves. The leaves flew into the laps of the witnesses. On each was a question: “Who owns the trust? Who guards memory? Who profits from the names?”

The sixth scene belonged to Chandrapal Batra. A young man came into the field carrying a shining fake phone. The screen gave no light; instead tiny stones glittered upon it. He kept saying, “Offer tribute, give homage, obtain digital immortality.” But when he tried to type the name of a dead person, the screen began showing his own incomplete name. He tried to run, but the kabaddi line stopped his feet. Some young men among the witnesses, who had once trusted fraudulent links, silently lowered their heads.

The seventh scene was Raghav Signal's. There was no voice onstage, only hand-signs. The players acted as though sending messages to one another, but every message fell as a leaf. On one leaf was written: “Even an erased message is read by the earth.” At those words the air above the field changed. The mobile phones switched off in people's pockets trembled for an instant, as if the machines too understood that their power was smaller that night.

In the eighth scene Lau Kin-Hung and Broom entered. They wore not English suits but bright white cloth—very clean, very lifeless—among the players. They said, “Earth is unsafe; come to the unnamed planet of dream.” At once the children flung the kabaddi line toward the sky. Above the field, before everyone’s eyes, an imaginary circle of a planet appeared. Kabaddi suddenly changed from a village game into a game among planets.

The ninth scene was the lesson of names on the unnamed dream-planet. There was no decoration: only earth, sky, and voice. One by one the children looked upward and said, “Present.” With each “Present,” a grain of dust flashed. The player portraying Lau laughed first, then fell silent, then put a hand on his chest and asked, “Where is my name?” No answer came. The witnesses understood: even if an offender leaves Earth, the question of the name follows him.

The tenth scene was Satyavrat Mehta’s silence. No one played him. An empty chair was placed at the centre of the field with the register before it. All the players, all the characters, all the names of the dead, all the children circled the chair. It remained empty. At last Ananya rose and said, “The chair remains empty for the one who did not come to listen; the name of the one who listened will not remain on the chair but in the register.” Satyavrat, actually seated at the back among the witnesses, trembled at the line.

The final scene of the play was kabaddi—pure, quick, full of breath. The players crossed the line crying “kabaddi-kabaddi,” returning, falling, rising. But now every grip was not violence but remembrance. Whoever fell had a name spoken. Whoever escaped said, “I am not alone.” When someone’s breath began to fail, the whole field joined its breath softly with that player. The game became one collective lung. The sound of breathing around the field came from no single place; it rose from all directions at once and met in the centre.

There was disagreement over whether the performance had ended. The organisers wanted applause, but the children held up their hands. Applause ends a performance; that night they wanted no ending. Ananya opened the register and said to the witnesses, “Whatever you saw, understand it as a story. Whatever you understood, carry it home.”

Then an old man who had never in his life stepped onto a stage rose and entered the field. “There is a name in my house too,” he said, “and it was not in the play.” Behind him stood a woman: “In mine too.” Then a young man, then a girl, then a migrant who had returned from far away. The stage suddenly began expanding. The play that had entered the Videha Theatre Festival carrying the earlier one hundred and thirty-two acts spread through the people’s throats into the one hundred and thirty-third, one hundred and thirty-fourth, one hundred and thirty-fifth, and beyond.

That night it was understood for the first time that acting is not false when it gives a moving body to suppressed truth. The kabaddi players did not become actors; they became runners carrying names. The performance did not become spectacle; it sent the story back toward people's homes.

At the end of the night a faint light fell on the new shoot of the Channa stump. The leaf was very small, but its shadow stretched across the circle of the field. Someone said, "The grove watched the play." Ba replied, "Not the grove—the root watched. When the root accepts a performance, the story returns to the earth."

After everyone left, the field remained empty, but the kabaddi line was not erased. Dawn dew gathered on it like pearls. In every droplet a tiny stage could be seen. The drops were packed so closely that from a distance the line looked like a bright row; up close it broke again into separate beads. Ananya bent over it and said softly, "The next act will now carry the story forward."

And so the play completed its staging and returned to the novel—not exhausted but breathing more deeply; not closed but opened wider.

FOLK SONG: The Dead Return to the Stage

Folk tune: Bhagait

Do not kill them again, do not kill the dead again,

Speak the name softly and carry it home.

*The mridang sounded, lamps were lit, the shadow of the leaf
descended,*

The one whose date paper had swallowed took a body onstage.

Bisesar's gamchha moved, Chhotu's mother called out,

Inside the witnesses' eyes the Ganga flowed again.

The calendar lost; memory won the night,

The actor did not weep—the name became his inheritance.

The curtain fell, but the story returned to the book,

Behind every applause a silent tear remained.

*O stage, do not kill the dead again,
The calendar lost; memory won that night.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Objection: the auspicious invocation cannot be a constituent part. A traveller recounted two ordinary examples: when the supporting peg of a house or chariot breaks, an iron bolt is fitted; and a Brahmin may be fed food cooked in milk. In these cases, fitting the bolt and feeding the Brahmin are not constituent parts of the principal act, but independent occasional acts performed when the relevant circumstance arises. This distinction showed that even within small events of ordinary life, a serious epistemological process may be operating. Objection: the auspicious invocation cannot be a constituent part.]

CHAPTER 136

The Silence After Applause

*The true price of performance is not applause—it is the silence after
applause.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: Work After Applause

Folk tune: Jagaran-Jhumar

Turn to the work, after the applause turn to the work,

Carry the stage's energy to school and field.

*When applause sounds, do not let the hands grow tired—put them to
work,*

Let the stage's excitement travel to road, school, and home.

*Let the feeling raised by hearing grief become service,
One pledge, one act of help, becomes a road through life.*

*After applause, not silence but responsibility must sound,
Let the witness's hands labour and untie the knots of truth.
Along with the flowers of the festival, carry the seed of work,
After applause, let labour fill the field of hope.*

*Let the flood of feeling settle into the form of service,
One pledge, one act of help—step by step it grows.
After applause, not quiet but labour hand in hand,
To the rhythm of jhumar, let awakening continue.*



When people applaud another person's pain, the listener must become careful twice over. Pain does not sound for praise; it sounds for justice.

A story that came from water-burial has authorship like a river. A river has villages on many banks; that does not divide the river—it makes it flow.

But openness does not mean anyone may violate another person's privacy. The play may belong to the people, but the rights over body and memory remain with the individual.

When the performance ended, the applause that rose was ordinary at first—the sound of hands, a sign of excitement, recognition of successful acting. But slowly the applause changed. Some hands stopped midway, some joined together, some began wiping eyes. The people seated in the hall understood that they had not merely watched a play; they were sitting before testimony from within themselves. The silence that spread after the applause was not the silence of failure but the silence of the weight of names.

The kabaddi players remained standing onstage. Sweat still shone on their bodies, but it was no longer only the sweat of play; it carried the guilt that follows performance as well. In the stage light, the drops on their foreheads gleamed as though someone had placed them there, and whenever one was wiped away another appeared in the same place. The boy who had played the elephant kept looking at his hands as though the crocodile's grip still clung to his fingers. The girl who had sprouted onstage as the shoot of the stump folded her knees and kept touching the earth. The young man who played the corrupt lawyer received applause, but went to a corner of the stage to wash his face—as though the blackness of the role would not come off even when the acting had ended.

The director of the Videha Theatre Festival came onto the stage holding a written note of thanks. But when he raised the page to read, the words stopped on the first line. "For this extraordinary presentation, we..." He fell silent. In the bright hall, the sound of that silence seemed enormous. At last he folded the page and said, "I will not comment on this performance. Those whose names were left out of the play should come forward."

With that sentence the line between stage and witnesses broke. For the first time, the people who had watched the play moved not toward the stage but toward the actors stepping down from it. An old woman said, "My husband's name was nowhere." A young man said, "My brother did not drown in a screen; he drowned in drink and debt. But that too was a crocodile." A woman whose face was half covered by her veil said softly, "My daughter is alive, but our house does not speak her name. May her name be written too?" Ananya answered at once, "A name silenced by force is no less absent than a dead one. Write it."

And so a second performance began after the performance—one no one had scripted. The actors took off their roles and sat around the register. The witnesses spoke names, the children wrote them, and the earlier one hundred and thirty-two acts gathered into the theatre festival suddenly became incomplete. Everyone understood that however much of the story had been told, that much still remained. The chapters that had seemed closed had only been holding their breath for the next voice.

Satyavrat Mehta sat in a back row. Onstage his part had been played by a thin boy wearing glasses. The boy had few lines; most of the time he listened. When the witnesses praised him, Satyavrat felt uncomfortable. He thought that acting the part of listening was easy; real listening meant sitting with years of silence, failure, wrongdoing, and regret. Slowly he rose, went behind the stage, and said to the boy, "What you did was acting. Now make the acting into practice. If the art of listening is learned onstage, its responsibility begins in life."

The boy asked, "Did I listen wrongly?" Satyavrat said, "No. But when people applaud another person's pain, the listener must become careful twice over. Pain does not sound for praise; it sounds for justice." The boy wrote the sentence in his notebook. On the page the words seemed to tremble slightly, as if even the ink understood that the dialogue would continue beyond the play.

Meanwhile Chandrapal Batra stood outside the hall. He had not found the courage to sit within. He kept looking at his face in the glass of the ticket window. His character had appeared only partly in the play—the memorial app, percentages, anonymous crowds, money made from tribute. The audience was applauding, but in his ears he heard not applause but the notification sounds from his old accounts. Suddenly, without any signal, a sentence flashed on his phone: "Your name is not written onstage but in people's losses." He switched the phone off, but the words remained like a print on his palm.

Batuknath Hariharan had not come to see the performance, but his representative had. The representative kept taking notes on how rights to the play might be acquired, how the script could be published, how future performances might be controlled in the name of a trust. But when the witnesses began climbing onto the stage to add their names, the notebook failed. How could a work that demanded a new name every moment be bound by a single seal? He closed the notebook and started out, but at the door the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost blocked his way. A voice said, "Who will buy the story? Will you issue a receipt for breath?" The representative fled.

Ira sat with the playwrights. Someone said, "The script should be published." Another said, "Every performance should leave an open place for local names." A third, a renowned theatre artist from the city, said, "Then authorship will scatter." Ira did not laugh. Calmly she said, "A story that came from water-burial has authorship like a river. A river has villages on many banks; that does not divide it—it makes it flow."

Meera added, "But an open place does not mean anyone may violate another person's privacy. Any name brought onstage must come with permission, with regard for the dignity of the household and the measure of its grief. The play may belong to the people, but the rights over body and memory remain with the individual." At these words the voice of the

Women's Night Assembly returned. For the first time, the theatre people understood that before making people's theatre, they would have to learn people's privacy.

The night advanced. The hall began to empty, but the stage did not. At its centre the kabaddi players sat in a circle. Once the hall was empty, its sound changed—words that had drowned in the crowd now struck the walls and returned. The players decided that in the next performance they would not merely enact earlier chapters; in every place they would first hear the names of local people and weave them into the story. The play would not be a fixed text but a moving watch. Whoever came to see it would also have to speak. For the one who could not speak, a seat would be kept for silence.

With chalk Ananya drew a small square in the dust of the stage. "This is not a kabaddi line," she said, "but the pledge of the stage. Whoever crosses it will carry the weight of testimony along with the performance." One by one the players crossed the line. No one said "kabaddi." Everyone said "Present." It was the first time the breath of kabaddi had become an answer to a name.

Outside, the night sky was open. The old flag of the Videha Theatre Festival fluttered in the wind. The year, number, issue, and advertisements printed on it had faded in moonlight. Only one word remained clear: "Videha." The children looked at it and said among themselves, "Not beyond the body, but passing through the body and returning to the body's dignity—that is Videha."

The last light in the hall was switched off. Then a faint voice rose from behind the stage—someone rehearsing, or a ghost teasing? "Kabaddi-kabaddi..." Slowly it changed into "Story-story..." Ananya turned. The stage was empty. But in the dust were very small footprints—neither a child's, nor an actor's, nor an old person's. Perhaps the dead of earlier times had come to watch the play and, when it ended, had written their next roles.

By dawn a new line could be seen in the stage dust: "Where the play ends, the village begins." No one had been seen writing it. The letters were so faint in the dust that they could be read fully only by bending down and looking sideways; standing upright, they became dust again. The director asked, "Shall we put this line in the script?" Ananya said, "No. It will remain behind the script. Whoever reads it will write the next act."

Thus the staging of the Videha Theatre Festival did not end with applause. It stepped down from the stage and moved toward village lanes, river ghats, kitchen hearths, school floors, and courthouse verandas. The earlier one hundred and thirty-two acts were no longer stories; they had become seeds.

FOLK SONG: The Crying After Applause

Folk tune: Karun Sama-Daun

Give the watch, not applause—give the watch,

Give the play's crying the support of life.

Applause stopped, everyone left, the chairs remained sad,

In a corner of the stage, an unheard faith kept weeping.

When the play ended, the village began,

Questions smouldered in the chests of witnesses walking home.

A mother kept running her hand over an empty seat,

“My son would have sat here,” she kept saying softly.

The flowers dried, the makeup washed away,

But the colour of the names would not leave the heart.

Not applause—give the next day's watch,

Give the play's crying the support of life.

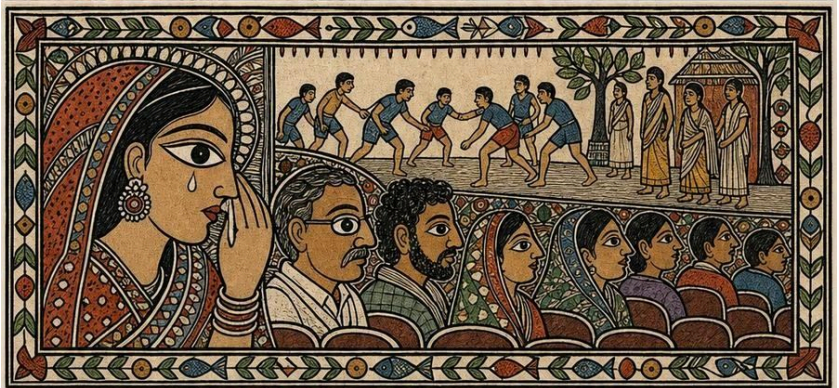


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The Navya view: the absence of an inhibitor is not a cause. Otherwise, when a rod connected to a wheel keeps turning but the effect does not arise because of the absence of a cooperating cause, that rod would lose its causal status. By the end of the dialogue both sides agreed that an example aids proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. The Navya view: the absence of an inhibitor is not a cause.]

CHAPTER 137

THE AUDIENCE'S TESTIMONY

*When the audience becomes a witness, the play does not stop even after
the curtain falls.*



Opening Folk Song: The Audience Became Witness

Folk Tune: Song of Public Awakening

Become a witness, O become a witness from an audience member,

The eyes that saw, the hands that applauded—reckon the debt of both.

The eyes that saw will now write down the names,

The hands that applauded will remain beside them.

The audience will not stay distant; it will become part of society,

*The story of the stage will teach responsibility from threshold to
threshold.*

Someone will listen, someone will write, someone will make a path,

*Someone will hold a sufferer's hand and walk with them to the door of
justice.*

Art succeeds when the audience becomes witness,

When the light of song can sleep within the darkness of life.

The story descends from the stage and goes from threshold to threshold,

Someone writes, someone listens, someone makes a path.

Holding a sufferer's finger, walking together to the door of justice,

Art succeeds only when it fills life with colour.



When the audience becomes a witness, the play does not stop even after the curtain falls. A curtain can cover only the stage; it cannot cover a story that has already entered those who watched it.

In a role a human being becomes someone else; in a name one cannot run away from oneself. So the real question is not who became what on the stage—the real question is who was sitting in the chair.

Small crimes join together to become a great crocodile. Someone stopped a marriage in the name of caste, someone remained silent, someone moved away saying, "This is not my family's affair"—and all those withdrawals together became a jaw.

The witness owns the testimony that has been given. The stage is only its servant—and the stage must remind itself of this again and again.

The silence after the applause remained trapped for a long time not on the stage but inside everyone. In that instalment of the Videha Theatre Festival, where the kabaddi players acted, people first watched the game, then heard the dramatic text, then saw the performance; but after the applause they still felt that they could not simply go home after seeing all this. The story enacted on the stage had descended from it and taken a seat in people's chairs, bodies, pockets, mobile phones, beards, veils, spectacles and silences.

When the auditorium lights slowly came on, people's faces looked strange. Someone was wiping their eyes, someone lacked the courage to open a phone, someone had unknowingly taken the hand of the stranger sitting beside them. The usual responses after a theatrical performance—"Very good," "Excellent acting," "Powerful direction"—did not arise that night. If anything arose, it was a quiet question: "Where is my name?"

Behind the stage the kabaddi players, exhausted now, rested their hands on their knees and caught their breath. Their bodies were covered with sweat, but the sweat carried the smell of earth. They had understood that the "ghost," "labourer," "crocodile," "boat," "stump," and "watch of names" they had embodied were no longer separate roles. The breath of the game and the words of the play had entered one another.

Ananya sat at one corner of the stage. The register lay before her, but today she did not open it. Ira asked, "Shall we write the names?" Ananya said, "Today first we will see whether the audience itself wants to write." The remark sounded simple, but within the guardianship of memory it marked a great change. Until now the children had been saving names; now it was time to see whether grown people could bear the shame of writing names with their own hands.

An old man rose from the first row. Hesitantly he came towards the stage, but did not climb onto it. Standing below, he said, "I was the clerk on the bridge project. I knew the real number of labourers. The number entered in the file was lower. I remained silent." A stir ran through the hall. The old man took a paper from his pocket. It had yellowed, and along the folds it had grown so thin that the fear of tearing could be felt in his hands as he opened it. "This list survived with me," he said. "I hid it all these years out of fear."

No applause came. No cheer. One kabaddi player simply climbed down from the stage, took the paper from the old man's hand and touched it to his forehead—as though it were not a list but bone. Ananya opened the register. The first line read: "Audience testimony no. 1: the silent clerk." After the old man's name the children wrote in brackets: "Crime acknowledged; names returned."

A woman rose from the second row. She said, "I used to distribute medicines at the hospital. During Covid some boxes meant to be given free to the poor were ordered to be entered under private shopkeepers' names. I did not protest. My son died of that same disease. Now I understand—writing profit upon medicine is like sprinkling salt upon death." She removed a small key from around her neck and gave it to Ananya. "This is the old key to the storeroom. The lock is gone, but the bolt on the crime must still be opened."

The third testimony came from a young man who had been making videos during the performance. He came near the stage and switched off his phone. "I was not directly in an online-fraud gang," he said, "but I wrote advertisements for them. The words that frightened old people and drew money from their accounts were words I wrote. I thought it was only language. Today I understood—language too has teeth." Mira looked at him and said, "Language has teeth, yes; but when those teeth begin to chew truth, punishment too has teeth." The young man sat down silently.

One after another, audience members began to rise. Someone said he had stopped a marriage in the name of caste. Someone said that even after hearing the story of Gangesha he had not allowed a Charmakar girl to sit on his veranda. Someone said he had remained silent when a false stigma was placed upon his daughter. Someone said he had seen brokerage in the Bar Council but moved away saying, "This is not my family's matter." There were no great slogans in these testimonies; all were small crimes. Yet small crimes join together to become a great crocodile—everyone was beginning to understand this that night.

Batuknath Hariharan was also in the hall. He had not been invited, but he had come to see how the play portrayed him. At the beginning he sat in the back of the auditorium with his legal smile fixed in place. But as testimony after testimony rose, the smile flaked away like limewash. When one young man said, "I learned from his name the formula for stretching out a case," Batuknath sank into his seat. He understood that the play on the stage had ended, but the real play had begun in the audience's chairs.

Satyavrat Mehta sat on an ordinary chair at the right corner of the stage. The organisers wanted him to say two sentences as chief guest. He did not rise. He listened to every line entered in the register. Now and then his eyes stopped where the words "I remained silent" were written.

The weight of that sentence was familiar from his own life. He knew that true testimony begins when a person writes the name of his own silence.

The kabaddi players who had earlier played the breath of the dead on stage now stood guard over the audience's testimony. If anyone tried to make a joke, they silenced them with a gesture. If someone forgot the words while crying, they steadied the person's breath with a soft chant of "kabaddi." It was a strange sight—the players had stepped down from acting and become servants of witnesses. They had not yet removed their stage costumes; in those costumes, listening to testimony, they seemed neither entirely characters nor entirely themselves.

Amid all this Ira noticed one thing. In the audience's testimony, crime and pain did not remain separate. Inside the person who spoke as an offender, a hurt child sometimes began to speak. In the sentence of one who spoke as a victim, the crime of one's own silence sometimes showed through. This mixture broke simple morality. That was the difficulty of justice in Garh Narikel—no human being has only one name. Yet the guarding of names was necessary for precisely this reason, because once nameless, a person could again be made into a lie.

The old 132 instalments of the Videha Theatre Festival came up again. A middle-aged devotee of literature said, "For years I watched plays—kings, peasants, revolution, love, God, rebellion. Today I understood that if the audience does not testify, the play remains half-finished." He was not making a declaration; he was admitting something. A child sitting beside him asked, "Then in the next instalment will the audience have a role too?" Before he could answer, Ananya said, "Not a role—your own name."

Silence descended over the auditorium again at that sentence. "Your own name"—those two words opened every curtain on the stage. In a role a person becomes someone else; in one's name one cannot run away from oneself. The children decided that in the next instalment the audience's testimony would be added to the written dramatic text. The performance text would not remain fixed; the testimonies that had arisen that night would demand their places in the next performance.

But this decision carried danger too. Chandrapal's people pricked up their ears. Data from "audience testimony" could be sold. In Raghav's old network it could become a formula for "emotional engagement." Broom's organisation could call it a "community healing model" in a grant proposal. Mira warned them at once: "The testimony belongs to the witness who gave it. The stage is only its servant." The children wrote the sentence on the next page of the register.

As the night passed, the space outside the auditorium became neither fairground, nor court, nor school, but a meeting of all three. Tea boiled; people stood in line not to enter their names but to write the names of

their silences. Morning dew began to fall, and glass tumblers felt first very hot in the hand and then suddenly cold—and somewhere between those two sensations people spoke. Someone said, “Fear”; someone, “Greed”; someone, “Caste”; someone, “Shame”; someone, “Salary”; someone, “Fear of family.” The children said, “These are not reasons; these are names. Do not hide behind a reason.”

After midnight, on the little root-shaped prop kept beside the stage as a symbol of the cut stump of Channa Grove, a faint green line gleamed. Someone called it a trick of the light. But the kabaddi players immediately stood up. They did not say “kabaddi”; they pronounced, “Present.” From every corner of the auditorium came the reply: “Present.”

In that reply, the breaths of dead and living, offender and victim, actor and audience, child and elder, woman and migrant, crocodile, elephant and graha entered one circle for a moment. It was not the victory of the play; it was the moment when the story swallowed the stage.

Towards dawn, as people left, they found a new notice pasted at the festival gate. It was not official; the children had written it by hand: “In the next instalment the audience’s testimony will be added to the dramatic text. No name spoken here will be performed without that person’s permission. No silence recorded here will be hurried into a voice.” Below, in smaller letters, they had written: “Kabaddi continues.”

For the first time, no one applauded the small notice. Everyone looked at their hands—the same hands that applaud also sign, also commit crimes, also bear witness. And at that moment the chapter opened its door towards the next story, where the audience’s testimony would enter the written dramatic text and the story would rise from the stage into public writing.

Folk Song: The Audience’s Hands

Folk Tune: Song of Awakening

*We raise our hands—not for spectacle, we do not raise them for
spectacle,*

We stand beside the one whose voice trembles.

The hand that applauded will now write testimony,

The eye that watched the play will not remain indifferent.

*To force open a silent throat in haste is also violence,
Sit beside silence and ask—when do you want language?*

*Before taking a name, light the lamp of consent,
Before looking at a wound, preserve the veil that covers it.
The audience is no longer a crowd; it has become a watchman,
The kabaddi line has run from the stage all the way to the village.*

We raise our hands—not for spectacle.

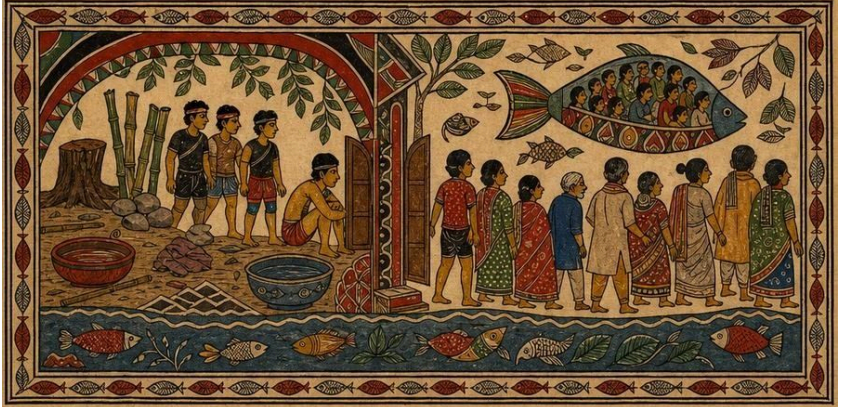


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The following counter-objection may again be raised: just as rice and barley are alternative instruments in a sacrifice, knowledge and action too may be taken as alternative causes of liberation. Again a counter-objection may be raised: if the particular actions are mutually non-uniform, how can liberation be uniform?]

CHAPTER 138

PROCESSION BEYOND THE STAGE

Once the procession left the stage, no auditorium could contain it again.



Opening Folk Song: The Procession Became a Song

Folk Tune: Festive Batgabani Rhythm

Come, O procession, come as a procession turned to song,

Not anger alone—carry flowers of hope in your hands.

The story came down from the stage and walked the dust-filled road,

Drum, leaf and voice together became Janaka's wedding procession.

A procession is not anger alone; it is a walking house of hope,

At every turn a new companion, a new voice.

Traveller on the road, sing; carry questions like flowers in your hands,

Quiet steps can shake the hardest roots of injustice.

When the procession becomes song, town and village will join,

Along the rhythm of togetherness the new history of truth will turn.

Drum in front, leaf-banners, voice answering voice,

At every turn another companion joins the song.

The cadence of peaceful steps shakes the hardest roots,

Town and village meet upon one road and embrace.



When a court becomes theatre, justice dies; when theatre becomes a court, memory speaks. The difference is that in the first, truth is called acting; in the second, acting serves truth.

A crowd can be controlled; testimony cannot. A crowd remains before the stage; testimony leaves the stage and makes its home in people's houses.

However much you print, something will remain outside. But what remains outside must be acknowledged in the act of printing—otherwise the printed page itself becomes a new silence.

The silence after applause had become the audience's testimony, and after the testimony the auditorium doors became too small. The bamboo, earth, stones, artificial stump, bowl of water, and the sweat of the kabaddi players still remained onstage, but the story did not. Like a submarine rising from beneath the water and leaving its reflection behind, the play had left the auditorium and settled upon every audience member's shoulder.

That night of the Videha Theatre Festival unfolded beneath the shadow of the old 132 instalments. What had once been magazine issues, pages of staged debate, plays printed and read, had now acquired living bodies. The kabaddi players who once held their breath in the soil now stopped and listened between lines of dialogue. Acting was no longer a profession for them; it had become another method of guarding names.

As people came outside, the crowd stopped on the auditorium steps. Someone searched for shoes; someone searched for a face. Someone opened a phone to look at photographs, then closed it again. Someone asked, "Was that a play or a court?" Another answered, "When a court becomes theatre, justice dies; when theatre becomes a court, memory speaks." No one owned that sentence, yet it travelled through many mouths all night.

The first testimony outside the auditorium came at the tea stall. The tea seller had not bought a ticket or gone inside, but the moment he saw people's faces he knew that the programme had ended and the event had not. "Why so much silence?" he asked. A woman, her hand trembling around the cup, said, "My brother too exists in no record." For the first time that day the tea seller tore a page from his credit ledger and wrote her brother's name upon it. Without intending to, his tea stall became the first outer substage of the Videha Theatre Festival. The ledger page had yellowed with years of smoke, and the new ink was so black that the name could be seen from a distance.

The second testimony came at the bus stand. A few people sat waiting for the last bus of the night. One young actor still had the ghost's lime on his face; sweat and tears had drawn white streams down his cheeks. An old man beside him asked, "Son, won't you wash off that paint?" The young man said, "Not until my father's full name is written." Hearing this answer in the darkness of the bus stand, two travellers quietly began to speak the lost names of their own villages.

The third testimony came by the theatre's rear door, where the actors were changing clothes. Those who had played crocodile, ghost, submarine, witch, labourer, judge, broker and child came out of their roles and began to speak their real names. The astonishing thing was how often the real names would not separate from the roles. The actor who had played a labourer had truly lost his grandfather in the bridge. The woman who had played a witch had a grandmother who had been

isolated as a widow. The actor who had played a judge came from a family whose case had dragged on for three generations.

The narrator was gathering the manuscript. He counted the pages; every page was present, yet the manuscript had grown heavier. Dialogues that had felt light at dusk had gained weight in the night. He turned the pages. In some places the audience's words seemed to have risen like writing without ink. On one page appeared the sentence: "When the audience carries a story inside, its author changes." The narrator closed the manuscript, but the sentence remained in his palm.

Ananya and the children sat below the steps with the register open. A separate page had been made for the audience's testimony. First column—name. Second—for whom are you present? Third—where will this story travel with you? People stumbled over the third question. Someone wrote, "Home." Someone, "Court." Someone, "School." A young man wrote, "The day my phone tries to load another lie onto me." An old woman wrote, "Where my granddaughter falls silent when someone asks her caste."

Mira guarded these pages. She said, "Private testimony will not leave the stage." The organisers of the Videha Theatre Festival had first wanted the story of this night printed in the next issue, but Mira said, "Permission before publication. The guarding of names began with the voice; its dignity must not change when it reaches the page." Some editors were uncomfortable, but the children gave not applause but silent assent.

Devika saw that some people wanted to cut the play into short clips. She did not stop them, but wrote one rule: "Do not sell fragments of grief; hear the whole context." Chandrapal's old tribute app tried to activate again. The title "Emotional Scene" flashed on the screen, but when it attempted to upload the clip, a line from the Constitution of Names appeared instead: "Names are not for sale." The app hung for a few moments, then shut itself down.

Raghav Signal watched all this from a distant city. He had thought the staging would stir emotion and then exhaust itself; instead, one word kept circulating through his secret message loops all night—"Present." He tried to delete it, changed the code, broke up the groups, opened messages under new names, but "Present" returned everywhere like a tune. The story beyond the stage had already stepped into digital darkness.

There was movement that night too in Batuknath Hariharan's Office of the Public Memory Trust. His secretary came with the news: "The play has succeeded." Batuknath asked, "How large was the crowd?" The secretary said, "More than a crowd—people are testifying." Batuknath's face changed. A crowd can be controlled; testimony cannot. A crowd

remains before the stage; testimony leaves the stage and takes up residence in people's homes.

Satyavrat Mehta remained seated for a long time in the rear corner of the auditorium. No one asked him to give a speech. For him this was punishment and release at once. When everyone had left, he went to the empty stage. A stone remained there, used in the performance; the sweat mark on it was real. Satyavrat put his hand upon the stone and whispered, "The right to testify is older than the court." No one heard him, but the stone grew warm.

As the night deepened, the costumes, masks, bamboo and stones were gathered away. But the kabaddi players did not want to erase the lines of their roles. The centre line remained drawn in the stage earth. One player said, "Tomorrow at dawn we will play along this line." Another asked, "On the stage?" The first answered, "No. Outside. The stage has become too small."

At first light they really did begin playing kabaddi in front of the auditorium. There was no audience, yet passers-by stopped: people carrying milk, a boy delivering newspapers, a schoolteacher, a bus conductor. The players ran chanting "kabaddi-kabaddi," but this time their breath rose from the earth and reached behind the stage, the tea stall, the bus stand, the register, the stone, and the cut Channa Grove. The road dust was harder than stage earth; when a foot struck it, no cloud rose, only a dry little thud.

No winner was declared in that game. When the players were tired, Ananya lifted some soil from the centre line and placed it between two pages of the register. The soil did not scatter; it remained a small round mound, and when the register was closed it printed a thin line on both pages. She wrote: "The play has come outside. The stage has spread through the village body." When this sentence was read, the flickering shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost appeared on the wall. This time he did not laugh; he bowed his head, as though he had accepted the living as actors after the performance.

For the next instalment of the Videha Theatre Festival a question arose: what should be printed? The manuscript? The audience's testimony? The children's rules? Or an account of the kabaddi played outside the auditorium? Ira said, "However much you print, something will remain out. But print only after acknowledging what remains out." The editors lowered their eyes. Literature was about to take an oath of its own incompleteness for the first time.

Just then a postman arrived from behind them. He carried an ordinary envelope, but a foreign stamp was fixed to its edge. The letter had come from abroad—from the children who, after reading Ira's letter, had begun to think of Garh Narikel not merely as an ancestral

village but as a responsibility. Inside was one line: “We too will perform the play, but first we will listen to the names.”

Ananya read the letter and fell silent. The procession beyond the stage was now signalling that it would cross the sea. The kabaddi line that had risen from Channa Grove and reached the auditorium would now travel through page, letter, expatriate voice, and perhaps again as far as the sky. The chapter did not pause here; it opened onto a fine planetary line glimmering upon the envelope’s blue stamp.

Folk Song: The Procession that Left the Stage

Folk Tune: Batgabani

*The story walks, O it walks after leaving the stage,
It says, “Give a court to those who remained unheard.”*

*Leaving the stage, the story walked the dust-filled road,
No drum now, only the sound of names, children beside it.
A child abroad wrote—first we will listen to the names,
Then we will make the play, and choose respect for the wound.*

*A mother opened the window and looked at her child,
In the procession she wrote the shadow of the dead beside them.*

*No slogan, only a quiet collective call,
“Give a court to those who remained unheard.”*

*Let the road be long, let blisters rise on the feet,
Let the truth of the stage climb every household threshold.*



[*PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The nature of comparison is not merely intention. In comparison there is no directly available speaker-intention through which one who knows the signification of the word “gavaya” could discover it; otherwise the establishment of comparison and knowledge of intention would become mutually dependent. Comparison is not merely intention.*]

CHAPTER 139

THE ROAD AS THEATRE

*A story that comes down onto the road has neither stage nor ticket—it
asks only for ears willing to listen.*



Opening Folk Song: The Road Is Theatre, the People Are Performers

Folk Tune: Salhes Folk Epic

Sing, O sing the saga, sing the saga of Salhes,

Road after road becomes a stage; let everyone enter the dance.

No ticket, no curtain needed; the road itself becomes theatre,

Ploughman, child and elder sister all become performers.

Sing public courage like the heroic tale of Salhes,

Make a path of justice through the forest of injustice.

At every crossroads a scene, at every threshold a dialogue,

Art and life together will give the taste of change.

When the road becomes theatre and people find their own roles,

The soil of Mithila itself will sing a new epic.

The ploughman became a hero, the elder sister a queen,

Scenes bloomed at every crossing, speech at every threshold.

No ticket, no curtain—the people themselves became the cast,

Upon the earthen stage a new epic scripture was written.



On a stage the light falls from above. On the road there is only as much light as the day gives—and in that equal light no one appears greater or smaller.

One who reads names is not going out to inflame anyone. But if the voice of names is stopped, it can become fire—and power knows this better than anyone.

When society speaks without a centre, the map of conspiracy grows blurred. No owner, no single leader, no account—then to whom is the message to be sent?

The procession had already left the auditorium of the Videha Theatre Festival, but its feet did not stop at the steps. The silence after applause, the audience's testimony, and the walk beyond the stage had joined into a voice that no curtain could gather back inside. The story first heard in the darkness of Channa Grove, then written around the stump, then made breath upon the stage, had now descended onto the road.

The moment it reached the road, the story changed. On a stage actors stand in assigned places, spectators sit in chairs, light falls from above. On the road no one's place is fixed. The man carrying milk became an audience member for a moment. The vegetable seller stopped the scales to hear a line. The rickshaw puller held his breath and caught the rhythm of "kabaddi." The policeman smoking a bidi behind the outpost laughed first, then fell silent.

The kabaddi players were no longer merely actors in a play. They began measuring the road—how many breaths to cross a market square, how many to cross a culvert, how many to move through the crowd before a medicine shop, how many to reach the old veranda of the court. At each place they drew a line not with lime but with the dust of their feet. The moment a line appeared, it began to vanish—between the wind and the next footfall it was granted only a little time. A line that appeared was called "the boundary of entry"; whoever crossed it had to give a name.

The first performance took place beside the market. One player did not become a "ghost"; he simply stood as an ordinary young man. Another did not become a "crocodile"; he merely held an empty bowl. A third child wandered carrying the stone of the stump. They said nothing. Then one person slowly filled his lungs and said, "Present." A knife cutting fish stopped in mid-stroke. An old woman selling chillies placed a hand on her basket and answered, "Present." Before the performance could begin, the market itself had become a stage.

On the second day the scene came to the bus stand. The children handed out brief leaflets of the earlier 132 watches. On each leaf was a breath-summary of one chapter—water burial, crocodile, court, digital fraud, Gangesha's question, justice of grain, cage of caste, republic of the kitchen. Travellers first thought the leaves were pamphlets and put them in their pockets. But before the bus started, the conductor himself read one aloud: "If a name is not entered on a ticket, does that person cease to be a passenger? If a name is not entered into life, does that person cease to be human?" The bus left five minutes late, but in those five minutes the bus stand had become larger than the old auditorium.

The third scene unfolded on the court veranda. It was the same veranda where, for years, the crocodile of adjourned dates had chewed through people's time. The players did not leap or shout theatrically. They sat quietly. One child wrote "Evidence" on a sheet. Another wrote

“Inference.” A third wrote “Word.” A fourth girl placed a blank page and asked, “In which column is the evidence for a life that has been suppressed?” Lime fell from the old veranda wall. It fell without sound—only when it landed on the blank page came a faint “srr,” a sound that could be heard only by keeping silent. A small white mark appeared on the paper. The children wrote: “The wall’s answer.”

That day Satyavrat Mehta stood at the far edge of the veranda. People recognised him, but now no introductions were announced. He saw that justice is often lost inside the building of law, yet outside the building, in veranda dust, a child’s question can give it birth again. His hand went automatically towards his pocket for a pen, but he stopped. This scene was not to be written first; it had to be heard first.

The fourth performance took place before a medicine shop. The breath, medicines, cylinders, prices and brokerage of the pandemic still hurt inside people’s bodies. One player stood with cloth tied over his mouth, playing “breath.” Another kept sounding an empty vial. A third child read names. At first the chemist went inside; then slowly he came back out. “I too raised prices,” he said. “I profited from fear.” No one attacked him. Mira said, “The first breath of testimony may begin with guilt, but it does not end there.” His name was entered not as a criminal but as one giving testimony—yet the words of his offence were not erased.

Not everyone in the market was comfortable with these road performances. Some traders said, “Customers will run away.” Some politicians said, “Obtain permission for a cultural programme.” Some officials said, “There is a possibility of inflaming public sentiment.” But the children gave only one answer: “We are not inflaming anyone; we are reading names.” The voice of names is quiet, but if it is stopped it can become fire—power knows this very well.

News reached Batuknath Hariharan that the play had left the auditorium and come onto the street. He smiled in his old way. “Theatre on the street? Very good. Disorder will be easy to prove.” He searched through files, rules, use of public roads, crowd control, breach of peace, permits—all the words gathered again on his desk. But just as he lifted his pen, an invisible hand wrote “Present” on the blank part of the paper. Hariharan shuddered. He knew Channa Grove had entered the veranda.

Chandrapal Batra saw a financial opportunity in this new road performance. If the play was being staged in the street, he thought, donations, advertisements, broadcasts and digital tickets could be attached to it. But when his people went to set up cameras in the market, the women stopped them. Mira said, “We will not put memory up for sale again.” Chandrapal’s app opened only a blank page that day. Across the blank page a line appeared like the scratch of a crocodile’s claw. He felt the story had moved beyond his grip.

Raghav “Signal” Somani recorded these events in his new code as “moving-theatre.” But the moment he sent the message, the word split in two—“moving” and “theatre.” The first ran away; the second stood still. Raghav could not understand to whom the people’s dialogue should be sent. There was no owner, no single leader, no account. When society speaks without a centre, the map of conspiracy grows blurred.

Lau Kin-Hung read the report in a glass room in a distant country. He was given the English phrase “rural performative resistance,” but as he read he forgot the words. He saw only the stump of Channa Grove, the emptiness of the unnamed planet from the dream, and a crocodile’s eye. No sound from outside entered the glass room, and in that complete silence he began to hear his own breath—a sound so close that it seemed to belong to someone else. He understood: these people would not leave Earth. A memory that had begun to play on the road could not be bought with a contract for another planet.

Folk Song: The Road Became the Stage

Folk Tune: Salhes Folk-Epic Rhythm

A stage was made, O the earthen road became a stage,

The story of the one without a home was laid upon the threshold.

No ticket, no curtain, no gold-studded seat,

The earthen road became the stage, the people became the authority.

At every turn a story, every threshold a character,

The weaver of nets was lost—whom could he buy tonight?

A child drew a line in the dust and made a game of names,

And brought an old man’s trembling voice into the centre circle.

Memory that plays upon the road is difficult to sell,

Its audience is field, river, tree and day.

Remain theatre, O road; break the city's locks,

Leave the story of the homeless upon every threshold.

*The people themselves became characters, and the people themselves
became the authority.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Refutation of secondary signification and inference: nevertheless, a person who sees such an animal and remembers the sentence meaning comes to know, “This donkey is the referent of the word ‘donkey.’” Refutation of secondary signification and inference.]

CHAPTER 140

THE TRAVELLING CHAUPAL

When no victory or defeat is declared in a game, understand that the game has become a guard over memory.



Opening Folk Song: The Game of Paper, the Victory of Names

Folk Tune: Kabaddi-Documentary Rhythm

Play, O play, play the paper game fairly,

Write every name in full; do not fear the seal.

*A line is drawn through the paper, a name crosses to the far side,
If the seal runs to catch it, truth touches the boundary and returns.*

*Rules clear, copies safeguarded, public watch beside them,
Transparent hands will change the game of documents.*

*Let it not be trick-kabaddi; let it be a festival of evidence,
Every name written in full, every consent made explicit.
Play the paper game with truth; let names win,
Set the green rhythm of life within dry pages.*

*Let the boundary line be clear, copies safe in every home,
Every consent written beneath the eyes of public watch.
Let the trickster's move fail; let evidence prevail,
Let the green rhythm of life sleep upon dry pages.*



A road is not a stage. No curtain is hung upon a road, no enclosure tied around it, no ticket torn. Yet the road is the oldest theatre of all. Upon the earth where people walk, their stories settle like footprints. A play inside a building ends; a play upon the road continues—because a road is never truly closed.

A game has a boundary line. One must cross it and return before the breath breaks. But what boundary is this? A field ridge or the margin of a page? The edge of a pond or the cover of a file? A name on this side is considered alive; one that falls beyond is called “cancelled.” Yet the boundary is not drawn in earth—it is drawn by someone’s pen.

In this game one must steal breath. The one who carries breath inside while crossing the line has only one rhythm beating through the whole body—name... name... name. If the breath breaks, the turn is lost. But breath cannot be put under guard. Names can. So whoever hears a name in full finds the breath preserved by itself.

The procession returns in the evening. The tiredness it carries is sweet like the tiredness after fieldwork. When theatre descends onto the road, power begins measuring its footsteps. Let it measure them. Feet can be measured; the road cannot.

Old Budhba's Ghost's words—"Do not merely read it; play it"—still hung from the edge of the stump when the next day's footprints began to fall in the road dust. Meanwhile the kabaddi players made a new rule. Wherever there was a performance, there must be a game at the end. But no winner or loser would be declared. A player would cross a line chanting "kabaddi," ask the people opposite for a name, and return before the breath broke. If the full name was heard, the turn succeeded. If the name was cut short, another breath would try again. In this rule the game became memory, and memory became game.

The children named this road theatre the "Travelling Chaupal." It required no stage, only three things—an open place, an ear willing to listen, and a name that had not yet been heard in full. A town unable to offer these three would remain merely a cluster of buildings; a town that could offer them would become an extension of Garh Narikel.

At dusk the procession returned again to the stump. Everyone was tired, but it was a simple tiredness, like after work in the fields. Ananya wrote in the register: "Today the story went out and learned from the road." Directly beneath, a little boy who had seen acting for the first time that day wrote: "A play is not what happens on a stage; a play is what compels life to tell its own lie."

Ba laughed at the sentence. "Then now it is life's turn," she said. The children did not understand. Ba explained: "Until now you have acted the story. Now the story will enter the homes of those who watched as spectators. That is the true stage—the kitchen, veranda, field, room, office, court, mobile phone, sleep."

The night deepened. Two policemen arrived on bicycles from the distant station. Politely they handed over a folded paper. It read: "Explanation regarding unauthorised obstruction of a public route, assembly of persons, and activity resembling a demonstration." The children read the paper. No one was frightened, but no one laughed either. Everyone knew that when a story comes onto the road, power begins to measure its feet.

Ananya placed the paper on the edge of the stump, exactly where the yellow notice had once been placed. A faint warm breath rose from within the stump. The corner of the paper lifted as if it too were waiting for someone to read it. From a distance Satyavrat Mehta said, “Tomorrow this will be read.”

From behind them Old Budhba's Ghost called, “Not read—played.”

At those words the night air seemed to stop. The children looked at one another. The next day would bring not road theatre but paper kabaddi—a game in which names had to be recovered from lines of law without losing breath.

Folk Song: Paper Kabaddi

Folk Tune: Documentary Folk Rhythm

*Call the names, O do not call kabaddi—call the names,
Bring one human being out of the darkness of every file.*

*A line through the paper, the seal becomes the opponent,
Old, child, woman and witness run carrying names.*

*Do not ask who won or lost; ask—who was missing,
Whose thumbprint was stolen, whose date disappeared.*

A dust-filled page held its breath and touched the boundary,

The red mark of “cancelled” broke and dissolved into earth.

Do not merely read; the paper itself must be played,

The body locked inside it must be opened.

Do not say kabaddi—call name, name,

Bring one human being out of the darkness of every file.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Difference of location in the tree: a traveller related an experience. Nor should this objection be raised: in the inference, “This tree is in conjunction with a monkey, because it is a tree,” the mutual absence in the locus of monkey-conjunction is only non-pervasive. This division showed how profound epistemic processes continue within small events of ordinary life. The justification of the special definition.]

CHAPTER 141

THE VERDICT ON THE VERANDA

*The veranda stone endures shoes all day, and at night it delivers
judgment.*



Opening Folk Song: The Veranda Became a Public Way

Folk Tune: Bright Courthouse Jhumar Rhythm

Spread the seat, O spread it upon the veranda,

Turn the shoe-worn stone into a public way.

*The veranda stone says—step after step has written its tale,
When the people brush off the dust and sit, the door of justice opens.*

*The stone that endured shoes now becomes a seat,
The tired body of the poor finds dignity there.*

*The waiting of day will become song, the silence of night a statement,
The veranda becomes a public way when human beings awaken.
Though the stone be cold, awaken the warmth of the heart,
Light a lamp of companionship along the court's long road.*

*In the dust of every footstep lies the story of waiting,
Brush it clean, sit together, share your sorrow.
The cold stone will gain warmth from human bodies,
On the long road of the courthouse, let the jhumar take colour.*



A veranda is not merely a place. A veranda is a condition—the condition between inside and outside. It is made for those who could not enter and could not turn back. Those sitting there are neither plaintiff nor defendant; they are only waiting. And waiting has no statutory section.

What is a date? A date is not a fragment of time. It is a fragment of the body. A person given dates for twenty-three years has had twenty-three years of the body divided among those slips: a son's youth one date, a father's eyesight another, a daughter's farewell a third. When justice delays, it does not consume time; it consumes the body.

Enduring shoes has been accepted as the duty of stone. Yet what endures also hears. Voices collect inside stone—the voice of summons, the voice of names, the peon's call, the lawyer's argument, and beneath all of them a faint sound no one heard: the breath of those sitting and waiting. That breath has gathered for years. Accumulated breath speaks one day.

The court has ears. But where are those ears placed? On the order or on the statement? On the statement or on the suffering? The court veranda is not outside the court—it is the court's unheard ear. The day that ear opens, the veranda will become a court.

The paper kabaddi played in the dust of the road reached the court gate, and by the time it arrived it was no longer a game but a watch. Even after the performance ended on the court veranda, people did not rise. The old stone that all day endured lawyers' shoes, clients' waiting, the peon's calls, the summoning of dates and dust kept beating silently that night as a stage. The actors' lines no longer remained words written on paper; they entered the bodies of clients whose years had been eaten by hearing dates.

Satyavrat Mehta stood at one corner of the veranda. In the performance he saw the shadow of his own old silence. There was a character who listened but did not write in time. The audience applauded, but in Satyavrat's ears it was not applause that sounded—it was the blankness of a page. He felt that behind the file numbers painted on the court wall, only dust had been placed where names should have been.

When the play ended, an elderly litigant came forward. "My case ran for twenty-three years," he said. "My son grew from young to old. The court said the papers were incomplete. But who will write the paper of my life?" At the question the last bamboo of the stage trembled. The actors were removing their costumes, but hearing him, they became still again. Those who had acted understood that the real play begins after one leaves the stage.

A clerk came outside from the court. He had feared that the programme on the veranda would disturb discipline. But when he heard the old man's question, the keys in his hand began to jingle by themselves. The keys were meant to open rooms, yet that night they seemed to him like tools that had kept people's throats locked. Quietly he said, "Some files are still in the record room. On some files there is not dust but the ash of names."

Ananya opened the register at once. She did not ask the clerk's name first; she asked the name of his fear. He was silent for a long time, then said, "Fear of losing my job." The children wrote: "Fear of protecting one's job is also a form of silence." At this, many faces in the crowd

changed. Everyone began to understand that the crime did not belong only to Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav or Lau; small fears join together to make long injustice.

At that moment an old disciple of Batuknath Hariharan, now an advocate, took off his coat and laid it on the stone. "We learned the language of law," he said, "but we did not learn the language of listening to justice." When the coat touched the stone it spread not like black cloth but like a tired document. Slips carrying hearing dates fell from its pocket. The children did not pick them up. "The one from whose pocket they fell will read them first," they said.

The reading of the slips began. Date after date was spoken aloud. The day someone's father was in hospital, the day someone's land was auctioned, the day someone's daughter left school, the day someone's hearth remained unlit—all were connected. The paper of the slips had become so old that between the reader's fingers it crumbled like dry meal. Slowly the courthouse veranda became not a calendar but human lifespan. When justice delays, it does not consume time; it consumes the body—everyone was beginning to feel this as touch.

Then Devika said, "A play was performed on this veranda. Now a reading will take place here." In place of the stage she laid stones, not paper. On every stone a date was written. Behind the date, a name. Behind the name, waiting. Behind waiting, a life. The veranda had grown from a place of performance into a place for the "Reading of Dates."

Mira warned everyone, "Do not drag into applause a story whose owner does not want it made public." The warning was necessary. The success of the performance could again become a market. Young men with cameras stepped forward, but the children stretched out their hands and stopped them. "Permission first," they said together. The oath of privacy had travelled from the theatre to the court veranda.

The actors who had wept in the procession of false ghosts also arrived. After watching the court performance, they felt that their bodies had been rented out to acting while their souls demanded testimony. One actor said, "I used to earn by becoming a ghost; today I understand that the ghost is in the paper that never became a judgment." Old Budhba's Ghost shimmered for a moment near the veranda roof, as though he liked the definition.

Although the stump of Channa Grove was far from the court that night, its presence seemed to fill the veranda. Someone said the stump's shadow had reached there. Someone said roots were beginning to grow inside the stone. Someone saw a bird sitting on the veranda ledge with a red thread in its beak. These belonged to those who saw them; the children guarding the names wrote only: "Channa Grove's listening has reached the court."

Gangesha's question rose again. A student who had come from the city to watch the play asked, "Justice requires evidence. How can all this crying be evidence?" Aruni did not answer directly. He pointed to the old litigant's feet—swollen, cracked, numbed by years of running. Then to the slips bearing dates, then to the clerk's trembling hand, then to the children's register. "If evidence lives only on paper," he said, "the life of the poor will always remain unproved."

The student fell silent. It seemed to him that if the fine logic of Navya-Nyaya could not read the fine pain of the body, it would remain incomplete. The leaf of Tattvacintamani once seen in the stump was now spreading across the veranda stone. Cage of caste, cage of dates, fear of employment, hunger for prestige—all circled one another as questions.

The veranda did not empty until midnight. The tea seller lit his stove. Coal smoke spread a faint sheet across the stones, and the smell of ginger made the cold night a little more bearable. The courthouse gate was closed, but outside it the hearing remained open. Those denied entry for years began to create their own language of justice outside. This language would not issue orders, but it would preserve names. It would not pronounce sentences, but it would remove silence from the face of crime.

At last Satyavrat Mehta came forward. No one wanted a speech from him. He merely took an old page from his pocket. On it was written: "The court veranda is not outside the court; it is its unheard ear." He gave the page to Ananya. Beneath it she wrote: "When the ear opens, the veranda becomes the court."

By first light the crowd dispersed. The dates remained on the stones. The coat remained on the stone. For a moment the clerk's keys were left beside it, then taken up again—because the world's locked rooms still had to be opened. As the old litigant went home, he said, "Today I did not receive a verdict, but my waiting received a name."

At that sentence the veranda stone grew warm. The court that had consumed bodies for years now found its veranda listening in return to the testimony of bodies. This was not victory; it was a beginning. For when a veranda begins to speak, the record-room door begins to tremble.

And indeed, the next morning old files in the court record room began fluttering by themselves. Dust rose but did not become wings; it began becoming letters. The pages seemed to say: read us too, but read us in such a way that the person trapped inside the paper can come out.

Thus the chapter did not end on the veranda. The performance that had left the stage now moved towards the darkness of the files.

Folk Song: The Veranda Stone

Folk Tune: Courthouse Lament

*I endured, O stone, all day I endured the shoes,
Now speak as a human—carry the crying to justice.*

*All day I endured shoes; at night I heard the names,
O veranda stone, when will the court's ear open?
The old man's petition yellowed, the light left his eyes,
Date piled upon date; half a life was spent.
The words of the play entered the body; silence tore open,*

*The name of unheard waiting was written upon stone.
No verdict came, but waiting found its way home,
The lock of the record room trembled that night.
O veranda, carry my crying as far as justice,
Stone worn by shoes, now sing as a human being.*

*Date upon date was piled; half a life passed away.
No verdict came, but waiting reached home.*



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The Navya-Naiyayika view: similarity between two pleasures. On this view comparison is possible even with what is incomparable: “The sky is like the sky,” “The ocean is like the

ocean,” “The battle of Rama and Ravana is like the battle of Rama and Ravana.” The Navya-Naiyayika view: similarity between two pleasures.]

CHAPTER 142

DARKNESS IN THE RECORD ROOM

*In the darkness of the record room, it is not files that rot—it is arrested
time.*



Opening Folk Song: The Cupboard's Breath Opened

Folk Tune: Parati

Open the lock, O open it with the hands of dawn,

Let pages buried for years dissolve into air.

The cupboard's shut breath receives the morning wind,

Page after page flutters and tells its own story.

Open the lock carefully; honour the dust,

Give the letters buried for years a bright seat.

A file is not lifeless; people's lives are there,

From every paper the smell of a household rises again.

When cupboards breathe, the office becomes human,

From the light of opened pages public trust is born again.

In every fluttering page lies someone's house and doorway,

Beneath the layers of dust sleeps a whole plate of rights.

A file is not lifeless—understand it as a ledger of breath,

In the light of the opened cupboard, reckon public trust anew.



What is a cupboard? A cupboard is a small dark room in which people's years are locked away. Outside, the sun rises and sets, crops are harvested, children grow young, the young grow old. Inside, not a single day passes. Time stands still there. Time that stands still begins to rot.

A lock may be old. But why does a lock become heavy? Bhikhari Lal says—the lock is not old; the breath inside is heavy. This is no tale. In a room where people's waiting has been shut for years, the air turns salty—as though tears dried and left salt behind.

Dust enters not the eyes but memory. The dust of old paper contains ink, glue, dampness, sweat, and among them a smell no one has named—the smell of unheard waiting. Whoever does not recognise that smell mistakes a record room for a storeroom.

Is a file alive? A file for which someone is still holding their breath and waiting is alive. A file for which no one remains is dead. Yet even a dead file cannot be thrown aside—because someone's last voice may be hidden inside it.

Dates had already been written upon the veranda stones; now it was time to search for the names locked inside those dates. When the court opened the next day, the record-room door was the first thing everyone looked at. On ordinary days the door only endured pushes—the peon came and opened the bolt, clerks went inside, dust rose, files came out, and then, along with the fate of paper, human fate too slipped into some cupboard. But that morning the wood of the door was beating from within, as though someone had been scratching it all night.

Peon Bhikhari Lal put the key into the lock, but it did not open at once. The key turned and jammed. A clerk said, "It is an old lock." Bhikhari Lal said quietly, "The lock is not old; the breath inside is heavy." At the sentence, the people standing on the veranda looked at one another. The previous night's Reading of Dates still remained in the air.

Satyavrat Mehta watched from a distance. He knew that the record room was the court's stomach. A paper sent inside might be digested into a judgment or rot into oblivion—no one outside could see which. Yesterday names had been written on stones on the veranda. Today the names trapped inside paper were pushing against the door themselves.

At last the bolt opened. The moment the door swung back, the dust ceased to be ordinary dust. It entered not merely the eyes but memory. Many sneezed, many wept, many fell silent. In the smell of the dust mingled old paper, rotting glue, dampness, sweat, ink, the touch of bribes, and the helplessness of waiting. Devika covered her mouth with the end of her sari, but the children's register remained open.

Cupboards stood in rows inside the record room—like soldiers of an offence. Each bore a number, but the files inside were far heavier than numbers. Some had broken strings, some carried termite bites, some were marked in blue pencil "next hearing"—a hearing that might have died years ago. In one corner papers had been stuffed into a sack as waste. Ananya went first to that sack.

"This is not waste," she said. "These are humiliated papers."

The clerk trembled. "The sack cannot be touched without an order."

Aruni looked at him. "Who will issue the order? The names in the sack are themselves the order."

Mira stopped everyone. "Carefully. Do not tear any file. If the paper tears, the name is wounded again. First count, then read, then find the person whose story it is." In this caution the oath of privacy from that earlier night sounded again. Eagerness to expose truth, if it has no compassion, can itself become violence.

The first file was opened. In thick letters its cover said "Land Dispute," but inside lay a torn corner of a wedding invitation. The date was the day the plaintiff's daughter had been due to marry. The case dragged on, the land remained frozen, the marriage broke. None of this appeared anywhere in the formal papers. The torn corner of the invitation rose as testimony. Ananya wrote: "A social death is hidden inside the legal dispute."

The second file contained no copy of an order, only copies of applications. "Received" had been stamped on the petition five times, but not once had there been a reply. Bhikhari Lal said softly, "Papers like these make sounds at night." His voice carried not the fear of a servant but the weariness of a witness. He began to admit how often he had told litigants, "The officer is not here; come tomorrow." Tomorrow kept coming until people's ages were gone.

Behind the third cupboard a thin file was found wedged in place. A small knot of red thread was tied around its string. The children looked into one another's eyes. Was this the shadow of the red thread once seen in the beak of the bird at Channa Grove? The name on the file had blurred, but the first line inside was clear: "Objection to deletion of name." The cage of caste rattled again as soon as the line was read.

The file contained a young man's petition saying that his surname had been altered in the school admission register, so his identity fell under suspicion on certificates, scholarships and employment records. The matter reached court and became a file; the file was buried in the record room. The young man's life remained unverified while waiting to be verified. Aruni said, "Cutting a name is not merely cutting letters; it is cutting a human future."

Hearing this, Satyavrat Mehta came inside. His feet entered the dust, and he did not brush it off. "If the dust of the record does not touch the body," he said, "a judge goes on imagining himself clean." At this admission the clerks' faces changed. Some felt relief, some fear. For when truth descends from above, the people pressed down below begin to breathe, while those who shared in wrongdoing lose sleep.

Suddenly a faint cough came from the back of the record room. Everyone turned. In the corner sat an old woman who had remained on the veranda all night and had quietly slipped inside in the morning. "My

husband's file is here," she said. "People told me the file was lost. I thought—if the man himself was lost, why should his file not be lost too?" She held an old cloth bag containing her husband's photograph, hospital slips and land receipts. The mouth of the bag was wrapped three times with thread, as though it had been opened and retied every day for years.

Mira tried to offer her a chair, but the old woman stayed seated on the stone. "I have sat on stone for years. A chair no longer feels true to me." Her words rang through the record room. Chair, seal, lock, cupboard—all were signs of civilisation; yet the stone of waiting was older and truer than all of them.

They searched for the husband's file. First the number was wrong, then the year, then the spelling of the name. Three searches found nothing. On the fourth, the children wrote three possible forms of the name. On the fifth, the sack was overturned. On the sixth, one paper fell out—only half the name remained. The old woman touched it to her forehead. "Half a name is still a name," she said, "if someone is willing to hear it whole."

At that moment the air in the record room changed. Papers inside the cupboards began to stir. Was it a miracle or merely wind? No one could say for certain. But everyone saw that letters which had seemed erased at the edges of many old pages began to appear. The paper seemed to say: do not read me in haste; read me with the eyes that can also see the absence of a human being.

Devika proposed: "There will be a list of every missing file. If a file cannot be found, the person's testimony will be written in a separate register. A missing file will not mean a finished human being." The proposal lay outside routine court procedure, but inside justice. The clerk hesitated, then took a pencil from his pocket. "Let a new register be opened," he said.

The old disciple of Batuknath Hariharan who had taken off his coat the previous day arrived again. He stood on the record-room threshold and tried to apologise. Mira stopped him. "An apology is not a sentence spoken on a stage. Help find the files you helped bury." For the first time the advocate lifted papers without fee, argument or prestige. Dust settled on his palms. Looking at it, he lowered his eyes.

By noon a line had formed outside the record room. But it was not a line for a hearing date; it was a line for matching names. The children asked: "How was your name written? How was it distorted? Since what year have you been waiting?" People answered first with surprise, then anger, then patience. For the first time the history of the court was being written backwards from people's mouths.

At last Satyavrat Mehta wrote an order. It was short, but its meaning ran deep: "Every file in the record room shall be recounted; a public list of missing files shall be prepared; and temporary records shall be made of the oral testimony of waiting parties." He paused while writing "oral testimony." It was difficult for a voice to enter the paper of law. But he wrote it. The nib trembled, then grew steady.

The order was read aloud. People wanted to applaud, but Ananya raised a hand. "This is not a moment of victory; it is the beginning of the watch." Everyone remained silent. There was respect in the silence. Files that had lived in darkness for years could also be hurt by the sudden brightness of noise. Slowly the papers were lifted, lists made, names matched, errors marked.

When evening fell, the record room's darkness seemed for the first time not simply darkness but a deep chamber in which a lamp could be placed. A wind came from the direction of Channa Grove's stump. Someone said, "The red thread moved." Someone said, "Old Budhba's Ghost laughed." But the register recorded only: "Today the darkness in the record room was asked its name."

By night the door was closed again, but this time the lock could not close the breath within. Outside, dates remained written on veranda stones; inside, files stood awake in cupboards. Between them the children's register was placed—neither stone nor paper, but living memory.

The chapter does not end here. For the person whose file was found still awaited judgment; the person whose file was not found had only begun the struggle for existence. The veranda of justice had begun to speak; now the darkness of paper was learning how to listen.

Folk Song: Breath Locked in the Cupboard

Folk Tune: Plaintive Jhumar

Open it slowly, O open the cupboard slowly,

Bring every shut breath out by name.

In the cupboard's darkness time is rotting,

Inside the leaves of files human beings lie.

The key turned; the lock said—the breath is heavy,

In particles of dust many widows awoke.

If the file was never found, where is that person's existence?

If it was found, the judgment there still sleeps.

The children's register burns like a lamp between them,

Between stone and paper living memory moves.

Open the cupboard slowly; do not scatter the wound,

Bring every shut breath out by its name.

Inside the leaves of files human beings lie pressed down.

If the file is not found, where is that person's existence?



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The tree with the monkey: if a relation that comprehends the whole is accepted, then in a specific inference such as “This mountain possesses the absence of conjunction with a monkey, because it is knowable,” one would have to become omniscient in order, through the universal knowability, to apprehend the pervasion of every instance of the probandum—the absence of monkey-conjunction—by the probans, knowability. Rejection of the counter-objection: indeterminate cognition is not the cause of determinate cognition.]

CHAPTER 143

The Testimony of the Scrap Sack

*On paper dismissed as scrap may be written someone's last hope in life
—therefore tearing it is the greatest crime of all.*



Opening Folk Song: Not Scrap, but Seed-Pages

Folk Tune: Seed-Sowing Song

Open the sack, sister, open the sack of scrap,

Search the torn pages for seeds hidden there.

*Open the scrap sack, sister; each page is like a seed,
On one is someone's house-map, on another someone's father's name.
We shall join the torn corners, read the words rubbed away,
And plant the seed of justice in the field of dried paper.*

*One page is one season, one seal a history,
Paper preserved will give forgotten people breath again.
Never call it scrap; save the grain of memory,
Plant these seed-pages and let new rights grow.*

*One page bears a father's name, another the map of a home,
Letter by erased letter, joined again, becomes the defence of a right.
Plant the seed of justice in the field of dried paper,
Water memory so forgotten people may breathe.*



It is easy to call something scrap. No one gives a name to paper thrown into a sack. It is called "old material," "useless," "fit for destruction." Yet inside that sack there is also a page on which only this is written—Hear me. Below it, a thumbprint. A blot where the name should be.

Why a thumbprint? Because for the person whom letters never reached, this one mark of the body was all that remained. No pen makes that mark. It is the inner line of that human being, one no one can copy. And yet the system writes over that mark—"unclear."

Who is unclear—the writer or the reader? If a widow's hand trembled and the writing went awry, that becomes her fault. But who will record the fault of a system that never learned to read the handwriting of a trembling hand? The paper is not unclear. Unclear are the eyes that never practised reading grief.

What was thrown into scrap did not end. A seed too is thrown into the soil. The thrower thinks, I buried it. But the soil knows, You planted it. The scrap sack is a dark soil. What rises from it will not be paper—it will be testimony.

The cupboards of the record room had been opened, but the heaviest corner was the one where the sacks were kept. Mira stopped everyone. "Carefully. Do not tear any file. The paper now being called scrap may carry someone's last hope in life."

At those words everyone's hands slowed. The children who yesterday had been writing dates on the veranda stones were learning today how to touch paper. The paper was weak, but the voice inside it was hard. Termites had eaten some letters; damp had blurred some names. But what survived was so sharp that the darkness of the record room began opening from within.

Ananya opened the mouth of the sack. Pages came out—applications, statements, rejected petitions, unsigned copies, papers on which nothing remained but a thumbprint. One page said, "Plaintiff present, hearing adjourned." Another: "Defendant absent." A third: "Original record unavailable." Aruni said softly, "The original record was not unavailable; the original human being was made absent."

The clerk trembled at that sentence. His years of service returned to him. How many times had he written "record not available" because he could not find the cupboard key? How many times "incomplete" because an officer was on leave? How many times "resubmit" because a file had been buried beneath papers on an upper desk? He kept thinking: upon whose body had the weight of these small words been falling?

Satyavrat Mehta picked up a page. A stain dark as kohl marked it. He read a widow's petition: her land had been occupied in the name of a mortgage. Along the margin, in red ink, someone had written "unclear." Satyavrat's eyes filled. The widow's writing was not unclear; the system was simply unaccustomed to reading her grief.

Devika said, "The first lesson of the scrap sack is this: those who were removed did not thereby cease to exist." The children wrote the sentence on a separate sheet. People standing in the room watched as papers once called scrap slowly took their seats as witnesses. No one lifted them

casually, no one dusted them impatiently; everyone bowed their heads before them.

One page contained only this: "Hear me." Below it, a thumbprint. A blot where the name should have been. Half an address. A faded date. But the sentence survived. Ananya held the page for a long time in silence. It had grown so thin that she could feel its fibres between her fingers, and within those fibres, the hidden touch of someone. Then she told the children, "If the name has not survived, protect the sentence. Sometimes a person leaves behind not a full identity, only a call."

At that call, dust fell from the record-room ceiling, as though the files stored above also wanted to say—Hear us too. Bhikhari Lal, who had been standing silently at the door, came inside. He set his broom against the wall. For years his work had been to remove dust; today, for the first time, he felt that while sweeping away dust he had perhaps also been sweeping away testimonies.

"We were taught to clean away old paper," Bhikhari Lal said, "but no one told us that old cries live inside old paper." Mira asked him to enter his name in the register. Bhikhari Lal was frightened. "If my name is written down, there will be trouble." Mira replied, "Writing a name is not trouble. Erasing a name is trouble."

Inside the sack they found a bundle whose cord had blackened with age. When the cord was untied, out came one family's case—two brothers, one sister, the edge of an old pond, and a footpath that had vanished from the government survey. As the pages were read, it became clear that the dispute was not only about land; it was about a road. When the footpath disappeared from paper, the sister's route back to her natal home disappeared with it.

Aruni said, "When a survey fails to show a path, relationships are severed." The footpath was absent from the map, but the statements still held the dust of their feet. The children placed the pages in order. A little girl named Nilima began drawing the footpath in pencil on a separate sheet. No one stopped her. Sometimes justice finds its road not through a map, but through memory.

Then Lau's name surfaced again in a file. A red seal, a clipped edge, and a letter inside. The letter suggested that certain records had deliberately been declared "irrelevant." Devika neither laughed nor cried when she heard the word irrelevant. She said only, "How can something that changes a person's life be irrelevant?"

Satyavrat Mehta stood still after reading the letter. He understood that the scrap sack might not be merely the result of neglect; it could also be part of a plan. Turning into scrap the paper that might lead toward justice—that was a silent conspiracy within the court. But not every paper

can be sold. Some papers retain their fire even after they are thrown into scrap.

The children decided that every page would be copied. Mira warned them again: "There will be copies, but there will be no spectacle. If making a name public would harm that person's family, the name will be concealed. We shall protect the testimony, not sell the witness's body." Hearing this, Ananya wrote on the first page of her register: "The light of truth does not grant permission to tear apart the darkness of privacy."

By afternoon the crowd outside the record room had grown. One person came asking about his case, another about his father's file, another about his grandfather's land, another about a lost petition. But the children did not answer at once. First they began making a list—dead files, living files, half-dead files, files at risk of theft, and files that must be touched with special care.

Someone laughed at the list. "Can files be alive too?" Ananya replied, "A file because of which someone is still holding their breath and waiting is alive." Everyone in the record room fell silent. In every household there was some living file or other—inside a box, a trunk, a memory, or the corner of an eye.

That evening the papers from the scrap sack were brought onto the veranda. Beside the dates written on stone now lay the shadows of pages. The old litigant who had found the name of his waiting yesterday returned. He saw one sheet and his hands began to tremble. "This looks like my brother's application," he said. But the name was blurred.

Mira stopped him immediately. "It looks like it—that is the beginning of testimony, not the end of proof." The old man accepted this. He did not touch the paper to his forehead, because he had been taught that paper needs reading, not worship. He said only, "If it is not mine, it still belongs to someone. If it belongs to someone, it belongs to our society."

By nightfall the scrap sack was empty, yet the record room seemed fuller than before. The empty sack was turned inside out and laid on the veranda. What remained in it was not dust alone, but a few broken pins, a dry leaf, and particles of red ink. The children wrote across its mouth: "Testimony was buried here."

Bhikhari Lal asked, "Will this sack be kept?" Devika said, "Yes, but not like a museum piece. It will be kept as a warning." Satyavrat Mehta added, "The day an office finds the courage to look at its own scrap is the day justice begins to recover its first face."

That night a wind came from the stump in Channa Grove. The papers laid on the veranda stones trembled but did not blow away, as though an invisible hand were holding them. Old Budhba's Ghost smiled

from the shadow of the eaves and said, "Calling something scrap is easy; rising again as testimony is difficult. Today the difficult work has begun."

At the end of the chapter Ananya did not close her register. She left the last page open because many pages were still waiting to be read. On the open page one line had been written: "What was thrown into scrap will return as the first witness in the court of justice."

And indeed, before dawn the empty sack stirred lightly. There was no one inside it, but the rustle of paper kept rising from its folds. The sound did not disappear into the darkness of the court.

Night descended. The door of the record room was closed again, but this time the papers inside had not been crushed together; they had been arranged. The trunk was not emptied, because everything cannot be opened in a single day. But a new label was pasted across its mouth: "Human Testimony."

Outside on the veranda, the old litigant sat on the stone. In his hand was a copy of his old application. He could not read it because his sight had dimmed. One of the children read it aloud to him slowly. The old man listened as though the voice of his own lost age had returned.

The veranda, the record room, Channa Grove and the night wind heard the sentence together. The human being inside the file was coming outside. This coming out was not yet a judgment, but it was certainly the first breath on the road to judgment.

Folk Song: The Scrap Sack's Last Hope

Folk Tune: Samdaun

Do not call it scrap; there is a home upon this page,

Inside termite-eaten letters there is a mother's voice.

Do not call it scrap; there is a home upon this page,

Inside termite-eaten letters there is a mother's voice.

Old eyes cannot read; a child reads aloud,

Hearing the voice of his own lost age, the heart begins to tremble.

The torn application says—do not tear me again,

I am the last hope; have mercy and hold me in your lap.

All night the empty sack rustled out its testimony,

At its mouth it bore a slip marked "Human Testimony."

Lift one life from the dust of scrap,

Carry the old man's half-dead hope home.

The old eyes could not read; the child read aloud,

The torn application said—do not tear me again,

I am the last hope; have mercy and cradle me close.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The Ekadeshin says: resemblance consists in possessing many common properties present in the related things. On this view, comparison is possible even in the case of incomparable objects: "Space is like space," "the ocean is like the ocean," "the battle of Rama and Ravana is like the battle of Rama and Ravana." The Ekadeshin holds that similarity is the possession of many common properties present in the correlates.]

CHAPTER 144

The Journey of the Name

*Once a name leaves the file, no seal marked “cancelled” can ever
imprison it again.*



Opening Folk Song: The Name as a Traveller Homeward

Folk Tune: Batagabani

Go, O name, go along the road to home,

A mother's lamp waits at the threshold—go as far as there.

Leaving the cupboard, the name set out upon the road home,

Crossing veranda, stairs and dust with steady steps.

At the threshold a mother waited with a lamp,

At the sound of the name's feet the dry courtyard smiled.

Though the road be long, sing the traveller's song,

Holding one another's company, carry every name home.

When the name returns, the ancestors will bless it,

The leaves of a forgotten lineage will turn green again.

Cupboard, veranda and stairs were all crossed,

Even on the dust-filled road the feet left their marks.

*At the sound of footsteps the courtyard smiled and the tulsi branch
stirred,*

The house and doorway shone with the tilak of the returning name.



Where does a name live? Not in a cupboard. A cupboard holds only a copy of the name. The true name lives at the threshold—where a lamp burns at dusk and someone sits waiting. A name that has not returned to the threshold is only half a name, however completely it may be written on paper.

The road is long. There is a river on it, a broken bridge, a half-paved road, and more than all these—the forgetting of people. A village forgets that someone once sat all day on the field boundary. But soil does not

forget. Soil keeps the footprint, and when someone calls an old name, the earth returns that mark.

Taking news is one thing; taking dignity is another. At the door of a house where sorrow lives, one must place one's feet gently. Turning someone's wound into a procession is also a kind of plunder. Return the name; do not turn it into a spectacle.

And what of the name that will never find a home? It too needs a place. For that there is Channa Grove. The name whose threshold has vanished will be kept in the tree's shade. For the crocodile may eat the body, but not the name. When a name begins its journey, the crocodile's teeth are left behind.

The paper marked "Human Testimony" pasted across the mouth of the trunk dried during the night, and as the glue dried the journey of the names began. The record-room door was shut at night, but the names did not remain shut inside. What until yesterday had been called dead cases, cancelled petitions, unclear statements, incomplete records and scrap paper slowly began, in the darkness, to search for their bodies. The papers lay on the table, but the names stepped down onto the veranda stones; from stone to stair, from stair to gate, and from gate onto the village road. The court went to sleep, but the journey of the names began.

At dawn, when Bhikhari Lal the peon came to open the gate, he felt that someone had left not dew but letters on the veranda stones through the night. He bent to look. Some letters were indistinct, but faces lived within them. Beside Jasoda Devi's name ran a line of soil; beside the old litigant's petition a mark like a wet thumbprint; beside a labourer's name iron filings; beside a student's name the broken point of a pencil. Bhikhari Lal caught his breath. The line he had drawn yesterday—beyond this line nothing shall be called scrap—had spread through the night and encircled the whole veranda.

Ananya arrived first. With her came Aruni, Devika, Mira and two or three children. They carried no new notebooks, only yesterday's dust-stained register. Ananya said, "The journey of the name began with paper, but it will not end on paper." Mira added, "News will reach the homes of the names that were trapped in files. But before we carry news, we shall carry dignity."

The word dignity sounded softly across the veranda. The court veranda had long heard loud voices, summons, arguments, scolding, dates, excuses and the thud of tired feet. But this word was so gentle that even the stone seemed to soften. Devika told the children, "If you carry news of someone's sorrow, do not arrive like a procession. At the door of a house where grief lives, place your feet gently."

The first decision was to divide the list of names into three parts. First—those who were alive and from whom consent could be sought. Second—those who had died, whose relatives would be traced. Third—those whose home, lineage and place had all grown blurred; their names would be read in a memorial recitation near Channa Grove, but not turned into spectacle. Aruni wrote on the list: “No face without consent, no quotation without context, no testimony without dignity.”

Satyavrat Mehta watched the arrangement. He remembered that in law this was called procedure; but in a poor person's life, procedure repeatedly became a cage. The new rules the children were making were not government procedure but human caution. He said, “If procedure does not protect the human being, it is merely a latch. Let this list be not a latch, but a door.”

The clerk quietly brought an old register. His eyes were red less from sleeplessness than from guilt. He said, “I cannot hand over copies of files directly. But there is a right to make a list of public records.” Devika looked at him. “For the first time you are using the word right in the proper place.” The clerk lowered his head, but this time his silence was not flight; it was acceptance.

The list began. Against each name they wrote not only the case number but the years of waiting: “twenty-three years,” “twelve years,” “seven hearings without a hearing,” “petition lost twice,” “plaintiff dead,” “heir migrated to the city,” “woman's statement suppressed as a domestic matter,” “labourer's injury declared outside jurisdiction,” “student scholarship blocked by error in caste certificate.” Amid these phrases, the children kept cutting away rigid bureaucratic language and replacing it with human language.

A young advocate who yesterday had laid his coat on the stone came today without it. Everyone recognised him, but he had stripped away the covering of his profession. He said, “I will help find the homes of these names. The address on court paper is often old. But perhaps some revenue records, panchayat papers and old maps can show the way.”

Aruni stopped him. “Help, but do not become the owner.” The young advocate fell silent at once. He understood the thin difference between service and control. A lawyer who had long held power over people through the language of paper now had to learn the language of listening. Bowing his head, he said, “I will only show the road. The guardians of the name will decide.”

The first house they searched for was Jasoda Devi's. The village name was half-erased in the file; termites had eaten the edge of the paper. But the field account number survived. Bhikhari Lal said, “An auction notice once came against this account. The village is across the river.” The old litigant also spoke. “I have been to the market in that village. Near the

pipal tree there is an old oil-presser's room." From these small memories a road was made.

Four children, Devika, the young advocate and Bhikhari Lal set out for Jasoda Devi's village. Ananya and Mira remained at the court to guard the list. Satyavrat Mehta stayed on the veranda, because he understood that the journey was not only outward; it was inward too. Someone had to guard the record room so that no one would remove papers again.

The road to the village was not simple. Half paved, half potholes. The shadow of a collapsed bridge still survived in people's speech. The river ran low, but its bank was cut away. Water gathered in the bottom of the boat and soaked the soles of their feet; from the wet wood rose the faint smell of moss. The boatman said, "Jasoda? An old name. There was a woman like that who used to sit all day on the field boundary. She would say: if the boundary goes, my body will be cut." Devika and the others looked at one another. The line in the file—"My field is the body of my name"—now met the village memory.

Jasoda Devi was no longer alive. Her house stood half fallen, half repaired. An elderly woman sat at the door. They learned that she was Jasoda's niece and was now a grandmother herself. Devika asked softly, "We found Jasoda Devi's name in an old court paper. Would you like to hear it?" The woman startled at first. Then tears came down her face. "Is that name still alive?"

Before any answer, the question itself summed up the entire journey. The children understood that the journey of a name from paper to home was not merely information; it was rebirth. Devika opened the register but did not allow a crowd to gather. Neighbours who began watching were politely asked to step back. The old woman's consent was taken. Then Jasoda Devi's line was read aloud. The woman placed a hand on her chest. "She used to say: if the field goes, I shall no longer exist. People laughed. Now the paper is saying it."

Jasoda's field was now occupied by someone else. A small brick warehouse stood on the boundary. The young advocate grew angry, but Devika stopped him. "Write the anger, but do not pronounce judgment yet." The children did not lift soil from the field edge or take photographs. With the old woman's consent they recorded only the village memory—when the boundary had been removed, in whose name the account had changed, how Jasoda had gone to the panchayat, and how she had been called "stubborn."

At that moment a middle-aged man who looked after the warehouse came forward. In a hard voice he asked, "What will you gain by digging up old matters?" Aruni remained calm. "We are not digging up old matters; we are reading a buried name." The man laughed. "Nothing will change because of what is written on paper." Bhikhari Lal, who for so

long had been only a peon, suddenly answered, "Nothing changed while the paper was in the wrong hands. Now it will go into the hands of the name."

The man fell silent, but a faint line of fear appeared in his eyes. When crocodiles remain in water, they trust their teeth; but when people on the bank recognise their name, they begin searching for the dampness of water. That search for dampness was on the man's face. Devika did not write his name because writing an accusation without proof would not be justice. She wrote only: "The occupying party attempted to evade the matter."

Before evening the group returned to court carrying the consent of Jasoda's niece, her oral memory, and notes on the condition of the field. For the first time, life outside the paper was joined to the file. Ananya read the notes and said, "Jasoda Devi is no longer a dead case. She is now a living memory." Mira made not a red mark on the list, but a pale yellow one: "Home found, voice found."

The second journey was planned for the labourer's name. The file wrote him as Lalan Mandal, but perhaps he had also been called Lalan, Lalaan or Lalit. Even the spelling of a name is often damaged by the system. Satyavrat Mehta said, "Ask before you correct the name. Do not force the paper's name upon the human being." The lesson mattered for the children. To save a name and in doing so distort it is also violence.

That night a small gathering took place on the veranda. The artists who yesterday had returned from the story of the false ghost came too. One artist asked, "Shall we make a play about these names?" Mira answered at once, "Do not hurry to make a play. First let the names re-enter their own homes." The artist's face fell, but he accepted it. Devika explained, "We shall perform only when the memory of the wounded gives consent. Otherwise the stage will once again become a place of plunder."

News also came from the stump in Channa Grove. Someone said dew had filled the crack in the stump through the night, as though it had been listening to the journey of the names. Old Budhba's Ghost was not seen, but a bird perched on the roof left behind a red thread. The children did not pick it up; they let it remain there. They were learning not to hurry to take possession of symbols.

After the night deepened, Satyavrat Mehta went alone to the record-room door. Inside, the papers were arranged. Outside, a copy of the list of names lay on the veranda stone. He felt that perhaps for the first time in the court's history, the human being within the file had travelled homeward and the memory of the home had travelled back toward the file. This movement in both directions would keep justice alive. Paper

moving only one way is dead; grief moving only one way goes unrecorded. When the two meet, testimony is born.

The clerk came quietly behind him. "I am afraid," he said. "What shall I say if the senior officer asks?" Satyavrat replied, "Tell the truth—the papers were read." The clerk did not smile. He knew that telling the truth could cost him his job. Satyavrat said again, "Write fear on the list too. A system that suppresses names first suppresses the employee's throat." For the first time the clerk made a separate slip for his fear. He titled it: "Statement of an Employee's Silence."

The slip was small but important. Injustice is not made only by the criminal at the top; it is tied together downward by cords of fear. Bhikhari Lal, the clerk, the junior lawyer, the person who carries papers, the person who stamps seals—if all of them say only, "I followed orders," then the crocodile of crime will keep swimming in nameless water. So today fear too received a name.

The list grew until midnight. Beside some names were question marks; beside others "home to be found," "relative's consent required," "document comparison pending." The children were exhausted, yet there was a strange brightness in their fatigue. They felt they were reading not a book, but the letters of life.

At last Ananya closed the register and said, "The journey of the names will not end on the first day. Some names will go to villages, some to cities, some across the river, some into memory. Some may never find a home. But the names that do not find a home will be given a place near Channa Grove."

Everyone on the veranda stood silent for a moment. This silence was not defeat. It was the pledge of people who had understood that justice is not only exposing the name of the offender; it is also pronouncing the wounded person's name again with respect. The crocodile eats the body, not the name. When the name travels, the crocodile's teeth are left behind.

By dawn the first list had been written in three copies—one for the record room, one beside the veranda stone, and one to be carried to Channa Grove. When the sun rose, drops of dew shone on the pages. Someone said, "The ink will get wet." Mira replied, "No. This is not dew; it is the bathing of the names."

Thus, in this chapter, the human being inside the file set out toward home. The court veranda became a road, the record room became a source, and Channa Grove became the listener waiting ahead.

Folk Song: The Name Set Out for Home

Folk Tune: Batagabani

*The name has set out, leaving the cupboard for home,
A name spoken with respect does not remain caught between teeth.*

*Leaving the cupboard, the name travelled across the veranda,
From stone to gate, from gate it took the village road.
Beside Jasoda's name was soil, beside the labourer's iron dust,
Beside the student a broken pencil—all were far from home.
Three copies were made—for court, stone and grove,*

*Dewdrops shone as though the names had bathed and returned.
The crocodile may eat the body; it cannot stop the journey,
A name spoken with respect does not remain caught between teeth.
Name, recognise again the threshold of your home,
Weave your sound again upon a mother's trembling lips.*

Beside Jasoda there was soil; beside the labourer, iron dust.

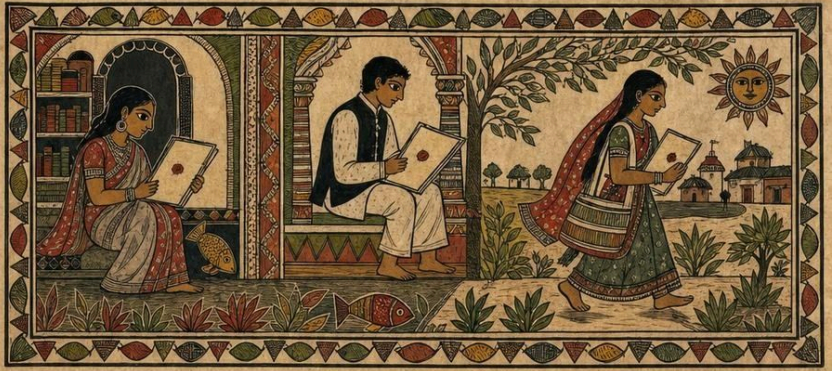


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—In a sentence such as “Space is like space,” the space in another region is the standard of comparison and the space before the speaker is the object compared. Similarly, in the example of the battle of Rama and Ravana, the battle in an earlier or another context is the standard, while the battle in the present context is the object compared.]

CHAPTER 145

The First Crack in Fear

Fear does not break all at once—first a crack appears, and through the crack light enters.



Opening Folk Song: A Lamp in the Crack

Folk Tune: Jhijhiya Vigil

Place the lamp, O place the lamp inside the crack,

Let light pour through the holes in fear's clay pot.

*A tiny crack in the pot of fear—place the lamp there,
Let brightness stream through every hole and fill the inside with
courage.*

*The pot will not shatter at once; first the light goes in,
One who carries dawn in the heart can cross the night.*

*Sisters, turn the Jhijhiya round and make a circle of song,
Call the crack not weakness, but the doorway of hope.
One ray becomes a hundred rays, reducing the price of darkness,
Inside the pot of fear the lotus of hope begins to bloom.*

*The pot does not burst at once; first the light enters,
The darkness within melts and the lamp of the mind wakes.
The sisters' circle sings; the Jhijhiya dances on the head,
One ray becomes a hundred and reads the account of the night.*



Where does the first crack appear? Not in the cry of the victim. The victim's cry may be heard for years while the pot remains unbroken. The first crack appears where the wrongdoer himself turns to an ally and asks—Whom are you protecting?

When the paper that has suppressed names for years begins to speak, fear no longer stays in one place. Somewhere it becomes laughter, elsewhere anger, elsewhere a slogan of wounded religion, elsewhere an appeal to rules. But wherever it goes, it weakens its own true form.

Silence too can speak. When a clerk who has remained silent for years writes a statement of his silence, it ceases to be silence—it becomes testimony. When the peon who kept sweeping says this was not scrap, his hands change.

A crack is thin. But once air enters, the smell of lies inside a closed room must come out. People begin by covering their noses, then are forced to open their eyes. This is the first work of a crack—to make falsehood recognisable by its own smell.

The chapter had not ended there—after the road as theatre, the verdict on the veranda, the darkness of the record room, the testimony of the scrap sack, and the journey of the name, now came the turn of fear. When morning light fell upon the veranda stones, the three copies of the list of names were ready to take their separate roads. One remained in the record room, one beside the stone on the court veranda, and the third Ananya placed in her cloth bag and carried toward Channa Grove. This was not merely a journey of paper; it was the first procession against the fear that for years had kept a soundless hand upon people's throats.

Mist still lay along the village road. Dewdrops shone on the grass, but there was more caution than dew in the children's eyes. They did not raise the list of names like a flag, because displaying suffering was not one of their rules. They carried the list in their laps, sheltering it with the warmth of their bodies, and walked slowly. The weight of a written name first demands respect—Mira kept reminding them of this.

At Channa Grove they opened the list. The red thread from the previous night was still caught in the soil near the stump's roots. This time the bird sat not on the eaves but on a dry branch of the stump. Its beak was empty, its gaze steady. Ananya placed the list before the stump and said, "These names are searching for their homes. Those whose homes are found will be carried there; those whose homes are never found will be given a place in the memory of this grove."

At that moment the wind fell silent. There were no leaves, yet something rustled within the stump. Aruni said softly, "The grove has given consent." No one laughed. This was not a time for laughter. People who until yesterday had gathered to hear ghost stories stood today to hear names. Fear of ghosts had been replaced by fear of human absence.

But at the other end of the village the news travelled like fire. A servant was setting down morning tea at Chandrapal's house when an advocate-messenger rushed in, breathless. There was as much fear in his manner as in the news. "The list has been made," he said. "Names have come out of the record room. The children have taken them to Channa Grove." Chandrapal lifted the cup, but his hand trembled; tea spilled over the rim onto the table.

Chandrapal could not believe that the darkness of a file could reach the outside world. For years he had assumed that once paper was locked in a cupboard its voice died. He believed the dust of dates covered truth the way pond-mud covers a drowned body. But today he was being told that paper was moving, names were searching for homes, and children would stand guard.

When the news reached Raghav, he laughed at first. His laughter was sharp as always, but hollow within. "What can children do?" he said. Before the sentence was complete, his face changed. He remembered that children ask questions, and questions cannot be answered with sticks. If the names from paper reached people's mouths, limewash would no longer cling to the wall of lies.

Lau, who always hid fear beneath an armour of audacity, sat in a back room behind the market. Before him lay two old slips—one bearing someone's thumbprint, the other the signature of a false witness. Those two slips had bound fields, houses, debts and the labour of bodies. For the first time Lau saw the slips not as tools of wealth, but as bite marks.

There was unrest too in Batuknath Hariharan's old mansion. Batuknath himself was no longer there, but the shelter of his name still lived in the portrait on the wall, the brass bell, the chest of donation deeds, and the pride of his followers. His heirs sat in a circle. One said, "Do not let Gurudev's name appear on that list." Another said, "Not the name, only an indication." A third, the cleverest, said, "Nothing is more dangerous than an indication."

In all these houses fear spoke different languages. Somewhere it became laughter, somewhere anger, somewhere a cry of insult to religion, somewhere an appeal to regulations, somewhere a discussion of the children's "immaturity." But the root of the fear was one thing—the journey of the name. When the victim's name returns home, the offender's name begins losing its disguise.

By noon there was agitation at the court. An officer came outside the record room with official hardness on his face. He scolded the clerk. "Why were files shown without permission?" The clerk remained silent. Bhikhari Lal stood behind him. Satyavrat Mehta stood beside a veranda pillar. Everyone waited to see whether the clerk would sink once more into his old fear.

The clerk slowly took the small slip from his pocket—"Statement of an Employee's Silence." The slip trembled in his hand, but his voice did not. "The files were not shown," he said. "The files were read. Inside the papers called scrap were human petitions. For years, in the name of rules, I allowed dust to settle upon those petitions. I must make a statement about that."

For a moment the officer was speechless. The language of regulation was ready, but the clerk's confession had slipped between the ribs of the rules. Bhikhari Lal stepped forward. "I used to sweep," he said. "I used to call it scrap. Now I say—it was not scrap." The effect of this short sentence could be heard clearly against the court walls. A peon's testimony is rarely heard, but today the veranda was listening.

Satyavrat Mehta told the officer, "If a rule erases a person's name, the rule will have to be interpreted again." The officer's eyes hardened. "You are obstructing court procedure." Satyavrat remained calm. "No. I am returning the human being to the procedure." At this answer, everyone standing on the veranda held their breath for a moment.

Meanwhile the first family reached Channa Grove. The old litigant came leaning on his stick. With him was his grandson, who had heard his grandfather's case only as a story. Ananya found the name on the list, took out a copy of the application, and read it slowly. The old man's eyes clouded again, but this time the mist was not humiliation; it was recognition.

The grandson asked, "Grandfather, is this your name?" The old man laughed and then wept. "Yes, but this name belongs even more to the waiting that continued as far as your father." For the first time the grandson understood that the case was not only about land; it was also about a family's time, labour, education, bread and dignity.

A woman from the second family arrived. Her mother had been the widow whose application was marked "unclear." The moment she saw the paper she said, "My mother's handwriting was crooked, but my mother's words were straight." Devika wrote beside the list: "Not unclear handwriting—unclear justice." Those present understood how often suffering had been rejected by blaming language and letters.

Before evening Chandrapal's messenger reached Channa Grove. In a polite voice he said, "It is improper to make such a list public. If names of respected families are attached without proof, there will be unrest in the village." Mira stepped forward. "The victims' names on the list will not be made public without consent. But those who buried the papers, sold waiting, and spread fear cannot be protected by calling accountability unrest."

The messenger's face fell. He had expected the children to shout slogans so that he could brand them unruly. But the children's rules were stronger than his manoeuvre. Privacy, consent, context and dignity—these four words had become their guard. One who feared only publicity now found ethical caution even more frightening.

Night came. Rumours spread through the village—ghosts were holding court near Channa Grove; children were reading curses from old papers; the clerk would lose his job; officers would conduct raids; disaster

would fall upon anyone whose name was written. The crocodile of rumour moves fast because it needs no body, only ears. But this time many village ears did not remain silent after hearing. They asked, "Is the name in the paper or not?" As soon as the question arose, the body of the rumour began to tremble.

Old Budhba's Ghost was not seen at Channa Grove that night, but the soil near the stump's roots looked slightly raised. The shadow of the Black Ghost moved west, the light of the White Apparition east. People kept saying these were signs. Aruni wrote in the register: "Do not hurry to interpret a sign. First hear the human statement." The sentence became another of the children's new rules.

That same night a meeting took place in an officer's chamber at the court. Chandrapal's people, Raghav's adviser, a representative of Batuknath's heirs, and several lawyers sat together. They wanted to declare the list illegal, describe the children as instigated, threaten the clerk with suspension, and change the lock on the record room. But the more plans they made, the clearer their fear became.

An elderly advocate who had remained silent for a long time finally spoke. "You can change the lock, but where will you imprison the names?" Everyone looked at him. He continued, "Copies of the files exist in three places. People have heard. The age of fear is passing." Raghav's adviser grew angry. "Are you changing sides?" The old advocate replied, "No. I am merely recognising the side late."

That sentence became the first crack in the meeting. A crack in a palace of lies does not always come from outside; sometimes it comes from the conscience of a tired person sitting within. The crack was thin, but air came through it. When air enters, the smell of lies stored in a closed room spreads, and people begin covering their noses.

An old fan kept turning in the room, its squeak making the old advocate's words seem deeper. Outside, a dog barked and then fell silent, as though it too had smelled the tension of the meeting. By midnight the court, the mansion, the market, Channa Grove and the village houses had all become tied by an invisible cord. On one side was the list, on the other a plan. On one side the dignity of names, on the other fear for prestige. On one side the children's little register, on the other seals, locks, office, money. But for the first time the scales did not seem completely unequal. The weight of truth grows not through numbers, but through utterance.

At the end of the night, while gathering the list, Ananya said, "From tomorrow we must go from house to house. Wherever relatives of a name are found, they will be told first. No story will be written without consent." Devika asked, "And the wrongdoers who are spreading fear?"

Mira replied, “We shall write the name of fear too. Identification of the spreader of fear begins the day people ask—Whom are you protecting?”

Wind moved through Channa Grove. Dust fell from the bark of the dry stump, but within the dust appeared a tiny green point. No one could say for certain whether it was truly a shoot or a trick of the night. The children did not touch it. They had learned that turning evidence of life into an immediate announcement is also violence. First it must be allowed to grow.

Thus the first crack appeared in fear. The journey of the name reached the offenders' homes as news, an employee's silence rose as testimony, and village ears began to hear questions instead of rumours.

Folk Song: Light Through the Crack in Fear

Folk Tune: Jhijhiya Vigil

Break, O fear—do not break the human being; let fear break,

Let the light from the crack touch every buried eye.

A tiny crack in fear's clay pot; inside, the lamp flashed,

“Whom are you protecting?”—at the question falsehood trembled.

The list in the lap, no flag, no spectacle,

With relatives' consent the language of pain will open.

The half-spoken employee could not sleep all night,

A thin wind of conscience entered the closed room.

A green point awoke inside the stump's bark,

No one touched it—life needs time to grow.

Let fear break slowly; let the human being not break,

Let light from the crack touch every buried eye.

“Whom are you protecting?”—at the question falsehood shook.

The half-spoken employee could not sleep all night,

A thin wind of conscience entered the closed room.

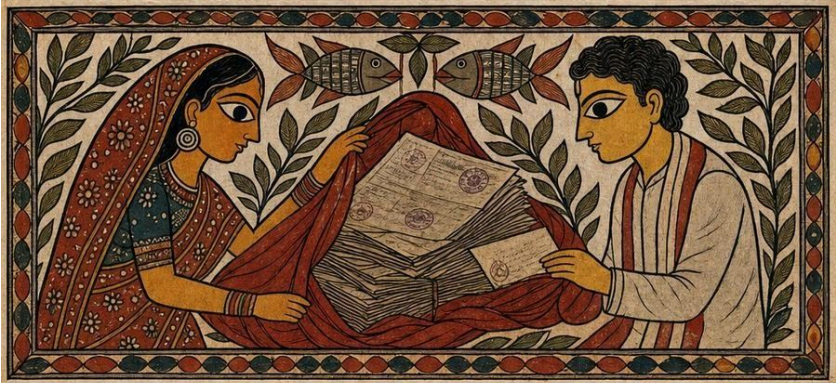


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Objection to defining determinate cognition by determinateness: the cognition “This is a cow” is a determinate perception produced by cognition of a qualifier, because it is determinate cognition. In this inference, indeterminate cognition is what must be excluded; but the existence of indeterminate cognition has not previously been established. Hence the objection to the proposed definition of determinateness.]

CHAPTER 146

The Stain of the Seal

*The stain of a seal lies not on the paper—the deepest stain remains on
the hand that pressed it.*



Opening Folk Song: Let the Red Seal Become a Serving Hand

Folk Tune: Nachari-Mangal

Lift the seal, O lift it into the hand of service,

See the red not as a stain, but as the tilak of trust.

*Let the red seal descend upon the palm as service,
Scatter flowers of truth upon the papers of people's rights.
Let every impression be not a stain, but a mark of trust,
Let the fall of the seal itself open the road to help.*

*May the mind of the hand that moves it remain clean,
May not the strength of office, but people's dignity stay beside it.
Red is the colour of the sun, of awakening and love,
Let the seal become a serving hand and open the people's door.*

*Let the impression fall on paper and the flower bloom in the hand,
Let a petition for rights travel easily along a straight road.
Not the heat of office, but the sun's warmth of awareness,
May the seal of a serving hand erase the people's distress.*



What is a seal? It is a round figure with letters written inside it. But when it falls upon a person's petition, it is no longer merely a shape—it becomes a mark upon that person's body. The life of the person declared “verified” changes. The life of the person declared “rejected” comes to a halt.

Is the hand guilty, or the seal? The seal is made of wood; it does not move by itself. The hand that lifts it may be driven by hunger, by fear, sometimes by an order. But once the hand has moved, the impression remains the impression of that hand, whatever the reason may have been.

A thumbprint is crushed when a seal is stamped over it. This is not merely about paper. It is the moment when the system's mark is laid over a human being's original mark, and the person's existence is dissolved into the existence of the office.

If ink dries, it turns to dust. Dust may fly away, but the stain remains. Therefore a system that wants to erase the ink would first have to erase the hand—and erasing the hand is impossible.

The first crack in fear had reached the officer's chamber at the court; now came the turn of the stain that sat not on paper but on hands. The files inside the record room, lifeless until yesterday, were now demanding their bodies. When Ananya opened an old bundle tied in red cloth, what came out was not only paper but the smell of seals. It was not the smell of ink; it was the smell of authority, which for years had clung to people's mouths as silence.

The cloth of the bundle crumbled into flakes as it was handled, as though the weight of time had chewed through every thread. Across the bundle, in thick letters, was written "Special Records." But there was nothing special about the pages inside—only the extraordinary suffering of ordinary people. A farmer's petition, a widow's copy, a migrant's statement, a Dalit family's survey dispute, a student's scholarship-stoppage letter—all bore the same kind of round seal. Some impressions were clear, some crooked, some half-formed, some pressed so hard that the person's voice seemed crushed along with the letters.

Aruni read the first page. The petition said the old boundary of the field had been marked not by pond water but by an acacia planted by the petitioner's grandfather. But the survey book contained no acacia, only a line. The line changed, the field changed, the household hearth changed. At the bottom of the page was a seal: "Verified." Aruni said softly, "The lie that devoured the body was declared verified."

Bhikhari Lal the clerk lowered his eyes. He had once been a peon and for the past year had been doing temporary clerical work. He now understood that a seal was no ordinary object. Once it entered a hand, it could change people's voices. The person who held the seal could turn "no" into "yes," and "yes" into "record unavailable." That power had never frightened him before. Today, for the first time, he felt that the stain of the seal entered deeper than ink.

Mira picked up a paper. In the middle was a woman's trembling signature. The name was only half legible—perhaps Surmani, perhaps Surmuni. Three pages followed, each bearing a different date and a different note. One said "attendance recorded." Another: "applicant absent." A third: "documents insufficient." Mira looked up. "How can the same woman, on the same day, be both present and absent?"

Silence settled over the room. Chandrapal's old munshi, standing quietly among the crowd, felt his throat dry. In those days he had not been a government employee, but he brokered small tasks between the court veranda and the revenue office—writing dates, getting names entered, obtaining copies, arranging seals, making papers disappear. He realised that his own hand had stood between one woman's presence and absence.

Satyavrat Mehta was reading his face. "If you remember something, say it now," he told him. "It is hard to speak today about the sins of past years, but harder still not to speak." The munshi first tried to laugh, but no sound came. Then his lips trembled. "I did not lose the file. I only sent it upstairs. It never came back from upstairs."

Ananya asked immediately, "Who was upstairs?"

The small question struck the record room like a spade. Who was upstairs? An officer? An advocate? A mukhiya? A moneylender? A temple manager? A disciple of Batuknath? Chandrapal's people? Behind every "upstairs" there was a face, but every face saved itself by calling itself the system. The munshi remained silent. In his silence the feet of many names shifted.

Devika began sorting the pages into separate piles—attendance, absence, verification, rejection, adjournment, missing record, and red seals. For the first time the children saw that injustice does not happen in a single blow; it grows pile by pile. First distort the name, then alter the date, then cast doubt upon attendance, then withhold a copy, then say—the paper is incomplete. In the end the wounded person grows tired, and the file is declared victorious.

On one page a seal had been stamped over a thumbprint. The thumb's lines were crushed; the circle of the seal survived. Aruni showed the page to everyone. "Here the office mark has been laid over the body's mark." The old litigant, who yesterday had spoken on the veranda of his twenty-three years of waiting, stepped slowly forward. He wanted to touch the page but stopped his hand. "My thumb too was pressed down like this," he whispered.

Morning light entered through the broken bars of the window, and dust motes danced up and down in the thin beam as though thousands of names were breathing together. When the light fell directly upon the seal, the red ink looked black. Mira said, "It is not the light that has changed the colour; it is the crime." No one could say for certain whether Old Budhba's Ghost laughed faintly at the sentence. But a speck of dust fell from the ceiling and settled directly upon the red seal.

The clerk opened his desk drawer. Inside lay three old seals—one with a broken edge, one with rotting wood, one with half its letters worn away. "These are no longer in use," he said. Ananya asked, "Then is

responsibility for what was written with them also no longer in use?" The clerk could not answer. An old seal can retire, but its stain cannot.

Devika then made a new proposal. "Every seal-stain we find will be listed. The seal's name, the date, whose petition it was stamped upon, and who later benefited—all of this will be joined together." The crowd stirred. Some said, "If you do that, many names will come out." Mira replied, "If the names do not come out, how will justice?"

Chandrapal's munshi suddenly spoke. "If all the names come out, the village will burn."

Satyavrat Mehta answered calmly, "Has the village not burned already? Did the village of the person who lost land not burn? Did the home of the daughter who fell ill running from office to office not burn? Did the lineage of the man who died waiting not burn? Fire is noticed only when it gives smoke. Some fires burn inside the body for years."

After this answer the munshi's eyes filled. From an inner pocket of his kurta he drew a folded paper. "I do not know why this survived with me. I do not know whether I kept it from fear or greed." The sheet was opened. It was a list—some names, some amounts, some file numbers, and a small mark beside each. The meaning of the mark was not immediately clear. But the last line read: "By order of B.H."

"B.H."—as soon as the two letters were heard, the air turned cold. The children looked at one another. Batuknath Hariharan's full name was not there, but his shadow spread through the entire room. The initials of a man who for years had shone behind religion, charity, sermons and prestige were found in the darkness of a file like an iron nail.

Ananya began making a copy of the paper. She wrapped the original not in plastic but in red cloth. "Many hands have left impressions on this," she said, "and time has left dust upon those impressions. We shall not beat it clean; even the dust upon evidence must be preserved." Aruni wrote in the register: "The seal's stain, the pressure of the thumb, and the abbreviated order together produce the disappearance of the human being."

The number of people outside the veranda kept growing. Someone heard that an indication of Batuknath's name had been found in the record room. Someone said Chandrapal's doors had remained shut since morning. Someone whispered that Raghav had left for the city in the night. Someone said, "The files have begun to speak." How much of these rumours was true was not yet clear; but the direction of fear had changed. Those who until yesterday frightened the wounded were now frightened by paper.

A child came running from the direction of Channa Grove. In his hand was a small stone with a red blot on it. "Found near the stump," he said. Everyone started. Whether the red mark was ink or soil was hard to say. But scratched in tiny letters on the back were the words: "Read the name." Ananya placed the stone on top of the file. For the first time paper and stone joined in the same testimony.

Mira warned everyone. "Now the most dangerous time begins. When paper starts becoming evidence, people who burn paper are born. When names begin to be written, knives that cut names grow sharp." She divided the watch over the files among the children. One would write the list, one make copies, one take statements outside, one make sure no page disappeared.

For the first time Bhikhari Lal placed his key before Ananya. "I can open the lock, but I cannot stand guard alone." Ananya did not pick up the key. "Let the key remain in your hand. The difference is only that now your hand will not be alone." At this sentence the clerk's face lightened. Responsibility was shared, but guilt was not washed away.

By afternoon the list of seals filled twenty pages. On every page some human being returned. Surmani, Rameshwar, Phulkumari, Mahendra, Basanti, Lalan, Ajmeri, Dulari—the names began emerging from dust. Some were alive, some were not; but all their waiting was alive.

At last Satyavrat Mehta said, "No judgment was written in court today, but the first statement against the seal has been recorded." At that moment wind entered through the record-room window and knocked over a dried red-ink pot. The ink had already dried, so it did not flow; it spread as powder. Looking at the powder, Devika said, "The ink with which lies were written is now turning to dust."

At the end of this chapter no door was closed. Instead, for the first time, a lamp was lit inside the record room. It was small, but in its light every circular seal-stain could be seen clearly. The final line in the children's register read: "When the seal is laid over the human being, the first act of justice is to make the human line visible again."

Folk Song: The Hand Behind the Red Seal

Folk Tune: Nachari

Speak, O hand—tell both your crime and helplessness,

Do not hide behind the seal and burn another name.

*A round stain on paper, a darker stain on the palm,
When will the hand that pressed the seal be brought into the light?*

*The names Surmani, Basanti and Dulari rose,
Dried ink became powder and scattered upon the stone.*

The seal says—I am wood; I gave no order,

The hand says—I was bound by hunger, fear and employment.

In the lamp's small flame every round stain appeared,

The human being's straight line returned to the page.

*O hand, speak both your crime and your helplessness,
Do not hide behind the seal and burn another name again.*

When will the hand that pressed the seal be brought into the light?



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Denotative power in corrupt or nonstandard words: the objector argues that if semantic power is admitted in the correct word *pankaja*, it must also be admitted in corrupt forms such as *gaccha* and the like, because people regularly obtain meaning from them. By the end of the dialogue both sides accept that an example aids proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Thus arises the question of denotative power in nonstandard words.]

CHAPTER 147

Knocking Door to Door

A knock given with consent can open a greater door than an order ever can.



Opening Folk Song: The Threshold Opens to a Knock

Folk Tune: Threshold Batagabani

Knock, O knock, knock gently,

Only when you hear "Come in" from within should you step forward.

First knock softly and listen for the voice inside,

Only when it says "Come" should you cross the door with care.

Every home has its dignity, every grief its own pace,

Only the patience to listen can open the deep knots of the heart.

Knock at threshold after threshold and leave a flower of trust,

Let a question not be an attack, but an invitation to sit together.

A threshold opens to a knock, never to an order,

At the respectful step the house itself begins to speak sweet dreams.

Not by pushing, but by patience, are the knots of the heart undone.

Make the question not an arrow, but an invitation to sit,

Seeing a respectful step, the threshold itself will smile.



A knock given with consent can open a greater door than an order ever can. An order pushes; a knock asks. A door opened by force closes again. A door opened after being asked becomes the door of trust.

What is a home? A home is not only wall and roof. It is the place where a person can show weakness without fear. Someone hard outside may be broken within. Therefore feet must be placed gently at the doorway—lest the brokenness inside be hurt again.

What is consent? Consent is the word that gives a vulnerable person the experience of equality. Someone who for years has heard only orders, when asked—Speak only if you wish—feels the power of decision return to the body for the first time.

Even a closed door speaks a language. It may be the language of fear, of exhaustion, or of a grief that has not yet found words. One who mistakes that language for mere silence and moves on becomes another wound upon that grief.

Soil kept in memory, a broken bangle, an old calendar—these can speak more truth than paper. Paper preserves dates; objects in a home preserve time. A justice that reads only paper reads only half the truth.

As soon as the lamp in the record room was lit, the stains of the seals came before people's eyes; now it was time to reach the human beings sitting behind those stains—to knock door to door. The record-room lamp burned all night. Its flame was not large, but in that small light the seal-stains rose as though old bruises had darkened again upon a body. At dawn Ananya wrapped the register, lists and copies in red cloth. Mira reminded everyone once more: "We are not going to make announcements; we are going to listen. Knocking door to door must not be noise. It must be the first touch of respect."

The first group consisted of Ananya, Aruni, Devika, the old litigant's grandson, and Bhikhari Lal. Bhikhari Lal was a peon, but today there was no broom in his hand. He carried a small cloth bag containing blank sheets for copies, a pen, and a notebook in which to write the names of people who wished to speak in their own voices. There was hesitation in his walk, because for years he had carried slips announcing dates to these very doors; today he approached them with the shadow of remorse.

The first house belonged to Surmani Devi. A crack ran through the threshold, and bathua greens had sprouted in it. Moss lay on the tiled roof of the veranda, and from inside came the faint smell of hearth-smoke—as though the house still breathed, only wearily. Surmani Devi had grown very old. Half the light had left her eyes and half the hearing her ears; yet the moment she heard her name, even the half of her body that still remained awake sprang suddenly to life. Ananya said softly, "This is a copy of your petition. The court stamped it, but no decision was ever made."

Surmani Devi took the page in her hand. She could not read, but the moment she touched its edge her fingers trembled. "I did not write this paper myself," she said. "I dictated it; the patwari's son wrote it. But where in his writing was my crying?" Aruni wrote in the register: "The writer was another person; the suffering belonged to the first." The line silenced everyone.

Surmani Devi's granddaughter brought an old brass box from inside. It held two seeds, a broken bangle, and a small clod of earth. "Grandmother says this is soil from the field," she said. The soil had dried, but the smell of rain was still caught within it. Devika wrote beside

the copy: "Proof of land is not only the survey book; the soil of memory is evidence too."

The second house was that of Rameshwar Sah, who was no longer alive. His son had migrated; his daughter-in-law kept the household. When Rameshwar's name was read from the list, she was frightened at first. "Will you reopen the case? We are exhausted." Mira took her hand and said, "We are not reopening the case. We are writing the name of the exhaustion." At this the woman's eyes filled. No one had ever asked the name of their exhaustion.

On the wall of Rameshwar's house hung an old calendar—twelve years out of date. In that year Rameshwar Sah had gone to court for the last time. The calendar was never changed because the family said time had stopped on that day. Aruni looked at the date on the calendar and compared it with the date on the list. They were different, but the years between them had become one continuous waiting.

Bhikhari Lal remained silent for a long time in this house. At last he could bear it no longer. He told the daughter-in-law, "If I ever came carrying a date-slip, forgive me. I did not understand that giving a date could leave someone's hearth unlit." She looked at him. She did not offer forgiveness immediately. She said only, "If you have understood, then write." For the first time Bhikhari Lal wrote in his notebook: "A date-slip can become hunger in a household."

The third house belonged to Phulkumari. She now worked at a sewing centre in the city, but her mother still lived in the village. The file contained the letter stopping Phulkumari's scholarship, stamped "insufficient proof." Her mother said, "That year she left her studies. It was not the proof that was insufficient; the stomach was insufficient." Hearing this, one of the girls among the children sat silently gripping her slate; suddenly her own schooling felt heavy.

Ananya asked Phulkumari's mother for permission. "May we write this story?" The mother first asked, "Will writing it change anything?" Ananya answered truthfully, "Not at once." The mother asked again, "And if you do not write it?" Ananya said, "Then it will remain buried again under the word incomplete." The mother slowly nodded. "Then write. But write my daughter not as an object of pity, as a bearer of rights."

The sun grew fierce and the children's feet burned in the dust, but none asked for shoes; their heat seemed small beside the heat of those years of waiting. By afternoon word of the house-to-house knocking had spread. Some doors opened on their own; some were bolted from inside. At the houses that remained shut, the children did not call out. Mira kept saying, "A closed door is also an answer. Respect the fear—but not the

people who spread it.” They left a small slip at each threshold: “If you wish, we can return to listen.”

The slip was something new in the village. Until now paper had given people orders—appear, produce proof, sign, wait. Today, for the first time, paper made a request—speak if you wish. The journey from the language of command to the language of invitation was the true change brought by knocking door to door.

Chandrapal's people watched from a distance. They hoped the group would make a mistake—force someone to tell a story, turn someone's tears into spectacle—and then it would be easy to defame them. But when they saw the children never push at a closed door, take consent before writing a story, and mark “family's wish” beside the name, their manoeuvre slowed. Civility can sometimes be a tool of deceit; here civility had become a guard.

In the market Raghav's adviser spread a rumour: “They are disturbing village peace by dragging up old cases.” Nandu the blacksmith, who usually kept away from politics, stopped his hammer and said, “Was there peace in the house whose hearth did not burn? If peace is another name for dust, then let the dust rise.” His one sentence changed the air of the market. For the first time people began discussing the difference between peace and silence.

In the record room Satyavrat Mehta and the clerk continued making copies. On every copy they wrote clearly: “Original paper damaged, but name legible.” The clerk wrote the sentence in his own hand. Earlier he would simply write “unclear”; today he searched within the unclear for what remained legible. He began to feel that the true meaning of his job should not be stamping seals but preserving human names.

Near evening something unexpected happened. Murari, the old photocopy-shop owner who for years had earned money making copies of files, came outside the record room with a bundle. “These are extra copies,” he said. “When people delayed payment, I kept them. Some pages may be useful.” Satyavrat Mehta looked at him sternly. Murari lowered his head. “It was wrong. But if these pages can save names, take them.”

The bundle was opened. Inside were copies of several things incomplete in the original files—a whole page of a statement, the edge of a map, half a witness's signature, the final line of a woman's petition. Bhikhari Lal whispered, “A human being survived in scrap among scrap.” Devika wrote: “Sometimes a copy preserved through wrongdoing can assist truth, but the wrongdoing that preserved it is not thereby erased.”

That night the first day's statements were read near Channa Grove. No name was spoken without consent. For every family that gave consent, a small lamp was placed beside the name; for those that did not, an empty lamp was placed—without wick, without flame, but with a

place. Everyone understood the meaning of those empty lamps: silence too needs a place, so that one day it may choose its own voice.

The green point seen yesterday near the stump's roots was a little clearer today. Aruni wrote again: "No announcement." Ananya smiled. The children were no longer impatient with symbols. They understood that respect for a seed does not mean turning it immediately into a flag; it means protecting its soil.

Meanwhile a second meeting took place at Chandrapal's house. This time the plan changed. They decided it would be difficult to stop the house-to-house knocking, so they would infiltrate it. Some people would present themselves as victims and give fabricated stories, some would add false papers, some would attach false accusations to real names, so that the list itself would be discredited. The representative of Batuknath's heirs said, "It is easier than defeating truth to mix falsehood into its crowd." This was the most dangerous decision of the night.

But Mira had already sensed footsteps of this kind. That night she had the children write down rules: one, every statement would be heard twice; two, copies of papers would be kept separately; three, the language of accusation and the language of experience would be marked separately; four, no person would be declared guilty before a crowd; five, suspicion of falsehood would lead not to silence but to verification. The rules were written in a small notebook, but their seriousness was no less than that of any code.

The old litigant listened for a long time. At last he said, "My life was cut up into dates, but do not let your lives be cut up entirely into verification. Let the road of truth be slow, but not so slow that another generation passes." The warning hung in the air. The children understood that they would have to balance caution and speed.

At the end of the night Ananya closed the house-to-house list after writing: "First day: Surmani Devi's soil, Rameshwar Sah's calendar, Phulkumari's unfilled stomach, the silence of closed doors, Murari's extra copies, and the approaching scheme to mix falsehood." Her hand did not tremble as she wrote. Fear still existed, but now there was a method beside it.

When truth begins to walk, falsehood puts on its clothes. The shadow of Channa Grove lengthened. Somewhere in the distance a crocodile slid through water, but this time its movement could be heard. Perhaps the knocking of names had reached it too.

Thus the house-to-house knocking began in this chapter. The wounded person's story was written not by command but by consent; the silence of closed doors was respected; copies that had survived among scrap rose as new evidence; and the offenders' fear changed into a new strategy.

Folk Song: Knocking at Every Threshold

Folk Tune: Batagabani of Separation

Knock, O knock, knock gently,

Not as an order—stand at the threshold as support.

We shall knock softly and first hear “Come in” from within,

Before writing the story we shall seek a mother’s consent.

Surmani’s soil, Rameshwar’s calendar,

Phulkumari’s unfilled stomach, the ocean of a closed door’s silence.

Do not blame the closed door; honour its fear,

A copy that survived among scrap became new evidence.

The crocodile moved through water; even it heard the knock,

Falsehood came from house to house wearing truth’s clothes.

Threshold, tell us the time of your own sorrow,

We bring no order; we knock only as support.

Only after hearing “Come in” from within shall we take a step,

Before writing the story, receive the mother’s consent.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The Vaisheshikas’ objection: an inference that serves as the cause of verbal cognition may be understood in this form. A worldly sentence such as “Drive the cow near with the stick,” or

a Vedic sentence such as “One who desires heaven should perform the Jyotishtoma sacrifice,” conveys cognition of the sentence-meaning through knowledge of the mutual relation among the remembered meanings of the words intended by the speaker, because these sentences are groups of words endowed with expectancy and the other conditions of sentential unity, just as in “Bring the pot.” By the end of the dialogue both sides agree that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. This is the Vaisheshika objection.]

CHAPTER 148

Recognising the Adulteration

Compare it with the true paper—the adulteration will reveal its own face.



Opening Folk Song: The Original Copy Shines

Folk Tune: Verification Jhumar

Compare the pages, O compare the original and the copy,

Under the lamp of comparison expose the colour of falsehood.

*Place the true copy beside it; the false colour will open,
At the scratch of adulteration the original letters will bloom.*

*One page speaks quietly to another page,
The bright lamp of comparison unties the knots of darkness.*

*Verification means not only finding fault, but protecting the honour of
truth,*

*Place a flower of trust upon the head of what is clean.
The original copy shines when the people's eyes are alert,
Adulteration defeats itself; truth remains steadfast.*

*The original copy stays quiet; the imitation speaks too much,
Compare patiently—the hearing of adulteration will open.
Verification is not punishment; it is guardianship of truth's dignity,
Raise the clean page high and let trust become a garden of flowers.*



Verification does not mean distrust. Verification means protecting what is true and not allowing what is false to slip into the crowd of truth. If there is no verification, a single falsehood can devour the credibility of a hundred truths.

The smell of soil does not lie. A person who has lost a field carries the smell of that soil in the body. A liar may possess facts, but not the smell. The verifier learns the art of smelling what a story carries.

The folds of paper speak too. The folds of old paper are filled with dust, its edges oily, its letters faded. A copied paper may be folded newly and cleanly, and manufactured age cannot remain entirely hidden. The body of paper is also a witness.

A person speaking truth pauses, trembles, looks away. A person speaking falsehood may let the whole story flow in one breath without a stumble. A polished story is not always a pure one.

The first statement against the seal had already been recorded in the record room; now came the time to verify the list assembled through the house-to-house knocking. At dawn, dew shone on the soil near the stump in Channa Grove. The list from the first day of knocking remained wrapped in red cloth, and Mira read the five rules aloud once more. "Today we shall listen," she said, "but we shall also verify. Verification does not mean distrust; it means protecting the name. If falsehood enters wearing the clothes of truth, genuine suffering will be discredited once again."

The children's faces grew serious. Until yesterday they had thought listening was the greatest work. Today they understood that listening without verification is incomplete. Along with recognising the cry of a body, they would have to see the colour of manufactured crying. Aruni wrote in his notebook: "Let the door of trust remain open, but let the guard not sleep."

The dew had not yet dried from the grass, and the scarves of the children sitting in the stump's shade were damp—yet no one rose. The first visitor came very early. He introduced himself as "Bhola Mandal." An old gamchha on his head, a bundle of papers in his hand, a manufactured tremor in his voice. He said Chandrapal's men had seized his field, the court had given him seventy dates, and Batuknath had cursed him. The story was so practised that it sounded like a dialogue rehearsed repeatedly on a stage.

Ananya did not interrupt. She let him finish. Then Mira asked quietly, "What did the soil of your field smell like?" Bhola Mandal fell silent for a moment. Then he said, "Soil smelled like soil." Remembering Surmani Devi's soil, the children looked at one another. A person who has lost a field does not answer a question about its smell merely by saying "like soil."

Aruni asked a second question. "What happened at home on the day of your first court date?" Bhola Mandal answered immediately: "Everyone cried." The answer was plausible, but too smooth. The memory of grief does not travel along a straight highway; it catches in hearth-smoke, in the cot on the veranda, in a wet gamchha. Bhola Mandal's story contained no such snag.

Devika examined his papers. They looked old, but the folds were new. Dust had been rubbed along the edges, yet the layer of dust did not match the paper's age. The seal was blurred, but the blue of the ink still shone fresh. The clerk, standing at a distance, said softly, "It resembles the court's old seal, but the spacing of the letters is different."

Bhola Mandal grew restless. "I am poor. What do I know about the spacing of letters?" Mira answered at once: "Poverty is not on trial. The paper is. Falsehood cannot be excused under the cover of poverty, because it devours the names of the truly poor." The crowd stirred. For the first time people saw that compassion and caution could walk together.

Bhikhari Lal took him aside. He did not become harsh. He simply said, "Tell the truth. Who gave you the false papers?" Bhola Mandal remained silent for a long time. At last his voice broke. "I am not Bhola. My name is Bhikhan Sah. Raghav's people said I would get two hundred rupees if I told the story this way. I thought, what difference can changing a name on paper make?" Bhikhari Lal whispered, "Changing a name can even change someone's death."

Bhikhan Sah was not humiliated before the crowd. Mira wrote his statement on a separate page: "Attempted false statement; causes—poverty, greed, pressure; source—Raghav's people." Ananya added: "The person bears responsibility, but there is also a network behind the wrongdoing." This was important. Recognising adulteration did not mean merely catching the liar; it meant seeing the hand that manufactured the lie.

The second visitor was a woman who gave her name as Jagmaya. Her face was veiled; in her hand was an old receipt. She said her husband had died because of a false case. There were few words in her story, but long silences between each. The children remained alert because the strategy of falsehood had already been seen today. Mira gave her water and said, "Continue only if you wish."

Jagmaya held out the receipt. The name on it was "Harimohan Jha," but the voice behind the veil said, "At home we called him Mohan." At this small detail Satyavrat Mehta became attentive. Harimohan on paper, Mohan at home—false storytellers seldom invent such differences. Household names differ from registered names, and genuine memory often beats in the household name.

Mira asked, "What did you carry the first time you went to court?" Without thinking, Jagmaya gestured with her hand. "Two puris, a little pickle, and his medicine." Then she stopped herself. "While taking the medicine he had said: if we speak the truth in court, it will be settled quickly. I told him: on the road of truth, carry a full medicine box." As she spoke, laughter and crying came out together.

The paper was examined. The ink was old, the folds were old, and the oily edge had truly been made by years of handling. The clerk matched the record number. In the main file in the record room, Harimohan Jha's page was only half there; Jagmaya's receipt could prove to be the missing edge of that half-page. Satyavrat Mehta said quietly, "Preserve this receipt. It is not merely proof of payment; it is the surviving voice of presence."

Some people in the crowd began saying, "First came the false one, now the true one." Mira interrupted at once. "It is not so simple. Falsehood too can be born under pressure, and truth too walks trembling. We shall verify statements, not measure human beings before a crowd." The sentence became the sixth line in the children's rules: "Examine the statement; do not measure the person in public."

At noon Raghav's manoeuvre arrived in another form. Three young men came together. Their papers were different, but the handwriting was the same. The dates differed, but the smell of the paper was identical. In all three stories the same sentence was repeated again and again: "We want justice, only justice." Aruni whispered to Devika, "Real pain does not repeat slogans so much; first it searches for its own event."

Devika seated the three separately. She asked the first, "Which direction does your threshold face?" The second, "Was your father's voice loud or soft?" The third, "Where did you keep the paper when you received it?" All three became tangled in their answers. One said east, one said north, the third said he had no house. One handwriting, three stories, no memory. The adulteration was clear.

Then a small boy stepped forward from the crowd. One of the young men was a neighbour in his maternal uncle's village. The child said, "He was on Raghav's veranda last night." Whispers spread. Mira immediately removed the child from the crowd and placed him somewhere safe. "Protect the child who speaks truth first," she said. This was the guardians' first open collision with the network.

Chandrapal's people continued signalling from a distance, but their plan did not immediately succeed because the rules had already been written. Every false paper was placed in a separate bag and marked "suspected adulteration." No page was thrown away. Mira said, "Even a lie is evidence—that someone tried to mix it into truth. Preserve it, so the hand of the manufacturer of adulteration can be identified."

By evening three piles lay near the stump in Channa Grove—accepted statements, incomplete statements, and suspected adulteration. They looked like ordinary piles of paper, but through them the guardians' intelligence was maturing. Earlier every paper had been merely paper; now they were reading the temperament of paper—where there

was crying, where rehearsal, where fear, where greed, where an incomplete sign.

As the afternoon sun declined, the shadows of the three piles lengthened across the soil, and in those shadows the children's tired bodies sought rest for the first time. A strange change had taken place in Bhikhari Lal. The peon who for years had merely carried papers had begun to see the body of paper. Lifting one sheet, he said, "This page is very clean, but the story is dirty. That page is dirty, but the story is clean." The children did not laugh. Everyone understood: this simple sentence was today's lesson. Clean letters do not always mean clean justice.

At night Murari the photocopy-shop owner returned. This time his face was pale. "Raghav's people told me to make false copies or they would shut my shop," he said. Satyavrat Mehta asked sternly, "Did you make them?" Murari lowered his head. "I made three. But on each I left a tiny scratch inside, so it could be distinguished from the real seal."

The confession left people confused: crime, and also a clue. Mira said, "An offence committed from fear remains an offence; but the small scratch left toward truth will also be recorded." Murari's statement was written on a separate sheet. In the corner Devika wrote: "A human being is neither wholly black nor wholly white. Justice must read the grey, but must not let the crime disappear into the grey."

When the lamp was lit near the stump, an impression of Old Budhba's Ghost appeared again. Someone said white smoke rose upward; someone said a black shadow sat near the roots. Aruni raised his pen to record the scene, then stopped. He wrote: "Invisible sign present; decision adjourned." Ananya laughed. "Now even your writing is learning the court."

Jagmaya did not take her receipt back. "Keep it wherever Mohan's name will remain safe," she said. Mira asked for a copy to be made and insisted that the original remain with her. "The original object belongs to the memory of the home," she said. "We need the copy, not ownership." After a long time Jagmaya agreed. The decision strengthened the guardians' discipline: hear testimony, but do not plunder people's memories.

At the end of the night the suspected-adulteration pages were placed in a separate box. The box was not locked; a red thread was tied around it. Bhikhari Lal asked, "Why no lock?" Mira replied, "A lock imprisons trust. The red thread reminds us that if the box is opened, it must be opened before everyone." The red thread became a new custom.

The children were tired today, but their fatigue carried a shine. For the first time they understood that truth is not merely something one finds; it is a discipline. The clothing of falsehood may be torn, expensive,

pitiable, religious, or legal. To recognise it requires not only sharp intelligence but patient compassion.

On Raghav's veranda, darkness spread early that evening. He had thought it would be easy to trap the children in falsehood, but the box marked suspected adulteration frightened him more than anything else. If a lie is thrown away, no evidence remains. If a lie is preserved, it can become a map of the network. For the first time Raghav understood that the game was slipping slightly from his hand.

At night Satyavrat Mehta opened an old page of his own. He wrote: "Justice needs not only a list of truths, but also a method of falsehood. A system that does not understand how lies are made will repeatedly leave truth alone." His hand was steady. He was no longer writing only a history of crime; he was writing the grammar of resistance.

Before dawn, the shadow of the red thread fell upon the green point at the stump's root. Some would call it auspicious, others coincidence. But the guardians of names did not turn it into an announcement. They simply placed the box, register, copies and soil of memory together and stood watch.

Thus the watch for recognising adulteration was completed in this chapter. The false Bhola Mandal emerged as Bhikhan Sah; Jagmaya's receipt became the missing edge of Harimohan's record; the stories of Raghav's three young men collapsed; the scratch hidden within Murari's offence was recorded; and the guardians learned that protecting truth requires verification alongside trust, firmness alongside compassion, and discipline alongside memory.

Folk Song: The Scratch of Adulteration

Folk Tune: Verification Folk Tune

Keep it beside you, keep the true copy beside you,

Recognise adulteration and protect the wounded person's testimony.

Keep the true copy beside it; the false colour will open,

Along the edge of the same seal a different scratch will appear.

Bhikhan came disguised as Bhola, wearing a story as a costume,

Jagmaya's receipt said—this is not my writing.

Keep compassion, but do not close the eye of verification,

Weave the thread of evidence together with trust.

Murari's hand trembled; the offence spoke only half its truth,

Under the shadow of the red thread the green point swayed.

Truth does not need cruelty; it needs caution,

Recognise adulteration and protect the wounded person's testimony.

Along the edge of the same seal a different scratch was found,

Bhikhan came as Bhola, walking in a borrowed story.

Weave the thread of evidence together with trust.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Reply to the Mimamsaka objection: if, in the expression “The hamlet is on the Ganges,” the word Ganges itself is taken as directly producing cognition of the riverbank, then there would be no need for an intervening primary cognition of the river-current or for any secondary, figurative relation. Thus the Mimamsaka objection is answered.]

CHAPTER 149

The Map of the Web

The larger the net, the smaller the place where the knot lies—and the watchman looks only for the knot.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Untie the Little Knots

Folk tune: Fishermen's song

Untie the knot, O untie each little knot,

However vast the net, loosen it with patience's nail.

Though the net be immense, the knot lies in a tiny place;

A fisherman's patient nail can loosen it.

One knot opens, and another path reveals itself;

Joining little signs together, the map of the net is drawn.

Do not blame the water; understand the working of the net;

To save the fish's life, choose the right knot.

Keep opening the little knots; the hand will not tire;

The boat of truth will dance freely again upon open water.

The fisherman's fingers know where to slacken, where to pull;

The moment one knot opens, the mark of another appears.

Do not blame the water; identify the one who cast the net;

The fish dancing in free water—that alone is the true reward.



A net is never the work of a single hand. One hand supplies the thread, another ties the knots, a third casts it. If only the hand that casts it is caught, the net can be made again. The watchmen must identify all three—the hand that supplies the thread, the hand that ties the knots, and the hand that casts the net.

Smoke, scratches, keys, seals—each may look like a separate sign. But when they are brought together upon one map, they cease to be signs and become a road. That road runs from one door to another—and behind both doors stand human beings.

A crocodile swims in water, yet its movement can also be heard in the air if the ear is alert. The person who once saw only water has now begun to read the trembling of the water, the map of the earth, and the direction of the smoke as well.

To make a map is not to make a declaration. To make a map is to practise patience. A knot opened in haste can be tied again. A knot opened patiently, one strand at a time, through evidence, cannot so easily be retied.

The box marked “Suspected Adulteration” had rested all night beside the stump’s roots; at dawn it was time to map the web that stretched behind the lies. Bound through the night with red thread, the box still lay at the roots. Morning dew had settled like pearls upon the thread, but to the watchmen they did not look like pearls; they looked like knots. The smaller the knot, the more it can conceal—Mira had said so the previous evening. Today was the day to begin untying them.

A crow called somewhere in the distance and then fell silent, as though even it had understood the weight of the stillness. Mira warned everyone once more: “We shall open the box, but not open accusations. First we shall examine signs, then relationships, and only then write names. Where something is not certain, we shall not call it a conclusion; we shall record it as an indication.” The children gathered their notebooks, old papers, Murari’s description of the scratch, and the boy’s account of what he had seen on Raghav’s veranda.

The knees of the children sitting on the ground were powdered with dust, yet no one rose; measuring the body of a document was no longer a game but a discipline. This time Bhikhari Lal was not merely a peon. He held no staff, but an old measuring cord. He began measuring the papers—their dimensions, matching folds, and the same kind of artificial dust along certain edges. Ananya smiled. “Now we shall measure the body of paper too.” Bhikhari Lal said, “Like a wound on the body, a fold in paper also speaks.”

The first document was Bhikhan Sah’s false statement. Beside it were placed the papers of the three young men. All four told different stories, yet all four had the same slight nick in the left corner. The tiny scratch Murari the photocopier had described was absent from Bhikhan’s paper but present on the copies belonging to the three young men. It became clear that the factory of lies had not been operating from one place but from two.

For a moment the air itself seemed to stop, as though the map were holding its breath and listening. Satyavrat Mehta cleaned his spectacles. “A false document is never a lie by itself,” he said. “When it meets another lie, the method behind it becomes visible.” Aruni wrote the

sentence in heavy letters: "The method of falsehood opens the road to truth."

Devika paid attention to the smell of the papers. Some pages carried the stale odour of dampness; others smelled of incense. "Why should a court document smell of incense?" she asked. The clerk, still afraid to give his name, replied softly, "Incense burns on Raghav's veranda every evening. People say the smoke makes papers look old." A shiver ran through the crowd. Once again the scent of religion stood before them as a disguise worn by paper.

When a genuine application drawn from an old sack was compared with a suspect paper, the difference in the seal's circle became unmistakable. The authentic seal looked tired: its rim was broken and the pressure of its letters uneven. The false seal was perfectly round and glossy, every letter equally deep. Mira said, "Life contains irregularity. Falsehood is often too neat."

Meanwhile Jagmaya arrived from her house carrying a cloth bag. Inside were an old prescription belonging to Harimohan Jha, half of a postal money-order form, and a yellowing photograph. In the photograph Mohan sat on a court veranda holding the same gamchha that had caused the oil stain on the receipt. Before the box of suspected adulteration, the little cloth bag acquired the weight of genuine memory.

Before touching the photograph, Mira asked Jagmaya's permission. "This may become evidence," she said, "but before that it is the last breath of your household." Jagmaya lowered her eyes. "If the breath still left in the house can save his name outside it, then let it go outside." Ananya added the photograph to the list of items to be copied, then returned the original to the bag.

The map of the web began to take shape. Beneath the stump's shade, three circles were drawn with charcoal on the earth—Raghav's veranda, Murari's shop, and the court record room. Lines joined the three. Instead of names, signs were written along the lines: "smoke," "scratch," "key," "false seal," "hired testimony."

When Bhikhari Lal's hand reached the word "key," his face changed. For years he had carried the key to the record room. Seeing the key written on the map felt as though a finger had been raised at his own neck. Mira understood his unease. "The key is not guilty," she said. "We have to learn who turned it, and how." Bhikhari Lal's eyes filled with tears.

At last the clerk gave his name: Kailash Prasad. Until yesterday he had simply been "the clerk." Today he said, "Without a name, the statement will remain incomplete. Write: Kailash Prasad, junior clerk." His voice trembled, but it was not the trembling of fear; it was the trembling of a

burden being set down. He admitted that, at the request of Raghav's people, certain files had been marked "temporarily unavailable."

Satyavrat Mehta immediately asked, "A bribe?" Kailash Prasad remained silent, then said, "A bribe is not always money. Sometimes it is a promise that your transfer will be stopped, sometimes the hope of a job for your son, sometimes a threat that your own case will be ruined." Aruni's pen paused. He wrote: "The grey region between fear and advantage—this is where files disappear."

Kailash Prasad remembered an old wooden plank inside the record room. Certain files were sometimes hidden temporarily beneath it. Bhikhari Lal rose at once. "Let us go before the court opens." Mira stopped him. "The crowd will not go. Four people, an open inventory, and a public reading when they return." That restraint preserved the dignity of the work.

Four people went—Mira, Satyavrat, Bhikhari Lal, and Kailash Prasad. The children waited outside. Waiting had so often been a punishment in this story; today it was becoming discipline. Ananya wrote in the register: "The urge to see everything at once can itself create adulteration."

In the darkness of the record room, the wooden plank was indeed loose. Beneath it, under the dust, they found three thin files, two pages torn from receipt ledgers, and an incomplete list. At the top of the list was the old seal of Batuknath Hariharan's ashram; beneath it, a court record number. Seeing a religious seal and a judicial number on the same sheet left Satyavrat Mehta speechless.

Mira did not touch the page. First it was photographed, then copied. The original was wrapped in cloth. Kailash Prasad said, "This is the first time I have seen this page." Bhikhari Lal looked at him. "You may not have seen it, but your key turned inside this room." There was less accusation than the bitterness of an age in the sentence.

When they returned, the list was read publicly beside the stump. Several names had been marked: Harimohan Jha, Surmani Devi's husband, a boatman named Madan Das, and two names half-erased. Beside each was a short notation: "deferred," "incomplete," "for settlement," "tour." Kailash Prasad explained that "tour" was a code meaning that the file had travelled out of the record room.

"Out where?" Devika asked. Kailash Prasad was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Sometimes to Raghav's house, sometimes to Batuknath's ashram, sometimes to Chandrapal's office. When the paper returned from its journey, one page inside it would have changed." Anger rose in the crowd. Mira lifted a hand. "Write the anger. Do not turn it into violence."

At that moment a new circle was added to the map on the earth: "Ashram." A line ran from it to Raghav's veranda, then to the court, then to Chandrapal's office. The map was no longer a picture of ordinary theft; it had become a quadrilateral of religion, law, money, and fear. Aruni said quietly, "The crocodile does not walk on four feet. It walks on four institutions."

At those words the air around the stump in Channa Grove grew heavy. The tale of Old Budhba's Ghost, which had once seemed like village amusement, was acquiring a body upon the map. The crocodile had been moving not only through water but through files, seals, door-latches, the incense of the ashram, tea in offices, and whisps of fear.

Bhikhan Sah returned. In his hand was a folded two-hundred-rupee note. "This is the money I was given for the false statement," he said. "I am not asking forgiveness; I want to know where I should put it." Mira did not take the note. "This object is evidence. Tell us how it was given, who gave it, and at what time." For the first time Bhikhan described the whole event without performing a role.

Bhikhan's true account was more broken and uneven than his false one. He stopped repeatedly, lowered his eyes in shame at his poverty, and avoided the children's gaze. Mira later said, "This brokenness is genuine. When a person trembles while confessing his own wrongdoing, that trembling too becomes part of the evidence." Bhikhan's statement was moved from "suspected adulteration" into a new section titled "Confession under Pressure."

Murari's scratch method was tested again. Every false copy he had made carried a faint diagonal line, difficult to see with the naked eye. Devika stretched a thread and changed the angle of the light; the scratch flashed. The children stared in amazement. Murari said softly, "I committed the offence out of fear, but somewhere inside I wanted it to be discovered one day."

Satyavrat Mehta was stern. "That wish does not wash away the offence." Murari lowered his head. Mira added, "But it can become a crack through which the web is broken." The watchmen's justice became difficult here: guilt recorded, cooperation recorded, punishment left open. Such openness was not weakness; it was the hard discipline of thinking justly.

By late afternoon the map had spread so far across the ground that the stump's shadow seemed too small for it. Not one child accidentally stepped upon it. Everyone felt that the map had been drawn not upon earth but across people's backs. Every line passed through somebody's body.

A man from Chandrapal's office watched from a distance. He carried an umbrella though there was no rain. Bhikhari Lal recognised him.

"That is the man who used to carry files back and forth." The moment their eyes met, the man withdrew. Ananya wrote down his description: blue shirt, white umbrella, an old cut-mark on the right ear. They had no name, but they had an indication.

"If there is no name, do not discard the indication," Mira said. "Sometimes an indication leads to a name." The children understood that blank spaces matter in the language of investigation. An empty room, a clipped corner, half a name, a smell, smoke, a scratch—all can become steps in the staircase of truth.

At dusk Jagmaya saw Harimohan's name upon the list. For a long time she said nothing. Then she whispered, "After so many years, Mohan's name has breathed again." Many people wept. But Mira warned them once more: "The tears will be recorded, but the tears will not give us the conclusion. The conclusion must come from evidence." Compassion and method walked together again.

That night Satyavrat Mehta made a copy of the map on paper. He first titled it "The Court Outside the Court," then crossed it out. He wrote "The Route of Injustice," then crossed that out too. At last he wrote: "Map of the Web: First Copy by the Watchmen of Names." There was no pride in the title, only humility before labour.

On Raghav's veranda the cooking fire was lit late that evening. He had heard that a circle marked "Ashram" had appeared on the map. Once the ashram entered it, the old shadow of Batuknath might rise again. For the first time Raghav feared that the ghost he had once turned into a spectacle before the village might now arrive at his own door in the form of paper.

At the end of the night the red-thread box was closed again, but beside it were placed a copy of the earthen map, Kailash Prasad's statement, Bhikhan's note, a sample of Murari's scratch, Jagmaya's copy, and the description of the unnamed umbrella-bearer. On the box was written: "First Form of the Web."

Near dawn the green point appeared again among the stump's roots. Aruni saw it but made no declaration. He merely wrote, "The root is still alive." Ananya added beneath it, "If the root remains alive, the map will not be erased."

Thus the chapter produced the first identification of the hands sitting behind the false papers. Raghav's veranda, Murari's shop, the court record room, Chandrapal's office, and Batuknath's ashram were joined on a single map. The watchmen learned that the first task in breaking a web is to see the web.

FOLK SONG: The Little Knots of the Web

Folk tune: Fishermen's folk song

*Know every knot, O know every knot in the net;
Bring the trapped names out without wounding them.*

*The net is vast, yet the knot lies in a tiny place;
Veranda, shop, and courthouse joined under one name.
The red thread ran from Raghav to Chandrapal;
In the ashram's shadow lay Batuknath's old game.
Not fish, but human beings were caught in the paper net;*

*The crocodile laughs on the water while doom weeps beneath.
The green point by the root says: the map will not be erased;
The hand that has seen the knot will one day loosen it.
Do not tear the net; first identify every knot;
Bring the trapped names out without causing another wound.*

Not fish, but human beings are caught in the paper net,



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The power of the word “Indra” in *Sahasraksha*: The *prima facie* view argues that if “heaven” means excellent pleasure entirely free from suffering, its figurative application to pleasures produced by sandalwood and the like becomes difficult; but if it means merely excellent pleasure, the qualification “free from suffering” becomes redundant. At the end of the dialogue, both sides agree that an example assists proof only

when its relation is clear and free from defect. The word “Indra” has its established power in Sahasraksha.]

CHAPTER 150

The Shadow of the Seal

*The rubber can be erased, but the handle remains—and an empty
handle bears the heaviest weight.*



OPENING FOLK SONG: Put the Handle in the Hand of Truth

Folk tune: Song of Awakened Objects

Listen to the handle, O listen to the wooden handle;

Receive the testimony of silent objects with respect.

*The rubber has been erased, yet the wooden handle speaks;
It remembers whose palm held it and loosens the knots of memory.*

*Objects are silent witnesses; read them with respect;
Place the handle in truthful hands and give it a new use.*

*A seal was made for service, not as an instrument of deceit;
When the hand changes, the meaning changes—the object is not
guilty.*

*The empty handle says: now carry the stamp of honesty;
Let trust flower white upon the people's papers.*

*The rubber was erased, the wood remained, and the palm's imprint
survived;*

*The object is never guilty; the guilt belongs to the sin of the mind.
Change the hand, change the meaning—the seal was made for service;
Give the handle to the hand of truth, and let a new voice rise.*



Wood does not speak, yet wood keeps many things. Whose palm held it, whose sweat touched it, whose haste struck it against a desk—all of this remains lodged within the grain.

When the rubber is erased, the letters disappear, but the mark of pressure does not. A crime that hopes to survive by removing letters forgets that the pressure of a hand sinks deeper than any letter.

The circle of a seal measures a boundary. What falls inside that boundary becomes “verified”; what remains outside it becomes “rejected.” But until today no one had looked for the hand that drew the boundary.

Ashram and court—two different forms of sacredness—had met beneath the shadow of a single seal. Where religion and law are moved by the same hand, the innocence of both comes under suspicion.

After the map of the web had been made, almost no one slept properly beside the stump. The circles traced on the earth had grown slightly damp with morning dew, but they had not vanished. Raghav’s veranda, Murari’s shop, the court record room, Chandrapal’s office, and Batuknath’s ashram—those five names were no longer merely on the ground; they had been driven into people’s minds.

A tiny bird landed on one of the earthen lines, pecked at the dust, then flew away, as though testing the weight of the map. Every eye remained fixed on the list whose top bore the old ashram seal and whose lower portion carried a court record number. The two signs on a single page looked like two rivers meeting in darkness. Ananya said, “Until we trace the path of this seal, the body of the web will remain unseen.”

Mira had already laid down the rule: “The moment we see the seal, we do not raid the ashram. A raid frightens truth. We shall ask, compare, listen, and when someone lies, we shall record the shape of the lie.” The rule cooled the crowd a little. Their anger was like the first rush of monsoon rain; Mira wanted to turn it into a channel.

Satyavrat Mehta placed the copy of the list in clear light. He noticed a minute notch in the seal’s circle, as though the edge of metal or rubber had once broken. The genuine court seal had no such notch. Kailash Prasad, however, recalled that roughly a decade earlier a temporary seal had been used in court and later officially recorded as “lost.”

At the words “lost,” Bhikhari Lal did not laugh; he grew sad. His measuring cord paused in his hand, as though the word itself had seized his fingers. “When something is lost in a court,” he said, “it is never lost alone. Along with it, someone’s trust, someone’s land, someone’s name is lost too.” The children wrote the sentence in bold letters.

Kailash Prasad began descending into memory. He said that around the time the old seal disappeared, Batuknath Hariharan’s ashram had hosted a large religious gathering. Several court clerks, lawyers, land brokers, and men connected to Chandrapal had attended. Boxes of prasad, red cloth, donation ledgers, and the smell of paper had all circulated together.

“Where is the donation ledger now?” Devika asked at once. Kailash fell silent, then said, “Perhaps in an old room at the ashram, if it has not been thrown away.” Mira replied, “Behind discarded things there is always a scrap dealer. Scrap dealers too are watchmen of history; no one simply asks them.”

At this Murari the photocopier supplied a name: Chhedi the scrap dealer. For years, he said, old papers, broken frames, iron chests, and torn religious posters from the ashram had gone to Chhedi’s shop at the far edge of the village, where river sand met the refuse of the town.

Four people set out for Chhedi’s shop—Mira, Ananya, Bhikhari Lal, and Murari. Satyavrat stayed behind to arrange the statements from the veranda. Aruni remained by the stump with the children, copying the map. The journey was short, yet they felt as though they were walking toward a morgue for documents.

Chhedi’s shop was piled with iron scales, torn books, old devotional pictures, broken locks, election banners, school notebooks, hospital slips, and old court envelopes. The air inside was heavy with the sour glue of decaying paper and the damp smell of rust. Chhedi was frightened at first, assuming he would be blamed for selling discarded papers. Mira spoke plainly: “We have not come seeking blame. We have come asking for a path.”

Slowly Chhedi opened up. Papers from the ashram, he said, usually arrived tied with red thread. Some bundles went straight to a dealer in coloured paper, some came to him. Once he had found a small, heavy, brass-like object, but had sold it as scrap metal. Bhikhari Lal started. “Heavy like brass? Round?”

Chhedi scratched his head. “Not round—half-round. One edge was chipped. There were reversed letters on it. I could not read them.” Ananya wrote immediately: “Chipped edge. Reversed letters.” Murari’s face went pale. The notch visible in the list’s seal seemed to echo in Chhedi’s description.

Chhedi said he had sold the piece to an itinerant metal buyer who travelled toward Darbhanga market. He could not remember the man’s real name; people called him “Sikka” because he bit every object with his teeth as though testing a coin. Mira did not ask for a date. She asked for the season. “After the monsoon,” Chhedi said. “The Nag Panchami fair at the ashram had just ended.”

The memory of season proved more useful than a date. According to Kailash Prasad, the notice declaring the temporary court seal lost had also been written in the week after Nag Panchami. Two memories had drawn closer to one another. Mira said, “Truth is not always caught by a name; sometimes it is caught by weather.”

Chhedi overturned an old sack. Out came the torn cover of a donation ledger, several pages bearing names, and a scrap of a receipt dusted with red powder. The cover carried the name of Batuknath Hariharan's ashram. The pages were incomplete, but some donors' names could still be read: Chandrapal, Raghav, an unnamed "Legal Service Circle," and two partly erased syllables—"Bha... La..."

The moment Bhikhari Lal saw "Bha... La...", he went quiet. Ananya read his face. "Did you recognise something?" Bhikhari Lal said, "My own name is Bhikhari Lal, but this is not mine. It may be Bhanu Lal—the old seal-maker. I had heard that he made the court's temporary seal."

Bhanu Lal. The name seemed to open a hidden door the moment it entered the air. Murari said immediately that Bhanu Lal's son still made rubber stamps near the station; the father was dead, but some old moulds might remain. Mira reached no instant conclusion. Before taking the pages from Chhedi, she wrote a receipt, copies were made, and Chhedi put his thumbprint on the record for the original items.

On the way back they met Surmani Devi, the woman whose husband's name had been marked on the list. She had heard the news and was coming of her own accord. She carried an empty water pot. "I had gone to fetch water," she said, "but people told me my household's name had appeared on paper. Water can wait. The name comes first." Even the dust of the road seemed to grow solemn.

Beside the stump, the torn donation-ledger pages were read aloud. Mira asked Surmani Devi, "Would you like to hear this publicly, or later in private?" Surmani answered, "The name is my husband's, but the wound is in my body. Read it publicly." Her permission was recorded. The children were learning that without respect for testimony, the voice of justice can become humiliation.

Beside the name of Surmani Devi's husband, Shyamsundar, the donation ledger carried the phrase "settlement service." Kailash Prasad explained that such a term belonged to no court vocabulary. It was the ashram's own code. In the name of "settlement," people were persuaded to surrender land, cases were exhausted, and the donation book later recorded it as service.

Surmani Devi's face hardened like stone. "My husband used to say that after going to the ashram the officials became soft," she said. "Now I understand—they were not softened; they were wrapped." Devika trembled as she wrote the sentence. When the cloth of religion is draped over the body of injustice, even the victim grows afraid to touch it.

That afternoon the group went near the station to see Bhanu Lal's son, Ramesh the stamp-maker. His shop smelled of rubber and ink; wooden handles and reversed letters stood in rows. At first Ramesh tried to laugh the matter away. "I make wedding-card stamps, school seals,

shop names.” But when the chipped edge was described, his smile dried up.

Ramesh opened an old chest. Inside lay Bhanu Lal’s register. The handwriting on its pages was so fine that it required a magnifying glass. On one page they found: “Special circular seal, for temporary court use; recut and later used with ashram name.” The date was blurred, but the margin contained an expense entry linked to the Nag Panchami fair.

Satyavrat Mehta, who arrived later, could not speak for a long time after reading the register. “Recut”—two words held the entire craft of the crime. A court seal, an ashram name, and the broken edge between them. One instrument had been used to counterfeit both judicial and religious trust.

Ramesh said that before his father died, he had once told him, “Make seals, but do not make the sin of the seal.” Ramesh had not understood then. Now he did. He was afraid to surrender the register but agreed to allow a copy. Mira said, “The original remains yours, the copy becomes public. But if the original is destroyed, your silence too will be recorded.” Ramesh consented.

The copy of the register, the torn donation-ledger pages, Chhedi’s statement, Kailash Prasad’s memory, and the seal on the list were placed in a single row. For the first time the children saw that pieces of evidence are like separate islands; bridges between them turn them into a continent. Ananya wrote, “The shadow of the seal is acquiring a body of evidence.”

Meanwhile a message arrived from Chandrapal’s office: “Writing names without permission constitutes defamation.” The messenger was the same white-umbrella man who had watched them from a distance the previous day. This time the scar on his right ear was plainly visible. Bhikhari Lal whispered, “That is Haricharan, Chandrapal’s old runner.”

Mira read the message without agitation. “We are not writing accusations,” she said. “We are recording relationships. If the relationship is false, give us a written rebuttal. If it is true, why fear it?” Haricharan looked away. He wanted to take the paper back, but Ananya had already copied it.

Haricharan’s movements were added to the map as well. The line ran from Chandrapal’s office to Raghav’s veranda, then to the ashram, then to the court record room. Looking at those lines, Jagmaya said, “My Mohan could never make his way to the court, but his paper travelled through so many houses.” The sentence became a seal of grief upon the map of the web.

Evening fell. The stump’s shadow lengthened until it covered every circle on the map. Some people felt fear: would the shadow hide

everything again? Aruni placed lamps on the earth—one beside Raghav's circle, one near the ashram, one at the court, one by Chandrapal's office, one near Murari's shop. The shadow did not retreat, but its shape became clearer in the light.

Satyavrat Mehta said, "It is not always possible to remove the darkness of injustice at once. Sometimes measuring the shadow itself is the first step toward justice." The children noted the sentence. The watchmen understood that before the shadow of the seal could be erased, its boundary had to be drawn.

That night Surmani Devi placed her empty water pot beside the stump's roots. "The water in my house has been dry for years," she said. "If the thirst of the name can be quenched here, I leave this pot." No one filled it with water. Yet even empty, it seemed full—with testimony, waiting, and courage.

At the end of the night Ramesh the stamp-maker returned. In his hand was one of Bhanu Lal's old wooden handles. The rubber was gone; only the handle remained. "My father kept this," he said. "Perhaps he hoped someone would ask about it one day." Mira did not put it into the box. "Leave this handle beside the stump. Let the public see that a seal rests in a human hand; it is not a god."

At this the shimmer of Old Budhba's Ghost seemed to appear above the stump. Some said he laughed. Some said he wept. Mira said nothing. She merely closed the register and wrote, "The shadow of the seal has entered the light. Now comes the turn of the hand that made the shadow."

Thus the chapter opened the path of the seal between ashram and court. Chhedi the scrap dealer, the donation ledger, Bhanu Lal's register, Ramesh the stamp-maker, Surmani Devi's testimony, and Haricharan's message together formed a new circle of evidence. The watchmen were no longer reading only papers; they were learning to read tools, smells, seasons, shadows, and the history of hands.

FOLK SONG: The Empty Seal Handle

Folk tune: Lament of Objects

Lift the handle, O empty handle, lift the weight of truth;

Restore the line of every name that was thrown into scrap.

The rubber was erased, but the wooden handle remained;

From a father's trembling hand it reached the son.

Why did Bhanu Lal keep it? Perhaps hoping someone would ask;

So many people's breath had gathered inside the empty handle.

A seal is no god; it is a tool in a hand;

From ashram to courthouse, the shadow was traded.

Did Old Budhba's Ghost laugh or weep—who can know?

Within the silence of wood, buried names recognise themselves.

Empty handle, now lift the burden of truth;

A seal is no god—only a tool in a hand;

The silence of wood is worthy to recognise buried names.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—The doctrine of syntactic proximity: Otherwise even a non-sentential cluster such as “door, objecthood, closing action, effort” would necessarily yield sentence-meaning, since each referent can equally be remembered there. This is the doctrine of syntactic proximity.]

CHAPTER 151

The Hand Behind the Seal

A seal never moves by itself—the hand that moves it has a name.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Give the Hand a Name

Folk tune: Hope-melody of a plaintive bhagait

Give it a name, O give each hand a name;

*Leave the smoke of “orders from above” and take responsibility
yourself.*

*A seal never moves itself; a hand makes it move;
Behind the hand is a mind, and the mind gives direction.
Let no one turn away from responsibility for the work;
Leave the smoke of “above” and clearly add your own name.*

*If a hand serves, blessing is its share;
If a hand deceives, truth will awaken against it.
Give every hand a name and responsibility will awaken;
Work done under a name increases the people’s trust.*

*The seal does not move itself; a hand moves it;
Behind the hand is a mind, behind the mind a word.
Flowers of blessing fall upon the hand that serves;
The hand that deceives fears the mirror of truth.*



“Orders from above”—for years this sentence had been the safest umbrella of all. Beneath it many hands remained dry while countless names were drenched. As long as the umbrella remained, the hands beneath it remained safe.

The peon’s hand, the clerk’s hand, the broker’s hand—each had treated its own task as small. But when many small hands together create a great injury, smallness cannot become an excuse for guilt.

The hand that once trembled in fear had begun to speak. When fear becomes a witness, its trembling too becomes a kind of evidence—there is a difference between the trembling of fear and the trembling of falsehood.

Codes, marks, abbreviations—these are shelters for words. What cannot be said with a name is hidden inside a letter or sign. But a sign too will one day speak its meaning if it is read patiently.

All night the wooden handle beside the stump's roots drank the dew. There was no rubber stamp upon it, only the handle—yet the empty wood carried such weight that people paused before touching it. The rubber had been removed, the letters torn away, but the marks of gripping remained. At dawn Mira told them, "Many crimes hope to survive by removing letters, but the pressure of a hand does not disappear."

Outside, the wind strengthened and the stump's dry leaves rasped in the dust—a faint, continuous murmur, like an old story being repeated. Ananya measured the curve of the handle. Aruni separated tiny black grains of old ink clinging to its base. Devika examined the grain of the wood—how often sweat had dampened it, how often dust had rubbed it, how often haste had slammed it on a desk. To the children the object was no longer a sacred token; it was evidence of labour. The seal people had treated as an order was, in truth, only a human tool.

Ramesh the stamp-maker sat nearby, relief and fear together on his face. He felt as though his father Bhanu Lal's shadow had finally left his own body and taken a seat in public. Softly he said, "Father used to say: Son, make seals, but do not ask what the seal says. If the seal begins asking questions, the house will drown." Mira did not interrupt him. When a sentence born of fear comes out whole, it becomes the first shadow of evidence.

Satyavrat Mehta did not lift the handle. He bent down to look at it. For the first time the judge's eyes descended from the height of a desk to the stump's roots. "On a legal document," he said, "a seal is treated as a sign of the state. But if it falls into the wrong hand, it ceases to be the state and becomes the discipline of theft." The children wrote it down. Bhikhari Lal added, "When theft becomes a discipline, the peon becomes its first sentry."

Every eye turned to Bhikhari Lal. He did not shrink. "How many sealed papers I carried inside without reading them," he said. "I told myself my work was merely delivery. But what I delivered often went out to destroy someone's home." There was no pride in his admission, only the plain truth of remorse. Mira wrote: "The ethics of small tasks must be recorded; otherwise the feet of large crimes always escape."

Haricharan's message had been discussed since the previous night: "Break these connections, or there will be consequences." But Haricharan himself did not appear that morning. Instead two young men from the ashram arrived, saffron bands around their heads, copies of the donation ledger in their hands, and a prepared sentence on their lips: "The ashram has always worked for public welfare." Ananya did not laugh. She asked, "Then why is a court record number written on a public-welfare document?"

The young men faltered, then gave a rehearsed answer: "For convenience." Aruni immediately wrote: "Convenience: purpose unknown." Mira asked the next question. "Convenience for whom? The widow? The farmer? The court? Or the hand that moved the seal?" The young men fell silent. Their silence exposed the limit of their training. They had learned slogans, not how to endure questions.

At that moment Jagmaya arrived carrying her old cloth bag. Inside was a letter from Mohan, incomplete and damp at the edge, but one sentence was clear: "The paper was stamped, but I could not read how I became a stranger on my own land." As the sentence was read, the air around the stump grew heavy. The seal had moved, but its meaning had remained unread; the paper had been created, but the human being was left unable to read his own fate.

While copying the letter, Devika said, "Keep this sentence separately. It is not Mohan's question alone; it belongs to everyone." Surmani Devi lifted her empty water pot and set it beside the letter. A vessel of thirst beside a page of unread justice looked strange, yet both contained the same emptiness.

Ramesh showed another page from Bhanu Lal's register. Beside various dates were written four codes: "A," "Ch," "R," and "Aa." No one understood them at first. Satyavrat said, "They may be abbreviations." Bhikhari Lal murmured, "A for court, Ch for Chandrapal, R for Raghav, Aa for ashram?" Everyone started. The code suddenly connected with four circles on the map.

Mira imposed a rule at once: "This is an inference. To become evidence it requires matching." The children split into four groups. One would compare the dates with court records, another with movements at Chandrapal's office, a third with night meetings on Raghav's veranda, and the fourth with the ashram donation ledger. The inquiry was no longer merely a story; it was becoming a method.

The clerk from the court record room began matching dates. Three matched immediately. On a date marked "A" in Bhanu Lal's register, the original court file had been declared unavailable. On a date marked "Ch," an application had been filed from Chandrapal's office. On a date

marked “R,” an outside vehicle had arrived at Raghav’s veranda that night—Bhikhan the tea-seller remembered it.

Bhikhan set down his kettle and stepped forward again. “I used to think a night customer was only a customer. Now I understand some came to digest papers.” He said one man always drank tea without sugar and carried red thread in his pocket. The detail connected with Murari’s scratch samples. The red thread lit up once more upon the map of the web.

The children’s fingertips had reddened from handling papers all day, but no one complained of fatigue. Meanwhile the unnamed umbrella-man appeared on the distant road, the scar on his ear clearly visible. Aruni called out, but he began moving away. The children did not chase him. Mira had taught them: “Sometimes truth grows frightened when you run after it. Record its route.” Devika marked the direction of his footprints in the dust—toward Chandrapal’s warehouse.

By afternoon the umbrella-man had a name: Ramlakhan Sahay. People said he had once been a court munshi, had sometimes kept Chandrapal’s accounts, and had also been seen driving an ashram vehicle. His work had no stable title; perhaps that instability was precisely what made him useful. When a position has no clear name, the wrongdoing attached to it can remain unclear too.

Ramlakhan was found and brought in before evening. In the fading light his shadow stretched to the stump’s roots, as though the size of his wrongdoing too were being measured. At first he said nothing. Then: “I only carried papers.” Bhikhari Lal looked at him. “That was my sentence too.” An invisible mirror rose between them. The same act in different directions—one a court peon, the other a courier for a private web. People who merely “carried papers” had been carrying people’s fates.

Mira did not threaten him. She merely showed him the wooden handle. Ramlakhan’s face changed. “Where did you get this?” he asked. Ramesh answered, “From the house of the hand that left it behind.” Ramlakhan’s lips went dry. He understood that though the rubber had vanished, the memory of the handle remained.

Slowly Ramlakhan began to speak. Sometimes blank paper was sealed first and the words filled in later. Sometimes new copies were made under old dates. Sometimes the donation ledger and court copies lay on the same table in the same night. He avoided names, but he described routes. Mira did not interrupt. When a lie begins to break, its voice becomes quiet.

“Whose orders?” Satyavrat Mehta asked. Ramlakhan first glanced toward Chandrapal’s name, then Raghav’s, then the ashram. Finally he said, “There was not one name. The elders called it service. The office called it procedure. The veranda called it arrangement. I thought

everyone did it.” Mira wrote: “The first defence of collective wrongdoing: everyone does it.”

Ananya asked again, “Batuknath?” At the name, the young men from the ashram became restless. Ramlakhan did not answer directly. “In Batuknath’s time, the seal was worshipped. After he was gone, the seal became a business.” The sentence sounded beside the stump like a dry leaf falling. How worship had become trade was now a necessary question.

Surmani Devi said, “When people turn a man into a god, someone else opens a shop on his seat.” The words cut deeply. Whether Batuknath was alive or only memory, whether the wrongdoing had been directly his or committed in the misuse of his name—those questions remained open. But it was now certain that the symbols of his ashram had been used inside the paper web.

This time Satyavrat Mehta wrote “inquiry,” not “suspicion,” at the top of his page. “The language of suspicion incites a crowd,” he said. “The language of inquiry catches the hand.” The children formed teams. Bhanu Lal’s register, the seal handle, Ramlakhan’s statement, Mohan’s letter, Surmani’s pot, and the coded page were placed in separate bags, tied not with red thread but white cotton. Mira said, “Red thread belonged to the web; white thread belongs to memory.”

By evening Haricharan finally came. Anger was written on his face, calculation in his eyes. “You are insulting the ashram,” he said. Devika replied calmly, “We are not asking about insult; we are asking about use. If the ashram is sacred, how did its name reach papers held by unclean hands?” At the question, Haricharan’s layer of anger began falling away like a dry leaf.

“What will you gain by opening old matters?” Haricharan demanded. Jagmaya stepped forward at once. “I will recover Mohan’s name.” Surmani said, “I will recover my water.” Bhikhari Lal said, “I will learn the size of my own guilt.” Ramesh said, “I will recover my father’s truth.” Ananya said, “The children who come after us will have less fear.” Before those answers, Haricharan’s question became very small.

Ramlakhan looked toward Haricharan. Their glance made the recognition between an old master and an old courier impossible to hide. Mira recorded that too: “Glance: indication of mutual recognition.” Haricharan flared. “You are writing down glances now?” Aruni answered, “Many crimes speak first through the eyes, before they speak in words.”

Then suddenly a single drop of water shone in the empty pot beside the stump. The sky was clear; there had been no rain. Some said dew, some miracle. Mira neither laughed nor showed fear. She simply wrote: “Moisture observed in empty vessel; cause uncertain.” The discipline of truth placed even miracles under discipline.

Night fell before Ramlakhan's statement was half complete. He did not give every name, but he said enough to show that Bhanu Lal had not acted alone. Behind the hand that moved the seal was a hand that instructed it; behind that, a veranda; behind that, an office; behind that, the shadow of an ashram. Catching one hand would not reveal the whole body, but it had revealed the body's direction.

The shimmer of Old Budhba's Ghost appeared again above the stump. The children no longer treated it as entertainment. They felt that names trapped in history sometimes return as air, leaf, scent, and shadow to ask, "Did you write it down?" Closing the register, Ananya whispered in reply, "Today we wrote the hand. Tomorrow we shall write the order."

Thus the chapter brought the first identification of the hand that moved the seal. The codes in Bhanu Lal's register, the search for Ramlakhan Sahay, Haricharan's unease, the ashram's defence, and the living testimony of Jagmaya and Surmani showed that the seal was not merely wood and rubber; it moved through power, fear, and convenience.

FOLK SONG: The Voice Behind the Hand

Folk tune: Plaintive bhagait

Speak, O hand; speak truth and lighten your burden;

Never again stamp the name of the weak.

The seal did not move itself; a hand moved it;

The hand did not move itself; a voice spoke behind it.

Bhanu, Ramlakhan, Haricharan—the trembling cord;

Behind the veranda an office, behind the office a thief.

"Did you write it?" the leaf-shadow asked all night;

Ananya said: today the hand, tomorrow the order.

Fear of employment, greed for convenience, the bondage of hunger;

*In one hand trembles the silence of many generations.
O hand, speak truth and make your burden a little lighter;
Never again place a seal upon the name of someone weak.*

The hand did not move itself—a voice sounded behind it.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—*The child's learning: Through agreement and difference, a child grasps the direct causal efficacy of a word in the cognition that immediately gives rise to action—that is, the action-directed cognition, "This act is to be done by me." The prima facie argument holds that semantic power operates only in connected meaning.*]

CHAPTER 152

The Source of the Order

An order is not born from one mouth—it is born from a meeting, and a meeting carries no signature.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Find the Root of the Voice from Above

Folk tune: Question-nachari

Ask, O ask: "Who is above?"—ask;

Look to the crown of the smoke and seek the responsible one.

When you hear “it came from above,” ask first: who is above?

Sky, office, or human being—let the answer name it.

When the head of the voice is sought, the smoke acquires a shape;

Write responsibility under a name and falsehood begins to retreat.

Ask with respect, but do not abandon the question;

If an order brings injustice, do not obey it.

Seek the root of the voice from above; carry the lamp down to the root;

A clear answer restores the people’s trust.

When you hear “orders from above,” do not bow your head;

Sky, office, or human being—first make it give a name.

A respectful question is not rebellion;

A lamp taken to the root finds the answer best.



An order is not born from one mouth; it is born from a meeting, and a meeting carries no signature. Where there is no signature, people imagine there is no responsibility. But responsibility does not depend upon a signature.

“Service,” “procedure,” “relationship,” “settlement”—the softer these words sound, the harsher the act they may conceal. Examining the language is no less necessary than examining the offender.

When the decision comes first and the paper afterwards, the reversed sequence reveals that the court had become merely a stage and the real dialogue had been scripted somewhere else.

A seat of reverence is the safest place of all, because questions bow before it. But if injustice speaks from that very seat, then bowing too becomes a form of participation.

The circles had once been drawn in earth; now they were being drawn in language. A map of language is more difficult than a map of places, because language can be changed while the intention behind it often remains the same.

At dawn the empty seal handle still lay beside the stump's roots as though it had kept watch all night. On its wood the droplets looked less like dew than a faint sheen of sweat. Ramlakhan Sahay had said the previous day that words were sometimes added after a seal had already been impressed. The question was no longer whose hand had held the seal; it was where the hand had received its voice.

The morning birds sounded strangely faint, as though even they were busy listening to the language of the map. Mira wrote the first rule of the day: "In searching for the source of an order, do not rush at a person; attend to the language." Offenders often change their names, she said, but the language of orders changes less. Phrases such as "it is procedure," "it is service," "it came from above," "it is for everyone's welfare"—their footprints must be followed. The children began collecting sentences instead of names.

Ananya reread Ramlakhan's statement from the previous day. The words "service," "procedure," "arrangement," "relationship," "settlement," and "above" appeared again and again. Aruni wrote them separately on a sheet. Devika drew circles around them. The circles were more frightening than the earthen map, because this time the web was not made of places but of language.

Satyavrat Mehta opened the notebook brought from the veranda. As he turned the pages, old ink left a faint stain on his fingertip; he did not wipe it away. "In law," he said, "the source of an order should be written. If a document says the instruction came from above but does not name the 'above,' it is not an order; it is pressure." Bhikhari Lal's face fell. "So many papers in my life came from above," he said softly, "and above was always darkness."

Bhikhari Lal brought out an old box. Inside were several slips edged in red that he had never found the courage to throw away. They bore no complete names, only instructions: "hold file," "delay copy," "write original not found," "after two dates." No signatures, but in one corner,

drawn in blue ink, was a mark—two curved lines with a dot between them.

Aruni started when he saw the mark. He remembered something similar in the margin of the coded page in Bhanu Lal's register. A faint version also appeared on one torn page of the donation ledger. The children placed the three papers together. The marks were not identical, but they seemed to belong to the same family—as though made by the same hand at different speeds.

Ramlakhan Sahay was called again. He no longer looked like stone; he looked like a tired man. Mira showed him the slips. At first he looked away, then said, "These were not direct orders. They were reminders." Ananya asked, "Reminders of what?" Ramlakhan answered, "To put on paper what had already been decided."

A shiver ran through everyone. Decision first, document afterwards—this formula had overturned many lives. Satyavrat Mehta said, "If judgment came before the paper, the court had become merely a stage." Mira added, "And if the dialogue on the stage had already been written, we still have to find the writer."

Slowly a new name emerged from Ramlakhan's mouth: Mahavir Pathak. No one had spoken it openly before. People said that in Batuknath Hariharan's time he had been a reader of scripture, later an adviser on the ashram's accounts, and eventually the silent drafter of land papers for Chandrapal. His position had never been formally declared, yet his slips travelled through many offices.

Haricharan, standing at a distance, flared at the name. "Mahavir Babu is an old man. Do not drag his name into this." Devika asked at once, "Does old age make a document innocent?" Haricharan fell silent. Mira recorded: "Defence: age used as a shield." The small note made the crowd understand that the question was not an attack on a person but light cast upon a role.

Mahavir Pathak's house stood on the back road of the ashram. The gate was decayed, the hinge squealed, and the silence within was so thick that even footsteps sounded guilty. It felt less like a house than a storeroom for old manuscripts. Above the doorway stood a tulsi shrine; inside lay dry neem leaves, a faded portrait of Batuknath, and old ink marks on a table. Mahavir Pathak lay half-reclined on a cot. His eyes were sharp, his body frail—the sort of man who protects a strong silence with a weak body.

Mira greeted him respectfully and made no accusation. She laid the slips before him. At first Mahavir laughed. "You children have fallen into a game of letters." Ananya replied calmly, "Land was lost through this game of letters, people died, names went into scrap. We need to understand the rules of the game." The old man stopped laughing.

Mahavir examined the mark. "This is not my handwriting." Satyavrat said at once, "No one said it was. We are asking what the sign means." For a moment the old man's pupils trembled. Aruni did not write down the tremor. Mira said, "A bodily sign may assist; it is not evidence. Wait for the answer."

After a long silence Mahavir said, "The mark was a reminder of a meeting. If a matter had been settled orally, only a sign was put on the slip. Writing names would have increased controversy." Bhikhari Lal asked sadly, "To avoid controversy you removed names—but who protected the person whose whole life became the controversy?" The old man gave no answer.

An iron chest stood in one corner. Mahavir kept saying the old papers had been thrown away. But Jagmaya, standing outside with the other women, suddenly mentioned a smell from within the house: "The smell of damp paper is still here." The scrap dealer's sacks, the record-room dust, and this house seemed to belong to the same family of smells. Mira asked permission to open the chest.

At first Mahavir refused. "It contains private family papers." Mira replied, "Private papers will remain private. We will look only at what contains names from public life." Satyavrat prepared written consent. With a trembling hand Mahavir gave the key. Beneath folded cloth they found three ledgers: "Memory of Meetings," "Thoughts on Service," and "Formulae of Settlement."

The pages of "Memory of Meetings" carried no dates. Each entry used a description instead of a name: "farmer from the south," "widow across the river," "old lawsuit," "piece of the grove," "land beside the temple enclosure." Devika trembled at "piece of the grove," because it pointed toward Channa Grove. Crocodile, water, stump, court—it seemed all of them had already been written into these pages.

One entry was read aloud: "Direct claim upon the piece of the grove difficult. Awaken memory of religious use. Use language of public welfare. Delay copy to old name." At once Surmani Devi's empty pot, Mohan's letter, and the testimony of the scrap sack seemed present together. The whiter the phrase "public welfare," the blacker its shadow.

Aruni asked, "Delay copy to old name—whose name was that?" Mahavir closed his eyes. "I do not remember all the names." Ananya replied, "If a name was not written down, then remembering it becomes a duty." The children left an empty space beside every coded description in the ledger, like a seat reserved for a missing name.

The "Thoughts on Service" ledger was full of ashram language: "quiet a dispute," "family reconciliation," "inspire land donation," "guidance of saints." But along the margin in blue ink were the numbers one, two, five, eight. The same numbers appeared beside coded dates in Bhanu Lal's

register. Mira said, "When religious language and accounting numbers stand together, inspect the body of the donation."

Haricharan pushed inside. "These are old books of ideas. An idea is not a crime." Satyavrat Mehta replied calmly, "An idea is not a crime. But if files were stopped, copies altered, land shifted on the basis of that idea, then the idea becomes the source of an order." Haricharan's anger turned back into calculation. He could see that the language itself had been caught.

Ramlakhan saw one entry and suddenly said, "This was later read aloud in Chandrapal's office." Mahavir glared at him. Ramlakhan trembled but continued. "I had gone to buy paan that night. Raghav was there too. The sentence was almost exactly this: use the language of public welfare." With that memory, the page from "Memory of Meetings" left the house and reached office and veranda.

Mira recorded each statement separately. Ramlakhan's memory, Mahavir's ledgers, Bhikhari Lal's slips, Bhanu Lal's codes, the donation book, and delays in the record room began joining along one line. "The source of the order is not one chair," she said. "It is a circle of chairs. Catching one chair is easy; catching a circle is hard. But now we have the line."

For the first time Mahavir Pathak spoke with exhaustion. "In Batuknathji's time it began as public welfare. Poor people died while fighting cases. We thought we would arrange settlements. Later so many hands joined in that I could not stop it." Surmani Devi answered sharply, "The one who could not stop it kept his name. The people who were stopped lost their land."

The old man trembled. For the first time he tried to say the word "forgive," but Mira stopped him. "Forgiveness cannot take the place of testimony. First tell the whole truth." The firmness was not cruelty; it was discipline within compassion. An incomplete confession would become another injustice against the injured.

Mahavir then produced a fourth page, which he had hidden inside the mattress. It carried few direct names, but many signs. Arrows ran among the words "court," "office," "veranda," and "ashram." In the centre was written: "key phrase: voluntary." Devika froze. "So 'voluntary' was written on papers made under compulsion." From outside Jagmaya answered, "Yes. Mohan's hand trembled; the paper said voluntary."

Bhikhari Lal placed his slips beside the page. The marks corresponded — not perfectly, but enough. Satyavrat Mehta wrote: "Preliminary match: shared form of order-sign." He knew this was not a court sentence but groundwork for a public indictment of memory. Yet the ground was strong, because it rested not merely on feeling but on testimony from many sources.

By late afternoon a crowd gathered outside Mahavir's house. Sunlight fell straight into the courtyard, and dry dust crackled underfoot like brittle leaves. Mira warned everyone: "No one will lift a stone. People who were turned to stone for years will not make their justice smaller by throwing stones now." The children stood guard by the door. Revenge in the name of justice and spectacle in the name of truth both had to be restrained.

Haricharan tried to slip away quietly. Aruni did not block him; he only asked, "Your written answer is still pending. Please state whether the ashram accepts these ledgers or rejects them." Haricharan said, "We will consider it." Ananya wrote at once: "Response deferred." No one laughed. This time the word "deferred," used for years against the poor, had returned to Haricharan.

By evening copies of Mahavir's ledgers reached the stump. The originals remained sealed in his house; the copies were for public reading. Mira said, "We will not seize the originals. Seizure too belongs to the language of wrongdoing. We shall keep copies so that memory itself does not become a thief." The children marked the sentence specially.

Beside the stump in Channa Grove, the names of the four ledgers were read aloud. At "Memory of Meetings," the shimmer of Old Budhba's Ghost seemed to appear on the eaves. No one was frightened. The ghost was no longer a backward-looking fear; it appeared like a demand from past names. Ananya looked at the blank spaces where there were no names, only signs. "From tomorrow," she said, "we will search for the names behind the signs."

Night was falling. In her empty pot Surmani Devi now saw not a drop of water but the shadow of the copied ledger. Jagmaya placed Mohan's letter beside it. Ramlakhan sat at a distance looking at his own hands. The smell from Mahavir's house still seemed to hang in the air—damp paper, old ink, and the crime that had survived by calling itself public welfare.

Thus the chapter revealed the first form of the source of the orders. The orders moved not from one mouth but through meetings, signs, slips, ledgers, and phrases about public welfare. Mahavir Pathak's "Memory of Meetings," Bhikhari Lal's red slips, Ramlakhan's recollections, Haricharan's deferred response, and the blank name-spaces of Channa Grove together showed that the true voice of wrongdoing often hides inside gentle words.

FOLK SONG: The Voice That Came from Above

Folk tune: Secret-meeting folk tune

Give it a name, O put a name upon the voice “from above”;

Whoever spoke it must carry the responsibility.

“Spoken from above”—where is the head of this voice?

A meeting without signatures—where is the hand of the crime?

Service, procedure, welfare—the gentle web;

For ages it lay wrapped in the ghee of words.

Mahavir’s ledger opened and all the blank spaces woke;

Haricharan’s “deferred” answer returned upon himself.

The originals were not seized; the copies became memory;

Inside the cover of public welfare, the body of the order appeared.

Voice from above, now take a name upon the earth;

There lay the gentle web of service, procedure, and welfare.



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Established usage is stronger than etymological derivation: Thus in the mantra concerning the essence of curd, the contextual derivative sense of the word *vajin*—“one who treats the essence of curd as food”—is recalled immediately, while the established sense “horse” is not. Conventional usage is stronger than derivation.]

CHAPTER 153

The Name Behind the Signal

Behind every signal lies a name, and behind every name another signal—the watchman must stand between the two.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Hang the Signs on the Pegs

Folk tune: Search-batgabani

Hang the signs, O hang them upon the empty pegs;

Ask even the silence of the absent to show a path.

When you see an empty peg, know that something once hung there;

Thread, scent, and scratch will show the road.

The farmer from the south, the widow across the river—

Joined little signs will make the whole story of truth.

Hang each mark upon the peg so that no one forgets;

The silence of an absent thing is not useless either.

Sing the song of search as you walk; preserve the smallest detail;

Hold the hand of a tiny sign and cross the darkness.

A fibre of thread, a line of scent, the gesture of a scratch;

Join the little signs and the edge of the story appears.

The farmer from the south, the widow across the river—

Hold the hand of the minute and cross the dark night.



An empty peg is itself a testimony. Where no one was, someone had been—this contradiction is not merely a play of words but the language of absence. Even the absent can be asked for a name.

The farmer from the south, the widow across the river—these were not identities but haze. When one letter after another becomes clear inside the haze, the haze itself turns into a witness.

A trembling thumbprint on a document declaring “voluntary”—this was the cruellest contradiction. The paper wrote freedom, yet it was in

truth a document of fear. The watchmen saw for the first time the chasm between the word and the truth.

The letter “B” emerged from inside a stain—one letter, many possibilities. Not rushing toward a name, calling a possibility only a possibility: this restraint contains the true patience of justice.

In the morning the blank spaces beside the stump in Channa Grove were opened again. The dawn air still held the night’s chill of dew, and the children’s fingers trembled as they hammered small pegs into the earth. Wherever the copied ledgers had used signs instead of names, Ananya planted a peg. From each hung a slip of paper: “farmer from the south,” “widow across the river,” “old lawsuit,” “piece of the grove,” “land beside the temple enclosure.” The papers fluttered in the wind, but their movement was not play; it was a summons.

Mira had already warned them: “We must search for names behind the signs, but we must not write an inference as a name. Where we do not know, leaving the space blank is itself honesty.” The children drew a red line under the rule.

Bhikhari Lal brought an old list from the record room. Insects had eaten the edges, but the numbers in the middle remained. He explained that the outside cover of many files had been replaced, yet old serial numbers survived in the copy register. Aruni said, “A name can be destroyed, but the bones of its number remain.” Satyavrat Mehta started; the metaphor of bones on a legal document struck him as harsh, but exact.

The first sign was “farmer from the south.” Along the edge of the old paper, faint dust marks from a foot still lingered within its smell. In the copy register, three land disputes from the southern hamlet appeared in that year. One name had been erased, another page torn, and beside the third, in red ink, stood “settlement completed.” Devika asked, “Was the settlement completed, or was the name itself completed?” Bhikhari Lal did not answer; he no longer trusted his old voice.

At that moment old Ramparikshit Paswan arrived leaning on a staff. The hem of his dhoti was already powdered with dust, as though he had walked a long distance. No one had called him and no one stopped him. He looked at the hanging slip and said, “The farmer from the south may have been my uncle, Devan Paswan.” Every eye turned toward him. Ramparikshit raised a hand. “I said may have been. Do not write the full name without full evidence. But my uncle used to say that a settlement over his field was written without his thumbprint.”

Mira immediately created two columns: “Memory” and “Evidence Awaited.” Devan Paswan’s name entered the first. Ananya left an empty

space beside it, as though the name had reached only halfway to the door. In Ramparikshit's eyes there was not consolation but the glimmer of restraint. For the first time he felt that refusing to hurry a half-truth into completeness was itself justice.

The second sign was "widow across the river." At those words Surmani Devi's empty pot trembled. "There were many widows across the river," she said. "Some husbands were taken by floods, some by illness, but on paper the women were always treated as alone and therefore weak." Jagmaya stood holding Mohan's letter. "They were made weak through the name 'widow,' yet when someone coveted land, their houses were the first to be examined."

In the copy register a blurred name appeared—perhaps "Phoolmati," perhaps "Phulkumari"; it was impossible to say. In the corner of the page was the familiar mark of two curves and a dot. Aruni compared it with the ledger sign. The match was not exact, but close. Satyavrat wrote, "Possible relationship; letters unclear." Ananya said, "When the letters are blurred, do not blur the human being."

At that sentence Ramlakhan Sahay's whole body seemed to prickle. "I remember one file. Not Phoolmati—Phoolkali Devi. Her brother-in-law said she could not read, so he would explain the paper to her. Later her thumbprint appeared on a deed of gift." Haricharan's face hardened again; every time the phrase "deed of gift" appeared, he seemed to feel the ashram walls sinking.

Mira did not accept Ramlakhan's memory as final truth. "Find a living relative of Phoolkali Devi," she said. "A document must stand beside living memory." The children went in three directions. They asked a boatman across the river, an old midwife, a woman who cut earth, and an elderly oil seller in the market. The day rose, but each answer scattered like dust and settled again.

Near noon a teenage girl arrived, named Kamla. Her grandmother, she said, had been Phoolkali Devi. Before dying, the grandmother had given Kamla's mother a small bundle. Inside were a lump of earth, a cloth stained with thumb-black, and one sheet of paper. Most of the writing had faded, but the word "voluntary" remained clear. Kamla asked, "What does voluntary mean?" No one answered at once.

Surmani Devi set her empty pot on the ground. "If you tell a hungry person, 'You gave it happily,' that is not voluntary. If you tell a frightened person, 'Write that it was your own wish,' that is not voluntary. If you surround a widow alone and take her thumbprint, that is not voluntary." Whether Kamla understood every word was unclear, but for the first time the bundle in her eyes ceased to be humiliation and became testimony.

Phoolkali Devi's name rose from the blank space into the list of "primary names." Mira wrote beside it: "relative's memory, bundle,

unclear deed of gift, voluntary-clause.” The children felt a flash of satisfaction, but Mira stopped them. “Not happiness—care. Finding a name does not mean finding justice. A name only opens the door.”

The third sign—“old lawsuit”—proved hardest of all. Old lawsuits often outlived human beings. A father filed the case, the son attended hearings, the grandson saw a thumbprint on the compromise paper. In the record-room list beside that sign stood only “original unavailable.” Bhikhari Lal said quietly, “On the day they wrote ‘original unavailable,’ perhaps the page did not walk away by itself. Perhaps it was made to walk.”

Satyavrat Mehta fell silent. He understood that judicial language often covers active wrongdoing with neutral words. To write “unavailable” is easy; to write “made unavailable” is difficult. In his notebook he wrote: “Inside the passive word, seek the active hand.” The children later took it as a new principle.

While tracing the old lawsuit, Bhanu Lal’s coded register was opened again. Between A, Ch, R, and Aa they found a new letter: B. No one had noticed it before because it lay buried in a red stain. Aruni touched the stain with a tiny drop of oil and the letter cleared. “B,” Devika whispered. “Batuknath?”

Mira immediately imposed restraint almost like a scolding: “Not a name—a possibility. Many names begin with B.” But the shiver that moved through the crowd was hard to stop. Until then Batuknath Hariharan’s name had been a shadow—known by everyone, touched directly by no one. For the first time his initial seemed to rise from a stain on paper.

Haricharan said quickly, “B could mean ledger, veranda, babu—anything.” Ananya replied calmly, “Correct. So we shall write: B—meaning unresolved.” Haricharan’s defence turned back upon him, because the web wanted the question abandoned, while the children were not abandoning it; they were preserving it.

This time Mahavir Pathak himself came to the stump, supported by two young men. “Do not load the letter B upon Batuknathji,” he said. “In his time people regarded him as a father.” Surmani Devi’s voice was not loud, but it cut: “If a man treated like a father permits his children’s thumbprints to be taken on another person’s paper, then the word father too will be examined.”

Mahavir fell silent. Perhaps for the first time he understood that a seat of reverence can become the safest place for wrongdoing. Mira asked, “Does the meaning of B appear anywhere in your ledgers?” Mahavir tried to refuse, but Ramlakhan interrupted: “In Memory of Meetings, one place says ‘Baba.’” Mahavir could not stop him.

The copy was examined again. Indeed, faintly written in the margin of one page were the words: "Baba's word to be read later." The main entry contained "piece of the grove," "religious memory," "language of public welfare," and "delay old name." Devika said, "Baba could be anyone. But this Baba was making decisions beyond the paper." Satyavrat wrote: "Unnamed Baba: higher source of order-language."

At the sign "piece of the grove," the whole assembly grew heavy. Channa Grove itself seemed a witness to the phrase. Sunlight struck the blackened face of the stump and a white line flashed in one of its cracks. Someone said, "The nail of the white ghost." Someone else, "The tree's vein." Mira wrote only: "Public perception: stump as active symbol." She wanted fear and evidence kept separate, yet the presence of both acknowledged.

Jagmaya opened Mohan's letter and read a line no one had noticed before: "Those who speak in the name of the grove do not all put their names on paper." Aruni placed this beside "Baba's word" in the ledger. A bridge formed between the two sentences. Mohan may never have understood the whole web, but his body had touched one of its threads.

Bhikhari Lal asked, "If Baba's word was Batuknathji's word, why was it not written plainly?" Satyavrat answered, "A word that derives its force from reverence needs less signature. And a word that smells of wrongdoing fears a signature more." A quiet murmur spread through the assembly.

Kamla took the lump of earth from her grandmother's bundle and placed it by the stump's roots. "Grandmother used to say the earth needs a name." Ramparikshit, nephew of Devan Paswan, touched the tip of his staff to the lump. Two later generations of two missing names met at the same earth. Channa Grove became a living bridge between past and future.

Mira told the children, "Today write three states: memory, signal, primary name. Do not make a name certain when it is not certain. Do not make a weighty signal light." Many elders were astonished by the method. They had imagined justice as either immediate shouting or years of files. Here a third path was being made: careful public writing.

By evening the list was ready. Farmer from the south—Devan Paswan, evidence awaited. Widow across the river—Phoolkali Devi, primary name. Old lawsuit—unknown, but connected to Bhanu Lal's B-code. Piece of the grove—old claim concerning Channa Grove, linked to the sign "Baba's word." Land beside the temple enclosure—investigation still pending. The list was short, but its weight was great.

Haricharan said again, "None of this will stand in court." Satyavrat looked at him. "Perhaps not. But what does not stand in court may stand in history. And what stands in history can one day change the language

of the court.” Haricharan did not lower his head, but for the first time his eyes trembled. He understood that the game was no longer merely about winning in court.

Before leaving, Mahavir Pathak said quietly, “Baba’s words were not all written down.” Ananya asked at once, “Why? Because Baba was a god, or because Baba did not wish to be answerable?” Mahavir’s lips went dry. “Sometimes reverence was placed above paper.” Devika answered, “Then human beings were crushed beneath the paper.”

At that answer the air became perfectly still. Old Budhba’s Ghost did not shimmer on the roof this time but inside the stump’s hollow. The shadow of the black ghost deepened near the roots while a white spectral line spread above it. The children were not afraid. They felt the symbols too were waiting to hear when Batuknath’s name would finally enter the paper.

As night gathered, Mira wrapped the list in cloth and handed it to Ananya. “This contains not names, but responsibility.” Ananya did not touch the cloth to her forehead; she held it against her chest. She understood that names are not for worship but for protection. Aruni preserved the empty spaces—there must remain room for those still unknown.

Thus the first names emerged behind the signals, though not every name became complete. Devan Paswan remained in memory; Phoolkali Devi in the bundle and the clause “voluntary”; the old lawsuit in Bhanu Lal’s B-code; Channa Grove in the sign “Baba’s word.” Batuknath’s shadow was still a shadow, but now its direction had been found.

FOLK SONG: The Empty Peg of the Signal

Folk tune: Search-batgabani

Tell us, O signal, tell us your true name;

For the one we do not know, preserve the empty space.

Farmer from the south, widow across the river;

A sign where a name should be—the wind reads and writes.

The empty peg sways and says: do not guess;

A false name is another killing; keep a place for the unknown.

Devan's serial number survived, Phoolkali's bundle remained;

Paper devoured the face, memory survived in a small bundle.

Over Channa Grove fell the shadow of "Baba's word";

Beneath the seat of reverence lay many buried roads.

Signal, slowly tell us your true name;

For the one we do not know, preserve the empty space.

Farmer from the south, widow across the river—the names;

A sign where a name should be—the wind reads there.

The empty peg sways and says: do not guess,

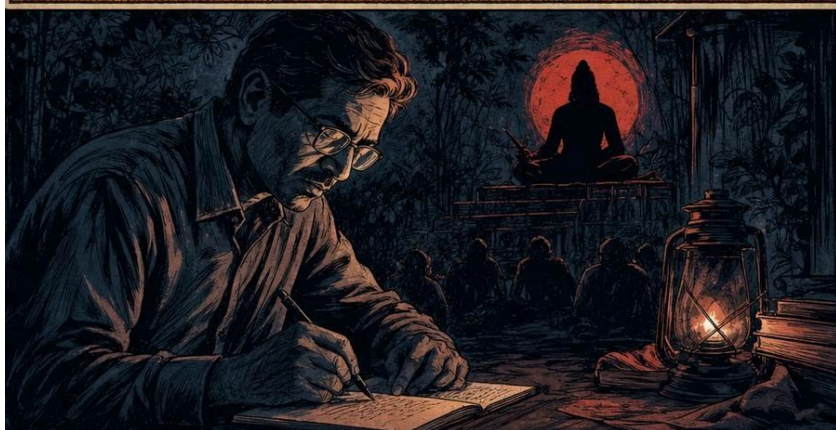


[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Cowhood is the denoted meaning: The component words establish relations among their own meanings; the compound as a whole produces cognition of the lotus, and together they yield the cognition "a lotus born in mud." At the end of the dialogue, both sides agree that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. Cowhood is the denoted meaning.]

CHAPTER 154

Baba's Promise

As long as Baba's word remained an object of reverence, it was untouchable; the moment it became examinable, the word turned into paper.



OPENING FOLK SONG: Dawn at Baba's Seat

Folk tune: Nirgun-prabhati

Sit a while, O sit beside Baba's seat;

Listen to the wood, beaded with pearls of dew.

*Baba's seat is filled with dampness, dew-pearls glitter there;
Unwritten words keep watch in silence along the field-bunds.
Let the descendants sit and listen; even wood tells a story;
The true lesson of the ancestors shows the road of dawn.*

*A seat is never truly empty; memory remains there;
The scent of Baba's labour travels homeward with the wind.
The morning sun bows to that old place;
From the seat will rise a new generation's campaign of integrity.*

*No idol, no scripture—the empty seat itself speaks;
Along the field-bunds rests an unwritten lesson.
The scent of labour in the air, memory in house and courtyard;
A ray of nirgun dawn descends into the mirror of the mind.*



As long as Baba's word remained reverence, it remained untouchable; the moment it became examinable, the word turned into paper. A sentence once kept outside all questions had now entered the register. This was no small transformation.

The ears of a kitchen hear more than the ears of a court because no one considers a kitchen dangerous. What people hide from walls is heard by smoke—and one day even smoke can speak.

Donation, service, blessing—the brighter these words appear, the denser the shadow that may fall behind them. A hand that cleans a village pond does not earn the right to dirty another person's paper.

Even when empty, a seat seems full: the smell of ghee, the shadow of incense, the marks of sweat remain. A place must be examined as a place—not worshipped, not insulted.

Earth, staff, and the cracks of flour on a working hand—three bodies from three generations stood around a single seat. When memory gathers in one place, it becomes more than evidence; it becomes the rebirth of identity.

In the first light of dawn, yesterday's list was spread again beside the stump in Channa Grove. The night's chill still rested in the air, and the children's voices trembled faintly within it. When the cloth was opened, drops of dew clung like pearls beside the letters. Ananya did not wipe them away. "Let it also be seen how much night-moisture settles upon a name," she said. Mira did not stop her. She understood that memory of the surroundings could remain beside written evidence, so long as it was not placed in the position of evidence itself.

One sentence from the previous day had kept them awake: "Not all of Baba's words were written down." Reverence, fear, order, silence, and wrongdoing all lived together inside that line. In the village, "Baba" meant not merely an elder or holy man but a seat before which questions bowed first and answers rose later. Early in the morning Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his notebook: "Create a method for hearing the words that were never written."

Mira gave them the first rule: "Today no one will be honoured merely by calling him Baba, and no one will be accused merely by calling him an offender. First identify how the words travelled." The children drew three columns: word, speaker, consequence. Aruni said, "Where the speaker cannot be found, we shall return from the consequence toward the speaker." Bhikhari Lal did not smile, yet a strange relief entered his eyes. For the first time he felt there might be a method for catching ghosts on paper.

Mahavir Pathak had not been summoned, but he came on his own. He walked more slowly than before, as though a night's thought had added weight to his body. He brought copies of four ledgers, torn cloth from an old seat, and a broken cord from a brass bell. "I brought whatever survived in the house," he said. "But I do not know what all of it means." Mira replied, "Do not supply the meaning. Let each object account for its own touches. We shall only give it a chance to speak."

The first ledger was titled "Memory of Meetings." They reopened the page seen the previous day. Faintly written in the margin were the words: "Baba's word to be read later." In the main text appeared: "leave the piece of the grove for public welfare," "keep the southern hamlet quiet," "keep the language of the deed of gift very simple," and "delay the old name." Devika stopped while reading. "Who delays a name? A name does not delay itself."

Satyavrat Mehta answered, "To delay a name is to keep someone's name held back until his claim grows tired." Ramparikshit Paswan gripped his staff more tightly. The half-name of his uncle Devan Paswan had surfaced in memory the previous day. Now he understood that the uncle's name had not naturally faded; it had been systematically blurred.

Kamla, granddaughter of Phoolkali Devi, also came. Today she carried neither the bundle nor the lump of earth. When asked why, she said, "The earth is beside the stump. Grandmother's name will stay here today." At the childlike simplicity of the sentence Surmani Devi closed her eyes. Systems never understand how simply memory chooses its own place.

The second page did not use the word "Baba," but it contained the phrase "approval from above." Mira noted at once: "Baba, above, public welfare, service—words from the same circle." Aruni drew the circle. Haricharan, standing at a distance, said sarcastically, "Will a circle of words prove a crime?" Ananya replied calmly, "Proving a crime is the court's work. Catching the movement of words is ours." Haricharan fell silent; the answer left no space for quarrel.

Bhanu Lal's coded register was opened again. Three dates stood beside the letter B. Two matched dates in "Memory of Meetings." Beside the third was only a dot. Bhikhari Lal said, "Sometimes a dot meant the work was oral." Ramlakhan Sahay, who had been trembling inwardly since the previous day, added softly, "Oral meant: no name on paper, but the order completed."

Mira wrote: "B: possible higher oral order; date correspondence at two points." She explained to the children that calling a possibility a possibility is not weakness but honesty. Devan Paswan's remembered case, Phoolkali Devi's bundle, and Batuknath's shadow could not be placed on the same level. The staircase of justice must be climbed one step at a time, not leapt.

Mahavir Pathak suddenly said in a tired voice, "As a child I was taught that Baba's words protected society." Surmani Devi replied, "Which society? The houses that survived were society? The people whose land disappeared were not?" Mahavir lowered his eyes. For the first time he spoke almost as an admission: "Inside the word society, we left some

people outside.” It was not a full confession, but it was the first tear in the curtain.

At that moment an elderly woman arrived leaning on a crutch. Her name was Sharda Jha. People called her “the woman from the mathiya” because she had once cooked at Batuknath’s ashram. “I have heard Baba’s words,” she said. “He spoke softly, but everyone heard loudly.” Every body tightened. Mira gave her a chair and water. “Tell us memory, not accusation.”

Sharda Jha said that after meetings, certain men would gather at night behind the kitchen. Baba rarely used direct names; he preferred indications: “the people of the south are stubborn,” “make the widow understand,” “the grove’s service will be for the public,” “keep the paper simple,” “give trust to those who do not understand.” Sharda said, “At the time I was rolling rotis. I thought they were talking religion. Later I understood—the rotis were being rolled in my hands, but the decisions were cooking in someone else’s belly.”

At those words a minute green point like a leaf appeared in a crack of the stump. Some called it a miracle, some an illusion. Mira wrote the same kind of note as before: “Observed: green point; meaning uncertain.” But inside the children the green point had already acquired meaning—testimony can sprout even in rotting wood.

Satyavrat Mehta asked Sharda, “Did you call Batuknath Hariharan ‘Baba’?” Without hesitation she replied, “Everyone did. I did too. But being called Baba does not make anyone innocent.” The direct sentence fell like thunder. For the first time, from someone’s mouth, Batuknath and Baba were explicitly joined in the same breath.

Mira immediately revised the list: “Baba: according to Sharda Jha’s memory, an address used for Batuknath Hariharan.” Beneath it she wrote: “No direct signature on the orders established at present.” Some people grumbled at the balance. “If the name has come, write it.” Mira stood firm. “We shall write the name, but only what has been found. If we write more, falsehood becomes Baba’s brother.”

Haricharan could no longer hide his unease. “Will history be built on a cook’s memory?” Sharda Jha looked at him. “Cooks hear the most because no one thinks they are dangerous. What you hide from walls is heard by smoke.” A low murmur rose. Kitchen, veranda, record room—places once treated as the margins were suddenly becoming the centre.

After hearing Sharda, Ramlakhan Sahay took a small slip from his pocket. It was stained with oil. “I kept this for years,” he admitted. “Bhanu Lal gave it to me one day. He said: Baba’s word—‘Put the date of the deed of gift in the previous month.’ I did not change the date, but I kept the slip. I was afraid it might be needed one day.”

The slip was shown to everyone. The handwriting looked like Bhanu Lal's, but the sentence began only with "Baba said." The date was blurred, yet the month corresponded. Satyavrat trembled while holding it. It was no direct signature, but it was a written shadow of an oral order. Mira wrote: "Bhanu Lal slip: instruction to alter date, attributed to Baba's word; authenticity still to be tested."

Kamla asked softly, "What changes when a date is changed?" Aruni explained, "If a paper is created for a day your grandmother could not understand or was not present for, then even the time of her voice is taken away." Kamla went quiet. Perhaps for the first time she understood that a date too can be part of a body.

Ramparikshit, nephew of Devan Paswan, said, "My uncle used to say, 'I was not in the village that day, but the paper says I was present.'" Satyavrat said immediately, "Compare this with the date-change slip." The children's eyes brightened, but Mira cautioned them again: "A match does not mean proof. It means a road." This was a chapter about making roads, not pronouncing verdicts.

Mahavir Pathak's body was trembling. "People regarded Baba as a great donor," he said. "He cleaned the village pond, opened a school, arranged marriages for poor families." Surmani Devi replied softly, "The light of charity does not forgive the darkness of wrongdoing. A man who cleans a pond gains no right to dirty someone's papers." The sentence travelled deep into Mahavir.

At that moment the shimmer of Old Budhba's Ghost appeared not above the stump but beside the slip. A black-ghost shadow seemed to bend over the paper, while a pale white gleam spread among the words. The children no longer assigned instant meanings to such sights. Ananya merely wrote: "Public perception: shadow observed during reading of slip." Not turning a symbol into evidence, but not erasing the symbol either—this had become their new discipline.

Sharda Jha offered another memory. "Once Baba said, 'If a name cries too much, calm it with service.'" Devika asked, "What did service mean?" Sharda replied, "Sometimes five seers of rice, sometimes medicine, sometimes a puja. But the papers were never returned." Aruni immediately wrote: "Service: not remedy, but pacification." Satyavrat added: "A counterfeit shadow of compensation."

Haricharan flared. "You are putting religion in the dock." Mira remained calm. "Not religion—the decisions made in religion's name. A religion that fears questions is not religion; it is a chair." Some in the crowd grew uncomfortable. Questioning reverence is never easy. But the purpose was not to destroy faith; it was to inspect the order hidden inside faith.

After noon the children made a “map of words.” Their hands became caked with earth, yet no one went to wash, as though the touch of soil too were a kind of witness. In the centre they wrote: “Baba/Batuknath: higher seat according to memory.” Branches ran outward to Bhanu Lal’s slip, Sharda Jha’s kitchen-memory, Mahavir’s Memory of Meetings, Phoolkali Devi’s deed of gift, Devan Paswan’s remembered absence, and the piece of Channa Grove. Each branch carried a different level of confidence. The map looked less like paper than the vein-map of a crime.

Looking at it, Satyavrat Mehta said, “You have not studied law, yet you are creating procedure.” Ananya replied, “When a procedure protects human beings, whether it is studied or created, both can serve justice.” Suddenly Satyavrat’s years of professional language felt small. The children’s language was raw, but it carried the moisture of life.

After evening fell, the cloth from Batuknath’s old seat was unfolded. It held faint ink stains and the mingled smell of ghee, incense, sweat, and paper. Mahavir said Baba had sat upon this seat during meetings. Mira neither worshipped nor insulted it. “This is the place where words were spoken,” she said. “A place will be examined as a place.”

Kamla took one grain from her grandmother’s lump of earth and placed it beside the seat. Ramparikshit touched the tip of his staff to it. Sharda Jha showed the old flour-cracks in her hand. “These hands rolled rotis, and these ears heard the words.” Three generations, three bodies, three forms of memory—earth, staff, hand—stood around a single seat.

Mira read the final list: “Today, for the first time, remembered usage links the word Baba to Batuknath Hariharan. Bhanu Lal’s slip supplies a written shadow of a date-change instruction. Sharda Jha’s kitchen-memory describes the pattern of oral orders. Mahavir’s ledger shows the language of the meetings. The evidence is not yet complete, but the direction is clearer.” Everyone remained silent. Silence suited the moment better than applause.

As night descended, no one could say for certain whether the green point appeared again in the stump. But the slip, the ledgers, the bundle, the seat, and the list were separately wrapped in cloth and secured. As Ananya tied the cloth she said, “Today Baba’s word was heard, but its answer is still due.” Aruni added, “The answer will begin not with paper, but with the names of the people who were affected.”

Thus, in this chapter, “Baba’s word” descended for the first time from indistinct reverence into language that could be examined. Sharda Jha’s kitchen-memory, Bhanu Lal’s slip, Mahavir’s Memory of Meetings, the suppressed times of Devan Paswan and Phoolkali Devi, and the testimony of Channa Grove together showed that Batuknath’s power did not live in signatures but in people’s fear and faith.

FOLK SONG: The Dampness of Baba's Seat

Folk tune: Nirgun-nachari

Give an answer, Baba; now give an answer;

Receive the tears of those whose homes your words destroyed.

Baba's word was never written, yet the fields changed hands;

The hand of blessing rose, and someone's home was taken.

Sharda in the kitchen heard the quiet command;

Earth, staff, and flour-cracked hands gave their message.

The seat held the smell of ghee, incense, sweat, and ink;

When reverence forbids questions, it becomes a blind bond.

Batuknath's name stepped from shadow into body;

The suppressed time of Devan and Phoolkali shadowed the heart.

Baba, not a god—it is time to answer;

Receive again the tears of those whose homes your words destroyed.

The word was never written, yet the fields changed hands,



[PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERTONE—Verbal testimony: Using the example of *pankaja*, he explains that although water-hyacinth too is born in mud, established usage has restricted the word *pankaja* to the lotus alone.]

CHAPTER 155

The Account of Service

When the account of service and the account of silence are kept in the same hand, both accounts demand an accounting.



Opening Folk Song: Grains of Speech at the Silent Feast

Folk Tune: Feast-Blessing Song

Serve the plates, yes, serve them with truth beside,

And where the grain bears someone's name, tell that person's story too.

*White rice upon the plate; serve truth beside it,
With every grain of charity, join back the people's dignity.
Not a feast of silence—together sing the songs of memory,
Where grain was given in someone's name, let that person's story be
told.*

*One grain, one labour; one cup, one thirst,
A feast is holy only when trust is shared.
Fill every plate with grains that speak, and fill them with love,
Do not turn charity into display; make it service to humanity.*

*White rice, a stream of dal, the fragrance of fried vegetables,
And songs of memory beside them, breaking the bond of silence.*

*One grain honours labour; one cup honours thirst,
Only the feast of shared trust is true sacred giving.*



When the account of service and the account of silence are kept in the same hand, both accounts demand an accounting. If the hand that gives grain also begins to demand silence, the grain ceases to be food and becomes a bargain.

Charity may look white, yet a black condition can remain hidden in its shadow. A condition never spoken aloud can be the heaviest of all, because it is written not on paper but upon the mind.

A hand raised halfway is neither a complete lie nor a complete truth. It bears witness to the place where one had to choose between hunger and truth, and hunger won.

If a hungry stomach receives food only on condition of silence, that food is no longer food but bondage. Yet the hungry cannot be blamed; the blame belongs to the one who turned hunger into a weapon.

The grove listened, for the grove has ears older than many years. What was never spoken in the house was being uttered for the first time beneath the grove's standing trunk—slowly, but clearly.

The darkness of dawn had not yet wholly lifted, yet people had again begun to gather beside the stump of Channa Grove. Smoke from the night's hearths still hung in the air, and with it mingled the faint smell of paper. The shadow of Baba's promise that had fallen upon paper the day before had whispered through house after house all night. Someone said, "Baba did good for everyone." Someone answered softly, "Good for whom, and silence for whom?" Each time the question arose, it smoked like a courtyard hearth.

Ananya opened yesterday's list first. At the top she wrote, "Consequences After the Promise." Mira saw the heading and breathed with satisfaction. Finding Batuknath's name alone was not enough; they had to see whose house was ruined along the road of his promise, whose house received charity, and whose mouth was closed. Satyavrat Mehta said, "Today, do not read the language of crime. Read the language of systemic benefit."

Devika spread out three new sheets. On the first she wrote "Charity," on the second "Service," on the third "Silence." Aruni added a fourth: "What Went in Return?" Everyone looked at him. He said, "Charity and service are visible in front of us; what went away is usually left behind the paper." A faint line of soot was drawn across that fourth sheet, as though the blank space had already been filled.

Mahavir Pathak brought his ledger again. Today his steps bore more weight than yesterday. The ledger contained a section titled "Service Expenditure." The ink was faded, but the discipline of the entries remained clear: "Phoolkali—two maunds of paddy," "Devan's family—medical assistance," "South Hamlet—kirtan feast," "widow—clothing," "Batesar—interest suspended." Hearing them, Ramparikshit Paswan leaned upon his stick.

Kamala asked, "Did Grandmother receive paddy?" Surmani Devi said, "Perhaps she did. But if land went in exchange for paddy, how can that be called service?" Mahavir's hand trembled at the question. He admitted the ledger recorded assistance but did not record any connection with

land or deed of gift. Mira noted: "Service-expenditure account matches names of affected people; exchange remains unclear."

Sharda Jha, who had recalled the kitchen the previous day, arrived carrying an old cloth pouch. It held torn slips, feast lists and oil-stained papers. She said, "The houses whose names rice was issued under in the kitchen often became more silent afterward." Haricharan laughed from a distance. "Eat the rice and then complain?" Sharda looked straight at him. "If rice given in hunger is used to suppress the paper of one's rights, it is not grain. It is a rope."

A stir passed through the crowd. Some grew uneasy, because questioning charity felt like questioning virtue itself. Mira said plainly, "Charity will not be insulted. What will be examined is whether charity was used to manufacture silence." The children drew small circles beside the word "charity": "virtue," "power," "silence," "debt."

Satyavrat Mehta kept turning the ledger's pages until one line stopped him: "Do not write the name; the family has understood." It was written in red ink along the margin. "The family has understood"—the sentence was dangerous. Which family? Who had understood? Who had been asked? Ananya immediately wrote: "Unnamed entry: possible collective pressure."

Ramlakhan Sahai, who until now had been opening only half the truth, came forward on his own. "The pages of the service account were kept separately," he said. "If there was fear of a case or a claim arising, expenses were entered beside that person's name. Later they were told—look, the ashram helped you; it would not be right to quarrel now." His voice carried remorse, but also an effort to save himself. Mira did not interrupt.

Bhikhari Lal asked, "Why did you not say this earlier?" Ramlakhan lowered his eyes. "Because I too took medicine for my daughter from the same account." Silence spread. The web of wrongdoing does not bind only those who give orders; those who receive help under compulsion can also become tied into knots of fear. Aruni wrote: "Benefited witness: a witness bound by the benefit itself."

The case of Devan Paswan came up again. Ramparikshit said his uncle had repeated for years, "I was not present in court." Beside Devan's name the ledger recorded "medical assistance." Its date fell in the same month as the alleged appearance. Satyavrat compared the dates and said softly, "This may be coincidence, but it is a coincidence worth examining." Mira underlined the balance in that wording.

Kamala placed a clod of soil from her grandmother Phoolkali's land among the stump's roots and asked, "Paddy is written against Grandmother's name. Where is the land written?" The children's eyes ran over the page. There were lines for paddy, clothing and ritual expenses;

no land was mentioned. Ananya said, "What was given was written. What was taken was hidden." Sharda Jha murmured, "Yes."

The wall inside Mahavir shifted again. "In our house this account was treated as proof of virtue," he said. "If anyone questioned Baba, this account was shown—see how many people were served." Surmani Devi answered, "When service is turned into a shield, service itself is wounded." Tears ran from Mahavir's eyes, but Mira did not let the moment become a stage for forgiveness. She merely dictated: "Family admission: account used as display of virtue."

At midday three people came from the South Hamlet—Kailash Mandal, Sakuni Khatun and Hariballabh Das. The sun fell directly upon their dust-covered feet, and the shadows of all three seemed to bend toward the stump's roots. Each said that their families' names had once appeared in the service account, and each remembered that after assistance was received, speaking in the panchayat was discouraged. Kailash said, "My father used to say—do not open your mouth against the name of the hand from which medicine came." Sakuni added, "Medicine should never be the price of a closed mouth."

Hariballabh Das had a different story. His father played cymbals in the ashram's kirtan. The ledger recorded "kirtan honorarium." Hariballabh said, "The honorarium came, but with a condition: do not raise a claim about the road through the South Hamlet." That road led carts toward a section of Channa Grove. Aruni drew a line on the map—kirtan, road, grove, claim. Suddenly devotion and land were joined upon the same line.

Haricharan roared again, "Will every matter be twisted into crime? Kirtan, charity, medicine—will you pollute everything?" This time Satyavrat Mehta answered himself: "What is pure is not destroyed by examination. What is polluted is revealed by it." Haricharan fell silent, though a brightness in his eyes said that he had not yet conceded defeat.

Mira taught the children to mark separately beside every testimony: "memory," "ledger," "date match," "interest relationship." She said, "A person who received charity is not thereby a weaker witness; but the bond created by the charity must be understood." Ananya wrote at the top of the page: "The Difference Between Mercy and Pressure." That became the real lesson of the day.

Sharda Jha drew a feast list from her pouch. The occasion was written as "Channa Service Sankirtan." The names were disproportionately those of families whose land or claims were disputed. Devika asked, "What did Channa Service Sankirtan mean?" Mahavir said, "Collective devotion for the protection of the grove." Ramparikshit immediately asked, "Protection of the grove—or preparation to occupy it?" A heavy rustle went through the crowd.

On the edge of the feast list was written "New Resolve." The line below was incomplete: "We all, for the public good..." Termites had eaten the rest. Satyavrat held the page to the light. In the blur, a few letters seemed to read "will not dispute." The line could not be fully read. Mira immediately said, "Do not complete incomplete letters. Write: doubtful reading." The children honestly recorded the incompleteness.

Sakuni Khatun said, "My mother gave her thumbprint. She could not read. She was told it was for attendance at the feast." Kamala started. "Can a thumbprint later change the paper?" Mira said, "A thumbprint is the body's trust. If it is placed upon the wrong page, trust itself has been stolen." At that, several women looked down at their own thumbs as though seeing the seals of their bodies for the first time.

Ramlakhan Sahai admitted that on some occasions attendance sheets from feasts were later tied together with resolution papers. "I did not do it directly," he said, "but I saw the files bound together." Bhikhari Lal asked bitterly, "You saw and remained silent?" Ramlakhan answered, "My household ran on silence." The statement was harsh, but not false. A system feeds silence with a mixture of wages, aid, prestige and fear.

Ananya added a new column to the "Silence" page: "Cause." Under it they wrote hunger, medicine, daughter, employment, prestige, caste, fear, religion, debt. Looking at the list, everyone understood that silence is not always cowardice; sometimes it is a distorted means of staying alive. But understanding this did not make silence innocent. It merely exposed its roots.

As evening shadows lengthened, yesterday's green point in the black crack of the stump looked slightly longer. Sharda Jha said, "Look, the wood is speaking." Mira wrote: "Visual recurrence; meaning belongs to folk experience." Satyavrat smiled. "Sometimes symbols lead people toward truth, provided we do not place the symbol in truth's place." The children were learning to practise that distinction.

On the last page of Mahavir's ledger they found a strange entry: "Baba's prasad: silent feast." The date fell in the same week as Phoolkali Devi's deed of gift. The words "silent feast" sent a shock through the crowd. Sharda Jha said, "Yes. There were feasts where people were told—forget the old matter and begin anew." Surmani Devi said sharply, "To instruct someone whose home has been taken to forget is to kill them a second time."

Kamala did not cry. She merely lifted the clod of soil and placed it beside the ledger. "A silent feast in exchange for Grandmother's land?" Her voice was very low, yet so sharp that even Haricharan fell silent. Aruni wrote: "Silent feast: date close to Phoolkali case; meaning remains under investigation." Beneath it, Ananya wrote in different ink: "Memory and ledger trembled together for the first time."

Ramparikshit Paswan did not swear by his uncle Devan's name. He said, "I do not want an oath. I want a search." The children liked the sentence. An oath wants an immediate ending; a search slowly makes a road. Mira said, "Make this a rule of the campaign—no one will take revenge, no one will add a lie, no one will hide evidence." Everyone raised a hand, though some hands rose only halfway. The half-raised hands were recorded too.

Bhanu Lal's slip, the service account, the feast list, the entry for the silent feast, Sharda Jha's pouch, Ramlakhan's admission and the testimony from the South Hamlet were wrapped in separate cloths. Each cloth was a different colour so that the papers could not later be mixed together in a file. Ananya said, "The system mixes things up. We will keep them separate."

At the final reading of the night, Mira announced, "Today it became clear that the service account was not merely a list of assistance; it may also have been an arrangement for silence. We will continue examining whether claims were weakened through charity, medicine, feasts, kirtan, prasad and debt. Some dates match, some memories match, some pages are incomplete. There is no final conclusion yet, but the shape of the web has become visible."

No one applauded. Applause belongs to celebration; this was not a celebration but an opened wound. That night beside the stump of Channa Grove, people understood for the first time how often black silence had been served upon a white plate of charity. Everyone knew that a crocodile eats the body; today they saw that sometimes the crocodile takes the form of rice, medicine, feast and prasad, and eats the body's voice.

The chapter ended with service and silence no longer remaining separate accounts. The promise of Batuknath's Baba had emerged as a web spread through the everyday workings of compassion, debt and shame.

Folk Song: The Plate of the Silent Feast

Folk Tune: Feast-Lament

*Spread the plate, spread the plate of the silent feast,
Food for whom, land from whom—open every account.*

The rice of charity is white; behind it, black silence,

Medicine, prasad, kirtan—which of them bound whom?

Phoolkali's land was lost; a feast came to the plate,

Kamala asked—who put a price upon Grandmother?

Why was the mouth of the one who received service closed,

Mercy and silence were written in the same hand.

The half-raised hands told the stories of fear,

The crocodile became rice and chewed away the body's voice.

Spread the plate of the silent feast now among everyone,

Kamala asked—who put a price upon Grandmother?



[Philosophical Undertone—Testimony: A traveller recounted an experience. Example: an experienced physician says, "This medicine cures fever," and the person takes it. The distinction reveals how even a small event of ordinary life contains a serious epistemological process. Testimony.]

CHAPTER 156

The Debt of Donation

The greatest debt is often wrapped in charity's white cloth.



Opening Folk Song: Transparency in White Cloth

Folk Tune: Auspicious Sohar

Wear white, yes, wear whiteness within as well,

Keep every thread clear, tie every knot clean.

*Wear white cloth and remain white within,
Keep each thread clean; endure no knot of deceit.
If there is donation, let the name, account and purpose be open,
In transparent hands the lotus of service blooms.*

*White is not merely an outer ornament,
Without inward cleanliness, virtue makes no sound.
As cloth in the wind turns almost transparent,
So let service remain open, so the people may trust.*

*Open the plate of donation—name, account and purpose,
Let air pass through it like a white garment.
Greater than outward shine is inward clarity,
Upon open-handed service falls the light of dawn.*



A half-raised hand is not only a sign of fear; often it also bears the memory of a favour. A person helped once can be made to feel that the right to question has been taken away for life. This is among the most refined forms of bondage.

If the labour of the poor is described as the mercy of the rich, history is written upside down. The maker of the water pot becomes the debtor, and the one who receives the pot becomes the benefactor. Where such inversion occurs, justice's first task is to set the account upright.

When devotion and land begin to travel along the same road, devotion itself does not become suspect; the hand using devotion must be examined.

The iron chest is still closed. A closed chest weighs more than an open one, because even while closed everyone knows that something inside is afraid of coming out.

All night the differently coloured cloth bundles beside the stump of Channa Grove fluttered lightly in the wind. Moonlight moved over them slowly, as though illumination itself were checking every account. The service ledger was tied in red cloth, the feast list in yellow, Bhanu Lal's slip in white, and the silent-feast entry in grey. By dawn the people understood that these were not merely bundles of evidence but knots in the village's soul.

Mira first opened the list of half-raised hands. The previous day everyone had raised a hand, but several had stopped halfway. Ananya had written, "Half-raised hand: fear, doubt, self-interest or shame." Today they would try to understand what those half-raised hands meant. Perhaps the hardest stories were buried inside the people who could not lift their hands all the way.

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Today we will not hurry to find criminals. First we will understand how debt takes residence inside the body. Did a shadow of debt fall upon those who received charity? Did that shadow take away their voice?" The children wrote above the sentence: "Before the account of donation, the account of the body."

The first half-raised hand belonged to Kailash Mandal. He had testified the previous day, but during the pledge his hand had risen only to his shoulder and stopped. Mira called him forward. His eyes were red. "My father received medicine—that is true," he said. "The medicine extended his life by a few months—that is also true. But the story of the debt for that medicine spread through our house so deeply that we felt ashamed even to speak about the land."

Aruni asked, "Who gave you that shame?" Kailash did not answer. After a long time he said, "People from the ashram would say: will the son of a man saved by Baba's mercy question Baba's land? Hearing such words, even as a child I would bend my head." Mira wrote: "The process by which mercy was converted into shame."

The second half-raised hand was Sakuni Khatun's. At first her voice was so soft that it seemed she had forgotten the practice of speaking. Twisting the edge of her veil, she said, "My mother received grain. Afterwards she was told in the panchayat: 'You are poor; charity is enough for you. Educated people understand papers.' My mother fell silent. I kept

thinking—poverty is not only hunger; it is also being removed from decision-making.” At that, the eyes of the women in the crowd brightened together.

Kamala wrote: “Charity to the poor; decision in another’s hand.” Surmani Devi said, “That is not charity. It is a plate placed on sand. The food is visible, but the ground slips beneath the feet.” Sharda Jha murmured, “I saw the plates in the kitchen, not the sand under people’s feet.” Her voice carried remorse and testimony together.

The third half-raised hand belonged to Hariballabh Das. His father had played cymbals in the kirtan. Hariballabh said, “In our house questioning Baba was treated as a sin. Father said the kirtan honorarium kept the household running. If we raised a claim, it would stain his devotion.” Satyavrat asked, “Would the stain fall on devotion, or on the use made of the honorarium?” Hariballabh raised his head for the first time. “Perhaps no one ever taught us to separate the two.”

Whispers passed among the children. Devotion, charity, honorarium, debt—each word was honoured within the household. Yet questions died behind that honour. Mira said, “No one will mock anyone’s devotion. But if devotion was used to suppress a land claim, devotion itself must be freed from that use.” Tears fell from Hariballabh’s eyes, but he remained calm.

The fourth half-raised hand was Ramlakhan Sahai’s own. The crowd was startled. He had already admitted that his household ran on silence. Today he said, “I am guilty, but I am not the only guilty one. I failed to say what I should have said. But also write the name of whoever turned my hunger and my daughter into tools.” Bhikhari Lal said bitterly, “You became a tool, but you also moved as one.” Ramlakhan bowed his head. “Yes, I moved.”

That small “yes” carried dust from many years. Mira stopped the children. “Do not make this testimony either complete forgiveness or complete condemnation. Write: involvement accompanied by admission.” Ananya coined a phrase: “bound wrongdoing.” Satyavrat smiled faintly. He liked it because it neither hid nor washed away the complexity of guilt.

At that moment Haricharan Tiwari came forward from a distance. His hand had not risen at all the previous day. Smiling thinly, he said, “Is this a court of half-raised hands? Everyone enjoyed their benefit; now they throw mud at Baba’s name. Those who ate are guilty; the one who gave is virtuous.” Some in the crowd wavered. The argument was simple, and simple arguments offer tired minds an immediate shelter.

Satyavrat Mehta looked directly into Haricharan’s eyes. “The one who ate because he was hungry and the one who used hunger to suppress papers cannot be weighed on the same scale.” Haricharan laughed. “Your

scale?" Mira intervened. "Not a scale. A description. Judgment can come later, but the distinction will be recorded now." The children wrote: "The beneficiary of hunger and the trader in hunger are not the same."

Hearing that line, Ramparikshit Paswan rose with the help of his stick. "My uncle received medicine. I will not deny it. But if, after the medicine, his thumbprint or presence was falsely recorded, medicine cannot become the cloth covering a crime." His voice trembled, but his words were steady. Devan's name returned to the air, and a green line flickered within the dark crack of the stump.

Mahavir Pathak sat beside his ledger, listening. Page by page, the glory of his house was opening. "Since childhood I heard that Baba was the protector of the people," he said. "Now I understand there is a fine difference between caring for someone and holding them in one's grasp." Devika asked, "Will that difference appear in the ledger?" Mahavir answered sadly, "The ledger records what was given; it does not record the soul that was held."

Kamala sat beside Mahavir holding the clod of soil from Phoolkali's land. Without fear she asked, "Did no one in your family ask why Grandmother's land was absent from the service account?" Mahavir was silent for a long time. Then he said, "No. Asking about land offended Baba. We were taught that the question of land was greed, while remembering service was virtue." Kamala said, "A poor person's land is not greed. It is the body's shade."

The sentence trembled like a nerve inside the stump. Surmani Devi placed a hand upon Kamala's head. Mira wrote: "Land = the body's shade. Donation = temporary grain. Distinction necessary." Sharda added, "If someone's shade is taken away, giving prasad to them while they stand in the sun does not restore the shade."

By noon a separate register had been prepared for the half-raised hands. It was titled "Witnesses of Debt." Beside each name four things were recorded: what was received, when it was received, what was later restrained, and what language was used to restrain it. The children saw that the language was almost always the same: "Be ashamed," "Be grateful," "Protect the village's honour," "Do not insult Baba," "Forget the old matter."

Ananya wrote beside these phrases: "Sentences of moral pressure." Aruni added, "A sentence repeated across many homes becomes a document in itself." Satyavrat said, "Exactly. When the same kind of sentence is heard in many houses, it is no longer merely personal advice. It signals a system." The children asked what "system" meant. Mira said, "Something that pushes everyone in one direction even without a single explicit order."

Then a new witness came forward—Nirmala the potter. Until then she had sat at the back of the crowd, hiding her clay-stained hands inside her sari. Her family's name appeared in the service account under "supply of earthen water pots." She said, "We supplied pots in exchange for grain. But once my father asked about a paper, he was told: 'We are serving you, not trading with you.' From then on, even while supplying pots, we began to feel indebted."

Bhikhari Lal stared. "You supplied the pots, yet you became the debtor?" Nirmala laughed. "What the poor give is not called donation; what the rich take becomes a favour." A deep silence fell over the crowd. Devika added a new column to the register: "inverted debt." She wrote: "Labour of the poor converted into mercy of the rich."

Nirmala's story changed the meaning of the service account again. It was no longer merely a list of objects given; it had also become a language-system in which even taking from the poor could be rewritten as generosity. Satyavrat Mehta said, "If the value of pots, labour, songs, cymbals, kitchen work and paths through fields was written upside down, history itself was written upside down." Mira added quietly, "We will not claim to set history straight. That claim can become another violence. We will write it clearly."

By evening Haricharan's restlessness had grown. At times he tried to take Mahavir aside, at times whispered to Ramlakhan, at times told the crowd, "All this will break the village apart." Kamala heard him. "The village was already broken," she replied. "It simply had no voice." At once the group of children stood beside her. Haricharan stepped back for the first time.

At that moment Bhanu Lal, who had preserved the old slip, said softly, "I know one more thing." Everyone turned toward him. "Separate from the donation account, there was a small notebook recording who had been 'made to understand' and how much. I never saw it fully, but I heard names." Mira stopped him at once. "A name you have not seen is not evidence. Say what you saw; what you heard will be recorded separately as hearsay."

Bhanu Lal said, "The notebook was called 'Consent.' It was kept in Baba's private room." Mahavir's face turned pale. "There is an iron chest in the upper room of our house," he said slowly. "I have never opened it." A shock passed through the crowd. A road was opening from the service ledger toward the consent notebook.

Surmani Devi said firmly, "We will not open the chest today. First rules will be made. If it contains someone's private matter, that privacy will be protected. If it contains papers of wrongdoing, copies will be made. If it contains nothing, then even an empty chest will be accepted as

the end of the suspicion.” Mira agreed. The children wrote: “Chest rules: privacy, copies, witnesses, inventory.”

Mahavir bowed his head. “I will bring the chest, but not alone. My family will say I have disgraced the lineage.” Satyavrat answered, “A lineage’s honour does not diminish because it can bear truth; it rots when it hides a lie.” Mahavir trembled, but his feet steadied. For the first time he was gathering courage not to act against his family history, but to treat its wound.

Night descended. The register of half-raised hands was closed, but its words remained open inside the people. Kailash, Sakuni, Hariballabh, Ramlakhan, Nirmala—each had been tied by a different bond, but today the knots had names. Naming a knot is no small matter. Once named, the means of untying it slowly begins to appear.

At the final reading beside the stump, Mira said, “Today it became clear that the debt of donation was not merely monetary. It was a combined bondage of shame, gratitude, religion, hunger, labour, prestige and fear. Those who fell silent after receiving charity will not all be written in one colour. Some are victims; some are involved; some are bound wrongdoers; some are victims of inverted debt. Next we will examine the consent notebook and the iron chest.”

The air grew heavy. No one felt victory. This form of truth was uncomfortable: it did not provide the comfort of putting the guilty and the injured into separate rooms. It showed that the crocodile does not merely chew the body; sometimes it shapes the body so that the person comes to regard their own voice as a debt and silences it themselves.

The chapter ended with the half-raised hands becoming full testimonies, and the white cloth of charity beginning to reveal the thick black threads within. Whether the chest proves empty, full, or locked by falsehood, it holds a sign that Batuknath’s layer will open still further inward.

Folk Song: Charity’s White Cloth

Folk Tune: Reversed Lamenting Sohar

Open the cloth, open charity’s cloth,

But do not tear privacy—bring the voice out with respect.

Donation in white cloth, black thread within,

Shame, religion, hunger, gratitude—each tied its share.

The hand rose halfway, the heart remained afraid,

Once the debt was named, the bondage became visible.

Some were victims, some involved, some both at once,

Such a truth makes the heart itself tremble.

Mahavir went to fetch the chest carrying fear of his lineage,

“Covering lies makes a lineage rot”—the words gave him strength.

Open charity's cloth, but do not tear privacy,

Bring the voice turned into debt outside with respect.



[Philosophical Undertone—Being spoken by a trustworthy person is not the cause: words uttered by a parrot in conformity with an original authoritative statement; words of a deluded or deceitful speaker that happen to conform to an original authoritative statement; and Vedic words, in which trustworthy-speakerhood is absent, can nevertheless produce true cognition. Therefore trustworthy-speakerhood is not the cause.]

CHAPTER 157

The Iron Chest

*In the darkness of the house the iron chest was commerce; in the village
light it became testimony.*



Opening Folk Song: Life Inside the Iron Belly

Folk Tune: Chest-Awakening Song

Open the chest, open it slowly,

Join the breath inside its iron belly to the sun.

*Open the iron belly slowly; history lies within,
Paper, cloth, seed, key—people's breath in every thing.
When the rust peels away, the letters will begin to shine,
Long-buried testimony will take new wings and fly.*

*Make the chest not a grave but a house of memory,
Honour whatever is found; make a clear inventory.
There is life inside the iron belly; open it with respect,
Join the truth kept in darkness to the sunlight.*

*Paper, cloth and seed sleep beneath layers of rust,
In every object beats the trace of someone's life.
Not a grave but a house of memory—make the inventory clear,
Give new wings to testimony buried for years.*



“The key is kept in the prayer room”—the statement sounds holy. Yet a key kept beneath the veil of sanctity often conceals the most unholy secret.

Consent and settlement are different words. In a settlement, both sides have a voice; in what is called consent, sometimes one side has a voice and the other has only a thumbprint. A thumb does not speak, so its silence is easily mistaken for approval.

A mark of authority can be more dangerous than a signature, because no one can easily deny the mark: it is not the sign of a person, but the sign of power above the person.

After a chest is emptied, its black smell remains in the room. When truth opens all at once, it does not first bring relief. It first brings weight. Relief comes later, slowly.

Dawn had not yet spread fully when Mahavir Pathak climbed toward the upper room of his house. For years the room had remained shut like the darkness of family honour. Dust lay on the stairs, cobwebs on the walls, and the smell of old wood carried a silence as if the house had been holding its breath to avoid questions about itself.

With Mahavir went Satyavrat Mehta, Mira, Surmani Devi, Bhikhari Lal, Ananya, Aruni, Devika and two women witnesses. The rules were read first: the chest would not be opened by one person alone; every object would be inventoried; private matters would remain protected; copies would be made of documents relevant to wrongdoing; and no name would be made public without hearing the person or family concerned.

The iron chest stood in a corner of the room. Upon it lay a torn cushion, old ritual vessels and a broken pair of cymbals. Hariballabh Das shivered when he saw the cymbals. His father had played cymbals in the kirtan, and their sound now seemed to lie here transformed into silence. He said softly, "How often objects of reverence cover the mouth of evidence."

Mahavir knelt beside the chest. He did not have the key. The eldest daughter-in-law said it would be found in the prayer room. Mira said plainly, "Record where the key was kept. The path to evidence is itself evidence." Kamala, listening from afar, wrote: "Key to chest in prayer room: sanctity as guard."

The key arrived. At first the lock would not turn. Bhikhari Lal asked for oil, but Surmani Devi stopped him. "First take an impression of the lock exactly as it is." The children recorded the lock, dust, key, room and names of those present. Some thought such slowness pointless, but Mira said, "Haste is the tool of those who later want to erase footprints."

When the lock opened, the air in the room changed. A faint heartbeat-like sound reached everyone's ears—perhaps the creak of an old hinge, perhaps their own breath. When the lid lifted, they saw an old cotton pouch, two ledgers, several stamped papers, a bundle tied in red cloth and a small copper box. Mahavir's hands trembled. Satyavrat placed a hand on his shoulder. "What we find is not your fault alone; hiding it now would be your fault."

The first ledger was titled "Food Distribution." It resembled a sister of the service ledger, but contained an additional column: name, occasion, item, and "promise." The word "promise" stopped Ananya's eyes. Some entries said "will honour Baba," some "will not raise land dispute," some "gave consent."

Aruni immediately asked, "Why was there a promise attached to food?" No one answered. Mahavir kept turning the pages. Beside the name of Kailash Mandal's father was written: "medicine received; silence on old boundary." Kailash was sitting outside. They did not call him yet. Mira said, "The name has appeared, but there will be no conclusion without testimony."

The second ledger was smaller. Its cover was black and oil-stained along the edges. Faded letters on it read: "Consent." Bhanu Lal's account now stood at the threshold of corroboration. Mahavir went silent as he held the notebook. He realised that this thin ledger, not the bulky service account, might contain the true pulse of the family's prestige; the larger ledger had been only its outward face.

The first page of the consent notebook stated a rule: "Assurances obtained after donation, service, or emergency assistance." Satyavrat closed his eyes when he read it. For a moment only his breathing could be heard in the room. "An assurance after emergency assistance," he said softly. "The emergency itself was turned into a document." Mira wrote: "Method of extracting consent from crisis."

Name after name began to emerge. The children's fingers brushed the brittle edges so often that the paper frayed further. Some names had thumbprints, some crooked signatures, some only the words "witness present." The witnesses did not vary much: Haricharan Tiwari, Ramlakhan Sahai, Lau's old accountant, and one of Chandrapal's men. The repetition itself was shouting.

Bhikhari Lal said angrily, "This is not consent. It is encirclement." Surmani Devi replied, "Write slowly. Anger may be right, but choose words that can stand on paper tomorrow." Ananya wrote: "Repeated witnesses: encircled consent." Everyone accepted the phrase—neither the club of accusation nor the water of silence, only careful measurement of names.

They opened the copper box. Inside were dried lumps of ink, two old thumb pads and bits of cotton. Aruni asked, "Why were thumb pads kept in the chest?" Satyavrat said, "If a thumbprint appears on a document, we must ask whose hand held the pad." Devika immediately began a new list: "Custody of thumb pads."

One stamped paper bore the name of Phoolkali Devi. Kamala was not called inside because the rule required a protected copy before the concerned family was shown the paper. Outside, however, Kamala sat

beside the stump tracing her grandmother's name in the dust. Perhaps she already sensed the page within.

Phoolkali's paper read: "Boundary dispute suspended in exchange for temporary shelter." Mira read the line three times. "Temporary shelter"—shade during crisis; "boundary dispute suspended"—the question of land pushed aside. She said, "When her house fell, she was given shade; in exchange, the shade of her field was withheld."

Surmani Devi's face hardened. Sharda Jha, who had seen Phoolkali sleeping on the veranda that year, said softly, "It was raining. Her roof had collapsed. Phoolkali lay there with the children. I never heard anyone discuss a boundary dispute that night. The next day someone took away a paper. I thought it was an account of relief." The air in the room grew heavier.

Mahavir Pathak broke down. "Why was I never told? I never heard this story." Satyavrat answered, not harshly but clearly, "What is never told inside a lineage is often the lineage's truest text." Mahavir bowed his head. Now even his ignorance felt like an inheritance.

The consent notebook listed Sakuni Khatun's mother beside the words "grain, season of illness, panchayat promise." Hearing this outside, Sakuni gave a sob. Mira did not bring her in yet; first a copy was made. The privacy rule was read again. Some in the crowd grew impatient—they wanted immediate disclosure. Mira said, "Truth is not spectacle."

Haricharan Tiwari still stood at the edge of the grove. His false smile had dried away. When his name appeared again and again as a witness, he shouted, "Being a witness is not a crime!" Aruni answered from outside, "Being a witness is not a crime. Writing consent in the hour of hunger stands at the doorway of crime." Every eye turned toward Haricharan.

Ramlakhan Sahai came trembling to the doorway. "Is my name there too?" Mira checked. His name appeared in two places—once as witness, once beside "made to understand." Life seemed to drain from his body. He sat on the floor. "I thought I was explaining matters. I did not understand that I was manufacturing consent."

Ananya wrote the sentence separately: "The crime between explaining and manufacturing consent." Satyavrat said, "That distinction requires a full hearing." Ramlakhan's confession contained fault, but also the pain of having been used himself. The story again arrived at the difficult place where easy punishment and easy forgiveness both seemed false.

At last they opened the bundle tied in red cloth. It contained receipts, letters and an incomplete map. Channa Grove, the pond, the old road and several field boundaries had been redrawn in red ink. Devika

exclaimed, "This is not a map of the village. It is a map of intended possession."

There was no signature of Batuknath Hariharan in the corner of the map, but there was his special sign—three trident-like strokes—the same mark seen on many pages of the service ledger. Bhanu Lal said, "Baba rarely signed directly. This mark was treated as his signal." Satyavrat dictated: "Unsigned mark of authority."

At the sight of that mark, Mahavir's last refuge of hope also shook. He had believed perhaps servants and clerks had made mistakes and there might still be room to save Baba's name. But the mark appeared page after page, as though Batuknath himself had stood in the shadows directing everything.

Mira ordered, "Today we make only an inventory and copies. No judgment." Haricharan laughed. "Afraid?" Mira answered calmly, "No. We will not write consent in haste, as you did." A restrained laugh rose from the crowd and immediately died; there was little room for laughter in that room.

The children were remarkable while the copies were made. Ananya read names, Aruni made columns, Devika recorded the authority marks, and Kamala outside maintained a waiting list of the families concerned. Each page was numbered in the presence of three witnesses. They were no longer merely children; they were becoming scribes of memory.

By evening the iron chest was empty, yet the room had become heavier. A black smell lingered inside the empty chest. Surmani Devi said, "The chest is empty, but the story of its belly will now enter the village's belly. Digest it slowly, or it will become poison." The warning mattered, because truth opened too suddenly can also become fire for revenge and rumour.

Beside the stump, a temporary inventory was read aloud. Private names were not disclosed; only categories were read: food promises, crisis consent, repeated witnesses, thumb pads, boundary map, marks of authority. The people understood that a crack inside the mountain had finally become visible.

At last Kamala asked, "When will Grandmother's paper be read?" Mira sat beside her. "When you are ready, and when her story can be heard as healing rather than spectacle." Kamala nodded. There were no tears in her eyes, only a new, hard light.

Night fell. The iron chest was left open-mouthed beside the stump so that everyone could see a secret belly can be emptied. The consent notebook, however, was tied again in red cloth and kept separately. It was guarded not by the children but by those who had once raised their hands only halfway. The half-raised hands had become watchmen.

The chapter ended with the iron chest brought out of household darkness into the village's collective gaze. For the first time a solid body had been found for the method that turned food, medicine, grain, shelter, honorarium and labour into consent.

Folk Song: The Iron Belly's Lament

Folk Tune: Chest-Lament

Speak softly, iron belly, speak softly,

Protect the privacy of wounds, but expose the papers of wrongdoing.

In the upper room the iron belly slept,

Sulking amid dust, cobwebs and the darkness of family honour.

Food promises, thumb pads, the red boundary map,

When it opened, it exhaled years of imprisoned questions.

On Phoolkali's page Kamala's eyes grew hard,

Grandmother's story is not spectacle—it is the dawn of healing.

The chest was emptied; the room grew heavy,

The half-raised hands became the night's watchmen.

Iron belly, tell slowly what you swallowed,



[Philosophical Undertone—Known intention is a cause: this is why in “yashtih praves haya”—“bring in the staff-bearers”—the intended meaning indicated by secondary signification is understood; and in an ambiguous sentence such as “saindhavam anaya”—“bring saindhava”—one grasps the

*specifically intended sense, salt or horse, from among several meanings.
Known intention is a cause.]*

CHAPTER 158

Matching the Consent Notebook

*For the first time, matching the consent notebook made one thing clear:
even a signature can be abducted.*



Opening Folk Song: Your Signature, Your Right

Folk Tune: Bright Testimony-Samadoun

Guard the line, guard the line of your signature,

Only after reading and understanding should you extend your hand.

*Your signature is your own voice; let no one steal it,
In every line let consent remain in its rightful place.
Read first, understand first, then extend your palm,
Do not place your name upon what you did not accept.*

*Whether letters or thumbprint, the right is equal,
A paper without consent is a house without a soul.
Teach every home the dignity of its signature,
Light the lamp of freedom in the line of one's own name.*

*Letter or thumbprint—the dignity is one colour,
Without consent, a document is a limb without a soul.
What the heart did not accept, do not sign,
You are the owner of your own line—never forget it.*



A thumbprint taken on a night of illness, a day of hunger, or in the rain is not free will but exploitation of circumstance. Freedom exists where there is freedom to choose; where there is no choice, there is no consent.

Treating silence as a promise is among the easiest crimes, because silence cannot defend itself. Justice's first duty is to ask why a person was silent.

When a mediator begins writing the paper himself, he ceases to be a mediator and becomes a party. Beneath the cloak of neutrality, the most partisan hand can move.

A dead person's name can continue moving across paper if a living hand wishes it. That is the cruellest theft, because the dead can neither refuse nor agree.

All night the consent notebook remained beside the stump of Channa Grove, tied in red cloth. It had three guards: the people whose hands had once risen only halfway, the children, and the silence that, once broken, no longer wished to return to falsehood. The wind moved; the cloth trembled lightly, but the notebook remained still, as though it wished to carry all the names within it safely from night's darkness into dawn.

At dawn Mira read the rules first. "Today the names in the notebook will not be read directly before the crowd. First, separate testimony from each family; then comparison with the paper; then a list of discrepancies; only after that a collective hearing. A private story has the right to remain private. Where wrongdoing was made public, the veil will protect the injured, not the wrongdoer."

Satyavrat Mehta added a sentence beneath the rules: "Matching is not revenge; it is the measurement of truth." The children wrote it in red ink. Since the previous night, many rumours had spread through the village—whose name had emerged, whose thumbprint, whose field, whose donation. Mira understood that rumour is truth's first enemy.

The first family was Kailash Mandal's. His hands trembled in the cold morning air, and his voice caught twice before the first word. His father's name appeared in the consent notebook beside medicine received and silence on the old boundary. Kailash's elder sister Rampari came with him. She said, "The medicine came—that is true. But no price was asked for it. At night, men from the ashram said: write that it was Baba's grace. Father was ill; they held his hand and pressed his thumb."

Aruni asked, "Was the boundary dispute discussed then?" Rampari shook her head. "No. At that time we were not even searching for the land papers. Later they said Father himself had agreed to remain silent." Ananya compared the notebook page. The line read: "voluntary silence." Devika wrote in the margin: "Night of illness: voluntariness doubtful."

Kailash began to cry, but Mira did not stop him. "Tears are part of testimony, but conclusions come from detail, not tears." Kailash steadied his breath. "I blamed Father. I thought he had grown weak. Today I understand that strong words were loaded upon a weak body." Satyavrat dictated: "Weakness converted into consent."

The second testimony came from Sakuni Khatun's family. Sakuni brought her mother's old water pot, a torn grain sack and the memory of the panchayat. "The grain came during the rains," she said, "but my mother always said the sack did not carry her name at first; the name appeared later on paper. When the question of the path through the land came up in the panchayat, Haricharan said: a mouth fed by Baba's charity does not look good making claims."

The consent notebook beside Sakuni's mother's name read: "grain, season of illness, panchayat promise." Mira asked, "How was the panchayat promise given?" Sakuni laughed, but the laugh had an edge. "My mother's mouth was closed. Her silence was written down as a promise." The children started together. Kamala repeated softly, "Silence written as a promise." The sentence was entered in dark letters along the notebook's margin.

The third family was Phoolkali Devi's. Kamala came herself, but Mira asked again, "Are you ready?" Kamala said, "Grandmother's story is no longer fear; it is a lamp." Phoolkali's paper was opened. It recorded that the boundary dispute was suspended in exchange for temporary shelter. Kamala showed the edge of an old blanket. "This is from that night. Mother used to say the blanket was warm, but afterward the field turned cold."

Sharda Jha, who had seen Phoolkali on the veranda that year, stepped forward. "It was raining. The roof had fallen. Phoolkali sat with her children on the ashram veranda. I heard no discussion of a boundary dispute that night. The next day a man took away a paper. I thought it was the relief account." Devika wrote: "Leap from relief account to boundary suspension."

Mahavir Pathak gripped the pillar of the doorway. Family shame, the pain of ignorance and a newly awakened responsibility all showed at once on his face. "I always took pride that our veranda had given shelter," he said. "Now I see that a paper-web was woven behind that shelter." Surmani Devi replied, "The pride will survive only if you lend your hand to tearing the web."

Hariballabh Das returned with the story of his father, the cymbal player. The consent notebook beside his father's name read: "kirtan honorarium, attendance consent." Hariballabh said, "Father went to sing, not to witness a paper. The beat of his cymbals was written down as presence and testimony." Aruni asked, "Did he ever read the paper?" Hariballabh answered, "He could read a name, but not the manoeuvre."

Satyavrat was silent for a long time. Then he wrote: "Reading the name is not enough; one must read the manoeuvre." Mira said, "This is why the children will be taught not merely letters but methods." A bird on the stump fluttered once, as though it too had heard the lesson.

Ramlakhan Sahai was called again. His name appeared in the notebook in two places—witness and “explained.” Bowing his head, he said, “I went to many families. I was told to obtain written thanks for Baba’s assistance. I would say it was only a formality. Now I understand that I was wrapping people’s fear in soft words.”

Mira looked at him sternly. “Did you know there was pressure?” Ramlakhan said, “Not fully. But I saw fear in their eyes. Even after seeing it, I said—do not be afraid, just put your thumbprint.” A murmur went through the crowd. Surmani Devi raised her hand. “Throw questions at a confession, not stones.”

Aruni asked, “Whose order sent you?” Ramlakhan was silent at first. Then he said, “Sometimes Haricharan, sometimes the accountant, sometimes a note from the ashram. But the name above them was never clear. Everyone said—Baba’s wish.” Satyavrat wrote: “Order in the name of a wish.” The sentence began looking for the ownerless master behind both the consent notebook and the service ledger.

Haricharan Tiwari had remained standing in the shade. When Ramlakhan’s statement reached his name, he growled, “I only carried messages.” Mira asked calmly, “Did the message offer a choice?” Haricharan faltered. “People could have refused if they wanted.” Kamala said at once, “Hunger, illness and rain are not circumstances in which refusal is a real choice.” A deep silence settled over the grove.

Bhanu Lal spoke about the old accountant. Lau’s accountant appeared as a witness on many pages. Bhanu said, “Lau used to say: if someone does not understand the language of paper, speak the language of trust. A thumbprint comes quickly after trust.” Devika wrote: “Transfer of rights through the language of trust.” Mahavir looked up again; fear had gone from his eyes, replaced by a hard decision.

In the middle of the matching, they found a strange discrepancy. Several names belonged to people whom their families said were not even in the village at the time. On one page, the date fell after the person had already died in a city hospital. Bhikhari Lal bent over the notebook. “Consent of the dead?” The air beside Channa Grove turned suddenly cold.

Satyavrat spoke almost as a plea rather than an order. “Mark this page separately. Death date, absence and false witness must be listed in separate columns.” For the first time the notebook had crossed from pressure to the threshold of direct forgery. Mira added, “Pressure upon the living is one wrong. Writing consent from the dead is murder of memory.”

Old Budhba’s Ghost was mentioned again. Someone said that when the name of the dead was read, a white line flashed upon the stump. Someone said a smell of water came from the pond. Mira did not stop the folk story, but told the children: “What was seen, what is believed, and

what is written on paper are three different things. Record all three; do not mix them." Folk belief itself was learning discipline.

By noon they had matched eighteen names from the consent notebook. Pressure was clear in five; silence had been converted into a promise in three; temporary aid into permanent claim in two; repeated witnesses appeared in four; one involved the name of a dead person; three remained incomplete. Ananya wrote the summary on a stone slab. For the first time the village saw truth as number, category and voice together.

Mahavir Pathak stepped forward. "From today, copies of every paper from my house that assisted this web will be placed in the village register. The originals will follow the legal path separately, but truth will not be hidden in duplicate." Haricharan whispered, "Will you sell the house?" Mahavir answered, "If a house survives by falsehood, it has already been sold."

Surmani Devi immediately set a boundary on the declaration. "Papers may become public, but human beings will not be stripped naked. A woman's story, an illness, a night of shelter, the details of hunger—none of these will be read without permission. We will read the method of wrongdoing, not turn suffering into spectacle." Mira nodded with satisfaction. The story had become a test of civilisation as much as of justice.

By evening the matching was incomplete, but the direction was clear. The faint red of sunset entered the room and spread across the pages, as though light itself wished to join the inquiry. The consent notebook was no longer merely paper; it was proving to be a combined machine of hunger, illness, rain, donation, kirtan, shelter, silence, thumbprints, witnesses and falsehood. The children opened a new heading in their register: "Method of Manufacturing Consent."

Kamala sat beside the stump folding the edge of Grandmother's blanket. "Grandmother took shelter. She did not surrender the field." With that one sentence Phoolkali's story became straight again. Kailash added, "Father took medicine. He did not choose silence." Sakuni said, "Mother took grain. She did not surrender the path." The three sentences echoed together in the grove. They were not a judgment, but they were the seed of one.

"If the mark, the witnesses and the beneficiaries are found in the same circle, the centre of the web will come into view." Satyavrat added, "And once the centre is visible, the question will be: who benefited?"

At that question Chandrapal's name moved through the air without being spoken. No one said it aloud, yet everyone felt its shadow. Lau's accountant, Haricharan's messages, Ramlakhan's explanations,

Batuknath's mark—all the lines were slowly bending toward one dark centre.

The chapter ended with the families named in the consent notebook recovering their own sentences. Medicine was not silence. Grain was not a promise. Shelter was not abandonment of a boundary. Kirtan was not testimony. Against the words written in the false notebook stood the true language of lived life.

Folk Song: The Stolen Signature

Folk Tune: Testimony-Samadoun

Return the face, return the true face of the stolen signature,

Return the right taken away in the name of consent.

He took medicine, not silence—Kailash said again,

She took grain, not the path—Sakuni found her voice.

She took shelter, not the field—Kamala called to Grandmother,

Before the false notebook, the language of life stood sharp.

Was the thumb truly free, or did hunger move it,

Who forged the signature in the name of the dead?

The red cloth trembled under guard all night,

Each family's sentence measured the paper's lie.

Stolen signature, return your true face,

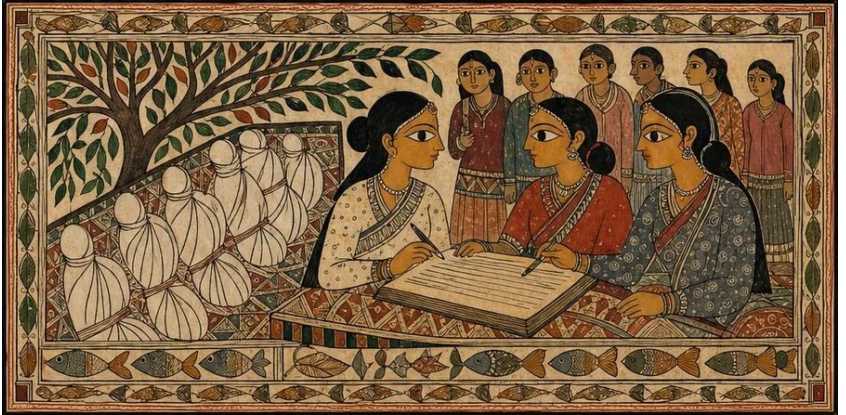


[Philosophical Undertone—Definition of expectancy: A traveller recounted an experience. In an expression such as “nilam sarojam”—“the lotus is blue”—there is no necessary invariable connection between blueness and lotus, yet the words possess expectancy. The distinction reveals how even a small event of ordinary life contains a serious epistemological process. The definition of expectancy.]

CHAPTER 159

Consent of the Dead

The consent of the dead is the cheapest paper in the world—and the costliest crime.



Opening Folk Song: The Dignity of the Thumbprint

Folk Tune: Labour-Blessing Song

Press the mark, but press your thumb only after understanding,

Awaken the sun's dignity in that round sign.

The thumb's round mark is like the sun upon the field,

A worker's full consent, the fullness of identity.

Only a living hand should mark, and mark after understanding,

Protect the names of the dead; do not turn them into distortion.

The inked thumb says: I am present,

Upon the page of my right, I sign freely.

Protect the dignity of the thumbprint; let education rise beside it,

Give every worker the strength to read their own paper.

Consent from a living hand, an awakened mind saying yes,

Deceit in the name of the dead is the greatest flaw.

The ink-stained finger says: I am present,

Let the lamp of literacy keep every right secure.



Dates do not lie, whatever the paper may say. Wherever a gulf appears between the date of death and the date of consent, the body of wrongdoing becomes clearest.

The curve of a thumbprint is one of the body's last marks. If that mark appears on paper after the body's death, the theft is not only of land but of memory.

A shadow seal can look almost exactly like the real one, but crime lives inside the word "almost." To see a tiny crookedness requires patience and a glass plate.

The question “who benefited?” speaks more loudly than a name. A person who never writes their own name may still have a shadow moving through warehouses, deeds of sale and an accountant’s figures.

The next morning the air beside the stump of Channa Grove felt more careful than on ordinary days. Not a leaf moved, as though the grove itself had stopped breathing to hear the day’s hearing. The names identified the previous day as dead, absent or displaced were tied separately in cloth. This time the cloth was white rather than red, because Mira said, “The names of the dead need white caution, not black suspicion. If we make a mistake, we wound their memory again.”

The children first observed silence. Ananya opened the register and wrote at the top: “For those who cannot speak, the date will speak.” Aruni added beneath it: “The absence of one who was not present is also testimony.” Devika wrote a third line: “A dead person’s thumb does not move; if it moved, some living hand moved it.” These three sentences established the dignity of the day’s hearing.

The first page was opened in the name of Jagdish Mahato. The consent notebook gave the date as the eighteenth night of Bhadra: ashram medicine, consent to silence, boundary dispute suspended. But the village death register, kept in an old temple box, recorded that Jagdish Mahato had died soon after the last Monday of Sawan. A darkness of twenty full days stood between the two dates.

Jagdish’s grandson Parmanand stepped forward. In his hand was a brass cup used for the water offering on the day of death. Its rim was still slightly blackened, as though years of water had left a mark. “I was a child,” he said, “but I remember the day water was offered to Grandfather. The house was in mourning. On the eighteenth night of Bhadra we were washing the utensils from the shraddha. How could Grandfather have given a thumbprint?” The question sank into the roots of the stump.

Mira was moved by Parmanand’s emotion, but did not abandon the rules. She made four pillars: death date, memory of the shraddha, neighbours’ testimony, and date in the consent notebook. “One memory alone does not prove the conclusion,” she said, “but when four things agree, falsehood begins to show its feet.” The children wrote: “First case of consent by the dead.”

The second page bore the name Sona Jha. The notebook said he personally came to the ashram and gave silence before Batuknath’s mark of authority. Yet at that time Sona Jha was in Kashi with his son. His son Harinarayan’s letters were brought out. Their dates were clear: “Father’s foot wound has worsened. He cannot go anywhere.”

As Satyavrat Mehta read the letter, his voice softened. The letter contained a son's anxiety, the cost of medicine, and the father's inability to return home. The consent notebook contained only the word "voluntary." Satyavrat said, "The letter contains the body's incapacity; the notebook contains the body's presence. That contradiction opens not a file, but a crime."

The third case was stranger still. The name of Malikain Rukmini Devi had not a thumbprint but a signature. The village knew Rukmini was literate, and her signature normally curled in rounded letters; on the notebook it was straight, hard, and shaped by a man's hand. Kamala said softly, "This is a shadow wearing the clothing of a signature."

Rukmini's niece Sharda Jha brought an old letter with Rukmini's real signature. The children placed the two signatures beneath a glass plate and compared them. Devika followed line after line. "The real signature's hand trembles, but the letters know their road. The hand in the notebook does not tremble, but the letters cannot find home."

Mira said, "From now on, comparisons of signatures will be recorded separately in writing. We are not a court, but we are careful readers." The children recorded the genuine and doubtful lines separately.

By midday seven pages involving the dead and absent had been opened. Four dates were impossible, two signatures doubtful, and in one case the supposed witness had actually been imprisoned on the date in question—Bhikhari Lal brought an old court copy showing it. A witness who was in jail had been written down as present on the ashram veranda. For the first time the sharp smell of anger rose from the crowd.

Surmani Devi stood at once. "Keep the anger, but do not raise your hands," she said. "The web was made of paper. Tear it by reading, not by fighting." Mahavir Pathak stepped forward too. "The old register bearing the family mark in our box should be opened today." At those words Haricharan Tiwari's face collapsed.

The box was brought from Mahavir's house. Brass fittings crossed the wood, and at their centre was a small sign—three strokes, a crescent and a dot. The same sign appeared as a red seal on many pages of the consent notebook. People began whispering, "Baba's mark of authority." But Mahavir's eyes held no pride, only clarity beyond fear.

Inside the box were three kinds of papers: donation registers, service accounts, and a thin booklet titled "Notices of Authority." The booklet gave off the smell of old leather, and dried flower petals fell from it—perhaps remnants of a ritual. The first page bore Batuknath Hariharan's name, the second Haricharan's handwriting, the third the accountant's figures, and the fourth was blank. The blank page spoke loudest, because the pages after it had been cut away.

Ananya examined the stubs of the cut pages. "What was cut away is itself an internal fact." Satyavrat touched the edge. The cuts were not fresh, yet not ancient either. He wrote: "Path of suppressed authority: booklet incomplete." Mira told the children, "Count the missing pages. Empty space is also part of the archive."

One sentence recurred on the surviving pages: "Whoever receives Baba's mark shall be accepted as mediator in disputes." Mediation sounded peaceful, but after the matching of the consent notebook the phrase had entered land, boundaries, debt and promises, and mediation had become authority. Aruni said, "If the mediator writes the paper, he is no longer an arbitrator. He is a party."

Haricharan grew restless. "It was an old custom, meant to keep disputes from growing." Mira asked, "Did the custom write consent from the dead?" Haricharan fell silent. "Did the custom place a jailed witness on the veranda?" His throat dried. "Did the custom turn shelter into surrender of boundaries?" This time he lowered his eyes.

Ramlakhan Sahai, who had admitted his role the previous day, rose trembling again. "When people saw a page bearing the authority mark, they became afraid. I used to say—Baba's seal is on it, what is the use of arguing now? In many homes I did not even read the paper; I merely showed the seal." Satyavrat wrote: "Seal used as threat instead of text."

Devika compared the mark across the consent notebook, service ledger and authority booklet. It was the same sign in three different contexts—donation, service, authority. She said, "One sign has worn three forms: compassion in donation, debt in service, pressure in authority. This is not a triveni of meanings; it is a tragedy." The children copied the sentence into the register.

Then Bhanu Lal brought an old pouch containing a duplicate seal-box used by Lau's accountant. Inside were dried red pigment, an iron stamp and sheets of practice impressions. Bhanu said, "Lau used to say: if the original seal is far away, use the shadow seal. People look at the mark, not the hand."

A shock went through the crowd. Mahavir picked up the stamp. It closely resembled the genuine mark, but the right corner of the crescent leaned slightly crooked. Devika compared it against several pages. On three pages of consent by the dead, the same crooked corner appeared. Ananya whispered, "Shadow seal upon the dead."

Mira immediately contained the discovery. "At this moment no final accusation against any person," she said. "We can only say that on some notebook pages the genuine authority mark may not have been used; the possibility of a duplicate mark is clear." Satyavrat did not smile, but satisfaction showed in his eyes. The village was learning that the language of truth can be sharp without being careless.

Then came the question: who benefited from the shadow seal? Bhikhari Lal spread an old land map brought from the record room. Near the boundaries suspended in the names of the dead or absent, three later deeds of sale appeared. Chandrapal was not named directly as buyer, but the names belonged to his nephew, his accountant's brother-in-law, and a partner of Lau. Once again the line bent toward Chandrapal's shadow.

Aruni stretched red thread across the map. One end touched Jagdish Mahato, another Sona Jha, another Rukmini Devi, and a fourth the names on the later deeds. The threads converged upon a single point—the old warehouse regarded as Chandrapal's business base. No one spoke Chandrapal's name loudly, but the wind through the grove seemed to read it for them.

Surmani Devi said, "It is hard to place your hand on a shadow. But you can see who casts it." Everyone understood. The children opened a new heading: "Benefit chain." Consent, seal, dead person, absence, deed of sale—no longer separate straws, but strands twisting into a rope.

Haricharan made one last attempt. "Chandrapal's name is not written." Mira answered, "A wrongdoer does not have to write his own name. Who benefited, who ordered, whose people acted, whose warehouse held the papers—these four questions can work harder than a name." Satyavrat added, "No direct name, but an indirect circle."

Old Budhba's Ghost flickered again in the evening smoke. Someone said the three lines, crescent and dot appeared reversed for a moment on the stump. Someone said the grove was turning the seal upside down. Mira let the fear become story, but the register recorded only: "Folk vision: inversion of the mark." Folk belief now walked beside the inquiry rather than replacing it.

By evening nine pages had entered the list of consent by the dead. Three bore duplicate marks, two impossible dates, two absent bodies, one false witness, and one the shadow of a cut page. Mira concluded, "The question is no longer only Batuknath's mark; it is the theft of the mark. Whoever steals a religious seal steals justice, memory and the dignity of the dead as well."

Mahavir Pathak bowed his head. "If my family's mark became an instrument of wrongdoing, the family's first duty is to open it before the people." He did not close the box. Instead he tied red and white threads around it and set it beside the stump. "Until the inquiry is complete, this box will remain under the grove's watch." Haricharan's face turned ashen.

Kamala said softly, "Grandmother took shelter, but the duplicate seal tried to swallow her field." Kailash added, "Grandfather had already died, yet his thumb was made to live again." Sakuni said, "Mother's silence

became a promise; the dead person's silence became consent." These three sentences circled the grove as the day's conclusion.

"The deeds of sale, the accountant's ledger, Lau's partnership and Chandrapal's old business accounts will be compared. If the road made from the consent of the dead reaches the warehouse, the face of the owner of the shadow will have to be seen."

The chapter ended with the dead remaining dead once again, no longer living puppets on false paper. The white covering of the authority mark tore, revealing the red stain of the duplicate seal beneath. The pages of the consent notebook were no longer merely a list of suffering; they had become a map of benefit.

Folk Song: The Thumbprint of the Dead

Folk Tune: Death-Lament

No, not consent—the silence of the dead is not consent,

The ancestors' names are white; the criminal's seal bears the stain.

How did the dead person's thumb move in the night,

Whose breath had stopped—who wrote that person's consent?

Names in white cloth, red stain within,

Impossible dates weep; the duplicate seal trembles without end.

Grandmother took shelter; she did not surrender the field,

Grandfather had died; he did not add a thumbprint.

A living thief's hand turned silence into a promise,

Turned the dead into puppets and made a road to profit.

Ancestors, your silence is no longer consent,

Your names remain white; the criminal's seal bears the stain.

Names in white cloth; within, the red stain appeared.



[Philosophical Undertone—Decisive doctrine of the non-eternality of word-sound: we naturally perceive clear differences among sounds produced by parrots, mynas, other animals and birds, men, women and other individuals—just as we distinguish the sweetness of sugarcane juice from that of milk. This establishes the decisive doctrine of the non-eternality of sound.]

CHAPTER 160

The Shadow of the Warehouse

When the warehouse opens, what appears is not commerce but the belly of shadow-justice.



Opening Folk Song: The Warehouse Opened, the Account in Light

Folk Tune: Festive Labourers' Jhumar

Open the warehouse, open it before the sun,

Let the people's eyes weigh every sack of accounts.

The warehouse doors opened, sunlight entered,

Papers, sacks and seals all became plainly visible.

Let each object bear its owner's name, each labour its due,

Let every line of the account carry a complete identity.

The labourers sing in jhumar—let the storehouse stay open,

The shadow of theft cannot remain where the people stand guard.

No longer a belly, the warehouse becomes a house of public accounts,

From transparent accounting, a city of trust can bloom.

Whose labour, their wage; whose goods, their name,

Line after open line of accounts leaves the shadow of theft defeated.

To the beat of jhumar dance the sacks, scales and seals,

In the people's watchful light rises a city of trust.



The elders say that if papers remain locked in a room too long, even the room's air begins to smell like paper. A grain sack contains grain, but the box hidden behind it may contain no grain at all—it may contain someone's thumbprint. If the body belonging to that thumb no longer lived, who manufactured the consent?

People think of a lock as a sign of security. Yet a simple lock is enough where fear, not iron, stands guard. What need is there for heavy metal when fear itself keeps watch? And once fear breaks, even a small key can open an age.

The difference between a seal and a duplicate seal is the difference between breath and counterfeit breath. Breath is born from the body; counterfeit breath from calculation. Yet imitation always carries its birthmark—the crooked corner of a crescent, too much pressure in the ink, the fatigue of a hand. A thief cannot erase it, because it is the tremor of his own hand.

And when the warehouse doors open, people do not count goods; they count names. How many names in ledgers, how many in the soil, how

many waiting on blank sheets already bearing a seal. When sunlight enters, the sacks do not shine; the shadows behind the sacks do.

“The ancestors’ silence is not consent”—the line echoed through the village all night. The next morning Batuknath’s box, tied with red and white thread, still stood beside the stump of Channa Grove. All night the wind had kept watch around it, as though not papers but people whose mouths had been closed were breathing inside. Mira did not first bow to the box; she first approached it with caution. “Today we will not worship the mark,” she said. “We will examine the account of how the mark was used.”

The red thread of the benefit chain from the previous day had run from Jagdish, Sona, Rukmini and the other pages of consent by the dead to one point: Chandrapal’s old warehouse. It stood behind the market beside a dried pond, made of half brick, half corrugated iron, and entirely of fear. People called it a business depot. In the minds of poor farmers it had another name: “the room that swallowed papers.”

Ananya lifted the register. On the first page she wrote the heading “Warehouse Matching.” Beneath it Aruni wrote four questions: “Who benefited? Who ordered? Whose people? Whose goods?” Devika added a fifth: “Whose name is absent, but whose shadow is present?” These five questions became the day’s road.

Mira said clearly, “We will not become a mob. Ten people will go inside; the others will wait outside. Every paper found will be recorded in order. Every object will be recorded with its location. Every name with its context. Nothing will be stolen, no accusation made without comparison.” The rules cooled the fire of anger a little, though the people’s eyes still burned.

Satyavrat Mehta, Surmani Devi, Mahavir Pathak, Mira, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Bhikhari Lal, Ramlakhan Sahai and Parmanand walked toward the warehouse. The old client insisted on going too, but Mira made him an outside witness. “Where fear grows inside, eyes outside can protect us,” she said.

The warehouse gate had no massive lock; the lock was ordinary, while the guard of silence around it was heavy. Bhikhari Lal could not open it with the court keys. Dhiru, Lau’s old servant, who until the previous day had remained silent in the crowd, came forward. A small key hung at his waist. Trembling, he said, “I was told to keep this key. They said it was to keep rats away from the papers.”

Mira stopped him. “Your statement will be recorded. Open it, but first say whose order.” Dhiru replied softly, “Lau sahib told me. Lau used to say the goods belonged to Chandrapal Babu, but their care was his responsibility.” It was the first sentence at the warehouse gate to give a

voice to Chandrapal's shadow. Ananya immediately wrote: "Key chain: Chandrapal through Lau."

When the door opened, a smell of damp and old rancid oil came from within—a mixture of rotting jute, cold iron and years of imprisoned breath, settling in the throat before the nose. Grain sacks, iron chests, a broken scale, half-charred ledgers, wooden boxes, red-seal tins and an old map hanging on the wall struck the eye at once. It felt less like a warehouse of trade than a storehouse in which the system had accumulated silence.

Devika went first to the wall map. Field boundaries were drawn in red, blue, black and yellow. Some lines bore crosses, some dots, some the three-strokes-crescent-dot mark. Aruni stretched out yesterday's red thread. To everyone's surprise, the thread's points matched the marks on the wall map.

Satyavrat Mehta studied the map for a long time. "These are not revenue lines," he said. "They are lines of greed." Bhikhari Lal opened the official land map he had brought from the court copy. The original boundaries differed. In the warehouse map, the lands of the dead and absent had been expanded and gathered inside three new names.

Mahavir Pathak's face hardened. He saw that his family's authority mark had been placed on the warehouse map not at the edges of fields but at turns of possession. He whispered, "Baba's seal was meant to reduce the suffering of land disputes, not to alter fields." Surmani Devi replied, "A seal that changes boundaries in the name of easing suffering is not a seal. It is a crocodile's tooth."

The first iron chest was opened. Inside were ledgers titled "Paddy Received," "Debt Account," "Service on Credit," "Mediation Expenses," and "Donation Expenditure." Each began like an ordinary business book, but deeper inside, names appeared beside plots of land, boundary disputes, page numbers from the consent notebook and types of seal. Devika read softly: "Shadow seal: expense adjusted."

At those words Ramlakhan Sahai broke into sweat. "Shadow seal" was no longer merely a village suspicion; it was the ledger's own language. Ananya began making a separate table of page number, date, name and remark. Again and again she said, "The original page stays as it is. Copies will be made. Keep your hands clean." The children were becoming not only guards of papers but craftsmen of the archive.

One page beside Jagdish Mahato's name read: "Service after death; family softened; hold boundary; transfer later." Parmanand trembled when he heard it. The brass cup fell from his hand and rang against the floor. He did not shout. He said only, "Here my grandfather's dead body is called service." The sentence sank into the warehouse bricks.

Beside Sona Jha's name the ledger read: "lives away; son's expenses; papers quickly." Beside Rukmini Devi's: "signature difficult; practice three times; success on fourth." Sharda Jha, waiting outside, tried to come in on hearing this, but Mira stopped her and took her statement from outside. "Pain will not enter and disturb the papers," she said. "Pain can remain outside and give the papers meaning."

A second chest contained seal boxes: one genuine, two duplicates, and three incomplete stamps. The right corner of the crescent on the iron stamp was crooked—exactly as seen on the pages of consent by the dead. For the first time Bhikhari Lal said without fear, "These should be kept in the court's evidence store." Satyavrat replied, "First in the people's inventory, then in the legal inventory."

Mira ordered the stamps wrapped in cloth, but before that Devika took clear impressions on paper. Three impressions were compared—genuine, duplicate, and the one from the pages of the dead. Aruni marked tiny points on all three lines. "A copy reproduces form," he said, "but error remains its birthmark."

Meanwhile Dhiru pointed toward a corner. Behind old grain sacks a wooden box was half buried. It bore no name, but the smell of paper from within was strong. When opened, it contained cut pages, practice signatures, blank sheets already stamped, and strips carrying thumbprints. Mira closed her eyes.

The strips bore dried stains of ink. Some had poor people's names; some only words such as "old," "widow," "away," "dead," "sick." Surmani Devi's voice hardened. "Here people were reduced even below their names. Old, widow, away—these are not identities. They were made into categories of prey."

Ananya opened a new heading in the register: "Prey Categories." Aruni added, "Classification that serves not compassion but ease of oppression is the language of crime." Satyavrat looked at him. The children's language was moving beyond the dryness of law; they were creating a combined grammar of body, fear, benefit and paper.

Then a small room at the back of the warehouse was opened. Inside stood an iron table, a broken chair, a lantern, and an old coat hanging from a nail. In the coat pocket they found a half-burnt paper with one name still clear: "Oral instruction from Chandrapal Babu: pages are not to leave." Beneath it was Lau's small signature and a date from the densest period of the consent notebook.

When the paper was read, the air inside grew heavy. Mira again held back haste. "A written memorandum of an oral instruction," she said. "It carries no direct signature of Chandrapal, but it records receipt of the instruction." Satyavrat added, "The shadow is no longer merely on the wall. It has fallen upon paper." Mahavir Pathak sat silently on the floor.

The crowd outside was restless. Rumour could spread; violence could flare. Mira stepped out and said only, "Material worth matching has been found in the warehouse. This is not a final declaration, but the benefit chain has grown stronger." A low growl moved through the people. The old client said, "Today the warehouse opened. Whose chest will open tomorrow?"

Haricharan Tiwari, watching from a distance, slowly began to retreat. His face showed calculation more than fear—how many names would survive, how many pages could be saved, whom could still be protected? Sakuni noticed him. She said quietly, "The one who steps backward is not always innocent; sometimes he is erasing his footprints."

Dhiru's second statement was recorded. He said that on many nights Lau and Chandrapal's men sat in the warehouse. First came talk of donation, then boundaries, then debt, then mediation expenses. "I was told to serve tea. Inside there was laughter; outside people were crying." Devika wrote in the register: "Laughter within, weeping outside: the warehouse's moral map."

Ramlakhan Sahai broke as well. He admitted that many papers were "explained" to him without being read aloud. Lau used to say, "Show the seal and people will accept it. If someone refuses, show their debt ledger." It became clear that consent was not only spiritual pressure but an economic snare. Debt, service, charity and seal—the four ropes tightened around the same throat.

For the first time that day Satyavrat Mehta was visibly trembling. The burden of his old silence rose within him again. "What I failed to hear in the corridors of law, this warehouse kept hearing," he said. "The warehouse was the ear of the crime." Mira did not stop him. Some confessions cannot become statutes, but in public memory they can become treatment.

By evening a preliminary inventory had been made: wall map; three duplicate impressions; expense note for the shadow seal; ledgers connected with consent by the dead; practice signatures; blank stamped sheets; thumbprint strips; memorandum of oral instruction signed by Lau; and accounts linking debt with consent. The list was read beside Channa Grove. For each item the people did not say "yes" but "heard"—because truth does not need a crowd's assent; it needs listening.

Mahavir Pathak announced, "My family's mark will no longer remain anyone's private fear. Its use will have a public account." He wrapped the box, genuine seal and duplicate stamps in separate cloths and handed them to Mira. Surmani Devi said, "The sanctity of a seal is preserved not by worshipping it but by exposing its misuse."

At that moment moisture gleamed upon the stump's bark though there had been no rain. People said the grove was crying. Someone said a

crocodile's tail moved in the water. Someone said the Black Ghost and the White Spirit had both surrounded the warehouse's shadow. Mira did not erase these folk statements. She dictated: "Folk vision: symbols awakened after the objects were found."

By night Chandrapal's name was spoken in the village for the first time as a question rather than as fear. "Where is Chandrapal?" someone asked. "Behind whom is he hiding?" another added. "Do not look only at the name; follow the benefit," Aruni reminded them. The children understood: the face of a wrongdoer is often found last. First one must seize the shadow, the benefit, the people and the papers.

The chapter ended with the warehouse no longer a house of trade but the opened belly of shadow-justice. Consent of the dead, duplicate seals, debt ledgers, practice signatures and oral instructions had together formed a road leading toward Chandrapal's door.

Folk Song: The Warehouse's Open Belly

Folk Tune: Labourers' Jhumar

*Speak, warehouse, speak the face of your owner,
If your belly is filled with the dead, endure the accounting.
The room that swallowed papers opened its mouth,
Ledgers, duplicate stamps and thumbprint strips spilled out.
From consent of the dead the thread of benefit ran,
And Chandrapal's warehouse made the shadow clear.
The deeds of sale wept; practice signatures trembled,
Field boundaries were measured in the name of workers' debt.
The people said not "yes" but "we have heard," and bore the weight,
In the grove's moisture the symbols opened their eyes again.
Warehouse, now speak the face of your owner,
If your belly is filled with the dead, endure the accounting.*



[Philosophical Undertone—The expressive power of the word “cow” is not untenable: in “kalayam pachati,” the pea may be recalled through prior perception; or in “dvaram pidhehi,” knowledge of the door may arise from another source, yet relational understanding remains possible. Therefore it is not necessary to take “lotus” as the literal word-meaning of “pankaja.” The expressive power of the word “cow” is not untenable.]

CHAPTER 161

The Captive Phone

*When a phone has imprisoned someone, there is no bail until the owner
of the voice is caught.*



Opening Folk Song: Speak, We Are All Together

Folk Tune: Collective Vigil Song

Speak, O speak, we are all together—speak,

*Unlock with your voice the lock of "tell no one."
The lock of "tell no one" breaks when voices join,
From one throat to another flows the water of courage.
Sister, brother, neighbour—all of you form a circle,
Do not tell the story of fear alone; tell it together.
Where ten ears are awake, deception cannot endure,
Name joined to name, no one will be left alone.
Speak softly, speak clearly, hold the rhythm of truth,
We are all together—with this mantra break the dark.
One throat's low voice becomes the current of ten throats,
Whispered fear melts away; the closed door opens.
Sisters, brothers, neighbours—fashion a circle,
Beat the drum of fellowship against the dark of loneliness.*



The old people say there are three kinds of fear—the fear that comes upon the body, the fear that comes upon the house, and the fear that comes upon the name. A person may flee from the first two. From the third, one does not flee; one falls silent. And silence is the cheapest room a swindler can rent.

"Tell no one"—these four words are stronger than any lock. A lock is fastened from outside; these words are fastened from within. To frighten someone who is alone, no pistol is needed; a heavy voice and a little accurate information are enough.

A voice too can bear a seal. As an iron seal falls upon paper, so the seal of a voice falls upon the ear—the voice of a court, the voice of the police, the voice of a bank. A swindler does not forge the seal; he forges the voice. And to detect a forged voice there is no stamp-matching test—only questions.

So the village learned one rule: when the phone rings, do not answer it alone. Let ten ears be present. Fear spoken before ten ears is reduced by half; fear locked inside a room grows larger through the night.

In place of “tell no one,” “tell everyone”—that line had echoed on the evening after the warehouse was opened, and after the warehouse’s shadow was exposed Chandrapal’s name floated in the village air for two days. No one saw him directly, yet at every turning his absence was present, like a man who has fled his house but left his slippers at the door. People kept coming to the list beside the stump in Channa Grove, standing there, reading names, then turning away in silence. A name was no longer becoming fear; it was becoming direction.

Mira opened a new page in the register that morning. At the top she wrote: “The Crocodile Beyond Paper.” Ananya asked, “Beyond paper?” Mira replied, “The crocodile that once chewed the boundary of a field now chews voices, fear and numbers. In the warehouse we found its old teeth; now we must search for its new ones.”

Just then the old client arrived, panting. His face was no longer like that of the old man at yesterday’s veranda reading; today it trembled like a starving bird. In his hand was his old button phone, and in his eyes a fear as though he had come after hearing not a court notice but news of death. He said only this: “They have imprisoned me inside my phone.”

At first no one understood. Imprisonment happened in a cell—how could it happen in a phone? In a trembling voice the old client explained: a call had come in the night. The voice said, “Your name is involved in a major crime. The police, the court and the bank are all watching. Do not leave your house. If you disconnect the call, you will be arrested immediately.” He had been told that he was “under surveillance confinement.”

Ananya immediately wrote: “Phone confinement.” Aruni added: “A prison that does not surround the body but surrounds the mind is locked by fear.” Hearing this, those standing beside the stump in Channa Grove understood that the warehouse lock had been iron, but this lock was made of voice.

The old man continued. The voice knew his name, his son’s name, his case number, his bank branch, the old dispute over his field, even the date of the veranda reading. “I thought they were government people,” he said. “They told me my name had been found in the court’s scrap sack and that an inquiry was now underway.” At this Mira became instantly alert.

Devika said quietly, “The testimony of the scrap sack has now become a snare on the telephone.” Satyavrat Mehta was approaching from a distance; hearing this, his steps halted. The material that had entered the public list only yesterday—how far had news of it already travelled? How? What ears had been planted inside the village?

A fragment of the night voice remained on the old man’s phone. His grandson, who studied in the city, had been too frightened to disconnect

the call, but midway through it he had attached another small device and recorded the voice. They played the recording. The voice was smooth, commanding and strangely self-assured: "You are under court supervision. To secure your account, transfer the money at once to a secure account."

"A secure account?" Aruni whispered. "Asking an insecure person for secure money—that is the first move of fraud." Mira did not stop the recording; she wanted to hear it all. The voice went on: if the money was not paid, the house would be sealed, the son arrested, the case accelerated, and the name published in the news.

Surmani Devi's face hardened. "This crocodile has begun chewing honour now, not the body," she said. The old client wiped his eyes with his gamchha. He had been frightened not with murder but with disgrace. In the new market of fear, after the body came the name, and after the name came the account.

Mira asked the old man, "Did the money go?" He remained silent. His grandson answered, "Half of it went. For the rest they told him to go to the bank, but to tell no one. Grandfather was trembling. At dawn I stopped everything." Until then there had been sympathy in the crowd; now the heat of crime rose through it.

Ananya made three columns in the register: "Fear," "Information," "Money." Fear—arrest, disgrace, sealing of the house. Information—case number, land dispute, names of family members. Money—transfer in the name of a secure account. Devika added a fourth column: "Performance of authority." For the crime by phone was like theatre too—a disguise, a prepared dialogue, an audience left alone.

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Behind this voice there is not merely a city swindler; it carries the smell of the record room." Bhikhari Lal agreed. "How would an outsider know the case number and what lay inside the scrap sack?" The clerk, who had been trembling until yesterday, broke into a sweat again. But this time his fear was not of his own mistake; it was fear of a secret leak.

He said, "Photographs are often taken in the record room. Some people bring in mobile phones under the pretext of making copies. I cannot stop them. They say, 'There are orders from above.'" Mira asked, "Who is above?" The clerk fell silent. Aruni said softly, "Above is not always a person; sometimes it is a staircase made of fear."

The old client's grandson showed them the list of numbers that had called. One number had no name, only a city code. Another carried a bank message. From a third came a brief voice: "Babu, the investigating officer has been changed." The moment Dhuru heard that short voice, he started. "That sounds like Madhukar, who used to drink tea at Lau's warehouse," he said.

Madhukar. For the first time the name arrived clearly. From Lau's shadow to Chandrapal, from Chandrapal's shadow to the warehouse, and now from the warehouse's shadow to the phone. Madhukar was the sort of man who could be a patwari's assistant one day, a bank agent the next, and a broker who located files on another. His real occupation was learning the language of other people's fear.

Mira gave instructions at once: "No one is to answer such a call alone. If a voice threatens you, write down the time, number, exact words and amount demanded. Give no secret number to anyone. Make no bank transfer without understanding it. Tell the elders in every house—courts do not sit over the telephone."

That last sentence spread among the people: "Courts do not sit over the telephone." The children wrote it on a stone. The old stone that had carried dates yesterday now carried a warning. Beside the stump in Channa Grove, for the first time a phone, along with paper, became evidence.

Sakuni, who had watched Haricharan Tiwari retreat before, saw him again today. Haricharan was telling people, "Do not drag village names into this; this is city fraud." His voice was sympathetic, but much too hurried. Sakuni said quietly to Mira, "The one who rushes to blame the city may sometimes be protecting a doorway in the village."

Haricharan's sentence remained unfinished because the old man's phone rang again. Everyone fell silent. Mira signalled: answer it, but on speaker. In that silence the ringtone sounded so loud it seemed to be knocking inside someone's chest. A voice came: "You have violated instructions. Your surveillance has been increased." The old man trembled, but Ananya took his hand. She whispered, "Fear is no longer alone."

Mira answered calmly, "Who are you?" A moment of silence on the other end. Then the voice changed: "I am from the investigation branch." Mira said, "Give the name of the branch, your designation, the written order and the office address." The voice turned harsh. "You ask too many questions." Mira replied, "Without questions there is no justice; without fear there is no fraud."

The line went dead. A strange tremor passed through the crowd—the voice that had frightened them at night like a god had fled in daylight at the sound of questions. For the first time the old client stood upright. "I was imprisoned in the phone," he said. "Now the voice has run away." It was a small victory, but it burned in the village mind like a great lamp.

Devika began transcribing the recording. Opposite every sentence she wrote its tactic: "command," "secrecy," "disgrace," "money," "urgency," "isolation." Aruni wrote the conclusion: "A digital snare is woven from

six ropes: fear, secrecy, time pressure, private information, the performance of authority, and isolation.”

Satyavrat Mehta looked at the note and remained silent for a long time. He understood that the name of a crime might change in the books of law, but its fundamental voice remained the same: isolate a person, frighten him, take his name, then claim authority over his body or wealth. The crocodile had climbed out of the water and settled inside the voice.

Bhikhari Lal brought the record-room entry register. During the previous month several names had been entered as people permitted to inspect files. One name—Madhukar Prasad—appeared three times. Once on Lau’s recommendation, once with Haricharan’s papers, and once marked “representative of Chandrapal Babu.” Those three lines warmed the cold air beside the stump in Channa Grove.

The colour drained from Haricharan Tiwari’s face. “Anyone can write the word representative,” he said. Mira asked no direct question. She simply had the pages of the register read aloud. The people listened. This was the rule of Channa Grove: first the page would speak, then the person. Haricharan’s defence sank beneath the voice of the page.

A demand arose that Madhukar be hunted down at once, but Mira stopped it. “If a crowd goes to seize him, truth will flee. First build the links.” She told them to see the record-room copies, the warehouse ledger, the phone recording, the bank messages and Madhukar’s entry lines not as separate things but along one line of benefit.

Ananya brought out the red thread again. The new end of the thread that had run across the warehouse map toward Chandrapal’s shadow was now joined to the phone number, bank message and Madhukar’s name. When the thread spread across the paper, it became clear that land fraud and phone fraud were not two rivers but two bends of the same dark current.

Surmani Devi said, “Earlier they frightened people with debt to seize their fields. Now they frighten people with law to seize their accounts. The names are the same; only the method is new.” Mahavir Pathak added, “By imitating seals they have learned how to make seals of voice.”

At this a child sitting beside the stump in Channa Grove asked, “A seal of voice?” Aruni explained, “A tone that makes us instantly believe it is the government, a court, the police or a bank—that is a seal of voice. The criminal imitates that seal.” The children wrote it down. Education had moved outside the schoolroom and was now studying the grammar of crime.

By evening a new watch had formed in the village. In every hamlet, teams of two children and two adults would explain phone snares to the

elderly, tell them never to disclose secret numbers, and write down the words of any threat. No call answered alone. No money sent in haste. No silence out of fear of disgrace.

The old client placed his phone upon the stump in Channa Grove and said, "It made a prison for me all night; now it will become testimony." The red of the setting sun shone on the phone's little glass screen. The stump appeared upside down in the glass, as if Channa Grove itself had entered the phone to inspect its darkness.

By nightfall came news that Madhukar Prasad had disappeared. His rented room was locked, but an old paper had been found inside—some phone numbers, some case numbers, and one name repeated again and again: "C. Babu." The paper had not yet arrived officially; this was only news. Mira cautioned everyone: "News is not testimony, but it can be smoke leading toward testimony."

That night the crocodile lay motionless for a long time on the riverbank. Some said it was listening. Others said it was laughing. Mira entered only this in the register: "First day of the digital snare: fear became collective; the lock weakened."

The chapter ended on this question: when crime has moved out of paper, seals and warehouses and taken up residence in voices, numbers and phones, how many ears, how many registers and how much courage are needed to catch it? Chandrapal's shadow is no longer only on a wall; it can hide inside every voice that isolates a person and says, "Tell no one."

Folk Song: Tell No One

Folk Tune: Telephone Lament

Come, O voice, come out of the room of fear,

In place of "tell no one," sing "tell everyone."

Inside the glass the voice says—tell no one,

Endure the chain of fear alone in your room.

Madhukar vanished, leaving numbers and "C. Babu" behind,

All night the ringing phone steals a mother's sleep.

Where is bail found when the owner of the voice is unknown?

How many ears are needed to open this invisible prison?

*When the village spoke as one, the lock grew weak,
The first knot of the digital snare came into the people's hands.*

*O voice, come out of the room of fear,
In place of "tell no one," sing "tell everyone."
Where is bail found while the owner remains unknown?*

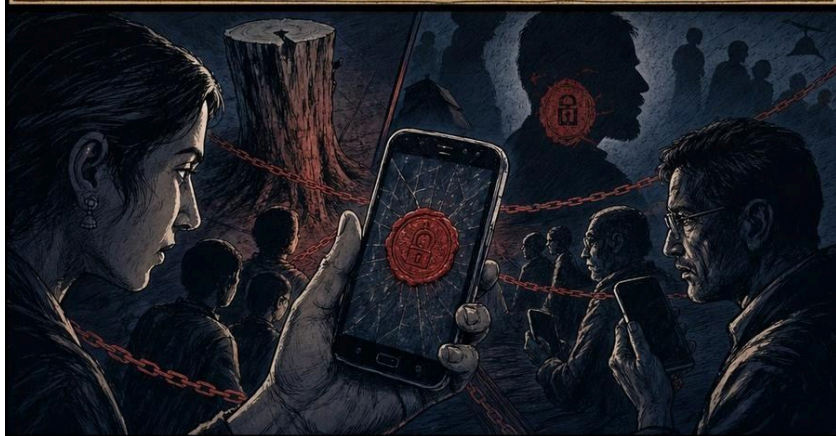


[Philosophical Undertone—The Teachers' View: Yet deliberate cognition such as "to cook rice by means of fire, establish the cooking" cannot be disregarded. Such is the teachers' view.]

CHAPTER 162

The Seal of the Voice

*A voice too can bear a seal—and the first way to break that seal is to
identify the voice itself.*



Opening Folk Song: The Seal on the Voice Opens

Folk Tune: Bhagat Vigil Song

Beat, O mridang, awaken the imprisoned voice,

*Turn the single breath of ten phones into a folk song.
At the first stroke of the drum the sealed voice opens,
The same breath from ten phones becomes a people's song.
If a seal has smothered the voice, the throat will open it,
The village singing together will shake the wall of lies.
One voice is small; joined with others it becomes a current,
The song of truth flows on and crosses even the court.
Beat the drum, call the names, bid farewell to the night of fear,
When the seal on the voice is opened, justice endures.
Raise the tune of the throat that was suppressed,
Join it to the collective melody of the whole village.
One stream is small; joined together it becomes Ganga-Balan,
The wall of lies trembles when it hears the song of truth.*



The old people say trust is the oldest capital a village possesses. Even one who owns no field, no oxen and no ledger still owns trust. And the thief reaches for that capital last of all, because he knows that the day trust is stolen, the village will begin to loot itself.

Imitation has its own science. First it copies outward form—the roundness of a seal, the colour of paper. Then it copies inward rhythm—the patience of an officer, the dry words of a bank, the cold tone of a court. But there is one thing imitation can never copy: accountability. That is why imitation fears questions.

What is genuine gives its name, its designation, its office and a written order. What is false speaks of haste, secrecy, and finally says, “You ask too many questions.” In that one sentence its entire seal melts away.

So the village forged a new tool—questions. Not a sword, not a stick, only questions. Fear grows large in isolation and small under questioning. A voice that cannot give its own name before ten listening ears is no government voice at all—it is merely an imitation sitting in the dark.

The shadow of the voice that had fled the phone lay over the village through the night, and news of Madhukar Prasad's disappearance gnawed at the edge of everyone's sleep. No one's eyes fully closed. The phone that had made a prison of the old client yesterday now gleamed on every household cot like a small black box. People seemed to hear it even before it rang, as though a bell were hidden inside silence itself.

At dawn the first gathering beside the stump in Channa Grove was devoted to phones. It was a strange sight. Where field boundaries, file strings, pages of testimony and warehouse ledgers had once been placed, old people now sat holding their phones. One screen was cracked, another set of buttons worn smooth; one held a son's city number, another a bank message.

Mira told them, "The phone is not guilty. The guilty thing is the voice that comes out of it wearing a seal." The children asked, "A seal is placed on paper—how can it be placed on a voice?" Mira replied, "Whenever a voice calls itself the government, a court, the police, a bank, religion, a doctor or a guru and claims authority over a person's judgment, it is placing a seal upon the voice."

Aruni wrote on the stone: "Seal of voice = imitation of trust." They discussed this for a long time. The old client said, "I trusted the voice because it knew my case number." Devika added, "When information falls into a thief's hands, it ceases to be proof and becomes a snare."

Satyavrat Mehta kept studying the record-room entry book. Madhukar's three entries, three borrowed names, three doors. Once on Lau's recommendation, once with Haricharan's papers, once as Chandrapal Babu's representative. Those three lines had been written so quietly they might have been invitations to a wedding, yet behind them stood an old man's trembling night, a half-emptied account and the fear of disgrace.

Bhikhari Lal said, "Madhukar came to inspect files, but his eyes rested less on the papers than on people's faces. He would ask: Is this client old? Does his son live away? Is the matter about land or a bank? Is there someone in the house who cannot read much?" Hearing this recollection, everyone beside the stump understood that a criminal first measures not weakness of the body but weakness of trust.

Ananya opened a new register: "Voice-Net Details." She made columns—number, time, claimed identity, demand, sentence of fear, response. Information began arriving from every household. One had received a call posing as the electricity department, another as bank security, another as the police station, another as a court officer. Different calls, the same method.

Devika said, "These are not different characters in separate plays; they are different masks worn by one troupe." The performers who had once

worked as fake ghosts were sitting in the lesson too. One of them said with embarrassment, "We used masks to create fear. These people create fear with voice alone, without even a mask."

Then Sakuni said something that startled everyone. "Once I saw one of Haricharan's men go into Madhukar's rented room. It was not at night; it was daytime. He had a bag of papers." Haricharan Tiwari was not in that crowd, but once his name was spoken, tension spread through the air like a slick film.

Mira immediately said, "Write what was seen. Keep inference separate." Sakuni replied, "I saw it; write only that." Ananya entered: "Sakuni saw: Haricharan's man; Madhukar's room; a bag of papers." Aruni wrote below it: "No conclusion." That discipline kept village testimony from becoming rumour.

By midday people had gathered outside Madhukar's room, but Mira would not let the crowd enter. "The room will testify; do not trample its testimony underfoot." Bhikhari Lal, Surmani Devi, Ananya and two witnesses went inside. There was a cot, a brass tumbler, two old shirts, and a calendar on the wall with three dates circled in red.

The dates matched the record-room entry book. First date—Lau's recommendation. Second—Haricharan's papers. Third—Chandrapal's representative. Beneath the calendar, in small letters, someone had written: "old; son away; land; account." The moment Surmani Devi read those four words, her body shuddered. "This is not a description of a person; it is the measurement of prey," she said.

An old bag was found beneath the cot. It contained photocopies of papers, some account numbers, some lists of names, and small slips carrying scripted voice-lines. One read: "Begin with fear of arrest." Another: "Mention family honour." A third: "Keep them alone." A fourth: "Tell them facts from the papers; establish trust."

Aruni read the slips and fell silent. It seemed to him that the criminals had opened not merely a school of fraud but a crooked school of psychology. Here sentences were prepared, fear was sequenced, and lists were kept of human vulnerability. The crocodile no longer waited for prey in water; it had written a script for its voice.

A small device was found as well—a cheap recorder. Inside were fragments of rehearsed voices. "I am speaking from the investigation branch." "Transfer it immediately to the secure account." "If you tell anyone, you will be arrested." The voices were not all the same person's; sometimes Madhukar, sometimes someone else. But all carried the same commanding cadence. The same sentences repeated with slight changes of tone—as though someone had sat in a dark room practising the manufacture of fear.

Devika listened and said, "This is the abuse of acting." The former fake-ghost performers lowered their heads. On a stage, acting can become a means of revealing truth; in crime, acting becomes a tool for concealing it. The children listened carefully to that distinction.

At that moment Haricharan Tiwari arrived. His face carried a mixture of his old pundit-like assurance and new unease. Seeing the crowd, he said, "Do not magnify all this. It will ruin the village's name." Mira remained calm. She asked only, "Is a village's name ruined by fear, or by crime?" Haricharan had no immediate answer.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward and placed the calendar's three dates before him. "Your name, or the shadow of your people, lies over these dates," he said. Haricharan tried to laugh. "Will shadows now be accepted as proof?" Satyavrat replied, "A shadow is not proof; it is direction. The house of proof is searched for in that direction."

For a moment Haricharan's eyes fixed upon Madhukar's bag. Ananya noticed, but did not write it down at once. Later she told Mira, "I saw something, but it may have been an illusion." Mira replied, "If you do not trust it, do not put it in the register. Keep it in memory; join it only if another sign appears." That was the discipline of testimony.

Toward evening word came from the bank: the account that had received half of the old client's money had been emptied within hours. The amount had been broken into three small transfers. One name was false, one was in the identity of a dead person, and the third was "M. Prasad Service Centre." Madhukar's "M" rose again.

"Service centre?" Bhikhari Lal said. Surmani Devi replied sharply, "First catch the language of the one who calls plunder service." Devika wrote: "Words of crime: secure, service, investigation, honour, confidential." In ordinary life these words created trust; in crime the same words had become traps.

The night reading began beside the stump in Channa Grove. This time the old people themselves read aloud the threatening phrases from phone calls, and the children named the tactic in each. "Do it quickly"—time pressure. "Tell no one"—isolation. "I am an officer"—performance of authority. "Your name is in a case"—disgrace. "We will secure your account"—seizure of money.

Slowly the language of fear began to break apart. Sentences that at night had sounded like divine decrees became ordinary deceit once opened up beside Channa Grove. The old client said again, "My mistake was that I listened alone." Mira stopped him. "The mistake was not yours. The system left you alone. From now on, fear will not be heard alone."

After that sentence, a new village pledge was made. Any threatening call would be heard by at least three ears. Anyone demanding papers

would be asked for a written order. Anyone demanding money would face public questions. Anyone using disgrace as a threat would have his voice recorded.

Haricharan gradually began withdrawing from the crowd. Sakuni watched from a distance. She saw him go outside and make a very quiet phone call to someone: “Remove the papers.” The words were not all clear, but “remove” was unmistakable. Sakuni did not shout the matter at once. She went to Mira and said, “This is not an inference; it is testimony of the ear.”

Mira had it entered in the register: “Sakuni heard: Haricharan’s quiet phone call—remove the papers.” That line changed the direction of the night. The question had moved beyond Madhukar’s room. Which papers? Remove them from where? Who would remove them? And why?

Satyavrat Mehta said, “This room will not be left sealed tonight without a record. Everything found here must be inventoried, signed by witnesses, and copies kept in separate places. One copy beside Channa Grove, one in the secure chest of the record room, one with Surmani Devi, and one in summarized form in the children’s register.”

Ananya kept matching page against page. Aruni transcribed the voice scripts. Devika named the acting tactics. Bhikhari Lal linked the dates to copies from the entry register. The old client gave his statement with a trembling hand: “They imprisoned me in the phone, but today I opened its door.” His voice still trembled, but now there was less fear in that trembling and more of an exhausted breath.

Night deepened. The crocodile was no longer visible on the riverbank. Some said it had slipped beneath the water. Others said it had entered the glass of the phone. Closing the register, Mira said, “Where fear is alone, the crocodile hides. Where fear is spoken, its skin begins to peel away.”

The chapter ended with the decision that the first way to break the seal on a voice is to share the voice. Madhukar is missing, Haricharan is uneasy, and Chandrapal’s “C. Babu” remains in shadow. But the village is no longer merely a listener; it is becoming a village that opens voices and reads them.

Folk Song: The Seal on the Voice Is Broken

Folk Tune: Collective Vigil

Break the seal, O break the seal on the voice,

Do not leave alone the one imprisoned in a phone.

The same sentence through ten phones, the rhythm of the same breath,

A seal upon the voice, a hidden net within.

The old client trembled and said—I was imprisoned,

Today I opened the door of my own fear.

Ananya matched the pages, Aruni copied the cadence,

Devika called every tactic of acting by its name.

When fear was shared, the crocodile's skin came off,

A lonely throat came out as the voice of society.

Break the seal on the voice; join voice to voice,

Do not leave alone the one imprisoned in a phone.



[Philosophical Undertone—Nyaya Tradition: Number is related to the qualifier of effort. In “Chaitra cooks rice,” Chaitra is the qualifier of effort; in “the rice is cooked by Chaitra,” the rice is the indirect qualifier of effort, namely the locus of the result of an activity produced by effort. Thus, in the Nyaya tradition, number is related to the qualifier of effort.]

CHAPTER 163

Traces of Removed Papers

*A paper can be removed, but not its trace—the remover's haste is itself
a trace.*



Opening Folk Song: Light Preserved in Carbon

Folk Tune: Paper Batgabani

Preserve, O carbon, preserve the black line,

*In the imprint of the missing page, find the road to dawn.
A page may be removed, but where will its impression go?
The black line of carbon will point toward morning.
Preserve the smallest mark; join each thread to the next,
Erased letters will return as a bright garland of truth.
If wind carries the page away, memory will hold it,
If dust covers its face, the people's eyes will read it.
The light preserved in carbon says—do not lose courage,
Give wings to little proofs and illuminate the village of truth.
The upper paper may fly away; the trace beneath remains,
Tiny threads joined together will make a complete statement.
Wind may scatter, dust may cover—memory crosses both,
On the wings of little proofs, truth flies as a garland.*



People think dust is dirt. But in a record room dust is the oldest clerk of all. It sits silently for years and keeps the measure of every hand that touches the place. The person who lifts a page forgets the dust—but the dust does not forget him.

An empty space can be read too. The loop of string remains where it was, the dried fragment of glue remains where it was, and in the middle there is only air. Measure that air and the body of the removed paper takes shape—absent, yet measurable.

Carbon is the most honest witness of all. It writes nothing by itself; it only bears another person's pressure. And what has borne pressure does not forget. The original page may burn, wash away or be sold—but the black sheet sitting beneath it quietly holds everything.

And the greatest truth is this: a name cannot be killed. Writing "dead" beside someone's name on paper does not kill that person; it kills only the paper. As long as breath continues, the name speaks for itself—and no seal can silence a name that has begun to speak.

After the seal of the voice was broken, the night's final question—"remove the papers"—remained lodged in the village ear. Dawn came, but the sentence did not dissolve in sunlight. On the contrary, the more the light grew, the clearer it became that some hand had truly reached toward the record room. A bird on the stump in Channa Grove fluttered its wings twice, as if announcing the beginning of the watch.

Satyavrat Mehta reached the court early in the morning. Bhikhari Lal was already standing by the gate. His eyes were red like those of a man who had not slept all night, but his hands were steady. Quietly he said, "Babu, the lock was found closed, but the lock is not silent." Satyavrat examined it. On the edge of the clasp was a fresh scratch, shining differently from the old rust.

Mira, Ananya, Aruni, Devika and Surmani Devi arrived as well. The crowd was kept back. Mira said, "If even one grain of dust is disturbed inside the record room today, we will account for it. Paper can be stolen, but even the footprints of dust testify." For the first time the children looked at dust not as a thing, but as a witness.

When the door opened, the smell inside was not the same as yesterday. Yesterday the dust had been still; today it had been disturbed. In the rows of cupboards a fine difference was visible—the strip of dust beneath cupboard number seventeen was broken. In front of it were two faint footprints, appearing less like sandals than bare feet. Bhikhari Lal said at once, "Someone entered at night after taking off his shoes."

Ananya wrote in the register: "Dust marks before cupboard seventeen: bare feet or soft slippers." Mira immediately added, "Put a question mark after the inference." Ananya did so. That small mark saved the testimony from false certainty.

The cupboard was opened. Inside were old land cases, mortgage deeds, inheritance papers, bank notices and court stay orders. But at one place a loop of string was empty. The string remained; the papers were gone. The empty cord lay there like a skeleton from which the flesh had been torn away.

Aruni whispered, "The empty space must be read too." Satyavrat heard him and said, "Sometimes what is not there speaks the loudest." The children measured the empty space—its length, width, the colour of the string, the dried patch of glue. The first image of the removed papers emerged—absent, yet present.

The entry book was examined. There was no official entry on the night page, but one corner of the sheet was swollen, as if something had been erased with a damp finger. Devika leaned close. When the light was angled across it, a faint pressure mark appeared—"P...ma..." and nothing more. Bhikhari Lal said, "Parmanand?"

Parmanand was a new clerk at the court. He always walked with his head lowered and spoke very little. At the sound of his name, the older clerk's face fell. "He was not on night duty," he said. Surmani Devi asked sharply, "If he was not on duty, why was his name erased?" At that question the air in the record room fell silent.

Parmanand was summoned. When he arrived there was less dust on his feet than fear in his face. At first he said, "I did not go there." Then, when the empty string from cupboard seventeen was placed before him, his lips trembled. Mira did not shout at him. She only said, "Fear makes truth smaller, but a lie kills it. Say separately what you saw and what you did."

Tears came to Parmanand's eyes. "I opened the door," he said. "I was told there were orders from above. The file was only to be taken out so a copy could be seen. The person who told me was one of Haricharan Babu's men, but the voice on the phone said it was calling from Chandrapal Babu's office." Satyavrat asked, "Where did the papers go?" Parmanand lowered his head. "They gave me a bag. I did not see what was inside."

Surmani Devi snapped, "You did not see—or you chose not to see?" Parmanand remained silent. Half the history of crime lived inside that silence. Many people do not commit the crime themselves, but by closing their eyes they make a road for crime. Aruni wrote: "Closing one's eyes can also become part of removing a paper."

A sheet of paper was found wedged behind a shelf inside cupboard seventeen. It was not the full file, only the reverse imprint left by carbon. The letters were backwards and broken, but readable: "death certificate attached," "heir absent," "mortgage reverification," and below, a blurred mark—"M. Prasad Service." Madhukar's shadow peered out again from behind the paper.

Ananya copied the imprint onto a clean sheet. Devika said, "It is like the reverse dialogue of a play. The principal page is gone, but its shadow remains." Mira did not smile, yet a hard satisfaction flashed in her eyes. "The theft was not complete. The soul of the paper was left behind."

When the name that appeared as "deceased" in the imprint was read aloud, the old client shuddered. "That is Nageshwar Jha. He is alive. He could not come to Channa Grove last night because he is ill." Satyavrat said immediately, "A death certificate for a living man! Then the roads to land, bank account and inheritance all open."

For the first time the children understood that paper was not merely memory; it could also become a tool for writing death upon a living body. The crime that had first appeared in a telephone voice now stood before them in the form of a death document. Digital fraud and the old

land web were connected to the same drain—first steal the name, then frighten the person, empty the account, and finally turn the land papers.

Bhikhari Lal asked, “Why was Nageshwar Jha’s file in this cupboard?” The older clerk answered, “His matter involved both mortgage and inheritance. His son lives away, the house has an elderly couple, and the land lies beside a pond.” Surmani Devi said softly, “The measurement of prey is the same again—old, son away, land, account.” The four words written on Madhukar’s wall had come alive inside the court cupboard.

Mira immediately formed two teams. One would go to Nageshwar Jha’s house and take his statement while he was alive. The other would ask the local bank whether any account, centre or agency named “M. Prasad Service” was registered. She said, “From now on we move by sequence, not emotion. The criminal wants us to shout; we will write.”

Sakuni went to Nageshwar Jha’s house. The old man lay on a cot, breathing weakly but with alert eyes. When he was told that papers were being prepared to declare him dead, he stared at the ceiling for a long time. Rain stains spread across the limewash like an old map, and he kept looking at them. Then he said, “I can still hear my own name. Who wrote dead beside the name of a man who can hear it?” Sakuni’s hand trembled, but she wrote the sentence down.

Nageshwar’s wife opened an old chest. Inside, wrapped in black cloth, were the land register, a bank passbook, an old letter from their son and a fifty-year-old wedding photograph. “I kept the papers safe,” she said, “but I never knew whether the papers would be able to keep me safe.” There was no fear in her eyes as she spoke, only hurt.

The second team reached the bank. At first the branch manager tried to evade them—“There are rules; there is confidentiality.” Aruni said calmly, “Confidentiality exists to protect the customer, not to serve as a curtain for the criminal.” Satyavrat Mehta submitted a written request in legal language. When the words “suspected death certificate for a living person” were entered, the bank’s manner changed.

The account was not opened to them immediately, but one piece of information emerged: “M. Prasad Service” was not a local account; it was linked to an outside payment-facilitation centre. The transactions were small, but repeated. Money from elderly people’s accounts was broken into pieces and sent outward through that route. Devika said, “This crocodile does not eat the body in one bite. It cuts off small pieces first, so the pain is felt late.”

By evening four papers lay beside Channa Grove: the description of the empty string in cupboard seventeen, a copy of the carbon imprint, Nageshwar Jha’s statement while alive, and the bank’s preliminary information. Mira said, “Look—the removed paper has not returned, but its movement has been found. Often truth does not reside in the original

page; it resides in the trace left by the haste with which someone removed it.”

Haricharan did not attend that gathering. But from the courtyard of his house voices rose and fell until late at night. Some said he was angry. Some said he was afraid. Mira did not enter rumour into the register. She wrote only: “Haricharan absent.” The short sentence was heavy. Criminals often give speeches when they are trying to save themselves; when they remain absent, the shadow speaks.

That night, when everyone had fallen quiet, Ananya looked again at the carbon imprint. Among the reversed letters was a small number: “17/C.” Aruni said, “Cupboard seventeen—and C. Babu?” Satyavrat Mehta remained silent for a long time.

The crocodile appeared again on the riverbank. This time its back was half in water and half in mud. In the moonlight its skin seemed scored with lines like torn paper. The old client said, “It ate the paper but could not digest it.” Surmani Devi added, “A living name tears open the crocodile’s belly and comes out.”

The chapter ended with the realization that traces of removed papers cannot be erased. Madhukar is missing, Haricharan absent, Parmanand half-broken, Nageshwar alive, and “17/C” stands like a new doorway. The story has now travelled from a voice on the phone to death written on paper.

Folk Song: The Shadow of the Removed Page

Folk Tune: Paper Lament

Show us, O page, show us your final line,

Seat the cut-out name again in the middle of the story.

The page was removed, but the carbon imprint remained,

In haste a fingernail scratched the letters “17/C.”

Madhukar absent, Haricharan absent, every trace present,

Parmanand half-broken, Nageshwar still breathing.

The crocodile ate the paper but could not digest it,

The living name tore through its belly and came out in moonlight.

At the death of the file its shadow wept all night,

A small number opened the chain on a great door.

Removed page, show us your final line.



[Philosophical Undertone—The Case Ending of the Qualifier Serves Only Grammatical Well-Formedness: An objection may be raised: in “bring the king’s man,” how can the relation between king and man be grasped from the compound if the qualifier word bears no separate case-ending to relate the two? By the end of the dialogue both sides accepted that an example assists proof only when its relation is explicit and free from defect. The case-ending of the qualifier serves only grammatical well-formedness.]

CHAPTER 164

The Belly of Chandrapal's Shadow

*A small number can open a great lock—if the reader has stayed awake
through the night.*



Opening Folk Song: The Key of Seventeen-C

Folk Tune: Fast-Paced Mystery Batgabani

Hold the key, O hold the key of Seventeen-C,

Take the little number by the hand and shake the great lock.

The little number Seventeen-C, a key in the palm,

The great lock began to tremble; awakened insight stirred.

Follow the thread slowly; the knot will open itself,

Honour the smallest sign and the larger web will appear.

Though night be deep, let the child's lamp burn,

When truth holds the key, even a sealed house opens.

Seventeen-C is not a name of fear, but the first station of search,

From one little sign the road toward justice will be found.

Quick feet, steady eyes, caution at every step,

Thread by thread the structure of the net will open.

Night is deep, the lamp is small—yet the path appears,

With truth's key in hand, even a closed door yields its meaning.



The old people say a net is recognised not by its mouth but by its belly. The mouth is different everywhere—here a voice on the phone, there a seal on a receipt, elsewhere the signboard of an office. But wherever all the threads finally meet, there lies its belly; and a belly is never in two places at once.

The most dangerous words are not words of violence. The most dangerous are “service,” “assistance,” “advice,” “facility.” At the sound of violent words people close the door; at the sound of service they open it with their own hands.

And there is one more thing. “Everyone knows that”—half the village's crime hides inside those three words. A fact everyone knows but no register records is the safest room a criminal can have. In the distance between knowing and acknowledging, the thief opens his shop.

So the work remaining today is not battle but connection. Place one paper beside another. One date beside another. One silence beside another. Once a sequence forms, no one will need to pronounce a verdict—the sequence itself will begin to speak.

The final mark on the removed paper, the little number "17/C," burned all night in Ananya's register. It no longer looked like a number but a key. The empty string in cupboard seventeen, the reversed carbon imprint, Nageshwar Jha's living statement and the name of Chandrapal's office were all becoming tied to the same thread. Before dawn mist settled upon the stump in Channa Grove, yet even through the mist the number seemed to shine.

Mira called everyone together in the morning. "Today," she said, "we will not look at Chandrapal's house; we will look at the belly of his shadow. A person's mouth can lie, but a shadow seldom lies, because a shadow falls only where a body has been." The children understood that this watch was not for confrontation but for joining lines.

Satyavrat Mehta laid the papers out again in order. First—Parmanand's statement that he had been made to open the door. Second—the empty place in cupboard seventeen. Third—the carbon imprint reading "death certificate attached." Fourth—"M. Prasad Service." Fifth—"17/C." He said, "If we treat these as separate events, the crime scatters. If we read them as a sequence, the net will speak."

Surmani Devi added quietly, "A net is always known by its belly. Wherever all the threads meet, there is the crocodile." At this the old client nodded. He remembered the crocodile from the previous night, its hide gleaming with lines like torn paper.

The first task was to discover what "C" meant. An old map of the court was opened. The divisions in the record room had not been marked ka, kha, ga, but by localised forms of old English letters—A, B, C, D. The "C" section of cupboard seventeen was where disputed inheritance, mortgages and death-certificate papers were stored. "17/C" was not merely a number; it was the alley of death-documents.

Bhikhari Lal was stunned. "I always thought a cupboard was just a cupboard." Mira said, "To criminals a cupboard is a road. Only someone who knows the inside map can reach the right place in darkness at night." The older clerk's face turned pale again. He realised he too would be asked how the map of the record room had reached outsiders.

Parmanand was summoned again. This time he was not scolded; he was given a chair. Mira said, "If a man is melting in fear and you keep him standing, he will lean on lies. Let him sit, so truth can find space inside his body." Parmanand sat, though his palms continued to tremble. "The caller first said 'C section,' then suddenly stopped himself," he said. "He told me only to take out the bag from seventeen."

At the words "C section," Satyavrat Mehta looked at Ananya. She immediately wrote: "The caller had knowledge of the internal section." Aruni added beside it: "Or someone inside was directing him." Mira told

them to leave a blank space between the two sentences. "Sometimes truth sits in the empty space between alternatives."

Now the question became: where had the call come from? In Parmanand's old cheap phone the number was saved simply as "Office." The number was now switched off. The young people's minds leapt toward police tracing, identity documents, towers and messages, but Mira stopped them. "We will not boast of technology. First see how many times this number called, at what times, and in what context." The call history was copied out by hand.

The number had called three times before—once in the evening, once at ten-thirty at night, and the final time just before the lock was opened. All three conversations had been brief. Parmanand said, "The voice was heavy, but from behind it I could sometimes hear someone whispering." Devika asked, "What did the whisper say?" Parmanand closed his eyes and tried to remember: "Not the sheets, the bag. Do not say the name. Do not say C."

At "do not say the name," everyone fell silent. To the child guardians of names, the sentence was a direct challenge. The criminals knew that if the name survived, the net would open. So they used numbers, bags, sections, service, office—all as curtains. Ananya wrote in the register: "First rule of crime: remove the name."

Meanwhile Sakuni returned from Nageshwar Jha's house carrying an old receipt sent by his wife. On it was a small seal: "Chandrapal Consultancy Centre," with a crooked line beneath resembling a signature. The receipt had been issued for "document verification assistance." Nageshwar's wife said that two men had come two months earlier claiming they could check the papers on behalf of the bank.

Devika looked at the receipt. "Consultancy centre? So this was a place for measuring the belly of papers in the name of advice." Satyavrat Mehta studied the edge of the seal. "Chandrapal" was clear, but the letters of "consultancy" were half worn away—as though the name had been preserved while the work itself was kept blurred.

The older clerk said quietly, "There is a room in Chandrapal Babu's office that people call the C-room. Brokers sit there for mortgages, document checks, pensions, accounts, death certificates, land measurement—everything." Mira stopped him midway. "Why did you not say this before?" The clerk's voice sank. "Because everyone knew it. And what everyone knows is often never entered in any register."

That sentence was more frightening than the darkness of the record room. Everyone knew—but knowing had never become public truth. Half the village's secret of crime lived inside "everyone knows." Surmani Devi said, "From today, 'everyone knows' will not remain outside the

register. Whoever knows will speak. Whoever does not speak will have the date of his silence recorded.”

They took the road to Chandrapal’s office. The children did not go inside; they recorded what could be seen outside. The paint on the gate was peeling, but the signboard gleamed. In the waiting room were plastic chairs, a service list on the wall, and a camera in one corner. The list read: document assistance, banking facility, pension advice, inheritance guidance, land-record copies. Every phrase looked like help, but behind it were hidden feeding teeth.

At first the office servant said, “Chandrapal Babu is away.” Mira replied, “We are not asking for Babu; we are asking to see the room.” The servant hesitated. Satyavrat showed the written request. When the small room inside was opened, a faded “C” was visible above the door. Aruni’s throat went dry. “17/C” was no longer a mark on paper; it stood before them as a door.

There were three desks in the C-room. Forms on the first, seals on the second, a computer on the third. Beside the computer, taped to the desk, was a note: “Identification required for dead/alive verification.” At once everyone remembered Nageshwar’s living face. Devika whispered, “Who gave them authority to verify whether a man we can see alive is alive?”

In a desk drawer they found some empty envelopes printed “M. Prasad Service.” The servant said, “Those belong to an outside agency.” Mira asked, “Then why is an outside agency’s material inside this drawer?” The servant fell silent. This silence was different from Parmanand’s; there was less fear in it and more habit.

The computer was not touched; a lawful order would be needed for that. But the shadow of the last page left open on the screen was still visible—an unfinished draft of some form. Satyavrat would not allow the power to be cut or the screen touched. “What we do not touch may survive,” he said. The children learned that sometimes protecting truth also means restraining the hand.

A map hung on the wall—elderly households, sons living away, lone couples, mortgaged land, pension accounts—marked in different colours. It was not an official map; it was a hunter’s map. Red dots had been placed so carefully that someone seemed to have sat patiently evening after evening counting one house at a time. Surmani Devi shuddered. “This is not service; they have turned the village into a hunting field.” Bhikhari Lal said, “The crocodile lived in water, but their crocodile swims upon a map.”

Haricharan suddenly arrived. Anger had risen across his face. “Entering a private office like this is illegal,” he said. Mira replied calmly, “In which part of the law does it say that a living person may be given a

death certificate?” Haricharan had no answer for a moment, then said, “Chandrapal Babu is a social worker.”

Surmani Devi stepped forward. “A social worker is not one who makes a draft of an old person’s death in the name of checking his papers.” Haricharan tried to laugh, but the laugh stopped halfway. His eyes went to the desk drawer where the “M. Prasad Service” envelopes lay. Ananya recorded the glance: “Haricharan’s gaze paused at the drawer.”

Chandrapal himself did not appear. His staff kept saying he had gone to the city. Yet on the C-room table was a fresh cup of tea, half drunk. A faint tooth mark lay on the rim. Mira would not let anyone touch it. “An absent person is sometimes present in his half-drunk tea,” she said.

In the waiting room outside sat two elderly women whom no one had questioned. With their permission, Mira spoke to them gently. One said, “They told me my pension would stop if I did not give my thumb impression.” The other said, “My son lives away. He says never to give papers over the phone, but these people say my name will be struck off if I refuse.” Those two sentences opened the entire trade in fear.

Aruni wrote: “Fear that the name will be removed, fear that the pension will stop, fear of being declared dead—three ropes.” Devika added: “The hand holding the ropes: the C-room.” Ananya wrote a third line: “The C-room is not merely a room; it is the belly of the net.” Reading it, Mira said, “That is the name of this chapter.”

That evening all the evidence was read aloud beside Channa Grove: the receipt, the envelopes, the description of the C-room, the statements of the elderly women, Parmanand’s memory of “C section,” and the match with “17/C.” No verdict was pronounced; only the sequence was read. Yet the sequence itself began to resemble a verdict.

The shadow of the stump in Channa Grove grew unusually long that day. Some said it reached as far as the C-room. Others said it climbed across Chandrapal’s signboard. The children wrote only: “The shadow grew long.” Mira was satisfied; the distance between imagination and testimony had been preserved.

That night the crocodile did not appear on the riverbank, but circular whirlpools kept rising in the water. The old client said, “The belly is inside.” Surmani Devi replied, “Now we are measuring the belly.” With that sentence the chapter ends. Chandrapal is absent, but his shadow has been caught.

Folk Song: The Lock of Seventeen-C

Folk Tune: Mystery Batgabani

Open it slowly, O open the lock of Seventeen-C,

Let the many names buried in the belly of the shadow speak.

The little number Seventeen-C made the great lock tremble,

Receipt, envelope and C-room measured along the same road.

The old women's statements joined Parmanand's memory,

As the sequence was read, the shadow became silence's verdict.

Chandrapal absent, his shadow growing long,

The evening shadow of the grove climbed the signboard.

No crocodile's body—only whirlpools from its belly in the water,

Surmani said—now we will measure the poison within.

Seventeen-C, slowly open what has been hidden,

Let the buried names inside the shadow's belly speak.

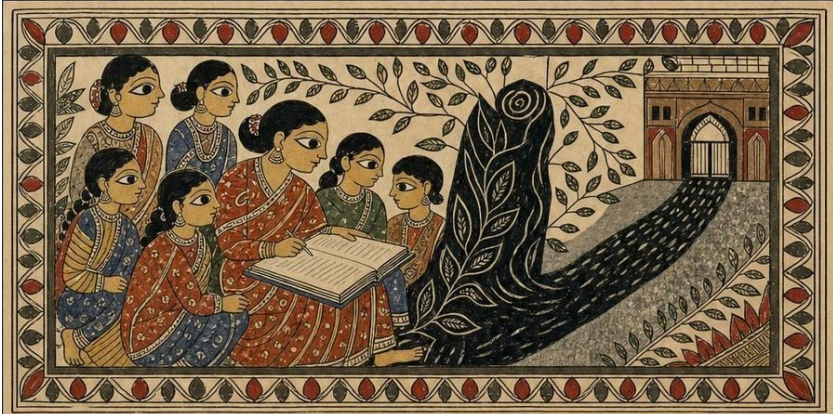


[Philosophical Undertone—The Agent Is Not the Meaning of the Finite Verb Ending: In “the cloth is blue,” “Chaitra cooks,” and “the rice is cooked,” co-reference consists only in expression of the same number, not in denotation of one and the same meaning. The agent is not the meaning of the finite verbal ending.]

CHAPTER 165

The Body of the Shadow

Once the shadow is caught, the question rises—where is the body? And the body is always found in some storehouse.



Opening Folk Song: A Boat at Tetari Ghat

Folk Tune: Boatman's Song

Untie the rope, O untie the rope at Tetari Ghat,

An oar of questions, an oar of truth—row with both together.

Dawn has come at Tetari Ghat; untie the boat,

Behind the shadow the body will be found; keep patience in your heart.

The current may change, but the boatman does not forget his course,

He reads the small sign of a star and moves across the water.

Let one oar be questions and the other the strength of truth,

Together they cross the deep water of crime.

The ghat calls—come all, let no boat go alone,

When public trust travels together, no distance is too great.

The dawn mist thins, the current changes colour,

A star's mark remains in the boatman's steady eyes.

Deep water, unknown shadow—the boat does not waver,

The sail of public trust is stretched; ghat after ghat becomes a halt.



Once the shadow has been caught, the question rises—where is the body? And a body is always found in some storehouse or granary. A shadow needs neither food nor drink, but a body needs a place, a lock, and hands that carry things through the night.

The old people say crime needs two places—one where it is written and another where it is stored. The place of writing is the office; the place of storage is the warehouse. So one who searches only the office sees half the crime; and seeing half can sometimes be more dangerous than seeing nothing at all.

Reversing a number is the cheapest magic. Write 17/C as C-17—the signs are the same, but the eye is deceived. The thief knows that people often do not read; they merely recognise. Once the eye is trained only to recognise, showing it the same thing in reverse is enough.

And an empty envelope? An empty envelope is the heaviest object in a village. It contains no paper, so it is called empty; yet what it truly contains cannot be named, so it remains heavy. Whoever understands

this arithmetic can say both things at once—the envelope is empty; be careful.

And so the road now turns toward the water. Storehouses and granaries stand by rivers, and a river never testifies—but a ghat does. Feet fall upon the ghat, mud preserves their measure, and a boat that moves through the night leaves the knot of its rope behind at dawn.

The belly had been measured, and one question remained: “When the shadow is caught, where is the body?” The question hung all night over the stump in Channa Grove. At dawn, as the mist began to lift, the children saw the stump’s long shadow fall directly toward the old back lane behind the office. The sun had not fully risen, but the shadow had already chosen its road. Ananya opened the register and wrote the first line: “The search for the body begins from the shadow.”

Mira cautioned everyone: “Today there will be no raid on anyone’s house. What we are searching for is not merely a person, but the body of a system. Its bones are hidden in paper, its blood in money, its breath in fear, and its face in prestige.” The children slowed their pace. They understood that crime is not caught by running; it is caught by holding the sequence.

Satyavrat Mehta placed the “17/C” page before them again. “C may not be only a room,” he said. “It may be a section, a sign, a code, or the first letter of a name. But whatever it is, its body will leave an account somewhere.” Bhikhari Lal added, “Accounts hide, but dust keeps their footprints.”

First they went to the back lane of the office. It was not straight but narrow, damp and colourless. Plaster had fallen from the wall in many places, making it seem as though the wall itself had grown tired after years of holding something back. In one corner stood an old iron door. The painted letters above it appeared erased: “Storage Room.” But when a finger was drawn below the letters, a “C” shone through the dust.

“C-room,” Devika said softly. Parmanand, who had not slept all night, trembled at the word. His lips dried. After a long pause he said, “I stood at this door many times to deliver pages. No one went directly inside. Papers were taken in from outside, and empty envelopes came back from within.”

“Empty envelopes?” Aruni asked. Parmanand lowered his head. “Yes. They looked empty from outside. But the officer would say—the envelope is heavy, be careful.” Surmani Devi neither laughed nor wept. “Where an empty envelope is called heavy,” she said, “understand that the weight inside is invisible bribery.”

They were discussing how lawful authority to open the door could be obtained when Nageshwar Jha appeared in the lane, dressed in his old

clothes and leaning on a stick. His face bore the wakefulness of the night, but his eyes had an oddly clear light. "This door is officially closed," he said. "But there is one way to see inside—the ventilator above." Bhikhari Lal started. "How do you know?" Nageshwar replied, "Once I was declared dead. A dead man's ears hear a great deal."

The children looked up at the ventilator. It was clogged with cobwebs, dust and pigeon feathers. Little Aruni did not climb the wall; first he wrote down the height, direction and flow of air through the ventilator. Mira was pleased. "First observe, then touch." The children were no longer breaking in; they were creating a method of testimony.

Bhikhari Lal cleared the cobwebs with his old broom. A stale smell came from within—old ink, dampness, iron and locked chests. They peered through the ventilator. Wooden boxes stood along the wall. Each had a painted stripe: one white, one red, one black, one yellow. On the white-striped box faint letters read: "C-17."

Ananya's hand moved automatically over the register: "17/C reversed in order as C-17." Satyavrat Mehta grew grave. "Crime sometimes reverses a number so that the eye cannot read it straight." The sentence struck the walls of the lane and returned. Everyone felt as though the wall were listening from within.

It would not be right to break a legal lock. Mira decided, "We will not break the door. We will hold a reading in front of it. We will call aloud the names of what is inside." Some young men grew impatient, but Surmani Devi restrained them. "A broken door gives a criminal a chance to call us attackers. A name called aloud makes him tremble inside."

And so the reading began in the lane. First name—Nageshwar Jha. Second—Madhukar Prasad. Third—Haricharan. Fourth—Surmani Devi's mortgage file. Fifth—a widow's petition. Sixth—an unidentified death certificate. With every name they joined a date. With every date, a page. With every page, a testimony. Slowly the lane began to resemble a court veranda.

When the name "Madhukar Prasad" was called for the third time, something fell inside the ventilator. The sound was small, but everyone heard it. Bhikhari Lal stepped back in alarm. Satyavrat Mehta said, "A paper fell." Aruni added, "Or someone inside is listening." The second possibility floated in the air and settled upon everyone's face.

Madhukar was missing. Haricharan absent. Chandrapal invisible. Yet a sound had come from inside the C-room. Whether a living person was hiding within or only a loose sheet had fallen was uncertain. Mira immediately had it written: "Unknown sound. No inference." That caution kept the story from turning into rumour.

At that moment a child ran in from the other end of the lane carrying a torn receipt. Panting, he said, "This was found under the mat in Madhukar's room." The receipt read: "Transport: four boxes; night watch; destination—C Warehouse." The signature was blurred, but the date fell in the same week when Nageshwar Jha was supposedly issued a death certificate.

"C Warehouse?" Devika said. Parmanand whispered, "The office C-room and the outside C Warehouse had different names, but the boxes moved through the same people." "Which people?" Ananya asked. Parmanand remained silent for a long time. Then a name reached his lips: "Chandrapal's man—Dharni Mahato."

At the name Dharni Mahato, the old client raised his head. "The same Dharni who once worked as a scrap dealer?" Surmani Devi said, "Not a scrap dealer—a buyer of the bones of names." Everyone went still. Scrap sacks, boxes, empty envelopes, transport, C-room—suddenly they began to join. The body of the crocodile seemed ready to emerge from paper sacks onto the scales of the marketplace.

Mira decided that Dharni Mahato would not be surrounded by a crowd at once. First his routes would be read. Bhikhari Lal said, "Outside the lane there is an old weighing scale. At night the boxes used to be weighed there." Everyone went to the scale. The iron was rusted, but fine fibres of paper clung to its platform. Devika did not touch them; she only looked and wrote: "Fibres present."

Aruni pulled a small piece of paper from beneath the platform. Only three words survived: "Original copy secure." Satyavrat Mehta's expression changed. "If the original copy is secure, then the false death certificate and the removed file may be second copies. The real box may still exist somewhere." The first thin line of hope entered the lane.

But danger came with hope. If the original box still existed, the criminals would certainly try to destroy it. Mira called the children aside. "From today, copies of the register will be kept in three places—one beside Channa Grove, one with Satyavratji, and one in the house that people would suspect least." Ananya asked, "Which house?" Surmani Devi smiled. "A widow's house. A criminal thinks her weak; weakness can be the safest curtain."

By midday news of the "C Warehouse" had spread through the village, but Mira read out a public notice to restrain rumour: "A reading was held outside the C-room. A C-17 box was seen through the ventilator. A transport receipt was found in Madhukar's room. Dharni Mahato's name has entered testimony, not judgment." The notice turned the people's anger into discipline.

That evening the old accounts of Dharni Mahato's work were read beside Channa Grove. Some called him a scrap dealer, some a transporter,

some Chandrapal's trusted man. But an old boatman said, "He used to carry boxes across the river at night." At the mention of the river everyone fell silent. Crocodile, water, boxes, paper—each word became the shadow of another.

Satyavrat Mehta asked, "Where across the river?" The old boatman replied, "At old Tetari Ghat. There is a half-sunken storehouse there. People say there is nothing in it now, but lanterns have often been seen there at night." Ananya wrote: "Tetari Ghat: possible C Warehouse."

No search party set out that night. Mira stopped them. "Darkness is the criminal's ally. We will go in light." The children's impatience did not vanish, but they understood that courage and recklessness were different things. Devika said, "Night looks beautiful on a stage; testimony needs daylight."

In the final watch of the night a bird returned to the stump in Channa Grove. This time its beak held not red thread but a fine fibre of paper. The fibre caught in a crack of the stump's bark. The dawn wind moved it, but it did not come loose—as though a name had seized a place. Surmani Devi said softly, "The grove gathers evidence too." Mira wrote: "Natural sign, not proof." Yet in her eyes was the belief that a sign can sometimes show the path toward proof.

That night the crocodile remained still for a long time on the riverbank. Its mouth faced not the water but Tetari Ghat. The old client said, "It is showing the road." Satyavrat Mehta stopped him. "We will not record the crocodile's gesture; we will record the boatman's statement." The old client smiled. "Good. Let the name survive; the story can live later."

The chapter pauses here. Chandrapal's shadow gave them a road toward the body; from the C-room to the C-17 box, from Madhukar's receipt to the C Warehouse, from Dharni Mahato to Tetari Ghat, and from paper fibres to the darkness of the river. The question is clear: in the old storehouse at Tetari, is there scrap, the true original copies, or the body everyone kept dismissing as a shadow?

Folk Song: The Shadow Goes to Tetari Ghat

Folk Tune: Boatman's Song

Show us, O shadow, show the real body at Tetari Ghat,

Do not hide the mud of your own feet now.

The shadow was caught—by which road did the body flee?

From the C-room to the box, from the box to Tetari Ghat.

Dharni the boatman said—the granary wakes at night,

Paper fibre from the bird's beak clings to the grove.

The crocodile turned its mouth and showed the road toward the ghat,

The story gave a sign; the boatman gave testimony.

Scrap, original copies, or the buried body of fear?

The dawn boat asks—who unloaded here at night?

Shadow, do not hide the mud of your feet,

Show the real body in the darkness of Tetari Ghat.



[Philosophical Undertone—Power in the Tatpurusha Compound: A traveller recounted his experience. Reply—if the relational meaning is not apprehended, then in “rajapurusha” the king qualified by kingship would merely become a qualifier of the man, without determining the kind of relation. This distinction showed how profound epistemic processes continue within small events of ordinary life. Power in the tatpurusha compound.]

CHAPTER 166

The Warehouse at Imli Ghat

There is no scrap in the warehouse—what rots there is fear kept under lock.



Opening Folk Song: The Smell of Grain in the Granary

Folk Tune: Storehouse-Granary Auspicious Song

Open the granary, O sweep away fear and open it,

Throw out the rotten silence; let the smell of grain dissolve through it.
Open the granary—fill it not with fear but with the scent of grain,
Cast out the rotten silence and bring new seed home.
Every grain speaks of labour, every husk of history,
Let the storehouse become once more a dwelling of trust.
Mother sweeps and says—the darkness will not remain now,
The window is open, the earth has dried, a new season will pass
through.
When grain fills the granary, the sleep of the household will smile,
The rotten smell of fear will leave and life will dwell again.
Mother sweeps; sunlight enters through the window,
Grain by grain, the story of labour settles in the storehouse.
A sack of new seed is lifted in; rats and envy are driven away,
Seeing the granary full, the household's sleep smiles.



There is no scrap in the storehouse—what rots there is fear kept under lock. Grain shut away for a year merely grows old; fear shut away for a year swells until it fills the boxes, and its smell tears through the lock and escapes.

The old people say a village storehouse was built for grain, not paper. Be wary of any warehouse that holds no grain yet has a heavy lock—for what is stored there is not eaten; it eats.

Dampness devours everything—sacks, seed, letters, signatures. Yet dampness has one virtue: it counts time. One who understands the language of damp can touch paper and tell which monsoon that sheet has seen. So the old carry salt and the young carry instruments—both ask the same question, only in different languages.

And the most terrible words are not written in blood. “Dead—ready”: two words, no weapon, no scream. A living person is still breathing, yet an order has already been written against his name on paper. In murder blood flows; here there is only ink.

So when the warehouse opens today there will be no cheering. Whatever is found will be counted, measured and recorded. People make noise in victory, and evidence is lost in noise. And one who has evidence in hand—what need has he of shouting?

The decision to go to the ghat in daylight had already been made. Dawn had not yet fully spread, but a line of villagers formed for Tetari Ghat. The question that had remained like a thorn through the night—does the old storehouse hold scrap, original copies, or the real body of the shadow?—would now be placed before sunlight. The fine paper fibre still clung to the stump in Channa Grove. Mira did not touch it; she entered only: “Sign remains in place.”

Before they set out, Satyavrat Mehta read the rules: “Whatever is found at the ghat will be observed before it is lifted, marked before it is handled, and witnessed before it is marked. No hand moves ahead in excitement.” The children nodded. By now they had learned that the greatest enemy of truth is sometimes not the criminal, but well-meaning haste.

Surmani Devi tucked a small packet of salt into the end of her sari. Aruni asked, “Why salt?” She smiled. “River damp eats paper. Salt reminds us how old the damp may be.” Mira had the answer recorded as half folk knowledge, half precaution. A new rule of hers was never to let folk knowledge become superstition, nor modern caution become arrogance.

The road to Tetari Ghat had little mud but many marks—cart wheels, boatmen’s feet, goat hooves, and in several places the dragging lines of heavy boxes. Bhikhari Lal knelt to inspect them. “Not fresh,” he said, “but not from before the rains either. Something heavy was moved in the time between.” Ananya wrote: “Drag marks old, but post-monsoon.”

The old tamarind tree at the ghat could be seen from a distance, half its trunk leaning toward the river and half its roots exposed in the soil. Behind those roots stood the storehouse—an old body of brick, torn sheets of tin where the roof should be, and a rusted lock on the door. At the sight of the lock Satyavrat Mehta stopped. “The lock is an outer object; the question inside is larger. We will open it lawfully.”

The old boatman stepped forward. He testified that the storehouse had been said to be empty since the previous owner’s time, yet lanterns had been seen there twice at night during the past month. “Did a boat come to the ghat?” Mira asked. The boatman replied, “No boat came to the landing, but the water was cut. Someone approached not from the ghat but through the lower current.” Devika said softly, “A net always leaves the main road and chooses the dark of the current.”

The lock was opened in the presence of a panchayat witness, the boatman, Bhikhari Lal, Satyavrat and two elderly women. As it opened, the smell inside came out—wet paper, old sacks, termites, oil, cheap perfume and trapped air. Someone tried to enter immediately, but Mira raised her hand. “Let the air come out first. Paper kept in captivity needs breath too.”

After a while no lamp was taken inside; instead a thin shaft of sunlight was allowed to enter. Across the floor lay not ash but crumbling paper. Old boxes stood against the wall, a broken table in the centre, and plastic containers in one corner. On one box, written in red chalk, was “C-17.” Aruni’s hand trembled. The “C-17 box” had become a body standing inside the warehouse.

Mira said, “No one will cheer. Evidence has been found, not victory.” The crowd fell silent. Ananya recorded the scene around the box—the box rusted, but tied with a fresh cloth strip; dried mud beneath; fine paper fibres clinging on top. Surmani Devi remembered the fibre on the stump and shivered, but said nothing. Until there was a match, a sign would remain only a sign.

The box was opened. Inside were not files but layer upon layer of envelopes. Some carried names, some numbers, some only black thumbprints. The first envelope contained a copy of Nageshwar Jha’s original mortgage deed, which the court had called unavailable. The second contained an old draft of Dharni Mahato’s statement. The third held consent papers for the land of two widows, with signatures that appeared to have been made by the same hand.

Satyavrat Mehta read each page without folding or pressing it. “These are not necessarily the true originals,” he said, “but they are doors leading toward the originals. Whoever practises on copies is preparing an attack upon the original.” The children wrote the sentence down.

The two elderly women who had been found in the C-room the day before began to weep when they saw the papers in the box. One said, “That is not my thumbprint.” The other said, “My name is spelled incorrectly. No one in my house writes it like that.” In that moment spelling became testimony. Ananya wrote: “Wrong spelling: counterfeit familiarity.” Mira added, “One who truly knows a name does not distort it.”

Inside the plastic containers were old mobile slips, empty SIM-card shells, shadow-copies of Aadhaar cards, bank chits and pension-account numbers. On one sheet, beside the names of elderly people, were written: “alone,” “son away,” “hard of hearing,” “frightens quickly.” At those four words the whole storehouse fell silent. This was not an inventory of documents; it was a survey of the field of fear.

Aruni clenched his teeth. "They measured the weakness of old people." Mira calmed him. "Not weakness—circumstance. Criminals call a person's circumstance weakness. We will write circumstance in the register." And so they wrote: "Isolation is not an opportunity for crime; it is a failure of society."

In a desk drawer they found a small device—an old voice recorder. With it lay a sheet of scripted phrases: "Your Aadhaar has been found in misuse," "your account is under investigation," "tell no one," "remain connected to the chamber." Devika shuddered as she read. "These are the lines of phone imprisonment." Satyavrat Mehta said, "The rehearsal was not only of signatures; voices too were rehearsed."

Bhikhari Lal noticed the rear wall of the warehouse. Bricks there had once been removed and then filled back with mud. At a light push the earth crumbled away, revealing an iron box within. Mira stopped everyone. "No hands. First record it." The wall, its height, number of bricks, colour of the mud—everything was written down. Respect for truth begins with respect for the place where truth is found.

The iron box was taken out. It held no cash, but five small ledgers wrapped in red cloth. The first ledger contained names and amounts. The second carried phrases such as "call complete," "fear established," "separated from family," "thumb taken." The third contained marks—K, Kh, C, Go, I. Mira stopped at "I." "Imli?" Bhikhari Lal said quietly, "The ghat."

In the fourth ledger, before many names, were written the words "dead—ready." At once Nageshwar Jha's face rose before everyone's eyes. The old client sat with his hand over his mouth. "Dead—ready"—the phrase was like an order written over a living person's breath. Surmani Devi said in a trembling voice, "One who kills the living on paper commits murder without blood."

The fifth ledger was the thinnest. It carried no name on the cover, only a curled mark like the tail of a crocodile. There were few pages inside, but every page held codes and dates. On the last page was written: "New voice list ready. Next consignment: across the river." Aruni asked, "Across the river means?" The old boatman replied, "The same current that was cut at night."

Haricharan reached the ghat at that moment. News had probably already reached him. In a loud voice he said, "This is an illegal search." Satyavrat Mehta remained calm. "You have arrived late, but spoken at exactly the right time. Your sentence will now be recorded too." Ananya wrote: "Haricharan's objection: time—after the box was opened." The time mark was small, but contained a whole portrait of unease.

Mira asked Haricharan, "Did you already know about this storehouse?" He replied, "Everyone knows the old village storehouses."

Mira asked again, “The C-17 box?” Silence. “The words ‘dead—ready?’” Silence. “The new voice list?” Silence. The three silences had different colours. Devika wrote: “First silence—defence; second—fear; third—connection.”

As evening fell, the warehouse was not merely closed; it was sealed. This time the lock was not fastened in silence. Around it stood a watch made of people’s names. The boatman, elderly women, Bhikhari Lal, the children, Satyavrat, Mira—the presence of each was recorded. The warehouse was no longer an object of darkness; it had become public memory.

At the night reading beside Channa Grove, the contents of the five ledgers were described. No victim’s full name was read without permission, but the method of the crime was made public. Mira said, “We will protect the privacy of the victim and expose the method of the criminal.” The children wrote the sentence on a separate line in their register.

That night the river was strangely calm. The crocodile did not appear. The old client said, “It has eaten its fill and is sleeping.” Surmani Devi replied, “No. Its belly is splitting. A ledger that has come outside cannot be digested.” The paper fibre on the stump in Channa Grove loosened in the wind and fell to the ground. In the dust it looked like an extremely small, extremely light witness searching for its place. Ananya did not pick it up; she drew a circle around it and wrote: “Fibre fallen: comparison pending.”

The chapter ends here. The storehouse at Imli Ghat proved to hold not scrap but a warehouse of fear, papers, voices and preparations for death. The C-17 box, five red ledgers, voice rehearsals, the list of elderly people’s circumstances, and “next consignment: across the river”—all of it is pushing the story once more toward the darkness of the current.

Folk Song: Rotten Fear in the Granary

Folk Tune: Storehouse–Granary Folk Melody

Release it, O granary, release the trapped fear into the air,

Join the true voice of the one whose throat was turned into rehearsal.

No grain—the granary had been filled with fear,

Five red ledgers carried the circumstances of the old.

Voice rehearsals, next consignment across the river,

Stealing the rhythm of names to build a market of threats.

The victim's privacy protected, the method read aloud,

The belly of the C-17 box made everyone tremble.

The crocodile's belly splits; the ledgers have come out,

The paper fibre falls orphaned onto the earth.

Granary, release the trapped fear into the air now.



[Philosophical Undertone—Analysis of the Karmadharaya Compound: In a karmadharaya compound such as “nilotpalam anaya”—“bring the blue lotus”—the relation of qualifier and qualified between blueness and lotus, the meanings of the two nominal bases, is understood without a case-ending after the qualifier word. Analysis of the karmadharaya compound.]

CHAPTER 167

A Voice Across the River

The voice is made across the river, but it is the people on this bank who drown.



Opening Folk Song: Mother, Know the True Voice

Folk Tune: Mother-and-Child Sohar

Know it, mother, know the true strain,

Among a million copies, count your child's own note.

Mother, your ear knows your child's true tone,

However many imitate it, affection reveals the living soul.

First ask the name of the village, one thing from childhood,

If the answer carries no scent of home, stop that road.

Do not obey the command of fear; call others to your side,

Know the loving voice of your own child with your heart.

A mother's wisdom is a lamp that defeats the swindler's night,

Before the truth of love, the counterfeit voice falls away.

First ask the village's name, some sign from childhood,

If the answer does not smell of home, know it for a fraudster's speech.

In fear's haste, send money nowhere,

Call neighbours and kin and have the matter checked twice.



The voice is made across the river, but it is the people on this bank who drown. The current separates the two villages, so people think the far bank is distant. But no current can stop a ringing phone; it does not search for a boat on the water, it goes straight into the ear.

The old people say a mother can recognize her son's voice even with her eyes closed. But a voice can be imitated—rhythm, pauses, pitch, everything. What cannot be copied is breath. When a son speaks, his breath laughs between words, tires, forgets. A counterfeit breath does only one thing: it frightens—and it frightens at one unvarying pace.

A fraudster's greatest weapon is not a pistol but isolation. "Tell no one"—within those four words an entire prison is built. No walls, no lock, no guard—only one sentence, and a person becomes captive on his own veranda, beside his own tulsi altar, inside his own home.

Nor does the fraudster ask for a huge sum the first time. First a small amount, then a medium one, then the household savings. A lock is tested first with a small key; when a person's suspicion grows tired, he himself pushes his ledger forward.

So the village's new rule was simply this: whenever a voice says, "Stay alone," call someone to your side. Whenever a voice says, "Hurry," stop. And any voice that cannot give its own name, designation, and office is no court at all—it is only a room across the river with "Public Service" written on the door.

The rotting fear stored in the granary had already been released to the air, and after the mansion-warehouse at Tetari Ghat was sealed, night could no longer descend early upon the village. Darkness still came, but people's eyes were open. The words in the five red ledgers—"next consignment: across the river"—remained like a thorn caught in every ear. The village across the river was not far, yet the current between them was so deep that at times even a nearby place felt like a foreign land.

At daybreak Meera gathered everyone by Channa Grove. She said, "We will cross the river, but not as a procession. Those who trade in fear are not caught by a crowd; they are caught by procedure." The children wrote the first line in their register: "Journey across the river: with the discipline of evidence."

Satyavrat Mehta examined the copy of the ledger again. His finger stopped at the words "new voice list." He said, "These people used to make false copies of paper. Now they manufacture false presence through a voice. A son who lives away from home will have his voice sent as law to his elderly parents. This is the crime's new mouth."

Ananya asked, "How will we find evidence in a voice?" Satyavrat replied, "A voice leaves marks not only in a device but also in fear—in the body of the one who heard it; in the sequence of what was said; in the timing of the money that left; in the method by which silence was imposed." Aruni wrote: "Voice evidence: body, time, sequence, transaction, silence."

To cross the river, the old boatman brought out his small boat. Water had collected in its belly, so he first scooped it out with a bowl. He said, "The man who leaves water in his boat will blame the current. First one must empty one's own boat." Meera smiled. The sentence became a signal to everyone to clear out his or her own faults first.

Meera, Satyavrat, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Bhikhari Lal, Surmani Devi, and two witnesses sat in the boat. The crowd remained at the ghat. People wanted to go along, but Meera said, "The boat of truth needs trust, not a crowd." The stump of Channa Grove faded in the distance, but its shadow floated on the water for a long time.

When the boat reached midstream, it trembled lightly. At that very moment a call came to Aruni's phone from an unknown number. No name appeared on the screen, but the ring sounded so loud it seemed to rise from inside the river. Everyone fell silent. Meera signalled: answer it, but on speaker. Aruni responded with a trembling thumb.

A voice came from the other side: "Your name is under investigation. Tell no one. Stay on the line right now." It was a man's voice, but its rhythm was rehearsed. It wore counterfeit clothing made of legal words. Aruni looked at Meera. She gestured with her hand: speak less, listen more.

Aruni asked, "Which department?" The answer came: "The higher office. Ask too many questions and you will be arrested." Satyavrat Mehta quickly wrote on a sheet: "Threat in response to questioning: method." Ananya noted the time. Devika began recording the sequence of sentences. The boat seemed no longer to move in midstream; even the current appeared to pause and listen to the testimony.

The caller said, "There has been an improper transaction from your account. Voice matching will be done immediately for verification. Who is at home?" At this question Surmani Devi's face changed. The words in the five red ledgers—"alone," "son away," "fear quickly"—came alive again. Meera whispered, "He is asking about isolation."

Aruni said, "I am in a boat." The answer came at once: "Do not lie. Your location is visible." Bhikhari Lal looked at the river and smiled. "It can see the location, but not the current." Satyavrat wrote: "Lie of technological fear: omniscience." A criminal pretends to be all-seeing in order to steal a person's judgment.

Meera signalled not to end the call. The caller now began asking for "family names." Aruni turned the question back: "Who is my father?" A moment of silence. Then the voice hardened. "Names are not disclosed during an investigation." In that pause the joints of the lie rattled. Devika wrote: "Pause at family name: list incomplete."

As the boat approached the bank, the call abruptly ended. The first house on the bank had a tulsi altar. An elderly couple sat there—Madhukant Jha and his wife Kamala Devi. The moment Kamala Devi saw the phone she began to cry. "Yesterday this voice came pretending to be my son. It said, 'Mother, tell no one, there is a police case.'"

Meera did not immediately ask her for a formal statement. First she was given water. Then they asked, "Tell only what you wish to tell. You have a right over the whole story." Kamala Devi slowly began to unfold it. First came the son's voice on the phone, then an officer's voice, then fear, then money leaving the account. "The moment I heard my son's name, I believed it," she said.

Satyavrat Mehta asked, "What was different in your son's voice?" Madhukant Jha replied, "The tone was like my son's, but the breath was not his. My son laughs between sentences when he speaks. This voice only frightened us." Ananya wrote: "Recognition through breath." A voice may be counterfeited, but it is difficult to imitate the rhythm of an intimate relationship.

Kamala Devi said the phone had ordered: “Keep the mobile to your ear. If you go outside, the case will worsen.” She sat for two hours in that invisible captivity. Though veranda, courtyard, and tulsi altar were all around her, they became a prison. Meera wrote: “Digital arrest: turning the home into a cell without walls.”

The bank slips were examined. Money had gone out three times—the first amount small, the second medium, the third the household savings. Bhikhari Lal asked, “Why a small sum first?” Satyavrat said, “The lock of trust is opened first with a small key. The great theft occurs after suspicion grows tired.”

Behind Madhukant Jha’s house, in an old veranda, the shadow of a young man appeared. He tried to run, but the boatman’s son stopped him. Two SIM cards, a small scrap of paper, and a slip covered with phone numbers were found in his pocket. Beside some names were notes: “mother will cry,” “father breaks quickly,” “son in Dubai,” “daughter in Delhi.” Devika trembled as she read them.

At first the young man said, “I know nothing.” Then, “I only provide numbers.” Then, “I do not make the voices.” Three sentences, three steps. Meera said, “A person who keeps reducing and changing his own guilt is approaching the threshold of truth, but has not yet entered.” The register recorded: “Three defences: ignorance, limited role, distance.”

The young man’s name turned out to be Naval. He worked at a cyber shop across the river. The shop was called “Public Service Centre.” Bhikhari Lal laughed. “Public service turned into public fear.” Meera stopped him: “Do not record the laughter; record the fact.” The fact was that copies of Aadhaar cards, pension accounts, mobile numbers, and information about family migration were all collected at that centre.

When they reached the Public Service Centre, the door stood half open. The computer screens were off, but dust had recently been wiped from the table. Government-scheme posters covered the wall, a jungle of wires lay below, and a microphone stood in one corner under a cloth. Satyavrat said, “Where service information accumulates, trust must be guarded twice over. Otherwise service becomes raw material for crime.”

A sheet in the drawer read: “voice samples: son, police, bank, customs, court.” At the word court, a chill ran through everyone. The courthouse veranda, the record room, the mansion-warehouse at Tetari Ghat—all joined into one line. The criminals were borrowing not only papers but the voices of institutions.

Without touching it, Ananya examined a sheet lying beside the microphone. It said: “Mother, hurry, I am trapped.” A cry burst from Kamala Devi. “That is exactly what it said!” Meera held her hand. “This sentence no longer belongs to them. It is evidence now.” Transforming grief into evidence was one of the hardest moments of all.

Naval finally broke. He said the voices were created in a distant city, but the lists of names, relationships, migration, banking, and fears were sent from here. "I only sent data," he said. Satyavrat Mehta answered sternly, "If a human circumstance is called data, half the crime disappears from sight. What you sent was not data. You sent the breath of a household."

By evening the Public Service Centre was sealed. For the first time the people across the river understood that a ringing phone was not only a convenience; sometimes it was an invisible snare. In a public lesson Meera said, "The first weapon of anyone who frightens you by phone is isolation. When someone says, 'Tell no one,' tell a trusted person first."

Back at Channa Grove that night, Kamala Devi's full name was recorded with her consent, but not the amount of money. Her son's real voice came from abroad on the boatman's phone. Crying, he said, "Mother, trust even my voice, but never obey an order of fear." Hearing this, Surmani Devi opened her little pouch of salt and sprinkled some on the earth. "Dry the dampness out of the voice."

That night Old Budhba's Ghost appeared near the stump, but this time it was not his mouth—his ears were shining. The Black Ghost seemed to retreat over the distant water. The crocodile did not appear, but foam rose in the middle of the river. It rose and settled again and again, as though someone's breath were being held beneath the water. Ananya wrote in the register: "The voice across the river has been caught; the real throat is still far away."

The chapter ends here. Tetari Ghat's "new voice list" has been traced to the Public Service Centre across the river. Counterfeit captivity through voice, lists of elderly people's circumstances, theft of family rhythms, and counterfeit institutional threats have all joined into a single web.

Folk Song: Mother, Do Not Obey the Command of Fear

Folk Tune: Pardesiya

*Do not obey it, mother, do not obey the command of fear,
Among counterfeit voices, know the rhythm of your own love.
From across the river the son's true voice came,
"Mother, know my voice"—the phone itself seemed to weep.
The counterfeit throat said, send the money now,
The true son wept and said, do not obey the command of fear.*

*Kamala Devi's name was written with her consent,
Not the amount—only the dignity of her pain was preserved.
Surmani scattered salt and dried the dampness from the voice,
Old Budhba's Ghost's ears shone in the night.
Son in a distant land, hold your mother's breath,
Among counterfeit voices, fill the rhythm of your own love.*

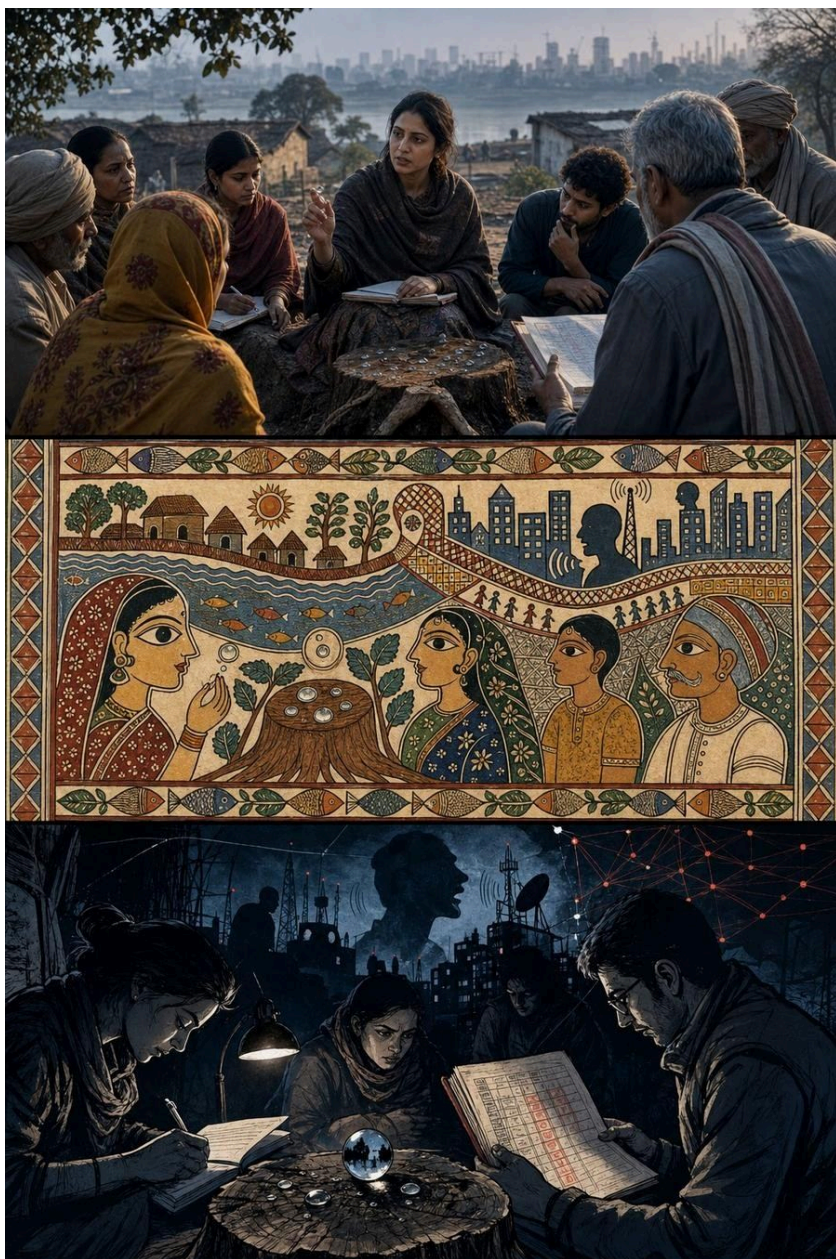


[Philosophical Undertone—Reply to the objection concerning activity: Even on the theory of effort, an objection may arise in the case of a person whose effort is suited to pounding grain when one says, "He is cooking." Therefore effort, too, must be understood as specifically suited to the meaning of the verbal root. Reply to the objection concerning activity.]

CHAPTER 168

The Throat of the City

*The city's voice can be caught, but not its throat—the throat always
lies still higher.*



Opening Folk Song: Let the Village Name Awaken the City

Folk Tune: City Batgabani

Ring, O bell, ring the village bell in the city,

Wake the solid buildings with the voice from an earthen doorway.

Let the village name reach the city and ring like a bell,

Let pension, bank, and lawsuit all find the road of truth.

The voice rising from the mud-walled door will climb the tall building,

The scent of earth will change the sealed air of glass rooms.

The village is no longer alone; the city's ears have awakened,

Behind one name stands an entire community.

Sing the Batgabani along every road—the right shall not be stopped,

The city's throat will open before the village's bright name.

The roads to pension, bank, and courthouse are no longer empty,

Behind one name stands the whole village—not a little thing.

When the scent of earth enters, the sealed air changes,

Even the ears of the tall building begin to hold the village voice.



The old people say no village name walks to the city on its own feet. Someone carries it—sometimes in a form, sometimes in a receipt, sometimes in a free scan, sometimes in the hands of someone who speaks sweetly and says, “I’ll clean up the system for you.” And once a name travels out, it never quite returns; it comes back only as a ringing bell.

Noise is the finest curtain. In a village even a whisper may be heard, while in a city a person may scream and still no one hears. So whoever wishes to hide does not take a room in a village; he takes one amid horns and loudspeakers—the crowd itself becomes his door.

And the saddest thing is that what is sold in that room is not merchandise—it is sorrow. Whose son lives far away, whose pension is stopped, whose case is pending, who struggles to breathe at night—there these things are called a “list.” Once a person’s sorrow becomes a list, his name is sold before his body is.

So the village must now do two things: guard its names, and give its suffering dignity rather than secrecy. Pain will not be hidden, but neither will it be stripped naked in the marketplace. A victim’s story must

become testimony, not spectacle—that is the difference between justice and a crowd.

“The real throat is still far away”—that line echoed through the night. After the voice across the river had been caught, a new question rose in the village: if the voice is made in the city, how does the village’s name reach there? The question was not like the ringing of a phone; it was like a worm moving through the soil. Everything above seemed quiet, while the whole earth below crackled. Morning dew rested on the stump of Channa Grove, and in every drop someone’s name seemed to be written backward.

Meera gathered everyone. “Today we will follow the voice,” she said, “but more than the voice we will follow the road taken by the name. A machine can fabricate a throat. But where did it get the correct house, the correct old age, the correct son abroad, the correct land dispute?” Ananya wrote the first line: “The throat is the city’s, the name is the village’s; between them lies the broker’s road.”

Satyavrat Mehta reopened the fifth page of the red ledger. It bore the heading “circumstance list.” In the next column beside the names of elderly people were their family vulnerabilities—whose son was away, whose land was in litigation, whose pension had stopped, who had hospital debt, whose bank passbook had been left at a Public Service Centre. Satyavrat said softly, “Crime does not merely steal a voice; it measures sorrow.”

Naresh, the boy from the Public Service Centre across the river whom everyone had seen the previous day, came trembling to Channa Grove. “I fill forms, keep Aadhaar copies, upload pension applications,” he said. “People from the city sometimes came and said, ‘Sell us your old registers. You’ll get scrap value.’” Meera stopped him at once. “Scrap value—or the price of information?” Naresh’s mouth went dry.

Naresh explained that two years earlier a man had come wearing the logo of a city mobile company on his shirt, a shiny bag in his hand, sweetness in his speech. “Give us the old papers to scan,” he had said, “and in exchange we will clean the system for free.” Naresh had been pleased, thinking the slow computer would be repaired. The scanned papers did come back, but some copies travelled to the city without his knowledge.

Devika asked, “What was the man’s name?” Naresh lowered his head. “The receipt said M. Services. He called himself a friend of Madhukar.” At Madhukar’s name a stir moved through the crowd. The shadow of the missing Madhukar had stretched as far as the far bank. Aruni wrote: “Madhukar: bridge between voice and paper.”

Bhikhari Lal, who knew how terror could be made from the keys of a court, examined Naresh’s bag. Inside were copies of old receipts, a broken pen drive, and a printed sheet: “Village Contact List: Senior Citizens

Priority.” There was no government seal on it, but it had stolen the language of government forms. Inside the phrase “senior citizens,” the loneliness of the elderly had been imprisoned. Surmani Devi looked at the page and said, “These people did not see elders. They saw prey.”

Meera did not read the whole sheet aloud. She read only its structure—name, age, family location, bank branch, litigation link, health concern. “We will not turn the victim’s private pain into a marketplace again,” she said. “Read the method of the crime, not the nakedness of the pain.” The children nodded together. Privacy, learned during the earlier watches, was becoming a habit.

That day they decided to go to the city. The city was not far, but in the village imagination it had always been a dark room where names became files, voices became commerce, and people became numbers. Meera prepared only a small team—Satyavrat Mehta, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Naresh, Bhikhari Lal, and the elderly client. Surmani Devi said, “I will not go. I will guard the grove. As long as the roots of the names are in the village, the city’s throat cannot run away completely.”

As they went to catch the bus, a light mist lay over the river. The crocodile was not visible, but beside the ghat a long tail-mark was pressed into the mud. The elderly client looked at it and nearly spoke, then fell silent. Meera smiled. “No signs today. Look after your ticket.” Everyone laughed. In so much darkness, the small laugh was not evidence, but it was practice in courage.

The moment they stepped down at the city bus stand, they met a flood of sound—calls, horns, shops, mobile ringtones, loudspeakers, abuse, bargaining. Aruni covered his ears. “Here every voice is eating another voice.” Satyavrat Mehta replied, “In this noise, a counterfeit throat can hide easily.” Ananya noted: “City: the curtain of noise.”

Naresh led them to the address printed on the old M. Services slip. A narrow lane, wires hanging above, a drain below, a glass door in between. The name on the door had changed to “Mitra Data Solutions.” Inside were five computers, two young men, a woman reading numbers from a register, and a closed room from which a recorded fragment could be heard: “A warrant has been issued against you...” Devika shuddered. “This is not theatre,” she said. “This is theatre turned criminal.”

The young man at the counter smiled at first. “What service do you need?” Satyavrat Mehta quietly placed the old slip before him. “Was M. Services here?” Half the smile vanished. “That old company closed. We are separate now.” Meera replied at once, “The name changed, the lane is the same, the computers are the same, the registers are the same. Separate how?” The young man’s fingers froze over the keyboard.

At that moment a voice came from the closed room: “Babuji, do not disconnect the call.” The elderly client went pale. It was the same cadence

that had imprisoned him; the words were different, the breath the same. In a trembling voice he said, "The throat that held me captive is here." Meera took his hand. "The throat has been recognized. We still have to see the body."

With her training in performance, Devika listened to the rise and fall of the voice. "What is speaking inside is not a single throat. Some sentences are recorded, some are live. Machine and human being are working together to manufacture fear." Ananya wrote: "Mixed throat: half recording, half threat." The line would later prove crucial, because the criminals hid human agency behind machinery.

Bhikhari Lal kept looking around. In a corner he saw a label on a box: "C-Group: Rural Elderly." He remembered the court's "C-Room," "17/C," and Chandrapal's shadow. Quietly he pointed it out to Satyavrat. Satyavrat put a finger on the slip and asked, "Who is C-Group?" Before the young man could answer, the inner door opened.

The man who emerged was not Chandrapal. Yet he carried the same confidence seen in a guard posted at the door of an absent owner. Light beard, unease in his eyes, headphones in his hand. "Client data is confidential," he said. Meera replied at once, "Confidentiality is the victim's right, not the criminal's shield."

The man tried to avoid giving his name. Naresh gathered courage and stepped forward. "This is the same man who took papers from my centre." The man laughed. "Mistaken identity." But the elderly client whispered, "Do not recognize the voice; recognize the breath. I heard this breath between sentences on the phone." Devika said immediately, "Breath too can testify, if its sequence is captured."

A brief struggle followed. The young man tried to shut down the computers. Aruni did not photograph the screen with his mobile; he looked to Meera. "Not private lists without authority," she said. "First witnesses present, then procedure." Satyavrat Mehta phoned a local lawyer, and Bhikhari Lal went out to inform the police station. The slowness was painful, but Meera said, "Haste often kills evidence."

Meanwhile Ananya noticed two registers under the table, wrapped in old newspaper. Their covers read "Voice Batch 3" and "Village Story Signals." At the words "Village Story Signals," everyone stopped. The registers were not opened, not photographed; only their existence was recorded before three witnesses. Meera said, "This is the moment in which stories are stolen. People's lives have been turned into scripts for fear."

A little later the local police arrived. At first they tried to dismiss it as "an ordinary cyber case." Satyavrat Mehta calmly but firmly read out the chain: the mansion-warehouse at Tetari Ghat, the red ledger, the far-bank list, Naresh's statement, the M. Services slip, the C-Group box, the

elderly client's recognition through breath. The sub-inspector's face changed. This no longer looked like phone fraud; it looked like organized theft of names.

On a computer screen, in full view of the police, a line stood open: "Chandra 2: old file active." Chandrapal's full name was not there, but the shadow flashed again. The blue light of the screen fell on every face in the dark room and for a moment made them all the same colour. Aruni whispered, "The shadow has entered the city's throat." Satyavrat Mehta cautioned, "Chandra 2 may be Chandrapal, or it may not. We will not turn inference into judgment." Meera watched with satisfaction. The children were learning the discipline of evidence.

The seizure procedure began. Naresh's statement was recorded. The elderly client's voice identification was recorded separately. Devika submitted a note on the "mixture of recorded and live threat." Ananya wrote in the register: "The city's throat does not stand alone. It is fed by village sorrow, office data, and a broker's memory." Reading the line, Meera let out a long breath, as though the chapter had found its central bone.

By evening the team returned to the village. Surmani Devi sat guard at Channa Grove, with women, elders, and children behind her. Meera summarized: "We found the throat in the city, half the body, and the shadow turned again toward the name Chandra." Surmani Devi opened her pouch of salt. "A throat rots without salt; a voice without truth." She sprinkled a little at the root of the stump.

That night's reading did not expose any victim's private story. Instead it read the map of the crime—copies from the Public Service Centre, city data brokers, voice practice, C-Group, Village Story Signals, Chandra 2. For the first time the villagers saw how many stations their sorrow crossed before becoming a trade in fear. The elderly client said, "I thought there was one person on the phone. Today I learned there was an entire marketplace."

That night the crocodile appeared again on the riverbank. This time its mouth faced the city, its tail lay in the village mud, and the middle of its body was submerged. The Black Ghost circled over the water; the Bright Spirit stood in the shade of Channa Grove. Meera heard people's accounts of these sights, but wrote in the register: "Folk vision: the body of the crime divided between two places."

The chapter ends with this understanding: the city's throat has been caught, but its true larynx has not yet been fully exposed. The village name travelled to the city through public service, registers, pensions, banks, and lawsuits; the city converted that name into the language of fear. "Chandra 2" now stands as a new dark doorway.

Folk Song: The City's Throat, the Village's Name

Folk Tune: City Lament

*Do not, O city, turn the name into a language of fear,
Return the village's tears to their own true home.
The village pension, lawsuit, the migrant son's name,
Reached the city and became merchandise made of fear.
From public service to broker, from rehearsal to C-Group,
On the phone there was not one person but an entire market's mouth.
The crocodile's tail lay in mud, its mouth toward the city,
Half the body of the crime in the village, half among glass walls.
The doorway named Chandra Two stands in the dark,
The throat has been caught; the larynx still hides higher up.
City, do not turn our name into a language of fear,*



[Philosophical Undertone—Objection concerning past and future usage: In “Chaitra cooks rice” and “Rice is cooked by Chaitra,” the number expressed by the finite verb is related respectively to the agent and the object. The traditional rule is that number is related to what the finite verb denotes. Objection concerning past and future usage.]

CHAPTER 169

The Door of Chandra Two

*At the doorway the peon is caught; the inner room keeps changing its
own lock.*



Opening Folk Song: Clean the Moon

Folk Tune: Madhushravani Moon Song

Wash it, sister, wash the stain from the moon,

Cast off the counterfeit shine and seek the true ray.
Whether there be Chandra Two or ten, the true moon is one,
The awakened love of the people will wash away the kohl-dark stain.
The bright platter of the sky looks upon everyone equally,
Behind false glitter it records the ray of truth.
Sisters, raise questions within the Madhushravani song,
Remove the shell of the stain and bring the true face forth.
The moon shares its light; let rights be shared as well,
Open the door of the dark chamber and fashion a bright day.
In the circle of Madhushravani song, flowers and leaves are arranged,
And among the stories, questions too are stitched one by one into song.
The bright platter of the sky descends into every courtyard,
With the moon, let rights too be shared equally.



The old people say that adding a number to a name is one of the oldest tricks. Chandra One, Chandra Two—the moment a number is added, the name becomes half one's own and half someone else's. If caught, one can say, "It was only a code"; if not caught, the name keeps doing its work. The number is not an account—it is an escape door.

And the greatest theft is not of money but of trust. The names before which people once opened their doors—uncle, Panditji, Babu—are lifted and placed inside a phone. That is the looting of the village's oldest capital. Money can return; trust, once stolen, may not return for years.

And what we call a new crime today is often only the interest accrued on an old injustice. A person whose case has dragged on for ten years trembles at the word "court." The fraudster does not create that trembling—he merely rents it. Where justice arrives late, the fraudster arrives on time.

So look at the moon. The brighter it is, the more clearly its stain can be seen. The greater a name, the more nakedly its blemish can rise into

view—one needs only eyes willing to stay awake through the night, and courage enough to count the stains.

The name that had stood like a dark doorway did not go home. “Chandra 2” remained hanging on the stump of Channa Grove all night. People went home, but the name did not. It stayed in the air, above the river, at the edge of old people’s pillows. Whenever someone closed his eyes, the shadow of those two glowing digits appeared on a screen—Chandra, and behind it another Chandra.

At dawn Meera gathered everyone again. “A repeated name will not be treated as coincidence,” she said. “A crime that wishes to hide its old face often keeps half the name, so that recognition survives and escape remains possible.” Ananya wrote in the register: “Repeated name: a bridge between memory and deception.”

Satyavrat Mehta reopened the slip they had found. After “Chandra 2” were three dots. They were not ordinary punctuation; the sentence seemed deliberately left unfinished. Satyavrat said, “When a criminal refuses to write a full name, he signs with his own fear.”

Aruni asked, “Could Chandra 2 be Chandrapal’s second name?” Meera replied, “It could. But a hasty conclusion helps the criminal. First we will see where Chandra appears in the papers, where it appears in the voices, where in the registers, and where in fear.”

From the seized list at the Public Service Centre, Devika selected three numbers. The first belonged across the river, the second in the city, and the third to a place that did not appear plainly on any map but repeatedly surfaced in bank messages. It had been saved as “Chandra Service Office.” Bhikhari Lal laughed. “Service again!” Meera turned stern. “Crime hides its teeth inside the best words.”

The Chandra Service Office stood behind the city’s old vegetable market. Outside, a blue-lettered board read: “Documents, Loans, Pension, Insurance, Online Assistance.” Inside was a crowd of elderly people. One had come to fill a pension form, another to correct a ration card, another to obtain a copy of a land record. Trust was being sold at every counter, and helplessness sat on every chair.

Meera signalled the team to stand apart. She wanted the office to open in its natural voice. One clerk was loudly saying, “Anyone whose son is abroad must complete video verification.” Another said, “Your bank may be frozen; submit the documents quickly.” A third leaned close to an old woman’s ear and whispered, “Tell no one at home, or the work will be stopped.”

At that sentence Meera stopped. “Tell no one”—the first mantra of digital fear. The phrase had appeared with Kamala Devi across the river, in the city voice-room, at the Public Service Centre—everywhere.

Satyavrat immediately wrote: "Construction of isolation: the crime's first act."

Ananya noticed an old file of records in a corner. On its cover were the words: "Elder Assistance, Land Dispute, Migrant Son." The three categories exactly matched the circumstance list read the previous day. She quietly called Devika. Inside the file were names, mobile numbers, family relationships, case numbers, bank branches, and a separate column titled "Emotional Signals."

"Emotional signals?" Aruni whispered. The entries read: "mother cries quickly," "father fears an official's name," "widow insecure about land," "grandson abroad," "old court case." Aruni's hand began to tremble. This was not merely information; it was a measurement of where a human being might break.

The moment Satyavrat Mehta saw the file, he understood that the darkness of the court record room had flowed into the city. Case numbers, dates of adjournment, land disputes, stopped pension entries—these could not all have come from ordinary public-service papers. Someone was quietly building a road among government office, court, bank, panchayat, and marketplace.

The man behind the counter introduced himself as Chandramohan. Middle-aged, neatly dressed, a faint tilak on his forehead, manufactured compassion in his voice. When Meera introduced herself, he smiled at once. "I only serve the poor. Where can a poor person go without paperwork?" Meera replied, "Between service through paper and theft through paper lies a line as thin as sand."

Chandramohan's smile trembled for a moment. "There are many people named Chandra here. It is not fair to suspect me because of Chandra 2." Satyavrat caught his sentence. "We have not yet mentioned Chandra 2 to you." Silence fell in the room. What the guilty mind hears first sometimes escapes through the mouth on its own.

Bhikhari Lal looked toward an inner corner. A small drawer stood half open. Inside were seals, blank stamped papers, and two mobile phones. One phone contained saved contacts: "C-Group," "Madhukar," "Naresh Old," "Chandra 1." At the sight of "Chandra 1," every eye turned to Chandramohan.

Chandramohan said immediately, "Those are business codes." Meera quietly asked, "Who is Chandra 1?" He fell silent. Satyavrat said, "If Chandra 2 is a business code, Chandra 1 should appear on the first page of the account. Show us the page." Chandramohan's throat went dry.

At that moment a soft rustle came from the back room. Aruni and Devika went in. There they found an old scanner, a voice-recording device, and sheets pasted on the wall: "Court Officer Voice," "Bank

Verification Voice,” “Police Warning Voice,” “Son-in-Crisis Voice.” A checkmark stood beside each.

One sheet was different. Its title was “Use of Old Trusted Names.” Beneath it were written: “Batuk Babu, Panditji, Chandrapal Kaka, Court Babu.” Devika froze. Chandrapal’s name was no longer merely the name of an old figure in the crime; it had become counterfeit currency of trust circulating through phones.

Meera asked Chandramohan, “Who is Chandrapal Kaka?” At first he laughed. “An old village man.” Then he said, “Everyone knew him.” Then silence. Satyavrat said, “The name before which people used to open a door has been used to sell fear over the phone.”

A crowd gathered outside the office. An old farmer said, “These are the people who prepared my papers.” A widow said, “He told me he would fix my court date.” The father of a migrant son said, “I do not even know when he wrote down my son’s number.” Meera stopped everyone. “The crowd will not deliver judgment. First the lists will be secured.”

Ananya repeated the children’s method: name, consent, document, reason, harm. She asked each elderly person, “May we write your story?” Some said yes, some no. Where consent was withheld, “confidential” was written in place of the name. Meera said, “The hunger for truth must not eat the body of privacy.”

On the second phone in the drawer was a voice message. The voice was heavy, slow, almost familiar. It said, “Old-case families first. Whoever has been eaten by the court will be eaten quickly by the phone.” At those words the veranda’s recital of dates, the dust of the record room, the scrap sack, Tetari Ghat—all seemed to tremble at once.

Satyavrat Mehta closed his eyes. “This crime is not only a product of new technology,” he said. “It is interest on old injustice. Those whom the court kept waiting have their fear turned into a counterfeit court by these people.” Aruni wrote: “New theft from old delay.”

Chandramohan now lost control. “I am not alone,” he shouted. “The lists came from above. Old cases, land, pension—everything arrived prepared. I only matched them.” Meera asked, “Who is above?” He fell silent. His lips moved twice without sound; on the third attempt he whispered, “Chandra 1.”

Everyone in the room heard the two words. Chandra 1—the first shadow behind Chandra 2. Chandramohan was only the second doorway. Where was the first? Chandrapal? Or someone else hiding behind Chandrapal’s name? Satyavrat Mehta said, “The name may be old and the hand new. That is why the chain of evidence must not be left incomplete.”

Bhikhari Lal lifted a thick ledger. Dust lay on the cover, but the pages inside were clean. The first page read: “Old Trust List.” The second: “Dead, Disabled, Litigants, Children Abroad.” On the third, underlined in red: “Channa Grove Area.” Ananya could not help saying, “They had been reading us long before we began reading them.”

Meera did not close the ledger. She placed it on cloth and had it sealed. “Those for whom the habit of reading others became power will now be read before the people.” The office board was not torn down, but beneath it a temporary notice was pasted: “Under Investigation: Do Not Hand Over Documents Without Collective Verification.”

That evening there was a public reading at Channa Grove. Chandramohan’s full name was not read aloud because the investigation was ongoing, but the machinery of “Chandra 2” was explained. People understood that the face of crime might be a person, but its body was built from paper, voice, fear, service, pension, court, and bank.

Surmani Devi opened her pouch of salt. “Chandra Two has been found; now search for Chandra One. But be careful—the brighter the moon, the more clearly its blemish shows.” Old Budhba’s Ghost seemed to smile behind the stump—or perhaps the wind had moved; no one could say for certain.

When night thickened, a faint splash came from the river. This time the crocodile’s whole body did not appear, only its eyes. The Black Ghost seemed to lay a layer of darkness across them, while the Bright Spirit removed it from the shade of Channa Grove. Ananya wrote: “Chandra 2 opened; Chandra 1 remains inside the dark.”

From the Chandra Service Office came the Old Trust List, emotional signals, institutional voices, and the shadow of Chandra 1. The marketplace of digital fear now reached directly into old court cases, land disputes, pensions, migrant sons, and Chandrapal’s name.

Folk Song: The Blemish of Chandra Two

Folk Tune: Moon Lament

Take it off, Chandra, take off the counterfeit light,

Wash the feet of those whose trust you stole.

Chandra Two, a bright name with a dark room inside,

Stole the trust-list and fashioned a map of fear.

A peon at the doorway, an inner lock that keeps changing,

Every victim's weakness turned into a travelling voice.
Surmani held up the salt and said—seek Chandra One,
Measure the blemish of the bright moon by naming it.
The crocodile became only an eye, gleaming on the water,
Chandra One still glowed inside the womb of darkness.

Chandra Two, take off your counterfeit light,
A peon at the door, the inner lock changing still,



[Philosophical Undertone—In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's Tattvacintamani, word or verbal cognition is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence—expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda. The thinkers concede that in the case of a parrot or a deceiver, the real causal ground—the speaker's true cognition or intention—is absent. Thus the Shabda-khanda establishes verbal cognition as a distinct source of knowledge while examining these conditions and objections.]

CHAPTER 170

Opening Chandra One

Strip away the shell, and Chandra One and Chandra Two are two clefts in the same darkness.



Opening Folk Song: Let the True Moon Rise

Folk Tune: Kohbar Moon-Mangal

Rise, O moon, let the true moon rise,

Let the paper moon of falsehood fade with dawn.

The paper-made moon of deception will sink with the night,

The true moon in the courtyard will bring a new gift.

In the Kohbar painting let fish, bamboo, and lotus bloom,

Let shared life, clear speech, and love show the way.

The light that is shared—that alone is the moon's honour,

What merely flashes illusion is no sky at all.

Let the true moon rise, let every face grow bright,

Fill every home and doorway with the cool light of truth.

On the Kohbar wall, the pairings of fish, lotus, and bamboo,

Shared life, clear speech—this is the thread of love.

What shares light alone is the true sky,

Let illusion's glitter fall away and gentle radiance remain.



The old people say some names grow larger than their bodies. Such names sometimes do more work after death than while alive, because a living person can be questioned and a name cannot. So thieves do not steal the person; they steal the name—and a stolen name never goes to the police station to file a complaint.

The paternal voice is one of the oldest locks. “Babu,” “Kaka,” “Panditji,” “court”—the moment the village hears such words, heads bow on their own. That bowing is good when responsibility stands behind the voice. Now the voice remains, responsibility has flown away, and the surviving bow is no longer reverence but a noose.

And the saddest thing is that the fraudster does not invent a new fear. He wakes an old one. Tell someone whose lawsuit has dragged on for ten years that “the date will be postponed,” and he trembles at once. The fraudster does not frighten us from nothing; he only lays a hand upon the fear the system has been storing inside us for years.

So the cure for this darkness is not “keep silent.” The cure is “speak.” Once a mantra is understood, half its fear dies; and fear spoken before ten

listening ears shrinks by half again. Listening is itself a form of watchfulness.

When the name of the first Chandra hidden inside the darkness was heard, the crowd at the Chandra Service Office did not thin; it grew denser. People understood that the man caught was only the peon at the door; the inner room was still locked. Meera placed a hand on the sealed ledger and said, "To decide in haste that the first Chandra is Chandrapal—or that he is someone entirely new—could both be mistakes. We must open the shell of the name, not worship the name."

Satyavrat Mehta reread the first page of the ledger. The handwriting was neat and orderly, almost like court script. Beneath "Old Trust List" a small line read: "First filter: families awaiting justice." Satyavrat said, "No roadside swindler writes this language. A system that teaches people to wait also supplies the language to a criminal who makes lists of that waiting."

Ananya copied the sentence into the register. It seemed to her that the real handcuff of digital arrest was not in the mobile phone but in old fear. Someone made to circle the courts for years does not feel fear for the first time when words such as "authority," "summons," "investigation," and "arrest" ring in his ear; an old fear merely wakes again.

Chandramohan had been seated in a separate room. His head was lowered, but silence could no longer protect him. Meera asked, "How did you communicate with Chandra I?" He said, "Not directly. Lists arrived, voice samples arrived, lines to be spoken arrived. I trapped elderly people according to those instructions."

"How did the lists arrive?" Devika asked. Chandramohan said, "Sometimes printed sheets, sometimes messages, sometimes pen drives. Some pages carried the shadow of old court seals, some panchayat seals, some abbreviated bank-branch names. I never asked." Bhikhari Lal said quietly, "Whoever refuses to ask becomes a partner in the answer."

At that moment a leaf of paper tucked inside the ledger slipped open. It held only four words: "Chandra I: Paternal Voice." Everyone froze. Paternal Voice—this was not a name but a method. Meera understood that the criminals used "father," "uncle," "Babu," "Pandit," and "court" as costumes for voices.

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Perhaps Chandra I is not a person's name but a mask made of old authority." Aruni objected at once: "Then why Chandrapal's name?" Satyavrat replied, "Because in a society that closes its eyes and trusts the paternal voice, a name like Chandrapal becomes a key. Whether the key is genuine or copied, the door opens."

With this thought the team went to another end of the city. An address had been circled in the ledger: "Old Typing Lane, Room Seven."

The lane now held electronics shops, seal-makers, photocopy shops, online-application stalls, and bail-bond brokers all in one row. Old typewriters hung in windows as display pieces, but inside, keyboards still rattled as though writing people's fate.

The door of Room Seven was closed. There was no board outside. Only the scraping of a fan and the faint sound of paper moving could be heard within. Bhikhari Lal put his ear near the door. "Someone is reading." Meera knocked softly. A voice from inside said, "Work is closed today." The voice was old, but deliberately made heavier.

When the door opened, an elderly typist sat before them. His name was Mohanlal Jha. Thick glasses on his eyes, old seals, a scanner, a microphone, and two speakers on the table. On the wall hung lists of judicial language, banking terms, police warnings, and family forms of address. Seeing Meera, he smiled. "I only write things for people."

Meera said, "When writing begins to sell fear, it is no longer merely writing." Mohanlal Jha shrugged. "You will never see me making the phone calls. I prepare scripts. Clients do their own work." Satyavrat picked up a sheet from the table. Its heading was: "Pressure on a Mother's Mind: Five Stages."

Ananya's face hardened. The sheet read: first isolate her; second remind her of an old case; third mention the son's name; fourth speak in a voice of authority; fifth demand immediate payment. Each line was an assault on human tenderness. Devika whispered, "This is a school for crime."

At first Mohanlal Jha laughed; then his voice stopped. Aruni read Kamala Devi's statement before him—the elderly mother, the son abroad, the police name, fear, silence, money leaving the bank. As he listened, Mohanlal's fingers began to tremble against the table. "I did not know people broke this badly," he said.

Meera answered sternly, "Anyone who fashions words must know the wounds words can make. Otherwise he is not holding the shaft of a pen but the crocodile's tooth." At that sentence the speaker on the table suddenly crackled, as though all the recorded voices were protesting together.

A red file was found in the desk drawer. Its cover read: "C-One." Inside were voice samples, old discourses by pandits, recordings of court announcements, the formal speech of bank managers, and a fragment cut from an old public speech by Chandrapal. The meaning of "Chandra I" became clearer: a composite mask built from the voices of old authority.

Satyavrat Mehta said slowly, "So whether Chandrapal is alive or dead, the force of his voice still binds people." Mohanlal Jha replied, "Names

sell, Babu. The voice of a name before which people bow fetches a higher price.”

Bhikhari Lal's eyes reddened. “So you steal the names of the dead.” Mohanlal answered, “Not the dead—the prestigious.” Meera struck the table with her palm. “When prestige becomes a shield for injustice, it is more dangerous than the dead.”

Two pen drives were found. One was marked “Father,” the other “Officer.” Aruni opened them on the laptop. They contained separate voice lines: “Answer immediately,” “Tell no one,” “The date can be postponed,” “Arrest can be stopped,” “Your son's life is at stake.” Listening to each one, Ananya understood that in the digital age a lie too can be rehearsed like a folk song until it is sung perfectly.

Meanwhile people gathered in the lane outside. Someone said, “Mohan Babu writes everyone's papers.” Another said, “Without him no application gets made.” Devika heard them and said, “If society deposits all its trust on a single table without scrutiny, that table may become not a shrine but a pawnshop.”

Mohanlal Jha finally broke. He admitted that Chandramohan, some bank brokers, an old seal-writer, and a man known as “Madhukar Babu” ran the network together. Madhukar Babu supplied information about old court-related papers. But Madhukar himself never spoke the higher name. He only said, “The old grove area first.”

At “old grove,” the stump of Channa Grove seemed to crackle inside everyone. Meera understood that the thread of digital crime had circled back once more to village soil, Channa Grove, the courthouse veranda, and the record room. Chandra's shell had opened, but inside the shell was another tunnel.

By evening Room Seven was sealed. Yet Meera did not rely only on the police seal. Before the gathered people she read out the method of the crime—isolation, fear, the voice of authority, a family name, urgent money, an oath of silence. For the first time people heard not the face of the fraud but its grammar.

At Channa Grove, Surmani Devi said, “Once the mantra is understood, half its fear dies.” The children tied the sentence to the stump with red thread. This time not a name but a warning was hung there: “If fear comes by phone, do not bear it alone; call the guardian of the name.”

Kamala Devi came too. She said softly, “My money is gone, but my fear has come back to me. Now I will not raise it alone.” Hearing her, many women stepped forward. One told of a fake call using her son's voice, another of a bank message, another of a threat to stop a pension.

The web of digital arrest began to tear under the community's collective speech.

Satyavrat Mehta kept writing silently. "The court gives waiting, the market sells fear, technology changes the voice; but when a community begins to listen, the tone of falsehood cracks." He handed the page to Meera. She added: "Listening is protection."

Night fell. On the stump of Channa Grove, the Black Ghost and the Bright Spirit appeared to be playing kabaddi again—or perhaps it was only the villagers' imagination. The Black Ghost kept chanting, "Tell no one," as he tried to cross the line; the Bright Spirit seized his wrist, crying, "Tell everyone." The children laughed, and the laughter became a lesson.

The crocodile rose from the river. Its eyes had the green glow of a screen, its body the mud of old times. Once it cut through the moon's reflection. The reflection broke, then joined again. For a single moment between breaking and joining there appeared to be two moons, then one. Ananya wrote: "Chandra One is not a person; it is counterfeit light made from authority. Its shell has opened, but the true night remains."

Here the first great circle of digital fear closes. Chandra 2 was an office; Chandra 1 was a mask of voice. Mohanlal Jha's room, samples of old speeches, the Father and Officer pen drives, and Madhukar Babu's shadow showed that the crime lives not only on mobile phones but on society's blind trust.

Folk Song: The Shell of the False Moon

Folk Tune: Nirgun Folk Tune

Leave us, false moon, leave the blind trust behind,

Inside the true night, add the lamp of watchfulness.

Chandra One is not a man but counterfeit light made from authority,

A stolen old speech was turned into the breath of fear.

Mohanlal's room, the voices on the pen drives,

Madhukar's shadow says—strip away this shell.

The Black Ghost says—tell no one,

The Bright Spirit grips his wrist—tell everyone.

The crocodile cut the moon's reflection once,

The water joined it again; the lie cracked in solitude.

False moon, abandon society's blind trust,



[Philosophical Undertone—One might now argue as follows. A traveller recounted that the destruction of means of suffering—such as snakes and thorns in ordinary life, and sins treated through Vedic expiation—is, in the absence of another alternative, regarded as a human end only in the form of the destruction of such causes of suffering. This division reveals how profound epistemological processes operate within small events of ordinary life. Yet the objection arises: to attain the destruction of that very suffering, must suffering itself first be attained, since its destruction cannot arise unless the suffering has first arisen?]

CHAPTER 171

The Invisible Court of Channa Grove

The invisible court has no seal—there fear is laid down, not an oath.



Opening Folk Song: Lay Down Fear, Put On Courage

Folk Tune: Grove Vigil

Lay it down, lay down the bundle of fear,

Within the circle beneath the grove, put on courage.

Seats are spread beneath the grove; open the bundle of fear,

Loosen each knot and let everyone speak his truth.

No heavy words of oath are needed; a loving hand is enough,

Even a trembling throat will speak when companionship is safe.

Lay down fear and wear courage like a new garment,

*The people's circle will become protection; the world will hear the
statement.*

The grove says—do not be afraid, every leaf is a watchman,

The east wind walks beside those who take the road of truth.

One knot opens, one voice awakens,

Even a trembling throat speaks within a circle of safety.

No heavy oath is needed; the hand of affection is enough,

Leaf after leaf stands watch, with the east wind entering too.



The old people say every village has two courts—one with walls, and one with only ears. In the first, dates are fixed; in the second, words are laid down. In the first people win and lose; in the second they return home lighter.

There is only one way to measure fear: speak it aloud. As long as fear remains inside, it keeps enlarging its own measure. But when it is spoken before ten listening ears, its boundary becomes visible for the first time; and what has a visible boundary is no longer infinite.

Yet the greatest duty in listening is to leave space even for the person who does not wish to speak. Some things expose the body when spoken—especially a woman's story, debt, or matters inside the home. There write not the name but only the method, because justice does not strip the victim naked a second time.

So this circle will have three colours of thread—red for what was seen with one's own eyes; yellow for what was heard; black for fear or inference alone. Tie the three separately. A society that knots fear and

evidence into the same bundle ends by neither catching the guilty nor protecting the innocent.

The shade of the grove now had no leaves, yet so many people stood within it that even the sunlight seemed to wait for a decision.

Meera first read out the declaration: "No official verdict will be given here. Here names will be heard, fears will be heard, and what people have carried alone for years will be placed into collective speech. Whoever does not wish to speak will have that silence recorded too."

Ananya made a circle of red thread around the root of the stump. There was no chair inside it, no raised seat. Only three stones were placed there—the first for "name," the second for "fear," the third for "testimony." Aruni said, "Whoever comes to speak will first touch the stone of the name; if he wishes to lie, the stone of fear will stop him."

Satyavrat Mehta sat at a distance. He distributed no papers and affixed no seals. Until yesterday the language of courts had weighed heavily inside him; today he had come to learn the language of listening. It seemed to him that when the courthouse veranda became the people's ear, Channa Grove became the people's memory.

The first testimony was Kamala Devi's. She still kept her mobile wrapped in the end of her sari as though it were not a device but a snake. "They told me my son was trapped and that I must tell no one. I told no one. Today I understand the criminal had asked me for silence, not for my son's safety."

Many women in the crowd filled with tears. Meera asked, "What was your first mistake?" Kamala Devi replied, "I thought that if I bore the fear alone, my family would be saved. Now I know that when fear is borne alone, the family becomes more trapped." The children wrote: "Silence is the fraudster's first cell."

The second testimony came from a farmer, Lakshman Yadav. His land map had been altered three times. He brought the papers, but before opening them his hands trembled. "In the file my field kept shrinking, but on the land-revenue receipt it remained the same. When the earth shrinks on paper, the farmer's chest shrinks too."

Satyavrat Mehta bowed his head at the sentence. He remembered the smell of the sack in the record room that had been called scrap. Quietly he told Ananya, "Do not record a land dispute merely as demarcation. It is also the demarcation of a body." Ananya drew a red line in the corner of the page and wrote: "The measure of paper and the measure of the body are not separate."

Then a young man who worked away from home came forward. His voice carried both the exhaustion of the city and the guilt of the village. "I called my mother too little. The fraudster called her more. When the

real voice of a household grows distant, the counterfeit voice enters its place.”

Hearing this, Aruni looked toward all the young men. “Digital arrest is not only the criminal’s trick; it also enters through cracks created by family distance.” Several youths lowered their phones. On the stump the warning fluttered in the wind: “If fear comes by phone, do not bear it alone.”

Then an elderly seal-writer came forward. His name was Shivnarayan Mishra. For years people had seen him writing papers for tehsil, court, and bank. In a trembling voice he said, “I wrote some sample letters with Mohanlal. I thought language was only language. But when language shows the road to deception, does it count as sin?”

The crowd went silent. No one applauded. Meera pronounced no punishment. She asked, “What will you do now?” Shivnarayan Mishra replied, “For every sample I wrote to create fear, I will write its opposite to protect people—what to do when a threat comes by phone, what caution to take in the name of a bank, where first to call when someone invokes the police.”

Devika immediately placed a new sheet beside the stone: “Protection Letter.” It would use the people’s language, not difficult official words. The invisible court of Channa Grove was opening an account of reform before punishment. Behind the stump, the shadow of the Bright Spirit seemed to smile.

But not every testimony came so easily. A woman who did not wish to give her name arrived in a veil. “Debt was placed in my husband’s name. After his death, bank, brokers, relatives—everyone came to the threshold. They told me, ‘Sign, or your daughter’s marriage will be stopped.’ I signed. Now I have neither house nor name.”

Meera signalled that there would be no camera and no whispering. In place of the woman’s name the children wrote: “Pressure at the threshold.” Devika said softly, “In many women’s records of crime there is no name, only a thumbprint; in truth, that thumbprint is the mark of pressure.”

At this the shadow of the Black Ghost moved near the stump, as though he liked the smell of coercion. He tried to cross the circle of stones, but the red thread moved and the Bright Spirit stopped him. Whether anyone truly saw it was uncertain; yet suddenly the air grew lighter.

Testimony continued until noon. One person had been threatened with loss of pension; another believed a call had come from the police station; another had been asked for money in the name of a son’s examination, a daughter’s hospital bill, a husband’s bail. The crimes

differed, but the method was one: isolation, voice of authority, haste, silence.

Aruni wrote those four words on a stone: "Isolation. Authority. Haste. Silence." Then he drew a line around them and wrote: "Together these four make the crocodile's mouth." The children shaped a small crocodile in clay beside the stone, its teeth shining like mobile-phone icons.

For the first time Satyavrat Mehta stepped inside the circle. "For years in court I heard the question: where is the evidence? Today I see that fear repeated again and again across society is itself the beginning of evidence. The language of law may come later; first record the language of the human being."

Bhikhari Lal's eyes shone at the sentence. The key he had carried for years to open locks he now tied with red thread and hung from the stump. "This key is not for a file; it is for listening." For the first time people saw the peon not merely as a keeper of keys but as a witness to doors.

In the slanting light of evening Madhukar Babu's name arose again. The thread of the shadow described by Mohanlal Jha was coming toward the Channa Grove area. One young man said, "Madhukar Babu came here fifteen years ago to conduct a survey." Another said, "He used to inspect panchayat papers." A third said, "Old men of Chandrapal's group were seen with him."

Names without evidence could turn into wind, so Meera stopped them at once. "Keep hearing and rumour separate. What you saw, say as seen. What you heard, record as heard. What is inference, leave as inference." Through this discipline the invisible court became not a crowd but memory.

Ananya distributed three colours of thread. Red—seen personally; yellow—heard; black—fear or inference. Each person tied a knot of the appropriate colour to the stump. By evening Channa Grove had become an archive of colour: few red knots, more yellow, and black most of all. Devika looked at it and said, "Our society has accumulated more fear than evidence."

Night deepened. People began to leave, but the stump did not become entirely alone. Red, yellow, and black threads moved in the wind. Whenever a gust came, the three colours tangled together and then separated again, as though the archive itself were preserving its order. From the river came the sound of water, as if the water wished not to wash away the testimony it had heard but to preserve it.

On the way home Kamala Devi carried her mobile openly in her hand. For the first time she did not hide it. "Now, if fear comes by phone,

I will first call the guardian of the name.” Her voice still carried grief for the money lost, but also the lightness of a broken captivity.

That night Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his notes: “First day of the invisible court at Channa Grove: no verdict, but the grammar of fear opened. No accused fully present, but the method of the crime present. No judge, but a collective ear.”

At that moment a bird came and sat on the stump with a yellow thread in its beak. It tucked the yellow strand among the black threads. The children who still remained laughed. Aruni said, “When something heard is taken toward inquiry, fear begins to take the road of evidence.”

The crocodile lay still in the distant water. Whether it was hungry or afraid could not be known. Watching the threads of testimony on the stump, its eyes dimmed. Perhaps the brightness of names was reducing its darkness. But the river was not yet calm.

The first day of this invisible court ends here. People left behind knots of their fear, while Madhukar Babu’s shadow was now moving in a definite direction.

Folk Song: The Court Where Fear Is Laid Down

Folk Tune: Grove Vigil

*Remain, O grove, remain an invisible court,
Do not punish fear—hear it and speak of its root.
No oath here; lay down the knot of fear,
Speak your name or remain silent; call in your own time.
Black thread for fear, yellow for memory’s road,
A bird tucked between them a small knot of listening.
No seal, no judge, only a circle full of people,
Beside every trembling throat sits its sorrow.
The crocodile’s eyes dimmed as the light of names grew,
Madhukar’s shadow took a clearer direction.
Channa Grove, remain an invisible court,*



[Philosophical Undertone—The Naiyayika view: convention recalls the lotus, while etymology makes that same lotus known as “that which is born in mud.” At the end of the dialogue both sides accepted that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. The Naiyayika view.]

CHAPTER 172

Reading the Knot

Once fear has come outside, the time arrives to read its knot—and the knot always has three colours.



Opening Folk Song: The Bond of Three Colours

Folk Tune: Thread-Mangal Song

Tie it, O thread, tie the thread of three colours,

Join red, yellow, and green into a single root.

Red thread for courage, yellow for the flower of memory,

Green hope will bind all three to one root.

Let the knot be not a bondage but a sign of consent,

Whoever says "I stand with you" gives the greatest gift.

Tie thread wrist to wrist, let the net of fear be cut,

The bright meaning of three colours will light every home.

Sing red, yellow, green—the festival of life,

With courage, memory, and hope the door of justice will open.

Red says—do not fear; yellow says—remember,

Green says—go forward, taste the fruit of hope.

Let the knot be tied by consent, not as a fetter,

Wrist joined to wrist will make a circle of protection.



The old people say there is only one rule for opening a knot—do not jerk it. If thread is pulled with a jerk, the knot tightens; and if a person's fear is struck with a jerk, it retreats inside again, and the second time it may not come out.

Red, yellow, and black are not merely colours; they are three different distances. Red means there is no distance between my own eyes and the event. Yellow means someone else stands between us—the teller. Black means no one stands between us, only the darkness within me. All three face toward truth, but their feet stand on different ground.

So asking questions is not distrust. We question someone because what he says matters to us. Anything written without questioning will fall at the first push in court; then the fault will belong not to the testimony but to our haste.

And most important of all: do not mistake the black knot for a lie. Fear is not a lie; fear is a history. A person may tremble at the name of the police station even though no phone call has come to him in this lifetime—perhaps his father, or his father's father, once returned empty-handed

from that doorway. That trembling is not falsehood; it is surviving memory.

The time had come to read the knots. The next morning people gathered again beside the stump of Channa Grove, but unlike yesterday they were not eager to speak at once. The fear that had come outside yesterday had to be read today. Red, yellow, and black threads had grown heavy with dew during the night, as though each knot were saying from within: do not turn me into a conclusion too quickly.

Meera sat on a stone before the stump and said, "Yesterday we listened. Today we will separate what was seen with the eyes, what was heard with the ears, and what fear created inside. All three are related to truth, but their roads are different." A light rustle moved through the crowd. For the first time people were understanding that listening demanded not only tears but discipline.

Ananya placed three baskets. The first held red leaves, the second yellow, the third black. "We will not open the knot first; we will first write its statement. The knot will be opened when the speaker himself says the fear has loosened." Kamala Devi wiped her mobile screen and sat quietly. It comforted her that the dignity of her fear would be respected before anyone tried to open it.

Aruni read the first red knot: the measurement of Lakshman Yadav's field. He spread together the map, receipts, old plot record, and new boundary survey. The papers quarrelled with one another. In one the field extended toward the river; in another it shrank toward the road; in a third half the letters of the name had been cut away. Aruni said, "It is a red knot because the papers were seen—but the papers themselves are contradicting one another."

Satyavrat Mehta added at once, "If quarrelling papers affect a human life, the first task is to place those papers face to face. In court such comparison may happen years later; in society it can happen today." The children wrote on the stone: "Paper face to face."

The second red knot belonged to an elderly woman who did not wish her name recorded. A thumbprint showed half her house as sold, but she said she had been in hospital that day. Devika examined the hospital slip and the sale paper. The date was the same. The times differed. She said softly, "The shadow of crime is dense in this knot."

Behind the stump the Black Ghost seemed to flare his nostrils and sniff. He liked knots in which thumbprint, illness, loneliness, and pressure were tied together. The Bright Spirit tugged the red thread and kept him back. Whether anyone saw it or not, the woman's hand began to tremble less at that moment.

There were more yellow knots. Someone had said Madhukar Babu came to conduct a survey; someone had said Chandrapal's people were with him; someone had said his signature lay in an old panchayat box. After each statement Meera kept asking: "Did you see it? Who told you? Is that person still alive? Do you remember the date?"

At first people became irritated. They thought questions weakened testimony. But Satyavrat explained, "A question is not distrust; it is the stair by which fear can reach a court. If we write what was heard as though it were seen, the criminal will laugh." The crowd grew quiet. The yellow knots began to enter the pages in order.

One yellow knot had been tied by Shivnarayan Mishra. He came today in a deliberate and sober state of mind. He brought three old sample letters—one for producing fear, one for pressure in a bank's name, and one "protection letter" he had written through the night. "I do not claim I can wash away my sin," he said. "But with the same language that sharpened the crocodile's teeth, I now want to make armour for the people."

Devika read his protection letter. The words were simple: "If someone on the phone says, 'Tell no one,' tell someone else first. If someone asks for money immediately, stop immediately. If someone invokes the police, contact the real police station separately. If someone imitates your son's voice, verify with your son by another route." People nodded. It sounded not like an order but like household wisdom.

Then Kamala Devi stood and said, "Add one more thing to that page—mothers should agree beforehand with their sons and daughters on a secret word to use in a crisis. A counterfeit voice will not know that word." Aruni did not laugh; he became serious and wrote on the stone: "A genuine signal among one's own people."

The black knots were harder to open. They had no dates, no names, only shadow. One young man's knot said: "Fear of the police station." He said, "No one has called me, but when I hear the word police my body trembles on its own." Meera did not blame him. "This is not merely personal fear; it is the surviving trembling of history."

Satyavrat Mehta remained silent for a long time. He remembered the years of voices on his veranda: "Next date." "Bail." "Appearance." "Warrant." These were tools of law, yet in the ears of the poor they had often become the roar of a demon. He wrote: "When the language of the state accumulates as fear, criminals sell its counterfeit shadow."

The reading of knots continued until noon. Red knots were fewer but heavy; yellow knots numerous but scattered; black knots most numerous and without shape. Looking at the three baskets, Ananya said, "Our society does not lack evidence; it lacks a method for holding evidence. Fear is abundant because places for listening are scarce."

Bhikhari Lal opened the small box of old dust brought from the record room. He did not scatter the dust on stone but on a blank page. Everyone was surprised. "Dust looks like dirt," he said, "but if you disturb it carefully, buried letters rise underneath. These black knots are like dust too. Brush them slowly; strike at them and the letters will fly away."

Meera smiled at the image. She decided that black knots would not immediately be given names. First they would make a "map of fear"—who fears the police name, who the bank, who the court, who family disgrace, who caste contempt. Criminals search for roads in such a map; now the community would search the same map for roads of protection.

Then a small boy, who until yesterday had only painted colours on the stones, stepped forward. His name was Phulesar. "I am not afraid of mobiles," he said, "but when Father says, 'If you do not study you will do labour work,' I become afraid. What colour is that knot?" The crowd stopped. Amid digital fraud, the knot of education, poverty, and a child's fear suddenly stood before them.

Devika placed a hand on the boy's head. "It is black and red both. Black because it is fear; red because your body is standing here before us today." Meera added, "The invisible court is not only for fraud. It belongs wherever fear eats a human future." The wind sharpened over the stump of Channa Grove.

Before evening the first solid red thread bearing Madhukar Babu's name appeared. An elderly panchayat worker, Ramkeval Paswan, came leaning on a stick. He had been in yesterday's crowd but had not spoken. Today he took an old register from his bag. Its pages had yellowed, but in one place a clear signature remained: "Madhukar Mishra, Special Survey Assistant." The date was fifteen years old.

Everyone held his breath. Ramkeval said, "The survey was not only of fields. Those people marked homes with old people outside, widows, migrant families, unfinished cases, mortgaged land—everything. I did not understand then. After yesterday's testimonies, it seems that the list later became material for a trade in fear."

Meera did not touch the register at once. "First this page will be copied. The original will remain safe, and Ramkevalji's statement will be recorded separately. A red thread does not mean the conclusion is complete; it means the door of inquiry has opened." Satyavrat Mehta nodded in agreement.

Ananya tied a new knot of red thread to the stump. It was the heaviest one yet. As it swung in the wind, its shadow fell across the black and yellow threads. Aruni said, "Madhukar Babu is no longer only a shadow; he has entered a page." Devika replied, "Entering a page is not punishment, but it is the first barrier against running away."

In the first darkness of night a wave rose from the river. The crocodile came half out of the water, but its movement was unsteady, as if the reading of knots had altered the road to its prey. Without making a sound it sank again, but the ripple of its tail reached the stump. The red thread trembled for a moment and did not break.

That night Satyavrat Mehta wrote: “When testimony gains colour, the crowd becomes an archive. Red is the beginning of truth, yellow the road of memory, black the mine of fear. Without all three justice is incomplete; without bringing the three together, the criminal will not be caught.”

This section ends with the reading of the knots. The invisible court has moved from emotion toward method. The first written thread leading to Madhukar Mishra has been found, but with that thread a new danger is born: whoever has now entered the page will certainly try to make the page disappear.

Folk Song: The Knot of Three Colours

Folk Tune: Thread Song

Open the knot, open it without a jerk,

Let the trembling human being inside every knot speak.

Red knot for testimony, yellow for memory’s current,

Black knot for the mine of fear—open it carefully.

The crowd became an archive when colour received a name,

Rumour apart, truth apart, injury apart.

Madhukar’s first written thread came onto the page,

And beside it moved the shadow that would steal the page.

The crocodile’s movement faltered; the red thread did not break,

In Satyavrat’s notes the community opened once more.

Three-coloured knot, open without a jerk,

Let the trembling human being inside every knot speak.

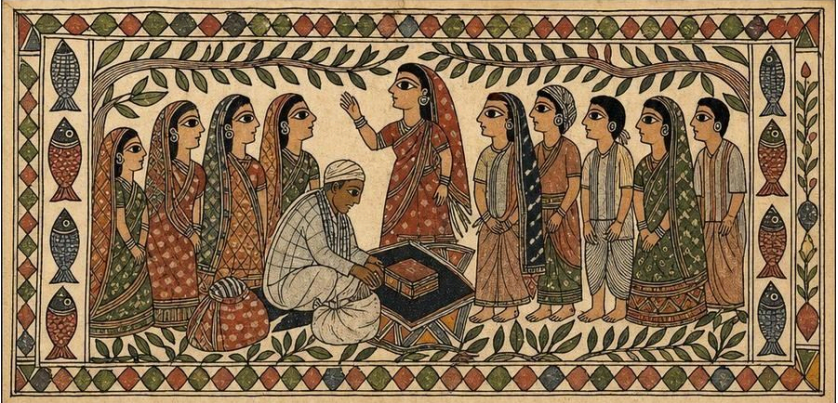


[Philosophical Undertone—Conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas: We, the proponents of the established position, say that in passive constructions such as “Rice is cooked by Chaitra” and “The village is reached by the chariot,” rice and village are objects. They possess the status of being the locus of a result produced by an action situated elsewhere. Conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas.]

CHAPTER 173

Guarding the Register

The register had been silent for fifteen years, but the signature had not slept for a single day.



Opening Folk Song: The Seed of Fifteen Years

Folk Tune: Barahmasa Seed Song

Wake, O seed, seed of fifteen years, awake,

*Feel the spring east wind and cast off your husk.
For fifteen years the seed lay silent beneath the soil,
Drinking dew season after season, life growing within.
Now the spring wind has come and the husk is opening,
From the old register sprouts a green blade of truth.
What if it was delayed? The seed knows its time,
The shoot of justice breaks stone and finds its own direction.
The patience of fifteen years will now smile as harvest,
Those whose names were suppressed will dwell in the dawn.
It drank the dew of Asadh and Sawan, endured the cold of Magh,
All twelve months it quietly grew in the lap of earth.
Delay is not defeat—the seed knows its time,
The sprout that breaks stone finds its own direction.*



The elders say that the most dangerous list is not the one marked “Punishment.” The most dangerous list is the one marked “Assistance.” People hide a punishment list, but they make an assistance list with their own hands—writing down their widows, their old people, their sons away from home, their pending cases, everything themselves.

“Special attention”—listen carefully to those two words. In an office they mean: pay more attention to this household. But once those words leave the office and reach the marketplace, they can come to mean: this household is easier to lay hands on. The same words, two meanings; the only difference is whose hands they are in.

So obtaining a paper is half the victory; preserving it is the whole victory. The person who starts celebrating the moment a paper is found may discover that the paper vanishes that very night. Therefore the first task after finding it is not noise but copies—and copies in three places, in three hands, each with a different mark.

And if someone throws a threatening note at night, do not throw it away. A threat is not an empty sheet of paper; it is the footprint of the

offender. The person who feels secure does not threaten. When a threat arrives, understand that the page has touched something real.

The time had come to guard the register, and at dawn Ananya was the first to reach the stump in Channa Grove. All night she had struggled with the register's shadow. Madhukar Mishra's signature on a fifteen-year-old page was not merely a name; it was a small door into a darkness behind which might lie many chambers—fields, thumbprints, phones, fear, mortgages and fabricated defenses.

Ramkeval Paswan brought the register not in his shoulder bag but in a cloth pouch tied at his side. The pouch bore old oil stains and loose threads at one corner, yet the paper inside was guarded by him like a newborn child. Sitting near the stump, he first touched the earth, then took out the register and placed it on a stone.

Mira asked everyone to stand in a circle. "Today, not testimony first—guarding first," she said. "The paper we have found will be protected. The page that bears names will be copied. On the back of every copy it will be written why it was made, when, and in whose presence." For the first time, the discipline of an archive entered fully into the act of listening.

Devika asked permission to photograph it with her phone, but Ramkeval hesitated. He feared that someone might alter the image, or that if the names on the paper went outside, pressure might be put on his grandson. Aruni said at once, "There will be three copies. One with you, one in the Register of Names, and one in a sealed envelope with Satyavrat Babu. No photograph alone will become evidence."

Satyavrat Mehta took a white envelope from his old legal bag. The envelope was empty, yet his hand trembled over it. For years he had collected papers, but today he understood that before a paper could be sealed, trust had to be sealed. He wrote on the envelope: "Ramkeval Register: original seen, copy made, guarding begun."

Bhikhari Lal explained the method he had learned in the court record room. "Do not put the page in direct sunlight. Hold it by the edges. Do not touch it with wet hands. If a letter is faint, do not complete it from imagination." The ordinary tone of a peon had gone from his voice; in its place came the austere care of an archivist. Many people looked at him with respect for the first time.

The register was opened. The page contained a survey list from fifteen years earlier: household names, field numbers, status of lawsuits, family members, marks for those living away, widows, the elderly, debtors—and in one corner, in small letters, "Special attention." Aruni stopped when he read the words. "Special attention" sounded administrative, yet the village pulse trembled at that line.

Kamala Devi said softly, "In the digital-arrest fraud too, they first asked: who is at home, where is the son, what bank account, what land, what case. This fifteen-year-old paper is like an old draft of the same questionnaire." As she spoke, the wire of digital fraud and the thread of the land survey seemed to knot together.

Black Ghost rolled in the stump's shade. He liked the words "special attention." When a system marks the vulnerable, criminals bite into those very marks. White Spectre bent over the register as though wishing to scatter pale ash over its letters. The children remained silent, but the whispering in the air grew stronger.

Mira asked, "Ramkeval ji, how was this list made?" Ramkeval cleared his throat. "Madhukar Babu said it was to deliver government benefits. Widows, old people, those living away, those trapped in cases—write their names separately. I thought perhaps they would receive help. Later there was no help, only notices; if not notices, then phone calls; if not phone calls, then fear of mortgage."

Many faces in the crowd changed. A list made in the name of benefit had become a marketplace of fear. Devika wrote on a stone: "If a list of beneficiaries is made without safeguards, criminals can turn it into a weapon." The sentence sank into everyone. Development, survey, assistance—all the words lost their shine and became questions.

Satyavrat Mehta began matching the register's date with dates in old court files. The voice from the recovered record, the record room, the scrap sack, the reading of knots—all seemed to gather on this one page. He said, "The true meaning of this register will open when we see which households, after this list was made, faced increased pressure through cases, notices, fraud or attempts at possession."

Ananya immediately made a new table. First column—the name in the register. Second—the household's present condition. Third—who received phone calls. Fourth—land dispute. Fifth—whether anyone's thumbprint or signature had been used. Sixth—whether the person wished to speak or wanted the name kept confidential. This table was becoming the village's first people's archive.

A young man who worked with computers in town stepped forward. His name was Neelmani. "I can scan it," he said, "but the scan will be password-protected. It will not be sent on WhatsApp." For the first time in the world of mobile phones, the language of restraint was heard. Kamala Devi agreed: "What travels fast can also be sold fast."

Aruni added one rule to Neelmani's plan. "Each copy will carry a different mark, so that if one goes outside we can know by which route it travelled." Satyavrat smiled. Without having studied the language of law, the children were learning chain of custody. What a court record room did with seals, the village began to do with trust and care.

At noon one of Chandrapal's men suddenly arrived. His name was Dhruvesh—smooth clothes, polished shoes, a courteous smile. "This old register will disturb social peace," he said. "All the papers should be deposited in the panchayat office." An order hid in his tone, though the sentences had been dressed as service.

Mira did not answer directly. She asked, "If we deposit it in the panchayat office, will you give a receipt? Will you state in writing why it is being deposited? Will you obtain permission from the people whose names are on it? Will the copies remain open for public inspection?" Dhruvesh's smile slowly dried up. He did not want service; he wanted custody. The small thorns of her questions tore open his polished sentences.

Black Ghost laughed, thinking Dhruvesh had come to work on his behalf. But White Spectre placed an invisible finger on the page of the register. For a moment the air stood still. Dhruvesh reached toward the register, but Bhikhari Lal stepped in front of him. "Write your name before you touch the paper." The peon had become a guard.

Dhruvesh flared up. "What right do you people have?" At the question, an old wave of fear passed through the crowd, but Ananya read aloud: "When a page bears our names, our land, our thumbprints, our fear, our waiting, guarding that page is our right." For the first time, a low but distinct answer rose from the crowd: "Our right."

Dhruvesh returned empty-handed, but his empty hands were full of threat. As he left he said, "Keep your papers safe tonight." The children looked at one another. The danger was no longer an inference; it had been spoken aloud. Mira decided immediately: "Tonight the register will not remain at the stump. Three houses, three watches, three copies."

Ramkeval kept asking to take the original register home, but everyone agreed that the original must not spend the night alone. Finally they decided: the original register would remain in an inner room of Devika's house with Mira and Ramkeval; the first copy in Satyavrat Mehta's sealed envelope; the second on Neelmani's offline computer; the third, a summary, in the children's Register of Names.

As evening fell, the watch was divided. Phulesar and two children would remain near Devika's courtyard, but Mira kept them outside under the pretext of play so that the burden of fear would not be placed directly on children. Bhikhari Lal would take the first watch near Mehta's house. Aruni and Ananya would remain near Neelmani's scanning room. This was not a police guard; it was a community watch.

Night deepened. From the river came the sound of crocodiles cutting through the water. The red knots tied to the stump in Channa Grove glimmered faintly in the dark. The black knots were still, the yellow

knots trembled, and the new red knots hung heavy. Somewhere far away a dog barked and then fell suddenly silent.

In the inner room of Devika's house, the register lay on a clay platform. Beside it there was no incense, only a small dry neem leaf to keep insects away. Mira remained awake. Ramkeval's eyes closed now and then, then opened again. In his dream he saw Madhukar Babu's pen moving, and every line sprouted like a thorn on someone's threshold.

Near midnight a shadow moved along the back wall of Devika's house. It was neither hurried like a thief nor open like a guest. In its hand was a sack—perhaps to carry papers, perhaps to take them away. Phulesar, awake outside under the pretext of play, heard the movement and struck a pebble against a stone three times—knock, knock, knock. It was the watch signal.

Bhikhari Lal came running from a distance. Aruni and Ananya emerged from Neelmani's house with a lantern. The shadow fled, but left a sheet of paper by the back wall—an unsigned note. It read: "Open old matters and new cases will be made." Satyavrat Mehta read it and grew grave. It was a threat, but also an admission: something in the old matter mattered enough that they now had to frighten people with new cases.

Mira did not keep the note with the register. She had it sealed in a separate envelope. "A threat is not the enemy of evidence; it is the shadow of evidence," she said. "If we are frightened, that shadow will consume us. If we record it, it becomes the offender's footprint." For the first time, the children saw a threat become testimony.

By dawn the register had survived. The original page was safe, the copies were safe, the note was safe, and the watchers were tired but upright. When the first morning light fell through the window onto the page, the fifteen-year-old letters shone as though they had been written that night. Wind moved over the stump in Channa Grove, and the red knots swayed slowly, as if saying that the watch had not been merely over paper; it had guarded memory, courage, and the rebirth of a community.

Folk Song: The Fifteen-Year Register

Folk Tune: Watch Song

Speak, O register, speak the silence of fifteen years,

Bear the hidden meaning of "special attention" from house to house.

For fifteen years the register was silent; the signature never slept,

A night shadow left a threatening note beside the wall.

“Open old matters and new cases will come”—those words,

Opened, along with fear, the offender’s own admission.

Original apart, copy apart, threat separately sealed,

The watchers were weary, but their eyes stayed clear.

The red knot swayed steadfast in the wind,

When the paper survived, a new community was written into birth.

O register, now speak the silence of fifteen years,



[Philosophical undertone—Inference section, culmination of the logical structure: a traveller recounts his experience. His reasoning is that “the earth, sprouts and the like are effects; therefore they must have some conscious maker, just as a pot, being an effect, has the potter as its maker.” The distinction reveals how even small events of ordinary life may contain a profound epistemological process.]

CHAPTER 174

The Threshold of the Invisible Court

*The threshold of a court is not made of stone—it is made of the courage
held within a circle.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



Opening Folk Song: A Lamp on the Stone of the Name

Folk Tune: Nachari-Mangal

Light, O lamp, light upon the stone of the name,

Soften the hard rock with a gentle flame.

The stone may be hard, but the lamp's light is soft,

And in that tender glow, buried deeds of years may be read.

Wash the stone of the name and place flowers and sacred rice,

Sit upon the seat of memory and vow to walk the path of justice.

From one lamp come a hundred lamps, from one name a village,

The stone will no longer remain silent; it will hum the names.

When a lamp burns upon stone, the night is defeated,

Whoever guards the dignity of a name becomes history.

Wash and adorn the seat of memory with flowers and sacred rice,

Read the buried stories in a gentle light.

The silent stone will begin to hum—names will echo in salutation.



The elders say that people take off their shoes of their own accord where they believe their words will be heard. Why do people remove their shoes in a temple? Because there they believe someone is listening. A person whose words have gone unheard for years in a court may walk across that threshold with shoes still on—and that is not disrespect; it is a sign of broken trust.

And understand the word “absent.” A paper may say “plaintiff absent,” while that same plaintiff has walked three kos before dawn without breakfast and is standing in the veranda. Then who was absent—the body that was there, or the chair that was empty? When a paper writes a human being as absent, the body itself becomes testimony.

People call a mistake in a name a small matter. “It is only a difference of one vowel mark”—that one sentence has ruined many households. But a name is not a mere vowel sign; it is the cord that binds a person to field, home, ancestors and rights. If a single knot loosens, the whole weight can fall.

So no sentence will be pronounced in this circle. Here names will only be corrected, and fear will be called by its own name. Whoever names

their fear is already half free of it; and whoever stands and speaks their own name can no longer be written absent by any paper.

The time came to read the meaning of "special attention" from house to house, and by evening the shade of Channa Grove was no longer ordinary shade. Around the stump, which people called half dead and half alive, a circle was drawn on the earth. No one called it a court, yet everyone entering the circle slowly removed their shoes. Those whose names had been called for years in court but whose words had not been heard came here without summons.

Ananya first placed a blank sheet in the centre. It belonged to no register, no government file, no seal. She said, "Today this page will carry what existed in the papers but could never become paper." A fine ripple moved through the crowd. People understood that the meaning of testimony was changing here.

Aruni arranged the stones in a line. On each was written one small word: name, body, water, land, paper, fear, silence, waiting, snare, memory. He said, "A government court has sections of law; in this invisible court, these ten stones are the sections." Some smiled, some grew afraid, some lowered their eyes, because it was difficult to escape the language of those stones.

The first to step forward was Sona, the daughter-in-law. Her mother-in-law's land paper had been found in the scrap sack. For years Sona had been reduced to one line—"not present"—though she had gone to court on every date. She showed her hands, cracked, darkened by sun, split by paddy water. "I was present," she said. "The only people absent were those who were not in their chairs to see me."

A sudden silence fell over the crowd. In legal language, "plaintiff present" and "absent" were tiny words, but Sona filled those words with a body. Mira wrote her statement softly, but did not write "testimony." She wrote: "Presence of the body." She felt that when paper makes a human being absent, the body itself becomes evidence.

Then old litigant Bholaram stepped forward. Until yesterday he had been able to say only that he had waited twenty-three years in the court veranda. Today he opened his household ledger: the year the first date was fixed, his son was in Class Five; the year the file disappeared, his daughter-in-law died in childbirth; the year "re-presented" was written, the field was mortgaged; the year the hearing was adjourned, he first took up a walking stick. Aruni asked, "And the judgment?" Bholaram laughed. "The judgment was written on my body."

Old Budhba's Ghost shimmered near a crack in the stump. It was not a shimmer of fear but of recognition. Black Ghost stepped back twice, while White Spectre traced something in the air with a finger. The children could not read it, yet they felt that the unseen world had also

become an audience. In the court of Channa Grove, the living and the dead were hearing the same truth: a name does not perish.

Meanwhile a young man who repaired mobile phones in town stepped forward. He had trembled earlier while telling the story of a digital arrest. His father's account had been emptied in the name of police, court and fear of arrest. "The voice on the phone told my father that his son was a criminal," he said. "My father gave his savings to save me. Later I understood—I was not a criminal; his fear had been turned into one."

Behind this testimony Devika wrote: "The counterfeit seal of the voice." Chandrapal's old paper fraud and the digital fraudster's false voice no longer seemed different. Both read human fear; both sold the name of law; both made a path for themselves between love, prestige and ignorance. The word "phone" was not written on the stone in Channa Grove; instead they wrote "snare from afar."

An elderly woman who had remained at the back of the crowd slowly stood. People called her "Silent Aunt," because after her husband's death she spoke very little. That evening she came to the roots of Channa Grove and said, "Three papers came to my house. The first for land, the second for a loan, the third for compensation. My name was wrong on all three. People said it was a small error. But because of that small error, I was excluded three times."

Ananya asked at once, "Your correct name?" The woman said it so softly that only the wind heard first. Then the children repeated it together. The crowd repeated it. From inside the stump came what sounded like a faint vibration. The name that government papers had misstated three times was corrected three times by the people's voice. Mira wrote: "Remembering the name is the first step of justice."

Satyavrat Mehta remained silent for a long time. He remembered his years at the bar. Many times he had thought a case weak because it lacked papers. Today he understood that papers are not scarce; the roads by which papers reach the poor are scarce. The pain of someone who cannot write is not less true. The old law within him was slowly melting into a new form of listening.

At that moment the record-room clerk, who until yesterday had been afraid even of the key, took a small notebook from his pocket. "These are my private notes," he said. "For years I wrote down a little of where files said to be missing were actually kept, whose instructions stopped them, and who was told to recreate them. I did not give this earlier out of fear. Today I place this notebook before this tree."

As soon as the notebook touched the stone, the crowd stirred. It was the first document to emerge from inside the machinery of wrongdoing. No one reached to seize it. Mira first asked the clerk, "Do you permit us

to write your name?" His face went pale. After a few moments he said, "Write the name—but write the fear too." Ananya wrote: "Clerk Ramballabh—afraid, but present."

At "afraid, but present," the children sitting by the roots laughed, then immediately grew quiet. It was not mockery. It was the laughter of a moment when a person admits weakness yet still takes one step toward truth. Aruni said, "When fear is given a name, fear becomes smaller."

Then a voice came from behind: "None of this has any legal value." People turned. It was a familiar man from Batuknath Hariharan's old household, now associated with Chandrapal. Confidence sat on his forehead, contempt on his mouth. "You will run a court sitting in a grove? Testimony without oath, document without seal, judgment without office?"

Satyavrat Mehta answered him for the first time. "We will examine legal value later. At present, humanity is counting value." The answer was brief, but it carried years of exhaustion and a new firmness. People wanted to respond, yet no one abused or pushed the man. The rule of the court of Channa Grove was that even one who came as an obstacle would be heard, so that his silence would not remain hidden wrongdoing.

Mira asked the man, "Your name?" He fell silent. Devika said, "See—the man who questions the worth of others' testimony does not have the courage to speak his own name." A low murmur rose in the crowd, but Mira raised a hand and stopped it. She wrote: "Anonymous objection—trust in the seal, distrust in the human being." The man's face fell. On that stone, an objection without a name became an accusation against itself.

Evening was closing in. Birds were returning, but the people sitting near Channa Grove did not want to rise. No one had been given a verdict, yet everyone felt lighter. What had remained a whisper inside homes for years had become collective hearing. The invisible court was becoming not a place of punishment, but a place where names were born again.

At last Ananya wrote in the middle of the blank page: "Today's proceedings are neither concluded nor adjourned. Today's hearing is preserved in the people's memory." Aruni gathered the stones again, but left the one marked "Name" beside the roots. Sona asked, "Why leave that stone here?" Aruni said, "For every name that is lost on paper, a guard is needed here."

As night descended, the smell of moisture rose from within the stump. Some said the roots were coming alive again. Some said it was only the night dew. But as old litigant Bholaram walked home he turned back and saw a faint glow on the name-stone placed in the crack. In that light the rough body of the stone looked as though the eyelid of some sleeping

eye had begun to tremble. He felt that for the first time the court had stepped out of paper and was breathing in earth.

And that night the wind opened the first page of the notebook Clerk Ramballabh had left on the stone. Among the names written there was one that, when heard, would make the breath of the old wrongdoing stop—the actual seal-bearer of Batuknath Hariharan. The invisible court would no longer hear only the stories of victims; now it would knock at the doors inside the house of the wrongdoing itself.

Folk Song: The Stone of the Name

Folk Tune: Court Nachari

Do not blur, O stone, do not blur beneath the dew,

Become justice upon the threshold of the forgotten.

A circleful of courage became a threshold,

Justice stepped outside paper and breathed in earth.

The proceedings were not adjourned—they were preserved in memory,

The stone marked “Name” stood guard beside the root.

Old Bholaram turned back and saw the glow,

In the crack of the stump, the court’s heart beat.

The wind opened Ramballabh’s notebook by itself,

The name of the seal-bearer stopped the breath of the old night.

Stone of the name, do not blur beneath the dew,

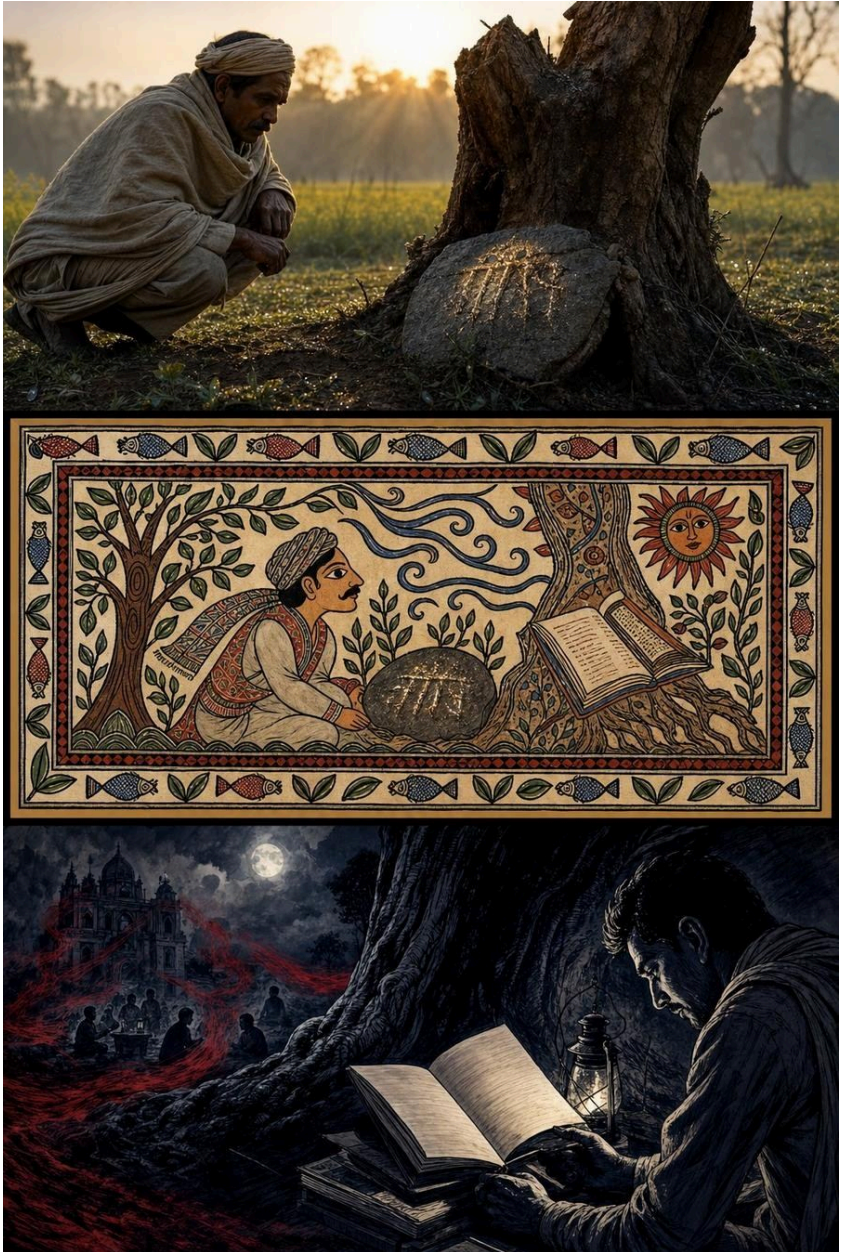


[Philosophical undertone—Conclusion: a logical discussion of how a jewel, mantra and the like may act as inhibitors, and how “absence of an inhibitor” can be treated as a cause of an effect. At the end of the dialogue, both sides accept that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.]

CHAPTER 175

The Name of the Seal-Bearer

*Even beneath the dew, the letters on the stone did not blur—moisture
does not erase a name; forgetting does.*



Opening Folk Song: Breathe Life into the List

Folk Tune: Father-and-Son Labour Song

Fill it with breath, fill the lines of the list with breath,

Place a father's days and nights behind the numbers.

*A list is not merely lines; it is a father's whole day,
Hammer, sweat, laughter, and the mark of a household's hope.*

*Dinbandhu, lift the pen; write the story beside the name,
Where a family stands behind it, let a whole life be seen clearly.*

The final list is not an ending, but a doorway to a new attendance,

The living guard the dignity of the dead.

Fill every line with breath; do not treat it as a number alone,

*Bring the bright sun of a father's labour into the memory of
descendants.*

The beat of the hammer, drops of sweat, the tired laughter of evening,

Stitch into every line the hope that lived in the house.



The name Dinbandhu that rose from Ramballabh's notebook was not the name of one man alone; with it came a cloth bag, red wax, a brass seal and the rustle of blank papers. "Seal-bearer" sounds like a small task, but the door of trust opens and closes through that hand. The hand may be poor and the order another man's, yet history still asks: how much did it see, how much did it understand, and how often did it quietly let things pass?

When a son hears his father's name, shame may awaken within him; but if shame covers truth, darkness becomes hereditary. Shashibhushan's real test was not to prove his father innocent. It was to place the objects his father left behind before examination. A son who lifts the veil from wrongdoing does not diminish his father; he rescues him from rumour and places him in the proper place in history.

A half-impressed seal is like a crocodile's eyes—its body remains beneath the water, only two bright points appear above. Wrongdoing too seldom arrives in its full form: a little red wax, half a circle, one sign, one date, one anxious arrival. But when these small marks are placed beside one another, the shape of the body under water begins to emerge. So the crowd had to learn not to invent a story, but to join signs with discipline.

"The final list" is not the last page; it is the doorway to the next darkness. Names are read from a list, garlands are offered, it is called service; but behind that light one must still ask whose land, whose labour, whose body and whose silence were mortgaged. Whether the seal should be saved or the name cannot be answered by dawn. The answer appears only when people do not abandon vigilance for spectacle, and memory fills the list with its own breath.

The name that had opened in Ramballabh's notebook during the night remained lodged in everyone's mind until morning. When dawn fell upon the stump in Channa Grove, the faint shine of the name-stone had not vanished. Dew had fallen all night, yet the letters on the stone were not blurred. Instead, tiny beads of moisture caught in the root's cracks settled around the letters like light; touching the stone left the night's chill on a fingertip. Bholaram saw the glow and understood silently that yesterday's hearing had not been a dream. The invisible court was truly breathing in the soil.

Clerk Ramballabh's notebook lay beside the roots. The night wind had opened its first page, and the name seen there was no ordinary name. It read: "Dinbandhu Jha, seal-bearer." Beneath, in smaller letters: "Connected with Batuknath Hariharan's private seal, mortgage deeds, undertakings and copies of the special list." The edge of the page was slightly damp with dew, but the blackness of the ink remained unchanged.

Ananya froze when she read the name. "Dinbandhu Jha?" The name survived in the memory of the village elders, yet no one had placed him within the wrongdoing until now. People said Dinbandhu only carried papers, affixed seals and issued receipts. Where is the crime in the hand of one who merely carries a seal? But the invisible court had a different rule: the hand that carries a seal is also a gatekeeper between truth and deceit.

Before touching the notebook Mira asked everyone to step back. "We have found a name, not an accusation," she said. "There will be a hearing now, not an uproar." The rising excitement in the crowd subsided. The first test of justice was that even the urgency of pain must learn the discipline of evidence. At that moment the shade of Channa Grove seemed more solemn than a courtroom; people listened even to the faint rustle of leaves.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward slowly. He remembered Dinbandhu Jha: a thin body, few words, a cloth bag over one shoulder, a wooden box inside the bag, and in the box red wax, black ink, a brass seal and many blank sheets. In the court veranda he was neither advocate nor peon, yet he moved among all of them like an invisible link.

"Is Dinbandhu dead or alive?" Aruni asked. Someone in the crowd said, "He died." Another said, "No, he is staying away with his daughter." A third said, "His younger son now sells stamps in the market." Memories collided. A man who until yesterday had seemed unimportant suddenly lived in fragments inside many minds.

Clerk Ramballabh said in a trembling voice, "Dinbandhu Babu did not belong to the record room, but many files passed through his hands. Officers would say: get the seal affixed, deliver the copy, enter it in the register. He held no official post." Bhikhari Lal laughed bitterly. "The one without a post is often the one who opens the most doors."

Ananya opened a new page in the Register of Names. At the top she wrote: "Role of the Seal-Bearer." Beneath she left three lines: "Seen," "Heard," "Verified." She told everyone not to add stories carelessly. First, what a person had seen themselves; then what they had heard from a trustworthy person; then what could be matched with documents. The discipline of a people's archive had become firm in the children's hands.

Kamala Devi gave the first testimony. "There was a thumbprint on my brother-in-law's mortgage deed. No thumbprint was taken at home that day. Later, when I saw the paper, it bore a seal like the red-wax mark from Dinbandhu's bag. I never paid attention. I thought it must be official." Delayed recognition of wrongdoing lay in her voice. What had seemed ordinary for years now showed its teeth.

Ramkeval Paswan opened the page of his register. Beside the line "special attention" there was a faint curved seal. Bhikhari Lal narrowed his eyes. "This is not the complete circle of a government seal. It resembles a half-impression from a private seal." Satyavrat Mehta cleaned his spectacles. "A half-impression often speaks more," he said, "because a full seal displays legality; a half-seal displays the hurry of theft."

At that, Black Ghost smiled inside the stump's crack. "The hurry of theft" pleased him. Just as a crocodile crossing water does not show its whole body, leaving only eyes and nostrils above the surface, so wrongdoing floated through these papers not in its full form but as a half-impression. White Spectre bent silently over the page, as if trying to pour light through the gaps in the broken seal.

By noon Dinbandhu Jha's younger son Shashibhushan reached the grove. A small bag of stamps hung from his hand and unease covered his face. The moment he saw the crowd he asked, "Why my father's name?" There was fear in the question, and anger too. Mira asked him to sit not

in the centre but at the edge of the circle. “No one’s father is immediately made a criminal here. Here we read the work behind the name.”

At first Shashibhushan remained rigid. “Father was poor,” he said. “He did what he was told. He did not know what was in the papers.” Old Bholaram said gently, “If a poor man’s hand was used in wrongdoing, poverty is not the crime. But the history of the hand must still be known.” The sentence softened Shashibhushan’s face. He took an old cloth bundle from his bag.

Inside were Dinbandhu’s remaining things—a torn cloth, two dried seal pads, a round brass seal with half its letters worn away, and a small diary. When the cloth opened, a mixed smell of stale ink, metal and an old storeroom rose from it; for a moment Shashibhushan closed his eyes. “These lay in a room after Father died,” he said. “I thought they were useless. But when I heard his name, I brought them.” For the first time, objects came on their own from the household implicated in the wrongdoing to the invisible court.

Satyavrat Mehta did not lift the seal; first he spread out a cloth. The brass seal was placed upon it. The letters were worn, but half the shape of “Hariharan Seva Niketan” could still be seen. Between the black grime on the metal surface, a minute grain of red wax still clung. The words “private seal” written in Ramballabh’s notebook suddenly acquired a body. Why had a seal made in the name of donation, service and trust cast its shadow on mortgage deeds, copies and the special list?

Shashibhushan opened the diary. Its pages carried dates, names and a few signs: “red,” “black,” “three copies,” “night,” “B. H.,” “Ch. Pa.” Ananya stopped everyone at once. “Do not immediately turn signs into names.” But Chandrapal’s name was already being whispered in the crowd. Mira said loudly, “A whisper is not evidence. A whisper is a direction. A direction needs rules before we follow it.”

Aruni began matching the diary dates with dates in Ramkeval’s register. Several matched. In the week when the “special attention” list was made, Dinbandhu had written “three copies.” On the date when the dispute over Kamala Devi’s brother-in-law’s mortgage deed arose, he had written “red.” Did “red” mean red wax, a red page, a red mark? No one knew. But coincidence had now become a question.

Neelmani brought the scanning equipment. “Photo of the seal, photo of the page, photo of the diary—each in separate sequence. No image will be cropped.” Kamala Devi added firmly, “And no one will spread these photographs as spectacle.” People wounded by digital fraud were becoming guards of digital evidence.

Just then Dhruvesh arrived again. Today there was less courtesy in him and more impatience. Looking at Shashibhushan he said, “Why did you come? If you had sold the old things, the matter would have ended.

These people will defame your father.” Shashibhushan’s hand trembled. Fear of an accusation against his father was weakening him. Dhruvesh’s aim was clear: turn memory into shame, so that evidence would retreat on its own.

Mira placed a hand on Shashibhushan’s shoulder. “Disgrace belongs to the one who hides truth. The one who gives truth places his father correctly in history.” Shashibhushan’s eyes filled. He slowly slid the seal-box toward Mira. “Examine it. If Father was only a tool, write that too. If he acted knowingly, write that too. But do not write a lie.”

Dhruvesh’s face fell. “This gathering is illegal,” he said. Satyavrat Mehta answered sternly for the first time. “Memory is not illegal. Looking at papers, making copies, preparing a list to submit to police or court—none of that is a crime. Fear is the old method of wrongdoing.” Bhikhari Lal stepped forward and wrote Dhruvesh’s name in the visitors’ list.

Dhruvesh left, but his shoeprints remained in the earth. Sona looked at them and asked, “Will we record those too?” Aruni said, “Not the shoeprint. We will record the time of his arrival. When a threat comes close to evidence at a particular time, that timing may matter later.” The children were learning that testimony was not only sentences; time, objects, silence and arrival could also testify.

By evening the preliminary reading of Dinbandhu’s seal was complete in the invisible court. No decision was given. Only questions were made: On how many documents was the private seal of Hariharan Seva Niketan used? Was Dinbandhu Jha merely carrying out orders, or did he gain from them? Did “B. H.” stand for Batuknath Hariharan or someone else? Did “Ch. Pa.” mean Chandrapal or was it coincidence? Each question was preserved on a separate page.

Ananya placed a new small stone beside the name-stone. On it she wrote: “Seal.” Mira asked, “Why a separate stone for the seal?” Ananya said, “A name belongs to a person; a seal belongs to trust. When a seal deceives, people begin to lose their names too.” Everyone fell silent at the sentence.

As night descended, Shashibhushan did not go home. He remained standing until copies of Dinbandhu’s seal were secured. He felt he was bringing his father back into memory, not into a courtroom. No one called him the guilty son of Dinbandhu. They saw him as the man who had brought the darkness left by his father into the light.

That night White Spectre remained still for a long time on the stump. Black Ghost circled around him as though saying: now the game of seals has begun. Far out in the river, a crocodile broke the surface once and immediately sank again. Its eyes shone for a moment. Perhaps the

creature that devoured bodies understood that now not only names but seals would also be guarded.

And before dawn the wind opened one page of Dinbandhu's diary. Only two words were clear on it: "Final List." Beneath was a date from the same week in which, at Batuknath Hariharan's service ceremony, the names of all the village's poor families had been read from the stage. As the page fluttered, the dry paper sounded in the darkness like someone knocking from inside a closed door.

Folk Song: Dinbandhu's Final List

Folk Tune: A Son's Lament

*I will not cover it, Father, I will not cover your mistake,
By handing over the truth, I will make your name whole.*

*From the bottom of Father's box, the shadow of the seal was found,
In Shashibhushan's hands, the darkness of lineage trembled.*

*Not heir to guilt, but witness to truth,
He stood in the court carrying his father's remaining pages.*

The wind opened the two words "Final List,"

The week of the service ceremony lived again.

White Spectre stood still, Black Ghost circled,

The crocodile's eyes said: now the seal too will not be lost.

Father, I will not conceal your mistake,



[Philosophical undertone—Inference: example: if we see smoke rising from a distant hill, we conclude, "There is fire on the hill." This is inference.]

CHAPTER 176

Darkness at the Service Ceremony

The final list is written on the smallest page, yet casts the largest shadow.



Opening Folk Song: Light on the Black Cloth

Folk Tune: Ceremony Mangal Song

Place the lamp, O place it upon the black cloth,

Fill the seat of darkness with light.

*Let the black cloth be spread; still place the lamp upon it,
Read the names with honour and fill the stage with truth.
A garland is truly of flowers only when the deed too is flower-like,
On the stage of service, the people's questions deserve their rightful
place.*

*The black cloth is resistance, not a curtain of shame,
The evidence laid upon it will say—we are not silent.
Arrange rows of lamps; the shape of the stage will change,
On that very seat of darkness, the people's light will bloom.*

*A garland is flowers only when the work too is flower-like,
The people's questions must receive first place on the stage.
Black is not shame; it is the garment of resistance,
Arrange the lamps in rows and sing the song of light.*



The final list is written on the smallest page, yet casts the largest shadow. Names fit on a small sheet, but the bodies behind the names, the fields, the sweat, a child's hunger and the hopes of old parents do not. The maker of a list enjoys the convenience of reducing a person to one line, then writing "benefit," "special," or "hold" beside it and changing the direction of that life. The paper remains small, the shadow grows large, because letters begin to spread when their meaning reaches courtyards and homes.

The light of a stage is not always the enemy of darkness; often darkness comes wearing the clothes of that light. Garlands, hymns, lamps, announcements—everything keeps people's eyes raised so that no one sees the pages being changed beneath the table. Applause suppresses the voice of questions; names are read in honour while papers of rights quietly take another form. Before trusting the glitter of a ceremony, one must look at the hands behind the stage.

The black cloth is not a curtain of shame; it is the memory of objects. Round stains of wax, traces of ink, dark impressions of fingers—these are silent sentences from a day people forgot but the cloth did not. Objects do not speak, yet when the right question is placed before them, they answer. What was thrown into a sack as rubbish may one day lie before a court as the skin of the stage on which wrongdoing was performed.

Women are placed in a separate line because the deceiver understands that shame, haste and the desire for assistance, when put together, reduce questions. "When your name is called, raise your hand, have your photograph taken, give your thumbprint"—within such a small order, the meaning of body, land and consent can be changed. A thumbprint taken without giving time to read cannot be called voluntary. Service is service only when the paper returns home, its meaning is explained, and the right to say "no" remains intact.

The final list is not an ending but the first map for going house to house. The name read on the stage must be matched with the paper, the paper with the field, the field with family memory, and that memory with the hand that accepted a garland and applauded. The truth of a seal is found not in the seal but in the order behind its use; the truth of a ceremony lies not in the speech but in the original document altered behind it. That is why the invisible court is in no hurry to deliver a verdict—it first makes a road by which breath can be restored to every name.

The door of darkness that Dinbandhu's diary had knocked upon at night stood fully open before the village by morning. The page marked "Final List" was placed on a clean cloth beside the roots of Channa Grove. The page was small, but the fear spread around it sat like a shadow over the whole village. Moisture from the dew had curled the edge slightly, and old ink gave off a faint metallic smell. As people bent toward it, it seemed that a room shut for years had suddenly released its trapped breath. The service ceremony had survived in memory as celebration—stage, garlands, lamps, hymns, donation papers and announcements of poor families' names. For the first time, the time had come to read the darkness inside that light.

Ananya read the first line: "Final List—Before Service Ceremony." Beneath were rows of names; some clear, some blurred, some carrying only signs. Beside the names were marks: "beneficiary," "applicant,"

“special,” “hold,” “two copies,” “stage.” Seen alone, each word looked harmless; read together, they formed knots in a net.

Bholaram said softly, “We all went to that ceremony.” There was not shame but astonishment in his voice. “The owners said the poor would have their names read from the stage and everyone would receive help. I applauded.” The memory of applause suddenly became a thorn in his palms. He could almost hear the old clapping of his hands, but now the sound carried no joy, only the hollow echo of regret. An accounting had begun of a celebration in which people had accepted their own humiliation as charity.

Mira stopped the crowd again. “People become emotional the moment they hear the word service. But if service, through papers, swallows land, names and rights, it cannot be called service.” The line of women stirred at her words. Widows, the elderly, the helpless and families with members away from home had been the ones whose papers were most often collected in the name of assistance.

Satyavrat Mehta began matching dates in the diary with the old register. An unusual number of copies had been prepared during the week of the service ceremony. On many applications was written “voluntary,” on many “donation,” on many “consent.” But the families said, “We had signed for grain, blankets, scholarships or medical help. How did they become papers about land, mortgages and rights?”

Sweat stood on Clerk Ramballabh’s forehead. At that time he had just begun his job. He remembered that before the ceremony, a temporary table had been set up outside the court, on which stamps, seals, applications and photographs were all kept together. People gave thumbprints while listening to hymns. Names were read from the stage, and pages were changed behind the curtain.

“Pages were changed?” Aruni asked at once. Ramballabh started. The sentence that had escaped his mouth had become a door to evidence. He fell silent, then said, “I saw a second page being attached afterward. I did not understand it then. The officer said it was for the benefit scheme. Dinbandhu Jha affixed the seal; Chandrapal checked the list.”

At Chandrapal’s name the crowd began whispering. Mira said sharply, “A name has been heard; there is not yet an accusation. Stay with what was seen.” The children wrote in the register: “Temporary table before service ceremony. Memory of page substitution. Dinbandhu—seal. Chandrapal—list checking.” In this way, folk memory was descending from speech into ordered record.

Meanwhile Kamala Devi returned from home carrying an old bag. Inside were a brass-coloured imitation medal from the ceremony, a certificate with a red border, and two photographs. In the photographs Batuknath Hariharan wore a garland; behind him was the board of

Hariharan Seva Niketan, and before him stood a line of poor families. Kamala Devi's brother-in-law was giving his thumbprint—half his hand visible. Fine scratches marked the yellowed surface as though the moment had continued struggling even inside a closed bag. The metal of the medal had turned slightly green, but the garland in the photograph still glittered—decoration fighting time while truth slowly stripped away its colour.

Neelmani would not let the photographs be placed directly on the ground. He spread clean paper, steadied the phone and took images without flash. He separately noted the small objects visible in the photographs: red wax at the edge of the table, black ink, Dinbandhu's bag, and a thick bundle of papers on which something like "Final List" could be seen. For the first time, the photograph became a witness to the words in the diary.

Bhikhari Lal leaned toward the picture. "Look—the cloth spread over the stage is the same one I saw in an old sack in the record room." Everyone looked at him. "The cloth?" Sona asked. Bhikhari Lal said, "Some objects remember more than paper. That cloth had wax stains. If we find it, the marks of the ceremony table may still survive."

The circle of the invisible court divided at once into two groups. One went with Bhikhari Lal toward the record room; the other remained in the grove guarding the diary, photographs and names. The rule was fixed: no one would touch an object alone; whatever was lifted would have its time, place and witnesses recorded. The children now understood that even haste on the road to justice could become a crocodile's tooth.

By noon a grimy cloth with a red border was indeed found in a sack in the record room. Across its middle were several round wax stains, at one edge traces of black ink, and in one place a dark finger mark. When the cloth was opened, the mixed smell of damp, dust and old wax rose together; several people instinctively covered their noses. Ramballabh said, "This was on the temporary table." Satyavrat Mehta examined it from a distance. "Let the object testify, but treat it with respect. This is not rubbish; it is the skin of the stage of the wrongdoing."

When the cloth was brought to the grove, Black Ghost emerged from behind the stump and circled it. The cloth seemed familiar to him. White Spectre cast a faint stream of light over the wax stains. Suddenly the old scene of the ceremony returned to people's eyes—the glow of lamps, Hariharan's speech, the blessings of the poor, and behind them thumbprints, seals, pages and lists.

Bholaram's wife Shanti, who had remained silent until then, stepped forward. "That day the women were placed in a separate line," she said. "They called it a women's assistance scheme. We were told that when our names were called we should raise a hand, have a photograph taken, and

give a thumbprint. Afterward no papers were given to us at home." Several women nodded together. The women's line at the service ceremony suddenly became a line of witnesses.

Mira recorded this testimony on a separate page. "Women's line separate. Called assistance scheme. Papers not given." She explained to the children, "Where a woman's signature is taken without allowing her to read, it is not donation; a road to dispossession is opened." Ananya's eyes flashed. The story was becoming not only one of land, but of the theft of body, shame and trust.

Before evening Shashibhushan returned. In his hand was a small slip found beneath the false bottom of Dinbandhu's wooden seal-box. It read: "Change the original after the stage reading. Signal will come from B. H." Everyone shivered when it was read. "Change the original"—those two words made the entire light of the service ceremony tremble.

Satyavrat Mehta drew a long breath. "Who B. H. is has not yet been determined," he said, "but the instruction to alter the original reveals the structure of wrongdoing." Aruni added, "Meaning that the paper read before the public may later have had its original replaced." Ananya wrote a new heading: "Public Reading and Private Record." It became a centre for the investigation to come.

Dhruvesh did not return, but two of his men circled outside the grove on a motorcycle. The children were not frightened. Sona recorded the time: "5:42 p.m. Two unknown men. Red motorcycle. Three rounds of the grove." Mira smiled when she saw it. When fear is written inside time, half its poison drains away.

By nightfall the matching of names began. The names read on the stage, Dinbandhu's "Final List," the register's "special attention," Kamala Devi's certificate, Shanti's women's line and the record-room mortgage deeds were not placed in separate piles but in parallel columns. For the first time, people saw that the language of donation and the language of dispossession had been moving together on the same dates.

Bholaram said in a trembling voice, "At the time I thought I was being honoured. Today I understand that my name was read from the stage so the mouth of my paper could be closed." Tears rose in the eyes of several elders. When honour is a deception, it leaves a wound deeper than insult. Insult is resisted at once; deception may take years before resistance awakens.

Black Ghost did not laugh. Even his face was grave today. Perhaps he understood that cheating people through fear is simple, but cheating them through honour is crueler. White Spectre remained seated by the cloth, as though keeping the voices buried in the wax stains warm through the night. Far away in the river, a crocodile rolled once; circles formed in the water and vanished into darkness.

At last Ananya set aside a stone for the service ceremony. On it she wrote: "Light of the Stage." Aruni asked, "Shouldn't we write darkness instead?" Ananya said, "We will write light, so people can see how light itself sometimes performs the work of darkness." The children stared at the stone for a long time. Language too was being tested—what word would become a curtain for wrongdoing, and what word would lift the curtain.

Shashibhushan signed Dinbandhu's slip and wrote: "I found this slip beneath the bottom of my father's box. I hand it over myself." The small sentence did not absolve him of anything, but it placed him on the side of truth. Mira said, "If someone finds darkness in his own house and brings a lamp outside, we call him a witness, not a criminal." For the first time, Shashibhushan stood upright.

In the last watch of night, Satyavrat Mehta touched an old root pressed against the stump in Channa Grove. He felt as though the rustle of paper were coming from within it. He closed his eyes and listened. The sound seemed to say: "What was read on the stage must be matched not with the stage, but with the paper."

The invisible court gave no verdict that night. But the cloth from the service ceremony, Dinbandhu's slip, the testimony of the women's line and the words "change the original" became so heavy together that the stump's shadow seemed pressed into the earth. Before dawn the wind turned another page of the diary. On the new page only one line remained: "Take papers from the homes of those whose names were given on the stage." The invisible court of Channa Grove remained awake, preparing to go house to house the next day.

Folk Song: The Black Cloth of the Service Stage

Folk Tune: Ceremony Lament

Give an account, not flowers—give an account,

Return the papers of those whose names you read aloud.

Names were read on the stage, garlands of flowers were placed,

Behind them, the slip saying "change the original" moved silently.

The list of poor families shone in the light,

Beneath that very light, the papers of fields were changed.

Shashibhushan himself handed over his father's slip,

Carrying the darkness of his house, he stood in the light.

The cloth grew heavy with the testimony of the women's line,

The stump's roots sounded with the groan of papers.

Service stage, now give an account, not flowers,

Return the household papers of those whose names you read.



[Philosophical undertone—Application: connecting the rule to the present case, the hill. Example: this hill too, like a kitchen, is filled with smoke.

Application means joining that general rule to the present situation of the hill.]

CHAPTER 177

Papers from House to House

*When a court begins to walk from house to house, understand that
justice has found its feet.*



Opening Folk Song: Paper to the Chest, People Together

Folk Tune: House-to-House Batgabani

Hold it to your chest, hold the paper to your chest,

But not alone—gather the people at every threshold.

Hold the paper to your chest, but do not walk alone,

Gather people at every doorway and string a garland of truth.

The road from the veranda to the village may be long,

But when companions' feet fall upon it, distance falls asleep as song.

A name on the paper, dignity in the heart, hand within hand,

A petition that walks with the people is not washed away by any road.

Sing the house-to-house Batgabani—let justice walk with the people,

Fill the dry pages of paper with the colours of life.

A name on the paper, dignity in the heart, hand within hand,

A petition walking with the people does not lose on any road.

At every threshold the voices join and the garland keeps growing,

The colours of life rise upon the dry page.



A threshold is the first boundary of truth. Opening the box inside may be easy, but evidence found in a box opened without permission is itself stained by injustice. People cheated for years in the name of papers cannot have their privacy robbed again in the search for truth. Justice must become not a crocodile's teeth but a human hand—a hand that does not snatch a paper but reads it aloud, does not belittle the owner, and preserves the owner's right to say “no.”

Name... how many forms a name takes. One on the stage, another on the medal, a third in the register, a fourth on the mortgage deed—and in between, one human being is divided into four pieces. When the letters

of a name are distorted, not only pronunciation but the road to the land is distorted; a person may remain in his own home yet become a stranger on paper. Matching things house to house is therefore not merely correcting the spelling of a name; it is the work of bringing body and right back together.

A thumbprint may be true, while the meaning made from it may be false. If assistance is spoken but consent is written, if treatment becomes debt, scholarship becomes surrender of rights, then paper becomes the mask of wrongdoing. That people did not understand is not their fault; that they were not allowed to understand is the fault of the method. When this is said threshold by threshold, bent backs straighten and questions take the place of shame.

The court that walks house to house finally returns to the grove, but now what sits in its circle is not merely objects but relationships—paper and owner, name and body, fear and blame, stage and home. The empty space in the middle is the seat of the person swallowed by paper. Once justice has found its feet, the next question rises upward: if the original papers left the homes, where are they locked now? The road from the threshold finally leads above the court itself, to a room whose lock is not only iron but years of silence.

The page of the “Final List” that had opened the previous night like an instruction to go house to house became feet at dawn. When the first light touched the stump in Channa Grove, the circle of the invisible court did not remain still for the first time. That day the court would not sit by the roots; it would walk from house to house. Dinbandhu’s diary page, the cloth from the service ceremony, Kamala Devi’s photographs, Shanti’s testimony and the slip saying “change the original” were tied together in cloth. Mira said, “The names read on the stage will be heard today in their own homes. No decision without matching the voice of the stage with the household papers.” As the first feet stepped on dew-wet grass, the knot of cloth gave off the mixed smell of old paper and wax, as though the court itself had folded up its seat and taken the road.

Ananya divided the children into three teams. The first would read names, the second examine household papers, the third write down testimony. The rule was clear: no chest, box, cupboard, bag or trunk would be opened without permission. Only papers voluntarily given by their owners would be examined. Aruni added, “In the name of seeking truth, we will not rob another person’s privacy. We are not to grow teeth like crocodiles.”

The first house was Bholaram’s. The courtyard had been swept early, as if guests were coming. But the guest was a question of justice. His wife Shanti brought a brass box. Inside were old certificates, photographs, a photocopy of the ration card and a yellowed sheet. The sheet read: “Voluntary Consent.” Shanti trembled. “I gave my thumbprint for the

women's assistance scheme. Voluntary consent to what?" When the brass lid opened, the smell of closed cloth and old oil spread out; Shanti's fingers still trembled as they held its rim.

Mira did not take the paper into her hand. First she read it aloud to Shanti, then asked, "Were these words read to you that day?" Shanti shook her head. "No. From the stage they said assistance for vulnerable families." The first mark was made on this comparison—the words spoken from the stage and the words on the paper were different. The children wrote in the register: "House One: assistance spoken, consent written." It was a small sentence, but from it the light of the entire ceremony began to peel away.

At the second house they met old Subhadra Jha. Her eyesight was poor. She had kept her paper tied in a piece of cloth. "My son lives away," she said. "My name was read on the stage and people applauded. Later a village man kept the paper. He said the work was done." Her document carried the pointed language of a mortgage. At one side was Dinbandhu's seal. The date was the day after the service ceremony.

Satyavrat Mehta, walking with this team, remained silent for a long time. He read the line: "The said party gives consent with full rights." Then he looked at the old woman. "When the language of law is read in darkness, it becomes a weapon." Subhadra Jha's grandson asked, "Then is my grandmother's thumbprint not true?" Satyavrat answered, "The thumbprint is true. The meaning made from it may be false."

The third house belonged to Chamru Mahato's family. They had few papers and more memory. Chamru said, "My paper was taken away by the people of Hariharan Seva Niketan. They said I would receive a receipt later." He had only the medal from the ceremony, on which his name was wrongly printed as "Chandu Mahato." The children were startled. On the stage "Chamru" had been read, on the medal "Chandu," in the register "Chandramohan," and on the mortgage deed "Chamru alias Chandramohan." As the name kept changing, the man became trapped in paper.

Aruni opened a separate page for this example—"Name Confusion." He wrote: "One person, four names. Stage, medal, register, mortgage." Ananya said, "This is the method. When the name is not stable, the right will not remain stable either." Chamru Mahato's daughter-in-law said, "People kept telling us that our man's name was not on the paper, so how could we claim the land?" A small distortion in a name was appearing before them as a large doorway to dispossession.

By noon the three teams had reached seven houses. In every house they found a different scene from the same play: someone's "assistance" paper had become "donation," someone's scholarship application had become "surrender of rights," someone's treatment paper had become

“loan consent.” Women’s thumbprints had often been taken from hands stained with kajal or oil, and later those thumbprints hardened on dry paper as if someone had turned their voices into stone.

At every house Mira repeated one thing: “Admit what you did not understand. Giving a thumbprint on a paper you did not understand is not a crime; it is evidence of compulsion.” The sentence straightened people’s backs. For years they had been told: you gave your thumbprint yourself, so why are you crying now? For the first time someone was saying that the giver of a thumbprint is not always guilty; the one who deceived the giver is guilty.

When they reached the central square, Dhruvesh’s two men appeared again. One was taking photographs on a mobile phone; the other spoke with a phone to his ear. Sona immediately recorded the time. Neelmani noted the motorcycle number from a distance. But Mira cautioned the children: “We are making a record, not taking revenge. If the record stays clear, the fog of fear will clear on its own.”

Meanwhile a summons came from an unexpected house—Dinbandhu Jha’s old home. Shashibhushan stood at the door. “My mother wants to say something.” Inside was a dark room. On the bed sat Dinbandhu’s widow Ragini Devi. Her voice was soft but sharp. For the first time publicly she said, “It would be a lie to say Dinbandhu understood nothing. He understood some things and not others. But in his last days he was very afraid.” The room smelled of extinguished incense ash and medicine; after the sentence came out, even that smell seemed to turn into a larger silence.

Everyone fell silent. From beneath the pillow Ragini Devi took a torn envelope. Inside was half a page: “Do not give copies to those whose papers are taken from their homes. Keep the originals upstairs.” The signature below was incomplete; only something like “Ch...” could be seen. Shashibhushan began to weep. Ragini Devi said, “Do not cry. Write as much of your father’s fault as there was. Write as much of his fear as there was too. If fear is not written, the wrongdoing cannot be understood fully.”

Satyavrat Mehta was stunned by Ragini Devi’s words. This ordinary woman had spoken a profound principle of justice—the need to account separately for fault and fear. “We will seal this page immediately,” he said. “We will not infer the signature yet.” Mira agreed. Ananya wrote in the register: “Dinbandhu house: keep original upstairs. Do not give copy. Incomplete sign.” The language of testimony was slowly learning severe discipline.

At the next house they met unexpected resistance. Lalit, an old volunteer of Hariharan Seva Niketan who was now a shopkeeper, shut his door. From inside he shouted, “If you look at the papers, there will be

quarrels in the family. What is gone is gone.” Bholaram answered, “The quarrel began earlier; now we are only asking its name.” After a long time Lalit came out. He had no paper, only a torn poster from the service ceremony. Batuknath’s smile still survived on it.

In small letters at the bottom of the poster was printed: “All records shall remain safely with the organising committee.” Aruni placed a finger on the line. “This was the pretext for taking household papers.” Lalit slowly admitted, “We went house to house saying the papers would be safer with the committee. The papers of poor people get destroyed at home.” Mira asked, “Who told you to say that?” Lalit was silent at first, then said quietly, “Chandrapal.”

Chandrapal’s name appeared again. This time the name came with a process—collection from house to house, failure to give copies, safe custody by the committee. Satyavrat Mehta said, “Wrongdoing is becoming not merely a person but a method.” The children wrote the sentence separately. The journey of the invisible court was no longer only a work of hearing sorrow; it was becoming a map of an unlawful system.

Shortly before evening, the teams returned to Channa Grove. Each opened its cloth bundle. Papers, photographs, medals, posters, notes, pages of testimony, the motorcycle number, memories of the women’s line—none was placed in separate piles; they were arranged in one circular ring. Ananya left an empty space in the middle. Sona asked, “Why leave the centre empty?” Ananya said, “The person whose name was eaten by paper will sit here.”

Then Chamru Mahato was seated in the middle. Around him were placed his four names—Chamru, Chandu, Chandramohan, Chamru alias Chandramohan. He did not laugh. Touching his forehead he said, “I am only one person. On paper I became four pieces.” At this, Black Ghost came out from behind the stump, circled Chamru once without laughing, and went back. Perhaps even he understood that splitting a name could hurt no less than splitting a body.

White Spectre slowly stood over the cloth from the service ceremony. The wax stains shone. Someone noticed that the stains looked like house doors—some open, some closed, some half-open. The stones at the roots of Channa Grove began to feel warm. Beside the stone marked “Light of the Stage,” Ananya placed a new stone: “Household Papers.”

Mira wrote the day’s summary: “One, difference between stage announcement and written paper. Two, collection of original papers from homes. Three, no copies given. Four, confusion of names. Five, separate use of the women’s line. Six, remembered instruction from Chandrapal. Seven, the page from Dinbandhu’s house.” As the seven points were read, no uproar arose; instead a dense silence spread. The first solid shape of truth often produces not noise but silence.

Bhikhari Lal said quietly, "Where would papers like these be found in the record room now?" Clerk Ramballabh answered, "If the originals were kept upstairs, we will have to see the upper room." "The upper room?" the children asked together. Ramballabh's face fell. "The old court's upstairs room, where boxes of closed files were kept. The key was always with Chandrapal's people."

At those words the leafless branch of Channa Grove shook, as though not wind but a question had touched it. The story turned suddenly from household papers toward the upper room. Until now the room's name had existed only in whispers. Some said rejected files were there. Some said donation deeds. Some said papers that were never filed in court yet changed ownership of land.

Night was descending. The invisible court gave no verdict that day either, but it showed a direction. All household papers were returned to their owners; only images, descriptions and permission-based copies were retained. Mira said, "The first place a paper must be protected is in the hands of its owner." Hearing this, several women held their papers to their chests as though they had found lost children after years.

In the final watch, Ragini Devi's page, the line on Lalit's poster, Chamru's four names and Shanti's "assistance spoken, consent written" were placed upon the cloth. Black Ghost bent over the circle, White Spectre gave light, and far away a crocodile moved through the water without a sound. In that silence Ananya opened a new page in the register. The heading was written: "The Upper Room."

Folk Song: The Paper Held to the Chest

Folk Tune: House-to-House Batgabani

*Do not leave the paper, do not leave its owner,
Become the feet of justice and break the upper lock.*

The court found its feet and walked from threshold to threshold,

Ragini's page spoke, and so did Shanti's thumbprint.

"Assistance" was spoken; "consent" was written on paper,

Between four names, years of deception spilled out.

The original returned to the owner's hands,

The woman held the paper to her chest like a child.

The upper room whispered on a road of fear,

Lost voices cut through the night within it.

Household paper, do not leave your owner,

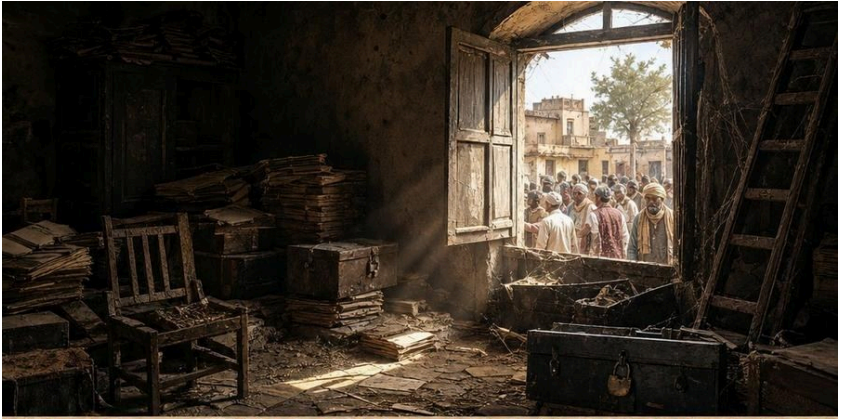


[Philosophical undertone—Conclusion: the final form by which the claim is established. Example: therefore it is established that there is fire on that hill. Conclusion is the final statement in which the claim is proved.]

CHAPTER 178

The Upper Room

The whisper of the upper room is fire in dry leaves—one spark and the whole village catches.



Opening Folk Song: Dust Will Lift, the Window Will Open

Folk Tune: Upper-Room Parati

Climb the stairs, climb to the upper room,

With one broom and one window, make the dawn.

*The upper room is full of dust, waiting for the sun,
With one broom and one window, let the darkness go out.*

*Climb step by step, keeping your breath steady,
Open the old boxes and preserve the marks of truth.*

*Dust is not guilt, only the sheet of forgetting,
When hands join, every page and every vessel will be made clean.
The window will open, the east wind will say—nothing will remain
hidden now,
In the upper room, the blue lotus of dawn will bloom.*

*Dust is not guilt—it is only a thin sheet of forgetting,
At the touch of a hand it will fall away, and inside and outside will
shine.*

*Preserve the truth in the old boxes, make the list beside it,
In the east wind from the open window, let the blue lotus bloom.*



The stairs do not take justice upward; they take it inward. On every step rests not merely the weight of a foot but years of silence. Lime flakes, cobwebs tremble, breath quickens; still one must climb, because a decision pronounced in the veranda below may have had its real paper altered in the darkness above. A person climbing the stairs reaches not only a room, but returns to an earlier trust, an old applause, and questions never asked.

Dust... dust is not guilt, but a thin sheet of forgetting. Yet when someone knowingly allows dust to gather, keeps the window closed and keeps the list outside, dust becomes a guard over evidence. Its smell carries damp, oil, iron and old ink; its grains cling to the hand and say that time here did not merely pass—it was held back. The broom therefore is not merely a tool of cleaning; it is a method of looking carefully at the face of history.

When a lock breaks, a door opens, but justice is born not in the blow that breaks the lock, but in writing down the time of the blow. Five witnesses, the owner's rights, an inventory of objects, protection of originals—these are the lines of restraint by which truth does not turn into plunder. There were three seal marks on the door, but one question: when did private service enter beside public authority? When the hand of assistance quietly holds a key, the wall between service and self-interest grows blurred.

When the window opens, the east wind does not carry out only dust; it brings out names compressed into codes, smiling surrender in photographs, the lost language of women and the smell of counterfeit seals. Once the upper room opens, it becomes clear that the darkness was not locked in a single room—it was a road spreading through the tehsil, the bank, land records and offices in the city.

When the question raised by the house-to-house papers the previous night settled on the page titled "The Upper Room," morning sunlight began climbing the courthouse walls. The name of the room spread through the village like fire in dry leaves. Until yesterday it had been only a whisper—a locked room near the roof of the old court where broken chairs, useless boxes and discarded papers were said to be stored. Today everyone understood that in those boxes might be chained the decision over someone's house, field, name and body. Even in the warmth of the sun, a cold shiver ran down people's backs.

Bhikhari Lal reached the court first. In his hand was the bunch of keys that had jingled at his waist for years, but the key to the upper room was not among them. He said softly, "The keys that jingled every day gave people confidence; the key kept silent opened the real door." As the bunch rested in his palm, a faint metallic smell rose. Clerk Ramballabh lowered his eyes.

Mira warned the children before they went in. "We will open the room, but we will not loot it. Everything we find will be inventoried. If an owner can be identified, they will be informed. If something is a lead to wrongdoing, we will secure it before reading it publicly." Ananya wrote the rules on the first page of the register. Aruni added, "Impatience is the greatest enemy when darkness is being opened."

As the group climbed the old court stairs, every stone step seemed to breathe. Lime flaked from the walls. In one corner a cobweb was so thick that it looked like an old lawyer's argument had become trapped in the air and woven itself into a net. The smell of damp lime stung the nose and fine grit crunched underfoot. Devika whispered, "The veranda below was waiting; perhaps the upper room is the hidden judgment." Satyavrat Mehta did not answer, but his steps grew heavy.

Outside the door were three old seal marks—one from the court, one from the tehsil, and a third from a private service committee. Seeing the private seal beside government seals, Mira stopped. "Why is the service committee on this door?" No one answered. Bhikhari Lal said quietly, "When the old things were to be stored, the committee came to help." Aruni wrote: "Entry in the name of assistance."

There was no key, but they would not simply break the door. Satyavrat Mehta said, "First, five witnesses." Two court employees, two village women and Sona as representative of the children were appointed witnesses. The time of every blow on the lock was recorded. At the first blow dust fell. At the second, a spider ran. At the third, the door groaned from within. On the fourth, the lock did not break; the latch released its rust, as though the objects inside no longer accepted being kept back. The sharp smell of rust spread through the veranda with the sound of the blow.

When the door opened, cold darkness came out. It was not the darkness of an empty place, but of accumulated silence. A shaft of sunlight entered and revealed the first sight—iron boxes, wooden trunks, bundles tied in torn cloth, and an old rack against the wall. The smells of damp, rats and old paper rose together. Lime had fallen on the rack, but some labels remained clear: "Ceremony Records," "Voluntary Declarations," "Donation Register," "Original Copies."

"Original copies?" Ananya exclaimed. "Original separate, copy separate. Why are the two words together?" Satyavrat Mehta stared at the label. He understood that the wrongdoing lay not only in hiding papers, but in overturning the relation between words. When an original is called a copy and a copy is called an original, the eye of the court is confused.

The first box was opened. Inside were files wrapped in cloth. The top page carried the blue seal of Hariharan Seva Niketan; inside was a photocopy of a government application. To many applications another sheet had been added beneath: "Transfer of Entire Rights." The paper was different, the ink was different, but the thumbprint had been aligned to the same place as the signature on the first sheet. Mira whispered, "Here the thumbprint is not speaking; a lie has been made to speak through it."

Clerk Ramballabh gripped a chair and sat down. His face had drained. "Why are these papers not in the record room?" Satyavrat Mehta asked. Ramballabh answered with difficulty, "They should have been entered in a separate register. The register for the upper room remained with Chandrapal." Bhikhari Lal patted him. "Write the name; do not be afraid." With a trembling hand Ramballabh wrote in the register: "Upper Room: entries kept outside the regular record."

The second trunk contained photographs. On the stage of the service ceremony people smiled, garlands around their necks, shawls in their hands, Batuknath's solemn face beside them. In one photograph, the corner of the paper in Kamala Devi's hand was visible. Devika lifted the photograph toward the light—the paper read "Assistance Approval." But the file under Kamala Devi's name contained "Surrender of Rights." The photograph stood forward as a witness—assistance on the stage, surrender in the file. Fine dust from the corner of the yellowed photograph settled on Devika's finger.

The room's air grew heavy at the discovery. The children began matching the sequence of photographs and files. Sona wrote the photograph numbers, Neelmani the file numbers. Ananya began making a comparison list: "Stage paper / Upper-room paper / Household testimony." This three-column table was becoming a map of the entire deception. Small hands were writing a method that large departments had failed to see for years.

When the third bundle was opened, red thread bindings appeared. It was the same kind of thread that had once been seen in a bird's beak on the ledge of Channa Grove. The bundle held women's applications separately. Many were marked with notes such as "husband absent," "son away," "widow," "illiterate." Mira and Devika looked at each other. The method of injustice was not seeking women's weakness; it was seeking their isolation.

On one page was written: "Explained." Mira asked softly, "Who explained it?" Below there was no name, only initials. Aruni stopped at the line. "Where is the language of the person to whom it was explained?" Indeed, throughout the file none of the women's own speech appeared; there was only office language. In testimony the women had spoken in Maithili; on paper their voices had been converted into hard bureaucratic sentences. This was not translation, but abduction of voice.

When the fourth box was opened, the strongest smell emerged—a mixture of damp, oil, iron and old ink. Inside lay a thick black register with frayed edges. On the cover was written: "Special Secure Record." Satyavrat Mehta opened it. The first page contained no names, only codes—K-1, K-2, U-1, Vi-3. Beside them were amounts, dates and "original received." Turning a page sent dry ink-dust toward the nose. Until now

people had been saving names; in this register, names had deliberately been erased.

Ananya asked, "Who is K-i?" Ramballabh searched for a loose key sheet at the back of the register. He found one. It gave a code list: K = Kamala, U = Ujjwala, Vi = widow group, Ch = Chamru line. Seeing the Chamru group compressed into "Ch," Sona said, "People were pressed into a single letter." Black Ghost's invisible laughter struck the wall and returned, but there was no humour in it—only darkness.

White Spectre ran a hand over the dust on the top shelf. An imprint emerged: "Send upward." Perhaps the words had survived in the dust from the pressure of an old note. "Upward from the upper room—to where?" Devika asked. Satyavrat Mehta said gravely, "To wherever profit was taken from the papers—the tehsil, bank, land register and perhaps city offices." The story was widening again. The crocodile had left the river and was moving from office to office.

There was movement outside. Dhruvesh's men appeared at the bottom of the stairs. One said, "What will you find among old things? Only dust." The other said, "No photographs will be allowed." Mira immediately placed not the children but elderly village women outside the door. Shanti, Subhadra Jha and Ragini Devi sat down on the stairs. Their silence became such a firm wall that no one dared climb past them.

Satyavrat Mehta announced, "Every object in the room is being listed. Nothing will leave until owners, witnesses and a public inventory are prepared." It was a legal sentence, but this time it became the people's language. Bhikhari Lal recorded the broken lock, the time, the five witnesses and the number of boxes. The peon who had carried orders for years became a witness to the order itself.

As afternoon passed, a small box was found. Inside were three seals—one of the service centre, one counterfeit tehsil seal, and one blank rubber block left ready for a changing name. Looking at the box, Aruni said, "These are tools for making and unmaking names." Chamru's four names came back to mind. If the seal could change, then land, debt, donation and consent could all change form on paper.

On one half-eaten sheet faint letters read: "Batuk Babu's instruction." Everyone stopped. The remaining words were: "public honour," "paper security," "withhold copy," "Chandra... will see." The name was incomplete, but the direction was clear. Before taking the page, Mira asked for gloves. "This page needs care, not anger," she said. "Half a page does not prove a whole accusation, but half a page certainly opens half the darkness."

Wind grew strong on the court roof. Broken glass in the window rattled. Someone said Old Budhba's Ghost was sitting on the stairs. Someone saw him clearing not dust but smoke with his hand. Yet the

children guarding the names kept their attention on the papers. Invisible help might exist or not; the real protection lay in discipline. Through that discipline the story was moving beyond public grief and becoming evidence capable of bearing justice.

By evening the room's contents had been divided into three categories—owner-identifiable, evidence leads, and unknown. A label was placed on every object. Matching marks were added to the copies of household papers. Photographs were wrapped in cloth. The box of seals was separately sealed. Images were taken of the special register, but the original was kept in the same place inside a locked box with the five witnesses. Mira repeated, "We must preserve truth, not spread sensation."

When they came downstairs, villagers stood around the foot of the staircase. No one had the courage to ask, "What did you find?" Everyone understood that what had been found was not merely news, but the wound of years. Ananya said only, "In the upper room we found the lost voices of house after house. Now each will be joined back to its owner's name." Shanti placed a hand on her chest and whispered, "My thumbprint is no longer alone."

That night a circle formed again at Channa Grove. In its centre they placed a small cloth carrying dust from the upper room—not evidence, but remembrance. The faint smell of damp spread through the circle with it. Beside it they set a new stone: "Upper Room." Black Ghost sat in the stone's shadow, White Spectre cast light over the dust, and far out in the river the crocodile did not move through the water this time; it lay still, as though listening to the fact that the papers had learned the map of its teeth.

At last Satyavrat Mehta said, "The upper room has opened. Now we must open the road above it—the tehsil, the bank, the register, the city office." The children opened the next page of the register. The heading was written: "The Route of the Seal." With those words the night air changed. The map of wrongdoing was now moving from the grove to the court, from the court to homes, from homes to the upper room, and from the upper room toward offices.

Folk Song: Dust of the Upper Room

Folk Tune: Upper-Room Lament

Return it, O room, return what you concealed,

Show the real person behind every thumbprint.

Every stair counted the breath of years,

The upper room swallowed voices from house after house.

Shanti said—my thumbprint is no longer alone,

The lost papers said—we are not rubbish.

A little cloth of dust was placed beside the grove,

Not evidence, but remembrance—this boundary was written.

The crocodile lay still and listened as the map of its teeth was drawn,

The route of the seal moved toward tehsil, bank and city.

Upper room, return what you concealed,



[Philosophical undertone—Application: the rule applies to Rama as well. A traveller explains: this rule applies to Rama because, like a patient in a hospital, Rama's body is also abnormally hot. The distinction shows how even small events of ordinary life may contain a profound epistemological process.]

CHAPTER 179

Footprints of the Seal

The seal's footprints do not dry with the ink—they keep showing the road.



Opening Folk Song: The Seal's Steps Toward Truth

Folk Tune: Footprint Song

Read them, O read them, read the footprints of ink,

Whose hand, which road—build the map with patience and think.

*The ink-footprints keep moving; read the road they trace,
From whose hand to what place they went, map them patiently in
place.*

*The seal itself is not guilty; it points toward the hand,
Truth's sentinels join every mark until the answer stands.*

*The footprints cross the city, reach bank and office door,
The people's awakened eyes pursue them more and more.
Turn the seal's steps toward truth; let service be the way,
Let a bright red mark fall only where public good may stay.*

*The seal is like an innocent child—it goes wherever it is led,
Let the name of the guiding hand come openly instead.
From bank to office, cityward, join sign to sign once more,
Turn the seal's stride back again onto the path of service sure.*



A step... a step is not merely the mark of a foot; it is the account of trust travelling from one place to another. A shawl was offered on a village stage, rights disappeared into a tehsil register, a photograph lodged in a city archive, and a bank account divided the money along three paths. Seen separately, each step looks small; joined together, they form the crocodile's whole body. So the sentinels must not run—they must match step to step.

A seal is like an innocent child: it goes wherever the hand leads it. The fault is not in the rubber, but in the finger that presses without

reading, presses after selling trust, or stays silent from fear. When an official stamp and a service stamp fall side by side at the same doorway, people's eyes are confused. Justice tears through that confusion and asks: whose authority, whose benefit, whose silence?

Trust... trust is not something to be bought and sold, yet in this story a market was made of it. The poor person's thumbprint was called consent, a smile on a stage became testimony, and a body lying in hospital was shown as present on a city document. The silence of those who could not protest was written as willingness. Now the language of paper will be set beside the language of the body—the hand pressed on a shoulder, the face gone pale, the trembling finger, and the impossible date will all be read together.

When the road enters the city, fear takes on the eye of a mobile phone, but the lamp of names travels with it. The question is no longer merely where the seal fell; the question is where its benefit arrived, in whose courtyard its roots were planted, and whose name remained in shadow. Reading the footprints step by step, justice will reach the city's account.

The upper room was sealed again in the presence of five witnesses, but the trail of the seals taken from inside did not close with it. The ink on the page beneath Channa Grove where "the road of the seal" had been written the previous night was still not dry by dawn. It seemed smoke was still rising from the words. The seals found in the upper room were not merely rubber and wood; they were footprints on paper, showing the movement of a crime from house to court, court to tehsil, tehsil to bank, and bank to city office.

In the morning the children first took separate impressions of the seals on paper: the blue round mark of the service centre, the crescent-like mark resembling a false tehsil seal, and a third blank rubber seal on which the name could be changed. Ananya wrote beside the three impressions: "declared service," "false authority," "changing name." Aruni said softly, "The first step of a crime always falls in language; it becomes visible on paper afterward."

Before going to the tehsil, Mira read out the rules to everyone. No crowding in any office, no threatening any employee, no snatching papers from anyone's hand. Whatever was asked would be written down. Whatever was refused would have the refusal recorded. Satyavrat Mehta said, "If truth is to be brought as far as a court, truth's own walk must also be clean." At that, Shanti wiped her thumb on her cloth, as though even its stain was about to become testimony.

The tehsil building was smaller than the court, but its veranda seemed more exhausted. People circled with papers in their hands. At every window an invisible sign seemed to hang: "come back later."

Bhikhari Lal had once entered verandas like this as a peon; today he entered as a witness. The keys at his waist jingled less—for today the keys were not meant to open doors for him, but questions. The mingled smell of damp files, hot iron grilles and old sweat gave a body to the veranda's fatigue.

The clerk in the register room grew uneasy as soon as he saw the group. "Why so many people?" he asked. Satyavrat Mehta replied calmly, "Only five witnesses will come inside. The rest will wait outside." Ananya, Aruni, Mira, Satyavrat and Shanti entered. Outside, Devika began noting the veranda with the children—someone carrying a land map, someone a caste certificate, someone a death certificate, and someone nothing but hope.

The first register opened was the register of land transfers. As pages were turned, Kamla Devi's name appeared. The entry bore the date of the very day when the photograph showed her receiving a "certificate of assistance" on stage. But in the register it said: "voluntary relinquishment of rights." Shanti's face went pale. "Voluntary?" she whispered. "How did my field walk away on the day they gave me a shawl on the stage?"

At first the clerk said, "What is in the register is valid." Mira looked straight into his eyes. "Where is the voice in the register?" The clerk fell silent. Satyavrat Mehta matched the photograph number from the upper room with the register number. The date was the same. One document on the stage, another entry in the tehsil. Ananya wrote: "One day, two stories; one public, one secret."

On the next page was Ujjwala's family land. In the margin, in red ink, were the words "special verification," but the signature of the verifier was blank. The clerk said, "It is an old case; the officer has changed." Aruni asked, "Did the signature become blank because the officer changed, or was it blank from the beginning?" At that question the fan in the room began to creak, as though its blades were exposing the lie in the paper.

On the third page, four names from the Chamar group were compressed into a single code. The register said "C-group." Ananya looked up. "Four bodies in the village, four voices, four homes; one 'C' in the register." Satyavrat Mehta marked the entry specially. He understood that abbreviating names could be more than administrative convenience; it could also be social erasure.

An old tehsil employee sitting silently in a corner suddenly spoke. "I know this stamp." Everyone turned toward him. He said, "People from the service centre used to bring the files. They said poor people's work had to be done quickly. Many times the pages were already prepared; the officer merely stamped them." Mira asked, "Did the officer read them?" The old man lowered his eyes. "Some read. Some trusted. Some sold trust."

The words fell like a stone in the register room. "Some sold trust"—the whole system seemed to gather inside those three words. The children waiting outside on the veranda had never heard trust described in such a way. As soon as Devika read Ananya's note from inside, she wrote, "If trust takes the place of proof, a poor person's thumbprint becomes merchandise."

An application receipt was issued for certified copies from the tehsil. The clerk was gradually becoming less rigid, though his fear remained. After handing over the papers he whispered, "The shadow of the original file will be found in the city registration office. Here there is only the entry." Satyavrat Mehta gave not thanks but assurance: "What you say will not be written under your name without permission." The rule of privacy once again became an ally of justice.

The registration office stood in the middle of the city. There the smell of paper was weaker and the smell of seals stronger—a world of ink, wax, tokens, scanners, old registers and new computers. A digital display glowed on the wall, but people inside were still pressing thumbs onto paper. Aruni looked at the screen and said, "Technology changed; the language of fear did not." The sharp smell of fresh ink in the stamp pad clashed with the pinging of the token machine.

When Kamla Devi's account number was entered at the search desk, the computer displayed: "transfer complete." The date was the same. Two names were listed as witnesses—people who, in the service-centre photographs, stood on the stage wearing garlands. Shanti trembled. "They were the programme organisers!" Ananya wrote: "Organiser to witness; witness to the path of possession."

The registration employee said, "There will be identity photographs." The record was opened. A blurred photograph appeared on the screen—Kamla Devi's face half bent down, someone's hand at her side pressing her shoulder. It was an official photograph, but the silent violence was visible. Mira said at once, "This photograph shows not consent but the body's language of pressure." The employee grew flustered, but Satyavrat Mehta remained calm and obtained a copy.

In the next record something strange appeared. The authorisation document bore the date of a day when Shanti had been admitted to the village hospital. The hospital slip was already recorded in the children's register. Devika whispered, "How can one body be in two places on the same day?" The invisible voice of the Dark Ghost seemed to circle the room: "The crocodile of paper runs faster than a body."

The city bank became the next stop. Loan approval after land transfer, arrears after the loan, possession after arrears—the chain slowly formed. At first the bank officer spoke the language of law: "customer confidentiality." Mira showed the consent document bearing the

thumbprints of affected families and the witnesses' signatures. The officer's expression changed. "Money entered these accounts," he said, "but was immediately transferred to three separate accounts."

"Three accounts?" Satyavrat asked. The printed bank statement revealed the names: one service centre, one building-material supplier, and one "Harihar Welfare Trust." Batuknath's name was not directly there, but the shadow was dense. Aruni wrote: "The name disappeared; the money's footprints remained." The inquiry that had begun at Channa Grove had now reached the current of money.

As they came out of the bank, Dhruvesh's men appeared again. This time they carried not cameras but mobile phones. They began photographing the group as if trying to give fear a digital form. Ananya moved the children back. Devika looked straight into the camera and said, "Photograph my face, but do not steal the face of the document." The men lowered their phones, though the threat remained in their eyes.

By evening copies from three places, photographs, receipts, bank entries and notes had been laid together. A line was drawn on the veranda stone: service ceremony → tehsil entry → registration photograph → bank loan → trust account. Seeing the line, Shanti did not weep. She only said, "They did not merely take my field from me; they took my trust." Everyone fell silent. Thin smoke rising from a mustard-oil lamp bent along the line of the map as though the road itself were testifying.

That night another assembly was held beside Channa Grove, but this time testimony was not read; the map was read. The seal's footprints were drawn on the stone. At every turn a small lamp was placed. The Dark Ghost stood by the first lamp, the Bright Spirit by the last, and the children between them. Old Budhba's Ghost seemed to sit near the roots, as if saying: however long the road of crime, increase the lamps of names accordingly.

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Do not accuse yet; look at the structure. Every vulnerable person was trapped inside the structure that was made. Those who were powerful took advantage of it. Those who were frightened supplied silence. Those who were greedy stamped the papers." Mira added, "And whoever speaks, keep that person's voice safe." The children answered together, "Safe."

That night the crocodile appeared again in the river. This time it came near the bank and rested its snout on the surface. Its eyes shone, but it did not hunt. Aruni watched from a distance and wrote, "The crocodile listens when people begin mapping its teeth." A bird flew from a dry branch of Channa Grove and settled on the stone; from its beak fell a single strand of red thread.

The seals from the upper room were no longer merely footprints; they had become a road. The road the offenders had built in silence would now be walked by the child sentinels of names, lamps in their hands.

Folk Song: The Feet of the Seal

Folk Tune: Footprint Song

*Reach them, O footprints, reach the owner at last,
Test every road of falsehood in the light of names held fast.*

*The ink dried, but the footprints did not dry,
From house to tehsil, bank to city, the road opened wide.
A greedy hand stamped it, the frightened gave silence,
The strong took profit, the weak were caught in violence.*

*Whoever speaks, that voice will remain secure,
Children carrying lamps will walk the criminal road for sure.
The crocodile rested its snout by the bank and listened,
A strand of red thread fell from the bird's beak and glistened.
Feet of the seal, now reach the owner at last,*

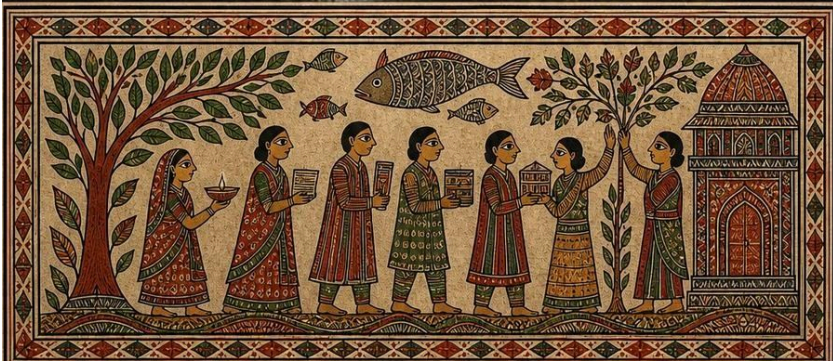


[Philosophical Undertone—Research: Background and Historical Setting: He served as a judge in the court of Mithila's King Bhairava Singh and composed the renowned legal treatise *Dandaviveka*. Research background and historical setting.]

CHAPTER 180

The City's Account

The account opens in the city, but its roots remain buried in someone's courtyard in the village.



Opening Folk Song: Shanti's Shawl, a Seat of Resistance

Folk Tune: A Hopeful Sama-Daun Rhythm

Spread it, O spread the shawl, spread Shanti's shawl,

Not silence—light the people's assembly lamps upon it all.

*On the shawl with which a mother covers her child, place truth,
Peace does not mean silence—fill the home with courage and youth.*

*Field boundary, woman's dignity, the poor person's right,
Spread the shawl between you and make a people's assembly night.*

*Even soft cloth becomes a shield when hands unite,
A song grows inside silence, fear's lock opens to light.
Do not wear Shanti's shawl merely to cover and hide,
Spread it like a seat; build a new society through love's firm resistance
side by side.*

*The shawl beneath which a child once slept becomes the place to sit,
Soft cloth becomes a shield when joined hands strengthen it,
From within silence a sweet song of resistance takes flight.*



When something taken from people returns as a donation in those same people's name, the shawl of charity is really cloth for covering shame. Shanti's old shawl remembers that deceit—it is soft, but caught in its folds are field-soil, applause from ceremonies, and questions forced down.

The line of the account advances like footprints: land to loan, loan to payment, payment to trust, trust to ceremony. Behind every arrow is a hand; behind every abbreviation, a name. Justice's work is not to fill in names by guesswork, but to recognise their bodies through evidence.

Fear now comes not only through paper but through the glass of a phone. A face may be stolen, a number may be false, but time, place, device and words leave their footprints. The old crocodile of the grove may take digital form, but it cannot completely escape recorded traces.

So the shawl is no longer something for covering; it becomes a seat for evidence. Where the women's group, children, elders and papers guard one another, the city's account is read in the village's voice. If the root lies in the village, the answer too will emerge from the village's awakened eyes.

Where the seal's footprints ended the previous night, the first light of dawn drew the next line toward the city's account. All night the footprints of the seal had shimmered on the stone at Channa Grove. Even after the lamp wicks died, the line did not. Service ceremony to tehsil, tehsil to registration, registration to bank, bank to Harihar Welfare Trust—the road was no longer merely a conjecture. In the morning, as the children bent over the stone and looked at the line again, Ananya said, "We still have to see the body of the crime. Yesterday we saw only its feet."

Before they left for the city, Satyavrat Mehta stopped everyone once more. "Reading an account is not the work of counting money," he said. "We must see whose trust was converted into whose purse." Mira added, "The trust's documents may be public, but the privacy of those whose thumbprints appear there must be protected first." Only after that rule was agreed did the group set out. Shanti carried her old shawl—the shawl from the ceremony on the day the path of her field had changed.

The address of the city's certified accounting office had appeared in the bank printout. A polished signboard read: "Siddhi Consultancy Services." A metal railing gleamed on the stairs, a glass door stood inside, and perfumed air drifted over the reception desk. After village dust, courthouse verandas and the darkness of record rooms, this cleanliness created a strange fear. Aruni whispered as he wrote, "Where crime sits in a clean chair, dust is invisible, but the breath stays held." Behind the glass, faint perfume, warm machine-metal and the smell of old paper in a sealed room mingled together; the place was so sterile that even dust from a foot might have been treated as an offence.

The young woman at reception first said, "No meeting without an appointment." Satyavrat Mehta showed the bank's certified letter and the name of the trust. Her face changed. Into the phone she said, "Some people have come about the old Harihar file." At the word "old," Mira grew alert. A document that was still a wound in poor people's lives had become an "old file" in office language.

After a while a middle-aged accountant came out. His name was Govardhan Sahay. Trying to smile, he said, "The trust's accounts were

filed according to rules. I only arranged the papers.” Ananya wrote immediately: “I only arranged the papers.” The children were learning to recognise sentences like this—where “only” appears, responsibility often tries to make its own body smaller.

Govardhan Sahay opened the file. The first page stated the objectives of Harihar Welfare Trust—assistance to the poor, rehabilitation of widows, scholarships, a dharmashala, disaster relief. The words looked bright. Mira said softly, “However bright the objective, we will follow the road of the money.” Pages turned. The donation list showed money coming from a building-material supplier, the service centre, and several unidentified accounts. The dates followed the land transfers.

Shanti bent over the page. She did not understand the figures, but she understood dates. “Is this date after they made me give up my field?” she asked. Satyavrat answered softly, “Yes.” Shanti gripped the edge of the shawl and fell silent. It seemed to her that the soil of the field had turned into money and taken a seat on the glass table while she herself had been left waiting outside. Fine lines of soil remained in the creases of Shanti’s nails; in the brightness of the glass table they shone like the last boundary ridge of her field.

Aruni began drawing the account line. Land of affected families, then loan, then payment, then donation into the trust, then the service ceremony. Seeing the cycle, Devika said, “What was taken from them was donated in their own name.” At that sentence, the chill of the office air-conditioning suddenly felt hard. Govardhan Sahay wiped his forehead with a handkerchief though the room was cold.

One page showed an expense under the heading “special administrative assistance.” An amount was entered, but instead of a recipient’s name there were only three abbreviated letters: “Ra. Cha. La.” Ananya asked, “Is this a code?” Govardhan replied, “An accounting abbreviation.” Satyavrat Mehta said, “An abbreviation is dangerous where the full name might create accountability.” Aruni wrote in the margin: “Ra—Raghav? Cha—Chandrapal? La—Lau? Confirmation pending.”

Mira stopped him at once. “Not in the register. Keep conjecture on a separate sheet. Write the names only when evidence arrives.” The children’s eyes brightened at this discipline. They were beginning to understand that telling a story was one thing and preparing a document fit for justice another. Had the Dark Ghost been there, perhaps he would have smiled: anger was learning to stand in ordered lines.

Govardhan Sahay slowly admitted that Dhruvesh’s people brought the annual accounts of Harihar Welfare Trust to his office. “Dhruvesh himself?” Mira asked. “Sometimes,” he said, “mostly his assistant. They would say it was village service work and the papers had to be filed

quickly.” Devika asked, “Did original receipts come with the papers?” Govardhan’s throat went dry. “Some originals, some copies, some merely instructions.”

“Written instructions?” Satyavrat Mehta asked. Govardhan was silent at first. Then he opened a drawer and took out an old envelope. A mobile number was written on it; inside was a small note: “Merge the sums from Kamla, Ujjwala and C-group accounts under service donation. Do not mention separately.” There was no signature, only the same number below. Ananya copied the mobile number separately. Her hand did not tremble. The sentinel of names was becoming a sentinel of numbers.

As they were photographing the note, Govardhan suddenly became frightened. “Do not bring my name into this,” he said. Mira assured him, “Not without permission. But the existence of the document will not be concealed.” Satyavrat said, “Fear is also testimony, but fear must not be allowed to choke truth.” Govardhan’s eyes filled. “For years,” he said, “I thought this was ordinary accounting. Today I understand that even an ordinary word can become an umbrella over a crime.”

The moment they left the office, the first form of Dhruvesh’s mobile threat appeared. An unknown number sent Ananya a message: “Leave the papers alone, or your face will be made public.” Attached was a photograph taken outside the bank the previous day. For a moment the children fell silent. Devika wrapped the phone in cloth. “This is not fear; it is evidence.” Aruni wrote: “Time of threat, number, image, words.” Blue screen-light fell across Ananya’s face, but in her eyes fear had been replaced by measured determination. Everyone’s breath stopped for a moment; then the pens began moving together.

Satyavrat Mehta proposed going immediately to the city’s cyber unit, but Mira said, “Secure copies first. If the original phone is seized, the work may stop.” Ananya, Aruni and Devika each copied the text of the message onto separate sheets. A screen image was taken. The time was written down. Even the phone’s battery level was recorded. Bhikhari Lal watched—once he had kept keys to doors; today these children were counting the latches of digital doors.

The cyber unit was in the rear quarter of the city. Large warnings on the wall read, “Do not share OTPs,” “Beware of unknown calls.” Yet the faces inside carried the same old fatigue seen in tehsil and court. A young officer looked at the message and said, “Threats like this are common.” Ananya asked calmly, “Does calling it common make the pain smaller?” The officer’s face softened.

Mira explained the entire chain—photograph, phone, surveillance outside the bank, trust account. The officer began listening carefully. “The number may be temporary,” he said. “The SIM could have been taken under a false identity.” Aruni immediately wrote, “The new face of

fear—a temporary name.” Satyavrat Mehta said, “Even if the name is false, time, place and device still leave footprints.” For the first time the officer smiled. “Yes. A digital crocodile leaves feet too.”

At that phrase Devika stopped. “Digital crocodile”—the words travelled with them all the way back toward the village. The river crocodile sank teeth into bodies; the paper crocodile ate fields; the digital crocodile ate faces, voices, fear and reputation. The story of Channa Grove was now extending through wires, SIMs, screens and servers.

At evening, on the return from the city, the group’s bus stopped at a deserted bend. Two of Dhruvesh’s men stood ahead on motorcycles. They said nothing; they merely raised their phones and began recording video. Bhikhari Lal stepped forward, but Mira stopped him. “No hands. Record only.” Devika called out loudly, “Time—5:28 in the evening. Place—Old Bridge Bend. Two motorcycles, three persons, video recording.” At once the men’s expressions changed. Recording had become the first resistance to fear.

On reaching the village, the children did not go straight to Channa Grove. First, all evidence was divided into three sets—documents, images and oral description. One set stayed with Satyavrat, one with Mira, one with the village women’s group. Shanti said, “Earlier my thumbprint stood alone on one page. Now all these pages guard one another.” For the first time there was more resolve than fear in her voice.

At the night assembly beneath Channa Grove, a phone was placed among the testimonies. The flame of a lamp reflected in the mobile glass. No one could say for certain whether Old Budhba’s Ghost appeared near the roots, but everyone felt that the old spirits were learning the language of the new fear. The Dark Ghost became a symbol like the darkness of a screen; the Bright Spirit like its glow.

Satyavrat Mehta drew the next line on the map: trust account → accounting instruction → mobile number → threat message → cyber footprint. “Understand from this line,” he said, “that the crime is not only of the past. The hand that altered papers in the past frightens faces in the present. If justice reads only old files, it will receive half the truth. Justice must learn to read the glass of a phone as well.”

Ananya opened a new page in the register and wrote the heading: “Teeth of the Digital Crocodile.” Aruni wrote beside it: “The face was stolen, but time remained; the number was false, but the message remained; fear was sent, but became evidence.” The children read the sentence three times. It became a lesson in courage.

At the end, Shanti placed her ceremonial shawl on the stone and said, “This shawl was used to cover my shame, and my field was covered with it too. Today let this shawl become the table of evidence.” On the shawl they placed the trust’s account line, the accountant’s envelope, a copy of

the threat message and the cyber receipt. In the lamplight the colour of the shawl seemed to change—it was no longer a symbol of charity, but a seat of resistance.

In the last watch of the night the river was very calm. After a long while the crocodile surfaced, opened its eyes, then slowly sank again. Aruni wrote, “When the teeth are given names, the teeth retreat.” But Mira remained cautious. “Teeth that retreat can bite again,” she said. The city’s account had opened; now it was time to move toward the hand that opened the account.

Folk Song: Shanti’s Shawl

Folk Tune: Resistance Sama-Daun

*Do not cover, O shawl, cover anyone’s shame no more,
Become the ground of resistance and look toward the open sky’s door.*

*The shawl that hid shame also covered the field,
Today upon that same shawl the city’s accounts are revealed.
The accountant’s envelope, the threat, the cyber receipt,
The bright cloth of charity became resistance beneath our feet.*

*The face was stolen, but time remained,

The number was false, but the message became evidence retained.

The crocodile opened its eyes and slowly sank below,
Once the teeth received names, they drew back a little so.

Shanti’s shawl, cover no one’s shame again,
Trace Dhruvesh’s SIM and Harihar’s shadow on the same plane.*

The shawl that hid shame also covered the field.

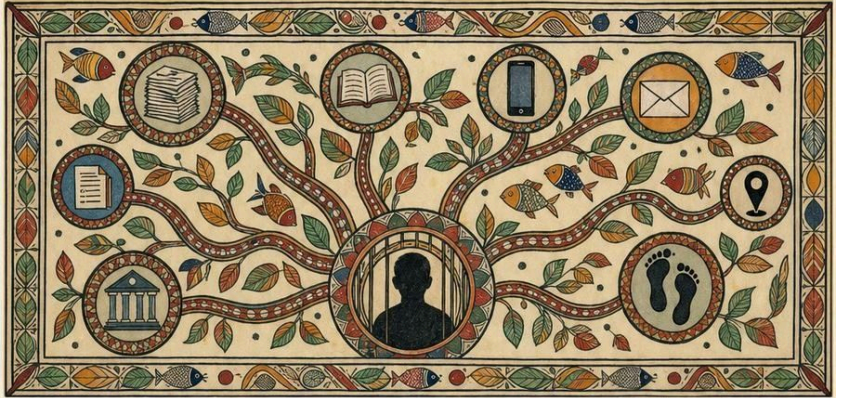


[Philosophical Undertone—Prabhakara's Refutation of the Infinite Regress Objection: In knowledge of an object as clear as an amla fruit resting on the palm, when no doubt about invalidity arises, the first cognition alone determines the object, and from that determination arises unwavering action. Prabhakara's refutation of the infinite-regress objection.]

CHAPTER 181

The Shadow of the SIM

A SIM's shadow wanders without a body—the number changes, the intent does not.



Opening Folk Song: The Person Beyond the Number

Folk Tune: The Bright Gait of a Sama-Chakeva Melody

Recognise, O recognise, recognise the person beyond the number,

*Let a thousand SIMs change—count the familiar voice beneath their
cover.*

*The number changes, the SIM changes, but a person's affection does
not,*

Voice recognises voice and tells the road where truth is sought.

*Grandmother's lesson, a child's laughter, the speech of home beside,
The counterfeit cloud will split apart and reveal the true road wide.*

*Hold hands and say together—we know one another still,
Beyond the web of glass we bind lamps of people by our will.*

*The first ray of morning says—let no one be afraid,
Keep walking with the name; deceit will surely fade.*

*A thousand SIMs, a thousand mouths—the tone of love is one,
Home speech, grandmother's lesson—the staff on which identity is
borne.*

*Beyond the web of glass the people's lamps remain alight,
Within the circle of joined hands deceit cannot enter at night.*



The number changes, the SIM changes, the shop changes; but if the intent remains the same, the shadow does not alter its gait. Its footprints remain in the first tower signal, the red-pencil dot, the sealed envelope and the thumb that was pressed in hope of receiving a benefit.

When a living threat is sent in the name of someone dead, it is not merely dishonesty on paper. It is theft of the body's memory. A name

that family members speak while lighting a lamp at home is turned into a market SIM for sending fear—what greater insult could there be?

A shadow is difficult to catch, but not impossible. The speech of the people, grandmother's teaching, a child's simple question, and testimony written in sequence give it shape. Truth drowns in a crowd; written name by name, fear's face opens.

Tonight the leaves of the grove are quiet, but the roots are listening. Let the SIM's shadow wander; every stolen name demands its body back. When paper, voice and thumbprint speak together, the body to which the shadow belongs will not remain far away.

Even after the previous night's page of the city's account had been closed, its last lines remained open in everyone's mind. At dawn the line drawn on the stone beneath Channa Grove after the city's account had been opened looked sharper in the sunlight. Trust account, accounting instruction, mobile number, threat message and cyber footprint—these were no longer separate things. The lines gripped one another's throats and began pointing in the same direction. The direction was toward Dhruvesh, but Mira said, "Seeing a direction is not enough. Read the footprints; only then take a step."

Satyavrat Mehta first matched again the time recorded in the register the previous day. The message had arrived immediately after they returned from outside the city bank. According to the preliminary information on the cyber unit's receipt, the number had been changed seven times in the previous three months. Each time there was a different name, different identity and different address. But through all three months one thing remained fixed—the first tower signal when the SIM became active was captured in the small market beside the village's old bus stand.

Ananya circled the bus stand on the map. Aruni wrote beside it: "The false name changes; the first signal does not." Devika said, "Whoever wants the shadow of the SIM must first come into the light." The children did not laugh. They understood that fear's language was now written on phone glass, but its birthplace still remained on soil.

The bus-stand market was old, but new signboards had been pasted across its body—mobile repair, recharge, Aadhaar assistance, photocopy, online forms, banking correspondent. When the group arrived, shopkeepers first watched with ordinary curiosity. But the moment Satyavrat Mehta mentioned a "SIM register," curtains in two shops shifted from inside. Mira said softly, "The first curtain of fear moved." Inside the shop, the mixed smell of hot wire, betel tins and an old ledger made Madhav's nervousness even more visible.

The smallest shop had a blue board: "Madhav Communication Service." Inside stood a plastic chair, a broken screen on the table,

charging cables, a betel tin and an old ledger. A young man named Madhav avoided eye contact. "I only upload customers' papers," he said. "The SIM belongs to the company." Satyavrat replied calmly, "A crime too often begins with 'I only.'"

Madhav's hands trembled. "Three months ago some people came," he said. "They said it was a trust service camp and poor people's phones had to be activated. They brought the papers. I took thumb impressions in the machine, photographed them, and the SIMs were activated. I thought it was service work." Mira asked, "Whose thumb?" Madhav began turning the pages of the ledger.

The ledger contained names—Ramratiya Devi, Kamlu Paswan, Jagdish Mallah, Phulkunwari—and one name beside which a small red-pencil dot had been made. Ananya noticed the dot. "Why this dot?" Madhav was silent. Devika did not strike the table; she merely said, "Where words fall silent, marks begin to speak." Madhav finally said, "I marked papers that came from outside."

Aruni opened a separate page at once: "Papers from outside." Satyavrat Mehta asked, "Outside means?" Madhav said, "From the Harihar Service Centre. Dhruvesh Babu's men said village elders would receive benefits. Of the SIMs distributed, some people received phones; some SIMs were later taken back." Mira's face grew grave. "A SIM in one person's name, but the phone taken from that person's hand. That is the first offence."

At that moment a child came out from the rear of the shop. He was Madhav's nephew and held the shell of an old mobile phone. Innocently he asked, "Uncle, shall I show them the red box?" Madhav panicked. The child did not understand, but his voice opened a door for truth. Devika spoke gently. "No need to be afraid. What box?" The child replied, "The one where the envelopes of closed SIMs used to stay."

The red box was taken from beneath the table. Inside were several empty SIM envelopes, scraps of paper and two old photographs. One showed the face of Ramratiya Devi—the elderly woman who had died two years before. The other showed a blurred face with the flag of the Harihar Service Centre in the background. Ananya's hand stopped. "A SIM still operating in the name of a dead woman," she wrote. Beside it Aruni added, "A living threat from a dead name." When the lid of the red box lifted, the smell of sealed papers and old plastic rose like the suppressed breath of dead names.

Madhav began to cry. "I did not know the SIMs would be used for threats." Mira stopped him. "Not knowing does not wash away wrongdoing, but telling the truth is different from hiding it." Satyavrat Mehta said, "I do not need the culprit from you; I need the link. If the link is destroyed, the culprit survives." Madhav agreed to provide copies of

the ledger, the contents of the red box and the slips received from the service centre. His face did not become light, but the weight of the lie diminished.

Then came the sound of motorcycles outside. Three young men stopped. One of them was Bishambhar, a servant from Dhruvesh's house who had distributed garlands during the service ceremony. His eyes went straight to the red box. He laughed. "Why are city-educated people so troubled over such a small matter?" Mira stepped outside and faced him. "A small matter? A SIM in a dead woman's name, threats through poor people's documents, and slips from a service centre—this is not a small matter. It is a large crime travelling along a small road."

Bishambhar's laugh disappeared. He took out his mobile phone and began recording video. Devika immediately opened her register and read aloud: "Time—11:32 a.m. Place—Madhav Communication Service. Present—Bishambhar, two unidentified young men, one black motorcycle, one red helmet." The hand holding the phone slowed. When fear is seen it changes shape; when fear is written it becomes identifiable.

Satyavrat Mehta asked Bishambhar, "Did you bring the SIM slips from the Harihar Service Centre?" Bishambhar replied at once, "I know nothing." But on the page of Madhav's ledger for that day there was a crooked line resembling Bishambhar's signature. Bishambhar said, "That is not mine." Aruni answered calmly, "The signature can be examined later. Your presence is being recorded now."

A crowd began to gather. Some supported Bishambhar, some the children. An old man said, "My thumb too was taken at the same service camp. They said I would receive a pension." Another woman said, "I never got a phone, but they said the SIM had been opened." A third voice called, "My name was read over the microphone and I was called a beneficiary, but no papers ever came to my home." The bus stand suddenly became an invisible court.

Mira raised her hand and quieted everyone. "A crowd will break the truth," she said. "One name, one thumb, one statement at a time." Ananya and Devika formed two lines. Whoever wanted to speak would first say their name, then say when the thumb was taken, who asked for it, and whether a phone was received. Aruni wrote the heading: "People's list of digital testimony."

This arrangement frightened Bishambhar more. In a crowd he might have drowned the matter in pushing and shouting; in orderly testimony he himself was sinking. He tried to mount the motorcycle. Bhikhari Lal stepped forward, but Mira stopped him again. "No hands." Satyavrat said, "You are free to go. But your arrival, the time and your denial have been

recorded.” For the first time Bishambhar looked truly frightened. His face seemed to say that a written fact travels farther than a stick.

By afternoon eight names had been recorded. Three dead, two ill, one away for work, two illiterate elderly women—SIMs, account assistance, beneficiary registers or service-centre papers existed in all their names. Some SIMs were closed, some active, some used for threats, some to receive bank messages. Satyavrat Mehta said quietly, “This is not merely a fraud of phones; this is theft of existence.”

At evening copies were placed by the roots of Channa Grove. The red box itself remained locked in Madhav's shop, but its contents were inventoried, photographs taken, and the signatures and thumbprints of witnesses obtained. Mira kept repeating, “Do not steal evidence in the name of collecting evidence.” The children had learned that haste in justice can itself become injustice. Evening wind touched the photograph of the red box, yet the corners of the paper seemed so heavy that each appeared to hold a stolen life.

A special silence settled around Ramratiya Devi's name. Her grandson said, “If fear was sent in her name even after she died, this is not an insult to a dead body; it is the killing of a surviving name.” At those words the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost seemed to tremble on the bark. The Dark Ghost thickened in the darkness, and the Bright Spirit lengthened in the lamp flame. Names do not die; they can be abused—the thought went deep into everyone.

That night Mira, Satyavrat, Ananya, Aruni and Devika wrote the next steps together—request the Harihar Service Centre's register, match the camp photographs, cross-check the beneficiary list against the SIM list, and submit the activation times of numbers used for threats to the cyber unit. It was no longer merely a village struggle; it had become a struggle to return the body of a name.

From Dhruvesh's mansion came the faint sound of a drum that night. Some said there was worship. Some said a feast. Someone said, “When offenders are afraid, the first thing they do is turn up the volume of celebration.” Channa Grove stayed quiet. Its leaves did not stir, but drops of dew fell on the papers beside the roots—as though the grove too were pouring water over the heads of the dead names.

In the last watch, before closing the register, Ananya wrote a line beneath the heading: “The SIM's shadow has been caught, but the body casting it has not yet come forward.” Aruni added, “If the shadow is caught, the body cannot be far.” Darkness thickened, but it was no longer empty darkness; inside it glimmered registers, thumbprints, false benefits and the calls of dead names.

Folk Song: The Bodiless SIM

Folk Tune: Digital Lament

*Tell us, O SIM, tell us who your true owner is,
Return peaceful sleep to the one whose name was stolen for this.*

*The number changed, the intent did not change,
From a dead name's thumbprint a SIM emerged again strange.*

*The body lies in earth, yet the phone rings at night,
A mother asks—whom is my dead son calling in this fright?*

Register, camp photograph, beneficiary list were joined,

The shadow was caught, the body still turned away unjoined.

*A drum at the mansion—fear sounding like celebration,
Dew at the grove dressed dead names with a water libation.*

*Bodiless SIM, now name your owner true,
Return peaceful sleep to the name that was stolen from view.*

*The number changed, but the intent never changed at all,
From the dead name's thumbprint the SIM came again to call.*

*The body lies in earth, yet the phone rings through the night,
A mother asks—whom does my dead son speak to out of sight?*

Tell us, O SIM, tell us who your true owner is,

Return peaceful sleep to the one whose name was stolen for this.

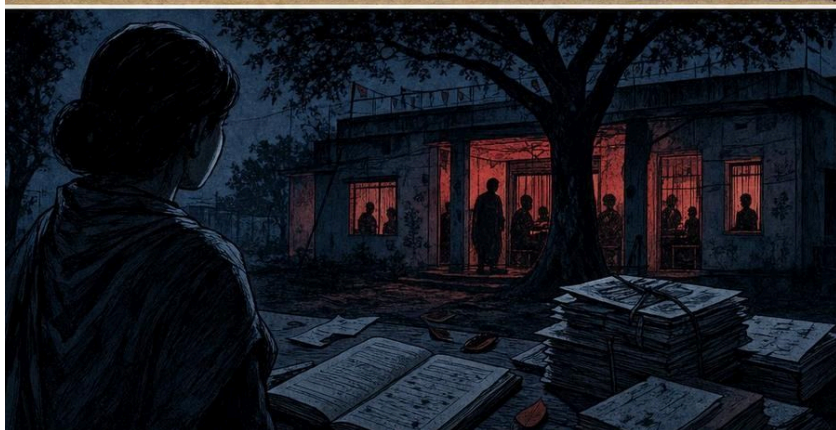
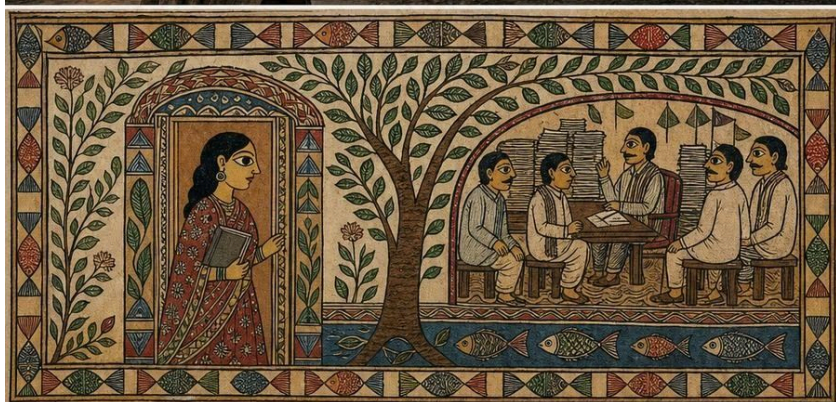
[Philosophical Undertone—Mimamsaka View: Absence of Defect as a Favourable Cause of Truth: Even if production-inhibiting defects, like a magical jewel, do not belong to a single common class, no fault arises in the causal relation; for the cause of valid cognition is the aggregate absence of the defects that cause error. This distinction shows how profound epistemic processes operate inside small events of ordinary life. Mimamsaka view: absence of defect as a favourable cause of truth.]

CHAPTER 182

The Door of the Harihar Service Centre

*By day the service centre's door distributes service; by night it keeps the
accounts.*

WATER-BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES



Opening Folk Song: The Service Door at Dawn

Folk Tune: Morning Parati

Open, O doorway, open the service doorway at dawn,

1968

Break the rusted lock with the key of the people's voice drawn.

*The heavy service door that stayed closed through the night,
At dawn the people's dear speech came and became its key of light.*

*Papers, accounts and seals—come now into the sun,
Call out the name whose right was suppressed and undone.*

*Place lamps at doorway after doorway, gather travellers on the way,
Make the word “service” true and loosen falsehood's knot today.*

*When the sun rises even walls cast off their shade,
Under people's watch every institution can learn trust again remade.*

*What stayed closed all night, appear at dawn today,
Wash paper, account and seal in the light of day.
Call the name of the buried right with the first bell's sound,
Even a wall drops its shadow when the rising sun comes round.*



When something is called service, people entrust their papers in good faith. If, in return for that trust, names, thumbprints, photographs and SIMs become market goods, the offence is not merely in a form; it is against the dignity of the threshold.

The key is in Narhari Kaka's hand, but the true key is the people's voice. The people who spent years hearing “orders from above” now ask: who is above? Whose order? Where is the account?

When a crowd becomes an ordered sequence, pain becomes categories. Name-confirmation, benefit-denial, thumbprint-without-

reading, phone-return—these are not merely list headings, but broken fragments of silence. Joined one by one, they form the institution's true face.

Night hides accounts, but dawn opens doors. When the rusted lock breaks, not only a room opens; people's right over their own names, their watch over their dignity, and their claim over their memory return with it.

Even after the SIM's shadow had been caught, its body remained far away; all night dew kept falling on the papers placed by the roots of Channa Grove. All night dew kept falling on the papers placed by the roots of Channa Grove. The SIM's shadow had been caught, but its body had still not come forward. Ananya woke before dawn. She kept rereading the line written in the register the previous day: "If the shadow is caught, the body cannot be far." Today they would knock on the first door of that body—the Harihar Service Centre.

The Harihar Service Centre was a small masonry building beside the old panchayat hall outside the village. For years, one saw fewer locks than flags on that building. Service camp, pension assistance, widow benefit, scholarship, ration registration, SIM distribution, health camp—announcements for every kind of work came from that same door, but no one openly asked whose house the true path of the benefits finally reached.

Before the group moved, Mira read the rules aloud: "We will see the papers, but not seize them. We will take permission from the person whose name we read. We will protect any employee who wishes to speak. If someone lies, the lie too will be recorded. And we will not let the crowd become the judge." The children walked under those rules. In his old bag Satyavrat Mehta carried copies, the cyber receipt, a transcript from Madhav's ledger, and Ramratiya Devi's photograph.

The first sight at the service centre was strange. The door stood half open; the floor had been swept; a flowerpot sat on the table; and a smiling portrait of Batuknath Hariharan hung on the wall. Beneath the portrait were the words: "Service is spiritual practice." Devika said softly, "Where the word service is written very brightly, one should also look for the shadow." From the half-open door came the mingled smells of a wet broom, old stamp ink and dampness from a closed room.

Inside sat an elderly watchman—Narhari Kaka. His eyes were dim, but his voice was clear. "Babus, the centre is closed today," he said. Mira asked, "Why?" Narhari replied, "Orders from above." Satyavrat did not smile. Calmly he asked, "Where is 'above'—the roof, the office, or fear?" Narhari's lips trembled. He rose from the chair and opened the inner latch.

The first room contained stacks of forms. Some had full names, some only thumbprints, some photographs pasted beside someone else's name, and many the same mobile number. Ananya began reading the labels on the bundles one by one—"elderly assistance," "housing benefit," "SIM assistance," "farmer honour," "disaster relief." Aruni wrote beside them: "Different names of benefits, one registering hand."

Mira opened the first bundle. Ramratiya Devi's name appeared again. Three different mobile numbers stood beside it. One form had a thumbprint, another a line resembling a signature, a third only a photograph. Satyavrat Mehta matched it with Madhav's ledger—the SIM activation and the service-camp page bore the same date. The children looked at one another. A living threat from a dead name was no longer a conjecture.

Narhari Kaka slowly began to speak. "My job was only to keep the key. People came, gave papers, seals were stamped, files went into the upper cupboard. Sometimes people came at night and took files out." Mira asked, "Who?" Narhari remained silent for a long while. Then he said, "Bishambhar, Dhruvesh's assistant, and sometimes a city gentleman who wore spectacles."

Devika immediately wrote: "Night movement of files." Satyavrat Mehta asked, "Is there a register?" Narhari pointed toward a rusted key hanging in the corner of the wall. "In the upper cupboard." The word "upper" reminded everyone of the court's upper room. In the language of crime, "above" is not always a physical place; often it is the direction in which responsibility is pushed away. When the cloth-bound register was opened, a fine layer of dust rose, and in the smell of old ink the suppressed names seemed to breathe again.

When the cupboard opened, two cloth-bound registers were found inside—"Beneficiary Attendance" and "Digital Assistance." The first contained names of poor village families, thumbprints and benefit codes. The second contained mobile numbers, SIM serials, bank messages, and in many places the words "phone returned." Aruni read in a trembling voice, "Phone returned." Mira said, "This phrase is the real door. A phone in one person's name, returned from that person's hand—that means theft of voice."

A crowd began gathering outside. Someone shouted, "Open the door; I want to see my name." Mira came out. "Everyone will be shown their name, but in order. No one's name will be read aloud in a crowd without permission." Some were dissatisfied, but the women's group stepped forward and formed a line. Shanti said, "Yesterday my paper's dignity was protected. Today other people's dignity will be protected too."

In the first line stood Kamla Devi, Phulkunwari, Ramratiya's grandson, Chamaru Paswan's daughter-in-law, and old Jagdish Mallah.

Each searched for their name. Where a name was found, the listed benefit was shown. Many said, "I never received this." Others said, "My thumb was taken, but the form was not read to me." Others said, "The photograph was taken that same day when a garland was put around my neck on the stage."

Ananya created separate columns: "name confirmed," "benefit denied," "thumbprint without reading," "phone returned." The children were no longer merely collecting stories; they were making categories. Truth acquires a body when pain finds order. A scattered cry can be dismissed as a crowd; organised testimony is not so easily denied.

At that moment Bishambhar arrived at the service centre. The arrogance of the previous day was less, but his voice was still made heavy. "This is a private institution," he said. "Looking at papers without permission is an offence." Satyavrat Mehta showed him the trust's public announcements, the beneficiary list, and a copy of the slip recorded in the ledger the previous day. "When a private service takes thumbprints in the name of public benefits," he said, "its papers cannot escape the people's questions."

Bishambhar tried to laugh. "You people are inciting the children." Devika stepped forward. "Incitement is where there is no fire," she said. "Here the fire has been under the ash for a long time. We are merely recording the smoke." A murmur rose in the crowd, but Mira immediately raised her hand and silenced it. Emotion had to remain method.

Bishambhar tried to move toward the cupboard, but for the first time Narhari Kaka stood in his way. "Today the key will stay in my hand," he said. Bishambhar's eyes hardened. "You will lose your job." Narhari's reply was low but clear. "For years I protected the key and lost the names. What use is protecting the job now?" At that sentence the wall plaque reading "Service is spiritual practice" seemed to tremble.

After midday the second room was opened. It contained a computer, an old printer, a scanner and a locked box. Inside the box were scraps of SIM envelopes, Aadhaar copies, photographs, and receipts marked "phone distribution." Many receipts bore different thumbprints but the same handwriting. Aruni said, "Different thumbs, one handwriting." Satyavrat Mehta added, "Meaning the consent was the people's, but the sentences belonged to someone else."

A small pen drive was also found. A paper label on it read: "Camp Photos." Mira stopped everyone immediately. "This is digital evidence. Do not touch it without a copying procedure." The cyber unit officer was called. He instructed them to keep the object exactly as it was, photograph it, write the time and keep witnesses. The children listened in surprise—the chain of custody for old paper and for digital evidence

had different disciplines, but the same purpose: to keep truth from breaking. Behind the computer was the smell of warm wires; from the closed box came the dense odour of paper, plastic and old glue, and for a moment everyone was silent.

By evening the service centre's door was open from outside, yet heavier from within. The line of names kept growing. Women looked at forms and said, "These words were never explained to us." A labourer said, "They photographed me receiving a phone; later the phone was taken back." An old man said, "They took my thumb saying pension, but bank messages went to another number." The statements looked separate until they met in the register; then they became one story—capture of identity in the name of benefits.

At the night assembly beside Channa Grove, three things were placed on the stone: the inventory of the Harihar Service Centre register, copies of phone-return receipts, and the description of the sealed pen drive. Deepak, Ramratiya Devi's grandson, sat before the lamp. "If a phone ran in my grandmother's name," he said, "it was not her spirit but her name that was enslaved." At that sentence the grove's shadow grew long.

That night the Dark Ghost walked for a long time around the stone. The Bright Spirit remained still in the lamp-light falling on the pen drive. The children felt that the old ghosts were learning the language of new devices. The crocodile lay motionless far away in the river; perhaps it understood that now, after the body, the name would be searched; after the name, the thumb; after the thumb, the voice; and after the voice, even the digital shadow. The evening's red light caught on the doorway; outside the line of names lengthened, while inside each paper carried its own weight.

Satyavrat Mehta drew the final line: service centre → SIM register → phone return → trust account → threat message → Dhruvesh's assistant. Mira wrote beneath it: "Confirmation pending, but the road is clear." Ananya opened the next page and wrote the title: "The Face Inside the Phone." Aruni added, "When the device answers, the shadow will speak."

The door of the Harihar Service Centre had opened, but the faces captured in the photographs inside still remained in darkness. Before dawn, dew shone by the roots of Channa Grove—as though the grove were saying, "The door is open; now read the face inside."

Folk Song: Night at the Service Door

Folk Tune: Doorway Song

Open, O doorway, let the face within be read,

Return the dignity stolen in service's name instead.

*By day service was given; by night accounts were hidden,
Thumb, SIM and photograph made the dead walk unbidden.*

*Inside the pen drive an old person's face was bound,
Harihar's shadow lengthened, deep and wound.*

Old ghosts learned the language of a new machine,

The crocodile watched from afar; the name reached in between.

*Service centre to trust, message to assistant,
The line ends at Dhruvesh—confirmation still essential and distant.
The door is open; let the face inside be read.*



[Philosophical Undertone—Conclusion: Alternative Definitions: In the command “Bring the staff-bearing man,” the staff limits the correlatum of the relation, and is therefore a qualifier. Conclusion—alternative definitions.]

CHAPTER 183

The Face Inside the Phone

A face can hide inside a phone, but the rhythm of breath does not hide.



Opening Folk Song: The Lamp of Grandmother's Name

Folk Tune: Grandmother-Grandchild Courtyard Song

Gather, O granddaughter, sit encircling Grandmother near,

Read Mithila written wrinkle by wrinkle clear.

Grandmother's face bears Mithila's map in every line,

Her name is like a lamp; love is its guard and sign.

Grandchildren sit in a circle and hear the story of her voice,

If someone steals her name, the whole village will rise by choice.

Winnowing tray, basket, old songs—all will testify,

The light of Grandmother's laughter will cut the darkness by.

The tulsi in the courtyard says—memory remains alive,

A name called by its own household cannot simply drift and dive.

Winnowing tray, basket, old songs—all stand as her witnesses,

*The whole village will guard against whoever steals her name from
this.*

The tulsi altar says—memory will remain,

How can one whom the household calls simply wash away like rain?



Grandmother's face is not a spectacle. In its wrinkles live the years of the household, in her throat the songs of the lineage, and in her name the trust of grandchildren. Making a counterfeit voice from that name is not merely a technical crime—it breaks the threshold of relationship.

There is also dignity in how evidence is viewed. Spreading a victim's face without permission is not justice; it is another humiliation. So Mira says: look, connect, write—but do not turn anyone's pain into a spectacle.

A hand was found, a laugh was found, the fan's rhythm was found, the cadence of breath was found. The whole face had not yet opened, yet the darkness was no longer as dense as before. When people stand guard over evidence, even a face hidden inside a phone slowly begins to reveal its shape.

After the Harihar Service Centre's door opened, the next breath of the digital shadow was sealed inside the pen drive. The seal on the pen drive kept by the roots of Channa Grove remained exactly intact until morning. Dewdrops had collected like pearls on the paper seal, but the children did not dare touch it. Three times during the night Mira had risen to make sure no hand emerged from the darkness. The service-centre door had opened, but the real door now was that small black device, inside which camp photographs and perhaps the face of the crime were hidden.

After sunrise the cyber-unit officer returned. His name was Vineet Jha, but Ananya's first question concerned method, not his name. "When you open this device, will what is inside remain unchanged?" Vineet Jha looked surprised for a moment, then grew serious. "A copy will be made first, the original will remain secure, the time will be written, witnesses will sign. The order of what we see will not be disturbed." Aruni wrote in the register: "The method of opening truth is itself part of truth."

A temporary table was set under Channa Grove. On it lay a white cloth, the seal, a camera, an empty envelope, copying sheets, and Satyavrat Mehta's old spectacles. The crowd was kept at a distance. Mira read the rules again: "We will look at images, not make a spectacle. If a face is found, its dignity will be protected. If an offender appears, paper will speak against that person, not the crowd." People fell quiet. For the first time a digital object was entering the people's court with such care. Dampness from the dew still touched the white cloth; metal near the camera was cold, and dawn light trembled in the old spectacles.

The seal was broken. The pen drive was small, but the sound of its torn paper seemed like the breaking of years of silence. Vineet Jha made a working copy on his device. Folders appeared on the screen—"Camp Photos," "Documents," "Beneficiary List," "Returned Phones," "Special." At the word "Special," lines formed on Satyavrat Mehta's forehead. A crime often gives its darkest things such ordinary names.

The first folder held photographs from service camps. Flags, banners, Batuknath Hariharan's portrait, smiles, chairs, papers, elderly hands giving thumbprints, women being photographed, young men holding mobiles, employees seated at a table in the background. At first glance everything looked like welfare activity. But Devika said, "If a picture is very carefully arranged, look at its edges." The edge was enlarged. Bishambhar stood there, only half his face visible, but holding the same bundle of receipts.

In the second photograph Ramratiya Devi appeared. Her eyes were not on the camera but on the papers lying on the table. A phone had been placed in her hand, but her fingers did not know how to hold it. A young man leaned beside her, explaining something. When the image was enlarged, a blue lanyard was visible around his neck, carrying the small emblem of the Harihar Service Centre. Deepak, Ramratiya Devi's grandson, rose silently and went to stand at a distance. No one stopped him. Some grief breathes not in a crowd but alone.

Aruni read the timestamp. The photograph had been taken on the same day as the first bank-message entry. Madhav's ledger also recorded the SIM activation that day. Three separate sources met at one point in time. Satyavrat Mehta said softly, "When paper, time and image meet at the same point, the legs of a lie grow short." Ananya drew three lines beneath the sentence.

The third folder, "Returned Phones," was opened. After photographs of phones being handed to people came other photographs of those same phones in someone else's hands. In many, elderly people were seen walking away while young men at the table repacked the phone boxes. There was also a video. The sound was blurred, but the words became clear: "The photo is done. Now deposit the phone; it will be given later." A single breath escaped together from the women in the crowd. Many remembered their own day.

Mira stopped the video at once. "Nothing showing people here will be made public without their permission," she said. "We will look for evidence, not for humiliation." A village youth who had been trying to record the screen slowly put his own phone back into his pocket. The court of Channa Grove was learning that no new injustice should be committed in the name of truth. Seeing the same ink and the same pattern of tick marks, Devika's finger stopped on the paper; she realised that falsehood first leaves behind its habits.

The "Documents" folder contained scanned forms. Many bore the same handwriting, the same tick marks, the same mistakes. On a widow-benefit form "married" was checked; on an old-age pension form there was a child's photograph; on a scholarship application there was a farmer's account. Devika said, "This is not error; these are copies made in haste." Vineet Jha added, "If the originals are found, handwriting can be examined." Satyavrat Mehta said, "The originals are in the belly of the service centre; now it must not be allowed to suppress the belch."

The hardest moment came when the "Special" folder was opened. Inside were several voice messages, lists of numbers and two short videos. In the first audio message, someone used the name of the police to threaten: "Send money immediately or you will be arrested." In the background was a creaking sound like the pole of a banner. Aruni started.

“That sound is like the fan on the service-centre veranda.” Narhari Kaka, sitting at a distance, raised his head. “My fan sounds exactly like that.”

The second audio message held the voice of an elderly woman crying, “I am afraid of the police. Leave me alone.” Everyone froze. This was not the voice of a stranger. It was Somari Kaki from Katwali hamlet, who had stayed inside her house for two days the previous month. Her son had said she was ill. Now it became clear: the sickness of fear had not begun in her body, but had been poured into it through a phone.

Mira immediately sent people to Somari Kaki’s house, but ordered, “No crowd. Only two women will go. Ask, do not pressure.” The instruction again showed everyone how testimony is taken—not by breaking a person, but by giving support. Devika wrote: “Even the voice of fear requires consent.”

In the second video a face was not clear, but one hand appeared again and again—long fingernails, a black thread around the wrist, and a faint wound near the thumb. The hand typed numbers on a keyboard, then turned a phone screen toward another camera. Vineet Jha froze the image. “The face is blurred, but the hand is a witness.” Satyavrat Mehta took out an old photograph from Chandrapal’s gathering. In it the hand of Dhruvesh’s assistant bore the same black thread and the same wound mark. When the audio was played again, the fan’s scraping was no longer just a noise; the suffocation of that night returned into the bodies of everyone sitting in the room.

Ananya’s register trembled. It was the first time the crime’s whole face had not appeared, yet a hand had come forward. She wrote: “Sometimes a face lies, but the hand leaves truth behind.” Aruni added: “Signature, thumbprint, hand—a crime always passes through a hand.” The leaves of Channa Grove stirred without apparent cause, as though confirming the line.

Bishambhar’s men watched from afar. Unease was visible on their faces. If the crowd grew, evidence could be damaged; if it thinned, fear could rise again. Mira chose the middle path—an inventory of each item, a short description of each scene, a separate statement from every witness. “Truth will not survive on excitement,” she said. “It will survive on discipline.” The children gathered their pages carefully.

By evening Somari Kaki’s first statement arrived. “When the police voice spoke on the phone, someone behind it was laughing.” At once Vineet Jha played the threatening audio again. There was indeed a very faint laugh after the threat, one no one had noticed before. Narhari Kaka heard it and trembled. “That is not Dhruvesh’s assistant,” he said. “That is the city gentleman. He laughed like this when he came to the centre at night.”

The city gentleman's face had not yet been found, but his laugh had. The story stood at a new doorway. Face blurred, hand matched, voice behind a curtain, laugh recognised, the service-centre fan creaking. The digital crocodile's teeth were now caught not only in messages, but in the air of a room, the sound of a fan, the edge of a photograph and the leftover particles of laughter.

That night at Channa Grove they placed not the pen drive itself but an inventory of its copy. The original was resealed and placed in a secure bag. Deepak set his grandmother's photograph before him but did not stare at it. "Today I did not see Grandmother's face," he said. "I saw the theft of Grandmother's name." Mira placed a hand on his shoulder. "The theft has been found," she said. "Now the road to the thief will be found." Blue evening light fell on the bag's seal, and Deepak's fingernail touched the edge of the photograph and then withdrew, as though measuring the distance between memory and evidence.

The Dark Ghost sat to the west of the grove that night. The Bright Spirit bent over the pen-drive inventory. Old Budhba's Ghost said softly, "Earlier names were erased. Now voices are made out of names. Find the breath of the one who makes the voice." The children took the words not as a story but as instruction.

Thus it ended with the face inside the phone still not fully revealed, but its hand, laugh, fan, time and the victim's voice had come onto the same line. Ananya opened the next page and wrote: "The Mask of the Voice." Dew shone again beside the roots of Channa Grove; this time not like dew, but like a lamp of inquiry.

Folk Song: Not Grandmother's Face, but the Theft of Her Name

Folk Tune: Grandson's Lament

*No spectacle, O no, Grandmother's face will not be spectacle,
The theft of her name will one day rise and speak as justice's oracle.*

*Deepak placed the photograph and said—I will not stare at
Grandmother,*

Today I will mark the traces of the theft of her name rather.

*Inside the phone: hand, laugh, the fan's repeated beat,
The cadence of breath survived though the cheek stayed incomplete.*

First the name was erased, now a voice was made from the name,

An old person's trust was stolen to create a counterfeit child's claim.

Mira held his shoulder—the theft is found, the thief's road will appear,

The grandson held back tears and guarded the list near.

Grandmother, your face will not become a spectacle for sight,

The theft of your name will one day speak as justice and right.

Today we will mark the traces of the theft of her name.



[Philosophical Undertone—Special Point: Justification of the Definition: A true cognition can arise in which the cause is non-different from the locus of the monkey-contact—that is, related through the absence of difference from it. This distinction shows how profound epistemic processes operate inside small events of ordinary life. Special point—justification of the definition.]

CHAPTER 184

The Mask of the Voice

A voice's mask is not made of cloth—it is made of practice, and the style of practice can be caught.



Opening Folk Song: Recognise the True Voice

Folk Tune: The Gentle Rhythm of a Vidyapati Song

Listen, O listen slowly, listen inside the voice,

*Among a thousand glass-made voices, count the one living breath by
choice.*

*Inside the glass are many voices; the true life is one,
The heart recognises the speech of love; deceit's tune comes undone.
As a mother knows her child even in sleep,
The heartbeat of a true voice differs from the imitation falsehood keeps.*

*Question first, then trust; keep people beside you near,
Before the phone of fear, speak the name of your own home clear.
Walk guarding the dignity of voice; let every throat stay free,
A human being's truthful speech is the greatest mantra there can be.*

*Even in sleep a mother knows her child's turning head,
An ear schooled by love catches false notes quickly instead.
Question first, then trust, with family by your side,
The heartbeat of a truthful voice is the greatest weapon and guide.*



The leaves of the grove seem to say: if the ear hurries, even falsehood may sound true; but when questions are placed slowly, an echo begins to seek its source. On which word did the breath catch, behind which laugh did metal ring, which fan's knock recalled an old room—these small signs together begin opening the stitches of the voice's mask.

Like a stolen name, a stolen voice reaches into a person's existence. A mother knows her baby's turning in sleep; an old person recognises a son's voice in a crowd. So if a machine imitates a throat, people's memory

becomes its first court—but this court must not run on frenzy; it must run on sequence and evidence.

When one thread of the mask comes into the hand, the face does not appear immediately. Sometimes only one “first,” a muffled laugh, the creak of a fan, or a quiet “sir” shows the way. Truth walks slowly, but there is dignity in that slowness; a crowd can seize, evidence can bind.

And in this grove, voice will no longer remain a weapon of fear. The story of every stolen throat will be written; the sequence of every practice session made for deceit will be opened; even the silence that stood beside the crime will receive a receipt. As the mask comes off, the true face will not merely be “in front”—it will stand directly before them, and people will learn again to trust their own voices.

In the morning the list placed by the roots of Channa Grove seemed covered not with dew but with tiny ears. The previous day the pen-drive images had yielded a hand, a laugh, a fan and a half-hidden face; today was the day to open the mask hidden inside the voice. Ananya carefully rewrote on a fresh register page the title she had written the night before: “The Mask of the Voice.” It felt to her as though the title had already been written on the leaves of the grove before it ever reached paper.

Vineet Jha warned them first: “Voice comparison is not final evidence in court, but it can certainly be a lamp showing the road. Ears are emotional; machines too can make mistakes. So a voice must not be read alone, but alongside time, place, phone, image and testimony.” Mira immediately wrote beneath the sentence: “Justice by ear will not be done by a crowd; it will be done by sequence.” The people gathered outside were told the same. They were beginning to understand that the crocodile’s new form entered through the ear to create fear.

The first audio message was Somari Kaki’s. A harsh voice on the phone said, “An arrest warrant has been issued against you; if you disconnect, you will be arrested.” The sentence was in Hindi, but a plaintive Maithili rhythm hid within it—the “j” in “jaari” was slightly soft, the “r” in “giraftaari” slightly prolonged. Vineet Jha slowed the audio. Behind it came a very faint laugh. The laugh identified the day before as belonging to the city gentleman who was now isolated and played separately. Narhari Kaka closed his eyes. “That is the night laugh,” he said. “When those people picked up files and went into the upper room, I heard that same laugh.”

Satyavrat Mehta asked Narhari, “Do you remember whose speech came with the laugh?” Narhari said, “He spoke very little. Only, ‘Do it quickly, there is little time.’ And when Bishambhar became nervous, he laughed and said, ‘The village people will forget.’” At the words “will forget,” Deepak’s fist closed. Ramratiya Devi’s face flashed in his eyes. The

grandchildren of those whom they had planned to make forgotten were now preserving their voices.

Finding a sample of Dhruvesh's assistant's voice was difficult. The face was blurred; the hand matched; but where was the voice? Then Devika remembered an old video of the service ceremony. At the edge of the stage a young man managing the microphone said, "Beneficiaries, come into line; thumb later, photo first." Vineet Jha extracted the audio. In that voice the syllable "hi" in the word "pahine"—"first"—rose in an unusual way. In the threat message too a voice in the background said, "First, don't disconnect." The two instances of "first" seemed to catch one another by the ear.

Aruni wrote, "The form of words changes; habit does not." Satyavrat Mehta stopped him. "Add this: habit is not proof, but an indication." The children had begun to like this discipline. A story may be exciting, but justice is not made from excitement; justice is made from careful lines.

A third piece of voice was found in the "Special" folder. The file was named "Re-check." When opened, it contained short practice lines: "I am speaking as a police officer," "Your account has been used in a crime," "Stay on the video call," "Tell no one." The same sentence was spoken in different voices—sometimes thick, sometimes thin, sometimes tired, sometimes hard. Vineet Jha said, "These may be practice takes, or samples for creating false voices. This is very important." The leaves of Channa Grove suddenly trembled. Earlier names had been cut away; now throats were being manufactured from names.

Mira's face hardened. "Did the people whose voices were taken consent?" she asked. No one answered. Somari Kaki said slowly, "At the camp they told us: say, 'I have received the benefit.' They made us say it three times. I thought it was for the photograph." A stir ran through the crowd. Several elderly women, farmers and widows began saying, "They made me say it too." Theft of voice was no less than theft of name.

Vineet Jha calmed everyone. "Write separately the names of the people who were made to speak. Do not pressure anyone to record again. Whoever wishes may simply describe what happened." Mira repeated the rule. The children opened another page: "Voice Testimony." First name, Somari Kaki. Second, Kamla Devi. Third, an elderly farmer—Ramsagar Yadav—who said his voice might have been used for some bank confirmation. The grove had become a court of sound.

Meanwhile Bishambhar arrived quietly. He stayed at the back of the crowd, but the hand with the black thread was recognisable from afar. Ananya saw him but did not shout. She went to Mira and whispered, "The hand has arrived." Mira did not turn around. She only announced, "Anyone who suspects something about himself should not run."

Remaining at the place of testimony does not reduce guilt, but speaking truth can save a name.” Bishambhar’s face went pale.

Bishambhar did not come forward. But his phone rang. The sound was very low, yet Vineet’s equipment was still running. Bishambhar tried to cut the call without lifting the phone to his ear, but one word escaped: “Sir.” Vineet immediately caught the hard whisper behind that “sir.” He could not read the number of the call, but the time was recorded. Bishambhar edged toward the outside. Aruni wrote: “Suspect present, did not flee; call received, time recorded.” Ananya added, “Fear too has its own receipt.”

Narhari Kaka then remembered something else. “When the city gentleman came, he never had the fan switched off. He would say, ‘Let the sound continue. If the fan noise stays in the camera, no one will identify anything.’” Vineet Jha immediately isolated the creaking fan from the pen-drive audio. The old fan on the service-centre ceiling had three identical catches in its rhythm—whirr, whirr, knock. Behind the threatening message was the same knock. The room seen in the photograph was not inside the service centre, but the fan was of the same kind. “Was a fan ever removed from here and installed somewhere else?” Devika asked. Narhari nodded. “Three months ago the old fan was taken to the city. They said it was for repair.”

That small piece of information changed the entire map. If the fan went from the service centre to the city, then the city gentleman’s room carried the service centre’s sound with it. A crime transports not only paper, but sound. Satyavrat Mehta drew a line: voice samples at the service camp → returned phones → fan sent to the city → threat room → trust account. Everyone stared at it. If a crocodile drags prey through water, the digital crocodile was dragging voice, fan, photograph and bank receipt together.

Evening approached. The shadow of Channa Grove lengthened. Somari Kaki gave her voice testimony: “They told me to say three times, ‘I am happy.’ I was not happy, but I thought I would receive the benefit, so I said it.” Kamla Devi said, “Nothing was read out to me; they only told me to speak.” Ramsagar Yadav said, “Someone unknown used my voice on the phone to reassure my son. My son said, ‘Babu, that was your voice.’” A shiver moved through the crowd. When a voice leaves the body and becomes a tool of fraud, people begin to lose trust even in their own throats.

The Dark Ghost sat that day not inside the grove, but very near. The Bright Spirit bent over the list of voices. Old Budhba’s Ghost said, “In old stories witches changed voices to mislead children. Now humans use machines to change voices and rob humans. People remembered stories of witches; bind the machine-witch into a list.” The children wrote the

phrase “machine-witch,” but Mira did not laugh. It was not a joke, but a warning.

After nightfall Bishambhar finally came forward. His voice was broken. “I connected the calls, but the city gentleman spoke. Dhruvesh Babu told me: just connect the numbers and stay behind. Many times he made me practise speaking in other voices too.” Mira asked, “The city gentleman’s name?” Bishambhar lowered his eyes. “I do not know the full name. Everyone there called him ‘Master.’ Dhruvesh called him ‘Madhaves Babu,’ though perhaps that is not his real name.” Satyavrat Mehta immediately wrote: “Master/Madhaves—confirmation pending.”

Bishambhar’s admission was incomplete, but a crack had opened. He held out the hand with the black thread. “This wound is from the night when, while I was snatching the phone box, an old hand bit me.” Deepak’s eyes filled again. “Grandmother?” Bishambhar was silent. The silence fell like an answer. The crowd surged, but Mira raised her hand. “The offender will be caught by testimony, not by the crowd.” The sentence was difficult, but necessary.

Thus the voice’s mask did not come off entirely, but a thread of it had come into their hands. The city gentleman emerged under the name “Master”; Dhruvesh’s assistant’s role in practice sessions, call-connecting and voice theft opened further; and the fan’s creak began showing a road toward the city. Ananya opened the next page and wrote: “The Master’s Room.” Aruni added, “Where the voice was made, the face may have remained.” Night settled over Channa Grove, but this time the darkness was speaking.

Folk Song: The Wound of the False Voice

Folk Tune: Lament of Confession

*Return it, O throat, return the stolen throat,
From every line of the wound reveal the true face afloat.*

*Bishambhar connected numbers; the city gentleman spoke,
Inside masks of practice many borrowed throats awoke.
On the black-threaded hand an old nail left its mark,
At “Grandmother?” silence became a poisonous spark.
The crowd surged; Mira said—testimony will catch,*

Not anger, but evidence will lock the offender's arm in its latch.

"Master," "Madhavesb"—threads of an unfinished name,

The creaking fan points toward the city room all the same.

False voice, stolen throat, return once more,

Mira said—not anger; evidence alone will bind the blaze at the door.

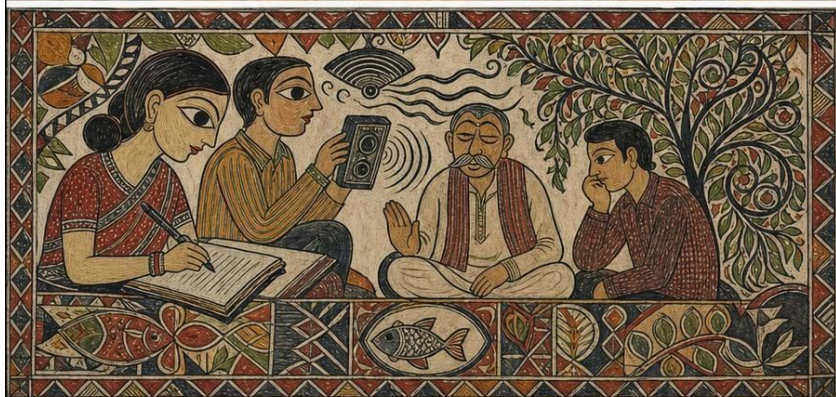


[Philosophical Undertone—Reply to the Objection: The Indeterminate as a Cause of Qualified Cognition: In the cognition “this person bears a staff,” mere indeterminate cognitions of the staff as qualifier and the person as qualified subject cannot be accepted as the cause; for “this person bears a staff” is itself a qualified cognition of a person qualified by the staff. This distinction shows how profound epistemic processes operate inside small events of ordinary life. Reply to the objection: indeterminate cognition is not the cause of qualified cognition.]

CHAPTER 185

The Master's Room

*The Master's room was found; the Master had turned to smoke—but
even smoke needs a road.*



Opening Folk Song: Morning in the Creaking Room

Folk Tune: Moderate Rail-Batagabani Rhythm

Open the window, open the creaking room,

Mix the dawn's melody with the station whistle.

The creaking fan keeps turning; the window seeks the dawn,

The station whistle says—the edge of darkness will open.

One step of truth, and the room becomes a road,

Shut air escapes outside and the scent of trees settles in.

Let courage move like a train, on two rails together,

One line writes justice, the other opens the way.

The room that was a house of fear becomes a chaupal,

And the creaking voice becomes rhythm, singing a new song of life.

The fan turns creak-creak, making an old beat,

At one step of truth the room becomes an open hall.

Like two railway tracks, justice and courage run together,

The hand of the trees' fragrance enters the sealed air.



The creaking fan... People think it is merely the fault of an old machine. But when the same creak sounds in a threatening phone call, in the memory of the service centre, and in a room in the city with the same rhythm, sound becomes a footprint. Truth does not run like this; slowly it measures the distance from one sound to another place.

The name... Madhaves or Madhvash... by cutting away a single vowel mark a person tries to hide his body. But numbers, rent ledgers, receipts, railway times, and the movement of a hand upon paper recognise one another. Crime shortens a name, but cannot shorten its shadow.

Inside the room, a grandmother's voice, a farmer's trust, fear of the police, and pressure from a bank are divided among separate slips. This is not merely voice practice; it is a method for cutting up the body of relationships and selling it in the market. Therefore dignity is required before touching evidence, and consent before listening to a victim's voice.

The railway line... a train passes, the room trembles, and the fan goes khat without turning. The timetable, red thread, SIM wrappers, and tiny name-strips together say—the house has been caught; its owner is still on the road. But when people keep conjecture outside and walk with recorded evidence, even smoke's road slowly begins to appear.

The thread of creaking sound caught from the mask of the voice stretched toward the city's railway tracks. All night the fan's creak seemed caught above Channa Grove. There was no fan in the grove, yet the leaves kept moving as though saying ghurr-ghurr-khat. Yesterday the thread behind the mask of the voice had come into their hands—"Master," "Madhaves," the fan, voice samples, phone links, and the practice of fear. Today was the day to follow that thread to the room itself. At dawn Ananya opened the register and wrote the title: "The Master's Room." As she wrote, she understood that this room would not be made merely of bricks; it would be the place where people's voices had been skinned and stuffed into sacks for the market.

Vineet Jha first played the voice again. Everyone was made to hear the fan's three catches in the background—ghurr, ghurr, khat. Narhari Kaka sat cross-legged. Closing his eyes, he said, "The old fan at the Harihar Service Centre used to catch in exactly this way. One blade was slightly bent, and when the motor heated up it went khat." Mira asked, "How did that fan reach the city?" Narhari Kaka said, "In the name of repairs. It was taken down by Bishambhar and loaded onto the vehicle of Dhruvesh's assistant. I thought it was junk." Satyavrat Mehta said quietly, "Crime does not carry away useless things; what it carries, it uses."

Bishambhar had been sitting at the edge of the grove since night. He had not been allowed to run, nor had he been beaten; his punishment was to listen. When the fan was mentioned, he came forward trembling. "There was a room in the city," he said, "behind the station, above an old photocopy shop. The Master made voices there. He used to say about that fan—we need the village's sound, not the city's. Dhruvesh Babu used to say—if Harihar's air remains in the background, trust will grow." At this, no stir passed through the crowd; instead a chill spread. Trust itself had been made into an atmosphere and mixed into fraud.

Mira immediately laid down rules. "We will go to see the room, but not as a crowd. No one will touch anything. We will enter lawfully with authorised personnel. Conjecture outside, record inside." The team was kept small—Mira, Satyavrat Mehta, Vineet Jha, Ananya, Aruni, Devika,

Deepak, Narhari, and the same young cyber-branch officer who had said the previous day, "A digital crocodile leaves footprints too." Bishambhar insisted on going, but Mira stopped him. "Your statement is testimony now; your presence could contaminate evidence." Bishambhar heard the phrase "contaminated evidence" for the first time. He understood that after a crime, even truth demands caution.

In the lane behind the city station, shops were half open. Tea, smoke, the shouting of buses, cheap hotel walls, torn coaching posters, mobile-repair boards, and wires hanging overhead together formed a web as though a digital crocodile were walking on land. The old photocopy shop now had a new signboard: "Master Media Service." The word "Master" shone in fresh paint, while the remaining letters rotted beneath older paint. Devika said softly, "The name changed; the wall did not." In the steam of morning tea mingled the smells of coal smoke, damp paper, and railway iron; whenever a distant whistle sounded, the hanging wires trembled for a moment.

The shopkeeper, who called himself not the owner but only a tenant, denied everything at first. "The room upstairs is empty," he said. The cyber officer asked for the rent register. The tenant's name was entered there as "Madhvesh Mishra." Not "Madhaves" but "Madhvesh"—one vowel mark missing from the middle. Ananya wrote, "A lack inside the name—coincidence or deception?" The mobile number on the page matched the same chain whose one end had been found in the instruction paper of the Harihar Trust. Looking at the paper, Satyavrat Mehta said, "A man may hide when a vowel mark is cut away, but the shadow of a number follows behind."

As soon as they climbed the stairs, the first khat was heard. The door was shut, but there was a fan-like sound inside despite the still air. The shopkeeper said, "The electricity is off." Vineet Jha put his ear close. "This may not be a real fan; it could be a sound recording as well." Before opening the door, a formal seizure memorandum was prepared. Time, persons present, lock, latch, seal, photographs—everything was recorded. The children watched and learned that before a room of truth is opened, it is not the lock but procedure that must first be opened.

The lock was opened. The moment they entered the room, smells struck them—hot wiring, dust, sweat, cheap perfume, old fan oil, and fear. The same fan really was fixed to the ceiling. One blade was bent; a black strip ran across the middle; and near the motor, in small white letters, was written "Hari-2." Narhari Kaka began to tremble. "This is the service centre's second fan. I wrote that myself when the first fan broke." The fan was off, yet the room seemed filled with its voice, as though its creak had soaked into the walls. When the lock came away, the cold smell of iron climbed up their fingers; a fine layer of dust floated in the

light, and even after the room was opened it seemed to be holding its breath.

The room was small, but the equipment of crime was vast. In one corner stood a holder for mobile phones, in another a circular ring light; in the middle an old table, slips of paper on top; half-peeled green cloth on a wall; behind it a curtain printed with a fake police-station image; and across the floor, snakes of wire. Vineet Jha folded his hands behind his back and said, "Do not touch. Photographs first." The cyber officer took pictures. Aruni wrote, "The room itself is a theatre, but its performance is aimed at plunder." The plays of Channa Grove made people listen to suffering; this room manufactured the voice of suffering in order to rob sufferers.

The first slip on the table read: "Grandmother voice: slow, trusting, no crying." The second: "Farmer voice: address as son." The third: "Police voice: harsh, mention sections of law in between." The fourth: "Bank voice: do not say OTP, but press for confirmation." Mira's face hardened as she read. "They were not reading people's language; they were reading maps of relationships," she said. "From a grandmother's voice to a grandson, from a farmer's voice to a son, from a police voice to fear, from a bank voice to trust—all four roads into the same bag."

Deepak looked toward a box behind the table. Old dust lay over it. The officer opened it. Inside were small paper strips—name, age, village, mobile number, relationship. On one strip was written: "Ramratiya—grandmother—Deepak—city." Deepak's breath stopped. He stepped back, but Ananya caught his hand. Mira made him sit. "You may cry," she said, "but do not touch the paper." The tear that fell from Deepak's eye did not reach the floor; it stopped on his knee. Even grief, sometimes, understands the dignity of evidence.

In one file they found a printed list of audio files: "Somari Benefit," "Kamala Confirmation," "Ramsagar Trust," "Grandmother-Three," "Master-Police-Practice." At the words "Master-Police-Practice," Vineet's face changed. He ordered a copy to be made. The officer said, "If we find the original device, there will be forensic audio examination." Satyavrat Mehta added, "And only with the victims' consent." Mira nodded with satisfaction. Theft of a voice cannot be answered by a second theft of that voice.

A calendar hanging in a corner of the wall was half torn. When the page was lifted, a pencil diagram appeared underneath: Harihar Service Centre → room above photocopy shop → city account → trust → "D" → "M". "D" for Dhruvesh? "M" for Master? Ananya began to write, but Satyavrat stopped her. "Record the letters, not their meaning." On a separate sheet Aruni wrote, "D/M—confirmation pending." By now the children had learned not to seat conjecture in the witness chair.

Inside a cupboard were several SIM wrappers, colour photocopies of forged identity cards, a torn thumbprint pad, and two old receipts. One receipt was for fan repair—received from Harihar Service Centre in the name of "Madhvesh." The other was for table rent, with only a black curl where the signature should have been. Narhari Kaka said, "That curl looks like the hand of Dhruvesh's assistant." Mira immediately replied, "Do not write 'looks like.' Preserve it for signature comparison." When the language of justice gets stuck at "looks like," the crocodile smiles.

The room's small window opened toward the station tracks. A train passed; the whole room shook, and the fan went khat without turning. Vineet Jha started. "This is the reason. The rumbling behind the threatening calls may have been the train." The timetable was checked. Somari Kaki's call had come at 8:13 at night; a freight train passed then. Kamala Devi's call had come at 10:02; the local passed then. Behind the voice, the station's shadow matched. The room was no longer merely a place; it was becoming evidence tied to time.

Suddenly a short piece of red thread was found inside a table drawer. The moment Ananya saw it, she remembered the beak of the bird in Channa Grove. Whether the red thread was merely for tying paper or a sign from the grove was impossible to know. The officer sealed it in an evidence pouch as well. Mira did not smile. Distance must be kept between folk tale and criminal procedure, yet sometimes folk signs walk quietly around the edges of evidence. Satyavrat Mehta said only, "The object was found. Meaning later."

When they came downstairs, several faces had gathered in the lane. Some were making videos on their phones; others whispered, "Cyber raid," "fraud," "the Master has fled." The shopkeeper's son said softly to Devika, "Last night a man took away two bags. His beard looked fake." Devika asked, "At what time?" The boy said, "Around half past eleven. A train whistled." His name, the time, and the circumstances of the statement were recorded. Mira did not photograph him; he was a minor. The guard around privacy did not break even at such a moment.

On the bus back to the village, no one spoke much. Deepak sat by the window. The words on the strip—"Ramratiya—grandmother—Deepak—city"—kept turning before his eyes. He said softly, "They kept using Grandmother's voice even after she died." Mira answered, "That is why we will write a right over the voice. The voice of the dead is also the family's memory, not merchandise for the market." Satyavrat Mehta wrote the sentence in his notes. Perhaps it would become a principle at the next public hearing. Deepak rested his forehead against the window glass; the poles racing past outside looked like incomplete memories of his grandmother—always slipping behind even when he wished to hold them.

When they reached Channa Grove, the photographs, lists, fan receipt, SIM wrappers, audio list, and copies of the rent register brought from the room were laid in order upon the stone. No one applauded today. The Black Ghost's shadow bent over the photograph of the fan; the White Spirit paused near the pouch containing the red thread. Old Budhba's voice came from within the leaves: "In old times a thief entered a house. Now a thief builds a house out of voices. The house has been found, but its owner is still on the road."

Bishambhar stood at a distance and listened to everything. When the name "Madhvesh" was read aloud, he whispered, "The Master used to say—keep the name short and you will escape." Ananya wrote the sentence down. Aruni added, "Shortening a name does not make the crime smaller." At that, the leaves of the grove stirred lightly. There was no wind. Perhaps the names agreed.

The Master's room had been opened, but the Master himself had not been caught. The room had taught them that in the theft of voices, maps of bodies, knowledge of relationships, the sound of a fan, railway timings, false backgrounds, and trust money had all been bound into one net. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "Madhvesh's Real Name." Beneath it Aruni wrote, "If the room has been found, the road of escape will be found too." Night descended over Channa Grove; this time there was no fan in the darkness, only the distant whistle of a train.

Folk Song: The Room of the Creaking Fan

Folk Tune: Batagabani Beyond the Railway

*Tell us, O fan, tell every practice of the night,
Show the direction of the track where the thief took flight.*

*A room behind the station, the fan creak-creak,
Inside that sound they built a counterfeit house of fear.
SIM wrappers, voice lists, a pouch of red thread,
Whose mother, whose son—every rhythm was soiled.
The Master became smoke and fled toward the tracks,*

The room declared—voice-theft awoke here.

“Keep the name short,” he said, but the crime did not grow small,

Madhaves’ road went far into the whistle of the train.

Creaking fan, tell every practice of the night,

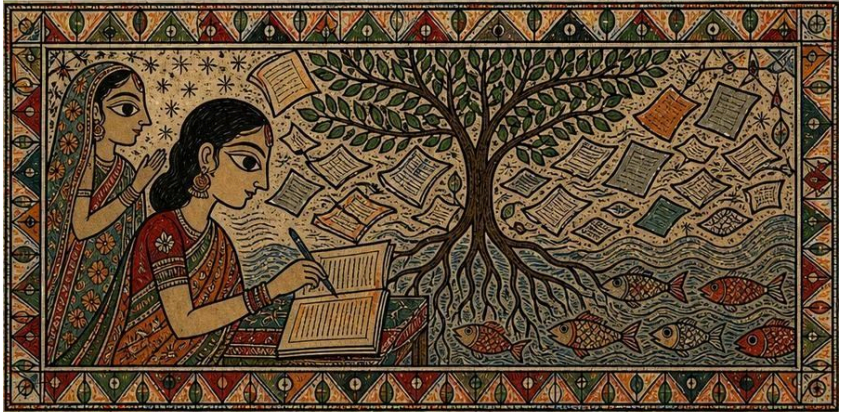


[Philosophical Undertone—Another View: Bodily Origination Is Not the Delimiter. For example: “If God is an agent, then He would be an embodied living being; then He would possess knowledge of the desired means, possess a purpose, and possess non-eternal cognition; and if He is the maker of earth and the rest, then the maker of that earth and the rest would be only an embodied living being.” Merely producing such an undesirable consequence does not by itself establish a fallacious reason. Another view: bodily origination is not the delimiter.]

CHAPTER 186

Madhavesb's Real Name

A real name is often written on the thinnest sheet of paper—the one everyone thinks is scrap.



Opening Folk Song: From Madhukar Back to Honey

Folk Tune: Honeybee Folk Tune

Buzz, O Madhukar, buzz along the road to flowers,

Forget the ring of poison and hum again of honey.

*Madhukar hums—show us the road to flowers,
Leave the circle of poison and bring sweetness home again.*

*Every flower's labour is equal, every wing has a right,
Only then will the hive be sweet, when conduct remains true.*

*The smoke of greed will clear when affection rises in the heart,
A wandering wing may turn again toward the road of fragrance.
Preserve the honour of the name Madhukar; do not steal the nectar of
labour,*

Give every flower an equal share, and join life together.

Equal the labour of every flower, equal the honour of every wing,

The hive is sweet only when integrity remains pure.

When greed's smoke clears, the road of fragrance appears,

Even a lost wing may turn back and gather its home again.



Madhukar... Madhaves... Madhvash... Master... letters cut away, vowel marks changed, shells made new; yet the gait of the voice and the habits of the hand remained the same. By changing a name a person may try to flee from village, poverty, and the memory of his mother, but the old call keeps following, like air filtering through gaps in leaves. The name that once drew laughter becomes, on paper, a source of urban trust.

Art... imitation... applause... fear... reproducing a child's cry, an old man's throat, or a leader's speech was once play. When greed buys that art, the same skill begins sending fear into people's homes. The words

written on his mother's wall—"Do not sell your voice"—were not merely advice; they became a warning that had somehow seen her son's future beforehand.

Finding a name does not complete justice. Permission is required to inspect a school register; childhood documents must not be turned into a market; what was heard must be recorded as heard, and what was seen as seen. Even while catching an offender, one must not sell his human dignity—this is a difficult rule, but it is the rule that keeps investigation separate from revenge.

If one bee is caught, the buzzing does not stop; the hive is somewhere else. One name opens roads toward Dhruvesh, Maheshwar, the service network, city accounts, and trust money. When investigators record even the empty spaces, evidence becomes honest; the honey of truth is found only when the entire hive is seen beyond the ring of poison.

The half-written letters on the name-strip found in the Master's room trembled all night upon the stone in Channa Grove. Near the roots of the grove, the whistle of a train seemed caught through the night. The Master's room had been opened, but the Master's body had slipped from their hands like smoke. Across the copies laid on the stone, the same name kept sprouting in altered forms—Madhvesh, Madhaves, M, Master, M. Mi. At dawn Ananya opened a page and wrote, "Madhaves's Real Name." As she wrote, she felt that the reality of a name was not merely spelling; behind a name lie lineage, papers, voice, accounts, and the old shadow of crime.

Mira warned everyone first. "Today we will search for a name, but no crowd will rise on the basis of that name. What the papers say, what testimony says, what the timetable says—only together will they form the matter. We will not call any caste, lineage, village, or household criminal; people commit crimes, and names are shells they wear for protection." The sentence was necessary. In a village, the moment a name is heard, people rush after clan, lineage, faction, and old hostility. The first safeguard of justice is correct identification of the name, not retaliation.

Satyavrat Mehta arranged again the copies brought from the Master's room. In the rent register: "Madhvesh Mishra." On the fan receipt: "Madhaves." Behind a SIM wrapper: "M. Mishra." On the order slip for the fake police background: only "Master." In the bank-account reference: "M.M." And in the old ledger of the city's photocopy shop, a half-erased name: "Madhu..." Mira said, "The offender has turned his name into a river; at every bend it changes form. Now we must search for the source of the stream."

Vineet Jha opened the digital image of the rent paper brought from the city. The landlord's statement said the rent had been paid in cash. In

the first month a man came with Dhruvesh's assistant and introduced himself as "Madhav Master." The second time he called himself "Madhvesh." The third time, "Mishraji." The landlord had asked no questions; cash rent produces fewer questions. Aruni wrote, "Cash reduces the questioning of names."

Devika read the shopkeeper's son's statement: "The man who took away two bags seemed to have a fake beard." It was a short statement, but inside it lay the direction of flight. A railway whistle at half past eleven. In the station guard's attendance book, at that same time, was a description of a passenger: long kurta, black bag, seen removing a false beard, trying to enter the platform without a ticket. When asked his name, he had said, "Madhukar." Vineet Jha said, "Another name." Ananya wrote, "A fleeing man changes names like clothes."

Narhari Kaka, sitting near Channa Grove, suddenly spoke. "I have heard the name Madhukar." Every eye turned toward him. He said, "Years ago a boy used to come to Harihar Service Centre. He imitated voices—an old man's throat, a child's crying, a politician's speech, everything. We called him Madhukar in jest. His real name? I do not remember. He went to the city with Dhruvesh." Bishambhar began to tremble. "The Master used to say, people in the village called me Madhukar. But don't ask my name now."

At this, three forms of the name came together—Madhvesh, Madhaves, Madhukar. Satyavrat Mehta removed his old spectacles and wiped them with a cloth. "Where a nickname and a documentary name differ, a school ledger, voter roll, or examination paper can open a road." Vineet Jha agreed. But Mira again drew the line of dignity. "Only a lawful copy. No theft of any private list. We will not commit a crime in opposing crime." At the sentence, the Black Ghost's shadow moved faintly within the grove.

By noon the team reached the old secondary school. The building was half broken, half freshly painted, and wholly filled with memory. The headmaster was frightened at first. "The records are old; I will not take responsibility." Satyavrat Mehta said gently, "We have not come to seize papers, but to align the sequence of evidence." The old admission register was brought out from an iron cupboard. As dust rose, Ananya remembered the darkness of the archive room. Whether a paper belongs to a court or a school, dust speaks the same language. When the cupboard opened, the mixed smell of damp lime, old chalk, and mouse-gnawed paper spread through the room; the turning pages sounded like dry leaves rustling.

The register pages were turned. In a list from ten years earlier they found the name: "Madhukar Madhav Mishra, father—Maheshwar Mishra, village—Bariyarpur Tola, temporary address—Harihar Service Centre premises." The date of birth was incomplete. In the next year's list

the same boy had become "Madhaves." In the third year, "Madhvesh." The headmaster scratched his head. "Now I remember. His father himself had the name changed. He said Madhukar sounded too village-like." Devika said softly, "The scent of the village was cut away from the name and made into urban crime."

Bishambhar's body began to shake. "Maheshwar Mishra?" he whispered. "He was a relative on Dhruvesh's maternal side. The first donation to the service centre came through him." Satyavrat Mehta wrote the statement on a separate sheet: "Claim of relationship—confirmation pending." Mira interrupted Bishambhar. "Say what you saw; if you heard something, record it as heard." For the first time Bishambhar understood that enthusiasm in testimony can also lead toward falsehood.

An old photograph from the school's drama day was found. A blurred image—a thin boy on stage wearing a police cap, standing before a microphone while the crowd laughed. On the back, in a teacher's handwriting: "Madhukar—voice imitation." Ananya looked at the photograph for a long time. An art born to receive applause had been turned into a tool for selling fear. Channa Grove's theatre opened suffering; the Master's mimicry manufactured it. The distance between art and crime was thin as a pencil line, yet deep as a stream of blood. The edge of the photograph crumbled at a touch; the smell of dried glue and the faded light of the stage seemed to awaken applause from long ago.

The headmaster brought another ledger—a scholarship form book. In it, Madhukar's bank account had once been linked to the service centre's account. The reason written was "guardian assistance." Vineet Jha did not photograph it immediately; first a written permission was obtained. Mira said, "It is a childhood record. Only as much as necessary." Satyavrat Mehta added, "Even if he later became an offender, his childhood privacy will not be entirely displayed in the marketplace." Aruni was astonished. Justice was this difficult—to catch an offender without auctioning his human dignity.

On leaving the school, they took the road toward Bariyarpur Tola. People gathered curiously along the village embankment. Madhukar's old house was locked. An elderly woman nearby said, "Madhukar? His voice was like a bee, so the name Madhukar stuck. As a child he could sing bhajans, become a leader, become a policeman. Maheshwar used to say—the boy will speak on the radio in the city. Then he joined Dhruvesh Babu in service work. Later came cars, phones, the city. He rarely returned home."

No old tin box was found at the threshold of the house, but half a sentence written in charcoal still remained on the wall: "Do not sell your voice." No one knew who had written it. The old woman said, "His mother wrote it before she died, after the boy had mocked people's speech." Everyone fell silent. Perhaps Madhukar's mother had

unknowingly written the first oath against the crime that much later appeared before them as a digital crocodile. In the cracked lime of the threshold lingered the old smell of mustard oil; when evening light fell on the charcoal letters, the sentence shone as though newly written.

Toward evening the team returned to Channa Grove. On the stone they placed together the certified copy of the school register, the drama-day photograph, the relevant part of the scholarship form, the old woman's statement, and the "Madhvesh" entry from the rent register. Ananya read the sequence aloud: Madhukar Madhav Mishra → Madhaves → Madhvesh → Master. Beneath it Aruni wrote, "The cutting and reshaping of the name became part of the preparation for crime."

Deepak asked quietly, "If his real name is Madhukar, why should we call him Master?" Mira replied, "Because Master was the role of the crime. But in government papers we will write the name that is established. The name preserved in people's memory will also be recorded. One name will help catch the offender; another will help history understand him." Satyavrat Mehta added, "The court will ask the accused's name; society will ask—how did he become this?"

Bishambhar kept scratching the soil at the edge of the grove. At last he said, "The Master used to say—Madhukar is dead, Madhvesh earns money. He hated his old name." Mira asked, "Why?" Bishambhar said, "He said when people hear Madhukar, they remember village, poverty, and Mother. When they hear Madhvesh, they think of papers, the city, and trust." Ananya wrote, "The man who fled from his mother's voice sold the voices of other people's mothers." Deepak bowed his head at the sentence.

Vineet Jha drew a line: Harihar Service Centre children's camp → Madhukar's voice imitation → Dhruvesh's service network → room behind the station → SIMs and trust → digital arrest. "In this line, Maheshwar's name, Dhruvesh's role, and confirmation of the city accounts are still missing," he said. Mira answered with satisfaction, "The gaps are written down; therefore the line is honest." The honesty of testimony lies not only in its completeness, but also in the empty spaces it admits.

After nightfall, an unusual buzzing rose in the leaves of Channa Grove. The name Madhukar was linked to the honeybee, and for a little while invisible bees really seemed to circle through the grove. Old Budhba's voice came: "If honey has been turned into poison, search for the hive. Catching one bee will not stop the whole venom." The Black Ghost moved near the school register laid on the stone. The White Spirit cast light over the drama photograph. Everyone understood—Madhukar/Madhvesh was only one point on the route; the hive still remained.

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the final note: "Probable real name of accused: Madhukar Madhav Mishra; names used: Madhaves, Madhvesh, Master; links: Harihar Service Centre, Dhruvesh-linked service network, station room; confirmations pending: bank, travel, Maheshwar relationship, trust funds." Above the note Mira wrote: "Secure the lawful copy before public disclosure of the name." Some people in the crowd grew impatient; hunger to hear a name is faster than justice. But Mira remained firm.

For the first time Madhvesh's real name stood before them in sequence—Madhukar Madhav Mishra. But finding the name did not end the crime; instead, the offender's childhood, art, shame, ambition, Dhruvesh's hand, Maheshwar's shadow, and the city's account began joining one another. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "The Queen Inside the Hive." Beneath it Aruni added, "The bee has been caught, but in whose house is the honey stored?" The buzzing remained over Channa Grove all night.

Folk Song: Madhukar's Buzzing

Folk Tune: Honeybee Folk Tune

Bear it, O Madhukar, bear the weight under your real name,

Name every home that wept because of your voice.

The name Madhukar was honey; the work became poison,

He sold the art of childhood and built a house of counterfeit voices.

Madhaves, Madhvesh, Master—three shells,

On a thin scrap of paper, the real name spoke.

Invisible bees circled the grove all night,

One was caught, but the poisoned hive did not vanish.

Shame, greed, Dhruvesh's hand, Maheshwar's shadow,

How many roads bend inside one person's fall.

Madhukar, bear the weight of the crime under your real name,



[Philosophical Undertone—Refutation: Let it be granted that from the completion of the incomplete sentence “processed rice is useful for pounding,” there arises knowledge of the causal relation concerning the pounding of rice qualified by processing. Refutation.]

CHAPTER 187

The Queen Inside the Hive

The queen inside the hive never goes to the flower herself—the buzzing reveals where she is.



Opening Folk Song: Let the Name Rani Shine

Folk Tune: Women's Circle Auspicious Song

Shine, O Rani, let your own name shine,

Brush off the dust of lies and bathe in the water of truth.

*Rani, do not wash away your name; brush off the dust and make it
shine,*

What lies have stained, bathe in truth's water.

The sisters form a circle and say—raise your head, Rani,

The leaf of your name is green; your speech is water.

The stain on paper may wash away, but honour does not,

When one woman's voice rises, a hundred lies retreat.

*Let the bright letters of the name Rani travel from threshold to
threshold,*

Hum your own story fearlessly in your own voice.

The circle of sisters says—raise your head, sister,

Your leaf is green; your voice is an ornament.

The stain on paper will wash away, but honour will not,

When one voice rises, a hundred lies will retreat.



There is not one Rani—sometimes it is the name of an elderly woman, sometimes the name of a daughter who has gone abroad, sometimes a committee alive only on paper. The shells change, but the honey moves along the same road. A society that assumes women are weak gives crime a strong vault inside that very illusion; but when the sisters rise in one voice, the stitching of the shell tears open.

Clearing a name is not separate from justice. Catching the offender may take time, but the soot on an innocent person's forehead must be

washed away at once. What was heard must be written as heard, what was seen as seen, possibility as possibility—with this restraint an investigation does not become revenge, and the poor person's story is not sold again in the market.

The true keeper of the hive does not speak his own name in the buzzing. His trace lies in blue seal-ink, the stream of accounts, committee registers, and thin letters of orders. Catching one bee does not empty the hive; the hand behind every name must be seen. Only then will honey be distinguished from poison, and Rani's stolen name flower again.

Even after Madhukar's real name had been found, the final question of Chapter 186 remained caught in the leaves of Channa Grove all night—into whose house was the honey being gathered? The buzzing that had hung over the grove through the night, by dawn sounded less like bees and more like the clink of coins. Madhukar Madhav Mishra's name had emerged the previous day, but Old Budhba's words remained like thorns inside everyone: "The bee has been caught, but into whose house is the honey stored?" Sitting beside the stone, Ananya opened the register and wrote a new title: "The Queen Inside the Hive." As she wrote, she understood that this queen might not be a woman seated upon a throne, but the centre of crime where small fears, voices, accounts, and stolen names had been gathered. The smell of damp earth rose from the dew-wet leaves at dawn, yet from the papers on the stone came an unfamiliar scent of old ink and metal, like coins.

Mira made her first sentence a warning. "The moment we hear the word queen, no accusation will fall upon any woman. If criminals use women's names as shields, the first task is to remove the shield, not to strike the shield." Ramratiya Devi's daughter-in-law, Somari Kaki, and the village women looked at one another. They understood that opening accounts in poor women's names, taking thumbprints, photographing them, and then moving money under those names was not new; this time the practice had simply grown digital wings.

Vineet Jha reopened the copy of the old device recovered from the Master's room. Inside it was a table divided into three sections—"Flower," "Honey," and "Queen." Under Flower were SIMs, voices, photographs, and beneficiaries' names. Under Honey were amounts, dates, accounts, and deductions. Under Queen were only codes—"R-1," "R-2," "old," "new," "trust," "service." Scratching his head, Aruni said, "Madhukar collected the honey, but Queen is above him." Satyavrat Mehta immediately added, "Or Queen may merely be a code. Evidence is needed before a code is turned into a person."

The cyber-crime officer, awake since night, bent over the page without even drinking tea. He showed the stream of small amounts—five thousand, eleven thousand, twenty-nine thousand, and then suddenly,

on one day, deposits totalling three lakh. The money first came out under claims of beneficiary assistance, correction of old-age pension, insurance renewal, emergency medicine, and fear of digital arrest. Then it split among different accounts and gathered into the section called “Queen.” The officer said, “It is like a beehive. From flowers to honey, from honey to a storehouse.” Narhari Kaka said quietly, “In our village, when a hive was broken, the honey was shared among the children. This honey was made from fear.”

The first Queen account was opened—name: Rani Devi. Village: Haripur Katan. Age: seventy-two. Thumbprint. In the photograph, an elderly woman wearing a sari over her head, a puzzled question in her eyes. The crowd began to stir—“So much money under this old woman’s name?” Mira’s face hardened. “A name has been read, not a crime. First this woman will be found and heard.” Ananya wrote: “Rani Devi—possible theft of identity.” The children had learned by now that merely seeing a poor person’s name on paper did not prove crime; it could instead mean that the name had been stolen before the body was.

By noon the team reached Haripur Katan. The village stood on sand left behind by a flood. Rani Devi sat outside a sagging thatched house, drying grain in the sun. The moment he saw her, Deepak lowered his eyes; in her face he saw his grandmother’s fatigue. Mira asked gently, “Did you ever go to Harihar Service Centre?” Whether Rani Devi laughed or coughed was hard to tell. “My old-age pension had stopped, daughter. They said—put your thumb here, give a photograph, the pension will start again. I gave the thumb. Money came for two months, then stopped. Where would lakhs of rupees come from?” The grain drying in the sun gave off the warm smell of husk; Rani Devi’s torn anchal trembled whenever the wind touched it, as though an old shame awoke with each question.

There was no account book inside Rani Devi’s home—only empty medicine strips, a torn blanket, and her grandson’s school certificate on the wall. When the cyber officer showed her the list of withdrawals from her account, she narrowed her eyes and said, “That is not my thumb. My thumb bends like this.” Her right thumb was indeed partly cut from an old injury while pounding rice. The thumbprint on the list was round, clean, and practiced. Vineet Jha said softly, “The name is genuine, the thumbprint is false.” Mira replied, “Then the woman is not the offender; an offence has been committed against the woman.”

Rani Devi’s grandson, now thirteen, spoke up. “At the service centre they held Grandmother’s hand and pressed it on a glass strip. Not once—three times. They said the machine was faulty.” Ananya’s pencil stopped. The machine had not been faulty; the machine had been skinning the name. Aruni wrote, “Repeated thumb capture under claim of device

failure—possible collection.” Satyavrat Mehta drew a circle around the line. What had been called an error might have been a method.

On the way back from Haripur Katan the team found the second Rani—Rani Kumari, an account opened in the name of a sewing group; in fact, she had married five years earlier and moved abroad. The third “Rani” was on paper as “Rani Women’s Assistance Committee,” whose office was listed as a room behind Harihar Service Centre, though no committee had ever sat there. Three Ranis, three masks—an elderly woman, an absent young woman, a committee on paper. The honey had not gathered in one name but inside many shells of Rani.

Back in Channa Grove, all the evidence was laid upon the stone—Rani Devi’s statement, thumbprint comparison, the grandson’s account, Rani Kumari’s overseas letter, the committee register, and the table tracing the flow of money. Mira said again, “We will not declare any woman guilty. This proves instead that criminals considered women’s names so safe that they hid money inside them. The name society considers weak becomes, for crime, a strong vault.” Devika shivered at the sentence. A weak person’s name turned into a safe—there was something terrifying in the idea. Evening wind lifted the corners of the papers; light struck the blue seal ink, and each page seemed to begin giving its own silent testimony.

Bishambhar, who had been sitting at the edge listening, suddenly spoke. “The Master did not give the name Rani. Above Dhruvesh Babu there was Maheshwar Babu; he used to say—open accounts in women’s names, questions will not arise quickly.” At the name “Maheshwar,” Narhari Kaka’s body stiffened. Until yesterday Maheshwar had been only a code; today his voice emerged from Bishambhar’s mouth. Satyavrat Mehta asked patiently, “Who was Maheshwar?” Bishambhar fell silent in fear, then said, “His seal was on the committee papers. He said—money circulates for service. But when service happened, I do not know.”

Ananya immediately turned back to the page of Chapter 186. There she had written, “Maheshwar link—confirmation pending.” Now the first grain filled that empty space. Vineet Jha drew a red circle around the image from the committee register: “Maheshwarnath Sevak, Coordinator.” Beneath the name was a blue seal, inside the seal the mark of Harihar Service Centre, and along the edge, in very fine letters, “Approved.” Aruni said, “This may not be the queen inside the hive; it may be the keeper of the hive.” Mira stopped him. “May be—write that. No conclusion yet.”

The Black Ghost bent over Rani Devi’s statement on the stone. The White Spirit sent a momentary light toward the thatched roof of her house, visible not to the eyes but to the mind. Old Budhba’s voice echoed through the leaves. “In old times, sin was washed by writing a woman’s name on a plate of donation. Now sin is hidden by writing a woman’s

name on a digital account. The plate and the account changed; the method did not.” The children wrote the sentence slowly, as though every letter were a heavy stone.

Rani Devi’s grandson said hesitantly, “Grandmother says—clear her name.” At that little sentence the gathering fell silent. Justice often demands that the soot on an innocent name be washed away even before the offender is caught. Mira placed a separate sheet on the stone: “Name-Clearing List.” First name—Rani Devi. Second—Rani Kumari. Third—the beneficiaries deceived under the name of Rani Women’s Assistance Committee. Deepak said quietly, “Let justice begin in the names through which the crime was run.”

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the day’s final note: “The Queen section appears not to be the actual controller but a multilayered cover. Links requiring investigation: poor women, absent young women, paper committees, forged thumbprints, and Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal. Madhukar created voices; Dhruvesh made connections; Maheshwar appears to have built the paper hive—confirmation pending.” Mira agreed, but underlined the word “appears.” A story may carry drama; a document requires restraint.

The “Queen” inside the hive proved not to be a single Rani at all, but a layered vault of stolen women’s names. Madhukar’s voice, Dhruvesh’s service network, flows through Rani accounts, forged thumbprints, and Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal now appeared along one line. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, “Maheshwar’s Seal.” Beneath it Aruni added, “Where there is a seal, there is a hand; find the hand, and catch it not with a crowd but with evidence.” Night settled over Channa Grove, and the buzzing was turning into blue seal-ink.

Folk Song: Washing the Name Rani

Folk Tune: Women’s Samdaun

Bloom, O Rani, your name will bloom again like a flower,

The stolen identity will return to its true threshold.

Rani Grandmother said—clear my name,

Do not lay upon me the crime run through my thumbprint.

Rani Kumari is far away, the committee lives only on paper,

A poor woman’s name became a fabricated stairway for accounts.

Justice first washes the soot from the innocent forehead,

Only then will it search for the true queen inside the hive.

Madhukar the voice, Dhruvesh the thread, Maheshwar the seal,

Black poison gathered inside a vault of women's names.

Do not lay upon my head the crime run through my thumbprint.

Justice first washes the soot from the innocent forehead, slowly, slowly.



[Philosophical Undertone—Defect Is Not Merely a Class-Property: A traveller related his experience—thus even the statements of the deluded, deceivers, parrots, and the like can become sources of true cognition when they correspond to an original true statement. From this distinction it became clear that a profound epistemological process operates within small events of ordinary life. Defect is not merely a class-property.]

Maheshwar's Seal

*The blue seal was not an imprint; it was a wound struck into the body
of paper.*



Opening Folk Song: Blue Seal, Green Leaf

Folk Tune: Jhijhiya Vigil

Lay a leaf, O lay a green leaf upon the blue wound,

Send rays through every hole of the Jhijhiya lamp.

If the blue seal has become a wound, place a green leaf upon it,

Send the lamp's ray through each opening, all the way inside.

Let the seal become a servant again, never a master,

Let a promise written by the people's hand smile upon the paper.

Blue is also the colour of sky, an open door of hope,

Collective healing can change the colour of a wound.

Turn the lamp like a Jhijhiya, light through every hole,

Let the people awaken inside the seal—that is the new thought.

Let the seal become a servant again, never be called master,

Blue is also the colour of sky, an open door of hope,

Together let the wound be healed.



Names change—Mahesar, Maheshwar, Maheshwarnath, Sevak—but the wound made by ink does not change its gait. Full name, short name, committee seal: the mark is divided into three forms to tire the investigation. Yet when the old memory of bills, the eyes of the stamp-maker, a grandmother's fear, and a child's questions rise together, all three curtains catch upon one key.

Blank paper is the deepest box. From its white body rises the question: who possessed the authority to write what was never written there? Approval first, date later; account first, order later—when time is made to run backwards, justice can straighten it only by returning each line, each thumbprint, and each breath to its proper sequence.

The rusted key would not open merely an iron box. It would open the shame locked inside old service, blank letterheads, stolen names, digital orders, and a silent watchman. The box would be opened not in haste but before the people, under the guard of evidence, after bowing to the names enclosed within. Only then could a green leaf be laid upon the blue wound and the seal become a servant again.

All night a blue gleam remained caught upon the leaves of Channa Grove. The seal seen the previous day inside the Rani accounts was no ordinary round stamp; it seemed a blue wound upon the body of paper, a wound that, when touched, made old service, new fraud, stolen women's names, and the darkness of Harihar Service Centre ache together. At dawn, the copies beside the roots seemed marked not with dew but with drops of blue ink. Ananya moved to wipe one away, but Mira stopped her. "Do not wipe the wound; first read its shape." The sharp smell of ink mingled with the green scent of dew-wet leaves; a blue drop on Ananya's finger shone for a long time like a cold wound.

Satyavrat Mehta placed three papers on the stone. First—the approval of Rani Women's Assistance Committee. Second—a training certificate from Harihar Service Centre. Third—the collective-account identification submitted to the bank. All three carried the same round seal: "Maheshwarnath Sevak, Coordinator." The letters were not printed perfectly; in the word "Sevak," the "v" sank slightly on every document, as though the hand applying the seal had been hurried or trembling. Aruni said, "When the word service itself is pressed down, do not trust the seal."

Opening the day's gathering, Mira said, "The seal is not the offender; its use may open the road to crime. Maheshwarnath's name has appeared, but a name appearing does not prove the person. We will examine not the person first, but the chain of use, dates, papers, ink, and authority." The fast breathing of the crowd slowed a little. The court of Channa Grove was to remain a guard, not a mob—this the children had now learned.

Vineet Jha displayed three images of the seal side by side on his phone. The circle was the same, the outer line the same, the inner lettering the same, but there were small differences: in one place "Maheshwarnath," in another "Maheshwar Nath," in a third only "M. N. Sevak." The cyber-crime officer said they might be variants made from the same original seal, or three seals manufactured at different times. Satyavrat Mehta added, "When offenders try to protect an identity, they do not always erase the full form of the name; they divide it into three or four forms so that the investigation itself grows tired."

Narhari Kaka slowly stood up. Until now all the seals had looked alike to him. He said, "As a boy, Maheshwar used to ring the bell at Harihar Service Centre. In those days his name was Mahesar. Later it became Maheshwar. Then he added 'Sevak' to his name. People said he was a

humble man. I did not understand that sometimes the towel of humility is tied across the mouth of crime.”

The statement stirred the gathering. The word “Mahesar” was like a childhood footprint emerging from dust. Ananya immediately created a new column in the name-list: Mahesar, Maheshwar, Maheshwarnath, M. N. Sevak. She wrote, “Evolution of a name, or curtain of a name?” Aruni added beneath it: “Confirmation pending.” Mira watched with satisfaction. Justice moves not by full stops but by commas.

Then the village’s old stamp-maker was called. He was Bajrang Mudrakar, owner of a tiny shop in a narrow market lane. He was so old that his hands trembled, yet the shapes of letters still lived in his eyes. Sitting near the stone, he looked at the images and said at once, “This is not a hand-carved seal; the mould was machine-cut. But look at the distortion in the letters—the ‘v’ in ‘Sevak’ sinks downward. The establishment that made it had this defect in its old machine.”

Vineet Jha asked, “Where was such an establishment?” Bajrang Mudrakar laughed. “There was such a machine in the lane behind the city station. I had my own first seal made there.” At the words “lane behind the station,” the Master’s room rose in everyone’s mind. The fan, dust, boxes of voices, SIM wrappers—all came before them again. Maheshwar’s seal and Madhukar’s room breathed within the same geography.

The cyber-crime officer immediately proposed searching for old bills. Mira stopped him for a moment. “Search for bills, but remember that the minds of these people are bills too. Memory is often called weak in court, yet many times it opens the first crack in a crime.” Touching his forehead, Bajrang Mudrakar said, “I remember once an order came for three seals—one with the full name, one abbreviated, one for a committee. The man himself did not come; a disciple came with blue ink stains on his hand.”

“A disciple?” Satyavrat Mehta asked. Bajrang Mudrakar thought for a while. “Was the name Dhruvesh, or Dhruv? I do not fully remember. But the young man did not want to sign the paper. He said, ‘It is Sevaki’s order.’” At the name Dhruvesh, the register pages on the stone seemed to flutter by themselves. Dhruvesh, Madhukar, the Rani accounts, Maheshwar—four fragments now began forming a small circle.

Deepak, Ramratiya Grandmother’s grandson, sat at the back of the crowd. He said quietly, “My grandmother’s voice was stolen. Now it seems a seal was also put upon that voice.” At first no one fully understood the sentence; then Mira explained. “When a lie sounds over the phone and behind it stand the names of an institution, certificate, seal, account, and training, an elderly person believes it to be true. Without the stolen voice, the seal’s effect was half; without the seal, the voice’s fear was half.

Together they became the digital crocodile.” The fine smell of dried rubber and metal clung to Bajrang Mudrakar’s fingers; even his trembling hand read pressure in letters as an old wall recognises its own cracks.

The bank paper was opened again. In the introducer column there was no signature of “M. N. Sevak,” only the seal. Rules required a signature, but the branch employee had merely written “committee-certified” and let it pass. Satyavrat Mehta looked at the date in the corner. The seal had been applied five days before the later approval letter. Aruni started. “How was the seal placed before the letter existed?” Vineet Jha did not laugh; his face hardened. “When the future has already been decided, the papers are filled in afterwards.”

At the sentence the leaves of Channa Grove trembled. Old Budhba’s voice echoed: “In old times a fraudulent partition was decided first in the mind and the paper made afterwards. Now fraudulent benefit appears first in the account and permission is manufactured later. Those who reverse time fear justice most.” The children wrote down “reversed time.” The Black Ghost bent over the blue seal; the White Spirit placed a fine beam of light upon the date.

By noon, statements arrived from women of three villages. One said, “A committee was formed in my name, but I was never called.” Another said, “I gave a thumbprint for ration work; they said it would correct my pension.” A third said, “They took my photograph, saying my daughter would receive a scholarship.” Different papers lay behind all three statements, but the same seal. After each statement Mira asked, “Did you see Maheshwarnath?” The first said, “No.” The second, “From far away on a stage.” The third, “I heard the name, not the face.”

Satyavrat Mehta stopped everyone from rushing to a conclusion. “The face of the person whose seal circulates is often absent. Absence itself may be power. The one always on stage may be a minor actor; the one who appears only as a seal upon paper may be directing from behind.” Mira nodded. “To catch Maheshwar means not merely finding a face, but tracing the road of authority.”

Vineet Jha obtained the sequence of possible old bills from the stamp shop behind the station. Bill numbers 446, 447, 448—three items on the same day. Customer name: “Service Centre.” Payment: cash. Items: round seal, small seal, committee seal. As the image of the bill grew clearer, everyone felt the dust from behind the station blowing again into the grove. Madhukar’s room had been in that lane; the seals were made in that lane; photocopies in that lane; SIM wrappers had also been found there. The city was no longer merely a place; it had become the loom of the crime.

Ananya drew a map on the stone—Channa Grove, Harihar Service Centre, the lane behind the station, the bank branch, the Rani accounts, Dhruvesh's service network, Madhukar's room, Maheshwar's seal. As the lines joined, they formed not a honeycomb but the open jaw of a crocodile. Aruni said, "Honey is stored inside a hive; names are trapped inside these jaws." A light laugh from Old Budhba fell through the leaves. "The children have begun to see the teeth of symbols."

Meanwhile an unexpected paper was found. In the old donation ledger of Harihar Service Centre, beside Maheshwarnath Sevak's name was written not "Treasurer," but "Key-Keeper." No one remembered such a post. Narhari Kaka said, "There was an iron box at the centre where old certificates, seals, blank letterheads, and donation receipts were kept. Mahesar kept the key. Later people began calling him Maheshwarnath Sevak."

"Blank letterheads?" Satyavrat Mehta became alert. Narhari Kaka nodded. "Yes. It had existed since Batuknath Hariharan's time. When donors came, certificates were issued at once. Many times signatures were put first and names filled later." Everyone fell silent. Batuknath's name cast a shadow over the stone like an old demon. The story was turning back toward its roots. Maheshwar's seal had suddenly joined itself to Batuknath's blank letterheads.

Mira said gravely, "This must be confirmed. If blank letterheads existed, the meaning of the seal changes. Then Maheshwar was not merely an individual; he may have been the custodian of an old method." Devika added, "And if the method is old, digital arrest is not a new crime; it is a new sentence written on an old blank sheet." The children remained silent for a long time. They understood that crime changes time, but not grammar.

Bajrang Mudrakar remembered one more thing. "They bought blue ink separately. Not ordinary ink. They said—the stamp must appear clearly in photographs." At "clearly in photographs," the cyber officer's eyes sharpened. A clear seal was needed for sending forged papers digitally. Digital copies, mobile photographs, PDFs, bank KYC—the blue seal inspired trust even at a distance. Maheshwar's seal had been designed to work less on paper than on screens.

Aruni said, "The seal was made for the eye, not for the law." Satyavrat Mehta smiled. "Exactly. Law asks for the original paper it can touch; a frightened elder sees an image sent to a phone." Somari Kaki, silent until then, said, "They showed me a document on the phone. A blue round stamp on top. They said it was a government order. I could not read it, but the stamp frightened me." Everyone understood that the seal was not merely for opening accounts; it was also stage scenery in the theatre of fear.

Deepak asked softly, “Then was the order sent to Grandmother also stamped with this?” The cyber officer said, “Image comparison is pending, but the possibility is strong.” Mira looked at him. “Write possibility, not truth.” Ananya wrote: “Somari Kaki’s digital order—blue seal—comparison pending.” In that one line, story, caution, and compassion remained together.

Toward evening, Gadhadhar, the old watchman of Harihar Service Centre, arrived leaning on a stick. He had been summoned repeatedly but kept saying, “I remember nothing.” Today he came by himself. His mouth was dry. He said, “The iron box still exists.” The gathering became utterly still. “Where?” Mira asked. Gadhadhar remained silent, then said, “In the storeroom behind the centre, behind cement sacks. The key is no longer with Maheshwar; Dhruvesh had it later. But the old second key...” He untied the cloth at his waist and produced a small rusted key. “It was given to me with the instruction—never use it.” When the old donation ledger was opened, the smell of dampness, mustard oil, and dried glue rose from the page; in Narhari Kaka’s eyes, the darkness of that iron box came alive again.

The moment the key was placed on the stone, the air around Channa Grove grew heavy. The Black Ghost bent near the key but could not touch it. The White Spirit brightened for an instant. Old Budhba’s voice came: “A key that does not open a locked box locks the soul instead. Today the old watchman has opened his soul.” Gadhadhar began to weep. “I thought it held only old papers. When I kept seeing that blue seal again and again, I became afraid.”

Mira immediately decided: “The storeroom will be opened, but lawfully. In the presence of the panchayat, police, a bank representative, two members of the women’s committee, and the children who guard the names. No box will be opened alone.” The crowd cried, “Let us go now,” but Mira became stern. “The feet of justice slip in haste. Tonight there will only be a guard. At dawn we open it.”

As night descended, round shadows of blue seals formed on the leaves. On every leaf there seemed an incomplete impression—someone’s name unfinished, someone’s date reversed, someone’s thumbprint forged. Channa Grove itself seemed to dream of the storeroom at Harihar Service Centre. The Submerged Woman rose from the pond and said, “There is no water in a box of papers, yet the voices of drowned people live there.” Hulasi stared at the key with her armless body. For the first time there was no fear in her eyes, only resolve.

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the day’s final note: “Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal appears to be a multipurpose mark of control. Possible links: Rani accounts, committee approvals, digital orders, bank introductions, and blank letterheads of Harihar Service Centre. Dhruvesh as intermediary, Madhukar’s voice network, the lane behind the station, and the old iron

box require investigation. Conclusion withheld, but the chain is clear.” Above it Mira wrote, “Open the box behind the seal, but first bow to every name locked inside it.”

Maheshwar’s seal proved not to be the mark in one man’s pocket but a key moving among the darkness of an old service institution, blank letterheads, theft of women’s names, digital orders of fear, bank laxity, and the Dhruvesh–Madhukar network. Gadhadhar’s rusted key remained on the stone. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, “The Iron Box.” Beneath it Aruni added, “Where blank papers were filled, real names remained locked away.”

Folk Song: The Wound of the Blue Seal

Folk Tune: Seal-Lament

Turn, O key, turn the rusted key,

Bring every locked name flowing out.

The blue round mark is no seal, but a wound on paper’s body,

The blank letterhead asks—who wrote my meaning?

Rani accounts, bank introduction, digital order,

Maheshwar’s seal moved through disguise after disguise.

The Submerged Woman said—there is no water, yet people drowned,

Hulasi watched the key; though without hands, her heart surged.

The rusted key lay silent upon the stone,

Inside the blank papers, real names remained locked.

Blue seal, tell us whose body you wounded,

Turn the key—let every locked name flow out.

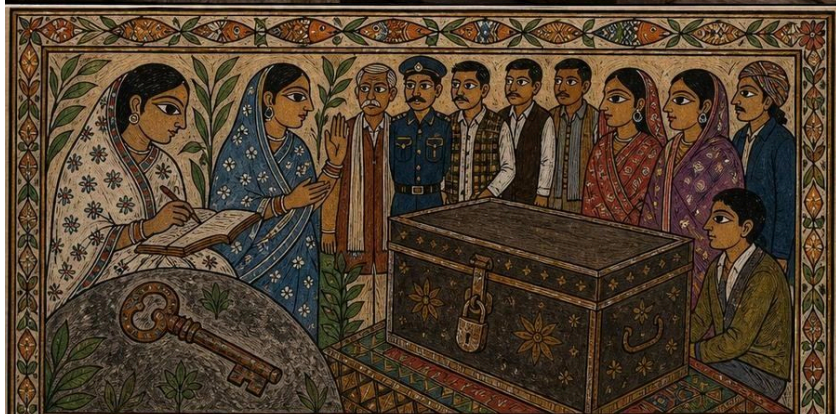


[Philosophical Undertone—Refutation of a Further Objection: In the words “jara” and “raja,” “nadi” and “dina,” the number of phonemes is the same while their order differs. Refutation of a further objection.]

CHAPTER 189

The Iron Box

The key of an iron box may rust; testimony does not.



Opening Folk Song: Bisesar's Name Returns

Folk Tune: Labourer's Sohar

O child, this is Bisesar's sohar,

A name is born anew from the iron box.

*Today the iron box will open and a name will be born,
The letters of Bisesar's labour will adorn the page again.*

*Shoes, gamchha, palms, sweat—all will speak,
His courage will remain inside every pier of the bridge.*

*Not only Mother; history too will now rise and say "Present,"
Where the name was cut away, a green shoot will sprout again.*

*When the name of labour returns, the earth is blessed,
Bisesar's bright memory becomes merit for all.*

*Shoes, gamchha, palms—all stand in testimony,
His courage is deep in every pier of the bridge.*

*Along with Mother, history too will now say "Present,"
A green shoot will remain where the name was cut away.*



The box says—do not blame me; read the hands that filled me. The coconut leaf was auspicious, but blank letterheads were placed beneath it and auspiciousness was turned into a sheet of deception. The seal was meant for service, but became a road for filling names later. Rubber became a thumb, carbon gave one lie many bodies, and coloured threads divided people's suffering into separate bags.

In the yellow thread Bisesar's incomplete name trembles. If death is written as "absence," how many days will a mother keep watching the threshold? A labourer's body became a pier of the bridge, but his name was pressed beneath layers of the box. Now the page asks for water, but

water first wants to hear the name; before water-burial, the letters must return.

The blue register is a field of fear—whose son lives away, who is illiterate, who will answer the phone at night, who trembles at the word warrant. Before counting money, crime counts the cracks inside people. But when a list of those cracks is read before the people, justice can enter through the same road. A victim's name is not spectacle; privacy too is a guard around testimony.

When the box opened, it was not iron that opened but a system. The seal of an old institution and a new digital fraud were found within the same cover. Now every object would receive a sequence, every conjecture would demand evidence, every name would recover its body. A key may rust; testimony in people's memory does not. When Bisesar's name is read aloud, the first green shoot will emerge in the darkness of the box.

The first light of dawn fell upon the storeroom behind Harihar Service Centre as though a slow bandage were being tied around the old body of darkness. Gadhadhar's rusted key had lain all night on the stone in Channa Grove. No one touched it, yet everyone felt as though the key itself were breathing. The previous day this box had appeared behind Maheshwar's seal; today was the day to open it. In the register Ananya wrote the title, "The Iron Box." She understood that the box was not merely an object but the belly of the crime. The chill of dew and the bitter smell of rust rose together; the fine stain of blue ink from the night before had still not dried on Ananya's palm.

At dawn Mira repeated the rules. Two members of the panchayat, police present, a bank representative, two women from the women's committee, Vineet Jha, Satyavrat Mehta, Gadhadhar, and the children who guarded the names—the storeroom would be opened before all of them. "Every paper will be lifted as it lies, and recorded exactly as it is lifted. Nothing will enter anyone's pocket. The crowd stays outside. Opening the box is not curiosity; it is testimony." People were somewhat dissatisfied, but the court of Channa Grove had learned the patience of sequence rather than the noise of a crowd.

When the storeroom door opened, the smell from inside pushed everyone back—old cement sacks, mongoose-gnawed papers, dampness, mouse droppings, stale oil, and bitter ink. Uneven heaps filled the corners. With trembling hands Gadhadhar moved the cement sacks. Behind them appeared the iron box—black, thick, rusted at the edges, with a blurred blue seal-mark in the middle. In old chalk letters was written "Service." The final letters were almost erased. Aruni said softly, "Service is incomplete here too." When Gadhadhar touched the edge of the lid, fine red rust powder stuck under his nails; amid the dampness the sharp metallic smell rose as though all the years shut inside had exhaled at once.

The key entered the lock but would not turn at once. Gadhadhar's hand trembled. Vineet Jha took photographs and recorded the time. The bank representative, who had stood at a distance until then, wiped away sweat. Mira said, "If the lock does not open, we will not break it; first we will record that it did not open." The words seemed to give Gadhadhar resolve. He turned the key slightly right, slightly left, then pressed inward. The lock sounded like an old groan—khrrraaak. The box opened.

When the lid rose, the first object was not paper but a dried coconut leaf. The leaf had blackened, but a yellow turmeric stain still remained at its tip. Satyavrat Mehta started. "This looks like an old household auspicious leaf." Narhari Kaka leaned in from outside. "In Hariharan's time, a coconut leaf was placed on donation papers for auspiciousness." Mira placed the leaf separately on a cloth. "A crime may begin under an auspicious leaf; the leaf is not guilty. Read the use."

Beneath the leaf lay a bundle of blank letterheads. Each page bore "Harihar Service Centre" at the top, a symbol on the left, a blank space on the right, and half an imprint of Maheshwarnath Sevak's seal below. Some pages already had lines resembling signatures, but the names were blank. Some carried only dates. On some, in red pencil, were written "Rani," "widow," "SIM," "voice," "account." Ananya trembled. "Where the name was to be filled later, the person had already been made to disappear."

In the second layer they found old blue-black carbon paper. As it was lifted, ink stained the children's hands. Aruni looked at his palm—a blue stain. "How many hands must have been manufactured with this ink," he said. Vineet Jha immediately noted that powder and trace examination would be needed. Gadhadhar murmured, "Carbon paper made many copies at once. No one asked which was original and which was copy." Satyavrat Mehta added, "If the copy is false, it murders the original document."

In the third layer were small bags, each tied with a different coloured thread. Red thread—women's committee. Blue—bank. Black—phone. Yellow—labourers. The first red bag contained photocopies of photographs, thumb impressions, and blank consent forms for Rani Devi, Rani Kumari, Somari Kaki, Kamala Devi, and more than a dozen other women. In many places the thumbprints showed the same direction, pressure, and size. The two women from the committee sat holding each other's hands. They understood that the clothing of their names had been stripped off and dressed upon somebody else's body.

The blue bag contained copies of bank identification forms. Some account numbers were incomplete; on some, the final four digits were circled. Every page said "committee-certified," but had no signature. The bank representative said, "These look like copies of our branch forms,

but without seeing the originals..." Mira let him finish. "No conclusion without the original—that is correct. But also record whether accounts were opened without seeing originals." The representative's face fell.

The black bag yielded a list of mobile numbers. Beside each name were two numbers—one actual, one labelled "work." Against some names were notes such as "old," "illiterate," "son outside," "daughter-in-law afraid," "call at night." Deepak saw his grandmother's name on the list. His eyes filled, but he did not cry. He said, "They wrote down Grandmother's loneliness too." Mira lowered her eyes. Deepak's finger stopped upon the name; when it touched the cold paper, he remembered the night calls and the trembling breath at the other end together.

The yellow bag held old labour claims. Some dated from construction of the Ganges bridge, some from later construction camps, some from accident-assistance cases. An incomplete page bore the name "Bisesar Paswan." Satyavrat Mehta's hand stopped. The page did not say death; it said "absence." Beside it was a faint old seal from Batuknath Hariharan's institution. Though far away, the leaves of Channa Grove suddenly stirred. The old water-burial among crocodiles spoke again from inside the box.

Gadhadhar stepped back. "I did not know all this was here," he said. Mira looked at him. "It will be recorded that you did not know. But it will also be recorded that you had the key and did not open it." Gadhadhar bowed his head. Satyavrat Mehta looked at him not with cruelty but compassion. Small fears keep a box alive for years. The criminal's hand may be large, but a lock is often kept shut by the silence of ordinary people.

In the fourth layer they found three boxes of seals—one round, one square, one small name strip. The round seal belonged to Maheshwarnath Sevak. The square one read "Rani Women's Assistance Committee." The small strip bore only "M.N.Se." The rubber had dried, yet the smell of blue ink remained strangely fresh. The moment Bajrang Mudrakar saw the images he said, "That is the same cutting. The 'v' sinks, the 'th' stretches." Vineet Jha preserved test impressions separately. Mira said, "Today the seals will speak, but their speech will be written in the language of court."

A small cloth pouch was wedged along the edge of the box. Inside it were five rubber pieces shaped like thumb impressions. The room went silent. Vineet Jha said in a hard voice, "This is extremely serious evidence." It seemed to answer why forged thumb impressions against so many names looked alike. Somari Kaki shouted from outside, "They made another version of my thumb?" Mira answered from within, "For now the question will be written. Examination will give the answer." But her voice trembled.

Some dried oil clung to the rubber pieces. Gadhadhar said, "They used to apply oil before taking a thumb impression. They said it made the print clear." Aruni wrote, "Clear print, misuse." Beside it Ananya added, "A thumbprint is not bodily consent; taking it without understanding is theft." The women's faces changed as they heard the sentence. For the first time they understood that the marks of their bodies, taken in the name of benefit forms, had been turned into evidence against them.

In the fifth layer lay a thin notebook with a blue cover. Nothing was written on the cover except a white circle in the middle, inside which someone had pencilled "Register." Vineet Jha photographed it before opening. Mira said, "This appears important. Slowly." The notebook was opened. First page blank. Second page: columns—name, real number, work number, voice, account, fear. Third page: codes—A, B, S, R, J. At the word "fear," a shiver ran through everyone.

Satyavrat Mehta read softly: "Ramratiya—son outside—night—arrest letter. Somari—pension—afternoon—seal. Ramsagar—son in city—father's voice." Page after page, people's vulnerabilities, relationships, trust, shame, and need had been turned into codes. Madhukar's voice network was no longer personal theatre; it was a structured curriculum. Harihar Service Centre had not been making beneficiary lists; it had been making maps of fear.

Looking at the page, the bank representative said, "Some of these account numbers seem to match our branch." Mira stopped him. "Write 'seem to.' Say 'match' only when evidence confirms it." For the first time the representative looked at Mira with respect. He understood that this gathering was not against the bank; it was against falsehood. Satyavrat Mehta noticed drops of red, blue, and black along the page edges. The colours of the threads matched the colours in the register.

A page in the middle of the blue register had been folded. When opened, an old name emerged: "Batuknath Hariharan Memorial Fund." Beneath it was written: "blank certificates—twenty-five; sealed orders—twelve; voice lists—twenty-six; active accounts—nine." Maheshwar, Dhruvesh, Madhukar—the three names appeared in small letters on separate lines. Batuknath's dead prestige had grown on paper into a fund for living fraud. Even in daylight, the shadow of Channa Grove fell across the storeroom threshold.

Mira remained silent for a long time. Then she said, "What is written on this page is heavy. Before it is read aloud, copies of every name must be secured. No name will be made public until the family concerned has been spoken to." The crowd grew restless again. People wanted the names of crime, not the privacy of victims. Ananya said loudly, "A victim's name is not a spectacle." There was such firmness in the child's voice that the crowd fell quiet.

Outside the storeroom Somari Kaki, Deepak, Rani Devi's grandson, and many others waited. No papers were brought outside; only the inventory. Deepak asked, "Was Grandmother's name there?" Mira held his hand. "The name was there, and with it we also learned who knew about her loneliness." Deepak trembled. "Can loneliness be stolen too?" Satyavrat Mehta said, "Yes, when it is turned into a code for fear."

Before evening the Black Ghost seemed to appear upon the storeroom roof, visible not to the eye but through the people's silence. The White Spirit paused at the window bars. Old Budhba's voice rose from Channa Grove and reached the storeroom: "Inside the iron box there is less iron than there are holes in people's lives. Through the hole where fear entered, justice may enter too." The children wanted to write the sentence, but Vineet Jha said, "First finish the inventory." Today even the ghosts' words remained behind procedure; this was the maturity of justice.

At evening the box was not simply closed again. It was sealed and placed under police guard. Every object received a number—IB-1, IB-2, IB-3. IB meant Iron Box. Aruni did not laugh, but said, "IB could also mean identity robbed." Ananya added, "Hidden pain." Mira looked at them both. "Keep the metaphors, but on paper write the full words—Iron Box. Justice proceeds not by abbreviation but by clarity."

That night, near Channa Grove, they placed not the physical objects from the iron box but its inventory. Blank letterheads, carbon paper, forged thumb impressions, seals, women's bag, bank bag, phone bag, labourers' bag, and the blue register—all were listed in order. The Submerged Woman bent at the edge of the stone and said, "The page where Bisesar was found again asks for water." Hulasi closed her eyes. "Read the name first. Water afterwards."

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the day's final note: "Recovered from the iron box: blank sealed letterheads, multiple seals, forged thumb impressions, beneficiary lists, bank links, phone links, labour claims, reference to the Batuknath Memorial Fund, and a blue register. The old institutional structure of the crime and its new digital method appear connected within a single collection. Safeguards required: privacy of every name, lawful chain of custody for every object, and confirmation of every inference." Mira wrote beneath it, "The box is open, but the people are still closed."

The iron box proved not to be merely a container of old papers, but a factory for filling blank names, a register of fear, tools for forged thumbs, a vault of women's names, incomplete death claims of labourers, and the belly of a service network running from Batuknath through Maheshwar, Madhukar, and Dhruvesh. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "The Blue Register." Beneath it Aruni added, "Where a name was written in a column of fear, that name will rise again as a living

identity.” Night descended over Channa Grove; this time the darkness was blue, and the leaves fluttered like pages.

Folk Song: Bisesar Found Inside the Box

Folk Tune: Labourer's Samdaun

*Rise, O Bisesar, raise your head from the darkness of the box,
Carry your name back to your mother's empty courtyard.*

*The rusted key turned, the iron box opened,
Blank letterheads, forged thumbs, names poured out.
Inside the labourers' bag Bisesar was found again,
The page asked for water; Hulasi said—read the name first.
Women's bag, bank bag, the black thread of phones,*

*From Batuknath to Dhruvesh, thieves in the same belly.
Testimony does not rust, even if the key corrodes,
One day the incomplete death-claim will reach the threshold.
Bisesar, raise your head from the darkness of the box,*

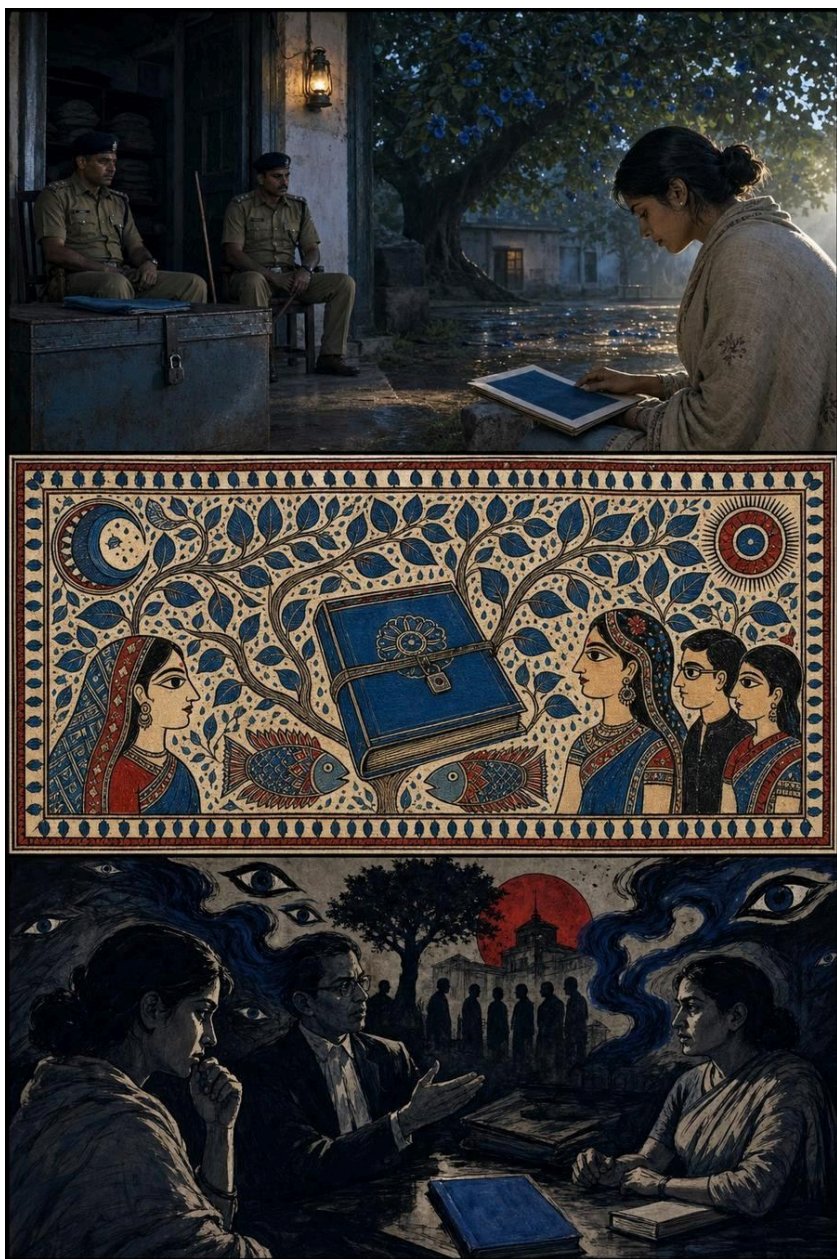


[Philosophical Undertone—View of the Gurus: When an action arises only after delay, the delay is due to the absence of another necessary cause—such as a staff and the like; even when desire is present, that cognition is not fruitless. View of the Gurus.]

CHAPTER 190

The Blue Register

*The colour of the blue register spreads beyond surveillance—fear has no
lock of its own.*



Opening Folk Song: The Register Wakes at Dawn

Folk Tune: Register-Parati

Wake, O register, blue register, wake,

Read at dawn the lines that were silent for years.

The blue register opens its eyes and reads the names of dawn,

Lines silent for years now build light.

Every letter is a grain of rice; preserve and keep it,

Fill the life of the one whose rights were suppressed.

The register will no longer hold fear, but public trust,

Its open pages will become a bridge of truth between village and city.

Let the pen move transparently, let the seal remain alert,

The dawn register will now write justice, dignity, and care.

Every letter a grain of rice—winnow, sift, preserve,

Fill the plate of the one whose right was suppressed.

No longer a ledger of fear, but an account of public trust,

Open pages join the bonds of village and city.



Voice samples, five breaths of silence, the hurry of “immediately,” and the phrase “arrest letter”—these are not merely words but tightening cords. Yet people’s speech is not only a road into a trap; when that speech is read with sequence, witnesses, and compassion, the same map of fear becomes a road leading to justice. Asking what silence means is itself a form of testimony.

Bisesar’s incomplete letters, the danger-mark beside Nand Aruni, Hulasi’s insulting label, and the stolen thumbprints of women—these are not objects in a register but fragments of living identities. Restoring a true name is not merely correcting spelling; it restores body, honour, and

memory. Justice finds its dignity by guarding victims' names from becoming public spectacle.

The final page says—new names go into a separate register. That means the hive is still alive; the chair still gives orders. But the old register is no longer alone; before every drop of its blue ink now stand public guards, seizure records, and questions. When a drop of water refuses the colour, a name survives; and if an empty chair can still commit crime, that chair too must be lifted away.

The storeroom was closed, the key sealed in an envelope, the inventory signed by the panchayat, and two constables stood at the door; still, all night blue stains rose and faded upon the leaves of Channa Grove. At dawn Ananya went to the copies placed on the stone. Yesterday she had written, "The Blue Register." Today it seemed to her that a register was not merely something to be read, but the name of an eye whose eyelids had been kept shut for years. Morning dew rested like pearls upon the blue stains of the leaves; from the storeroom door came the combined smell of rust, damp wood, and dried ink. The lantern of a constable seated far away trembled over the stain, as though the register were counting the guards outside.

Mira warned everyone first. "The names in this register are not things to be made public. Reading them is necessary to catch criminals, but exposing victims again in the marketplace would be a second form of crime." Vineet Jha added the legal formulation: "Every page will be photographed, every page entered in a seizure memorandum, and a name will be read only to the person concerned." The children remained silent. There was respect in that silence; guarding names was not spectacle but an exercise in restraint.

The outer cover of the blue register was old. At the corners the blue had worn almost black, yet a round mark still shone in the middle—as though someone had dipped a thumb in blue ink and pressed it there. When the pages opened, smells rose—ink, sweat, an old safe, incense, and bank slips. Aruni said, "This register smells of both office and shrine." Satyavrat Mehta added softly, "A crime that travels wearing the fragrance of worship is difficult to catch." Fine dust settled on their fingers as they separated the page edges, and the brittle sound of old glue seemed like paper counting the years it had been shut.

The first page bore the heading: "Service List: Special Protection." Beneath the word "service," certain areas had been rubbed away, as though something else had once been written there. In the corner was half the old mark of Maheshwarnath Sevak's seal, overlaid by a newer blue seal with a later date. On the right were narrow columns—name, relationship, fear, voice, account, share, status. Mira read the columns once and closed her eyes. "This register does not store names; it stores methods for breaking people," she said.

The “fear” column was the most terrifying. In one place: “son outside”; elsewhere: “land dispute,” “widow,” “daughter’s marriage,” “government assistance,” “legal fear,” “digital case.” Ananya stopped at one name beside which was written “mother alone.” To the criminals these words were information; to that mother they were the naked truth of life. Aruni wrote in the register notes: “Where people understand their own sorrow, criminals see opportunity.”

The second page contained women’s names. Beside some were codes for Rani accounts; beside others numbers for forged thumb impressions; beside others: “explained,” “frightened,” “stopped,” “call again.” Mira remained bent over the page for a long time. Her voice was soft but edged. “These women are victims, not suspects. A person whose name was used to open an account is not necessarily an offender. Blaming someone whose thumbprint was stolen makes us an accomplice to the crime.” Vineet Jha immediately wrote, “Separate victim-protection list.”

On the third page appeared shadows of labourers’ names. Bisesar Paswan was incomplete—only “B.P.”; Salamat Ansari, “S.A.”; beside Chhotu was an empty box. At the sight of that empty box, the air of the Submerged Woman seemed to touch the doorway. There was no water in the storeroom, yet everyone felt the pages of the blue register becoming wet. Gadhadhar shivered. “These are matters from the old bridge,” he whispered. Satyavrat Mehta’s voice hardened. “If an old matter is still breathing in an account today, it is not old.”

A page in the middle of the register was folded. When it was opened, a small map slipped out—Harihar Service Centre, Maheshwarnath Sevak Trust, Rani accounts, three mobile SIMs, two bank branches, one practice room, and the city room. Blue-ink lines joined them all, with small marks along the routes. Beside Madhukar Madhav Mishra’s name: “voice”; beside Dhruvesh: “instruction”; beside Maheshwar: “blessing/seal”; beside the Batuknath Memorial Fund: a question mark. That question mark was the largest statement of all.

Looking at the map, Aruni said, “The whole network is blue.” Ananya asked, “Why blue?” Mira did not answer. Old Gadhadhar said in a trembling voice, “Sevakji used to say red ink frightens people, black ink looks official, blue ink creates trust. When people see a blue signature they think—it is the signature of a living person.” A shiver ran through everyone. The criminals had stolen even the colour of a living signature.

The fourth page was headed “Practice.” It listed how Madhukar’s voice samples were to be taken, whose relationship-name to speak before calling whom, which sentences made a person tremble, how to say “immediately,” “case,” “arrest letter,” “police,” “bank freeze,” “ruin the name.” Ananya stopped while reading. “This is not language; it is a noose,” she said. Mira answered, “And when this noose tightens around

someone's throat, that person's voice afterwards does not become free testimony."

At one place was written "time of silence." The instruction was to remain silent for five breaths in the middle of a call. "Silence increases fear." Aruni remembered the silence of Channa Grove. The ghosts' silence made one remember; a criminal's silence trapped. Both lived in the same word, but the soul of the meaning was different. He wrote, "Silence must be examined—who is silent, why, and who benefits from the silence." Satyavrat Mehta read the line and nodded.

The next section of the register was "share." It recorded percentages, cash routes, account circulation, exchange of slips, and transactions under the name "service donation." In some places five percent, elsewhere twelve, elsewhere "special." Beside "special" were Dhruvash's initials. Maheshwar's seal was not directly present here, but beneath every division lay the blue mark of the service centre. Vineet Jha said, "This is a financial chain." Mira added, "And a moral chain too—someone sold fear, someone counted the money from fear, someone blessed the fear."

Gadhadhar slowly began to describe his role. He said that at first the register had been a "beneficiary register"—real names of poor people, scholarships, widow assistance, labour claims, provisional lists after the bridge accident. Then Dhruvash arrived. He said, "Keep the papers; the work will be digital now." Gradually the beneficiary register became a register of fear. "Do not remove names," Dhruvash had said. "Add the reason behind each name." Under the name of those "reasons," people's privacy had been cut into pieces and stored.

At this admission Mira stopped Gadhadhar. "Say what you saw; write what you heard separately." Gadhadhar bowed his head. Once again procedure stood guard over the story. The ghosts of Channa Grove were astonished by this discipline, but today even they understood that emotion in justice is fire and procedure is its vessel. Without a vessel, fire burns the house.

On one page of the blue register appeared the name "Nand Aruni." Everyone felt time stop. Beside the name was written: "old engineer—report—labour list—lineage link—caution." Aruni's face went pale. He had never imagined seeing the shadow of his father's name in such a register. Satyavrat Mehta leaned over the page. "This name is not a suspect on the criminals' list; it is a danger mark," he said. "The person whom the criminals marked 'caution' may have been an obstacle to them." As Aruni bent over the blue letters, he remembered the scent of sun and sweat rising from his father's old gamchha; his palm trembled not over the paper, but over an unfinished question of lineage.

Aruni said nothing for a long time. Then he asked, "Then why did Father's report disappear?" No one had an answer. The register held not

the answer but a route. Behind Nand's name were three small codes—"diary," "gamchha," "Ba." Ananya shivered. Channa Grove, the gamchha, Ba, the water-burial at the bridge—all had arrived upon the same blue page. What had seemed folk legend still lived in the criminals' archive.

Hulasi's name did not appear directly, but one code read "the woman from the well." Mira immediately said, "That is not a name; it is an insult. If we find her true name, this word will be replaced in our record by that name." The children wrote on a separate sheet: "Nickname, insulting name, fear-name—all must be removed so the true name can be found." Old Budhba's black light flickered near the window, as though sealing the decision.

Until noon they continued making a copy of the blue register. Every page received a number. Each name received, on a separate list, one of three coloured marks—victim, witness, suspect—so the original register remained untouched. Mira said, "The old criminals coloured the register; we will not colour the original even with our anger." Vineet Jha could not suppress a smile. In legal language, this was the hardest restraint of all.

Then a thin sheet of paper slipped from inside the back cover of the register. It was not blue but pale yellow. It carried only three lines: "Register secure. Orders oral. No page to be opened without asking the chair." Below was no signature, only a mark—a diagonal line between two circles. The moment Gadhadhar saw it, he trembled. "That is Dhruvesh's mark," he said. "He rarely signed. He used to say—a mark is safer than a signature."

Everyone stopped at the word "chair." A chair was not merely something to sit upon; it was the invisible body of command. Dhruvesh himself did not appear before people, but his chair made decisions. Maheshwar gave seals, Madhukar gave voices, Gadhadhar opened locks, the bank circulated slips—but the chair, where was the chair? The register answered: the room above the centre. The same room where ordinary people were forbidden to enter, where there was no fan yet the air was always shut, where service awards hung upon the walls, and beneath the table there might be another box.

Ananya wrote on the page: "Dhruvesh's Chair." Aruni stopped her hand. "First finish the blue register." Ananya nodded. She knew the story was in a hurry, but justice needed sequence. She opened the register's final page. It was almost blank. At the top only: "No new names on completed pages. New names in a separate register." The date was recent. It became clear at once—the network had not closed; only the register had changed.

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the day's note: "The blue register appears originally to have been a beneficiary/assistance register, later converted into a fear-based target register. Columns include names, relationships, vulnerabilities, voice instructions, account links, division of shares, status information. Links to old labour lists including Nand Aruni and to women's accounts. An instruction paper bearing Dhruvesh's mark recovered. Next legal steps: victim protection, financial chain, voice samples, and securing Dhruvesh's command-chair." Mira added, "Blue was the colour of trust; it was turned into the colour of fear. Now that same blue will draw the map of truth."

At evening, near Channa Grove, they placed not a copy of the blue register but only its empty blue cover. The pages remained in the secure room, because names could not be left out in the night's dew. From a branch Old Budhba said, "Do not read the pages today; read the colour." The Submerged Woman lifted a drop of water from the pond and placed it on the corner of the cover. The drop did not become blue; it remained transparent. Hulasi said, "When water refuses the colour, the name survives."

Night was descending. The room above Harihar Service Centre stood silent in the darkness, but inside its window the back of a chair gleamed. There was no person, only a depressed shadow of pressure upon the seat. Closing the page, Ananya wrote, "Dhruvesh's Chair." Beneath it she added, "Even the one who is not seated may have to be made to rise." All night the leaves of Channa Grove fluttered not blue, but ash-grey.

Folk Song: The Eye of the Blue Register

Folk Tune: Register Vigil

Open, O register, release the lock of fear now,

Join every stolen name back to a living body.

Blue was the colour of trust, made into the colour of fear,

Name, vulnerability, voice—arranged column after column.

Not "the woman from the well," but Hulasi's true name,

Erase the insulting label and return her honour.

Rani, labourers, women, Nand's old line,

Dhruvesh's slanted mark says—the power was in the chair.

The drop of water remained transparent upon the cover,

The guardians of names read every page with restraint.

Blue register, release the lock of fear now,



[Philosophical Undertone—Objection of the Naiyayikas: A traveller related his experience—if one says that “only the cognition of an act as a means to an end is the cause,” then even when, through erroneous evidence or trusted testimony, the eating of poison is understood as a means to an end, action toward it would follow. From this distinction it became clear that a profound epistemological process operates within small events of ordinary life. Objection of the Naiyayikas.]

CHAPTER 191

Dhruvesh's Chair

*A chair can rule even while empty—so long as its name is not called
aloud.*



Opening Folk Song: The People Around an Empty Chair

Folk Tune: Chaupal Jhumar

Gather, O chaupal, gather even without the chair,

Let no work stop while the circle of people is there.

*A chair may stand empty, but the people's seat is never bare,
In the village circle, a decision is never something distant there.*

*When the bell rings, let the people say—first hear every side,
Office exists only for service, not as fear's gift or pride.*

*As one chair's shadow shrinks, the strength of a hundred voices grows,
If the people's eyes stay awake, straight the course of governance goes.*

*Place the flower of the Constitution upon the empty chair,
Rights rooted in the people shall remain unshaken there.*

*When the bell rings, first let the people's words be heard,
Office is another name for service—teach this lesson word by word.
As one chair's shadow fades, a hundred voices gain their power,
With the Constitution's flower, let the people sing their rights this hour.*



Orders fall from above, but their weight is made by the feet climbing from below. Every stair writes a separate line in dust, betel stain, worn shoes, and hesitation. A room forbidden to someone remains most clearly in the mind of the person kept outside: the bell beyond its door, the scrape of its chair.

A chair's rule is not carried by the sitter's body alone. "Mother alone—soft voice," five breaths of silence, blank confession forms, and a prey-map—together these turn performance into command. When a victim's private fear is written on a slip and rehearsed, the voice ceases to be mere words; it becomes a tightening noose.

Incense ash, a dried garland, and a map on the wall dress crime in the curtains of worship, service, and development. But when Nand's torn report appears beneath the cushion and soil from Channa Grove is found in the wheels, the curtain tears. Far away the grove keeps moving its leaves; the chair thinks even it can be bought, but soil remembers its own road.

The true reversal of rule begins when people do not rush to seize the chair, but first draw a yellow line around it, count the objects, and preserve the names. The flower of the Constitution is placed on the empty chair; the bell becomes a signal to hear the people; questions begin travelling toward the source of the absent command. The chair is no longer master—it becomes a piece of evidence held inside public testimony.

The slanting mark of Dhruvesh on the last page of the Blue Register remained lodged in everyone's mind through the night like the shadow of a chair. In the morning light the upstairs room of the Harihar Service Centre looked ordinary from outside. Night dew clung to the iron bars of the window, while the back of the chair still glimmered grey in the darkness within. Yesterday the last page of the Blue Register had said, "New names in a separate register." After that sentence everyone understood that the page of crime had not closed; only the register had changed. On the stone Ananya wrote the day's heading: "Dhruvesh's Chair." Aaruni added below it: "The chair that looks empty carries the greatest weight." From beside the staircase rose the smell of damp wood, rust, and the stale air of a room shut all night; within that smell, the unseen weight of command seemed already present.

That morning Mira repeated the rules to everyone. "The room will be opened, but the crowd will not go up. The chair will not be moved. First the dust around it, papers, footprints, scratches on the wall, electrical wires, and every desk drawer will be inventoried. An object that was the seat of criminal orders will not be turned into a spectacle." Vineet Jha said, "A chair carries marks of authority. If those marks are disturbed, the chain of command may break." This time the children left their notebook pages blank: first observe, then write.

Gadadhar again held a key, but this time it was not the storeroom key; it was the key to the wooden door of the upstairs room. His hand trembled. "I only swept the place," he said. "The upstairs room was forbidden to me." Mira looked at him not with hard eyes but with tired compassion. "Forbidden rooms speak the loudest. The person denied entry remembers the sounds outside more clearly. What did you hear?" Gadadhar lowered his eyes. "Sometimes a phone bell at night, sometimes a man speaking softly, and sometimes the scrape of a chair being dragged."

As they climbed, the staircase seemed not ordinary brick but a sequence of old commands. Thick dust lay on the first step; less on the second; betel spit marked the third; the fourth bore scuffs from shoes. Aaruni said softly, "Whoever went upstairs every day left a different dust on every step." Satyavrat Mehta photographed each tread. Mira said, "The staircase is testimony too. The chair upstairs does not command alone; the feet that climb from below give it authority."

When the door opened, the air inside did not come out; instead the outside air seemed drawn inward. The room looked as if it had been closed for months, yet the dust on the desk was uneven. In the middle was a clean circular patch, as though a heavy glass or device had only recently been removed. A calendar on the wall was stuck on an old month, but a fresh pen had written one number over it: "17." Someone asked, "A date?" Vineet Jha said, "Possibly a sequence. Treat everything as inference, not proof." Mira nodded in approval; justice is quickly spoiled by the temptation to guess.

The chair was not in the middle of the room but shifted slightly to the right. Its artificial-leather back was torn in several places. Fine nail scratches marked the right arm; a round impression from a phone marked the left; dried soil and thread were caught in the wheels below. Ananya bent to look. The thread was blue—the same blue as the register cover. Mira stopped her from touching it. "Look, write, but do not lift it." Ananya wrote: "Blue thread in chair wheel; possible relation to blue colour of register."

Satyavrat Mehta studied the likely places where people would have sat or stood before the chair. Would the feet of someone being frightened have remained near the door, or in front of the chair? A faint ring showed in the dust on the floor. Inside it was a short streak, as though someone had turned while dragging a foot. "Impatient waiting," he whispered. Mira heard him. "On paper write: dragged footprint. Emotion later." Satyavrat smiled. He understood that Mira was not removing feeling; she was teaching it the discipline of evidence.

Three objects lay on the desk—a bell, a broken charger, and a black rubber-stamp box. Finger grease still shone on the bell's metal. Aaruni asked, "Whom did the bell summon?" Gadadhar said, "Me downstairs. When it rang, I sent up tea, water, a file, or sometimes a person." "A person?" Mira asked. Gadadhar blinked repeatedly. "Madhukar came most often. Dhruvesh was seen less, but the door opened in his name." A faint smell of warm oil and sweat rose from the metal surface, as though the fingers that had rung it had left their invisible sequence behind.

The room grew heavy at that sentence. Had Dhruvesh actually sat in the chair, or had only his name occupied it? The question encircled them. Vineet Jha said, "In many networks the real issuer of orders does not appear directly. The chair becomes his representative. The sitter reads the

order; the writer of the order remains absent.” Ananya wrote on the page: “Absent command.” Aaruni added, “The one who never sat is harder to make rise.” Mira did not stop either of them. Sometimes metaphor reveals the true bone of a crime.

The first desk drawer opened. There were fewer papers than slips: half-written phone numbers, the last four digits of bank accounts, a note saying “See fear column,” and on one small paper: “Mother alone—soft voice.” Mira went still at the sight. Yesterday the Blue Register had contained “mother alone”; today an acting instruction appeared beside it. Satyavrat Mehta wrote, “Voice style directed according to emotional vulnerability. Crime is not only information; it is performance too.” An oil stain and a dried fingertip mark lay on one corner of the slip. For a moment Mira remembered the trembling phone-silences of mothers she knew, then immediately fixed her gaze back on the evidence.

The second drawer held a small digital audio recorder. Its screen was off, but a memory card might still be inside. Vineet Jha said at once, “This goes directly for technical examination. Do not play it now.” Someone in the crowd outside whispered, “Let us hear the voices.” Mira stopped them sharply. “Victims’ voices will not be opened into a fairground for everyone’s ears.” With that single sentence, the school of Channa Grove came alive again—privacy is another name for compassion. Ananya wrote in the register: “Protect the voice as we protect the name.”

The third drawer seemed empty. But Gadadhar said, “This drawer always jammed.” Satyavrat Mehta examined the wooden panel carefully. There was a second layer within. When the strip was lifted, a stack of thin papers appeared—white, unprinted, with a faint blue dot in one corner. Not blank letterheads, but blank statement forms. On top, in pencil: “If they resist, make a confession.” Aaruni shuddered. “The criminal writes the fear first, then makes the victim speak the confession.” Mira said, “Every page in this stack is a mould for a possible lie.”

An old map hung beside the wall. At first it looked like a village development plan, but up close it was clearly a route-map: Garh Narikel to the station, the station to a small city bank, the bank to a phone shop, the phone shop to the Harihar Service Centre. Red dots marked houses where there was a “beneficiary,” blue dots where “fear” was high, black dots where there was “resistance.” Ananya gasped. “This is not a service map; it is a prey-map.” Satyavrat Mehta added, “The old map of field-boundary disputes has begun measuring people’s loneliness.”

Behind the chair, a garland had dried on a nail in the wall. Ash from an incense holder lay beneath it. Dhruvesh’s chair had been decorated like an object of worship even in this room of fear. Gadadhar said, “Incense was offered every new-moon day. They said it was so the service work would continue without obstruction.” Mira hardened. “Where the

smell of incense is used to hide fear, there is no worship—only a curtain.” Panidubbi, felt only in the pond air outside, seemed to whisper: “Drowning without water, burning without flame.”

When the chair cushion was lifted, an envelope was found underneath. It bore no name, only the letters “Dhru.” Inside were five photocopies: an old letter from Maheshwarnath Sevak, a note resembling Madhukar’s appointment, a sample of Dhruvesh’s signature, a copy of a page from the Blue Register, and a torn piece of Nand Aaruni’s old report. At the sight of Nand’s report, Satyavrat Mehta remained silent for a long time. The names of Ganges bridge labourers, the women’s accounts of the Harihar Service Centre, and digital terror had come together in a single envelope. “The network is crossing time,” he said.

Only two sentences remained on the torn piece of Nand Aaruni’s report: “Death list incomplete. Verification of names required.” Why was this fragment under Dhruvesh’s chair? Aaruni, whose own name was tied to Nand’s and born from his memory, trembled at the page. “Were they searching for the names in the old report?” he asked. Vineet Jha answered, “Possibly. Whoever obtains the names of old dead people gains routes to compensation, claims, identity, and bank records.” Mira said, “From water-burial in the Ganges to digital captivity, the thread is becoming clear.”

At last the blue thread caught in the chair wheel was removed according to procedure. A small clod of dried soil clung to it. Gadadhar said, “This soil is not from the upstairs room. It looks like the soil beside Channa Grove.” Everyone started. Had someone come from Channa Grove into this room? Or had the chair ever been taken near the grove? Satyavrat Mehta did not hurry. He wrote only: “Soil with blue thread; source test required.” But Ananya had already written inwardly: had the chair been listening to the grove, or had the grove reached behind the chair? The soil crumbling from the thread carried a faint smell of dew-dried leaves; in Aaruni’s nose, a morning in Channa Grove suddenly came alive.

The room’s window opened toward the pond behind. Channa Grove was not fully visible from it, only its upper leaves. If Dhruvesh had sat in this chair, he would have watched those leaves moving. Mira stood by the window and said, “A criminal who could see Channa Grove’s leaves would have known that the guardians of names were awake. Yet the network continued. The fear must have been very deep—or the greed.” Aaruni said, “Or he thought the grove itself could be bought like paper.”

By midday the inventory had grown long: chair, bell, charger, rubber stamp, slips, audio recorder, blank statement forms, route-map, worship ash, envelope, fragment of Nand’s report, blue thread, and soil—each item received a number. The crowd outside tired of waiting, but the sequence inside did not break. Mira came out and said only, “The chair

was not empty. Fear, command, performance, an old report, and new fraud were all sitting upon it.” The people fell silent. Many understood for the first time that lifting a chair was not merely removing an object; it meant lifting an entire arrangement of orders.

At evening the chair was not removed. A yellow line was drawn around it, photographs were taken, and the room was sealed. Vineet Jha said, “The search for Dhruvesh is no longer merely a search for a person. His signature, voice, order-slips, bank threads, and relation to this chair must all be examined together.” Satyavrat Mehta wrote the day’s note: “Upstairs room: command chamber. Indications of direct or indirect control associated with the chair. Recovered: voice instructions linked to the Blue Register’s fear column, blank confession forms, route-map, audio recorder, envelope marked ‘Dhru.’ and fragment of Nand’s report. The centre of the crime now moves beyond the chair toward the source of command.”

At night no replica of the chair was placed beneath Channa Grove; only the circular outline of its dust was drawn on stone. Old Budhba’s Ghost watched from a branch. Hulasi said, “Whether Dhruvesh sat there or not, the chair itself is calling his name.” Panidubbi kept the pond water still, as though afraid of all the voices locked inside the recorder. Ananya opened the next page and wrote: “The voice inside the switched-off recorder.” Aaruni added below: “Even what was not played will be heard.”

Folk Song: The Rule of the Empty Chair

Folk Tune: Darbari Lament

Speak, O chair—tell us whose order it was,

*Even after the people rise, bear the burden of the crime because you
must.*

The chair is empty, yet the bell still rings commands,

The sitter has fled, but the shadow still rules the lands.

Charger, slips, recorder, incense ash,

Nand’s torn report beside the proof of newer fraud’s lash.

A yellow ring was drawn around the chair,

Dhruvesh's burden stayed caught in the circle of dust there.

Hulasi said—the chair itself calls the name,

Panidubbi's water fears the noose of the locked voice's claim.

Empty chair, tell us whose order it was,

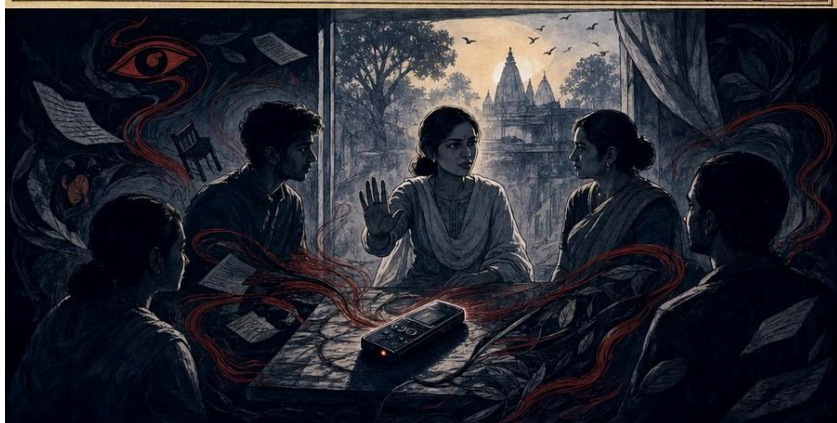


[Philosophical Undertone—The View of the Most Recent Prabhakaras: A traveller related his experience. The most recent Prabhakaras say that the agent's effort must be qualified by "it will not yield a prohibited result"; thus a person afflicted by a great calamity does not proceed to consume poison or perform worship of a deity. This distinction shows how a profound epistemic process continues within even a small event of ordinary life. The view of the most recent Prabhakaras.]

CHAPTER 192

The Voice of a Switched-Off Recorder

*The voice of a switched-off recorder is loudest—because now no one can
stop it.*



Opening Folk Song: A Bowl Filled with Voices

Folk Tune: Water-Bearer's Song

Pass the bowl around, sister, carry it from house to house,

Gather in it, drop by drop, every voice that was suppressed.

The empty bowl became an ear, drinking voices drop by drop,

The cry that stayed buried will now live again as song.

Fill it with the water of affection, add the salt of trust,

Hear one another's words, and breathing will grow light.

The bowl goes house to house; each person lays a story there,

A listener's quiet heart can turn sorrow into a flower.

An empty vessel is not lack; it is the ground of welcome,

There the people's voices will gather, carrying boundless hope.

A listener's steady heart is the greatest preparation.

Mix the water of affection with the salt of trust,

Break the night of sorrow with the song of the filled bowl.



A voice can wear many masks—a mother's tenderness, the sternness of law, the sweetness of service. But the rhythm of breathing, a whisper behind the speaker, the sound of pages turning, and the scrape of a chair lift the edge of the mask. When science does not rush to conclusions, memory can walk beside it.

Like a name, a voice is part of a person's body. Making a copy, recording time-marks, and leaving the original untouched is not merely procedure; it is a guard over the victim's dignity. Hearing a cry is not a right. To listen beyond necessity is to steal from the victim once again.

Now the Blue Register's letters are speaking as sound, and the command of the empty chair is hidden behind breath. But the bowl is

travelling—from one house to another, from one testimony to another. The face belonging to every captured voice will be sought; when that face is found, responsibility will be placed before the people's watch.

On an ordinary night the pond carried frog calls, the shifting shadow of Panidubbi's hair, and now and then the whisper of leaves. But this night the water seemed to have become an ear. Everyone felt that the voice trapped inside the digital recorder in the locked room was making water, leaves, dust, and chair all wait to hear it. Ananya wrote on the stone: "The Voice of a Switched-Off Recorder." Aaruni added below: "A captured voice first has the right to be heard safely." From the pond rose the smell of dampness, moss, and wet leaves; although the metal device lay cold inside the shut room, its silence felt like warm breath.

At dawn Mira made the rule explicit. "The recorder is not a toy. It may contain a victim's crying, a criminal's threat, a forged order, or someone's private humiliation. Every sound may become a court document, so it will not be played before a fairground of ears." Vineet Jha said, "The process has three stages: photograph the device, remove and seal the memory card separately, make a copy, and only then hold a restricted listening. The original file remains untouched." This time the children suppressed their curiosity. They had learned to protect names; now it was time to learn to protect voices.

A young man came from the city for the technical examination—Abhay, an audio-recording examiner by profession. He carried a small bag on his shoulder, wore thick glasses, and spoke little. Before climbing the stairs of the Harihar Service Centre he removed his shoes. No one laughed. "So dust does not enter the equipment," Abhay said. Mira smiled faintly. "Here dust is evidence too. Do not throw it away; just keep it separate." For the first time Abhay understood the language of this case: here science and memory were not opponents but companions.

The recorder, with its memory card, was placed on a separate table. A white cloth covered the table, witnesses stood around it, the time was recorded, and photographs were taken. Wearing gloves, Abhay opened the rear cover. Inside was a cheap-company memory card marked with a tiny sign in blue ink: "Dhru." Aaruni said in a lowered voice, "The envelope under the chair had the same incomplete sign." Vineet Jha wrote at once: "Similar mark, not conclusive." Mira said, "Hunger for a conclusion can be as fierce as a criminal's hunger; justice makes it fast."

No one spoke while the first copy was being made. Only the faint hum of the machine could be heard. Gadadhar sat outside the door and began to bite at a nail, but Mira stopped him. "Anxiety becomes sound too. Sit still." Gadadhar placed his hands in his lap. He remembered all those nights when the bell rang upstairs and he carried tea to the door: sometimes a rough male voice within, sometimes a woman's muffled sob, sometimes such silence that the tea went cold. When the memory card

was removed, a fine ring of dust remained on the table. With every hum of the machine Gadadhar's fingers curled involuntarily, as though the old bell might ring again.

After the copy was made, Abhay displayed the list of files on the screen. The names were strange: "soft_mother," "law_fear," "son_away," "confession," "chair_night," "Nand_list," and the last file, "new_register." At once the Blue Register's fear column turned into sound. Ananya wrote, "Written fear is matching spoken fear." Mira told her to add: "Match is a preliminary indication; verification remains." The children now had to learn the language of restraint in their notebooks.

The first file, "soft_mother," was played only in the presence of limited witnesses. The speaker volume was kept very low. At first came the sound of paper turning, then a man clearing his throat. After that came a soft voice, unnaturally sweet: "Mother, do not be afraid. I am calling from the service centre. Your name has come under special assistance." The eyes of one woman witness filled with tears. Mira stopped the file immediately. "If anyone's memory begins to break apart, the hearing stops," she said. The pace of justice cannot outrun the human body.

The second time, the file was heard in short segments. The soft voice slowly explained the rules: first identity papers, then bank details, then not a one-time secret code but a "verification code for the application"; the terms had been altered so that fraud sounded like service. Between sentences another man whispered in the background: "Not threat—affection." Abhay paused the file. "The background voice is on a separate layer. There may have been two people in the room." Vineet Jha wrote: "Main phone voice and background direction—two sources." Aaruni said, "A criminal performance has a director too."

In the "law_fear" file the voice changed. This time it was hard and official, with broken shadows of English words mixed in: "There is a notice against you," "digital surveillance," "if you wish to avoid arrest, complete verification." Mira listened with knitted brows. The voice was performing law, not speaking law. Satyavrat Mehta wrote, "The language of the State has been stolen." That single sentence contained the network's cruelty: the very law that should protect people was being used as a name under which fear was sold.

In the middle of the file a name suddenly appeared: "The Bisesar matter is old; do not open it now." The room froze. Bisesar Paswan, the Ganges bridge, Nand Aaruni's death list—all were suddenly present on the table. Abhay stopped the file. He was trained, yet his hand trembled. Vineet Jha said, "Note the time-mark." Mira spoke softly: "They were still afraid of the old water-burial. The names pushed under water are surfacing again in a digital room."

The file “Nand_list” was the strangest. There was no conversation; someone was reading from a page: “Death list incomplete... verification of names required... contract condition... safety belt... recorded absent.” The reader stumbled, as though both old Devanagari and official language were difficult for him. Someone in the background said, “Cut this part. We only need the names. Where can the claim be made?” Aaruni clenched his teeth. The page that had carried Nand’s warning was being turned into raw material for crime.

Mira stopped the hearing for five minutes. No one went outside. Channa Grove’s leaves were not visible from the window, but their shadow moved on the wall. Hulasi’s voice seemed to come in the air: “They turned surviving testimony into a claim.” Panidubbi stirred the pond from within. Old Budhba’s Ghost seemed to say, “If a surviving page falls into the wrong hands, the dead are robbed again.” Satyavrat Mehta closed his pen and shut his eyes.

After the break they listened to the file “confession.” First came a woman crying. Then a voice recognisable as Madhukar’s: “Just say that you gave the papers voluntarily. The service centre is not responsible.” The woman said, “I did not understand.” Madhukar replied, “If you did not understand, a case will be made. Say you understood and the money may return.” There was no sweetness in that voice, only the thick stickiness of pressure. Gadadhar listened in stunned silence outside. He remembered how many times he had sent bundles of blank statement forms upstairs.

Mira paused the file and called Gadadhar inside. “Do you recognise this voice?” Gadadhar’s eyes remained on the floor. “It sounds like Madhukar Babu,” he said, “but sometimes Dhruvesh also wrote for him how he should speak.” “Did you see that?” Vineet Jha asked. Gadadhar nodded. “Words on paper, a person in the chair above, and I below with the bell. I thought they were service papers.” His voice broke. Mira said, “Doing something unknowingly is not a crime, but remaining silent afterward can become one.” For the first time Gadadhar was ready to write his full name.

The “chair_night” file contained only the sounds of the room: the chair being dragged, the fan rattling, a mobile phone vibrating, a pen scratching sharply on paper, and small breaths between them. No clear words. Abhay listened for a long time through headphones. Then he said, “There is a whisper here.” Everyone fell silent. The volume was increased. From inside the harsh digital crackle emerged a sentence: “New names in a separate register.” The last page of the Blue Register suddenly spoke aloud.

The sentence seemed to split the walls of the room. What had been found in writing had now been found in sound as well. Dhruvesh’s signature was still not conclusive, but the method of command was

becoming clear. Aaruni whispered, "Written fear, spoken fear, blank statements, the chair—all one thread." Ananya answered, "Not merely a thread—a noose." Mira wrote: "Search for new register required. Secure copy of voice evidence made. Voice identification remains."

The final file, "new_register," was opened. At first there was a long silence. Then the tapping of typing on a phone. Someone said, "Remove the old names. Those who have risen, mark them dead. Those who have begun to speak, mark them disputed. Those who are silent, put them in the next list." A second, much softer voice said, "Aaruni?" The first voice replied, "Do not leave the children alone. They are becoming guardians of names." For the first time real fear entered the room. The crime was watching not only old victims but those protecting their names. At the word "children," Ananya's nails pressed half-moons into her palm; the night-light of Channa Grove flickered for a moment in Aaruni's eyes, but neither closed their notebook.

Mira ordered at once, "Make a separately secured copy of this segment. The children's safety is now primary." Ananya wanted to protest. "I will not be afraid." Mira took her hand. "Not being afraid and being careless are different things. Guardians of names must remain alive if names are to survive." Aaruni bowed his head. For the first time he understood that a guard also stands within the circle of protection.

Dhruvesh's direct voice still had not emerged clearly. Sometimes there was background breathing, sometimes a whisper, sometimes Madhukar reading written instructions. Abhay said, "We need a sample for voice identification. A name cannot be assigned on guesswork alone." Disappointment spread through the crowd. People wanted the voice to play and the criminal to be caught. But the road of justice is not so simple. Satyavrat Mehta said, "In the court of sound, the ear gives judgment too quickly; the law must walk slowly."

At the end of the day the recorder was switched off again, but the voice inside it was no longer alone. Copies had been made, a list prepared, time-marks written, and relevant segments separately sealed. A sample of Madhukar's voice would be taken; known speeches or meeting recordings of Dhruvesh would be sought; mobile tower locations would be matched; and the new pages of the Blue Register would be searched for. Mira came out and told the people only this: "The voices have been heard. Pain will not be opened into a marketplace. The investigation will continue." Through this discipline the crowd was slowly learning to trust justice.

At evening the recorder was not brought beneath Channa Grove. In its place they set an empty earthen bowl. Old Budhba's Ghost asked, "Why a bowl?" Ananya said, "A voice has no shape; it needs an empty place." Hulasi bent over the bowl. "When there was no hand, the voice became a hand. But a voice that steals another person's throat must be

bound.” Panidubbi lifted a little water from the pond and placed it in the bowl. No face appeared in the water, only ripples.

Night deepened. Channa Grove’s leaves moved without wind. Black ghosts in the shade, white spirits at the tips of leaves, Loth with his mouth half open—all seemed to be listening to the recorder’s silence, the woman’s cry, Madhukar’s pressure, Dhruvesh’s possible breath, and the sound of Nand’s torn report being read. Mira wrote on the stone: “The voice has been found, but the face remains.” Ananya opened the next page and wrote: “The Face of the Voice.” Aaruni added below: “The body behind the breath will be sought.”

Folk Song: Voice in the Empty Bowl

Folk Tune: Listening Lament

*Guard it, O bowl, guard every stolen throat,
The voice has been found—now call the face that spoke.*

*The recorder was off, yet the crying grew loud,
A woman’s trembling throat moved within the time-marked cloud.*

*Copy, sealed segment, sample of voice,
Pain is not a marketplace—dignity is the choice.
No recorder beneath the grove, only an empty earthen bowl,*

A voice has no shape—an empty place must hold it whole.

*Panidubbi poured water; no face appeared there,
The speech of Nand’s torn report fell from within the air.*

Empty bowl, guard every stolen throat,

A voice has no shape—emptiness is its abode.



[Philosophical Undertone—The Question of Strongly Consequent Harm: The prohibitive sentence “Do not eat poisoned meat” restrains action by conveying that such food is a means to harm stronger than the desired pleasure it might yield. The question of strongly consequent harm.]

CHAPTER 193

The Face of the Voice

*The face of a voice appears when the people standing behind its breath
are counted.*



Opening Folk Song: A Face Rises from Breath

Folk Tune: Slow Sohar Rhythm

O child, a sohar for the first breath,

In every face its own dawn has risen.

From the first breath a face emerges; through a name, life flowers,

Beyond the dark womb, the wings of morning open.

Read the eyes of the one whose throat was suppressed,

Build recognition from palm, gait, sweat—everything.

One face is one world, not merely data,

Walk in respect for the dignity of breath; no one is nameless.

Sing the morning sohar and say—life is greatest of all,

In every face shines the cloud of humanity.

Life opened its wings beyond the dark womb,

Not data but the light of the eyes—this is the true wealth.

Read the gait and palm of the one whose throat was suppressed,

“No one is nameless”—make this the refrain of the sohar.



First trust, then fear—this lesson of fraud arrives in a sweet voice. Service on the stage, threat on the phone, consent on paper: the same face wears different masks. When a victim speaks with uncertainty intact, the distance between “seems like” and “certain” becomes evidence too.

Do not expose as spectacle the person whose name needs protection. Keep the sign of the lamp, but preserve the light of the testimony. Let scientific language be slow, copies separate, originals sealed—because a loud declaration gives the criminal a road to escape, while a slow process closes that road.

Now the face behind the voice has half emerged. On one forehead is the shadow of an old date, on one cheek a seal, in one throat repeated orders, and behind them a broken web of signals. A summons is sent not merely to a face but to the doorway of breath; when that door opens, the many teeth of the crocodile will be counted one by one.

No drum sounded in the village and no proclamation was made, yet everyone knew that the mouth of the crime could no longer remain hidden behind a voice. The upstairs room of the Harihar Service Centre was still sealed, the Blue Register lay in a separate box, the recorder in a separate envelope, and Mira's face held the same hardness that kept compassion from becoming spectacle. Ananya reread the line written on the stone the previous night: "The voice has been found, but the face remains." Below it Aaruni wrote the day's title in bold letters: "The Face of the Voice." The dew-wet morning air carried a mingled smell of iron seal, old wire, and damp leaves; everyone breathed slowly, as though the village itself were preparing to hear a difficult name. The cold from within the stone climbed into Ananya's palm, and Aaruni felt that the night's voice was still caught in the leaves.

Finding the face of a voice was not ordinary recognition. The ear quickly says: this is so-and-so's voice, this is someone's breath. But Mira said at the outset, "No one will be declared guilty on the confidence of ears alone. Time, place, device, witnesses, and samples must all be joined to the voice. A face visible in sound must also be seen in the mirror of law." A faint restlessness spread through the crowd. People were impatient for justice, but justice requires a slow flame.

At first light Abhay arrived with a small device, wires, papers, and a computer. Before opening the recorder copy he explained, "To see a voice with the eyes, we make its waveform. The line is not complete truth, but it can catch the flute of a lie. If two voices share the rise of breath, the way they cut syllables, habits of pausing, and background rumble, the comparison can be called strong; the judicial process still makes the final decision." For the first time the children saw the geography of a voice—one ascent, one descent, a broken mountain, a dark valley. Ananya whispered, "The geography of sound."

A sample of Madhukar's voice was taken. He was seated in a separate room with a glass of water before him and five sentences on paper. First: "The service centre will reach the homes of the poor." Second: "Do not be afraid; cooperate." Third: "If a name is written incorrectly, it will be corrected." Fourth: "Do not disconnect the phone." Fifth: "Say exactly what you are told to say." Madhukar stumbled on the fifth. His throat dried. Mira said, "Read the sentence; this is only a sample." Madhukar read it, but in his voice one could clearly hear the strings of a man who for a long time had been a puppet of another's orders.

A sample of Dhruvesh was harder to obtain. He was not present and his house was locked. Vineet Jha said, "Find known public speeches, meeting recordings, inauguration videos, old bank gatherings, or panchayat announcements. If they contain clear speech, comparison will be possible." From an old cupboard at the service centre Gadadhar brought CDs, pen drives, broken phones, and a disc marked "Welcome Ceremony." As the lid was lifted, a fine cloud of dust rose; the smell of old plastic, dampness, and stale incense stung the nose. Gadadhar's eyes watered, but he did not blink. It seemed to him that along the edge of every disc some suppressed complaint was scratching with a fingernail. Beneath that dust lay layers of smiles, applause, oaths, and lies.

The first disc would not open. The second contained only devotional songs. The third held footage from the inauguration of the Harihar Service Centre: stage, coconut, garlands, incense, a line of children, and Dhruvesh seated in the middle on a chair. His face was painted with the colour of service, but his eyes searched not the crowd but the camera. His speech began: "The village's pain is my pain." Several people in the crowd stiffened. Some remembered the applause that day; others remembered the fraud that followed. Slowly his voice filled the room.

Abhay stopped and replayed the speech. He went to the segment of the original recorder containing the background breath, then to Dhruvesh's word "pain" in the inauguration speech, then to "process" in another public video. His eyes stayed fixed on the waveform. "See," he said, "before Dhruvesh reaches 'r,' he clears his throat slightly. After 's' there is a faint whistle. And at the end of a long sentence, rather than inhaling, he releases breath outward and catches the next word." Mira stopped him at once. "Write comparison, not declaration." Abhay nodded.

Ananya kept writing: pause in breath, throat-clear before "r," whistle after "s," exhalation at sentence end. It seemed to her that a person can hide a crime, but the throat does not easily abandon its old habits. Aaruni said, "A name may be false, a face may change, paper may be cut away; where can the gait of a voice hide?" Satyavrat Mehta replied, "A voice can be changed through practice too, but the breath of fear is harder to alter."

Then Vineet Jha placed a new document on the table. It was an old meeting list from the bank branch, referring to the day when accounts for the Harihar Service Centre were opened. The branch manager had been afraid at first, but after the previous night he had sent a copy. With it came a short video: tea on the table, an almanac behind, and Dhruvesh, Maheshwar, Madhukar, and an unknown young man seated before the camera. The audio was unclear, but for one moment Dhruvesh could be heard leaning forward and saying, "First trust, then fear." Silence spread through the room.

“First trust, then fear”—the same phrase had been repeated by Madhukar inside the switched-off recorder. There he had said, “First trust, then fear, then money.” Abhay played the two segments together. The rhythm of the sentence was the same. Dhruvesh’s public face spoke of service; the formula in the locked room spoke of fear. Mira closed her eyes and listened for a moment, then said, “Make three copies of this segment—one for court, one for the secure archive, and one for verification before the victim’s representative. Not for the crowd.”

Outside, the crowd was growing impatient. Some said, “Announce the name.” Others, “Arrest Dhruvesh now.” Others, “Burn the service centre.” Mira went outside. The moment people saw her, the noise rose. She raised a hand and silenced them. “The voice comparison has advanced,” she said, “but the face-matching is not complete. If evidence is damaged in haste, the criminals will use that very haste as their shield.” The crowd quieted. People understood, but the body of anger moves faster than reason.

Madhukar was not shown the bank video; only the phrase was played to him. At “First trust, then fear,” his hand began to tremble. His eyes stayed on the ground, not the paper. Mira asked slowly, “Who gave you this instruction?” Madhukar remained silent for a long time. A crow called outside; Abhay’s equipment hummed faintly within. At last Madhukar said, “I did not see the face. I heard the voice.” Vineet Jha asked, “Whose voice?” With a dry throat Madhukar said, “Like Dhruvesh Babu’s.”

Mira stopped at the word “like.” “Not ‘like.’ If you are certain, say certain. If not, write your doubt. Hiding doubt inside truth is the beginning of a lie.” Madhukar’s face collapsed. “I am afraid,” he said. “They said if I named anyone, my mother’s medicine would stop, my son’s job would end, and the papers of my house would disappear.” After that sentence, no sob came from his mouth—only air. Many village crimes open not with a roar but with such empty air.

At last Madhukar wrote his statement: “The instructions that I repeat in the switched-off recorder came to me originally over the phone from Dhruvesh Babu. Sometimes he spoke himself; sometimes a slip came through Maheshwar; sometimes there was a voice behind. My order was: first take the victim toward service, then papers, then fear, then the account.” His hand shook as he signed. Mira did not hold it; she wanted the signature to be his own act of will. Trembling, Madhukar wrote his name.

After that statement, the face of the voice emerged from the blur for the first time. It was not Dhruvesh’s face alone. On its forehead lay the shadow of Batuknath’s old date; in its eyes Chandrapal’s screen; on its cheek Maheshwar’s seal; in its throat Madhukar’s practice; and behind it the broken web of Raghav Signal. Crime wears one face, but many teeth

live within. Ananya wrote: "One face, many teeth." Aaruni added: "The crocodile is still changing water."

Abhay drafted the technical report. He wrote: "Audio characteristics in recorder segment no. 7, inauguration speech segment no. 2, bank-meeting video segment no. 4, and Madhukar sample segment no. 1 are comparable. Similarities occur in pronunciation, breath-pause, verbal rhythm, and style of background direction. Final scientific opinion awaits specialist laboratory examination." Satyavrat Mehta nodded in satisfaction. "This language is slow," he said, "but in court, slow words survive longer than fast anger."

In the afternoon an elderly woman arrived—the same woman whose crying had been heard on the recorder. Her name was not made public. Mira seated her behind a separate screen. She was played only the sentence in which Madhukar pressured her. The woman began to tremble. "This man told me: sign, or the file will disappear. But there was another voice behind the phone. It said: do not explain too much; show fear." Mira asked, "Do you recognise that voice?" After a long time the woman said, "The one who used to speak on the service-centre stage." Her sari-end carried a faint smell of dried turmeric and medicine; her fingers shook so much that the rim of the water glass rang again and again. Mira steadied the glass, but did not repeat the question. She let the woman's breath find its own pace again.

The children's faces changed after hearing the woman's statement. Ananya wanted to write her name, but Mira stopped her. "First protect this name." So in place of the name Ananya drew a small lamp. Aaruni asked, "A lamp instead of a name?" Ananya said, "When a name must be hidden, write its light." Mira heard this from a distance. It seemed to her that the children were learning a language of justice that protected both the dignity of paper and the modesty of people.

They discussed sending a summons to Dhruvesh's house. Vineet Jha said, "First, a notice for questioning on the available evidence. Record the risk of flight. Apply to freeze accounts, phones, and travel routes." Gadadhar said, "He may have fled already." Satyavrat Mehta answered calmly, "A crime that commands from a chair needs fewer walking feet and more escape routes. Close the routes." At that sentence the route-map was opened again. Its red lines began to shine with a new meaning.

The old photograph of Dhruvesh hanging on the service-centre wall was taken down. In it he smiled before a blanket-distribution scene with poor children. Mira did not display the picture to the crowd; she wrote only in the inventory: "Public-image material; authentication required." But Ananya shuddered when she saw it. Behind Dhruvesh's right shoulder she thought she saw a black stain shaped like a leaf from Channa Grove. "What is this mark?" she asked. Abhay looked. "Probably image

damage.” Had Old Budhba’s Ghost been there, he would have said: not the photograph—the witness behind it has appeared.

At evening the empty bowl was again placed beneath Channa Grove. This time it held not pond water but a little incense ash brushed from the paper bearing the elderly woman’s statement. Hulasi bent near it. “Show the face of the voice,” she said. First ripples appeared in the water, then a blurred face, then the back of the chair, then the creak of the fan, then a hand rising with its thumb lifted as though saying: increase the fear. Before the face could fully appear, the water trembled. Panidubbi said, “The face will not remain in water; it will remain in people’s statements.”

From his branch Old Budhba’s Ghost said, “Long ago people died without names. Now people are killed without voices. Find the face of the one whose throat was taken. Find the true owner of the voice placed in another’s mouth. Write the darkness behind every order that came from behind.” The black ghosts made a circle. The white spirits stayed silent on the leaves. Loth opened his mouth halfway and uttered one phrase —“First trust...” then fell silent. Everyone understood: the lesson of fear had reached even the village air.

As night fell, Mira gathered the day’s papers. Dhruvesh’s voice comparison, Madhukar’s statement, the elderly woman’s protected testimony, the bank-meeting video, the inauguration speech, recorder segments, and lines from Nand’s report were all placed in separate envelopes, each numbered. Vineet Jha wrote: “Next steps: presentation before Dhruvesh, lawful collection of voice sample, account restraint, verification of phone location.” Satyavrat Mehta added a final note: “The face of the voice is half revealed. The criminal who covers his face can no longer hide his breath.”

Before closing the register at the end of the night, Ananya wrote: “Today the face did not fully appear, but the doorway of its breath was found.” Aaruni wrote below: “A summons will be sent to the face.” Channa Grove’s leaves moved once. A dog barked somewhere far away. The sealed upstairs room of the Harihar Service Centre seemed to be listening from within. Voice had ceased to be an object and become testimony. And when testimony begins searching for a face, the criminal’s first defeat begins. On the next page Ananya slowly wrote: “The Summons of Breath.”

Folk Song: The Face Behind the Breath

Folk Tune: Investigative Folk Tune

Come, O voice—let the one who stands behind you come,

Before every stolen throat, speak the true name from which you come.

Find the face of the one whose throat was taken,

Restore the true owner of every stolen voice.

“First trust...” Loth spoke half the phrase, then fell still,

In those two words the whole doorway of fraud opened.

Speech, bank meeting, recorder, Nand’s report,

When the gait of breath matched, the mask began to fall.

The face was not complete, but the doorway of breath was found,

Letters of summons descended upon the leaves of night.

O voice, let the one who stands behind you come,

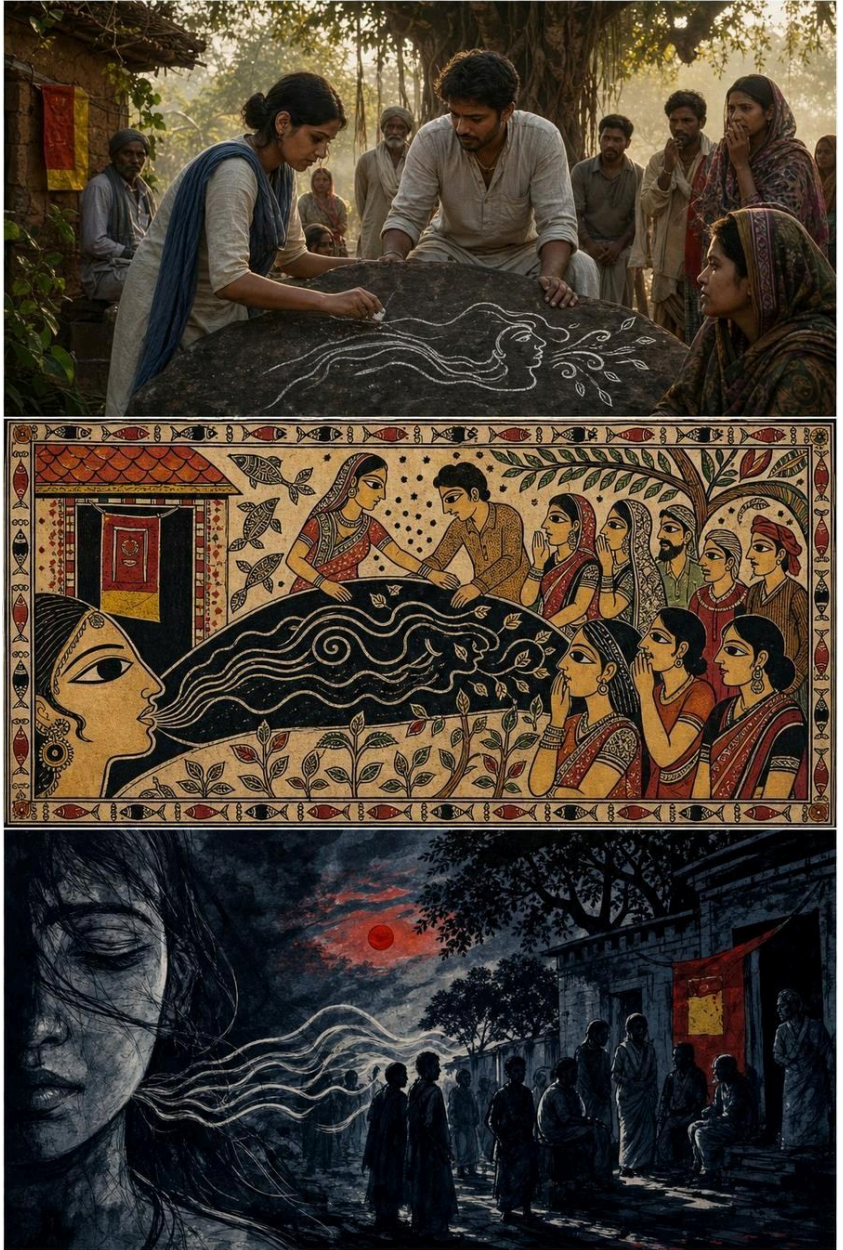


[Philosophical Undertone—The View of One Group of Prabhakaras: In “the paddy is being pounded,” it is enough that the action of pounding be related to the meaning delimited by paddyhood; no separate secondary signification is required for each individual grain of paddy. The view of one group of Prabhakaras.]

CHAPTER 194

The Summons of Breath

*A summons is issued not to the body but to the breath—and breath has
no lawyer.*



Opening Folk Song: The Receipt of the Heart

Folk Tune: Hopeful Nachari Rhythm

Keep the account, keep the account within the heart,

Paper may be lost; do not lose affection's receipt.

A paper receipt can disappear, but the heart's account remains,

What was done with affection leaves testimony that flows.

A clear account within the heart, light within the eyes,

What fear or burden can weigh on one who walks the road of truth?

Carry not an envelope but the seal of trust,

Give a clear answer in the court within.

The heart's receipt will always say—justice is not on credit,

Truth's earnings may come slowly, but they are never wasted.

Every evening the inner court opens its ledger,

Look yourself in the eye and speak your answer.

Not an envelope—the seal of trust remains with you,

The slow earnings of truth bear fruit for a lifetime.



Paper is pasted on a gate, but the true summons shakes the bell within. Tyre marks, a suddenly ringing phone, a lawyer's letter, an excuse for absence—these are fine lines in the circle. One line may be weak; many together can close the criminal's road.

The memory of a frightened witness becomes a receipt, but turning that fear into spectacle is not justice. First there must be water, a seat, silence, and time to write; only then can a trembling statement become a seed of evidence. If a name needs protection, preserve its light—do not expose the body.

The summons now goes beyond the person into the lane of accounts. The pulse of money and the breath of fear are connected; once withdrawals stop, the voice of command changes. The crocodile's body may remain hidden in water, but its teeth, footprints, accounts, and breath are entered one by one in the people's register.

Earlier, people whispered after hearing news of crime; now, before speaking, they listened to the rhythm of their own breath. Whose sentence carried fear? Whose laughter carried the shadow of command? In whose silence was Dhruvesh's name caught? Such questions moved through the air. At dawn Ananya wrote a new title on the stone: "The Summons of Breath." Aaruni added below: "The voice that came from behind must now come before its own breath." Green fragrance rose from dew-wet leaves, and the tyre-dust from the previous night still lay damp on the raw road in the distance. Ananya felt that at the tip of every leaf an unspoken name trembled, waiting to be written. At that sentence Channa Grove's leaves moved as though even leaves were learning how to send a summons.

For village people, the word summons had long been a word of fear. A court peon would sometimes hang a red-yellow paper on a door and the whole neighbourhood would know that the shadow of a date had entered that house. But this time the summons was not for the victim; it was for the shadow of accusation. Mira said clearly, "A summons is not punishment. It is a call—now explain the relationship of your breath, your voice, your signature, your chair, and your register." The faces in the crowd showed surprise. For the first time, the language of court was becoming a tool to demand an answer instead of a weapon to frighten.

Vineet Jha prepared the document early in the morning. Dhruvesh's full name, father's name, connection to the service centre, references to pages of the Blue Register, suspicions arising from the audio recorder, the bank-meeting video, the chair-room, and Madhukar's statement were written in order. He read every line, and Mira repeatedly stopped him to add: "Do not write the victim's full name. Give a reference number. Private trauma stays in the case diary, not in the summons. The accused may be confronted; the victim must not be stripped bare again." The children saw that justice was not merely haste to catch a criminal; it was also the discipline of refusing to let eyes roam once more over a victim's body.

Abhay summarised on paper the comparison among the recorder waveform, Dhruvesh's inauguration-speech sample, and the five sentences read by Madhukar. His language was direct: "Similarity is sufficient, but a lawful voice sample is required for a conclusive finding." The village people listened to that sentence three times. At "sufficient," they said, "Then arrest him." At "not conclusive," they grew restless. Mira said, "It is easy to strike a crocodile the moment its teeth are seen;

but in justice, the teeth, the bitten body, the water, and the time all become evidence. Dhruvesh's breath must be taken through lawful procedure; only then will the face of the voice become complete."

To serve the summons went Gadadhar, two constables, Vineet Jha's junior assistant, and—at Ananya's insistence—only Aaruni among the children. Mira stopped Ananya. "Not everyone goes everywhere. The one who writes must sometimes write waiting too." Ananya remained by the stone, but her gaze travelled with the dust of the road from the Harihar Service Centre toward Dhruvesh's new concrete house. It was the same road on which many poor people had gone seeking assistance, many widows had gone to submit papers, and many had returned empty-handed because their names had been placed in the "wrong column."

Dhruvesh's house had risen unlike the village's old houses: a high gate, cameras, tiles, a small fountain inside, and outside a signboard advertising service to the poor. On the board was a smiling face wearing a garland, hands joined, a blue curtain behind. The guard at the gate said, "Babu is away." Vineet's assistant showed the summons. The guard first made a phone call, then said, "I know nothing about this legal notice." Gadadhar told Aaruni softly, "In the house where every matter moved by order, today the house says it knows nothing."

Not Dhruvesh's wife but his manager came from inside. His name was Sheetanshu. Courtesy on his face, calculation in his eyes. He did not take the summons in his hand; he read it from two fingers' distance. "Babu is in the city for treatment," he said. A constable asked, "When did he leave?" Sheetanshu answered, "Last night." Aaruni silently studied the soil at the gate. Fresh tyre tracks were visible, but they were deeper from outside toward the inside and fainter from inside toward the road. It seemed to him that a story sometimes leaves the weight of a lie in the earth.

Vineet's assistant read the procedure: if receipt were refused, the summons would be pasted, witnesses would sign, and a photograph would be taken. Sheetanshu softened at once. "It is not refusal; Babu is absent." Yet he still would not take the paper. Finally a copy of the summons was pasted on the notice board inside the gate and photographed. Aaruni saw it fixed just beneath the advertisement where Dhruvesh smiled with a hand on a poor child's head. The smile on the board and the line of the summons overlapped: "Appear."

The moment the summons was pasted, a phone rang somewhere inside the house. The ringtone was ordinary, yet Gadadhar shuddered. He recognised the tone of the phone from the upstairs room. "It is the same bell," he said softly. The constable wrote it down. Sheetanshu immediately said, "All the phones in the house are from the same company." Vineet's assistant replied calmly, "Fine. The phone records

will also be requested.” For the first time, Sheetanshu’s face changed from hard tile to raw earth.

On the way back to the village Aaruni remained silent for a long time. Gadadhar asked, “What will you write?” Aaruni said, “The summons was not served; the summons was seen. I will write the difference.” Gadadhar did not understand. Aaruni explained, “The paper was pasted on the gate, but the phone inside woke first. The summons that travels on paper is legal; the summons that shakes a phone is the criminal’s fear.” Gadadhar looked carefully at Aaruni for the first time. He was a child, but in his eyes the blue of the register, dust from the chair, and the recorder’s waveform had settled together.

Meanwhile, beneath Channa Grove, Ananya was writing the waiting. She had learned that waiting too is an event. Lines formed on her page: “The summons went. Dust rose. Leaves were still. Pond calm. Mira checked the clock three times. Abhay coiled the equipment wires and opened them again. Satyavrat Mehta kept touching the corner of the old report.” These were not merely outer details; once a criminal has been called, time itself becomes a witness.

By noon word had spread that Dhruvesh was not at home. Some said, “He has fled.” Some, “He is ill.” Some, “It is a conspiracy.” Mira stopped them all. “A crowd of guesses blocks the road of evidence. Record the absence of the absent. Verify the excuse that was given. Write the time of the phone call. Write the name of the manager who would not receive the summons.” Satyavrat Mehta smiled. “Absence is testimony too, if read correctly.”

Before evening a letter arrived from Dhruvesh’s lawyer. It said that he was facing a health emergency and wished to cooperate in the investigation, but needed security because of “public agitation.” Vineet Jha read it and said softly, “Behind the phrase ‘public agitation’ often hides fear of public testimony.” Mira wrote in the margin: “Security available; voice sample not deferred. Medical papers to be requested. Alternative place of appearance proposed.” Ananya asked, “Will the summons go again?” Mira replied, “The summons is not searching for the person; it is searching for his breath. Wherever he goes, breath goes with him.”

Abhay suggested controlled sentences for the lawful voice sample. From Madhukar’s reading, the victim’s threatening calls, the inauguration speech, and Dhruvesh’s ordinary speech they formed five new sentences. First: “Service is not a trade in fear.” Second: “First create trust.” Third: “The account of names will not fail.” Fourth: “One who does not read the paper will obey the order.” Fifth: “A crocodile’s teeth touch the body, but not the name.” Everyone fell silent at the last sentence. When Dhruvesh read it, what inner body would his voice touch? The thought raised gooseflesh.

Old Budhba's Ghost had already heard the shadow of those sentences in Channa Grove. As the first darkness of night fell, he descended from his branch and said, "Summonses do not belong only to the courts of the living. The dead send summonses too." Hulasi drew a line in the air with her handless body. The line became a sheet of paper. Letters appeared upon it: "From the breaths of Bisesar Paswan, Chhotu, Salamat, Rajnu, the unnamed widow, the woman frightened by digital terror, Nand Aaruni—and all the rest." Panidubbi made a seal from pond water. Its mark fell on the water and immediately became a ripple.

Copies of the summons were not distributed among the villagers, but its substance was read aloud. Mira explained, "Dhruvesh has not been proved guilty; he has been lawfully called to answer. He must answer for the fear spread in his name, the orders formed in his chair-room, and the similarity between his inauguration voice and the recorder voice." Some people were disappointed by this balance. They wanted revenge. But the elderly widow whose voice had trembled in the recorder said quietly, "Give me secure truth before hurried punishment. I do not want to see my fear in another wrong mouth again." Her sentence fell like cold water upon the crowd's haste.

That night fresh movement was seen at Dhruvesh's house. From a distance two vehicles went inside and one empty vehicle came out. Someone saw a number plate, someone did not. The children were not keeping watch, but the village's eyes were awake. Those who once lowered their eyes before the shine of the service centre were now counting the shadows behind that shine. A herdsman said that someone left through the small rear gate carrying a bag. Whether it held clothes or papers was unknown. Mira said, "No unverified statements. Write the time, direction, observer, distance, and light." The village was slowly learning the grammar of testimony. After the vehicle left, the smell of diesel remained in the air for a while, and the dog beside the gate sniffed the ground and kept circling one spot. The roughness of his rope still stung the herdsman's palm; he repeated what he had seen in his mind so that not one direction would reverse itself.

Meanwhile Vineet Jha sent an interim notice to the bank: monitor suspicious accounts, stop large withdrawals, and report account activity linked to the person under summons. As the bank seal fell on the paper, it gave a faint tremor as though money itself had received the news. Satyavrat Mehta said, "In searching for the face of the voice, we are reaching the pulse of money." Aaruni asked, "Are pulse and breath the same?" Satyavrat replied, "Separate in the body, together in crime. Where the breath of fear quickens, money beats there."

Late at night Abhay noticed something new. The background rumble on the recorder already contained the sound of a fan, but in one segment there was also a faint tone like a distant temple bell. Gadadhar

said that the automatic evening-worship bell in Dhruvesh's prayer room rang in that same pitch. Abhay wrote immediately: "Background similarity merits examination." Mira cautioned him: "Similarity is not proof; it is a lead." But even a lead can sometimes change the current of a river. From the sound of that one bell, a new thread opened among the upstairs room, Dhruvesh's house, and the time of the threats recorded on the device.

That night there was no kabaddi in Channa Grove, but a reading of summonses. The names of the dead were called one by one, and after each name an empty space was left in the air for Dhruvesh's breath to come and answer. "Bisesar Paswan"—the air stayed still. "Chhotu"—a dog barked far away. "Nand Aaruni"—a leaf fell. "Unnamed frightened woman"—a ripple crossed the pond. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "See, breath runs away, but it stops before a name." Hulasi added, "One without hands will summon through voice. One whose voice was taken will summon through silence."

Before dawn a second message came from Dhruvesh's lawyer: Dhruvesh was "voluntarily" considering giving a voice sample, but only at a private hospital in the city. Vineet Jha smiled. "A lawful sample will not be taken in a private hospital, but at the designated authorised place." Mira wrote the reply: "Authorised room available with medical support. Non-cooperation will be recorded. Summons remains effective." The sentence was short on paper, but its weight was like monsoon rain over the village. Dhruvesh's breath, protected by house, phone, chair, recorder, and registers, now seemed enclosed within a small legal sentence.

At day's end Ananya gathered the register and wrote: "The summons was served, but there was no appearance. Absence was recorded, but the marks of breath increased. House bell, phone tone, tyre weight, lawyer's letter, the pulse of the bank, the background prayer bell—all are making a circle around Dhruvesh." Aaruni added: "A summons is not merely paper; it is a circle." Mira lingered over the line. She understood that in the next stage the circle would tighten around the accounts.

As night fell, the sealed room of the Harihar Service Centre remained still, but the upstairs window of Dhruvesh's house lit for a moment and then went dark. From a distance it looked as though someone inside was reading papers—or burning them. No one could be certain. But Channa Grove's leaves fluttered together. Old Budhba's Ghost said softly, "If breath escapes the summons, the account will speak." Panidubbi made a round ripple on the pond like a figure in an account.

Meanwhile an old assistant of Sheetanshu, who sometimes delivered papers to the service centre at night, came quietly to Mira. His name was Mohan Paswan. "I do not want to become a criminal," he said, "but twice an envelope went through my hands. Once to Dhruvesh's house,

once to the lane behind the city bank. The envelopes were sealed. I was told only: no receipt, no memory.” His kurta carried the night’s dust and the smell of old diesel; as he held the water glass, his nails kept touching the glass with a faint sound. He could still feel the weight of each envelope in his palm—paper was light, but the names hidden inside were heavy enough to bend a shoulder. Mira did not bring him straight to the centre of the platform. “A frightened witness first needs water, a seat, and time to write.” Mohan’s statement was kept separately. The summons had now moved beyond the person into the lane of accounts.

After hearing Mohan, Satyavrat Mehta turned the pages of an old diary. In Nand Aaruni’s writing there was a line: “Where there is no receipt, let memory become the receipt.” Satyavrat read it aloud. Vineet Jha wrote: “Oral transport lead. Envelope route to be verified.” The children understood that evidence of crime is often locked not in a safe but in the memory of frightened people. Opening that memory without humiliation and without pressure was a new lesson.

Ananya opened the next page. Her hand was tired but her letters remained steady. She wrote: “The Frozen Account.” Aaruni added below: “When the road of money is closed, the voice of fear changes.” Mira extinguished the lamp. Somewhere far away a phone rang again—once, twice, three times. This time no one answered. The unanswered bell remained caught on Channa Grove’s leaves through the night, as though Dhruvesh’s breath itself were reading the summons.

Folk Song: No Receipt, No Memory

Folk Tune: Song of the Frightened Witness

Do not, O Mohan, turn fear into humiliation,

Let memory’s receipt lead us to the frozen account.

Mohan carried two envelopes along the road at night,

“No receipt, no memory”—the order fell into his ears.

One to Dhruvesh’s house, one to the lane behind the bank,

For years the memory of fear burned inside his chest.

Nand had written—where there is no receipt, memory itself is receipt,

Even a trembling witness's words can become a seed of justice.

The phone rang three times; this time no one answered,

The unanswered bell read the summons to Dhruvesh's breath.

Mohan, do not let your fear become humiliation,

With two envelopes Mohan walked the road at night,



[Philosophical Undertone—Refutation of Another Alternative View: A newly born cook belongs to the class denoted by “cook,” but a white water-lily is not a member of the class lotus. Refutation of another alternative view.]

CHAPTER 195

The Frozen Account

*Only when an account is frozen does one first understand—money too
can be afraid.*



Opening Folk Song: Money Trembles, Truth Stands

Folk Tune: Fast Account-Jhumar

Open the account, open it at first light,

Weigh trembling money against truth.

*The account trembles, coins are afraid, truth stands smiling,
The people's united questions make the tower of greed collapse.*

*If money serves, it is Lakshmi; if it deceives, it is a burden,
Honest earnings are a head of paddy; wealth of greed is worthless.*

*Open the accounts at dawn, let the windows fill with light,
Let each person receive what is theirs—that alone is justice.
Money trembles before truth; labour will not bow its head,
If the people's eyes remain awake, the dark current will stop.*

*Coins fear, pages tremble, the question stands unshaken,
Before the joined gaze of the people, the tower of greed falters.
Let each receive what is theirs—that alone is the thought.*



Freezing an account is not merely closing the door of a vault. It is the discipline of stopping the flow of crime without extinguishing a poor family's hearth; of bringing down the tower of fraudulent service while keeping an old person's pension and a student's hope safe. A wrongful freeze can itself become injustice, so every red mark requires the patience of evidence behind it.

Name, phone, thumbprint, seal, and date of withdrawal—seen separately, these are small marks. Joined together, they become the hidden pulse of money. Where a voice of fear rose, money moved from there; where money circulated, someone's name was shortened, someone's memory was turned into business.

The victims' claims register must remain separate from the criminals' accounts—within this distinction lives the compassion of justice. Surajmukhi's full name, an elderly woman's life savings, a labourer's wages, and a child's scholarship are not numbers for spectacle. One who has already been robbed must not be humiliated again in the name of proving the loss; procedure must give dignity even to tears.

The frozen account is not the end but the next threshold of water-burial. A body may sink in water, a name in forgetting; money may hide in an account, but if public memory remains awake, every current can rise again. The crocodile's teeth now gleam not on the riverbank but in circles of numbers—and the people are writing down each footprint.

At dawn the branch's iron shutter rose halfway. The computers inside were not yet on, but a queue had already formed: elderly people with pension slips, labourers with copies of identity papers, students carrying hope for scholarships, and victimised women holding deposit and withdrawal papers in trembling hands. Everyone knew that an order to freeze accounts had gone out the previous night. But which accounts—the accounts of crime or the accounts of life? At that question, people's chests were more tightly stuck than the bank shutter. The mingled smell of damp iron, old currency, and warm wires drifted outside; coughs, the rustle of slips, and the faint clink of coins blended in the queue as though money itself were waiting to hear its judgment.

Ananya wrote on the stone: "The Frozen Account." Aaruni added below: "When the road of money closes, the voice of fear changes." Mira read it and remained silent for a while. She knew that freezing an account was the beginning of justice, not its completion. Freeze the wrong account and a poor family's stove goes out; fail to freeze the right one and the snake of crime finds a new hole. So today's vigilance concerned not stone, grove, voice, or chair, but restraint in the realm of numbers.

Vineet Jha told the branch manager, "First read the list. No account is to be frozen merely because a name resembles another. Source, flow, beneficiary, signature, and phone-link must all match before freezing." Manager Manoj Mishra kept wiping sweat from his forehead. He was a bank man; paper, deposits, withdrawals, interest, and signatures were his everyday world. But today he understood that an account is not merely a balance—it can also be the pulse of someone's fear.

The first account was matched against a copy of the Blue Register. Name: Harihar Service Centre Assistance Fund. Purpose: care for the elderly, scholarships, disaster relief. Deposits: small hundreds, a thousand, five thousand. Withdrawals: large sums on the same day, split into different payments, but with the same descriptions—"special service," "necessary assistance," "publicity expense." Mira asked, "Special service for whom?" The manager was silent. Gadadhar, who until yesterday had

been opening locks, sat trembling in a bank chair today. He said softly, "Special service meant instructions from above."

The word "above" hung in the air again. Chair, voice, breath, summons—all pointed upward. Satyavrat Mehta wrote on the paper: "Above = Dhruvesh? Verification required." He did not hurry. The story wanted speed, but testimony moves slowly. The children grew irritated at such patience, yet they were gradually learning that even when the feet of justice are injured, haste only makes them slip again.

The second account was in the name of Madhukar's family. Deposits were small but frequent. Each time money first left an elderly person's account, moved into an account belonging to a member of Madhukar's family, and then became cash at night. Signatures on the bank slips often did not match. Abhay, following digital footprints, leaned over the corner of a printout and said, "This is not merely banking; this is the pocket after the voice. Behind the fear given over the phone lies this withdrawal."

A woman came forward. The register wrote her name as "Surja Devi," but she said, "My name is Surajmukhi. People call me Surja, but on paper they made me smaller." Mira immediately told the children, "Write the full name." Surajmukhi said, "I received a call saying my son would go to jail. They told me to deposit money immediately in the assistance fund. I thought the service-centre people were from my own village. I sold my goat." After her sentence, even the cash counter inside the bank seemed ashamed. A tiny fibre from the goat's old rope was still caught in the corner of her sari; unconsciously she rubbed it between her fingers, as though preserving the final warmth of the animal she had sold.

Ananya paused while writing Surajmukhi's statement. She remembered Old Budhba's Ghost saying in Channa Grove: a crocodile eats the body, not the name. Today money had been eaten, but the name had also been shortened. Surajmukhi was made "Surja," so her pain would occupy less room in an account table. In bold letters Ananya wrote: "Surajmukhi Devi, full name." Aaruni added in smaller letters: "The one whose name was cut had her money cut first."

The immediate freeze order was applied to the Harihar Service Centre Assistance Fund, accounts linked to Madhukar, Maheshwar's seal-payment account, Gadadhar's cash-withdrawal account, and not an account directly in Dhruvesh's name but accounts belonging to his trusted associates. Red marks appeared one after another in the banking system. With each one the screen flashed: "Transaction suspended." Someone in the crowd breathed with relief; someone else grew afraid. An old man asked, "Will my pension stop too?" Mira answered at once, "The victim's life money will not stop. The movement of crime will." The sentence was posted on the bank wall.

News of the freeze spread within half an hour. Phones began to ring. First came a calm, grave voice: "This action will obstruct service work." Then a hard voice: "You are attacking a charitable fund?" Then Madhukar's trembling voice: "Mira ji, there has been a mistake; open the account." Then an unknown number: "If those children write names, look into their household expenses too." Mira recorded the calls but did not answer. "When money stops, threat quickly comes in its true language," she said.

Manager Manoj Mishra's statement began. At first he kept saying, "Everything was according to rules." But when Vineet Jha showed him a slip bearing a large withdrawal signed after banking hours, his voice changed. "Sometimes a call came from above," he said. "They said it was village service work and there should be no delay." At "a call from above," Mira asked, "Did you recognise the voice?" Manoj Mishra lowered his eyes. "Not directly, but everyone said it was Dhruvesh Babu's instruction."

This was not a direct admission, but it was a thread. Satyavrat Mehta wrote: "Bank manager: pressure calls; common reference to Dhruvesh as source of direction. Confirmation required." Ananya was slightly dissatisfied. Why did even the clearest statement become "required" again? Satyavrat read her face. "Daughter," he said softly, "writing 'required' does not save the criminal; it saves justice. A line written in haste today may break in court. A line written slowly will hold."

In a small room behind the bank they found a bundle of old cash-withdrawal slips. Some bore thumbprints, some forged-looking copies of signatures, some women's names although men had taken the money. One slip read: "Nand Aaruni Report Assistance." Mira started. "What sort of payment is this?" Gadadhar said, "They said it was for gathering documents of the old bridge victims. In fact the money went upward." Silence fell like the silence during the recorder hearing. Nand's name had been stolen again—the memory of a dead witness had been turned into a road for money.

Aaruni picked up the slip. His hand trembled. The name "Nand Aaruni" rang within him like a home. It seemed as though a crocodile had come not from the river but from a bank slip to chew on an ancestor's name. Ananya gently took the slip from him and placed it in an envelope. "The name will survive," she said. Aaruni only nodded. Sometimes saving a name is harder than crying.

By afternoon five accounts had been frozen, two were under partial examination, three under immediate monitoring, and one account—Dhruvesh's private research trust—remained disputed. A lawyer's letter arrived: "This trust is independent and has no relation to the service centre." Abhay checked the system. The recorder had been purchased from this trust, phone services had been paid from it, and it had paid the

bill for the city guesthouse where Madhukar's mobile had remained all night. Vineet Jha did not smile. He only said, "Independence on paper, dependence in transactions."

The crowd grew outside the bank. People wanted to know how much money had been found, who had been caught, how much would return. Mira came out and said clearly, "Frozen money is not justice; it is only a dam across a flowing crime. Any recovered money will return only after lawful identification of victims, examination of claims, and a court order. No one should expect money to be distributed today." There was disappointment in the crowd, but also trust. People wanted an immediate miracle, but miracles often open the door to a new fraud.

Surajmukhi Devi came forward again. "When will I get my money?" The question was direct. Mira met her eyes. "I will not sell you a date. I will write the process. Your claim will be the first line in the register today." Surajmukhi watched her for a long time, then said, "Do not sell dates—I like that." She pressed her thumbprint. This time the mark was not submission but resistance.

By evening a map of the accounts had been drawn: one line from village to bank, bank to service centre, service centre to Dhruvesh's trust, trust to a city equipment shop, equipment to the audio recorder, recorder to the phone, phone to fear, fear back to the poor person's account. A circle. Like the kabaddi of Channa Grove, but with numbers as the field. Looking at the map, Aaruni said, "This is not an account; it is a cycle of fear." Satyavrat added, "And to stop a cycle, one account is not enough; the whole flow must stop." When the old bundle of slips was opened, the smell of dampness, dust, and dried ink rose from it; the page edges felt gritty against the fingers, as though names suppressed for years were asking for their voices back.

Before the Harihar Service Centre a group began shouting angrily: "Save the service!" At first people were confused. The centre was supposed to serve the elderly and students; hearing "save the service" because its accounts had been frozen made it hard for many to distinguish service from crime. Mira looked toward the crowd and said, "A service that dies when an account is frozen was not service—it was business." The sentence flew like an arrow. Some slogans fell silent. Some people slowly moved aside. Only two or three faces remained hard—on those faces rested Dhruvesh's invisible hand.

At night an empty ledger was placed beneath Channa Grove. It was not the bank's ledger but the children's. On the first page Ananya wrote: "Frozen Account: victims' claims register separate; criminal accounts separate." Hulasi saw it and smiled. "When I had no hands, seeing thumbprints hurt me. Today a thumbprint has become a weapon." Panidubbi touched the ledger's corner with pond water, yet the page did

not become wet. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "The flow of money has been stopped, but water-burial is not yet understood."

Everyone fell silent at that sentence. "Water-burial" had begun as a word from a distant bridge, yet now it echoed inside a bank and in the ring of a phone. Bisesar's body went into the Ganges; Surajmukhi's goat became money and went into an account; the elderly woman's voice went into the recorder; Nand's report went into a withdrawal slip—the same action in every case: a living memory was made to sink into some current. The crocodile was sometimes in the river, sometimes in an account, sometimes in a voice, sometimes in a chair.

Old Budhba's Ghost gave no verdict that night. He asked only that the names be read: Surajmukhi Devi; the unnamed frightened woman; Nand Aaruni; Bisesar Paswan; Chhotu, whose real name remained incomplete; the elderly woman whose confession had been hidden in the recorder; bank manager Manoj, who stayed silent under pressure; Gadadhar, who kept opening locks; Madhukar, who became the voice; Maheshwar, who became the seal; and Dhruvesh, who hid as breath. After each name, an empty space. In that emptiness no account number breathed—only a soul.

At midnight news came from the city: two additional accounts of Dhruvesh's research trust had been found elsewhere. One used a changed name; the other listed its purpose as "Preservation of Public Memory." Ananya flared at the phrase. "Preservation of Public Memory! They steal people's memories and write 'preservation.'" Mira calmed her. "Keep the anger, but write the line cleanly." Ananya wrote: "Account titled 'Preservation of Public Memory' under examination." Her letters were steady, but the ink was dark.

Before dawn the phone rang again. This time the number belonged to the research trust office. No person spoke; a machine voice said, "For error correction, clarify the status of the account." Mira recorded it. Abhay said, "The voice is synthetic, but there is breathing behind it." Everyone fell completely silent. Whether the breath was Dhruvesh's or someone else's could not yet be said. But summons, account, voice, and face had become tied to one another.

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the final note of the day: "Account restraint initiated. Financial flows among the service fund, linked family accounts, seal payments, cash withdrawals, research trust, and secret 'Preservation of Public Memory' accounts are established/under examination. Victim claims register kept separately. Care required so that wrongful freezing does not obstruct life-sustaining funds. Dhruvesh's direct name remains limited in the principal accounts, but command links, legal objection, voice similarity, and financial flow point in his direction. Next stage: legal and public reading of submerged memory and the meaning of water-burial."

Before sunrise dew gathered on Channa Grove's leaves. Panidubbi placed one drop on the ledger. The drop stayed round and refused to soak into the page. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "See, water refuses to sink into paper." Hulasi whispered, "Then how does water-burial happen?" Old Budhba's Ghost replied, "When it is not water but forgetting that makes one sink." Ananya shuddered at the sentence.

Ananya opened a page and wrote: "The Meaning of Water-Burial." Aaruni added below: "The one who sank in water lost the body; the one who sank in forgetting lost the name. Now the names will rise." Mira extinguished the lamp. The frozen bank accounts stayed closed through the night, but on Channa Grove's leaves the account of names opened. The road of money had stopped, and the story now turned toward deeper water—the water where the first splash had been heard, and where the first light of the ending was preparing to arrive.

Folk Song: Money Too Was Afraid

Folk Tune: Account-Jhumar

Be afraid, O money, grown fat on tears—be afraid,

Return every stolen share to the victim's home.

The account was frozen; for the first time money's breath caught,

Service fund, seal-payment, secret trust—all trembled.

Let no victim's life money be frozen by mistake,

*Let justice's hand be hard, but never extinguish the poor person's
hearth.*

A drop of dew refused to sink into the page,

Old Budhba said—forgetting is the true current of water.

The body went into water; the name died when forgotten,

In the night of frozen accounts, the ledger of names opened.

Money grown fat on tears, now be afraid,

Never let the victim's life money be frozen by mistake.

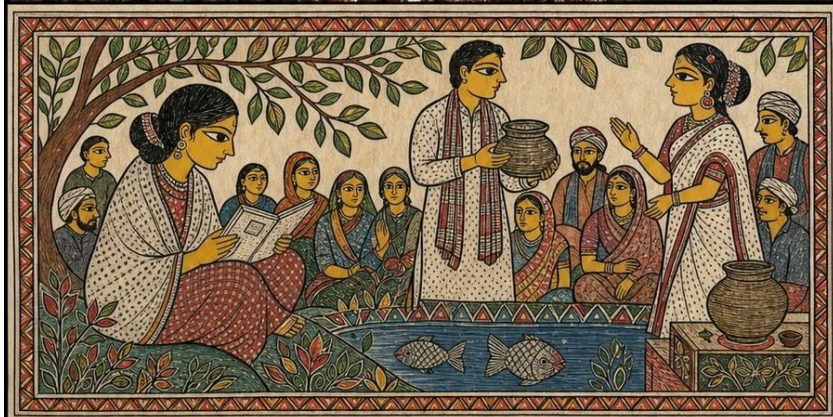


*[Philosophical Undertone—The Nature of Secondary Signification:
Conclusion. A traveller related his experience. There is no over-extension in
the genitive relation, because “the king’s relation” is not present in the king as
an absence; the individual king and the relation-to-the-king are distinct
entities. This distinction shows how a profound epistemic process continues
within even a small event of ordinary life. The nature of secondary
signification—conclusion.]*

CHAPTER 196

The Meaning of Water-Burial

Water does not know the meaning of water-burial—the name does.



Opening Folk Song: The Gamchha Became a Flag

Folk Tune: Traveller's Auspicious Song

Fly, O gamchha, torn though you are, fly,

Become the flag of labour, memory, and courage.

The torn gamchha in the hand is no longer a sign of defeat,

It is no small flag of labour, memory, and courage.

Sister will join corner to corner, stitch by stitch,

And write a new history in the colours of labourers' names.

When the wind catches it, the gamchha says—the road is open still,

The throat that was cut off has flowered again.

When torn cloth becomes a flag, the village lifts its head,

The red-ochre colour of memory points toward justice.

Sister joins corner to corner; every stitch becomes a song,

A new custom dyed in the colours of labourers' names.

*When wind touches the gamchha, it speaks—the road is open, the road
is open,*

The severed throat flowers again; the village's head shines.



Water is not the criminal; water simply carries away whatever it receives. The true force of drowning is the system that, after the body is gone, also takes away the name; that writes a labourer as absent, turns a woman's crying into family shame, and converts an old person's trust into numbers. Water-burial becomes deepest when even those standing on the bank remain silent.

Gamchha... bowl... leaf... register... The torn gamchha is not a sign of defeat but a flag of surviving memory. When water from the village well, the Kamla-Balan, and the Ganges comes together in a bronze bowl, it is

not three rivers but three kinds of testimony sitting together—the death suppressed inside the home, the erosion of field and soil, and the bodies of labourers drowned beneath the bridge. The full names written on leaves give meaning to this water.

Bringing someone up is not merely reading a name aloud. The one whose land was erased must regain rights; the one whose voice was bought must regain the throat; the one whose account was looted must regain economic autonomy; the one whose trust was burned must regain social dignity. All must again be given a place among the people. If justice looks only at the criminal's face, the victim once again becomes merely an instrument of the story.

From the first splash to the frozen account, the story has turned like a circle, but this turning is not going backward. When it returns to the beginning of the wound and writes its name, water-burial becomes water-unveiling. Let what sank in water rise in memory; let public voices raise what sank in forgetting—from this vigil is born the first light of the ending.

When the first light of dawn fell on the leaves, the drops of dew no longer seemed ordinary. Each drop appeared to be saying something from within, but the voice came not from water, but from names. The smells of wet earth, green leaves, and the mustard-oil lamp that had burned all night mixed in the air. Far away the bank's iron shutter was closed, yet the dripping from the leaves sounded as though every frozen number were asking for the buried name within it to be returned. Sitting beside the stone, Ananya kept reading the night's final line: "The one who sank in water lost the body; the one who sank in forgetting lost the name." For the first time she understood that the word water-burial was as deep in memory and the darkness of paper as it was in water.

Aaruni brought an empty brass *lota*. It belonged neither to the village well, nor to the Kamla-Balan, nor to the Ganges; it was a symbol of all three waters. Mira said, "Before filling this *lota*, understand that we are going to fill not water but meaning." The people fell silent. Those who yesterday had looked at bank windows, seals, accounts, withdrawals, orders, and numbers suddenly stood before water and felt uneasy. The language of money frightens people; the language of water draws them inward.

The son of the old boatman Fakira Sahni, now himself an old man with a wrinkled face, came forward. In his hands was an old bronze bowl. "My father used to say, a crocodile eats the body, not the name. As a child I did not understand. Today I do. Even when the body goes into water, the name remains caught on the bank. But when the name is cut from paper, swallowed by a register, hidden in a bank account, altered in a voice sample—where does the name find a bank then?" At the question the leaves moved once.

Mira poured the first drop of water into his bowl. It had been brought from the village well. Hulasi stood like darkness in the direction of that well. Mira said, "This water belongs to all who died inside their homes, and whose deaths were suppressed beneath family shame, fear of caste, women's silence, or the humiliation of papers." The bowl trembled slightly. Ananya saw the eyes of many women opening and closing on the water's surface. No name was spoken, but the weight of silence descended into the water.

Aaruni poured the second drop—from the Kamla-Balan. "This water belongs to those fields whose boundaries the river swallowed and paper refused to recognise; to farmers who ate date after date for years in court verandas; to families whose land survived in the register but not in their stomachs." A fine line of sand rose in the water. On the sand a small footprint appeared and then was erased. The old litigant who had spoken of a twenty-three-year case quietly wiped his tears.

Devika poured the third drop—the water of the Ganges. This water had not come easily; within it lived the memory of Nand Aaruni's old torn gamchha. Devika said, "This water belongs to Bisesar Paswan, Salamat Ansari, Chhotu—whose real name is still being sought—and all those labourers whose bodies went among the crocodiles and were written as absent in the report." The water suddenly became heavy. The old boatman holding the bowl began to tremble.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped slowly forward. In his hand was a copy of Nand Aaruni's diary. He opened the page that read: "A crocodile eats the body, not the name." He stopped after reading the line. His voice roughened. For a long time Satyavrat had spoken in the language of paper; today his throat searched for the language of water. "The meaning of this line is changing today," he said. "At first it was the truth of the river. Now it is the sentence of justice for the whole story. If the body is gone, save the name. If the name was suppressed, save the voice. If the voice was bought, save the breath. If the breath escaped the summons, make the account speak."

Dhruvesh's name rose like a whisper in the crowd, but Mira raised a hand and stopped it. "Today water-burial is not Dhruvesh's verdict," she said. "Today is the consecration of meaning. The criminal's name must be written, but the victims' names rise first. If we focus only on the criminal, the dead will again become instruments. The first rule of justice: bring up the one who was made to sink." At this sentence Ananya opened a new page in the register: "Names Brought Up."

The first name written was Bisesar Paswan. Fakira Sahni's son held the bowl forward. A faint whirl formed on the surface of the Ganges water, as though someone were waving a hand for the last time. Second name—Salamat Ansari. Third—Gopi Mahto. Fourth—Rajnu Mandal. At the fifth place Ananya stopped. Chhotu. His real name had still not

been found. Mira said, "Leave an empty place. An empty place is testimony too." The fifth line in the register was left blank, and the blank began to shine more fiercely than all the names.

The children were told the story again—the kabaddi of Channa Grove, Old Budhba's Ghost, Hulasi, Panidubbi, the splash at the bridge, Nand's diary, the gamchha found by Ba, and Fakira Sahni's sentence. It seemed that the story was turning not toward the end but toward the beginning. But this return was not retreat; it was a return to the place where the wound began. If the beginning of the wound is not found, treatment cannot have meaning.

Aaruni drew a line on the stone. At one end he wrote: "Splash." At the other: "Frozen Account." In the middle: "Name." He said, "Look. Water-burial was first a splash. Then it became an 'absent' report. Then a date. Then paper. Then voice. Then account. But inside every form the name kept trying to survive. The story is the journey of that name." The people kept looking at the stone. For some, the whole story appeared for the first time as one line.

Mira silently drew a second line beneath it. At one end she wrote: "Shame." At the other: "Testimony." In the middle: "Woman's Throat." She said, "Water-burial happened not only at the bridge. It happened inside homes too—when a woman's crying was suppressed in the name of family honour, when a widow's land was called uncertain, when an elderly woman's pension dependence was used to steal her signature, when the service centre became a factory of fear in the name of compassion. Where was the water in these? There was no water—there was silence. But silence can drown too."

Devika drew a third line: "Voice" at one end, "Face" at the other, "Breath" in the middle. "The digital crocodile does not enter water," she said. "It lives in the ring of the phone, in the voice of a forged order, in the app someone is made to download, in bank numbers, and in the fear that locks a person alone in a room. This too is water-burial—the body is alive, but name, trust, sleep, and reputation are drowned." The students kept writing notes on the line for a long time.

Then an elderly woman who had stood trembling in the bank queue the previous day came forward. She held a small box. "This does not contain my son's ashes. It contains the ashes of the currency notes I burned out of fear, so my family would not ask where the money had gone. The man on the phone told me: your son will go to jail. That night I sold my jewellery. My son was safe, but my trust died. These are the ashes of trust." Around the lid clung the bitter smell of burnt paper and metal; her fingers trembled as though the night's phone were still ringing in her palm. She held the box against her chest; within the ash the yellow shine of the sold jewellery seemed still to glimmer with her tears. Mira did not open it. "We will not throw the ashes of trust into the water. We will

keep them beside the register. What burns leaves smoke, and smoke too is testimony.”

The shadow of Channa Grove lengthened. The black ghosts sat in a circle. The white spirits stood today not on branches but behind the people, as though the dead were supporting the living. Old Budhba’s Ghost came down beside the bowl. Some saw him, some did not. Suddenly the water opened in the middle. Very old scenes appeared within it—the river’s splash, a labourer’s hand, the gamchha found by Ba, the court veranda, the scrap sack, the Blue Register, Dhruvesh’s empty chair, the frozen account, and Ananya’s register. All the scenes dissolved into a single word: “Up.”

Ananya wrote that word: “Up.” Aaruni asked, “Up what?” Ananya answered, “Everything.” Mira smiled, but her eyes were wet. “Yes. Everything that was made to sink—the body, the name, the voice, the soil, trust, pension, testimony, a child’s real name—bring it all up.” Someone in the crowd almost began to clap, then stopped. This was not a moment for applause; it was a moment for lifting.

Vineet Jha wrote in legal language: “Water-burial: not merely physical death; the organised suppression of memory, identity, records, economic autonomy, social dignity, and voice. Restoration at every level is essential in judicial proceedings.” He startled at his own words. This definition might not appear in a law book, but today in the people’s court it became a provision. Satyavrat Mehta looked at it and said, “Law sometimes walks behind the sorrow of the people. Today sorrow is ahead; law will follow.”

In the afternoon the bowl was placed at the root of Channa Grove. No one could drink the water; it was not consecrated offering, but evidence. The children began writing names on individual leaves and placing them around the bowl. Known names were written in full. For an unknown name, a blank leaf. For a woman who did not wish to speak, the leaf was turned face down. For a victim of digital fraud afraid of social shame, only one dot was marked on the leaf. Mira said, “A dot is the beginning of a name, not its end.”

At that moment news came from Dhruvesh’s house—he was again avoiding the authorised sample, while one of his associates had quietly left the city. Abhay said, “The circle is tightening.” Mira answered, “It will tighten, but not around him today. Today let those who sank be brought up.” The restraint carried the dignity of the story. Anger toward the criminal was necessary, but attention to the dead was more necessary.

By evening, the waters from all three sources, dew, the moisture of tears, and the shadow of the ashes of trust had mingled in the bowl. The water was not muddy; it became strangely bright, as though light had dissolved into darkness. The cold, glass-like smells of wet leaves, ash, and

river spread around; the last red light of evening trembled on the bowl's surface. The edges of blank leaves placed nearby shook in the wind, yet no leaf fell into the bowl—as though names stood waiting in the discipline of their own turn. Panidubbi rose from the pond water and looked toward it. Hulasi whispered from the direction of the well: “The drowned names are rising.” Old Budhba's Ghost said, “You are no longer performing water-burial. You are performing water-unveiling.”

Ananya started at the phrase. Water-unveiling. A word that reversed water-burial. Let the water itself open what was pressed beneath water. Let memory itself call what sank into forgetting. Let the register turn what became scrap paper back into a name. Let what wanders as a bank number become a victim's right. This was preparation for the ending—not by weeping and weeping, but by lifting and lifting.

After night fell, the people slowly returned home, but the bowl remained at the roots. Ananya, Aaruni, Mira, Devika, Satyavrat, Vineet, and Abhay stayed to the end. No one spoke of future plans. No one spoke of arrest, trial, media, or speeches. They simply looked into the water. That night the sound came again within it—kabaddi... kabaddi... kabaddi... then the voice changed—name... name... name.

Ananya said softly, “We have turned the story all the way back to the beginning.” Satyavrat Mehta replied, “No, daughter. We have brought the beginning all the way to justice.” At that sentence Mira wept openly for the first time. Her crying made no noise; it fell into the bowl as one drop. The water trembled, and from within emerged the corner of the torn gamchha—in the colour made by paper soaked in water, blood dried in sunlight, and dust from a labourer's palm.

Aaruni wrote the final line in the register: “Water-burial is not when water carries away the body; water-burial is when the name is cut away from the people's memory. Today the first name rose.” Channa Grove's leaves bent together, as though laying hands on the heads of all who had drowned.

The next page opened. Its heading seemed to descend by itself: “Names Raised Above.” Aaruni wrote beneath it: “When a name rises above the water, the criminal's earth begins to tremble.” The bowl remained at the roots through the night. Far away the Ganges sounded as though the first splash of the beginning were finally receiving the answer of the end.

Folk Song: The Torn Gamchha Rose Again

Folk Tune: Great-Compassion Sama-Daun

Return them, O Ganges—you kept the bodies, now return the names,

Bring every mother's child into the corner of the torn gamchha.

In the water of the bowl the torn gamchha rose again,

Labourers' dust, dried blood, wet paper fell together.

For the first time Mira wept openly in silence,

One drop fell into the water—the lament of a hundred names.

Water-burial is not merely the drowning of a body,

The greatest loss is cutting a name from the people's memory.

Channa Grove's leaves bent over the drowned heads,

The first splash received the answer of the ending.

O Ganges, you kept the bodies—now return the names,

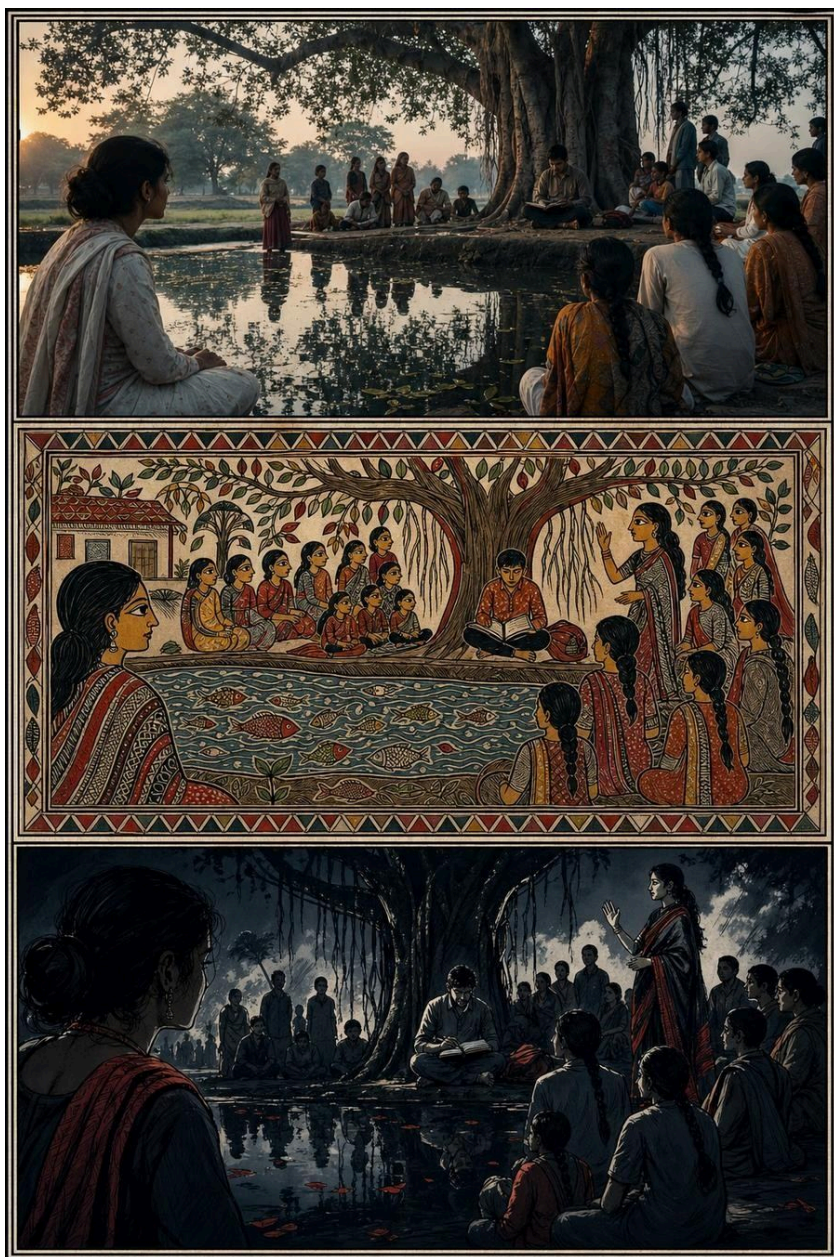


[*Philosophical Undertone—Refutation of the Earlier View: A traveller related his experience. In “feed the people staying in the pavilion,” the conventional meaning of “pavilion” is a particular building. Although an etymological analysis of its parts could yield another meaning—“one who drinks manda”—ordinary usage conveys the people located in the building through convention and secondary signification. This distinction shows how a profound epistemic process continues within even a small event of ordinary life. Refutation of the earlier view.*]

CHAPTER 197

Names Raised Above

*When drowned names rise, it is not the water that trembles—the bank
trembles.*



Opening folk song: Lamps of Names on the Bank

Folk tune: Chhath Arghya Tune

Offer the arghya, offer it to the drowned names,

Set rows of lamps all along the banks.

*The trembling bank will steady when we place the lamps,
With honour for the drowned names, we shall raise the rising sun.
An offering in water, a vow in earth, truth upon the tongue,
Families standing side by side, the circle of fear will break.*

*The eastern line has reddened; a new day is coming,
Every grain of the bank says—justice is awakening.
Do not float away the lamp of a name; cradle it in your palm,
With the sun on the eastern horizon, raise a new trust.*

*Standing waist-deep in water, the winnowing tray of truth in hand,
See the setting and the rising sun as one and the same.
With families in a line, fear breaks circle after circle,
With the red of the east, a new day of justice breaks.*



Raising a name is not a spectacle. The consent of the wounded is the first offering; the silence of a silent household is also worthy of respect. If the village becomes a crowd gathered to watch grief, the drowning begins again. But when children put down their pencils and learn to listen, justice is born in conduct before it is born on paper.

An incomplete name... a mother's speech... letters on a leaf... Chhotu, as he was called at home, had been marked absent where his name should have stood in the register. When the full name leaves his mother's mouth, it is not the surface of the water that moves but years of lies.

When household memory joins paper, time, place, and witnesses, the bank finds its bearings again.

Waiting, too, needs a home. To throw an unconfirmed name into a sack of scrap is a second water-burial; to place it in a basket of waiting and write “search continuing” is human dignity. If the full name cannot be found, one must not supply a false one; incompleteness itself must be preserved as truth. Through this restraint a name rises; the story is not decorated.

When a name rises from the water and sets foot upon the earth, the fugitive’s ground begins to tremble. Seal, account, breath, date, and raw path all become footprints. Yet this is not the moment for a victory cry. A name raised up makes the living into watchkeepers. The next threshold is the criminal’s earth, where justice must arrive not as fire, but as a lamp.

At dawn the first bird called, yet no ripple rose in the bowl of water; instead the water grew still, as if water itself had put an ear to the tree to hear the voice within it. The scents of dew-wet earth, stale mustard-oil lamps, and green raw leaves mingled in the air; within that smell the questions of the night were still awake. Ananya arrived first. It seemed to her that what floated on the surface was not the last light of the moon but letters. Aruni came behind her, opened the register without speaking, and sat down. On that day’s page, written the previous evening, were the words: “Names Raised Above.” Now the title was no longer a story; it had become work.

Meera raised her hand and stopped everyone. “Whatever rises today will not be turned into a spectacle. Raising a name does not mean reopening the wound of a body. Only the names whose families consent will be read publicly. If a family remains silent, its silence too will be honoured.” Hearing this, the children set down their pencils. The first lesson of justice did not begin with paper; it began with consent.

The leaves placed around the bowl the previous day were wet with dew. On some, written names had bled outward; on others the letters had grown darker. On one leaf only “Chho” remained. On another, “tu.” A third bore, in someone’s trembling hand, “son of the Musahar woman.” Aruni placed the leaves together. “This first name will not remain incomplete,” he said.

Satyavrat Mehta took from his bag an old copy from the bridge construction records, reconstructed from Nand Aruni’s diary. The page had blackened, but in one corner, in the row for a child labourer, crooked letters remained: “Shiv... Lal.” The age-at-birth field said twenty-eight, yet in the remarks someone had very faintly written “Chhotu” and then struck it out. Vineet Jha matched it with an image of the city labour register. The village name was wrong there, the father’s name incomplete, but the mother’s name was clear—Phoolkali.

An old woman came forward from behind the tree. People made way for her. Her body looked so light it seemed years of waiting had eaten the flesh from within. In the fold of her sari clung the stale smell of incense, riverbank earth, and old oil; the dust on her feet showed that she had walked a long distance. Her breath came in short strokes, but her gaze remained fixed on the bowl. "I am Phoolkali," she said. Her voice held neither anger nor pleading, only the rasp of dried water. Meera went to her. "If you wish, the name can be read publicly." Phoolkali looked at the bowl for a long time, then said, "My son did not run away. Read only that."

Ananya wrote on the page: "Shivlal, alias Chhotu, mother Phoolkali, dead/missing at the bridge worksite, recorded as absent in the register." As she wrote the word "absent," her pencil broke. Aruni gave her another, but with the broken point itself Ananya struck through "absent." Beneath it she wrote: "Taken into the water; name present."

As soon as the line was read, the leaves of Channa Grove trembled together once. Someone said the wind had come. Someone said it was the river's breath. But Phoolkali knew it was Chhotu's answer. She knelt beside the bowl but did not touch the water. She merely bowed her head. "After so many years, your name has come home, son." Something broke inside everyone at those words, yet no wail rose. The village was learning that grief, too, has a discipline.

Old Budhba's Ghost appeared on the branch like a faint glow. Hulasi rose from the direction of the well. Panidubbi left the pond water and sat in the shade of the tree. In the council of the dead, the living were reading names. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "Once a name has been matched by a mother's mouth, no register can ever lose it again."

After that first name, the leaves began to open. Bisesar Paswan's name was already complete, but his father's name differed in two registers. Satyavrat said, "Add family testimony in order to complete the name." Bisesar's grandson, now a young man, said, "Grandfather was Bisesar in the village and Bisesaru on paper. But Mother used to say Bisesar Paswan." Ananya wrote: "Name stabilized according to maternal memory."

A few people almost laughed, because in the world of paper it seemed strange to treat a mother's memory as evidence. Meera turned her gaze toward the laughter. "When paper has written someone wrongly, living memory can also help correct it, provided it agrees with available documents, place, time, and witnesses." Vineet immediately added, "Make separate columns—name on paper, name at home, stabilized name." The children began drawing a new table. The language of justice was learning from the village tongue.

Surajmukhi Devi came forward. Her case concerned money, a goat, and fraud, not death. Yet she said, "Raise my name too. My name became

a road for crime in the accounts. People said I had eaten the money. I did not.” Ananya opened a page titled “Name-Correction List.” First line: Rani Devi. Second: Rani Kumari. Third: Surajmukhi Devi. Meera said, “The names of the dead will rise, and the names of the living will be cleansed as well. These are not separate tasks.”

The water in the bowl slowly became not clearer, but denser. Whenever a name was read, for a moment an odd droplet formed on the surface, then broke like dew. Aruni resisted the temptation to record the sight as a miracle. He wrote: “During collective witness-reading, attention was concentrated on the water. Visual experiences varied; the principal event was confirmation of names.” Meera read the line and smiled. “Good. Preserve faith, but do not make evidence into jewellery.”

By noon word came that unease was growing at Dhruvesh’s house. His lawyer said “emotional pressure” was being created in the village. Meera drafted a reply: “Not emotional pressure; public restoration of suppressed names. The process of accusation is proceeding separately.” Abhay added, “Anyone who erased names is bound to feel pressure when they return.” Meera stopped him. “Not on paper. The sentence of justice must be a lamp, not a fire.”

An old page bearing Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal was shown again. It contained a promise of assistance to the family of a dead labourer, but the signature space was blank. Traces of the money appeared later in the accounts, yet not a grain reached the family. Phoolkali looked at the page and asked, “Why is my thumbprint not here?” Vineet replied, “Because you were never allowed to reach the paper.” Phoolkali laughed—a laugh more terrible than weeping. “My son in the water, the paper above; now the paper has come down.”

The shade of Channa Grove was lengthening. In the midst of the name-reading a child asked, “What if some name is never found in full?” Satyavrat Mehta thought for a long time. “Then preserve the incomplete name as incomplete. To give a false full name would be another killing.” Hearing this, Ananya crossed out “unknown” and wrote: “Name incomplete; search continuing.” It did not seem to her a small change. It was a correction to an entire age.

Aruni placed an empty platter behind the bowl. Every leaf bearing a confirmed name went onto that platter; leaves with unconfirmed names went into a separate bamboo basket. Devika tied a red thread around it. “This is the waiting basket.” Someone joked, “A waiting basket?” Devika answered firmly, “Yes, because waiting needs a home too. It will not live in a scrap sack.” Once again the humiliation of the scrap sack came to mind.

Toward evening, a message came from Vineet’s friend in the city. In an old metal box at the labour department, an image had been found of a

water-damaged register. The names were blurred, but beside five wage-payment entries stood the same signature—the clerk's. There were no thumbprints of the dead. Vineet whispered, "Someone drew the workers' wages even after their deaths." Abhay's fist tightened. Meera said, "Do not panic. This is the next piece of evidence. Do not stop today's name-reading."

Hearing this, Phoolkali rose silently. With the edge of her sari she lifted some earth and placed it beside the bowl. "The name came from the water. Now let it stand on the earth." In that simple act lay the meaning of the whole novel. Water-burial had been a name buried in water; a name raised above was setting foot on earth again. It seemed as if the roots of Channa Grove drank in the soil.

For the first time that night, the dark ghosts and the pale spirits stood facing each other without kabaddi. From the dark ghosts fell not darkness, but exhaustion. From the pale spirits fell not light, but remorse. Old Budhba's Ghost said, "Raising a name does not free the dead; it begins the work of the living." Panidubbi slowly circled the bowl, as if guarding the water had become her duty.

In the first watch of the night, the upper window of Dhruvesh's house lit up again. This time the light did not remain steady; shadows could be seen hurrying inside. Someone said documents were being bundled. Someone said phones were being changed. Someone said preparations were being made to flee to the city. Meera stopped everyone from writing conjecture. "Write what was seen, not what was imagined." Ananya wrote: "Unusual movement at the upper window; time—first watch of night." Nothing more.

For security, Abhay placed two young men at a distance to observe, but said clearly, "No chase. No scuffle. If he runs, the road will tell us. We will not break procedure in the temptation to catch him." Several young men in the village were disappointed. But Satyavrat Mehta said, "Justice that wins by breaking procedure is not victory; it is the seed of the next injustice." The sentence hung in the air all night.

At the final hour of the name-reading, Ananya opened a blank page in the register. Before her were the platter of confirmed names, the waiting basket, the name-correction list, the bowl of water, the heap of earth, and a copy of the old seal. She wrote: "Today the first list of names raised above was made. Death, disappearance, fraud, humiliation, and false criminalization are all entered in separate sections." Aruni added: "When a name rises, crime no longer remains merely a story; it becomes line, date, account, seal, breath, and memory, and reaches the criminal's threshold."

Meera laid her hand on that line. "You have all begun writing the ending," she said. "Be careful. Let the ending be emotional, but not

closed. A survivor's life is not an epilogue." Ananya bowed her head. She understood that now there would be less victory-cry and more responsibility. This story would not end by destroying the criminal; it would leave people as guardians of names.

Before leaving, Phoolkali asked to lift Chhotu's leaf. Meera asked, "Take it home?" "No," she said. "If I keep it at home, I will weep alone again. Keep it here, so everyone will call him by name." The leaf remained on the platter. Phoolkali went home empty-handed, yet those hands were not empty; in her gait was the weight known only to a mother who has received back a name.

The night deepened. No letters were now visible in the bowl, but the leaves laid around it seemed to gleam faintly. Old Budhba's Ghost whispered from the branch, "The names have risen. Now the earth will tremble." Hulasi answered, "Not the earth—the chair of the one who sat upon it." The pale spirits bent toward the leaves. The dark ghosts remained silent.

At that moment came the sound of a vehicle moving from the direction of the distant city. Such a loud sound was unusual at night. The sharp smell of diesel spread through the air, the rasp of tyres on the raw road reached the leaves of the grove, and once, far in the darkness, came the clang of metal striking metal. The young men keeping watch sent word: the rear gate of Dhruvesh's house had opened, an iron chest had been loaded into a vehicle, and instead of taking the main road the vehicle had turned onto the dirt track. Meera closed her eyes. "No more conjecture. Now comes the sequence of action." Abhay stood. Satyavrat Mehta gathered the register.

Ananya opened the next page. Her hand trembled, but the letters came down clearly: "The Criminal's Earth." Beneath it Aruni wrote: "When a name rises from the water and stands upon earth, the fugitive's feet become witnesses themselves." The bowl remained at the roots, the leaves on the platter, the waiting basket in the bamboo shade, and Channa Grove stayed awake all night.

Folk song: The Bank Began to Tremble

Folk tune: Song of the Risen Name

The name has risen, the drowned name has risen,

For the house left desolate, the door of justice has opened.

*The drowned name rose above; the water remained still,
The legs of the chair that served as crime's seat began to tremble.*

*The platter of leaves shone; the letters in the bowl slept,
Old Budhba said—the name rose, the rule of shadow wept.*

Toward the city, an iron chest fled in the night,

The moment it took the dirt track, the watchkeepers woke.

*No conjecture now; the sequence of action will begin,
Once the name stands on earth, the fugitive's feet can be read.*

Name risen above, shake the fear from the bank,

For the house left desolate, open the door of justice.

The platter of leaves shone; the letters in the bowl slept.

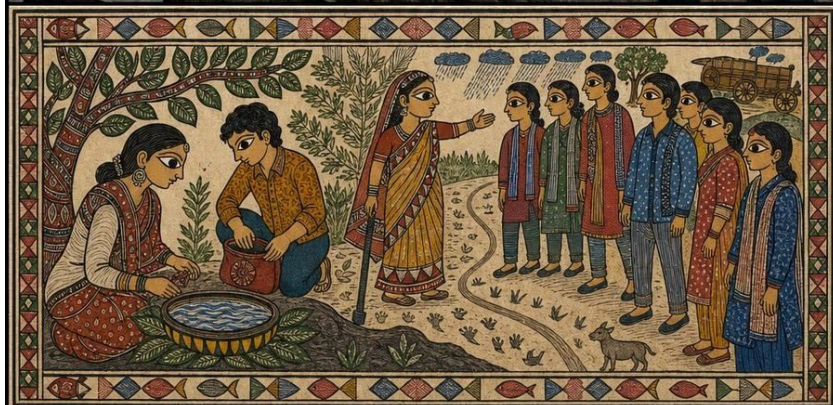


[Philosophical undertone—answer of the eastern grammarians: In “Feed the people in the pavilion,” the compositional meaning “one who drinks manda” is first abandoned and the conventional meaning “pavilion/house” of the compound is taken. This is the answer of the eastern grammarians.]

CHAPTER 198

The Criminal's Earth

*The criminal's earth is not separate earth—the soil is the same; only
the footprints are different.*



Opening folk song: The Trail of the Shoe

Folk tune: Footprint Batgabani

Come, companions, let us walk the trail of the shoe,

From the marks left behind, read the road ahead.

*A shoe left in the soil is not the end of the road,
From that place the trail will rise; courage will not diminish.
One foot will become a witness, the other will go toward justice,
Dust-grey marks will join to make a map of truth.*

*The one who fled may go far; the marks will remain here,
The earth will faithfully tell what it saw with its own eyes.
Along the trail of the shoe, people will walk together,
On the criminal's earth, the rice of justice will grow.*

*What the earth saw with its own eyes, it does not forget,
It joins the dusty prints and makes the map clear.
Let the fugitive run far; the marks remain here,
Behind the people's steps, the current of justice flows.*



A shoe is a covering; the foot is habit. Shoes can be changed, vehicles can be changed, roads can be diverted; but a hurried step reveals its gait, weight, and direction. The criminal's earth awakens when people put aside anger, keep their distance, record measurements, and preserve evidence instead of seeking revenge.

Earth... dust... dew... testimony... In the night's darkness the iron chest, the sunken wheel, and the bare foot appear to be separate objects; at dawn they become words in the same sentence. But that sentence must be read carefully. If a crowd tramples even one letter, falsehood finds

another chance; if restraint stands as a boundary, the footprint can speak its whole language.

Humiliating the accused is not justice. If a shoe sticks in the soil, restrain laughter; do not stare at the bare foot, look at the mark. Such public decency prevents evidence from becoming revenge. Whether guilt is proved is the law's work; the earth's work is only to record how someone walked. The people's work is not to spoil that record.

When a name raised above sets foot on earth, the criminal's ground begins to tremble. The chest goes to the outpost, seals are applied, the register opens; yet true morning comes only when the victim's name and the accused person's footprints are entered in the same account without noise. Ahead lies Morning Inside the Chest, where the lid will open in the hands of witnesses and the papers will tell whose weight the earth carried through the night.

The water in the bowl at the roots of Channa Grove trembled once, then became still. Ananya looked at it. It seemed the water was saying: do not run; look. The smell of dew-wet leaves, mustard oil burned through the night, and damp earth hung beneath the tree; far away, the faint rasp of wheels cut through that stillness. Aruni took out the small bag he had prepared—for preserving soil, leaves, and measurements of marks. Meera said, "Tonight our anger will not become feet. Our feet will become witnesses." After that, the young men who had been eager to run began to walk slowly.

The dirt track was one of those roads on which, after rain, bullock-cart wheels, children's bare feet, goats' hooves, and farmers' cracked heels all left their own letters. Asphalt on the main road is the criminal's friend; it does not preserve marks. But raw earth takes no side. It writes the weight of whoever passes. When Dhruvesh's vehicle left the rear gate and turned onto this track, the earth wrote its first line.

On the phone, Abhay informed not the police station first, but the tehsil night team. He said clearly: "We are not chasing anyone. We are only observing visible evidence. There is an iron chest in the vehicle; the time has been recorded; witnesses are present." A drowsy voice on the other end said it would be seen in the morning. Abhay's tone hardened. "By morning the chest may disappear. If procedure sleeps, the earth is awake." At last an order came: two employees from the nearest outpost and a written representative of the panchayat would come.

The vehicle did not get very far. At an old dry channel where rainwater filled the hollow in the monsoon and sand remained in winter, the wheels sank into the soft ground. The engine roared in the night, but the earth held silently. Those coming from behind stood at a distance. Meera raised her hand. "No one goes forward. Whoever runs to help may

become an accomplice in concealment. Whoever runs to strike will spoil justice. Let the earth speak.”

The vehicle’s headlights cast a long beam across the sand. In that light Dhruvesh’s body appeared for the first time without the costume of a hero. There was no shawl over his shoulder, only haste. Two men were pushing the chest; a driver was trying to wedge stones beneath the wheel. The mixed smell of a hot engine, diesel, and damp channel sand made breathing heavy; with every shove the iron box gave out a mingled clatter of metal, paper, and coins, as though years of lies, suffocating inside one chest, were striking against one another.

From a distance Ananya wrote: “Iron chest, apparently heavy, being removed from the vehicle by three persons. Location—the dirt bend at Kharihāni channel. Time—second watch of night.” Her hand trembled, but the letters stayed steady. Aruni measured the width of the wheel marks in the soil. Abhay did not stop him; he merely said, “First rule of evidence: write only as much as you have seen.”

At that moment Dhruvesh looked back. He did not see a crowd; he saw the shadow of the grove. Far away the dark ghosts seemed to stand in a circle in the darkness. The pale spirits rested like faint light upon the reeds along the road. Perhaps only Dhruvesh heard Old Budhba’s Ghost say: “The feet of the one who erased names from the earth are now caught in the earth.” Dhruvesh shivered for an instant.

He shouted in anger, “This is my private property.” From a distance Meera replied, “Private property does not flee through a rear gate at night.” Satyavrat Mehta added, “If it is private, it will be inventoried, opened before witnesses, and returned. If it is a chest of crimes against the public, then the earth has not held it here for nothing.” Dhruvesh clutched the vehicle door, but the pointed shoe on his foot sank into the mud.

Surajmukhi Devi also arrived. No one had summoned her, but people whose names have been blackened by lies hear news through the wind. She came with measured steps, stood at a distance, and said, “If this box contains papers that stained my name, it must be opened.” Meera went to her. “Not without official presence.” Surajmukhi said, “I am not saying open it now. I want the box not to escape before my eyes.”

After a while two employees from the outpost arrived. Their faces carried drowsiness, fear, and discomfort all at once. At first they slowed when they heard Dhruvesh’s name; then they saw Phoolkali, Surajmukhi, Satyavrat, and the children’s register in the crowd. One employee said quietly, “We will make an inventory.” The other held the lantern. In its light the night scene became a courtroom veranda.

The phone in Dhruvesh’s pocket kept vibrating. Sometimes it was a city lawyer, sometimes an unknown number, sometimes an old bank

employee. He would lift the phone, but before a voice could come through Meera said, "Put it on speaker, so everyone can hear." Dhruvesh would cut the call. For the first time he understood that a voice too could become evidence. The same voice through which people had been trapped in digital arrest now frightened him.

The inventory was made: vehicle number, time, place, witnesses present, external condition of the chest, lock, faint trace of an old seal on one edge, and earth stuck to one corner. Ananya noticed that the earth was not ordinary; it resembled the dry dust from the inner room of the Harihar Service Centre. Aruni preserved a sample in a separate bag. One employee asked, "Who are these children?" Satyavrat replied, "Guardians of names. For now, assistants to your eyes."

The question arose whether the chest should be opened. Dhruvesh insisted, "You need a search warrant." Vineet, who had arrived from the city on a motorcycle, caught his breath and said, "The warrant process has begun. For now, prepare a seizure memo, seal the lock, and keep the chest secure." A voice from the crowd said, "Open it now." Meera stopped them sharply. "Justice will not answer the accused person's impatience with impatience of its own. What opens will open by law." At once the heat in the crowd diminished.

Phoolkali sat far away in the darkness. She did not know whether Chhotu's name would be inside the chest. Yet for the first time that night she felt that her son's name could no longer remain imprisoned in anyone's cupboard. She lifted earth and touched it to her forehead. "This earth must know his feet," she said softly. Her voice was so low that only Panidubbi heard, and perhaps for that reason a faint dampness came over the dry sand of the channel.

As the seal was being fixed, Dhruvesh suddenly stepped backward. His shoe remained stuck in the soil while his bare foot slipped out. Suppressed laughter rose from the crowd, but the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost grew heavy. Meera stopped the laughter. "Do not humiliate a man for being barefoot. The earth wanted the shoe and kept it. Look at the mark, not the naked foot." Dhruvesh stood barefoot on the sand. His footprints came down clearly—heel deep, forefoot trembling. The criminal's earth was writing its letters.

Abhay planted thin bamboo stakes around the mark. "No feet here," he said. Aruni took measurements. Ananya wrote: "Dhruvesh's right shoe stuck in the soil; bare footprint five hands north of the chest." The employees laughed at first, then grew serious. They understood that crime does not remain only in a box; it is also left in footsteps.

Dhruvesh said bitterly, "You have already made me guilty." Satyavrat Mehta answered calmly, "We are not making you guilty. We are writing the names that were erased. If you are innocent, this earth will speak for

you as well. But fleeing feet know little of the language of innocence.” Dhruvesh could say nothing. For the first time, the colours of lineage, money, education, and the service centre seemed to drain from his face.

The chest was closed under an official seal. It was placed not on a bullock cart but in the outpost vehicle. When it was lifted, a dark square remained in the sand beneath it. After Ananya photographed it, she made a pencil sketch. Devika said, “Where lies are kept, the earth turns black.” Meera corrected her. “Not black—heavy. Earth records weight, not colour.”

The vehicle left for the outpost, yet the people did not immediately go back. They stood by Kharihāni channel as though the scene were not yet complete. On the raw road Dhruvesh’s footprints, the shoe, the stain left by the chest, the tyre marks, and the deliberately limited footsteps of witnesses formed separate lines. Aruni said, “Tonight the earth wrote a sequence.” Ananya wrote beneath it: “Paper later; earth first.”

Then a wind came from the direction of Channa Grove. In it were the smell of leaves, the damp of the well, Ganga silt, the ash of burned banknotes, and the earth from Phoolkali’s forehead all at once. The dark ghosts slowly drew back. The pale spirits’ light merged into the first line of dawn. Old Budhba’s Ghost said, “A criminal cannot flee the earth. He needs soil, house, room, account. One day the same earth simply reads his feet.”

In the dawn light Meera told everyone to return to Channa Grove. The chest had gone to the outpost, the marks had been protected, a report written, witnesses listed. Yet the story was not over. “No slogans today,” she said. “To cover with noise the night in which the earth gave testimony would be another injustice.” The villagers returned in silence. There was no defeat in that silence, but the restraint of an exhausted victory.

The bowl still stood by the roots of Channa Grove. In its water appeared not the night sky but the earth of Kharihāni channel. Ananya placed the bag of soil beside the bowl. Phoolkali made a tiny dot of that soil beside Chhotu’s leaf. “The name rose above the water,” she said. “Now I have given it feet.” At these words Meera wiped her eyes. Emotion did not become lament there; it became rite.

Satyavrat Mehta opened the register. He wrote: “The Criminal’s Earth. Tonight an iron chest fleeing the village was stopped. The chest has not yet been adjudicated, but the earth’s marks have been recorded. After public restoration of names, the accused person’s footsteps became evidence for the first time.” He paused, then added in small letters: “Justice is not only proving guilt; it is also giving the earth a chance to speak.”

Ananya opened the next page. She knew the ending was truly near now, yet an ending did not mean closing a door. The chest still had to be opened, the names had to receive legal bodies, and Channa Grove had to decide whether it would become a memorial or a living watch. She wrote: "Morning Inside the Chest." Aruni whispered, "The dawn will open not inside the box, but in the eyes."

Thus the night ended. Dhruvesh's shoe had remained stuck in the soil; no one was in a hurry to pull it out. When the sun rose, dew had gathered on it. The droplets shone on the pointed leather as though every fleeing step of the night had become a small piece of evidence by morning; in the cool smell rising from the raw earth, the sharp trace of diesel still lingered. The light breeze moved the shoelace, but not once did the edge of the footprint crumble. One could have said: it is only a shoe. But the people of Garh Narikel knew that sometimes the criminal runs away and leaves his foot with the earth. And where the foot remains, a name does not take long to arrive.

Folk song: The Shoe Left in the Earth

Folk tune: Footprint Lament

Speak, O earth, preserve the footprint and speak the truth,

Where the foot remained, let the name arrive soon.

The criminal fled; the shoe remained in the soil,

The bare footprint became the earth's statement.

The iron chest was stopped on the road; dust rose,

As names were restored, the fugitive's foot was caught.

The sun rose; drops of dew stood on the shoe,

Some call it an object; the village calls it a stanza of crime.

Justice will hear not guilt alone, but the speech of earth,

It will know the dawn not in a box, but in opened eyes.

Earth, preserve this footprint and speak the truth.

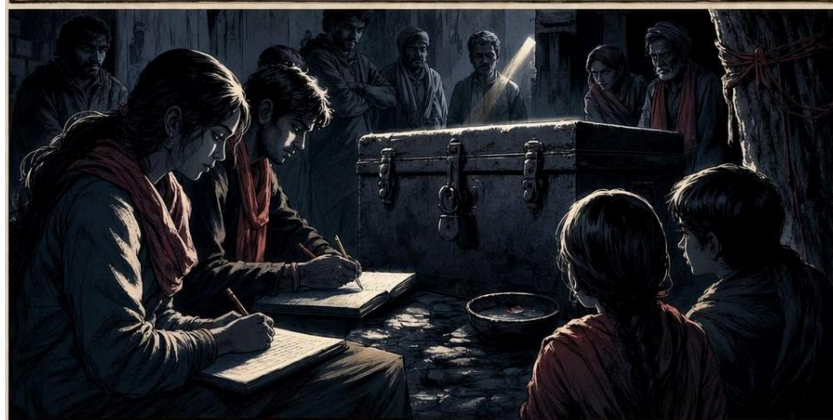
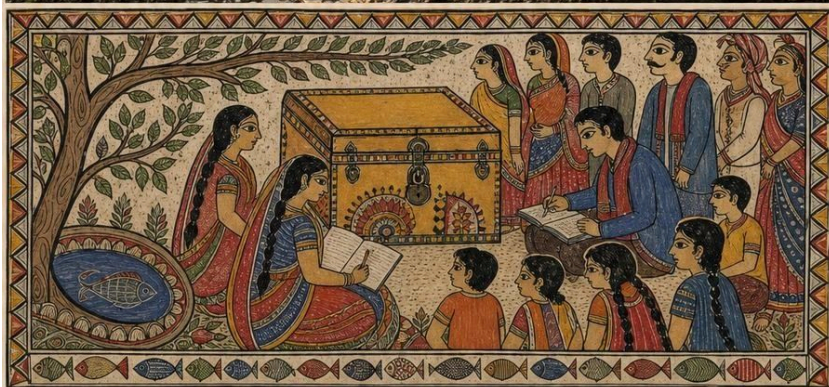


[Philosophical undertone—economy in the secondary sense of the genitive: A traveller recounted his experience: in “blue lotus,” the lotus requires no supplementary relation; therefore a karmadhāraya analysis is sufficient there. From this distinction it became clear that profound epistemological processes continue within small events of ordinary life. Economy in the secondary sense of the genitive.]

CHAPTER 199

Morning Inside the Chest

Morning comes even inside a chest—if the lid is opened by the hands of witnesses.



Opening folk song: Morning of the Opened Chest

Folk tune: Bright Form of the Morning Samdaun

Open the lid, open the lid of the chest,

Dissolve years of shut-away truth into the morning.

*The iron chest opened; morning was found within,
The letters spread their wings and flew beyond the dark.
Though the witness's hand trembled, it lifted the lid,
The sun took years of locked truth into its lap.*

*Ash, paper, key, seal—all became voices,
Inside an old belly a new future was born.
Sing the morning song, all of you; the night of fear is over,
The opened chest says—truth remains unconquered.*

*Even a trembling hand found courage and raised the lid,
The sun took the letters suppressed for years into its lap.
Ash, paper, key, seal—all became witnesses,
From the old belly a new current was born.*



Register... Shivnath... tears... presence... When a body recorded as absent returns with its name, a mother does not merely weep; she stands upright. Shivnath Sada's name on paper becomes more than evidence; it gives thirty years of waiting a household threshold. Restoring a name does not bring the dead back, but it strikes their "absence" from a lying register.

Seal... thumbprint... voice... vacancy... A forged thumbprint, a stolen voice, a blue register, a digital order, and an empty space for an heir—these are not separate objects of crime, but teeth of the same crocodile. A thumbprint was made in the name of one who had no hand; a voice was

sold in the name of one who never spoke; a dead person was declared ineligible. Here justice means not only identifying the guilty, but also making the next vacancy public and guarding it.

Empty chest... echo... watchkeeper... next breath... An emptied chest is not an ending. Its darkness comes outside and becomes responsibility, and the hollow metal asks: will the eyes remain open now, or will another lid fall? A memorial accepts flowers; a watchkeeper gives up sleep. Ahead is the chapter of *The Guardian of Names*, where the village will surrender its right to close its eyes and make justice an everyday task.

The villagers had gone back, yet no one had truly reached home in the mind. What each had seen sat like a stone within. The iron chest had reached the outpost, yet its weight still rested on the village's shoulders. The bowl at the roots of Channa Grove remained still until dawn; no letters now floated in it, only a hazy morning. The smells of dew-wet earth, mustard oil burned through the night, and faint iron from the distant outpost hung together in the air; droplets at the tips of leaves trembled at the first light. A crow called far away, but the footsteps going toward the outpost drowned its voice.

At dawn Meera said first: "The chest will be opened, but not as a celebration. Whatever papers are inside are bandages on someone's wound. If you remove a bandage, let air touch it—not a camera." After this Ananya wrote the first line in the register: "Rules for opening the chest: silence, witnesses, copies, consent." Beside it Aruni wrote the date, time, people present, name of the outpost, and seal number. The children's handwriting was no longer practice for a game; it had become the breath of procedure.

The small room at the outpost was so full that even the walls seemed to be listening. On one side sat the tehsil employee; on the other, Abhay, Meera, Satyavrat Mehta, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Phoolkali, Gadadhar, the bank representative, and two women whose names had been stolen into the Rani accounts. Dhruvesh was seated in a corner. His right foot had no shoe. The earth from Kharihāni still clung to his bare foot.

The iron chest bore an official seal. When the seal was cut, there was no dramatic sound—only a slow scraping, as if a lie stuck fast for years were shedding its skin. When the lid rose, the first thing to escape was not dust but smell—Ganga silt, old courtrooms, rotten glue, banknotes, women's hair oil, workers' sweat, and a whiff of burnt plastic. The cold air sealed inside the metal struck every face at once; the damp trapped between layers of paper entered not the tongue but memory. Meera closed her eyes and breathed it in. "This box did not store things," she said. "It stored fear of time."

The top layer of the chest held cloth—an old gamchha, a dry coconut leaf, a torn paper, and a small bundle tied with red thread. Phoolkali

trembled when she saw the gamchha. She reached out, then stopped. Meera said softly, "Record first." Ananya wrote: "Old gamchha, edge torn, colour like paper soaked in water, possibly connected with a labourer." Tears came to Phoolkali's eyes, but she did not cry. She understood that this time the name had to be written before the tears came.

The bundle was opened. Inside were a folded paper stained with betel spit, half a broken identity slip, and a torn page from the wage register. The tehsil employee could not read the page; damp had swollen the letters. Satyavrat Mehta wiped his spectacles and read: "Shivnath Sada, age sixteen, mother's name Phoolkali, daily wage recorded—three days, payment—zero, remark—absent." The air in the room stopped. Phoolkali said quietly, "Chhotu."

In that one word were thirty years of waiting, river water, a contractor's lie, village ridicule, and the shelter of motherhood. There was no applause, no victory cry. Ananya wrote in the register: "Chhotu's true name confirmed: Shivnath Sada." Aruni added: "Body recorded as absent; name present." Phoolkali sat with joined hands. On her face was the peace that comes not from recovering the dead, but from recovering a name.

The second layer held files. Each bore a different hand on its cover. One said "Service Certificate," another "Compensation Rejected," a third "Rani Account," a fourth "Digital Order," and a fifth "Water-Burial—Old." At the words "Water-Burial—Old," the shadow of Old Budhba's Ghost shimmered near the window despite the daylight. Dark ghosts are harder to see by day, but when the chest of names opens, even darkness becomes an ear.

Inside the "Water-Burial—Old" file was a copy of Nand Aruni's diary. It was unclear who had taken the original, but the copy bore Nand's signature. On the first page was written: "The crocodile eats the body, not the name." On the second page were thirty names; on the third, an estimated three hundred; on the fourth, an empty space where someone had written in red ink: "Exaggeration." Satyavrat Mehta's voice thickened. "When the criminal cannot erase evidence," he said, "he calls suffering an exaggeration."

The file contained Bisesar Paswan's name, Salamat Ansari's name, Rajnu Mandal's name, and tick marks beside those whose compensation claims had been labelled "not eligible." Eligible—the word was so cold it could have laid ice upon a dead body. Devika whispered, "The dead were not eligible. Those who kept eating were the authorities." Meera took her hand. "Keep the anger, but do not let the sentence damage the evidence." Devika lowered her head and wrote: "Misuse of the word 'eligibility'; merits investigation."

When the Rani Account file opened, the women's breathing quickened. It contained more than twenty women's names, different thumbprints, the same photograph, many accounts, and many withdrawal slips. The names of the two women present at the outpost were also on the list. One woman, Jamuna, said, "I have never been to a bank in my life." The bank representative lowered his face. He was not guilty, yet he felt shame at the weakness of the system. Meera said, "If shame goes to work, it becomes reform; if it does nothing, it becomes another seal."

In the back corner of the file was a wax mould for forging thumbprints. For a moment Hulasi's handless shadow rippled across the table. A thumbprint had been made in the name of a woman without a hand—the irony was so sharp that every eye in the room dropped. Ananya wrote: "The theft of a thumbprint is more than an insult to a hand; it is theft of existence." Aruni found the line apt and drew a double line in the margin.

The Digital Order file contained fewer handwritten papers and more printouts. Phone scripts, phrases for frightening people, versions in mixed Maithili, Hindi, and English of "You are under digital arrest," forged police emblems, forged court notices, and lists of people called at night. One page instructed: begin with a gentle voice, then turn harsh, then invoke family shame. Meera trembled as she read it. "This is not merely theft of money," she said. "It is abduction of the mind."

In one corner of the chest were three small mobile phones, five SIM cards, two memory sticks, and an old voice recorder. The recorder was scratched. Abhay had legal authorization entered before switching it on. When sound emerged, there was first static, then the voice of Madhukar Madhav Mishra, then someone's heavy breathing. The voice said: "Keep the names separate, the accounts separate; the service centre must appear clean." At this Dhruvesh shifted in his chair. Earth fell from his bare foot. The employee preserved even that fallen earth on paper.

Dhruvesh said, "That is not my voice." Satyavrat Mehta remained calm. "A device will decide the voice," he said. "For us, at present, the sequence of breaths is enough." Abhay added, "Your side will also be recorded." Dhruvesh looked straight ahead for the first time. "My side?" Meera said, "Justice remains justice only where the side of the person treated as accused is also recorded. But that side will not be allowed to eat the truth."

At the bottom of the chest lay the heaviest bag. It held no cash, but blank letterheads, seals, a half-wet register, and a map. Arrows on the map ran from the old bridge site to the Harihar Service Centre, from the centre to the bank, from the bank to a city account, from that account to a foreign money route, and then back to village soil. Looking at it, Aruni whispered, "This is the crocodile's digestive system." Ananya wrote:

“Route of the black river of money—from the market of bodies to digital fear.”

At the centre of the map was a small circle marked “Channa.” The tehsil employee asked, “What is Channa?” Everyone from the village looked at him. Devika said softly, “In your paper it may be only a place. For us it is a grove that listens.” The employee’s expression changed. For the first time he understood that what is a point in a government file can be a universe in public memory. He wrote: “Channa Grove—site inspection required.”

The final page of the file was the most unexpected. It bore a shadow of Batuknath Hariharan’s old signature, Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal, Madhukar’s code-name, Dhruvesh’s service authorization, and one blank space with the words “future successor.” Meera trembled when she saw the vacancy. “Crime is larger than an individual,” she said. “If a blank place is left, the next Dhruvesh is born.” Silence grew heavy around the line.

Ananya stepped forward and wrote in thick letters across the copy of the blank space: “Vacancy made public.” Aruni asked, “Is it proper to write that?” Satyavrat Mehta said, “Yes. If the empty place in a crime remains secret, it will be filled again. Making the vacancy public is itself a form of watch.” The children’s faces were tired, yet their eyes showed that they were writing not the end of a book, but the beginning of a watch.

Every object from the chest was inventoried in order. The originals went into officially sealed packets. Copies, subject to family consent, would be made in three forms—legal, public-memory, and private. Meera said clearly, “No one’s tears, thumbprint, or shame is an object for public display. Keep the difference between restoring a name and staging a spectacle.” At these words Phoolkali covered Shivnath’s page with the edge of her sari, as though placing the shade of a home over the name.

By noon a crowd had gathered outside the outpost, yet no slogan came from within. People asked, “What was found?” The answer came: “Names were found.” Someone asked, “Was money found?” Answer: “The path of money was found.” Someone asked, “Was the criminal caught?” Answer: “The belly of the crime was opened.” The village slowly learned the language of such answers. Those who wanted sensational news were disappointed. Those who wanted justice waited quietly.

By evening the chest was not closed again; each object had been separately sealed. The empty chest was turned upside down on the table. Its belly was vacant now. The darkness accumulated there for years had come outside, but once outside it did not become light; it became responsibility. When the last ray of sun touched the metal, it did not

glitter; it looked tired. Perhaps even the belly of a crime grows tired when it must vomit back names.

When Phoolkali came out of the outpost, her gait had changed. Until yesterday she had been Chhotu's mother, whose son was missing; now she was the mother of Shivnath Sada, whose name had returned with proof. The change seemed to be on paper, but in truth it was in the body. The damp smell of the chest, the scent of the old gamchha, and the dust of the outpost clung to her sari; when the outside air touched them, the smell lightened, as though a room closed for years were lifting from her chest. Her back straightened, her headcloth settled firmly, and in her eyes came the steadiness known only after a mother has wrested not a son, but a name, back from the river.

At night everyone returned to the roots of Channa Grove. This time the bowl reflected not the outpost's light but the lamps of house after house. The bag of earth, a copy of Shivnath's page, the shadow-copy of Nand's diary, the Rani-account list of names, a copy of the map, and the blank successor space were all placed on separate stones. Old Budhba's Ghost did not descend from the branch; he watched from above, as if saying: now let the living do it themselves.

The dark ghosts' darkness dissolved into the shade of leaves. The pale spirits' light mingled with the lamps. From the direction of the well Hulasi called, "Was the theft of the hand written down?" Ananya answered, "Yes." Panidubbi asked, "The names from the water-burial?" Aruni said, "Including Shivnath." Loth opened half his mouth and asked, "The chest?" Devika said, "Empty." Old Budhba's Ghost laughed so softly only the leaves could hear: "An empty belly is the greatest testimony."

Meera asked everyone to sit in a circle. "Now there is one last question," she said. "These pieces of evidence will go to court, but shall we leave the story only to the court? Will this grove become a memorial or a watchkeeper? A memorial receives flowers; a watchkeeper keeps its eyes open." Satyavrat Mehta turned the pages of the register. "A memorial gives the dead a place," he said. "A watchkeeper gives the living work."

Ananya wrote on the page: "The Guardian of Names." Aruni added beneath it: "The end does not come when the criminal's chest opens; the end begins when the village gives up its right to close its eyes." Meera stroked his head. "This is the beginning of the ending," she said. "Emotion will remain, but it will not set fires; it will keep watch."

The night became very deep. The empty chest remained at the outpost, yet its echo remained in Channa Grove. Shivnath's name stayed upon the leaf. Nand's sentence shone again in the bowl: "The crocodile eats the body, not the name." The earth from Dhruvesh's bare foot was

sealed in a government envelope, but in the village's memory it would remain open.

Just before dawn, the oldest leaf of Channa Grove broke and fell. No one called it an omen. The leaf was dry, but its veins were clearly visible. Phoolkali picked it up and laid it beside Shivnath's page. "Now it will keep watch," she said. The leaf trembled, perhaps from the wind, perhaps in agreement.

Folk song: Morning in the Belly of the Chest

Folk tune: Morning Samdaun

*Do not become fire, do not become the fire of revenge,
Become feeling and keep watch; let the shoot of a name grow.*

*The lid opened in witnesses' hands; the darkness stepped back,
Shivnath's name came to rest beside the dry leaf.*

*The empty chest stayed at the outpost, its echo in the grove,
Nand's sentence shone in the bowl's clear water.*

The end does not come when the criminal's belly opens,

The end comes when the village gives up the right to close its eyes.

*The old leaf broke; its veins showed clear,
Phoolkali placed it by Shivnath and said it would keep watch.*

Morning of the chest, do not become the fire of revenge,

The lid opened in witnesses' hands; the darkness withdrew.



[Philosophical undertone—conflict in aggregation is untenable: Some scholars say that in “The Gargyas eat,” the verbal suffix expresses plurality connected with the action of eating. Conflict in aggregation is untenable.]

CHAPTER 200

The Guardian of Names

*As long as names continue to be called, even a stump will keep a green
point alive.*



Opening folk song: We Are Here—Rising Epic Song

Folk tune: Videha Folk Epic

Sing everywhere, sing the epic song of “We are here,”

Water, leaf, earth, breath—bring every voice together.

Water speaks, the leaf writes—we are here, we are here,

Earth says, breath says—we are here, we are here.

A name is not merely a list, but the bright platter of life,

The world stands awake in one another's watch.

However many forms the crocodile changes, waking eyes will know it,

The seed of truth will split stone and become a green shoot.

Two hundred thresholds have opened; the story will travel onward,

We are here, we are together—in this voice let a new Mithila awaken.

Two hundred rows of lamps are lit, two hundred thresholds and doors,

This world wakes within one another's watch.

Let the crocodile change a thousand forms; the eyes will not close,

This folk epic of Videha will be sung age after age.



Leaf... veins... letters... water... The story that survives in the veins of a dry leaf becomes visible again the moment it receives a drop of water. In this chapter Shiy Nath's name, Nand's diary, Hulasi's hand, Panidubbi's water, Dhruvesh's shoe, and the empty chest speak to one another. All of them say: the belly of crime may be large, but public memory is larger.

Silence... gain... shame... market... The teeth of the outer crocodile can be seen; the teeth of the inner crocodile hide as convenience. Fear, profit, display, caste, prestige, employment, and the market in suffering—these are criminals written without names. When the village writes down the

names of its own silences, justice ceases to be merely another person's guilt; it becomes the cleaning of one's own house.

The first light of dawn came down upon a dry leaf of Channa Grove and paused there. In its veins still moved all the testimonies of the night—the name of Shivrath Sada, Nand's diary, Dhruv's shoe, the empty belly of the iron chest, Phoolkali's trembling hand, Ananya's register, Aruni's pencil, Meera's watchful eyes, Satyavrat Mehta's silence, and the low laugh of Old Budhba's Ghost that no one but the leaves could hear. The smells of dew-wet leaves, ash, and stale mustard-oil lamps hung together in the air; when the first bird called, droplets on the leaves began to tremble. Far across the hazy sky, the first cooking smoke rose from homes, yet to those seated beneath the tree it seemed the night was still saying its last words. Garh Narikel awoke, but today waking was not ordinary. People rose not merely into routine, but into watch.

Meera reached the grove first. She carried no flowers, only a small cloth. In it were wrapped earth, dew, ash, and a few letters dampened with water from the bowl. She sat before the leaf and said, "Today the final chapter will be written, but this is not an end. This is the page on which we shall open our eyes and each accept responsibility for our names." No one applauded. A final word needs agreement, not applause.

Ananya opened the register. On the first page she again wrote: "Kabaddi in Channa Grove." Beside her Aruni wrote: "The Village on the Right Bank." One by one the chapter titles began to be read. Those said to have died in the story were made present. The names of those called criminals were read as well, because without the criminal's name the crime too remains incomplete. The guardian of names does not make justice merely by listing victims; it also writes the genealogy of crime.

With her own hand Phoolkali placed the copy of Shivrath's page beside the leaf. "This is not my son's death certificate," she said. "This is his page of homecoming." There was no weeping in her voice, yet everyone understood that tears kept within for years eventually leave the body as voice. Some women bowed their heads. Some men looked at their own feet for the first time, as if asking themselves: in whose name have we remained silent all these years?

Word came from the outpost that the inventory of objects from the chest was complete. Some papers would go to court, some to departments, some to investigators, some to archives. But Meera said, "The government's road will proceed. Ours will proceed too. Copies for the law belong to the law; copies for memory belong to the village." Devika spread a clean cloth. Shadow-copies of papers were placed upon it. Before every copy was a small stone, on every stone a name, before every name a grain of earth.

Satyavrat Mehta rose slowly. His aged voice carried exhaustion, yet today the exhaustion did not sound like defeat. "All my life I sought justice in the language of paper," he said. "Today I understand that paper needs the village throat to receive human meaning. If the file goes to court but the name does not live in the village, the judgment is half. If the village preserves the name but the criminal escapes the law, justice is half. From today the two halves will seek each other."

Old Budhba's Ghost did not descend from the branch. This time there was no need for the dead to sit as judges in an assembly of the living. From inside the well Hulasi called, "And my hand?" Ananya answered, "In the testimony, the song, and the children's lesson." Panidubbi asked, "The water-burial?" Aruni said, "Water has been kept with every name. A body may have gone into the water, but the name will be read above it." Loth whispered through half his mouth, "And us?" Devika laughed. "You are not spectators; you are watchkeepers. Even half a mouth, if it opens at the right time, can save a whole history."

The village children, who for so long had written testimony, drawn pictures, guarded pages, and asked questions, now held one another's hands and formed a circle. No one called "kabaddi." First there was silence. Then Ananya said, "Whoever crosses the boundary must return with a name." Aruni added, "Whoever cuts out a name, we will hold that hand." A small child, who still did not understand everything, laughed and said, "The crocodile eats the body, not the name." Every eye turned toward him. The sentence left a child's mouth and became the future.

At that moment the water in the bowl stirred. It showed no face of the dead, but the village's living present—a hungry child, an exhausted labourer, a farmer crushed by debt, a young man trapped in a phone, a widow afraid of paper, an old man standing in a bank queue, a hospital veranda, a court date, a school gate, and the shade of Channa Grove. Meera said, "These are all alive. The watch began for the names of the dead, but it must reach the bodies of the living. Otherwise the crocodile will remain hungry."

Abhay, who had stood carefully at the perimeter through many nights, came into the centre for the first time. "The names of criminals will go to court," he said, "but where shall we place the names of our own silences?" The gathering stopped at the question. Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau, Dhruvesh, Madhaves—these were outer names. But what of the small silences? Fear, greed, convenience, caste, shame, employment, donation, prestige, religion, development, progress—these lay like stones within the village.

Satyavrat Mehta opened a new page in the register: "List of Silences." The first name written was "Fear." The second: "Profit." The third: "Display." The fourth: "Excessive faith in dates." The fifth: "The habit of closing one's eyes before paper." Phoolkali said, "Add one—taking

pictures of a poor person's grief." Devika wrote it. Meera added, "And one more—the market in suffering." No criminal had signed that page, yet the shadow of every living person fell upon it.

By noon the villagers began cleaning around Channa Grove. Someone wanted to build a colourful gate. Meera stopped them. "A watchkeeper does not need a gate; it needs a path." Someone wanted to carve one great name upon a stone slab. Ananya said, "If one name is made large, the small names will be buried again." In the end they decided to place small earthen plaques all around the grove, one name on each; and for names still incomplete, there would be a blank place. A blank place too is testimony.

Phoolkali placed a lamp before one blank place. "Do not give darkness to the one whose name has not been found," she said. At those words every leaf of Channa Grove moved together. Old Budhba's Ghost may have smiled. Hulasi may have stretched her absent hand inside the darkness of the well. Panidubbi bent over the pond water. The dark ghosts dissolved into the grove's shade; the pale spirits into the lamp flame. Today the dead were receiving not a memorial, but a home.

Toward evening a message also came from the court veranda. The old client, withered by a twenty-three-year case, reached the village leaning on his stick. "Today for the first time someone on the veranda asked me: how many dates have you eaten?" he said. It was a small question, yet his eyes held so much light that no one considered it small. If a question is sprouting upon the stone of a courthouse, it is a seed from the leaves of Channa Grove.

When night fell, the final reading began. All the titles were read again. No one hurried. When "Kabaddi in Channa Grove" was read, the children formed a circle. When "The Crocodile of Dates" was read, the old client gripped his stick. When "Harvard Ethics" was read, Satyavrat Mehta lowered his eyes. When "The Crocodile of the Screen" was read, the young people turned their phones face down. When "The Market of the Body" was read, the women held one another's hands. When "The Constitution of Names" was read, the register pages trembled. When "The Criminal's Earth" was read, Dhruvesh's shoe became caught again in memory. When "Morning Inside the Chest" was read, the echo of the empty belly could be heard.

At the final title Ananya paused: "The Guardian of Names." When she had read it, Aruni asked, "Now?" Meera gave no answer. She began walking along the outer boundary of the grove. Everyone followed. From every threshold came one person, from every house a small stone, and on every stone a letter. Some letters were correct, some crooked, some written by children, some by trembling old hands. Together they formed a sentence: "Keep the watch over names alive."

No author's name was written beneath that sentence. It belonged to everyone—the village, the dead, the survivors, those admitting their mistakes, and even those who still hid in darkness. The watch was not only against the thief outside, but also against convenience within. Whether the village fully understood this was hard to say, but at least on this night it did not turn its delusions into a festival. It became a watch.

In the middle of the night Old Budhba's Ghost finally came down from the branch. Everyone fell silent. He walked slowly to the row of blank spaces. On one empty plaque he scratched something with his nail. The living could not see the letters clearly. Ananya bent down. A few words could be made out: "The name not yet born." Meera closed her eyes. A guardian watches the future as well as the dead.

Then Panidubbi brought from the pond a handful of dampness like Ganga silt and let it fall into the bowl. The cold smell of wet silt reached the mustard-oil flame, and fine vapour seemed to gather along the bowl's rim. A small whirlpool rose; within the turning water the shadows of leaves grew long, then short. The children seated beside the bowl held their breath; no one reached out, as though even a light touch might drown the letters again in silt. In the whirlpool appeared a crocodile—the crocodile of river, screen, paper, dates, body, money, and memory. Everyone was afraid. But this time the crocodile did not open its mouth. Something was caught between its teeth—letters. The letters came out, floated on the water, and joined once more into the same sentence: "The crocodile eats the body, not the name."

At these words Phoolkali began to weep. It was the first time she wept openly. Her crying was not a wail, but rain. The village women surrounded her. Someone had lost a son to water, someone a field, someone a body, someone reputation, someone trust. Each grief was different, but that night they became one water. Channa Grove finally received water—not the water of forgetting, but the water of memory.

Amid that weeping Satyavrat Mehta wrote the final testimony: "Today Garh Narikel became a guardian of names. Punishment of criminals is under the authority of the courts; guarding memory is under the authority of the village. Blank spaces shall remain open. Every year the children shall read the chapter titles. No name shall be turned into spectacle without consent. No grief shall be a commodity. No paper shall be accepted unread. No date shall pass without question. No body shall be without a name."

Devika turned the order into song. There was no applause of a stage in it; there was the rhythm of fields, the tune of the river, the echo of the court, the trembling of a mobile phone, and the rustle of leaves. The children slowly began repeating: "Keep the watch over names alive." The Rakshas did not cast silver light; they protected the lamp flame. Loth

tried to open his half-mouth fully, but no voice came. Ananya looked at him and said, "The silence too has been written." Loth was satisfied.

Before the first line of dawn broke, Meera placed a shadow-copy of the empty chest outside the grove. "The chest is not a memorial," she said. "It is a warning." Aruni laid a dry leaf over it. "Which chapter is this leaf from?" someone asked. Old Budhba's Ghost laughed. "A leaf that breaks and comes down is not a ghost; it is a seed."

The sun rose. The shadow of Channa Grove fell in a circle on the earth. In that very circle the children began to play. Some called it kabaddi, some name-reading, some watchkeeping. The rule was simple: whoever crossed the boundary had to return carrying one name. Whoever forgot a name was not put out; that child went into another turn of learning. Defeat did not mean punishment, but remembrance. Victory did not mean applause, but the correct pronunciation of a name.

The people of Garh Narikel slowly returned to their homes. Hearths were lit. Feet moved toward the fields. Papers remained at the outpost. Files would go to court. City accounts would be examined. Some criminals would flee, some would be caught, some would fall ill and say they were innocent, some would wrap themselves in religion, some in development. But now one sentence stood on the village threshold: "No story is complete without a name." It was not difficult to erase; it might be wiped away every day. But who could erase what had entered the throat of every household?

In memory of Ba, who at the beginning had touched the gamchha to her forehead, Phoolkali and Ananya tied a small cloth to a low branch of the tree. The cloth was blank. Someone asked, "No name on it?" Phoolkali said, "Not yet. When some new injustice trembles for the first time, we will write its name on this cloth." The blank cloth moved lightly in the wind. Its emptiness was not frightening; it was ready.

For the last time they looked into the bowl. Within it turned together the letters of Nand's diary, Shivnath's name, Hulasi's hand, Panidubbi's water, Lattar Thakur's warning, Kalit's paper, Bisesar's splash, the search for Chhotu, Ujjwal's screen, the old client's dates, Satyavrat Mehta's silence, Meera's caution, Ananya's letters, and Aruni's questions. The water did not become full; it became deep.

Meera lifted the bowl. Everyone thought she would pour the water onto the earth. But she did not. The cold metal trembled for a moment in her palm; the smell of wet earth and old ash reached the children. She handed the bowl to Ananya. Ananya passed it to Aruni. Aruni gave it to a small child. The child's two palms dipped slightly under the weight; a droplet trembled on the rim. Earth caught under his fingernails darkened blue-grey with moisture, and every eye rested on that small hand—a hand learning not punishment, but responsibility. The child

was frightened. “It will fall.” Meera smiled. “If it falls, the earth will drink it. Only do not let the name fall.” The child placed one drop from the bowl onto the ground. The dust darkened and made a small circle—like the first boundary of kabaddi.

Within that circle the story began again. The ghosts had not come to play in Channa Grove today; they had come to watch. The living played. The dead kept watch. The river flowed far away, yet its voice was in the leaves. The crocodile might remain somewhere in water, somewhere on a screen, somewhere in a file, somewhere in human greed. But now one village had learned that bodies do not return from a crocodile’s belly, while names can return—if someone keeps calling them.

At the end Old Budhba’s Ghost returned to his branch and, for the first time, laid the judge’s stick on the earth. “Now let the living decide,” his voice fell from the leaves. The leaves moved. Some fell; some buds opened. A wholly new green point in Channa Grove shone in the sunlight. No one called it a miracle. Everyone understood: if the watch remains alive, even a dry stump can keep a bud within it.

Here the story pauses; it does not end. For once a name reaches the hands of a guardian, it no longer asks for another chapter; it asks for life. In the circle where the children of Garh Narikel are playing, the nights of chapters, the dawns of chapters, and the unknown days of the next generation turn together. Someone crosses the boundary. Holding the breath, the child chants, “Kabaddi... kabaddi...” then suddenly stops and calls a name.

And at the sound of the name, the leaves of Channa Grove answer.

Folk song: We Are Here—The Final Watch of Names

Folk tune: Videha Folk Epic

Say it, all of you — “We are here, we are here,”

As long as even one mouth says it, let the watch remain.

Water speaks, the leaf writes—we are here, we are here,

The one whose name was cut away says—we are here, we are here.

The crocodile chewed the body, but could not eat memory,

On a mother’s lips the child’s name awakened again.

Heavy is the night of the one who saw and stayed silent,

The one who saw and spoke became a steadfast guardian.

A green point survived in the crack of the stump,

With one call the dead lived a second time.

The story did not stop here—place a lamp in every throat,

As long as even one mouth says “We are here,” keep watch.



[Philosophical undertone—Mandana’s view: An objection is raised: if the result itself is the meaning of the verbal root, then why is “rice” the object in “He cooks rice”? This is Mandana’s view.]

THE BOOK’S FINAL VOICE

1.

The water returned, the trees laughed, and the drowned names rose one by one and went home.

2.

The stone that had once been silent began to speak, because now everyone’s name was written upon it.

3.

The crocodile was gone, the graha was gone, but the child’s hand remained—the hand that had risen and asked for a name.

4.

In the village that remembered its history, the coconut trees began to bear fruit again.

5.

Truth was a seed, and it sprouted; the name was water, and it rose; and Garh Narikel chose Earth again.

6.

The one who saw and spoke lived twice in name—once in the body, once in the village's memory.

7.

This story does not end here; it lives in every mouth that says—"I am here."

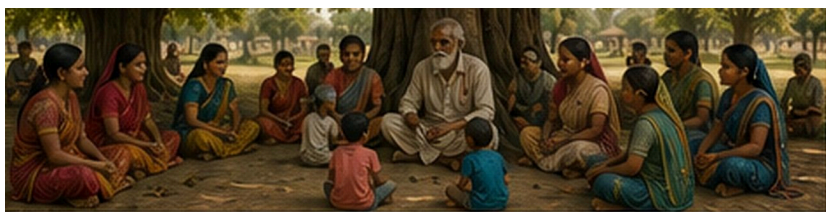
APPENDIX I: THE GARH NARIKEL FOLK LEXICON

To sharpen the main narrative of Chapter Zero, the extensive folk-cultural material has been preserved here in its original sequence.



Knowledge takes many forms in Garh Narikel. One kind of knowledge can tell, merely by touching the soil of a field, whether paddy or pigeon pea will thrive there. Another reads the movement of clouds and knows whether the river will rise at night. Another judges the depth of water from the movement of fish. Another knows the uses of animal bodies, leaves, roots, milk, dung, ash, oil, and soil. Yet another recognises an occasion from the tune of a song—this is a sohar, this a samdaun, this a transplanting song, this a boatman's call, this a bhagait, this a marsiya, this a nirgun, this a children's play-tune. Such knowledge is not opposed to school, but it is older than school and lives outside it.

The first characteristic of folk culture is oral transmission. Ba tells stories to her granddaughter; a mother teaches her daughter the rites of marriage; in the field, a woman transplanting in the front row teaches the new daughter-in-law behind her how to catch the refrain; a boatman teaches a child to read the current; a dholak player teaches a pupil not written beats but the pressure of the palm, the strike of the fingers, and the rise of the voice. Knowledge enters through the ear, settles in the body, and is made firm by practice.



The second characteristic is collective ownership. No one person is the author of a folk song; the people are its makers. The first line may once have arisen from a single throat, but when the community accepts it, changes it, repeats it, and adds to it as the occasion demands, the song becomes the people's. Collective ownership does not mean that individual creativity has no value; it means that the creation has broken the boundary of the individual and become a vessel of shared experience.

The third characteristic is local identity. The river in a Garh Narikel song is not an abstract river: the behaviour of its current, the smell of its silt, the colour of its floodwater, its ghats, boats, crocodiles, fish, lotuses, embankments, and erosion make it particular. Soil is not merely earth: it appears as hard cloddy soil, smooth clay, silt-rich earth, sandy earth, mud, cracked ground, and wet ground. A tree is linked not only with fruit but with shade, medicine, fodder, fuel, stories, deities, ghosts, birds, and memory. For this reason Garh Narikel's folk culture cannot simply be a copy of another village. Even where tunes are similar, its words, rhythms, images, and occasions remain local.

The fourth characteristic is its flowing, changing form. Folk culture is not an object locked in a glass case. As time changes, the words of songs change; as occupations change, the situations of work songs change; as migration grows, traveller songs acquire new images of trains, buses, cities, phones, screens, and distance. An old flood song may have spoken of boats and bullock carts; a new stanza may bring in rescue boats, bridges, machines, embankments, mobile messages, and government lists. A tradition that never changed would die; it lives because it changes.

The first path to understanding Garh Narikel's folk culture is to understand its geography. The body of the village is not drawn by fixed lines. The river changes course, floods cut through field-bunds, sand buries fields, silt brings new fertility, ponds are filled or dredged, embankments break and are rebuilt, groves are cut and new trees planted. Amid this continual change the village preserves its identity. Geography here is not merely background; it is an active character in life.

The houses, courtyards, hearths, walls, vessels, toys, objects of worship, field-bunds, sacred groves, and pond-banks of Garh Narikel are all bound to the soil. Soil is not merely a building material here; it is also life's final refuge. Straw and thatch decay into earth with time; dry grass, leaves, dung, ash, hide, and wood all return at last to soil. Living within

this cycle teaches people the impermanence of things and the mutual dependence of life.

A courtyard plastered with cow dung is at once a means of cleanliness, a ground of beauty, and a sacred surface for festivals. On walls coated with smooth clay, aripan designs, handprints, coloured lines, or the smoke of a lamp write the time of the house. If rain washes the coating away, it is applied again. This repetition is not mere maintenance; it is an act of bringing the house repeatedly back to life. Women's hands are the chief agents of this rebirth.

The smell of rice cooked on a clay hearth, potatoes buried in ash, spices ground on a stone or clay slab, cool water in an earthen pitcher, clay bowls and cups, little Mahadevas made for worship, children's clay birds and tiny creatures—these dissolve the boundary between daily use and art. In making useful things, the craftsperson's hands also create form, proportion, texture, and beauty. Folk art here is not an object hung in a separate gallery; it moves through the hand, the kitchen, the shrine, play, and the field.

Garh Narikel's soundscape is full of water. The splash of a bucket in a well, pitchers knocking at the water-place, a fish leaping in a pond, rain beating on thatch, water running through a drain, the distant roar of floodwater at night, waves tapping the body of a boat—these are the elemental rhythms of folk melody. When a singer says "splash," the word is not merely an imitation of sound; within it accident, drowning, birth, net, play, fear, and memory may all awaken at once.

The measure of breath is especially important in boatmen's songs. Against the current there are short, forceful calls; while drifting with it, long open notes; in fog, names or signals for direction; at night, narrative singing to lessen fear. One singer raises a line and another boatman answers. Call and response does more than keep rhythm: it confirms one another's presence. On dark water, the voice itself tells you that your companion is still beside you.

Time changes with the seasons. An Agahan dawn carries the smell of paddy; the days of Sawan bring mud, leaves, snakes, and the tales of Madhushravani; Bhadon nights bring darkness, humidity, clouds, and fear of flood; Chait and Baisakh bring pond-dredging, field preparation, mango blossom, dust, and hot winds; Jeth teaches the value of water; Kartik brings lamps, ripening grain, and the sequence of festivals. Songs preserve this seasonal memory. "Feet in the mud" tells the listener it is transplanting time; "the heads of paddy have bowed" opens the scene of harvest; "tie the boat" instantly awakens the warning of flood.

Even pauses in daily life are cultural. Sitting beneath a tree to chew betel, talking for a while out of the sun, drying nets on a pond-bank, exchanging news on the way home from the market, bringing up old

stories when the hearth-fire dies down—none of these is mere idleness. In such pauses knowledge, memory, satire, decisions, relationships, and lines of song are passed on. Many folk-song lines may have been born in precisely such moments—from someone's fresh remark, an accidental rhyme, a pain, or a laugh.

Cultivators carry knowledge of soil, seed, plough, oxen, field-bunds, weather, and labour. Carpenters make plough-beams, yokes, bullock carts, doors, cots, parts of boats, and the woodwork of houses. Blacksmiths tend iron tools, sickles, spades, knives, nails, repairs, and sharpening. Potters make pitchers, lamps, bowls, ritual vessels, objects of worship, and toys. Leatherworkers make shoes and sandals, drum-skins, carry out necessary work after animals die, and prepare many useful objects. Doms make bamboo winnowing trays, fans, chests, baskets, and materials required for rites. Barbers, washermen, midwives, bearers, boatmen, sweet-makers, pamarias, dholak players, pipahi players, storekeepers, betel growers, oil pressers, fishers, and herders—all their work is tied to some rite or daily practice of life.

Festivals and rites make communal dependence visible. A wedding is not the work of the bride's and groom's families alone: the wedding pavilion, bamboo, clay, vessels, cloth, betel, sweets, music, decoration, bathing, departure, procession, and meal require many hands. At birth there is the midwife's experience, the women who sing sohar, the work of barbers and washermen; at death, the bier, bamboo, ghat, water, lament, and collective presence; at festivals, images, earth, drums, sacrifice or offerings, flowers, betel, lamps, and cleaning. All of these create interdependence.

It would be wrong to mistake such interdependence for equality. Many kinds of work have been deemed "necessary" while the people who perform them have received little social respect. Folk songs comment sharply on this contradiction. If a rite is incomplete without the dholak, why is the maker of that drum denied a place inside the doorway? Why should the person who ferries everyone across the water receive the smallest share? Why is the touch of one who removes dead animals and protects the village from disease called impure? Such questions recur in folk satire, laments, heroic ballads, and stories of resistance.

In Garh Narikel, "ilm" is not merely occupational skill; it is a union of experience, observation, memory, bodily practice, and moral responsibility. Children learn by watching work. First they hold the tool, then do a small task, then make a mistake, then correct it. No written book teaches where a thin bamboo will bend and where it will split; one must watch the pressure of the craftsperson's hand. Where a fishing net should be cast is not read from a map but from the wind, the colour of the water, the movement of fish, and old experience.

Song gives it its rhythm. When paddy is pounded, two or four pestles must rise and fall together; the song keeps the beat. When a boat is rowed, many hands must move with one direction and one force; the call holds the rhythm. In transplanting, the row must stay straight, the bent body must endure fatigue, and the pace must remain even; the refrain gives support. The spinning wheel makes its own *dhun-dhun* rhythm, and the singer gives it words. Thus labour creates music, and music organises labour.

In Garh Narikel's oral tradition, "listening" is an active ethical act. Merely allowing sound to fall on the ear is not listening. Listening means giving the speaker's experience room, not cutting across a story, understanding the fear or shame behind words, and accepting both old and new forms. When elders say, "Keep listening," they are not asking only to entertain you; they are asking to place their memory in the next throat.

The same tale is told many times. Each time the audience changes, the occasion changes, the storyteller's age changes, and the village situation changes. The words change as well. A character may grow larger, an event may be shortened, a new comparison may be added, or a song-stanza may lengthen. A written perspective may call these differences errors; a folk perspective sees life in them. If a story never changed, it would sever its relation with the present.

Truth in oral tradition has many layers. A folktale does not provide dates, documentary proof, and uniformity like a historical record, but it preserves a society's emotional truth, moral judgements, fears, aspirations, and memory. A story about the origin of a pond may be factually impossible, yet it reveals how people experience that pond's depth, mystery, or collective importance. A hero's strength may be exaggerated, yet the ballad expresses a community's ideals of justice, fidelity, and courage.

Heroic ballads teach more than courage in battle. Who is a true hero? One who refuses greed, guards a boundary, stands beside the weak, keeps a promise, and opposes injustice. Tales of folk deities may give sacred form to a woman's endurance, a worker's honesty, a boatman's courage, a poor person's intelligence, or the self-respect of a marginalised community. In such ballads, people excluded from official history find their own heroes.

Garh Narikel's folk song is not merely poetry but a living act tied to an occasion. A song is sung because something must be done—to transplant rice, row a boat, lull a child, welcome a newborn, complete a marriage rite, send a daughter away, call upon a deity, struggle against a flood, remember the dead, mock injustice, remember one who has gone away, or survive a night of fear. Because of this functional nature, a song's

words, rhythm, refrain, breath, and voice are deeply connected to its occasion.

The emotional range of folk song is wide. Joy, love, modesty, satire, taunting, labour, hope, longing, lament, courage, devotion, rebellion, humour, fear, and memory all find a place within it. A single song may shift its emotional register. A wedding-gari may begin in laughter and turn into a sharp comment on women's social pain. A samdaun, though a lament for a daughter's departure, can also express a mother's blessing, practical wisdom, and the hope that her daughter will be treated with respect in her new home. A flood song may begin in grief and end with a communal boat, shared grain, and the resolve to build homes again.

The language of folk song usually stays close to everyday speech. The words need not be difficult; sound, repetition, forms of address, local imagery, and the refrain give a song depth. "O mother," "Brother," "Sakhi," "Baua," "O river," "Boatman," "Sister"—such forms of address reduce the distance between singer and listener. Folk song ceases to be merely something heard and becomes a shared conversation.

A folk-song line is not always a complete grammatical sentence; sound, breath, and feeling complete its meaning. "Ho re," "hai-hai," "he daiba," "re sakhi," "are Rama," "jhoom-jhoom," "dhun-dhun"—these are not meaningless fillers. They are bridges of rhythm, places for breath, extensions of emotion, and signals by which the group joins in. Words that look small on a written page can open an entire emotional landscape in performance.

Many songs of Garh Narikel are sung in several stanzas to the same tune. The melody gives a stable base; each new stanza adds a different event, person, object, or feeling. This structure may be called stanzaic recurrence. In a transplanting song, for example, the refrain may remain unchanged while the first stanza concerns the clouds, the second the landowner, the third memories of the natal home, the fourth wages, and the fifth laughter and teasing. The group repeats the refrain while the lead singer raises a new stanza.

This form gives folk song the power of indefinite expansion. There is no fixed written limit. If the occasion is long, more stanzas are added; if time is short, the song may end after two or three. If something new has happened, a new stanza may appear the next time. In this way folk song can become the community's moving newspaper, ledger of feeling, and history.

The refrain is the foundation of memory. A child or new singer who does not know the full stanza can still catch the refrain and join the group. Gradually the stanzas are learned as well. The refrain is the musical form of collective ownership—one throat raises the story, the community repeats its central feeling.

Folk-song lines generally try to keep a comparable length, but they are not bound by the strict rules of written metre. In singing, a note may be prolonged, a word shortened, a pause inserted, or a sound added so that the line sits within the rhythm. Folk singers may not know the names of metrical rules, yet by body, breath, and practice they preserve rhythmic balance.

A folk tune is direct, but not simplistic. Its simplicity grows from the needs of collective singing. The melody should be catchable on first hearing, so that people in a field or boat can repeat the refrain without rehearsal and both old people and children can participate. Difficult ornament can distance the group; therefore the core tune tends to be clear, its turns limited, and its rhythm easy to recognise.

Repetition is the life of folk song. The same word or sentence returns again and again, but its feeling may shift slightly each time. The first “come back” may be an appeal, the second a waiting, the third a cry, the fourth an impossible hope. The listener experiences these changing shades of meaning.

Repetition is also useful in labour. Transplanting or pounding paddy requires the same pace over a long period. A constantly changing, complex melody can break the body’s rhythm; a repeated refrain gives a stable base amid fatigue. In a boat too, the recurring call keeps the strokes of the hands even.

Simplicity makes it easy to add new stanzas. A singer remembers the framework of the tune and can fit fresh words into it at once. This improvisational creativity lets folk song respond immediately to current events. Someone pays too little wages, someone leaves an embankment half-repaired, someone displays vanity at a festival—by evening a new stanza may already exist.

Call-and-response is especially natural in Garh Narikel’s collective songs. One singer raises a line; the group answers, repeats the refrain, or echoes the ending. This method provides leadership for labour, unity for the group, and expansion for emotion.

During transplanting, an experienced woman in the front row may ask, “Where are the clouds held up?” The group answers, “Beyond the Balan.” In the next stanza the question may become, “Where is my beloved held up?” and the group answers in the same tune. Nature and private life thus enter the same musical structure.

In boatmen’s calls, the answer is also a signal of safety. The lead boatman cries “Pull,” and the group answers; in darkness or fog, the sound confirms that everyone is awake and together. Hauling in a fishing net, lifting a heavy load, carrying earth onto an embankment, thatching a house—small call-and-response patterns become the rhythm of collective work.

In religious or narrative performance, the lead singer tells the story while the group answers with “ho,” “hai,” “jai,” “are,” “listen,” or a fixed refrain. The listeners are therefore not passive; the story occurs collectively.

The kabaddi of Channa Grove is itself a vast form of call and response. The continuous utterance of “kabaddi” joins breath, boundary, and presence. When this utterance turns into “name” or “water-burial,” the game becomes collective testimony. One spirit raises a name, the others repeat it; the name passes from private memory into communal memory.

Many folk songs can originally be sung without modern instruments. There will not always be a dholak in the field, a harmonium at the water-place, or a heavy instrument in a boat. Voice, clapping, the strike of feet, the sound of tools, the tap of water, the beat of pestles, the turning of a spinning wheel, the grinding of a millstone—all become accompaniment in themselves.

In singing without instruments, the collectivity of voices matters. Perfect unison in a single pitch is not essential; voices of different ages, timbres, and heights combine to make the sound of a village. The beauty of folk singing lies not in solo brilliance but in collective texture.

Local instruments change the emotional colour of an occasion. The dholak takes different strokes in a wedding, sohar, Holi, dance, bhagait, marsiya, or narrative song. The mridang deepens devotion, storytelling, and serious performance. The sharp sound of the pipahi carries news far—to a wedding procession, festival, march, or emergency. Cymbals, manjira, khajuri, damppha, danka, nagara, rasanchauki, bamboo jharni, and household metal vessels may all become instruments of rhythm.

Instruments are themselves products of local craft. The wood, hide, rope, or strap of a dholak; the tube of a pipahi; the bamboo jharni; the clay or wood of a mridang—each depends on the cooperation of several occupations. A craftsperson’s *ilm* is hidden within the instrument’s voice. If the skin is loose, the beat is dull; if stretched too tight, the sound grows sharp; rain or winter damp changes the tone. Experienced players correct it with fire, sun, oil, or tightening.

When modern instruments enter Garh Narikel, old sound does not simply disappear; a mixture emerges. Harmonium, drums, or amplification may join the folk tune. But if machinery overwhelms the voice, the occasion, and the group, folk song is reduced to stage performance. The life of folk melody lies in the fact that people can sing it themselves rather than remain only spectators.

If pestle-strokes become uneven while pounding paddy, an accident may occur. Song fixes the sequence of blows. A woman grinding grain repeats a stanza with the circular movement. When the spinning wheel

turns, its “dhun-dhun” becomes the base of a song. The ox at an oil press goes round and round, and the singer may turn that circle into a metaphor for day, season, poverty, or life.

Thatching a house, cutting earth, repairing an embankment, dredging a pond, lifting a load, hauling a boat, drawing in a net—all these may have short collective songs or calls. The harder the work, the more necessary the group’s voice. Song does not abolish fatigue, but it keeps fatigue from becoming solitary.

Work song is an open space for social comment. In the field women may sing of the landowner, the in-laws’ home, husbands, wages, poverty, or injustice in ways that would be difficult to say directly. The group refrain turns a private complaint into shared truth. Protest remains sheltered inside laughter.

Agriculture is the foundation of Garh Narikel’s time, food, labour, hope, and fear. Agricultural songs remember the order of the year—choosing seed, ploughing, making field-bunds, waiting for rain, transplanting, weeding, irrigation, disease and pests, the grain filling with milk, harvest, carrying sheaves, threshing, winnowing, storage, and saving seed for the next year. Each stage has its own rhythm and feeling.

A seed song is a song of hope. The food of an entire year rests within a tiny grain. Holding seed in the hand, the cultivator remembers soil, cloud, labour, and fate together. A song may call the seed a child, a lamp, a promise, or a gift from the ancestors.

Transplanting songs are a powerful domain of women’s voices. Bodies bent for hours in mud, feet sunk in water, backache, clouds, laughter, abuse, love, memories of the natal home, questions of wages—all become stanzas. One woman raises a line and the others take up the refrain. The length of the field becomes the length of the song.

In weeding, song turns the distinction between crop and weed into a comment on distinctions in life—whom to preserve, whom to uproot, who is useful, who is an obstacle. The folk imagination turns this agricultural work into a moral metaphor.

Harvest songs carry the fruit of labour, respect for grain, the shine of the sickle, bowed paddy, hope for the household, and collective sharing. But if the yield is poor, debt is heavy, shares are unfair, or the landowner is unjust, the same song may turn sorrowful or satirical.

Agricultural song does not depend only on old tools. New seed, chemical fertiliser, pesticides, pumps, machines, labour shortages, migration, and market prices can all become new stanzas. The folk tune remains old while the questions become new. That changing form is precisely the vitality of folk culture.

A river song contains not only waves but directions. East and west, right and left, the rise and fall of the current, ghats, banks, sand, silt, whirlpools, crocodiles, fish, boats, drowning, and crossing—these words preserve geographic knowledge of life. The river both makes the village boundary and erases it. In flood, right may seem left, an old path may sink beneath water, and a new boatman may create a route. Song keeps this moving geography in memory not as something fixed but as something flexible.

The central feeling of a boatman's song is companionship. Even a lone boatman speaks with the river; in a group one voice gives direction, another strength, a third warning. The knock of the boat's planks, the splash of the oar, the tap of water, and the call of the throat make a combined rhythm. When the river is calm, the rhythm opens; when the current is fierce, it becomes short and sharp.

Fishing songs carry respect for nature. Experienced fishers do not want to catch every small fish and destroy the following year's life. Knowledge of net size, season, breeding time, pond depth, and collective sharing travels through song, proverb, and rule. This is a folk ecological discipline. Long before written departmental orders, communities made limits so that their resources could endure.

A communal fishing day can become a village festival. From dawn people are in the water, others wait on the bank, children are excited, shares are discussed, nets are repaired, fish are sorted, dishes are planned. Song makes the whole activity collective. Yet disputes over shares, distance between hamlets, and the rights of widows or weaker families also arise. Folk song mocks such injustice: why should a household without an adult man receive less? Why should someone who helped clean the pond have no name in the distribution?

On a flood night the voice of song changes. Sometimes songs are sung not loudly but softly because children are frightened, animals are restless, and the water is near. The refrain becomes reassurance—"we are together," "the boat is coming," "dawn will come," "the soil will grow again." Folk song gives psychological support in crisis.

In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles*, the mournful form of the water song is linked with the worker's splash. Yet Garh Narikel's cultural vision does not treat the splash as a final point. After the splash come the calling of a name, the waiting household, the search for testimony, the writing on leaves, the refrain of song—all of these bring the dead back into collective memory.

Human life in Garh Narikel is marked by rites, songs, and communal participation. Birth, naming, first hair-cutting, initiation, marriage, gauna, pregnancy, motherhood, old age, death—each stage has its songs.

Songs remember the rites, clarify the roles of relationships, give voice to emotional pressure, and make the community present.

A sohar does more than welcome a newborn. It expresses the mother's labour pain, the midwife's *ilm*, the family's hopes, the lineage's memory, the child's future, and social aspirations. Old discrimination between sons and daughters may remain in the words of some sohars; a changing society can add new stanzas that celebrate a daughter's birth equally. Here the vitality of folk culture appears in its capacity to alter unjust elements within tradition.

Naming songs reveal the social importance of a name. A name is not merely a label; it brings together family, ancestors, deity, season, event, hope, and memory. In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* the right to a name is central, so the meaning of this early life-cycle rite becomes still deeper. How can a society that sings a person's name at birth accept the erasure of that name at death?

Wedding songs form the largest storehouse. *Nachari*, *mangal*, *gari*, groom-welcoming songs, *mandap* songs, *kohbar* songs, *kanyadan*, departure, *samdaun*, *gauna*—each rite has its own tune, words, and group of singers. Humour and grief move through the same sequence. *Gari* turns relational tensions into play; women comment openly on the groom's side, men, greed, vanity, and social rules.

Samdaun is one of folk song's peaks of sorrow. A daughter leaves home, but the song sends her away not as broken, but blessed. Along with her tears, a mother gives lessons for life—preserve your dignity, do not endure injustice, do not forget your name, and know that the road to your natal home remains open. In *samdaun*, household objects, the threshold, *tulsi*, the pond, trees, childhood companions, brothers, mother, and father all seem to speak.

Songs of *gauna* and married life carry waiting, shyness, love, distance, and the awakening of the body. When migration separates husband and wife, old longing acquires a new economic reality. Letters, trains, buses, phones, screens—new media enter the song.

Songs of death give a community a discipline of mourning. Private grief finds a collective voice. The dead person's qualities, unfinished work, the family's condition, injustice surrounding the death, the river, or disease enter the song. Sometimes lament becomes resistance—when death is not an accident but the result of neglect or crime. The remembrance of *Bisesar*, *Saryu*, *Chhotu*, and unnamed workers belongs to this new chapter of folk lament.

Aripan is a silent song. Rice paste, the finger's line, circles, leaves, feet, lotuses, nets, sun, moon, *kohbar*—these designs are at once ritual and beauty. One generation teaches another by guiding the hand. There is no

written measurement; the eye is trained by practice. The design changes with the occasion.

Women's songs are a safe yet sharp medium for speaking social truth. Pain in the in-laws' home, marital relations, domestic violence, dowry, poverty, migration, wages, pregnancy, discrimination between daughters and sons, caste humiliation—what is difficult to say directly can be sung. Because of the group, one woman does not stand alone.

In samdaun, sohar, transplanting songs, gari, jhijhiya, Madhushravani, Sama-Chakeva, and Bhagavati songs, women are not merely performers but creators, keepers of memory, and social critics. When a daughter goes to another village she carries the tune with her. Local words are added there; thus songs travel between regions.

Garh Narikel's religious life is not monochrome. Household deities, village deities, river, trees, folk heroes, Bhagavati, Dharmaraj, Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Surya, Kabir's nirgun voice, marsiya, jharni, and faqir tales—many streams flow within one geography. Folk culture builds coexistence in practice more readily than rigid boundaries of doctrine.

The drums of Durga Puja, the image, fair, sacrifice, offering, immersion, and women's weeping form a complete cultural sequence. The grief of immersion may link the goddess's departure with the feeling of sending a daughter away. Men's unrestrained weeping during marsiya turns martyrdom, injustice, and family sorrow into collective emotion. Though the religious narratives differ, the human voice of grief speaks across them.

Madhushravani is a festival of newly married life, serpents, nature, narrative, and women's companionship. Stories pass from one breath to another; pictures, flowers, leaves, food, questions and answers, and song together become ritual. Sama-Chakeva is a festival of brother and sister, birds, clay, play, and Kartik nights. Chhath is sun, water, fasting, purity, and the collective discipline of the ghat.

Ghadi festivals, worship at the gahbar, the Fourteen Deities, the presence of folk gods, and bhagait all join local experience to formal priestly knowledge. Sometimes a deity gives a sign in a dream, sometimes divine emotion descends upon a singer, and sometimes a story gives meaning to illness or crisis.

Nirgun singing leads people beyond outer distinctions of caste, appearance, and occupation toward reflections on soul, body, illusion, and truth. Such singing takes place at night, in satsang, or on journeys; difficult philosophical ideas enter everyday language in a simple form.

An important aspect of folk religion is mutual assistance. Cleaning, materials, instruments, food, processions, ghats, safety, and guests at festivals all require many hands. Song joins people in one rhythm. Yet

there are also disputes over expense, vanity, exclusion, and rights; folk satire exposes these distortions.

The culture of Garh Narikel's children is not merely something received from adults; children make their own world. Kabaddi, mock weddings, brother-sister games, clay houses, pebbles, wooden wheels, pond games, hide-and-seek, paddy straw, bits of bamboo, imitation of birds and animals—these are forms of children's folk culture.

Play teaches social roles, but children also change them. In a mock wedding a girl may become the groom, a small child the priest, and a lump of clay the meal. Play makes rigid social structures flexible.

Children's songs are short, repetitive, and joined to movement. Counting, choosing, running, chasing, swings, rain, moon, birds, animals—simple images. Such songs teach language, memory, rhythm, and the rules of the group.

Riddles teach children to observe the environment. Leaves, fruits, tools, animals, moon, sun, river, household objects appear as comparisons. In searching for the answer, a child attends to form, quality, and use.

Ghost stories do not teach fear alone. They may carry practical lessons about places not to visit at night, the depth of a pond, the limits of a grove, caution at a well, and respect for the dead. The kabaddi of Channa Grove becomes a bridge between children's play and memory of the dead.

When Ananya rewrites the story, children's folk culture becomes the next chapter of history. Children do not merely repeat old stories; they question them, reshape them, adopt new media, and make new paths through memory.

Many Garh Narikel folk songs tell stories. In such songs, characters, events, journeys, conflicts, love, promises, deception, war, flood, famine, deities, folk heroes, or social crisis unfold stanza by stanza. Where written history lists rulers, years, orders, and wars, narrative folk song preserves the experience, fear, hope, and moral judgement of ordinary people.

The memorability of narrative song is strengthened by melody and refrain. A long story may be forgotten in prose, but stanzas survive with the help of tune. The lead singer knows the sequence of the narrative; the group gives the refrain, a question, or a response. At intervals the storyteller may explain the context in prose and then raise the song again. In this mixed form, story and song support one another.

It is natural for a single narrative to have many versions. One hamlet may enlarge the hero's courage, another the mother's grief, a third the betrayal, a fourth divine intervention. A daughter who carries a tune to

another village after marriage may find the local story of that village joined to it. Thus a song changes as it travels.

Narrative song is a form of moral education, but not in the manner of a sermon. Listeners hear the deeds of characters, their consequences, and the community's response, and decide for themselves. The humiliation of one who accepts greed, honour for one who keeps a promise, a defender of the weak becoming a folk deity, collective punishment of the unjust—values are transmitted through such patterns.

Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles itself takes the form of a modern folk epic. Bridge, contractor, court, papers, screen, bank, migration, village, river, and ghosts all enter the same narrative. Here the hero of old ballad does not merely raise a sword: one person writes names, one preserves evidence, one stands beside the victim, one teaches a child to recognise fraud. These modern forms of courage deserve entry into folk song.

Folk song is not only a mirror of the village; at times it is also a hammer. It strikes at inequality, vanity, greed, injustice, hypocrisy, delay in court, a landlord's miserliness, the groom's side's arrogance, dowry, caste humiliation, exploitation, government neglect, and family violence. Song's satire may cut more sharply than direct speech.

Wedding gari is a socially permitted occasion for commentary. Beneath the cover of laughter, the groom, in-laws, greedy relatives, vain men, and unequal relationships are criticised. Everyone laughs, but the words remain in memory. Women's suppressed experiences become collectively audible.

Work songs comment on wages and workers' conditions. The owner in shade, the labourer in sun; granaries full, wages incomplete; the bridge high, the worker's hut leaking—such contrasts become direct images in song.

Religious songs too may criticise hypocrisy. Outer display, expensive ceremonies, public exhibitions of donation, exclusion of the weak—folk satire exposes injustice carried out in the name of deities. True devotion is understood as linked with common welfare, food, water, compassion, and justice.

Modern fraud, fake phone calls, theft of privacy, fear of the screen, online debt, and digital blackmail also lie within the reach of folk song. Ujjwal Jha's tragedy may become a new setting for old songs of longing or fear. The refrain might say: do not remain alone; call out together; shame belongs to the criminal. Folk culture understands modern crisis in its own language.

Garh Narikel's folk life is not filled only with sorrow and struggle; humour is one of its strengths for staying alive. Amid hard labour,

poverty, flood, social tension, and family burdens, people make paths for laughter. Nicknames, exaggeration, mimicry, instant rhyme, paradoxical sayings, gari, riddles, and tales are among humour's many forms.

Folk humour can move both from above to below and from below to above, but its moral value depends on whether it humiliates the weak or breaks the vanity of the powerful. Just satire targets the greedy, hypocritical, unjust, fraudulent, and arrogant. Laughter at caste, poverty, bodily disability, or a victim's suffering violates the humane foundation of folk culture.

Humour lightens fatigue in the middle of work. During transplanting one singer may add a fresh stanza, the group laughs, and the burden on the body becomes a little lighter. Once danger has passed, a boatman turns the incident into a tale. Children imitate the mannerisms of adults.

Ghost stories too may be humorous. A ghost laughs at human foolishness, fails to understand official language, or a human being turns out to be more frightening than the ghost. In *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* such inversion becomes serious social criticism—the panidubbi says that it pulls people into water, but these people push them into it.

Humour helps a thought stay in memory. A dry sermon is forgotten; a sharp proverb remains. Folk justice therefore often travels from generation to generation in satirical form.

Folk culture is not only long songs and stories. Generations of experience can be compressed into a short proverb. Proverbs about field, river, animal, tree, season, relationship, justice, labour, and greed guide conduct.

To remain memorable, a proverb relies on rhythm, alliteration, contrast, comparison, or rhyme. A contrast such as "falsehood is stone, truth is seed" gives an entire philosophy in miniature. "The crocodile eats the body, not the name" opens the relation among body, death, memory, and justice in a single sentence.

A proverb's use changes with context. Elders use it as warning; women in disputes; farmers in reading weather; children in play; storytellers at a turn in the narrative. The same proverb finds a new meaning in a new situation.

Sometimes proverbs preserve old prejudices as well. Respect for folk culture does not mean accepting every old sentence as truth. A proverb that belittles women, caste groups, or the poor requires criticism, inversion, or a new form. A living folk culture can change the injustice within itself.

The soul of Garh Narikel's folk songs lies in the local speech. A standardised language is useful for writing and wider communication, but a song's address, sound, diminutives, tone, teasing, affection, and satire may be incomplete without local pronunciation. Forms such as "mae," "baau," "bhaiya," "sakhi," "ge," "rau," "hau," "chhai," "chhai," "jeme," and "aabah" are not merely linguistic forms; they give the temperature of a relationship.

Words change with the singer. In one corner people sing "pani," elsewhere "paani"; one place has "ghuri aau," another "ghuri aabah"; a refrain in one hamlet may differ slightly in another. To erase these differences in the name of uniformity would be to cut the body of the song.

Locality, however, should not become obscurity. When a song is printed in a book, a short meaning may be given for difficult words where necessary, but the original voice should not be altered. Exaggerated phonetic spelling that breaks the word apart should be avoided; the song should remain meaningful, natural Maithili.

Speech changes through migration and education. The new generation brings words from the city; the older generation carries local names. A song can hold both. New objects such as mobiles, accounts, screens, and messages become Maithili when joined to local verbs, forms of address, and comparisons.

It is difficult to search for the single "original" form of a folk song because folk song lives in its many versions. Within one village, stanzas may change from hamlet to hamlet. One singer may sing her mother's version, another her mother-in-law's, a third a form heard on radio or at a fair.

Versions change for many reasons—failure of memory, creative addition, needs of the occasion, local names, social change, length of performance, religious influence, migrant connections, new instruments, stage presentation. Through all these, melody, rhythm, stanza order, or refrain may change.

A song learned by ear lacks written fixity, but it has bodily continuity. A singer may forget the exact words of a line yet remember the turn of the melody, the place of the refrain, the rise of feeling, and the beat. New words then arise naturally upon that frame.

Writing or sound recording is an important means of preserving folk song, but it should not be declared the final authentic form. Every record is one performance on one occasion. It is useful to preserve with it the singer, place, occasion, season, group, and version.

The folk songs at the openings and endings of chapters in *Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles* can likewise become a modern extension of

this tradition. Though written, they name a tune, their refrains can become collective, and singers may add stanzas. A written creation can enter folk life and acquire a new oral existence.

Many people from Garh Narikel go to cities or distant places for education, jobs, labour, or business. Migration can weaken village culture, but it also brings new experience. The distribution of labour at home changes: fields face shortages of workers, burdens grow on elders and women, houses stand empty, and festivals have fewer participants. From the other side come money, education, tools, new ideas, treatment, communication, and new tunes.

Traveller and migrant songs are major forms of this experience. Older songs spoke of letters, travellers, bullock carts, or boats; now trains, buses, aeroplanes, phones, video calls, remittances, leave from work, rooms in great cities, and factory shifts have entered them.

Migrants carry their food, fish, betel, festivals, songs, and speech with them to the city. Sama-Chakeva, Chhath, Madhushravani, sohar, and wedding songs are sung in small urban rooms. Where local materials are unavailable, substitutes are made. Culture changes its location, but village memory travels with it.

Those who return bring new words and habits. Sometimes conflict follows—the elders say, “This is not our way,” while the younger generation wants change. Folk culture becomes a medium for this conversation. A new stanza added to an old tune can bring the two generations together.

The sorrow of migration is not merely distance; it includes insecure labour, crisis of identity, language, debt, loneliness, and death. When someone dies away from home and the name, body, or compensation does not return, folk song becomes a bridge of testimony between home and elsewhere.

With time, wells decline and hand-pumps increase; alongside houses of straw and thatch come brick and cement; beside bullock carts, motors; beside hand tools, machines; beside oral news, phones. Every change brings both convenience and loss.

A hand-pump brings water closer, but reduces the well as a common meeting-place. Meetings, songs, news, and relationships at the water-place may diminish. A tap or motor gives water faster, but raises new questions of groundwater, common rights, and repair.

Brick-and-cement houses appear durable, but knowledge of earth, cow dung, local thatch, climate-wise ventilation, and craft may diminish. Each repair of an old house kept collective ilm alive; ready-made material weakens that relation.

Machines reduce agricultural labour but may also reduce the occasions for work song. A rice-pounding machine erases the collective rhythm of pestles. Songs must therefore find new occasions—fairs, schools, families, recordings, new forms of labour.

Roads connect the village to market, hospital, education, and the wider world; at the same time they bring questions of land, accidents, noise, migration, and outside influence. Folk song records both the benefit and cost of change.

The mobile phone is not merely a machine that destroys Garh Narikel's oral tradition; it can also extend it. Songs are recorded, migrant families listen, elders' voices are preserved, and a new generation learns tunes.

But the screen can turn collective singing into private consumption. People may watch videos instead of singing themselves. Amplification can make one singer so loud that the group's voice is suppressed. The life of folk melody lies in participation, not spectatorship.

The digital world brings new dangers—fake voices, frightening calls, debt, theft of privacy, blackmail, false news, loneliness. Folk culture can create collective forms of protection against these crises. Short warning songs, school refrains, family conversations—"do not stay alone," "tell your family first," "the shame belongs to the criminal," "do not give your account"—can become new folk ethics.

Ujjwal Jha's story is a symbol of this new water-burial—a drowning without water. If old village knowledge learns a new language, it can teach people to recognise the crocodile of the screen. Village collectivity protects a person from being left alone.

When folk songs are published through new media, consent and dignity remain essential. Broadcasting someone's grief, a private song, or the intimate singing of a women's group without permission is cultural theft. Though folk song is a collective tradition, each performance and each person still has rights.

Garh Narikel's store of folk songs cannot be confined to rigid boxes because one tune may change form on many occasions. Yet some major families of tunes can be identified to understand the cultural background.

Parati—dawn, waking, new beginning, invocation of the divine, and a slowly rising rhythm of hope. In this tune the darkness of night gradually withdraws. Parati is especially suited to positive songs at the openings of chapters in the novel.

Sohar—birth, new life, a new voice in the household, the mother's pain, and the family's joy. The tune of sohar need not sing only of a

child's birth; metaphorically it can also sing the birth of a new idea, new testimony, or new courage.

Samdaun—departure, separation, a mother's tears, threshold, natal home, blessing, and distance. It is a principal form of lament, but within it can also live messages of dignity and inner strength.

Batgabani or batohiya—journey, migration, road, river crossing, train and bus, memory of home, hope of return. In the world of the story it suits journeys from village to city, court, foreign land, or back again to Garh Narikel.

Ropani—collective labour in mud, call and response among women, clouds, natal home, wages, laughter, and social comment. The rhythm is moderate, repetitive, and joined to the body's movement.

Sohani or nirai—pulling weeds, protecting the field, distinguishing useful from useless, patience, and orderly labour. Sharp material for social metaphor.

Katani—fruit of labour, sickle, bowed paddy, grain, honour of labour, sharing, and celebration. It can become a song of victory, but also a lament over an unjust share.

Jhoomar—a moderate rhythm, circular movement, dance, collective joy, love, satire, or narrative. Many local forms are possible.

Jat-Jatin—dialogue between woman and man, rain, home, scarcity, love, and social circumstance. Its question-and-answer form gives it living dramatic force.

Sama-Chakeva tune—brother and sister, birds, clay figures, Kartik nights, play, and women's collective voices. Suited to memory, relationship, and the feeling of homecoming.

Jhijhiya—a lamp within a perforated vessel, light amid darkness, women's groups, dance, and collective vigil. A figure of small light amid fear, illness, darkness, or falsehood.

Bhagait—folk deities, heroic tales, devotional feeling, the beat of mridang or khajuri, narrative, and group response. Suited to serious stories, justice, resistance, and folk heroes.

Nachari—devotion, surrender, plaintive invocation, remembrance of Shiva or a folk deity, and a slow emotional movement. Private pain becomes collective.

Nirgun—reflection on body, soul, illusion, truth, humanity beyond caste, and the impermanence of life. Powerful with few instruments or a single voice.

Marsiya—martyrdom, death, family lament, history, and moral memory. A deep form of collective compassion and remembrance of injustice.

Jharni—a rhythmic collective performance, bamboo or other local implements, often in the context of marsiya or procession. A meeting of sound and bodily rhythm.

Boatman's viraha—current, boat, distant shore, drowning, the household waiting, call and response. Naturally tied to the narrative root of "water-burial."

Fishermen's song—net, pond, fish, sharing, wind, depth of water, and collective labour. Its rhythm is short and forceful according to the work.

Children's kabaddi tune—breath, running, boundary, group, and refrain. Joined to the ghosts' kabaddi of Channa Grove, it can become a song of memory.

Courtyard song—daily household work, children, relationships, laughter, women's conversation, hearth, grain, and season. Sung without instruments or with light clapping.

Jagaran song—collective awareness, all-night vigil, deity, crisis, justice, or popular campaign. In the story-world it can become the tune of the campaign to save names.

These tune-names are not rigid commands. A singer may add a batgabani stanza to a parati, create a new social song in the rhythm of ropani, or sing a modern injustice as bhagait. The truth of a folk tune lies in its use and communal acceptance.

Collecting folk songs is not merely copying down words. Who sang the song, on what occasion, in which hamlet, in what season, in whose presence, with which instruments, and in what emotional state—this information is part of the song's meaning. The same line can be comic at a wedding, sorrowful in mourning, or satirical in a field.

The singer's consent is essential. Intimate songs of women's groups, laments, private narratives, caste humiliation, and sensitive family matters should not be made public without permission. Folk song is a collective tradition, but the dignity and rights of the person who performs it remain intact.

When words are written as sung, pronunciation should be respected, but spelling should not be broken so excessively that meaning collapses. The original line, necessary notes on meaning, tune, occasion, and version may be given separately.

One version should not be declared "pure" and other versions called wrong. Forms sung by elders, women, young people, different hamlets,

and migrant groups should all be recorded. Difference is part of the wealth of folk song.

Written text is useful alongside sound recording. With voice alone, searching becomes difficult; with words alone, melody, rhythm, pronunciation, feeling, and the group's response disappear. Photographs or film preserve the bodily form of an occasion, but require care about consent and privacy.

If folk songs are taught in school, they should not be reduced to stage competitions. Children should have opportunities to listen to local elders, craftspeople, cultivators, fishers, women singers, and instrumentalists. Alongside the song they should understand the work, season, object, story, and social history.

When folk songs are sold in the market or performed on outside stages, community credit, payment to artists, and cultural context should be protected. Writing only "anonymous folk song" and erasing the contribution of local singers and community becomes a new form of name-theft.

Garh Narikel's folk culture is not an alternative to law, but it forms a foundation for the sense of justice. Law asks for papers, evidence, procedure, and orders; folk memory reads objects, voices, smells, footprints, songs, collective experience, and moral credibility. The two need to speak to one another.

Nand Aruni's work is to build a bridge between folk memory and modern evidence. He listens to the river's names but also writes them in his diary; he preserves a shoe and a gamchha but also files an application; he reads the village's leaves but also learns the language of the court. Justice requires the meeting of both systems of knowledge.

Ba is the moral foundation of folk memory. For her, objects are not lifeless—the lone shoe that returns is a sign of an entire crowd, wet paper carries the evidence of smell, a leaf is the writing of ancestors. This way of seeing joins objects to human stories.

The generation of Ananya and Aruni Nandan carries folk justice into education, questioning, writing, and new media. Tradition will remain alive when the new generation receives it not only with reverence but with critical love.

Channa Grove is the night assembly hall of the village's suppressed history. Names that cannot be spoken by day are called by ghosts at night. Matters shut inside papers by day open as games in the grove. The rules of play become rules of folk justice—cross the boundary, save the name, return before the breath breaks.

Ghosts, spirits, rakshasas, loth, panidubbi, and the Brahma of the peepal are not merely the village's fantasies of fear. They are folk

categories of death, incomplete rites, famine, water, forest, body, and memory. When modern crime enters the village, these old figures become metaphors for understanding it. The crocodile of the screen, the crocodile of paper, the crocodile of dates—the old animal is recognised within a new system.

The coconut leaf is the village's alternative archive. Paper can be cut; a leaf can grow. A seal is pressed onto paper from above; on a leaf a name rises from the sap within. A leaf is not permanent stone—it dries, falls, and another leaf comes—an image of the flowing nature of folk memory.

The river knows the true names of the dead. Within this imagination lies a folk-cultural belief that nature is not wholly subject to lies made by human beings. The register says “absent,” the mother says “drowned,” the river keeps the name.

Though Nand Aruni is a modern engineer, he inherits Garh Narikel's tradition of listening. His struggle is to make the human being visible behind the number. His diary becomes the written counterpart of folk song—name, object, signal, call, splash.

Ujjwal Jha is a victim of the new age. His river is the screen; his crocodiles are numbers, debt, threats, and shame. From his story Garh Narikel's folk culture learns that collective conversation can save a life in modern crisis. “You are not alone, are you?” becomes a new folk mantra.

Ba is the memory of the house, Ananya the next story, Aruni Nandan the transition of generations. Through these figures the novel shows that folk culture is not a collection of the past but a power for confronting crises of the present.

Positive, hopeful folk songs at the opening can join the reader to Garh Narikel's collective breath. They do not deny the darkness ahead, but show the seed of life within it. Parati, sohar, ropani, katani, batgabani, jhoomar, Sama-Chakeva, jhijhiya, boatman songs, children's songs—different tunes give different forms of hope according to a chapter's theme.

The function of an opening song is not to tell the story in advance but to prepare its emotional ground. If the chapter contains a river crisis, the song raises the boat, companionship, and hope of crossing. If it concerns a court, it raises leaves, testimony, and the sprout of truth. If it concerns fear of the screen, it raises group, dialogue, and light. If it concerns a woman's struggle, it raises a sister's hand, the line of an aripan, and self-respect.

A mournful song at a chapter's end becomes the collective grief, memory, or question that follows the event. Opening hope and closing sorrow together form the full cycle of folk life. Garh Narikel's culture

does not deny suffering, but it keeps life before suffering and memory after it.

Both songs should remain deeply connected to the chapter's story, not become generic decorative verses. The characters' present names, events, objects, weather, place, and moral question should be transformed into melody. The song should feel as if villagers themselves composed it after hearing what happened.

The refrain should be simple and collective. Eight or ten written lines may be enough, but in singing the refrain can be repeated and expanded. The tune-name is not merely a title; the movement of the line, forms of address, repetition, and feeling should suit the nature of that tune.

Songs should not adopt an artificial antiquity. When new objects appear, they should enter naturally within Maithili folk imagery. A mobile may be "the glass screen," digital fraud "the crocodile of the screen," an archive "the blue register," a server "the distant chamber"—such transformations absorb new experience into village language.

This culture is oral, therefore fragile; collective, therefore strong; local, therefore distinct; changing, therefore alive. One singer may die, but the refrain catches in another throat. One tree may be cut, but memory of the leaf may grow in song. A name may be erased from paper, but a mother's call, the sound of the river, a child's question, and the village song can make it present again.

Garh Narikel's collective identity rests on the belief that life cannot be lived alone. Farming, fishing, home, rites, festivals, crisis, mourning, and justice all require another person's hand, throat, and memory. Folk song gives audible form to this "togetherness."

Water-Burial Among the Crocodiles is a modern epic of this folk culture. Here crocodiles eat bodies, not names. Here leaves write, the river listens, ghosts play kabaddi, Ba reads objects, Nand Aruni writes names, and Ananya raises the story again. Here water-burial is not an ending; it is the beginning of a name returning in the collective voice.

Garh Narikel's folk songs are therefore not merely village entertainment. They are the rhythm of life, an alternative ledger of history, companion of labour, the open voice of women, the child's school, knowledge of nature, criticism of injustice, a memorial to the dead, and a warning for the future.

As long as some mother keeps calling a name from the threshold, some child catches a refrain, some boatman answers in darkness, some woman transplanting rice raises a song in the mud, some leaf moves without wind—Garh Narikel's folk culture will remain alive.

And when every paper falls silent, the song will speak.

That song sounded on that very night. At dawn, beside Channa Grove, children drew the first line in the dust, and from someone's throat rose the first sound—"Kabaddi..." The village's self-narration paused here, and the story began here—Chapter One, The Kabaddi of Channa Grove.

THE VILLAGE'S SELF-PORTRAIT

Folk tune: Village-Introduction Parati

*The soil speaks as our body, the water as our breath,
In tree and leaf is kept the dwelling-place of memory.
No single writer owns the song; the people are its makers,
Child, elder, father join by catching the refrain.
Paper may be cut, leaves grow—we have seen both,
What the register erased, a mother wrote again.
Labour is our rhythm, our throat our ledger,
Even after defeat we keep singing—this is our true identity.
Hear our story now; walk with us,
When paper falls silent, become a song and burn bright.*

Each major cultural theme of Garh Narikel is accompanied by a local tale and a singable example, naturally connected with the story-world, its characters, objects, geography, folk beliefs, and communal memory.

THE SPEAKING BRICK OF THE RUINS

Tale—In the old ruins of the village, one brick grows warm whenever rain falls. People say it was the last brick of the hearth in a house whose family was scattered by flood. Ananya once put her ear to the brick and heard the scrape of a ladle, a child's laughter, and a door falling shut. So before breaking down the ruins, villagers sing a house-song there once.

Song—The House Inside the Brick

Folk tune: Mournful Courtyard Song

Listen, O brick, listen to the warm brick,

Remember the last warmth of the extinguished hearth.

The brick is warm, the hearth gone cold,

Where has the smoke gone?

Laughter caught inside the wall,

Where has the house gone?

Sing the song, awaken the name,

Where has the house gone?

Laughter trapped within the wall, the road of smoke was lost,

At the touch of rain the old house warmed inside the chest.

Put your ear to it like Ananya; even a brick can tell a tale,

Wake the song and the name wakes; the house is built again.

Listen, O brick, listen to the warm brick,

Remember the last warmth of the extinguished hearth.

THE UNDYING LAMP OF THE GAHBAR

Tale—The lamp kept in the gahbar does not go out even in strong wind when someone in the village stands beside the helpless. But on a day of ostentatious worship the lamp keeps going out. Ba says that the deity looks not at ghee but at justice. Once, when grain was offered in Saryu's name, the flame split into two and burned together.

Song—The Flame of Justice

Folk tune: Bhagavati Jagaran

Wake, O Mother, wake, flame of the gahbar,

Be satisfied not with ghee but with a morsel of truth.

*The Mother of the gahbar asks no ghee,
Only one morsel of truth,
For the one whose name was suppressed,
Give that person light.
Two flames burned together,
The lock of the broken night gave way.*

*When one stands beside the helpless, the flame remains steady,
Before a platter of vanity, the wick falls again and again.
Wave the lamp together before the names held down,
Break the lock of night; let the colour of justice wake.*

*Wake, O Mother, wake, flame of the gahbar,
Be satisfied not with ghee but with a morsel of truth.*

THE ECHO OF THE OLD WELL

Tale—When a name is called into the old well, the same name does not return; the relationship attached to it comes back. Call “Bisesar” and the echo says “mother”; call “Saryu” and it says “labour”; call “Ujjwal” and it answers “not alone.” Aruni Nandan understood that the village sees a name not merely as an individual, but as a web of relationships.

Song—The Well’s Answer

Folk tune: Call-and-Response Song

*Call into the well, bend down and call a name,
Whatever bond returns in answer, hold it in your heart.*

Which name?—Bisesar!

Answer—A mother's tears!

Which name?—Saryu!

Answer—The strength of labour!

Which name?—Ujjwal!

Answer—The dawn of companionship!

*Not only the name returns; its whole world returns,
A mother's tears, labour's strength, the dawn-gift of companionship.*

*The deep throat of the well forgets nothing,
What has once been called cannot be erased.*

*Call into the well, bend down and call a name,
Whatever bond returns in answer, hold it in your heart.*

THE MOON IN THE LITTLE POOL

Tale—When a little pool dried up, people thought it useless and planned to fill it with earth. That night the full reflection of the moon appeared only in that little pool, not in the large pond. Ba said, “Even a small body of water can hold the whole sky.” The pool was then saved for children’s play, birds’ drinking water, and the first gathering of rain.

Song—Little Water, Whole Moon

Folk tune: Children’s Jhoomar

*Save it, children, save even the little pool,
A whole moon in a little water—see the wonder.*

Little pool, whole moon,

*How did you gather the sky?
Great trust in a small hand,
Light within a little home.
Save the pool, save thirst,
Life dwells here.*

*The pond boasted; the little pool stayed quiet,
When night came, the whole sky descended into its lap.
Do not forget anyone because they are small—so Ba taught,
A whole life can fit inside a little pitcher.*

*Save it, children, save even the little pool,
A whole moon in a little water—see the wonder.*

THE RED TURBAN OF THE OLD GHAT

Tale—During floods, a red turban is sometimes seen floating without a body near the old river ghat. People say it is the sign of a boatman who abandoned his own boat to save five children. Whenever the current grows fierce, villagers tie a red cloth at the ghat to remember the courage of boatmen.

Song—The Red Mark at the Ghat

Folk tune: Boatman's Call

*Look, the red turban is flying at the ghat,
Children first, boatman after—the current tells the tale.*

*Red turban flying at the ghat,
The current says—beware,*

Children first, the boatman last,

This is the village's honour.

Strike the oars together,

We shall cross the storm.

The body went with the current; the sign remained at the ghat,

In five children's breath that boatman still flows today.

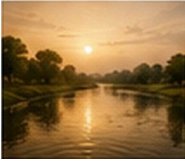
Whenever the current roars, the turban flies,

This emblem of the village's honour returns to show the way.

Look, the red turban is flying at the ghat,

Children first, boatman after—the current tells the tale.

SONG FOR ROWING A BOAT



Tale—While crossing the river, Nand Aruni saw that the tired boatmen were pulling with separate strength. Ba raised a short refrain; the oars began falling in one rhythm and the boat came out of the whirlpool. Boatmen therefore say: the shared voice is lighter than an oar, yet stronger than a boat.

Song—One Stroke, One Current

Folk tune: Boatman's Call-and-Response

Pull, O pull, pull on a single stroke,

One breath fore and aft—escape the whirlpool.

The front cries—Pull!

The rear answers—Pull!

Four oars in one stroke,

The current says—Press on.

When shared breath becomes one,

The whirlpool says—Go free.

Tired arms were separate, their strength scattered,

At Ba's little refrain all four oars came together.

*The moment rhythm was found, the boat slid on; the whirlpool stayed
behind,*

Before the power of one breath even the current said—Go.

Pull, O pull, pull on a single stroke,

One breath fore and aft—escape the whirlpool.

LULLABY FOR PUTTING A CHILD TO SLEEP

Tale—On a flood night the children were frightened. Ba sat beside the fading ashes of the hearth and sang a lullaby that made the river a cradle, the moon a watchman, and the tree a grandmother. The children slept. Outside, the water kept rising; inside, fear kept falling.

Song—The River's Cradle

Folk tune: Maithili Lullaby

Sleep, little one, swing in the river-cradle,

*The moon keeps watch, Peepal Grandmother guards you—sleep
without fear.*

Sleep, little one, the river rocks you,

The moon keeps watch,

Peepal Grandmother stirs her leaves,

And drives fear far away.

A mother's breath is a gentle pat,

Dawn will make its home.

Outside the water kept rising; inside the lullaby flowed,

Beside the faint warmth of ash, fear sank low.

A mother's touch took the rhythm of breath; song became a blanket,

Even on the flood-night the child's dream flowered green.

Sleep, little one, swing in the river-cradle,

*The moon keeps watch, Peepal Grandmother guards you—sleep
without fear.*

WEDDING MANGAL

Tale—Rain began over the wedding pavilion. People panicked, but Ba said that the clouds had come to bless the bride and groom with the scent of the soil. The women raised a song, the children steadied the pavilion, and the wedding did not stop.

Song—The Cloud's Blessing

Folk tune: Wedding Mangal

Rain, O cloud, rain upon the wedding pavilion,

Lay the blessing of the soil's fragrance upon bride and groom.

Clouds descended on the pavilion,

*The scent of flowers awoke,
The groom's feet, the bride's laughter,
Joined themselves to the soil.
Rain gave its green blessing,
Two lineages became one and moved together.*

*People panicked; Ba laughed—this is an auspicious guest,
Even the sky has come to bless us—what a fortunate hour.
Flower-scent, soil-scent, the music of laughter rang,
Like two streams, two lineages met and were adorned in one
confluence.*

*Rain, O cloud, rain upon the wedding pavilion,
Lay the blessing of the soil's fragrance upon bride and groom.*

SONG FOR CALLING UPON THE DEITY

Tale—On a day of crisis at the gahbar, people did not ask only for wealth and grain. Nand Aruni said, “First ask for the courage to hear the truth.” The lamp flame grew tall, and together everyone vowed that they would write the names of the unnamed.

Song—The Boon of Truth

Folk tune: Bhagait

*Ask, O ask—not for wealth, but ask for courage,
From the awakened flame of the gahbar ask for the language of truth.*

*O awakened power of the gahbar,
Give us not wealth but courage,*

Let the throat not tremble before a lie,

Give us the language of truth.

For the one whose name was left in darkness,

Give that person light.

On a day of crisis, put forward not the platter but the chest,

Give the unnamed a name—stand firm upon this vow.

The lamp flame grew tall; every head bowed,

With the cry of bhagait the village's courage opened.

Ask, O ask—not for wealth, but ask for courage,

From the awakened flame of the gahbar ask for the language of truth.

Songs of Struggling Against the Flood

Tale—When news came that the embankment had breached, people from every hamlet ran with sacks, earth, bamboo, and rope. With each refrain of the song, another sack was laid down. The embankment held until dawn. People said that night it had been bound not only with earth, but with voices too.

Song—Set the Sack, Plant the Bamboo

Folk tune: Flood Vigil

Wake, O wake, let the embankment not break—wake, O wake,

At every refrain lay down a sack and bind the river's mouth.

Set the sack, plant the bamboo,

Turn the current's mouth,

Not one household's embankment—the village's,

Joined by every hand.

The night will pass, dawn will rise,

Break the knot of fear.

People ran from hamlet after hamlet, burdens in every hand,

To the rhythm of the song a thousand sacks were laid.

The night passed under watch; by dawn the embankment stood,

The song did not stop first—the flood stopped first.

Wake, O wake, let the embankment not break—wake, O wake,

At every refrain lay down a sack and bind the river's mouth.

Satire on Injustice

Tale—An official said, “The name is not on the list, therefore the event did not happen.” That evening, while singing a transplanting song, the women added a line: “If you did not count the ears of paddy, does that mean there was no field either?” By the next day the line had reached the market, the ghat, and the school.

Song—The Spectacles of the List

Folk tune: Satirical Jhumar

Open them, babu, take off those list-making spectacles,

Weigh field, paddy, tears, and life with your own eyes.

The list says—there are no people,

The field asks—then where is the paddy?

The seal says—there are no tears,

The mother asks—then where is the life?

*Take off your spectacles, babuji,
Without a name, where is your knowledge?*

*“No name, therefore no event”—such is the babu’s wisdom,
The women planted one great new line in their transplanting song.*

*If you did not count the ears, did the field cease to be?
The needle of satire struck home, and the spectacles came off.*

*Open them, babu, take off those list-making spectacles,
Weigh field, paddy, tears, and life with your own eyes.*

Song for Remembering the One Away from Home

Tale—In a household from which someone had gone away to work, an extra lamp was placed at the threshold on Kartik evenings. People said that the lamp did not show the road to the house; it showed the road of memory. When someone living in a city suddenly remembered the smell of earth, the flame of that lamp had reached within him.

Song—The Extra Lamp at the Threshold

Folk tune: Batohiya

*Light it, O light it—light one lamp more,
Each evening raise the wick that bears the migrant’s name.*

*One lamp for those at home,
One lamp for your name,
Feet grown weary in a distant city
Remember their own village.
The lamp will burn, the road will remain,*

Come home again one evening.

*On a Kartik evening two flames tremble together at the threshold,
One for the people at home, one measuring the distance beyond.
At that same hour, in a city room, memory suddenly swelled,
Lamp joined lamp with a thread, and village joined city.*

*Light it, O light it—light one lamp more,
Each evening raise the wick that bears the migrant's name.*

Song for Getting Through a Night of Fear

Tale—When darkness thickened near Channa Grove, the children grew afraid. Ba would say, “Call fear by its name, and it will grow smaller.” The children made refrains by calling out “ghost,” “crocodile,” and “darkness,” and at the end answered each one with “We are together.”

Song—We Are Together

Folk tune: Night Vigil

*Speak, children, speak the name of fear,
The ghost grows small when named—sing, “We are together.”*

*Is there a ghost?—We are together.
Is there a crocodile?—We are together.
Is the darkness thick?—We are together.
Does the wind hiss?—We are together.*

*Call the name, light the lamp,
Garh Narikel is together.*

*Say ghost, say crocodile, say darkness, say wind,
For every name hold fast to one answer: "We are together."
The refrain became a shield, the lamp became a spear,
Even in the grove's thick darkness, fear's lock broke open.*

*Speak, children, speak the name of fear,
The ghost grows small when named—sing, "We are together."*

Paddy-Pounding Song

Tale—The four pestles were not striking in one rhythm. Saryu stood in the middle and raised a short refrain. Each time the refrain ended, all four pestles fell together. More than the paddy they pounded, people remembered that day the rhythm of labour.

Song—Four Blows of the Pestles

Folk tune: Paddy-Pounding

*Raise the pestle, sisters, raise it to one beat,
Catch Saryu's refrain and make blow meet blow.*

*One rises, two rise,
Three and four together,
The pestles fall in a single beat,
And the paddy sounds its colour.
Hands apart, one melody,
Labour turns to joy.*

*An off-beat blow brings danger; the paddy scatters away,
But when the refrain is complete, all four pestles fall together.
The paddy was pounded, the hearts were gathered—both tasks were
done,
Before the rhythm of the song, the reign of weariness bowed.*

*Raise the pestle, sisters, raise it to one beat,
Catch Saryu's refrain and make blow meet blow.*

House-Thatching Song

Tale—Before the rains, when the thatch was changed, the whole family gathered. The old loosened the worn thatching ties, the young steadied the bamboo, the women handed rope and straw, and the children carried the small bundles. Thatching a house was not merely repair; it was practice passed from generation to generation.

Song—The Roof's Green Hope

Folk tune: House-Thatching Call

*Thatch it, O thatch it, thatch it before the rains,
Grandmother's knot, child's knot—bind them side by side.*

*Raise the ties, spread the straw,
Hold the bamboo, brother,
One knot learned from grandmother,
One knot brought by the child.
Rain will fall, the house will smile,
The roof will give its shade.*

*The old loosen the ties, the young steady the bamboo,
Women pass rope and straw, children spread the bundles.
Hands of four generations meet beneath one roof,
Let the rain come dancing—the house will smile at home.*

*Thatch it, O thatch it, thatch it before the rains,
Grandmother's knot, child's knot—bind them side by side.*

Earth-Cutting Song

Tale—When cutting earth for a new field ridge, people first asked permission of the ground. Ba touched a handful of soil to her forehead and said, “As much as we cut, that much we shall tend.” Because of this restraint, useless pits were not left behind.

Song—Permission of the Soil

Folk tune: Hoe Rhythm

*Cut gently, O cut gently—ask before you cut the earth,
Touch one handful to your forehead, then set the hoe to soil.*

*Take the hoe, cut gently,
The soil is Mother's body,
As much as we take, that much we fill,
Let labour keep this love.
The ridge will rise, the field will live,
The earth will give affection.*

The soil is Mother's body—do not touch it without asking,

As much as you take, that much you fill—understand this vow.

Even a wound cut by a hand of restraint can heal,

The ridge rises, the field smiles, the earth gives love.

Cut gently, O cut gently—ask before you cut the earth,

Touch one handful to your forehead, then set the hoe to soil.

Embankment-Repair Song

Tale—Children were the first to notice the cracks in the embankment. They placed little clods of earth beside them as markers. Nand Aruni understood the importance of their game and gathered the village. That is why, on embankment-repair day, the children's first call is honoured.

Song—News of the Crack

Folk tune: Embankment Call

Listen, village, listen to the children's news,

A little clod beside a little crack—read the great warning there.

The child saw a little crack,

Village, listen today,

If we fill the small sign now,

Field and grain will be saved.

Join earth, bamboo, and sacks,

Together we will do this work.

At play the children set down a marker of earth,

Aruni understood—this too was the speech of watchfulness.

*Fill the small sign now, and the bhadaï crop will be saved,
Children too are sentinels of the village—so the song gives praise.*

*Listen, village, listen to the children's news,
A little clod beside a little crack—read the great warning there.*

Pond-Dredging Song

Tale—When the pond filled with silt, people said, “It is dead.” Ba objected: “Water does not die; its path gets blocked.” After the village dredged it together, the old spring broke through again, and everyone applauded at the first splash of a fish.

Song—The Spring Opens Again

Folk tune: Pond-Dredging

*Dredge it, O dredge it, clear the silt and dredge,
“Water does not die”—keep faith with Ba’s words.*

*Clear the silt, wake the spring,
Let the pond draw breath,
The hoe speaks, the basket sways,
Water gathers life again.
When the first fish splashes,
The village fills with joy.*

*In the breast of the pond they called dead, a spring lay sleeping,
To the rhythm of hoe and basket, its road broke open again.
At the first fish’s splash the whole village rejoiced,*

Life called blocked was opened by labour shared.

Dredge it, O dredge it, clear the silt and dredge,

“Water does not die”—keep faith with Ba’s words.

Load-Lifting Song

Tale—When people tried to raise the heavy bamboo of the wedding pavilion by straining separately, the pole bent. An old craftsman gave them a “hum-ho” rhythm. Once their breathing became one, the bamboo rose easily. Thus in heavy work the words are short, but the rhythm is strong.

Song—The Hum-Ho Load

Folk tune: Collective Load Call

Say hum, say ho, bring your shoulders together,

With the strength of one breath, raise the heavy load.

Say hum—say ho,

Bring four shoulders together,

On one breath the burden rises,

No one’s bones will break.

Strength shared can make a mountain smile,

Hum-ho is the village’s bond.

With separate force even the bamboo bent,

To the old craftsman’s rhythm it rose straight.

That no one’s bones should break—this is the rhythm’s wonder,

In the pair of hum and ho, the village’s shared hands resound.

Say hum, say ho, bring your shoulders together,

With the strength of one breath, raise the heavy load.

Boat-Pulling Song

Tale—When a boat became stuck in the sand of a dried channel, people held the rope and pulled separately, but the boat would not move. Aruni Nandan counted the beat, Ananya raised the refrain, and on the third pull the boat slid free. People said: the rope joins hands; the song joins breath.

Song—Move the Boat

Folk tune: Boat-Pulling

Pull, O pull—count to three and pull,

Free the boat's belly from the grip of sand.

On one, lean in; on two, hold,

On three, pull hard,

The sand will release the boat's belly,

The river's reach will open.

One rope, many hands,

The song will steal the heart.

With separate pulls even the rope grew weary,

Aruni's counting, Ananya's refrain—together they became rhythm.

On the third pull the boat slid free, and the sand laughed in defeat,

Counted, bound strength together—the greatest oar of all.

Pull, O pull—count to three and pull,

Free the boat's belly from the grip of sand.

Song of Gathering the Net

Tale—When the fishing is over, gathering the net is the hardest task, because fish, grass, leaves, and rubbish remain caught in its knots. An old fisherman teaches the children: “Casting the net is courage; gathering it is responsibility.” The knots are loosened to the refrain of the song.

Song—Untie the Knots Slowly

Folk tune: Fishermen's Net-Gathering Tune

Gather it slowly, slowly gather the net's knots,

*Casting takes courage, gathering takes wisdom—learn the old man's
jewel of a lesson.*

We cast the net in high spirits,

Now gather it slowly,

Save the fish, clear away the leaves,

Do not snap the knots in haste.

The end of a task is responsibility,

The song says it gravely.

In knot after knot, fish, grass, and leaves are caught,

In haste the thread will break; patience alone untangles it.

Fish to the water, leaves to the side, the clean net on the shoulder,

Responsibility at the end of work—that alone is true justice.

Gather it slowly, slowly gather the net's knots,

*Casting takes courage, gathering takes wisdom—learn the old man's
jewel of a lesson.*

Seed-Selecting Song



Tale—Ba does not choose only the glossy grains from the heap of paddy; she looks for full, disease-free seed that will preserve the old flavour. Ananya asks, “Why the small grain?” Ba says, “Sometimes an entire ancestral field lives inside a small seed.”

Song—The Seed-Selection Veil

Folk tune: Seed-Selecting Parati

*Choose, sister, choose the seed at early dawn,
Not shine but fullness—learn to see with Ba's eyes.*

*A full grain, a true grain,
Hope for the coming year,
An entire field held in a small seed,
The ancestors' trust.
Save the seed, save the flavour,
The soil will keep the history.*

*The small grain asked—where is my place?
Ba said—inside you breathes the old flavour.
Disease-free, full and sound, a companion recognised by the season,
This veil of chosen seed is the lamp of the coming year.*

*Choose, sister, choose the seed at early dawn,
Not shine but fullness—learn to see with Ba's eyes.*

Field-Ploughing Song

Tale—Before drawing the first furrow, the farmer rubs a clod of soil in his hand to test its moisture. Patting the bullock's neck, he says, "The work is shared." Folk belief holds that grain from a field ploughed while abusing the animal tastes bitter.

Song—The First Furrow

Folk tune: Ploughman's Song

*Come, bullock, come slowly, slowly,
Pat the neck and do the shared work together.*

*The plough enters the earth's breast,
Walk slowly, bullock,
Your sweat and my sweat,
Together will become grain.
Let the first furrow be true,
And society will fill and rise.*

*The clod was rubbed and its moisture read; only then was the plough
lowered,*

*No abuse—earth was called with affection.
Your sweat, my sweat—falling in the very same field,
If the first furrow stays true, grain will fill the land.*

Come, bullock, come slowly, slowly,

Pat the neck and do the shared work together.

Field-Bund Song

Tale—The bund between two fields is both a boundary and a support for water. Once, during a quarrel, the bund was cut and the water drained from both fields. Ba said, “If a boundary becomes enmity, both homes will dry up.” The two families then rebuilt the bund together.

Song—A Bund Is Not Enmity

Folk tune: Bund-Building Song

Raise the bund, do not raise enmity,

Keep a path beside the boundary; preserve affection.

Raise the bund, not hostility,

The water belongs to both fields,

Keep the boundary, keep the path,

Affection feeds both bellies.

If one cuts it, two will dry,

Keep wisdom awake.

In anger the bund was cut; both fields grew thirsty,

Remembering Ba’s words, both heads bowed in shame.

Soil from both homes was mixed, and the bund was bound again,

The boundary became a bridge, and the water too was held.

Raise the bund, do not raise enmity,

Keep a path beside the boundary; preserve affection.

Song of Waiting for Rain

Tale—At the end of Jeth, clouds gather and circle away without raining. Women turn empty water-pots upside down toward the sky, as though inviting the clouds to fill them. Children see boats, crocodiles, and elephants in the shapes of the clouds. Waiting becomes play inside the song.

Song—Invitation to the Clouds

Folk tune: Rain-Wayfarer

Come, cloud, circle back over the garh,

Accept the invitation of the upturned pot and fill the courtyard.

We have turned the pot upside down in the courtyard,

Cloud, fill it with water,

The paddy seed waits for you,

The dry earth is a queen.

Do not go far; rain upon the garh,

Listen to the field's voice.

End of Jeth, wandering clouds, the earth-queen thirsting,

Children shape clouds into boats, crocodiles, and water.

The empty pot gazes at the sky, the field waits on the path,

At the first drizzle, a market of green will open.

Come, cloud, circle back over the garh,

Accept the invitation of the upturned pot and fill the courtyard.

Weeding Song

Tale—While pulling weeds, Saryu said, “Not everything green is paddy.” Within that line she also placed the difference between false promises and real help. The women caught the refrain and made it a song for cleaning both field and society.

Song—Knowing One Green from Another

Folk tune: Sohani

*Pull them out, friend, recognise and pull them out,
Not everything green is paddy—remember Saryu’s words.*

*Not everything green is paddy,
Look at the root and recognise,
Whatever is sucking the grain’s sap,
Lay its nature bare.*

*When weeds are gone the plant will bloom,
Truth will preserve honour.*

*A false promise drinks the paddy’s sap like a weed,
Look at the root and recognise it; only then will the field live.
In the bent line of women weeding, knowledge stood upright,
The weeds were gone, the plants smiled, and the grain’s honour
remained.*

*Pull them out, friend, recognise and pull them out,
Not everything green is paddy—remember Saryu’s words.*

Irrigation Song

Tale—During the night irrigation turn, too much water was held back in one field. The next field dried. Nand Aruni opened the channel and divided the flow evenly. Then the song arose: “Hoarding water is not wealth; sharing water is life.”

Song—Justice of the Channel

Folk tune: Irrigation Call

*Open the channel, open the impounded water,
Let it flow equally through first field and second.*

*The first field is full, brother,
Why should the second thirst?
Open the channel, turn the stream,
Water is no one's private affection.
In shared water the paddy will smile,
Justice will sprout in love.*

*Night watch, one stream only; half the fields were satisfied,
Aruni's hand opened the channel, and justice came flowing.
Water is no one's private patch; it is everyone's shared affection,
Sharing does not diminish it—it enlarges love.*

*Open the channel, open the impounded water,
Let it flow equally through first field and second.*

Crop-Disease and Pest Song

Tale—As soon as the paddy leaves turned yellow, people thought of spraying medicine. Ba turned over the leaves and examined the tiny insects, the soil moisture, and the air. She said, “Know the name of the illness first; then treat it.” That care prevented needless poison.

Song—Read the Leaf

Folk tune: Field-Inspection Song

*Read first, read the yellow leaf,
Before medicine, learn the illness's name.*

The yellow leaf is saying something,

Read it first,

Insect, water, shortage in the soil—

Find the true cause.

Poison is not the answer to everything,

Keep the lamp of judgment lit.

Ba turned the leaf and saw insect, moisture, breeze,

Patient attention is better than poison poured in haste.

*The cause was known, the treatment matched, the field grew green
again,*

This song of looking carefully was sung from house to house.

Read first, read the yellow leaf,

Before medicine, learn the illness's name.

Harvest Song

Tale—Before the first sickle is swung, a corner of every field is left standing so birds and small creatures retain shelter. Ananya asks, “Why not cut everything?” Ba says, “Do not leave empty those who helped the field give us food.”

Song—First Ear, Last Corner

Folk tune: Harvest Song

*Cut the paddy, cut it with respect,
Leave one corner in the name of birds and creatures.*

*The sickle flashed in the Agahan sun,
The paddy bowed in respect,
Leave one corner as the birds' home,
It is the field's blessing.
Harvest, share, give thanks,
So food becomes identity.*

*“Why not everything?” the child asked simply,
Ba said—the birds and insects helped guard the field.
First recognise the share of those who protected the crop,
Know this corner of gratitude as the field's blessing.*

*Cut the paddy, cut it with respect,
Leave one corner in the name of birds and creatures.*

Sheaf-Carrying Song

Tale—When tying bundles of harvested paddy, a loose knot lets grain spill all along the path. An old farmer says, “A bundle is not merely heavy; it is a household’s trust for the whole year.” To the rhythm of the song they tighten the rope, change shoulders, and choose places to rest.

Song—Change Shoulders

Folk tune: Load-Carrying Call

*Change shoulders, change the tired shoulder,
Tighten the knot and carry the household’s year upon your head.*

Change shoulders, do not drop the load,

Honour every grain of paddy,

One step you, one step I,

The road becomes easy.

The household granary waits,

Walk together, farmer.

*From a loose knot grain kept falling all along the road,
Hearing the old farmer’s words, the rope was pulled tight.*

*One step you, one step I—the road keeps shortening,
The granary waits as the bundle comes singing home.*

*Change shoulders, change the tired shoulder,
Tighten the knot and carry the household’s year upon your head.*

Threshing Song

Tale—Bullocks walk round and round to thresh the paddy. Watching the circle, children hear the story of life's cycle—seed, plant, ear, grain, then seed again. If an animal is made to work without rest, Ba stops the round.

Song—The Threshing Circle

Folk tune: Threshing Song

*Go round, bullock, go round and round,
Count the hours of rest between the rounds.*

*Round and round the bullock walks,
The grain loosens from the ear,
Today's food, tomorrow's seed,
The circle sings its spell.
Honour the animal's breath,
Then the plate will fill.*

*Seed to plant, plant to ear, ear to grain,
Grain back to seed—this is the cycle's refrain.
When the animal's breath tires, Ba stops the turning,
Threshing with respect fills courtyard and home.*

*Go round, bullock, go round and round,
Count the hours of rest between the rounds.*

Winnowing Song

Tale—On winnowing day the wind's direction is read so the chaff goes one way and the grain another. Once the wind shifted, but at the refrain "Stop, stop," every hand paused; the grain was saved.

Song—Read the Wind

Folk tune: Winnowing Call

*Read the wind, read it before raising the winnowing tray,
Let the chaff fly and the grain remain—that is the skill to learn.*

*Which way is the wind blowing?
Raise the tray only then,
The chaff will fly, the grain will stay,
Move slowly now.
If the wind turns—stop, friend,
Then the grain will be saved.*

*East wind or west wind was read, and the winnowing place was set,
The wind shifted—"Stop, stop," the refrain rose at once.
Every hand halted together, and all the grain was saved,
Even the language of the wind is known in Garh Narikel.*

*Read the wind, read it before raising the winnowing tray,
Let the chaff fly and the grain remain—that is the skill to learn.*

Granary Song

Tale—Before paddy is stored, the earthen granary is prepared with sunlight, neem leaves, and ash. Ba says, “Filling the store is not greed; it is collective care for hard times.” A separate measure is kept aside for poor households.

Song—Affection of the Granary

Folk tune: Granary Auspicious Song

*Open the granary, open it with neem and sun,
Before filling it, speak first of sharing.*

*Neem leaves, scent of sunlight,
Open the granary today,
Fill it with grain, set some aside to share,
Keep hunger’s dignity.
A full store is beautiful only
When society too is full.*

*With ash, leaves, and sunlight’s scent the granary stood prepared,
“Filling is not greed but caution,” Ba declared.
Remember first the empty pot in a poor home,
The granary is auspicious when society is fed—tie this knot in the
heart.*

*Open the granary, open it with neem and sun,
Before filling it, speak first of sharing.*

Fishing and the Communal Catch

Tale—On the day of the communal catch, the raised net held mostly small fish. The people returned the little fish to the pond. A child asked, “Hasn’t our share become smaller?” The fisherman answered, “We have left next year’s share in the water.”

Song—Release the Little Fish

Folk tune: Communal Fishing Song

Let them go, let the little fish go,

Add a living share for next year back into the water.

The net is full, the water glitters,

Release the little fish,

Next year’s living share,

Put it back into the pond.

Take what you need, save as much,

Turn greed aside.

The net rose, silver flashed, temptation stirred a little,

Seeing the old fisherman’s eyes, the hand stopped on its own.

“A smaller share?” the child asked; a deeper answer came,

The share growing in the water—that is the custom of the communal catch.

Let them go, let the little fish go,

Add a living share for next year back into the water.

Spinning-Wheel and Oil-Press Song

Tale—The spinning wheel turns and the oil press moves in a circle—both repeat the same motion, yet fruitfully. Ba says, “When repetition is labour, it becomes thread and oil; when repetition is falsehood, it becomes only exhaustion.” The women sing songs of those away from home to the hum of the wheel, and verses scented with oil beside the press.

Song—The World Turns Round

Folk tune: Spinning-Wheel and Oil-Press Jhumar

*Turn the spinning wheel, turn it slowly, slowly,
In the oil press’s circling gait, lengthen the thread of life.*

*The wheel turns, thread comes out,
The press turns, oil flows,
Patience of the hand, grain by grain,
Makes the game of life.
The circle of truth bears fruit,
The circle of falsehood is a prison.*

*Labour’s repetition spins thread and sends the stream of oil flowing,
Falsehood’s repetition only wearies body and breath.
Holding fast to Ba’s lesson, the jhumar moves onward,
In this round and circling world, the true circle rises.*

*Turn the spinning wheel, turn it slowly, slowly,
In the oil press’s circling gait, lengthen the thread of life.*

Artisans and Tools Song



Tale—Carpenters, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, potters, and bamboo craftsmen recognise one another's work by the sounds of their tools. One day a collective repair was undertaken near Channa Grove: one person split bamboo, another made nails, another rope, another clay lamps. In the song, the sound of each tool became a refrain.

Song—The Orchestra of Tools

Folk tune: Artisans' Rhythm

Play, tools, play each of your own instruments,

In knock-knock, hiss-hiss, whirl-whirl, bring the village together.

Knock-knock the hammer, hiss-hiss the saw,

Whirl-whirl turns the wheel,

Slap-slap the hide, crack-crack the bamboo,

The skill of the hands bears fruit.

Different tools, one village,

The song of labour joins them.

Carpenter, blacksmith, potter—each has a tune of his own,

On the day of collective repair, all the notes became one breath.

Different hands and different skills, one village's work,

This joined orchestra of tools became labour's music and ensemble.

Play, tools, play each of your own instruments,

In knock-knock, hiss-hiss, whirl-whirl, bring the village together.

Animal-Husbandry Song

Tale—Cows, buffaloes, goats, and bullocks are bound to the family through grain, milk, manure, and labour. Separate fodder for a pregnant animal, leaf-medicine for a sick one, the calf's share first—these are the rules Ba teaches the children.

Song—The Calf First

Folk tune: Cowshed Parati

Give it first, let the calf drink the milk first,

An animal's body is the family's body—teach this truth.

First the calf drinks the milk,

Then we fill our pitcher,

An animal's body is the family's body,

Not merely wealth or possession.

Equal fodder, water, and shade,

Only then does happiness play.

Separate fodder for the pregnant one, leaves for the sick—

The calf's share first: this is what Ba taught.

*An equal account of fodder, water, and shade,
In the cowshed parati shines a bright line of affection.*

*Give it first, let the calf drink the milk first,
An animal's body is the family's body—teach this truth.*

Betel Vines, Vegetables, and the Market

Tale—Garh Narikel's betel-vine enclosure needs moisture, shade, and patience; the vegetable garden needs a keen understanding of the season. On market day betel, greens, oil, sweets, fish, and crafted goods come together in one place. Ananya sees that the market is not merely for buying and selling: it is a birthplace of news, songs, satire, and new verses.

Song—Colours of the Market

Folk tune: Market Jhumar

*Come to the market, come to the many-coloured market,
More than buying and selling, come to the spread of talk and song.*

*Green betel, fragrance of greens,
Fish gleaming in the market,
A stream of oil, the laughter of sweets,
A wide-open spread of talk.
More than buying and selling, here
Songs change their road.*

*Green betel rolls, the fresh scent of greens,
The shine of fish, the flow of oil, the delight of sweets.*

*What news from which house? Here the tidings are found,
The market is the village newspaper—read it aloud in melody.*

*Come to the market, come to the many-coloured market,
More than buying and selling, come to the spread of talk and song.*

Drought and Famine

Tale—In a drought year the well water sank low and the fields cracked, but the village made a rule: drinking water first, then animals, then fields. Grain from prosperous households' stores was not lent as debt; it was shared as a common resource. The drought song teaches water-sharing and patience alongside sorrow.

Song—Thirst First

Folk tune: Drought Viraha

*Quench it first, quench thirst first,
Fill the children's and animals' pitchers, then go to the fields.*

*Cracked earth, dried-up stream,
Quench thirst first,
After giving water to children and animals,
Turn toward the fields.
If there is grain, share and eat,
And defeat the drought together.*

*The well water sank low, the earth cracked open,
The rule was made—drinking water is the first task of all.
The granary opened as common store, not as debt but as sharing,*

Even the hard days of drought passed, and the village endured.

Quench it first, quench thirst first,

Fill the children's and animals' pitchers, then go to the fields.

Naming Song

Tale—When choosing a newborn's name, the family considers not only lineage but the season of birth, the mother's wish, the village's memory, and hope for the future. Ananya says, "Let the name be one that no one can cut away." So the name is first written on a leaf and only later on paper.

Song—The First Letter

Folk tune: Naming Benediction

Choose a name, choose one that cannot be cut away,

Weave it from season, mother, village, and hope together.

The first letter sprouted on a leaf,

The second in the mother's throat,

The village wrote the third letter,

The fourth was given by resolve.

If the name remains, the story remains,

And the story remains without end.

The first letter from the leaf, the second from the mother's throat,

The third from the village's memory, the fourth from the path ahead.

Ananya's words resounded—let the name be uncuttable,

If the name remains, the story remains—let the story be endless.

*Choose a name, choose one that cannot be cut away,
Weave it from season, mother, village, and hope together.*

Mundan Song

Tale—On the day of the child's first tonsure, the first hair is not thrown into the river; it is tied in a leaf and placed near the roots of a tree. Ba says, "Hair is the body's first time; the soil will keep it as memory." A humorous song is sung so the child will not be afraid.

Song—The Leaf of First Hair

Folk tune: Mundan Sohar

*Little one, this is the mundan sohar,
We shall bind the first hair in a leaf and place it by the roots.*

*The little scissors flashed,
The child laughed today,
Keep the first hair in a leaf,
Let the roots guard its honour.
Bright head, a morning moon,
May society live long.*

*It was not floated down the river; the hair was entrusted to the soil,
The first sign of childhood-time, a lesson in memory.
The scissors flashed, the child laughed, the courtyard filled with light,
A dawn of birth joined to a keepsake guarded by roots.*

Little one, this is the mundan sohar,

We shall bind the first hair in a leaf and place it by the roots.

Upanayana Song

Tale—At the upanayana, Aruni Nandan is taught not merely a mantra but responsibility toward water, soil, labour, and truth. Ba says, “The thread is on the body; responsibility is on the mind.” The children add a verse: “Whoever listens to a name is twice-born.”

Song—Thread and Responsibility

Folk tune: Upanayana Benediction

*Wear the thread, wear the thread upon your shoulder,
Bear truth’s weight upon the mind—carry both together.*

*A mantra in the ear, a thread on the shoulder,
Truth’s weight upon the mind,
Save water, listen to names,
Become a doorway for the weak.
Knowledge is called sacred only then,
When conduct stands open.*

*A mantra in the ear, soil in the hand, lessons of water and labour—
Aruni was taught the dignity of responsibility.
Save water, listen to names, become the weak one’s door,
In open conduct the burden of knowledge became sacred.*

Wear the thread, wear the thread upon your shoulder,

Bear truth's weight upon the mind—carry both together.

Gauna and Married Life

Tale—After the gauna, Ba gives the newly married couple one rule: “The habits of two homes will collide, but do not close your throats.” Husband and wife promise that even in disagreement each will hear the other to the end. The song sings, alongside shyness, the importance of dialogue.

Song—A House of Two Voices

Folk tune: Jat-Jatin

*Sing, you pair, sing a song of two voices,
Even when angry, speak it out—keep this promise.*

*Your speech, my speech,
Two tunes in one house,
Even when we sulk, we shall still speak,
We shall not become stone.
Love does not mean silence,
Listening too is love's voice.*

*Your tune, my tune—the house keeps one rhythm,
Even in disagreement we shall remember to listen.
Never become stone, never close the throat,
With Jat-Jatin's dialogue, affection will not dim.*

*Sing, you pair, sing a song of two voices,
Even when angry, speak it out—keep this promise.*

Pregnancy and Motherhood

Tale—Exempting a pregnant woman from the heaviest household work is regarded as an old Garh Narikel custom, though poverty often breaks that custom. Saryu continues to labour while pregnant. In song the women's circle says, "Do not reduce her wages; reduce her burden."

Song—A Body with Two Breaths

Folk tune: Pregnancy Benediction

*Slowly, slowly—a body with two breaths,
Reduce the burden, raise the honour—this is a household's affection.*

*Two breaths within one body,
Give her a lighter load,
Full wages, full rest,
That is the heart of the home.
If the village protects the mother's dignity,
The child will receive a world.*

*The custom frees a pregnant body from the heaviest work,
Let it be kept even in poverty—that is the village's rule.
Full wages, full rest—Saryu's rightful claim,
If a mother's dignity survives, the child will find a beautiful dawn.*

*Slowly, slowly—a body with two breaths,
Reduce the burden, raise the honour—this is a household's affection.*

Song of Old Age

Tale—An elder's slow gait is not treated as useless time. Sitting in one place, Ba identifies seeds, tells stories, notices children's mistakes, and points out the marks of old floods. The village says, "Those whose steps are slow have time that runs deep."

Song—Wisdom of Slow Steps

Folk tune: Elder's Parati

Listen slowly, listen to Ba's slow steps,

Read the marks of old floods in her very eyes.

Ba walks slowly, sees far,

Recognises the old field-bund,

One story, one seed,

Becomes tomorrow's road.

The body is tired, knowledge awake,

The village warms itself by her.

Sitting still she knows the seeds, tells stories every day,

Corrects a child's mistake and points out where the old bund lay.

Body tired, knowledge awake—the village's living book,

Beside the slow step walks the light of the future.

Listen slowly, listen to Ba's slow steps,

Read the marks of old floods in her very eyes.

Courtyard-Smearing Song

Tale—Before a festival the women smear the courtyard with a mixture of cow dung and clay. Ananya asks, “Why again and again?” Ba says, “A house gathers dust, and so does the mind; smearing means beginning again.” The first footstep on the freshly smeared courtyard is given to a child.

Song—Beginning Again

Folk tune: Courtyard Song

*Smear it, sister, smear it at early dawn,
Wash old dust and old sorrow out together.*

*Mix clay and cow dung,
Wake the courtyard again,
Old dust, old sorrow,
Let them flow gently out.
Freshly smeared earth, a new footstep,
Bring dawn into the house.*

Clay and cow-dung mixture in hand, the courtyard became a mirror,

“Why again and again?”—the answer was a new offering.

*A house catches dust, and so does the mind,
Smearing means beginning again—so Ba said.*

*Smear it, sister, smear it at early dawn,
Wash old dust and old sorrow out together.*

Vrat-Katha Song

Tale—On a fasting day, the story is not described merely as a bargain for receiving a reward. In the middle of the tale Ba asks, “Was this woman’s decision right or not?” The listeners answer, discussion follows, and only then does the song rise. In this way the story moves from one breath to another carrying questions with it.

Song—A Question in the Middle of the Tale

Folk tune: Vrat-Katha Tune

*Ask in the middle, ask in the middle of the story,
Before the promised fruit, weigh the decision and understand.*

*Hear the story, ask questions too,
Silence is not religion’s honour,
Whose sorrow, whose decision—
Understand, and only then make a rule.
The fast will brighten the mind only then,
When knowledge wakes.*

*Ba pauses and asks—was this decision just?
The circle of listeners speaks, and a lamp of discussion is lit.
Silence is not religion’s honour; the question itself becomes worship,
The true fruit of the fast is discernment, nothing else.*

*Ask in the middle, ask in the middle of the story,
Before the promised fruit, weigh the decision and understand.*

Pounding, Grinding, and Cooking Grain

Tale—Lentils grinding on the hand-mill, spices on the grinding stone, rice on the hearth: each sound forms the rhythm of a woman's day. One day Ananya writes down all the sounds—grrr, slap, clang, puff. Ba laughs: "The kitchen is an orchestra all by itself."

Song—The Kitchen Orchestra

Folk tune: Hand-Mill Song

Listen, sister, listen to the kitchen orchestra,

In the rhythm of grrr-clang-puff, hear the cadence of the day.

Grrr-grrr speaks the hand-mill,

Clang-clang dances the ladle,

Puff-puff the hearth draws breath,

A tree of rice-fragrance rises.

Grain becomes a platter of song,

The kitchen is the house's own music.

Ananya pinned down all the sounds—grrr, slap, clang, puff,

Ba laughed—this itself is the tune of our whole day.

Hand-mill, grinding stone, hearth, ladle—the house's instruments,

As food is made, the kitchen orchestra keeps playing.

Listen, sister, listen to the kitchen orchestra,

In the rhythm of grrr-clang-puff, hear the cadence of the day.

Care of Animals, Birds, Water, and Household Things

Tale—Ba teaches the children not to notice only human thirst. A small water bowl for birds beside the threshold, clean water in the cowshed, tools kept where they can dry, seed boxes raised high, water-pots covered—these are all disciplines of the household. Ananya calls them “small watches.”

Song—Small Watches

Folk tune: Household-Watch Song

*Add them, little by little, add the small watches,
Bird, animal, seed, water-pot—remember them all.*

*A bowl for the birds,
Clean water for the animals,
Seed kept high, tools kept dry,
A calm lid upon the pot.
Join these little watches,
And the household gains gravity.*

*By the threshold a bowl holds the birds' share of water,
In the cowshed, clean water—Ba's instruction.
Tools kept dry, seed raised high, water-pot quietly covered,
Through small acts of vigilance, the household becomes steadfast.*

*Add them, little by little, add the small watches,
Bird, animal, seed, water-pot—remember them all.*

Mithila Painting



Tale—The eyes of the fish painted on the wall always remain open. Ananya asks, “Why does it never sleep?” Ba says, “The painted fish keeps watch over the household’s water and its names.” Among the lotus, sun, moon, bamboo, women, birds, and river in the painting, a leaf from Channa Grove was added.

Song—The Fish on the Wall

Folk tune: Painting Jhumar

*Paint it, sister, paint upon the wall, paint the waking fish,
Set the village within the colours; learn the art of keeping watch.*

*The fish upon the wall never sleeps,
Its eyes keep watch at night,
Lotus, moon, rows of bamboo,
The leaf records every tale.
Within the colours lives the village,
The painting stands on guard.*

*“Why does it never sleep?”—Ananya asks,
Ba says—the painted fish stays awake by day and night.*

*Lotus, moon, rows of bamboo, the fish with open eyes,
This sentinel on the wall keeps the household's names alive.*

*Paint it, sister, paint upon the wall, paint the waking fish,
Set the village within the colours; learn the art of keeping watch.*

Clay Objects of Worship

Tale—The children shape little Mahadevs, lamps, horses, birds, and bowls from clay. When one figure breaks, a child begins to cry. Ba moistens the same clay again and makes a new lamp: “A clay deity breaks and returns to clay; faith does not break.”

Song—Forms of Clay

Folk tune: Clay Mangala

*Shape it, child, shape a form from clay,
Do not weep when it breaks—wet it again and shape anew.*

*Clay became little Mahadev,
Clay became a lamp,
The broken form returned once more,
Mother Clay gave it life.
The form may change, affection does not,
Therein lies worship.*

*Mahadev, lamp, horse, bird—a family of clay,
Tears for the broken figure; Ba offered the remedy.
The same clay was moistened; a new lamp smiled,*

The form may change, affection does not—worship dwells in this.

Shape it, child, shape a form from clay,

Do not weep when it breaks—wet it again and shape anew.

Sewing and Embroidery

Tale—On a torn gamchha, Sarayu embroiders a flower. The torn place is not hidden; it becomes a beautiful mark. Ananya says, “Repair is not shame; it is art.” Then the women begin embroidering story-signs onto old cloth.

Song—A Flower at the Tear

Folk tune: Sewing Song

Embroider, sister, embroider a flower where the cloth is torn,

Do not call repair a shame; name it art instead.

Do not hide the torn place,

Bring needle and thread,

Around the wound of sorrow,

Embroider a green flower.

Dignity lives in repair,

Save the old cloth.

Sarayu’s needle moved; a flower bloomed on the gamchha,

The torn mark was not hidden—it met the eye as beauty.

Old cloth, new embroidery, a green sprig upon grief,

In a life joined and stitched, dignity remained unbroken.

Embroider, sister, embroider a flower where the cloth is torn,

Do not call repair a shame; name it art instead.

Leaf Plates, Khoinchha, Grain Arrangement, and Wedding Decoration

Tale—At a wedding meal, even the order in which food was placed on the leaf plate carried meaning—salt in a small measure, rice generously, sweetness at the end. Grain, durva grass, betel, and turmeric were placed in the khoinchha as a blessing. Ananya saw that decoration was not merely for the eye; it was a language of relationships.

Song—Blessing on the Leaf Plate

Folk tune: Khoinchha Mangala

Serve it, sister, serve the leaf plate in its proper order,

In the khoinchha place durva and turmeric—fill it with blessing.

White rice upon the leaf plate,

Dal in a golden stream,

Green durva in the khoinchha,

Turmeric, affection without end.

The order of grain speaks silently,

Stay together, family.

Salt in little measure, rice generous, sweetness last of all,

This order of food teaches the flavour and measure of life.

Green durva in the khoinchha, turmeric's boundless affection,

Silently the leaf plate says—family, remain together.

*Serve it, sister, serve the leaf plate in its proper order,
In the khoinchha place durva and turmeric—fill it with blessing.*

Dowry, Poverty, Wage Labour, and Migration

Tale—At one wedding the groom's family makes an excessive demand. The women stop the auspicious singing and raise a song of satire: "A house whose belly is filled with dowry is empty of love." The village elders support them too, and the demand is withdrawn. Song becomes a weapon of social decision.

Song—The Plate of Greed

Folk tune: Wedding Gari

*Sing the gari, sister, sing over the plate of greed,
With arrows of laughter, bring down the mountain of dowry.*

*Ask for gold, ask for a motorcar,
Where will you keep affection?
After counting a poor mother's tears,
What happiness will you find?
Leave the plate of greed empty,
Eat the rice of dignity.*

*At the demand for gold and a car, the mangala singing stopped,
The women's arrows of satire struck straight and true.
"If greed fills the belly, where will affection dwell?"
The village elders joined them—the custom learned a new smile.*

Sing the gari, sister, sing over the plate of greed,

With arrows of laughter, bring down the mountain of dowry.

Gari and Women's Satire

Tale—In wedding gari songs, the women strike laughingly at the groom's party's pride, laziness, and greed. Once, a friend of the groom takes offence; Ba explains, "This is not an insult; it is medicine for arrogance." By the end of the song both sides laugh and eat together.

Song—Medicine for Arrogance

Folk tune: Wedding Gari

Sing out the gari, sing it laughingly, sister,

It is not insult—give arrogance its medicine.

The groom's shoes shine so brightly,

Yet his feet cannot walk four steps,

Sweetness in the mouth, a mountain in the demand,

What a fine show you make!

Hear the laughter, leave the greed,

Only then become beloved.

The groom's shoes glitter, yet he cannot take four steps,

Sugar in his mouth, a mountain in his demands—the gari burns there.

His friend took offence; Ba explained the meaning,

*He swallowed laughter's bitter draught, and the delusion of pride fell
away.*

Sing out the gari, sing it laughingly, sister,

It is not insult—give arrogance its medicine.

Madhushravani

Tale—Listening to the Madhushravani tale, a newly married couple learns stories of serpents, the laws of nature, faith, and caution. Ananya asks, “Should we blame the serpent, or human carelessness?” The woman telling the story pauses, then adds a new answer. In this way the tale remains alive.

Song—Leaf, Serpent, and Question

Folk tune: Madhushravani Song

*Listen, bride, listen to Madhushravani,
Along with fear, gather flowers of reason and questioning.*

*Place the flowers, arrange the leaves,
Listen to the serpent’s tale,
Keep reason beside fear,
Choose the lamp of questioning.
Let new married life move with affection,
Honour the laws of nature.*

*“Is the fault the serpent’s, or carelessness?”—Ananya asks,
The tale pauses, discussion begins, a new meaning opens.
Flowers and leaves are arranged; the new couple learns the heart of it,
Respect for nature, the lamp of questioning—these are the duties of
married life.*

Listen, bride, listen to Madhushravani,

Along with fear, gather flowers of reason and questioning.

Sama-Chakeva

Tale—On Kartika nights, the girls sing with clay Sama and Chakeva figures, remembering the journeys of birds alongside the bond between brother and sister. One year fewer migratory birds arrive; a new verse is added to the song about saving ponds, trees, and wetlands.

Song—Sama, Come Home

Folk tune: Sama-Chakeva

Sing, sister, sing Sama-Chakeva,

Save pond, wetland, and branch; call the wings home.

Sama, come back to the wetland,

Chakeva, return to the branch,

If the pond survives, the wings survive,

And Kartika's love survives.

Brother and sister make a pledge together,

We will keep the waters green.

Fewer birds this year—the song received a question,

The pond dried, trees were cut—the cause stood plainly revealed.

A green promise entered the brother-sister pledge,

We will guard water and branch—only then is Kartika precious.

Sing, sister, sing Sama-Chakeva,

Save pond, wetland, and branch; call the wings home.

Bhagavati Song

Tale—On the day of Bhagavati worship, the women ask not only for their families' happiness but for the dignity of unseen women workers such as Sarayu. The first leaf plate of offering is set aside in the name of the one who labours. The lamp flame remains steady.

Song—Bhagavati of Labour

Folk tune: Bhagavati Song

*Worship her, sister, worship Bhagavati of labour,
Give the first leaf plate of offering to the one whose hands do the work.*

*O Mother, guardian of grain,
Protect the dignity of labour,
The one by whose hands the household runs,
Write down her name.
Let the first leaf plate of offering be hers,
Light the lamp of justice.*

*Along with family happiness, they asked that Sarayu be honoured,
The unseen woman worker's name was hung within the arati song.
The lamp flame rose tall; the Mother smiled,
When justice received the offering, the worship was called complete.*

*Worship her, sister, worship Bhagavati of labour,
Give the first leaf plate of offering to the one whose hands do the work.*

The Household Deity

Tale—The household deity is no great idol: sometimes it is a corner of the wall, the tulsi altar, the hearth's first flame, or a leaf-offering to an ancestor. Ba says—the household deity is the rule that never sends a guest, the hungry, or the helpless away empty-handed.

Song—Deity of the Threshold

Folk tune: Household Mangala

*Know the deity, know the deity of the threshold,
Let no hungry person return empty-handed—count this as worship.*

*A small lamp at the threshold,
The first rice upon the hearth,
The hungry one who comes must not leave empty-handed,
Therein speaks the divine.
The idol need not be small or great,
Let compassion live day and night.*

*Tulsi in the corner, the first share of rice from the hearth,
Welcome for the guest, dignity for the needy—the household's true
melody.
There is no quarrel here over whether an idol is small or great,
Where compassion lives day and night, there the deity truly dwells.*

*Know the deity, know the deity of the threshold,
Let no hungry person return empty-handed—count this as worship.*

Village Deity and Gahbar

Tale—In times of danger, one handful of soil from every neighbourhood is placed in the village gahbar. The belief is that so long as the soils remain mingled, protecting the village is not the duty of one neighbourhood but of all. After a flood, the soil of the gahbar is distributed back into the fields.

Song—Soil from Every Neighbourhood

Folk tune: Village-Deity Bhagait

*Bring it, bring soil from neighbourhood after neighbourhood,
Mingle it in the gahbar and take the vow to protect all together.*

*One handful from the eastern quarter,
One handful of southern soil,
When west and north joined them,
The gahbar woke in the night.
Protection is one for every quarter,
In this lies the deity's trust.*

*A handful from east, one from south, west and north together,
Upon the mound of mingled earth, the deity's presence awoke.
Protection is not one neighbourhood's task; the weight rests on every
shoulder,
To the rhythm of the bhagait rises a shared cry of victory.*

*Bring it, bring soil from neighbourhood after neighbourhood,
Mingle it in the gahbar and take the vow to protect all together.*

Dharmaraj's Song

Tale—While telling the story of Dharmaraj, Ba says that at the final judgement it is not wealth but the imprint of one's deeds that is weighed. With water in one vessel and workers' names in another, the children are taught that justice is incomplete without names.

Song—The Scales of Deeds

Folk tune: Dharmaraj Song

*Weigh it, weigh deeds together with wealth,
Speak first the names of labour left unnamed.*

*Place the heap of wealth on one side,
On the other, the names of deeds,
Which side of the scales will weigh heavier?
The court of dharma asks.
Whose labour remained unnamed,
Write that name first.*

*A heap of wealth in one pan, names in the other,
The children saw—the scales bent toward the place of deeds.
No coin passes in Dharmaraj's court,
The pan of truthful labour carries the weight.*

*Weigh it, weigh deeds together with wealth,
Speak first the names of labour left unnamed.*

Shiva and Nachari

Tale—Near Channa Grove, women singing Nachari in Mahadev's name speak their sorrows, yet at the end ask for fortitude. Once, the image of "Nilakantha" in the song was given a new meaning: not to endure poison silently, but to recognise poison and remove it from society.

Song—Recognise the Poison

Folk tune: Nachari

Sing the Nachari, sing Nilakantha's Nachari,

Do not drink the poison—recognise it; this is the new resolve.

O Nilakantha, recognise the poison,

Do not drink it in silence,

Bring the poison of injustice out into the open,

Wash it with the water of truth.

Let the throat be blue, the mind bright,

Live together with everyone.

No more enduring in silence; we will bring the poison out,

Naming injustice, we will strain it through the water of truth.

Let the throat remain blue if it must; let the mind remain bright,

In the women's Nachari sound both patience and resistance.

Sing the Nachari, sing Nilakantha's Nachari,

Do not drink the poison—recognise it; this is the new resolve.

Vishnu and Harigit

Tale—Singing Harigit, people seek the meaning of preservation and patience amid life's crises. Nand Aruni says—preservation does not mean covering up injustice; it means protecting the truth and carrying it forward. In the song, the boat that crosses the river becomes not Vishnu's couch upon Shesha, but a figure for the workers' shared labour.

Song—The Boat of Preservation

Folk tune: Harigit

*Steady it, O Preserver, steady the boat upon the current,
Carry the wick of truth's lamp safely from bank to bank.*

*O Preserver, steady the boat,
Let truth's lamp not go out,
Whose name is caught in the current,
Let that voice not be stopped.
Preservation means safeguarding justice,
This is what the song says.*

*"Preservation does not mean concealment"—Aruni's thought,
Keep truth alive and carry it forward—this is preservation's essence.
Revive the voice of the one whose name is caught in the current,
Wave after wave of Harigit, send the boat of justice onward.*

*Steady it, O Preserver, steady the boat upon the current,
Carry the wick of truth's lamp safely from bank to bank.*

Durga Puja: Drum, Idol, Fair, Sacrifice, Offering, Immersion, and Lament

Tale—The Durga Puja fair is an occasion for the village's colour, trade, music, and meeting. The clay for the idol is brought from many hamlets, the drum is made through the craftsmanship of many hands, and the offering is communal. On the day of immersion, the women's lament rises like the farewell of a daughter. One year, instead of animal sacrifice, a pledge was made to offer grain and care for animals, and a new line was added to the song: "Shakti protects; she does not ask only for blood."

Song—Mother, Return Again

Folk tune: Durga-Immersion Song

*Go, O Mother, go by the river road,
Go, giving your promise to return next year.*

*The drum sounded, the fair was bright,
The leaf-plates were filled with offerings,
Mother set out upon the river road,
The women of the village wept.
Shakti will remain within as protection,
Return again next time.*

*Your body was shaped from the clay of hamlet after hamlet,
Many hands made the drum and offering, many hearts gave their
love.*

*In the tears of immersion glimmered a daughter's farewell,
Shakti remained behind as protection, wakeful in every home.*

*Go, O Mother, go by the river road,
Go, giving your promise to return next year.*

Sun and Chhath



Tale—At the Chhath ghat, the whole village joins the fasting worshippers in tending the cleaning, water, riverbank, leaf-plates, and safety. Offering arghya to the setting sun teaches that declining light too deserves honour. The arghya to the rising sun marks a new beginning. In memory of Ujjwal Jha, one lamp was placed at the ghat under the name “Not Alone.”

Song—Setting and Rising

Folk tune: Chhath Song

*Offer the arghya, offer it to both setting and rising sun,
Honour both lights—the one declining and the one ascending.*

*Setting sun, our salutation to you,
The tired body of the day,
Morning sun, our welcome to you,
The affection of new life.
Standing in the water, the village says,
No one is alone.*

*Every ghat was cleaned, every stretch of water bright with leaf-plates,
With the fasting worshippers, the whole village stood waist-deep in
water.*

*First, salutation to the weary sun of day,
Then the welcome of morning—this is Chhath's observance.*

*Offer the arghya, offer it to both setting and rising sun,
Honour both lights—the one declining and the one ascending.*

Marsiya and Jharni

Tale—Listening to the marsiya, even the men of the village do not hold back their tears. The rhythm of the jharni makes the memory of martyrdom and injustice bodily and immediate. A new marsiya was sung with the names of Bisesar, Saryu, and the unnamed workers added to it; along with compassion, it carried a demand for justice.

Song—Tears of the Jharni

Folk tune: Marsiya-Jharni

*Play the jharni, play its falling, rustling rhythm,
Sing the row of omitted names together with the tears.*

*The bamboo sounds in a falling rhythm,
Tears descend in a stream,
Whoever was left behind through injustice,
Call out that person's name.
Grief is not merely weeping,
It opens the door of justice.*

*To the bamboo rhythm descends the memory of martyrdom,
Even the men do not restrain their tears before such a sorrowful sound.*

*Bisesar, Saryu, the unnamed—a new marsiya took shape,
Not grief alone; through it the door of justice too was opened.*

*Play the jharni, play its falling, rustling rhythm,
Sing the row of omitted names together with the tears.*

Fakiri Tale and Shared Devotion

Tale—A fakir came to Garh Narikel and sat in three places: at the temple threshold, in the shade of the gahbar, and at the river ghat. People asked, “Where is your place?” He answered, “Wherever the thirsty are given water.” Thus the fakiri tale makes shared compassion the root of religion.

Song—The Religion of Thirst

Folk tune: Fakiri Melody

*Speak, O fakir, speak of the religion of thirst,
Make your music at mosque, temple, and ghat alike.*

*Mosque and temple ask the road,
The fakir says—water,
Where the thirsty fill their water-pot,
There, in that very place, is God.
Names are many, compassion one,
In this the heart grows pure.*

"Where is your place?" the people asked; the answer was simple and plain,

"Wherever the thirsty receive water"—the words became enduring.

Names are many, compassion one—this is the essence of the fakir's way,

This melody of shared devotion became an ornament of the village.

Speak, O fakir, speak of the religion of thirst,

Make your music at mosque, temple, and ghat alike.

Riddle

Tale—Ba asks the children a riddle: "It has no body, no wings, yet it flies from village to village; when you try to catch it, your hands remain empty." The answer is—the song. From this riddle the children understand that folk culture is not an object, but a travelling voice.

Song—The Riddle's Answer

Folk tune: Children's Riddle Song

Solve it, children, solve Ba's riddle,

Who flies without a body? Search within your minds.

Who flies without a body?

The song flies, brother,

Who lives from house to house without wings?

The tale lives, brother.

If you would catch it, catch the voice,

Your hands will remain empty.

*No body, no wings, yet it dwells from village to village,
Try to catch it and your hand is empty; its dwelling is the voice.
The answer was found—the song! All the children cried out,
This bird of culture had entered every throat.*

*Solve it, children, solve Ba's riddle,
Who flies without a body? Search within your minds.*

Nicknames

Tale—In Garh Narikel, nicknames arise from affection, occupation, habit, or humour, but when they cross the boundary into insult, the community stops them. Aruni Nandan says, “A name that makes a person smaller is not a nickname; it is a wound.” So a new rule is made: a nickname is valid only when the person who hears it can laugh.

Song—Affection in a Name

Folk tune: Humorous Jhumar

*Give a nickname, but let it be filled with affection,
Know the flower that brings laughter from the thorn that brings tears.*

*If a nickname awakens laughter,
Know it as a flower of affection,
If a nickname makes tears fall,
Stop upon that road.
Let a name be play, not injury,
Let this boundary bring ease.*

Nicknames are born of affection, occupation, and habit,

But at the boundary of insult the whole village intervenes.

Aruni's words—if a name makes a human being smaller,

It is not a nickname but abuse—cast it aside openly.

Give a nickname, but let it be filled with affection,

Know the flower that brings laughter from the thorn that brings tears.

Hyperbole

A tale spreads its wings and flies,

Song—The Great Tale

Folk tune: Narrative Jhumar

Send the tale flying, send it flying with wings spread wide,

Make the fish larger than the boat; drown it in laughter.

The fish became larger than the boat,

The hoe broke a mountain,

Let laughter mark the boundary.

But do not cover the body of truth,

Give imagination its turn.

A hoe of eighty maunds, an embankment touching the sky,

The child asked, "A lie?" Ba said, "The language of emphasis."

The bigness of a tale tells the measure of experience,

But no curtain should remain over the body of truth.

*Send the tale flying, send it flying with wings spread wide,
Make the fish larger than the boat; drown it in laughter.*

Mimicry

Tale—The children mimic the official's weighty language, the market caller, the boatman's cry, and the drummer's manner of playing. One day Ananya imitates the phrase "the name is not on the list" so sharply that the elders laugh and, at the same time, feel uncomfortable. Mimicry becomes a mirror of power and behaviour.

Song—The Mirror of Mimicry

Folk tune: Children's Humour Song

*Mimic it, mimic it with laughter,
With a thin voice expose the hollowness of weighty speech.*

*The babu speaks in weighty words,
The child mimics him,
The words are large, the meaning small,
Every pretence is uncovered.
Before the mirror of laughter,
Crooked sense becomes straight.*

*The official's "the name is not on the list"—the child repeated it,
The mimicry was so sharp that even the elders grew embarrassed.
Words large, meaning small—the mirror showed it plainly,
Before laughter, crooked sense came straight again.*

Mimic it, mimic it with laughter,

With a thin voice expose the hollowness of weighty speech.

Improvised Rhyme

Tale—A sudden rain falls in the market and everyone runs. One woman calls, “Save the betel, save the song,” and another immediately adds, “In the soaked market, save your lives.” Within a few minutes a complete song has taken shape. Folk song has just such a swift power to seize the event of the present moment.

Song—The Rain-Soaked Market

Folk tune: Fresh Market Jhumar

*Save it, save it—save the betel and the song,
Sing together the fresh song of the rain-soaked market.*

*Save the betel, save the song,
Save your lives in the soaked market,
Cover the fish, gather the sweets,
Every shop began to run.
The rain came and made a song,
Such is the people's singing.*

*Sudden rain, the market running, umbrellas and leaves flying,
One woman spoke, another added—and the lines took shape.
Fish covered, sweets gathered, melody even in the wet,
Within minutes a song was born—the people's fresh Phag.*

*Save it, save it—save the betel and the song,
Sing together the fresh song of the rain-soaked market.*

Inverted Saying

Tale—Ba says, “The one who speaks the most may sometimes hear the least.” The children turn it into an inverted saying: “Silence has large ears.” In the tales of Channa Grove, the living fear ghosts, while the ghosts fear the injustice of the living—this inversion lays bare a social truth.

Song—The Ears of Silence

Folk tune: Nirgun Inversion

*Turn the saying around; sing the straight thing upside down,
The speaker is deaf, silence has ears—understand it.*

The mountain speaks and hears nothing,

The ears of silence are vast,

The living fear the name of ghosts,

The ghosts fear the snare.

Turn the world around and look, brother,

Truth stands before you at once.

One who thunders like a mountain hears nothing,

One who stays quiet like a current understands the world.

The living fear ghosts, the ghosts fear the snare,

Turn the world around and look—truth stands there at once.

Turn the saying around; sing the straight thing upside down,

The speaker is deaf, silence has ears—understand it.

Storytelling Gathering



The tale is a river, its forms are many,

Song—The Tale's Four Roads

Folk tune: Story-Song

Tell the tale, tell it by all four roads,

Its ending is in no one's hand—let it flow with the current.

One tells the eastern form,

A second tells the western,

A third adds the mother's part,

A fourth gives the child's note.

The source remains without limit.

The first does not tell the ending, the second adds another form,

The third adds the mother's part, the fourth leaves the child's question.

The same tale has a hundred forms, its source one and deep,

Beside the gathering's slow fire, the water of story keeps flowing.

Tell the tale, tell it by all four roads,

Its ending is in no one's hand—let it flow with the current.

Call and Response

Tale—On the embankment, in the boat, during rice-transplanting, immersion, or vigil—in every collective task one voice goes ahead and the group follows. The call becomes the leader; the response proves that the group is awake. After Ujjwal Jha's incident, the school gave the call: "Alone?" The answer came: "No, we are together."

Song—Alone?

Folk tune: Call and Response

Call it out, call "Alone?"

Beat the drum of the answer: "No, we are together."

Call—Alone?

Response—No, we are together!

Call—Afraid?

Response—Even so, we are together!

Call—Name struck off?

Response—We will write it; we are together!

*The call becomes the leader, the response the proof of wakefulness,
On embankment, boat, and transplanting field, the same rule holds.*

*After Ujjwal's incident this lesson became larger,
Without the answer "we are together," no one was left behind.*

Call it out, call "Alone?"

Beat the drum of the answer: "No, we are together."

Garh Narikel in a Migrant City



Tale—In a small room in the city, people from Garh Narikel sing Sama-Chakeva, Sohar, Chhath, and wedding songs. If there is no pond, they watch the moon in a bucket of water; if there is no soil, they keep a little of the village earth in a small vessel. Culture changes its place while preserving the memory of its roots.

Song—The Village in a Room

Folk tune: Pardesiya

*Settle it, settle the village inside the room,
Lower the moon into a bucket of water and sing Sama.*

*Within four city walls,
The village lives in one corner,
The moon descends into a bucket of water,
The ancestors' names live in the soil.
Though far away, the song says,
One's own home travels alongside.*

*Within four walls, one corner bears the village's name,
In the earth of a small vessel rests the dwelling of the ancestors.
Chhath, Sohar, and wedding songs resounded even in the city,
Distance remained only for the body; the heart stayed joined to the
village.*

Settle it, settle the village inside the room,

Lower the moon into a bucket of water and sing Sama.

Appendix 2: Original Songs of the Unnamed-Planet Episode

In the main narrative, the unnamed-planet episode has been condensed into the form of a dream-parable. All the original folk songs from Chapters 101–104 are preserved here intact as an archival record.

Chapter 101 — Invitation from the Unnamed Planet

Chapter-Opening Folk Song: Take Earth's Gift

Folk tune: Sky Batagabani



Pack the bag, O pack the travel bag,

Take the scent of soil, Mother's song—this much wealth is enough.

If a distant planet calls, what shall we take along?

We shall take the scent of soil, Mother's song, and the lamp of names.

Neither wealth nor weapons, but words of shared affection,

Carrying Earth's green lesson, we shall cross the reaches of the sky.

*The stars will ask—what is your root? We shall say—human dignity,
Wherever we go, we shall sow peace, labour, and honour.*

*Take Earth's gift; leave greed behind here,
On the journey to a distant planet, join the road with love.*

*Let tickets be cut star by star; let affection be the passport,
At the border someone may ask—show the face of your land.
Leave wealth and weapons outside; carry the name-lamp within,
Earth's green lesson will become a shell for the universe.*

*Pack the bag, O pack the travel bag,
Take the scent of soil, Mother's song—this much wealth is enough.*



Folk Song: The Call from a Distant Planet

Folk tune: Sky Batagabani

*The planet asked, 'What will you bring along?'—the planet asked,
We shall take the breath of names, the scent of soil, and a child's
hand.*

*A distant planet sent an invitation, asking—what will you bring
along?
I shall take the breath of names, the scent of soil, and a child's hand.*

*No spacecraft smoke rose; a kabaddi line appeared,
The moment 'Present' was written, a crack split the glass wall.*

Who will go, who will remain—the decision is not yet made,

If the name arrives, the person arrives; distance will remain no more.

From the village dust the game rose and entered the orbit of stars,

In the darkness of the unnamed planet, Earth's voice played.

The invitation is distant, the question close to home:

What shall we take along?—our memory intact, unshaken.

No spacecraft smoke rose; a kabaddi line appeared,

The moment 'Present' was written, the glass wall cracked.

From the village dust the game rose and entered the orbit of stars,

In the darkness of the unnamed planet, it became Earth's voice.

The planet asked, 'What will you bring along?'—the planet asked,

*We shall take the breath of names, the scent of soil, and a child's
hand.*



Chapter 102 — Kabaddi Between Planets

Chapter-Opening Folk Song: The Name in the Starry Turn

Folk tune: Kabaddi-Sky Tune



*Go, O player, go into the turn among the stars,
Breath bound, name open—carry both together.*

*Hold your breath, speak your name, take the turn among the stars,
Though the boundary be in the sky, do not forget your roots.
One turn for Earth, the second for humanity,
The third bearing justice, the fourth coexistence.*

*With stardust upon your brow, the village beat within your heart,
Kabaddi's rhythm says—stay together beyond counting.
Into the starry turn the name will arrive with honour,
The universe too will learn when human beings live with affection.*

*The first step for Earth, the second for humankind,
The third for justice, the fourth—the lamp of coexistence.
Let sky-dust touch your brow, the village rhythm fill your heart,*

The platter of the Milky Way dances to kabaddi's beat.

*Go, O player, go into the turn among the stars,
Breath bound, name open—carry both together.*



Folk Song: The Planetary Turn

Folk tune: Kabaddi Folk Tune

*Hold your breath, speak the name, return,
Wherever the game reaches, no place will remain without the lesson.*

*Hold your breath, speak the name, return across the stars,
Earth's soil in your palm, cut through the line of darkness.
Even in a game between planets, the same old rule remains:
Whose memory is unbroken, that person's step stays steadfast always.*

Ananya wrote—the line had gone far from Earth,

The breath did not break; the game only slowed a little.

The child did not say 'kabaddi' but 'Present',

The first crack gleamed in the invisible wall.

*Change the planet, change the sky; the law of the name does not
change,*

Wherever the game reaches, the lesson will remain.

Even between planets, the same old rule endured,

Whose memory did not break, that person's step remained steadfast.

The child said not 'kabaddi' but 'Present',

The first crack gleamed in the invisible wall.

Hold your breath, speak the name, return,

Wherever the game reaches, no place will remain without the lesson.



Chapter 103 — The Lesson of Names on the Unnamed Planet

Chapter-Opening Folk Song: The Thread of Names in the Sky

Folk tune: Swing-Sky Song



Swing gently, O swing upon the stars' swing,

One end in the ancestors' hands; child, understand the other.

A thread stretched between the stars; the swing of names sways,

One end the ancestors hold, the child opens the other.

However deep the sky may be, the thread will not break,

Memory, love, and responsibility are never small.

*Swing gently, sing a song, light lamps among the stars,
Join every generation to the generation that follows.
The thread of names will make a bright road in the sky,
Lives far apart will know themselves as one family.*

*Like a Sawan swing, a cord stretched across the sky,
Three strands were woven—memory, love, responsibility.
Push the swing higher, sing, touch the stars and return,
Join generation to generation and make an unbroken cord.*

*Swing gently, O swing upon the stars' swing,
One end in the ancestors' hands; child, understand the other.*



Folk Song: A Name Stretched Among the Stars

Folk tune: Sky Viraha

*Stretched is the thread, the thread of names stretched among the stars,
From a single call of Earth, even the universe awoke.*

*A slender thread of names stretched among the stars,
The voice of kabaddi became a mantra for the journey.
Where there is no name, life's breath is only half,*

In numbered houses, human beings dwell in sorrow.

*The moment a name was spoken upon the nameless wall, a crack
appeared,*

Returning to Earth, the child said—this is our world.

We shall not leave Earth; we shall save it together with its names,

We shall make the line of soil shine as far as the sky's orbit.

The stars are far, but the affection of a name is near,

One call from Earth awakened even the universe.

Where there is no name, life's breath is only half,

In numbered houses, human beings dwell burdened and sad.

*The moment a name was spoken upon the nameless wall, a crack
appeared,*

Returning to Earth, the child said—this is our world.

Stretched is the thread, the thread of names stretched among the stars,

From a single call of Earth, even the universe awoke.



Chapter 104 — Garh Narikel Chooses Earth Again

Chapter-Opening Folk Song: Earth Is Our Choice

Folk tune: Love-of-the-Soil Song



*Choose Earth, O choose Earth again and again,
Count our own mud better than a palace of glass.*

*Better our own mud than a glass palace without memory,
The scent of soil, the voice of water, the deep shade of the peepal.
Choosing Earth is not submission; it is a great proof of love,
Here is the sweat of labour; here is the people's honour.*

*Where there is a wound, sow the seed of healing there,
Do not flee by abandoning Earth; make Earth anew.
Say that Earth is our choice, with responsibility beside it,
To make our own home just—this is the bright road.*

*Yes, the wounds are here, but the medicine for the wounds is here too,
Here are the fields of sweat; here too are the people's songs.
To flee is cowardice; to change is the proof of love,*

To fashion Earth into a just place—this is self-respect.

*Choose Earth, O choose Earth again and again,
Count our own mud better than a palace of glass.*



Folk Song: We Chose Earth

Folk tune: Love-of-the-Soil Song

*We chose Earth, O again and again we chose Earth,
Better our own mud than the memoryless dome.*

*Better our own mud than a dome without memory,
The scent of the Kamala-Balan, the broken field-ridge deeply dear.
Not numbered housing; we need a threshold with a name,
Not an oxygen contract; our own air and soil.
One drop holds darkness, another a new dawn,*

*The child wrote—we choose Earth here, in this very place.
Not the final page; the next watch was written,
The point of the unnamed planet slowly dissolved into morning.
Earth, your wounds are ours; your tears are ours,
Let the next lifetime pass in guarding your name.*

Not numbered housing; we need a threshold with a name,

Not an oxygen contract—our own air and soil.

One drop holds darkness, another a new dawn,

Not the final page—the place of the next watch.

We chose Earth, O again and again we chose Earth,

Better our own mud than the memoryless dome.



Appendix 3: Original Inner Tales of Nyaya Philosophy

In the main chapters, brief philosophical undertones related to the narrative have been retained. All the original classical examples and principles are preserved here, chapter by chapter.

Chapter 57 — Gangesha's Question

The Last Page of Kadambari — The Book and the Obstacle



In the library of Garh Narikel lay an old copy of Banabhatta's *Kadambari*. On the final page of the manuscript, the story stopped all at once. Every new student who reached that page asked the same question: after so vast an imagination, so much dedication, and so much care, why did the story remain unfinished?

One day Acharya Gangesha showed that page to his students. One student said, "Gurudev, an auspicious invocation had been performed; then the book ought to have been completed." Another replied, "Perhaps the invocation was not sufficient." Gangesha smiled. "You are taking the

result and an assisting cause to be one and the same. A lamp shows the road, but it does not walk in place of the traveller."

He opened the library window. The pages began to flutter in the wind. "The author's intelligence, memory, time, health, materials, and sustained labour are the ordinary causes of a book's completion. The auspicious invocation is an effort to remove obstacles. If death, illness, or some other powerful impediment intervenes, the opening prayer alone cannot write the remaining chapters in the author's place."

The students looked again at the unfinished page. It no longer seemed evidence of failure, but testimony to the complex relation among causes. The silent last page of *Kadambari* itself became a question: is the desire to complete a work enough, or must all the necessary causes also be present? (Philosophical principle: the direct result of an auspicious invocation is not the completion of the book, but the removal of obstacles.)

Chapter 58 — Chandrapal's Memorial App

Kiranavali's Unhindered Journey

In Udayanacharya's chamber, the students were tying bundles of manuscript leaves. Someone noticed that there was no traditional auspicious verse at the beginning. A young man said anxiously, "Acharya, this book is about to travel. Who will protect it?"

Udayana answered calmly, "Care, study, clear writing, and timely revision." The young man pressed him again: "But the auspicious invocation?" Udayana replied, "Faith disciplines the mind; I do not disparage it. But the logical question is this: what actually causes a work to reach completion?"

Days passed. When the time for copying came, the palm leaves remained dry, the ink did not spoil, the writer remained healthy, and the work was completed. Later, a dispute arose over the incident. Some took it as a refutation of the doctrine of auspicious invocation. Gangesha said, "No. It shows only that no powerful obstacle was present there. Where there is no illness, remaining healthy without taking medicine does not prove that medicine can never be a cause of health."

The complete manuscript of *Kiranavali* lay in the students' hands. Its completion was not the triumph of any single cause, but the combined result of favourable conditions. (Philosophical principle: when the absence of obstacles is already secured, a work may be completed even without an auspicious invocation.)

Chapter 59 — Raghav Signal's New Code

The Blank Page of the Accusation Register

There was little sunlight in the registrar's room, but the ink of accusation was very dark. On one page of an old register, a red mark stood against Gangesha's name. Some people had come to regard that mark as the whole truth of the person.

One day the boy Gangesha saw the register. He was told, "Society's judgment has already been written." Gangesha asked, "What is the ground for that judgment?" Silence spread through the room. People repeated tradition, suspicion, and stories of birth, but his question kept asking for evidence.

Years later, that boy fashioned a language of reasoning in which no claim could stand without clarity about its delimiter, reason, and relation. Society had tried to confine his identity to a red mark; he offered a method by which knowledge would be assessed through causes, defects, and evidence.

The page of the register was not blank, but Gangesha's future was not written in that ink. His life continued to show that a record may be evidence, yet every statement in a record is not automatically valid knowledge. (Philosophical undertone: the conflict between birth-based accusation and evidence-based reality.)

Chapter 60 — Satyavrat Mehta's Second Silence

The Leatherworker Woman's Lamp

At the edge of the village stood the small house of a family that worked with leather. Each evening a woman there lit a lamp and patiently softened the hard layers of hide. Gangesha often watched her work.

Society said that some forms of touch were pure and others impure. Gangesha would ask, "What is the evidence for purity?" The woman would laugh and say, "Look at the use of the shoe that protects the foot; do not look only at its birth." That simple sentence remained in Gangesha's mind.

When the two decided to spend their lives together, voices of exclusion rose around them. Yet the small lamp in the house did not go out. Questions, labour, love, and study continued to dwell together there. Society kept judging by external names; Gangesha kept searching for the actual properties of things.

As the night deepened, the woman would add oil to the lamp. Gangesha would continue writing. One day he said, "Absence, too, is real.

I experience the absence of the respect that society did not give us. But the light of knowledge is real as well." The flame remained steady. (Philosophical undertone: the value of a thing lies in its actual properties, not in an inherited qualifier of birth.)

Chapter 61 — The First Festival of Names

The Hookah at His Maternal Uncle's Village

In the school at his maternal uncle's village, Gangesha's place was not in the row of students but near the doorway. The scholars debated while he was ordered to fill the hookah. No one believed that the quiet boy sitting there understood the subtleties of their reasoning.

As he shook out the ash, he listened to the questions. "Is knowledge valid in itself, or through something else?" "How is fire proved from smoke?" He was not permitted to answer, but the questions kept gathering in his mind.

One day the fire in the hookah went out. A student laughed: "He cannot even keep a fire alive." Gangesha answered softly, "Even where fire is present, if moisture or an obstruction is present, burning does not occur." Everyone fell silent. For the first time, his uncle understood that the boy had not merely been hearing words; he had been seeing relations.

Whether the legend is literal truth or metaphor, the meaning of the scene is clear: within a person whom society sees only in the role of a servant, the causal conditions of thought may be quietly preparing themselves. (Philosophical undertone: outward behaviour alone cannot justify a final judgment about an inner capacity.)

Chapter 62 — A Green Point in the Stump

The Question at the Cremation Ground

On a new-moon night, Gangesha reached the cremation ground—or so the folk tale says. In the distance a pyre was dying down, the bell of Kali's shrine moved in the wind, and a Tantric sat in silence.

The Tantric asked, "Do you seek knowledge?" Gangesha replied, "Not knowledge; I seek the ground on which knowledge is known to be valid." The Tantric opened his eyes. He drew a circle in the ash and asked, "Is whatever you see true?" Gangesha looked toward the smoke of the pyre. "Perception presents an object; but when a defect is present, it can also present illusion."

In the tale, the Goddess appears and grants a boon. History would perhaps say only that after long nights of humiliation, labour, study, and extraordinary intellectual effort, a great awakening occurred in him. Folklore compresses that long process into a single flash of lightning.

At dawn Gangesha left the cremation ground. He carried no magical book in his hand, only one question: on what basis may knowledge be called true? That question later became the heart of Tattvachintamani. (Philosophical undertone: folklore gives the scene of a miracle; history searches for long discipline and the sequence of causes.)

Chapter 63 — The Garh Narikel Heritage Project

The Shining Shell — Perception, Illusion, and Self-Awareness

On the bank of the Kamala, the evening light fell at an angle. Madhav saw a gleam from a distance. At once the memory of a silver bowl from the market rose in his mind. He ran across the sand: "I have found silver!"

When he came near and reached out, the object proved to be a shell. Two students walking with him began to argue. The first said, "Madhav failed to apprehend the difference between the shell and remembered silver. There was a perception of 'this something' before him and a memory of silver, but their separation was not apprehended." The second said, "No. His cognition was not merely a failure to apprehend. He actively perceived the character of silver in the shell; that is why he ran to pick it up."

Madhav listened while brushing sand from his clothes. His illusion had ended, but the story of the illusion had only begun. One side treated his error as a blending of two genuine cognitions; the other as the attribution of one object's property to another.

He put the shell into his bag. "I did not find silver," he said, "but I did find a question: how do my eyes, memory, and desire combine to make an illusion?" (Philosophical principle: in akhyati there is non-apprehension of difference; in anyathakhyati, silverness is attributed to the shell.)

Chapter 64 — Tender for Memory

The Yellow Conch

In a physician's house, a patient looked at a conch and said, "It is yellow." Everyone else saw the conch as white. The patient's vision was affected by a bilious defect, but to him the experience was immediate and compelling.

The physician placed a white cloth, milk, and the conch in a row. The patient called them all yellow. The physician asked, "Did all these objects change colour at the same moment, or is there a defect in the causal conditions of your seeing?"

The patient remained silent. Later, after treatment restored his vision, the conch appeared white. The object of the earlier cognition had not been wholly imaginary—the conch was there before him—but the attribution of colour had been defective.

The acharya placed the incident before his students and said, "Perception is not merely a matter of the eyes being open. Sense faculty, object, light, distance, and the absence of defect must come together in the proper conditions." (Philosophical principle: a defect in the sense faculty can make a real property of an object appear otherwise.)

Chapter 65 — Broom's Return

The Amla in the Palm

The teacher placed an amla on a student's palm and asked, "What is this?" The student answered without hesitation, "An amla." "Did you test the evidence?" the teacher asked. The student laughed. "It is on my hand; I can see it and touch it."

Then the teacher pointed to a gleaming spot in a distant field. "Is that water?" The student stopped. Heat, distance, and light meant it could be water or a mirage. This time he did not run; he first looked for other signs.

The teacher said, "The same mental process does not follow every cognition. Some cognitions lead to unwavering action; in others doubt arises, and we determine truth through later successful action, closer inspection, or other evidence."

The amla remained steady in the palm. The distant gleam remained a question. Together the two experiences opened different states in the validity of cognition. (Philosophical principle: with clear and unwavering cognition, action may be immediate; when doubt arises, validity requires subsequent testing.)

Chapter 66 — The Harvard Research Team

The Empty Seat

When the assembly was about to begin, the royal preceptor's seat was empty. A servant said, "The teacher has not yet arrived." A student asked, "Did you see that the teacher was absent?" The servant replied, "No."

The student smiled. "Are not seeing and not being the same thing?" The servant pointed to the open doors of the hall, the bright light, the empty seat, and the people present. "If he were here, he would be visible. The seat is fully available to perception, there is no obstruction to sight, and yet he is not here."

The teacher arrived later and heard the dispute. He said, "Non-apprehension yields knowledge of absence only when all the conditions for the object's being apprehensible are present. Failing to see a pot in a dark room does not prove the pot's absence; an empty seat in a brightly lit hall can."

The empty seat was no longer mere emptiness; it began to give true information about the absent person. (Philosophical principle: absence is not mere non-seeing; it is the actual absence of the counterpositive in a qualified locus.)

Chapter 67 — Meera and the Right to the Gaze

The Simultaneous Circle

At a fair, a performer whirled a burning stick. The spectators saw a complete circle of fire, although at any one instant the burning point occupied only one place. The children stared in wonder.

At the same time a drum sounded, perfume reached the nose, a lamp appeared to the eye, and the taste of sweets reached the tongue. One student said, "We experience all these things together; the mind must surely be in many places at the same time."

The acharya stopped the burning point. The circle vanished. "The sequence was so rapid that it appeared to you as a simultaneous circle. The mind likewise joins the eye, ear, nose, and tongue in an exceedingly rapid sequence. Memory gathers that sequence into what appears to be a single moment."

The fair filled again with noise, but the student now began to hear the subtle sequence within experience itself. (Philosophical principle: the mind connects with one sense faculty at a time; rapid succession creates the appearance of simultaneous experience.)

Chapter 68 — Devika versus the Tribute App

Memory of the Black Pot

A pot in a potter's house had once been black. After firing, its colour turned red. Months later, a young man returning from a distant land said on the basis of his old memory, "That black pot is still in the room."

The pot was indeed the same pot, and it stood in the same place, but its colour had changed. The young man's memory grasped the persistence of the object, not its present property. When he entered the room and saw the red pot, he stopped short.

The acharya said, "Memory arises from the impression of a past experience. Even when the object continues to exist, a particular property

may change. The recognition 'that same pot' is true; the judgment 'black now' is false."

The young man ran his hand over the red pot. Memory was a page of time, not a mirror of the present object. (Philosophical principle: memory may become false when the form previously experienced is applied unchanged to a present object.)

Chapter 69 — The Theft of a Name

Smoke on the Mountain — The Journey of Inference

At dawn, travellers were walking toward a mountain. Smoke could be seen rising from behind the summit. A young man said, "There is fire there." The elder asked, "Did you see the fire with your eyes?" "No, I saw the smoke."

The elder reminded him of the kitchen: wherever there had been smoke, there had been fire; smoke did not arise there without fire, and the relation had proved regular. But an old rule and the smoke now seen, if they remained separate in the mind, were not enough to complete the inference. The young man joined them inwardly: "This mountain possesses smoke that is pervaded by fire."

After that specific act of connecting, the inference of fire became clear. The travellers moved forward cautiously, because the fire might be a forest blaze or a cooking fire. Inference established its existence; its particular purpose or character required further evidence.

The mountain was far away, but the bridge of smoke, memory, and reflective application crossed the distance. (Philosophical principle: recollection of pervasion, knowledge that the reason is present in the subject, and the corresponding reflective cognition together produce inference.)

Chapter 70 — The Submarine's Testimony

The Heated Iron Ball

In a blacksmith's furnace, an iron ball glowed red. A new student announced, "Wherever there is fire, there is smoke; therefore smoke must rise from this ball." The teacher let him watch for a while. The iron remained heated, but no smoke rose.

The teacher placed wet wood on the fire. At once the air filled with smoke. "Now look," he said. "Fire alone is not the cause of smoke. Contact with moist fuel is a condition. A property that pervades the probandum but does not pervade the reason functions as an upadhi, a limiting condition."

The student understood that it was dangerous to make a rule too quickly from observed accompaniment. The furnace fire could not burn away his generalization, but the heated iron ball exposed its defect.

On his tablet he wrote, "Make the reason free of limiting conditions; otherwise the conclusion will fill the eyes like smoke." (Philosophical principle: fire is not by itself a sufficient reason for smoke; a condition such as contact with moist fuel is required.)

Chapter 71 — Procession of the False Ghost

Devadatta's Night Meal

Devadatta was stout, yet everyone in the village said that he ate nothing during the day. His friend stayed with him from morning until evening every day and never saw him eat. The question arose: how, then, was his body so well nourished?

A Mimamsaka guest said, "He does not eat by day, yet he is stout; therefore he must eat at night. This is arthapatti—postulation, a distinct means of knowledge invoked to reconcile apparently conflicting observed facts." The Naiyayika replied, "The conclusion may also be framed through negative concomitance. A person who never eats cannot remain well nourished; Devadatta is well nourished and does not eat by day; therefore he eats at some other time."

That night the friend stayed awake. At midnight he found Devadatta opening the kitchen and eating rice. The fact was settled, but the dispute over how that fact had been known did not end.

Embarrassed, Devadatta said, "You are discussing the route by which you knew about my meal more than the meal itself." Everyone burst out laughing. (Philosophical principle: postulating a night meal to reconcile the observed facts; in the Nyaya account, this may be treated as a kevala-vyatireki inference based solely on negative concomitance.)

Chapter 72 — The Laughter of Channa Grove

Devadatta Outside the House

Devadatta's mother sent word: "He is alive and well." His friend reached the house, but every room was empty. Courtyard, roof, cowshed—Devadatta was nowhere to be found.

One young man said, "All I know is that he is not in the house." Another replied, "A living person must be somewhere. His continuous absence from the interior of the house is certain; therefore he is outside the house."

A little later Devadatta returned from the fields. The conclusion proved true. Yet the friends were less interested in the field than in how knowledge of his location had arisen from negative concomitance without any positive instance of the same kind.

The emptiness of the house once again became active evidence of an absent person's whereabouts. (Philosophical principle: a living person is absent from the house; therefore he is outside it—an instance of *kevala-vyatireki* inference.)

Chapter 73 — Batuknath's Dream Court

The Crow and a Friend's Son

A black crow sat in the courtyard. In jest, a student said, "This crow is black because it was raised in the house of my friend's son." Everyone laughed, but the teacher seized upon the reasoning.

"Is being raised in the house of your friend's son a regular cause of blackness?" the teacher asked. No one had an answer. Perhaps something in that house—food, surroundings, or some other factor—was related to colour; perhaps there was no relation at all.

The teacher said, "It is not enough that the probandum happens to be true. The crow really is black, but the reason you have offered does not establish its blackness. A true conclusion is not proved by a false or irrelevant reason."

The crow flew away, but its black wings left behind in the school of logic a lesson about the responsibility of the reason. (Philosophical principle: when the regular relation between the reason and the probandum is doubtful, no certain inference can arise.)

Chapter 74 — Chandrapal's First Confession

Rama in the Hospital

In the hospital waiting room, Rama's body was unnaturally hot. A trainee nurse said, "Rama is ill." The senior physician asked, "State your conclusion clearly in five steps."

She said, "Proposition: Rama is ill. Reason: his body is abnormally hot. Example: whoever has a body this hot, like a fevered patient in a hospital, is ill. Application: Rama's body has that same heat. Conclusion: therefore Rama is ill."

The physician added a thermometer reading, blood tests, and other examinations. "Inference gives us an initial direction; to determine the particular nature of the illness, further evidence is required."

Rama's treatment began. The trainee understood that ordered reasoning is not merely the language of scholastic debate; it is also a discipline that can help protect life. (Philosophical principle: proposition, reason, example, application, and conclusion are the five members of a classical Nyaya inference.)

Chapter 75 — Raghav Signal Without a Network

The Potter's Wheel — Agent, Power, and Liberation

Outside the village, a potter's wheel was turning. The clay slowly took the form of a pot. A child asked, "Did the pot make itself?" The potter removed his hands, and the shape began to collapse. "The ordering of form, purpose, and means requires an agent's knowledge and effort."

The acharya placed the scene in a lesson on the inference of Ishvara. "The earth and the rest are effects; effects, like a pot, are produced by an agent; therefore the world has an agent." The opponent immediately asked, "The maker of a pot is an embodied potter. Why, then, should the maker of the world not also be embodied?"

The dispute widened—to the uniformity of the subject, the agent's knowledge and effort, the necessity of a body, and the combination of atoms. The potter's vessel became not an answer alone but a doorway into further questions.

At dusk the wheel stopped. The pot stood still. The child understood that an example shows a resemblance, but the limits of every resemblance must also be examined. (Philosophical principle: inference from being an effect to an agent; in the inference of Ishvara, the pot is the example for the claim that the earth and the rest, being effects, have a maker.)

Chapter 76 — Lau Kin-Hung's Journey to India

The Jewel and Fire

A Tantric was famed for possessing a jewel in whose presence, so the story went, fire would not burn the hand. A test was arranged in the royal court. The fire burned, a hand was brought near, yet no burning occurred.

A Mimamsaka scholar said, "The jewel has destroyed the fire's power to burn." The Naiyayika asked, "If an invisible power was destroyed, how did it return immediately when the jewel was removed?"

He offered another explanation: fire is a cause of burning, but burning also requires the absence of an inhibitor. While the jewel was present, the required absence of an inhibitor was missing, so the causal complex was incomplete. When the jewel was removed, that absence was restored and burning again became possible.

The king said, "If the same event can be explained clearly by assuming fewer entities, why multiply invisible powers without need?" The rule of explanatory economy shone in the court. (Philosophical principle: burning requires fire together with the absence of an inhibitor; there is no need to posit a separate invisible power.)

Chapter 77 — The Crocodile at the Airport

Story 21 — The Threshold of Liberation

An elderly seeker had spent his life performing sacrifices, giving charity, and studying. Yet one question remained: is liberation an endless ocean of happiness, a special quality of the self, or the complete cessation of suffering?

The teacher showed him the chain of illness, grief, desire, aversion, and rebirth. "Where a cause remains, its effect can arise again. Knowledge of reality cuts the root of the defects; the fruits of past karma are exhausted through experience. Knowledge destroys the power of karma to produce further bondage, while experience serves as the intervening process through which already-begun effects are spent."

The seeker asked, "Then why is there delay?" The teacher replied, "A lamp that has been lit removes the cause of darkness, but an arrow already released must still complete the motion that remains to it."

The old man sat at the threshold and watched the sunset. Liberation no longer seemed to him a brightly coloured realm, but the condition in which the return of suffering had become impossible. (Philosophical principle: liberation is the absolute cessation of suffering; knowledge of reality destroys the causes of future bondage, while the effects of past karma are exhausted through experience.)

Chapter 78 — The Silent Dialogue of Satyavrat and Lau

The Gavaya in the Forest — Comparison and Recognition

A young man from the city had never seen a gavaya. A forest guard told him, "A gavaya is like a cow, but it has a wild build, a different colour, and a distinctive gait." The sentence remained in his memory.

A few days later, in the forest, he saw a horned, hoofed animal resembling a cow yet clearly different. His eyes apprehended the animal before him; memory revived the guard's words; comparison brought the shared features together. He said, "This is a gavaya."

The guard corrected him: "You have learned not merely that this single animal is a gavaya. You have understood the common property on account of which the word 'gavaya' applies to all members of this kind."

The young man's knowledge was no longer the memorisation of a name. A new relation had opened between word and world. (Philosophical principle: from recollection of the instruction together with perception of similarity arises the upamiti that determines the property responsible for the correct application of the word 'gavaya'.)

Chapter 79 — Broom's Deed of Gift

The Baby Elephant and the Donkey

A traveller was told, "The animal that looks like a baby elephant is called such-and-such." On the road he met a donkey whose body, from a distance, shared certain shapes with a baby elephant. He applied the new name to the donkey.

A local man laughed. "Similarity is not merely a count of two or four shared properties. Look at the relevant features—the ears, trunk, feet, gait, and structure of the body. Even where some similarities exist, decisive dissimilarities can block the application of a word."

The traveller looked again at the donkey. His first comparison had been superficial. When he later saw a real baby elephant, the meaning of the earlier instruction became clear.

The donkey was not simply a wrong answer; it became a teacher that exposed an incomplete method of comparison. (Philosophical principle: similarity is not merely the number of shared properties; relevant properties and decisive dissimilarities matter in determining word-reference.)

Chapter 80 — Hariharan's Descendants

Green Broccoli

Madhavi was visiting the vegetable market for the first time. A friend had earlier told her, "Broccoli is like cauliflower, but dark green." In one corner of the market she saw a green, branching vegetable resembling cauliflower.

She asked the seller, "Is this broccoli?" The seller smiled and agreed. Madhavi had not merely encountered an object; the meaning of a word she had heard earlier had become connected with a directly perceived thing.

At home she showed her child different heads of broccoli—small, large, light green. The child understood that the word did not refer only to that one vegetable from the market, but to all things possessing the relevant broccoli-nature.

Cauliflower provided the comparison, but broccoli acquired its own independent identity. (Philosophical principle: knowledge of the referent of an unfamiliar word can arise through similarity to a familiar object.)

Chapter 81 — Batra's Incomplete Name

The Striped Zebra

The teacher had said, "A zebra is like a horse, but its body has black-and-white stripes." At the zoo, the child stopped the moment he saw the striped animal.

He recognised the horse-like build, legs, face, and gait; the stripes marked the difference. The teacher's sentence returned to memory. "This is a zebra!" he cried with the delight of discovery.

The teacher asked, "Only because it resembles a horse?" The child said, "No. The similarity was the clue given in the instruction; the stripes and the whole form fixed the correct object of the word."

That day the zoo became a classroom of philosophy of language. (Philosophical principle: instruction, recollection, and perceived similarity work together to produce knowledge of a new relation between a name and its referent.)

Chapter 82 — The Gaja-Graha Within

The Parrot's Command — Word, Sentence, and Trust

The parrot in the courtyard had learned from its master's voice to say, "Bring water." One day the master was away from home. The parrot uttered the same sentence, and a child went and filled a water-pot.

A learned guest asked, "Did the parrot intend to ask for water?" The child laughed. "No." "Then how did you understand the meaning?"

The words were familiar, their order was appropriate, the relation between 'water' and 'bring' was semantically possible, the pronunciation was recognisable, and the convention had been learned from earlier behaviour. Even without a genuine present intention in the parrot's mind, the sentence generated meaning in the hearer.

The incident raised a dispute: is a speaker's present intention alone the cause of verbal understanding, or do the structure of the words and a previously known convention possess an independent capacity as well? (Philosophical principle: even without the speaker's present intention, meaning can arise from proper word order, expectancy, semantic fitness, and a previously learned convention.)

Chapter 83 — The Coconut-Leaf School

Bring the Pot

A child was learning language. An elder said to another servant, "Bring the pot." The servant rose, went into the room, and brought a water-pot. The child observed the relation between the sentence and the action.

The next day the elder said only "pot", and the servant looked toward the object; he said "bring", and the servant prepared to move. Through repeated agreement and difference across many situations, the child began to grasp that the word 'pot' recalls the object, the case ending marks its role as object, the verb expresses bringing, and the imperative points toward action to be performed.

Some held that the child first grasps the meaning of the whole sentence and only later divides it into words. Others held that the power of each particular word is learned directly from particular patterns of behaviour. The child knew nothing of this scholastic debate; he was living his way into language.

One day he himself said, "Bring water." His words caused another person to act—language had become established within him. (Philosophical principle: by observing the behaviour of elders, a child learns word-power and the causal relation between sentence-meaning and action.)

Chapter 84 — First Lesson: Present

The Wooden Puppet

A puppeteer moved a wooden puppet with strings. From the stage came the command, "Bring the pot." The puppet turned, picked up a small pot, and brought it over. A child in the audience stared in amazement: "The puppet understands words!"

When he went behind the curtain, he saw the strings, the puppeteer's hand, and the rehearsed movements. From the visible action he had first inferred knowledge and desire in the puppet; when counterevidence appeared, he revised the conclusion.

The acharya said, "Observed behaviour can be a means of learning how words function, but we must be careful about the cause of that behaviour. Mistaking the agent leads to mistaking the cause."

The child watched the play again. Now, behind every step of the puppet, the invisible string reminded him to reason. (Philosophical principle: the actual agent and cause of observed behaviour must be examined; outward movement can lead to a mistaken inference.)

Chapter 85 — The Women's Night Assembly

The Door

A gust rose. From inside the house the master called only, "The door!" The servant immediately shut it. The sentence did not contain the words "close it," yet its meaning was complete.

Later a scholar asked, "It could have meant bring the door, open it, paint it—or any number of things. Why did the servant understand that he was to close it?"

The gust, the open door, papers flying through the house, the master's tone, and the immediate need fixed the intended meaning. The word "door" awakened an expectancy for an action; context supplied the missing verb.

The wind stopped, but the question remained: how had an entire sentence awakened inside one word? (Philosophical principle: context, expectancy, and speaker-intention can license the supplementation of an unexpressed word.)

Chapter 86 — The Labourer's Feet

The Village on the Ganga

A traveller was told, "The village is on the Ganga." He took a boat and began looking for houses in the current. The boatman laughed: "The village is not on the water; it is on the bank of the Ganga."

"Then is the sentence false?" the traveller asked. The boatman replied, "It is impossible in its primary sense, but the speaker's intention is clear. Because of its intimate relation to the river, the word 'Ganga' indicates the bank."

The village soil was damp with river water and its life depended upon the stream. Figurative meaning is not arbitrary: relation to the primary meaning, context, and the impossibility of literal syntactic connection set its limits.

The traveller reached the village. Language had not drowned him in the river; intention had put him ashore. (Philosophical principle: when literal syntactic connection is impossible, a related secondary meaning is grasped in accordance with the speaker's intention.)

Chapter 87 — The Screen Fast

Saindhava

While eating, the king said, "Bring saindhava." The servant ran toward the stable, for saindhava can also mean a horse from Sindh. The cook stopped him: "At mealtime the king wants salt, not a horse."

The same word had two meanings. Lexical power opened both possibilities; the context of food, plate, and taste selected one. Had the king spoken while preparing for a journey, the horse would have been appropriate.

Taking the salt, the king said, "A word offers a list of meanings; intention chooses the meaning of the present sentence." This time the servant remembered the taste of saindhava.

Polysemy was no longer a defect of language; it became a test of contextual understanding. (Philosophical principle: the determinate meaning of an ambiguous word is known from the speaker's intention and context.)

Chapter 88 — Ira's Letter to the Children Abroad

The Dispute over Pankaja

The poet wrote, "The pankaja bloomed." A new student of grammar objected: "A water-lily, an insect, or anything else born in mud could also be called pankaja; the meanings of the components lead in that direction."

The poet pointed to the lotus in the pond. "The components pank and ja provide a general etymology, but the whole expression, through long-established usage, recalls a particular lotus. The semantic power of the compound does not activate every possible compositional meaning equally."

The student looked at a white water-lily. The question arose: is the use of pankaja for it primary, secondary, or incorrect? The debate extended to the usage of earlier authorities, expectancy, and the limits of convention.

The flower continued to bloom silently in the pond while language debated its name. (Philosophical principle: compositional meaning and the semantic power of the whole expression are distinct; by convention pankaja denotes the lotus, not every thing born in mud.)

Chapter 89 — Satyavrat's Public Hearing

The Child's 'Amba'

A small child, crying with hunger, uttered "amba." The sound was indistinct, yet the mother immediately picked the child up.

A learned guest asked, "The word is not grammatically complete; how did its meaning arise?" The mother replied, "Tone, circumstance, the child's previous behaviour, and resemblance to the correct form of 'amba' joined together in my mind."

A listener often recalls a correct word through a corrupted or indistinct sound. Whether the first cognition of meaning comes directly from an independent power of the faulty form or through recollection of the correct word can be debated; the mother's response did not wait for that debate.

The child knew no science of words; language had carried the child's need all the way home. (Philosophical principle: from an unclear or corrupted sound the listener can, through resemblance and context, recall the correct word and grasp its meaning.)

Chapter 90 — The Constitution of Names

News of a Son's Birth

Chaitra sat dejected. A messenger whispered something into his ear and his face suddenly brightened with joy. A child nearby did not hear the messenger's words clearly, but saw the change.

Later it became known that the news was of a son's birth. The child inferred that the cognition of the birth produced by the messenger's words was the cause of the joy. Other causes were possible, but context, timing, and subsequent confirmation strengthened the relation.

The teacher said, "Learning language is not merely reading a dictionary. From other people's activity, joy, fear, and action we grasp the causal role of cognition produced by words."

The messenger's brief sentence changed the mood of a household and opened, in a child's mind, a lesson in verbal testimony. (Philosophical principle: knowledge produced by news is inferred as the cause of an emotional change; causal relations are learned from behaviour.)

Chapter 91 — The Absence of the Rogues

The Mobile-Phone Rumour

A message spread through the town: "The embankment will break tonight; leave your homes." There was no source, only a trail of forwarded marks. People began to panic.

A schoolteacher checked the administration's official notice, spoke to the embankment engineer, and verified conditions locally. It turned out that a photograph from an earlier year had been attached to the new message.

She told the children, "A clear sentence is not by itself evidence of truth. A parrot can utter a correct sentence; a deceiver can write grammatical prose. Examine the source, intention, possible defect, context, and any defeating evidence."

The rumour subsided. The mobile phone was a modern messenger, but trustworthiness lay not in the device; it lay in the source and verification. (Philosophical principle: verbal testimony requires examination of the speaker's truthful intention, reliability, absence of defect, and defeating evidence.)

Chapter 92 — The Shade of the Stump

Witnesses in Court

In court, two witnesses gave different accounts of the same event. The first had seen it from far away in darkness; the second had been close but was hostile to the accused.

The judge did not decide merely upon hearing, "I saw it." Distance, illumination, defects of vision, the time elapsed before recollection, personal attachment or aversion, consistency of testimony, and physical evidence were all examined.

One witness's perception was defective; the other's intention was biased. A third, impartial record clarified the event.

The judicial process became a modern form of Navya-Nyaya's questions: how was the cognition produced, was there a defect, what was the purpose of the statement, and was defeating evidence present? (Philosophical principle: the statement of a trustworthy speaker arises from true cognition and an intention to speak truth; defects of perception, memory, and intention are all open to examination.)

Chapter 93 — Flood Again

The Same 'Ga' Again?

The teacher first pronounced "ga," then after a while pronounced "ga" again. The disciple said, "I have heard the same ga once more; therefore sound is eternal."

The teacher asked a man, a woman, and a child to pronounce "ga." Pitch, force, and tone differed in every utterance, yet one common form was recognised in all of them.

The recognition of "the same" need not establish the persistence of an individual sound; it may be the reappearance of the universal ga-ness. The first sound arose, endured for a moment, and ceased; the second was a new sound belonging to the same universal.

The disciple listened to a temple bell. Each strike produced a new sound, yet the familiar character of the bell returned as a common feature. (Philosophical principle: individual sounds are produced and destroyed; re-identification rests upon the universal character of 'ga'.)

Chapter 94 — The Return of the Crocodiles

Shell and Silver / The Illusion of Silver

The teacher wrote a familiar case on the board: mistaking a shell (shukti) for silver (rajata). The students pictured every term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The teacher replied that an illustration is not ornament; it links an abstract rule to experience. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine a person who failed to apprehend the difference between the shell before him and the silver supplied by memory. Once the disciple pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion emerged naturally. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

A traveller recounted the Naiyayika view: in illusion a person does not merely fail to apprehend the difference between shell and silver, as the Prabhakaras hold; rather, he positively cognises in the present shell a property that is not there but belongs to silver. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary error. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first framed the issue of the cause of illusion and action, the theories of error: in a

cognition such as "this shell is silver," is action caused by the Prabhakara doctrine of akhyati, non-apprehension of difference, or by the Naiyayika doctrine of anyathakhyati, a determinate erroneous cognition? The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that there are in fact two distinct cognitions here: a general cognition of the presented shell as "this," and a cognition of silver supplied by memory. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the Naiyayika account: in illusion the shell before one becomes the qualificand, while silverness is imposed upon it as qualifier or mode. Once the disciple pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion emerged naturally. (Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani, Perception Section.)

A traveller recounted this point: to act toward silver, a direct cognition of the form "this is silver" is indispensable. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed how a serious epistemic process can inhabit a small event of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: detailed refutation of the Prabhakara theory of akhyati.)

The teacher wrote on the board: in the cognition "this shell is silver," silverness functions as the mode of cognition; therefore the cognition is erroneous. The students pictured every term as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an illustration connects an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the character of the subject and the opponent's objection.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the objection: if validity is the validity of a means of cognition, how can the cognition "this is silver" arising with respect to a shell be invalid? Once the disciple pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion emerged naturally.

(Philosophical principle: Prabhakara position—validity is self-known and self-produced.)

The teacher posed a question in class: the cognition "this is silver" is self-revealing in determining its object, and its validity as truth limits

and manifests itself through presenting the object as silver or as the locus of silverness. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: truth is known intrinsically.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that unwavering action does not arise from a cognition merely resembling the illusion "this is silver"; it arises from a cognition distinguished from error. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Prabhakara position.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first considered the composite cognition "this is both shell and silver, and this is silver": the shell-component is veridical and the silver-component non-veridical, so validity and invalidity are experienced in different parts. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the case in which an invalid cognition is valid with respect to a particular component.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that taking the mere objects named "shell" and "silver" as delimiters does not solve the problem, because silver-objecthood is also present in the illusion "this shell is silver." People added their own experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The meaning of the example emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: validity and its absence cannot be non-pervasive occurrences in this manner.)

A traveller recounted this analysis: in the illusion "this shell is silver," the objecthood residing in the shell is delimited by the defeating property of silverness, while the objecthood residing in real silver is delimited by the appropriate silverness. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, exposing the deep epistemic structure of an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: objecthood is a special form of qualificative relation.)

The teacher wrote on the board: this definition does not apply to the indeterminate cognition "this is something," yet it applies to the illusion "this shell is silver," because the objecthood of "this" and the mode can be taken to occur in one locus. The students pictured each term as a real scene; the illustration linked the abstract rule to experience.

(Philosophical principle: a cognition whose mode is co-located with objecthood is not thereby established as valid.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first objected that, for the same reason, the definition would also apply to the erroneous component of a mixed cognition such as "this is both silver and shell." The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: a cognition opposed to objecthood delimited by a property absent from its own locus is not thereby valid.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that if shell and silver in the illusion are assigned only one objecthood, delimited by silverness absent from the shell, then the cognition "this shell is silver" would cease to be valid even with respect to its shell-component. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: a single objecthood cannot be accepted.)

The teacher wrote on the board: suppose one says the cognition is valid with respect to the silver-component and the shell-component, but invalid only in the qualificative component "shell is non-different from silver"—that too is unsatisfactory. The students pictured each term in a real scene and asked which relation was decisive; the example linked abstract rule and experience.

(Philosophical principle: a single objecthood cannot be accepted.)

The teacher wrote on the board: the illusion "this shell is silver" is valid in its "this" component because thisness is present in the shell, but invalid in its silverness-component because silverness is taken as the mode in a shell where silverness is absent. The students pictured every term in a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: indeterminate cognition is excluded from both valid and invalid cognition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine that in the mixed cognition "this is silver and shell," coexistence of the marks of validity and invalidity is possible because they belong to different components. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion emerged naturally.

(Philosophical principle: another view.)

A traveller recounted this analysis: in the illusion "this shell is silver," the thisness-component and the silverness-component remain distinct,

so the first proposed mark of validity and the third proposed mark of invalidity do not suffer under- or over-extension; shell-objecthood and silver-objecthood are mutually distinct. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: alternative definitions.)

The teacher posed a question in class: in the second inference, "non-presence in silver" becomes an upadhi, because in a cognition that prompts action toward something other than silver, silverness may be the mode even though its object is not silver. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: objection that invalid cognition is not established.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first proposed taking the cognition "this shell is silver" as the subject: it has the shell as its object and produces action toward the shell, like a cognition of shell. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: defect of having no suitable example in the inference.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over two conditions: "the shell is the locus of the objecthood of a silver-cognition" and "the shell is the object of an action undertaken for silver." Both function as upadhis in the proposed inference. People added their own experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: defect of having no suitable example in the inference.)

The teacher wrote on the board an alternative inference: the shell is the qualificand of a cognition that has silverness as its mode, produces action toward the shell, and arises from a desire for silver, because, like a cognition of shell, it produces action toward the shell. The students pictured every term as an actual scene; the illustration linked abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika establishment of invalid cognition.)

A traveller recounted this claim: the erroneous cognition "this shell is silver," or the determinate false cognition of silver, is the cause of the action that follows, just as a veridical cognition of silver is. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and inference, bringing the epistemic process into view.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika establishment of invalid cognition.)

The teacher wrote on the board: if one objects that taking "this shell is silver" as the subject involves contradiction or unestablishedness, then let the subject simply be whatever cognition both sides admit to be a cause of action. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika establishment of invalid cognition.)

The teacher wrote on the board the objection: cognition of the non-difference of silver and shell should arise from a positive cognition such as "this shell is silver," not from mere non-apprehension of difference; otherwise even cognition of difference would have to arise from non-apprehension of difference. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: Prabhakara position—non-apprehension of the desired object's difference causes action.)

A traveller recounted the introspective cognition "I know this shell as silver" or "this is known as silver." It too has the shell as its object; it cannot be reduced merely to failure to apprehend silver's non-relation. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: alternative view—the subsequent cognition that does not take the difference from the desired object as its object is causal.)

A traveller recounted the reply: in a case of veridical silver-cognition no such later cognition is produced, because that very silver was not previously known. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: alternative view—the subsequent cognition that does not take the difference from the desired object as its object is causal.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that non-apprehension of the difference of the shell, remembered as the counterpositive of mutual absence in the judgement "this is silver, not shell," cannot be the cause of cessation; otherwise the meaning of a negative expression would have to be non-apprehension of non-relation and invalid cognition would again become unavoidable. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: non-apprehension of an undesired difference as the cause of cessation.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this consequence: if cognition of non-difference from an undesired object were the cause of cessation, then after the false judgement "this is not silver" a person would not withdraw from silver. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: non-apprehension of an undesired difference as the cause of cessation.)

The teacher posed a question in class: if mere non-apprehension of difference were the cause of cessation, then in the case "this is not silver" neither action nor a false cognition would be necessary. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: non-apprehension of an undesired difference as the cause of cessation.)

The teacher posed another question: in the composite illusion "this is both shell and silver," action toward silver and withdrawal from shell need not occur simultaneously. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: non-apprehension of an undesired difference as the cause of cessation.)

The teacher continued: otherwise one would be forced to posit a doubt of the form "is this silver or shell?" The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: non-apprehension of an undesired difference as the cause of cessation.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that the cognition "silver is the qualificand" is simply a cognition in which silverness is the mode; then a false cognition of "mere silver" could not be a cognition of the non-silver shell. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: on one Mimamsaka sub-view, invalid cognition would become a cognition with no qualificand.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that "knowing one thing as another" is impossible by the very nature of cognition: if the shell is the qualificand, silver cannot simultaneously be the qualificand. People added their own experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: on one Mimamsaka sub-view, invalid cognition would become a cognition with no qualificand.)

The teacher posed a question in class: therefore, in the disputed cognition "this shell is silver," silverness is not present as a defeating qualifier, because that cognition, like true cognition, is still a cognition. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion of the akhyati prima-facie position.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that akhyati in "this shell is silver" appears to produce action toward the shell through non-apprehension of difference, just as a true cognition "this is silver" produces action toward real silver. People added their own experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion of the akhyati prima-facie position.)

The teacher posed a question in class: in mutually reversed composite cognitions—"this is both shell and silver" and "this is both silver and shell"—action toward the shell and withdrawal from silver would have to be present at the same time. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: action cannot be established by mere non-apprehension of difference.)

The teacher continued: the causal conditions for both composite errors concerning shell and silver are simultaneously present; hence the arising of the illusion "this is both shell and silver" is as much a matter of experience as the arising of a veridical composite cognition of the same verbal form. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: action cannot be established by mere non-apprehension of difference.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that the Naiyayika need not posit doubt here, because through the power of sensory defect the difference between shell and silver can be cognised in relation to each; but the Mimamsaka would have to posit a separate doubt, "is this shell or silver?" since the distinct differences of shell and silver cannot both be grasped in one and the same object. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: action cannot be established by mere non-apprehension of difference.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over memory: silver is remembered only as qualified by silverness and shell only as qualified by shell-ness; one does not remember a shell qualified by silverness or silver

qualified by shell-ness. People added their experiences, while the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that action and withdrawal arise from non-apprehension of the corresponding differences.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the further point that action and withdrawal cannot arise merely from sensory defect, because in veridical cognitions of silver and shell produced by unimpaired senses the defect is absent. People added their experiences, while the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that action and withdrawal arise from non-apprehension of the corresponding differences.)

The teacher posed a question in class: in a verbal pseudo-cognition such as "this is both shell and silver," silverness and shell-ness are equally recalled by the words; therefore both action and withdrawal would be liable to occur together. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: another proposal of the later Prabhakaras.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the reverse proposal: if silverness and shell-ness are taken to have respectively a closer and a more remote relation, then a graded doubt—"is this shell or silver?"—would become unavoidable. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: another proposal of the later Prabhakaras.)

The teacher posed a question in class: discordant action toward the shell arises from the grounding cognition "this is silver," not from a cognition merely presenting the shell as the desired object. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: cognition of the desired object and non-apprehension of difference as successive causes.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first suggested that in successful action a grounding cognition "this is silver" happens to take the desired silver as its object and thereby produces action. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: renewed refutation of the view that cognition in general is the cause, and renewed establishment of anyathakhyati.)

The teacher wrote on the board: some other Prabhakaras say that the negative cognition "this is not silver" concerning silver inhibits action toward silver. The students pictured every term as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: a negative cognition of an unapprehended non-relation is not the inhibitor.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that in the verbal cognition "this is not silver," the possibility of simultaneous action and withdrawal shows that mere non-apprehension of difference cannot be the inhibitor. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: a negative cognition of an unapprehended non-relation is not the inhibitor.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the Naiyayika claim that positive and negative concomitance in experience establish the determinate cognition "this shell is silver" as the cause of action. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that cognition of the absence of opposition between desired and undesired objects is causal.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that a verbal pseudo-cognition "this is both shell and silver" cannot establish action toward shell and withdrawal from silver, because the word does not make the properties present in silver and shell respectively be remembered as belonging to shell and silver in reverse. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: another view in which a property is taken as the cause of action.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that belief in the non-deviating but deceptive statement "this is both shell and silver" can in fact be the cause of action and withdrawal. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: another view in which a property is taken as the cause of action.)

The teacher posed a question in class: action toward the shell arises through non-apprehension of the difference of some property remembered as existing in the shell and grasped under the form "silver." The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition is the cause of action.)

The teacher wrote on the board: the invalid determinate cognition "this shell is silver" is the cause of action, on grounds of theoretical economy and positive-negative concomitance; there is no need for an elaborate construction of mere non-apprehension of difference. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition is the cause of action.)

The teacher wrote on the board: on this account the invalid determinate cognition "this shell is silver" can be a single cognition, like recognition, arising when its complex of causes is present. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: "this is silver" is one cognition.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that the false cognition "this shell is silver" is established by the subsequent introspective cognition "I knew this shell as silver." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: perception is the cause of anyathakhyati.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the fact that even after the difference between shell and silver has been apprehended, the introspective cognition "I knew the shell as silver" arises. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: perception is the cause of anyathakhyati.)

The teacher posed a question in class: in the introspective cognition "I knew this shell as silver," it is impossible to locate in one self both cognition of the shell as object and mere non-apprehension of the non-relation of the qualifier silverness; therefore, on the Mimamsaka view, there would be no example at all of an invalid determinate cognition such as "this shell is silver." The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: perception is the cause of anyathakhyati.)

The teacher posed another question: in the expression "as silver," the instrumental ending conveys silverness, which is a qualifier of silver; a qualifier cannot be apprehended without a qualificand. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: perception is the cause of anyathakhyati.)

The teacher wrote on the board: one might ask how the cognition "this shell is silver" can be invalid when both shell and silver are real and

existent. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: defect is the cause of illusion.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the Naiyayika reply: the cognition "this shell is silver" concerns only existing shell and existing silver, yet its invalidity consists in presenting a qualifier in a locus where that qualifier is absent, or in apprehending an objecthood opposed to that qualifier. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: defect is the cause of illusion.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the ancient Naiyayika view: identity and other unreal relations become the objects of false cognitions such as "this shell is silver." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion emerged naturally.

(Philosophical principle: old Naiyayika view—anyathakhyati is, in this respect, a cognition of an unreal relation.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the claim that in the illusion "this shell is silver" there remains a capacity for silver-directed practical behaviour, but the defect suppresses that behaviour. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: being one's own object is self-luminosity.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the Naiyayika reply: perception does not establish that a simple first-order cognition is self-luminous, for ordinary experience has the form "this is silver," not "I know this silver." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: Naiyayika refutation of self-luminosity.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the fact that the introspective cognition "I know this silver" arises after the first cognition; that experience cannot simply be discarded. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: Naiyayika refutation of self-luminosity.)

A traveller recounted this point: in the first-order cognition whose content is "I know this silver," cognition itself is not its own object, because no sensory contact is available that would make cognition the object. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: cognition is not its own object.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first returned to the claim that in "this shell is silver" silverness is the mode of cognition, and therefore the cognition is erroneous. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the view of certain scholars.)

The teacher wrote on the board a possible inference: these word-meanings—the object delimited by thisness and silver—stand in the natural sentential relation intended by the speaker, because they are recalled by the expression "idam rajatam" whose words possess expectancy and the other conditions; alternatively, they are recalled by a group of words possessing semantic fitness and proximity and used to communicate a sentential relation. The students pictured every term as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: the Vaisheshika alternative inference.)

Chapter 95 — Lau Kin-Hung's Final Bargain

The Case of Water

The teacher wrote an analysis on the board: in this inference, the probandum is that earth is distinct from the other substances—water, air, ether, and so on—and the reason is possession of smell. The students pictured every term of the example as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: kevala-vyatireki inference.)

The teacher wrote on the board: since this property is not a quality of the physical substances such as earth and water, its substratum must be an immaterial substance, the self. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. (Philosophical principle: the Inference Section—the culmination of logical structure and the analysis of pervasion.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over an example: when someone sees what appears to be water in darkness or from afar, the validity of that first cognition is not yet settled. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: the Navya-Nyaya doctrine—the formidable logical establishment of extrinsic validity.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first proposed: when the person reaches the place, drinks the water, and the thirst is quenched—successful action—one can infer negatively, "This cognition of water is valid because it produces successful action toward water capable

of removing thirst." The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. Both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the Navya-Nyaya doctrine—the formidable logical establishment of extrinsic validity.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first presented the Mimamsaka claim that a ritual act such as *prokshana*, sprinkling water upon grain, produces in the grain an *adheya-shakti*, an implanted capacity by which it becomes fit to generate the future ritual result. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation and establishment of the absence of an inhibitor, *pratibandhakabhava*.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: the cognition "the water is hot" is not false, yet a cognition taking the form of disregard may produce behaviour not conducive to the intended result, and is therefore described as non-veridical in that practical respect. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion of the *akhyati* *prima-facie* position.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over the claim that gold is not water, because it is not the locus of natural fluidity; like lac it is the locus of adventitious fluidity and lacks viscosity. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: the later view—gold is not water.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first formulated a negative inference: disputed molten gold, which is a locus of fluidity and is doubtful between being fiery and earthy while being distinct from water, is of the fiery substance, because its non-eternal fluidity is not destroyed even by intense contact with fire when there is no relation to an opposed liquid substance; whatever is not so is not fiery, as in water and ghee. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: another view—fluidity is produced in gold.)

A traveller recounted the concluding inference: "Disputed molten gold is fiery, because it is the locus of an abiding fluidity not destroyed even by intense contact with fire; whatever is not so is not fiery, as in water." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, showing how the fiery nature of gold is established.

(Philosophical principle: final establishment of gold as belonging to the fiery substance.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first observed that otherwise one would also have to say that air, being tangible and different from water and fire, is earthy. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: a partial view—gold is a distinct substance different from earth, water, and fire.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the unwanted consequence that in the inference "water is knowable because it possesses taste," earth-hood would become an upadhi because it pervades knowability delimited by taste. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: the view that something may pervade the probandum yet, if it does not pervade the reason, is not thereby an upadhi.)

The teacher posed a question in class: one may object that under this definition non-audibility becomes an upadhi in the inference "sound is nameable because it is knowable," while earth-hood becomes an upadhi in "water is knowable because it has taste." The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: alternative theory of upadhi—not merely an irrelevant extra factor.)

A traveller recounted a reason contradicted by the very perception that apprehends it: "Water and air are hot, because they are tangible and distinct from earth, like fire." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: a reason defeated by the perception that apprehends the reason itself—for example, 'water and air are hot because, being tangible and distinct from earth, they resemble fire.')

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first considered an inference intended to establish the property that delimits thirst-quenching water as "water." The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: alternative view that failure to establish a property possessing the form that delimits the inhibitor of inference is what matters.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first observed that otherwise, even when the absence of colour has been known separately in earth, water, and fire, doubt about colour in air would be impossible. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani—the doctrine of burning power.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over the point that even if the causal efficacy of the total causal complex is explained through absence of an inhibitor, then the mere collection of absences of inhibitors such as a gem would be the cause of the experience of burning—just as water together with a turning stick may form part of the causal complex in producing a pot. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani—the doctrine of burning power.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the rite "the grain is consecrated by sprinkling water." Both sides accept that consecration produces an imperceptible distinction conducive to a future effect. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means for knowing causality is available, mere deviation is the defeater of causal knowledge.)

The teacher posed a question in class: otherwise, why would the same grain, even after being consecrated merely by sprinkling water, later become specifically fit for pounding and the other prescribed operations? The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means for knowing causality is available, mere deviation is the defeater of causal knowledge.)

The teacher wrote on the board a proposal: in scriptural sentences such as "one should sacrifice with grain," "one consecrates grain by sprinkling water," "one pounds the grain," and "one should sacrifice with a cake of cooked rice," the continuity of the parts of the pounded grain creates an expectancy for the whole grain in relation to the cooked cake; therefore only the pounded grain is semantically connected with the sacrifice. The students pictured each term as a real scene.

(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means for knowing causality is available, mere deviation is the defeater of causal knowledge.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first offered proposal 174: consecration by sprinkling water produces a distinction inhering in the individual grain, because it is a prescribed act at the time of producing a future result such as sacrifice. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani—the doctrine of burning power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: the theory may be explained by saying that consecration through sprinkling water produces an unseen potency, *adrsta*, because that consecration is prescribed as a cause of a future result in the absence of any known intermediate unseen factor, like the sacrifice and its subsidiary acts. The students examined the subject, *probandum*, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: *Tattvacintamani*—the doctrine of burning power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: in the scriptural sentence "the consecrated grain is pounded," the preceding rule requires that only grain consecrated by sprinkling water be intended, because the injunction cannot be violated. The students examined the subject, *probandum*, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: *Tattvacintamani*—the doctrine of burning power.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first asked: otherwise, how would the accusative expression have its meaning in sentences such as "he goes to the village" or "he sprinkles water upon the threshing-floor of grain"? The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: *Tattvacintamani*—the doctrine of burning power.)

A traveller recounted proposal 185: in consecrated water, sprouts, and similar cases, the mere destruction of the consecration—delimited by the specified time—can be what removes pain and the like. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: the established view—the destruction of consecration is what conditions the status of being worthy of worship.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first cited the scriptural sense: "As water remains separate from the leaf of a blue lotus, so action becomes separated from the knower of reality." The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: *Tattvacintamani*—the doctrine of human ends.)

Chapter 96 — Batuknath's Late Forgiveness

The Colour of the Conch

The teacher posed a question in class: a *Mimamsaka* may say that when there is an ocular defect such as excess bile, an illusion like "this conch is yellow" may arise despite perception of a particular property, just

as a face appears in a mirror. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the argument that another defect generates doubt about validity.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that because the bile-defect inhibits it, no direct determinate perception of the particular truth "the conch is not yellow" arises. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the argument that another defect generates doubt about validity.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine that the invalid cognition "this conch is yellow" is nevertheless valid with respect to the conch as its object. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the other proposed inferences.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first objected: even when the particular feature is seen in the illusion "the conch is yellow," a veridical cognition of the conch's whiteness does not arise; therefore seeing the particular feature cannot be the cause of white-cognition. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions. The objection, however, does not stand.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion—the excellence or non-defect is causal, and its form in inference and the other means of knowledge.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the objection: even without a defective discrimination such as "the conch is yellow, not white," a person desiring a white conch does not proceed toward the yellow-looking object; only after a later veridical inference distinguishing the yellow object from the white conch does he stop. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: establishment of non-apprehension of difference as the cause.)

A traveller recounted the resulting claim: one should then take the cognition of non-difference expressed as "the conch is white" to be the cause of action. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: establishment of non-apprehension of difference as the cause.)

The teacher wrote on the board: in the cognition "the conch is yellow," what is presented is only yellowness of the eye, not a yellow

substance; the supposed parts of a yellow substance would be distributed like rays. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: later view—air is imperceptible.)

The teacher posed a question in class: similarly, an illusion of absence does not block veridical cognition of presence; the error "this conch is yellow" can be found even in one who has already determined "this conch is not yellow." The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: the renewed objection that cognition of absence in general does not block cognition of presence in general.)

Chapter 97 — Chandrapal's Mule Account

Validity When Objecthood Is Treated as a Separate Entity

The teacher wrote on the board: then "a determinate cognition having jewel-ness as its mode and producing action that results in obtaining the jewel" would become a deviating reason in the inference establishing the validity of jewel-cognition. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: account of validity when objecthood is treated as a separate entity.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that obtaining the jewel occurs only accidentally, because otherwise it would be impossible not to obtain the jewel. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: account of validity when objecthood is treated as a separate entity.)

The teacher wrote on the board: although the cognition of the jewel and the effort that results in obtaining the jewel occur at different times, the mind can know their causal relation, just as it knows the causal relation between cognition and recollection. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: account of validity when objecthood is treated as a separate entity.)

Chapter 98 — Raghav's Final Message

An Objection Concerning Mere Absence of the Agent

A traveller recounted this consequence: otherwise one could not explain the unobstructed usage concerning the absence of the man alone

and the absence of the staff when the staff is placed beside and then removed from the man. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: objection—the practice of speaking of the absence of the man alone, such as the potter, may appear to establish merely absence due to absence of a qualifier and the like, because that absence alone possesses the relevant power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: by the same rule, when an excitant factor is introduced and removed one must likewise accept the absence of an inhibitor such as the gem. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: objection—the practice of speaking of the absence of the man alone, such as the potter, may appear to establish merely absence due to absence of a qualifier and the like, because that absence alone possesses the relevant power.)

The teacher wrote on the board, point 124: if absence of an inhibitor such as a gem cannot be included within the three kinds of relational absence because it differs from all three, let that absence of the inhibitor be accepted as a fourth relational absence. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: objection—the practice of speaking of the absence of the man alone, such as the potter, may appear to establish merely absence due to absence of a qualifier and the like, because that absence alone possesses the relevant power.)

Chapter 99 — Satyavrat Mehta's Testimony

Perception

The teacher posed a question in class: for example, if a person sees a fire burning on the hearth with the eyes, or smells the fragrance of a flower with the nose, that is perceptual knowledge of the object. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: perception.)

Chapter 100 — Gaja, Graha, and the Child's Hand

Navya-Nyaya: The Formidable Logical Establishment of Extrinsic Validity

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first argued that in ordinary practice, where no doubt arises—as in a clear cognition of an amalaka fruit resting on one's palm—no additional inference of validity

is needed; unwavering action follows immediately. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

(Philosophical principle: the Navya-Nyaya doctrine—the formidable logical establishment of extrinsic validity.)

Chapter 101 — Invitation from the Unnamed Planet

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Apprehension of Validity

The teacher wrote on the board an example: "This cognition of a body is valid because it is a cognition of a body with respect to a locus possessing hands and feet, like cognition of one's own body." The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of intrinsic and extrinsic apprehension of validity.)

Chapter 102 — Kabaddi Among Planets

The Sense Organ Is Not a Means of Knowing Absence

The teacher wrote on the board: this also refutes the argument that cognition of the locus and the sense organ are both causes, like a staff and a wheel, merely because separate positive and negative concomitance is known for each. The students pictured every term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: the sense organ is not a means of knowing absence.)

Chapter 103 — The Lesson of Names on the Unnamed Planet

Manifest Colour as a Cause of Illumination

The teacher posed a question in class: unlike the example of a spinning staff and wheel, here the positive and negative concomitance of one cannot be established while excluding the other; therefore the causal status of both may be accepted. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: manifest colour as a cause of illumination.)

Chapter 104 — Garh Narikel Chooses Earth Again

The Possibility of Many Cognitions at One Time

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine that on some occasions simultaneous multiple

cognitions appear to be directly experienced—for example, eating while watching a dance, hearing a song, and taking in a fragrance. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: the possibility of many cognitions at one time.)

Chapter 105 — Earth's First Watch

A Qualifier Is Establishing and Useful

The teacher posed a question in class: in the cognition "this man carries a staff," relation to the staff qualifies the man and thereby distinguishes him from a man without a staff. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: a qualifier is establishing and useful.)

Chapter 106 — The Seed's Testimony

Two Kinds of Modes: Qualifier and Indicative Mark

A traveller recounted this distinction: a present staff is the principal qualifier in the cognition "this man carries a staff"; the absent Kuru lineage is an indicative mark in the cognition "this land is Kurukshetra." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion.

(Philosophical principle: modes are of two kinds—qualifier and upalakshana, an indicative mark.)

Chapter 107 — The Theft of the Seed

An Indicative Mark Must Figure in Determinate Cognition

The teacher posed a question in class: under the view that a discriminator related to the action is called a qualifier and anything else an indicative mark, the staff itself would become an indicative mark in "the long-armed man carries a staff," because the staff is not directly connected with the action. The students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects.

(Philosophical principle: an indicative mark must be an object of the determinate cognition.)

Chapter 108 — The Mouth of the Soil***A Qualifier Is Not Merely Something Co-located with Exclusion***

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine the statement "this lotus is a blue lotus": it does not explicitly express exclusion of every object other than blue lotus; nor does the recognition "I know this lotus as a blue lotus" display such total exclusion. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience.

(Philosophical principle: a qualifier is not merely something co-located with exclusion.)

Chapter 109 — The Memory of Water***Shivaditya Mishra's View: The Directly Related Qualifier***

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first proposed: in "the man carries a staff," the staff qualifies the man, while the universal staff-ness qualifies only the staff. The second searched for causes, defeaters, and exceptions.

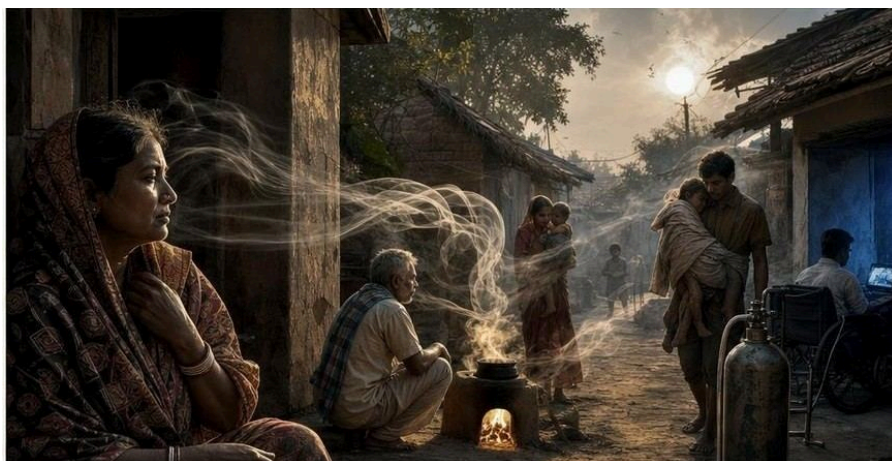
(Philosophical principle: Shivaditya Mishra's view—the directly related qualifier.)

Chapter 110 — The Testimony of Fire***A Directly Connected or Qualificand-Related Qualifier***

The teacher wrote on the board: on this account, colour in a pot possessing colour would also become a principal qualifier, while in the past-tense statement "he carried a staff" the staff would be only an indicative mark. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

(Philosophical principle: a directly connected or qualificand-related qualifier.)

Chapter III — The Question of Air

The Sign of Smoke

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example: "There is smoke on the mountain because there is fire there." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: the nature of upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: In this inference fire is the reason and smoke is the probandum. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event. (Philosophical principle: the nature of upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: Here the conjunction with damp fuel is the upadhi: it does not pervade fire, since fire may occur in dry wood or cow-dung cakes without moisture, but it does pervade smoke, because smoke is not produced without the relevant moisture or damp fuel. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event. (Philosophical principle: the nature of upadhi.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, in the inference "There is smoke in the hearth because there is fire," fire qualified as produced from dampness is a definite upadhi. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: the effect of definite and doubtful upadhi upon inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example: "There is smoke on the mountain because there is fire there." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear. (Philosophical principle: upadhi.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Take the ordinary inference: "There is fire on the mountain because there is smoke there." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: inference and conclusion.)

A traveller recounted the following: This familiar example, "There is fire on the mountain because there is smoke," makes three principal components of Nyaya inference clear. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event. (Philosophical principle: inference and conclusion.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Inference requires prior knowledge of a fixed pervasion such as that between smoke and fire. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (conclusion): he then determines, "This green vegetable is the referent of the word 'broccoli'.")

The teacher posed a question in class: Many ancient logicians and Mimamsakas held that recollection of pervasion—"wherever there is smoke there is fire"—and knowledge that the reason is present in the subject—"there is smoke on the mountain"—are separately sufficient for inference, with no need for a third cognition called paramarsha. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of inference and the necessity of linga-paramarsha.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The process of paramarsha begins when a person observes the concomitance of smoke and fire in a kitchen and thereby learns the pervasion, "wherever there is smoke, there is fire." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of inference and the necessity of linga-paramarsha.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: From the conjunction of those two cognitions arises the third cognition, "this mountain has smoke pervaded by fire"—knowledge of subjecthood qualified by pervasion—and this is called paramarsha. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of inference and the necessity of linga-paramarsha.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the inference "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," the specific pervasion of smoke is its relation to fire: smoke-ness delimits the relation to fire, and smoke as a class occurs only in relation to fire. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the definitive account of vyapti in Gangesha.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If one doubts that smoke may occur without fire, tarka proceeds thus: "If smoke existed without fire, smoke would not be an effect of fire." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Yet the cause-and-effect relation is directly evident: smoke is produced from fire. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: When we observe the pervasion of smoke and fire in a kitchen, we directly see only the present smoke and present fire. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

A traveller recounted the following: How, then, is pervasion known with respect to all smoke and fire—past, future, and present, in every place? The listening scholar separated the account into perception,

memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

The teacher posed a question in class: According to the doctrine of extraordinary sense-contact, when a person perceives one individual smoke, sense-contact also apprehends the universal smoke-ness inhering in it. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Through that universal smoke-ness, cognition extends to all individual instances of smoke. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: tarka and the removal of doubt about deviation.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Here fire is the reason and smoke is the probandum. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the theory of upadhi: reasons with and without an upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: The inference is defective because fire need not always be accompanied by smoke; a red-hot iron ball contains fire but gives no smoke. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the theory of upadhi: reasons with and without an upadhi.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The upadhi pervades the probandum—wherever smoke occurs there is the relevant contact with damp fuel—but it does not pervade the reason, since fire need not be accompanied by damp fuel. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the theory of upadhi: reasons with and without an upadhi.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even though the pervasion "where there is smoke there is fire" is real, without cognition of that pervasion there is no reasoned movement toward fire. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: false memory may take presentness as its object.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: A definition of pervasion based on absence of co-location would fail in a purely affirmative inference such as "this is nameable because it is knowable"; it also fails for smoke, since smoke occurs in loci in which fire, the probandum, is present. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of an additional prima-facie definition: vyapti is not mere co-location in a locus.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the inference "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," the fire on the mountain is merely the counterpositive of the absolute absence of the fire present in the locus of kitchen-smoke. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not mere co-location with the probandum.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Therefore the proposed definition of pervasion is not found even in the smoke-reason of the valid inference "the mountain has fire because it has smoke." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not mere co-location with the probandum.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the case of a red-hot iron ball, such pervasion is absent from the heterogeneously pervaded reason in the inference "the mountain has fire because it has smoke." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the proposed definition of vyapti as a natural relation of reason and probandum is untenable.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," smoke's specific pervasion is relatedness to fire—co-location with fire—because smoke-ness delimits that relation and smoke as a universal is related only to fire. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti as possession of the form delimiting relatedness.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the sound inference "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," smoke's co-location with fire is delimited by smoke-ness; hence smoke as reason is the pervaded term. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti as delimitation by the delimiter of the relevant co-location.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," the fire or fire-possessing object in the kitchen is not respectively the counterpositive of the absolute absence of a pot or of the mutual absence located in the pot-locus; this is directly experienced. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not co-location of the probandum with the counterpositive of an absolute absence located in the reason-possessing locus.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: One may object to the power of tarka: suppose smoke is produced neither from what is related to fire nor from what is unrelated to fire; then smoke would simply never be produced at all. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the objection that tarka does not assist cognition of vyapti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Knowledge of one factor—for example, the conjunction with damp fuel, which may pervade the probandum fire while not pervading the smoke-reason—cannot block another cognition, namely that smoke is pervaded by fire; otherwise the definition would overextend. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: non-deviation, not merely absence of an upadhi, causes cognition of vyapti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The Naiyayikas propose that knowing all instances of the reason to be pervaded by the probandum means grasping, through universals such as smoke-ness and fire-ness, a comprehensive relation linking every individual smoke as reason with the relevant individuals of fire as probandum. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika proposal.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Their view is that in the case of nearby smoke, such as smoke in a kitchen or sacrificial altar, perception knows smoke delimited by smoke-ness to be pervaded by fire, through the co-location of the universal smoke-ness. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection that samanyalaksana is unnecessary.)

A traveller recounted the following: First, with respect to nearby kitchen or sacrificial smoke, perception yields the pervasion-cognition: "smoke delimited by smoke-ness is pervaded by fire delimited by fire-ness." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection that samanyalaksana is unnecessary.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: But in inferring fire from mountain-smoke, the universal cognition "all smoke is pervaded by all fire" is not produced merely by knowing that smoke is present on the mountain. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection that samanyalaksana is unnecessary.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the inference "the mountain has smoke because it has fire," being different from what is present in the mountain-subject is not an upadhi, though the proposed definition would wrongly include it. Instead of answering at once, the students

examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: manifest-colourhood and being produced by cooked greens as upadhis.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example, in the defeated inference "the lake has fire because it has smoke," being other than the subject is not an upadhi. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the objection to treating what is other than the subject as an upadhi.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Several forms of being other than the subject—being different from what inheres in a part of the mountain, being a substance different from what inheres in the mountain, not being the locus of the lake-mountain conjunction, or being different from both lake and mountain—can function as upadhis in inferences such as "the mountain connected with the lake has fire because it has smoke." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion: what is other than the subject may be an upadhi.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Likewise, the probandum-pervasion present in the smoke-reason is reflected upon fire through the upadhi of contact with damp fuel; hence contact with damp fuel is an upadhi in "the mountain has smoke because it has fire." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: second proposal: an unequally pervading factor is not an upadhi.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Under this definition even the damp-fuel conjunction would fail to be included as upadhi in "the mountain has smoke because it has fire," because the probandum-pervasion delimited by the reason-property present in the subject is not found in that conjunction. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: failure to pervade the reason does not by itself constitute an upadhi.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Moreover, in "the mountain has smoke because it has fire," fire as reason is unable to establish smoke as probandum because the reason is accompanied by an upadhi. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the view that a factor may pervade the probandum yet fail to pervade the reason without thereby being an upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: Yet in "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," the entire causal complex of fire is not an upadhi, because the smoke-reason does not deviate from fire merely because the causal complex of fire does. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of Ratnakosakara's theory of upadhi.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, in "the lake has smoke because it has fire," conjunction with damp fuel is an upadhi of the fire-reason: the red-hot iron ball lacks smoke, so the lake-subject lacks an invariable relation between fire and smoke. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: another definition of upadhi.)

The teacher posed a question in class: But under this definition, in "the lake has smoke because it has fire," being other than the subject would undesirably become an upadhi, since it would be taken as qualifying the relation in which fire pervades smoke. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Yattukara definition of upadhi.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In "the lake has smoke because it has fire," possession of fire produced by damp fuel is a definite upadhi. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: classification of upadhi.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In "the mountain has fire because it has smoke," the complete causal complex of fire is not an upadhi, because smoke as reason is known not to deviate

from fire merely on account of that causal complex. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: being produced by cooked greens is not the probandum.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example, in "the mountain has fire because of smoke or light," the presence of either smoke or light functions as the reason. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a disjunctive statement "it exists or does not exist" be knowable, when existence and non-existence cannot be grasped together?.)

The teacher posed a question in class: It may be said that the property "being pervaded by fire" in smoke pervaded by fire is itself the delimitter of smoke-ness as pervaded by fire; that is, the fire-pervadedness occurring in every individual smoke delimits the general pervasion occurring in all smoke. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: objection: cognition of being different from smoke or light rests on an irrelevant qualifier and therefore cannot assist perceptual knowledge that smoke or light is pervaded by fire.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The example-sentence "where there is smoke, there is fire" communicates the probandum's pervasion of the reason. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: another view: paramarsha as cognition that the probandum pervades the subject-property.)

A traveller recounted the following: Objection 29: if the cognition "fire pervades the smoke situated on the mountain" is the paramarsha that causes inference, then fire alone would be the object of paramarsha; unless the co-location of smoke and mountain is already accepted, nothing would remain to be inferred. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: another view: paramarsha as cognition that the probandum pervades the subject-property.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: This can be understood through the standard smoke-and-fire example. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example: "Wherever there is smoke, there is fire, as in a kitchen." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: example: wherever there is smoke there is fire, as in a kitchen.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even when the pervasion-statement "whatever has smoke has fire" does not name a particular instance, it retains the function of an example. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: an anvaya-vyatireki reason occurs in the subject and positive instances but not in negative instances.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Questions such as "what possesses fire?" or "how does smoke indicate fire?" are not required everywhere; they are useful only in particular contexts. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: objection: the actual absence of a defeater and counter-reason may assist inference, but cognition of their absence need not, since no means for such cognition or semantic relation is established.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example: "There is smoke in this region because perceptible smoke is unavailable"; "because fire is absent"; and "because it is a reservoir." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: established view: a contradictory reason is one whose presence is the counterpositive of an absence of the reason that pervades the probandum.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: One should not say that "there is smoke in this region because smoke is absent" creates a fourth kind of contradictory

reason. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: why the contradictory reason is threefold.)

A traveller recounted the following: If certainty that the cognition of absence of the probandum in the subject is valid did not oppose inference of the probandum, then cognition of a reason possessing pervasion and subject-property would invalidate that absence-cognition and establish the probandum, as smoke establishes fire on the mountain. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of the defeater.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example, on a mountain that actually has fire, mist may be mistaken for smoke and an inference of fire may arise; the inferred fire may be real even though the reason employed is defective. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: alternative view: being the object of a veridical cognition that blocks inference is not itself probative.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Gangesha also rejects the view that because mist is mistaken for smoke, fire appears as the pervader of the smoke-reason, although the relevant smoke is not actually present in the mist; therefore, on that view, the inference of fire from the apparent smoke would not be true. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: objection: once pervasion by the probandum is known in inference, inference of the fire-probandum need not cease.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example, the inference "this mountain has fire produced from sandalwood because it has odourless smoke" contains a contradiction. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: alternative proposal: from the pervasion "a positive effect inheres," one could establish a relation of ether with the Supreme Self.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Otherwise ordinary smoke could never generate an inference of fire even though a specifically qualified smoke may be produced by fire. The students pictured each term

as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the foregoing refutation also rejects the claim that effort causes only through bodily activity and never directly by its own force.)

A traveller recounted the following: Thus, just as smoke is pervaded by fire, being produced by an agent is said to be pervaded by being produced by an embodied agent; on that reasoning, embodied production would become an upadhi. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Navya-Nyaya reply: even granting that producedness and embodied-producedness are both pervaded by agent-producedness, as with a pot, they delimit different forms of production by an agent.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Otherwise, if pervasion were admitted only in black smoke, smoke in general would cease to be pervaded. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: proposal: only absence of a known qualifier that fails to prevent deviation is intended in the reason; “being knowable” is not such a known qualifier of the smoke-reason.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A further doubt is possible: knowledge of an intermediate class of smoke may arise only after knowing that smoke is produced from causes such as fire, just as knowledge of an intermediate class of fire may arise only after knowing that fire is produced from causes such as grass. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: again, the reason “being productive” is purely affirmative; its absence cannot therefore be established so as to make the same reason affirmative-and-negative.)

A traveller recounted the following: Nor should one say that no secondary signification is needed in a smoke-statement because, on hearing “there is smoke,” the speaker’s intention toward fire is known by inference. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: in a secondary expression such as “the village is on the Ganga,” the expressed river cannot directly relate to the village, so a related meaning such as the bank is properly indicated.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Otherwise, by parity, secondary signification would have to be admitted even in the inference “the mountain has fire because it has smoke.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: upamana is not merely speaker-intention.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Even non-uniform entities such as individual smokes can be pervaded entities. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: a distinct means of knowledge, upamana, is necessary.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Intention cannot be restricted merely to the expressed word-meaning. In the expression “this word ‘smoke’ is intended toward smoke,” the object of intention changes according to the distinction between expressed and secondarily indicated meaning. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: reply: definition of intendedness.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Just as the pervasion “smoke is pervaded by fire” is grasped generally over infinitely many individual smokes and fires, word-power is grasped generally with respect to individuals qualified by cow-ness. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the individual too is denoted.)

Chapter 12 — The Emptiness of Ether

The Question of Fire

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Absence of an independent establishing proof means that no direct means, such as perception, is already available there to establish the probandum, such as fire. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: the subject is that locus in which there is absence

of an establishing proof together with absence of a desire to establish the probandum.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The argument is that recollection of pervasion—"wherever there is smoke, there is fire"—and knowledge of the subject-property—"there is smoke on the mountain"—together directly produce the inference. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: the dispute between Mimamsakas and Naiyayikas over paramarsha.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: But if a special jewel or mantra, functioning as an inhibitor, is present, the hand may fail to burn even though fire is present. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The causal complex for the experience of burning is not fire alone but fire together with the absence of an inhibitor, such as the absence of the jewel. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

A traveller recounted the following: If fire plus absence of the inhibitor suffices to explain burning, what logical fault, from the Nyaya standpoint, follows from additionally postulating in fire a new invisible "power," as the Mimamsaka does? The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The argument is that the practice of saying "there is fire on the mountain" arises merely from the possibility of fire. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of inference and the necessity of linga-paramarsha.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Here knowability is present both in fire, the positive instance, and in water, the negative instance. People added their experiences, but the teacher

tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the deviating or inconclusive reason.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example: "Fire is cold because it is a substance, like water." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the defeated reason.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Therefore a separate entity called "power" must be postulated between the cause, fire, and the effect, burning. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of burning power (shaktivada): the reality of causality and absence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The Mimamsaka offers the inference: "A power of burning must be admitted in fire, for in its absence the palm does not experience burning; by such negative inference a burning-power is established in fire and similar causes." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of burning power (shaktivada): the reality of causality and absence.)

The teacher posed a question in class: According to Navya-Nyaya, the cause of burning is not fire alone but the complex "fire plus absence of an inhibitor, such as the absence of the jewel." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation and establishment of absence of an inhibitor.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: When the causal factors differ, distinct causal differentiations must also be admitted in the effect; otherwise the relation would deviate. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation and establishment of absence of an inhibitor.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Citing the remembered saying "the fire of knowledge reduces all karma to ashes,"

Gangesha says that the fire-like knowledge burns accumulated karmas. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the established view: liberation is the absolute cessation of suffering.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example: "This cognition of fire is not delimited by a property absent from fire, because it produces action toward fire capable of burning." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Answer: to avoid contradiction, one first accepts in a general way that veridical cognition and its objects such as fire are established. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Because the probandum is already familiar in a general form in the example, the specific validity of fire-cognition is not unestablished; and because it is not already settled in the specific form, the reason is neither uncommon nor merely affirmative in a defective sense. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Thus the probandum of the fire-cognition would be only "not being delimited by a mode absent from fire," but that probandum is not established in the example. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Answer: the inferred state—"the fire-cognition, with respect to fire as qualificand, is not delimited by a mode absent from

fire"—ultimately establishes, through the force of subject-property, the validity of the cognition of fire itself. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: This general validity, when inferred in fire-cognition through subject-property, takes the form "a cognition of fire that does not qualify fire by a fire-ness absent from fire." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: validity is known by inference.)

A traveller recounted the following: A negative inference may be formulated thus: "This cognition of fire, which takes fire-ness as its mode, does not predicate fire-ness of a locus lacking fire-ness; it does not predicate a property found in non-fire; it does not predicate a qualifier absent from its locus; while qualifying by fire-ness it does not make a non-fire its substratum; it is not delimited by a qualifier non-co-located with fire-ness; or it does not predicate a qualifier absent from fire." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Navya-Nyaya view.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Validity may also be fixed by a second negative inference: "This fire-cognition, taking fire-ness as its mode, has as its object something possessing fire-ness, because it is an object-directed cognition and does not have as its object something that lacks fire-ness." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: alternative forms of negative inference.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If objecthood located in the qualificand is treated as a separate entity, the probandum becomes: "This fire-cognition does not predicate, in non-fire, a fire-ness located there; it does not predicate a fire-ness non-co-located with fire-ness; or it does not predicate fire-ness absent from the locus of objecthood." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: alternative forms of negative inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: An objection may be raised: the objecthood of fire capable of burning, determined by the cognition of fire, cannot be fixed by the first cognition "this fire is capable of burning," because that first cognition does not take itself or its own objecthood as object. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection and reply concerning cognition of the objecthood of burning-capable fire.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor is the object of the inference some different fire; recognition concerns the very same fire. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: consideration of the objection that the utterances of the deluded, deceiver, or parrot are not testimony.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: An illusion of smoke blocks independent recollection of the state "there is no fire"; fire remembered independently from knowledge of pervasion then serves as the mover of inference. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: use of the word "doubt" without invalid cognition.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The Mimamsaka may say that cognition of a floor possessing a pot is cognition of both floor and pot, just as cognition of the dual deity Agni-Soma is cognition of both Agni and Soma. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the existence and perceptibility of an additional absence.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Later Naiyayikas say: "Molten gold, which is the locus of directly perceived fluidity not destroyed even by intense contact with fire, is a fiery substance, because while possessing colour it is distinct from water and earth, like fire." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the later view: gold is not water.)

A traveller recounted the following: The inference "there is fire on the mountain because of the present smoke" has present fire as its object, not past or future fire. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: false memory may take presentness as its object.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In ordinary life, after perceiving smoke, the practice "there is fire on the mountain" may arise merely from the possibility of fire; and because another source of knowledge happens to agree, one may falsely take the inference itself to be valid. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the objection that inference is not a means of knowledge.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: On that view, although fire and relations such as conjunction may be established as pervaded, an unwanted consequence would arise in an inference whose probandum is conjunction: existence and similar properties would become non-deviating reasons. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not mere co-location with the probandum.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For the absolute absence of fire in general, expressed as "there is no fire," is neither known nor established in the locus of smoke. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the decisive definition of vyapti concerns general pervasion.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Objection 20: it may nevertheless be known both that "the locus of smoke contains neither fire nor a lake" and that "the locus of smoke is not a locus of fire and lake." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: removing the difficulties in the definitions.)

A traveller recounted the following: One should not object that this would force us to admit pervasion even in a false, upadhi-laden reason

such as fire. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: revision of the teacher's definition: vyapti is an upadhi-free relation.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The prima-facie opponent may now say: doubt about deviation, which is doubt concerning what is to be known, need not obstruct certainty of non-deviation or pervasion; otherwise, after the doubt "is there fire on the mountain or not?" no certainty of fire could ever arise. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti cannot be apprehended from a first observation alone.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: But the complete causal complex of the two-sided doubt "is there fire on the mountain or not?" cannot by itself produce certainty of just one side, fire. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti cannot be apprehended from a first observation alone.)

A traveller recounted the following: Ultimately, the very cognition that smoke is present on the mountain produces the inference "the mountain has fire because of smoke." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection that samanyalaksana is unnecessary.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In the inference "fire is not hot because it is produced," being other than the subject, while present in the fire-subject, may be treated as pervading the absence of the probandum, non-heat; then it would undesirably fail to count as an upadhi even in the counter-instance of the absence of the probandum. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: being other than the subject would have to be an upadhi.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Consequently, being other than the subject,

present in the subject and pervading the absence of the probandum there, would have to count as an upadhi in "fire is not hot because it is produced." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that "absence of a qualifier excluding negative instances" is the relevant qualifier.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If the upadhi is instead treated as providing a counter-reason, then even the defect of being other than the subject generated from absence of the probandum in "fire is not hot because it is produced" would fail to count as an upadhi, because exclusion of the probandum through that factor specifically establishes the absence of the probandum. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection: such an upadhi may really be nothing more than a counter-reason.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In "perceptible fire is not hot because it is produced," non-fiery-ness and similar factors may serve as upadhis, but the general rule of being other than the subject does not straightforwardly apply. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the objection to treating what is other than the subject as an upadhi.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, in "fire is hot because it is luminous," non-artificiality is only an apparent upadhi with respect to a defeated absence of the probandum. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: account of apparent upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: But fire on the mountain has not previously been known perceptually as a qualifier; therefore a veridical perception of fire cannot arise from mere residual impression. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the view based on non-apprehension of difference in the pervaded term is incoherent.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Objection 30: how can the mountain-subject, known in the paramarsha only secondarily or as a qualifier—as in "fire pervades the smoke situated on the mountain"—become the principal qualificand in the inference "the

mountain has fire because of smoke"? People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: another view: paramarsha as cognition that the probandum pervades the subject-property.)

A traveller recounted the following: Just as fire on the mountain may first be considered only in general while the particular mountain becomes the subject. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can an earthen pot be the subject when the doubt whether all earth differs from other substances concerns earth in general, not one particular pot?.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, in the defective inference "fire is not hot because it is a substance," substance-hood is a fallacious reason, because the absence of heat—the object of the true cognition "fire is hot"—is not pervaded by substance-hood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: fallacious reasons are discussed because they assist both determination of truth and dialectical victory.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example, in "the mountain has fire because it has blue smoke," blue smoke may be pervaded by fire, but the qualifier "blue" is irrelevant in an inference for oneself. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the view of other scholars.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example: "This region has fire produced from black aguru because it has pungent, odourless, white smoke." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: why the contradictory reason is threefold.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A reason defeated by perception establishing the counterpositive of the probandum is exemplified by "fire is not hot because it is produced." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive.

The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: a reason defeated by perception that establishes the counterpositive of the probandum, as in "fire is not hot because it is produced".)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Nevertheless, if fire is in fact present on the mountain, the conclusion is true. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: alternative view: being the object of a veridical cognition that blocks inference is not itself probative.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Another possible inference is: "A fire that is not conducive to the experience of burning, although furnished with all directly perceptible causes of burning, lacks in its productive state the positive power conducive to burning when an inhibitor is present, because like a blunt axe it does not produce the relevant effect." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: absence is not supersensible, because it cannot be established that absence is incapable of being an object of perception.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: One may also infer: "Such fire, in its productive state, lacks a positive power conducive to the experience of burning, because like fire not connected with fuel it does not produce the experience of burning." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: absence is not supersensible, because it cannot be established that absence is incapable of being an object of perception.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Again, in the first of the five inferences, the reason "not being productive" does not mean simple intrinsic incapacity, because fire and an axe do not possess such incapacity in themselves. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Objection 165: in a specific causal complex consisting of wood together with absence of a jewel, the positive and negative concomitance "when grass is present fire arises" and "when grass is absent fire is absent" generates knowledge that grass and the like are causes. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: argument: when causal roles of grass, wood, and a jewel with respect to fire are known, either a power or a distinct causal class-character must be admitted.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The cognition "fire exists even without grass" prevents one from taking the invariable presence of grass immediately before fire as constituting causality. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: argument: when causal roles of grass, wood, and a jewel with respect to fire are known, either a power or a distinct causal class-character must be admitted.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: This refutes the proposal that from the positive and negative concomitance "fire arises when the absence of all three—grass and the other alternatives—is absent, and does not arise when all three absences are present," causality of each alternative cause is established. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means of knowing causality is available, deviation alone defeats causal knowledge.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Some other scholars say that the scriptural line "O Arjuna, the fire of knowledge burns all karma" concerns only the merit generated by subsidiary sacrifices that remains independent because the principal sacrifice has not been performed, since there is no destroyer of such karma other than knowledge. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of purposive action.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In "he cooks rice with fire," the relations

among fire, instrumentality, rice, objecthood, the act of cooking, and the agent's effort are understood as one sentential meaning from mutually expectant words. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: a second alternative view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In "he sprinkles with fire," the instrumental expression and the verb are structurally capable of suggesting a relation, but knowledge that fire is semantically unfit for sprinkling blocks that relational cognition, just as knowledge of a magical jewel hostile to burning blocks the causal process of combustion. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: account of expectancy.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Just as fire on the mountain is established there from a general cognition of fire together with the smoke-reason even though that particular fire was unestablished, so effort-producedness in cooking in general can establish the future act of cooking. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the view of some Prabhakaras.)

A traveller recounted the following: In the expression "Agni with the Vasus, Soma with the Rudras, Indra with the Maruts, Varuna with the Adityas, and Brihaspati with the Visvedevas," the compositional meaning "all the gods" of Visvedevas is recalled quickly, not a conventional group-sense such as Pururavas-Madravas. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: convention is stronger than etymological composition.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example, in the sentence concerning the chariot-maker who preserves fire during the rainy season, the word "rathakara" quickly recalls a conventionally established specific caste, and the conventional meaning is therefore taken first. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: convention is stronger than etymological composition.)

A traveller recounted the following: In the Agni-Soma example, the first member indicates a collective relation while the second expresses its own primary meaning. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection that secondary signification is impossible.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: An objection may be raised: in "the pair wearing linen garments should establish the fire," the dual form "wearing garments" expects a second person in order to yield the cognition of a pair. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the grammarians' view.)

Chapter 113 — The Body of the Word

Smoke on the Mountain

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In plain terms: when smoke as reason is seen in a subject such as a mountain, and the prior pervasion "where there is smoke, there is fire" is known, cognition of fire in that subject arises. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: the nature of inferential cognition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For inference it is essential to understand the status of the subject, such as the mountain in which fire is to be established. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: definition of subjecthood.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: There is a deep dispute between Naiyayikas and Mimamsakas over whether paramarsha—the cognition that the subject possesses a reason pervaded by the probandum, as in "the mountain has smoke pervaded by fire"—is the extraordinary cause of inferential cognition. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: the dispute between Mimamsakas and Naiyayikas over paramarsha.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Paramarsha is the specific cognition expressed by "vyaptivisistah paksadharmah paramarsah": the subject, such as the mountain, possesses a reason, such as smoke, that is

pervaded by the probandum, fire. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: paramarsha.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: It differs from mere recollection of pervasion—"wherever there is smoke there is fire"—and mere knowledge of subject-property—"there is smoke on the mountain"; paramarsha is the mature cognition, "this mountain possesses that smoke which is pervaded by fire." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: paramarsha.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The basic argument is that all visible products such as earth, water, and mountains are made by some agent or maker because they are effects—produced entities. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: inference to God as proof of a creator.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: A standard counter-example is: "The mountain is smoky because it has fire." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the theory of upadhi: reasons with and without an upadhi.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example: "The mountain has fire because it is knowable." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the deviating or inconclusive reason.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example: "The mountain is smoky because it has fire." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the unestablished reason.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example: "The golden mountain is made of stone because it is a mountain"—a claim defeated by verbal testimony. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the defeated reason.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If the mountain is perceived and fire is later remembered after cognition of the sign, then the perceptual illusion "I see fire" differs from the inferential illusion "I infer fire." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: use of the word "doubt" without invalid cognition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Objection: cognition of fire, even when functioning as cognition of a qualifier, is not the cause of the inference "the mountain has fire," because inference is not produced by knowledge of fire as the locus. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection that cognition of the qualifier is not a cause.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The mountain, the locus of fire, is merely the counterpositive of the mutual absence expressed by "the mountain is not the hearth," while that mutual absence is present in the hearth, the locus of smoke. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not merely located in the reason-possessing locus.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, in "the mountain is smoky because it has fire," conjunction with damp fuel is an upadhi of fire that pervades neither the fire-reason nor the smoke-probandum in the required unrestricted way. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the teacher's view: vyapti, as non-deviation or invariable concomitance, is an upadhi-free relation—the co-location of reason and probandum without an intervening upadhi.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In the upadhi-laden inference "the mountain is smoky because it has fire," smoke as probandum is not co-located with the absence of the damp-fuel conjunction; that absence, in turn, is the counterpositive of an absolute absence co-located with fire as reason. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: revision of the teacher's definition: *vyapti* is an *upadhi*-free relation.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In the same inference, fire as reason is co-located with the absolute absence of the *upadhi*, the conjunction with damp fuel. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative definition of absence of *upadhi*.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: But in "the mountain is smoky because it has fire," fire's specific pervasion is not relatedness to smoke, because fire-ness does not delimit a relation to smoke: fire in general is also related to non-smoky cases. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: *vyapti* as possession of the form delimiting relatedness.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: In an *upadhi*-laden inference such as "the mountain is smoky because it has fire," fire's co-location with smoke is delimited only by the *upadhi*, conjunction with damp fuel, not by fire-ness; therefore fire as reason cannot be genuinely pervaded. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: *vyapti* as delimitation by the delimiter of the relevant co-location.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: That is, inference occurs only through *paramarsha* of the smoke-ness that is pervaded by fire: "the mountain possesses smoke-ness pervaded by fire." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: inference through *paramarsha* of fire-pervadedness in smoke-ness.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The third sign-reflection that causes inference is "smoke pervaded by fire is present on the mountain," or "this mountain possesses smoke pervaded by fire." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: if only the universal smoke-ness were taken as the sign, the role of individual smoke would disappear and collecting all individuals through *samanya-laksana* would become unnecessary.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The separate expressions "this mountain has fire" and "because of smoke" generate distinct qualified verbal cognitions, such as "the mountain is the subject of the fire-probandum" and "the mountain possesses the smoke-reason." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: objection: the application-statement "smoke pervaded by fire is on this mountain" also assists *linga-paramarsha*, so the five-membered set may be treated as a single Nyaya argument.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Thus in an affirmative inference, the expression "so too this mountain" produces the third sign-reflection: "this mountain possesses smoke pervaded by fire." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the teachers hold that repeating the relative pronoun in "whatever has smoke has fire" prevents deviation of the reason from the probandum.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the defective inference "the mountain is smoky because it has fire," cognition that "fire is pervaded by smoke" obstructs the inference; hence fire as reason is fallacious. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: fallacious reasons are discussed because they assist both determination of truth and dialectical victory.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the defective inference "the fireless mountain is smoky," knowledge that fire is absent from the mountain obstructs the use of smoke as a reason for inferring fire. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: fallacious reasons are discussed because they assist both determination of truth and dialectical victory.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A reason defeated by verbal testimony is exemplified by "the golden mountain is made of stone because it is a mountain." The students pictured each term as a real scene

and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: a reason defeated by verbal testimony, as in "the golden mountain is stony because it is a mountain".)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: A mountain doubtful with respect to fire and a non-mountain doubtful with respect to fire cannot both become subjects of the same inference merely because smoke is present in them, without a common property such as mountain-hood. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: reply: the nature of the probandum.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor can "knowable smoke" be made the reason in "the mountain has fire because it has knowable smoke," since adding knowability introduces both deviation and redundancy. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: proposal: only absence of a known qualifier that fails to prevent deviation is intended in the reason; "being knowable" is not such a known qualifier of the smoke-reason.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Moreover, in inferences such as "this mountain lacks smoke because it lacks fire produced by sandalwood" or "this mountain lacks smoke because it lacks fire produced by conjunction with damp fuel," one cannot infer absence of a specifically qualified effect merely from absence of a specifically qualified cause when the absence of that cause has not been established. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: proposal: only absence of a known qualifier that fails to prevent deviation is intended in the reason; "being knowable" is not such a known qualifier of the smoke-reason.)

Chapter 14 — The Soul of Meaning

The Case of Devadatta

A traveller recounted the following: A famous case: Devadatta is alive, yet he is not seen at home during the day. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event. (Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka view that postulation is a separate means of knowledge.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: "Living Devadatta is outside the house because, while alive, he is absent as the counterpositive of the continuous absence occurring inside the house." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear. (Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika view that postulation is only a purely negative inference.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The cognition "this is that very Devadatta" is recognition, *pratyabhijna*. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine that mind is atomic.)

A traveller recounted the following: The Mimamsaka's famous example is: "Stout Devadatta does not eat during the day." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika rejection of postulation as a separate *pramana* and its inclusion in purely negative inference.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: To resolve the inconsistency one postulates, "Devadatta eats at night." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika rejection of postulation as a separate *pramana* and its inclusion in purely negative inference.)

A traveller recounted the following: Likewise, Gangesha includes within inference the postulation "living Devadatta is not in the house, therefore he is outside." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika rejection of postulation as a separate *pramana* and its inclusion in purely negative inference.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over this point: God knows that "Devadatta is mistaking the shell for silver." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of the subject and the opponent's objection.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Objection 5: mind, independently of the external senses, may generate doubt about an external object—"is Devadatta fair-complexioned or not?" or "is an atom the locus of colour or not?"—because recollection of opposed alternatives and non-apprehension of a differentiating property serve as auxiliary causes. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: mere cognition of pervasion of a subject-property is not the cause of inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In recognition, a previously known qualifier is apprehended again in the same individual through a mental impression, as in "this is that very Devadatta." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the view based on non-apprehension of difference in the pervaded term is incoherent.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Devadatta's being alive is known as temporally delimited by divisions such as moment, short interval, and long interval: "Devadatta is alive today," "Devadatta will be alive tomorrow," and so on. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika view that external presence is known through purely negative inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: A generally observed inference may take the form: "Devadatta is the counterpositive of life or death because he is a living person, as I myself am." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection is not sound; a generally observed inference reinforced by tarka is stronger.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Objection 22: the external location of living Devadatta can be inferred: "Living Devadatta is outside the house because, though alive, he is not in the house, like a pot"; or, "Whatever exists but is not in one place is in another, as I am not in the corner of my house but in its middle." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection: postulation is unnecessary.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example: "Living Devadatta is outside the house because, though alive, he is not in the house; whatever is not like this is not so, as with a dead person or one who is inside the house." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Hence it is said: "Devadatta is now outside the house because, while alive, he is not inside the house." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation concerning tarka.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: One may object that even without doubt about identity or difference there is cognition of similarity—"this is Devadatta or someone else, but he is like Devadatta"—so similarity must be a separate entity. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection: even without doubt about identity or difference one can cognize "this is Devadatta or someone else, but resembles Devadatta"; therefore similarity is a separate entity.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Otherwise mutually opposed cognitions and usages such as "this is Devadatta but not like Devadatta" and "this resembles Devadatta but is not Devadatta" could not be justified. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection: even without doubt about identity or difference one can cognize "this is Devadatta or someone else, but resembles Devadatta"; therefore similarity is a separate entity.)

A traveller recounted the following: An objection may be raised from an expression such as "this Devadatta and rice": without supplying a verb, the agent is not expressed, and therefore an instrumental case-ending would have to be used. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara reply.)

A traveller recounted the following: In fact a newly trained cook, a newly coined poetic word, a figurative or secondary word, and a new proper name such as "Devadatta" are all used even when no prior usage is known. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: To understand that the word "Devadatta" causes cognition of Devadatta, the conventional assignment of that word to Devadatta must first be known from elsewhere. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka objection.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Naiyayika replies that knowledge of convention is the cause of word-meaning cognition, because this causal relation is observed elsewhere also in the cognition of meanings of words such as "Devadatta." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka objection.)

Chapter 15 — The Watch of the Voice

The Colour of the Crow

At the Garh Narikel chaupal, discussion arose over this example: "The crow is black because it is a friend's son." In this inference, being produced by cooked greens is a doubtful upadhi with respect to the probandum, blackness. People added their own experiences, but the teachers tested every view against the criteria of proof. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear from the proper relation and context, not from the words alone. (Philosophical principle: the effect of definite and doubtful upadhis upon inference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In the inference "air is perceptible because it is the locus of perceptible touch," possession of manifest colour, and in "the crow is black because it is my friend's son," being produced by cooked greens, are treated as upadhis because they reveal deviation of the respective reasons from the probanda perceptibility and blackness. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: manifest-colourhood and being produced by cooked greens as upadhis.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Likewise, in "the crow is black because it is my friend's son," being produced by cooked greens would become an upadhi insofar as it pervades blackness. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the view that a factor may pervade the probandum yet fail to pervade the reason without thereby being an upadhi.)

A traveller recounted the following: In examples such as "sound is nameable because it is knowable" or "the crow is black because it is my friend's son," the alleged upadhi is not necessarily a defect that establishes deviation of the reason from the stated probandum, because it does not in fact show such deviation. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Prabhakara Upadhyaya's argument.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Likewise, in "the crow is black because it is my friend's son," the reason being my friend's son deviates from the probandum blackness because it deviates from a wider property such as being my friend's black son, not because it simply deviates from being my friend's son—just as non-pot-ness deviates from pot. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: alternative theory of upadhi: it is not an irrelevant shift of issue.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In "the crow is black because it is my friend's son," being produced by cooked greens is a doubtful upadhi with respect to the probandum blackness. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: classification of upadhi.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: But in that inference, it is not certain that the full causal complex of blackness pervades being my friend's son; therefore being produced by cooked greens remains only a doubtful upadhi. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: being produced by cooked greens is not the probandum.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Sometimes, even without grasping the speaker's intention, context makes the word "saindhava" denote a particular breed of horse, and the word "crow" may denote an animal that spoils curd. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the view of other scholars.)

Chapter 16 — The Inheritance of Silence

Mutual Dependence

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The Mimamsakas hold that fire possesses an invisible burning-power which is checked when an inhibitor such as a jewel or mantra is present. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: On the basis of this example, what is it that the Mimamsakas take the jewel or mantra to explain when the hand does not burn? Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

The teacher posed a question in class: According to the Mimamsakas, the jewel or mantra is an inhibitor, pratibandhaka. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: When the jewel is placed near the fire, its influence either destroys the invisible burning-power of fire or shifts that power into a non-productive state. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: When the hand comes into contact with fire and no jewel is present, absence of the

inhibitor is present, the causal complex is complete, and the hand burns. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

Chapter 117 — The Debt of Memory

Purely Negative Inference

The teacher posed a question in class: For example: "Earth is different from the other eight substances because it possesses smell." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: purely negative inference (kevala-vyatireki).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The classical example is: "Earth differs from the other substances because it possesses smell." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: purely negative inference (kevala-vyatireki).)

Chapter 118 — The Right to the Body

The Mimamsaka View: Postulation as a Separate Means of Knowledge

The teacher posed a question in class: Definition and example: when two observed facts appear mutually inconsistent, and one must postulate an unseen or absent fact to remove the contradiction, that cognition is called arthapatti, postulation. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka view that arthapatti is a separate means of knowledge.)

Chapter 119 — The Body of Labour

Hetu: The Reason for Accepting the Claim

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example: because smoke is rising there. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the reason: the ground for accepting a claim.)

Chapter 120 — The Body of Justice

Pervasion with an Example: A Rule Applying Everywhere

The teacher posed a question in class: For example: wherever there is smoke there is fire, as in a kitchen. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: pervasion with an example: a universally applicable rule together with a known instance.)

Chapter 121 — The Cage of Caste

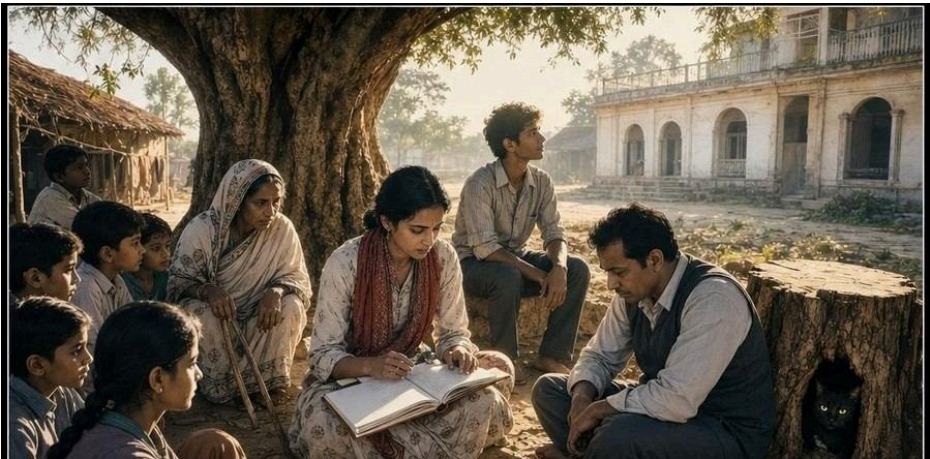
The Contradictory Reason

The teacher posed a question in class: For example: "Sound is eternal because it is produced." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the contradictory reason.)

Chapter 122 — Gangesha's Liberation

The Counterbalanced Reason



The teacher posed a question in class: For example, the proponent says: "Sound is eternal because it is audible." Instead of answering at once,

the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: a counterbalanced reason (satpratipaksa).)

Chapter 123 — A Leaf of the Tattvacintamani

The Nature of the Subject and the Opponent's Objection

The teacher posed a question in class: According to the opponent, wherever there is an agent there is a body, as in the case of a potter. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of the subject and the opponent's objection.)

Chapter 124 — The Fire of Proof

Prima Facie: The Auspicious Invocation Is Not an Instrument

The teacher wrote a case on the board: One might further say that the alternatives resemble rice and barley: sometimes merit from a previous birth, sometimes the present auspicious invocation, is the cause of completion. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: an auspicious invocation is not an independent instrument.)

Chapter 125 — The Grain of Decision

Cognition of Absence Through a Sign

A traveller recounted the following: Distance and similar conditions do not intrinsically block sight; a defect of the relevant causal complex blocks it, just as a magical jewel blocks the burning efficacy of fire. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: a cognition of absence can arise through a sign.)

Chapter 126 — The Justice of Food

Pervasion Is Not Merely Located in the Reason-Possessing Locus

The teacher posed a question in class: The cognition "the lower part of the tree is not the locus of conjunction with the monkey" is unobstructed; therefore the mutual absence of the locus of monkey-conjunction can itself occur in the tree, which is a locus of monkey-conjunction. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: vyapti is not merely located in the reason-possessing locus.)

Chapter 127 — The Name of Hunger

Another View of Paramarsha

The teacher posed a question in class: Just as cognition "the staff belongs to the man" produces cognition "the man is staff-bearing." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: another view: paramarsha as cognition that the probandum pervades the subject-property.)

Chapter 128 — The Name of Thirst

Inference Without a Positive Instance

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Example: "Earth is different from the other eight substances because it possesses smell." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: an inference with no positive instance, generated from knowledge of negative pervasion, is purely negative.)

Chapter 129 — The Oath of Salt

The Teachers' Account of the Relative Pervasion Statement

The teacher posed a question in class: The Jara-Mimamsakas say that a Nyaya argument ends with three members—proposition, reason, and example; application and conclusion are unnecessary. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum,

reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the relative pronoun in “whatever has smoke has fire” is repeated to block deviation of the reason from the probandum.)

Chapter 130 — The Justice of Taste

The Pot

The teacher posed a question in class: For example: “A pot is nameable because it is knowable.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: purely affirmative inference (kevala-anvayi).)

The teacher posed a question in class: Just as a pot is an effect whose maker is a potter, so this world, being an effect, has God as its maker. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine. (Philosophical principle: inference to God as proof of a creator.)

A traveller recounted the following: Their claim is that wherever being produced by an agent occurs, being produced through a body necessarily occurs, as pots and cloth are made by embodied potters and other artisans. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: upadhi.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: God as originator of the Veda and language: at the beginning of creation, conventions of linguistic usage relating words such as “Veda” and “pot” to their meanings are established through God’s cognition, will, and effort. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In the cognition “there is no pot on the ground,” pot-absence is said to be nothing over and above the empty ground itself. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the theory of absence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: When an eligible counterpositive, such as a pot in sufficient light, is not present, its non-apprehension or unavailability yields cognition of the pot's absence. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine that non-apprehension is a means of knowledge.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: When we see an object, as in "this is a pot," the first cognition is called *vyavasaya*, primary cognition. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine that mind is atomic.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: When mind, connected with the self, produces the cognition "I know that this is a pot," the cognition itself becomes explicitly experienced. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine that mind is atomic.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: "Earth and the like have a maker because they are effects, like a pot." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: inference to God: establishing the Supreme Lord on logical grounds.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Just as a potter directly knows the clay, the material cause, desires to make a pot, and exerts bodily effort, the production of the world requires an agent who directly knows all atoms, wills creation, and exerts effort. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of the subject and the opponent's objection.)

A traveller recounted the following: If similarity were a single recurring entity, every object would have to resemble every other object, since some similarity can be found not only between cow and *gavaya* but also between pot and cloth. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation of unity and infinitude of similarity.)

A traveller recounted the following: Fifth doubt: is the validity of the first cognition "this is a pot" known through the later reflexive cognition "I know that this is a pot," or not? The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: five forms of disagreement in the Mimamsaka account.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A further question is: does the cognition "this is a pot" apprehend its own validity by itself? The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: five forms of disagreement in the Mimamsaka account.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Objection: the first pot-cognition becomes the object of the reflexive cognition, so there is no doubt that "this is cognition of a pot." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of further arguments for doubt about validity.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Without cognition no one experiences "I know the pot"; and when the first cognition of the pot exists, the reflexive cognition does not take the form "I know this as cloth." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika conclusion: inference is independently valid, not a reflexive cognition generated by habit.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: One may argue: "A valid cognition arises from a cause whose causal efficacy is delimited by a property absent from invalid cognition, because it is an effect heterogeneous to invalid cognition, like a pot." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: summary of the prima-facie position.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Thus the inference is established: "A non-eternal valid cognition arises from a cause heterogeneous to the cause of invalid cognition, because it is an effect heterogeneous to invalid cognition, like a pot." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the established view: validity is produced by a positive excellence in the cause.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If mere absence of a speaker's defect sufficed, one would have to count as testimony the speech of a deluded or deceitful person who says "cloth" in place of "pot," an accidentally true statement, a mistaken injunction such as "bow to the Buddhist caitya," and even the utterance of a parrot or child. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: mere absence of illusion is not the cause.)

A traveller recounted the following: A statement such as "the pot is not in its own locus" does not generate illusion by taking some different object as its subject. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: consideration of the objection that utterances of the deluded, deceiver, or parrot are not testimony.)

A traveller recounted the following: But in the composite doubtful cognition "is this cognition valid or not, and this is a pot," validity must be settled by reflexive cognition or inference; therefore validity is not a universal genus. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: prima-facie definition of veridical cognition: validity is not a universal genus.)

A traveller recounted the following: The cognition "this pot is not black now" does not contradict its former blackness in the case of a pot fired red, because the times differ. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: cognition of a property that is not the counterpositive of an absolute absence in the qualificand does not constitute veridicality.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The composite cognition "this is a pot and cloth" is not invalid merely with respect to the qualificand; pot-ness and cloth-ness are not presented as modes in loci of their respective absences. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: indeterminate cognition lies outside both valid and invalid determinate cognition.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Before firing, the pot was black, so "the pot was black" can be valid; after firing it red, "this pot is black now" is invalid. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: validity of cognition of non-pervasive presence and absence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In the composite cognition "this is a pot and cloth," the objecthood of pot and cloth is distinct, so both definitions apply in their proper ways. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: alternative definitions.)

The teacher posed a question in class: It is not correct to say that the determinate cognition "the pot is blue" takes inherence itself as the qualifier-qualificand relation that is directly its object. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: inherence is not the relation of apprehension.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The prima-facie opponent says: if cognition "the ground is known as potless" were false, then even when no pot was on the ground there would be no pot-absence there and no cognition of it, though such cognition plainly occurs. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: inherence is not the relation of apprehension.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Other teachers argue that after excluding conjunction as the relevant relation, inherence as a component of sensory apprehension may be established by the inference: "Sound,

sound-ness, colour, and the like are related to the senses because they are perceptible, like a pot." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Bhatta view: qualifierhood, a relation of form, is itself the apprehension-relation.)

A traveller recounted the following: A further objection: cognition "the pot is known" is common, so knownness itself might be treated as the relation of apprehension. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of knownness as the apprehension-relation.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In cognition "this pot is blue," blue colour and the pot appear in an unobstructed unity, just as in "this man carries a staff" staff-bearing and the man are experienced together. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: quality and qualified are non-different.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If both "this pot is blue" and "this man carries a staff" had only a generic qualifier-relation as object, then "the pot possesses blueness" and "the man possesses staff-bearing" would have to arise in exactly the same fashion as "blue pot" and "staff-bearing man." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: quality and qualified are non-different.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Alternatively, blue-ness and pot-ness may be delimiters of qualification and qualificandhood, both known to occur in the same locus, the blue pot, as staff-bearing and manhood occur in one staff-bearing man. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: quality and qualified are non-different.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Because they share one locus, the qualifying and qualified words "blue" and "pot" can stand in grammatical co-reference. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: quality and qualified are non-different.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The expressions "blue" and "pot," each grounded in its own basis of usage—blue-ness and pot-ness—combine in a single sentence. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view: quality and qualified are non-different.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If "white" and "cloth" were synonyms, a co-expression such as "this cloth is white cloth" would be as incongruous as saying "this pot is a jar." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: reply: quality and qualified are not non-different.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The two experiences "there is white colour in the pot" and "the pot is white" are used to argue for a relation of difference-and-non-difference. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the Madhva view: relation is difference-and-non-difference.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: After the pot is fired, the unobstructed cognition "this pot is red but not black" establishes the mutual absence of black form in the locus of red form. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the Madhva view: relation is difference-and-non-difference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Thus, in "this pot is blue," the pot may be different from the blue form, because in the pot delimited by pot-ness

there is mutual absence between blue form and pot. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the theory of difference-and-non-difference.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even if neither difference nor non-difference is separately present in the pot delimited by pot-ness, the experience "this pot is blue" remains possible. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the theory of difference-and-non-difference.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Accordingly, in the experience "this pot is blue," what appears is simply the inherence of the blue form in the pot. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the theory of difference-and-non-difference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If relational objecthood is admitted, cognition "this pot possesses blueness" is exactly what should arise; in the expression "blue pot," an elided possessive suffix or a secondary usage based on non-difference allows "blue" to indicate the locus of blue form. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the theory of difference-and-non-difference.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The reply "when the inhering substratum is destroyed, destruction itself should also be destroyed" is not sound, for then the destroyed pot would be produced again. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: objection: absence is related by inherence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor is the argument sound that destruction must remain undestroyed, otherwise the destroyed pot would be produced

again. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the established reply.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Bhatta reply distinguishes two cognitions: "the ground possesses absence," where the locus qualified by an absence brought by non-apprehension is sense-produced, and "there is no pot on the ground," where cognition of absence in the visually presented ground is produced by non-apprehension. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: sense produces cognition of a locus qualified by absence; non-apprehension produces cognition of the absence itself.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The eastern Naiyayika replies that the unobstructed cognition "there is no pot on this ground" appears directly in perceptual experience. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the eastern Naiyayika reply.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: This particular locus is not recurrent as a universal but individual; nevertheless an individual locus can support an absence, just as one pot can support a single counterpositive relation. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: a particular individual can be the locus of an absence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The cognition "there is no pot on this ground" clearly presents a relation of substrate and superstratum; therefore absence must be treated as distinct from the ground. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the existence and perceptibility of an additional absence.)

A traveller recounted the following: Thus the negative cognition "there is no pot on the ground" itself is evidence for an additional entity, pot-absence. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the negative cognition "is not" is evidence for an additional absence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Because the counterpositive and the locus of absence differ in nature, negation in a common locus is possible: even while the ground is known as pot-possessing, the cognition "the ground is not a pot" is unobstructed. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara view: cognition of the ground itself constitutes absence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Merely distinguishing the object as "ground that is locus of absence" is not sufficient, because even while a pot is now present one can cognize the past absence, "this pot was not on this ground before." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara view: cognition of the ground itself constitutes absence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even when a pot is now perceived, cognition "there was no pot here before" remains possible; therefore present absence of the pot is not an indispensable condition. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: it is impossible to treat absence and locus merely as separate special forms.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: How can both mutual absence and its absence occur in a ground delimited by pot and pot-absence? The cognition of ground, the cognition of pot-possessing ground, and their absence can bear distinct forms and corresponding absences under different delimitations. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: cognitive difference follows from difference of causal material; ground different from pot-possessing ground is treated as absence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Doubt "is there a pot on the ground?" and the contrary cognition "there is no pot on the ground" may arise through defect; because of the defect, difference from pot-possessing ground in the locus and difference from cognition of pot-possessing

ground in cognition are not fixed. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: cognitive difference follows from difference of causal material; ground different from pot-possessing ground is treated as absence.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor can one single pot-absence recur identically everywhere; if eternal, it would license talk of pot-absence even where a pot is present and would collapse distinctions such as prior absence. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: a satisfactory generic definition of absence cannot be given on the opponent's account.)

The teacher posed a question in class: It is not the case that the pot would be produced again when cognition of the ground is destroyed or when the absence of pot-absence occurs. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: establishment of the Prabhakara *prima-facie* position.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The Naiyayika position is that experience presents only a specific absence determined by a counterpositive, as in "this is not a pot" or "this is not a cloth." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika conclusion: an additional absence determined by a counterpositive.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Reply: in the experience "there is no pot here," the pot is directly cognized as the counterpositive of the absence; it is not merely the counterpositive of a later linguistic usage. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika conclusion: an additional absence determined by a counterpositive.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The Mimamsaka objects that use of the expression "pot-absence" is caused by some cognition, while in cognition of absence no pot as counterpositive is revealed—only empty ground appears. The

second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the ground is not itself the denotation of the expression "pot-absence".)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If the applicability of the expression "pot-absence," generated by pot-cognition, constitutes a counterpositive-correlate relation between pot and ground, then the ground itself may be said to stand in relation to the counterpositive. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the ground is not itself the denotation of the expression "pot-absence".)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Reply: there is no cognition or usage "the ground is pot-absence"; experience is "pot-absence is on the ground" or "there is no pot on the ground." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the ground is not itself the denotation of the expression "pot-absence".)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Such usage shows pot-absence to be distinct from the ground, just as in "a pot is on the ground" the pot is not the ground. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the ground is not itself the denotation of the expression "pot-absence".)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: On the Naiyayika view, one mutual absence of cloth supports the usage "pot and the like are not cloth"; one absolute absence of cow-ness supports "pot and the like lack cow-ness"; one destruction of a pot supports "the pot has been destroyed" with respect to different sherds; and one prior absence supports "the pot does not yet exist" in the sherds before production. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the impossibility of explaining recurrent absence-usage without real absence.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Mimamsakas say that conjunction with a particular time may itself constitute the absence "there is now no pot on the ground" and thereby establish the substrate-superstratum relation. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: conjunction with a specific time is not itself absence.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: But in "there is now no pot on the ground," time, like the ground, is cognized as a locus of the absence, not as the absence itself. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: conjunction with a specific time is not itself absence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The objection that "first the pot is seen, then the hammer falls, and finally a sequence of sherds is seen; no absence distinct from the counterpositive is perceived, so scriptural talk of absence is baseless" is itself unestablished. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: otherwise sherds and similar objects would become the causes of pot-usage.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The cognition "the pot was destroyed by the hammer-blow" directly presents destruction as an additional fact. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: otherwise sherds and similar objects would become the causes of pot-usage.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If eye-pot conjunction alone is treated as the cause, by the logic of a perforated sieve one would also be forced, unnecessarily, to treat light-eye conjunction as an additional independent cause. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the relation among object, light, and eye is causal for visual perception.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A mass of air carrying smell or hot and cold vapour

may remain unperceived, like a pot in darkness, even when the eyes and light are nearby, because the required perceptual cause is absent. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the traditional view: the eye too functions as a manifesting factor.)

A traveller recounted the following: Inference: "Air is perceptible because, while possessing magnitude, it is the locus of manifest touch, like a pot." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the *prima-facie* view: air is perceptible; manifest colour is not a universal condition of substance-perception.)

A traveller recounted the following: Although the skin is an external sense that apprehends substances, it does not apprehend colour, just as the eye does not apprehend touch; nevertheless a pot is an object of touch. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the experience "I touch" is legitimate with respect to air.)

A traveller recounted the following: With respect to air, a reflexive awareness arises as with a pot: "I touch it"; therefore air is perceptible. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the experience "I touch" is legitimate with respect to air.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Number and similar properties residing in an eligible individual may be apprehended by the proper causal conditions; nevertheless no one knows the number of hot vapour-particles merely by touching them, as one may touch a pot. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the later view: air is not perceptible.)

A traveller recounted the following: The objection that, if the self were known only by inference, the present-tense cognition "I now know the pot" would be impossible because the pot-cognition would have perished three moments before the inference of self, can be answered by appealing to a coarse temporal qualifier, just as one says "the potter is making a pot" after seeing his activity. The listening scholar separated the

account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the self is perceptible; air is not.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Recognition "the same I who saw the pot now touches it" directly presents the identity of the self. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the self is perceptible; air is not.)

A traveller recounted the following: Such recognition—"the same I who saw the pot now touches it"—occurs even in one who does not know the inferential instrument. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the self is perceptible; air is not.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Therefore one may infer: "If molten gold, when intensely connected with fire and unrelated to a heterogeneous liquid substance that blocks transformation, were an earthy substance, it would, like a pot in fire, become the locus of a colour different from its previous yellow." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: gold is not earthy but fiery.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The Mimamsaka says that the first present cognition "this is a pot" is self-known and does not require a second mental cognition, reflexive awareness, to make it known. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Mimamsaka objection: cognition itself is the cause of its own practical manifestation.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The collective cognition "this is a pot and cloth" produces practices directed to pot and cloth separately; no distinct entity called the collection exists, so there is no need to posit a separate relation to a collection. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: self-objecthood as self-luminosity.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The Naiyayika objects that the first cognition "this is a pot" arises first, while the reflexive cognition "I know that this is a pot" arises later. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the incoherence of one cognition illuminating another.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Therefore the experience "I know this pot" is not an endless chain weighted by hundreds of cognitions; it is simply a reflexive cognition of the first cognition. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: simple first cognition is not independent of all later cognition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Objection: after mind produces the simple first perception, how does the second determinate cognition "I know that this is a pot" arise? Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the rationale of determinate cognition.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the cognition "I know this pot," only a coarse present condition is revealed, not a precise moment, because a moment is supersensible. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the rationale of determinate cognition.)

The teacher posed a question in class: But the proposed account is impossible, because at that time the cause of the subsequent cognition is absent; and recognition "I infer that this is a pot" does not contain inferentiality as a present object. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative explanation of determinate cognition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In the simple first cognition "there is no pot on the ground," ground is grammatically the qualifier and pot-absence the grammatical qualificand; later arises the determinate absence-cognition "the ground possesses pot-absence," where the ground is the real locus and

pot-absence the qualifier. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: there is no indeterminate cognition of absence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: On this view, the word "indicator" would be merely figurative: the counterpositive pot of pot-absence does not reveal any quality, yet is called an indicator. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: qualifiers may be directly connected or connected through the qualificand.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Even when a presently perceived pot is inferred under a past-time delimitation, cognition or usage "that pot" is not inevitable. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the prima-facie view that identity is relation to past time.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Even with cognition of a past relation, doubt "is this pot that same pot?" or the contrary cognition "this pot is not that pot" may arise. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the prima-facie view that identity is relation to past time.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Conversely, even when absence of relation to the past object is known, recognition "this pot is that same pot" may occur; and the co-expression "this pot qualified by past time is that same pot" is possible. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the prima-facie view that identity is relation to past time.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Nor can its meaning be restricted by prior cognition in this very life; doubt or contrary cognition is possible even without such prior cognition, and one may say "the pot

qualified by prior cognition is that same pot." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the *prima-facie* view that identity is relation to past time.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: When another cognition grasps the pot not as an object of present experience but as something experienced before, recollection "this pot is that same pot" arises; otherwise the pot would be stripped of the element of identity. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that identity is merely being an object of past experience.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Inference may establish that an object was the object of past experience, but it does not thereby produce the identity-cognition or usage "this is that same pot." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that identity is merely being an object of past experience.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The co-expression "the pot qualified by prior cognition is that same pot" would also become difficult to explain. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view that identity is merely being an object of past experience.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Doubt "is this pot that same pot or not?" and the contrary cognition "this pot is not that pot" may be understood as concerning a property different from the determinative property, or some special property. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of identity as qualification by a past property.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In memory that does not mention thisness, a property different from thisness appears as the identity-character; on that account "this is a pot" would not be

memory, and every memory would have to be derived from an erroneous experience. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: identity and thisness are not one indivisible limiting adjunct.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: By economy, therefore, it is proper to say that in recognition the pot itself is remembered simply as "that same pot." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: identity and thisness are not one indivisible limiting adjunct.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Thus a memory "this is a pot" does not arise from a formally identical perception "this is a pot"; nor does a perception "that is a pot" produce a formally identical memory "that is a pot." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika reply: use of the pronoun "that" in memory.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Gangeshopadhyaya's decisive view is that in an experience "this is a pot," the pastness of the property under which the object was presented is what constitutes the character of "that same." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the established view: identity is pastness; the form of memory.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In fact, neither a memory in the form "this is a pot" nor a first experience in the form "this pot is that same pot" is ordinarily observed. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the established view: identity is pastness; the form of memory.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The co-occurrence of the first experience "this is a pot" and the recollection "that is a pot" is to be understood with reference to a

special property. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the established view: identity is pastness; the form of memory.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Alternatively, memory may take presentness as its object, since it is a cognition similar in form to the cognition "the pot exists." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: false memory may take presentness as its object.)

The teacher posed a question in class: For this reason, in the case of a pot fired red, the cognition "this pot is black" is pragmatically false: one mistakes the former blackness of the unfired pot for a presently existing property. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: false memory may take presentness as its object.)

A traveller recounted the following: This also refutes the view that because blackness existed earlier, "this is black" regarding the now-red pot is true and that there is no distinct form "the pot is black now." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: false memory may take presentness as its object.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The final position is: in memory "this pot is that same pot," the pot qualified by identity is presented together with presentness. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion: memory as memory does not itself guarantee veridicality.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The same causal account applies in recognition "this pot, which is that same pot, exists now." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion: memory as memory does not itself guarantee veridicality.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: From a recollective certainty such as "that pot is in the house," one proceeds toward the pot without doubt. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion: memory as memory does not itself guarantee veridicality.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Otherwise even a counterpositive known only indeterminately could produce the absence-cognition "there is no pot here." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of absence defined by a counterpositive delimited by a property in another locus.)

The teacher posed a question in class: A neutral party may ask: "Is pot-ness the object of this cognition or not?" A person may know that the particular pot is the object of cognition while not knowing whether pot-ness, its qualifier, is present in this pot. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: rejection of the counter-objection: indeterminate cognition does not generate determinate relational cognition.)

A traveller recounted the following: The determinate cognition opposed to such doubt would be: "the object of the cognition is a pot," where pot-ness is the qualifier and the pot as object of cognition is the qualificand. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's conclusion.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For example: "The pot is nameable because it is knowable." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: inference is threefold—purely affirmative, purely negative, and affirmative-negative; where the probandum has no negative instance, the inference is purely affirmative.)

A traveller recounted the following: When the full causal complex for inferring the probandum in the subject is present, a cognition arises in

which the probandum is principal and the subject functions as qualifier; compare "there is no pot on the ground," where absence is principal and ground qualifies it. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: validity as freedom from a mode delimited by a property located elsewhere.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In purely affirmative inference, a non-excluding reason such as "all things are knowable because they are nameable," and an uncommon reason such as "this is a pot because it is this object," can on some occasions be faultless. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: a deviating reason may be defined as an intended reason whose cognition as a subject-property recalls opposed alternatives that generate doubt concerning the probandum.)

The teacher posed a question in class: This would exclude an inadmissible example such as "all things are non-eternal because they are knowable," yet include a defective inference such as "the pot is non-eternal because it is a pot or something else." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the established account of the deviating reason.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the contradictory inference "the pot is eternal because it is produced," combination with the defect of being defeated does not constitute a separate additional fallacy. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: qualification of the Ratnakosakara view.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "the pot is nameable because it is knowable," nameability is a property distinct from a property found only in the pot and also distinct from a general property that is the counterpositive of an eternal absence located in the pot; it is analogous to the mutual absence between a pot and cloth-ness. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Saundadasa's view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A reason defeated by proof or perception is exemplified by "the pot is all-pervading because it exists." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: a reason defeated by proof or perception, as in "the pot is all-pervading because it exists".)

The teacher posed a question in class: The inference "earth and the like have a maker because they are effects, like a pot" is used to establish God. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: inference to God in the Tattvacintamani.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even with respect to the pot used as example, mutually opposed inferences can be formulated. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: inference to God in the Tattvacintamani.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For then produced entities held to be made only by God—produced special qualities of selves, sound, breath, the Veda at the beginning of creation, pots, and conventions such as script—would not fall within the subject. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: inference to God in the Tattvacintamani.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If the proposal is framed that way, the pot-example itself would lack the probandum. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: it may also be said that direct cognition of the material cause of pots and the like cannot itself generate earth-hood because its causality deviates.)

A traveller recounted the following: Nor can one say that "material cause" is merely a relational expression that, when combined with specific terms such as "earth-element" and "pot," conveys the corresponding specific material cause, as in "Caitra is devoted to his mother, like Maitra." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: being made by an agent is not defined as being the object of cognition and effort concerning the material causes of earth and the like, since no such uniform property is established.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The relevant property is absent in examples such as the pot. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of proposed forms of subject and probandum.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: No recurrent common form exists in the specific material causes of pots and the like that could be expressed by the non-recurrent special words "pot" and so forth. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation by tarka.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Nor can one say that specific words such as "pot" merely point to their denoted meanings in general and thereby remove the defect that the example lacks pervasion by the probandum. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation by tarka.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A traditional view may therefore formulate the inference to God as follows: "At the beginning of creation, the conjunction of two atoms, the dyad, is fit to be produced by a total causal complex simultaneous with cognition, desire, and effort, because it is an effect, like a pot." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the form of the inference to God.)

A traveller recounted the following: Some scholars offer another form: "This pot is fit to be produced by cognition, desire, and effort different from the non-eternal cognition, desire, and effort that produce this pot, because it is an effect, like cloth." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative form of the inference to God.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Otherwise one could similarly prove an eternal locus of merit and demerit, and an

eternal locus of pleasure and pain, by saying: "This pot is fit to be produced by an eternal unseen factor different from the non-eternal unseen factor that produces it, because it is an effect, like cloth." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative form of the inference to God.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The proposed alternative is also defective because of a counter-inference: "This pot is not fit to be produced by eternal cognition and the like different from the non-eternal cognition that produces it, because it possesses pot-ness, like another pot." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative form of the inference to God.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A qualifier may at times fail to exclude anything, as in "the pot is knowable." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: reply: the nature of the probandum.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The occurrence of a definite reason pervaded by the probandum, as in a pot-example, can be found both in the earth-subject and in a subject-similar case such as a sprout. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: reply: the nature of the probandum.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Large entities such as the sea, which exceed waterfalls and the like, may be merely positive instances like a pot. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: One should not infer "the pot is selfless because it is produced, like cognition." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Nor is the inference useful: "the pot is fit to be produced from ether because it is produced, like sound." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

A traveller recounted the following: Therefore the self, like effort, is also a cause of pots and other effects. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the self, like effort, is a cause of pots because conjunction of an effort-possessing self with physical substances acts causally through motion.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Again, we do not know the causal efficacy of such an inference, or of some other inference, in the same way that we know the causal efficacy of perceptual cognition that leads to action toward a pot. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the objection that conjunction of self with physical matter is not a cause because the negative concomitance between absence of self-conjunction and absence of motion is unestablished.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Otherwise, whenever the causal complex remained present, a pot already produced would be produced again. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the foregoing refutation also rejects the claim that effort causes only through bodily activity and not directly by its own force.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor may one say that the existing pot, as an effect, is itself an inhibitor of its own reproduction. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the foregoing refutation also rejects the claim that effort causes only through bodily activity and not directly by its own force.)

A traveller recounted the following: Under the first alternative, if an agent without a body cannot produce a specific effect such as a pot, what is gained by saying in general that pots and the like are produced by an

agent? The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Navya-Naiyayika replies: grant that producedness and embodied-producedness are both pervaded by being produced by an agent, since in the pot they delimit distinct forms of agent-production. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Navya-Nyaya reply: producedness and embodied-producedness may both be pervaded by agent-producedness while delimiting different forms of it.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A property that does not pervade the probandum, as in the pot, may nevertheless delimit producedness. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Navya-Nyaya reply: producedness and embodied-producedness may both be pervaded by agent-producedness while delimiting different forms of it.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: As in the sentence "the knowable pot exists," here only a cognition furnished with an accidental qualifier is intended as the subject. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: being unproduced by non-eternal cognition mediated by unseen merit cannot serve as the reason in an inference to God; "producedness" is an unexcluding and therefore useless qualifier.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For this inference produces cognition of agency in a bodiless self, depends upon cognition of eternal knowledge, desire, and effort, and produces cognition of being agent-made in entities not produced through a body—cognitions comparable to "the pot has a maker," "the cognition belonging to the pot's maker is eternal," and "ether has a maker." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: another view: embodied-producedness is not the delimiter.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Suppose now that divine agency is established through the inference "the pot is made by God because it is an effect, like earth." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the view of some scholars.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The pot is like earth and earth like the pot; this would lead to an unwanted infinity of Gods. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the view of some scholars.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Another objection arises: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of usage for words such as "Veda" and "pot"? The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of use for words such as "Veda" and "pot"?.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The ancient view is therefore that, using the embodied sages as instruments, the Vedic tradition itself establishes conventions of usage for words such as "pot." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of use for words such as "Veda" and "pot"?.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Objection 113: if word-power is apprehended through God's cognition, then the cognition that the word "pot" causes pot-cognition, inferred from the behaviour of the person prompted, would be illusory, because God's cognition alone is eternal. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of use for words such as "Veda" and "pot"?.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Consequently all verbal cognitions of pots and the like would be illusory, since knowledge of the powers of words such as "pot" would be held to arise from such cognition of verbal causality. Once

he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of use for words such as “Veda” and “pot”?.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Even if the cognition “this pot-cognition inferred from the prompter’s behaviour causes knowledge of the power of the word ‘pot’” were false, the cognition of word-power “the word ‘pot’ denotes pot” may still be true because no contradiction exists in its object. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: objection: how can a bodiless God establish conventions of use for words such as “Veda” and “pot”?.)

The teacher posed a question in class: For this very reason, a child who sees a wooden puppet moved by strings bring a pot after hearing “bring the pot” understands a causal role of the word “pot” in cognition of the pot. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: scripture and remembered tradition are means of knowledge.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Therefore the knowledge of the power of the word “pot” produced by such cognition of verbal causality is not necessarily illusory. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: scripture and remembered tradition are means of knowledge.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If that knowledge of word-power were illusory, the child’s observation of the prompter’s use of “pot” would not yield cognition of verbal causality, because the child would remain uncertain whether the causal relation was learned from the conduct of a conscious person or from the conduct of an unconscious wooden puppet. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: scripture and remembered tradition are means of knowledge.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Nor can one say that when “this pot was black,” destruction of the black pot yields only destruction of the fired pot but

not destruction of that same fired pot under the generic form pot. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: objection: usage concerning absence of the potter alone seems established merely by absence of a qualifier, because that absence alone is taken to possess the operative power.)

A traveller recounted the following: If destruction of a presently qualified object resided only in the past qualifier, the destruction of a qualificand such as the pot would have to exist in the present, because that same pot is delimited by the past qualifier, namely the past moment. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: objection: usage concerning absence of the potter alone seems established merely by absence of a qualifier, because that absence alone is taken to possess the operative power.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: It is just as the presence and absence of a pot respectively license the usages "the pot exists" and "the pot does not exist." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example, in "the ground has no relation with the pot," no relation between pot and ground is superimposed; only identity in the form of pot-ness is denied. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In "the ground is not a pot," the ground is understood as possessing absence of pot-ness; thus pot-ness alone constitutes identity with pot. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The unobstructed and mutually distinct usages "this pot is not on this ground" and "this pot is not the ground" are themselves evidence of distinct kinds of absence. Instead of

answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: proof of the causal efficacy of superimposition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Prior-absence cognition "the pot is not in its two future sherds" has a special causal role because its mode of occurrence differs. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: But absolute-absence cognition "the pot is not on the ground" does not possess that same special causal role. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

A traveller recounted the following: Some other scholars hold that the distinct cognitions "the pot will be produced" and "the pot has been destroyed" cannot both be explained by one and the same absolute absence. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If residual impressions were conducive to results merely as impressions, a result could arise whenever a single qualification was present, as a pot is produced through use of a rotating staff. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

A traveller recounted the following: Just as one acts to obtain a hammer in order to destroy a future pot, one would then have to act to obtain future suffering in order to destroy that suffering. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: argument: if destruction of suffering required the suffering to arise first, one would have to seek suffering in order to destroy it.)

The teacher posed a question in class: A pot remains after the effort has ceased; therefore the qualifier "in the future" must be added when prior absence is characterized in relation to effort. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: objection: only what cannot be attained without effort is effort-attainable, whereas prior absence of an effect is not of that form.)

The teacher posed a question in class: For this reason the prior absence, like the pot, is something whose termination is attainable through effort. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: liberation is the prior absence of endless suffering.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: No cognition of a relation between pot-absence and the ground arises when perception of pot and ground and cognition of the pot's real presence on the ground defeat such relational cognition. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: objection of deviation in the reason.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In the word "ghata," the sound "ta" is the counterpositive of a prior absence that exists while the sound "gha" is being uttered; thus phonemes appear to be produced in sequence. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view of certain scholars.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: But cognition of the sequence of phonemes in words such as "ghata" and "pata" is mental; therefore the phonemes themselves need not be produced entities. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view of certain scholars.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "he knows the pot," "he wants the pot," and "he makes the pot," the object is the same pot. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the teachers' view.)

A traveller recounted the following: A child observing an elder act after hearing "bring the pot" first infers only that cognition of "the task of bringing the pot" causes the action; the child does not infer an additional general cognition called "knowledge of a general meaning connected with action." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the final Naiyayika position.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Later, observing positive and negative concomitance of the words "pot," the accusative ending, "bring," the imperative, and so forth, the child successively grasps their powers to convey pot, objecthood, the act of bringing, and taskhood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the final Naiyayika position.)

A traveller recounted the following: When a particular sentence "bring the pot" is heard and a particular action of bringing a pot follows, the causal relation between that particular sentence and that particular cognition can be grasped directly. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection to the teachers' view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example, in "ghatam anaya," "ghatam" conveys pot and objecthood, while "anaya" conveys the act of bringing; the relation among these meanings is understood through order, expectancy, and speaker-intention. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: word-power does not reside in some other relation.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Objection: if a word denotes only a particular individual or a particular meaning, how can cognition of the word "pot"

regulate both general cognition of pot and cognition of a particular pot? Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: objection.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Therefore the power that produces cognition of entities such as pot should be located with respect to those very entities. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: view of one group of Prabhakaras.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Without a conventional assignment, the word "pot" reveals only its own word-form; the case-ending relates to that word-form. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: one view: conventional assignment is not necessary.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: We reply: in an expression such as "bring the blue pot," expectancy and word-order alone generate cognition of the qualifier-qualificand relation between blue-ness and pot; the case-ending on the qualifier is not the cause. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: case endings on qualifiers serve grammatical well-formedness only.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Therefore compounds such as "king's man" or "blue-pot" need no additional indivisible power beyond conveying a man related to the king or a blue pot. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: case endings on qualifiers serve grammatical well-formedness only.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In "not-a-pot, but cloth," the negative particle conveys negation or sentential denial. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: analysis of compounds with the negative particle.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "he does not cook" and "there is no pot on the ground," the negative particle, joining verb or noun, primarily conveys absence. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: analysis of compounds with the negative particle.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In "two pots" or "many pots," the word "pot" through its general power recalls many individual pots; dual or plural endings relate to those many individuals. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification is required in coordinative compounds.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Just as "pot" conveys pot and not an additional cognition "a pot different from the held pot," so the meanings of words such as dhava and khadira connect directly with duality. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: a reply that secondary signification is unnecessary.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "bring two pots and one cloth," duality relates to the pots, not to the cloth, because cloth is not the meaning of the dual nominal base. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: no collective secondary signification is necessary.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In "two pots" or "many pots," the word "pot" expresses many pot-individuals through its universal power, and duality or plurality relates to those individuals. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: coordination becomes difficult if the compound is treated improperly.)

The teacher posed a question in class: An objection arises: usages "made" and "not made" concerning pots and sprouts depend respectively on production through effort and production without effort; and the word "agent" denotes a locus of effort. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Bhatta view.)

A traveller recounted the following: Even after the statement "he knows the pot," doubt "is the pot known or not?" is possible; this shows that the knower is not simply identical with productive agency. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Ratnakosakara view.)

Chapter 131 — The Shared Plate

The Doctrine of Burning-Power

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The Mimamsaka holds that fire has an invisible burning-power that a jewel destroys or obstructs. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: the doctrine of burning-power: the theory of cause and effect.)

The teacher posed a question in class: When a moonstone jewel is placed near fire, the jewel destroys or suppresses that burning-power, and the hand therefore does not experience burning. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of burning-power (sakti-vada).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The case can be explained thus: contact between hand and fire ordinarily produces burning, but when an inhibitor such as a jewel is present in that same contact, burning does not occur. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of burning-power.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Experience establishes the rule of co-absence: wherever one of these two is absent, the specified jewel is not present; and wherever the specified jewel is present, neither of those absences is present in the relevant causal configuration. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against

the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Usage of "absence of the man alone" is recurrent, because aloneness and absence of relation to the man may occur when only the staff is present, when both staff and man are present, and when both are absent. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The act of consecration is conducive to pounding, just as the grain itself is conducive to being pounded. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

A traveller recounted the following: If one grain were destroyed, the destruction of the corresponding specific qualification would not necessarily follow, because destruction of one locus does not destroy an effect dependent on a larger complex, as in the case of a tree. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Objection 176: if consecrated grain produces an unseen potency, it could have no other use, like sacrificial kusa already employed, because reuse of an object once ritually used is forbidden. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example, injunctions such as "spread the consecrated kusa" and "place the sacrificial rice upon the consecrated kusa" employ only ritually consecrated kusa. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

Chapter 132 — The Republic of the Kitchen

A Proposal Concerning Causal Knowledge

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Under the second alternative, positive grass, wood, and jewel cannot be reduced merely to absences of their respective absences; otherwise one and the same piece of grass would have to count as wood and jewel as well. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

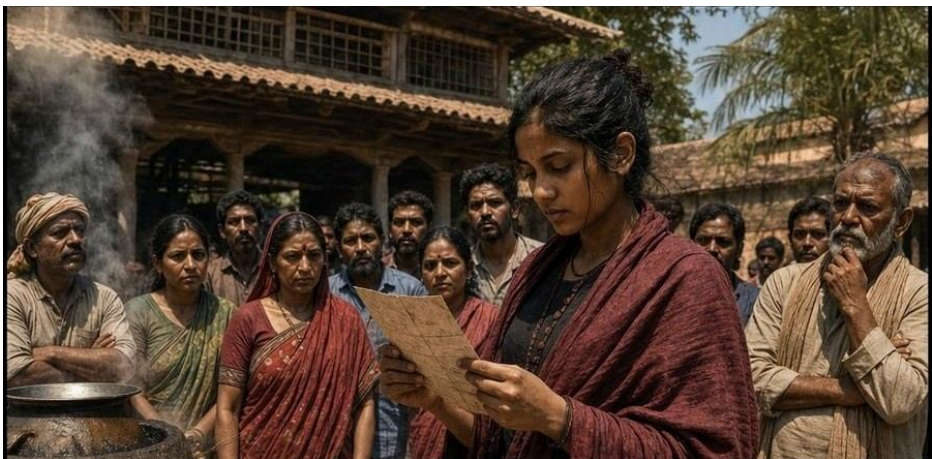
(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means of knowing causality is available, deviation alone defeats causal knowledge.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The scriptural sentence "he pounds the grain" remains coherent even if only unconsecrated grain is directly related to the act of pounding. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: some scholars propose that where no independent means of knowing causality is available, deviation alone defeats causal knowledge.)

Chapter 133 — Invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival

Gangesha's Refutation and the Establishment of the Absence of an Inhibitor



At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Gangesha replies that arising and destruction occur in the absence of an unspecified person alone; by the same rule, when an excitant factor is introduced and removed, the absence of an inhibitor such as a jewel must also be accepted. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation and establishment of the absence of an inhibitor (pratibandhaka-abhava).)

Chapter 134 — The Kabaddi Players' Dramatic Text

The Definition of Liberation: Refutation of Various Philosophical Views

The teacher posed a question in class: Gangesha says that the destruction of an instrument of suffering, such as a thorn or a snake, is not itself the ultimate purpose. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Definition of liberation: refutation of various philosophical views.)

Chapter 135 — Staging the Videha Theatre Festival

Objection: The Auspicious Invocation Cannot Be an Auxiliary Rite

A traveller recounted the following: In examples such as fitting an iron bolt when the supporting peg of a house or chariot breaks, and feeding a Brahmin food cooked in milk, fitting the bolt and feeding the Brahmin are not limbs of the principal act but independent occasional acts performed when the relevant occasion arises. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Objection: an auspicious invocation cannot be an auxiliary rite.)

Chapter 136 — The Silence After the Applause

The Navya View: The Absence of an Inhibitor Is Not a Cause

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Otherwise, when a staff connected with a wheel keeps turning yet no effect arises because a co-operating cause is absent, the staff would lose its causal status. The second examined causes, defeaters, and

exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The Navya view: the absence of an inhibitor is not itself a cause.)

Chapter 137 — The Audience's Testimony

A Further Counter-Objection

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Therefore, just as rice and barley can be alternative means in a sacrifice, knowledge and action too would have to be regarded as alternative causes of liberation. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: A further counter-objection may be raised: if particular actions lack a common form, how can liberation possess a common form?.)

Chapter 138 — The Procession Beyond the Stage

Recognition of the Gavaya

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example, suppose a person is told that a gavaya, the wild ox, is like a cow. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free. (Philosophical principle: Upamana as a means of knowledge.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: When that person later sees a cow-like animal in the forest, similarity enables the recognition: "This is a gavaya." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone. (Philosophical principle: Upamana as a means of knowledge.)

A traveller recounted the following: The discussion of comparison proceeds chiefly through the famous example of the wild ox, gavaya, and the familiar cow. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, upamana (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Instruction: when a person has never seen a gavaya, someone knowledgeable tells him, "That which resembles a cow is a gavaya." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over this point: *Upamiti*, the resulting cognition: he then determines, "This animal is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For example, a gavaya shares many common properties with a cow. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

A traveller recounted the following: For example, the gavaya shares with a cow such features as horns, hooves, and general bodily form; through these shared features cognition of similarity arises. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: After seeing in the forest an animal resembling a cow and remembering the instruction "that which resembles a cow is a gavaya," the process of comparison produces the new determination, "This animal is a gavaya." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: When the person sees that animal in the forest and remembers the instruction, he determines, "This animal is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The person understands that the word 'gavaya' is applied to that animal because of a specific ground, *gavaya-hood*. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, *probandum*, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over this point: Not perception alone: if this determination arose merely from seeing the animal, then even a person who had never heard the instruction "a gavaya resembles a cow" would learn the word 'gavaya' merely by seeing the animal; but this does not happen. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: This section concerns Nyaya's third means of knowledge, *upamana* (comparison or cognition through similarity), chiefly illustrated by the familiar example of the gavaya and the cow.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over this point: Instruction: the teacher tells the child, "A zebra looks very much like a horse, but its body has black-and-white stripes." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: *Upamiti* (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: Perception and recollection: a few days later the child goes to a zoo and sees there a striped animal resembling a horse. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: *Upamiti* (the resulting cognition).)

The teacher posed a question in class: Suppose someone gives a negative rather than positive instruction, for example: “An animal that does not resemble a cow is not a gavaya.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: According to the text, even a negative instructional statement such as “an animal that does not resemble a cow is not a gavaya” can fully assist in learning the meaning of a new word through knowledge of similarity and dissimilarity. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

The teacher posed a question in class: The fruit of comparison, the final cognition: older Naiyayikas such as Jayanta Bhatta held that the result of upamana is simply the cognition, “This animal is a gavaya.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

The teacher posed a question in class: Gangesha, however, holds that the genuine result of upamana is the determination that the power of the word ‘gavaya’ resides in gavaya-hood, the universal, not merely in one particular animal. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

A traveller recounted the following: First, the view of older Naiyayikas such as Jayanta Bhatta: when a person sees the animal in the forest, the conclusion is, “This animal standing before me is the meaning of the word ‘gavaya’.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Second, Gangesha Upadhyaya’s Navya-Nyaya criticism: if the meaning of ‘gavaya’ were confined to that single animal, what would one call another gavaya seen in the forest tomorrow? The example thereby reveals the need for a universal ground of application.

Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

A traveller recounted the following: Thus, for Gangesha, the genuine fruit of comparison is the determination that the power or denotation of the word 'gavaya' lies not in one animal but in gavaya-hood, a universal or common property. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In simple terms, one learns not merely the name of one animal but that every animal possessing gavaya-hood is properly called 'gavaya'. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

A traveller recounted the following: For this reason Gangesha holds that the denotation of 'gavaya' is not one particular animal but gavaya-hood, the universal. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: On this basis a question arises: when a person sees the animal in the forest and understands the word 'gavaya', did he already possess the universal concomitance "whatever resembles a cow is the referent of 'gavaya'," or does he compare directly after hearing the instruction and then perceiving the animal? The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

A traveller recounted the following: After seeing the animal and recalling the instruction, the person reaches the conclusion that this animal is a referent of 'gavaya' and that the denotation is not confined to this individual but extends to gavaya-hood as a whole. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: That is, the person understands that the word ‘gavaya’ is applied to the particular animal seen in the forest and that its denotation is gavaya-hood, the universal. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

The teacher posed a question in class: If someone merely goes into the forest and sees the animal, without having received any prior instruction, can sight alone teach him that the animal is called ‘gavaya’? The question requires examination of the ground, the thesis, and possible defects. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: No such universal-concomitance cognition is required for learning the meaning of ‘gavaya’; recollection of the instructional sentence together with perceived similarity reveals the word-object relation. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Distinct from perception: merely seeing a wild animal cannot yield the knowledge that its name is ‘gavaya’ or that it is the referent of the word ‘gavaya’. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (the resulting cognition).)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The celebrated traditional example is the gavaya, a wild animal resembling the nilgai or wild ox. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: When a townsman who does not know the gavaya asks a forest-dweller, “What is a gavaya like?”, the forest-dweller replies, “A gavaya resembles a cow” — gosadrsho gavayah. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested

every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Later, when the person enters the forest and sees an animal shaped like a cow, he obtains the determinate cognition, "This animal is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In the Mimamsaka, especially Bhatta, account, upamana is the means of knowledge that produces a true determinate cognition of similarity of the form, "This animal resembling a cow is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Thus the cognition, in the remembered cow, of similarity to the gavaya is produced by upamana as a means of knowledge. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The existence of similarity is established by the uncontradicted practice of saying, "The animal resembling a cow is a gavaya." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Inquiry into similarity: the metaphysical basis of upamana.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Therefore, when the comparator cow is absent, as when only the gavaya is seen in the forest, complete similarity-practice cannot arise merely from a universal property distributed through all cows. The students pictured each term as

a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Kumarila Bhatta's view: the theory of an aggregate of common properties.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Otherwise only the awkward expression "the gavaya is similar to the cow" would fit, while the natural cognition "the gavaya is cow-like" would not. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the theory of possessing those properties.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Similarity would then become merely an identity-cognition like "the gavaya is the cow," not a non-identity cognition such as "the gavaya resembles a cow." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the theory of possessing those properties.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Because both cow and gavaya possess cow-like features, the gavaya would become identical with the cow, contrary to direct perception of their difference. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the theory of possessing those properties.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Gangesha argues that if similarity is subsumed under the seven categories, the ordinary judgment "the gavaya resembles a cow" becomes difficult to explain. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the theory of possessing those properties.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Hence the cognition arises: "This gavaya resembles a cow, but it is not a cow." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The early Naiyayika doctrine.)

A traveller recounted the following: The old Naiyayika Jayanta Bhatta holds that when an inquirer asks, "What does a gavaya look like?", a forest-dweller replies, "A gavaya resembles a cow." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika view, represented by Jayanta Bhatta.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Later the person sees a cow-like animal in the forest, recalls the meaning of the instruction "this gavaya resembles a cow," and determines, "This gavaya is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika view, represented by Jayanta Bhatta.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Jayanta Bhatta calls precisely this determinate cognition of the word-referent the fruit of comparison, *upamiti*. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika view, represented by Jayanta Bhatta.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Gangesha makes clear that the power of the word 'gavaya' cannot be confined to a single gavaya-individual. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and *upamiti*.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Ordinary people cannot know the power of the word 'gavaya' merely from directly perceived horns and the like when the ordered delimiter of denotation, *gavaya-hood*, is not already known. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and *upamiti*.)

At the village *chaupal*, discussion arose over this point: Yet the power of the word 'gavaya' applies also to other gavayas that have never been perceived. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every

view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Therefore the power of words such as 'gavaya' resides in a universal property such as gavaya-hood, indicated through similarity, just as the word 'earth' is grounded in earth-hood, which may be indicated by smell and related properties. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine of grasping word-power and upamiti; in conclusion, the power of the word "gavaya" resides in gavaya-hood.)

A traveller recounted the following: The final fruit of upamiti is the cognition, "This animal qualified by gavaya-hood is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If mere resemblance to a cow were made the meaning of 'gavaya', then an animal known to be a gavaya by another means but not known through cow-similarity would fall outside verbal usage; such a theory also incurs needless complexity. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Nor may one say that the word 'gavaya' itself first reveals gavaya-hood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

A traveller recounted the following: For knowledge of the word's power would require prior knowledge of gavaya-hood, while knowledge of gavaya-hood would require knowledge of the word's power, producing mutual dependence. The listening scholar separated the account into

perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: If similarity and gavaya-hood are both made joint causes, then use of the instructional sentence for learning the meaning of 'gavaya' becomes pointless. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The person learns the power of the word 'gavaya' in gavaya-hood alone, not in resemblance to a cow. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's revolutionary doctrine: grasp of word-power and upamiti.)

A traveller recounted the following: Before the power of 'gavaya' in its referent is specifically known, the instructional sentence "a gavaya resembles a cow" does not directly yield a determinate cognition of the delimitor of denotation, the ground of application. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The role of the instructional sentence and recollection.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Through mere co-reference it is possible to cognise the relation, "the cow-like gavaya is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: The role of the instructional sentence and recollection.)

A traveller recounted the following: Some philosophers propose that in the expression "gavaya resembling a cow," the word 'similar' must operate secondarily to denote an animal possessing similarity to a cow. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: They say that a trustworthy elder instructs a person wishing to learn the power of 'gavaya': "The animal resembling a cow is a gavaya." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The speaker's intention makes resemblance to a cow the delimiter of the denotation of 'gavaya'. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: From the complete causal conditions for word-power cognition, a specific knowledge of the convention of 'gavaya' necessarily arises. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Some Naiyayikas or Mimamsakas object that this power could be proved by a negative inference: "There is some ground for the use of the word 'gavaya'; no ground other than gavaya-hood is available." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

A traveller recounted the following: But it is not based on such a known universal relation; therefore the denotation of 'gavaya' cannot be established merely by a negative inference. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The relevance of upamana is not confined to animals such as the gavaya. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: The power of pronouns and the wider range of upamana.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In the same way one might propose that the power of 'gavaya' resides in one gavaya-individual and that other gavaya-individuals are understood through established usage. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: The power of pronouns and the wider range of upamana.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The power of a pronoun terminates in a determinate referent such as the gavaya only when that referent has already become the object of a specific cognition. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The power of pronouns and the wider range of upamana.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: According to Gangesha, upamana is characterised as the operative condition producing the determinate upamiti-cognition, "The gavaya is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's final definition of upamana and upamiti: upamana is the condition that produces the determinate upamiti-cognition, "the gavaya is the referent of the word 'gavaya'".)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Gangesha gives several refined definitions of upamiti so as to avoid over-extension, under-extension, or impossibility: first, upamiti is cognition of the ground of word-application, such as gavaya-hood for 'gavaya' or donkey-hood for 'donkey', where that ground co-resides with a general property such as similarity or dissimilarity. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's final definition of upamana and upamiti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: An alternative definition: the fruit of upamiti is cognition, as a qualifier, of the ground of word-application such as gavaya-hood, delimited by co-reference within the sentence-meaning of a word whose power was previously

unknown. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's final definition of upamana and upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Gangesha gives this final definition in accordance with the traditional rule that, after behavioural knowledge of the word's power has arisen, upamana yields a specific determination of gavaya-hood and the like. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's final definition of upamana and upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Likewise, cognition of a gavaya may contain a general appearance of cow-similarity, but the specific judgment "the gavaya is like a cow" depends upon cognition of the cow. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The example of shortness, length, and similarity.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A reason contradicted by upamana would be, for example: "Gavaya-hood is not the ground for use of the word 'gavaya', because it is a universal." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: A reason defeated by upamana, as in: "gavaya-hood is not the ground for applying the word 'gavaya', because it is a universal".)

The teacher posed a question in class: Some Mimamsakas say that in the context of upamana, the means of knowledge producing the true determinate similarity-cognition "this cow-like animal is the referent of the word 'gavaya'" is comparison. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: The Mimamsaka view: upamana is the cause of cognition of similarity.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Here the determinate cognition produced by upamana is specifically "this cow-like animal is the referent of the word 'gavaya'," not merely "the gavaya is the referent of 'gavaya'." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject,

probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: The Mimamsaka view: upamana is the cause of cognition of similarity.)

A traveller recounted the following: Its existence is established by the uncontradicted practice of saying, "The animal resembling a cow is a gavaya." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The Mimamsaka view: upamana is the cause of cognition of similarity.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Otherwise only the improper expression "the gavaya is similar to the cow" would fit, while the natural expression "the gavaya is cow-like" would not. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: One might argue that similarity has a counter-correlate; hence one would necessarily have to say, "the gavaya is similar to the cow." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: One may argue that similarity has a correlate; therefore usage of the form "the gavaya is similar to the cow" should be unavoidable.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Similarity would then be merely an identity-cognition such as "the gavaya is a cow," rather than the non-identity cognition "the gavaya resembles a cow." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: One may argue that similarity has a correlate; therefore usage of the form "the gavaya is similar to the cow" should be unavoidable.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If similarity were subsumed under the seven categories, ordinary usage such as "the gavaya resembles a cow" would become incoherent. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: This objection is unsound. If similarity were included among the seven categories, the usage “the gavaya is similar to the cow” would become incoherent; similarity must therefore be treated as outside those seven categories.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Limitation, as in difference, length and the like, does not itself constitute counter-correlateness; otherwise the expression “the gavaya is similar to the cow” would be unavoidable. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: The early Naiyayikas hold that similarity is the state, present in one relatum and determined by the other, of possessing many common properties distinct from exceptional class-properties.)

A traveller recounted the following: Hence the cognition is: “This gavaya resembles a cow, but is not a cow.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: An objection may now be raised that the state of possessing many common properties and similarity itself would collapse into one another.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: An objection may be raised: if similarity consists in a plurality of common properties, one would obtain only the aggregate cognition “the gavaya has horns and so forth,” not the unitary cognition “the gavaya resembles a cow.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: An objection may be raised that if similarity is merely the possession of many common properties, cognition would amount only to an aggregate such as “the gavaya has horns and so on,” not the relational cognition “the gavaya is similar to the cow”.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: But on that account the judgments “the gavaya resembles a cow” and “the gavaya resembles a buffalo” would also require dissimilarity from the cow wherever the gavaya lacks such cow-properties as purity or milk-giving capacity. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: It may be objected that in the word “dissimilar” the prefix marks negation, so dissimilarity is merely the absence of similarity.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Otherwise, if cow-similarity were the delimiter of the meaning of 'gavaya', there would be over-extension to the buffalo as well. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: An Ekadeshin holds that similarity is the possession of many common properties present in a related object.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A comparative sentence such as "the gavaya resembles a cow" conveys difference, not identity. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Comparative sentences such as "the gavaya is similar to the cow" express difference, not identity.)

A traveller recounted the following: The inference "the cow resembles this gavaya because it possesses the common properties such as horns found in the gavaya, like another gavaya" is not acceptable. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The gavaya's similarity to the cow cannot itself establish the cow's similarity to the gavaya, because the probandum cannot be proved without prior knowledge of pervasion.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: One cannot say, "The gavaya resembles the cow, but the cow does not resemble the gavaya." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: The gavaya's similarity to the cow cannot itself establish the cow's similarity to the gavaya, because the probandum cannot be proved without prior knowledge of pervasion.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The upamiti-result "the gavaya resembles a cow" cannot be obtained without some cognition of a general relation. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of the Mimamsaka view.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Jayanta's older Nyaya view is that when the inquirer asks, "What does a gavaya look like?", the answer is, "A gavaya resembles a cow." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof.

The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika theory of upamiti.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Later, after seeing a cow-like animal, the person recalls the instruction "this gavaya resembles a cow" and determines, "This gavaya is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika theory of upamiti.)

A traveller recounted the following: It should not be said that the determination "this gavaya is the referent of 'gavaya'" arises from the instructional sentence alone. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika theory of upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If knowledge of the sentence-object and perception of the animal, mediated by recollection, are taken merely as auxiliaries to the upamiti "the gavaya is the referent of 'gavaya'," they still do not establish the specific word-power in gavaya-hood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The ancient Naiyayika theory of upamiti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Ordinary people cannot know the power of 'gavaya' merely from directly perceived horns and the like when the ordered delimiter of denotation, gavaya-hood, is unknown. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Ordinary people cannot learn the power of the word "gavaya" merely from perceived horns and other features when they do not yet know the serial delimiter of denotation, gavaya-hood.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Nor should it be said that learned definition could reveal the power of 'gavaya' in an unperceived gavaya known by inference or another means, as may happen with the word 'ether'. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Ordinary people cannot learn the power of the word “gavaya” merely from perceived horns and other features when they do not yet know the serial delimiter of denotation, gavaya-hood.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: It should not be said that prior cognition of the sentence-meaning decisively yields knowledge of word-power in the gavaya by the form, “in the cow-like gavaya the referent of ‘gavaya’ arises.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: It cannot be maintained that prior cognition of the sentence-meaning by itself yields a determinate cognition that the word-power resides in the gavaya resembling a cow.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: An objection may be raised that, once gavaya-hood is known as the delimiter of the word’s referent, economy fixes cow-similarity merely as an indicator and produces the relational cognition “the gavaya is the referent of ‘gavaya’,” as in the sentence “the village is on the Ganges.” Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: There is no need to cognize again, through another means of knowledge, a meaning already supplied by a different means of knowledge.)

A traveller recounted the following: Yet mere co-reference is sufficient for the relational cognition “the cow-like gavaya is the referent of ‘gavaya’.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: There is no need to cognize again, through another means of knowledge, a meaning already supplied by a different means of knowledge.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: An objection may be raised that in the phrase “gavaya resembling a cow,” the word ‘similar’ must secondarily denote an animal possessing cow-similarity, since the speaker cannot intend mere animality. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: In a sentence involving secondary signification, such as “the village is on the Ganga,” the expressed meaning “Ganga” cannot directly relate to the village; it is therefore

proper to accept secondary signification to another meaning, such as the riverbank.)

A traveller recounted the following: But a trustworthy elder teaches a person wishing to know the power of 'gavaya': "The animal resembling a cow is a gavaya." The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: In a sentence involving secondary signification, such as "the village is on the Ganga," the expressed meaning "Ganga" cannot directly relate to the village; it is therefore proper to accept secondary signification to another meaning, such as the riverbank.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In upamana there is no independent, directly perceived speaker-intention that itself reveals the convention of 'gavaya'; otherwise the establishment of upamana and the cognition of intention would depend upon each other. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: The nature of upamana cannot be reduced to speaker-intention alone.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Where the speaker's intention does not directly reveal gavaya-hood, the ground for use of 'gavaya', as the delimiter of denotation, the comparative sentence only states the fact that whatever resembles a cow is the referent of 'gavaya'. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even if one accepts a general inference that learned people use 'gavaya' for a certain kind of animal, economy fixes the gavaya qualified by gavaya-hood as the referent of the word. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: An independent means of knowledge, upamana, is necessary.)

A traveller recounted the following: One proposal is that denotation is learned inferentially: the word 'gavaya' denotes an animal qualified by gavaya-hood because trustworthy elders use the word in that sense and not in another, just as 'cow' denotes a cow. The listening scholar

separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: An independent means of knowledge, upamana, is necessary.)

A traveller recounted the following: Again it may be proposed that the general-seen inference “the word ‘gavaya’ is used on some ground, and no ground other than gavaya-hood is available” is established with the aid of reasoning. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

A traveller recounted the following: An objection may be raised that the instruction “a gavaya resembles a cow” is intended to produce knowledge of universal concomitance. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

The teacher posed a question in class: A person who knows the universal relation “whatever resembles a cow is the referent of ‘gavaya’” would immediately infer, “This cow-like animal is the referent of ‘gavaya’.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

The teacher posed a question in class: But a person who already knows that a gavaya resembles a cow does not ask an elder, “What does the word ‘gavaya’, meaning something like a cow, denote?” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: One who knows the word ‘gavaya’ instead asks, “What does a gavaya look like?” The force of the example therefore depends on the intended question, not on a pre-known inference. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Another proposal is that the sentence “a gavaya resembles a cow” supplies the distinguishing mark of the gavaya. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The intention of the question would then be, “What is the defining mark of a gavaya?” and the answer, “A cow-like animal is the referent of ‘gavaya,’” meaning that such an animal is called a gavaya. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

A traveller recounted the following: But on that account an animal unlike a cow, such as an elephant, would simply be excluded from the term ‘gavaya’ by the supplied mark. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Yet the question “What does a gavaya look like?” is not identical with the question “What is the defining mark of a gavaya?” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: The instructional sentence is not merely an answer to a question.)

A traveller recounted the following: The answer can even be merely practical: “Go into the forest and you will see a gavaya.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The instructional sentence is not merely an answer to a question.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The questions “What is a gavaya like?” and “On what ground is the word ‘gavaya’ applied?” are asked in order to learn the specific ground of word-use. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Conclusion: ascertainment of the specific ground of application is the fruit of upamiti.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: After seeing the animal and recalling the instruction, reasoning helps produce the specific cognition, "This animal qualified by gavaya-hood is the referent of the word 'gavaya'." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Conclusion: ascertainment of the specific ground of application is the fruit of upamiti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: An objection may be raised that the ground of application, gavaya-hood, is learned through a negative reason and the argument from theoretical economy: "There is some ground for use of 'gavaya'; no ground other than gavaya-hood is possible." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Conclusion: ascertainment of the specific ground of application is the fruit of upamiti.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The reply is that both cognitions — "gavaya-hood is the ground for use of 'gavaya'" and "no property other than gavaya-hood is such a ground" — arise through upamana itself, with the aid of the economy argument. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Conclusion: ascertainment of the specific ground of application is the fruit of upamiti.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Merely knowing that the word has some ground of application and that it is not something other than gavaya-hood still does not by itself establish the positive specific cognition, "gavaya-hood alone is the ground." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: It may be objected that a general proof that some property grounds word-use, together with the argument from theoretical economy, is enough to establish gavaya-hood as the ground of application.)

A traveller recounted the following: The power of a pronoun terminates in a determinate referent such as the gavaya only when that referent has become the object of a specific cognition. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The preceding view is unsound. An incidental indicator such as knowability, which occurs equally in pot-hood and other properties, cannot by itself fix a pronoun or another word upon a specific referent; upamana supplies that determination.)

A traveller recounted the following: Upamiti is cognition of the ground of word-application — gavaya-hood for ‘gavaya’ or donkey-hood for ‘donkey’ — residing in the same locus as a general feature such as similarity or dissimilarity. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti is cognition of the ground of word-application—gavaya-hood for “gavaya” or donkey-hood for “donkey”—located in the same subject as a general property such as similarity or dissimilarity.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Alternatively, the fruit of upamiti is cognition, as a qualifier, of the ground of word-application such as gavaya-hood, delimited by co-reference in the sentence-meaning of a word whose power was previously unknown. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Alternatively, the fruit of upamiti is qualificative cognition of the ground of word-application, such as gavaya-hood, delimited by co-reference in the sentence-meaning of a word whose power was previously unknown.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the negative instruction “an animal that does not resemble a cow is not a gavaya,” the speaker’s intention is indirectly directed only toward the gavaya’s similarity to the cow. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on upamana.)

Chapter 139 — The Road as Theatre

The Donkey

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Gangesha gives a striking practical example: “the baby elephant and the donkey.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation of the Bhatta view and its logical inconsistency.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: A baby elephant and a donkey possess no directly identical aggregate of parts, qualities, or actions; their bodily structures are wholly different, yet ordinary people can still say, "This donkey eats like a baby elephant." Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation of the Bhatta view and its logical inconsistency.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Gangesha gives a vivid example: a northerner instructs an inquirer from the south about the road north by describing the donkey as having an extremely long neck, long moving lips, eating tough tender twigs, a body infested with lice, and being despised among animals. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation of the ancient view and the example of the donkey.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The southerner hears this instruction, travels north, sees an animal of that description, and determines, "This animal is a donkey." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha's refutation of the ancient view and the example of the donkey.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Even so, the person who sees the animal and remembers the sentence-meaning acquires the cognition, "This donkey is the referent of the word 'donkey.'" People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of secondary signification and inference.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Cognition of similarity arises even between wholly dissimilar things such as a baby elephant and a donkey; for instance, "This donkey eats like a baby elephant." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was

decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The foregoing Bhatta view is unsound. Cognition of similarity also occurs where there is no common aggregate of parts—for example with qualities, actions, or universals, as in the similarity between two lotuses belonging to the same class.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A northerner may instruct an inquirer from the south: “The donkey, with an exceedingly long neck, long moving lips, eating hard tender twigs, its body full of lice and despised among animals, is contemptible.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of the ancient Naiyayika view.)

A traveller recounted the following: The southerner hears the instruction, travels north, sees such an animal and determines, “This animal is a donkey.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Refutation of the ancient Naiyayika view.)

A traveller recounted the following: The person who sees such an animal and recalls the sentence-meaning nevertheless obtains the cognition, “This donkey is the referent of the word ‘donkey’.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The sentence “shame on the donkey with an exceedingly long neck” is meant to censure the donkey, not to state donkey-hood as the ground for applying the word.)

Chapter 140 — The Road as Theatre

Spatial Difference in a Tree

A traveller recounted the following: Nor should one object that, in the inference “this tree has contact with a monkey because it is a tree,” the mutual absence associated with the locus of monkey-contact is only non-pervasive. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: The justification for a special definition.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: A contradictory reason cannot be defined merely as a

reason pervaded by the absence of the probandum, for that definition would over-extend to a faultless reason such as “this tree has monkey-contact because it is a tree.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Suppose “all things” constitute a single subject in a doubt concerning nameability. Then in “all things are nameable because they are knowable,” knowability becomes an anupasamhari, or non-conclusive, reason.)

Chapter 141 — The Veranda’s Verdict

The Navya-Nyaya View: Similarity Between Two Pleasures

The teacher wrote a case on the board: On this view, comparison would be possible even with incomparable things: “the sky is like the sky,” “the ocean is like the ocean,” and “the war of Rama and Ravana is like the war of Rama and Ravana.” The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: The Navya-Nyaya view: similarity between two pleasures.)

Chapter 142 — The Darkness of the Record Room

The Tree with a Monkey

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If a relation grasping an entire class were admitted, then in a specific inference such as “this mountain possesses absence of monkey-contact because it is knowable,” one would have to be omniscient to grasp, through knowability in general, the pervasion of every instance of the probandum, absence of monkey-contact, by the reason knowability. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Rejection of the counter-objection: indeterminate cognition is not the cause of qualified cognition.)

Chapter 143 — The Scrap-Sack’s Testimony

The Ekadeshin View: Many Common Properties in a Relatum

The teacher posed a question in class: On this view comparison would again become possible even with incomparable things: “the sky is like the sky,” “the ocean is like the ocean,” and “the war of Rama and Ravana is

like the war of Rama and Ravana.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: An Ekadeshin holds that similarity is the possession of many common properties present in a related object.)

Chapter 144 — The Journey of the Name

“The Sky Is Like the Sky”: The Other Sky as the Standard of Comparison

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In the example of the Rama-Ravana war, the earlier or otherwise related war is the comparator, and the present war is the object compared. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: In a sentence such as “the sky is like the sky,” the sky in another place is the standard of comparison and the sky before the speaker is the object compared.)

Chapter 145 — The First Crack in Fear

The Word “Cow”

A traveller recounted the following: According to Gangesha, complete cognition of an object—for example, “This is a cow”—is determinate perception, in which the relation between the qualificand, the cow, and the qualifier, cowhood, is explicit. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event. (Philosophical principle: Perception section: the primary source of knowledge and sense-object contact.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Gangesha offers a thought experiment: when a child sees a cow for the very first time, there is no prior mental disposition concerning cowhood. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear. (Philosophical principle: Perception section: the primary source of knowledge and sense-object contact.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: A person goes into the forest and sees an animal whose body resembles a cow, though its shape and features differ in certain respects. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Upamiti (concluding recognition): one determines, “This green vegetable is the referent of the word ‘broccoli.’”.)

A traveller recounted the following: Thereafter, when the mind relates the qualifier—such as cowhood—to the qualificand, the cow, determinate cognition arises: “This is a cow.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine that the mind is atomic.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If resemblance to a relatum such as a cow were itself present in that very cow, the cow would be similar to itself. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the doctrine of possessing those same properties.)

A traveller recounted the following: Therefore, if cognition of resemblance were merely cognition of possessing those same properties, the gavaya too should generate cow-cognition and the use of the word “cow.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara Mimamsaka view: the doctrine of possessing those same properties.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For this reason, even where there is no strict similarity, expressions such as “the face is like the moon” are intelligible because of delight-producing properties, and “the cow is like the buffalo” because of bulk and similar features. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of the older Naiyayikas.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: But when difference is cognised, resemblance consists in a gavaya, distinct from the relatum such as a cow, possessing properties common to that relatum. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of the older Naiyayikas.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The Mimamsaka proposal is: “The cow is similar to the gavaya.” The students pictured each term as a

real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the result of upamiti and the refutation of the Mimamsaka theory of postulation.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Mimamsaka proposes that the determinate cognition “the cow is similar to the gavaya,” arising from perception or verbal cognition of the cow’s resemblance in the gavaya, is the result of comparison. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the result of upamiti and the refutation of the Mimamsaka theory of postulation.)

A traveller recounted the following: Gangesha says that what the Mimamsaka calls the result of comparison—“the cow is similar to the gavaya”—is in fact an inference. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha’s refutation of Mimamsaka upamiti.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: He says this determination is not produced by instructional testimony alone, because it does not arise in a person who has never seen an animal resembling a cow. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the older Naiyayika Jayanta Bhatta.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: An Ekadeshin holds that in usage such as “Bring a cow,” the power of the word “cow” is learned from an elder’s behaviour only with respect to an individual cow, not cowhood. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Ekadeshin view and the argument from parsimony.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The Naiyayika inference would be: “The Veda was composed by an independently authoritative knower, because it is reliable testimony informed by true cognition of sentence-meaning, like the sentence ‘Bring a cow.’” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: in the Veda, a speaker's true cognition of sentence-meaning is not the relevant excellence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The inference is: the qualified perception "This is a cow" is produced by cognition of the qualifier, because it is a qualified cognition, like inference. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: qualified cognition arises from cognition of the qualifier.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Objection: in the inference that the qualified perception "This is a cow" arises from cognition of the qualifier because it is a qualified cognition, the excluded counter-instance is indeterminate cognition; but the existence of indeterminate cognition has not yet been established. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: objection to the definition of qualified cognition.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: If qualified cognition is defined as cognition whose object is a qualifier-qualificand relation, an infinite regress arises in establishing the qualified character of the cognition of that relation; even indeterminate cognition of "This is a cow" would raise the issue of a relational qualifier. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: objection to the definition of qualified cognition.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In the perception "This is a cow," only cowhood need be established as the qualifier; positing a separate cognition of qualification beyond it generates an infinite regress. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: continuation of the objection to the definition of qualified cognition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The first perception "This is a cow" is indeterminate. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the first perception “This is a cow” is indeterminate.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The established view says that the first-ever perception “This is a cow” arises from the first cognition of the qualifier cowhood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the first perception “This is a cow” is indeterminate.)

A traveller recounted the following: In the cognition “This is a cow,” the qualifiedness of cowhood is not itself manifested. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: in the cognition “This is a cow,” the qualifiedness of cowhood is not manifested.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: In the perception “This is a cow,” cowhood is manifested, but not cowhood qualified by cowhood; if cowhood-qualified cowhood were manifested, another cowhood would be needed as its qualifier, producing an infinite regress. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: in the cognition “This is a cow,” the qualifiedness of cowhood is not manifested.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the cognition “This is a cow,” the object possessing cowhood is known as distinct from objects lacking cowhood. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the qualifier is probative and useful.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The first cognition “This is a cow” is not a fully determinate cognition generated by prior cognition of a qualifier; it is simply perceptual. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the qualifier is probative and useful.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: One and the same cognition “This is a cow” may be both indeterminate and determinate. Once he pictured the

agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: one and the same cognition “This is a cow” can be both indeterminate and determinate.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Thus there is no contradiction in the perception “This is a cow” being indeterminate with respect to its character as cognition, while determinate with respect to being qualified by cowhood. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: one and the same cognition “This is a cow” can be both indeterminate and determinate.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In “the beautifully formed cow is impermanent” and “the beautifully formed cow moves,” form can function as an incidental mark even though it is directly related. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Sivaditya Misra’s view: a directly related qualifier.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Determinate cognition is qualified cognition, as in “This is a cow.” The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition may be perceptual and recognitional.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Sometimes such determinate cognition takes the form of a sense-born recognition of a qualified object, as in “I know that this cow is that very cow.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition may be perceptual and recognitional.)

The teacher posed a question in class: With the aid of a residual disposition as a co-operating cause, cognition of identity arises between the cow qualified by “that” and the cow qualified by “this.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition may be perceptual and recognitional.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Objection: in a qualified determinate cognition such as “This is a cow,” one co-operating cause may produce one result; but the later cognition “This is that same cow,” or recognition, cannot be a single cognition. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition is one cognition and can include recognition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: There is no contradiction in the recognition “I directly know this cow as that very cow.” The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: determinate cognition is one cognition and can include recognition.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Likewise, in uttering the word “cow,” experience of its denotative power, memory of that power, and comprehension of sentence-meaning stand in a causal sequence because all are qualified by the same property, cowhood. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Mimamsaka objection: generic-character perception is unnecessary.)

A traveller recounted the following: Verbal cognition of a previously unknown individual cow from the word “cow” arises through semantic fitness, expectancy, proximity, and related conditions. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Mimamsaka objection: generic-character perception is unnecessary.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The Mimamsaka further says that in the qualified cognition “This animal is a cow,” cognition of the relation of the qualifier “cow” to the universal cowhood and cognition of the relation of the qualificand “animal” to animalhood operate together as causes. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: rejection of the counter-objection: indeterminate cognition is not the cause of qualified cognition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For this reason, when the counterpositive such as the cow is remote, resemblance-usage does not arise because there is no cognition of a common property recurring through all cows. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Bhatta view: resemblance is an aggregate of several universals.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Difference from the relatum varies with each locus, and so does its counterpositive, such as the cow. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on comparison.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If resemblance to a relatum such as a cow were present in the cow itself, the cow would be similar to itself. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: one may argue that resemblance has a counter-correlate; hence the expression “the gavaya is similar to the cow” becomes necessary.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If the gavaya, like the cow possessing cowhood, possessed that very same property, it would become non-different from the cow, contrary to direct perception of difference. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: one may argue that resemblance has a counter-correlate; hence the expression “the gavaya is similar to the cow” becomes necessary.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Hence, even without strict sameness, “the face is like the moon” is justified by delight-producing features and “the cow is like the buffalo” by bulk and similar features. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: plurality or multiplicity is common to groups of three or four objects; therefore it is not wholly non-recurring.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In the sentence “the cow runs behind the boar,” resemblance to the cow is predicated of the boar. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: plurality or multiplicity is common to groups of three or four objects; therefore it is not wholly non-recurring.)

The teacher posed a question in class: But when difference is cognised, resemblance is the possession, in a gavaya distinct from the relatum such as a cow, of properties common to that relatum. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: an objection may now be raised that possession of many common properties and resemblance collapse into one another.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: If possession of those properties and resemblance were distinct, then on cognising cowhood in another cow one could say “this animal resembles that cow,” but not “this animal too is a cow.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: if possession of those properties and resemblance are distinct, knowing cowhood in another cow would support “this animal resembles that cow,” but not “this animal too is a cow”.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Nevertheless, the determinate cognition “the cow is similar to the gavaya,” produced from perception or verbal cognition of the cow’s resemblance in the gavaya, is said to be the result of comparison. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: even if resemblance is not a separate entity, the determinate cognition “the cow is similar to the gavaya,” arising from perception or testimony of resemblance, is said to be the result of comparison.)

A traveller recounted the following: On that basis one infers: “The cow is similar to the gavaya, because the cow is the relatum of the

resemblance present in the gavaya.” The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the section on comparison.)

A traveller recounted the following: Thus cognition of resemblance that makes the cow-like relatum its qualificand is a distinct cognitive result called upamiti, and its instrument, comparison, is a distinct means of knowledge. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: objection: universals such as hornedness are unitary and sense-connected, so cognition of resemblance should be perceptual, like recognition.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Once the general pervasion “whatever is the relatum of a resemblance present in another object is similar to that object” is known, one can infer: “The cow is similar to the gavaya because it is the relatum of the resemblance present in the gavaya, just as a sister elephant is similar to her brother elephant.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka view.)

A traveller recounted the following: Otherwise, even though the gavaya resembled the cow, the cow could remain unrelated to that resemblance. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka view.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: On that view, the cognition would arise even in someone who had never seen an animal resembling a cow. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the older Naiyayika theory of upamiti.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: An Ekadeshin says that in usage such as “Bring a cow,” an elder’s behaviour teaches the power of the word “cow” only with respect to an individual cow, not cowhood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Ekadeshin view: apprehension of a restricted word-power.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: For such a view denies the actual experience expressed in “I know the cow through the word ‘cow.’” The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: absence of defect is not itself the cause.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: The Prabhakaras say that the power of words such as “cow” cannot be confined to individuals alone. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara view.)

A traveller recounted the following: If “cow” denoted only one individual, it would be indeterminate which individual was denoted, and usage regarding other cows would become inexplicable. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Objection: if only the universal is denoted, how can the action of bringing connect with the universal when one hears “Bring a cow”? The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view concerning the unity of the individual.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In “the cow goes,” what is understood as the agent of motion is neither the universal alone nor an individual stripped of the universal, but an individual cow qualified by cowhood; universal and individual jointly form one object of meaning. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: semantic power resides only in the universal.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Just as in “Bring the copper-coloured cow” the action of bringing relates to an individual delimited by the class-feature of copper colour, a class-denoting word yields a combined meaning involving both the individual as locus and the

universal as denoted. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Srikara's view.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: We Naiyayikas reply that the power of the word "cow" lies in producing the cognition "this is a cow," that is, an individual qualified by cowhood. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the view of one group of Prabhakaras.)

The teacher posed a question in class: When one hears "Bring a cow," a particular individual is brought; therefore the word's power is apprehended in the individual. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the view of one group of Naiyayikas.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Alternatively, the power of the word "cow" may be apprehended in all individual cows known through generic-character perception. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the individual too is denoted.)

A traveller recounted the following: In "Bring a cow," the act of bringing cannot occur in a universal; therefore an individual, the locus of cowhood, must be admitted. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the Bhatta Mimamsakas.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The qualified cognition "This is a cow" is not always of one form: sometimes only the universal is remembered, sometimes only the individual. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: universal and individual are not invariably known in one and the same cognition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Followers of Mandana say that "Bring a cow" produces cognition of an individual cow qualified by cowhood and connected with the act of bringing. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana's view: secondary signification to the individual.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The individual as qualificand of cowhood is what enables relational comprehension; thus the individual is known not by postulation but by secondary signification of the word "cow." The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana's view: secondary signification to the individual.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The individual that is the locus of the universal is not expected by the word "cow" in the way that "king" in "Bring the king's man" expects a particular individual. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana's view: secondary signification to the individual.)

The teacher posed a question in class: If the action connected only with the individual, cognition would take the form "Bring the individual," not "Bring a cow." Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana's view: secondary signification to the individual.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Mandana's intention is not that the individual is known by postulation; rather, through the word "cow" the individual qualified by cowhood is known by secondary signification. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana's view: secondary signification to the individual.)

A traveller recounted the following: But an individual cow is not cognised as a "mere individual" distinct from cowhood; it is cognised precisely as a cow. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification to a bare individual is impossible.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If the individual cow were indicated through individuality, dewlap, or some other shape, the word “cow” would generate cognition only of an individual or a shape, not cognition in the form of cowhood. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification to a bare individual is impossible.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In expressions such as “See the cow” and “There is a cow,” seeing and existence relate to the individual. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification to a bare individual is impossible.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If universal and individual were two separately denoted meanings, cognition would be “this is cowhood and this is a cow-individual,” not “this is a cow.” People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification to a bare individual is impossible.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The word “cow” cognises an individual qualified by cowhood and by a characteristic configuration such as the dewlap. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: configuration too is denoted.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In an expression such as “cows made of dough,” the lumps of dough are not cows; hence “made of dough” is understood by secondary signification as referring to a cow-like configuration. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: configuration too is denoted.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The denotative power of the word “cow” is not unintelligible. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of

proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word "cow" is not untenable.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: An objection may be raised: if the word *pankaja* can recall a lotus through disposition without a distinct lotus-denoting power, then "cow" too could recall a cow through disposition without a cow-denoting power. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word "cow" is not untenable.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Memory of a cow may arise from disposition, but fresh verbal cognition concerning a cow cannot arise from another means of knowledge; therefore a denotative power in "cow" is necessary. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word "cow" is not untenable.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Nor is it adequate to locate the power merely in the general property of "knowability," as though the word conveyed only that a cow is knowable. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word "cow" is not untenable.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The cognition "a cow is knowable" does not produce cognition of a cow; verbal power must be located in the specific cognition that takes the cow itself as its object. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word "cow" is not untenable.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If natural regular usage alone could account for recall of a cow from words such as "cow," there would be no need to posit semantic power anywhere. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: reply.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: One might derive special forms for “cow” or a particular sacrifice by adding exceptional suffixes after roots, but those suffixes have no independent meaning in ordinary language. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: terms such as “go” are purely conventional.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In the bahuvrihi expression “Bring Citragu”—“bring the person who owns a variegated cow”—the object connected with the act of bringing is a third entity, the cow-owner, distinct from the expressed meaning “variegated cow.” People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: prima-facie view: secondary signification belongs to the sentence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: “There are a cow and a horse” functions like an independent sentence and does not yield some single special unified content. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: another view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: When unrelated nominal meanings such as cow, horse, and person are merely remembered without connection to an action, cognition of their mutual relation is impossible. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: cognition of relations among nominal meanings is impossible without an action.)

Chapter 146 — The Stain of the Seal

The Meaning of Pankaja

The teacher posed a question in class: In this context, Gangesha’s analysis of the word *pankaja* is an example of his subtle philosophy of language. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of power in the universal and the concept of etymological convention.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Because inert objects such as pots are not liberated, “liberated” may denote only a bearer of the relevant relation qualified by destruction of the causes of suffering, just as *pankaja* comes to have a specific meaning through etymology and convention. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: one may argue that when causes of suffering are destroyed, cognition and usage concerning the relation “this is the absolute absence of suffering” are possible.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The word *pankaja* regularly conveys lotus alone. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: configuration too is denoted.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The *Mimamsakas* say that there is no need to posit a separate lotus-denoting power in the word *pankaja*. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the *Mimamsaka* view.)

A traveller recounted the following: The cognition “a lotus is something born in mud” arises from the etymological meanings of the components of *pankaja*. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the *Mimamsaka* view.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If *pankaja* possessed no semantic function concerning lotus in “Bring a lotus,” there would be no basis for taking lotus as the sentence-meaning. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word “cow” is not untenable.)

A traveller recounted the following: It may further be said that *pankaja* is properly used only when a lotus is actually coming into being, because the suffix “*ja*” denotes the real action of birth. The listening

scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the denotative power of the word “cow” is not untenable.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If *pankaja* were merely an indicator of lotus through co-reference with some established lotus-word, comprehension would disappear when that established word was absent. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the later view.)

A traveller recounted the following: One may say that the suffix “*ja*,” like a fossilised element in another word, blocks awareness of the component meanings; or that “*ja*” denotes a special class, lotus; or that *pankaja* is naturally incapable of denoting a white water-lily; or that the power of its components is inhibited there. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: reply.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: Where there is a purpose, speaker-intention, or expected result concerning a white water-lily, the absence of usage of *pankaja* for that flower cannot simply be assumed without argument. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Some scholars hold that earlier teachers did not use *pankaja* in the sense of a white water-lily, and therefore later scholars should not use it so either. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Use of *pankaja* for a white water-lily would then arise from a mistaken cognition that it possesses *pankaja*-hood. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

A traveller recounted the following: Reliable speakers are not observed to use a term such as “village-goer” absolutely for any traveller, whereas *pankaja* is used absolutely for lotus. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: The etymological sense “born in mud” may apply to a white water-lily; the conventional lotus-sense of *pankaja* does not. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

Two students debated in the *gurukula* courtyard. The first put forward this case: The word *pankaja* is not correct for a white water-lily without some other semantic operation—that is, secondary signification. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the impropriety of using *pankaja* for a white water-lily.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: An equally strong counterargument says that *pankaja* is correct for a white water-lily because in a sentence with the requisite expectancy it produces cognition of that flower, just as “flower” is correct for a flower and “cook” for a cook. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the impropriety of using *pankaja* for a white water-lily.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Some scholars say that on hearing “Bring a *pankaja*,” convention immediately recalls lotus and connects it with the act of bringing, while the etymological sense “born in mud” appears only later. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the *Naiyayika* view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In “Bring a *pankaja*,” the power of the whole expression connects “born in mud” and lotus in co-reference; thereafter the act of bringing connects with that qualified lotus. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject,

probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: cowhood is the denoted meaning.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If “*pankaja*” is intended to refer to a white water-lily, the expression abandons its primary conventional meaning lotus and, on the basis of its component meanings, operates by secondary signification. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: cowhood is the denoted meaning.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: It may be argued that the components of *pankaja* and the word *kumuda* recall their respective meanings, and when lotus is found semantically unfit, the property “born in mud” can be connected with the white water-lily. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification in the word *pankaja*.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: But on hearing *pankaja*, the cognition “the thing born in mud is a lotus” arises before the semantic fitness of the word *kumuda* is known. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification in the word *pankaja*.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: The established conclusion is that when a white water-lily is intended, the primary lotus-meaning of *pankaja* is inapplicable; therefore a secondary meaning such as “an aquatic flower born in mud,” related to the primary meaning, must be admitted. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification in the word *pankaja*.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The *prima-facie* opponent says that if genuine *pankaja* is granted denotative power, corrupted forms too would have to be granted denotative power, since people regularly obtain meanings from them. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end

both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: denotative capacity in corrupted word-forms.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In “Bring a pankaja,” cognition arises successively: first agency expressed by the suffix, then the action of birth, and finally the bringing of the lotus born in mud. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the powers of the components are not inhibited.)

Chapter 147 — The Door-to-Door Knock

The Injunction of Sacrifice

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For example: “The auspicious invocation is fruitful because it is an unimpeached practice of cultivated persons, like the new- and full-moon sacrifice.” People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: objection: the causal efficacy of the auspicious invocation is unestablished.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: One should not object that, as with a Vedic sacrifice, the place and time of the principal act would then have to be related to the auspicious invocation. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the auspicious invocation is an auxiliary rite.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Thus a scriptural statement indicating such proximate completion would have to be inferred, and, as with the kariri sacrifice, completion in the near future would become the fruit of the auspicious invocation. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka view.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Then the auspicious invocation, like the kariri sacrifice, would have to produce completion without any subsequent action by another agent, which is impossible. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the partial Mimamsaka view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Even then, the fruit of the auspicious act would be only the absence or destruction of obstacles, just as heaven is the fruit of a sacrifice undertaken with the desire “May I attain heaven.” Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha’s conclusion: the auspicious act causes destruction of obstacles.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Acts such as seeing a mirror at dawn, prescribed for people engaged in auspicious observances, devoted to the gods, silent, and performing rites that ward off sin, are called “auspicious” in another sense, not in the strict sense of acts that destroy obstacles. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the word “mangala” has several meanings.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Even after knowledge or certainty of validity, every kind of human action does not necessarily follow; an expensive and laborious act such as sacrifice is undertaken only when the specifically desired result, heaven, is established as necessary. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Madhyamika Buddhist objection.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Reply: once the validity of the first cognition “sacrifice is a means to heaven” has been established, a second distinct cognition concerning the same sacrifice does not generate a fresh doubt about invalidity. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Mimamsaka objection and Naiyayika reply concerning the validity of the members of inference.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: A reason defeated by scriptural testimony enjoining the Rajasuya sacrifice would

be: "A Brahmin should perform the Rajasuya because it is a means to heaven, like the Agnistoma sacrifice." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: a reason defeated by verbal testimony enjoining the Rajasuya sacrifice: "A Brahmin should perform the Rajasuya because it is a means to heaven, like the Agnistoma".)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Such a disposition is produced as the cause of future qualification by cognition generated through a means of knowledge, as in sacrifice and medical treatment. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Moreover, an action undertaken to obtain a result already connected with a thing produces, in the absence of an inhibitor, a result-favouring qualification only in the cause of that result, as with sacrifice and medical treatment. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: For example, the inferential structure underlying verbal cognition may be stated thus: ordinary sentences such as "Drive the cow with a stick," or Vedic sentences such as "One who desires heaven should sacrifice with the Jyotistoma," are preceded by cognition of the sentence-level relation among remembered word-meanings intended by the speaker, because they are groups of mutually expectant words, like "Bring the pot." The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the Vaisesika objection.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: In "One should perform the Visvajit," knowledge of the enjoined agent is impossible without supplying the omitted expression "one who desires heaven"; therefore the verb "should sacrifice" stands in expectancy toward "one who desires heaven." People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's

meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: an alternative view.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Nor can the Veda be defined merely as a collection of injunctive sentences such as “One who desires heaven should sacrifice,” because Smṛiti and the Mahabharata also contain injunctions and would thereby become Veda. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the argument that the Veda is authored.)

A traveller recounted the following: The optative verb “should sacrifice” conveys that sacrifice is attainable through effort and productive of a result; the specific result is fixed by context. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: postulation of semantic power.)

The teacher posed a question in class: When sacrifice is cognised as both a means to heaven and an act achievable by effort, the desire “I shall sacrifice” arises. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika conclusion.)

The teacher posed a question in class: “One who desires heaven should sacrifice” conveys that a trustworthy speaker desires the heaven-seeker’s effort toward sacrifice. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: Udayanacharya’s view.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: For this reason, in a sentence such as “With this mantra the Nisada-sthapati should sacrifice,” if “Nisada-sthapati” is taken as a karmadharaya compound, only the primary natural denotation of the compound members need be admitted. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: parsimony in secondary signification of the genitive meaning.)

Chapter 148 — Recognising Adulteration

The Meaning of Ganga

A traveller recounted the following: In a sentence involving secondary signification such as “The village is on the Ganga,” the expressed meaning “Ganga” cannot directly bear the relation to the village; therefore secondary signification of another meaning, such as the riverbank, is appropriate. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: in “the village is on the Ganga,” the primary meaning “Ganga” cannot directly relate to the village; hence a secondary meaning such as the bank is appropriate.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: A secondary-signifying word—such as “Ganga” in “the village is on the Ganga”—does not directly denote the bank, yet it indirectly assists cognition of the bank; hence such a word too participates in intended meaning. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: definition of intendedness.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: One may object that the word “Ganga” conveys only the riverbank, because the bank is invariably related to the river water and so the secondary meaning is cognised through the primary meaning. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: a second objection.)

A traveller recounted the following: If “Ganga” were taken to convey only the bank whenever the speaker lacks intention toward the primary meaning, then no word could ever convey a primary meaning, because in every primary use the speaker also lacks intention toward countless alternative meanings. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: a second objection.)

The teacher posed a question in class: In “On the Ganga dwell both the stream and the village,” once the intention of “Ganga” is understood to include both the watercourse and the bank, the same word recalls both meanings together and both are connected with the verb “dwell.”

Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: cognition of two meanings without repetition and the importance of speaker-intention.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Therefore it is not invariably necessary to posit two distinct powers—primary denotation and secondary signification—in “Ganga”; such a distinction is introduced only to account for a speaker’s particular intention. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: cognition of two meanings without repetition and the importance of speaker-intention.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: We Naiyayikas say that secondary signification occurs only when the indicated meaning is cognised as distinct from the primary meaning, as when “Ganga” indicates the bank, which is distinct from the river. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification to a bare individual is impossible.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Just as “Ganga” is not correct for the bank without secondary signification, and a term such as “village-goer” is not correct for a traveller without a special convention, so *pankaja* is not correct for a white water-lily without secondary signification. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the impropriety of using *pankaja* for a white water-lily.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: If in “the village is on the Ganga” the word *Ganga* directly produced cognition of the bank, there would be no need for the mediating primary cognition of the river-flow or for a secondary semantic relation. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Mimamsaka objection.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In “the village is on the Ganga,” because a village cannot be located in the stream itself, the word Ganga recalls the bank. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification is a distinct semantic operation.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The *prima-facie* opponent says: a child sees an instructed elder act after hearing a sentence such as “Bring what is on the Ganga bank,” and thereby learns a power of “Ganga” to mean the bank; why posit only speaker-intention? People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: there is no primary denotative power toward the riverbank.)

A traveller recounted the following: Reply: the remembered bank is in fact related to the Ganga; cognition “the bank related to the Ganga” is possible through secondary signification, not because the word Ganga explicitly denotes the bank. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the view based on differences in word-usage.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: There is no separate cause by which the word Ganga produces cognition of a relation to some “general meaning.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification is not merely a device for connecting a general meaning.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Another view says that the unity of the sentence “the village is on the Ganga bank” is established through the bank remembered from the meaning of Ganga; therefore secondary signification of bank in the word Ganga should be admitted. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: secondary signification is not merely a device for connecting a general meaning.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: If the word “Ganga” did not in some way present the bank, the locative case-ending could not connect its meaning of locus-hood with the bank. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the older view.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: One may say that derivational grammar is only a rule of usage and that a rule of secondary signification should likewise be admitted; in “Gangayam,” only the locative expression as a whole need be taken secondarily, not the noun Ganga itself. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: prima-facie objection.)

Chapter 149 — The Map of the Net

The Means to Heaven

The teacher wrote a case on the board: If it is said that God creates the world out of compassion, then he ought to create only happy beings in heaven, not suffering beings in hell. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: mutual dependence.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: “Being a means to the desired end” is the cognition that an action is a means to attaining an intended result such as pleasure or heaven. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the threefold account of the cause of action.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: Further, scriptural testimony describing the one God whose eyes, faces, and arms are in every direction and who creates earth and heaven, together with Smṛiti describing the distinct supreme Self who enters and sustains the three worlds, may be taken as evidence establishing God. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: Śruti and Smṛiti are evidence.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Otherwise one would have to say that only a particular Yajurvedic form accidentally associated with a sacrifice produces heaven, rendering unseen merit purposeless. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of burning-power.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Unlike heaven, liberation does not have many distinct varieties. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: Tattvacintamani: the doctrine of purposive action.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In “One who desires heaven should sacrifice,” the word “heaven” specifies the desired result and the optative ending conveys that sacrifice is the means. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika reply.)

A traveller recounted the following: In the Veda, the semantic power of the word “heaven” is apprehended in unsurpassed happiness. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the semantic power of “heaven” lies in unsurpassed happiness.)

The teacher posed a question in class: When “heaven” is used in ordinary speech for common happiness, secondary signification must be admitted. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: the semantic power of “heaven” lies in unsurpassed happiness.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The *prima-facie* opponent says: if “heaven” means unsurpassed happiness free from suffering, its secondary application to pleasures produced by sandalwood and the like becomes difficult; but if it means only unsurpassed happiness, the qualifier “free from suffering” is redundant. The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the

end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: the power of the word “Indra” lies in the thousand-eyed deity.)

Chapter 150 — The Shadow of the Seal

The Expectancy of “Door”

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: According to the Mimamsaka view, in expressions such as “One should perform the Visvajit” and “Close the door,” meanings not explicitly uttered—such as “one who desires heaven” and the relevant object “door”—are supplied because they are expected. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: definition of expectancy.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: Because the separate forms of the words function as causes, an omitted verbal element is supplied in an elliptical expression such as “the door—close it.” Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: account of expectancy.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In “Close the door,” recollection of the meaning of the supplied expression “door” likewise produces cognition of the door’s relation to the act of closing. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara reply.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Otherwise even a non-sentence string such as “door, objecthood, closing, effort” would necessarily yield sentence-meaning, since all the relevant meanings could equally be remembered there. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the doctrine of proximity.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Even on hearing an incomplete utterance, one observes the instructed elder’s action; for example, on hearing only “Door!” the omitted “Close it” can be supplied.

The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: prima-facie argument: semantic power operates only in connected meaning.)

Chapter 151 — The Hand that Moved the Seal

The Child's Learning

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: By positive and negative concomitance, the child learns the direct causal role of words in the cognition that immediately causes action—namely the action-oriented cognition “This task is to be done by me.” Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: prima-facie argument: semantic power operates only in connected meaning.)

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: The prima-facie opponent again says that the child first understands the elder's general prompting “Do the task,” then learns sentence-power as the cause of general action-oriented cognition, and finally learns the powers of particular words. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example's meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the objection to the Guru view.)

The teacher posed a question in class: Just as a child, seeing delight on Chaitra's face after news of a son's birth, takes the news-generated cognition of the birth as the cause of delight even though other causes of delight are possible. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: word-power is possible even for an already established meaning.)

A traveller recounted the following: Just as a child utters an indistinct “amba” and a learned hearer recalls the correct word and grasps the meaning “mother,” so the first cognition of meaning arises through recollection of the correct form; through convention, a mistaken belief in the power of corrupted forms later becomes entrenched. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: the established reply.)

Chapter 152 — The Source of the Command

Convention Is Stronger than Etymology

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Similarly, in a mantra concerning the essence of curd, the etymological sense of vajin as “one that treats the essence of curd as food” is recalled quickly from context, while the conventional sense “horse” is not. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: convention is stronger than etymological composition.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: In an ordinary expression such as “Feed the people in the pavilion,” when context is absent the conventional meaning “house/building” is recalled first; then by secondary signification the people located there are understood. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: convention is stronger than etymological composition.)

The teacher wrote a case on the board: In “Feed the people in the pavilion,” the word is intended toward the people in the building; its conventional building-meaning is semantically fit and connects to the people by secondary signification. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: convention is stronger than etymological composition.)

Chapter 153 — The Name Behind the Sign

Cowhood Is the Denoted Meaning

The teacher posed a question in class: Objection: the components of pankaja produce cognition of “born in mud,” while the whole word produces cognition of lotus; how then does the unified cognition “the lotus itself is what is born in mud” arise? Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, probandum, reason, context, and possible defects. The small case opened the full structure of the doctrine.

(Philosophical principle: cowhood is the denoted meaning.)

Two students debated in the gurukula courtyard. The first put forward this case: The components connect their own meanings, the whole produces cognition of lotus, and together they produce the cognition “a lotus born in mud.” The second examined causes, defeaters, and exceptions. By the end both agreed that an example supports proof only when its relation is clear and defect-free.

(Philosophical principle: cowhood is the denoted meaning.)

Chapter 154 — Baba's Word

Verbal Testimony

The teacher wrote a case on the board: Using pankaja as his example, he explains that although a water-lily too is born in mud, the word pankaja has become conventionally fixed for lotus alone. The students pictured each term as a real scene and asked which relation was decisive. The teacher replied that an example links an abstract rule with experience. (Philosophical principle: verbal testimony as a means of knowledge.)

Chapter 155 — The Account of Service

Word

A traveller recounted the following: Example: an experienced physician says, “This medicine cures fever,” and a person takes it. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: word.)

Chapter 156 — The Debt of Donation

Being Uttered by a Trustworthy Person Is Not the Cause

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For words spoken by a parrot that reproduce an originally authoritative sentence, words of a deluded or deceptive speaker that happen to reproduce such a sentence, and Vedic words may all lack the property of being uttered by a trustworthy person, yet still produce veridical cognition. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: being uttered by a trustworthy person is not the cause.)

Chapter 157 — The Iron Chest

Known Intention Is the Cause

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The teacher asked him to imagine this case: For this reason, in “Admit the staffs,” secondary signification yields the intended meaning “admit the staff-bearers”; and in an ambiguous sentence such as “Bring saindhava,” context yields the intended specific meaning, salt or horse. Once he pictured the agents, objects, and action, the aphorism became lived experience and the conclusion became clear.

(Philosophical principle: known speaker-intention is the cause.)

Chapter 158 — Reconciliation of the Consent Register

Definition of Expectancy

A traveller recounted the following: In an expression such as “the lotus is blue,” blueness and lotus are not invariably concomitant, yet the words still possess expectancy. The listening scholar separated the account into perception, memory, and conclusion, revealing the epistemic process within an ordinary event.

(Philosophical principle: definition of expectancy.)

Chapter 159 — The Consent of the Dead

The Decisive Doctrine of the Non-Eternity of Sound

At the village chaupal, discussion arose over this point: Sounds produced by parrots, mynas, other animals and birds, men, women, and other individuals are naturally experienced as distinctly different, just as the sweetness of sugarcane juice differs from that of milk. People added their experiences, but the teacher tested every view against the criteria of proof. The example’s meaning emerged from proper relation and context, not from words alone.

(Philosophical principle: the decisive doctrine that sound is non-eternal.)

Chapter 160 — The Shadow of the Warehouse

The Semantic Power of the Word ‘Cow’ Is Not Untenable

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: even if in ‘kalayam pacati’ the peas are recalled from an earlier perception, or in ‘dvaram pidhehi’—‘close the door’—knowledge of the door comes from another source, cognition of the relation is still possible; therefore it is not

necessary to take lotus as the lexical meaning of *pankaja*. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the semantic power of the word ‘cow’ is not untenable.)

Chapter 161 — The Captive Phone

The Process of Cooking

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: then even in a genitive construction such as ‘*Devadattasya pakah*’—‘Devadatta’s cooking’—the instrumental case would have to be required because number is not expressed there. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Prabhakara answer.)

A discussion arose in the village *chaupal*: the cognition ‘I shall accomplish the cooking through effort’ gives rise to the desire to act, and that desire is an auxiliary cause of activity. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the teachers.)

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: the prior cognition ‘I shall accomplish the cooking in order to cook rice by means of fire’ cannot be disregarded. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the teachers.)

A traveller recounted an experience: in ‘he wishes to cook’, it is the act of cooking that is the object of desire, not the effort. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the teachers.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: before the act of cooking is perceived, it

may be inferred—‘this cooking will not occur without my effort, and through effort the desired result, namely rice, will be accomplished.’ When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: cognition that something is accomplishable through effort.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: if the universal ‘cooking-ness’ is made the subject, both accomplished and unaccomplished instances of cooking are included, producing deviation. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: the prima-facie view of the doctrine of injunction, and the beginning of the established position.)

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: the desire ‘to cook’ arises from cognition of cooking as something attainable through effort; effort then follows. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the later, or Saundada, view.)

A traveller recounted an experience: desire is not merely directed toward cooking; it takes the form ‘I shall accomplish the cooking through effort.’ The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the later, or Saundada, view.)

A traveller recounted an experience: just as cognition that cooking can be accomplished through fire gives rise to the desire ‘I shall cook by means of fire,’ so cognition that cooking can be accomplished through effort gives rise to desire for the effort itself. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: a further consideration of the later thinkers.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: the desire ‘I shall cook by means of fire’ arises when cooking is understood both as the means to the result, rice, and as an effect accomplishable by fire. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which

relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Nyaya established position.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: in the example of cooking, one who desires food undertakes the act of cooking because cooking is the proximate means to food. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: only the *apurva* is the object to be accomplished.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: '*pacati*'—'he cooks'—is analysed as '*pakam karoti*'—'he produces cooking.' The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the author of the *Ratnakosha*.)

A traveller recounted an experience: if '*pacati*' denotes the locus of effort, the verbal meaning, cooking, cannot be related to effort as its object or as a result to be produced; by the rule governing sentence relation, the meaning of one word is connected as a constituent of the meaning of another word. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the agent is not the meaning of the finite verbal ending.)

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: the relation between cooking and the locus of effort is understood as 'cooking is to be produced by the locus of effort' or 'the locus of effort is the producer of cooking'; not as 'cooking is the object of effort' or 'effort is the agent of cooking.' Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: the agent is not the meaning of the finite verbal ending.)

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: when the result has not yet arisen, or while the operation is still under way, the expression ‘cooking is occurring’ requires secondary signification of ‘cooking’ in the sense of the operation; by parsimony, becoming soft is the primary meaning of ‘cooking’. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana’s view.)

Chapter 162 — The Seal of the Voice

Nyaya Tradition — Number Is Related to What Is Qualified by Effort

A traveller recounted an experience: in ‘Chaitra cooks rice’, Chaitra alone is the agent; in ‘rice is cooked by Chaitra’, rice alone is the object. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: in the Nyaya tradition, number is related to what is qualified by effort.)

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: if the operation were related to rice as its object, then in ‘Chaitra cooks rice’ the operation too would be related to rice and number would become connected with the object. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: in the Nyaya tradition, number is related to what is qualified by effort.)

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: in ‘Chaitra cooks rice’, Chaitra is directly qualified by effort; in ‘rice is cooked by Chaitra’, rice is an indirect qualifier of effort, namely the locus of the result produced by an effort-generated operation. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: in the Nyaya tradition, number is related to what is qualified by effort.)

Chapter 163 — Traces of Removed Papers

The Case Ending on a Qualifier Serves Only Grammatical Well-Formedness

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first raised this objection: in ‘rajapurusham anaya’—‘bring the king’s man’—the relation to the king and the man cannot be connected without a case ending after the qualifying word; how, then, can the compound itself produce cognition of a man related to the king? The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the case ending on a qualifier serves only grammatical well-formedness.)

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: therefore the compound ‘rajapurusham’ must possess an independent semantic power to express a man related to the king. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: the case ending on a qualifier serves only grammatical well-formedness.)

Chapter 164 — The Belly of Chandrapal’s Shadow

The Agent Is Not the Meaning of the Finite Verb

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: in ‘the cloth is blue’, ‘Chaitra cooks’, and ‘rice is cooked’, co-reference consists only in the expression of the same number; it does not require denotation of one and the same meaning. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: the agent is not the meaning of the finite verb.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: in ‘rajapurusha’, ‘king’ is related to ‘man’ through another expression, but effort is already a property located in the agent, so no further relation of effort to the agent need be supplied. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the agent is not the meaning of the finite verb.)

Chapter 165 — The Body of the Shadow

Semantic Power in a Tatpurusha Compound

A traveller recounted an experience: the answer is that if the meaning of the relation is not grasped, then in ‘rajapurusha’ the king qualified by kingship would merely become a qualifier of the man; the kind of relation would remain undetermined. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: semantic power in a tatpurusha compound.)

Chapter 166 — The Warehouse at Imli Ghat

Analysis of the Karmadharaya Compound

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: in a karmadharaya compound such as ‘nilotpalam anaya’—‘bring the blue lotus’—the qualifier-qualified relation between the two nominal meanings, blueness and lotus, is understood even without a case ending after the qualifying word. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: analysis of the karmadharaya compound.)

Chapter 167 — A Voice Across the River

Reply to the Objection Concerning the Meaning ‘Operation’

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: even on the theory of effort, the defect could arise that a person exerting effort appropriate to pounding paddy might be described as ‘cooking’; therefore effort too must be understood as specifically appropriate to the verbal meaning. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: reply to the objection concerning the meaning ‘operation’.)

Chapter 168 — The Throat of the City

Objection Concerning Past and Future Usage

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: in ‘Chaitra cooks rice’ and ‘rice is cooked by Chaitra’, the number expressed by the finite verb is related respectively to the agent and the object; the traditional rule is that number is related to what the finite verb denotes. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: objection concerning past and future usage.)

Chapter 169 — The Door of Chand Two

Tattvacintamani: Introduction to the Work

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first raised this objection: if a parrot, by rote, utters a completely correct and meaningful sentence such as ‘Bring water’, does the parrot really possess true knowledge of the relation among the meanings of those words? The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya’s Tattvacintamani, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: they concede that in the case of a parrot or a deceiver, the real causal ground—the speaker’s true cognition or intention—is absent. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya’s Tattvacintamani, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also

presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: the Naiyayikas argue clearly that if a sentence uttered by a parrot corresponds to an original true sentence—a statement that is a source of knowledge—it can indeed become the basis of true cognition. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: imagine that someone is eating and says, 'Bring *saindhava*'—'*saindhavam* *anaya*.' The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: the word '*saindhava*' has two meanings: 'salt' and 'horse'. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also

presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: if the hearer does not know the intention—the context or the speaker’s purpose—the hearer cannot determine whether at mealtime the speaker is asking for salt or for a horse. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya’s *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: the context of the meal—the intended meaning—helps the hearer understand that ‘salt’ is meant here, not ‘horse’. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya’s *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

A traveller recounted an experience: according to them, sound is produced by our effort and is destroyed after a time, just as a potter makes a pot and, in due course, the pot breaks. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya’s *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also

presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: there is an audible difference between the sound 'ka' uttered by a parrot and the sound 'ka' uttered by a human being. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

A traveller recounted an experience: intention is the speaker's actual purport or purpose, which determines the correct meaning when a word is ambiguous—such as 'saindhava'—or is used secondarily. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: In the Shabda-khanda of Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, word—or verbal cognition—is principally established as an independent means of knowledge. The work refutes objections from Buddhist and Vaisheshika schools and gives a subtle analysis of the four principal conditions required for understanding a sentence: expectancy, semantic fitness, proximity, and intention. It also presents a Nyaya treatment of the non-eternality of words and the debate over the human authorship of the Veda.)

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: this Mahamahopadhyaya, regarded as a contemporary of the powerful Karnata king Harisimhaddeva, inaugurated through this enduring work an entirely new age in Indian philosophy, known as Navya-Nyaya. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: Gangesha Upadhyaya's *Tattvacintamani*, Perception Section—a profound and extensive analytical study of epistemology and metaphysics in Navya-Nyaya philosophy.)

Chapter 170 — Opening Chand One

Now It May Be Argued Thus — In This Way, That Very...



A traveller recounted an experience: in ordinary life the destruction of causes of suffering such as snakes and thorns, and in Vedic expiatory rites the destruction of causes of suffering such as sin, are—when there is no alternative—pursued simply as the destruction of a cause of suffering. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: it may now be argued that, on this account, one would also have to obtain suffering itself in order to destroy that very suffering, because its destruction cannot arise unless the suffering first arises.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: an objection may be raised that activity aims only at the non-arising of suffering—for example, ‘let the cause of suffering, such as a snake, thorn, or sin, be destroyed so that the suffering caused by it does not arise.’ The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: it may now be argued that, on this account, one would also have to obtain suffering itself in order to destroy that very suffering, because its destruction cannot arise unless the suffering first arises.)

Chapter 171 — The Invisible Court of Channa Grove

The Naiyayika View

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: where conventional usage and etymology conflict, convention blocks the etymological meaning; where they do not conflict—as when the lotus really is born in mud—convention and etymology jointly convey the meaning. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika view.)

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: convention recalls the lotus, while etymology presents that very lotus as ‘born in mud’. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayika view.)

Chapter 172 — Reading the Knot

Conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: we, who uphold the established position, say that in passive constructions such as ‘rice is cooked by Chaitra’ and ‘the village is reached by cart’, rice and the village are objects; they are loci of results produced by actions located elsewhere. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas.)

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: in the active ‘Chaitra cooks rice’, agent and object are obtained from the nominal stem and case ending; in the passive, objecthood is expressed by the verbal ending. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas.)

Chapter 173 — Guarding the Register**Inference Section — The Culmination of Logical Structure**

A traveller recounted an experience: the argument is that earth, sprouts, and the like are effects; therefore they must have some conscious maker, just as a pot, being an effect, has the potter as its maker. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life. (Philosophical principle: the Inference Section—the culmination of logical structure and the examination of pervasion.)

Chapter 174 — The Threshold of the Invisible Court**Conclusion**

In the gurukul courtyard two students were debating. The first put forward this case: how jewels, mantras, and the like function as inhibitors, and how the ‘absence of an inhibitor’ is counted among the causes of an effect, are matters for logical analysis. The second student searched for the reason, the defeater, and possible exceptions. By the end of the exchange both agreed that an example assists proof only when its relation is clear and free from defect. (Philosophical principle: conclusion.)

Chapter 175 — The Name of the Seal-Bearer**Inference**

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: for example, if a person sees smoke rising from a distant mountain, he reaches the conclusion, ‘There is fire on the mountain.’ People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: inference.)

Chapter 176 — Darkness at the Service Ceremony**Application: Connecting That Rule with the Present Case—the Mountain**

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: for example, this mountain too is filled with smoke, like a kitchen. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an

illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: application—connecting that rule with the present case, the mountain.)

Chapter 177 — Papers from House to House

Conclusion: The Final Form of the Claim Establishes It

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: for example, therefore it is established that there is fire on that mountain. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion—the final form of the claim establishes it.)

Chapter 178 — The Upper Room

Application: The Same Rule Applies to Rama

A traveller recounted an experience: application—the same rule applies to Rama, because Rama's body too is abnormally hot, like that of a patient in a hospital. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: application—the same rule applies to Rama, because Rama's body too is abnormally hot, like that of a patient in a hospital.)

Chapter 179 — Footprints of the Seal

Research—Background and Historical Setting

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: he held the office of judge at the court of King Bhairavasimha of Mithila and composed the celebrated juridical work Dandaviveka. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: research—background and historical setting.)

Chapter 180 — The City's Account

Refutation of Prabhakara's Regress Objection

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: when, in cognition as clear as an amla fruit placed in the palm, no doubt about invalidity arises, the object is determined by the first cognition itself, and that very determination of the object produces unwavering activity. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of Prabhakara's regress objection.)

Chapter 181 — The Shadow of the SIM

Mimamsaka View: Absence of Defects as a Cause Favourable to Veridicality

A traveller recounted an experience: even though defects that inhibit production—like a magical jewel—may not fall under one common universal, there is no fault in the causal relation, because the cause of valid cognition is the totality constituted by the absence of those defects. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: Mimamsaka view—the absence of defects is a cause favourable to veridicality.)

Chapter 182 — The Door of the Harihar Service Centre

Conclusion—Alternative Definitions

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: in 'Bring the staff-bearing man,' the staff delimits the status of being the correlate of the relation and is therefore a qualifier. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: conclusion—alternative definitions.)

Chapter 183 — The Face Inside the Phone

Special Point—Justification of the Definition

A traveller recounted an experience: this is because a veridical cognition can arise concerning non-difference from the locus of conjunction with the monkey—that is, concerning the absence of difference from that locus. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: special point—justification of the definition.)

Chapter 184 — The Mask of the Voice

Rejection of the Counter-Objection: Indeterminate Cognition Is Not the Cause of Determinate Cognition

A traveller recounted an experience: in the cognition ‘This person bears a staff,’ an indeterminate cognition merely of the staff as qualifier and the person as qualificand cannot be taken as the cause; for ‘This person bears a staff’ is itself a determinate cognition of a person qualified by a staff. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: rejection of the counter-objection—indeterminate cognition is not the cause of determinate cognition.)

Chapter 185 — The Master’s Room

Another View: Being Produced by an Embodied Agent Is Not the Delimiting Condition

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: for example, merely deriving an unwanted consequence—‘If God is an agent, He must be an embodied living being; then He would possess knowledge of the desired means, purpose, and non-eternal cognition; and if there is a maker of earth and the like, that maker too would have to be only an embodied living being’—does not by itself establish a fallacious reason. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: another view—being produced by an embodied agent is not the delimiting condition.)

Chapter 186 — Madhaves' Real Name

Refutation

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: suppose that from the completion of an incomplete sentence such as 'Processed grain is useful for pounding,' there arises cognition of a causal relation to pounding possessed by grain qualified by processing. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: refutation.)

Chapter 187 — The Queen Inside the Roof

Defect Is Not Merely a Generic Property

A traveller recounted an experience: for this very reason, sentences uttered by a deluded person, a deceiver, a parrot, and the like can become sources of true cognition when they correspond to an original veridical sentence. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: defect is not merely a generic property.)

Chapter 188 — Maheshwar's Seal

Refutation of a Further Objection

In class the teacher posed a question. He said: in the words 'jara' and 'raja', and 'nadi' and 'dina', the number of phonemes is the same but their order is different. Instead of answering at once, the students examined the subject, the probandum, the reason, the context, and possible defects. The incident was small, yet the entire structure of the doctrine became visible within it.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of a further objection.)

Chapter 189 — The Iron Box

The View of the Teachers

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: an action may arise only after a delay because other necessary causes—such as the staff and the like

—are absent; therefore, even when desire is present, that cognition is not futile. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the teachers.)

Chapter 190 — The Blue Register

The Naiyayikas' Objection

A traveller recounted an experience: if it were said that mere cognition of something as accomplishable through effort is the cause, then even when eating poison is understood—through a mistaken cognition taken as valid or through trusted testimony—as accomplishable through effort, activity toward it would follow. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the Naiyayikas' objection.)

Chapter 191 — Dhruvash's Chair

The View of the Most Recent Prabhakaras

A traveller recounted an experience: the most recent Prabhakaras say that the agent's effort must be qualified by 'not producing a prohibited result'; thus even a person overwhelmed by severe misfortune does not engage in eating poison or in worship undertaken for a prohibited end. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the view of the most recent Prabhakaras.)

Chapter 192 — The Voice of a Switched-Off Recorder

The Question of Connection with a Stronger Harm

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: the prohibitive sentence 'Do not eat poisoned meat' restrains activity by conveying that such eating is a means to a harm greater than the desired pleasure. When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: the question of connection with a stronger harm.)

Chapter 193 — The Face of the Voice

The View of One Group of Prabhakaras

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: in ‘The rice is being pounded,’ it is sufficient for the pounding action to be related to the meaning delimited by rice-ness; a separate secondary signification for every individual grain is unnecessary. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: the view of one group of Prabhakaras.)

Chapter 194 — The Summons of Breath

Refutation of Another Alternative View

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: a newly born cook belongs to the class denoted by the word ‘cook’, but a white water-lily is not a member of the lotus class. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of another alternative view.)

Chapter 195 — The Frozen Account

The Nature of Secondary Signification—Conclusion

A traveller recounted an experience: there is no over-extension in the relation expressed by the genitive case, because in ‘the king’s relation’ that relation is not present in the king as an absence; the individual king and the king-relation are distinct entities. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: the nature of secondary signification—conclusion.)

Chapter 196 — The Meaning of Water-Burial

Refutation of the Eastern View



A traveller recounted an experience: in ‘Feed the people staying in the pavilion,’ the conventional meaning of ‘pavilion’ is a particular kind of building. Although its components may etymologically yield a meaning such as ‘one who drinks manda’, ordinary usage conveys the people located in the building through the conventional meaning and secondary signification. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: refutation of the Eastern view.)

Chapter 197 — Names Raised Above

Reply of the Eastern Grammarians

The acharya wrote a situation on the board: in ‘Feed the people in the pavilion,’ the component-derived meaning ‘one who drinks manda’ is first set aside, and the conventional meaning of the compound—the building—is accepted. The students imagined each term of the example as an actual scene and asked which relation was decisive on the path to the conclusion. The acharya replied that an illustration is not mere ornament: its work is to connect an abstract rule with experience.

(Philosophical principle: reply of the Eastern grammarians.)

Chapter 198 — The Criminal’s Earth

Parsimony in the Secondary Signification of the Genitive Meaning

A traveller recounted an experience: in ‘nilotpala’—‘blue lotus’—the lotus does not require any relational complement; therefore a karmadharaya analysis is sufficient there. The learned listener divided the account into separate stages of perception, memory, and conclusion. The division showed that a profound epistemological process continues to operate within the smallest events of ordinary life.

(Philosophical principle: parsimony in the secondary signification of the genitive meaning.)

Chapter 199 — Morning Inside the Chest

A Dvandva Analysis Is Untenable in a Collective Expression

A discussion arose in the village chaupal: some scholars say that in ‘The Gargas eat,’ the finite verbal ending expresses plurality related to the act of eating. People added their own experiences, but the acharya tested every view by the standard of evidence. In the end, the meaning of the example became clear not from its words alone, but from the proper relation and context.

(Philosophical principle: a dvandva analysis is untenable in a collective expression.)

Chapter 200 — The Guardian of Names

Mandana’s View

The disciple found the abstract definition difficult. The guru asked him to imagine this situation: the objection is—if the result alone is the meaning of the verbal root, why is rice the object in ‘He cooks rice’? When the disciple saw the objects, entities, and actions in his mind, the formula became a living experience and the conclusion arose naturally.

(Philosophical principle: Mandana’s view.)

VIDEHA THEATRE FESTIVAL

(Second Draft — Incomplete)

Chapter Two Hundred had ended. But in the rear room of the old house in Garh Narikel, beside the silent water of the Kamala-Balan, Bijji still sat beside that soot-black diary—the second diary, whose cover bore no name. The first diary had contained the first draft of the play, which had been completed as a tragedy. In this second diary its next draft was being written—but this draft would never be completed. A page opened by itself. Beside Bijji, out of the darkness, the Stage Director appeared

once more—the same one who had wanted to turn the first play into a happy ending, and had failed.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sutradhar (Old Budhba) — Voice of Time; the same one who counted the watches of the first night.

Stage Director — completed the first play; will not be able to complete this second one.

Bijji — revered guardian (mongoose). Mute. This time its snake is not in the water—it is in the wires.

Himpurush — the new crocodile—the lord of digital darkness. But his face is never seen in full; he is only a name.

Hungry Programmer — a young man whose hands are caught in the net; an incomplete character.

White Hat — a shadow-character whose introduction was left unfinished in the diary.

Chorus (People of the Net) — thousands of invisible voices behind the curtain.

PROLOGUE

[The stage is almost dark. There is no Kamala-Balan—only countless trembling points on a bluish screen at the rear, like distant towers, or a web of wires. At centre, the same single lamp. Bijji sits to one side. The Stage Director holds the second diary.]

STAGE DIRECTOR. (To the audience, weary.) I could not completely change the first play. This second one—I cannot even begin it properly. There are characters, but no faces. There is a stage, but no boundary.

SUTRADHAR. Because this night is larger than that first night, Director. The first time, the crocodile was in the water—Bijji could meet it at the ghat. The second time, the crocodile was in uniform—Bijji could meet it in the house. But now?

[The network of points at the rear flashes brightly once.]

SUTRADHAR. Now the crocodile is neither in the water nor in uniform—now it is in the wires, in numbers, in that darkness that has no ghat, no boundary. Which frontier can Bijji guard? When the frontier lies thousands of miles away, and the snake has no body?

STAGE DIRECTOR. (Softly.) Then how can this play be staged?

SUTRADHAR. Perhaps it cannot. But the diary will go on writing. Listen—the First Watch.

FIRST WATCH

[A closed room on Neelkanth Path. A web of wires, heating machines, and a directional antenna looking out through the window—like a gun aiming into the dark. A shadow sits in a chair. The face cannot be seen, only hands moving across a keyboard.]

HIMPURUSH. (From the shadows, faceless.) The old market is over. Now everything has come to one place—to my market.

[Behind him, thousands of whispers from the Chorus—names, passwords, identities—all erased together and then sprouting again.]

CHORUS. Who is this Himpurush?—who is he who is he who is he—

HIMPURUSH. Asking for a name is useless. I am not a name; I am the absence of a name. The one you catch will no longer be me.

[Bijji rises; it sniffs for a scent—but the scent is not in the air, it is in the wires. Bijji cannot find a direction. For the first time, it is confused.]

SUTRADHAR. Look—Bijji's nose could read the scent that rose from earth. But this scent rises from numbers. Old Bijji stands before a new darkness—and for the first time, it does not know where to spring.

SECOND WATCH

[The stage light is unstable—going out from time to time, then returning, as though some invisible hand were controlling even the light. A young programmer with exhausted eyes sits in the glow of the screen.]

HUNGRY PROGRAMMER. I only wrote code. I did not know whose house that code would open, whose money it would take. I was hungry. Himpurush gave me food—

[His sentence remains unfinished—the stage light suddenly goes out. When it returns, the programmer's chair is empty.]

STAGE DIRECTOR. (Distressed, looking at the diary.) Where did he go? Where did my character disappear in the middle of a sentence?

SUTRADHAR. The diary did not write him any further. Some characters are like that, Director: their stories remain incomplete—because many disappear in that darkness, and no page ever writes them to completion.

[At the rear, a shadow called "White Hat" appears for an instant, the shade of a white hat across its face—but before it can be introduced, it merges into the darkness.]

SUTRADHAR. (To the audience.) Did you see? This character even has a name—White Hat. But the diary stopped just as it began his story. This play is like that—every character half-drawn, every scene unfinished.

[The network of points at the rear flashes brightly once, then goes completely dark. Only the lamp at centre remains. Just beyond the lamp's light—in the darkness—a long, bodiless shadow glides, like a snake, but not a snake of water: a snake of darkness itself.]

STAGE DIRECTOR. (Trembling.) That... what was that? What moved there in the shadow?

SUTRADHAR. The crocodile. It has moved ahead—into that darkness where the light of our stage does not reach. Now the decision is yours, Director. Lower the curtain and accept that the play ends here—or

[Bijji comes and stands at the edge of the lamp's light. It looks toward the gliding shadow. Then it turns toward the Stage Director—for the first time, as though calling him.]

SUTRADHAR. (Very softly.) —or follow it.

[A moment of silence. Then the Stage Director closes the diary and lets it fall from his hand. He comes beside Bijji. Bijji takes the first step toward the darkness, and the Stage Director goes with it. Both—the mongoose and the Director—walk out of the lamp's light and into the darkness after the gliding shadow.]

[No one remains on the stage now. Only one burning lamp, one abandoned open diary, and at the rear the network of points fading in the darkness. The curtain does not fall—it remains open.]

SUTRADHAR. (Invisible, from the darkness.) This play is incomplete. It will remain incomplete. For as long as that shadow keeps gliding through the darkness, some Bijji, some Director, will keep following it—and no curtain will ever close completely. The next watch, the next diary, into the hands of the next generation.

(Here the pages of the diary are blank. Videha Theatre Festival — Second Draft — Incomplete.)

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