CHAPTER TWO

TRANSLATION OF BHARELO AGNI
Part I
The Triggers of an Uprising

1. Rudradatta

_Eyes’ light floats into a faint slumber;_
_life has found repose away from the worldly woes;_
_dreams drizzle in that magical land;_
_Gods’ eyes welcome me to the heavenly abode._

_Nhanalal_

No one knows Rudradatta today. About three decades ago, however, if a child had inquired about him, someone would have at least given sketchy information about Rudradatta. Perhaps, that child’s father would have answered, ’My grandfather was under Rudradatta’s tutelage.’ While discussing our family history, our ancestors of the fifth generation might appear to have lived long ago; yet, many around us often refer to their grandfathers and great-grandfathers with ease.

Over seventy-five years ago, Rudradatta headed a Sanskrit school in Vihar, a village in east Gujarat. A scholar of Nyaya and Vedanta, he was known in Hindustan among the men of letters. When the pundits of Kashi could not conclude their debate, they came to Rudradatta for a solution; when the scholars of Madura could not interpret a question, they rushed to Rudradatta for an insight, travelling eight hundred kilometres. Eminent philosophers of Nyaya and Vedanta schools proudly claimed that Rudradatta had taught them once.

Even so, this renowned scholar never set out of Vihar. He had explored the entire Hindustan after completing his education; and, many believed that Rudradatta had also spent considerable years in Trivishtap (Tibet), Rishidesh (Russia) and Mahachin (China). Rudradatta had never narrated his life story to anyone, and hence, his past was a part of popular folklore. Yet, in every known centre of education and religion, learned men fondly remembered Rudradatta and his scintillating intellect.

Once he set foot in Vihar, Rudradatta made it his home and did not leave the village. He was often invited in scholars’ symposia and in aesthete kings’ courts, but he did not attend any of them. He did not explain his behaviour, but when like-minded friends insisted, he said,

’My friends, I have not learnt how to win the game of chess!’ The members of the royalty had also learnt that Rudradatta observed aparigrah. He did not seek gifts from anyone, and, as a result, he did not care even for the high and mighty.

Why a platoon of cavalrymen had come to this aloof Sanskrit scholar, the villagers wondered, when, under the leadership of a white commander, a few native horse-ridden soldiers came to Vihar. The soldiers asked the bewildered villagers about Rudradatta.

Vihar was a small settlement. It had added a few more inhabitants after Rudradatta started his school, commonly known as an ashram. Some traders, farmers, craftsmen and Brahmin students lived in that hamlet. It was late afternoon. The white commander prodded a shopkeeper to show him the way to Rudradatta’s school. The shopkeeper, not used to
running, was made to sprint ahead of the cavalcade. Fortunately, for the poor trader, the village was small, with Rudradatta’s ashram at the outskirts.

Rudradatta’s ashram and home both made one long, single-storey structure. It was made of bamboo and mud. In the front was a shaded veranda, as long as the building, making an alley leading to the ashram. On one side of the veranda stood another structure made of bamboo. Apart from the sunshade, the veranda was open on the sides. A number of students set there on grass-mats, in small groups, reading books or discussing what they had read.

In an open space adjoining the veranda, a cow and her calf were tied to a nail. A young woman stood close to the animals, stroking them and fondly feeding them hay. When she heard the noise of horses and soldiers, she flinched and looked at the entrance of the ashram, her hand still tenderly touching the calf.


‘Nothing dadaji! I heard horses clopping somewhere around.’

His eyes fixed on Kalyani, his grand-daughter, Rudradatta moved from one group of students to another, instructing them. Then, he walked to Kalyani, who now played with the calf. This was a habit of the patriarch. After teaching his pupils for a few minutes, he was drawn to Kalyani for a casual chat. Although people thought Rudradatta to be above love and hatred, all his students knew that their guru was attached to Kalyani. Whenever Rudradatta went to his grand-daughter and talked to her, one or the other student commented,

‘Bharat’s deer!’

Horses’ galloping in that small village was a trivial incident for Rudradatta, like other routine occurrences. He began stroking the calf and offered it fodder. The guru did not notice that the horses and the retinue had stopped at his doorstep.

‘Where is Rudradatta?’ a horseman shouted. Hearing this loud query, Kalyani shivered, but Rudradatta did not pay attention to it. The students, till then busy in their lessons and discussions, jumped to their feet. All eyes were now set on the intruders.

A European commander and a horseman dismounted and walked onto the veranda. It was intolerable to all to see a white man and a soldier whose caste was not known entering into the sacred precincts. First, the students moved backwards, in an attempt to avoid touching the strangers; and then, they formed a semicircle around them.

‘Hey you, Bamuns! Where is Rudradatta?’ the soldier repeated the question, and added disdainfully, ‘Can’t you answer my question?’ The brave do not speak tender words.

‘You are asking about our guru, aren’t you?’ a student hesitantly asked.

‘Guru! What guru? We want to know where he is hiding right now,’ barked the soldier and stomped further inside the premises. The students moved backwards, and some of them, standing in the back row, went to Rudradatta, who was still oblivious of the commotion. The students informed their guru in an agitated voice,
‘Guruji, a platoon has come over here.’

‘Let it be. You continue with your lessons.’

‘They are asking about you!’

‘For me? Why?’ Rudradatta now turned towards the veranda where the hullabaloo was going on.

‘We don’t know. A white commander is leading the platoon.’

Rudradatta sniggered,

‘We have two masters: God above, and the white sahibs below. Let’s see what the matter is.’

Guruji’s clanking sabots were well known among students. The encircling crowd gave way to Rudradatta. Rudradatta raised his hand in blessing to the soldiers and affectionately asked,

‘Are you looking for me, my son?’ Rudradatta always talked fondly with young students. His tone did not change while talking to the soldiers.

Both the soldiers observed Rudradatta. The soldiers were tall and strong, but the Brahmin standing in front of them looked a few inches taller than the soldiers, and he also possessed a sinewy physique. How imposing the Brahmin would look in a soldier’s uniform, the Englishman thought.

‘Are you Rudradatta?’ the native soldier’s mouth often puked humiliating words at people, but he could not fill his words with venom then.

‘Yes,’ Rudradatta calmly replied.

Rudradatta’s mane and moustache were uniformly grey; otherwise, nothing betrayed his advanced age. The white soldier could not make a reasonable guess of Rudradatta’s age.

‘Where is Gautam Pandey?’ the Hindustani soldier asked brusquely.

‘I want to ask you that question. Do you know Gautam’s whereabouts? I haven’t seen him for the last two years,’ Rudradatta said.

The two soldiers looked at each other. Rudradatta’s reply confused the Englishman, making him angry. The British soldier believed that he was cut out to rule over the brown-skinned dregs. How could he find an old, unarmed Brahmin impressive? How shameful! When such guilt-ridden uneasiness turns into anger, its consequences can be dangerous. Furious with himself, the white man ordered the native officer,

‘He is a liar! Arrest the old man!’

The native officer took a step towards Rudradatta. All of a sudden, a small, heavy object hit the officer’s face. The officer, hurt on the face and jolted by this unexpected resistance,
keeled over in a heap. The projectile, a heavy notebook tied in a cloth, was hurled by one of the students.

The British officer ordered his soldiers to be prepared to defend such attacks. In a moment, ten cavalrymen climbed off their horses and rushed to the veranda. Ten bayonets were now pointed towards young students, ready to be thrust forward.

‘Tryambak!’ without turning around, Rudradatta called out.

A sturdy young man, of about twenty years, came forward. Clad in a white dhoti, the young man looked like a wrestler. A stole lay on his shoulders, revealing muscular arms and chest. The young man’s face was livid. His voice choked with anger, he could not reply to the revered guru.

‘Tryambak Bhatt!’ the guru cried out once again.

‘Yes, guruji,’ at last, he could speak two words.

‘You did this, didn’t you?’

Tryambak did not reply.


‘Who is he to humiliate you?’ the student spoke at last.

‘But, he hasn’t humiliated you.’

‘My guru’s insult is the insult of Aryavart’s all Brahmins.’

‘Is Aryavart left with true Brahmins, or even with the essence of a Brahmin’s life? They now aspire to become soldiers.’

The native soldier, who was until then massaging his cheek, stood up. Enraged, he turned to the white man, his master,

‘What is the next order, sir?’

He wanted to thrust bayonets through all these Brahmins; the Englishman, however, was not prepared for such violence. He ordered,

‘Search the school and the house thoroughly!’

Three soldiers stayed back with the white officer. The native officer and seven soldiers jumped down the veranda and began moving into the open space of the courtyard. The curious crowd of students followed the company, but the officer stopped them,

‘Don’t! Let them do their work!’

Tryambak Bhatt had already jumped onto the courtyard. Kalyani, who was observing the actions on the veranda, went to the small haystack, picked up bales of hay lying around and
arranged them. Beside the haystack lay students’ dhotis, drying in the sun. Tryambak went close to Kalyani, who was standing near the cow and her calf.

The native officer stared at the beautiful Brahmin woman. A soldier is often beastly, and a beast holds nothing as sacred. The officer winked at one of his soldiers and then approached Kalyani. They all seemed eager to talk to her.

Tryambak Bhatt, the tall and strong Brahmin, stood there, unarmed, yet impressive enough to make the troopers hesitant to go close to the comely woman. The officer, now that he had already made his intentions obvious, did not want to change his mind because of Tryambak’s presence. That would have hurt his pride. He stood right in front of Kalyani and addressed her,

‘Where is Gautam?’

‘Why do you ask her? You know the answer to your question, and if you don’t trust us, you can search the premises,’ replied Tryambak to the question posed to Kalyani.

The soldiers stamped off into the building, and in a few minutes, scrambled through everything, throwing things around. Looking at Kalyani, who had become pale with fear, Tryambak asked,

‘Why do you look scared? I have never seen you afraid of anything.’

‘I am scared, yes...’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know why.’

In a tender voice, Kalyani pleaded Tryambak,

‘Will you do me favour?’

‘Sure. What is it?’

‘Guard this haystack.’

‘Guard the Haystack? Why?’

‘Don’t ask me anything right now.’

‘Okay. Do as I say. Tie the calf close to the stack.’

In the meanwhile, the soldiers that had gone inside the house came out in the courtyard. Hearing their footsteps, Kalyani quickly tied the last knot to a nail that was close to the haystack. The calf, now a little away from its mother, became agitated. Looking at her little one being uneasy, the cow bellowed in anger. By then, all the soldiers had gathered in the yard. The officer hurriedly walked towards Kalyani, either to talk to her or to check through the haystack. His soldiers eagerly followed him. They young woman was frightened at the sight.
The officer kicked the haystack and rudely asked,

‘What is all this?’

‘It’s a haystack. What else could it be?’

The moment one of the soldiers raised his bayonet to forcefully thrust it through the stack, he heard a loud grunt behind him. Astounded, the soldier turned. He saw that the cow, snorting and raising its tail, was bolting towards him. If he had not jumped aside in time, the cow’s sharp horns would have broken his ribs. Missing her target, the maddened cow now changed her direction and ran to other soldiers. The soldiers ran helter-skelter in the yard and then quickly hopped onto the veranda.

‘It’s a haystack, after all,’ the native officer concluded. He too came over to the veranda.

Kalyani went to the cow, fondly smacked her lips, affectionately patted the cow, and, speaking a few sweet words, tied the cow to a nail. Tryambak helped her out in putting the haystack in order. Kalyani whispered to him with a chuckle,

‘Tryambak, it was a good idea to unleash the cow!’ Tryambak did not respond to the comment. He did not appear as cheerful as Kalyani.

2
The Gift of Death

*A lion jumps up, hearing the thunder in the sky;
if it doesn’t, know the beast to be a fox.*

*A cobra dances to the tune of a flute;
if it doesn’t, know it be a lowly snake.*

—Okhaharan (Premanand)

After searching through Rudradatta’s house and ashram, the platoon announced that they could not find anyone in the premises.

‘How is it possible? We have precise information about the place,’ the white commander was angry at the outcome of the search.

‘This Brahmin is hiding Pandey, I am sure,’ the native officer declared.

‘Drag him here in the courtyard,’ the commander ordered.

As soon as two soldiers rushed to seize Rudradatta, the students stood around their guru, shielding him. The soldiers stopped dead, looking at the unarmed young men. Attacking a pack of armed soldiers was easy; but the soldiers hesitated before charging headlong at these students.

‘Don’t keep looking at the lads! Push them out of the way!’
Now the soldiers started pushing and shoving the students, but it was not easy. Rudradatta’s wards were not a bunch of scrawny riffraff.

In the meantime, Tryambak jumped onto the veranda and dashed where the scuffle was going on. He tightly held two soldiers from their shoulders, and dragging them to the white commander, he warned,

‘You may talk to guruji, but don’t you touch him! If you do, we shall shed our blood to save him!’

‘Tryambak! Stand aside. All of you wait over there, and let the soldiers do their job,’ said Rudradatta, making his way through the crowd surrounding him.

‘Guruji! Please go inside and take rest. I shall handle these people,’ Tryambak expressed concern for the old man.

‘You are adamant, Tryambak! Have you already forgotten what the Geeta teaches on equanimity? You must strike a balance in treating all human beings. Don’t just learn the lessons of the Geeta. Put the message in practice. None of you will utter a word in this matter.’

‘No, we shan’t say anything,’ they all responded in chorus. They knew that if they argued further, guruji would bind them by an oath, and it would force them to be silent spectators in the later turn of events.

All the soldiers looked on at the fearless Brahmin with silent admiration. The British commander began doubting his own actions: How could this man lie? Yet, the commander was confident of the information he had. An aged teacher was attempting to save Gautam Pandey, and in doing so, he was prepared to sacrifice his life—this situation was not plausible to the Englishman. He thought of using the last tactic up his sleeve.

He climbed down the veranda and instructed the soldiers to bring along Rudradatta. The commander noticed that by then the entire village, including women, children and old men, had gathered in and around the school.

‘Ask these people to go away,’ sahib ordered.

The horsemen drove the beasts onto the rabble. Soon, disorder, noise and dust-clouds filled the place. Many were hurt in the chaos of bawling children and fleeing adults. The horses and the horsemen, both did not care about the injury they could inflict on people. Even so, once the horses returned to the ashram gate, in a few moments, the dispersed people gathered again at the same place. A crowd behaves strangely.

Rudradatta was made to stand in a clear corner of the courtyard. Ten feet away a soldier stood, pointing a rifle at him. Sahib spoke in broken Hindi,

‘Listen to me! You are hiding Gautam Pandey, who is Company Sarkar’s offender. I am giving you some time to reveal Pandey’s whereabouts. If you don’t, I shall give orders to shoot you. I shall count till twenty-five. You must open your mouth in the meanwhile!’
In the resultant ruckus, horrified people made many remarks: ‘Ram, Ram!’; ‘Oh my God!’; ‘Things have come to such pass!’; ‘This is indeed Kaliyuga!’; ‘Killing a Brahmin!’; ‘Murdering the best of the Brahmins? Oh God!’

‘Nine, ten, eleven…’ the counting continued.

His face untroubled, Rudradatta stood there quietly. He was sure that death would pounce on him in a few moments. Death doesn’t scare a devotee and a philosopher. The weapon-wielding soldiers looked petty in front of Rudradatta, who smiled as if a new life was going to open its doors to him.

‘Fifteen, sixteen…’

Over a thousand people intently watched this spectacle. No one uttered a word as the counting continued. In that terrible silence, the British commander’s loud voice sounded like the roar of a lion in a quiet forest, terrifying and tormenting,

‘Twenty-one, twenty-two…’

People’s anxious hearts turned upset, missing their set rhythm. They heard a roar, and saw Tryambak dashing to the soldier who had pointed his rifle to Rudradatta. Leaping on the soldier, Tryambak yanked at his weapon, and in a moment, he was pointing the rifle at the British commander.

‘I will shoot you if you utter one more word,’ the lad bellowed.

The Englishman was astounded by this sudden turn of events. He could have ordered his soldiers to shoot at the people around, but in that case, the student would have killed him.

Some people of the crowd screamed; some others screeched, as if echoing shrill cries. Then, with scythes and sabres gleaming in the sunlight, the crowd moved forward. The soldiers could not prevent the horde because any action on their part could provoke Tryambak to shoot the commander. They did not want it to happen.

Rudradatta, like an ascetic becoming conscious after meditation, brought himself out of his trance. He blinked a couple of times and in a grave voice said,

‘Tryambak, my son, drop that weapon! Wielding a rifle is not your job. Go inside and take care of Kalyani.’

Tryambak was deeply saddened by his guru’s firm instructions. He wished to ignore his teacher’s words that day. Troublesome thoughts filled his head: How could I be a mute spectator when my innocent, revered guru is put to death? Is my life so precious that I should protect it even when someone is killing a Brahmin, right in front of me?

‘My child, don’t invite the sin of defying me! You have never done anything against my wish,’ advised Rudradatta. Tryambak might have often thought of disregarding his guru’s instructions, but he could never bring himself to do so. He might have committed many sins, but ignoring guru’s instructions was not the one he had ever committed. Tryambak flung the rifle on the ground.
The sahib waved at the soldier, who picked up the rifle and aimed at Rudradatta again.

Strong-willed Britishers don’t give up the task on hand. Besides, after the young student’s intimidating action, the white man had turned spiteful. Otherwise, why would he continue with his counting?

‘Twenty-three, twenty-four...’

‘Boom!’

The rifle fired, its noise reverberating in the sky. Everyone’s heart was beating violently. With bated breath, people waited to learn the worst. Women covered their eyes. Death ruled over the quiet village.

3.
Yuvanasen, the Priest

_Brahma unfurled the universe, a deep, pleasant bower,_
_I fly in it alone._

_Beauty abounds here: the sun, the life, the people, the moonlight,_
_ but I fly in it all alone._

—Nhanalal

The sahib was taken aback by the noise. The shot was fired before he had completed the counting. Moreover, the noise came from afar, it seemed. How was it so?

The soldier that was pointing a rifle at Rudradatta lay on the ground, his rifle rolling in mud. He emitted muffled, painful cries. Breathing heavily, he kept on squirming.

The mob screamed with joy. Sahib saw that Rudradatta stood at the same place.

How was this possible? How did the bullet hit the soldier? Why didn’t it hit Rudradatta? Like the barbaric and superstitious Hindis, the educated and civilised British officer did not believe in Rudradatta’s divine power. It was also obvious that the soldier was not accidentally hit by his own rifle. A gunshot was fired from a distance and a bullet hit the soldier at the critical moment. It was definitely a conspiracy to save Rudradatta, a plot of a henchman hiding somewhere.

The British defeated the French with the help of Hindis; they had already begun eliminating the Hindu rulers from Hind with the help of brave Hindis; the Company Sarkar had built its palace by the sweat and blood of Hindis; yet, the British believed the Hindis to be scheming, and they said so bluntly and readily.

People began moving forward. This was no longer just a spectacle; they were there to see the drama in which their revered social leader was humiliated, and, as a result, they had suffered a loss of self-respect. Their greatly admired idol—their honour incarnate—was standing there, strong and unhurt. Rudradatta was alive. Moving forward, people flocked around the guru, cheering loudly and happily.
The rulers who perceive a rebellion in their subjects’ awakening end up facing a mutiny. If I show weakness now, the mob will rise against me, and my platoon will be in trouble, the white sahib thought. The battle-hungry believes that force is the answer to crush a mutiny.

‘Oh, the poor soldier is shot by someone! Who did it? Bring the wounded soldier in the ashram,’ Rudradatta exclaimed. He addressed the sahib,

‘Sahib, Go ahead, complete the counting! Otherwise, someone would die unnecessarily due to me.’

The white commander thought that Rudradatta was right. Rudradatta should have been killed when the drama kicked-off—but the commander intention was to scare the guru, not kill him.

‘Yes, I must finish the counting,’ saying this, the white sahib drew his rifle, and leapt towards Rudradatta.

The edge of the bayonet gleamed in front of Rudradatta, a few inches away from his chest.

‘Hold on! For God’s sake, hold on a moment!’

Astonished on hearing English at this place, the white commander turned towards the voice. He saw a European man, waving his hand and running towards him.

‘Who is this? Johnson?’

‘Yes.’

‘How come you are in this village?’

‘That I shall narrate later. But tell me what farce you are engaged in here?’

‘Why? I am performing my duty.’

‘What duty?’

‘This old man is hiding a Company’s offender in the premises.’

‘Who told you about it?’

‘I am sure of it. We were close on the heels of the criminal, but somehow the gap grew between us and we lost the track by a short margin. Yet, we could trace him till this village.’

‘And what does the old man say?’

‘He refuses the charge.’

‘You better believe him. Even if you have seen an event with your eyes, and if this old man denies it taking place, you should trust his words, not your eyes.’
'How's it possible? Do you know the man?'

'Yes, I have been a priest in the village for the last five years. I assure you this Brahmin never tells a lie.'

'What if the criminal is hiding somewhere else in the village?'

'If that is the case, the villagers will not inform you his whereabouts. They will, however, definitely co-operate with this old teacher. He can get the required information for you.'

'I shall have to stay put here for the night. I cannot leave the village without getting accurate and complete information about Pandey.'

'That's fine, but you must relieve the old man first. You have no idea you were on the verge of a dangerous situation. If you had harmed the old man, the Company would have faced a violent uprising even in distant regions. You and your soldiers would have been dead by now.'

Johnson, the priest, turned towards Rudradatta and said,

'Punditji! Please return to your home. These people don't know you. Deep apologies for all the trouble you had to undergo.'

'Yuvanasen, you seem to know him, don't you?' asked Rudradatta.

Rudradatta addressed the priest as Yuvanasen. Johnson first became Juvanasen for Rudradatta; and the pure form of the word Juvanasen was Yuvanasen. The British always changed Hindi names: Ganga became Ganges; Mumbai, Bombay; Dakshin, Deccan. Similarly, Hindis could easily change a Johnson to a Yuvanasen.

'Yes, punditji, he is a friend of mine! We studied together back home.'

'That makes him my friend as well. He went through a great deal here because he doubted that I had given shelter to Gautam Pandey. Tell him that I would never hide Gautam, and my Gautam would never do anything that would force him to go into hiding.'

'I did assure him about it, but he suspects that Gautam is hiding in the village, if not in the ashram.'

'I would certainly not protect Gautam. If someone else has, we can ask the people around.' Rudradatta addressed the villagers, 'Friends, if anyone in the village has given shelter to Gautam, please inform me about it.'

Not responding to this, the people around began talking and whispering. Their general tone was clear: No one had any knowledge about Gautam coming over to the village.

The sun had set. Students helped the injured soldier sit up. They applied medicines on the wound, tied a bandage over it, lifted the soldier and laid him on the veranda.
The white commander, whose name was Peters, instructed his company to camp in the village. Since a British would be comfortable with another of his clan, the priest invited Peters to his place, and he gladly went there for the night-stay. Rudradatta advised local leaders to make the village serai available for the company; and, he instructed villagers to give ingredients to the soldiers so that they could cook their meals. Villagers agreed to do the favours because they feared that otherwise the soldiers might plunder the village households.

The wounded soldier was also taken to the priest’s house, as the priest was known for his medical treatment. The crowd dispersed after the long drama. Rudradatta began preparing for his Sandhya.

Johnson, the priest, lived a little away from the village. When he came to Vihar five years ago, Johnson had built a small hut. Later, he turned the hut into a small bungalow with a little garden in front. In the beginning, the villagers did not want the priest to build even the hut. He had come there with the intention of reforming Vihar, believing the village to be a centre of Hindu fanaticism. Assuming Rudradatta to be a worshipper of ancient culture, Johnson wanted to mount an attack on him and embark on a crusade; the priest once dreamt of converting the entire Hindustan to Christianity. He was familiar with the land, having lived in various parts of Bengal, Gujarat and South India. Johnson’s most successful stint was in Bengal, where he could convert a large number of people. He had heard frequently of Rudradatta, the Gujarati pundit, and hence had come to Vihar, with the purpose of diminishing the pundit’s influence on people.

Johnson squandered a great deal of money, but no one offered him a place to live in the village. The history of evangelism, a colourful document, records many brave and adventurous acts of its missionaries.

Once, Rudradatta heard about a homeless white Christian man, who wandered around in the village whole day and slept in the open.

‘Why do people behave so cruelly?’ Rudradatta asked.

‘People fear that the Christian, if allowed to live here, would cast a magic spell on all and covert them,’ someone explained.

‘We all should immediately adopt Christianity if we fear that a priest’s presence among us will make us Christian. Call him here. I want to tell him that all the people living in Vihar are eager to become Christian.’

People understood what Rudradatta meant: The fear that mere presence of a Christian in the village would make them Christian was a mockery of their religion. When Johnson learnt that Rudradatta was arranging an accommodation for him, he was surprised because Brahmans could rarely be kind to Christians. He had imagined Rudradatta to be a proud, clever, argumentative and fanatic Brahmin. Johnson received land for his hut. His notions about Rudradatta changed a little, and he wished to meet the renowned guru.

Once, early in the morning, Rudradatta, with a few students and Kalyani, was on his way home after taking bath in the river. Johnson was taking a stroll at the same time and came face to face with Rudradatta.
‘He is that padari, isn’t he?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Yes, guruji!’ a student replied.

‘Hello padarisahib! Are you fine? Please inform me if you require anything.’

‘I am your enemy. I wish to convert your people.’

‘You may believe so, but no one is an enemy to those who observe Aryadharma. When our religion will lose its essence, all of us will become Christians. No one can stop them.’

Thus, both preachers were introduced to each other. Johnson’s ideas about Rudradatta turned out to be wrong. Gradually, the Christian missionary became fond of Rudradatta. To everyone’s surprise, Rudradatta began teaching the Geeta to the Christian; subsequently, Johnson’s respect for the old man grew. They both often discussed religion, and if Johnson’s knowledge of Hinduism astonished Rudradatta, what Rudradatta knew about the Bible amazed Johnson. The priest passionately argued in the support of his religion, but Rudradatta never spoke against Christianity. While teaching the Geeta, he often quoted the Bible that had incidents or messages similar to the Hindu text. It was unlikely that Rudradatta knew English, yet he was familiar with significant details of the Bible. If all Brahmns become like Rudradatta, the efforts to promote Christianity would be pointless, thought Johnson.

Why these excellent scholars of Hinduism don’t make efforts to spread their religion, Johnson often wondered. That they did not engage in proselytising was good for my self-interest, he concluded. Once, since he could not contain his curiosity, he asked Rudradatta,

‘Punditji, why don’t you work to spread Aryadharma among people?’

‘Aryadharma need not be propagated because it is an eternal religion. All religions contain Aryadharma’s seeds. When developed fully, Christianity, Islam and Judaism become Aryadharma. Since this is the case, why do we need to spread it?’

This may be right or wrong; nevertheless, it put an end to Johnson’s disapproval of Hinduism. Yet, he continued with his mission as a priest, but he now paid more attention to treating patients. Rudradatta and the priest developed an affectionate friendship. Johnson could not help meeting the guru every day. Rudradatta, however, made a point of taking bath if the priest touched him—this happened rarely, though; and, when Johnson came over to the ashram, Rudradatta offered him a separate seat so that no one touched him.

When the soldiers began harassing Rudradatta, someone informed Johnson about it. He also learnt how people were agitated and prepared to attack the platoon. Johnson knew the situation would turn grim if Rudradatta was injured; hence, he rushed out of his bungalow and hurried to the ashram. He was proud to be a Britisher, but he did not blindly appreciate all that the British officers did. The British had made mistakes, often indulging in unforgivable wrongdoings, he believed. Rudradatta’s execution would be one such atrocity and Johnson did not want it to happen.

Coincidentally, Peters, the commander of the platoon, happened to be Johnson’s college-mate. Therefore, the priest could prevent the guru’s killing. Johnson took Peters to his place, where his wife and daughter warmly welcomed the guest. Peters and his platoon were
returning from the campaign at Crimea, that horrific war between Russia and England. Peters’ platoon was sent back from that battle for some reasons.

At Johnson’s place, Peters lived in a proper household after a long time. His life, for one night, seemed easy and cheerful. Captain Peters and Johnson chatted about the wonderful days of school. Peters excitedly narrated thrilling incidents of war; whereas, Johnson talked about his encounters and experiences with uncivilised tribes. At last, Peters made a confession,

‘I have seen many brave men dying in battles, and I have also faced moments when my death appeared imminent. I have also seen people quietly enduring great difficulty. Yet, I must say, I have never experienced anything close to what happened today at the guru’s school.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. An unarmed Hindi, without any resistance, waited to embrace his death—I kept on counting the numbers and he stood there, quiet and smiling. I haven’t seen anyone so unbothered about his life and death!’

‘Yes, you are right.’

‘What he did today...How is it possible?’

‘These Hindus’ thinking seems incomprehensible, and their behaviour appears mysterious, I must admit. We shall be able to rule over them, only if we can understand them.’

‘I believe we shall not be able to control these people. Today, one unarmed man fearlessly faced a platoon. If they have even a small number of such people, our army will become ineffectual against them, won’t it?’

Both the friends began reflecting on this observation for some time. A noise in the garden disturbed them.

‘Juvanasen, are you awake?’ they heard a voice outside. Before Johnson could identify the speaker, his servant announced,

‘Punditji is at the door.’

Both the friends started at the words. Johnson got up and went outside in the veranda,

‘Punditji, at this hour?’

‘I have brought Gautam for you.’

Overhearing the words, Peters jumped up and flew off to the veranda.
4. Exile

One path leads to exile,
another to the glory of a throne!
The third path drives you to the rivers of blood,
where arrows pierce the body.
Nhanalal

‘I had told you that Gautam was not at my place, but he was indeed there. I had no idea about his presence in the ashram. I have come here to give him away,’ said Rudradatta to the stunned white men.

This was an example of matchless honesty! An entire platoon had come over to know Gautam’s whereabouts and seize him; to achieve their purpose, they were prepared to shoot Rudradatta—these facts were sufficient to know that Gautam had serious charges levelled against him. Yet, when all the doubts about Gautam being in the ashram were clearly dispelled, Rudradatta came to hand over him. This extraordinary righteousness left the priest and the commander astounded.

‘I am leaving now. Gautam, my son, I bless you. Don’t go astray from the path of truth, and don’t ever take refuge in violence again. God will save you!’

Rudradatta turned to go away.

‘Punditji, please have a seat,’ the priest requested.

‘I shall come over later,’ said Rudradatta and, clattering his sabots, vanished in the dark.

Gautam came out in the light. In the dim lantern, Peters could not clearly see his face. His build, however, was easily recognisable.

He was sentenced to death, for he had broken a military rule. Gautam had attempted to kill a European officer, and he had filched important documents recovered from enemies. Peters was put behind Gautam to arrest him. He had orders to shoot Gautam. The military rules are stringent everywhere.

Peters thought about his dilemma: After witnessing Rudradatta’s uprightness, would I have used a pistol to shoot Gautam, if I had a pistol with me? Gautam walked forward and stood right in front of the two men.

Noise of the disturbance woke up Johnson’s wife and elder daughter. They came there. I cannot shoot this man when women are around, thought Peter. Europeans learnt to respect women’s emotions early in human history.

‘Gautam, come in!’ the priest said.

The priest took the lead; Peters and Gautam followed him. As soon as Peters stepped inside the room, he wondered if Gautam had weapons; he looked at him inquisitively. Gautam noticed it and immediately exclaimed,
‘Sahib, I don’t have a weapon on me. And, even if I have one, I don’t attack an unarmed man. Don’t you know it?’

Peters always had a marked bias in favour of Gautam. In the war between Turkey and Russia, the latter justified its aggression by claiming that Turkey had killed many Christians. Fearing that Russia would crush Turkey and capture Dardanelles, and thus creating an intolerable situation, England began supporting Turkey; England also sent battalions from India to display its extensive power. As a result, one Christina state warred against another in Crimea. One such platoon was sent there under Peters. Gautam was an officer in it, holding the third rank.

It was not easy to fight a war on a foreign land: climate, people and country, everything was unfamiliar. A handful of Hindi soldiers came to the battleground after a long journey. The British soldiers did not respect the platoons consisting of Hindi soldiers, the people of a conquered land. They ignored the truth that several Hindis had helped the British in winning Hindustan. Praising their military strength, the British soldiers believed the myth that the British led fierce campaigns and miraculously defeated the Hindis. The Hindi soldiers were brought to the dangerous Russian terrain to put up a show, the British soldiers thought.

Bitter winter cold; the chilly, biting wind blowing from the North Sea; on one side was the ocean, and on the other, giant Russian soldiers! The British army, smug after their victory over Napoleon, found the Crimean war difficult. Their only battle to boast about was the tragic charge of the ‘Light Brigade’, immortalised in Tennyson’s verse. Otherwise, disappointing news came in from everywhere. The British commander-in-chief, worried and frustrated, targeted the Hindi soldiers, who lay about without a tent or a sigri; they did not have warm clothes or brandy to fight the winter cold. The commander-in-chief, however, found these soldiers to be a burden; hence, one fine day, he called the commander of the Hindi cavalry and ordered,

‘Immediately send back these brown cavemen.’

The white commander, trained in the military tradition of swallowing insults and following orders, saluted his superior. Peters, who had also accompanied him, went against the rules and protested,

‘Sir, the Hindi soldiers haven’t been given an opportunity to serve in the war.’

‘Oh, do they want an opportunity? I would be glad if they pack up and don’t be a burden on us.’

In the meanwhile, a messenger, breathless and bewildered, came and handed over a note to the commander-in-chief. The chief read the note and cried out,

‘Oh my God, we are ruined!’

‘What happened?’ asked Peters.

‘Out entire platoon was destroyed in Sebastopol while they attempted to stop trucks full of Russian ammunition. I wonder if these Russians are demons!’
‘Let me take over this battle if the ammunition has still not reached the fortress,’ Peters said emphatically.

‘What are these brown men capable of doing? Have they ever fought in war?’

‘Well, you anyways think they are good for nothing. If they are unfit for a war, they all will die, definitely relieving off your burden!’

‘Okay then, I shall send the official order soon. The vehicles carrying ammunition are still far from the fort, but they will reach the destination by morning, I am sure.’

Peters returned to his company and asked them to be prepared for the strike. He gave a pep talk, using whatever little Hindi he knew, encouraging his soldiers to go for the kill in that dark night and extreme cold of an unfamiliar terrain. Both the white officers gulped down shots of brandy. Since they didn’t take alcohol, the Hindu and Muslim soldiers could not take spirits to warm up their bodies. Yet, their teeth chattering with cold, the soldiers moved out. The freezing cold singed them, making their limbs numb. Even fire would have felt better than the severe cold, they thought. Wolves’ sad cries peppered the night. High above, stars, too, were trembling. The soldiers could not guess how far they must have plodded down and for how long.

‘Sahib, it seems someone is around,’ Gautam softly addressed the commander.

All the soldiers became alert. With the enemy in the vicinity, a wave of heroism swept through the Hindi soldiers. They were eager to take on the challenge.

‘Is anyone scared of the battle?’ Peters asked.


‘It seems they have taken a break. Let’s move forward after their noise dies down,’ Jackson, Peters’ assistant, advised.

‘But how can we charge at them when they are asleep?’ objected Mangal Pandey, who was right behind Gautam.

‘Idiot!’ Jackson blurted out angrily.

Mangal Pandey gnashed his teeth at this humiliation. Mangal Pandit, a haughty and ill-tempered young man, could not tolerate insults. People rarely crossed his path. But, like a mahout who doesn’t bother about the giant beasts under his care, the European commanders too didn’t give a thought to the innumerable Hindi soldiers that served the force.

A bullet flew over the troop. The Hindi soldiers immediately plopped on the ground. The bullet made sure that the enemy soldiers were not off-guard, and their sentries had already noticed something amiss. Holding their breath, the Hindi soldiers waited to make a counter attack, but nothing happened for a long time.

Suddenly, Gautam jumped up and rushed towards a mound on the side. His sharp eyes had noticed movement there. After a while, the other soldiers heard a thumping sound. It was a
Russian sentry, whom Gautam put down before he could signal his friends. The sentry could not even whimper.

The Hindi soldiers had reached close to the Russian company and the ammunition. The supply of weapons held high importance because it was going to be a decisive factor in the battles. A large Russian troop guarded the supply. They had already slain one platoon of British soldiers that had attempted to destroy the weapons. If the Hindi soldiers stormed to the Russian camp, it was almost certain that they would be destroyed in no time. Peters pondered over the strategy for long.

‘Who has courage to go for a recce?’ he whispered.

‘Don’t ask for opinions. Give us an order,’ Mangal retorted.

‘Why don’t you go ahead, then?’ Jackson said casually.

‘The job requires two. I shall go with Mangal Pandey,’ Gautam suggested. Peters gave the order. Soon, both the young men vanished in the dark night.

Cruel, relentless winter had withered most vegetation, leaving a few scattered shrubs. The dunes, the clumps of bushes and their shadows made a strange pattern on the ground. The dark night and dim moonlight both made the landscape enigmatic. A Russian soldier shouted,

‘Who is there?’

In the dark night, his cry sounded menacing. Another soldier rebuked him,

‘Why did you shout? Everyone is tired and asleep in the camp.’

‘But I noticed some movements there.’

‘Don’t worry. No one will venture here at this hour. We have already destroyed their one troop in the evening. I am sure they won’t dare come here for at least two more days.’

‘I saw shrubs moving around there.’

‘Did you? How stupid, my friend, shrubs don’t move on their own. I am sure you are not drunk, but you have gone bonkers because you haven’t slept for the last four days,’ the soldier sniggered.

The first soldier, to dispel his doubts, pelted a stone at the ‘moving’ shrubs. The stone hit the plants, but nothing happened. The soldier became sure that everything was in order.

‘You should have fired a bullet at it,’ the other soldier joked.

‘I am not stupid. A bullet would have woken up others.’

Both the sentries continued with their patrol and marched towards other location. Once again, some plants moved a little. A gentle breeze began blowing through the vast plane. The sentry still wondered if the shrubs had acquired a special skill to move about. The
enchanted night could delude people to believe anything. After sensing movement in one clump of shrubs, the sentry felt that all the plants, scattered through the plane, were animated by a spirit. What a delusion!

The soldiers went the other way. A little distance away was the military camp, and further down, the officers' tents were pitched up. Soldiers lay sleeping close to the campfire. From a distance, a number of handcarts appeared in the middle of the camp. That particular place was well guarded with a number of armed soldiers keeping a watch.

Over three kilometres from the camp, Peters’ platoon sat waiting in the dark for the two soldiers that had gone for a reconnaissance. After a while, the moon came out of the clouds and began showering pale, cold light. They all grew impatient, especially Peters. Three hours had passed sitting in that nowhere place, doing nothing. Pressure mounting, he found it difficult to wait for new information; and, without an idea about the lie of the land, he could not attack the Russian camp. If Peters chose to return, he would become a laughing stock. How could a soldier tolerate being ridiculed by colleagues and superiors?

‘Who is there?’ a Russian soldier’s roar came to them as a faded, yet angry echo. Peters’ heart began beating violently. He immediately turned to his liquor bottle for solace.

‘They both are arrested, I am sure,’ Jackson remarked disdainfully.

Peters could not speak for a few moments. Slugging down all that was left in the bottle, he firmly said, ‘They won’t be caught alive, I am sure.’

‘I don’t trust these Brahmins. The entire clan is arrogant and treacherous!’

Peters did not respond to this comment. The moonlight, now brighter than before, made the cold even sharper, as if peeling off the soldiers’ skin with a jagged blade.

‘Let’s go back,’ Jackson broke the silence after a while.

‘What about those two soldiers?’ Peters was surprised at the idea of going back without them.

‘Oh, they are up there in the heaven.’

‘I don’t believe it. I haven’t heard a gunfire.’

‘Can’t you kill someone without using your gun? Don’t the Russians have bayonets? It doesn’t take long to kill two.’

‘Jackson, please don’t make such prophecies. Gautam and Mangal, both are our excellent soldiers. They would definitely try to send a message to us.’

Right then, they heard a muffled report. And then, another. The Hindi platoon was terrified by the idea of losing two young soldiers. After a few moments of scary silence, a deafening explosion shook all of them. The earth trembled for miles around even after the long, thunderous blast, as if chaos came again. A massive dark cloud obscured the wide sky and the moon. Many bangs and crashes followed the blast for a long time. The Hindi platoon rose to retreat because shells and waste began falling over them in spite of the distance. The
noise of the Russian soldiers added to the din. In the pandemonium, the most distinct were
the screams of injured soldiers.

The worried British commander-in-chief had hardly stretched out himself in his bed. Hearing
the volcanic blast, he jumped up. He could not figure out what could have caused the blast.
He vaguely remembered that the funny lot of Hindi soldiers had gone to block the
ammunition carriers’ passage.

His face turned grim, and then he smiled from ear to ear.

‘What must have happened?’ he asked his guards.

‘The Russian ammunition is blown away,’ a guard replied.

Still smiling, the commander-in-chief lay on the bed and immediately slipped into deep
slumber. He continued smiling even when asleep.

5.

Home

Loneliness inflames my heart;
my friend, I dream of my beloved.

Nhanalal

The astonishing feat exhilarated the British army: the ammunition that could have killed
millions of people and caused immense destruction was blown away without losing a single
life. The Hindi platoon was received with great jubilation and hurrahs for this unparalleled
exploit. Peters and Jackson were honoured and invited for a special dinner with the
commander-in-chief. The Hindi soldiers were also treated with a feast. The commander-in-
chief held a special meeting with them. Peters introduced Gautam and Mangal to the chief
and gave them credit for the great success. The chief shook hands with them and promised a
reward to both the soldiers. Since Gautam had an injury in the head, the chief advised him
to take care of the wound.

After the chief left, Jackson said,

‘Peters, you seem to be a generous man indeed.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘Why do you give all the credit to those Brahmins?’

‘Isn’t it right? They deserve it most of all.’

‘You are the head of the company, and they carried out your orders. Who should be
praised—a machine, or the one who puts the machine to proper use?’

Peters did not respond to this. He knew that unthinking machines could not have crossed
the enemy’s defense, searched the ammunition, blown it off and returned safely to the
company. The execution required skill, poise and courage. Even if England worships these two soldiers’ idols, it would not be enough, he believed.

When the two reached the tents, Peters told Jackson,

‘Do you know we now have a complete map of Sebastopol?’

‘No, I don’t know anything about such a map. If we have the map, we can easily comprehend the Russians’ maneuvers.’

‘Yes, we have the map. Guess who got it?’

‘No idea.’

‘Gautam!’

‘How did he do it? I think he ran off immediately after blowing off the ammunition.’

‘You talk as if blowing off the ammo was easy. Gautam went into a Russian commander’s tent and made off with whatever papers he could lay his hands on.’

‘And they could not identify him in their camp!’

‘Remember the sentry he had killed on the hillock? Gautam had put on the dead Russian’s clothes! The general commotion and darkness helped him. He went straight to the tent and as if he was a Russian soldier.’

Jackson did not acknowledge Gautam’s courage or cleverness. Like most people, he could not appreciate others; on the contrary, Jackson felt that he himself could have done the same job better and faster. What was commendable in penetrating the alert Russian defence while hiding in bushes? To adjust to a place and situation was a soldier’s duty. Jackson felt a deep resentment for a perceived injustice: the Hindis stole the honour that was rightly mine.

The day passed without any significant activity. Florence Nightingale, the English nurse, had provided exemplary service of treating wounded soldiers in the Crimean war. The Lady with the Lamp, as she was fondly known, had won over people everywhere. What would an injured soldier love more than someone who nursed his wounds?

Although Gautam was not seriously injured, Nightingale visited him and wrapped a fresh bandage on the gash on his head. Her kindness jogged Gautam’s memory of his dead mother, filling his eyes with tears.

‘Brave soldier, what’s the matter? Everyone is showering praise on you today! Why are you crying?’ saying this, Nightingale wiped Gautam’s eyes.

‘You remind me of my mother.’

Even murderers and executioners become sentimental while remembering their mother. A kind-hearted soldier’s tears flow freely when talking about the woman who gave him birth and raised him. Although rarely, great conquerors also resort to shedding tears.
‘Will you remember your European mother after returning to Hind?’ Nightingale asked, wiping away Gautam’s tears.

‘Yes I will. You are like Ganga and Jamana, the holy rivers. Anyone who dies in the war after meeting you will definitely reach heaven.’

‘If mothers set their eyes on battlefields even once, they would not let a single war take place anywhere,’ gazing at the horizon, Nightingale uttered prophetic words.

Nightingale left. Gautam came out of the tent. The brave and strong soldier suddenly became a tender child on the verge of weeping: he remembered his parents, whom he was not going to see again. When he was still a child, Gautam’s parents kept him in Rudradatta’s guardianship and passed away. Gautam’s father was Rudradatta’s student and friend. Although Gautam’s father was a karmakandi Brahmin scholar, he had a keen interest in warfare, always looking for opportunities to participate in a battle. Since he was known as a good fighter, kings often invited him to lead their platoons, and he accepted the invitations out of his passion for combats. Once the fight was over, he returned to live with Rudradatta. When the long conflict between the thugs and the Company began, a thug leader had requested Gautam’s father to join his troops. Even after participating in many battles, the Brahmin remained poor because he did not think of gaining anything out of his services as a fighter.

One such battle ended with a grave injury to Gautam’s father. Realising that his end was near, he immediately embarked on a journey to Vihar and reached there with great difficulty. Before breathing his last, he requested Rudradatta to take care of his wife and son. Then, he left the world, remembering Narayan Bhagawan. Devotion and passion gleamed in his wife’s eyes. Still a young woman, she took care of her husband till the last moment and did not budge from her husband’s bed even after his death. Like the people around, she did not treat her husband’s body as a corpse. With dry and vacant eyes, she kept on gazing at his dead face, and after a while, she cried, ‘Jai Ambe!’ Everyone around understood the signs of what was going to happen. Rudradatta thought of using the best trick to save the situation: he called Gautam, a little boy then, and made him stand close to his mother. His mother began sobbing; along with tears, her eyes showered love and blessings for the little one. For a moment, even Rudradatta felt that the boy’s presence has pacified the young woman, and she would give a thought to the boy’s future. She would choose life for her son over death after her husband. In the woman’s mind, a devoted wife and an affectionate mother struggled for long. Then, she mechanically said,

‘Ambe Ma! Take care of my son! Guruji, Gautam is under your care. I am not worried about him.’

Rudradatta, the great scholar of Vedant and Darshan, tried hard to control his tears. He closed his eyes. Keeping her husband’s head in her lap, Gautam’s mother sat on the pyre. The flames might have moved and tumbled the logs of wood on the pyre, but the woman calmly sat amidst blazing fire, as if she was taking a bath in amrit.

It is good that the practice of sati is now abolished. It is indeed good that we no longer see a lovely woman burning herself in the pyre. Yet, in all that we see around us, whether it is earthly or heavenly, the sight of an Arya sati enveloped in raging flames is the most divine sight. World over, people have not known of an emotion as sacred as that of a sati’s. An Arya
woman, a member of the weaker sex, scorning death and ignoring the unbearable pain of burning her body, sits on the pyre to free her soul and become one with her beloved. Not only Hindustan, the world will forever imbibe life out of this picture.

The practice of sati is now abolished in society; but no one can stop women from being satis. The ritual of burning on the pyre has now ceased, but no one can extinguish the yajna fire in which women melt their body. Only a woman can become a sati because her life is a perpetual yajna. She dutifully devotes herself to her beloved. How can such a woman find death difficult? What qualities does the man possess to save himself? He criticises the woman and confines her in a veil; he selfishly shuts her in home. Who is greater between these two? To answer the question, we must ask another question: what is greater, sacrifice or selfishness? The world will become a habitable place when the man will begin to emulate the self-sacrificing woman. Till then, it will remain a butcher-house full of quarrels, battles and agony.

Gautam saw a European sati in Florence Nightingale. He remembered his mother, his home and his ashram. He fondly thought about Rudradatta, his foster father. Gautam chose to be a soldier, a profession Rudradatta detested. How hurt he must have been by my actions, Gautam thought. For a long time, Gautam followed Rudradatta’s footsteps; the guru, however, knew that the young man’s war-loving nature would definitely flare up one day, and, tossing about scholarly tomes, Gautam would pick up a sabre.

Then, Gautam met Mangal. An aggressive Brahmin from Uttar Pradesh, Mangal loved the battle of bodies and of minds. An excellent student of Nyaya, he always enjoyed a good argument. In those days, Brahmins enlisted in the military, but strictly followed the rituals of Sandhya; they also polished up their knowledge of Sanskrit, which came naturally to them. They mingled and competed with Jats, Rajputs, and Muslims in the service; otherwise, they lived the life of the best and sacred of society, as Brahmins rightfully do. They took baths every day; they spoke Gayatri mantra before meals; they cooked their meals and did not let anyone touch their food. This is how they articulated their received superiority from others.

As a young boy, Mangal Pandey did spend a couple of years in Rudradatta’s ashram. The belligerent Brahmin, nevertheless, paid more attention to weapons and warfare. Eventually, he began enlisting in platoons. In those days, platoons were formed and dispersed often. A soldier quit Sindhia’s troops and joined Holkar’s; and, a Holkar’s recruit joined Company Sarkar’s army to learn a few tricks. Mangal, after similarly working in various troops for a long time, decided to take a break. He came over to Rudradatta’s ashram to brush up his lessons of Nyaya. He met Gautam there and latter’s nascent passion for armed combats was aroused. Assuming that guruji would not allow him to choose the profession of a soldier, one fine day, Gautam ran away from the ashram.

Whom did he meet before leaving the ashram? Why did he meet Kalyani at the last moment? Kalyani—what a lovely name! A beloved’s name sets a man’s heart on fire, always and all over. Kalyani’s tears could not hold back Gautam. Passion for heroism had overpowered him; neither love nor duty could have prevented him from embarking on his journey. A lion, living a happy life in a large cage, yearned to break the shackles and roam around under the wide blue sky. Gautam had crossed over all the barriers: Vihar’s rural beauty, Rudradatta’s affection and Kalyani’s love. Ignoring all the temptations, he went ahead, joined the military and became a brilliant maneuverer in the battlefield.
Gautam shone out in Punjab’s Sikh conflict, winning a shield from the Company Sarkar. He also received a promotion in ranks. Within a century of its presence, the Company had won over almost the entire country, like a yajna fire consuming all that was offered to it. The land of the Sikhs, ruled by the brave Ranajitsingh, was also taken over. As a result of these defeats, Hindis had lost patriotic fervour. By 1850, Hindis shamelessly fought against each other and gladly offered a defeated state on the Company’s altar.

At the onset of the Crimean war, the Company made a troop of its most skilful soldiers to be sent there. After experiencing insults and hardships for a long time, the troop of Hindi soldiers had impressed everyone by their strength and daring in that war. Except Gautam, all the Hindi soldiers were excited after blowing off the Russians’ ammunition. After meeting Nightingale, memories of his mother and of his past troubled him. He had not heard about Rudradatta for about two years. Kalyani—what must she be doing? Why did Gautam, a hardy soldier, worry about these people?

Greatly upset by the recollection of people, places and incidents, Gautam could not enjoy his troop’s victory. Everyone around appreciated him, but he kept on thinking how he could share the success with Kalyani. He also feared that Kalyani could have fallen in love with someone else—especially after he made a choice of the being a soldier, a profession that made one heartless. Why would she wait for an ordinary soldier whose life was meant to wander about till its wretched end?

Gautam became dizzy. He closed his eyes. Mangal was preparing dal-bati in a corner of the campsite. As he sensed that Gautam was wiping his eyes, Mangal skipped off to his friend. Affectionately holding Gautam’s hand, he asked,

‘Gautam, what’s wrong with you?’

‘Nothing. I want to go home.’

‘Home? We are far from home!’

Gautam broke down in tears.

6
A Murder

Slaughterers of the world surround us.
Kalapi

Human beings are intelligent. If they always followed their mind, they would be saved from many obsessions. A man sheds tears at the mere mention of his home—is he really intelligent?

But then, who does not become excited at the memory of home? Many men have left behind palatial houses of faraway lands to return home and live in a humble hut. The shrewd men who match wits with clever women are drawn to their uncouth wives, even if only for routine, petty quarrels. Who has not seen a guru of a royal family, escaping the daily life with the clean and clever princes and irresistibly returning to the troop of his batty children,
to join them in the boisterous fun? The longing for home has made adventures and ambitions meaningless. Home and homeland hold mysterious power over mankind. What could explain this strange pull?

‘Is the pain unbearable?’ Mangal asked.

‘No.’

‘Go to sleep now. Don’t exert yourself.’

‘I can’t sleep, and I can’t be alone. I want to be around you.’

‘That’s good. I am preparing bati. We shall have a little bhang first and then meals.’

Many Hindustani bhaiyas preferred to have bhang before taking meals. Mangal Pandey loved to have bhang. Since bhang could be difficult to buy in Crimea, he had secretly brought it along in his luggage. Whenever he felt depressed, or when he had a tiff with someone, or when he ate too much or not at all—bhang saved Mangal’s day and kept him cheerful. He relished taking bhang and arranged a concoction for other soldiers having a taste for it.

Mangal served bhang in small mud cup. Sitting on a rock, Gautam gazed at the wide ocean ahead. He stared at the ocean; after a while, the ocean faded away. Gautam saw his home, in a village thousands of miles away from where he sat. The crimson evening sky; the dark, snake-like, shining waters of the Black Sea; the eternal noise of rolling waves—nothing touched his heart. Kalyani’s image rose in his mind.

‘You want to go away leaving everything behind,’ Kalyani said, wiping away her tear. She was tired of arguing with Gautam and defeated by his stubborn ideas.

‘Yes, but why are you crying? I suffer a great deal when I see you crying. I want to experience war. Let me go and fight in one, and then I will return to you all.’

A cuckoo’s sweet song twittered in Gautam’s ears; and, on the other hand, war cries and drums called him out. Both the forces pulled him. Where should he go?

‘Okay. If you don’t want me to go to war, I won’t.’

The cuckoo won. The bird understood the value of her song. She knew that Gautam’s passion for war would raise its head again and trouble him. He would not enjoy the bird’s song for long. It was likely that one day the storm would drown the cuckoo and her song. What would happen if such devastation came about in their life?

Kalyani compassionately thought about Gautam’s dilemma. A woman is naturally kind-hearted; she doesn’t have to make an effort to be kind.

‘Okay, then. You do what you want to.’

‘I will always think of you. Will you remember me?’
Kalyani did not reply. Sneaking out of Vihar in darkness, Gautam looked back a couple of times. He saw Kalyani standing at the place of their last meeting. Gautam looked back for the last time before vanishing in the dark. She still stood there.

Gautam, reliving those moments of departure, awoke with a start from the reverie. A crude laughter echoed around. With a jolt, he realised that he was in Russia. He saw a European man and a woman walking around, holding hands and fondly touching each other. The woman often gave a squealing laughter. Soldiers are the worst of all the scoundrels, full of many vices. Many loose women wander around military camps. Every form of business revealed a human weakness. And, the sale of a woman’s body is the worst business men could participate in. The flesh trade is a dark stigma on men, who control and rule over society. The man with a woman was Jackson sahib, enjoying an evening of sloshed merrymaking.

Not that Hindis were any better in moral standards. Even Hind was full of red-light areas. The Hindis, however, practised love in a different manner. They did not perform love as a drama on a roadside. Hence, a display of affection embarrassed them. Gautam took his eyes away from Jackson and the woman, who were walking arm in arm, flirting and laughing loudly.

‘Sahib, don’t touch it, please, our food will become impure,’ said Mangal. Gautam turned to see what happened there.

Jackson was intoxicated, free of all concerns. Although a man under the influence of alcohol would not hold back at anything, Jackson did not go near Mangal’s cooking pans.

‘A coward,’ the woman stroked Jackson’s cheek and laughed.

Hindu Vedas speak extensively about wine’s vices and virtues. Alcohol makes a man uncontrollable, pushing him to commit crimes. Yet, its most potent impact is on a man overpowered with lust. How can she call me a coward? She believes I cannot handle my soldiers—Jackson thought.

‘Hey you, coolie, what are cooking in this pan?’

‘This is bhang, sahib. It is a drink.’

‘Let me have it.’

‘Wait, I will get a bowl for you, sahib.’

‘No, I will use this bowl of yours.’

‘Don’t, sahib. The vessel and the bhang will become impure.’

‘Bloody swine! You work under me, don’t you? How dare you insult me? You will have to suck the cartridges with cow and pig fat, do you know?’

Jackson kicked the small pestle used for pounding bhang and picked up a mud bowl with bhang in it. His companion began laughing.
When Jackson called him a ‘cooie’ and a ‘swine’, Mangal, in spite of simmering anger, kept himself in check. But, when the sozzled Englishman touched bhang, Mangal became uncontrollably furious. He could have tolerated Jackson touching his meals, but Jackson touched bhang, Bhagawan Shankar’s gift to His followers. All the Hindi soldiers first offered a little bhang to Shankarji, like true devotees, and then they themselves took the drink. The drunken British officer had insulted Bhagawan Mahadev. Mangal jumped up, and, in a fit of rage, hit Jackson on the face with brutal power. The British officer stumbled and fell down in a heap.

The reformed society might not observe the decree about untouchability, but the ideas were so entrenched in Hindu society that even after the European contact of years, people could not get rid of them. The ideas could not be justified now, but just a century ago they were widely practised. Oppression or ruthlessness cannot alter people’s beliefs.

The woman began laughing once again. Clearly, she was not in love with Jackson.

Jackson was humiliated. The insult had made him sober. Fired up to take revenge, arrogant in his superiority, he got up. How can an ordinary soldier of a slave country attack me? He is a lowly stooge of the country which I have conquered. This Brahmin soldier salutes me every day. Isn’t he humiliated then? But my touch makes his food impure! This entire community of Hindus should beconverted to Christianity!

Jackson, a tall, strong and brave man, was ready for a fight. In spite of his stocky built, Jackson was no match to Mangal in raw physical power. Jackson attacked Mangal with his bayonet.

Before he could strike, Gautam came and tightly held Jackson’s hand. Gautam also appeared bitterly angry. He yanked away the bayonet from Jackson’s hand and threw it away. The Englishman realised that it was not possible to fight with these two Hindis.

‘Yuk! Is that all what you have to show?’ the woman taunted Jackson. She continued, ‘Both of you fight a duel. I will go with the winner!’

‘Gautam, choose your weapon!’ roared Jackson.

‘Let us fight with bare hands.’

‘You were the one to hold my hand from behind. You wimp!’

‘Now, pick up the weapon you like and fight with me, sahib,’ Gautam picked up the bayonet lying around and gave it to Jackson. Jackson, by now burning in rage, struck the first blow. Mangal thought that the bayonet had torn through Gautam, but Gautam had quickly slipped out the bayonet’s path. Then, in a few rapid moves, he threw Jackson and his weapon down on the ground.

Jackson was bleeding. He was badly wounded. Gautam noticed the oozing blood and reddening mud. That woman, Jackson’s companion, ran to the camp, screaming,

‘Murder!’
‘Murder!’ hearing the frightened cry, the entire camp came out. Although Jackson was hurt, the wound was not fatal. Gautam and Mangal looked at each other. Remembering the unwritten rule that a wounded soldier, even if he was an enemy, must be treated, Mangal tore off his upper garment. When he sat down to wrap the wound, Jackson kicked him.

Jackson lay there wounded, but he had not fainted. He yearned to take revenge. Hot headed and arrogant, Jackson believed that the brown coolies were born to serve others, and they should be humiliated at every instance. This belief shaped his behaviour. Few soldiers like Gautam, Mangal and Azizullah were spared the extremes of his nature. Yet, he insulted every soldier on trivial matters. The soldiers held a deep resentment against him, but they could do nothing about it. The strange military law expected soldiers to obey every order, not granting them scope to complain about a superior.

Under the influence of alcohol, Jackson annoyed two soldiers, both known to be headstrong. Besides, he didn’t stop at riling them; he touched the proud Brahmin soldiers’ sacred bhang and made it impure. As if this was not enough, he challenged them for a duel. Unfortunately, he himself was hurt in the fight with the soldier who was, according to his belief, borne to salute him. He was put to shame in front of his woman friend. Wounded Jackson kicked the Hindi dog!

Even a dog fights back. Although the essence of Brahminhood was lost in society, Mangal Pandey was proud of his blood. He could not take the disgrace of being kicked. Even if a royal family has lost its power, their behaviour reflects authority for seven generations. Drona and Durvasa both were aroused in Mangal Pandey, whose ancestors were once worshipped by kings. Furiously angry, Mangal tightly held Jackson’s throat and began strangling him. Choked Jackson began wriggling on the ground, and blobs of blood squirted out of his wound. He fell unconscious.

Gautam tried to pull Mangal’s hands off the Englishman’s throat, but at the moment Mangal’s anger and strength were uncontrollable like that of a great warrior. A couple of British soldiers hit his hands with batons, but that provoked him more, and his grip became stronger. Had Gautam not held his hands, Jackson would have been strangled to death in a few moments. The din in the camp became deafening. In this noise, Mangal heard someone addressing him,

‘Pandeyji, what are you doing? Don’t kill a fainted man. Cowards do such things!’

He was Azizullah, Mangal’s Muslim friend. Mangal immediately took his hands off Jackson’s throat and got up. A couple of soldiers held him, but Mangal, who could have fought anyone then, pushed them off and shouted,
‘Who hit me with batons? Where are those white soldiers?’

In the meanwhile, Jackson was taken away in a tent. Mangal and Gautam, the two rebels, were arrested.

To rise against the military power was a serious offence. Death sentence was the sure penalty for this breach of discipline. Besides, Mangal had confronted, hit and injured a superior. This was an attempt to murder a military chief. Everyone thought that both the rebels would be shot dead right there.

Gautam and Mangal, however, were presented to the military court after a few days. Military courts worked fast; their system was as sharp and quick as their weapons, unlike the sluggish civil courts.

Both the criminals made a confession. A few witnesses were called for a testimony—especially, that woman, Jackson’s companion, became a critical witness to the incidents. All the grave allegations levelled against them were proved in the court: provoking a brawl in the army camp, protesting against a superior and attempting to murder him. Not a single proof was found about what had provoked these actions. For Mangal and Gautam, presenting a defence became impossible.

The subordinate is always at fault; the master, never. This general rule is doubly true in the military. Mangal and Gautam both were declared guilty. The court sentenced them to be shot dead.

Peters felt deeply for both the brave young men. A few days back they had done a great service to the British army and earned praise for the Hindi battalion. How could such young men die in disrepute, that too in a land away from their native place? True, Jackson was hurt, but his health had improved the next day. Peters persuaded Jackson to testify in favour of the two Hindis, but Jackson didn’t want to let go of the opportunity. Peters said,

‘Jackson, be kind to those Hindis.’

‘I am kind, but I am not liar.’

Truth becomes an easy and useful defence when its consequences are going to affect someone else; lies become despicable; conscience plays its role; poems and proverbs supporting truth come to mind. Eventually, the truth ruins others to its satisfaction. Do such truths carry any merit? Who knows!

‘You know the Hindis and understand their beliefs about purity. Why did you touch their drink?’ Peters asked.

‘I did what I wanted to. But the barbarians have no right to kill me. I will tell the truth to the court.’

And, finally, Jackson testified in the court, presenting a convenient truth. Two brave Hindi soldiers, whom the British army had given a grand welcome few days back, became convicts facing the death penalty.

Gautam and Mangal waited quietly for death, but the moment of execution took time.
Peters, sad and shaken by the series of incidents, kept on thinking about the future of his two soldiers. He had sent a letter to the commander-in-chief, recommending prizes and decorations for Mangal and Gautam. Soon the decree stating the death sentence to the two men also went to the commander. Couldn’t we show mercy to the two young men, Peters thought.

Right then Azizullah came to the tent and saluted Peters. Azizullah, a pious Sufi poet, had earned respect among all soldiers. His pleasing language and charming manners made him likeable. He befriended many and advised almost all on various issues. Muslims respected him, as a descendent of the prophet; the Hindus respected his Sufi ideas as words of Vedanta.

‘Saiyad, please come in,’ Peters warmly welcomed Azizullah.

‘Huzoor, I want to inform you about something,’ said Azizullah.

‘Yes, tell me, what is it about?’

‘Huzoor, Mangal and Gautam should not be punished here.’

‘What do you mean?’ Peters raised his eyebrows. A subordinate’s truth is not palatable to the master.

‘I am sure you must have noticed that our soldiers are disappointed by the recent incidents. If something happened to those two soldiers, the platoon will become uncontrollable. I thought it right to inform you about this, so I came over to talk to you.’

Peters thought that if the Hindi platoon would rebel there, in an unfamiliar land, the situation for the troubled British army would become more difficult. Besides, the new complications would benefit the enemy camp.

Peters went to the British commander-in-chief. The chief, preoccupied with many issues at hand, flung his papers and called Peters in. With a distraught face, the commander-in-chief said,

‘Your Hindi soldiers raise new problems every day.’

‘Yes sir, I know. I want to discuss something about them. If we execute those two Hendis here, the battalion will rebel against us.’

‘If they rebel, I will bow them away!’

‘Yes, it is possible to eliminate them, but everyone will learn about this rebellion, and it will make things difficult for us.’

‘I will consider the consequences first, since I am responsible for things here. By the way, what is the purpose of your visit?’
‘I want to request you that you pardon the two convicted soldiers. We shall sack them from the British army, but death sentence is an extreme punishment. Jackson was hardly wounded in the squabble, and in fact, I believe Jackson’s behaviour had caused the tiff.’

‘What can I do about it? The court has decided the penalty. I have to approve it. I don’t have authority to pardon the convicts.’

‘You may file a mercy plea to the right authority.’

‘See these papers. I had recommended the minister to give the highest honour to both the Hindi soldiers. Now I have to inform him about the soldiers’ execution. Do you think I like the job? If Jackson had shown mercy to the Hindi soldiers in court, we would have been saved from this difficult situation.’

The chief passed on a few papers to Peters. Peters glanced through them, and returning the papers to the commander, he said,

‘Sir, I am indebted to you for writing this letter of appreciation to the minister. I am sure if you endorse a mercy plea for the soldiers, they would be pardoned. The Company Sarkar will not face more complications. As a soldier of the Company, and as a humble subject of our Queen Victoria, I request you to send a mercy plea.’

The commander-in-chief mulled over the request for a while and then said,

‘See, I do feel for you and your brave Hindi soldiers. I can at best request the minister to delay the execution. In the meanwhile, take your battalion to Hind and keep both the convicts under arrest for about two months. When you receive an order from here, either you relieve them or hang them to death, according to the ministry’s decision. I will begin the procedure today. Let’s see what happens.’

‘I am indebted to you, sir,’ said Peters and left the tent. Without discussing the issue with anyone, he gave marching orders to the troops.

The Hindi battalion was low in spirits. They might have rebelled if Mangal and Gautam were punished there. When this anxious lot was asked to leave Crimea, they were concerned for their two colleagues. A few leaders went to meet Peters at night.

‘When will our friends’ execution take place?’ they asked.

‘Why are you bothered about it? You follow my orders. That’s all.’

‘Yes, sir, we will obey your orders. But, once the Brahmin soldiers leave for Hind, Gautam and Mangal’s dead bodies will not be cremated according to Hindu rituals. It will be a disgrace in death. They must not suffer this insult. Therefore, we request you to give us details about the time of their execution,’ Azizullah politely explained.

Peters knew that the soldiers wanted to know about Gautam and Mangal’s future under this pretext. He told them the truth,

‘Gautama and Mangal will come with us to Hind.’
While boarding the steamboat, Peters first took in the convicts, so that all the soldiers could see them joining in the journey back home. Then, the rest of the battalion boarded the ship. Like a dancing dot in the vast ocean, the ship made its way on rough waters. And the soldiers, tiny particles on the ship, stared beyond the endless waters. What did they see? How far could small human beings see? Nothing could stop them to see far, not even elemental forces. Human beings could perceive even the supreme spirit of life. To see beyond the Arabian Ocean was not difficult for the soldiers. There they saw their homes, aged parents, innocent children and hardworking wives.

What did Gautam and Mangal think? How would death come to us: will it be a noose or a bullet? Will it be on the boat or in the homeland? Is this the last day? Shall we see the sun tomorrow?

‘Punditji, they should execute the sentence soon. I am not scared of death, but this uncertainty is unbearable,’ confessed Gautam one day.

Mangal did not reply. Since the day they were declared guilty in spite of their innocence, his mind had turned turbulent because of conflicting thoughts: why doesn’t the ocean swallow the earth? What is wrong if all the human beings die in that deluge? All those who have divided the humankind in the poor and the rich, the conquered and the conqueror, the slave and the master, the black and the white should be dead; and, all those wretched people who quietly accept these divisions should also be dead.

Once, a soldier came over to Mangal and Gautam in the ship’s penitentiary,

‘Sahib wants to see you. Come over with me.’

‘Who is this sahib? If your sahib wants to see us, let him come here. We won’t go anywhere,’ Mangal said. The soldier left. After a while, Peters walked in. Gautam saluted him; Mangal did not even move from his place.

‘Gautam and Mangal, you are my brave soldiers! I could not face you because I knew you did not deserve this punishment. I deeply regret whatever happened,’ Peters said affectionately.

Hindis respond to kind words immediately. They welcome sweetness, even if death follows it. They don’t accept great wealth if bitterness accompanies it. Mangal replied,

‘Sahib, you tried everything that you could. What more could you do? This must be our kismet.’

‘We shall reach Mumbai tomorrow. I have strongly recommended a pardon for you and the commander-in-chief has supported it. If the mercy plea succeeds, I shall be happy. But if it doesn’t...Well, I know you are brave soldiers.’

‘Sahib, we would be glad if we don’t get a pardon,’ said Mangal.

‘Why do you say so?’

‘If we go on to live, we shall become your worst enemy. Your efforts to obtain a pardon for us will we wasted.’
Hearing these threatening words, Peters laughed. He felt that the Hindis had a childlike naïveté.

‘Besides, why should offenders go unpunished? We don’t want anyone’s mercy,’ said Gautam.

‘Okay then, I would withdraw the plea,’ Peters sounded harsh. Instead of gratitude for the mercy plea, the two Hindi soldiers derided his efforts. Although such behaviour could have inspired vengeance in Peters, he just threatened Gautam and Mangal, as if to unruly children.

‘Yes, sahib, it would be better for all of us.’

‘If the minister grants you a pardon. Then what?’ asked Peters.

‘Sahib, we shall burn the entire country,’ barked Mangal. His eyes had turned red. Peters looked on at Mangal. Gautam’s face also wore a harsh look, as if already preparing for a revolt. The conversation embarrassed Peters, but he laughed it off. The white man’s pride helped him in ignoring the two petty Hindi soldiers. The British had conquered Hind; even if these two petty soldiers blurted away threats, it did not mean much. Sniggering, Peters said,

‘Both of you are too small to burn Hind. You will require more people.’

The conversation for Peters was a light-hearted banter. He was also fond of the two brave men. But, his humour provoked the two Hindis.

‘Sahib, even a spark can burn the whole world!’ said Mangal.

‘We Britishers can douse any fire, remember.’

The dialogue came to a pause. After a few moments, Peters asked,

‘Where are those papers, Gautam?’

‘Which papers?’

‘I am talking about those maps you had picked up from the Russian camp.’

‘You won’t get them now.’

‘Have you torn them off?’

‘No.’

‘I am sure you haven’t thrown them away in the sea!’

‘No.’

‘What have you done with the papers? They are important documents. I am supposed to send them to the commander.’
‘That may be. You will not get the papers.’

‘I think you are out of your mind! Have a glass of bhang and think carefully about what you want to do. I will see you tomorrow.’

Peters slapped their back and went away. Mangal glared fiercely at the Englishman. Gautam took a deep breath and defiantly looked down.

8
The Escape

I am going off to a far-away land, don’t you come there!
Nothing would hold me back there—not even if you build a hundred walls.

Kalapi

These two captives were confined in the ship’s separate room, but they were rarely chained. A few soldiers had also been put up in the same room, as if to keep a watch over Mangal and Gautam. The prisoners could interact with others and move about a little. Peters had given them this facility out of trust and goodwill. Thus, Mangal and Gautam were jailbirds on paper.

All the soldiers, however, believed that both the prisoners would be shot dead in Mumbai, and the convicts enjoyed freedom on the ship because Peters feared the Hindi platoon. In Mumbai, Company Sarkar’s troops would take over the charge of the captives, and then the ‘brave soldiers of Crimean war’ would be forgotten. Since the soldiers suspected everything, their ideas found a support in whatever happened around them. All the Hindi soldiers wanted Mangal and Gautam to live. Some of the aggressive soldiers even prepared to rebel against the Company Sarkar. Some other soldiers like Azizullah, who showed better judgement, pacified the hostile members.

Azizullah went to see the prisoners. Mangal and Aziz were intimate friends in spite of being ardent practitioners of their respective faith. When Mangal did Sandhyapuja, Aziz appreciated it; and, when the latter said his Namaz even at the midnight hour, the Hindu friend delighted in the sight. One addressed God as Om; the other cried out for Allah. One prostrated in front of God, in a sashant pranam; the other genuflected to worship the almighty. Their ideas and practice might be different, but, they searched for the same divine presence. After living together for thousands of years, the Hindus and Muslims had learnt that they could not fight over religion. True, Hindus did not drink water at a Muslim’s place, but the village priest and kazi respected each other.

‘Saiyad, we shall live for a day or two more,’ said Mangal.

‘Allah knows better, punditji,’ said Azizullah.

‘Forgive us if we have hurt you in any way,’ Gautam said with a tinge of sadness.

‘Gautam, I can understand if Mangal has lost all hopes. But, you are a young man. You shouldn’t be sad even if the gun is pointed at your head.’
‘Saiyad, I am not scared of death. I hope to visit my native place once and touch my guru’s feet. Then, death doesn’t matter.’

‘If you wish to do so, do it!’

‘How? Once we are in Mumbai, we have to face the guns.’

‘No one can kill you, nor can you die whenever you wish.’

‘These Britishers can definitely decide our death.’

‘The sahib sitting above controls the white sahib.’

‘I think that sahib of the heaven is in a deep slumber. Otherwise, an innocent would never receive the death sentence.’

‘A brave man like you should not use such appalling words. If that sahib is asleep, wake him up. Knock on his door, cry out for him. He will come down from the sky to help you, or he will rise out of the ocean to show you the way!’

Hearing these words, Mangal became restless, as if awoke from a deep sleep.

‘What happened, punditji?’ asked Gautam.

‘Well, I remembered Gangaji. We cannot take a bath in the holy river, but if we take a bath in this ocean, we shall definitely earn divine merits of taking bath in nine hundred and ninety-nine rivers.’

‘Gautam, can you swim?’ asked Aziz.

‘Yes, when I lived in Kashi, I used to cross the Ganga even during a stormy monsoon.’

‘If you know to swim, the ocean’s waves will give you great speed.’

The three friends became quiet. They gazed at the long, wavy, crimson images that the setting sun cast in the dark water.

‘Let me go now. It is time to say Namaz.’

‘Salam aleikum!’ greeted Gautam.

‘Aleikumassalam, see you in Mumbai.’

‘If I have completed my Sandhyapuja, I will see you. Otherwise, once we land in Mumbai...’ said Mangal.

Aziz put his finger on Mangal’s lips to stop him from speaking further. He went away.

Nigh fell. In the dark, the ship’s bright lamp was the only evidence of the vessel’s existence. The smiling stars went through their eternal motions. Once in awhile, a trail of light flickered in the sky and then died down, as if the falling stars wished to compete with the
constellations, those immortal pearls. Why wouldn’t they compete? A falling star glimmers for a while and then vanishes in the dark night; similarly, human beings momentarily pass through the world. Isn’t it possible that the everlasting constellations, too, must be short-lived according to universe’s unimaginable calculations? In the context of eternity, even an age is but a fraction. Why do, then, human beings crave a long life? God knows why! That night, the ship’s lamp flickered as if it reflected Company Sarkar’s hopes. Why was it dark behind the lamp? And in that darkness, was someone planning to blow out the lamp?

‘AllahuAkabar…’ a voice echoed in the night.

‘This man doesn’t let us sleep. Saiyad, let us sleep peacefully. The night is still long.’

‘Why has this muezzin joined the military, I wonder?’

Saiyad Azizullah laughed. In his pious passion, he often screamed for Allah in sleep. Soldiers whined about it, but they had accepted his peculiarities.

‘When I was saying my namaz, I heard someone jumping into the sea.’

‘Namaz at this hour?’

‘It is already the crack of dawn’

‘Why would anyone jump into the sea early in the morning? He would rather enjoy his sleep!’

‘And even if someone has jumped off the boat, the crew would learn about it.’ All the soldiers fell asleep. Aziz began his ablutions. At the sunrise, the boat stopped and two crew members came over in urgent haste,

‘The captives are missing from the boat!’

‘What?’

‘Yes, Gautam and Mangal have disappeared!’

‘Who told you about it?’

‘They are not anywhere on the boat!’

‘Well, then, you should look into the sea,’ chuckled Aziz. The two sentries left without responding to the comment.

After a while, Peters called Aziz to his room and said,

‘Your friends have vanished from the boat.’

‘Yes, I heard about it.’

‘How did this happen? Could you explain it to me?’
‘I think they must have jumped into the sea.’

‘Why did they do so?’

‘They must have thought that death by drowning is better than death by the noose.’

‘How do you know?’ Peters was sure that Aziz had an idea of the two captives’ plans.

‘You should have guessed it as well. They would prefer suicide to a dog’s death.’

‘But they have not jumped off to die. I know that both are excellent swimmers.’

‘It is likely. They can easily swim in the ocean for some time.’

‘I can see you knew about their plans. Why didn’t you inform me about it?’

‘No sahib. They never told me that they were going to jump off the boat.’ Aziz was right. He, however, was abusing the truth since last evening. In fact, Aziz had suggested to the jailbirds, how to escape the prison.

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Aziz doesn’t tell lies.’

‘I know you don’t, and that is what baffles me.’

‘Huzoor, I did hear noises while saying my morning prayer. I woke up people to tell them about it, but no one believed me. Since I was in the middle of namaz, I could not move out.’

‘How can we search the fugitives?’

‘Keep a watch over their homes. They will definitely go there once.’

Peters asked Aziz to leave. Peters was angry; the prisoners for whom he had written a number of recommendations had let him down. The Hindis were unkind, he felt. He was known as the captives’ well-wisher. Obviously, the prisoners could escape because Peters had given them certain liberty. He might be blamed for helping out the two Hindis in escaping the confinement. Even if the charges would not be proved, the affair would leave a stigma on his career, limiting his opportunities.

‘You should have properly confined them,’ a European officer advised him on landing.

‘And whipped them every day,’ another added.

‘Whipping is no longer allowed,’ Peters said.

‘That may be. But it is the best way to straighten up the Hindis.’

‘Besides, in special circumstances you can opt for stringent punishments,’ someone explained the rules.
A kind-hearted man, Peters felt that he should have remained stricter with the two prisoners. The Hindis were indeed unfaithful. He forgot that both the innocent men’s death penalties were unfair. The prisoners had taken an extreme step because they were provoked by the injustice done to them.

Peters resolved to catch both the fugitives. He was sure that they did not drown in the sea. Soon after landing in Mumbai, he prepared a small cavalry and began amanhunt. He attacked Rudradatta’s house and then, strangely, at the priest’s place, Rudradatta turned in Gautam.

9
Gautam in Vihar

King of swans, come over to the desolate lake!
Visit once the lonely water standing still.
Nhanalal

‘How do I trust you, after all that you have done?’ said Peters at the priest Johnson’s house, when Gautam declared that he did not possess a weapon. They entered into Johnson’s living room.

‘I will stand here with my arms folded on the chest. You may sit on the chair pointing a pistol at me,’ Gautam replied.

Peters came into the room smiling. He was glad to see his trustworthy soldier Gautam, a fugitive whom he had fondly remembered often in the last few days. On the other hand, Rudradatta, a stranger, and his love for truth had thrilled him.

‘You may arrest me and put me behind bars once again. I shall neither attack you nor try to escape,’ said Gautam.

‘Why did you flee from the boat?’

‘I did not have any other choice. After reaching Mumbai, you would have dumped me in a jail for two months and then hanged me. I wanted to visit my village and home. I wanted to touch my guru’s feet. The authorities would have never allowed me to visit my home. I made my way and came here.’

In the meanwhile, Johnson’s wife and daughter joined them. Gautam narrated the events of the last few days to Peters. When the boat reached Prabhat, some distance away from Mumbai, Gautam and Mangal jumped off the boat. They could easily swim in the ocean because both had crossed many rivers in the past. Gautam had a strong attraction for his home; whereas, Mangal had one desire—that of taking revenge against the British. Such passions excited them enough to swim for one whole day.

When they hit the ocean water, the two friends realised that they were free. The enormous waves aroused their enthusiasm, provoking them to win over the waves. They began swimming vigorously, cutting through the waters. The sea helped the adventurers, as the Hindis had helped the British in conquering Hindustan. The waves carried forward the
courageous soldiers, as a sharp and agile horse would gallop away, helping its rider cut a
great distance in a few moments.

When Mangal and Gautam set their foot on the seashore, the day had not broken yet. The
sea, however, sparkled, as if celebrating the victory of the two men. They had landed on the
north end of Mumbai, in an area covered with trees and vegetation.

In those days, people did not hesitate to walk through forests. Railway was introduced at
few places, bewildering local people with its ‘magical’ powers. Like most people, the two
friends walked on the trails passing through jungles to reach Gujarat, tramping through fifty
kilometres in a day. When they reached the familiar stretch, an old acquaintance met them
and helped them with horses and weapons, making it easier to reach the destination. From
the outskirts of Vihar, Mangal went to a nearby forest with two horses, and Gautam walked
down into the village. Both knew that soldiers must be tracking them down. Some farmers
and farm-labourers also informed them about a cavalry taking rest a few kilometres away
from Vihar. The sun had reached the middle of the sky. The day was bright.

Gautam came close to the ashram and tiptoed into the compound. It seemed the guru and
students had gone to the river to take bath. He went to the ashram’s rear veranda and stood
there quietly.

‘Who is there?’ Kalyani called out.

Breaking Company Sarkar’s prison, swimming through a stormy ocean, travelling across
miles of forests, he had come all the way there to hear that sweet voice. Gautam had stayed
calm even among roaring battle-cries; but on hearing Kalyani’s voice, his heart began
pounding.

Kalyani came out. She could not recognise Gautam at the first glance. War and long travel
had turned him dark and dishevelled.

‘Whom do you want to see?’ she asked, and right then she recognised the person standing
in front of her. Kalyani exclaimed,

‘Gautam!’

Gautam had still not recovered enough to speak. His eyes were fixed to the ground.

‘Come in, Gautam. Come in!’

‘Where were you for such a long time? Why do you look so worn out?’ Kalyani had many
questions. Gautam did not want to answer and interrupt the flow of her voice. He wanted
that voice to continue, and let the honey soak him. Why should he open his mouth and let
out his voice, made hoarse by shouting in the battlefield?

‘Why don’t you speak?’ Kalyani offered him a mat to sit on. ‘Sit down. You look tired.’

Gautam followed her instructions. His severity was defeated by Kalyani’s pleasant welcome.
He turned into a tender young man. Who rules over the world, the man or the woman? To
what do people surrender? A sword or a charming smile?
‘You must be hungry,’ said Kalyani.

‘No longer so.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ Kalyani now talked with intimacy, as if Gautam had not separated from her.

‘Take a bath first.’

‘No. I don’t want to take bath. I don’t want to eat.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to look at you for a while.’

‘Why do you talk so? Are you going away again?’

‘I am on the run. I have to go away soon.’

‘But why?’

‘I am given a death sentence.’

Kalyani’s big eyes widened. Her lips parted. She leaned on the wall, and began thinking if all this was a nightmare.

‘I want to see you for the last time. Death will be easy after meeting you.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Yes, what you have heard is right. I have met you. I shall leave after meeting guruji.’

‘No, I won’t let you go anywhere.’

‘A troop will come here hunting for me any moment.’

‘Tryambak Bhatt recently told everyone that you have achieved something extraordinary in a battle.’

‘I have no idea what he was talking about me. But, it is true that I am sentenced to death, and I have come here to see you for the last time. Since I am a fugitive, the military is searching for me everywhere.’

‘When they come over here, you go into hiding,’ Kalyani presented a solution with a childlike innocence. She thought it easy to trick a military company.

‘I may hide somewhere here, but guruji will definitely give me away,’ Gautam drew attention to Rudradatta’s dogged commitment to truth.

‘We won’t let him know that you are around. When the search company goes away, you come out of the hiding and see guruji.’
‘You are crazy, Kalyani. The search team will be here soon. They will rummage through every house of the village. Let me go away.’

‘Okay, then, I will come with you.’

Gautam realised that love is binding to a lover. Giving a slip to the search team was going to be difficult even for the two fugitives; and, this young, tender woman’s company would make the journey more difficult for them.

He began thinking of alternatives. Even if he managed to escape from Vihar, in all probability, he would be caught later. Besides, while in hiding, he would have to drift through forests and mountains. In that case, it would be impossible to meet Kalyani again. Gautam thought it better to get arrested and face the noose than going through the aimless wandering.

He declared his decision,

‘Kalyani, I will not go away anywhere, but you will have to hide me somewhere in the ashram.’

Unfortunately, he was at a guruji’s small hut and ashram. Where could he hide? Students and Rudradatta must be returning, he thought. He had little time left to hide somewhere. Kalyani also thought about places to hide him safely. A corner in the hut, the nook below a plank, a mattress roll—but nothing seemed good enough.

‘Gautam, how about the haystack?’ she asked.

‘Yes, that would be fine. Fast now, I can hear students uttering “Narmade Har” on their way back.’

Kalyani and Gautam removed hay from the stack and made space sufficient for a man to sit there. Once Gautam settled there with a gun, Kalyani began arranging bales of grass on him.

Guruji and his students returned after a while.

‘Kalyani, what are you doing there in the sun?’

‘Nothing. I have anything else to do, so I am arranging the haystack.’

Kalyani kept on looking at the haystack that morning. She served lunch to dadaji, but she did not eat anything. She went to the haystack whenever she got a chance and once thrust a bowlful of snacks in it.

The soldiers came and searched the house, but Tryambak’s trick spared the haystack and Gautam.

When the soldier was pointing a gun at Rudradatta, before the counting reached the final number, a bullet hit the soldier’s hand. No one, including the gathered villagers, could know who shot the soldier. Kalyani knew that the bullet was fired from the haystack. She feared that the soldiers would search the house once again. Gautam did not want Rudradatta to die
for a student’s crimes. Gautam was prepared to fire again. He could have killed Peters if the
priest had not intervened.

Gautam could hear the clamour in the yard dying down. Realising that the soldiers had left
the ashram, Gautam peeped out of the haystack.

10
Lover’s Jealousy

That festival of death
Is a passage to a treasure.
Why hasn’t the celebrations yet begun?
Why do eyes keep gazing afar? Is that all my eyes will ever do?
Kalapi

Gautam narrated the story to Peters. Gautam looked tired. Yet, he spoke with flair and
force, surprising the listeners. A brave soldier, Peters empathised with the fugitives. A
cheerful British man often begins by poking fun at others. Besides, a soldier’s jokes are
always sharp. Peters blinked his blue eyes and said,

‘Where is Mangal?’

‘In a nearby forest.’

‘Why didn’t he come over here?’

‘He doesn’t want to.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am prepared to be behind bars and face the noose. Mangal is not.’

‘Doesn’t he know that the Company Sarkar’s long arm won’t spare him?’

‘He wants to cut off those arms.’

‘What?’

Johnson interrupted Peters and explained that Gautam should not be admonished for what
Mangal had chosen to do. But Peters was under pressure to catch Mangal as well. If he
arrested Gautam, he would still be in disgrace for failing to seize Mangal. His superiors were
bound to find faults with the way Peters had handled the prisoners. Peters wanted to test
Gautam. He said,

‘Gautam, you are a man of integrity. Give me an idea of Mangal’s whereabouts.’

‘After becoming a prisoner, I have lost the virtue of honesty.’

‘Then, why did you surrender yourself?’
‘To honour my guru’s words.’

‘Your guru would have died today, do you know?’

‘Why do you threaten me?’

‘I think you don’t know what it is to die.’

‘Haven’t I faced death often?’

‘Oh, to fight a war is a thrilling experience. But to die normally…’

Unexpectedly, a shadow emerged at the door. Lucy, the priest’s daughter jumped up,

‘Who is at the door?’

Everyone looked at the door. A young, muscular man holding a gun followed the shadow. He stood at the door.

‘Tryambak, what are you doing here?’

‘I have come to free Gautam,’ said Tryambak.

Peters was astonished at this turnaround of events. He thought that it was not possible to forcefully take away Gautam from the village. Moreover, he now had a respectful appreciation for the fascinating Hindis: Rudradatta and Gautam, who did not fear death; Tryambak, who came over to save Gautam from a white military officer; and Lucy, the priest’s daughter, who gazed at Tryambak as if under a spell. Peters found all these people beautiful and every turn of events delighted his kind heart.

‘Gautam, can you get us Mangal Pandey?’ Peters asked.

‘No.’

‘Both of you should have come to me together. What do I do with one fugitive? You better go away. I have set you free.’

‘Why do you do so? For the Company Sarkar, we are offenders. They will hold you responsible and probe into the matter.’

‘I will tell them what I have to. But you should remember that the British can be generous.’

Gautam laughed. It became clear from his muffled laughter what he thought of the British generosity. Gautam got up. He glared at Peters before turning. Then, he saluted his superior in the manner of a true soldier and left the room. He didn’t look at Tryambak, who was walking behind him. As soon as they reached the bungalow’s gate, a tender voice called out,

‘Tryambak, wait!’

They both turned and saw that the priest’s daughter Lucy was walking down to them.
‘Why don’t you come over to teach me these days?’ she asked.

‘I don’t have time left to come here,’ Tryambak replied.

‘But then, I shall forget whatever Sanskrit I have learnt.’

‘You have already learnt enough to study on your own.’

‘I can’t. I can’t understand the figures of speech.’

‘Note down what you cannot understand. I shall visit you once to explain those figures of speech.’

‘When would you come over?’

‘In about two days.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yes.’

Lucy went away. Gautam now became conscious of what had happened: Tryambak had come over to save him from the hardships of prison and later punishment. A man of great courage, Gautam could not tolerate this help from young Tryambak. Gautam, who had battled against vast ocean, did not want to be saved by a boy.

‘Tryambak!’ Gautam barked.

‘What?’

‘Why did you come over to the padari’s place?’

‘For your sake.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I wanted to save you from those white sahibs.’

‘You, a lad... You wanted to save me!’

‘Why not? You think I can’t hold a gun. I can.’

Gautam sniggered at this. His scornful laughter hurt Tryambak.

‘You regularly exercise, don’t you? You have an obsession of training your body, I have heard,’ Gautam, an experienced soldier, continued to run down the young student.

‘You had taught me wrestling when you were here,’ said Tryambak.

‘Ha, ha...’ laughed Gautam, ‘But who had advised you to come to my rescue?’
‘Kalyani,’ Tryambak spoke the name with confidence. Gautam did not like the ease with which Tryambak talked about Kalyani.

Why should he speak Kalyani’s name? Gautam had noticed that Tryambak, a junior student of the ashram, often made efforts to please Kalyani. His advances annoyed Gautam. If my love for wars keeps me occupied, Kalyani may easily get attracted to this man, thought Gautam.

During the long separation, Kalyani yearned to be with Gautam; she took a great risk to hide him in the ashram when the troop came searching for him; and then, she sent Tryambak to release him. Yet, Gautam forgot all this and suffered stabs of jealousy.

‘Why do you drag Kalyani in this matter?’ Gautam blurted out.

Tryambak could not understand why Gautam sounded hostile. The young man knew that Kalyani loved Gautam, but he doubted if Gautam, a wandering soldier, could have an emotional bond with Kalyani. Tryambak still could not understand why, when he took Kalyani’s name, Gautam felt ruffled. A man in love can be so jealous that he wants to confine his lover in a burka; he wishes to cover the moon and the sun; and, he is even spurred to terminate the humanity to protect his lover. Oh jealousy!

‘Why shouldn’t I speak her name?’ Tryambak asked.

‘What right do you have to talk about Kalyani?’

‘She is guruji’s daughter.’

‘If you lust after her, you will suffer hell-fire!’

The comment enraged Tryambak. Had he ever given a lewd look to Kalyani? Wasn’t affection different from depravity?

‘Better you learn the lesson!’ Tryambak retorted.

‘Hey you, boy, what is your age?’ Gautam began acting like a man.

‘I am twenty-one.’

‘You are too young to advise me.’

‘I am hardly six years younger than you.’

‘You must observe celibacy till at least twenty-four.’

‘I know. My study of texts is still fresh.’

‘That must be the reason why you chase Kalyani and that British girl.’

The night was getting darker. They had reached close to the ashram. Although Tryambak had found Gautam’s spiteful comments absurd, he was fired up. He pounced on Gautam and gripped him from behind, strangling his throat.
‘Tryambak, stupid boy, leave me!’ Choked, Gautam could hardly speak. Tryambak’s grip did not loosen up. Although Gautam was the stronger one, he was not prepared for this attack. Moreover, he began losing strength because of suffocation. This brutal Brahmin would smother me, he feared.

Everything around was quiet. Tryambak’s powerful hand slipped off unexpectedly. A man separated them and said,

‘How stupid of two brothers to fight with each other! Look around, a fierce fire has swept through all over!’

11
A Blast of Ash

_Innocent young men with bloodshot eyes,
 their vigorous arms holding daggers,
 their shields shining in battles._

   Nhanalal

Gautam recognised the voice. Mangal, who was hiding in the jungle, had come over to see his friend.

‘Pandeyji, why did you take the risk of coming here? I am free, you are not,’ Gautam said.

‘You think you are free! Your eyes don’t work it seems. A blind man!’ Mangal laughed. His roaring laughter shook the night.

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘You won’t. We have allowed them to build a prison and helped them build it. Sometimes, man falls to such pathetic state that he believes a prison to be a palace.’

‘You are probably right.’

‘Yes, that is how it is. Neither you nor any other Hindi is free. The Company Sarkar is certainly free.’

‘Let’s not talk here. Someone might hear us.’

‘You should say this to everyone around: We all are slaves, we all are prisoners. They should know what they are.’

‘But, the military platoon is stationed here.’

‘We know that military well, don’t we?’

‘Yes, we are their soldiers.’

‘Right! Let other soldiers get the message. Don’t fear them. They need to know the truth.’

‘Tryambak!’ Kalyani cooed in her silvery voice from the ashram.
'Yes, what happened?'

'Are you back?'

'Yes.'

'Who is with you? What are you doing there?'

'Nothing. We are coming over to ashram,' Gautam replied.

Kalyani did not reply. Gautam’s voice put her at ease, diminishing all anxiety.

Mangal hesitated to enter into the ashram. Although he wanted to meet Rudradatta, he feared that the haloed guru’s honesty would become a hindrance in his plans. He no longer required peace; his passion was for storms and devastation; he had lost affection for quiet ashrams and wise, scholarly students. Mangal dreamt of Panipat and Haldighat; he wanted to discuss battles, soldiers and shelling. He said,

‘Gautam and Tryambak, both of you should leave these ashrams. The Himalaya and the oceans have turned into our prison walls.’

‘You are right, but come over to the ashram for a night. Pandeyji, I have met you after a long time,’ said Tryambak.

‘No. I have enjoyed the delights of the ashram. It is a magical place. Rudradatta will persuade me to throw away the weapons and sit on the grass-mat to study.’ A little away, they all saw a young woman with a lantern coming over to them.

The lantern floated ahead, lighting up the space around it. The woman came closer, playing around with light and darkness.

‘The ashram has two charms that would cast spells on you. Take care. I shall see you later,’ saying this, Mangal left quickly.

‘Who was that man?’ asked Kalyani, walking to them quickly.

‘Mangal Pandey.’

‘Pandeyji, don’t go away. Guruji was asking after you the other day,’ Kalyani shouted. Mangal stopped. A guru is equal to a king and a deity. Superstitious Hindus may be responsible for tolerating incompetent and pleasure-seeking gurus’ harmful tradition; however, one must not ignore those genius gurus who inspired devotion.

Mangal returned to his friends. Until then, Mangal, a determined and courageous soldier, had craved to die on the battlefield; now he wanted to fight the Company. Rudradatta disapproved war as a sport, but for Mangal, war had become a duty over the last several years. Rudradatta might bless me for my exploits, Mangal thought.

Rudradatta had fondly remembered Mangal; he might wish him well for his battles. Mangal began walking towards the ashram.
‘Pandeyji, you look thin and weak,’ Kalyani observed.

‘Yes, my daughter, we had travelled to a faraway land across the ocean.’

‘It seems you have killed many.’

‘We have to obey the orders of our leader.’

‘Who is this leader of yours?’

‘Gautam.’

Kalyani was pleased to hear this. Gautam is in charge of a platoon, and soldiers like Mangal take orders from him, she thought.

A voyage across oceans could be tiring; consequently, the traveller might lose weight; but Mangal’s health was affected by the fire in his mind, not by the long voyage. He was an ordinary recruit of the military, but his status in the army did not influence his beliefs. Mangal had studied Darshan; a proud Brahmin, he detested those who had defiled his faith; he had boundless courage; and, he thought and behaved in a refined manner. Such courage and culture, however, could not unify Hind. The Hindu religion could not shape a Hindu state. The Hindus worshipped Ganga and Godavari; they paid homage to Pashupati in Nepal and Rameshwar in the south; their pilgrimage included Dwarika, Prabhas, Gaya and Jagannath. Yet, their reverence for these varied sacred lands could not arouse a desire for a unified political power.

The Muslim rulers’ religious fervour attempted to unite Hind; Hindus and Muslims came in close contacts in many ways; yet, either because they made Islamic ideas more aggressive, or because like Hindus, they also failed to summon up enough desire for power, Muslim rulers, too, could not unify Bharat.

Eventually, Hindus and Muslims readily presented the entire land to a third power that fearlessly came over, taking advantage of the prevailing darkness. The Company Sarkar did not want to destroy temples and mosques. The Christian traders were not interested in religion; they wanted to control the territory for business purpose; and, Hindus and Muslims helped them in achieving their goal.

Hindus and Muslims, the helpers of the British, could have lived on without a complaint against the Company Sarkar. But, the Company Sarkar remained a foreign power, claiming its superiority and refusing to assimilate with the native culture. The British considered their values and culture superior to those of the Hindus: Hindus might be brave, but they could not lead an army because they were stupid, superstitious and rigidly orthodox; they might be clever, but only for their selfish gains; they might be cultured, but inferior to us. The Company’s employees did not understand that when they touched a religious person’s food, they were not protesting against untouchability—in fact, they were rudely slighting Hindi creed.

Mangal was deeply hurt, and this humiliation had awakened his soul; he was a volcano, ready to explode.
‘Either I continue to live, or the Company continues to be in Hindustan,’ he had decided. He had given glimpses of this resolve to Gautam, a fellow prisoner, when they were incarcerated. He had faith in Gautam, who had half-heartedly agreed to fight against the Company’s rule, if at all they were released from prison. Expecting Gautam’s support, Mangal wanted to be close to him, although he knew that Gautam was drawn to Rudradatta and Kalyani.

When Mangal and Gautam were on their way to Vihar, they knew that a search team must have been tracking them down; and, they also knew that it would be ideal to scoot away somewhere else to avoid an arrest. But, Gautam would not have agreed to it; he had to visit Vihar. As they reached closer to the village, Gautam became more and more determined to visit his ashram, his guru and guru’s daughter. To change their route became impossible.

‘Gautam, I shall stay put in the bushes. You visit the ashram. When will you come back?’ Mangal said when they reached the outskirts of Vihar.

‘Before nightfall.’

‘The search team must be close on our heels.’

‘We shall blow them away, Pandeyji!’ saying this, Gautam went towards Vihar. Mangal tied his horses to a tree and lay down beneath a tree to take a nap.

The hoof beats woke him up. The search company had come over sooner than Mangal had thought. Hiding in the trees, he saw the movements of the Company’s soldiers, some even familiar to him, eager to go ahead for their search.

Since Gautam did not turn up even after dark, Mangal went to the village. He was determined to free Gautam immediately if Gautam fell in the search team’s hands. If one wants to achieve a goal, the task requires wherewithal to go ahead; and, if one is determined to achieve the goal, the resources come about anyhow. That day, Mangal entered into the village with the intention of going for lonely, all-out fight to release his friend from the Company Sarkar.

Mangal heard what Gautam and Tryambak were talking out of the ashram. He recognised the streak of passion in Tryambak. When the two came to blows, Mangal intervened to separate them, and taunted both the young men for their attitude.

Mangal did not want to see Rudradatta, because he did not want to disappoint the guru. Rudradatta might insist him to stay back at the ashram; or, he may argue with Mangal and convince him to deviate from the course Mangal had laid down. Yet, eventually, he went with his friends to the ashram because Kalyani urged him, and because deep down he hoped to receive Rudradatta’s blessings for the success of the fight ahead.

A soldier doesn’t require a cushy bedding to spend a night; those who are used to sleeping on soft mattresses cannot enlist themselves in the army.

One who serves society also faces tough challenges—probably tougher challenges than those faced by a soldier. The essence of a Brahmin always gives importance to serving people, and that makes a Brahmin venerable. A Brahmin doesn’t reside in a palace; he doesn’t lie down on a comfortable bed; a true Brahmin lives in a hut till every human being
in the world gets a shelter, a bed and enough food. Rudradatta’s ashram was a remnant of that disappearing essence of Brahminhood. The ashram did not provide luxury to guests. For Mangal, a soldier, a coarse mat was sufficient to spend the night.

Yet, Kalyani found out a hammock from somewhere and spread a sheet over it to make a bed for Mangal.

‘Where is Guruji?’ asked Mangal.

‘He has gone to sleep.’

Mangal lay down. Although he was tired, he could not sleep. He kept on gazing at the blinking stars. Were the stars laughing at the Hindus, who lived under the domination of foreigners? Looking at the condition of Hind, a millions stars were derisively winking their eyes.

Mangal was bewildered to see this. He got up and sat on his bed.

‘Pandeyji, aren’t you sleepy?’ Gautam asked. He had lain on a mat in the same room.

‘I shall sleep later, probably some another night.’

‘Lie down. You will fall asleep. You must be tired after the long journey.’

‘No I am not tired. We have slept enough—we are in a deep sleep for the last one thousand years.’

‘If you don’t sleep tonight, will you be able to shake off the inertia?’

Mangal did not reply. He lay down again and closed his eyes. Jackson abusing Shankar Bhagawan’s bhang, the scuffle with Jackson, the death sentence and the escape from the boat—he thought about the unfolding of recent events. Why are you asleep? You still have to face the noose! Death sentence to two innocent soldiers! Why? Mangal had many questions.

He opened his eyes.

Was the sky full of stars? Or, were they spears flying from the sky, flying to stab our heart? Mangal saw the patterns of a cobra, a bow and many arrows in the clusters of stars.

‘That’s it! The stars bring a good omen. Draw the sword and speed up! Don’t miss your target!’

A divine voice goaded him and challenged him to embark on a battle. Mangal got up and began walking around. He looked at the sky, as if it was a treasure full of ammunition. He raised his hand to pick up a destructive weapon.

Noticing a stranger walking around in the yard, the cow mooed, as if sighing deeply. Her calf, too, squeaked. While searching for weapons in the sky, Mangal had a darshan of the ashram’s cow. Hindus respect the cow. The Hindus, who worship idols, effortlessly create a mother’s symbol out of the ideas of motherhood.
O mother cow, Kamadhenu, my motherland! How heartbreaking is your sigh! And yet people want to sleep! Mangal muttered.

Mangal gnashed his teeth and bit his lower lip. Clenching his fist, he swung it in the air—as if brandishing a sword.

PART II
AN UNTIMELY BLAZE

1.
Signs of Times to Come

At the time of dusk,
great waves of darkness explode tearing apart the earth;
breaking the bank of the lake,
stormy, fiery waters splash around.

Nhanalal

‘ॐ वाङमे मनिस’ (Divine power resides in speech and mind.)

Mangal recognised Rudradatta’s voice. The indignation overflowing within him began subsiding.

‘Who is awake at this hour?’

‘I am Mangal. Pranam Rudradattaji!’

‘Bless you. Haven’t you gone to sleep yet?’

‘No. I have lost my sleep.’

‘Why?’

‘I see God’s destructive powers working everywhere. लेलिखसे ग्रहमान: सम्मताल्लोकान्त-समागान्तवद्विष्य लघित: (…With your fiery mouth, you are licking and swallowing down all the people everywhere…)’

‘You should submit to God. He will assume a gentle form.’

‘I don’t want his quiet form. I want to experience a terrifying power.’

Rudradatta got up and came close to Mangal. Mangal touched his feet. The moment Rudradatta’s hand touched his head, Mangal experienced boundless peace; he could not decide whether such calm was good or not.

‘Rudradattaji, I am scared of you.’

‘How can anyone scare a Brahmin?’
'When you set eyes on someone, your sight turns that man into a Brahmin, a pure and honest human being. That is what scares me, because I don’t want it to happen to me.’

‘My son, the world doesn’t depend on Brahmins, but it certainly depends on the essential qualities of a Brahmin. If the world lacks such qualities, it will become a worthless place to live in.’

Mangal did not respond to Rudradatta’s comment. Rudradatta looked at the stars and constellations above, and as if reading a clock, said,

‘It is almost the last phase of the night. I am going to the river to take bath. Do you want to come with me?’

Everyone in the ashram and village was still asleep. Mangal preferred to be with the old man.

‘Yes, I shall also take bath and complete Sandhya.’

Rudradatta kept two dhotis and two kerchiefs on his shoulder, put on his sabots and began walking towards the river. Mangal joined him barefoot. Surrounding peace made darkness pure, not scary. Thousands of stars hung in the sky, looking like bright chandeliers, though a little pale by the dim morning light. Rudradatta, Mangal, the twinkling stars and the gentle breeze were awake at that moment.

But no, someone else too, was awake. In a nearby hut, an old man was singing a morning bhajan:

_In the entire universe, you live everywhere, Shree Hari!  
You appear eternal in your innumerable manifestations!_

‘Who is singing this bhajan?’

‘A villager of a lower caste. He has become Christian,’ Rudradatta replied.

‘A Christian? Why does he sing our bhajan?’

‘Although he has converted, his Hindu character is not completely lost yet.’

‘Then why did he convert?’

‘The Company Sarkar made him Kshatriya. He felt so indebted to the Company that he became a Christian.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘Have you forgotten the Company has set up a platoon consisting of lower caste soldiers?’

‘Yes. Such sins will bring the Company’s downfall.’

‘Yes, all sinners will be destroyed one day. And, if Brahmins become Kshatriyas, such violations will wipe out their essence.’
‘But gurudev, what did Parashuram do?’

‘You tell me what he did.’

‘He picked up a weapon, his axe, and killed all the Kshatriyas living on earth.’

‘Right. It should happen again today. Brahmins should not turn into Kshatriyas. In fact, it is their sacred duty to destroy the Kshatriyas.’

They reached to the riverbank that had a parapet built by villagers. A few stars still lingered on in the sky. The roosters, however, had begun crying. The river flowed, and with it flowed the stars’ reflections. Rudradatta’s sabots clattered, waking up the solitary riverbank. Mangal, who walked a step behind Rudradatta, saw that his guru, in spite of standing on a lower step, looked as tall as he did. Mangal respected Rudradatta, his guru. He began respecting the guru more when he noticed Rudradatta’s tall and broad frame.

‘Gurudev, I have one request to make,’ said Mangal, dipping his hands in the river.

‘Yes, tell me.’

‘I want a Parashuram for our society.’

‘You know that Parashuram is immortal.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Then, you invoke Parashuram and invite him here.’

‘Either you become our Parashuram, or ask Gautam to become one.’

‘And then? What shall we do?’

‘We shall destroy the Company Sarkar.’

Rudradatta laughed. ‘Hari Om! Hari Om,’ he exclaimed, and after sprinkling water on his head, he took a dip into the river. Mangal was still standing with his feet in the river. Rudradatta became invisible for a while. Mangal’s suppressed traits of a true Kshatriya were excited after this talk. He knew that Rudradatta was an accomplished combatant, and he had wielded weapons with ease in past. Rudradatta had laughed when Mangal requested him to be a Parashuram. His laughter seemed to be a consent. If Rudradatta agreed to be a leader for the battle ahead, he would definitely prove to be as invincible as Bhishma.

Rudradatta came on the surface. He shook off water from his hair. Bathing in the river, he looked like a fearsome lion. Mangal dived into the river and went close to his guru.

‘Mangal, how did Parashuram fought the Kshatriyas?’

‘Yes. That great and brave man whirled through the earth with his axe all alone and eliminated the enemies.’
‘He didn’t gather a platoon of Brahmins, did he?’

‘No.’

‘Your Parashuram will also have to fight all alone.’

Rudradatta took another dip. Mangal also plunged in. Two men, bright like fire flames vanished in the water. The bright stars, too, had vanished by then.

Mangal came to the surface first and looked around. To his surprise, he noticed that Rudradatta was still under water. After a while, Rudradatta, too, came out. He shook his head and asked,

‘Mangal, will Parashuram do the trivial work you want him to do?’

‘Trivial work? Is it really a small job to save Bharat from tyranny?’

‘Yes, Bharat was Parashuram’s birthplace. But he had promised to save the whole earth from tyranny, not only Hind. Parashuram won’t come out to battle for a petty cause.’

‘But I don’t want all the Kshatriyas to die. Without them, who will fight wars?’

‘But do we have to fight wars?’

‘How can we do without wars? One has to die to save one’s soul.’

‘You can attain salvation without dying.’

‘In a war, either you kill or you die.’

‘My son, even after Parashuram annihilated Kshatriyas from the surface of earth, two Kshatriya families survived. They spawned enough descendants to occupy the entire earth once again. Tell me, what did Parashuram do later?’

‘I can’t understand you.’

‘Parashuram threw away his axe and began a tapasya. You, too, should begin a tapasya, if you want to free earth free from the Kshatriyas.’

Mangal listened to this incomprehensible argument. He looked at the horizon in the hope of finding a meaning of his guru’s message. The eastern sky had become red. He felt that a blood-red sun was trying hard to rise from the sky. When the first rays burst out, right then, Mangal heard a bugle far away.

The battle call shook Mangal’s heart; his hair stood on end out of rage; his eyes began glowing, and a surge of violent passion swept through him. The clarion was calling out Hindis to join the Company Sarkar’s war! One must stop this arrogant trumpet, thought Mangal.

He looked at Rudradatta. Rudradatta, a rishi, stood in the river with eyes closed, paying tribute to the rising son. Mangal became calm once again. He was scared to be there. Probably, guru’s proximity would make me quiet, he thought. I would break my oath and
give up on my goal. Rudradatta’s soothing presence blunted Mangal’s passion for war. It was indeed not good for him to be around Rudradatta. He said,

‘Guruji, I am scared…’

‘Why?’

‘I am scared of you.’

‘Do I scare you? Why?’

‘If I pay attention to what you say, I will forget about the Company’s war bugles. I have to stop these bugles. I must go now. Bless me success in what I want to achieve.’

Mangal hastily began swimming to the bank.

Rudradatta began laughing.

‘Mangal, come back!’ he shouted.

‘No, I will return to you after ousting the Company,’ replied Mangal from far.

The bugle was now playing somewhere closer. The moment Mangal reached the embankment, he saw a few horses coming towards the river on the other side.

Mangal angrily swung his fist in their direction and then vanished into the bushes.

Rudradatta came out and saw Mangal running away, and he also saw that Peters rode one of the horses that had come over to the river. He and three other cavalrymen were leaving the village. Peters, whom Rudradatta had deeply impressed by his courage, came over to the river to meet the guru. He did a salaam to Rudradatta.

‘Bless you, sahib! Your one prisoner just went away,’ said Rudradatta, smiling.

‘Who was it? Mangal?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you let him go away?’

‘He went away because he was scared of me.’

‘Why should he fear you?’

‘Because I was trying to appease his desire for revenge.’

‘I wouldn’t have arrested him,’ Peter said after thinking for a while.

‘So, you are going away?’

‘Yes, I wanted to see you before leaving the village. I will often remember you.’
‘Sahib, Yuvanasen knows me well. The way the priests try to know us, if your soldiers and politicians also become familiar with us, Hindustan will stay united.

‘We, too, wish that Hindustan should be unified. God has sent us for Hindustan’s good.’ Peters said these kind words with a sense of self-importance. Kindness is always welcome, but if kindness is full of vanity, it does not spread goodness around. Moreover, people do not feel grateful for the favours received from vain benefactors.

‘God is greater than anyone on earth. What do we know about God’s intentions? The Hindis might bring benefits to Englishmen. I believe they should work for mutual well-being as they have been doing till date.’

‘You are a holy man. I am sure your wish will fulfill itself.’

‘Remember, you will have to become Hindi if you want to rule over Hindustan. The Hindis will not accept even God as their ruler if He comes over in the garb of a foreigner.’

Peters turned to go away with his cavalrymen. The sun had moved up a few feet by then. Rudradatta looked at the sun with narrowed eyes.

They want to do good to Hindustan! Is it so? Rudradatta began thinking on his way to ashram.

Who does good to others—the master or the slave? If the powerful people, who enjoy the high seats, come down and sit on simple mats, the world will certainly benefit from it.

Rudradatta walked ahead and said loudly,

‘He Suryadeva, please inspire us! Please show us the way!’

2

A Sleepless Night

My friend, I dream about my beloved;
loneliness burns my heart!
My friend, love has turned into a tormenter;
hope, like a vine, grows long but then drops to the ground.

Nhanalal

Every generation believes that the younger generation has become wild and uncontrollable. Relationships between man and woman always receive such criticism; yet, one must pay attention to the fact that people have always expressed love, a universal emotion, in various ways all over the world, in every era. One generation is not morally superior to any other.

Kamadev, the God of love, functions in the same way, in every age. Human beings eagerly judge what is good and what is evil. We must not reach the conclusion that the tradition in which parents played matchmakers worked better than the practice of choosing one’s spouse.
If Mangal did not sleep that night, Gautam, too, did not sleep for a moment. And Kalyani, even after closing her eyes, was having visions of Gautam. Lovers and patriots always stay awake like stars.

How could Gautam and Kalyani get up and talk to each other? A sleepless person suffers restlessness through the night. Gautam tossed about for hours. True, if a wealthy man had come over to the ashram, he would not have slept well on a mat, covering himself with a thin quilt. But why Gautam, a soldier, could not sleep that night? He should be able to sleep even on a hard rock. Why was he sleepless?

Did he miss his battleground? Did he think about stormy oceans? Probably, the possibility of ending up at the noose made him sleepless. Did the day’s ups and downs trouble him? No, for a soldier, such experiences were common. In fact, the moon’s rays burnt him; a sweet smelling flower made him uneasy; and, the fantasy of someone beautiful kept his eyes wide open.

Why did he fantasise about this beautiful woman? She lay a few feet away, close to guruji’s bed, present in the ashram in her pretty form. Gautam could cross the vast ocean to see her; but he could not cross the ocean of decency that kept her a little distance away. He could not move even an inch closer to the woman he loved.

Although he could not go close to Kalyani, Gautam stayed awake, imagining the possibilities of doing so. Once, while turning over in the bed, he looked around, and noticed Mangal sitting on his mat. Gautam advised him to lie down and go to sleep. Even if Mangal went to sleep soon, Gautam could not have tiptoed to Kalyani. Yet, Mangal’s presence made him anxious.

Mangal did not go to sleep. Gautam kept his eyes closed. He imagined Kalyani coming over to him. In his imagination, she came close and began talking about the days when Gautam stayed at the ashram. Gautam could not control himself and made an attempt to hold Kalyani’s hand. His hand fell off. Gautam realised that everything had happened in his imagination. He opened his eyes and saw Mangal strolling around!

Gautam wanted to stride down to Mangal and push him onto his mat. Since he could not force Mangal to go to sleep, dejected Gautam closed eyes and rested his head on his palm. After a while, he saw that his wish was about to be fulfilled: Mangal and Rudradatta both were leaving together for the river.

They both left the ashram. But how could he go to Kalyani, who must be fast asleep? He thought of calling out her name. But others would wonder why he had called her. True, he would not be at peace till he talked to Kalyani. But, how would he explain it to others?

He closed his eyes once again, but he became more and more uneasy. Why was this brave soldier so nervous? He did not get agitated even while facing an enemy platoon. Why was he so upset then? Why did he feel so helpless? What should he do to become calm again? He jumped up from his mat and opened his eyes—right in front of him stood Kalyani!

Was it really Kalyani, or was it an illusion? He rubbed his eyes and looked again carefully to confirm that it was not a dream. He heard Kalyani’s voice, as if providing evidence to what was happening to him,
‘Gautam, couldn’t you sleep?’

‘How do you know?’

‘You were tossing about the whole night!’

‘How do you know?’

‘Why wouldn’t I know?’

‘You too haven’t slept, have you?’

‘How would I get sleep? How difficult was the day!’

Gautam felt that all the daylight, which was hidden in the surrounding darkness, had gathered to make Kalyani’s beautiful body. He gazed at her. Kalyani appeared as a hazy outline in darkness, as if a heavenly nymph had mysteriously emerged from somewhere. Gautam, astonished at the vision, wondered what made Kalyani beautiful.

Kalyani observed Gautam. His restless eyes shone in darkness. She knew why his eyes seemed excited, and the reasons delighted her. Although Gautam had lost weight and he looked lean, he had matured into a man. His posture possessed a masculine strength. She wished to rest her head on that chest, to be in those arms. Gautam’s presence thrilled Kalyani.

A chill ran down Kalyani’s spine. Do my eyes also betray excitement? In a carefully controlled voice, she said,

‘Why are you so crude?’

‘What have I done?’

‘I have been standing here for quite a while. You don’t even offer me a seat!’

‘Oh yes. I am sorry. It did not occur to me. Sit here.’

Kalyani sat on the floor. Even in routine actions like sitting down or walking around, women create beautiful, delicate shapes in air, Gautam thought. When does Kalyani look more beautiful, while she stands upright, or while she sits in front of me? How does she turn into a beautiful picture wherever she is? Let me ask her to do the actions again. But can I? Gautam kept thinking.

‘Why are you staring at me? Talk something.’

‘Talk what...Tell me, how are you?’ Gautam asked.

He didn’t have anything to talk about, and in such a situation, it was best to talk about health and weather.

Kalyani laughed, ‘Gautam, I believe your days in the military have hardened you.’
'Yes, they make a machine out of you—follow every order, either kill or die,’ Gautam answered after thinking for a while.

Kalyani did not want to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of a military training. She asked a clearer question, ‘Do soldiers forget to appreciate beautiful things in life?’

‘Oh yes, they become beasts, you know. They continuously face death on the battlefield. And so, they want to fill every moment with beastly pleasure.’

‘You must have also turned into a crude, insensitive soldier.’

‘Yes, but when God or a loved one comes to mind, even a beast’s heart...Oh I hear a bugle in the village!’ Gautam did not complete his sentence. Peters’ cavalrymen were preparing to leave the village. They had blown the bugle as a signal to the platoon. Gautam’s passion for war aroused; the tenderness of love left his demeanour. Hearing a clarion call, a soldier gives up everything and returns to the battlefield.

‘Why have you turned into a beast once again?’ asked Kalyani. She looked at Gautam, who was clearly visible in the early morning light.

‘I am worried about Pandeyji. They will arrest him,’ Gautam spluttered.

‘Who, Mangal Pandey?’

‘Yes.’

‘They will let him go, as they allowed you to go away.’

‘No, I must rush to help him.’

Bugle cried again, forcing Gautam to get up and rush out of the ashram. He charged to the door and before going out, turned towards Kalyani to glance at the lovely face. Kalyani stood there, tenderness personified, like a beautiful picture.

But behind her, a little away, Gautam saw two flashing stars. Were they stars, or someone’s eyes?

3

The Tradition of Hospitality

An inhabitant of mountain-tops,
you have descended down here to a ditch!
How your halo lights the place!
Unfortunately, we cannot attend you well.

Gautam could not move a step forward. Tryambak’s eyes shone right behind Kalyani. He could not see his face properly, nor could he read what Tryambak’s eyes said. You might find the sun’s bright rays spewing fire, yet you might also see seven lovely colours in the sunlight reflected through a mirror. Gautam noticed such a rainbow in Tryambak’s eyes.
Kalyani, astonished to see Gautam standing there like a statue, wondered why he did not dash away to the bugle playing battalion. She also noticed that Gautam had begun walking towards her! She turned and saw Tryambak standing close to her. She understood the situation. Gautam came close to Tryambak and asked,

‘What are you doing here, Tryambak?’

‘Why do you ask this?’

‘Gautam, why are you jealous? Tryambak is my younger brother.’ Kalyani exclaimed.

‘Oh.’

They heard bugles and horse-steps outside. Gautam left the ashram and went towards the river. He saw that the soldiers of the troop, most of them familiar to him, were ready and waited there for the order to march ahead. Hiding in the bushes, he raced to the riverbank. A little away from the river, Peters met him. He was returning to the village. The moment he saw Peters, Gautam saluted him out of habit. He loathed himself for saluting the white sahib.

How I ended up saluting him! I didn’t want salute him, Gautam thought.

Peters nodded and instead of talking for a while, moved ahead. A soldier, on a horse behind him, cried,

‘Sahib, look there, Gautam!’

‘Let him go. I have set up another trap for him,’ said Peter, since he did not want others to know that he had deliberately let Gautam off. This accidental meeting with Gautam in front of other soldiers made Peters uncomfortable.

On the riverbank, Rudradatta was lost in deep meditation. The power that has created the world and takes its care is ‘God’; or, we unintentionally attribute intelligent designing to that power and call it ‘nature’; whatever the power may be, we should think deeply about it. While we deliberate about the greatness of that power, man’s achievements appear trivial. Where do Alexander, Genghis Khan or Napoleon stand in comparison to this eternal force? The mighty kings prove nothing more than tiny sand-grains on seashore; innumerable kings take birth and die during the time when that mighty power just blinks its eyes once.

Rudradatta meditated to know that power. No one can see that great force without ignoring the petty affairs of the world. Whether the British will do good to the Indians, or the Indians will benefit the British—the question became unimportant. Rudradatta, a believer, thought that the ultimate power worked for the welfare of all, even of inanimate objects, not just that of Indians and the British.

Gautam did not wake up Rudradatta from his meditation. Mangal Pandey was neither with Peters nor with his platoon. Obviously, Mangal was not caught. Gautam worried about where he might be hiding at the moment. Gautam took bath in the river. The clean, flowing river made him fresh and cheerful; his body felt energetic. The joyfully flowing generous river, ceaselessly smiling sun, warbling birds and quiet, colourful, happy environment: all these made Gautam calm. After taking a bath, he sat close to his meditating guru. Gautam
closed his eyes. His soul, peaceful and cleansed of any desire for revenge, experienced a harmony with the world.

This was due to Rudradatta’s resolution made while meditating. After opening eyes, Gautam did not get up. He sat there, close to Rudradatta. He received all the waves of goodness that flowed from guruji. He heard the bugles once again, signalling that the soldiers had reached the outskirts; the blare of the bugles did not provoke him, however.

Rudradatta opened his eyes. His eyes showered amrit around. Gautam did a namaskar.

‘Gautam, when did you come here?’

‘A little while ago.’

‘You must be looking for Mangal.’

‘Yes.’

‘He made an escape on the other side of the river.’

‘Oh, he managed to run away!’

‘Yes, he was scared of me.’

‘What? Why should he be scared of you?’

‘He feared that I would suppress his desire to fight battles.’

How could Gautam say that Mangal’s fear was not misplaced? How had he also experienced a surge of peace just a few moments ago? If more such rishis lived in the world, fewer wars would take place, thought Gautam and did not speak more.

Many students came over to the river. After a namaskar to Rudradatta, they rushed to complete their ablutions. Their faces showed obvious surprise when they saw Gautam. To young students, Gautam was a strange man who was the centre of exciting events taking place in a quiet ashram.

When they were a little away from the ashram, Rudradatta and Gautam noticed a palanquin and a few horsemen there. Right then, Tryambak and Kalyani came out and stood outside the ashram.

‘Who could this be?’ asked Gautam.

‘No idea. Let us see who has come over. Gautam, if you stay back at the ashram I shall be relieved.’

‘I want to live here, but I am addicted to the military life. And…and I have promised Mangal that…’

‘What promise?’
‘That we shall overthrow the Company.’

‘You two alone...how would you do it?’

‘Now that we have made up our mind, we shall achieve our aim.’

They stopped talking because they had reached close to the people who stood outside the ashram. A man came out of the palanquin. The horsemen whose outfits were similar to military uniforms also dismounted and came close to Rudradatta. The man did a namaskar to the guru. The stranger had an attractive personality, playful yet sharp eyes, a nicely shaped nose and a protruding chin. He looked proud of himself. He wore clothes that suited an administrator, unlike those of a military officer. He appeared to possess aggressive dynamism, common to the men from southern regions; and, he also had a dependable masculinity of men from the northern areas.

‘Bless you,’ Rudradatta raised his hand.

‘We are your guests for the day,’ the stranger said.

‘Welcome, you may stay as long as you want to. Few saintly people are left in the world today, and they meet us only as visitors. Kalyani, arrange for our guests in the veranda.’

Rudradatta ushered the guest inside. The cavalrmen waited outside. Kalyani, first to go in, became busy in making arrangements. Gautam and Tryambak followed their guru. A number of mats were already spread out in the veranda. Kalyani put a small cushion on one of them to make it comfortable to sit, and a bolster to lean on. The cushions were covered in clean and fresh linen.

‘Please have a seat,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Thank you, guruji,’ said the guest and sat on a mat.

‘Pease sit on the cushion,’ Rudradatta held the man’s hand and showed him the comfortable seat.

‘No, I am fine here on the mat. You deserve that seat, respected guruji!’ The stranger did not let Rudradatta have his way.

Manners reflect a community’s prominent character. People of every community behave according to their age, education and position. And that conduct of theirs reflects the standard of their civilisation. The question whether Hindustan is civilised or not can be conclusively answered by observing the elegant, elaborate and beautiful civility practised by Hindus and Muslims—a ceremony that foreigners may find meaningless and complicated. The polite formalities that go on between the guest and the host, in India and in Asia, have come to be known as a grand spectacle. Some may find its exaggeration ridiculous.

The stranger could not convince Rudradatta about the choice of seats. The latter almost carried him onto the cushioned seat, even when the guest sweetly resisted the attempt. Eventually, Rudradatta won and the guest, astonished at the old man’s physical strength, sat where Rudradatta wanted him to sit. Rudradatta sat across him. Tryambak brought a bajoth and placed its close to the guru. Rudradatta addressed Kalyani,
‘Kalyani, dear, the guests would require warm water for their bath.’

‘No, no, we started after taking a bath. And, we may take a bath in the river later.’

‘Okay then. Kalyani, make preparations for lunch.’

‘I have two Brahmans with me.’

‘That is fine. We all shall eat together, Brahmans or otherwise.’

‘We have not come here to trouble your daughter, guruji.’

‘She will take help of others, if she requires.’

‘The girl must be your son’s daughter.’

‘Yes.’

‘Guruji, have you recognised me? Do you know me?’

‘We have a long time ahead to know each other. Are you in a hurry to go away?’

‘If you don’t know me, why do you treat me so generously?’

‘Once I know you, you will no longer be my guest. You will become a member of the household, won’t you?’

‘Let me become a member of your family right away. Guruji, have you heard of the peshwas, the well-known monarchs of yesteryears?’

‘Yes, one can’t forget them easily. Among them all, Nanasahib is the most renowned, making people proud even today.’

By then, four decades had passed away since the last peshwa ruled anywhere. Yet, they lingered in people’s memory. The dream of a ‘Hindu Kingdom’ had wilted, but people had not entirely forgotten the dream.

‘I am Nanasahib’s attorney. My family name is Tope.’

‘Are you Tatya Tope?’

‘Yes, guruji.’

The British historians, who later ridiculed Tatya by calling him ‘toupee’, had then not known the attorney; most Hindis, however, knew about Tatyasahib. The Marathas, who quenched their horses’ thirst with Katak water, who gave their names to the ditch that the Britishers had dug to save the forte of Kolkata, had lost their power. When the last peshwa lost his seat, the wide ocean of Hindu Kingdom that once ruled the land, disappeared; the receding waters took a support from others and became small ponds for a while; yet, subsequently, just a few puddles remained. Nanasahib, the last in the line of Peshwas, wanted to unite
those puddles to make a rivulet; he dreamt of gradually shaping the ocean of old once again. But, Nanasahib had lost even his annuity. Tatya Tope, an attorney, struggled to secure subsistence for Nanasahib, the last descendant of the peshwas, who once gave away lakhs of gold coins in charity. Tatya, a brilliant Maharashtri, could not forget that the man, who was begging then for annuity from the British, had once legitimately ruled over the land.

4

New Acquaintance

*Tatya Tope—that renowned warrior*

Narmadashankar

‘How is Shrimant sahib?’ Rudradatta asked.

‘Yes he is fine. And even if he isn’t, one can’t admit it!’ the brave man said sarcastically.

‘From where are you coming to Vihar?’

‘I had gone to Pune.’

‘And then you came over here?’

‘No, I first went to Khanderao’s Vadodara. Now I shall visit Dhar, Indore, Jhansi and Gwalior. From Gwalior I shall drop in to see Nanasahib at Bithur. The last destination is Kolkatta.’

‘I am glad you have come over here. Shrimant’s father had invited me twice to his court.’

‘And Shrimant has also invited you. Come over to Bithur for a couple of months.’

‘I cannot come over all the way to Bithur. Tathyasahib, I stopped working long ago.’

‘Even Shrimant wants to give up everything now. The Company has suspended his annuity. Shrimant wants to spend his time in Kashi.’

‘Arei, how sad!’ uttered old, selfless Rudradatta.

‘He wishes that you, too, come over with him to Kashi.’

‘I wish to see Shrimant, but if I leave the ashram, the ashram will stop working.’

‘You can leave the ashram for a few days, I am sure.’

‘I may come over later, but at present, the situation is full of uncertainty.’

‘Uncertainty? How? Company Bahadur’s rule has brought peace and prosperity everywhere!’ said Tatya, smiling and narrowing his eyes.

‘I know little about prosperity, but yes, I can experience peace.’
‘A cemetery is always peaceful, but then, we always fear ghosts there!’ said Tatya in a deliberately deep voice.

‘God will decide what happens next,’ said Rudradatta and became busy with his chores in the ashram. Tatyasahib appeared restless and walked around in the courtyard. Tryambak was assigned the duty to accompany him.

‘What is your name, young man?’ Tatyasahib asked him.

‘Tryambak,’ came a one-word reply.

‘Good! It was Bhagawan Shankar’s bow. I like your name.’

While taking a stroll outside, Tatyasahib noticed hoof-prints. He had not used that path and the hoof-prints suggested that many horses had come that way.

‘A platoon had passed from here, had it?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Whose troop was it?’

‘Company Sarkar’s.’

‘Company Sarkar’s troop had passed from this place! How come? This village doesn’t seem on the regular route of the platoons.’

‘Well, a troop makes its way anywhere.’

‘You are right, but it is so during war time. Otherwise, the military platoons stick to their decided route.’

‘We had a warlike situation here!’

‘Why?’

‘They had come to kill guruji,’ said Tryambak, trembling with anger. Tatyasahib observed that the young Brahmin was fiery and brave. He thought that such Brahmins could give a new life to Hind. He asked,

‘But why did they want to kill guruji?’

‘What do these Christians understand about guruji? Even their padaris are like hunters.’

‘Did they have a reason to do so?’

‘A friend of mine, who studied in the ashram, is an offender of the Company Sarkar. A white officer thought that guruji had given him refuge in the ashram.’

‘Then, what happened?’
‘Nothing happened. Gautam is still free.’

‘Gautam? Isn’t he the young man who was with guruji?’

‘Yes.’

‘What has he to do with the military?’

‘He is a soldier in Company Sarkar’s army.’

‘Is he? Does Rudradatta still train soldiers?’

‘No. He is against wars.’

Tatyasahib did not say anything. Tryambak was surprised to learn that his guru once trained combatants. He then thought about guruji’s imposing physique, muscular strength and quiet authority of a military commander—all this clearly suggested that he must be familiar with a soldier’s life. What does all this mean? Did guruji ever wield weapons? Tryambak wondered.

‘Tryambak Bhatt!’ Tatyasahib woke up the young man from his mental preoccupation.

‘Yes!’

‘Let us go and take bath in the river. The river isn’t far from here, is it?’

‘Okay, I will bring our clothes.’

‘Will Gautam come over with us?’

‘Let us see. I will tell him about our plan to go to the river.’

After a while, Tryambak returned with their clothes.

‘What about Gautam? Won’t he join us?’

‘No. He is asleep.’

‘Why?’

‘He is tired. He returned from the Russian borders a few days back.’

‘He was there for the Crimean war, I guess.’

‘Yes, and he also made a name for himself over there.’

‘Then why had they come over to arrest him?’

‘He had hit a white officer there.’

‘Oh! Tryambak, do you like battles?’
‘I love combats. But guruji is against it.’

‘Someone like you should be at the forefront of the army.’

‘One should not be with the army, but against it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Even I don’t understand the statement, but my guruji often says these words.’

‘I understand that your guruji has chosen to put aside his weapons, but why does he convince others to follow his path. Is it right?’

‘He says that Brahmins must not even touch weapons.’

‘What kind of humbug is this? Who was guru Drona? Wasn’t he a Brahmin? The peshwas are Brahmins.’

‘You can discuss this with guruji. I don’t qualify to argue on this issue.’

‘What do you study, Tryambak?’

‘I completed the study of Darshans.’

‘And what is left now?’

‘I shall seek Guruji’s consent to leave the ashram.’

‘Good. Tryambak, you come along with me. I shall seek Rudradatta’s permission to take you under my charge.’

Tryambak did not respond to this suggestion. If I live with a statesman like Tatya, I may be able to fulfil my aspirations, he thought. Tryambak had a desire to participate in battles. He had seen how Gautam had run away from the ashram and won accolades in wars. He didn’t want to secretly join the military. He wanted to be forthright about his ambition to become a renowned soldier. Kalyani must not think that only Gautam knew to fight, he thought.

They went to the river, took a bath and came back to the ashram without exchanging a word.

Tatyasahib had crossed his prime; whereas, Tryambak was in the prime of his youth, dreaming about a bright future. He asked,

‘Do I have to immediately join an army?’

‘No, we cannot be sure about what will happen. Even your knowledge of the Darshanshastra will be useful to Shrimant.’

When they entered into the ashram’s compound, a British woman walked out of it. On noticing a white woman, Tatyasahib raised his eyebrows.
She addressed Tryambak,

‘Tryambak, why don’t you come over today evening?’

‘Okay. I will see you in the evening.’

The girl hurried away.

Tatyasahib asked,

‘Who is she?’

‘A padari’s daughter.’

‘Why does Rudradatta let a padari live in the village?’

‘The padari and guruji are friends.’

They saw Rudradatta walking down to receive Tatyasahib.

5.

A Developing Friendship

*Death’s kingdom is burnt and destroyed, yet, a pinch of ash hopes for a newblaze. Once again, the cinders throb with desire, a fire within rages without a flame.*

Kalapi

‘I am taking Tryambak along with me,’ said Tatyasahib to Rudradatta, entering into the ashram.

‘You may do so. We all belong to Shrimant,’ Rudradatta responded.

Kalyani stood close by. When ashram’s students moved out, she became unhappy. She even cried when students left for home after completing their education. Every student was deeply impressed by Kalyani’s affectionate nature, as they were by Rudradatta’s virtues and scholarship. They loved Kalyani, that innocent doe.

Tryambak was Kalyani’s childhood friend. Although Tryambak did not speak often, he had a keen ear for what Kalyani said. Since childhood, Kalyani had narrated many hopes, plans, dreams and anecdotes to Tryambak. Kalyani would certainly not like it if someone took away her friend.

Kalyani’s expressions delighted Tryambak. He became sure that Kalyani would be unhappy if he moved out of the ashram. He decided to leave soon. Kalyani always remembered Gautamin our talks. Now, she will remember me when I am away, he cheerfully mused.

Rudradatta offered a modest lunch to the guests. When Tatyasahib noticed that Kalyani kept a distance while serving food, he teased her,
‘I am also a Brahmin, sister!’

‘I want everyone to become a Brahmin,’ Rudradatta laughed.

‘Was that your aim when you toured other countries?’ Tatyasahib asked.

‘Well...’ Rudradatta did not reply.

Tatyasahib’s question surprised all those who were present there. They knew that their guru was known in Hindustan, but for the first time someone had clearly talked about the vague story they all had heard about Rudradatta’s exploration of many other countries. They became alert to the conversation.

‘Dadaji has never mentioned his journey to foreign lands,’ Kalyani said.

‘What is remarkable about it? All Hindus go on a pilgrimage.’

‘That you had crossed the ocean is definitely a remarkable incident.’

‘Our Gujarati sailors went to Java and China every day in past. Muslims routinely go to Mecca Sharif. Jangabar is like Hind’s veranda. You may not know this, Kalyani, but a Gujarati sailor had guided European explorers to Hindustan.’

‘Yes, we should be grateful to that Gujarati man,’ Tatyasahib sneered. What else would the attorney of the Peshwas, who had lost their power to settlers, say about that Gujarati sailor?

‘It is an old tale, though—about hundred and twenty-five years before even Shivaji was born.’

Chhatrapati Shivaji established a kingdom, and later, the Peshwas spread its roots in the entire Hindustan. Yet, the European traders toppled them down. Rudradatta wanted to contextualise the historical events by clarifying the time when the Gujarati sailor had guided European traders to Hind. But Tatya misread his narration and said,

‘One Gujarati brought Muslims from the north and another brought Europeans from the south. Gujarat is providing good service to Hindustan.’

Gautam could not tolerate the taunt. With strained eyebrows he said,

‘When we have kings who rape women, they are bound to lose their kingdoms. Even if Madhav had not called Muslims...’

‘Gautam, don’t argue with your elders. If Gujarat has sinned, eventually, a Gujarati’s tapasya will save Hindustan,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Gautam is right. Today, Hindustan is full of cowards.’

The conversation stopped there. In those days, Maharashtra, Gujarat and North India were closer than we can imagine today. Uninterrupted movements of platoons and frequent deliberations among royal administrators brought distant places closer; and, the scattered
territories of southern kingdoms had also brought a unity in a vast area. Scholars, teachers and professional writers exchanged ideas with one another. The railways have definitely helped us, but the trains have created an illusion of relocation now, which did not exist then. Today, someone living in Gujarat would take hardly twenty-four hours to reach Gokul-Mathura; but the train passengers of our high-speed age cannot intimately interact with the local folks of various places as the travellers on foot did during their fourteen days’ long journey. The railways, built to transport the military from one place to another, give an impression of great distance between two places; in addition, they have made the means of communication superficial. Bharuch and Bhavnagar are right across each other, yet the roundabout railway route makes them appear afar; besides, the railways also make the bay of Khambat unfamiliar to most. Before the railways, cities like Pune, Satara, Vadodara, Nagpur, Indore, Gwalior, Agra, Delhi, Kashi and Prayag had an interconnected life. Every day, carriers and agents travelled through these cities with messages, documents and hundis. The traders’ business-branches were scattered everywhere. Wealthy devotees built step-wells, shelters, caravanserais and dharmashalas on the roads. Village panchayats, active in those days, provided guards and escorts to travellers going to faraway destinations. Some of us wrongly believe that people then lived an unhappy life, full of uncertainty because they did not have today’s facilities.

After lunch, Tatyasahib lay down to take a nap, but that brilliant and energetic man could not sleep. Taty, whose every pore burst with life, who wished to die at the barrel of a gun, began talking with young students. He talked about their families and their ideas about life. He wanted to know if any of them had a passion for wars and adventures. And if any of them showed signs of these qualities, he wanted to fuel patriotism in them.

They had assumed that Tatyasahib will resume his journey in the late afternoon, but he did not show any sign of leaving the place. When Johnson, the priest, learnt about Rudradatta’s guest, he came over with his daughter, Lucy. Rudradatta was instructing a small group of students. When he saw Johnson, Rudradatta discontinued his lesson and warmly welcomed the priest.

‘Welcome Yuvanasen, this is Lakshmi’s second visit to the ashram today. She has taken a liking to Sanskrit.’ Rudradatta had changed Lucy’s name to Lakshmi.

‘If we want to live with Hindus, we must learn the language of their religion. Lucy knows better Sanskrit than I do. I want her to translate certain portions of the Bible into Sanskrit,’ said Johnson.

‘You are right. If the Bible is available in Sanskrit, our teachers will read it one day.’

‘Who has come over at your place?’

‘The peshwa regime’s attorney.’

‘The peshwa...regime?’ Johnson wondered.

‘Yes, why?’

‘The peshwas lost their power about four decades ago.’
‘Oh yes, yet we sometimes refer to it as a regime. Come with me, I shall introduce you to him.’

In the backyard of the ashram, sitting on a cot, Tatya was talking to Kalyani.

‘Do you know horse riding?’ Tatya asked Kalyani.

‘Yes, I know. When Gautam stayed here at the ashram, he often brought horses. I used to practise horse riding then,’ Kalyani blushed while saying this.

‘Do you want a good horse? I shall send one for you.’

‘No, no, now I lack practice of riding horses. Moreover, what do I do with a horse here? I don’t require one at the ashram.’

‘We can’t predict how the horse and horse riding skill can be useful. When your grandfather rode a horse, the beast used to take wings!’

‘Does Dadaji know horse riding? I am surprised!’

‘Yes, he does.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I know it.’

‘Have you seen him riding a horse?’

‘No, but I have heard this from the people who have seen him riding a horse.’

‘Tell me, what else do people talk about him?’

‘That when he mounted a horse, it galloped at lightning speed!’

‘But, why did dadaji ride a horse?’

Right then Rudradatta, Johnson and Lucy came over there.

‘Kalyani, you didn’t let Raosahib relax for a while. Don’t pester him with your endless chattering!’

Tatyasahib got up from the cot. Rudradatta insisted that he need not get up, but he did.

‘He is Tatyasahib, Shrimant’s attorney,’ Rudradatta introduced Johnson to Tatya. Johnson respectfully bowed his head.

Tatyasahib gave a probing look to Johnson. He kept on observing him for a while; then, disgust and hatred filled his eyes, as if Johnson’s white skin was due to leprosy. He interrogated,

‘He is a padari here, isn’t he?’
‘Yes, Yuvanasen is a good friend of mine.’

‘He may be your friend, but he is our master,’ said Tatyasahib. While making this caustic remark, Tatyasahib gave a sharp look to Johnson.

Johnson, who had practised the art of kindness said,

‘We Christians are friends to all. Jesus has instructed us to love our neighbours.’

‘That exactly is the reason why you kill your neighbours… Liars!’ growled Tatyasahib. While speaking the last word, he turned his head away.

Rudradatta partly heard the comment and missed some of it. He looked at Yuvanasen and offered him a mat to sit on. Tatyasahib also sat on a nearby mat. Kalyani was ready with a mat for Rudradatta and spread it on the floor. Then, she, along with Lucy, sat on a thin rug lying there.

Lucy naturally put her hand on Kalyani’s waist. Noticing this proximity between two women, his eyes turned red with anger.

6

Preparations

Your skin receives a tan
and you end up holding the ascetic’s bag,
if you roam around all over in hope.

Kalapi

The priest understood that Tatyasahib disapproved of his presence there. The Christian missionaries, who went to various places to spread Jesus’s love and message, faced situations that were far more difficult. A resentful Maharashtri could not defeat Johnson.

‘You seem to dislike Christians,’ Johnson addressed Tatyasahib.

‘Yes, I dislike them, especially the white ones,’ replied Tatyasahib. Johnson thought about a reason for this obvious insult. He wanted to say,

‘Is it because the peshwas lost their reign?’

Experienced and affectionate, Johnson did not put across the question. He knew the Hindis well. Besides, he believed, though faintly, that he, too, had teamed up in some way to build up Company Sarkar’s secured and peaceful administration. Hence, he often suffered the Hindis’ jibes with a smile. He laughed and said,

‘Gradually, your aversion will become less.’

‘How?’

‘Most people are convinced that the Company Sarkar’s administration is for their welfare.’
'You must have gone around seeking their opinion!'

'I live among people.'

'Have you taken Pundit Rudradatta’s opinion?'

'We often discuss these subjects.'

'I am sure he agrees with the idea that the men in hats have given us a secured life, doesn’t he?'

'Rudradatta says what he has to. But, don’t you admit that the country has now become more peaceful?'

'The Sikh war ended hardly six years ago. That poor Kamaru was annexed just four years ago. And, till recently, a war with Russians seemed imminent. As if all this is not enough, preparations for a war with China and Iraq have begun. Now you tell me, are the Whites peace-loving people?'

Johnson realised that Tatyasahib knew about the current history. He then focused on the benefits the Company Sarkar bestowed on people. He said,

'See the education people now receive here.'

'They educate local people to make them clerks—everyone knows it.'

'Trains…'

'To transport their military…'

'The Thugs and Pindharis have been practically driven out from everywhere.'

'And who loots us now? The elite Thugs!'

'I believe you see only one side of reality to make a judgement.'

'Sahib, I am not as ignorant as you think me to be. I know Farsi and English. I have studied documents prepared by the Company’s administration and those by local lords. You should see them first, and then talk about what is right and what is wrong.'

Rudradatta interfered to stop the debate that was heating up,

'Raosahib, I believe in one’s karmas. What we have today, is because of our past karmas. The destiny has mysteriously preordained our life.'

'I don’t see any mystery in what is happening,’ said Tatyasahib.

'Probably Bharat will become an amalgamation of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. All the communities together will live in glory.'
Tatyasahib did not have faith in Rudradatta’s vision. Since Johnson left for his evening prayer after a while, agitated Tatyasahib relaxed a little. Lucy went with Tryambak. Kalyani went into the kitchen. Gautam played around with the cow and her calf. Rudradatta also prepared for his Sandhya. Tatyasahib went to him and said,

‘Punditji, I want to have a word with you in private. I have come here to talk to you, but you are never alone.’

‘I know. When you told me that Shrimant had sent you, I had guessed that you had come on a special purpose. We shall talk alone at night.’

Dusk turned into a dark night. Kalyani served supper to all. Rudradatta had taken an oath to have meals only in the morning. After a while, every member of the ashram went to bed. The fiery Maharashtri had not lain on his mat as yet. Restless, Tatyasahib noticed that Rudradatta also sat on his bed. Tatyasahib softly said,

‘Punditji!’

‘Yes I am awake. Let’s go,’ Rudradatta replied.

Tatyasahib did not know where they were supposed to go. He kept on following Rudradatta, through the fast asleep village up to the quiet outskirts. Darkness added to the strange silence surrounding the place. They both sat on the steps of Bhagawan Shankar’s shrine at the riverbank.

‘This place is fine, isn’t it?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Yes, it is quiet and secluded.’

‘After a month, thousands of people will gather here. The people of surrounding villages visit the temple on pilgrimage.’

‘Good. I want to take an advantage of all the festivals and places for pilgrimage that we have.’

They could hear soft gurgling of the distant river. The cricket’s continuous song kept ringing in the hush.

‘Yes, tell me. What do you want to ask me?’ said Rudradatta.

‘A lot.’

‘I witnessed the days when the Peshwas’ reign came to an end. The last of the Peshwas can ask me whatever he wants to. I have one clear instruction: do what I say. If Shrimant Bajirao had followed mine and Bapusahib Gokhale’s advice, the saffron banner would still be fluttering in Pune.’

‘Bapusahib lost his life.’

‘I did not make efforts to save myself. I was left alive accidentally. But after that day, everything changed.’
'Yet, on his deathbed, Shrimant had advised Nanasahib to seek your advice in the time of crisis.'

'That reflects his generosity. What else do you want to ask?'

'I am preparing in various ways.'

'Okay.'

'Should I give you details of it?'

'No, I shall ask you if I want to. How have you prepared?'

'All the princely states are on our side.'

'How do you trust the princely states? Go through the peshwa’s history.'

'You detest the Peshwas, don’t you?'

'Even if I hated them once, I no longer bear any ill feeling. Now, I have become an observer of reality—I observe what happens around and humbly bow my head to the cycle of karma.'

'What if the cycle of karma brings the peshwas back to power?'

'It will not happen. The loss of peshwas’s power was not altogether wrong.'

'Rudradatta, are you sure of what you are talking?'

'Yes, I am. Brahmins cannot be rulers. The Brahmin who seeks a throne instead of a simple grass-mat turns dangerous for society.'

'Let’s not talk about peshwas. Would you help us in overthrowing the Company?'

'If Brahmins cannot rule, the Vaishyas, too, cannot rule over the earth. This regime, which gives excessive importance to trading and business, will come to its end one day.'

'You are right. Kshatriyas are the true rulers. I want all the Kshatriyas of Hindustan to be united.'

'How?'

'I want all those who can wield weapons to prepare for a war.'

A dog barked at a distance. Both felt that something rattled behind the shrine.

'What could this be?'

'A leaf must have fallen around,’ said Tatyasahib.

'A spy could be following us,’ Rudradatta chuckled.
The Company’s Lust for Land

We pleaded you, we urged you, we wandered around,
we did all that behooves noble-hearted men.
If you see misery in our humble ways,
waging a war will be our duty.

Nhalhal

Tatyasahib jumped up and ran to the shrine’s backyard. He saw a shadowy figure swiftly moving into the bushes.

‘Stop, Tatyasahib, don’t follow that man,’ cried Rudradatta as he thought Tatyasahib would chase the man.

‘Let me catch him!’

‘Why do you want to catch him?’

‘So that we know who he is.’

‘We should be more cautious now on. Even if he was an enemy, does it matter to us?’

Tatyasahib came back and sat close to Rudradatta. He asked,

‘Punditji, I am sure no one wants to know what I am doing these days. Does the Company still keep a track of what you do?’

Rudradatta laughed. Memories stirred up in his mind and began shimmering like stars. He immediately overcame the reverie and said,

‘Raosahib, how would any ruler control his territory if he doesn’t keep a check on his enemies?’

‘I am glad, punditji, that the Company still considers you as its enemy. If this is the case, I am sure you will support our plan. And, with your support, the plan will definitely succeed.’

‘I am not the Company’s enemy. The Company’s employees too do not think me as someone against them, more so after the padari came over in the village.’

‘A padari? That white friend of yours?’

‘My brother, let me make one clarification. Don’t be bitter and angry. Your father was my mate in the ashram. I wandered around in my youth, but he dedicatedly pored over the shastras for years. Your father’s skin may not be white but his name was Pandurang!’

‘Punditji, thinking about the present situation, I become aggressive. I can neither eat nor sleep. How to overthrow the Company—this question torments me day and night.’

‘What will such aggression result in?’
'A fire.'

'That fire will consume all of us, won't it?'

'What is wrong in it? Chhatrapati died, the brave Muslim of Mysore was eliminated, badshahs are no more, Ayodhya’s nawabs have vanished and the Sikh lion was also behind bars—what is left now?'

'We, too, shall meet the same fate.'

'I am here to set fire to everything. Let that fire destroy me. I don’t want to sit quietly.'

'You will not be in sin for either burning someone or for being burnt if you strictly follow the Geeta. निम्ती भूल्या.’

'A desire to fight burns within me. And since the day Chhabili’s Jhansi was lost…'

Anger choked Tatyashahib’s voice. Jhansi’s Rani Lakshmibai’s proclamation still reverberated in entire Hindustan,

'Main meri Jhansi nahidungi, kabhinahi!' Love, purity and bravery—Lakshmibai had all the qualities of an Arya woman. People bowed their heads in her memory everywhere. People affectionately addressed this venerable woman as Chhabili.

Bajirao gave up the independence that Nanasaib Phadanvis had fiercely protected for a long time. A shrewd man, Phadanvis had long predicted this debacle. Attractive like a bright star, handsome Bajirao had lost courage and cunning, the qualities for which the peshwas were renowned; he did retain the vices of his ancestors, though: love for pleasure and arrogant obstinacy. As soon as Phadanvis died, the Company Bahadur’s tentacles gripped the peshwa’s territory. With this, the Hindu state met its end.

Once in a while, Bajirao woke up from sensual self-indulgence and agonised over his abject state; since his friends taunted him, he often mulled over the idea of fighting for independence from the Company; but Bajirao feared death, and hence, he could not be free of other fears. When he made efforts to liberate his state, people perceived it as a treacherous intrigue against the Company. At last, when BapuBhosale, a fearless soldier, passed away, the peshwa rule, too, went in flames. Accepting an annuity of eight lakh rupees, the last peshwa went in exile. He left Pune and put up in Brahmavart-Bithur, on the bank of the Ganga, leading a quiet and secluded life.

The spirit behind people’s actions achieves far more distinction than the people who act. The peshwas’ reign and its achievements were greater than the peshwas. Bajirao’s family, friends and their protégés had joined him in Brahmavart. Remembering the days of old, still hoping to regain the lost glory, they all crowded around Bajirao. This large group of Maharashtris mingled with the northern people, and, as a result, acquired the northerners’ manners and aggression. Their command over two languages, Maharashtri and Hindi, added an element of nationalism in them. Among them was noted scholar Pandurang Shastri, whose son Tatay was hardly ten years older than Bajirao’s adopted son Nanasaib. On the other hand, Moropant Tambe’s daughter, Lakshmibai, the queen to be, was about ten years
younger than Nanasahib. The girl’s beauty and flamboyance inspired someone to aptly call her Chhabili. Chhabili, everyone’s darling at Bajirao’s sham ‘court’, learnt to ride a horse, throw a spear and wield a sword. She preferred brandishing weapons on a battlefield to becoming a pretty, delicate wife in someone’s zenana.

Tatyasahib loved that girl as he would love his daughter; Nanasahib treated her as his younger sister; and all those who were proud of the peshwai history worshipped her as if Chhabili was a Goddess. Little Chhabili, who once adamantly demanded an elephant ride and shared the howdah with Nanasahib, eventually became Rani Lakshmibai.

Chhabili became a widow at eighteen, and, after that unfortunate event, she devoted herself to Jhansi’s administration, living a simple and saintly life that befitted an Arya woman.

The British had an insatiable lust for land. They established small trading centers first, and then began colonising small towns in the south, west and east of Hindustan. The wave of their irrepressible power swept over Bengal; victory in the battle at Plassey raised the British soldiers’ and administrators’ expectations, and they wished to conquer the entire Hindustan. The administrators of the Company in England were bewildered by the idea. Yet, in the span on about ninety years, the administrators here swallowed Hindustan.

If the British had showed generosity like Muslim conquerors, Hindi subjects would have accepted the Company Sarkar. The Muslim conquerors were satisfied if a state accepted its supremacy; but the Company persecuted the states first and forced them to accept its supremacy. In one year, the Company eliminated great warrior Shivaji’s descendants in Satara, Raja Ranjit’s Sikh kingdom, Tanjore’s Maratha kingdom, Nagpur’s Bhosales and Jhansi’s Brahmin rulers—all were routed in a few years. Defeated and powerless, Bajirao lived a long, ineffectual life. When he passed away, his son Nanasahib’s rightful annuity was suspended. Once, the Mughal dynasty’s emperors ruled over India; after the Company’s sway, the last of the great Mughals too did not hold any power in Delhi. The Company Sarkar had announced that his son was not going to inherit the throne, the last ruler already lying degraded and confined in a prison. Wajid Ali, the luckless Nawab of Ayodhya, was declared incompetent and his sate lawless. Eventually, he was dethroned. A state was forcefully carved out of Brahmadesh and Sikkim. Varad, a region belonging to the nizam, was snatched away, and its worthless ruler was made to weep for days.

Chhatrapati, peshwa, Mughal emperor and the Nawab of Ayodhya pleaded to the Company’s administrators; but, the stubborn officers didn’t know compassion. Assuming that the bigwigs in England knew to be kind, the supporters of these native rulers sent their attorneys and representatives to England; but the Englishman had learnt the art of saying a ‘no’ without offending the pleader; besides, they did not want to undo what was done by their executives in Hindustan. The descendants of the rulers, of their courtiers, of their attorneys and of the other supporters lived with a deep grudge, simmering with anger.

How could Tatyasahib tolerate Chhabili losing her Jhansi? Who would forgive the plunderers of a daughter’s home?

Tatyasahib controlled his wrath and then said,

‘Rudradatta, imagine if Kalyani were at the place of Chhabili. Would you still choose to be aloof?’
Rudradatta became upset at his argument. Rudradatta controlled himself with great difficulty, but he felt that he would be furious in a moment and explode. Restraining his emotions, he became calm and said,

‘I don’t see any difference in Chhabili and Kalyani. Both are my daughters. But the Company has done nothing that would make me angry.’

‘Will you not be angry if you see them grabbing away your daughter’s kingdom?’

‘Why won’t the Company annex Jhansi? In the last one hundred years, a number of Hindu and Muslim states were blown away like straws. What is Jhansi, then?’

‘You will gladly accept the typhoon, won’t you?’

‘I may not. Yet, I certainly feel that if these numerous small, insignificant states of Hindustan disappear, it would not be a great loss to us. The excesses of these states have sunk our ship in past, and future too seems bleak if they gain power once again. Let the wheel of time crush them for good.’

‘Who is speaking these words? Who was once peshwa’s well-wisher?’

‘Tatyasahib, you don’t have to remind me what I had given up for protecting the peshwas, or what efforts I had taken to bring them back to power. My determined attempts made from foreign countries to purge Hind of the Company should remain unknown to people. The past won’t help anyone. You may know one fact well—I have never prized my life while fighting for native states, and I have sacrificed my son, too, in the struggle to help our rulers.’

‘I vaguely know the details of the incident. That is why I have come to you.’

‘But I fear you will fail the way I did in toppling down the Company.’

‘Hindustan is all braced up now for a revolt.’

‘In promises and provocative statements—Hindustanis are not ready for action.’

‘All the princely states have promised me that they will enter into the fray.’

‘It’s all in vain. If the princely states had true spirit in them, the Company would not be ruling over Hindustan today. The moment you would announce yourself to be the enemy of the Company, the princely states would not let you enter into their territories.’

‘The Company’s soldiers are disgruntled. They have their problems with the Company.’

‘They don’t have anyone who would guide them.’

‘Why?’

‘Let me explain. I had hoped Ranjitsingh will definitely defeat the Company’s army, but it did not happen so. His battalions held parades like the Company’s soldiers do. Parades were not enough to keep the Company at bay. In a battle, our troops fight like burglars and Pindharis.’
‘Then what do we do? Sit down and pray for God’s intervention?’

‘Nothing wrong with it! If you look up to God for help, he will definitely guide you.’

‘I am on the way shown by God.’

8

Rudradatta’s Protestations

Don’t, don’t you slaughter people, young man,
cruelty has no place here,
this world is a saint’s ashram.
Kalapi

Rudradatta did not respond to what Tatyasahib said. They heard the church bell tolling in the priest Johnson’s house. The jingling echoed in the village.

Tatyasahib growled, obviously annoyed at the priest’s presence in Vihar.

‘Did you hear the bell? Its echoes suggest how far and wide the Company has reached.’

‘We will send them across the ocean.’

‘And, what will you do then?’

Tatyasahib began thinking. What would happen after overthrowing the Company—this question was probably more important than the problem of toppling it down.

‘It will depend on the situation later.’

‘Speak clearly. Nanasahib will become the peshwa, and Bahadurshah will be the emperor.’

‘It is obvious. Otherwise, why would people battle it out with the Company?’

‘The wars that take place to gain power are cursed battles from the beginning. My experience says that waging war is the most cruel and meaningless exercise.’

Tatyasahib felt that Rudradatta was either overtly excited about his inane ideas or old age had made him weak.

‘Punditji, could anyone achieve anything without making a war?’

‘And, will it be an enduring achievement, if one has to gain it by fighting a battle?’

‘Do you mean Hindustan should remain a slave state?’

‘Not at all. I will sacrifice my soul to free Hindustan.’

‘That is what I am asking for.’
‘No, sahib, you don’t intend to abolish the control of the Company Sarkar. Your purpose is to bring the peshwas back to power. You want the Mughals to rule over Hindustan again. You should ideally create a state that will be as good as the peshwa’s reign and the Mughal rule, accommodating virtues of both.’

Tatyasahib began laughing. His barking laughter echoed in darkness. The laughter sounded hollow; it was that of someone who did not have the support of a visionary and passionate campaigner like Rudradatta.

‘I know one such administration,’ said Tatyasahib.

‘Which one is it?’

‘The Company Sarkar. The Company swallowed the peshwas and the Mughals. Both are accommodated in its rule, as you want it.’

‘If you don’t revive the peshwas and the Mughals, the Company will be definitely displaced one day.’

‘How so?’

‘Think of creating a state for the entire Hindustan, a state for all the Hindis. The Company could defeat the peshwas, it could defeat the Mughal rulers, but it will not be able to defeat all the Hindis. Hindustan belongs to people—not to a king or his son. Don’t repeat the mistakes made by the peshwas and the Mughals.’

‘I don’t understand this argument. I am loyal to my master. Azimullah, whom Shrimant had sent to England, also said something similar. France and America have such administrations, I have heard. But I know only Shrimant. Now, let us come to the last issue that I want to discuss with you.’

‘Okay. I know few people will understand me. That is the reason why I don’t open my mouth.’

‘How will you help me in my fight?’

‘I quit using weapons years ago.’

‘Take them up once again. We are with you.’

‘Impossible. I have sworn not to...’

‘Yes, what have you sworn to do?’

‘Even if I am going to achieve salvation by using weapons, I will not strive to achieve such salvation.’

‘What about the training to combatants? You used to train young men in warfare.’

‘They all died for the sake of those petty princely states.’
‘Some of them must be around.’

‘Now I instruct such warriors who don’t wield weapons.’

‘Even they will do. Give me such men.’

‘Gautam and Tryambak both were ready, but Gautam could not resist the temptation to participate in battles. I can see fire in Tryambak’s eyes. He is eager to go the same way. I don’t trust either of them.’

‘Why?’

‘If Tryambak spends more time with you, he will definitely play around with pistols.’

‘Rudradattaji, we want one young man whom you have instructed, even if he doesn’t participate in battles.’

‘Tryambak may leave the ashram, if he wants to. My ashram is not a prison house.’

‘Won’t you formally give him permission to come along with me?’

‘No, I won’t—never to participate in battles. A time will come when warriors will be as despicable as butchers.’

‘Rudradatta, many eminent astrologers have announced that the end of the Company raj is going to begin soon.’

‘Do they predict who will rule after the Company winds up from Hindustan?’

Neither Rudradatta nor Tatyasahib were satisfied with the way their meeting ended. Tatyasahib, who had come over to Vihar in the hope of Rudradatta’s help, noticed that the guru’s opinions about the Peshwas and Mughals had changed. Rudradatta, who once acted like the great Parashuram, had subdued his passions. In fact, all the brilliant Brahmins of Aryavart did so at one stage in their lives. Drona, that great warrior, had also renounced everything in a moment.

Rudradatta was renowned for the purity of his soul and for his scholarship. Few knew, however, about this brahmarshi’s role in those days’ political movements; and hence, Rudradatta emerged as a mysterious character. Many believed that Rudradatta had played a significant role in the last war of the peshwas, in the Company’s wars with Sindhiyas, Holkars and Bhonsales, in the skirmishes with the thugs and Pindharis and in the conflicts with Kabul, Iran and Russia. His name was never mentioned in official documents and correspondence. Many British officers believed that Rudradatta was a figure of people’s imagination, a perfect example of the Hindis’ unruly mind.

The Hindustani rulers, after surrendering themselves to foreign powers, indulged in a life of pleasure; then, the Company came over and gave them protection, making them unworthy of throne. The princely states did not assist Rudradatta when the guru attempted to overthrow the Company’s hold. On the contrary, the princely states, to display their bravery and loyalty, made great efforts to get Rudradatta arrested. Later, the Company realised that Rudradatta was a living human being, not a vague and popular idea against the Company.
Then, for many years, the officials thought that Rudradatta was in exile living in a distant country. That, too, was proved wrong, and they learnt that Rudradatta was not an agitator but a teacher in charge of an ashram in Vihar, a hamlet; they also concluded that people had invented many stories about this guru—he was not as harmful to the Company as the stories of exploits suggested. The Company’s intelligence network became lenient towards Rudradatta, but they could not trust the guru. Eventually, they planned to send a missionary in Vihar, so that the priest, while leading people to the gates of heaven, can also keep a watch on Rudradatta.

The priest later became Rudradatta’s friend. In the beginning, Yuvanasen dreamt of converting Rudradatta to Christianity; the priest’s success in it would have given him satisfaction of converting all the Hindus of Hindustan. After his friendship with the guru, the priest quickly understood that it was impossible to realise his dream. On the contrary, fellow missionaries blamed Yuvanasen for holding a bias in favour of Brahminism. Yuvanasen often wore Hindu attire and sang his prayers in the tune of Hindu bhajans; this attitude was unbearable to the rulers since Yuvanasen was their representative there. On one hand, the Company’s administrators began disliking Yuvanasen; on the other, they stopped doubting Rudradatta.

‘Tatyasahib, I better take my bath,’ said Rudradatta, looking at the stars in the sky.

‘Okay. I have not brought my clothes here.’

‘I will not take long. Water will comfort my eyes.’

‘Peshwa’s palace in Brahmavarta is on the bank of Ganga. I have often taken a bath in the river. Enough of it! I now want to roll in the rivers of blood.’

Rudradatta did not respond to the comment. While they walked down to the river in the receding darkness of dawn, Tatyasahib looked at the sky a couple of times.

‘Raosahib, what do the stars say?’ Rudradatta laughed.

‘They say that we should keep our spears sharp and shining like them.’

‘They send a different message to me.’

‘What is it?’

‘They tell me how they have arranged themselves like bright and fiery buntings in the sky. Human beings, too, should live in a neat, beautiful order. We want to raise our spears and indulge in manslaughter. How loathsome! We are worse than brutes!’

‘Punditji, look, a shooting star!’

‘I think that shooting star wanted to make wars, and other stars didn’t want to. So that war mongering star has decided to come down on earth to live with us and fulfill its wish!’

Before Rudradatta’s laughter subsided, someone shouted,

‘Guruji!’
Who is this? Rudradatta asked. Students knew that Rudradatta often went to Shankar’s shrine when he wanted to be alone for a long time. A young student of the ashram had come there looking for Rudradatta.

‘What happened?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Someone stabbed Tryambak with a dagger!’

9
A White Man’s Blow

People’s words hurt me,
Difficulties stab me like daggers.
Kalapi

Rudradatta and Tatyasahib both rushed towards ashram. Rudradatta said,

‘These sabers and daggers have tainted mankind.’

‘Punditji, youth and battles enjoy a close friendship,’ said Tatyasahib.

‘How about battling with one’s soul? Lust, wrath, greed, temptation, arrogance and envy—these six enemies have a tight hold on all of us. We should conquer them first.’

Tatyasahib believed that saintly life befitted only renouncers and old people. He asked the student,

‘Who was the attacker?’

‘We don’t know who he was, but he was a white man for sure.’

‘And you people did nothing? Didn’t you all thrash him?’ while asking this, Tatyasahib’s eyes glowed even in darkness.

‘Guruji strongly disapproves it. The ashram’s students never get involved in village brawls.’

‘Punditji, you must not hold them back by such rules. See, your students are no longer safe.’

‘Tatyasahib, if we don’t sacrifice something we can’t perform a yajna, and if we don’t perform a yajna, we can’t receive desired fruits. If we want to perform the yajna of making the world weaponless, we will have to make many sacrifices,’ Rudradatta firmly said. In the meanwhile, they reached close to Yuvanasen’s church.

Tryambak was sitting on the ground, and Lucy was applying ointment on his back. Kalyani helped her in tying a bandage. The priest and his wife were arguing with Gautam, who wanted to go inside the priest’s house.

‘Bring him here, otherwise I will set fire to you mission,’ Gautam shouted.
‘Calm down, Gautam, I will bring him here later,’ Yuvanasen tried to pacify Gautam.

‘Let us discuss things with punditji. We shall do what he suggests,’ Yuvanasen’s wife protested.

‘Everyone wants to shield behind punditji. I will kill that man against guruji’s orders, you see! That coward attacked from behind!’ Gautam screamed his arguments and began shoving the priest and his wife to make way inside the house. Someone screamed,

‘Punditji! We are here!’

Gautam’s face fell. He recognised Rudradatta’s tall, lean body some distance away. He immediately understood why Mangal had distanced himself from Rudradatta and his divine presence. Gautam’s vengeance lost its sting.

‘What happened, Tryambak?’ Rudradatta asked.

‘Nothing, I am hurt a little.’

It was a deep wound. Tryambak’s broad, strong back bled profusely, even after Lucy repeatedly splashed water on it. Lucy and Kalyani could not tie a bandage around the wound. Although the wound was not on a critical part of the body, it was a serious injury. Tryambak did not betray the agony on his face in spite of suffering acute pain. In fact, he seemed embarrassed by the attention he received from those gathered around. Tatyasahib was glad to see Tryambak’s unbending spirit. He cheered Tryambak,

‘Excellent, young man! Keep it up!’

Rudradatta looked at Tatyasahib and smiled. Rudradatta appreciated Tryambak’s courage. He gave a look of admiration to Tatyasahib for the encouraging words.

‘Gautam, don’t kick up a fuss about this. Arrange for a cot first and bring Tryambak to the ashram.’

‘No, don’t bring a cot here. I will walk down,’ Tryambak said with determination.

‘No, don’t move from here right away. You will feel better after a while,’ Kalyani advised.

‘Let him spend a day at my place. I will take his care,’ said Lucy.

‘What about that white man you are hiding in?’ Gautam bellowed.

‘Drag him out! Where is he hiding?’ Tatyasahib provoked Gautam.

Rudradatta looked at Gautam and signaled him to stop. Yuvanasen, his wife and two servants joined Lucy in treating Tryambak. Rudradatta did not know the reasons behind the brawl. He learnt that a white man had attacked Tryambak with a dagger, and the white man had hidden himself in the mission. He did not know what Tryambak had been doing around the mission in the wee hours of the day. Rudradatta imagined what must have happened, and when he talked with Tryambak while walking down to the ashram, his conjecture about the sequence of events turned out to be right.
Apart from being a priest, Johnson was also a good surgeon and a fine writer. Most British priests, soldiers and administrators considered all unbelievers to be lowly, wicked, barbaric, fit to be Christians’ servants when alive, and deserving hellfire after death; all such British men were enthusiastic to save the unbelievers by converting them. Yet, some were exceptions, and they admired and respected Hindi culture, literature and philosophy. These British men and women studied Hind’s folk literature, poetry and society with sympathy and wrote about them in books, pamphlets and magazines. English magazines were published in most important centers, and some Hindi traders and businessmen also published such magazines.

In Madras, Kolkata and Mumbai, Hindus received excellent English education. The main intention of these schools was to civilise the Hindis and make clerks out of them. The Hindis, who came out molded by the English educational institutions, were little but clerkish worshippers of white civilization. Yet, because ancient Sanskrit and Persian tradition too were taught in these schools, along with the best of English literature, people became sensitive and conscious, albeit in a different way, to the glory of Hind’s culture. And, in bringing this consciousness, the British writers, who were sympathetic to Hindi civilisation, played a significant role.

Johnson, after knowing Rudradatta, became a different writer altogether. The priest, who once wished to translate the Bible in Sanskrit and convert all the Brahmins, later began publishing essays on subjects like ‘The Soul of the East’, ‘Eastern Philosophy’, ‘Similarity Between Christ’s and Krishna’s Precepts’, ‘Christian and Muslim Monotheism’ and ‘The Logic Behind Karma and Rebirth’. Such write-ups not only made Johnson a popular writer, but also helped increase the sale of the publications he wrote for. Orthodox Christians, the priests who attempted to convert all the Hindis and the administrators who hated the idea that subjugated Hindis had even an element of refinement—they all were enraged by Johnson’s writings. Some held public debates about the issues. Christian missions questioned why a Christian priest, who subsisted on mission’s funds, should appreciate Hindi culture and admire heathen life. Why we should not remove Johnson from the mission, they thought.

In addition, a Christian priest was not just a preacher; he was also a representative of the British Empire. Those who study how empire expanded with the help of these priests have always wondered what the priests loved more—Christ’s cross or the British flag. The reason behind this puzzle was obvious: wherever the priests went, they always raised the British flag first, and the Cross later.

Since Arya rishis perceive the earth as a big family, their patriotism is dissolved in the love for that family. For a Christian priest, family did not mean all the Christians, but only white Christians; and not just that, they consider only the whites born in their country to be a family! Hence, a Christian priest cannot stop being a political figure. His patriotic fervour is similar to that of a soldier; and whenever an opportunity arises, he turns into a soldier. The priest, who chants the Bible’s Ten Commandments, always carries a pistol along.

Therefore, not just the clump of missionaries, even political circles had become averse to Johnson. Johnson often discussed political issues, keeping aside religious topics; and, though rarely, he wrote against the Company Sarkar’s policies. Everyone began taking a note of what Johnson did; and, his mission’s superiors questioned him about his activities.

The news that Johnson had begun wearing Hindu outfit resulted in an uproar among missionaries all over. Many publications discussed the choices of the priest. Everyone felt
that Christianity and Christian state were slighted because a priest had been wearing clothes that signified heathen civilisation. In addition, a renowned and high-ranking administrator heard about Johnson’s friendship with Rudradatta, a man shrouded in many myths. Because of Johnson’s friendship with Rudradatta, a recognised dangerous figure, they saw seeds of treason in Johnson’s actions.

Henry, a young man who had recently left military to become a priest, was assigned the task to keep a watch over Johnson. Henry was an acclaimed soldier and a passionate Christian. He believed that not just entire Hindustan, but all the infidels of the world must be forced to convert to Christianity—this, he said, would create an ideal world. Even the military should be put to use to achieve the goal, he argued. Many Europeans held such convictions and often used their official positions to promote the purpose. The Company Sarkar’s administrators, who had unexpectedly gained control of a large area with a large population, did not permit such activities. Hence, anxious campaigners, who felt harassed by the Company’s unthinking employees, made strange attempts to convert people and increase the number of Christians in Hind. This activity was strictly kept apart from the Company Sarkar’s administration.

Henry had visited Johnson’s mission in past. Although he was younger than Johnson, because of his knowledge of religion and educational qualifications, Henry’s position was high and respected. When he received orders to keep an eye on Johnson and his mission, he left for Vihar on a horse. He had taken a few horsemen along. When Henry and his assistants were some distance away from Vihar, they met Mangal on the way.

Henry asked his men to stop Mangal, who looked tired and agitated.

‘Hey, you there, stop!’ one man cried.

‘You all go ahead and don’t you ask me to stop,’ Mangal carelessly said without bothering to look at them.

‘Stop, young man, otherwise you will be dead!’ said the leader of the attendants.

‘You puppet, you want to help your sahib, don’t you? I will see who will roll in the mud!’ threatened Mangal, drawing a rapier. All the attendants were Hindi.

Henry was angry at whatever was happening there, but he was wise enough to avoid a brawl at an unknown place. He came forward and asked,

‘Pandeyji, we are not soldiers. We want to know directions to a village.’

In those days, all Hindi soldiers were known as ‘Pandey’.

‘Don’t ask for directions any more. You better cross the ocean and go back where you belong.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘The Company’s days are numbered.’
Speaking the last words, Mangal kicked his horse and the beast galloped away in the forest. Henry decided to spend the night at the spot and instructed his attendants to dismount.

10
Irresistible Attraction

Restrain you passions, dear!
Futile is the attraction of hearts, dear!
Nhanalal

To Henry, the village of Vihar appeared as the center of turbulence. He found all the incidents and circumstances to be mysterious: Rudradatta, an enigmatic figure; Johnson, a Christian priest biased towards Hind; and a Pandey, who ignored and insulted a British right outside the village. He did not fear going to Vihar, though. The British believe that a true British never fears anything or anyone; besides, they do not fear conquered people even in a dream. Yet, Henry decided to camp in the forest because he wanted to move ahead cautiously, after making proper inquires. He sent one Hindi attendant ahead to observe the state of affairs in Vihar.

The attendant returned with information about the search team coming over to Vihar looking for a fugitive soldier of the Company; the harsh treatment meted out to Rudradatta by the search team; and, Johnson’s intervention to save Rudradatta. He also had information of a southern man named Tatya Tope, who had stayed at Rudradatta’s ashram with few other men.

Henry was not an ordinary priest; he was not just a representative of the British power, proud of his white skin; he was also a spy for the Company. Many priests played this role, in addition to spreading the message of Jesus. He knew that Tatyasahib was a Peshwa’s representative. Shrimant Nanasahib’s palace in Brahmavart was, for many years, a holiday destination for British officers and their wives. The Company’s white officers, tired after making favours to the Hindis in the role of administrators, and their memsahibs, who too felt drained in spite of the retinue of attendants at disposal, often became Nanasahib’s guests.

After enjoying the generous hospitality of Nanasahib, whom British historians painted as a demon, the Company’s administrators claimed to be Nanasahib’s friends. Henry had also enjoyed Nanasahib’s hospitality more than once. Although Nanasahib had bitterly complained about the suspended annuity during Henry’s stay there, Henry had not imagined that Nana, a kind soul, could conspire against the Company. Tatyasahib’s itinerary from Pune to Satara appeared innocent, since it was normal for all the Maharashtris living in the northern regions to visit these places. Yet, when Henry learnt that Tatyasahib had stayed at Rudradatta’s ashram, the fact sounded alarming to him. He believed all this activity as the hatching of a deep conspiracy. He was eager to unravel the threads of this entanglement.

Henry, a strong-headed British, instructed his assistants to be stationed at a few places in the village. Helped by the dark night, he stood behind the ashram, keeping a watch on the ashram and the mission. He saw Johnson and his daughter returning from the ashram late in the evening. Apart from this, not a single significant event took place till late night. By midnight, Henry became sleepy. Since he had not noticed any movement till then, Henry went to the Shankar’s shrine and sat behind it. He dozed off sitting there. After a while, an informant came running,
‘Two men came out of the ashram. They might come to the riverbank.’

‘Who could they be?’

‘I am not sure, but possibly they are Rudradatta and Tatyasahib.’

In the meanwhile, Henry saw two figures some distance away. He sent away his assistant and rushed to hide behind the shrine. Surprisingly, the two men came to the shrine and sat there. It was not possible for Henry to move away. Like a seasoned burglar, he sat still for a long time and heard the conversation between Rudradatta and Tatyasahib. His chest swelled to imagine that he would get the credit for exposing a conspiracy against the Company. In his flight of fancy, he became careless for a moment. His leg touched something lying around, rattling it in the quiet night. A dog also accidentally barked right then.

Like a snake, Henry slithered out of the place immediately. Tatyasahib saw a shadow vanishing away. It would also help in proving that he was a priest—if, at all, a ruckus took place. When he reached close to the mission’s premises, he came upon a shocking sight. Even in darkness, he could see that beneath a tree, a brown man and a white girl were talking.

Tryambak had mentioned to Lucy that he had been planning to go with Tatyasahib to the court of the Peshwas. He told Lucy when she was leaving the ashram that evening,

‘Lakshmi, you will have to look for another teacher for your Sanskrit lessons.’

‘Why? I won’t be able to adjust to someone else’s method of teaching.’

‘I am going to Brahmavart, at Shrimant’s court.’

‘Why are you going there? What will you do at the court?’

‘That I don’t know. It must be a teaching job, I think.’

‘Has guruji given you permission to go away?’

‘I am sure he would not refuse it.’

‘Do you wish to go there?’

‘I don’t like to be away from guruji, but I would love to see the world.’

‘My study of Sanskrit will be left incomplete.’

‘You white people are so meticulous that you can do anything.’

‘When are you going to leave?’

‘Tomorrow. I think tomorrow morning.’

‘So soon?’ Lucy was surprised.
‘Yes.’
‘Do me a favour, please!’
‘Tell me, what is it?’
‘Come over to see me tonight.’

Tryambak was not comfortable with the idea of meeting a young woman at night. He said,

‘I will come over to see priest sahib, memsahib and you.’
‘I want you to come to see me.’
‘How is it possible?’
‘Make it possible. For my sake!’
‘Tell me right away if you have some work with me.’
‘No. This is something I can speak only if we are in dark.’

Tryambak was astounded to hear this. Before he said a word more, Lucy laughed and said,

‘I shall wait for you beneath the mango tree.’
‘When?’
‘I am prepared to wait there throughout the night, till you come over.’

‘No, no, don’t wait there at night. I shall come over to see you before I go to the river to take a bath at dawn.’

‘Okay. Come over a little earlier than your usual time.’

Saying these last words, Lucy flew across the path and disappeared. After she left, Tryambak evoked an image of the girl: her quick gait; her fair, lovely body; her bright, blue eyes; her lively, expressive face. While observing Lucy’s image, he compared her with Kalyani. Who was more beautiful, Krushna or Subhadra? A student of Sanskrit literature, Tryambak remembered the two beautiful women, celebrated throughout Hind. Then, he forcefully focused on daily chores.

‘How can a brahmachari think about women?’ he muttered. He picked up a bludgeon like club and exercised using it for a while. Then, he opened a volume of Yogasutra and began reading. Gautam came to him after a while and said,

‘Tryambak, these old clubs are full of lead...’ Tryambak stopped exercising and said,

‘They are guruji’s clubs.’
‘I know. I thought I was the only one to exercise with these heavy clubs, but I saw you using them. You have practiced well, it seems.’

‘It is all due to guruji’s blessings and your guidance.’

‘My guidance? How?’

‘You are guruji’s pet student. You learnt from him, and then you taught me. But all this is meaningless now.’

‘Why?’

‘These skills will not be used anywhere.’

‘You did use them on me!’

‘I am sorry for that scuffle, Gautam! How I hit you!’

‘It is okay. Even I am like you. I often become aggressive.’

‘I want to learn something from you.’

‘What is it?’

‘I want to learn how to wrestle with someone who has a weapon.’

‘Fine. I will teach this to you. Come over, you won’t take long to learn it.’

Gautam and Tryambak, Rudradatta’s two favourite students, went to the small gymnasium behind the ashram. Both the students required physical exercise to calm their mind. Gautam began instructing how to attack and defeat a rival who is holding a weapon, even while not possessing a weapon. The art of wrestling, developed in Aryavart, is surprisingly elaborate.

Rudradatta noticed that his students had been practising certain skills in the gymnasium. While teaching wrestling skills to Tryambak, he had deliberately ignored the lessons of fighting an armed man. Rudradatta had begun to dislike weapons altogether.

After exerting himself in the gymnasium for a long time, Tryambak fell fast asleep; but as soon as he woke up, he felt that Lucy’s blue eyes were drawing him out of the bed. He sat up on his mat. How could Lucy be in the ashram? He remembered the promise he had given to meet her beneath the tree. He picked up a dhoti and a stole and went out of the ashram.

Tryambak was a little early for his daily bath. The village was quiet, and the villagers still asleep. Tryambak began walking in the direction of the mission. On the way, he felt he should avoid meeting Lucy and go to the river instead. But eventually, assuming that Lucy must be waiting for him, he turned towards the mission.
11
How was Tryambak Wounded?

The lotus is innocent, and so is the lily,
The bee too is innocent, but a little crazy!
One who belongs to you loves someone else,
A lover seekssomeone else’s lover.
Kalapi

When Tryambak reached the mission, he saw Lucy beneath the enormous banyan tree, standing in the mission compound, holding the fence. If one wants to see, even darkness cannot blind one’s eyes.

‘Tryambak!’ whispered Lucy. Tryambak walked towards her and stood outside the compound. The fence stood between both of them. Lucy’s blue eyes seemed a little dark because they reflected the dark sky above. Looking into Lucy’s eyes, Tryambak, a student of Darshanshastra, thought about the five elements that made the human body. Has God made Lucy’s eyes out of the sky? Tryambak wondered.

‘I have been waiting since long,’ said Lucy. Tryambak did not respond to it. ‘I thought you would not come over,’ Lucy kept speaking, not able to control herself.

‘I had given you my word. I had told you I would come over to see you,’ Tryambak replied. Lucy was thrilled to hear the deep, resonant, masculine voice. She loved Tryambak’s voice, but its high volume perturbed her.

‘Speak softly.’

‘Why?’

‘Someone might hear us talking.’

‘What is wrong in it? We are not doing anything wrong by meeting each other.’

‘I want to tell you something that no one should hear. Only the two of us should hear our words.’

‘Go ahead and tell me what you have to say.’

‘Are you leaving tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sure?’

‘Almost.’

Lucy sighed. She took her hands off the fence, and then held its wire once again.

‘Tryambak, I will miss you.’
'I will also remember you often.'

'Is it? Will you, too, miss me?'

'Yes, you are my guru. You taught me English!'

'Is that all? You will remember me as a teacher…'

'No, of course not. You were my student as well!'

'Is that all?'

'Is it not enough? Neither all teachers and nor all students are worth remembering.'

Lucy became quiet. She looked around to see if anyone had come over there. Through the leaves, she could see stars blinking. What else can those fireballs do? They are destined to keep their eyes open and observe the life on earth. Besides, on that night they had found two bright, passionate stars on earth. The stars gazed at them, but the couple did not become conscious of the stars. No one fears the eternal elements around us. Lucy became motionless.

'Will you write a letter to guruji?' Lucy asked.

'Yes definitely. The messengers keep travelling here and there.'

'Will you mention me in those letters?'

'I will write a separate letter to you.'

Lucy sensed that Tryambak was gradually warming up to the situation and becoming tender towards her.

'What will you write in the letter?'

'I don’t know what I will write, but I will certainly write to you something.'

'In English?'

'No, I cannot write a letter in English. I will write it in Sanskrit.'

'Write simple Sanskrit.'

'Okay.'

'Let’s say…How will you begin the letter?'

Tryambak chuckled a little. He hesitated to answer this probing question.

'Why are you asking the question at this hour?'

'Why are you Brahmins so insensitive?'
‘You people have established this fact—all Brahmins are selfish and insensitive.’

‘That is how you all are.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘If you weren’t insensitive, you would have understood many things.’

‘Hmmm…’

‘And, whether you are selfish or not that I will decide later.’

‘Lakshmi, is your heart at the right place?’ Tryambak wanted to ask this question since he met her. At last he did.

‘No!’ answered Lucy, laughing.

The British are not more serious or taciturn than Europeans. In fact, compared to Hindis, they are more expressive. They can clearly articulate their feelings.

‘Take care of your heart then!’ said Tryambak.

‘I am taking good care of my heart.’

‘That is good. What else?’

‘You didn’t ask me how I take care of my heart.’

‘Lakshmi, by our customs, a young boy and girl cannot meet like this if they are not married to each other.’

‘But I don’t belong to your society, and I don’t observe such customs.’

‘But I have to.’

Looking around carefully, Lucy said,

‘Tryambak, you should have been borne a Christian!’


‘How come a thinking individual like you get angry at the idea? We all follow the religion of our parents. How else is a religion important?’

‘We can die for the sake of our religion.’

‘And we can kill for it. Our religion assumes either the role of a sword or that of a shield. What more is there to religion?’

‘But we cannot laugh off a religion.’
‘Whose religion cannot be laughed off?’

‘Any religion...’ said Tryambak, stammering a little.

‘Why can’t we ignore our religions?’

‘All religions contain truth in their message.’

‘Yes, but we hide that truth.’

‘We both alone should not debate about religions. We are not capable of doing it.’

‘I often curse Christianity though I am a Christian. All religions put more and more restrictions on us, as if we already don’t have enough of them.’

‘A religion helps us in achieving salvation. That is what Aryadharma does.’

‘Will you help me become a follower of Aryadharma?’

‘No, how can I? It is a matter of one’s culture, education and training.’

‘You can definitely give me all that is required to a follower of Aryadharma.’

‘What do you want to achieve by doing all this?’

‘I want to marry you.’

Tryambak was left speechless, as if hit by a thunderbolt. He had a vague idea of Lucy’s love for him; yet, he was not prepared for this loud and clear declaration of her feelings. Moreover, Hindis don’t talk about love with such frankness; Tryambak was astonished to see these shameless European manners.

Yet, Tryambak did not get as angry as he should have been at this impudence, because he could feel a childlike naiveté in Lucy’s words. He could not hurt her.

‘Lakshmi, do you know what you are speaking? I am a brown man!’

‘A white-skinned person finds brown people attractive.’

‘I am a Brahmin, and you are a Christian.’

‘I told you just now that either you become a Christian or make me a Brahmin.’

‘Is it possible?’

‘That is why I told you that religions cripple us. Why can’t a Christian woman marry a Brahmin man?’
Tryambak knew that Christian missionaries converted those who were not caste Hindus; he wondered if this was a method to convert Brahmins. As Tryambak was thinking through this, he heard Lucy’s voice,

‘Don’t give attention to Kalyani.’

‘What? Why do you say so?’

‘I just mean that Kalyani loves Gautam.’

‘I don’t need you to tell this to me.’

‘Crazy! I said this because I needed to make things clear for my sake.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I want you. If you become a Christian, we shall make everyone Christian. And if I become a Brahmin, we shall make the whole world wear the sacred thread.’

‘It is time to take a bath. I want to go to the river now.’

‘Have you heard what I said?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you understood it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you respond to it?’

‘No.’

‘Will you write something for me in your letters?’

‘Yes, I will, probably.’

‘What will you write?’

‘Oh Lakshmi! Women should be modest!’

‘But I find that men are modest here.’

Tryambak began laughing. Lucy stared at Tryambak, a serious student of the ashram, whom she had rarely seen laughing. Her eyes too smiled. Looking at those eyes, Tryambak vaguely realised why a pretty woman could unsettle even a tapasvi like Shankar Bhagawan.

‘I should leave now,’ declared Tryambak.

‘Okay.’
‘I will come over to see you tomorrow.’

‘So many thanks!’

Tryambak stood there.

‘What happened? Why don’t you make a move?’ asked Lucy.

‘Have I offended you in any way?’

‘No. Why do you ask this?’

‘I don’t know how to please someone, so…’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Tryambak turned to walk away. Right then, Lucy said,

‘Wait, Tryambak!’

‘What happened?’ Tryambak turned and took a step towards Lucy.

‘I also want to ask you the same question.’

‘What is it?’

‘Have I hurt you in any way?’

‘No…’

‘You sound hesitant. Tell me if I have.’

‘No, I am not hurt, but I found it strange that…’

‘Good, if you found something strange. I wanted to startle you a little.’

‘Okay, I am leaving now.’

‘Shake hands with me.’

Tryambak did a namaskar.

‘No, not like that. Shake hands with me,’ Lucy insisted.

Tryambak was dumbfounded. He could not extend his hand. He did not like this western custom of shaking hands even with a woman.

‘My touch won’t make you impure,’ said Lucy.

Tryambak could not move his hand.
‘This is the last wish I make,’ said Lucy in a choked voice, her hand still waiting for Tryambak’s touch.

Tryambak reluctantly gave his hand. Lucy grabbed it and squeezed it gently. Her quivering hand felt soft. Tryambak looked into her deep, wide eyes. Sweet happiness often scares us. After a wave of fear, he experienced joy. Why did Lucy’s touch make him happy?

Even when he held Lucy’s hand, his face twitched. A sharp pain tore his back. What was it?

Lucy screamed. She touched Tryambak’s back with the other hand, leaning over the fence. The fence bent with her weight. Tryambak felt that something was dribbling down his back. He looked back to see what was wrong.

A white man’s burning eyes stared at him. The man raised his hand to give another blow with a bloody dagger. His terrible white face wanted a bloodbath.

‘You, a brown man! Bloody demon!’ rasped the angry white man. Pushing off Lucy’s hand from his shoulder, Tryambak stood in front of the white man. Tryambak did not say a word, but his face was determined to fight with death.

The white man leapt on Tryambak. Lucy screamed again, and at that moment, Tryambak, making a few quick movements, yanked off the dagger from the white man’s hands. He thought for a while what to do with the dagger, and then flung it off in the bushes. The white man pounced upon Tryambak, pushing him on the fence. The scuffle continued for some time. Eventually, Tryambak lifted the white man and tossed him on the ground. He kept kicking and hitting that unknown man who had attempted to murder him.

Hearing the screams, Lucy’s father and a servant scrambled through darkness. They saw the white man gasping for breath under Tryambak’s relentless, ferocious blows.

‘Who is this? Catch him!’ cried Johnson. Tryambak stopped when he heard the priest’s voice. The white man immediately rushed towards Johnson,

‘Save me!’

‘Henry, how come you are here? Go inside the mission and hide there.’

The white man was Henry. Henry, a visitor in Vihar to keep an eye on Johnson and pass on important information to the government, had rushed to the mission to avoid being caught by Rudradatta and Tatyasahib; when he reached the mission, he saw a white girl romancing with a barbaric brown man. Henry, a representative of the Company’s administration, one who thought it was his duty to protect the Company’s reputation, could not tolerate the sight. He observed the couple’s behaviour for a while and heard the conversation; and, when he saw the couple holding hands, he felt that it was an insult of all white women.

Henry had come over to the mission in past, and then too he had paid special attention to Lucy. He could not forget the beautiful girl. How could he bear the white beauty wasting her bounty on an alien brown man? All this while, he was hiding behind a tree. When he could not control his outrage, he dashed to the spot and attacked Tryambak. If Lucy had not prevented him, the blow could have been fatal.
Strong and muscular Henry was prepared to discharge another blow, but Tryambak, who had learnt some tricks from Gautam in the evening, snatched his weapon away. Eventually, Henry received violent beating from Tryambak, and he had to hide in the mission to save his life. After this fight, Tryambak felt overwhelming fatigue; he could not even stand straight; he plopped on the ground. Lucy immediately held his hand.

‘Who attacked him?’ asked Johnson.

Lucy pointed out to Henry.

‘Inform Rudradatta about the incident,’ saying this, Johnson sent a servant to the ashram. Rudradatta was not in the ashram but Gautam, Kalyani and a number of students hastened to the scene.

Tryambak could have fainted after all the bleeding and exertion, but when he saw Lucy, Kalyani, Gautam and others, he could recollect himself. Kalyani said some words of encouragement. Lucy’s mother came over with water, cotton and bandages.

‘Who stabbed him?’ asked Gautam, shivering with rage.

Johnson pacified him first and then quietly told what had happened.

Tryambak, a junior student of the ashram, was like a younger brother to Gautam. Gautam’s inherent qualities of a Kshatriya revolted within. He wanted to drag Henry out of the mission, but Rudradatta came over and appeased him.

The attacker was saved that day.

12
Mysterious Schemes

Send someone who bears a mystery,
I will learn all the secrets over and again.
Nhanalal

The attacker was indeed saved that day, but Tryambak could not leave Vihar with Tatyasahib. Tatyasahib eagerly wanted to take along Rudradatta’s one student, especially a treasured student of the ashram. He had made the choice of Tryambak and Gautam. Tryambak was prepared to join him, but he was bedridden, nursing his wound. It was not advisable to let him leave the ashram in that condition. His injury required Lucy and Kalyani’s good care. Before leaving, Tatyasahib came to see Tryambak, who was obviously disheartened in his helpless state.

Tatyasahib, a political leader, wanted to contact a number of princely states and narrate the Company’s atrocities to them, and thus prepare them to challenge the rulers. He had expected help from Rudradatta in this campaign. Shrimant Nanasahib had specially requested Tatya to bring Rudradatta to Brahmvart, but Rudradatta declined the invitation. Besides, Rudradatta did not even sympathise with Tatyasahib’s cause.

In old age, people become slow. This ponderous nature either takes the path of kindness to all or turns to religious pursuits. The old man who finds the world absurd, life temporary and
relations inconsistent, is left incapable of a task in which he has to actively participate. Tatyasahib concluded that Rudradatta’s disappointments of early life, his kind nature and his religious bent due to old age had made him unfit to work for Hindustan’s independence.

Yet, if a youthful student, trained by the brilliant guru, could join the struggle, it would be like taking help of a young Rudradatta. This was what Tatyasahib had thought while proposing to take Tryambak along with him. Tatyasahib had faith in his idea. He was impressed by Tryambak’s physical strength and sincere demeanour. Eventually, Tryambak agreed to come over, and Rudradatta allowed him to move out of the ashram.

Unfortunately, Tryambak could not join Tatyasahib because of his injury. He was left bedridden. If Tatyasahib now asked Gautam to come along, as an alternative to Tryambak, it would look improper. Tatyasahib went to see Tryambak. Although Tatyasahib appeared cheerful, his face gave away his disappointment.

‘Tryambak, I am leaving today. I am sure your disciplined routine and your age, both will help the wounds to heal soon.’

‘As soon as I can move around, I will come over to Brahmavart.’

Rudradatta and Tatyasahib looked at each other, as if sending a message. After a while, Tatyasahib said,

‘If Rudradatta sends you to us, we shall be grateful to him. Otherwise, we have lost his support.’

‘Don’t speak such words, Raosahib. I am no one to make a favour to you, and such a favour made by a mortal won’t save anyone,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Rishis have blessed many to save them and cursed many to ruin them. You are a rishi, and you have not blessed us. In that case, haven’t we lost your support?’

‘May God bless all of us—so I pray every day.’

‘Punditji, you will have to come over to Brahmavart to bless us. If you won’t, all of Brahmavart will come over here.’

‘You are unnecessarily putting me on a pedestal.’

‘You may be considered insignificant if one ignores your youth. I think I should leave now. Kalyani, my sister, please accept this little gift from me!’

‘No, I cannot accept gifts from a guest,’ said Kalyani.

‘Why can’t you?’

‘All that I did in hospitality will go waste.’

‘Come on now, sister...Punditji, please tell this girl to accept the gift.’

‘Kalyani, we should do something to make Raosahib happy before he leaves the ashram.’
'But these are gold coins. What do I do with them?' Kalyani frowned. Money made her uncomfortable, as if she was receiving alms from someone.

‘Okay, I shall not give you gold coins. Take this bracelet. I had given one such bracelet to Chhabili. This one is for you. Punditji, I wish she wears this at the time of her wedding.’

Holding a diamond-studded bracelet, Tatyasahib looked at Kalyani. Strangely, his hand dropped. He stared at Kalyani for a few moments and then sighed.

Rudradatta, who was smiling till then, became serious. He too looked at Kalyani as if deciphering her destiny and then said quickly,

‘Take the bracelet, Kalyani!’

Tatyasahib put the bracelet in Kalyani’s hands. Her face glowed and then turned red, as would any girl’s face when her wedding is mentioned. A girl cannot hide her blushing face. At best, she can lower her eyes. Fixing her gaze to the ground, Kalyani accepted the bracelet and hid it in her sari’s palav. No one noticed a slanted smile that bloomed on her face.

Everyone around noticed Tatyasahib’s grim face, however. He walked out of the ashram to his palanquin. He did a namaskar to Rudradatta and said,

‘Punditji, I am leaving now.’

‘God will take your good care, Raosahib! Come back to the ashram again.’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘Why?’

He looked around and softly said,

‘Remember me when you see a lotus around. The lotus is our symbol.’

‘I am merely an observer of life now.’

‘One who is actually a creator of things often assumes the role of an observer for a while.’

Rudradatta smiled for the sake of formality. How mysterious did Tatyasahib sound!

Tatyasahib, a devout Brahmin, had planned and executed a number of confidential dialogues with cabals all over Hindustan. He had now focused on Russia, Iran, China, Turkey and Egypt to explore the possibility of stalling the Company’s surging influence.

All in vain, Rudradatta’s heart echoed. He continued with the dialogue in his mind, I am not surprised by what Tatya is doing. What else can he do, anyway? And, if he believes that he has been following my path, is he wrong in believing so? It was my mistake to believe in those royal ruins of princely states when I was young.
Hindustan failed to recognise the evils of monarchy and its hereditary system of transferring power. In nurturing that power, in pampering it, and in honouring it, we lost our freedom, and yet neither the soldiers nor the administrators understood the consequences and significance of the change that was taking place. The court’s officials paid all their attention to the monarch; and, and the monarch paid all his attention to those who were devoted to him; they all, subsequently, forgot about the lay subjects of the kingdom. People ought to honour an astute man; but why do intelligent people commit the blunder of honouring the sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of that capable and shrewd man who had lived many years ago? The descendants of monarchs had proved now and again that genius was not hereditary, yet everyone ignored that obvious truth. What would have happened if Shivaji did not have a son like Shambhaji? The saffron banner would have retained its status. How life could be different if Bajirao did not have a son like Raghoba? Raghoba, like an inauspicious comet, brought the decline of the peshwas. Why did we let that tradition of dynastic rule continue in Hind for so long?

But didn’t Rudradatta make the same mistake? Didn’t he also waste his energy and intelligence for the princely states, planning wonderful strategies to bring them back to power?

‘That is why I failed! Now, someone else is making attempts to bring those ghosts back to life! Peshwas and Mughals...The hollow words, the grand delusions!’ Rudradatta’s train of thought halted. He raised his eyes and then looked down again, repeating the gesture to ward off his thoughts. Then he concluded, ‘This must be the last yajna for the sake of those monarchs! When its fire will consume the Mughals and the Peshwas, new political principles will emerge, and people will begin thinking beyond peshwas, monarchs and Mughals.’

Thinking about Hindustan’s past and future, standing outside his ashram, Rudradatta kept gazing at Tatyasaib’s palanquin. Then, he saw Lucy walking down to the ashram. Not that he was unaware of Lucy’s infatuation for Tryambak, but he did not think Tryambak, a disciplined young man, required to be restrained in any way. Besides, even in this situation, he could see a volcano simmering in Hindustan’s society.

If two people belonging to different religions live in proximity for long, it inevitably leads to mutual attraction.

Rudradatta could not ignore the reality that most Muslims living in Aryavart had Hindu blood in them.

‘Come, sister!’

‘How is Tryambak?’

‘He is better. He has shown improvement in just one day. Good you were there to save him,’ said Rudradatta.

Lucy felt good to hear this. If she had not prevented Henry’s dagger, he could have given more and deeper wounds to Tryambak. But, the scuffle would not have taken place at all if Tryambak and Lucy had not been there, holding hands in dark. If someone had raised this issue, it would have offended Lucy.

‘Will that gentleman from south visit us again?’ asked Lucy.
‘Who, Tatyasahib?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you ask this?’

‘When he met me on the way, he glared at me. I was scared by his look. He looked like a murderer.’

Rudradatta laughed. He had noticed that Tatyasahib disliked white people. He knew how the Whites looked down on the brown people. Not surprisingly, this condescending attitude provoked the Hindis to attack the white population.

The Hindu caste system is decadent, but the discrimination because of skin colour, as observed among the non-Hindus, is also equally strong. Quite likely, one day, the dark skinned lot and the fairer race will come to blows and kill each other! Rudradatta controlled his racing mind and told Lucy,

‘Don’t judge that man’s intentions from his looks. Come in!’

Tryambak was lying on a mat. He looked at Lucy.

‘Has that guest of yours gone?’ Gautam brusquely asked.

‘Who, Henry?’

‘Who else? The white man who attacked Tryambak!’

‘He will leave tomorrow.’

‘Let Lakshmi have a seat, then ask your questions,’ chided Kalyani.

‘That is okay. I have come here to talk about him.’

‘What do you want to talk now?’

‘I have been thinking about the incident since yesterday. How about filing a complaint against Henry?’

‘A complaint? We go and narrate how that white man hit Tryambak, and how we all stood there doing nothing! If Tryambak has the right spirit, he will go to the white man and pay off,’ Gautam replied.

‘But it would be legally wrong!’ said Lucy, who knew how spirited Tryambak was because she had seen him knocking Henry down, even when Henry was armed and Tryambak was not. Lucy was raised in a law-abiding society. She found Gautam’s ideas uncivilised. Lucy knew that the Company had established courts and thus paved a way to receive justice.

‘What are you all discussing? Don’t talk anything that would upset Tryambak,’ said Rudradatta, entering into the room.
‘Lakshmi says we should complain about whatever has happened,’ said Kalyani.

‘Why? Complaint against whom?’

‘Against that white priest because he attacked Tryambak with a weapon.’

Rudradatta began laughing. He was not surprised that Lucy had high opinions about the white administration. True, the Company Sarkar had laid down clear laws, set up courts and appointed judges to serve justice. He knew that Company’s administrators made efforts to convince people about the courts’ good work; and, he knew that people also admired the way the white judges’ unbiased, judicious thinking distributed justice. Rudradatta had also noted that the status attached to castes and communities had begun affecting courts. A white judge could easily remain unbiased while judging a dispute between a brown Hindu and a brown Muslim; and in a feud between two white litigants, a Hindu or a Muslim judge undoubtedly behaved in a just manner. When, however, the contention was between a brown person and a white, a white judge did try to see through the blinding band of justice tied over his eyes. If this was not so, why did the law dictate that the white men’s dispute should be judged by a white judge? Two reasons can explain this: arrogance of being superior, or a bias in favour of the white skin. When either of this was true, how impartially could the judiciary function?

‘No, sister, we don’t want entanglement of courts and lawyers. For conducting the suit, they insist on a white judge and white juries.’

Lucy did not reply, but Rudradatta’s statement ruffled her. Rudradatta was right. British historians painted the Muslim rulers as tyrants and religious fundamentalists. If a historian described the British rule in similar terms, would it be wrong? Look at the racially biased judiciary!

Lucy’s eyes wandered over Tryambak’s brown body. ‘If I submit my body to this brown man, can I repent the crimes committed by the white skin?’ thought Lucy. Kalyani was observing Lucy. Waking up from her absorption, Lucy saw Kalyani’s eyes fixed upon her. Their eyes exchanged a message. Then, the conversation drifted to routine matters.

Tryambak recovered fast. His strong will power helped him to become fit again; moreover, Kalyani and Lucy’s care was excellent. After a Christian’s touch, a Brahmin should take a bath—this custom was shrugged off over a period because of Lucy’s regular visits to the ashram for Tryambak’s treatment. Teaching in Rudradatta’s ashram went on well. Under Gautam’s guidance, the Brahmin students also spent a long time in physical exercises and holding parades.

Young and energetic Gautam could not sit idle; the son of a Brahmin family, he immediately began brushing up his lessons under Rudradatta; and, in his leisure, he taught a variety of drills for fitness to students and villagers. Yet, he could not forget that he had committed a crime against the Company Sarkar. Once, someone brought the news that Gautam had received a pardon, but so long as the news was not officially received by him, he could not leave the village.

Students were swept off their feet in the excitement brought in by Gautam’s presence. He narrated the incidents of Sikh war, Burmese war and Russian invasion, stimulating young
students’ imagination. Besides, he often spoke about Company Sarkar’s disdain for Hindi soldiers, and thus enraged the fire of dissatisfaction in young minds.

Once, early in the morning, Rudradatta and Gautam left the ashram to go to the river for a bath. As soon as they stepped out of the ashram, a sadhu wearing bizarre clothes flew down to them from a corner. They stood there, looking at the stranger. The sadhu stood in front of them, put a chapatti in Gautam’s hand.

‘What is this?’ asked Gautam.

‘Give away a chapatti each to eight people, and tell them that the Company is pulling out of Hind. Be alert, all of you!’ spluttering these words, the sadhu disappeared in the dark.

‘A mad man!’ laughed Gautam.

‘No, he is not a mad man.’

‘Who else will give a chapatti to strangers? And he wants me to do the same to eight other people! The Company is going away—what does he mean by it?’

‘It means a rebellion is in the air. This is how a mutiny is unfolded traditionally over a vast territory.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You are supposed to distribute chapattis to eight people and with it pass on the message that the Company is pulling out of Hind. Each of these eight people will pass it on to the other set of eight.’

‘What will be the outcome of just spreading the word?’

‘It will bring forth awakening—an awakening of people.’

‘What should I do next?’

‘That you decide.’

‘What would you have done if the sadhu had passed on the message and the chapatti to you?’

‘I don’t know if I would have passed on the message. Perhaps, I would have.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I can feel a raging fire all around.’

‘What will be the result of this fire?’

‘The old political order will go up in smoke.’

‘Guruji, I cannot understand you.’
‘The belief that a king or a royal family can save Hindustan will be put to rest forever.’

‘Then who will save Hind?’

‘The people who live in Hind.’

‘And what should we do when the fire will envelope all of us?’

‘Offer ourselves to be consumed by the fire, if the situation demands so.’

‘But you are against wars.’

‘Yes, personally, I am against wars.’

‘Your views are crucial for me and many other people.’

‘Who knows! How significant is a petty individual?’

‘Anyone who considers you insignificant is committing a blunder.’

‘Look, my son, human beings still think that a war will solve most of their problems. They have not risen above the idea. To learn that wars are ineffectual, we shall have to experience manslaughter of a large scale. Lakhs of people will have to die before we realise the truth.’

‘Should I participate in that butchery?’

‘I cannot answer this question. Go where your destiny takes you. I don’t want anyone to be a coward under the influence of my ideas against wars.’

‘But how do you know that all this will result in a war?’

‘Gautam, I have set fire to the political climate many a time in past. Don’t ask me any more questions. नहीं प्रजातांभि तव प्रतित्तमि! (I don’t know about your activities!)’

Both took a bath in the river without discussing the subject further.

13

Shivaratri

_In dark, we open the doors of our hearts, my friend!_

Nhanalal

Shankar Bhagawan’s shrine appeared insignificant to travellers unfamiliar to the lie of the land; the small shrine, however, became important on Shivaratri. Known as Bhairavanath shrine, the temple attracted thousands of pilgrims from surrounding and distant villages; people flocked the holy place in the hope of Bhairavanath’s darshan for a few moments, turning Vihar into a place full of sadhus, vendors, acrobats and all kinds of visitors, some even with women and children. This jamboree was known as Bhairavanath fair. Innumerable
people walked down to Vihar; and, many others came on horses, by carts or in palanquins—they came there using the resources available to them to participate in the midnight puja. After receiving God’s blessings and taking a dip in the river, they left the next day.

The shrine could not be expanded further by building enclosure walls, dharmashalas or caravanserais. According to a legend popular among people, any change in the temple and its surroundings invited Bhairavanath’s anger. Ignoring this widely held belief, if people attempted to renovate the temple or build a structure close by, in just one day, Bhairavanath’s curse made them drop the plans. Hence, at the time of the fair, the pilgrims took a shelter in makeshift bamboo pandals; even trees and large rocks on the bank of the river served the devout pilgrims’ purpose for those two days.

The houses of the hamlet, too, overflowed with devotees. Some comfort-loving visitors, who could not tolerate the cold night or the bright day for two days in the open, often stayed in local people’s houses. With someone’s reference or by passing on a little gift, they sought lodging ata villager’s place. Rudradatta’s ashram was the only place that accommodated everyone, without reference or gifts. Those who had no other means easily found a roof there.

‘Look at the crowds this time around. So many have come over!’ said Kalyani.

‘That is how we feel every year,’ responded Tryambak. His wound had healed, but he was not allowed to go out of the ashram.

‘No, I am not talking about the pilgrims. I saw some young men moving around in groups. They looked like soldiers.’

‘But soldiers can also go on a pilgrimage. Law doesn’t stop them from visiting temples,’ Gautam laughed.

‘They should have such a law. How can those butchers seek God’s blessings?’

‘Kalyani doesn’t like soldiers,’ Gautam winked.

‘Yes, I don’t like them. Why would I like soldiers?’

‘She likes rishis, who sit in a padmasan, holding their breath.’

‘Right! By the way, Gautam, I saw a fakir in the village today. He was roaming around holding a lotus!’

‘Whom did you see?’

‘A fakir with a lotus. He came over yesterday. His lotus looks lovely!’ said Kalyani.

‘Fakirs have also started visiting the fair. How strange!’ said Tryambak. Gautam, Tryambak and Kalyani had spent their childhood together. They enjoyed chatting with one another.

‘Why fakirs, even Christian priests visit the village these days,’ said Gautam.

Tryambak looked at Gautam. Kalyani said,
'Our priest is leaving tomorrow.'

'Who is this “our” priest?’ Gautam asked, his voice filled with disgust.

'Why, our Yuvanasen.'

'Who told you about this?' asked Tryambak.

'Lakshmi.'

They all exchanged looks. By then, everyone knew about Lakshmi’s obsession for Tryambak. They also knew that both had met in early morning darkness, and also about how a priest had attacked Tryambak when he saw Lucy alone with a brown man. They knew about the incident, though no one had inquired about it, nor had anyone asked Tryambak why he had gone to see Lucy at an odd hour. When a couple of students carped about Tryambak’s character, Rudradatta immediately called them and reproached them,

'Look, my students never indulge in sinful liaisons!’ This put a stop to colourful ideas students hatched up about Tryambak. Everyone, however, believed that Lucy passionately loved Tryambak and wished him well. Lucy did not object to it, and she had narrated her feelings to Kalyani, her friend, although Kalyani had not inquired about it.

'I will miss Lakshmi,’ said Kalyani. Kalyani and Lucy had become bosom friends. Kalyani feared that someone might catch her learning English from Lucy.

'Why are they leaving the village?’ asked Gautam.

'Because of Tryambak,’ said Kalyani.

'Because of me?’ Tryambak was surprised to learn this.

'In a way, yes.’

'How is that? Explain it to me.’

'That priest who had attacked you went back and complained to the superiors about the mission. He said some nasty things like Yuvanasen intended to become a Hindu, and Lakshmi was to be married off to a local young man. As a result, the orders came to transfer Yuvanasen somewhere else.’

'Where are they going?’

'In a forest of Malwa.’

'When are they leaving?’

'In a day or two, after the fair is over.’

'Gautam, I want to visit the fair. Is it fine to go out today?’ Tryambak requested Gautam for a permission.
‘Yes, it is. Guruji also said so in the morning. Go ahead!’

‘Good then, let me go right away. I feel stifled lying around all the time,’ Tryambak jumped up from the mat.

‘Don’t go alone. I shall come over with you,’ said Gautam.

Both picked up their stoles and prepared to leave. A rudrakshmala hung around their neck. Their long hair covered their ears, flowing up to their shoulders. Putting on their sabots, both the young men began walking down the veranda. Kalyani kept gazing at them: they looked like devout rishis who had just completed their tapasya in the forest; in them burnt the flame of a Brahmins’ virtues. Kalyani loved both the young men. She could sacrifice her life for either of them. Tryambak would not have recovered so soon if Kalyani had not taken his care. Yet, her love for each was different. She loved Tryambak as a sister would love her brother, and she loved Gautam as a...

Kalyani shifted her gaze and looked at the calf tied to a nail in the courtyard.

Gautam and Tryambak went to Guruji and touched his feet,

‘I wish to go for darshan at the shrine, if you allow me so,’ requested Tryambak.

‘Yes, my son, I had told Gautam that he should take you to the shrine today.’

Both the young men began walking to the gate of the ashram. Rudradatta addressed Tryambak,

‘Don’t exert yourself. You will get tired.’

‘If he is tired, I shall lift him back to the ashram,’ Gautam laughed.

‘Yes, it would be a good scene for onlookers! By the way, Gautam, don’t stay at the fair for long. A number of your caste members have come over this time around,’ Rudradatta joked.

‘My caste members? Do I belong to a different caste?’ Gautam asked.

‘Yes, you are a soldier. Many have come over this year.’

‘How do you know? I have not seen a single one in a uniform as yet.’

‘No, they are in civil clothes. Probably, when they were on their way to another camp, someone told them about Bhairavanath fair and so, they came over.’

‘I don’t fear an arrest now.’

‘I shall be happy if you bring Tryambak back safely,’ saying this, Rudradatta picked up a book lying in front of him. Tryambak and Gautam stepped out of the ashram. Since he had come out after a long time, Tryambak was excited to see the crowds. The room of a sick person and a prison house resemble in many ways; a patient and a prisoner both experience equal
relief when they get out in the world, rediscovering the life around. Tryambak was delighted to visit the fair.

Both the friends walked slowly, making their way through the surging crowds in Vihar’s alleyways. Men, women and children—all moved about enthusiastically. Clad in colourful clothes, they expressed their joy in various ways. Children, dragging their parents along, skipped to shops selling toys and sweets and enjoyed rides on joy wheels. Young men, strutting about in their best clothes, tried hard to attract girls’ attention. Women danced a ras-garaba, singing songs in the praise of Shankar Bhagawan; and, they often slipped into singing folk ditties about Radha-Krishna. Some devotees gathered beneath trees and sang bhangas; and some half-hearted souls, after spending a few minutes in a bhajan group, ran to nearby shops. Those who were onhorseback, took the opportunity of displaying their riding and racing talents in the village maidan. The pickpockets and other petty thieves slunk in the throngs, and pushing people around, quickly and skillfully moved their hands on their clothes. Overall, Vihar had turned into a jubilant and vibrant place for the day.

The joys of a funfair filled every corner of the hamlet, but Gautam and Tryambak were drawn to a particular crowd. Some young men were playing the game of cudgeling. They joined in the crowd of spectators.

‘This is a new sport they have brought in this year,’ said Tryambak.

Horseracing was common during the fare; the bhils performed their skills of archery every year; but cudgeling with wooden maces, a manly game routinely played by Rudradatta’s students, was never performed at the festival.

The large crowd gawked at the three to four pairs engaged in a battle of skill, strength and courage. The combatants used a mace and a shield to play, quickly moving their hands and feet. The sharp noise of slamming maces and loud noise of thumping shields, along with occasional grunts from the players, absorbed the spectators.

An old man defeated about six young men in duels. His broad chest and long mane made him look like a majestic lion. The victorious veteran challenged in his deep but slow voice,

‘Is there anyone here ready to duel with me? If my mace drops on the ground, I shall accept defeat.’

Tryambak and Gautam were eager to take the gauntlet. Moreover, after watching the old man’s superb show, Gautam had concluded that he was a member of the military because cudgeling was a favourite pastime of Indian soldiers.

‘We should have brought our maces and shields!’ said Tryambak.

‘Don’t even think of this right now. Your wounds are sore.’

A pilgrim overheard the young men’s conversation. Slapping Tryambak’s back, he said,

‘Go ahead, give it a shot’

‘Who is this? Let me see!’ roared the old man.
I don’t have my mace and shield, otherwise…’ said Gautam.

‘Is it? Come over, I shall ask someone to give them to you.’

Immediately, Gautam had a choice of a number of maces and shields. Gautam hopped on to the centre. The crowd became quiet. Gautam picked up comfortable tools and then went ahead to touch his rival’s feet. Pleased by Gautam’s polite gesture, he asked,

‘Who is your teacher, my son?’

‘I am your student for now.’

‘No, tell me your guru’s name.’

‘If I fight well, I shall definitely announce his name and give him credit for what he has taught me.’

‘Is that so? Get ready for the duel,’ the old man’s loud cry would have put even a young man to shame. Before beginning the combat, both the fighters touched the other’s shield with mace and shook hands. With such salutes, brave men begin their fight. Even if it is a duel, the combatants become friends at the beginning of the fight, and the friendship continues after the fight.

Once the ritual was over, maces and shields swung around at great speed. The leaping feet, lightning fast hands, bouncing bodies and sharp sounds of maces brought to life the artful game.

Gautam soon realised that the old lion’s technique was extraordinary and his agile body was a match to Gautam’s. In a few moments, the crowd swelled with people watching the game with bated breaths. The rhythmic noise of mace and shield filled the quiet, tensed scene. Occasionally, the old man’s voice punctuated the battle with ‘Well done!’ or ‘Superb!’ or ‘How wonderful!’

All of a sudden, a macetossed high in the air. People around screamed and Gautam hesitantly looked at his hand. His mace was well in his hand.

The old man plunged forward and gave a tight embrace to Gautam, saying, ‘Well done, my son! After years, I have met someone who would snatch away my mace!’

The old man talked affectionately, as if not regretting his loss to Gautam; in fact, he was overwhelmed with admiration for the young man’s skill.

‘You are a respectable father figure. I am young and you are old! I believe you have won the duel!’ said Gautam, feeling uncomfortable with the appreciation.

‘No, no, you are an excellent sportsman. Who is your guru?’

‘Pundit Rudradatta.’

‘Now I know! Where is your guru?’
Gautam looked at Tryambak. He was in the front row of the crowd and next to him, with one hand on Tryambak’s shoulder, stood the tall figure of Rudradatta. Gautam did a namaskar to Rudradatta and pointed him out to the old combatant.

‘There he is!’

The old man gazed at Rudradatta. Rudradatta was not present when the duel began. The old man took long strides to Rudradatta and exclaimed,

‘Rudradatta?

‘Yes, Mahavir!’ replied Rudradatta.

‘We have met after thirty years, haven’t we?’

‘What are you doing in the army?’

‘I have joined the military because I lost my principality. Don’t ask me any more questions.’

Both the old men stood there for a while, looking at each other.

14
A Fakir

We ascetics look dreadful and seek a shelter in crematoriums
Kalapi

Even after a long time, Gautam and Tryambak did not return from the fair. Rudradatta had clearly instructed Tryambak not to exert himself. Passions of youth push a person out of the limits wisdom has defined; a young man does not bother about consequences of his actions. Hence, after waiting for a while, Rudradatta left the ashram to look for the friends who had gone out to see the fair.

People always made way for Rudradatta because of his personality. Even among hundreds of people, he always met someone who knew him. It did not take him long to reach Gautam and Tryambak. He saw Tryambak enjoying Gautam’s duel with the old man, Mahavir. Rudradatta also stood there for long as if enjoying the combat. Standing there with his hand on Tryambak’s shoulder, Rudradatta was happy to see that his student was given a few lessons of the art by someone of an older generation.

Rudradatta’s student won the combat, but the young man had realised that the victory was hard earned.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Rudradatta to Gautam.

‘Tryambak wanted to go cudgelling with the old man. I told him not to duel because of his health. And then, I tried a hand…’ said Gautam apologetically.

‘That is fine. Tryambak, both of you visit the temple for a darshan and then head straight to the ashram.’
The shrine was not far from there, but a crowd on the way obstructed their passage. Rudradatta looked at the melee and thought,

‘People are unusually excited at the fair this year.’

In those days, as people did not possess a distinct consciousness about the overall political and social conditions, a fair became a medium to initiate an organised movement. The instigators secretly worked during such fairs, forming bands of like-minded people to plot future actions. Rudradatta knew about these activities. Observing the crowds at the fair, he had concluded that a thick plot was being designed there that year. Besides, since entire Hindustan possessed a uniform culture, many festivals were celebrated on the same days everywhere. On such occasions, all over, people left their homes and gathered at nearby temples. The messengers of the movement, stationed at the centres of pilgrimage, skilfully communicated with people, widening their network. Rudradatta had sensed the vibrations of Bhairavanath fair; and, he knew that the undercurrents of the fair would easily affect young men like Gautam and Tryambak. Hence, when his students did not return within expected hours, Rudradatta left the ashram, searching for them.

While making his way to the shrine, he noticed an unusual fakir. Like Hindu sadhus, Muslim fakirs also put on strange clothes, and they often sit in awkward postures. The fakir, who had a string of beads around his neck, genuflected in a corner, as if performing a namaz. His long hair and beard added weight to his appearance. He had a club that had the shape of a snake and two skulls, like those kept by the aghori sadhus. Two skulls, lying side by side, had a flower each in them—in one was a rose, and in another a lotus. The flowers, standing on their stem, touched each other. The arrangement immediately attracted the pedestrians’ eyes.

Close to the old fakir, sat two young fakirs on a sack. Although they did not seek alms, Rudradatta could see a few coins lying in front of them. The young fakirs disdainfully observed the passers-by.

A pilgrim, walking down the road, threw a coin to them and said, ‘Sai, this is for you!’

‘Ai…You, stop there!’ shouted one of the young fakirs threateningly. The pilgrim stopped and asked,

‘What is it?’

‘Say, “Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai!”’ the fakir ordered.

‘Who denies it? How else would you receive alms on a Hindu festival?’

The fakirs looked at people with contempt. He said again,

‘Say, “Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai!”’

‘Okay, brother, I will do what you say. Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai!’

The younger fakir looked at the older one. The latter nodded his head, without looking up. Now, the younger one ordered again,
‘This is not enough. Now say “Hindus and Muslims are one and the same!”’

The pilgrim was perplexed by this persistence. He did not mind declaring Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, but by saying that Hindus and Muslims were not different, he felt inferior. He did not respond and began walking away.

The fakir immediately picked up the coin the pilgrim had given and threw it back at him, saying,

‘If you don’t think we are one and the same, we don’t want your alms!’

This happened with other people as well. The fakir returned the coins to anyone who did not comply to his wish. Few Muslims were in the fair, and one of them witnessed this incident. He came over there and gave a coin to the fakir. Even he was asked to repeat those statements; and, he too could not speak according to the second command.

‘Mihyasahib, we don’t want your alms,’ the fakir said.

‘But I am a Muslim and so are you. Then, why don’t you accept the money? We all Muslims are equal, aren’t we?’

‘Yes, but he who does not think Hindus to be equal is not a Muslim. And he who does not believe himself to be equal and same with Muslims is not a Hindu.’

People around lingered on to see the development of this argument. More people came over there as they saw a crowd there. A man came forward and gave a coin to the fakir. He responded to the first order,

‘Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai!’

The older fakir nodded and the second command came,

‘Say “Hindus and Muslims are one and the same”!’

The man repeated the statement. The older fakir raised his eyes and smiled at the man. He told the young fakir,

‘Receive his alms. His money is pure.’

The young fakir took the coin. After touching the rose and lotus with the coin, he put it on the mat.

Rudradatta saw the flowers. The flowers evoked strange emotions in him.

‘The sign of lotus,’ he murmured.

Then he thought,

‘Tatyasahib’s plan is already executed, it seems!’

Tryambak asked,
'Sai, why have you kept these two flowers together?'

The fakir smiled and said,

‘My son, it is a good question. This stands for Hindus,’ said he, pointing at the lotus.

‘The lotus and the rose live together in my hut.’

‘Where is your hut, sai?’ asked the man whose money was declared to be pure by the fakirs.

‘Over there,’ came the vague reply.

The man vanished in the crowd. Tryambak wanted to move away from the farce. As soon as Tryambak took a few steps, the fakir began singing a ghazal:

Listen to the voice rising from Kaba, Punditji, O Allah!
Listen to the voice rising from Kashi, O Maula!

Here is a kazi, and there a Brahmin,
Can you tell the difference?
Can you tell me where resides Bhagawan,
And where dwells Allah?
Have you seen their places?

What exists in the living and the lifeless is Ram,
Who says that Ram is not in the hearts of the white men?

Allah is kind to all,
Aren’t unbelievers also kind?

Don’t go to a pundit; don’t seek a Kazi’s help,
Hold hands and declare with love,
‘Bhagawan-Allah, Allah-Bhagawan!’

The fakirs sang the moving ghazal in a chorus. The pain in their voice deeply affected the crowd. When we evaluate the contribution of Muslims in Aryavart, we must not ignore the ghazal. The genre is capable of expressing a range of emotions, and because of that reason, even Hindu poets compose ghazals. The fakirs sang in an appealing tune and well-trained voices. When such trained voices sing in chorus, the song achieves an unforgettable emotional power. The street singers that roamed around our cities and villages in past were not just entertainers. They were tools through which cultural ideas transmitted from one region to another.

These wandering artists were naturally used for many political activities. They spread messages about meetings of political leaders and plots of mutinies. If someone wants to find out how, in those days of limited means of transport and communication, religious, social or political upheavals came in effect, the investigator will have to study the street life of the era.
Gautam, who was behind Tryambak and Rudradatta till then, peeked out at the fakirs. He said,

‘Oh, Saiyad, what are you doing here?’

The old fakir looked up. The onlookers often felt that the fakir gazing down was searching for something.

The fakir looked up because he recognised Gautam’s voice. He quickly got up and went to Gautam. Embracing him affectionately, he told Gautam,

‘You have been granted a pardon. Come back to the platoon soon!’

15

A Confidential Discussion

Bhairavanath temple’s bells rang all of a sudden, waking up the pitch-dark night, stirring up a dark hillock across the river. A shadow on the hill moved. A conch whistled; a gong banged; the chiming of the tower-clock and the noises of people blended in. The man on the hill guessed that Bhairavanath’s arati had begun.

Arati gives an emotional charge to devotees, immersing them in bhakti. For almost half an hour, the arati reverberated in Vihar. The shadow on the hill sat still. In dim starlight, a small raft floated across the river, with five people sitting close to one another on that chilly winter night. The man on the hill moved around for a few moments and then again stood still. The raft came towards the hillock and stopped on the bank of the river. One by one, the five men jumped on to the riverbank. Of these, four stood on the bank, but one of them began climbing the hillock. He reached the top and clapped once. Then, one more man began climbing up the hillock. In the meanwhile, the shadow on the hill tiptoed to the first climber. A sword glittered in his hand. He asked,

‘Who is this?’

‘Lotus.’

‘What is in your hand?’

‘A rose.’

‘Let me see.’

The man handed over his rose. ‘Go ahead!’ said the guard. The man began walking further and tiptoed down to the other side of the hill. The raft brought about fifteen men to the riverbank. They all clambered up the hill and slunk down to the other side.

The guard on the hills kept an eye on the raft going back to the other side. Someone put a hand on his shoulder. Surprised, he looked back, drawing his sword at the same time.

‘Who is this?’ asked he, with the sword ready in his hand.
‘Lotus,’ the new comer said. The guard asked,

‘What do you have?’

‘A rose.’

‘Let me see.’

The man gave a rose to the guard. The guard looked at the man. A stole masked his face. The eyes did not give away the newcomer’s identity. The man began walking further. The guard said,

‘Wait!’

‘Why?’

‘I have not given you a go-ahead yet.’

‘Why haven’t you?’

‘I have my doubts about...’

‘About what?’

‘I have doubts about who you are.’

‘Why do you doubt me?’

‘Because you did not come by the raft.’

‘Right. But one can use other means to come over here.’

The guard hesitated for a while. The man was right: Although most attendees were going to come there by the raft, it was not clearly stated that those who come over by other modes of transport, would not be allowed to join in.

‘How did you come here?’ asked the perplexed guard.

‘You need not know it. You may stop me, if I have used wrong signs. I won’t argue with you if the sign is wrong. I will just go away.’

‘No, your signs are right. But I wonder how you reached till here. I did not see you climbing the hill.’

‘It is not my fault. If I have given you correct codes, you should let me go. Think over it. So long as the signs are correct, I will go ahead to the valleyeven if you stop me.’

‘Is it? Do you know I have a sword in my hand?’

‘You haveno right to threaten me with a weapon.’
The guard could sense a familiar voice now. The newcomer had the right codes and he knew the venue of the meeting. Few people knew the venue. Most attendees were eventually guided by the next guard on the way ahead. All the attendees were first tested by the raft’s rower; next, by the guard on the hillock; and at last, by the second guard who made sure that the right person would go in. The guard on the hillock thought that the latecomer must be an insider of the band, and hence did not come by the raft with others. At last, he said,

‘Okay. Go ahead!’

Before leaving, the man said,

‘You will not regret your decision of letting me in.’

Climbing down the hillock, a trail led to the ravine. The narrow and winding path dipped abruptly and ended in a wide, open tract of land. People said that Pindharis and other rebels lived there before the British raj. Hence, except the plucky few, not many ventured to visit the valley, believed to be a dreadful place by all.

Deeper in the valley, raging flames of a bonfire sent out sparks that competed with the stars. Mannmade fire and natural fire are different: the fire lit by man does shower sparks, but after flying off for a few feet, the sparks die down; whereas stars, the sparks created by nature, linger on, watching the rhythm of earthly life.

About twenty men, in saffron kurtas and saffron turbans sat around the bonfire. They all had masked their faces with black clothes. Some sat there in half Padmasan, some on bent knees, and some with their hands wrapped around folded legs.

They could see the shining eyes of other participants, but could not identify who the other persons were.

All heard a deep voice, a little muffled because of the mask around the speaker’s mouth. The gathered men became attentive.

‘It is in summer.’

‘Good. Many white officers go to hill-stations in the season.’

‘Day and date?’

‘We should go by the Company Sarkar’s calendar. It is better that way.’

‘Yes we have decided everything according to their almanac. The Company put down roots in 1757 at Plassey. PunditLakshman Shastri, a scholar of astrology, living in Kashi, has often said that the Company will last one hundred years. Since the Company completes its century this June, we should begin on the last day of the month.’

They became quiet for a while. Their minds were fast thinking about how they would be able to stir up people against Company Sarkar. One arm of the conspirators was already awakening the people of Malwa and Gujarat. Now, in this meeting, the members of the branch were given further details of the plot. The meeting had one man more than the number of people invited. They counted repeatedly, but they found one person more than
the expected number. The proceedings were delayed because they could not decide who
this stranger was. At last, they hesitantly began,

‘Not one white man should remain alive on that day in Hindustan’s villages, towns or
jungles.’

‘It is impossible,’ stated a somber voice.

‘Don’t you speak that word! You may leave if you think it is impossible,’ an arrogant voice
responded.

‘Sin is impossible,’ came a firm reply.

‘To become independent is not a sin. If you say so, you become a sinner and should soon go
away from here.’

‘The war for independence should be a moral fight, one that is based on values. You want to
kill all the white people—it is a sin.’

‘Do you want me to point out the sins that the Whites have committed on our land?’

‘Not required. Their sins do not justify our sins.’

‘If you want to discuss sins and merits, better go to Rudradatta’s ashram. We don’t want
you.’

‘I once again say that it is impossible to kill all the white people. We can’t even touch
women, children and elderly members living here. If we kill even one child, even one woman
or even one aged dependent—it will be our moral defeat.’

‘Stop it!’ the man shouted and then clapped twice. From one corner, two armed men bolted
in.

‘Catch that man. He is a traitor.’

‘Mind your language! I am not unfaithful to anyone or anything!’ saying this, the man firmly
pushed aside the armed soldiers who had stormed over to him.

‘Come on, seize him now. Take off his mask. Let me see who he is!’

‘Everyone should take off their masks. Then, we shall know who the real traitor is.’

‘Yes, that is a good idea. All of you, take off your masks!’

In a few moments, the faces became bare. Everyone looked at one figure sitting in the far
corner. With the mask off, the person’s long black hair fell on the back. A delicate face
appeared to all. It was a woman’s pretty face. Looking at a woman there, everyone around
was surprised.

‘Kalyani?’ a man asked, surprised.
‘Yes, Gautam!’ replied Kalyani.

‘How did you reach here?’

‘The way you came over here. But let us ask the two people over there to remove their masks,’ Kalyani pointed at two men who passionately discussed something at one end.

‘Yes, we all took off our masks because of their arguments! And, yet they have not shown their faces to us!’

The two men untied their masks. One of them cried,

‘Rudradatta?’

‘Yes, Mahavir!’

All eyes were fixed at the two old, renowned warriors. Mahavir, surprised at the development, looked like a lion; Rudradatta, quietly observing people around, looked like an elephant. Rudradatta addressed Gautam,

‘Where is Tryambak?’

‘I came over at his place,’ answered Kalyani in her sweet, clear voice.

All became quiet for a while. Someone threw a log of wood in the fire. The flames rose once again.

‘Rudradatta!’ said Mahavir.

‘Yes, what is it?’

‘Someone else at your place would have been chopped down to pieces by now. Good that you revealed yourself in time!’

‘Mahavir, I don’t fear a sword, you know it. Don’t bother who I am if you want to…’

‘You should not have come here.’

‘Why?’

‘We had not called you for the meeting. This place is not for you. Brahavart and Delhi have already invited you. You should be at the Divan-e-Khas. We are their clockwork toys. Why do you waste yourself with trifles?’

‘You are right, I have come over uninvited. I won’t stay here for long. You are an old friend. Gautam and Tryambak are like my sons. When you all have gathered here, I thought of coming down for a chat.’

‘What do you want to tell us?’

‘If you wage a war, don’t ignore your moral duty.’
'Yes, but what if war is our duty?'

'Then go on war, but eliminate violence from that war.'

'Have you heard of a war that does not commit violence?'

'If no one has heard of such wars, people will learn about it for the first time.'

'How do we go about this war?'

'If individual selfishness and the desire for revenge disappear, the war will not require weapons.'

'I don’t understand you. You are a brave man, and you are a scholar as well. But I only know to wield weapons.'

'I don’t want to be a hurdle in your meeting, but as your well-wisher, I must repeat what I have already told you. Even in war, don’t ignore your moral duty.'

Saying this, Rudradatta immediately got up and began walking away. Before anyone could appreciate or criticise his advice, he vanished in the dark.

16
An Unpleasant Suggestion

It was decided that some efficient and trustworthy leaders should be informed about the uprising. The occasion of Bhairavanath fair was chosen for that discussion to take place. The instructions clearly stated that Gautam and Tryambak both should be pulled into the plan. Mahavir, an old but fierce feudal lord who had lost his estate, and Saiyad Aziz, a pure-hearted and brilliant soldier, were assigned the task of holding the meeting.

Before becoming a soldier, Mahavir owned a large tract of land. Mahavir believed himself to be a free landholder. Delhi’s badshah is the sole legitimate ruler of Hind, he often said. Once, he refused to let the Company’s platoon pass through his estate. Even before that incident, he had offended the Company on several occasions. The list of these crimes was long and varied, which the Company’s administrator exaggerated at will. When he did not permit the passage of the Company’s platoon, who, according to him, was composed of the soldiers working for an alien ruler, the Company’s administrator recorded this as a serious crime. Assuming it their right, the soldiers trespassed through Mahavir’s private estate. Mahavir, a self-respecting landlord, confronted them with his small army. Mahavir and his army bravely fought with the Company’s troops, but eventually lost the battle; the Company seized his estate and searched for the offender so that they could send him behind bars. Although Mahavir was fatally wounded, he did not die. His loyal attendants took him away from the estate. As he was left alive without wealth, Mahavir had only one option: that of putting on an ochre robe and become an ascetic. He went into hiding for years, and met Rudradatta during those years of wandering around. Both travelled on different paths of life; the purpose behind their wanderings was also different. One wanted to overthrow the Company; the other sought freedom. One hated the white skin; the other hated the arrogance of the white people. One was agonised by the scheming British administrators;
the other was distressed by greedy, selfish, mean and coward Hindis. One believed that the end of foreign rule would save Hind; the other saw deliverance in the patriotic awakening of Hindis. Both, however, wanted to get rid of the foreign rule’s stifling yoke; yet, both were motivated by different emotions to see the end. One was full of vengeance and venom; the other introspected broadly about past and repented many actions of people and rulers. One possessed an aggressive but unstable force; the other possessed slowly mounting strength.

Who was right? Who was good? Both were right. Who was better in his method that time was to decide. Mahavir and Rudradatta remained together for some time, but later their paths changed. Mahavir discovered how the Whites ruled over Hind: a few white men depended on brown soldiers to rule over people. The soldiers did not realise that they were instrumental in making the British powerful. The idol-worshipping Hindis remained so even as soldiers. The clever, witty and authoritative white man moved around his finger or wielded his magic wand—and the charmed soldiers adored him as if he was a God and offered their lives in his service! Theses soldiers, not the white men, were behind the Company’s victories. If the soldiers could understand this truth, their idol would break into pieces and the worshipping too, would end. Mahavir wanted to expose the nature of the Company and its white officers, so that the Hindi soldier could break the spell that had captivated him; and then, the same soldier would bring freedom to Hindustan. This was his grand idea. To achieve this goal, he joined the army as an ordinary recruit, forgetting his life of fanciful luxuries. Since Mahavir was a brave and skillful soldier, he easily reached the post of a military officer.

Before joining the army, he had explained his plan to Rudradatta, but latter had begun thinking beyond peshwas and Mughals. He saw nothing but roots of destruction in the state that transferred power within a family. He found that the system of hereditary transfer of power was against people’s progress. He wanted to create a republican system that would function as in England, France or America. Very few people had the vision to imagine such a state in India. The dream was still vague, but it was becoming clearer by the day. It was too early to realise the idea. As a result, Rudradatta had become a visionary, instead of a campaigner, striving to realise a people’s republic in Hind.

Rudradatta had discarded the plan Mahavir had discussed before entering into the army.

‘The question is not whether Hindi soldiers have strength or not. Even when the Company began its campaigns here, our soldiers had strength. Yet, we lost the entire Hind,’ said Rudradatta to Mahavir.

‘Then what is the question. Explain it to me,’ said Mahavir.

‘The Whites have the ability to manage and apply that strength to win battles. We lack in that ability. This, exactly, makes them better fighters. An army commander’s role is different from that of a soldier.’

‘You always point out our faults. Can’t you see anything else but our shortcomings? I believe a good soldier can also become a good leader of an army.’

‘Every good commander has to be a good soldier, but in Hind, every soldier wants to lead the army.’
‘I can’t believe that just one incident in Asia could push you to become a pessimist. That Bengali friend of yours has made you a coward. Don’t you know that Bengali babus were the first to accept British authority?’

Raja Rammohun, a Bengali, who had represented the Nawab of Oudh and the Emperor of Delhi, so that they receive justice from the Company, was famous among leaders of the day. Rudradatta had enjoyed Rammohun’s company for a short time—a fact that was known among all who knew the guru and took interest in his activities.

Rudradatta laughed and did not respond to what Mahavir said. After this discussion, Rudradatta and Mahavir did not meet each other again.

Rudradatta, a sharp observer of surroundings, could immediately notice that an unusual contest was going on in a corner of Bhairavanath fair. He saw Mahavir and Gautam’s friend Saiyad Aziz at the fair; he remembered Tatyasahib’s preparations and Mangal Pandey’s visit to the village.

‘It seems Mahavir has lit fire to the minds of all soldiers,’ he thought. What would this fire do to people? Will it burn all of them to ashes, or even in that ashes, a spark would remain alive? Agnihoatra, an important ritual sacrifice, required pure land and pure wood for its ceremonies. Would these sacrificial proceedings possess such pure qualities? Rudradatta felt it was his duty to warn all the plotters about it. Gautam and Tryambak, both were attracted to the fire. Mahavir was a friend. Many others were also friendly with Rudradatta; some had even studied under him. They all wished Rudradatta well and even sought his leadership in the revolt. They all did not have Rudradatta’s vision because they had a different sensibility. Showing great restraint, Rudradatta refused to lead them, but he could not resist a word of caution to them.

‘I will definitely attend the meeting in the ravine,’ decided Rudradatta.

Rudradatta had witnessed wars and attended many assemblies of political stalwarts. He did not find it difficult to make way up to the meeting place. He candidly said what he had to and then moved out, leaving all stunned by his statements. He did not have a desire to participate further in their discussion or planning. Vihar’s every single stone was familiar to Rudradatta; hence, he could easily find out a secret way to reach the valley.

After he left, all the attendees became quiet. Once their amazement died down, the discussion continued till dawn. No one, however, could understand why a young woman had come over to participate in the meeting. According to the organisers of the meeting, no one had an idea that a woman would come over, though it was not unusual for a bold and bright woman to join the uprising in many parts of Hindustan. When the gathering dispersed, Kalyani left quickly without waiting for anyone to accompany her.

Kalyani did not take the trail leading to the river. Instead of climbing up the hillock, she turned to right from its base. It seemed a shadow moved a little ahead of her. She appeared to walk around that shadow. Someone was keeping a watch over her movements. Did she know about it? She walked about fifteen steps and then looked back. The person following her came forward, stopped for a while and called out softly,

‘Kalyani!’
Kalyani stood still. She recognised Gautam’s voice. He came close to her and excitedly asked,

‘Kalyani! How come you are here?’

‘Why are you surprised? I know what is happening around.’

‘I wanted to tell you about all this, but I did not have courage to come to you.’

‘And, I wanted to see if I can make up my mind to participate in the meeting.’

‘But, why did you…’

‘You should ask me if I have come over to see someone.’

Gautam could see Kalyani’s sparkling eyes.

‘Yes, you are right. For whom have you come over here?’

‘For you.’

‘For me?’

‘Are you surprised to hear this?’

Gautam did not say a word. Kalyani took a step and moved closer to Gautam. Gautam also walked towards her. They were now hardly three feet away from each other.

‘How did you reach here?’ asked Gautam.

‘It was not difficult.’

‘Wasn’t it?’

‘I came over in place of Tryambak.’

‘That I could guess because I did not see Tryambak. But why did he allow you to attend the meeting at this hour?’

‘Tryambak would do anything I ask him to do.’

‘But he pushed you to danger!’

‘He didn’t push me to anything.’

‘What else is this?’

‘He did not leave me alone even for a moment.’

‘What about the meeting? Was he there?’

‘No.’
‘Then?’

‘He knew that you would be in the meeting. And he had also come to the meeting, but he had hidden himself somewhere.’

‘How is it possible?’

‘Tryambak is familiar with every nook of this valley. He knows the place very well.’

‘Is he still around?’

‘Yes, look, he is walking ahead of us.’

Gautam looked far ahead. In the dim light of dawn, he could see a shadowy figure walking away.

‘Call him here!’ said Gautam.

‘Why don’t you call him?’

‘Tryambak!’ called out Gautam, cupping palms around his mouth.

The shadow stopped and turned towards Gautam and Kalyani.

‘Kalyani!’ said Gautam in a trembling voice.

‘What?’

‘You and Tryambak...’

‘You want to know why I came with Tryambak,’ Kalyani completed Gautam’s question, but Gautam did not say anything more.

‘Why don’t you ask the question?’ asked Kalyani.

‘That was not my question.’

‘Then what do you want to know?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Don’t deceive yourself, and don’t make a sad face.’

‘I want to ask you to do something. Once you do what I say, I will not be able to cheat you.’

‘Go ahead and ask me what you want to.’

‘I want to tell you that...’ Gautam did not complete the sentence once again.

‘Please speak now. I would bind you with an oath if you don’t speak the truth now.’
‘No, don’t do anything of that sort. It is not something important.’

‘If it is not important, why don’t you spell out what is in your mind?’

‘No, I don’t have anything to say.’

‘I will stand here till you speak out. I won’t budge from here. You may go away if you want to.’

‘You are stubborn, Kalyani! I will tell you later what is in my mind.’

‘Tell me now, otherwise I will make you swear by my life to share your feelings.’

‘See, Kalyani…that…’

‘Okay,’ saying this Kalyani, began walking away. She did not even look at Gautam.

‘It was just a crazy thought, you know…’ Gautam made an effort to laugh, trying to cajole Kalyani.

Kalyani did not respond to him. Gautam kept walking next to her. His face serious, he softly said,

‘It was just that…Wouldn’t it be nice if you get married to Tryambak?’

‘What? What did you say?’ cried Kalyani. Her eyes had fire in them. Her fair face turned red. The eastern sky also turned reddish, as if reflecting Kalyani lovely face.

17
A Heart’s Conflicts

Looking at Kalyani, Gautam’s heart trembled. He had never feared anything till then; yet, his heart began beating fast. Kalyani’s face and her question overwhelmed Gautam. He felt that the lightning of the sky stood in front to strike him. Tryambak had, by then, reached close to them. His presence supported Gautam a little.

‘What happened?’ asked Tryambak, looking at the strange expressions on their faces.

‘Gautam insults me,’ said Kalyani, her face red, her lips trembling.

Tryambak looked at both, confused about what he could tell them to resolve the situation. He knew how passionately Kalyani loved Gautam. Tryambak cared for Kalyani. And, Kalyani knew about Tryambak’s feelings for her. That day, Kalyani could attend a secret meeting with Tryambak’s help, wearing his clothes. Tryambak still looked at Gautam and Kalyani, wondering what to say.

‘Tryambak, you go ahead,’ Kalyani said to her perplexed friend.

‘But Gautam insults you, doesn’t he?’
‘I need to settle scores for all that.’

‘All alone?’

‘I don’t fear anything. Whatever little fear I had has evaporated now.’

‘I am sure you are not scared of Gautam.’

‘No. You go ahead now.’

Tryambak left them alone. He turned a couple of times to see what his two friends did there, but noticed that both kept standing at the same place. Tryambak saw that people flocked to the river to take bath before having their first meal after Shivaratri’s fast. Tryambak plunged into the water, and, in a few moments, he mingled into the crowd on the other side of the river. The first rays of the sun struck the hillock; Gautam and Kalyani also woke up from their thoughts.

‘You have not understood what I mean,’ said Gautam.

‘I don’t want to understand it either!’ Kalyani exclaimed.

‘I am a soldier. You know it, don’t you?’

‘I believe that you are a good, civilised soldier.’

‘That is fine, but I am sure you know how a soldier’s life ends.’

‘No, I have no idea of it.’

‘It ends in death.’

‘Oh, I thought you would come up with something I did not know. Everyone’s life ends in death, not just that of a soldier.’

Gautam became quiet. Kalyani also looked relaxed now. After a while, gathering courage, Gautam suggested,

‘Let us sit somewhere and talk for a while.’

‘Yes, I want the matter to end,’ said Kalyani. She sat down, leaning against a boulder, lying on the hillock. Gautam sat across her. For a long while, Gautam kept looking down. When he looked up, he realised that all this while Kalyani had kept staring at him.

‘Kalyani, could you understand the plan?’ asked Gautam.

‘Yes.’

‘I will be going away soon to fight with the Company Sarkar.’

‘Go away, I will not stop you.’
‘This is the last game. Mangal Pandey had declared, “Either the Company goes out of Hind, or I die.” Today, every soldier has sworn to overthrow the Company. Along with Mangal, I had also pledged to defeat the Company.’

‘Go ahead and devote yourself to your mission, so that your words come true soon.’

‘I am drawn to my duty, but I am also emotionally attached to you. That is why I told you that...’

‘Speak out, whatever you want to...’

‘I am scared of you.’

‘You need not fear me. If you can easily talk about your death, how can you fear me?’

‘I don’t fear my death, but I fear your anger.’

‘Don’t play with words now. You are more heartless than these stones.’

Gautam looked around for a while and then looked into Kalyani’s eyes once again. She could not bear that gaze; she felt that a strange ancient power, full of desire, looked in her calm eyes to satiate itself. She had often observed Gautam; and, she had often noticed Gautam observing her; his eyes looked different all the time. Yet, that day she felt as if Gautam’s soul was entering into her. She was deeply shaken by the experience. Her body shuddered.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Gautam.

‘What else happens in the middle of winter?’

‘Let us go to ashram. The sun is already up.’

‘I want to tell you something.’

‘What is it?’

‘You told me that I should get married to Tryambak.’

Gautam looked down. He looked tormented, as if suffering from an acute pain. Kalyani asked,

‘Why did you give me that advice?’

‘I am older than you. I can advise you, can’t I?’

‘Do you think it was a right advice?’

‘It was. Is there anyone else who deserves you more?’

‘I know Tryambak better than you do. He is bright and pure like the sun. But I want to marry someone else. In that case...’
'Kalyani, don’t be stubborn. I am sure you will obey guruji’s words.'

‘He has already given me freedom to do what I want to do with my life.’

Gautam looked down once again. He knew that Kalyani loved him. She had chosen to remain single in spite of crossing the marriageable age. She had allowed Gautam to join the army against her wish. Gautam knew what Kalyani wanted. Who else would know Kalyani’s heart?

‘But I will go back to the battleground once again.’

‘Have I stopped you from going away? Go ahead. I had not stopped you earlier also.’

‘I want to leave for war after you happily settle down in your life. I want to see that day.’

‘Enough of it! Don’t pretend to be wise and mature.’

‘You may tell me whatever you want to. I shall patiently listen to you.’

‘No, don’t just listen to me. You will have to do as I say.’

‘Kalyani, the war will begin in about two months.’

‘I know.’

‘I will be at the forefront of the battles.’

‘That is where brave men belong.’

‘And that is also the place where death hovers over you all the while. A man who is already at death’s doorstep should not get married.’

‘You are alive today.’

‘I am accidentally alive. You should better get married to Tryambak…’

Once again, Kalyani’s face turned red, but she did not say anything. She began laughing out loudly, something she rarely did, usually choosing to smile. Her laughter, however, sounded as fearsome and angry as her words. Laughing, she said,

‘Do you know...I am already married to you...in my heart?’

Her words rebounded from the boulders lying around and reverberated through the hills and mounds around the river,

‘I am already married to you...I am already married to you...’

Gautam could hear a koel’s sweet voice and smell flowers’ delightful fragrance in her words. His heart began beating faster; passion overpowered his body; his hands became eager to hold Kalyani and crush her against his body. Such passion ignores everything—place, time and the world.
Gautam controlled the sway of emotions. He stifled the speeding arrows of his desire. Kalyani may believe her to be married to him; he also loved her more than he loved his life; yet, they were not married to each other. They did not have a right on each other’s body.

Even if they ignore the question of rights, and if they please their desire, would it not harm their relation? Gautam was prepared to sacrifice his love for the sake of Kalyani’s happiness. How could he then disgrace his immaculate life for the sake of momentary surge of passions? Under the waves of emotions, if love can tightly embrace a beloved, why can’t it destroy itself? Gautam was prepared to let his love go up in flames so that Kalyani can live happily with Tryambak. When he could make such a sacrifice, how could he touch Kalyani’s body?

From the other side of the hillock, a hazy figure ambled down, startling Gautam and Kalyani. A man’s long shadow obscured both of them. He was Mahavir, Rudradatta’s friend. Gautam and Kalyani were embarrassed to see him there. Could the revered father figure have heard their conversation?

Even if he had heard it, what was wrong in it? Life and love are connected. Why should anyone bring in strife in between? Mahavir, who usually looked menacing, wore tender expressions and looked at the couple. Is war the only option left to end conflicts—a war that separates loved ones?

‘Kalyani, my daughter, you should go back to theashram now. Rudradatta must be waiting for you.’

‘Yes, I should be going now. Let us all break the Shivaratri fast together at the ashram,’ said Kalyani.

They began walking to the river. More and more people had come over to take bath in the river.

‘Do you know horse riding?’ Mahavir asked Kalyani.

‘Yes I know to ride a horse, but I have not mounted one for about five years.’

‘And how about using weapons?’

‘Long back I learnt a few tricks from Gautam and Tryambak. But dadaji dislikes the use of weapons.’

‘He is a yogi. I am an ordinary mortal. I shall always worship weapons.’

Man used arms against beasts to overpower them; such use of weapons can be forgiven. But man keeps on using the tools of destruction against fellow human beings, a sin that he commits now and again. Why does he do so—just to win over other human beings with the help of weapons? Which armed man has ever achieved enduring power over the world?

How great is a man who doesn’t brandish weapons to convince others of his ideas? The Gita’s message, given by an unarmed Krishna, is eternal; but, when Krishna wielded arms, his clan and his state, both were ruined.
Mahavir awoke from his thoughts: why did he think about all this? Probably, Rudradatta’s village influenced people to consider nonviolent means to end conflicts. Besides, at that moment, Rudradatta’s granddaughter walked next to Mahavir. Rudradatta himself had come over to the meeting at night to make an intervention. Therefore, it was not surprising to have such thoughts early in the morning. Yet, for once, Mahavir doubted if his old age made him think about the virtues of nonviolence.

Mahavir gave a jerk to his head, as if shaking off his weak thoughts, the sign of his aged mind. Right then, he noticed a man sitting on a large, flat boulder. The man was in deep meditation.

‘Look, Rudradatta!’ Mahavir cried.

Had Rudradatta’s meditation made the climate of the village nonviolent? The idea bewildered Mahavir. Now he understood why Mangal had escaped from Vihar, Rudradatta’s village.

‘I too should not live with Rudradatta for long,’ Mahavir thought. He looked at the raft that was making its way to this side of the river to receive him. Mahavir also noticed a white man in the crowd across the river.

‘A white man!’ he clenched his feet.

Isn’t death the last act of life? Isn’t death one of the last functions of life? Life and death are two sides of the same coin. Why do they say that nonviolence is holy and violence unholy?

कालोःम लोकःक्षणकृत्यल्पवर्णदेहं प्रसविताम | I am death, the destroyer of people.

‘Let Rudradatta represent one side, that of nonviolence. I will speak for the other side, that of violence!’ Mahavir excitedly thought.

Rudradatta opened his eyes, but Mahavir, avoiding him, rushed to board the raft.

18

A Challenge to the Uprising

On the day of Shivaratri and during the next day, the raft kept rowing from one bank to the other, helping people cross the river. It was a free service given by the village for two days. Not many people crossed to the other side. Because of the forest in the middle, a small number of pilgrims came to the temple from that side. Few went there to wander around in the forest, and some were forced to go there to return to their village. After taking abath in the river, most pilgrims went for darshan; and then, they visited the fair in the village.

Mahavir sat in the raft. Gautam and Kalyani waited for Rudradatta to come over. Mahavir instructed the rower to start, but he seemed lethargic,

‘Wait for a while. Let bapji come over,’ he said.

‘Bapji? Who is this bapji?’
‘Look there...He is sitting there.’

‘Who, Rudradatta?’

‘Yes.’

‘When did he become a bapji?’

The ferryman did not like the disparaging tone of the question. He lit his chillum and began smoking. The smoke drifted to Mahavir.

‘Aei, stop smoking your chillum!’

‘Why should I? Does it trouble you in any way?’

‘Yes, the smoke troubles me.’

‘Let it be. Fire and smoke are always together. Don’t you know?’

‘Stop acting wise and start doing your work.’

‘If you cannot bear the smoke, you may get off the raft.’

The comment enraged Mahavir. He wanted to push the ferryman off the boat and into the river. He was capable and provoked enough to do so. Before Mahavir acted on his impulse, Rudradatta, Gautam and Kalyani came there.

‘Look there, bapji is coming to the raft,’ saying this, the rower blew out the chillum and put it in his small bag.

‘Come Rudradatta, the raft won’t move without you,’ Mahavir said, annoyed.

Rudradatta, Gautam and Kalyani sat on the raft.

‘Many rafts began their long journey, leaving me behind,’ Rudradatta smiled.

‘What can they do? You refuse to go along with people,’ Mahavir also gave a lighthearted answer.

‘The rafts look fragile, as if they would capsized soon. What do I do?’

‘The best is to drown you away in the river. Okay now, forget all this and tell me something about the white man there.’

‘He is a priest here. In a day or two, he will be transferred to another place.’

‘Is he your friend?’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘Which other pure Brahmin will choose to be a white man’s friend?’
‘If a Hindu and a Muslim can be friends, why can’t a Hindi or a Muslim become a white man’s friend?’

‘The white men first became our friends, and then became our masters. Look at that priest. He moves around as if he owns our country. And our people make way for him everywhere!’

Gautam wanted to say something, but before he said a word, Rudradatta looked at him. Gautam did not say anything. No one uttered a word, but Mahavir’s face and eyes kept expressing different emotions, a surprising behaviour for an old man. Since Rudradatta knew Mahavir well, he did not find anything unusual in the way Mahavir behaved.

Who was against the Company Sarkar? All those who had lost their power opposed the Company: the nawabs and badshahs; the princes of yesteryears’ small states and landholders. If many had lost their power because of the Company, many had achieved stability with the Company’s support. The original banyan tree was old, but its branches had begun their independent existence. These branches did not bother about the central trunk, even if someone damaged it or chopped it down. On the contrary, they saw an opportunity for their further growth in the trunk’s removal; and, if they could not get space for further development, they were at least keen to get rid of their connection with the core from which they had moved away. When the peshwas lost their power, the Gaekwads felt liberated; and, when the badshah of Delhi became ineffectual, the nizam felt relieved.

When the limiting chains snapped off, the Company Sarkar’s new, soft, subtle shackles tied all of them; they gladly welcomed these shackles. The states became stable; the direct and obvious control of a badshah or a peshwa was eliminated; the rulers began enjoying all the luxuries of power; they became free from frequent and exhausting battles and politicking; no one questioned them till the situation turned so bad that the subjects began making noise about it. Because of all these factors, the local rulers led a happy, peaceful and protected life—a life that Gods would not receive even if they asked for it. The Company Sarkar made this possible for the states that supported its rule. Which stupid ruler would leave this heavenly trap and tread on the thorny path of freedom? If they had ever wished independence, they would never have accepted the dominance of the Company. Acting cleverly and tactfully, the Company initially offered friendship to native rulers and later became their master.

Hence, Rudradatta supported neither Tatyasahib nor Mahavir. Mahavir had one more argument to convince Rudradatta about the probable success of the uprising: the real strength of the Company lay in the soldiers, who were joining forces to fight against the Company; let those coward rulers stay away from the uprising.

Rudradatta did not find this a convincing argument. If badshahs and peshwas were going to replace the Company, they would repeat history. Hind had to rise above the badshahs and chhatrapatis. Rudradatta found a new meaning in the Vedic word ‘prajapati’ and imagined that the populace would, one day, be the master of the state. He might have learnt about such a state by reading books or by his experience; or, he might have just borrowed the idea from the western world. As soon as he imagined such people’s rule, he began spreading the word around. The people in the middle of the nineteenth century, however, could not understand the notion; they could not accept the idea of a people’s republic. They were used to the reign of badshahs and nawabs; Rudradatta’s talk sounded like an enchanting tale to them. Rudradatta wished to maintain peace because he had thought that a republic could
eventually become a reality due to the Company’s presence. Therefore, Rudradatta did not support Mahavir’s uprising.

Tatyasahib and Mahavir both had noticed weaknesses in Rudradatta, who was otherwise a selfless sadhu: Kalyani, Gautam and Tryambak. Rudradatta’s granddaughter and two students, who were like sons to him, appeared to be Rudradatta’s weaknesses. They wanted to pull the three strings that had kept Rudradatta connected to the everyday world. They pulled these strings, yet could not comprehend how this had affected the sadhu. Mahavir and Saiyad Aziz were busy spreading the message about the uprising and wished to keep Rudradatta out of it altogether. Rudradatta, nevertheless, attended the confidential meeting. He left the venue long before important announcements were made, but Mahavir sensed that Rudradatta knew all the details well.

When he saw Gautam and Kalyani talking, Mahavir learnt one important fact: Kalyani was in love with Gautam, and she would definitely marry the young man one day. If this was the case, it was likely that Rudradatta would be drawn to follow Gautam’s trail. For strange reasons, all the plotters eagerly wanted Rudradatta to join them.

The raft reached the other end of the river. Tryambak unexpectedly came out of the crowd and tightly held the raft to keep it stable. Tryambak did not know why he stood there, out of respect for Rudradatta or out of love for Kalyani. Kalyani and Gautam got off the raft first. The priest saw them and began walking to the raft.

‘I can’t tolerate this white man,’ said Mahavir.

‘Get down first. Tryambak is holding the raft for us,’ said Rudradatta.

‘They all have a few days left now. Then, not one will be around.’

By then, the priest reached the raft. Rudradatta did him a namaste.

‘I was observing the festivities around,’ Johnson said.

‘As if looking at a collection of wild animals,’ muttered Mahavir. Johnson did not hear it.

‘Religion is a powerful pull for all of us,’ said Johnson.

‘You are right, but it should not inspire violence!’ Rudradatta responded.

‘I think we Christians have lost the way. We follow Christianity that is not guided by Jesus.’

‘All religions suffer from the same malady. Let me introduce you to one of my oldest friends, Mahavirsingh,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Rudradatta, everyone reaches out to you—old, new, known and unknown,’ said Johnson.

Mahavir was not eager to know this priest. He did not show enthusiasm to talk to him, clearly showing his dislike for the man. They all walked ahead, leaving the priest behind at the riverbank. Rudradatta advised Mahavir,
‘Before you spur people for the uprising, you should learn to leash you tongue, shouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, I know and that is what we all do. Someone like you intrudes into meetings to know about our activities. What can we do?’

‘You are mistaken. Do you know what all you spoke while we were on the raft?’

‘We were all friends there. Why should it become a problem then?’

‘Are you sure only friends were around?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your uprising can’t see properly.’

‘My eyes were open. I did not see anyone around.’

‘You are ignoring one man.’

‘Who is this? You? I am sure you are not against us.’

‘I may be against you. One who is not with you is against you. But, I am talking about someone else on the raft.’

‘I don’t remember anyone unfamiliar on the raft. Yes, that stupid ferryman was there, of course. But he has nothing to do with us.’

‘This is your mistake. You may think that the rower was a stupid drudge, but he is a dangerous spy.’

‘A spy!’ Mahavir was shocked to hear this. Others of the company were also astonished at the news. How could an ordinary ferryman work as a spy? Besides, he addressed Rudradatta as bapji. Did they all hire the raft of a spy? And, could that ferryman now identify all those who had come over to attend the meeting?

‘Don’t worry. The Company Sarkar is drunk with power and doesn’t bother about the information passed on by such petty Hindis. All his information is a waste,’ Rudradatta consoled Mahavir.

Mahavir jumped up and began acting with the vigour of a wild beast. He held Gautam’s shoulder and said,

‘Gautam, pay attention to what I say. We have to eliminate all those who are against the uprising. This is my first order to you!’

‘Kill Rudradatta, if he is against you all,’ said Rudradatta in a serious tone. Mahavir felt that Rudradatta was joking. He said,
‘Yes, anyone against us should meet the same end. The spirit of the uprising is more important than an individual’s ideas. Our ideals hold higher significance than our relations, even those relations whom we respect. If need be, kill Rudradatta!’

19

Gautam’s Dilemma

That day, more than the usual number of people had gathered in Rudradatta’s ashram to break the Shivaratri fast. Mahavir, who had instructed Gautam to terminate Rudradatta’s life, also lived in the ashram the whole day. Because of his charming personality and interesting conversations, he became the center of attention for everyone in the ashram. Rudradatta also listened to his talk with interest and made him feel important.

By late night, the bhajan singers began dispersing; Mahavir’s retinue also prepared to leave; Saiyad Aziz and other army men left one by one. For a few moments, Rudradatta and Mahavir were alone. Mahavir said,

‘This is our last meeting.’

‘Why do you say so? Do you want to finish off this round of your life-cycle?’ Rudradatta laughed.

‘Brother Rudradatta! You are free from birth and rebirth. We have to go through the motions.’

‘I am no different, Mahavir. I am also trying to fulfill my desire.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Peace in the whole world,’ said Rudradatta as if chanting a mantra.

Mahavir intently listened to the words as if they created a beautiful image in his mind; in a moment, he became conscious and alert, for he knew how Rudradatta could influence others. He swept the lovely image off his mind before it worked its charms like a nymph and led him astray. He said,

‘Rudradatta, I shocked Tryambak and Gautam today.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘I suggested that they should kill even you if the situation demands so.’

‘Oh, it was not your suggestion. It was, in fact, your wish.’

‘What should I do if that is the case?’

‘Such words don’t disturb an old man like me who is already in the last phase of life.’

‘You are right, but the idea agonises me. I would definitely stab Rudradatta if I have to, but while doing it, a dagger would stab me as well. I mean, in my imagination.’
Rudradatta began laughing. It was already late in the night. Because of the dim lamp lying nearby, large shadows of the old men fell on the wall of the ashram. Rudradatta said,

‘Krishna annihilated the entire Yadava clan.’

‘I don’t want to become a Krishna. I want my clan to live. You know whom I want to kill.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘I still hope that you will support me in that war.’

‘Are you still hopeful?’

‘Yes, I have some cards up my sleeve.’

Rudradatta closed his eyes for a while. He knew that a fighter like Mahavir must have been devising tricks to get his work done.

Some men entered the room to see Rudradatta before leaving. Mahavir also got up and embraced Rudradatta. At the door of the ashram, Rudradatta and Mahavir intently looked at each other, as if communicating the deepest secrets of hearts. Those who witnessed the scene were amazed at this unforgettable separation of friends. Kalyani could not help asking,

‘Dadaji, is he our relative?’

‘No, he is a friend. Why do ask so?’

‘I feel you both look similar.’

‘It is a sign of aging. How babies look similar! Two old people often look similar,’ Rudradatta gave a simple explanation.

After the fair was over, Vihar appeared a deserted place—the way our home becomes silent after our cherished guests go away! Although all its inhabitants were around, the hamlet turned mute as if missing the visitors. The local people adjusted again to their routine after a couple of days. Rudradatta began his lessons, explaining aphorisms to students. Gautam spent more and more time with the young men of the village, teaching them how to cudgel with a mace. Villagers and students spent long time with Gautam, who honed their skills in the sport.

Rudradatta noted that Gautam’s passion for cudgeling reflected his Kshatriya spirit and his talent for strategic planning. After observing Gautam’s lessons for about five days, Rudradatta said,

‘Gautam!’

‘Yes, guruji!’

‘How long will you teach them the game?’
'About a week, by then I shall receive a call.'

'You are getting married in the month of Chaitra. You will have to return for a few days for your wedding.'

'My wedding? In Chaitra?'

'Yes, with Kalyani,' Rudradatta calmly said. He wanted to arrange the wedding after Gautam returned from the Russian war. Rudradatta had read Kalyani and Gautam's minds. Eyes and face reflect what the heart feels. Human beings have an inborn ability to express their wish to people around.

Gautam often talked with Kalyani about their marriage, but he did not know how to discuss the matter with Rudradatta, whom he highly respected. Every society establishes certain practices for the sake of civility. Among the Hindus, young men or women don't discuss their marriage with the elders of the family. Hearing what Rudradatta had said, Gautam could not speak a word; his heart felt heavy. Gautam realised that he would have to speak something to let off steam. He said,

'How is it possible?'

'That is what I am asking you. If you cannot come over in Chaitra, we shall seek an auspicious date this month.'

'But what if I leave in a week or so?'

'I am sure we can find a favourable time today for the wedding.'

Rudradatta's words made Gautam quiet. Would he have to get married that day? Would he soon enjoy those moments of bliss about which he dreamt even at the warfront? He was exhilarated. We all experience heavenly joy when we get to be with a companion we have always desired. Kalyani's image surfaced in front of Gautam's mind.

Yet, the pleasure was tinged with regret. Gautam knew Kalyani's heart; she had clearly expressed her wish in a way that did not commonly happen in Hindu families. He could have married Kalyani long back. Why wasn't he married to her till then?

Warzones called him out; his heart swayed between the bliss of love and the challenge of heroism. When he looked at Kalyani's lovely face, he remembered war strategies; and, when he stood among exploding bombs and firing bullets, he thought about Kalyani's eyes. In this perplexing dilemma, twenty-six years of life had already gone by.

After the Russian war, his craving to hold the gun lost its edge. He often wished to spend life with Kalyani, enjoying marital happiness. But, how could Gautam enjoy a quiet home and a lovely woman's embrace, when everywhere people planned to overthrow the unjust and exploitative Company Sarkar? After the Company would vanish from the scene, he could easily pursue his pleasure!

Besides, after the other night's scuffle with Tryambak, Gautam had a question that now perturbed him: if he loved Kalyani, what should he seek, his happiness or Kalyani's? A war-
loving soldier leads an uncertain life. Life is a fleeting moment for all, true, but we clearly realize how fragile everything is when we witness a war. Should a soldier, who knows how temporary life is, make Kalyani a part of his uncertain stay on earth? Thinking about his soldier’s life and its unpredictability, Gautam became generous; he learnt to be pure and selfless in love; he came upon the truth that self-sacrifice was required to complete his love. He wished that Kalyani should live with someone who could give her a secure and stable life. If she married Gautam, who lived a normal life between two wars, her marital life will be of short spans of a month or a year till a new war began. After a long consideration, Gautam decided that he should let Kalyani live her life, if he truly loved her.

Gautam, who was going to participate in the uprising against the Company Sarkar, first thought about Kalyani. To defeat the Company was like dousing a forest fire. It was likely that Gautam will meet his end in the efforts to end the Company’s regime. The uprising was to begin in about three months, and Gautam was going to be one of its important leaders. He was definitely going to face the first bullets; he was sure going to be one of those who would rush towards raging cannons. Every brave soldier would eagerly wait for such exciting battles and gladly meet his death. If such a death would make Kalyani a widow, how could her lover eagerly await that exciting day of death? Hence, Gautam, with deep fear and anguish, advised Kalyani that she should get married to Tryambak.

Gautam made a mistake—that of assuming that Kalyani sought happiness through marriage; and, as a result, he enraged Kalyani, making her look more fearsome that death. After the experience, Gautam did not dare to repeat his suggestion.

Gautam was in a deep dilemma. Kalyani’s marriage with someone else was unbearable for him. At the same time, he was certainly going to become the first victim of the war for Hind’s independence. He knew he could live for two to six months more. In that case, he had to bear the unbearable: he had to see to it that Kalyani should be married to someone else and live in bliss forever. This was his duty, he believed. Gautam eagerly waited for the order to join the battlefield. But before he received a word from the plotters of the uprising, Rudradatta mentioned the plan of holding a wedding ceremony. If he married Kalyani, he would undoubtedly live a happy life for a day, a week or a month. And then, for giving him all the joy of marital love, could he repay Kalyani with an agonizing life of a widow?

What could he do in this situation? Gautam could not give a clear reply to Rudradatta about the wedding date. He could discuss any issue with anyone, but he became tongue-tied in front of Rudradatta.

Rudradatta went off, leaving Gautam immersed in his thoughts. Gautam feared that Rudradatta would really marry him off in a day or two.

What would have happened if he had not taken the pledge to participate in the war? Gautam shook off all the thoughts and said to himself: No, we must overthrow the Company. If I don’t observe the pledge of participating in the insurrection, I would suffer a life of depravity forever.

How would he, then, be able to hold Kalyani’s hand, an Arya woman’s hand, in a wedding ceremony?
Kalyani was occupied with her daily chores, sitting in the veranda. A heap of yellow-white Bakul flowers lay next to her. Gautam, after training the villagers in mace cudgeling, returned home. He asked,

‘Kalyani, what are you doing?’

‘I am making a mala.’

‘Why a mala?’

‘Yes, a mala. It is the mala that a bridegroom wears on the wedding day. Don’t you know anything yet?’ said Kalyani, laughing.

Gautam kept gazing at the fount of a ringing laughter. Kalyani, who had announced that she was already married to him, was making a groom’s mala. What if he had to wear that mala that night?

If the wedding took place, Gautam’s wish to marry Kalyani would definitely come true, but Kalyani’s life would be tied to a void forever.

‘Who is going to wear the mala?’ asked Gautam.

‘How many times do I tell you the same thing?’

‘When is the wedding?’

‘Right now. Let me put it around your neck!’ Kalyani said, giving him a naughty look. Gautam had never seen Kalyani, a naïve but sincere woman, indulging in mischief before. She often joked these days. Kalyani continued making her mala. Gautam went to her and snatched away the garland from her. A few flowers fell on the ground.

‘Aei, leave it!’ cried Kalyani.

‘I will let you make the mala if you promise me that you will not put it around my neck.’

‘Okay, you keep that mala. I have another one!’ Kalyani showed a mala that she had put around her neck.

‘It is your mala.’

‘We can use the same mala. See, this is how we can use it!’ Kalyani made the gesture of putting her mala around Gautam’s neck. Although Gautam was far from Kalyani, he moved a step backward.

‘See, isn’t it lovely? And, it is good enough for both of us,’ said Kalyani, and then noticing Gautam’s puzzled face, she began laughing.

Gautam turned and walked away from there. Kalyani clapped and then shouted,
‘Gautam…Aei Gautam…Look here. I want to tell you something.’

Gautam did not look back. He knew what she wanted to talk to him. Right then, Kalyani noticed that Rudradatta and his students entered the ashram.

Nothing drastic happened around, yet Gautam felt that the world was taking up a new shape. He enjoyed being in it. He had often imagined Kalyani putting the groom’s mala around his neck. In his imagination, he could see a beautiful mala. Then, he noticed the hands that held that mala; he gazed at lovely curves of those hands and at the fair, delicate fingers. He imagined Kalyani’s face at the wedding ceremony and then carefully looked at her. Would he ever be able to look at Kalyani for such a long time? He could do so only in his imagination. He had an eyeful of the pretty face that always occupied his mind. The face was soothing like the moon, bright like the Venus and elegant like a pattern of stars; hazy, yet bright aura shone through that face; and, when the face smiled mysteriously, it glowed with a deep, celestial light.

The beauty of the whole universe manifested itself in Kalyani’s face. True beauty is always magnificent and adorable. We may worship such beauty, but we cannot playfully caress it. And, if one cannot touch it, if we cannot feel it, the beauty loses its meaning to us.

Kalyani understood what Gautam was thinking. Laughing, she asked,

‘You cannot tolerate me, it seems!’

‘तेनैवǾपेण चतुभु[जेनशॐबाहो भवा विभ्रुतो्’ (A thousand-armed form of the universe! Manifest yourself as a four-armed deity,)’ replied Gautam, quoting an aphorism from the Gita.

‘What if I become the moon?’

‘No, the moon lives far away in the sky. Besides, it shows its full face once a month.’

‘What if I become a star?’

‘Stars are flighty. They keep twinkling.’

‘How about a mala?’

‘I love flowers, but flowers are tender. I fear even touching them.’

‘How do you want to love Kalyani?’

‘A Kalyani whom I adore, and yet I can play with!’

‘It is an art all women know. Men have not learnt how to bring together worship and pleasure.’

‘What do I do now?’

‘See what I shall do. I shall wear a mukut on the head and play bansuri.’
'Lovely! As if Krishna has come over as Kalyani!'

'That is what I mean! We worship Krishna, and we love Krishna. Don’t we?'

Kalyani’s argument stupefied Gautam. He looked at Kalyani, a sublime presence in front of him. He was stirred under the influence of this unusual beauty. Gautam’s legs shivered with excitement. He wished to rush towards the attractive woman, forgetting his calling to be at the warfront. He forgot where he was, what time it was and who he was. He was immersed in Kalyani. He could not control the desire to embrace her; he leapt forward and took her in arms, passionately crushing her body against his chest. He experienced the pleasure of love and beauty for the first time—and then, in a moment, Kalyani moved away, laughing. He realised that his embrace held nothing; his hands touched nothing.

Gautam opened his eyes. A jackal was crying in the village. Was it a dream, he wondered. The darkness suggested that the hour was past midnight. How long was the dream? Did he really see Kalyani making a mala? Was that also a dream? Will the dream turn out to be true? And, if it was bound to be true, shouldn’t he gladly accept his destiny?

Gautam was becoming gentle to himself and his life’s choices now; ignoring revolution on cards, he began to seek happiness. The jackal gave another cry.

‘How come a jackal wandered into the village? It seems the animal is close to the ashram,’ thought Gautam. Sometimes jackals passed through the village.

Gautam heard the cackle of a jackal. The species of cackling jackals did not live in the forests around the village. Gautam wondered if he had heard this cackling of jackals in his sleep. Was it Kalyani’s laughter? Our mind often blends dream with reality. Gautam still thought about the jackal that cackled in night. How did the beast come so close to the village?

Gautam got up and tiptoed to the alley out of the ashram. The cackling continued intermittently through the dark night. Gautam hurriedly walked towards the ominous noise.

He knew that burglars often cried or chuckled like jackals, sending off messages to accomplices lurking around. He had often heard such stories. Probably, Gautam was trying to interpret a coded message in the animal noises.

Gautam stopped at the Bhairavanath shrine, looking around in the dark. He did not notice anything unusual there. Right then, he heard someone clapping once. It came from the clump of wild plants and trees. Gautam walked towards the corner, dense with vegetation. As soon as he reached there, he heard a voice,

‘Who is this?’

‘Gautam.’

‘Come closer.’

Gautam went close to the dark corner. A man, covering his head and torso in a quilt, came out.

‘Why so early?’ Gautam asked.
'It all happened a little earlier than we had planned.'

'Oh! What are the orders for me?'

'You have a lot to do. Are you ready?'

'Yes...I am ready,' Gautam sounded hesitant. The brave soldier had wholeheartedly committed to the cause of revolution. Was he now reluctant to join his friends because of imminent wedding? Had his stony heart turned soft like a petal after the dream? Gautam immediately collected himself.

'If you are not yet ready, begin your preparation soon,’ said the stranger.

'Why?'

'The fire has lighted up unexpectedly, terrifying all of us. And, the results will begin to show up quickly, making things difficult for us.’

'I am ready. What about others?’

'Not all of them are prepared to rush out for the fight. Most had believed June would see the first spark. Forget the spark now, the flames have already engulfed us!’

'How did it happen?’

'Because of Mangal Pandey, that loony friend of yours!’

'What did he do now?’

'He killed a white general!’

'Oh God! When did this happen?’

'Not just one general. He killed as many as three white officers!’

'Why did he do it?’

'Pandeyji had joined the army again as both of you have received a pardon. I am sure you know about it.’

'Yes. And where is Mangal right now?’

'He is behind bars right now.’

'Tell me the story. What happened?’

'Pandeyji attacked the officers, but other soldiers did not join in. Pandey knew that a white officer would kill him, and so he shot himself.’

'Then?’
‘You know how he is! Even death fears him. Pandey did not die, and white officers arrested him.’

‘Now what?’

‘Either a firing squad or a noose!’

‘And what shall we all do?’

‘We can’t do anything for him. He is far from here.’

‘Let it be. Even if he is thousands of miles away, we should do something for him.’

‘I don’t think we can do anything for him.’

‘Why?’

‘Before any one of us reaches there, he would be dead.’

The dark night appeared to be getting darker, as if earth and the sky both oozed gloom. Out of the two friends, who had pledged to overthrow the Company, one now faced death. No one was capable of bringing him back from the jaws of death! What a tragic beginning of the uprising!

‘What are our leaders doing at present?’

‘They want to trigger the revolution three months from now. If the captains of the revolution come forward to save Mangal Pandey, they will be exposed and the revolution will fizzle out. They have to observe things quietly!’

‘We can’t let Pandeyji die.’

‘Saiyad has already gone there and has asked me to convey the message to you.’

Gautam was excited to hear that Saiyad was making some attempts to save Mangal. He became a little more hopeful when he remembered that an ill or injured criminal could not be hanged to death. The Company has to treat Mangal’s wounds first, and let him become fit to be a death sentence. The British observed this rule as any other civilised society.

‘I will start soon,’ blurted out Gautam.

‘What do you hope to achieve?’

‘See, they cannot execute the sentence till Pandeyji recovers fully.’

‘Are you sure of this rule?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, then go ahead!’
‘I will not return to Vihar till Pandeyji is not out of prison!’

The stranger smiled, his teeth shining in dark. He said,

‘I can immediately give you a horse and a few weapons.’

The man vanished behind the shrine. Hundreds of ideas overwhelmed Gautam, who was now left alone; he looked up at the sky, and saw Kalyani’s face in the middle of stars, as if the moon floated in the ocean of pearls.

As if a spear stabbed Gautam’s heart.

‘Will you ignore Pandeyji to please Kalyani?’ his heart asked.

Gautam wanted to storm out of that place. After thinking for a while, he lifted his foot, prepared to speed away. Before he took the first step, someone pulled him backward, as if darkness had seized him. Wide eyed and bewildered, Gautam turned his head.

21
The Departure

_both cried, and their hearts_
_floated like little boats in a river of tears;_
_how wide were the beautiful sails,_
_swollen with a sweet breeze!

Chandravadan

‘Leave me!’ Gautam growled.

Immediately, Gautam’s hand hanged loose. Tryambak stood in front of him.

‘Why had you seized me like this?’ asked Gautam.

‘Guruji has instructed me to catch you if you try to slip away.’

‘What did he tell you?’

‘That you should be stopped if you try to leave Vihar.’

‘How does he know that I have planned to go away?’

‘Guruji knows everything.’

Gautam stood still. Tryambak was still facing him.

‘Tryambak, do you know why guruji wants me to stay back?’ Gautam asked.

‘Yes.’
‘Tell me if you know the reason.’

‘For your wedding with Kalyani.’

‘Would you like it if I marry Kalyani?’

‘Why not? You and Kalyani are not my enemies.’

‘Tryambak, if you are my friend, you should help me out.’

‘Sure. Even guruji wants to help you.’

‘You should do as I say.’

‘What is it?’

‘Let me get away from here right now.’

‘You may go away, but you should meet guruji first and ask for his permission to leave the ashram.’

‘He won’t let me go away.’

‘Guruji does not like to see his students unhappy.’

‘Unfortunately, I always make him unhappy.’

‘You should know how to stop doing it.’

‘What is the solution?’

‘Do what guruji asks you to do.’

‘If I follow his instructions, I will break a pledge.’

‘How so?’

‘Just a few moments ago, I took a pledge.’

‘What is it?’

‘That I won’t return to Vihar till Mangal Pandey is out of prison.’

‘Mangal Pandey will not live long now.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Guruji told me.’

‘Does he know that Mangal Pandey is in prison?’
‘Yes. He also knows that he has injured himself.’

‘Oh! Whatever happens, I will have to make every attempt to free Pandey.’

‘I am your friend, and, in a way, I am also your student. Accept a request of mine.’

‘Tryambak, what do you want me to do? You all are perplexing me.’

‘I don’t want to complicate things any more for you.’

‘Why don’t you clearly tell me what you want me to do?’

‘You will have to give me what I want.’

‘No, I can promise nothing.’

‘You want Mangal Pandey to be free, don’t you?’

‘Yes, that is what I want.’

‘I can manage it for you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Instead of you, I will go and free Pandey from the prison.’

Gautam was overcome with emotions. He was so choked up that, for a few moments, he was left breathless. He was also proud of his friendship—he knew that only Rudradatta’s students could be so kind to one another. At the same time, Gautam could not accept the idea that a younger student of the ashram should go at his place and face death.

‘Tryambak, I know you well, and I know you mean well. If someone else had made me the offer, I would have it as my insult,’ said Gautam.

‘Your insult? I have never thought of putting you down in any way!’

‘That is why I don’t take your offer seriously.’

‘But why?’

‘Because I cannot be so selfish as to let a younger student die. How can I go on with my life, if you…’

‘Have you thought about Kalyani?’

‘Yes, that was the first thing I did.’

‘Did you? If you really had, you would not attempt to escape in the dark of night.’

‘In fact, I have thought about Kalyani, and that is why I want to leave soon.’
'What would happen to her after you leave?'

'She would become free, no longer tied down to me.'

'Have you tied her down?'

'Well, love can often be binding to people.'

'Look Gautam, I am scared of you now. Don’t go away, leaving Kalyani behind!'

'How can I attach my brief life with Kalyani’s happiness? Let me face dangers all alone.'

'Kalyani will live like your shadow.'

'I may die for love. I may die to protect myself or someone else. Now, don’t argue with me more, Tryambak. You should know why I want to leave today.'

'I know.'

'Good. I want to go now. Every moment is precious.'

'Okay.'

Gautam had thought that Tryambak would use force to stop him or might use a clever trick to hold him back. Gautam was surprised that Tryambak easily allowed him to go away. He took a couple of steps and then said,

'Convey my pranam to guruji.'

'Okay.'

'Take care of Kalyani.'

'Hmmm...' 

'And...tell her that she should not be sad over what I have chosen to do.'

'Okay.'

'And...Look, you should do something that would make her happy.'

'Don’t tell me to do something that is impossible to do.'

'What is impossible?'

'Kalyani will not be happy without you.'

A jackal cried far away in the forest. Gautam, though startled to hear the call, did not want to start soon, now that they had begun talking about Kalyani. He wanted to talk more and more about her. Gautam turned, embraced Tryambak and said,
‘Tryambak, my brother, I am leaving!’

Speaking the last words, Gautam moved away from Tryambak. He heard Tryambak sobbing, but the jackal’s cruel cries did not let him hear the sobs for long. Goaded by the jackal, Gautam began taking long strides. He felt that the world was built by tears and painful cries: A hungry lion roared out of hunger and a deer, held under the lion’s paws wailed out of pain. Whose cries were painful? Whose pain was justified? A burglar robbed a rich merchant and gave food to his hungry children. Who deserved our sympathy, the merchant or the burglar’s hungry, crying children? Gautam saw Tryambak, a young student who was like his brother, crying when they separated. And, Hindustan also wept like a jackal. Whose anguish should be ignored—that of a brother or that of Hindustan?

Gautam crossed Vihar’s outskirts. There, under a tree, he saw a memorial stone, commemorating a local hero who had lost his life while protecting his village in a clash with either robbers or some outsiders. A simple man would choose to give his life for the village—these ideals no longer existed, he felt. In the protective bubble built by the Company, such deaths had become rare.

‘The Whites have made cowards out of us!’ Gautam muttered. A horse was tied to the tree beneath which the memorial stood. Hearing Gautam’s footsteps, the horse became anxious, as if the stallion had identified a brave soldier. Gautam went to the horse and looked at its strong body with affectionate admiration. The horse shook and lifted its head, making a statement of its strength. Its small pointed ears became erect and began quivering. The horse now lifted its front leg and struck it on the ground. It was a beautiful gesture. Gautam slapped the horse’s back. The horse’s skin shivered. The beast recognised the man who was going to ride it and turned its head towards Gautam. Smacking his lips out of affection, Gautam stroked the horse’s head. The tall, strong animal dropped its head in submission. Stroking and slapping the animal, Gautam said,

‘Well done, my boy!’

Animals can understand emotions of those around them. The horse, excited by the encouraging words, began dancing with joy.

‘Stop, my boy, we have a difficult journey ahead. Don’t get impatient.’

Gautam untied the beast, and in a moment, mounted it. The horse, eager to move ahead, began trotting immediately.

‘Take it easy, take it easy. Stop for a while!’ Gautam asked the horse to stand at a place.

It was already time for sunrise. Gautam turned to look at Vihar. He could see houses form above the trees and also through the quivering leaves of trees. He fondly looked at the village, like a painter affectionately looking at his painting.

Along with the twittering birds around, Gautam could hear the temple bell ringing. The first devout of the day had arrived at the temple, waking up the surroundings. The bell rang like a mysterious sound floating in from a distant planet, shaking earth, awakening it from a deep slumber.
Gautam kicked the horse with his heel. Within moments, the horse began galloping as if competing with the wind. The waves of wind kept striking Gautam’s face. His eyes soon became dry.

22
The First Tremor

Hindustan is not a country; it is a continent. Its vast landmass, long rivers and high mountain peaks teach lessons in enormousness, taking in miles and miles of earth. A mysterious hand keeps the universe together; similarly, an old and unfathomable civilisation keeps Aryavart together, preventing it from falling apart in small provinces. A Kashmiri pundit visits Kanyakumari; a Bengali babu often goes to Dwarkanadheesh for a darshan. The Arya thought and culture have resisted space and time, thriving independently of the limitations imposed by them. Even when the railways did not connect places, Hindustan’s armies, pilgrims and merchants often and easily moved from one village to another, one town to another and one city to another.

The man who mounts a horse feels like an emperor. Gautam, who had ventured out to free his friend Mangal Pandey, went to the northeast of Hind, travelling about two hundred kilometres in a day. He relaxed for a while in the afternoon, but cut through most of the distance in the morning and evening. He changed his horse on the third day. Since the ideas of the uprising had taken wings by then, Gautam did not find it difficult to get a new horse for his purpose. The like-minded people had developed a network by through Hind. With the fresh beast, he decided to journey even during nights. Once, when he was getting ready in a temple’s serai for the night journey, he overheard a conversation,

‘The thirty-fourth platoon is disbanded!’

In those days, every village had temples and every temple had arrangements for lodging. If not more, a small corner of the temple served the purpose for a few pilgrims or travellers. The travellers could easily receive a shelter at such places.

The news about the thirty-fourth platoon jolted Gautam. He asked,

‘Bawaji, what is the news about this platoon?’

‘The thirty-fourth platoon is dissolved.’

Gautam and Mangal Pandey belonged to this platoon.

‘Who told this to you?’

‘That merchant who came riding a camel brought the news,’ said bawaji.

Gautam approached the merchant. They both went near the well of the temple and then Gautam whispered the question to him,

‘I heard the thirty-fourth platoon is disbanded. Is it true?’

‘Yes,’ the man softly said, staring at Gautam.
'And yet the soldiers did not retaliate?'

The merchant laughed and asked,

'Why are you so eager to know about the platoon?'

'I am a soldier of that platoon. I was going to join it soon.'

'What is your name?'

'Do you know the platoon members?'

'Lotus?'

'Lotus!'

All the revolutionaries recognised one another by the code of lotus. Those who did not belong to the revolutionary faction would give away their names. The sign of ‘lotus’ was to convey the other person that he was an insider.

'Now you should give me your name,' the merchant said.

'I am Gautam.'

'Gautam! I must tell you how the platoon’s soul was destroyed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Mangal Pandey was hanged to death!'

'What?' roared Gautam.

'What was left in the thirty-fourth platoon without Mangal?'

'Mangal is dead! Is it true?'

'Yes, but don’t get agitated by the news!'

'Then what do I do? Be patient and smile?'

'Don’t make the mistake that Mangal did.'

'The platoon was full of cowards! How did all this happen?'

'He became the first sacrifice to Ma Bhavani.'

'And what are others waiting for?'

'Mangal was unnecessarily hasty in taking action. Others wanted to wait for the right time. His mistake has put our plot to risk. You be patient now. I want to give this message to all.'
Gautam wanted to know the details about what led Mangal to the noose.

‘I will narrate the story to you after midnight.’

‘By the way, who are you?’ Gautam asked.

‘Can’t you recognise me? Have I changed so much?’

‘I can’t see you in the dark.’

‘But you can hear my voice.’

‘You are right, but for the last three days I am on the move. My mind is not steady as I have been continuously thinking about Mangal for all these days.’

‘I am Saiyad,’ the merchant said.

‘Saiyad! Where are you coming from?’

‘I was at Mangal’s pyre!’ said Saiyad in a sad voice.

‘But you had gone to get him out of the jail.’

‘I was late, just a few moments late!’

‘Now what?’

‘First let me narrate the entire story to you. We shall then think what to do next.’

After midnight, bawaji, Saiyad and Gautam sat around a fire. Saiyad narrated the episode leading to Mangal’s death.

Those bullet-shells with the tallow of cows and pigs! The commander decided to give those bullets to the thirty-fourth platoon as a test, declaring that the shells did not contain animal tallow. They wanted to see how the soldiers take to the use of the bullets.

The thirty-fourth platoon was impatient to revolt. Its soldiers had already pledged to rebel! Hindustan had hundreds of platoons and a number of military thanas that helped the Company to rule over people. The platoons were trained to parade in a novel way, and they had modern artillery to fight. The soldiers were Hindi, but their leaders were white! Besides, one platoon consisting of white soldiers always kept a watch over other platoons, as if the Company did not trust the Hindis!

Hindi soldiers were demoralised due to various reasons: the scorn with which the white officers treated the Hindi soldiers; the humiliation at the hands of superiors; the deliberate disregard even of accomplished Hindi soldiers; and, the obvious discrimination between the white and the brown soldiers. In the military, the officers believed rudeness to be manliness and humiliating others was a way to control them. Spiteful speech was the power of officers who did not bother how such words could hurt someone’s soul. All the Hindi soldiers were agitated because of the arrogant white officers.
Over and above these usual complaints, the rumour spread that the Company wanted to convert Hindu and Muslim soldiers to Christianity by making them suck bullet-shells containing animal fat. This upset the Hindi soldiers. So long as religion is considered the soul of cultural heritage, people will always be ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of religious beliefs. The maharajas, nawabs and feudal lords of the day were dissatisfied with the Company; the soldiers too became unhappy, thinking that the Company wanted to corrupt their religion. Hence, more and more platoons began joining the revolution. The day for the revolution to begin was still long. In the meanwhile, the thirty-fourth platoon was told to begin using the new bullets.

Every single soldier refused to touch the bullet, making the white officers angry. The soldiers were threatened that they would be punished for insubordination for not using the new bullets. The punishment could even be a death sentence. Mangal, a soldier famous for being hotheaded, had also resumed his duty in the platoon. Once, while talking to a white officer, he argued,

‘Sahib, we prefer losing our lives to corrupting our souls. No one will even touch the bullets.’

‘Mangal Pandey, you have already started showing your true colours!’

‘I am speaking on behalf of all.’

‘I want to see four representatives of the platoon to discuss the matter,’ said the officer. The officer postponed the test of new bullets for a few days.

Mangal and three other leaders went to the sahib’s bungalow. Whether they were railway guards or governors, all white sahibs lived in bungalows. White soldiers guarded such bungalows.

The white sahib was enjoying a cheroot. He nodded to the soldiers’ salam and kept smoking for a while without saying anything. Then he said,

‘So, Mangal Pandey...’

‘Yes!’

‘You went unpunished once, and so you think you can always get away with what you do.’

‘You may think so.’

‘I know you keep on telling tall stories to soldiers.’

‘If you can prove it, you are fee to hand out a punishment to me’

‘I have to prove it, you say! Are you trying to scare me with laws and courts?’

‘No, I don’t want to scare you. And, I am not scared of anything. In law lies the real power of the Company, because the law is for all of us.’

‘Stop this rubbish now and listen to me!’

193
'What?'

'You are a naik of the platoon. All of you are naiks. You should act wisely and help out the Company.'

'Sahib, we are prepared to die for the sake of Company.'

'I know it. That is why I tell you that once the Company has clearly informed you all that the bullets don't contain fat of either cows or pigs, you should not object to using the bullets!'

'Sahib, we have a request to make. This is a matter of our faith. Please convince the pundits and maulvis about the bullets' purity. If they approve the bullets, we will definitely use them.'

'You mean the Company Sarkar will go out looking for your maulvis and pundits? Why don't you trust the Sarkar?'

'No, it is not that we don't trust the Company.'

'What else is it? Are your sadhus superior to the Company Sarkar?'

'Yes, we seek the refuge of sadhus when the Sarkar goes against our faith.'

'What you all suggest is not possible. We have already announced that the bullets are not to abuse your faith. You should accept it. Otherwise I will disband your platoon.'

Mangal’s hand was on the waist, where his dagger hung. His eyes and face looked tense. A fellow naik saw it. Dragging Mangal away, he told the white officer,

'We will get back to you after talking with the soldiers.'

'What do you want to talk to them? There is nothing to discuss further. I give you one night to convince the platoon. Do whatever you want to—coax them or explain things to them.'

Mangal roared,

'We are not going to discuss anything with the platoon. I want to tell you right now. Even if it is proved that the bullets don't have animal fat in the shells, we are not going to use them.'

'Why?'

'Because you are insulting us, because you want to put us to shame! The thirty-fourth platoon will not touch the bullets.'

'Then we will dissolve the platoon tomorrow.'

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'What?'

'You are a naik of the platoon. All of you are naiks. You should act wisely and help out the Company.'

'Sahib, we are prepared to die for the sake of Company.'

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'That we will see tomorrow, sahib!' said Mangal. His friends pulled him out of the bungalow. While leaving the sahib’s bungalow, Mangal laughed loudly. His laughter rung around like lightning.
Before sunrise, the thirty-fourth platoon stood ready for the daily parade on the maidan. Since the soldiers had refused to use the new bullets, they were going to be forced to surrender their weapons. Then, the platoon was to be disbanded. All the soldiers appeared restless, yet firm in their decision. They looked around as if realizing that an astrologer’s prophecy about the sun’s failure to rise that day was turning out to be true. They had two options: use the bullets and be cursed; or, refuse to use the bullets, surrender the weapons and be humiliated. What should they choose from the two options?

During the night, the platoon’s naiks had held meetings with soldiers, stressing repeatedly that they all should remain calm, even if their weapons were snatched away in the morning. Not that the naiks worried about the soldier’s safety, but they did not want the revolt to go haywire. For the sake of the revolt, they were prepared to lose their honour. They had decided to give up the arms and then disperse throughout Hind with the message of revolt. Choosing to sleep in the barracks, Mangal Pandey did not participate in discussions. He had taken a bowlful of bhang, which had put him to deep sleep. Next morning, he was the first one to rise and get ready. After taking a cold-water bath, he spent a long time doing his sandhyapuja. At the time of parade, Mangal cried ‘Har HarMahadev’ before taking his position, and stood there with a stern face.

One by one, the soldiers stood in lines. The white officer came and immediately announced,

‘We are going to distribute new bullets today. First, we shall demonstrate how to use the bullets. Then, each of you will walk down and pick up cartridges.’

A white soldier came and showed how to use the bullets, pulling out the shell using his teeth.

The platoon shivered at the sight. No one was sure if the grease in shells contained tallow, but the idea had taken root in soldiers’ minds.

‘Come on now. Come forward and pick up a cartridge!’ the white officer ordered.

Not one soldier came forward. The officer glared. He bellowed,

‘You know the consequences of this mischief.’

No one responded to the officer, but no one came forward to pick up the cartridges.

‘Put your weapons on the ground.’

One soldier, who was in the front row, went ahead to submit his gun. Right then, Mangal rushed forward from his line and shouted,
‘Friends, are you all cowards? That is what people will call you if you give up your weapons! We won’t turn in our guns—we are here to snatch away their guns!’

Mangal’s words set fire to soldiers’ soul. Their eyes glowed. A few soldiers, who had come forward to submit their rifles, stood rooted at once place, bewildered by Mangal’s tirade.

The white officer observed this gimmick. He had learnt that the Hindis always followed orders given in a loud voice and threatening tone; that glaring eyes and rude words worked on them. He shouted,

‘Arrest Mangal Pandey!’

The word of superior was considered sacred in the military. Yet, no one budged to seize Mangal.

‘Major sahib, you better go away from here,’ said Mangal softly to the white officer. Sargent Major Hewson had come there to order around, not to receive orders. The British knew to take care of themselves, and they also knew to risk their lives at the time of crisis. Hewson did not fear that Mangal Pandey or the platoon might raise hell there. Determined to impose his order on the soldiers, he firmly moved forward and thundered,

‘What? What did you say?’

Everyone became quiet. Then, they all heard a loud report of a rifle. The lightning had struck earth after hesitating for a long time. Major Hewson collapsed on the ground, bleeding.

That was the first response to the Company Sarkar’s arrogance; the first protest against ignoring people’s religious faith, whether right or misplaced; the first outburst of people oppressed by the military.

The western military didn’t remain long without a commander. As soon as one commander died on the battlefield, another took his place and led the army. As a result, their army never went into disarray due to the absence of a leader. Among Hindi fighters, it was a rule to escape the battlefield the moment the king or the commander fell. Many a times, even the winning side dispersed when the leader succumbed to death, losing the opportunity to conquer the opponent. This happened often in Hind, and as a result, one kingdom often depended on another after a battle. The western countries strictly believed the adage: an army commander never dies. Although the Hindus believed in the undying soul and rebirth, their soldiers felt that the death of their leader also eliminated his soul from the ongoing war.

Major Hewson died. Lieutenant Baugh immediately took charge. Mounted on an agile white horse, Baugh resumed Hewson’s work and ordered the army,

‘Arrest Mangal!’

No one came forward to execute the order. Then, a gun fired as if following Baugh’s command. Baugh’s white horse fell on the ground. Again, it was a shot from Mangal, who could not bear the fact that Baugh’s white horse was proud of being squeezed by Baugh’s white thighs. Mangal could not tolerate the horse’s slavish mindset, feeling sorry for the beast. He found it unbearable to see the powerful horse happily surrendering to someone and then act haughty even in that abject state.
The horse and Baugh both were grounded. Baugh got up, not betraying even a bit of fear or asense of humiliation.

‘Lieutenant sahib, go back,’ Mangal instructed the white officer.

If the British knew to backtrack, they would not have been able to establish the empire on which the sun never set. Baugh calmly said,

‘If no one arrests you, I will.’

Baugh pointed his pistol at Mangal and fired. Mangal jumped out of the line and saved himself. Since sahib did not have another bullet, he drew his sword and flew down to Mangal.

Mangal dropped his rifle on the ground and pulled out his sword. Mangal could not think like a trader who looked to benefit from the rival’s weakness. Raising his sword, Mangal, too, jumped in front of Baugh. For a moment, the swords swished through the air and glittered in sunlight. In a moment, the onlookers found Baugh lying on the ground, right next to his white horse. The beautiful horse and handsome British officer were quietly embracing death.

Mangal stared at the dying man and his beast. Mangal had all alone rebelled against the Company and killed two white officers. It was easy to kill them. Mangal fondly looked at the dead bodies lying around. He knew that the officers had bravely met their death. When Mangal was gazing at the dead white men, a British soldier rushed towards him. Before Mangal could react, a Hindi soldier hit the white soldier on the head with a rifle’s stock. The white soldier was fatally injured and died after a while.

Thus, three white men died that morning. Mangal lifted his bloodied sword and turned to other soldiers,

‘All of you! This is the moment to draw your sword and fight. If you wait to plot and plan, you will suffer insults for life.’

‘Mangal, you better run away now. Go away from here!’ one soldier cried.

‘Why should I run away?’

‘They will arrest you. We don’t want the plot to fail now. Once you are behind bars, we won’t be able to help you!’

‘Cowards! Did I ask you to help me out? You people want to live a life of disgrace.’

‘You are impatient, Mangal! You have ruined our plan!’

‘You all want to keep planning a revolt. Your plans are fickle. If you think about death, you fail to fight. Look at these white soldiers. Their death scares you. I think the dead white officers had more courage than you all. They did not wait to plan out strategies.’
Mangal swung his sword in the air, as if in a frenzy. The platoon went back to barracks, leaving Mangal alone on the ground. He was sure that white soldiers would definitely come to the ground for parade. This is the difference between two races, he thought. The white soldiers follow their orders even if it endangers their life; whereas, Hindi soldiers, even when humiliated, quietly retreat.

Mangal looked at the sun. Rudradatta’s face appeared in the sun. Rudradatta looked sad at the death of three white men. He looked at Mangal, reprimanding him for the violence. Mangal heard the echo of his voice,

‘These white men will be around for along time, ruling over us.’

Mangal felt that Rudradatta was right about the British rule. He began noticing faults in his conduct: although I am prepared to overthrow the Company, although I can muster courage to fight the white officers, I do not possess the planning skills that the rulers have. Could I stick to the plan of revolt? Could I wait till the decided day to begin the fight? I reacted to a personal insult with courage, but I also made the mistake of judging other soldiers as cowards because they wanted to follow the strategy prepared by the leaders.

He saw a few soldiers some distance away. They all were rushing towards him. Mangal picked up his rifle once again, kept his bloodied sword back in the sheath and waited for the soldiers to close in. He looked at his blood-smeared hands and legs. He could easily shoot five soldiers more and then butcher as many with his sword. Would it make any difference, he thought. Hind was not prepared for a revolt. Mangal could not wait till the day of revolt; he did not have patience to tolerate the condition for long. He felt that Hindis would take a long time to set out for the uprising, and in the meanwhile, the Company would keep insulting the Hindi men and their masculinity. Mangal could not appreciate the wisdom and planning behind the plot for revolt. He doubted if he would ever be able to agree with those who patiently thought out tactics for the revolt.

For a moment, Mangal considered the option of running away from there. It would have saved him. But how could Mangal choose to run away? It would be a far better idea to face death than escape the punishment for his crimes. To sneak out like a coward would be a disgrace. It would bring shame to Hindi soldiers. If a soldier ran for his life, his descendants would live with the guilt and stigma for generations. If a solider or a revolutionary feared death, courage and revolution both would bite dust.

Besides, what was the value of Mangal’s life? If he lived after running away, he would be nothing more than an insect dying under an elephant’s stamping feet. However, if he would hanged by the Company, many would learn a lesson from it. His life might have been meaningless, but his death would certainly prove that a Hindi soldier did not fear death. Wasn’t it enough to turn his trivial life significant?

‘How many should I kill?’

‘Don’t! Don’t kill anyone unnecessarily!’ someone cried.

‘Who is this? Rudradatta? Guruji?’

Mangal looked around. He could see that the soldiers galloping to him were white. Rudradatta was nowhere around.
'How can Rudradatta come here?'

Yet, Rudradatta’s face kept flickering in Mangal’s mind. Vengeance and aggression gave way to peace. On the verge of death, he wanted to listen to guruji’s words. He knew that a few moments of his freedom were left; he was going to be captured by the white soldiers. Yet, he did not feel contempt for the white men. Even if I kill a few soldiers, what difference would it make? Yes, if the killing could make the revolution successful, I must kill. But it was not so. The success of revolution depends on the number of people prepared to die for a cause. Then, why shouldn’t I prepare to die and be the first one to make a sacred offering? Mangal kept thinking.

It is easy to die at the hands of the British. Can’t I meet a glorious death? If I kill myself, I would at least not die at the hands of foreigners. I would not be in sin either. It is believed that one who commits suicide has to end his life for the next seven lives. Good. I will have an opportunity to die for the sake of Hind seven more times. Mangal’s train of thoughts continued.

The company of white soldiers came close, waving rifles and bayonets. Rudradatta’s image waved at Mangal, as if asking him not to take anyone’s life. Mangal sat down and stretched his legs. Then, he held his rifle between knees. The rifle’s stock rested on the ground and the barrel, on Mangal’s chest. He lifted his right leg, and with the help of a toe, he pulled the trigger.

The gun exploded. Mangal lay bleeding along with three white soldiers and one horse. Earth is mother to all, fondly offering her lap to everyone. She is not biased to a beast or to a human being. How could she, then, be biased towards a white man or a brown?

In death, the Whites and the Browns were equal.

PART III
The Lion’s Fall

1
The First Martyr

The white soldiers stopped when they saw Mangal falling over on the maidan. They quickly stood in a line and raised their bayonets, paying homage to the dead soldiers. The sight of death melts even a demon, bringing out the divine from within. Neither the white men nor the brown had become too beastly to insult someone in death.

Mangal’s leg moved. Thinking it to be the last struggle of a dying man, the white company did not rush forward. Then, Mangal’s hand too stirred.

‘Pandey seems alive,’ the leader said. Now the leader and a few soldiers marched forward. They were ready to respect Mangal if he was dead, but not if he was alive. Mangal was a rebel and a murderer. They saw that Mangal had opened his eyes. One bullet would not kill Mangal, a strong and muscular man. One more shot required to finish his life. His body did not have enough strength to pick up the rifle and fire another shot.
Mangal looked around and grinned. The surrounding soldiers were furious to see the glee on his face. The leader ordered to pick up Mangal and send him to the infirmary. The hospitals for the white and brown soldiers were separate in the military. Mangal was taken to the place where brown soldiers were treated.

After two days, Mangal became stable, yet he did not have enough strength to live for long. Moreover, he had rebelled against the Company, murdering white soldiers in front of witnesses. The military law was eager to punish the criminal. Ignoring physical pain, Mangal had begun doing most of the chores on his own. The military court immediately started its procedure, quickly going through evidence against Mangal. Mangal, who was presented in the court as a murderer, pleaded guilty. He did not protest when he was taken to the court even though his wounds were sore. In the court, Mangal declared that the Company Sarkar was against soldiers’ religion and humiliated them now and again. He stated that he was devoted to the Company and was prepared to sacrifice his life for it, but the Company had betrayed him, not appreciating his commitment. For these reasons, he confessed that he felt duty-bound to overthrow the Company’s regime. Mangal said that he did not have a personal enmity with the soldiers he had murdered, presenting instances of how he had saved many white soldiers in battles. He believed in disrupting the system that was against his religion; he saw the brown and white officers as agents of this system and, it was his duty to eliminate them. He confessed that he had felt sad while attacking the white officers, but he had to ignore the feeling to perform what he thought to be his duty. He admitted that he did not consider the murders as criminal acts. Mangal said that he would gladly undergo any punishment because he knew that eventually justice favoured the mighty.

Even while making his defence, injured Mangal did ask for a table to sit, he did not ask for water to drink, or he did not seek time off to gather strength. The court did not appreciate his defence, because it did not sound true. Whenever an individual confronts society, the individual’s ideals are condemned because those who represent society pass the judgment. The state is also a part of larger society, isn’t it? At last, Mangal was found guilty of murders and the court sentenced him to death. He was sentenced to be hanged till dead.

Mangal Pandey was not surprised by the judgment. He smiled and addressed a white soldier standing next to him,

‘Once again, I will be born and act according to my destiny. One body will die and the soul will seek another body for itself.’

Hindus, who thought death to be just a change of bodies, could easily embrace death. Mangal was an example in front of all. Mangal’s wounds were still sore. Would he be hanged in this state? All brown soldiers discussed this question. They also debated if they should begin the revolt soon as a protest against Mangal’s sentence. One section of the Hindi soldiers was keen to begin the revolt; another wanted to ignore Mangal, since he had disrupted the plot. Both the factions left the question to the leaders. They had not imagined that Mangal, who had not fully recovered yet, would be hanged within ten days. It was planned that Saiyad would go over there and any how make off with Mangal. Before Saiyad could reach there to save Mangal, he was hanged to death.

The administration was prepared to execute the sentence sooner, but they could not find a hangman to do the job. The executioners backed out when they learnt that the criminal was a Brahmin; some of them refused to do the job, when they came to know that the criminal was Mangal, a soldier who wanted to fight the Company. The white officers felt that a delay
in execution would increase problems. To avoid further complications, they secretly summoned a hangman from Kolkata. They informed Mangal about the execution.

‘I am long ready. I was surprised why you took so many days!’ Mangal got up, not paying heed to the pain in the wounds.

‘Do you have any last wish?’ the officer asked the routine question posed to the prisoner who was going to face the noose.

‘My wish? Well, it will be fulfilled!’

‘Tell us your wish. Would you like to have sweetmeats?’

‘Yuk! I am not a Brahmin who indulges in eating sweets. I have observed fasts to purify myself before death.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I want to be born again, so that I am sentenced to death once again—this cycle of my birth and death should continue till my country becomes independent. That is my wish.’

The white soldiers were amazed at Mangal’s bold words. They took him to the gallows, set up in a small maidan. Except a few white soldiers, the maidan was deserted. They had taken care to exclude brown soldiers and officers from this procedure. Mangal, who looked peaceful, glanced around the maidan. His eyes were fixed on the gallows. The structure meant for hanging became invisible by an image—Rudradatta’s face emerged there.

Mangal rubbed his eyes. The white soldiers took this as Mangal’s fright. They were naturally pleased to see Mangal trying to see the gallows clearly. The executioners often become happy when they see the convict feeling even a tinge of repentance at the time of death.

‘Why, what happened? Don’t be scared at the last moment,’ a white officer consoled Mangal.

Mangal looked at him. For a while, his eyes became fiery. The white officer shivered at the thought that Mangal might become aggressive. Mangal looked at the gallows once again, and, with a calm face did a namaskar to Guru Rudradatta’s face. He realised that the death sentence could not prevent crimes from taking place; and, similarly, murders could not change anyone’s heart. The shackles of foreign rule would be broken not by a weapons, but by courage; not by daggers, but by intelligence; not by swords, but by long-term consistent efforts. Mangal wished to be born again, and he wished to meet his death for the sake of Hindustan’s liberation. He now thought that probably the soldiers whom he had killed might have asked the same cycle of birth and death to keep Hindustan enslaved by the Company!

‘Let’s move ahead, Pandey! It is pointless to think over things now!’ one of the soldiers said.

Mangal laughed and said,

‘Don’t think that I am scared of death. I was just thinking that you might later find the murders I committed as a futile action. Just as I find the death punishment meaningless!’
‘Have you now understood all this?’

The question provoked Mangal. With a stern face, he forcefully pulled the handcuffs, breaking its chain. He held the chain and made a gesture to the soldiers around as if attacking them. He might have killed one more man there, but Mangal did not want to commit one more murder. He began walking towards the gallows and jumped onto the stand as if he was an adventurer setting out on a long journey.

‘Pandey, your money. What do you want us to do with them?’

‘My money? How much is it?’

‘Six rupees. We found them in your prison cell.’

‘Give me the money.’

He took the bills and then said,

‘Buy toys of two rupees and give the toys to the dead sahibs’ children. They are my gifts to them. I had nothing against those sahibs.’

‘Okay.’

‘Give two rupees to the Brahmin who would perform my last rites.’

‘Fine.’

‘And... And give two rupees to that hangman.’

Amazed to hear this, everyone around fondly looked at Mangal. The gesture of giving away two rupees to the hangman was a strange, yet a great example of generosity.

The hangman came forward and began arranging the noose. Mangal stopped him and said,

‘Don’t bother yourself. Give me the noose,’ saying this, Mangal put the noose around his neck. The hangman brought the mask to cover Mangal’s face.

‘Don’t! I don’t want to die in dark. I am not scared of death. I want to stare at death’s eyes.’

In a moment, Mangal forcefully hit the board on which he stood. The board broke off. Mangal cried,

‘Jai Mahadev!’

Mangal’s body swung on the rope, and in a moment, he was dead. The brave man, who wanted to overthrow the Company Sarkar, left the world. His last words, ‘Jai Mahadev’, reverberated around. All present there were stupefied by the way Mangal met his end.

Mangal became the first martyr of the revolt.
2

Wide Open Eyes

Kalyani heard the jackals crying in the middle of the night. It was not unusual for jackals to cry at night. Villagers everywhere heard such cries after sunset. When our mind is not preoccupied, we can hear nature’s fascinating voices.

Kalyani first assumed that the jackals were crying in pain. And then, Kalyani thought that her assumption might be wrong. She tried hard to hear a voice of excitement in their howling. It is debatable whether human beings are intelligent or not. Even if we consider human beings unintelligent, we cannot deny that sometimes they collectively come up with wise ideas. We do not like jackals howling in the night. Kalyani, too, did not like the cries during that dark night.

Kalyani thought: Do jackals, known for their cleverness, cry in the night to tell their tragic stories? Is it possible that they have something else to tell? Perhaps, they are singing songs of pleasure after catching a game!

Kalyani shivered when she thought about hunting. Like beasts, human beings also kill to fill their stomach. Few animals live on grass and leaves. Lucy had once posed the question, how animals were enslaved by human beings! The cow eats grass and leaves, yet human beings domesticate it. We cannot, however, tame a meat-eating lion. This is how the world works: kill someone else for your survival. This is the reason why the jackals are happy after killing an animal.

Even human beings are like other animals. Good food delights them, too. How many Hindus eat vegetarian food? A few Brahmans and Baniyas living in the north and south of Hind; andsome communities of Gujarat. The meat eaters always and everywhere defeat the vegetarians.

Kalyani laughed. The Rajputs, Muslims, Marathas and Sikhs also eat flesh, yet they could not build successful kingdoms. If anyone could win a battle by eating meat, how could Gautam go out and fight? Gautam strictly practices all the rituals expected of a Brahmin and yet his skills as a fighter are excellent. Tryambak also appreciates Gautam’s ability in battles.

Kalyani thought about Gautam and wars: the wars keep me away from Gautam. Why do people fight like beasts and birds? How are human beings different from beasts and birds? How do people embark on wars, leaving their loved ones behind? Can’t we find out another way to resolve our problems? Do Gods fight wars?

Yes, they do! Gods had fought with demons! Gods, demons, birds, beasts and human beings—all wage wars. Why do we have a God that is a symbol of destruction? Why do Gods create what they want to destroy eventually? Don’t Gods make our fun, when they create us and then also decide our end in death?

Suddenly, Kalyani heard an owl hooting on a tree outside. Kalyani shivered to hear that ominous call. An owl’s calls were not unusual in the village. Yet, it was definitely scary to hear them. Kalyani got up from the bed and covered her ears with her palms. She still heard the hooting. Kalyani shouted,

‘Go away, you horrible bird!’
‘What happened, Kalyani?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Dadaji, you are still awake!’

‘Yes, I am. You can’t sleep it seems.’

‘No, I can’t. I don’t know why.’

‘Are you scared of the owl?’

‘No, I am not scared of the bird, but its hooting is disgusting.’

‘Ignore your superstitions, Kalyani. The owl is made by God, isn’t it?’

Kalyani did not respond to this comment. The owl kept hooting. Kalyani began tying a knot to the sacred thread lying close by. The bird hooted once again.

Kalyani tied another knot. People believed that if someone tied seven knots on a thread while listening to an owl’s seven calls, that person would be able to avoid seven dangers in life.

‘If I can tie seven knots, I would tie the thread on Gautam’s arm.’

Kalyani heard the fourth call and then the fifth. The owl became quiet. Kalyani’s heart began beating faster.

‘Will it hoot twice more?’

She heard the sixth one. Kalyani’s hand trembled, and the thread dropped from her hand.

A lamp flickered in a corner of the room, but its light could not help to find out the thread in dark. Kalyani began groping around. Her hands lay on the thread after rummaging the bed. Right then, the owl hooted the seventh time. Kalyani tied one more knot—and then realised that she had had tied six knots though the owl had given seven calls. She waited for the owl to give a call once again. The bird did not open its mouth for a long time. Kalyani was getting impatient: Will my efforts go waste for just one knot?

Swishing its wings in the dark night, the bird flew over the ashram and perched on another tree.

Annoyed, Kalyani flung away the thread in the room. The owl hooted once again! Right then, they all heard someone knocking the ashram’s gate.

‘Who could this be?’ asked Tryambak, who was sleeping in a far corner.

‘Open the gate!’ the stranger at the gate shouted.

‘Who is this?’ Kalyani asked in a trembling voice. She was already scared because of the hooting owl. Besides, after Gautam left, she remained anxious, as if sensing a danger almost everywhere. Kalyani had become superstitious, always thinking what was auspicious and
what was not. Rudradatta often told her that these beliefs reflected our deep-set fears, yet Kalyani’s joy and sadness depended on insignificant events.

‘Whoever that may be, you better go to sleep,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Hurry up, open the gate!’ the man outside was getting impatient.

‘Tryambak, open the gate,’ Rudradatta said.

Tryambak went out and saw four soldiers at the gate.

‘Whom do you want to see?’ asked Tryambak.

‘Rudradatta.’

‘Your name?’

‘You don’t have to know our names.’

‘Tell me your names. I will not let you in otherwise.’

‘We thought everyone was welcome in Rudradatta’s ashram any time of the day.’

Tryambak raised his lamp and carefully saw the young soldier standing in front of him. The soldier had a delicate, but bright face.

‘Tryambak, let them come in,’ Rudradatta said from inside.

‘Guruji, they are soldiers,’ said Tryambak. He disliked soldiers after the experience of the cavalry team that had come over in search of Gautam. Moreover, the hardened soldiers failed to understand the greatness of his guru. This gave Tryambak one more reason to hate the men in uniforms.

‘Let them in, whoever they are. They must be looking for a place to stay for the night.’ Tryambak opened the gate reluctantly.

‘I will come in alone. The others will wait outside,’ the young soldier said and walked in.

‘I want to see Rudradatta,’ the soldier said.

‘Meet him in the morning. He is in bed,’ said Tryambak.

‘Wake him up. I think you are Tryambak, aren’t you?’ said the soldier.

Tryambak was surprised to hear his name from this stranger. They heard the clacking of guruji’s sabots. The soldier and Tryambak both looked in the direction of the door. Rudradatta came out in the veranda, and doing a namaskar to the soldier, said,

‘Welcome to our ashram!’
The soldier kept looking at the guru for a few moments. Then, looking down, he walked towards Rudradatta. When he reached close to Rudradatta, he said,

‘Mangal was hanged to death!’

‘Hmmm…’

Tryambak was shocked to hear that one of his mates was no more.

‘So you know about it?’

‘Yes.’

‘When did you learn about his death?’

‘Well…I had my doubts…’ said Rudradatta, avoiding a straight reply.

‘And where is Gautam?’ asked Kalyani, who had crept in behind Rudradatta, as if hiding herself.

‘He is in prison.’

‘Is he? I didn’t know about this,’ Rudradatta’s face betrayed anxiety for the first time.

‘But why? Who put him behind bars?’ asked Kalyani in a fearful voice. She heard the owl hooting in distance.

‘The Company Sarkar took action against him.’

‘Why?’ asked Tryambak.

‘Reasons are not yet clear, but I have heard that he tried to pick out bones from ashes where Mangal was cremated. He was planning to perform Mangal’s last ceremony’

‘What is wrong with it?’

‘The Company thinks that Gautam must be a rebel, because he tried to perform a ceremony for a rebel!’

They all became quiet. Kalyani had taken the lamp from Tryambak. While she was looking at everyone’s faces there, the lamp dropped from her hand.

It was all dark now. Did the darkness reflect everyone’s feelings?

‘Doesn’t matter. Kalyani, Go inside and light the lamp again,’ said Rudradatta.

After spending a few moments in dark, eyes get adjusted to it and begin deciphering figures and shapes around. Kalyani brought the lamp. In the light, she looked restless, as if trying hard to reach a decision!
‘Maharan! Welcome to my ashram. My hut doesn’t have the space like your palaces!’ said Rudradatta.

The soldier, Tryambak and Kalyani were confused at these words. Who was a Maharani here?

‘Are you addressing me as a maharani?’ the young soldier asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I recognized you as soon as you walked in.’

‘Guruji, you are teasing me. I had no idea you would do this to me!’ the soldier said. Tryambak and Kalyani now noticed that the soldier’s face was delicate and the voice was soft. They both immediately guessed who that maharani was, though not sure about it.

‘Who is she? The maharani of...’ asked Kalyani.

‘These days everything is turning into a joke in Aryavart,’ said Rudradatta.

‘That is why I have come all the way to seek your blessings,’ the maharani said.

Tryambak and Kalyani had heard guruji referring to Jhansi’s Lakshmibai as a maharani. Could this be Lakshmibai, the renowned rani of Jhansi?

‘I knew that one day, you will definitely come over here,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Now that everyone else is hopeless and worn out, I have to act.’

‘Good to see you here. I can no more leave Vihar and go on a long journey.’

‘Guruji, Mangal has gone and we don’t know what will be Gautam’s fate. The fire is consuming all your children. How long will you be confined in Vihar?’

‘Maharani, don’t get impatient!’

‘Don’t call me a maharani. I lost the status long back.’

Her words reflected the flames that howled within that sharp, lightning-bright, brave woman.

‘The royal seat doesn’t make a maharani. In the new world, the maharanis will live in modest houses and move about bare feet.’

‘I am already there,’ she laughed feebly.

‘I know it, my child. I can see that this is how, one day, we shall have maharanis all around.’

‘We won’t live long enough to see those days.’

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‘You are tired. Go to sleep now.’

‘Guruji, you might be feeling sleepy. After having lost your support, Chhabili cannot go to sleep.’

Kalyani and Tryambak were now sure that the woman was indeed Lakshmibai.

‘Chhabili, my child, I bless all your efforts. People will forever remember your name. Although I know that a lesser mortal like me can do little, I, too, cannot sleep peacefully. You have unnecessarily elevated me to the status of a guru.’

Rudradatta could not sleep for the few hours of the night. Chhabili required rest after a long journey. Kalyani made a comfortable bed for the maharani, who was going to earn fame in the entire Hind. Lakshmibai did not sleep there and chose to sleep in the simple bed next to Kalyani. Women find comfort even in a narrow space. A flower looks beautiful in a flowerpot; it looks lovely even in a garland with other flowers. Before falling asleep, Lakshmibai stroked Kalyani’s head for a while. Kalyani, who had always lived alone, trembled at this shower of affection.

Those quiet hours of night induced everyone to a deep sleep. Even the constellations in the sky closed their eyes, every now and then. Lakshmibai tolerated the hard bed and lay still for a long time, not wanting to disturb Kalyani. Kalyani, although eager to know more about Gautam, pretended to sleep because she wanted the maharani to take rest for the night.

Two human beings, lying next to each other, cannot hide their restlessness for long. Darkness cannot hide a sleepless soul for long, if someone is around to know about it.

‘Kalyani, haven’t you fallen asleep yet?’ asked Lakshmibai softly.

‘No. You, too, are awake!’

‘Do I trouble you in any way? I shall sleep somewhere else.’

‘You may go away if I make you uncomfortable.’

‘No, I want you to be comfortable.’

‘I am fine. I feel better because of you.’

‘Why? Are you worried about something?’

‘Yes. I am worried about Gautam. He is in prison, isn’t he?’

‘Why should that upset you so much?’

Kalyani did not answer, but Lakshmibai sensed that Kalyani’s body shivered in nervous excitement while talking about Gautam.

They heard sabots stepping towards them.
‘Who could this be?’ Lakshmibai asked.

‘It is me. I can’t sleep so…” said Rudradatta.

‘The cock has not cried yet, dadaji. You can easily get some sleep before the sun rises,’ Kalyani wanted dadaji to sleep for some time.

‘My dear, birds and people living on earth may make an error in judging time, but stars don’t. It is almost dawn. You all go to sleep. I shall go to the river,’ saying so, Rudradatta walked towards the gate.

Someone’s sabots clacked behind him.

‘Who is this?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Tryambak, guruji!’ the student, keen to join guruji for a bath, said.

‘You, too, could not sleep, it seems.’

‘No.’

‘No one could sleep tonight. We all are awake!’ said Lakshmibai, but no one responded to it.

It was right. That night, no one could close eyes even for a few moments.

3
The Departure

Rudradatta and Tryambak left for the river. Lakshmibai asked Kalyani,

‘Kalyani, can you ride a horse?’

‘I have not practised horse-riding for a long time.’

‘So, you have learnt it at least.’

‘Why do you ask this?’

‘If in case I abduct you, you should be able to ride a horse on your own.’

‘Why do you want to abduct me?’

‘If Rudradatta refuses to step out of Vihar, we shall have to think of a way out!’

‘Why do you think dadaji is so important?’

‘If he doesn’t lead us, the revolt will fail.’

‘Why do you say so?’
‘Well...He can jolt all the countries of Asia and push them to act.’

‘But then, why are the Asian countries still lying inactive?’

‘Because Rudradatta began living like an ascetic at a critical time.’

‘Will dadaji participate in the state affairs once again?’

‘He may. For your sake!’

‘I have no idea how dadaji will continue to live. But I know that I will definitely leave Vihar.’

‘Why?’ Lakshmibai asked, startled.

‘Gautam is in prison.’

‘What will you do, if he is in prison?’

‘I will get him out of the jail.’

‘All alone?’

‘Yes, if no one helps me, I will go all alone.’

Lakshmibai’s eyes became wide with surprise. Kalyani’s words also made her hopeful of getting Rudradatta out of Vihar. Till then, Rudradatta had stubbornly refused to move out of his ashram; once he came out of the village, it would be possible to make him participate in the revolt. Mangal, Gautam, Tatyasahib and Mahavir had failed to convince Rudradatta to support and direct the uprising. Lakshmibai accepted the challenge of bringing in Rudradatta. All the leaders felt that Rudradatta’s minor role could make the uprising successful. Now, it seemed likely that Rudradatta would pick up weapons for the sake of Kalyani. When Lakshmibai learnt about Kalyani’s resolution to get out of Vihar for the sake of Gautam, Rudradatta’s support to the rebellion seemed a clear possibility.

Kalyani had become restless after learning about Mangal’s death and Gautam’s imprisonment. Will Gautam meet the same end? The thought filled her mind with fears. How could Gautam be hanged when Rudradatta, a holy maharshi, is still alive? My life would be meaningless if Gautam rots in prison, Kalyani thought. Kalyani, thinking fast, came to a decision: I would go and get Gautam out of prison—if no one helps me in this, Tryambak will definitely do so. She was even prepared to go out all alone to do what she wanted to. She had concluded that she would not continue living her insignificant, though promising, life without Gautam.

If Rudradatta doesn’t allow me to set out for this adventure? If he doesn’t want me to venture out, he should try to free Gautam! It is likely that Rudradatta, who no longer wields weapons, would not support the cause of the armed rebellion. Kalyani knew how sensitive Rudradatta was, and how strong-headed he could be.

‘Dadaji! They have put Gautam in jail,’ Kalyani began talking with Rudradatta as soon as he came back from the river. Kalyani’s voice sounded eager, as eager as any woman would be to embrace her man. When a man and a woman want to be one, even the Himalayas cannot
block their way. Looking at Kalyani, Rudradatta imagined all the instances where the masculine and the feminine passionately sought each other. No power is capable of preventing this union—the union that holds the seeds of life. Rudradatta replied,

‘Yes, my child, he will be out of jail.’

‘Who will bring him out?’

‘God will do it.’

Kalyani could not leave the matter to God at that moment. She asked,

‘May I go and do something?’

Rudradatta stood still, affectionately gazing at Kalyani. He could see that the girl was not a fledgling anymore, ready to stay put in the nest, grateful to God. She wanted to fly, explore life, and struggle to achieve that for which she was brought up. Should the nurturer be jealous of the young’s potential? Or, should the nurturer appreciate the young’s strength and consider it a result of his efforts?

‘Good,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Should I start right now?’

‘As you wish. Take Tryambak along.’

‘Then, who would look after you?’ Kalyani asked affectionately.

‘Don’t worry about me.’

Kalyani fondly looked at Rudradatta and then said,

‘Why don’t you come over with us?’ implored Kalyani, in a touching voice. She appealed to her grandfather, who was a human being, not a God; a patriarch, not an ascetic. He was a mortal after all, a grand old man!

‘Yes, guruji, why don’t you come over!’ said Lakshmibai, noticing the opportunity to insist what she wanted to say.

A man might refuse his son’s request, but how could he disappoint the family’s daughter? A daughter is all tenderness, all compassion. How could he refuse a daughter’s request?

Rudradatta smiled, as if sunshine fell on the Himalayas! He answered,

‘I could have said no to one daughter, but how do I let down my two daughters?’

‘And daughters rarely ask for something,’ said Lakshmibai.

‘I shall come over with you on one condition!’ said Rudradatta.

‘Okay, no one will ask you to use weapons,’ said maharani.
‘I am bound by a pledge so…’

‘What do you want, guruji?’

‘Whenever I ask the revolutionaries to drop their weapons, they will have to obey me! If you agree to this term, I shall come over with you and support you all.’

Lakshmibai considered Rudradatta’s condition. Rudradatta had disappointed all the revolutionaries till now. He had refused to support them. Maharani, who had come over to make the last effort, did succeed in her efforts, but Rudradatta’s condition seemed to make the revolt a futile exercise. The uprising depended on weapons!

‘Don’t think for long. You want to overthrow the Company, don’t you?’ asked Rudradatta.

‘Yes.’

‘Even I want to achieve the same end. The British rule hasn’t become the golden thread uniting the people of Hind. Instead, it has turned into a python that swallows people. Such a python cannot move around after gorging itself on people.’

‘Then, how would we fight such a python without weapons?’

‘I have quit weapons after using them for years. I have learnt my lessons. I am sure you don’t pass off as foolishness what I have learnt after a long struggle!’

Lakshmibai thought deeply about what Rudradatta said. Kalyani asked,

‘Dadaji, what shall we do about Gautam?’

‘We shall go there. We shall go there today.’

Hearing these words, Kalyani became very happy—as if Gautam was already out of jail. She lost interest in the revolt. Kalyani’s aim was not to defeat the Company. She was committed to Gautam, not in the momentary power play. She did respect the leaders of the uprising, but Gautam was her life. Gautam was a man of education with refined manners; besides, he lived a life full of adventure, with courage and confidence; he was as fearsome as tornado and as tender as a breeze.

‘Why don’t you come over to Jhansi?’ asked Lakshmibai.

‘I don’t mind coming over there. But if you want my support, let me decide where I will stay.’

‘That’s fine. But how about the condition you have put forward? Will everyone accept it?’

‘That is your problem.’

‘I believe that the revolutionaries should seek your support, even if they have to give up weapons. But shrimant and badshah should also accept your condition. I will make efforts to convince all, once you join us.’
‘We don’t have time left. The chosen day is now close.’

‘Yes, guruji. I request you that you should come along with us.’

‘No, maharani, you go ahead. I will take another route and see you after one month.’

‘In the meanwhile, we all would be ready with the next action plan.’

‘I shall come to know about the plan. If you consider me to be more important than your weapons, I will meet you all. Otherwise, I will stay in Vihar.’

‘Okay, guruji.’

‘Vihar means unrestricted freedom to wander around.’

‘What?’

‘And it also means a wandering in the heaven.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘I have lived a long life. My heart seeks a new light now. And, if my body hinders the passage of the new light to my heart, the body will suffer a fall.’

‘Don’t say such words guruji! Your old body is precious to us.’

‘Does the body hold any value at all?’

‘Why not? The soul resides in it.’

‘Yes, but when the body stops being a dwelling place for the soul, the soul discovers another body to live in. Therefore, I don’t fret about my body.’

Rudradatta spoke effortlessly and in a simple language, yet his message had immense power. He often discussed subjects like life, death, body and soul. Many Hindustani men talked similar ideas, but Rudradatta’s words conveyed a different meaning to listeners. Those who met him and talked to him felt that Rudradatta looked like someone who had original ideas; in fact, they felt that every original thinker in the world must be like Rudradatta in speech and looks.

Lakshmibai succeeded in drawing Rudradatta in the uprising. Although the condition put forward by Rudradatta was strange, they all were happy that he had at last supported the cause of revolt. Kalyani could compel Rudradatta to come out of his life of vanaprasthasram. The rishi, who stubbornly refused to step out of Vihar, had agreed to travel to the northeast. This was indeed an astonishing achievement for Kalyani.

Lakshmibai left Vihar to discuss Rudradatta’s terms with other revolutionaries. Rudradatta gave the charge of the ashram to a student and then announced that he was going for a holy bath at Prayag, taking along Kalyani and Tryambak. A few aged villagers wished to join them for the pilgrimage and even suggested they all should form a procession so that many other
people could join on the way. Rudradatta declined the proposal and said that they all would go on such a pilgrimage later.

‘We shall feel lonely without your guardianship,’ said Rudradatta’s one follower.

‘He is up there taking our care! God doesn’t desert us,’ Rudradatta consoled him.

‘Punditji, you bring honour to the village. Scholars, patrons and members of royal families visit the village because of you,’ one villager said.

‘The way through Vihar has become a popular route for people,’ said another local man.

‘We began earning a little because of the ashram,’ commented another.

‘Village now faces fewer quarrels,’ said a man with gratitude in voice.

‘You are generous enough to believe that I brought the change. In fact, Vihar gave me a shelter when I came here. How can I forget the day?’ at last Rudradatta said.

‘Guruji, when will you return to the ashram?’ a student eagerly asked what many others wanted to.

‘I shall return to Vihar after taking a bath in the holy rivers, and after a darshan at Kashi Vishveshwar. I will not take long.’

Rudradatta, Kalyani and Tryambak left the village that evening at an auspicious time. Someone advised against a night journey. Hence, they arranged for a halt after travelling for about six kilometres.

‘Bapji, why did you refuse to travel by a cart?’ someone asked.

‘We are pilgrims. Pilgrims walk down to the seat of God!’

‘But the distance is of thousands of kilometres!’

‘I have offered Gangotri waters to Rameshwar temple. I am not going on a pilgrimage for the first time!’

Before leaving the village, they went to Bhairavanath shrine for the evening arati. The drum began beating and the bells started ringing when Rudradatta visited the shrine. They received the warmth of arati lamps on their hands, eyes and head. The temple pujari met Rudradatta. The pujari was appointed years ago, almost about the same time when the ashram was set up in Vihar. Since those days, both the men met each other regularly on the shrine’s premises. On that evening, Rudradatta warmly embraced the pujari in front of Lord Bhairavanath. The pujari gave a small chandan ball to Rudradatta and said,

‘Punditji, keep this carefully.’

‘Lord Shankar will rule wherever we go!’ said Rudradatta and went ahead to the river. The ferryman asked him,
“Bapji, when will you return to Vihar?”

“As soon as I complete the pilgrimage.”

“May I come along?”

“You will come over, even if I say no to you.”

“No, I won’t. But bapji, for many years I wish to go on a darshan. I have not set out of the village for a long time. With your blessings, I can also take a bath in the Ganga.”

“You have powerful people blessing you and protecting you.”

“Who will protect me, bapji?” aghast, the ferryman asked.

“Yes, yes, you do have others to take care of you.”

“No one is more powerful than you, bapji!”

“The Company Sarkar is more powerful than me.”

“Oh, the Company. Who knows the Company here? We know you, bapji. You are greater than anyone we know. The village will be lifeless in your absence,” the ferryman sounded confused.

“Everyone has to come to a place and get out of it at the decided time. By the way, Shankar, how is your son?”

“Don’t you know about him? He has taken up a job with the priest sahib.”

“Has he? Then, he must have gone along with him to the village where the priest is posted.”

“Yes, bapji!”

“I am going to see the priest sahib on my way.”

“Good, bapji! Meet my son there.”

The boat reached the other bank and the three of them got off the boat.

“Bless me, bapji!” the ferryman kept repeating the words.

Till the three pilgrims became invisible, the villagers stood there affectionately looking at them. The village became lifeless without Rudradatta.

Climbing up a hill, Rudradatta asked,

“Kalyani, won’t you get tired of this journey?”

“No, dadaji, I won’t,” said Kalyani. Already thinking about meeting Gautam, Kalyani wanted to reach Prayag soon.
'We are not travelling for long today,' said Rudradatta.

'I don’t mind a long journey either.’

'We shall spend the night in the forest.’

'Why?’

'My ghost hovers around in the forest.’

'What? A ghost? Your ghost?’ said Tryambak, surprised.

'Why, are you scared of ghosts, Tryambak?’

'So long as you are around, I fear nothing.’

'Tryambak, guruji won’t live forever!’

'You will always live in my heart.’

'Is it? Then you will have to prove it today. Even if Rudradatta vanishes right in front of you, you should believe him to be alive.’

'What? What all are youtalking?’

'Nothing that should surprise you. I have seen eighty summers. I am old now. And all old people die.’

'Guruji, you have never talked about death before.’

'I have reasons to talk about death. When I am not physically present here, you will have to make efforts to keep my soul alive. You will have to perform my shradh ceremony. I wish you do it.’

'Guruji, let’s not talk about all this. It is unbearable to imagine what you are talking about. See, Kalyani is crying.’

'You succeed in life when you turn the unbearable into bearable.’

The three travellers kept walking in dark. Although it was summer, because of the dense forest, the night was cold. The trees looked like ghosts dancing around to frighten the travellers. The gentle, whispering breeze seemed to convey a mysterious message from an unknown world. The ceaseless rustling of leaves made Kalyani and Tryambak more and more anxious.

Like the wide and deep sky above them, Rudradatta walked ahead, guiding their way. The jackals had long begun to bark. The crickets’ songs fused life in the night. An owl hooted somewhere deep into the forest. Once in a while, bats flew quickly over their heads.

In the middle of that bizarre night, Rudradatta turned and in his deep, resonating voice said,
'Come, I will show you my ghost.'

4
The Ghost

For the first time in his life, Tryambak shivered out of fear. Kalyani’s teeth chattered as a chill passed through her body in the cold of night. Rudradatta, who normally appeared like a vast, quiet ocean, seemed like a titanic wave that night. Would the wave sink them in the deep, or just sway them gently for a while and subside forever? Kalyani held Tryambak’s hand.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ said Rudradatta and then leaned on a large rock. The moon had already risen in the sky.

‘We shall spend the night here,’ announced Rudradatta.

They had cut through about nine kilometres. At the touch of moonlight, the frightening night had become beautiful, and the eerie forest looked poetic. Yet, Kalyani and Tryambak were scared and wondered what was going to happen. Rudradatta, a yogi, looked like a mysterious shaman today. Will he really invoke a ghost, Kalyani and Tryambak thought.

‘Let us sit here for a while,’ said Rudradatta. Rudradatta and Kalyani sat on the ground, a little away from each other. Tryambak stood near them. Rudradatta pulled Kalyani close to him and made her lean on him. Kalyani’s white cloth fluttered in the breeze, as if the Ganga flowed down from the top of the Himalaya.

‘My child, long back Rudradatta was a frightening figure!’

Hearing these words, Kalyani tightly held Rudradatta’s arm. They all were quiet for a while.

‘Tryambak, why don’t you sit?’ Tryambak sat there, humbly following his guru’s instruction.

‘See that rock,’ said Rudradatta.

Kalyani and Tryambak looked at the rock, which was as large as a small hill; its height was hardly a hundred feet, but had a length of about thousand feet. Though it looked beautiful like a painting, the hill did not stand out among a number of such hillocks.

‘Apparently, the rock does not have anything exceptional,’ said Rudradatta. Kalyani and Tryambak agreed.

‘My ghost is hiding in that rock!’ Now the hillock looked scary. This is how words change the world around. Kalyani and Tryambak began noticing a ghost’s eyes and hair in the rock’s caverns and bushes. They also felt that some corners of the rock mysteriously glowed sometimes.

‘Would you like to see that ghost?’

Tryambak became alert, assuming that his guru had come to know about his fear. Tryambak believed that Rudradatta could know everything, even what was going to happen. The young
student proudly said that nothing could scare him. He sensed that night that his arrogance was misplaced. He immediately said,

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t want to see the ghost,’ said Kalyani.

‘I am with you all,’ said Rudradatta.

‘No, not even if you are with us. How can I see your ghost?’ said Kalyani, shivering with fear.

‘The ghost will vanish today.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kalyani was now filled with fear of what was going to happen next.

‘I will be with you, but the ghost will go away.’

‘I am scared, dadaji!’

‘Crazy girl, it is just a ghost after all! How can it scare you? I want to show my ghost to the whole world!’

‘I can’t bear the thought anymore.’

‘Then, how would you go and fight for Gautam? Don’t you want him to be free? I want you to see something that existed long back, but is insubstantial now. A ghost, after all! When you will fight for Gautam, you will face tall, strong men pointing guns at you!’

Kalyani became still, gathering courage. She can’t fear a ghost and claim herself to be a brave woman. She must be strong enough to face a ghost, if she wished to fight armed guards to free Gautam. A ghost cannot be more fearsome than death, she thought.

But how I can see dadaji’s ghost, Kalyani wondered. This was the real reason of her fear. She did not fear a ghost as such, but she did shiver to think about her dadaji’s ghost.

‘If I have to see dadaji’s ghost to free Gautam from jail, nothing is wrong with it,’ decided Kalyani. Rudradatta knew that Kalyani was becoming firm about what she was going to face. He said,

‘My child, the ghost does not reside in that rock. My emotions live there!’

‘I will face even a ghost, if I have to dadaji!’ said Kalyani.

‘Okay,’ said Rudradatta and got up. In the moonlight, tall, strong Rudradatta looked like a messiah, with a calm face and ruffled hair. Kalyani noticed that Rudradatta was a little taller than Tryambak. This fact, something that she carefully noted for the first time, astonished Kalyani.

‘Tryambak, move this boulder,’ said Rudradatta, pointing at a big stone. Using all his force, Tryambak moved the stone, opening up a large cavity behind. It was pitch dark inside the hollow space.
'We have to go in,' said Rudradatta.

‘Dadaji, should I light a lamp?’ asked Kalyani.

‘Yes, do it. You are the light of life.’

Kalyani struck flint with an iron piece and lit a wad of cotton. She lit up a small piece of cloth with the help of cotton.

‘Let’s go in,’ said Rudradatta and began walking ahead. The light was not enough to dispel darkness; in fact, the little light made the cave look more fearsome. After walking for about ten steps, Rudradatta said,

‘Take care of the lamp, Kalyani, if it blows out, we shall be in trouble.’

Kalyani covered the lamp with her hand. Rudradatta stopped at a place and began moving a large boulder. Tryambak said,

‘Let me do it, guruji.’

‘No, this requires a trick, not power. It will not take long.’

The moment the rock rolled on one side, a gust of wind blew in from a hole, putting out the lamp. Kalyani and Tryambak became anxious at the surge of darkness.

‘Doesn’t matter. Light the lamp again,’ said Rudradatta.

Kalyani could light the lamp with after a couple of attempts. Holding the lamp, Rudradatta entered into the hole, waving at Kalyani and Tryambak. Both took time to go in as the lamp went off again. Rudradatta’s distant voice said,

‘Come over inside!’

First Kalyani and then Tryambak entered into the hole. They saw that Rudradatta had lit about four candles that stood in stands. In the light of the candles, they saw a door.

‘Pick up the candles,’ said Rudradatta.

They stood in front of the door, holding candles. Rudradatta pushed the door, which easily opened into a room as large as a meeting place for about hundred people. The room also had pillars for support and a few seats. Looking carefully, they noticed intricate carvings on the pillars. When their eyes shifted from the fine carvings, they were astonished to see that all the walls had hundreds of weapons hanging on them. In the light, the weapons gleamed, as if inviting the visitors to pick them up! Tryambak and Kalyani were aghast to see the armoury.

‘This is my collection,’ Rudradatta explained.

‘Why?’ asked Kalyani.
‘I was a soldier once!’

‘When was this?’ asked Tryambak.

‘About twenty years ago.’

Rudradatta was eighty then, which meant that he fought battles till the age of sixty! Kalyani and Tryambak imagined Rudradatta as a soldier—agile like a lion, full of vitality, with cruel eyes and bloody hands.

‘But this armoury is enough for a large army!’ said Tryambak.

‘Yes, that is what I did! I used to lead an army!’

‘How many such ammunition depots did you have?’ asked Kalyani.

‘Ten!’

‘What happened to them?’

‘All were wasted because they were not put to proper use.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Four such collections were used when Hind’s brothers fought with brothers!’

‘And other weapons?’

‘Three were wasted in Afghan, Russian and Chinese wars.’

‘Who wasted them there?’

‘I did it.’

‘How?’

‘I thought of triggering a revolt while living in other countries.’

‘Did you succeed in doing so?’

‘Yes, I did, but Hindustan was too cold to turn the sparks into a fire!’

‘And the remaining three stocks?’

‘They all were seized by the British.’

‘From whom?’

‘From peshwas and Pindharis. I am now left with only one armoury. This is it.’

‘Will you pass it on to the peshwas?’
‘That is why the revolutionaries insist that I should support them!’

‘Give them what they want. Why don’t you?’

‘They don’t deserve it.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘They are after their principality. No one wants a people’s state.’

‘But a king also represents his subjects.’

‘Such kings no longer exist in Hind. Some of these kings will die soon, and the rest will meet their death later.’

‘Then, why don’t you work towards establishing a people’s republic?’

‘When people are ready for such a state, and they wish for it, they will definitely get it.’

‘In spite of the Company?’

‘Even if God is controlling Hind, He cannot deny what people want!’

‘How about giving away these weapons to people?’ said Tryambak, like a true student, keen to realise guru’s wish.

‘People don’t require weapons.’

‘Why?’

‘People need to be strong and determined. Their determination will make the king and his kingdom meaningless.’

They all became quiet after this discussion. Rudradatta took a round of the room. The walls had spears, daggers, swords, jambiya, khukri, tiger nails and shields. Some of them were a little rusted, but even then, they looked strangely beautiful in the candle light. One entire wall was full of armours. Tryambak had never seen such variety of equipment used in battles. Kalyani was dazed, as if dreaming.

It would take anyone the entire night to see the weapons and armours hanging there. That room opened in another room and a long veranda with benches and chairs.

‘Let’s see a few other things,’ said Rudradatta. They entered into another room, as big as the first one. This had guns and pistols. They glanced through them and went into the next room. The third room was full of bigger guns and slings. A few bows and arrows, too, had found a place there.

‘We still have to check what is lying underground,’ said Rudradatta and pushed a wooden slab on the ground. A staircase in the tunnel led deep down in a roomful of ammunition. Kalyani was startled to see Rudradatta’s shadow on the wall. Rudradatta laughed and said,
'That is my ghost!'

Tryambak quietly looked at all the things and then asked,

‘Who owns all this?’

‘All this is mine.’

‘Its value must be lakhs of rupees.’

‘Oh. Crores, not lakhs.’

No one spoke for a while. A small piece of burning cloth dropped on the ground from Kalyani’s hand. Kalyani stamped on it to put it off. Rudradatta noticed it and said,

‘One such spark can light up an inferno here, destroying the armoury.’

‘Guruji, you should let this be put to a good use,’ said Tryambak.

‘I wish the same.’

‘How?’

‘I want to destroy all this.’

‘All this will be wasted, then!’

‘The world will celebrate the occasion when all the armaments will be destroyed from the surface of earth.’

‘Why?’

‘The power that we gain with the help of weapons is trivial—as trivial as the weapons themselves. Human beings will be free of all beastly traits the day they get rid of weapons.’

‘Guruji, how many soldiers can use this armoury for a war?’

‘One lakh soldiers can easily fight battles with this collection.’

They came up from the underground room. Kalyani asked,

‘Dadaji, the cave’s walls have carvings!’

‘Yes, but I have not done it. It was carved about thousand years ago.’

‘It is beautifully done. Who must have done it?’

‘A follower of Buddha had done it. Buddha could not bear the sigh of even a sheep, and I have collected weapons of destruction in a Buddhist cave!’
They moved to the first room of the cave. Rudradatta pointed to one sword and said,

‘Tryambak, see, that one is my sword.’

Kalyani and Tryambak looked at the sword and then at Rudradatta. Rudradatta was affectionately looking at the sword, as if looking at Kalyani. Brandishing that sword, how Rudradatta must have looked? Kalyani imagined a picture of fierce Rudradatta with red, cruel eyes. Kalyani feared the idea. She looked at Rudradatta. His eyes were full of compassion.

‘Today, the sword will melt,’ said Rudradatta.

They came out of the cave. It was midnight, the moon lit up the night with its steady light.

‘We shall sleep here,’ said Rudradatta pointing at a flat rock.

They spread their deerskin on the rock and lay there.

‘Kalyani, my child, go to sleep now.’

‘Guruji, I can’t understand something that you said,’ Tryambak addressed Rudradatta.

‘What is it?’

‘How come you have affection for the sword?’

Rudradatta laughed.

‘I won’t explain it to you now.’

‘When will you answer my question?’

‘In the morning. In the morning, when the sword will melt in fire.’

They went to sleep. The moon kept making its way through the stars, weaving dreams in the eyes of those who slept on the rock. Rudradatta’s soft voice woke them up a little before dawn. The moon had set, but the stars still lingered on in the sky.

‘Tryambak, Kalyani, get up now!’

‘Guruji!’ said Tryambak, getting up immediately.

‘Isn’t the night long...’ said Kalyani, still sleepy.

‘No, it is almost dawn.’

‘Okay,’ Kalyani got up.

‘Besides, after half-an-hour this place will be in turmoil.’

‘Why?’
'I have set fire to the ammunition!'

Tryambak and Kalyani got up and prepared to leave, scared and surprised by what Rudradatta said. They wound up their deerskin and began walking in dark.

When they had walked about hundred feet, they heard a howling gust of wind from the rock behind. They hesitated for a while, but then continued walking.

‘Guruji!’ Tryambak whispered and tightly squeezed Rudradatta’s arm, urging him to stand still.

‘What happened?’ asked Rudradatta and stopped there.

‘Don’t move!’

‘Why?’

‘A cobra is slithering away. It is right over your foot!’

Rudradatta and Kalyani saw a long black snake vanishing in the bushes. Rudradatta laughed and said,

‘That was my ghost! It has disappeared for good and forever!’

5
The Journey

They must have walked for hardly half-an-hour, when they heard an ear-splitting explosion that left the earth trembling for a few moments. They stopped where they were and experienced the reverberations passing through their bodies. Rudradatta looked behind. The sky was obscured by the clouds of smoke that were gradually blowing in all directions. The thudding noise of stones falling on the ground began filling the air.

‘My life’s one episode is over with this,’ said Rudradatta. Kalyani and Tryambak now understood that the thundering noise was due to the fire set to the ammunition in the caves. Kalyani could not think that the cave was also destroyed.

‘Dadaji, the cave had lovely carvings,’ she sighed.

‘Right, my child,’ Rudradatta agreed.

‘You should have given away the ammunition to those who were after it.’

‘Whom should I give it? Tell me.’

‘To Lakshmibai.’

‘I don’t want her to participate in violence.’
‘Then, you should have let the weapons lie in the cave.’

‘The Company Sarkar would have soon discovered the collection. I didn’t want the Company to butcher people with the help of the weapons. But, I am not the Company’s enemy either.’

‘Yet, you have encouraged those who want to overthrow the Company.’

‘Because it will benefit the Company. If the Company becomes involved with the people and creates a state, that state will be a permanent one. The administration that is isolated from its subjects is always short-lived.’

‘But, how would the company have learnt about your weapons?’

‘Let me tell you that the Company’s spies follow me everywhere. And recently, even the revolutionaries sent their men to tail me.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Keep your eyes open. You will know everything.’

They kept moving ahead. Booming explosions kept hitting their ears off and on. A small stone flew down all the way on their path. Kalyani looked at the stone and said,

‘The engravings were lovely in the cave! I spent more time looking at the fine designs.’

‘The art that doesn’t bring welfare to people may vanish for good. That cave had a brahma-rakshas in it. Without destroying the cave, the demon would not have gone away.’

They stopped talking and began walking a little faster. Right at dawn, they crossed the jungle. A village surfaced some distance away; roosters began crying; and, villagers, too, appeared busy in the chores. While they were on the narrow path to enter into the village, they heard someone’s hurried footsteps. They looked behind: it was Shankar, the ferryman who lived in Vihar. Rudradatta said,

‘I knew you would come over.’

Breathless, Shankar said,

‘Bapji, I could save myself at the last moment.’

‘Why? What happened?’

‘Didn’t you hear the noises? The jungle is on fire it seems! God knows what happened. It could be either a fire or an earthquake. A big stone dropped close to me. It just missed my head! And the smoke! It would have suffocated me. Your blessings saved me!’

‘But why are you following us?’ asked Tryambak.

‘I could not control myself. I also want to join you in the pilgrimage. I will be with you throughout the journey.’
'That's okay,’ said Rudradatta.

The four of them entered into the village. After the thundering explosion in the forest, many villagers had gathered at the outskirts. The villagers were terrified by the sight of smoke and flying stones. Some of them feared that a war had begun. The news of political upheaval had reached even in hamlets.

Raid by looters and battles were not new in the area. Ready with daggers and batons, the young and strong of the village were on the vigil since early morning. Curious women and some children also came over to the outskirts. Speculations abounded there: Khanderao Gaekwad, that war-loving monarch must be out with his army; Pindharis and the Company are battling it out in the jungle; or, the Afghans and the Russians have invaded us. Among these colourful stories, no one had guessed that the villagers would receive someone as quiet and saintly as Rudradatta that morning.

Many residents were familiar with Rudradatta. He was renowned as a saint and scholar in surrounding villages. Most visitors to the Bhairavanath fair also went to seek Rudradatta's blessings when in Vihar. Besides, every nearby village had some residents who had studied under him years ago.

People were surprised to see Rudradatta there because he had never set his feet out of Vihar. Looking at the tall, impressive figure from afar, they wondered why he had come to their village.

‘Isn’t this punditji?’ someone asked.

‘Which punditji?’ another wondered.

‘One who lives in Vihar!’

‘Is it? I don’t believe you!’

‘Yes...See carefully!’

‘You are right, he is punditji!’

A few people came forward to welcome Rudradatta and touched his feet.

‘Welcome, guruji, it is our honour to receive you,’ the leader of the group said.

‘Yes, brother, I will be here till evening.’

‘Why till evening! We want you to live in our village. It will change our life!’

‘No, we have to go far. We shall start in the evening.’

‘No, you will have to stay here for a few days. We are capable of looking after you for long. Why do you want to leave in a day?’

‘I have to go a long way, so...’
‘Where are you going, guruji?’

‘Kashi. We are on a pilgrimage.’

‘Why do you bother to go all the way? Your footsteps make a land as pure as any renowned temple.’

Talking thus, they all reached the village dharmashala. The dharmashala was attached to a small temple—that is what people found in every Hindustani village. Such a lodging was available to all, rich and poor. In a short time, villagers arranged food for the pilgrims. Like Hindi householders, Hindi villages, too, consider hospitality an honour bestowed upon them. They do not let even a stranger go hungry.

They all began talking about the big blast of the night. People believed that Rudradatta must have information about whatever happened in the night. The explosion took place on the only way that was available to access the village. Rudradatta said,

‘An old storage of ammunition must have exploded.’

‘Is it?’

‘Who must have done it?’ Shankar asked.

‘Whoever that may be. The man will not come forward and say that he did it.’ The villagers appeared frightened by what Rudradatta said. One man wanted to discontinue the talk,

‘Let’s not talk about it. We have not slept after that accident.’

‘Yes, it was a scary night. Good that it all happened in the forest. If it had happened anywhere close to the village, thousands would have died by now!’

‘Bapji, where were you when it happened?’

‘I was somewhere nearby.’

‘Such explosions cannot harm punditji. He is a saint.’ a villager said.

‘All my brothers, remember that we oughtnot kill even an insect,’ said Rudradatta.

‘You are right, punditji!’

‘I had heard a Brahmin saying something like this to his host,’ said Shankar.

‘I am repeating what that Brahmin had said, and what I say would be repeated by someone else: Violence is the most heinous sin.’

Talks and discussions continued till evening. Rudradatta and his company prepared to leave. The villagers insisted that he should stay back, but Rudradatta said that he had to leave soon. Some of them offered to escort them till the destination.

‘God is the true escort we all have. He will be with us wherever we go,’ Rudradatta said.
People walked down till the other end of the village to see them off. Rudradatta sent them back from there. Rudradatta and Kalyani paired up and walked together; Tryambak and Shankar paired up and followed them. They walked for about six kilometres. The sun had set by then. After the sunset, the air cooled down. A hare crossed their path and disappeared in the bushes. Rudradatta said,

‘Tryambak, do you remember your question?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Why didn’t you ask the question again?’

‘You had told me that you would give me the answer later. Besides, I did not want to ask anything in front of villagers.’

‘You had asked me why I looked at my sword with affection.’

‘Right, guruji.’

‘Did you find the reason for it?’

‘No, I am still thinking about it.’

‘After using the sword for years, I realised that it was useless to do so.’

‘Yes…’ Tryambak still did not understand what guruji was driving at.

‘Not that I had turned coward in the later years, but the decision was due to the cultural tradition that has shaped my mind.’

‘From death lead me to life eternal’—this message of the Vedas seemed right to me. My sword taught me to triumph over weapons and quit their use forever. Yesterday night, when I realised that the sword of mine, which had become my guru, will melt in fire, I became emotional.’

‘Do you believe that all the swords will vanish from the world now?’

‘It will happen one day, but before that the sword will take numerous other lives.’

‘Those thousands of dead men’s sacrifice will probably slack the sword’s thirst.’

‘Sacrifice means giving your life, not taking someone else’s life.’

‘If we sacrifice our life, the enemies will become stronger.’

‘The idea of self-sacrifice will make the idea of ‘enemy’ absurd.’

They heard someone snorting behind. Rudradatta looked behind. He saw Shankar clenching his fists.
‘What happened Shankar?’

‘Nothing bapji, I saw a wild beast there.’

‘Yes, why not a wild beast? Earth is not only for human beings.’

They kept walking through the darkening dusk. The next village was still half-an-hour’s walk away.

Their path was through an untreaded, beautiful stretch of land full of variety of trees: tall and green palash, pillar like straight teaks, leafless mahudo, dense mangoes and huge rayans. The trees made a strange, pretty picture in the twilight. Stones were scattered all around the uneven plane. They came across two hills after a while.

‘Let us stop for a while,’ said Shankar.

‘Why?’ asked Kalyani.

‘I can see a tiger on the hill there,’ he pointed out.

A ferocious looking tiger sat there looking over the wide expanse. Even from a distance, they could see its bright eyes. Its restless tail reflected its restless mind. Waving his long, wooden staff, Tryambak said,

‘Doesn’t matter, I will take the lead.’

‘But how about waiting here for a while,’ said Shankar.

‘No, I don’t think we should take a halt. Tryambak, you will not have to use your staff. You all follow me,’ said Rudradatta and confidently began walking ahead.

They were about twenty feet away from the tiger. It could have easily pounced upon them, but surprisingly, the cat just got up and went to the other side of the hill, sneaking into bushes.

‘We should be careful. The tiger is a spiteful beast. It can still attack us from behind!’ said Shankar.

‘We are not far from the village now. Before dark, we shall be there,’ Rudradatta said without any fear for the tiger’s sudden attack.

Although Tryambak knew that his guru did not fear anything, he was astonished how he ignored the tiger. He learnt that guruji was not scared of even wild animals. His guru was not cold like a coward; he was quiet like a yogi who had swallowed a fireball.

That village, too, gladly welcomed Rudradatta. Thus, in about five days, Rudradatta and his companions cut through about hundred and fifty kilometres. They had long crossed Gujarat and were well into Malwa. What you learn through a journey on foot is incomparable; vehicles do not provide such experience of land and its people. Even in the villages of Malwa, they came across a few people, who had heard of Rudradatta. Rudradatta carefully avoided cities, passing through rural areas.
Shankar did not leave them even for a short while. Tryambak and Kalyani noticed that he went somewhere in the middle of the night. Once, when all were asleep, Shankar sneaked out from a dharmashala. Tryambak suggested to Rudradatta,

‘Guruji!’

‘Haven’t you gone to sleep as yet, Tryambak?’

‘No. I wanted to talk about Shankar. He doesn’t seem to be a trustworthy person.’

‘Will he loot us? Do you think he can become rich by robbing us?’

‘No, not like that, but his behaviour seems strange.’

‘What can we do about it?’

‘We should try to know more about his activities.’

‘That I know. I will tell you what keeps him engaged,’ said Rudradatta. Tryambak was surprised to hear this. How does guruji understand what Shankar is doing?

‘See, Shankar is a spy,’ Rudradatta declared.

‘Is he? How do you know this?’

‘He keeps a watch over me right since the days when I came over to Vihar!’

‘But he is a ferryman.’

‘That is the reason why he is a good informer.’

‘To whom does he pass on information?’

‘He passes on information to the Company Sarkar.’

‘I had no idea of this!’

‘Previously, the Company Sarkar’s administrators trusted him. These days he has lost their favour.’

‘Why?’

‘The administrators then knew about Rudradatta’s ghost. The new ones don’t know about this ghost. They have no idea who Rudradatta is! And hence, they don’t think that the information about Rudradatta is relevant.’

‘If this is the case, we should drop Shankar from this journey.’

‘Why should we? We are not against the Company. We are not against anyone.’
Tryambak understood what guruji said, but he could not sleep that night. Even that night he saw Shankar leaving the bed and quietly getting back. When they began the journey next day, Tryambak asked,

‘Arei, Shankar, where had you gone in the middle of the night?’

‘What? No, I had not gone anywhere!’

‘I had seen you getting out of the room.’

‘Oh, that was to smoke chillum! I went out because chillum’s smoke would have irritated you and disturbed your sleep.’

‘And he must be missing his son! That is why Shankar cannot sleep well,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Right bapji, you know how a father feels for his son. Tryambak won’t understand it now.’

‘Then it would be a good idea to visit my Christian friend. I shall see him, and you will also get to meet your son.’

‘Who is your Christian friend?’ asked Kalyani.

‘Yuvanasen.’

‘Where does he live?’

‘About forty to fifty kilometres from here. We shall reach there tomorrow morning.’

‘Very nice of you bapji. If we go from there, I will get to see my son’s face,’ said Shankar in an emotional voice.

‘No problem, we are on the same way.’

The four of them decided to halt at Yuvanasen’s new mission before heading for Prayag. Throughout the journey, they had experienced that the atmosphere was tensed everywhere. They heard these words,

‘Soldiers have revolted against the Company!’

‘Yes, we have also heard of it!’

‘The Company has gone!’

‘The soldiers are killing British officers everywhere!’

No one had seen any killing or witnessed any revolutionary activity. They all were repeating hearsay. Rudradatta asked some people,

‘How do you know that the soldiers have revolted?’

‘So people say.’
‘Do you know anyone who has witnessed the events?’

‘No. All this is happening around Kolkata.’

People could not think what would happen after the Company left Hind. Since they were familiar with battles and changes in power, the news of revolt did not bewilder people. What was most obvious was this: if revolution had not broken out till then, it was soon going to break out. Some men of the older generation asked Rudradatta,

‘Punditji, why are you going to Kashi?’

‘People go to Kashi for three reasons: for studies, for pilgrimage or for dying.’

‘We thought you are going there because of this revolt against the Company.’

‘What would I do there? I am an old man now.’

‘You may be old, but even stalwarts touch your feet, punditji!’

Without discussing for long, Rudradatta changed the topic. Sometimes, they came across British officers on the way. It seemed they did not know anything about the changing political climate; and, even if they did know something, they ignored it. They had faith in their ammunition. They had outwitted and defeated Marathas, Rajputs, Sikhs and Muslims in Hind. Their self-confidence was not misplaced.

Early in the morning, they saw a minaret. Kalyani asked,

‘Dadaji, look at that. What is it?’

‘Let us go there.’

‘Why?’

‘Our priest sahib lives there.’

‘Shall we meet Lakshmi there? I think we shall,’ said Kalyani and then looked at Tryambak. Tryambak turned his head and kept walking. They reached the church after walking for an hour. Next to the church was a small bungalow. When they reached close to the bungalow, Lucy ran out to receive them, screaming,

‘Kalyani!Tryambak!How come you all are here! Namaste, punditji!’ Lucy hugged Kalyani.

The priest and his wife also came out. The priest and Rudradatta embraced each other.

‘I am so glad you have come over here, punditji! I often think about you these days. God has sent you here to see me!’ said the priest. Johnson was happy to meet Rudradatta.

‘Priest sahib, even a leaf on a tree doesn’t tremble without God’s consent.’

‘Sometimes God wishes us to do what we also want to do.’
‘Yes, if our wish is for someone’s welfare.’

‘How long will punditji wait outside? It is hot here! Call him inside.’ The priest’s wife showed the warmth befitting a host.

‘Come in, punditji! When did you start form Vihar?’ asked Johnson.

‘No, I won’t come in. I would like to stay in a dharmashala here,’ replied Rudradatta.

‘Why should you stay in a dharmashala? My house is in this village. I will ask a Brahmin to cook for you,’ said madam.

‘I have a lot to talk to you,’ said Johnson.

‘I will first go to the village well to take a bath. You come over to the dharmashala later. Before nightfall, we shall continue our journey.’

‘How can you go away so soon? God knows, when we shall meet again. Besides, I shall be returning to England soon.’

‘We were going to visit Vihar to see you all for the last time,’ said Lucy.

‘See, we have come here to meet you. We have fulfilled your wish. I also want to give you a wedding gift.’

‘Wedding gift? To me?’

‘Yes, you will get married after reaching your home, won’t you? I will not be able to come there, so I better gift you something right now.’

‘No, I am not going to get married back home. I shall return to Hind and live here. Hind will be my country.’

‘Okay, then. I shall tell you where you should live in Hind.’

Johnson insisted, but Rudradatta did not stay at his house. He took bath at the well and stayed at the village dharmashala. After taking bath and visiting Shankar’s shrine, Kalyani prepared a simple meal for all. Rudradatta often observed a fast on the journey. While travelling, he took only a little milk or a fruit once a day, or rarely, one thick roti.

6
The Lion Sinking

‘Where is Shankar?’ asked Rudradatta, sipping milk that the priest had sent.

‘He must have gone to the priest’s place to have lunch with his son. He has informed us that we should not wait for him to join us for meal,’ replied Tryambak.
After having lunch, they lay down to take a nap. Johnson, his wife and Lucy came to the dharmashala after a while. The temple pujari made his dislike for the white visitors obvious. He, however, did not protest against Johnson’s presence there because Johnson had helped the pujari in getting his land back, when the village patel had grabbed it away from him. The priest had recommended the pujari’s case to a white administrator. Rudradatta and Johnson sat on the deerskin and began talking. After some time, Rudradatta told Tryambak,

‘Tryambak, bring some bhang. Pound it well, but put only a little of it in the sherbet.’

‘You are our guest here. We would love to entertain you, but you won’t eat what we cook for you,’ said Johnson.

‘Our faith attempts to find security in these food restrictions,’ laughed Rudradatta.

Tryambak went outside at the well to prepare sherbet. He sat on the well’s parapet, thinking about his friend Gautam’s state in prison and about Rudradatta’s profound ideas about war. Lucy’s blue eyes also haunted him. While pounding bhang, he looked up. Lucy stood right in front of him. The bright, sunny day turned into a soothing blue. Before he said a word to Lucy, she said,

‘Come here, Tryambak, I want to show you something!’

‘What is it?’

‘Punditji’s wedding gift to me!’

‘Good. Wear it on your wedding day.’

‘At least ask me something about the gift?’

‘Okay, tell me what this gift is.’

‘Punditji has given away Tryambak as my wedding gift.’

‘What?’ the pounding stone dropped from Tryambak’s hands.

‘I shall make off to England with you!’ said Lucy, laughing.

‘Your England will not keep an uncivilised Hindi like me.’

‘I shall take care of it. You don’t worry!’

‘I still have to visit Prayag along with guruji.’

‘Go ahead! I have given you permission to complete your pilgrimage.’

‘Lucy, I think you have gone mad! Are you still deluded about our relationship?’

‘Yes, and I will remain deluded till I die.’

‘Have you ever heard of a marriage between a white girl and a brown man?’
‘Many white men have married brown women.’

‘But this is altogether different. A white woman is going crazy for a brown man!’

‘Why not? If a white man likes a brown woman, a white woman can also fall in love with a brown man!’

‘It would be humiliating to all.’

‘You may believe so, I don’t.’

‘This is not just about the two of us. Your community would treat you as an outcast.’

‘They may do so, because men treat women as slaves and possessions. They set separate laws for men and women. I don’t want to be a part of this community of white people. Just see what happened in Vihar. We were casually talking that morning, and Henry attacked your for that. If we continue our relation, both of us will be wounded and probably, both of us shall die. Tryambak, we shall die together and we shall lie next to each other in death. Oh, how grand is the idea! I will definitely choose such a death.’

Tryambak did not respond to what Lucy said and began kneading bhang. Lucy stared for a moment at Tryambak’s brown body, his arms and the movements of muscles. From Tryambak’s narrow waist, his body became broad at the chest and broader at shoulders. The pure masculinity oozing from his limbs reminded her of Greek warriors. Lucy’s tender, white body wished to touch that brawny physique. Lucy said,

‘Give me the stone. I shall make the paste.’

‘A white sahib’s daughter cannot do such work.’

‘Let me try.’

‘No. If you touch the bhang, Rudradatta will not take the sherbet.’

‘And what about you? Will you take the sherbet if I touch it?’

‘I don’t take bhang.’

‘Is it? Lucy is still an untouchable for you. You arrogant Brahmin!’ Lucy snorted and threw something at a stone. She got up and stood away from Tryambak.

Tryambak did not know much about love. He was a devoted brahmachari and carefully avoided women’s charms. Women’s charms work subtly, making it difficult to escape their wide net. How long would a man save himself from their spells? Tryambak did not bother about women, yet Kalyani and Lucy both made him nervous and self-conscious in a peculiar way. He found it difficult to look into these women’s eyes; and, he found it equally difficult to keep distance from them. Lucy, who had gone away from his life, had now come back to trouble him.
After annoying a woman, a man cannot leave her alone. It is impossible to do so in any era for any man belonging to any community. The universal rule says that a man has to coax and pamper a woman.

‘Lucy, don’t be cross with me!’ said Tryambak.

‘Yes, I am upset with you.’

‘We are together for few moments, and even in this little time that we have, you get upset over trivial issues.’

‘These moments are like eternity for me, not something that will be over soon.’

Avoiding to look at Tryambak, Lucy had turned her back to him. A banyan tree cast its shadow on and around the well. Standing in that shadow both could see the dry, vast maidan that had become hazy due to heat. Not a soul was around on that sunny day. Sunrays, shining off from tree leaves, shimmered on Lucy’s fair, graceful body. Tryambak saw a shining object lying at Lucy’s feet. He realised that it was something that Lucy had thrown on a stone in anger. He picked it up. It was a precious sparkling stone in rudraksh mala.

‘Lucy, is this yours?’

‘Yes.’

‘From where did you get it?’

‘Punditji gave it to me.’

‘Is it? Keep it carefully,’ said Tryambak, handing it over to Lucy.

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Why?’

‘What do I do with it?’

‘How can you refuse Punditji’s gift?’

‘Do you know why he has given it to me?’ Lucy turned to face Tryambak.

‘No.’

‘It is my wedding gift.’

‘Good. Keep it and wear it at your wedding.’

‘I am not going to get married.’

‘Why?’
‘Because you are an arrogant Hindu!’

‘How is it related to your wedding?’

‘It is deeply related to my wedding.’

‘How?’

‘You want me to speak everything clearly, don’t you? Look, Tryambak, I want to marry you. I am not going to marry anyone else.’

‘Lucy, are you serious? It seems more like a joke.’

‘Yes, I am serious. This British girl is still serious about getting married to you.’

‘Haven’t you British women learnt to be modest?’ Tryambak insulted Lucy so that she would stop being stubborn, stop talking about her marriage and go away from there.

‘Yes, we are not modest because we are more honest than Hindu women,’ Lucy defended herself.

‘How is that?’

‘We easily say what we like, whereas Hindu women hide their feelings.’

‘May be. You should keep this mala.’

‘What do I do with it?’

‘Keep it safely.’

‘Come here, and put it in my hand. While doing so, your hand should touch mine!’ saying this, Lucy extended her hand. Tryambak saw a challenge in Lucy’s eyes. Drawn by Lucy’s provocative words, Tryambak took a step forward and put the mala in Lucy’s hand and touched it, forgetting the restrictions of untouchability.

Lucy immediately grabbed his hand and tightly held it by her hands. Before Tryambak made an effort to yank off his hand, they heard people shouting, ‘Kill them...Kill all of them!’ In a flash, a mob surrounded the temple and the dharmashala. A few of them rushed inside screaming and stood in front of Tryambak and Lucy. Tryambak could not understand what was happening around. He thought them to be robbers first, but then realised that robbers do not flock in a crowd.

Lucy was still holding Tryambak’s hand. She was scared to see the mob holding sticks, swords and daggers. Some of them had a rifle as well. They kept shouting, ‘Beat them up!’ Tryambak asked them,

‘What do you want? Why have you all come here?’
‘Kill all these white people. Beat them up! Kill them,’ shouted someone. One man, who looked like their leader, said,

‘Give away this white girl to us.’

‘Why do you want her?’

‘We will first sacrifice a virgin.’

‘Who are you all?’

‘We are their enemies. The Company is gone!’

‘Let the Company go wherever it wants to. Why do you want to attack this girl?’

‘Every single white person would be killed from Hind. We are going to butcher them today.’

‘She is holding my hand right now. I cannot turn in a person who has sought protection from me,’ declared Tryambak. Tryambak did not have a weapon. Lucy was scared to see the aggressive crowd.

‘Is it? Then you, too, will die!’ said the leader. Three or four men from the crowd came forward and one of them tried to hit Tryambak with a long bamboo-like stick.

Tryambak took the attack on his arms and then, in an instant snatched away the stick from his attacker. He pulled away his hand from Lucy’s and jumped off the well’s parapet. Skilfully swinging the stick, he hit the weapons of some people who stood at the front. Their weapons flew off people’s hands. A couple of them broke their arms, hands and legs. Soon the crowd moved backwards.

‘So long as I am alive, you will not touch this girl. And, before dying, I will send a number of you to hell!’ threatened Tryambak, taking a few steps towards the crowd.

‘Let us leave,’ said their leader and joined the other mob that had surrounded the dharmashala. They all had gathered around the temple and the entrance of the dharmashala. The back entrance of the temple and dharmashala were closed. Tryambak asked,

‘Lucy, where do you want to go now?’

‘I want to be with you.’

‘It is dangerous to be with me. People have revolted against the Company and white people. Do you want to go to the church?’

‘My parents are with Rudradatta. I won’t go to the church all alone. Where are you planning to go?’

‘I will be with guruji.’

‘I will come with you.’
‘The mob is growing bigger.’

‘I am not bothered. Let’s see what happens.’

‘Okay then, let us go.’

The well was in the backyard of the dharmashala. The dharmashala’s back entrance was closed. It was impossible to go to the front door as the screaming mob stood there. Lucy felt that death was imminent. Tryambak forced open the back entrance and they both went inside the dharmashala. It was a small quarter used by the pujari as his residence. The walked ahead and reached the veranda of the dharmashala. Rudradatta stood there looking at the crowd. His tall, impressive presence stalled the crowd.

‘Give us the white people hiding inside,’ someone cried.

‘What do you want to do with them?’ Rudradatta addressed them in a serious tone.

‘We will dispatch them to...’

‘An unarmed white man and an unarmed white woman—isn’t it a sin to kill them?’

‘They have committed many sins. They are going to pay for those sins now.’

‘Who are you to decide how they should pay for their sins?’

‘We are Hindus and Muslims. They have made us impure and abused our religion.’

‘Then leave it to God. He will punish the white people. You better repent for your impurities and become a pure Hindu or Muslim.’

‘We will become pure by killing them!’

‘The priest is innocent. You cannot become pure by killing an innocent man.’

‘His sin is that he is a white man. That’s all.’

‘You will not win Hind by killing innocent white men.’

‘Punditji, we have already won Hindustan. Now, we want to kill every single white soldier.’

‘You are making a mistake. The decided day for the revolution is still two weeks away.’

‘The revolt has begun sooner. We are now controlling the Company Sarkar’s soldiers.’

‘Good then. You have won Hind. You now control the army. Why do you want to kill such isolated white people?’

The crowd became quiet. Rudradatta’s fearlessness and logical argument affected them. Most villagers knew Rudradatta. It seemed that the crowd would be dispersed in awhile. Someone shouted,
‘Punditji, don’t interfere in our work. Every white man is as dangerous as one lakh men put together. He must be put to death.’

‘Who is this? Shankar? How come you have joined the mob?’

‘Don’t ask me questions. First of all, you stop supporting these white men.’

‘I shall always support anyone who is helpless and unarmed. I shall always support women and children.’

‘Punditji, I plead you. Don’t protect these venomous snakes.’

‘What if I do?’

‘The consequences will be unfortunate.’

‘Let it be.’

‘Bapji, I request you. Don’t spoil the matter.’

‘You have already spoilt it.’

‘Do you really mean it? You were the one to bless the revolutionaries.’

‘I don’t bless the revolt that is too impatient to wait for the right moment to take up arms, that indulges in trickery to serve the selfish goal of people who hate one another and that has rogues in its army. A self-serving, aimless revolt is nothing but a fire in a haystack. It will blow out on its own.’

‘What are you all looking at? This old man’s mind is not working properly,’ cried Shankar, making his way to the front of the crowd. Rudradatta saw that Shankar was fired up. He had never seen Shankar in such a spirit. Some men came forward, and once again, they began crying out ‘Kill them!’ Tryambak picked up a stick lying there and began getting down. Rudradatta said,

‘Tryambak, control yourself.’

‘Follow me. Hold down punditji and seize the white people,’ ordered Shankar. He took a couple of steps forward. Rudradatta’s eyes lit up and the suppressed qualities of a Kshatriya overpowered him. His white mane trembled, as if he was lion. His body shuddered with excitement, like that of an old, unarmed Parashuram. His tall, strong Himalayan body appeared fearsome to all. In a deep voice, he said,

‘Shankar, so long as I am alive, no one will be able to touch the unarmed people who are in the dharmashala.’

‘Then you won’t live long,’ Shankar had hardly completed saying this when they all heard a gunshot.
'33' uttered Rudradatta. His right hand on his chest, Rudradatta fell in the hands of Kalyani and Lucy, who were standing behind him, as if morning and evening both stood ready to hold the sun.

7
Death

The dharmashala turned silent. No one had imagined that a saintly guru would be killed in that small village. Even the people in the mob had no thought that someone would attack Rudradatta, a revered figure among the revolutionaries. The incident had jolted people as if Krishna was attacked in the battle of Mahabharata. Before people could recover from the shock, Tryambak jumped down with the stick and attacked the mob. Most of them began running away through the narrow passage next to the temple. Tryambak saw that Shankar was trying to point his rifle at him. Tryambak’s stick struck quickly, flinging away the rifle somewhere. Shankar, now, tried to dash off from there, but Tryambak grabbed him by his hair and gave him a few punches. Shankar fainted. Tryambak, bursting with anger, cried,

‘You devil! You murderer!’

Tryambak was about to kick Shankar when he heard Rudradatta’s faint voice,

‘Tryambak!’

Tryambak looked at his guru, who, leaning on Lucy, sat on the veranda. Kalyani, Johnson and Johnson’s wife were cleaning up Rudradatta’s wound. Rudradatta was profusely bleeding. Tryambak stopped. Rudradatta said,

‘Come here, my son. Don’t shed blood when I am dying!’

Tryambak realised that his guru’s wound was fatal. Will this take his life? Tryambak’s limbs began losing strength. He tottered back to his guru and fell at his feet.

‘I shall bring the first-aid-box. I have some good ointments to apply on such wounds,’ said Johnson and left. His wife also began following him.

‘Don’t go right now. People around are agitated,’ said Rudradatta.

‘You brought it upon yourself because of us. How can we sit and see you suffering? How can it be? Lucy is here to help Kalyani, and we shall quickly bring the tools for treating your wound.’ The priest and his wife left.

‘They should not have taken the trouble,’ said Rudradatta.

‘Why do you say so?’

‘The wound is right on the heart. It is now a matter of a few moments.’

‘What?’ Kalyani shivered. After the incident, Kalyani had become so involved in treating her grandfather that she had not thought about the consequences of the attack. She had never imagined that Rudradatta could die one day.
‘Don’t be astonished! My body has served me for long. It now requires rest,’ said Rudradatta and then, looked at someone sobbing. It was Tryambak. Tears flew down his cheeks. He could not control his tears.

‘Tryambak! How can a man cry?’ said Rudradatta.

‘I am not a man. I am your child,’ said Tryambak in a choked voice.

‘My son...Many students respected me as a guru...But I must say that among all, you are unique. I never had a student so dedicated as you are.’

‘I must apologise if...’

‘You have never made a mistake. You devoted yourself to me. I know that you could have become a great warrior, if you had left the ashram. As Gautam did. You are a greater warrior than anyone I have heard of. I want a dakshina from you. Will you...’

Tryambak could not reply. He touched Rudradatta’s feet.

‘My son, promise me that you will never hold a weapon in your life.’

Tryambak had not used swords or guns yet, but he did wield a stick occasionally. He wanted to become a renowned warrior, and he wanted Rudradatta’s permission to become a soldier. The revolt had begun at a few places. He also knew that some leaders were persuading his guru to lead the revolt. Tryambak had thought that his guru would lead the revolt after Gautam’s release, and that would also be the opportunity for him to prove his valour.

Unfortunately, Rudradatta destroyed his ammunition. Now, it was time for the guru to go away forever! Right at his deathbed, Rudradatta asked a promise that would lay waste Tryambak’s potential as a soldier. What would Tryambak do? Would he make his guru happy, or let his soul suffer for life?

‘Guruji! I will use weapons just once. And then won’t touch them again!’

‘Where do you want to use your weapons?’

‘I want to kill those who attacked you and also all those who are behind this plan. That is it. After that I will not touch any weapon.’

‘You are crazy, Tryambak. Will you pay tribute to your guru by killing people?’

‘Then what do I do?’

‘Get rid of weapons and get rid of rancor from your thoughts. If you can promise me to quit weapons forever, you will be able to perform my last rites. And if no one comes forward to take the vow to quit weapons forever, abandon my body on the streets. Let it rot there.’ Rudradatta closed his eyes and stopped speaking. Tryambak, Kalyani, Lucy and the pujari kept looking at each other.

‘I will have to take care of Kalyani,’ said Tryambak.
‘And Lucy also, I fear,’ added Rudradatta without opening his eyes.

‘How do I do all this without using weapons?’

‘Don’t live in a place where you cannot protect women without using weapons,’ said Rudradatta.

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘Destroy all the weapons available in the world. Or, leave the world altogether!’

‘How is it possible?’

‘Only then human beings will retain humanity.’

‘But do all the human beings believe in these ideas?’

‘I believe in them, my son! If even one person would believe in these ideas, I would consider my life was not wasted. I will die a happy man. I trust you, Tryambak!’ Rudradatta looked at Tryambak. Rudradatta’s eyes were bright with the meaning of his message. Tryambak felt that the lightening in Rudradatta’s eyes would strike him. Tryambak said,

‘Guruji, I take a pledge that I would never pick up a weapon again.’

‘It will bring happiness to you and to the world,’ Rudradatta closed his eyes again and then said,

‘I want to lie on the floor. Give me durva and tulasi.’

‘Punditji, you will not be comfortable on the floor...’ said Lucy.

‘It doesn’t matter anymore...It is better to be closer to the ground now. The mother earth’s lap is always ready to accept her children.’

Kalyani brought a few leaves of tulasi from a plant. They gently laid Rudradatta at a clean place. Putting tulasi leaves in Rudradatta’s hands, Kalyani lost control and began weeping. Stroking her back, Rudradatta said,

‘This is not the time to cry. You should sing songs.’

‘Dadaji!’

‘A great dadaji will take your care now. Let Him take you in life as He wishes. He will decide something good for you. My child, sing a bhajan. Tryambak, read out the Geeta. Lakshmi, you, too, sing a prayer for me.’

Lucy was the first to recover among them. She sang a prayer about going from darkness to light in her sweet voice. Rudradatta’s face became peaceful. When the prayer was over, Rudradatta said, ‘तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय’ (From darkness, take towards light). Who says Jesus is not ours?’
Kalyani could not sing. She knew many bhajan-kirtans, but she was too upset to sing. She kept crying. Rudradatta had raised her, playing the role of her mother and father. How could she remain calm at his deathbed? Who would be with her, now on? Dadaji was dying. Gautam had joined the revolutionaries. She felt helpless. She could speak nothing.

Tryambak began reading the Gita. Rudradatta opened his eyes and said,

‘Tryambak, where is Shankar?’

‘I have no idea where he has gone.’

‘You had hit him hard. He must be lying around. Bring him here.’

Tryambak did not want to listen to his guru. Now that he had quit weapons, his heart too was trying to be less aggressive. He hesitated for a while and then softly said,

‘Okay, I will see where he is.’

‘Punditji, let me see why my father has not turned up as yet. You urgently need some ointments,’ said Lucy.

‘Lakshmi, I don’t require ointments. औषधं जाÛहवी तोयं (The water of Ganga is a remedy). You better be around here.’

‘Why?’

‘People are agitated and everything is in a disorder.’

‘So...’

‘Priest sahib will not be able to get back here.’

‘Where could he be?’

‘Either he must have gone away somewhere, or he could be in the bungalow, unable to get out because of the mob outside.’

‘Then I must go there,’ saying this, the British girl dashed out, without bothering to even look at anyone. Rudradatta closed his eyes again.

Tryambak looked for Shankar, but could not find him. He sensed that people were raising a ruckus in the village and around the priest’s bungalow. Shankar must have joined the crowds after he regained consciousness, or his friends must have taken him away. Nothing else could explain his disappearance.

‘Shankar is not around,’ said Tryambak.

‘Okay.’

‘Do you want me to look around in the village?’

‘No, I don’t think you would be able to find him.’
'Do you want to talk to him?'

'I wanted to do his darshan...now that I am dying.'

'His darshan? Why?'

'He was my guru.'

'Shankar? How could he be your guru?'

'Yes.'

'How could it be? I cannot understand what you say.'

'Listen to me. I lost my son—Kalyani’s father—in a battle. When I saw my son’s dead body, I became bitterly angry. I wanted to kill the sons of all my enemies. Then, Shankar and another brave young man were with me. Shankar was my pet student. I had taught him the craft of war. I told him, “Shankar, get ready, pick up your weapons, and butcher the children of our enemies.” My son’s dead body was still bleeding. Shankar answered, “Punditji, isn’t there any other way to fight with enemies? Do we have to slaughter them?” His words showed me a new light. And in that light, I read these words on my heart:

*If men don’t behave like beasts, the world will not require weapons.* I just erased the words from my mind, thinking them to be a result of fatigue and cowardice. I hit Shankar and said, “You coward! You are afraid of death!” He said, “Punditji, I will be your death one day.” Shankar went away from the camp because of the way I had insulted him. Another student of mine wanted to go home because his wife had delivered a son a day before. I became emotional and said, “Go ahead, you haven’t seen your son’s face as yet.” “No, I will not go home. I am not keen to see my son’s face. I would rather follow your order.” said he and left with soldiers to fight. I sat next to my son’s body and began thinking. Those words written on my heart kept surfacing, each one glowing with light. Am I sending a father of anewborn to kill someone’s children? And that too, when I have lost my son! Because I have lost my son, should I take revenge by killing someone else’s children? Then I realised that weapons help people to commit a crime, and they help other people to take revenge of the committed crime. What if we get rid of weapons? It will free us of crimes that we may commit with the weapons. We will not be able to take revenge on someone with the weapons. I dropped all the weapons that moment. I sent someone to call back my student and other soldiers, who had gone over to the battle. Shankar had passed on information to the enemy about my soldiers, so the enemies could easily kill that student of mine. That evening, I performed the last rites of my son and my student. From that day onwards, I have been looking for ways to fight without using weapons. That is what Shankar had suggested, hadn’t he? Now tell me, Tryambak, isn’t Shankar my guru? Shouldn’t I touch his feet?*

Rudradatta spoke for a long time. Because of exertion, his wound began bleeding profusely. He closed his eyes. For about one hour, he lay there quietly. He did not toss about like a wounded, suffering man; nor did he rave on like one facing his death. Rudradatta, a mahatma, knew to separate his soul from his body. Hence, he did not suffer bodily pain.

The village was in an uproar, but no one had entered the temple yet. Tryambak heard crowds of men shouting and running around in the by-lanes.
Tryambak realised that it was not a very small village, and therefore it could be one of the centres chosen by the revolutionaries for their activities. In the evening, they could see fire and fumes at many places. The temple pujari brought the news,

‘They have set fire to Priest sahib’s bungalow.’

‘What about Lakshmi? Has she come back?’

‘No.’

‘Whatever God thinks right! What he decides is good for all. We cannot understand his design because we can see little. Kalyani and Tryambak...Don’t be afraid of pain and death. Pain and death will take you to ecstasy and eternal life.’

Kalyani could not stop crying. Whenever Rudradatta spoke, she became hopeful that Rudradatta would get up and live on. When he closed eyes, she became disheartened. She asked her dadaji,

‘Dadaji, can’t we go back to Vihar?’

‘No. It is not possible to reach there.’

‘Why?’

‘I have few moments to live.’

Kalyani began crying once again. Rudradatta said,

‘How can my child cry?’

‘I can’t see death.’

‘Life is full of events that are far greater than death. Death is just a stop to one wave of life. My death should not stop you anywhere in life. Once you stop crying, I will peacefully go away,’ said Rudradatta with a casual smile.

Kalyani stopped crying. She thought that a great moment of life was waiting for her. It was dusk. The pujari lit a lamp and beat the temple-drum.

‘Is this the temple drum?’

‘Yes.’

‘I want to sit.’

‘Will you able to?’

‘Yes, I will. One can’t lie down in the evening—not when the pujari has invoked God.’

Tryambak and Kalyani helped Rudradatta to sit. Rudradatta put his hand on their heads.
‘Tryambak, take care of yourself. The world cannot be saved by violence—if you don’t understand what I have said, think long and deeply about it. Kalyani, get married to Gautam, if you can find him somewhere. A new life, a new body and a new game! Jai prabhu…This is the moment to die…When the temple bells are ringing…’

Rudradatta’s head dropped on Kalyani’s shoulder. Tryambak took Rudradatta’s head and lay his body on the ground. Guru’s milky face, looking glorious in white hair, smiled in the light of the lamp. His eyes were open a little as if observing the world, but it was not so. His eyes were calm, as if he was a yogi sitting in dhyan like bhagawan Shankar.

‘Tryambak, what happened?’

‘Guruji has left all of us.’

‘Won’t he talk to us now?’

‘No.’

‘What shall we do now?’

‘Kalyani, don’t think about all this now. Call the pujari maharaj.’

‘Why?’

‘We shall have to take Guruji…I mean his body…’

‘For cremation? We shall cremate this body…’

Tryambak did not reply.

‘O dadaji! Where are you?’ screamed Kalyani. She felt that earth beneath her feet was trembling. She wanted to cry, so that pain would not tear her apart. She began weeping.

If Rudradatta’s soul had heard Kalyani’s wailing, it would have returned to Rudradatta’s body. But a soul doesn’t return to the body it has left behind. Otherwise, would Rudradatta go away to God’s abode, leaving Kalyani, a sweet, adorable woman?

8
A Failure

At dawn, a horseman at the outskirts of the village saw smoke in the sky. To enter into the village, he still had to cross the river. The river was shallow, but the riverbed was wide. The horse found it difficult to trot through sand, yet the beast could move forward at a good speed. The horse splashed into the river and reached the other bank in a few leaps.

On the bank, a few men were preparing a pyre. The horseman cried,

‘Stop it!’
The men looked at the horseman. Kalyani, who was sitting a few feet away, shouted,

‘Tryambak!’

‘What is it, Kalyani!’

‘Look, Gautam!’

‘Gautam?’

The horse, in the meanwhile, reached the pyre. The armed horseman dismounted and said,

‘Tryambak! What are you doing?’ He was Gautam.

‘Setting up Guruji’s pyre.’

‘Guruji has left us!’

‘Yes.’

Gautam took off his turban and sat down on the sand, holding his head.

‘We have lost the world, Tryambak!’

‘God’s wish,’ said the pujari.

‘I came here to prevent guruji’s death. But…’

‘You had come here to prevent guruji’s death! How is it?’ said Tryambak.

‘Yes. It is a long story.’

‘But you were in jail.’

‘All the plans have gone wrong. I don’t have any hope now.’

‘Hope for what?’

‘I don’t hope we shall win.’

‘We? Who are these people?’

‘I mean we all, who are against the British.’

‘Against the people or their reign?’ asked Tryambak. Tryambak had been thinking deeply about Rudradatta and his ideas. He had arrived at a clear understanding of Rudradatta’s life and message.

‘It is all one and the same.’

‘No, I am not against the British. I am certainly against their rule.’
‘I know what you mean. You know we lost guruji, because I tried to save white men on my way.’

Gautam stopped talking. Covering his face in his palms, he sat on the sand for a long time. Rudradatta’s body was put on the pyre. They began preparations to perform the last rites.

‘Gautam, you were Rudradatta’s pet student. You should do the agni-samskar,’ said Tryambak.

‘I don’t deserve the honour. You do it. You served him till his last day.’

‘And dadaji had asked Tryambak to perform the rites,’ said Kalyani.

‘Why did he do so?’ asked Gautam.

‘Because Tryambak took the pledge that he would never pick up a weapon.’

‘Yes, a weapon killed guruji. Such weapons should be melted down in a fire,’ said Gautam.

‘Then, you too should give up weapons,’ said Kalyani.

‘It is not possible for me to quit weapons now.’

‘Why?’

‘Guruji could have made ascetics out of all the revolutionaries. Now the deluge has swept over Hind. No one can put a stop to the surging water now.’

They saw two horses some distance away. Tryambak was about to cremate the body. Gautam said,

‘Wait for a while. I think Saiyad is coming over.’

‘Who could be that other person?’

‘The priest.’

‘How did you all meet one another?’

‘I will explain later.’

About fifteen minutes passed away. The horses were tired and the sun, too, had moved up. The two riders reached the riverbank. Saiyad Aziz and the priest got off their horses. They both could guess that Tryambak and Gautam were preparing to cremate Rudradatta. Gautam addressed them,

‘It is all over, Saiyad!’

‘We don’t have any hope now. What can we do against God’s wish?’
‘You knew punditji well, didn’t you?’ asked Johnson.

‘Everyone knew punditji well. He was our Sufi, a devout man. Do you know he had learnt the entire Koran by heart?’

Tryambak did a namaskar to guruji’s body; Gautam did a sashtang pranam; Johnson took off his cap and looked down in respect; Saiyad genuflected; Kalyani kept staring at her grandfather. The pujari helped Kalyani standup. Tryambak lit the pyre. In a moment, the flames began competing with one another to gulp down the body. The fire gave away golden sparks. Gautam was the first to cry. Johnson and Saiyad wiped their eyes.

‘My friend has vanished from the world,’ said the priest.

‘Priest sahib, he was a friend of the whole mankind,’ said Saiyad.

‘The British could not make him their friend,’ the priest commented.

‘And Hindis could not understand him,’ a stranger, who lived in the village, said.

‘The Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian blended in him. Such an amazing man is now lost in the sand,’ said Saiyad.

Rudradatta’s body became invisible. They sat there quietly. A burning pyre makes everyone silent, making people realise how fleeting life is. The fire that consumes a human body humbles even emperors. What can beat the quick movements of fire flames? The human tongue can. Human beings cannot sit quietly for long. Sitting there, Gautam began telling them the story of how he reached the village.

Gautam had left Vihar with the intention of setting Mangal free from the prison, but when he reached there, he could get hold of Mangal’s bones and ashes. The place where Mangal was hanged to death, and where he was cremated became holy for Gautam. Although Mangal was elder than Gautam, Mangal could not rise to a higher position in the army because of his unruly temper. Although Gautam was a senior officer, both had maintained a close friendship with each other. Mangal had hoped that Gautam would take Rudradatta’s place one day; and, Mangal also believed that Gautam’s leadership would lead to a great success—a success of Rudradatta’s life and of all the Kshatriyas. Mangal often enjoyed discussing Nyay philosophy with Gautam. Gautam treated and respected Mangal as if Mangal was his elder brother. On the warfront, they had often saved each other’s life and suffered serious wounds while doing so. Mangal’s death was an elder brother’s death for Gautam. When Saiyad gave him the news of Mangal’s death, dejected Gautam rushed to visit the place where Mangal was hanged to death.

Gautam began thinking: Should I behead those who have killed Mangal? Should I kill the hangman who executed the killing? Why shouldn’t I eliminate every member of the platoon that quietly accepted Mangal’s death? Troubled by such thoughts, Gautam came to the place where Mangal was cremated. He saw nothing but cinders and ashes not yet blown away by the wind.

‘I will scatter his ashes in entire Hind and provoke many other young men against the Company. They will have Mangal’s angst in them.’ Gautam picked up a handful of ash and then let it slip away from his palm. Even in a dark night, the ashes looked white like snow.
Staring at the ashes, Gautam remembered many incidents of Mangal’s life: Mangal’s knowledge of Nyay, his courage, his carefree nature, his aggression and his strong sense of self-respect.

While remembering Mangal, Gautam kept touching the ashes lying there. With every touch, he felt that Mangal was resurrecting. His hands touched a hard object. He unconsciously picked it up. It was something smooth, unlike wood. He now looked at the object. It was the piece of a bone. Gautam felt that Mangal stood in front of him.

‘Oh, the bones are still lying here! Who would come to collect them? Who will bother to flow them in a river? Let me pick up his bones.’

Gautam began rummaging the ashes. He could sense that the ash below was still warm. He kept digging with his hands at a few places. A cinder still burnt deep down somewhere. Gautam looked at stars in the sky, and then he looked down at that cinder. Yes, a cinder still burnt there. Gautam said,

‘A spark? Should I set a fire with the help of this spark? Or, should I stamp on the cinder and put it out?’

Someone held Gautam’s shoulder. He turned. Four white soldiers stood there. The Company had kept them to keep a watch in the area because they feared that the disbanded platoon’s soldiers might create trouble there. During their patrol, they noticed a Hindi soldier talking to himself and digging up the ashes. They found his behaviour suspicious and soon reached there.

‘Who are you?’ asked Gautam.

‘Who are you?’ the white soldier asked Gautam.

‘My weapon will tell you who I am,’ said Gautam angrily. This was the opportunity to give some of them a good thrashing. Right then, Gautam felt that Mangal’s bone said something to him. He became still and listened to the words,

‘Don’t light a fire. Throw water on cinders and sparks!’ Gautam clearly heard the message. He did not use his weapon. He asked the white soldiers,

‘Did you hear his message?’

‘What?’

‘So, you could not hear it.’

The white soldiers thought that Gautam was deranged. Who else would dig up ashes and hear voices in the middle of a night? Gautam had lost the desire to fight. The white soldiers had realised that Gautam would not attack them. They arrested him immediately. Their leader asked,

‘Who are you? What is your name?’

Two white soldiers pointed their guns at Gautam.
'Who am I? I am a soldier.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I had come to visit the place where my friend was cremated.'

'Could you meet your friend?'

'I could see fire there.'

The white soldiers began laughing.

'Don't you laugh! You laughter will fan the fire again,' Gautam barked.

'What will happen then?'

'It will burn all of you. You all will turn to ashes.'

'Is it? The fire of a cremation ground will burn us!' One of the soldiers teased Gautam. Their leader, however, stopped the jokes and asked,

'Who is this friend of yours who was cremated here?'

'Mangal.'

'You mean Mangal Pandey?'

How could the white soldiers forget Mangal Pandey so soon? His ghost still hovered over the white soldiers. They patrolled throughout the night after Mangal Pandey’s death. For the soldiers, Mangal Pandey’s friend was Company Sarkar’s enemy.

'Oh! Then, we won’t let you go away.'

Thus, Gautam was thrown into a prison. Gautam was not bothered about being in the prison. He could have escaped the confinement easily. He even ignored a couple of opportunities to run away. Gautam remained worried in the prison about the imminent revolt: How will the plan succeed? How to set fire to Hind, using that little spark left in Mangal’s cremation ground? Gautam was so entangled in the thoughts that he did not bother to break the prison.

The next day, he was taken to an army officer. The soldiers believed that Gautam would also be hanged like his friend. They had reasons to believe so, because Gautam had confessed to be Mangal’s close friend.

Gautam stood outside the sahib’s bungalow, not realising how serious his offence was. The sahib came out of his bungalow, and, taking long strides, walked towards Gautam. He stood still when he recognised the soldier standing in front of him. He asked,

‘Gautam?’
Gautam looked at the white sahib and immediately saluted him.

‘How come you are here?’ asked the sahib.

‘And how come you are still here? I thought you had left for home,’ Gautam asked.

‘I was about to go back home, but then stayed back because the Company ordered us not to leave.’

‘You put Mangal to the noose.’

‘I took charge of the platoon after he was hanged to death.’

The white soldiers there were surprised to learn that Gautam knew their sahib. They did not know that their officer not only knew Gautam, but also greatly admired him. The white officer talking to Gautam was Peters.

The naik told the officer,

‘Sahib, Gautam will be punished for his offence.’

‘Is it? Gautam, have you confessed your crime?’

‘No. I have not done anything wrong.’

‘Then, why have they arrested you?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Sahib, he visited the place where Mangal was cremated. And, sitting there, he kept talking to himself.’

‘Yes, that is right.’

‘Why did you visit that site?’

‘To pick up my friend’s bones.’

‘That is not an offence. I know it is a religious obligation for you. Let him go.’

‘Bus sahib, he is Mangal’s friend,’ the naik said.

‘That is not an offence. You may not know, but Gautam and Mangal both were my friends. A criminal’s friend is not a criminal, and it is not a crime to be a criminal’s friend,’ said Peters. Gautam was immediately released. Peters expressed a wish to meet him, but Gautam first wanted to immerse Mangal’s bones in the Ganga. He picked up all the bones that he could and galloped to Prayag. When he reached the Triveni, Saiyad was waiting for him there.

‘Have you brought Mangal’s bones?’
‘Yes.’

‘Immerse them in the river, take a dip and come back soon. Don’t take long, otherwise it will be time to immerse our bones here.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘That I will explain to you later. First, you complete the work on hand.’

Gautam immersed the bones in the rivers with misty eyes and deep devotion. He took a quick bath in the river and came out. He enjoyed swimming, but that day he did not have time for it. On the riverbank, an old Brahmin sat with all the required materials for a puja. Saiyad was also sitting there, under that Brahmin’s sunshade.

‘Come here, I will do a tilak on your forehead,’ said the Brahmin.

Gautam noticed that the riverbank was full of pilgrims. Many Brahmins sat on the bank under parasols, inviting pilgrims to perform a puja, in expectation of a dakshina. Gautam did not want the Brahmin to do a tilak to him, but since Saiyad was sitting there, he too went there. The Brahmin looked at Gautam. The Brahmin had bright eyes, a large head like that of lion and a white mane.

‘Can you recognise me?’ the Brahmin asked him.

‘I think I have seen you somewhere.’

‘I was your opponent in a game once.’

‘Mahavirsingh?’

‘Yes. See, Gautam, if you want to be out of a serious trouble, go away from here as soon as possible.’

‘Where should I go?’

‘To Rudradatta.’

‘I can’t set my foot in Vihar.’

‘Saiyad will be with you. He will go inside the village. You may stay at the outskirts.’

‘What do I do there?’

‘Don’t let Rudradatta die.’

‘What? But how can I prevent it?’

‘Yes, you can do it.’

‘How do I do it?’
‘Give this note to Shankar.’

‘Shankar? Who is he?’

‘That Shankar who sometimes works as a ferryman in Vihar.’

‘What is written in the note?’

‘That Rudradatta must not be killed under any circumstance.’

‘Who had planned Rudradatta’s murder?’

‘I had planned it.’

Dedicated to the cause of revolution, Mahavir had become friends with Shankar and convinced him to work for the revolutionaries. Shankar had one aim in life: kill Rudradatta at any cost. If he could not achieve his aim as the Company’s spy, he was prepared to do so as a supporter of the revolutionaries. Besides, the Company no longer had any interest in Rudradatta’s activities. The Company had laid strong foundations, and Rudradatta had also focused on innocent activities of his ashram. Shankar too could not find out anything suspicious in Rudradatta’s activities. Mahavir became chummy with Shankar and told him about the ammunition Rudradatta had. This ammunition was the reason why the leaders of the revolt wanted Rudradatta to join them. Some of them wanted Rudradatta even without the weapons. The guru, however, refused to join them in the violent revolt, and he refused them to use his weapons.

Mahavir, though an old man, was eager to take revenge on the Company. When the time for the break out of the revolt came, he became desperate to get hold of Rudradatta and his weapons. He lost his good sense and told Shankar,

‘Shankar, keep following Rudradatta. Rudradatta knows about a huge collection of weapons somewhere close by. If anyone attempts to destroy the weapons, kill him—even if you have to kill Rudradatta, do it! Don’t you underestimate me! My word is as good is that of a peshwa or a badshah.’

Thus, Shankar became a member of the revolutionaries. He had an impressive ability to disguise himself to obtain information. He went around disguised as a sailor, a soldier, a trader, or sometimes even as a mysterious revolutionary. He could easily get the latest news this way. When Rudradatta, Kalyani and Tryambak began their journey, Shankar followed them immediately.

Rudradatta changed routes quickly and took a path where Shankar could not track them down. Rudradatta reached the ammunition and set fire to it. The explosions could be heard for hundreds of kilometres, and the revolutionaries could guess what had caused the blasts. Among revolutionaries, it was an unwritten rule that the person who could not complete the assigned task should be killed. Shankar sensed that he had few more days to live, and therefore he feared that he would not be able to fulfill his wish to kill Rudradatta. Shankar kept provoking people on the way, and when they were at the village where Johnson was a priest, Shankar learnt about the killings of white officers and the armed rebellion of Merath-Meerat platoons. He believed the rumour that Mughals had taken over Delhi’s seat, and white people were being massacred everywhere.
The village was a centre for a faction of revolutionaries. Shankar met them and plotted the killing of Johnson’s family. Johnson, his wife and his daughter had gathered in the temple. Shankar knew that Rudradatta would not let them die. He took the opportunity and killed Rudradatta, taking revenge for an old wound.

All the revolutionaries were shocked to hear the news because Rudradatta was a revered figure for all. They thought that the event was ill fated and foretold a failure of their efforts. The mob, in whose presence Rudradatta was killed, was also upset. They suffered Tryambak’s attacks, and later set fire to the priest’s bungalow to divert themselves from the disappointment.

When the discussions about the uprising began, all the revolutionaries highly valued Rudradatta’s. Mangal made the first mistake by lighting the fire earlier than the decided day; the platoons at Merath made another mistake by rebelling and killing white officers and invading Delhi soon, forcing the revolutionaries in Delhi to begin the battle earlier than when they had planned; as a result, the fire began raging all around. Before Lakshmibai reached Brahmavart, the mobs of revolutionaries began ravaging cities and villages. Their initial success at disturbing peace was thought of as a victory. When Nanasaib, Tatyasahib, Lakshmibai, Mahavir and Aziz met in Brahmavart, they deliberated over the situation. Mahavir said that he had planned to kill Rudradatta if his ammunition could not be seized. Anguished, Lakshmibai said,

‘Kill Rudradatta? Not something I can even imagine! Send a messenger to prevent the murder. If Rudradatta is killed, the revolution will fail!’ Mahavir and Saiyad jumped up.

‘Will both of you go there?’ asked Tatyasahib.

‘No, I shall send Gautam there,’ replied Mahavir.

‘Where is he?’

‘At Prayag.’

‘Far from here.’

‘Yes, but we shall go by a boat and will meet him there.’

Mahavir and Saiyad both had rightly guessed that Gautam would visit Prayag to immerse Mangal’s bones there. They reached there and stayed at the place in disguise. When Gautam came there, Mahavir told him to meet Shankar as soon as possible.

‘I reached here as fast as I could, but it was all futile!’ said Gautam to all those, who sat at Rudradatta’s burning pyre.
PART IV
Beyond the Earthly Life

1
The Trail of the Revolt

Rudradatta’s body burnt in the fire, turning to ashes. However hard they all attempted to hide their sadness, their heart moaned in pain. Gautam kept thinking about various situations. On his way back to Prayag, he had wasted one day in trying to save a white trader and his family. What if he had reached the village earlier? Shankar would not have shot Rudradatta; Rudradatta would have been alive; and, probably he might even have taken the charge of the revolt. He might have saved a number of innocent white men, women and children. Eventually, Rudradatta lost his life while saving a white family.

The priest Yuvanasen’s bungalow was set ablaze by the revolutionaries when the priest and his wife were inside. Yuvanasen was collecting the tools and ointments required to treat Rudradatta’s wound. He and his wife were trapped inside the burning house. The mob had not intended to hurt Rudradatta, and when Shankar shot Rudradatta, the mob of revolutionaries left Shankar there and went away. Since Rudradatta was hurt while saving a white priest’s family, the mob became more averse to the priest. To do something that would vent their hatred, they decided to burn the priest’s bungalow. A mob often loses its sense of discretion and ends up indulging in demonic acts. A person does not even imagine doing certain acts when alone; he excitedly does the same when in a crowd. The mob burnt the bungalow.

The priest’s servants gave their clothes to Johnson and his wife. They applied oil on their faces to make the skin darker. Thus disguised, they all came out of the bungalow with the servants.

‘Where are those Christians? Where is that sahib?’ asked the mob’s leader.

‘We have no idea,’ a servant said.

‘You don’t know where he is. Then we will kill you all.’

‘Why do you want to kill poor people? We are not white either,’ one of the servants said.

‘Priest sahib and his wife have gone to the dharmashala,’ the servant said.

The crowd had not seen the white couple entering the bungalow. One servant suggested that if the mob burnt the bungalow, and if the priest and his wife had hidden inside it, they would be charred to death. This looked like a good idea and the mob allowed the servants to go away. Johnson and his wife escaped with them. They could not go to Rudradatta, but they remembered that Lucy was in the dharmashala. The thought that Lucy was there, in the village that was taken over by the revolutionaries, made them tremble with fear. It had become impossible to be white and alive in that village. ‘Kill the white men! The Company is gone!’ they heard such words everywhere. The priest’s servants pretended to be one of them and joined in shouting the slogans. If you do not want to be a victim of a crowd’s fury, the best idea is to join it.
They could have reached a residential colony of the white traders after a day’s journey. Johnson wanted to be there; and, the revolutionaries wanted to go to the same locality to kill the white people living there. That night all the revolutionaries slept in and around the dharmashala. The priest and his wife were a little away from them. They wanted to begin the journey at night, so that they could reach the fellow white men and warn them about the probable attack. Besides, they could not have lived with the crowd for long. They could not have adjusted the way of living with the people. The missionaries made attempts to be close to common people, but they, too, discriminated between the brown and the white. Hence, it was difficult to spend the night there with the mob. Johnson and his wife had lain down beneath a tree. Noticing that the revolvers were asleep, the priest and his wife began walking away from the camp.

One of their servants, who was around, said,

‘There...They are running away!’

‘Who are they?’ asked a soldier who was half-asleep.

‘I know them. But you might go and tell others if I...’

The soldier woke up. The soldier, who believed himself to be the leader of the revolters, threatened the servant,

‘Tell me who they are, otherwise...’

When in a mob, people’s behaviour becomes perverse. The servant was scared by the threat. He wanted to cosy up with the revolters. So, he revealed,

‘I can see a white man and a white woman there.’

‘Where are they going?’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘Where are they? Show me!’

‘Right there. They are in disguise.’ Although the servants had saved Johnson and his wife, one of the servants had now changed after being with the revolters for a few hours. He thought that if two more white people died, it would not make a big difference. He became irresponsible towards the priest and his wife.

‘Catch them!’ cried the soldier.

The other soldiers, who were still asleep, woke up and began shouting ‘Kill them!’

Although the couple was in disguise, now that the mob knew them to be white, they were not safe. Some people ran after them, and Johnson feared that the mob would kill them soon. Most people lose their sense of judgment while facing death. The priest sensed that death was following them, but he did not become panicky. The man who knows to die can rule over people. The priest and his wife were not frightened by the people who were after them. They slipped into a Mahadev’s shrine that was in a corner and closed the door.
The revolutionaries had burnt the priest’s bungalow, but they did not dare burn the shrine. Although the white man had polluted the shrine, it was possible to purify it again. White men often took shelter in a temple.

The gathered mob outside the temple threatened the couple and even pelted stones inside the shrine. After a while, they stoppedstoning, because the stones could have hit Mahadev’s idol. They threatened to break the doors, but once again, faith did not let them do so. Building a temple was an act of faith. How could they damage a temple? They feared Mahadev’s anger. Who could bear the fire of His third eye? Fear is at the root of Hindi mindset; some of their Gods too are fearsome.

The mob wanted to capture the priest and his wife at any cost. About two hundred people gathered outside the shrine. They could have opened the door in a push, but the fear of God’s anger prevented them from damaging the temple. The doors had become steel hard for them. All the Hindus gathered there could only scream and cast aspersions. The Hindis always did these two things well.

The mob stopped screaming when they heard a horse whinnying around. They all looked in that direction. In a moment, a horse flew down.

‘Who are you?’ the mob’s leader asked the horseman.

‘Lotus,’ said the man on the horse and then made a few gestures with his fingers. It was a sign that the revolutionaries made to recognise each other.

‘Your name?’

‘Gautam.’

Although Gautam was a young soldier, his name was known to most revolutionaries. They all knew that Rudradatta’s brilliant student was a prominent leader among the revolutionaries. His friendship with Mangal Pandey and his adventures in the wars were woven in poems and stories. People believed rumours about how the Company had tried to curtail Gautam’s career because he was exceptionally brave. Hence, most in the mob knew who Gautam was. Besides, his relation with Kalyani made Gautam more than just a brave soldier—his life was an exciting story for all. Hearing Gautam’s name, the mob’s leader politely asked,

‘Gautam Pandey! How come you are here?’

‘I have come here to put a check on your impatience.’

‘What do you mean, Gautam?’

‘First of all, who asked you to openly revolt in the village?’

‘Why do we have to wait for orders? We know people are revolting everywhere. The Company has been defeated!’

‘How stupid of you to believe this! Either we Hindis are too early into something, or we just forget to act and get late. Don’t you know we have decided a day to begin the revolt?’
Gautam had noticed this immature and excitable people everywhere. He had spent hours on the way to release a few British traders from an agitated mob of revolters. In this village, another crowd was up to a mischief.

The mob felt that they had blundered, and their most glaring mistake was to attack Rudradatta. People in the crowd could not inform Gautam about how they had shot his guru, Rudradatta. Gautam asked them,

‘What are you doing at this shrine?’

‘A British couple is hiding inside. We want to kill them.’

‘How funny! Two hundred people are trying to catch two people! How many of you are trained soldiers?’

‘About fifty.’

‘And others?’

‘They don’t have formal military training.’

‘Is anyone trying to prepare them?’

‘They will learn to fight on their own.’

‘This is the reason why you cannot catch two people!’ Gautam was sarcastic in his remark. When riffraff rioters join a group of properly trained soldiers, the latter can do little and are carried away in the chaos. Gautam knew that ten disciplined soldiers do better work than a crowd of hundred excited people. A number of soldiers from the disbanded platoons had taken up the task of secretly preparing capable young men in north and central Hind. Yet, before soldiers instruct people in military drills, people had begun revolting without receiving proper orders. Such impatience guarantees failure of the fight.

‘The white couple is in the temple,’ the leader of the mob explained why they had not caught the couple yet.

‘Break open the doors.’

‘But it is a Shankar’s shrine.’

‘So? Are you all scared of Bhagawan Shankar? Or, you fear the white man inside?’

No one replied to Gautam. Opening the door would obviously result in Mahadev’s wrath and the white man’s anger. Mahadev’s third eye and the white man’s pistol scared every one. The mob of two hundred people was brave enough to fight with two people in a maidan, but they did not want to challenge the white man in the shrine. Even expert soldiers sometimes lost patience and courage in the company of a mob. God’s wrath was a pretext to hide their fear of the white man’s pistol. The brave had turned coward because cowards surrounded them.
‘Okay. Are you going to kill them?’ asked Gautam.

‘Yes, that is the order.’

‘The order is to kill the white soldiers, not unarmed white men.’

‘How do we know if they have a pistol or not.’

‘Let us open the door and see who is inside.’

Gautam got off his horse and began walking towards the shrine. The mob followed him. Gautam’s horse stood beneath a tree.

‘Who will push open the door?’ asked Gautam.

‘The door is closed.’

‘Yes, it is. One push will open it.’

No one came forward.

‘Let me do it,’ said Gautam. He went to the door. The excited mob cried ‘Har HarMahadev!’ and surged forward.

‘Why are you all rushing there?’ Gautam stopped them.

‘We shall help you out.’

‘I don’t want your help. I will go there and open the shrine’s doors. Obviously, the white people inside will kill me. Then, you all will get together and tear apart the two of them. This is not fair. Come over with me if you are ready to open the door. I can do without cowards.’

The mob became quiet. Many of them were ashamed of their conduct and braced up for action. About ten people followed Gautam. Gautam asked,

‘Why are you following me now? I have told you not to help me in this. I will shoot you, if you join me in the fight there!’

‘I will open the door,’ one them said.

‘Even I am ready to do it,’ another said.

‘It is a matter of one rough push,’ someone commented.

‘Yes, I will pounce on the white man,’ one tall, strong man declared.

At least ten men from the mob were ready to die. Gautam was happy to see these eager young men. If members of a crowd can easily lose courage, they can quickly give a spirited response to a situation. Such heroism can make a revolution successful. Gautam climbed up the shrine’s steps and said,
‘Who will come forward and approach the door?’ asked Gautam.

A couple of them were ready to go ahead.

‘No, let me do it. I don’t want someone else to take the risk,’ said Gautam and then knocked on the shrine’s closed doors.

‘Open the doors, whoever you are!’

No one replied from inside.

‘Any idea who is inside?’ Gautam asked his companions.

They knew about the priest. Someone said,

‘He is a priest of the village mission.’

‘Is he alone in the shrine?’

‘No, his wife is with him.’

‘Priest sahib, open the door. Don’t worry, you are safe out here!’ Gautam shouted. They heard the priest and his wife whispering inside.

‘We know you are with your wife. We don’t attack women and unarmed men. Open the door.’

The priest did not open the door. Gautam pushed the door with his shoulder, but he sensed that the priest was pushing the door, probably with his back. Using all his strength, he pushed the door once again. They all had expected to hear a gunshot from inside, but what they heard was a tender female voice,

‘Gautam!’

‘Who is inside? If you know me, you are safe!’

‘Don’t you recognise me?’

‘Who is this? Memsahib? Priest sahib, are you there inside? Open the door! You are our friend.’

Johnson and his wife had immediately recognised Gautam’s voice, yet he did not want to open the door right away. Now that they were sure that the man outside was Gautam, they came out of the shrine.

‘How come you are in this village?’ asked the priest.

‘I have come here to see guruji.’

Johnson and his wife looked at each other and then the priest exclaimed,
‘Gautam, don’t try to reach guruji now! It is pointless to make efforts to meet him.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t think Rudradatta would be there to receive you.’

Gautam was jolted by the news.

‘What do you mean? What happened to him?’

‘Someone shot him in the chest.’

‘What? Who did this?’

‘One of the members of this mob.’

Gautam gnashed his teeth. He wanted to tear apart all those who were around him.

‘Who was that scoundrel? Give me his name. Otherwise, I will burn you alive.’

‘Shankar did it,’ someone said.

Gautam sat on the shrine’s steps, hiding his face in his palms. He had come there to prevent Rudradatta’s death, but he could do nothing. He sat still for a few moments, not uttering a word. Then he asked,

‘When did this happen?’

‘Yesterday afternoon,’ the priest said.

‘Who told you about the incident?’ Gautam asked, thinking that it could just be a rumour.

‘I saw it. I was there at the dharmashala.’

‘And how come you reached the shrine?’

‘I had gone to my bungalow to fetch ointments for Rudradatta. But, the mob came over to my house and surrounded it. We could manage to escapesomehow.’

‘And Lakshmi? Where is she?’

‘She was with Rudradatta.’

‘Where are you all going now?’ asked Rudradatta to the revolters.

‘They all are heading towards a nearby town to kill the white people living there.’

‘I spent a day to release some white men. If I had not wasted my time there, I could have saved guruji.’

‘The white men are wicked. It is a sin to protect them,’ one man excitedly said.
‘Guruji died while trying to save this white man.’

‘So, guruji has really left us...’ Gautam said. He was thinking about guruji, not about the sins of white men.

‘I don’t think he would have survived the blow,’ said Johnson.

‘I could not do his darshan for the last time.’

‘If you rush to the cremation ground, you might get to see his face!’

‘Is it?’ Gautam jumped up. He asked for his horse. Even if he could see dead Rudradatta’s face for once, he would believe his efforts did not go in vain.

When he was about to start, he heard clopping of hooves from afar. It seemed a number of horses were coming towards the village. During his travel through many places, he had noticed that people had become sensitive to Hindustan’s condition. Yet, it was obvious that people were naïve. True revolutionaries were few. Most others, who had joined the anarchy, had ulterior aims: some wanted to imitate the revolutionaries; some wanted to plunder around in the name of battles; some were keen to pursue a personal vendetta; and, some wanted to participate in the revolt for the sake of glory. Such a gathering of people could not act with discipline; they did not know how to fight battles; they did not have a drive to achieve a goal. Anyone who protested against a white man became eligible to join the revolutionaries. They lacked discipline, a sense of direction, consistency of opinions and solidarity with one another. The leaders of the revolution knew about these shortcomings. As a result, they wanted to pass the baton to Rudradatta. They doubted if a bunch of people, who were the bitter family members of princely states and resentful landholders, could lead the revolt to success; some revolutionaries were there just because they were unhappy with the cultural values of the Whites. How could they give a good fight to the Company’s platoons? The revolt had not even touched powerful states of Sindhia, Holkar, Dhar and Devas; the revolt had failed to stir Satara, Hyderabad and southern kingdoms; The Sikh state, which had recently lost hold over its territory, did not respond to the uprising; and, some kingdoms on whom the leaders had high hopes sent disappointing messages. All these powerful states did not care for Hindustan; their interest lay in maintaining their personal honour and luxury. Under the protection provided by the Company, they all enjoyed absolute security, easy comfort, unchallenged power and underserved honour. They did not want to give up their lovely life and take a risk for the sake of patriotism or fellow feeling. To hope that they would do anything of that sort was a hope as vain as a mirage. In addition, the revolt broke out earlier than the decided date. Now, the leaders had to take guard and lead the battle.

The horses approached the mob. Gautam, who stood at the front, ordered the trained soldiers to come forward.

‘Those who do not have training in military drills should stand aside,’ said Gautam. Following his words, those who had crowded there because they were swayed by passions ran away. About thirty men took guard and stood on Gautam’s left and right. Drawing his sword, and standing on the stirrups, Gautam was ready to face the horse riders.

‘Allah-o-Akbar!’ the horse rider cried.
‘Har Har Mahadev!’ Gautam cried in response.

All were quiet for a while; the horses stopped about hundred feet away. Gautam observed the people at front and then declared,

‘They are friends.’ He and his soldiers put the sword back in the sheath. The newcomers, too, lowered the swords.

‘Come over,’ said Gautam.

‘Lotus,’ shouted their leader.

‘Fine. I am Gautam here.’

‘Gautam! Are you still here? I am Saiyad. Where is punditji?’

‘I may be able to see his body. His soul has already reached heaven.’

‘What?’

‘Yes. Before I could convey Mahavirsingh’s order, Shankar had done the job.’

‘Now what?’

‘Well, let me see guruji for the last time. His face might guide me to take the next step.’

‘I will come over with you,’ said Saiyad.

‘Even I want to see that saint for the last time. He lost his life for our sake,’ said Johnson.

‘Saiyad, both of you follow me. Let me ask people to delay guruji’s cremation for a while, so that we all can see his face.’

‘Okay, you go ahead. By the way, who are these people? What are they doing here?’

‘I won’t waste my time in explaining the details. They are our friends. Since they don’t have anyone to guide them, they hunt for the white people in the villages and kill them. Please see to it that priest sahib and his wife are safe. Then, you too join me.’

Gautam rushed to the riverbank. By then it was already dawn. He recognised Tryambak and Kalyani at the riverbank.

Saiyad made arrangements for Johnson’s wife and then asked the revolters’ mob to follow him to the riverbank. They all witnessed the cremation with a heavy heart. People believe that brave mendo not cry, but Gautam did not believe in the idea. Gautam, a brave soldier, believed that a man might cry if he is deeply anguished; but, he cannot shed tears for the sake of observing the custom of expressing grief at someone’s death.

Everyone there, cried at the cremation: soldiers, who were serious, devoted and idealistic; Saiyad, a devout Muslim; the Christian priest, who, like all British people, considered a display of sentiments an insult; Gautam, who cared little for death; and, the pujari, who lived
intimately with God. None could control their emotions and tears. Two people did not cry: Tryambak and Kalyani. They both had become hard and cold after witnessing Rudradatta’s death.

The sun was up. Pujari requested them to come over to the dharmashala; villagers also invited them to their homes; but no one wanted to return to that village. His eyes vacant, Gautam could not move away from the burning pyre. Kalyani said,

‘Gautam! You should go to sleep for a while. Why don’t you?’

‘He needs to take rest,’ said Saiyad.

‘Guruji has left us. What shall we all do now but take rest?’ said Gautam.

‘If you don’t want to stay at someone’s place in the village, go to the dharmashala at the bank of the river,’ the pujari insisted. They all went to the place situated on the riverbank, some distance away. Gautam had a burning sensation in his eyes. He began feeling dizzy. He asked Saiyad,

‘Saiyad, how did you come over to this village?’

‘That I will tell you later. You should go to sleep first,’ replied Saiyad. Saiyad had noticed that Gautam was experiencing an emotional turbulence. Such mental state could make someone unhinged, if it lasts for long.

‘No, first you tell me why you came over here.’

‘That Tokaraswami had called me. I went to see him.’

‘Who...The one that lives in Chanod?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘He is going to lead a small troop in Gujarat.’

‘But what about Gaekwads? Have they given us a response?’

‘They had refused at the beginning.’

‘And later?’

‘Tokaraswami hopes that Gaekwad will agree to join us. Khanderao has a soft corner for Islam, and he immediately called in Tokaraswami for a talk. He might agree with what Tokaraswami says.’

‘If Gaekwad supports us...’ before Gautam completed the sentence, Kalyani chided him,

‘Right now, you should forget Gaekwad and Tokaraswami both. Go to sleep first!’
Gautam lay down and closed his eyes. After a while he opened his eyes and said,

‘Is guruji back?’

Kalyani went close to Gautam. Ignoring all the people around, boldly putting her hand on Gautam’s eyes, she said,

‘Gautam, you should sleep now!’

2

Kalyani’s Resolve

After many sleepless nights, Kalyani’s tender hands put Gautam to sleep. A sleepy man would use even a dead body as a pillow for his comfort. Rudradatta’s death had deeply anguished Gautam. When he closed his red, burning eyes, his heart was anxious. He wanted to keep his eyes open, but Kalyani had firmly kept her hands over them. Gautam wanted Kalyani to stroke his head, but he could not tell her so. He did not have strength to speak. He put his hand over Kalyani’s, and fell fast asleep.

He did not have an idea of how long he had slept. In his sleep, he went on a journey of deeper realms. He slept through the night, morning and noon. His tired mind dreamt of incidents that he had seen or imagined in life: hundreds of ships carrying white men to Britain; a battle with the Company’s army; a victory cry of the Hindis; a meeting with Rudradatta after the victory, justifying the massacre of enemies. He saw Bahadurshah and Nanasahib challenging each other in a duel; he and Saiyad rushed to avoid that unfortunate event. Rudradatta came to wounded Gautam, asked him to hold Kalyani’s hand, and blessed the couple. Gautam’s eyes opened. He wondered whether what happened was a dream or reality!

Kalyani was still sitting there, close to Gautam. A few moments ago, Rudradatta had asked him to hold Kalyani’s hand. Why is she still keeping a distance from him? They are by themselves after a long time, aren’t they?

‘Kalyani!’ said Gautam, opening his eyes.

‘Oh! How did you wake up?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You were asleep for a long time!’

‘Was I? What about all that happened some time back?’ Gautam was scared that probably what he had seen was all a delusion.

‘What has happened? Did you sleep well?’

‘Come here, I shall tell you what happened.’

‘I sat next to you the whole night,’ said Kalyani, getting closer to Gautam. Gautam was thrilled that he was alone with Kalyani in a room. He held her hand and said,
‘See, guruji came and gave me your hand…’

‘Guruji has left us. Have you already forgotten? How much had you cried at the pyre yesterday!’ said Kalyani. She let Gautam hold her hand.

The magical spell was taken off from over the world. Gautam’s hands fell and he connected the series of events in a sequence: His long, futile journey, the encounter with the mob in the village, the meeting with Saiyad and Rudradatta’s cremation. He thought about the events. A pang of anguish seared him. He asked,

‘Has guruji really left all of us?’

‘Yes. You keep asking the same question since yesterday.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Even I can’t, but is true.’

‘Where is Tryambak?’

‘At the river. He has gone to take a bath.’

‘At this hour?’

‘Why not? This is early morning. He will also go for the darshan of the pyre.’

‘And Saiyad?’

‘He left yesterday night.’

‘Where has he gone? To see Tokaraswami?’

‘No. Saiyad went towards Jhansi. Khanderao is in the control of the resident. Tokaraswami could do nothing, so he has turned down all the offers and possibilities.’

‘And where is the priest sahib?’

‘He and his wife went away with Saiyad. He will help them reach a British camp.’

‘What should I do now?’

‘Do what you think is right.’

‘Has Saiyad left a message for me?’

‘No. He said that you knew what to do next.’

The revolutionaries had made up their plans. They had thought that Rudradatta would live to lead them. They had also prepared for the moment, if Rudradatta refused to take up the baton. Yet, they had not considered a situation where people all over repeated the mistake
made by the platoon, beginning the revolt earlier than the decided time. If Rudradatta refused to lead them, they had chosen Gautam as the leader for the central parts of Hind. They had instructions to surround the white men’s camps and prevent the progress of troops coming in from Mumbai. Saiyad had arranged to provoke agitations in Khandesh and Gujarat. He had also planned to help Gautam in his tasks.

By the time Saiyad turned towards Jhansi, the revolt had spread everywhere. All the plans had gone awry. Gautam, an experienced war campaigner, could see through the initial victories. He knew that the end-result would be a defeat. In spite of the harsh reality facing him, he could not think of being an ally of the Company. He was determined to send the Company back to Britain. Gautam did not have any idea how he could overthrow a foreign power without the use of violence.

Can I achieve the aim without violence, as guruji had suggested? He kept thinking. Can I withdraw from the revolt and devise a well thought out strategy? Will that prove me a coward? Isn’t it a betrayal to the idea of revolt? My withdrawal will disturb the entire execution of the plan. Is there a way to alter what is happening? Can a revolt ever be perfectly planned and executed? How can I just pull out of the revolt, leaving Nanasaibh, Tatyasaibh, Lakshmibai and Saiyad to do the rest?

‘What are you thinking?’ asked Kalyani.

‘I am anxious about Hindustan’s future.’

‘And what about your future?’

‘I have ruined my future. In fact, Hindustan’s destiny is now my destiny.’

‘Think of a way out of this muddle and get over your anxiety.’

‘I can’t handle it. And, guruji, my guide, is now no more.’

‘Now what?’

‘That is what I am thinking. I fear this revolt will fail.’

‘Then go and try to make it successful!’

‘Kalyani! You are guruji’s granddaughter! How can you say this?’

‘You are Rudradatta’s student, yet you have joined the revolutionaries. I can, at least, wish the revolutionaries well. And, remember, guruji had not stopped you from joining the revolters.’

‘I dislike wars now.’

‘Why?’

‘Can we win Hindustan back by killing our enemies? Will we become as intelligent as the white men, if we kill them?’
‘I hope you are not scared of wars.’

‘Scared of wars? No, never. Yes, I do fear that the battles that the revolters have planned will lead to a disaster. Nothing will come out of them.’

‘Now what?’

‘I have two options. One, since I have given them my word, I should go ahead with the revolutionaries and get involved in the conflagration, or...’

‘Or what?’

‘No, nothing...’

‘Tell me. You should share it with me at least...’

‘No, I won’t tell this to even you...’

‘Why?’

‘Because you...’

‘Tell me what is on your mind. Otherwise, I will make you swear on my life...’

‘Don’t! You should know other ways to learn what I am thinking.’

‘How do I know what you are thinking?’

‘You can find a way out my confusion...’

‘Tell me about it. I will help you find a solution to your dilemma.’

Gautam looked around. They both were alone in the small courtyard of the dharmashala. He could see Tryambak sitting in front of Rudradatta’s pyre at the riverbank.

‘Yes, Kalyani, I am going to ask you a question. Promise me you will give a clear answer.’

‘I have clearly told you everything that I wanted to. I did it long back.’

‘I want to ask the same questions again. For the last time.’

‘Okay. I always speak my mind.’

‘Will you be able to love Tryambak?’

‘I love him.’

‘Will you marry him?’

‘No.’
'Why?'
'I want to marry you. I will not marry anyone else.'
'When will you marry me?'
'When you give up weapons.'
'That is the option I was thinking about. Should I continue the fight and embrace death in the battle? Or, should I quit the ways of wars and embrace you?'
'Don’t come to me because you fear death.'
'I will give up weapons, not out of fear for death. I have faced death so many times that it can no longer scare me even in a nightmare.'
'Why are you prepared to quit weapons?'
'Your future frightens me.'
'Why?'
'If you don’t agree to marry Tryambak, and if I die in a battle…'
'Then what will happen to me, right?'
'Yes.'
'You are ready to give up the life of a soldier because of that!'
'I am thinking to do so.'
'If you quit weapons because you pity me, I will not marry you.'
'How will you marry me then?'
'Quit weapons, but after you win the war.'
'Hmmm…'
'Or, as guruji had suggested, find out a way to fight without using weapons. Quit weapons to fight in that new way and then come to me. I will be yours forever.'

Gautam gazed at Kalyani: Kalyani, a tenderhearted woman, was also sharp in thinking and intensely emotional; her bright and pleasant face could hide her passionate mind. Gautam had sometimes felt her passions penetrating out of her obvious softness. He had intimately known Kalyani for years. She was attractive yet intangible, always maintaining a distance from her lover. If a woman lets a lover touch her, he loses attraction for that body.

Gautam still gazed at Kalyani. She gave a weary laughter. Rudradatta’s pyre had not turned cold yet; and, she was pushing her lover away from her; yet, she could laugh.
‘Haven’t you seen me before?’ she asked.

‘I have seen you innumerable times and in different situations.’

‘Why are you staring at me?’

‘Whenever I see you, I feel I am looking at you for the first time.’

‘Am I beautiful?’

‘I am an insensitive soldier. I can’t understand what beauty is.’

‘But you keep gazing at me.’

‘I am trying to figure out why I cannot forget your face.’

‘Enough of all this, Gautam! Don’t try to be romantic!’

‘If I think about you in the middle of a battle, death doesn’t seem terrifying. If I think about you when I am lonely, my misery ends. Whenever grief strikes me, your face keeps me alive. Let me look at your face.’

‘Don’t! You embarrass me!’

‘I can’t take my eyes off your face. I fear I will...’

‘Stop it, Gautam! I can hear Tryambak’s sabots around.’

‘Okay, I will ask for something later. Kalyani, I want to ask you something.’

‘What is it now? Your demands don’t end.’

‘After my death, will you marry someone else?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who would he be? Tell me his name, so that I can peacefully meet my death.’

‘Why don’t you suggest a suitable match?’

‘Tryambak. I can think of only one man.’

‘I want to tell you for once...I repeat, Gautam, I will speak this just once...’

‘What?’

‘If you die, I will get married to your dead body.’
Gautam stood up, his eyes wide with terror. With smiling lips and playful eyes, Kalyani kept looking at him. Gautam stared at Kalyani, as if a yogi contemplating Kalyani’s face. Frozen into silence, his body had only one sign of life: a beating heart.

Kalyani took handful of water from a small pot lying next to her and sprinkled it on Gautam’s face. Gautam woke up from his trance and heard what Kalyani spoke,

‘I am helping Gautam in getting rid of his madness.’ Kalyani was looking behind Gautam.

Gautam turned and saw that Tryambak stood there looking at them.

3  Who was unhappy?

What did Kalyani speak? The fair, lovely, innocent girl, unhesitatingly, spoke about that fearsome time beyond life. She could have married Gautam that day, but she let the moments of happiness pass. And, instead of certainty, she chose to imagine an uncertain moment that was still away. What other evidence of love can one give? And, how would Gautam respond to Kalyani’s choice, because at that moment he was eager to make Kalyani happy, at the cost of his personal joy.

Tryambak overheard Kalyani saying that she would be wedded to Gautam’s dead body. He began thinking about life and death. Our short life results from a combination of numerous forces and synthesis of many elements. When someone dies, everything vanishes with the human body! If it would be true, God and nature both could be insane, immature or wasteful. If life ends with death, it would be a complete waste. Is such a waste fair? When someone dies, a universe ends with that person’s death. Who else, but a devil would enjoy the sport of eliminating a universe along with a person? A devil cannot be the force behind our life and death, and hence, we can say that blind nature must be carefully preserving the essence of our life somehow somewhere.

Kalyani’s statement about marrying Gautam’s dead body opened the unbreakable doors leading to the thin, yet vast atmosphere beyond our stony life. Tryambak could see that Gautam and Kalyani’s love went beyond physical attraction—it was a sacred relationship. Violence eventually leads to death. What can take us beyond death? What can give a life to death? Isn’t it love? Didn’t guruji mean this when he talked about non-violence? If a bond of love develops among all human beings… It would envelope the entire earth in an ocean of kindness. Why would such love limit itself to human beings? Why should it not touch birds, beasts and vegetation? Will it then leave any scope for violence?

‘Both of you have become quiet, haven’t you?’ asked Kalyani to Gautam and Tryambak.

‘Sometimes, the guru’s daughter plays the role of the guru,’ responded Tryambak.

‘Oh! You do have a tongue, don’t you?’ said Kalyani to Tryambak, a taciturn man.

‘Yes, I have decided to speak today.’

‘Why?’ asked Gautam.
‘For your sake.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘You will,’ said Tryambak and then went to hang his upper garment on the railing of dharmashala’s compound. Kalyani got up and began her chores; Gautam picked up his clothes and prepared to go to the river. His horse neighed as it noticed that its master was preparing to go somewhere. Gautam went to the beast, stroked it and gathered the hay lying around. The horse pleasantly whinnied, happy because of all the pampering. Gautam addressed the horse and said,

‘Be patient, kiddo! We shall be together later in the day.’

As if it has understood the message, the horse flapped its ears and danced for a while.

‘Good boy!’ said Gautam. He smacked his lips at the horse and left for the river. After taking bath, he offered water to the sun and sat for his sandhya. He could not concentrate on sandhya as he kept thinking about Kalyani. He wound up his puja and went to guruji’s pyre. Gautam picked up ashes from there and smeared it on his forehead and arms.

‘Guruji’s ashes! Sacred ashes!’ he said. Guruji was with us a few days back and today his body has turned into ashes, he thought. He could see Rudradatta in the silver-grey dust.

How can I say that guruji is not around us anymore? We remember him. Isn’t he living in our memory? In spite of thinking about Rudradatta being alive in memory, sadness gripped Gautam. If we don’t actually see someone, our darshan remains incomplete. Thinking about Rudradatta, Gautam returned to dharmashala. He began putting on his soldier’s uniform.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Tryambak.

‘I am preparing to leave.’

‘Why so soon?’

‘I think I should go now.’

‘Where will you go?’

‘Where I was before coming over here.’

‘Where were you?’

‘With the revolters. I shall go back there.’

‘What if you don’t?’

‘Then everything will be in a disorder there.’

‘Gautam!’

‘Yes?’
’You have to give me a promise!’

’I have already promised so many things to so many people that I don’t have courage to make one more promise.’

’Now that you have promised many things to people, can’t you make one more promise to me? I want you to do just one thing.’

’What can I do for you? I have nothing, Tryambak.’

’I shall ask for something that you have.’

’Okay, don’t confuse me anymore. Tell me what you want. I will definitely do what is possible for me.’

’Give me your soldier’s uniform.’

’Oh, is that all? Okay, keep it.’

’You stay back here. Don’t go to battlefront now.’

’Why?’

’You will have to take care of guruji’s ashram and Kalyani.’

’I have vowed that I will not return to Vihar, till the Company is not ousted from Hindustan.’

’I will fulfill your vow.’

’What do you mean?’

’You stay back and let me go to the battlefront.’

’You earned the right to cremate guruji by taking a vow to give up weapons forever. How can you now fight battles?’

’I will fight without weapons. I will find a way to do it.’

’To do that you don’t have to go instead of me. Tryambak, you are a kind soul. Definitely far more generous than me. I have one request to make. I am leaving. You take care of Kalyani.’

Tryambak did not respond to this last comment. Gautam began putting on his clothes. The pujari and Kalyani came over there. Kalyani immediately asked,

’Where are you going, Gautam?’

’I have to go.’

’I know…But so soon?’
'Every moment counts.'

'Don’t you want to have lunch?'

'No. I won’t be able to eat now. Guruji’s memory haunts me.’

'You can’t leave without having your meals. We all have not eaten since yesterday. I won’t let you go hungry,’ announced Kalyani.

Gautam realised that he would have to do what Kalyani said. He kept his clothes aside and said,

'Okay, I will leave, when you allow me to.’ He sat on a mat there.

Kalyani went to the courtyard to cook lunch. After Rudradatta’s death, Kalyani had become lonely, but she had controlled herself with determination. She required consolation; she could have wept over the lossover and over again. Kalyani, however, cried hysterically once and grew stronger. She did not shed tears when Rudradatta’s students and followers cried. Not that she had become insensitive, but she controlled herself out of deep attachment for her grandfather. Crying over a loved one’s death is natural and sometimes, even beautiful; but an absolute control over venting one’s emotions in such a situation is rare. In fact, it is a grand achievement. Our mind has to use immense strength to prevent tears. If a woman can weep easily, she can also control her tears easily. How can we call a woman ‘weak’ when she can keep a smiling face, even while feeling terribly lonely? Kalyani’s control over her emotions amazed Gautam and Tryambak.

The villagers often came to the dharmashala and brought words from various sources. Because of the uprising, their life became alive with tales and events. The travellers described what they had witnessed, evoking vivid pictures. Gautam tried to test if the stories had any truth in them. He was sure that the news about Rudradatta’s death had reached all around. The revolutionaries were acting according to the plan they had made, if Rudradatta had refused to be the leader of the revolutionaries. They were going to lay siege to the closest camp meant for the white people. A group of revolters was going to gather at the shrine where the priest had taken shelter. Gautam was getting impatient. He asked Kalyani to hurry up. While having lunch, Kalyani joked,

‘Gautam would not stay put even for a moment, once he decides to go for war.’

‘Yes, the cruel acts of war thrill soldiers.’

‘And you have become addicted to that thrill.’

‘I shall get rid of the addiction soon!’

‘How is that?’

‘Hindustan will be peaceful soon.’

‘What will you do then?’

‘I shall get married and become a householder.’

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‘Good. I and Tryambak will come to see you. But what if your habits to fight battles affects your domestic life?’

‘No, I am going to give up arms and surrender myself to my queen!’

‘Liar!’

‘I am all prepared to serve my wife.’

‘We are waiting to see that day! If you trouble your wife, we shall hold your ear and remind you of these words of yours!’

In spite of this bantering, Gautam could not eat well. He wound up fast and began putting on his uniform. Kalyani insisted that he should lie down for a while, but he did not. Kalyani wanted Gautam to honour his promise to be at the warfront, but she also felt like delaying the moment of separation. Yet, she felt that Gautam should go to the battle, and she believed that he must go there soon. Gautam had said that a day’s respite had given him strength to work for a month.

‘Don’t you want to take a nap?’ asked Kalyani.

‘No.’

‘You want to go now.’

‘I should go now, shouldn’t I?’

‘Yes, you should.’

Gautam was ready to go, but he could not lift his feet off the ground. He had to use all his strength to walk, as if he was lifting Shesha’s head. He piled his satchels on the horseback and then mounted the beast. He turned to look at Kalyani. She looked into his eyes and waved her hand. In the blink of an eye, the horse galloped away with Gautam. Kalyani heard the horse splashing through the river. When the horse reached a turn, Gautam fluttered his handkerchief. Kalyani saw the blurry image through tears and that was it: Kalyani began weeping. She could no longer control herself. The playful smile that lingered on her lips a while ago disappeared and she kept sobbing for long.

Tryambak observed this; he neither cried, nor did he console Kalyani. He felt that his life was turning grimmer and difficult. He let Kalyani cry because it was best for her fragile heart to weep at that moment. At last, exhausted, Kalyani became quiet. Tryambak said,

‘Kalyani!’

‘Hmmm…’

‘Have your lunch now.’

‘I don’t want to.’

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‘You haven’t eaten for the last two days.’

‘Tryambak, will you do me a favour?’

‘What?’

‘Take me to Gautam.’

‘Why?’

‘I won’t be able to live without him!’

Tryambak began thinking about what Kalyani said. Kalyani asked him,

‘Would you come over with me?’

‘I won’t leave you alone.’

‘Why?’

‘It is guru’s instruction. And, it is also a fellow-student’s instruction.’

‘Let’s go then.’

‘Have your lunch first. I shall go and arrange for two horses.’

‘Shall we get horses in the village?’

‘If we can’t, I will lift you and take you to Gautam!’

‘I can walk.’

‘We shall never reach there if we walk down.’

‘Okay, go and fetch horses.’

‘That I will, if you do what I say.’

‘What is it?’

‘You eat something first.’

‘Okay, I will’

Tryambak left. He could easily arrange for two horses. When he returned to the dharmashala, he saw Kalyani sitting in front of a plate made of leaves. The food was untouched and Kalyani was lost in thoughts.

‘What are you doing? Haven’t you eaten yet?’ asked Tryambak.
As Gautam passed through various regions, many revolters began following him. The soldiers that were resentful over the Company’s attitude to them were scattered all over; after exchanging coded messages, they joined Gautam. These soldiers had provoked many civilians against the Company; they too, eagerly left their homes to fight against the Company, making the group larger. Apart from these, numerous laymen came in: some were curious to know what would happen next; some were after fame or money; some were out for a personal vendetta; some were there because someone else was also there; and, many had come over under a brief spell of excitement.

Since people could easily possess weapons then, every one of them had a sword, a gun, a bayonet, a bhan or a jambiya. Many lay people were also trained to use weapons. Yet, they lacked discipline and training in military drills. The Company’s soldiers had destructive weapons; besides, their soldiers were trained to fight for long hours like automatons. Gautam knew that the revolters lacked these important qualities. He could judge that the British could win because of their intelligence and their soldiers. Undoubtedly, their soldiers trained in daily parades and drills played an important role in the Company’s victories. To combine a group of trained soldiers with that of untrained ones was dangerous. When the rabble influenced the soldiers, together they turned into a large, irresponsible crowd, and sometimes they even indulged in plundering. Gautam began instructing people on what was to be done, and gave a direction to various groups.

Gautam had the responsibility of preparing a large platoon for the fight. He saw that except Bengal, the lands around Ganga and Jamuna and some areas of central Hindustan, the rest of the country was not prepared for a revolt. The flames had not even touched Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Konkan, Hyderabad and Madras—this covered the large population of western and southern Hind. The lion of Punjab was fast asleep. The Company’s military, posted in the south and west, was marching over to the north to crush the revolt. Gautam was supposed to prevent the passage of the Company’s army and thwart their efforts. This was an enormous task, because Gautam had to work over a wide area, using crude tools and scanty resources. He, however, tried hard to discipline the people he had to work with. Gautam arranged surveillance over the zones from where the Company’s army, coming over from south and west, would pass to enter into the northern regions. He had strictly instructed his soldiers that they must not attack women, children and unarmed men.

Once, on a bright moonlit night, beneath a banyan tree, Gautam was lying over his horse’s saddle. He fell asleep. That night, Gautam’s platoon had laid siege around one of the Company’s camp. About hundred white soldiers and five hundred Hindi soldiers were stubbornly guarding the camp, not showing any sign of giving in. Gautam doubted that some of his soldiers were providing ammunition to the Company’s men. He had decided to strike at dawn and capture the camp. He had delayed a direct attack to avoid a blood bath. Yet, he realised it was time to complete the mission after the hours of siege. He ordered other leaders to attack the camps, and, as he was sure of a victory, he dozed off for a while.
While he was dreaming of victory and his wedding with Kalyani, he heard a distant voice addressing him.

‘Who is this?’ Gautam woke up, and immediately laid hand on his sword’s hilt.

Astonished to see who stood in front of him, he cried,

‘How come you are here?’

His naik had arrested two people and brought them to him.

‘They were wandering around our camp. They could not explain why they were here. We found their movement suspicious so we brought them here.’

‘Good. They are friends,’ said Gautam.

‘I doubt if they are our friends. We think they are passing on information to the enemy camp,’ said the naik.

‘How do you know this?’

‘We had seen them yesterday as well. Today, when we arrested them, they said that they did not support us.’

‘That may be. They don’t support our cause, but they don’t support our enemy either. I know them well.’

‘These people know that the platoons coming over from Mumbai are on the way. They have brought the news, and hence, the white men don’t want to surrender.’

‘Oh! So the Mumbai platoons have reached here!’

‘Yes, they will be here in two days.’

‘Who brought this information?’

‘This man, whom we have seized, told us. Saiyad had also sent a word about it.’

‘Okay. This man would not inform our enemies about it. I am sure.’

‘I know he has done it, yet if you want to...’

‘Release them. Let me introduce them to you. This is Rudradatta’s daughter Kalyani, and this man is Rudradatta’s student Tryambak.’

The naik was startled to learn this. He did a salam to both and untied them. Kalyani and Tryambak were in ascetics’ clothes. The naik observed them and made sure that one of them was indeed a woman.

‘If this is the case, why were they moving about among our soldiers?’
‘That I shall ask them. You may go now and take rest for a while. By dawn, we should conquer the Company’s platoon.’

‘Okay,’ said the naik and left with the soldiers.

Gautam instructed his guard to take a nap. Even war demands rest for a few moments. Soldiers always keep turns to enjoy the moments of leisure to give respite to their body and mind. Gautam believed that what the commander could not do, he could not expect his soldiers to do. Hence, he always worked the hardest of all, took lead in a dangerous situation and relaxed for few moments. Gautam asked the guard to go to sleep; Kalyani and Tryambak also lay down to relax; and Gautam patrolled around to keep a watch on the enemy’s movements.

How could he fall asleep now? Kalyani had returned to him. When he was trying hard to erase all pleasant memories of being with his beloved, when he was deliberately getting involved in work, the woman who was the center of his reverie came to him in person, making him restless. Because he was a generous leader, he could not have fallen asleep even if he wished to take rest. Gautam’s sharp eyes could see until far, making sure that sentries were doing their job well. He reached close to the makeshift battlement prepared by the Company’s soldiers. A bullet whizzed past his ear. The shot disturbed the quiet night. He hid behind a tree.

When he knocked against someone, he realised that someone else was also hiding behind that tree.

‘Who is this?’ roared Gautam.

‘Kalyani.’

‘Kalyani, what are you doing here?’

‘Just learning to be brave, to see a brave man in action!’

‘Why have you come here?’

‘I have already told you. I have come here to see you.’

‘But I had met you ten days ago.’

‘I could not stay away from you.’

‘A battle is going on here. This is a dangerous place.’

‘I know. We came over here yesterday.’

‘What were you doing here since yesterday?’

‘I kept looking at you. No one had noticed us till today.’

‘Didn’t the naik doubt you both?’
‘Yes he did. I saw you at the front of the platoon yesterday.’

‘Where were you?’

‘Quite close to you. This makeshift battlement has some nooks where one can easily hide.’

‘Had you noticed that two enemy soldiers had tried to attack me from behind? They had swords.’

‘We had seen them and we also thwarted their attack!’

‘Is it? How?’

Yesterday, Gautam had wandered to the battlement’s corner that was not guarded. He could easily observe the enemy camp from there. He asked two of his soldiers to keep a watch and then climbed up the fortress. Once up, he stood on the rampart for a while, before jumping in. Right then, two white soldiers who were hiding below leaped up and attacked him. Gautam slipped out to save himself, and then he heard two gunshots. The white soldiers rolled on the ground. Gautam believed that his soldiers had shot from below.

‘So, you thought the soldiers shot them down!’ asked Kalyani.

‘Yes.’

‘No, the bullets did not hit them. In fact, we snatched away their swords and pushed them down from the parapet.’

‘Kalyani, you saved my life!’

‘I am not sure about it. I think you would have fought back all alone.’

‘Let’s return to our camp. This place is not safe.’

‘Gautam, I want your permission to do something.’

‘What is it?’

‘Let me be your guard!’

‘You are my protector! You take care of my soul, don’t you?’

‘Don’t trick me with your words.’

‘But how will you handle weapons?’

‘I will do it for you!’ said Kalyani with a twinkle in her eyes. Gautam felt that Kalyani was prepared to sacrifice her principles and stifle her emotions for the sake of love. What is better: love or principles? What is greater: sacrificing love or sacrificing principles? Can we say that someone has betrayed principles, when her creed is to offer everything for the sake
of love? Isn’t love a great emotion? Doesn’t it stand for an eternal ideal? Who is greater than a lover? Besides, Kalyani had never taken the pledge of not using weapons.

‘Don’t be crazy, Kalyani! I have soldiers to guard me. And, by tomorrow, we are going to conquer the enemy.’

‘You know that additional forces are going to help them tomorrow.’

‘Yes, my soldiers don’t know it, but I know about it.’

‘How will you all fight at two fronts?’

‘We shall capture the fortress in the morning. Saiyad and his troops will also join in.’

‘What do I do then?’

‘You should not have come here.’

‘I could not help it.’

‘Kalyani!’ said Gautam. He held Kalyani’s lovely hand squeezed it. Kalyani moaned in pain, but she did not pull away her hand. Some pains leave a sweet sensation in the body. Bullets rained everywhere around, but the two lovers behind the tree ignored the killer shots altogether.

A rooster cried in the nearby village. Gautam, who was still stroking that soft hand, was startled to hear the messenger of morning. He dropped Kalyani’s hand and said,

‘I am sorry, Kalyani!’

‘For what?’

‘I made a mistake.’

‘What is it?’

‘I touched you.’

‘So what?’ Although Kalyani was brought up in the sacred premises of the ashram, she did not find anything wrong in what was done in the moments of passion. Probably, a touch of love is never improper.

‘I don’t have a right to touch you.’

‘You don’t have a right to touch me. Is it? See this now,’ said Kalyani. She took Gautam’s hand and rubbed it on her cheek. Gautam’s heart began pounding, and as if experiencing an earthquake, he became anxious and helpless. He realised that he was losing control over his mind and body. Longing to crush Kalyani in his arms and suck her lips, Gautam kept looking at the beautiful woman. The lovers, immersed in their union of love, forgot about the material world around. A bugle’s shrill cry tore reverberated around.
Gautam pulled back his hand that wanted to hold Kalyani; he crushed his lust for a kiss; he withdrew his hand that Kalyani was rubbing on her cheeks.

‘Do you want to leave?’

‘Yes, we want to capture the fortress before dawn.’

‘Okay, go away.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Whatever I like.’

‘But this is a warzone.’

‘I and Tryambak don’t fear the battle.’

‘Both of you don’t have weapons.’

‘Tryambak doesn’t have a weapon, but I have one!’

‘You are disappointing guruji’s soul for my sake.’

‘I can do anything for you.’

‘Why?’

‘Gautam, I fear that we shall never meet again.’

‘Why should it happen? Once the Company goes away, I will give up wars and weapons forever.’

‘Then what?’

‘We shall get married, as was guruji’s wish.’

‘But I fear that...Hear the bugles. They all are waiting for you,’ said Kalyani and ran away. Gautam took long strides to his camp. He saw that his soldiers had begun preparing for the battle. Gautam was determined to capture the fort soon. He turned once, but Kalyani had vanished in the reddish morning light.

‘Was this our last meeting?’ thought Gautam. He shivered thinking about it.

5
The War

The sun was not up yet, but its blood-red eyes were preparing to cast light on the day. The drums and bugles stirred up the morning. Shouting commanders, stomping feet and gunshots put an end to the quiet morning.
The battlement and the camp behind were still quiet, as if they had become speechless. The revolters wanted to conquer the fortress and eliminate the white rulers forever. The fortress was a makeshift structure made of logs of wood and clay; it was neither tall nor broad; its walls were incompletely done; yet, it was not so fragile that it could be easily destroyed. Gautam wanted to conquer the fortress, but he did not want to lose many soldiers in the battle. He had already won over some of the white camps and by doing so, he was spreading the fire of revolt in the south and west of Hind. When he heard that the Company's troops were coming over from Mumbai, he decided to capture the fortress. It was easy for him to break through the makeshift battlement.

Gautam began attacking the fortress from two flanks and asked two more platoons to stand afar and observe the development. He hurled ropes onto the fortress. He and his armed soldiers climbed up the structure. The moment he hoisted the flag of the revolutionaries there, the cries of 'Har HarMahadev' and 'Allah-o-Akabar' filled the air.

In a moment, Gautam heard an explosion that rose above the soldiers' cries. A cannon ball shot above them, crossed the platoons stationed below and then, uprooting a few trees, it dropped on the ground. If it had dropped on the soldiers, they would have been killed on the spot. It was aimed at the platoon standing below. Gautam had ordered his men to kneel on the parapet, and thus he saved them from getting in the way of flying cannon balls.

After a while, the team on the rampart jumped inside the battlements and confronted a few Hindi soldiers of the Company. Tired after a long confinement within the fortress, the hungry Hindi soldiers could not sustain a long fight, scattering away after an initial battle. Gautam rushed to the nearest camp. Gautam's platoons that stood outside noticed that the team on the rampart had jumped in. They launched attacks the fortress's sides. The white soldiers could not devise a strategy to defend themselves. They could not decide who should be targeted first: those already in, or those who were trying to get from the two sides of the fortress. Before they could turn the barrel to either of the sides, Gautam and his team stormed in and killed the soldiers that were operating the guns. A nearby bungalow and other such houses had wounded white soldiers, women and children. Gautam and his men turned the barrel to the bungalow. Before they fired a shot, a white flag fluttered over the bungalow.

With this indication, all the soldiers lowered their weapons. The white platoons had expressed their inability to continue fighting. Gautam and his men stopped using weapons, yet they could not help cheering their victory. The platoons below also echoed with shouts of joy. Gautam announced ceasefire, ordering his men to restrain their urge to kill the defeated. The Arya creed was clear about it: Never attack those who have accepted defeat. Such rules made even wars ethical. Gautam asked the leader of the white platoons,

‘Who is inside the bungalow?’

‘Our superiors, women, children and infirm men.’

‘I want to assure them that they are safe.’

Gautam instructed his men to provide medical treatment to all, the white and the brown alike. Later, he entered into the bungalow with a white soldier. The women and children inside began screaming, when they saw Gautam. Both the sides had such deep mistrust for
each other that it was unimaginable that either could be kind or forgiving to the other. The conquered were not sure that the victorious would spare their life.

Gautam stopped at the entrance and told the white officer,

‘Tell them I don’t attack the women, children and unarmed men.’

The officer gave the message and consoled all. When Gautam went inside, the chief commander came forward and extended his hand to Gautam. Looking at each other, Gautam and the commander both stood frozen. Their eyes betrayed bitter hatred for each other. At last, the white officer held Gautam’s hand and said,

‘Hello Gautam! We have met after a long time, haven’t we? I was wondering who this kind enemy is!’

‘But Jackson sahib, I knew that you were the chief here. Who else would put up such a stubborn fight?’

‘You are lucky. We have decided to declare a ceasefire.’

‘It is a realistic decision. Give your ammunition to us, and then go wherever you want to.’

‘Aren’t you detaining us?’

‘No, you are too few to be arrested. If I detain all men, the women will be left alone.’

‘Gautam, for old time’s sake I want to request you something. We want to stay here for a day.’

‘Why?’

‘We have not eaten well for many days.’

‘I will let you stay here, and I will also arrange for your meals. You all are my guests for now,’ said Gautam, after a while. He had reasons to take time to make up his mind. Although he had suffered immensely in the Russian war because of Jackson, any two soldiers who have spent time together at the frontier also develop a bond with each other. Because of that relationship, they help each other at the time of crisis, ignoring their flaws. Fellowship of soldiers inspired Gautam to arrange for Jackson’s platoon and people.

Gautam captured the fortress and seized all the ammunition stored in it and the cannons placed on the rampart. The cannons were immediately shifted to his camp. Few knew that they would have to battle it out again after a few hours. Gautam gave his soldiers a pep talk and asked them to be prepared for a fight. His helper asked,

‘Pandeyji, you are being impatient. We have time, don’t we?’

‘Am I impatient? Look there at the horizon. Can you see the dust clouds there? It could be the Company’s platoon.’

‘We have captured all of their nearby camps. I don’t think this could be a new platoon.’
‘These white men have crossed oceans to rule over us. Do you think they will leave Hind after losing a few camps here and there? We have a long battle ahead.’

‘I shall go and ask our soldiers to be ready,’ the helper left and began talking to all those who were either busy talking or eating or taking rest. Gautam had guessed it right. The dust clouds were moving ahead at a great speed. Gradually, they could see horses and people; it was indeed a platoon coming over from Mumbai. Gautam first wanted to prevent the platoon’s progress. The revolt would succeed only if Gautam could block the invading army.

Gautam had asked his soldiers to hide in trees. Trees provided protection as well as a good point to attack the soldiers on the ground. A warrior never gets tired. It was not possible to take rest after the morning battle. The hot summer afternoon added to the difficulty. Heat, hunger or fatigue does not bother a brave man. Gautam motivated soldiers and stationed them at right places. He instructed some of them to move ahead for the initial encounter with the invading troops.

Gautam followed a strict personal rule: he never attacked first. His friends did not approve of such principles, since the ideas did not fit into the practice of war on the ground. Gautam’s principle was impractical to follow in a battle. Yet, they followed their leader’s instructions like good soldiers everywhere. The large army was now close. On approaching Gautam’s soldiers, they separated in two troops and began closing in from two sides. Gautam’s assistant looked at him, asking for the signal to begin the attack and disrupt the opponents’ strategy. But Gautam, determined to avoid making the first strike, waited for the Company’s army to make an assault.

They did not have to wait for long as they heard an explosion and with it, a cannonball dropped right in front of them, almost burying in the soil. Gautam’s platoons were excited by the beginning and struck back, forcing the Company’s platoons to halt on the way. Some soldiers confronted the platoons attacking from the sides.

The scene was chaotic, with thundering noise filling the sky. Dust cloudswirled around, guns and cannons exploded, swords and daggers rattled on, grunts and shouts of soldiers punctuated the din. The sky had darkened, obscured by dust. A wounded soldier rarely cried. Gautam’s soldiers were trained by military drills; hence, the fight was fierce between both the sides. Gautam had not included the plunderers and indiscipline daredevils. He had rejected even those who had failed his test, even after receiving training. ‘One rash and suicidal man would kill hundred enemies’—a proverb went; Gautam often said, ‘One trained soldier would kill hundred rash and suicidal enemies’. In his insistence for discipline, he dismissed a number of over-excited revolters. As a result, this particular battle was largely between two trained armies, going on for a long time.

Neither of the sides was giving way, making it impossible to move forward. The arms used were also destructive. If a platoon rushed forward, its soldiers would be destroyed in a moment. Unbending soldiers passionately fought the battle that gradually heated up. Hundreds were killed in the battle, convincing each side that the other was better at warfare. Gautam decided that this battle would end only by an audacious attack on the enemies’ cannons. If the cannons stopped blowing cannonballs, the pressure would ease off. But who would penetrate through the lines and assault the soldiers at the cannons. Who would lead this mission?
Gautam decided to be the leader of the mission. Before he gathered his men for the attack, he heard a voice,

‘Gautam!’

Looking at the person who called out, his eyes widened.

‘Gautam, I am with you,’ said Kalyani, dressed as a soldier. Gautam easily recognised her.

‘You go away from here, Kalyani. This place is not for you,’ said Gautam.

‘Why should I leave now? And, where do I go? You tell me, where should I go?’

‘I am going to attack the big guns.’

‘That is good. You should do it. I will also join you.’

Gautam kept staring at Kalyani. A soldier rushed in and announced,

‘Their left lines are making a retreat.’

‘Good. Keep attacking them. I will lead my company from the middle.’

‘But they are still firing cannon balls.’

‘I will put an end to that firing.’

Gautam gave a loud command, and in a moment, a team of soldiers speeded towards the cannons.

Gautam told Kalyani, who was running next to him,

‘Kalyani, death is awaiting us!’

‘I would love to die with you.’

They could not talk more. Gautam attacked the enemy troops, launching a fierce battle in the middle. In a few moments, the blasting cannons became silent. The enemy troops on the left began making an escape, and the lines on the right turned directionless. The Company’s troops began withdrawing from all sides; some of them even looked disoriented in the situation. When on a winning side, the soldiers become overjoyed; but when on the losing side, they fast become dejected. When winning, the troop cannot see the deep ditches of defeat; when losing, they cannot see the windows that could lead to a possible victory. Gautam and his soldiers chased the retreating lines because so long as the Company’s troops had not accepted defeat, enmity raged.

At last, the Company waved the white flag. Gautam suspended his attack and ordered his soldiers not to massacre any more soldiers. Winning over the Company’s military in a battle was a glorious occasion for the revolters. Knowing well that a victory can make men cruel, crazy and arrogant, Gautam immediately acted to contain his soldiers’ misbehaviour. The first task was to begin the treatment of injured soldiers. He threatened his soldiers that
those who ill-treated the wounded and the defeated would be severely punished. The Company’s wounded soldiers should be treated as friends, he said. Gautam asked some of his soldiers to take care of the wounded, and then he went to a nearby hillock to take rest and discuss the next strategy with his friends. Someone informed him then that some of the soldiers captured after the morning victory had escaped and joined the Company’s soldiers.

‘Let them do what they want to! Jackson is a liar and cannot harm us in any way,’ Gautam responded.

The long summer dusk lingered on the maidan; smoke and dust-clouds filled the sky. The victorious soldiers ran around and carried stretchers of wounded soldiers. The battle had ended; Gautam had conquered the Company’s platoons; the revolution’s success seemed possible now. After a few such battles, the Company could definitely quit Hindustan forever. Yet, Gautam appeared restless. He looked around.

What was he looking for?

6

Beyond Life

Gautam had not set eyes on Kalyani for a long time. Even Tryambak was not around. They both should have greeted him after the victory, but they did not. Where did Kalyani go after the battle? Why did she come over at the time of danger and vanish when the battle ended? Have the Company’s soldiers caught her? Could she be lying wounded in the field? Perhaps she is...

Gautam, who never lost heart even while facing death, shivered thinking about Kalyani’s death. He jumped up.

‘Pandeyji, what happened?’ a friend asked.

‘Nothing. I am looking for a wounded soldier.’

‘You relax now. Someone else can find him out.’

‘I am not tired. They might not pay attention to awounded soldier as they all are in a hurry. Let us go and join them, so that we can carefully see who is wounded and who is dead.’

Gautam was worried about Kalyani, and he was determined to find her out. Unable to sit still, he began wandering around. The red sky of dusk turned dark and remained so till the moon made it bright again. In spite of winning the battle, Gautam looked defeated. He looked at the faces of people walking around and of bodies lying around. He sighed. A victory might be as dazzling as the sun, but who would like it if it is smeared with blood? Who would celebrate such a victory?

A number of vultures hovered in the sky, but they had not yet descended to relish the dead bodies. Since the quiet birds, as grave as death, knew the future of the carcasses, they were not in a hurry to start their feast. In moonlight, their shadows appeared like men-eating ghosts. Even in their silence, the vultures loomed there like death’s shrill screams.
A jackal ran past Gautam. Its eyes gleamed in the dark, like the eyes of death. Does victory always involve a deathly light in it? Even that jackal had a twinkle in the eyes, as if it had killed someone. Some other jackals barked in the distance. Human beings never learn why animals cry, whether they do so out of joy or pain. The pack of jackals that bark around dead human bodies looks like the platoon of soldiers that cheers after a winning a battle. Whose victory was it—Gautam’s or jackals’? Who should cheer at the moment—Gautam or jackals?

Owls sitting in a nearby tree began hooting. Nocturnal birds send ominous messages, but they don’t eat carcasses like jackals and vultures; they bravely catch their prey. The fearless always confront the enemy. Gautam banished jackals and vultures from his thoughts and compared himself with owls. But how could he sustain the analogy? The owls kill, but they do not save those who are on the deathbed. Gautam was looking for the wounded whom he could save. He saw that a body lying close by shivered a little.

‘He is alive. Pick him up,’ said Gautam, looking at the face of that soldier. Before someone would pick up that soldier, his body became lifeless.

‘Let it be. It won’t help him anymore,’ said Gautam’s helper.

‘Why?’

‘He is dead.’

‘I just saw his body trembling.’

‘That was the last movement.’

Those who kill more number of soldiers, either by power or by trickery, are remembered as brave. But why was this battle fought? For overthrowing the Company? For Nanasahib and Bahadurshah? The Company Sarkar might be alien in our land and it might be arrogant. Nanasahib’s ancestors were arrogant, and so were Bahadurshah’s ancestors. What if the Company turns Hindustani? Shall we still fight against it?

And even if the Company is not Hindustani, isn’t it better than the peshwa and Mughal administration? How does it manage its affairs? How has it formed its political system? The Mughals may have another Shah Alam, and the peshwas may produce another Raghunathrao. The Company did not bother about an insignificant Shah Alam or a selfish Raghunathrao. Why should we indulge in violence to bring back the peshwas or the Mughals?

No, all this violence is for making Hindustan independent. Hindis should rule over Hind. But, is violence necessary to win the seat of power? What is the other option? Violence is frightening. Violence is cruel. Yet, the aim of winning independence justified violence, making violence sacred.

Gautam heard someone laughing. He saw a lonely bird flying above. Is death laughing at me?

‘Did you hear someone laughing?’ asked Gautam.

‘No,’ his assistant said.
'I heard someone’s barking laughter.'

'I think you need to take rest now.'

Gautam did not reply. He could still hear the echoes of that laughter. Independence through violence—how is it possible? How can we associate an idea as pure as independence with death? He felt that Rudradatta stood in front of him. He was grinning at Gautam. Happy to see his guru, Gautam did a pranam. The guru asked,

'Has violence brought independence for you all?'

'Guruji, we shall soon achieve independence.'

'Has anyone ever won freedom through violent means?'

'Yes, violence and freedom are closely associated. It is a universal phenomenon.'

'Violence begets death! And the freedom that depends on death also dies soon.'

Gautam was lost in thoughts. The civilisation that relies on violence will bite dust when it meets another force of greater violence. If violence rules the world, the revolutionaries would overthrow the company; and, later, another violent force will diminish today’s victorious revolters.

'But how can anyone win independence without indulging in violence?'

'Find a way out. You are a human being. Observe the religions of the world. The religious creeds are eternal. They are more pervasive than all the kingdoms that sustain themselves by violence. The message of the religions will touch your heart,' replied Rudradatta.

Before Gautam could proceed with this dialogue, his assistant spoke, eliminating Rudradatta from his mind. The assistant said,

'Shall we move ahead?'

'Oh...yes...'

'We are short on time.'

'Was I talking to someone?'

'No, you were not.'

'Did you hear someone’s voice?'

'No.'

'What are we doing here?'

'Nothing. You were lost in thoughts.'
'Let’s go from here.'

Gautam began walking ahead. He had not found Kalyani and Tryambak yet. He remembered having seen Kalyani before he unleashed the last attack on the cannons. She might have died in that last flare-up.

‘If Kalyani lost her life during that last combat, I will destroy the entire white race,’ murmured Gautam. He heard someone chuckling. A muffled voice asked him,

‘Will your revenge earn you freedom? Or, it will make relations more venomous.’

They heard a distressed cry,

‘Water, please...I want water...’

Gautam turned to that voice. Could it be Kalyani? Hundreds of dying soldiers lay there. Many craved for few drops of water. Can such violence open the doors to people’s well-being, or can it bring a greater common good? Gautam ran to see a few of the bodies. None required water now.

‘Water!’

Gautam saw a body that seemed to have life. He dropped the head of a dead soldier and ran to that solider with flickering life. He was preoccupied with the desire to set eyes on Kalyani’s face; he hoped to save her life. When he discovered that Kalyani was not the one asking for water, Gautam became more and more anxious. A white soldier was thirsty. When death is close, even an enemy turns into a friend; and, people give away whatever an opponent asks in such moments. Even in the middle of a massacre, while facing death, the perpetrators of that violence behave in the most humane manner and observe a moral code—this makes violence absurd!

Gautam went close to that dying man. He was Jackson.

‘Sahib?’

When Jackson and his soldiers, who had surrendered to Gautam after losing the fortress, learnt that the Company’s troops had reached there, they escaped the camp where they were given a shelter. Duping the guards, they joined the battle. Eventually, Gautam won the battle, and Jackson lay there on the verge of death, craving for a few drops of water.

‘Water!’ cried Jackson.

Gautam took water in a mug and put few drops into Jackson’s mouth. Jackson opened his eyes and gave a desperate look around. He grabbed the mug and poured water in his mouth.

Jackson felt better and became conscious enough to make sense of the surrounding. He stared at Gautam. The dim moonlight helped him recognise who was holding him. He remembered that the Company’s army had lost the battle. The brown men’s victory can often be intolerable to white men. The white men, who believed that God had sent them torule over others, found it blasphemous of brown men to demand freedom. Jackson was wounded; he doubted if he would survive long. Leaning on Gautam, Jackson sipped some
more water. Although he was on the verge of death, he experienced a burst of strength. Holding the mug with one hand, he pulled out a dagger with another, and thrust it in Gautam’s chest.

‘You brown man! You betrayed the Company!’

Speaking these last words, Jackson dropped on the ground. That was his last burst of power. He began breathing his last.

At first, Gautam experienced a sharp pain in chest. He stopped his assistants from assaulting Jackson, and pulled out the dagger that was stuck in his chest. Blood squirted out of the wound.

‘Jackson, you a white man! After you surrendered, I let you go and you…’ said Gautam.

‘I have saved the Company by killing you…You would have…’ said Jackson. With these last words, Jackson passed away. After making a fatal attack on a fine warrior like Gautam, he died a satisfied man.

Gautam’s pale lips smiled, but suffering a wave of pain, he fainted. His head fell on Jackson’s chest. Gautam cried,

‘Kalyani, this war…this war…’

Gautam’s assistants realised that Gautam would not survive for long. The soldiers from the victorious camp rushed there. They all wanted to massacre the wounded and captive white soldiers, but they immediately became busy with Gautam’s treatment, when they saw his bleeding wound. The bleeding stopped in a few moments. Gautam opened his pale eyes. A brave soldier, Gautam, the backbone of the revolt, was still lying with his head on Jackson’s chest.

‘Oh…My head is lying on the enemy’s dead body…’ Gautam said, smiling.

He closed his eyes again. In his deep sleep of unconsciousness, he heard someone calling out his name. Is this my death? No, this is a sweet voice. Death’s call cannot be as sweet as this voice.

‘Gautam!’

Gautam tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids had turned heavy. The victorious platoon’s commandercould not open his eyes. Is this all that men can do? Men can kill others, but they cannot bring others back to life. Can they?

‘Gautam!’

Was someone trying to put life back in that dying body? That voice had a life-giving power. Did this voice come through the doors of heaven? Gautam tried to open his eyes, but he could not. He realised his powerlessness and tried to smile. He could not even move his lips. Yet, his face looked pleased, as if the moon shone in a cloudless sky.

‘Gautam, say something!’
Gautam, now sinking deeper and deeper, realised that someone was sobbing. Is my Kalyani calling me? I met my death while looking for her. Has she come to me at last? Gautam mustered all the power that he could and opened his eyes. Although he felt the weight of stones on his eyes, he did open them. Kalyani sat there, stroking his head. Kalyani, his darling. How fortunate his moment of death had become!

‘My Gautam!’

Gautam noticed that he was lying in a military camp. Kalyani and two more people stood there. They all were crying. In her obsession for Gautam, Kalyani kept taking his name so that her lover would look at her once. Whose sincere desire is ever fulfilled? Yet, Kalyani’s earnest voice brought Gautam back to the surface after some time.

‘Gautam...My Gautam!’

Gautam looked pleased to see Kalyani. Losing the sense of where he was, and what had happened, Gautam also cried,

‘Kalyani!’

Gautam’s cry turned into a muffled, unclear moaning. Yet, Kalyani knew what it meant. She was so thrilled that her soul wished to leap out of her body, to be one with Gautam. She wanted to embrace Gautam. She wanted to crush his body. She wanted to be one with him.

‘At last you have come over...’ said Gautam, in a faint voice.

‘Yes, and I am not going anywhere now.’

Exhilarated to hear Kalyani’s voice, Gautam wanted to hold Kalyani in his arms, but he could not lift both his hands. His right hand rose a little and then dropped in Kalyani’s lap. Kalyani began stroking Gautam’s hand. Gautam experienced boundless joy to touch Kalyani.

‘Kalyani!’ Gautam said.

‘What?’

‘Guruji was right.’

‘About what?’

‘Revenge and violence begin a chain of defeats...’

‘Did you want to win anything?’

‘Love...With love we can win everyone and everything...Everyone wins and everyone lives...’

‘So, what will you do with your weapons?’

‘Weapons...I quit them...The moment I was stabbed, I gave them up...’
‘Gautam, Now that you have given up weapons, I am yours. I am married to you, Gautam!’

Gautam closed his eyes. He held Kalyani’s hand. He had a wonderful dream. He was getting married to Kalyani in a large, colourful pandal. All that he had always wished, and all that he had fantasised, then was becoming a reality. He heard the mantras for wedding rituals. Kalyani had instructed Tryambak to chant the mantras; Tryambak was involved in realising Gautam and Kalyani’s dreams—the dreams they had seen while awake.

‘Tryambak, why are you crying? Chant the mantras properly!’ Gautam opened his eyes.

He could not hear the mantras. Tryambak was standing in a corner of the tent.

‘Kalyani!’

‘Yes!’

‘Is the wedding over?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now what?’

‘We have become one.’

‘I…I can’t believe this…’

‘Do you want me to convince you that we are wedded forever?’

‘Yes…’

‘Gautam, I am yours now…’ saying this, Kalyani bent and embraced Gautam. She boldly kissed his lips, gently sucking them. Gautam, ignoring his wound, raised his hands and tightly held Kalyani. The lovers’ divine kiss lasted a long time. Gautam’s soul left his body in the middle of that union, carrying the essence of the ecstasy he had just experienced.

Why is death secretly present in every crumb and moment of life?

7

A Journey Together or the Victory of Values?

Happiness has its limits. Human beings live with inherent limitations: even their joy is restricted to time and place. Liberating all her suppressed love through a kiss, Kalyani, too, enjoyed a heavenly pleasure. When the waves of her passion subsided, Kalyani realised that wounded Gautam must not exert himself. Yet, Gautam had held her tightly, as if not prepared to let her go. Then she felt that Gautam’s hands were around her but they were not holding her; his breath did not tickle her cheeks. Startled at Gautam’s behaviour, she took his hands off her back and looked at his face. She screamed,

‘Gautam!’
Gautam and Kalyani were thousands of miles away from each other. Kalyani touched Gautam’s cheeks and shook his face. Gautam did not respond. She now looked around. They were alone in the tent. Kalyani called out,

‘Tryambak!’

‘What happened?’ Tryambak came in.

‘Look at him. Gautam’s eyes are open and he keeps smiling.’

Tryambak looked at Gautam. In the meanwhile, other assistants and soldiers came in. Controlling himself with great difficulty, Tryambak said,

‘Kalyani, you go out and sit there for a while.’

‘Why should I sit there?’

‘You do what I say, Kalyani.’

‘No, I won’t leave my Gautam alone,’ said Kalyani, touching Gautam’s forehead. She was shocked to notice his steady, but vacant gaze.

‘Tryambak, what is wrong with Gautam?’ she asked. Who could explain to her what was wrong with Gautam? Tryambak could not put in words how he felt looking at Gautam. He controlled his tears. He had learnt to be hard hearted: He performed Rudradatta’s last rites; he quit weapons and thus gave up his dream to live a soldier’s life; he supported Gautam and Kalyani’s relation, stamping on his emotions. He did all this, so that he could see Kalyani happy. After all the sacrifices, he witnessed Gautam’s death, an occasion that was going to create an ocean of tears. How could he answer Kalyani’s questions?

Tryambak did not reply, because he did not have an answer. He kept looking at Gautam.

‘Tryambak, tell me, what is wrong with Gautam?’ Kalyani was desperate for an answer.

‘You go out of the tent, and let me sit next to Gautam. I will have to see what is wrong with him.’

‘No, you are lying. Tell me why he doesn’t stop smiling.’

‘Kalyani, my sister, Gautam’s smile is an eternal smile. He would never stop smiling!’ a helper said.

‘Why?’

‘He has left all of us.’

‘Where has he gone?’

‘To the heaven.’

‘But why did he leave me behind?’

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Gautam had left everything and everyone—he had left the revolution, the revolutionaries and Kalyani. One war destroys the worlds of thousands of human beings. To win power over a piece of land, thousands have to lose all that they had artfully created in their life—the loss of all that for gaining fickle power. One human being represents one entire world! The blaze of war destroys numerous such worlds. How can anyone enjoy a regime born out of such violence? And, can such rule bring good to people? Yet, people all over have become warmongers!

Tryambak stopped thinking. Kalyani’s eyes became still and stony; it seemed that an inhuman power had entered into Kalyani’s body; she raised her head and made a gesture as if she was ordering someone standing in front of her; then, she picked up dead Gautam’s hand and smiled at him. People around feared that Kalyani had gone mad.

‘Kalyani!’ cried Tryambak but she did not hear him. She began arranging Gautam’s ruffled hair.

‘Kalyani! Look here,’ shouted Tryambak.

Kalyani, as if startled out of her reverie, looked at Tryambak. Her eyes full of anxiety, she asked,

‘Tryambak, did you call out for me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Look at me.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to show you a man made of ash.’

‘A man made of ash? Dead or alive?’

‘Alive, yet dead.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Look at me. I am made of ash. I am living, yet I am dead.’

‘Tryambak, my brother, may you live forever! Your life will be as beautiful as a lovely garden.’

‘It won’t happen in this life at least.’

‘Why won’t it happen?’

‘For whom would I live, when you would not be around?’
‘I am not going anywhere. I will be with Gautam.’

‘I cannot leave Rudradatta, my guru. I cannot leave Gautam, my brother. I cannot leave Kalyani, an inspiring sister.’

Kalyani looked at Tryambak—he was indeed made of ash! His life was the most tragic of all around. He was like an ascetic, living just for the sake of Kalyani, putting up with the burden of an aimless life! Wasn’t he a sorry figure?

‘Kalyani, you had once promised me a wish!’ said Tryambak.

‘I remember it.’

‘You are now married to Gautam.’

‘Yes. I believe I married to him long back.’

‘When you promised me a wish, you must be sure that I would not demand anything unreasonable.’

‘I know you are pure at heart. You are as pure as gold.’

‘So I shall I always be. Now, may I make a wish?’

‘So long as I am alive, I will fulfill your wish.’

‘I wish you don’t bring an end to your life, till I am alive.’

‘Tryambak, you scoundrel, what kind of wish is this? What would I do in this world without Gautam?’

‘Gautam quit weapons. At the end of his life, he did what guruji wanted. You should dedicate your life to make the world weaponless. Can’t you do it? That is how guruji wished the world to be. If we don’t pursue that goal, we both shall be unfaithful to guruji and Gautam.’

‘Had Gautam been alive, I would have devoted my life to that goal. Now…’

‘Gautam’s wife must go ahead on Gautam’s path.’

‘It is cowardice to live without husband.’

‘No, in fact, only the brave can endure unbearable separation. You have shown courage all along. Why don’t you continue living a heroic life?’

‘Tryambak, why do you tempt me to live?’

‘Kalyani, no one can tempt us to live. What is tempting in our life? We are made of ashes, living hopelessly. We crave for death, don’t we? But let us not fall for that craving.’
Kalyani was amazed to hear the words. She kept looking at Gautam. Will it make me happy if I lie together with Gautam on his pyre? What would have Gautam liked me to do: that I take leave of this world with him, or that I dedicate my life to eliminate weapons from this world? Gautam opted for the life of a soldier and thus separated from me. Even after he quit weapons, we could not live together. How can I bear this separation?

‘Tryambak, don’t prevent my death! That is where my happiness lies!’ said Kalyani.

‘I am not preventing your death. I want you to do something that would fulfill your promise.’

‘If that is the case, let me cry...let me weep...’

If human beings cannot weep, their anguish would crush their heart. Kalyani began weeping. Platoons and tents—all drowned in her screams. The brave soldiers, who often witnessed death, also began crying. Tryambak, who thought it humiliating to cry, could not control his tears. The sun, looking at the world through his red eyes, also joined in the weeping of tormented souls.

The victorious army was standing in lines. The soldiers looked pale. Some white soldiers, among whom were the soldiers that were arrested but were later released, also stood there, taking off their hats, paying homage to a great fighter, who was no more. Gautam’s blood-smeared body was put on a pyre. In a moment, flames covered up the pyre. A young woman’s anguished screams could be heard some distance away,

‘Gautam!’

Even the hard-hearted soldiers, who had always held weapons, could not contain their sobbing. It seemed that the fire-flames that consumed Gautam’s body, too, were crying in pain; the sparks bursting out were the tears. As a soldier represents manly strength, he cannot cry. Yet, every soldier faces a situation when he has to cry.

‘If people of different skin colour, whether white or brown, live together in peace, won’t the world turn into Vrindavan?’ thought Lucy, who was also present there, dressed as a soldier. She noticed how everyone was in tears.

‘Tryambak, I am with you,’ said Lucy to Tryambak.

Tryambak looked at Lucy. He found the whole world as false as distant, hazy waters of a mirage. He felt that Kalyani’s screams for Gautam and Lucy’s vague words were true; and that truth forcefully struck his heart.

Does violence deserve a place in this world that is hungry for love? Tryambak kept gazing at the burning pyre.

‘Gautam! Gautam!’ The shrieks and their echoes filled the sky.