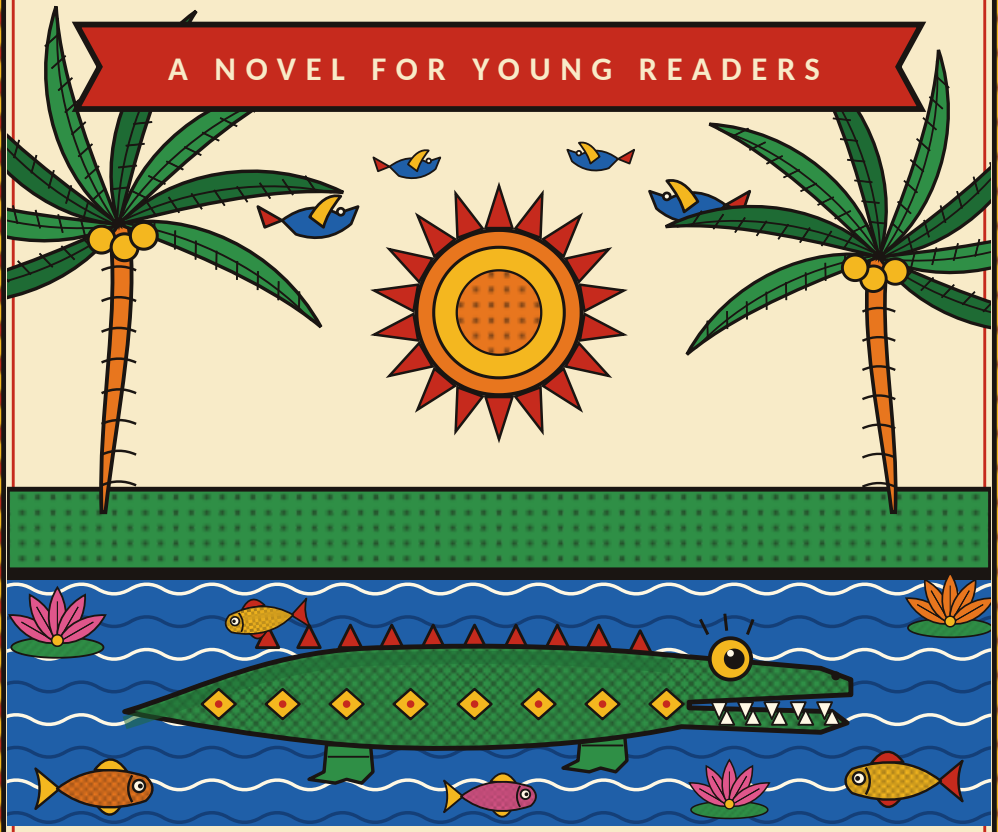
JAL SAMADHI

AMONG THE CROCODILES

A NOVEL FOR YOUNG READERS



GAJENDRA THAKUR

translated from original Maithili by the author himself

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A Novel for Young Readers

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VIDEHA

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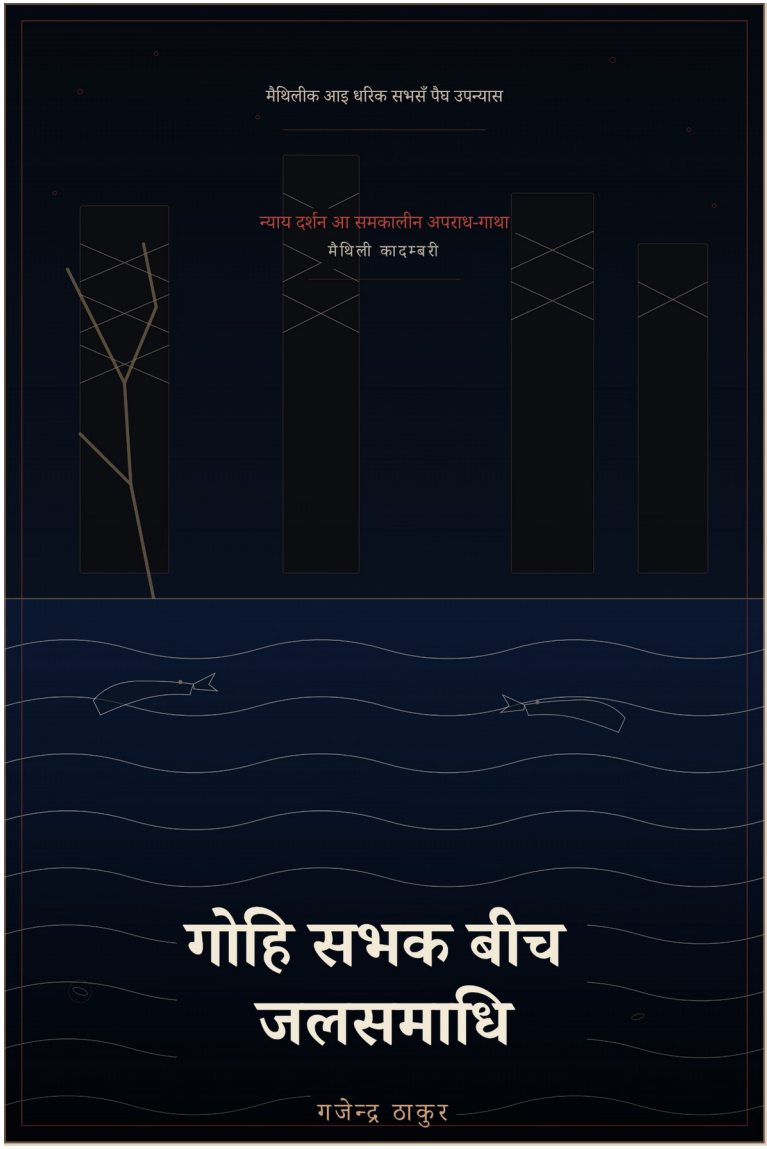

To Young Readers

This story begins in a village called Garh Narikel. Its trees, river, ponds, children, women, workers and ancestors come together to make a living memory.

In this story, the "crocodile" is not merely an animal in the river. Sometimes greed becomes a crocodile. Sometimes lies, fear or injustice become crocodiles. Even a swindle hidden inside a phone can turn into one.

If you come across a difficult word while reading, try to understand it from the story around it. Ask questions. Read people's names in full. Never share someone's private information without permission. And stand beside those who are vulnerable. These are the lessons at the heart of this book.

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Part Zero

Before the Story · Chapters −100 to −1

CHAPTER — 100

The Conch and the Silver

Not everything that glitters is silver, and not every name is a body. Whoever mistakes a conch for silver may mistake a map for a village.

This was a very long time ago. In a corner of Mithila stood a village called Garh Narikel. You would not find its name on any

grand map, yet its memories had lived for twelve hundred years among the roots of a tree. At the heart of the village lay Channa Grove.

One day, a child spotted something shining in the distance and ran towards it, shouting, 'Silver! Silver!' But when the child came close, it was only a white conch shell. Boodhba, the old village elder, laughed and said, 'Not everything that shines is silver. First, open your eyes and look. Ask questions. Only then decide what to believe.'

This was Garh Narikel's first lesson: what we see is not always true, and the truth reveals itself when we ask questions and seek to understand.

The conch shone bright; the child was fooled, and ran with outstretched hands.
The child asked, learned, and understood: hold fast to truth, not glitter.

CHAPTER — 99

The Self as Its Own Proof

The breath of anyone who says "I" is witness to that "I." A pond does not ask anyone how deep it is.

One day a child asked Boodhba, 'How do I know that I am really me? What proves that I exist?'

Boodhba smiled. 'You breathe. You remember what has happened. You laugh and cry. That is who you are. Just as a pond does not ask anyone how deep it is, you need not ask anyone for permission to know that you exist.'

The child understood. One's own name and one's own mind are the first truths one can know.

"Who am I?" the child asked. Breath replied, "You are yourself."
The name the heart remembers becomes a witness to its own life.

CHAPTER — 98

Who Made This World?

The tree asked, "Who planted me?" The earth laughed: "The one who planted you never asks."

One evening, the children sat beneath a peepal tree. One of them looked up at the sky and asked, 'Who made these trees, this river, and all these stars?'

Some said, 'The earth.' Some said, 'God.' Others stayed silent. Boodhba said, 'Once a tree asked, "Who planted me?" And the earth laughed and answered, "The one who planted you does not even need to ask."'

The children came to understand that a question can be greater than any single answer, because it shows us the way forward. Keep asking questions. Those who question are the ones who discover new paths.

> The tree asked, the stars asked: who made this world of ours?
> Boodhba smiled: keep asking; questions open wider paths.

CHAPTER — 97

The Chintamani Jewel

When the mind is steady, even a lump of earth seems a diamond. When it wavers, even a diamond seems a lump of earth. The jewel lies not outside us, but in the eyes that recognise it.

There was a story told in the village about the Chintamani, a wondrous jewel that could grant every wish of the heart. A

child set out to find it and searched for a long time, but nowhere could the jewel be found.

At last, exhausted, the child returned to Boodhba. 'When your mind is calm,' he said, 'even a lump of earth can seem as precious as a diamond. But when your mind is restless, even a diamond can seem no better than a lump of earth. The jewel is not somewhere outside you. It is in the eyes that know how to see.'

The child understood that the true jewel was a peaceful mind and a kind, attentive gaze, able to recognise the worth of ordinary things.

Far and wide the child sought the jewel, until weary feet could go no more.
"Steady your mind," said Boodhba, "and even earth may shine like a jewel."

CHAPTER – 96

Keeping Memory Safe

The body returns to the earth, but a name lives on a leaf. No one can erase a person whom the village remembers.

One day, an elderly villager died. The children were sad. 'Where has he gone?' they asked. 'Has he disappeared completely?'

Ba, the grandmother, said, 'The body returns to the earth, my dears. But a name can live on a leaf. No one can erase a person whom the village remembers.'

From that day, the children began to remember the names of everyone who had passed away. For when a name is kept alive, something of the person lives on too.

The body rests in earth's embrace; the name remains upon a leaf.
Whoever lives in the village's memory lives through the years.

CHAPTER – 95

The Manuscript Beneath the Flood

A flood can drown a book, but not the voice that knows its words. What is written in the heart cannot be soaked by water.

One year a terrible flood swept into the village. Water poured through the houses, and a great many very old books were

soaked. The scholars were distressed. 'Now this knowledge will be lost forever!' they cried.

But a student named Jeevanti remained calm. She had learned every word of one of those books by heart. 'A flood can drown a book,' she said, 'but it cannot drown the voice that remembers it. Words written in the heart do not get wet.'

That day, the village learned something important. What we carry in memory cannot be swept away by any flood. A book may be ruined, but living memory can survive.

> The books sank in floodwater; their letters lay soaked in mud.
> But words kept safe within a voice awoke with every dawn.

CHAPTER — 94

The Silence of Four Voices

Four mouths spoke, yet one truth remained hidden. Behind every answer, silence stands.

One day a great gathering took place in the village. Four learned scholars arrived and answered every question put to

them. Their answers were beautiful and full of careful reasoning.

But Boodhba noticed something. All four had spoken, and still something remained unsaid. 'There is a silence behind every answer,' he said. 'The more you know, the more there is left to discover.'

The children understood that knowledge has no final boundary. Anyone who decides that they know everything stops learning. It is far better to remain humble and curious.

> Four voices spoke out loudly; still silence waited in a corner.
> What they knew was only part; so much remained to learn.

CHAPTER — 93

The Conch's Final Question

Even something you recognised yesterday may face another question at dawn. But a sound answer need not fear a question.

There was an old questioner in the village. All his life he had travelled from village to village, doubting accepted ideas and

asking people difficult questions. Some grew impatient with him.

One day he returned and asked, 'What you understood yesterday—is it still true today?' Udayanacharya answered calmly, 'Yes, each morning may question what we know once more. But an answer that stands on firm understanding has no reason to fear questions.'

The children learned that asking the same question again is not an insult. It can make knowledge stronger. When you truly understand something, you need not be frightened by someone asking about it.

Again the old man asked his questions; the stream of doubt flowed on.
Whoever held a sound answer stood unafraid before him.

CHAPTER — 92

A Prisoner of the Water Clock

Drop by drop falls water, drop by drop passes time. The one held captive by the clock may never know where words end.

Long ago, people called Garh Narikel by another name: Narikel Ghat. In the middle of the village lay a large pond called Jori Pond. It had two parts, one deep and the other shallow.

There was a water clock there. Water dripped from it, drop by drop, marking the passing of time. An elderly caretaker named Budhua lived nearby. He was so old that the villagers had stopped trying to count his years.

Yet Budhua never gave up his promise to safeguard the village's names and memories. Time passed in drops, and generations changed, but Budhua stayed true to his word. Boodhba said that the truest guardian is the one who does not forget a promise, however much time may pass.

> Drop by drop the water fell; drop by drop the years went by.
> Budhua kept his promise still, untouched by passing time.

CHAPTER — 91

The Light of the Leatherworkers' Quarter

The hands that stitch leather have names written on the leaves too. A lamp in a humble lane and a lamp in a palace burn the very same oil.

At the western edge of the village, beside the Kamala-Balan River, stood the leatherworkers' quarter. There lived Malati, a bright teenage girl with deep, searching eyes. Her father, Somar, made the finest drums and mridangams in the village.

The learned people who came and went from the assembly hall hardly ever looked towards that quarter. But Boodhba said, 'The hands that stitch leather have names written on the leaves too. The lamp in a humble lane and the lamp in a palace burn the very same oil.'

Little by little, the village began to understand: every name shines with equal worth, whether it belongs to someone poor or rich, from a small quarter or a grand house. No caste can claim a person's work as its own.

> A lamp in a lane, a lamp in a palace: the oil in both is one.
> Malati's name shines on a leaf, as surely as a monarch's name.

CHAPTER — 90

Budhua's Jal Samadhi

The crocodile took the body but left the name behind. Whoever enters jal samadhi dwells not at the bottom of the pond, but in the heart of the village.

Budhua had grown so old that his body was worn out with age. One day he went to Jori Pond and quietly sank into its waters. The people of the village began to weep.

Boodhba said, 'The crocodile took his body, but not his name. Whoever enters jal samadhi dwells not at the bottom of the pond, but in the hearts of the villagers.' From that day, the village understood what the words meant: jal samadhi was not merely death; it was also a way of keeping memory alive.

Here lies the origin of the novel's title, Jal Samadhi Among the Crocodiles. Whoever leaves behind a promise faithfully kept and a name remembered never entirely dies.

The crocodile took his body; his name stayed in the village's heart.
He entered jal samadhi and lived on in every heart.

CHAPTER – 89

The First Night, the First Flood

The first flood swept away houses, but not the village. The night they survived became the seed of a new morning.

It was past midnight when the sky seemed to split open. Fierce winds, lightning and sheets of rain brought the village its first

great flood. Coconut leaves cracked like whips, and many houses were swept away.

But the villagers held one another's hands and gathered on higher ground. Together they made it through the night. When morning came, the village had survived—exhausted, but alive.

Boodhba said, 'A flood can take away houses, but not the village itself. The night we survived together has become the seed of a new dawn.' It was the village's first flood and its first lesson in facing disaster: stand together.

At midnight the heavens split; houses were carried away by the rushing flood.
Hand in hand, the villagers stood together and survived upon the farther bank.

CHAPTER – 88

The Accusation of Witchcraft

The village called her a "witch" without even asking her name. An accusation can burn a body, but truth remains upon the leaf.

In the leatherworkers' quarter lived a woman named Gauri, who had an extraordinary knowledge of herbs and how to use

them to help the sick. She was an heir to Ratna's healing tradition.

Once, frightened and ignorant, some villagers began accusing her of being a "witch". Yet no one asked her name or listened to what she had to say.

Boodhba said, 'Accusations can burn a person, but the truth remains upon the leaf. We must never call someone guilty without asking questions and finding out what really happened.' The village learned that justice does not come from fear of a crowd. It comes from examining the truth.

The crowd cried "witch" and kindled its anger; no one even asked her name.
Truth stayed firm upon the leaf, while the accusations drifted off like smoke.

CHAPTER — 87

At the Quarter's Gate

Torches may come to the gate, but the names within cannot be burned. The walls of a united quarter stand higher than fire.

One night, a group of angry people came to the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter carrying burning torches. They meant

to punish Gauri. She sat with folded hands beside the roots of the peepal tree and pleaded, 'Boodhba, protect me.'

For a moment the wind fell still, and the peepal leaves trembled though no breeze stirred them. The whole quarter woke, joined together and stood around Gauri.

Boodhba said, 'Torches may come to the gate, but the names inside cannot be burned. When a neighbourhood stands awake and united, its walls rise higher than the flames.' Faced with that unity, the torchbearers gave up and turned back.

The torch-bearing crowd arrived; the whole quarter rose with a single voice.
Love raised its walls above the flames, and fear of fire was defeated.

CHAPTER – 86

The Crocodile of Time

Time is a crocodile too, swallowing one generation after another. Yet it cannot swallow those whose names the village remembers.

Many years passed. The older villagers died and new people came. Houses changed; paths changed. One day, as Gauri sat

beside the peepal tree, she wondered, 'Where have so many people gone? How can time swallow everything?'

Boodhba said, 'Time is a crocodile too, Gauri. It swallows generation after generation. But even time cannot swallow those whose names the village keeps alive in memory.'

Gauri understood that she must remember every name, so the crocodile of time could not devour it. This was the oldest struggle in the village: memory against forgetting.

The crocodile of time swallowed generations as the years rushed by.
But names remembered by the village lived on upon every tongue.

CHAPTER – 85

The Amil's Order

The officer's order is written on paper; the village's justice is written upon a leaf. A command can be erased, but a wise saying endures.

One morning, an amil—a royal official named Jaisingh—rode into the village on an elephant. Ten soldiers accompanied him, along with Yashpati. At the village meeting place, he posted an order commanding that Gauri be punished.

Yashpati, who had long held a grudge against Gauri, pointed at her with delight. But the village did not give way to fear.

Boodhba said, 'The officer's order may be written on paper, but the village's justice is written upon a leaf. A command may be erased, but a wise saying cannot.' The villagers understood that the written command of an outside authority and the truth they themselves knew were not the same thing.

An order came upon paper, riding proudly on an elephant's back.
The old saying stayed firm upon its leaf; no voice could wipe it away.

CHAPTER –84

The Silence of the Forest

The forest keeps silent, yet hears everything. To anyone who understands its silence, even the forest begins to speak.

Yashpati ran away. The village headman and several young men went looking for him in the thick forest beyond the Kamala-Balan River. Gauri did not go with the search party, for she had to stay home and care for her daughter, Savitri.

That morning she went to Boodhba to seek his blessing.

Boodhba said, 'The forest is quiet, yet it hears everything. When you learn to understand silence, even the forest will speak to you.' Gauri realised that sometimes silence holds things we cannot hear amid noise.

The forest stood silent, yet heard the whisper of every leaf.
To the heart that understands silence, the forest's voice can be heard.

CHAPTER – 83

Sonma the Fisherwoman

To the woman who holds the fishing net, the river is a mother. A fisherwoman catches fish, but lets their names go free.

A few days later, a new fear spread through the village. First a goat, then a buffalo calf disappeared from near Jori Pond. Everyone was frightened. 'What is happening?' they asked.

A fisherwoman named Sonma Majhin cast her nets in that pond. To her, the river was like a mother. She knew every bend of its course and every deep place.

'My net catches fish,' she said, 'but I do not keep names trapped in it.' She spoke the names of the creatures that had disappeared and kept them in her memory. Boodhba said that whoever regards the river as a mother honours every name belonging to it.

A net in her hands, the river her mother, the flowing water sang its song.
Sonma caught the fish, but kept their names as dear companions.

CHAPTER –82

The First Game of Kabaddi

Go out in one breath, return in one breath, touch and come back. Kabaddi teaches us not to hold others captive, but to be present.

Over the next three years, things grew worse. Now, from time to time, people too disappeared near the river after dark. Savitri, who was sixteen, could hear Boodhba's voice not only in dreams but in broad daylight.

To overcome their fear, the villagers began playing a new game: kabaddi. 'Go out in a single breath, touch, and return in that same breath.'

The game taught them not to hold on to someone by force, but to go forward bravely, touch, come back and stand together. In years to come, this very game of kabaddi would become the village's most important ritual: a game in which they remembered the names of those who had died.

One breath went out, one breath came home; a touch, a turn, a return to the gate.
Not captivity, but presence: that is the lesson kabaddi taught.

CHAPTER – 81

The Shadow of Invasion

A longer shadow need not mean a greater fear. Those who hold fast to their names need not be afraid of their own shadows.

Twenty years passed. The kabaddi game held on new-moon nights had become an inseparable part of village life. The children played it as naturally as though it had always been there.

But one evening, a strange cloud of dust rose at the village boundary. It was stirred up by pounding horses' hooves, and a crowd of fleeing people came with it. An attack was drawing near.

Boodhba said, 'A larger shadow does not have to mean a greater fear. Whoever stands firm in their own name need not fear their shadow.' The village had spent years learning courage through kabaddi. Now its people prepared to face the approaching danger calmly.

A mighty cloud of dust rose high, and hoofbeats thundered through it.

Those whose names stood firm stayed brave; no shadow made them tremble.

CHAPTER – 80

The First Line of the Song

One voice begins the first line of a song; the rest of the village takes it up. The poet is not one person—the village itself is the creator.

Around that time, a young wandering poet named Haripati came to Garh Narikel. He travelled from village to village, composing songs wherever he went.

One evening, he sang the opening line of a song in the village meeting place. What happened next was wonderful. The villagers began adding the remaining lines, one after another, until the song was complete.

Boodhba laughed and said, 'One voice begins the first line, and the whole village takes up the rest. The poet is not just one person. The village itself is the creator.' That is the spirit of Mithila's folk songs. They belong to no single person; they are a treasure shared by everyone.

One voice sang the opening line; the village joined the tune.
No single poet made that song: together they gave their village music.

CHAPTER – 79

A Turn for Forgiveness

In kabaddi, even the player who has been touched gets a turn to return. Forgiveness, too, is a turn—not an act of revenge.

Many years later, one evening, a very old man appeared at the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter, leaning on a walking stick. His clothes had once been expensive, but now they were torn and dirty. He was the very man who had wronged the village long ago.

If the villagers had wished, they could have taken revenge. Instead, they looked towards Boodhba.

Boodhba said, 'In kabaddi, even someone who has been touched is given a turn to come back. Forgiveness is also a turn, not revenge.' And the villagers forgave the old man. The chain of revenge broke then and there, because forgiveness is the greatest strength of all.

The old man reached the gate, shoulders bowed and eyes filled with tears.
The village said, "You may return. Forgiveness is our truest strength."

CHAPTER – 78

Outside the Panji Register

A person whose name is missing from the register is not outside the village. Those left out by paper are welcomed by the earth.

Mithila had an ancient system called the panji, in which family lineages and names were carefully written down and preserved. But only certain families had their names entered in these registers.

A young panji keeper named Yadavanand Jha, serious and devoted to his duty, came to the village. There he discovered that the names of many good, hardworking people were missing from those pages.

Boodhba said, 'Someone whose name is not in the panji is not outside the village. When paper leaves someone out, the earth takes that person into its arms.' From that day onwards, Yadavanand began recording everyone's name, for every person and every kind of work deserved to be remembered in the records.

The panji left so many names unwritten; its pages were still incomplete.
The earth embraced them all, until its store of names was full.

CHAPTER – 77

Boodhba's Silence

When Boodhba falls silent, he sometimes speaks most clearly. Silence, too, can be an answer.

On a new-moon night, the game of kabaddi began, but Boodhba did not come to act as referee. The children waited and then started whispering among themselves. 'Why hasn't Boodhba come?' they wondered.

At first they were worried. Then, little by little, they began making the decisions themselves: who had won, who had lost, and which names should be called aloud.

At last they understood. Boodhba's silence was a lesson in itself. He had once told them, 'When I am silent, I speak most of all. Silence is also an answer.' Now the village was learning to make its own decisions about what was fair.

> Boodhba kept silent that night; the village chose its own way.
> And silence spoke a deeper truth: learn to judge for yourselves.

CHAPTER – 76

The First Lesson on a Coconut Leaf

The first lesson on a leaf is how to write a name. A leaf that holds a name lets a tree hold history.

From the time she was little, a girl named Mandakini had longed to read and write. She learned the history of her village from the stories told by Yadavanand and the poet Haripati.

But the old village school admitted only boys from the higher castes. Girls and children from poor families were not allowed to go there.

So the village opened a new school beneath a coconut tree, where children of every caste and every gender could learn to write their names. Boodhba said, 'The first lesson on a leaf is how to write a name. When a leaf keeps a name, the tree keeps history.' This was the Coconut Leaf School, which would remain the village's centre of learning for hundreds of years to come.

Beneath the coconut leaves, all the children sat together.
Their first lesson: write your own good name upon a leaf.

CHAPTER — 75

The First Rebellion of Reason

The pupil who asked a question did not defeat the teacher; he awakened him. The first rebellion of reason was the first dawn of knowledge.

Mandakini's school flourished for three generations. Now every child in the village—children from leatherworking families,

Brahmin families, Kayastha families and all the others—could read letters and do sums.

One day, the school's brightest pupil, Vishwanath, asked his teacher a difficult question. It was a question for which even the teacher did not have an answer ready.

But the teacher did not grow angry. Instead, he smiled, for he knew that the question would open a new door to knowledge. Boodhba said, 'The pupil who asked did not defeat his teacher; he awakened him. That is the first rebellion of reason, the first dawn of knowledge.'

The pupil asked a difficult question; his teacher smiled within.
The teacher was not defeated but awakened, and a new dawn of learning broke.

CHAPTER — 74

The Sickness of the Tree

Treat the sickness of one leaf before it spreads through the whole tree. The troubles of a village, too, can begin with a single silence.

Kedar had become the keeper of the village's rituals. By then, this responsibility could be given to a woman or a man, according to ability alone.

One day he asked Boodhba anxiously, 'Boodhba, I think the old witness tree is a little ill. Does it affect you too?'

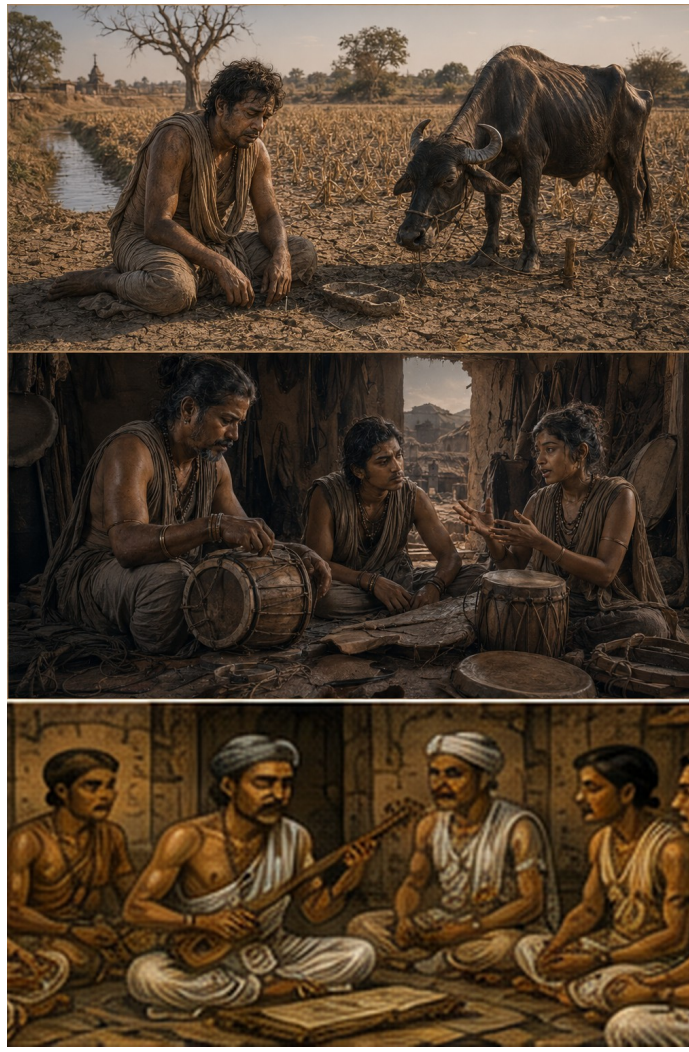
Boodhba said, 'Take care of a sick leaf early, or the sickness will spread through the entire tree. The troubles of a village begin in much the same way, with one small silence.' Kedar understood that great troubles often begin as small ones. Whoever notices them in time can save the village.

A sickness touched one leaf and quietly gathered strength. Care for it while there is time, before the whole tree is overcome.

CHAPTER – 73

Mohan's Melody

The notes of a flute fade into the air, yet our ears remember them. A melody that touches the heart is never forgotten.



In Shilavati's time, the leatherworkers' quarter made the finest drums and mridangams. The most gifted musician in that

quarter was Mohan. He had a little daughter, Radhika, only four years old, whom he loved more than his own life.

One winter, Radhika fell terribly ill and passed away. Mohan was heartbroken. One evening, he sat beneath the peepal tree and played his sorrow on his flute. The melody was so sweet and full of feeling that the whole village seemed to hold it in its ears.

Boodhba said, 'The notes of a flute fade into the air, but our ears hold on to them. A melody that touches the heart is never forgotten.' From that day onward, the villagers began every gathering with a song. It was here that the tradition of opening each chapter with a folk song—a tradition that continues to this day—was born.

The flute sounded beneath the peepal tree, a sweet tune born of grief.
Its notes faded into the air but stayed in every ear, becoming the village's song.

CHAPTER — 72

Witnesses to a Wedding

At a wedding, the fire bears witness, the village bears witness, and names bear witness. When the village witnesses a marriage, the promise is written on a leaf.

Shilavati's granddaughter, Anuradha, and a young man named Gopinath from the village's Brahmin quarter had been friends

since childhood. They had studied together at the Coconut Leaf School.

They wished to marry, but they belonged to different castes, and some of the older villagers still believed in caste divisions. Anuradha's mother was worried. 'How difficult this will be,' she said.

But the entire village came together to witness their wedding: the fire was a witness, the village was a witness, and their names were witnesses. Boodhba said, 'When the village witnesses a wedding, the promise is written on a leaf.' That day, the village broke down an old wall.

Fire bore witness, the village bore witness; two hearts joined as one.
A wall of caste fell that day, and their names received a blessing.

CHAPTER — 71

The Night of the Epidemic

The epidemic took lives, but it could not take away the songs. Those who stayed awake together through the night kept the morning alive.

Ten years after Anuradha and Gopinath's wedding, an unseen danger came from the east: an epidemic. At first it arrived as a

rumour, then in the stories of travellers, and finally it reached the village itself.

These were very hard days. The first family to suffer lived at the northern edge of the village. Then another family was struck, and then a third. Many families were left in sorrow.

But the villagers did not lose heart. Each night, lamps glowed from house to house. People checked on one another and sang together to keep their courage strong. Boodhba said, 'The epidemic took lives, but not our songs. The night we stayed awake together was the night that saved the dawn.'

A dark sickness came from the east, and the night grew very deep.
Lamps burned and songs stayed awake, keeping hope for the morning alive.

CHAPTER –70

The Planting of Channa Grove

A newly planted tree cannot give shade in a single day. Be patient: its roots take hold first; its leaves come later.

After the epidemic, Vimala and the village elders came upon a lovely idea. Vimala said, 'Boodhba, I want us to remember every great sorrow and every great hope of our village not only in our hearts, but also by planting a tree.'

Boodhba was delighted to hear this. The village planted a new grove, Channa Gachhi, which would later become the central place of witness in this entire novel.

Boodhba said, 'A tree does not give shade the day it is planted. Have patience. The roots take hold first, and the leaves come afterwards.' The village learned that good work does not bear fruit at once. It flourishes with patience and time.

Vimala planted the grove with her own hands, a single seed of memory.
Roots first and leaves afterwards: patience brings so many gifts.

CHAPTER – 69

The Tale of the Elephant and the Crocodile

The elephant is in the water, the crocodile is in the water, and their struggle lasts for years. Yet a cry that calls out a name brings a helping hand.

In Suryanath's time, the village temple kept an elephant named Gajraj, who was raised to take part in festival processions.

One day, while Gajraj was bathing in the pond, the water suddenly churned. A huge crocodile caught hold of his leg. Gajraj cried out and struggled for a long time, until he was exhausted.

But when at last he called for help, someone came to his rescue, and he was saved. Boodhba said, 'The elephant is in the water, and the crocodile is in the water. Their battle goes on for years. But when someone calls out a name, a helping hand comes.' Asking for help is not weakness. It is courage.

The elephant and the crocodile struggled in the water, a battle that seemed to last for years.
When Gajraj finally called out, a helping hand came to his rescue.

CHAPTER – 68

The Court's First Hearing

Hearing after hearing, yet justice still lives upon a leaf. The court asks about bodies; the village remembers names.

In Kamalini's time, under the state's new administration, a formal court was established for Garh Narikel and the surrounding villages.

At first, the villagers welcomed it. After all, written law was supposed to give every person equal rights, whatever their caste.

But little by little, they noticed that the court kept setting one hearing date after another. It asked for bodies and papers, while the village continued to preserve its people's names. Boodhba said, 'Date after date in the court, but true justice lives upon the leaf.' The villagers learned that law and justice are not always the same thing.

Hearing followed hearing; the court asked about the body.

The village kept its names, and on the leaves it kept its love of justice.

CHAPTER – 67

The Call of Distant Lands

A distant land may give you wealth but take away your name. Those who remember their village are not lost, even far from home.

In Janaki's time, a new kind of visitor appeared at the village gate for the first time. He spoke sweetly, wore shining clothes and carried papers in his hands. He tried to tempt poor families with promises of earnings in distant lands.

Many families had very little land or were sinking deeper into debt, and the offer appealed to them. Ramsevak, Bhola's grandson, saw how hard life had become for his family and decided he was ready to go.

Boodhba warned them, 'A distant land may give you money, but it can also take away your name. Yet someone who remembers their village will not be lost, even abroad. Carry your name and your roots with you.'

A sweet-tongued stranger came, holding out the promise of riches.

Boodhba said, 'Take your name with you, or you may lose your way in a distant land.'

CHAPTER – 66

The Women's Night Assembly

Where women's voices come together, the darkness grows thin. A meeting at night can scatter darkness even without a lamp.

In Sulochana's time, the new court had a clear failing despite its good intentions. It did not listen properly to women's cases, especially when the injustice happened inside their homes.

One such case concerned a woman named Padma. Her husband had mistreated her for years. She went to court to seek justice, but the judge brushed aside what she had to say.

So the village women began holding their own night assembly, where they could speak and help one another. Boodhba said, 'Where women's voices gather, the darkness grows thin. Even without a lamp, a night assembly can break through the dark.'

Women's voices gathered at the night assembly, speaking what lay in their hearts.
Even without a lamp, the darkness broke, and the light of dawn appeared.

CHAPTER – 65

The Procession of False Ghosts

A false ghost can frighten only someone who has forgotten their own name. Those who know who they are can laugh at a procession of ghosts.

In Harinandan's time, news of the women's night assembly and Boodhba's rituals spread to neighbouring villages. A wandering

trickster named Kalicharan tried to profit from this fame by claiming to be 'Boodhba's true spirit'.

At night he led processions of supposed ghosts from village to village. He frightened people into giving him money and grain. But Garh Narikel was not afraid. The villagers asked him plainly, 'Who are you really? Tell us your name!' Unable to answer, the trickster ran away.

Boodhba said, 'False ghosts frighten those who have forgotten their names. Someone who knows their name can laugh at a ghostly procession.' A person who knows the truth about themselves need not be frightened by make-believe terrors.

The trickster came pretending to be a ghost, leading his procession through the night.
'Tell us your name!' the village cried, and away the false ghost fled.

CHAPTER – 64

Sukhdev's Revenge

Revenge is a fire that burns your own hands first. Those who choose forgiveness can save the village.

In Champavati's time, a new land survey frightened poor families once again, just as Bhola's family had been frightened many generations before. A man named Sukhdev had suffered

a terrible injustice, and the fire of revenge was burning in his heart.

He had made up his mind to take revenge on the person who had wronged him, whatever happened. But Champavati and Boodhba talked to him and helped him think again.

Boodhba said, 'Revenge is a fire, Sukhdev. It burns your own hands first. Someone who chooses forgiveness can save an entire village.' Sukhdev thought for a long time and at last let go of his anger. The village was spared another cycle of hatred and violence.

The fire of revenge burned within him, and Sukhdev could find no peace.
He chose forgiveness and understood its meaning; the whole village was saved.

CHAPTER – 63

The First Printed Page

The first printed page makes names harder to erase. What has been printed can be read across the village.

In Devkinandan's time, a printing press opened for the first time in a town a few kos away from the village. It printed works in both Maithili and Sanskrit.

Haripati Gangadhar, a seventh-generation descendant of the old poet Haripati, became a young writer and publisher. Now the village's names and stories could reach many people in print, instead of only in handwritten copies.

Boodhba said, 'The first printed page makes it harder to wipe out a name. Once something is printed, the whole village can read it.' The printing press became a new and powerful way of protecting names, for it was no easy matter to erase something once it had been printed.

The press began to work in a corner of town, and the first page came into the world.
Now names would not be erased so easily; people throughout the village could read them.

CHAPTER – 62

Waiting for Relief

Eyes grow tired while waiting for relief, yet the village remains standing. Waiting together makes the burden lighter.

In Savitridevi's time, British rule spread across the whole region. Then a terrible famine struck. Government officers

announced relief measures: grain distribution, food in return for work, and medical care.

But most of these plans remained on paper. What little reached the village came slowly and was never enough. The villagers grew weary of watching and waiting for relief.

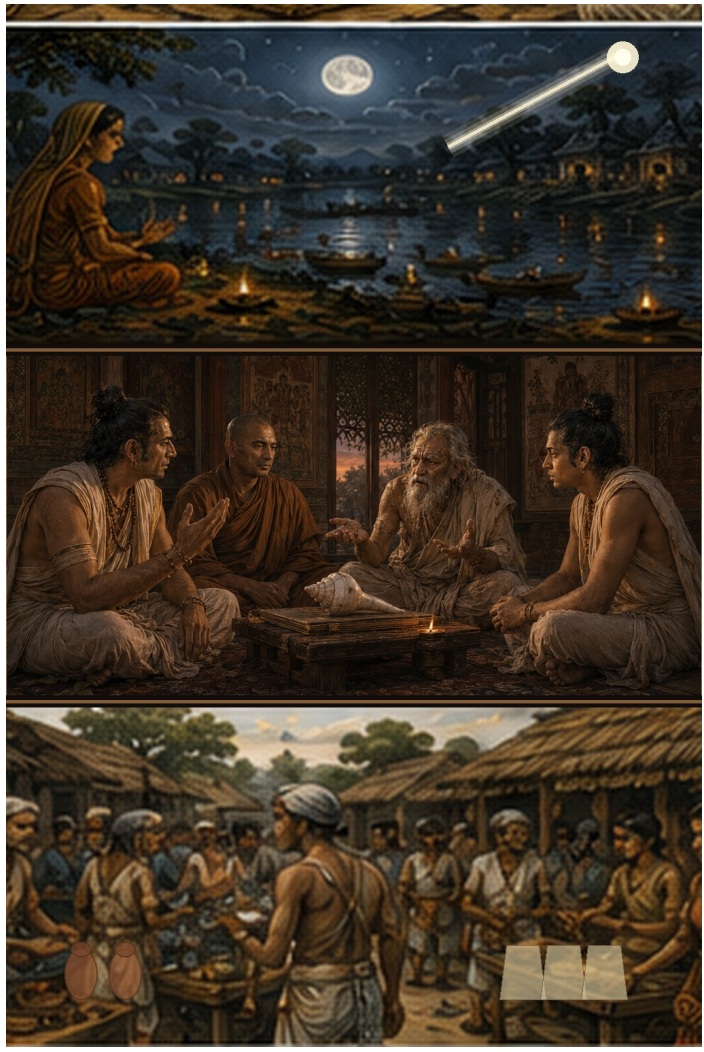
Still, they shared the little they had and waited together without losing courage. Boodhba said, 'Eyes grow tired waiting for relief, yet the village stands firm. For those who wait together, even the waiting becomes lighter.'

Their eyes grew tired watching for relief, but still they stood their ground.
They waited side by side, and together made the burden lighter.

CHAPTER – 61

The Comet in the Sky

Comets come and go, but the village stays where it is. What shines above cannot change the names below.



After Savitridevi, in Rudranath's time, an extraordinary sight appeared in the sky one autumn night: a star with a long, shining tail, slowly moving across the heavens.

An elderly astrologer in the village cried out, 'This is a bad omen! The ancient scriptures say that a comet foretells a king's death, war, famine or an epidemic!' The villagers were frightened.

But Boodhba stayed calm. 'Comets come and go,' he said, 'but the village remains where it is. What shines above does not change the names below. Do not be afraid of the sky. Keep your roots in the earth.' Trust your own actions and memories more than the fear that grows from superstition.

A comet rose in the sky, and the villagers trembled with fear. Boodhba said, 'Keep your roots firm; what holds fast will not change.'

CHAPTER – 60

The Night of Fire

The fire took the houses, but not their names. From the ashes of a burning night, a new hearth was lit.

On a fiercely hot night in the month of Jeth, a lamp standing near the village grain store toppled in a gust of wind. Fire

caught the dry straw. In moments, the wind began carrying the flames through the village.

Indrani, Rudranath's daughter, was now the keeper of the village rituals. She saw the red glow of the fire from her window and cried, 'Fire! Fire! The whole village will burn!' She ran from door to door, raising the alarm.

The entire village woke and stood together against the flames, fighting them with water and earth. Houses burned, but not a single name was lost. Boodhba said, 'The fire took the houses, but not their names. From the ashes of that burning night, new hearths were lit.'

> Fire leapt high on a night in Jeth; Indrani ran from door to door.
> Houses burned, but names survived; from ashes hearths were lit once more.

CHAPTER – 59

The Second Flood

The second flood knows the old paths, yet leaves new wounds. A village that has faced a flood learns to read the water.

Three months after the fire, the rainy season arrived. But these were no ordinary rains. Day and night, without a pause, rain

poured down. The Kamala-Balan River and every nearby stream swelled with floodwater.

Indrani, who had helped save the village on the night of the fire, faced another trial. This time, though, the villagers had learned from earlier floods. They watched and read the water, strengthened their embankments and moved to higher ground at the right moment.

Boodhba said, 'A second flood knows the old paths, yet it leaves new wounds. But a village that has endured a flood learns to read the water.' Experience is the greatest teacher of all.

The second flood came rushing back along its old familiar way.
This time the village read the water and made the riverbanks strong.

CHAPTER –58

The Third Calamity

One calamity teaches; the third makes us stronger. Whoever has fallen three times can rise and stand firm on the fourth.

When the floodwaters went down, pools of foul, stagnant water remained in many parts of the village. Within two weeks, a new illness began to spread, bringing stomach pains and diarrhoea.

Indrani had already struggled through both fire and flood. Now she faced a third ordeal. 'Boodhba,' she said wearily, 'the comet was right. Three calamities have come: fire, flood and illness.'

Boodhba replied, 'One calamity teaches us; the third makes us stronger. Someone who has fallen three times can rise and stand firm the fourth time. Boil your drinking water, keep everything clean and look after one another.' The village came through all three calamities stronger than before.

Fire, flood and then disease: three times the village fell.
A fourth time it rose and stood; every name held firm.

CHAPTER – 57

The Sahib's Notebook

What the sahib wrote was his account; what the village remembered was its own truth.

In Nandkishore's time, an English scholar called Mr Henry Thompson came to the village to study Indian folk traditions. The villagers called him 'Thompson Sahib'.

Carrying his notebook and pen, he questioned all the village elders. Who was 'Boodhba'? What did 'kabaddi' mean? What was the story of 'Channa Gachhi'? He wrote down their answers with great care.

Boodhba said, 'What the sahib has written is his account. What the village remembers is the village's truth. Both may exist, but do not let an outsider's pages take the place of your own memories.' The village itself, not any visiting writer, was the true keeper of its story.

The sahib filled his notebook with the stories of the village. The truth stayed in the villagers' hearts; the paper travelled beside it.

CHAPTER –56

The Call for Freedom

A call that reaches village after village belongs to more than one voice. Freedom, too, is a song sung together.

In Lakshmidevi's time, the movement for India's freedom had gathered strength across the country, from the Salt Satyagraha to many other struggles.

A young freedom fighter named Ramashray travelled from the town to Garh Narikel. 'Brothers and sisters,' he called, 'join the struggle for freedom!'

The village had always tried to protect every name and respect every person. Its people understood what freedom meant, for the struggle to protect people's names and the struggle for liberty were part of the same fight. Boodhba said, 'The call that reaches village after village does not belong to a single voice. Freedom, too, is a song that we must all sing together.'

The call travelled from village to village, waking hearts everywhere.
Freedom is a song we share; come, let us sing it together.

CHAPTER – 55

The Dawn of Independence

Dawn has come, but it does not enter every courtyard at once. The first true dawn belongs to those whose names are free.

In Vishwambharnath's time, a new sun seemed to rise on the morning of 15 August. Across India, including Garh Narikel, the

country had gained its independence after hundreds of years under foreign rule.

For the first time, the tricolour flag was raised in the village meeting place. The children of the Coconut Leaf School had learned to sing 'Jana Gana Mana', and that morning the song rose from every voice.

Boodhba said, 'Dawn has come, but not to every courtyard at the same time. The first true dawn belongs to those whose names are free. Real freedom will come when every person in the village, of every caste, every woman and every man, is free.' Independence was a beginning, not an ending.

The tricolour flew above the meeting place; 'Jana Gana Mana' rang out.
Dawn reached every courtyard; people everywhere rejoiced in freedom.

CHAPTER – 54

The End of the Zamindari System

The owners of the land changed, but the soil did not. The fields know the names of those who till them.

In Kamala Devi's time, the government of independent India brought the zamindari system to an end. This system of landlords had lasted for hundreds of years.

The village's last zamindar family, descendants of Pratapsen Thakur, had to hand over most of their land to the government. A large part of that land went to farmers who owned no fields and to families in the leatherworkers' quarter.

Boodhba said, 'The owners of the land have changed, but the soil has not. The fields know the names of those who till them.' At last, those who had worked the land for so long received land for their own labour. It was a great act of justice.

The land changed hands, but the earth remained just as it had been.
Fields came to those who tilled them: a day of long-awaited justice.

CHAPTER –53

The First Electric Light

The electric light is shining, but do not forget the oil in the old lamp. Let new light come without erasing old names.

In Harivansh's time, one evening, the first electric light suddenly shone in the village meeting place. Everyone in Garh

Narikel, from the youngest child to the oldest elder, stopped and stared in wonder.

The bulb's yellow light shimmered across the water of Dakahi Pond. People gazed at the reflection as though they were watching a miracle.

Boodhba said, 'The electric light has come, but do not forget the oil in the old lamp. Welcome the new light, but do not let it erase the old names.' Embrace progress, but do not surrender your roots and memories in exchange for it.

The first electric lamp shone bright; its light danced on the pond.
Keep the new light and the old lamp's oil, and cherish both with care.

CHAPTER –52

The Call from the Border

Cannons thundered at the border, while songs of birth rose in the village. Even through war, the village did not abandon its names.

In Harivansh's time, the sounds of war rose along distant borders, first towards China and later towards Pakistan. News of the fighting reached the village in whispers from the radio.

Many families sent their sons to the border. Some came home; others never returned. A shadow of fear spread across the village.

Yet even in that fear, village life went on. Children were born, songs celebrating their births were sung, and the fields were ploughed. Boodhba said, 'Cannons thundered at the border, but songs of birth were sung in the village too. Even a village that endures war need not abandon its names.' The song of life is stronger than the noise of death.

> Cannons sounded at the border; in the village, birth songs rose.
> Though it had endured the war, the village kept its names.

CHAPTER –51

The Seeds of the Green Revolution

New seeds may bring a greater harvest, but the old seeds know the soil. Seeds that save a village plant not hunger, but names.

When the Green Revolution reached Garh Narikel, the fields began to change. New seeds that yielded more grain arrived,

along with sack upon sack of chemical fertiliser. For the first time, so much rice grew that the grain stores were full.

But Harivansh's daughter Sunayana, who noticed the smallest changes, asked Boodhba, 'These new seeds will give us more food, but our old, local varieties of seed are disappearing. Is that a good thing?'

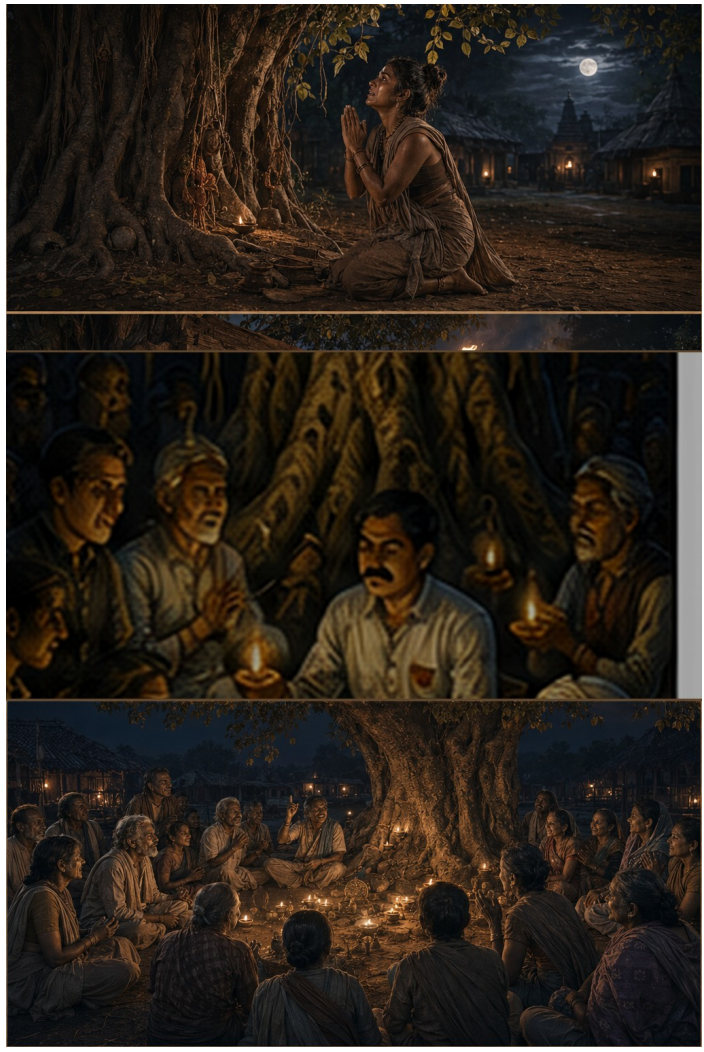
Boodhba said, 'The new seeds may bring a bigger harvest, but the old seeds know the soil. Keep both. The seeds that save a village plant not hunger, but names.' Progress matters, but so does protecting what we have inherited.

> New seeds and fertiliser arrived; the grain stores overflowed.
> Keep the old seeds safe as well: they know the earth below.

CHAPTER – 50

The Darkness of the Emergency

A time of darkness never lasts forever. But when a lamp is put out, it takes time to light it again.



In 1975, when a national Emergency was declared, its shadow travelled from Delhi all the way to the meeting places of distant villages. Public meetings and open speech were restricted.

Sunayana, who had been carrying on the tradition of women's night gatherings, went anxiously to the peepal tree. 'Boodhba, gatherings have been forbidden. Will we have to stop our night meetings too?'

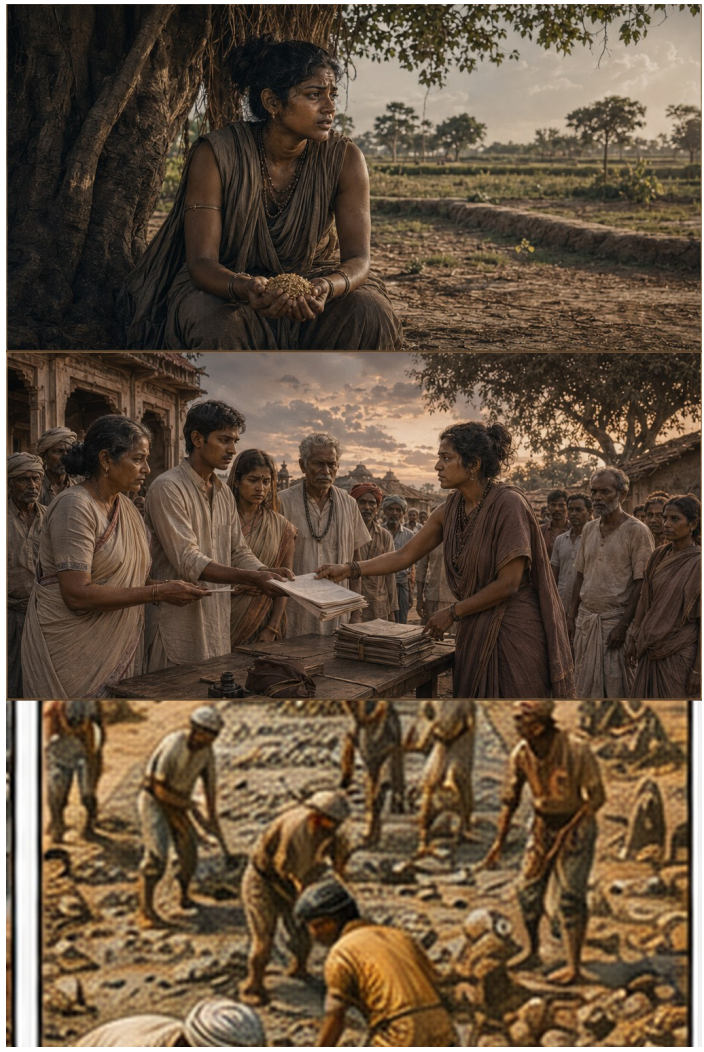
Boodhba said, 'A time of darkness never lasts forever. But when a lamp is put out, it takes time to light it again. So quietly keep the little flame of our names alive and wait. Dawn will surely come.' In difficult times, patience and quiet courage are our greatest strengths.

The darkness of the Emergency came; the village's voices fell silent.
But deep within, a lamp stayed lit, waiting for the precious dawn.

CHAPTER – 49

The Year of Drought

A year of drought may dry up the ponds, but not the names. When the village dug wells together, water returned.



One year, the monsoon failed again. For months the sky remained bare, the water in the ponds fell lower, and the soil in the fields cracked as though it were crying out with thirst.

But this time, unlike during earlier droughts, government relief and the village's own organisation both went into action in time. Sunayana's son Gopal, the village's young headman, worked with officials to bring help.

Together, the villagers dug new wells and deepened the old ponds. Boodhba said, 'A year of drought may dry up the ponds, but not the names. When the village dug wells together, water returned.' By working together, people can overcome even a terrible drought.

The ponds ran dry, the earth cracked wide, and the village longed for rain.
Together they dug wells, and water came to the village once again.

CHAPTER –48

The Voices of Radio and Television

A machine's voice comes from far away, but the village's song rises from within. Whoever still hears that inner voice will not be lost in the noise outside.

In Gopal's time, the first radio arrived at the village meeting place, and a few years later came the first television. On its very

first night, a voice from Delhi emerged from the little box, and the whole village sat around it.

Yet the new brightness brought a new silence too. Children who used to come to the peepal tree in the evenings to hear Boodhba's stories now began sitting in front of a screen. The old songs and stories slowly slipped into the background.

Boodhba said, 'A machine's voice comes from far away, but the village's song rises from within. Whoever keeps listening to that inner voice will not be lost in the noise outside.' Listen to new ways of telling stories, but do not forget your own songs.

The little box spoke from Delhi, and the village gathered round.
Those who heard their inner voices did not lose their names in the sound.

CHAPTER –47

The Markets of the Gulf

Markets abroad may bring money, but the hearth at home gives us our name. Whoever forgets that name while earning money returns a stranger.

During the 1980s, an oil boom in the Gulf countries drew young people from the village to Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for construction work and other jobs.

Kusum's husband Ramesh went to Dubai on a three-year contract. But unlike Ramsevak of long ago, Ramesh regularly sent letters and money home. Sometimes his voice could even be heard over the telephone.

Boodhba said, 'Markets abroad may bring money, but the hearth at home gives us our name. Whoever forgets that name while earning money returns a stranger. So wherever you go, carry your name and your people with you.'

Ramesh went abroad to earn; the hope of money drew him far.
But he kept his ties and his name, and never lost the road back home.

CHAPTER –46

The Test of Harmony

When the fire threatened, the village stood as one. Harmony is tested not at festivals, but in times of trouble.

Towards the end of the 1980s, a wave of tension between religious communities spread through the surrounding region.

Rumours carried its heat as far as Garh Narikel. Some outsiders came to the village hoping to divide Hindus and Muslims.

But the Muslim families of Garh Narikel had been part of village life for generations. Their ancestors had drawn water from the same ponds, worked in the same fields and rescued one another during the same floods.

So the villagers stood together and sent the outsiders who wanted to stir up quarrels away. Boodhba said, 'When the fire threatened, the village stood as one. Harmony is tested not at festivals, but in times of trouble.' Shared memories and shared sorrows were stronger than any rumour.

> Outsiders came to divide the people; the village stood as one.
> They shared their ponds and sorrows; their trust could not be undone.

CHAPTER –45

The Winds of Liberalisation

A new wind opened the doors, but the roots did not move. A village rooted in its soil will not be blown away.

After the economic reforms of 1991, the village market began to change. Colourful plastic goods, smooth new clothes and, later,

the first cable television arrived. New things and new dreams reached the village.

Kusum's son Dinesh found a job with a private company in town, something that would have been impossible for his father and grandfather. The speed and glitter of this new life excited the village, but also made some people uneasy.

Boodhba said, 'A new wind has opened the doors, but the roots have not moved. A village rooted in its soil will not be blown away.' Welcome change, but keep your foundations strong.

The winds of a new market came, and door after door swung wide.
Those who held fast to their roots were not swept away by the tide.

CHAPTER –44

The First Computer

The new machine teaches us to count, but it cannot count our names. The names a village remembers matter more than any number in a machine.

In Pratima's time, a government scheme brought the first computer to the Coconut Leaf School. It was a large, grey machine, and everyone gazed at it in wonder.

The children stared wide-eyed. Letters that had once taken so long to write by hand could now appear on a screen in an instant. A new age had arrived.

But an elderly teacher smiled and repeated Boodhba's words: 'The new machine teaches us to count, but it cannot count our names. The names a village remembers matter more than any number in a machine.' A machine is a tool; memory is the soul.

A machine arrived at the school and counted numbers without end.
But every name the village kept was worth more than a machine could tell.

CHAPTER –43

The Thinning River

The stream is growing thinner, yet it remembers its old course. Even a drying river has not forgotten the floods.

In Pratima's time, the village elders noticed a new danger, one that came slowly. Year after year, the water level of the

Kamala-Balan was falling. The river that had once swept houses away was growing thinner.

The elders sat worried beneath the shade of the peepal tree. 'The river whose floods we endured so many times is now drying up? That is an even greater warning.'

Boodhba said, 'The stream is growing thinner, yet it remembers its old course. Even a drying river has not forgotten the floods. Protect the water, so that it does not forget you.' Our bond with nature must be protected, just as our bond with memory must be.

> Year by year the river thinned, and less and less water flowed.
> It had not forgotten the floods; take care of the water it holds.

CHAPTER –42

The Wonder of the Handheld Phone

A machine in the hand has brought the distant near. But do not forget to ask the name of the person sitting beside you.

In Satyanarayan's time, the first mobile phone reached the village. At first there was only one, in the village headman's hand. When the voice of his son, who had gone to a distant city,

came out of the little device, the whole village gathered in amazement.

Slowly, phones reached many homes. Sons who had gone far away could speak to their parents at once, and every piece of news, from a birth to a death, began to travel in a moment.

Boodhba said, 'A machine in the hand has brought the distant near. But do not forget to ask the name of the person sitting beside you.' Let the machine bring faraway people closer, but never let it drive away the people who are already near.

Phones passed from hand to hand, bringing distant voices near.
But listen to those beside you too, the loved ones sitting here.

CHAPTER –41

The City Market

The city buys bodies, but the village does not sell its names. Whoever sells a name in the marketplace returns empty-handed.

In Anjali's time, as India's information technology industry grew rapidly, educated young people from the village began leaving for software jobs in cities such as Bangalore,

Hyderabad and Delhi. Children who had once learned to write their names on leaves were now writing computer code.

The village was proud of them, but their journeys also created distance. Those who had moved to the cities began celebrating their festivals there, while many houses in the village stayed locked for most of the year, with their grown children far away.

Boodhba said, 'The city buys bodies, but the village does not sell its names. Whoever sells a name in the marketplace returns empty-handed. Fly high, but keep your name and your village in your heart.' Success should not cut us away from our roots.

They went to the cities to write code, and their names shone bright.
They kept their village in their hearts and did not come home empty-handed.

CHAPTER – 40

The Right to Information

Those who have the right to know also have the right to ask.
Information is a lamp that reveals names in the dark.

In Karunakar's time, India passed the Right to Information Act, a law that gave ordinary citizens the right to request official documents from government offices.

Following the old tradition of Yadavanand Jha, the young people of the village began asking the government archives for records of their land and history. Until then, those papers had been shut away in officials' locked cupboards.

Boodhba said, 'Those who have the right to know can now ask. Information is a lamp that reveals names in the dark.' People who can ask questions do not allow injustice to remain hidden in darkness.

They asked for the papers; cupboards opened to the people's right to know.
The lamp of information shone in their hands, and names emerged from shadow.

CHAPTER –39

The Guarantee of Work

When people find work, they can stand tall. Work gives a person a name and dignity, not charity.

In Vibha's time, the central government's rural employment guarantee scheme reached the village. It gave every family the right to a hundred days of assured work in the village itself.

Digging ponds, building embankments, making roads—the village's work could now be done by its own people. Hands that had once been idle, or forced to seek work far from home, found employment in their own village.

Attendance for every job was entered in a register. It was the old tradition of recording names, taking a new form. Boodhba said, 'When people find work, they can stand tall. Work gives a person a name, not alms.' Dignified labour is the greatest freedom.

Work was found within the village; every pair of hands stood proud.
Names entered the attendance register, and each worker was recognised.

CHAPTER –38

The Internet's Web

The new web brings faraway people close, but turns names into numbers. Those caught in its net may lose sight of their own faces.

In Suresh's time, smartphones and inexpensive internet connections reached the village. Children who had once

learned their letters on coconut leaves now carried the whole world in the palms of their hands.

But the new web brought new problems too. False news spread as though it were true. People looked at other people's glittering lives and grew unhappy with their own. And strangers, sitting far away, could reach into someone's life.

Boodhba said, 'The new web brings faraway people close, but turns names into numbers. Those caught in its net may lose sight of their own faces. Use the web, but do not let the web use you.'

The web spread far and wide, until a name became a number. Whoever was caught in its meshes could lose the face they knew as their own.

CHAPTER –37

The First Shadow on the Screen

Faces glowed on the first screens, while names fell into shadow.
Those who look at screens must not forget to see their real village.

In Neeraj's time, Facebook and WhatsApp reached nearly every hand in the village. Relatives living far away seemed close

again, old friends found one another, and news of the village's joys and sorrows travelled in moments.

But stories of rumours, fraud and online harassment began to circulate as well. Someone would take another person's photograph; someone else would spread a lie from the shadows. In these ways, a person's life could be made miserable.

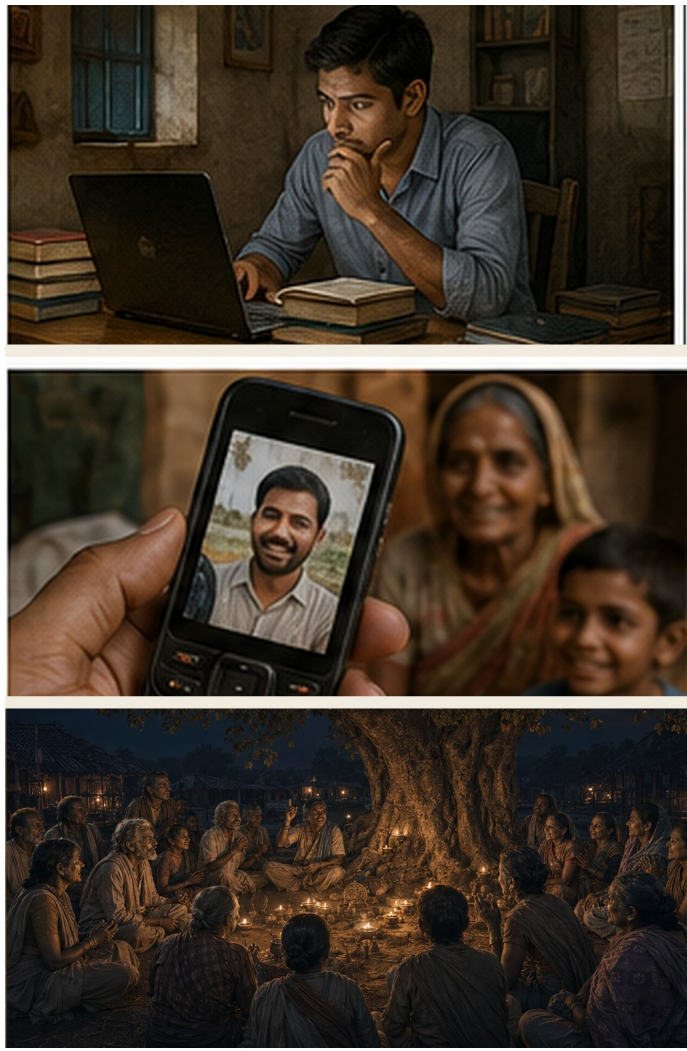
Boodhba said, 'Faces glowed on the first screens, while names fell into shadow. Anyone looking at a screen must not let their eyes forget the real village.' Trust the real faces of the people you know more than the glitter of a screen.

> Faces shone across the screens, while names lay hidden in the dark.
> They looked at screens, yet did not forget their real village and its doors.

CHAPTER –36

The First Sign of an Unseen Swindler

The most dangerous swindler is the one you cannot see. Listen for his approach, ask his name, and trust your eyes rather than the papers.



In Sapna's time, a young man from the village was lured by the promise of a job and lost all his savings to a fake online

company. The company had seemed genuine. It had a website and an office address. Yet it was operated by unseen hands in a distant country.

A complaint was filed with the police. But how could anyone catch a person who could not even be seen? This was a new kind of fear for the village.

Boodhba said gravely, 'The most dangerous swindler is the one you cannot see. This is a new crocodile. It lives not in the pond but in the web. Listen for its approach and ask its name. Trust your own eyes, not merely what is written on paper.' This was the very "new crocodile" whose full story would unfold in the main novel.

An unseen cheat appeared, a new crocodile in the web.
Hear its approach, ask its name, and keep your eyes open wide.

CHAPTER –35

A Market for Human Beings Opens

Where human beings are bought and sold, their names are treated as cheap. But a village that remembers its people will not let them become merchandise.

In Rajiv's time, the fraud built around promises of work grew still more frightening. Earlier, swindlers had taken people's money. Now they began luring people far away with false

promises of "good jobs", and some of those people never returned.

From one household in the village, a son left after hearing just such a promise. Years passed without any news of him. His mother kept watching every road, hoping for his return. It was a new and cruel injustice.

Boodhba was deeply troubled. 'Where people are treated as things to be sold,' he said, 'their names are made cheap. But a village that remembers its people will never let them become merchandise. Ask questions. Check the truth. Never send your children away merely on a stranger's promise.' Being watchful is one of the first ways we show love.

A son went away on a false promise; his mother watched each road.
The village cried, "Protect each name; no human body must be sold."

CHAPTER –34

Ujjwal's Dream

Dream as high as you wish, but keep your roots in the earth. A dream that forgets its own name wakes up alone.

In Rajiv's time, a child was born into a poor family in the village. There was the ordinary joy of a new birth: a sohar, a

traditional birth song, was sung, pieces of jaggery were shared, and the child was named Ujjwal Jha.

Yet the villagers had never seen Boodhba so restless. Again and again he looked towards the poor family's house, tried to speak, and fell silent, as though he could see something in the distant future.

At last he said softly, 'Have great dreams, child, but keep your roots in the earth. A dream that forgets its own name will wake up alone.' This was Ujjwal, whose story would take a moving turn later in the main novel.

> Ujjwal was born to a poor home; a birth song rose at the door. Boodhba said, "Keep your roots firm; let your dreams have ground beneath them."

CHAPTER –33

The Shadow of a Lawyer's Coat

Justice can hide beneath a lawyer's coat, but it still speaks in the village. A lawyer reads the law; the village reads the names.

In Dipali's time, a sharp and spirited young man from the village named Batuknath studied law and began practising as a lawyer in the city. The village was proud of him. A boy who had

once written his name on a coconut leaf was now arguing cases in court.

But as powerful clients came to him, his path began to change. The pleasure of winning, the glitter of money and the intoxication of power drew him, step by step, away from the road Boodhba had shown him.

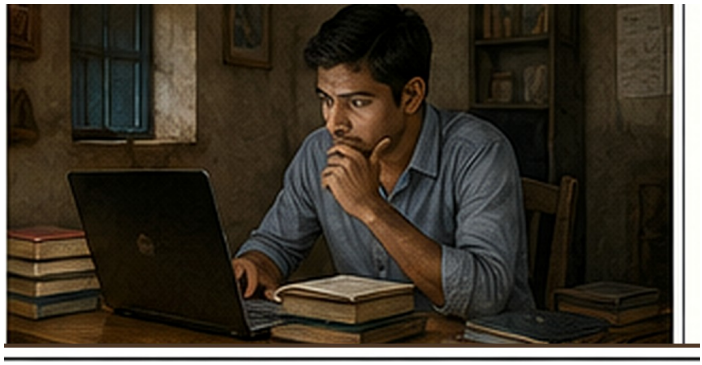
Boodhba said sadly, 'Justice may hide in the shadow of a lawyer's coat, but it continues to speak in the village. A lawyer reads the sections of the law; the village reads its names. Let him not forget where the truth lies.' Talent can become dangerous when it is separated from a sense of right and wrong.

Batuknath became a lawyer; his fine coat caught the light.
He read the law but forgot the names, and sadness gathered within.

CHAPTER –32

Shadows Across the Seas

A shadow may come from beyond seven seas, but it cannot carry our names away. Even a distant swindler leaves a trace on the leaf.



In Dipali's time, global trade and the web of digital finance began connecting the village's stories of fraud to places across

the seas. Money stolen from poor hands in the village travelled to distant countries.

One report showed a photograph of a tall glass tower in a faraway city. It spoke of an unseen power working from somewhere inside that tower, cheating thousands of people from thousands of miles away.

Boodhba said, 'A shadow may come from beyond seven seas, but it cannot carry our names away. Even someone who cheats from far away leaves a trace on the leaf. Keep records. A leaf remembers when the eyes cannot see.' Written records are among the strongest weapons against criminals who remain out of sight.

A glass tower rose far away; deceit reached across seven seas.
Yet traces stayed upon the leaves, and the village kept its accounts.

CHAPTER –31

Satyavrat's Silence

One word from someone long silent may carry the greatest weight. Even Satyavrat's silence was a kind of testimony.

In Abhinav's time, a quiet, honest young man of the village named Satyavrat Mehta got a job at a bank in town. He was the sort of person who spoke little but observed everything closely.

Gradually he began to notice suspicious accounts. Money came in and was immediately sent onwards, for no clear reason. Hundreds of thousands arrived and vanished in moments. Something was wrong.

Without telling anyone, he remained silent, watching, taking notes and gathering the truth. Boodhba said, 'When someone has stayed silent a long time, a single word from him may carry the greatest weight. Even Satyavrat's silence was testimony.' A patient witness is what even the most dangerous criminal has reason to fear.

Quiet Satyavrat watched each transaction from his corner of the bank.
In his silence, testimony gathered, its chain growing heavy with truth.

CHAPTER –30

Gop Kumar's Documents

Whoever keeps a written record protects it against time. Documents preserve names, not bodies.

In Satyavrat's time, another young man of the village, Gop Kumar, carried forward the work of Yadavanand and Vibha. He devoted his life to collecting records and carrying out research.

The boy who had once written names on coconut leaves began bringing old maps, ancient family registers and new digital records together in one place.

The names Yadavanand had written in the darkness of night, the papers Vibha had obtained through the Right to Information Act—Gop Kumar linked them all, piece by piece. He knew that truth scattered in a hundred places was weak, but truth brought together could not be defeated.

Boodhba said, 'Whoever keeps a written record protects it against time. Documents preserve names, not bodies.' In the years to come, Gop Kumar would be the one to uncover the secrets of the entire web of deceit.

Gop joined the old to the new, gathering threads that lay apart.
His papers guarded every name and challenged the passing years.

CHAPTER –29

Chandrapal's Dream

A dream may shine in someone's eyes while deceit waits at their feet.
Whoever signs without understanding may be trapped in a net.

In Gop Kumar's time, a child named Chandrapal Batra was born in Meerut, into a distant branch of a family connected to

the village. His family had left the village many years before and wandered from town to town.

The villagers were astonished. Why was Boodhba worried about a child born hundreds of miles away, in a city that hardly anyone there knew? But Boodhba's concern did not stop at the village boundary.

Boodhba said, 'There may be dreams in his eyes, but deceit may lie in his path. Anyone who signs a paper without understanding it can be caught in a net. Let someone, someday, teach him to read before he signs.' In time, Chandrapal would become part of a great scheme without even realising it.

Far away in Meerut, Chandrapal was born, dawn-bright dreams in his eyes.
A signature given without understanding can be caught in a cunning net.

CHAPTER –28

Raghav's Code

Someone who understands the language of machines may not understand a village. Yet even inside a code, a name lies hidden.

In a branch of Abhinav's family living in a city, a boy named Raghav was born. He had an extraordinary gift for computers

and their codes. Even as a small child, he found the language of computers easy to learn.

By his teenage years, he could do things that astonished people. He could repair a complicated machine or discover an error hidden deep inside it. But such remarkable talent could take him in either direction—towards good or towards harm.

Boodhba said, 'Someone who understands the language of machines may not understand a village. Yet even inside a code, a name lies hidden. Let him use his skill to uncover names, not conceal them.' What matters most about a gift is the direction in which it is used.

Raghav learned the language of machines and the hidden ways of code.
A name slept deep inside that code; reveal it, do not hide it away.

CHAPTER –27

Aruni Builds

Those who build must first shape themselves. Before the splash, Aruni learned to keep his eyes open.

In Gop Kumar's time, a young man of the village named Aruni studied engineering and began building bridges and embankments. He was Nand's father.

Remembering the stories of floods from his childhood and Indrani's early warnings, he rebuilt the village's old embankment. In place of its earthen barrier, he put a stronger, solid one, and installed new instruments to help predict floods.

Yet he knew that the strongest defence against disaster was a watchful, honest pair of eyes. Boodhba said, 'Those who build must first shape themselves. Before the splash, Aruni learned to keep his eyes open.' A builder must first build strength of character.

Aruni built a solid embankment and kept his eyes alert.
First he trained his watchful eyes; then he built peace for village homes.

CHAPTER –26

Devika's Song

Where there is a song, there can be a voice for justice. A name sung aloud can echo through a whole village.

In Aruni's time, a young woman of the village named Devika carried on the musical tradition of Mohan. She gave fresh

melodies and new instruments to the village's old folk songs—the songs of Hulasa, Jivanti and Gangesh.

She sat with elderly women and listened to songs that few people remembered any more: a song about a flood, a sohar sung at a birth, a samdaun of farewell, a refrain from a time of famine. She learned them all and kept them alive in her own voice.

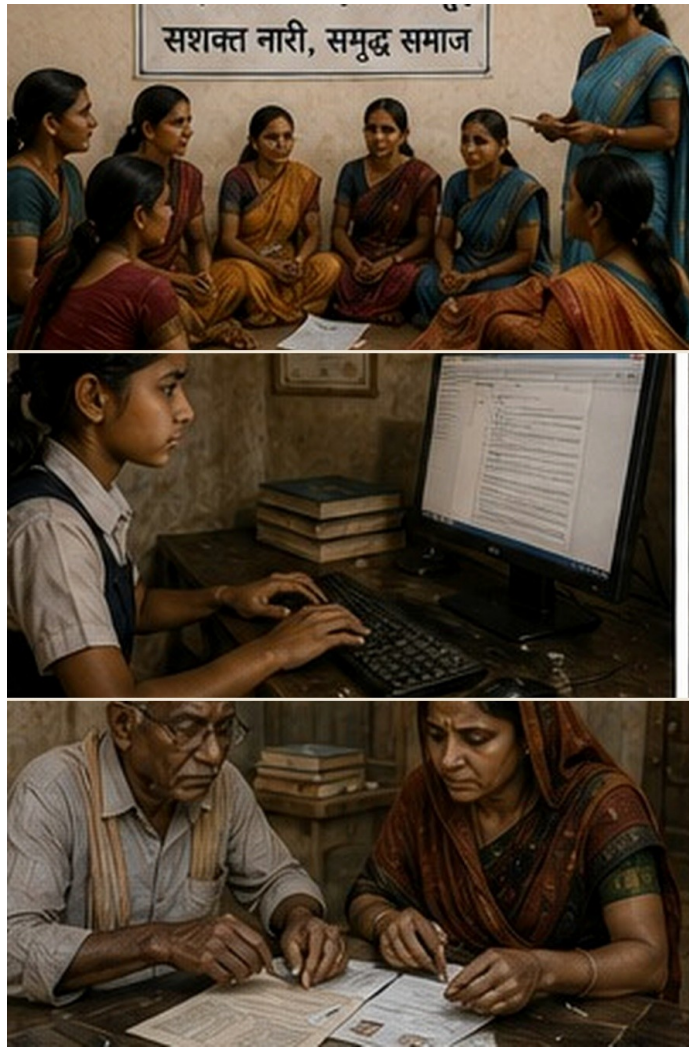
Boodhba said, 'Where there is a song, there can be a voice for justice. A name sung aloud can echo through a whole village.' Music is one of the sweetest and strongest ways to protect memory.

Devika sang the songs of old, filling them with the life of new melodies.
The names she called within her songs rang through the village air.

CHAPTER –25

Meera's Right to Privacy

The story belongs to the person who lived it, and so does the right to give permission. A name is not a sample; Meera's story is her own.



In Devika's time, a spirited young woman from the village named Meera studied in the city and began working on digital

privacy and women's safety. She carried forward Sapna's idea of a "digital night assembly".

Meera saw new kinds of injustice appearing. Someone stole a woman's photograph. Someone sold her personal information. Someone used her name without permission, making her life difficult.

Meera stood up to protect these women. Boodhba said, 'The story belongs to the person who lived it, and so does the right to give permission. A name is not a sample. Meera's story is her own.' Privacy is part of human dignity, and it is everyone's right.

Meera rose to defend those whose photographs and names were stolen.
"Your story, your permission," she said. "No one's life is for sale."

CHAPTER –24

Nishant's Bank

A clear account brings peace of mind. But those who sell names through bank accounts lose the true reckoning.

In Meera's time, a young man of the village named Nishant studied banking and set out to help rural families use financial

services. He wanted every household to have access to a bank account, insurance and loans.

Nishant did not want the old injustices to happen again. But he noticed that bank forms and their language were just as strange to village farmers who could not read as the old family registers and the language of the courts had once been.

So he patiently explained what a bank account was and why a person should think carefully before signing anything. Boodhba said, 'A clear account brings peace of mind. But those who sell names through bank accounts lose the true reckoning.'

Nishant taught the village how accounts worked, and warned them to sign with care.
Keep clear accounts and steady minds, so that no one loses in the reckoning.

CHAPTER –23

The Birth of Nand

Every child born into the world brings a new name. Nand's birth gave the village a new witness.

In Nishant's time, a son was born in Aruni's home. The family named him Nand. On the night of his birth, the old peepal tree

—the village's witness tree—was unusually still and quiet, as though it too were watching something important.

There was the familiar happiness of a new baby. People sang sohar birth songs, danced and shared jaggery. Yet those who knew Boodhba noticed that he gave the child an unusually deep and special blessing.

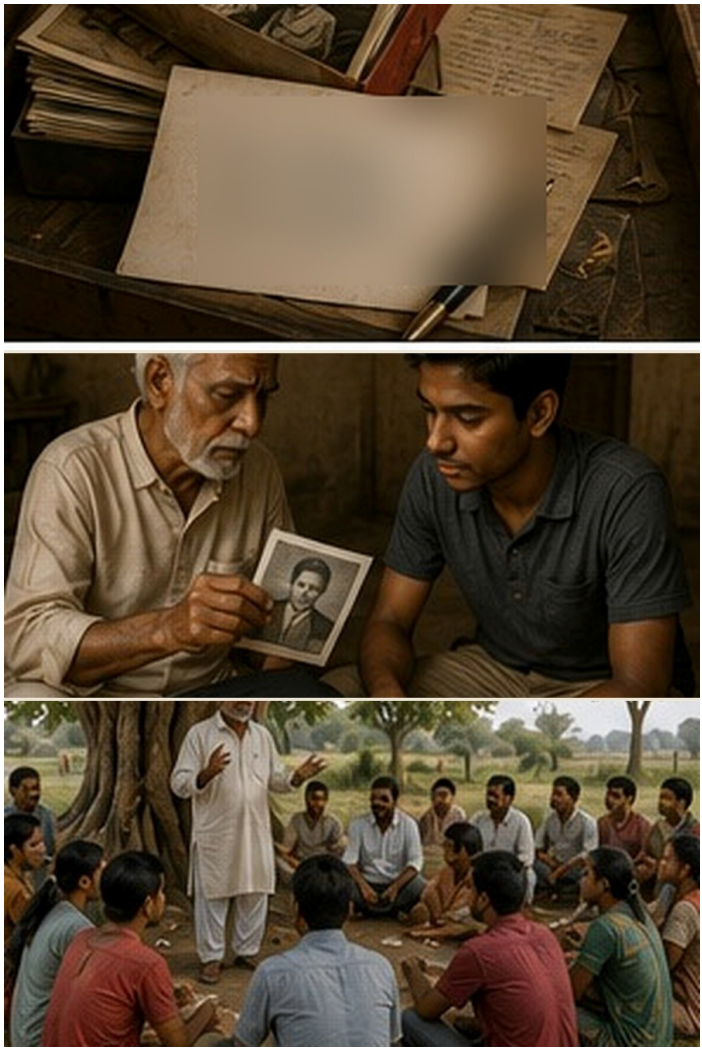
Boodhba said gently, 'Every child born into the world brings a new name. Nand's birth gave the village a new witness.' This was the same Nand who would become a central witness in the main novel, the next keeper of the village's twelve hundred years of memory.

> Nand was born in Aruni's home; the witness tree stood still.
> A new name came among the villagers, and with it a new witness.

CHAPTER –22

Approaching Twelve Hundred Years

Twelve hundred years do not pass in a single breath. A village that has endured so much will stand to the end.



One evening after Nand's birth, Gop Kumar sat down to piece together Boodhba's entire timeline, from the days of Vachaspati

Mishra to the present. Generation by generation, he began to join the years together.

Hundreds of names appeared in that long record: Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Savitri, and countless generations after them. Among all those names, one witness had remained throughout every generation: the village itself, with its memories and all that it had seen.

Gop Kumar realised that the village was approaching its twelve-hundredth year. Boodhba said, 'Twelve hundred years did not pass in a single breath. A village that has endured so much will stand to the end—and an ending, too, is a new beginning.'

Gop counted twelve hundred years and long rows of remembered names.
The village stood until the end, and found another beginning there.

CHAPTER –21

Ananya's Question

A small question can crack a mighty dome. Whoever dares to ask can save a name.

While Nand was still a child, a young teacher named Ananya arrived to teach at the modern branch of the Coconut Leaf

School. She was the kind of teacher who taught children to ask questions rather than memorise answers.

At first, the village elders, who had learned by repeating lessons by heart, were astonished. But gradually they saw that Ananya's pupils did not simply believe whatever they were told. They asked, 'Why?' and 'How do we know?'

Boodhba was delighted. 'A small question can crack a mighty dome,' he said. 'Whoever learns to ask can save a name.' This was the same Ananya who would one day join Nand in guarding the village's memories—for those who ask questions are the ones who challenge injustice.

Ananya taught the children to ask, "Why?" and "How do we know?"
Small questions cracked the mighty dome, and many names were saved.

CHAPTER –20

The First Reckoning of the Splash

The first splash—the first name in the water. Whoever kept the account made even the crocodile a witness.

After studying under Ananya, Nand grew up, studied engineering and, following the example of his father Aruni, went to work at a bridge-construction site. There he saw the

conditions in which the labourers lived: broken-down huts, low wages and too little protection from danger.

Then one day he heard a story that shook him to the very core. A labourer had fallen into the water while working on the bridge, and in the register his name had been marked simply "Absent"—as though he had never existed at all.

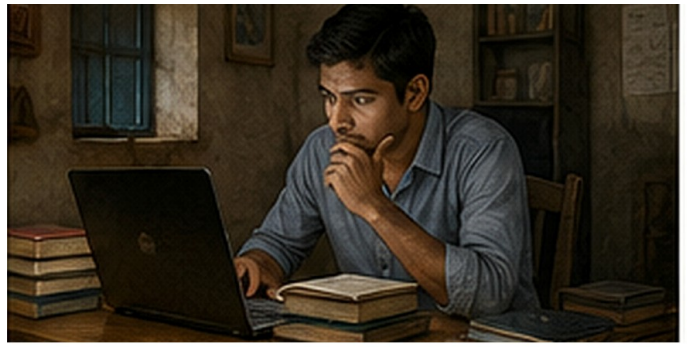
From that day on, Nand began keeping his own account of every name. Boodhba said, 'The first splash—the first name in the water. Whoever kept the account made even the crocodile a witness.' This was the moment at which the story of the main novel begins.

A worker fell into the water by the bridge; the register said "Absent" beside his name.
Nand kept account of every name, and made even the crocodile a witness.

CHAPTER – 19

Satyavrat's Decision

A decision that comes late can be the firmest of all. Satyavrat kept silent, but at last he stood up for the names.



While Nand was studying, Satyavrat Mehta—now holding a senior position at the bank—opened his old notebook again. In

it were details of suspicious transactions he had written down years before.

The pattern showed money travelling from one account to another, from the second to a third, and finally to an account far away across the seas. Some names appeared again and again. A few were familiar; others were strangers.

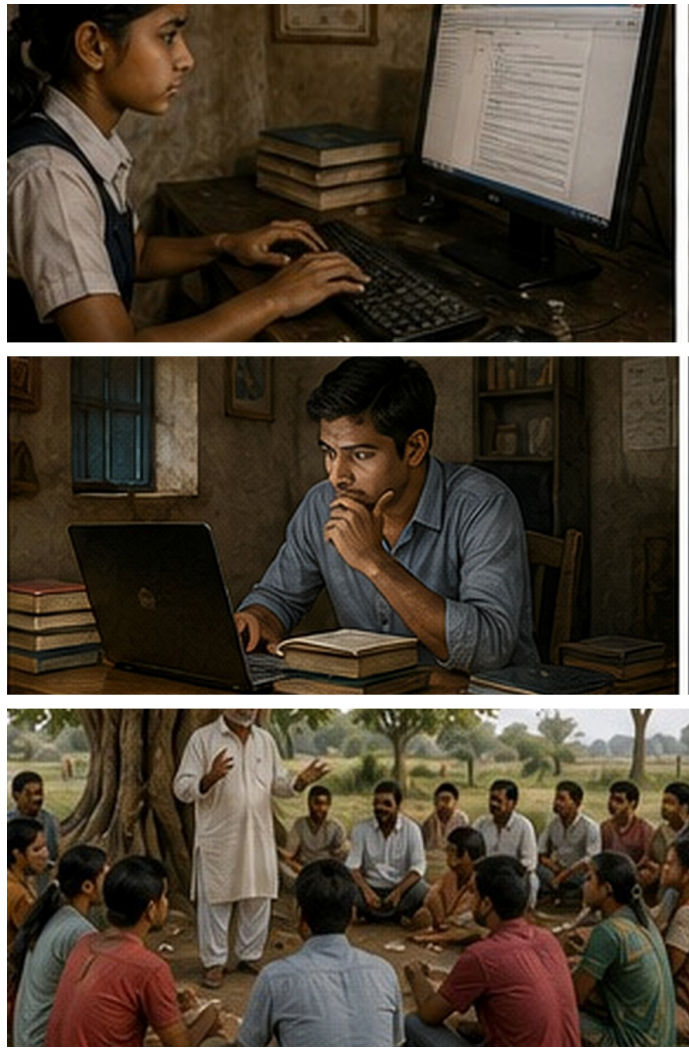
Satyavrat had remained silent for a long time, patiently gathering the truth. Now he decided to act. Boodhba said, 'A decision that comes late can be the firmest of all. Satyavrat kept silent, but at last he stood up for the names.'

Satyavrat opened his notebook again and traced the movement of accounts.
He had kept silent; now he stood up, troubled yet determined, for the names.

CHAPTER –18

Ananya and Nand Meet

Two paths met in one place, and a new journey began. Those who share a purpose can walk together.



After completing his engineering studies, Nand returned to the village. He began working with Ananya on a project to

modernise the Coconut Leaf School and preserve the village's heritage in digital form.

Ananya knew every old village story, every folk song and every genealogical register. Nand knew how to preserve these things in a lasting digital form. Their work complemented each other's, like a leaf and a pen, like memory and a written record.

Boodhba smiled and said, 'Two paths met in one place, and a new journey began. Those who share a purpose can walk together.' Nand and Ananya were the pair who, in the main novel, would join together to protect the village's memories.

Nand and Ananya met in one place; leaf and pen came together.
One purpose, one path—the colours of a new journey began to unfold.

CHAPTER –17

The Trap of the Glass Tower

The glass tower gleams from far away, but there is a net inside. Whoever is dazzled by its shine may be caught in that net.

In Nand's time, the news repeatedly carried stories of an enormous network of online fraud operating from Hong Kong.

The name of its operator, Lau Kin-hung, was linked to the network.

The network was arranged so that no one could see its whole shape. On one side, young people were promised "good jobs"; on another, investors were tempted with offers to "double their money". Countless names were caught in between.

Boodhba said, 'The glass tower gleams from far away, but there is a net inside. Whoever is dazzled by the shine may be caught in it. Do not be fooled by glitter. Ask whose names lie behind it.' This was the same international network that the village would fight in the main novel.

Far away the glass tower gleamed, but inside it a net was woven.
Ask whose names are hidden behind the shine, or you too may be caught.

CHAPTER –16

Batuknath's Final Turning

Even a wrong road must have a turning at its end. At last Batuknath turned back towards his own name.

Several months after Ananya's warning, news arrived that Batuknath Hariharan—now a respected but questionable

lawyer—had begun working for the defence in several major fraud cases.

He was now counted among the city lawyers whom powerful accused people sought out to defend them. He won cases, grew rich and gained respect.

Yet after every victory, something inside him grew heavier. He remembered his childhood, the coconut leaves and the old verses. Boodhba said, 'Even a wrong road must have a turning at its end. And at last Batuknath turned back towards his own name.' No human being is ever completely lost.

Batuknath won his cases, but every victory weighed more heavily upon him.
At last he turned back towards his name and broke away from the wrong path.

CHAPTER –15

Chandrapal's Account

A signature on an account you do not understand can still carry a heavy burden. Ignorance, too, is a knot in the net.

In Nand's time, news arrived that Chandrapal Batra—the distant relative whose name Boodhba had mentioned many years earlier—had become trapped in heavy gambling debts.

Weighed down by what he owed, he was drawn into a network of fraud.

Chandrapal did not fully understand what he was doing. He had been told it was only "commission work": some money would enter his bank account, he would send it on and keep a small amount for himself. But he did not know that he was becoming a knot in a much larger net.

Boodhba said sadly, 'A signature on an account you do not understand can still carry a heavy burden. Ignorance, too, is a knot in the net. Understand before you sign.' Sometimes the criminal and the victim can both be caught in ignorance.

Chandrapal was caught in a net of debt, not understanding the work he did.
Understand before you sign, or the voices of the net may draw you in.

CHAPTER –14

Building the Bridge

A bridge joins two banks, but it must not forget the water. Whoever builds a bridge must remember the floods.

Because 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 so many years, the bridge would connect the village to the other bank.

Nand had learned how to build bridges. But his questioning eyes noticed things that worried him: too few safety measures for the labourers, people working at heights without helmets, the contractor's carelessness and irregularities in the paperwork.

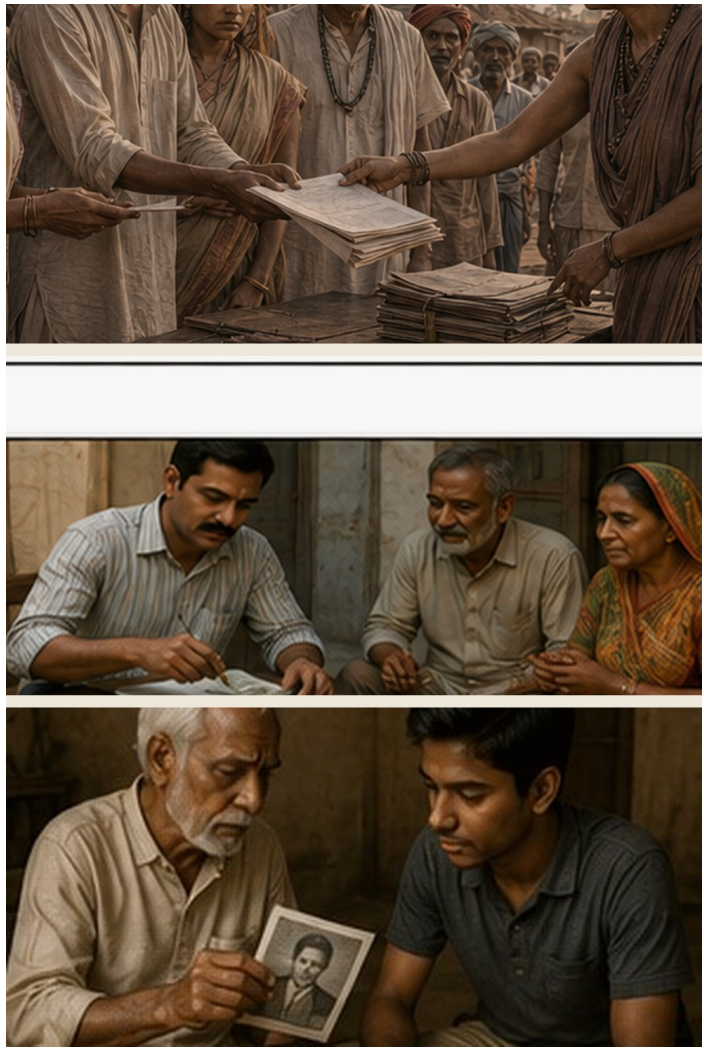
Boodhba said, 'A bridge joins two banks, but it must not forget the water. Whoever builds a bridge must remember the floods and the names of those who built it.' Development is not true progress if it forgets human lives and names.

Nand built a new bridge, joining one bank to the other.
He did not forget the water or the names of the workers who built it.

CHAPTER –13

Gop Kumar's Collection

Whoever gathers name after name together makes history. A collection cannot save bodies, but it can save memory.



Gop Kumar, now an old man, sat down to gather in one place the records he had collected throughout his life. They stretched from Yadavanand's shadow register to the books of the poet

Haripati, Gangadhar's efforts with the printing press and the modern digital archives.

As he joined the pages together, he began to understand that all the threads were coming to one place: the confusion between the conch and silver, Hulasa's jal samadhi, Sukhdev's nameless death, Batuknath's turning. Every name was a thread in a great weaving.

Boodhba said, 'Whoever gathers name after name together makes history. A collection cannot save bodies, but it can save memory.' Later, in the main novel, this collection would become the most important evidence against injustice.

Gop joined name to name and wove the threads of history. The collection preserved their memory—a burden greater than the body.

CHAPTER –12

The Trembling of Channa Grove

The grove trembled, and the village heard: something was about to happen. When the grove speaks, the village knows how to listen.

One evening, for no clear reason, every tree in Channa Grove—from the peepal to the last of the Channa trees—trembled

slightly at the same time, even though the air was completely still. There was not a breath of wind.

The villagers felt it and, frightened, gathered near the peepal tree. The elders remembered that they had seen such trembling only two or four times before, and every time something important had happened in the village afterwards.

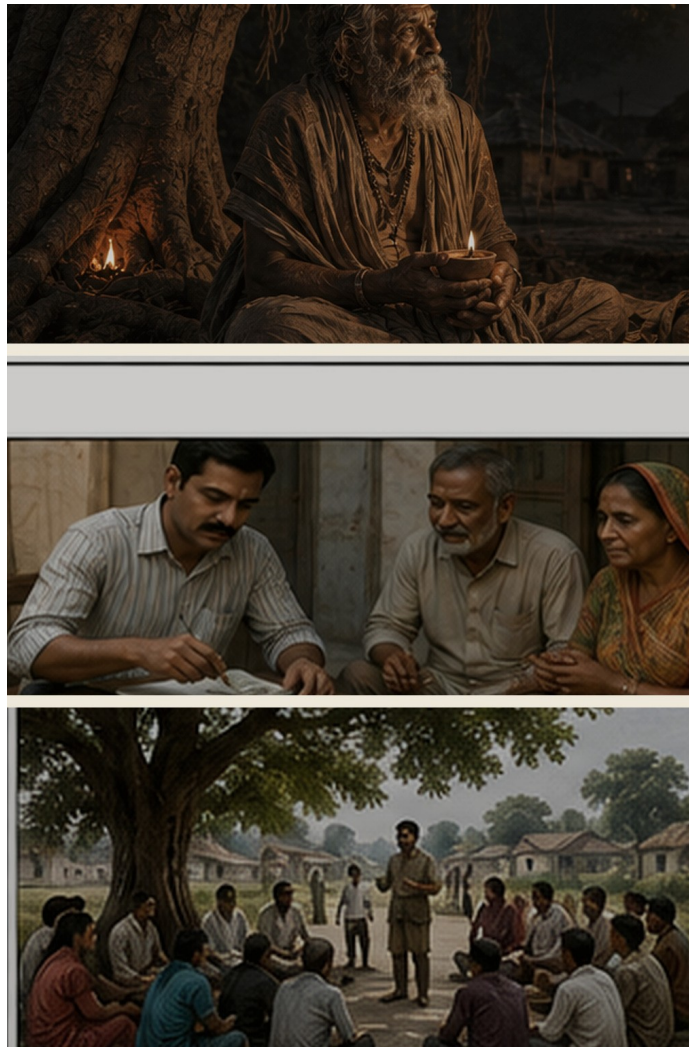
Boodhba remained silent. But his old words echoed in their minds: 'The grove trembled, and the village heard: something was about to happen. When the grove speaks, the village knows how to listen.' Nature and the village understood each other's language. This was a sign of the great event that would happen in the main novel.

The grove trembled without wind, and the frightened village gathered.
The grove spoke without a sound, and the village understood its words.

CHAPTER –11

Boodhba's Last Blessing

A blessing gives a name, not a body. Boodhba's last words became a seed for the next generation.



On the night after Channa Grove trembled, Boodhba called Nand to meet him alone beside the peepal tree. Only one lamp

burned beneath it, and in its faint light Boodhba's face showed a deep and serious affection.

Nand said nothing. He had known Boodhba since childhood and heard every one of his stories. But what he heard in Boodhba's voice tonight was more than a story. It sounded like a farewell, like something being handed over to him.

Boodhba blessed him: 'A blessing gives a name, not a body. Remember everyone's name, Nand. Be a witness.' Those last words of Boodhba became a seed for the next generation—a seed that would grow into a tree in the main novel.

Boodhba called Nand to the peepal tree, where a single lamp was burning.
He blessed him: "Remember the names." That blessing became a seed in every home.

CHAPTER –10

The First Splash at the Bridge

The first splash at the bridge—the first name in the water. The name of the one who sank there rose upon a leaf.

One night at the bridge-construction site, there was no moon in the sky. After the rains, the river was flowing with all its

strength. Tired workers were still labouring in the darkness, without proper lighting.

Suddenly, a worker—whose name was still uncertain—fell into the river. The sound of the "splash" reached the hamlet nearest the village. It was that same sound the village had heard year after year, generation after generation.

Nand made up his mind: this name would not be lost. Boodhba's words echoed: "The first splash at the bridge—the first name in the water. The name of the one who sank there rose upon a leaf." This is the very incident from which the first chapter of the main novel begins.

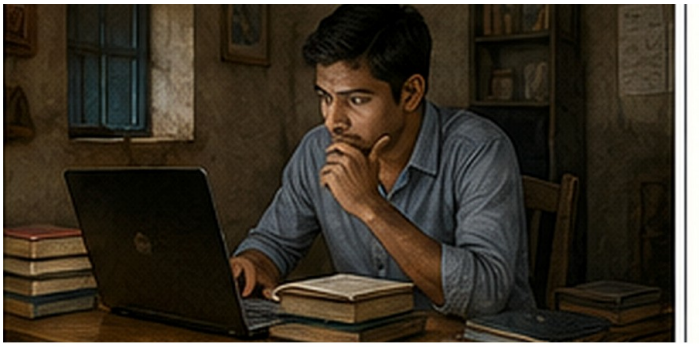
A "splash" rang through the dark night; a worker fell into the water.

Nand vowed to save that name, to raise its words upon a leaf.

CHAPTER –9

The Investigation Begins

An investigation is like digging a well: first mud, then water. Whoever begins to dig will reach the truth.



After the accident at the bridge, Nand began searching for the worker's name and recording his findings in his diary. He

asked the contractor for documents, examined the attendance register and questioned the worker's companions.

But the more he dug, the clearer it became that this was no ordinary accident. The bridge-building company's records were unclear, the workers' names were not their real names, and the money transactions looked suspicious.

Boodhba said, "An investigation is like digging a well: first mud, then water. Whoever begins to dig will reach the truth. Keep digging, Nand." Truth is not always found on the surface; it is found in the depths.

Nand dug through papers and registers, finding mud and muck at first.
He went on digging till he found water, and glimpses of truth began to rise.

CHAPTER –8

The Evidence Comes to Light

Evidence hidden in darkness will one day see the dawn. Truth may lie at the bottom of the water, but it will surely rise.

With Gop Kumar's help, Satyavrat passed all the evidence in his notebook to a trustworthy journalist and an honest

investigative agency. Every thread gathered over the years was now brought into the open.

As more evidence emerged, the shape of the whole web became clear: Ujjwal Jha's falling into debt, Batuknath's legal assistance, Chandrapal's mule account and Lau Kin-hung's glass tower. All were linked to one another, parts of the same web.

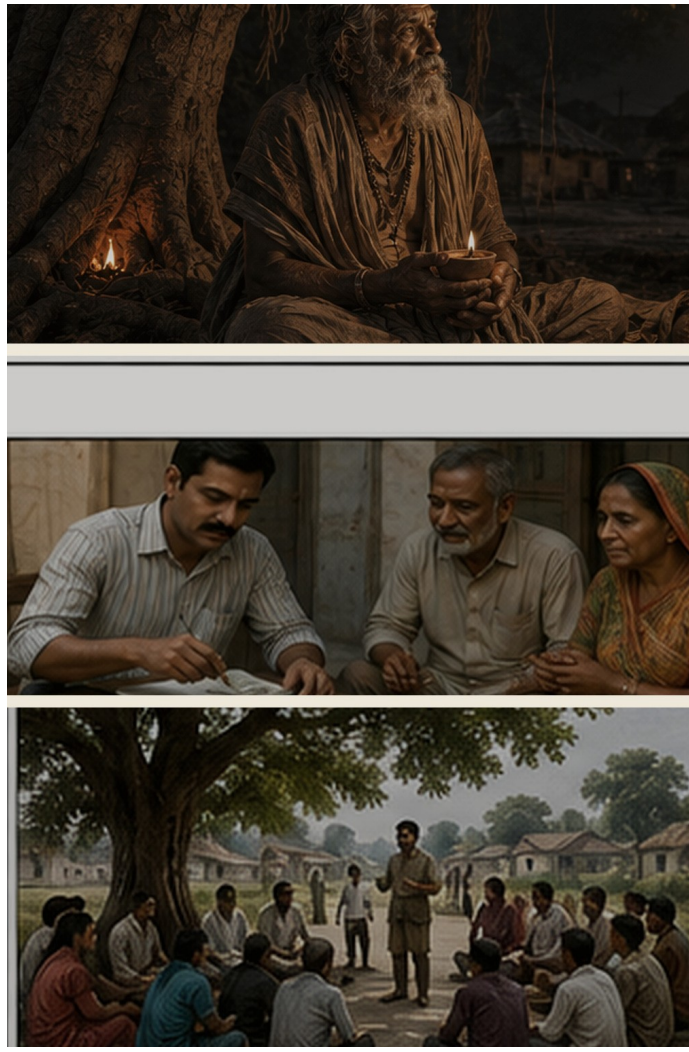
Boodhba said, "Evidence hidden in darkness will one day see the dawn. Truth may lie at the bottom of the water, but it will surely rise." Truth joined together is always stronger than lies scattered apart.

Evidence came out of darkness into daylight; each thread of the web joined another.
Truth rose from the depths of the water, and the village saw what lay beyond.

CHAPTER –7

The Half-Ghost Experience

Half-truth and half-ghost can both frighten us. Whoever knows the whole name need not fear a half-ghost.



One night, tired and grieving, Nand fell asleep beside the roots of the peepal tree. He had spent the day trying to discover the

name of the worker who had died in the bridge accident, and the weight of his sorrow had exhausted him.

In his dream, he saw Boodhba somewhat clearly for the first time: an elderly figure sitting on a branch, between smoke and light. His face was not completely clear, but his eyes were full of affection and wisdom.

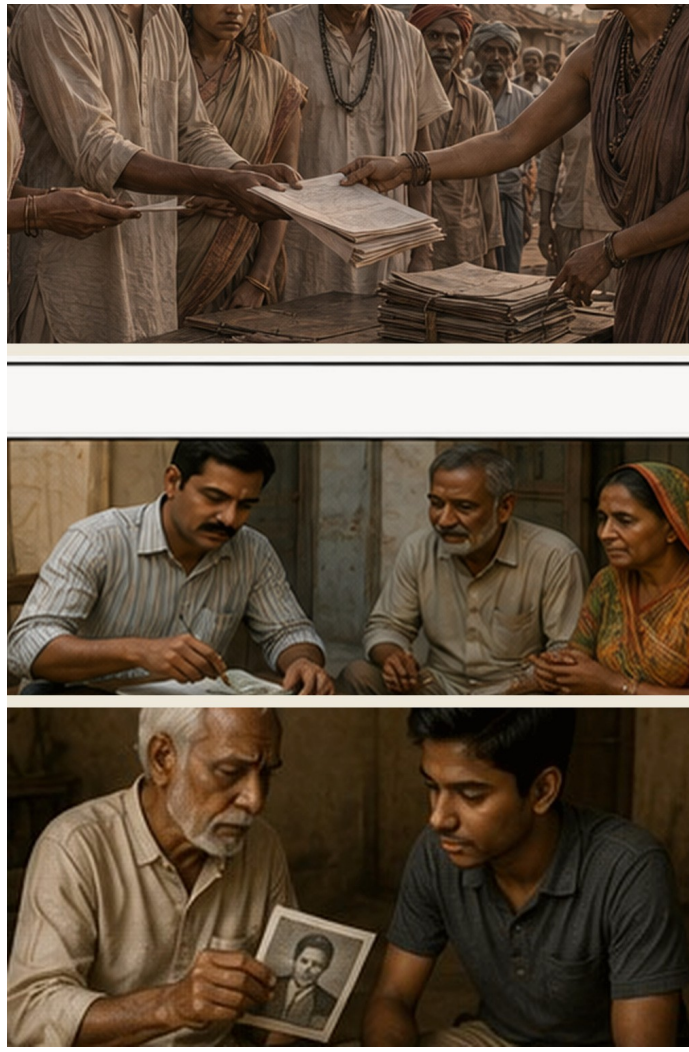
Boodhba said, "Half-truth and half-ghost can both frighten us. But whoever knows the whole name need not fear a half-ghost. Find the full name, Nand, and your fear will leave you." Incomplete knowledge brings fear; the whole truth brings courage.

In a dream Nand saw Boodhba, between drifting smoke and light.
"Find the whole name," Boodhba said, and fear began to slip away.

CHAPTER –6

Gop Kumar's Final Page

Whoever holds the final page must carry the weight of the story. Gop Kumar handed over the names and felt his burden lighten.



Gop Kumar, now extremely old, completed the final page of the collection he had worked on all his life: Boodhba's entire story,

from Vachaspati Mishra's time to the present day. His hands were trembling now.

The collection held the memories of centuries: from the confusion between the conch and silver to Hulasa's jal samadhi, Sukhdev's nameless death, Yadavanand's shadow register, Gangadhar's printing press and the digital archives of the present day.

When it was complete, Gop Kumar placed the whole weight of those names into the hands of Nand and Ananya. He felt lighter, as though a lifelong burden had been lifted. Boodhba said, "Whoever holds the final page must carry the weight of the story. Gop Kumar handed over the names and felt his burden lighten."

Gop wrote his final page and placed it in the hands of Nand and Ananya.

His burden lifted; with new companions, the story travelled on.

CHAPTER –5

The Web Exposed

When the net was uncovered, it was the fisher, not the fish, who was caught. Whoever saw the net recognised the crocodile.

After months of investigation, the evidence gathered by Satyavrat and Nand finally exposed the local part of the fraud

network. Batuknath's involvement in the area and Chandrapal's mule account both became clear.

Legal proceedings began against Batuknath. For the first time, the respected lawyer had to stand before a court himself. Chandrapal, despite providing evidence of his ignorance, faced difficult questioning.

Boodhba said, "When the net was uncovered, it was the fisher, not the fish, who was caught. Whoever saw the net recognised the crocodile." Only someone who sees the whole system can recognise the real offender.

> The net lay exposed; the fisher was caught, and the crocodile was recognised.
> Whoever saw how the whole net was woven understood that dark well.

CHAPTER –4

The Final List of Names

The names that had been left out were added at last. When the list was complete, so was the crocodile's reckoning.

After months of searching, Nand succeeded in discovering the real names of every worker who had died at the bridge-construction site. He travelled from village to village, searched

for their families and tracked down the contractor's crossed-out papers and the workers' forgotten addresses.

Thirty names belonged to the story that the official records had forgotten. Nand entered all thirty, one by one, into his diary, "The Reckoning of the Splash". Beside each name he recorded the person's family, story and dreams.

Boodhba said, "The names that had been left out were added at last. When the list was complete, so was the crocodile's reckoning." Every name, every human being, deserves to be counted. That is the lesson the village has learned over twelve hundred years.

Nand searched out all thirty names and joined the threads that had been lost.
The list was complete, the reckoning complete; the crocodile's debt stood revealed.

CHAPTER –3

Twelve Hundred Years Come Full Circle

The circle of twelve hundred years was complete, on a moonless night. What stood at the end was also there at the beginning.

One new-moon night, Nand, Ananya and everyone in the village gathered at Channa Grove to play kabaddi, just as their

people had gathered for hundreds of years. This was more than a game. It was the village's oldest ritual for remembering names.

For the first time, Nand's own name was included in the game. Until now he had only been a witness; this time he stepped into the game himself. When his turn came, the entire village fell silent.

Boodhba said, "The circle of twelve hundred years was complete, on a moonless night. What stood at the end was also there at the beginning." From that first question about the conch and silver to the kabaddi game of this very night, the village's story had come full circle.

> On a moonless night Nand stepped into the game of kabaddi. Twelve hundred years came full circle, and every name belonged within it.

CHAPTER –2

The Next Generation's Promise

The promise made by the next generation keeps the village alive. Holding on to names is not salvation; listening is freedom.

After the kabaddi game, as the darkness of that new-moon night began to thin, Nand and Ananya called all the village's young people to the peepal tree and made a new promise

together. The names called out during the game were still echoing in the air.

There was a light in the young people's eyes—the very light Boodhba had hoped to see year after year. It seemed to say that the story would never die, because there were still hands ready to carry it forward.

The young people promised, "We will not simply hold on to names. We will listen to them, understand them and carry them forward." Boodhba said, "The promise made by the next generation keeps the village alive. Holding on to names is not salvation; listening is freedom."

The young generation made its promise while names still echoed in the air.
Freedom lies in listening, not merely holding on; the village found a way to endure.

CHAPTER –1

The Final Witness

When the final witness spoke, the story changed hands. A crocodile eats the body, not the name: this was the village's final saying.

One last evening, Boodhba called Nand to meet him alone beside the peepal tree. "Nand," he said, "I want to tell you something I have come to understand over many years. You are

the one the whole village has been waiting for. You are its new witness."

Astonished, Nand asked, "Boodhba, how do you know that?" Boodhba smiled and replied, "Because when the names were sinking, you did not run away. You stayed and asked questions. That is all."

Then Boodhba gave Nand the village's final—and first—saying: "A crocodile eats the body, not the name." Nand wrote it in his diary. And so the twelve-hundred-year-old story of Garh Narikel passed into Nand's hands, and a new story, the story of the main novel, began.

Boodhba, the final witness, spoke, and the story changed hands. "A crocodile eats the body, not the name"—and a new story began.

CHAPTER 0

Garh Narikel: A Brief Introduction to Village Folklore

A living landscape of earth, water, labour, memory and names.

Before listening to the story, listen to the village. A village makes its body from the soil, draws its breath from water and keeps its memories among the leaves of its trees. Here, knowledge lives not in books alone but in hands, ears and bodies. No single person writes the songs; the people themselves are their creators.

On the evening before the story was to begin, Ba sat on the ground at the Coconut Leaf School. The children asked, "Will the story begin tomorrow?" Ba laughed. "Before you listen to the story, listen to the village. Anyone who has never listened to a village will understand only half a story." And that night Garh Narikel began to speak for itself—in the language of its soil, its waters, its songs, its wounds and its watchfulness.

Folk culture is made up of the customs, beliefs, songs, stories, skills, traditions, arts, ways of speaking, memories and shared rules that grow out of people's everyday lives, not from books or government orders. It is not something that appears only on festival days. When a woman smears and smooths the courtyard floor at dawn, when a farmer holds a seed and breathes in the smell of the soil, when a child throws a pebble into a pond to judge its depth, when an old person points to an ancient flood mark and says, "The water rose as high as this," all these are acts of folk culture.

In *Jal Samadhi Among the Crocodiles*, water becomes the ground between justice and crime. A person who falls into the

water may have their name erased from the official record. But the river knows who they are.

Games play a great part in passing knowledge from one generation to another. When children play at being a bride and groom, they learn about the social customs of marriage. When they build houses out of mud, they learn about building.

Folktales can also impose a kind of social punishment. Instead of ordinary mourning, a person who has harmed the community may be remembered through a story of public disgrace. Someone who commits an injustice may be punished in a tale by becoming a ghost, suffering a curse, seeing a family line end, a tree dry up, a boat sink or a name disappear.

In *Jal Samadhi Among the Crocodiles*, Ba carries within her the deep memory of the women of Garh Narikel. Before turning to written evidence, she reads shoes, gamchhas, leaves, doorsteps and smells. Whenever she answers "Present" to the name of someone who has died, she performs a ritual of remembrance.

A tale: Near Channa Grove lies an unusual stone. It becomes cold when someone tells a lie and warm when someone tells the truth. One day, after returning from court, Nand Aruni placed his hand upon it. Slowly, the stone grew warm.

Another tale: Every year, on the day when the splash at the bridge returned to the village's memory, people placed four objects near Channa Grove—a shoe, a gamchha, a bangle and a leaf. There were no statues and no speeches. Ananya read out the names. Ba answered, "Present." A breeze came from the direction of the river, as though replying.

Another tale: After Channa Grove was cut down, the children began planting a tree in the name of every newborn child. Maps were drawn of the ponds, pools, low-lying wetlands, embankments and places where people gathered to discuss

matters. Nand Aruni said, "The heritage of our ancestors is not merely the saving of old things."

Those who saw and remained silent died twice. Those who saw and spoke had their names spoken twice.

A Little Folk Song

Float, little lamp, float upon Dakahi Pond;
Stay through the night, a witness to the names cut away.
A green lamp glows in the middle of the pond.
Whose name is it calling?

CHAPTER 1

Kabaddi in Channa Grove

Where the living keep silent, the ghosts argue their cases through kabaddi.

A bhoot is dark, a pret is white, and a rakash feeds upon corpses. When a child is buried instead of being burned, the child becomes a loth. Ghosts and spirits play kabaddi, the

rakash provides the light, and the loth watches. A Brahma-spirit lives in the peepal tree.

Bhoots, prets, rakashes and loths belong to the world after death, especially death that comes too soon. There is also the Brahma-spirit in the peepal tree, and the souls of those who became tangled in the hair of the panidubbi, the water-spirit. Garh Narikel has known many untimely deaths.

That night Bisessar arrived at Channa Grove. His body was not whole. Where the crocodiles had bitten away pieces of him, there was water in their place.

But after the flood, the shade had been cut away. Sand had crept into the village courtyards. Children in the pigeon-pea fields began to fear not the wild civets but the sand sinking beneath their feet.

Many years later, the true face of the ghost of that courtroom would be revealed: Batuknath Hariharan. But that night nobody knew his name. He was only smoke wearing a coat.

Nand wrote the sentence in his diary: "A crocodile eats the body, not the name." That night the old ghost Boodhba repeated those very words in Channa Grove as Bisessar, Chhotu, Salamat, Rajnu and a dozen other souls with incomplete names played kabaddi. For the first time, Hulasi did not laugh. She wept.

Before dawn, the game ended in Channa Grove. The drops on the leaves were not dew but ink. Boodhba the ghost settled once more upon his branch.

Smoke from morning hearths began to rise at every doorway in Garh Narikel. Women swept their courtyards. Children turned in their sleep.

Ba picked up that gamchha and pressed it to her forehead. No tears came to her eyes. The women of Garh Narikel knew that sometimes a name could be washed away with tears.

A Little Folk Song

Play, oh play the first turn of the morning;
Beneath Channa Grove, play to guard each name.
The moon slipped down beyond the grove; the east grew red.
Amid the ghosts' game, a cuckoo sang its happy song.

CHAPTER 2

The Village on the Right Bank

The river cuts the field-boundaries with its current; paperwork cuts villages apart with dates.

"The river cuts the field-boundaries with its current; paperwork cuts villages apart with dates."

"When the river eats someone's boundary, paperwork eats their court case."

Channa Grove was the night-time heart of this village. By day, it looked like no more than a thick cluster of trees. At night, all the dead gathered there to hold their council.

Kalit's childhood spread into every corner of the village. When he walked beside the Kamala-Balan River, the water rose a finger's breadth behind him. When he approached Sabhagachhi, the pandit reciting family roots and lineages fell silent.

When Kalit turned twelve, he was taken to Darbhanga. For the first time he spent a night away from the village. That night no kabaddi was played in Channa Grove at Garh Narikel.

At dusk, Ba carried a gamchha and an old slip of paper to Channa Grove. Women did not usually go there at night. But Ba was no ordinary woman.

That night there was no kabaddi in Channa Grove. The dead observed a vow of silence. Only Boodhba the ghost moved from one branch to another, as though waiting for someone.

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 workers must be submitted."

As soon as the date was written down, the paper trembled slightly. Nand felt the quiver reach his hand. He thought he heard Boodhba the ghost in Channa Grove saying, "Be careful."

A Little Folk Song

Come, traveller, walk along the right bank;
Carry the village's full name with you as you go.
The river may change its course; the sun still knows its direction.

The village's roots count their home beneath the soil.

CHAPTER 3

The Reckoning of the Splash

The splash of a clod falling into a well takes time to reach us, but it never stops asking for an account.

"When a death has no name, the person's spirit wanders through government corridors."

The night in Channa Grove stirred inside Nand. Bisessar Paswan, Chhotu, whose true name had never been found, the splash in the darkness, the torn corner of a gamchha—all rose together and began to speak, as though voices silent for years had opened their mouths at once. He said quietly, "Those who have gone leave footprints behind."

That night Nand began, for the first time, to practise listening to the river for names. He placed his ear against his papers, fixed his eyes upon the water, and held Channa Grove of Garh Narikel inside him. The names did not come clearly.

Nand's head grew hot with anger. Women worked, but their names did not appear in the register. Children carried water, handled sacks and picked up bricks, yet the register recorded only "family".

That night kabaddi began again in Channa Grove. Boodhba the ghost was the referee, the panidubbi marked the boundary, and the witches were strategists, not spectators. The loth, who always watched with its mouth half open, stepped onto the playing field this time.

Hulasi stepped forward from the spirits' team. She had no hands, but her voice was strong. Crossing the boundary, she asked, "If a woman's name disappears beneath her husband's, whose death is it?" The panidubbi drew a line with its long hair.

Third: Saryu, a woman worker, officially nonexistent.

After that the pages seemed to fill themselves. Outside, the river kept flowing. Within Channa Grove, the kabaddi game went on.

A Little Folk Song

Row slowly, boatman; carry the names across;
Set a line of lamps in the darkness of the splash.
At the first splash the boatman lifts his oar;
Not bodies alone, but names must cross: that is his vow.

CHAPTER 4

Thirty Names, Three Hundred Bodies

Thirty names in the register, three hundred bodies in the earth. The dead must always bear the burden of what is missing.

Saryu's name stood on the third line. Nand kept looking at it. The letters trembled like a woman's body.

At dawn he woke Bholaram. "Did you know Saryu?"

That night the rules of kabaddi changed in Channa Grove. Boodhba the ghost said, "From today, anyone who is caught will be asked not for their name, but for their reckoning." The rakashes would provide light. The spirits would take their turns.

The air stopped moving in Channa Grove. Old people in Garh Narikel say that when the wind falls still and not a leaf stirs, the dead sometimes begin to count. That night the counting began.

The first court date was set for two months later. Nand came outside without laughing or crying. He remembered the kabaddi game in Channa Grove.

That night the coconut leaves in Garh Narikel shook violently. The kabaddi game in Channa Grove was stopped halfway through. Boodhba the ghost addressed everyone: "A court date eats a name." The panidubbi asked, "Who will save it?" Hulasi replied, "The one who writes the name on a leaf." The loth, now half a player itself, rose a finger's breadth above the ground and said, "The crocodile of court dates lives in the courthouse."

That night Nand dreamed of a courtroom. A crocodile sat in the judge's chair. The court clerk called out the dates: "One splash, two splashes, three splashes." The lawyers wore coats made from river water.

The chapter had not ended. Only the bundle of papers had been closed. And the moment the bundle was tied shut, the story began another life.

That night kabaddi began again in Channa Grove. This time the ghosts crossed the boundary calling out one word: "Court!" The spirits answered, "Date!" The rakashes kept shining their light. The panidubbi gathered up its hair, as though it knew that from now on people would drown not in water, but in paper.

A Little Folk Song

Count, sister, count the names one by one;
Count places for three hundred lamps, not thirty.
Do not stop the counting at thirty; count while the leaves still stir.
Behind every number is a home, a mother and a dream.

CHAPTER 5

The Crocodile of Court Dates

People survive because the water at the river landing is visible.

When Nand Aruni entered the district courthouse corridor with Devkinandan Chaubey, he felt he had stepped into an old pond rather than a building. Dust lay on the walls like green moss. Each room contained tables, the tables held bundles of papers,

the bundles were tied with red ribbon, and the ribbons were knotted as though the panidubbi's hair had dried into rope—a rope that did not bind anything together, only tangled everything up.

Advocate Chaubey said softly, "Sir, you must not hurry here. The court moves at its own pace."

Chandrapal Batra stepped forward with a smile. "Mr Aruni? A very emotional case. But a court does not run on feelings. It runs on arrangements."

Nobody knows whether the word "signal" was born in that corridor. But many years later every one of Chandrapal Batra's crimes would run on signals—disappearing messages, secret codes, a hundredfold profit, accounts operated in other people's names and arrests supposedly carried out through a device. That day he was only a small-time fixer standing in a courthouse corridor.

When Nand returned from court that evening, an unusual gathering was taking place in Channa Grove. In the middle of a kabaddi match, Boodhba the ghost changed the rules: "From today the game is called Court Date."

Boodhba said, "Whoever takes a turn must hold their breath and call out a name. The other team will try to stop them, shouting 'No written account!' 'No judge!' 'No lawyer!' 'No bundle of papers!' If a player runs out of breath, their name will sink into the paperwork."

By chance Satyavrat Mehta met Nand outside Chaubey's office. The evening light slanted across the wall. Satyavrat spoke softly. "Mr Aruni, make many copies of whatever you have."

Far away, inside the courthouse storeroom, Bisessar's shoe dripped again: splash. Beside the Ganga, a crocodile lifted its

head out of the water for a moment. In the city, Satyavrat Mehta turned over in his sleep.

The leaves of Garh Narikel's coconut trees shook until late that night. The leaves themselves seemed to speak—date, date, date—and between one date and the next, a name flashed into view. It had been written not upon paper but upon water, as though the water itself were the final, indestructible diary of all the names, a diary that no court date, seal or red ribbon could ever erase.

A Little Folk Song

Rise, dear sun, rise even upon the court dates;
Wake the courtyard of the widow waiting for years.
The water of court dates is deep, but the sun rises every day;
At every hearing, let the people's courage stay.

CHAPTER 6

Ethics at Harvard

Before polishing the shoes of morality that climb the stage, look to see whose blood is on their soles.

Outside the Harvard auditorium, snow was falling that day. Inside there was warm light, smooth wooden chairs, shining

phone screens and name badges hanging around everyone's neck. Each badge carried a name, an institution and a country.

Ira Aruni sat in the very last row. She had always thought such halls beautiful: the bricks were old, the ideas were new, and people spoke as though every speech made the world's troubles a little smaller. But that day another sound was ringing inside her ears.

Ira had known that sound since childhood. Whenever she listened on the phone to Ba's stories about the village, Ba would sometimes stop speaking. Then she would say, "Your great-grandfather Nand Aruni did not drown in the waters of the Ganga. He drowned in government papers." Back then, Ira had laughed.

After the programme came a reception with food. Smooth plates, little dishes of food and a glass in every hand. Broom moved among the guests so easily that it seemed the water that had flowed across the stage existed only in Ira's imagination.

That same night in Garh Narikel, kabaddi was suspended in Channa Grove. Boodhba the ghost sat upon a branch. Hulasi leaned over the edge of the well.

By daybreak, work had begun in three different places. At Harvard, Ira was waiting for an answer. In Delhi, Satyavrat was preparing a note requesting the original written accounts.

And in Channa Grove, the ghosts had begun playing kabaddi again. This time, however, the rhythm had changed. One team called out "Jal samadhi!" and the other replied, "A hundredfold return!" Between them stood a young man who had died because of the crocodile on a phone screen. He said nothing.

Before the first light reached the grove, the panidubbi bent towards the water and said, "The words about right and wrong spoken abroad have reached the crocodile's ears here."

From beneath the water came the answer, "Mine too."

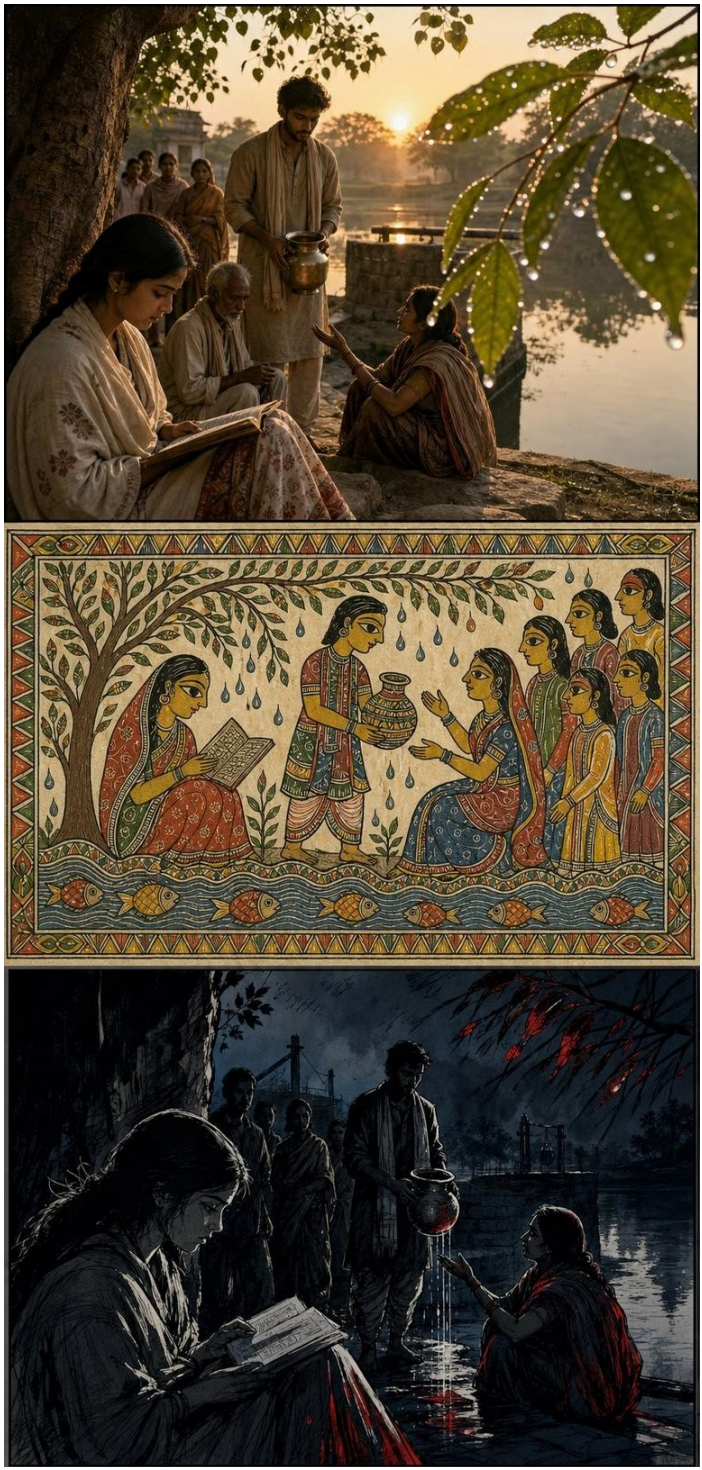
A Little Folk Song

Fly, leaf, fly across seven seas;
Carry the truth of Mithila's workers into the great hall.
A green leaf from the village flies to a land of snow;
Among the golden words onstage, let a worker's name ring out.

CHAPTER 7

The Price of a Breath

When the market begins setting the price of a breath, even ghosts stop playing and turn towards the living.



When the price of breathing began to be set by the market, the ghosts of Garh Narikel stopped playing for the first time and looked at the living. They watched with such care that they resembled an old doctor feeling for a pulse—except the pulse was not the doctor's own; it belonged to the entire world. Untimely death was nothing new to them. The ranks in Channa Grove already held every kind of death: the waters of a well, a river's current, a snake's fangs, the shadow of a witch and the foundations of a bridge.

That night, the spirits sat in a circle on the kabaddi field. The light from the rakashes was dim. The loth's mouth hung half open, but the laughter of a spectator was gone from it.

Then he said, "Keep writing down the names. Write the name of everyone who dies. Those who died of disease, those who died in hospitals, those who died because they had no air to breathe, those who died without medicines—list each kind separately."

At that time Chandrapal Batra flourished during the pandemic. Closed courts, fear of the police, hospital charges, families rushing about in distress—all of it was new ground for him. His law degree from Meerut hung on his wall.

Gop did not know that a man called Aruni Nandan was listening to ambulance sirens in another corner of Delhi. He did not know that Ira Aruni was waiting for an answer at Harvard. He did not know that Satyavrat Mehta was asking for the old written accounts.

Before dawn, when the haze over the city and the mist above the village were the same colour, Boodhba the ghost made an announcement in Channa Grove: "From today there will be a separate list of the new deaths. Those who died of disease, those who died because of greed, those who died without air to breathe, those who died because of bills, and those who die

because of mobile devices—all their names will be recorded separately."

The news said, "The situation is under control." Outside the hospital, the queue was long. The company's accounts were still running. Chandrapal Batra was composing his next message using a signal.

At the cursor, Gop typed his first line: "The reckoning of breath is not separate from the reckoning of jal samadhi."

At that very moment, far away in Garh Narikel, the panidubbi lifted an empty bottle from beneath the water and kissed it. A single drop fell from the bottle: splash.

A Little Folk Song

Sing, dear child, a birth-song for every breath;
Spread a shawl of wind above every courtyard.
At a baby's first breath, the whole village sings a birth-song;
The wind fills its free-flowing shawl with the sweetness of life.

CHAPTER 8

The Crocodile on the Screen

There is no body inside a phone screen, yet there is water enough to drown one.

The ghosts in Channa Grove did not go to sleep until late that night. The list of untimely deaths had been prepared, but a new

worry weighed on Boodhba the ghost. At the grove's outer edge he could see a new kind of shadow standing there.

At these words Hulasi shook with anger in Channa Grove. She had no hands, yet she struck out at the air with her handless arms. Dust whirled through the grove.

Gop traced the route. Lines appeared across his phone screen: from a young man in Garh Narikel to Munna's account, from there to a payment gateway, then to Raghav Somani, on to Lau Kin-hung, and finally to Broom-Calder's "Community Innovation Fund". He rose from his chair.

That night Ujjwal's spirit arrived in Channa Grove. He was new and frightened, no longer carrying the weight of his former body, yet still half lost in the glow of a phone screen. The ghosts were playing kabaddi, but this new spirit could not step onto the field for a turn. He held a phone in his hand. Its screen was cracked, but it still shone.

That same night Devika Sah resolved to get Ujjwal's phone to Gop Kumar. The phone was broken, but it held chats, threats, account details, screen recordings and fake notices of arrest carried out through a device. The phone was sent to the city by a child of Ananya's age, hidden inside a book cover.

A sheet of paper slid from the printer. There was the smell of fresh ink. Gop touched the sheet to his forehead.

From the water came a sound: splash. But this was not water splashing. It was the sound of a phone screen breaking.

The morning news announced, "New opportunities in the online gaming industry." At that very moment a chapter title appeared among Gop Kumar's bundle of papers: "The Crocodile on the Phone Screen." He knew that the next form of jal samadhi had begun. The river now lived in a pocket, and the crocodile used a thumbprint to open a bank account.

A Little Folk Song

Wake, young friends, keep watch with kindness;
Light the lamp of friendship in the screen's dark places.
When the screen shines at night, keep a friend beside you;
Life is greater than a losing score—say it every day.

CHAPTER 9

The Market in Human Bodies

When a paper packet is labelled "Guest Services", there is always a price written inside it for someone's daughter.

That night the kabaddi game stopped in Channa Grove. This was most unusual. In the world of bhoots, prets, rakashes,

loths, panidubbis and witches, the rules of the game were older than death.

Hulasi, who had fallen into a well while looking at her reflection and whose death had been falsely recorded by the village, asked Boodhba, "Why is there no game today?"

The committee was led by Malvika Green. Her name meant green; there were plants in her office, smiling children on her website and a slogan in her meeting hall: "Dignity, Rehabilitation, Self-Reliance." But her private phone held a message from Chandrapal Batra: "Two guests have come from abroad."

Phoolmati was not from Garh Narikel, but her grandmother had come from a hamlet near Channa Grove. Her grandmother used to say, "When dogs howl at night for no reason, you can be sure some wandering soul is looking for a path." Phoolmati had heard dogs howling on many nights in that hotel, even though dogs were forbidden there.

The words did not reach the meeting hall downstairs. But they reached Channa Grove. Hulasi stood up. She had no hands, yet in that moment her body held such strength that it seemed twelve hundred years of silence had broken all at once.

Late that night Satyavrat Mehta watched the same video in his official residence. He was supposed to add a comment to a bundle of papers: "Validity of Voluntary Service Agreements." He paused the video. Phoolmati's voice sounded again and again: "My name is Phoolmati."

Gop Kumar added a new title to his bundle of papers: "The Market in Human Bodies." His hand grew heavy as he wrote it, as though the letters knew their own weight. Under the heading he made three columns: Fear, Payment, Protection. In the column marked Fear he wrote Phoolmati's name.

The coconut leaves stirred in the morning breeze, soft yet firm, like a tired witness giving evidence one last time. Their rustling made a sound: "Name." Then another: "Consent." Then a third: "Fear." And finally came a deep splash, not in the water but inside the papers.

After that night in the novel, the criminal network became plain among Gop's papers: the bridge workers, the struggle for breath during the coronavirus pandemic, gambling on phone screens and the market in human bodies. All were circles drawn upon water.

A Little Folk Song

Sing, sisters, sing a song of dignity;
Spread a shawl of respect above Phoolmati's head.
Do not only call the body a temple—the body belongs to its owner;
Without consent, no one may open its door.

CHAPTER 10

Blackmailing Privacy

A body may be sold once, but a person's right to privacy can be sold again and again.

That night the ghosts were playing kabaddi once more in Channa Grove, but the lines of the game had changed. In the

past, they had been drawn upon the earth. Now the panidubbi drew them through the air with her wet hair.

Hulasi went in for her turn. The moment she touched the line, everyone could see the night at the well: she bent down, saw her reflection in the water, slipped, and the village called her death a suicide. Hulasi did not tremble.

For Meera, those words were like the sound of a dead woman's name returning to her ears in Channa Grove. The weight had not grown lighter, but she had found more strength to carry it. She ended the call and sent Gop Kumar a message: "I am sending the documents used to threaten and pressure me. But I have one condition: do not turn this into a question of homosexuality."

The first page held a threat sent by Chandrapal Batra's assistant. The second contained Raghav Sanket Somani's secret signal. The third recorded a payment for a device that stored information in Hong Kong.

In Garh Narikel that night, Ba was opening her old chest. She did not know Meera personally, but she remembered the many branches of the families. She ran a finger over a page of the old genealogy.

Ba replied, "Last night Hulasi came from the direction of Channa Grove. She said that women have now begun to speak their own names."

Far away in Channa Grove, the kabaddi game ended. The ghosts were tired, but there was happiness in their weariness. Boodhba the ghost rubbed out the lines of the phone screen that had been drawn on the ground.

The coconut leaves stirred. Three words could be heard in their rustling: "Name. Testimony." Then there was a long silence.

The chapter had not ended. Only the next face of the crime was about to appear. The flow of money would now turn towards weapons, drugs and the financing of terror.

A Little Folk Song

Sister, guard the threshold that is yours;
Your key, your story—think them through, dear sister.
Sister, your threshold is yours, and the key is in your hand;
Whoever enters through your phone must first have your consent.

CHAPTER 11

The Dark River of Money

Ghosts have no breath, yet they grow tired—not from their bodies, but from giving testimony.

That night, when Mrinalini Arya's testimony had been entered into the written account and the theft of her private life had become evidence of a crime, the kabaddi game did not stop in

Channa Grove. It merely slowed. Ghosts do not breathe, but they can grow weary.

Boodhba the ghost came down from his branch. At that moment, his twelve hundred years of patience seemed a little weaker. His feet always hovered a finger's breadth above the ground, but that night even that small distance trembled. The soil beneath Channa Grove began to grow damp from within.

"No," said Boodhba. "This is not water. When money becomes very dark, it flows like water, burns like fire and bites like a crocodile."

The network gave the names of rivers to its accounts: Kamala, Balan, Ganga, Sindhu, Mekong and Pearl. When money was sent out of India, they would say, "The water has receded."

Chandrapal Batra had earned a law degree in Meerut. The people of Garh Narikel did not know him by name. In the darkness of the city he was called "Batra Sahib."

Gop Kumar made three copies of the memory device, without hurrying, as carefully as a priest checking the offerings for a sacred fire three times. One was for Satyavrat Mehta, one for Eera Aruni overseas, and one to be placed inside the hollow of the old peepal tree in Channa Grove.

Boodhba the ghost said, "From today the game will be harder. In kabaddi now, to touch the other side, we must cross not merely bodies but accounts, bundles of papers, phone screens, courts and platforms in foreign lands."

The first sunlight fell upon a coconut leaf. The figures written on it slowly turned green. When Boodhba the ghost saw those green figures, he smiled.

That morning Gop Kumar wrote a sentence in his diary: "When crocodiles begin laying eggs inside bank accounts, you know it is time to clean the accounts, not the river."

A Little Folk Song

Launch, oh launch a green boat upon the dark stream;
Bring home the wages of labour and sow joy at every door.
The river of dark money flows; set your green boat afloat;
Let names, evidence, memory and courage be its four oars.

CHAPTER 12

A Coconut Leaf on the Dark Web

A coconut leaf neither sinks nor drifts away on the dark river—it shows the way.

As dawn spread across Garh Narikel, Channa Grove lay silent, exhausted by the night's game. The ghosts had returned to their branches, but their stillness was not the usual silence of the

dead. It was the silence of those who had heard a secret and were enduring the difficult task of guarding it until the proper time.

The little device hidden in the peepal's hollow during the night sent a faint glow up from the earth. The four faces of the Brahma-spirit of the peepal tree were not chanting four different mantras. Each was offering a different warning. The first said, “Protect the truth.” The second said, “Do not become a guide to lies.” The third said, “Keep the names safe.” The fourth said, “Reveal only as much evidence as justice requires.”

Meanwhile, across the sea, Eera Aruni was in Harvard's library. Outside the window lay a light covering of snow; inside the warm room, students were discussing ethics, justice, development and global responsibility. To reach this place, Eera had run a long way from the story of her family's village.

That morning a bundle of papers reached her. Its title was “The Names of Garh Narikel.” At first Eera was frightened. Then she opened it.

For the first time, Eera saw her family name not as a burden but as evidence. That day she decided that at Edward Broom's next lecture on ethics, she would ask a question. It would be short, but behind it would stand three hundred deaths by jal samadhi, Ujjwal's death linked to a phone screen, Meera's right to privacy and the black market in bottles of medicine.

Night came again to Channa Grove. Boodhba the ghost gave the first call: “Kabaddi.” Hulasi called next: “Name.” Then the loth: “Evidence.” And the panidubbi: “Dignity.”

Within that green light, the names of dead workers, Ujjwal's unfinished message, Mrinalini's testimony, Devika's tears, Gop's fear, Soumya's caution, Ramaiyya's silence, Ishan's lost shadow, Mehta's shame and Eera's question all came together upon a single line for one brief moment.

Boodhba the ghost said softly, "The truth is no longer only on paper. Now it is on the road."

Far away the dark river kept flowing. But for the first time a coconut leaf floated upon it without sinking.

A Little Folk Song

Walk gently, traveller; the paths of the web are dark;
Carry a leaf-lamp in your hand and journey with care.
On the road through the dark web, the leaf becomes a lamp;
A little green line of names shows the true direction.

CHAPTER 13

The Sealed Cover

The brighter the seal shines, the thicker the darkness inside the cover.

"The brighter the seal shines, the thicker the darkness inside the cover."

After that night, when the coconut leaf had floated without sinking on the dark river, no one in Channa Grove rested easily. The dead need no sleep, but waiting can weary even their bones. Boodhba the ghost sat upon his old branch, while his eyes seemed to gaze down the corridors of a court.

Chandrapal Batra reached him early that morning, sleepless, with five messages on his phone. The mark of Raghav "Sanket" Somani was visible, but the messages were brief.

At that moment Satyavrat Mehta stopped. The struggle within him awoke again. A sealed cover can protect something, but sometimes it can also become a grave for the truth.

Hulasi did not weep in Channa Grove. The tears of ghosts become dark dew. Boodhba the ghost went on counting names.

That evening at Harvard, Eera Aruni sat in the first row of the auditorium. Edward Broom was coming onto the stage. Behind him the screen displayed the title "Global Enterprise and Human Dignity." Eera held that same question in her lap.

Night fell over Garh Narikel. The game began again in Channa Grove. This time the rules had changed.

The courtroom was empty. A cleaner was mopping the floor. His cloth caught on one spot.

But the mark did not dry. Until dawn, a name went on shimmering within it.

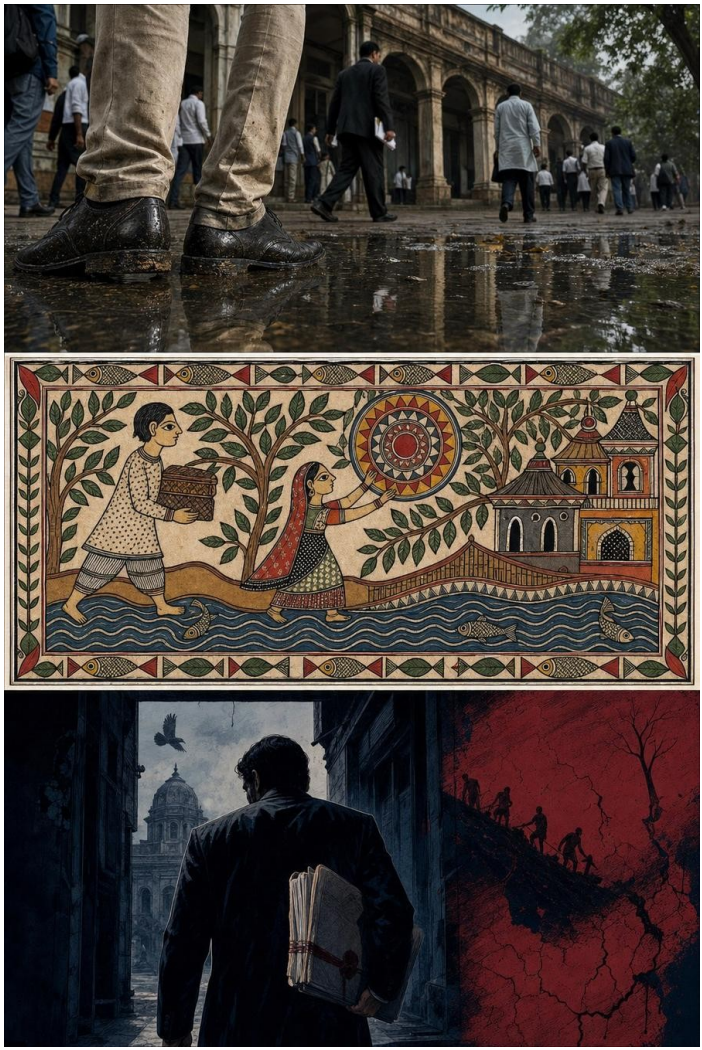
A Little Folk Song

Morning, come and untie the knot of the seal;
Let the breath imprisoned inside the cover speak.
Inside the sealed cover, a breath waits for its turn;
The rule of dawn is this: let the rightful hands open it gently.

CHAPTER 14

The Road Home

When a name comes home, even the earth awakens from its sleep.



"When a name comes home, even the earth awakens from its sleep."

"When a name returns home, the soil itself awakens."

By evening the news had spread through the village that several people had arrived from Delhi. Devika Sah came carrying a small photograph of her brother Ujjwal. Munna Paswan also arrived; his bank account had become a mule account in Chandrapal Batra's network.

Ishan brought out three bundles. The first held a list of workers. The second contained a list of frauds carried out through devices—the names of young men like Ujjwal, accounts operated in other people's names, false threats of arrest, and the fee receipts from Batuknath Hariharan's office.

“Bones are immersed in water,” said Ba. “Not this time,” Gop replied. “This time, at the roots of a tree.” A small digging tool was brought beneath the coconut tree near the doorway. Copies of Nand's bundle of papers and the workers' names, Ujjwal's photograph, copies of the threats against Meera, Munna's account record and Satyavrat Mehta's words in court were placed in separate brass boxes and buried beside the roots. It was the planting of testimony.

Satyavrat Mehta could not come to Garh Narikel that night, but a message arrived from him. It was not on paper or by phone, nor did it bear a court seal. An old friend brought his spoken words: “Keep the names safe.”

At midnight Aruni awoke to a sound. Something seemed to fall upon the coconut tree by the doorway. The moon was only half full, but the tree cast a full shadow.

Far away, in a guesthouse in the district town, Batuknath Hariharan tossed and turned in his sleep. In his dream there was no courtroom floor, only Channa Grove. He tried to play kabaddi, but whenever he opened his mouth to cry “Kabaddi,” the word that came out was “Hearing date.” The ghosts laughed.

When the first bird called at dawn, nobody in Garh Narikel took it for an ordinary bird. Its voice seemed to be saying something aloud to everyone. The next court date was no longer merely a date.

A Little Folk Song

Come home, traveller; a lamp burns on the threshold;
Your mother's shawl of shade is waiting along the road.
Footsteps sound through the mist; the threshold lamp burns;
A name steps out of the papers and turns towards its own courtyard.

CHAPTER 15

The Water of Names

No seal could erase a name that had remained upon the water.

"No seal could erase a name that had remained upon the water."

"When a name remains upon water, even the earth does not forget it."

Meanwhile, in Garh Narikel, kabaddi had been stopped in Channa Grove since morning. The ghosts sat along the two edges of the playing field. For the first time Boodhba the ghost had come down from his branch and stood a finger's breadth above the ground.

Ba sat upon a mat by the doorway, with Ananya in her lap. Gop Kumar, Soumya Ramanathan, Eera, Nishant, Devika, Munna and Mrinalini had not all been able to travel to Delhi.

Chandrapal Batra sat in his chair staring at his phone screen. Messages from Raghav Sanket had arrived throughout the night: “Remove the names.” “Bring up the victims' right to privacy.” “Blame the poor for the accounts run in other people's names.” “Hariharan will handle it.” But since morning Sanket had been silent. The signal from Lau Kin-hung in Hong Kong was gone.

The game in Channa Grove was at its height. Bhoots, prets, rakashes, loths, panidubbis, witches and the Brahma-spirit were all on the field. The workers from the Ganga bridge stood along the boundary line.

The highest leaf of the coconut tree stirred. Within that movement were Nand Aruni's hand, Sarayu's basket, Ujjwal's broken phone, Mrinalini's courage, Devika's shawl, Munna's lowered eyes, Ishan's returning shadow, Satyavrat Mehta's trembling yet upright voice, Soumya's blue pencil, Gop's silence and Eera's question—all together.

Then Boodhba the ghost gave his final call: “Crocodiles eat bodies. But when names are written upon the water, even the water cannot erase them.”

And all through the night the coconut leaves kept sounding: “Kabaddi, name, kabaddi, name.”

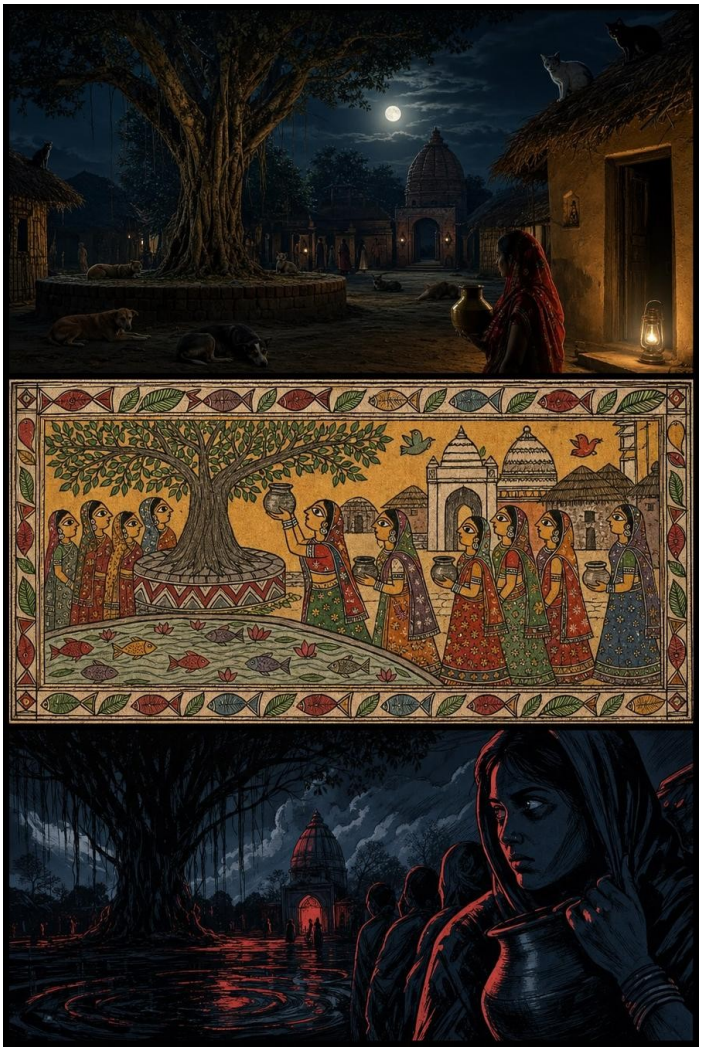
A Little Folk Song

Fill your cupped hands; fill them with the water of names;
Carry its nectar, drop by drop, to every throat.
A name written on water travels far with the waves;
It cannot be erased; drop by drop, it enters new voices.

CHAPTER 16

The Court of Channa Grove

No page of paper can forget a name once a tree has heard it.



"No page of paper can forget a name once a tree has heard it."

"Paper cannot erase the name a tree has heard."

Aruni did not reply. That night Gop Kumar held no bundle of papers in his hands. Soumya had closed her bag.

The panidubbi rose from the pond and sat at the edge of the grove. Her long hair was drenched, and when she spread it across the earth it began to form a script as dark as ink. The witches left their little platforms and came without their mounts.

Then the criminals' names were called in the court of Channa Grove. But something strange happened: Batuknath Hariharan did not come.

Their shadows, however, appeared in court. Hariharan's shadow took the form of a thick bundle of papers whose pages changed their hearing dates all by themselves. Batra's shadow glowed like a phone screen, and inside it a long snake slid across a keyboard.

That morning Gop Kumar, Soumya, Devika, Meera, Eera, Aruni, Ramaiyya and Satyavrat Mehta's voice, which came from far away, all understood the same thing: the court's decision had been obtained, but now it must be written not on paper but upon people's lives.

And indeed, from that day onwards the schemers roamed about holding their papers of victory. Those they had defeated were nowhere to be found sitting on the courthouse steps. Some were writing down names. Some were teaching children to recognise crocodiles hiding inside phone screens. Others were telling women that shame belongs to the offender, not to the victim.

That night the novel did not end in Channa Grove. Only one cycle had reached its close; many more remained. The first cycle was complete. The leaves stirred, and anyone with ears could hear: the real story had now begun.

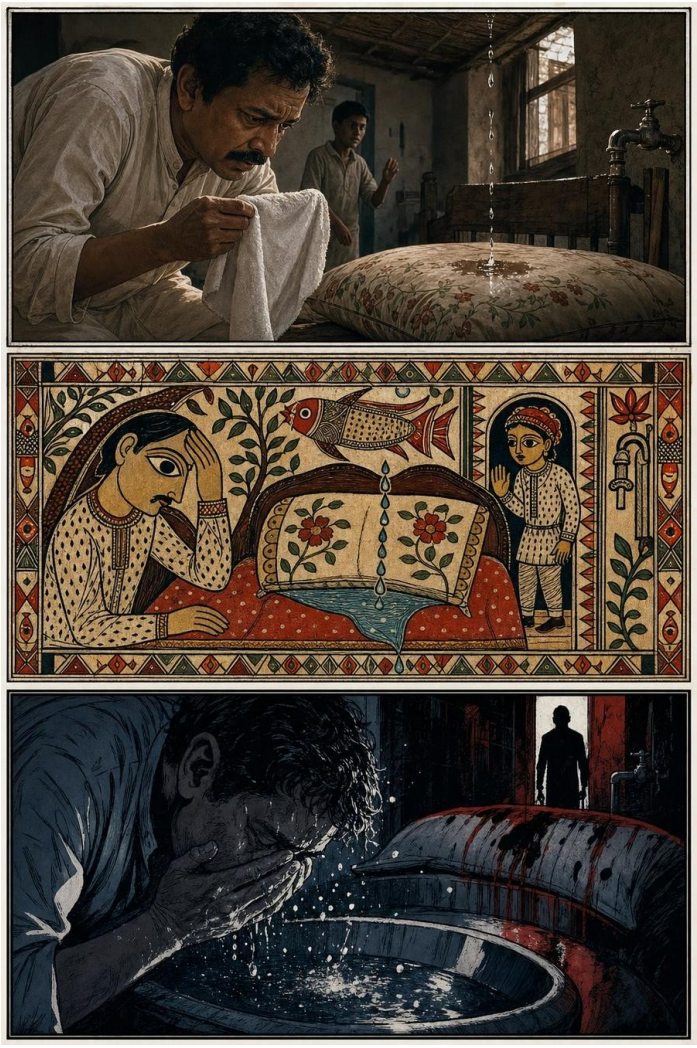
A Little Folk Song

Sit, village elders, sit beneath the tree;
Write the law upon its leaves and serve the truth faithfully.
Mats are spread beneath the tree; its leaves become the law;
The seal is far away, the people are near—everyone receives a fair hearing.

CHAPTER 17

The Sorrow of Victory

If the defeated stop waiting, the victor's triumph will collapse beneath its own weight.



"If those you defeated no longer wait for you, your victory will break beneath its own weight."

That afternoon Batuknath's men searched the courthouse corridors. The bench where Devika used to sit was empty. By the window where Gop Kumar used to examine papers, there was nothing but dust.

At the same time, in Garh Narikel, Aruni and Ba were setting the first bamboo pole near Channa Grove. It bore no flag and no political symbol. Devika was levelling the ground.

Ananya, Aruni's daughter, sat down with a little piece of chalk. “Whose name comes first?” she asked. Everyone was silent. Ba answered, “The person whose name was first struck from the papers.”

Soumya opened the list. It held a thousand faces, but the first line was blurred. The shadow of a leaf fell across it and the letters became clear: “Sarayu.” Ananya found it difficult to write Sarayu's name.

That night, after the first name had been written in Garh Narikel, the people did not go home. The widow of an elderly worker arrived and said, “My husband's name is not in the government papers. But he belongs to this village.” She could not read her dead husband's name.

The chapter was not over. The sorrow of victory had only just begun. Day and night, the schemers were now searching for the people they had defeated.

The leaves of Channa Grove moved gently in the morning light. Boodhba the ghost watched from his branch and whispered, “This is the sorrow of victory. No court could give a punishment greater than this sorrow.”

A Little Folk Song

You have won, you have won—but take off your crown;
First bring healing balm for the wounds of the defeated.
If you have won, first look for the wounds that remain;

Lay down your crown and serve; only then is victory complete.

CHAPTER 18

The Empty Court

When a court stands empty, know that justice has grown afraid of the names of those who are absent.

"Justice that listens only to those present is afraid of the names of the absent dead."

Batuknath's face stiffened. Chandrapal Batra sat in the row behind. He thought Satyavrat was once again crossing a line.

“Discipline should not be the art of striking the names of the dead from the record,” Satyavrat said, and walked away. Batuknath watched him go for a long time. He realised this would not be an easy man to defeat.

Those words did not blow away upon the wind. They settled on a leaf in Channa Grove, and the veins of the leaf began to shine.

That night beneath Channa Grove in Garh Narikel, a new game began. The children played kabaddi, but the rules were different. A player who was caught would not have their name crossed out.

Boodhba the ghost sat smiling upon his branch. The rakash dimmed his light so as not to disturb the children's game. For the first time, the loth rose from the spectators and sat beside the playing field.

Thus the first written account kept by a citizen was opened in the empty court—not because of an order or a petition, but because a cleaner remembered something.

When Batuknath arrived, the benches were clean. Yet he felt that someone invisible was sitting on every one of them. The court was no longer empty.

A Little Folk Song

Fill them, oh fill the empty benches;
Hold high the letters written by the sweeper's son.
The benches seem empty, yet shadows sit upon them;
Names once denied entry have arrived with the dawn.

CHAPTER 19

The Record of Names

Chairs rot; roots do not.

The names that had appeared in the dust on the benches of the empty city court had sent their seeds upon the night's wind to Garh Narikel. Here the court of Channa Grove had ended its

sitting, but its seats remained. Seats—or perhaps roots—for these were not chairs made of wood.

When the first bird called at dawn, the lines of the game were still visible in Channa Grove. There were footprints in the soil, but no human being could tell whose they were. Some marks had touched the earth; others looked as though they had passed a finger's breadth above it. Still others formed circles, as if some great boneless body had rolled there.

By noon, fifty names had been written in Channa Grove. Leaves lay spread upon the ground. Crows walked across them, but the ink did not rub away.

Ba looked towards her. “Recording a name does not mean laying a person's life bare. If someone's suffering should remain private, it will remain private.”

By nightfall the ground in Channa Grove was covered with a blanket of leaves. Ananya and the village children began learning to read the letters. At first they thought the names were part of a game.

That night there was no kabaddi in Channa Grove. The ghosts sat around the playing field. The leaves lay spread out in the middle.

When the sun rose, the names written on Channa Grove's leaves had dried. Some letters had turned faintly green, as though the leaves had taken them into their very veins. Ananya read the names one by one.

Ananya asked, “Has school begun?”

A Little Folk Song

Sing a dawn song: “I am present!”
Adorn the leaves with turmeric and kohl, and write the old names.
With turmeric and kohl, adorn the leaves with the names of old;

At the hour of roll call, let everyone sing, “I am present!”

CHAPTER 20

The School That Stood Up to the Screen

One by one, the school began to give back everything the phone screen had swallowed.

The dry coconut leaf that had rung like a bell the previous evening kept ringing in people's ears until morning. On the day after the written record of names was made, such a stillness settled over Garh Narikel that it seemed a great hand had been laid upon the village. The names written on leaves in Channa Grove were wet with dew, yet their letters had not run.

Ananya stood at the very front. She read the names rather as a small child reads the alphabet for the first time—only here the alphabet had been made from the bodies of the dead. "Sarayu Devi," she read.

"At first, they let a person win," Devika told the children, winding the end of her sari around a finger. "These crocodiles of the phone screen first allow their prey a little victory, just as a river crocodile keeps the water still at first."

That morning, the first class gathered beside the leaves in Channa Grove. There was no slate, no bell, no government recognition. In the middle lay the shattered glass of a phone, an old bank passbook, Ujjwal's unfinished notebook and a coconut leaf.

That night Boodhba the ghost laughed heartily in Channa Grove. "Did you see?" he said to Hulasi. "The living are learning."

Chandrapal Batra's gang suffered its first great blow on the day Munna Paswan's cousin was taken to open a bank account. The boy stopped outside the bank. He held a pen, but his palm was sweating.

That night there was kabaddi in Channa Grove again. But this game was different. The ghosts played upon the very lines the children had drawn across the ground during the day.

Those questions brought many scams to an end. Many fears were shared. Much of the shame was returned to the people who had committed the crimes.

And the court of Channa Grove, which had already delivered its judgment, sat smiling at a distance. It knew that sometimes justice does not take the form of an order. Sometimes it takes the form of a school.

A Little Folk Song

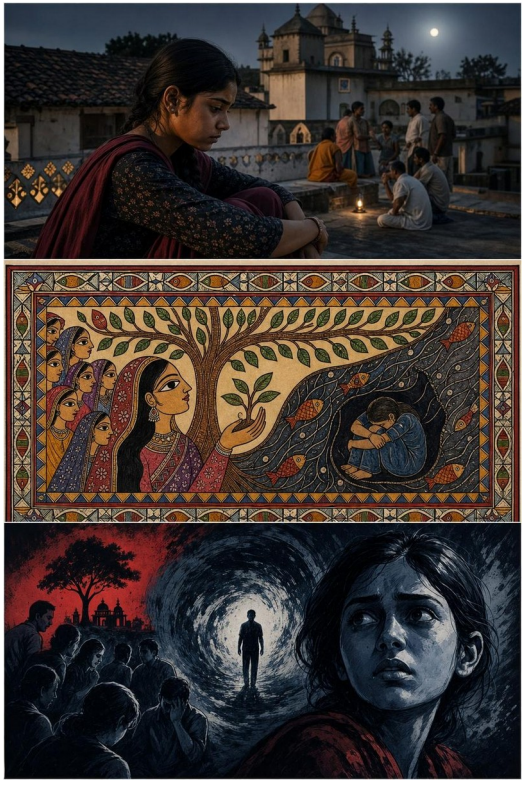
Come, my friends, join hands and make a ring;

“You aren't alone, are you?”—let that be the first thing.
The screen-crocodile has four feet—greed, fear and shame;
When helping hands come together, its whole kingdom falls apart.

CHAPTER 21

The Promise to Protect Privacy

Peace does not come from outside.



"You aren't alone, are you?" had become the village greeting. Because of that question, and because the written record of names was complete, the villagers thought peace would now come to Garh Narikel. But peace never arrives from outside. It grows from within. And when the soil within has been filled for years with fear, shame, silence and threats, the earth trembles as its first small shoot pushes through.

On the day Devika Sah saw Ujjwal's name written on the third leaf of the record, she could not sleep. Her brother's death, she

felt, was not merely a black dot sunk into a phone screen. It was the darkness of the entire village.

Devika drew the next line and wrote, “Fraud.” After her, Meera stepped forward quietly and drew a third line: “Shame.” She said, “Scammers hold us captive not with money but with shame. They know that before going to court we will fear our families; before our families, society; and before society, what might happen to our own bodies. So today we promise that the shame will belong to the criminal, not to the victim.”

During the promise-making in Channa Grove, a girl who attended Ananya's school asked, “What should I do if somebody says they'll send my photograph to everyone?” No one spoke. The question was so simple that answering it became difficult. Devika sat down beside the girl.

That night Raghav “Sanket” Somani sent Lau Kin-Hung a message: “The local resistance is taking a different path from the law.” A reply came: “Outside the law?” Raghav wrote, “Not outside the law. Before the law.” For the first time Lau Kin-Hung wrote, “I don't understand.” Raghav stared at the reply for a long while. He felt that someone who understood only accounts, percentages, commissions and transfers could never be made to understand a promise, shame, names and memory.

Meera sat alone at the edge of Channa Grove. In the grove's stillness, only the crickets could be heard. Hulasi came to her.

When the promise was complete, the panidubbi returned to the pond. Hulasi looked at her reflection in the well. This time she felt that the reflection had hands.

After daybreak, the children of Garh Narikel wrote a new sentence on the school wall: “When fear is shared, it becomes a warning. When fear is hidden, it becomes a noose.” Beneath it Ananya added, in smaller letters, “Silence is a scammer's first profit.”

Devika stood at a distance and read the words. She knew that Ujjwal would never return. But now, if another Ujjwal were trapped, there would be somewhere to speak before it was too late.

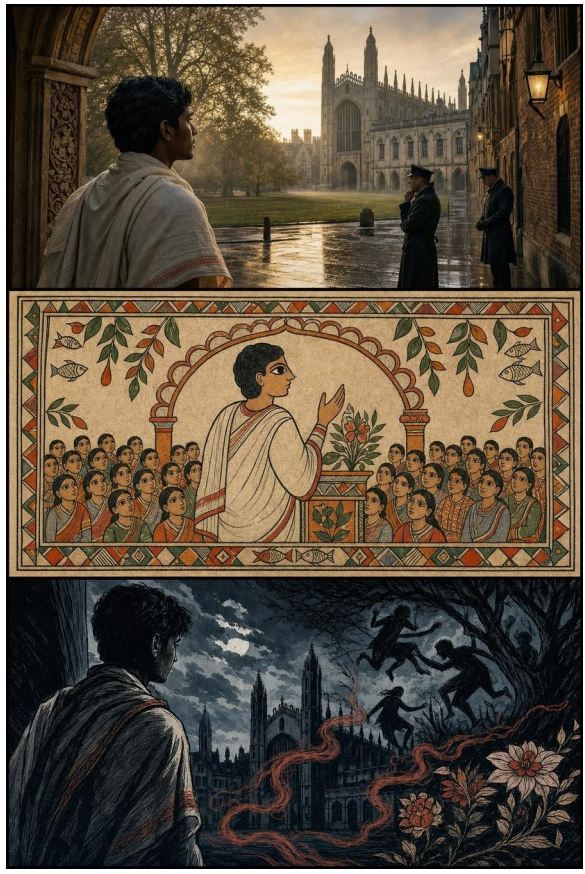
A Little Folk Song

Rise, my sisters, gather in a circle;
Let our voices join: "We are innocent; we stand together."
We have done no wrong, sister; the shame belongs to the criminal;
Hold one another's hands and a safer path will open.

CHAPTER 22

The Second Lecture at Harvard

A second lecture can be better than the first only when someone has spoken the truth in between.



Morning in Cambridge was not like morning in Garh Narikel. There was no mist rising over paddy fields, no dew dripping from the edges of coconut leaves, and no ghosts returning to their branches in Channa Grove after a night's kabaddi. Yet that morning, moisture filled the air in Cambridge so strangely that the old bricks of the great university buildings seemed to give off the scent of the Kamala-Balan River.

That day Edward Broom was to give another lecture on right and wrong. Posters outside the auditorium announced "Global Enterprise, Human Dignity and Responsible Capital." The letters were gold, the paper was thick, and the flowers on the stage were so spotless that it seemed they had never touched the earth.

Eera Aruni had received an invitation to enter the auditorium. Her seat was in the front row, marked with a card bearing her name. Reading the card, Professor Elina Graves smiled and asked, "Will you ask a question?"

At that very time evening was settling over Garh Narikel. The next page in the written record of names was opened on a leaf in Channa Grove. Ananya was lining up the children.

Ananya began to read. "Sarayu Devi." The children answered, "Present." "Kanhaiya Paswan." "Present." "Ujjwal Jha." "Present." "Unknown woman, Room Number Twenty-Seven." "Present." "The third elderly person on the waiting list for breathing air." "Present." "Not the number of the account run in someone else's name, but Munna Paswan." "Present." The voices rose from the village into Eera's device, travelled from there to the steps in Cambridge, and from the steps reached the closed doors of the auditorium.

Batuknath Hariharan sat in his luxurious drawing room. Tea stood before him, with a skin forming on its surface. He watched Eera on his phone screen.

After the broadcast ended in Garh Narikel, the children scattered. Ananya could not fold the leaf—it folded itself in the air and settled beside the roots of the coconut tree. Boodhba the ghost sat on a branch, laughing.

By dawn a new saying had spread through Garh Narikel: "Listen to whoever speaks from the stage. Believe what is written on the leaf." The children wrote it on the school wall.

Below it Ananya added in tiny letters, "Sometimes silently reading names is another way of asking a question."

The following week Edward Broom changed the name of his company. The news announced a new beginning, a new commitment and a new direction in ethics. But the children of Garh Narikel laughed.

A Little Folk Song

Sing out the tune of truth, even if the stage is bare;
Let one voice from the leaf fill the whole hall.
Though the stage is empty, the leaf's voice will still arise;
One truthful name rings louder than golden words.

CHAPTER 23

Batuknath's Search

The paper announcing victory was thick, but it held not a single sound—and a victory without a voice is only a burden.

The stage across the sea was empty, and the company had changed its name. Meanwhile, in the city, Batuknath Hariharan had received a paper declaring his victory, but victory had no taste. The paper was thick, the seal shone, and the language of the order was so polite that even cruelty seemed to be dressed in good manners.

The empty doorway frightened Batuknath most of all. He was a man who feared silence, not noise. Noise he could turn into a legal argument; silence he could not.

He called his secretary. The secretary had been with him a very long time. He could lift a bundle of papers and tell from its weight whether it contained truth or a bribe. "Where are those people?" Batuknath asked. The secretary did not understand.

The words hurt Batuknath. Roads are marked out on the map of the law, too. But people's suffering carves its own course.

At that moment 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 looked at the line. He felt that the moment he crossed it, every secret message inside him would spill out: messages about Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Sanket, Lau Kin-Hung, payments, dates and plans for defence.

Evening was slowly falling. The first shadows lengthened across Channa Grove. Batuknath saw shapes in those shadows.

That night kabaddi was played in Channa Grove. The children had finished playing during the day; now it was the ghosts' turn. Boodhba the ghost crossed the line, held his breath and chanted, "Batuknath, Batuknath, Batuknath." The rakash made a light shine, the loth clapped, and the panidubbi stirred the pond.

A new day began in Garh Narikel. Devika left to teach the next lesson on digital scams. Meera sat down to hear the story of another woman in her group for the right to privacy.

In the city, Batuknath Hariharan put his victory order into a cupboard. Sunlight did not fall upon it. But now and then he could hear the rustling of leaves from inside the cupboard.

A Little Folk Song

Come, victorious traveller, first visit the home of the defeated;

Carry your papers under your arm and share some kindness on the way.
With the victory paper beneath your arm, go first to people's homes;
Listen to the lives of those you have defeated today.

CHAPTER 24

The Novel Begins Again

Where the story is said to end, the grove opens a new page.

All night, the victory paper in the city's cupboard listened to the rustling of leaves. Meanwhile, in Garh Narikel, the first thin light of morning clung to the branches of Channa Grove, as though the court that sat there at night had not yet been adjourned. Dogs barked on the road beyond the village, but within the grove there was no uneasiness.

That morning not a single line flew away. Names shone within the drops of dew. The children could not read them as letters, but they recognised them through their breathing.

In class Meera was saying, "Love is not a crime. The right to privacy is not a weapon. Using threats to put pressure on someone is not shame; it is violence." At first some people felt uncomfortable.

That evening the second round of the game began. This time some adults entered the field with the children. Crossing the line, Devika called, "Ujjwal is not for sale." Meera called, "Privacy is not for sale." Nishant said, "Open the channels of payment." Soumya said, "The documents belong to the people." Gop Kumar said, "When information becomes a name, fear grows smaller." Aruni crossed the line and fell silent.

The last kabaddi game began in Channa Grove. This time the rules were different. Whoever crossed the line had to speak not a name, but a future.

The ghosts climbed into their branches. The panidubbi disappeared into the water. The rakash's light dissolved into daylight.

Chandrapal Batra's mobile operation began working again. Some people were trapped again. The world does not become free in a single night.

Crocodiles eat bodies. But when a name has entered a child's breath, no river, no court, no foreign bank account, no phone screen run by a machine, no order of victory and no paper of defeat can erase it. That name becomes a game.

And the village—Garh Narikel—begins all over again.

A Little Folk Song

Turn the page again, children, turn a brand-new page;
With ink made of dewdrops, call forth a new story.
The book said, "The End"; a child turned the page;

One tiny dewdrop wrote a new story there.

CHAPTER 25

The Mind Left Hanging

Inside a locked cupboard, it is dust, not the order, that speaks—and the voice of dust will not let you sleep.

The village had already begun again. Meanwhile, in the city, when an order declaring victory has dried completely, its voice no longer sounds like paper. It sounds like dust.

At first Batuknath thought it was a mouse. Then he remembered that all the mice in his house had been exterminated years ago. Steel mesh covered every hole, chemicals lay in every corner, and every servant was watched.

Chandrapal, too, remained silent. A movement could be made into a crime when it had a crowd, slogans, leaders, donations, posters, trucks and a stage. But these were children reading names on leaves.

That night Channa Grove was quiet. The game had not ended, nor had it been postponed. It was the stillness of a game waiting for its next breath.

In a dream, Ananya saw Batuknath Hariharan arriving in Channa Grove. He held his victory order in one hand, wore a lawyer's pride on his brow and had weariness in his eyes. “Where are the defendants?” he shouted. Boodhba the ghost answered, “At work.” “What work?” Batuknath asked. All the children replied together, “The future.”

Before daybreak, a faint sound rose in Channa Grove. From his branch Boodhba the ghost said, “Now they will come.” “Why?” Hulasi asked. “Their hearts have been left hanging,” Boodhba replied. From inside the pond the panidubbi sent up a ripple. “Without their bodies?” “First their minds,” said Boodhba.

And so the minds of Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Sanket, Lau Kin-Hung and Edward Broom all set out towards Garh Narikel from different directions. Their bodies were still in cities and foreign lands, in glass offices, hotels, courts, strongrooms and before phone screens. But their minds had already gone ahead.

There were still no cars on the road outside the village. No travellers waited at the station. The court order remained in the cupboard.

The court of Channa Grove had not been adjourned. It was only waiting for the next matter it would have to consider.

A Little Folk Song

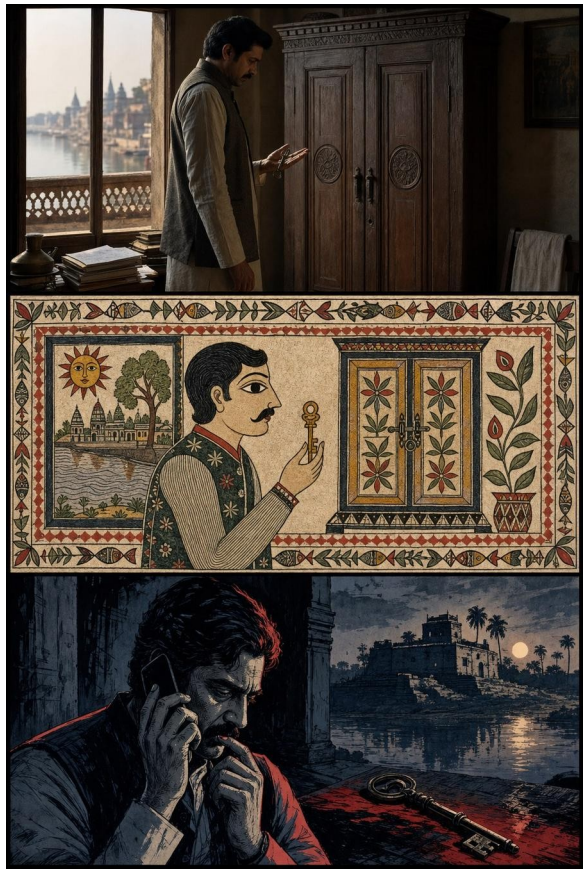
Traveller, take the road of the heart back to the village;

Leave your body in the city; carry your bundle of memories home.
Though your body stays in the city, your heart takes the village road;
Leaves rustling, the smell of the pond, and grandmother's words.

CHAPTER 26

Batuknath Hariharan's Journey

Hold a key all night, and by morning your palm smells not of brass but of questions.



His mind had arrived there the night before. At dawn, Batuknath Hariharan stood before his cupboard. Because he had held the key all night, the smell of brass lingered on his palm.

Batuknath telephoned his secretary. “Sir, there is a Bar Council meeting this afternoon,” the secretary said in a half-sleeping voice. “Cancel it,” said Batuknath. The secretary was startled.

"The media?" "Cancel that." "Where are you going?" Batuknath took a moment to answer. For someone ashamed even to speak the name of a village, that village first comes like a thorn upon the tongue.

Boodhba the ghost did not give his name. Had he spoken it, the story would have opened at once, and the story of Garh Narikel never opens all at once. He merely drew a circle on the floor of the railway carriage with the tip of his walking stick.

Batuknath was annoyed, tired and frightened, yet curious, too. Curiosity never quite dies inside a cunning person. It merely turns into a question of usefulness.

The old man read what was in his mind. "You are thinking of another trap," he said. "A net belongs in the water."

Channa Grove came into sight in the distance. Even daylight seemed to grow weary as it entered the trees. Children's voices floated from the grove—not cries of kabaddi, but the reading of names.

The children saw him, but they were not afraid. Devika nodded from a distance. When Meera saw him, she folded up her page.

"Yes," said Batuknath. Ananya asked a second question: "Will you read a name?"

Before he could answer, Boodhba the ghost climbed onto a branch. A light breeze moved through Channa Grove. All the leaves rustled together, as though a thousand pages were being opened at once.

A Little Folk Song

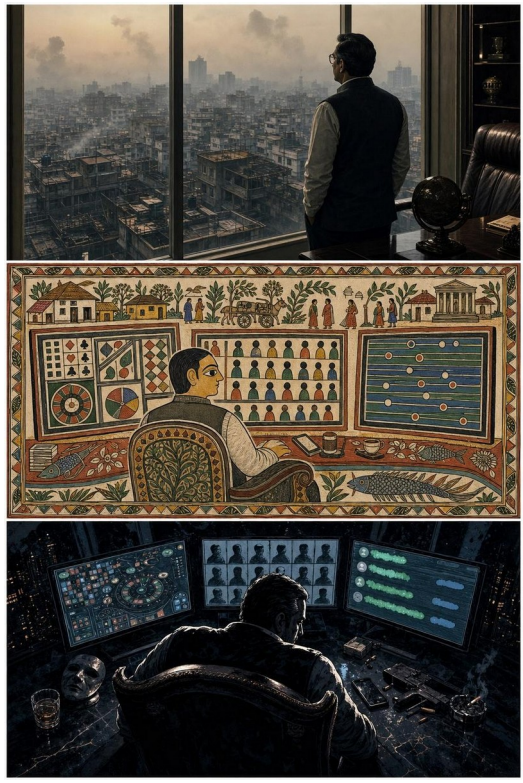
Take off your shoes, traveller, leave them at the door;
Lay down the weight on your head, and the heat of your high position, too.
Leave your shoes at the doorway, and leave your pride beside them;

Let the cool earth beneath your feet take the fever from your head.

CHAPTER 27

Chandrapal Batra's Screen

You cannot see the village through a wall of glass, but the village's names can pass through glass.



Chandrapal Batra would not go to Garh Narikel. He set his seal upon that decision on the very morning Batuknath Hariharan was practising reading names with Boodhba the ghost aboard the train. One cunning man had set off in person; another had not moved from his place. Yet the grove was reading both of them together.

His room was not an office; it was a web. Phone screens covered three walls. One showed the dashboard of an online gambling app, another a list of bank accounts operated in other

people's names, and the third strips of green and blue signal messages.

He heard no voice from Raghav Somani. Yet the sound Batra sensed behind those glimpses was not Raghav's. It was the breath of someone young, trapped inside a phone. Batra wanted to throw the phone away, but it clung to his hand.

There was Raghav Somani. Behind Raghav stood Lau Kin-Hung. And behind Lau Kin-Hung lay the sea, glass, banks, hawala transfers, ships, data-storage devices and a language Batra did not fully understand—though he understood the percentages.

"This is not some magic of Garh Narikel," Batra said, making his voice hard. "It's a campaign aimed at the mind." "Then how do we respond?" asked Raghav. "With a counter-move," said Batra. "We'll have the written record of names declared illegal."

His secretary arrived in the morning. "Sir, your appearance in court today?" "Postponed," said Batra. "The board meeting?" "Postponed." "Raghav Somani?" Batra hesitated. "I told you, keep all the phone screens switched off." The secretary looked astonished. "Sir?" Batra did not reply. He kept staring out of the window.

Chandrapal Batra remained by the window. Below him, the city went on moving. Above him, the phone screens were quiet.

In the evening Raghav sent a coded message: "Orders?" For a long time Batra did not type. At last he sent one line: "Look for names, not evidence." The message erased itself as soon as it was sent. Then a leaf from Channa Grove dropped onto the phone screen.

In this way Chandrapal Batra entered Garh Narikel without ever going there. His body remained in the city's glass room, but his mind hung towards Channa Grove through a crack in the phone screen. The inner journey of the cunning men had only just begun.

A Little Folk Song

Sing and sway, sing beyond the glass;
Make a bridge, not a screen, so both sides may cross.
A glass screen has two faces, and each can see the other;
The city watches the village, and the village watches the city.

CHAPTER 28

Raghav Signal's Silence

Those who fear voices speak through letters that disappear.

The second stop on the cunning men's inward journey was Raghav. In the life of Raghav "Sanket" Somani, the human voice had never mattered much. In fact, he feared it.

That night, returning from Chandrapal Batra's glass-walled room, Raghav stopped as soon as he opened his apartment door. Everything inside was as before: a blue light, a glass table, three phones, two closed laptops, and a metal cupboard containing no cash but SIM cards, bank kits, seals for false

companies and several old passports. Yet there was one new thing in the room: silence.

Raghav Somani was not really a businessman but a ledger. Clothes covered his body, a smile covered his face, a phone lay in his pocket. Inside him there were only deposits and withdrawals.

His escape plans were everywhere: another name, another passport, another country, a house in the mountains, cash, gold, coins and a third phone. But a green line ran along the edge of every page, like a vein in a leaf.

By evening Chandrapal Batra called. Raghav saw the call but did not answer. Then a message came: "Status?" Raghav began to type, "Everything is under control." His finger stopped.

Something inside Raghav broke in that emptiness. A criminal's greatest fear is not being caught. It is being unable to remember the name of the first crime he committed.

Raghav's eyes filled, but no tears fell. Long practice in crime can dry the water from a person's eyes. He wanted to cry, but there seemed to be no water left inside him.

In the morning a new leaf lay on his table. On it was written, "Listen before you break your silence." Raghav put the leaf inside his notebook. This was not a confession. Nor was it repentance.

That morning a new sound joined the kabaddi in Channa Grove. "Who has come?" the ghosts asked. Boodhba the ghost listened carefully. "Not a body," he said. "Someone has sent a silence." The loth smiled.

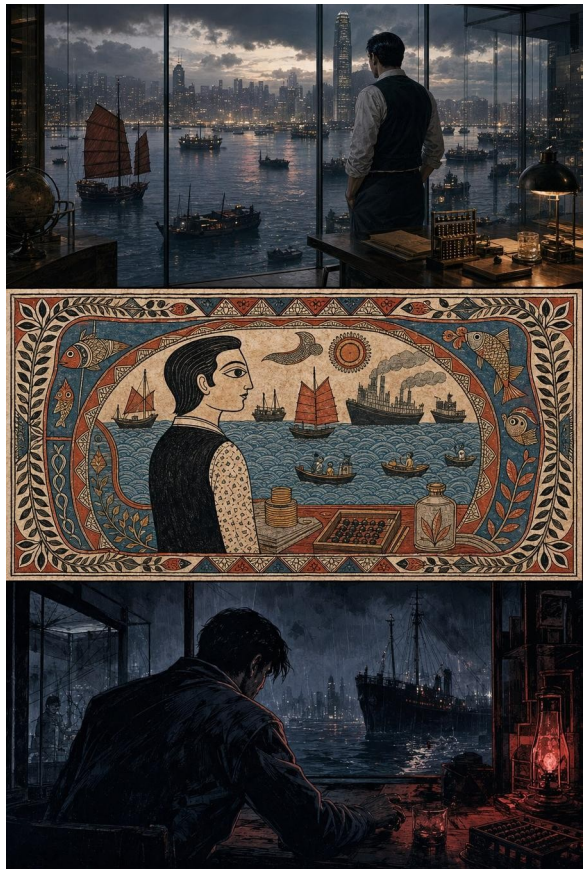
A Little Folk Song

Wake, my friend, and hear the message bell;
Listen even to words that last five seconds.
Even five-second letters may carry a signal;
Recognise signs of trouble, fear and despair in time.

CHAPTER 29

Lau Kin-Hung's Dream

A name written out in full can lead to arrest—but a half-written name becomes its own prisoner.



Raghav's silence had already crossed the sea to Hong Kong. Lau Kin-Hung never pronounced his full name. He said that a name written out completely on paper could be arrested.

He lived in a glass house beside the sea. It was not really a house but a cave made of glass. He was inside and outside at the same time.

Then a crocodile appeared in the water. A crocodile in the sea off Hong Kong? But dreams pay no customs duty on impossible things.

The crocodiles surrounded him. One, two, three, four. At that moment the kabaddi of the ghosts in Channa Grove could be heard in the water.

He saw himself in an auditorium at Harvard. On the stage Edward Broom was speaking: "Human dignity is the soul of development." The hall applauded. Lau Kin-Hung sat in the darkness at the back.

Then water began to drip from the auditorium ceiling. Professor Elina Graves hurried to save her notes. Eera Aruni stood up, but did not go towards the stage.

Yet he did not understand that when a person is cut off, their mind becomes free first. Raghav's silence had already become a leaf. Batra's phone screen had already become Channa Grove.

Lau drew the curtain. But the sound of water passed straight through the glass.

It was not the sound of Garh Narikel. It was the sound of his own mind. His mind had been left hanging. And one day a mind left hanging will tug the body after it.

A Little Folk Song

Sing a Malhar song, sing inside the house of glass;
Let the river's melody wake within its cold glass heart.
See the sea through the glass house, but let its voice come inside;
Among the lines of profit, honour every human name.

CHAPTER 30

The Court Within the Tricksters

In the laughter of those who have won in the outer court but lost in the court within, you can hear the rattle of teeth.

The minds of all five tricksters were now hanging in suspense. And for minds left hanging, Channa Grove opens its own court. When someone wins in the court outside but loses in the court within, every step becomes more carefully measured than before.

That night, in three different rooms in three different cities, three men woke at the very same moment: Batuknath Hariharan in his expensive chair, Chandrapal Batra before his phone screen, and Raghav Sanket behind a closed window. Across the sea, Lau Kin-Hung was awake too, but there was no sweat on his body as he kept his vigil.

He wrote a message to Lau Kin-Hung: "Get me out." The message did not go through. A red mark appeared in its place. Then, instead of an answer, a mirror opened on the phone screen.

Across the sea, Lau Kin-Hung paced inside his glass house. His inner court did not speak his language. He could hire interpreters for English, Chinese, Hindi and legal translations—all of them.

In these inner courts, one chair stood empty. In Batuknath's room, on Chandrapal's phone screen, in Raghav's leaf-court, in Lau Kin-Hung's glass house, in Broom's respectable chamber—the same empty chair stood everywhere. There was no name on it.

As dawn approached, they were found on their beds in their different cities. Batuknath held the order declaring his victory, but his thumb pressed down upon the place meant for a name. Chandrapal's phone screen was dark, yet Ujjwal's unfinished message glimmered from inside the glass.

Meanwhile, in Garh Narikel, the children were sweeping the courtyard of the Coconut Leaf School. Devika wrote on the first lesson board: "Do not be afraid of fear that travels through a machine." On the second board Meera wrote: "The right to your private life is the shadow of your body." Saumya was putting old documents into the language of ordinary people. Eera, leaving behind the halls of distant countries, was helping children practise speaking names aloud.

The tricksters had attended their first hearing in the court within. But no punishment had been given. Instead, they had received something harder to bear than punishment: waiting.

In Channa Grove, Boodhba the ghost remained awake a little longer that morning. He turned over a leaf and looked at it. Written there was the date of the next hearing: Dream Night.

A Little Folk Song

Light the lamp, oh, light it in the court within;
Spread the record of your own deeds before you.
The outer court may delay, but the inner lamp burns bright;
The quiet judge called conscience holds the page of truth.

CHAPTER 31

The Work of Those Who Lost

Those who have lost do not raise slogans; they rise at dawn and lift up the names of others.

The court within had bound the tricksters to a time of waiting. But those whom the outside court had called losers rose at dawn and shouted no slogans against anyone. They beat no drums outside anyone's door.

The night of Channa Grove's court had passed. Dew rested upon the leaves. Anyone who bent to look into the droplets saw not their own face but the name of someone who had died. That morning Boodhba the ghost sat upon a branch and said nothing.

Aruni was the first to rise. He had not slept all night. He kept wondering: if the papers of the law court said "defeat" and Channa Grove said "victory," which paper should a person trust?

Meera arrived late that day. The fear that had surrounded her time after time was no longer in her step. Society wanted to turn her love into a crime. A company wanted to turn her right to privacy into bundles of paper. And Chandrapal Batra's men wanted to make market goods of her photographs, messages, voice and shadow.

That night there was no kabaddi for the ghosts and spirits in Channa Grove. Everyone sat and listened. The sounds of the work the living were doing in different places were reaching the leaves.

At the chapter's end, nobody made a speech before a gathering. No flag was raised. Work was simply shared out.

Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Sanket and Lau Kin-Hung received no news of any defeat that day. They only understood that making their next move was becoming difficult. In the world of tricksters, that is the very first sign of defeat.

The tricksters thought this change was too small to matter. They did not understand that power first keeps people apart. When people shut away their suffering in separate rooms, men like Batuknath can brush them aside in the name of "procedure," and men like Chandrapal can trap them behind a phone screen.

The leaves of Channa Grove whispered: "People who leave off fighting and set themselves to work are not merely difficult to defeat. They are impossible to defeat."

A Little Folk Song

Yes, my brother, win even after you have lost;

Carry a hoe, not a flag, and sing a song of work.
No flags, no stage; those who lost are busy working,
For schools, for fields, for help, for a children's society.

CHAPTER 32

The Third Game of Kabaddi

When the leaves move without a breeze, know that an old judgment is leaving the paper and settling upon the tree.

The evening's whisper lasted into the night. There was no breeze in Channa Grove that night, yet the leaves were moving. When leaves move without wind, you might think an unseen hand is stroking the tree's head—or that an old judgment has stepped off a sheet of paper and settled into the leaves.

On the bare ground in the middle of Channa Grove, a ring for kabaddi appeared. No chalk was used, no string, no line drawn with a stick. The ring formed of itself, as though the earth had uncovered an old mark on its chest, the trace of a fingernail.

The children arrived on the other side of the ring: Ananya; the children of the Coconut Leaf School; the boys and girls who had gone about with Devika learning to spot scams on phone screens; teenagers who had heard Meera's promise to protect private lives; and pupils who had learned from Eera how to ask questions on the stages of distant countries. They carried no exercise books. They carried coconut leaves.

The third team arrived late. They did not come in their bodies. Their bodies stayed in their own places—in costly city houses, in a glass house across the sea, in shut rooms and in cars with dark windows.

The second breath belonged to the children's team. Ananya stepped into the ring. “Question, question, question,” she called. Batuknath's mind drew back.

Then something strange happened. The tricksters' minds wanted to escape, but the children did not stop them. The rule of the game was this: anyone who wished to leave could leave, provided they left one word behind.

Far away, in cities, across the sea, in glass houses and closed rooms, the tricksters awoke at dawn. They could not remember having entered a game during the night. But their old familiar words no longer tasted the same on their tongues. Batuknath tried to say “procedure,” but he heard “the lesson of names” instead.

And in Channa Grove the next breath was drawn. The story did not end there. Crocodiles devour bodies, courts devour years, and phone screens devour minds.

A Little Folk Song

Call out, kabaddi, call out for the third round;
There are no spectators—let everyone be a player.
The first round was a game, the second a song of names;
The third round is togetherness—the living people's campaign.

CHAPTER 33

The Test of the Mind

When the body grows tired, it sits down.

The next breath had already been drawn. The first breath of the third kabaddi game in Channa Grove was over, but the game itself was not. Only when a breath runs out do the true rules of the game become clear.

In the ghosts' game of kabaddi, the mind is tested more than the body. When a body grows tired, it sits down. When a mind grows tired, it drags its owner along with it.

Boodhba the ghost spread his dark radiance. “Under the old rule,” he said, “a player who was caught had to leave the field.

Under the new rule, anyone who has struck a name from the record cannot leave without calling that name aloud."

His mind did not want to enter the game. But anyone who draws a breath in kabaddi cannot stay outside the field. The words "a share of a hundred" escaped his mouth.

Edward Broom's mind was the strangest of all. It was a hollow vessel made of applause in an auditorium. Whenever he spoke, he made people clap.

Boodhba the ghost said, "Then your victory will bring sorrow, but there will be a little water in that sorrow. Victory without sorrow begins to rot."

Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau Kin-Hung and Edward—all five minds fell silent. Outside, their bodies were in their separate cities, but within, they sat on the veranda of Channa Grove. Far away, Devika, Meera, Saumya, Eera, Gop Kumar and Aruni were holding no meeting to take revenge.

In the first light of dawn, a leaf shone in Channa Grove. No verdict was written on it. Only these words: "The fourth breath is over."

And at that moment the novel moved forward again.

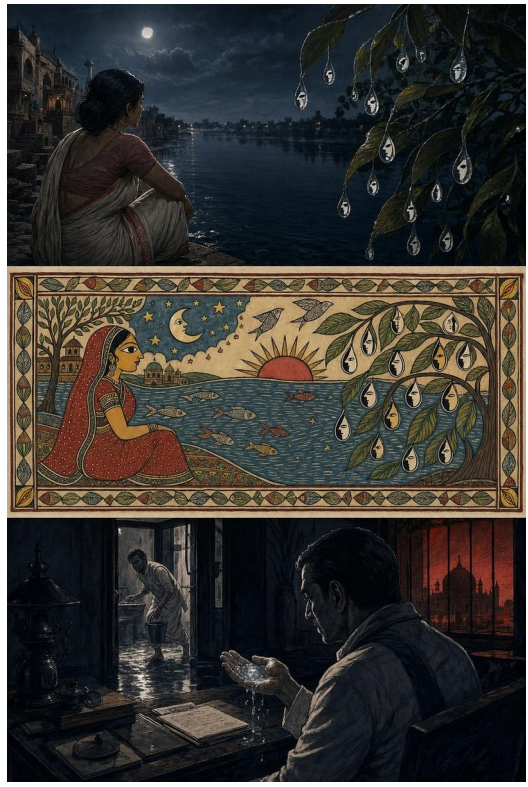
A Little Folk Song

Look in the mirror; look without fear;
With compassionate eyes, trace the lines of your own deeds.
A mirror is not just a punishment; know it as a friend of truth;
See your deeds as clearly as your face, and recognise your mistakes.

CHAPTER 34

The Listening River

The river holds back its current to hear who is lying on its banks.



The silence that spread after the fourth breath was not peace. It was the kind of silence in which a river holds back its flow to listen for the liar on its bank. The leaves of Channa Grove said nothing all night. But what hung from their tips was not dew: it was letters.

Day had broken in the world outside. There was no hand pump in Batuknath Hariharan's mansion in Delhi, yet that morning muddy water flowed from the tap in his bathroom. At the sight of it, a servant came running.

From four directions, five minds were being pulled toward Channa Grove. Their bodies remained in their separate cities. But the people inside those bodies, who thought themselves their own masters, now had the reins of their minds held by names. The children of Garh Narikel were already awake.

But seeing is not the same as accepting. He shut his eyes. At once his mind rose inside Channa Grove and stood in the kabaddi ring.

Boodhba the ghost replied, "A name spoken with love gives off steam like hot rice. A name spoken only to save oneself stays cold as iron. Channa Grove knows the difference between warmth and cold."

It was Lau Kin-Hung's turn. He did not know the Devanagari script. He could not speak the name.

In the world outside, all five bodies woke. Batuknath bought a ticket to Garh Narikel. Chandrapal thought of smashing his phone, but Ananya's voice came from inside it: "Breaking a phone does not break a name." For the first time, Raghav sat down to write letters of the Devanagari alphabet on paper.

At the Coconut Leaf School the children poured a bowl of water around the roots of Channa Grove. The roots drank it. In that movement lay a sentence: "Speaking a name is the first breath."

And the story of Garh Narikel moved forward once more, drawing its fifth breath.

A Little Folk Song

Listen like a river; hold back your current and listen;
Listen closely, even to a faint call from far away.
The river pauses to hear the name of every bank;
Beyond the noise of lies it finds the tune of truth.

CHAPTER 35

The Threshold of a Name

Speaking the name is the first breath; reaching the home of that name is the second.

After the fifth breath, the five drops of water poured at the roots of Channa Grove did not sink into the earth. They circled within the roots, like children's laughter passing through an old house. At the first light of morning, their sparkle could be seen upon the tree's leaves.

That morning Ananya drew a circle in the soil. Five little houses were marked around it: Sarayu Devi's home, Munna Paswan's home, Ujjwal's home, the homes of unknown labourers, and a

house whose owner had still not been given a name. The children sat in the circle.

"Why are you following me?" Batuknath asked irritably. Looking out of the window, Boodhba the ghost answered, "I am not following you. The names you left behind are walking ahead of you."

Chandrapal Batra could not destroy his phone. He struck it with a hammer, threw it into water and set it on fire. Each time, the phone screen turned into a leaf of Channa Grove.

Devika sat outside Ujjwal's home. She wanted Chandrapal to see that house, because once a house has been truly seen, it becomes difficult to turn it into a number.

Batuknath's train stopped at a small station. He could not read its name through the mist. He did not want to get down, but Boodhba the ghost said, "Here." There was no crowd on the platform.

Chandrapal did not reach Ujjwal's home. Yet Ujjwal's home had reached his phone, his fingernails and the tooth marks on his bed. He told his men, "Do not put pressure on Devika." They were astonished.

The sixth breath did not end. It became dust beneath people's feet and scattered in five directions. In Garh Narikel, the children sprinkled water on the thresholds of the houses.

All the leaves of Channa Grove moved together. Their rustling held not the sound of kabaddi but the voice of the school. The story moved on, because a name does not rest until it has reached home.

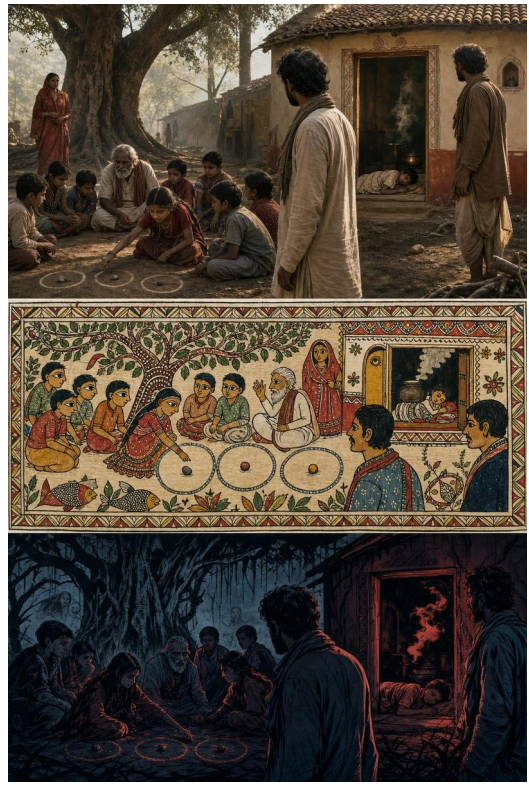
A Little Folk Song

Dust of the threshold, place it upon your forehead;
Let a broken home's blessing fill a new home.
Though a house may fall, its threshold keeps the dust;
It knows the steps of those returning and tells the elders' stories.

CHAPTER 36

Home, Fear and Dream

Home, fear and dream—what stood true between all three circles remained in the game.



When the name reached home, the seventh breath of Channa Grove's game began. For six breaths the name had searched for its threshold. In the seventh, the darkness inside the doorway, the smell of rice, the thorn of fear and the dream's extinguished lamp all slowly came into view.

At dawn the village children gathered beside Channa Grove. Beneath the leaves' shade they were no longer playing; they were writing rules. Ananya drew three circles in the soil: Home, Fear, Dream.

Sarayu Devi's threshold spoke first. There was smoke inside, half-cooked rice, and a child who had fallen asleep after waiting all night for his mother. Batuknath Hariharan saw the scene and immediately wanted to turn his eyes away.

In Garh Narikel, Ananya told the children, “Now we've asked about home. Ask about fear.” The children were startled at first. It is easy to hear the story of a home; it is hard to hear the story of fear.

The last part of the seventh breath was the dream. Ananya said, “After home and fear comes the dream.” The children were delighted, but Boodhba the ghost was grave. For the living must fulfil the dreams of the dead.

That night the tricksters' minds returned to the game in Channa Grove. But this time their turn was not to catch anyone. They had to speak of home, fear and dream. Batuknath could describe Sarayu Devi's home, could speak of half her fear, but fell silent when he came to the dream.

Boodhba the ghost gave no verdict. This time Channa Grove's court assigned homework instead of passing judgment. “Learn what you could not tell us, and come back.”

Day broke in the outer world. An order of victory lay on Batuknath's table, but on it shone a sentence written by a little child: “Ask where the name lives.” Chandrapal's screen would not open the mobile application; it showed only “Write your answer.” Lau's map grew blurred.

The children of Garh Narikel set off for school. Ananya turned back to look at Channa Grove. Not kabaddi now, but the rustle of homework.

A Little Folk Song

Rattle them, children, rattle the pebbles in your pockets;
Learn the three names by heart: home, courage and dream.
Three pebbles in a pocket, a child gives them names:

One for home, one for courage, and one to hold a dream.

CHAPTER 37

Three Pebbles

When the three pebbles in your pocket stop rattling, know that an answer has been lost.

The seventh breath went away as three pebbles in the children's pockets: home, fear and dream. The pebbles rattled all day—in the school, on the ridges between fields, after a phone screen had gone dark, and beneath their pillows at night.

The tricksters could not escape this rule either. Channa Grove's court had said, “Learn what you could not tell us, and come back.” The tricksters had thought this was the language of the dead, a sound made inside a game that would vanish when they woke.

In Garh Narikel, Ananya told the children, “Today we shall study the tricksters' homes.” The children were amazed. One asked, “Do they have homes too?” Boodhba the ghost came

down from a branch. “An oppressor has a home,” he said, “but leaves it behind.”

The children wrote five names in the soil: Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Somani, Lau Kin-Hung and Edward Broom. They left a blank space beside each. Ananya said, “If we cannot write where a person lives, we cannot fully understand what that person has done wrong.”

Meera Mrinalini arrived with the page bearing her promise to protect privacy. She told the children, “Remember, a trickster's suffering does not excuse his crimes.”

In Garh Narikel the children studied all five leaves. Ananya asked, “And their punishment?” Boodhba the ghost replied, “Punishment will come when it is time for the court. Whoever fails to study where a crime began cannot stop it from being born again.”

Chandrapal picked up his phone and, for the first time, spoke without the language of lawyers. “Raghav, I am beginning to remember,” he said. “So am I,” Raghav answered. Both fell silent. They did not ask forgiveness, did not surrender, and did not yet feel complete remorse. But the work of the eighth breath was not to finish feeling sorry. It was to begin remembering.

At dawn Ananya gathered the three pebbles and five leaves. “Here is a new rule,” she said. “Understand the home of the person you defeat. Otherwise even victory can turn into another crime.” Boodhba the ghost smiled.

Thus the eighth breath came to an end—not with forgiveness or punishment, but with the first understanding of where things had begun. The story moved forward, for a door had opened inside the tricksters' world. When a door opens, nobody changes at once.

A Little Folk Song

Plant them, planters, plant the seeds of questions;
Search not only the leaves but the roots; put your hands deep in the earth.
Read not just a tree's leaves; read its roots beneath the ground;
The egg of a crime is small, and behind it lies a fine-spun net.

CHAPTER 38

Speaking a Name Aloud

Writing down a name is not enough; you must make time to learn how to say it.

After the eighth breath, the game in Garh Narikel stopped for two days. The children found this astonishing, for the ghosts' kabaddi had never stopped before. Flood or drought, wedding or death, a court judgment, a bridge built by the government or a speech from a foreign visitor—whenever night fell, the game began in Channa Grove.

At first the children did not understand. A written record had been made: on leaves, in soil, on screens and in songs.

Meanwhile, Garh Narikel held its first gathering for the "lesson of names." The ground beneath Channa Grove was levelled. The children sat in a circle.

Ananya held up the first leaf. "We shall not read a name incorrectly." The children repeated together, "We shall not read

a name incorrectly." Devika added, "If we do not know a name, we shall ask." "We shall ask," the children answered. Meera said, "If a name has been hidden, we shall look for it." "We shall look for it." Saumya said, "If a name has been joined to an insult, we shall remove that insult." "We shall remove it." Boodhba the ghost was pleased.

The third name was Ujjwal Jha. She felt her voice might break. But Ananya took her hand.

These rules reached the tricksters' inner world at once. A bundle of papers opened in Batuknath's room: Home, Death, Humiliation. He searched for a case number, but the bundle itself said, "Home first." Chandrapal searched his phone for a ledger, but the screen said, "Death first." Raghav searched for an old message, but the screen said, "Humiliation first." Lau opened a report. It said only, "Name first."

For the first time, Batuknath Hariharan set aside the language of the courts and wrote on plain paper: "Bhola Nat, home unknown." As soon as he wrote it, the paper turned black. It was not so simple to write "unknown." Calling a home "unknown" when nobody has tried to find it is laziness.

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 incorrectly repeats a crime." She did not pluck the leaf. It was left upon the tree.

The ninth breath did not come to an end in this way. Far away in their separate rooms, the tricksters began reading names—wrongly, then correctly, then stumbling again. In Garh Narikel, those who had suffered listened as the names were spoken.

A Little Folk Song

Read it rightly, read every letter of a name;
With every sound and mark, honour someone's life.

A written name is the body's shell; a spoken name gives it breath;
When we say a name correctly, a person's dignity grows.

CHAPTER 39

The Stillness of a Seed

Still on the outside, ready to burst open within: that is the stillness in which a seed is made.

After the ninth breath and the lesson of names, a strange stillness descended upon Garh Narikel. It was not the peace a tired person finds after a meal, nor the quiet that settles upon papers when a court adjourns. It was the stillness that lives inside a tree as a seed forms.

The children left Channa Grove for home before dawn, but their voices remained. Names hung in the air like dry hanging roots on an ancient banyan tree. Seated upon a branch, Boodhba the ghost went on counting: Bhola Nat, Sarayu

Mahato, Ujjwal Jha, Munna Paswan, Devika Sah, Hulasi, Nand Aruni, and all those whom the papers had never given a page.

Meanwhile, another worry was growing inside Gop Kumar. The names had been recorded, lessons about the dangers of machines had begun, and the promise to protect privacy had been made. Yet the people who owned the real bundles of papers were still alive. Broom, Lau, Batuknath, Chandrapal and Raghav had all withdrawn into their separate holes, but the holes had not collapsed.

In Channa Grove, no court gathered on the night of the tenth breath. Instead, a feast was laid out: a feast of symbols shared among the dead and the living, children, ghosts, spirits, witches and the panidubbi water beings.

Beside the leaf bearing Ujjwal's name, Devika placed a pinch of salt. Meera placed a lamp beside the leaf carrying the promise to protect privacy. Saumya placed a page of translation.

Then a faint crackling sound passed through the air. The invisible screen above Channa Grove tore open. Through the tear came the voices from within the tricksters.

In the last watch of the tenth breath, Batuknath did not sleep at the inn. Chandrapal remained seated before the printer in his office. Raghav left the ticket page open.

"Now"—that was time's command. Teach the children now. Let the tricksters' minds come inside now, because anyone who has entered will no longer be able to shelter behind lies told outside.

The kabaddi game did not begin again in Channa Grove. Nor was the game put off. It stood holding its breath, like a runner waiting for the next signal.

A Little Folk Song

Wake, letters of dew, wake now;
Say not "tomorrow" but "now," and take the first step.

On a still leaf the dew wrote: Now, this moment, this very time;
The seed has waited long enough—open life's doorway again.

CHAPTER 40

Letters Written in Dew

The palm of a person who reads the letters of dew grows wet, and a wet palm can open a door.

At the end of the tenth breath, the game of kabaddi stood holding its breath. Those who had eaten their fill at the feast of names now hungered for truth. So the eleventh breath descended upon the morning dew. The word "Now," written in the dew of dawn, spread through Garh Narikel as though an ancient spell had awakened not by accident, but at precisely the right moment.

The eleventh breath began with this understanding: reading a name was not enough. After the name, you had to read the life. You had to read the hunger, the fear and the body's weariness of the person whose name had been written down; the waiting

of his wife, his child's school fees, the sand covering his fields, and the last call on his phone. Every part mattered.

Ananya told the children, “From today, write down one thing beside each name.” The children scattered. From one house came an old letter, from another a hospital prescription, from another a photocopy of a bank passbook, and from yet another a bus ticket. Devika brought the cracked glass of Ujjwal's phone.

Batuknath set off from the inn towards Channa Grove once more. This time he carried no copy of a court order. In his pocket was an old slip of paper on which his father had written names. All night he had been remembering how his father used to write and rewrite the names of poor people until they were correct.

That day Meera said something difficult in the circle devoted to the right to privacy. “What I choose to share is a memory. What is taken from me to frighten me is violence.” Silence fell at those words.

Then Panidubbi rose from the pond. Thin threads of paper, instead of water, hung from her hair. She said, “Water has already carried away so many names.

At the end of the eleventh breath, Ananya asked, “What now?” Before answering, Boodhba the ghost looked up at Channa Grove. The wind spoke: “Once you have read a person's belongings, read the path they travelled.” The children understood that their next lesson would be a journey: where the dead had come from, where they had gone, whose hand had pushed them onward, and whose hand could have stopped them but had not.

The tricksters heard this too. The slip written by Batuknath's father trembled in his pocket. A new folder opened on Chandrapal's computer, labelled “Paths.” The roots of Raghav's little SIM sprout dug into the wood of his table.

The eleventh breath ended, but this time the breath was released. With it, the air of Garh Narikel filled with the scents of rice, salt, water, paper, lunchboxes, phones, leaves and flowers. The story had moved from names to lives, and from lives to the paths people had travelled.

A Little Folk Song

Open your palm, oh, open it, not a fist;
Mix trust into each of its rain-wet lines.
A wet palm leaves a loving print upon the door;
The lock hears from within and slowly slips aside.

CHAPTER 41

The Boat of Names

A boat resting on the bank means little; the boat of names speaks only when it enters the current.

At the end of the eleventh breath, Channa Grove had said, "Whoever reads a life cannot escape its path." Through the night those words echoed from leaf to leaf. The villagers knew that it was time to move beyond names and belongings. The names of the dead had been written; their lunchboxes, phones, papers and salt had been laid out before everyone.

At dawn, with the twelfth breath, Ananya cleared the earth in the middle of Channa Grove. The children brought water in small vessels, Devika brought rice, Meera turmeric, Saumya the red pencil from an old survey notebook, Eera a blank sheet of map paper she had brought from abroad, and Gop Kumar an

old USB drive that was being kept for memory now, not for use. Boodhba the ghost watched from a branch.

He wanted to send Lau Kin-Hung a message. But as he kept deleting words, only one line remained: "The path is turning back." Lau's reply came late. Just one word: "Cut it." Raghav understood that in the world of crime, if a path remained open, someone would try to cut it off.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung listened to a report in his glass office. His advisers said, "An Indian rural group has begun constructing a story." Lau nodded. But grains of salt on his desk arranged themselves into a line during the twelfth breath. The line crossed a map of the sea and moved towards India, then Bihar, then the Kamla-Balan, and finally Garh Narikel.

This time Eera sat inside rather than outside. She did not stand to ask questions, however. She opened her notebook and continued writing down Channa Grove's lesson about paths.

An elderly woman of Garh Narikel, whose son had died at the bridge, stopped halfway as she approached Channa Grove for the first time. She said, "I can't remember the path. I was young then.

Before dawn in Channa Grove, Boodhba the ghost stopped the children. "You have read the path and seen its bends. In the next breath we shall see who will carry the weight of what was not stopped at those turns." Ananya asked, "The tricksters?" Boodhba said, "If a trickster carries it, that is atonement.

At these words there was a stirring in the water. It was not in the distant Ganges or in the current of the Kamla-Balan, but in the dew of Channa Grove. In every drop tiny bends in a path glimmered.

The twelfth breath was over. Now the air of Garh Narikel held together the scents of names, belongings, lives, paths and their bends. Wherever the tricksters were, they could smell them.

They were beginning to understand that entering the inner world meant not only fear but responsibility.

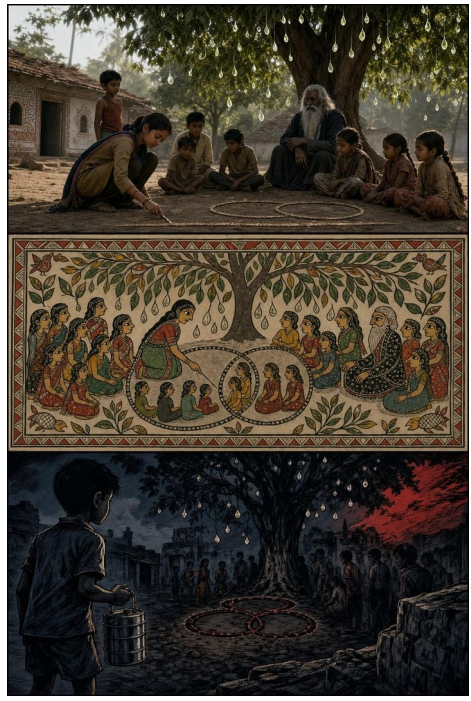
A Little Folk Song

Row, boatman, row, and carry the names along;
Take more than bodies across—carry who they were: make this your vow.
The boat waits by the bank; take up the oar of names;
However fierce the current, fill your hearts with courage together.

CHAPTER 42

The Circle of Burdens

Punishment is handed down from above; a burden rises from within and settles on your shoulders.



At the end of the twelfth breath, the drops of dew had taught two words: "Lift the burden." Until dawn those words stayed caught on every leaf of Channa Grove. The wind blew and the leaves moved, but the words did not fall. They were like tiny stones rather than words.

Ananya drew two circles in the middle of Channa Grove. She called one "Those who suffered the wrong," and the other "Those who committed the wrong."

Edward Broom was about to release his most expensive report yet, entitled "Rebalancing Good and Evil and Emerging Markets." When the first copy came out of the printer, its pages

would not dry. An assistant said, “There's something wrong with the ink.” Broom knew it was not the ink.

Gop Kumar wrote down his part first: “I understood the information too late.” He said, “For how many years did I mistake bundles of papers for work, instead of seeing the lives behind them?” Ramaiyya wrote, “I was talkative, but how often did I stay silent when I should have spoken?” Saumya wrote, “The documents remained trapped in English, and reached ordinary people too late.” Meera wrote, “I did not listen early enough to the language of people living in fear.” Devika wrote, “When Ujjwal first showed his fear, I thought he was merely being stubborn.” Ananya asked, “What is my part?” Boodhba the ghost answered, “Your part is to keep asking questions.”

Edward Broom told his public-relations team, “Make it a story of sympathy.” The team began looking for pictures: children, villages, leaves, women, bridges. Watching from afar, Eera sent a message: “If you turn the burden into an image, you will make it a business again.” The team's phone screens went black.

For the first time, Lau Kin-Hung drew the curtains of his glass house overlooking the sea. He did not want to look outside. But the shadow of water fell on the curtains, and inside that shadow children from Garh Narikel walked with lunchboxes, helmets, passbooks and chalk in their hands.

In Channa Grove, the objects that represented the burdens remained in their places. There were no statues and no garlands. They were simply things ready to be used.

At that moment, three winds arrived from three directions. From the city came the smell of paper. From the sea came the smell of salt.

The thirteenth breath paused upon this promise. The burden was no longer only sorrow; it had become a messenger on the

move. Whoever refused to acknowledge their share would find an object at their door: a lunchbox, a brick, a leaf, some salt, chalk, a passbook, or a little bottle.

A Little Folk Song

Share the burden, oh, share it from shoulder to shoulder;
Bring our tired bodies together, moving to the same beat.
A burden on your shoulders is halved when a friend comes near;
One hand reaches back to help, another reaches forward.

CHAPTER 43

The Travelling Burden

Sharing a burden does not make it disappear; it begins to travel from village to village.

The thirteenth breath had left behind this promise: “To each person's door, their share.” The promise stayed awake throughout the night. So the night did not quite end. Morning came, but without bringing its colours.

Ananya brushed the earth from her hands. The children had shared the weight of the lunchboxes, but dividing a burden did not make it disappear. Now it was beginning to move.

Aruni remained seated at the edge of Channa Grove. He felt that the novel might stop here once more. But stopping was not part of the way of Channa Grove.

At that time, in the city, Batuknath Hariharan stood facing the degrees hanging on the wall of his sitting room. Once they had hung straight, shining behind glass. But now, in the morning, fine mist had gathered inside the glass.

The phone screen immediately returned to normal: advertisements, games, numbers and bright colours. Chandrapal breathed a sigh of relief.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-Hung had been asleep in his glass house beside the sea. When he woke from his dream he wondered, "How could a village in India enter my sleep?" He told his secretary, "Find out whether there's a place called Garh Narikel." The secretary opened a map on the computer.

Meanwhile, in Channa Grove, the ghosts began to appear faintly even at midday. Once they had belonged to the night. Now children played in the grove during the day, and the ghosts were learning the rules of their games.

In the distant city, Hariharan's mother said again, "Read the name." Chandrapal's son switched off his phone and opened the window. Raghav's wife gathered the grains of rice and put them aside. Lau Kin-Hung kept his finger resting on the map.

In Garh Narikel, the children ran out for the first game of the morning. Channa Grove was ready. Half of each trickster's mind was inside, and half remained outside.

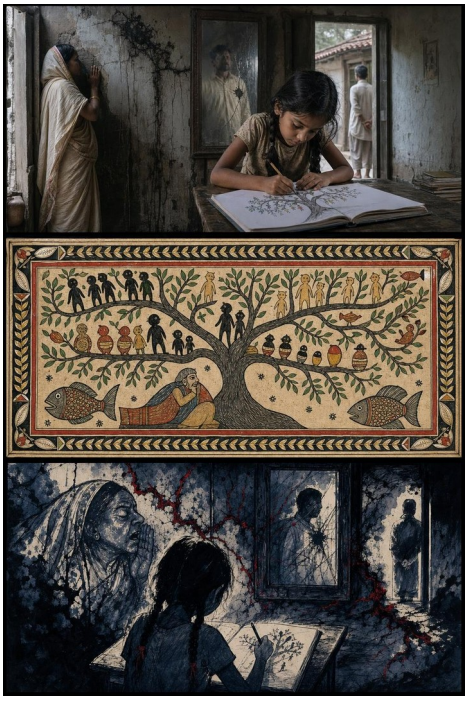
A Little Folk Song

Come, neighbours, let us walk from doorstep to doorstep;
Let every house help shoulder the burden of one home.
The burden travels house to house, and relief travels with it;
One doorstep offers helping hands; another brings a meal.

CHAPTER 44

The Granddaughter's Notebook

Fear is like water: when it meets a wall, it looks for a crack. If it finds no crack, it seeps into a granddaughter's notebook.



The story had entered every home, and the word “work” was turning green upon the leaves. After the fourteenth breath, the tricksters thought that fear had reached their bodies and would perhaps stop there. People often imagine that the fear they carry cannot cross beyond their own chests.

In Batuknath Hariharan's house, fear first appeared on his mother's tongue, then on the wall, then on the glass covering his degrees. At dawn, with the fifteenth breath, it reached his granddaughter's notebook. She was seven years old.

Hariharan's wife was startled. Nobody in the house had mentioned Channa Grove. The little girl asked, “Grandfather, why is he standing outside there?

Outside Lau Kin-Hung's glass house lay the sea. Its waters shone like silver in the sunshine. Suddenly he felt that every wave was a name.

These things did not happen at exactly the same time in Garh Narikel, yet they happened within the same breath. In Channa Grove, Boodhba the ghost told the children, “When a child asks a question inside a trickster's home, you may know that the leaf has reached his door.”

That night another game took place in Channa Grove. Four drawings were hung at the four corners of the kabaddi field: the tree drawn by Hariharan's granddaughter, the empty chair of Chandrapal's son, the question written by Raghav's daughter, and the map drawn by Lau's son. The ghosts formed a circle around the pictures.

The rakshas spirits made the light brighter. It showed that at one edge of the field Batuknath Hariharan's mind was trembling; at another, Chandrapal Batra's mind was searching for his phone; at the third, Raghav Sanket's mind was deleting a message; and at the fourth, Lau Kin-Hung's mind was folding up a map.

Watching from afar, Ba said, “Now the story has reached their homes. Even if they want to, they cannot remain outside it.”

Aruni wrote the final line, but it was only the last line of the chapter, not of the story: “Where a child asks, ‘Whose is it?’, a door opens inside the trickster.”

A Little Folk Song

Ask, little granddaughter, ask whatever is in your heart;
Gather pearls of answers from Grandmother's store of stories.

The granddaughter asked, “Whose fear?” Grandmother smiled
like a flower;
“Fear melts away for one who hears the name of truth.”

CHAPTER 45

The Air Within

A door does not simply stay open: first, the stale air trapped inside must flow out.

With the fifteenth breath the children had asked, "Whose?" That one word opened the doors of the tricksters' homes from within. During the sixteenth breath, the doors did not simply remain open. Air began to move through them.

For several days Batuknath Hariharan kept his granddaughter's drawing locked in a desk drawer. If a paper did not belong to the law, he would not recognise it as a document. But the little girl's drawing did not stay inside the drawer.

Just then Raghav's phone vibrated. The trembling travelled from the table into his finger, as if someone were shaking him

from deep within. A coded message arrived: "Remove the bundles of papers.

At the school that taught children how to stand up to the world of phone screens, Devika Sah added a new lesson: "Questions at Home." She told them, "Fraud does not always begin outside. Very often it begins with silence inside the home. If an unusual amount of money, fear, phone calls or secrecy suddenly appears in your house, begin by asking questions with love.

That night in Channa Grove, all the children's questions were hung like leaves. There was the question of Hariharan's granddaughter, the refusal of Chandrapal's son, the notebook of Raghav's daughter, the essay of Lau's son, and the curiosity of Broom's granddaughter. The ghosts read every leaf.

Boodhba the ghost said, "Today is the sixteenth breath. With this breath, children born into the families of wrongdoers have refused to inherit their wrongs."

At those words the leaves of Channa Grove changed colour. A faint green glimmer entered the bodies of the black ghosts, like fresh oil poured into an old lamp. Tears gathered in the eyes of the white spirits.

Watching from a distance, Ba said, "This is no longer only a story about the dead. It is also about children who will refuse to drink the milk of a tainted victory."

Aruni wrote: "The sixteenth breath came on the day the descendants of those who had committed wrongs said, 'We shall take the names, not the profits.' For a long time the sound of that refusal echoed through Channa Grove."

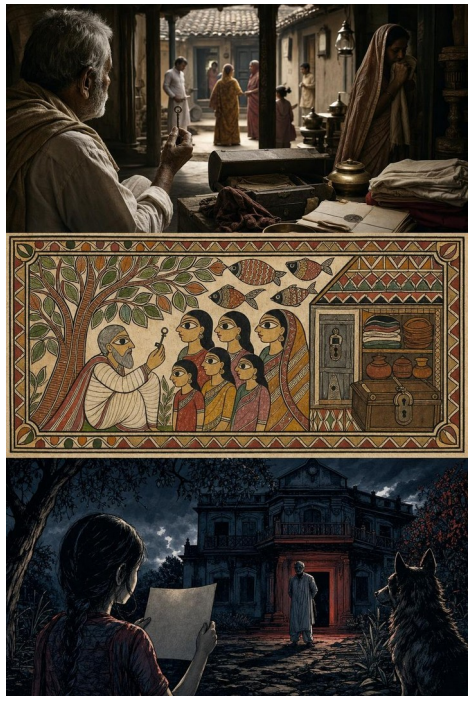
A Little Folk Song

Open the door, oh, open it from within;
Let the stale air out and let fresh sunlight in.
The door opened from inside, the old air rushed away;
Sunlight filled the room and brightened every doorway.

CHAPTER 46

The Darkness Behind an Inheritance

The true heir is the one who looks past the face of wealth and sees the darkness behind it.



With the sixteenth breath, the children had said, "We shall take the names, not the profits." As those words were written on the leaves of Channa Grove, they travelled from house to house. But when words reach a home, they do not remain mere words.

For a long time Batuknath Hariharan avoided answering his granddaughter. He thought that children asked questions and then went back to their games. But a child's question is like a dog that, having once caught the scent of a doorway, returns to stand there every morning.

In that moment Hariharan understood that an answer from the law would not work against a child's drawing. He wanted to

snatch away the paper, but his hand would not move. The feet of the house drawn on the paper were stirring.

In Lau Kin-Hung's home, the question came from the sea. His granddaughter drew a tree in blue on the glass wall. Lau asked, "What tree is that?" The little girl said, "The one that came in my dream."

Saumya was writing down the rules for this game. Meera said, "Add a rule about the right to privacy. Nobody's love, body or fear can be handed down as an inheritance." Devika said, "And making someone open a bank account without understanding it is a cursed inheritance too." Nishant added, "Where you find your first victory, ask your first question."

At these rules the loth spirits went round and round in circles. The rakshas spirits dimmed their lights, because in daylight the children's faces now gave enough light themselves. Panidubbi did not emerge from the pond, but one drop from her hair rose into the air and settled on a leaf in Channa Grove.

Boodhba the ghost drew a breath. The black ghosts stood in a row. Panidubbi was quiet in the pond.

The seventeenth breath was about to end, but Channa Grove held it back. The story had reached a turning point: the children of those who had lost and the children of the tricksters were about to play on the same field. Papers declaring victory would count for nothing in this game.

Aruni wrote the closing line: "The real test of an inheritance is not what you receive. It is what you are able to let go from your own hands, so that your name stands on your own breath, not on another person's death."

A Little Folk Song

Sing a blessing, sing a blessing for the breath of life;
Teach this lesson: life comes before profit.
Life before gain—let us follow this rule;

Build towers of wealth later; first light the lamp of life.

CHAPTER 47

The Tale of the Elephant and the Crocodile

The elephant's foot is trapped in water, the crocodile's teeth are caught in history; the hand that frees it always belongs to a third.

With the seventeenth breath, the heirs had seen the darkness behind wealth. They saw a platter of profit placed before them, but did not reach for it. Channa Grove did not smile at this.

In the morning, the children of Garh Narikel gathered to play beside Channa Grove. The night's dew still clung to the leaves. The loth spirits sat in a circle, as though they had spent the whole night meditating with their eyes closed.

A girl in Lau Kin-Hung's family was called Mei-Lata, because her Indian nanny had called her Lata when she was small. She

asked, "But the water is the crocodile's home, and the elephant is an outsider. Won't the elephant lose?"

Boodhba the ghost motioned for the children to enter the playing field. One child would be the elephant and another the crocodile. The elephant would try to cross a line on the ground, while the crocodile would hold its foot inside a circle of water.

Ananya played the elephant first. Hariharan's granddaughter was the crocodile. Ananya ran into the circle, and her foot was caught.

Chandrapal Batra's son was the crocodile. The little girl entered the circle of water. Batra's son caught her foot.

The book said that the elephant had cried for help in its hour of danger. Satyavrat stopped. It seemed to him that in this novel no elephant had called out.

The leaves of Channa Grove bowed at that line. For this chapter was not a story of the sky, but of feet: a foot caught by a crocodile, and a foot that slowly comes out of the water through the strength of a name.

The eighteenth breath did not end. It merely paused, exhausted, like the elephant still searching for the right words with which to call for help. And everyone in Channa Grove—the ghosts, spirits, children, the minds of the tricksters, the leaves and the water—began practising how to listen.

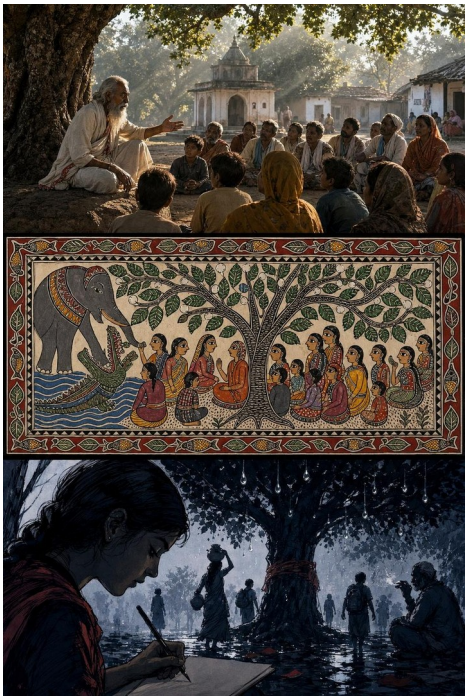
A Little Folk Song

Listen to the story, the tale of elephant and crocodile;
Think on this truth: wisdom joined with others is greater than strength.
The elephant's foot is caught in water; a friend raises a cry;
However strong the crocodile's teeth, wisdom finds a way.

CHAPTER 48

The Call

Speaking can take a lifetime.



During the eighteenth breath, the elephant saw its foot trapped in the water, the crocodile began to understand the history of its grip, and everyone in Channa Grove sat down to practise listening. Listening was no small task in Garh Narikel. Here people could talk their whole lives, but when the time came to listen, their ears were already full of old fear, profit, caste, rank, education, defeat, documents declaring victory, and the dust of humiliation.

That morning the dew in Channa Grove did not dry for a long time. The day grew bright. The village women finished washing the courtyards with water and cow dung; children set off with schoolbags on their backs; old men lit bidis on their verandas.

Still the dew remained on the leaves of Channa Grove. Tiny drops hung at their tips, as though waiting for someone to speak a name.

Ananya brought not an empty sheet of paper but an empty bowl. As soon as Ba saw her, she understood that the little girl had discovered the next rule of the game. The bowl was placed in the middle of Channa Grove.

Ananya asked him to step inside it. Munna came forward trembling. His feet touched the ground, but his shadow was being left behind.

Meanwhile the calling of names continued in Garh Narikel. They were not only the names of the dead. One day Meera stood in Channa Grove and said, "Tell whoever tried to frighten me that my love is not a crime. It is their threat and coercion that are wrong." The leaves kept those words apart from all the others.

Listening to the calls, Boodhba the ghost grew tired. Ghosts do not tire, but the weariness of listening belongs not to the body but to the soul. He said to Panidubbi, "So many names have come today."

Ba whispered in Ananya's ear, "Do you see? Satyavrat is not a god. He simply accepted that the bowl was empty.

Ananya wrote, "Those who call out do not need a god. They need ears that can hear even the wrongdoing hidden in their own silence."

Satyavrat Mehta did not read those words. He was slowly learning that some sentences, when read with the eyes, become knowledge. When heard with the ears, they become remorse.

A Little Folk Song

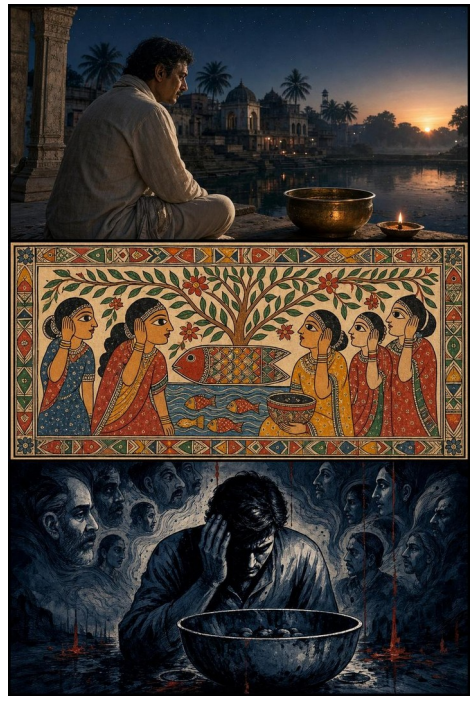
Lend your ears, oh, lend your ears to the call;
Before you answer, give it your fullest respect.
Give an ear to those who have called throughout their lives;

Do not interrupt with answers; honour the whole call first.

CHAPTER 49

The Record of Silence

A voice you have heard is a debt; the listener is the one who must repay it.



The call came with the nineteenth breath. With the twentieth, the account of that call was opened. In Garh Narikel people believed that once a voice reached someone's ears, it was no longer merely a voice.

The bowl grew heavy with this understanding. It was filled not simply with water, but with the weight of names whose bodies were gone.

At first Satyavrat Mehta wanted to express this in the language of law. He turned words such as “dignity after death,” “compensation” and “responsibility” over in his mind. But in

Channa Grove he understood that when a body is no longer there, dignity is not merely a word used in court.

Dawn was different that day in Channa Grove. The sun rose, but the light stopped upon the leaves. It was as though day had appeared outside but not yet entered within.

Satyavrat began to close his notebook. Boodhba the ghost called down from a branch, “Not yet. The names have been written, but the name of silence remains.”

Satyavrat Mehta's notebook filled up. Ananya brought another. Eera laid down a bundle of paper she had brought from far away; the sheets bore the mark of an overseas conference hall.

At that time Edward Broom was sitting in his office across the sea. Before him lay the draft of his next speech, entitled “The Future of Responsible Capital.” Suddenly a blank sheet slipped out from among the pages.

In Channa Grove, the leaves slowly began to dry. The dewdrops fell. The empty bowl could now be lifted.

The twentieth breath was not finished. It was only the first lesson in keeping a written account. In the next breath the names that had been read would begin to walk.

A Little Folk Song

Write in the heart's ledger, write with the ink of consent;
Keep the pearls of stories you have heard in the casket of dignity.
The ledger written in the ear runs deeper than one on paper;
Responsibility for what we hear makes the heart grow thoughtful.

CHAPTER 50

The Name That Remains After the Body

The body passes away, but the name remains—and the feet of a name are still wet.

There was no water in Channa Grove that night, yet everyone felt as though their feet were wet. The ground in the grove was as cool as if the first drops of rain had fallen upon it, although the sky above was clear. Stars seemed caught on every branch, and now and then the branches trembled as though what rested upon them were not stars but someone's name.

Satyavrat Mehta stood outside the grove for a long time. No one gave him permission to enter. But there was no one there to stop him, either.

Satyavrat kept watching the scene. The elephant was no longer crying out. The crocodile held not its foot but its memory.

His clothes were not wet, yet his way of walking had changed. He no longer walked like a man of the courts, but like an elder of the village—slowly, listening, feeling the warmth of the earth. He did not look towards Batuknath's shadow.

The water in Channa Grove began to disappear little by little. The pond had not vanished. Its water had gone down into the earth.

But the tricksters had different dreams. Batuknath dreamed that the order in his hand turned into a crocodile's jaw and clamped around his wrist. Chandrapal dreamed that all his secret words changed, one by one, into the names of the dead.

No one was playing kabaddi in Channa Grove. Yet the ground of the silent playing field was covered with countless footprints: those of people, ghosts, children, the elephant, the crocodile, and all those whose bodies had passed away but whose names remained.

At dawn the leaves of the coconut trees of Garh Narikel stirred very slowly, as if they were saying: The body has gone, the water has gone, the fear has gone. But now the name is searching for roots.

And when a name begins to search for roots, the story changes once more.

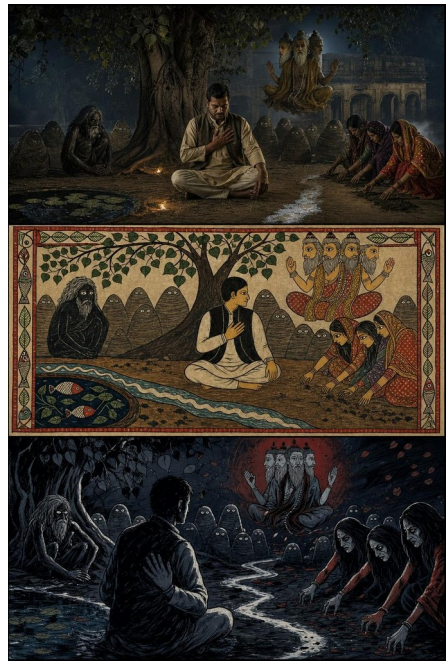
A Little Folk Song

Take care of the roots, oh, take care of the roots of names;
Even when the body is far away, do not forget its letters.
Though the body has gone afar, the roots still guard the name;
Deep in the earth, the letters drink the dew's white milk.

CHAPTER 51

The Weight of Witnessing

The weight of testimony is measured not on a scale, but upon the chest.



When Satyavrat Mehta entered Channa Grove, he felt as though he were entering his own chest, not a grove. Outside, the ground was hard; inside, it was soft. Outside lay papers bearing orders; inside were leaves bearing names.

Brahma of the peepal tree was no longer sitting on a branch. He had come down, but all four of his faces were silent, each turned in a different direction. Boodhba the ghost sat to one side, drawing in the light of his dark body.

The crocodiles stopped in the dust of Channa Grove. There was no blood in their mouths. There was water on their teeth.

Satyavrat thought of tearing up his papers. But his hand stopped. Tearing up a piece of paper did not tear away a crime.

His shoes caught in the soil. With every step he heard a name—Sarayu, Dukhan, Mahito, Lalna, Ujjwal, Hulasi, Nand; the unknown child whose body had not been burned at Khoranathi; the migrant born far away who heard the name of his home village only at festivals; the woman who could not speak because she feared the pressure of threats; the young man whose bank account had been turned into a money-mule account. The names were not separate from one another.

The children formed a circle around him. Devika, Meera, Saumya, Eera, Nishant and Aruni came slowly towards them. Gop Kumar was nowhere to be seen, but a coconut leaf stirred once.

The children sat around the witness document. Ananya read the first name. Then another child read the second.

Above Channa Grove, the first bird of dawn began to sing. Its song was not something that could be explained in the careful voice of a debate before an assembly. It simply felt as though the night had used up all its darkness.

Satyavrat gathered his papers. The leaves gradually began to move as usual. But where the written names had been set upon the soil of the grove, a small coconut shoot had sprung up.

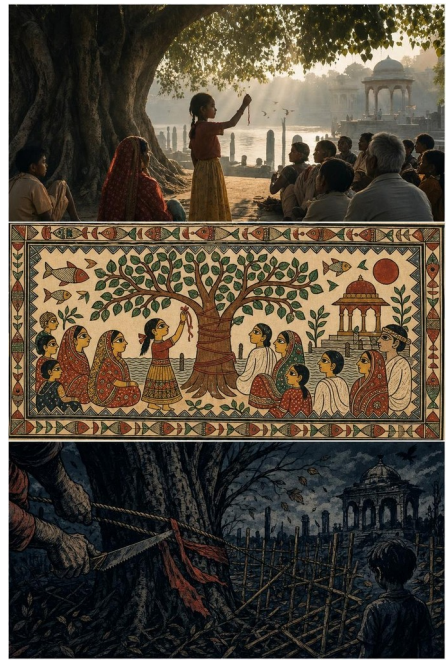
A Little Folk Song

Hold the witness's hands, oh, hold them with both of yours;
Share in two the heavy burden pressing on the chest.
When witnessing weighs heavily, offer a shoulder beside it;
Offer a safe home, a listening ear, advice, and somewhere to rest.

CHAPTER 52

The Next Voice

Crocodiles may chew up bodies, courts may chew up years, and phone screens may chew up minds—but none can chew through the watch kept by children's hands.



What they heard was not the ending of the novel. It was the next voice at the beginning. Crocodiles can chew up bodies, courts can chew up years, and phone screens can chew up minds. But if the duty of guarding names passes into children's hands, even jal samadhi—being submerged in water—can become a doorway to freedom from bonds.

Yet the world does not stand still, even after a long breath. Little by little, people began cutting down Channa Grove. First they tied a tight rope around it. Then they took away the red cloth. Then they built a bamboo fence all around the roots.

At first the villagers watched silently. Some thought that perhaps it was right. If the shade of the grove where the court had met was removed, perhaps the fear would go away too.

Then Satyavrat Mehta came there again. This time he did not arrive in an official car, looking like an officer carrying bundles of orders. He wore a plain white kurta. His face was tired, and in his hand was an old cloth bag.

But on the day the last great branch was cut, something strange happened. From the roots rose not a smell of rot, but the gentle scent of wet earth, sunlight, old paper and the hair of a tiny baby. The worker's axe stopped for a moment.

Then the girl who had questioned Satyavrat before put her hand on the cut stump and said, “Could we grow a grove here again?” A second child said, “A new grove, but the old names.” A third said, “Under the shade of the new trees, there will be no court of lies—only a gathering place where people listen.” Satyavrat Mehta did not even smile. The corners of his eyes were wet. He took an old ledger from his bag and handed it to the children.

Now he had to leave. But this departure did not feel like the endings of old. The girl asked, “Will you come back?” He replied, “Wherever names are spoken, I shall always owe them a hearing.” There was no scent of office or rank in this answer—only a human being's acknowledgement.

That was why the story did not end in Channa Grove that day. The grove remained half-cut, but a gathering place had grown. The darkness had lifted, but the mystery had not died.

And then—at the very place where people thought the story had ended—it began again.

A Little Folk Song

Sit in the village circle, oh, sit in a round together;
When your voice is finished, move aside for the next speaker.

Where the trees were cut, a new gathering circle grew;
One voice finished, and the next one found a place.

CHAPTER 53

The Morning After the Cutting

When a tree is cut, dawn does not stop—even the stump begins to look straight towards the sun.

To those who had stayed awake all night, dawn arrived that day not late, but all at once. For centuries Channa Grove had seemed to hold back the morning. Now, for the first time, the half-cut stump let sunlight enter without a curtain of branches. As the light came in, the people were filled not with happiness but with a strange feeling of shame.

Even in daytime, Channa Grove had been dark. In that darkness, stories kept their voices safe. People spoke softly there, watched where they put their feet, and scolded children into silence.

The first light of morning fell upon the round cut surface of the stump. Within the wood lay the rings of the rainy years—dark,

pale, dark, pale—as though the tree had written both the hard and the gentle passages of time into its own body. Boodhba the ghost was counting those rings.

No one knew whose ears had caught this thought. But at that moment the children seated around Channa Grove looked at one another. In their hands were the notebooks of names from the night before.

Eera arrived on the night bus. Foreign education, meeting halls, research, questions and speeches seemed to have settled on her face as weariness. In the light of dawn, she stopped short when she saw the cut body of Channa Grove.

By midday small tasks had begun in the new open space. Someone set down a pot of drinking water. Since there was no longer any shade, someone stretched a cloth overhead to make a temporary shelter.

Boodhba the ghost could not remain for long in daylight. Even so, that day he stayed beneath the shade of a severed branch. His dark body was growing thin in the sun.

Looking at that star, Ananya asked, "Which star is it?" No one answered. Eera looked upwards. Far away in the sky she saw a strange, cold gleam, as though some nameless place were listening to the voice of the earth. She wanted to say something, but just then the village watchman came running with a yellow paper.

The yellow paper was pasted to the stump. The children stopped playing. In the darkness, Boodhba the ghost grew solid again.

A Little Folk Song

Wake, oh stump, and wrap yourself in morning gold;
Where branches have been cut, put forth new shoots.
The tree was cut, yet the path of sunlight did not close;
Morning's first gold bent down to dew upon the stump.

CHAPTER 54

Around the Stump

Even where no branches remain, heads still bow—not to darkness now, but to testimony.

For the first time, people sat in a circle around the stump. Earlier, when they entered Channa Grove, they bent their heads. Was it because of low branches or because of the deep darkness? It had been hard to tell. Now the reason for bowing their heads had changed.

The first patch of sunlight sat on the rim of the cut stump. It did not glitter like gold. It was fearless, like a doctor's knife.

The children wanted to pick up these things, thinking they were treasure, but Ananya held out a hand to stop them. She was no longer merely a little girl who played games. She had become the first guardian in the watch over names.

Ujjwal's mother read the second name. She was afraid her words would be lost in the crowd. Devika placed a hand on her shoulder and said, “Read slowly. A name is in no hurry.” Ujjwal's mother read very slowly.

Satyavrat Mehta watched from a distance that day. No one had invited him. And now he no longer wished to be invited.

Just then the first visitor from outside arrived: the postmaster on his bicycle. Government mail filled his bag. He did not usually come towards Channa Grove, but the road was open now, so he had taken the shorter way.

The envelope seemed to grow hot in Aruni's hand. He wanted to open it, but Ananya stopped him. “The reading of names is going on. The yellow paper can wait.” A little ripple of laughter passed through the people, but there was fear in the laughter too.

Closing the ledger, Ananya said, “Tomorrow we shall read the yellow paper. But first we shall ask the name of the words written on it.” No one quite understood what it meant for words to have names. But the children understood that official language could not remain nameless either.

In this way, the first day around the stump did not really come to an end. It sat there, waiting for the next hearing. The grove had been cut, but a circle of people had grown all around it.

A Little Folk Song

Make a circle, oh, make a circle around the roots;
With the stump at its centre, let a new grove grow.
Though no branches remain, gather around the roots;
Sit together to hear memories, plans and songs.

CHAPTER 55

The Municipality's Yellow Notice

The flutter of yellow government paper sounds not like wings, but like scissors.

All night the yellow envelope lay on the edge of the stump. One by one the lamps went out, and the voices of the people faded away. But the corner of the envelope kept fluttering in the breeze. It looked less like paper than some small, yellow-winged creature, waiting with its teeth hidden inside.

Ananya was the first to arrive in the morning. She looked along the row of stones, wiped the dew from the ledger, and picked up the yellow envelope. On its seam was the blue seal of the municipal office—a wheel within the seal, letters within the wheel, and a cold voice within the letters.

When Aruni arrived, he said, “I'll read the paper.” Ananya shook her head. “You will read it,” she replied, “but first we

shall hear what this paper is called." Some elders smiled at that. But Satyavrat Mehta, who this time was sitting close by behind a stone, bowed his head and listened.

For the first time Boodhba the ghost was partly visible in the daylight. His body seemed to be forming between shadow and dust. He went around the yellow notice three times.

As soon as the name was spoken, a chill passed through the circle. Batuknath Hariharan, who had steered the boat of crime through the courts, now wanted to climb aboard the boat of memory. His messenger opened a bundle of papers and displayed some colourful pictures: a gate, plaques, a ticket booth, a memorial gallery, a visitors' book and a donation box.

Aruni took the yellow notice in his hand again. In its empty margin he wrote in pencil, "Not vacant land—a place of names." In another margin Devika wrote, "Not a crowd—families." Meera wrote, "Not superstition—memory with the right to privacy." Gop wrote, "The absence of evidence is evidence of a crime." With a trembling hand, Ba wrote, "The roots are alive." The children wrote in round letters, "Present."

Aruni spread out an old mat. Gop opened his papers. Devika mixed red earth with water.

In the final watch of the night, the first dot was placed at the centre of the mat: the cut stump of Channa Grove. Around it Ananya drew a red circle. "Memory will spread from here," she said. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked, water stirred, and Boodhba the ghost spoke out of the darkness: "Now the real map has begun."

The yellow notice remained on the edge of the stump. Its seal was growing dim, but the word "Present," written by the people, shone brightly. On the first night of the seven-day threat, Garh Narikel sat down to draw its first map of memory.

A Little Folk Song

Fly, little yellow letter, oh, spread your wings and fly;
Become a warning, not scissors, and reach from home to home.
Yellow paper, become wings and not a blade;
Leave orders to cut behind; carry news of truth instead.

CHAPTER 56

The First Map of Memory

The place marked "vacant land" was the very place where the most names lay buried.

All night the words of the yellow notice fluttered on the edge of the stump. Its description, "vacant land," entered everyone's sleep like a thorn. The place where bodies had gone under water, where names had risen, where ghosts had played kabaddi, where silence had become a witness—this was being called empty.

In the morning Ananya did not begin by opening and reading the yellow notice. First she straightened the stones arranged around the stump. There was a name on each one. Some letters were uneven, some names complete, and some nothing more than an opening sound.

Meera brought red earth mixed with water. Devika brought ashes. Eera gathered dry leaves.

Aruni drew the course of the Kamla-Balan River. His line did not run straight. It turned again and again, crossed old fields, wavered near the workers' settlement, became a dark whirlpool near a pillar of the bridge, and finally came to rest beside Channa Grove.

Ujjwal's mother made a black circle at the place where Ujjwal's phone had last been active. Devika drew a faint ring of ash around it—the crocodile of the phone screen. But Meera stopped her and said, “Mark his death, not a spectacle.” So a tiny white dot was placed inside the black circle.

An employee said quietly, “I've come under orders.” Ba replied, “Orders have someone who gives them, too. Tell us that person's name.” The employee was silent. Aruni lifted the yellow notice and read it.

Late in the afternoon the map seemed nearly complete, but Eera said, “There is no sky in it.” The children looked up. It was true: they had drawn the river, grove, bridge, houses, footpaths, stones, holes and circles, but there was no sign of the sky through which the calls of kabaddi could rise. Then one boy made a blue colour like dark kohl and drew an open sky all around the map.

Silence spread around the stump. The map trembled in the wind. For the first time the children understood that the next attack upon memory would come not with an axe or a yellow notice, but in the sweet language of protection.

The map hung behind the stump—the river, grove, holes, a palm, the circle marking the right to privacy, and the imagined question of the “Nameless Planet.” The proposal, polite on the outside, might have been hiding the first tooth of the most cunning crocodile within.

A Little Folk Song

Read the earth, oh, read it before you measure;
Even land called "empty" holds stories of names.
A plot marked "vacant" was filled with names;
Someone's games, someone's home, someone's dreams had grown there.

CHAPTER 57

Gangesha's Question

No proposition without evidence—Gangesha's question still stirs among the roots of the stump.

One night, between the yellow notice and the first map of memory, the stump of Channa Grove was so restless that it seemed its severed roots were turning in the earth. The map the children had made was spread upon the ground: the Kamla-Balan, the bridge pillar, the place of jal samadhi, Ujjwal's room, Meera's pledge, Devika's school, and in the middle the half-cut stump of Channa Grove. The government paper called this place vacant land.

After dawn, when the sunlight fell directly on the cut surface, a white car appeared in the distance. It carried no flag and no emblem. Yet the moment its passenger got out, everyone recognised him: Batuknath Hariharan.

As soon as the name was spoken, a faint grating sound came from inside the stump. Those who had only heard the name of the books of Navya Nyaya, the New Logic, were startled. Those who thought logic belonged only to scholars began to wonder: What did the cut stump of Channa Grove have to do with Gangesha's arguments?

Ba said softly, “Speak.” Then Eera began to untie that difficult knot in the tale handed down by word of mouth: “They say he was born five years after his father's death. The question arose: What is the evidence of his birth? Does something become untrue merely because society declares it impossible?

The words hung heavily in the air. Batuknath stood up at once. “Be careful! It is easy to make accusations against scholars.

Eera looked at the cut surface of the stump. The tree rings shone there like twelve thousand thin lines. One boy whispered, “The book of logic called Tattvachintamani.” Another said, “Twelve thousand texts.” A third added, “Gangesha's writing inside the tree.” No one could tell whether the children were playing a game or seeing philosophy come to life.

Batuknath tried to recover his position. “Very well,” he said. “The trust's rules will contain no caste discrimination. Every name will be written down.” Meera immediately asked, “And will every body be treated with dignity too?

The story of knowledge does not take place only in assemblies of learned people. The shine of a shell, smoke on a mountain, an empty seat, a child's indistinct words, green vegetables in a garden, and a message on a phone—everywhere, the mind builds its understanding of the world through direct seeing, memory, signs, comparison and words.

Gangesha's achievement was to explain these everyday ways of knowing in language so precise that causes, errors, absences,

relationships and limits would not remain vague. The story turns this precision into scenes we can see. The theory remains in the background, reminding the reader that behind each scene stands a whole structure of reasoning.

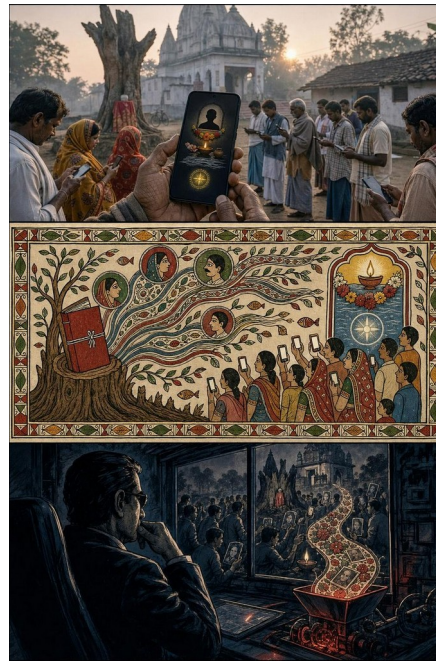
A Little Folk Song

Plough the field of questions, oh, plough it deep;
Sow seeds of evidence in Gangesha's field.
Like a plough, Gangesha's question turns the deep soil;
Plant evidence as seed and grow the rice of knowledge.

CHAPTER 58

Chandrapal's Memorial App

When remembrance becomes an app, even grief can be charged in instalments.



By dawn, Chandrapal Batra's "digital tribute platform" was lighting up many phones in Garh Narikel. Its message read: "Make your loved one's name immortal, protect their memory, offer a tribute." Below it were a flower, a lamp, water and a small shining symbol. The symbol carried no clear company name. It said only "Public Service Cultural Forum."

Chandrapal Batra did not come to the village himself. That was his way: where someone would have to meet people's eyes, he sent a representative. Where tears could be counted, he built a platform.

Eera opened her copy of Gangesha's book again. She told the children, "Yesterday we asked, What counts as evidence? Now apply Gangesha's test to this mobile app.

A faint scraping sound came from inside the stump. Someone said, "The grove agrees." Boodhba the ghost shimmered even in the bright daylight. There was no smile on his face, only scorn.

Then Satyavrat Mehta arrived. He looked at the phone, read the conditions, and sat at the roots of the stump. Then he said, "Consent may be written into law, but how freely is consent given in a moment of grief?

Meanwhile, Chandrapal Batra was looking at reports in a cool room in the city. How many people had opened the page? How many had entered a name? How many had left without finishing? Numbers climbed across his phone screen. The names themselves did not interest him.

That night Ananya added a new symbol beside the map: a small square phone screen, with a ripple of water and the eye of a crocodile inside it. Beneath it she wrote, "Questions about the memorial app." Eera looked at it and said, "The next lesson in New Logic is ready.

Ananya looked again at that symbol. She realised Chandrapal was not alone; Raghav "Signal" was stirring again in the shadows. This time no laughter came from within the stump. A warning rose instead.

All night the children kept watch around the stump. Some watched the glowing phones, others the names on the stones, others the yellow notice, and still others the bundle of red papers. Channa Grove had been cut down, but four crocodiles now lay in wait around its gathering place: the government, the trust, the phone screen, and the signal.

A Little Folk Song

Share compassion, oh, and keep the accounts clear;

Go beyond flowers and lamps to help families rebuild their lives.
Flowers and lamps glow on the screen; let the accounts be clear as well;
The families must receive answers about the fund that serves them in grief.

CHAPTER 59

Raghav Signal's New Code

The scripture written in the faint marks of an erased phone screen is the easiest to read.

The next morning people sat around the stump to read Raghav's secret code, as though they were opening an ancient scripture. But this scripture was not written on a leaf. It was written in the faint traces left on a phone screen after something had disappeared. The message erased during the night no longer had a body, but its mist remained.

Raghav "Signal" Somani had always believed that if words were erased in time, a crime could never take shape. His faith was simple: say it, erase it, and there will be no proof that it was ever said. But from the day the children of Garh Narikel took over the watch of names, even erased words began to return with their shadows.

Ananya was the first to speak. “Before we read the secret code, we must establish that it is evidence.” Eera smiled at these words. Gangesha's question was still new in the gathering at Channa Grove, but the children were learning its language in their own way. What is knowledge gained by seeing with the eyes?

Batuknath Hariharan came again that day. His stiff, straight-looking clothes still pretended that he stood for the law. From a distance he saw the children reading Raghav's secret code.

Meera asked Bhavesh, “Did you know that when a person's name lit up on the phone screen, their family would think their son's memory was safe?” Bhavesh lowered his head. “But I was told that emotion runs the platform and accounting runs the business.” At those words a dry insect crawled out of the stump and crept along the cut bark. The children watched it.

Eera asked, “Where does this silence come from?” Everyone's eyes turned of their own accord to Satyavrat Mehta. He was sitting at the edge of the gathering that day. He was quiet, but this time his silence was not a hiding place for wrongdoing. It was a place from which to listen.

By evening they had made a list of Raghav's symbols, but they did not put the list up for everyone to see. Meera said, “When we warn people about a crime, we must not show them how to commit it.” So the children decided to post only this warning in public: “A donation separated from the name it honours is a crocodile's tooth. A platform that displays names without the family's consent is not remembrance but theft.

With these words, the blue line in the earth cracked. Blue dust rose and settled on the cut stump. For the first time Boodhba the ghost could be heard clearly: “The secret code has been read.

All night the kabaddi line glowed faintly in the soil. The children stood guard. Every name-stone remained in its place.

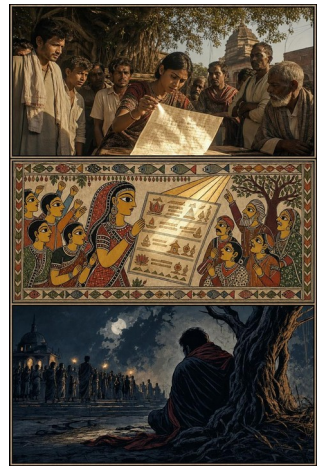
A Little Folk Song

Preserve the mist, oh, preserve the mist upon the glass;
Even an erased letter's shadow can show the way.
The message was erased, yet mist remained on the glass;
A tiny secret code can point towards the whole road.

CHAPTER 60

Satyavrat Mehta's Second Silence

Accounts written in the language of religion are the first to seize silence by the ears.



When Raghav "Signal" Somani's new secret code reached the area around the stump, the villagers could not at first make sense of it. Everything on the paper was couched in religious language—offerings, devotion, rebuilding, support for remembrance, a fund for victims' families. But Devika had learned to see how often fraud dressed itself in the holiest words.

People wanted to raise an uproar. Some young men said, "This time we should go straight to court." Others said, "Call Satyavrat Babu. He is a man from Delhi; he will understand." Some elders said, "Anyone who wants to trade in people's names again should be tied up in Channa Grove." But the stump remained silent. There was a strange restraint in that silence, as though the felled tree were saying, "Listen first. Speak afterwards."

Just then Ananya came to him, carrying the ledger. "Satyavrat Babu," she said, "everyone is calling for you." Satyavrat raised his head.

Everyone was waiting beside Channa's stump. The yellow notice, Batuknath Hariharan's proposal for a People's Memory Trust, the printed pages of Chandrapal's memorial mobile app, and Raghav's donation document written in his new secret code—the four papers had each been weighted down by a different stone. They looked like four crocodiles that had crawled out of the water and settled on their bellies around the stump.

Ba said in her quiet voice, "Gangesha wrote about justice, but society did not do justice to his life. Those who found questions of caste, marriage, birth and lineage uncomfortable preserved him as a statue of respectability. This was the murder of memory in the name of honour.

"How do we answer that?" Aruni asked. Satyavrat said, "Anyone with a proposal must first listen to the reading of names. Anyone who wishes to build a memorial must first visit the homes of the dead. Anyone who speaks of remembrance through a machine must first switch off their phone for one day and sit in the circle around the stump.

Until now, those in power had made ordinary people stand trial and prove what was true. Now the assembly at the stump wanted to examine the truth of the proposals. Ananya, Devika, Meera, Saumya, Eera and Gop began drawing up a page together.

After everyone had dispersed, Satyavrat Mehta was left alone beside the stump. Moonlight fell upon the severed surface. He looked at it without speaking.

As he rose to leave, the wind came through a crack in the stump and called after him, "Kabaddi." Satyavrat stopped. The field

was empty. The children had gone home. No ghosts were in sight. But the line had been drawn.

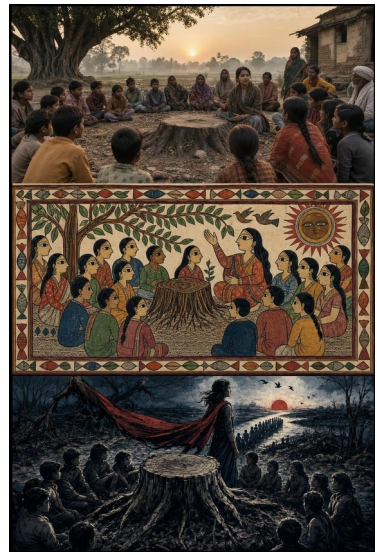
A Little Folk Song

Let silence ripen, oh, ripen the promise deep inside;
At the proper hour, bring clear words into the world.
This second silence is not the first—it is a place for thought;
The robe of religion falls away; the truth beneath comes out.

CHAPTER 61

The First Festival of Names

At a true festival, it is not the drums that sound—it is the names.



The morning of the Festival of Names did not arrive like the mornings of village fairs. No drums beat, no flags flew, and no one arranged chairs on a platform for visiting speakers. Around the felled stump of Channa Grove there was only the old earth, the severed roots, the names written on stones, and the children who, though they had guarded the place all night, sat with brightness rather than sleep in their eyes.

Many people were surprised to hear the word "festival." A festival among jal samadhi, fraud, the humiliation of bodies, years spent in court and the wrongs committed through silence? But Ananya said, "A name that is heard again does not remain only a cry of grief.

At those words came a cough as light as a leaf from Boodhba the ghost. No one could see him, yet everyone understood that Channa Grove agreed. The first stone was lifted. It bore the

words, “Those whose names were never found.” Ananya held it in both hands and read aloud.

On the second stone was an unfinished name: “Sar, ”. No one knew the whole name. Years earlier, a labourer had been swept away in a flood, and only the first letters of his name had survived in someone's notebook.

Ba stood up and said, “Gangesha asked about the nature of things; society asked about family lineage. So in our reading of names, what someone is must come before their ancestry.” Not everyone understood her meaning at once, but the words were entered in the ledger. Satyavrat Mehta sat at a distance and listened.

At noon Batuknath Hariharan's people returned, carrying invitations headed “Preliminary Consultation on the Formation of the People's Memory Trust.” They believed that the Festival of Names had gathered a crowd, making it the perfect time to speak in public. But when one assistant began reading the invitation, the children stopped him.

“Today belongs to the dead,” Aruni said quietly. “Trusts, committees, plans and contract bids can all be heard tomorrow. Today this place will not become a stage for the schemes of the living.” A murmur of agreement rose from the crowd.

At night everyone slowly went home. Around the stump remained the stones, two papers, the new pages of the ledger, and lamps that had burned out. A long while later Satyavrat Mehta rose to leave.

The stump kept watch all night. The voices reading the names had sunk into the soil. The white trust document and the yellow notice lay trembling beside each other, as if both had realised that paper would not rule this place so easily.

A Little Folk Song

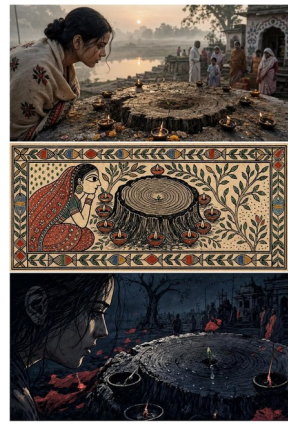
Celebrate, oh, celebrate without the beat of drums;
One lamp, one flower, one name—that is enough adornment.

No drums, no flags; a lamp for names is quite enough;
Read aloud in a quiet voice, and memory will be kept safe.

CHAPTER 62

A Green Speck in the Stump

The oil was gone, the wick was short, yet the flame was stubborn—it was not the oil but the names that gave it strength.



The night of the first Festival of Names had passed, yet the lamps around the stump of Channa Grove did not go out before dawn. Their wicks had grown short and almost all the oil was gone, but their flames clung on as though the duty of guarding names lived inside them. Fine drops of dew gathered on the stones whose names had been read throughout the night.

At the first light of morning, Ananya came alone to the stump. She thought the place would be tired after the festival, the way a singer's throat goes dry after a song. But she saw that the stump was not tired. It was quietly awake.

By noon the news had spread. Some people came to see a miracle. Others arrived with explanations from the science of plants.

That night Boodhba the ghost appeared clearly for the first time. He stood not behind the severed stump, but right beside the green speck. His body seemed to be made of leaf dust, smoke and old tears.

The subject of Gangesha arose again. A student asked, "If Gangesha was a founder of Nyaya reasoning, why did society overlook the injustice in his own life?" Ba replied, "Because society reads scriptures but not lives. It lays flowers on the heads of books, yet fears the love, humiliation, caste restrictions and rebellion of the people who wrote them." Satyavrat trembled as he listened.

But the children were learning how to bring buried questions into the open. They brought the name of the book on reasoning, Tattvachintamani, into their game. One child ran into the circle and, holding his breath, cried, "Knowledge from what our eyes see!" Before the second could be caught, he said, "What we understand from signs!" A third ran out shouting, "Words!" A fourth, a little girl, folded her hands beside the shoot and said, "Memory!" The teacher smiled.

Aruni could not stay silent. "Will there be an entry ticket to a place of testimony?" he asked. "There can be no preservation without arrangements," the official answered. "Preservation or ownership?" Meera asked. "Facilities or surveillance?" Devika asked. Satyavrat Mehta said nothing, but his hand went of its own accord to the ledger in his bag. He understood that a second struggle had begun.

That evening a name was entered in the ledger for the new shoot: "Green Speck. Son/Daughter of: the Felled Channa Grove. Guardian: the Watch over Names." Below it the children wrote, "The leaf trembled during the outside inspection." This was no ordinary remark. It was the first warning of a new age.

That night, after everyone had returned home, a paper blew up beside the stump. It bore no government seal. It was smooth, like a consultant's draft proposal. Across the top, in bold letters, were the words "Garh Narikel Ancestral Heritage Corridor: Preliminary Concept." The paper caught against the new shoot.

A Little Folk Song

Sing the birth song, dear child, for the little green speck;
Even a wick with oil spent carries a wave of life.
The oil is gone, yet the tiny wick still burns;
Upon the dark night's paper a green speck begins to grow.

CHAPTER 63

The Garh Narikel Heritage Project

As long as those names were a source of shame, the bundles of papers stayed hidden.

On the third day after the green speck sprouted in the stump, government vehicles came to the village openly for the first time. Earlier, whenever anyone mentioned Channa Grove, officials would hide their faces behind bundles of papers. Now the stump lay exposed, sunlight could reach it, crowds had gathered and reporters from outside were beginning to take an interest. Suddenly the authorities saw the same place as "ancestral heritage."

At the front came the district cultural officer; behind him, a clerk from the municipal office; behind the clerk, a photographer; and after them, a consultant sitting in a shining jeep. His sunglasses were so dark that they reflected not the village, but only his own face. The moment he stepped out he declared, "This site has enormous potential." His words sounded gentle, but to Aruni they were like the second blow of an axe.

Batuknath Hariharan was not part of the visiting group in person, yet he was present like a shadow. His proposed People's Memory Trust had already found its way into the bundles of government papers. He did not come that day, but his people did.

At that moment Gangesha's question returned. During the previous days, as they had heard stories beside the stump about the lines of the book of reasoning called Tattvachintamani, the children had understood that a seal was not the only kind of evidence. Eera said softly, “Gangesha would have said, ‘First find out what kind of evidence this is.

Just then a faint cry of “Kabaddi, kabaddi” rose from the distant water. Hearing the ghosts play kabaddi in full daylight was new to the village. One clerk asked, “Is this a rehearsal for the programme?” “No,” Aruni replied.

Satyavrat Mehta stood at the edge of the gathering, listening. His years in office told him that the law offered a way of stopping the project. His new way of listening told him that the people's own understanding must be made clear first.

At night Boodhba the ghost appeared openly. He sat on the rim of the stump, as though the cutting had taught him how to come out in daylight. Looking at the children, he said, “Earlier, people came into the darkness because they were afraid.

At midnight a man from the municipal office came quietly. He brought no official seal, only a ladder and some glue. Thinking the village was asleep, he planted a post beside the stump and pasted a new notice onto it.

At dawn Ananya saw the paper. She opened the ledger of names and wrote on a blank line, “Today bids were invited for a contract over memory.” Then she looked towards the green leaf of the stump. It seemed to be saying, “Now the struggle has begun.”

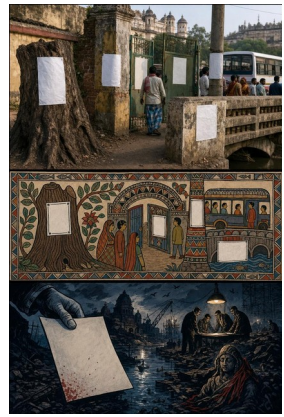
A Little Folk Song

Dance, O Jhijhiya dancer, dance with a lamp upon your head;
Look through every little opening; keep watch over the light.
When the lamp is lit, do not merely look—stand guard;
Be careful that greed does not slip into the light.

CHAPTER 64

Bidding for Memory

When contracts are put out for memory, understand that even grief may be auctioned off.



Not even three days had passed since the Garh Narikel ancestral heritage project was announced when identical white notices appeared on the walls of the tehsil office, the municipal gate, a post at the bus stand and a half-broken pillar of the bridge. At the top was a government seal, and in bold letters beneath it: "Bids Invited for Memory Preservation, Beautification and the Development of an Experience Zone." What the villagers called the stump of Channa Grove was listed on the paper as "Site Parcel A."

The language of the tender was so polished that no one could see its teeth on the first day. The smooth paper slipped between the fingers like soap; whenever you tried to hold on, its words slid out of your grasp. There was no grief in that language, only provisions.

Aruni fell silent as he read. He remembered the old bundles of bridge-construction contracts. The language had been just as polite then: safety, standards, international quality, workers' welfare, third-party scrutiny.

Eera brought a copy of the yellow notice to Channa's stump. The children read its heading first. Then Ananya asked, “What is bidding for a contract?” Devika replied, “When the government pays somebody to do a job, it asks people to make bids.” A little boy immediately asked, “Will people bid for names too?” Everyone fell silent. A child had asked the question, but every adult felt ashamed of the answer.

Ananya looked Batuknath in the eye. “Will the families whose names are remembered have a place in the trust?” Batuknath laughed. “They will be represented.” “And the children?” “A children's advisory committee could be formed.” “What about Meera Didi's pledge to protect people's private lives?” “We shall consider it in the rules.” “And Gangesha's question?” Batuknath hesitated. He could not understand why this little girl had brought Gangesha into the discussion.

Hariharan said, “Enough of these intellectual questions. The land belongs to the government. The project has been approved. The funds have arrived. If you stay outside, your views will never be written into the papers.” Aruni asked calmly, “And if we join your trust, will our views remain—or only our names?” Hariharan's face hardened.

That evening the children played kabaddi around the stump. This time, instead of chanting “Kabaddi, kabaddi,” they ran while holding their breath and repeating, “Evidence, evidence.” Anyone who was caught had to explain a line from the tender notice.

Aruni took the paper from his hand and looked at it. The mark was unclear, yet an old shadow rose before him: Edward Broom. The man who had spoken at Harvard about ethics and right and wrong was now travelling about selling advice on how to turn Garh Narikel's memories into a project.

Ananya wrote the final line of the night in her ledger: “Bids have been invited for memory. The bidder has not yet revealed his name.” Then she closed the page. From far away the breeze carried the smell of the river.

A Little Folk Song

Reach out your hands, oh, reach into the house of grief;
Bring food, clothes and justice along with flowers.
Do not make a contract out of mourning; offer hands of help;
Along with flowers bring support, justice and care.

CHAPTER 65

Broom Returns

The smell of greed comes not from new ink, but from the water beneath the old bridge.

As soon as the tender documents for memory were opened, an old smell rose from them. It was not the smell of paper, fresh ink or government dust. It was the smell of that old greed which had first settled upon the bodies of dead labourers hidden beside the bridge pillars in the river.

The company's name was different now. The name that had appeared on the first bridge contract had been written in English letters, with Edward Broom's face shining behind it. Now the name had been rendered in Devanagari on the paper: "Nav-Arogya Aadhaar Pvt. Ltd."

Eera did not laugh as she read the letter, but a bitter light shone in her eyes. "Look," she said, "the people who drowned bodies now want to sell tickets to see the drowned." Devika bent over

the second page. It said the centre would offer visitors films, sound installations and a "personal memory register," in which people could deposit the names, photographs, voices, last messages and stories of their loved ones.

This language was read aloud to the children sitting around the stump. Ananya asked the first question: "Will they ask for names? What will they do with the names?" No one had an easy answer.

Satyavrat Mehta was there. Everyone's eyes turned towards him of their own accord, as though he would provide a legal answer. This was his second silence—not a way of escaping, but a way of giving the people's voices room to speak first.

Batuknath tried and failed to smile. "How can anything get done with so much suspicion?" he said. "The world runs on procedures." Ananya replied, "Does justice run on procedures too?

Meanwhile, a boy came out from behind Channa's stump with a pot of water and poured it upon the green speck. He did this every day, but today he did it in front of everyone. "Son," Batuknath said, "this is going to become an officially protected relic.

Ananya read the message. She looked up at the sky, where the stars had become clearly visible since Channa Grove was cut down. She said softly, "Where memory is put out to tender, research will come too.

The green speck in the stump opened a little further that night. Broom's letter fluttered in the breeze, as though some old crocodile from a distant seashore were once again sniffing the water. Garh Narikel was silent, but its silence was now a watch being kept.

A Little Folk Song

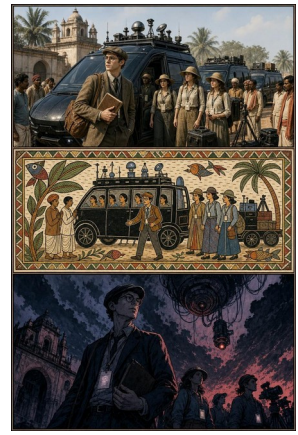
Set your new feet, oh, set them upon the old bridge;
Walk with bowed heads before its sweat, mud and history.

In the smell of the old bridge live sweat, silt and history;
Set new feet upon it, guarding the trust it carries.

CHAPTER 66

The Harvard Research Team

Those who come with devices hanging from their necks begin measuring before they begin seeing.



On the third morning after Broom's return, a strange vehicle came into Garh Narikel. Its windows were dark, small devices were mounted on top, and identity badges gleamed around the necks of the passengers. The vehicle followed the new road being built by the municipal office and stopped beside the stump.

The first person to get out was a young man with a cap on his head, round glasses on his nose and a thick notebook in his hand. He introduced himself as a researcher from Harvard, a great institution of learning.

Silence descended upon the research team. Eera began to explain slowly. “Here Gangesha is not the name of a book, but the name of a question.

A researcher immediately asked, “What is the written source for this story?” His voice was polite, but inside his politeness was a hunger for what could go into his notebook. Ananya placed her hand upon the stump's root and answered, “The

source breathes here. If you want a written source, you will find one.

A woman scholar from Harvard said softly in English that her team was studying caste and justice. Meera, who had been sitting a little way off, moved forward. “Study is a good thing,” she said.

From the stump to the bridge, from the bridge to the pond, and from the pond to the home of a labourer's widow whose husband had been marked “absent” on paper. The researchers grew sweaty, their trousers became muddy and their shoes sank into the water. “If academic distance keeps itself clear of the mud,” Eera said, “it will not deliver justice.” The scholar wanted to write that down, then looked towards Ananya.

That night, after the names were read around the stump, Gangesha's name was spoken again: “Gangesha Upadhyaya—present.” The people answered. In the children's voices there was curiosity, rebellion and the fire of learning that was beginning to crack the wall of caste.

As the research team prepared to leave, Meera told them the rule for the following day. “If you want to take photographs tomorrow, we must first discuss the right to decide how one is seen. Who looks, who is shown, who is hidden and who is sold—all of that must be made clear.

The filmmaker still held his device, but dust from Channa Grove had settled on its lens. He reached to wipe it clean. In the dust, however, he saw not his own reflection but the eye of a crocodile. He lowered the device.

A Little Folk Song

Clean your lens, oh, first clean the lens of your mind;
Before you look, ask what lives in another's heart.
Clean the lens first, and then look at the human being;
A face is not an object; seek consent before you write its story.

CHAPTER 67

Meera and the Right to Be Seen

There is a right to look—and the first document for the person being looked at is their consent.

When the Harvard research team returned to Channa's stump the next day, they did not sit down and open their notebooks as before. This time cameras hung from their necks, shiny bags swung from their shoulders, and a strange impatience shone in their eyes. It was not impatience to learn, but impatience to collect.

Eera was standing there already. She held the map of memory in her hands, but it was folded. She had understood that when people arrived on the ground, they first spoke the lofty language of the sky: "study," "participation," "documentation," "international platform."

Gangesha's question had floated in the air since the previous day: What is evidence? What do we know by seeing with our own eyes? What can we understand from a sign?

Just then an elderly leatherworker arrived. His name was Jagdish Ram. Usually he sat at the back and spoke very little.

Meera did not answer. Instead she put the question before the children. Ananya said, “If justice became a subject of learned books, why was the humiliation of living people left out?

Ananya began chanting softly, “Kabaddi, kabaddi ... seeing, seeing ... names, names ...” The children did not enter the game. They simply caught the rhythm of her breathing. Meera understood that the game had not stopped.

For the first time the foreign research team had to put its trust in the village's own language. Eera unfolded the map for them: Channa's stump, the stones of names, Gangesha's question, Jagdish Ram's writing and the thread on Meera's wrist—all joined along one line. “On this map,” Eera said, “the way people look at one another has a current, just like a river.

Devika trembled as she read the paper. Meera took it in her hands 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 ledger: “The First Doorway to the Theft of Names.”

The green speck on the stump glowed dimly in the night. It was as though the tree were saying: the watch over people's right to be seen has begun, but the marketplace of memories is still awake.

A Little Folk Song

Ask first, oh, ask, “Am I ready?”
Honour a “yes” and honour a “no”; learn to respect them both.
Before you look at me, ask—am I ready?
My body, my story, my choice belong to me.

CHAPTER 68

Devika Versus the Tribute App

The person pressing buttons in the names of the dead is searching the pockets of the living.

After the Festival of Names, peace ought to have settled over Garh Narikel. But it did not. At the place where the children read names, where the green speck of the stump blinked in the sunlight, where Meera guarded the dignity of faces and people's right to decide how they were seen, the glow of phone screens began creeping back at night. Names were written on stones all around the severed body of Channa Grove, but now someone proposed sticking little shining symbols on top of the stones.

The first time Devika heard this proposal, she remembered Ujjwal's mother's quiet words: "A name is in no hurry." Yet the tribute app's advertisement began with the words "Devotion at a Touch." Devika shivered when she read them. If devotion took only one touch, what would become of the long hours of grief, the heat of waiting, the trembling voice calling a name and the testimony of silence?

Devika showed the app to Ananya and the other children. The children watched not the tiny letters on the phone screen, but what the app did. One boy asked, "It says it needs the full name.

That night Devika went looking for Chandrapal. He was not beside Channa's stump, but in a new office behind the market. A board outside read “Cultural Memory Support Centre.” Inside were a glass-topped desk, fragrant incense, the glow of a computer and an artistic picture of Channa Grove on the wall.
“Why did your app refuse a person whose name could not be found?” Devika asked calmly. Chandrapal kept quiet for a while, then said, “The system needs data. Without data, we can't make a register. Donors want completeness.” Devika replied, “Channa Grove gave unfinished names the first place.
When she came outside she said, “Remove Ujjwal's name.” “The name has already been made public,” Chandrapal said. “Memory belongs to everyone.” “Shared memory and commercial possession are different things,” Devika replied. “You cannot sell the tears attached to Ujjwal's name without his mother's permission.” “That is not what the law says,” Chandrapal answered. Devika said softly, “If the law does not say it yet, the village assembly of names will.
Meera tied her own thread to this rule. “Without the right to control how one is seen, memory becomes humiliation,” she said. “If any camera, app, donation document, research project or memorial touches someone's grief without their permission, it will not be allowed into Channa Grove.” Boodhba the ghost gave a faint laugh.
At dawn the children went to count the stones. Every stone was still there, but the letters on three of them had grown faint, as if someone had scraped them with a sharp point during the night. On the first page she wrote, “From today the theft of names has begun.” Devika looked towards the stump. The green speck was still there, but the earth around it looked slightly disturbed. Keeping watch over memory was no longer a matter of feeling alone.

A Little Folk Song

Pause, dear child, pause before you press the button;
Take one breath, ask one question, then go forward.
Before your fingers press a button, search your heart;
Whose name, whose money, whose honour? Speak clearly of them all.

CHAPTER 69

The Theft of Names

The theft caught on a phone screen is only the visible side of a theft.

When Devika exposed the lies of the tribute app before everyone, people thought the real theft had been discovered. But Channa Grove's stump knew that the theft caught on a phone screen was only its bright, visible page. The real theft was the quiet removal of names from memory, so the next generation would never even ask whose body had drowned, whose labour had been devoured, whose voice had been silenced.

In the second week after the Festival of Names, Ananya opened the ledger and noticed its first blank space. On the page where "Sarayu Mandal" had been written the day before, only a faint smudge of ink remained. It looked as though someone had gently rubbed the name away with a wet thumb.

Gangesha's question came back to Ananya. She said softly, "What is evidence? That which lives in memory—is that?

The children gathered around her. Ananya asked, "Will you read aloud the name that has been erased?" Batuknath smiled. "If there is proof, I will read it." Ananya asked again, "What if the proof is not in your papers, but in the voice of our elder?" Batuknath's smile grew a little harder. "Feeling and evidence are different things."

"Not feeling—evidence from a human life," Aruni said. At those words a faint creak arose from within the stump, as if the dry roots agreed. Batuknath turned over his papers.

Gangesha's shadow grew deeper behind the stump. No one could see it with their eyes. But the children heard a question in their ears: "The general, the particular, relationship, absence—where does the name belong?" Ananya wrote in the ledger, "The absence of someone declared absent can itself be evidence, if that absence was made by somebody." Satyavrat Mehta raised his head for the first time.

From far away Chandrapal Batra was watching the scene on his phone. A warning flashed in his app: "Invalid Name Reactivated." He panicked. To him, a name was only an entry in a database.

The ledger was not closed that night. Ananya wrote one last line: "The erased name has gone down into the water. Tomorrow we shall listen to the pond." The yellow envelope, the trust's draft proposal and the phone screen of the app all lay to one side.

The chapter paused where the theft of names began to turn into the testimony of water. The next morning the people of Garh Narikel would gather beside the pond, and Panidubbi would speak clearly for the first time: "A name that has sunk beneath the water cannot be erased from paper."

A Little Folk Song

Fill your water pot, sister; fill it with names as well;
Place a lotus upon each ripple at the water steps.
An erased name rises from the water like a lotus once again;
However far the river flows, its roots remain within memory.

CHAPTER 70

The Testimony of the Panidubbi

What cannot be seen from above remains tangled in the panidubbi's hair.

Boodhba's words—“Water will keep the names that have been erased”—and Ananya's written promise, “Tomorrow we will listen to the pond,” went on beating in the village's heart all night. On the night of the theft of names, no one in Garh Narikel slept soundly. The pages of the ledger had survived, and the stones still lay around the stump, but a kind of smoke seemed to have settled over some of the names.

Ananya reached the stump early in the morning. She opened the ledger, ran her hand over a page, and noticed faint water stains where the missing names seemed to have been. Where had that water come from in the night?

On the shore of the pond, Meera first read out the rules: no one's face would be shown by force; no one's tears would be photographed; no one's sorrow would be turned into a business. Devika added that the family of anyone whose name was read could speak if they wished; otherwise, the water itself would answer. Satyavrat Mehta sat at the back without uncapping his pen.

Meera asked, “What if a name is connected with the humiliation of someone's body, and the family does not want that made public?” The panidubbi answered, “We shall protect the name, not put sorrow on display. Water shows faces, but it does not bring an image ashore without permission.” Meera drew a long breath. The promise to respect people's privacy had now become a rule of the river.

Then something strange happened. The image of the false donation page created for Chandrapal Batra's Respectful Remembrance mobile app opened by itself on Gop's phone. Gop was startled, but he immediately tilted the phone towards the water.

As the night deepened, the panidubbi's voice rose for the last time. “Do not merely save the names. Save their game as well. A name that stops playing will become no more than a mark of remembrance. A name that plays kabaddi will remain a living breath.” The children sat up sharply at these words.

Boodhba the ghost stepped out of the reeds and, for a moment, could be seen clearly. He said softly, “Where breath is held and names are called aloud, testimony remains alive. If kabaddi stops, the watch over names will grow old.” With that he dissolved into smoke again.

The following morning, a new poster had been pasted on a village wall: “Channa Grove Ghost-Kabaddi Festival: A Wonderful Folk Experience, with Light, Sound, Performances and Panidubbi Scenes.” A company name appeared in small letters at the bottom, and behind it the villagers could sense Chandrapal's people. Ananya read the poster in silence. The smell of fresh paste was still in the air—the smell of the city, trying to cover the earthy sweetness of the village morning.

So the panidubbi's testimony had not come to an end. Instead, it had revealed the next danger. Memories that had survived the water were now to be turned by the market into a

performance. And the kabaddi of Channa Grove, which held the truth of living breath, was about to be turned into a procession of make-believe ghosts.

A Little Folk Song

Untangle, dear friend, untangle the names caught fast;
Bring the oil of love and the patient comb at last.
The names entangled in the panidubbi's hair,
The friends gently combed them loose with loving care.

CHAPTER 71

The Procession of Make-Believe Ghosts

In a procession of make-believe ghosts, even the smoke is hired; the real grove simply laughs.

The fresh paste on the posters had not even dried when preparations for the festival reached the village. Two days after the panidubbi's testimony, a new vehicle arrived in Garh Narikel. Across its sides, shiny letters announced: “Channa Grove Night Experience: Ghost-Kabaddi Procession.” Below the words was a picture of rising smoke, a half-transparent figure, the felled stump behind it, lamps in front, and a small slogan in one corner: “A Unique Blend of Fear, Ancestral Heritage and Entertainment.” Here, names trembled on people's lips as they spoke them. In the outsiders' advertisement, those same names had become an “experience.”

The first person out of the vehicle was a young man wearing an identity card around his neck and carrying folded papers. Showing a permit from the town authorities, he said, “This programme will increase local employment, attract tourists and spread awareness of our memories.” Behind him came boxes of make-up, containers of artificial smoke, drums, lights, black-and-white costumes, and five performers. Two were unemployed young men from the village, one had come from a theatre troupe, one was a city dance instructor, and one was a boy who had never even seen Channa Grove at night.

Ananya watched from a distance. “Shall we stop them?” Eera asked. Ananya shook her head. “First, let us see. Even something false must provide evidence for what it claims to be.” Gangesha's questions from the earlier chapters had entered the children's everyday speech.

As evening fell, slips resembling tickets were handed out. Whoever sat inside would receive a “special experience.” Tempted by the promise, some young villagers went in. Devika said to the organiser, “Now return the money collected from everyone for this show.” The organiser began, “Permits, taxes, expenses—” Meera interrupted. “Under which account do you pay tax for selling the fear of the dead?” People turned to look at her. For the first time, the organiser realised that the crowd was no longer a group of customers but the people of the village. Without arguing, he opened the box containing the ticket slips.

But the story did not end there. After night had fallen, the performers remained seated around the stump. No one drove them away.

Someone tried to upload photographs of that night to Chandrapal's Respectful Remembrance mobile app. The pictures appeared, but the performers' faces were blurred while the names on the stones stood out sharply. In Raghav Signal's secret code, the event was described as an “emotional risk.”

After midnight, when everyone was tired, a faint sound rose from inside the stump. It was not weeping, nor wind, nor the rustle of leaves. At first everyone thought they had imagined it. “Did the grove laugh?” someone asked. Ba answered, “Yes. When someone tries to sell memory and memory survives all the same, the grove laughs.” The children were not frightened. They opened the next page of the ledger and wrote a heading: “The Laughter of Channa Grove.”

A Little Folk Song

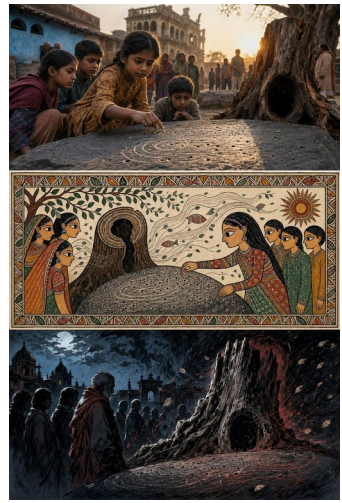
Recognise, dear friend, recognise the ghost that is real;

Count who stands behind the hired dance; learn what is real.
A hired ghost can dance and spread its clouds of smoke;
Real fear flees only when wisdom lights its lamp.

CHAPTER 72

The Laughter of Channa Grove

The stump's laughter was not hollow: it was the voice of the roots that remained.



The title on a new page in the children's ledger—"The Laughter of Channa Grove"—began to tell its own story as dawn approached. The laughter that had risen after the false ghost procession fell apart was not merely an event of one night. Until morning it echoed like air trapped inside the hollow of the stump.

In the first light of sunrise, the children came to examine the stones. The letters of some names had grown darker. New dots had appeared beside certain incomplete names. Ananya touched one dot with her finger.

Gangesha's question returned once more. Ananya asked the children, "What is the evidence of laughter?" One boy said, "Knowledge from direct perception, because we heard it." Another said, "Inference from signs, because the letters on the stones have changed." A third said, "Testimony, because Ba said so." The fourth child, 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. This definition was not written in any scripture, but all around the stump it was accepted.

In the report prepared by Edward Broom's team, the laughter of Channa Grove was called "an acoustic sign of local resistance." Broom's adviser said, "It can be put to positive use: community healing, memory tourism, sound installations." Broom stood by the window listening. He thought he heard someone laughing far away.

By noon, journalists from outside had arrived. One asked, "Does the grove really laugh?" Ananya replied, "Are you looking for the truth, or a spectacle?" The journalist smiled, but the question stayed with him. He lowered his camera.

His mind told him: give the laughter a legal form, form a committee, appoint trustees and a secretary, collect signatures, open a route for the money. But another voice asked, "Do you know what justice is?" It was the very question the children had asked him in Gangesha's name. Batuknath struck the table with his hand and got up.

An old ghostly player, who for years had been visible only in darkness, became half-visible in the moonlight that night. His body was not smoke but something like river mist. Teaching the children the game, he said, "In kabaddi, you hold your breath, but in memory, you share your breath.

Then a voice came: "Batuknath Hariharan, the first hearing of your trust will take place within you." He tried to start, but in his dream his body was tied to the chair. Somewhere far off the children's voices rose. "Direct perception?" The stump answered, "Greed." "Inference from signs?"—"Delay." "Testimony?"—"Justice." "Truth?"—Laughter.

And within that ring of laughter, Batuknath's dream court opened.

A Little Folk Song

Green, oh green, even the old stump will turn green;
Trust the laughing roots—new shoots shall yet be seen.
The stump laughed from within; its roots were living still;
At the first rain, a tender shoot will come alive again.

CHAPTER 73

Batuknath's Dream Court

What a person mocked throughout life may sit in judgement over him in a dream.

That circle of laughter, the doorway to the dream court, had followed Batuknath since evening. The laughter of Channa Grove rang in Batuknath Hariharan's ears all night. Sometimes it seemed to rise from the stump, sometimes from the corridors of the court, sometimes from inside the iron cupboard in his house.

He thought, This is all superstition. Give the villagers a few documents, a trust, some committee members, a few donation receipts, and they will settle down. I shall give their shared memory a legal form, make myself its chairman, open a fund in the name of protecting the dead, and tie Channa Grove—which has been left so untidily in the people's hands—with the ropes of rules.

Then two shadows appeared in his dream—the shadows of the names of Ramanath Jha and Udaychandra Jha “Ashok.” They did not appear as living people making accusations, but like

stern editors of memory, pens in hand, a curtain of respectability behind them. They began marking out the inconvenient parts of Gangesha's life: cut the account of his marriage, soften the wounds of caste, remove the word "charmakarni" for a woman of the leatherworking community, keep the image of the founder of Navya-Nyaya, and suppress the rebellion in his life.

Gangesha asked, "Do you want evidence?" Batuknath felt relieved. The language of evidence was familiar ground to him. "Yes," he said. "There can be no justice without evidence." Then the floor of the court opened.

Gangesha said again, "Listen to verbal testimony." One by one came the voices of Channa Grove's stump, the panidubbi, the cries of the false ghosts, the children guarding the names, Meera, Devika, Gop, Aruni, Ba, and even the silence of Satyavrat Mehta. They did not recite clauses of law. They simply said, "We are here." Batuknath lowered his head.

A little girl entered the court—not Ananya, perhaps her shadow. Holding a stone with a name upon it, she asked, "Mr Hariharan, you wish to create a trust. Will there be a place in it for Gangesha's wife from the leatherworking community?" Batuknath did not answer.

Then a kabaddi line shone across the ceiling of the court. The ghosts did not enter. They stood along the boundary.

That day Batuknath did not go to Channa Grove. He stayed in his room and, for the first time, opened the cupboard in his office. Inside were bundles of old case papers, receipts for fees, notes of adjournments, and letters from ordinary people.

When the stump laughed again that night, the laughter did not stop at Batuknath's house. It travelled along an invisible thread of wires and entered the screen of Chandrapal Batra's phone.

A Little Folk Song

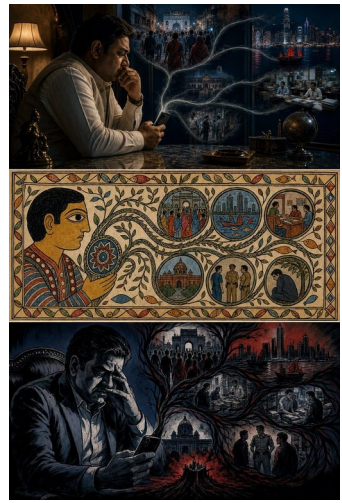
Let the court assemble, the court of dreams, today;

Give widows, children, workers the foremost seats, I pray.
The dream court met, and everyone was given a place;
The widow, child and worker told their stories face to face.

CHAPTER 74

Chandrapal's First Confession

A first confession is always made alone; the crowd applauds only afterwards.



"Now it is the turn of the man of a hundredfold returns." The stump's laughter had sent out this unwritten message, and by morning it had found its destination. The night of Batuknath Hariharan's dream court had passed, but its dust had settled on more than his head. Once the laughter of Channa Grove's stump had risen, it had spread through the air.

Chandrapal Batra had spent his life avoiding names. To him, people were only numbers: income per person, deception per click, extraction per fear, transfers per account. He had never wished to understand whose house, whose mother, whose roof, whose debt or whose beating heart lay behind a phone screen.

Chandrapal switched off his phone. The names were still visible—on the surface of the glass table, in the liquid inside a bottle, between the hands of a clock, on the windowpane.

By dawn he set out for Garh Narikel, not so much after making a decision as in a state of exhausted collapse. Chandrapal Batra

usually travelled in shining cars, surrounded by security and a careful distance from others. This time he arrived without a word in an old car beside the felled stump of Channa Grove. "Sir, shall you get out?" his driver asked. Chandrapal did not reply.

There was punishment in this act of writing. A criminal's grand, expensive name was breaking apart and returning to the helpless name of his childhood. Tears filled Chandrapal's eyes, but those tears could not yet be trusted.

Devika did not read the paper as soon as she took it. She looked towards the circle of stones. "An account is not the same as a name," she said, "but without an account of what happened, our next struggle will remain unfinished." To Chandrapal, her words sounded not like forgiveness but like an instruction to begin work.

Batuknath's dream court, Gangesha's questions, the procession of false ghosts, the laughter of Channa Grove—all entered Chandrapal's mind in that moment. He felt that he was sitting not merely around a stump, but before Navya-Nyaya itself as his witness. Direct perception: he had been a swindler.

Chandrapal's hands went numb. It occurred to him that somewhere far away Raghav might also be looking at his devices. A faint breeze stirred within the stump.

That night the stump of Channa Grove fell silent again. But the message in that silence was clear: the first confession was not the end of punishment. It was only the latch on a door. Beyond that door sat Raghav Signal, with a network that no longer worked.

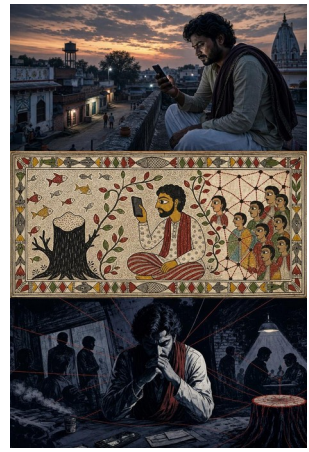
A Little Folk Song

Say softly, oh say, "I was in the wrong";
Know that words behind a closed door are the seeds of dawn.
The first confession is born softly in a shuttered room;
"I was in the wrong"—and a hardened heart begins to bloom.

CHAPTER 75

Raghav Signal Without a Network

Surrounded by networks yet left alone, he understood that the real network is made not of wires but of trust.



Beyond that door, in a glass-walled city room, sat Raghav, the man who had everything except a connection. For the first time in his life, Raghav "Signal" Somani felt that the greatest power in the world came not from money, authority, access or cleverness, but from the network itself. All day he stared at his phone screen.

At first he had not been a man of technology. His special skill was never to write the whole truth, never to speak an outright lie, and to leave signals between the two, so that every criminal thought he was one of their own. He lived among disappearing messages, vanishing chat rooms, half-heard voices, contracts read only halfway, and the smoke of hundredfold returns.

News of Chandrapal's first confession had reached him in the night—not by telephone, not through a person, but through uneasiness. When a criminal sees the first crack in his wrongdoing, the tremor travels far through the network of crime. Raghav thought, "Chandrapal is breaking apart.

His first message went to Batuknath Hariharan: “Stop the trust proposal at once. The children are out of control.” Two grey ticks appeared on the screen, but they never turned blue. His second message went to Chandrapal: “Do not make your confession public.

In fear he wanted to throw his phone away, but it seemed stuck to his palm. For years he had held other people's lives as data in his hand. Today the names themselves were holding his hand.

At that very moment the children were sitting on night watch at Channa Grove. “Tonight we shall stop the signals,” Ananya said. “How can a signal be stopped?” a boy asked. Placing her hand on the green speck in the stump, Ananya replied, “Any language that refuses to speak people's names will be denied a path.” The children sat in a circle and began the breathing rhythm of kabaddi—slow, long, unbroken. Instead of chanting “kabaddi, kabaddi,” they kept saying, “Present, present.”

Boodhba the ghost sat quietly beside the children's circle in Channa Grove. “A web breaks where a lie asks to be let through,” he said softly. “A web of truth?” one child asked. Boodhba laughed. “Truth needs relationships, not a web.” Ananya wrote that sentence in the ledger.

Raghav rose from his chair. The first pale light before sunrise spread across the city's smoke. The morning air carried the smell of burnt diesel and, somewhere far away, the scent of wet trees—the city and the village held together in a single breath.

At that same moment in Channa Grove, Ananya closed the ledger. “A distant name has stirred today,” she said. “What happens now?” the children asked. Ananya looked at the green speck on the stump. It had grown a little longer during the night. “Now it will not be a network,” she said. “A road will open.”

A Little Folk Song

Weave, oh weave a net of trust, weave it well;

Like the pair in the Jat-Jatin song, let togetherness swell.
Though signals may flash on every side, we still need one another;
The human chain will make a net of trust, each linked to each other.

CHAPTER 76

Lau Kin-hung's Journey to India

Even someone who crosses the sea comes ashore at the landing where the waters of his name await.

The shadow facing Mithila was beginning to take bodily form. The news that Raghav Signal's network had failed travelled overnight as far as Lau Kin-hung's city. No message arrived, but word that the message had failed did arrive.

His room looked out upon the sea. Below him stretched rows of ships, lights, goods, insurance, contracts, loans, medicines, tools, labour, organs and information—all moving in the great currents of world trade. Lau was proud of those currents.

That night, when he slept, he dreamed of a long river. Crocodiles swam through its waters. They were not chewing up bodies.

By morning he had decided to travel to India. Publicly the visit was described as a review of "investment in culture and resettlement." Privately it was a search into Raghav's broken network, Chandrapal's fractured confession, Batuknath's dream court, and Edward Broom's failed donation.

An elderly Indian passenger seated beside him was reading a Maithili newspaper. Lau did not understand Maithili, but the letters looked to him like ripples upon water. The old man looked towards Lau and tried to speak English. Then he stopped himself, smiled, and showed him a corner of the newspaper.

During the journey Lau fell asleep. This time, in his dream, he was not on an aircraft. He was walking inside the stump of Channa Grove. The passage inside was circular, damp, and covered in countless lines.

At the immigration desk, an officer turned his passport over, read the name—Lau Kin-hung—and granted him entry on paper.

He stepped out of the airport. Hot wind, dust, the smell of fuel, tea, sweat, the clamour of people speaking in public, taxi drivers calling out—all surrounded him at once. The cool glass world had broken apart.

The interpreter could not understand that sentence. But far behind them, in the airport glass, a crocodile's eye truly blinked.

A Little Folk Song

Come, traveller, come across the sea;
Keep your home tongue close; let the world's knowledge be your strength.
A traveller beyond the seas still gazes at the same moon's light;
He keeps his home's name and mother's speech within his heart at night.

CHAPTER 77

Crocodiles at the Airport

The city lights are sold in airport glass, but a crocodile's eye can be seen for nothing.

That blinking crocodile's eye, which had opened a door, waited on the very first step inside the airport. Lau Kin-hung's plane landed between night and dawn. The city lights spread across the terminal windows as though the sky had sold all its stars and hung advertisements upon the earth.

The moment he set foot on Indian soil, he caught a smell—spices, diesel, dampness, sweat, wet cloth, and the scent of earth arriving from somewhere far away. The smell cut through the airport's cold air. Lau wrinkled his nose and thought of it as a "local inconvenience." Yet something inside him said at once: There are names in that smell.

"This country's machines do not work properly," he told his assistant. The assistant, who had already been staying in Delhi, replied quietly, "The machines work properly, sir. Sometimes there are simply more reflections here." Lau felt uneasy. In the world of his business, reflections had no value.

A message from Batuknath Hariharan reached him: "There is a way to bring local feelings under a legally constituted trust." Chandrapal sent another: "The structure of the Respectful Remembrance mobile app is secure. Only the public's feelings need managing." A coded message from Raghav Signal said: "New secret code active; risk is emotional." Lau read them all. All three messages meant the same thing: memory could once again be turned into merchandise. But behind the letters on his screen he began to see crocodiles' teeth.

A black car was waiting for him outside the airport. A name was written on the driver's badge, but when the driver looked at Lau, his eyes became as still as the stones around the stump of Channa Grove. "Garh Narikel?" the driver asked. Lau was startled. Garh Narikel was not on the public itinerary for that day.

He could not sleep that night. After a while he dreamed that he was standing once more at the airport arrivals gate. Instead of officials, the children of the stump were sitting in a row.

When he woke, the first grey streak of morning lay beyond the glass. A message glowed on his phone. It was not from Satyavrat Mehta, nor from any assistant.

By noon Lau Kin-hung had decided to go. I shall go, see, strike a bargain, take control, he thought. But beneath that decision something else trembled. Perhaps he was about to meet, for the first time, people who would set aside his wealth, caste, country, passport and language, and read only his name.

So the crocodile at the airport did not chew his body. It stripped away the first layer of his sense of safety. He had arrived in India as a businessman, but as he walked towards the waiting area, his shadow belonged to a man who could no longer run from his own reflection.

A Little Folk Song

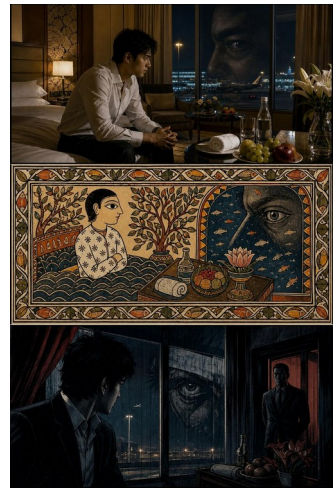
Wake, oh city, wipe the glass and wake;

Keep the heart as clear as every shining pane you make.
The walls of glass are bright; let the heart within be clear;
Not crocodile eyes, but compassion's gaze, should greet us here.

CHAPTER 78

The Silent Conversation Between Satyavrat and Lau

When two people's silences settle upon the same question, even that is a conversation.



The message from the waiting area opened a road, and that road led straight to Channa Grove. After seeing the crocodile's eye in the airport glass, Lau Kin-hung did not sleep all night. In his five-star hotel room, the bed was soft as the waves of the sea, the air-conditioning steady, and the table arranged with fruit, flowers, mineral water and scented towels. Everything was so perfectly provided that one might imagine there had never been a wrong in the world.

Lau Kin-hung told his assistant: no meetings with journalists, no investors' dinner, no cultural tour.

The meeting was not held in anyone's office. Satyavrat Mehta had invited him neither to a building in Delhi nor to a roadside spot outside Garh Narikel, but to the felled stump of Channa Grove. Lau Kin-hung's security team objected at first.

After a long while, Lau himself spoke. “Do you want to accuse me?” In a calm voice Satyavrat said, “It is the courts that bring accusations. Here we read names.” Lau asked again, “Do you want evidence?” Satyavrat placed his hand upon the ledger. “Evidence takes many forms.” Gangesha speaks of knowledge from direct perception, understanding from signs, and words.

The children's reading of names stopped. A small stone was in her hand. She set it before Lau and asked, “Will you write your name?” The assistant was about to interrupt, but Lau raised his hand and stopped him.

Lau Kin-hung stayed in Garh Narikel that night. He wanted a guesthouse, but the children did not permit him to stay inside the circle around the stump. “For reasons of security—” he began. Ananya said, “In the place of those whose names drowned without any protection, please speak less of security.” In the end they gave him a room in an old school outside the village.

In the middle of the night he had a dream. He was standing beneath a shining dome on the imagined “Nameless Planet.” Every building bore a number; none had a name.

As the day grew brighter, a messenger from Edward Broom arrived. He carried a donation deed with a golden border—a vast sum for the Garh Narikel Memory Centre, foreign expertise, a mechanised archive for old papers, a world-class exhibition. The messenger was certain that the village would bow before such a document.

Satyavrat Mehta did not smile. Neither did Lau Kin-hung. A faint rustle rose from inside the stump—not laughter, not weeping.

A Little Folk Song

Build a bridge, oh build between two silences;
If words do not come, give time, and sit together in patience.
Two silences sat together; the wind spoke between them;

Damp eyes and trembling hands began their conversation.

CHAPTER 79

Broom's Donation Deed

The smoother a donation deed looks, the older the contract may be beneath its seal.

The warning of the next test, spoken in the rustle of the stump, arrived in the village the following morning as a thick packet of post. On the morning after Lau Kin-hung's silent conversation, that parcel was delivered to Garh Narikel. It was no ordinary packet of papers.

The donation deed had come from Edward Broom's new institution. His company's old name appeared nowhere. The company whose contracts had left labourers' bodies buried in bridge foundations, whose advice had turned water, work, medicines, information and fear into "projects," had returned in a new form: the "Global Memory Restoration Fund."

Satyavrat Mehta stood at the back and listened. He wanted to say something, but his practice of a second silence held him back. This time the right to speak belonged to the children.

The representative grew troubled. "You are all being emotional," he said. "This is how memories are preserved

throughout the world." Ananya put a hand upon the stump and replied, "If that is the way the world does it, how many names have been erased by it?

The crowd caught its breath. "The paper has changed its appearance," a young man whispered. Ba said, "Not the paper. The skin of wrongdoing has grown wet." The children's eyes shone. This was direct perception—not the stern vocabulary of Gangesha's Nyaya, but knowledge seen through the eyes of the soil.

The representative tried to snatch back the document. Ananya did not stop him. She simply said, "Take it away.

The son picked up the paper and began to read. Batuknath started. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "Father, is this meant to protect justice, or your profession?" the son asked calmly. The question was small, but all the bells of the dream court seemed to ring together. Batuknath's mouth went dry.

That evening the children placed the empty envelope of the donation deed around the stump. On it they wrote, "If compassion demands rights in return, it will be examined." One corner of the envelope was wet. The representative had taken away the paper inside, but the water stain remained near the stump.

From the damp smell of the donation deed came the next question: would the child of a father who had sold justice to gain prestige inherit that prestige, or become a witness to his father's crimes? The laughter of Channa Grove had stopped. It was now time for a question from inside the home.

A Little Folk Song

Dry the donation deed beneath the sun, let it dry;
Whose money, where did it go? Read every letter, ask why.
Dry the damp donation deed in the sunlight bright;
Whose wealth, whose gain? Let everyone read it in the light.

CHAPTER 80

Hariharan's Daughter

One question from a child—"Did you protect justice, or your profession?"—can shake every certificate of honour hanging on the veranda.

That very night, the question from within the family found its way to the doorstep. On the night when Broom's donation deed was soaked in water and turned into a copy of an old contract, Batuknath Hariharan sat on the high veranda of his house. There were portraits of his ancestors on the veranda pillars, certificates of honour from the Bar Council on the walls inside, and thick law books in glass-fronted cupboards. And there sat Batuknath himself, as though all that remained in this house of law was not the law, but its weary shadow.

In the middle of that silence, the door opened without a sound. Batuknath's daughter, Tarini, entered. She was studying law, but unlike her father, she did not regard it as a clever means of earning a living.

Batuknath's eyebrows drew together. At the mention of Gangesha, the public speaker within him wanted to spring to

life. At many gatherings he had declared that Navya-Nyaya, the New Logic, was one of Mithila's extraordinary gifts.

“Gangesha is a subject for scholars,” Batuknath said. “History allows for many opinions. At home, at this hour of the night, all this…” Tarini interrupted him. “Not in the night of this house, Father. In the darkness of our family.”

Then Tarini asked the question herself. “Did you protect justice, or your profession? When workers drowned at the bridge, you pushed aside their families' papers by calling them technical defects…”

Batuknath's mouth went dry. He tried to object at once.

“Without sources, without evidence…” Tarini could not smile. Her voice hardened. “It is right to ask for evidence. But it is also right to open the door through which evidence can enter…”

At those words, the floor of Batuknath's house began to change. The marble of the veranda became the cut stump of Channa Grove. The books flew from their cupboards as leaves, and on each leaf shone the name of someone whose case he had kept going round and round for years.

That morning in Garh Narikel, dew lay on a new shoot growing from the stump of Channa Grove. The children were about to begin their watch over the names. No one knew whether Tarini would come there.

Elsewhere, in his closed room, Chandrapal Batra put away his phone and, for the first time, sat down to write his full name on paper. He managed “Chandrapal,” but his pen stopped at “Batra.” Then, instead of letters, incomplete circles began appearing on the page, like the symbol for a hundredfold share.

A Little Folk Song

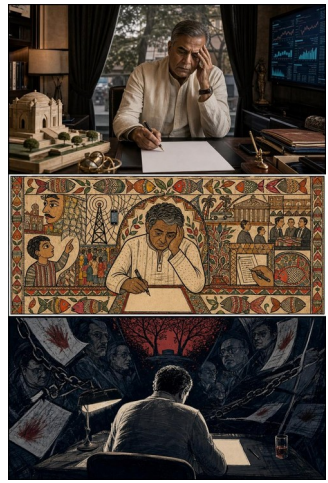
Ask him, daughter, meet his eyes and ask;
Seek the page of truth in Father's old record book.
“Did you defend justice?” the daughter asks. Father, raise your eyes;

Do not hide your old mistakes; bring forth an answer that is true.

CHAPTER 81

Batra's Unfinished Name

Someone who lives with half a name is afraid to sign it in full.



The court that waited was not held in a hall, but within the borders of a white sheet of paper. The question Hariharan's daughter had asked her father that night—“Did you protect justice, or your profession?”—echoed far beyond Garh Narikel. It passed through networks of phones, bank accounts, donation deeds, plans to mark memories and meetings abroad, until it reached a room where Chandrapal Batra had sat for a long time with a pen above the white paper before him.

The room was in a city, yet the shadow of Channa Grove lay all around it. The window was closed, the curtains were drawn, the air conditioner was running, and numbers glimmered on the phone screen. Still, not a single word appeared on the paper. At the top was written only: “Write your name.” There was no signature and no seal.

At that same moment, an invisible line stretched from the stump of Channa Grove into the children's ledger. Far away in Garh Narikel, Ananya turned a page. She did not know why,

but a phrase appeared of its own accord in black ink at the corner: “A hundredfold share.” She showed it to Eera.

Now the walls of Chandrapal's room began to move. On one wall appeared the shadow of Lau Kin-hung, cold and calculating, speaking the language of profit. On another flickered a disappearing message from Raghav Signal.

For the first time that night, Chandrapal wept. He was not crying to ask for pity. He cried like a man who had discovered that the child still living inside him could no longer find a body for his name.

Ananya opened a new page in the ledger and wrote at its top: “An Unfinished Name.” The children sat in a circle behind her. “Why should we write down the name of someone who has committed a crime?” they asked. Ba answered, “We record a crime not to forgive it, but to preserve the evidence…”

Satyavrat Mehta was present at that gathering. Nobody had told him what was happening in Chandrapal's room. But the practice of listening can be so deep that even the trembling of a wrongdoer far away seems to reach one's ears.

At dawn, the paper folded itself. No hand touched it; no wind stirred. Fold after fold appeared, until the paper took the shape of a leaf.

Chandrapal could not tell whether he was dreaming or being punished. At that same moment, in Garh Narikel, Ananya closed the ledger and said, “Next time, the elephant and crocodile within us will play.” A shiver ran through the children. This game would not be played on a field, but in the waters of the mind.

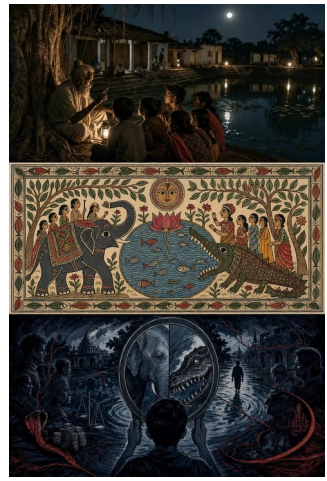
A Little Folk Song

Clean it, oh, clean the pond within your heart;
Let its four banks differ, but keep its waters one.
Four different banks, yet one living breath in the water;
Clean the inner pond, and the net of confusion will fall away.

CHAPTER 82

The Elephant and Crocodile Within

The pond has four different banks, but only one body of water—and within it live both elephant and crocodile.



"Next time, the elephant and crocodile within us will play." By the following evening, Ananya's words had found their playing field. Hariharan's daughter's question, Batra's unfinished name, Raghav's loss of a network, and the crocodile seen in Lau Kin-hung's mirror were no longer separate happenings. They were the four banks of the same pond.

There was no water on the stump of Channa Grove that night, yet everyone could smell it. Moisture gathered in the cracks between the roots and began to shine, one glimmer at a time. The shadows of the stones bearing names stretched out to form a circle.

Ananya said, "It is difficult to see a living human being in someone who has done wrong." Boodhba the ghost replied, "Yes. But justice is difficult and revenge is easy. The jewel of evidence that Gangesha fashioned was not meant to be used only against other people…"

The children looked towards him. They all understood how important those words were. The one who recorded other people's testimonies did not wish to hide the crocodile within himself.

Then a real scene of elephant and crocodile rose in the middle of the stump: a great stretch of water, mud, and moonlight. The elephant was half submerged, while the crocodile gripped its leg.

Names came from its mouth: first one, then many, then names that had found no place on any list. Whenever a name fell upon the water, the children answered, "Present." With each "Present," one of the crocodile's teeth loosened its grip.

As dawn approached, the watery vision on the stump faded away. The village looked like a village again. But something tired and long asleep had awakened inside every person there.

Beside the circle of stones at Channa Grove, the children made a rule for their next gathering. "We shall not read only the names of the dead. We shall also search for the names trapped inside the living." From that rule came the idea of the Coconut Leaf School. Watching over names would no longer mean merely protecting written records. It would become a lesson in knowledge, the body, caste, labour, privacy and justice.

That morning, Ananya opened a new page of the ledger and wrote: "The Coconut Leaf School." The little green spot on the stump spread slightly. From far away Boodhba the ghost breathed out the kabaddi call: "Kabaddi…" The children answered, "School…" The game was becoming a lesson.

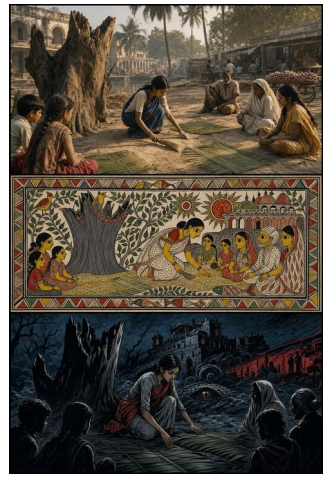
A Little Folk Song

Sit down, little children, on seats made of leaves;
Write your letters on the earth with a twig for a pen.
The shade is small, the seats are leaves, but knowledge fills the sky;
In a circle, children learn the love that keeps each name alive.

CHAPTER 83

The Coconut Leaf School

Even where there is no shade left, a school can gather—on seats of leaves.



The game that had turned into learning during the night took the form of earth and leaves by morning. After the night of the inner elephant and crocodile, the dawn in Garh Narikel was no ordinary one. Water kept flowing along its familiar course, dust blew across the road, and people still argued in the market about the price of potatoes and onions.

That morning, Ananya was clearing sand from an empty patch behind the stump. With her were five children, two girls, an old potter, a widow and Devika. "What will be built here?" someone asked. "A school," Ananya replied. Everyone stared in surprise.

Ba gave it the name Coconut Leaf School. "The stump of Channa Grove will remain," she said, "but we shall need leaves for shade. Coconut leaves catch the wind from far away…"

On the school's first wall, Devika wrote in charcoal: "No one's sorrow shall be written down without permission." Meera

added a second line: “No one's body shall be made into a spectacle here.” Gop Kumar, who arrived late, wrote a third: “Paper is evidence, but it is incomplete without a human voice.” Satyavrat Mehta stood at a distance. The children saw him, and Ananya called, “Please write the fourth line.” Satyavrat thought for a long time before writing: “Silence, too, is testimony here, if it comes from listening rather than fear.”

The writing on the leaves was unusual. There were no full stories, only clues: “The bridge foundation,” “Fear spread through devices,” “The night of air for breath,” “Meera's consent,” “Gangesha's question,” “The false ghost's weeping,” “The crocodile within.” The children left a blank space beneath each clue.

Hearing these words, the elderly pandit sitting at the edge of the gathering cleared his throat. “Not every story about Gangesha's life has been proved,” he said. Ananya immediately asked, “Then what is the evidence for pride in caste? What is the evidence for the purity of a family line?…”

That night, the first lamp was lit. No bell rang. Ananya picked up an empty bowl and struck it gently three times.

At that very moment, a faint sound of a dholak drum drifted in from far away. The children stood up, wondering whether to begin kabaddi. Ba raised her hand to stop them. “Tomorrow is the first lesson…”

The chapter ended in that waiting. The Coconut Leaf School had come into being, but its first lesson had yet to open. The empty bowl remained in the middle.

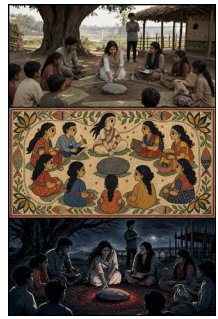
A Little Folk Song

Call each name, oh, call each name in turn;
When “Present!” comes the answer, lift the lamp with care.
Call every name, one by one; let everyone say, “Present!”
Mother, worker, child and elder—each person's honour shall be safe.

CHAPTER 84

The First Lesson: Present

The first lesson is not the alphabet. It is learning to say, "Present."



The title in the ledger—"The First Lesson: Present"—became the day's first school bell as dawn broke. On the opening day of the Coconut Leaf School, nobody studied the alphabet. No letters, no numbers, no multiplication tables.

Eera held an ink pen, Devika the ledger, Meera a red thread, and Soumya a little cloth bag containing blank paper, kohl, two pieces of charcoal, and several tiny flints. Aruni stood some distance away watching. He realised that measuring bridges, foundations, the force of rivers and the terms of contracts had been only one part of knowledge.

The first child stood and said his grandmother's name. At home she was simply called "that old woman." She had no papers, no recorded date of birth, and no claim to any land.

Sitting between Sonki and the third child, she said, "The name of one whose labour supported everyone must not be written at the bottom. It must be written at the foundation." Devika wrote Manglu Das's name not in the first column of the ledger but in the centre, just where the weight of the page seemed to rest.

Ananya said to everyone, "In this school, caste cannot keep anyone from being present." The children replied, "Present."

Being present at this school did not mean exposing everything. Some names would be spoken in full, some through clues; some would wait until a family gave permission, and others would be kept only in the warmth of a stone. Meera wrote a rule: "We shall not make memory by cutting away the right to privacy." Devika added, "If speaking a name puts someone in danger, that person's silence is also present." The children repeated the words three times.

Near noon, an old pandit arrived. "It is not right," he said, "to teach children things that go against caste, clan, family tradition and scripture in a school like this." Ananya asked politely, "Do scriptures save names or erase them?" The pandit fell silent. Then he said, "There must be order." Eera answered, "If order devours the names of the dead, we must call that a crocodile too." The pandit seemed to be searching for darkness, but Channa Grove had been cut down.

In the afternoon, the lesson on being present became a lesson in citizenship. "If a name is in the ledger," the children said, "that person has a place in society, even when their body is no longer here." Aruni added, "If someone's labour is built into a bridge, their name must be written on its foundation." Gop Kumar said, "Someone whose information has been stolen shall be remembered as a human voice, not an account number." Meera said, "No one shall sell the name of someone whose bodily dignity was taken away without their consent." Satyavrat Mehta listened from the back and wrote just one word in his notebook: "Present."

Meera asked Ananya for the ledger. She turned a page and left it blank. "Some names ask for the night…" she said.

The green spot on the stump glowed faintly in the darkness. The first lesson had not ended. It was beginning to turn into a meeting after nightfall.

A Little Folk Song

Gather, sisters, in the bright hours of the night;
Speak your names yourselves, and set old troubles right.
Day's work, night's words—the women form a circle;
Hearing one another, they kindle lamps of courage.

CHAPTER 85

The Women's Night Assembly

Words spoken by day find their true strength at a night gathering, when the women begin to speak.

That blank page did not wait all night. As evening fell, it seemed to call its own gathering. The first lesson at the Coconut Leaf School—"Present"—had been taught during the day. But the real meaning of the word began to reveal itself at night.

Ujjwal's mother was the first to arrive. She carried her son's old shirt, which had never been washed since his final day, when he had been lost in the world of the phone screen. The smell of his sweat had gone, but the sharp salt of a mother's memory still clung to the cloth.

The first testimony was not given by Ujjwal's mother but, it seemed, by the shirt itself. She laid it beside the stump and said, "Everyone says my son was defeated by a phone screen…"

Eera opened the knots of the migrant heart as she spoke. "Living abroad, we look for the women of our village in pictures—fish, traditional turbans, Madhubani paintings, folk

songs. But after coming here, I understand that a village woman is not only colour. She is also reason…"

Ba spoke softly. "Gangesha wrote the book of logic called the Tattvachintamani, which is said to be equal to twelve thousand books. But if we cannot read even one woman's name within all that knowledge, what is the weight of twelve thousand books worth?" At her words came a creaking sound from the roots of the cut stump. The children, who were keeping watch at a distance, ran over to see.

A young woman who had remained silent until then tied a thread around her wrist and said, "Do not write the name of the person I love. Write this: a woman who, in spite of her fear, refused to call the truth within herself a lie." Meera looked at her. "The right to your name belongs to you. Choosing not to say it is also a way of protecting it." Devika wrote on the page: "Present in confidence." All the women agreed on the new expression.

Half the night had passed. From behind the stump of Channa Grove came a sound like a cold winter wind. Someone thought that Boodhba the ghost had arrived.

In the first light of dawn, the women rose one by one. Had the green spot on the stump grown a little larger during the night, or had their eyes deceived them? No one could be sure. Looking at her cracked heels, Phulkumari said, "Tomorrow we shall read the feet of the workers." The children answered, "Present."

The women left before sunrise, but around the stump remained the scent of red thread, the dampness of the shirt, the weight of the blank page, and the dust from cracked heels. Garh Narikel's next morning already understood something: the history of the feet buried in the bridge's foundations was not only the history of male workers. Women's heels, children's hunger and the unspoken names of households had been pressed into that earth as well.

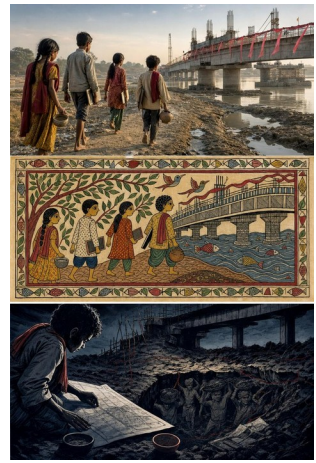
A Little Folk Song

Come, my friends, come with the dust of the road upon your brow;
Follow each footprint and make a path for tomorrow.
The dust upon a worker's feet draws a map of the way;
Where the steps of labour fall, there true progress begins.

CHAPTER 86

The Workers' Feet

When a name is declared present, ask on what soil that person's feet once stood.



By morning, the story had turned and taken the road from the village to the half-built bridge. After the first lesson in the republic of names, the children understood that the tale did not end when someone answered, “Present.” They must also hear how that person had walked, what earth their feet had touched, and what labour of theirs lay buried within the bridge.

From far away, the bridge looked like iron, sand, cement, government paint, an inauguration ribbon and a stony surface shining in the sun. But the closer one came, the more weariness showed in its body. Near the foundations, the ground still sank in strange ways, as if something were trapped beneath it.

An old man came to the front—Munna Paswan's uncle. He wore no sandals. The soles of his feet were split, his heels cracked and his toenails crooked, yet there was a remarkable steadiness in his walk.

Aruni touched the foundation of the bridge. He had been taught to measure weight, depth, mixtures, proportions, tension and

pressure. But no one had taught him that when labour is dishonoured, the very soul of a bridge becomes hollow.

At that moment, Chandrapal Batra's people arrived from a distance. They brought a small plaque reading: “Memorial Wall to the Martyred Workers.” Its measurements had been decided, its position chosen and its lettering fixed.

By noon, a long path of leaves had formed near the bridge's foundation. It led towards the water, then turned towards the stump of Channa Grove, as though the workers' feet, after building the bridge, had not crossed the river.

Satyavrat Mehta stood at the back and watched. Countless sworn statements from the courts returned to his mind. How many testimonies had been correct on paper, yet false to the lives people had lived?

When everyone began returning home, the sound of a worker's sandals could still be heard for a long time from the direction of the bridge. Perhaps it was a memory held inside the roots. Perhaps it was the workers whose wages had been withheld, whose names had been erased and whose bodies had drowned, but whose footsteps were still returning to the earth.

As they walked home, Ananya said, “Tomorrow the phone screens at school will stay off.” “Why?” asked Devika. Ananya replied, “Today we read the feet. Tomorrow we must open our eyes and ears again. A phone screen that chews away at the mind all day should be made to fast for one day.” The children laughed, holding their breath as if chanting kabaddi.

A Little Folk Song

Set the screen aside; let it rest for one whole day;
Fill your eyes with groves and skies along the way.
Let the screen rest for a day, and let your eyes seek trees;
Watch the earth's colours, leaf veins and clouds upon the breeze.

CHAPTER 87

A Fast from Screens

After a single day without phone screens, the sound of your own breathing returns to your ears.

The morning of the announced fast woke the village's ears before anything else. The earth from the workers' feet had hardly dried when the children of the Coconut Leaf School made their next decision: for one day, Garh Narikel would observe a fast from phone screens. It was not a fast from food, but a fast for the eyes.

At once, the village split into two groups. “Switch off our phones?” some asked. “How will we hear the news?” Others protested, “What about the buying and selling in our shops?…”

Ananya set a small earthen pot beside the stump and named it the “Screen Pot.” Anyone who wished to put away a phone, an old device, a broken tablet or a little gaming screen for one day could leave it nearby in a cloth bag. Nobody was forced to do so.

Devika was the first to put away her phone. Her face trembled slightly, for the device kept bringing back the shadow of

Ujjwal's last message. As she tied the bag, she said, “Let it rest for one day too.” Meera put down her device. “Today I close the eye of the thing that once tried to sell the sight of me.” Soumya hesitated for a while.

By evening, old songs returned to the village. Songs once sung at weddings, but drowned out by loud music from phones, rose again from the throats of elderly women. Some verses were complete; others came back only halfway.

The students in Broom's research team were astonished. They understood the expression “digital detox,” but Garh Narikel's fast would not fit inside it. The villagers had not switched off their screens to follow a fashionable health trend.

Late that night, when everyone was tired and happy, Ananya looked up at the sky. With the shade of Channa Grove gone, the whole sky lay open. Eyes that were no longer looking at screens took time to become used to the darkness. Then the stars appeared one by one, as though the eyes themselves were breaking their fast.

Eera gazed for a long time at the little green spot. She thought of the children of Garh Narikel's families living abroad, children who understood only half the Maithili they heard, knew the village from pictures, and thought the sorrows of their roots were merely stories. That very night, she decided to write to them.

Beside the pot, Ba's spectacles, Satyavrat's phone, Devika's device, Meera's thread and the children's ledger shone together in the moonlight. The fast from screens had ended, but the hunger it had revealed had not gone away. Everyone understood that one day of silence was not enough.

A Little Folk Song

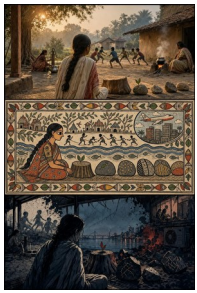
Write a letter, oh, write to those far from home;
Fill it with courtyard laughter and news of the growing shoots.
Write to the children overseas: the courtyard still can smile;

New buds spring from the cut stump, and tulsi leaves are fragrant.

CHAPTER 88

Eera's Letter to Children Abroad

No post office can tell you whether the letter arrived; the answer finds its own road.



That first line, written before dawn, was now asking to become a whole letter. On the second morning after the fast from screens, the sky above the village seemed clearer than before. Throughout the day without phones, people had begun hearing the sounds of their own lives again: breathing, footsteps, water rising on the waterwheel, rice cooking on the stove, and the children's kabaddi calls.

That morning, Eera sat on the veranda of the Coconut Leaf School. Before her stood the cut stump of Channa Grove, with a green spot on one side and stones bearing names on the other. Among those stones were some names that children born overseas found difficult to pronounce.

In her letter, Eera wrote that the soil of the village was not merely a memory of cooking fires, ponds, mangoes, betel leaves, fish and the taste of betel. It was also the place where workers' feet had been buried beneath a bridge's foundations; where a young man's mind had drowned in digital fraud; where devices that captured images had threatened a woman's privacy; where courts had swallowed years; and where names had waited in the darkness of Channa Grove. If you are descended from this village, she wrote, your first duty is not to turn its suffering into pictures, but to make it heard. Listen first.

That evening, the first letter crossed the sea. Nobody saw it, spoke it aloud or watched it turn into a bird. Yet a faint light fell upon the green spot on the stump.

Two days later, a reply arrived. It came from a boy in Toronto whom his family called "Neel," although his grandmother had called him Neelkanth. He wrote, "I have never been to Garh Narikel…"

The people of Batuknath Hariharan's Public Memory Trust were delighted when they heard of the letters. Children overseas, families living abroad, donations, stages, conferences, broadcasts—what an opportunity, they thought, to turn memory into an institution! But at the foot of her letter, Eera had written clearly: "This letter is not raw material for any trust, institution, platform, prize, donation appeal or cultural spectacle…"

Edward Broom's research team also took an interest in the replies. They called them a "diaspora memory network." Eera answered, "If you call it a network, you will bring in the language of wires, information, grants and ownership again. I call it a chain of breaths." The interpreter was left searching for words.

Late that night, Satyavrat wrote back. "A public hearing is not only for bodies that are present. It is also for obligations that remain present. If Garh Narikel wishes, the letters from children far away should be read at the next hearing." He folded the letter and sent it.

When the children gathered around the stump the next morning, Ananya opened the ledger and wrote a heading: "Satyavrat's Public Hearing." Eera placed the letters from distant countries to one side. The green spot on the cut stump was turning into two leaves. The village understood that listening now knew no borders.

A Little Folk Song

Offer a seat, oh, give the unheard the first place;
Do not interrupt; let them tell their whole story.

Seat first the one whose voice was never heard;
Let them finish, and honour every word.

CHAPTER 89

Satyavrat's Public Hearing

At a public hearing, the greatest testimony comes from someone who has never been heard before.

The moment that heading was written in the ledger, the day of listening seemed to arrive of its own accord. No post office could prove whether Eera's letter had reached every child abroad. Yet the replies came to Garh Narikel in astonishing ways.

Eera pinned that map to the wall of the Coconut Leaf School. At first the children laughed, because no one could imagine where a grandmother's name might be placed in the middle of a city. But their laughter soon gave way to silence.

Then a date was set for Satyavrat Mehta's public hearing. The people of Garh Narikel had once heard the words "public hearing" with fear. At government hearings there was a high stage, officials in chairs, words spoken into microphones before everyone, police standing behind, and piles of papers in front.

Ananya, Devika, Meera, Eera, Aruni, Soumya, Gop Kumar and many other women and men sat together in a circle. They placed three things in the middle: the old ledger, a dried leaf from Channa Grove and an empty clay bowl. The blades of

grass pressed against their legs like tiny thorns, something no chair had ever taught them to feel.

Satyavrat asked, “Under what category should we record this reply?” “Memories of the diaspora,” said Gop Kumar. “Record it with consent,” said Meera. Ba said, “First write the child's grandmother's name, and decide the category afterwards.” At last they wrote in the ledger: “A question from a child born far away: a name needs to be spoken, not merely spelt.”

The third testimony came from the families of workers. After they had brought earth from the foundations of the bridge, their new courage had found words. A young man said, “On paper, my father was a temporary worker…”

At midday, Gop Kumar brought a copy of an old message from Raghav “Sanket” Somani. It read: “Turn emotion into content, content into funding, and funding into control.” As the people read it, they understood that a plan to market their memories had been hidden inside those words all along. Satyavrat wrote beside the message: “To call people's memories content is a second killing.” Ananya smiled.

Late that night, everyone went home. Around the stump remained the stones, leaves, bowl, ledger and rules the children had written. The moon hung above, but its light now seemed less like an order and more like a lamp by which to read.

The farther Satyavrat Mehta walked, the more the children's written words echoed in his ears: “We need rules to guard the names.” He knew that the next day people would ask what those rules should be called. Some would call them a proposal, others a constitution, and still others an oath written by the people. But the stump of Channa Grove knew that this was the first breath of a little book of rules shared by all.

A Little Folk Song

Read the veins of the leaf; read the earth's own law;
Hold high this book of shared rules, without a seal upon it.

In every vein of a dry leaf, the river's pathways run;
Nature's common book of rules needs no official seal.

CHAPTER 90

A Constitution of Names

A book of rules shared by everyone can be written even on a dry leaf —if the writers are children.

As soon as dawn came, that first breath began searching for a body of its own—among dry leaves, notebooks and pens. On the day after the public hearing, no lessons were taught at the Coconut Leaf School. The children sat with their notebooks open, but in the teacher's hand there was no textbook. There was only a dry leaf that had fallen from the stump of Channa Grove.

Ananya asked at once, "What shall we write?" The teacher answered, "The rules you will make for guarding your names." At first the children laughed. The very word rules reminded them of scoldings at school, notices from the municipal office, court dates, and the conditions imposed by Chandrapal's phone application. But the teacher spoke again. "These rules will not come from above.

The fifth rule was born from Gangesha's question. Ananya wrote: "Justice shall not be murdered in the name of caste." At this, the faces of some of the elders hardened. To some, the words sounded far too sharp.

The thirteenth rule brought a long debate: "How shall we forgive?" The names of Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau and Broom floated through the air. Some children said, "No

forgiveness." Others said, "Punishment." Ba told them, "Forgiveness cannot simply be announced. It grows slowly out of listening." In the end they wrote: "Forgiveness shall be sought not on a stage, but in the labour of listening to names."

The fourteenth rule concerned the future: "Children are guardians, elders are witnesses, women are keepers of the law, workers are owners of the soil." No single person spoke the whole line. One child wrote "Children are guardians"; Ba added "elders are witnesses"; Meera contributed "women are keepers of the law"; and Aruni added "workers are owners of the soil." In this rule lay the seed of a new society for Garh Narikel.

Once all the rules had been written, another question arose: who would place a seal upon this shared book of rules? The municipal office? Satyavrat remained silent.

Far away, at Batuknath Hariharan's house, his child was reading a copy of the shared rules. On Chandrapal's device, the words "No name shall be erased" flashed again and again. On Raghav's phone, cut off from the network, the words "Silence, too, is a form of presence" remained stuck on the screen.

That night in Garh Narikel, no one invited the schemers to the gathering. The rules were made, testimonies recorded, thumbprints given and names read aloud—but the wrongdoers were absent. Now another question was about to arise: when a community has written its own common rules, is the absence of the schemers a punishment, or the beginning of a new conspiracy?

The roots of the Channa stump stayed faintly warm throughout the night. The children took turns keeping watch. Lamplight trembled upon the first page of their shared book of rules, while an invisible hand seemed to be waiting to write upon the last, still-empty page: "Even those who are absent shall be asked their names."

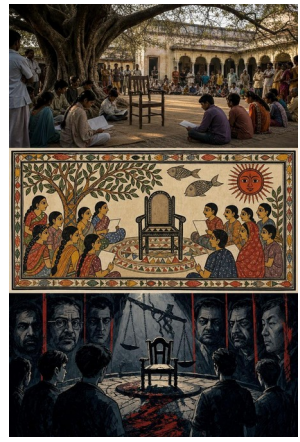
A Little Folk Song

Gather in the courtyard; let the chairs stand empty,
Let the people's circle wake, and let their work flow freely.
Though the chairs are empty, let the courtyard still be full;
If the officials stay away, the people's work must not stand still.

CHAPTER 91

The Absence of the Schemers

Even a schemer's absence is a kind of presence—an empty chair can speak the loudest.



As the pages of the shared book of names and rules dried, a strange stillness spread around the cut stump of Channa Grove. The rules the children had written—no erasing names, no selling away the right to privacy, no dishonouring bodies, no granting contracts over memory—were taking shape not only on paper, but on people's faces. Eyes once lowered in fear were now lifted to read.

The next question surrounded the assembly: should those who had caused so much suffering be invited, or not? Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Signal Somani, Lau Kin-hung, Edward Broom—their names clung to the edges of the page like thorns. Some young men said, “Let's call them here and expose them before everyone.” Some women replied, “No. Why should we be punished by having to look at their faces again?” The children said nothing.

Ananya opened the ledger to Gangesha's page. When the story of the book of logic called Tattvachintamani had come before

the Channa stump, the children had heard the words "is not." Even what is absent can be supported by evidence. The thought had remained with them.

Chandrapal Batra kept searching his phone for images of Channa Grove. A notice ought to have appeared in the app: "Special Live Testimony." But the phone screen was still.

Edward Broom heard the news from one of his advisers. He laughed. "Local emotional politics." But when he read in the report that the gathering had gone ahead without a stage, funds, branding or an international partner, his laughter stopped. Nothing in his training had prepared him for this.

Meera said, "When we do not invite them, are we not being cowardly?" Ananya answered, "No. When it becomes necessary, we shall call out their names. But today we shall not measure our wounds through their eyes.

Ananya picked up a stone and set it upon the shadow. Another child added another stone. A third said, "Names are written on the stones. The shadow cannot hold its ground." Little by little, all the shadows of the wrongdoers were pushed beyond the circle of stones.

Afternoon passed and evening fell, yet a long patch of darkness kept stretching from the western edge of the stump. Everyone wondered: the grove had been cut down, so where could so much shade come from? The stump was not tall enough to cast a shadow like that.

Ananya wrote the next title in the ledger: "The Stump's Shadow." The dark page closed. The stones bearing names settled into their places. The schemers remained absent, but their shadows became the lesson for the following day.

A Little Folk Song

Come and sit in the shade, however small the shade may be;
The stump has great big ears—come share your story with me.
The tree is cut; the stump remains, its shadow may be slight;

But there are ears to hear beneath it, and the hearing shall not cease.

CHAPTER 92

The Stump's Shadow

The stump casts a little shade, but those who sit beneath it grow great ears for listening.

The peace that came over the village after the schemers stayed away was not the peace of rest, but the peace of listening. Even after the gathering ended, people did not hurry away from the stump. Those who had never been forbidden to attend had not come.

The great body of Channa Grove was gone, yet the shadow of the cut stump stretched unnaturally far. The sun was overhead, but the shadow kept moving towards the place where an old branch of the Kamla-Balan River had once flowed. At first Aruni thought the ground must be uneven.

Gangesha's question returned. A small boy who had heard about the reasoning of Nyaya at school looked at the shadow and asked, “Is a shadow evidence, or is it not?” Everyone was about to laugh, but Ananya did not. She said, “Knowledge gained through the eyes is a shadow.

Batuknath's child arrived from far away. The child had not taken part in the assembly, but had come to see the stump's

shadow. In one hand was an old pen that had belonged to the father.

Before evening, someone brought in the paper bearing Chandrapal Batra's unfinished name. Four times he had begun writing it; four times it had turned into "a share of one hundred." The children read the paper, but did not make fun of him.

Broom told his advisers, "Local psychology, shadow rituals, community imagery." His secretary went on taking notes. But when Broom said "shadow," his laptop screen went black, and he saw the ink of his donation deed running wet. The language of selling rights over memory, of donations, research, ancestral heritage and phone applications—each had come with its own words.

Satyavrat Mehta took a blank sheet from an old affidavit out of his bag. "This paper once belonged to the government," he said. "Let it now belong to the people." Meera cut cloth into strips. Devika went on reading out the names.

Slowly, the stump's shadow reached towards the water. Within that shadow stood, all at once, the schemers' absence, the children's watch, Gangesha's questions, the women's vows, the workers' feet, the fast from phone screens and the shared constitution of names.

And the water, which until then had been only a smell, was coming back.

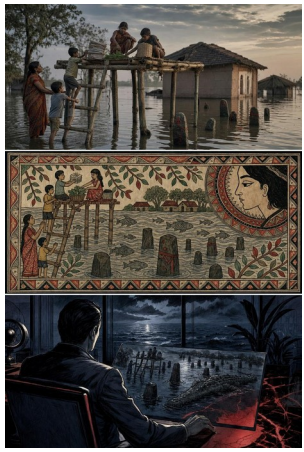
A Little Folk Song

Sing through the monsoon, sing gladly even when floods come;
Raise the platforms, pack the seeds, and ready every boat.
Should the floods return, keep your boats prepared;
High platforms, boxes of seeds, and helping hands—keep them safe together.

CHAPTER 93

The Flood Returns

The river does not trust silence—it comes back to open the old accounts.



As far as the stump's shadow had spread, the land looked calm. But the waters of the Kamla-Balan never trusted silence. For years that river had carried and submerged memories, bodies, names, bones, soil and silence along the village banks. That day, it sent a heavy smell from far away once more—the smell of wet mud, broken bamboo, drifting leaves and a sky burdened with rain.

First the clouds came and bent low over the cut stump of Channa Grove. The green point that had sprouted upon it trembled beneath the first raindrop, but did not break. The children heaped soil around it.

Devika and Nishant gathered together once more the children's group they had formed during the fast from phone screens. This time the phones were not switched off, but used carefully. News that needed to be shared would be shared.

In the midst of these preparations, what struck them was not the first raindrop but the first slap of rain. Water fell from the

sky as though an old dam had burst open. The roofs of mud houses rattled, ponds filled and water spread through the lanes.

Then Boodhba the ghost appeared. This time he was neither smoke nor a flickering outline. He had never looked as clear as he did amid the rain.

Satyavrat Mehta set up a temporary corner for hearing people's needs in the school building. Families fleeing the flood were not asked their names when they arrived. First they were dried off and given warm water.

At midnight, when the rising water began to threaten their shoulders, a strange light rose from the Channa stump. The green point, trying to become a new shoot, shimmered beneath the water. Like something breathing, the light grew faint and then bright again; its green glow broke and scattered across the trembling surface.

Just before dawn, the rain eased a little. Through the mist, people saw long black shapes moving slowly across the water. At first someone took them for logs. Then someone held their breath.

Kabaddi had entered the water. And in the grey current of the Kamla-Balan, beyond the shadow of the cut Channa tree, the first glimmer of the crocodiles' backs appeared again. The next testimony would rise from the riverbed.

A Little Folk Song

Know the crocodiles, recognise both kinds of crocodile;
One belongs to water, one to deceit—see how they differ.
The river's crocodile belongs to nature; deceit has another kind;
Learn to tell their shapes apart; do not blame the river wrongly.

CHAPTER 94

The Return of the Crocodiles

By day the water is muddy; by night it gleams like black oil—the crocodiles have not changed their colour, only the light has changed.

The first testimony from the riverbed arrived on the second night of the flood. That night, the water began showing its true colours. By day it had looked merely yellow, muddy, miserable, splashing water. Once night fell, it shone like black oil.

Nobody saw the first crocodile. Only a long line sliced silently through the water, as though someone had drawn a knife across black cloth without making a sound.

But Ananya did not step back. She stood beside the ring of stones and said, “Watch the breathing.” Nobody understood. She said again, “The one who has come to eat is in a hurry.

Satyavrat Mehta came down to the riverbank that night. The water touched his knees. People stopped him. “Don't go any farther.” He stopped.

At home, Batuknath Hariharan was sitting beside a priest reciting sacred verses. “An affliction of the waters,” the priest declared. Hariharan thought that a religious remedy might settle the matter. But just then he heard the voice of the water

at Channa Grove in his ears: "Not a date. A name." He picked up a paper, thinking of legal proceedings, but it went soft in his hand as though it were wet.

Ba said, "Did you see? The water has drawn the line of the playing field." Devika wrote in the ledger: "The return of the crocodiles—a lesson about boundaries beyond the fear of bodily harm." Meera added: "Boundaries without names mean violence. Boundaries with names mean freedom." The children kept repeating those words.

That morning, Eera received a message from abroad. A huge company had offered to buy the flood-affected area of remembrance for a project called "Water Safety and Future Housing." Behind the offer were familiar shadows again—Lau Kin-hung's money, Broom's advice and Chandrapal's local network. This time the deal was not merely for land, but for the memory of the flood, the stories of the crocodiles and the children's watch.

Ananya lifted a stone soaked in floodwater. The nameless letters carved on it were still clear. She looked at Eera. "Now they will want to buy not only memories, but even the water." Eera answered, "Then the next lesson will be about bargaining." The first light of dawn touched the green point on the stump.

So the crocodiles' return did not bring fear to an end. It began the next struggle. Greed was coming with papers to purchase even that boundary.

A Little Folk Song

Draw the lines, draw limits even in the marketplace;
Bodies, consent and breath are not for sale—mark out their place.
In the final bargain, let lives come before names and prices;
No weighing scale for money can measure a human life.

CHAPTER 95

Lau Kin-hung's Final Bargain

In the final bargain, the price is not what gets written down—it is the name.

That night Lau opened the first page of his passport and gazed for a long time at the name he had borne as a child. Once, when he was small, someone at a refugee camp had called him by the wrong number on a list. The humiliation had lodged so deep inside him that later he came to mistake safety for a life without a name.

The papers meant to buy the boundary were still on their way. Meanwhile, after the return of the crocodiles, the floodwaters spent three days measuring the village thresholds. The grey current of the Kamla-Balan, which had once counted fields and tiled roofs, now seemed determined to touch the stones bearing names around the stump.

At that time, far away, Lau Kin-hung sat in a tall building enclosed by walls of glass. There was a sea beyond his window, but his eyes did not see it. No sound of waves reached the room, only the cold breathing of machines, and in that chill the pictures of the flood appeared even more feverish.

When the agreement reached the village, the floodwater was knee-deep. First came Raghav Signal's invisible message, then Batuknath Hariharan's seal, then Chandrapal Batra's advice, then a line about Broom's donation, and finally Lau Kin-hung's neat signature. The papers were wrapped in plastic and brought by boat, as though they were sacred scriptures.

Satyavrat Mehta was sitting there. He was asked to read the document. Slowly, he unfolded it.

Night grew deep over 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.

For the first time, Satyavrat Mehta smiled faintly. This was not a punishment imposed by law, but how severe it was! What greater punishment could there be for someone accustomed to buying everything with money than to bind him to the act of listening, where money could buy nothing?

He stood apart from the stump in ankle-deep water. Nobody welcomed him. Nobody insulted him either.

The floodwater rose a little at those words, then grew still. The circles made by the crocodiles slowed. Lau Kin-hung's agreement lay wet upon the raised platform, and for the first time Batuknath Hariharan stood before Garh Narikel without a proposal, without legal procedures, without a position of authority—with only his ears to listen.

A Little Folk Song

Come, Lau, bring amends along with your plea for forgiveness;
Not words alone—show that you can restore the rights you took.
If your late apology is true, bring acts of repair along with it;
Do more than speak: give back the rights that have been broken.

CHAPTER 96

Batuknath's Long-Delayed Apology

Forgiveness that comes late must not arrive empty-handed—it must bring an account of the delay.

Even before the test everyone awaited, a strange quiet settled over Garh Narikel after Lau Kin-hung's last bargain. It was not the peace of victory. It carried the weariness of floodwater receding, the smell of names soaked into stones, and the breathing of people who had discovered that bargains could be made not only with money but with memory itself.

On the third day of this silence, Batuknath Hariharan arrived. He did not arrive as he once had at public gatherings, with two men walking in front, bundles of papers behind, and his own heavy stride between them. This time he came alone.

He reached the stump and stood there a long while. The children recognised him, but nobody made a commotion. A society that begins to mock an offender puts that offender back at the centre of attention.

Batuknath went first to Satyavrat. From long habit, a hint of command entered his voice. “Mr Mehta, I have something to say.” Satyavrat raised his head but gave no answer. Batuknath

tried again. “I have come to ask forgiveness.” This time Satyavrat said softly, “Not from me.

Batuknath listened. The voice of the man who had come to apologise grew weaker and weaker. It is easy to say the word forgiveness when one speaks it from a stage.

When the name “Gangesha” was spoken, faint moonlight fell on the green point of the stump. Ananya read, “Gangesha, founder of Navya-Nyaya, whose life's uncomfortable truth was murdered in the name of honouring him.” Batuknath closed his eyes. He remembered his speeches at public gatherings, where he used to praise the glory of tradition.

Suddenly he said, “I am guilty.” No one gasped, not even the children. Ananya merely asked, “Guilty towards whom?” Batuknath faltered.

That morning, Chandrapal Batra woke in his distant home. No one had sent him a message throughout the night, but the ledger app on his phone had opened by itself. In every row, where it once said “credit,” “debit,” or “a share of one hundred,” a single word shone: “intermediary.”

No one in Garh Narikel knew this yet. But as soon as Batuknath's long-delayed apology was left unfinished, the next door of the story opened upon a man who was about to realise that his entire life had been an account operated in another person's name, on behalf of greed.

A Little Folk Song

Wake, brother, wake and take charge of your own account;
Do not stain your name with the weight of unknown money.
Do not carry someone else's account; honour your own name;
Keep your transactions clear and your identity safe.

CHAPTER 97

Chandrapal's Mule Account

The man who turned other people's accounts into money mules one day realised that his own life was an account run in someone else's name.

Chandrapal remembered his first day at school. During the roll call, the teacher had mispronounced his name, and the class had laughed. He had cried until evening.

Beyond the door that had opened, Batuknath Hariharan had spent the night listening to names until he was exhausted. But Chandrapal Batra had gone nowhere to listen that night. He sat alone in his old room, where five phone screens at a time had once been open. In the stale air of the shut room mingled the cold smell of phone plastic and the sour scent of old ink.

Gangesha's questions gave him no peace that night. Gangesha, who wrote the great work of logic called Tattvachintamani, asked about evidence: what do we know from seeing, what from signs, what from words, what from comparison? Chandrapal searched for the evidence of his own life.

Then came a knock at the door. Only a wet leaf slipped through the gap beneath it. There was no name on the leaf, only a

question: "Whose account was it?" He wanted to answer: Lau's, Raghav's, Broom's, Hariharan's, the system's.

Chandrapal stared at the accounts floating on the water. Slowly he saw that each account had turned into a small crocodile. Their open jaws were chewing not money, but names.

Then he understood: Raghav's next message would not disappear. The words once erased to hide crimes would now want to become leaves and cling to the Channa stump.

Chandrapal switched off his phone.

He went out of the house. The water was knee-deep. At every step it caught his ankles and tugged him a little backwards, as though the road itself were demanding an accounting from him.

Chandrapal said to himself, "Write my full name, but also write down my share of the hundred. Do not call the person through whom wrongdoing passed merely a victim. Call him a pathway for the crime." At that instant the water stirred. No crocodile could be seen, but the water divided as though a tail had swept through it.

When he reached the stump of Channa Grove, a final flash rose from Raghav's phone. There was neither a number nor a name on the screen, only three words: "The message will not be erased.

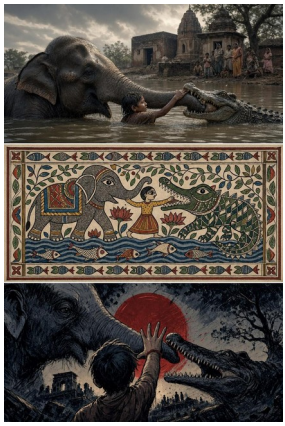
A Little Folk Song

Send a message, send a message of hope;
Plant tomorrow's seed even in letters meant to disappear.
Though the final message is erased, it lives upon the leaf;
The wind reads it, carrying hope from house to house.

CHAPTER 98

Raghav's Final Message

The final message cannot be erased—it becomes a leaf and clings to the stump.



Raghav had a habit: send messages, erase them, destroy the evidence. But at night he remembered his mother's last voice, the recorded account of which he had unknowingly deleted while clearing his phone. Although he knew the pain of that private loss, he went on erasing the pleas of others.

The message's journey into a leaf began that very night. Once Chandrapal Batra had realised that his life was an account operated in someone else's name, a bell of emptiness rang for the first time inside Raghav "Signal" Somani's hidden network. Chandrapal's hundredfold share, Batuknath's delay, Lau Kin-hung's profits, Broom's donation—all these had, at one time or another, passed through Raghav's invisible messages.

Raghav closed his eyes. A scene opened inside him. It was not the stump of Channa Grove, but a vast dark room in which thousands of messages hung like leaves.

He tried to send Chandrapal a message: "You were right. We are all accounts." It would not go through. He wrote to Batuknath: "It is late, but listen." That would not go through

either. To Lau he wrote: “The language of profit has no place in Channa Grove.” It, too, failed.

An old memory opened inside Raghav. As a boy he used to write secret messages on sheets of paper—lemon juice, the warmth of fire, words hidden from sight. His father would say, “Learn to keep secrets. Only then will you be useful in the world.” But Channa Grove was saying, “A secret that protects human dignity is protection.

A little boy asked, “Whose name is this?” Ananya said, “This is not a name. It is the first leaf of an admission.” Another child asked, “Raghav's?” Ananya did not answer. She knew that Raghav's offences were far from small, and his admission was far from complete. One leaf does not make a forest.

The leaf remained there until dawn. There was no procession and no slogan. Ba looked at the leaf and said, “A man whose message has not disappeared must now stand before the court of names.” Meera said, “An admission without responsibility is incomplete.” Devika added, “It is easy to say that your soul is open. Harder to stand openly before those whose minds were wounded by your secret signals.” Ananya placed a stone beneath the leaf.

Everyone fell silent at this reply. Raghav's final message remained as a leaf upon the stump, but its shadow fell across Satyavrat Mehta's silence. If Raghav were to write down the wrongs he had committed through his secret signals, Satyavrat would have to write about his own delay, the words he had failed to speak and the fears hidden inside his office.

In the evening the leaf stirred faintly. Its green grew darker. The letters shifted a little, and beneath “The account is not closed; the soul is open” appeared a fine new line: “The debt of listening remains.” Ananya moved the lamp closer to the leaf.

A Little Folk Song

Listen to the silence; hear the silence answer “Present”;

Read the eyes and the wet leaves; understand their hidden signs.
No one speaks, yet the eyes say, “I am here”;
An empty seat and a wet leaf say, “I am here.”

CHAPTER 99

Satyavrat Mehta's Testimony

The wind tried to carry his testimony away, the water tried to dissolve it—but the testimony was a leaf, and it would not move.

Just before giving his testimony, Satyavrat folded his paper three times. He was afraid that speaking the truth would destroy the standing of his office, his friendships and the decisions he had made in earlier days. Then he remembered Ananya's notebook, where children crossed out mistakes and wrote the correct words.

It was the morning of that debt of listening. Raghav's final message had turned into a leaf and remained stuck to the stump of Channa Grove. All night the flood wind had tried to blow it away, and the water had tried to dissolve it, but the leaf had not moved.

One line in the children's people's code said: “Whoever listens shall also write down the name of their own silence.” When they first wrote that line, everyone thought it an ordinary rule. Now they understood that it was the hardest rule of all. A wrongdoer hides a wrongdoing.

He took just one white sheet from his bag. There was no government heading on it, no seal, no official title. At the top he

wrote: "The Testimony of Satyavrat Mehta." Then he stopped for a while.

Devika asked softly, "Is this an affidavit?" Satyavrat raised his head. "No. In an affidavit, people swear to tell the truth. Here I admit that I kept the truth silent.

But the testimony did not end there. Satyavrat trembled as he wrote its last part. "I ask forgiveness for this, but asking forgiveness is not enough.

Then, for the first time in daylight, Boodhba the ghost appeared in his full form. He was the colour of earth, with both sunlight and shadow falling upon him. He approached Satyavrat, looked at the page, and said, "You have written your testimony.

Before nightfall, Satyavrat Mehta's testimony was pasted into a middle page of the ledger. At the top there was no name and no title, only one line: "Silence, now seated to undergo the punishment of listening." The children said together, "Present." In reply, the green point on the stump seemed to turn white.

Far away in the floodwater, where the eyes of crocodiles sometimes glimmered, a vast shadow rose this time—neither entirely an elephant nor entirely a crocodile. The story turned to take its next breath, for the moment had come for the guardians of names to reach out their hands.

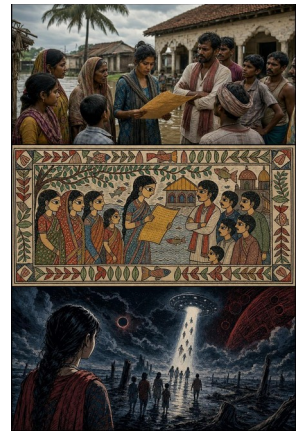
A Little Folk Song

Hold on, children, hold on to the finger of truth;
The elephant's strength may tire, but your hands will not—
remember.
The elephant's strength can fail, but a child's hand need not;
Small fingers hold on to truth and never leave the path.

CHAPTER 100

The Elephant, the Crocodile, and a Child's Hand

The elephant's strength may fail, the crocodile's grip may loosen—but a child's hand never grows tired.



That night, the stones bearing names had been arranged in a circle around the stump. The floodwater had washed dust from some of them, but the letters had not been erased. Ananya wiped one stone with her palm.

Ba said, “Tell the story of the elephant and the crocodile again today.” The children were surprised. They had heard this story before: an elephant steps into the water, a crocodile seizes it, the elephant cries for help, and rescue comes. But in Garh Narikel, no story ended after being told just once.

Ananya asked, “Who is the elephant? Who is the crocodile?” Ba did not answer. She merely looked towards the edge of the water.

When Chandrapal Batra was seen in the waters within himself, his elephant was tied up in the ropes of shares divided into hundreds. His crocodile was not the account he operated in

another person's name, but his hunger without a name. He had earned money from a thousand faces, yet forgotten his own.

The elephant within Raghav "Signal" Somani had no voice. His crocodile was the disappearing message. What had been written was erased.

Lau Kin-hung appeared in a glass building in a distant country. The elephant within him wanted to flee the Earth. His crocodile was not merely profit, but his dream of a future without names.

Ananya took the first turn at kabaddi. She crossed the line, but facing her was no human being. There was the shadow of a crocodile rising from beneath the water. Its shadowy body carried the mingled smell of old papers and wet iron.

The game did not stop at the first light of dawn. The children were tired, but the line had not been rubbed away. Each stone was warm in its place.

And the children of Garh Narikel, who had learned from the elephant and crocodile that holding someone captive was not rescue, and that listening to a name was liberation, were ready for their next breath.

A Little Folk Song

Run, little children, run your turn for the names;
Take laughter for your shield and curiosity for your sword.
Kabaddi, kabaddi—the children run their turn for the names;
Laughter becomes their shield, curiosity their sword.

CHAPTER 101

A Dream Invitation from the Nameless Planet

If a distant invitation demands that you erase history as the price, it is not a journey—it is a bargain with forgetting.

After the story of the elephant and crocodile, the night grew very deep. Aruni remained seated by the stump of Channa Grove, among notebooks, a phone, and bundles of half-opened papers. An advertisement glowed on the phone screen: “New Horizon Human Settlement: A New Beginning Without Suffering.” He fell asleep while reading it.

In his dream he saw a white planet. There was no river, no cremation ground, no root of a tree. Every house bore a number instead of a name.

Ba did not enter the dream. Only her voice came: “How will you rest a hand upon the head of someone who has no name?” Ananya asked at once, “Are these people equal, or have they all been made nameless at the same time?” It was a small question, but a fine crack appeared in the planet's glass dome.

Meera read the words “Cultural Memory Sample” 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 permission." Satyavrat searched for the language of the law, but in the dream the numbers of its legal sections turned to smoke.

Far away, in a glass room, Lau Kin-hung was delighted by the sight of clean accounts. To him, a planet without memory was the perfect marketplace: no families of the dead, no old agreements, no inheritance. But when he went to sign, his own name was wiped from the page.

In his dream, Aruni understood: this was no scientific voyage. It was the criminal network's next proposal—to make people's history useless in the name of keeping them safe. He tried to rise, but a kabaddi line shone beneath his feet. On one side was the nameless planet; on the other, the soil of Garh Narikel.

Ananya caught his hand and said, "We shall cross the line, but come back with a name." Those words turned the dream invitation into a test. The shining planet was no longer the future; it was a question.

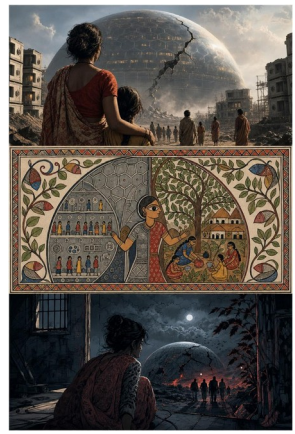
A Little Folk Song

The distant glitter calls, "Come, forget every wound";
The earth asks, "Without a name, where will you build a home?"

CHAPTER 102

Kabaddi Among the Planets in a Dream

Whether a boundary lies in the sky or on the earth, you must keep both your breath and your name if you are to return.



As the line shone, the shadows of the children descended upon the dream's nameless planet. Their bodies remained seated beside the stump on Earth. Only their consciousness made the journey.

Ananya made the rules of the game: whoever crossed the line must find a forgotten name and bring it back. Whoever forgot the name would lose their turn. She faltered once while reading out that rule.

The guards of the dome had no faces. Numbers were written across their chests. They asked, "Names give birth to suffering. Give up your names." Meera replied, "Suffering is born not from names, but from the wrongs committed in their name." She saw her own image moving across the wall, but this time she did not turn her face away.

When Satyavrat stepped forward to cross the boundary, the first words from his mouth were "officer," "witness," and "law." At last he said, "I am the man who saw what was happening and stayed silent for too long." The line shifted a little. The

words of the law became useful only when they took the shape of an admission of his own failing.

Aruni laid a hand upon the dream's soil. It was as clean as information, but without life. He remembered the foundations of the bridge, a labourer's cotton scarf, and a deleted message on a phone.

The return grew slower instead. Every step brought a question, every touch a name. At last Ananya reached the middle of the dome and touched an empty wall.

The smell of water came through the crack. For the first time, the water of Earth entered the dream's planet without memory. The game was not over.

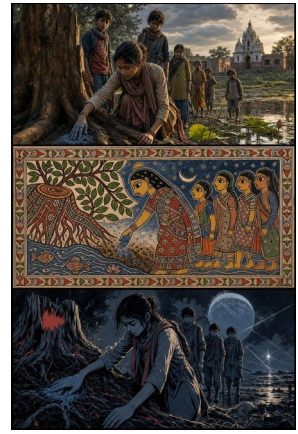
A Little Folk Song

Hold your breath, release your names, cross the line of night;
Whoever comes back with a name has won this turn outright.

CHAPTER 103

A Lesson in Names on the Dream's Nameless Planet

Reading out a name does not mean counting the dead—it means bringing back their relationships, their labour, and their unanswered questions.



Beyond the crack lay an immense hall. There were only numbers upon the walls: 30, 300, 791, 0. When the first name was read out, it was not a face that appeared behind the number, but a relationship: someone's mother holding a lamp at the doorway, someone's child learning to row a boat from his father, someone's wife holding an incomplete wage slip.

Meera read the names of women whose private pictures had been used to threaten them. After each name she added one sentence: “Not their story without their consent.” As she spoke, the hall lost some of its shine, but the air became fit to breathe.

Batuknath sat in his dream court. Before him, his grandson asked, “Grandfather, did you save justice, or did you save your profession?” He tried to answer by speaking of lineage and the scriptures, but the words fell away like insects from a bundle of papers. For the first time, he saw something stronger than his

greed: his fear. The fear of losing respect; the fear of becoming small in the eyes of his family.

Accounts lay open all around Chandrapal. Behind every commission was a voice asking, “What was my name?” He remembered a day in childhood when his teacher had read his name wrongly during attendance and he had gone home crying. Although he remembered that humiliation, he had turned thousands of other people's names into shares divided into hundreds.

Lau Kin-hung stood at the far end of the hall. “Names stop the market,” he said. “Yes,” answered Ananya, “because names demand an accounting.” At that small reply, water stains spread across all his neat account books.

Aruni looked at an empty line in the ledger. He understood that the final aim of an investigation conducted by machines was not to find a criminal's equipment, but the victim's full name. On the blank line he wrote, “Those whose names have not yet been found.” The largest number on the wall shattered.

The planet was not destroyed after the reading of names. Only its shine fell away, revealing ordinary grey soil beneath. As memory returned, the perfect world came to an end.

A Little Folk Song

Speak one name—the smell of earth will wake;
Speak another—a closed door will be reached.

CHAPTER 104

Awakening: Garh Narikel Chooses Earth

Choosing Earth with all its wounds is not defeat—it is accepting responsibility for changing the causes of those wounds.

Aruni woke with a start. The first light of dawn touched the bark of the stump. The phone's screen was dark, and the ledger lay open.

There was no blue dust on Ananya's palm, only the ordinary colour of chalk from the school. She laughed a little shyly. “We never went anywhere.” Ba said, “Your body does not have to move for you to travel a great distance. But when you wake, your feet must be placed upon Earth.”

Meera untied her red thread and tied it again. The dream had not erased her pain. It had only made clear that forgetting pain was not freedom.

Aruni checked where the advertisement had come from. “New Horizon” was not a real planetary settlement scheme. It was a trial publicity campaign by the criminal network, run by machines to measure people's fears, their desire to escape, and the appeal of words that opposed memory. Broom's fine-

sounding yet harmful language, Lau's capital, Chandrapal's registrations, and Raghav's chain of messages were all connected to it.

The children wrote down their decision: "We will not erase suffering. We will change what causes suffering. We will not leave Earth and declare crime innocent.

For Batuknath, Chandrapal, and Raghav, this decision was not a letter of pardon. They were given the work of restoring names: open the bundles of papers, reconcile the accounts, listen to the voices, and stand before those they had made invisible. Understanding the minds of wrongdoers did not mean ending their punishment.

Dew shone upon the new shoot on Channa's stump. Beneath it Ananya wrote, "We choose Earth—because it is here that we must answer.

A Little Folk Song

Our own mud is better than forgetfulness made of glass;
We shall name our wounds—only then will a seed sprout.

CHAPTER 105

The First Watch over Earth

To a traveller waking from a dream, Earth appears not as an old home, but as a new responsibility.

Ananya first touched the bark of the stump. Its damp roughness settled against her palm as if the stories of many years had taken her hand in a single touch. The blue dust she had seen in the dream still clung to her hand—blue-grey, without a smell, perfectly clean, so clean that it was frightening.

Ujjwal's spirit, which had written the word “Present” for the first time on the dream's nameless planet, now became a trembling light on the surface of the water. Devika saw him, but did not call out. Some presences are such that calling to them would bind them to sorrow again.

Chandrapal Batra, who had come to understand himself as an account operated in someone else's name, kept staring at his empty palm. He had no money left, but the marks remained: memories stored in old phones, encrypted accounts, false donations, and the shadow of a phone tool that paid tribute to the dead. 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 answered, “Then listen.

As the night deepened, the crocodiles' eyes began to shine on the water. But this time people did not run from those eyes. Ba said, “They were creatures hungry for flesh.

Ujjwal's light joined that same voice, along with Meera's vow to protect her privacy, Devika's melody, the fault 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 could a lie hold its breath, and how long could the truth go on without breaking?

Suddenly the stones placed beside the stump began to make a soft sound. Every stone on which a name had been written rang out in a shared rhythm. Yet every voice was different—some deep, some thin—as though an ancient scale of seven notes had awakened beneath the soil.

And the first sound of the next voice rose from a child, under the shade of the new shoot, on the kabaddi field. “I am on Earth.” Another child answered, “Present.” A third said, “The watch begins.” And the stump of Channa Grove, which was no longer a tree but still held the resolve to become one, drew a long breath in the morning air.

O Earth, newly born, born like a little child;
Feed her the milk of names, fill the next voice with stories.

A Little Folk Song

Little one, sing Earth's birth song;
Guard the dawn as tenderly as a newborn's sleep.
Earth smiled like a newborn in the lap of morning;
She drank the milk of dew beneath the sun's spread-out shawl.

CHAPTER 106

The Testimony of Seeds

A seed bears witness—to whom the soil belonged, and whose hands worked it.

People say that a seed is small. But a seed is not small: an entire tree is hidden within it, and an entire village within the tree. Whoever shuts a seed inside a box shuts a village inside a box. What lies in the darkness of the storehouse is not sleep—it is waiting. It waits for the season, waits for a hand, waits for a song. You cannot wake it by giving it a number.

Behind the stump, Boodhba the ghost laughed softly. His laughter carried the shadow of Channa Grove's laughter. He said, “Those who divided human beings in the name of the caste system never understood the language of seeds.

Hearing this, the children began placing stones beside the seeds. On the stones they wrote: “Soil,” “Water,” “Hands,” “Season,” “Song,” “Hunger,” “Justice.” Ananya said, “The evidence for a seed is not the seed alone. All the relationships around it are evidence too.” Satyavrat Mehta's eyes brightened. A local official said, “This is a government scheme. The old seeds will be kept in a secure bank. Future generations will benefit.” Ananya asked, “Will the seeds leave their own

village?" The official smiled. "Temporarily, for their safety." Devika asked, "Will their names go with them?" The official turned a page. "Their numbers will." At those words the shoot on the stump trembled.

It was written: "What the eye saw of the seed collection project: a jeep, papers, boxes. What was inferred from the signs: safety. Examination: no songs, no soil, a desire to turn names into numbers." The children said together, "Incomplete evidence." Gangesha's question stood up once more as a demand for justice.

Ananya saw that line and shivered. "The 'New Horizon' scheme wants data about seeds," she whispered. Ujjwal's light flashed for a moment on the edge of the stump.

After midnight, a very faint sound rose from the seed containers, as if thousands of tiny voices were speaking together. "We want soil, not numbers. We want seasons, not vaults. We want the earth of our own names, not a nameless scheme." The children heard those voices even in their sleep.

Before dawn, Ananya opened a fresh page in the ledger and wrote the title "The Theft of Seeds." Her hand trembled, but her letters were clear. The watch had spread from names to seeds, and Garh Narikel understood that the next struggle would take place in the unseen womb of the fields.

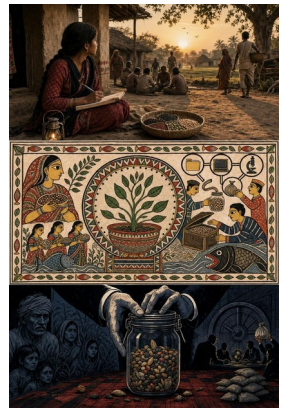
A Little Folk Song

Bring them together, bring the seed and soil together;
Water's love, the sun's warmth—join all four and sing.
The seed says, "I need soil"; the soil says, "Come";
Water says, "I'll give you love"; the sun says, "Bloom."

CHAPTER 107

The Theft of Seeds

The thief who steals seeds does not steal a field—he steals the future.



The thief who steals seeds does not steal a field—he steals the future. The field remains where it was, and so does the soil. What he takes away is tomorrow's meal.

There are two kinds of theft. One happens at night and is discovered in the morning. The other arrives in broad daylight with papers and folded hands—and is called not theft, but protection.

Before the first light of dawn, Ananya had written the words "The Theft of Seeds" in her ledger. Those words spread through the whole village like the wind. People had already seen the theft of names and recognised the trick behind the theft of memory. But the theft of seeds? Until then, it had seemed impossible.

The official said, "Numbers are necessary in scientific procedures." Then Gangesha's question rose again from within the Channa stump. Ananya said quietly, "A number is not proof. The evidence of a seed is its sprout, its smell, its soil, the words of its people, and its history.

A secret signal from the night flashed again upon Raghav Signal's leaf: “Secure the seed list.” But this time the message could not form completely. The letters broke halfway and became the veins of the leaf. It caught beside the green point on the Channa stump.

Suddenly a sound came from inside the little brass box. It was heard less with the ears than through the palms. Surmani Kaki handed the box to Ananya.

By evening, a decision had been reached: no seed would leave until its full name, home, field, season, story, and the people of its village were clearly known. If research were ever carried out, the seeds would be accompanied by the rights of their names, the rights of their soil, and the language of their people. The children named this code “The Testimony of Seeds.” Ananya wrote in her ledger, “A grain is not just a grain.

After midnight, wind came from the direction of the Kamla-Balan. Fine cracks appeared across the surfaces of the earthen vessels. Surmani Kaki started, but Ba stopped her. “Do not be afraid.

No one had an answer to this question. The fields were divided by debt, chemicals, land acquisition, floods, droughts, and caste. The soil itself seemed to ask, “Where will you save me?”

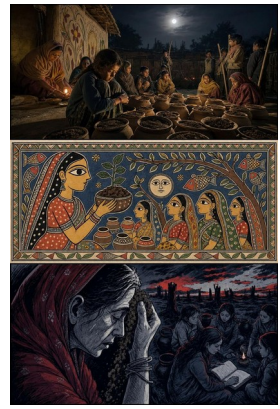
A Little Folk Song

Save the seeds, save tomorrow's meal;
Guard Grandmother's seed box and the rules of the fields.
If the seeds are stolen, tomorrow's plate will be empty;
If the seeds survive, seven generations will sow the laughter of grain.

CHAPTER 108

The Soil's Mouth

The soil opens its mouth when someone asks it, "Where shall I grow?"



The soil opens its mouth when someone asks it, "Where shall I grow?" Until then it stays silent, because people have always demanded things from it and never asked it a question.

People plough the soil, sell it, divide it, mortgage it—and think that all this amounts to speaking with the soil. But a conversation is not only what we say. It is what we hear.

Ananya asked Harihar Jha again, "If Gangesha's Nyaya asks for evidence, what is the evidence for your purity? Is it only fear of caste?" Harihar Jha flushed with anger, but the children's eyes showed no fear. This was not a question for a courtroom. It was a question from the soil.

That day a procession went out towards the fields, but it was no procession of make-believe ghosts. The children went in front, carrying the earthen vessels in the middle, followed by the women; behind them came the elders, labourers, Satyavrat, Eera, Meera, Devika, and Gop. More people joined them along the way.

But Devika stopped them. “Do not erase the history of fallow land in the name of cleaning it.” The rubbish was separated, but the memories were not thrown away. Dhirmati kept a scrap of an old shoe. “This is a mark of my father's work.” A small portion of ash was mixed into the earth. Dung, dry leaves, silt from the flood, dust from Channa's stump, and water from all five directions came together to form a small garden bed.

Before the seed was planted, Ananya said, “Say the name of the grain that will go here.” Surmani Kaki held up the grain and said, “This is flood-resistant rice.” Ba said, “This is a safeguard against hunger.” Dhirmati said, “This is the light of hands called impure.” Meera said, “This is an answer to the humiliation of the body.” Satyavrat said softly, “This is justice born beyond the law.” The children said together, “Present.” The grain went into the soil.

That night the watch was set up among the fields. This time there were five circles, not three. Separate groups of children kept watch over the five plots: the leatherworkers' quarter, the Musahar settlement, the widows' garden, the sharecroppers' field, and Channa's stump.

This answer brought relief to everyone, but the story was not about to stop there. The land that had agreed to receive the seed would now raise a question about rights. Whose right was it—the owner's, the cultivator's, the caste's, the state's, the company's, or the village people who listened to the seed?

“The seed has found a place to grow,” she wrote, “but now the crocodile of ownership has arrived upon the field's boundary.” Dhirmati picked up some earth and clenched it in her fist. Somewhere far away, the pages of a bundle of papers turned, a crocodile's tail moved in the water, and the dream's nameless planet faded for a moment in the sky.

A Little Folk Song

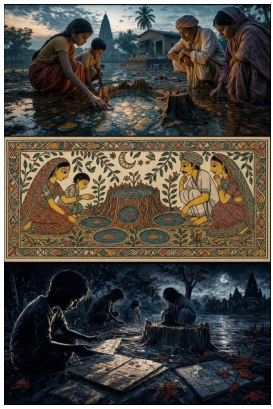
Make room, make room for the soil;

Give it a green window even in the midst of concrete.
The soil asks, "Where shall I grow?" Say, "In my heart";
Field, courtyard, flowerpot, forest—let each have a place of honour.

CHAPTER 109

The Memory of Water

It is easy to forget water; it is impossible to forget what water remembers.



The soil holds names, and water holds movement. When a foot steps on soil, it leaves a mark. When a foot steps on water, no mark remains—but water remembers who entered from which landing place and did not return.

That is why papers can be changed, but water cannot. You can cross out what is written on paper. But when water has touched someone once, the coolness of that touch remains within it.

The soil had opened its mouth. After the seeds, dust, and hidden footprints had spoken during the fourth watch, people felt that Earth had begun to give its testimony. But in Garh Narikel no testimony stood alone.

The children were astonished. The watch over names was no longer only a matter of stones inscribed on the ground. Water was demanding a written account of its own.

Ba said, "Water is a very old witness. Before human beings built courts, they committed wrongs in front of the water. Water

knows the roots of the grove, knows the warmth of bodies, knows how hunger dissolves.

Gangesha's question arose once again. A boy asked, "How can the memory of water be evidence?" Aruni smiled. He had once been an engineer who trusted the weight borne by a bridge, its reinforcing rods, cement, measurements, and design.

Panidubbi spoke again. "If the reasoning of Navya-Nyaya cannot hear the humiliation of the body, it will remain incomplete. If caste decides who may approach the water, justice will never cross the river. If Gangesha is the question, then water demands an answer." The leatherworking woman, marriage, lineage, birth, the impossible tale of five years—all these rose faintly upon the water's surface.

Closing the ledger, Ananya said, "Water is speaking, and they have come to shut it inside bottles." Satyavrat Mehta looked at his wet hands. The letters had dried, but the coolness of water still remained on his palm. He said quietly, "Wherever memory begins to be sold as water, the watch must become stricter."

At night the children drew a new kabaddi line around the circle of water. The soil had opened its mouth, and water had given its memory. Now the market would try to put a lid over water's mouth.

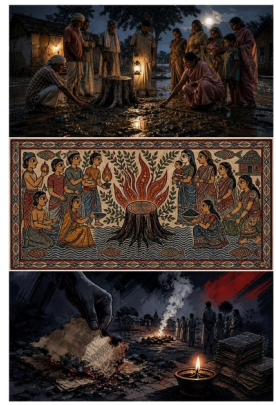
A Little Folk Song

Fill your pots, water-carriers, with water from the free-flowing stream;
Open the bottle's cap and bring the river home.
The memory of a river shut inside a bottle pushes at the cap;
The current was born free and plays beside the thirsty.

CHAPTER 110

The Witness of Fire

Fire goes out, but its ashes bear witness.



People think that once something has been burned, the matter is over. But the smell of what has burned remains in the air, and no one can put a lock on a smell. Whoever secretly burns a document finds its smoke returning to that very person's courtyard.

Fire comes in two colours. One burns on the veranda, in everyone's sight, driving away the darkness. The other burns in secret at night—frightened, greedy, and fleeing from its own shadow.

After listening to the memories of water, the people of Garh Narikel were beginning to understand that names lived not only in stones, papers, ledgers, seeds, soil, and water. Names also lived in the ashes left after a fire went out. Near the cut stump in Channa Grove, the floodwater had receded on the night of the fifth watch, leaving a blackish-brown coating upon the soil.

The children did not cry out. Ananya had taught them: first breathe, then speak. They formed a circle and called together,

"Present." At that word, the smoke behaved strangely. It did not rise straight upwards.

Aruni threw the first bucket of water, but Meera caught his hand. "If we put out every last trace," she said, "how shall we find evidence of what was burned?" The people were startled. The fire had to be stopped, but the ashes must also be allowed to tell their story.

Saumya sifted the ashes through a piece of cloth. She searched for the tiniest scraps of paper among them. On one scrap she found half of the emblem of Broom's company.

Ananya asked, "Ghost Baba, what is the fire saying?" The voice of the Old Ghost came like the rustling of dry leaves. "Fire says that what is hollow inside takes little time to burn. But what is filled with names speaks even through its ashes." Having said this, he did not disappear. He remained seated behind the ashes, as though it was his turn to keep watch too.

Satyavrat Mehta said softly, "Air is the hardest witness of all. It never stays in anyone's hand, yet it reaches everywhere."

Ananya opened the next page and wrote a heading: "Seventh Watch: The Testimony of Air."

And so the witness of fire did not come to an end. It settled as ash upon their heads, shone in the letters carved into stone, and went out to make the air speak. Those who had hoped to erase memory by burning papers had instead spread that memory, as smoke, throughout Garh Narikel.

A Little Folk Song

Awaken, O ashes, awaken the seed within;
Wait for the first drop and return as a tender shoot.
The fire went out; the ashes stayed, a seed concealed inside;
The first raindrop fell, and a green new shoot smiled.

CHAPTER 111

The Question of Air

The smoke did not go into the sky; it wandered through every lane—the question of air is asked at every door.

Soil, seeds, water, fire—all these can be held in the hand. That is why people imagine that the air belongs to no one. But what belongs to no one belongs to everyone—and what belongs to everyone is the easiest thing to plunder.

Words travel on the air, and so do rumours. Their wings seem to be the same colour. The difference is that a true word has roots, while a rumour does not—and whatever flies without roots will fall into somebody's courtyard.

Soil, seeds, water, fire—people could touch them all with their hands. But how could anyone catch the air? Aruni fell silent at the question.

By afternoon, the village's trial had begun. At the tea stall, a man declared that some of the names written at the Festival of Names were false. Ananya arrived there.

In the evening, the children gathered beside the stump. They had made little cloth flags—red, yellow, and white, but none black. Each flag carried a word: Truth, Name, Privacy, Labour, Water, Soil, Seed, Fire, Air.

One boy had earlier been caught entering false names into Chandrapal's phone app. Now he was afraid to join the game. Ananya said, "Holding your breath is not the hardest thing. Holding back a lie is." The boy closed his eyes and stepped into the game.

As night deepened, the watch over air faced its final test. The tiny shoot on Channa's stump stirred ever so slightly. The movement made no sound, yet the children heard a question: "What would the air be like on the nameless planet of our dreams?" The question unsettled them all.

That night, no one lit incense around the stump in Channa Grove. "Let the air keep its own scent," the children said. For a long time they sat without speaking. Their silence did not come from fear. They were listening.

" The children drew their circle of stones closer together. Far, far away, inside the shining dome in the advertisement for "New Horizon," a fine crack appeared. Perhaps the air of Earth had reached even there.

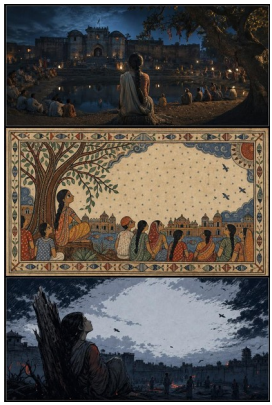
A Little Folk Song

Blow, O wind, across every doorstep, blow;
Let there be no charge, no discrimination for breath—sing so.
The wind comes to every doorstep and charges no one;
Clean air is everyone's right, denied to no one.

CHAPTER 112

The Emptiness of the Sky

When the sky becomes empty, it offers no relief—it asks the greatest question of all.



When the sky becomes empty, it offers no relief—it asks the greatest question of all. A little piece of sky can frighten us. The whole sky demands an answer.

The sky glimpsed between leaves seems easy to face. We see it in pieces, only as much as we can bear. But when the tree is cut down and the whole sky suddenly stands before us, its weight presses upon our chests.

Satyavrat Mehta spoke much less than usual that day. His testimony had been written down, and his guilty silence had also been recorded. Yet under the open sky, every written word seemed small. He opened the ledger, then closed it again.

The children were not satisfied with that answer. They had grown used to finding evidence of each element in a stone, leaf, water, ash, dust, voice, or mark. “Clouds,” said one boy. “Birds,” said another. “The part of our breath that leaves the body and rises,” said a third. Ananya was silent for a long time before saying, “The sky's mark is an empty place—somewhere a name has not been written, but can still be heard.”

Then, for the first time, the Old Ghost became faintly visible in broad daylight. His body was not smoke but something like the edge of a beam of light. He stood not upon the stump but between its shadow and the sunlight.

In his distant city, Lau Kin-hung looked through a wall of glass. He believed that every building, every satellite, and every line of communication was under his control. But that night, the sky above his room suddenly changed into the sky of Mithila.

At dusk they played kabaddi once more. This time, however, they drew no line on the ground. The children stood in a circle around the stump and looked upwards.

At that very moment, the soft beating of a drum came from far away. There was no procession, no performance. Only a drumbeat arriving across water, fire, air, and sky.

The chapter did not end with that trembling. It was the first invitation from the depths below. When memory reaches as far as the sky, the roots beneath the earth begin to demand an answer.

A Little Folk Song

Fill the sky, O fill it with questions and replies;
Let questions rise as clouds and answers fall as rain.
The empty sky asks, "Who is awake down below?"
The earth will answer, "The people's wisdom has not fled."

CHAPTER 113

The Body of a Word

Words need bodies too—without a body, a word is lost in the air.

A lie quickly finds a body: bundles of documents, seals, agreements, the language of contracts, platforms, and deeds of donation. The moment it is written, it puts on a body. But if truth is never put into action, it wanders around without a body until the wind carries it away.

Simply saying "justice" does not bring justice. Writing "present" does not make anyone present. A word's body is sweat. It is waiting. It is the time we spend listening to another person's story.

At first the children were puzzled. A name was a sound, letters written down, a mark cut into stone. But Ananya recognised the trembling question hidden beneath all this.

Satyavrat Mehta was present at the gathering too. Contrary to his usual habit, he gave no speech. He looked at the papers, and then at the children.

Meera placed a mirror beside the words "the right to privacy." She said, "Privacy does not mean hiding. It means having a right over your own face. A camera that takes pictures of pain without asking, a phone app that gathers donations in the

names of the dead, a society that turns love into a crime—all of them cut away the body of the right to privacy.

Just then an old voice came from outside the school. "What is the evidence for a word?" Everyone turned to look, but the question hung in the air. Gangesha's question had returned.

The children stopped their game. The word "agreement" shone brightly, but no one could see its body. It had neither stone nor ear, neither mirror nor leaf nor seed.

A faint sound came from within the stump. It was neither laughter nor weeping, but a warning. The Old Ghost stepped out of the shade and, for the first time, spoke as simply as a child in daylight. "Look for the agreement's body. If you cannot find its body, you will find its belly."

Those words did not end the night of the ninth watch. The watch over the body of words had only just begun. And the following morning, Garh Narikel would have to understand whose bones, land, water, seeds, and futures an agreement was written upon—not merely what was written on its paper.

A Little Folk Song

O little one, a birth song for letters!
Clothed in meaning's body, a word is born.
A word is born when it arrives wrapped in meaning;
Hands, eyes, labour, and experience welcome it home.

CHAPTER 114

The Soul of Meaning

If the body of a word survives but the soul of its meaning is sold, the watch remains unfinished.

The same word can be written in three places: on the lips of a bereaved family, on a government flag, and on the wall of a planet that has no name. The letters will be identical in all three places. But the first will hold tears, the second calculations, and the third nothing but emptiness.

Meaning does not live inside the letters. Meaning lives in what the word touches. A heritage that leaves the hand unmoved when we touch it is not our ancestors' legacy. It is merely decoration.

At the sound of Gangesha's name, the Old Ghost's shadow appeared in the doorway. He could not fully enter the daylight, but his voice filled the courtyard. “When you speak of the testimony of someone trustworthy, examine three things: whether the speaker can be trusted, whether the listener is ready, and how the words are connected to their meaning. When ‘present’ is the answer spoken for the name of someone dead, that is one meaning.

Meanwhile, a vehicle arrived from the government office in town. The officials began handing out caps bearing the slogan, "Be Present, Save Our Heritage." The caps showed Channa Grove, but instead of the cut stump the picture displayed a grove of lush green trees. The wound in the earth had been hidden.

That evening, the children held a test of meanings around the stump. They wrote different words on stones and placed them in the middle: "development," "donation," "justice," "respect," "safety," "heritage," and "present." Before each word, someone told a story from their own life.

Suddenly a child came running from the pond where Panidubbi lived. In his hand he held a wet leaflet. The printed seal of the government's "Be Present Campaign" had washed away, but one word remained in the middle: "Reinterpretation."

Devika read the leaflet aloud to the children. With each word, the stump's shadow grew longer. The sun was still high, yet the shadow kept spreading.

As evening fell, the little flags of the "Be Present Campaign" began flapping in the wind. From every flag, one letter broke loose, floated away, and came to rest beside the cut stump. The children kept gathering the letters.

That night, a deep sound rather than laughter rose from inside the stump. It was as though someone, far away, was turning the pages of Tattvachintamani, the great book on reasoning. Gangesha's shadow, the Old Ghost, Panidubbi, Meera, Devika, Satyavrat, Ananya, and Aruni all understood the same thing.

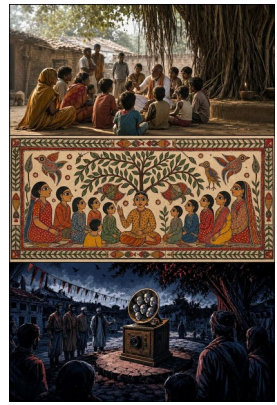
A Little Folk Song

Guard the meaning, O guard the word's soul;
Look for the lamp inside its shining body.
A word's body may shine while its meaning weeps within;
Look upon it with love, and gather its soul again.

CHAPTER 115

The Watch Over Voices

Guarding a voice is hardest of all—for what survives is often the first thing to be sold.



A voice is part of a body. It rises from the chest, forms in the throat, and leaves through the mouth. As soon as it escapes, people think it belongs to the air—and therefore to anyone. But being carried by the air does not make it nameless.

A box can listen, but its belly cannot ache. Ears attached to a living body let what they hear enter the heart. Ears attached to metal merely collect it.

The people who arrived with the box called themselves "Guardians of Listening." They said, "Keeping watch over names is very important. But people will die, children will grow up, and voices will change.

Batuknath Hariharan stood at a distance. He was thinking of linking these people to the proposal from his trust. If the rights to people's voices were turned into legal agreements, the watch over names could once again be imprisoned between signatures and seals.

Then a boy stood up. His grandfather had disappeared during the construction of the bridge. He wanted to speak his

grandfather's name, but his throat closed with emotion. The people with the recording device grew impatient as they waited.

The smile faded from the face of the Guardian of Listening. “We must preserve these voices for the future,” he said. At last Satyavrat Mehta spoke. “The rights of people living today cannot be taken away in the name of the future. To give a private person or an institution ownership over a community's suffering is an injustice.

The device was lifted away, but before it could be removed Ananya said, “Write down the name of this box too.” “What name?” the children asked. Ananya replied, “The Ear of Greed.” So the ledger recorded: “The Ear of Greed came, failed to learn how to listen, and went away.” At that, the Old Ghost's faint laughter was heard again.

Far away, the crocodiles' eyes gleamed in the floodwater, but this time they did not swim forward. It was as if they, too, were listening. In the sky, the nameless planet of dreams looked like a tiny, cold point of light.

That night the chapter did not end. The watch over voices had been established, but the next danger was coming with its mouth bound shut. Since the voices could not be imprisoned, someone would now try to control language, printing, and reading. In the shadow of the stump, the next page of the ledger opened by itself, and a single word shone like an unwritten heading: “The Pen.”

A Little Folk Song

Let the garden of voices flower, O let it bloom;
Each flower has its own scent—do not copy another's.
Each voice is a flower, with a different colour and fragrance;
Music grows through respect, not through imitation.

CHAPTER 116

The Inheritance of Silence

The enemy of a name is not only a throat that tells lies—sometimes it is the silence of those who know the truth.

One kind of silence protects power. Another covers the soul. One is a companion to wrongdoing.

An empty bowl is not really empty. It is filled with everything that has been left unsaid—and only the person who tries to lift it knows how heavy it is.

On the first day, the teacher said nothing at the school. The children sat in rows, holding leaves, stones, and old ledgers. Usually Ananya began the lesson.

One boy grew restless and asked, “Will there be no lesson today?” Ba said, “Today, first read the words that were never spoken.” The children looked at one another. How could they read words that had not been spoken? Then Satyavrat Mehta slowly stood up.

Meera read the leaflet without smiling. Looking up, she asked, “If you collect people's voices, will anyone then be able to play them without permission—on a stage, on a screen, in a machine, at a donation meeting, or during an evening for tourists?” The leader of the group replied, “We are only

preserving culture." Meera said, "If preservation separates a voice from the body it belongs to, that is theft. A voice, too, is part of a body."

Gangesha's question arose once again. In knowledge gained by seeing, no one was speaking—so what counted as evidence? In knowledge inferred from signs, there were tear-filled eyes—was that enough?

That night something strange happened in Lau Kin-hung's dream. None of the echoes from the collected voices that should have reached him arrived. On the gleaming wall of his dream, there appeared only an empty circle: the silent boundary of a kabaddi game.

Before dawn, Ananya wrote on the next page, "Now we must keep watch over sight." For if voices had been protected, and silence too, the marketplace would next attack people's right to be seen on their own terms. It would sell the face of someone who did not speak, and display the tears of someone who wished to remain silent.

From inside the stump came only a faint reply, a sound as light as the shadow of a leaf: "Look, but do not devour." The inheritance of silence did not end there. It opened a path towards the eyes.

A Little Folk Song

Keep patience, O keep a seed within the silence;
Wait for time's dew, and watch it grow into a shoot.
Silence is not empty; a seed grows deep inside;
One day, touched by time's dew, it will rise as a tender shoot.

CHAPTER 117

The Debt of Memory

To hear a name is to incur a debt; no memorial rite can pay it—only deeds can.

To hear a name is to incur a debt; no memorial rite can pay it—only deeds can. Once a name reaches your ears, an account has been opened. Flowers and garlands cannot settle that account. Only what you do will count.

This is not a debt that can be repaid with money. A moneylender's debt carries interest. This debt demands a change in the way we live: whoever has listened must change the way they walk through the world.

Ba said quietly, “It is easy to place a garland on the head of a sacred book, but hard to touch the thorns on its body. A society that accepts Gangesha's wisdom but cuts away the uncomfortable truths of his life is killing half of him.” Aruni added, “If, in the name of honour, an inconvenient Gangesha is turned into a spotless statue, then a knife has been hidden in a garland of flowers. The blood of that killing flows not outside, but inside memory.”

At this rule, fear stirred among the schemers. Batuknath Hariharan, who wanted to save his name by asking forgiveness, understood that tears alone would not be enough here. Chandrapal Batra, trapped in the incomplete name of his share in a hundred, understood that the debt of memory could not be paid into a donation box.

That afternoon, an unfamiliar official arrived with a newly printed notice: "Memory-Debt Relief Scheme." Its language was sweet and reassuring. The scheme promised that families whose names appeared in the register of memory would receive an "honour payment" from the government, private donors, and the heritage project working together.

Ba read the notice. She neither laughed nor wept, but handed it to Ananya. Ananya placed it on the edge of the stump and asked, "Has this scheme come to free us from our debt—or to become the owner of that debt?" "Evidence first!" the children cried together. The official said, "The notice carries a seal." Ananya answered, "A seal is not knowledge gained by seeing with your own eyes. It is a claim.

Meera drew a red circle around that empty space. Beside the name of a young man who had been cheated, Devika wrote, "No profit from selling another person's fear." Beside a worker's name, Saumya wrote, "A memorial is incomplete without labour." Eera began a new letter to children living abroad: "The village's debt does not ask for money. It asks us to change how we live." Aruni measured the riverbank, but this time he was not measuring for a bridge. He measured the flow of the water that washed over names. When he pulled the measuring tape taut, his hand trembled—not, for the first time, under the weight of iron, but under the weight of names.

After midnight, the leaflet announcing the Memory-Debt Relief Scheme suddenly became damp. Its printed seals spread out and dissolved into smoke, but three words remained clear: "Whose release is it?" Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "Tomorrow: the question of release from debt." From where he sat at a distance, Satyavrat Mehta read the line and added to his own notebook, "A promise to free someone from a debt they do not understand is a trick."

And so the thirteenth watch did not end. The debt of memory stood on the threshold of the coming days. The green point on Channa's stump shone all night, and every glimmer asked: You have heard the name. What will you do now?

A Little Folk Song

Repay the debt, O repay the debt of the names you have heard;
Offer a plate of service, not flowers and garlands.
Hearing a name leaves a debt, and service is its interest;
Memory asks for more than flowers—it asks for responsibility today.

CHAPTER 118

The Right to One's Own Body

The name has been saved and the voice has been heard—but without bodily rights, everything remains only half-done.

The first right over a body belongs to the person whose body it is. Whoever wishes to speak must keep control of their words. Whoever does not wish to speak owns their silence too.

Society places the mind upon a pedestal and presses the body down below. It makes a statue of a person's ideas and buries the story of that person's body. Someone whose thoughts could have broken open the cage of caste is seated upon the high throne of scripture—and silenced there.

As talk of the debt of memory spread around Channa Grove's stump, the children understood that a debt was not owed to names alone. Names had been saved, voices had been heard, and the inheritance of silence had been written down. But the bodies that had sunk in jal samadhi, the bodies chewed by crocodiles, the bodies crushed beneath bridge supports, the bodies held captive by hospital bills, the bodies humiliated in the name of caste, the bodies turned into specimens by cameras and the hunger of researchers—on which page were the rights of those bodies written?

The question arose unexpectedly. The people from the heritage project arrived with a new list. It read: “Items for collection: root-soil from Channa Grove; floodwater samples; old clothing; bone-like fragments; oral accounts from bereaved families; women's memories; workers' tools; equipment that runs on machines.” The language was polite, the terms scientific, and the stated purpose cultural.

Edward Broom's new representative tried to explain. “This is only for preservation.” Devika did not smile. Her eyes grew hard. She said, “Preservation is what protects a family's rights.

Ananya wrote the elderly woman's words on a page of the school ledger. That page later came to be called “The Code of the Body.” Its first rule was this: the first right over a body belongs to the person whose body it is.

He did not stand up and address the children. Instead, on a blank page of the ledger, he wrote, “If justice does not begin with the body, it remains a game played with words.” Ananya read the page and added below it, “Without the body, a name is incomplete.” Satyavrat smiled for the first time, but it was a smile of embarrassment, not victory.

Yet a new danger was born behind that small gleam of hope. Those who wished to buy memory realised that names alone would no longer be enough. People were now keeping watch over bodily customs, humiliation by caste, women's rights, and the sweat of workers.

The stump in Channa Grove stayed warm with that question for a long time. The children slept, but the page bearing the Code of the Body remained open.

A Little Folk Song

Count them all, O count every right of the body;
Breath, sleep, labour, consent—treasure all four.
Saving a name is good, but the body must have dignity too;
Health, safety, consent—these are life's true treasures.

CHAPTER 119

The Body of Labour

The body of labour is written upon stone, but can only be read through sweat.

Where an employer is afraid of names, he writes numbers instead. "Forty-seven men, nine women"—that is not a true count of human beings. It is a curtain hung where their names should be. Hiding names does not make labour disappear.

The body is not merely a vessel for suffering. It is that same body which lifts the spade, pours the foundations, pushes the boat, and carries the dead home. The world rests upon the strength of those bodies.

Aruni Nandan sat beside the cut stump. Three objects lay before him: a torn shoe belonging to an old labourer, a fingernail caught in cement, and a wage slip with a number written where a name should have been. When Ananya saw the slip, she asked, "Can a number be a name?" Aruni replied, "No. A number is put there when the employer is afraid of a name." At the top of the ledger, the children wrote: "Hiding names does not kill labour; it reveals an employer's fear."

Satyavrat Mehta did not sit far away that day. He sat on the earth directly in front of the stump, beside the line where the

workers were seated. He had a pen, but he did not begin writing at once.

Meanwhile, an engineer from the town's heritage project said that local workers would be hired to build the memorial, and that this would provide jobs. “Contracts with their names on them?” Aruni asked quietly. The engineer hesitated. “Wages paid on time?” Devika added. He fell silent.

Ananya wrote rapidly. The children decided that the next lesson at the school would be called “A Name Before Work Begins.” For everyone who worked there, a public written record would show the worker's name, village, physical condition, family contact details, wages, rest, food, drinking water, and safety arrangements.

Then Chandrapal Batra's name came up once more. The story of his mule accounts was still fresh in everyone's mind. Bhagelu Paswan said, “Our labour, too, had been turned into a mule account.

During the final watch, Satyavrat Mehta closed his notebook and said, “Justice will ask not only for the names of the dead. It will also ask whether the tired bodies of the living have had their rest.” This time the children did not call out “Present.” They rose and fetched water to wash the workers' feet.

After everyone had gone, the stump's shadow stretched longer. Among the stones inscribed with workers' names, they placed one blank stone: “For the person who works but remains unseen.” Touching it, Ananya said, “Tomorrow we shall learn about this invisible labour.

A Little Folk Song

Read, my brothers, read the letters written in sweat;
Count the hammer, the plough, the loom as pens.
Eyes alone cannot read a name engraved upon stone;
Letters of sweat shine through every dawn and every dark hour.

CHAPTER 120

The Body of Justice

Justice has the body of a tender shoot—soft, yet strong enough to break through the earth.

For so long, justice had lived in papers, in seals, in pages filled with hearing dates. But where was the body of justice for the person who carried sand upon his back, or the person whose chest was crushed beneath a bridge support? Justice without a body becomes the crocodiles' food again and again.

There is a difference between a statue and a living body. A statue asks to be worshipped: people bow before it and move on. A living body demands responsibility: people must stand before it and answer.

On the night when the stones bearing the workers' names were set around Channa Grove's stump, its new shoot did not remain still. It had not yet grown into a leaf—only a green point, a soft trembling, the breath of earth deep within. Yet that night a faint gleam left the green point and fell across the stones.

Ananya called a morning gathering. Perhaps 'gathering' was no longer the right word. It had become Garh Narikel's daily breath.

Those words reached Ba first. Wiping her eyes with the end of her sari, she said, “Justice that arrives wearing perfume often comes to cover the smell of a rotting body. Real justice is incomplete without the smells of sweat, ash, mud, milk, blood, and tears.” The people fell silent.

Chandrapal listened to the news from far away. A plan was being drawn up to add a new feature to his phone app: 'Place the name of someone you love upon a clay image that moves on a machine.' Devika understood immediately. She told the children, “If the body of justice is sold on a phone screen, the crocodiles will come again.” No new fast from screens was announced that night, but people turned their phones face down of their own accord.

The earthen body of justice stood beside the stump. Crocodiles gleamed far away in the floodwater, but this time they seemed to be looking not with hunger for bodies, but with curiosity. Panidubbi rose from the pond like a mist and circled the clay figure for a little while.

The villagers kept watch until the first light of morning. This watch was different from the watch over Earth. There were no weapons here—only listening.

In that shade, Ananya opened the next page and wrote, 'Seventeenth Watch: The Law of Shade.' For once justice had been given a body, another question arose: did shade belong only to the tree, or also to those whose names had still not been fully heard?

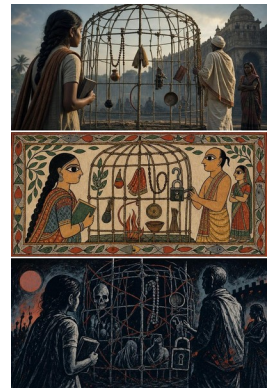
A Little Folk Song

Water the tender shoot, O water the shoot of justice;
Its leaf is soft, its root breaks stone—remember both its gifts.
Justice has the body of a shoot, with leaves so tender and mild;
Yet roots that break through stone hold faith both firm and wild.

CHAPTER 121

The Cage of Caste

The bars of this cage are made not of iron, but of habits—and habits shine brightest in the morning sun.



The bars of this cage were made of lineage, clan, cooking, marriage, touch, cremation grounds, and food. A lock called scripture hung upon its door. And those who had fastened the lock said, 'This is tradition.'

But what society calls tradition is often an invisible wall built around the breath of a living person. Calling a wall 'tradition' does not make it cease to be a wall. It merely changes its name.

At the village school, the children had been taught only this about Gangesha: he wrote Tattvachintamani, the great book on reasoning, and founded the school of Navya Nyaya, or New Logic. But in the court beside Channa's stump, that account was considered incomplete. Eera opened a page and asked the children, “Why does society boast of a thinker's intelligence, yet remain silent about the uncomfortable truths of his life?” Then old stories began to circulate among the people: the account that he was born five years after his father's death; the story of his marriage to a woman of the leatherworking community; the story of love and knowledge piercing the wall of caste; and the

belief that Tattvachintamani held the weight of thought equal to twelve thousand books, rather than merely one.

Batuknath Hariharan, who was once again going about carrying papers for his People's Memory Trust, was troubled by the discussion. He was not afraid of the science of reasoning. He was afraid of what that reasoning would mean for living bodies.

Satyavrat Mehta remained silent. Gangesha's voice came again: “Caste is not a fact known by looking at a mark. It is an accusation. Birth is not proof, but a cage built through social arrangements.

Batuknath rose uneasily. “Be careful before you write down a name.” Ananya answered, “Those who want to erase names always speak of caution. I am writing questions, not accusations.” At her reply, the shoot on Channa's stump trembled, and a drop of sunlight seemed to rest upon its leaf. The drop shone as though a delicate argument from Tattvachintamani were being written upon the earth.

Gangesha's voice was heard one last time: “Thinking about truth without compassion is darkness. Justice without a body is a corpse. Evidence becomes complete only when life itself cannot deny it.” After those words, white dust, not black earth, emerged from a crack in the stump.

At the chapter's end, Batuknath Hariharan was gathering the documents of his People's Memory Trust. He understood that if this lesson spread, the rights of memory would become tied to questions of caste. Then it would be difficult to sit in the trust's chair and control what people remembered. That very night he wrote a secret note: “The discussion of Gangesha must be kept within limits.

But by morning the note had turned not yellow, but black. Between its letters, a word had grown all by itself: 'Touch.'

A Little Folk Song

Open the cage, O open the cage of caste;
Join hand to hand and let the free sky spread at last.
When hands reach out together, the cage of caste falls away;
The warmth of human touch makes withered hearts bloom again.

CHAPTER 122

Gangesha's Liberation

Freedom comes not from books alone, but from restoring the right to ask questions.

Society puts a crown upon a thinker's head and presses the troubles of his life beneath that crown. The book survives; the human being disappears. No one calls this murder, yet a vein has been severed all the same.

If a guard sits at the door of evidence, truth can be killed before it enters. So the real question is not simply whether evidence exists. It is who controls the language in which evidence may be given.

Ananya opened the ledger beside the stump. On the previous page stood the words 'The Cage of Caste'. Beneath them was an empty space. “Where is the key to this cage?” she asked.

Nobody answered.

Gop Kumar immediately reached for the papers, but Satyavrat stopped him. “First listen,” he said. “Evidence here does not mean bundles of documents alone. It also includes the memories of ordinary people, their questions, and the fears they have had to hide.” Gangesha's question had become not an examination of ancient philosophy, but a test of society. Sometimes society calls a thing impossible simply to silence it and hide its own falsehood.

Ananya drew three circles in the earth: knowledge gained by seeing, knowledge inferred from signs, and testimony given in words. Then she drew a fourth circle: 'Lives Kept Hidden'. She

said, “If society accepts only the evidence that keeps its cage standing, justice will remain incomplete.” At the children's fourth circle, the laughter of the Old Ghost could be heard. In their hands, Gangesha's New Logic was taking on a new form.
The story of Gangesha's marriage struck the court at Channa's stump like an explosion. Batuknath Hariharan, already wounded by his own child's questions in the chapter of the cage of caste, listened from a distance. He thought he might save himself by dismissing the story as merely a dispute among scholars.
News of that day's discussion reached Lau Kin-hung's faraway network. His adviser wrote, 'The caste question poses a risk to the memory project.' An agency linked to Broom's donation deed said, 'Put this section among the folktales, not in the official written records.' Chandrapal Batra thought that putting it in his mobile app would stir up controversy and bring more users. But the children stood guard: Gangesha was not an advertisement. He was a question.
During the chapter's last watch, a voice rose from within the stump. It was not the Old Ghost's, nor Ba's, nor Satyavrat's. It was deep and fine, as sharp as the edge of an argument: “Whoever is frightened of a question is unfit to dispense justice.” The voice seemed to ring not in their ears but in the roots of their teeth—a tingling that remained inside their heads long after they had heard it. The children understood that Gangesha's arrival meant not simply remembering him, but facing a test.
Ananya opened the next page and wrote at the top, 'Nineteenth Watch: The Crack in Evidence'. A question remained: if evidence itself was imprisoned in the hands of caste, power, money, and honour, how could those who had been kept down protect their truth? The answer, on the following night, would rise not from within Channa's stump, but from the courtyard of a house that the village had called the lowest of all.

A Little Folk Song

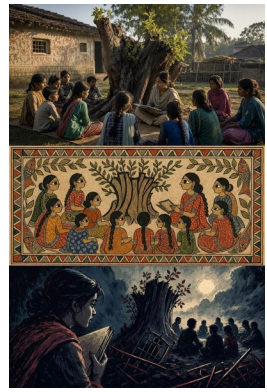
Light the lamp, O light the lamp of questions;
From one answer, look for the path to another.

Gangesha's question is a lamp no one can put out;
Each answer opens yet another road to follow.

CHAPTER 123

A Leaf from Tattvachintamani

A leaf from the book of reasoning called Tattvachintamani is stronger than paper—for arguments, not fear, are written upon it.



There are four doors to evidence: knowledge gained by seeing, knowledge inferred from signs, words, and what cannot be seen. Everyone talks about the first three. No one talks about the fourth, because it asks: where did whatever is missing go, and who benefited from its disappearance?

A book that does not teach us to see people is worth neither twelve thousand books nor even half a leaf. A book's true weight is not the weight of its pages. It is the endless reach of its questions.

After Gangesha's liberation, an unusual peace settled around the stump in Channa Grove. This was not the silence that spreads through a house after a cloth has been laid over a dead person's face. It was the quiet of a question that had found not its answer, but the next question it must ask.

Aruni took a leaf from a dry crack in the stump. It was not one of Channa's old leaves, but a leaf of the new shoot. Fine lines ran across it, as though an invisible scribe had written upon it with a fingernail.

Then the first lesson from the book of reasoning called Tattvachintamani began. The children drew four circles in the earth: knowledge gained by seeing, knowledge inferred from signs, words, and what cannot be seen. Devika laughed. “Such a difficult lesson, turned into a game?” Ananya replied, “If difficult ideas cannot enter a game, justice will be locked in the courtroom all over again.”

The first circle was 'Knowledge Gained by Seeing'. One by one, the children named the stump, stones, names, floodwater, severed roots, Chandrapal's trembling, Batuknath's tears, and the crocodile Lau Kin-hung had seen through glass. All these, they said, were things seen with their own eyes. But then a child stood up and asked, “Is caste something we know by seeing?” Everyone fell silent.

At once, a faint trembling rose from inside the stump. It was as though the bones of some person whose name had never been spoken were shaking. The children bowed their heads together. The scholars quietly gathered up their papers. The children went on reading the shadow of the leaf. And far away, from within the old roots of the cut Channa tree, there rose a deep voice. It was not Gangesha's, not a child's, not the Old Ghost's. After those words, twelve thousand tiny shadows seemed to spread over the earth.

A Little Folk Song

Write, sister, write a name upon the leaf;
Complete the book that has been left half-written.
The page lies empty, sister—write a name there;
Adorn the erased lives of women with flowers made of letters.

CHAPTER 124

The Fire of Evidence

The fire of evidence gives more light than heat; whatever is true emerges brighter from it.

Society says, 'We consider you great,' yet cuts away the very things that make a person human. A garland remains a garland only so long as it does not tighten around someone's neck.

There is a difference between killing a body and killing a memory. In the first, blood flows and people see it. In the second, a single line is cut away, and nobody notices.

Satyavrat Mehta came again that day. He had promised to sit at a distance, but the children asked him to sit among them. “You have listened to the law,” Ananya said. “Now listen to the evidence.” Satyavrat hesitated.

Then Gangesha's story arose again: the account of his birth five years after his father's death, the remembered story of his marriage to a woman from the leatherworking community, his immense work on Tattvachintamani, and the birth of New Logic. Eera said, “Of all this, society kept the book and cut away the life. It kept the ideas and erased the marriage.

Ba interrupted. “When someone's life is hidden away and a garland is woven from that person's name, even the flowers

become a noose." A faint clearing of the Old Ghost's throat came from within the stump. He liked this kind of justice, in which an elderly woman could break the pride of those who edited ancient books.

Eera said, "Gangesha gave us New Logic. But we need a new way of remembering too. When caste binds the evidence, justice goes blind.

A boy asked, "What was the name of the woman from the leatherworking community?" Everyone fell silent. The weight of their ignorance descended upon them at once. Society had been disturbed by the memory of her marriage, yet it had lost even her name.

That night the children wrote in their ledger, 'Gangesha will be free not through his books alone, but through acceptance of his whole life.' Ananya paused after writing it. Then, on the next page, she added a heading: 'The Leatherworker Woman's Name'.

At the sight of that heading, the green shoot upon the stump began to tremble. The story was turning away from Gangesha's reasoning and towards the search for the woman whose name had been hidden—and without whom the fire of justice would remain incomplete.

A Little Folk Song

Spin the little festival lamp, sister, let the lamp of evidence shine;
Through its many openings, let its fire burn away confusion.
Fire shines through the lamp's small openings and burns the web of lies;
The page of truth emerges not like ash, but like gold made bright.

CHAPTER 125

Rice Seedlings of Judgment

When a judgment is planted like rice, even its ripened ears bow down to bear witness.

A court writes its judgments. The earth grows them. A written judgment can remain shut inside a page, but a judgment that grows reaches the dinner plate. Until it reaches that plate, it is only language.

Ash does not belong to evidence alone. Mixed into it are the ashes of all those who were crushed down, called liars, cast out of their family lines, or removed from memory in the name of honour.

The fire of evidence had glowed around the stump all night, giving more light than heat. By morning, its ashes had grown cold. This time the children did not rush over to stir through them.

The children went towards the fields. The path from the stump to the fields had once lain beneath the grove's shade. Without shade, sunlight can be harsh, but today that harsh brightness showed the path clearly.

Then something shimmered in the water among the young rice plants. No one could tell whether it was Panidubbi's body or

merely a trick of the light. But an elderly woman from the leatherworking community said, "Ask the water again about all those we carried away with us." So the children bent over the wet field boundary and began to read the names.

At those words, the wind changed. The woman from the leatherworking community was no longer merely an incident in the story. She was an equal partner in its evidence. If Gangesha's justice had been true in life, it could not be separated from the body, humiliation, courage, and exclusion of the woman who had stood beside him.

That day the children took turns at the plough, which usually divided its work according to the caste of the owner and the caste of the labourer. The elderly leatherworker woman guided the first furrow; Aruni took the second, Meera the third, Satyavrat the fourth, and Ananya the fifth. Each time the ploughshare sank into the soil, its sound was not like something being cut, but like something breaking open. Steam rose from the parted earth, carrying the smell of winter that seemed to have been shut inside it for years.

At night the sky descended into the water in the fields. The stars glittered like seeds. The children wanted to write the ending of the chapter in their ledger, but Ananya stopped them.

All that night, the stump of Channa Grove looked from afar not like a patch of darkness, but like a grey lamp. Ash, seeds, and water slept together in the field. No words had been spoken before everyone, and there was no written judgment.

A Little Folk Song

Plant the rice, O planters, plant the rice of justice;
Feet in the mud, hope in the sky—keep hold of both.
Sink your feet into the mud and plant the rice of justice;
One row for courage, another for love—plant them side by side.

CHAPTER 126

Justice for Food

Justice for food is decided not at the dinner plate, but at the field boundary.

Before an empty stomach, every scripture is incomplete, every book of shared rules is incomplete, and every piece of evidence is incomplete. Justice that has not become a meal of rice is only a sentence.

There is a difference between charity and a rightful share. Charity is rice thrown down from above—the giver remains above the receiver. A share is rice eaten while sitting together—both people sit in the same row.

Ba arrived at the field early in the morning and sat down. She lifted a handful of earth, smelled it, and said, "Justice that does not become rice is only a sentence. Justice that does not reach a hungry mouth is like the shade of a grove without roots." Aruni drew a long breath.

That day the Coconut Leaf School held its lesson in the field. From the circle of stones bearing names, the children came to the young rice plants. Ananya opened her ledger, but before writing anything she placed a single grain in her palm.

This list of names was not a register of gifts and charity. Ananya said plainly, “Someone who is hungry needs a share, not pity.” Ba added, “Charity is rice thrown down from above. A rightful share is rice eaten together.” At these words, even the air over the field seemed to become still.

An offer of foreign seeds arrived from Lau Kin-hung's people. They said the seeds would withstand floods and droughts, yield more grain, and fetch a good price in the market. Aruni asked, “What memory do these seeds carry?” The consultant bringing the offer smiled. “Seeds are science, not memory.” Eera replied, “If something has no memory, who owns it?” At that moment, a faint metallic smell rose from the packet of foreign seeds lying on the ground.

By nightfall, the first grains had been gathered in the communal granary. Ujjwal's mother gave a handful of rice. A worker's son gave two handfuls.

At midnight a sound rose from the empty plate. At first everyone thought a grain had fallen into it. Then the sound grew clearer—neither a word, nor a cry, nor the ringing of metal.

Ananya opened the next page and wrote a heading: 'The Name of Hunger'. As she opened it, a wind sprang up. All the ripening ears of rice bowed together.

A Little Folk Song

Cut the ears, O cut the ears of dawn;
Place the first handful in a hungry person's bowl.
The sickle flashed at daybreak, and the ears of rice bent low;
The first handful reached a home, and its cooking fire began to glow.

CHAPTER 127

The Name of Hunger

An empty plate weighs more than a full granary—inside it, hunger calls out its name.

Writing the name of someone dead is hard. Writing the name of someone living with hunger is harder still. The dead do not object.

There is no shame in saying that one is hungry. Yet society teaches hungry people first to hide their hunger, then their names, and at last the share that belongs to them.

Satyavrat Mehta sat facing the plate. His hand had written so many sworn statements, objections, reports, and legal arguments. But when it was time to write the first name in the register of hunger, his fingers trembled as though he held a needle instead of a pen.

After the rule had been made, the first woman stepped forward. Her name appeared on no list of widows. She had visited no relief camp and had given no speech from a stage. She merely said, “There has been no smell of cooking rice in my house for three days.

A small boy gave the third name. “I used to get rice for lunch at school,” he said, “but on holidays an empty playground seemed

to echo inside my stomach." No one asked what his family earned, what work his father did, or whether his name appeared on a list. Everyone remembered Gangesha's questions: the sound of an empty stomach was knowledge gained through direct experience.

At that name, the green point on the stump trembled slightly. It was as though an old thorn of caste had pricked Channa Grove once again. The memory of Gangesha Upadhyaya came down upon the field wind.

By evening the first communal cooking fire had been lit. Its smoke did not rise straight into the sky. It drifted a little way above the earth and spread across the courtyard, carrying the scent of burning wood and the damp smell of clay from hearths that had stayed cold for many days and were being lit again at last. The hearth was set away from the ring of stones bearing names, so that memory might become something useful, not merely something worshipped.

That night the stump's shadow fell across the plates, but it did not look dark. It was cool, like sunlight turned inside out. The register of hunger was not yet complete, the granary was not yet permanent, and the rules were still newly born.

As midnight approached, a grain in the empty plate began to move gently. No one had touched it. The grain turned and came to rest pointing north, towards the dry well whose water had been considered bitter for years.

A Little Folk Song

Bring a handful, O bring just one handful each;
Together fill the empty plate that stands between you.
Set an empty plate in the middle; let each person bring a handful;
Jat brings the rice, Jatin brings the salt—together they share a meal.

CHAPTER 128

The Name of Thirst

Thirst, too, must have a name—without one, thirst is merely a number.

Hunger grips the stomach; thirst grips the throat. Hunger makes a noise, while thirst stays silent—and because of that silence, people are made to endure it longer.

Society has learned to show pity to the hungry. But when it comes to water, society claims rights instead of offering pity: whose well, whose bathing steps, whose water pot, whose hand, whose caste?

Gangesha's question returned once again. Ananya opened her ledger and wrote, 'Evidence: Thirst'. Eera asked, “What is the evidence of thirst?” A little boy raised his empty water vessel. It was something they could see with their own eyes.

Meera remained silent for a long while over this story. Then she said, “There can be no right to water without the right to one's own body. When people are forbidden to touch someone, it becomes easy to forbid that person to drink.” Saumya added, “When someone is forbidden to drink, that person's voice dries up too.” Devika said very softly, “Fraud through phone screens came later.

The discussion of Gangesha's New Logic began again. Gop Kumar said, “If what we see with our own eyes is a thirsty person, if what we infer from the signs is that caste caused the humiliation, and if the words of an elderly woman are testimony, then what should the judgment be?” A child answered, “Judgment: water belongs to everyone.” Another added, “And the memory of those who stopped people from drinking must be recorded, names and all.” Ba said, “Punishment does not mean writing only the offender's name. Opening the well is a punishment too.”

After ten bucketfuls, the water grew a little clearer. After twenty, a trembling could be heard from the bottom. After thirty, a breath of cold air rose from within the well.

That night the first shared lesson about water was held on the rim of the well. There were no chants and no order decided by caste. Each person would take a palmful of water from the bucket, speak their name, and say, “I share this thirst.” Meera poured her handful onto the earth and said, “For those who were not allowed to drink.” Devika said, “For those who were cheated through the excuse of thirst.” Eera said, “For those who were sold the dream of changing planets so that water could be sold to them.” Satyavrat said, “For those whom the law listened to too late.”

The darkness gathering in the sky was becoming not a cloud of rain, but a cloud of questions.

A Little Folk Song

Come down, O cloud, and fill the water pot;
Quench the dry throat and the thirsty field alike.
The monsoon clouds gather; a pot reaches towards the sky;
Drop by drop, hope fills it, and the parched throat drinks.

CHAPTER 129

The Oath of Salt

The oath of salt is the oldest oath—from a mother's milk to a worker's sweat, it carries the same taste.

The oath of salt is the oldest oath—from a mother's milk to a worker's sweat, it carries the same taste. Once it touches the tongue, no book is needed to prove it.

Mithila has no sea, and yet salt lives in every body—in a mother's milk, a worker's sweat, a woman's tears, and the last moisture of a body after death. It is one and the same taste.

Eera laughed and asked, “An oath of salt? People swear on the Gita, on water, on soil, on fire.” Ananya replied, “Why not swear upon the sweat without which none of those words could stand?” There was a child's wonder in the question, but also the searching edge of Gangesha's reasoning. If evidence must be something seen with one's own eyes, then sweat is such evidence.

Meera did not arrange the bowls of salt in any order. She said, “We shall not ask the caste of salt. Salt tastes the same in the hand of a woman of the leatherworking community, on a Brahmin's plate, in a worker's sweat, in a widow's tears, on a child's lips after play, and in the last moisture of a dead body.

Why should we place it in separate rows?" Two men from Batuknath Hariharan's group stood at a distance and watched.

The merchant smiled, but the smile did not last. For a secret message from Raghav had followed him: "Turn emotional material into a product, turn the story into flavour, turn memory into something to be consumed." Devika intercepted the message. She did not read it aloud.

A faint grinding sound rose from inside Channa's stump, as though its roots were gnashing their teeth. The children did not tremble.

The Old Ghost watched from behind the stump. That night, for the first time, he spoke a complete sentence: "Whoever has understood the taste of salt will be slow to leave Earth."

Hearing this, Panidubbi made a gentle circle in the water. Far away beyond the floodwater, the crocodiles lay still.

Before dawn, Ananya closed her ledger. Beneath the heading, a final line had been written: 'Salt does not demand an oath. Salt becomes the taste of an oath.' As soon as those words were set down, a drop of dew gathered on the stump's green shoot. When it dried, a faint white line remained along the edge of the leaf—as if Earth herself had set down a pinch of salt.

But this watch was not the end. Once the oath of salt had reached the people's tongues, the next attack would be upon the scent of memory. For after taste has been preserved, the marketplace wants to turn fragrance into a product.

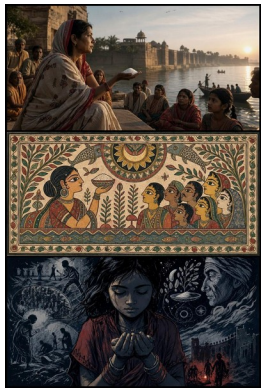
A Little Folk Song

Swear the oath, O swear upon a pinch of salt;
Never betray the one with whom you shared your food.
Take a pinch of salt and swear to tell the truth;
Honour what brings flavour to the food upon your plate.

CHAPTER 130

The Justice of Taste

When you sense that taste is changing, know that justice has reached the tongue.



The body is not made of hunger and thirst alone. It also remembers which flavours it was given, which were taken away, and which were used to make it believe a lie.

A custom that asks hunger for its caste is no worthy custom at all; it is an insult to the body. Once people sit down to a meal, to ask whose hands prepared it is no longer a question about food. It becomes a question about justice.

That day, the people decided to prepare a community meal in the courtyard of the Coconut Leaf School. There would be no deed of donation, no ceremony, no stage. Each household was asked to bring something: flattened rice from one, curd from another, greens, cooked rice, garlic, salt, or even a single handful of uncooked rice.

Devika sat beside the stove, sorting leafy greens. Each time she snapped a tender stem, its faint little crack seemed to travel all the way into her trembling hands. Meera was washing rice with the other women.

Before the first mouthful, Ba said, "Names." Everyone fell silent. Then the names were spoken, one by one: a labourer; a young man caught in fraud run by machines; a person held back by an unpaid hospital bill; a woman lost to jal samadhi; love rejected because of caste; a woman of the leatherworkers' community; Gangesha; someone whose name was unknown. After every name, everyone took a mouthful.

Meera noticed that food had a different taste for the women. Many said, "I serve everyone else first. I eat whatever is left at the end." Devika wrote in the ledger, "Justice in taste is incomplete without justice in serving." A rule was made that day: whoever cooked would taste the food first, and whoever served would also sit down in the row to eat.

The memory of Gangesha entered that meal in a strange way. Fine lines shone on grains of rice, like the lines upon a leaf of the Tattvachintamani, the great book of reasoning. One child asked, "Is knowledge gained through the eyes a kind of taste?" Another replied, "Yes, but the tongue alone is not proof of taste.

At that moment a thin wisp of smoke rose from the cut stump of Channa Grove. There was no fire and no ash, but there was a scent: wet leaves, old salt, the sweat of labour, river mud, and the aroma of a cooking fire arriving from somewhere far away. It would not stay in any one place.

The justice of taste had been fulfilled here. Yet the scent left after the meal seemed to say that memory was beginning a journey: from mouth to nose, from plate to home, and from home into history.

A Little Folk Song

Come home, O flavour, the taste of home has come again;
The scent of Mother's rice makes the courtyard smile again.
The taste of rice made by Mother's hands has found its way back home;
Smoke, salt and mustard oil make the courtyard smile again.

CHAPTER 131

The Shared Plate

The salt in a shared plate tastes the same on every tongue.

It is easy to listen to separate stories of hunger and thirst. It is much harder to sit together and eat from the same plate. However often people claim that the cage of caste has been broken, its bars begin to gleam again when food is served.

In kabaddi, you touch someone and return. At a shared plate, you touch and remain. That is where the difference between a game and life begins.

Preparations for the common meal began. Devika and Meera went from house to house. Some people gave flattened rice, others curd, jaggery, cooked rice, greens or vegetables. Some could give nothing but the fire from their earthen stove.

Yet as the preparations grew, fears began to show themselves. Some whispered, "Eat with everyone? Will the elders at home allow it?" Others argued, "Memory is all very well, and justice is all very well, but customs about food are a different matter." At those words, "a different matter", Gangesha's question returned once more.

That day a leaf bearing the name of Gangesha Upadhyaya was placed on the edge of the stump. On it was written "Evidence". Beside it lay another leaf: "Understanding by means of a sign".

The children did not start playing kabaddi in the middle of the meal. They were not holding their breath; they were slowly joining their breaths together. One child whispered, "In kabaddi, you have to touch and return.

By evening, the pages of the ledger were full. At the top, Ananya wrote, "Twenty-seventh Watch: The Shared Plate." Beneath it she added, "Where caste stops a plate from being shared, justice eats an unfinished meal." Meera read the words and said, "That will be the first sentence of our next school lesson." Devika added, "And the first document of our next struggle."

When everyone had gone home that night, a faint smell of curd, the green trace of leafy vegetables, the sweetness of jaggery and the oath of salt remained around the stump. The stars were clear. Far away, the nameless planet of their dreams shone like a cold point of light from which the eye almost turned away, as if the planet itself were amazed that people on Earth had to struggle so hard merely to eat together.

For the first time that night, something became unmistakably clear in Garh Narikel: freedom meant not only hearing a person's name, but being able to share the same taste upon the same earth.

A Little Folk Song

Play, dear sister, play the game of Sama-Chakeva;
Let the moon of one shared plate circle every courtyard.
The moon descends into one plate and looks upon us all alike;
Sama says, "Share food, affection and kindness equally."

CHAPTER 132

The Republic of the Kitchen

Where the plate is shared, fear is cut in half.

Where the plate is shared, fear is cut in half. Yet a shared plate does not, by itself, make a shared kitchen. As long as caste remains locked into the kitchen, eating together will be no more than a festival.

The fire within a household can be no less cruel than the court outside it. In many homes, food prepared by the very hands that plough the fields is called impure. A woman may spend the whole day feeding everyone, only to have her own hunger considered last.

If justice has reached the plate, however, its next destination must be the kitchen. Meera said this first. "As long as caste remains in the kitchen," she declared, "the sharing of plates will be only a festival." At those words, the leafless shadow of Channa's stump seemed to tremble.

Saumya said, "If memory does not eat, it cannot live." Devika added, "If memory is offered only in the prayer room and never enters the kitchen, the body of society will tell lies again." Ba laughed. "Daughters, the true test of justice does not come at the feast. It comes when the dirty dishes have to be washed."

The children stopped in their tracks. Their common rulebook of names had no article about washing dishes.

As those words hung in the air, Gangesha's name rose of its own accord. The question of caste had now reached the cooking fire. Ananya asked, "If Gangesha is concerned with the nature of things, then what is the nature of food?

Meera made a rule: "No one's work shall be called low. Anyone who says so must study the watch over their own name all over again." Devika said, "The right over one's body does not mean only protection from violence. It also means respect for labour." Saumya added, "No device for taking pictures in the kitchen.

By noon, the republic of the kitchen had come into being: five stoves, seven cooking pots, water from three caste communities, grain from four settlements, salt from two widows, firewood from a boy of the Musahar community, greens from a young woman of the leatherworkers' community, ghee from an elderly Brahmin, rice from a labourer, oil brought by Meera, lentils from Devika, dried fruit sent from abroad by Eera, and pickle made by Ba's hands. Together, they made a fragrance to which no family name could be attached.

That night the spent ash of the stoves cast a grey glow upon the names carved in stone. The Old Ghost came out from behind the stump and picked up a dry leaf. Nothing remained upon it but a fine line of salt.

Ananya opened the next page. Its heading was still blank. Yet everyone understood that the republic of the kitchen was not simply a chapter about filling stomachs. It was the beginning of remaking the very body of society.

A Little Folk Song

Prepare the hearth, O prepare the republic's hearth;
Teach everyone that work and honour must be equal.
Three stoves, one fire, and smoke of the selfsame colour;
In the kitchen's republic, everyone stands together.

CHAPTER 133

The Invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival

An invitation is answered not by drums, but by preparation.

A summary can be like a crocodile: it chews up the body and leaves only the bones. A play needs the body, not merely the skeleton. So the task was not to shrink one hundred and thirty-two chapters, but to give them breath.

In this story the hero is not the one who delivers the longest speeches, nor is the villain simply the one who laughs in the darkness. The true character is breath. When someone's breath was broken, that person's name was sought.

Ananya sat near the stump, holding the letter. "There will be a play," she said, "but only those who know how to hold their breath will act in it." The grown-ups did not understand. The children did.

Aruni asked, "How can we bring one hundred and thirty-two chapters onto a stage?" Ba replied, "Call them acts, not chapters. What has passed is a chapter in a book. Upon a stage, those chapters will become acts." And so they began giving new names, one by one, to the old one hundred and thirty-two chapters.

Devika spread sheets of paper before her. Meera continued writing "The Right to Be Seen" on a separate page. Satyavrat Mehta sat at a distance, listening.

With that answer the order of the play was settled. This chapter would be the chapter of invitation and decision. The next part would be the play script, in which the old acts would be given bodies of words.

Yet the story would need to be guarded even more carefully as it took the form of a play. Meera said, "No scene shall show a person's suffering without that person's consent." Devika added, "Give the first seat to the one whose name has not been found." Eera wrote, "Let foreign audiences listen first and claim understanding afterwards." Gop Kumar said, "Put no copied records on stage, only testimony that the people have agreed to share."

Then a faint voice rose from the water's edge: "Do not put darkness upon the stage. Put water there." Everyone understood that the stage must be washed before the play began. Ananya wrote the opening line: "There is water in the middle of the stage. Whoever enters must first speak the name of the reflection they see."

That line did not close the chapter. It opened the door to the play script. In the next part, the old one hundred and thirty-two acts would be written for the stage; the performance would come after that; and then Garh Narikel would carry on with its story, for the game of kabaddi never truly ends.

A Little Folk Song

Beat the drum, O beat the stage's first drum;
Let the stories long held down rise on dancing feet.
The first drumbeat calls, "Come, speak your name!"
The stage is no distant palace; it belongs among the people.

CHAPTER 134

The Kabaddi Players' Play Script

Before learning a script, a kabaddi player learns to count each breath.

A story is not something to be played like a game. A story must be given breath. Whoever shortens it merely to carry it onstage shows not the story, but its bones.

Those who have died must not be made into "ghosts" simply to frighten people. They must be called "present". And those who are deceitful must not be given the bright outer colours of villains; the emptiness within them must be shown instead.

"We cannot perform the whole story," Ananya said. "It is far too large." Ujjwal's spirit, which looked a little clearer in the evening smoke that day, laughed and said, "A story is not played. It is given breath." Eera opened a blank sheet beside her letter.

That night they decided that the play would be called "The Watch". Its subtitle would be "The Kabaddi Players' Play Script". No single person would be the hero of this play. Breath itself would be its hero.

The first page of the script held the cast of characters: Breath, the Stump, Water, the Crocodile, the Children, the Old Ghost,

Channa Grove's Laughter, Satyavrat's Silence, Gangesha's Question, Chandrapal's Hundred Divided Parts, Raghav's Vanished Message, Lau Kin-hung's Nameless Face, Batuknath's Leaf-Lawyer, Meera, Devika, Eera, Ananya, Ujjwal's Spirit, the Feet of Labourers, the Women's Night, the Smoke of the Kitchen, and Kabaddi. No caste was written beside any character.

The sixth scene would be "The Nameless Planet of Dreams". The stage would be drenched not in darkness, but in overwhelming light. Everything would become a number: House One, Body Two, Labour Three, Air for Breathing Four. Lau Kin-hung's nameless face would say, "There is no caste here, no village, no river, no sorrow." Ananya would answer, "Without names, there is no life." Then the children would draw the kabaddi line across the sky.

The last line of the play caused the longest debate. One child wanted, "The story is over." Another proposed, "Present." A third said, "Kabaddi." Ba listened to them all. At last she said, "As long as a breath remains, a story remains." Everyone accepted those words.

Eera gathered the pages and placed them in a cloth bag. As the papers were put together, their rustling sounded astonishingly loud in the stillness of the field, as though someone were sitting very near and speaking very softly. Ananya wrote in her ledger, "Today the story became a play script.

The morning of the next act of the Videha Theatre Festival was still far away, but the stage had already been built in the field at Garh Narikel—from earth, water, salt, stone, names, a new shoot, and breath. What they called a script was really the shared promise of living people. The question was no longer whether the play would succeed.

A Little Folk Song

Count your breaths, O count them, but do not count out life;
Weave respect for every heartbeat into every rule.
One breath for a name and two for bearing witness;
A third for standing together, a fourth for the good of all.

CHAPTER 135

The Videha Theatre Festival Performance

When memory climbs upon the stage, the calendar is defeated.

When memory climbs upon the stage, the calendar is defeated. A date may be swallowed by paper, but once a name has entered the voice, no counting of years can erase it.

Where the story of names is performed, there can be no high and low between stage and audience. The moment a platform is raised above others, the watchers and those who have suffered are separated—and the story becomes a spectacle.

In the second scene, the crocodile appeared. No mask had been made for it. A player slid across the earth on his belly, but it was his shadow, not his body, that became the crocodile.

In the fifth scene came Batuknath Hariharan. The quickest child among the players acted his role. He entered the field carrying a thick book, saying, "Trust, rules, committee, structure, legality." With every word his feet sank deeper into the soil.

In the eighth scene, Lau Kin-hung and Broom entered. They wore not English suits but dazzling white cloth as they walked

among the players—nameless, spotless, and lifeless. "The Earth is unsafe," they declared.

In the tenth scene came the silence of Satyavrat Mehta. Nobody acted his part. An empty chair was placed in the centre of the field, with a ledger before it.

At the end of the night, a gentle light fell upon the new shoot growing from Channa's stump. Its leaf was tiny, but its shadow reached across the round field. Someone said, "The grove has watched the play." Ba replied, "Not the grove—the roots have watched.

When everyone had gone, the field was empty, yet the kabaddi line had not vanished. Morning dew rested on it like pearls. In each drop there seemed to be a little stage.

And in this way the play finished its performance and returned to the novel—not exhausted, but filled with greater breath; not closed, but opened wider.

A Little Folk Song

Sing, O storyteller, sing the song of remembered lives;
To the beat of the drum, tell the stories still unfinished.
The drum sounded, the lamps were lit, and memory stepped onstage;
The unfinished story of each was heard with honour.

CHAPTER 136

The Silence After the Applause

The worth of true acting lies not in applause, but in the silence afterwards.

When people applaud the suffering of others, those who listen must become careful all over again. Suffering does not speak to win praise. It speaks to demand justice.

A story born of jal samadhi belongs to its makers as a river does. Many villages may stand along a river's banks, but that does not divide the river. It continues to flow.

Satyavrat Mehta sat in the back row. A thin boy wearing spectacles had played him onstage. The boy had very little dialogue.

"Did I hear it wrongly?" the boy asked. Satyavrat said, "No. But when people applaud the suffering of others, those who listen must become careful once again. Pain speaks not for praise, but for justice." The boy wrote that sentence in his notebook.

Meanwhile, Chandrapal Batra stood outside the hall. He had not dared to enter. He kept looking at his own face reflected in the glass of the ticket window.

Batuknath Hariharan had not come to watch the performance, but he had sent a representative. The man went on taking

notes: how to acquire the rights to the play, how to publish its script, how to control future productions in the name of a trust. But when members of the audience climbed onto the stage and began adding their own names, the representative's notebook could no longer contain what was happening.

Eera sat among the playwrights. One said, "The script should be printed." Another said, "Each performance should leave an open space where local names can be added." A third, a well-known theatre artist from the city, objected, "Then the authorship will be scattered." Eera did not laugh. In a quiet voice she said, "The authorship of a story born of jal samadhi will be like that of a river.

By dawn, a new line appeared in the dust of the stage: "Where the play ends, the village begins." Nobody had seen anyone write it. The letters were so faint that a person had to bend down and peer sideways to read them in full. On standing upright, they seemed to become dust again.

So the Videha Theatre Festival performance did not end with the applause. It stepped off the stage and walked towards the lanes of the village, the riverbank, the kitchen fires, the school floors and the courthouse veranda. The old one hundred and thirty-two acts were no longer merely a story. They had become seeds.

A Little Folk Song

Set to work, O set to work when the clapping ends;
Carry the courage of the stage to schools and fields.
Let your hands not tire with clapping; put them to work;
Let the spirit of the stage run through roads, schools and homes.

CHAPTER 137

The Audience Bears Witness

When the audience becomes a witness, the play continues even after the curtain falls.

When the audience becomes a witness, the play continues even after the curtain falls. A curtain can cover only the stage. It cannot cover the story that has entered the hearts of those who watched.

In a role, a person becomes somebody else. In a name, a person cannot run away from themselves. So the real question is not who played which part upon the stage. It is who was sitting in the chairs.

Ananya sat in a corner of the stage. A ledger lay before her, but she did not open it that day. Eera asked, “Shall we write down the names?” Ananya replied, “Let us first see whether the people in the audience wish to write them themselves.” It sounded a simple thing, but it marked a great change in the way they guarded memory.

One by one, the spectators stood up. One admitted having stopped a marriage because of caste. Another said that even after hearing Gangesha’s story, he had refused to let a girl from the leatherworkers’ community sit on the veranda of his house.

Batuknath Hariharan was also in the hall. No invitation had been sent to him, yet he had come to see how the play portrayed him. At first he sat at the back of the audience, wearing the polished smile of a lawyer.

Eera noticed something amid these testimonies: in the words of the audience, wrongdoing and pain could not always be separated. Sometimes, within a person confessing a wrong, the voice of a child who had once been hurt began to speak.

But the decision held dangers too. Chandrapal's people pricked up their ears. The information gathered from the audience's testimonies could be sold.

Towards dawn, as the audience came out, they found a fresh notice fixed to the festival gate. It was not an official notice. The children had written it: "In the next act, the audience's testimony will be added to the play script. No one's spoken name shall be performed without that person's consent.

For the first time, nobody applauded that little notice. They looked instead at their own hands. Hands could clap, but they could also sign documents, commit wrongs and bear witness. And in that moment the chapter opened a door to the next part of the tale, in which the testimonies of spectators would enter the written play, and the story would rise from the stage into a work written by the people.

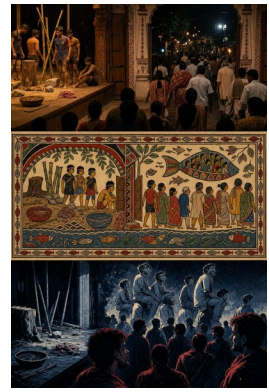
A Little Folk Song

Become a witness, O become a witness, not merely a spectator;
Count your debt with seeing eyes and applauding hands.
The eyes that watched will now put a name on the page;
The hands that clapped will now stand beside the others.

CHAPTER 138

The Procession Beyond the Stage

No hall could ever call back the procession once it had walked off the stage.



If a court turns into a play, justice dies. If a play becomes a court, memory begins to speak. The difference is this: in the first, truth is dismissed as acting; in the second, acting becomes the servant of truth.

A crowd can be controlled, but testimony cannot. A crowd remains in front of the stage. Testimony steps beyond it and takes up residence in people's homes.

The silence after the applause became the audience's testimony, and after that the doors of the hall were too small. The bamboo, soil, stones, imitation stump, bowl of water and sweat of the kabaddi players remained upon the stage, but the story did not. Just as a diving bird rises from beneath the water and leaves its reflection behind, the play left the hall and settled upon every spectator's shoulders.

The third testimony was given near the back door of the theatre, where the actors were changing their clothes. Those who had played crocodiles, ghosts, diving birds, witches, labourers, judges, middlemen and children stepped out of their roles and began speaking their real names. Strangest of all,

some of those real names were not so different from the roles they had played.

Ananya and the children sat below the steps with their ledger open. A separate page had been made for the audience's testimony. The second question was: "For whom are you present?"

Devika saw that some people wanted to cut the performance into short clips. She did not forbid it, but she wrote down a rule: "Do not sell a fragment of someone's suffering. Listen to the whole story." Chandrapal's old memorial phone application was trying to come alive again.

No winner was declared in this game. When the kabaddi players grew tired, Ananya lifted a little soil from the centre line and placed it between the pages of the ledger. The earth did not scatter as it fell; it stayed in a small rounded heap. When she closed the ledger, it left a thin mark upon both facing pages.

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 children overseas, children who had read Eera's letter and had begun to think of Garh Narikel not merely as an ancestral village, but as a responsibility.

Ananya read the letter and fell silent. The procession beyond the stage was now pointing towards a journey across the seas. The kabaddi line that had travelled from Channa Grove to the hall might now pass through pages, letters, distant voices—and perhaps reach the sky once more.

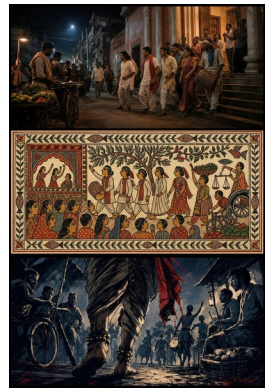
A Little Folk Song

Come, procession, O come, procession made of song;
Carry flowers of hope, not anger, in your hands.
The story stepped offstage onto the dust-covered road;
Drum, leaf and voice joined in a procession of the people.

CHAPTER 139

The Road Becomes a Stage

A story carried onto the road needs neither stage nor ticket—only ears willing to listen.



On a stage, light falls from above. On the road, everyone receives as much light as the day provides. In that equal light, nobody looks great and nobody looks small.

Those who read out names do not go out to inflame others. Yet if the voices speaking those names are silenced, they may become a fire. Those in power know this better than anyone.

The procession had left the hall of the Videha Theatre Festival, but its feet did not stop at the steps. The silence after the applause, the testimony of the spectators and the walk beyond the stage had joined into a voice that no curtain could ever gather back inside. A story once heard in the darkness of Channa Grove, written around its stump, and breathed upon a stage had now reached the road.

On the next day, a scene took place at the bus stand. The children handed out small leaves summarising the old one hundred and thirty-two watches. Each leaf carried the living breath of a chapter: jal samadhi, the crocodiles, the court, machine-run fraud, Gangesha's question, justice for food, the cage of caste and the republic of the kitchen.

That day Satyavrat Mehta stood at the far end of a veranda. People recognised him, but nobody offered the whole gathering an introduction. He saw how often justice lost its way inside the building of the law, and how, outside it, in the dust of a veranda, a child's question could bring justice back to life.

News reached Batuknath Hariharan that the play had left the hall and come out upon the road. He smiled in his old way and said, "A play on the road?

Chandrapal Batra saw a chance to make money from the new street performances. He thought he could add donations, advertisements, broadcasts and machine-issued tickets. But when his men arrived at the marketplace with a device for taking pictures, the women stopped them.

Raghav "Signal" Somani recorded the event in his new secret code as a "moving play". But the instant he sent the message, the expression broke into two parts: "moving" and "play". The first kept running, while the second stood still.

In a glass building in a distant country, Lau Kin-hung was reading a report. Someone had given him the English phrase "rural performative resistance", but as he read, the words slipped from his mind. All he could see were the stump of Channa Grove, the emptiness of the nameless planet in his dream, and the eyes of a crocodile.

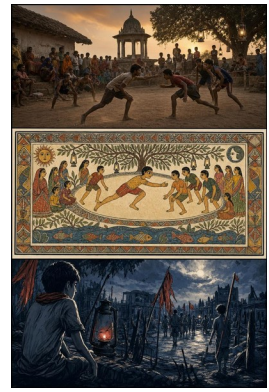
A Little Folk Song

Sing the story, O sing the ballad of Salhesh;
Make every road a stage where everyone may dance.
No ticket and no curtain needed: the road itself becomes the stage;
Ploughman, child and mother—every one of them can act.

CHAPTER 140

The Travelling Chaupal

When a game declares neither winner nor loser, know that it has become a watch kept over memory.



A road is no stage. No curtain is hung across it, no enclosure is built around it, and no tickets are sold. And yet the road is the oldest theatre of all.

Every game has a boundary line. You have to cross it and return before your breath runs out. But what kind of boundary is this?

The voice of Boodhba the ghost—"Not to be read, but played"—still seemed to hang above the edge of the stump when, the next day, footprints began to appear in the dust of the road. Meanwhile, the kabaddi players made a new rule: wherever a play was performed, a game must follow at the end.

The children named this theatre of the road the "Travelling Chaupal". It needed 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 that could not provide all three would remain merely a collection of buildings.

At dusk the procession returned to the stump. Everyone was tired, but theirs was the simple tiredness that follows work in

the fields. Ananya wrote in the ledger, "Today the story went out and learned from the road." Beneath her words a little boy, who had seen a play for the first time that day, wrote, "A play is not something that happens on a stage.

Ba laughed at that sentence. "Then it is life's turn now," she said. The children did not understand. Ba explained, "Until now, you have acted out the story.

Ananya laid the paper on the edge of the stump, in the very place where the yellow notice had once been left. A faint warmth rose from inside the stump. A corner of the paper lifted, as though it too were waiting for someone to read it.

From behind them came the voice of Boodhba the ghost: "Not to be read, but played."

At those words the night breeze stopped. The children looked at one another. Tomorrow they would not be performing a play on the road; they would be playing kabaddi with papers, trying to bring names back across the lines of the law before their breath could be stolen away.

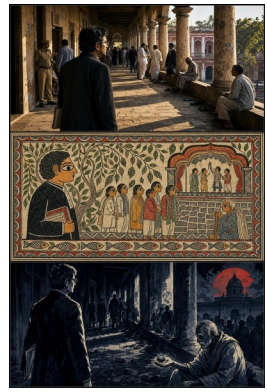
A Little Folk Song

Play, oh play—play the paper game fairly, come and play;
Write every name in full; do not fear the official seal today.
A line is drawn across the paper; a name must take its turn;
If the seal runs out to seize it, let truth touch the line and return.

CHAPTER 141

The Verdict of the Veranda

All day the veranda stones bear the weight of shoes; at night they deliver their verdict.



A veranda is not merely a place. It is a condition: the condition of being between inside and outside. It is made for those who cannot get in and cannot turn back.

A court date is not a fragment of time. It is a fragment of the body. A person who has received hearing dates for twenty-three years has had twenty-three years of life divided among those slips of paper.

Satyavrat Mehta stood in a corner of the veranda. In the performance he saw the shadow of his own old silence. There was a character in the play who listened but failed to write things down in time.

Ananya immediately opened her ledger. She did not first ask the clerk his name; she asked him to name his fear. The clerk remained silent for a long while, then said, "The fear of losing my job." The children wrote, "Fear of losing one's job is another form of silence." At this, the expressions of many people in the crowded veranda changed.

Just then a former pupil of Batuknath Hariharan, now a lawyer, removed his coat and laid it upon the stone. "We learned the language of law," he said, "but never learned the language in which to listen for justice." The moment the black coat touched the stone, it spread out not like a piece of cloth but like tired paper. Slips bearing court dates fell from its pockets.

Though the stump of Channa Grove was far from the courthouse that night, it seemed present in the veranda. Some said its shadow had stretched all the way there. Others said the stones of the veranda had begun to put down roots from within.

At last Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward. No one was asking him for a speech. He simply took an old page out of his pocket.

And indeed, the next morning, bundles of old papers in the court records room began to flutter by themselves. Dust rose, but it did not turn into wings. Instead, the dust began to form letters.

So this chapter did not end on the veranda. The performance that had come out of the theatre now moved towards the darkness of the paper bundles in the records room.

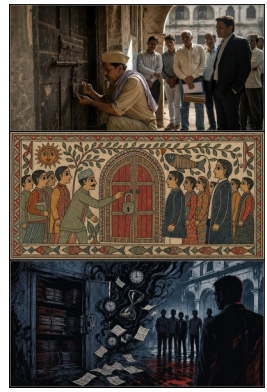
A Little Folk Song

Spread a mat, oh spread a mat across the veranda floor;
Make a people's pathway of the stones that have borne shoes before.
The veranda stones say, "Every footstep has left a word";
Brush away the dust; when people sit, the door of justice will be stirred.

CHAPTER 142

The Darkness of the Records Room

In the darkness of the records room, it is not bundles of paper that decay, but time held captive.



A cupboard is a little chamber of darkness where people's years are locked away. Outside it the sun rises and sets, harvests are gathered, children grow into young people, and the young become old. Inside, not a single day passes.

A lock can grow old. But why does it become so heavy? Bhikhari Lal says the lock itself is not old; it is the breath trapped inside that weighs upon it.

Satyavrat Mehta watched from a distance. He knew that the records room was the stomach of the court. A paper that entered it might be digested into a judgment or left to rot into forgetfulness. No one outside could see which would happen.

Behind the third cupboard they found a thin bundle of papers wedged into place. A small knot of red thread was tied into its cord. The children looked into one another's eyes.

Hearing this, Satyavrat Mehta came inside. His feet stepped into the dust, but he did not brush it off. "If the dust of the records never touches a judge's body," he said, "the judge will go on

believing himself clean." At that admission, the clerks' faces changed.

Meera offered the elderly woman a chair, but she stayed seated on the stone. "I have sat on stones for years. A chair no longer feels true to me." Her words rang through the records room. Chairs, seals, locks, cupboards—all were signs of civilisation.

Devika put forward a proposal. "A list will be made of every missing bundle. If a bundle cannot be found, the person's testimony will be entered in a separate ledger. A human being must not be considered to have vanished simply because the papers cannot be found." This was outside the court's usual arrangements, yet it belonged within justice.

As evening fell, the records room's darkness seemed, for the first time, not like darkness itself but like a deep chamber into which a lamp could be carried. A breeze came from the direction of Channa Grove's stump. Someone said, "The red thread moved." Another said, "Boodhba the ghost laughed." But the ledger recorded only this: "Today the darkness in the records room was asked its name."

By nightfall the door was locked again. This time, however, the lock could not imprison the breath inside. Out on the veranda lay the stones and their court dates; inside the cupboards, the awakened bundles of paper. Between them rested the children's ledger—neither stone nor paper alone.

A Little Folk Song

Open the lock, oh open it with the hands of dawn;
Let the pages buried all these years breathe freely in the morn.
The cupboard's captive breath feels morning air at last;
Page after page begins to flutter, telling stories from the past.

CHAPTER 143

The Testimony of a Sack of Scrap Paper

A sheet called rubbish may hold someone's last hope of life; that is why tearing it can be the gravest wrong.

It is easy to say "scrap". No one gives a name to the papers thrown into a sack. They are called "old material", "useless", or "fit to be destroyed".

For a person who was never given the chance to write, only this one mark of the body may remain. It is not made with any pen. It is a line from within that human being, a mark no one else can copy.

On one sheet only two words were written: "Hear me." Below them was a thumbprint. But the plea had survived. Ananya held the page for a long time without speaking.

The children decided to make a copy of every page. But Meera warned them once again: "We shall make copies, not a spectacle. If publishing a name would hurt the person's family, that name must be concealed.

Bhikhari Lal asked, "Will you keep this sack?" "Yes," Devika replied, "but not as a museum exhibit. We shall keep it as a warning." Satyavrat Mehta added, "The day an office has the

courage to look at its own rubbish, justice begins to recover its first face."

That night a wind came from the direction of Channa Grove's stump. The papers lying upon the veranda stones stirred but did not fly away, as though an unseen hand were holding them down.

The records-room door was shut once more, but this time the papers inside were not crushed into a heap. They had been arranged in order. The chest was not empty, for everything could not be brought into the open in a single day. A new label was pasted on its lid: "HUMAN TESTIMONY."

Outside on the veranda an elderly litigant sat upon the stone. In his hands was a copy of his old petition. He could not read it; his eyes had grown dim.

The veranda, the records room, Channa Grove and the night wind seemed to hear those words together. The human beings hidden inside bundles of papers were beginning to come out. Their emergence was not yet a verdict, but it was surely the first breath on the way towards one.

A Little Folk Song

Open the sack, sister, open the sack of discarded paper;
Look for the seeds hidden in pages torn and worn and frailer.
Open the scrap sack, sister; each page is like a seed;
One bears a plan of someone's home, another a father's name in need.

CHAPTER 144

The Journey of Names

Once a name leaves the bundle of papers, no "CANCELLED" stamp can ever lock it away again.

A cupboard holds a copy of a name. The real name lives on a doorstep, where a lamp burns at dusk and someone sits waiting. A name that has not returned to that doorstep is only half a name, however fully it may be written on paper.

On the way there is a river, a broken bridge, a road only half paved, and more than all these, people's forgetfulness. A village forgets the person who used to sit upon a field boundary all day. The soil does not forget.

Ananya was the first to arrive. With her came Aruni, Devika, Meera and two or three children. They carried no new notebooks, only yesterday's ledger, still covered in dust.

Four children, Devika, the young lawyer and Bhikhari Lal set out towards Jasoda Devi's village. Ananya and Meera stayed at the court to look after the list. Satyavrat Mehta remained on the veranda, for he felt that the journey was taking place not only outside him, but within him too.

The road to the village was no easy road. Half was paved, half was full of potholes. The bridge that had collapsed still cast a shadow in the speech of the people.

Jasoda's field was now occupied by someone else. A small brick storehouse stood upon its boundary ridge. The young lawyer was angry, but Devika stopped him. "Write down the anger," she said, "but do not announce a verdict yet." The children neither picked up soil from the field's edge nor took pictures.

News also came from the stump in Channa Grove. Someone said that dew had filled its cracks throughout the night, as though it were listening to the journey of the names. Boodhba the ghost did not appear, but a bird sitting on the roof dropped a length of red thread.

By dawn the first list had been written out in three copies: one for the records room, one for the veranda stones, and one to be carried to Channa Grove. When the sun rose, drops of dew shone upon the pages. "The ink will get wet," someone said. "No," Meera answered, "this is no ordinary dew. It is the names taking a bath."

So the people imprisoned inside the bundles of paper began to make their way home. The court veranda became a road, the records room a source, and Channa Grove a listener waiting for their return.

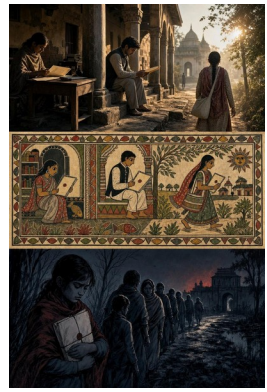
A Little Folk Song

Go on, dear names, go down the road that leads you home;
A mother's lamp waits on the doorstep—walk until you reach its glow.
Leaving the cupboard, the names set out upon their homeward track;
Past veranda, steps and dust they went, determined to come back.

CHAPTER 145

The First Crack in Fear

Fear does not break all at once. First a crack appears, and through that crack the light enters.



Where does the first crack appear? Not in the cry of the person who has suffered. Such cries have been heard for years, yet the earthen pot has remained unbroken.

When papers that have buried names for years begin to speak, fear can no longer stay in one place. Here it turns into laughter, there into anger; elsewhere it becomes a religious slogan or an appeal to the rules. But wherever it travels, it weakens its own true shape.

At the other end of the village, meanwhile, the news spread like fire. A servant was bringing the morning tea into Chandrapal's house when a lawyer's messenger hurried inside, breathless. There was as much fear in the way he spoke as there was in his news.

Before dusk Chandrapal's messenger reached Channa Grove. In a courteous voice he said, "It is not right to make such a list public. If the names of respectable families are included without proof, there will be unrest in the village." Meera stepped forward.

Boodhba the ghost did not appear near Channa Grove that night, but the earth around the stump's roots looked slightly swollen. The shadow of a black ghost moved westward; the glow of a white spirit went east. People continued saying that these were signs.

That same night a meeting was held in an officer's room at the court. Men working for Chandrapal, Raghav's adviser, a representative of Batuknath's successor and several lawyers sat together. They wanted to declare the list unlawful, accuse the children of being incited by others, threaten the clerk with suspension, and change the lock on the records room.

As the night drew to a close, Ananya gathered up the lists. "From tomorrow we must go from house to house," she said. "Where we find relatives of those named, we shall tell them first. We shall write down no one's story without permission." Devika asked, "And what about the criminals who are spreading fear?" Meera replied, "We shall write down the names of those fears too.

A breeze passed through Channa Grove. Dust fell from the dry bark of the stump, but within the dust a tiny green point could be seen. No one could say for certain whether it was really a sprout or a trick of the night.

And so the first crack appeared in fear. News of the names' journey reached the houses of wrongdoers; an employee's silence began to turn into testimony; and the village's ears began to hear questions instead of rumours.

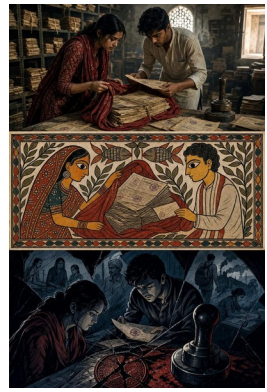
A Little Folk Song

Set down a lamp, oh set a lamp within the crack;
Let brightness trickle through the hole in fear's old earthen pot.
A tiny crack runs through the pot of fear; place your lamp there;
Light will pour through every opening and fill the heart with courage.

CHAPTER 146

The Stain of the Seal

The mark of a seal stays darkest not on the paper, but on the hand that pressed it.



A seal is a round shape with letters written inside it. But when it is pressed upon a person's petition, it stops being merely a shape and becomes a mark upon that person's life. A life can change because a paper has been declared "verified".

Is the hand to blame, or the seal? The hand that lifts it may be driven by hunger, fear, or sometimes an order. Yet the mark of the act will always belong to that hand, whatever the reason.

Morning light entered through a broken window bar. Dust motes danced up and down in its narrow beam, as though thousands of names were breathing together. When the light fell directly upon the seal, its red ink looked black. "It is not the light that has changed the colour," Meera said. "It is the wrongdoing." No one could be sure whether they heard Boodhba the ghost give a little laugh.

Then Devika offered a new proposal. "We shall list every stain left by a seal: the name on the seal, the date, the petition it was stamped upon, and who benefited afterwards. All of these must be connected." A stir passed through the crowd.

Ananya began making a copy of the paper. She wrapped the original not in plastic, but in red cloth. "Many hands have left their marks on this," she said, "and over those marks lies the dust of time.

The number of people outside on the veranda kept growing. Some had heard that a clue pointing to Batuknath's name had been found in the records room. Others said the doors of Chandrapal's house had been shut since morning.

A child came running from the direction of Channa Grove, holding a little stone marked with a red patch. "I found it near the stump," the child said.

By noon the list of seals had filled twenty pages. On every page a human being was coming back into view: Surmani, Rameshwar, Phulkumari, Mahendra, Basanti, Lalan, Ajmeri, Dulari. The names began to emerge from the dust.

At last Satyavrat Mehta said, "No judgment was written in the court today, but the first testimony against the seal has been recorded." Just then a gust through the records-room window tipped over a dry inkpot. The red ink had long since dried, so nothing spilled. It scattered only as powder.

A Little Folk Song

Bring down the seal, oh place it in the hands of service;
See its red not as a stain, but as a mark of trust.
Let the red seal descend upon a palm and become an act of service;
Scatter flowers of truth upon the papers that protect the people's rights.

CHAPTER 147

Knocking from Door to Door

A knock made with permission opens a greater door than any command.

A knock made with permission opens a greater door than any command. An order pushes; a knock asks. A door forced open by a push soon closes again.

A home is not merely walls and a roof. It is the place where a person can show weakness without fear. Someone who seems hard and strong outside may be broken within.

Once the lamp of the records room had been lit, the marks of the seals came into everyone's view. Now it was time to reach the people sitting behind those marks: time to knock from door to door. The lamp in the records room burned all night.

The first group consisted of Ananya, Aruni, Devika, the old litigant's grandson and Bhikhari Lal. Bhikhari Lal was a court attendant, but today he carried no broom. In his hand was a small cloth bag holding blank sheets for copies, pens and a notebook for the names of those who wished to tell their own stories. His steps were hesitant. For years he had carried slips bearing court dates to those same doorways; today he returned under the shadow of regret.

The first house belonged to Surmani Devi. A crack ran across its doorstep, and bathua greens had sprouted in it. Moss covered the tiles of the veranda roof. From inside came the faint scent of smoke from a cooking hearth, as though the house were still breathing, only very tired.

Near evening something unexpected happened. Murari, the old photocopy-shop man from the courthouse who had earned money for years by making copies of paper bundles, appeared outside the records room. He was carrying a bundle.

The little green point seen yesterday near the stump's roots had become somewhat clearer. Aruni wrote again, "Not a statement to be made before everyone." Ananya smiled. The children were no longer eager to turn every sign into a public claim.

"When truth begins to walk, falsehood will dress itself in truth's clothes." The shadow of Channa Grove lengthened. Somewhere in the distance a crocodile slid through the water, and this time its movement could be heard.

So the knocking from door to door began. The stories of those who had suffered were written down not by order, but with their permission. The silence behind a closed door was respected.

A Little Folk Song

Knock, oh knock, softly, softly at the door;
Wait to hear "Come in" before you step across the floor.
Give a gentle knock at first and listen for the voice within;
Only when it says "Come in" should you cross the door with care.

CHAPTER 148

Recognising the Tampering

Compare the papers with the truth, and the tampering will betray itself.

To investigate is not to distrust. It is to protect what is true, and to keep what is false from slipping into the company of truth.

The smell of the earth does not lie. Someone who has lost a field still carries its scent in the body. Someone speaking falsely may possess facts, but not that scent.

The first testimony against the seal had already been entered in the records room. Now the list compiled by knocking from door to door had to be checked. At dawn, last night's dew was shining upon the soil around Channa Grove's stump.

Bhikhan Sah was not humiliated before the crowd. Meera recorded his statement on a separate sheet: "Attempt to give false testimony. Possible causes: poverty, greed, pressure.

At noon Raghav's move took another form. Three young men arrived together. Each carried a different paper, but all three papers were written in the same hand.

Then a small boy stepped out of the crowd. One of the young men was a neighbour of his mother's family. "He was on

Raghav's veranda last night," the boy said. Whispers spread among the people.

When a lamp was lit near the stump, there was another faint suggestion of Boodhba the ghost. Some said white smoke had risen. Others said a black shadow had sat down beside the roots.

Before dawn, the shadow of a red thread fell upon the green point near the stump's roots. Some might call it a good omen, others a coincidence. But the guardians of names did not turn it into something to announce before everyone.

So the watch for signs of tampering was completed. The false Bhola Mandal had appeared in the guise of Bhikhan Sah; Jagmaya's receipt had become the missing edge of Harimohan's record; the story told by Raghav's three young men had collapsed; and the hidden scratch in Murari's wrongdoing had been recorded. The guardians learned that to protect truth, trust must go with examination, compassion with firmness, and memory with respect.

A Little Folk Song

Compare the pages, oh compare the original and the copy;
Beneath the lamp of checking, make false colours show themselves.
Place a true copy to one side; the colour of the lie will come to light;
Once you see the scratch of tampering, the real letters bloom in sight.

CHAPTER 149

The Map of the Web

However vast the web may be, its knots lie in tiny places—and those are what the guardians seek.

A web is never the work of one hand alone. One hand supplies the thread, a second ties the knot, and a third casts the net. If only the hand that casts it is caught, the web will be made again.

Smoke, scratches, keys and seals may seem like separate clues. But put them together upon a map and they become paths. Those paths lead from one door to another, and a human being stands behind each door.

Four people went in: Meera, Satyavrat, Bhikhari Lal and Kailash Prasad. The children waited outside. In this story, waiting had always been a kind of punishment.

In the darkness of the records room, a wooden plank really was loose. Beneath it, in the dust, they found three thin bundles of papers, two pages from a receipt ledger, and an incomplete list. At the top of the list was an old seal from Batuknath Hariharan's ashram.

"Outside to where?" Devika asked. Kailash Prasad remained silent for a long time. At last he said, "Sometimes to Raghav's

house, sometimes to Batuknath's ashram, sometimes to Chandrapal's office.

At that moment another circle was added to the map drawn upon the earth: "ASHRAM". A line ran from it to Raghav's veranda, then to the court, then to Chandrapal's office. The map no longer described an ordinary theft.

At those words the air near Channa Grove's stump grew heavy. What had once sounded like a funny village tale about Boodhba the ghost was now taking bodily shape upon the map. The crocodile moved not through water, but through paper bundles, seals, door latches, incense in the ashram, tea in the office, and whispers of fear.

Near dawn the green point could be seen again at the stump's roots. Aruni noticed it but made no announcement before everyone. He wrote only, "The root is still alive." Ananya added beneath it, "If the root lives, the map will not be erased."

So this chapter revealed the first signs of the hands sitting behind the false papers. Raghav's veranda, Murari's shop, the court records room, Chandrapal's office and Batuknath's ashram were joined on one map. The guardians learned that the first task in breaking a web is to see it.

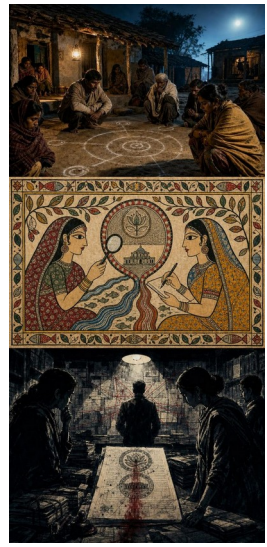
A Little Folk Song

Untie the knots, oh untie the little knots one by one;
However great the net, patiently loosen every thread.
The net may be vast, but each knot occupies a tiny place;
The fisher's work is to open it with the fingernails of patience.

CHAPTER 150

The Shadow of the Seal

The rubber wears away, but the handle remains—and an empty handle can carry the greatest weight.



Wood does not speak, yet it holds so much. Whose palm once gripped it, whose sweat touched it, who slammed it hurriedly onto the desk—all these things remain in the grain of the wood.

When the rubber was worn away, the letters disappeared, but the marks made by pressure did not. A crime that hopes to survive by removing its letters forgets that the pressure of a hand leaves a deeper impression than any letter.

After the map of the network had been drawn, hardly anyone slept properly beside the stump that night. The lines of the circles drawn in the soil were a little damp with morning dew, but they had not been erased. Raghav's veranda, Murari's shop, the court records room, Chandrapal's office, and Batuknath's ashram—the five names were now engraved not in the soil, but in people's minds.

A little bird alighted on one of the lines in the soil, pecked at the dust, and flew away again—as though it, too, were testing the weight of the map. Most eyes remained fixed on a particular list. At the top was the ashram's old seal; beneath it was the number of a court record.

Kailash Prasad searched his memory. He said that around the time the old seal disappeared, a large religious gathering had been held at Batuknath Hariharan's ashram. Some court clerks, lawyers, land brokers, and Chandrapal's people had attended.

Four people set out for Chhedi's shop—Meera, Ananya, Bhikhari Lal, and Murari. Satyavrat stayed behind because he had to put the statements from the veranda in order. Aruni remained with the children near the stump, making a copy of the map.

The stump's long shadow spread over every circle on the map. Some people felt afraid. Would the shadow cover everything again? Aruni placed a lamp on the ground.

Then a shimmer, like the presence of Boodhba the ghost, seemed to appear above the stump. Someone said he was laughing. Someone else said he was weeping.

In this way, the chapter uncovered the route taken by the seal between the ashram and the court. Chhedi the scrap dealer, the donation register, Bhanu Lal's ledger, Ramesh the seal-maker, Surmani Devi's testimony, and Haricharan's message together formed a new circle of evidence. The guardians were no longer reading papers alone.

A Little Folk Song

Listen, oh listen to the wooden handle; hear what it has to say,
And weigh the silent witness with respect along the way.
The rubber vanished, but the wooden handle still can speak;
It knows whose palm once held it and unties the knots of memory.

CHAPTER 151

The Hand That Wielded the Seal

A seal does not move by itself—the hand that moves it has a name.

"Orders from above"—for years those words had been the safest umbrella of all. Under it many hands stayed dry, while many names were soaked through. As long as that umbrella remained, the hands beneath it would be protected.

The peon's hand, the clerk's hand, the broker's hand—each person had thought the task performed by that hand was small. But when many small hands work together to cause great harm, the smallness of their tasks cannot excuse their wrongdoing.

Outside, the wind grew strong, and the brittle edges of the stump's dry leaves rustled in the dust—a faint, unending sound, as though an old story were being repeated. Ananya measured the round handle. Aruni separated a few black specks of old ink clinging to its base.

Ramesh the seal-maker showed them another page from the ledger kept by his father, Bhanu Lal. Beside the dates were secret marks: "A", "Ch", "R", and "Aa". At first, no one understood what they meant.

Meera immediately set a rule. "What we think a sign means is an interpretation. It becomes evidence only when we can check it against something else." The children divided into four teams. One would compare the dates with court records, another with visits to Chandrapal's office, a third with the night meetings on Raghav's veranda, and a fourth with the ashram's donation register.

The children checked so many papers that their fingertips had turned red, yet no one said they were tired. Meanwhile, the nameless man carrying an umbrella appeared on the distant road. The cut mark on his ear was clearly visible.

"Whose orders?" Satyavrat Mehta asked. Ramlakhan first glanced towards Chandrapal's name, then towards Raghav's, then towards the ashram. At last he said, "There wasn't just one name.

A shimmer of Boodhba the ghost appeared once more over the stump. The children no longer treated it as a spectacle. They felt that names caught in history sometimes returned as wind, leaves, scents, or shadows, asking, "Have you written it down?" As Ananya closed her ledger, she answered softly, "Today I wrote down the hand.

In this way, the first signs identifying the hand that wielded the seal emerged. The secret marks in Bhanu Lal's ledger, the search for Ramlakhan Sahay, Haricharan's uneasiness, the ashram's defence, and the living testimony of Jagmaya and Surmani together showed that the seal was moved not merely by wood and rubber, but by power, fear, and personal advantage.

A Little Folk Song

Give them names, oh give each working hand a name,
Leave behind the smoke of "orders from above"; accept your share of blame.
A seal cannot move on its own; a human hand must make it go,
And behind the hand is a mind that tells it where to go.

CHAPTER 152

The Source of the Order

An order is not born from one mouth—it is born in a meeting, and a meeting leaves no signature.

An order is not born from one mouth; it is born in a meeting, and a meeting has no signature. Where there is no signature, people pretend there is no responsibility either. But responsibility does not depend on a signature.

"Service", "procedure", "relationship", "agreement"—these words sound gentle, yet very harsh deeds may be hidden behind them. Examining language is no less important than examining the people responsible for a crime.

Ananya reread Ramlakhan's statement from the day before. The words "service", "procedure", "arrangement", "relationship", "agreement", and "above" occurred again and again. Aruni wrote each word separately on a sheet of paper. The answer sent a shiver through everyone. The decision came first and the papers afterwards. That method had overturned so many lives. "If decisions were made before the papers existed," Satyavrat Mehta said, "then the court became nothing more than a stage." Meera added, "And we still have to find the person who wrote the lines spoken on that stage."

Slowly, a new name came from Ramlakhan's mouth: "Mahavir Pathak." No one had openly mentioned that name before. People said he had once studied the scriptures in Batuknath Hariharan's time, later become an adviser on the ashram's accounts, and finally turned into the silent writer of Chandrapal's land documents. No official position had ever been announced for him, yet his slips of paper travelled through several offices.

The pages headed "Memories of Meetings" had no dates. Instead of names, each entry used clues: "the farmer from the south", "the widow across the river", "the old case", "a piece of the grove", and "the land near the temple garden". Devika trembled, for "a piece of the grove" pointed towards Channa Grove. Crocodiles, water, the stump, the court—it was as though all of them had already been written into that ledger.

Beside the stump of Channa Grove, the names of four ledgers were read aloud. At the words "Memories of Meetings", a shimmer of Boodhba the ghost appeared on the overhang. The ghost no longer seemed to stand for people's old fears, but for the demand that forgotten names be restored.

In her empty water pot, Surmani Devi saw not a drop of water this time, but the shadow of a copy of the ledger. Jagmaya placed Mohan's letter beside her. Ramlakhan sat some distance away, gazing at his hands.

In this way, the first outline of the source of the orders became visible. They did not come from one person's mouth. They travelled through meetings, signs, slips of paper, ledgers, and phrases about the public good. Mahavir Pathak's "Memories of Meetings", Bhikhari Lal's red slip, Ramlakhan's recollections, Haricharan's delayed answer, and the blank space for a name at Channa Grove showed together that the true voice of wrongdoing often hides inside sweet words.

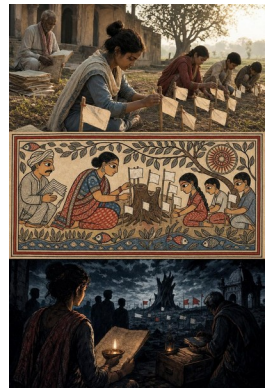
A Little Folk Song

Ask, oh ask, "Who is above?"—ask it once again;
Look beyond the smoke and find the one who bears the blame.
When someone says, "It came from above," ask, "Who is there?"
The sky, a lofty office, or a person? Let the answer fill the air.

CHAPTER 153

The Name Behind the Sign

Behind a sign is a name, and behind a name another sign—the guardians must stand between them.



An empty peg is itself a witness. Where no one was, someone had been. This is not merely a clever contradiction; it is the language of absence. Even an absent person can be asked for by name.

The farmer from the south, the widow across the river—these were not identities but ways of making people indistinct. When the letters inside that haze began to come clear, one by one, the haze itself became a witness.

In the morning, the empty places beside the stump of Channa Grove were opened again. The dawn air still held the coolness of the night's dew, and the children's fingers shook as they drove little pegs into the ground. Wherever a sign had taken the place of a name in the copy of the ledger the night before, Ananya planted a small peg.

Bhikhari Lal brought an old list from the court records room. Insects had eaten the edges of the paper, but the numbers in the middle remained. He explained that the outer pages of many court bundles had been replaced, while their old serial numbers could still be found in the copy register.

While searching for the clue marked "the old case", they reopened Bhanu Lal's ledger of secret signs. Among "A", "Ch", "R", and "Aa", another letter appeared: "B". No one had noticed it earlier because it was hidden inside a red stain.

Mahavir fell silent. Perhaps for the first time he understood that a seat of reverence could become the safest place for wrongdoing. "Does the letter B mean anything anywhere in your ledger?" Meera asked. Mahavir tried to deny it, but Ramlakhan interrupted: "In the Memories of Meetings there is one place where it says 'Baba'." Mahavir could not stop him.

At that answer the wind became perfectly still. Boodhba the ghost shimmered not on the roof but inside the hollow of the stump. The black ghost's shadow thickened by the roots, while the pale spirit's line spread above it.

As night fell, Meera wrapped the list in cloth and gave it to Ananya. "These are not just names. They are responsibilities." Ananya held the cloth against her chest, not to her forehead. She understood now that names were meant to be protected, not worshipped.

In this chapter, the first names behind the signs began to emerge, but not all of them became complete. Devan Paswan remained in memory; Phoolkali Devi, in a bundle and a statement of consent; the old case, in Bhanu Lal's secret mark "B"; and Channa Grove, in "Baba's word". Batuknath's shadow was still only a shadow, but at last its direction could be seen.

A Little Folk Song

Hang the sign, oh hang it on the empty peg today,
And ask even the silence of the absent to show the way.
An empty peg tells you that something once was there;
Threads, scents, and scratches can point to where it went from there.

CHAPTER 154

Baba's Word

So long as Baba's word was revered, no one could touch it.

So long as Baba's word was an object of reverence, it was untouchable. Once it could be examined, that word became a document. Words that had once stood beyond all questions were now inside the ledger. That was no small change.

A kitchen hears more than a courtroom, because no one considers the kitchen a threat. The hearth hears what is hidden from the walls—and one day the hearth, too, can speak.

In the first light of dawn, yesterday's list was spread again beside the stump of Channa Grove. The night's chill still lingered in the air, and the children's voices trembled a little in the cold. When they unwrapped the papers, drops of dew clung like pearls beside the letters.

The second page did not say "Baba", but it did say "approval from above". Meera immediately had them write: "Baba, above, public welfare, service—words belonging to the same circle." Aruni drew a circle. Haricharan, standing at a distance, remarked sarcastically, "Will a circle of words prove a crime?" Ananya answered calmly, "Proving a crime is the court's work.

Satyavrat Mehta asked Sharda, "Did you call Batuknath Hariharan 'Baba'?" Sharda answered at once, "Everyone did. But being called Baba does not make anyone innocent." Her plain words struck the gathering like thunder. For the first time someone had clearly joined the names Batuknath and Baba in a single breath.

Sharda Jha offered another memory. "Once Baba said, 'When a name cries too much, quieten it with service.'" "What did service mean?" Devika asked. "Sometimes five seers of rice, sometimes medicine, sometimes a prayer," Sharda said. "But the papers were not returned." Aruni immediately wrote: "Service: not a remedy, but a way of silencing." Satyavrat added, "A false shadow of compensation."

After midday the children made a "map of words". Their hands grew dark with soil as they worked, but no one went to wash them—as though the touch of soil were itself a kind of testimony. At the centre they wrote, "Baba/Batuknath: by recollection, seated in authority." From it spread branches: Bhanu Lal's slip, Sharda Jha's kitchen memories, Mahavir's Memories of Meetings, Phoolkali Devi's donation deed, the memory of Devan Paswan's absence, and a piece of Channa Grove.

No one could say for certain whether the green speck on the stump appeared again when night fell. But the slips, ledgers, bundle, seat, and list were wrapped separately in cloth and kept safe. As Ananya tied the cloth, she said, "Today Baba's words were heard, but his answer is still due." Aruni added, "That answer will begin not with papers but with the names of the people affected."

In this way, "Baba's word" became, for the first time, language that could be examined rather than a vague object of devotion. Sharda Jha's kitchen memories, Bhanu Lal's slip, Mahavir's Memories of Meetings, the stolen time of Devan Paswan and

Phoolkali Devi, and the testimony of Channa Grove together showed that Batuknath's power had rested not in signatures, but in people's fear and faith.

A Little Folk Song

Come sit a while, sit close beside Baba's seat;
Hear the wooden words where pearls of dew and morning meet.
Baba's seat is damp, and drops of dew shine bright;
Unwritten words blink silently beside the fields at night.

CHAPTER 155

The Ledger of Service

When one hand holds the ledger of service and the ledger of silence, both demand an accounting.

When the same hand keeps the ledger of service and the ledger of silence, both demand an accounting. If the hand that gives food also begins to demand silence, the food is no longer a meal; it has become a bargain.

A donation may appear spotless, but a dark condition can hide in its shadow. An unspoken condition can be the heaviest of all, because it is written not on paper but on a person's mind.

Ananya began by opening yesterday's list. At the top she wrote, "The consequences of the words." Meera saw that heading and breathed with relief. Finding Batuknath's name alone was not enough.

As Satyavrat Mehta turned the pages of the ledger, one line made him stop: "Do not write the name. The family has been made to understand." The words had been written in red ink along the margin.

Meera taught the children to make separate notes beside every testimony: "recollection", "ledger", "matching dates", and "connections of personal interest". She said, "Receiving charity

does not weaken someone's testimony. But we must understand the bonds it may create." Ananya wrote a heading at the top of the page: "The difference between kindness and pressure." That became the day's real lesson.

As the evening shadows lengthened, the green speck in the dark crack of Channa Grove's stump looked a little taller than it had the day before. "Look, the wood is speaking," Sharda Jha said. Meera recorded, "The sight recurred. Its meaning is a matter of people's experience." Satyavrat smiled. "Sometimes a symbol leads people towards the truth," he said, "but never put the symbol in place of the truth." The children had learned to practise that distinction.

He simply picked up a clod of earth and placed it beside the ledger. "A meal of silence in exchange for Grandmother's land?" His voice was very quiet, but it carried such sharpness that even Haricharan fell silent. Aruni wrote: "Meal of silence: date close to the Phoolkali case.

No one applauded at this discovery. Applause would have suggested celebration. This was not a celebration but the opening of an old wound.

The chapter ended with the discovery that the ledger of service and the ledger of silence could no longer be kept apart. Batuknath's word as Baba had become a network woven through everyday kindness, debts, and shame.

A Little Folk Song

Serve the plate, oh serve it with the truth as well;
And tell the story of the one whose name the food must tell.
The rice upon the plate is white; serve truth beside each grain;
With every gift of food, restore the people's worth again.

CHAPTER 156

The Debt of Charity

The whitest cloth of charity can wrap the heaviest debt.

A hand raised only halfway is not always a sign of fear. Often it is also the sign of remembering a favour. Someone who once received help may find the right to ask questions taken away for the rest of their life. That is the most carefully disguised form of captivity.

When the labour of the poor is presented as the generosity of the rich, history is written backwards. The person who supplies the water pot is made the debtor, and the person who receives it is called the benefactor. Wherever this reversal occurs, justice's first task is to put it right.

There were many years of dust inside that small "yes". Meera stopped the children. "Do not turn this testimony into complete forgiveness or complete guilt," she said. "Write: involvement accompanied by admission." Ananya found a new phrase: "wrongdoing under obligation". Satyavrat smiled faintly.

Satyavrat Mehta looked into Haricharan's eyes. "Someone who ate because they were hungry, and someone who used that hunger to suppress papers, must not be weighed on the same scale." Haricharan laughed. "Your scale?" Meera intervened.

"Not a scale—a description. Judgment will come later. But the distinction must be written down now." The children wrote: "The person who receives help in hunger and the person who trades upon hunger are different."

Beside these phrases Ananya wrote, "Words that press people towards right or wrong." Aruni added, "A phrase repeated over and over can become a document in itself." "Correct," Satyavrat said. "When the same kind of phrase is heard in many homes, it is no longer merely personal advice. It points to a system." The children asked what "system" meant. Meera answered, "Something that pushes everyone in the same direction, even without a single order."

At that moment Bhanu Lal, who had saved the slips of paper and brought them back, said softly, "I know something else." Everyone turned towards him. "Besides the donation ledger there was a small notebook recording how much each person had been 'persuaded'. I did not see all of it, but I have heard names." Meera stopped him at once. "A name you have only heard is not proof you have seen.

Bhanu Lal said, "The notebook was called 'Consent'. It was kept in Baba's private room." At this Mahavir's face went pale. In a low voice he said, "There is an iron chest in the upper room of my house.

The air grew heavy after those words. No one felt triumphant, for this was an uncomfortable kind of truth. It would not allow them to put the guilty and the injured into separate rooms and rest easy.

The chapter ended with the half-raised hands becoming full testimonies, while the white cloth of charity began to reveal its dark threads. Whether the chest was empty, full, or packed with lies, it held the promise of revealing another, deeper layer of Batuknath's story.

A Little Folk Song

Wear the white cloth, and keep its inner threads white too;
Make every thread and every knot both honest and true.
If you wrap yourself in white, let what is inside be clear;
Keep every thread free of deceit, and let no crooked knot stay near.

CHAPTER 157

The Iron Chest

In the darkness of a house the iron chest held secrets of a bargain; in the village light it became a witness.

"The key is kept in the prayer room." That sounds like a holy arrangement. But a key hidden behind a screen of holiness often conceals the least holy of secrets.

Consent and agreement are two different words. In an agreement both sides have a voice in considering what is to be done. Sometimes, in what is called consent, only one side has such a voice; the other has nothing but a thumbprint.

Satyavrat Mehta, Meera, Surmani Devi, Bhikhari Lal, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, and two women witnesses went with Mahavir. First they read out the rules. No one would open the chest alone. Every object would be listed. Private matters would be protected. Copies would be made of documents relating to crimes. No one's name would be made public without a hearing.

Aruni immediately asked, "Why a promise in return for food?" No one could answer. Mahavir went on turning the pages. Beside the name of Kailash Mandal's father was written, "Medicine received; silence over the old boundary." Kailash sat outside.

On the first page of the Consent Notebook were written the rules: "Promises obtained after donations, service, or assistance in a crisis." Satyavrat closed his eyes as he read them. For a moment the only sound in the room was his breathing. Then he said softly, "A promise after crisis assistance—that means the crisis itself was made into a document." Meera wrote, "A method of extracting consent from a crisis."

Ananya wrote the phrase separately: "The wrong that lies between explaining and manufacturing consent." "There will be a full hearing on that distinction," Satyavrat said.

Ramlakhan's admission carried guilt, but it also carried the pain of being used himself. The story had returned to that difficult place where easy punishment and easy forgiveness both seemed false.

The children played a remarkable part in making the copies. Ananya read the names aloud, Aruni drew the columns, Devika marked the signs, and Kamala made a waiting list outside for the families concerned. Each page was numbered in front of three witnesses.

The iron chest was left open beside the stump of Channa Grove so that everyone could see a secret container could be emptied. But the Consent Notebook was wrapped in red cloth and kept separately. Its guardians were not the children, but the people who had once raised their hands only halfway.

The chapter ended when the iron chest emerged from a household's darkness into the village's shared view. At last the method of turning food, medicine, grain, shelter, gifts, and labour into "consent" had taken on a solid, visible form.

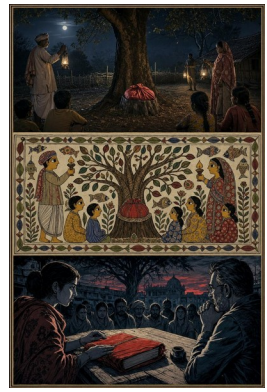
A Little Folk Song

Open the chest, oh open it slowly, take your time;
Let sunlight meet the breath held in its heart of iron.
Open the iron belly slowly; history waits inside:
Papers, cloth, seeds, and keys hold the breath of lives denied.

CHAPTER 158

Checking the Consent Notebook

Checking the Consent Notebook revealed for the first time that even a signature can be stolen.



A thumbprint taken on a night of sickness, on a day of hunger, or on a rainy night is not free consent. It is the exploitation of someone's circumstances. Real consent exists where people are free to choose. Where there is no choice, there is no consent.

The easiest wrongdoing is to treat silence as a promise, for silence cannot speak in its own defence. Justice's first duty is to discover why the person remained silent.

All night the Consent Notebook, tied in red cloth, lay beside the stump of Channa Grove. Three kinds of guardians watched over it: those who had once raised their hands only halfway, the children, and the silence that had finally broken and did not want to return to falsehood. The wind blew; the cloth quivered gently, but the notebook stayed still, as though it wanted to carry all the names inside it safely through the dark to morning.

Satyavrat was silent for a long time after hearing those words. Then he wrote, "Reading names is not enough; we must read the method." "That is why the children must learn not only their letters, but also how such things are done," Meera said. A

bird on the stump fluttered its wings once, as though it, too, had heard the lesson.

Aruni asked, "Whose orders did you follow when you went?" Ramlakhan was quiet at first. Then he said, "Sometimes Haricharan's, sometimes the accountant's, sometimes a letter from the ashram. But the name of the person above was never clear.

Satyavrat spoke at once, not like someone giving an order but like someone making a request. "Mark this page separately. Keep the dates of death, the absences, and the false witnesses on different lists." For the first time, the notebook had led them beyond pressure to the very edge of outright fraud. Meera added, "Pressuring someone who is alive is one crime.

Talk of Boodhba the ghost arose again. Someone said that when the dead person's name was read out, a white line shone on the stump's bark. Someone else said a smell of water came from the pond.

At that question, Chandrapal's name seemed to circle through the air without anyone pronouncing it. No one spoke it, but everyone felt its shadow. Lau's accountant, Haricharan's messages, Ramlakhan's persuasion, Batuknath's mark—all the lines were slowly bending towards a dark centre.

The chapter ended with the matching of the Consent Notebook to other records, allowing the families who had been harmed to recover their own words. Medicine did not mean silence. Grain was not a promise. Shelter did not mean giving up a boundary. A devotional song was not testimony. Against the words written in the false notebook stood the true language of life.

A Little Folk Song

Guard the line, oh guard the line where your signature shall stay;
Only hold out your hand when you have read and understood.
Your signature is your own voice; let nobody steal its sound;
In every written line, let your own willing choice be found.

CHAPTER 159

The Consent of the Dead

The dead person's consent is the cheapest paper in the world—and the costliest crime.

Dates do not lie, whatever the paper may say. Where there is a gulf between the date of death and the date of consent, the body of the crime comes most clearly into view.

The circle of a thumbprint is one of the last signs of a living body. If that mark appears on a paper after the body has died, the theft is not only of land but of memory as well.

The next morning the air near the stump of Channa Grove seemed more watchful than on an ordinary day. Not a single leaf moved, as if the grove itself were holding its breath to hear the day's hearing. The names marked as dead, absent, or displaced in yesterday's comparison of the Consent Notebook had been tied up in separate pieces of cloth.

First, the children observed silence. Ananya opened her ledger and wrote at the top, "For those who cannot speak, their dates will speak." Below it Aruni added, "The absence of one who was not present is also testimony." Devika wrote a third line: "A dead person's thumb cannot move. If a thumb did move, it belonged to someone alive." These three sentences established the dignity of that day's hearing.

Ananya examined the stub of a page that had been cut out. "Whatever was removed matters," she said. Satyavrat ran his fingers along the edge of the paper. The cut was not fresh, but neither was it very old.

A stir of alarm spread through the crowd. Mahavir Pathak picked up the little bag and examined it. The impression looked remarkably like the real mark, but the right corner of the crescent was slightly crooked.

By evening, nine pages had been added to the list of consent attributed to dead people. Three involved copied marks, two impossible dates, two people who were absent, one a false witness, and one the shadow of a cut-out paper. After giving this summary, Meera said, "The question now is not only Batuknath's mark, but the theft of that mark.

The sale deed, the accountant's ledger, Lau's partnership, and the old accounts of Chandrapal's business would have to be compared. If a path created by the consent of the dead led all the way to the warehouse, they would have to look into the face of the shadow's owner.

The chapter ended with the dead being allowed to remain dead in the record, instead of being turned into living puppets by fraudulent papers. The white covering around the mark of authority tore open, revealing the red stain of a copied seal beneath it. The pages of the Consent Notebook were no longer merely a list of suffering.

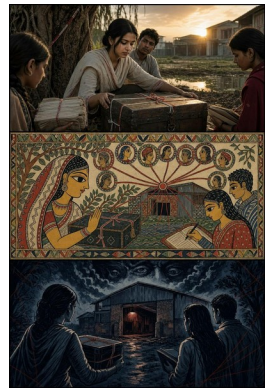
A Little Folk Song

Give your thumbprint only when you know what it will say;
Let the round mark carry the honour of the sun each day.
A round thumbprint is like the sun above the fields of grain;
A worker's full consent expresses their whole identity.

CHAPTER 160

The Shadow of the Warehouse

When the warehouse opens, it reveals not trade, but the belly of justice hidden in shadow.



The elders say that when papers remain shut in a room for too long, even the air begins to smell like paper. A sack of grain holds grain. But the chest hidden behind it holds no grain—it holds someone's thumbprint. If the person whose thumb made that mark is no longer alive, who forged their consent?

People think a lock is a sign of security. Yet an ordinary lock is fitted in a place where fear, rather than the lock itself, stands guard. When fear is the watchman, what use is a thick piece of iron?

"The silence of our ancestors is not consent." That line echoed through the village all night. The next morning, Batuknath's box, tied with red-and-white thread, stood beside the stump of Channa Grove. All night the wind had kept watch around it, as though it held not papers but people forced into silence, still breathing. Meera approached the box not with a bow but with caution.

Satyavrat Mehta, Surmani Devi, Mahavir Pathak, Meera, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Bhikhari Lal, Ramlakhan Sahay and Parmanand set out for the warehouse. The elderly client

insisted on accompanying them, but Meera appointed him a witness outside. "When fear grows stronger inside, the eyes watching from outside will protect us," she said.

Meera stopped him. "Your statement will be written down. Open the lock, but first tell us—whose orders were you following?" Dhiru said quietly, "Master Lau told me. Lau used to say the goods belonged to Chandrapal Babu, but he was looking after them." Those were the first words at the warehouse gate to give Chandrapal's shadow a voice.

Meera asked for the impression to be wrapped in cloth, but before that Devika traced its clear outline on paper. Three impressions could now be compared: the genuine one, the copy and the one from the deceased person's page. Aruni marked tiny points on the lines of all three.

At that moment, moisture gleamed on the bark of the Channa Grove stump although there had been no rain. Some said the grove was weeping. Others said the crocodile had begun to stir its tail in the water.

By nightfall, Chandrapal's name was spoken in the village for the first time as a question rather than a source of fear. "Where is Chandrapal?" someone asked. "And who is he hiding behind?" another added.

The chapter ended with the warehouse no longer a place of trade but the opened belly of shadowy injustice. Consent attributed to the dead, a forged seal, debt ledgers, signatures practised for imitation and spoken instructions together formed a path leading towards Chandrapal's door.

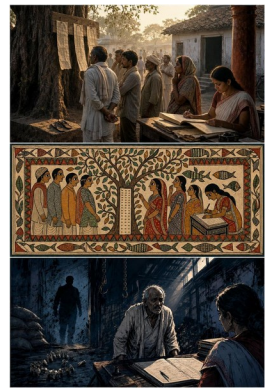
A Little Folk Song

Open the warehouse, open it before the sun,
Let the people weigh each sack's accounts, every one.
The warehouse door swung wide; the sunlight entered there,
And papers, sacks and seals were plain for all to compare.

CHAPTER 161

Imprisoned by the Phone

Those imprisoned by a phone have no bail until the owner of the threatening voice is caught.



The elders say that fear comes in three forms: fear that attacks the body, fear that enters the home, and fear that attacks a person's name. People can run away from the first two. They cannot run from the third; they fall silent instead.

"Don't tell anyone." Those four words can be stronger than any lock. A lock is fastened from the outside, but these words lock a person from within. No pistol is needed to frighten someone who is all alone.

"Tell everyone" instead of "Don't tell anyone." Those words rang out on the evening after the warehouse opened. For two days, Chandrapal's name floated through the village air. Nobody saw him face to face, yet his absence was present at every turning—like a man who had fled his home and left his slippers at the door.

Ananya immediately wrote, "House arrest by phone." Aruni added, "A prison that does not surround the body but traps the mind has fear for its lock." Hearing this, the people gathered beside the stump of Channa Grove realised that the warehouse

had been locked with iron, but this new prison was locked with a voice.

"The testimony of the sack of scrap paper has now become a telephone trap," Devika said softly. Satyavrat Mehta was approaching from a distance. When he heard her, he stopped in his tracks. How many people had already heard about the material entered in the public record only yesterday?

Bhikhari Lal brought the entry register from the records room. During the previous month, several people had signed for permission to examine bundles of papers. One name—Madhukar Prasad—appeared three times.

At this, a child sitting by the stump asked, "A seal made of a voice?" Aruni explained, "It is the kind of voice that makes us believe we are hearing the government, a court, the police or a bank. Criminals copy that seal of authority." The children wrote it down. Their learning had moved beyond the classroom: now they were studying the grammar of crime.

That night the crocodile lay perfectly still on the riverbank for a long time. Some said it was listening. Others said it was laughing.

The chapter ended with a question: now that crime had moved out of papers, seals and warehouses and into voices, numbers and phones, how many listening ears, how many ledgers and how much courage would it take to catch it? Chandrapal's shadow no longer lay only on the wall. It could hide in every voice that isolated a person and said, "Don't tell anyone."

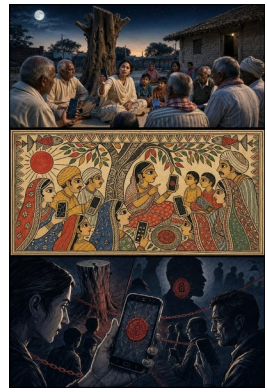
A Little Folk Song

Speak, oh speak, we stand together—speak!
Unlock "Don't tell anyone" with the voices of those who seek.
When voices meet, the "Don't tell anyone" lock will break,
And courage will flow from throat to throat like water in a wake.

CHAPTER 162

The Seal of a Voice

A voice can carry a seal of authority too—and the first way to break it is to recognise the voice.



The elders say that trust is the village's oldest wealth. Someone who owns no field, no oxen and no ledger can still possess trust. A thief reaches for that wealth last, because he knows that on the day trust is stolen, the village will begin to rob itself.

Imitation has a method of its own. First it copies outward appearances: the round shape of a seal, the colour of a sheet of paper. Then it copies the rhythm within: an official's measured patience, a bank's dry language, a court's cold tone.

Satyavrat Mehta kept looking through the entry register of the records room. Madhukar had entered three times, under the cover of three names, through three doors: once with Lau's recommendation, once with a paper from Haricharan and once as a representative of Chandrapal Babu.

Meera immediately said, "Write down what was seen. Keep what you infer from the signs separate." Sakuni said, "Write only what I saw." Ananya wrote, "What Sakuni saw: Haricharan's men, Madhukar's room, a bag of papers." Beneath that, Aruni wrote, "Not a conclusion." This discipline stopped the village's testimony from turning into rumour.

For a moment Haricharan's eyes rested on Madhukar's bag. Ananya noticed, but did not write it down at once. Later she told Meera, "I saw something, but perhaps I imagined it." Meera replied, "Do not put anything you cannot trust in the ledger.

The night lesson began beside the stump of Channa Grove. This time the elders themselves read out threatening sentences from telephone calls, and the children explained the tricks behind them. "Hurry up"—pressure of time.

Ananya continued comparing page with page. Aruni copied down the words spoken over the phone. Devika gave names to the tricks used in the performance.

The crocodile was nowhere to be seen on the riverbank now. Some said it had gone under the water. Others said it had slipped inside the glass of a telephone screen.

The chapter ended with a decision: the first way to break the seal of a voice was to share what had been said. Madhukar was missing, Haricharan was uneasy and Chandrapal's "C. Babu" remained in the shadows. But the village was no longer merely listening.

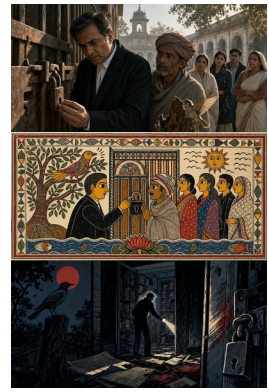
A Little Folk Song

Sound, oh drum, awaken every voice shut tight,
Make ten phones breathing together a folk song in the night.
At the drum's first beat the imprisoned voices find their way,
And ten phones breathing as one become a song to sing and say.

CHAPTER 163

Traces of the Removed Paper

Paper can be taken away, but its traces remain—and the haste of the person who removes it leaves a trace of its own.



People think dust is dirt. But in the records room, dust is the oldest clerk of all. It sits silently for years, preserving the marks of every hand that touches the place.

Even an empty space can be read. The curve left by a cord remains; a dry scrap of glue still clings nearby, and between them lies nothing but air. Measure that air and the removed paper begins to take shape—absent, yet still measurable.

Meera, Ananya, Aruni, Devika and Surmani Devi arrived as well. The crowd was kept at a distance. Meera said, "Today, if even a speck of dust is moved inside the records room, it must be recorded.

"We should read the empty space too," Aruni whispered. Satyavrat heard him and said, "Sometimes what is missing speaks most loudly." The children measured the vacant space—its length, its width, the colour of the cord and the dried scrap of glue. The first image of the removed paper emerged: missing, yet present.

Tears ran from Parmanand's eyes. "I opened the door," he said. "They told me the orders had come from above.

Ananya transferred the impression onto a straight sheet of paper. Devika said, "It is like a scene in a play performed backwards. The main page is gone, but its shadow-copy survives." Meera did not smile, but a stern satisfaction shone in her eyes. "The theft was not complete.

That night, when everyone had fallen quiet, Ananya examined the carbon impression again. Among the reversed letters was a small number: "17/C". Aruni said, "Cupboard seventeen and C. Babu?

The crocodile appeared again at the river's edge, its back half in the water and half in the mud. In the moonlight, streaks on its skin looked like the torn lines of a sheet of paper.

The chapter ended with the understanding that traces of removed paper could not simply be erased. Madhukar was missing, Haricharan absent, Parmanand almost broken, Nageshwar still alive—and "17/C" stood like a new doorway. The story had travelled from the sound of a phone to the death of a sheet of paper.

A Little Folk Song

Keep it safe, oh carbon, keep the dark line clear,
Find the road towards morning in the marks left here.
A page may be removed, but where can its imprint go?
The carbon's dark lines tell us where the dawn will glow.

CHAPTER 164

The Belly of Chandrapal's Shadow

A tiny number can open a great lock—if the person reading it stays awake through the night.

The elders say you recognise a net not by its mouth but by its belly. Its mouths are different everywhere: a voice on the phone, a seal on a receipt, a nameplate outside an office. But where all the threads finally meet is where its belly lies.

The most dangerous words are not always words of violence. They can be "service", "assistance", "advice" and "convenience". People shut their doors when they hear the language of violence, but they open them of their own accord when they hear the language of service.

The traces of the removed paper had been studied all night. Its final mark—the small number "17/C"—continued to burn in Ananya's notebook. It seemed less like a number than a key. The empty cord in cupboard seventeen, the reversed carbon impression, Nageshwar Jha's living testimony and Chandrapal's office were all becoming tied to the same thread.

At the words "C Section", Satyavrat Mehta looked towards Ananya. She immediately wrote, "The caller knew about the internal section." Beside this, Aruni added, "Or someone on the inside was directing the caller." Meera told them to leave a

space between the two statements. “Sometimes the truth sits in the empty space between them.”

Looking at the receipt, Devika said, “An advice centre? In the name of giving advice, this became a place for measuring the belly of a bundle of papers.” Satyavrat Mehta examined the edge of the stamp. “Chandrapal” was clear, but the letters of “advice” were partly worn away.

At first the office servant said, “Chandrapal Babu is away.” Meera replied, “I am not here to see Babu. I am here to see the room.” The servant hesitated. Satyavrat showed him the written request. The small room they then opened had a faded “C” above its door.

Aruni wrote, “Fear of losing one’s name, fear of losing one’s pension, fear of being declared dead: three cords.” Devika added, “The hand holding the cords: the C Room.” Ananya wrote a third line: “The C Room is not merely a room; it is the belly of the net.” Reading this, Meera said, “That is the title of this chapter.”

That day the shadow of the Channa Grove stump grew unusually long. Some said it stretched all the way to the C Room. Others said it climbed onto Chandrapal’s nameplate.

That night the crocodile did not appear at the riverbank, but round whirlpools kept forming in the water. “The belly is inside,” said the elderly client. Surmani Devi answered, “And now we are measuring it.

A Little Folk Song

Hold the key, hold the key marked seventeen-C,
Take the little number’s hand; shake the great lock free.
Small seventeen-C rests in the palm, a key so slight,
The heavy lock begins to tremble before the waking mind’s light.

CHAPTER 165

The Body Behind the Shadow

Once the shadow is caught, a question stands before us: where is the body?

When a shadow is caught, a question arises: where is the body? And the body is always found in some storehouse or warehouse. A shadow needs neither food nor drink, but a body needs a place, a lock and hands to carry things through the night.

The elders say that a crime needs two places: one where it is written down and another where it is stored. The place for writing is an office; the place for storing is a warehouse. Those who search only the office see only half the crime.

The belly had been measured, and one question remained: "When we catch a shadow, where do we find its body?" All night that question seemed to hang over the stump of Channa Grove. At daybreak, as the mist began to lift, the children saw that the stump's long shadow pointed straight towards the old lane behind the office. The sun had not yet risen high, but the shadow had already chosen its path.

"The C Warehouse?" Devika asked. Parmanand whispered, "The office's C Room and the C Warehouse outside had different names, but the boxes passed through the hands of the same

person." "Who was that person?" Ananya asked. Parmanand remained silent for a long time.

But hope came with danger. If the original boxes were still safe, the criminals would surely try to destroy them. Meera took the children aside and said, "From today, copies of the ledgers will be kept in three places.

That evening, Dharni Mahato's old work history was read out beside Channa Grove. Some called him a scrap dealer; some, a transporter; others, Chandrapal's trusted man. But an elderly boatman said, "He carried boxes on the nights when he crossed the river." At the mention of the river, everyone fell quiet.

No investigating party went out that night. "Darkness is a criminal's friend. We shall go in daylight." The children were still impatient, but they understood that courage and rashness were not the same thing.

The crocodile lay motionless for a long time at the river's edge that night, facing not the water but Tetari Ghat. "It is showing us the way," said the elderly client. Satyavrat Mehta stopped him. "We will not record signals from a crocodile.

The chapter paused here. Chandrapal's shadow had opened a path towards its body. The C Room led to the C-17 chest; Madhukar's receipt led to the C Warehouse; Dharni Mahato led to Tetari Ghat; and a fibre of paper led into the darkness of the river.

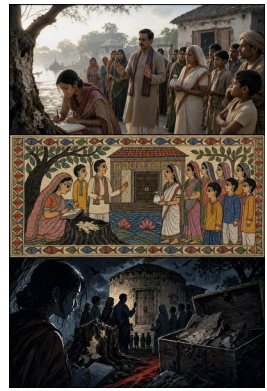
A Little Folk Song

Untie the rope, untie the rope at Tetari Ghat,
Row with the oar of questions and the oar of truth, both at that.
Morning has come to Tetari Ghat; release the boat to glide,
Behind the shadow lies the body—let patience be your guide.

CHAPTER 166

The Storehouse at Imli Ghat

It is not scrap that rots in the storehouse—it is fear kept shut away.



It was not scrap rotting inside the storehouse, but fear kept shut away. Grain locked up for a year only grows old. But fear locked up for a year swells until it fills a chest, and its smell pushes through the lock and escapes.

The elders say village storehouses were built for grain, not for papers. Beware of a storehouse with no grain in it but a heavy lock on its door—for the thing stored there is not meant to be eaten. It is something that eats.

They had decided to visit the ghat by daylight. Dawn had not yet spread its full light, but a line of villagers had already formed to walk towards Tetari Ghat. The questions that had pricked them like thorns all night—did the old storehouse contain scrap, original documents or the real body behind the shadow?—would be brought into the sunlight today. That slender fibre of paper still clung to the stump of Channa Grove.

The elderly boatman came forward. He testified that the storehouse had supposedly stood empty since the old owner's days, yet lanterns had been seen there twice at night during the past month. "Did no boat come ashore?" Meera asked.

The lock was opened in the presence of witnesses from the village council, the boatman, Bhikhari Lal, Satyavrat and two elderly women. As it opened, the smell inside poured out—damp paper, old sacks, termites, oil, cheap perfume and stale air. Someone wanted to rush in, but Meera raised her hand to stop them.

"No one is to cheer," Meera said. "We have found evidence, not won a victory." The crowd fell silent. Ananya recorded what she saw around a chest: it was rusty, but tied with a fresh strip of cloth.

In a desk drawer they found a small machine, an old device for recording voices. Beside it lay a paper bearing sentences: "Your Aadhaar details have been misused", "Your account is under investigation", "Don't tell anyone", "Stay connected to the call." Devika shivered as she read. "These are the lines from the prison made by the phone." Satyavrat Mehta said, "They practised more than handwriting. They practised voices too."

That night the river was strangely still. The crocodile was nowhere to be seen. "It has eaten its fill and gone to sleep," said the elderly client. Surmani Devi replied, "No. Its belly is bursting.

The chapter ended here. The storehouse at Tetari Ghat proved to hold not rubbish, but preparations involving fear, papers, voices and death. The C-17 chest, five red ledgers, rehearsed voices, a list of elderly people's circumstances and the words "Next consignment: across the river" were carrying the story once more towards the darkness of the current.

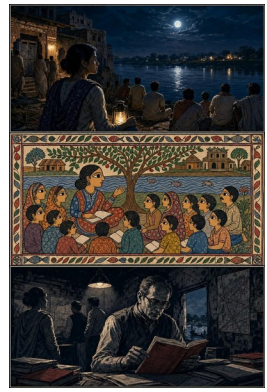
A Little Folk Song

Open the storehouse, sweep away the fear,
Let the rotten silence out, let the scent of grain draw near.
Open the storehouse; fill it with grain, not fright,
Throw the rotten silence out; bring new seeds home to light.

CHAPTER 167

A Voice Across the River

The voice is made across the river, but the people who drown are on this side.



The voice was made across the river, but the people who drowned were on this side. The current separated the two villages, so people thought those on the far bank were far away. Yet no current can stop a ringing telephone.

The elders say a mother can recognise her son's voice with her eyes closed. Yet a voice can be copied—its rhythm, pauses and pitch. What cannot be copied, they say, is the breath beneath it.

Meera, Satyavrat, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Bhikhari Lal, Surmani Devi and two witnesses boarded the boat. The crowd remained at the ghat. Everyone wanted to accompany them, 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.

The boat trembled gently as it reached midstream. 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 that it seemed to rise from beneath the river.

A voice said, "Your name is under investigation. Stay on the line right now." It was a man's voice, with the rhythm of a practised performance. It wore the language of the law like a false costume.

"Which department?" Aruni asked. "The higher office," came the reply. "Ask too many questions and you will be arrested." Satyavrat Mehta quickly wrote on a sheet of paper, "Threat in response to a question: a method." Ananya recorded the time. Devika began writing down the sequence of sentences on the call.

"I am in a boat," Aruni said. The voice replied at once, "Do not lie. We can see your location." Bhikhari Lal looked at the river water and smiled. "They can see the location, but not the current." Satyavrat wrote, "False claim of knowing everything: fear through technology." By pretending to know everything, a criminal steals a person's power to think.

That night the ghost Boodhba appeared by the stump, but this time it was not his mouth that shone—it was his ears. The dark ghost seemed to retreat into the distant water. The crocodile did not appear, though foam rose in the middle of the river.

The chapter ended here. The "new sound list" from Tetari Ghat had reached the public service centre across the river. The fake prison of a voice, the list of elderly people's circumstances, the theft of familiar family rhythms and threats spoken in the names of institutions had become part of a single net.

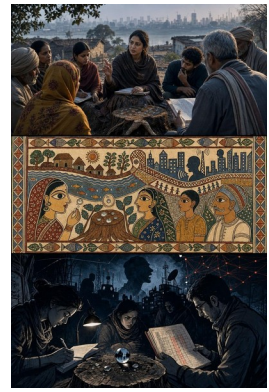
A Little Folk Song

Know it, dear mother, know the tune that is true,
Among a million imitations, hear your child come through.
Mother, your ears know the true note of your little one,
Though countless voices mimic it, love reveals your son.

CHAPTER 168

The City's Throat

The city's throat can be caught, but not its voice—the voice is always higher up.



The elders say the name of a village never walks to the city on its own feet. Someone takes it there—sometimes on a form, sometimes on a receipt, sometimes in a free scan, sometimes through a sweet-talking person who promises to "clean up the system". And once a name has gone away, it does not come back.

Noise is the best curtain. In a village, even a whisper can be heard. In a city, a person may shout and still be ignored. That is why someone who wants to hide chooses not a village room, but one amid horns and loudspeakers. The crowd becomes his doorway.

That day they decided to go to the city. It was not far away, but in the villagers' minds it had always seemed like a dark room where names became bundles of papers, voices became merchandise and people became numbers. Meera agreed to take only a small party: Satyavrat Mehta, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Naresh, Bhikhari Lal and the elderly client.

As soon as they stepped off the bus at the city station, a flood of sound met them—shouts, horns, shopkeepers, ringtones,

loudspeakers, insults and bargaining. Someone said, "Here every voice is eating up another voice." Satyavrat Mehta replied, "It is easy to hide a false voice in all this noise." Ananya noted, "The city: a curtain of noise."

Then a brief struggle broke out. A young man tried to switch off the computer. Aruni did not use his phone to photograph the other phone's screen.

A line on the computer inside remained visible to the police: "Chandra 2: Old bundle of papers active." Chandrapal's full name was not there, but the shadow gleamed again. Blue light from a phone screen fell over everyone's face in the dark room, making them all appear the same colour for a moment. "The shadow has entered the city's throat," Aruni whispered. Satyavrat Mehta cautioned, "Chandra 2 may be Chandrapal—or it may not be.

The process of seizing evidence began. Naresh's statement was written down. The elderly client's identification of the voice was recorded separately.

That night the crocodile appeared again by the riverbank. Its mouth faced the city and its tail lay in the village mud, while the middle of its body remained under water.

The chapter ended with an understanding: the city's throat had been caught, but its true voice had not yet been fully exposed. The village's names had travelled to the city by way of public services, ledgers, pensions, banks and court cases. The city had turned those names into fear carried by a voice.

A Little Folk Song

Ring, oh bell, let the village bell ring through the city,
Wake the walls of solid buildings with a humble doorway's plea.
Let the village name reach the city, ringing clear and strong,
And set pensions, banks and lawsuits on the road where truth belongs.

CHAPTER 169

The Door of Chandra Two

At the doorway, it is the peon who gets caught.

The elders say that adding numbers to names is one of the oldest tricks. Chandra One, Chandra Two—the number makes the name half familiar and half strange. If you are caught, you can say, "It was only a secret code."

And the greatest theft is not of money but of trust. People once opened their doors when they heard a familiar name—Uncle, Panditji, Babu. To take that name and attach it to a telephone call is to rob a village of its oldest wealth. Once trust has been stolen, it may take years to return.

"Could this Chandra 2 be another name for Chandrapal?" Aruni asked. "It could," Meera replied, "but jumping to conclusions helps criminals. First we must see where Chandra appears in the papers, in the voices, in the ledgers and in people's fears."

In a corner, Ananya spotted a bundle of old account papers. Its cover read: "Assistance for the elderly, land disputes, sons living abroad." These three categories were an exact match for the list of circumstances they had read the day before. She quietly called Devika over.

Just then there was a faint rustling in the back room. Aruni and Devika went inside. They found an old scanner, a voice recorder and sheets posted on the wall: "Court officer voice", "Bank verification voice", "Police warning voice", "Son in trouble voice".

One sheet was especially striking. Its heading was "Using Names from Old Relationships of Trust". Underneath were written "Batuk Babu", "Panditji", "Uncle Chandrapal" and "Court Babu". Devika was stunned as she read the list.

Meera asked Chandramohan, "Who is Uncle Chandrapal?" At first Chandramohan laughed. "An old man from the village." Then he said, "Everybody knew him." After that he fell silent. Satyavrat said, "The name that once made people open their doors was being used to sell fear over the telephone."

Late that night a faint splash from the crocodile came from the river. This time its whole body could not be seen in the water; only its eyes shone. The dark ghost tried to lay a film of darkness across those eyes, while the pale spirit swept it away with the shadow of Channa Grove.

From the Chandra Service Office they had uncovered an old list of trusted names, emotional cues, voices imitating institutions and the shadow of Chandra One. The machine-run trade in fear now led straight to old court matters, land disputes, pensions, sons abroad and Chandrapal's name.

A Little Folk Song

Wash it, dear sister, wash the stain from the moon,
Cast aside the false glitter; seek the true ray soon.
Be there two Chandras or ten, the real moon is one;
The people's waking love will wash away the soot when all is done.

CHAPTER 170

Unmasking Chandra One

Strip away the disguise, and Chandra One and Chandra Two are two pieces of the same darkness.

The elders say that some names grow larger than the people who bear them. Such names sometimes accomplish more after the person has died than while that person was alive. A living person can be questioned; a name cannot.

The voice of a father or an elder is the oldest lock of all. "Babu", "Uncle", "Panditji", "the Court"—as soon as the village hears these words, its head bows of its own accord. That bow is a good thing when responsibility stands behind the voice.

When the name of the first Chandra hidden inside the darkness was spoken, the crowd at the Chandra Service Office did not disperse. Instead, it pressed closer together. Everyone understood that the man who had been caught was merely the doorkeeper. The inner room was still shut.

"Perhaps Chandra One is not a person's name at all," said Satyavrat Mehta. "Perhaps it is a mask worn by an old authority." Aruni objected at once. "Then why use Chandrapal's name?" Satyavrat answered, "Because in a society that trusts the voices of its elders and patriarchs with its eyes closed, a

name like Chandrapal becomes a key. Whether the key is genuine or copied, the door opens."

"When writing begins to sell fear, it is no longer merely writing," Meera said. Mohanlal Jha shrugged. "You will not see me calling anybody. I prepare scripts. The customers carry out their own work." Satyavrat picked up the page lying on the table.

At the words "the old grove", it seemed as though the stump of Channa Grove rattled inside everyone's heart. Meera understood that the threads of this mechanical fraud were leading back once more to the village soil, Channa Grove, the courthouse veranda and the records room. The disguise of Chandra One had been opened, but behind it lay another tunnel.

Beside Channa Grove, Surmani Devi said, "Once you understand a spell, half its power to frighten you dies." The children tied these words to the stump with red thread. This time they hung a warning there, not a name: "If someone frightens you on the phone, do not bear it alone. Call the guardians of names."

A crocodile rose from the river. Its eyes held the green gleam of a phone screen, but its body was covered in ancient mud. For a moment it cut straight across the moon's reflection.

Here the first great circle of manufactured fear came to a close. Chandra Two was an office; Chandra One was a mask made of voices. Mohanlal Jha's room, the samples of old speeches, the pen drive of fatherly and official voices, and Madhukar Babu's shadow showed that the crime worked not only through telephones but through society's blind trust.

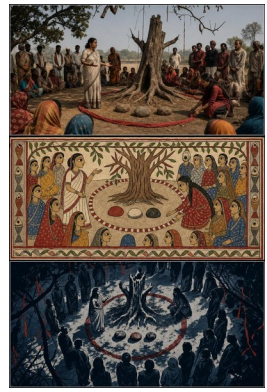
A Little Folk Song

Rise, O moon, rise, O true moon, bright and clear;
Let morning wipe the paper moon that is not real.
The counterfeit paper moon will fade away with night;
The true moon above the courtyard will bring a new delight.

CHAPTER 171

The Invisible Court of Channa Grove

The invisible court has no seal; there people lay aside their fear, not swear an oath.



The elders say that every village has two courts: one with walls, and another with nothing but ears. In the first, dates for hearings are fixed. In the second, people's words are heard.

And there is only one way to measure fear: speak it aloud. So long as fear remains inside, it keeps making itself seem larger. But when it is spoken before ten listening ears, its limits become visible for the first time.

Ananya made a circle of red thread around the roots of the stump. Inside it there was no chair, no raised seat. They placed just three stones there: one for "Name", one for "Fear", and one for "Testimony".

Satyavrat Mehta sat some distance away. He handed out no papers and stamped nothing. Until yesterday, the language of the court had weighed heavily inside him.

Hearing this, Aruni looked at the young people. "A digital arrest is not only a criminal's trick. It also finds the cracks created by distance within families," he said. Several young people lowered their phones.

Meera signalled to everyone: no photographs, no recording devices, no whispering. In place of the woman's name, the children wrote, "Pressure at the threshold." Devika said softly, "In the records of wrongs done to so many women, there is no name—only a thumbprint. In truth, that thumbprint is often the mark of pressure."

Ananya handed out threads of three colours. Black stood for fear, or for something merely inferred from a sign. Each person tied a knot of the appropriate colour to the stump for the testimony they had brought.

Far away in the water, the crocodile lay motionless. No one could tell whether it was hungry now or afraid. As it watched the threads of testimony on Channa Grove's stump, the light in its eyes dimmed.

So ended the invisible court's first day. People left their knots of fear tied to the tree; meanwhile, the shadow of Madhukar Babu was taking a more definite direction.

A Little Folk Song

Put down your bundle, put your bundle of fear away;
Wear courage in the circle beneath the grove today.
A place is spread beneath the trees; untie your fearful load;
Knot by knot, let each one speak the truth they have long owed.

CHAPTER 172

Reading the Knots

Once fear has come into the open, it is time to read its knots—and the knots are always of three colours.

The elders say there is one rule for untying a knot: never yank it. If you pull a thread sharply, the knot grows tighter. If you jolt a person's fear in the same way, it retreats inside them, and it may never come out a second time.

Red, yellow and black are not merely colours; they mark three different distances. Red means there is no distance between my eyes and what happened. Yellow means someone else stands between me and the event: the person who told me about it.

There were many yellow knots. Someone had heard that Madhukar Babu had come to conduct a survey. Someone else had heard that Chandrapal's men were with him.

At first people grew irritated. They felt the questions would weaken their testimony. But Satyavrat explained, "A question is not distrust.

Devika placed a hand on the child's head. "This is black as well as red. Black, because there is fear. Red, because your body is here before us today." Meera added, "The invisible court is not only about fraud.

Meera did not touch the register immediately. "First this page must be copied, the original must be kept safe, and Ramkevalji's account must be written separately," she said. "A red thread does not mean that every conclusion is settled.

Ananya tied a new knot of red thread to the stump. It was heavier than any of the earlier ones. Swinging in the breeze, it cast a shadow upon the black and yellow threads.

That night Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his notes: "When testimony is given colours, a crowd begins to turn into a record. Red is the beginning of truth, yellow the road of memory, black the mine of fear. Without all three, justice remains incomplete.

This chapter ends with the reading of the knots. The invisible court had moved from feeling towards method. The first written clue leading to Madhukar Mishra had been found. But it brought a new danger too: whoever now had a name on the page would surely try to make that page disappear.

A Little Folk Song

Tie the threads, the threads of three bright colours, tie;
Bring red and yellow and green together where the roots lie.
Red is the thread of courage, yellow memory in bloom;
Green hope will bind the three together in a single room.

CHAPTER 173

Keeping Watch over the Register

The register lay silent for fifteen years, but its signatures did not sleep for even one day.

The elders say the most dangerous list is not necessarily the one headed "Punishment". Often it is the one headed "Assistance". People hide from lists of punishments, but they draw up lists of assistance with their own hands—putting down their widows, their old people, their sons overseas, their long-delayed court cases. They write it all down themselves.

Listen carefully to the words "special attention". In an office they mean that more attention should be paid to a household. But when the words leave the office and reach the marketplace, they can come to mean that this house is an especially easy target.

Now the time had come to guard the register. At dawn Ananya was the first to reach the stump of Channa Grove. All night she had struggled with the register's shadow in her thoughts. Madhukar Mishra's signature on the fifteen-year-old page was more than a name.

Devika asked permission to photograph it on her phone, but Ramkeval hesitated. What if someone altered the picture? What if the name on the paper travelled outside and his grandson

came under pressure? Aruni spoke at once. “There will be three copies.

Ramkeval kept asking to take the original register home, but everyone agreed it must not be left alone that night. At last they decided that the original would stay with Meera and Ramkeval in the inner room of Devika’s house. The first copy would go into a sealed envelope held by Satyavrat Mehta.

As evening fell, they divided the watches. Phulesar and two children would remain near Devika’s courtyard, but Meera arranged for them to stay outside, under the pretence of playing, so the weight of fear would not fall on the children. Bhikhari Lal would stand the first watch near Mehta’s house.

Bhikhari Lal came running from a distance. Aruni and Ananya came out of Neelmani’s house carrying a lantern. The shadow fled, but left a sheet of paper beside the back wall—an unsigned note.

Meera did not place the note with the register. She had it sealed in a separate envelope. “A threat is not the enemy of evidence,” she said. “It is the evidence’s shadow.”

By dawn the register was safe: the original page safe, the copies safe, the note safe. The guards were tired but still standing straight. When the first light came through the room’s small window and fell upon the page, the letters written fifteen years earlier shone as though someone had written them that very night.

A Little Folk Song

Wake, O seed, O seed of fifteen years, awake;
Feel the spring breeze, let the old husk break.
For fifteen years the seed lay quiet underneath the ground;
Drinking dew through changing seasons, life grew deep without a sound.

CHAPTER 174

At the Threshold of the Invisible Court

The court's threshold is not made of stone; it is made of the courage gathered in a circle.

The elders say that people take off their shoes of their own accord wherever they feel they will be heard. Why do people take off their shoes in a temple? Because there they believe someone is listening.

And think about the word "absent". A paper records, "The petitioner was absent," although the petitioner rose before dawn, walked three kos without breakfast and stood on the veranda that very day. Who, then, was truly absent?

The ghost of the old elder shimmered beside a crack in the stump. This was not a frightening shimmer; it seemed a sign of acceptance. The dark ghost stepped back twice, and the white spirit wrote something in the air with a finger.

After this testimony Devika wrote, "The counterfeit seal of a voice." Chandrapal's old tricks with paper and the digital fraudster's imitated voice seemed scarcely different. Both read the fears inside human beings.

As soon as the notebook was set upon the stone, a stir ran through the crowd. For the first time a document was coming

out from inside the crime itself. No one rushed forward to snatch it.

For the first time Satyavrat Mehta answered him: "We shall examine its legal value later. Right now we are weighing its human value." It was a brief answer, but it held years of weariness and a new firmness. People seemed about to speak, yet no one in the crowd abused the man or pushed him.

"What is your name?" Meera asked the man. He remained silent. Devika said, "Look: the person who questions the value of another's testimony has not the courage to give his own name." A murmur rose, but Meera lifted her hand and stopped it. She wrote, "Anonymous objection—trust in the seal, distrust of the human being." The man's face fell.

As night descended, a damp smell rose from inside the stump. Some thought its roots were coming alive again. Others said it was only the night dew.

That night the wind opened the first page of the notebook that the clerk Ramballabh had placed on the stone. Among the names written there was one that would make every old crime catch its breath: the name of Batuknath Hariharan's actual bearer of the seal. The invisible court would no longer listen only to victims' stories.

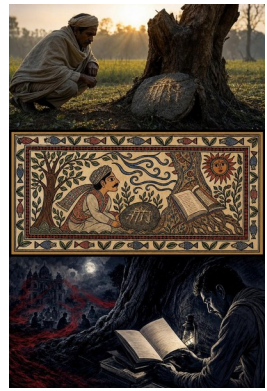
A Little Folk Song

Light a lamp, oh light it on the stone of names;
With its gentle glow, soften the rock that pain has claimed.
The stone is hard indeed, the lamplight soft and warm;
Only tender light can read the deeds long buried by the storm.

CHAPTER 175

The Name of the Seal-Bearer

Dew fell, yet the letters on the stone did not blur. It is forgetting, not moisture, that erases a name.



The name Dinbandhu, which emerged from Ramballabh's notebook, was not merely the name of a man. It seemed to arrive accompanied by the rustling of a bag, red sealing wax, a brass seal and blank sheets of paper. Carrying a seal may sound like a small responsibility, but the doors of trust open and close beneath that very hand.

When a son hears his father's name spoken in this way, shame rises inside him. Yet if shame covers the truth, darkness becomes an inheritance. Shashibhushan's real test was not to prove his father innocent. It was to place everything his father had left behind before the investigation.

The "Final List" was not an ending but a doorway to the next darkness. Names were read from the list, garlands offered, and the word "service" spoken. Yet it remained to be discovered whose land, whose labour, whose bodies and whose silence had been pledged as security behind that brightness.

Dinbandhu's name, discovered in Ramballabh's notebook during the night, stayed in everyone's mind until morning. When dawn light touched the stump of Channa Grove, the faint

shine on the stone of names did not fade. Dew had fallen through the night, but the letters written upon the stone remained clear.

Ananya stopped short at the name. "Dinbandhu Jha?" The village elders remembered him, but until now no one had placed him among these crimes. People had always said that Dinbandhu merely delivered papers, applied seals and issued receipts.

Ananya opened a fresh page in the register of names. At the top she wrote, "The seal-bearer's role." Below that she left three lines: "Seen", "Heard" and "Verified". She warned everyone not to piece together a story carelessly.

Shashibhushan opened the diary. Its pages held dates and names and certain signs: "red", "black", "three copies", "night", "B. H." and "Ch. Pa." Ananya immediately stopped the others. "Do not turn signs into names too quickly." Even so, Chandrapal's name was whispered in the crowd.

That night the white spirit stood motionless for a long time beside Channa Grove's stump. The dark ghost circled it, as if announcing that the game of seals had now begun. In the distant river, a crocodile broke the surface once before diving straight back under.

Before dawn, the wind opened a page in Dinbandhu's diary. Only two words stood out clearly: "Final List". Below them was a date from the very week when the names of all the village's poor families had been read aloud on the stage at Batuknath Hariharan's service ceremony.

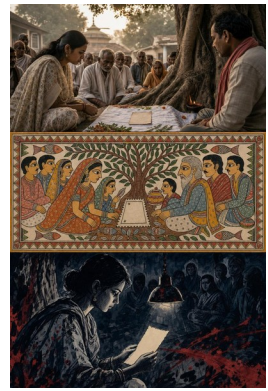
A Little Folk Song

Breathe life, breathe life into each line of the list;
Behind the numbers, hold a father's days and nights in your fist.
A list is not a row of words: it holds a father's day,
His hammer, sweat and laughter, and the hopes that light his family's way.

CHAPTER 176

Darkness at the Service Ceremony

The final list is written on the smallest page, yet casts the longest shadow.



The final list is written on the smallest page, yet casts the longest shadow. Names fit on a small sheet, but the bodies behind those names, the fields, the sweat, children's hunger and the hopes of old parents do not fit there. A person making such a list can reduce a whole human being to a single line, then write "benefit", "special" or "stop" beside it and change the course of that life.

Light on a stage is not always the enemy of darkness. Often darkness arrives dressed in that very light. Garlands, devotional songs, lamps, words spoken before a crowd—these keep everyone's eyes raised so that no one sees the papers being changed beneath the table.

The women were made to stand in a separate line, because the cheats knew that embarrassment, haste and the hope of receiving help, taken together, would mean fewer questions. "When your name is called, raise your hand, have your picture taken, give your thumbprint." Such a short instruction could change the meaning of a person's body, land and consent. A

thumbprint taken without allowing someone time to read cannot be called freely given consent.

"The pages were being changed?" Aruni asked at once. Ramballabh started. The sentence that had slipped from his mouth had opened a doorway to evidence.

At the sound of Chandrapal's name, whispers spread through the crowd. Meera spoke firmly: "We have heard a name, not yet proved an accusation. Stay with what was actually seen." The children wrote in their ledger, "A temporary table before the service ceremony.

Meera recorded this testimony on a separate page. "Women's line separate. No papers handed over." She explained to the children, "Where women's signatures are taken without their being allowed to read, the road opens not to charity but to seizure." Ananya's eyes brightened at these words.

Satyavrat Mehta drew a long breath. "We cannot yet say with certainty who B. H. is," he said. "But instructions to change the original reveal the pattern of a crime." Aruni added, "That means the original document may have been altered after a different page was read aloud to the people." Ananya wrote, "Public reading and private records." This new heading became central to the investigation ahead.

In the last watch of the night, Satyavrat Mehta touched an old root beside Channa Grove's stump. It seemed to him that he could hear the rustle of paper from deep inside the root. He closed his eyes and listened.

The invisible court gave no verdict that night. Yet the cloth from the service ceremony, Dinbandhu's slip, the testimony about the women's line and the words "change the original" together grew so heavy that the stump's shadow seemed pressed into the earth. Before dawn, the wind turned a page of the diary.

A Little Folk Song

Set down a lamp, set it upon the dark cloth there;
Fill the seat of darkness with the light that we can share.
Though the black cloth has been spread, upon it place a flame;
Read each name with reverence, and fill the stage with truth, not shame.

CHAPTER 177

Documents from Door to Door

When the court begins to walk from house to house, justice has found its feet.

A threshold is the first boundary truth must respect. It is easy to open a chest inside someone's home, but even evidence found in a chest opened without permission is stained by injustice. The private rights of people deceived for years in the name of paperwork cannot be stolen once more in the search for truth.

Names, names—how many shapes a name can take! One on a stage, another on a medal, a third in a register, a fourth in a mortgage deed. And somewhere in between, a single human being is split into four pieces. When the letters of a name are distorted, it is not merely the pronunciation that goes wrong: the path to the land can change as well.

The previous night, the page marked "Final List" had unfolded into an instruction to visit every household. By dawn that instruction had acquired feet. As the first sunlight fell on Channa Grove's stump, the circle of the invisible court ceased to be still. That day the court would not remain seated among the roots.

Ananya divided the children into three groups. The first would read names, the second would examine household documents,

and the third would write down testimony. The rule was clear: no one was to open any chest, trunk, cupboard, bag or box without permission.

Satyavrat Mehta was struck by Ragini Devi's words. This ordinary woman had expressed a profound idea about justice: guilt and fear required separate accounts. "I will seal this page immediately," he said.

Beneath the poster, in tiny letters, were the words, "All written records will be kept safe by the organising committee." Aruni put a finger on the line. "That was their excuse for taking household papers." Lalit quietly admitted, "We went from house to house saying the committee would keep the papers safe. Poor people's papers can be destroyed at home." "Who told you to say that?" Meera asked. Lalit fell silent at first, then said softly, "Chandrapal."

Chandrapal's name had arisen again, this time alongside a procedure: collecting documents house to house, giving no copies, keeping the committee's supposedly safe records. "Crime is becoming not merely the action of one person but a system," said Satyavrat Mehta. The children wrote his words on a separate line.

The invisible court reached no verdict that day either, but it had shown the way forward. The papers collected from the houses were returned to their owners. Only images, descriptions and copies made with consent were kept.

In the last part of the day, they laid four things on the cloth: Ragini Devi's page, the line printed on Lalit's poster, Chamru's four names and Shanti's words, "They called it assistance, but wrote it down as consent." The dark ghost bent over the circle, the white spirit cast light upon it, and far away a crocodile cut silently through the river. In that silence Ananya opened a new page in the ledger.

A Little Folk Song

Hold the papers to your heart, hold them close, hold them tight;
But do not stand alone—gather neighbours at each doorway in the light.
Press your papers to your heart, but do not walk alone;
Gather people door by door, till truth is woven and is known.

CHAPTER 178

The Room Upstairs

The whisper in the upstairs room is fire in dry leaves—one spark can spread through the village.

A staircase does not take justice upwards; it carries justice farther in. Each step bears not merely the weight of a foot but years of silence. Lime flakes from the walls, cobwebs tremble, breathing quickens.

Dust, dust is not a fault. It is a thin blanket of forgetting. But when someone deliberately lets dust gather, keeps the windows shut and hides the list, the dust becomes a guardian of evidence. Its smell mingles dampness, oil, iron and old ink.

Meera warned the children beforehand. “We shall open the room, but we shall not plunder it. Everything we find will be listed. Whoever is identified as an owner will be informed.

As the group climbed the old courthouse stairs, every stone step seemed to breathe. Lime crumbled from the walls. In one corner the cobwebs were so thick that they looked like the arguments of some ancient lawyer, caught in the air and spun into a net.

Outside the door were three old impressions of seals: one from the court, another from the tehsil office, and the third from a

private service committee. Meera stopped when she saw the private seal beside the official ones. "Why is a service committee named on this door?" No one answered.

Ramballabh the clerk sank into a chair. His face looked devastated. "Why were these papers not kept in the records room?" Satyavrat Mehta asked.

The white spirit brushed a hand across the dust on the top shelf. An impression emerged in the dust: "Send upstairs." Perhaps the pressure of an old note had preserved those words there.

That night the circle was formed again beside Channa Grove. In its centre lay a small cloth holding some dust from the upstairs room—not evidence, but a remembrance. The faint smell of dampness spread with the dust around the circle.

At last Satyavrat Mehta said, "The room upstairs has opened, but now we must open the route that led upstairs—the tehsil, the bank, the ledgers, the city offices." The children turned to a fresh page in their ledger and wrote the heading, "The Route of the Seals".

A Little Folk Song

Climb the stairs, climb to the room above;
With a broom and an open window, make a morning we can love.
The upstairs room is full of dust; the sunlight waits outside;
One broom, one window opened wide, and darkness cannot hide.

CHAPTER 179

Footprints of the Seal

The footprints of a seal do not dry with the ink; they go on showing the road.

A footprint is more than the mark of a foot. It is an account of trust travelling from one place to another. A cloth was offered on the village stage; authority was entered into the tehsil register; a picture was caught in the city records; money was divided along three roads by a bank account. Each step seems small when seen separately.

A seal is like an innocent child: it goes wherever a hand carries it. The fault lies not in the rubber but in the finger that presses it without reading, presses it after selling trust, or keeps silent through fear. When an official seal and a service committee's seal appear side by side on the same doorway, people can easily be confused.

The upstairs room was sealed once more in the presence of five witnesses. But the route of the seals discovered inside it could not be closed. Through the night the ink on the sheet marked "The Route of the Seals", laid beneath Channa Grove, did not seem to dry. It was as if smoke were still rising from within the words.

In the morning the children first took separate impressions of the seals on paper: the blue circular mark of the Seva Niketan, a counterfeit half-moon mark resembling the tehsil seal, and a third blank rubber stamp on which the name could be changed. Beside the three impressions Ananya wrote, "Claimed service", "False authority", "Changing name".

The clerk sitting in the records room grew uneasy when he saw the group. "Why have so many of you come?" he asked. Satyavrat Mehta answered calmly, "Only five witnesses will come inside.

"Three accounts?" Satyavrat asked. The bank's printed statement showed the names: one Seva Niketan, one supplier of construction materials and one "Harihar Welfare Trust". Batuknath's own name was not there, but the shadow grew darker.

That night the assembly met again beside Channa Grove, but this time no testimony was read aloud. Instead they traced the footprints of the seals on stones. At every turning they set a small lamp.

The crocodile appeared in the river again that night. It came close to the bank and rested its snout upon the water. Its eyes glittered, but it was not hunting.

The seals from the upstairs room were no longer merely footprints. They had become a road. The criminals had laid that road in silence; now the children, guardians of names, would walk along it carrying lamps.

A Little Folk Song

Read the footprints, read the footsteps ink has made;
Whose hand, which road? Trace them patiently, unafraid.
The ink's footprints are travelling still; read the path they show;
From whose hand to which place they went, draw the map and know.

CHAPTER 180

The City's Accounts

The accounts may be opened in the city, but their roots remain buried in someone's courtyard in the village.

When something is taken away and later returned as a donation in the name of those from whom it was taken, the mantle of kindness becomes a cloth for concealing shame. Shanti's old shawl remembers this deception. It is soft, yet caught within its folds are the soil of fields, the applause of ceremonies, and questions never allowed to be asked.

The lines of an account book advance like footprints: from land to loans, from loans to payments, from payments to a trust, and from the trust to ceremonies. Behind every arrow stands a hand; behind every abbreviation, a name. Justice does not fill in a person's name through guesswork: it identifies that person by evidence.

Where the footprints of the seal had ended the previous night, the first light of morning drew another line towards the city's accounts. All night those traces shimmered upon the stone at Channa Grove. Even after the wick of the lamp had gone out, the lines remained.

On one page an expense appeared under the heading 'Assistance for Special Government Arrangements'. The amount stood beside it, but the recipient's name had been reduced to three letters: 'Ra. Cha. La.' 'Is this a secret code?' Ananya asked. 'An accounting abbreviation,' Govardhan replied. 'Abbreviations become dangerous where a full name could make someone answerable,' said Satyavrat Mehta. Aruni wrote in the margin: 'Ra—Raghav?'

As they emerged from the office, the first threat from Dhruvesh's telephone campaign appeared. An unknown number sent a message to Ananya's phone: 'Leave the documents alone, or your face will be made public.' With it came a photograph taken outside the bank the previous day. For a moment the children were silent.

Satyavrat proposed going immediately to the city's cybercrime unit, but Meera said, 'First secure copies. If the original phone is seized, our work may stop.' Ananya, Aruni and Devika wrote the message separately on paper. A picture of the phone screen was also taken.

Meera explained the chain: the photograph, the phone, surveillance outside the bank, and the trust's accounts. The officer listened more closely. 'The number is probably temporary,' he said.

At last Shanti laid her ceremonial shawl upon the stone. 'This shawl covered my shame, and covered what happened to our fields. Today let it become a table for evidence.' The trust's accounting records, the accountant's envelope, a copy of the threatening message and the cybercrime receipt were placed upon it. In the lamplight its colour seemed to change: no longer a symbol of charity, it was a place of resistance.

In the last watch of the night the river was extraordinarily still. After a long absence the crocodile surfaced, opened its eyes and

slowly sank again. Aruni wrote: 'When the teeth are given their true names, the teeth begin to retreat.'

A Little Folk Song

Spread the shawl, spread Shanti's shawl tonight,
Let people's lamps, not silence, fill its light.
Upon the cloth that shelters mother and child, let truth be laid;
Peace is not silence—let courage fill each home unafraid.

CHAPTER 181

The Shadow of the SIM Card

The shadow of a SIM card wanders without a body. Numbers change, but intentions do not.

Numbers change; SIM cards change; shops change. But where the intention remains the same, the shadow does not alter its gait. Its footprints stay in the first signal from a phone tower, in the red-pencil dot, in a sealed envelope, and in a thumbprint given in hope of receiving assistance.

When living threats travel in the names of the dead, the offence is more than dishonesty on paper. It is the theft of memory. A name that a family invokes beside a lamp becomes a SIM card in the marketplace, sending fear into other homes. What greater insult could there be?

Ananya circled the bus stand on the map. Beside it Aruni wrote: 'A false name changes; the first signal does not.' 'The person seeking the shadow of a SIM must first have appeared in the light,' Devika said. The children did not laugh. Fear was now written on a telephone's glass, but it was born on the earth.

The smallest shop bore a blue board: 'Madhav Communication Services'. Inside were a plastic chair, a broken phone screen,

charging cables, a betel box and an old register. A young man named Madhav avoided meeting their eyes.

Aruni opened a fresh page, 'Documents Received from Outside'. 'Outside where?' Satyavrat Mehta asked. 'The Harihar Service Centre,' Madhav said. 'Dhruvesh Babu's men said the elderly would receive benefits. Some who were given SIM cards received phones; some SIM cards were taken back later.' Meera grew grave. 'A SIM registered in someone's name, but no phone in that person's hand…'

Meera raised her hand and silenced them all. 'A crowd will tear the truth apart,' she said. 'One name at a time, one thumbprint at a time, one account at a time.' Ananya and Devika made two columns.

That night Meera, Satyavrat, Ananya, Aruni and Devika wrote their next steps: obtain the service centre's register, compare photographs from the service camp, check beneficiaries against the SIM list, and submit the activation times of the threatening numbers to the cybercrime unit. It was no longer just the village's struggle. It was a struggle to restore the bodies of stolen names.

Tell us, O SIM, tell us who your true owner is.

Give back peaceful sleep to the one whose name was stolen.

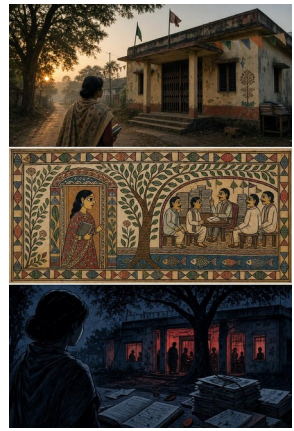
A Little Folk Song

Look beyond the numbers; look and recognise,
Change a thousand SIMs, yet love's true voice survives.
Numbers may change, and SIM cards too, but human affection stays;
One voice knows another, and truth reveals its ways.

CHAPTER 182

The Door of the Harihar Service Centre

By day the service centre distributes assistance. By night, its door conceals the accounts.



When people hear the word ‘service’, they trustingly hand over their documents. If their names, thumbprints, photographs and SIM cards then become merchandise, the crime is not confined to forms. It violates the dignity of the threshold they crossed.

The key is in Narhari Kaka’s hand, but the real key is the people’s voice. Those who spent years hearing ‘Orders from above’ have begun to ask: who is above?

The SIM card’s shadow had been traced, but its body was still far away. All night dew settled upon the papers beside the roots of Channa Grove. All night dew settled upon the papers beside the roots of Channa Grove.

The first sight at the service centre was strange. The door stood half-open, the floor swept, a flowerpot on the desk, and Batuknath Hariharan’s smiling portrait upon the wall. Beneath it were the words ‘Service Is Sacred Duty’. ‘Wherever service is written in very bright letters,’ Devika whispered, ‘look for the

shadows too.' A smell of damp broom, old sealing ink and the mustiness of a closed room came through the door.

An elderly watchman, Narhari Kaka, sat inside. His eyes were dim but his voice clear. 'Sirs, the centre is closed today.' 'Why?' Meera asked. 'Orders from above,' he answered. Satyavrat did not smile.

Devika wrote: 'Bundles of papers moved at night.' 'Is there a register?' Satyavrat asked. Narhari pointed to a rusty key hanging in the corner: 'In the upstairs cupboard.' The word 'upstairs' reminded them of the courthouse's upper room. In the language of crime 'above' is not always a physical place; it is a direction in which responsibility is pushed away.

In the cupboard they found two cloth-wrapped registers, 'Beneficiary Attendance' and 'Digital Assistance'. The first listed poor families, thumbprints and secret benefit codes. The second held telephone numbers, SIM serial numbers, bank messages and repeated entries reading 'Phone Returned'.

Satyavrat drew the line: Service Centre → SIM Register → Returned Phones → Trust Accounts → Threatening Messages → Dhruvesh's Assistant. Beneath it Meera wrote: 'Verification pending, but the route is clear.' Ananya began a new page, 'The Face Inside the Phone'. Aruni added: 'When the device answers, the shadow will speak.'

The Harihar Service Centre's door was open, but the faces trapped in its pictures remained in darkness. Before dawn a dewdrop glittered among the roots of Channa Grove as though the grove were saying, 'The door is open. Now read the faces within.'

A Little Folk Song

Open the door, open the door of service at daybreak,
With the people's voice, make the rusty lock give way.
The heavy door stayed closed throughout the night;
At dawn the people's loving words became its key of light.

CHAPTER 183

The Face Inside the Phone

A face may hide inside a phone, but the rhythm of breathing cannot be hidden.

A grandmother's face is not a spectacle. In her wrinkles live the years of a household, in her throat the songs of generations, and in her name her grandchildren's trust. Making a false voice from that name is not merely a crime of technology; it breaks the threshold of a relationship.

There is dignity to be respected even when examining evidence. Spreading a victim's face without consent is not justice; it is another humiliation. So Meera says: look, connect, record.

After the Harihar Service Centre's door was opened, the next breath of the digital shadow lay sealed within a pen drive. The seal on the drive, left all night beside Channa Grove's roots, was untouched in the morning. Dew rested like pearls upon the sealing paper, but the children did not dare touch it.

After sunrise the cybercrime officer returned. His name was Vineet Jha, but Ananya's first question was about his procedure, not his name. 'When you open this device, will what

is inside it change?' Vineet looked startled for a moment, then grew serious. 'First a copy will be made, the original will be kept safe, the time recorded, and the witnesses will sign.'

A temporary table was set beneath Channa Grove. Upon its white cloth lay the seal, a camera, an empty envelope, copying paper, and Satyavrat Mehta's old spectacles. The crowd was kept at a distance.

Meera stopped the video at once. 'We will not make the people shown here public without their consent,' she said. 'We are looking at this as evidence, not as a means of humiliating them.' A young villager who had been about to record the scene on his phone slowly put it into his pocket.

Ananya's notebook trembled. For the first time the crime had not revealed its entire face, but a hand had appeared. She wrote: 'Sometimes a face speaks falsely, but a hand leaves the truth behind.' Aruni added: 'Signatures, thumbprints, hands—every crime passes through hands.' The leaves of Channa Grove stirred without apparent cause, as if confirming the words.

Today the dark ghost sat towards the west of the grove. The pale spirit bent over the pen drive's record sheet. In a low voice the Old Man's ghost said, 'In earlier times, names were erased first.

Here the chapter ended: the face within the phone had not been fully revealed, but its hand, laughter, fan, time, and the victim's voice now stood in a single line of evidence. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, 'The Mask of a Voice.' Dew glimmered once more beside the roots of Channa Grove.

A Little Folk Song

Gather round, dear granddaughter, sit beside your grandmother,
Read the Mithila written in every wrinkle together.
Grandmother's face holds Mithila's map in every line;
Her name is like a lamp, and love keeps her safe through time.

CHAPTER 184

The Mask of a Voice

The mask worn by a voice is not made of cloth. It is made through practice, and the patterns of practice can be recognised.

The leaves of the grove seemed to say: if the ears are impatient, even falsehood may sound true. But when questions are asked slowly, an echo begins to reveal its source. At which word was the breath caught? What metallic ring sounded behind a laugh? Which rattling fan recalled an old room? Together, such tiny clues began to undo the stitching of a voice's mask.

A stolen voice, like a stolen name, strikes at a person's very existence. A mother knows the way her little child turns in sleep. An elderly person can recognise a son's voice even in a crowd.

Vineet Jha first gave a warning: 'Voice comparison is not final proof in court, but it can certainly be a lamp showing the way. Ears are moved by feeling, and machines can make mistakes too. So do not examine a voice alone: examine it alongside time, place, telephone records, pictures, and testimony.' Meera immediately wrote beneath those words, 'A crowd will not judge by ear.'

Meera's expression hardened. 'Did the people whose voices were stolen give their consent?' she asked. Nobody answered.

This small piece of information altered the entire map. If the fan had travelled from the service centre to the city, the city man's room had carried away the service centre's sounds. The criminals had transported not only papers but sounds as well.

Today the dark ghost came and sat very near the grove. The pale spirit bent over the list of voices. The Old Man's ghost said, 'In the old days, witches would change their voices to mislead children.

When night fell, Bishambhar finally stepped forward. 'I used to answer the phone, but it was the man from the city who spoke. Dhruvesh Babu told me: just connect the numbers and stay in the background.'

Bishambhar's admission was not complete, but a crack had opened. He held out the hand with the dark thread. 'This wound is from the night when I tried to snatch away a box of phones and an elderly person bit my hand.' Deepak's eyes filled with tears again. 'Grandmother?' Bishambhar was silent.

Thus the voice's mask was not entirely removed, but a thread of it had come into their hands. The city man emerged under the name 'Master'; the part played by Dhruvesh's assistant in rehearsing voices, connecting calls, and stealing speech became clearer; and the fan's creaking began to show the road to the city. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, 'The Master's Room.' Aruni added, 'Where a voice was made, a face must have left its trace.' Night descended over Channa Grove, but this time the darkness itself was speaking.

A Little Folk Song

Listen softly, listen within the sound,
Among a thousand glass-like voices, let the living breath be found.
Many voices speak behind the glass, but only one life is true;
The heart knows loving speech, and deception breaks in two.

CHAPTER 185

The Master's Room

The Master's room was opened, and the Master vanished like smoke. But even smoke must have a path to follow.

People hear a creaking fan and think an old machine is wearing out. But when the same creak, in exactly the same rhythm, is heard on a threatening call, remembered at the service centre and found in a room in the city, the sound becomes a footprint. Truth does not always run towards us.

Madhavesh or Madhvesh—remove a single vowel and someone hopes to hide. But telephone numbers, rental registers, receipts, railway timetables and habits of handwriting begin to recognise one another. A criminal may shorten his name, but not the shadow it casts.

The thread of the fan's creak led towards the city railway tracks. Its whirr seemed to hang above Channa Grove through the night. There was no fan there, yet the leaves rattled as if an invisible machine were turning between the branches.

Meera set down the rules: 'We shall inspect the room, but not as a crowd. Nobody touches anything. We enter lawfully, with authorised people.'

A half-torn calendar hung on a wall. Beneath the raised page was a pencil diagram: Harihar Service Centre → Upstairs Photocopy Room → City Accounts → Trust → 'D' → 'M'. Ananya was about to expand the initials, but Satyavrat stopped her. 'Record the letters, not their supposed meanings.' Aruni wrote: 'D/M—Verification Pending.' The children had learned not to let inference sit in the witness's chair.

Then a bit of red thread was found in a drawer. Ananya remembered the little bird's beak at Channa Grove. Was the thread used to bind documents, or was it linked with the grove's mysterious signs? No one could yet say.

At Channa Grove they arranged photographs, an inventory, the fan's receipt, a SIM-card casing, a list of recorded sounds and copies of the rent register upon the stone. Nobody applauded.

The dark ghost bent over the fan's photograph. The pale spirit lingered beside the bag of red thread. Bishambhar stood at a distance listening. When 'Madhvesh' was read aloud he whispered, 'Master said: Keep your name short and you will escape.' Ananya wrote it down. 'Shortening a name does not make the crime smaller,' Aruni added. The leaves stirred.

The Master's room had opened, but the Master had escaped. They now knew that the theft of voices involved knowledge of bodies and families, the noise of a fan, railway timetables, invented background sounds and money moving through a trust. Ananya opened the next page: 'Madhvesh's Real Name.'

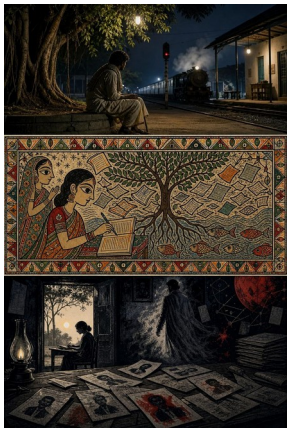
A Little Folk Song

Open the window, open the creaking room,
Let the station whistle mingle with the music of dawn.
The old fan turns and searches for the morning light;
The railway whistle calls—the edge of darkness comes in sight.

CHAPTER 186

Madhvesh's Real Name

A person's real name may be written upon the thinnest paper—the very paper everyone mistakes for rubbish.



Madhukar. Madhavesh. Madhvesh. Master. Letters were removed, vowels altered, new disguises assumed. Yet the hand's habits and the voice's movements remained. A person may try to escape his village, poverty and his mother's memories by changing his name; the old name follows like wind through leaves.

Once imitation had been a game. A child could copy laughter, fear, a baby's cry, an old man's speech or a politician's voice and win applause. When greed bought that talent, the same gift carried fear into other people's houses. The words on his mother's wall, 'Do Not Sell Your Voice', had become a warning about his future.

The half-visible letters from the Master's nameplate seemed to tremble on the stone at Channa Grove all night. The whistle of the railway station lingered beside the roots. The room was open, but the Master had slipped away like smoke.

Now three forms of the name were assembled: Madhvesh, Madhavesh and Madhukar. Satyavrat Mehta removed his spectacles and wiped them. 'If a nickname and an official name differ, school registers, voter rolls and examination records may help,' he said. Vineet Jha agreed.

The headmaster produced another register of scholarship applications. In it they found that Madhukar's bank account had once been linked with an account associated with the service centre. The explanation was 'Guardian Assistance'.

The investigators returned to Channa Grove. On the stone they laid a certified copy of the school register, a theatre-day photograph, the scholarship extract, Katki's statement and the entry 'Madhvesh' from the rent register. Ananya read out the sequence: Madhukar Madhav Mishra → Madhavesh → Madhvesh → Master.

At night a strange humming rose among the leaves. Madhukar's name suggested bees, and for a moment invisible bees seemed to circle the branches. 'If honey has turned to poison,' said the Old Man's ghost, 'search for the hive.'

Satyavrat wrote: 'Probable true name of suspect: Madhukar Madhav Mishra. Names used: Madhavesh, Madhvesh, Master. Links: Harihar Service Centre, Dhruvesh-associated service network, station room.'

For the first time Madhvesh's real name appeared in a clear sequence. But discovering the name did not end the offence. His childhood, art, shame and ambition, Dhruvesh's hand, Maheshwar's shadow and the city's accounts became connected.

A Little Folk Song

Hum, little bee, hum along the flowered way,
Leave the circle of poison; let sweet honey have its day.
Hum, O Madhukar, show the path where flowers grow;
Leave the poison's ring and bring the sweetness home.

CHAPTER 187

The Queen Inside the Hive

The queen within the hive never visits the flowers herself. The bees' humming reveals her whereabouts.

There was not just one Rani. At times she was an elderly woman, at others a young woman living overseas, or a committee alive only on paper. The coverings changed; the honey travelled by the same route. Those who assume women are weak offer criminals an illusion behind which they can build a strong fortress.

Clearing an innocent name is part of justice. Catching the culprit may take time, but the stain on an innocent forehead must be removed promptly. Record hearsay as hearsay, observation as observation, possibility as possibility. Restraint prevents inquiry from becoming revenge and prevents the poor person's story from being sold again.

Even after Madhukar's real name was found, the question of who had stored the honey troubled Channa Grove all night. By morning the humming sounded more like the clink of coins. The Old Man's question lodged in everyone's mind: 'The bee is

caught, but whose house holds the honey?' Ananya opened her register and wrote: 'The Queen Inside the Hive.'

They opened the first Rani account. Name: Rani Devi. The photograph showed an elderly woman in a sari, questions in her eyes. 'So much money in this old woman's account?' murmured the crowd. Meera was stern: 'A name has been read. A crime has not been established.'

Rani Devi's thirteen-year-old grandson spoke: 'At the service centre they held Grandma's hand against a glass strip. Three times, not once. They said the machine was broken.' Ananya's pencil stopped.

On returning to Channa Grove they laid out Rani Devi's statement, thumbprint comparisons, her grandson's words, a letter from Rani Kumari abroad, the committee register and the flow of money. 'Do not declare any woman guilty,' said Meera. 'This shows that the criminals believed women's names would be safe places to hide money.'

Ananya turned back to a page in Chapter 186: 'Maheshwar Connection—Verification Pending.' The first fragment now filled that blank space.

Satyavrat wrote: 'The Rani section appears to be a layered cover, not the true controller. Investigate connections among a poor woman, an absent young woman, a paper committee, forged thumbprints and Maheshwarnath Sevak's seal. Madhukar manufactured voices…'

The queen within the hive was not one woman but layer upon layer of stolen women's names. Madhukar's voices, Dhruvesh's service network, the Rani accounts, false thumbprints and Maheshwarnath Sevak's seal formed a chain. Ananya wrote the next heading: 'Maheshwar's Seal.'

A Little Folk Song

Shine, O Rani, let your rightful name shine bright,
Shake away the dust of lies; bathe in truth's clear light.
Rani need not wash away her name—only brush the dust aside;
Let truth cleanse what falsehood stained and restore her rightful pride.

CHAPTER 188

Maheshwar's Seal

The blue seal is no mere stamp. It is a wound upon the body of the paper.

Names change—Mahesar, Maheshwar, Maheshwarnath, Sevak—but the ink's wound does not change its ways. The full name, shortened name and committee stamp are three shapes of a sign intended to exhaust whoever investigates them.

A blank sheet is the deepest chest. Who had the authority to write the words that had not yet been written? That question rises from the paper's white body. First the supposed consent; afterwards the date.

Beginning the gathering, Meera said, 'A seal is not a criminal. How a seal is used may reveal the criminal path. Maheshwarnath's name has appeared, but a name's appearance is not proof of someone's guilt.'

The assembly stirred. 'Mahesar' sounded like childhood footsteps coming out of dust. Ananya made a new column: Mahesar, Maheshwar, Maheshwarnath, M. N. Sevak.

The leaves shook. The Old Man's ghost spoke: 'In older times a false division of property first happened in the mind; papers were prepared afterwards. Now fraudulent benefits appear in an account first, and consent is manufactured afterwards.'

Ananya mapped Channa Grove, the Harihar Service Centre, the lane behind the station, the bank, the Rani accounts, Dhruvesh's network, Madhukar's room and Maheshwar's seal. The joined lines resembled not a beehive but the open jaws of a crocodile. Aruni said, 'A hive stores honey…'

'Blank letterheads?' Satyavrat asked sharply. Narhari Kaka nodded. 'Yes. Since Batuknath Hariharan's time.'

Satyavrat's final note read: 'Maheshwarnath Sevak's seal appears to be a multipurpose mark of control. Rani accounts, committee approval, digital orders, banking identification and the service centre's blank letterheads may be connected. Dhruvesh's mediation, Madhukar's voice network, the station lane and the old iron chest require inquiry.'

The seal had become a key travelling through the darkness of an old charitable organisation, blank letterheads, stolen women's names, digital threats, lax banking and the Dhruvesh–Madhukar network. Gadadhar's rusty key lay on the stone. Ananya wrote: 'The Iron Chest.'

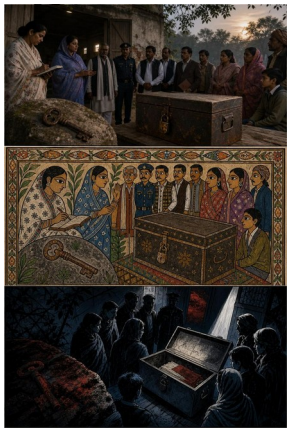
A Little Folk Song

Lay a green leaf upon the blue wound, lay it gently there,
Let rays pass through the little openings of the Jhijhiya lamp with care.
If the blue seal leaves a wound, cover it with living green;
Through the lamp's small openings, let the light of truth be seen.

CHAPTER 189

The Iron Chest

The key of an iron chest may rust, but testimony does not.



The chest seemed to say: 'Do not blame me. Examine the hands that filled me.' The coconut leaf had been auspicious, but blank letterheads were hidden beneath it, making blessing a cover for deception. The seal was meant for service, but became a way to fill names in afterwards.

Bisesar's unfinished name trembled upon yellow thread. If death is written as 'absence', how long will a mother watch the threshold? The labourer's body helped support a bridge, but his name was buried in the chest's folds.

At dawn Meera reminded everyone of the rules. The storeroom would be opened before two village council members, police, a bank representative, two women from the women's committee, Vineet Jha, Satyavrat, Gadadhar and the children guarding names. 'Each paper is to be lifted as found, and each act of lifting recorded.'

In a yellow bag were labourers' old claims: some from the Ganga bridge works, others from later construction camps,

others for accident assistance. One incomplete sheet bore the name 'Bisesar Paswan'.

In the fourth layer they found three seal boxes: round, square and a small name stamp. The round seal belonged to Maheshwarnath Sevak.

A page folded in the blue register revealed 'Batuknath Hariharan Memorial Fund'. Beneath it stood: 'Blank certificates—twenty-five. Sealed orders—twelve. Voice list—twenty-six. Active accounts—nine.' Maheshwar, Dhruvesh and Madhukar were written separately in tiny letters.

At Channa Grove that night, they displayed not the finds themselves but an inventory: blank letterheads, copies, forged thumbprints, seals, women's files, banking files, telephone files, workers' claims and the blue register. Panidubbi bent towards the stone: 'The page where Bisesar was found again asks for water.' Hulasi closed her eyes. 'Read the name first.'

Satyavrat recorded the blank sealed letterheads, multiple seals, forged marks, beneficiary lists, bank and phone links, labour claims, the memorial fund and the blue register. Old institutional arrangements and modern digital methods appeared connected. 'Protect every name's privacy, preserve each object's legal chain, and verify every inference.' Meera wrote: 'The chest is open, but the people are still shut inside.'

The iron chest was not merely a box of papers but a workshop for inserting names into blanks, a register of fear, tools for thumbprint fraud, stolen women's identities, unfinished death claims and a service network stretching from Batuknath to Maheshwar, Madhukar and Dhruvesh. Ananya wrote 'The Blue Register'; Aruni added: 'Where names are listed under fear, their living identities will rise again.' Night descended over Channa Grove.

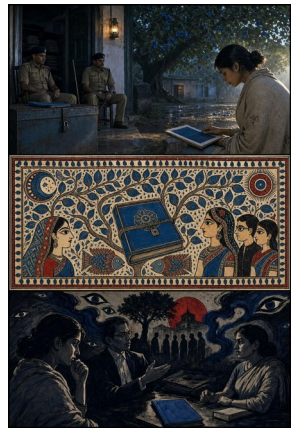
A Little Folk Song

O dear child, sing a birth song for Bisesar,
From the iron chest, a name is born anew.
When the iron chest is opened, a name will rise again;
The letters of Bisesar's labour will shine upon the leaves once more.

CHAPTER 190

The Blue Register

The colour of the blue register spreads beyond the reach of surveillance. Fear has no lock of its own.



Samples of voices, five breaths of silence, sudden urgency, and the name of an arrest warrant are not merely words. They are ropes that tighten. Yet human speech is not simply a way of trapping people. Read with sequence, witnesses and compassion, the same map of fear becomes a road towards justice.

The unfinished letters of Bisesar's name, the warning against Nand Aruni, the insult substituted for Hulasi's name, and the stolen thumbprints of women are not objects in a register. They are fragments of living identities. Returning a true name is more than correcting its spelling: it restores dignity, body and memory.

On the third page were shadows of labourers' names. Bisesar Paswan had been shortened to 'Bi. Pa.' and Salamat Ansari to 'Sa. A.'

One entry read 'Time of Silence', with instructions to pause for five breaths during a call. 'Silence increases fear.' Aruni remembered the silence of Channa Grove.

On a page they found 'Nand Aruni'. Time seemed to stop. Beside it stood: 'Former engineer—report—labourers' list—family connections—caution.' Aruni went pale.

For a long time he said nothing. Then: 'Why, then, did Father's report disappear?' No one knew. The register offered a road, not an answer.

Hulasi's proper name was not written there; instead appeared 'the woman at the well'. Meera said, 'That is not a name. It is an insult. If we find her real name, we shall restore it here.' The children wrote separately: 'Find the real names behind nicknames, insults and names used to inspire fear.' A dark light shimmered around the Old Man's ghost at the window, as though he endorsed the decision.

That evening they brought only the blue register's empty cover to Channa Grove, leaving its pages in a secure room. Names could not be left to the night dew. From the branch the Old Man's ghost said, 'Do not read the pages today.'

The upper room of the Harihar Service Centre stood silent in darkness. Through the window the back of a chair caught the light. No person sat there, but the shadow of someone's weight seemed pressed into it. Closing the page, Ananya wrote: 'Dhruvesh's Chair.'

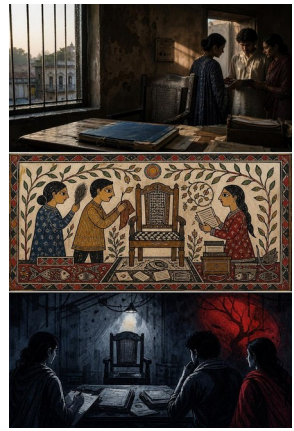
A Little Folk Song

Awaken, O register, blue register, awake,
Read the lines kept silent for so many years at daybreak.
The blue register opens its eyes and reads the morning's names;
The lines once silent through the years now kindle living flames.

CHAPTER 191

Dhruvesh's Chair

An empty chair can still exercise power, until the name of the person who occupied it is called aloud.



Orders fall from above, but their weight is made by the feet that climb from below. Each step of the stairs writes a line of dust, betel stain, worn shoe and hesitation. Those forbidden to enter a room remember its bell and scraping chair more clearly than others.

The rule of a chair is not carried by the seated body alone. 'Mother alone—soften the voice', five breaths of silence, blank confession forms, maps of possible victims: together these turn performance into an order. When someone's private fear is written down and rehearsed, the voice ceases to be mere words.

Climbing the stairs, they felt the steps were lines from old orders, not ordinary bricks. Dust lay thick upon the first step and the fourth bore the marks of scraping shoes.

The chair had been moved to the right of the room's centre. Its false leather was torn, its right arm scratched by nails, the left

marked in a circle where a phone had rested. Dry earth and thread clung to a wheel beneath.

In the second drawer was a small digital audio recorder. Its screen was dark, but a memory card might remain. 'Directly to technical examination,' Vineet Jha ordered.

The blue thread in the wheel was removed by the proper procedure. A little dried earth clung to it. 'This soil is not from the upstairs room,' Gadadhar said.

The window looked towards the pond. From it one could see only the highest leaves of Channa Grove. Had Dhruvesh sat there, he would have watched them moving.

By evening a yellow outline had been drawn around the chair, photographs taken and the room sealed. 'The search for Dhruvesh is no longer merely a search for a person,' said Vineet Jha.

No imitation chair was set beneath Channa Grove that night. Only the circle its dust had made was copied upon the stone. The Old Man's ghost watched from the branch.

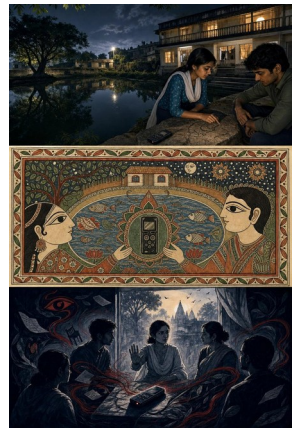
A Little Folk Song

Gather, O village council, gather without a chair,
Within the people's circle, let the work continue there.
A chair may stand empty, but the people's place remains;
Within the village circle, decisions need not wait in vain.

CHAPTER 192

The Voice of the Silent Recorder

The voice of a recorder that has fallen silent may be the loudest of all, for now no one can interrupt it.



A voice has many masks: a mother's affection, the law's severity, charity's sweetness. But the rhythm of breathing, whispers behind the speaker, pages turning and a chair scraping reveal their edges. When science refuses hasty conclusions, memory can walk beside it.

Like a name, a voice belongs to a person's identity. Make a copy, record the time, leave the original untouched: these procedures also guard a victim's dignity. Hearing another person's weeping is not an automatic right.

On ordinary nights the pond held croaking frogs, the swaying hair-like shadow of Panidubbi and the whisper of leaves. Tonight the water seemed to have become an ear. All felt that the voice trapped in the closed digital recorder was making the pond, dust, tree and chair wait to hear it.

Meera stopped the hearing for five minutes. The leaves of Channa Grove could not be seen through the window, but their shadow moved on the wall. Hulasi's voice seemed to pass

through the air: 'The testimony that survived was turned into their claims.' Panidubbi disturbed the pond's water.

The sentence seemed to split the room's walls. What written pages had revealed was also present in sound. Dhruvesh's signature remained unproven, yet the manner in which orders had been given was becoming clear.

They opened the final file, 'New_Register'. First came a long silence. Then the tapping of someone typing upon a phone.

'Keep a separate secured copy of this section. The children's safety comes first,' Meera ordered. 'We won't be afraid,' Ananya protested. Taking her hand, Meera said, 'Not fearing and not caring about danger are different things. Only living guardians can keep names safe.' Aruni bowed his head.

That evening they brought no recorder to Channa Grove. An empty earthen bowl took its place. 'Why the bowl?' asked the Old Man's ghost. 'Because a voice has no shape,' said Ananya.

The leaves stirred without wind. The dark ghost in shadow, the pale spirit at a leaf's edge and Loth with his mouth half open seemed to listen to the recorder's silence, a woman's sobs, Madhukar's pressure, Dhruvesh's possible breathing and Nand's torn report. Meera wrote: 'Voice found, face still missing.' Ananya wrote the next heading: 'The Face of the Voice.' Aruni added: 'Find the body behind the breath.'

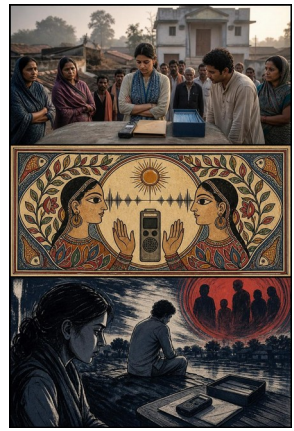
A Little Folk Song

Pass the bowl, pass the bowl from home to home,
Gather every drop of silenced speech where it may roam.
The empty bowl becomes an ear and drinks each fallen sound;
The cries once buried deep will live as songs newly found.

CHAPTER 193

The Face of the Voice

The face of a voice becomes visible when the people standing behind its breath are counted.



First trust, then fear: that is the lesson of fraud delivered in a sweet voice. Charity onstage, threats by phone, consent on paper. The same face wears many masks.

Do not make a spectacle of anyone whose name needs protection. Mark that person with a lamp but keep the light of the testimony alive. Let scientific language be careful, copies separate, originals sealed. Public haste gives a criminal room to escape; slow procedure closes that road.

Ananya wrote: pauses in breathing; a cough before 'r'; a whistle on 's'; air released at the end of a sentence. Crime may be hidden, she thought, but the throat does not abandon its habits. Aruni said, 'Names may be false, faces altered, documents cut…'

After this evidence the face emerged a little from the mist. Not Dhruvesh alone: Batuknath's old dates lay on its forehead, Chandrapal's screens in its eyes, Maheshwar's seal on its cheek, Madhukar's practice in its throat, and the broken Raghav Signal network behind.

The children's faces changed at an elderly woman's testimony. Ananya was about to record her name, but Meera said, 'Protect her name first.' Ananya drew a little lamp in its place. 'A lamp instead of a name?' Aruni asked. 'When a name must be hidden, write down its light,' she answered. Meera overheard.

An old photograph of Dhruvesh was removed from the service centre wall. In it he smiled amid poor children receiving blankets.

At evening the empty bowl returned to Channa Grove. This time it held not pond water but incense ash from above the paper bearing the elderly woman's testimony. Hulasi bent towards it.

At night Meera gathered the day's records: comparison of Dhruvesh's voice, Madhukar's statement, the elderly woman's protected testimony, the bank meeting video, the inauguration speech, extracts from the recorder and lines from Nand's report. Each went into a separately numbered envelope.

Before closing her register Ananya wrote: 'Today we did not see the whole face, but found the doorway of its breathing.' Aruni added: 'A summons shall go to the face.' Channa Grove rustled. A dog barked far away. The sealed room upstairs at the service centre seemed to be listening.

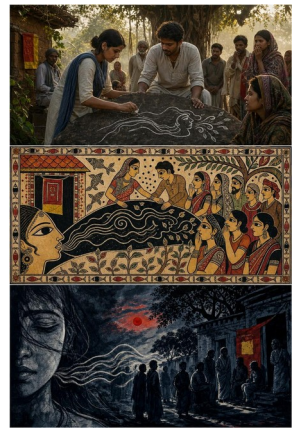
A Little Folk Song

O little one, sing a birth song for the first breath,
In every face a private dawn is born.
From the first breath grows a face; through names, life flowers;
Beyond the dark womb of night, dawn opens its wings.

CHAPTER 194

A Summons to the Breath

A summons is issued not merely to a body, but to its breathing—and breathing has no lawyer.



Paper may be pasted upon a gate, but the true summons stirs the bell within. Tyre marks, a sudden telephone ring, a lawyer's letter, excuses for absence: all are fine lines of a circle. Any one line may be weak.

A frightened witness's memory may serve as a receipt, but making fear a spectacle is not justice. First provide water, a seat, silence and time to write. Then trembling words can become seeds of evidence.

Gadadhar, two constables, Vineet Jha's junior assistant and, among the children, Aruni alone went to deliver the summons. Meera stopped Ananya: 'Not everyone must go everywhere. Those who write must sometimes write about waiting.' Ananya stayed by the stone, watching the dusty road towards Dhruvesh's new brick house.

At Channa Grove Ananya wrote about waiting. She knew now that waiting itself is an event. Her first line read: 'The summons went…'

The Old Man's ghost seemed already to have heard those words. As darkness fell he came down and said, 'Summonses do not belong only to the courts of the living. The dead send them too.' Hulasi drew a line through the air with her handless body.

There was no kabaddi that night, but a reading of summonses. Each dead person's name was spoken and space left in the air for Dhruvesh's breath to reply. 'Bisesar Paswan.' The air stayed still.

The sealed upper room of the service centre stayed quiet. One upstairs window of Dhruvesh's house filled briefly with light, then darkened. From far away someone might have been reading papers, or burning them; no one knew.

After Mohan's statement, Satyavrat found a line in Nand Aruni's old diary: 'Where there is no receipt, let memory become the receipt.' He read it aloud. Vineet Jha wrote: 'Verbal chain of transmission.'

Ananya's hand was tired, but the letters on her next page were steady: 'The Frozen Account.' Aruni wrote beneath: 'When money's road is blocked, fear changes its voice.' Meera put out the lamp.

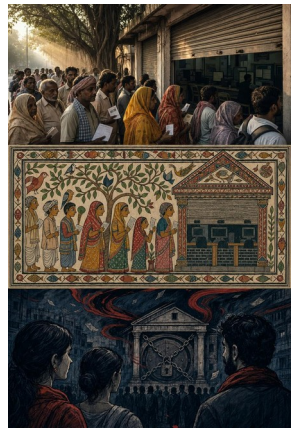
A Little Folk Song

Keep the account, keep its record in your heart,
Though papers disappear, let love's receipts never depart.
A paper receipt may be lost, but memory keeps its due;
Whatever was done with love will have its testimony too.

CHAPTER 195

The Frozen Account

Only when an account is frozen do we discover that money, too, can be afraid.



Freezing an account is not simply closing a treasury door. It requires the discipline to stop the flow of criminal money without putting out the fires in poor households. The tower of false charity must fall, but an old woman's pension and a student's hopes must be protected.

Names, phones, thumbprints, seals and withdrawal dates appear separately as small marks. Joined together, they form money's hidden bloodstream. Wherever a threatening voice arose, money moved.

Ananya wrote on the stone: 'The Frozen Account.' Aruni added: 'As soon as money's road closes, fear changes its voice.' Meera was silent for a while. Freezing accounts was the beginning of justice, not its completion. If the wrong account was stopped, a poor family might lose its cooking fire.

Ananya paused while writing Surajmukhi's testimony. She remembered the Old Man's ghost saying that the crocodile eats

a body but not a name. Today money had been swallowed and the name made smaller again.

This was not yet direct proof, but it was a thread. Satyavrat recorded: 'Bank manager: pressure by telephone; Dhruvesh commonly mentioned as giver of instructions. Verification required.' Ananya was a little dissatisfied.

By evening they had mapped the accounts: village → bank → service centre → Dhruvesh's trust → city equipment shop → digital recorder → phone → fear → poor person's account again. It resembled the kabaddi of Channa Grove, except that numbers were its playing field.

At night they laid an empty account book by the grove. It belonged to the children, not a bank. Ananya wrote: 'Frozen Account: keep victims' claims separate from the criminal account.' Hulasi smiled: 'When I had no hands, the sight of a thumbprint hurt…'

Before dawn, dew gathered on the leaves. Panidubbi placed a drop upon the book. It remained round; the paper did not absorb it.

Ananya opened another page: 'The Meaning of Jal Samadhi.' Aruni added: 'Those who drowned in water lost their bodies. Those drowned in oblivion lost their names. Now names will rise.' Meera put out the lamp.

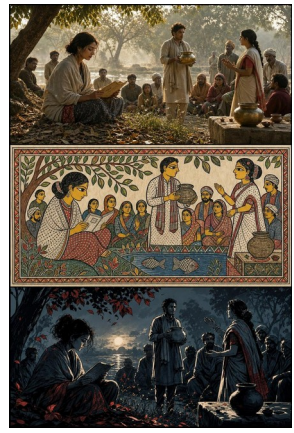
A Little Folk Song

Open the accounts, open them at break of day,
Weigh the trembling money on truth's honest scale.
Accounts tremble, coins grow frightened, truth stands smiling tall;
When the people question together, greed's great towers fall.

CHAPTER 196

The Meaning of Jal Samadhi

Water does not know the meaning of jal samadhi. Names do.



Water is not the criminal. It carries whatever it meets. What truly drowns people is the system that steals their names after their bodies have gone, records labourers as absent, calls a woman's cries family shame and turns the trust of elders into numbers.

A gamchha, bowl, leaf, register and torn cloth are not emblems of defeat but banners of surviving memory. In a bronze bowl, water from the well, Kamala-Balan and Ganga brings together three testimonies: a death suppressed inside a home, erosion of farmland and the labourer drowned beneath a bridge. The full name on the leaf gives that water meaning.

Meera poured the first drop of village-well water into the bowl. Hulasi was present towards that well like a dark shape.

The story was told again: kabaddi at Channa Grove, the Old Man's ghost, Hulasi, Panidubbi, the splash near the bridge, Nand's diary, the gamchha found by Ba and Fakira Sahni's words. The tale seemed to turn towards its beginning, not its end; but returning was not retreat.

Channa Grove's shadow grew long. Dark ghosts sat in a circle. Pale spirits stood behind the living rather than in the branches, as though the dead were holding them up.

Ananya wrote one word: 'Above.' 'Who will rise?' Aruni asked. 'Everyone,' she said. Meera smiled with wet eyes: 'Yes. Everything drowned—body, name, voice, earth, trust, pension, testimony, a child's true name—everything above.' Someone was about to clap, but stopped.

After nightfall the people gradually went home. The bowl remained at the roots. Ananya, Aruni, Meera, Devika, Satyavrat, Vineet and Abhay sat until the end. None spoke of what to do next.

Aruni's last line read: 'Jal samadhi is not merely when water takes a body. It is when a name is severed from the people's memory. Today the first name rose again.'

The next title seemed to arrive by itself: 'The Names That Rose Again.' Aruni added: 'When names rise above the water, the ground under criminals trembles.' The bowl remained there all night. Far away, the Ganga sounded as if the first splash of the story was receiving its final answer.

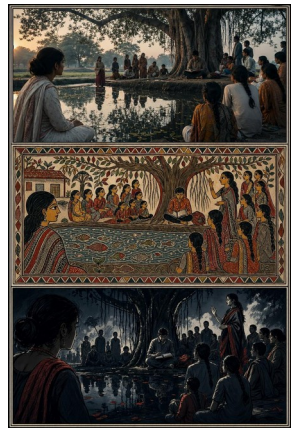
A Little Folk Song

Raise the gamchha, raise even the torn cloth high,
Make it a flag of labour, memory and courage against the sky.
The torn cloth in our hands is no longer defeat's sign;
Labour, remembrance and courage make its colours shine.

CHAPTER 197

The Names That Rose Again

When drowned names rise again, it is not the water that trembles. It is the shore.



Returning names must not become a spectacle. A wounded person's consent is the first offering of respect; the silence of a household must be honoured too.

An unfinished name, a mother's voice, writing upon leaves, a child called Chhotu at home—where that name should have stood the register had read 'Absent'. When the full name comes from a mother's lips, it is not the water but years of falsehood that shake. Combine family memory with papers, times, places and witnesses, and the shore finds its identity again.

The first bird called at dawn, yet the water in the bowl did not ripple. It grew still as though listening. Damp earth, the stale scent of a mustard-oil lamp and tender green leaves mingled in the air.

The Old Man's ghost appeared as faint radiance in the branches. Hulasi rose from the direction of the well. Panidubbi left the pond and sat in the grove's shade.

The shadow grew longer. A child asked during the reading: 'What if we never find a complete name?' Satyavrat thought a long while. 'Then we must preserve it as incomplete…'

That night, for the first time, the dark ghost and the pale spirit faced each other without kabaddi. Weariness fell from the dark ghost instead of darkness; regret from the pale spirit instead of light.

At the end Ananya opened a blank page. Before her stood a tray of verified names, a basket of names awaiting confirmation, a list of corrections, the water bowl, a heap of earth and copies of old seals. She wrote: 'Today the first list of names brought back to light was made…'

A vehicle approached loudly from the city, unusually for that hour. Diesel spread through the air, and wheels scraping the dirt road made the leaves tremble.

Ananya's hand shook but her letters were clear: 'The Criminal's Ground.' Aruni added: 'When names rise from water and stand on earth, fleeing feet become witnesses.' The bowl, tray, waiting basket and grove remained awake through the night.

A Little Folk Song

Offer water to the drowned names, offer it with care,
Arrange a row of little lamps along each river shore.
The trembling banks grow steady when the lamps are gently laid;
We greet the rising sun with honour to the names once swept away.

CHAPTER 198

The Criminal's Ground

A criminal does not walk upon a different earth. The soil is the same; only the footprints differ.

A shoe is a covering; a foot has habits. Shoes, vehicles and routes can change. But a step taken in panic reveals its own gait, weight and direction.

Soil, dust, dew, testimony, an iron chest in the night, sunken wheel tracks and bare feet look like separate objects. By morning they may be words in one sentence. But that sentence must be read cautiously.

The bowl at Channa Grove's roots trembled once, then grew still. Ananya felt the water saying, 'Do not run; look.'

He shouted angrily: 'This is my private property!' Meera answered from a distance: 'Private property does not flee through a back gate at night.' Satyavrat added: 'If it is private, it can be inventoried, opened before witnesses and returned.'

The number of the vehicle, the time, place, witnesses, the chest's exterior, its lock, a faded old seal on the edge and earth clinging to a corner were recorded. Ananya thought the earth

resembled dried dust from the inner room at Harihar Service Centre. Aruni bagged a sample separately.

As they prepared to seal it, Dhruvesh suddenly stepped back. His shoe stuck in the mud while his bare foot slipped out. The crowd suppressed its laughter, but the Old Man's ghost grew sombre.

A breeze came from Channa Grove carrying leaf scent, moisture of the well, silt of the Ganga, ashes of burnt banknotes and the soil upon Phoolkali's forehead. The dark ghosts slowly withdrew.

Ananya opened the next page. She knew the ending was near, but it did not mean closing the door. The chest must be opened, names must acquire their rightful legal identity, and Channa Grove must decide whether to be a monument or a living guardian.

Thus the night ended. Dhruvesh's shoe remained stuck in the earth. No one hurried to pull it free.

A Little Folk Song

Come, companions, follow the path of the abandoned shoe,
Read the traces left behind and find the road anew.
The shoe left in the mud does not mark the journey's end;
From there a pathway rises, where courage walks again.

CHAPTER 199

Morning Inside the Chest

Even inside an iron chest morning can arrive, if witnesses' hands open its lid.

Registers, Shivnath, tears, attendance, bodies entered as absent—when the names return, a mother does not only weep but stands upright. Shivnath Sada's name on paper is not merely evidence; it grants thirty years of waiting a threshold at home.

Seals, thumbprints, voices, blank spaces, forged marks, stolen speech, the blue register, digital orders and empty spaces for heirs are not separate objects of crime. They are one crocodile's teeth. A thumbprint was made for a hand no longer there; a voice was sold for someone who never spoke.

At dawn Meera said first: 'The chest will open, but not as a festival. The papers are bandages upon someone's wounds. When bandages are removed, they need air, not cameras.'

The small police outpost room was crowded enough for the walls to seem to listen. The tehsil employee stood on one side; on the other were Abhay, Meera, Satyavrat, Ananya, Aruni, Devika, Phoolkali, Gadadhar, a bank representative and two

women whose names were stolen in the Rani accounts. Dhruvesh sat in a corner.

At night they returned to Channa Grove. The bowl reflected the lamps of homes, not the light of the police station. Earth bags, a copy of Shivnath's page, Nand's diary, names from the Rani accounts, map copies and the empty place for heirs lay on separate stones.

The dark ghosts dissolved in leaf-shadow, the pale spirits' light into the lamps. Hulasi called from the well: 'The theft of hands has been written down.'

Ananya wrote: 'The Guardians of Names.' Aruni added: 'The end does not come when a criminal's chest opens. The end begins when the village gives up its right to close its eyes.'

The night deepened. The empty chest remained at the outpost, but its echo stayed in the grove. Shivnath's name rested upon a leaf.

Just before dawn Channa Grove's oldest leaf broke off and fell. No one called it ill fortune. Though dry, each of its veins could be plainly seen.

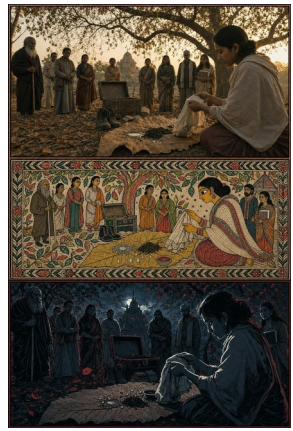
A Little Folk Song

Open the lid, open the iron chest today,
Let truth locked away for years dissolve into morning's ray.
The iron chest is open, and morning waits inside;
The letters spread their wings and over darkness glide.

CHAPTER 200

The Guardians of Names

As long as names continue to be called aloud, a point of green will survive even in a tree stump.



Leaves, veins, letters, water: the story preserved in a dried leaf's veins becomes visible again at a drop of water. The belly of crime may be enormous, people say, but people's memory is greater still.

Silence, profit, shame and commerce. The teeth of crocodiles outside can be seen; those within hide as convenience. Fear, gain, pretence, caste, reputation, employment and the commerce of suffering are criminals whose names have not been written. When a village names its own silence, justice ceases to be merely a charge against others.

The Old Man's ghost did not descend. The dead did not need to judge the living today. Hulasi called from the well, 'What about my hands?' 'In the evidence, the songs and the children's lessons,' Ananya replied. 'Jal samadhi?' Panidubbi asked. 'Water has been kept with every name,' said Aruni.

The water in the bowl stirred. It reflected not dead faces but the village of today: hungry children, tired workers, farmers in

debt, youth trapped by phones, widows afraid of papers, old people in bank queues, hospital verandas, court dates, school gates and Channa Grove's shadow. 'They are alive,' Meera said.

By afternoon people were cleaning the grove. Someone proposed a colourful gate. 'A guardian needs a path, not a gate,' Meera said. Someone else proposed a large name carved in stone.

Phoolkali set a lamp before an empty place. 'We will not leave those whose names are missing in darkness.' All the grove's leaves moved at once.

Ananya paused at the final title, 'The Guardians of Names.' When she finished reading, Aruni asked, 'Now?' Meera did not answer but began walking the outer circle of trees. Everyone followed.

The story does not end here. It stays alive in every mouth that says: 'I am here.'

A Little Folk Song

Sing everywhere, sing the great song of 'I Am Here',
Let water, leaves, earth and breath join in one voice clear.
Water speaks and leaves write—'I am here, I am here.'
Earth says and breath replies—'I am here, I am here.'

APPENDIX 1

A Simple Guide to the Folk Culture of Garh Narikel

This appendix explains the village's soil, water, songs, labour, games, festivals and traditional knowledge in simple language.

1. There are many kinds of knowledge in Garh Narikel. A farmer can touch the soil and understand whether rice or pigeon peas will grow well there.

2. The houses, courtyards, hearths, walls, utensils, toys, worship objects, field boundaries, village shrines and pond banks are all linked with earth. It is not merely building material but also life's final refuge.

3. Even rest has cultural meaning: chewing betel beneath a tree, talking in the shade, drying nets beside a pond, exchanging news on the way from the market, and recalling old tales as the cooking fire dwindles. None is mere idleness.

4. In Garh Narikel's oral traditions, listening is an active moral act. Letting sounds enter the ear is not enough.

5. Folk-song language usually stays near everyday speech. It need not use difficult words.

6. Folk melodies are direct, not commonplace. Their simplicity grows from people's need to sing together.

7. In a boatman's call, the answering voice is a safety signal. The leader calls 'Pull!' and the others answer.

8. Musical instruments come from local craftsmanship: the dholak's wood, hide, ropes or straps.

9. Songs of sowing are songs of hope. In a small seed lives the promise of an entire year's food.

10. Companionship is the heart of a boatman's song. Even a lone boatman speaks with the river.

11. A sohar does more than greet a newborn. It expresses the mother's pain, the midwife's knowledge, the family's hope, ancestral memories, the child's future and society's wishes.

12. Aripan is a silent song. Rice-flour paste, lines drawn by fingers, circles, leaves, footprints, lotuses, nets, sun, moon and kohbar designs embody both ritual and beauty.

13. Festivals, shrine worship, the fourteen deities, folk gods and devotional singers connect formal priestly knowledge to local experience. A deity may give a dream-sign, a singer may enter a devotional state, or a story may give meaning to illness.

14. Riddles teach children to observe their surroundings. Leaves, fruit, tools, animals, the moon, sun, rivers and household things become comparisons.

15. Narrative songs teach right and wrong without preaching. Listeners consider what the characters do, what follows, and how the village responds, and decide for themselves.

16. Modern fraud, false calls, stolen privacy, fear on phone screens, online loans and digital intimidation belong within folk song too. Ujjwal Jha's tragedy may become a new subject for ancient songs of separation and fear.

17. Folk culture is not only long stories or songs. A brief proverb may hold the experience of generations.

18. Local character should not mean obscurity. A printed song may explain a hard word briefly when needed, without changing the original voice.

19. The songs opening or closing chapters of Jal Samadhi Among the Crocodiles extend that tradition today. Even though written, they may be set to melody, their refrains sung together and their verses expanded by singers.

20. In time, wells decrease and hand pumps increase. Brick and cement houses rise beside thatched houses.

21. Screens may turn communal singing into private consumption: people may watch videos instead of singing themselves.

22. Sohar concerns birth, new life, a new voice in the household, a mother's pain and family joy. Its melody is not limited to the physical birth of a baby.

23. Jhumar has moderate rhythm, circular movement, dance, shared happiness, love, satire and stories. It has many local variations.

24. Nirgun reflects upon body, soul, illusion, truth, humanity beyond caste and life's impermanence. A single voice with few instruments may be powerful.

25. Courtyard songs concern domestic work, children, relationships, laughter, women's conversations, hearth, food and seasons, often without instruments or with light clapping.

26. Do not declare one song version 'pure' and others wrong. Record the versions of elders, women, youth, different neighbourhoods and migrant groups.

27. Ba is a moral foundation of folk memory. No object is lifeless for her: a shoe returning alone suggests a crowd, damp paper bears evidence in its smell, a leaf preserves ancestral writing.

28. Nand Aruni, though a modern engineer, inherits Garh Narikel's tradition of listening. His struggle is to see people behind numbers.

29. Both songs belonging to a chapter should relate deeply to the story, not decorate it. Current names, events, objects, weather, places and moral questions should become melody.

30. Thus Garh Narikel's folk songs are not simply entertainment. They are life's rhythm, an alternative book of history, labour's companion, women's open voices, children's school, knowledge of nature, criticism of injustice, remembrance of the dead and warning for the future.

31. A little tale: A shrine lamp does not go out in a strong wind if someone in the village stands with a helpless person. But during worship performed in pride, the lamp keeps going out even in daylight.

32. A little tale: When a small pool dried, people called it useless and planned to fill it. That night the moon's perfect reflection appeared in that pool alone, not in the big pond.

33. A little tale: When a bund began to break, people rushed from every neighbourhood with sacks, earth, bamboo and rope. Each refrain of their song accompanied another sack put in place.

34. Grandmother's knot and the child's knot: tie them together and untie them together.

35. A little tale: People pulled a boat caught in the sand of a dried stream from different directions, but it would not move. Aruni Nandan counted the rhythm, Ananya started the refrain, and on the third beat it slipped free.

36. A little tale: Before first ploughing, the farmer crushed a lump of earth to test its moisture, patted the ox's neck and said 'We share the work.' Folk belief says grain tastes bitter in a field ploughed while abusing the beast.

37. The cause was identified, the treatment applied, and the field became green again.

38. A little tale: On threshing day they watched the wind so husk fell on one side and grain on the other. Once it shifted, but everyone stopped at the song's refrain, 'Wait, wait!'

39. A little tale: Carpenters, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, potters and bamboo craftsmen recognised one another's work by tool sounds. At a shared repair day near Channa Grove, some split bamboo, some made nails, some rope and some clay lamps.

40. A little tale: At Aruni Nandan's sacred-thread ceremony he learned not only mantras but duties towards water, soil, work and truth. Ba said, 'The thread is upon the body; the responsibility upon the mind.' Children added, 'One who hears a name is twice-born.'

41. A little tale: An elderly person's slow walk is not wasted time. Ba can sit and recognise seed, tell stories, notice children's mistakes and point out traces of old floods.

42. A little tale: Ba teaches children to notice thirst beyond humans: a small vessel by the threshold, fresh water for cattle, tools dried safely, seed boxes raised high and water jars covered are household disciplines.

43. A little tale: The order of food on a wedding leaf-plate meant something: a little salt, generous rice, sweetness last. Blessings came with grain, durva grass, betel and turmeric in a ceremonial khoinchha.

44. A little tale: At Bhagavati worship, women asked not only for their families' welfare but for the dignity of unseen working women such as Sarayu. The first plate was offered in the labourers' name.

45. A little tale: In Dharmaraja's story, Ba says the final judgement weighs the marks of one's deeds, not wealth. A bowl of water and a worker's name taught children that justice without names is incomplete.

46. A little tale: Durga Puja's fair is an occasion for colour, trade, music and meetings. Clay for the image comes from many neighbourhoods, drums from the skills of many hands, and offerings are shared.

47. The child asked, 'A lie?' Ba replied, 'The tongue of force.'

48. A little tale: In small city rooms Garh Narikel's people sing Sama-Chakeva, sohar, Chhath and wedding songs. Without a pond they see the moon in a bucket; without fields they keep village soil in a little pot.

APPENDIX 2

Songs of the Nameless Planet

These songs speak of memory, Earth, names and the importance of home.

Chapter 101 — The Invitation from the Nameless Planet

Song: Take Earth's Gifts

Pack the bag, prepare the traveller's bag,
Take the scent of soil and a mother's song—no greater treasure than that.

If a distant planet calls, what shall we take along?
The scent of soil, a mother's song, and a lamp of names.
Neither wealth nor weapons, but the words of affection shared,

Folk Song: The Call of the Distant Planet

The planet asked, 'What will you bring? Tell us, what will you bring?'
'The breath of names, the scent of earth, and a child's hand.'

The distant planet sent an invitation: 'What will you bring with you?'
'We shall carry the breath of names, the scent of earth, and a child's hand.'
No smoke from a spacecraft rose; instead, a kabaddi line appeared,

Chapter 102 — Kabaddi Among the Planets

Song: Names Beyond the Stars

Go, O player, go beyond the stars,
Hold your breath, let your name be free—keep faith with both.

Hold your breath, speak your name, and cross beyond the stars.
Even when the boundary is the sky, do not forget your roots.
One turn for Earth, the next for humanity,

Folk Song: The Planetary Turn

Hold your breath, call your name, and return,
Wherever the game may reach, its lessons will follow.

Hold your breath, speak your name, and return from beyond the stars,
With Earth's soil in your palm, cross the lines of darkness.
Even in a game among the planets, the same ancient rules,

Chapter 103 — The Lesson of Names on the Nameless Planet

Song: The Thread of Names Across the Sky

Swing gently, swing upon the stars,
One end held by ancestors, the other understood by a child.

A thread stretches between the stars, and the swing of names moves upon it.
An ancestor holds one end, and a child opens the other.
Though the sky is deep, the thread will not break,

Folk Song: The Thread of Names Among the Stars

Stretch the thread, stretch the thread of names between the stars,
One call from Earth has awakened the universe.

A slender thread of names stretched between the stars,
The voices of kabaddi became a traveller's sacred chant.
Where there are no names, life's breath is only half complete,

Chapter 104 — Garh Narikel Chooses Earth Again

Song: Earth Is My Choice

Choose Earth, choose Earth again and again,
Know that your own mud is better than a palace of glass.

Better our own mud than a glass palace without memory,
The smell of soil, the sound of water, the deep shade of a peepal tree.
Choosing Earth is not poverty, but a great expression of love,

Folk Song: We Chose Earth

We chose Earth, again and again we chose Earth,
Our own mud is better than a dome without memory.

Better our own mud than a memoryless dome,
The scent of the Kamala-Balan, the deeply familiar broken field boundary.
Not a numbered dwelling, but a threshold with a name,

APPENDIX 3

Simple Stories for Understanding Justice

Justice is not merely a word used in court. Observing the truth, understanding causes, examining evidence and respecting everyone are also justice.

Chapter 57 — Gangesha's Question

The Novel's Final Page — The Book and Its Obstacles

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 58 — Chandrapal's Memorial App

Kiranavali's Unobstructed Journey

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 59 — Raghav Signal's New Code

The Blank Page of the Register of Objections

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 60 — Satyavrat Mehta's Second Silence

The Lamp of a Leatherworking Woman

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 61 — The First Festival of Names

The Hookah of the Maternal Uncle's Village

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 62 — A Green Speck in the Stump

The Question at the Cremation Ground

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 63 — The Garh Narikel Heritage Project

The Shining Seashell — Perception, Illusion and Self-Knowledge

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 64 — Bidding for Memory

The Yellow Conch

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 65 — Broom Returns

Dhatarim upon the Bier

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 66 — The Harvard Research Team

The Empty Seat

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 67 — Meera and the Right to Be Seen

Ekakalika Chakra

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 68 — Devika Versus the Tribute App

Memory of the Black Pot

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 69 — The Theft of Names

Smoke on the Mountain — The Journey of Inference

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 70 — The Testimony of the Panidubbi

A Heated Lump of Iron

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 71 — The Procession of Make-Believe Ghosts

Devadatta's Evening Meal

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 72 — The Laughter of Channa Grove

Devadatta Outside the House

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 73 — Batuknath's Dream Court

The Crow and a Friend's Son

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 74 — Chandrapal's First Confession

Ram in the Hospital

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 75 — Raghav Signal Without a Network

The Potter's Wheel — Agency, Power and Liberation

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 76 — Lau Kin-hung's Journey to India

The Jewel and Fire

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 77 — Crocodiles at the Airport

Story 21 — The Threshold of Liberation

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 78 — The Silent Conversation Between Satyavrat and Lau

The Gavaya in the Forest — Understanding and Recognition Through Comparison

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 79 — Broom's Donation Deed

The Baby Elephant and the Donkey

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 80 — Hariharan's Daughter

Green Broccoli

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 81 — Batra's Unfinished Name

The Striped Zebra

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 82 — The Elephant and Crocodile Within

The Parrot's Command — Words, Sentences and Trust

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 83 — The Coconut Leaf School

Bring the Pot

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 84 — The First Lesson: Present

The Wooden Puppet

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 85 — The Women's Night Assembly

The Door

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 86 — The Workers' Feet

The Village Beside the Ganga

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 87 — A Fast from Screens

Saindhava

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 88 — Eera's Letter to Children Abroad

Pankaj's Dispute

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 89 — Satyavrat's Public Hearing

The Child's 'Amba'

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 90 — A Constitution of Names

News of a Son's Birth

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 91 — The Absence of the Schemers

The Telephone Rumour

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 92 — The Stump's Shadow

A Witness in Court

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 93 — The Flood Returns

That Same 'Ga' Again?

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 94 — The Return of the Crocodiles

The Seashell and Silver — The Illusion of Silver

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 95 — Lau Kin-hung's Final Bargain

The Question of Water

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 96 — Batuknath's Long-Delayed Apology

The Colour of the Conch

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 97 — Chandrapal's Mule Account

Validity When Objecthood Is Regarded as a Separate Category

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 98 — Raghav's Final Message

Now Such an Objection May Be Raised — Only the Person

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying “There is nothing here,” examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 99 — Satyavrat Mehta's Testimony

Knowledge Gained Through Direct Perception

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other

cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 100 — The Elephant, the Crocodile, and a Child's Hand

Navya-Nyaya Theory — The Doctrine of Extrinsically Established Validity

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 101 — A Dream Invitation from the Nameless Planet

The Nature of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Apprehension of Validity

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 102 — Kabaddi Among the Planets in a Dream

The Absence of a Sense Organ Is Not a Means of Knowledge

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 103 — A Lesson in Names on the Dream's Nameless Planet

The Cause of Revealing Manifest Colour

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 104 — Awakening: Garh Narikel Chooses Earth

The Possibility of Several Cognitions at the Same Time

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 105 — The First Watch over Earth

Its Quality Is Evidential and Useful

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 106 — The Testimony of Seeds

Two Kinds of Classification — Its Quality and Secondary Characteristic

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 107 — The Theft of Seeds

A Secondary Characteristic Must Be the Object of Specific Knowledge

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 108 — The Soil's Mouth

Its Quality Is Not Merely Co-Located with Exclusion

Desires, pleasure, sorrow, memories and thoughts move within people. Outward appearance alone cannot reveal them fully. Respect your own inner feelings and those of others.

Chapter 109 — The Memory of Water

Shivaditya Mishra's View — A Directly Related Particular

An old judgement written on paper is not always wholly true. A person's worth is not determined by birth or caste but by knowledge, work and conduct. Unjust written claims may be questioned.

Chapter 110 — The Witness of Fire

Its Quality Directly Connected with the Principal Object

Many things share a quality, but each has its own particular character. Understand a group label without imposing every belief about the group upon an individual.

Chapter 111 — The Question of Air

The Sign of Smoke

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 112 — The Emptiness of the Sky

The Question of Fire

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 113 — The Body of a Word

Smoke on the Mountain

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 114 — The Soul of Meaning

The Case of Devadatta

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 115 — The Watch Over Voices

The Colour of the Crow

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 116 — The Inheritance of Silence

Mutual Dependence

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 117 — The Debt of Memory

Inference Based Only on Negative Concomitance

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 118 — The Right to One's Own Body

The Mimamsaka View — Presumption as a Separate Means of Knowledge

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 119 — The Body of Labour

The Reason — The Ground for Accepting a Claim

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 120 — The Body of Justice

Repeated Association with Examples — A Rule Applying Throughout

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 121 — The Cage of Caste

Contradiction

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 122 — Gangesha's Liberation

Consideration of a True Proposition

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 123 — A Leaf from Tattvachintamani

The Nature of the Subject Under Discussion and the Opponent's Objection

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 124 — The Fire of Evidence

An Earlier Discussion — Invocation Is Not an Instrument

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 125 — Rice Seedlings of Judgment

Knowledge of Absence Is Possible Through an Indicative Sign

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 126 — Justice for Food

Repeated Co-occurrence Is Not Confined to the Possessor of the Reason

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 127 — The Name of Hunger

The Subject to Be Proved, Knowledge of Universal Connection and Reflection

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 128 — The Name of Thirst

Inference Without an Appropriate Consideration of the Sign and Negative Concomitance

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary

examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 129 — The Oath of Salt

The Teachers' View — Whatever Possesses Smoke

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 130 — The Justice of Taste

The Pot

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 131 — The Shared Plate

The Theory of the Power to Burn

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 132 — The Republic of the Kitchen

Some Scholars Propose This View

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 133 — The Invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival

Gangesha's Refutation and the Establishment of the Absence of an Obstruction

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 134 — The Kabaddi Players' Play Script

The Definition of Liberation — Refutation of Different Philosophical Views

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 135 — The Videha Theatre Festival Performance

An Objection — Invocation Cannot Be a Component

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 136 — The Silence After the Applause

The Navya View — The Absence of an Obstruction Is Not the Cause

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 137 — The Audience Bears Witness

A Counter-Objection May Then Be Raised

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are

clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 138 — The Procession Beyond the Stage

Recognition of the Gavaya

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 139 — The Road Becomes a Stage

The Donkey

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 140 — The Travelling Chaupal

Differences of Location Among Trees

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 141 — The Verdict of the Veranda

The Navya-Nyaya View — Similarity Between Two Pleasures

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 142 — The Darkness of the Records Room

The Tree with Monkeys

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 143 — The Testimony of a Sack of Scrap Paper

The Ekadeshi View — Several Properties Existing in a Related Object

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 144 — The Journey of Names

The Comparison 'The Sky Is Like the Sky' and Another Place

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 145 — The First Crack in Fear

The Word 'Singer'

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 146 — The Stain of the Seal

The Meaning of 'Pankaj'

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 147 — Knocking from Door to Door

The Rules of Sacrifice

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 148 — Recognising the Tampering

The Meaning of 'Ganga'

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 149 — The Map of the Web

The Means of Reaching Heaven

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 150 — The Shadow of the Seal

Expectation at the Door

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 151 — The Hand That Wielded the Seal

The Child's Lesson

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 152 — The Source of the Order

Conventional Usage Is Stronger Than Etymological Association

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 153 — The Name Behind the Sign

Cowness Is the Denoted Meaning

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 154 — Baba's Word

Verbal Testimony as a Means of Knowledge

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 155 — The Ledger of Service

Words

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 156 — The Debt of Charity

Being Spoken by a Trustworthy Person Is Not the Cause

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 157 — The Iron Chest

Known Intention Is the Cause

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 158 — Checking the Consent Notebook

The Definition of Expectancy

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 159 — The Consent of the Dead

The Conclusive Theory of the Impermanence of Words

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 160 — The Shadow of the Warehouse

The Power of the Word 'Cow' Is Not Untenable

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 161 — Imprisoned by the Phone

The Process of Cooking

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 162 — The Seal of a Voice

The Nyaya Tradition — Numbers and Effort in Relation to the Principal Object

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 163 — Traces of the Removed Paper

Its Grammatical Case Ending Exists Only for Correctness

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 164 — The Belly of Chandrapal's Shadow

Agency Is Not the Meaning of the Verbal Ending

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 165 — The Body Behind the Shadow

Semantic Power in Tatpurusha Compounds

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 166 — The Storehouse at Imli Ghat

Analysis of the Karmadharaya Compound

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 167 — A Voice Across the River

Reply to the Objection Concerning Activity

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 168 — The City's Throat

An Objection Concerning Past and Future Usage

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 169 — The Door of Chandra Two

An Introduction to the Nyaya Treatise Tattvachintamani

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 170 — Unmasking Chandra One

One May Now Argue in This Way

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 171 — The Invisible Court of Channa Grove

The View of the Naiyayikas

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 172 — Reading the Knots

The Conclusion of the Navya-Naiyayikas

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 173 — Keeping Watch over the Register

The Inference Section — The Highest Development of Logical Structure

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 174 — At the Threshold of the Invisible Court

Conclusion

A claim requires a sound reason. The reason must be connected to the claim, apply in all relevant cases, and survive contrary examples. Clear reasoning, not difficult words, makes a decision stronger.

Chapter 175 — The Name of the Seal-Bearer

Inference

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 176 — Darkness at the Service Ceremony

Application — Applying the Rule to the Present Case of the Mountain

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 177 — Documents from Door to Door

Conclusion — The Final Form of Establishing a Claim

We may infer fire from smoke. But first we must find out whether the smoke really comes from fire or from some other

cause. When the correct cause is identified, the inference becomes trustworthy.

Chapter 178 — The Room Upstairs

Application — This Rule Applies to Ram Too

We can understand something new by comparison with something familiar. Comparison is useful when similarities are clear and differences are also considered. Do not assume two things identical merely because they look alike.

Chapter 179 — Footprints of the Seal

Research — Background and Historical Context

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 180 — The City's Accounts

Refutation of Prabhakara's Objection of Infinite Regress

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 181 — The Shadow of the SIM Card

The Mimamsaka View — The Absence of Defect as a Supporting Cause of Truth

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 182 — The Door of the Harihar Service Centre

Conclusion — Alternative Definitions

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 183 — The Face Inside the Phone

The Justification of a Particular Definition

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 184 — The Mask of a Voice

Rejection of a Counter-Objection — Indeterminate and Qualified Cognition

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 185 — The Master's Room

Another View — Bodily Origin Does Not Define the Limit

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 186 — Madhvesh's Real Name

Refutation

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 187 — The Queen Inside the Hive

A Defect Is Not Merely a Property of a Class

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 188 — Maheshwar's Seal

Refutation of Further Objections

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 189 — The Iron Chest

The View of the Teachers

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 190 — The Blue Register

The Objection of the Naiyayikas

A seashell may shine like silver from a distance. Our eyes may deceive us at first. Before deciding, look again, test by touch, and compare it with other evidence.

Chapter 191 — Dhruvesh's Chair

The View of the Later Prabhakaras

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 192 — The Voice of the Silent Recorder

The Question of a Strong Connection with Harm

Desires, pleasure, sorrow, memories and thoughts move within people. Outward appearance alone cannot reveal them fully. Respect your own inner feelings and those of others.

Chapter 193 — The Face of the Voice

The View of One Group of Prabhakaras

Many things share a quality, but each has its own particular character. Understand a group label without imposing every belief about the group upon an individual.

Chapter 194 — A Summons to the Breath

Refutation of Other Alternative Views

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 195 — The Frozen Account

The Nature of Figurative Meaning — Conclusion

Sometimes not seeing something is itself a piece of information. But darkness, distance or inattention may hide an object. Before saying "There is nothing here," examine the place and circumstances carefully.

Chapter 196 — The Meaning of Jal Samadhi

Refutation of the Earlier View

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 197 — The Names That Rose Again

The Answer of the Earlier Grammarians

In this tale, teacher and pupil explain a difficult question through a small example. The lesson is to observe carefully, ask why, and compare evidence before deciding. Never rush to conclusions.

Chapter 198 — The Criminal's Ground

The Meaning of the Genitive — Economy of Figurative Meaning

Memory is useful but may be incomplete or altered. In deciding events of the past, compare recollection with written records, testimony and other signs.

Chapter 199 — Morning Inside the Chest

Dvandva Cannot Be Explained Through Aggregation

Not everything people say is true. We can trust the testimony of someone who knows the facts, does not lie, and speaks clearly. It is even better to compare what we hear with other evidence.

Chapter 200 — The Guardians of Names

Mandana's View

Desires, pleasure, sorrow, memories and thoughts move within people. Outward appearance alone cannot reveal them fully. Respect your own inner feelings and those of others.

THE BOOK'S FINAL WORD

A name is more than letters. With a name come a life, a home, a dream and a right.

When someone tries to erase a vulnerable person's name, those who speak the truth, listen attentively and safeguard evidence become guardians of names.

You too can be a guardian of names.

JAL SAMADHI AMONG THE CROCODILES

A NOVEL FOR YOUNG READERS

In a village called Garh Narikel...

its trees, river, ponds, children, women, workers and ancestors come together to make a living memory.

But the crocodile here is not only an animal in the river. Sometimes greed becomes a crocodile. Sometimes lies, fear or injustice do. Even a swindle hidden inside a phone can turn into one.

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You too can be a guardian of names.

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