Chapter 3

Translation of *Vyathana Vitak (The Afflicted)*

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A Time When I Had Three Mothers!

I am motherless now but once I had no less than three mothers. From the age of four to fourteen they have often stroked colors in my life: of compassion, humanity and motherhood (!) and left me desolate. I am left behind with a craving for the aspect called mother which pinches me even today as a curse.

When I see a mother immersed in trans of affection while feeding her child, I feel the inner pang. I have never blamed women who desert their house; and the helplessness of a woman who ends her life throttle my emotions.

I feel close to heaven around me when the heartily utterance ‘son’ or ‘child’ in response to the call ‘Maa’ (mother) from the depth of her heart impinges my ears. Once in the standard 10 class while teaching Subhadraji’s poem ‘My Childhood’, my voice got chocked, my eyes were wet and the whole class froze. A couple of them laughed even; and I saw one of them was in tears. We spent five minutes in silence waiting for the class to get over. In the moment when the time had stopped, I dived into the sorrow of an age. When I took few steps out of class, I heard a call: “Sir..!”

I looked back. It was the same weeping student. “I too don’t have mother!” He climbed down the steps touching the soft sensations. We were fellow sufferer in this world: motherless, devoid of love and care of a mother!
I lost my mother at around the age of six. My memory is so sharp that sometimes it surprises me even. So many childhood reminiscences are still stored in my memory. Thus even today my mother’s exact face is framed in my memory. If I were an artist, I could draw it without missing a single line. My mother was wise. I have heard from many that she was beautiful and affectionate. Her name was Hiri. My grandma and aunty called her ‘Hira’, the admirers said that she was truly a ‘diamond’ of our family.

She was infected by TB. She was admitted in the old Civil Hospital for treatment. Later, I found her letter written to my father from there from an old trunk. She had written each and every thing calligraphically with a pencil. My father was Master in the Mission school. He lived in Kambhoolaj. The house had a large backyard and mother wrote to take care of the hen if it had hatched eggs along with the instructions to plant okra and valor beans in that letter. Concern for us was certainly there, but she had not forgotten the special instruction to bring home the bottle of custard oil kept in the corner of a wooden trunk and that aunty should give us two spoon of custard oil with tea on every Sunday.

We were two sons of the mother. The elder one was Manubhai and I was around six years younger than him. In between, we had a sister but did not live longer after birth. At the time of mother’s illness, we had been sent to our native, Oad to grandma Ghanidosi. At grandma’s house there were six-seven milk yielding animals. There was plentiful milk and ghee. Strong and stout uncle and barren aunty had immense affection for us.

During mother’s illness itself, my father remarried a woman. When mother returned after little recovery, she was taken aback! People used to say: “Hiri could have lived, but after
knowing the fact, she lost interest to live on.” I remember the event, when the same woman came up as our ‘new mother’.

Grandma used to say: “You can bring her in this house only over my dead body.” My younger uncle was educated. He used to obey each word of Bapu, my father, but he too was displeased. But Bapu was stubborn. Just on the very day of marriage ceremony, my grandma closed her eyes forever. At three, on the same day, her grave had been dug beside my mother’s grave.

Those who had gone in the funeral at the graveyard returned home and had just sat for some time in the front yard while, within half an hour, Bapu prepared himself for marriage. We were also compelled to be part of the marriage procession. Elder brother was obstinate to join but lamenting aunties convinced him. I, on the contrary, persisted to join. Uncle did not come. The marriage procession returned the next morning. Eight miles distance was to be covered by foot. Some carried me on their waists and others led me by their fingers to walk. Half the way, came two miles long stretch of meadows. At this very place, somebody said in a way that my new mother could overhear, “Go, your mother will lift you in her waist.” And she, as if, suddenly realizing it, came to me and picked me up saying, “Come dear! I shall carry you.” By the time I reached at her bosom, my elder brother, Manu shouted loudly, “Jasya! Don’t go. Look this is the same place of our mother. . .!”

And my memories stirred up: when mother had returned from hospital, we were going to Oad (a region) on this same way. Both of us were walking slowly and playfully. Maa was quarrelling with Bapu on that disturbing issue. At that time aggrieved Bapu beat Maa with his umbrella to such an extent that she fell flat on the ground. Due to agitation she started
coughing and vomited blood. Least bothered, Bapu had moved ahead and in that deserted meadows, we two very young brothers clung to our mother and cried a lot. Mother too, pressing our heads against her panting chest, sobbed heavily not for the affliction and humiliation but more so of the apprehension of our motherless future. Coincidently, this was the same place. The loud yell of my brother put fire in my nerves and tweaking my mother from her waist, climbing down, I ran back to my brother. My father’s eyes were showering embers but my brother was looking at the spot only with tearful eyes. This place has framed my mother’s place in my tender heart in such a way that even if father’s threat compelled me to address my new mother as ‘Maa’ but her place could never ever be removed from my heart and all and the new could not establish itself for whole life.

Returning from the pasture on that day, Mother, who churned in pain, remained silent but my brother and I narrated the whole episode to grandma. She bewailed and cursed her son. My mother was whining spreading her lap to grandma and my younger aunt. My brother explained to me that my mother had been entrusting us to them after her death and in a way was making our future safe, but at that time, we hadn’t yet seen and realized the lengthened shadow of death.

After that incident mother was bedridden. My younger aunties, Kaki and Foi were continuously in her service and aid. Mother used to deny us to stay longer nearby her bed. She worried that the germs from her breath should not consume us. Many a times she used to make us stand by the footboard of her bed and stare at us for long and tears overflowed her eyes. Foi used to wipe off her tears and send us away to play outside. In such situation, my elder brother used to be helpless. He took to a corner of the lobby with a book in his hand.
Maa could not bear his sniffles and used to ask Manubhai to read out his poems to her. Even today, I remember those poems.

We are the ushers of the sun; we are thecallers of the dawn,

The sun appears on the seven steeds, Arun rides the chariot.

Walking forth with the scepter, the songbird of effulgence. We are. . .

And the bumble bee with lure humming whole day,

Wandering here and there does not return home even at the dusk.

He used to recite poems and the poems he sung were at the tip of my tongue. Although I could not read in those days, I used to sing these full poems to my mother from brother’s book. I could hold the book upright due to the picture of a cock but there was not picture with the poem of bumblebee and therefore sometimes I used to hold the book upside down. Seeing this, Maa could not control her laughter. I liked my mother’s smiling face so much that I used to hug her leaving everything aside. At these moments she longed much to kiss my face but could not stop herself from heavy sniffles. When my uncle used to drag me away from there, she used to urge him: “Take care of them, please never make them feel any want, my dear brother!” and my uncle used to get mopish.

Mother had sensed her last days. Uncle wanted to call Bapu but she persisted not to. As per her wish, Foi and Kaki both bathed her and dressed her in a new sari. She made us wear clothes of her choice and kept us in front of her eyes. On that evening, she fed us with her own hands the morsels of kansaar and she herself also eat calmly. Tenaciously, I had put on my embroidered cap and performed the role of Walter from the drama ‘William Tell’ to
cheer her. Grandma, Foi, Kaki and many others crowded around mother on that evening. Without having the understanding of what was happening, I even don’t know when I fell asleep with those new cloths and when I woke up in the morning, house was filled with wailing mourners.

Bapu, who had returned from Kambharoj, was seated near a baluster with his head bowed down. Mountain like uncle of mine was wailing like a child and brother had fallen unconscious. The shock of the mother’s death had yet not touched the right spot of my conscience and therefore, wearing the embroidered cap, I reached to my mother through many women around her. I saw that Ladu, my aunt, was crying and lamenting while making my mother’s long hair. I don’t remember what I said going close to my mother’s bed; but, giving my mother’s head to my Foi, yelling Ladubhabhi had embraced me tightly. Her heartbeats have been embossed forever in my heart and even today I can feel these heartbeats. I have always felt that it was only she who was worried about my motherless forlorn fate.

I was so unfortunate that the first burial procession in my life was of my mother and I could not see even a semblance of my dejected future that was going to hover over me forever in my life. Often, I was curious for one thing: why did she dress me in the new clothes, with the boots of soft leather and a velvet cap on my head the previous evening? But now I discern that she must have bought all these things for us cheerily. And making us dressed with these things must have filled her with pleasure. Those eyes must have stored me deep in her heart the previous evening . . . but how can those eyes be so pallid today?
“I am going to keep an apple on my head, Bapu (father)! I will not move even slightly. You shoot it down with your arrow.” While performing this dialogue of Walter, the word Bapu had made her sniffle and my uncle had dragged me away. Now, I was staring into her eyes with the same cap on my head but she did not even raise her eyelids, “Maa, why is Manu crying so much?” not answering my such innocent questions! Everybody there who had been bewailing have, as if, become stunned. The jam-packed lobby had also become appalled and I, striving to open the eyes of my mother, was increasingly being pressed in her bosom by Ladubhabhi.

When my uncle and others lifted up my mother along with the bed and began to walk away, I got myself free forcefully and joined the corpse bearers. For the ritual of taking four rounds around the grave, Kaka held the bed from one side and made us do so. She was put down in the grave and then the priest of the Mission read the Bible. Afterwards, as per my mother’s last wish, my brother and uncle and I first threw earth on her grave.

Later, I realized that my mother had gone only when I saw tombstone of my mother’s grave. Then, I realized that she had been buried and at that time only a cry came out of my heart over my fate. Seeing me cry, my younger uncle also started wailing and seeing the shaking tremor of uncle’s whining, my elder brother again became unconscious.

The demise of my mother, as if, brought the lengthened shadows of death and pain over our lives. Without any reverence even for the demise of Maa, Bapu got married in the very fourth month after her death. Grandma had vowed not to see the face of the new wife of my father’s second marriage and therefore on the very day of my father’s remarriage, she took the shelter of death. Was that an act of quietus? Perhaps yes! Something which grandma did not expect
should not have happened in her own home, before her own eyes. And she closed her eyes forever not to see that. Foi used to say that grandma had taken an over doze of opium. She tried a lot to get rid of *maya* therefore she also kept us away from her. She said many things to Kaki but no one could realize her motives and, at the end, digging her grave beside my mother’s grave, my uncle had broken down.

My brother could not endure the fact of loosing mother and grandma as well as the arrival of the new mother in the home. For days, he remained dead silent. He would eat little if he felt like or if Kaki could entreat him, otherwise would remain seated at the Dharmashala in the chowk. After some time, he fell ill and after seven months of the mother’s demise, he remained sick for two days and passed away... 

He languished a lot and died. After inhuming him, Kaka, hiding his face in my mother’s grave, cried so much that he could not be helped by any. Being the witness of the entombment, I, even after making hard efforts, was not allowed to go along to the cemetary by Ladu and Kaki as it was thick dark in and out.

My uncle was young and hefty but after the death of my mother, he too, as if, had lost meaning in life. Nobody knows how his right knee had swollen like a big human head. It had perhaps suppurated. Many times, he could not stop himself from groaning due to muscle pain. Many times, I used to caress his knee with my little fingers and was helping him to relieve slightly from the pain. As per the indigenous medical cure, Bhavanakaka had burned a kiln of cow-dung ingredients and had cauterized my uncle’s knee five times. He had swallowed all the pain without even making a yelp. But at last, the leg was required to be
imputed from thigh. After returning from the hospital, he had recovered and gradually made himself able to bring a bundle of hay to home from the farm.

We had milch animals at home and also had rich farm field but uncle had been left with single leg only. Father took short vacation with the intention of leaving the service permanently. He took leave and came temporary because, since his childhood, he had been known as goldbrick. He was squanderer who had fond of gaudiness. Whole village used to respect him as ‘Master’. He was, for sure, not able to do physical work and hard farming labor hence he decided to first try it out and decided to leave job only if he could settle otherwise goodbye to husbandry. But uncle was sensitive regarding farm. He persisted that he would not leave farm even if he would require doing toilsome work and therefore my father had started going to farm with my new mother.

In those days, an accident happened because of me. Aunty and grandma had not spared anything in pampering me. Grandma had made me habituate of eating a loaf of bajari (millet) smeared with ghee with the intention of making my physique strong. Whenever I used to ask for a loaf out of hunger, I used to get one smeared in ghee. On that day too, new mother might have made bajari loaves but were finished off in lunch itself. Around midday, one or two o’clock, I got hungry. Aunty had gone somewhere away and uncle was in bed for rest. I searched for food, then searched aunty and when could not find anything I cried. Uncle could not come out of bed. Due to hunger I could neither take interest in playing with friends nor remain sitting silent inside home. After waiting a lot, Bapu along with new mother came back home from farm and I immediately revealed to them my hunger.

‘Oh mother! Why didn’t you keep even food for me?’
Listening this, Bapu got fury. Throwing the bundle of hey aside, he rushed to me at the threshold. With heavy wrath, he slapped me. I was thrown and fell down on a pestle. It started bleeding from my forehead; the scar still exists being a witness of that day. Bapu had, as if, become demon. He was beating me blindly without even looking at the blood trickles. I up roared and listening to my screams, people gathered there. Uncle too came out into veranda even without crutch and clipped father.

‘One has already died, now do you want to kill the other one also?’ First time Kaka had spoken so furiously.

‘Have I killed him? Everything comes on me.’ Saying so, mother started lamenting falsely.

‘You have spoiled this rug rat, with your fawn, but I cannot foster and even tolerate this.’

‘You need not to worry about him; I am here to look after him.’ Saying so, he relieved me and stretched his hand forward to hold doorframe but fell down on his amputated leg. The daubing got red with the blood. This blow then never did heal and within few days his such a heavy body waned like a dry ear corn.

In those days, Kaka used to make me sit at his bed and used to put my hand in his. He used to caress my back and head and make me sing the poems I knew.

One evening, when I returned from playground, I saw that Kaka’s face had drastically changed. He gestured for water. He asked me to call Kaki who was milking a buffalo. He asked her to stand beside his head and, staring at her, indicated something like negation. Before Kaki could understand anything, Kaka tried to raise his feeble head and tumbled down. Taking his head in her hands, Kaki started wailing: ‘Jasya! . . . your uncle has gone
forever!’ (As it was at the time of mother’s death, this time too Bapu was away at his place of work.) Kaki’s squealing filled the home with pain. The glass of milk fell down from the hands of Foi. At the time of mother’s demise, I was not as mature as Munnabhai but after then the frequent assault of death had struck my consciousness with such a deep blow that I had learnt more lessons of the dearth created by the loss of the close ones than my tender life should know. First time in my life, I cried enough on the dolour of death.

Not less than four graves of my mother, grandmother, brother and uncle in a row and in a year had been hailing the glory of death! We used to be scared of graveyard in childhood but these graves of kinsfolk have conquered this fear and at many times when I remember and miss my mother terribly I used to go to those graves to get consolation. I used to say, sitting beside uncle’s grave: ‘Mother, see Manu has come to you, uncle has also come there, now, when will you call me? Mother, I also want to come to you!’ I used to imagine that ‘Very soon, here only, beside uncle, my grave too will be.’

Nearby the graveyard, there was a farm of Ladu. Once she might have been passing from there while I was lamenting so. Listening this, she felt it deep dread in her heart. Rushing towards me, she embraced me. ‘You will never come alone here, swear by me - ‘Saying so she took me to her home. After the death of Kaka, Kaki was bemoaning. In the morning, when nobody used to be at home, other women from neighborhood used to come to Kaki and used to explain, console and convince her. I could not understand that then but now I can understand that Maa had died at the age of 29, Kaka had died at the age of 28 and Kaki must be around 25 at that time. How can she spend her whole long life alone? Remarriage was not an objection at all. But she was, if at all, concerned for me and a bud of uncle that was taking
shape in her womb. Once, she, taking me in her lap, spoke out, ‘If your younger brother comes, I would live on my own separately with both of you.’

But she could not get her space as per her wish. God knows what happened on that morning, when aunt’s brother came. He spent lot of time and chatted a lot with Kaki and went back. After few days from then, one morning, both of us were at home. Step mother and Bapu were at the farm. They used to return around one and half in the noon. Kaki packed her bundle of clothes. She told me to give it to maternal uncle who was waiting at the well. Enthusiastically, I followed her instructions. Kaki took cauldron and cooked pudding in ghee and by the time it gets cold, she also made few loaves. Then serving the puddings to me, she was crying and feeding me the dish: ‘Kaki! You too take some.’ She replied: ‘No, dear son! I cannot eat!’ Then she rose, went in the garth and cuddled buffalos. Taking in hand the branches of sugar-apple-tree stared long at the manger and then foddered four hay stalks to each buffalo. Closing the window of the garth, she came to flourmill. There in the recess used to lay Kaka’s Bible. Kaki paid her respect to it, and then touched gently the wheat containers. Glanced deeply into the empty house, filled up the glass with water which Kaka used to use and slamming the door, she took me off with her.

She did not speak anything until we reached the main lake, then there, cuddling me, she spoke: ‘Now go back dear son! I will come to see you if I would be alive. Tell your father: ‘Kaki has gone to her home.’’

Then I understood that Kaki was going forever and therefore realized: I cannot live alone in a home without Kaki. I realized and said: ‘Take me too with you. I will come with you, would not go back.’
Kaki got baffled. She did not wish to go leaving me behind alone and could not even take me with her. If she could, she would have taken me with her as a stepchild, but the society would not approve of it. I was not her own child!

At this time, Ladubhabhi, who had gone in the field for wages work, appeared nearing us. Within a moment, she could realize the situation. Embracing Kaki, she wept a lot. Sweeping the tears of Kaki’s eyes with a hem of her sari and saying goodbye wishes to Kaki, she caught me by hand and dragging me from there, said: ‘Come dear son, you are born as unfortunate! Come’

Oh! The brightening water, the buffalos coming for water, in front of the temple of Mahadev in tranquility, and I and Ladubhabhai were under the banyan tree. The scene of my Kaki who was wailing looking back again and again, going with heavy heart as if had lost whole life is still there framed in my consciousness. At later stage, when I read in Sakuntalam that one should go up to a village lake for seeing off then I could not visualize Kanva, Shakuntala or her friends but the pond, the banyan tree and Ladubhabhai and Kaki nebulously appearing at a distance have always writhed in my eyes.

Then it was pain for Kaki’s departure. But when the emotions turned into manageable feelings, then maturity made me understand the renunciation of Kaki for leaving home for another home. Childhood, teenage and young age had not been in my fate. After losing the shelter of Kaki, I had become more mature than my age. She had taken away with her all my fondling, unknown urges and sentiments. At the age of eight, my daily routine was to draw twelve belly pot water from the deep down of the village well with a rope which weighs not less than a ton, to sweep and clean whole home and to wash utensils, to pod millet, to husk
paddy, grind pigeon pea, to leaven split pulses, to sweep and throw away the dung to the dung heap, to continuously look after a new born son of a new mother, to take care of farm, to collect firewood and dung cake that can run for whole year, to vamp the hedge of farm at the very early age. Along all these, due to interest in study, to take care of school also. I had learnt all the types of ploughs and farming. From all these upheavals, sometimes, if time would have allowed, I used to go for disport but I had not have the freedom, ease and quietness like my all other friends.

Some unknown burden and cold feet were always there to hover over me. I, the master of all games, could not be defeated in any game. But if anyone wanted so, they just needed to call my name in a disguised voice of my parents and they could see my sports-spirit being scattered. The fear of my father used to frighten me.

I had always accepted my step mother as my true mother. From the age of five, addressing her as Maa – mother had become natural to me; but even after years my love for her cannot melt her. I would have been blessed, had she just addressed me as ‘son’ once only. But she did not have a heart which can sympathize me. Even after doing the unbearable drudgery of the household work, I was always trying to win her affection, but she had never even glimpsed once with love. I was the most unwanted for her. ‘Why don’t you die even in the place of somebody else?’ She used to chide me. That is true that being scared of father, she never thrashed on me but her piercing words, her envy, and her constant evasion have destroyed my soft conscious. These painful strokes on my heart than on my body have become unbearable forever.
My friend Magan never used to obey his mother and above all still used to get what he wanted. Shanko used to get five rupees for getting the costliest thread for kite and his mother used to make lugadi for him. And the mother of her only son could not devour food if her son Bhaga is not in front of her. And our Dhansha was not less than ten but still used to suckle her mother whenever he used to feel.

If these mothers find their children slight ill, they used to do every possible remedy. For accomplishing the religious vow taken for Babala, his parents had gone to Pavagadh on foot. To cure Khaniya, his mother had even sold out her gold ornaments. But, while plucking mangoes from a mango tree, a branch broke and I fell down. I got four inch long and an inch deep wound from a spike and nobody was there to care for me. On the third day, the wound had got suppurated and I was groaning, ‘mother, mother’ out of pain and fever, but grievously nobody was there to look after me. Out of the fear of public opinion, she took me to doctor. There fortunately the doctor was my fifth standard classmate Dinakar’s father. Seeing my condition, he got very dejected and after giving me anesthesia, he cleaned the wound and instructed my mother with rebuke: ‘Go and inform his father.’

Till evening, he kept me in rest at the hospital, but nobody came from my home and when the doctor sent compounder to my home then came but Ladubhabhi and her daughter, Heta. They took me to their home. The wound recovered after fourteen days and the medical fees was paid by me by sweeping the hospital for many days. The doctor used to say, “You are fortunate that you were saved. Had you delayed for a day or two, the bone deep wound would have been gangrenous!”
I knew well how fortunate I was and I used to remember my mother on such occasions. My every pore used to call mother, my soul used to desire restlessly for the cuddling of mother, embrace of mother, sometimes for motherly scold and the mothers’ love for their children.

If anyone had tried to fulfill my aspirations of mother, then it was Ladubhabhi. She was a wife of Maniya Chamar, lower caste than us but had close intimacy with our family. When she came on aanu first time, she had asked for the blessings from grandmother. People used to say that even miser grandmother Ghanidosi had given five royal coins as a token of well wish. She and my mother both came to in-laws house around the same time and their friendship too was unique.

Manibhai was strong and stout with six feet height. Ladubhabhi too was equally tall but slim like long teak and beautiful. Face was so graceful that anyone would love to keep the image permanently with oneself. Her voice exudes attention. Ladu was her name; the person who had given her such name might not have thought that she would be honeysweet. It was she who held and supported me in a series of deaths from mother to uncle.

From immature child to grown adult whenever I have got vexed from stepmother, whenever have got tired of drawing water from well, tired of hard work of farming, at that time her affectionate heart used to be a refuge to an orphan like me. In the life, devoid of mother’s love, in the difficult time, I had got deep warmth and felt peace putting my head on her breast.

Her daughter Heta was around five years older than me. She was a new avatar of affection. She had been born with the physique of her father and leniency of mother in manifold. I never got quenched from paying a game of Kuka with her. She deliberately used to lose at the
top of win and my turn used to come for playing. While playing the game of *Kuka*, I used to get stuck into her eyes forgetting to drub her long *mahendi* colored hands. At this time, she used to bring me back from my spell bound condition and we used to laugh together and end the game.

She used to help me pull water from well, wash my clothes and comb my hair. When I used to get hungry, she was the one to recognize and used to drag me to her home. I also used to persist to eat in the same plate with her and meanwhile Ladubhabhai used to keep watch at the gate in case somebody comes around. I could not understand it then but used to hear people saying not to eat anything from *chamar* otherwise one gets polluted.

At the age of fifteen only, Heta’s beauty crossed a threshold and became talk of the town. Her clean limbed body was as beautiful as a flower of tanner’s cassia and had got alluring long neck and on top of her, a basketful braid. She had got fine shaped forehead and light sky blue colored eyes below the long curved eyebrows which can amaze anybody.

She had been married in childhood itself. Her physique had grown up early then her age therefore sending her to in-laws house was hasted. When we used to imagine about her husband, her face used to turn out pale. ‘You are my uncle. You should not ask me about my husband!’ Saying so she used to pull my nose mischievously and I used to embrace to her long neck.

For the expenses of *aanu*, discussions were getting serious and worries were visible on the face of Manibhai also. Now, Ladubhabhi used to take even Heta with her for the labor work in farms with the expectation of small but additional earning, but she could not convince herself ever to bring Heta for work even in the barnyard of tobacco. Meanwhile, it happened
so that they had to borrow money from the tobacco barnyard owner and therefore, to reduce the burden of debt, Ladu took even Heta with her for work there too.

Heta was as attractive as thrilling. When she used to pass across the village, many eyes used to get stuck on her. Her beauty did not remain hidden from the wicked eyes of the owner of tobacco barnyard. Once or twice Heta also complained to Ladu about it but life was dependant on daily labor wages and more to it was the debt of aunu. Ladu believed that there was no fear till she was there with her and she thought, ‘It was good to have her with her instead she, being a young girl, remains home alone. And if the God is the savior then why to be worried!’

Once Ladubhabhi required to go to a nearby village. She nixed Heta to go to barnyard but the wife of Mukadam strenuously took Heta with her in the name of reciprocation of work and on that very day, Heta was molested. She was trapped in such a way that neither her shrieks could be heard by anybody nor anybody could go to help her.

Her frightened face, which I saw on that evening, could not be forgotten even today. Since that moment, as if, Heta had forgotten to laugh. Taking her both hands into mine, I used to request her: ‘Heta! At least tell what happened to you?’

And without looking into my eyes, she used to stare at the sky. Tears of the size of a flower of Gengadi used to roll down off her eyes and her angina used to come out in form of sobs.

Her obstinacy for games, her attractive walking style, her course and enthusiasm to draw water from the deep down well and her playful eyes all drenched before the privilege of her marriage.
As time passed, her belly started talking about the incident. ‘And poor Ladu! Whom can she show her face?’ Manibhai’s strength also weakened. Looking at me and calling me young brother, his voice now used to get scattered and Ladubhabhi’s eyes wet. Heta used to remain stuck in home and even after many requests, she was not ready to come to see me.

At last, the bell was to ring. It was decided to send aunu to her in-laws and the Gor came to take her. In artisan community, there is no problem if such news gets subsided within time but if it becomes bulge, it invites dangers. But when he came to know about Heta’s conception, he returned back to talk to Heta’s in-laws to find a quick fix. And when he came back, he came with two other wise elder relatives of Heta’s in-laws. The panch was called and Heta was divorced with the fine of 150 rupees to Heta’s father. The aspirations and scope of aunu were smothered and to pay the fine, quickly Heta’s another marriage was fixed. She had frozen and the spectators’ eyes became stony when Heta’s life was tied with a black color man of the age of a father of four children.

It was the tradition that when a daughter of a community used to be sent to in-laws on completion of aunu, all the women from all three localities used to come together to see off the girl. But in case of Heta not even a single person came out of their home for benediction. Heta, dear to all, had lost her place from everyone’s heart as she had been polluted.

Heta gone, my love gone. The hammer like heartbeats of Ladubhabhi are still dashing in my heart. On that night, I could not sleep. Whenever I tried to close my eyes, the helpless Heta’s sight and blood trickling from the helpless eyes of Ladubhabhi used to pierce me. When I woke up early in the morning, everybody seemed to rush towards the meadow well . . . finally at noon; the dead body was drawn out.
The deep calmness of water had defeated the spirit of Ladubhabhi’s life. I saw my mother’s face in her washed out face. The despair of my inner soul did not wait long. My another mother – real mother – once again had gone leaving me orphan behind. First time, my head embraced to her breast, did not get any response.

Since one and half decade, my old life is wandering with aspirations and pain. After the death of Kaki, nobody had been my guardian except Ladu. Father was being respected in the community, was considered as wise but I don’t remember even a single moment when he had thought of my future prospect.

I was scared of him; however I used to like his courage in the social matters. But he was not respectable figure to me. I had faith and respect to only one and that was Ladu. Due to my helplessness, miserable conditions always used to wrap me up and therefore people, specifically women, used to pity me. I used to like their sympathy but the clemency used to prick me. I used to prove myself mature in common sense. I was being trusted more therefore, but, as a result, I have to be unnecessarily serious even when I feel like having fun and mischief of my age. In the natural mischievous fun of childhood, only I didn’t have the protection of my own family members from others and therefore, in spite of being right, many times, I used to remain in fear and pressure. Had to bear many injustices silently and therefore the attitude of being strong even after being beaten had remained weak in me hence, ninety nine times out of hundred, I can remain silent or let go and bear insults. But sometimes when injustice crosses its limit, my suppressed self reacts back and all my close-ones are also left to surprise.
Lack of true love of a mother has always pricked me. At the young age of love and emotions, I had searched more for a mother than a lover. In my life, I have by chance got or sometimes grabbed more occasions with women compare to men. The reason behind it has always been my longing for mother’s love. Many times due to this, I have even become victim of misunderstanding but only I know my inner pain. I have constantly been in search of a source of love and affection which can sympathize and love me and my disdained heart with commitment and without any expectation but such happiness has always made distance from me.

In my life, I have been mostly influenced by Ladubhabhi. The contempt which could have been created by the asperity of my new mother was restrained by the cuddling and caress of Ladubhabhai. She tried to fulfill my wishes as much as she could. The destroyed life of Heta had made me realize the social inequality, the pain of being helplessness and exploitation, while the premature death of Ladu taught me the meaning of life. Whatever I am today is due to her influence and grandeur personality. Only her face has equaled with the face of my mother and set in my heart. Kabir says to bow down to the feet of a teacher even before the God. If I get a chance, I would embrace Ladu first even before my actual mother.
Lakshmi’s Fate

Once, I ran into Lakshmi at the Billimora bus station. Eyes never forget a familiar one. A quarter of a century has changed her appearance completely and, in terms of outfit, I too have reached almost at the stage of the grandeur of the aristocrats. But, both of us could immediately recognize each other even after an age. When we came face to face, she immediately drew to me at once.

“It’s you! Sir! I am surprised to see you after a long time! You have changed completely. How is he? Your buddy?”

“Don’t you know Lakshmi? It has been two, almost two decades since Magan had passed away. Without you, he pinned a lot before he died. My dear friend Mago! And you don’t know even?”

She stared at me for a few moments. Her tears did not stop to wait for anything. Immediately, she dashed both her hands together on a close by pole and smashed her glass bangles. Blood came out from her right hand wrist but not caring about her bleeding right hand wrist, she wiped off her chandalo from her forehead.

Her lips trembled of the words coming out from deep down her heart: “At last, even if you meet, you meet to give the news of my widowhood! What a fate!” And before I could say
anything, she went away quickly. It was not the walk that anyone would lustily fall for but a run to jump into the abyss of darkness at the end of horizon.

Laxmi’s sprint! It was my friend Magan’s wife’s sprint! Her perversity to complete all her wishes of life in a single move has ruined two different lives. She did not stop pursuing me up to Surat. When I got off at Surat, a song was running in a radio,

‘Meera, being engrossed, sings for Hari’

At that moment, I realized that Magan had got entwined with every single vein of mine and his affection with candor eyes is still stored in every pore of my life. The sound of his name creates his image in front of me. Fair skin complexion, little shorter than an average height, strong physique, sharply pointed nose, thin lips, large forehead, rectilinear jaw, and sky-blue-color tinted eyes under black eyebrows in which few desires were always at play. The smile playing on his lips compelled anybody to love him.

We both were all most similar. Our homes were in front of each other and except a very time of a year, we both too always remained in front of each other. Quarrels among the elders were sure for any reasonable or unreasonable things ranging from a slope of water to a broken trough by a hit of a buffalo. And when they used to quarrel, the history of generations used to be revealed. Magan’s grandmother Jivikachi’s tongue was as sharp as an edge of a saw and it was her habit to reprimand somebody or to be reprimanded. And then, after a quarrel, a vow not to speak would continue till Diwali. When the sun on the day of Diwali would sink, Jivikachi would come to our home after dinner and Magan’s mother Panibhabhi would be behind her. She used to spread her lap with request and Jivikachi used to say:
“Tomorrow is the New Year’s Day! Please forgive each other for all mistakes and take care in future!”

“It happens Jivi. If empty vessels are put together, it may make noise but care should be taken that it doesn’t get broken.” My father used to say so and all neighbors used to gather with Jivikachi. Quarrels are forgotten as time passes and if there is virtue in the stories of happiness and sorrow then life can be passed peacefully.

Such quarrels used to pain us more than anybody else. When the elders used to quarrel, they would vow not to speak to each other. Making a wry face when crossing each other; they used to use their tongue like a weapon that blows the other. In that time, we also needed to stop seeing each other and we also used to be warned not to meet. That is another thing that we didn’t care much about it. Many times, at the time of quarrel itself, we used to gesture each other and run away from there. We used to be sure that the quarrel would not end in less than two hours because they used to prove right and wrong, witnesses used to be called and many such things. As a result, we used to reach at the banyan tree quickly and wreaking our vengeance, used to vow: “When we will grow up, we will never fight.” Mago used to come up with his grandmother’s flaws and I with my step mother’s.

Our friendship was like two bodies with a single soul. I used to sing various songs for hours on his request while we would be looking at my face. He used to give me the best of the dry berries stored in a container at his home and we never knew where the time used to pass while chatting on here and there. In the children’s team, we were being considered wise as there used to be no accusation as well as complaint for us! Mago never helped for anything at his home but whenever I used to draw water, he would help me for that. He would carry a
water pot from the well up to my home as well as work here and there at farm whenever he used to come with me.

His father was the only child of Jivikachi and Magan was the first child of his parents. His brother, born after around five years of Magan’s birth, was half-witted hence Magan was very dear to whole family. His every demand or obstinacy used to be fulfilled anyhow. He had never seen a shadow of any hardship and privation therefore he used to be very kind to my condition. Charity hospital was being built up in front of our locality. I was working there on the wages of eight annas a day. Meanwhile, the mason’s plummet was lost. He was unable to say anything to other workers therefore he doubted me. My father, instead of taking my side in defense, beat me till I went almost unconscious only for the reason of saving himself from the possible stain it might had caused to his reputation. I could save myself from the atrocity only when many women from our locality gathered there for my help.

Because of the blame of theft and injury of insults, when I remained laying down – hungry and thirsty – on the parabadi built up around a pipal tree at precinct then Mago persistently dragged me to Heta’s home. Heta clung to me tightly. When she saw the marks of beating on my back, she could not stop herself from sobbing. When Magan’s and her soft hands were caressing my back, at that time Magan’s hands were trembling and tears were rolling down. Such many other incidents have happened in life but have never again felt the sympathy which I had felt at that time and nor have been fortunate again to taste the khichadi cooked by Ladubhabai.
At the evening, Mago himself took me home. Nobody at home was concerned about me.
After sometime when I laid down in a bed doubling myself, Magan came there and, sitting on
a bed, said:

“Cannot understand what’s going to happen? Father has drunk heavily and beaten my Pani,
my mother. Grandma has gone to Foi’s home and Pani hasn’t cooked anything. I too haven’t
eaten anything in lunch also and now got severely hungry. Let’s go and get dates to eat. Pani
has given four-annas.”

Magan’s hunger immediately reached to my aching heart. We both reached to the grocery
shop which used to remain open till late. Buying one sher dates, we sat on the brink of the
well. Both ate half each and taking water from Satya’s home, went back to bed and slept
down. I don’t know when his hand might had stopped from caressing my aching back but we
had slept so hard together that I could go to sleep in my bed separately only when
Panibhabhi, who had woke up early in the morning for milking their buffalo, woke me up.

Magan’s father was vexatious prodigal. His family had enough wealth to live on. They had
five vidha land and Jivikachi used to lend money on interest. Gordhan who was a hawker of
cloth, used to drink heavily after every eight-to-ten days and used to fuss in the whole
locality. He used to abuse all the seven generations of his step uncle who was living there in
front of his home. Nobody could even dare to stop him. When he would get exhausted, he
would come to verandah and sit there. Afterward, he would wash his mouth and quaver a
hymn with the message of not to take wine, but nobody could dare to laugh on him. Just to
make his uncle feel shame, he arranged a trick of marrying Magan. Magan was hardy eight-
ine years old then.
Augury pot\(^1\) came, a small wooden pillar was erected and *Valamgor* placed Magan’s Ganesha\(^2\). A printed photo frame of Lord Ganesha was affixed on a wall, an auspicious flat wooden seat was placed and Magan was seated there. A *mindhal* was tied around Magan’s wrist and given a sharp edged bright knife for protection from any negative energy. *Pithi* was smeared on Magan’s body and all other women too played a lot with *pithi*. A lot of jiggery was distributed. Our happiness for all that was beyond limit. During those days, I had almost become his shadow.

Magan’s uncle was earning good from his job in railway. He brought such grand *mameru* that people may be envy of it. All the people of the locality had gathered at the central Neem-Trees chowk when the marriage procession was started. Magan was presented a beautiful suit and a large flower wreath covering him whole. He was decorated with colorful bulbs. Small switch was kept in his coat pocket and when the switched was pressed the bulb started shining. In the countryside, it was a new amazement. He was very fair and, more to it, his golden shade skin because of *pithi*, big auspicious red mark on his forehead, a cap embroidered with brocade and, on the top of this, a decorated flower wreath. The two eyes and lips were smiling from it. Seeing this little husband’s impressive image, we all children-friends desired to get married and many of us had even made marriage proposals tenaciously to our mothers. But whom could I express my feelings to? Who was there to listen to me?

In spite of it, I was the most joyous than anybody else. To me, it was not Mago but I who was getting married. I have affection for him as good as skin is attached with flesh, therefore how could I be jealous of him? I had always been privileged to be with him as his shadow. I was

\(^1\) An earthen pot filled up with few auspicious things is sent to the in-laws as a sacred sign
\(^2\) In marriage ceremony, idol of God Ganesha is placed
his *anavar*, I was his soul. He wouldn’t even breathe without me. Therefore, Mago opposed insistently, when he was seated in the decorated cart and others too along with him got settled in the cart, no space was left for me “I don’t want to marry if his seating is not arranged beside me” And listening to that, all the present there laughed till they went exhausted. Then, I got an invitation to sit with him but when I got settled with him then only someone realized that I did not have any suitable outfit which could suit the bridegroom’s relatives or even to me as an *anavar*. Neither I nor Magan had realized that before. Hence, I was dressed then by one of Magan’s own pair of cloth and I also put on a coat of the uncle’s son from Mumbai and I too became alike a bridegroom!

The marriage procession reached to the place in other village in the evening. For an hour or so, the *jamgari* pierced our ears. And then all the guests were received with wild hurry and bustle. The women from the bride party did not spare anyone in singing nasty songs to tease the other party.

You are the bridegroom and old is the bride,

How can such a match be allowed . . . dear sister!

I was very fond of music and therefore I was enchanted by the songs. I was also not spared with the songs like: “Who is it beside the bridegroom, my brother’s brother in-law or someone else…?!” Elder’s hospitality used to be taken care in its own way. And the youngster’s care used to be taken first wherein the bridegroom was offered sweets first and as a companion to him I too got chance.
Second day, theft\(^3\) takes place. Magan was very worried about it. We had heard that when a 
gor request a couple to take seven rounds around fire as a part of ritual, at that time, at the 
end of each round, whosoever sits first, is the one who remains in more power than the other. 
At that time, we did not have any idea about what that ‘remaining in power in marriage’ was 
but the women had emphatically taught us that a bridegroom sits first and then a bride. 
Magan used to consider my each advice more aptly but in that matter we both were ignorant. 
I used to take his turn on my head in various games and household work but how could I 
perform his bridegroom role! We could not sleep till late night in that tension and never 
before but that day Magan reasoned: “Will they allow you at my place for the marriage 
rituals if I tell them that my legs are very tired?” And listening to our story again, the 
relatives got joke to laugh on and we got strict warning: “We have come in a marriage ritual, 
you both be in manners. Don’t behave senseless.” At last, the apprehension came true. When 
the bride came in the marquee, she, on one hand, seemed double in physique than Magan and 
on the other hand, she was pacing fast and would sit on the plank so quickly that we were 
frightened. Before any attempt, Magan was conquered. Being helpless, Magan somehow 
could complete the four rounds and Lakshmi won all the rounds. From the jokes, jolly songs 
and laughter, even our bellies started aching and after completion of the marriage ritual, 
Magan’s face had already gone despondent. At the end, he told me:

“Let’s go now to some place away. I don’t like this getting married!” And Magan was 
relieved when the marriage procession had returned after three days. 

“This time, somehow I have got married but now onwards I will never marry again and 
warning you too not to even think of marriage.” We enjoyed his marriage a lot but

\(^3\) Tradition of stealing/hiding shoes of the groom by the bride’s friends for fun
remembering the incident of his defeat, he used to be so sad that the reminiscences of the occasion would rather disturb us and therefore we gradually forgot all these incidents.

When I passed sixth, Mahiji master called my father and handed my certificate to him.

“Send him to one of your Mission schools. He is clever and if he will pass final (V. F.) with good grades, he will be a teacher of a board school somewhere and will be blessed.”

My father had thought that I should pass my seventh from the same school in the village doing drudgery at home but because I passed at the first number and Mahiji master also warned my father, he was compelled to send me to another school. Fortunately, Mission had started new boarding in Nadiyad hence I could get admission there.

I went for labor on wages in tobacco barnyard for the whole summer vacation and earned twenty four rupees. From the amount, tailored two pairs of cloth and remaining amount was saved. I used to work in daytime and sleep at night out of fatigue. Mago used sit at the bed footboard. “How would I like here after you will go?” He used to repeat the same distress daily and when my eyes would overcome with sleep, he used to go back. I had aspiration for education and had never ever stepped outside my village therefore I had ardent wish to see new world. Magan never used to like it when I used to talk about all that. One night, he said:

“You have changed. You are no more yourself. You care for yourself only and don’t care for me.” In those days, there was a vow between our families not to speak to one another. We both too were not allowed to meet. He called me on the previous night of my leaving. He had hidden a bowl under a cover of his shirt. There was a shrine on the neem tree chawk. Always used to be timid Mago had sat on that day as a brave man and dragged me too in. Giving me
the bowl he said: “I requested my mother to cook *kansa* for you; you are leaving tomorrow therefore; now take and eat.” Then he put a morsel in my mouth and I put a morsel into his.

When the *kansa* was finished, he came out holding my hand. None of us spoke anything until we reached home! But as we reached at home, he got his hand off with a jerk and went in his quilt. I could not understand anything. Gathering courage, I went to his bed and shook him but he did not uncover his face from his quilt. Being forlorn, I also gave up in my bed and after hard efforts got asleep.

Father woke me up at four in the morning. The station was four *gaun* away from the village. The fare in private bus was four *annas*, so father decided to go on foot. When I left my home with a trunk, my helpless eyes roamed in all the corners of Maga’s veranda. Nobody was there in the bed but when we crossed the veranda, a human shape appeared at the stem of the need tree. Magan, who never dared to go out in darkness, was there waiting for me. Without uttering even a word, he joined me. When we reached to the Vijasar Lake, he prolonged his hand to help to carry my trunk. I said: “Now you go back. They may get worried at home.”

“What so ever! I am coming with you up to the station.” Putting my bag on his head, he started walking ahead. Changing our turn one by one, we kept moving.

“Don’t forget me. I will miss you daily!” This was his iteration. Bapu was walking fast and we were dragging ourselves behind maintaining a distant to be able to speak freely. We could not realize where the four *gaun* distance was passed. The train came, I boarded in. A thought stroke my father. Taking out a penny and putting it in Magan’s hand, he said:

“Take this dear child. Don’t go back by walking, you will get tired. Go and take the motor, they must have been searching for you at home.”
But Mago did not move an inch away from me. On one hand the train pulled off and on the other tears started rolling down from his eyes. I kept looking at him from a window of the train till I could see him but as the train moved ahead the shape became indistinct and gradually disappeared.

When I felt chocked emotionally and my hand went to my chest, I felt some weight in my pocket. When I looked in, I realized that he had slipped the penny in my pocket which my father had given to him. When the train was dragging me away, he must have been going back to home on his foot, alone, tired!

The first letter I received through post in my life was Magan’s! He had written three pages densely. And a habit of writing beautiful letters was given to me by Magan only.

As the year passed, Magan and I both passed the Final. I scored around seventy percentages, so people, out of obligation, were coming to meet me. Seeing the good grades, the Father appointed me as a teacher and Magan took admission in eighth standard. Around a year, I worked in Kahmbhaloj then was transferred to Nadiyad. There was four gaun distance between Kambhaloj and Oad. Mago used to spend whole day with me when I used to come home on weekends. He used to come with me up to pasture when, on the next day, I used to leave for Kambhaloj. Almost after two and half gaun, he used to return back. Almost an hour was used to be passed in looking back again and again and waving hands for good bye.

Exchange of our letters increased when I was transferred to Nadiyad. Mago was in ninth standard then. He might have hardly reached to seventeen or seventeen and half while on the other side the already well grown Lakshmi’s physique grew up so well that her parents started being restless. Now, they were not at all ready to wait for the completion of Magan’s...
study. They warned Magan’s father: “Either you invite aanu or divorce.” Listening to such words from the girl’s father, Magan’s dad became annoyed and unreasonably hasted: “I will summon aanu and bring her home. If I will give divorce without bringing her here, she still will remain spinster. Hence, not going to allow divorce so easily.” And he summoned aanu.

After returning from High-school, when Magan came to know that his father had sent Gor to summon aanu, he rebuked all a lot. He wanted to study further. While he was looking just like a student, his wife was coming to live with! He reprimanded furiously. He scolded his grandma as much as he could and then went away somewhere in huff. On the next day, the aanu arrived. There was a tradition of taking a new bride to home with celebration and then to welcome the bride with a ritual of samaiyu. For the preparation of the samaiyu, she was seated at the relative’s home. Meanwhile, someone gave good news to hidden seated Magan: “Brother, Your wife is very beautiful! No such pretty woman has been seen in our village before. She is the pride of our village, brother!” Listening that, he melted but basically he has smug nature, hence how can he go home back so easily! He remained there with an excuse:

“Buddy, I was not even asked. I wanted to call my friend – Joseph! With whom would I go in samanyu without him? Somebody go and bring him!”

But, unlike today, it was not easy to call me from far away Nadiyad. His mother went to convince him and administered swear: “I administer swear of your friend whom you love the most. Now, you cannot disagree!’

And Mago softened. The samaiyu was organized merrily. Patbehana was arranged and the bride Lakhami took the dust of his feet on her head as blessings.
Then came the first meeting after marriage and, more to it, a cold winter night, the refulgence beauty of Lakshmi, the youthfulness at height and the warmth intimacy fascinated Magan so much that he completely gave up his life to Lakshmi only. He had written me a letter catering the details of how he had been made surrendered to his wife. He said to Lakshmi:

“You defeated me in the marriage ritual of taking rounds around fire. I am again left behind in the sculpting of body. On that day, you had become disliked to me but today when I look at you, I feel, as if, nobody is as fortunate as me. You are very beautiful but let me tell you this village has enmity with beauty. If you believe me, don’t go out ornamented. In a way, you look elder than me and there is no reliability on my father. If he finds even something doubtful, believe me, it will turn out to be divorce! I can sense something like this. Lakhmi, I used to like the word ‘divorce’ before I saw you, now the word seems my enemy. Now, I want to be with you until death. . . I am not going to leave you even if I need to give my life. Tell me, what do you think about it?”

And in response to it, she dragged Magan close and hugged him. Pointing to her heart, she said: “You reside here since I saw you first in our marriage ritual. I have been worshipping a pair of vessels since I matured. When the Valamgor used to praise your gentle body, I used to be overjoyed. I used to inquire of you to whosoever came from this region. You are my husband. I like you more than Sona liked Halaman, Hothal liked Hodho and Utara liked Abhimanyu. Apart from you all others are my brothers and father!”

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4 Worshiping vessels is traditional practice performed by a spinster to get good husband.
And like this, in the first nine days of the first aanu, Mago and Lakshmi became one for each other. Mago went up to half of the way to see her off and got many things for her. They both became haste for the second aanu as early as possible.

If I had stored Maga’s letters of that time, I am sure that these letters which were written by him without any study or additional knowledge, would have become a meaningful heritage of the stories of what the young lovers feel. During that period, when I, first time, went to meet him, each part of his body seemed rocking. I could see some wonderful peace and freshness in his eyes. Still, he was my friend but only for sharing his stories of romance otherwise he was only Lakshmi’s husband. “My Lakhmi!” Only a movie can articulate his enthusiasm shown while saying these words.

After a month and half, Lakshmi came back from second aanu. She had now become daughter-in-law of a family. And there were milch cattle in the home along with mother-in-law, grandmother-in-law, father-in-law, and also brother-in-law. She took up the responsibilities of filling drinking water, sweeping and cleaning dung, cleaning utensils, sweeping rubbish but was not able to do much. Among all these, Magan used to gait around and Lakshmi used to glitter! It would have been heaven, had their samsara gone on so. But, Jivikachi had never allowed Maga’s mother to sit free even for a moment then how could she allow a young and dumpling daughter-in-law to sit free in home? And, more to it, somebody instigated: “The daughter-in-law is healthy and strong; good at all work and above all smarter enough. Your Mago is not even half of her. Her youth may eat up Mago. Control her, give her hard work, yoke her to labor wages to make her body controlled and give burden that she keeps on panting all day. If she is given such leisure for next six month only, Mago will not remain a man in inch.”
This instigation worked like miracle. Jivikachi immediately ordered all: “Daughter-in-law will go for labor wages. Mulaji Makadadma has been informed. The main barnyard will be more suitable. One gets good overtime there apart from daily work wages.”

Jivikachi’s order used to be always followed in home. Nobody could ever dare to oppose her. Magan struggled against the order of sending Lakshmi for work in yard; but nothing came out of it. “She has gathered body like a stray animal. Are we going to offer her as a scarification so to make her seated at home? A daughter-in-law had to labor. You cannot understand this.”

And within a week, Lakshmi clearly told to Magan: “Either you get me some other work or you do whatever you like on your own. I cannot go on like this.”

Magan’s mind had frozen since the day when he could not do anything in relieving Lakshmi from going to yard for work. He used to go into his bedroom without saying a single word and that is too only when Lakshmi would have gone asleep out of tiredness.

Lakshmi’s expression, “This cannot be tolerated” has pierced his heart down to the bottom. And on the next day, he deliberately and firmly opposed Jivima. Out of that, serious dispute took place and a conclusion was derived that the daughter-in-law hated the work. She wanted to relish sitting at home. And the whole matter turned out to be a question of self respect. And for the sake of convincing all, Lakshmi got huffed out of connivance.

But, Lakshmi, who had to her parents, returned just out of light immoderate temper, was not welcomed there. Parents or in-laws, wherever she used to go, her startling beauty used to propel fire wildly. It was not difficult for her parents to shelter and bring up Lakshmi but to protect her charming beauty. If some nefarious might hold her hand and the respect in the
community could get smashed. Hence, a conclusion was oozed: “When we go as married to in-laws’ home, we have to do the given work. One cannot afford to dislike work! And are you alone going for work in the barnyard? The whole world goes! If we are good then all other are good! If we are alert then let the whole world do whatever they want. Why do we need to worry unnecessarily?”

And the very next day, Lakshmi had to unwillingly leave for her in-laws’ home! This time, there was absence of the vibrating enthusiasm in her steps. The joyous smile was not playing on her lips. Yea, brightness was there in her eyes, but Magan always saw pain in it.

She started going to work even if nobody asked her to do so. In the morning, from seven to nine, she used to work on cash (four annas for two hours). From nine to six, whole day, she used to do the daily labor wages (one rupee a day) and in the evening, from six to eight, two more hours for eight annas, she used to work in lump sum. She used to labor for more than 12 hours for two rupees and seventy five paisa. Now, she did not use to wear a good sari, make hair, and was not putting a bindi on her forehead which used to suit her the most. She even used to keep her face covered, stopped taking part in fun gossiping. But, though, how could her beauty remain hidden? Before she shifted to a new yard for work, the news of her work and shift had already reached there.

The owners of the yards are very cunning. It’s a play for them to savor and play with beautiful women as they like! And they don’t count anything for the reputation and honor of lower castes. “What honor do they have? We can rob anybody we like!” And unfortunately, this is how it was. An owner or a son of an owner indicates to a headman for whosoever they like. And the wife of the headman working under the owner convinces the indicated person.
It is the fact that if they want to work there, they have to surrender themselves to the malign desires of an owner. If anyone denies to cave in, they will be tricked or expelled. And the helplessness after being expelled or tricked pains more.

The young owner of another yard had come to know the reasons for Lakshmi’s shift. He played his trick, but Lakshmi had always remained alert. However, her vigilance could not last long. At an unfortunate moment, Lakshmi was compelled to bring winnowing basket from a warehouse. Unknown of the trick, when Lakshmi reached there, it was dark in there. When quickly she made effort to turn back, somebody held her hand and put another hand on her mouth. Within a moment, Lakshmi realized that she was going to be abducted on that day. Instead of making any harsh efforts, she removed the person’s hand from her mouth and said: “Slow down a bit. I know what you want!”

The other had never thought that a woman like Lakshmi could surrender so quickly. Being very happy he said: “Lakshmi, I will lavish you if you will remain mine. I will get even Magan set for work. Take, this is my first gift!” – Saying so, he put a heavy gold chain in her neck. “Come on now. Come closer. Cannot control since I have seen you!” Saying so, he dragged Lakshmi closer.

“Let me first close the door.” Said Lakshmi and first latched the door. “Come on this side.” and she led him to the place where big wooden pegs were laying. “Spread a sack.” She ordered to the lecherous. When he bowed down to spread the sack, Lakshmi, holding a wooden peg in both her hands tightly, stroke it forcefully on her head. With a sound of thud, the owner fell down there only and Lakshmi escaped from there. Coming home, she explained the entire incident to Magan and putting the golden chain in his hand said: “This is
the proof. The peg has been hit high. I don’t know whether the rogue will live or die! Now, whatever you say is right!”

Magan cannot think of anything. Before it gets bawl, something should be done. He sent Lakshmi to the main well and, taking one companion with them, they reached to his in-laws at eleven in the night.

“Keep her here until I get job. Don’t send her with anybody, even with my father until I intimate you.”

Many rumors took place next day. She was accused severely but the surprise was that there was no reference to the blow of peg on the head of the owner. And he who had always snatched and eaten from others did not even die with a blow. Yes, but he had got broken partially and that fact had made him more malice. As he recovered, he employed tricks two times to hijack Lakshmi but somehow she could save her life. Once, she could escape even from a very close snare but, on the other hand, Lakshmi’s brother was victimized for the outrage. More to it, her unfortunate fate started chasing her.

This time when Lakshmi came back at in-laws, she had brought ladoos with her and every morning Magan used to eat that rich dish. In a way, he had broken down after sending Lakshmi away to her home. His own father had become his strong enemy and Jivikachi anyhow did not want the bad luck of Lakshmi’s steps in her home. During that time, Magan gost gripe. And the efforts for cure switched over from medicine to superstitions. The close relatives believed that a henchman of the owner had induced in the minds of the Magan’s family members that Magan had been fed something shadowed by necromancy. And coincidently, the ladoos became a proof of it and Lakshmi was declared and became known
as a necromancer without any fault of her. Magan tried hard to clarify the delusion but was not paid attention by anybody. He was even being infused that:

“She is a witch, she is immoral. After her arrival here, the buffalo has stopped calving and yielding milk. The season for farming too passed weak. She doesn’t want to have life with you but playing a black game to ruin you.”

Howsoever Mago kept on imploring; his vexatious father went in advance to Lakshmi’s village and convinced two sycophants. And then one day, he got Lakshmi’s divorced paper signed through her brother. Lakshmi’s brother was thinking to get her remarried to somewhere long distance away hence he can save himself from her troubles as he too had got tired of the tricks and problems against her. And therefore, when Magan’s father produced the divorce paper, he got it signed by the sorrowful Lakshmi’s thumb impression. And producing the same paper to the bedridden Magan, his father said: “See fool! See your darling’s thumb impression and you too sign”. After some time, Magan told me: “The words: ‘from her hair to heel, I don’t have any right on her’ had dizzied me but my enemy like father rest only after taking my signature.”

Gradually, he could recollect himself. Some wise man had explained to him: “Court doesn’t accept such divorces. You recover and on some fine day go away taking Lakshmi along with you. Then, nobody can interfere between you!” That consolation had encouraged Magan. He gradually made his will strong but at that inappropriate time, a bad news came in: “Lakshmi’s brother has got her remarried and sent her off to her new in-laws and Lakshmi did not even resist slightly.”

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And this news broke down Magan totally. His dieses and pain turned over back. He stopped taking either any medicine or cure and kept on crying silently sitting whole time in the verandah or steering lifelessly at the fainted image of the God Ganesha which was used at the time of his marriage and had remained on the wall. On that day, he, first time, prattled in delirium. He was not giving any clue to stop all those things even after being helped by many. That night, he created a tempestuous situation and started abusing all endlessly. He used to attack his own father with anything that would come in his hand whenever he would see him. He even grabbed his grandmother’s throat which he relieved only after very hard efforts. Having gone mad, Magan, tied up tightly, was brought to city and was given electric shocks. In all that, his tongue got crushed and therefore started stammering. After learning all those things, when I went to meet him first time, he conscious hugged me and cried a lot.

“My whole life is ruined by my enemies, my dear friend! I cannot live without Lakhmi!”

First time in whole life, my consolation and sympathy could not convince him.

“You are my true friend only if you unite me with Lakhmi otherwise I have nothing to do with you.” And to adjust something for the love of Magan, I, leaving him behind, went to his in-laws’ village. But Lakshmi’s brother was not ready to even talk and her Bhabhi said that:

“After many hard efforts we have remarried her. Why do you interfere unnecessarily? Have you ever known anybody getting united again once divorced? Live and let live peacefully!”

How to show my face to Magan after not being able to find any clue about Lakshmi? Therefore, I returned to my place with disturbed mind. They tried their best to admit him in a mental hospital but Magan behaved so well there that nobody believed the words of Magan’s father. They returned back home but then he had really gone insane. Sometimes, he used to
remain silent and well mannered but when he used to get impatient, he would vandalize whole house. His father could not even come in front of him. And, tired and lost, he used to tie him tightly and confine in a nearby room. Food and water was being supplied in there. He would eat sometimes if he would feel otherwise he would fill the whole house screaming continuously.

Gradually, all that came down. Now, he used to imprison himself in the room tying his own self with chain. He used to take some food if he would feel so, otherwise would abstain himself from food for days. Now, he was not even conscious about excreta. The whole house used to stink and he used remain carelessly inside it. I was summoned, when, doing so, once he did not open the door for four days. When I reached there to his room at two in the noon, strong stink, which can distract anybody, was coming out through the chinks of the door. My love for Magan encouraged me and I started calling him:

“Magan! Magan! I am your Joseph! Open the door friend!”

After half an hour of pleading, he melted. The door making some noise remained as it was. The locality people standing away from me got frightened. I raised the bolt and open the door. The whirl of stink wrapped me from all the sides. I courageously went inside and Magan, turned out in skeleton, was standing there holding the chain of the swing on which we used to sit for hours. I thought: “Seeing me, he will cling to me as usual.” People used to say that he would not relieve once he would hug me, will entwine like a ghost. But I was not worried about it. His faded eyes were still recognizing me. His once long beautiful hair had turned matted. His once used to be golden bright face was covered with the layers of grime.
Louses were rambling on his clothes. His veins had turned lifeless and his lips had become barren.

Resting my hand slowly on his shoulder, I said: “Maga! Do you remember me, friend!”

And his pale eyes shed our relationship in tears. I could not restrain myself. I embraced his deformed body. My shoulders could feel the weight of his lifeless body but not the warmth of our meeting. He had gone unconscious.

I first got him lie on the swing board and got the windows open. Then, I made the people move away and got the house cleaned and changed the bed with quilts and removed his clothes by tearing it off. After long time, he came to his senses. I got the water heat; called a barber and got his louse full hair cut as well as cut his nail and I myself bathe him. I cleaned him as much as possible by taking care of not hurting the blebs.

He was following my words like a child. I got recovered Magan sit in the same house where once he zealously celebrated his first night with Lakshmi and where we had spent uncountable moments of love for each other. I made his favorite khichadi cooked and fed him with the vegetable gravy and the chutney of garlic-red pepper. He started eating voraciously. After a saturation level, I felt to stop him and therefore I said: “Buddy! Stop now!” and gave him some water.

Then, caressing his back for long time, I tried to turn him towards our tales but he didn’t response to even a single word. He was looking either to me or at the wall. Slowly he started dozing therefore got him sleep and soon he went deep in sleep.
I too got up, took bath and dressed myself. The condition of Magan had withered my desire for food otherwise if he would have just said, “You too take some.” when I was feeding him, then eating with him in the same plate would have quenched my desire for whole life. Having a cup of tea, I sat in my verandah. We had spent years in the verandahs in front of each other. The memory of the good days was futile then, the remembrance was in vain.

I went back to Magan’s bed when he did not move even at around six o’clock. His forehead was hot like a burning coal. He had got sever fever. I sent a man to call a doctor. The doctor didn’t want to come in the localities of the lower caste hence he sent tablets. I woke up Magan shaking violently and gave him two tablets then I put pieces of clothe dipped in salt water on his forehead. After few minutes he vomited and emptied his stomach. The vomit made the place stinking again. Wiping his mouth, I gave him few droughts of water and made him stretch his self on the bed but again he went unconscious. The temperature was not coming down. Around after twenty minutes, he could recollect his senses back. He opened his eyes and struggled to raise his hand. I recognize it and put my hand into his. He tried to say something but the words could not come out therefore steered at me with his helpless feeble eyes. Again he lost his conscious and his delicate neck fell off! That was the first death I have seen face to face! Once, we had promised each other to keep our friendship until death. But on that day, time had proved us wrong. When he was entombed in the light of a lantern, I was asked to first throw earth on him as his closest family member. While throwing the five fists of earth on his corpus, at the last step my soul rebelled:

“I have deep affection for you – and aspired to be one with you after life. But today, I tell you by swear: ‘I would prefer to die in backwoods but will not allow your company even for a moment. You are curse on us. You would not free us from the sorrow of life.’”
Her name was Jivikachi. She was Magan’s grandmother but known as Magan’s mother. She was beautiful with plump physique, light dark complexion, brown eyes, arms tattooed, pomp in walk, crispy speech. She had a son and a daughter only. I don’t remember when she might have become widow but by the time I matured, she had got free from the social responsibilities of getting her children, son-daughter, married and was dominating her son and daughter-in-law pompously.

My father was a teacher in Mission. After the death of my mother, out of the disgrace of the society, he brought us to the place he was working. I was grieving after the death of my mother hence he brought us to Grandma’s home to stay there in our village. There, then, Gordhan had spoken to my father with his nose in the air: ‘See Uncle, Magan has learnt kakka-barakhadi. He can write on his own.’

Seeing the slate forwarded by him, my father, a teacher, said: ‘The hand writing is clear and beautiful. It seems he will become studious and clever.’

“Yes, agree with you Uncle. His writing is as beautiful as yours. Where are you? Magan? Come here dear! Look, Master-uncle wants to see you. He is praising your hand writing.”
And a smiling-shying little child had come out. He was Magan. The first time, we saw each other and became close friends forever. While holding my hand he dragged me in his verandah, at that very time, Jivikachi came in from somewhere.

“Oh! You have arrived Master! How are all there? Fine?” And in response to that question, Bapu said:

“Yes, Bhabhi. I have come to leave both my children here. The elder is fine but you take care of the younger one. He is very upset in the absence of his mother!”

“Now, he would not remain sad as he will have his aunt’s company.” Saying so, Jivikachi caressed my head with her hand and embraced me. That was my first contact with her loving and caring heart. In her life, she might have been rude and harsh to others but has always been amiable to me.

Jivikachi’s nature was very harsh. She used to wake up at half past four in the early morning and sit at the second baluster of lobby. Panibhabhi had to wake up before her and after giving a basket full paddy-straw to the buffalo, prepare a hookah for her mother-in-law. She used to smoke hookah till only a residue of tobacco would be left behind. Then, Panibhabhi used to go for milking the buffalo while she used brush her teeth with a datan. By the time the buffalo would be milked, she would reach to her seat back on the lobby after being fresh. Meanwhile, Pani would give her a bowl and a small glass of the size of one seer. She would start selling milk after drinking a full bowl herself. She used to give milk to all the customers with a glass of the size of quarter of a seer. She was cautious for not giving more or waste even a drop. But the quality of the milk used to be so pure and dense that everybody
preferred to come to her to get milk. She believed it a sin to add water in the milk. She used to say that the God disdains one from happiness if one earns through immoral means.

Mago used to wake up at the sun rise. He first would sit in her lap. The old woman used to clean him and urge him for a glass of milk but Magan preferred tea. When Magan used to refuse a glass of milk for a cup of tea, she would curse, “May those who brought tea here go to hell! One cannot be healthy with the tea.” And she would wish to pour milk in Magan’s cup of tea but Magan didn’t like milk and didn’t allow her anyhow ever.

By the time, Panibhabhi would complete cleaning the garth with the third basket of waste, Jivikachi too would join her. Both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would reach their farm in the area of Chaliya. Both would cut a full bundle of grass and then would collect a bundle of firewood. If it was a pleasant winter season, they would also pluck peas and beans. Afterwards, they would pod the peas and beans while walking back home with a heavy load on their heads. They would reach back home not later than ten in the morning. Magan would be doing his home work and I would be doing my drudgery of the household work.

Then, Panibhabhi would proceed for cooking and Jivikachi would go to collect the interest of the money lent to the people of Rohit caste. Every day, she would uproar to somebody who might not pay the amount. The needy people would come and entreat her in the evening. But the old woman would lend money only after taking a proper stalk of the situation and nobody could dare to misappropriate her money. Nobody could bear her sharp tongue. If the old woman got upset, she would literary abuse not only the person but his all forefathers. Nevertheless, if someone would pay back even a half rupee less, the person would lose her
respect for him forever. Jivikachi would never allow such an unworthy person come again in front of her.

Goradhan was her only son. Both the mother and the son used to quarrel a lot with each other. Nonetheless, he was as dear to her as the interest of money. I also used to get benefited from her lot of love for Magan. She didn’t like my new mother at all and her disputes with our family mostly used to be in this regard.

Gorahan used to flatter her whenever he was in need of money. He would share many tales from across the world and explain to her the possibilities of the assumed business. But, even after all that, if the old woman didn’t melt down, he would move away with a scowl face and, when he would return, he would be heavily drunk. He was so clever that in such a situation, he would not take more than a peg or two to sound heavily drunk. He would then pretend as if heavily drunk and then he would start prattling. In that, he would abuse Jivikachi like anything:

“She is not a mother but a shameless shrew woman. One day her deep pockets will be taken away by some crook but she would not give even a penny to her own child. She would not provide any opportunity wherein her child’s business can be started and grown. You have all the money because my father has earned. It is not that you had been born with a silver spoon. You are disgust to many. You neither die nor leave the wealth free. I cannot have good fortune before your death. It’s sad that death doesn’t take you even instead of somebody else!”

Jivikachi wouldn’t care even if the whole world would hear her being abused. But God knows why, when it used to come to her death, she would get annoyed. She could never bear
anything about her death. It is said that her husband Bakor died young at the age of thirty two. In his last days, he made her stand close to his face and stared close into her eyes and, as if, the frown eyes were relieving pain, said, “I am dying because of you!” Bakor had urged lot for his medical treatment but she, taking it very lightly, had not paid attention to it saying, “You will recover.” Bhavan Bhagat, who knew the treatment of the dieses, had advised: “The disease has got deep and serious. You should go to the hospital in the city for treatment. It seems to me the symptoms of T.B.” However, Jivi didn’t even pay attention to it out of the greed for money. On the contrary, she scolded Bakor, “A body sometimes becomes weak. Why do we need to spend in hospitals for this? If your life is left, then even Yam cannot come close to you.’ And miserable Bakor had passed away wailing, “I will return as a ghost of khavish and wrangle you. I will not allow you to even die in peace!”

Hence, when her own child would curse the misfortune of her death, she used to shiver out of fear. And Gordhan, well aware of the soft corner of his mother, would make last sharp blow, “You have killed my father with a painful death. But you wait and watch how is going to be your condition? I will not pour even a drop of water when you will be on your last breaths. You will see Jivali!” And the old woman to get very restless with that last shocking blow. She, joining her hands, used to plea him to calm down and would offer him whatever amount he wanted and entreat him.

“Everything is for you only, dear son! All is yours! Why should I suffer all such upheavals of life? Why do you go so mad? Am I going to take all this wealth with me after death? This all will come to you only when I will be no more. Calm down and first tell me how much do you need? Why are you spoiling my life?”

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1 As per the Hindu tradition, a person who is breathing his last is given water by his/her loved ones.
But the shrewd son used to continue the play of prattling. He would observe till the old woman would get convinced but would not end the drama until she would have money in her hand.

To get herself free from such façade, she would go in, close the main door behind her, open the casket and come out with few notes in her hand. He used to take more than his need. He would hide few notes in the skein and then to end with the act, he would lie down pretending to be unconscious to end the drama.

Jivikachi was as innocent as noxious. Immediately, she would start consolidating him. She would pour water on his face, wipe his face with the hem of her sari and would pine, “Why do you do so, my son? Isn’t it all for you?”

After some time, Gordhan used to recover from booze, sit on the porch and troll with load voice:

‘Take soda, take janjir, or lemon drink is fine;

If you want to come for invocation of God,

Please don’t take wine, dear, don’t take wine!’

When people would overcome of laughing from his ridiculous self contradictory play, they and even Jivikachi would advice him, “Why don’t you practice such wisdom in your own life?” Listening to that, Goradhan would vow bowing down to the feet of Jivikachi, “I swear not to drink ever again. If I booze now even a drop, I would see you dead.”

Jivikachi used to be satisfied. She thought it to be worth full to give him money. Goradhan would fetch a stock of clothes for hawking. And he would also be happy for having chance
for boozing with the customers in various villages. He was earning well by the work of auctions. After a month or two, he would show her the doubly earned money of what he might have borrowed to make her happy and would purchase goods of all the money far from Ahmadabad. He used to do the business for three-four months and then would return the borrowed amount with interest to his mother and would also give her the profit amount for saving. He would show the vigor of keeping the vow till enough respect is earned from his mother then one day he would suddenly disappear with all the money in such a way that he couldn’t be found for months. Jivikachi then used to search for him everywhere, send messengers at various places and get letters written to him but would fail to trace him. And the tired old woman would sit on the porch and wail loudly, “If he will not return by the full moon day, then on the fifth day from padava, I will mourn his death. My lovely child, how can you go away leaving us behind lifeless?”

The experienced Panibhabhi knew everything as she had suffered all that many times but she could not dare to utter a word against Jivikachi. In such a situation, Magan used to embrace Jivikachi and all the members of the locality used to gather to console her wherein some would blame them for their mistakes while others would pity her for her naïve and innocent nature. After a day or two, his letter would suddenly appear, “I am well wherever I am. In any way when have I been there with you that now my absence pains you? You need not to mourn even if I die here.” Jivikachi used to get afflicted by such a red cautery however she also used to feel the comfort of having his son well. Then, the old woman used to instruct Magam to write a letter, “Write a letter to your father and ask him to return home. Even if he is worthless, it is good to have him here.” We used to search a lot for his postal address but at last Magan would post a letter writing on top, “To, Gordhan Bakor, Wherever he is.” Then,
days would pass and one day, suddenly from nowhere, he would appear in a wretched condition and would start wailing from the far corner of the street itself, “I am looted and cheated. I have lost everything. Some buglers attacked me. I could save my life with difficulty. I haven’t even eaten anything since days.”

People used gather and the old woman would keep staring at him in a shocked state of mind. Panibhabhi would be watching the play from the verandah and Magan climbing on the porch, would wonder, “How could he receive that letter?”

“Dear son Godha! Come here! Pani, get a bucket of warm water.” Saying so, Jivikachi used to take Goradhan in the home.

“It is your good luck dear mother that I could survive and return.” Saying so, he would bow down to her feet.

Jivikachi would get emotional and order for the preparation of a feast. After getting fresh, he would sit for sometime before the image of God and then he would go to invite a group of hymn singers. Hymns would be sung vigorously whole night. The priest used to read a lesson of ‘Prodigal Son’ from the scriptures and advice all. Expressing indebtedness to God for Goradhan’s safe return, the group used to disperse. While going for a long peaceful sleep, Gordhan would start planning for a next trick.

For next month or so, Gordhan would remain at home, look after the farm and calculate the interest which had been collected by his mother. He would collect the debt from those who would haven’t paid and plan another trick as soon as he would realize that his mother had been impressed. Meanwhile, his some new friends would come and a new wave of the business stories would start, “Look mother, wasn’t the money of the crook that I have
brought back almost gone? So, why don’t you give me that much of amount this time and see how your fortune changes! Due to this War, there is scarcity of yarn and my friend is in scarcity of money. This time, there are good chances for earning-gaining four times high. I swear by you, if I am saying anything wrong.” Saying so, he used to get money as per his expectation smartly and even the business used to run well but he would get robbed again while returning home! His injured body would be required to bring home in a cot. After four-five days, his wounds would recover and after a week or two he would again sit on the porch and troll:

‘A movement of karma is strange! A movement of karma is very strange!’

But now Jivikachi used to get neither tricked nor deceived and therefore Gordhanda had turned to the addiction of wine. Again he would repeat the curses on her mother and the old woman used to give up to save keep herself out of that.

People used to say, “Nobody has born yet except her son who can teach her true lessons!” People used to say so because nobody had ever got even her consolation in the ebbs and flows of their lives. She was innocent but very isolated. She had never helped anybody even in one’s worst time. It was not in her nature to give money without expectation of interest therefore there was no chance for anybody to get money on credit. Due to this reason, she could not ever nurture herself as a mother.

She used to beat the world but she could do nothing against her own son and therefore she used to relieve the frustration on her son’s wife. Gordhan did not have any affection for his wife and Jivikachi’s awe was such that Panibhabhi would not ever dare to speak even a single word against her. Like an animal, she would keep on doing work day and night. She
was even going for labor work. She used to wake up early at four o’clock in the morning. She would start grinding after milking a buffalo. She would have drawn around ten large pots of water by seven. If she was to go on labor wages the next day, she would pod paddy or split **kodara** at night. After completing dinner, adding starter to milk, foddering buffalo, completing the scattered usual work, preparing hookah for mother in law, she used to go to bed at around half past eleven. In the morning, a cock might miss his call but Panibhabhi would never miss to get out of a bed before four in the morning.

For one thing, Jivikachi was equal to Gandhiji. She would take it as a sin if Panibhabhi got sick. Jivikachi would not even pay attention to her high fever. Even if Panibhabhi would be shivering out of flu and fever, she would say, “You are pretending. Is your behavior unknown to me?” Even if her body would be heating out of high temperature, she would command her, “Go to the well and draw two pots of water and the fever will be gone.” Even if her whole body would be shivering and she would be tormenting, she would keep doing her work. Seeing her miseries, our childish hearts used to get stirred but the old woman would not pity her. The old woman would ask her to massage her legs when she would be very sick. One day, knowing that she had fell down under a banyan tree with a basket of dung on her head and hearing a gossip among other women about it, Magan got very upset and ran after the old woman with a broom to beat her, “You are worthy of the way my father treats you. You don’t allow having peace to my mother even for a moment. I will not spare you today without breaking your legs!”

However, Panibhabhai never complained about it. She had, as if, imbibed the nature of suffering anything silently. She used to nag her head in disapproval when the women at the well used to sympathize with her criticizing her mother-in-law. She would never accompany
them in the gossips against her mother-in-law. She would never pay attention to the tricks being suggested to punish the old woman. “Your husband is also impotent. How long will you keep suffering like a dumb animal?” Saying so when the women used to cross their limits, then, having no other option, Panibhabhi would speak, “If he himself has given this life of suffering then whom to complain about it?” and drawing her pot, she would walk back to her home.

She used to cook for the whole family for the whole day but she was allowed to eat only what would be offered to her by the old woman. The old woman used to keep sharp watch on the pot of milk, ghee, wheat flour, butter milk. Sometimes, Gordhan would eat curd and the blame would come on her. Magan always used to say, “My grandmother doesn’t allow my mother, Pani, to have even belly full food!” Magan used to take more food in his dish so Pani could eat additionally the leftover but the old woman would insist to give it to a buffalo and not to her.

Gordhan used to express his dominating husband attitude fully on Pani. Whenever he would come drunk, he would lose control over his senses and Pani could not save herself from his beating. Moreover, he would not even realize when to stop. In such a situation, only the old woman could stop him but she always liked the atrocities on Pani to such an extent that she never came in and stop Gordhan. That event of atrocity used to stop only when Panibhabhi, being tired-frightened-exhausted, would hide herself somewhere or some elder neighbor would stop him.

Jivikachi got Magan married in his very childhood itself. When he had just turned up sixteen, his stout wife came on aanu. Her name was Lakshmi. She was stunning. But, as the old
woman used to do with Pani, she started mistreating her too. For more income, she sent even the new bride on work in the tobacco barnyard. There, her beauty started creating problems for her and therefore she hesitated for going to work in the tobacco barnyard. The old woman found solution for it, “Pani, you too go with her. If you are there with her then nobody would dare to do anything to her.” But the tricks on Lakshmi kept increasing surpassing even the vigilant watch of Pani. And in that situation, the devoted and virtuous Lakshmi went to her parent’s home out of huff. From that step of Lakshmi, the situation got more tangled and the old woman, warning Gordhan about it, got Lakshmi divorced. Pani earnestly wanted to have a bride of her son’s choice in their home as she also wished to have some improvements in their lives from the bride’s presence among them. But the old woman did not have second thought about it. As a result, Lakshmi’s return to her parent’s home gripped Panibhabhi along with Magan in pain. Yes, but, one change obviously came: Lakshmi had gone but the labor work of the tobacco barnyard remained for Panibhabhi forever!

Panibhabhai never knew at what point the old woman may find fault with her work hence she needed to do any work with utmost care. Before giving hookah to her mother-in-law, she used to change water in it and, in that case, she used to test whether it was working-testing good. From that routine, she got addicted to hookah. She could not dare to smoke it in presence of her mother-in-law hence she used to smoke while preparing the hookah for her or some other time stealthily. She also started smoking bidi when she was going to tobacco barnyard. Closing her eyes in gratification, she used to take long drags of hookah.

As time passed, her throat got infected from all that. In the beginning, her throat used get chocked, a mouthful would not come down her throat. Sometimes even water used to create the same problem and her throat used to give unbearable pain. After some time, that pain and
suffering became regular but there was no scope for diagnose and medicine. Unceasing work, insufficient food and no rest! Due to all that, gradually the time came when her throat got blocked. Rarely, she was able to take few drops of water down her throat. She collapsed. Magan would not go away from her bed but the old woman would not pay even attention to it and Gordhan already did not have slightest affection for her. She gave up her life out of unbearable pain. In her last moments, when her tongue could move for some time, she cursed the old woman, “You will have to pay for this. You have given a lot of pain to us!”

Jivikachi could realize the importance of Pani in their comfortable life only after Pani passed away. She got intensely tired, exhausted and exasperated for the work which she hadn’t done for her whole life and, above all that, as if taking reward on behalf of all others, Goradhan too did not come to her help.

She had got so alert of her son’s tricks on her for money that now even if he would create mayhem, she would not give even a penny to him. She wanted to make her family settled well again by getting Magan remarried. Looking at Gordhan’s lax nature, she wanted to save the amount which was left with her. But the cunning son would find out the ways to get money. He was the only scriber of the old woman’s all accounts. Hence, he knew every detail of the old woman’s debtors. He used to go to all the debtors. He would collect the principal amount letting interest go and would close the accounts. “Give me half of what you owe and keep paying interest of the remaining amount to my mother. Your debt is paid.” Taking care of keeping it secret, he would let go half of the amount from the debtors and get money for himself.
Once, the old woman got some problem with a debtor of large amount which turned into a squabble and the secret was leaked. The restless old woman inquired with all the debtors. Realizing the fact that her son had turned her bankrupt, she became despaired.

Out of the fear of Gordhan, she had kept some gold ornaments and money at some honest man’s place in the village. Being hopeful about that much of secure amount, she went there to check but he too show thumbs down: “You better ask your son about the ornaments and money!”

Returning home back, she started bawling. People said that they had never found the old woman mourning so intensely even when Bakor had died and she had become widow at her very young age. Moreover, the face behind the scene, Gordhan had escaped somewhere.

Grown up Magan believed that the sins like Pani’s death, his father being cheater, the act of separating Lakshmi from him were done by the old woman. Nobody could ever know how much money the old woman had at any point of time. Had she trusted Gordhan and shared the responsibilities with him. Had she given the rights of being the only heir of her family to Gordhan, he would never have got addicted to wine and become wicked. Had he been stopped while thrashing his woman, he would have remained human at some extent. The old woman did not unhand even a penny. She was feared that her son might waste all her money. Her family and home could have been saved, had she trusted and loved Pani taking her in confidence for controlling and saving her family and property. But she behaved as if she didn’t know anything about generosity. At such a time, despaired and infuriated Magan cauterized her verbally while she was bawling about the loss of money.
“Dear grandma, your condition has become like the mercenary rats of a Sanskrit story. There was a cauldron of money under his burrow. He was so intoxicated of money that he could make a four times high jump than others. He would never allow anybody to enter in his home. Someone came to know about the propeller behind his intoxicated strength. He stealthily removed the cauldron from under the burrow. Losing the wealth, the rat’s legs soon became feeble. Now, he was not able to jump even slightest. You legs too have been broken down by your greed of money, dear grandma!”

But the old woman was also as innocent as greedy. She had deep faith on the scriptures. While Magan was narrating the story, the old woman heard ‘shashtra’ instead of ‘Sanskrit’. “If it has been written even in the shashtra then it must be true!” said the old woman and her legs actually went feeble. Even after many efforts, she could not rise again on her feet. The same place of verandah became her bed. She suffered the pain even without any disease and while waiting for her death foresaid by her son, daughter-in-law and grandson, she kept cursing those who had misappropriated her money.

On that day, since morning she was caught by Yamdut. With the fear and bewilderment in her eyes, she had kept on looking at the ceiling. Her body had gone cold and her breast had been panting. She had never made anybody’s company in her life and therefore there was nobody to console her at her last moments. Instead of paying solace for death, most people there were excited to learn how death may come to them. I have always observed that the people around the person who is on the last breaths are excited to get some familiarity of death to overcome the fear of death.
“Let the soul get free, mother! Don’t entangle your spirit with anything. Everything will be alright. Which moments of life have still remained unlived that you are still not liberating your soul?” These were the words of some wise woman and it seemed that the old woman was listening to that. And at that moment only, Gordhan, as usual, suddenly appeared from nowhere. He could not bear the scene of the death which he had otherwise always wished. Supporting his hand on the side of her bed, he came close over her face.

“Should I pour you water, mother!” he asked the old woman. Listening to the voice which had always pained her, the old woman slightly came back to consciousness. Dragging her eyes towards her son, she signaled in negations. After hard efforts, she could open her mouth, gather her lips but could not utter anything. At that time, Gordhan said: “Magan, son, she is longing for you!”

Magan came close to her pillow. Keeping her eyes on his face, Jivikachi moved her eyelash positively. Magan gave her water and as soon as few drops of water touched her tongue through his hand, the head which had ruled there for almost a century, fell back.
The Salt of the Earth!

The inhabitants of all the three lower caste communities\(^1\) were residing in the same locality on one side of the village. They were all living in the same locality. Even though all the three castes used to suffer as well as be exploited equally, but they would still not unite with one other anyhow. Across the whole village, when one reaches to the south side, the first street was of the houses of *Bhangi* who sweeps and cleans to keep the people healthy. Close to it was the locality of the laborer *Vanakars* and the last was the locality of the *Charmakar*. The degree of estrangement between the localities of *Bhangi* and *Vanakar* was so high that even the doors of the mud houses were kept in the opposite directions. While the inhabitants of *Vanakar* and *Chamar* had their houses so close to each other that it was difficult to identify their separate localities without the signs of the pelts spread out to clean and dry by the *Chamars*.

There was a huge chawk surrounded by neem trees against the localities. Hence, it was popularly known as *Limbadi Chawk*. The main road passes beside it and there was a deep well around ten feet’s distance from the road. The well was so deep that one cannot see the bottom from the top. Even the rope which may be used to draw water cannot be less than the

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\(^1\) Indian society is structured in the strata’s of castes. All the castes are arranged in a hierarchical order from higher to lower. Among it caste, there are further sub-castes and all these castes are too arranged in a hierarchical order within a given caste. The castes *Vanakar*, *Chamar*, *Bhangi* and *Harijan* belong to lower social strata wherein these castes are further arranged in the given hierarchical order.
weight of thirty seers. It was a well was shared by all the three localities. In my childhood, I used to witness all kinds of incidents at the well.

Except for the northern side pulley, all other sides of the well were reserved for Vanakars who had then converted to Christianity. Only northern side of the well was spared for the Chamars. Around forty Chamar families were living in these localities and around twenty were living on the other side, half a mile away from the village. All of them used to draw water from that one pulley of northern side spared to them. It did not matter even if there was a long queue for drawing water, many might be yawning there waiting for their turn and even if the other three sides would be vacant but they could not come on the other side of the well.

The pots were allowed to mingle inside the well but when they were out, they were suppressed to behave their caste.

I used to go with my mother to help her in drawing water. When it used to be long queues, I used to see my Labhubhabhi waiting there helplessly on the other side. I would even insist her to come on my side, “Come Bhabhi, Come on this side.” But she used to simply smile at me. I used to see helplessness in her smile but at that age I was not able to understand all that.

When the responsibility of drawing water for my whole family came down to me, her daughter Heta – my childhood friend – used to come on my side of the well to help me to draw water. Sometimes, she would fill up her vessels too along with my pot however she could never dare to come on our side of the well with her own pot and rope.

Moreover, on the northern side of the well, the women of the Harijan locality used to queue with their vessels for water but could not dare to come even close to the well.
“Pour some water in my pot, sister. Aunty, please fill up this pair of vessels! Oh Ladukaki, please pour some water in my pot too. My husband is sick at home and hasn’t taken water since last night and I cannot give him the water of pond!”

Every day, such imploring used to continue. If someone would sympathize, the person might donate two-three pots of water with an attitude of giving something very valuable. They used to pour water from above, keeping distant from their vessels lest the water gets polluted! Both the Chamar and Vanakar would ensure not a drop from a Harijan’s pot bounce back and touch them.

Almost whole locality was a poor laborer class hence the women hardly used to remain free and therefore even if they would have sympathy for the Harijans, they could not afford to help to get water to them. There would be nobody around the well by nine in the morning. The Harijans could get water from somebody if they could manage something by that time. Otherwise, they had to return back empty handed. For preparing lunch, they would go and beg water to those houses which might have been open.

In the Bhangi locality, Kasna’s wife had come to her in-laws house on her first aanu. Her name was Tara and she was a pretty woman. She used to be the center of the attraction when she used to play garaba wearing a new banta! Kasno did not use to allow her to go out even for drawing water or throwing waste away to save her from the evil eyes.

I used to go to draw water from the well in the morning. After hard efforts of a couple of hours, I used to draw ten-twelve pots of water from the seventy feet deep well. It was so hard that I had to take breaks while in between drawing up a pot from the well. My panting chest used to bulge. Heta used to come to my help when she would be free.
On that day, Tara had some guests at home. She was in hurry and moreover did not have drinking water at their home. She was earnestly requesting me: “Dear! My brother! I beg you to fill me two pots of water. I have guests waiting at home.”

Being a child, I liked to oblige beautiful Tara but I was tired of dragging the pots. I was not left with the energy to be able to drag two more pots for her but I did not even want to let go the opportunity to make her obliged to me. Looking around, I said: “Bhabhi! Dragging these heavy pots, my arms are now aching. Do one thing, help me to drag the rope and I will fill up not only your one pot but all other pots also.

Looking around, Tara said, “How is it possible, brother? If somebody comes to know, we will have our backs to the wall.”

“Generally, nobody comes around here at this time and nobody is going to come either. Don’t worry and come, let’s do it. Nobody will ever come to know about it.”

In a way, Tara was a brave girl and she was brought up in a city. Immediately, she came on my side. Then, we both on each side of the rope started dragging it one after the other, puffing chest in and out. Within some time, all the pots were filled. On that day, nobody remained devoid of water. The incident was completed so swiftly that nobody got even a whiff of it.

The same incident was repeated for few days and then Tara was not even required to ask for it. One day, we were drawing water in the same routine. There was a large dense banyan tree around two hundred gaj away from the well. And, on the north of the banyan tree, there was a church of the Methodist Mission. The Father of the church was living there. He had greater affection for me. His to-and-fro way was passing along the well. Generally, he would pass
from there without paying any attention to the well. But, on that day, he might have some work to me and he came close to the well and said, “Joseph, will you come to the bungalow in the evening?”

I got frightened. Tara got scared. Before I could say anything, he recognized Tara under her veil.

“Who is she? Why is she here on our side of the well?” Before I could explain anything, he went away taking steps back. Tarabhabhī got restless. She asked me in restless voice, “What will happen now, brother?”

“Nothing to worry. The Father is the salt of the earth. He will not do any harm to us.”

But, the panch was called in the Limbadi chawk in the evening itself. Kasano, abusing and thrashing, dragged his beloved Tara forward in front of the panch.

The charges were clearly proved. Tara stretched her lap begging to forgive and Kasano begged for pardon putting his head on their feet and said, “Such mistake will never occur again, my lord! My wife has committed a crime. Please forgive us this time, please!”

They were fined one tola corn for polluting the well. For my offence, my father’s work of writing the scripts for the panch was snatched from him and I was given a title of an idiot.

In the whole drama of justice, pressing the Bible in his armpit the Father was ‘truly witnessing’ all that.
After completion of the fifth standard in the rural school of the Missionary, I took admission in the local board school of our village. In the very first week, our class teacher, Mahiji Master recognized my voice and brought me forward for getting the students sing a prayer.

We have jumped in the ocean of life on your name!

Save or get us drawn or keep dangling a mid is up to you;

Oh Ram, I am not to worry about it. Oh Ram!

I used to get them all sing with melody and my fellow classmates used to sing after me. On the very next day, Satiyo hesitantly requested to our sir, “Sir! May I play tambourine?”

The teacher approved. Under the dense neem tree, we both used to sit ahead of all facing the rest of the students. I used to get them sing:

Ram came to Shabari’s home;

But my hut is too small, how can I host him?

Then we used to sing a dhun:

Ram, only you are the voice of the dumb!

Ram, only you are the cradle at the time of birth!
Ram, you are the soothing shelter at the time of death!

And Satiya’s beats on the tambourine used to create energetic rhythm. The tune and rhythm used to create such atmosphere as well as the voice flowing from our delicate throats used to create such fascination that we all would get engrossed into it. The teacher used to praise enthusiastically: “This is called a true prayer.”

After the prayer, we used to move to the class. Satiyo would enter at the last after we all would have taken our seats. First he would look at the whole class with his restless eyes and when we all would get busy in showing homework to the teacher, he would take his seat. He rarely used to come forward. He never used to be eager either about showing homework or solving the sums. I understood the reason later.

We both used to remain ahead of all in the prayer but, in class, his place always used to be at the last. There was a long wooden box of maps at the end of the class. Satiyo used to sit there only because he belonged to Bhangi caste. His father used to sweep the ground of the school. Many a times, when we would go out in the recess, he would also see him cleaning the streets. How can his son sit equal to others?

I too could not understand the attitude of not only others but even my own friends. Our homes were close to one another, behind Satiya’s home, there was wreckage - our childhood playground - where we all used to play. We, around a dozen of students, used to go to school together. Among us, two were Rohit, one was Satiyo and remaining all were from my caste. When we used to go to school crossing the well, he, looking decent in good clothes and fair complexion than us, used to wait there with his school bag. His eyes used to reflect some unidentified affection. His heart wanted us to invite him joyously: “Come Satiya. Let’s go to
the school.” But as soon as we would see him, all of us would go dumb. We used to pass from there avoiding to look at him and Satiyo used to follow us silently!

Sometimes, someone of us would share with us some snacks but there never used to be a share for Satiya. Sometimes, if someone would feel to give him then too he would give maintaining distant from him. Satiyo would not deny but his deep down feeling of embarrassment used to come on his face!

We turned out to be good friends once we became a pair for singing a prayer. He brought us two three friends with him to the theater in the village as well as, later, to watch the drama Harishchandra-Taramati. Later, my other friends too joined our friendship. Then, nobody used to bother about eating dates given by Satiyo. Yes, but, Nanako who was a Rohit used to get angry on all of us and was not getting friendly with us. He was considering us as polluted. Then, I, Satiyo and Magan used to remain together almost all the time. Now Satiyo would not go to school without me. We used to meet at the well. We used to talk about here and there while walking to the school and sing the prayer together but get separate once entered in the class. My heart used to pine but I could not say anything to anybody. Satiya’s heart too was moping but he could not pull himself together to come and sit beside me.

I stood first in the class in the mid year exam. Our teacher, Chunarasir, was an incarnation of honesty. He announced to the class loudly:

“The student who stood first in the exam should sit on the first seat! Come Joseph, you sit on the first bench.”

I picked up my bag and reached to the first bench. It was Chandu Patel’s seat. I could incidentally read disgust in his eyes. I hesitated to sit there but the teacher shouted, “Chandu,
get up! How surprising it is that you want to sit on the first bench even if you have failed in three subjects!”

He vacated the seat with good amount of resentment. But I did not like to move to his place. My attention went outside the class. Satiyo was looking at me with his helpless eyes. Pulling myself together, I said to the teacher:

“Sir, will you please allow me to sit where I want and count the first number from there? May I sit wherever I like?”

Teacher did not understand what I meant but he approved. The whole class was looking at me and I went to Satiya. As soon as I took my place beside the box near to him, tears started rolling down from his eyes.

Teacher Mahijibhai was astonished seeing the act which had been played out unknowingly. He realized what he should have understood earlier. He came close to us, put his hand on both of our shoulders and led both of us to the first bench.

Today, Satiyo has gone and the bench too might have dissolved in the panchmahabhoot. The neem tree, under whose soothing shadow, Satiya’s little palms used to create beats and melody on the tambourine and sing with his pleasant voice, has been cut down. But, the efforts for removing caste discrimination started long ago, haven’t succeeded yet even after thirty eight years of independence.
It was the twelfth year since Bhavan Bhagat’s vanavas when his young son Punjo breathed his last. As I informed him, he looked at the sky and uttered as if addressing God: “It seems you won’t even grant me a peaceful death.” Then he smothered his chillum, turned down his hokali, rearranged the arrows in the quiver, wrapped a loin cloth on his head and shut the wicket gate of his hut.

He remained speechless at the rite of sathavara after the funeral. Supporting his legs from knees with the loin cloth, he remained seated at the same place where he used to sit daily in the morning and sing hymns in the praise of God, He then disappeared in the branches and leaves of the tree that he himself had planted. Everybody was anticipating Bhavankaka’s speech preaching the futility of maya as it was a common practice that he had consoled the mourners formerly on similar occasions. But now the difficult times had approached him. Long time after the death of Bhalikaki, it was the first shadow of death there. How could anyone condole with Bhavankaka, the man who knew all the colors of life and life after death?

His eldest son had joined a Missionary and had dissolved in his service to the tribal people at Chhota Udaipur hence had forgotten his home and family altogether. The youngest one had fought bravely in the Second World War and therefore was offered a good job by the Government and as a result found a good wife for him. Then, with his job and wife, he had
disappeared in a city somewhere and seldom visited his village. The middle one was Punjo. Out of the thirty six arts that Bhavankaka knew, Punjo had imbibed sewing and henceforth had occupied himself on the sewing machine furnished by the soldier brother. His wife Monghi assisted him in eyelets and buttons and their life passed peacefully.

After Punjo got married and had children, Bhavan Bhagat renounced the worldly affairs. He became vanprashthashrami in the true sense of the word by dwelling in a hut he himself constructed amid the tress he was nurturing. Punjo brought him lunch and he wasn’t required to worry about dinner.

Bhavankaka was popular as Bhavan Bhagat and renowned as the master of all the thirty six arts. Rarely anybody knew what these thirty six arts were but it was assumed that he had mastered with all of them. He could devise a number of tools useful in household as well as farming. He knew the maintenance of everything. He was skilled in sewing, embroidery and treating diseases. When the village children suffered from hoarseness out of hunger or grippe, Bhavan Bhagat was there to cure them in the wink of an eye using local medical herbs.

Our home was beside his. My mother conceived a child, my younger brother, after many orthodox hermetic practices. He was so healthy and fair at the age of eight months that anybody would like to cuddle him. He got hoarseness that gradually resulted into heavy diarrhea. Due to the heavy diarrhea of blood and pus, he got reduced to a skeleton. His cotton like soft and plump body turned into a dry thorn. Father spared nothing for his treatment but still he could not recover.
During these days, there was no sign of Bhavankaka, neither did he turn up after a month. The condition grew so worse that we lost all hopes of his survival. One day, people, neighbors, Jivikachi and others gathered around to console us as we had given up all hopes of my brother’s survival. At that very moment, Bhavan Bhagat appeared from nowhere with bundles of luggage on his shoulders. He was startled at the sight of our home full of people and immediately rushed to my brother who was counting his last breaths. He checked his health and gave some herbal medicine. Then, he ordered the fresh shoots of the roots of a banyan tree. As soon as they were brought, he scrubbed them and administered a spoonful to the ailing child. And, the fatal hiccup subsided!

After an hour, my brother opened his eyes. Looking at the layers of his eyes which had gone deep down, the old man said, “He might not have remained among us, had I been late by only half an hour. Perhaps, his life instinct dragged me here on time.” And on the prescription of the herbal medicine by the old man, my brother recovered within a fortnight.

Bhavan Bhagat was also adept at solving the problems of breech birth. A story went around that there was a sturdy man residing in the interior silent bank of the river Mahi. He had once been a bandit and people were terrified of him. His daughter encountered the complications of a breech birth. When a doctor and a midwife lost their hopes, Bhavan Bhagat was invited urgently. He reached there right away. First, he eased her pain by giving her two spoons of herbal medicine and then transported her to the bank of the river in a cart. There, filling up a large bucket of sand, he told the pregnant woman, “Look! Dear daughter! Forget everything else and lift this bucket up with all your might.” She followed his instruction and it is said that by the time the bucket reached her head, she safely delivered the child.
A myriad incidents revolving around Bhavan Bhagat were narrated everywhere. He knew how to detoxify a scorpion’s venom or suck out a snake’s poison. He was revered owing to his know how. However, a marginal class also detested him anticipating him a practitioner of black magic. The buzz was that he knew witchcraft and could command the evil spirit whenever he wished. Many vouched to have witnessed him going to learn and practice diabolism on the day of kali-chaudas. All these various assumed activities of Bhavan Bhagat raised suspicions about him and when people praised him, all present there would have consensus for one thing, “Had he not had this one weakness, he would have been equal to a deity.”

But to us, the children, he was an angel. As the arrows from his quiver had never run out, in the same way, the interesting stories from his mouth for us never used to cease. He used to narrate various tales from Sinhasan Batrisi, Soodaboteri, Barasa-kasturi, Vikram and Vital and Savaringa to self fabricated manifold stories day and night. We provided him with basic needs like drinking water, chars for his smoke, fresh and special tobacco. Maniyo massaged his legs and Magan his head. He took long drags form his hookah. Bhagalo took care of the chars and gradually the whole veranda would smell of tobacco. After being gratified with hookah, he would gulp down a whole pot of water and then his tales would commence. In his tales, there sparkled the bravery of Vikram as well as the adventures of Vaital. He could delineate the characters like Nal who left Damyanti at midnight while she was asleep in such an interesting and detailed way that the women listeners would start disgusting Nal. In his tale, he would present Shravan in such an incredibly beautiful manner that all of us would dream to be like him and worship our parents picking them up in a kavad.
All this became an inevitable part of winter and monsoon schedules but summer was even more alluring. As soon as the month of Chaitar set in, he would pick up an axe or a scythe. There was a mango tree in the midst of a fifty acre farm. He would make a tree house with walls of reed for all the sides, two storeys up on the tree. That used to be his summer-station. Whole day he spent there making handles or sharpening edges of various tools. At the end of the day, he would come in the village, treat the needy with herbal medicines and return with his necessary things at around nine for guarding the farm in the night. We accompanied him. Dragging us in the mid of the dark farms, he showed us various animals, cattle, heaps, and the stars. He knew about all the stars in the sky and could even forecast based on their position. After smoking hookah, he would tell us a story. He bloomed in the darkness of night. We didn’t know why but his characters in those dark nights always were ghost and devils, witches and sorceresses. His immaculate narration of events and settings made our blood run cold and heart skip a beat. We would nestle in each other’s side or hold others’ hands tightly but his flow of fear would keep flowing from his mouth:

“When the Prince with all the thirty two qualities of a perfect man but in a harassed and ruined condition reached to the lake, the darkness was about to take over. It was only two days away from the new moon. The prince was very thirsty and there was plentiful water in the lake in front of him. He moved towards the bank. But when he tried to step into it, suddenly the water withdrew itself making a thunder like roar. The Prince, shuddering with fear, opened his mouth to enquire. But his voice failed to come out. With great effort, he advanced again. But when he bowed down to take the water in his palms, it retreated with a boom. Only a span away was the water from his lips, but the poor fellow could not even taste it. The thirst was making him unconscious. As soon as he would try to take a sip of water, the
roars and screams would scare him killing all his hopes. In search of the rationale, when he looked around, he saw an outrageous witch. She had bright red cloths and fiery bright eyes. Her large fat lips were like a swollen ridge guard and teeth, dark spikes. Her tongue was dangling like that of a serpent. She had a bright red blowing forehead and long hair. Her face was as frightening as ugly. She was so horrible that anybody’s blood would go cold. She said to the Prince: ‘I will eat up your heart if you drink water from here. I’d love to eat a soft heart like yours very much.’”

While narrating a story and spreading waves of fear, Bhavan Bhagat tested our courage. He stopped in the scariest narrations, when we were afraid of our own shadows. After a long pause, he cleared his throat and ordered someone of us:

“Who would be brave enough to go to the lake of Meghar and fetch a pot of water? Come Jasya! It’s your turn today.”

The lake was afar. There, on the way, comes a shrine of Khatri where the leaves of a huge peepul tree would be clattering. The path was so lonely that people would not dare to cross it even during day time. Now in that situation, one had to go to fetch water alone and it would be around one or two am when the old man ordered. Some other time, he described the ghost of Babaro turning us into heebie-jeebie and then commanded Maniya, “There is a ripe mango at the Jalbedi mango tree. Go and get it.” One had to follow his words. Once the task was accomplished, he boosted our confidence by blessing us. “Proven! Truly brave man! You will never be scared of anything.” I would come down from the tree house and pull out all the stops to pass the difficult test of bravery. I would still expect uncle to send somebody with me. But observing my condition he would hearten me: “Never say die! There, it’s your
farm near to the lake. You roam there whole day and now when it is slight dark you are scared of it! Go go! Hurry! Then I will complete the story. If a man is brave and confident, nobody can harm him.” Like that, he would encourage us and I would pull myself together to get the job done. He kept on encouraging us from behind as far as we could hear his voice. Then I would run and reach the lake where I played daily and fill up a pot with water. Out of fear, I would not walk but run back even with a heavy pot. When I reached back near, his voice would touch my ears again. “Don’t worry. I am with you!” Hearing his voice, I could catch my breath again and take pride in being able to get the job done. As soon as I reached the tree house, he patted on my back and said: “Tell us, has anything happened to you? Was there anybody? Nobody is there. These are all rumors. If we are fearless, nobody can do any harm to us. Get it? Be clever. I want to see you all as brave men!” Then we would realize that Bhavankaka had been teaching us the lessons of gallantry. He was practicing various tricks to swipe away even the slightest fear. He was taking extreme care to leave us remotely weak at anything.

Bhavankaka’s practices had inculcated such boldness in us that we initiated competitions as to who could visit the darkest places. Many a times he sent us to the tree house promising: “You go. I will reach there soon.” While waiting for him, we would roam in the whole field and even bring water from the lake. We would be lulled to sleep while chatting with one another. He then arrived late in the morning and woke us up then assigning us the task of collecting the ripe mangoes which might have fallen off. His teachings instilled such confidence and fearlessness in us that we would not be scared of spending even the darkest nights in the fields.
He taught us various stratagems that included wrestling, art of stick handling, and jumping over fences. He was very powerful in archery. He shot down any mongo that we pointed out. Our astonishment knew no bounds when he shot a mango thrown in the air. He taught us easy techniques for tying string with string groove and the tricks of a good marksman. He brought us to lake to teach manifold swimming styles. He was happily amazed at our performance of various swimming techniques. He motivated us to swim across the lake by offering prizes of his hand crafted slingshots and in that competition, mostly, Maniyo used to win.

The old man was very honest in the worldly affairs and his experiences of life were very rich. Sometimes when he would feel like, he would share his funny experiences. In his days, there was a widow, Shavali, in his locality. In his own words: “She was a crook. She could never resist herself from stealing something. She went to others’ homes to get charcoal but with a fake bowl of hookah. Whichever home she went, she would steal some salt, chilly, or few garlic bulbs. In the houses of poor people, most of the things lay open in the kitchen and Savali found it easy to make off with it. Gradually, everybody became aware of Savali’s weakness but keeping in mind the respect for her age, nobody said anything to her. “She’ll receive the fruits of her deeds. What bad is it going to do to us?” But such opinions of people promoted her to pilfer more and more. Now, sometimes, somebody’s money would be gone or some other things would vanish! Savali was so swift in her act that nobody could ever catch her. Like a magician she would use her hands with such legerdemain that sometimes if someone did try to catch her, he would not find anything but on the contrary would be put to shame for accusing her. And then, her scissors like tongue would lash out. At the end, people would lose money as well as respect.
At last, Bhavankaka decided to teach her a lesson. He planned a trap with Bhalikaki and waited for a chance. At some inauspicious moment, Savali came to get charcoal to his house. When she came, Bhalikaki, giving an excuse, got out of the kitchen, asking her to take whatever she had come for. Bhavankaka pretended to be absorbed in his work without noticing anything. Savali could not find anything more valuable but finding the house unattended and a chance to take anything, she took two fists of salt from a clay pot. Bhavankaka saw this from the corner of his eye. As soon as Savali took a step and crossed the threshold, he obstructed her way and yelled his wife: “Bhani, where have you gone?” Listening to his roar, Bhalikaki arrived immediately and the old man started beating her. Bhalikaki cried loudly and people gathered there. Somebody said: “How shocking! Such behavior is very unlikely on Bhavan’s part. Why is he so mad today?” Grabbing the opportunity, he dragged Bhalikaki close to Savali and said:

“I have long been advising her to follow Savali’s example. It’d at least provide us with our daily livelihood! Not only do you get charcoal but also many other things along with it. Just give her (Savali) a glance. She has taken half of my charcoal as well as two fists of salt. Is it feasible that you go around asking for charcoal keeping salt with yourself?” In saying so, he tactfully revealed Savali’s act. Then looking at Bhalikaki he said, “In spite of spending her whole life with me, she is foolish enough to have learnt no art at all. She is not worthy enough to be Bhavan’s wife! She should accompany Savali and learn some tricks from her. Folks, am I wrong?” Meanwhile, Savali had become frozen and lifeless. But Bhavan was in no mood to spare her yet. “My desire is none but to worship you. Please accept my wife as your disciple and teach your tricks to her so that she can accomplish her life.” The crowd was
trying hard to suppress their laughter and Savali bowing down to Bhavankaka’s feet was begging for forgiveness.

“Please stop now, Uncle. Please let me go. I will never do any such misdeed in my entire life.” From that day, Savali abandoned her vices and the people went mad laughing for days. That evening, people heard Bhavankaka telling Bhalikaki: “If you are hurt somewhere, please take it easy. I just wanted to teach the lesson of a life time to that wicked lady.” And on the other hand, Bhalikaki, proving qualities of innocence that go with her name, sighed and said: “You are really a wicked man! What had you to lose if she, a helpless window, was managing herself by pilfering little things? You ruined her self-respect and honor.”

We haven’t seen Bhalikaki but it was said that Bhali and Bhavan were a couple that accompanied each other birth after birth. When Bhalikaki passed away, Bhavan thought to give up the worldly affairs and become an ascetic but, while counting her last breaths, she had entrusted him with the responsibility of their three sons. This had persuaded him to carry on his life as a worldly saint.

His day started very early. He then took a bath drawing water from the deep well. Afterwards, he would sit down on his crossed legs and play a harp accompanied with his hymns about the maya of the world:

Oh! The ascetic one, oh the recluse, the lover of humanity;

You have mortified this mortal life!

You were much enchanted by a body,

You liked the earthly things much,
You didn’t see the love behind.

Oh! The ascetic. . .

The sweet melody woke us up and we gathered around to listen to him. Sometimes, when in a mood, he asked us to follow which we did.

One day we all have to go away leaving behind the world!

This strength and the wealth accumulated,

Will be vanished within a moment!

Oh. . . the maya for the life got unwind. – one day we all. . .

His couplets still play on our lips. Many hymns that he created were sung on plentiful occasions. His couplets made us relate to the sad-happy occasions of life. He never took a seat in the panch nor did he accept any power or position. But whenever any panch decision was approved by him, the verdict was valued even more.

But, when Punjo’s death broke him down, a state of uneasiness and shudder spread everywhere. How could God test so hard a person whose conduct was nothing but good and honest? His eldest son, now converted to Christianity, was highly respected by villagers. Whenever he visited the village in his red coat and the Bible, everyone very carefully listened to what he had to say. He too urged his father: “Papa, liberate your soul from everything. Accept Christ. He is calling you.” And then Kaka used to gently answer:
“No dear son! The youngest has gone to the army of government and you have joined the army of Jesus. Let me be with my own army. I have one life, one religion. I can imbibe no other life, no other path.”

No counter argument could follow such an utterance and yet, the elder son who came to attend the condolence meet on his brother’s demise, spoke out:

“This is the result of neglecting Jesus!” Then, even in such deep sorrow, the old man cried out loudly:

“Go away, you wicked man! Couldn’t you learn anything better than this? Can an ocean of compassion punish others ever? All your learning is in vain. This is the cycle of life, as rightly said by Kabira. Can you even escape from it? Everyone’s fate has been sealed and better we leave them to it. But, you leave this matter aside and tell me, have you thought of anything for Punja’s four children?”

The eldest did not have any child. Kaka thought he might adopt one or two of them. And if so, the remaining two can be brought up by their mother. But avoiding eye contact, he burst out: “I am living in a jungle. Schooling cannot be arranged there. If you allow, I can manage the boarding of Mission for them.”

“Can’t you afford the bringing up of your own brother’s children? How could you suggest admitting them in the Mission? Do you think of me too as shameless person that you are? This thirty two year old is still alive to look after them.”

And as if testing his words, Punja’s widow, called her father and decided to leave with him, bidding farewell to all.
Even today, that scene hovers before my mind’s eye. The crowd in the Neem Chowk was so huge that it seemed like a fair. Monghi wailed, amidst the group of women; and her father was on the other side, bowing down his head of shame. Some wise women tried to convince her to stay back and not desert her home. “Stay here, foolish woman! Endure for some time. Think of your children and give up the idea. Soon your children will grow up and you will never know where your bad days have disappeared.” But Monghi had gone foolish and numb and her two sons of my age were shading tears ceaselessly. The youngest of them was not allowing her mother to go and eight-nine years old daughter had gone indiscreet. But not taking care of them, she went away abandoning them high and dry. The people there, seeing her, had become stunned as if framed in a portrait. Consoling Maniya, who was two years elder to me, I said: “Don’t worry! Until now, I was the only one without a mother but now you too don’t have one. We are in the same boat now!” When we returned home, Bhavankaka was still there in the same position seated under the same tree. Looking at us, he addressed my father:

“Master, have you heard? Monghi has gone. Now, I need to start my worldly life again. Oh God! What game are you playing with me?”

But Bhavankaka fitted in the new role perfectly. He had donned the role of both a father and mother, for the four children. The hard times passed and the children grew up. A good life for them was ensured. After five years, the eldest Manibhai got a job in the city. After two-three years, he got married and settled down there. He also took all his siblings with him. Ripples of happiness played on the wrinkled face of the old man when he received letters of their welfare. Manibhai often came to look after his grandfather. Every time he entreated Bhavankak to accompany him to the city but he never agreed.
“No dear son, I don’t want to see anything new in this life. My only wish is to count my last 
breaths with whatever I have been till now!”

And yet, a play still remained to be enacted. A son was born to Manibhai’s wife. He rushed 
to Bhavankaka: “Grandpa, come with me to see your grandson and bless him. We can’t go on 
without your blessings. We want you to see and name him.”

Even others insisted: “It’s an occasion of joy. Bhavankaka, Manibhai has no family but you! 
This child is your great grandchild, your ultimate bundle of joy! It’s a fruit of your hard 
work. Go now and return if you don’t like there.”

Seeing a child of his third generation, he went on cloud nine. Manibhai too wanted him to 
stay. He thought that if Bhavankaka got affectionate with his son, he won’t return to the 
village. Hence, every time when the old man would propose to return back, Manibhai found 
some excuse and insisted him to spend a few more days. The old man hated the crowded and 
stagnant urban life like a sin. But he could not move away from the cradle of the child in the 
hope of getting him healthy and fit. He suggested many types of herbal medicines, also 
brought some from the grocery and gave it to the new born baby. Manibhai’s house was 
larger as compared to other houses in the city. Bhavan Kaka’s bed was arranged beside the 
child’s cradle in the verandah. Sometimes when he sang lullabies very beautifully, the 
passersby would be tempted to stop there.

Slowly, the old man started wandering in the city. He went to the river side. And on spotting 
the river, how could he restrict his art and knowledge? He would find and bring home one or 
the other herbal medicine. He didn’t permit any outside drugs for the child under any
circumstances. Gradually, even the child got affected to him. Due to proper care of the great grandfather, the four months old infant became full of beans.

But in those days, the old man got hit by a car. His leg was fractured down the hip. The old age and that too with a plaster! He could not even move a step from his bed and to top it all, he refused to take any other drug besides herbal medicine. “For the whole life, I have treated and cured people with regional herbal medicines and how can I now pollute my own soul? No, I can’t take that medicine!” That is what he kept on saying.

The old man’s illness lasted long. His grand daughter-in-law, Manubhai’s wife’s name was Karuna. It means compassion, mercy and she truly was an incarnation of love and compassion for the old man. Initially, she drew a veil over her face but being in his service all the time, she didn’t care much about veiling her face. She had heard the grandpa’s story from her husband. She had seen through her own eyes a shower of love and affection on her child by the old man. She had become aware of his concern for her child. Whenever the child caught even the slightest cold, he completely devoted himself to his well-being. She was indebted to him for the remedies he had brought along from the village when he came to the city so that she could recover after delivery. Therefore, she absolutely dissolved herself in his service.

But the old man sighed in restlessness: “This is my deathbed, Mana! Please take me to my village. My dear son, please arrange something so that I may die in my own land.”

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1 It is an old Indian social tradition that a daughter-in-law needs draw veil over face in front of father-in-law.
I reached there as soon as I received Manibhai’s letter. Grandfather’s eyes got wet. Taking my hand in his wrinkled hands, he said: “Dear son Jasya! Please convince Mani. Do whatever you wish but bring me to my home in our village. I don’t want to die here.”

“Who will take such intense care of you there? Manibhai is ready to send you home you’re your health is restored. Give him too the pleasure to serve you. Grandpa, please be patient!”

And his real intent got expressed: “Son, the fact is I don’t want anyone to serve me. I don’t want to be dependent on others. The truth is that Mani’s wife is an avatar of my mother. Even my mother may not have been able to take such care of me. I can’t believe that such a young girl like daughter-in-law can have such compassion and mercy. When Monghi went away abandoning these children, she had shaken my trust in women. But, Mani’s wife has won it back. And that’s all. This is what I was supposed to learn and the Almighty has demonstrated it to me. Had I not witnessed it, I might have cursed the world while dying. But now I won’t. My death, my last moments have been saved. I am done here. Now please take me home. I don’t want to die away from my home.”

However, we convinced and reassured him that he would be transferred to his home in the village once he recovered and was able to walk on his own feet. But the bed didn’t allow him to stand on his feet again and his desire to return to the village remained unfulfilled. As per Manibhai’s letter, “One evening, he took his favorite food and went to sleep but never woke up. When we saw in the morning, our grandpa was no more with us. He was entombed with full respect and love.”

We went to the graveyard after the condolence meeting. I could not believe that Bhavankaka lay in the earth. He who was adept to create even human beings from the earth ultimately
merged himself with it. How would he feel if I didn’t let my sorrow flow? And I could not stop myself from yelling. Manibhai’s hand was consoling me with his eyes full of tears!

“It’s not just our grandpa, but our real mother who has passed away! And he has never even taught us to cry!”
Hezal Padamani

When Rudo Hajam, a barber, tall and lean with stout body, with a turban of colorful knitted cloth, embroidered colorful fit jacket, dhoti up to knees, red deep eyes, rings in his fingers, large mustache covering half the face, scarf on one shoulder and a pot glass decorated with cotton threads tied on his wrist came first time in the Neem tree chawk, we, the children, thought of him as Kaadu Makrani. It was a fantastic scene for us. He rested his long walking cane on a pillar. We know not what he was saying to the elders and why had the brave young stocky man gone blench and what imploring before to the members of the panch taking off his turban.

When the wrestlers came to the village they asked for permission for the show and with drumbeats they would announce the show on the decided day. The play would start at ten and the wrestler Ukal would tie a rope on his waist and would challenge all the young men to wrestle with him. “With all due respect, I challenge you to come and drag me even an inch from here if you really have the guts! If so, I would bow down to your youth.”

Sometimes, Bhavaiya (Turi) used to come and beg for permission from the panch for playing Bhavai. Their trumpets and clarions resounded the streets of the village. And they requested with smiling faces, “Respected elders, if you allow, we would play.” They cajoled them to get approval. Those who knew their style of work would chuckle on it.
But, this man, Rudo was neither asking for the wrestling nor for Bhavai as how could he all alone perform any of these? But we could not understand at all why he was begging taking off his turban.

“Methakaka, he seeks our patronage. Give your approval. He has come with hope to you. It might have been destined in the stars. He would get what is spared for him. Why should we decline his request?” Somebody from the panch said.

And Methakaka who was blind since birth ordered: “Listen! There is no barber in the village hence you are welcomed. Now, this is your field of work. You have to dress the hair of all from children to aged. You have to go to the houses of the members of the panch on the specified days. You also have to do other work of the villagers in case of some occasions like marriages or funerals. If you can still spare time, the neighboring villagers are also your customers but you are bound to us. Your first priority should be this village. You cannot change or adopt any other village without our permission. The yearend will be counted on the day after Diwali. Two rupees and twenty five paisa is your fixed hanel. Those who have farms will give you grains and nobody shall pay you less than twenty kilo grains. The Chamars are with us but the Bhangis are separate and don’t touch them!”

And as if accepting each word of the decree, he bowed down on the feet of the members and picked up his turban from earth and put it on.

“But where do I live?”

“Listen all, whose house is vacant and free? Provide it to him. The rent is twelve rupees a year and will be paid by the panch.” Then Rudo settled down in the village. On the very next day itself, he came in the Limbadi Chawk and started his service and many were waiting
there to get their turn for hair cutting. Before that, the people used to help each other in getting their hair cut and shave on their own.

Ruda’s hand was very caring and soft. When his hand was on head, one would feel relaxed and if his hand was on one’s face, one would feel it like a marble. If anyone complained about the lice and nits, he would clutch the head of the child under his knee and would move his razor and within few moments the head would have turned bald. Other children used to tease the bald child. Rudo used to be disliked by the particular child only for that much of time, otherwise he was loved by all.

On evening, all the elders gathered again in the Limbadi Chawk and happily presented him twenty five rupees from the panch fund.

After that evening, Rudo disappeared for fifteen days. And when he returned on a scorching noon, a woman with a long veil was walking behind him making a musical sound from her heavy anklets. On the same evening, she begged to the panch to allow her to live in the village. All the people welcomed his wife warmly filling up her lap with ten rupees as presents and blessings. The news spread among the women who came to welcome the bride that she was the most beautiful woman. Recently in those days, the Turis had performed there a play of Hothal-Padamani and the character Hothal had become very popular among them. The wife of the barber had similar sounding name and beauty of Hezal like Hothal Padamani of the play hence immediately she was turned from Hezal into Hezal Padamani.

Some appreciator tattoo maker had made two tattoos with three petals each around her dimples and one amid her attractive chin. These three tattoos were giving such a beautiful
look to her brisk eyes and curved nose that her alluring charm would prick in anybody’s heart and they would be left unable to forget it anyhow.

After Hezal’s arrival, the youngsters had increased their frequency of shaving and hair cutting. Those who used to get shaved once in a week started visiting Ruda’s house more frequently and used to boast about themselves. While boasting, they used to keep looking towards inner room to ensure whether they were able to create an impression.

Learning the fact that Hezal had gone out to collect firewood, many used to reach there immediately with their hatches and collect and tie up bundle of firewood for her. The eyes of the youngsters chased her when she went at the well to draw water. It is not that she was unaware of their feelings for her but the dazzling beauty never entertained anyone.

Hezal was not gifted only with beautiful appearance but she was also bestowed with a sweet and delightful voice. Hazel got popular in the ceremonial songs like marriage and the festival of Navaratri. As time passed in the night, her throat used to sing melodiously that anybody present there would go romantic. Many ceremonies were celebrated with her songs only. Her voice got others forget their whole day toil. Her art of putting mahendi on hands and designing teeth were most popular among women. She was unique in forming songs on the spot. All the women from young to aged wanted to have her company. She was skilled in dressing hair in various styles. She used to make braid such beautiful which would turn an ordinary looking girl into a princess. Her wheatish complexion would appear fair because of her proper care for her clean-limbed body. Her whole beauty reflected in her walk. In a way, though she was a woman from lower caste but she had become a jewel of the village. Such a precious jewel that anyone would aspire to possess and wear.
But, Hezal was as amour propre as clean-limbed beauty she was. Through her conduct, she had created such atmosphere around her that nobody could even look at her with mischievous eyes. She won’t yield any chance for the youngsters to flirt with her but she used to remain so soft in the conversation with others that nobody could ever misbehave with her. She had always drawn a line even with her peers where there was a free scope of innocent fun but crossing the limits was restricted.

In this hustle and bustle, three years passed of her arrival in the village. She was contented with everything but her only wish to have child was not coming true. She had tried all the cures at her level including various practices of alchemy. No fault on the part of the strong and stout Ruda could be seen and nobody could even think that Hezal could not bear a child. She was trying various available remedies, taking utmost care in the diet, and was always alert to save herself from some type of wizardry. But, at the end of a month, menstruation would not miss its date. Hezal was worried about it and expressed herself to Ruda: “Something has to be done about this. I cannot bear this condition.”

Ruda replied reminding her about his suggestion: “Everything will be alright. You continue the remedies. And you don’t forget what I have said to you in any situation. The Almighty will put it right.”

“But how long should I wait?” she blurted.

“Till the Almighty sends His good wishes. Look at your mother as an example. I get scared off when you start singing.” He complained about her hobby of singing.

“No! Don’t be fool. How can one remain infertile from singing?”
“There is difference in various types of songs. Singing some types of songs badly spoils the condition. Believe me. Whatever happens, even if you are forced, don’t sing, specially, dirge. Your mother. . .” he was cut off by her before he could complete.

“You first leave my mother aside. She had vowed of Bharamal Dada to sing at least seven dirges and that too on the deaths of young persons. But she could complete five only. That is because one cannot wish deaths of youngsters to complete one’s vow. Remaining two dirges have to be finished by me. I would not break the promise given to her in her last moments. In a way, one cannot get pregnant by not singing such songs. Many singers have got their aspirations fulfilled and now even children have been born to their children’s children!”

The man who never lost his temper got worked up and he stroke Hezal with a heavy boot. She tried to protect her face with her hands hence the boot struck against her hands. The bangles of her good fortune broke down with the rattling sound. And she cautioned with shedding tears, “Go to hell! How misfortune am I that you yourself broke my bangles! This is the last time I am warning you. Now, if you will even take my mother’s name on your tongue, you won’t be able to stop me from singing anyhow. The song and the ability to sing is my wealth, bestowed by the Almighty. Your orders will not work in it!”

Hezal stopped obeying her husband from that day onwards as if she vowed to.

After few days of that incident, Rudo required to go to other region and meanwhile the young son of Sava Muliyara passed away only after two days’ of sickness. The wife of the son who had passed away was Hezal’s friend. Both were like two bodies with one soul. While the widow Ratan was lamenting over her loss, Hezal too bust into crying.
The condolence meeting was kept on the third day. As a young man had passed away, many Ratan’s relatives from her parent’s side also came to attend the meeting. Almost hundred of them were women. First the basic rites of the condolence meeting were performed and then came the turn of dirge. At the last moment, the Ratan’s relatives realized that in the remorse for the death of the young son-in-law, they had forgotten to bring with them a person to sing the dirges as a part of the ritual. As it was a very sad death of the young man, anybody could not sing the dirges. It was the belief that if the dirges would not be sung properly, the soul of the dead person would not rest in peace. No wish of the dead should remain unfulfilled and more to it, the singer should be skillful enough. And in the village who else could sing dirges better than Hezal!

Ratan’s father appealed to the panch for help. In such a sad time, panch too granted their need: “Hezal should sing dirges for Ratan’s relatives! And in turn, they will pay her.” At the same time, Hezal remembered Ruda’s heavy boot, his burning eyes and bitter words! Carefully she said to the panch, “I am not allowed by him. He has taken promise to not to sing dirge. I cannot break his words!”

And the atmosphere was infuriated. How could a woman (wife) of a lower caste disobey the words of the panch! They had to simply obey. And the blind member of the panch, Medha ordered: “You have to do what panch asks you to do. Being a woman, you don’t have any right to utter a word against us. Now, you choose between a dirge and a village. If you don’t want to sing, not only you shall leave this village but the entire region!”

There was a pin drop silence for some time. Many youngsters scowled at Metha and some who were not being entertained by Hezal became happy. Ratan looked at her friend. Their
eyes met and before Ratan could urge her, Hezal agreed to sing and the very next moment, Hezal was singing.

*Padhar thaya pardesh ramtila rajaji*

*Tamane kemna te gamya juhar ranamal jodhaji*

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

*Rang molatyuma rat kemni kadhaviji*

*Hu kone re kav vaat, ora avo re paronal,

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

*Kalajade kai kai thay kunvar o kodila*

*Mare hathe me randhya kansar jamava avo re paronal,

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

*Gamata te gana gaish rasiya rangjoddha*

*Tame rizo a vesh hu laish raj mara hadiyana,

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

*Bhavata bhojaniya daish man mara mohi lyo,*

*Nay avo to ruhane jaish rangila rasiyaji,

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

*Ugamana deshni vat sai mari kaheteli*
Kaho chyamana te rakhupatiyavhana vahi gaya,

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

Prane prityuna dor bandhya pataliya

Tari vatyuma vahi gai rat, margho bolyo re parabhatano

‘Lyorejoddha hay... hay...’

[The place has become barren for me without you, oh dear, where have you gone? o warrior! I miss you o warrior!]

How to spend nights in the farms, whom can I share my love with, you come close to me o my guest! I miss you o warrior!

I have deep affection for you oh my love, I have made dishes for you of my dear, I invite you to come! I miss you o warrior!

I will sing the songs you like and wear what makes you happy, oh my sweetheart! I miss you o warrior!

I will cook your favorite dishes, please come and love me. I would not talk to you if you don’t come, o darling! I miss you o warrior!

My friends have been telling me the stories of the north, you tell me, whom I should trust as the time has gone! I miss you o warrior.

I am tied with you with the thread of love; nights have been spent waiting for you, the rooster has crowed! I miss you o warrior!]
Hezal was singing with obstinacy. Her voice with pathetic rasa reached each leaf of the trees. The time has, as if, stopped and desolation had come down on the earth. There was great harmony among the hands being beaten against their chests, the dirge being followed by others and Hezal’s voice. Her voice grew so painful in singing the dirge that it seemed that it was not Ratan’s but her own husband had passed away. The passer byres of even other communities stopped there. The elders were remembering whose commemoration had been so grieved in their entire lives. Those who were spelled by Hezal wished death at that moment so that Hezal would sing a dirge in their commemoration.

*Man na mohya – hay hay*

*Dil na dohya – hay hay*

*Achamach hendya – hay hay*

*Adhavach melya – hay hay*

[Oh my love, oh my sweetheart, you went before me, you left me behind – hay hay]

And by the time the dirge was completed, Hezal went unconscious. The women around her got scared off and clamored. She came to her senses after some long consolation.

When Rudo was told the detail account of the incident on his return from his journey, he just sighed once. He apprehensively stared at Hezal. Hezal felt, “From that day, he has changed. Since then he has neither even smiled at me nor touched me warmly. Whom shall I share my inner pain with?”

Two years passed after that incident but Hezal could not conceive a child. Hence, she too felt that she won’t become mother ever. She felt that the sin of neglecting her husband’s words
was restraining her. But, Ratan did not believe her. She said, “This is the age of medical science. There are many hospitals. Go and see a doctor once. I have heard a lot that if the one who cannot conceive a child goes to doctor and takes medicine, she can have a child. See the wife of Nathakaka’s son could conceive even after seven years. They saw a doctor in Vadodara for diagnosis. You at least get yourself diagnosed to the doctor of our charity hospital.

“I shy to go there. How to narrate the problem to a doctor?”

“Don’t worry! I will come with you. One needs not to be adept in this! Put forward the problem. How can one afford to sweep under the rug?

“I will think about it. I will tell you after consulting him.”

On that day Hezal told about diagnosis to Ruda, “How about getting examined by some doctor? Everybody is insisting for that. Will you please come with me?”

“You have ignored me. You do what you like. Don’t bring me in.”

Mocking out Ruda’s bad mood, she retorted, “But even after visiting a doctor, I will need you to have a child! Why do you start scolding? Am I alone going to have a child?” When the relatives learnt about that incident, they laughed like a silly. But Hezal noted that Ruda did not move even slightest.

When two three months more passed fruitless in that exertion, Hezal determined to visit a doctor.

She along with Ratan went to the charity hospital near to their locality. The young doctor went astounded seeing Hezal’s beauty. “Well taken care body and the three decades
blossoming beauty! It is her who sang the dirge before few days!” thought the doctor. It seemed that the doctor has forgotten her pain and was concentrating on her body only. The observant Ratan realized it and quickly interrupted, “Sir! Looking at her won’t yield anything! She needs to be diagnosed. It has been ten years but she could not get pregnant.”

Recovering himself he replied, “Oh! Is that so? I was looking for the same. But for that we need to go through long diagnose process. The blood and urine need to be tested. Do one thing. Your blood sample will be taken now but you come tomorrow morning to submit urine sample. Then you come again when I call you.”

The blood sample was taken. The urine sample needs to be from the morning urinating only hence it was postponed on the next day. While returning back Hezal expressed her impression of the doctor, “The doctor is very kind because he tests our excretion. Oh my God! I am very embarrassed. I will not come tomorrow.”

Ratan explained the matter to her, “Now, don’t be silly. Tomorrow, I have to go to work for collecting cotton. Don’t worry. You go there and do what he asks to do.”

Next morning, Hezal reached to the hospital with full of anxiety. Taking the bottle from her hand, a compounder said, “Sir has told me to tell you that you should come at two o’clock in the afternoon.”

She reached to the hospital with anxiety of going to get a verdict of murder.

The doctor offered her a chair in his office with a broad smile and affectionately said, “It seems that there is no biological problem. I have checked blood and urine. The report is good. You need not to be worried. Then he inquired about the regularity of periods, food,
work and some general issues. While asking the questions to Hezal, he was laughing to lighten the atmosphere and remove her hesitation. When Hezal started believing him, he completed the dialogue and said, “Good! Come tomorrow at the same time. Still few things need to be examined. Don’t eat anything and bring somebody with you if you are yet scared or shy.”

At last, when Hezal took out money to pay to the doctor, the doctor shot the last arrow of trust to win her. He said, “Please don’t worry about it now. You can pay later. First, let your hopes be fulfilled then I will take whatever I want. And I am sure you won’t mind then. Will you?”

At the end, Hezal has developed full trust on the kindness of the doctor. The image of the doctor smiling while giving hope for good results was not moving away from her mind. She even told Ratan that the God Himself had come down on the earth in form of that doctor. She further added that otherwise such kind human being she had not come across.

When Hezal was floating in the world of imagination for good hope, Ratan brought her back down. “You are right. But have you been given any medicine or not?”

Coming back to her real world, she replied, “No dear! No medicine has been given yet. He has instructed to foment my back at home and has called me tomorrow with empty stomach. He was saying that I should bring somebody with me if I am scared or shy yet. So, Ratan! Will you come with me?”

“Of course I will come with you. But he will not do any harm to you. He will check your tummy and some other parts. What can we understand in this medical diagnose? But since you are calling him kind like God, he will certainly give you a God’s gift like child.”
Neither she knew why Ratan said so nor did she use to think about it. On the next day, when both of them reached to the hospital, the doctor took them in, closed the doors’ of his office and checked Hezal’s belly and other parts. She closed her eyes and kept on feeling the touch of the hands of the person who had given her hope for a child.

After completion of the diagnose process, the doctor said, “The diagnosis yet need to be done further for few more days. You take this medicine now. Take the tablet before meal and come again on Saturday noon.”

Hezal’s fear then started melting. She said to herself, “I need not to fear of the God like doctor. He has given me hope and he will make sure that I conceive a child.”

She went to the hospital alone on the said Saturday. She thought not to disturb Ratan’s wage work frequently. Looking into her eyes, the doctor explained, “Hezal, I have studied your report. I have also shown it to a doctor in the city. There is not fertility problem with you. Hence, I doubt, the fault must be with your husband.”

Listening to his words, Hezal startled. But the doctor put his words more carefully, “I understand your emotional state. How painful it is that one can enjoy all the aspects of life but still devoid of a child. But some of the mango trees can give fruits while some cannot even germinate.”

Hezal was depressed. She was trying to avoid his attention. Then the doctor cunningly suggested, “But still let me examine you one more time.” He brought her in the special room, closed the door and keeping his hand on her shoulder he said, “Sometimes even a healthy and stout man can have some weaknesses. Hence, you have to try on your own. You should take help your young brother-in-law or somebody else. . . however, as I am
medicating you, how about taking my help in this matter too. . .?” Saying so, he seized Hezal against his chest.

On that night, Hezal cried a lot putting her head in Ratan’s lap. She lamented, “I am polluted, Ratan. I have lost my purity. My own body stings me. I cannot live such life. Ratan, what have you done to me?”

But what can Ratan, a widow, do in such conditions other than shedding tears with her. Since then, Ratan had changed. The liveliness of speech and fun had withered. Ratan tried hard to console her but she used to say, “My fate is damned, my belly is damned, my breaths are damned and my whole life is damned! Now, I don’t have any desire for life.”

Her frustration of life killed her enthusiasm. Her beauty had huffed with her and faded away before her age.

On one morning, the villagers came to know that Hezal had disappeared. Rudo who had gone to search for her returned after a month like a defeated soldier. For the sake of reputation, he said Hezal had been to her parent’s home but his hollow tone did not confirm that Hezal was alive.

Nowadays, when it happens to visit the village, only two of the five huge neem trees have remained which used to give shade on the large Limbadi chawk. Whenever I see this chawk, Hezal’s image of playing dandiya-rasa under the shadow of it comes alive in front of my eyes and makes me sad.
Her name was Shamali. Perhaps her name was Shyam, but her wheat colored skin complexion and clean-limbed body made her known as Shymali which means dark skin color. She too did not like if anybody would address her as Shyam. She liked her new name Shamali. One could not take one’s eyes off when she put on a simple but her own distinctly styled cloths on her lean and delicate body.

Her splendid beauty used to actually blossom at the well. She was so exuberant and joyous that everybody present on the well would be laughing. Many liked her company and therefore used to come to the well when she would come there. The well seemed lifeless without her. When she was there making fun, even the work of drawing water from the well used to become joyous. The women never stopped praising her, “Shamali! You draw away our all stress and tiredness.” Nobody, from a child to an elder could escape from her nature of ridiculing. Her sarcasm was as stark as smooth. Her words pierced but never embarrassed anybody. She instructed to the elder women who could not win their husband’s hearts as well as guided to the newly married for how to have happy love life with their husbands. Sometimes she ridiculed a sad unmarried young girl, “Don’t hurry for marriage dear. Marriage is like the distance which lends enchantment to view.” A newly married bride and a young unmarried girl would turn red out of meekness and shyness. When an elderly married
woman asked her for a solution to win her husband’s heart, she made fun of her in such a way that all the present at the well had a belly laugh.

The young girls liked her company desperately. They always wanted to remain around her. Shamali knew well everyone’s wish. She had advice for everyone. She warned even a shrewd person and removed ignorance of a meek.

Her husband was naïve. He wore a knee size dhoti, half sleeve shirt. He had long hair which spread over his shoulders. Above all used to put an unwanted, worn out, black cap on his head and wear a string of beads called kanthi around his neck, and a bracelet of rudraksha on his wrist. He was so ugly looking that everyone felt as if he had been in the competition of being disliked. It was his austere routine to get out of bed early in the morning and to take bath with cold water. Then he would pray to the worn out image of the God kept in the alcove. But he was very laborious man. He could single handedly do work of two persons. He used to do every kind of work of farming. He kept the work of the landlords on lump sum and completed without any delay. He reaped single handedly the bajari of three vigha land and ploughed land alone. The landlords were happy on him and always wanted to give their land for farming to him. He could earn enough to run his household and spend freely. He rarely asked Shamali to accompany him in his work. Otherwise she used to go to his work place in the farm bringing his lunch. Many felt jealous of Bhagat’s fate when Shamali would be going to get him lunch. Everyone wondered for what good deeds Bhagat got such a beautiful wife.

Shamali too was a devoted wife. She loved her not so handsome husband immensely. “My husband is kind and honest like God.” She usually praised Bhagat. “When he goes to the city,
he gets me a sari and a gift of an ornament is sure on the festival of Diwali. He never asks me to go away from him. Even if he senses the people drooling on me, he never distrusts me slightest. He always tells me that he would have liked and loved me as he is now even if I would not have been that much beautiful because, he believes, we are in love since many births. He told me that even if he had not seen me ever before our marriage, he had seen me many times in his dreams. He said how it is possible had we not been together in the previous birth. For such a devoted husband, anything can be sacrificed.’”

Her satisfaction and enthusiasm for her good fortune overflowed in her narration in such a way that the ugly looking Bhagan used to turn out to be a nice and handsome man for all others and therefore became the reason for their jealousy. At such moment, if Bhagat with his awkward outfit appeared while returning from farm, some jocular woman would immediately throw an arrow of sarcasm, “Bhabhi, See, the king of your heart!” Afterward all present at the well looked at Bhagat so anxiously as if they had been seeing Bhagat first time in their lives. But Shamali retorted without being shy, “Ya, dear sister-in-law^1! He is my king like Radha’s Kana. When you get married, compare him with your husband and if you find him even slightest lower in merit, I will give my life to you.” Listening to her immediate retaliation, the whole well would laugh so mad that the sister-in-law would be put to shame and pity.

Every woman coming to the well used to come with their grief. Somebody’s husband might have been drinking hard while some other’s husband might have developed a bad habit of gambling. Somebody might have got addicted to lewdness or some other might have gone on the path of some other vices. No problems or secrets remained hidden at the well.

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^1 In Indian villages, it is the practice that a daughter-in-law addresses the girls of the village as ‘sister-in-law’. 
Everybody’s case used to be discussed there without worrying about their social reputation. The women opened up their hearts there spontaneously. They consoled themselves by sharing with and supporting each other. A humiliated woman who might have been beaten by her vexatious husband would be supported, consoled and even taught how to retreat at the well. A woman being harassed by her mother-in-law was also instigated to react to it at that ghat of the well.

As per my knowledge and experience, the proverb “if four women gathers, they even destroys happy families” proved wrong at the well. Here, not only four but fifty-to-sixty women used to gather for all the time of a day to draw water and share their joys and sorrows. At the well, I had listened to many such stories personally wherein the broken relations had been recovered; the newly married women had been given hopes for happy married life by the advices of being patient and tolerant. Many times, I had felt that the well didn’t only provide water for our homes but also the love and affection which maintained gaiety in our lives. The affection among us had been knitted as strong as the ropes to draw water. Even if our houses were away from one another, a day’s hard labor work used to break our bodies but all the gathered at this well used to get so light and happy that their tiredness would be forgotten and the bleak picture of life used to turn out to be auspicious and celebratory.

All the women always gathered with one call on the occasions of the festival of Navaratri for playing Garaba or singing songs on the marriage ceremonies. More to their enthusiasm for all such celebrations, the actual cause for participation was the harmony and bond created through the conversations at the well.
Our well remained busy for all the time of a day. Many times it happened that we two, I and Shamali, only remained till the end in the morning. She used to be on the east side of the well and I on the west side of the well. She did not require drawing much water. They hardly required eight brass vessels of water for two of them. She used to pour a pot or two into the plant of Tulasi in their front yard and a pot or two into the earthen basin kept on the parabadi for birds. She always helped to the tired for drawing water.

One day, it so happened that she immediately and dreadfully came back from her home after going from the well with her last round of water. Her face was reflecting news about somebody’s arrival and her eyes were covered with fear. She rushed to me when I was drawing water and saying, “Let me help you”, started dragging the rope.

She was perspiring even though it was a cold day. Her heart was beating so fast that I could hear the beats while dragging the rope. She came very close to me as she wanted to abate her fear by embracing me. When the water was drowned, she, holding my shoulders, requested.

“Dear brother, will you please accompany me up to my home?”

“Why Bhabhi? What help do you need?”

“I want to get a letter written.”

“But you are educated.”

“I can read but not well at writing. And I want some other help also.”

“But I still have to draw four more vessels of water.”

“That both of us can complete within two rounds but then you please come with me.”
When we reached to her home, some stranger was waiting for her anxiously. Seeing her he quickly remarked.

“Up to what you will keep on escaping Shyam! I will not leave you without taking revenge. If you don’t want to spoil your life, you agree with my demand! Why have you brought him with you?” and turning towards me he asked me, “Who are you? Go away now.”

Without answering him, Shamali led me in her house and slammed the front door quickly and addressed me.

“Don’t worry! The black hat will go away after sometime”

The intruder shouted from outside, “This is not good. I want to tell you few things Shyam! Open the door.”

She replied, “You, devil, go away. If you will shout like this, others will also come and you won’t be in position to escape then.”

“I will not move from here without eating kansar of made by you. One should not shun one’s parental relatives.”

“You are not my parental relative. You, devil, are my nemesis. Don’t you even shame on yourself for harassing a girl. You will rot out.”

The dispute ran for some long time. The man was outside hence was speaking softly but Shamali had gone red in the house like an annoyed lion. In her one room mud house, a half wall was erected to separate a space for kitchen. The room was pack from all the four sides and only two-three small squares of net were kept at the top of the wall for light and air. The
main door was closed hence the room was dark even in the day light. I was worried. I could not follow the dispute and the darkness was scaring.

As Shamali’s angry voice kept on rising, the other’s voice decreased slowly. And at last, he left warning her, “I am going now. But you will not be happy. Don’t come to me when you repent over this.” I climbed on the container of wheat and looked outside from the square net going him away. Then, I followed him up to the village entrance and returned to confirm to Shamali that he had gone. When I returned to her, she was still scared.

“Who was he?” I inquired.

“He was from my parental village.”

“Then he should be treated as a guest. Why did you get scared of him?”

“You can’t understand this. But you stay here for some more time. What if the devilish comes back?”

I understood the context as time passed. That man was a rogue form her village. He had polluted many girls’ chastity. He was drooling for her. He thought a kittenish Shamali won’t remain devoted to her naïve husband. Therefore, he had thought to plan some tricks when she visited her parent’s home which will turned into her divorce. Whether Shamali could be married again somewhere else or not but he could get chance to take her benefits. In those days, it was the tradition not to let go if anyone even looks at an unmarried girl, such a man won’t be spared. If the need would arise, the panch would even excommunicate such person. But it was hard to settle again for a girl who had returned with huff from her in-law’s home and caught in any such flirtatious act.
But Shamali was Shamali, not an ordinary girl. She proved herself a devoted wife. Many in the village also had opined that Shamali won’t stay long with a callow Bhagat and even if he is naïve he could not uphold a beautiful wife like Shamali. Many have witnessed the pitiable conditions of those who had alluring wives. But God knows how Shamali fell in love so intensely with naïve Bhagat that she immediately came back to her in-laws on her second *aanu.* And once, she entered in the life of Bhagat, she almost remained as the better half of his life. Newly married daughters-in-law used to visit their parents on the occasions of festivals and other. But Shamali never went back as if she had forgotten her parents and her village. Her all the celebrations of the festivals and pilgrimage she found in Bhagat only.

On the other side, the rouge was still occupied with the idea of Shamali. Neither he could submerge his ego nor could he act on it. He inquired about her further and learnt that she hardly went out in the farm and Bhagat always remained poured with work in the field. Hence, once he dared to come even to Shamali’s home to talk to her personally and to take even an advantage of the situation if he could. It was a busy morning. Everybody had gone on their work. Only some children and few aged were in the locality. When Shamali reached her home with a vessel of water from the well, the rouge was there in the verandah. Shamali could quickly read the lust which was playing in his eyes. Even before she could empty the vessel, the rouge entered in her house and closed the door behind quickly. Shamali grasped the situation. Before the rogue could play any trick on her, she banged the vessel on his face. Before he could recover from the blow, she opened the door and rushed to the well.

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2 There is tradition of two *aanu* in some of the communities wherein, after marriage, on her first *aanu,* the bride comes to her in-laws for few days only and returns to her parent’s home. Then, after few month, on her second second *aanu,* she come gain to her in-laws forever.
Now, bringing me with her, she came back to home as there was risk at home and the rouge could go to any extent. What Shamali was saying and the swollen face of the rogue were evident about his vices and therefore he ran away from there. Otherwise he won’t have left before the time of Bhagat’s arrival and Shamali would have required to prepare meal for him due to the social hegemony as he was from her village. Shamali was clutched in the dilemma as she could not even tell the true thing to Bhagat in the fear of quarrel.

But the rouge also determined to spoil Shamali’s peaceful life. On the very fifth day from that incident, he planned a ploy and complained in the panch, “She has misappropriated my money. She was my mistress. You send her with me or I will pour kerosene or dump a dead dog in the well. Some wise man put that news to the attention of Bhagat. Bhagat filled with aghast and stood stunned. Shamali realized his gloomy state of mind. She narrated the whole incident from the first and kept me as witness.

The next week, kerosene was poured in the well by some anonymous and many blamed Shamali for their personal vengeance. In such situation, the panch used to take over the situation. The panch used to search for the guilty or call and demand explanation from those whose names had been involved in the matter. In those days, answering to the accusations of the panch in public was itself a punishment. If it had been a girl, her parents used to be punished and scolded severely for her having an affair, “Keep your children in control. Get them married before they become lavish.” Such rebuke in public gave shame up to the extent of dying out of it. It was even harder, had the accused been a daughter-in-law. Her husband’s life then would get barren. He would be warned, “Throw her out. You don’t have courage to control your wife and run your married life.” The panch used to go to such extent only in
extreme cases. In that too, some wise men remained there to explain the situation and customs.

The whole locality was in shock when the calamity fell on Shamali. Shamali too didn’t come out for days. The families had become alert about having assembly of the panch on Shamali’s issue. There was hardly any woman in the community who did not believe that Shamali was innocent and didn’t love Shamali. The decision of the panch used to be taken by few elders but all the men of the locality used to participate in the meeting. Even in those days, there had been democratic atmosphere of free expression of opinions. The so called naïve women’s intellect took its sufficient benefit. Without any promotion or planning, their sympathy and love for Shamali worked as game changer. Those women who had some command in their families chided their husbands, “Today, Shamali has been accused but tomorrow any one of us can be accused. Why should we suffer when some rogue intentionally want to spoil our reputation. If even a husband doesn’t protect us then how can we be saved? You don’t remain dumb in the panch meeting. It won’t be good for you, if Shamali will be called in the panch meeting.

The barber Rudo was panch’s summoner. He was also alerted by his wife Hezal: “If Medhakaka asks you to summon, at least open your mouth and say few true things to him. It is a matter of Shamali’s reputation. She is not a characterless woman. We know her completely from her head to heel. Tell them to prove the rights and wrongs and insist to search the person who has created this vengeance trick. One should not accuse somebody’s daughter-in-law on any baseless matter.”
That self generated enthusiasm worked magically. The idea to call the *panch* meeting became weak. A postman lived in the village. He found out the village from where the letter was posted from the stamps on it. Apparently, Bhagat did not have any friends but everybody felt so sympathetic for Shamali’s problem that all the members of the locality were anxious about it as well as felt hatred for the rogue. Shamali’s one of the close friends could understand her true condition. She talked to her husband about it. Her husband was brave and stout. His mind worked creatively and fast in critical circumstances. He and his friend approached one of the rogue’s friends and sent a message on Shamali’s name.

“Don’t create havoc. Life is not going to end now. We can meet and pour our hearts out if you come on a particular day.”

To recognize him in the lonely barren place, he took me with him on Shamali’s suggestion. We had a foot track up to Bhalej station from our village. On that foot track, away from the village, there was a frightening place called “Joganiyana Jara” which looked dark even in the full day light. We three reached there. Around even in the morning the rouge was coming with the desire to have her in his control. Pointing at him, I recognized him and hid myself behind a *pipal* tree.

“Where are you going?” The stout one of the two asked ironically.

“I am going this way only.” He replied.

“Who do you want to see?”

“I am going to meet Bhagat. I have some work with him.”
“Then come here. Let’s finish the work here only.” Saying so, Rana gave first blow and the rogue fell down. He was scared but was courageous enough to get up again and fight back. But how much could he fight against two brave and sturdy men! After some time, those two were reprimanding as well as assailing him.

“You, block head! You are playing with the chastity of our village’s daughter-in-law and above it, playing vengeance tricks. Let’s satisfy all your cravings today!” And he was beaten repeatedly by the sticks. While he protected himself from one, the other will strike heavily. When he turned on this side, the other hit from the other side. Both were beating him heavily saving his head. The lecherous was sobbing and requesting to forgive him but nobody else was there to listen to him. When grabbing an opportunity, he tried to run away, a flinging stick beat him to the ground. One of the two held him tight and forced him to take footwear into his mouth. And he was taught a life time lesson. Meanwhile, the stout of the two thought, “Come with us in the village and confess against the panch that you are the guilty lecherous one.”

The injured and half dead rogue readied to come along with us out of fear but his steps were resisting. And the malevolent at last realized the situation and showed some wisdom. He beseeched.

“Please listen to me. I will certainly be declared guilty but you think of Shyam. When I will be presented to the panch in public, it will stain Shyam as well. Let me go. I will never come in this region ever!”
“It’s ok. We are letting you go now. And share a bidi if you have any. The rogue took out a bundle of bidis. Almost all had been smashed in the thrashing. Few were in good condition. Taking these bidis, he was again warned at the end.

“We are from Chehariya village. If we find you doing any malice again, we will come to your village and tech you a lesson again. Understood?”

He went away with his bowed head. And in the excitement of the victorious act, they both gradually started dispute. “Nobody can dare to challenge us. We have cracked down on the scoundrel. Jasya, you judge ‘who among us is braver?’”

I was put into dilemma. Whose wrath should I invite? I tried to save myself, “Dungarbhai, you are really a brave man. Your one blow threw the man on ground. And Danabhai, you reined him so forcefully, that he had to take a shoe in his mouth. But don’t you know that somebody from our own community had helped the malevolent to pour kerosene in the well as well as create the vengeance trick against Shamali? Why don’t you find him out?” And, relieving me, the dispute of bravery turned to that subject. The whole village enthralled on the two braves.

Shamali’s fate of doom passed away without hurting her but since that incident, she withered so, that she could never blossom again. Her enchanting chats at the well went silent. She would talk and laugh with others but only when it was inevitable. Her bewitching eyes started shading indescribable pain.

The rogue’s act became misfortune and surrounded her from all the sides. After a year or so of that incident, one day, Shamali was going to get Bhagat a lunch in the farm. A wild male-buffalo had arrived in the range of the village from nowhere. It used to get angry at the sight
of a red cloth or woman. But there was no fear of him in the farm side area hence Shamali was going to the farm relaxed. A girl from her neighborhood was with her. When they were about to reach their farm, an amok male-buffalo suddenly appeared as her misfortune. He attacked them fiercely, roaring and shaking the earth with his front legs. Seeing him, Shamali screamed making all the directions shake and ran away picking the little girl on her head. Listening to her screams, panic ran through Bhagat’s vein. He ran towards them picking up a rake. When they found no option to save themselves, Shamali struck the buffalo with the big basket of lunch. The basket got stuck in his horns and being more ferocious, he ran towards Shamali like a demon. The little girl screamed out of fear and fell down rolling for a while. She was about to be crushed by the beast but Shamali thrashed him. Bhagat arrived there when the buffalo picked her up with his horns and threw her in the air. He immediately smashed the rake on his head. But how much effect can a rake make to a stone like head of the buffalo? The rake broke into pieces and the beast attacked Bhagat. Bhagat fell down with the first blow only. But somehow he managed to save himself from the fatal blow of his head and pulling himself together, he caught his horns. Meanwhile, listening to the screams, yells and calls, other farmers rushed there. When injured Bhagat was helped to get up, he was almost obliterated. His left leg had fractured from knee and left hand had broken from shoulder as well as three ribs close to chest had been cracked.

Bhagat remained in the hospital for four months. Shamali took his care earnestly. She sold her golden ornaments and also spent the savings in his treatment. After some time, Bhagat recovered but could not regain his fitness again. His body was drained of all energy and his stout body lost all his strength of hard work. All his responsibilities were taken over by Shamali. The situation was so ironic that it seemed as if Bhagat was demanding reward for
all the comforts he had given to her. But Bhagat’s hard working conscience could not accept it. He who was always ahead of others in any work, could not accept the condition wherein Shamali harvested millet and he reaped it. He was so embarrassed of his incapability that he felt his life had become poisonous for him. Neither he was talking to anybody nor laughing. Shamali used to complete reaping a bed ahead of all to show her skills to Bhagat and to confirm him for a good life. But, Bhagat could not see into her eyes out of embarrassment when Shamali used to sit beside his plough. His face used to fade and eyes used to get wet. At that moment, Shamali’s whole enthusiasm used to get receded. When all the workers used to take lunch-break and have fun, Bhagat’s sadness used to turn the atmosphere gloomy.

To avoid Bhagat’s helplessness, Shamali insistently stopped taking him with her on agriculture labor work. But, being a hard worker, how could he rest even at home. He used to do some or the other household work. He drew water from the well, even though Shamali had requested him, many a times, not to do so. And once, the vibrant well itself turned fatal for him. One day, when he was drawing water at mid day, the rope shredded and he lost his balance with the jolt of the rope and he first fell on the raised parapet and from there, into the well. Uproar of lamentation spread around. Four men went down into the well. He was taken out as early as possible. But by the time, Shamali’s fortune had gone crippled.

Shamali’s lamentation, Bhagat’s funeral and all other things were so dejecting that the memories of that time make me cry even today. Seeing gleeful Shamali enveloped in the widowhood, the people went appalled. Her friends helped her to be alive but that was not the Shamali but her lifeless shadow. Not only was her good fortune obliterated but also of the well.
When she first time came to the well after Bhagat’s death, pin drop silence spread over the well. The other women who were drawing water went frozen when they saw Shamali, stunned, was looking deep into the well to receive a call from Bhagat from the ‘bood bood’ sound the vessel was making while sinking into the water. Keeping her hand on Shamali’s shoulder Hezal had consoled her, “If you too are thinking of giving your life after Bhagat, then you will not meet Bhagat even in the next birth. His soul will be contented only if you live after him in his memories.”

And Shamali decided to live perhaps only with that desire. I feel betrayed and burdened when I call her drudgery a life which she is desiderating since last three decades.

If you see an old, helpless woman, coiled from her waist, with wrinkled skin and broken specs with the arms wrapped with a thread, surprise you about the ugly condition of an old age yet caressing a worn out tomb at around hundred steps distant from the well, under a banyan tree you believe that it must be none other than our Shamali!
I had never seen a cremation in my life. Once in my childhood, I had got scared seeing a burning funeral pyre. Since then, my heart misses a beat even today whenever I remember the scene of the funeral pyre. But still I felt like being its eyewitness. I have endured the sorrowful blows of inhumation. Perhaps, therefore, I was always concerned about the emotional state of a person while preparing a pyre for the person’s dear one, setting fire to it, and seeing one’s own dear one melting with the panchmahabhoot. Once, I too happed to be in the same situation. But the incident came to me in such a way that it set fire to my whole body.

In the October of 1956, a message came to our School of I P Mission from a nearby hospital.

“An unclaimed dead body of a man needs to be brought to the crematorium. His religion is Hindu. Arya Samaj has agreed to provide woods but they don’t have men. Will you kindly take this responsibility?” The principal shared the message with us in the class. We around eight students showed willingness for that. When we reached to hospital, they provided a stretcher and exclaimed, “Why are you very few!”

Four-five male nurses handed us a dropsy, swollen and demonic size bloated dead body. We realized the nurses’ exclamation when we arranged the dead body on the stretcher which was too small for him and pull it on our shoulders. The dead body was so heavy that it bruised our
shoulders and we required to change our sides again and again. We experienced the funeral process truly by the time we reached crematorium.

One among us was Brahmin. He was guiding us with his knowledge of the sacred religions rites hence our any mistake didn’t become obstacle in the late person’s journey towards moksha. He said, “I don’t believe that the hospital staff would have bathed the body. And we will be damned if we cremate the impure body hence first we should bathe the body.”

Nobody opposed his opinion in the desire of earning God’s grace. We took him to a close lake. We pulled the body up and took it into deep water as it was muddy in the swallow water. The Brahmin friend was chanting something in Sanskrit as well as bathing the body. By the time, I could help; the dead body slipped out of their hands and went deep down in the water. We became despondent. Only we could understand the pain in diving in the water immediately, finding and bringing out the dead body. We could not have found the dead body, had our brave friend Bhikhu not been with us. We would have drawn the body instead of cremation.

I got shocked to see a tattoo of Hanuman and a name at the feet of the image on the right arm of the dead when we were arranging the body on a pyre. What to talk about the Almighty who weaves life’s wafts with the wefts of circumstances!

The pyre was burning with huge flames. The unclaimed and unidentified dead body was melting in it. It was difficult even for fire to melt the body due to the liquid pouring out of the dropsy body. My friends got teased for keeping the fire up with hard efforts and I was agonizing to unravel the mystery of the letters of the tattoo in the flames. Far on the horizon, setting sun created a red bright circle. The flames of the pyre turned into the flames of the
oiled tatters tide around a ring and one figure was coming out of the ring and earning applauds from the group of spectators.

He was Ukko Malla! His name ‘Ukkamal’ was inked at the feet of Hanuman in the tattoo. Years before, I had seen that tattoo on his muscular hand. His name in the tattoo had made us crazy. His each performance used to captivate us. But on that day, he was playing his last performance on the pyre against my bewildered eyes. He was embracing the flames as enthusiastically as he used to perform the various acrobat acts.

My friends were repenting, “Who this poor guy may be? He must have done some good deeds so that he has this fortune of cremation even in this countryside.” I have personally seen his virtuous deeds. But the acquaintance I had with him was useless to produce here.

The Brahmin friend was chanting, “The soul cannot be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor can it be burned by the fire” and my memories, crossing all the time and places, reached to my childhood playground with the company of Ukkamal.

The month of Posh had gone back with its heavy cold waves and we were engrossed in the game of jumping over a cart in the smooth sunshine of Maah month. And there arrived a man with the decorated bullock cart who was being followed by his community group.

Before we could come out of the surprise of the arrival of a new man and gather around him, he jumped over the cart, came to us and said,

“This is how it should be jumped over, my dear brother! Now you please go and call Medhakaka. Please tell him that Ukko Malla has come and waiting for his permission to encamp here.”
We rushed. The old man Medho was the head of the community. He was blind hence always used to remain at his home. In the panch assembly too, he would come after all the members would have arrived. No decision could be taken in his absence. He was a man of angry temperament like Rishi Durwasa. But, listening Ukkamal’s name, he smiled and came to the Limbadi chawk as we led him.

Ukko bow down to his feet out of reverence and requested, “Please allow us to encamp here!”

“You are going to rule over our hearts and still you are asking for permission? Say, for how many days you want to stay here?”

“First day for rest, second day for your obligation, third day for our performance, the fourth day for sharing love and memories and fifth day for good bye. We won’t stay here more than these days.

“Ok! You are allowed to stay. Inform Ruda to call the panch assembly tomorrow night.” He returned saying so and while relieving bullocks from the cart Ukkamal started singing aloud,

My lord Krishna won the battle,

He brought an end of Kans’ arrogance,

He lost his life due to his malign acts,

His was not bravery but hollow act.
It was Ukkamal’s practice that he would not encamp in any village without permission of the head of the panch. Many a time, if the panch was not willing, if there was some disagreement among them, or if some youngster had passed away then the Turi won’t be allowed to play Bhavai and the actors would not act. But he always used to speak straight, “I shall encamp here only if you permit.” He would not stay in the village where there is any disagreement about him. He would leave the village immediately and never come back to that village again. In the whole region, he was being respected as the way he was popular as an acrobat. The Turis and the actors used to address the people as ‘Bapa’ (father) and gaining respect in return but Ukalo never addressed anybody as ‘Bapa’. He used to address the elders as ‘kaka’ (uncle) with due respect and ‘Bhai’ (bother) to his peers. He liked more to be addressed as ‘Ukkamal’ or ‘Ukaji’ than ‘Ukabhai’. His community fellows used to address him as ‘Ukaji’ with due respect. Turis’ mode of expression was little bit naughty. They addressed the women of the village as ‘Bon’ (sister) and ‘Fui’ (aunty) and learnt about the newly married daughters-in-law’s natures. And if they got an opportunity, they would even reveal the secrets about them. But, Uklo was different from them, his clan always behaved with respect.

They encamped outside the dharmashala in the wide open ground. They rested there in their cots or the borrowed charpoys. Their women used to sew small quilts and asaniyas of colorful rags with a long veil on their faces. Sometimes they used to make a peacock on the bed sheets with the stitches of colorful threads. The beautiful designs and perfection in the stitches used to surprise everybody. The youngsters used to look at the faces behind the veil more than the art. But, Ukkamal warned them at the very beginning, “Look brother! There is the border around our camp. You don’t cross it and don’t stare at our women. If you behave respectfully, we too will pay respect to you!”
Their women cooked delicious khichadi for lunch and beg dinner from the locality. They won’t spare the one who might have given stale food or not well cooked.

Sometimes, when they would have mood, their drummer Pitambar would play a dhol and Ukko and his companions would sing duha-soratha. The youngsters would applaud them.

On the third day evening of their arrival, they started their performance. People didn’t go on work on that day or those had gone retuned early. The hero of the whole performance was Ukkamal. Stories about his skills and performance used to be told like mythologies. He knew well to fascinate people among other magic tricks. At the beginning of the performance, he worshiped Hanumanaji and collected lot of edible oil on His name. To inaugurate the show, he demanded a coconut from a nearby shop. He surprised the people by showing them a coconut with dripping blood instead of water. After offering the bowl in which the blood was collected, he went to some elder spectator and said, “Uncle, take this. It is a coconut of the shop of your village. Take the water.” The uncle got perplexed. Ukkamal emphasized further and, addressing him as ‘dear’, told that he could not take anything which was of the village and therefore he was offering it to him. When he pressed the uncle more to sup the water, the spectators too got shocked as the blood of the bowl had turned into sweet coconut water with few particles of husk.

“Give it me! You cannot do it.” Saying so, he took it back and started pouring it from above into his mouth. While pouring into his mouth, the liquid seemed pure water to the spectators but the last sip turned red again.

Ukkamal pierced his companions tongue, passed a thread through it and then challenged the youngsters to come forward and drag the thread. The person who was drawing the thread got
tired but the thread kept coming out endlessly. And the exhausted person could get free only after paying quarter and a rupee. From the same coin he produced many coins and threw them towards the elders by dragging their attention to catch it. The elders saw the coins while they were being thrown from Ukkamal’s hand but, to their great surprise, when they caught the coins, the coins had turned into either marble balls or toy tops or a round shaped stones!

Again he said while laughing, “Uncle, I have given a one rupee coin to you in the presence of this huge crowd. And why should I take back a stone now?” And the elders happily gave him one rupee coins.

Ukkal had purchased five foot long and thick pole the previous day from a timber shop. He fastened a thick a handle amid it. During the performance, he brought it on the stage with the help of few youngsters. Then, with the rhythm of a dhhol being played in the background, he squatted and took the handle in his mouth and throw away behind his back. He picked up hot balls from a brazier with his teeth and threw it in the nearby small water pit. The spectators went stunned when the hot balls released steam with sizzling sound. Hefty Ukkamal could jump across a frame stuck with sharp knives from inside and so narrow that only one’s head could be passed through. There won’t be even a slight bruise or cut on his body. There was a metal rod ring of the size of bicycle tyre with the oiled rugs tied around the edge. Flames were coming out of the ring. Ukkamal passed through the ring, first time, with his head first and the second time he took a somersault and passed through the burning ring with this legs first. The astounded people appreciated him with applaud. He accepted the gifts with smile and his companion drummer Pitambar asked for money. The astounded people completed their demands. Then came the height of Ukkamal’s skills.
There were six age old huge neem trees. There was long distant of around fifty gaj between two opposite neem trees. Ukko got a rope tied strongly around twenty to thirty feet up from the earth. He examined the knots and then he tied some support on the rope. He took a bamboo pole given by his companions into his hands and walked on the rope straight as well as upside down on the rhythm of a drum. The people’s necks would pain from looking up but still kept on staring at him with surprise. The dancers used to play dhol wonderfully. The drummer Pitambar was Ukkamal’s closest friend. Ukkal’s play won’t be effective and interesting without his dhol. Ukkam’s art won’t sprout without his words. Pitambar was master of oratory. The performance being played and the actors performing in it would come alive on his tongue. His words would stun one’s mind and heart so much that one would loss one’s awareness. The eyes of the spectators would keep on wishing good luck to high soaring Ukkamal and ears would be immersed in the rhythm of the dhol. Walking reverse with his face in the opposite direction, he suddenly threw away the bamboo pole when he reached amid the rope and, making all the spectators restless, jumped high in the air and hanged back on the rope. The people went perplexed and Pitambar, addressing one of the elders, said:

“O… Dayakaka! Ukkama’s soul has stuck in your dhoti. Now, say, whether you want to make him happy by giving a piece of cloth or he should dive from there.” While Dayakaka was hesitant to give a fifteen-twenty rupees loincloth, the drummer added: “If he will fall from there, he would directly enter into heaven but his soul would remain in your dhoti. Then you won’t be able to put it on.” And Dayakaka nodded to give a new dhoti. When Pitambar started jumping out of pleasure, Ukalo released his hands and hanged upside down with his legs and his heart craved for Madhakaka’s Doubleghoda Boski cloth. He too said happily, “It is given, take it.”
During the performance itself, Pitambar would indicate what and how much would be paid as *dakshina* by singing a song.

Various types of people I came across in various villages,

But, Ukkamal is the only one in the wide spread Charotar,

Wealthy and generous villagers grace the villages,

They are good enough to take care of our wishes

They appreciate us like a king and respect the hero,

We too will take enough gifts from these generous people.

After learning the amount of *dakshina* and to please above hanging Ukkamal, the drummer would encourage him singing a song on the beats of *dhol*.

The people who were mentioned in the poem were wealthy as well as fops. They had to give the gifts on the next day of the performance. The amount could not be less than five rupees and a quarter. After the names of the people he thought of were announced, Pitambar changed the rhythm of his *dhol*. Ukkamal who was still hanging on the rope with his feet swung himself and clutch the rope with his hands. He started dragging himself with the rhythm of the *dhol* and reached to the need tree. There, jumping like a monkey from one branch to another, he reached to the top of the tree within few jumps and, astonishing all the spectators, he performed some acrobat moves there and came down within a moment. He put an earth on his head as a sign of respect, bowed down to all the spectators and winded up the performance towards the evening. Somebody voluntarily invited them for dinner of *ladoo*
and the panch too gave dakshina of 101 rupees willingly. At first, Ukkamla didn’t accept it and then the panch added more rupees increasing it up to 125 rupees.

His performance of that day was being watched by a citizen of Mumbai. He was born there in Mumbai but had affection for his forefather’s land. When Ukkamal lied down on a bed after getting free from dinner and other things, he reached to him. Offering him a cigarette, he said, “Ukkamal, I want to talk to you.”

In the same position of lying on the bed Ukkamal responded, “Please say!”

“First, you at least take this cigarette.” The other man said.

“No, brother! I haven’t developed such bad habits. The lungs should be strong for our play of heavy energy. One should not make it weak by smoking.”

“So, you don’t take wine or anything?”

“Don’t even talk about it, brother. In our community, those who developed such addictions have lost the strength of the play as well as lost their wealth and health both. Towards the end of his life, my father used to take opium but while teaching me this art, he told me: “This art can be learnt and developed with healthy body only. Don’t even make habit for tea.” Since then I am keeping his words and therefore have learnt better art than him.”

From that conversation, I came to know that he was very vigilant about his diet also. He used to get millet grinded at his own hand-mill at home and used to take five rotala with vegetable. He didn’t use to take very spicy as well as non-vegetarian food. He used to beg milk from the villagers and people too liked to give him. People used to churn buttermilk specifically for him. He used to exercise in the early morning as well as run on a trail for a
kilo-meter or two. Sometimes, when, in a light mood, he used to come to the main parapet and, holding a stick in his hand, challenge youngsters, “Those who can relieve this stick will get two rupees on the spot.” Around four to five persons together tried to relieve the stick but in vain.

Smoking the last butt of the cigarette, the person of Mumbai said, “See Ukkamal, I have seen many successful circuses in the cities but I haven’t seen dexterity like you. Nobody can beat you. Believe me and join some circus. You will earn popularity and money both and you won’t need to beg like this.”

“Do you call our work begging?” Ukkamal quickly got up. “This is our right. They are our customers since ages. Once in a few years we entertain you and, in return, rightfully take whatever we are entitled to. Neither we flatter the people nor do you give anything unwillingly. Whatever you offer to us is offered willingly. We are not under your obligation. We pour our life spirit in the performances.”

“You are right but still circus has many more benefits. You can earn popularity and also roam the entire country. You may get an opportunity to visit foreign land if you will come to the notice of some big circus. Above all, you will get good salary as per your demand. Otherwise, here, your whole dexterity is being wasted.”

“How many people are there? Have you even counted them?” Ukkamal asked him a question. And then he himself answered the question, “Not less than twenty five people are being nourished from this. Moreover, the support is also being extended to the old aged and helpless people. Many people before you had talked to me about joining a circus. Even if I
get salary, I alone can live comfortable but what about all these?” Ukkamad answered his question.

“Are! You don’t worry! You will get enough money to nourish even more than these people. You will get ascendancy once you earn reputation, money, experience, and then you can start your own circus.”

“So you are telling me to sell my skills? Never! Art dies when used in a business, dear brother! This is our ancestral gift. And nobody will even come close if they will come to know about my caste *Mal*. Please, don’t show me stars in a day light. We are good and happy however we are!

“Oy! Listen! Nobody sees one’s caste in the city. As you are adept in this art, caste won’t be barrier to you. I want to popularize your art. Once you will get true appreciators of your art, you too will realize its power.”

“No, dear no! I don’t have any such aspirations. Let it go. Why are you seeding such desires?”

“See! I have advised you the right things. Now, whenever you feel like, you can come to me at Mumbai, this is my address. I will help you.”

That conversation ended there. On the fifth day, they collected their gifts and Ukkamal’s group left the village. We had gone after their cart for two-three kilometers to bid them farewell.

After that, years passed. The world changed. Those who were considered to be the appreciators of Ukkamal’s and his companions’ art came under the influence of the Mission.
Those who started believing in Mission had been turning back their faces from the *Turi-Targara*, and *Mal-Mangan*. It was then believed to be sinful for the so called developed community to enjoy *Bhavai*. The golden days of generosity were forgotten and Ukkal’s good time started sinking down.

Whenever I watched other circuses, it reminded me of Ukkal. The other performances were nothing compared to Ukkal. My eyes used to search for Ukkamal in the acrobat paying on the high rope and my interest used to fade away.

One day, accidently, I ran into Pitambar. He was tired and returning from a mill. I recognized him from his walk, his eyes, and the black birthmark on his forehead. Going straight to him, I affectionately rapped on his back and asked, “Hello Pitambarbhai, can you recognized me?”

“Who are you, brother! Truly speaking, I don’t recognize you.” It was true what he said. How could he remember my name and face? When I was eight or nine, we used to surround him out of curiosity but how could he remember my childhood days? I reminded him of the *Neem* trees and gave him evidences of the echoes of his *dhol*. I sung the songs Ukkamal used to sing while playing on the rope to remind him of those days.

Remembrance of those sweet memories made his eyes wet. The tiffin in his hand fell off and putting his hands together, he said, “How can I recognize you, Bapu! You were very young then!” and he empathetically invited me, “Come! Let’s have a cup of tea.”

Sitting face to face, I, without indulging in other things, directly asked him, “How is our Ukkaji?”
It struck a wrong cord. It pained him. Shedding grief from his eyes, he said, “It has been years since I have seen him last. You all embraced Christianity and we lost our customers. How long can we sustain with thrift. The clan started getting scattered. We started search for whatever amount of work we could find. The good time of living together had passed. Then, Ukkal decided to go on his own way. He said, “If I will live, I will live on our ancestral art. I will not earn wages of servants.” And as far as I know, he went to Mumbai and joined some circus. He got a letter written from there, “I have got work. I am earning well. We will start our own small circus once I can save some amount of money. I cannot perform well without your dhol.”

“After he left, I took my way to mill. Family has scattered. I could not answer his letter but once he came back here after around five years. His health had deteriorated. He was saying that he didn’t like city. There too he faced caste discrimination. The other people of the circus company used to keep distance from him in cooking and living. He didn’t leave company as he fell in love with a Marathi woman in the company. Others were jealous of his skills also. He also roamed around some regions and as I have heard he left the company with the woman. Now, there is no news about him since long. God knows, where he is!”

“Don’t you miss Ukkamal, his art, your dhol anything? You were very close friends!”

“Let it go sir! You are first in life to remind me of it. What to do remembering about it? Many times I dream of those days. When I heard a dhol being played, my hands also start throbbing. But those days have gone. It is futile to hope for calving from an infertile buffalo. Everything has gone! I have brought that dhol with me even here in the city. Sometimes, when its memories pain my heart, I run my hand on it but cannot pull myself together to play
it. I go to all the circuses coming here in the river area in the hope that perhaps he will come across. But, how can he come across? People can get separated but not their affections.”

“My heart went dejected after meeting Pitambar. Today, Government is trying hard to survive this art and the true artists of that art are trying to survive their lives. Ukkamal, unknown to anybody, separated from his companion, aloof, helpless, has passed away with these hard survival efforts!” I meditated.

Bhikhu put his hand on my shoulder, “Let’s go now! Do you want to come with us or wish to collect his remains?”

He asked a very crucial question? Did I have any right to collect his remains? I could not sleep that whole night. The memories of the man dancing on a high rope and crossing a ring with flames made me grieved. When I was getting ready to go to college, then Shantubhai, the laboratory in charge at the hospital came and said, “The wife of the man whom you have cremated yesterday has come all along from Mumbai and crying very hard. She wants to go to crematorium.” On the way to the hospital, I told Shantubhai, “The unidentified person was nobody else but Ukkamal who had made us gaga in our childhood.”

Being dazed, Shantubhai said, “What are you saying? I don’t believe! How alone and unknown Ukkamal was! How did you recognize him?”

“From the tattoo of Hanuman on his arm. But didn’t he give his details at the hospital yesterday?”

“No. He came around ten days before. He went unconscious on the case window itself. We admitted him. When we asked him he said, he was helpless and vulnerable. He handed over a
piece of paper with two addresses written on it and said, “If you have any compassion then kindly write letters on these addresses. Perhaps they will find me.” Shantubhai showed that piece of paper. One address was of Pitambar and another was of woman named Gajara Modhbole. He said, “I have sent letter to both of them immediately and the woman has come from the two.” said Shantubhai.

We went to her. She was holding the letter which had been sent to her and her eyes were shedding tears. Her face was reflecting the pain of losing her life. We consoled her as much as we could, “We were Ukkamal’s fans. We could have done all the possible things for him if we could have recognized him or he would have given his identity. But now nothing can be done. It must be his fate. Nobody can change what has been written in one’s fate.”

Gajara felt comfortable in speaking her mind after our sincere sympathy for her. She told us about their lives.

He had a special position in circus. His plays like dancing on a rope without having a net below, to jump across a ring stuck with sharp knives from inside, to fall off like a star and many such acts have made him front attraction of the circus. As a result, many other circus men became jealous of him. They dejected him on the name of caste but due to his affection for this Gajara, he bore all that. The Parashi owner of the circus was very pleased on him. He gave him salary as per his expectation. The owner respected him lot but he too was bound to practice caste based commensality. Moreover, his relationship with Gajara became known to all. One Mangalorean who also wanted to posses Gajara became his fierce enemy. Meanwhile, while performing a play of riding a one wheel cycle, Gajara fell off and her hand got fractured. Far away in the Brahmadesh, Ukkamal looked after her very vigilantly, hence
their affections for each other grew more. At last, something was mixed with his food by his enemies. He could somehow survive his death but his health deteriorated permanently. And Ukkamla’s stunning art dried off. He lost his mental and physical ability of acrobat exercises. The owner of the circus gave him some amount of money with the condition of not to file a complaint against the enemy who had mixed poison with his food. He along with Gajar left the circus. They started their new life by renting a room in Mumbai. But, sickness did not leave Ukkamal alone. All of the savings was spent in his treatment. Gajara did everything to run their home as well as to look after his treatment. But, Ukkamal had received his last call of death. Seeing his death near, to save Gajara from the troubles, and for his affection for his native land, he, hiding from Gajara, had come here. Gajara tried hard to search for him but how could she find him without any address or location? Receiving the letter from the hospital, she had immediately arrived here.

Her love and affection as well as her agony for her loss were reflecting in her wailing. I and Shantubhai took her to the crematorium. She affectionately took rounds of Ukkamal’s pyre and collected his remains in the hem of her sali. She put the ash of his pyre in the parting of her hair\(^1\) and took off her bangles too. After passing some time in silence, she wiped out her sindoor.

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\(1\) As a belief, Hindu married women put vermilion mark on their forehead as a sign of good fortune. Here, she replaced vermilion with ash.
The Ocean

Untidy and dirty hair, torn and shredded clothes, a crossed eye, and lot of dirt not only on the body but also on the face. Considering her mad, the children had encircled her and brought her to my home as she was repeatedly uttering my name. Seeing her filthy appearance which can even beat a mad man, I got stunned for a moment. Before I could say anything, she herself said, “Can’t you recognize me, brother? But I have recognized you. I am your Bhabhi, Ruth! Remember? I have shown you the ocean.”

My mind ran back to the memories of an age before. I witnessed the dusky beauty, compassionate and graceful idol in clean clothes. My affection for her stored in those memories helped to reconstruct her image in my eyes and her identity became very fresh to me.

In those days, I was denied for one rupee to go on a school tour to our nearby place Gataleshwar. But my father gave me five rupees to go to Mumbai with my cousin to prove himself generous against my uncles who had shifted to Mumbai selling his house and land in the village and competing all the rituals of their mother’s death. I was given a secret letter with a message for my innocent uncle hence my cousin would do any wrong. I was around ten years old in those days. Whenever the uncle from Mumbai used to come to village, he used to grudge seeing me toiling all the works of our home. He grudged to my father, “Let him go to Mumbai. He would be paid not less than fifteen rupees for that much of work in
addition to food!” Another thing he used to say, “People are taunting me that I don’t even have my own home in my village and I am boasting about the rituals of my mother’s death! Hence, do something for my home in the village.” One home could be managed for him and therefore only I was sent personally to give him the true message and make him trust about it.

We took the train in the morning from Anand. The cousin I was travelling with was canny. He continuously smoked bidis and took teas but didn’t purchase me anything even for a paisa. After Bharuch, my mouth went dry and I got intensely thirsty. Hesitantly I asked for water. He didn’t give me water but, on the contrary, he scolded me so harshly that I could not dare again to ask for water. On one hand, I could not bear thirst and, on the other, seeing the rivers full of water, I felt like jumping into it from the running train but the cold hearted didn’t pay even slightest attention to my hungry and thirsty condition. At last, in the painful condition of empty stomach and dry throat I went asleep.

We reached Vandara around at nine o’clock in the night. We took bus for Pali Hill and reached Uncle’s home at around half past nine and I got relieved at last. The cousin got engaged in drinking but my throat could not even make sound. It was the time when I met Ruthbhabhi. Putting her hand on my face, she asked, “You must have been very hungry?” In response, I narrated to her my story of being thirsty since morning. And while I was drinking water, she snatched the glass before I could even finish half of it and said, “One should not drink much water with empty stomach. It gets stomach ache. Now, wait for some time!” Saying so, she led me to the backside. While getting my hands and feet wash, she said, “Now, instead take a bath. The water is also warm.” After bath, she got me dressed in the cloths of my uncle’s son of my age and made my hair. When she made me face a mirror, I had changed so much that I could not recognize my own self.
She prepared my dish with such endearment as if she was serving me dinner of her affection. After dinner, she said, “You come with me to my place. Here, it would be congested. Now you are my guest for whatever days you stay here!”

Taking her hand in hand, I reached to her place. It was made up of curved bamboo roof covered with tin sheets and colorful papers. It had three rooms with the bamboo walls and some open space at the backside. It was a thatch but so clean, tidy and well designed that one liked to live in. The well arranged furniture of the thatch gave proof of its mistress’ dexterity.

Next day morning, when she dressed herself in a sari and started going on job, then I came to know that she was a teacher. She said to me, “Today, when I will return in the evening, I will take you to see an ocean.”

When I left with her in the evening, I was very curious to see an ocean, “Bhabhi, how big an ocean is?”

“It is so big that you cannot see its boundaries!”

“Is it bigger than even our Vijasar Lake?”

“Dear, it can contain lakhs of such lakes!”

“Aha!! But from where does such a large quantity of water come?”

“From many rivers! Many rivers pour water into it. Haven’t you studied about it?”

And talking about here and there, we reached to the western side of Pali Hill. I could not believe on the sight when I saw the glittering water because of the rays of the setting sun.
falling on it. But when I saw the rising and falling waves of water, I realized the scene and I got astounded. I got stuck there holding Bhabhi’s hand with both of my hands.

“Stop here Bhabhi. I don’t want to go ahead anymore. I am scared!”

“What are you scared of?”

“I am scared of the ocean! When such a large quantity of water rises up in our village, the lakes overflow and everything turns into floods. We should not have come here. The ocean is going to deluge. I don’t want to go ahead anymore.”

Reading the emotions of fear on my face, Bhabhi got laugh, “You have totally gone mad, dear! Nothing will happen. Come with me. Don’t worry! I am with you!”

Putting her hand on my shoulder and affectionately holding me close in her one side, she took me up to the upside wall where the waves were getting dashed against. Seeing first time in my entire life such an immense body of water of the ocean, I got speechless.

“See dear! This is an ocean. Huge ships travel into it. During the days of tide, the waves rise up to the height of huge trees and its roaring sound is auditable even at our home.”

“Bhabhi, I am surprised. How can this small wall hold such a large quantity of water? Doesn’t the ocean overflow? It must be happening in monsoon. Otherwise, how can this large quantity of water be contained?”

“No dear! It doesn’t overflow anytime. An ocean doesn’t cross its limits. Even if it is heavy downpour, its shore would not move even an inch. If it breaks its limits, then the Samsara cannot survive even for a moment. Hence, it never crosses its limits!”

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I could not understand her words much at that time but that affection made my fear run away and I watched the ocean with full satisfaction. But, I realized the meaning of her words on the very same evening even in that young age.

It was almost dark when we reached home back. Lalabhai, her husband, had gone impatient. Immediately, he started abusing her and rushed to her. Dragging her plait, he threw her on the floor. When people could hardly save her from his blows of fists and kicks, he lashed a wedge on her head. Bleeding heavily, she fell off there.

I was shocked. I had not seen such a brutal incident even in the village. Bhabhi’s only fault was that she had not given money to her husband as per his demand from her salary. When she was brought back from hospital, there were stitches on her head and a long bandage was tied around her head.

I thought Bhabhi would resent in the morning. When such things used to happen in the village, the women used to return to their parents in resentment. Instead of that, she prepared tiffin and tried to wake him up who was still in sleep and unconscious due to yesterday’s heavy dose of wine. He woke up abusing her and went away. After he left, I asked Bhabhi, “Why do you tolerate all this? Why don’t you resent about it? How can one tolerate such things?”

Smiling with pain, she said, “Haven’t you seen the ocean yesterday, dear? As it doesn’t cross its limits, in the same way, a woman too should not cross her boundaries. She should not cross a threshold otherwise the samsara cannot run balanced!”

But once breaking all the limits, she crossed the threshold such a way that everybody was shocked.
Due to her clean limbed beautiful figure, dusky complexion, continuously playing aspirations in her eyes and her husband’s agonizing insensitivity, she earned sympathy from all the staff members where she was working. One of the teachers started loving her. He used to console her as well as sometimes instigate her to fight back against her husband. Suffering for another five years, once the situation reached to a very critical moment. Even after her eight years of married life, she could not become a mother yet. And Bhabhi had realized that her always drunken husband would not give her good life. On one hand, he hardly used to bring full salary and, on the contrary, blaming her for nonsense things, he used to fight all the time to make her leave the job. He used to go even to the school and abuse her publicly. In all that drama, once police caught and beat him severely. But, on the same evening, Ruthbhabhi was also put into severe troubles. He beat her till she almost went unconscious and then threw her outside in a rainy night.

On that night, she went to her companion’s home for shelter. He accepted her but as a result, both were terminated from the job. After around six months, he too left her. And then the tempest of her life started. An impenetrable tempest and full of her misfortunes! Like a tornado of sufferings of a woman who had been abandoned by the Devas after playing with her.

After that incident, she disappeared from all her familiar ones for almost a decade and half. Everybody thought she had passed away.

Once, when I had stayed in a hotel in Indore, a woman who had come to fill water in my room was staring at me. She went down and learnt about my name and address and, with the
effusion of affection for meeting someone her familiar, she said, “Brother! Can you recognize me?”

I was surprised. I could not take my eyes off her! Her age had distorted her clean limbed appearance and the constant dismissal from life had obliterated her enthusiasm. But the aspirations which always used to float in her eyes had not yet ceased. “It’s you. Ruthbhabhi? Here?”

“Yes brother, it’s me! I am where life has brought me. Will you please come to my home? I will come to receive you in the evening.”

She left and I started thinking about her. So, at last, Bhabhi too had ‘settled’ down. Otherwise she would have not invited me to her ‘home’ with such enthusiasm. And I felt gloomy, “Why is she still fondling such relationship again when it has disgraced her youth and destroyed her life? How passionate about life she is!”

It was more honest to say her ‘home’ a hovel than a house. The cleanliness and tidiness of the home in the slum was evident of her present. A quilt with bed sheet was spread on a coir rope charpoy. Few vessels and few tin pots were evidences of their limited together life. Seeing me, an aged man got up and welcomed me in Hindi, “Please come! Welcome!” There was neither any cunningness nor lust on his face. He was not anything more than a simple, innocent Rajasthani villager.

“Now, as you have come, I shall go and get whatever you say.” Saying so in Hindi to Bhabhi, he picked up a bag.
“Get some mangoes, vegetable if you like and don’t forget tomatoes.” Said Bhabhi and gave him money. He, without any curiosity, walked away.

“So, it seems that you have finally settled down!”

“Brother, it is not in my fate to settle down. I have read somewhere ‘In the journey of life, the loved ones we come across are only stages of life, otherwise the destination is always in death.’ All the people in my life too have been stages only!” Such grand thoughts and deep understanding of life but wandering here and there! I could not stop myself from expressing my uneasiness.

“Bhabhi, you are educated and capable to take your decisions. When you left Lalbhai’s home, the women around were gossiping about what you used to say, ‘A woman should not across her limits, should not cross a threshold.’ They said about you, “But she herself put aside her modesty in such a way that she went away publicly!” Hadn’t your dreadful condition ended, if you could have kept patient for some more time? You must be aware about the fact that after around six months since you had left, Lalbhai passed away in an accident.”

“I know about it, brother! You see, I have kept my forehead also without sindoor since that day. But there is difference between enduring for love and tolerating injustice. On that day, you yourself had said why didn’t I resent? But resenting depends on the call of heart. I didn’t have any call from my heart. Do you know that your cousin was impotent? Even though, I had decided to pass my life with him. But, he never stopped doubting me that I would have been trying to get from others what I could not get from him. He wanted to prove himself what he was not by beating me all the time. And to tell you, a woman doesn’t have a stomach
only but a womb also. My womb hasn’t given me peace ever. This series of steps I have taken is more about my womb than stomach. But still it is . . .?"

At that moment only, the man arrived with a bag of vegetables. “Prepare meal for him, by the time, I will return.” Saying so, he went back.

“Bhabhi, it seems that he doesn’t like my coming here! If that is so then I shall leave. Unnecessarily, there will be problems for you!”

“No no! Don’t think so. You can go only after taking dinner. He feels shy. What to talk about with you? And I can have more time to talk to you freely. He is Brahmin. He doesn’t eat meals cooked by me but still he loves me. Such life with separate commensality is being lived since last seven years. But therefore only I feel that it is one of the stages and not the destination of my life.”

That confession was a shock to me. To live under the same roof, to like and love each other but still they were cooking and eating separately. And this practice of cooking and eating separately itself will make them separate. Bhabhi was preparing dinner with full enthusiasm. She had seen her relative after years of wandering and therefore she very affectionately wanted to entertain me for dinner.

At the time of serving the dinner, the man came back. He fed me with the courtesy of the head of the family. He himself sliced the mangoes and prepared tomato chutney with his special recipe. After dinner, I prepared myself to return to my place. While talking with Bhabhi, I had given my address to her and also said, “You can come to my home whenever you wish. If you wish I can take you with me. You won’t have any problem.” But she
replied, “No, not now! Let me roam in my own world of difficulty until no option is left than coming to your shelter. I have seen many colors of life hence I wish to explore some more.”

The man came with me up to the bazaar to bid me farewell, “Here, they make very testy pan, which one would you like to have?” He didn’t allow me to pay for pan and he himself paid. When we almost arrived to my place, I earnestly requested him, “She has suffered a lot. Don’t leave her. I don’t find words to tell anything else!”

“Everything is a matter of fate, Babuji! We will have company of each other till it is written in our fate. Further, God knows. The point is I will not leave her.”

I don’t know why but Bhabhi did not come on work at the hotel for the remaining days I stayed there. On the last day, I went to see her. Again explained to her, “People have already forgotten you. You can live at my place comfortably. Now, I can even get some work for you as per your talent and settle you down in a convent also. You husband is a kind man; he would allow you to come with me. Hence, come with me. If he denies, then run away from here and come there whenever you get a chance.”

She replied, “No brother! I cannot cheat with my innocent man. He has supported me in my very critical time. Even if he doesn’t take food prepared by me, he is, otherwise, fully dependent on me. If I deceive him, nothing good will happen to me. You are my relative. You are also educated. Learning about inviting you here, he started thinking that I won’t stay here long. He also liked the way you have suggested him to take care of me. He was saying, “Babuji is a gentleman. Now, I believe that you were a wife of some good family!” I don’t want to break his trust. After leaving Mumbai, I had fallen in the hands of a butcher. He got me relieved from there. Otherwise, God knows what would have been my condition!”
“Then, accept him as the destination of your life, Bhabhi! This is what may be good for you.”

“I am also striving to accept so, brother! But, my conscience doesn’t support me to believe so.”

First time in her life, Bhabhi’s eyes were reflecting pain for some relative’s departure. He kept looking at me for long with her wet eyes.

Her innocent husband had been waiting at the station with a full basket of sweet, light snack and fruits.

“Write letter sometimes, Baboji! I don’t have anybody of my own.” Saying so, he very affectionately bid me farewell. I was perplexedly thinking, “What should it be called, fate or perversity of life?” Her husband, my cousin, could not tolerate even the fact about showering her motherly affection on me when I was only ten years old. While this totally strange man was very affectionately taking care of me due to his affection for Bhabhi!

After returning to home, for many days, my heart remained anxious for Bhabhi’s matter. I could not relieve my mind by talking about her to anybody as she had been forgotten by all before years. When her memories which used to cause pain in mind and heart were about to recede, one day, a letter in an unfamiliar handwriting arrived. Bhabhi’s husband Bholanath had passed away. In his last moments, he was very happy for her care for him. He had taken water from her hand while breathing his last moments. Because of that honor, Bhabhi too was very satisfied and as per his last wish, she was to go to Gangaghat to drop his remains in the holy water. After returning from there, she would come to my home if there would be favorable circumstances otherwise she would pass her life in some unknown place.
I didn’t feel that much gloomy and shocked on the death of Lalbhai as felt with the death of that person. Ruthbhahbi’s helpless face – the face which had become harsh for suffering all her life – was floating in my eyes.

After that letter, years passed. Her memories too were about to fade away. At that time only, she unexpectedly arrived to my home in ragged cloths. Not with any other recollection but of the ocean only.

Her appearance was not allowing my wife to trust her while it was very hard for my children to accept her as their aunty. Only my heart was anxious to tie her up with the threads of love and relations. My wife’s nature was over compassionate and it came to my help. She made her bath, washed her hair and got her cloths changed. I sat with her for dinner with such an enthusiasm as if I had been paying back the debt of her affection. The very first mouthful remained in her hand only and she started sobbing. After long time, she could recover.

Mumbai with the remembrance of the ocean and Indore with the remembrances of Bholanath kept floating in her eyes. To solace her, I said, “Bhabhi, consider us your relatives. The thread of affection had drawn you here. Accept us as your children and settle down here for the last stage of your life. Gradually everything will be all right and your accommodation here would not be hard for us. I have been waiting for you since I received your letter.”

Gist of what Bhabhi shared with us was this, “One of Bholanath’s friend had gone with her up to Kashi. Bholanath’s saving of around three thousand was with her. The friend felt that the remains of a Brahmin should be dropped in the holy water by a Brahmin only. He was Bholanath’s faithful friend hence Bhabhi too trusted him. But from one of the caravanserais of Kashi, he secretly ran away with the bundle of money and Bhabhi was reduced to poverty
and helplessness. While searching for the man, she came across a lost child of around two to three years. She kept on roaming on the Gangaghat for few days in the hope of finding his parents. When she could not find anybody, she took a train with the child but got caught for travelling without ticket. Nobody believed on her explanation of the child who was with her hence she was believed to be a member of a children abducting gang. She passed three years in jail and was relieved on Gandhi centenary. While she was worried about where and how to pass her free life, she was run over by a fast running truck. When she came to her senses, she was in hospital with injured eyes, forehead and hands. She was relieved from the hospital after two-three months recovery. She, collecting some amount of money for fare by begging from here and there, went to Indore. There, somebody had misappropriated her home and nobody in the locality was ready to accept her as Bholanath’s wife. Hence, she went to Mumbai with the hope that she would get some money which the school had deducted in the name of fund. She kept on visiting the office of the education department for days. But the employees of the office thought of her a mad woman and handed her to the police and the police got her admitted in a mental hospital. In her own words, “Brother, I could have passed my life there also but there was nobody with whom I can share and talk hence the burden of agony kept on increasing daily. I realized that this hard life would not even have death soon hence, one day, I ran away from there and jumped into an ocean to end my life but even the ocean didn’t harbor me. Some people saved me. But, I was accused of suicide and sent to jail. On the condition of becoming a good citizen, I was relieved from jail after some time. While coming out, I requested the jailer to give me some work. I told him that I was educated and could do any work. I told him that I was helpless and there was nobody to support me. I earnestly requested him to get me some work and shelter. He sent me to a sheth. After
completion of the entire work of the home, I was required to transfer some goods from here to there. Within few days, I realized that it was illegal exchange of goods but I was helpless. The police caught me and declared serial criminal. But, the Sheth got me out of jail. Then, I escaped from there with hard efforts and kept roaming wherever my fate led me. I was not left with any other option than begging. And still the tempest hasn’t receded brother!”

The whole struggle story was very painful. My heart turned gloomy. “The tempest now is coming to its end, Bhabhi! Now, you don’t have to go anywhere else!” Saying so, we arranged for her bed in the open lobby.

Before going to bed, I explained to my wife, “She has loved me like a mother. We should accommodate her at least for this debt. I will find some work for her. We have to support her even if nobody supports her.”

It was hard to convince my wife. She taunted, “She cannot fit with us. She has roamed a lot and had been in all the bad situations. And sooner or later, people are going to learn about her. We cannot stop them from making things about her. Find some work for her immediately and arrange her lodging too there. We cannot afford her here!”

At the same moment, a door was knocked. One of my little sons didn’t want to share a bed with her. I took him in the room and made my bed outside. Bhabhi didn’t say anything and I got asleep while thinking about her.

When I got up early in the morning, her bed was vacant. To solve our perplexity, she herself had left. My wife felt peaceful but I knew the reason for her leaving in such a manner and that is what is piercing my heart even today.
A Labor of Love

What good could you get by changing your dress?

Rather you should have transformed your mind!

What good could you get by changing your name?

Rather you should have transformed your actions!

It was Major Punjo, an officer in the Salvation Army, who used to make us sing these couplets. He passed his whole life in the service of Mission. When he arrived in the village after retiring from his service, the villagers felt restless seeing his very little household goods - a tuck of clothes and a sack of few needed vessels. Somebody even inquired, “Major Uncle! Is the cart of goods coming behind?”

“O brother! This is what I have. How much is needed for two of us? We only need a pair of clothes to cover our bodies and a pan to prepare food. Haa haa haa!” Saying so, he laughed loudly. And the people who heard his answer were perplexed more.

I always observed that whenever a teacher of Mission used to come in our village, he would have brought a full cart of household goods and when he would be leaving the village due to his transfer, the goods would have increased to one and a half cart. We even had seen many people with not less than two carts of household goods. Hence, seeing Punja Major with very less household goods many people thought: “He doesn’t seem a prudent man. He spent his
whole life meaninglessly but now, he would realize how difficult it is to live life comfortably!”

But Major Uncle was not concerned about it. He directly headed towards his place with the two men who had come to drop him. His mud house was close to the temple of Salvation Army. The house had remained closed for years. Bhavankaka got it repaired by sweeping and daubing. Bhavankaka was his elder brother. It seemed that the composed life was his gift to him.

On the same evening when Major Uncle had arrived, he asked to Bhavankaka, “Bhavanbhai! Can I get a coir charpoy? I am comfortable in sleeping even on the floor but Ujam needs it badly. The old woman’s bones are too soft to sleep on the floor!”

Before Bhavankaka could say anything, my father himself said, “So Major! Haven’t you arranged even for two charpoys in your whole life? Then what have you earned?”

He answered, “As these Hindus’ believe in earning God’s grace, I too have earned the same, Master!”

I have been deeply in love,

I love Ishu,

I love Him, I love Him!

His contentment was reflecting in that song. But, Bhavankaka said, “You have sung songs all your life. Haven’t you been satisfied yet? Have you even earned few coins or not? People are interested in money. There should be at least somebody to wail on our death, shouldn’t there? Now, why would anybody shed tears on your death?”
“Is that you who are saying such things . . . ?” He taunted Bhavankaka.

“Yes, it’s me who is saying so. See, I have to do this drudgery even in my old age! I thought you would have earned some wealth hence I would not require to do much!”

“Ok, then let me tell you. I have never aspired for any such thing. I need not to worry as the ultimate caretaker is there. Everything has been left to Him. When the time to wind-up life has come close, whatever household goods have been gathered was, truly speaking, making me shame. Jesus had told me to leave it and follow Him. But, while following Him, I could not realize when and how all this had been gathered. Hence, I distributed all these things among those who were in need. And when I started to give up things, why should I worry about what has been given and what has remained behind? If I ever need anything, He is there, isn’t it so?”

“Good, then ask Him to provide you a charpoy also. Let me also see how Jesus would provide you things?” Bhavanbhagat taunted.

But, without feeling bad about it, Punjo Major returned from there! After some time, he went back to Bhavankaka again and said, “See Bhavanbhai, as you wanted to see, He has given this charpoy. I found this charpoy when I climbed on the loft to find few tools. You please mend it little for me and I will arrange for coir.

In around five days, his home was settled well. There was no trouble about the number of family members as they were two only. They didn’t have any botheration about descendants. They used to live on their own in such a way that nobody would even come to know what they ate and what they drank! He was completely a man of Saint Matthew. He was like a bird in the sky, not worried about sowing, reaping, and collecting anything.”
He used to get us together in the evening. He told us some interesting stories from the Gospel and then he made us sing songs with full of passion. He was a tubby man. Affectionate eyes under his puffy eyelids with short neck and plump face. He used to wear a dhoti and a red coat with three stars on his shoulder. The sign of ‘S’ beside the stars was expressing more the feeling of ‘Sharpness’ than ‘Salvation’.

After their arrival in the village, he acquainted himself with the villagers and understood the workings of the panch. He also visited all the three village schools being run by the Mission as well as roamed around the farm of Bhavankaka. But, he liked very much the barren land in front of the graveyard and a pond like valley which used to remain full of water in all the seasons.

After pondering about it for long, one day, he went to Bhavankaka to get his scythe repaired.

“What do you want to do with this scythe?” asked Bhavankaka.

“I have already acquired a spade and a hoe. This scythe is required to cut the pieces of cactus to prepare a fence. I want to plant mango trees in the barren land of outskirt of the village, outside the village!”

“Have you gone mad? Can the mango trees be grown there in the outskirt of the village? Instead, do some such work out of which you can also earn something.”

“We both can comfortably eke out from the pension of twenty five rupees. We don’t aspire for more. Why should I worry unnecessarily when I am getting a stomach full meal for a day?”
“If that is so, then you rest peacefully in your home; pray to God but don’t take all these troubles unnecessarily.”

“Why are you chiding me like this when you yourself have passed your whole life among trees?”

“Whatsoever I have saved is not being of any use to me. Your mango trees would not grow. People will not like it to grow.”

“If some trees are grown then the outskirt will have cold shade and the children would get fruits. The mango trees which I have planted in Zalod would be giving mangoes this year. Here too, I want to plant few mango trees, come what may.”

And he got engrossed in his work. He dug deep pits at different appropriate places in the hot days of summer. He took out soil from the pits as well as collected animal dung. He made layers of dung and earth in the pits. I didn’t leave his work even if he was perspiring and panting. He used to encourage us to collect lumps of dung when we used to be around looking at his efforts with curiosity. We had prepared a huge dung-heap out of joy of being of some help to him. He poured water into the heap to decompose it and waited for the season of monsoon.

He had collected some seed of the finest quality of mango trees. He sowed them in an uncultivated land close to the temple and developed them into plants. And after the three rains of the season, he put the grown up plants into the pits. After being satisfied from planting sixty two mango plants and preparing fence around each of it, he said, “I have planted as many mango trees as many years I have lived. But the number of plants will survive and grow the number of years I have lived with honesty and truth.”
We could not understand his thoughts at that time. He was taking care of the mango plants like his own life. He had made fences of cactus around each plant to save it from getting harmed by some mischievous children and stray animals. He used to take rounds around the outskirt with his long scythe for the whole day. He persuaded the children in such a way that they saw the act of uprooting a plant as a sin. In that year, when everything had flooded due to heavy rain, he too was as worried about his plants as the farmers were worried about their crops. His grief for each of the plants which had got uprooted or rotten was like losing his own children. And, after the flood receded, first, he had taken care of the plants before worrying about anything else.

In the season of summer, he purchased two empty square metal cans and made a kavad (bamboo lath borne on the shoulder with slings at both ends for carrying cans) of it. He watered each plant by bringing water in the kavad from the deep valley. He went gaga when forty six mango plants survived and grew after a year. “Sixteen years of my life must not have been lived with true spirit so that the sixteen plants dried. I will take care of it next year.”

In those days, Ujamkaki fell ill and he was required to take her to the hospital of Kook in Anand. Returning from there after a week, he first went to see the plants. He was shocked to see that some wicked man had uprooted half of the plants while some other man had taken away the cactus of the fences to make a fence around his own farm.

That unexpected calamity hurt him more than the dreadful illness of Ujamkaki. He felt so helpless as if he had returned from a graveyard by leaving a loved one behind. Few elders at the parabadi abused the wicked man severely when he expressed his disappointment about
the event. Pouring out his heart, he said only these words, “I would neither get the fruits nor sit under the cold shed of these mango trees. If few mango trees would grow up, you and your children will get mangoes. What are they going to get by agonizing me with such acts?”

Ujamkaki could not survive the illness. She had passed her whole life like his shadow without complaining for anything. Death of his better half left Major Uncle almost paralyzed. He remained seated beside her body and read the Bible. When he saw few young men going to dig her grave, he, even in the state of intense grief, suggested, “Prepare the grave at a place where the plants don’t get damaged.”

His eyes were shedding tears while throwing soil in the grave of the old woman, probably, because of the plants which had been uprooted.

After Ujamkaki’s obsequies, he didn’t have any other support than of the mango trees. He remained engrossed in the care of the plants until his death. As his favorite song was Lagi hai laganiya (I am in love), his heart was inclined for the care of the plants. He used to sing the song Lagi hai laganiya while watering the plants or mending the fence. He never uttered anything else than that song. He didn’t even have much affection for anybody. Sometimes when someone would go on talking about here and there and during the chatting if he would make any derogatory remark about anybody, he would not bear it. He would look into the eyes of the person with such frown look that the other person would be put to shame. If somebody is slandering about anything, he would dig out a bush with one heavy blow of spade or he would cut off the grass growing in the fence as if demonstrating to the man and then he would say to the person, “Look brother, better you uproot this bad habit of slandering others like this. This is what is good for us!” He had immense faith in worship for God but he
never advised anybody about it without being asked for it. Many times, he had been requested to deliver a sermon but he always used to say, “Everything has been explained in the Bible. Whatever is needed to be told has been told in the Bible and that is what my sermon is!” He used to visit sick people and spend time with the person. He always showed eagerness to go with the sick persons to a hospital. He would also purchase the needed things for the patients and in doing all these services, even if his whole pension would be spent, he would anyhow manage to live on but he would never ask anybody for help. Freshly churned butter milk was a feast for him.

No elder would ever visit his home but we, the children, were allowed twenty four hours. Many times in the noon, we had seen him seated speechless keeping Ujamkaki’s trunk opened in front of him.

His efforts to save the mango plants increased even more when he realized that the end of his life was coming close. Once, he requested to the panch, if the panch would take responsibility to take care of the plants, he would like to donate some amount of money to the panch fund. But, God knows why others had never taken interest in his mango plants. Being disappointed there, never before in his life but on that day, he went to the choro of the village. When he shared the things with the village headman, the headman, on the contrary, alleged him, “By planting trees on the land without permission, you want to take possession of the land for your graveyard. I will complain about it to the government, and then you see what happens!”

Returning from the choro, perhaps, first time in his life, Major Uncle had forgotten the song of ‘lagi hai laganiya’. There was one poor man. He used to wander around having a turban
on his head and a sharp long scythe on his shoulders. He used to twist and turn his moustache. We never heard that he had harassed anybody but still everybody was scared of him. Many times, he, smoking a bidi, used to stare at Major working in the barren land. Sometimes, he even asked, “Master! Can you give a bidi?” But Major Uncle never created an occasion to talk to him. But after the event of the choro, Major Uncle too got restless. The mango trees had been seven years old by then and some of the trees had even got the height of a man. How can they be left unprotected? Major Uncle approached the brave man.

“I have some money. I planned to spend it for some good purpose. But I am giving it to you for taking care of these mango trees till your death. I have heard that Rajputs don’t break their words.”

After that, Major Uncle went into tranquility. The voice of the song ‘lagi hai laganiya’ went higher and then, at one night, submerged with the cosmos.

When we woke up in the morning, the sun had gone up and the long scythe was lying in the corner. His kavad and his slippers were waiting for him.

Today, only two out of the sixty two mango trees have survived. His grave has also lost somewhere under the new tar road. The villages have ‘progressed’, the country is developing!
Uncle's Repayment

One evening, when I was foddering to our bullock, a person with dark skin of a chameleon arrived at our compound. His wide shoulders had bent down slightly hence, it formed a small hunchback. A slightly forward leaning neck, a jungle like variegated hairs on his chest, a brass coated bright new scythe in his coarse hands, a half sleeve cloak on a dhoti covering up to his knees, a turban on his head, a worn out pair of local sleepers, and big nails coming out of his slippers. While I was looking at the man stunned by his appearance, the stranger spoke: “Is your father at home, dear?”

And I was conquered by the word ‘dear’ in his question. Plentiful feelings were oozing out of his gloomy eyes and I liked his affectionate voice the most.

“Father has gone to Baroda but who are you?” I asked.

“Couldn’t you recognize me? I am your Jethakaka (uncle) from Kambholaj. Hasn’t Master conveyed you that I was to come?”

At that time, my step mother came out. Offering him a lota of water, she said, “He has gone to get a pair of bullocks if he could find a good one. Please have a seat, he will come soon.”

He spread out my charpoy in the open lobby and sat on it. He asked about my health and wellness in detail. He got very pleased about my ability of preparing a hookah. He acquired detailed information about me while simultaneously removing bugs from the bullock,
keeping his eyes on my activities, caressing the bullock with his hands and smoking the hookah. And by the time my father came, we got tied in such a friendship which could never be broken.

When we sat for dinner in the evening, my father was little drunk and therefore speaking generously.

“Look Jethabhai! From today onwards, this is your own home. Don’t consider us the other even for a while. We have fourteen vigha of farming land. If this year goes well, and the good thing is that there are indications that this year will be good one, then you as well as we all will be happy. If you will need, I will also get the home beside this room opened for you. You should take care of the pair of bullocks. If I could have got a new pair, we could have advanced ploughing equipments. But this time, we have to roll on with this pair only.”

Jethakak didn’t say much in response but, during the dinner, I got sure for one thing that he was not only a guest but he was to stay with us like a family member specifically being my companion. I was very happy for that because in our family, father used to remain on his own. My step mother and younger brother had their own separate world. I was the only aloof one. Hence, I liked very much Jethakaka’s hoondhal.

At the time of going to bed, Uncle told he could adjust anywhere. But still, father got him a big cotton strings charpoy. When I too started to make my bed, he said, “I can’t sleep alone. You better sleep with me!”

From the whole day toiling, I could hardly get some free time in the evening after dinner. Hence, we used to play the game of hutututu or stick-and-ball as well as talk about here and there in the nights only. Most of us used to sleep in the open lobbies hence there wasn’t
anybody to stop us from going out at night. When, first time in life, I was affectionately invited by Uncle to sleep with him, for some time, I felt not to go to the Dharmashala in Limbadi chawk. But Magan’s whistle for call enticed my mind so much that the very next moment, I was with my friends.

When I was with my friends, my heart wanted to go back to Uncle again and again. I could not take interest either in the games or in our chatter-putter. I was thinking, “If Uncle would have gone asleep then I should not disturb him for making my space in his bed. In that case, my own charpoy is more appropriate. Now onwards, I won’t be able to chatter with Magan till late nights.” Magan too was concerned about it. We were concerned as our freedom was then going to be watched.

At around eleven o’clock, Bhavankaka compelled us to go to sleep. We got scattered. When I entered in the lobby, all my anxieties were calmed down. Uncle was still awake. He said, “Come dear! What have you been doing till that much of late night?”

“I was playing!”

“What was the game which kept you caught for such a long time?”

“We were chattering at the parapet of the Dharmashala.”

“Better you don’t involve in such activities. Unnecessarily it becomes our habit. Now, don’t go there from tomorrow onwards.”

“But Uncle, I can’t sleep before late night!”

“That is all right. I will tell you stories.”
“Uncle, then you tell one now!”

“Ok, then listen.”

He started a story of a clever son of an unfavorable queen. The conspiracies of a king’s favorite queen, a gullible king, punishment to the queen to dwell into jungle, a birth of the prince in an unknown place, prophesy of an astrologer, the prince being brought up by the woodcutters, harsh nature of the woodcutters, prince’s studying secretly while going to cut woods, abundant heavy work, and the faith of the queen that the prince would overcome all the hardships and earn the throne. All these events were being narrated by Jethakaka in such an interesting way that I could not even realize when Magan who was sleeping in the opposite lobby came and sat down beside the footrest. I was engrossed in seeing my own troubles in the troubles of the prince. And deep in my heart, I too decided to study hard like him. There was something special in Uncle’s words which were attracting us towards him. His voice was so affectionate that it would trickle his affection for the characters of a story. His voice used to be soft as well as compassionate while narrating the queen writing a beseeching letter to the king. His voice used to become harsh while narrating the prince training his own self for the battle and fighting against the trees of a jungle considering them an enemy’s army.

We could not understand one thing about him. In his stories, not a single character would be completely evil. While narrating the story, he used to protect the characters like, “What can the king even do about it when his favorite queen was instigating him and being a man, he would believe on the words of the woman only. But what can the favorite queen also do when she herself was foolish and moreover, the maids were continuously flattering her?
What else to say about a credulous woman!” He used to praise the good characters from the bottom of his heart but he would also prove the vicious characters right like a cunning minister, a selfish commander of an army, a deceitful pundit, a lying maid by narrating their weaknesses as natural part of humans. Howsoever the person would be immoral, for him, the person was never completely wrong or immoral. For that reason, the cunning minister would be saved from harsh punishment even if he would have been caught up in some fraudulent tricks. The favorite queen would be saved at the last moment from the punishment of being bald and making her seat on a donkey facing its back when her evil deeds would be revealed. The unfaithful commander of an army would be given punishment of an exile instead of a death sentence. As we had mostly heard the stories and bhavai with the poetic justice, we always expected the evil characters to be punished harshly. But there was nobody completely useless, wrong or evil in the stories of Jethakaka. When, once, I could not stop myself from expressing my uneasiness about it, he said, “Trust humans foremost. The goodness is always there in each human being but the circumstances made them forget about it. Dear son, don’t see anybody’s shortcomings! Everybody repents for lying and that is what the true quality of a human being.”

In that age, this lesson had been stored in my heart even though I could not understand it with much depth. But, from that night, our roaming around in the nights was stopped. Uncle’s stories became the best night gifts for us.

Jethakaka’s stories used to reach at its climax when it would be raining heavily; the bed sheets would have become cold; the fragrance of humidity would be coming out of daubing; the water would have been trickling from the damped eaves of roof. I used to save charcoals especially for his hookah. They used to smother less and burn quickly. Uncle was very
obliterated for that much of my service. The more the hookah would burn, the more his stories too would get interesting. I didn’t know how much had Uncle studied but his reading was good. He always kept the *Mahabharata* and other such scriptures in his bag and took great care of them. Sometime, if he would get time, he would sit to read the scriptures with such concentration that he would look like a sculptured idol. A man like Bhavankaka also got interested in his stories and applauded. Being happy, Jethakaka said, “I am only trying to make these children happy otherwise I know nothing compared to you!”

“It would be more than good if these children learn the art of understanding the stories from you.” Saying so, Bhavankaka asked for hookah and Jethakaka’s story went further.

After Uncle’s arrival, my poor condition was hurting me less. The toiling of the home remained as it was but Uncle’s affection for me was working as a shield against it. People used to say that Master had ‘kept a man’. I could not understand what did it mean but I felt that it was Uncle’s insult. I could not even understand Uncle’s sudden arrival, joining directly in the farming work like a laborer, and to work day and night without complaining about anything. My father used to talk to Uncle only about necessary things. Uncle’s wisdom in the farming work would not leave any option for suggestion. Now, my father hardly used to take in hand the work of ploughing and all the hard works used to be done by Uncle only. Sometimes, some jealous people used to instigate Uncle while he would be resting from work, “It’s only you otherwise nobody would do that much of toiling. Have you calculated your wages or even looked at your account?” In response, tired Uncle would say only these words with a smile, “Everybody has its own fate, brother! I am too not doing the work free of cost but I work here as if it is my own.”
The others tried to fathom his commitment, “How long will you keep doing this?”

“How long will you keep doing this!”

These conversations used to confuse me. I felt that the pleasant company of Uncle was going to come to an end like my fleeting moments of happiness. I wished the time won’t just pass over. Once, I expressed my fears to Uncle.

“Uncle, how long will you stay with us?” I asked

“Till God allows!”

“Look I know that you give such artificial answers to all but you please tell me the truth!”

Looking at my helpless face with his merciful eyes, he said, “Dear Son, I haven’t lie in my whole life. But to be frank with you, I am afraid I won’t be able to leave if I will stay here longer hence I want to get rid of your affection now!”

“So you too will go away?”

“First, let my debt be repaid. So many days are still left for that!” He said so while drawing his eyes away from my weeping face and digging the threshing floor.

I knew well what obstinacy was but I had never been obstinate about anything in my life. After Uncle’s arrival, I used to hesitantly be obstinate about some minor things. I liked to demand things from him. Hence, I emphatically demanded to tell me about the matter of debt, and at last, Uncle told me about it.

“Around four years before, your father could reap very good crop of tobacco. In that same year, I had borrowed two hundred rupees from your father for my son Devaji’s marriage. I
have returned the borrowed amount of others but due to our family relation, I was not much worried about your money. Last year, Devaji was instigated wrongly by the daughter-in-law to go to live with his parents-in-law as gharjamai and I was left alone at home. Now, whether to eat for myself or to save money from the income of my wages only! Moreover, what is the fault of your father also? He has lent money without any interest and never even asked for it. Hence, I myself told your father that I would stay here as a ‘man’ and work for you. You keep an account of my wages and take your amount from it. This two hundred rupee is my debt to your father. I have to repay it. The people are envious hence they talk about hundreds of things. But what is the fault of the people also? That is what their way of life is. Otherwise, I don’t have any such thing in my mind. And who is waiting for me at my home? If it goes well, I will spend my remaining life here only.”

Uncle’s last few words gratified me deeply. But I was gloomed by learning the fact that a man like Uncle had to work by being a ‘man’ to repay his debt. We all understood the fact well that to work as a ‘man’ is to be a servant.

Now, Father used to only visit the farms like a landlord. He would remain at the farm only on the days of reaping or sowing. Rarely, he used to take in hand a plough. Otherwise, all the work was Uncle’s responsibility. The care for the bollocks too was being taken by Uncle but still Uncle was not being respected as a man. After toiling for the whole day, a farmer needs to take a bath of warm water but, for him, the water mostly used to be lukewarm only and sometimes even completely cold. Even whenever I warmed the water for Uncle, I was scolded. “Don’t worry about him much, the firewood doesn’t cost free.” Uncle liked a dish of doliyu very much. Therefore, I had prepared a dish of doliyu for him from the fruit of dolis I had collected. We had sufficient production of ghee in our home, but Uncle could not even
ask about it. He was being given a dish of doliyu only but Uncle never felt bad about it. He used to say, “Your mother’s nature is better than Deva’s wife. Whatever she is doing must be good for something and where am I going to live so long that I need to take ghee!”

I used to go to the farm bringing Uncle’s lunch. Sometime, when the step mother would be busy in some work or feeding my younger brother, I was required to prepare a lunchbox for him. At such chances, I would fill up the lunchbox full. Uncle would realize about it and he would insist me to share the lunch with him. He used to say, “I don’t like that you remain hungry. Why don’t you ask for food whenever you are hungry?” Then, he grudged on his own, “Oh God! Why is that so? Even the man like Master too cannot see the condition of his child. Why is it so pathetic?”

Once, he himself told the fact to Father. Listening to that, Father got annoyed. He pretended to be unaware about it even though he knew about it. He didn’t like that fact that some outsider came to know about the family secret and moreover the person told the thing in such a way that hurt one’s self image. He also told the things to Mother but in such a way which would not hurt her, and, rather she would refine her deeds.

She didn’t change much but, on the contrary, one thing clearly happened that Uncle lost his all respect from her. She started seeing him as a trouble.

I and Uncle used to sit together for dinner. Uncle used to put some of the food from his dish into my dish and he himself used to fill up his stomach with water. He would not ask for more food unless he is given. After that incident, my step mother too was annoyed. Once, she served very less quantity of the dish to Uncle. She wanted to know what Uncle would do next
with that much of less food. Uncle realized her trick and he got up from his dish without taking a single mouthful. Not being able to hit the target, she changed her trick.

She said, “Am I not giving him sufficient food that you are embarrassing me with such actions!” Uncle didn’t say anything in response but Father became very angry. He was also little bit drunk. First time, he beat the step mother and that was too with a rode. Uncle stopped him. He didn’t want a quarrel on that matter nonetheless the same matter became the reason of quarrel. He felt very bad about it. Putting his turban on my father’s feet, he said, “It’s my mistake that I interfered in your family matter. But we cannot have God’s grace if we live like this. I should not stay here anymore. I think it’s my time to leave. If you ask me to leave, I shall leave now or I will leave in the morning!”

“You should not go anywhere unless I check your account and ask you to go!” Father said with an authoritative tone. Due to his powerful impression, the quarrel didn’t last long and we were saved from being embarrassed publicly. For the first time, Uncle and I went to bed with empty stomachs. On that night, neither Uncle had strength to tell a story nor did I have courage to respond to him.

On the next day, before Uncle could get ready, Father himself got prepared and left for farm with the bullocks and a plough. Uncle followed him. I went to the Limbadi chawk to save myself from Mother’s wrath.

At around ten o’clock, Uncle came back. On one hand, he was cooking and on the other, he was pursuing the vexed mother. He cooked daal and rotala. First, he served me and then also prepared a dish for Mother.
“You are feeding milk to a child hence take some food otherwise the child won’t get milk and he would get sick. In the name of your child, you should prepare dinner in the evening.

Uncle went back with the lunch of two. In the evening, dinner was prepared by Mother and the routine of the family was again on the track.

Due to Uncle’s good luck, there was a bumper farming production in that year. A cart of paddy from the two *vigha* land and two tons of *bajari* from another three *vigha* were produced. The pigeon pea was also blossoming with very high estimate while the *korat* tobacco was giving hope for two thousand rupees even at its very lowest price.

It was truly the production of Jethakaka’s hard work. He didn’t rest even for a while. He had prepared the land for tobacco after ploughing and leveling it for eighteen times. He himself had roamed in the market to purchase the seeds of his own choice. He had never wasted a day in the farming work. Even on the day of festivals, his scythe was moving.

People used to say, “Nobody would do such a hard work as Jethakaka had done, even if a person would be offered a wage of thousand rupees. Even after cutting the amount of your debt, Master should pay you at least five hundred rupees of difference. But Uncle had never entertained any such talks. “These are all my problems. Why are so worried about it?” saying so he had always cut such talks short. But some of the rumors fell on the ears of Father like, “Jetho is going to demand equal part of the production. If the master would not agree to it, then Jetho would call few elders and discuss the case with them!” On one hand Father was hearing such rumors and on the other, the step mother was instigating him for the matter.

Exactly in the end of the last *Vaishakh* month, Uncle had come to our home. From the month of *Jetha*, he had engrossed himself in the farming work. And, it was the month of *Maah*
when these rumors were being knitted. As per the accepted practice, Uncle’s tenure as a ‘man’ was coming to an end in the month of Aso but, still, Uncle had not asked either for the settlement of the account or for permission to go back.

Yes, once, while podding off the pigeon pea, he had said only that much, “Brother! Please get me the nearby home opened and provide me some corns. I will cook for myself and the fields will be taken care of by me only. I like to work here. You can keep watch on the work. If you agree we can keep Bhikhamiya’s land in partnership and purchase the strong bullock of Parabha Bariya. It will make a special pair of bullock. This pair of bullock is not sufficient for large farming work.

After saying so, he looked at Father with his aspirant eyes but he didn’t receive expected response of his long narrated planning. Mother stopped at half way while shelling off the pigeon pea. She looked at Father and Father, without responding much, just nodded and walked away. Uncle felt embarrassed and shocked.

In the evening, he took dinner only for the sake of taking it even though it was Uncle’s favorite Lilava curry. After some time, when I went backside of the house to fill up chillum, Father was trying to convince Mother. “He considers the work as his own otherwise nobody would work so hard like him. You keep patience for some more time.”

But, Mother was stubborn about one thing, “Whether he works hard or not, I would not bear him anymore. If you don’t want to work in the farm, you hire some other man. We don’t have shortage of laborers, do we?”

When I came back in the lobby, Uncle was smoking the hookah without chillum into it. When I fit the chillum on the top of the hookah, he got startled and came out of an oblivious
state. After long imploring, he agreed to tell a tale. It was about a king who didn’t trust his minister and moreover expelled him from his kingdom. The king realized his mistake when the king was about to lose his throne in an invasion of his enemy army but the expelled minister turned the lost game into a victory. Being happy, the king told the minister, “Demand whatever you want. Your every wish will be fulfilled.” The minister urged, “Don’t expel wisdom!” and he rode back his horse.

Casually I asked him, “Uncle, why didn’t the minister asked to forgive his punishment and permission to stay in the kingdom?”

“The king was supposed to take him back instead of granting him a boon. It is worthless to stay there by begging for it.”

I was feeling painful from inside as if something was being nibbled in my heart. I realized that Uncle was to go back soon and the flow of affection too was going to get dry. Two days before, a young one of a buffalo had died hence it was bawling out of suffering. Uncle went into its manger. He affectionately ran his hand on its head and neck. Since last two days, neither had it eaten a straw nor had it even allowed anybody to touch its udders. Uncle foddered her. When, arranging its hind legs in comfortable way, it started eating the forage, Uncle said to me:

“Son, go and get a small vessel. The buffalo is ready to be milked!”

After missing three times of milking, it gave a one and a half of big pot milk. He kept milking till late night, until his fingers got tired. After that, the buffalo kept ruminating cud peacefully. Uncle then caressed the bullock. He foddered him a bundle of grass and then spread a charpoy and laid on it.
“You sleep peacefully! I don’t feel like sleeping!”

My heart missed a beat. I felt as if he would leave during night. I forcefully drew him in my charpoy and cried for long keeping my head on his chest.

“Dear son, I will not go anywhere. Don’t cry.” He could not say anything more than affirming me that he would not go. I slept the whole night clinging to him lest he might leave. When I woke up in the morning, he was sweeping dung with a hoe. I felt relaxed.

When he was unchaining the bullocks to go to the farm, Father told him, “Let it remained tied. Today, I want to yoke the bullock to the cart.”

Uncle waited for his further instructions like ‘Yoke the bullocks and take them to so and so place’ for long but then he himself asked, “Am I supposed to go with the cart?”

“No. You please go to the farm.”

Uncle started walking towards farm silently. He used to remain at the farm whole day as lots of work of thrashing the plants of pigeon peas was still to be completed. A strange thing happened at around ten o’clock. Father brought some stranger with him and unchained the bullocks for him. I felt like going unconscious for not knowing where the bullocks were being taken to. I could not think of anything. A call for Uncle’s tiffin wasn’t given even at twelve in the noon. Out of anxiety, I myself prepared lunchbox and ran to the field.

Uncle was turning the bundles of pigeon peas upside down. On that day, my usual way of calling him for lunch got smothered in my throat itself. I could not give him a call for lunch.

“Uncle, Father sold the bullocks.” My voice got smothered.
“What?...When?...What are you saying?” Saying so, a scythe fell off from his hand. Its bleak fell on his thumb and blood came out but without paying attention to it he said, “Has he sold the chief bullock also? It is enough now. He is doing all these tricks as he cannot tell me to leave on my face. But what is his fault even? When one’s fate is bad, one thinks of such things only!” I got annoyed on him for not seeing anybody’s fault even in such a critical time but his miserable condition made me dumb before I could say anything.

He used to put on a turban whenever he was either to start work or to go somewhere. Seeing him doing so, I got shocked. I implored, “Uncle, I have brought lunch.”

“Yes dear son, food should not be disrespected. But tell me the truth, was my lunch prepared today?” I could not face his question; I looked down. We both tried to eat but neither he nor I could eat. Packing back the tiffin, he got up. He changed his cloth and put on the pair which he had worn when he had arrived here. He put the same worn out vaheru on his head. Holding a lower branch of a mango tree, he looked at the whole field closely. And putting his hand on my head, he said, “Dear son, I am leaving now! Study well. God will look after you!” and walked in the direction of his village through the fields. Following his steps, I went to see him off up to the way of Moti Nali. There, he made his way by removing a thorn from a fence. Going on the other side, he said, “Now you go back.” And he walked away quickly.

I could neither cry nor shout after him. I was feeling some unknown burden on my heart as his image was gradually disappearing. I kept on looking him going until the he melted on the far horizon.

That day to this time, I haven’t seen him again even once!
Patak Uncle

It was the month of *Shrawan*. Three *Turis* who used to earn their bread and butter by performing dramas had just arrived in the *Dharmashala*. One of them came to the few youngsters who were leisurely gossiping in a bullock cart and asked, “Can you please tell me whose turn is it to invite us over a meal?”

Khaniyo gave me a signal by blinking his eye hence I replied, “Turn for a meal? Oh Yes, it is Patak uncle’s turn today!”

“With due respect, will you please tell me who is he and where is his home?” He asked.

“The first house with the partition of cotton sticks in the street.” Khaniyo showed direction.

When the man started moving in the direction, I further added, “The old man can not listen clearly hence speak loudly!”

While going there, he also took his companion with him. “Let’s go together. In this way, we shall also see the locality so that tomorrow it will be convenient to demand for offerings. This is a village of generous people!”

As soon as they stepped into the verandah, the man shouted, “Patak uncle, O Patak uncle!” by the third loud call, he reached close to him.
Without thinking of anything else, Patak uncle rose up from his bed quickly, picked us a baton, and with the abuses like “You, husband of your own sister” lashed harshly the baton on the back of the man standing at the door. The man got scare. He implored uncle with confusion, “Sir, what is my fault, Patak uncle?”

“You rascal! How you dared to call me these words on my face?” and he lashed another one.

“But uncle, why are you just beating like that without even listening to us, Patak uncle?” saying so, when another person came forward, he too was beaten and both of them ran away from there. But the crazy gone Patak uncle chased them with a thick stick. Clamor spread out in the Limbadi chawk. The mischievous children on the cart had also run away. Even though the Turi actors had entered in the Dharamshala, Patak uncle was still beating them and they were trembling out of fear!

One elder person calmed him down saying, “They are new to this village. They are poor beggars. They have been misguided by some of our own rascals. They haven’t done anything wrong intentionally, Khushal uncle!”

The old man calmed down like a soldier is returning from a battle once his actual name was taken with due respect. But the actors got extremely shocked hence, they, even at the time of late evening, started going to a nearby village. “Let’s all go! We should not stay here. They have thrashed us seriously. Really a generous village! The elders and children all are same.” They went away while yelling and cursing but nobody was even concerned to stop the lower-artisan caste people.

Some such incident also had happened in the pay of Bhavai. Some popular bhavaiya had come to our big village after performing ten to fifteen bhavai in each village. There was not
even good facility to stay in other villages while in our village, an exclusive dharmashala was available. The dharmashala was built up of bricks and corrugated sheets where around three hundred people could be accommodated. Moreover, there was also a large Limbadi Chawk which was able to accommodate around five thousand people. All the wishes of the bhavaiya used to be fulfilled here. Those who hadn’t made even kansar for their own children will invite them for ladoo. If they would stay a month or so in a village, they would also collect a good amount of gifts and would leave with wet eyes and taking with them the memories of affection and love. Quite aware of all the practices, they would elatedly sing and praise,

My Oad is more than our perceptions and two herons are there,

A white flag is blowing on the tower there and the people are generous,

It’s an angel for this beggar with a beautiful nose,

My Oad is popular in all the four hundred and fifty villages of Charotar!!

With such flattering, people used to be happy. The lower caste which was always insulted by the higher caste liked their praises. The panch permitted them, “You are allowed to play till you feel!”

“Yes, respected elders, this time we want to play till we are satisfied. It is the month of Karatak. The season of monsoon is also good this year. As I have heard, the fields too have given bumper production. We will stay and perform happily, until you tell us to go!”

Then the musical instruments were played. The poems of legends and the sagas of the village were sung. The actors were also instructed to make the first show grand.
The zealous turis got encouraged completely. A stage was built up by collecting six planks with three curtains on each side. The stage was decorated briskly and chairs were borrowed. They had good costumes and also collected few saris from the villages. They wanted to impress the spectators with their first performance itself. In a way, they were so good narrators that they could create the scenes of jungle or desert by their words itself but, this time, they tried to create actual visual scenes on stage. They were saying to the curious youngsters about it, “You see! We are as good as the Company. If Chiman Marwadi will get to see our show once, he will purchase all our performances. Our Govind is far better than his Karanataki!”

At night, after the villagers got free from routine, trumpets were blown. Not less than four pertromaxes were arranged. Torches with aromatic substances were ignited. First, a prayer was offered to the Lord Ganapati then, the Sutradhar asked the Vidusak, “Which play do you want to perform?” Taking care of the spectators’ interest, he said, “A play which elevates body and mind both. And the Sutradhar announced the play of ‘Halamaṇa Jethava’ and narrated, “Your heart will get pleased, your body will get relaxed and your soul will get elevated. The youngsters will be exuberant while the elders will too be titillated!”

The performance was started with full exuberance. King Jethava’s royal court meeting was called. Many kings wanted to marry beautiful princess Sona of a neighborhood state. Before the kings could get ready to fight for getting married to Sona, the sagacious princess declared, “I will marry the one who will be able to understand as well as complete my poems. Others are like my father and brother.” Her poems with the challenge to complete them were sent to all the states and kingdoms. The stupid kings were put to great difficult. The idiotic king Jethava accepted the challenge but was put to shame. His personal man
Mepo instigated the king, “Ohh! This can be solved easily by Prince Halaman. You don’t worry about it unnecessarily!’

And unaware about the story behind the poems, the prince Halaman could understand as well as complete the poems. But, when the young bride with aspirations for life married to a sword of king Jethava and came to her in-law’s and saw old Jethava, she got frightened. Then, a conflict started between the king Jethava and the prince Halaman. When the performance was at it’s a climax, a female singer was invited in the court of the Jethava.

This was the actual chance for the Bhavai actors to get money. The female singer would sing and dance to flatter some spectators while others would pay them to cut a song amid out of jealousy. Govindo in the disguise of a female singer could read each one’s mind. He sang a range of songs from the plays, films, popular demands and some created by him instantly. Godinda’s one song had always made all crazy.

My beautiful doll plays,

The cheater doll plays . . . !

All the friends and peers were crazy about that song. They would get the song cut amid by paying more to the singer than the other and would make the singer sing the songs on one another. In the neighborhood village, some foppish got that song sung at huge amount of one hundred and twenty five rupees. Before the vidusak could recreate the scene, God knows what made one of the jolly men that he requested to sing a song by paying five rupees and twenty five paisa.

The zealous singer sang the song with sweet voice and various expressions:
My beautiful doll plays,

My doll play’s on the belly of Patak uncle!

The cheater doll plays . . . !

As soon as Patakuncel’s name was sung in the song several times, silence spread out everywhere for a moment. On the very next, everybody went crazy laughing on the song. Vidusak was singing with his own enthusiasm.

Patak uncle, get the song cut

Otherwise Khanbhai will rule,

The song will be cut only if you pay ten rupees,

And if you don’t get the song cut, we will scorn on you!

The singer Govindo was in the impression that soon a young and brave Patak uncle would come forward and get the song cut but, then, suddenly he heard a cry. Patak uncle, up in arms, jumped on the stage with a pole. He stroke the pole on Govind’s back. Shouting out of pain, Govind lost his balance and fell on a harmonium. Along with the harmonium, its players too got injured. Then, Patak uncle hit a pole on Vidusak with such intensity as if Hanuman wanted to burn Lanka. He missed the blow and the pole hit a petromax and it blasted. The fire first caught up one of the curtains. Within few moments, everything was in flames. People were yelling and screeching, making their way to save themselves.

But, Patak uncle was still wandering around wildly and abusing with so harsh words that one could not even heard. Few wise men somehow stopped him. Others were trying to extinguish
the fire. Sona got extremely frightened; Jethavo was lighting a bidi after losing all the hopes and Halaman had gone stunned seeing his minaret into fire.

When the situation was taken under control, neither the turi had courage to perform nor did the people have any wish to watch the performance. And Patak uncle was still growling in anger like an enraged wolf.

On the next day, the panch requested and tried to persuade a lot the actors of Bhavai who were leaving the village but they said, “No no! We came to know the true reality of your very popular village. Now, we will never come in this region.”

And the panch which used to hardly give twenty five rupees after a lot of imploring gave fifty one rupees even without their demanding for it in the hope that they would not defame their village in other villages. One generous man purchased them two long pieces of cloth. But, they couldn’t be pleased for curtains. Nonetheless, they didn’t spare anything to defame the village!

The hero of this whole chaos was Patak uncle. His actual name was Khushal. A man with average height of four feet, very black skin complexion, curved spine, wide shoulders, short nose and brisk eyes. He used to wear a short dhoti up to knees with a sleeveless shirt. He passed his entire life alone. In his young age, he had roamed up to the desert of Rajasthan and had earned some amount by serving a camels’ caravan. He could also cure the diseases of the camels. Those people who had camels used to call him for curing their camels. This is how he passed time and earned money also. But, he was a very angry man. His was residing in the lobby of Bhikha Master’s abandoned house. He had built walls of dry stalks on all the three sides of the lobby with such care and dexterity that not even a drop of rain would come in.
Moreover, it remained cool in hot summers and saved from cold winters. The main entrance wicket gate was made so artistically that anybody would get surprised seeing it. It was built so strongly that the dogs or cats could not enter in. He used to be in demand for making weather-shades in the season of monsoon. He was so adept that everybody had to respect him for that matter. If he would not be offered wages and spicy food as per his expectations, he would not work even for the village headman. He didn’t prefer heavy work after growing old. He used to roam around in the fields and find edible things from the trees. He would anyhow arrange for his meals. He liked to live alone. Hence, he didn’t have close affection with anybody. Hardly he used to speak with anybody. He would light fire even by rubbing flint stones but never begged anything from anybody. He respected women so much that if a woman would be passing across, he would stand aside making a way for her. Never even he looked at a woman. People used to say that he had saved one hundred and twenty five queen’s coins for his old age. He kept it with a bania. And his friend Makano Chamar was kept as a witness. Meanwhile, Makano Chamar borrowed forty five rupees on interest from the same bania and he could not make it to return the amount. Hence, he supported the bania in a trick against Khushal uncle. The bania misappropriated his money which was given to him without any writing. From that day, he lost his trust on humans. Otherwise, before that incident, he liked to meet people.

That incident shook his trust on humanity in such a way that he started hating people extremely. People passing from the way close to his home, had to pass quietly. If anybody would even just clear one’s throat loudly or laugh aloud, the person was sure to receive abuses.
I was around ten years old in those days. I passed from there with my younger brother playing with him. I had put on old styled slippers (leather slippers generally worn by women). The slippers were big in size hence, while taking a step, it was making ‘patak…patak’ sound. At the same time, Khushal uncle was repairing the wicket gate with a strand of vines. Accidentally, on one hand, the strand of vines got torn and on the other hand, I was repeating the ‘patak…patak’ sound which was being produced by my slippers. And that was all to infuriate him. Khushal uncle felt that a little child was mocking him. Hence, with the torn strand of vines, he, abusing my mother, dashed to me and beat me several times. “Idiot, still you are a kid and calling your father ‘patak…patak’!” Without thinking about anything else and even leaving my younger brother behind, I ran away. I felt bad more about his abuses and arrogance than being beaten by him. With the intention of taking revenge, our mischievous friends’ group fired crackers of ‘patak patak’ on Khushal uncle’s castle. He got infuriated and started chasing us while bombarding with abusive words. The echo of ‘patak patak patak’ resounded all over. The pranksters found it very interesting hence Khushal uncle was turned into Patak uncle. God knows why, but just hearing a sound ‘patak’, he used to lose his control on his senses and dash to lash people madly.

Then it became routine, whether he was going to answer nature’s call, going to fields, passing from the bazaar or going to the out skirt of the village, an echo of ‘patak’ used to come from some unknown direction. On one hand, a horse laugh would spread out and on the other hand, a deluge of abusive words. The more he got irritated, the more he heard the word ‘patak’. The circumstances got so worst that he started keeping stones in his pockets and a pole in his hand. If somebody would get caught by him, the person was sure to get seriously injured. The old man used to beat mercilessly or abuse going home to home. The elders got
upset. They persuaded the children not to harass him and sometimes even beat them as a punishment. But, the doors would be closed with ‘patak’ sound, the woods would be broken with ‘patak’ sound, the bullocks would be unhitched with ‘patak’ sound, and the sprouts too would be extracted with ‘patak’ sound. They both had mixed with each other so well that it was impossible to separate them!

In those days, there came the festival of Diwali. It won’t be good if the old man squabbled while the women singing Garaba on the festival of Navaratri. Hence, the elders had warned the children not to irritate the old man. But, on the morning of Kali Chaudas, the old man beat a person seriously without any fault. He got infuriated. There was a tradition of taking out a procession with mairaiyu on the night of the same day. People gathered at the temple of Goddess on the turn of a street with the firebrands in their hands. Most of them were youngsters hence a ploy was planned. On that time, the wicket gate was opened silently. A pot was kept beside his bed and a ladoo made up of ash were kept at each leg of the bed. The man even dared to tie him in his bed as a dead body is tied in a bier. When he woke up at midnight, the fastenings worked as barriers in getting up. When he got out of bed after some efforts and lit a kerosene lamp, he found the pot along with the ladoos. A message of death at all the four legs of the bed. The old man went mad. He made the night roar with harsh abusive language. He went home to home and abused people with their names. After much imploring, some people stopped him. They persuaded him and sent him back to his lobby.

On the day of Diwali, more wonder was created. The youngsters thought that the old man would abuse whosoever would come across. But nothing like that happened. The old man had changed completely. The frown face was replaced by a miserable face and the harshness of his eyes was replaced by compassion. By the time, he reached to the bazaar through the
chawk, the echo of ‘patak’ was heard several times but he didn’t even pay attention to it. Never before but on that day, he came and sat on the parapet of the Dharmashala when the women were singing Garaba.

After that, he was not seen for around ten days. When he returned, three feeble, about to die camels were following him. The cuts and sores on their backs were inviting a swarm of bees. While making the camels sit under the neem trees, he said, “Bloody wicked people! They used these animals for their interest until they could work. Now, when these camels are old and weak, they have become burden on them. They have kicked them out to let them die. But, I will take care of them. They will not die before my death!”

Now, he used to roam in the fields for the whole day, making the camels graze and treating their sores. When we gathered around out of curiosity, he said, “Once they recover, I will take you on ride around all the fields.”

In the hope of getting a ride of the camels, we too were praying to the God for the quick recuperation of the camels. But camels did not improve. One of the camels fell down into a valley while grazing and died there. Another one tumbled down in the grassland. The old man remained in the jungle for two days to protect him from stray dogs and wolves. He returned to his home with a wretched face, when the camel died. The third one came up to his verandah on the night of its death and fell off at the wicket gate itself. Out of curiosity, we asked, “Kaka, is it looking at the place of Marwad?”

“No dear, it is looking at me!” his eyes got wet.

After that event, he again disappeared for a month or so. One day, someone brought news, “Patak uncle is lying under the banyan tree.”
Some youngsters rushed there and brought him to his lobby. The old man was shivering out of fever. The Missionary master gave him a tablet. One man prepared a dish of *rab* for him but he could not take it more than few drops. I prepared hookah but he didn’t have strength to smoke it. He was conscious and was explaining something to the master with his gestures. He was making gestures for eating something. We thought he might have wished to eat something. The master responding him by nodding his head told us not to move away from his bed.

On that night, some youngsters stayed there. In the next morning, we came to know that Khushal uncle was no more. On his death, large number of children, youngsters and less number of elders had gathered. He had gone asleep permanently in the same charpoy which he himself had made by knitting coir. In those days, death used to frighten us but the man sleeping in front of us was receding our fear for death.

At around ten, his funeral procession was started. It was the first death in the whole locality without women’s wailing. We too were not crying however our hearts were sobbing from within. A large crowd of people joined his funeral as if paying respect to a leader. We who had annoyed and mocked him for his entire life were in the largest number. He was being taken to the graveyard in his charpoy itself. His grave was dug at a very good place, beside a *pipal* tree and near to a *neem* tree.

While covering his grave with an earth, the priest prayed. Accidentally he spoke, “God may give peace to the soul of Patak uncle.” Suddenly, smile appeared on everyone’s lips but on the very next moment they all took a gloomy look. And everybody realized that his name ‘Patak’ had been stored in everybody’s memory as his actual name. The grave was covered
with flowers. People brought flowers from wherever they could find. Khaniyo who had teased him the most was erecting the incense sticks with his wet eyes. Dano was stunned while lighting candles.

When all returned to his lonely open lobby, the Mission Master said, “Patak uncle had given eighty rupees to arrange a meal for children.”
I trust You!

I have immense trust on you!

Oh. . .God I have immense trust on you!

A sage is singing with a string harp and melodious voice. He was going from home to home; waiting outside for a moment or two. It was good if he would get something from there. Otherwise, he would give his blessings and move on. His face was reflecting satisfaction of whatever he could get. His face won’t reflect grief even if he didn’t get anything, someone didn’t welcome him, someone quickly closed doors with his arrival, or someone expressed dislike saying ‘move ahead’. His face was reflecting only contentment…serenity…!

He was not coming there daily. He appeared once in a month or two. He didn’t believe in roaming many homes or the whole village for begging. He never accepted alms in cash. He accepted only food.

“Baba! Will you take some rice?”

“No sir! Except flour, everything can be accepted.”

After collecting a bowl or two of flour, he would get someone to make him a roatala. He never hesitated in asking for help. His true appreciators and followers were the Bhils (Tribal community) living in the open grounds. One of the Bhili girls was baking his rotal on a baking pan and he was telling the stories of benevolence to the Bhils who would have
gathered around him. Someone of them was singing hymns also. The satsang with the Bhils who were accused to be thieves lasted till the roatala was baked or till the Bhils wished to listen. He won’t be worried about dinner, if he had got a lunch. He won’t beg for lunch if he got a dinner. A true saintly life! As night fell, he started singing hymns and telling stories. The stories taught lessons of life to the Bhils, ‘Don’t be idler and disloyal to your work, think of good for all, live united, share others’ problems, never forget your own land, and go to other places for earning only when it is not possible to avoid. Don’t get attracted to wine.’

The Bhils used to listen to his messages patiently. They would bring the matter to him for solution if they would have quarreled among themselves. Howsoever impudent a person may be but he becomes polite in front of Baba. Everybody followed his words! He never took anything from the Bhils. He used to beg flour only from the settled families.

“Maharaj! Does it happen that sometimes you don’t get food in this critical time of inflation and scarcity? What do you do if sometimes somebody doesn’t like you or somebody insults you? Earlier it was fine, but now can you afford to live on begging?”

He laughed with his innocent face. “Trust! Faith on the Almighty. Trust gives life and distrust brings death. Life without faith is worthless.”

“But, doesn’t the trust cost much sometimes, Maharaj?”

In response, he gave a loud and innocent laugh! Then, with some seriousness he said, “It is futile to dream for things and to worry for future is very meaningless. When the Almighty himself has given this good company and peaceful life then why shall I be worried about anything? And if we understand well this mantra of life only, the humanity will be emancipated. But, don’t feel bad sir if I ask you whether it’s your curiosity only or your
leisure that you are asking me these questions? What have you studied? I hope you haven’t thought of me as a rogue, have you?”

I was put into difficulty. My educational qualification was put to shame and there wasn’t any way to hide the pretence. Avoiding his question, I said, “Baba, come inside! Have a seat! Don’t think that I was disrespecting you. I would not call my questions a curiosity but I asked you because I see you only a few times in a year and that too with these nomadic Bhils. Your behavior and your unusual ragged outfit reveal your mind. Hence, the curiosity was met with the sense of wonder.”

He sat down comfortably. He smiled affectionately when I asked my wife to bring tea, “No sir, I haven’t developed habits of taking tea. I don’t have an alunu vrat but I prefer not to relish in the testes. I beg for flour from several homes. If only one rotala could be made of it, it is all. One rotala without salt is my full dish. One meal a day. Nothing is to be taken for dinner except fresh breaths.” The beauty of the saint’s face which had been burnished by the mixed flour from various homes was truly grand.

Kabir’s book was visible among many books on the shelf. Pointing towards it, he said, “It seems you have studied Hindi. Then you must have studied Kabir also. Kabira used to say,

Kabira in the market place, having a stick in his hand,

Those who are ready to burn their home shall only come with me.

Listening to his words, I felt to experience once the joy of burning one’s own home. You won’t believe me but I have earned two degrees from a university. The degrees didn’t do anything than enhance burden only. I felt that it was an entanglement of life. It was nothing
but to be one of the unemployed of this country. If the testimonials can not testify our life then why should we carry its burden? I could not follow Vinobaji in burning the certificates as I am still in search of a guru like Gandhi. I have been to Sabaramati and Vardha both the places. I haven’t yet developed the qualification to call it worthless but, at both the places, I saw only the people without soul, artificial followers. You must have seen the cages in a zoo, haven’t you? Its name would have been put on the name plate but you won’t find the animals alive in the cage.”

After having a glass of cold water, he too became cold as if speechless. I requested him lot to share his experiences but he said, “No, whatever I have said seems like a prattling. It seems like a boasting of my own self. One should not say anything until one has something meaningful to say. I am in a very initial stage of the spiritual journey!”

Within few moments, my mind was filled with the material things. I thought, “He seems a very shrewd person. He must have taken experiences of all the types. He might have been reading newspapers too. He is good at dazzling people. Now, he may manage to ask for money!”

Meanwhile, he got up and said, “Sir you please sit, but I will take your leave. Wise men have said that when distrust enters in the sympathy, the conversation should be ended.”

I felt deeply embarrassed and thought, “How could he learn about what I was thinking? He seems a very keen observer!”

My wife came out after he left. She was sweeping the floor, suddenly she asked, “Whose money is this lying here? Is it yours? Do you have any sense? The money is laying anywhere!” When I saw, it was ten rupees note in her hand.
When my money was at its appropriate place and no such thing had happened that the ten rupees could get lost like that, I thought, “Had the sadhu lost his money? But, how can a sadhu have ten rupees. It’s not possible” Doubt about the sadhu arose in my mind.

“Perhaps, it’s my own. Give me!” I said

“The rogue was sitting here only. What if he had found it? Who told you to invite him even inside the home?” I was not in mood to argue with my wife hence I remained silent.

Few days passed after that incident and I forgot about it. Meanwhile, suddenly, I happened to visit a police station.

“You scoundrel! Why are you calling us master now and again? Your father is not the master here that you will be relieved.” The policemen were rebuking a man in jail.

“You are right master! But when have I even told you to relieve me? I am myself saying that I am guilty. Punish me however you want to punish… master!” the prisoner said.

“Again you picked up ‘master…master’? You scoundrel, what problem do you have in calling us sirs?”

“I am addressing you as master because it stands for the Almighty. And you all are too parts of the Almighty, aren’t you?” he explained.

Few of the policemen laughed on that, “Rascal, he seems mad.”

“No, he is cheating us by being so. Otherwise, he is very shrewd. Rascal! Since long, many doubtful things have been noted about him in the police station.
His speaking style of the word master drew my attention. It was the same tranquil face. Memories came alive. He was the same sadhu. At last, he had been caught up. He could not escape from the powerful trap of the police.

My heart felt bad for a moment. On that day, my heart wanted to see him as an ideal man but the material mind was suspicious about him. At last, the suspicion was proved right.

When I was about to move from there, I heard a voice, “Welcome sir! What made you to come here?” PSI Thakarsir was calling me inside.

“Namaste sir! I have some work with you but it seems that nobody is free here. All are busy with some ascetic man.”

Sir laughed on that. “This is a very interesting incident. Have a seat please. You would specifically like it very much. Have you seen this sadhu before?”

“Yes. I know him since long. He seemed to be educated. He is mostly seen among the tribal people. I had even developed some respect for him, but seeing him here, now...!”

“You are right but here all have proved him a cheater. They think of him as cunning and scoundrel. But I have different opinion about him. In fact, now the matter has become a matter of respect and dignity. They have taken the matter as per their understanding and I see the matter with my eyes. But...”

“I don’t understand what you are saying sir! I know him at some extent hence I too have little regret as well as confusion for him. You please explain it in detail. Perhaps, I can be of some help to him.”
“He has been caught up before three days. His language is very elevated and polite. I could not see offence and sin in his eyes but he himself has accepted the crime. The thing is there was one contractor in the work of canal construction and some Bhils were working as laborers under him. They hadn’t been paid for last two week. Meanwhile, one of the Bhils received urgent call from his native place. He requested the contractor for some amount of money. “Please give me some money. I don’t have money and I need to go to my native place.” The contractor denied to pay a penny before completion of the work. The worker first beseeched, then condemned him and then attacked him. On the same night, the contractor’s coat was stolen from his office. He has complained that there were three hundred rupees in its pocket. On the next morning, the Bhil young man had gone. The coat is found from the distant fields. Only money is missing, nothing else.”

“But, in all these hush, how did the sadhu come into the picture?”

“After the contractor’s complaint, two policemen went there. The man was already not there but his wife was wailing. The sadhu was persuading something to the crowd of the Bhils. When the policemen started inspecting all, they came to know that the man had already run away. Hence, their suspicion was confirmed. In the absence of the suspicious, they decided to arrest his wife. They thought the man would come to them from wherever he might be, once he would come to know about his wife’s arrest. The woman got frightened when she heard the order of the police station. All the Bhils gathered there. Finding an opportunity in that chaos, the sadhu too started running away from there. The police became suspicious about him and caught him from running away. When he was brought here and inspected, they found around hundred and twenty five rupees from his bag. When he was inquired further, he said, “I myself have stolen the money. I was running away to escape from you.”
“When the amount of money is found from him and he is also accepting the offence then now what is the problem? In these days, in a way, there are lots of such deceitful saints!” I said.

“At first sight, one would tend to believe the way you are thinking about it. These policemen too have the same opinion. In my personal inspection, I came to know that the sadhu is a virtuous man and he is concerned for the poor Bhils. On the other hand, the Bhils too respect and trust him a lot. They deposit their savings with him. It could not be possible, had he been a scoundrel. They all are in sorrow because of his arrest. They are saying that the money found from him is their savings which was deposited with him.” the inspected explained.

“Then why did he run away when the police was inspecting for the thief? Why didn’t he came forward and protect them?”

“Actually, he pretended doing so to draw police’s attention towards him and got attested. He knew that until the actual thief is found, the policemen would harass all the Bhils. He wanted to save them from that situation.”

“But, why would anybody do so? Any reason?”

“The reason is his concern and sympathy towards these ignorant poor people. He knew how police behaves with the accused!”

“Why doesn’t he persuade the Bhils for not doing any such illegal, dishonest things when he is already very close to the Bhils?”

“Why should we believe that he is not doing so? I have heard that he was planning to wind up the matter at their own level. He had the savings of the Bhils with him. He persuaded the
Bhils to resolve the problem with the contractor by giving him the money of their savings. After that he proposed to persuade the absconder hence their work remains continue. But, the contractor didn’t agree with the amount of hundred and twenty five rupees. He firmly demanded three hundred rupees and, moreover, also kept a condition of letting go the wages of last two weeks. He has complained to frighten them. In addition to that, the police came into the matter.”

“If the matter is so clear and you are confident about him being innocent then why don’t you take the right actions?”

“It’s not as easy as you see it. The thing is when the absconder came to know that the sadhu has got arrested in his place, he immediately came back leaving his dying mother there. Now, he says that the contractor’s coat was stolen by him and he hardly found thirty rupees from its pocket. Now, if I arrest him, there would be two accused. If the legal procedure is followed further, both of them, the one who has stolen the money and the other who has hidden the stolen amount, might get punished.”

“What fuss the policemen have created with him?”

“I have denied them to beat him but these people see my order as religious bias. The contractor has decided to go ahead with the legal matter therefore they all now want to prove the sadhu an actual thief. Not only that but one another ascetic man who is believed to be smuggling opium and ganja could not be trapped by the police. They are planning to fit him in that matter too. He says he would confess in the court whatever he has done but won’t accept the false accusations even if they kill him. He said, “You should present me before the Magistrate within twenty four hours. Instead you have been pestering me since last three
days. But, still I give you time to think about it!” Our police department is getting irritated because of his such ideas. They are annoying him like anything and I am trying to find some way to save him.”

“They all get scared with your one cry and these are all working under you, then how can you afford to be so helpless?”

“I am also bound by the law. Everything should be done as per the legal procedure, only sentimentality doesn’t work!” he himself said the words which had been used to criticize him for his human approached work.

I said, “Thakarsir, first time, I have come across a man like you in this department. I don’t have respect only but also affection for you. If you need it anywhere, I am ready to be surety for him in the court.”

“No, it is not required. You just see, I will put it right.”

And he started his legal procedure. The contractor became very submissive when he came to know that the footprints of the government cement being sold in the black market were leading to him. He bowed down when he was warned for filling wrong complaint against the laborers to avoid paying two thousand and five hundred rupees, an amount of last two weeks wages of the laborers. He withdrew his complaint and paid the wages. Thakarsir advised the person not to do such things and relieved Baba with respect.

On that night, Baba was playing a harp and the young man was accompanying him with his small drum in the open fields, under the starry night and among the Bhils.

You have come to help of Narsinh Mehta.
You have saved Prahlad,

O… with the one word of Ajaamil,

You took across even a sinner. . .

Oh. . . God, I have placed my trust on you. . .

The joy of hymns attracted me. I went there and sat down on one side. In a small break, I apologetically told him, “Maharaja! On that day, when you had come to my home, your ten rupees had fallen off there. Please accept it. I have made a serious mistake in recognizing you. Please forgive me!”

He smiled. Taking the ten rupees note from my hand, and giving it to another man, he said, “Go and get prasad of this.” Then turning back to me, he said, “Master, the note didn’t fall but it was fallen. On that morning when I came to your home, one generous person had given it me without my asking for it. Perhaps, he had been benefited by some unexpected things. You first talked with sympathy but then you too doubted me and thought that I would be a rogue. I felt that you won’t have doubted me, had the unrightful ten rupees not been with me. At that time, I felt to let go the attachment for the ten rupees. In a way, I was not going to spend it on me.”

The hymns were sung till late night. In the morning, the field was empty. The tents had been furled up. Years have passed after that event but I haven’t seen Baba again. Today even, when I see an ascetic man, my heart becomes restless to see the true saintly face in these faces. But even after long time, I could find the face again.
It was the day of Sharadpurnima. A fair was arranged in Dakor. Hence, there was full traffic in the train to Godhara. I was going to Umareth. Hence, I contacted a familiar T.C. and arranged for a seat in the first class compartment. Only one traveler was traveling with me on the opposite berth. He was around thirty five with slight dusky complexion. His jaws were slight fat and the healthy chicks were reddish. His hair was black, long and thick and combed slick back. The ears sloping down on the outer side were giving his face a flat shape. A golden frame goggles was on his eyes and the Times of India in his hand. While entering in the coach our eyes met and returned back with the message of unacquainted. I was holding a Hindi translation of a book ‘Rathchatra’ and my name was written on its wrapper. I was engrossed in my reading. But the man was looking at me again and again from the newspaper. He was thinking about something but then restrained himself from asking me.

At Sadanapur, the ticket checker Dashbhai asked me, “Where are you travelling up to?”

I answered, “Umareth.”

After that when the train pulled out of the station, the suited young man asked, “Is Umareth your native place?”

“No, my native is Oad which will come after Bhalej.”

“Is it your name written on the book?”
“Yes, It is.”

“Can you recognize me?”

Diving deep into the valley of memories, I started searching for his face in my past. His thin long lips were smiling. The appearance of his eyes after taking off his goggles and his slick back but straight combed hair which were once known as ‘porcupine’s arrow head’ created an image in my mind. But the image of the clean, healthy and educated gentleman’s image was anyhow not matching with the image I had created from my memories.

I again and again tried to find a nose with layers of dirt, a mould of rheum at the corners of slanting eyes, always runny nose, nails unusually long, yellow teeth with scum in the opposite man’s face. Even both the images were almost similar; my heart was denying to match them.

Then, he laughed aloud and asked again, “Oy Jasya, Haven’t you recognized me yet?” and receiving a clue from my name, his image came alive and words came out of my mouth, “You are Jasyo Nepado, aren’t you?”

“Shut up rascal!” saying so in English, he got up spreading his hands and we embraced each other. As I was seeing him after a long time of twenty years, my heart was not accepting him as Jasyo Nepado who had not only transformed but also rejuvenated himself.

How could I even believe it? When I entered in the board school in the fifth standard, only Jasyo among all of us was the most vulnerable classmate. Rarely had he taken bath. His entire body was coated with the layers of dirt. Everywhere on his body, there were abscesses and ulcers on which flies would be buzzing in group. He used to scratch the scales of the
blisters with long dirty nails. The rheum in his eyes used to irritate us daily. Hardly could anyone identify the color of his shirt. His half pant had become hard and moreover a number of rags were sewed on it. Nobody would sit beside him but on the other hand, he would not sit near Satiya. Even though he was the most filthy one, he had proud of being higher than Satiya. His caste was Kanabi but he liked to be called by his surname Patel. He used to sit on the floor beside the big box of maps in the class. Neither any teacher ever asked him to read to the class nor did he ever show an interest for any such activity. He would remain seated bowing down his head for the whole day or at the most, he would prey the flies which might have been annoying him.

When teacher Mahijisir brought me forth for singing prayer, many had praised my good voice. Among them, he too complemented, “You sing very well. Sing daily!” His smile of that moment with his dirty lips and yellow teeth had made its place in my memory forever.

Almost all the classmates used to tease him. When he would be addressed as ‘Nepado’, he would dash to fight and scratch them with his nails. He hardly spoke anything. He used to protest rarely and suffer mostly. I didn’t have any affection for him but sympathy. When he asked for anything to me, I never denied. Sometime, when I went to him to talk to him or teach him some sums, he kept on staring at me. Once, he had brought berries in his filthy pocket. In the recess, when I was going out of the class with Satiya, he came into the way. He took out a handful of berries from his pocket and, offering it to me, said, “Have it! I have brought it specifically for you.”

His hands with berries were dirty but his eyes were full of affection. When I stretched my hands, he emptied his whole pocket of berries.
While going out, Magan said, “Oh very bad! Are you going to eat the berries of his very dirty hands? Throw it away!”

Satiya said, “Didn’t Ram ate the polluted berries?”

And after this, forgetting about washing the berries with water, we all three sat at the parapet of the well and ate the berries happily.

Once, Mahijisir organized a school tour for Galateshwar. One rupee was its fee and snack had to be brought from our homes. From the whole class, we two, I and Jasyo, only didn’t get money for the fees of the tour. But who would sing songs at the bank of Galati River without me? How could our team win in the game of Antakshari? Hence two of my friends, Jadav Moti and Vinu Chiman arranged for my fees. Then, I borrowed a shirt of one friend and a half pant from another and this was how a pair of cloth was made for the tour. We walked up to the railway station. When started walking, Jasyo in his ragged and dirty cloths was also following us. At the station, he too got into the train. He came and enjoyed the tour without invitation and paying a penny.

Then, came the final exams. Jasyo failed in the exam. After giving us result, we were number wise being sent to the new class. We moved from fifth to sixth standard but Jasyo had sat down amid the door of the sixth standard class and started crying aloud. After some times, he stopped and saw around the impact of his yelling and then started crying loud again. The teachers were busy in their work and we got bore of his crying program. Then, it was the time for recess but Jasyo didn’t leave his place. He would raise his voice when he would see a teacher passing from there. When he didn’t stop crying even after recess, Mahijimaster got angry and said, “O… Akabarbhai, Ganapatbhai please come here. Let’s send him to the sixth
standard!” And truly, Jasya’s yelling made his way to the sixth standard. As soon as he entered in the class, he wiped out tears and laughed showing his yellow teeth.

Ganapatsir was the class teacher of the sixth standard. His caste was Brahmin. He was as strict as lazy. If sometimes he would feel to teach, he would teach the property of Inversion Angle. Otherwise, most of the time, lying his legs on a table and leaning his chair against a back wall, he remained asleep. We could not make a slight noise, when he would be sleeping. He always made Jasya sit at a distant. Jasyo passed the final exam of the sixth standard too with his practice of crying.

I didn’t know much about his family but that much I knew that he too had a step mother and his family was very poor. His father used to pass his whole day in the fields and nobody was much concerned about Jasya.

Departed after the seventh standard, now, we met after twenty years. How can I match my class mate, original Jasya with this new rejuvenated Jasya?

He removed my confusion. His one of the uncles was living in Kalakata and doing tobacco business. He didn’t have any child. Once, when he came to Jasya’s home, he felt bad about Jasya’s condition. Moreover, on that day, due to some fault, his father beat him mercilessly. The neighbors suggested the uncle to bring Jasya with him. He felt it right and Jasya’s fortune took a turn.

“He suggested me to take bath and become neat and clean. I went to the lake, removed the layers of dirt by scrubbing an earthen pot on my whole body. When I washed my clothes, it got torn. Hence, Uncle purchased a new pair from a Sindhi shop. When I was going with him, I didn’t know where I was going but I surely knew that I was going out of a hell.”
“Uncle thought that I would do some work here and there, and just live with them but Aunty was truly an incarnation of compassion. She said, “Now, when you have already brought him here, the purpose can be served when we make him a good human also!” As a result, a teacher started coming to my home to teach me. Initially, I could not understand anything. The habit of being seated bowing down became a barrier there too. But, one day, a cane made its way on my back. I got urinated, my whole body was shivering and tears were rolling down from my eyes. The master seemed like a devil. He shouted, “Tell me, whether you want to remain like an animal or you want to be a man also?”

That mark of cane on my back opened my eyes. I started paying attention to my study. Within short time, my senses became keen. Within a year, I learnt Mathematics-Gujarati and Bengali and also leant working English. In the next year, I was admitted in a regular school and, stumbling at some points, I reached to matrix. I learnt managing Uncle’s shop, the complexities of business and all other things. When I championed business, Uncle got me married. Before two years, Uncle passed away and Aunty is living with us. I am going to make settlement of a piece of land in the village. You tell something about you. What’s going on in your life?”

When I narrated my life, he, nodding his head, said, “I knew that you would be a teacher only but you haven’t progressed well as per your talent. The teacher who taught me is still teaching my children and addressing me as sheth. Why didn’t you try some other line?”

Seeing a Captain cigarette between his fingers with gold and diamond rings, I remembered somebody’s words: ‘Those sitting on the first bench of the school are hardly first in the queue
of life and those who sit last in the last line of the classroom are likely to come first in the desert of life.’ Jasyo was its true example.

Before his station arrived, he took my address and gave his address along with a beautiful golden covered fountain pen. He said, “In this comfortable life, many times, I remembered you only. God knows why but I cannot forget that you alone were kind to me in the whole class. Write to me sometimes and came to my home for sure if you happen to come to Kalakata.”

The letter correspondence with him didn’t work as he never answered my any letter. In the year of 1973, I was selected as a non-Hindi speaking Hindi writer by the Education Ministry of the Government of India. I happened to attend a literary workshop which was organized in Gurudev Tagor’s Shantiniketan. I was completely unknown to Kalakata. Where to go? Then, I remembered him again. I wrote to him, “On that day, you very affectionately invited me to Kalakata. Because I have got an opportunity, I am coming there. I am unknown and scared of the huge city. I am writing this letter with the faith that you will surely come to the station to receive me.” But he didn’t reply even to that letter. When I got off at the Howrah station, nobody had come to receive me.

I reached to Shantiniketan via Bolpur in the evening and, to my surprise, I received his letter there in Shantiniketan. “I received you letter late. Please tell me in your return letter when will you come back to Kalakata. To my great surprise, he came up to Shantiniketan with his car. He drove me to Gurudev’s birthplace Jodasankur and then Kalakata from there. He himself showed me all the places from Botanical Garden to Kali Temple and from
Belurmadh to Secretariat. During that trip, he sometimes laughed friendly but didn’t say anything openly. His two children were studying in a convent and wife was ruling at home.

On that day, when we were getting ready to go out, we heard a sound of breaking costly tea cups and dishes and then came the angry voice of his wife. He immediately reached there with a smiling face and then softly said to her, “Madhu, please don’t scold him. It happens. Sometime we too make mistakes. Don’t cut his salary. Radhu, you go. Go down stair. Don’t feel bad about madam!”

He brought me down with a smiling face. There, Radhu, with his miserable face was repenting. Starting his car, he told Radhu in Hindi, “Radhu, come! Sit down in the back seat. I will drop you in the bazaar. Today, you won’t be able to enter in the home.”

Dropping him in the bazaar, he said to me, “I have suffered a lot hence I cannot bear other’s problem also. She is from a wealthy family and she didn’t know my critical condition of those days. You won’t believe that that is why I cut all the relations with our village also. What else had it given to us than pain and suffering? Nobody was concerned about me in those days. But, today, people come all along here with the references of far relatives. I don’t like such pretentious relations.”

Before two days of my return, he was required to go in the South for some business work. Dropping me at the Rupchand Roy Steet, he very sincerely said, “I don’t like to write letters. But meet me without fail if you happen to come again. I don’t wish to dream about the relations which did never exist. That’s why I have cut myself from our village. I would like if you will keep writing me.”
When he left, the man to whose house I had stayed said to me, “He is a Gujarati but doesn’t keep any relation with anybody.”

And I am writing to him even today, but the letters have always remain unanswered.
The Beats of *Tabla* and the Rhythm of Life

Near the small village of Vilaspur, in the frozen dark night, the beautiful beats of *tabla* were repeatedly bringing to front my memories. Usually, the beats of the *tabla* pleases one’s mind without shuddering one’s emotions but those continuous beats of the *tabla* were distracting me. That *taal* used to make me crazy even when I didn’t know much about music. On that day, when I had developed some understanding of that *taal*, I felt I was in better position to understand it. I was feeling drowsy and an image of the constantly playing long thin fingers on the surface of the *tabla* was getting shape in my closed eyes. The reminiscences of his palm on the *baya* and the words of the songs being sung simultaneously were giving me a call of years old love and relations. A memory was making me restless. When I could not bear it anymore, I got up. I took the host friend with me. After walking down a long distant with a torch light, when we reached at the place where the hymns were being sung in an occasion, the *kerava taal* was being played. The way the player of the *tabla* was seated, a *bayu* kept in his lap, and a *tabalu* arranged near his folded left leg, skillfully found out the right place for an index finger, the beats which were being produced by the middle and ring fingers and the strokes of his palm on the *bayu* were exactly resembling with the image I had created in my mind. But, the long oiled hair covering his neck, dark black beard and worn out framed spectacle on his long nose had made his appearance very strange.

I was in a bit of a spot. “How can he be here at such a far distant and unknown place?”
My mind was reprimanding my heart, “You are very interested in finding relations anywhere. If a slight clue is found, there you start seeing them as relatives!”

In spite of the logical arguments, I asked to one of the hymn singers. “Who is that man playing tabla?”

The man paused for a while, looked at the tabla player. I had pointed at and said in Hindi, “He? He is our Peeru Bhagat!” he closed his eyes again and started swinging with a pair of cymbals.

Peeru Bhagat’s fingers were playing on the surface of the tabla. The beats were creating a wonderful rhythm.

The world is engrossed in praying to the Almighty,

This mortal life can also achieve the immortality.

This refrain was being taken up by the villagers who were engrossed in the hymns forgetting everything else. A break was declared after long and exhausting play. Peeru struck his fingers on the surface of the tabla three times and then he struck his palm on it for last time. The audience of devotees was swinging their heads even after the completion of the hymns. As if they had attained enlightenment.

The beats of the tabla towards the end of the hymn created a scene before me. I dived into my past to find the memories for the scene. I looked at Peeru and he too looked at me. When he saw a man in a different outfit among the villagers, he observed me closely. Our eyes met and he got surprised. He could identify my familiar face hence his heart missed a beat. Meanwhile, somebody requested him to sing and he raised his voice:
In water, a fish is thirsty,

It makes me laugh that

The fish is thirsty in the water!

It was the same tune, the same rhythm, the same style of swinging his head and the same Bageshri raga. I wondered, “Has Peeru become Guru here?” Perhaps yes! A string of beads swinging in his neck was speaking for it.

The hymn was completed at very late night. Then Guruji talked about the emancipation of human soul; the devotees hailed the words of Guruji. Then Prasad was distributed and everybody got up and started dispersing. I told to my host friend, “It seems I know this Guruji. If that is so, then you please leave alone, I will go with him.” Meanwhile, Guruji came to me and putting his hand on my shoulder said, “How have you arrived here? Don’t say anything now. Come with me.”

“He seems to be Guriji’s relative.” – Believing so, the devotees and the fellow singers didn’t show much curiosity.

“Send more milk in the morning!” –Saying so, Peeru Bhagat moved on and I followed him. I realized that he was being respected very well. His impression was strong on the devotees.

He ordered in Hindi to two youngsters who were walking behind at some distance, “You go to sleep and give me the stick.” And addressing me, he said, “You will require to walk for some distance.”

After walking for one and a half mile, we reached at the end of the village. A worn out temple and residence type Dharmashala were visible in the dark night. Listening to the
sound of his throat clearing, a chain for fastening door made noise from inside the room. A woman and opened the latch of the wicket gate.

“Lali, bring lantern. See, who has come with me!”

Their language in the other regions had changed completely but he asked Lali to recognize me in the language in which they had fallen in love with each other but Lali said, “Don’t tease me, tell me who is it?”

As soon as the lantern was brightened, my memories got triggered. The fact that the rumors were true pained me. She was shadowed by her age with dark complexion and weak body. And Peeru would become our Paslo if we would remove his long beard-mustache and bhagava sleeveless long shirt.

Before Lali could get surprised seeing me in the light of the lantern, my memories quickly travelled back to the ruins of the home before three decades.

On the west, there was the back side of Pasya’s home. In the east, a bricks wall was built. In the north, wooden sheets had been fastened up to the height of twenty five feet and in the south, there was a mud wall of Kana Khoja’s house. Amid these four walls, there was 24 square yard wide desolate space. It was known as Khander (ruins) among others but it was a playground for the children like us. We used to perform dramas there, becoming kings and queens. Sometimes we used to play Bhavai and the scenes of Rangalo-Rangli. We used to perform the women characters of the dramas and Bhavai one after the other. We had learnt the entire dialogues by heart. We liked to be wise and honest while playing the character. During these performances, we used to make the stories so interesting that the leisurely seated elders too would get glued and could not leave before the completion of a play.
Paso was the youngest son of Kanaji Khoja. He was the eldest, fair, long and brave among all of us. Kanji Bhagat was a singer of hymns in religious festivity and *Kafi*. The musical instruments like *tabla*, *dholak*, and few types of cymbals of the hymn-group were being kept at his home. Since his childhood, Paso had been listening to the tunes and trying his hands on *tabla*. He naturally inherited music sense from his ancestors. He learnt to play *tabla* powerfully at the age of seven-eight only. He knew how to find a right place of the beats on the surface of *tabla*. Everybody was impressed by his skills. After a congregation donated a harmonium to the singers’ group, he had been ruling the *tabla*. When we weren’t interested in other things, we used to gather and sing songs and he used to be an accompanist.

In those days, a drama company had come in our village. First time, we heard the name of Chiman Marwadi. In those days, we could not afford to buy even the third class ticket of three *annas*. Someone who would have entered in the show secretly would narrate us the play next day and we would get desperate to go and watch the show at least once.

In those days, the play called *Pruthviraj Chauhan* had become very popular. Consecutive five shows were required to be arranged and the interested people from so many villages had come to watch the play. Our friend Paso too had watched it. We had gone crazy for the play from his narration of it. But he was dissatisfied for one thing. He said to me, “Had you come with me, we could have remembered few couplets of the songs. Alas! How beautiful *tabla* they were playing!” Then he used to play and make us listen whatsoever he had remembered.

The narration of the abduction of Sayukta and the sharp words of Pruthviraj created a lot of curiosity in us. Hence, we used to go to the stage in the recess as well as after leaving the school early. Even if we didn’t get to see the performance, at least, we could see its actors!
Our friend Satiya’s father was working there to sweep the theatre. Satiya too used to go with him and help him in collecting litters. The drama company men knew him hence he used to take us inside the theatre one by one. We used to clean chairs, sprinkle water on the land and used to get satisfied by seeing the actors. Among all that, one day brought luck to us.

We saw a man on the stage with long hair, broad forehead, dark wide eyes, broad chest, strong shoulders and long neck with a harsh face. Satiyo whispered to us, “Pruthviraj Chauhan”. We got stunned with the sense of wonder. As if the stupendous historical figure had become impatient to kill an inept person.

He was extremely angry when we saw him. He was singing a song but he didn’t like the beats of tabla. Perhaps his player of tabla had been ill or had gone away somewhere. Now, another man with little knowledge of tabla was trying to play for his song but his coarseness was irritatiing Pruthviraj. He was instructing the man but the man was already scared of him, hence his shivering hands were making more mistakes. Meanwhile, once he shouted on him so loud that we too got frightened. This process ran for some more time and then, Pruthviraj sat down on the throne disappointedly. Our friend Satiyo was actually very smart. He could play dholak as well as he was aware about Pasya’s skills of tabla playing. Pulling himself together, he went on the stage and nervously said, “Sir! One of our friends could play tabla very well. Shall I call him here?”

The big head which had fallen down on the arm of the chair was raised, the eyes with full of anger and hatred were opened and we all got frightened.

“You idiots! Go away just now!” We ran away but Satiyo remained there with his hands folded.
“Honestly sir, he beautifully plays tune on *tabla*.” he reiterated.

Pruthviraj got smooth listening about tune. A play was scheduled in the evening and his songs needed right tune. “Call him in. Who is that boy?”

Paslo - Parasotam presented himself. Curly hair, slim forehead, long hand in half sleeve shirt, and slim long fingers. His eyes were shedding his expertise along with the fear of the man.

“Do you know playing *tabla*?” Pruthviraj asked.

He nodded in response.

“Where have you leant?” he further asked.

Paslo whispered to himself, “Does one even need to learn *tabla*?” he kept on thinking about the foolish question.

Meanwhile, he ordered, “Give him a pair of *tabla*.”

Paso sat down there only with crossing legs. He arranged *bayu* in his lap and placed a *tablu* near the knee of left leg and then looked at Pruthviraj.

His clumsy style of sitting made Pruthviraj laugh but the way he struck the *tablu* for finding right place for tune and the way he got right sound from the *bayu* made Pruthviraj surprised. Nonetheless, as if he was playing with a child, he very amusingly said, “Play this: dhee dhee dharatak, tinna, kata! Dhin dhin dharatak!”

Pasyo too kept staring at his face as other were.

“Oy. .. play this! I am telling you what to play!”
“But sir! How can I play if nobody is singing a song?”

Then Pruthviraj realized. He called the harmonium player and, I still remember, he himself sang in his melodies voice:

“Embellished as a bride, she looks angelic.”

And Pasla’s fingers casted magic on the tabla. In a moment, he found the right tune and then Pruthviraj too could not move his eyes from Pasla’s dancing fingers on the tabla.

As soon as the song got over, he hugged Paso. “Dear son, where have you learnt to play?”

“At my home only! These tabla are kept at my home only.” Paso answered.

After that, he understood properly all the instructions of when to start playing, when to beat it distinctively, and when to stop. We could not realize when the next half and an hour had passed. At the end, Prusthviraj gave him two rupees out of happiness and instructed him to be back on time for the play in the evening.

With the king’s order, our entry passes were arranged and the seats in the first row of second class were reserved for us. After around five days, the original tabla master came however our entry in the show continued. In those days, Paso had become our bosom friend and we two-three of us had even decided to join and go with the company secretly, if the drama company would have accepted us to work with them. Nobody knew about our changed routine of those days. We went to school in the day and secretly ran away to the theatre from there. We did their work enthusiastically. In the evening, we completed our duties at home quickly and then reached to the theater at night. These were the days of immense fun. Chiman Marwadi had become our god. His slightly short wife who used to play Sayukta was
like a goddess to us and the beautiful acting of Amir Karnataki had made mad. Whenever we would get some free time in the afternoon, our ramshackle playground used to turn into a theater.

When the drama company was about to wind up their stay, Chiman Mawradi called Pasa’s father Kanaji Bhagat and requested him to send Pasa with them. He happily put ten rupees in into his hand and persuaded, “The boy is very clever. He only needs little bit of training and he would be a famous tabla player. I will pay twenty rupees per month along with the food and clothes.”

But uncle Kanji didn’t see it right. He, on the contrary, advised Pruthviraj, “The drama people are not trustworthy. My son’s life may get spoiled. He would become foppish and careless about life.”

After that, the drama company went away by abducting our aspirations and sky-high dreams. For days, we felt the pain of departing with our loved ones. During recess, we used to visit the barren place of the theatre and our eyes used to get wet. Now, we didn’t like our ramshackle playground at the ruins and sometimes while paying some characters, the remembrance of the scenes of the drama used to become so painful that we started crying. As a result, we even stopped performing the characters.

In those days, two unknown persons’ visits to our ramshackle playground became frequent. After few days, footings were prepared and within a few days a small house was built up there. On another day, Captain Dhanajibhai, his wife Jethubai, and their seventeen-eighteen years old daughter Lali came there with their household stuffs to live in the house. Dhanjibhai had served army for years and now, he had come to his village in his retirement.
His wife had slight poor eye vision and he himself too was not in position to do any hard work. Their worry about their young girl’s marriage had brought them in the village. For days, he used to wander in the neighboring villages and return after a fortnight or a month. He would bring with him some grains and food and go back again after a stay of a day or two. Jethubai used to go in the fields with the neighbors to collect firewood and some vegetables. Lali had studied up to few standards and had been brought up in the city hence her mother didn’t feel it right to send her for labor work.

Now, instead of the ramshackle playground, we used to meet in the middle room of Pasa’s home. Singing songs of the dramas and to recollect the golden memories of the drama were our new hobbies. Sometimes Lali used to come there and listen attentively the beats of Pasa’s tabla. We have seen that sometimes her feet and her hands used to move with the rhythm. But one day, we got extremely shocked. When Paso was engrossed in the tune which would move anybody’s heart, Lali got up, shut the front door and her feet started moving in harmony with the beats of the tabla. She reminded us of Amir Karnataki, the same style and expressions. Girls used to play with us in the games like Manch, Chayada, Kooka or at the most used to sing puzzles but never had any girl joined in our fun of singing, music and acting. However, a young girl started dancing among us was very shocking. We got stunned out of fear. Paso was engrossed in his tune and Lali too was dancing forgetting about everything else. We felt that the girl had certainly gone mad and she was going to put us in troubles. But, meanwhile, she gave us another blow. While dancing, she started singing also:

My eyes are tired but my beloved hasn’t come,

My beloved hasn’t come, my sweetheart hasn’t come,
My eyes are tired but my beloved hasn’t come,

I have gone restless with the tune of flute,

I dressed nicely and went up to Vrundavan,

I waited for him on the bank of Jamuna, but my beloved hasn’t come

I have forgotten everything but my beloved hasn’t come.

Her melodious voice brought us back from the worried state of mind. And after some time, we even started clapping in tune with her words and as soon as the song was completed, we applauded for her.

She reminded us, “Nobody should come know about this incident outside of these walls. We will continue our play here secretly.” From that day, Paso had no more remained our friend. He succumbed himself to Lali. In a way, he was four-five years elder than us. Lali was two years elder then him also. Lali’s touch had dragged his heart away from us. He became prudent. Now, he didn’t like to play with us. He used to remain lost. And he could not bear a single critical word about her. He used to chat with Lali for hours. Sometimes we had seen him asleep keeping his head in Lali’s lap. But, we didn’t feel anything wrong about it as our singing and music playing remained continuous. He used to become passionate with his tabla and Lali used to get engrossed in dance.

Due to Lali’s father’s job, they had stayed in Mumbai for some time. There, a woman, to whose home Lali was going for work as maid, was running dance classes. Lali had learnt dance there by imitating other dance students as well as with the support of the woman. She had passed seven-eight years of her teenage there only hence she didn’t like to come to the
The mistress too was ready to keep Lali with her but Captain Dhanaji came to the village with both mother and daughter. He wandered in the villages in search of a little educated and well earning boy for his daughter. He had left the village before years. He served army for seven years and from there, he joined Missionary and served in the villages of Maharashtra. He also got married there only hence he didn’t have many relations with the people of our region. Moreover, Lali’s mother was from other caste hence social protocols became hurdle in finding a boy for Lali. In his running here and there for finding a boy, he passed away in a nearby village itself. Both the mother and daughter became dead meat. Jethubai’s eyes turned blank in the jittery situation.

Helpless Lali, small amount of pension, a blind mother! Lali’s difficult days brought calamity for her. Paso was helping her stealthily for small amount of grains and other needy things but how long could it run? At last, Lali decided to go on work at tobacco barnyard. But, there, inebriated by tobacco, she became unconscious. Returning back from there, she stopped at a cold-drink’s shop and asked for a bottle of soda. After ordering for the bottle, she realized that she didn’t have money to pay for. But the shopkeeper said, “You take soda, don’t worry. If you won’t money, I will give you.”

Coming from there, she persuaded Paso, “You please do what I am suggesting. I can see many such rogues keeping their lusty eyes on me. I cannot work in the tobacco barnyard. The other day, the headman said, ‘You won’t have to bear tobacco work. Work in master’s office.’ You know what it means, don’t you? The two men who had become my relative after father’s death are too planning to make money by getting me married with anybody. They haven’t succeeded only because my mother doesn’t agree with them. If you agree to come with me, we can go to Mumbai. The woman will keep you for playing tabla and I will do her...
household work. Otherwise, it is very hard to live here. I won’t be afraid of anything if you will be with me.”

Paso had never gone out of the village even. Hence, he got scared on the matter of running away to Mumbai. He made an excuse, “But what about your mother?”

“We cannot go leaving her behind. If you show readiness to go, I will convince her. I will tell her to take you with us. There, I will get some work and seeing her condition, somebody will even help us in getting a home on rent. The woman is very kind. I have written her a letter. If you too get some work, then there won’t be anything to worry about.”

But Paso was changing his mind every day. He was nervous about the big city like Mumbai. Before he could be confident about it and Lali convinced her mother, Jethudosi slipped down in a bathroom and her legs got fractured. She was admitted in the Missionary hospital at Anand. Lali remained by her side but the old woman could not breath long.

Helpless and alone Lali returned home and cried terribly. The relative started convincing her again and she started taking Pasla’s test. But, Puso could not promise anything for the matter of Mumbai.

On day, an evil looking man in his forty came with a marriage proposal for Lali. Silently Lali was watching the play of her fate. Some elder women were persuading Lali, “A girl is better sent off to her in laws. One needs some support and shelter for life. Don’t refuse if they agree for the relationship!”

Lali was not left with any other option than to protest. She caught up the rogues who were her distant uncles, “How may rupees have you taken for fixing the relationship?”
“Only the amount which is socially permitted.” One of them answered.

“That is fine but how much have you charged for yourselves?” the man bowed down but another explained, “They will come with the procession of their relatives. We will need to spend at least some amount on their food and other arrangements, won’t we?”

“That is true, but you have decided five hundred and fifty as a custom of all these. Out of that amount, the expenditure may hardly be of three hundred rupees. Then too, two hundred rupees will remain unused!”

“But we will need to spend amount on your dowry also, won’t we?” the uncle answered.

“Look uncle, I don’t have such aspirations. I will take care of my home when I will go there. You return me the additional five hundred and fifty rupees which you have taken from them additionally. After all, this amount has been given from my own home!”

Everybody became speechless. The city girl had proved herself very powerful. The members of the panch too found Lali’s argument appropriate. And the man was required to give five hundred and fifty rupees to Lali.

But, one of them went to Lali’s would be in-laws with the news that the girl was ready to get married. He also fixed the marriage date with them. He told them that he had given five hundred rupees to Lali in the presence of the panch hence the five hundred rupees were anyhow to go back to them. And with such explanation, he managed to get another two hundred rupees.
Exactly on the morning of the marriage day, Pasla’s mother shouted to wake up Lali. When she didn’t respond even after several calls, she herself came and removed her quilt. But, out of surprise, another quilt was arranged under the upper quilt and Lali was gone.

The marriage procession was put to embarrassment and the people could not stop themselves laughing on the bridegroom’s situation. The nefarious uncles were ordered to pay one thousand rupees to the bridegroom family and one hundred and twenty five rupees additionally to the panch for spoiling the reputation of the village. The bridegroom returned shamefaced!

“Lali taught a very good lesson to the gloating rogues.” We opined about her being very happy. But, Paslo was very sad among the happy friends. “Where will she go alone? Poor girl! It would have been better, had I too gone with her.”

With the departure of Lali, our meeting too were discarded. Now, Paso was not even looking at the tabla. He remained seated alone for many days. Keeping his bag at the school, he used to go to the bank of the village pond and sit there for hours throwing stoned into the water. To change his mood, once I jokingly sang:

   My eyes are tired but my beloved hasn’t come!

My other friend laughed on it but Paso got extremely angry on me. Looking into my eyes, he asked, “I have already given up life to you. Now, if you give me an opportunity to put a garland in your neck, I will believe that you too have loved me.’ Tell me who sent this message?”

I replied, “Sayukta’
“Then Lali was Sayukta for me. I used to become Pruthviraj in the drama but I could not become Pruthviraj in real life. You all may not feel sad about it but I do. Now onwards, don’t make such fun.”

We got bewildered. We could not dare again to say anything or laugh on him. Hardly a month after the incident had passed and an envelope came for Pasa. We insisted lot but he didn’t open the letter in our presence. On the next day, we heard that Paslo too had run away!

He was searched everywhere. We were inquired for days. We were threatened as well as given temptations. But, I remained completely silent. I could not say what I knew and what I was saying could not be believed by them.

Only I know what pain I had passed through to forget him. He was like Magan. Only I know how restless I had been to learn some news from him as he had promised. But today, when the curiosity and restlessness had faded completely, his long thin fingers dragged me to him with the beats of tabla.

“Have a cup of tea!” I came back into present with Lali’s request.

“Lali, today, the night was not in a mood to make us sleep for the whole night!” and turning towards me, he said, “But how did you come here in this completely unknown region?”

I said, “I have come here in Bhopal for some study. I have got habit of visiting new places and here, I have freedom for it. I have gone to visit Amarkantak. While returning from there, I stayed to my classmate’s home for a night. There, I heard your tabla and the beats of your tabla made us to meet. Now, you tell me how have you turned into Peeru and even into Guruji from Paso?”
The play of karma is strange,

Oh God, the play of karma is strange.

Running his head on the string of beads in his neck, he said, “She had written about the hundred rupees which she had secretly kept into my history book and guided me for the way to Mumbai in the letter. I could not then hold myself back and I ran away in the next morning and reached Mumbai Central in the evening. I could not find Lali on the first day of my arrival in Mumbai. I spent the night there in a fearfull situation. On the next evening, Lali came there and took me with her. The mistress liked my tabla playing but she didn’t like me. She said, “It’s better to have an aged person as an accompanist. Here, young girls come for dance and above all, you are very handsome.” She wanted Lali to get married with a harmonium player Gulamrasool. Amid this, I suddenly reached there. She anyhow didn’t agree to keep me there. “Go back to your village. You cannot stay here.” After that, we stayed there for three-four days and then ran away. We met a gentle milkman. He brought us to Dalisar. We have saved four hundred and fifty out of the five hundred rupees. We got a good place there by paying two hundred rupees. We purchased some households things. Lali got work at a clinic. I started going to stable with the milkman hence I too could earn three-four rupees a day. Once in a week, their group used to meet for hymns. Once, I got chance to play and everybody was impressed. They were saying, “How beautiful his tune and voice is!” In that charged atmosphere, once Lali also sang:

Hey God, don’t pay attention to my weakness.

Since that moment, Lali became Chhotuma (sanity figure) and I became Maharaj (saint) for them. I had learnt many songs from the drama company. Whenever I used to sing, one gentle
man always used to say, *Maharaj, You are master of Peelu.*” I even didn’t know that I was singing the songs in the *peelu* raga. Gradually, the *Peelu* became *Peeru.*”

“But, didn’t you face any problem due to your caste?” I inquired.

“No brother no! ‘Nobody asks about caste and race, one who prays to God, becomes dear to god.’ We were very happy there but it didn’t last long. The compounder at the hospital wanted Lali. His harassment of Lali became serious and the news reached to our locality. Our two followers beat the rogue seriously but it turned into a riot. Police too started troubling us. Hence, one day, we left the place with one devotee. A fair had been organized in Ujjain in those days. We didn’t have money hence we purchased a flute and started singing. We could earn a good amount within two days. Our fate then brought us here. And the same flute came to our help here also. Here, people used to visit this deserted temple only on some occasions or festivals. We sang hymns here too and people liked it. Seeing this, two gentlemen said, “Maharaj, If you don’t have anywhere to go, make this temple your home.” They mended this home for us and since then we are here. The people are poor. Most of them are farmers but are kind and generous. Our lives are passing happily. We help the people in their health problems. Lali’s medical knowledge which she had learnt at the Missionary hospital comes to our help and I resolve their problems like quarrel etc.”

“Don’t share the plain journey but also tell him about the miracle.” Lali interrupted in Hindi language. From her Hindi language and tone of speaking, I came to know how much they had become one with the land. I also realized that their settling down there was not as smooth as Paso was putting it but some extraordinary elements too had performed its role to get them
settled here. Paso stared at me for moments and then said, “Do you remember the incident of the black he-goat?”

In our village, the people of Pagi community used to sacrifice a he-goat at the shrine of Khatri on the festival of Dashera. In those days, Paso’s family was bringing up one plump black he-goat. Paso liked it very much. They were ready to pay whatever amount would have been demanded but still Paso didn’t allow the goat to be sold out. The goat was kept in the ramshackle home. One night, the goat was stolen from there. It could not be found even after lot of search. But, Paso was determined to find it. In the evening of Dashera, he reached to the shrine of Khatri along with two three friends including myself. The place was at the distance of around three-four kilometers from the village. There, the same he-goat was decorated and ready to be sacrificed. Before the bhuvo could run his sword on the neck of the he-goat, Paso jumped in the air and embraced it. Seeing that, people created uproar. The scarification was polluted at the nick of the time. Now, it had to be sacrificed. They scolded, persuaded, and then frightened but Paso took his way to home taking the he-goat on his shoulders. We got scared and followed him.

Few Pagi people ran and reached in our locality before us. They told to the elders that the he-goat which had been decided for sacrifice had to be sacrificed otherwise it would bring bad luck to all. They even paid two hundred rupees in those days for the he-goat. They took it back with them and beheaded. Paso cried that whole night in the Dharmashala without eating and drinking anything.

We both revisited the story of the he-goat. Picking up a clue from there, he said, “From that day onwards, I extremely hate sacrificing animals. On that evening, when we arrived here,
such incident was taking place here too. The whole village had gathered here along with a decorated he-goat at this temple itself. I saw my Manako in that he-goat hence, before a sword could touch its neck, I jumped and clung myself around its neck as if it was calling me. I said to the people, ‘Instead of it, you sacrifice me. Not only will your animals but the people also survive.’ The people used to sacrifice a he-goat in this temple every year so that no diseases would spread among the animals as well as no calamity would come in the village.”

“It created a serious stifle. People produced different logics but I had only one thing to say, ‘I will not allow you to behead this he-goat till I am alive. First, you have to kill me to kill this goat!’ The leader of the village said, ‘If we will not offer a sacrifice at this time only, the Goddess will get angry and have calamities in our village.’ I said, ‘Then better we test it. You just wait for a night and see. It is my responsibility, if anything happens tonight. Tomorrow, you can sacrifice me along with the he-goat.’ And I shot a last arrow, looking into the eyes of the man with a sword, ‘Say. What is the goddess’ order?’

“The sword fell off from his hand. God knows why but he got frightened. He took a step back and said, ‘The auspicious moment has passed, now I cannot. . .!’ Two wise men suggested better solution. They said, ‘Tie the goat here and don’t let go the person also. He will be tested by tomorrow morning.’”

“And then we had an opportunity. We both started singing hymns:

Oh God, my self esteem is in your hand,

I bow down to your feet,
You are very kind to the poor; my self esteem is in your hand

The people who were there to keep watch on us also got influenced by the hymns. Gradually, people from village also started gathering there. The hymns created very energetic atmosphere. At the mid night, they remembered that we were hungry. Immediately they arranged for milk but I said, ‘Let it be fast today. This is what might me the God’s wish.’ And utilizing this opportunity, I narrated the story of a hunter and a deer and showed the stars in the sky which were part to the story. It created an impression. They said, ‘He seems educated and kind.’”

“On the next morning, the whole village gathered there. They led us in the village with the pomp of music and dance. The leader said, ‘Guruji, you must have your own place for residence somewhere. A man like hero must not be wandering like that. But, if you listen to me, I suggest you to stay here only. I bow down in your feet.’ Since then we have been staying here. The miracle is neither an animal nor a man died during that year and the harvesting season too was good. With the fear among the people that I have some mysterious power, the small thefts which were earlier taking place here have also now stopped. I emphasize more on the medical treatment than the magic or other superstitious practices. I am always trying to remove their superstitions and orthodox beliefs. I have learnt from the experiences that one should be in the side of truth and shouldn’t be dependent on other. I too was tested hardly when a boy was suffering from smallpox and a disease of mumps spread in the animals. As a part of experiment, I ordered the villages to stop the animals from taking water from the trough and the well and instructed them to give boiled and clear water to the animals. For the matter of smallpox, they again wanted to sacrifice an animal but at the nick
of the time, we packed our luggage and started walking away. The villages came behind us, persuaded us and brought us back. That is all about us!”

“But, haven’t you ever remembered our village, the affection for our land in these long years?” I further inquired.

“Is it possible that I don’t crave for my village? I could not stop myself after coming here. Then, I had gone to the village and stayed in the Dharmashala for two days. Nobody recognized me in that bhagava clothes, long beard and Hindi language! But, look at the coincident, my mother was taking her last breathes in those days. When I was wandering in the village, I heard about my mother’s wish, ‘I will not die without seeing my Pasa’s face.’ I had gone there as if she had called me. I went to her bed and asked her in Hindi, ‘Mother, Do you want anything?’ She said, ‘No son, nothing else but just death!’ I got shocked for a moment. Perhaps, she had recognized my voice. But, the people could not identify me. I then insistently gave water to my mother and she left her mortal body. In the morning, I joined her funeral process and also lift her bier; I too threw an earth in her grave and in the evening attended her condolence meeting. But, in that huge group of people, there wasn’t any sign of mine. Hence, I left my motherland forever. We shall not be affectionate about the place where we are not even remembered. In a way, now I have transcended such emotions. Perhaps, that is why the God hasn’t given any child also. Now, I don’t have any aspiration than to die serving these people and singing hymns for the God.”

When I bid farewell to them, Lali put her hands together. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he didn’t miss to say one thing, “If you remembered, we used to support and trust when we used to be team members in the games. With that trust, I want to take one promise from you that
don’t tell anybody that we are here.” He was neither happy for the matter that we had met after many years nor sad for the fact that we might not meet ever again. He had completely become ascetic. And, as if, it has been in my fate only to caress pamper feelings, to strengthen the weakening relationships.
Since long, I had been aspiring to visit the mountain of Girnar and the pool of Damodar. Once it came true but it came true in such a way and intensely that it shook the memories of my childhood.

The acute natural beauty of the Girnar increased my sense of wonder about it. While watching the relics and the historical ruins, I felt as if these were inseparable parts of my existence. My soul must have roamed around at some unknown time in that brisk atmosphere. In the same way, the ruined temple of Konark too had spellbound me. The attractive and elegance sculptures of Khajuraho had astounded me. The simple and gigantic stupas of Sanchi had saturated me with compassion. The nearby Delwada of Abu had always made me curious. The temple of Kadiya had assured me that the laborers who had created such a wonder with their hard work and spontaneity must not have been in exploited condition. But, had it been that much only, the Girnar could not have made its forceful place in my memories. But, the visit shot such painful memories that I quickly jumped back into my childhood.

Due to the steep steps of the mountain, not only my lungs were panting but I was scared also. I needed some rest to step down from one hill and to climb up again another mount with the same height as of the previous one. I jumped and climbed few steps more to reach at a huge stone under a tree for some rest. When I was settling down on the stone, a yogi with matted
hair captured my eyesight. I heard many devotees saying that it was one’s good fortune if one ran into a naked sadhu. But, the crowds of the sadhus and their wretched communities on the Ghats of the river Ganga and other such places of pilgrimage across the country had created some unusual dislike for them. Hence, I was not much impressed simply by seeing a matted hair yogi.

But, that man was with long hair divided equally on both the sides, unusually broad forehead with large wrinkles and wide eyes as if the eyes were of an artistic sculpture. His appearance was so terrible that some unfamiliar people would get frightened if the eyes got little reddish and frown. He had large jaws than an average man. A sigma was running from the tip of his nose up to his head crossing the wrinkles of his forehead. The long lobes of his ears touching his neck and the flat chick like the wings of a butterfly were giving such shape to his face which reminded me of somebody again and again.

Due to his worn long clock, I could not see his broad shoulders but my doubt became more strong when I saw a large ring in his foot and the marks of whips on his legs.

I went close to him but could not think of what to say. After a few moments, I greeted, “Jay Gurudevjiki!” and put my hands together.

“Jay Bholenath…!” he responded in his slight coarse voice and it again reminded me of my past and I revealed to him what was crippling in my mind, “Nayno Bajiyo, the son of Luli!”

Suddenly, his half closed eyes turned wide open. The sound of the words blew on his existence of last decades. He was startled and his eyes reflected the efforts to identify me.
“Who are you?” asking me in Hindi, his round wide eyes gave me one more evident of his identity. Hence, I responded with full confidence, “Can’t you recognize me? Naranbhai. . .I am Joseph! Your Josseb. I am Jasyo who used to provide you the bundles of bidi.”

For a moment, he felt to get up on his feet. His hands got stretched to embrace me but, God knows why, the very next moment, he closed his eyes and started meditating.

“What happened? Don’t you like that I recognized you? . . .Oh man, after how many years have we met? I even thought that you won’t be alive anymore!”

“To be alive or dead makes no difference but what are you doing here?”

“I have come to visit this place. I didn’t know that I will see you as a sadhu!”

“Ohh yes. . .!” He responded.

I thought he would say something but he remained silent after saying “Ohh yes. . .!”, then I again felt to inquire more about him. Hence, I asked very touching question, “It’s ok that you have forgotten us but don’t you even remember Lulima? Don’t you even remember Aslo?”

“What to do by remembering them? Who is going to come with us?”

“But it’s strange that nobody else but your mother passed away that too thinking of you only and you didn’t come even to her funeral!”

“You all were there, weren’t you? But you tell me one thing what happened after I left the village? How long did my poor mother live after that? And what about Aslo. . . he too must have passed away! Ohh… but why have you run into after these many long years?”
I could see that the remembrance of the village, his mother, and the enemy was making him restless. It is the body that becomes ascetic but the soul can’t remain devoid of love and affection. Awakening his affection for his land, I said, “Lulima passed away on the very fourth day of your going. You were searched everywhere for two days by all your friends. Lulima cursed Asla for three days under the Limbadi chawk. Lulima breathed her last under the same neem tree where you had been hanged. After her death, Aslo could not pass a day peacefully. He too passed away within two years. People were saying that his misdeed of pining you as well as Lulima’s mourning destroyed him. Still whenever I go to the village, I heard someone or the other remembering you. Don’t you ever felt to visit our village?”

“No dear. . . Now, don’t remind me of it and don’t even tell anybody that I am alive!”

“After such a long time, nobody is curious even to know about you!”

“Right. . . Guruji used to say, ‘One you are gone, your world too forgets you!’”

“Have you been here only for all these years? Haven’t you come to village ever?”

“No. . . On that night, I left the village and left it forever. I wandered as much as I could and now I am here. But you leave this matter. . . It seems you have attended a school as well as you are wealthy also. Sometimes, I used to remember you and your friend Magan and Dungar! Are they all well?”

“Magan passed away. He died after going almost mad. Dungar also died in the famine. Do you miss all that?”

“No… Guruji used to say not to be affectionate. These all things are unreal. You should not have met me. That’s all. I am leaving now!” Saying so, he stood up. While getting up, he
took support with his hands and I saw an inch deep pit in his uncovered shoulders. It was confirmed. He was Nayno only. Lulidosi’s Nayno!

After getting up, he didn’t even look at me. He started walking on a trail without hesitating even for a moment and without even looking back. He disappeared again in the Gir jungle as he had disappeared before thirty years from the village. The memories of thirty years ago were revived.

In my own verandah, there was a mud house, uninhabited and deserted since years. On its north, a hut had been built up with the walls of straw. It was Nayna Bajiya’s mansion. Luli was his mother. Her original name might be something else. She had bent down from her waist and her left leg had bent down on right side from its knee. Her walk was ‘luli’ (lamb) as well as her tongue was also ‘luli’ (course). Hence, she became popular as Lulidosi. She was considered to be extreme bad luck. Nobody wanted to see her face in the morning. The farmers beginning their work in the season of monsoon would strictly warn her not come out of her home before nine in the morning. On the auspicious ceremonies too, people were worried about her. On such occasions, people used to go to her home to tell her not to come out and they would make arrangements to make the needed things reach at her home. But, the old woman too was niggard. If she would decide, she would come out anyhow and ask people forcefully in her stammering tongue, “Where are you going? What have you sown in the farm this year? Are you going to buy a buffalo? When did you purchase this goat?” Then, she would receive a lot of abuses from the man whom she would have asked a question and afterwards, she would start prattling, “Idiots! I am bad luck for you or your karma? You are paying for your karma. Don’t blame me!” Such niggard old woman had six feet high son like the tenth wonder of the world.
His biggest innate quality was laziness. He used to remain lying day and night on the *parabadi*. Whenever we saw him, he would be asleep. He was like an incarnation of *Kumbhaakarn*. He hardly felt to go on work once in a week or so. Mostly, he used to go on work for grinding tobacco in a mill or to fill up the sacks of tobacco in a barnyard. He was so strong that the sack which he would have filled up could not be less than seventy kilos. He was strong enough to pull up and carry the sack on his shoulders. He used to work for three four days and earn twenty to twenty five rupees. He would keep five rupees for him and give remaining amount to Lulima. From that amount, the old woman ran their home.

He was very fond of gambling of cards. He liked very much the hearts of the deck. “Show, Heart” was his catchphrase. He would be very happy if he would get heart card in his hand. He would not say show, howsoever other good cards he would have in his hand. We used to call the king of the deck a ‘Bajiyo’. From that reference only, his nick name too gradually became “Lal no Bajiyo” (king of heart in a deck). His name was ‘Naran’, hence gradually it got further corrupted and became ‘Nayno Bajiyo’.

He would get very angry if anybody would call him Bajiyo. He abused his friends and ran behind the children like us and sent us towards fields. If he wished, he could catch us within two jumps but he liked to make us pant by making us run. We, couple of young friends, were running. When we reached at the banyan tree, he cut a long staff from it and shouted, “Now, stop there…!” And nobody of us dared to ignore his order. After that, he ordered, “Collect some dry firewood.” By the time, we executed his order; he climbed on the banyan tree and cut few dry branches. He also observed if anyone of us was escaping. After some time, he came down of the tree, prepared few bundle of firewood tiding it with vines of Dodi. He put
it on our head and then drove us towards home. He walked behind us and teased us making jokes on us.

“Now call me Bajiyo! Why are your legs shivering? You idiots eat lot but cannot even lift up a small bundle of woods! You are good for nothing but using tongue!”

But, he was not completely ruthless man. When he realized that someone of us could really not bear the weight of the woods, he would lift up the bundle on his own shoulders. But, before doing so, he made it sure that the guy was not pretending. If he would have got even a slightest clue that anyone of us was pretending to be tired, the person would immediately receive a blow of the staff on his back or heel. Hence, no one of us could deceive him. Another serious matter for us was that he would break his friendship with the boy who would have tried to deceive him. He would never again look at even the face the person. And not having the speaking terms with Nayno was equal to life sentence for us. He didn’t ask for anything from us. He even ate roti, onion and green chilly very happily. Sometime, he used to ask for chutney of garlic but, instead of it, even if he would get some vegetable or pickles, he would happily accept it. He used to earnestly ask for bidi only. Many times, I had provided him the stock of bidis which were being prepared at my home. When I put a bundle of bidi in his hand, he said, “Have you brought it for me stealthily? Don’t do so again!” But the lessons used to last only till the bidis would be finished off.

He sat on the parapet of a shrine on the day when we had collected firewood for him. He called a few of us who had collected the firewood and gave us one anna. “Get me bidi for one paisa and remaining three paisa are for you.” In those days, one could get twelve bidis
for an *anna*. One would get a bowlful of chickpeas or a cake of dates for an *anna*. One paisa was very big amount for us.

When he used to sit putting his both hands on the ground, a pit of an inch used to be created on his each shoulder. He used these pits for mischievous things. He burned two long stalks of plants and tied it with his shoulders. He tied one another burning stalk on his head and then stood in the darkness or climbed a banyan tree. He remembered all those who were crooks, boasting about themselves and their bravery, harassing their kind wives. One night, he taught them lesson by showing them his terrifying appearance. He produced strange voices, and blew fire in the air by throwing kerosene from his mouth. He could scare anyone but he never harassed any woman. A rumor was popular about a ghost with three eyes. The children were scared of it. Only two people, he and his friend Dungar, knew the truth behind the mystery.

Due to his foolish nature and unorganized life, he remained single while all his friends gradually got married. And, a friend like Bajiyo, single and rough, became unwelcomed. Nayno was as innocent as a keen observer of his friends’ minds. He never even went close again to those friends’ home after learning about their dislike for him. His friends used to take him in their marriage processions but when the procession would be returning home, Nayno would sigh, “I lost one more friend!”

Many could read his pain behind such funny expression and some of his friends even tried to get him married but he didn’t agree anyhow.

“Let it go! You all idiots are slaves of your wives. I don’t want to have such troubles in my life. Come what may, I will remain single for whole life.”
He used to say these words joyfully. But, to have joyful life and to forget the pain of remaining alone, Nayno, who was pining without friends, took the shelter of wine. Once he started drinking. He got so engrossed in it that he was always found drunk.

He had neither married nor had any affair. His visits to his one close friend had persisted. He himself had persuaded and brought back his friends wife who had returned to her parents after her first aanu. The rumors about it also were spreading in the village. And these rumors brought bad luck for him.

It was the time of festivity. The lower caste people would be fed by their master with ladoo. Lulima too got one or two bowls. On the night of that festival, it rained heavily and on the next day, it was sunny atmosphere for sowing tobacco in the fields. People won’t get wages more than a rupee on the other days but, during the sowing time, people would be paid even ten rupees a day. Those castes were so skilled in sowing that hardly any seed would fail. During those days, even seven years old child won’t be free. The children too could earn five rupees a day for distributing young plants. God knows why but Nayno didn’t go for work on that day. A farmer who had shortage of workers even offered him to pay fifteen rupees a day. But, he remained lying on the parabadi even after that offer. There was so severe need of workers that even Luli herself went for work on that day but he didn’t change his mind.

People returned home tired in the evening and around ten o’clock the news spread that a theft had occurred in Asla’s home. Somebody had stolen eighty rupees along with a large plate from a wooden box. The amount had been given to Asla by his landlords to pay it to the workers for sowing work. Everybody thought that the thief was Nayno as he alone was in the locality on that day. When the rumor was catching fire, Nayno was lying drunk on the
parabadi. Also and his companions woke him up, searched his pockets but could not find anything. Then, they searched his hut but could not find anything from there also. They found the big plate but, defending that, Luli said, “It was borrowed to carry millet which we had purchased yesterday!”

They inspected Nayno for whole night but he had only one thing to say, “I haven’t even gone close to Asla’s home. I don’t know anything. Please, let me go to sleep. Next morning, Asla’s two Patel landlords came. Nayno who had passed the previous whole night uneasily was furthermore beaten. When he didn’t accept the accusations even after that, he was taken to a neem tree and his hands were tied with a branch. Then, they started beating him blindly with a rein. Nayno was crying, the people were trying to stop them and Luli was lamenting, “Please don’t beat him. Oh my master, oh my god . . . don’t beat my son. He is not a thief.” The more she implored, the more the Patels got instigated. The ropes were making sound of beating. The marks were appearing on his back. He was crying so hard that the people too started shivering out of compassion but the arrogant Patels didn’t feel any mercy for Nayno. Suddenly, the strip of his pant got torn. Half dead Nayno tried hard even in that condition and lifted his legs up to his stomach to cover up his body and to save himself from embarrassment. His will power could manage to save his respect but his body could not. Due to the hard pain, it went out of control and his body release night soil.

Everybody felt distressed and started hating the Patels. They started beating him again. What the brutal landlord could not feel was felt by the rope. It got shredded when it could bear the pain of Nayno. He fell down on the ground. Luli was crying over him but he had gone unconscious.
A few people brought him at his hut and fomented. He regained his conscious in the evening and said, “If you want me to keep alive, give me some wine!” and he closed his eyes again. A bottle was brought. He gulped it down and after some time he got up on his own. He stretched his hands and touched his toes and said to his companion, “Caress my back for some time.” After some time, he said, “Now you all go. See you all in the morning. Let me rest now!”

On the next morning, the people who were curious to know about him learnt that Nayno had run away.

After a month, people learnt that one of the Patel who beat him met with a ghost at his field in the night. On both the shoulders of the ghost, two red coals were burning on its each shoulder and a torch was burning in its mouth. Not only the evil spirit harassed him but it dragged and beat him like an animal and left him half dead. The man frightened of a ghost could not live long.

Aslo got the most frightened in that situation. Later, some people learnt that the money had fallen down in the corner of the wooden box. The actual thing was something else. Actually, Aslo wanted the woman with whom the rumor of Nayna’s affair spread. He saw Nayno as a hurdle for that. Hence, he planned the trick to teach a lesson to Nayna.

After, Nayna’s departure from the village, Lulidosi lamented continuously for three days and passed away. Learning about Lulidosi’ death, Aslo got so seriously frightened that he could not recover again until he died.
Forlorn Hopes

An era has passed since that night. But, even today, I remember that darkest storming night as it was:

The heavy downpour of the month of Bhadarva had stopped after raining continuously for three days. The wind was cold. The walls of an age old mud house were exhaling a smell of an earth in the humid air. The sound of groaning from a closed room was coming out from the cracks of the doors along with the rays of a lamp of the room. Outside, Ashima was groaning in her charpoy because of the pain of arthritis.

A goat in the lobby too was restless and scratching the wet daub. When it tried to make sound, Ashima chided her, “Sit down dear, sit silently. You are also restless like me. I know your condition but what to do. We don’t have any option than to bear!” and, as if, the goat too had understood her, she sat down silently staring at the cracks of the door.

After the downpour like the heavy sufferings of Ashima’s whole life had stopped, few drops were dripping from the eaves of roof and the old woman was getting startled and scared of some unknown inauspicious time.

The lightening was shaking an empty gunny and the arrows of sufferings were penetrating through Ashima’s heart. The tower clock struck three at night and the dark night got shivered by a piercing shriek. Immediately after the shriek, came the sound of beating a brass dish and
a voice of a crying child echoed. The old woman who had been lying in a charpoy since days as each part of her body had gone stiff due to arthritis got up on her feet within split of a moment.

“Open the door. Ichchhali, open it. The unfortunate time had come to an end now. Ichchhali, open the door!”

She instantly entered in the room and the midwife Ichchha and Marwadi Mulachi were startled and surprised to see her. They could not even imagine that the old woman Ashima who had been in bed since days due to joints’ pain would forget all her sufferings and recover to such an extent with the birth of her grandson.

While Mulachi continued her work and Ichchha got occupied in the work of removing umbilical cord, Ashima ran her vibrating hand on the forehead of her still unconscious daughter-in-law and said, “My dear, you have brought me out of my misfortune of being childless. You paid off for my widowhood. You have glorified both lives of yours and mine. You are my soul, my good fortune!”

After few moments, she relapsed and fell down there only. Mulachi and the midwife Ichchha lifted her and laid her in her charpoy. Meanwhile, Ashima’s eyes staring at one part of the lobby in that receding darkness had reached at the other side of her life.

Twenty five years before, she had married to Vashram and came into this home. Vashram was the only son of her mother-in-law. In the very second year of her mother-in-law’s married life when the five months old Vashram was in her womb, she became a widow. She didn’t leave Vashram’s father’s home in the hope of having a child. She single handedly brought up Vashram and got him married with Ashi. She wanted to extend the lobby of her
mud house. But, on the very eighth month of Vashram’s marriage, both the son and mother died due to cholera. The rumors spread in the whole village that there is a demonic influence over the family. People didn’t spare anything to call Ashi a bad luck and menace. Hence, some elders also believed that when her father would come to her home for the obsequies of applying oil in her hair, she would go with her father and then she would get married to someone else. And she would not come back here. But, when the women who had gathered for the funeral rites asked to change her clothes of a widow after few days of her husband’s death, all of them were stunned by Ashi’s response.

When the funeral rite of wailing last time for the person who had passed away was completed, an elderly woman proposed to change Ashi’s widowed clothes but not following the decorum of widowhood, Ashi suddenly got up and addressing loudly her father and all the relatives who had gathered in the lobby said, “I will change the clothes of mourning but I will not go to my parent’s home for the rite of pouring oil in my hair. I am four months pregnant. Hence, this is my only home and this is where I will spend my whole life. The God will give us good health and bring back our good time. You may all disperse now. I also want to talk to my father in person!”

The startled people dispersed slowly saying, “What can we do? It’s her family matter. We cannot send her forcefully. How can we stop her if she herself wants to pass life in widowhood?”

“Father, relax and return home. Don’t worry about me. I will inform you if I will need any help. Please allow me to carry out responsibilities of my home here.” She requested her father.
After that, the daughter-in-law Ashi led her life so well and kept her words so honestly that she turned out to be mother Ashi (Ashima). She never ever looked at any young man and kept her brothers-in-law away. She didn’t rest even when she was pregnant. One day, she reached on the seventh sky by getting a son as her whole life’s reward. Her mother had come to help her in bearing the child. When she returned after having a baby to her daughter, she too was contented that her daughter, Ashima had exalted their honor in the society.

As it was God’s benefaction, they named him Dano (Benefaction). Ashi continued her daily wages work even when Dano was a kid. She used to put him in a carrycot or tying up a hammock at the branches of a tree or took him with her in the fields when he started walking on his feet. She brought him up with full of love and care as if she wanted to compensate for seven births. But, her endearment for him itself spoiled him. Ashi never looked back in spending money to fulfill his wishes. He was so dear to her that she was having him sleep with her till he turned twelve. He could not get satisfied unless she herself would put morsels in his mouth. His love would not be complete until he would not go against her words. Due to the liberty of spending money, he learnt from gamble. He didn’t even attend school but by the time he turned sixteen, he had wrapped himself with many bad habits.

Ashi, by requesting people and visiting the villages wherever she could reach, finalized his marriage when he had just turned seventeen. She borrowed seven hundred rupees from the landlords to whose fields she was going for work on daily wages and added her savings to it. She offered it to two honest men and got Dana married. She arranged meal for the entire locality. Marriage songs were sung for three nights and jaggery was distributed abundantly. She took care of minute details of the marriage and she completed the event of marriage so
well that the resentful people did not have any chance to say anything against her. The whole event was so well organized that nobody could say that it was the marriage of a widow’s son.

Moreover, many youngsters’ hearts had missed beats when, first time, the daughter-in-law Pashi reached to Ashi’s home through the Limbadi chawk with the vessels of water on her head filled from the popular central well.

Pashi learnt about her mother-in-law’s virtuous life. She brought back Dana from the bad habits. She didn’t stay long at her parent’s home even in the first aunu. And as soon as she returned on her second aunu, she told to Ashima, “Mother, find some work for me also, both of us will go on work. We have to pay Patel’s debt and also extend the back side of our house. And Pashi started going on every types of work of field. She worked as hard as others were but Dano felt it very difficult as he had never done any such hard work before. But, his love for Pashi had controlled him so intensely that he could not move away from her watch and work. Ashima’s home again become happy one but it didn’t last long.

On an unfortunate moment, when Dano was digging a canal, he felt pain in his stomach. He vomited a few gobs of blood. When he heard that he was suffering from T.B., he got so seriously shocked and lost his courage that he could not come out of his bed again. He got more frightened by remembering the rumors of having a death shadow on his house. His wife and mother both were constant around and didn’t spare anything for his medication. They had got him relieved from the addiction of wine but now, when he used to take a peg or two secretly, Pashi just pitied him. To meet the expenses of his medication, both the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law were going on full day work and Dano was coughing and remaining in his bed for the whole day. Gradually, his healthy body turned weak. No magic spell
worked. Before even Pashi’s twelve months as a wife, one night, Ashi’s hopes and Pashi’s fate were shattered. Dano passed away.

Aashima completely went in shock with the blow of her son’s death. When Pashi was wailing after Dana, Ashima had become insentient. Looking at Ashima’s frozen eyes, some elderly women felt if the old woman would not cry, she would go mad. The other lamenting women persuaded her, “Cry Ashima cry. Being a stone would not work. Ashima mourn. Dano is no more. Cry.” But, the old woman reacted to them as if she hadn’t heard anything. Nobody could understand what she was up to. But, what other could not apprehend was apprehended by Pashi. The old woman’s stiff eyesight was staring straight at Pashi who was wailing on the body of her husband. She got up and went to her mother-in-law and, even during such a hard time, she said, “Ma, cry. Wail. What else is left now in our fate except lamenting? Cry. Relieve your heart. Your descendent is growing in my womb. I will not go anywhere leaving you behind. Till now, only you have been widowed but now both of us are widows. This common widowhood now will be borne by both of us. Ma! Wail!”

With these words of Pashi, Ashima cried loudly. Embracing her daughter-in-law, she lamented and she went unconscious the very next moment.

Like her mother-in-law, Pashi too earned respect for accepting widowhood in the hope of brighter future for her child. And six months after Dana’s death, the good news came and both the women let forget the pain of Dana’s death in the hope spending their life with the support of a child. The birth of a son lightened their pain of widowhood. As the time passed, their grief receded gradually. But, the amount borrowed for Dana’s marriage and medication became a question of self esteem. The death of the son had broken Ashima. Moreover, she
got arthritis. Now, their livelihood was Pashi’s responsibility and the amount of debt came in her misfortune.

But still, Pashi didn’t give up. The arthritis caught up Ashima so severely that she could not even rock the cradle of her grandson. Hence, Pashi started going on work tying the child behind her back. When she went to the fields, she would tie the ends of her sari with the branches of a tree, put the little one into it and complete the work. By the noon, she would return with her child embraced with her chest and put one rupee in the hands of the old woman.

She passed five months in such daily wages but then came winter. As the landlord Patel had lent them money, they had to work for him. He suggested a settlement, “Work for this season in the farm of tobacco. I will settle your account for hundred rupees and let go the interest.”

After pondering about it, the old woman said, “You are right Patel! We have to pay back your money but what about our daily expenses? There is a little child in the home. He remains unwell sometimes and I cannot even leave the charpoy. How the daughter-in-law alone can work?”

The Patel melted down a little and said, “Ok. You accept the responsibly of the work of four vighas. In return, I will pay you one rupee at every round of the tobacco sprout.”

The tobacco plants were sprouting once in a week or ten days. Pashi could complete the four vighas work by continuously thrashing and cleaning the pods for two days. She used to search for other work on remaining days.
It was the month of Posh. It had rained for previous two days hence the temperature had fallen down further. Dana’s son who, though, had born in difficult times, used to remain fit. On that day, it was the turn to go to the Patel’s field. She wrapped the child in whatever piece of cloth came into her hand to protect him from the cold and reached to the field in the early morning. She tied a carrycot with a mango tree. Before starting work, she offered her nipple to her son, but he didn’t take it in his mouth. “May be he is not hungry. I will feed him when he will get hungry.” Saying so she put the baby in the carrycot, swung it for few moments and when she felt that he was gone asleep, Pashi started her work.

After many efforts and pondering about many things, she started her work. Due to the cold plants, the wet land, and above all, the fog had made the atmosphere fiercely cold. While plucking the sprouts, they were piercing the tips of her fingers so terribly that the pain was coming out with her sighs. But, what else the people of that caste do even who born to with the belief that ‘the need of the work makes even the cold weather warm’. After plucking few bundles of pods, her hands got frozen and insensitive. When the sun rose a bit high in the sky, the atmosphere became little warm and Pashi felt little bit comfortable. But, she was perplexed, “Why am I still not catching speed in the work and why hasn’t my little one moved yet?” After completing one more round, she went to the mango tree. She wrapped the end of her sari around her hand which was smeared with tobacco and touched her son’s forehead. But, her hands wrapped with a sari and smeared with tobacco cold not feel the coldness of his body.

She took out Deva from the carrycot. She opened her blouse and gave her nipple in his mouth and suddenly she became perplexed by his inanimate touch. She immediately adjusted him on her another side to make him comfortable for feeding but while doing so, her elbow was
slightly moved from his head and his lifeless head fell off. “Oh my dear…!” She cried loud out of fear. Frozen Pashi looked at her dead son once then she looked at the sky for God to challenge Him but she could only see a vigha of remaining sprouts to be collected and a barren horizontal.

Suppressing her pain and anger, she put her son’s body back in the carrycot and started completing the remaining work. She thought that even if she had cried there, for whom to cry and who was there to console her in the distant field?

She completed her work at one o’clock in the noon. She picked up Deva. She couldn’t even think of untying the carrycot and she rushed towards her home madly. At the wicket gate of the farm, she came across the landlord Patel.

“Pashi, have you completed the work?” Pashi looked into his eyes but the insentient landlord could not read her eyes.

“Ok then, Take this one rupee.” Saying so, he put one rupee into her hand.

Pashi could not realize when she crossed the path. When she reached home, Ashima was waiting for her in the charpoy.

Seeing Pashi, she said, “Good, that you have arrived. Give me Deva in my hands.”

“Yes ma, I have returned. Take this surplus one rupee which given by Patel.” And then, giving Deva’s body into the old woman’s stretched hands, she completed, “Also take this hope of your life.”
Miserable Life and Unbearable Pain

When I first time went to our village school holding my elder brother’s finger, one of the girls who seemed eldest among all of us lifted me in the air and showed love and affection for me. I could not understand her unclear nasal sounds. I also didn’t like the way she was indicated to make me sit beside her. It was the season of spring hence she was trying to convince me to sit beside her by offering me a mango. In the lunch break, she came all along to my home to drop me and there, she was explaining something to my aunty with the gestures and eye movements. As my aunty couldn’t understand her and imitated her in response, she loudly said, “Oh yes yes... you don’t worry and go. Why do I need to worry when you are there?”

When we returned to the school in the afternoon, I felt very happy. The mistress of the teacher in a beautiful sari asked us to fetch clay for daubing. I also prepared myself to join other students but the girl held my hand to stop me from going there. By stretching her hands, showing her heel, yelling out of the pain of thorn pricking, she tried hard to explain me that it was a difficult task and they were to go far away to fetch clay. She was trying to explain that my feet would pain and the thorns would prick but I could not understand anything of it. When I was trying to run away by jerking her hand, the mistress came with a clod and started explaining to her. Showing me the clod, she expressed her dislike by
gestures and pointing her finger towards the boys with spade and bricklayer’s trough, shackled her head in dislike. Then, she forced the boys to move ahead without me.

After some time, she became very happy and dragging my hand, she started walking with all others. I could not understand why she was not leaving my hand just before few moments and then suddenly what made her to go with the group? After we crossed the central well, the boys started teasing her. They were making various gestures, faces and nasal sounds by putting their fingers in their ears and showing their teeth to her. But, the girl, without annoying even for a moment, kept on walking with a smiling face. When they could not create any impression on her, one of the boys started teasing me.

“Ohh… Bobado (dumb) and Baheri (deaf) are together.” When they all laughed loudly and repeated the words together, I realized that the girl who had been showing her affection for me and still not leaving me alone was dumb and deaf.

When I came to know the fact, I didn’t like that a dumb and deaf person was holding me. I jerked my hand to get free from her grip and as soon as I was relieved, I joined the group of friends. But they made distance from me and teased me by calling ‘Baheri’s brother is Bobado, Baheri’s bother is Bobado!’ When I started crying out of embarrassment, she rushed to me. Innocence and compassion were flowing from her eyes. Holding me on her side, she comforted me by putting her hand on my chest as if saying, “You need not be scared of anything when I am with you. Let them tease! I will complain against each one of them to the teacher!”

Meanwhile, we reached at the valley. People used to take the clay for daubing their mud houses from there. The valley was very deep and was dug slantingly deep in its root. Hence,
it had created a hanging cliff. The elder boys dug the clay and filled up their baskets from the places suggested by Baheri. Afterwards, throwing a spade at her, they asked her to dig her clay. While she was digging, some mischievous children decided to tease her. They put aside their bags and climbed on the hanging cliff and they started pestering her from there by throwing small stones at her. She dragged me close to her to protect me from the stones. Only two of us were left in the place like a cave. As a child I was frightened by the situation and I also didn’t like to be covered by her. Suddenly, we heard some frightening shrieks from above, “Baheri, run away... Jasya run away from there. The cliff is falling down.” Baheri could not listen to it and I could not understand what they meant but the frightening shrieks instigated me to run away from there. Before I could move away dragging her hand, she herself dragged me close to her and the lumps of the clay fell down making bam... bam... sound the very next moment. Due to some inner voice, Baheri shielded me with her own self. She bent down completely on me. One of the big lumps got stuck little above with the handle of a spade but lots of the clay thrust on us and buried us. I could hear the uproar from the beneath. I could hardly breathe. I felt the darkness as if I had been graveed. Baheri was groaning in pain due to the burden of the clay. Seeing her groaning, I too started crying loudly. The people who had rushed there might have heard the voice hence they started removing the lumps of clay. After a considerable time, we were rescued from the very painful situation.

Baheri was injured seriously. Her elbow and back had been scrapped. Her whole body was wounded. Her head was smeared in the clay. She didn’t leave me until the helpers removed entire clay and brought us out. The helpers got surprised when they saw that she had saved me even from slight injuries. When the people took us out, she became unconscious due to
the injuries and the burden of the clay. She was brought to the home on a stretcher. The entire village was impressed by the way she had shown intelligence to save me. My aunty gave her lot of blessings, “You have saved my child. I will always be obliged to you. Have God’s grace.” But, as I had heard, her Bhabhi was prattling at the same time, “It is good that the boy is saved but it would have been better, had she remained buried there. She is our biggest responsibility and moreover, she is dumb and deaf. How difficult it is to protect a pretty young girl.”

At that time, the people who were feeling sad for Baheri reprimanded her Bhabhi, “Everybody comes on the earth with one’s own distinct destiny! No one would be able to stop her from getting her destined things. Your agitation is of no use. Don’t unnecessarily spoil your own image!”

Out of obligation, my aunty provided her milk and ghee for days and, it was that time when unknowingly we became close friends. Within ten days, she recovered completely and started attending school again. In her family, they were three only: her elder brother, her bhabhi and she. Her brother was sensible about her condition. His command over her wife was so strict that she could not even talk to her sister-in-law strictly in the presence of her husband. Therefore, other girls of her age were going for work in the barnyards but Baheri was attending school with us. Her brother knew that she was not going to study further and her study was not going to be of any use to them. Nonetheless, he could not make his mind to send her for work. He had learnt to drive a motorcar by joining a private shuttle car service as a cleaner. He had also learnt to repair the vehicles. Hence, he was offered to drive the landlord’s new car and sometimes a truck. He was earning well out of that job hence neither his wife nor his sister was required to go for any work. He was authoritative with his wife,
“You sit at home leisurely till I am earning. You need not to take trouble but you don’t dare to harass my sister.” He had also instructed the school teacher, “It’s ok if she doesn’t study well. But, I need not to worry till she is here under your watch. Let her pass time so that we need not to worry about her!”

Because of that reason only, Baheri was studying with us. In reality, she used to do teacher’s household work instead of studying. She used to remove nits from the little girls’ hair and daub the school lobby. Her ability to prepare clay and daub beautifully was mesmerizing. Her precise style of daubing used to make it appear like ripples. Everybody felt wonder looking at her ability of drawing the pictures of birds on the walls. She had made two pictures from the panchatantra tales: one being of the foolish crow and the other was of a greedy jackal. The pictures were good and live on the wall that the deputy sir who had come on a visit of the school was also astounded. But, when he learnt that the artist was deaf and dumb, he too was shocked and kept staring at her with pity. But, Baheri was laughing our loudly.

After the incident of the cliff, my affection for her had doubled. I had started learning her sign language and I was then able to communicate with her clearly whatever I wanted to tell her. She too was able to speak her mind clearly to me than anybody else. Looking into her eyes, I was able to decide which of her hands would move in which direction. We used to talk to each other in that theatrics of silent signs for very long. The influence became so deep that, many times, unconsciously I had started using sings instead of words to communicate with my friends. Due to that, my nickname too had been diminished from ‘the deaf’s brother dumb’ to ‘dumb’ (Bobadiyo) only. But, then, I didn’t feel bad about it.
Up till that time, she used to come to school for the sake of coming. It was meaningless to teach her something or to write anything on the blackboard for her. But, I was trying to explain to her the letter and digits which were given with pictures in my book. She could see and recognize the pictures of a crow, a mynah, a peacock, a neem tree, a nest etc. After some time, she was able to identify the letters given below the pictures or a jackal’s actions of jumping under the grape vine. The more she learnt about all that, the more curious she became. I needed to take the help of signals as well as demonstrations to explain to her the sentence constructions. In the sentence ‘a crow is cawing’, she could understand ‘a crow’ but it was very difficult for me to explain to her the word ‘cawing’. I used to get irritated when she could not understand even after many efforts. She felt sorry seeing me shouting and making faces. She held my both hands and looked into my eyes. She didn’t leave me unless I laughed. She used to come with me to collect dung when I used to take my buffalo to the pond. On the bank of the pond, I wrote, ‘The buffalo is drinking water’ indicating to her the buffalo. From the smile on her face, I could realize that she had understood it. And gradually, she understood many other actions and sentences with the demonstration of the water drinking buffalo. She started learning the words, sentences and descriptions and became a keen learner. She always felt strongly to tell me that she had understood the story which she had read. Our whole class used to laugh a lot when she would be explaining a story with her actions. But, she never cared about it. She would just remain engrossed in her acting.

She had been deaf since her birth but she was so modest that none of the unusual problems which are generally born out of the impaired senses were visible in her. She had learnt many things naturally and she didn’t have any aspiration of the things which were beyond her. It was her innate nature to be clean and hygenic. Therefore, her mother had named her Dahi
(wise). People have given her a name of ‘Baheri’ (deaf) which was trampling her existence under their feet but they were not concerned about it.

I liked to call her Dahi. She herself understood the meaning of her name very lately. After that too, she was not much concerned about the meanings of names Dahi and Baheri. After depriving her of these two senses, the Almighty became more perverse. He made her very beautiful! Being jealous of her good fortune, the Almighty gave her a curse of being very beautiful. Her broad forehead with long and slim curved eyebrows, big oval shaped eyes, proportional ears with large hanging lobes, attractive long neck, a well shaped chin as if it had been created to support her neck only, above all these, always smiling elegant lips, crystals like teeth, fair, and curvaceous body. She always looked attractive due to her habit of remaining always clean and well dressed.

People used to doubt the God’s kindness by looking at her mesmerizing beauty. But, what revenge he would have taken by not giving her voice to that attractive body?

The women didn’t get tired from praising her clean limbed physique. Her peers didn’t want to prove themselves less beautiful by comparing themselves with her. Her own Bhabhi was not so good looking but as she was free at home, she used to pass her whole day in titivating herself. However, she was nothing against Dahi. Therefore, she used to get very angry at her for that matter. Sahadev suffered due to his mastery over knowledge and our Dahi suffered a lot due to her lack of knowledge. Her foppish Bhabhi was flirting with a rogue living in their own street. Dahi’s vigilant eyes had seen it. Her Bhabhi was harassing her in the absence of her brother. Once, she wrote to him about her Bhabhi’s affair. As a result, the husband-wife fought a lot. Bhabhi got very annoyed. After few days, she planned a trick. One day, she
called the rogue to her home, sent him in a room, locked the room from outside and went away. Dahi was sewing a blouse inside the room. She got frightened seeing him there. The rogue dragged her with her braid and closed a backside window. In a way, the dumb Baheri could not shout for help, but she got hold of a screw driver from her brother’s bag of instruments. When the rogue was trying to clasp her, she pierced it in his chest. At the same time, due to her good fortune, her brother arrived from nowhere. He lost his mind hearing Baheri’s shrill groaning and the sound of violent struggle. When he opened the door, he saw the rogue was trying to save his chest by holding Dahi’s hair.

The rogue got scared by Brother’s sudden arrival. Before he could run away from there, Brother hit a steering of a car on his head. He fell down there but, out of fear, he got up again and ran away with shedding blood drops. From that moment, he had never been seen again in the village.

Bhabhi started defending herself, “I have gone to the well to draw water. When the rogue was after your sister, you on the contrary have doubted and dishonored me!”

Some wise men advised Brother, “Don’t make uproar. In a way, the news will spread. After all, she is a girl and how long will you keep her with you?”

In the evening, the panch meeting was called. The rogue’s family was excommunicated. His father begged for forgiveness by lamenting. Fining them twenty five rupees, his other family members were let go with a condition. “Today, you have been expelled from this village but if the rogue will appear in the village again, all of you will be excommunicated from the entire community.”
Dahi’s Brother was warned, “Arrange her marriage wherever it fits. Many dumb and deaf are being married. Find a boy suitable for her. Never trust an interest of a bania and a girl growing adult.”

Dahi’s brother realized the fact. The suggestion was right. How long to take care of her? A man can stay and manage for food anywhere but what about a girl who was above all very attractive.

His other family members too started persuading him obstinately for the same thing, “Once you get her marry, other things will be taken care of. Someone suitable for her can certainly be found.”

One of those well wishers came with a proposal: “This is the tenth year of my sister’s marriage. But she is not graced to bear a child yet. The brother-in-law wishes to have another wife for a scion of the family. They are wealthy family with animals, land, and a good house. Baheri won’t have any problem. If you agree, we shall arrange her relation there only. It is like our own family hence if there is any problem we can instruct them for right and wrong. What do you think? If you agree, I will invite Soniben here.”

Dahi’s brother could not agree to it. One’s own sister should not be just married to anybody. He tried very hard from his side to find a good boy. He even tried to pay money to a good boy if anyone would agree to marry her. But, nobody felt to marry the very beautiful but deaf and dumb girl. At last, losing all hopes, he unwillingly agreed to get his sister marry with his already married brother-in-law.

There was no need of asking what Dahi wanted. When the marriage was being fixed, I was shocked by seeing the groom sitting on the charpoy in Dahi’s lobby. He was double the age
of Dahi. But, what could I do? It wasn’t that Baheri didn’t know about all these stages of life. She had seen many of her friends getting married, and joyfully visiting their parent’s home with their husbands. Only she and the God knew whether she too had any such aspirations but I felt like not to be part of the event. Escaping from there, I went to the back side of her house and called her there. I tried to explain her with signs, “It is your engagement!”

Indescribable feelings came out on her face. Who knows whether it was out of pleasure or shock? But, seeing me sad, she gestured, “Where is the groom?”

I got startled. Nobody took care for showing her the groom even if he was there in the lobby itself. She tried to understand the situation and explain me something with gestures but I felt it better to escape from there. In the evening, she came to my home and started explaining me, “There were many people at home. The dishes of Kansar were made. But, as you were saying, it was not my engagement because there was not anybody young like a groom among the guests.”

I looked down. She used to read my disappointed face quickly. She also knew that I used to look down whenever there is something which I didn’t like. Interpreting that pause on her own, she held my chin and pushed it up and started explaining me with a smile on her face. “I am not going to marry. I want a husband like you. Put your head in my lap and lie down. I want a husband like you who talks to me continuously without getting bored. I will not marry anybody else even if the person is a king.”

I got annoyed from my sympathy for her by seeing her actions of taking my hand in her for getting married, putting her hand on my chest for comparing the groom of her aspiration with
me, making signs for a crown and a sword of a king. Out of annoyance, I unconsciously said, “You go now. Don’t disturb me.”

She got shocked seeing me annoyed. She took out a slate from my school bag and wrote down, “I will not get married until you agree. Are you happy now? Now come with me, I have kept Kansar for you.”

Her innocent ignorance made me cry. Seeing me crying, she too started crying.

Her would be co-wife was Dahi’s uncle’s daughter only. To comfort Dahi’s brother for his decision and to be familiar and frank with Dahi, she had come to stay at her maiden home. She had brought a beautiful sari for Dahi. Dahi had come to me putting on the same sari. Giving her the reference of the woman who had brought that sari, I explained her and made her read the slate, “Husband of that woman is going to be your husband also. You will be married to her husband.”

Dahi who had never been angry at me got angry that day. She thought, I was just teasing her because I didn’t like that she had put on the sari given by the woman. Dahi could not understand the hidden message of the sari because for the sake of a cousin or a woman, she used to bring some or the other things like bangles, earrings, hair buckle etc. for Dahi whenever she used to visit her maiden home. Hence, there wasn’t anything surprising to her about that sari too. “I will not put on the sari if you don’t like it. I will not wear it again until you say but don’t get angry on me like this. I don’t like this!”

Unlike the other days, I didn’t talk to her in the sign language on that day hence she also got annoyed. She stopped talking to me and dashing her foot on the floor. “Now, I will not talk to you ever.” saying so firmly, she went away.
She passed that night restlessly. The marriage ceremony was to be arranged soon; hence her brother got busy in the preparations from the very next day. Dahi had stopped attending the school. Our way to school was passing from close to her home. She used to wait for me there daily. As usual, on that day too, she was waiting for me at the school time but I could not look into her eyes. She came in the street and stopped me. She wanted to tell me that some preparations were going on at her home. But, I don’t know why I didn’t stop for her and ran away quickly bowing down my head. She came to the school after me. The teacher’s wife too smiled and indicated about her engagement. Then, Baheri realized. She returned to her home.

Her brother was getting ready to go for job at that time. She offered a slate to his brother, “Brother, whose marriage are we preparing for?”

The question stumped her brother for a moment. But, sooner or later, the question was to be answered. He knew about his sister’s stubborn nature. He warmly wrote on the slate, “It’s your marriage. It is my sister’s marriage!”

Immediately Dahi asked another blowing question, “Whom am I being married to? Why haven’t you shown me the groom?” Brother got frozen by her innocent questions. Meanwhile, Bhabhi came to his help, “You will see your groom when he will come along the marriage procession. He is very handsome and kind!” Bhabhi got busy in explaining those ideas to her and, finding a chance, Brother escaped from there. Showing her the new sari, Dahi asked to her Bhabhi, “Is the husband of the woman who had brought this sari is my husband also?”

Impolite Bhabhi thought what sense did the deaf and dumb could have! Hence, she merrily told, “Yes yes. He is the person. He will get you many new fine saris.”
Listening to that, Dahi got angry. Picking up a coal from a charcoal burner, she started writing on the white walls of the home with large letters, “I don’t want to marry, I don’t want to marry!” When Bhabhi held her hand to stop her, she jerked it. Seeing her spoiling all the walls, she rebuked her but she then broke down a water pot. The whole room became wet. When Bhabhi tried to save a sack of rice from getting it damp, she opened the sack and emptied it there only. Seeing Dahi’s terrible look, she got frightened and ran away in the bazaar and brought her husband. Seeing the home in a messy condition, Brother asked her, “Have you done all this?” She shouted out of anger and fearlessly said in her own way, “Yes, I have done this because I don’t want to get married. I will jump in a well, if you marry me with the man!”

First time in his life, Brother got very angry on her. On the other side, his wife was instigating her, “Many times I have told you to believe me and keep control on her! All this freedom is going to put us in serious troubles. Now you see! Still there is time. Thump her. Immediately, she will become disciplined. Otherwise, what will you tell to the panch? The engagement was organized in the presence of the panch.”

Learning that Bhabhi was instigating her brother against her, angry Dahi attacked her. Then, Brother too lost his mind. He threw her on the ground by pulling her braid. Out of anger, he started beating her with fists and kicks. Her brother had never ever beaten her. She was stunned by seeing her brother’s new frightful nature. Initially, she tried to save herself from Brother’s blows but, seeing her brother gone mad, she stopped protesting herself and surrendered herself completely. “Beat me; kill me!”
More than the pain of being beaten, the unexpected form of her brother turned Baheri’s heart into a stone. Seeing her injured sister-in-low, Bhabhi felt mercy for her and stopped her husband, “Stop now. I would be blamed, if anything happens to her.”

Bother turned red again when he felt that his wife herself had created all the nuances in their peaceful life. Leaving his sister, he seriously beat his wife also. She started shouting and created uproar. Dahi’s would be co-wife and other neighboring women gathered immediately. After much consolation, Dahi recovered herself. Due to being beaten blindly, many bruises, bleeding cuts and marks had come out on Dahi’s chicks, lips, eyes and other parts of her body. But, there were more serious marks of being beaten on her soul than the parts of her body. It was the pain of the shock that how couldn’t her brother, who had always loved and cared for her intensely, who didn’t have any other world than his sister, see her wishes and expectations.

The women persuaded Dahi trying whatever they could, “When a girl grows up, she has to go to her in-laws. All your friends also have got married. And you too have to get married. Due to your disability, no good boy is ready to marry you. You are fortunate that your own uncle’s daughter has agreed to accept you as a co-wife of her own husband.”

The women neither cared whether Dahi could understand nor did they care whether Dahi’s heart could feel all these emotions. Dahi remained seated in a frozen pause without moving her head for yes or no. Dahi had realized on her own that there wasn’t any other option than not only to kill her senses but to smother her all feelings also. With her each sob; she stuffed her pain in her heart. Her eyes became barren and she turned lifeless.
No enthusiasm used to be there in such marriages of ill matched couples. Hence, the groom came with only five guests. No marriage ceremonial procedure was followed. Quickly the ceremonial practice of exchanging money was completed. The guests took lunch and immediately, Dahi’s aanu was bid farewell before the afternoon. Her brother could not give his blessings to his sister and bid her farewell happily. He thought he was breaking the promise he had given to his mother for taking care of his sister for her whole life. He felt that he himself was killing his sister. He had committed a sin of beating his sister with his hands. He wanted to cauterize his own hands. On the other hand, for Bhabhi, it was like getting rid off from troubles. Remaining were the neighborhood women and her friends. They were crying and singing marriage farewell songs.

Go to your in-laws and brighten yourself,

Draw a veil when you see your father-in-law,

See your mother-in-law as your mother only; make your in-laws proud!

The women were singing the song and crying and Dahi was being pushed away from them alone, aloof.

I was waiting for her at the chabutara where we used to play a game of kooka. Tears were rolling down from my eyes. Looking at me for a moment, she dragged her eyes away. A girl going to her in-laws used to meet, embrace and cry for departing from her own loved ones in that chawk of their childhood play. Dahi too was not an exception from these feelings. Many of her friends, who had got married before her had cried embracing each other for. Baheri too had cried on those occasions. She was aware of the pain of departing from one’s loved ones. Sometime after a marriage, the bride would pass her whole life with her in-laws only. Then,
she would visit her parents only occasionally. She had also played with the children of her friends. In short, she was affectionate to that social life. Perhaps, she also had aspired for the auspicious moments of life because nobody had warned her about her unknown barren future and dependent life. But, she never thought about her life the way it had come to her in form of exploitation. Today, when everybody had turned against her, whom shall she ask for help? And, perhaps, with this helplessness, she was walking towards her unknown future. She didn’t have any hope, aspirations, enthusiasm, and joy for it. Therefore, she neither hugged anybody nor cried for being departed for her loved ones. She saw off all forever with her frozen eyes.

Her co-wife was beside Dahi. The neighborhood women were advising Dahi’s co-wife only, “She is very kind! She is not very smart. If you will keep her well, you will be fortunate. But, if you will behave like an elder co-wife, the God will not have his grace on you!”

As per the advices and her own understanding, Soni might have explained to her the meaning of accepting her as co-wife. She might have shown her the big house, comfortable life. But, perhaps, Dahi didn’t like it or these things might not have fit to her rebellious mind.

God knows what she might have thought of but on the very fifth day of her stay at her in-laws, her husband with a group of her first wife Soni, and five other elders came back to Dahi’s village. The panch was called again in the same chawk to decide about Dahi’s fate. The in-laws of Dahi complained, “Give me divorce right now, we have been deceived. We thought of her as deaf and dumb only as we have been told. But now, we came to know that she is mad also. We were not informed that she was mad also!”
After much quarrelsome discussion, the leader of the panch said, “She has been raised before our eyes. We have never seen her madness. You give evidences. Where and how did you see her insanity?”

“In these three days, she has caught her husband’s throat two times. Second time, she held his throat so hard that Madhyo would have died, had Soni not been around.”

When the humorous secret was reveled behind such a serious matter, people could not stop themselves from laughing. And somebody said in that humorous tone, “You would have better controlled your yearnings as a husband till she gets settled down in the new environment.”

“Don’t blame me for yearnings! You have got your insane girl married to me. The engagement was fixed in the presence of the panch. The panch should have clarified these things then. How can the panch cheat anybody? Your village’s reputation will be spoiled. Who will trust you then?”

How could the panch bear their insult by some other villager? The leader of the panch got angry. Clearing his throat, he said, “Who was in need, you or we? As we are clarifying you since long, we have never seen a mark of insanity in the girl. Where is Soni? Dear, you make it clear. Have you accepted your sister as your co-wife even if she was mad?

Soni got stunned for a moment. The panch told her, “Tell the truth to the panch? Have you ever seen any type of madness in her?”

Soni said, “No uncle! How can I lie under the roof of God? Had I been aware that she was mad, I would not have arranged her marriage and accepted her as my co-wife!”
After Soni’s clarification, the members of the panch discussed among themselves for some time and the leader announced their decision, “Pay attention! You are our guests hence we respect you! If something wrong had happened in our presence, we are responsible for that. But in this case, you yourself had proposed and agreed for the marriage in the hope of having descendent to your family. Moreover, Baheri’s own cousin was there in the whole process, and she is your wife also. The relation was fixed in her presence. Nothing had been hidden. Now, if you don’t like and if we give divorce as and when you wish, then it would mean insult to us and our village. This is not a child’s play. You cannot play with somebody’s life. Marrying a woman over a wife is not the tradition of our society but for your scion of family, the community had allowed you. But, if we give freedom further, then you will leave her today and marry some third woman. And if there comes any problem, you will further try to get even fourth wife also.”

“But, with all due respect, I want to say that you cannot blame. . .!” A member of the opposite group wanted to say something but cutting him in between, Medhakaka shouted.

“Oh stranger, don’t interrupt in between. Don’t forget which panch you are facing now. Do you know that nobody disrespects my word in the entire region? Listen carefully. The divorce would never be granted. When you have come, be our guest and take Baheri with you when you return. Now, she will even die there at your home. If we will hear about her harassment from anybody, we will call the whole community and excommunicate you. I will communicate the message to your panch as well as telling you also: Call your panch meeting and count all the wealth of Madhabhai. Give half of the wealth on the name of Baheri in the will. If you think of her as a burden, send her here with the wealth of her right. Also decide that if Baheri will have a child, the entire wealth should be given to her child. If you disagree
with our verdict, then it is your responsibility to call community meeting. You may leave now!"

Saying so, the leader got up. Everybody got stunned. The panch got dispersed. During the whole drama of justice, Baheri was there frozen and unknown of what was happening. She had neither to say anything nor to listen anything. As per the order of the panch, Baheri’s brother arranged a lunch for the guests. They advised as well as asked for forgiveness to each other. The main question was to explain the situation to Baheri. Only I could explain her in her sign language and they all thought that she would believe me hence I was asked to persuade her for her happiness.

When I was pushed to her, she was in the room. Her eyes had been completely insentient and frozen. Here, in that room itself, we used to ponder over the lives of the neem trees in the chawk, to indentify the birds passing over there, to understand the life cycle of the hatchlings. At the same place, a chick of a sparrow which had just learnt to fly was preyed by a cat. Though Baheri could not listen to the wailing of the sparrow parents and their painful chirping but seeing their fretting and fuming had made Baheri cry a lot. She had cried a lot explaining me about her inability to help the sparrow couple. I was expected to explain the matter of giving descendent to her husband to that innocent Baheri.

When I went to her, she gave me a scolding look. With the outburst of feelings, she clasped me. My head got wet due to her tears. Relieving myself from her embrace which was requesting help, I said, “Dahi, all want you to go at your in-laws!”
She stared me with her broad eyes. Then I realized how can my words reach to her? I explained to her with signs, “From the panch to the all your relatives, everybody is against you. Dahi, it is good for all except you that you go to your in-laws!”

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she asked, “Do you too want me to go?” I looked down and ran away from there.

Then, as I know, Dahi went to her in-laws forever. Her in-laws’ realization that she could not be forced to serve the purpose of the marriage as well as wrath and hatred due to the criticism by the panch resulted in an exploitation of Baheri. She was not being beaten but all the drudgery at home as well as field was imposed on her so hard that, within two months, the people coming from her village brought news that Baheri hadn’t remained half of what she had been. Her brother used to feel very sad by learning that but he was helpless. He cannot complain to the panch again and again!

But, the Almighty had planned something else for Baheri! Due to the fear of Baheri’s insanity, her husband could have good time with her but the entire village was surprised for a after her six months stay at her in-laws. Dahi’s co-wife Soni was pregnant. She felt that it was due to Dahi’s stay at their home. Hence, out of obligation as well as repentance she accepted her from the bottom of her heart.

“Your good fortune came to my help. I will not forget your obligations for my entire life.” And Dahi earned her respect and love at her in-laws. After her mother’s death and her Bhabhi’s ill treatment had pained her lot. Suffering all the troubles silently had made her harsh. After her mother, Soni was the first woman in her life who had loved her and softened her heart. Soni’s compassion for her made her lovely person again. Her love and intelligence
improved. She also started taking intense care for Soni. And Soni too came very close to her to understand her wishes and emotions.

When Soni bore a boy, Baheri became happy even more than Soni. She didn’t leave him alone even for a moment. She didn’t spare anything in taking care for him but she felt poor for two things: She could neither sing lullabies for him nor feed him. When Soni would be feeding him, she felt some indescribable desires in her heart. To satisfy her desires, she used to take boundless pleasure by imitating the act of feeding him when Soni won’t be around. But, one day Soni came to know it. She became suspicious about her. From that moment, she started remaining fearful in giving her child to Baheri. Moreover, somebody instigated her, “Don’t keep your child in her company otherwise he won’t even learn to speak.” And gradually, Baheri’s innocent love and genuine care for the little baby was snatched from her. Baheri could not understand the change. She asked Soni many times, but Soni didn’t feel to answer or explain her anything.

Once Soni had a child, Baheri too aspired to have a child but her desires used to melt down in her boundless affection for the child. But, since her affection and care for the little one was stopped, her desire to have her own child started burning again. Somebody also persuaded her that she only would have been a mother of the child, but because she didn’t agree to it, it came down to Soni’s fortune. In that matter, it was not required much to explain her. Having a beautiful child at the very elder age, Soni was on cloud nine. She earned love, respect and lot of care from all and nobody was concerned for Baheri. Madhav could read Baheri’s desires when she was serving dishes of food to him, laughing and behaving very friendly with him. And one day, Soni learnt that her co-wife too was pregnant. Instead of being happy about it, she got shocked. She thought that two swords could not be together in one scabbard.
The *panch* had declared to give Madhav’s entire wealth to Baheri’s child if she could bear a son. Once Soni had a son, everybody had forgotten that matter. But now, Baheri too was going have a child and if the child would be a son, then, he would obviously be a partner of the wealth. She thought she had borne only one child that was too with intense love and care but still she could not have recovered completely while Baheri was young and stout. If something happened to her, only Baheri would have children. Lost in so many such thoughts, Soni asked her husband about her doubts. He could not answer it. Hence, Soni lost her control and scolded her husband, “Break your promise and change your mind if you want to live peacefully! Disown the child!”

Soni’s husband disowned the child, “I am not the father of the child in Baheri’s womb. I am scared even of her shadow since she has caught up my throat.”

There were no proofs and nothing to be doubtful about but still, she was blamed. Some wise people even tried to persuade them, “This would invite God’s wrath on you. How will you forgive yourselves by punishing a helpless innocent woman?” But, Soni had become Dahi’s fierce enemy. They called the *panch* of their village. Putting his hands together, Madhiyo earnestly stated, “If I am lying, then I should be punished by beating me with your shoes!”

The *panch* didn’t care to investigate the right and wrong. They were little bit annoyed by the way the *panch* of Baheri’s village had declared their verdict and they were in need of wealthy Madhyo also. They expelled pregnant Baheri.

It was convenient for Baheri to go to her parent’s home. When she learnt for sure that Soni didn’t have even slightest love and affection for her and Madhyo, who used to love her
hiding from others, was not even coming in front of her, she left the village on that evening itself and disappeared in the darkness.

When her brother came to know about the matter, he got panicked. He rushed to Soni. Soni melt down and said, “We have gone to the panch to avoid the distribution of wealth. She had gone somewhere on her own.” Brother’s wife had been seriously ill since long and she was repenting for harassing Dahi. She said, “Find her from anywhere and bring her home. She is our own family member.”

Since that day, Brother’s eyes had been searching for Baheri during his job of truck driving. One day a nephew of his village who was nurse gave him the news, “A deaf and dumb woman had borne a dead child in the Ashram. Go and see. She can be our Dahi also!”

Brother rushed there. The news was confirmed. Persuading the members of the Ashram, he brought his sister home.

But the end of her story was still far. After few months of expelling Baheri, with the God’s disgrace, Soni’s son fell ill. Seeing his child stammering, Soni realized that it was the result of harassing innocent Baheri. She vowed, “I will bring Baheri back wherever she is and keep her with me as a sister. Oh God, please don’t disgrace my son!”

But, by the time the disease could be cured, Soni’s son became deaf. Many reiterated to Soni, “You have had son due to Baheri’s auspicious presence in this home. Still you go to her and ask for forgiveness. Due to her purity of heart, you son’s trouble might be solved.”

With a guilty and apologetic heart, Madhiyo and Soni reached to Dahi’s home. But, Dahi’s brother didn’t allow them to even enter his home hence they again went to the panch. They
begged for forgiveness for their mistakes and Soni spread her lap begging for her son’s life. The panch advised Dahi’s brother, “Please agree. She is their family member. Everything will be good and send her with them when they are imploring so much!”

Brother got angry, “You, the members of the panch only have spoiled my sister’s life. I got her married because you suggested. Where have you all gone when she was expelled? Whatever you say, but I will not send my sister now!”

The panch meeting ended. Then Soni narrated her painful condition to Baheri with tears rolling down from her eyes. She also gave her son in Baheri’s lap.

People were astonished to see that Baheri pressed the little one with her breast. Her Brother kept on imploring her not to go, the people around kept on requesting her not to go but she made her way to her in-laws with the little child in her hands!