CHAPTER 3
A TRANSLATION OF THE
SELECT SHORT STORIES OF
RAMNARAYAN PATHAK
In the evening, looking at the strong current of the flood of Jamuna and then at the *Padiya* of lamp held in her hand, she mumbled to herself: “Today, my longstanding desire will be fulfilled.” After a while, looking at the boat anchored at the bank, she said to the fishermen, “Take the boat to the centre of flood.”

A young fisherman said: “No boat would ferry anyone today. I have never seen such flood in my entire life.”

A middle-aged fisherman said: “Such flood had come twenty-five years ago. A fisherman chose to go against our protests and his boat turned turtle over there.” He pointed and showed that place.

She disappeared from the crowd quickly since no fisherman showed any interest.

All started performing Jamuna’s *aarti* in the evening, as usual. Lighting lamps in a small *padiya*, several women were laying them from the shore to float on water. Several *padiyas* were floating with the flow of Jamuna, some due to wind, others due to the force of water, and still others by being pushed by the flapping of fish. The *Kalindi* was maddened by the sight of several lamps – some floating, some still, some wobbling, some small, others big, somewhere clustered, somewhere scattered - and laughing at the cursed celestial Ganges.

What made that big lamp go off yonder, at the centre of the flow? Lo, another lamp similar to the earlier one went off too!

At that place, the shore of Jamuna, like a wedge, stretched out to the main current. She sat there, trying to float her lamp at the centre of the flow. She failed twice but didn’t give up her efforts. She hung a string at the end of a long thin stick and tied the burning lamp. Taking the stick up to the flow, she put the lamp to float. She, then, bent the stick slightly on the floating lamp. She managed to get the string burnt in the flame of the lamp and lifted the stick. Detached from the stick, the lamp started floating in the middle of the current.

*Aarti* was being performed at that time. The floating lamps on the violent flood of *Kalindi* seemed like a firefly on a cloudy night. The *aarti* of seven wicks
was being performed; it seemed as if, a Kaliya snake at every wick was moving sideways seeing this beautiful scene. All women stood speechless, lost, engrossed in loveliness, grandeur and devotion of the spectacle.

But her thoughts were quite different. She was impatient to see her long awaited desire being fulfilled. My lamp is the largest and unique among all, it will keep burning for the longest duration. In the centre of such pace, my lamp will go the farthest and people in distant villages would be astonished and say; “Oh! What a wonderful lamp!”

There were all the lamps near aarti – which lamp belonged to whom; their movement at a varied speed beautifying one another; whereas her lonely lamp was floating like a date tree across a desert. When all the women were lost in the beauty of the entire scene forgetting the lamp, she, like her lamp, stood alone in a corner and was minding only her lamp.

The lamp moved away. She climbed up to the temple on the corner to see her lamp moving afar. The lamp moved even farther and she climbed up to the peak of the temple. “Where did the lamp go?” Where did that lamp of mine which would astonish the distant villagers go?” The lamp slightly curved in the river and to see it, she bent one side. Her legs slipped and Kalindi, who had given way to Krishna, drowned her into it without even caring about the floating tortoises, fishes within, and those floating lamps far away from her. Nobody knew what had happened.

Nobody came to know how far her lamp floated. It was only she who was watching the lamp!

Today, Kalindi has washed the foothills of several high mountains like an ascetic in meditation. She has drawn many evils into her current and thrown it into the sea. She has fertilized several farms of the bank and has held several lamps on her bosom – perhaps she has held her lamp as well. She wished for her lamp to float afar and surprise all. Kalindi, however, unaffected by all human concerns, did not care to be considerate enough to show that her wish would ever come true.

What on earth would be the purpose of floods in the world?
I said: As it is already night and there is no hustle and bustle of passengers that might keep one engaged it is becoming all the more difficult to idle away the time.

Pestanji said: It is all your fault. Had we been there, we might have sat in the second class and it would have been possible for us to sleep.

Pestanji was an inspector, Department of Explosive Powder.

I said: But our education department’s office does not pay second class fair. My former brother did not draw any amount for ticket. I even drew the amount for third class.

Mr. Sendha said: He did not buy ticket but sat in the second class, didn’t he? Even I usually do not buy ticket.

Mr. Sendha was a police inspector.

Taking advantage of his mastery over English language Dr. Bhinde said: Those women are sitting there covering their faces. If they keep their faces open, we would pass time looking at their faces. The knowledge that a woman’s body is made of flesh and blood brings a sense of renunciation in us. That is what is written in our scriptures, but doctors have proved it wrong.

Mr. Sendha said (in English): Leave it! If she happens to uncover her face and if she turns out to be ugly, it would be very difficult to sit. This is better than that.

Mr. Pestanji said: Mr. Keshavlal has brought us to the third class. It is truly his fault so he should tell a story.

Mr. Sendha and Bhinde said: Yes, yes....

I said: Ok.

Mr. Bhinde said: But not like a schoolmaster. Women should figure in it.

“Agreed!” I stared.

“I had a dispute with Mr. Vijayray so he conspired against me and got me transferred to the forest department. This department is so wild that we called it exile. I came in contact with Mr. Harison there so it was a blessing in disguise. At
that time, Mr. Harrison was at the post of an assistant. Right now he is considered a very shrewd officer, but at that time he was a novice. He was about twenty-four years old and was fond of hunting therefore he would go camping. He used to go for hunting the whole day and would meet the clerk in the evening to finish the work considered important by him as fast as he could. But when there was a session’s case, he had to work for the whole day unwillingly. Once there was such a session’s case. A merchant from Telgadh and I were called as assessors. We went there and the case began exactly at 11 o’clock.

Two accused women were sitting covering their faces. The first had worn a thin colourful cloth and seemed to be middle-aged. The second had worn a red thin cloth and seemed to be a young woman. The witnesses were very few in the case. First, testimony of a police constable from Manjirgadh was taken.

The police constable said: I know the dead Kesharisinh Vajesinh. His house is situated on the outskirts of the village in the north-east. It is three hundred steps away from my police station - here he presented a map of the village, the police station and the house of the dead - I was at the police station on the day the crime took place. All of a sudden at around 9 or 10 o’clock I heard a cry from the house of the person who died. The cry was that of the woman called Hari, accused no.2. The cry ‘Run...run someone has been killed’ was heard. On hearing this, I followed and saw that the dead man was lying in an unconscious state in the house. Hari was screaming. Rukhi was sitting frightened. Rukhi was the dead man’s first wife and Hari was his new wife. The dead man was not on good terms with his first wife so he decided to give her ten rupees for a year and got rid of her.

The court: Since when was there an estrangement?
Answer: Kesharisinh had married this new woman Hari almost before two and half years ago and since then she has been separated.

The court: From where did he bring Hari?
Answer: He does not know.

The court: Had you asked Hari regarding the murder at that time?
Answer: Yes. She said that she had mercy for her elder sister and therefore I asked her to invite her sister by giving some excuse. Then I was cooking in the
house. My husband was filling the hookah. Seizing that opportunity my co-wife killed my husband with my husband’s sword. This is what Hari had told me.

The court: Did you ask anything to Rukhi?

Answer: Yes, but she did not answer anything. I took Rukhi under custody and sent her to the police station. I called for the leaders of the village and the report was prepared. The dead man was sent to the doctor. These clothes are for mourning. This is the sword which was lying there. The dust filled in this earthen pot is the same that I had taken as a sample from the crime scene.

The court: Then when and why Hari was arrested?

Answer: An inspector himself started the investigation. He imprisoned her, after three days.

Mr. Sendha: But why was Hari arrested?

Mr. Bhinde: Let me answer this, Mr. Keshavlal! The new wife was more beautiful, wasn’t she? Would an inspector of some princely state let go a chance to meet a fair woman?

I said: Whether you believe my story or not. But that is certainly a story. And the story teller has the right to tell a story the way he likes.

Mr. Bhinde: No problem. She was certainly very young. That was the only reason.

I continued: ‘The court saw the papers of the police department but there was no reason mentioned. The court asked why that inspector hasn’t come to give testimony. The answer was given that nobody knew where he was. Then the court asked both the accused if they wanted to make any counter inquiry. None of them spoke anything. The court asked both of them to uncover their faces, but neither obeyed the command. The judge, who was fond of hunting, seemed to be in a hurry. He looked at me. I told him to be practical. I said: “What is the need thereof?” The court said: I want to see whether accused no. 2 is mature or not. If she is mature then I have to release her and consider her as a witness. ‘I said: we will see when we need to get the answer of the accused.’ Then I myself asked the women: ‘Do you want to ask anything? Both nodded their heads. After writing ‘There is no counter inquiry’ the matter proceeded further.'
The next witness was Mr. Girjashankar Mehta. First of all, he presented an investigation report conducted on the night of the crime related to the injury on the body of the dead. Then he presented a post mortem report after three days. Seeing a signature on it the court asked: ‘Who is G.P. Joshi whose signature is there on it?’

Answer: Those reports are of a former doctor. He has left without permission and there is no news of him. A second paper has been recovered from the hospital. I consider it my duty to present it. This is a note of Keshrisinh’s last words before his death, and carries his signature. ‘The new wife has killed me.’ Only these many words are in it.

The court: It is written in the report that a blood vessel in his head is cut. But can a human being live and speak after it is cut?

Answer: No, if the blood vessel of neck is cut, death occurs at once. It was written ‘there is no counter inquiry’ and the testimony was closed.

The court called the police officer of Manjirgadh again and asked: Did he die as soon as he was injured?

Answer: When I went there after the crime was committed, he was unconscious, but alive.

The court: Did you try to take his testimony?

Answer: He lived for three days. For the first two days when I went to see him, he was unconscious. On the third day, the inspector came to see him and took Hari in custody. And then the chief Keshrisinh died.

The court closed the testimony.

Now, only the testimony of the accused remains to be taken. First, the woman No.1 - Rukhi - was called. She stood folding her hands. The court persuaded her to speak but initially she did not respond but when I explained to her that the court was just like a parent, she spoke.

Shall I tell you? Is there a god of ugliness as there is a god of beauty in this world?

Dr. Bhinde making a derogatory comment about Sanskrit and Vedant said: the God of beauty is Cupid and the God of ugliness is.....let’s call him Non-cupid!
I continued: “I have never seen such an ugly woman. Her lips were extremely thick and its thickness had also become uneven because of pointed teeth. Her forehead was short and her eyeballs were moving around. She seemed like a playing stick, thick in the middle and thin at the top and bottom. There was a mole on her cheek and on it your Non-cupid God has planted big white hair like his victory flag.”

Mr. Bhinde: What is new in it that the poor married the new one?

Mr. Sendha: I was unable to believe that Hari pities her co-wife and invited her. But now it seems probable to me. There is no need to envy such an ugly woman.

I said: This is not the time to say whether the matter is probable or improbable. The matter is still incomplete.

Mr. Sendha: Now I have understood the matter. We have solved many such cases. The case is very simple. On the basis of available evidence, no. 1 can be convicted a criminal. And if no. 2 is taken as witness then the case is solved.

I said: But what about the doctor’s report in which the dead says that he has been killed by the new wife?

Mr. Sendha: In fact, in every case something remains unsolved. But on the basis of my 18 years’ experience, I can say with certainty that the murderer is Rukhi. I would conclude that the doctor and the inspector did not succeed in filing a new case on Hari so they ran away. Can anyone live after the blood vessel was cut?

I said: But he was alive for three days! Let’s not consider that. Let me proceed with my story: Rukhi’s testimony was taken. She was extremely foolish. On being asked, she only said this much that she had opened the door upon hearing some noise and found the dead lying injured. Nobody was in the house except the new wife. The new wife has made a false accusation. I do not know who has killed him. The police caught me. I know nothing. I have been living separated from the dead since the last three years. I have no estrangement with the new wife. I have not been invited.

Now the fact has become even more complicated. Now the court and all of us are eager to hear what the new wife has to say.
The new wife was asked to speak but instead of speaking she started crying. The court got confused. I said that all women act the same before giving testimony. You can ask the police to persuade her; meanwhile if you need to get signature in any papers, make them do. The court looked at the head clerk. The head clerk said that a criminal has been kept in a lock up. He has passed twenty four hours and is now supposed to be handed over to police. That proposal needs to be presented.

The criminal was called soon. We all kept looking at Hari and so the new accused started looking at her too. The head clerk casually asked: ‘which caste do you belong to?’ He said: ‘Anjana Patidar.’ I said: ‘Then there must be some dispute related to woman.’ The head clerk said: ‘No, it’s a theft of an ox.’ Meanwhile Hari uncovered her face. She could easily be called beautiful. Her stature was small and diminutive and looked very young. Her skin was fair but so much that it showed disgust. The parts of the face were proportionate but no one could guess what her thoughts were. Her eyes were luminous and women used to say that her eyes were filled with amorous desires. In short, in the first look, she was beautiful but as we kept looking, some inexpressible dislike would gradually overcome us. One might want to go away from her and yet one could not remove one’s sight from her. This was how she looked.

I kept watching her. Meanwhile the Patidar shivered and joined his hands and said to sir, ‘My lord, I want to make a request.’ The police got startled and thought that he might talk of getting beaten by the police. I came to know that he might confess his crime. The court said: ‘What is the matter?’

Patidar: My lord, that is my wife.

The court said: Which? First number –

As if the whole world would be thinking in terms of court’s numbers!

Patidar: My lord, that fair lady is my wife – as if he was showing us the heifer.

The court: What is her name?

Patidar, paused for a while and said: Teji.

The court went through Hari’s reply submitted to the district court. She said nothing in the district court. Her name was Hari and no other name was
written. We did not believe her answer. I said to the head clerk jokingly: Look, isn’t it matter pertaining to wife? The court scolded *Patidar* and said: ‘you have to prove it.’

*Patidar*: She is my wife! I will provide twenty one evidences.

The court looked at *Patidar*. Then looking at Hari, The court asked: Is it true what he says?

Hari: Yes sir.

Our surprise knew no bounds. The court said to Hari: Tell all your facts.

Hari began: I am a maid servant of Thakore of Mengana. My true name is Vali.

Head clerk: Manjirgadh’s Thakore ran away with Vali, the maid servant of Mengana’s Thakore. The case continued for three years. Wasn’t that the case for this woman?

Hari: Yes sir.

The court: What do you know?

Hari: I used to stay at Mengana’s Thakore. I was very unhappy there. Then came Kesharisinh and took me away. He was estranged from his first wife. I stayed there for two three months and in the meanwhile a man of Manjirgadh’s Thakore came. He said that an investigation was being carried out by the government and so he advised me to go away from the state and return afterwards. Keshrisinh and I both ran away. On the way, Keshrisinh explained to me that we might be caught during such rambling, so I should stay in someone’s house for some months. I agreed with him as I was scared. Then Kesharisinh married me off to a potter for Rs. 700 and told that he would bring me back after six months. After six months, he took me away secretly.

The court: Why did you go?

Hari: I did not like the potter’s place.

The court: What happened then?

Hari: I came back. He enjoyed for a couple of days till the time he had money. As he had no money, he persuaded me again and married me off to this *Patidar* for Rs.900. He took me away from there also after eight to nine months.
*Patidar:* Sir, she has taken my ornaments as well. The ornaments around her neck are mine.

The court: Well, say further.

Hari: After returning, he squandered all that money and asked for these ornaments. I said these are mine. He tempted me again to marry in Bayad caste. He told me that I would get many ornaments and I would not have to work there. But I was afraid of being recognized there so I refused. Then he said that he would declare my name to the government. Finally, I was afraid of him so I did what he said.

The court: Why did you blame his first wife when you killed him? What harm had she done to you?

Hari: There was noise when I killed him. On hearing this, the first wife came and tried to open the house. For some time, I did not speak anything and did not open the door. Yet she did not believe, so I blamed her.

The court: How did you kill your husband?

Hari: In the course of the conversation I said: ‘How would these blind people find their houses? See it, do I know it?’ On saying this, I got myself blindfolded and then said that I did not find anything and told him to do it. Then I blindfolded him and said: ‘Give me water.’ When he was going to take water, I thrust a sword.

We all had become so much tired from this fact that the court adjourned the case.

Dr.Bhinde: What was the end of the case?

I said: My story ends here.

Mr.Sendha: How would it proceed? It is wrong! The doctor’s certificate is still unexplained for.

I said: But you were saying that in every case something does remain unexplained.

Mr.Sendha: But if Hari had wanted to murder her husband, she could have done so at midnight. Then why was the blindfolding drama called for? I do not believe this. What do you think Mr. Pestanj and doctor?

Both: Of course, it is wrong.
“No, it is right.” A woman, sitting at the far end of our compartment said in an undertone.

Mr. Sendha: What is its surety?

The woman uncovered her face. She took a railway pass out of her pocket slowly. It was the same railway pass that was given to the released prisoners from Andaman to return to their country. In the pass, the name of the released prisoner was Hari alias Vali.

She was the same Hari or Vali or Teji. Mr. Bhinde was also filled with disgust while looking at her. We could not make out what she was thinking at that time. Her grey eyes were filled with erotic desires. Looking at her, some sort of inexpressible dislike would gradually overcome us. We couldn’t stand there any further and yet were not able to divert our gaze from her.

None of us could utter a single word on the way.
‘Why do you ask for more years of job instead of going for a pension?’ ‘Why do you get more years of job?’ ‘Why is your promotion denied? You are asking these questions to me, don’t you? Or is it that you are asking just for the sake of asking?

Don’t you see there isn’t any faithful and regular government servant like me! How can you who are regular late comers know that I reach the office even before the porter? I have never taken even casual or paid leave in the entire length of my service! Don’t you see that this constant writing has turned my face pale! You all give up your work on the pretext of smoking or tea etc., keep chatting to idle away your time and make friends for chatting, laughing and joking together. But have you ever seen me idle except for going to answer the call of nature? When the work is finished, I ask for more work from our sir. And, at last, if nothing is found, I make copies for sir himself! I write personal letters for him. But I do not sit idle even for a second without writing. You were all reading ‘Navjivan’ hidden in your files during enlistment for the Non-cooperation, but have I ever had raised my head while writing? Won’t government appreciate even that?

What did you ask again? ‘What brought such devotion towards the work in you?’ Do you want to know? Can you show a little patience? Ok, listen.

I became a widower at the age of 35. At that time, there were only two members in our family - my old mother and a child Chhotu. I was considered highly respectable in our community at that time. Many people came to soothe my painful heart. From ancient times, ritual expressions of sympathy of worldly life are established customs. ‘Alas! How weak your body has become only in eight days! Stop worrying now. There is no shortage of girls in your caste. You should not feel distressed. Chhotu would get his new mother tomorrow and she would shoulder the domestic chores!’ etc. several types of consolations were being offered.

What did you say? Why did I butt in? What does this matter have to do with my straight forwardness in office? Well, you belong to the modern age. You keep your clothes, hair style, shoes, moustache everything in accordance with new
fashion. Don’t you even know that every man’s success in his career depends on his wife? I also want to show that my success depends on my wife. Enough now, don’t butt in.

What was I saying? Oh, Yes! You must be feeling that I have agreed upon marrying immediately. No, I was a modern man. I can see the sign of distrust on your face. You do not believe that I am a modern man. But I have also done graduation. I was more enthusiastic than you when I became a graduate. I had read the great writers like Herbert Spencer and Govardhanram and I had nursed the ambition for unification of both the east and the west, observing the similarity and dissimilarity between them. I am well aware of the difference with regard to marriage between our country and the west nowadays. In the west, women refuse to marry and the man agrees to marry. Here, the man refuses to marry and the woman does not have chance to speak her opinion. I did refuse to marry. We, educated people, are not merciless like old people that immediately after the death of the wife would agree to marry openly.

I was consoled by the traditional people. But it was not that they were foolish people. They questioned me again: ‘But why don’t you want to marry?’ My refusal to marriage was true so I made an argument: “I have a very clever boy. What is the purpose of remarrying?” But for the sake of truth I should accept that this argument did not stand up. “The wife is required only for the upbringing of a child. You can manage yourself somehow but the poor child cannot live without a mother!” I advanced the argument and said: “Now I’ve turned 35 years old. I should not remarry.” But my neighbour’s father had married at the age of 45 and then he had seven boys and her mother was lucky that she died in the presence of her husband. The other’s maternal uncle married at the age of 50 and someone else’s uncle had married at the age of 60. Thus, several examples of happy marriage life were presented before me. All said: “everything would be all right.” Who says Hindus are not optimists? At last, my obstinate refusal was given up before two people. One said: “How can you be called elder?” You got married quite young because you belong to a noble family that’s why you had children, otherwise in fact, it is now that you seem to be marriageable. Englishmen are unmarried even at this age.” The other says: “Don’t you have mercy even on your
mother? Only a woman can serve a woman in a better way, what could you do?”
Now according to the ideals of both the West and the East, I had to get married.
Why, is it not the ideal of the West to marry at an advanced age? And is it not the
ideal of our East to marry for the sake of parents and for benevolence? Why, did
you not get the point? Saraswatchandra was prepared to marry for the sake of the
parents. That is the ideal of our East. Do you take it as a joke? Brother, you do not
know the significance of Hindu marriage. There is no reason for the first marriage
of the Hindus; and every fact becomes the reason for the second marriage.

There were many difficulties still – internal as well as external. But the
principal rule of my life is that once the chief principle is decided, then I take
liberty in supplementary matters. I do not insist upon it. Likewise, although the
grief that pained my heart had not calmed down yet, on the very thirteenth day of
the death my wife, though the age of the girl was half of my age, I had to agree to
marry with the daughter of the famous shashtri called Puranram of our caste. The
search of that girl was made by those who consoled me and from them I heard that
shashtri had educated her sufficiently enough to make an ideal Hindu wife. She
knew the songs related to a sati of Dahyabhai Dholasaji. She used to eat only after
the recitation of the life of ‘Satyavan Savitri’. She had read both the parts of
‘Satimandal’ well and understood the duties of a sati.

I got married. What did you ask? What is my wife’s name? Why did you
ask that question? I ask you why did you butt in? A very dangerous incident of my
tale had taken place because of that question. Do you think that I am an old
fashioned person and would feel too shy to utter her name? No, it is not so. Let me
talk about it so that you will be convinced.

It was after two months of my marriage that an old friend of mine came to
my home. My wife was cooking with her little experience. While we were having
our meal, my friend congratulated me and asked this question. I said: ‘Vimla.’ On
hearing this Vimla fainted as if struck by a lightening. Her head fell on the stove.
Her face got some burns. I lifted her and took her to the bed and I sent my friend
to fetch a doctor.

What did you ask again? ‘Why did she faint?’ Was that so? It seems you
did not understand that she was a sati. Yes, but I haven’t told that yet. You
interrupted me by asking her name. Had you allowed me to say it before, you yourself would have understood why had she fainted?

She entered this home on the day of Dhanteras. I reached the room and sat there. She bowed down and touched my feet with complete devotion. I thought she was doing all those age-old formalities because Diwali festivals were going on or maybe because it was our first meeting. She came back at night and addressed me as “Lord”. I got startled at first. Then at once I felt a great sense of disgust, hatred and contempt. I did not understand whom and why did I hate? Or did it happen so because the word “Lord” is not used in Sanskrit literature? But I heard strange words which I had never heard and this had never taken place!

What did you say? ‘You have heard that word many times yet you did not feel anything.’ Is that so? Well, where have you heard? ‘In a drama?’ I have also heard in a drama. But there are so many things which would appear good in a drama but in real life experience, it makes us extremely angry. The women on whose dance and coquetry you are so attracted in a drama, you will certainly run away if the very same women approach you. For making an appearance only as a male character beside such women, I would reward them with as much as is possible. You may be discussing on art anything. But I would certainly believe that whatever beautiful appears in art is extremely dangerous in practical, real life. Like mountains, art is also beautiful from a distance.

But I did not have as much time on that day as I have now for discussion. Hardly had I thought over the first word than she uttered a sentence: “Lord, Why don’t you order the maid-servant?” I did ever speak in favour of women’s freedom during my study but like all men in the world, I had never any doubt in my mind about man’s natural superiority: but I was dumbfounded when I experienced such obedience from a woman. I did not understand what superiority would I have over the woman? But she was earnest. She said in a shaky voice again: “Lord, the maid-servant is ready for what is ordered.” But my mind tried to escape from her at her every question as if it escaped from a fear of some unprecedented ghost. Someone was wonderfully escaping even from my own self. I was not able to decide even what I wanted. Now it was necessary to decide soon because her shaky voice was turning to sobs. I got rid of confusion and surprise, came to my
senses and said “Brush my coat properly before I go to the office tomorrow.” She said: “Thank you, but I long to serve you.” My confusion kept growing. She asked: “Should I massage your legs, massage your head or fan for you?” My mind started whirling with confusion as if it was suffering from nightmare. My mind could not find out what my body wanted at that time though I tried hard to find. Now it should not be too late. She started crying. As one gets startled in a nightmare, I got startled and answered: “Massage my legs.” She started massaging my legs. But because of some unknown movement, my legs were also shrinking because of her touch. They were being pulled. And I did not have the courage to take back my legs and therefore only my nerves were stretched.

When I felt that sati would have been content, I asked her to go to bed. She, indeed, slept with the content of an unprecedented gratitude but I could not sleep the whole night lost in her thoughts. To be true, I did not have any thoughts, there was only confusion. My mind slept as the morning approached. But before sleep could restore peace to my mind, I was woken up by some strange touch on my legs. When I saw, my wife bared my legs and lay there at my legs bending her head over them. I was not only confused but also fearful. A great number of mornings stood before my sight all together. And I trembled at the very thought of undergoing this operation every morning. Eternity may appear very beautiful in art but I had its first dangerous experience.

But when the nature of fear is known, a man’s confusion is dispelled and he tries to face fear. I thought for the whole day. In fact, there wasn’t any progress in thought. But the same dangerous scene was appearing. Finally, I courageously decided to stop her rituals at once. That night I told her clearly not to serve me and bow down her head to me in the morning. I felt that my trick was successful; because she neither sobbed nor cried. She even left without bowing to me in the morning. But the trick was not successful. On the third day, the mother said that the wife has not taken food for two days and keeps doing work! I immediately understood. On the same night I told my wife: “Sati! I am happy with your chastity and fidelity. You fan for me happily.” I allowed her to bow down to me in the morning. Everything was set in order again.
I felt that now I should find some other trick. I thought for two three days only about trick. Finally, I got a trick. That night I took books, sat cross-legged and started reading as if I was deeply engrossed in study. Sati came but I did not look at her. She came and asked for doing routine service. I said: “Sati, I should serve mother but I have so much of reading work that I cannot serve her and I feel like having sinned. If you serve her for twenty four hours, I may get rid of sin. Even at night, she might need something so you sleep there. Otherwise I will have to do all that.” And I uttered this sentence with great devotion and sati believed that. She immediately went to his mother. Mother was also fond of receiving leg massage which was now fulfilled. And I was saved from oppression. It was the most ingenious plan. I did not marry for my sake. I married for my mother. I had protected my religion. And religion would certainly protect me in such adversity!

I married so that my child got a mother, likewise sati married for the sake of the ideals attributed to a sati and not for her own sake or for me and she was not going to desert her duties. She came and bowed down to me in the morning. Now I started thinking what to do about this. In the meanwhile, I gradually understood that the way English regime bound Hindustan from every direction, in the same way she was also binding my life from every direction. I understood that she was eating from my dish, and served me more than I wanted deliberately and was eating my leftovers. And one day, she came back hungry from a caste-dinner because she could not find my patrali. Moreover, my house had become a centre of attraction for many of my neighbours. Sati used to sing songs about the life of a sati. The husbands of the neighbourhood praised my wife and sent their wives to my house in the afternoon to acquire the qualities of a sati and to possess cardinal virtues. And sati used to sing legendary stories like ‘satimandal’ and ‘savitri-charitra’ etc.. To get rid of this worship, I used to visit someone else’s place away from my home. But then there too the song was heard:

‘The nature has turned all the more beautiful’

The last rhymes of the song which you, as a male or a female or as both, recite enthusiastically seem to me like the long-drawn wild cries of women beating their foreheads. Here also I was not happy. Moreover, the neighbours criticised my good fortune in my presence and sometimes even addressed me directly. What
could be more pitiable than being congratulated for the thing that you have a great
disgust for and when you could not even make others understand about how you
were overcome by waves of nausea?

*Sati* was turning me into a god and I didn’t know how to stop her from
doing that. I feared I would grow accustomed to this deification. In the meanwhile,
a more shocking incident took place. It was our first monthly wedding
anniversary. When she touched my feet, I came to know that she got up earlier
than usual on that day. I got up at my usual time, went out and came back. And I
saw a totally new function in home! I guessed there might be something like the
story of lord Satyanarayan. But when I was washing my legs, she came. She
started saying submissively: “God!” the importance of the day had made me ‘God’
from ‘Lord’ – give me that advantage today. Kindly do me this much favour.” For
a while I did not understand. Then I came to know about the experiences I had to
undergo. But I was well aware that what could be the optional insistence if I did
not oblige. I went inside the home silently. I was made to sit on a stool.

My legs were made to put in a copper saucer and washed with *panchamrit* as if one makes
Lord Krishna bathe, in worship, slowly with a spoon. And finally she drank the
water. Then she performed *aarti*. During this activity, I was filled with much fear,
doubt and disgust. I felt that I might go mad. The simplest way to make any person
mad is to bow to him. In the same way, the standards of the teachers have
degraded, and they do whatever pleases them. The preachers have become
inhuman!

New worries rose up because of this activity. *Sati*’s bow in the morning
was a private activity and it was felt that this might take the form of a public
festival. Moreover, I started trembling at the very thought that if these many rites
are performed on monthly wedding anniversary then what would be the scenario
during the annual wedding anniversary. I decided to find out the way anyhow for
this. And I did find it out on the basis of all my experiences and fancy. I went to
*sati* at night and said: “*Sati!* The way I am your God in the same way I also have
my God. The way you worship your God I should also worship my God. But my
mind cannot concentrate on God worship when you worship me. So I have another
solution. The way we worship an idol as God, you also worship me as an idol. I
will give you my photograph. You can worship it after bath regularly. And worship it even on wedding anniversary. This will ensure well-being for both of us.” Sati understood this matter. From that day onwards, I experienced relief seeing the worship of my photograph with sandalwood and husked rice.

Now my worry was removed. However, I had to face difficulties in between sometimes. When Chhotu took my photograph to see, it got smashed and broken. On that day, sati had a premonition of something inauspicious. I removed that glass, and I had to make her understand that God did not want any transparent obstacle like glass in your worship so it had happened thus. From then on, all the rites were performed on the photograph. And in a way, that became a true photograph of my soul. If you see that photograph now, you will find the photograph covered with sandalwood, husked rice, ghee etc. to such an extent that it cannot be recognized; and the same thing has happened to my soul.

Now you would have understood why sati had fainted! Why, haven’t you understood yet? You also do not seem to be more intelligent than I. I also did not understand on that day. But sati herself helped me in my confusion again. When she regained consciousness, she told me: “If you feel headache, get me up and sleep in my lap. If Yama comes, then I will even answer him.” Initially my confusion arose. I understood that sati had become ready to die after her husband like Savitri but I could not understand which Naradji had forecasted death. At last, sati herself said: “It is a religious principle that if man and woman utter one another’s name, then their life is shortened.” At that time I realized that this problem could not be solved by the doctor alone. My friend had left before this. But I have told you that the solution is found after the nature of fear is known. I created a stanza. I could have found an old stanza but it was difficult to find so I myself created it. It meant that one, whose name is uttered, shortens one’s life. Sati’s mind was soothed. Do you want to listen to the stanza? ‘No?’ It seems you have lost patience. Let me complete the remaining matter soon. ‘No?’ Have you not lost patience? Then you might not know Sanskrit. Ok.

Now the routine work was going on properly. I was worried only that the mother was growing older and she might die, then I would have to shoulder all the responsibility of funeral rites. Now I understood that the way authors of our
scriptures have specified our deeds for the entire day, in the same way I have to manage my life. But I did not find all types of aims and rites. Meanwhile a new accident took place so I got all the solutions. I had to go to another village. I thought that I would get an opportunity to be free from the influence of satī for some days. But for her there was not even a single occasion without a rule. Satī put salt, knot of turmeric etc. in the suitcase. At the time of leaving, she said to me to remember God Ganesha and the sage Agatsya. And after giving all the instructions, she gave me a beautiful small box. I thought about my good fortune, there may be something like red turmeric. But she had no time to care for the good fortune of anyone except herself. She opened a small box, showed mung and said: “Take a mung from this small box after you get up and brush teeth in order that I would not have any problem even if you happen to have lunch late.” You might not have understood, but I had spent enough time with her that I could understand the secret of this instruction immediately. Satī did not eat anything before me. And it was a religious rite that she did not want to break that rule anyhow.

Now the philosophy of the whole life was set. The rites were also specified. The time for the execution of rites had also come because of mother’s death. I asked for transfer. From the time I came here, I have been following the same routine. The world may change, but my rules never change. Do you want to listen? Yes, of course, the secret till now is hidden in these rules.

The first rule is to let satī live the life of a satī. Apart from worship to my photograph, I have taught her to repeat my name like a mantra. And she knows that I am transferred and paid handsome salary as a result of her worship. Salary increases and service also increases due to unavailability of pension. And though I am old, I live.

The second rule is that I should be away from house as much as possible.

Both these rules are well maintained. I have got a very good job because of the good deeds and prayers of satī. Sir has entrusted me with a confidential work so I have to go to the office very early and return very late. Sometimes I cannot even go home!

Let me inform about its sub-arrangement. Satī spends so much time in her worshipping that food is always half-baked. So I have been suffering from a
disease somewhat like dysentery. So it was necessary for me to have arrangement for food separately. This Brahmin cook provides good sweet and food here. You all eat with great appreciation but you may not know that that organization is thankful to me. Having mung in the morning does not break her vow.

The third rule is that I should not make friends. Why, do you think that I do not make friends as I feel envy that you would see my wife? Nobody would see my wife – especially from that day when she showed her cooking skills at the gas stove – and even if one of them tried to do so, he would see nothing but the large red bindi spread over her forehead looking like an alarming railway lantern! But because of friends, our mutual rites are not maintained properly and the situation becomes difficult for friends. Therefore I should not make friends.

Of course, you all find time to relax from paperwork by chatting with friends, but for me, the disease of dysentery transmitted from sati, works the same. It provides me with relaxation and stops others from becoming my friends. I spend a great deal of time in writing fearing that I might make friendship with someone.

My story is over, but why do you seem to be confused thus? Do you consider me to be unhappy? No, no, how can I be unhappy? I have a fortunate woman at my place, Chhotu studies. Though I have a step mother, both of them never quarrel. Chhotu hardly comes to home from hostel. I have a government job, a salary and blessing of my superior. Years are passing by in the service, and I have learnt to be patient to such an extent that nothing affects me now!
I was preparing for tiffin when I heard his steps. I could predict his mood from his steps which at times suggest despair, enthusiasm or just a thoughtful dawdle. Presently his steps seemed to be filled with enthusiasm and I could hear them coming towards me. He came in order to tell me something, but stopped when he saw me cooking.

‘What is all this?’ He asked.

‘I am preparing tiffin as I am to board the train in the afternoon.’ I replied.

‘But where are you going and why?’

‘To improve my handwriting and let you concentrate on your studies without any hurdles.’

Once when we had met after a considerable period, I wondered what he would say to me. All he said to me was: ‘There is benefit to a wife in staying away from her husband. Such a separation would provide a woman with a chance to improve on her handwriting who otherwise never gets enough time to practice the same.’ When we are together, he often complains of not being able to concentrate on his studies on account of my presence.

‘But have you thought what I shall eat in your absence? How will Moti manage for her food?’

Moti was our bitch, as fair and smooth as a pearl.

‘Those who work may not get the food, but those who don’t work easily get food. A man may not get it, but the dogs, ants, black-ants, fishes all get their food. I am not at all worried about anyone for the same reason.’ I said.

‘Okay... I won’t refuse you if you wish to go, but where are you going?’

‘Well, you can easily find it out on your own being a thriller writer.’ I said while making puris.

As I feared I might leave before he came, I had already put a chit on his half-finished story with a paper weight on it so that he can easily find it out.

‘I can see X-rays coming out of your eyes.’
'They are not X-rays; they are Z-rays.' I answered while cooking *puris*.

‘My all-knowing Meerabai, can you tell me who wrote Premanand’s plays? I gave you those plays the other day. Why didn’t you read them?’

‘The meal is prepared. You can talk to me while having your meal. You said his plays can be enjoyed by all - children, women, or old people. I didn’t like the plays. Don’t you think it proves that those plays must be written by someone else? Now you can happily say that the plays are not written by Premanand.’

‘So you want me to declare that those plays don’t belong to him because my wife doesn’t appreciate them? ...Good!’

‘Why not? Are you ashamed of publishing my opinion? You haven’t changed a little. That man didn’t feel ashamed when he asked his wife if she liked Gandhiji’s face and he even made the incident public. Have you ever asked whether I have liked the face of any great man?’

‘Let me ask you about it now.’

‘Ask me.’

‘Do you like my face?’

‘But you are not great.’

‘An English writer has made one of his lady characters say: ‘Knowing my husband is more important to me than knowing who the president of England is.’ Don’t you think my face is more important to you than any other face?’

‘What would you do if I say no?’

‘Whatever you ask me to do.’

‘I don’t want to like your face for fifteen days and I beseech you to manage a ticket for Agra.’

‘I hope Kamala is in perfect health.’ He said seriously.

‘There is nothing serious, but the doctors say they would have to perform an operation. As it is a woman’s hospital, even her husband, Mr. Oza, can’t meet her. I will stay with her during that period.’

Ozas were our intimate friends.
The life of a husband without a wife is so strange that one would fail to find out an appropriate word for it. A woman is called miss if yet to be married, considered *Saubhagyawati* if her husband is alive, *proshitbhartrika* when her husband is abroad and a widow when her husband is dead. The life of an unmarried woman is the sign of a carefree life and enjoyment; a *saubhagyawati* is the sign of self-less love; a *proshitbhartrika* is the sign of separation; and a widow is the sign of the mournful state of a wife. What if a man is not married? Well, in that case he is called a bachelor. What after he gets married? Nothing, he is just called married, a husband. There is no specific word for him when his wife is away from him. After his wife dies, he is called a widower. The very word shows that he has lost all pleasures of life. An unmarried man is not considered a part of any community. If a husband shows much affection to his wife he is called a henpecked husband and if he is not so, he is called cruel, someone who always deprives her of all her beauty and liberty. The very word husband means a fool. And a widower means a suitor who is in search of a woman to remarry. He becomes a husband if he is fortunate or else remains unmarried. What if his wife is on a tour? Where can he go? It is not a matter of a day or two. Others might think that he will pass time anywhere and won’t show much concern. Even if a husband tries to sound sad or dejected, no one would take it seriously!

‘What is the problem if your wife is not around? Don’t you get your food to eat or clothes to wear? Don’t you get money? Why become so helpless? Is there anything you don’t have? A widower means you don’t have unwanted responsibilities and that is rather a good thing.’ Now I think men are so habituated to bearing those responsibilities that their absence makes them restless. Once while I was travelling in a cart, there was one policeman belonging to Makran with us who had carried a considerably heavy gun with him. I told him to put down the gun as there was nothing to fear. He had replied, ‘The load of the gun helps me in walking comfortably.’ Premanand said a husband is one who is always ready to undertake any responsibility. Without it life looks too trifle to live.

Mr. Oza’s son - Kiko- had just recovered from some illness. Once when he had finished his meal, his mother said, ‘Stand up and clean your mouth.’ Kiko
stood up and started crying. He said, ‘I can’t walk. I feel strange sensation in my legs as if someone is pushing thorns into them.’ All burst into laughter at this. His legs were tingling. Separation from one’s wife for a short duration is not a great deal, but it numbs the heart and nearly stops functioning. It feels as if it is pricked with thorns and if we can’t walk properly, people start laughing at us.

A man is highly dependent on a woman! All would like to talk about the emancipation of women. As for me, the problem that needs to be taken seriously is the emancipation of men.

What to do? The authors of the ancient scriptures have chalked up a complete system based on the principles of those nine poetic sentiments for the ideal behaviour of a spinster, saubhagyawati, or proshithbhartrika. They have practically mentioned no such ideal behaviour for men. What should a husband do or not do in the absence of his wife? Is he not allowed to take a bath? Should he go for lukewarm water before a bath? Should a husband have tea, no matter how badly it is made? Should he take his meals at home or should he eat out? Can he shave? Should he comb his hair? Is he allowed to reach late at office? Should he light a lamp at night? Can he sleep in the chair? Is he allowed to sleep at day and stay awake at night? There are a lot many queries to be answered. It is a fact that the world has neglected men to a great deal.

At last I felt hungry. It is, in a way, a good thing. When we can’t think of anything else, we think about it. I got up and changed my clothes. Moti came to me just when I was shutting the door. She was sitting there till now and appeared to be sad. Such a separation naturally inspires poetry in one. I also felt inspired and the following line occurred to me:

*Kachchid bhartya smarasi rasike! tvam hi tasya priyetti!*

I also translated the line as:

‘O my beloved! Do you ever miss your husband?

You are extremely dear to him.’

You might find some problems with the line, but Moti seemed to understand it completely. I patted her. I sat her on a chair and closed the door.

Long ago I had been to a hotel during such an occasion. I visited it again. I was late but it was still open. The cook was newly recruited but was effusive in his
greetings towards me: ‘Oho! Sir, you have arrived here after a long time. Why do you look so emaciated? You were in perfect health when you came here.’ I was pleased with the concern he showed. I got something new to ponder over or to play with.

‘You are right, maharaj. That is why I have come to you again. Prepare a dish for me.’

God must have created him during leisure hours. His skin was fair, as fair as a peeled boiled potato and had a soft shade of black, red and yellow sesame. His roly-poly body was tied tightly with a loincloth in the same manner as a greengrocer ties potatoes in a bundle. He had a large belly which seemed to be divided into two with the loincloth tied tightly. In the upper part the dark janoi was stuck to his body with his perspiration. When he stood upright, his legs appeared round and wide apart and when he walked, his steps looked like those of a camel without curve at the waist. It seemed as if his mouth was filled not with teeth but with molar teeth. And Lord Brahma must have patted his forehead and back in his ecstatic state after looking at his wonderful creation which is why his head stilted towards his forehead and had a slight hump on his back.

While he was serving me, I refreshed my older acquaintance with Revashankar who was having his meal beside me. He was well aware of the service provided by maharaj. When maharaj had served, Revashankar told me, ‘maharaj has a heart of gold.’ Maharaj who was serving us went back to the kitchen and came with a bowl of ghee and served us two spoonfuls of ghee though it was not needed. He sat down beside us with one leg on the other and started moving his hand on the sole of his foot hand in hand with his entire body. He said:

‘I never think twice about serving people. We, Tarvadis, never do that. You see, my master, Mr. Pandya is quite mean in this regard. Once he had distributed glasses which were smaller in size than the ones he had promised. That glass is still with me. I may be a servant. I look upon all as equal. I am not afraid of anyone. I would raise my voice in front all in our caste. I serve ghee to customers secretly without my master developing an iota of doubt about it. The moment he raises his voice, I threaten to leave the job. As a son of a Brahmin, I am not ashamed of begging to earn my daily bread.’
It seemed to me that he wanted to hear words of support at this juncture, so I asked whatever came to my mind, ‘Does Mr. Pandya belong to your caste?’

‘Yes, sir, but he is considered inferior in our community. No one was ready to marry his daughter to him. I managed one for him and brought him up. She was my own niece. Despite this, he has never said two words with regard to my marriage.’

I looked at Revashankar and said, ‘Poor maharaj! So he is still a bachelor. Should I tell him the story of Jakshani?’ The moment Revashankar nodded his head, maharaj asked eagerly, ‘Who is Jakshani?’

‘I have one Jakshani at my home who possesses great powers. If you see her two eyes in the pitch-dark of the night, you would feel like seeing two lamps. She fulfils the desires of everyone.’ I said.

‘Won’t you take me once so that I can see her?’

‘But there is one problem. She doesn’t prefer to meet anyone. She sits at home and does meditation all the time. If she allows everyone to meet her, she would be thronged with people who would never let her find time for herself. Besides, you know the people and their demands. They ask for senseless things. They want such things which are never meant for them. There was a woman who was not destined to have a son, but she persisted. She ultimately got a blind son.

While I was telling this to maharaj, I could observe feelings like delight, worry and concern that ran over his face. He seemed less worried when I uttered my last sentence. He said, ‘It is sure that I am destined to be married. I am already engaged to Bhat’s daughter. The girl is still young but she is quite beautiful. Though she is quite young, she understands everything. When I go to their place, she asks me, ‘What have you brought for me? When I ask her for a glass of water, she hides her face and walks away thumping her legs!’ While uttering the last words, he became so excited that I feared he would start dribbling. I ordered for shaak. He stood up with alacrity and brought the shaak and served us both. When maharaj is happy, he serves the two items whole-heartedly: the ghee and the shaak.

‘In that case you don’t need the blessing from Jaskshani.’ I said.

‘Do you know anything about natural cure?’
‘No.’

‘Long ago I was serving Deputy Mehta. He had remarried, but the wife didn’t know how to cook and that’s why they hired me. He had complete faith in me. I respected the fact that as a husband married to a much younger girl this deputy showed discernment and care in hiring a cook. Now as his wife was short. He met some quack and gave the kernel of the coconut to his wife as per the advice and soon she turned this much tall.’ Maharaj kept the thumb of his left hand palm on his left shoulder and continued, ‘I never forget anything once I hear it. I applied the same formula on my fiancé, but it didn’t work in her case. She has grown alright, but still she appears short.’

‘That means you want a new wife.’

‘No, no; I won’t get a better wife than her. I just want her to increase her height. I want Jakshani’s blessing in this regard. I have no doubt she would be extremely happy at my home. I will cook the food. She would just have to remove stones from pulses and rice. I am a cook but I finish my job at twelve and then I am totally free. None can tell that I am a cook when I loiter in the village. I go to barber’s for shaving even if he charges eight annas. I also ask him to apply oil, perfume, gel etc...I regularly visit cinema once or twice in a month. I tell you my wife would have no reason to be sad.’ Maharaj described all his qualities as a husband and in the end he said, ‘Now tell me, when can I come to ask for Jakshani’s blessing?’

‘See, if you come there in my absence, she would attack you in the form of a bitch. You can do one thing though; send food for her everyday instead.’

He felt extremely happy at this. I finished my meal. Maharaj packed the tiffin and informed me. I said, ‘She doesn’t have her lunch at night. I will send a boy in the morning. You can send the tiffin with him. Listen; send only four chapattis, cooked rice, dal and also some ghee. Don’t send any shaak. I will send you money as she doesn’t accept anything free. But make sure you send everything on time.’

Maharaj was surprised. Moti started enjoying the food from the next day.
I came back home a day earlier than expected and opened the door. As we believed in the equal rights of a man and a woman, we keep separate keys with us.

I entered the house. Moti appeared before me wagging her tail. Everything in the house was in disorder. Moti seemed to be in perfect health. However everything appeared dusty. Everything except chairs appeared untouched including books. Even the chit I had left lay in the same condition. I can’t guess what made god create men on earth!

I cleaned the entire house. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was already tired of the journey and here I was cleaning the house. I thought I should have a complete bath now. Just as I untied my hair, someone knocked at the door. I thought he had arrived. I kept the end of my sari around my neck and opened the door... But whom did I see?

An awfully ugly man in black coat carrying twigs was standing there. It seemed as if he has just arrived from a salon after a hair-cut and shaving. His hair was oily. He wore a cap with its brim smeared with oil. His dhoti had several folds. He had a tooth brush in hand. He moved forward and tried to touch my feet.

‘Who are you? Why have you come here?’

‘I pass from this place every day. As there was no lock hanging today, I came to have your blessing. Please, fulfill my desire. I will do everything if you do so.’

‘It seems someone has befooled you. I am not Jakshani that I will fulfill your desire.’ I said and tried to close the door, but he thrust in and said, ‘Mother, I have send food for you all these days. Won’t you consider that?’

It was becoming too much now. I said, ‘Who are you to send me the food? Would you like to leave the place or would you like to get bludgeoned?’

Moti barked at the same time from inside. I would have beaten him, but his helpless face stopped me from taking that extreme step.

Mother, there is, of course, a wife destined for me. I don’t want a new one. Do some miracle so that she grows taller.

My anger knew no bounds now. I took up a bludgeon and was about to start beating him when he entered the scene and stopped me saying:
‘Chandi! Don’t get so angry.’

He, then, gestured that fellow to leave and came in. He said to me:

‘Chandi, be happy!’
It is nine or ten in the morning. All the cattle have thronged under the shade of a banyan tree on the outskirts of Ravaiya village. Only few cattle laboriously trudge around to secure some shade on feeling uneasy from the heat as the fickle shade of the banyan tree kept on moving. The rest of the cattle have sat motionless waiting for their herdsman. There was a small but beautiful ancient temple on the banks of a nearby pond. This temple had become quite famous since the stone inscriptions belonging to ancient Vallabhi Empire were recovered from around it. However what I am going to mention in this story happened three years before the excavation. The jowar was scattered for the birds at the place of the current temple at that time. Having pecked up enough, the parrots were chirping with one another moving their large heads as if they were discussing some serious business. One Thakarada wriggled his way through the cattle towards the village with slow pace, saving himself from being knocked down by the shepherds and reached the market. The first thing he did there was to have tea at a shop which had just opened. He asked for some fire so that he could light the pipe. He, then, untied the strip of cloth wrapped around his head and moved towards the centre of the market. He reached a bania’s shop and inquired about Raghnath’s address. Some banias stretched their necks; others cast a glance outside still others inquired about the visit. Thakarada repeated the name. One of them asked, ‘Raghnath?’ two-three times like a student who is eager to answer even before his teacher finishes the question and then continued, ‘There are two persons by that name. Raghnath Joshi lives in Joshi compound and Raghnath Bhat lives in the first house with the latch doors on the corner.’

As the name Raghnath was taken two-three times, a widow of about twenty-two peeped from that house. Seeing a telegram in Thakarada’s hand, she turned her face and said, ‘Father, it seems someone has arrived with brother’s telegram. You should go and meet him.’ The clothing of the lady was patched but clean. Her face wore a worried look and her hair was shaved just today, but still one could see liveliness and health in her body along with the ease that one feels
when one is in perfect control over the circumstances and enjoys some unknown bliss that results from having performed one’s duty well.

Her father came out of the house wearing the same woollen blanket and with the book of Bhagwad Gita in his hand. He received the telegram from Thakarada. The father and the daughter went inside the house. Thakarada noticed their agitated face and left without expecting a tip from them. Raghnath Bhat put on his dhoti; a white turban and a white strip of cloth on his shoulder and went towards the market with a stick in his hand. Ganga looked at his trembling hands and unstable legs and said, ‘Father! Don’t worry about it. Maybe he has sent the telegram as he is late in arriving here this year. He may have to stay somewhere. I will go and get someone to read it if you allow me.’ The old man controlled himself, shook his head and started towards the market. The son of Kasalchand Bania had learned English enough to read the telegram of the cotton price. Raghnath went to him and asked him to read the telegram. After a lot of effort he could understand the letter as: ‘Mukundray is coming in the local train with his friends.’ He could not decide the number of friends from the telegram. The old man moved to leave as the telegram was read. When Kasalchand insisted that he should stay for a while, he said he was in a hurry as he has to take care of the preparations for the cooking at home. Kasalchand said earnestly, ‘This time I will surely ask your son to send the complaint letter to the postal department.’

People in Raviaya had to suffer a lot due to the late delivery of the post. Before the train services, they got their mails from Toraniya. Now Raviya station was only four miles away, there was no reason for the officials to continue with the old system of delivering mails late by one day. The postal department seemed to believe that it had nothing to do with the new stations being established as their department was all together independent of the Railway department.

Raghnath reached home with hasty steps. Ganga who found nothing to worry about from his face said, ‘I told you there was nothing to worry. Is Mukund coming or not?’

‘Yes, he is coming with his friends. How shall we arrange for their food? I think it is time for the train’s arrival. Have you added turmeric powder into the dal?’
‘Yes.’

‘Shall we start making laddus?’

‘No, Mukund doesn’t like laddus. He once said that he prefers shira. We shall also make bhajias. You can bring all items to prepare bhajias. We already have almonds at home to prepare shira.’

Raghnath took a vessel and went to the market to bring ghee. After cooking dal Ganga started cooking kadhi. Raghnath, in the meantime, brought fresh ghee in a vessel and a pumpkin and said, ‘I couldn’t find anything else so I have brought this.’

‘It will do. Cut it into small pieces. We can prepare tasty bhajias with that pumpkin.’ Ganga then sat down to grind the gram. The old man sat down to cut the pumpkin into small pieces for bhajias with due care. Thus, the house which looked gloomy was roused into pleasurable activities for some time.

Raghnath was considered a prestigious Brahmin of a noble lineage in the village and in his own community. He had studied at Jamnagar and then at Kashi after his parents died. He was well-versed in Sanskrit and had studied astrology, poetics, Bhagwat and all ceremonial rituals. He had a sweet voice. When he narrated the incident of Krishna’s falling into Yamuna and the lamentation of Yashoda or sang Krishna’s song during his Bhagwat reading, even uneducated people could not stop themselves from crying. They were many who were jealous of his prestige, but still he could find an appropriate wife belonging to a cultured family for himself. He got back his old customers and ancestral assets from his uncle. He also added his own assets with the passage of time. He was married at quite an advanced age and his wife - Harkor- was quite young. Her family was also considered respectable in the community and she was adept at cooking well and fast. No one could prepare chapatti as thin and as puffed as she. Women living around came to her to learn how to make pooranpuri. No one could make wicks as thin as she and it was she who found out that the light of two thin wicks is brighter than that of single fat wick.

Their happy days, however, didn’t last long. Harkor died when Ganga was nine and Mukund was six. There were plenty of marriage offers from good families for Raghnath but he refused to remarry at that advanced age and
concentrated on bringing up his children. As the children were quite young and the relatives of no use, he stopped going out of station and could live without much problem with hard work and economy. He could even save some money for the lean period. Ganga became a widow while she was just fourteen years old and it was another trauma that this old man could not bear at that age. Ganga had inherited the skills and wisdom of her mother and values and seriousness of her father. She took care of her father just like her mother, but Raghnath could never enjoy life again. Though he never lost his intellectual power, his enthusiasm to undertake new responsibilities was waning and he grew reticent with the passing years. The tribulations that he had gone through in his life had brought about this disinterestedness in him. The only thing that he desired passionately was to see his son achieve a reputation for himself. He had continued enjoying the respect that he had amongst the villagers. People had high regard for him for facing all suffering with patience.

Mukund had no doubt inherited all the qualities of his father but they were not cultivated properly due to his father’s disinterested attitude. He was habituated to work independently right from his childhood and this habit had strengthened all the more while acquiring English education away from his family. Having passed his matriculation exams, he went for college education. Now he was in the first year of B.Sc. and was returning home during the holidays.

It is during the years of college education that the students decide upon their career plans and develop their character. They also indulge in all sorts of fun and extravaganza in the free atmosphere of the college and free from exam worry. Mukundray was no exception in this regard. He could play tennis well. Though he was defeated in the last game he played, the audience had praised him for his style. He was especially a favourite amongst the female-students for his style and manners. They always preferred him during doubles’ matches. Even his male-classmates held him in high regard for his manners towards women. There was one distinguished student in the college named Miss Gupta who always looked upon men with a kind of contempt. She often made fun of men in the debating society. This kind of behaviour is generally employed for attracting men rather than making fun of them which was true in the case of Miss Gupta. Several youths
belonging to well-to-do families were eager to fulfil all the orders of this lady. She could easily win points while playing matches against men. Men, on the other hand, considered it an honour not to hit back while they played against her. The one most benefited from that trick was Mukund who allowed her to win three sets in a row. This paved the way for their friendship. Coincidentally, they also happened to meet at the same table in the laboratory several times.

Once when Miss Gupta went to his table, she noticed that Mukund had prepared a beautiful blue deposit which he showed to her saying, ‘Miss Gupta, don’t you think this colour is awful?’ She nodded her head. He continued, ‘People think science as a dull subject, but who will deny the beauty of this colour?’ She nodded her head again. Mukund continued further, ‘Do you think the sari of this colour would look equally beautiful?’ Miss Gupta, ‘Yes, there are sarees of the same colour.’ Mukund became bolder this time and said, ‘They have to be. India is a country of colours. We should make experiments with colours. What if we match this colour?’ Miss Gupta grew interested in it. The next day she came wearing the same sari and asked Mukund to prepare the solution of its colour. He said, ‘You make it yourself. I will provide you with all the things.’ He, then, gave her all the things. When all steps were taken she stood there with a test-tube in hand and a bottle in another pouring the last liquid into it. While she was observing the changing colour in the test-tube, the safety pin fixed in her hair got unhooked and the end of her sari broke loose. Somehow she pronounced Mukundray’s name. Mukund said, ‘Don’t worry’ and set it in the previous position with due respect. He was revered as the most fortunate youth in the college since that incident.

Mukund was fast becoming a prestigious student. All the students respected him. Even servants would salute him and provided their service to him whenever demanded. His taste was admired by everyone. All wanted to befriend him. Many rich students became his friends. He taught them the use of a particular thing; informed them about the types of tie; gave advice how they could hit the ball with the racket and informed them about the latest style of playing tennis. In return, he received many things that he could not buy on his own.
Mukund didn’t like to present himself as poor in front of his friends. He thought he was adept in the art of sounding a rich person. He didn’t have much money with him, but he kept an attractive purse. He didn’t have money enough to buy costly boots, but he could keep them perfectly immaculate. He had not yet started wearing pants and coats but he wore thin dhoti in the best way possible. Although he lived a frugal life, his expenditure went beyond the allowance he was given, so he had to ask his father to send him extra money on the pretext of buying books. Impressed by his victories at the college, his friends had decided to spend the vacation at his home.

While Raghnath and Ganga were busy in arrangements, Raghnath’s sharp ear could hear a tonga stop at their home. He moved towards the gate slowly. Mukundray jumped from the tonga and entered the gate shouting, ‘Come on, come on.’ Two youths in khaki shirts, khaki neck-tie and dhotis followed him carrying their rackets in one hand. Raghnath said, ‘So finally you have arrived, son.’, but Mukundray was too busy attending to his friends to answer his father. The sound of the mill irritated him, as if someone had rubbed out a beautiful picture drawn by him, and he shouted, ‘Who is on the mill at this hour?’ With a smile on her face Ganga came out, cleaning her hand smeared with flour. She said, ‘I was grinding grams to prepare bhajias for you. But why does your face look so thin?’

‘Haven’t you prepared the food yet? I had sent you the telegram well in advance. It is already too late’ he said and then he turned to the tonga-man and said, ‘Bring the trunks in. Come Mr Pandit, Mr Choksi’. Both the guests witnessed the shock that Mukundray felt, but as they didn’t want him to be more embarrassed, they returned to carry their luggage. Mukundray was still in a perplexed mind, so he could not think of what he should tell his friends whom he had called in. If there were chairs available at home, he would have asked them in English to: ‘Please have a seat.’ Instead of chairs, all they had was a slab with small steps to climb on. What should he tell his friends? He had always felt a kind of wonder at the planning of the entire village and all its houses. Raghnath could sense his uneasiness. Without answering his earlier questions, he said to the guests, ‘Sit here if you’d like to or you can go to the room on the terrace where you are going to stay. You can keep your entire luggage there.’
Mukund thought he should ask more questions to prove his importance and to show how caring he is as a host.

‘Is everything perfectly clean there?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Ganga has been cleaning the place regularly since your holidays were declared.’ His father answered emphatically. He didn’t like the answer. He asked the tonga-man to carry the bags and trunks to the terrace and asked again:

‘But why isn’t the meal ready? I sent you the telegram so that you could cook the meal on time.’

‘Son, we got your telegram just a few hours back. Besides, I have to go to the people who can explain it to me.’

We all are well aware of the fact that the telegram hardly reaches the place before the person who sent it. Why don’t some people realise that their desires can never overcome reality? Fact is always unpalatable and it makes an existence meaningless to those who do not accept it.

‘How is it possible? I sent the telegram from Zankhariya station.’

Ganga smiled at her brother’s childish anger and said, ‘How do we know that? As for the meal, it will be ready by the time you take your tea and bath.’

Ganga’s smile lessened some heaviness in the atmosphere. He turned to his friends and said in an apologetic voice, ‘You see, this is how they deliver telegrams in villages!’ His friends showed how generous they were by saying, ‘It’s alright.’ In the meantime, the tonga-man had shifted their luggage to the terrace, so he said to them, ‘Let’s go to the terrace.’ When the tonga-man asked for money, he opened his purse and took out a rupee and threw it to him in a way that it seemed money didn’t matter to him. Raghnath said, ‘Why did you pay him so much? They charge half the amount you just paid.’

Mukund answered in a carefree tone, ‘We never ask the fare in advance, so there is no question of accepting the change. I don’t think he has the change. Do you have it?’

When the tonga-man shook his head, his father said, ‘They will, of course, shake their heads.’
Now Mukund changed his facial expression to avoid the subject, but his father did not understand it. He said, ‘If it was only a question of change, I could manage that amount from the house or from others.’

Mukund said in a final tone, ‘Don’t worry. Let that poor man have the money.’

The tonga-man saluted Mukund and left, but Mukund didn’t like his friends to know that the family would bargain even for a pittance. He tried to keep a happy smile on his face and went to the terrace. Meaningless smiles to peers and shameless disrespect to the elders are the characteristics of the modern age.

After some conversation they took their tea and finished their routine which included having a cigarette. They considered it was their achievement and would like to maintain it. Mukund never refused when he was offered a cigarette, but today he refused in order to show regard to his father. They went outside.

Ganga was completely right. The meal was ready by the time they finished their bath. Raghnath didn’t want them to feel shy of his presence while having the meal, so he continued his worship. Ganga arranged for stools and kept the glasses ready. The three collegians sat for the meal. Mukund asked Ganga to serve.

When Ganga came out with a dish with shira, puri and dal, Mukund’s anger knew no bounds. He said in an angry tone, ‘Why have you prepared shira?’

Ganga patiently replied, ‘I didn’t have time to make anything else.’ He himself had once told her that he liked shira. However, she didn’t remind him of that for it would have embarrassed him. But Mukund was not to be pacified so soon.

‘Don’t repeat the answer. You should have prepared pooranpuri.’

‘I had already added turmeric powder in dal. It would take much more time if I had started all over it again.’

‘But there is no shaak at all!’

‘Nothing was available, but we have made bhajias.’

‘Hmm...With what have you prepared these bhajias?’ He continued asking like a senior officer who was ruling out all the explanations from his subordinates.

‘Pumpkin.’
He could not tolerate that word. If he had been wise enough to taste them, he could have convinced his friends that they were not inferior in quality to the bhajias they ate in the city. He raised his voice and said, ‘How can one prepare bhajias from pumpkin?’

These words made Ganga sad, but she didn’t reply which was what Mukund wanted to show. He didn’t even look at her once and continued having his meal in that status. He started talking about their cinema parties in order to entertain his friends.

Readers may not be willing to believe that an educated person like Mukund doesn’t respect women. I have already mentioned that he possessed great respect for women. Even his friends respected him for the honour he showed towards women. But what does he mean by women? He showed respect to women towards whom he could feel attracted. Besides, one meaning of the word woman is also a wife. Sometimes we give importance to a particular meaning avoiding other meanings.

Raghnath wanted to inform Mukund about the delay of the mails that was discussed that morning, but he didn’t know where to start. He at last said to Mukund, ‘So you must be planning to take rest.’

‘Yes.’ Mukund gave a curt reply.

‘You can show them around. You can also take them to the small temple on the bank of the river and see the stone inscriptions on it’

Mukund cut him short by saying, ‘What is there to see in it?’

The old man was a bit shocked at this, but he continued, ‘Go to Kasalchand in the evening. He remembered you this morning. He wants you to write a complaint to the postal department.’

Mukund was not in a mood to entertain such trivial matters.

‘We are so much tired of studying at college. How can I go there to write applications for them?’ He said and jolted his head sideways to realign his hair that hung on his forehead. This action showed his unrestrained speech and mind. His father stopped there.

The three friends went to the terrace to sleep. Mr. Pandit and Mr Choksi soon fell asleep, but Mukund could not sleep with his restless mind.
‘The old man has ruined all my prestige. Now Mr. Pandit and Mr Choksi would think I am poor and will inform everyone at the college. When I was paying the tonga-man, he continued his arguments even when I signaled him to stop! He doesn’t know what frugal life I lead at the college. Mr Dalal uses a racket priced Rs. 35 while I use a racket priced Rs. 9 This is why I lost that tournament though my style was admired by many. The collector and his wife had asked for my name. How far should I tolerate this? How far should I continue respecting him? I will have to talk to him to make this thing clear to him. It is a weakness of my mind that I respect him....’

Mukund’s decision to meet his father grew firm and he got up silently as he didn’t want his friends to wake up. He went to his father. Raghnath was deeply hurt with his son’s behaviour today and didn’t take his lunch saying he didn’t feel like having anything. Sad and tired he lay there. Hearing some noise, he opened his eyes. As he saw Mukund, he sat up. Mukund sat beside him, but could not say what he had come for; it was not his college nor was he accustomed to speaking against his father. He summoned courage and started rather artificially. He, therefore, lacked common decency and manner in his behaviour and his sentences were broken and incomplete. ‘How far should I tolerate this? You have spoiled my reputation in front of my friends. I have to do without rackets. Why are you so greedy? How long should I respect you?’ He spoke whatever came to his mind. Raghnath kept quiet as per his habit. Mukund could not think of what to say next, but he didn’t want to keep anything in his mind. He wanted to tell everything this time. He thought seriously and said, ‘So what do you say?’

‘Regarding what?’ Raghnath said in a sad but calm manner.

‘What about I have been going through all the sufferings due to lack of money?’

‘I send you all the money I can. How can I send you more?’

Mukund was determined to discuss everything, so he said, ‘You can sell the farm. I am ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of my education.’

‘How will Ganga live a happy life if we sell the farm?’

Mukund was lost in deep thoughts. He remembered some more disadvantages of not allowing widow marriage. He thought of explaining all this
to his father, but could not utter a single word about it. However he said, ‘There is no reason to worry about her. If we spend enough on my education, I will come in contact with some good people who may be useful to us in future. I would be able to earn enough to keep her happy.’

Mukund’s father didn’t reply back. He didn’t find it much improbable that Mukund would earn enough after a few years, but at the same time his mind was beset with a doubt: Would he take good care of his sister? He didn’t know anything about what sorts of expenditure his son indulged at college. Raghnath had come to know about his son’s dreams of having good rackets, shoes, coat-pants, ties and hats from whatever he had talked about during the day. He thought Mukund would not be able to keep Ganga happy with this mentality. He gave a deep sigh and said, ‘It may not happen.’ Mukund would have continued further, but he couldn’t find anything.

‘I leave now.’ he said and stood up, jolted his face and went to the terrace.

Ganga heard all this standing in the room. She didn’t like the discussion that ensued between the father and the son. She suppressed her emotions and got up the next day at the usual timing to fetch water. A lot of water was used up yesterday. When she was going to fetch water with two pots, she walked quickly in order that no one could see her. Raghnath saw her with two pots and asked her, ‘Why are you carrying two pots? Pay money for the water if you need more water.’

‘This one is rather small.’ she said and went out of the gate.

Mukund went up the terrace and started reading the paper he had bought in the train. When his friends woke up, he started making tea for them. His friends started asking him various questions about his caste and his sister. The brewing tea had enthused them all and Mukund was pumping the stove with the same enthusiasm. When Ganga reached there, all were shouting and enjoying the morning. She could not enter the gate with the pots, so she called out for Mukund’s help. Mukund didn’t hear this, but his father who was just thinking about her at the time heard her voice and reached the gate. While he was helping Ganga with the pots, he could hear disparate pieces of sentences spoken in English. They were talking about caste, widow-marriages, Ganga and education.
Both Raghnath and Ganga had realised from what Mukund spoke in front of his father in the afternoon that he was always criticising everything in the house including his father and Ganga.

Mukund brought the tonga from the market at five in the evening. He asked the tonga-man to upload his luggage and stood on the slab and said, ‘My friends are leaving and I am going to see them off. I don’t want to have my meal in the evening so don’t wait for me.’ He didn’t wait for any reply and went with his friends moving a stick in his hand.

A deafening silence pervaded the house. It was a kind of silence that ensues after the storm has battered a fleet and sunk them all to the bottom of the sea. Ganga knew the only thing that would provide respite to the agitated mind of her father was a peaceful atmosphere, so she didn’t speak anything. At night she said, ‘Father, get up for your dinner. You haven’t had anything since morning.’

The grief brought about by the rude behaviour of his son had not lessened still. Ganga sat beside her father who kept silent. He kept staring at something. Ganga felt the grief her father was going through and knew that he would not be relieved till he had shared it with someone.

‘Why are you so unhappy about it? I could not keep the food ready for them despite the telegram he sent. It made him angry. There is no reason for you to worry about all that.’

The old man didn’t say a single word. He didn’t even change his eyes. She thought that she should say something more, so she said, ‘Why do you worry so much about me? I am not weak or an orphan. I have a brother who will take care of me.’

The old man opened his mouth, but he spoke as if he was talking to himself:

‘He is no longer ours!’

This made her happy; she said, ‘How can it be so?’

The old man said, ‘I tell you, he is no longer ours. He is lost.’

‘Mukund has gone with his friends.’ They heard a voice from the slab outside their house.
On their way to the railway station Mukund had candidly told his friends that it was quite difficult for an educated person like him to stay in the village. He could find no friends or no any means of entertainment. His friends had persuaded him to go with them without his luggage. He had asked the tonga-man to deliver the message that he had left with his friends. What the tonga-man had said became a part of their conversation and neither Ragh Nath nor Ganga asked him anything further.

Ganga saw that there was no scope for any argument. She finished some odd chores to give some more time to her father. When she returned and sat beside him, he said, ‘Do you remember we went to Ambaji?’

She nodded her head. She thought her father was talking about a different topic.

‘And then we went to see the temples of Kumbhariya?’

‘Yes.’

‘They were built by Vimalsha.’

‘I didn’t know that.’ She said.

‘Vimalsha was a devotee of Ambaji.’

Ganga thought her father was getting normal and it enthused her spirit. She kept on listening to her father with interest.

‘Once while he was going to her temple, he came across a big well with the steps on his way. He went in to drink to satisfy his thirst. A man belonging to Vanzara community was sitting on the steps. He asked for some money for water.

‘What for?’ he asked.

‘The man who built this well - Pitho - was my grandfather. Our economical condition has deteriorated and so I have come here to claim my right over the well my ancestor has built.’

This audacity made the king wonder. He thought I have built such wonderful temples and if one of my descendants turns out to be as unashamed as that man, the same thing would happen with these temples.’

Ganga stopped nodding her head.

‘He went to Ambaji. The goddess appeared to him and said: ‘Ask whatever you want.’
Vimalsha said: ‘Mother, I want you to make sure I don’t get any descendant. I want nothing else.’

Ganga sighed at this.

‘The goddess asked him again: ‘What do you want?’ and he repeated the same thing. The goddess asked third time: ‘What do you want’ and he repeated the same thing: I don’t want any descendant to follow me.’

The old man finished and was lost in the silence.

A deadly silence pervaded the entire house.
As I could not get the train at Shivdurg station, I had to stay there for a day. One of my old friends - Dr Doshi - was working in the asylum there. I decided to stay at his place. After lunch and rest, the doctor asked his servant to lay the chairs and papers under the shade of the canopy made of creepers. He had planned to sit there till tea-time. I went through the headlines for some time and then I asked the doctor, ‘Why not visit the asylum?’ Thus, we went for its visit.

The asylum housed all sorts of mad people from different regions speaking different languages. Their names were mentioned on the plates outside their rooms. I could see from names on the plates that most of them belonged to the south region. I was in search of a Gujarati name. I saw a cross (X) on one of the plates, so I asked, ‘Why does this plate carry this mark?’

‘It is not a mark. It is (X).’

‘Have you brought this patient from algebra?’ I asked.

‘We haven’t been able to find out his name till now’

‘Have you taken help from anyone who knew his language?’

‘You see, he is a Gujarati, the only Gujarati amongst all. We couldn’t even know where he has come from.’

That he was a Gujarati made me more curious to know more about him. We approached him. He was seated on the chair and was doodling something speedily. We could see only his back. The doctor informed me that it was his mania to keep doodling in that fashion. He would raise a storm if not allowed to do so.

Mr. X heard us talking and looked back at us and said blankly, ‘So you came back again to take my photograph! A person took one and just left. Since the receipt of the Nobel Prize, I have been overwhelmed by these requests for photographs, quotes, interviews and all that. But don’t you think we have other things to do except meeting you? Poor Tagore, he also had to go through all this.’

Somehow I found this voice familiar. I asked him, ‘What’s your name?’

‘I would be able to render my service to the nation more comfortably if you stop pestering me in this way and allow me to work for literature.’
‘Of course, the nation will be benefited by it, but let us know your name.’
‘I gave my name as Hans in one of those books.’
‘What is your real name?’
‘My name was Dhantooro in ‘Kumbhipak’, Sanyasi in ‘Saraswati’ and in yet in another book my name was.... Well, can you tell me what it was?’
‘How can I say that?’ I said.
‘I have eighty-seven names. My names were Nikhalas and Khalasi in other works of mine.’
‘What is your real name?’
‘But what is your real name amongst all?’
‘As there are many names of the Creator, I possess many names.’ He started singing:

The backing of your name, what else,
Sell your ware on your name.

‘The entire universe is functioning on the name’ he said and started singing again.’

In that state of ecstasy he started moving his head and snapping his fingers. The doctor told me he was habituated to sing in that way. He often oppressed the warders by singing his songs in a loud voice for the entire night.
‘Does he keep mentioning the names and Mr Tagore?’ I asked.
‘Always, invariably same names and the same number: eighty-seven.’
I was beginning to understand something.
I took some courage and asked, ‘Who is that ‘Kheladi’?’

The patient burst out laughing and said, ‘It is he who has received the Noble Prize. It is not only his victory; it is my victory as well. It is the victory of Gujarat and it is the victory of eighty-seven.’ He, then, started singing again.

‘Do you know him?’ The doctor asked me.
‘Yes, I know him now.’ I turned to him and said, ‘Your name is Kapilray, isn’t it?’

‘I give you my Nobel Prize. Enjoy’ he said and started singing again.
We moved ahead from there. The doctor said, ‘Such patients, usually, don’t forget their names. This patient is not an extreme case, but he still doesn’t give out his name. It is my first encounter with such a patient. By the way, how do you know him?’

‘We lived together for some time.’

‘If you don’t mind let me know the details. I am extremely interested in this case. I can cure him better if I come to know why he gets so excited very often. I can inform his relatives if I get his address from you.’

‘Of course.’ I said.

‘Tell me everything that you know. Sometimes the cause of madness may be found even in apparently insignificant matters.’

We went to have tea. While we were having tea, I started the entire story:

‘I met Kapilray at Bhatodar for the first time. My mother’s family belonged to that village. I went there with my mother for a few months following an outbreak of plague in our village. I was in matriculation at that time. Bhatodar is a small village. I had brought some books with me, but didn’t feel like reading. I even didn’t like the village either. Most of the boys of my age would go to work as farmhands. I never enjoyed their games of breaking the coconuts, lifting the stones or eating dates. But I was naturally drawn towards Kapilray. Kapilray belonged to this village and was studying in metric and stayed in a hostel in Ahmedabad. I was a fresher in matriculation, and he had experienced the matriculation tests two times. I looked upon him as a respected person. I respected him all the more because he was just two years older than us and yet he lived like a gentlemen. He would move in the village with a strip of cloth on the shoulder, visit choro, boasted of everything and talk about things happening in cities and literature of which the villagers were ignorant. He showered his love over me and guided me about what to do during the examination. He surprised us by narrating funny incidents like how he annoyed the supervisor by asking for useless notebooks or how he, at the end of the exam, had spilled all the ink from the ink-pot thereby making the most of the fee paid for the exam.

Once I went to chora to taste undhiyu with my uncle. The headman of the village asked my uncle to read an application. The application was about a man
named Chyavanray Nirdoshi and it said that he wanted to transfer certain numbers to his names from that of his father, but the client could not be ascertained. My uncle got lost in thought after reading it. Kapilray arrived on the scene and asked the headman: ‘What makes you so much worried? Are you worried about a place to accommodate people? Don’t worry if it is the case. We will find out the solution together.’

The headman said, ‘There is nothing of that sort. I can’t recognize the name in this application, so I will have to check his number carefully.

‘Let me see.’ said Kapilray and read the application. When he finished reading, he said, ‘Don’t worry. I will give you every detail.’ The headman said, ‘If you can, do it right now.’ He said, ‘It’s not possible right now as I’ve a lot of things to take care of. I have to write letters and your work will take time to discuss.’ He said and left. While leaving, he cast a glance at me. Surprised at his artful reply, I looked at him with due respect. He asked me, ‘What will you do here, Mr. Bhatt? Come with me. You will learn many things.’ I accompanied him to his home. Taking care of our heads from bumping into the roof, we went to the terrace. `He opened the window and cleaned the bed and the pillows on the cart and sat down. He caught my hand and asked me to sit there. I sat there with some hesitation. I wanted to ask him about the application, but I could not dare ask about it to that ever busy man; instead I looked at him with a bit of surprise and then started looking at the photographs on the wall and the pictures snipped from the newspapers. The cupboards were smaller than those we had at our home, but everything looked to be in splendid condition. Seeing him among the cupboards as the main member of the house, I felt a renewed reverence for him. I couldn’t speak anything.

In order to make me feel at home, he said, ‘Did you sense anything about the application?’

‘No.’ I replied.

He explained everything to me. I didn’t know what it was to change the rights of the assets in person. Like a true teacher or professor he explained to me the details. His father had died one and half years ago. He had made the application to transfer the ownership of the farms to his name. The inspection had
been conducted, but he was yet to be informed whether or not the transfer has taken place and that was the reason why he had sent another application. He wrote the second application with the name of Chyavan Nirdoshi deliberately, so that the responsibility to find out who Chyavan Nirdoshi fell on the shoulder of the headman.

‘But why did you send another application when the inspection had already taken place?’ I asked.

‘That’s the problem. Let me tell you about the foolishness of the government. In my first application I had clearly mentioned my name as Kapilray alias Chyavanray Nirdoshi alias Gajmaldandi, but who cares to read the application? The second time I sent the application with the name Chyavanray, so they sent it for inspection not knowing that this is the same client. I may send it for the third time with a third name. Let there be a heap of correspondence with governmental departments? The lethargy on the part of governmental procedure might become public.

‘How can you remember so many names?’ I asked.

‘How do I remember with what name I had written the earlier application? I had sent the application in a hurry with whatever name that came to my mind. You know how busy I am as I keep writing letters to thousands of my friends and writing articles for monthlies. Let me show you the number of people I am associated with. See, these are the cards and covers I received on Diwali. These are my published poems and these are handwritten! I have written letters to a lot of people, carrying different names!’ He showed me a heap of cards which looked like playing cards.

‘But how can government take a note of all names that you have?’ I asked.

‘Can’t the government officials remember the names of other plaintiffs?’

I thought it is better to listen to him than asking him anything.

‘Government doesn’t encourage literature...I would like to set it straight with the help of literature.’

‘I want to encourage literature anyhow. Do you think that there is no one in Gujarat who can get the Noble Prize? Why can’t we have it? I have already decided the pseudonyms with which I am going to create my literature. I have
even decided upon the titles of my novels. I want to form an association that can work towards literature. I want to arrange for the needs of the members or the outsiders for pseudonyms or names of titles of the books.’ He then opened a magazine and showed it to me saying, ‘Look at this poem and read the pseudonym: ‘Kampilya!’ Do you know who he is? It’s me. This is another pseudonym: ‘Kokil’. Take these poems if you want to read them. I can give any number of poems to you.’

There was no question of taking any books from him as I was not reading even the books which I had brought with me. But he insisted and gave me three monthlies and noted down my name and address in his note-book. He assigned me the task of finding out his article from the monthlies.

Evening was falling. When I took his leave, he said, ‘I would accompany you.’

‘Why, you must be busy with your work.’
‘Not at all, I can finish it tomorrow.’ he said and started walking with me.

One chapter of my story was over here, so I told the doctor, ‘You are free to stop me when you find anything irrelevant in my talk. I would be brief in that case.’

The doctor said, ‘The games they play in villages are not much useful to me, but you can continue with whatever you want to say without worrying about my perspective. The details you have given so far help me. However I am yet to find out the cause of the main problem. I am interested in everything you say.’

‘The most interesting part of my story, like the stories in the monthlies, comes now.’

The doctor laughed. I continued:

‘We met after four years. I was studying in the first year of B.A. in Elphiston College. Kapilray had failed in the inter arts and had now come to Mumbai. The examiners were from Mumbai, so he had decided to stay in Mumbai and learn from the study notes here. In the meantime his service to literature had increased many fold. Now I used to feel boredom and hatred, rather than respect, towards him. He was engrossed in his poems, stories and all that. He wrote a poem
on the subject he failed in and used to feel ecstatic when once he could match the rhythm coincidentally.

Once he came to meet me during the holidays. Of course, I had also started reading monthlies, but I could not take interest in his long-drawn speeches about literature. It was not his habit to leave on time, so I called my friends and we started playing chopat. When we asked him whether he would like to play, he said he never preferred to kill time like that. Having said that, he sat beside us in order to lend us whatever advice he could. Those who don’t play or can’t play prefer to lend their advice.

There is no game that takes as long as chopat to be over. It must have been invented in India at a time when killing time was a problem. We got engrossed in the game, not because we were expert players, but because we were novices. Being novices we enjoyed our conversation more than the game. Our companion Dhirubhai didn’t know how to move the wooden pieces. He got many turns to play, but he would fall down again. He couldn’t move any further till the end. His piece would reach the fold and soon go out of it and then again start its eighty-four laps. We started calling his pieces as Kapilray. Though he had got our message to some extent, he laughed with us. If Dhirubhai’s dead pieces would enter the game again, he would feel proud of them. Another companion was Chhatrapati. He knew only two rules of chopat: It is always beneficial to cast the shells in another’s fold and the player would not lose any pieces if they are at specific positions. He would stretch his hand to throw the shells on another’s fold and search for the advantageous positions for his pieces. Once he got such places, he would not leave them. We called his pieces as Ganpatishankar. He was famous in our literature at one point of time. He had written an article in 1902 which was greatly admired in those times. He wrote nothing after that. He would just provide his pieces of advice to people working in different fields, but his efforts were in vain.

Mangubhai was an expert player. He spoiled Chhatrapati’s plans by attacking the latter’s pieces at those safe positions that could reach their final destination. He could empty certain positions from the pieces, but his pieces went out of the game. We called these pieces as Manharlal. Some of his writings were
admired for their quality, but he, later, started writing against all famous writers. He destroyed the reputation of a few unworthy writers, but he himself could not write anything worthy. I was playing the game rather cautiously. I was able to send three of my pieces to its goal. I could not make the last piece reach its goal despite my best efforts, so they started calling me unlucky and gave me the name of Kevalray who works for literature lying in his bed. He started writing before most of the other writers but had not made much progress. I was tired of playing and left the game in the middle.

The evening was falling. Kapilray stood up. I said to him, ‘I don’t see your articles these days.’

‘It is not easy to recognize my articles. I have met people making guesses at that, but none can recognize me. Each of my articles is having a new pseudonym!’ he laughed.

‘But still you must be writing something serious.’

‘Just wait for some days. Something is going to arrive which will send a ripple in the world of literature.’

We all showed our surprise towards that and departed.

After three months, I came across one article titled ‘Saraswati chaucer’ in Saraswati magazine. Some people thought the meaning of the word ‘chaucer’ meant the four-lined necklace that goddess Saraswati wears around her neck, but the author had made a note that ‘chaucer’ meant chopat in Hindi. In it, he had selected sixteen famous literary figures and divided them into four groups and made one piece of each. He had described his comments on the positions of the pieces and their final destination with reference to those literary figures. It could attract nearly all its readers and they started making logical guesses. The article did not carry a specific objective; who was the butt of the satire and who was blamed in it so each writer was under the impression that the article was a biting satire on his rival. The article was signed as ‘Kheladi’ at the end. Since it was the first article by that name, everybody started thinking about his identity. All the magazines were discussing this issue and readers’ letters were also published. Those whose letters were rejected sent them elsewhere with a note that it was rejected. There was one article which got published after being rejected at five
places. The publication of such an article would give rise to discussion. Readers’ letters became so overwhelming that one writer came out with a plan to begin a weekly solely for the publication of readers’ letters. The committee for encouragement of literature provided him with special help. The editors, except for signing, were not supposed to write or do anything like establishing rules and all that. This fact led one literary aspirant to provide his service as its editor. The first edition was the compilation of all readers’ letters apropos the article ‘Saraswati Chaucer’. All details of the letters like dates, writes, addressee, replies were recorded in chronological order. 1000 copies were sold out in an instant. The editor proved, with the figures, that it was a history in the entire country that the very first issue of a magazine got sold out very quickly.

The boys in our hostel enthusiastically took part in the discussion. We were pretty sure the article was written by Kapilray himself. We called him and congratulated him for creating the controversy. Kapilray grew quite serious and told us it could never be written by him. He averred that he would never write anything with the pseudonym that would reveal his identity and that he would never be dependent on someone else’s imaginative power. We forced him to believe that it was true, but he would never do that. He departed with the words that its secret will take twenty years to come out.

We were completely annoyed with the mysterious prophecy. We thought we should do something about it and started finding out the way. Dhirubhai came out with an idea. He was of the opinion that we should spread the rumour through the readers’ letters that the article was written by one of us. Once Kapilray would know that he would automatically reveal his identity. All of us liked the idea. Chhaganlal was considerably a good chopat player among us and he had published one article on the game long ago. We decided he would be declared as the writer of that article. Four-five youths from our group sent their letters in this regard. One wrote that even when we doubt Premanand as the author of his plays, it is a lamentable fact that such problems exist even in our own age. It is a kind of blunder committed by Saraswati magazine that it chose to publish an article without taking enough care to know who actually wrote it. Would it not give a bad name to us if we are not able to find out its writer in case Nobel Prize is conferred
upon him? Another wrote that there was striking similarity in the style of writing of the article with that of another article written on *chopat* a few years ago. Besides, this article must have been written by an expert *chopat* player. The old files should be checked to find out the name of the author and it should be made known to the readers. The third one had written about the criticism of a writer in one of Chhaganlal’s articles. He pointed out the similarity in both the articles and opined that the writer of both the articles was indeed one and the same person.

All these letters started raining one after another. Some of us wrote against it and we asked another to provide an answer to it. We, in that letter, criticised the earlier counter-argument and mentioned that there was no question of any doubt about Premanand and Chhaganlala being alive. We also threw a challenge to anyone who could prove that the article was not written by Chhaganlal! We asked Chhaganlal to write a reply. He, in his reply, didn’t reject outright his authorship, but just wrote: ‘Will anyone tell me what I should do to prove that the article in question is not written by me?’ Once it was published two of us wrote demanding a clear refusal instead of vague replies. The editor also repeated the same thing below the letters. Two of us wrote open letters to Chhaganlal to prove their allegation that certain writers were always protesting against others and some others have proved to be a jinx. In a month, every contemporary editor almost believed that it was Chhaganlal who wrote that article. Now Chhaganlal didn’t even have to tell a lie like Yudhisthira. His silence strengthened the rumours all the more.

‘I should say it was a clever trick. It also worked in your favour. I can see its glow on your face as you are talking of it.’ The doctor said.

‘But we couldn’t say it was successful as far as Kapilray kept his identity hidden. We believed he would mention in one of the monthlies that it was he who wrote the article or at least he would visit us once. A month went by. Second month went by, but there was no news of Kapilray. At last I decided to visit his college and inquire about him.

‘I went to Mr. Pandya’s room before visiting the college. He was one of his relatives and I thought he could provide some information about him.

‘What is the news of the occupant of room no 87?’ I asked him.
‘I was bewildered looking at his grim face.’

‘Did your trick made him mad?’ The doctor asked.

‘No, I think what turned him mad must have happened later.’

That man informed me that he had left the room with all his things inside. He didn’t even take care to lock the room. Police searched all the rooms, but could not make out from the papers.

I told him we should go through those papers again and reached room no. 87. A Sindhi student lived there at that time. When we asked him about the papers, he informed us there was a heap of papers, but they had cleaned everything after the police searched the room.

‘Can you tell us what was written in those papers?’ I asked him.

‘Everything was in Gujarati. I could decipher only one line because it was in English: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’

When he ended that quote he made fun of himself by saying that he had rushed in when Kapilray chose to leave!

We took his leave. I said to Mr Pandya, ‘It would have been better if you had kept those papers with you. I believe he left with the hope that some of us would surely publish those papers.’

‘May be you are right. He met me that evening, a day before he left and told me that he had written something which would bring a solution to all problems of literature. However, he also said that he was not interested in publishing anything. What should I make of that? Whatever it may, we can’t do anything now.’ I took his leave.

The effects of our victory over Kapilray were much more than our expectations and I now started worrying about Kapilray. A fool as he was, I didn’t know what extreme step he would take now. The things were getting serious now. I called the friends and told them everything. We decided that Chhaganlal should write a letter and inform all that it was Kapilray who had written the article and not he. Kapilray would be reading everything no matter where he was, at least with the hope to come across some of his writings that he had left.

Chhaganlal sent his letter and got it published. The editor had put a note at the end that he had published the letter as he had received it, but he didn’t find it
trustworthy. Why did the writer choose to delay the fact? If Kapilray had written it, why didn’t he himself mention it especially when so much had been discussed on the subject? If Kapilray was his friend, why didn’t he mention his friend’s name right at the time when his name was taken? If he had taken Kapilray’s name because he was his rival, it was left to readers’ discretion how much faith they should put in this letter.

We all were surprised. We thought upon once again and wrote back with details including our game of chopat that we played with Kapilray. We wrote it was Kapilray’s idea to apply literary terminology to the game of chopat to prove that the writer of the article was Kapilray. We also added that he used pseudonym as he was shy by temperament and that’s why he didn’t reveal his identity. It would indeed shock the writer if another writer is wrongly credited as the writer of the article in question. It would not only pain the writer forever but affect literature as well. I have written all this as a duty towards literature. This was the general theme of our letter. In a separate letter to the editor, we had also mentioned the fact that Kapilray had left his hostel and there was possibility of his committing suicide.

This letter was also published, but not without the editor’s note. This time he made the matter worse by writing: ‘Such a marvellous article can never come from the pen of a worthless person. It seems that some of Kapilray’s friends are trying their best to project Kapilray’s diseased mind as a normal one behind the façade of literary merits. As friends their concerns may be bona fides, but they should remember that literature is all about truth. The value of truth is more important in literature than the damage done to likes of Kapilrays.’

We could not undo our victory and we consider it was our misfortune as well as that of Kapilray. We decided not to say anything further in this regard. We silently waited for Kapilray’s article or his pseudonym but failed to come across them. After some time ‘Readers’ feedback’ closed down. Disappointed we stopped worrying about it. We forgot about it all with passage of time and worries of exams.

‘Now, everything is clear to me. I am sure this is the same person. Let us have his address when you leave us.’
The doctor rose and went towards the name plate without saying anything and wrote: Kapilray.

Kapilray laughed absent-mindedly.
“Hey, how many matchsticks do you want to waste in this way? One matchbox should last at least for two days” said Khemi when Dhaniya wasted five matchsticks one by one to light his bidi.

“Don’t you see how fast the wind is blowing? It doesn’t let me light my bidi.” Dhaniya said and opened the matchbox again.

“Let me help you.” said Khemi spreading the end of her sari with which she would cover her face. She went near Dhaniya and provided protection against the wind. Dhaniya could light his matchstick this time. The glow at the end of the bidi started glinting as he breathed in and out. Dhaniya stared at her wife’s face - young, chubby, dark-complexioned, but bright, with sparkling eyes and wearing a nose ring. He forgot his bidi and was engrossed in the beauty of his newly married wife. Khemi was about to return to her earlier place after the bidi was lit when Dhaniya told her:

“I would die if you budge from this place.”

“Don’t be crazy; you are really mad.” said Khemi and returned to her place.

“I swear by you, Khemi, you are very much dear to me.”

“You are going crazy again. Don’t you see there are so many people around us?”

“They are busy with their dinner. Who cares what we do?”

It is but natural for newly married couples to think about people in this way.

One of Dhaniya’s customers, a baniya had arranged for a caste-dinner party. In the hope of a square meal, this couple was chatting alone at the steps of the toilet. His master had asked him to sit there and stop vagharis from entering the dining place. Both were dressed in the same clothes they had worn on the day of their wedding a few days ago. Dhaniya had wrapped a piece of cloth and beneath it he had worn a silk jacket and socks on his legs. Khemi had worn discarded silk clothes of one of her mistresses when she died as saubhagyawati.
Dhaniya drew on his bidi and said, “I would have married you no matter what your mother would have asked for.”

“But has my mother ever taken one paisa from you? Rather, I have brought some of my own when I came to your home. My mother married me off just like Brahmins marry off their daughters.”

“You mother is a kind woman, but I don’t know why are you so mean.”

“What wrong have I done to you that you are calling me mean?”

“Don’t you remember the conditions you put before the wedding? You declared that you would only marry the man who would never touch alcohol and who would never abuse you or beat you; in case he starts doing all these, you would leave him at the moment...Don’t you think this is impossible?”

“Why impossible? I had decided I would never tolerate his drinking habit or foul language or battering. I am not the one who would suffer battering.”

Dhaniya observed the glow of truth on her face and considered it wise not to argue any further.

“But why are you speaking in this way? I never drink alcohol. I wanted to marry you at any cost. I was all for you even when you very quite young and went to sweep with your mother wearing the blouse with a knot.” Touching the knot on her bosom, he asked, “Who taught you to tie such a knot?”

“All the women in Paddhari tie the knot in the same way at work.”

Khemi’s mother belonged to Paddhari in Kathiawad. It was during the famine that she came here with Khemi.

“Will you tell me, Dhaniya, why men prefer to drink? What is it that attracts men towards it? You once told me that it tastes quite bitter.”

“When men are not in a mood, they go for it. When they are feeling fatigued, it refreshes their mind and body”

Khemi didn’t speak anything for a while, but when she wanted to hear some encouraging words about her being fortunate and important, she asked, “Tell me what you would have done if I had been married elsewhere.”

“How can it be? Who is audacious enough to marry you? I would have brought you to my home from the end of the world.”
“Don’t be so proud. You are not the only bold man; the world is full of equally courageous people.”

Suddenly there was uproar at the dinner. A dog had entered the place and spoiled the food in a dish. Soon it was driven out of the place. The master scolded the caretaker who in turn found fault with Dhaniya. The master turned to Dhaniya and vented his anger on him. He was about to beat Dhaniya and said:

“You are sitting like a governor enjoying your bidi here! Can’t you take care of a dog? Stand up, you bastard...”

The words pained the couple. Their pleasure had evaporated into thin air with the words. Both started walking without saying a word. They didn’t know where to go, but Khemi started walking towards the Richiroad so that they could come across some pleasing sights. Dhaniya was extremely disturbed by the incident. Khemi tried to console him. Dhaniya could not speak anything there, but now he said, “It was the caretaker’s job, not mine, to drive away the dogs. There was no reason why the master should scold me.” Khemi consoled him again. Dhaniya, then, told her what it was that really pained him, “I can’t tolerate those ugly words he said to me right in front of you.”

When Khemi heard this, she thought it was she who had encouraged him to indulge in a conversation. The very fact that she was completely responsible for the insult that Dhaniya had to undergo, now pained her heart. Dhaniya was walking silently, the memories of the insult still tormenting his mind. They reached the road that led to the market in Raykhad. Khemi remembered Dhaniya had told her that alcohol refreshed his mind when he was afflicted with worries. She untied the knot at the end of her sari, took out eight annas and gave them to Dhaniya and said, “How long will you keep standing there? Take this and enjoy your drink. And return as early as you can.”

Khemi kept waiting there. She thought she had committed some grave mistake. It was she who had put forward the condition that he won’t drink and today she allowed him to drink! Dhaniya approached her appearing to be in perfect mood now. He said, “See, Khemi, I am alright now. Didn’t I tell you the alcohol refreshes me?” She said, “Alright, but never drink again or I will drive you out of the home.”
“I will never. You are so dear to me. Who cares, now, what happens to that bania’s dinner-party. I drink but you know it does not affect me much. Can you find anything unusual in my speech? You are vainly afraid of that. I may drink, but I will never beat you. You know how I like you…” He kept babbling while walking ahead. Khemi brought him home without saying a single word, thinking over incidents of the day.

2

It is evening time. Khemi is sweeping the floor with the same knot with which Dhaniya was enamoured in Ahmedabad. However, she is not in Ahmedabad nor does she have Dhaniya with her. She left both six months ago. After the above mentioned incident, Dhaniya had forgotten Khemi’s conditions and started drinking partly because he thought that it is unmanly to obey such conditions of a wife, and partly because his fallacy, that every drunkard seems to indulge in, that alcohol doesn’t affect him much. His drunkard friends also encouraged him to drink. Khemi scolded him, despised him and also threatened him to leave him, but Dhaniya took it just as empty caveat. Once he came home highly drunk and started beating up Khemi saying proudly, “Where else can you go if you leave me?” She left home the next day. She went to Nadiad because her mother had died. There she managed to get a job by giving a bribe to a municipal clerk named Parshottam who was the head of bhangis. It was decided that she would pay the amount of the bribe from her salary. She was generally considered jolly among all bhangis. They all joined her in merry-making. However the estrangement from Dhaniya had always pained her. She eagerly asked about Dhaniya to each bhangi that came from Ahmedabad. She knew that Dhaniya would take good care of her if she went there on her own, but she had firmly decided that she would go there only if she is called. She had taken vow that she would come back only if Dhaniya sent for her. But no message had come so far. Disappointed, she started criticising Parshotam who took bribe from others. Khemi had prepared some songs to annoy him. When Khemi was sweeping, Mangi asked her, “Khemi, please sing that song.”

Khemi was thinking about Dhaniya. She said, “Why don’t you sing that song yourself?”
Mangi couldn’t sing as sweetly as Khemi. She said, “But I can’t sing the fourth line.”

“It means you don’t know how to sing it.”

“Why don’t you sing it?”

Khemi somehow felt like singing and she started:

Come near O Keshala, I want to beat your chest,
Come near O Keshala, I want to beat you with my legs,
Come near O Keshala, I want to thrash you with a club,
Come near O Keshala, I would keep a lemon at your tail.

Now tell me what is problematic?”

“But how can we say ‘a lemon at your tail’ instead of moustache?”

“What if one does not have a moustache? That is why he will keep lemon at the tail.”

Mungi burst into laughter. Parasotam’s slight brown moustache appeared to be almost non-existent on his fair oblong face with a short forehead.

Both started singing enthusiastically. Parsotam happened to pass by at that time. He was wearing a hairy cap and a black half-coat over his shirt and had a stick in his hand which he was hitting on his shoes while walking. He heard this song. The song didn’t carry his name. Nor was it being sung in front of him, but he somehow thought that it was meant for him. The dictum that ‘One’s own self is the most trustful witness.’ proves alright in case of irritation on account of mixed emotions. He shouted, “Hey, you lazybones...! Find out some work instead of shouting like this.”

Mangi was embarrassed at this. Khemi said, “We are singing, but we were also doing our work. You can see that.”

“You would do nothing, but would enjoy speaking ill of me. Do you want to insult me?”

“But I was not singing for you.”

“You are singing it at every place and insulting me. Do you think I don’t understand that?”

Khemi had a furtive glance at Mangi and said, “Have I ever sung to annoy Pasabhai? I am singing for one Keshala who exploited bhangis in Ahmedabad.”
“You lazybones, you have again started explaining to me. You are insulting your senior. Don’t you see how much we respect our seniors? Have we ever tried to explain to them?”

“But...”

“Stop your nonsense. We have other things to do. Put the impression of your thumb here and take your salaries.” He put the register on a stone slab. When Mangi finished, she gestured to Khemi to go ahead.

“I want my salary first before I put the impression.” said Khemi.

“Do you think you alone are honest, and the government is a thief? Put the impression of your thumb first. It is a government rule.”

“If that is the case, take it.” She showed her thumb to him and put the impression on the register. Parasotam saw that but he didn’t have time to get annoyed. He cut half of their salary and kept nine rupees and eight annas there. Mangi took her money. Khemi said, “Give me my whole salary or I won’t take it.”

“If you don’t want to take it, let it be there on the floor. I am going” he said and started walking. Khemi took her broom and stopped him by raising the broom against the opposite wall. She said, “How can you go without paying the salary?”

_Bhangis_ from other district arrived there just at that time. Parasotam realised he would not be able to overpower her and it would rather damage his own image in front of other _bhängis_, so he said, “Take this salary and give me back the one I gave you earlier.”

“Give me one rupee first.”

Parsotam threw one rupee on the floor. Khemi lowered her broom and started collecting money from the floor. Parsotam again asked for the earlier salary.

“Just wait, let me check the coin by striking it.” She started striking the coin simultaneously looking at the people.

Parsotam once again asked for the earlier salary.

“I can’t find it now.” She said and left. He had to take the salary from the ground on his own.

All _bhängis_ standing there felt wonder and respect for Khemi. She started the song and others joined her in singing:
Fonseka and his wife - Jenny - are waiting for their evening tea sitting in the compound of a newly built small and modest house with a fence little taller than usually found. Both are dressed in simple but European attire. Chuniyo, their male-servant, comes and puts the tray before them. Jenny pours two cups, adds milk and sugar and stirs them. They started having their tea, but in a stillness that often results from external satisfaction and inner disinterest. All of a sudden the wind started blowing strongly. Though the walls were high and the ground just sprinkled with water, the whirlwind blew away their tea cups and it soon turned into a storm. Now, this change appeared strange to the Christian couple who were accustomed to the dustless Mumbai. It was for the first time they were out of Mumbai and in this unknown region. Chuniyo sensed their discomfiture and said, “Sir, such storms are going to be regular from now onwards.”

“How can you say that?” asked his master.

“Sir, it means the monsoon is near. Such storms usually come after nine. It is, however, early this year.”

“But still eight such storms remain, don’t they?”

“But, sir, the frogs have already started croaking. It is a sure sign of early monsoon.”

“Dear Jenny!” said Fonseka addressing his wife. “In that case, the earlier you reach Mumbai, the better for you. It would be difficult to drive a car in the mud if it rains here. It would be difficult to send you there. And here, we wouldn’t be able to even call a doctor in case of emergency.”

“Dear, a palmist has told me that this year is going to prove inauspicious to me, but I know I am not going to depart from you.”

“Where do you find out such palmists? You are well aware that we live here all by ourselves. There is not a single soul from our community. People in the
surrounding area are not going to be helpful to us and still you are adamant on staying here! Don’t you think this is absurd?”

“I told you not to buy the land of the woebegone people of the village, but you were hell-bent on buying it.”

The Christian converts are adapting not only the foreign attire but outlook towards life as well.

Fonseka got irritated at this and said, “Why do you keep repeating the same thing every now and again? Don’t you have other things to talk about? Have you never desired to live in a magnificent house with a garden in the countryside? We have now nothing with the Hindus. Did anyone of them cast a single vote for Professor D’Souza in the Council election?”

“Neither do we for them! We were among them earlier, weren’t we? We grabbed their land illegally and still they are not up against us, are they?”

The heated argument between them continued for a long time. At last, however, they agreed upon conciliation. Jenny promised that she’d never taunt him about grabbing the land from the Hindus. And it was decided to search for an experienced nurse for Jenny as she was expecting a baby.

The dust-storm had abated now. Fonseka asked her to accompany him for a stroll as it was their wont. Jenny refused to go with him today, so he took the rifle slung on the wall and went on his own. He always kept the rifle with him when he went out for a stroll. He might like others to think that he kept the rifle for hunting (and sometimes he did manage to bring back pigeons and rabbits with him) but in reality he was afraid of people. He kept the rifle so that he could frighten people. He had got the license for the rifle after they settled here.

Fonseka left. Jenny remained where she was. The argument that happened a few minutes ago reminded her of the occasion that had led them to this place. The people of Devusana sub-district had decided not to pay the revenue as they felt that they had been denied justice by the government. The government resorted to all sorts of repression but in vain. Their lands were seized but that could not break their determination or create a fear among them. The lands were auctioned
but no one came forward to buy them, so the government published special offers through notification. Fonseka came to know about it from the government gazette and read it out to Jenny. Jenny had always wanted to lead a simple, peaceful and idyllic life in the countryside. Besides as a part of his duty as an employee in the excise department Fonseko had to stay out for days together and roam in the terrible jungles which she had never appreciated. Her father was an influential Zamindar (landed gentry), so it was natural for the couple to dream of buying the land. At first Jenny had opposed buying the land of those woebegone people, but later her dream of wanting to live an idyllic life led her to agree. The land of Devusana was not purchased by the Hindus, the Muslims or the Parasis. But Christians did purchase them. They purchased around 80 acres of the best land available around half a mile away from the village.

Once they bought it, they soon realised that they would have to face a lot of difficulty there. They realised that they could find no one in the village or the sub-district who would till the farm or even build the house. One couldn’t purchase any article from the market. Even getting change for money was a problem. Fonseka’s uncle had accepted the contract of buildings for the railways who had the labourers build the house they were living in at present. A friend of Fonseka was a band master in a princely state. Fortunately Chuniyo had been staying at his friend’s home for years as his village - Kadi - was famine-affected. This band master sent this trusted servant to Fonseko which brought some relief to the couple’s household.

Jenny, by now, was disillusioned of the idyllic life she had imagined in the countryside and life here looked like an imprisonment to her. The fence with the glass pieces at its tall ends looked to her like walls of a gaol. There was not a single soul to converse with. How long could she keep talking with her husband or loving him? The absence of all other comforts made her restless. It was unbearable for her to face the passers-by whose eyes always reminded her that they had grabbed their land. She felt as if she too was a partner in the wrong that her husband had committed.
She, then, thought of her child. She had read somewhere about the ill-effects of the unpleasant thoughts on the foetus. She decided to stop worrying about the land and tried to think positively. She had just promised that she would not utter a word about it to Fonseka. They could do some charity work with whatever they got from the harvest. They could build a school or a hospital or a small chapel. They could preach the essence of Christianity to the woebegone people and possibly convert them into Christians. She fell asleep with the happiness that these optimistic thoughts gave her.

Man would like to reform himself by forgetting his wrong rather than trying to right it!

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It is 10 P.M. Jenny is in severe labour. Fonseka asks the nurse about her health every now and then but doesn’t get a definite answer. Completely nonplussed, he walks about the compound with a heavy heart. All of a sudden, he approaches the nurse as if something important has struck his mind and asks her, “Will you be able to help us in case of any eventuality during the delivery?

It was not for the first time that he was asking this question. He had asked this question daily and his agony made him ask the same question for the fourth time today. The nurse was fully acquainted with his nature. She replied with complete patience and softness, “It won’t be a major problem if it is a normal delivery. But we’ll need a doctor in case of any complication. Fonseko couldn’t hear the complete answer she gave and even if he had, he would not have grasped it. He closed his eyes painfully, clasped the hair over his forehead tightly and resumed his walking in the compound.

Presently, the nurse appeared before him and informed him that there was some complication with the position of the child. An experienced doctor would be needed. She asked him to call in one such at the earliest as Jenny was suffering from acute pain.

The village had no doctor as such. But one was available today. Gulabbhai Desai’s daughter was to be married today and the father of his son-in-
law was a doctor himself. But whether he would choose to come was uncertain. Gulabbhai himself was the local leader of the ‘No Revenue’ movement. He was quite a tempered person and the entire village feared his presence. Fonseka, at first, rushed towards the door to bring him here, but soon his steps receded as if he was pulled back by some rope. He had never ever tried to socialise with a single person of the village till now. Nor had he met Gulabbhai. He had always considered them as his foes. What right did he have to call them now? He collapsed into the chair with a fallen head. He ruefully told the nurse, “Maybe he would take your word seriously as both of you belong to the same profession.”

Chuniyo, who was standing nearby them, said, “If you allow me, I would ask Abdul Ghanchi to come here.”

There are still a lot many pious souls scattered in the countryside who possess all skills, knowledge, talent and art of ancient times of our nation. There are people who are adept swimmers, who can cure a snake bite, who can cure boils through burns or who can adeptly pierce ears. There are also quakes who can cure people suffering from osteopathic conditions or supposedly incurable diseases like goitre. There are also great yogis who have mastered Yoga and devotion. They live a life of obscurity and leave the world spreading their fragrance through their good deeds during their life-time. In present times when products are sold through advertisements no one has time to judge what is true and what is illusory in them. In fact, no one could feel the void left by such noble people. Abdul Ghanchi was one such rare soul. He could skilfully handle any complicated case of delivery. He always did it with eyes blindfolded so that the woman does not feel any hesitation. It was his vow and it also showed his mastery. He considered his skill as god-gifted and would never say no to anyone who approached him for help and never charged anyone. This Christian couple never mixed with the villagers but their servant knew everyone well. He had come to know about Abdul Ghanchi and had earlier told his masters about it. Now as getting any doctor was out of question, Fonseko had no option but to call on him despite his much dislike for the locals.
Khodidas Patel lived in the mango grove of the prized land in front Fonseko’s land. Khodidas, as his name, suggests suffered from some physical defect. As a lame cat is a sign of ill-luck, Khodidas too tried to prove to be an obstacle to this couple. There are certain people who can smell a rat without much effort. Khodidas somehow sensed what Jenny was going through. He had, no doubt, participated in the protests by the villagers, but had not lost one single rupee. In fact, he was the last to sign. He reached Abdul’s house at the late hours of night, much before the nurse or Chuniyo. Abdul was still awake. His son had just gone to bed after crying for her mother. He was there on the slab outside his house lost in himself. He looked like a man drawn in deep water where one doesn’t see the water once the eyes are closed, but he is suffocated by the water from all directions. Though he was least worried about himself, all sorts of mundane worries had beleaguered his mind.

“Abdulkaka, that thief of your land is now paying the penalty. His wife is in labour. I tell you not to visit them.” He informed Abdul Ghanchi and soon left to inform the same to Gulabbhai.

The wedding was going on at Gulabbhai’s home. He was seated on a small stool. Khodidas told others that he had to meet him to discuss a serious matter and managed to reach him. He told him in his ears, “Gulabbhai, It is time we taught a lesson to that land-grabber.”

Gulabbhai was well aware of his character. “Why are you calling him land-grabber? Have you lost any land to him?”

“But...Gulabbhai...”

“Go away...Is this the time for you to come with your Tonga? Don’t you know a marriage is going on here? Do you think I am going to entertain your words at this hour? Go away from here...”

Khodidas fled the place.

Presently, the nurse and Chuniyo reached there. They informed everything to Gulabbhai. He, now, understood why Khodidas had come to him.
Soon he called the doctor and said, “No doubt he has grabbed our land, but we can’t treat him in the same way at this hour of crisis. Please go there now.”

Gulabbhai was a true follower of Gandhiji’s principle of Non-violence and he wanted to defeat the Christians on the moral ground who had grabbed their land and supported the government with the same principle of Non-violence.

“But I don’t have any of my equipments with me right now.” said the doctor.

“Whatever it may be, please go there and do whatever you can do to save the life of the lady.”

The doctor put on his topi, took his stick and set out.

Abdul had already arrived there before the doctor reached. Fonseko could not appropriately welcome Abdul, partly because of feeling really low and partly being unaccustomed to talking with the lower section of the people. But Abdul, in his usual warm manner, said, “Bring some water to wash the hands and fire to create frankincense smoke.” Chuniyo fetched water and Abdul washed his hands. He, then, spread the frankincense that he had brought in a packet with him on the fire. He kept his palms over it and then rubbed on his eyes. He kept a strip of cloth he had brought with him over the fire and then asked Chuniyo to tie around his face.

“Now take me to the room where the lady is.”

As he entered the room, he said, “Don’t fear, my sister. Nothing will happen to you. Just close your eyes for a while and do what I ask you to.” His face didn’t show the alertness of a doctor; it showed the sobriety of a saint who is on his mission. His face and the strip - no less holy than that which Gandhari had put on her eyes for a lifetime - restored some faith in Jenny. She closed her eyes.

Abdul assumed his role of a midwife. The doctor and nurses arrived soon. Fonseka regained his composure. He welcomed the doctor and told him about Abdul. The doctor had heard of him, so he let him do the job. The doctor and the nurse both just stood there observing.
Fonseka was standing outside. He could occasionally hear Jenny’s painful cries and Abdul’s comforting words and instructions: ‘Don’t worry...Keep taking deep breaths.’ In between he could also hear the nurse’s words of praise. With a heavy heart he kept hearing everything. At last he heard Abdul’s last comforting word ‘Fine’ and then heard the cries of the child as if making a way for himself or as if compelling everyone to take a note of his arrival. Abdul smiled modestly and said, “My boy, what a feat you have performed even before you took birth! Surely you are going to do big things in your life.” He could tell from the voice that it was a boy child.

The doctor came out. He praised Abdul before Fonseka, gave some routine instructions to the nurse and left. Abdul came out of the room after some time. Having the strip removed, he too left. This made Fonseka amazed and he just kept looking at Abdul as he left.

Abdul came after three days to make sure everything was alright. Jenny was perfectly healthy. Now, she could talk to him freely. After sometime he left. After two hours she asked the nurse to call Fonseka. The events that had occurred in the past couple days had made him humble and grateful. He came and stood there willing to do everything that Jenny would ask him to do.

Jenny said, “Dear, do you know what has happened to Abdul? I asked him everything today. All his land has been confiscated. His wife wanted to keep the land, but she thought they can’t do so by deserting their fellows. She died lamenting the loss of their land.” Jenny took a deep breath and continued, “Despite this Abdul let them grab their land. Now, he is facing lots of hardships at work. The bullock that he used at his oil-mill has been confiscated. There is nothing to eat at his home. I offered him Rs.200 or Rs.300 but he refused to accept it. He said he does not charge anything for his service as a midwife. All that he can give to his child is milk. He is planning to move out of the village in search of a job, but worries about his young child. Who will take care of him in his absence?”

Jenny could observe the change that went through Fonseka’s face. She took a deep breath and was about to say something when Fonseka burst out loudly,
“Oh! My God!” He hid his face with his hands. Jenny cordially asked him to come near her. She said, “No, dear. I am not going to complain...but....”

“No...no...dear, I have decided to give back his land.”

“I have already asked him to consider that, but he said he doesn’t want to have his land by deserting his fellows.”

“I was listening to that. I will leave my claim over their land and we will leave this place.”

Fonseka sat beside Jenny on the chair. They sat there in the stillness of the room for quite some time. Jenny was moving her hand on his knee lovingly.

It is said that there is something that works as an obstacle in the way of a man’s fortune and he cannot succeed till that obstacle is removed. But the truth is that such an obstacle covers the kindness that lies within us and we do not try to remove it. If that obstacle is removed, it would bring a brighter side of our personality to the surface.

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Needless to say, now, that the government chose to reach a compromise on the issue of revenue as it failed in its efforts to create a new colony. An association was established from amongst the people who had come forward to take part in the protests, to bring some reforms in the condition of the locals and to educate them. Both Fonseka and Jenny have joined it. They have given their land to the people and a trust has been set up that has helped Abdul to run a ‘Delivery Home’. He is joined by a doctor, a specialist in delivery. They also provide Childbirth education and the women of the sub-district benefit from that.
A castle called Ajitdurg existed in the forest around thirty miles from the northern outskirts of the dense, impassable and terrible forest called Dandkaranya in ancient times which our history-books talk about. The Dandakya kings who belonged to the genealogy of the Bhoj dynasty ruled this area. At present the thirteenth Dandakya Bhoj named Viradhsen is ruling the kingdom. He came to the throne three years ago.

The servants were bustling around the entire palace. The king had ordered a secretariat to be built. The servants were whispering amongst themselves, making conjectures behind this construction with whatever political information and intellectual discernment they had at their disposal. The healer from the kingdom of Magadh called Ajivak Dhundhumar was to arrive today. A new palace was being built on the banks of the river Shon by the order of the king of Magadh. The king had asked his men to bring the best and numerous woods like teak and sisam (a kind of timber) from Dandak. He had also asked Vaital, his minister, to meet the king of Dandak and inform him that they were ready to pay whatever tax he would ask for. Viradhsen had replied to the minister with perfect humility that the kingdoms of Bhoj and Magadh are old friends, so he would just ask for a nominal tax. The king then mentioned that Ajivak Dundhumar, the healer and one of the extraordinary persons of the kingdom of Magadh, was his school classmate. Both had lived together in Takshshila for many years, but hadn’t met each other for years. He then requested the minister to send him to his kingdom for a month so that his people could live in the wilderness of the forest without any ailment besetting them.

Now there was no reason for any animosity between these two kingdoms as they were not sharing borders. Besides, the presence of the warrior tribes like Atwik, non-Aryans and Kirat and the climate of the region would always force the king to reconsider his decision before he would wage a war with Dandak. Nearly all maintained warm relations with this kingdom so that they could utilize this
place for their own good. However, no one looked upon these Bhoj kings as amongst the dignified Kashtriya (warrior) dynasties. As they were living far away from the cultural centres of Aryans, people in other kingdoms often spoke ill of them. A Bhoj prince never dared to take part in any Swayamwar of the Kshatriya dynasty. They had to marry the daughters of Atwik kings or those belonging to the inferior warriors, mistaken as Arya. Viradhsen was sent to Takshshila for the studies with the sole aim of acquiring the etiquette and it would restore glory to the kingdom. The servants kept all these facts in their mind when they were making their political conjectures. No one thought that the king was desirous to establish a marital relationship with Magadh. The healer might be called so that he could help them to be blessed with a son, but the maid that worked in the harem denied any such possibility. They returned to their homes when their work and calculations came to an end.

Ajivak Dhundhumar had taken his meals and rest at his place and now had come to meet the king at the secretariat. There was no third party present there. There was no servant present there to fan him. Even the favourite parrot of the queen was kept outside. The guards were watching standing far away from them.

Dhundhumar sat on the seat the king had showed with due respect. The king remembered the old days of their friendship and taunted him that it was obvious he would get no time to visit him as he was in the service of a larger kingdom. Dhundhumar first told about his well-being and then explained his inability to visit the king saying that he was busy preparing some medicines and it had taken him twelve years of constant observation to finally prepare them. At last he asked, “Why have you grown so thin? Is there anything that worries you?”

“I am any king not beset with worries?”
“But I don’t see any reason that should make you restless.”
“It seems you have forgotten all we went through at Takshshila.”
“But you did get this kingdom.”
“But not without the help of your chemical. I had put the drop of the chemical you gave me on the bed of King Siddhosen and rubbed harital (a metal) over it. It took all this to get the kingdom.”

“Maharaj, I had met many citizens since I came here. No one carries even a slight suspicion about that; I met the kings under your subjection in the north on my way towards your kingdom but none of them showed any such suspicion.

“They had developed suspicion about my intentions initially, but as the medicine without harital appeared harmless to them, it removed all their doubts. Has that feudal king said anything about me?”

“He has offered me one thousand gold coins if I do something that makes you unable to have an heir.”

“Do accept his offer, I say. I have called you here not because I want to have an heir, but because I want you to do something so that I don’t have an heir. And that’s the worry that pains me these days.”

“But, Maharaj, the kingdom needs an heir.”

“Friend! Aren’t you aware of our history? In the last ten generation of Bhoj kings, seven kings have killed their fathers and seized the throne. Look what is happening in other kingdoms especially Magadh, Madra, Kosal and Avanti. The same thing is happening everywhere like an order of nature. The prince seizes the throne by killing his father. The father and the son have become enemies just like two kings sharing one common boundary. If I had been a lexicographer, I would have created a new word father-son indicating the relationship shared by snake-mongoose. It has been rightly said that the princes are like crabs. The princes kill their fathers just as crabs kill their mothers.”

“So what do you wish?

“See, I had sex in the last sixteen days after menses, as you suggested and still Vajjikadevi got pregnant. Fortunately it was a girl and died soon.”

“Maharaj, there must be some error in your calculations. Though I have never conducted any experiment with regard to this, but I can say with complete confidence that the words of Babhravya can never be wrong. There are only two
copies of his book are available. One is with the healer of Avanti and other at my disposal. The healer at the Kaling wanted to have a copy of the book, but I refused to give.”

Viradhsen stood up. He went to a small wooden cupboard nearby and brought a small painted box. He took out some papers from it. He showed those papers containing the dates in tabular form to Dhundhumar and said, “I got these dates from some of my reliable maids.” Dhundhumar matched the dates with the motion of the moon and said, “It seems this calculation here is right. If you don’t have any objection, I would like to note this down in my diary, in my own language, without mentioning the real name. I do it not for myself but for the development of science.”

“No one should hinder the development of science.”

“What precaution are you following at present?”

“I avoided having sex with Devi for a few months after the birth of the daughter. I put a stop to it after she died.”

“You did well, but what happened after it?”

“I am living a celibate life of the Rujujads, the sadhus of Rushbhdev since then.”

“So that is the reason that makes you restless. Why don’t you have women outside the harem? You won’t have trouble from their sons!”

“Friend, you aren’t familiar with the traditions of this kingdom. This is not Uttarapath. Even the son of a prostitute can claim the throne here. We, Bhojs, are living under a lot of distress here. While we follow the manners of other kings to be counted as one of them, we have to suffer some queer traditions existing in our own kingdom.”

“What is your wish, then?”

“I have informed you everything. Now you find out the solution. Isn’t there anything that makes a woman barren?”
“There are two remedies. If the first is applied, a woman is made barren for the entire life; the second does not make her barren for the entire life, but she has to take the drug before love-making.”

“The first one is better.”

“Rather I would not suggest that Kuchumar prayog. I have found it successful every time I went through its result, but at the same time there was one or the other complication with all the cases. The woman, no doubt, is made barren, but she becomes horribly ugly and gradually starts avoiding a man’s touch. She develops beard and moustache. My father has made a note that a man will never enjoy the touch of such a woman. I cannot recommend it to you. The other drug is also a surefire remedy, but one has to be very careful in its use.”

“What is the duration in case of the first remedy before the effects of the drug start surfacing?”

“Four to eight months.”

“Let me have both of them. I will try the first one on one woman and if it produces the same effect, I will not try it next time. I will give the second one to some other women.”

“I tell you not to ask for the Kuchumar Proyog. I would not be able to help you out when you would wish to have a son. Even Brahma, the Creator, cannot undo the damage brought about by Kuchumar. I beseech you not to ask for it.”

“No, I just want it. You will see that I won’t bother anyone afterwards.”

“As you wish. One more thing. I have not conducted the Kuchumar prayog myself. However, I have conducted the second remedy many times. Just don’t forget to give it to the woman or you will curse me.”

“I will give it myself.”

“That’s fine.”

“Wait.” Viradhsen stopped him. He took out a diamond from the cupboard and gave it to Dhundhumar and said:
“A separate celebration will be organized in your honour. I have asked my ministers to pay you a moderate amount so that no one develops any suspicion about our secret. Accept this diamond which is as firm and pure as our friendship and your knowledge. Look at that river, Shushkanira. It has dried down now. It holds water just for two months, but it is a mine of diamonds. This one has come from it. You’d find such a diamond only in a great dynasty. Accept it....And there is one more thing. I will need your help...Can’t you visit me at the intervals of six months?”

“I’ll definitely come, Maharaj.”

“Good. So much time has lapsed in our discussion. You can now go and take rest comfortably.”

“May you overcome all your worries.”

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Both these old friends met at the same secretariat after six months. After exchanging greetings, Ajivak Dhundhumar said, “Maharaj, you seem even more disturbed than I found you earlier.”

“You are right, but there is no fault of yours. The fault lies with our ignorant harem.”

“Maharaj, let me know everything in detail, so that I can find out the solution.”

“I myself want to inform everything in detail to you. See, I have made all the notes of my usages of the drug here. I gave the pills of Kuchumar to Ashlesha. She is the daughter of Atwik who is from the east, so there is no problem even if there is any adverse effect. At first she had refused to take the pill. I wonder why all women are so stubborn all the time!”

“She can sense anything that is going to harm her with her sixth sense.”

“But she didn’t know anything about the effects of those pills. Other queens were also reluctant to have the other pills. What was there to be reluctant in them?”
“Of course, there were reasons that made them act in that way. They don’t want their act of making love to fail as you wish. They may not have knowledge of the effects of those pills, but I have experienced that it doesn’t take long for a woman to realize a harmful thing or a person around her. Dattak has also made the same comment. But what were the results of all that?

“Your theory proved right. She started showing the sign of being ugly just after four months.”

“I told you well in advance.”

“Now we don’t enjoy each other’s touch. It seems she has changed completely.”

“Will you share those changes with me? - Of course, for the betterment of science.”

“Of course, I will. I think she will go mad. She sits there lost in herself for entire day. She doesn’t care to comb her hair. She is not able to sleep at night. Her diet and sleeping patterns have become irregular. Generally, she avoids having her meals but prefers stinking and rotten grains. She beats all around for no apparent reason. I think women don’t have a nature of their own. They are mostly dependent on the external force. A man in her position would not change so much. There are eunuchs in the harem but they are not having such perverted minds. They cannot think in terms of the scientific theories as we are doing now.”

“Were the effects of the other pills satisfactory?”

“They showed the same reluctance before taking them. It was only after being convinced of the therapeutic qualities of the pills for conceiving that they relented. I could feel their suspicion while they were taking those pills.”

“So what makes you restless now?”

“The matter bothers me as even after two months the queens keep asking me why there are no signs of conceiving. I told them the delay will bless them with a glorious son.”

“There is no punishment for such lies to the kings.”
“But does the same thing apply to Ajivak like you? I am a Lokayat who believes in the philosophy of Charvak and I believe that it is my right to indulge in pleasures.”

“What happened then?”

“They heard the truth with their suspicious face. It was just during this time that signs of deformity started surfacing all over Ashlesha’s body. Now all the queens started refusing to take the pills. I explained to them that they were given different pills but in vain. All now oppose the pill. In fact, the truth is women do not possess understanding. When I saw one of queens artfully throwing the pill, I stopped enjoying their company. This isolation has adversely affected my entire being. And that is the cause of my restlessness.

“Do you have any solution in your mind?’’

“Isn’t it possible to have the same pleasure with my hands or any other part of my body?’’

“That is possible, but I have not experimented it myself. I will send it to you if you allow me.”

“Of course, do send it to me. Let me try it. Is there any side-effect attached to it?’’

“Nothing. Just be cautious of excessive usage.”

“Will the real making love...”

“There is no iota of doubt about it or how can I call it a solution?’’

“Do send me that drug. But how am I supposed to use it?’’

“It is a type of bath. Mix it with your bath-water and take a bath with the same water. It is a fragrant liquid.”

“Will you be able to return here in five months instead of six? It might develop hurdles as I went through the last time. You must be knowing it is quite difficult to deal with women.”

“I will.”
The same two friends were having their talk at the same place after five months. Dhundhumar said the same thing that he spoke the last time:

“You seem to be in the same condition. Besides it seems as if your heart is burdened. Didn’t you find the drug useful that I gave you the last time?”

“It is not that. It was certainly useful. I can find out no fault in your drug.”

“I would like to hear everything in detail as it was entirely a new experiment.”

“There is nothing that remains to be said on the experiment. It is as sure-fire a remedy as would have been created by Dhanvantari. The problem is with the queens. You must be knowing, my harem is quite spacious.”

“I know that.”

“Busy as we were in finding the solution, we could not concentrate on the problems that might erupt.”

“What problems, Maharaj?”

“I started visiting all queens one by one. I would sit beside them, and would touch them with either a kiss or wish beetle leaves or with embrace and then leave the place on some or other pretext. All grew suspicious about my behaviour within two months. Though there is no doubt about its efficacy, we failed to see that it goes against our last remedy.”

“How?”

“In our last experiment, I assured them that they would conceive a son. This time I avoided them and that further confirmed their suspicion and they grew more suspicious over my new behavior!”

“That is what we call the unscholarly wisdom of women.”

“One of my queens avoided my advances and blatantly told me that she has experienced signs of pregnancy even without our union and so I should let her alone. When I asked about the duration, she replied she would be blessed with a glorious son if the duration stretches out for long! I realized it was just out of the
bitterness against me. I often went to her for beetle leaf. Now even that has come to an end.”

“So what do you do now?”

“I have ordered the courtesans of the kingdom to come for the service taking it in turns, but they appear to be even more stubborn than the queens. There are times when earlier kings have forced themselves upon courtesans, but they never revolted against the state. Rather they were eager to oblige. Now they can’t tolerate one touch of mine. I banished her for insolence and offered death penalty to another. The other day I got the information that all courtesans are waiting for an opportunity to escape. Now, we will have to find cure for it.”

“What sort of cure do you want?”

“A cure where one doesn’t have to be dependent on a woman.”

“As there are men and women on the surface of the earth, it is not going to be possible. But I have an eye-salve that can help you. If you apply it to your eyes, you will be able to see a woman’s body throughout her clothes. You can feel the pleasure with the help of your eyesight.”

“It seems to be a perfect solution. Is there any possibility of complication?”

“I can’t say anything about it as it is the first experiment.”

“Do send it to me. How long will it take?”

“It will take fifteen days to prepare it.”

“I will send my messengers after fifteen days. Mark the drug with this sign and as it is a new experiment I want you to come after four months this time.”

“I am myself eager to know about the efficacy of the drug.”

* 

At the end of four months both the friends were seated at the same place. This time it was Viradhsen who spoke first:

“Dear friend, the experiment has proved perfectly successful this time and there is now no possibility of any failure.”

“Did any of the queens have any doubts?”
“None. To tell you the truth, your power has defeated not only their suspicion but also their wisdom. They are at their wit’s end. Some don’t even come before me. But that doesn’t mean your solution has failed.”

“And what about your health and equilibrium?”

“If I had been the creator of all those scriptures, I would have called it a ‘Salvation’. When one is not dependent on another person with likes and dislikes of their own, life is nothing less than a salvation - a life beyond the fears of life and death.”

“I am happy for you.”

“I forgot to tell you how I used the drug you gave me. I have recently discovered a new device. I have declared that the state will sponsor the expenditure of marriages of the girls belonging to the Brahman or other communities. Now I even don’t like to have a glance at old women. But Dhundhumar, do you think the eye-salve has any impact over women?”

“In my opinion it should not have any impact over them. Have you noticed anything?”

“Some girls are very much afraid of me. They refuse to sit in my presence. They shiver and feel uneasy as if someone is touching their body parts. The other day I received a word from a Brahmin called Bhrugu who wanted his daughter to get married. I sent a chariot for her and called her here. While the ceremony of Kanyadan was going on I happened to look at her and somehow she fainted. She has been crying ever since she got married. Bhrugu comes to me and asks the reason. I ask them to let me know what wrong I have committed. I ask them to prove if I have done anything wrong. I am ready to repent. I would like to see how he proves that. He says the king is responsible for anything that goes awry. Now he says he would give me a curse. These Brahmins are fools. Even those uncultured people are living better than they. They never bother about such trivialities. Have I told you about the Kalpis.”

“No Maharaj. I haven’t heard anything about them.”
“That tribe is unknown in Aryavrat. It is one terrible tribe of Kirats habituating far in the south. Their women are quite fair. Can you explain why women in some tribes are fairer compared to men?”

“I have experienced the same in many tribes like Ahir, Shak, Bahlik and others.”

“I have women from all the communities but the Kalpi. I tried my best to have one but in vain. They are quite strict in guarding the chastity of their women. The women are brave too. But I could overcome the hurdle through the remedy you gave me. I saw the real power of your remedy in this case. By the way whose experiment is it?”

“Babhravya’s”

“It is really extremely powerful. The headmen of the Kalpis had asked for my permission to settle with their cattle in the Dandak as they were facing severe famine in the south. Why should I refuse? Their women perform all sorts of works that the men do. It is just yesterday when I saw a woman of this tribe on the tamarind tree. That young beautiful woman was all alone there. She must be around sixteen or seventeen. When I looked at her, she fell down the tree like a ripe fruit and started struggling hard as if she was being raped by someone. She fainted at the end. I left the place. In a way they are admirable people who don’t indulge in the nonsense of the duties of the kings or repentance and all!”

“Can I leave, Maharaj? Do you want me to do anything else for you?”

“Nothing.”

“May you always be victorious.”

“May Lord Babhravya be victorious.”

*But what had happened with that woman did not end just there. One man from her tribe saw her lying under the tree. He called others and took her to the hut. Her kin and the headmen sat around her reciting the songs of their goddess, playing their flutes and drums. The woman started trembling on the third day. We create an entirely new world in our dreams and we, not realizing that it is our own
creation, take it to be true. The same is done in real life by the tribes which are considered uncultured. The woman narrated what she had gone through in the same manner. The woman possessed by the goddess said, “What are you thinking now? The king has molested the girl.” The next moment she died. The person who brought her to the hut admitted that he had seen the king leaving the place.

The chieftain of the Kalpis gave a loud shriek and pierced the point of the spear into his thumb and let a drop of blood fall on the corpse of the woman. He then smeared his blood on the spear and drove it into the land at a throw near the pillow of the dead girl. The girl’s father brought a drum from the house and started playing it in a manner of a battle. The Kalpis in the nearby area heard the sound and got the indication. They too started playing their drum. All the Kalpis habituating across 300 miles started playing their drums and all the sides started reverberating with the sounds of their drums. A group of dark-complexioned men with the arrows in their hands and quivers on their back and women with the water containers and additional quivers reached the place dancing, jumping, and playing their drums. Every headman of those groups pierced the point of the spear into his thumb and let a drop of blood fall on the corpse of the woman and smeared his blood on the spear that stood there. The groups kept gathering at this place for three days and three nights playing their drums as if a great misfortune has befallen them.

The king was informed that the Kalpis had started gathering with their bamboo arrows, but he could not think of any reason behind that. He thought maybe they were gathering to celebrate some festival of their deity. Besides he didn’t know the exact number of the Kalpis. Though he ordered his army to be prepared for any eventuality, he did not give order to fight. He didn’t want to incur any disagreement by meddling with their religious rituals or festivities. It was not wise to provide any reason to fight the warrior tribe. This, in return, led to a laxity amidst the army that was prepared to fight.

The assorted groups of the Kalpis started moving towards the palace on the fourth day. The army of the king attacked them but they found it difficult to match
the overwhelming rush of the Kalpis who didn’t seem to mind the loss of any number of people belonging to their tribe. They kept moving ahead with firm determination. A great number of Kalpis died in the fight and still others kept rushing ahead trampling the bodies of their men. The soldiers struck with poisoned arrows could not stand up again. The army of the king gave a tough fight, but when they found that they were far less in number compared to the Kalpis they fled the battleground. The Kalpis captured the king and killed all men and the kin of the king at the palace. They took the king to that tamarind tree and tied him there and torched the palace. The palace was in flames for three days. When all was over, the chieftain of the Kalpis brought a basket-full of sand from the river Shushkneera and emptied it on the ruins of the palace. The rest of men and women too brought the sand from the river and threw it on the ground where the palace existed. Singing their songs, they continued throwing the sand for three days and the mound kept growing. On the seventh day after the battle, all Kalpi women gathered at the tamarind tree. The king was still alive. Those women killed Viradhisen Dandkya Bhoj by shooting several arrows at him.

Arya historians have described this incident in a different way. Jaymangal and Kamandak, in this regard, mention that: “the man named Dandak was the chief of Bhoj dynasty. The name Dandkya based upon his name became famous. Once while on a hunting spree, he felt thirsty and visited Bhrugu Rishi’s ashram. He saw the beautiful daughter of the Rishi all alone. Charmed by her beauty, he climbed down his chariot, captured and brought her to his kingdom. When the Rishi returned to the ashram with wood and grass, he could not find his daughter anywhere. He sat in meditation and came to know what had happened in his absence. He became angry and cursed the king: “You will be destroyed along with your kin and kingdom in the storm of dust within seven days.” Thus, the kingdom was destroyed and a forest came into existence there. The above mentioned scholars believe that the forest came to be known as Dandkaranya. But the fact is stated in the story.
TWO MEETINGS

A great number of men and women have gathered outside the high gate of the jail to visit their dear ones. With their eager eyes, they are trying to have a glance of the inside but the darkness and the thick rods of the gate obstruct their sight. While some move about the gate, others look up at the window above, yet others keep talking about the jail and life in general and praise the people they are going to meet. To idle away their time, they curse the officers, complain about the unfair treatment with the severest words. Occasionally, some rich people take out some baskets from their cars or other vehicles and inform about their arrival to the people behind the gate. An old woman dressed in simple rustic clothes was sitting under a tree with a glass of drinking water. She would look at the gate every now and then. The closed gate disappointed her and she would just let out a faint sigh.

The affairs inside the jail, however, go on without caring for feelings of the people waiting outside the jail. It is the duty of the jail authorities to see that even free moving air should not enter the jail without permission. They took special care to make sure that both the doors are not opened at the same time. They opened the outer gate only to take out the inmates for some work or to let in the prisoners returning from their work outside. And the illiterate warders in their yellow hat became busy counting the number of prisoners. They kept counting the numbers of prisoners that had left or had arrived or were yet to arrive. They could find no time to indulge in any other activity as their attention was occupied with their slip-ups in counting properly; fear of any such lapse in future; the rattling of the type writer; their regular salutations to the officers who would arrive there or leave, all this, which they had been taught at the very outset, to follow instantly.

At last, Vinayak’s name was announced. The old woman stood up with her glass. A warder opened the heavy bar gate. After she entered, it was closed. She somehow looked at it with some suspicion. The warder showed her a room and asked her to sit there with a stern face. As the jail itself is considered something
outside the rest of the community, its language would also sound different to ears from the one we are accustomed to.

The old woman sat in that room full of luggage looking at the door. Presently, as per the rule of the jail, the window of the inside door opened and Vinayak came. His shirt and half-pants had a chequered design and it appeared that his entire body was imprisoned within that grim design. Shocked at this dreadful attire she gave out a sigh and burst out in a hushed voice, “My son, Vinu.”

“I am fine, mother” said Vinayak in a comforting voice.

“Son, I am worried about your health.”

“Don’t worry about me, mother.”

“Do you like the food they serve you here?”

The food that we eat nourishes our body. No one else but only a mother knows what it is to nourish a soul. She had learnt this important aspect of life through her duty as a mother for ages. Even a wife has to play the role of a nourishing mother.

“Of course, I do like the food.”

“What do they provide?”

“Everything that we ate at home, mother. The gruel they provide in the morning is so good that we should prepare it at our home.”

“I have heard that they mix cement in what you eat.”

When he had just come here, he had found small stones in the chapatti. People outside the jail must have thought that it was cement, he thought.

“Not at all, mother. How can they do that? In fact, I have gained more weight.”

The moment the word ‘weight’ was uttered, the clerk who was appointed to watch the visits came out of his slumber and said, “Don’t talk about weight.”

“But I am not saying I’ve reduced my weight. I said I have gained more weight. Can’t I say that?”
The clerk had no problem with that, but Vinayak’s mother shuddered at this unjust rule of law that one can’t even talk about reduction of weight in jail! Her senses became numb and could not utter a single word for a while. She started thinking about what she had wanted to ask.

“What are you thinking?” asked Vinayak.

“How do you find your stay here? Do they provide you bed sheet and all?” His mother asked without thinking.

“Yes, mother...”

Before Vinayak could finish, came another order from the clerk: “You can’t talk about anything that happens in the jail.”

Vinayak wanted to say something but before that the clerk interrupted and said, “You seem to be argumentative. Your time is over.”

Vinayak and his mother stood up. The separation from her son was becoming unbearable for the mother. She wanted to continue talking to her son. Vinayak came to the stairs of the room and said, “Please go, mother.” Caught by the concerned gaze of his mother, he himself could not move any further.” This bereaved mother, then, started moving her hands over his face and neck as if led by some unknown force.

“Please go, mother.” He kept saying to her, but the mother didn’t want to leave him. Mumbling meaninglessly, she kept moving her hands over his face and neck just like a cow that licks her calf. The sight must have made an emotional effect on the clerk, because he didn’t say anything. However after a while, she calmed down and realized where she was. Before parting, she said, “Should I bring Diwali, the next time I come here? She has been waiting to meet you.”

He nodded with the same readiness with which he had allowed his mother to shower her love upon him.

“Take care of yourself.” She said and left.

She stopped at the gate as the wicket gate was closed. They were taking Vinayak out of the opposite room, so they had to stop her. This gave her a chance to have another look at her son. Vinayak was walking with his face downcast
thinking about Diwali and whether he should meet her or not. The mother had
realized this dilemma, but she was happy that she could bring her here next time.

Poor Vinayak! He had done what his mother had asked him to do three
years back. The same thing happened today and he allowed his mother to bring his
wife, Diwali, next time.

Vinayak was a graduate from Mumbai University and belonged to a middle
class family. His father had died when he was quite young. His mother had reared
him with lots of dreams. He himself had endured all pains in life bravely. But it
was not this that made him helpless. In fact all these painful experiences had
shaped his character. He had developed a firm determination and ambition in life.
But there was one thing that pained his entire existence. If one knows of that, one
will certainly pity this youth.

This mother and son had deep affection for each other. The mother wanted
her son to be strong enough to do big things and live a blissful life. On the other
hand, the son had never disappointed his mother either. But as he entered youth
and joined college his thoughts were directed towards all sorts of things including
marriage. He wanted to lead a public life. He had dreamt of a wife who could
discuss anything under the sun with him, who could refresh his tired body or who
could co-operate with him to achieve the dreams he had cherished.

Now, the dreams of the youth are always minus experience. Vinayak didn’t
know how the lady of his dreams would look or which qualities would be helpful
to her husband. He just wanted to find out a wife on his own though he had no
idea how he could do that.

As Vinayak’s mother had always taken care of his education, clothing and
food, she now started finding a suitable girl for him. It never occurred to her that
she should consult her son in such matters. She soon found out a girl educated in
Gujarati and fixed the engagement, whereas Vinayak was still studying at college.
When he came home, she informed him with sweets.

He winced as if he had stepped on a thorn. He said, “But you should have
asked me.”
His mother could not understand why he said that but could see that he was not happy with what she had said. She praised the girl before him; also informed him that he had seen the girl earlier, but this did not bring any change in him. After a few days, she forgot the matter. She didn’t raise this topic during the holidays. Obviously Vinayak had not appreciated what had happened. Not being able to find any solution, he didn’t utter a word on that either.

We always keep on procrastinating upon things that we don’t want to do. We don’t realize the best thing to do is to deal with the situation as early as possible. After a year when the girl’s father started talking about fixing the date for the marriage, he realized the situation had worsened to the extent where he could do nothing to set it right. Confused, he, at last, said to his mother, “I don’t want to marry.”

“But my son, only ten days remain before the marriage. Invitations have been sent. Vadi papad have been prepared. How can we say no to them?”

She repeated the same sentence and could say nothing any further.

His mother kept asking him: Who do you want to marry then? or don’t you want to marry at all. What is wrong with this marriage? But he, considering the chasm that lay between the frame of mind that his mother possessed and his own thinking, chose not to provide any explanation. To tell the truth, he was also not having the answers to these questions. He just wanted to choose a wife on his own. And this was something that he could not tell his mother and even if he had said that, she would not have grasped it.

He kept repeating his refusal till the day of the marriage. It dawned on him that all human beings are born just to get married. On the last day, his mother moved her hand over his son lovingly and said, “Don’t refuse, my son. I’ll die if you do that. Let me tie this mindhal.”

As a child wanting to play outside, Vinayak was often assigned some odd chores by his mother to divert his mind. The same thing happened when he let his mother tie the mindhal. He got married within three days!

It is a common weakness with human beings that when something
important happens in our life, we just focus on a part of the thing instead of seeing it in its totality. After the marriage, Vinayak realized marriage is not just following what the mother or the Brahmin asks you to do during those three days, but it is a lifelong commitment. The more he realized it, the more restless he grew. He couldn’t even tolerate his wife’s presence. Diwali! Even this name looked old-fashioned to him. Though he was married to her, he didn’t feel he had any duty towards his wife. He now started feeling a kind of aversion towards his mother who, he thought, was the cause of this entire unfortunate situation. Though he behaved well with her, he realized that his love for her was on the wane. He didn’t like this, but he could feel that the love that he had for his mother would never come back. An invisible wall existed between them which was getting more and more impenetrable. The emotional distance between this mother and son was getting wider. It was like two neighbours whose minor problems assume a bigger shape and they altogether stop visiting each other. Though apparently no one was at fault, three members of this family were equally hurt at what has happened. Not knowing what exactly was the cause of concern, their hearts remained heavy. In such an atmosphere, the routine of the family continued somehow.

Vinayak received his B.A degree. Earlier he had thought of taking up a job but, when Gandhiji launched his Dandi March, Vinayak too joined the freedom movement. He had left his family at a time when he was expected to assist his family economically. His mother was deeply hurt. But somehow she knew that she would never be able to convince his son.

That day when she met her son in the jail for the first time in that appalling atmosphere, she was not able to suppress her love for her son. Vinayak could not remain detached either. He allowed his mother to bring Diwali for the visit just as he had allowed her to tie mindhal two years ago.

Vinayak had never shown any interest in his wife and that had, rather, endeared her all the more to his mother. Now both were feeling a kind of renewed enthusiasm after his permission.
One day an unprecedented incident happened. The slogan ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ could be heard sung with gusto at some distance from Vinayak’s home. Diwali, after the arrest of her husband, felt a sort of curiosity about such political rallies and towards the people who took part in it. She reached the terrace and saw a procession of some youths nearing their house. A youth in the front was carrying a pole with the tri-colour flag. Presently they stopped shouting the slogan and started a song:

May our flag fly high always...!

Some policemen arrived there from another side just as she was watching them. They pounced upon those youths as if avenging some wrong they might have brought to them. The youth carrying the flag was the first to be struck with the baton, but the wrestler didn’t lose his hold of the flag. He passed it on to the other youth when he felt that he was not able to carry it. Now the police started striking those who carried the flag. When one flag-holder became weak and passed the flag to the other, they would laugh and start beating the other youth with abuses. They thought they had achieved victory. Within a short span of time many of them fell down one by one. In the end only one remained. Thinking that victory was near, they continued beating and abusing them. All of a sudden the flag went up towards the sky like some miracle. That took the police aback. Soon they realized the victory was not achieved as the flag was pulled up by the woman on the terrace. Diwali herself could not realize what she was doing. That youth had somehow sensed her readiness to hold the flag without any apparent indication from her. The moment the flag swayed near her, she wasted no time in pulling it up. She stood there on the terrace with the flag. This enthused the youth beaten to the pulp and they raised their hands towards the flag despite their bleeding condition and started singing in their broken voice again,

May our flag fly high always...!

Police was now helpless. They abused Diwali and hit some of the youth again and left. A sense of victory brought delight on the face of everyone.
Now some statesman might find it meaningless to get beaten just for the sake of a flag, but they do not realize that it was the suffering of such people that inspired the poet to compose our national-song ‘Vande Mataram’. This flag, with the same logic, became our national flag and awoke patriotic feelings in us.

After the police left, Diwali wanted to give back the flag to the volunteer, but they asked her to keep it there. Diwali called her mother-in-law. She was delighted when she knew what had happened. The volunteer asked her to keep the flag because such an act would certainly have been appreciated by Vinayak if he had been here. The mother gave her consent. They filled a broken earthen pot that lay there on the terrace with earth and placed the flag in it. There was the flag at Vinayak’s house flying highest in the entire village. Diwali became famous as ‘flag-woman’ among all.

There are things that don’t demand much bravery to accomplish, but if you do them they might instill in you the quality of being brave. Pulling up the flag that day was not an act of bravery as such, but she became brave after that. The act she had performed infused a renewed bravery among the women of the entire village.

One day while she was going to fetch water, she saw a vehicle and some khaddar-clad volunteers were standing around it at the outskirts of the village. Her curiosity led her towards the vehicle. A speedy cyclist approached them, got down from his bicycle and panting heavily, informed all that the police have come to know about their plan. The news made them all nervous. They had planned to sell salt openly in a nearby village in their bid to fight back. They lamented the fact that they knew no one in the village to whom they could go and ask them to hide the salt. Diwali got an idea and asked them to hide the salt in water-containers. She stopped all the women who were going to fetch water and informed them everything. Soon their water-containers were filled with salt instead of water. One volunteer was asked to keep a vigil at the bank of the pond. When the vehicle was emptied, they got a hint from the volunteer on guard. All the women scattered from the place. Some went to the well and others went towards the village. The
volunteers drove the vehicle out of the village just to mislead the police and scattered some salt on the way. The police followed them on their horses and stopped them but could find no salt. They came back to the river and carried searches for salt but couldn’t find it. Disappointed, they stopped their search and returned.

Diwali became famous even in the neighbouring villages after this incident.

Many workers had been arrested so far from the main city of this sub-district. Women were now appointed as ‘Sardar’ (the leader) at some places in other sub-districts. Diwali had now become so famous that she was made ‘sardar’ of the sub-district. Initially, however, she didn’t have much idea of what she was supposed to do as a leader, but gradually things started becoming clearer to her and soon she started planning programmes for their fight. She opened a department for Khaddar, prepared a team for picketing against liquor and foreign clothes, formed a vanara sena (a children brigade) and held prabhat feris (early morning rounds singing songs.) and processions regularly. She not only prepared herself to go to jail but also inspired others to come forward to go to jail and many did. Now her name figured even in newspapers.

She accompanied her mother-in-law this time to meet her husband. She entered the jail and sat there following the jail procedure. In the meanwhile, Vinayak arrived. He looked at Diwali who was sitting beside his mother clad in a saffron sari which gave her a mature look. He diverted his eyes to his mother, asked about her health and also informed that he was well too. Their involvement with non-violent fighters during the last few months had filled the jail officials with humility. They didn’t meddle much this time. Having a cold glance at Diwali, he sat on the floor.

His mother was happy that he would return home after fifteen days. In that happy state she told Vinayak that he would find a flag flying high at their house.

“Is it so? That’s fine.” he said in an artificial voice.

“Won’t you ask Diwali to stay at our place when you come home for a few days?”
“That’s for their parents to decide.”

“She is not at their parents’ home. She stays at Bhamala village to serve our country. She is appointed a leader in that area.”

“Is she the same Diwali of Bhamala village?” asked Vinayak and looked at Diwali for the first time in his life.

“Yes, my son. Don’t you see her saffron sari?”

“Oh! You’ve done a great job.” He said enthusiastically and patted her shoulder.

It was for the first time that her husband had touched her and that too at such a place and in front of her mother-in-law and others. Her face turned red with mixed feelings of coyness and happiness. Vinayak, for the first time, noticed that Diwali appeared astute and beautiful though slightly dark-complexioned. Vinayak this time asked her directly:

“Are you the same Diwali who is famous as a flag-woman? Jagdish came here from Bhamala who told me about that woman. I had no idea it was you! But tell me why do people call you by that name?”

Mother just kept observing his son’s face while he was saying all that. How happy he appeared! His entire existence seemed bursting with enthusiasm! All his unfulfilled ambitions and love for a wife that remained hidden in him so far had surfaced like water cannons that burst out of the soil.

Diwali regained her composure. She narrated the incident to him like a soldier who briefs another. Towards the end, she said, “It was not a great deal.”

“Why don’t you tell him about the salt episode?” Her mother-in-law said.

Here the guard had to interfere as they had started discussing the most sensitive issues. He said, “Don’t discuss that.”

Diwali continued unfazed, “We were on our round to fetch water. As per the plan, the volunteers had to get hold of the salt that would arrive in the goods train coming from Utarwad. The bullock-cart riders were worried about the store-room in the village. The storm hovered in the sky. If it rained, it would certainly
ruin everything. The daughter of the sheriff – Vaji, our neighbour Rasika and priest’s daughter Dahi and I shifted the salt in our water-containers.”

The way everything was narrated pleased Vinayak and at the same time he was impressed with his wife’s presence of mind and understanding.

The discussion between the husband and the wife included so many things. The time of the visit was over and Vinayak had to ask them to leave. They stood up and his mother put her hand on Diwali’s shoulder lovingly and walked towards the gate. They stopped as they reached the window. Despite the presence of wardens, police officials and visitors around her, Diwali had the last glance of her husband without any hesitation. Vinayak also stared back at her. Jail is not the place to hide such emotions. He knew those mute eyes wanted to say something more. Vinayak broke his stare and disappeared behind the window.
He was known as Surdas. The proverbial devotee and poet Surdas had destroyed his own eyes. After that the story became popular, every blind person, especially a blind mendicant, was called by that name. This Surdas too was a blind fakir.

The city had a guest-house which had its buildings on both sides of the road. On one side there were buildings with rooms where people stayed and on the opposite side was one building having a single sloping roof of steel. Its walls were three-feet tall above which it was open. Surdas would stay in this building along with the mendicants and sadhus who would frequent this place.

His age was around thirty. As he did not have any friends, he couldn’t go to the city for bhiksha (alms) like many others. The pilgrims of the guest-house or some passers-by would often give him something or the other but that was not enough. It was Vitthal Marathi - the caretaker of the guest-house - who would take care of his needs. He would meet him once or twice in a day without any apparent reason. Whether Surdas had the wherewithal to pay was immaterial to him; he supplied him with everything that he needed including food.

Surdas would sing with his small tambourine in the evening. Though his voice was not quite pleasing, he could sing in perfect tune and play the tambourine beautifully. However, city-bred people had never appreciated his skills. Once a famous learned person, from another village arrived at the guest house to deliver a speech under the auspices of some institution. While he was passing by, he heard Surdas singing and stood there fascinated. It is ironical that people would never know the worth of a particular thing till they are convinced of it by others. After this incident, people started showing interest in his singing. A small group of people would gather in the evening around Surdas. This gathering was often attended by labourers that passed by or by other gentlemen who gave something to Surdas. He was now getting more money as compared to the other mendicants. Vitthal bought him some good second-hand clothes and Surdas was now no longer considered a beggar but was a sophisticated singer.
A sarangi player from some other place had arrived in the village a few days back. He looked penniless from his appearance. He wore an old silky turban in the manner of a king and a long kurta that is usually worn in North India. He earned a living for himself by roaming around shops playing his sarangi. Once, during his wanderings, he came to this guest-house and heard Surdas singing and playing his tambourine. He went to him and sat on the slab and said, “Oh! You are an excellent singer, Surdasji! Now sing something and I will play my sarangi.”

He started tightening the strings of his sarangi. Surdas started singing. The sarangi player was enthralled with his tambourine playing. He offered him a paisa.

A sadhu who was sitting near them said, “How can you give him anything when you yourself are a beggar?”

“I am giving this money so that he can buy a paan. I keep roaming in this city. What is wrong if I occasionally offer him some money?” replied the sarangi player.

Surdas was pleased with this. He started another song. The sound of the tambourine and the sarangi attracted a good number of people. Now he asked the sarangi player to sing a song. His voice was all the more pleasing. The number of people grew further. This fetched a lot of money. The sarangi player collected the money and gave it to Surdas. Surdas could understand that the voice of the sarangi player was far more pleasing than his. The sign of embarrassment could easily be read on his face.

“You sing better than I do.” he said.

The sarangi player sensed the situation and didn’t want to discourage Surdas. He said, “I have roamed entire India, but have never come across any person who plays tambourine as beautifully as you.”

This statement cheered up Surdas and he sang some more bhajans.

“What exactly do you do?” asked the sarangi player after some time.

“Nothing. I just sing bhajans.”
“Why don’t you come with me? We will go together for singing in the city. I would enjoy your company.”

“I do not mind.”

“Then, let’s go right now.”

Both struck a deal and set out on the path to the station.

Both of them became extremely famous in the village and started receiving more money. One day while Surdas and the sarangi player were singing on the same slab of the guest-house, they could feel a third mellifluous voice mixing with theirs quite naturally. The sarangi player saw a woman sitting in a slightly bent down position near the slab. Her untied beautiful hair hung on her bosom from both sides of her neck. A dot of ash was applied to her forehead and was wearing a long kurta. No one knew when she had arrived in the village; whether she belonged to the place or had recently arrived; what her age was or whether she was married or not. The guest-house is a place where no one knows anyone. It is like the stage of a juggler where things keep appearing out of thin air or like a play where new characters keep coming on the stage. This lady appeared in the guest-house in the same way. She had entered into a real-life drama of Surdas out of the blue.

When the song was over, the sarangi player asked her, “Where have you come from?”

“I just came here.”

“But where from?”

She gave an innocent smile but her face was sad. However, she appeared quite beautiful.

“Where did you learn singing? I see you sing quite well.”

“I just started singing with you.”

“But where did you learn it from?”

Her sad face gave the same smile.

“See, if you wish you can come with us. We shall sing and eat together.”

“Alright.”
“What is your name?” Asked Surdas.

“Rampyari.”

The sarangi player opened a tin box and spread some pieces of papers, laid the lid and the tin box on it, readied three dishes and kept them in front of them. They started eating but Rampyari despite her sullen face, was smiling within looking at both. The sarangi player observed her face as if trying to understand this queer characteristic of the lady.

“Why don’t you eat?” Surdas asked Rampyari.

She smiled in reply. Her face glowed with eternal beauty at this time. However she didn’t eat anything.

This queer characteristic in Rampyari could only be found in the sadhu community. She was taciturn by nature and showed no interest in anything except singing. Such people appear mad to others, but Rampyari had a certain benign quality in her which spread over her face when she laughed and made her even more beautiful. This quality had given her a chubby face without a single wrinkle and she looked younger even at this age.

All the three now went together in the city. They made a perfect choir. Rampyari sang, Surdas played his tambourine and the sarangi player played his sarangi. The sarangi player led the group followed by Rampyari and Surdas followed her with one hand on her shoulder and the other playing the tambourine. They never failed to attract big crowds wherever they went. Rampyari collected the money which they were getting plentiful these days.

Once while this choir was passing by a sweet maker’s shop, a youth sitting in the shop said in jest, “Surdasji, who is this lady with you?”

“Why? She is Rampyari. She too sings with us.” said Surdas.

The boy continued, “Surdasji, I should say you are lucky to have such a beautiful wife.”

Rampyari looked at them without any definite expression.

Another from the same group said, “Absolutely right! She preferred him to that handsome sarangi player!”
Rampyari gave her characteristic smile.

The third said in jest, “Who has said that blind people can’t get married? How can you expect them to remain a bachelor when you, blessed with eyes, get married?”

This conversation made Rampyari give a brisk laughter.

The sarangi player asked Rampyari to leave the place and so they left but they didn’t move about much that day. They came back with whatever money they had received.

Surdas had never touched a woman’s body in his entire life before he met Rampyari. He had never given a serious thought about getting married to Rampyari; but the touch of a woman would never go in vain. He was already fascinated by her voice. He felt a thrill when he kept his hand over her shoulder. He, in fact, enjoyed the fact that he could have her company on the pretext of his blindness. Her constant company had created a feeling of possessiveness in him. Now the words he heard at the sweet maker’s shop had created a new suspicion in his mind: ‘Was she beautiful? Was the sarangi player handsome too?’ Being blind, he could not know how much handsome he himself was! Nor could he appreciate the beauty of Rampyari. That such a beautiful lady loved a blind man like him seemed impossible to him. She must be in love with that sarangi player. There may be something going on between them. How could he know that?

Love between a man and a woman often begets suspicion and that suspicion takes the form of an insect that not only sucks the juice of the fruit but also damages the entire tree even before it blossoms. The same thing happened with Surdas. If he had thought over it with a balanced mind, he would have realized that conjugal bliss occupied no place in Rampyari’s life. The sarangi player who had roamed far and wide was wise enough to sense this aspect of her life much earlier. If Surdas had possessed eye-sight, he could have got rid of his suspicion by looking straight into the eyes of the sarangi player. The biggest disadvantage of being blind is that one cannot read the face of the people around him and, as a result, one doesn’t get a chance to change one’s opinions. We make
most of the reforms in our life by observing others and our eyes play a large role in it. As Surdas didn’t possess eyes, all sorts of ugly thoughts started besetting his mind.

One night while he was climbing down the slab, he missed one step. He slipped and twisted his leg. It was not possible for him to go anywhere on his own. He knew they had saved five rupees till now. When the sarangi player was not around, he said to Rampyari, “I advise you not to go anywhere. As my leg is awfully twisted, you would have to do all chores alone.” Rampyari just smiled at this. The sarangi player came late so that Rampyari could take care of Surdas. He said to Surdas:

“It’s the time of train’s arrival. As all your needs have been taken care of, I think she can accompany me for an hour or so. We’ll return very soon.”

“Do you wish to go?” Surdas asked Rampyari.

She smiled and showed her willingness to go.

“....but I....” said Surdas, but could not think of any task that could be assigned.

The sarangi player noticed his unwillingness so he said, “Surdas, I will buy a fantastic stick for you. It’s my fault I didn’t buy you any till now. Even people having no physical defects need it, in your case it is surely needed.”

Surdas felt restless with all odd thoughts pestering his mind. He said, “Well, you can go if you want to.”

After they left, Surdas kept hearing the tunes of sarangi till they faded.

After some time a sadhu, a regular at the guest-house, came to him and asked, “What happened, Surdasji? Haven’t you gone with your companions?” Surdas showed him his leg. Soon both slipped into intimate conversation. Surdas asked him, “What do you think about the sarangi player?”

“Well, he appears to be a nice chap to me.” The other replied. This answer meant the sarangi player appeared to be a nice chap, but one cannot say anything with surety till one is fully familiar with him. Surdas got this meaning, but the suspicion that he had secretly nursed in his mind made him take the other meaning.
that the sarangi player looked handsome. He continued with modulated voice, “What does he wear on his head?”

“A turban.”

Surdas remembered he wears only a topi. He asked, “Tell me, what looks better: a turban or a topi?”

“Well, it depends on the person. Some look well in a topi, others look well in a turban.”

This answer puzzled Surdas even more. He thought looking handsome was a faraway thing for him. He asked for water and changed the subject.

To make the matter worse, the sarangi player and Rampyari arrived late as the train had been late that day. Surdas did not ask at that time. While they were having their meal, Surdas thought for a while then asked the sarangi player, “Where do you belong to?” With the same gentility that every Indian possesses he answered, “Jaunpur.”

Surdas asked Rampyari, “And you?”

“Jaunpur.” She answered like a child who answers at the very completion of the question and without much thought.

Surdas’s suspicion grew further. This time the sarangi player could notice that. He knew very well that Rampyari’s answer was not correct.

“Tell me where do you live in Jaunpur? Whose daughter are you?” The sarangi player asked Rampyari as if he was cross-examining her.

She kept smiling at this as if showing her unwillingness to answer the question. The sarangi player didn’t ask her anything further.

Rampyari had to devote considerable time in serving Surdas and as a result they could not roam about much. All their savings were spent during these two-three days and now Surdas could not ask Rampyari to stay.

After a week or so, Surdas started walking on his own. As they were hard up for money, they decided to go to a faraway place of the city which they had not visited for a long time. A youth who came across this choir after a long time, said:
“Oho! Surdasji, you came again! I thought your companions would have runaway somewhere leaving a blind man like you in the lurch.”

Rampyari smiled. The sarangi player said, “Why do you defame poor people like us?”

Surdas was deeply hurt with what the youth had said.

Once they were in the market singing bhajans. That day a Brahmin had smeared sandalwood paste on her forehead and a boy had put a garland around her neck while she was returning from her bath at the river. She had not removed the garland. Her untied hair as usual hung on her bosom. She was singing lost in herself. She looked extremely beautiful today. She was singing a gazal today:

“Though feasts are always held here for you,
Where are you going in this beautiful attire?”

While singing, she gave a twist to her head at the end of the line which shook her body and she looked even more beautiful. When the song came to an end, someone from the crowd said, “Rampyari, you are so finely dressed today. Are you planning to go somewhere? She smiled. The sarangi player saluted the crowd and asked all to stop making fun of them. He asked both to follow him. He could notice that Surdas was quite irritated.

They moved ahead. Rampyari somehow continued the same gazal which talked about death:

“Where are you going in this beautiful attire?”

They kept moving ahead. The sarangi player asked her to sing another song. She sang another song which again dealt with the same topic.

“Put all your make-up, you clever soul,
As you are to go to your beloved’s house.
Take a good bath and comb your hair well,
As you will never come back from there.”

Surdas thought the song was talking about running away in beautiful attire.
They returned to the guest-house in the evening. The sarangi player had brought some sweets to please Surdas. They sat down to eat. While they were eating sweets a glass of water fell down so the sarangi stood up to fetch water.

Surdas had grown all the more suspicious since morning. He had kept thinking about his two companions. ‘Both belonged to Jaunpur. Today Rampyari must be in her best attire. She was talking about running away in the beautiful attire. They have purchased sweets so that they could eat it on the way. Surely they are going to run away today.’ His alert ears heard the sarangi player stand up and instantly asked him, “Where are you going?” The sarangi gave him the reason, but Surdas’s suspicion grew one step further and he became conscious of even the slightest movement. Rampyari sat there lost in herself. Suddenly a dog ran away with Rampyari’s bowl of sweets. She stood up in a hurry and ran. Surdas heard the sound. He was convinced she had run away with the sarangi player. He cried out in a broken voice, “Rampyari....Rampyari....”

“What do you want?” Rampyari had responded but he could not hear that.

Surdas ran brandishing his stick. This unusual sight made her laugh. Surdas brandished his stick which made her burst into laughter again. Surdas hit his stick with both the hands. Rampyari died just as the stick hit her head. The sarangi player who came back with water saw this. He didn’t want to get involved in the criminal case so he secretly flew from the place.

Surdas banged the stick on the floor and started climbing the stairs of the guest-house throwing heaps of abuses on both the sarangi player and Rampyari. The stick fell on his tambourine and it broke down.

The next day Surdas, with his blind eyes, was sitting on the same slab sad and lost in him. Vitthal arrived there and asked, “How are you, Surdasji?”

His imaginary fear which he had foolishly taken to be true had caused the pain he was experiencing now. He realized it and suddenly burst into tears.
When the wife of Parmananddas, a lawyer by profession, passed away, those who were witness to the love between them believed that Parmananddas would never recover from the shock. But he was a man of principles. He returned home after performing all the funeral rites. The very next day, he called his servant Kodar and said, “See Kodar, now we both have to play the role of a mother of Shantibabu. Both you and I have to look after him. I don’t think it would be much of a problem if you follow my instructions.”

An ordinary person might wonder that an eminent, distinguished and awe-inspiring advocate like Parmananddas should share such a matter with his petty servant. But the apparent strictness and forbidding quality of the man belied the kindness of his heart, which his wife knew well and Kodar had experienced it from the beginning. Kodar had become almost like his family member. It was during the lean year before the famine of 1900 AD (1956, according to Indian calendar) that a young boy came wandering from North Gujarat. Parmananddas kept him as a servant in his home without worrying about his caste, brought him up, educated him and took care of him as a family member. Chandangauri also took great care of him. After his arrival, the couple was blessed with a son whom they named as Shantibabu. Thus, Kodar had proved to be auspicious to them. And Kodar also tried to be as convenient to them as he could. Parmananddas was also happy with him. It is always easy to please a man of principle. His needs were quite few and he would become happy the moment they were taken care of.

Parmananddas had fixed a daily schedule for Shanti’s whole day: when he would have his meal, when he would play, when he would be taken for a walk, when he would sleep and when he would be woken up. His nature of forming rules that had disappeared under the warm atmosphere of the house when his wife was alive had surfaced now. He had decided the clothes that Shantibabu would put on in a particular season, for example he was allowed to put on only certain types of
flannel clothes during the monsoon. The father had even fixed the ingredients with scriptural accuracy that would be added to his tea in a particular season.

As Shanti grew up, his father decided the timings of the school, along with the day and the places for walking. He also decided how far he should go and which exercise he should perform. In short everything was decided by him according to the days and hours. In those days, the quality of punctuality and accuracy attributed to the Britishers was considered extremely important and Parmananddas had executed it at home in toto.

On hearing this, some psychologists would surmise that Kodar must have rebelled against his master and Shanti must have raised a storm, run away from the house, learnt how to steal, started hating his father or gone astray after the death of the father. But nothing of the sort happened. Shanti kept growing up in a very healthy and happy state of mind. I won’t say what happened after Parmananddas died as it is the subject of my story but no problem ever occurred in this household till he was alive. And I do not say this because I want to propagate the father’s principles. Besides, people usually don’t consider individual examples or such writing seriously. But this father’s experiment was extremely successful. Kodar became Shanti’s mother, his elder brother and a servant simultaneously. When Shanti grew up, he could clearly feel his father’s boundless concerns, love, mildness, generosity, and also a kind of freedom behind all restrictions that his father had put on him. And of course, nobody would take this it as a sure-fire precept. Nevertheless this home consisting of a father-son and a servant became an ideal home.

It is obvious that extraordinary events rarely happen in the house which runs through rules. But one did happen when Shanti passed his B.A.. Parmananddas’s friends advised that Shanti should become a lawyer. Parmananddas liked this suggestion and dreamt his son taking his profession. He took the decision instantly. He entered into the necessary correspondence with the institutes in England. Along with that he, as per his rules, also started preparation for Shanti’s marriage before Shanti’s departure for England. Soon he found out a
marriageable girl named Malti who belonged to a cultured family in a village near Surat and got Shanti married. The bride had probably not taken a glimpse of her husband yet nor had she exchanged a single word with him when Parmananddas, following his rules, summoned the newly married couple to him. He said, “When Shanti is in England you can write letters to each other. I have told Jaymitbhai about it.” He dictated Shanti’s father-in-law Jaymitbhai’s address to his son which he noted down in his diary. As Malti didn’t have a diary with her, Parmananddas asked Kodar to bring one. He dictated the address where Shanti was going to stay and gave the diary to Malti.

Shanti departed for London. Malti was sent to her father’s home. Parmananddas didn’t even go to Mumbai to see him off. He thought he should face the departure bravely without being sentimental.

A lot of correspondence happened between the couple. Shanti never wrote anything about love or courtship. He liked to be lost in his own thoughts away from other people which was something he had inherited from his father or maybe it was the influence of his father’s temperament upon him. He felt shy of expressing his innermost feelings on paper or mentioning them in any other way. The more personal the feeling, the quieter he would become. He mentioned everything in his letters but love. He wrote about how he lived there, people he met, places he visited, and the manners in England. If there was anything else, it was eulogy for his father because he thought his foremost duty after getting married was to make his father happy and expected his wife to help him in this regard.

But Parmananadas was not destined to enjoy the care that his devoted son would have taken. After Shanti left for England, he grew quite weak. After returning from the station the day Shanti left for Mumbai, he found out some old photo-frames of his late wife and the family which lay untouched so far. Those frames also contained Shanti’s photograph taken a few days ago. He put all the frames in the sitting room. Kodar called him for dinner that night and it was for the first time in his disciplined life that he refused to have his dinner.
Shanti regularly wrote letters to his father. Parmananddas never complained about his health in his replies, but the truth was that his health was gradually deteriorating. His friends grew worried about it and asked for the real reason. But it was beyond his principles to convey the news of his ill health to his son and cut short his studies by bringing him here. Besides he knew very well that he was going to die soon. He made an arrangement so that Shanti would receive money regularly even after his death. He also arranged everything pertaining to his property and died without showing any sentimentality.

Shanti was dismayed at the sudden news of his father’s death. The very fact that he was burdened with all the responsibility of the house made him restless. On the other hand, an intense desire to start a married life with Malti was intriguing him lately. He now started writing about how to run a house, how people in England ran their houses and how they maintained it in his letters to Malti. He cancelled his Europe tour and informed all that he was coming to India. As per his plan he went to his father-in-law’s home from Mumbai. He stayed there for a few of days after which the couple left for Ahmedabad on an auspicious day.

Kodar was there at the railway station to receive them. On their way home, he informed them about the last days of his master: what had happened to him, how he lived, and his advice to him (Kodar) on how he should take care of the couple in his absence. At the end Kodar said, “I touched his feet and convinced him that I will serve your son and your daughter-in-law in the same manner I have served you so far till I die. It was only after this assurance that he could die peacefully.”

Shanti could observe on his face the glow of his vow and the obsession towards his duty that had intensified all the more with age. The only aim of Kodar’s life was to serve Shantilal, his new master.

Shantilal entered the home bereft of his father with a heavy heart. Everything was arranged in the same order as it was when his father was alive. Malti could understand the pain her husband was going through. Wives naturally take it upon themselves to soothe their husbands when they are going through a
rough patch in life. They try to create an atmosphere that comforts the restless husbands. Malti felt she should prepare tea and some snacks first. She said to Kodar, “Show me everything. I will make tea and in the meantime you can provide him with a tooth brush and everything.”

While she mentioned this arrangement out of her newly generated desire to be helpful to her husband, Kodar had planned to do the very same chores that he had been doing since the last many years. He told her in a matter-of-fact voice that she didn’t know which type of tea he preferred and he had already kept those things there for them. As he finished, he looked at Shantilal who was lost in his father’s photo taken with him and Kodar. Somehow he felt as if Kodar was a living remnant of his father. He said to Malti, “Let him make tea.” When Malti heard this, she was embarrassed just like a child who is not allowed to play. However she didn’t say anything at that time. While she was having her tea, she found that Kodar was not around. She asked her husband earnestly, “Didn’t you like the tea I made for you yesterday?” Shantilal replied in the affirmative. However he couldn’t explain to her the reason why he had allowed Kodar to prepare tea. The question she had asked him implied an outright allegation. He could feel the heaviness in the atmosphere the question had caused.

Having taken her bath Malti entered the kitchen and found Kodar with all the things handy to prepare the sweets. He had asked Shantilal what to cook while she was having her bath. Shantilal had asked him to cook whatever he thinks was appropriate. Kodar had said, “On this auspicious day some sweet items should be prepared. I have kept everything ready for that.” Shantilal had just nodded his head. Kodar was pleased and kept everything ready before Malti entered the kitchen. Before she could think about all that, Kodar said, “I have asked Shanti. He doesn’t mind if I prepare the sweets.”

Even if Malti had asked Shantilal the same question, he would have given the same reply he gave to Kodar. Malti would have decided the same thing. Her only problem was that it was not her decision. When a child learns to eat with its own hands, he doesn’t allow anyone to feed it. It resents other’s interference.
When a human being starts a new activity, he starts with the same mentality of a child. Malti also resented Kodar’s interference in the same manner. It happened twice, but she didn’t say anything.

After having meals Shantilal told Malti, “In case you need any household things, you can give me the list.” There were already many things in the house, but Malti along with two-three items also mentioned a stove. The stove had been recently introduced in Ahmedabad and Malti wanted to bring in the new item. Kodar was startled the moment he heard about the stove and said, “No, Shanti, don’t mention that thing. It spoils the cooking.”

“But we shall prepare only tea with it. It will be ready in an instant.” said Malti.

“But don’t bother about tea. I will wake up as early as you want and make tea for you. My master said the stove gives such flames as would surely burn the person.” replied Kodar.

“No problem. You can do without the stove. We will consider about it later.” said Shanti and put an end to the discussion.

When the river faces the towering mountains after emerging from its origin, it gets baffled as to what to do and its water turns back after smashing into the mountains. The same thing happened with Malti. She was a dreamer and it was the very reason that made her disappointed. She was a woman with high self-respect and would often get hurt at the slightest refusal. “That’s fine!” was all she said.

Shantilal was not unaware of Malti’s feelings, dreams and disappointments that she had gone through in the past few days. But he could realise that the old ways of Kodar were proving to be an obstacle to her dreams. Kodar knew no other trade except serving Shanti as was the order of his old master. He remembered all that Kodar had done for him and the family. At the same time he could also realise that Kodar was so old and his mind had turned so rigid that it was almost impossible to turn towards new ways. Shanti felt if he explained these things to Malti, he might be able to bring a solution to the problem.
The bed was spread for the couple in the old fashioned room where Parmananddas lived. As they were alone in the room, Shantilal started, “You must be feeling lonely as you are accustomed to living with so many people around at your father’s home. There is no one here.”

“We have Kodarbhai here, don’t we?” she said it so bitterly that Shantilal could say nothing further. He thought he would have to find out another solution.

They went to bed without exchanging a single word that night. She wanted to ask so many things that he had mentioned in his letters. She wanted to ask about his bicycle tours and his night-stay on a mountain when he had by mistake come quite near to the precipice. She was terrified as well as impressed while reading about his stay at the mountain, but couldn’t ask anything. Shantilal remembered while coming to Ahmedabad, a lady had asked Malti where she belonged to. Instead of giving the name of her village she had said that she belonged to Ahmedabad. At that moment, he had desired to embrace to her as the rainy clouds would embrace the wild trees of the mountain; but now Kodar interfered in their life. They were quite near each other when a distance of thousand kilometres lay between them. But now when they were quite near, they felt they were quite far from each other.

The next day also started with unpleasant happenings. Malti was accustomed to waking up early. She heard the milkman shouting in the early morning. While she was going to fetch milk, she came across Kodar. He said:

“Why did you wake up so early? I have already fetched milk. I have kept ready the tooth brush and the stools for you. The tea will be ready by the time you finish it.”

It seemed to her that Kodar meddled in each and everything she planned to do which made her feel useless. All her dreams were ripped apart. This constant meddling by Kodar started besetting her mind and she was sure that things would grow worse in the coming days. The second day had in fact really worsened matters rather than curing them.
The days and months went by in the same way. Showing anger or complaining about that seemed to be a weakness for her; at the same time it didn’t occur to her to show love and care towards Kodar and her husband. She was so proud that she didn’t even let anyone know her unhappiness. An outsider could not find anything odd in this situation. Kodar, of course, would never have noticed that. Shantilal had observed that but he knew very well that it was beyond his power to cure what was ailing her. She was such an arrogant woman who, in the absence of any concrete reason, would never be convinced by an emotional plea or affection. As she was not quite aware of the past, she could never understand the mentality of Kodar. How could she tolerate the stubborn Kodar when she was deeply lost in her own dreams? The couple was beginning to fall apart and both were suffering from the same pain. The only happy person in the household was Kodar serving this couple in the best way he could.

Shantilal, in the meantime, started thinking about separating Kodar in a way that would not hurt him. He, at last, found an idea. He told Kodar that a trusted man was needed for a post at the office and he had appointed him with livery. The job didn’t require him much to do. He had just to sit there and take care of everything. This made it possible for Malti, although for a few hours, to live in the house on her own terms. It, no doubt, had brought some relief to her, but didn’t completely remove the fear she was afflicted with. She thought Kodar was removed just to please her. It made her feel that it was not her natural right to run the household. Shantilal understood this too, but he didn’t think it appropriate to talk about this intimate matter in an outright manner. He let the time pass as he believed Malti would understand everything on her own with the passage of time. Malti naturally never mentioned anything to him either.

One day when Malti was in another room, tea water started boiling. Kodar who had just come from office for some account saw that and said, “You have forgotten to add the ingredients into it.” and mixed mint, cardamom and cinnamon. Shanti went there to ensure that the situation did not worsen. When Malti came in, Shanti told her to let Kodar make the tea. Her pent-up anger burst
out and she said, “I wonder whether I have been married to one husband or two!” After saying that, she felt a kind of embarrassment and repentance. A motley of emotions made her feel hysterical and she thought she was going to cry. She tried to control herself. If either of the things had happened the couple would have got an opportunity to be united. Instead she grew more firm. She knew that she should not have said that statement and should apologize for that, but the pain she had to suffer in Kodar’s presence in the house stopped her from doing that. Shanti had already forgiven her as he knew very well what was going in her mind. He could also see that she was not in a mood to suffer this pain for long.

He tried his best to make sure Kodar did not spend much time at home, but his tricks didn’t always prove successful. Once he was among his friends on Sunday. While Malti was making tea, Kodar came there and said, “You forgot to add the ingredients into it.” Shantilal grew angry at this and said, “Why do you keep meddling in each and every thing? Can’t you sit somewhere and let others do the job?” Kodar tried to mention what happened in the times of his old master, but Shanti cut him short and said, “I don’t want to hear all that. Just go to your place.”

Kodar was shocked with the word ‘I don’t want to hear all that’. It was for the first time that he felt hurt in this house and left it right at that time with whatever he had. Shanti realised that he should not have scolded him in that way. He wanted to go behind Kodar but controlled his feelings in the presence of his friends and wife. When his friends left, he sent his office servants to find out where Kodar had gone. He could not enjoy his meal that day. Malti didn’t like that. She thought it was merely to please her that he had appointed Kodar for office work; in reality Kodar was more important than she. She found her husband in the same restless mood at night and felt that the ghost of Kodar tormented her more in his absence than when he actually lived there. This couple who once loved each other passionately was now feeling extreme disappointment in love. It was increasingly becoming unbearable for them to live together though they were quite ready to love each other in the same way as they did earlier.
There was no sign of Kodar even the next day. There was no other place except this house which he would frequent, so it became more difficult to search for him. Kodar himself might not know what village he belonged to. Shantilal, without telling anything to Malti, had asked the police to search for him, but there was no news of him the next day.

It rained at noon on the third day. Soon a wave of cold swept over Ahmedabad. Describing the cold the next day, the journalists had reported that none in the city had ever experienced such severe cold in his lifetime. The crop spread over thirty miles around the city failed. The government had to make arrangements to face the famine. Not only the crop but even the trees were affected with the famine and had turned dark. Three persons had died of severe cold in the train that ran between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The dogs, monkeys, squirrels, pigeons, and mynas were found dead on the road and scavengers were not available till mid-afternoon to clean the roads. A family of the untouchables had arrived there from Kathiawad. All the members of this family including five children who had slept on the sandy banks of the river had died of cold. A passionate poet had jotted down a limerick which ended like this:

“One blessing among countless sufferings,
The hearts of the lovers were never so entwined.”

Shanti kept walking in the sitting room till mid-night. Malti kept hearing his footsteps but could not ask him to go to bed. Even when he went to bed, she kept hearing his breathings. She couldn’t sleep that night as her mind was beset with a motley of emotions of worry, anger, betrayal and confusion. She heard some noise on the ladder in the morning. She went out and what she saw shocked her completely.

Kodar lay there like a sack with his clothes completely drenched. Before she could recognize him, he said, “Don’t forget to add the mint, cardamom and cinnamon in Shanti’s tea or he will catch a cold. It was an order from my old master.” Malti was, after all, a brave woman or she would have got startled hearing that deadly voice. She went inside the house and awoke Shanti and said,
“Wake up, Kodarbhai has fainted.” Both lifted him inside. Malti’s bed was near so they lay him on it. Malti said:

“Wipe his body and change his clothes with woollens. She gave him a towel and whatever clothes that she found. She woke up another servant and sent him to call a doctor immediately. She started the stove and put a vessel full of water on it. She brought some dried ginger powder which had been prepared by Kodar himself and started rubbing it on his legs. She obeyed Shantilal’s advice and did everything to save Kodar.

Their care, however, was in vain. When the doctor came, he informed that it was just a matter of few hours. Malti brought tea with the same ingredients Kodar has asked her to add, but Kodar could not have it. He died despite the care taken by the very master whom he had served his entire life.

The day passed in performing the last rites of Kodar. When Shantilal entered their bedroom, Malti was sitting in an armchair with a fallen head. He could see she was weeping. He sat on a nearby bed and moved his hand on her head. He said, “Why are you crying? I was responsible for his running away.” He gently lifted her and laid her on the bed. She put her head on his shoulder and burst out crying. Shantilal moved his hand over her back and soothed her. When she stopped crying Shantilal said, “It was my fault that I became angry with him.”

“No, no, no...You said those angry words to him just to please me. I kept harassing you with my complaints. I am responsible for his death.” She said and started crying again. She was crying in repentance. The repentance of a brave person is equally august. When the repentance brought some relief to her soul, she said, “Why didn’t you ever stop me from behaving in that manner?” Shantilal said politely, “It was not your fault. He had turned so rigid that no woman could tolerate meddling in the household. I knew if I would stop him, he would run away from home and die away roaming here and there.” Malti changed her tone and complained, “If you had explained all that to me, I would have learned to tolerate him.” Shantilal smiled at this and asked, “Do you think you would have taken my explanation seriously? You would think I was threatening you mentioning his
death just to keep him in the house. Don’t you think so?” She leaned her face towards him and just nodded her head.

Let’s leave this incident here and move further. We saw that the hard layer that had engulfed the real heart of Malti had melted now. We do not need now to know what happened later. The aestheticians might be of the opinion that pity or sorrow is an opposite sentiment for the emotion of love. However, in our phenomenal world, the situation is no less cognizable to the god of love.

One and a half years later, after the above mentioned incident took place, Malti came from her father’s home with a beautiful son. While the child was sleeping, Shantilal asked Malti, “What name shall we give to him?”

Malti hid her face on his shoulder and said, “Any name you like that starts with the letter K.”

Maybe she thought that Kodar had taken birth in the form of their son. Maybe they didn’t believe in any such theory. This kind of theory about relationship is necessary in the world where human beings sever all their ties when a person dies; where even kith and kin can’t understand or explain matters to one another. It was not possible for these three souls to be together without such a theory!
Come near O Keshala, I want to beat your chest,
Come near O Keshala, I want to beat you with my legs,
Come near O Keshala, I want to thrash you with a club,
Come near O Keshala, I would keep a lemon at your tail.

The passers-by and the passengers coming from the station stood there to hear the queer song. A voice was heard at that time:

“Hey Khemi, come here.”

Khemi at once stopped singing. She looked towards the street from where the voice had come and went towards it.

Her mother-in-law had come to take Khemi with her.

The first three days of the couple passed with indescribable pleasure and enjoying good food items. On the fourth day when they were together, Khemi told him about how she had lived in Nadiad, her songs, her merry-making with other bhangis. When she finished, Dhaniya said, “There is no doubt you are a strong lady. I didn’t enjoy living without you and you were enjoying your days there.”

“Who said I was enjoying there? I wanted to come to you, but how could I come until you asked me?”

“How could I ask you to come when I was at fault? I told mother, but she said you would come in a day or two. She thought you would not stay there for long. But you were quite firm.”

“If you believe it was your fault, you should have called me much earlier.”

“We are back together because of Mother Bhadrakali.”

“How?”

“First I took a vow to Ramdevpir, but you didn’t come; then I took a vow to Mother Harakhsha and to Mother zampadi but you didn’t come. It was then that I vowed to Bhadrakali. When I went home, my mother asked me why I was getting thinner. She also asked whether she should find a new bride for me. I told her I didn’t want to be married to any other woman. It was then that my mother came to bring you with her.”

“I also took many vows which brought your mother to Nadiad.”

“On whose name did you take those vows?”
After the wedding, Kanku and Kanaiya started their married life in a hut in Ambavadiya village. The sight of a happy couple pleased Kanku’s parents. However they were a bit worried over one thing: Kanku had not conceived even after three years of marriage.

Once there was excessive rainfall and the rain continued to pour down for seven days. It continued raining intermittently. The rain unleashed more with howling winds. All schools, offices and markets had to be closed! Even trains, telegram services and newspapers were not available to people. No one could tell what was happening outside. No one could step outside their homes; even their homes were not safe for them. No one could provide any help to the other person. It was as if all were afraid of the worst that might happen. The best judgement or the best tricks did not provide them any respite against the terrible weather. All were realizing the truth that man will always prove helpless against the forces of nature. It reaffirmed their belief that the world can be destroyed by water and the god of wind is the most powerful among all the gods.

The rain subsided in the morning of the fourth day. People had started feeling the lack of certain things. The same thing was experienced at Kanku’s father’s home despite the fact that they kept helping each other. Kanaiya and Kanku’s father were planning to go to buy things but Kanku asked her father to remain at home and she accompanied her husband along in the cart. They covered their heads with sacks, kept two-three sacks under the cart to pack the things. They purchased all items except corn in the first place and then went to one of their customers who sold corns and other things. Soon it started raining heavily. They, however, kept moving thinking they would wait at the shop for the rain to subside. When they reached there, the merchant asked them to go to Narottam sheth saying, “The house is about to fall and his wife is in labour.” Kanaiya often carried the corn sacks in his cart to the shop. The
couple realized they could not refuse to go. When they reached the house, they witnessed a completely different sight.

That narrow lane was filled with vehicles and carts. People were running around shouting at one another and bringing the luggage out of the house. The children were crying. The drivers at the top of their voice exchanged words to make way for their vehicles. As if the noise and chaos were not sufficient, the men began with their bickering and abuses. Kanku and Kanaiya could not make out anything from those words. Even those people could not understand what was being told to them, but each one was showering abuses on others. The dutiful people don’t shirk their duties till the end of their life. In the same manner, these people were also quarrelling and fighting even in such a chaotic situation!

The matter was that there was a common wall which separated the houses of Narottam sheth and Keshavlal. When Keshavlal was getting the wall repaired, Narottam sheth took recourse to the court and brought a stay-order. The repair work had to stop which soured the relations between the two neighbours. The house was tending to fall just because of that wall and Narottam sheth had to shift their household luggage when his wife was in labour. When it all started Keshavlal felt quite happy and started taunting his neighbour but he soon found that his own house was on the verge of collapsing. He too started shifting his luggage. It provided a chance to the men and women of both the houses to face one another and direct their grudges at one another.

One man approached Kanaiya and asked him to stand at a place between the two houses and went inside the house to bring the luggage outside. After some time, another man came to Kanku and Kanaiya who put a bale under the cart and hid it underneath the sack. Before he left he said, “Take care of this. The rest of the luggage will arrive soon.” The cart was full within a few moments. A man said, “I will direct that cart.” Kanku and Kanaiya followed the man in the downpour. The luggage was shifted to a house at some distance.

“Whose sacks are these?” asked the man.
“We, actually, went to buy grains and other things at the grocer’s shop where we were asked to come here.”

“That’s good. You should help him in such crisis. He will surely help you. Now you can leave.”

They didn’t wait for the payment and returned to the grocer’s shop. They purchased the things and went back home. They put aside the sacks full of corn. When they dragged other sacks, they found a bale. When they opened it, they saw ornaments made of gold and pearl. The couple was startled as if they had seen a hooded cobra. They decided to meet Narottam sheth once the rain stopped and bury the bale inside the hut and not tell anyone about this.

The bale belonged to Keshavlal. When all the luggage was shifted from the cart, he searched for the bale which contained things worth twenty thousand. He, along with his family members, believed that either Narottam sheth or his workers had stolen the bale. Keshavlal registered a complaint at the police station and a search warrant was issued. The search was carried out in the house of a man who was friends with Narottam sheth. In fact, it was this friend who was once kind enough to provide shelter to Narottam seth and his pregnant wife in a heavy downpour and helped her have an easy delivery. The workers who were shifting the luggage benefited from this incident. Soon Keshavlal realized that police had not found anything to accuse Narottam sheth of theft and it made him restless. He even forgot the ornaments.

Though the police were not able to find out anything, Keshavlal or for that matter, the police still suspected Narottam Sheth. The policemen closely watched all the movements of Narottam sheth. The police also asked Keshavlal to declare the prize of Rs. 701 for anyone who could help to find out the ornaments.

Kanku and Kanaiya went to Narottam sheth with fear the next day when the rain stopped. He asked for the fare for the service he provided that night. A servant went in and came with twelve annas. He was asked to give only eight annas first but if Kanaiya insisted, he could give twelve annas. The servant gave eight annas but didn’t mention anything about the bale. Kanaiya dared and told the servant that he wanted to
meet Norottam sheth. The servant paid him twelve annas, but Kanaiya insisted to meet Narottam seth.

“Sheth, have you lost anything?”

“No.”

“In that case, it must belong to your neighbour. Where has he shifted his home?”

Narottam sheth understood everything. He thought if Kanaiya went to Keshavlal and gave the ornaments, they would take them secretly and would not even pay the prize. So he decided to take Kanaiya to the police station so that Keshavlal could pay seven hundred rupees to him. He could even register a case against Keshavlal for the baseless search warrant. His mind went through all these thoughts in an instant. He explained everything to Kanaiya at leisure and said, “It’s good that you came to me. Had you approached any other person, he might have got you arrested or would have got the prize himself. Police have declared a prize of seven hundred rupees for the bale. I would like you to have it as you have helped me shift my luggage that night. You would not earn this much money even if you work hard for your entire life.”

We are not concerned about the enmity that might have remained between the neighbours in future. They might have borne animosity to the bitter end. Kanku and Kanaiya saved themselves from unexpected trouble in the fight between the two neighbours and got seven hundred rupees. They gave the amount to the grocer on interest for the time being. It had become the greatest happening in the entire village.

Now the couple started thinking what to do with the money. Kanaiya came out with an idea of building a new house at his native place. Kanku said, “What is the use of building a house there when we are going to live our entire life here. We are already spending around fifty rupees each time we go there. We cannot build a hut with this money so there is no question of building a house in this city!” So the idea of the house was dropped. Kanaiya talked of ornaments. Kanku said, “I want to have just one ring. Anything more than that won’t suit us. Kanaiya, we haven’t visited your village ever since we got married. Do you remember you would often sing:
‘Lejudi, I want to visit the place where you live!’

Now I want you to show me the place where you lived.”

While playing in Ambavadiya as a child, Kanaiya had often described to her the hardships he had gone through at his native place and that had aroused a strong desire in Kanku to visit the place. Kanaiya said, “But you won’t have water, good clothes, vegetables or comforts of a city there.” Kanku did not hear any word from him. So they took leave of all in Ambaviadya and left it with some money kept in the hollow of a flute.

Travelling together is something enjoyed by even middle-aged couples so it was natural that this young couple enjoyed a lot during their travelling. It was a short break out of a rut. He told her many things about the house and his ancestors. They lived a prosperous life in those days. His grandfather - Jiva - had got a well dug in their locality from which all the people of the area fetched water. Now the well no longer existed. He also told her how the condition of the house deteriorated afterwards, how their house was swept over in the flood and all that. It was during such conversation that the idea of having a well dug there came to them.

Both stayed at one of their distant old relatives’ place. The people came to see this couple who had come to visit their place after earning a lot of money in the city. All were pleasantly surprised when they came to know that they were planning to have a well dug.

Within a few days the well was ready with Kanaiya’s money and the hard work of the people. Kanaiya got a railing built in the same style that rich people have in their well. He also got pulleys installed around the railing. When everything was finished, he held a dinner party for the people of the area and gave alms to the Brahmins. The old people tied a turban on his head that day.

Once while the women were fetching water at the well, Kanaiya reached there. They asked him in jest, “Can we call it Kanaiya’s well?”

“No, rather call it Kanku’s well!” said Kanaiya laughing.

All the women were so much amused with the words ‘Kanku’s well’ that they laughed when they heard them. Kanku was fetching water at that time. One of the
women patted her back. The well really became famous as ‘Kanku’s well’ without any memorial stone or any formal naming ceremony.

Having spent a considerable time, they returned to the city. Kanku gave birth to a son within a year. Kanku’s mother thought god blessed them with a son because of the well that they got dug for the people. The neighbours called the boy as Jivalo. When he was old enough to be carried outside, Kanku took him with her and accompanied Kanaiya.

One hot day while breast-feeding the infant, Kanku fell asleep under the shade of a roadside tree on the cart, tired after the hard work of the day. Kanaiya lay down on the land using a piece of cloth as a pillow. When he awoke from his slumber, he saw that the sunshine was approaching Kanku’s face. He moved the cart a bit and the shade covered her face.

Some American tourists on a tour to India saw this sight and one of them made a note of something in the diary!
I made friends with Mallika ever since she came to us. I was attracted towards her more than anyone else. I have never seen such an elegant and beautiful lady. It was not that she was quite young. She was anywhere between thirty-five and forty. Her face didn’t show any sign of her age. She didn’t have any children, but that cannot explain her young appearance. There are people who enjoy the bliss of youth for a longer period naturally, without much effort.

My attraction was partly because she and her husband made a perfect pair and appeared to be quite happy and romantic. Vinodray was handsome and possessed an imposing height. I clearly remember the day when we came into contact with him. He had rushed in our house at ten at night shouting ‘doctor….doctor’. Doctor and I were seated in our chairs in the moonlight. We knew that he was a newly recruited excise inspector. We welcomed him and asked him to sit. When asked about the reason of his visit he said that a branch had scratched his cheek on his way home. The doctor could see with his torch that the wound was half an inch deep. He tied a strip around it at that time. After he left the doctor said to me, “If our people were allowed to join military, Vinodray could easily make it and would have brought glory to it.” He indeed appeared to be so. He would often win the horse race bets against his equals.

The reason behind my attraction towards that couple may be an element of romance that one could observe in their life. We often feel attracted towards people having opposite characteristics. We were rather cool as a husband and wife in comparison. Vinodray seemed to be filled with irrepresible romance. He had come to meet us once. Our relation with his family later grew further. Once the doctor said to him, “Vinubhai, what made you ride your horse so fast at night that you got that scratch?” I clearly remember that he had said, “One of the my acquaintances who keeps a camel often sings a duha which says: 'If a pedestrian stays put seven miles away from his house and a horse rider does so at fifteen miles, it shows either the wife is not very beautiful or there is some fault in the man.’ Now tell me how can I live
away from her if I have my horse with me? If I have to stay in around fifteen miles, I am sure to come back to home!” He had replied in jest but his concern was real.

It was his true passion. Once I went to Mallika’s house at noon. I often visited their house to keep Mallika company when Vinodray had to stay for long at the district. Once while we were chatting with each other, Vinodray came there thumping his steps on the ladder. Without going to the office, he had returned home singing that *duha*. He rushed in the room where we were seated and soon saw me. He, then, changed his direction and went to wash his face. I could sense Mallika’s embarrassment and immediately I took her leave on some pretext.

I thought doctor and I were quite different. If a couple occasionally stays away from each other, it would lessen the boredom and disinterestedness of the couple and would add, if not love, at least some new colour to their married life.

One thing often perplexed me. It seemed to me that Mallika harboured some pain. She was not the one to worry about not having children. I thought she must have some genuine reason because she was a lady with a strong character. I never dared to ask her the reason. She was such a strong-willed woman that she would suffer everything without asking any condolence from anyone. As the days passed, I was pretty sure that there was something that afflicted her and it surprised me all the more.

Once when Vinodray was at the district, Mallika visited us. Their servant came to us at three in the noon and told that her husband had arrived. I somehow said, “So go wise lady - your husband has arrived.” Having said that I looked at her, but was surprised to see the expression of dislike, regret, hatred and worry on her face. I couldn’t think of what brought that kind of expression on her face. Though she was of the same age as mine, I joked with her as if she was quite young. Did she think that I taunted her about not having children? Or was it that she didn’t like any connotation of physical love that I might have mentioned? I looked at her instead of asking anything or apologizing to her, but she left without looking at me. However after three days when she came to meet me, she was wearing a sweet smile and that removed my doubt that she was upset with my comment. I couldn’t ask her anything that day, but my surprise grew further.
One day she was at my home. We were seated on a sofa when our milkmaid – Jivi - entered the home with her six year old daughter. Tall and stout, Jivi was really an impressive personality. In her prime, she would have been surely plump and voluptuous, if not fat. She was fair and her skin was glossy. She walked like a queen. However the corners of her eyes showed her age and the worries she was afflicted with. She settled here three years ago. We needed considerable milk for home and for the patients in the hospital. We were not happy with the milk we got. It was around this time that she came and we started having milk from her. The rate she charged was less compared to what we paid earlier. She won my trust from whatever she said and I asked the doctor to buy milk from her and it was fixed. She would never mix anything to milk and it would never get spoilit.

“You are so early today.” I looked at Jivi and said.

“Is this the lady that you often talk about?” asked Mallika to me.

I nodded and said to Jivi, “Why have you brought milk so early today?”

“I will deliver milk at regular time. One of my buffaloes gave birth to its calf so I thought I should give you its first milk so that you can make bali from it. Give it to the doctor and your children. This is the same buffalo that I bought with the money you lent. You can make sweet bali from it.”

“Did she give birth to a male or female calf?”

“Female calf.” She smiled while answering.

I stood up to give her money for the first milk she brought for us. She stopped me from doing so and said, “Don’t do that. It is just because of you that I could settle here. This is nothing. If you come to my home, I would wash your feet with milk. As a host, I have never objected to milking four buffaloes. I have always taken great pains to serve my guests.”

“What is the name of your village?” I asked her.

“Jivapar. It is just twelve miles from here.”

“Did you relocate all your cattle from there?”

“No. Everything is there. There are four buffaloes and four oxen.”

“Who takes care of everything there?”
“Well, there are my daughters-in-law. I have four sons and two are already married. One will get married very soon. I have two daughters. One daughter is now old enough to get married. My husband is there to take care of everything.”

I grew more interested in her story. I said, “Jivi, you are quite early today, so you can spend some time with us. You can go after you taste the *bali*.”

I went in and asked the servant to make *bali*, and then I came back and sat on the sofa. I removed the coffee table that came between us and got into conversation with her.

“Tell me everything in detail. Why did you choose to leave such a comfortable home?”

“Nothing serious. I just felt like coming here. What else?”

“No, there must be something else. Did you live peacefully with your daughters-in-law? Or was there some dispute over getting the daughters married? Tell me.”

“There can never be any problem with the daughters-in-law. I take care of them just like my own daughters. I don’t differentiate between them. I give them all the same things.”

“You may say that but I think you must have been dissatisfied with your daughters-in-law. You are so strong-willed; you would never allow anyone of them to do as they please. They wouldn’t have allowed you to do as you please.”

“No, what I am saying is true.” said Jivi.

*Bali* was brought in just at that time. The servant put the plate on the table.

“Taste it hot and with jaggery. You would find it tasty that way.”

I wanted to play some prank with her so I said, “I would taste it only if you tell me about yourself or let it be that way. I won’t eat it. I won’t even touch it.”

“This is not fair.” She laughed. She, then, said to her daughter in a hushed voice, “Go home with this glass. It is time for the buffalos to come back. I will come in a short while.”

“Let her sit with us.” I said.
“It is not good to let children sit among elders when they are discussing.” She said and again asked her daughter to go. I gave jaggery in the glass and the pieces of fresh bali as many as her hands could hold. I asked her to take care of herself.

“How old was she when you came here?"

“Two years.”

“Now tell me why did you choose to come here? If, as you say, you didn’t quarrel with anyone there, what led you to leave the place? Was it that Patel was taking interest in other women finding you old?”

“No, it was not so. I still miss him. I can’t blame him in that matter.”

“If it is not a serious matter, should I call Patel? I will ask him to persuade you and bring you with him. A woman like you would bring glory to his home.”

“He would come and take me with him if I ask him on my own. When he came to know that I have come here with the buffalo, he came to me without wasting a moment. He told me he would bring me all types of clothes and ornaments I wanted from the cities. He told me he had come with two hundred rupees and wanted to go to the city with me. He also promised me that he would take great care of me, but I refused to go with him.”

I was very much surprised. I could see that she still had love and affection for her husband and still she left his home to live a lonely life at a considerably young age! I could not understand the reason.

“If that is the case, tell me why did you come here? I will die if you don’t.”

Jivi said, “Why should you die? Why should I share my woe-begone story with fortunate people like you?”

“No, tell us everything.”

“I will if you insist so much. I am old now and would not be able to give birth to more children and that’s why I left that place with my youngest daughter.”

“If you don’t want children, I will arrange something for that and you won’t have to worry about it. It has become a common practice among all high class people. Look at Desai sahib. He has three children. The youngest is eight years old. No child was born after that.”
“But I don’t want to indulge in any sort of physical relations. I am satisfied with all that. I was twenty years old when I came to his home. I have grown older now but he seems to have the same appetite that a man feels in his youth. I regret that I didn’t die so that he could remarry a young woman and satisfy his needs. At this age and with this old body I don’t even like his touch. Somehow he has retained the lust for my body. I was also young a few years ago and so I can understand it is natural to have an urge for it but there should be an end to it. His urge for it is as desperate as it was.”

I could only stare at her. After some time I told her, “If this is the case, you should try to explain the matter to him. One should not feel shy in such matters. You should tell him in clear terms that this is the reason why you don’t want it.”

“Don’t you think I must have told him? I told him about it several times. I told him in the house, at the farm and even tried to explain everything to him with signs and hints. Once while my youngest son was sucking the seed after eating the mango, Patel told him, ‘Leave it now. What has remained there that you are sucking it?’ As there were no elder children around, I taunted Patel, ‘Why don’t you yourself understand it before explaining it to the child?’ He understood what I wanted to say and smiled but behaved the same way at night. How can I oppose him in the presence of all grown-up children? Even the house we lived was small, we can’t even talk loudly. Besides, any refusal from my side would encourage him to continue. He would never take my refusal. He would behave as if he was a youth of twenty-five. I put up with it for many years. There were times when I felt a kind of disgust for it, but what can a woman do being totally dependent on a man? Annoyed at times, I let it happen thinking it was not my body at all. When, at last, it was unbearable, I decided to leave once my daughter was a little older. It was good that there was a considerable period of time between the births of my children or it would not have allowed me to get out of bed. I took the decision to leave only as the last option. Who would like to leave the house, the farm, the prestige and children? We, as husband and wife, enjoyed good reputation in the village. All the newly married brides would come to
touch my feet as none of my children had ever died. I was blessed with all the happiness by god. But I got defeated at this and decided to leave.”

I kept staring at her. I felt respect for her courage and understanding. After a while I said, “You are really courageous. Weren’t you worried about how will you maintain your family alone?”

“We are not so fortunate like you that we need to worry about it. We do our work and earn enough to maintain the house...Didn’t I get customers like you? In our community a widow can spend her entire life with just one buffalo. I don’t have any other responsibility. I will raise my daughter and marry her off in a cultured family. We belong to the working class and we maintain our lives through hard work.”

Mallika had remained silent all this while. She said, “You are really fortunate that you got rid of it in this way. You call us fortunate but we are the real unfortunate people. Suppose we are suffering the same pain you once suffered, we can’t leave the way you did.”

“This kind of pain can never happen in the life of fortunate people like you. It can happen with people like us who are not educated and so don’t understand such things. How can I call it a life? By the way, sit and eat this bali. It must be cold by now. I unnecessarily made you upset with my story.” I gave her some bali to taste, but she refused saying she couldn’t eat it in front of us. When I persisted, she said, “Okay, I take two pieces because you insist.” and started leaving. I accompanied her to the gate. She left walking boldly like some officer. I returned to the room. When I was sitting on the sofa, I found Mallika quite sad.

“Did you listen to her story? The life of poor people is always full of problems.” I said to Mallika.

“Why do you say only poor people suffer such problems? Those whom she calls fortunate may also be suffering from such problems. They are, in fact, all the more unfortunate as they can’t find a solution like her.”

“Are you telling the truth, Mallika?” We had become quite intimate friends by now. We addressed each other with names, without any suffix to show respect or honour.
“Yes, it is the truth and I say this from my own experience.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Yes, her every word was narrating my own story. Just like her, I too developed disgust for all tactile contacts. Well, the matter is, I have many a time surrendered my body to him with abhorrence and disgust just like one throws something away to a pariah dog. I decided to leave him, but I could not do in a way. I carried two doubts till now, but they vanished today. I thought I felt this way because I lacked the attraction of a married life as I was unable to conceive a child. Today I realized it is not so. And the other thing is that I thought his attraction to my body will reduce as I’ll grow old. But today it turned out to be a false belief. I don’t see the end of the pain I am suffering. The only thing that can provide respite to me is death itself.

The passionate words that came to her mouth were like lava coming from a volcano that had erupted. I embraced her and consoled her. She burst into tears. I gave her water and helped her stand up and wash her face. When I asked her to have some bali, she said, “I can’t eat it today. When I feel like this, I can’t eat anything.” I offered her coffee. We sat there for long and then I allowed her to go.

The doctor came after some time. He saw the bali served in the plate and asked, “Why is everything served before my arrival? I said, “This bali is indeed a cursed one. You may want to eat it but you will fail to do so. I thought I would eat it hot but it is served for the last two and half hours but I haven’t eaten it. We listened to such horrible things that it was impossible to eat it.”

“And what were those horrible things?” asked the doctor.

“Eat it before I tell you.”

“Don’t worry. We take our meal even after tearing the patient’s body apart at the operation table.”

“But still eat it first. I will tell you later.”

“No, now I will eat it only after I have listened to what you have to say or I won’t.”

He didn’t relent, so I told him everything that Jivi and Mallika had told me. I said at the end, “When he sang that verse, I thought his life was poetic.”
“You know, a bad man spoils not only his wife but also poetry.” said the doctor.

He just took one bali. He started thinking. After some time he said, “I will talk to Vinodray about this.” I said, “But won’t he be angry with Mallika?” He said, “We are doctors and know how to tackle such things. I will start with the fact that they don’t have children.”

In the following days, he talked the matter with Vinodray, but I never saw Mallika happy. She came to meet me when Vinodray’s transfer took place after eight months. She cried her heart out to me and said, “I won’t live long. I may not be able to write to you. But rest assured that I will remember you when I die.”

How helpless we human beings are! There was no one who could help her out.

And she cut her life short within a year. She died when Vinodray was at the district headquarters. When the news of her death reached us, some of our common friends came to our place to remember her. Most of them had said: “What a fair lady she was!” “How delicate!” “So fortunate!” “The moment we see her we think of the most fortunate woman.” “How can the most fortunate wife die?”

I was lost thinking about the words: “The most fortunate wife!!”
TWO BROTHERS

One who was familiar with the temperament of Jivram and Rajaram would never believe that they had come from the womb of the same mother. While Jivram was small-minded, selfish and cunning, Rajaram was open-minded, cheerful, adventurous, friendly and innocent.

Their mother had died at a very young age. When their father passed away, Jivram was twenty and Rajaram was fourteen. They maintained the house by performing rituals for hosts and with whatever they got from the land. Jivraj took the land and the hosts under his care and control. He wanted Rajaram to continue his education and become a teacher in a far away school so that he could have the land and the hosts. When Rajaram talked about going to distant places to learn Sanskrit, Jivram would show his fake love and wouldn’t let him go. He would say their father had asked him to take care of him and so he couldn’t bear to be away from him. He allowed him to study in Gujarati in their village Adavad.

Rajaram finished all the seven standards. As he had always stood first throughout, he got a chance to become a teacher with a salary of two rupees. The credit for this, of course, went to Jivram. When Rajaram would go for playing hockey during the day, Jivram would criticize him in front of people of his caste saying Rajaram didn’t worry at all about his wife, the land or their traditional profession. He also mentioned how hard he had tried to make sure that he got the job as a teacher, but he never took that seriously.

Rajaram’s salary was raised to three rupees after two-three years.

There were many marshes around Adavad. There was a creek at some distance. The government was planning to build a port in that area. If they could build a bridge at the outskirts of the village and took rail tracks to the city, it was possible to build a port there. An English officer and his clerk had arrived there to investigate the possibility of a bridge there and evaluate the cost thereof. While moving around, this English officer desired to visit the school and turned up there. He asked some sums to Rajaram which he worked out with alacrity. Pleased with this, the English officer
expressed his desire that Rajaram should join his office with a salary of twenty-five. Rajaram accepted the offer with the same alacrity. Soon the word spread in entire village: An Englishman himself appointed Rajaram for a post with a salary of twenty five rupees per month! The entire village started praising Rajaram. However Jivaram could not digest this. He showed many problems which would crop up when he accepted the job. He said to Rajaram: “Where would you stay in the city? Not a single person had been happy once he moved to the city. They all have died without having children of their own. How will you raise your young children? How long will I carry our traditional profession? Who will attend the occasions that would take place in our caste? How long will I do that alone? This job in an Englishman’s office means polluting your character and will make you wicked.”

He found out many reasons to reject the offer, but Rajaram didn’t take any of them seriously. Accepting the offer he went to the city with his small family, purchased a house and started his life there. He returned to his village to meet all in his caste once in a year. He never asked his elder brother about his share in the land and his share from whatever he got from his hosts, so it was a benefit to Jivram. The only problem he had was that he couldn’t bear to see them enjoying in the city. When Jivram came to him every year for a month he would keep criticizing Rajaram by saying that he got everything readymade in his life without doing much hard work.

This continued for some time. Nothing new happened except that his jealousy increased over the years. Jivram came up with an idea when Rajaram’s daughter was seven years old. His own son Jayanti was betrothed. There was no problem getting a wife for Rajaram’s son Mohan as he was considered rich by now. If he found out a girl for Mohan and fixed the engagement, he would get the credit for helping his brother among the villagers. He might find out a suitable boy for Rajaram’s daughter Vasant too and then he can get his brother-in-law married somewhere in return. He started his game by writing a letter about Mohan’s engagement, but Rajaram rejected the idea outright writing back, “I don’t want Mohan to get engaged so early.” He didn’t even come to the village.
This rejection by Rajaram was a setback to all the schemes Jivraj had designed and it intensified his jealousy, but he couldn’t do anything. He had to provide the account of his failure to save his prestige in front of all which he did with complete knack. He had often said to the young and old Brahmins in the compound or the corridor of Naimisharanya Brahmin colony of Aryas: “The traditions that we have in our caste are unique. Whatever our ancestors told us has come from their experience. There was a time when people respected the elders. You can see Gopalji uncle sitting here. He never lifted his children or played with them in the presence of his father till his hair grew grey. As long as the elders are there, the younger generation doesn’t know much about how to do particular things. They followed their elders. My younger brother doesn’t know anything about what is going on in the caste and at the same time he will not allow me to help him out. Was there any fault in the daughter of Bhimji Bhat? Is he so rich that he can afford to say no to Bhimji Bhat’s daughter? Whose daughter is he planning to accept? In my opinion, he has committed a grave mistake by refusing. They will get a girl if she is there in their fortune. In the meantime I pray to god that they may enjoy their health. We can bear everything but can’t bear losing a person. The times have changed and I don’t know what I am fated to see in future.” He delivered this speech as if he was explaining the secret of some scriptures with the concern of a missionary and with the pity that one feels when one sees a sinner getting his rewards.

He told the same thing again and again to people. No one knows how much seriously he was taken by the people, how much they believed or rejected. But all listened to his ramblings that is for sure. What is wrong in listening to someone if there is nothing else to listen to? Besides, no one is supposed to pay for listening.

Once Rajaram took his brother’s word seriously and thought that he should send his son Mohan to the village so that he could travel alone and also get to meet the people, so he sent his son to Adavad. Jivraj had to go to perform some rituals at a host’s house, so it was decided that his son, Jayanti, would go to receive Mohan at the railway station.
The station was six miles away from Adavad. It was a flag station. The train had arrived after the day ended. Jayanti was a bit late so he started running as he saw the train coming. Mohan saw him coming and threw his trunk from the window and jumped from the same window on the station. He had got down on the opposite side of the station. He didn’t go to the other side just to assign the ticket to the ticket collector as it appeared to him an act of bravery. Both hurried towards the village eager to meet all.

It was getting dark. One could find only vast stretches of land on every side one saw. One could see the complete horizon. The trees appeared like fur of the land. The colour of the land looked strange and deceiving in the darkness.

Jayanti took his trunk trying to help him and asked, “What have you stuffed in this small bag that it has become so heavy?” Mohan had stuffed the bag with books without considering the possibility of getting time to read those books. He said, “It contains books which you would like to read. They are story-books.” said Mohan. Jayanti offered to carry the books but Mohan kept the trunk with him as his father had advised him to do his work himself. Besides, he wanted to show that though he lived in a city, he was not weak. He tucked the lose end of his dhoti, pocketed his cap and he moved further changing the hands carrying the trunk.

There was no rain for many days, but as the movement of the people had not yet started, there was no trace of road on the land. Jayanti had roamed every corner of this place. He was walking with careful steps making guesses. They were chatting on the way. Jayanti told Mohan, “Go ahead and wait for me there till I come back.” But Mohan instead of waiting, continued walking slowly. While Jayanti was following Mohan, he suddenly heard his cry and saw Mohan falling into the marsh. He quickly reached there, but there was no trace of Mohan. There was only dust on the surface. The marsh had gorged a man full of infinite feelings and hope, endless possibilities and who had connections with so many people. The sky appeared the same as if nothing had happened. Jayanti looked everywhere and saw the same meaningless sky, the earth and those trees. Everything looked the same.
But we human beings cannot be as disinterested and impartial like the earth. Jayanti was not at all responsible for what had happened. But he could not accept the fact that he was just a mute witness to the horrific incident of his cousin slipping into the marshy land. Neither his heart nor his life could tolerate it. He was overtaken by a sudden fear and he saw land trembling for a while. The vast stretch of the land and the sky appeared to be suppressing his entire being. He couldn’t even cry. He looked everywhere, but there was no man or even animals or birds to comfort his grieving heart. For a while, he stood there speechless like destroyed vegetation after the snow-rain. Disappointed and tired, he at last started walking towards home like an animal for comfort.

Jivram was standing in the compound as he reached home. He asked, “Is it you Jayanti? Why did you come so late?” Jayanti burst out crying and embraced his father.

Jivram could understand from the way he cried that something serious had happened. He could realize that something bad must have happened with either Mohan or his father and Jayanti needed to be saved from some grave mistake. On one hand, his jealousy was satisfied and on the other hand, he started thinking about what he would say in defense of his son. Just as water finds its own level, Jivram decided his course of action without thinking about it with a logical mind. He embraced Jayanti who was crying profusely and said, “Why are you crying so much? If Mohan didn’t arrive today, he will surely come tomorrow. There is no reason to cry.” Jivram’s wife came out of the house and said, “He is having a soft heart when boys at his age are generally mature. Look at the way he is crying just because his cousin didn’t arrive today!” Neighbours started gathering there and it gave Jivram one more opportunity to promote his son’s kind nature.

“You see, he is having such a soft heart that he has started having all sorts of premonitions since Mohan didn’t get off at the station. Mohan is like a real brother to him. His heart is so pure.”

Jayanti stifled his sobs and said, “Why, then, he didn’t get off the train? Something must have happened to him.” Feeling helpless, he followed the way his
father had followed otherwise he would not have lied this way on his own. Jivram said, “There may be some reason for not sending him today. They will send him tomorrow. Today is not an auspicious day so it is good that they didn’t send him today. However I don’t know whether they believe in such things or not because they are high-class people. They may change their decision any time. They don’t care about caste. We care about his son so much, but they don’t take it seriously. He even refused to get his son married to that girl. If you are worried so much, we will write a letter to them and ask them the reason. Did you stay at the station till the train departed?”

After Jayanti’s nod he started again, “I got that when you came late from the station or you would have arrived before it is time to light the earthen pots. Now stop crying. We will send them a letter tomorrow.”

Jayanti had nightmares the entire night. Sometimes he would see Mohan going down in the marsh struggling to save himself; sometimes Mohan would come out of the marsh and scold him with his big round eyes as if saying: “Why didn’t you pull me out of the marsh?” At times he felt as if Mohan was dragging him into the marsh along with him and he would wake up crying with trepidation. Jivram explained his philosophy to him in the loneliness of the night saying, “We should not worry so much about others. All sorts of things keep happening in this world. If you worry about others in this way when would you live your life? We should take care of ourselves instead of worrying about others.” Jivraj told all this with so much conviction that Jayanti changed his decision to tell his father about what had happened.

Jivram went to the school teacher’s house for the post-card the next day. On his way he told everyone he met the same story. At the school teacher’s home he repeated the story again. He talked about the innocence of his son while accepting the post-card. He wrote in the post: “Mohan didn’t get off at the station, so I believe that you have not sent him. Do tell us when you are going to send him. I will go to the station myself and will take him home if he arrives today. Don’t worry about him. I wrote this letter because Jayanti is so much concerned about him.”
He had to go to a village near the station for performing some rituals for a host, so he could visit the station while returning. He confirmed at the station that his nephew had not arrived yesterday. When he came home, he put his hand on Jayanti’s shoulder and consoled him saying that Mohan must not have come the previous day.

On the third day Rajaram and his wife Santok reached the village with their seven year old daughter Vasant without resorting to the telegraph or correspondence. They also enquired at the station. Jivraj was wonderstruck when he found them at his home. Santok cried out to her sister-in-law Daya, “What could have happened to my Mohan?” Jayanti also started crying. Vasant started crying though she didn’t know the reason. The neighbours heard this mourning which suggested someone’s death. They started gathering in the house as well outside. They scattered, when they knew that nothing of the sort had happened and that they were crying because they haven’t yet found where Mohan was.

Both the brothers sat together after dinner at night. Rajaram informed him that he had gone to the railway station with Mohan to see him off and that he was quite well at that time. Jivram said, “But the people at the railway station said that they didn’t see him getting off. Rajaram believed that as he himself had enquired there. Rajaram said, “Let’s ask Jayanti whether he had seen him getting off.” Jayanti started crying. He had not got time to say anything to anyone till now as his father had tackled the entire matter.

Rajaram and Jivram started a thorough inspection the next day. They took Jayanti with them. Rajaram asked him, “Which path had he followed?” How could Jayanti answer that as there was no path at all? How could they find the trace of the path they had treaded three days ago? They moved in the area at random, but couldn’t come to any conclusion. How could the land inform them of what had really happened? If the earth could speak, it could have said many things to humanity!

The brothers sent Jayanti home and went to the main station; sent telegrams to concerned authorities; sent the report to the newspapers and informed the kith and kin. When they got together in the evening, Santok said from her veil, “I think Jayanti knows something which he is afraid to tell us.” Jayanti’s mother said, “What is there
to know. What can he tell us when Mohan had not got off at the station in the first place? He is growing thin day by day with his concern for his cousin. I don’t want you to pressure him more.”

Neither Rajaram nor Santok could sleep that night. They agreed that Jayanti held something back but didn’t speak out. The problem was that they didn’t have any proof to justify their doubt.

On the other hand Jayanti was still suffering from nightmares that made him flutter with fear.

Three-four days passed. Santok had almost stopped having her meals. All the villagers were talking about the incident. Some said a gang of mendicants or people from Kabul had carried him away; others said he had stolen money from his house and ran away; still others believed Aghori mendicants had taken him for sacrifice to the deity.

Once while she was talking with other women, Santok could not stop herself from informing them that Jayati knew something but didn’t say anything. Someone from the group supported her. The word spread and Jivram came to know about it and he felt the same jealousy and selfishness. He soon got an opportunity to vent his displeasure. Rajaram informed the neighbours of a vacancy at his office once. He asked if anyone wanted to join it. Govind was educated like Rajaram so he was ready to take the job. Once again Jivram started showing his wisdom and talking about being religious and helpful. He said to Govind, “Don’t go there if you take my advice. Whoever leaves this village never enjoys bliss in life. Don’t you see what is happening to us? There is no trace of our youthful boy. Though we take our meals, our hearts are full of miseries. I give this advice for your own good and for the good of our caste. You can eat whatever you get at home, but it is unbearable to lose our near and dear one.” He would have said much more than this but he thought that it was not an appropriate time to speak about that subject at length so he stopped himself there.

Once, Jivram and Daya went to a host’s place as Rajaram was going to a faraway station to enquire about his lost son as his wife had forced him do so. Santok
had fever that day so it was decided that Jayanti would remain at home to take care of her. Soon all left. Santok was sleeping on the terrace where she usually slept. Jayanti was sleeping downstairs. She could not sleep because of severe fever. All night she kept thinking about her son and it had disturbed her mind. When she could not endure the pain, she came downstairs and went to Jayanti. She caught his hand. He was startled with the touch of her warm hands. He could not even scream in his fright. He started perspiring. Santok came closer to him and said, “My son, tell me the truth. You know the truth, but you don’t tell it. I know you are not envious. You possess an innocent heart. Tell me everything that you know. I will not scold you even if you tell that he has died. Even that information would calm my grieving soul. I can’t tolerate this state of worry. No one is at home, so you can tell me everything. I won’t tell it to anyone. Come on, tell me everything. Just tell me whether he is alive or dead. God will surely shower his blessing on you if you do so.”

Suffering acute mental and physical pain, she didn’t know how much she spoke; why she held Jayanti all the while; when he was trembling in fear and perspiration. At the end of her rambling, Jayanti freed his hand and fled. She collapsed there. Jayanti sat there outside the gate shivering with severe cold. Jivram saw Jayanti in that condition in the morning when he came back. Daya asked him raising her voice, “Why are you sitting here in this severe cold?” Jayanti’s voice broke out and he started crying and informed them everything. The neighbours started gathering. Jivram and Daya went in and woke up Santok whose fever had subsided by now. Daya started scolding her, “Why do you harass my son? Ask your husband who went to see him off. We haven’t seen your son. How do we know what is happening in your home or city that made him run away from home? My husband was kind and gracious enough to find out a daughter of Bhimji Bhat for your Mohan and you refused her. You know a girl is considered goddess Laxmi and when you refused Laxmi, you will surely get the reward. What can Jayanti or I do in it? I warn you not to harass my child any more.” Jivram retorted, “You didn’t think twice sending your son on an inauspicious day alone and now you are harassing my son.”
Santok heard all this while crying continuously till both stopped criticising her. Then she went outside and sat on a slab. Daya arrived there and said, “Why are you sitting in the hot sun? It will worsen your condition. Why do you create more problems for us in this way?” Santok replied, “I don’t want to step inside this house in this lifetime.” He called for Govind who had shown his willingness to work in Rajaram’s office and asked him to manage for a cart. When Jivram came to know about this, he gave the key to Santok and said that they had to go to a host’s place. The couple left with Jayanti. Rajaram came home. All he had to do was to take his wife and daughter to the flag-station. He locked the house, handed the key to a neighbour and left. While she was closing the door, Santok had said, “This is my last touch to this house.” She didn’t even go in to take her belongings. They left at noon without their meals. The neighbours stood there disconcerted.

Nobody cared to look at Jayanti when his parents in a rage of anger left the place with him. He himself was so much overwhelmed with all the happenings that he would not say anything on his own. They reached their host’s place and prepared food. When Daya asked Jayanti to have his meal, he refused. It was only then that she had a look at him. Finding him restless, she touched his hand and said, “Oh, he is having severe fever. That unfortunate lady is responsible for all this. Come dear, have at least something.”

When they finished everything, they came back. They knew Rajaram would have surely left with his family. Jivram took the key from his neighbour. He opened the house, arranged the bed and laid Jayanti on it.

Jayanti could not come out of that bed for one month. He was suffering from delirium. He, in that condition, saw Mohan and Santok and smarted speaking: “Mohan is coming; he has not got off the station; I don’t know where he is; have I done anything to you, Mohan? See, Mohan is coming. Stop him, aunty...”

Jivram had put up a brave face when Rajaram was here with his family. Now when his younger brother left, he tried to overcome a sense of dilemma. He felt as if his heart had become heavy all of a sudden. He didn’t know what had happened to Mohan and he had played no role in it. So far he had always felt jealous and desired
the fall of his younger brother’s family. When Mohan got lost, he had secretly enjoyed the fact as if it was his own doing. But now he was at his wit’s end. He felt the only way to save himself was to continue with the same feelings and criticize his brother’s family. He followed this as a drowning person clutches whatever comes his way. Even in the midst of his son’s ailment, he continued to hold Rajaram responsible for whatever was happening in their family. He would say, “I think Mohan’s spirit is oppressing Jayanti. I don’t think he is alive or this would not happen. I knew something bad would happen to us when Rajaram refused that girl. I don’t know why such a senseless person was born in our family. I think Mohan’s spirit is moving around us because he died without being married. He doesn’t say anything because he is shy. Who likes to die young?” Thus he gave many instructions. When Jayanti came to himself, he asked him if he saw anyone. He asked many questions and came to the conclusion that Mohan had died and that his unfulfilled desires were still lingering. He wrote a letter in front of the people asking Rajaram to come to the village and perform the rituals that would pacify the grieving soul of his son.

Santok got the letter first and asked Vasant to read it. She had believed that Mohan must have died, but she became quite angry at the mention of his unfulfilled desires. It had disturbed her mind and she wanted to fight back till she died. He asked Vasant to write for her: “Don’t speak ill of my son. Who says he is dead? I won’t believe he is dead till Jayanti says he killed him or he saw him dying. Besides, if his spirit exists, he would come to us and we will do whatever we should do. What has it to do with you?” This answer angered Jivram further. That Rajaram had provided education to his daughter became one more sin in the eyes of Jivram. He sent one letter to Rajaram at his office and wrote that a spirit would only contact those who believe in it. What would the spirit achieve if it approached to an atheist? Rajaram read that letter out to his wife. She informed him everything about the first letter, but she objected to doing any rituals that Jivram wanted them to perform. Rajaram kept his cool and wrote to his elder brother that he should keep patience and wait for a few days. Jayanti’s health was not completely restored even after his illness. Jivram wanted to undertake the responsibility of the ritual just to prove all the allegations that
he had levelled against Rajaram. Daya told the women of the caste, “He is there in
the city and we are here handling the affairs. We don’t mind it, but they don’t even
believe in the rituals. My husband is kind enough to see that even if Jayanti performs
the rituals, it would give peace to Mohan’s soul. It seems that Rajaram wants to bring
an end to our lineage. He is our true enemy, but we can’t be like him. We will spend
any amount of money to perform the rituals. There isn’t any other alternative. We
don’t want to amass money like him.”

Jivram performed the rituals and invited all for caste-dinner. He sent a letter to
Rajaram and taunted that he has become a slave to his wife. Rajaram sent his brother
two hundred rupees in installments without letting his wife know about it.

Jayanti’s condition didn’t improve, but that couldn’t prove Jivram wrong. He
started saying, “If his father does the ritual, it will pacify his spirit.” The girl who was
engaged to Jayanti was marriageable. Jayanti’s parents thought if he married that girl,
maybe his condition would improve. Jayanti got married to that girl, but his body
grew more emaciated after the wedding and he died within a year with the pain of the
terrible incident he had witnessed which had been afflicting his mind. His parents also
died one after another within two-three years. They kept calling Rajaram a heretic and
repeating the same thing about the caste, religion, scriptures in front of people. That
they always got the listeners cannot be denied. That was perhaps the only thing that
they had achieved in life.

*

Santok has not gone to Adavad till now as was her vow; nor has Rajaram. The
hosts have turned to other Brahmins. Rajaram sends money to Jayanti’s widow and
villagers who are working in Rajaram’s office manage the work at their farm as per
his instructions.
The train was not going to stop at the station for long so Vanravandas was wriggling through the crowd with as much force as he could use simultaneously chanting loudly ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jay’. When Mahadevbhai saw him coming, he asked the crowd to clear the way for him. The crowd made room for him and Vanravandas came forward. He touched Mahatma’s feet. Mahatma lay his hand on his head and asked, “Where is your daughter Sasti?” After the death of his wife, Vanravandas had renounced all mundane pleasures and joined Mahatma’s ashram with his two and half year old daughter Saraswati who mispronounced her name as ‘Sasti’. When she heard her name, she said, “But this crowd doesn’t let me come before you...” The crowd made room for her and she got into the compartment and touched Mahatma’s feet.

“Oho! You’ve grown older! But why do you look so weak? Or is it that no one provides you with food as your name is Sasti?” said Mahatma and lovingly patted her back.

“She has just undergone an operation for appendicitis. The doctor says that she should go to some other place for a change.” Said Vanravandas.

“Is it so? In that case, Mahadev, shouldn’t she visit Jagjivan Shah’s place in Balasor?” Mahatma, then, looked at Vanravandas and said, “It is a nice place. The cotton-ginning factory is a bit far from the village and has a hospitable climate.”

“Yes, Bapu, a jeweller from our village also lives there. It is indeed a suitable place.”

Mahatmaji looked at Saraswati who was just standing beside him and said, “You have really grown up. So what do you wish to do? Do you wish to work somewhere or get married? Don’t feel shy to inform me if you want so.”

“I just want to work somewhere.”

“That’s fine.” Mahatma appreciated this decision.

The train departed after some time and Mahadevbhai wrote one more letter of the day to Jagjivan Shah. When the train stopped at the next station, he gave the letter to a visitor to post it in the mail coach of the same train. After three days, Jagjivan
sent a letter to Vanravandas informing him that he would make accommodation for Saraswati.

Saraswati reached the cotton-ginning factory of Balasor in three days. The factory was not working as it was not the season. Jagjivan’s family was rather small. It consisted of Jagjivan, his mother, a cook, a servant and a watchman.

Jagjivan was younger in age, but still he had achieved considerable fame for himself. His family belonged to Kathiawad. His father had established the ginning factory in this southern part far away from Kathiawad. After his death, Jagjivan’s mother reared the two sons and took charge of the factory. The elder son completed his BA and married an educated girl. She often quarrelled with his mother and so she had to ask her elder son to leave home. Jagjivan was so much disturbed with the family feuds and conflicts caused by his sister-in-law that he decided not to marry and instead serve his mother in the best possible way. He took charge of the factory at a considerably young age. As a result, he could not take English education further. Moreover this was the time of the Non-cooperation movement. He could get the opportunity to move forward in life without worrying about English education. His mother knew how to spin cotton so he engaged her in that task. He continued reading ‘Navjivan’, a tabloid edited by Gandhiji regularly. He led a life of principles and started taking interest in many subjects. The factory remained working only for a few months. He started growing cotton in the remaining months and continued his correspondence with the Mahatma on issues like spinning, combing of cotton, celibacy and domestic production of items. Sometimes the Mahatma answered his queries in ‘Navjivan’. This made Jagjivan Shah famous in his region. He was extremely ecstatic when the Mahatma, during one of his journeys, stayed at his home.

Saraswati didn’t take much time to feel comfortable at this place. She liked the place on the very first day of her arrival. She had reached there early in the morning. She had a glass of milk and then she took her bath. When she was sitting outside, the doctor came there. He examined her, and gave some instructions about food and all that she should take. Jagjivan, his mother and Saraswati sat for lunch right at ten o’clock. The old lady told Saraswati how happy she felt on her arrival. She also
expressed her anguish over the fact that she was all alone at home. Jagjivan told his mother a lot many things about where Saraswati’s father lived and the climate in that part. Then they started talking about combing cotton. Saraswati informed them that her father had invented a new combing machine. Jagjivan asked her many questions about the machine; how much labour was needed, the quality of wool after combing and whether she knew how to operate the machine. His mother interrupted him saying, “This poor girl has come here so that she can rest here for a couple of days and you want her to operate the machine. Wait for a few days, son.”

“I never said I want her to operate the combing machine. I want her to take complete rest here, I was just planning to learn operating the machine from her before she leaves. One of our workers belongs to that region. He will bring one machine here. Is it right, Saraswatibahen?”

Thus they finished their lunch. After some rest at noon, the old lady resumed the conversation with Saraswati. She mentioned her son’s aversion to marriage to Saraswati. When Saraswati came to know about this, her respect for Jagmohan grew further and she also felt pity for the mother.

The very next day, they received a letter from Ratilal Zaveri who lived in the city informing that he had got a letter from Vanravandas and he and his wife Ujam would visit them in the afternoon. Ratilal came with his wife Ujam and their little son, Hemu. Saraswati liked the couple the moment she saw them. The old lady complained to them that they did not visit their place often. Ujam replied that she avoided going out of the house. The old lady noticed that she was pregnant. She asked her in front of all, “Which month is going on?”

“Fifth.”

“Are you going to call someone from the village at the time of delivery? Or do you want to visit the hospital?”

“We have decided I will go to the hospital and we have asked our elder sister to come here to take care of Hemu. It is better if a child enjoys his father’s company. My problem is that Hemu can’t live away from me.” The old lady now looked at
Ratilal and asked, “Why don’t you come over here. Have you taken a vow like my son, Jagjivan, not to move out of the house?”

“I never take any vow. I don’t come here just because I am afraid of Jagjivan’s rules and regulations. I can’t stick to rules and regulations.”

“Oh! We don’t have any rules that might frighten you?”

“You do have. That Jagjivan doesn’t want to marry is itself the biggest vow. Besides he doesn’t have tea, doesn’t smoke, doesn’t go anywhere to play and never meets anyone. Can’t I call them rules set by him? I wonder where he found all these rules and how he could follow them. Jagjivan, let me know how you could follow your rules.”

“Isn’t it your rule to wear home-made clothes?” asked Jagjivan.

“I don’t follow that rule completely. The followers of your Mahatma visited our home long ago and convinced Ujam that we should wear home-made clothes. She started buying home-made clothes. How could I do otherwise? I never visit the market for shopping anything.”

“You need a wife to follow the rules, but I don’t need one to do the same. That’s all.”

All laughed at this.

“Right. Ujam has indeed brought about reforms in my life. You can take your cue from her and marry some lady to reform her life.”

All laughed again at Ratilal’s reply.

Ujam said to Jagjivan, “He can just talk about reforms, but the fact is that none can lead the principled life that you follow. I also wonder how you follow so many rules for so long. Don’t you feel bored? Or haven’t you ever felt to break the mould?”

Now Jagjivan grew serious and explained his philosophy: “If we put a red hot coal somewhere, it will lose its heat after some time. We have to keep dusting the ashes off by blowing air around it in order to keep it burning. The same applies to our aims.”

“But if the coal is all alone, it would rather burn completely very soon. In a group, they keep burning for a long time.” Saraswati said this from her kitchen
experiences. Obviously she had said it without considering what exactly she meant by that statement or whether she wanted to prove a point. But all were amused at this statement. Hemu who was playing outside came in and embraced his mother and then started jumping near Saraswati.

The old lady understood what she wanted and said, “Did you listen to her? Another coal is needed. Go and search for that.”

They continued this conversation for a long time. Tea was made and served. Jagjivan and Saraswati didn’t take tea. The old lady would not take tea as a general rule, but didn’t mind taking it when there were guests. While she was sipping, she said, “There is no difference for my son between a married life or life as a bachelor.”

Hemu started his tantrums by saying he would have his tea only if Saraswati held the saucer for him which Saraswati readily did for him. While they were leaving, Hemu especially invited Saraswati to come to his place. She went to their place after four days and Hemu enjoyed a lot in her company.

The new combing machine arrived in a week. While they were having their meal, Jagjivan asked Saraswati, “Will you teach me how to comb the cotton today?” Saraswati nodded. After the meal, they took some rest. Jagjivan then went to his mother’s room and asked Saraswati, “Shall we go?” She nodded and got ready to leave. Jagjivan asked her mother to join them. She said, “Whatever I spin is more than enough for me. I don’t want to comb.”

“I am not asking you to comb.”

“Then what business do I have there?”

“You thought I would ask her to comb the cotton. You can come yourself and see that I am not asking her to do the same.”

Saraswati couldn’t understand why he insisted upon his mother to join them. His mother soon got up and they went to the combing room. Jagjivan combed according to Saraswati’s instructions and he soon got the hang of it. He prepared some nice rolls. He showed them to Saraswati and said, “Do they look like the ones you prepared at your village? Now, give these rolls to mother. She will spin them.”
Saraswati could not understand the reason behind this insistence first, then she realized that he did so just because he wanted to avoid being alone with her. She believed that one should have a balanced mind to achieve one’s goal. This incident heightened the respect she had for him. She started taking care of his study room now. She consulted him on what books she should read. Jagjivan’s principles often got in the way of her doing all this. Not finding his mother to be present while they were reading there, he’d call one of the servants and asked him to clean cupboards. She often desired to leave the place. When she felt so, she visited Ratilal’s home and stayed there for two days and returned to Jagjivan’s home with renewed respect for him.

Saraswati’s health was improving little by little. All of a sudden, she had to undertake a responsibility. She had gone to Ratilal’s home at around four in the evening. She reached there and saw that they were facing a difficult condition as Ujam’s condition had grown worse and she needed to be hospitalized at the earliest. Ratilal had sent his servant to one of his acquaintances who could send his car. Ratilal was helping Ujam get into the car. Not able to understand what was going around, Hemu was crying loudly. When Ratilal saw her, he asked her to take care of Hemu so that he could admit Ujam to the hospital.

Hemu was crying. Saraswati took him in her hands and went inside the home. She consoled the child by telling him that his father would bring back his mother in the evening and persuaded him to take his meal. She told him a story to put him to sleep. Ratilal had to stay for a considerable time at the hospital. He came back at nine at night. When Saraswati asked him to send the servant to inform this at Jagjivan’s home, he told her that he himself had gone there as the servant was not available. As someone had to stay at the hospital, it was decided that Jagjivan’s mother would stay there. Ratilal had hardly finished the meal when Hemu woke up and started crying again. It was only after both convinced him that his mother would arrive in the morning that he stopped crying and slept beside Saraswati. Saraswati got up early the next day. She took her bath and made tea. Hemu woke up and looked at Saraswati. As Saraswati had not brought her clothes, she had put on Ujam’s clothes. Hemu saw that
and started talking about it. ‘Why have you put on my mother’s clothes? Should you wear her clothes? Do they fit properly on you? Has my mother allowed you to wear them?’ She faced a battery of questions from him. He was satisfied with finding Saraswati in her mother’s clothing and talking about her. But at noon, he again started crying for his mother. Both Ratilal and Saraswati tried to divert his attention.

They took Hemu to his mother on the third day. She had a miscarriage. She had to stay at the hospital for a few days. Hemu met his mother all those days, but he would often put both in trouble wailing to meet his mother at night or at any time during the day. After eleven days, Ujam came back home. Saraswati wanted to go back to Jagjivan’s house, but Ujam insisted that she should stay with her for two days. She could see that Saraswati was tired, so she asked her to take rest. When Saraswati reached Jagjivan’s home, his mother too found her to be quite tired.

The old lady could notice that Saraswati didn’t take her meals properly after she came back. When she asked the reason, Saraswati informed her that she felt hungry at irregular times and so she had her meals after the mother and son had theirs. No improvement in her health was noticed. When Jagjivan mentioned calling the doctor, she asked him to wait for ten days. He sent his servant to call the doctor after ten days, but the doctor was out of station. Saraswati didn’t want to call any other doctor. The factory started working during this time. Jagjivan was now extremely busy with the work at the factory. Saraswati did not remember calling the doctor and so her health began to deteriorate. At last, the old lady asked Jagjivan to call the doctor.

The doctor came with his sister who had recently become a nurse. The doctor examined her and raised his eyebrows as if not able to understand what ailed her. He advised, “Take your food regularly even if you don’t feel like eating. It will cure all your problems.” The doctor’s sister was observing all this. She said in English, “But this lady seems to be pregnant.”

The doctor answered in English, “But she is not married. You should have considered that before coming to this conclusion.”
Though their conversation was in English, the old lady and Saraswati could understand what they were talking about. The old lady looked at Jagjivan with a mixture of confusion and anger. Saraswati failed to stop her finger from trembling. She broke out in perspiration.

The doctor asked them to take her meals regularly and call him when his service was needed. Saying this, both the doctor and his sister left. After they left, Jagjivan, his mother and Saraswati sat speechless for a moment. Jagjivan rose first and went out on the pretext that he had some work to attend. The old lady asked Saraswati about it. She said she too felt that same about it.

They didn’t take the things seriously. A month went by. They did not want to reach any decision. The experienced eyes of the old lady could see the unknown fears that might strike, but she didn’t tell anything about it to Saraswati as she had not confessed about it.

This situation could not remain so for long anyhow. One serious incident occurred during this time. An editorial article titled ‘The decay amongst the followers of Mahatma’ was published in the local newspaper ‘Satyashodhak’. Mahatma had said something in his answer to a question on celibacy. The newspaper, criticising the answer, had written: “All the followers of Mahatma are lewd, adulterous, hypocrite, mean and womanizers. They enjoy secret physical relations with their friends’ daughters whom they call for change of climate for their recovery from the illness.”

Now the thing was that the proprietor of the newspaper wanted an advertisement from Jagjivan. When he had come for the same, he had, in a way tried to threaten him by saying, “The doctor has asked me to inquire about that lady’s health.” Busy with his work, Jagjivan could not understand what his intention was behind asking that. He didn’t entertain the idea of advertisement that day. The news created an uproar in the village. The old lady asked Saraswati again but she didn’t say anything about such doubts. When she scolded Jagjivan for the same, he showed his anger at this.
The situation worsened when a copy, with lines underscored with a red pencil, was sent to Mahatmaji by someone. Mahatmaji immediately wrote a letter to both asking them to meet him.

Jagjivan called Saraswati into his room and told her about Mahatmaji’s letter and said, “You know well that I have always followed my vow of celibacy and behaved with you with the same principles. I am not responsible for your condition. What will you tell to Mahatmaji when he asks about it?”

“I will tell him that you are innocent.”

“What will you tell to him when he asks you about the person who is responsible for it?”

“I will reveal the man’s identity.”

“Who is he?”

She hesitated for a while and then said, “Ratilal.”

“Alright. We will leave tonight.”

They reached the ashram in the morning. They had visited the ashram many times earlier, but this time it was different; they felt like being prisoners accused for a crime. Jagjivan inquired about Mahatmaji and then wrote a chit for him. He had written: “If you meet and ask Saraswati, she will tell you everything. Her account would prove that I am not responsible for her condition. If you wish, I would accompany her.”

Mahatmaji felt as if a blaze cooled down in the volcano. He sent the message that Jagjivan alone should meet him. He asked others to leave the room. When Jagjivan entered the room, he gestured him to sit. When he took his seat, Mahatmaji asked, “Tell me, what you have to say in this regard.”

“I am innocent.”

“Have you never met Saraswati when both of you were alone?”

“I did, but...”

“Do you want to say that you were never tempted to keep relations with her? You never felt the lust?”

“I did. I won’t deny that, but...”
“It was my mistake. I’ve often seen this happening and still I committed the same mistake. In fact, it is I myself who should repent for this.” mumbled Mahatma as if talking to himself.

He again looked at Jagjivan and asked, “Why don’t you get married then? People like you...”

“But Mahatmaji I would call someone the moment I found myself drifting towards the sin. In the absence of my mother, I would keep one of the servants with us when we were alone. I am not at all responsible for this. You can ask Saraswati.”

“Who, then, is the person responsible for that?”

“There is Ratibhai Zaveri who lives in Balasor. He is a friend of Vanravandas.”

“Is he not married? He must be visiting your house.”

“Actually, Saraswati stayed at his house for ten days. She can tell what happened there.”

“But why did you let her go there?”

“Because his wife had a miscarriage and Ratibhai could not stay at his home to take care of his son. Saraswati stayed there to take care of his son.”

“In that case, you are innocent. However I will ask Saraswati about it. I will have to think about what is my duty in this matter.”

“Bapu, won’t you mention that I am innocent in this matter in ‘Navjivan’? It will help me to regain my prestige among your followers and community.”

“Yes, I will mention it if you insist. In fact I’ve received so many letters in this regard. But what will happen to Saraswati now? You say that you did feel attracted towards her. Can’t you marry her?”

“But what about my vow?”

“I don’t think you will be able to serve your mother the way she can.”

“If I do that, others will think that I am responsible for what has happened. In that case, I will not care spending my money in finding out the truth through Underhill method. I will give a befitting answer to all those who are pointing accusing
fingers at me and especially to the editors of the papers. I will ask the very inventor of
the method to check the veracity of the incident.”

Mahatmaji sighed at this. After Jagjivan left, Saraswati was called in. She
could not go near Mahatma. She just sat there completely dejected and gestured to
touch his feet. When asked she told that Jagjivan was innocent. She said it was her
own fault and that Ratilal was responsible for it. While answering Mahatmaji’s
questions, she told that she didn’t want to go to her parents’ home or stay at the
ashram. She said she would stay in a delivery home in another city as Jagjivanbhai
had advised her. When they left, Mahatma asked Jagjivan to take care of her. He,
then, wrote a letter to Vanravandas to console him. He asked him not to worry about
what has happened as he had taken charge of the matter and would bring satisfactory
solution to it.

Ratilal met Jagjivan and showed his willingness to bear all the expenditure of
her delivery without letting her know about it. Jagjivan didn’t accept his offer. He
admitted Saraswati in a private hospital in a nearby city before people would raise
their fingers. After a few months, she delivered a son.

Jagjivan went to that city after a fortnight. He had one doctor with him. When
they reached there, he asked the doctor to take a sample of his blood for Underhill
blood test. He, then, took the doctor to the delivery room and met Saraswati. He asked
about her health so that she might feel comfortable. She, however, could not
overcome her embarrassment. When Jagjivan asked some questions about the boy,
she started showering praises upon the child. She said that the nurses were of the
opinion that her child was the healthiest of all they had come across so far. The baby
slept regularly and was normal in every sense. When asked more, she said he was
sleeping at that time but would wake up very soon. She became all the more enthused
when he showed his eagerness to see the child and led him to the child. When they
reached there, the child opened his small, beautiful, clean and innocent eyes. Jagjivan
said, “He woke up. Good. He must be hungry. We are sitting in the neighbouring
room. Come there after some time.”
After some time, Saraswati entered that room with the child with a smiling face and sat on the bed. Jagjivan said, “I told you that I was going to answer all those who have accused me publicly in the newspapers with scientific test. The scientists can say whether a particular person is the father of a child or not by testing the blood samples. Even the courts have approved the test. I have already given my blood sample. The blood sample of the child is also supposed to be sent on the same day. And this doctor has come...”

“Oh! Will you take blood sample of an infant? Is that why you have come here?” said Saraswati and went to her room with her child.

“I will have to persuade her.” said Jagjivan and followed her.

“No, no. You can take my blood as much as you want. But I won’t allow you to take blood of my child.” Saraswati embraced her child and hid herself in the bed.

Jagjivan started persuading her. He told her that he had led a principled life, but people had started raising fingers at him just because of her. He told her that he didn’t criticise her for what happened and she should help him and make sure that justice was done to him. He told her if he was not proved innocent, the followers of Mahatmaji would never be able to enjoy the respect and love from the people. He informed her that the child would not get hurt. He kept putting pressure on her till she felt totally helpless and tired. He, then, took the child sleeping by her side in his hand. Saraswati could not say anything; she just lay on the bed like a worthless insect burying her face in the bed and crying helplessly. Later she heard the cry of the child and she too screamed. She felt that she was an orphan and had given birth to a child who was destined to be an orphan. She kept lying there in this condition. She rushed to him when she heard cries of the child. When she reached there, the child had almost stopped crying and the doctor was walking towards her carrying her child. She took the child in her hand, ran towards her bed and started suckling her. The child stopped crying. She saw the finger from which the blood was taken and which was bleeding. She put it in her mouth, licked it and saw it again. It didn’t carry any sign now. The wound healed up in an instant. But the wound that was created in her heart would not heal up so soon. Jagjivan and the doctor left the hospital.
Saraswati had a dream that night. Jagjivan was carrying a burning ember in his palm and was blowing it with full force. His face covered with the red glow of the burning ember and tense blood vessels appeared frightening. His eyes were stretched and looked equally frightening. He kept blowing the burning ember and came near the child and tried to give it a burn. She put her hand in between and got a burn. Overwhelmed with fear, she couldn’t even scream. She woke up all of a sudden and took the child in her arms from the cradle. He was asleep. She kissed him several times. She kept him by her side and started suckling. She stayed awake for a long time and then went to bed completely tired.

Jagjivan continued getting their news from the delivery home. He had expressed his happiness in a letter to Saraswati when he came to know that the child’s weight had increased. Now Saraswati was getting worried about her future. Where should she stay with the child without a father? Where could she stay? Such questions started confusing her mind. They might allow her to stay in the ashram but would she prefer to live there after all this? All she could think of was a bleak future in front of her.

After some days both the mother and the son’s health started deteriorating. Jagjivan rushed there when he heard the news. He did all he could do to provide them with the best medical treatment, but the child could not survive and Saraswati was quite emaciated. Jagjivan decided to take her to Balasor. He got her examined by the doctor before they left. The doctor advised that she should take rest for around two months.

Jagjivan brought her to Balasor and informed Mahatmaji all that had happened. He also allowed Saraswati to stay there till her health was restored.

Saraswati’s condition improved as the days passed. The factory was again practically closed. As her health was restored, Jagjivan took her out in a car. She too was coming out of the afflictions of the recent past and started leading a normal life. Jagjivan had proved his innocence in front of all so he started moving with her without anyone’s presence.
Once Saraswati mentioned to Mahatmaji and said, “Even those who are considered noble and famous are nothing when they meet him. He would find out what is going on in the mind of the person.”

“Yes, the same thing happened with me when we went to meet him.” said Jagjivan.

“I haven’t asked you what transpired between you at that time.”

“He thought it was I who had done that. He asked me whether I had met you alone. I accepted that. He, then, asked me if I felt any attraction towards you. I couldn’t deny that.”

“That means you did feel attraction.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I can’t believe it! I never thought a person like you who is a firm believer in his goals would ever have such a feeling. Ordinary people might indulge in such a feeling. However, I don’t find fault with them if they do so. I thought you wanted someone’s presence between us so that I don’t indulge in such a feeling.”

“Actually it was I who needed someone’s presence.”

They discussed so many things, but after Jagjivan’s confession of his innermost attraction, they had come quite closer to each other. When the day came to go to Mahatmaji, Jagjivan was quite forthright in his conversation to her.

“I should say your health did improve at this place.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you feel the climate here is far better for you than you had at your father’s village or at the ashram?”

“Of course, it is.”

“You enjoy my mother’s company, don’t you?”

“Yes, she abundantly showered her love upon me.”

“Don’t you think there is no wrong in staying here permanently?”

“How can it happen? Mahatmaji wants me to return to the ashram.”

“It can happen if we get married. Has Mahatmaji ever mentioned about your marriage?”
“He once asked me clearly to inform him if ever I wanted to get married.”
“He asked me to marry you the last time we went to meet him.”
“Really?”
“In that case, we can get married in the ashram itself with his blessings, can’t we?”
“We can.”
“When we meet him this time, you should tell him about this.”
“I feel so shy.”
“Then I will tell him everything and you can ask for his blessings.”
“Fine.”

This conversation brought some relief to Saraswati’s mind. These days she remained worried about her future and she thought this would bring an end to her worries.

Both went to Mahatmaji who looked at Saraswati and said, “Your health is restored.” His voice was not particularly warm. Jagjivan expressed his desire to meet him personally, so Mahatmaji asked others to wait outside.

“What is it?” asked he.
“We have come here to have your blessing!” said Saraswati.

Mahatmaji didn’t understand this first, but he understood her meaning when he had a look at Jagjivan’s face. His eyes brightened soon. He turned his face towards Saraswati and asked, “Do you wish to marry him?”

“If you allow me.”
“How can I allow anyone? When you two came to me earlier, I had asked him to marry you and he prevaricated mentioning his vow. Now when your son has died, he is planning to marry you with my blessing! If he had really loved you, he would have married you at that time. I would not stop you marrying him. I just want you to ponder over everything before you finally decide to marry him.”

Saraswati was alarmed at this. She remembered the dream she had seen that day. Its memory frightened her.

“What do you want to do?”
“Let me live at this ashram for a couple of days before I take any final decision.”
Devigram - the village currently situated in Sindh – has come to life since morning. Its ritual activities and chores have been usual, almost the same with no change in them for the past seven years. In fact, they are beyond any change. But today it was a different occasion. One could observe a kind of excitement in everybody as they performed their puja and pradakshina, uttered their prayers, or chanted mantras with a rosary. Today after seven years, it is an occasion for a great festival in the village. The sadhak and the sadhika will end their sadhana and will start a long journey towards Jwalamukhi Devi. When they would return from there, the sadhika Chandralekha would become an image of Jwalamukhi Devi and the sadhak will become the ninth accomplished man.

This seven-year long sadhana was as difficult as it was peculiar. For sadhana, they would select a man of twenty and a woman of sixteen from the followers of the goddess after observing the horoscope and chiromancy. They had to stay in different rooms in the compound of the goddess. These rooms were without doors. There was one room for the goddess apart from the two rooms. It also didn’t have any doors. One small metal lamp for the goddess kept burning there. The sadhak and the sadhika had to add ghee and lighten the lamp in turns and keep it burning continuously. This room also did not have doors. But it was deep inside and the passage was so complex that, the wind could not put out the lamp. The lamp kept burning even during the storm. People took it as a miracle of the goddess.

The sadhak and the sadhika had to live in the compound for seven years and observe celibacy. If it was broken, it would soon be known to others through some miracle of the goddess. The scriptures of Uttar Marg contained some tales showing how the breaking of celibacy was made known to people. The sadhak and the sadhika had to listen to these tales one by one in the early morning. Their daily activities were carefully and minutely planned out. The sadhak had to take bath in the early morning and perform puja to the goddess that was yet to enter the body of the sadhika. The sadhika wearing one cloth - they were not supposed to wear stitched clothes - would
lie down with her face towards the north facing the sky. The sadhak would sit at her pillow and would put a dot of vermilion on her forehead. He, then, would touch his forehead to hers so that he also got the imprint. He had to sit around her waist and offer a red oleander on her navel without touching it. Then he had to sit at her feet and touch them with both the eyes. A quack would remain present there during this procedure. He would check their pulse which must, as a rule, remain normal at the end. The quack would check the pulse three times in a day; early in the morning, at noon and in the evening. They received their one time meal at noon. They were not supposed to do any work. The only duty they were assigned was to keep the lamp burning all the time. The lamp was so small that it had to be filled with ghee now and again during the day or night. There was nothing around the lamp with which it could be lighted again if it was extinguished. People would soon come to know about it if such a thing occurred. In case it happened, it had to be rekindled after a ceremony and the sadhak and the sadhika had to start their seven-year long sadhana all-over again.

One of them had to stay awake at one time to fill the lamp with ghee. When the ghee was consumed, the other would be woken from sleep to fill the lamp. The procedure of awaking was peculiar. They had to touch each other with the red oleander flower at the forehead or at the thumb of the feet.

This sadhana was indeed very difficult. That’s why, according to their scriptures, only eight men and women could accomplish this in Kali Yuga. This was the ninth couple and today was the last day of their tapascharya. That was the reason why the sound of the gong rung by the devotees appeared to be different since morning. The crowd larger than usual had gathered to witness the puja of the goddess in the form of the sadhika. When Chandralekha came before all with her beautiful and fair body enveloped in a white cloth, all stood speechless. Chandralekha arrived there with slow pace and slept on the altar. Then Harkant entered slowly from the front wearing a dhoti, the end of which was hanging over his shoulder. He sat at the pillow and put a dot on her head and touched his forehead to hers. He stood up from there and while sitting near her waist, he looked at her face. He could visualize all those mornings before his eyes during which he had done the same thing. He could see
some uncertain future before his eyes. He became aware of the fact that this was the last time he was casting a glance on her beautiful body and face. He sat down there, but his hand trembled while he was offering the flower. He took a deep breath and controlled himself again. He stood up and touched her feet with his eyes. She stood up calmly. Her face turned red, resulting from the efforts in standing up. The quack checked their pulse which was normal as usual. With that their hardest test came to an end. The quack smiled at the thought that he was checking their pulse for the last time and left. The crowd also scattered silently. Harkant and Chandralekha returned to their rooms.

As usual, a huge crowd had gathered in the morning to attend the tale-reading session today. Pauranik of the scriptures entered with a devotee who was carrying the bundle of books and took his seat. The book was designed in such a way that it would take exactly seven years to read if the Pauranik read one chapter a day. There was no need to repeat anything. The listeners were not in a mood to remain silent today. They were discussing about the activities and changes that were going to take place tomorrow and about the sadhak and the sadhika; how fortunate are these sadhak and sadhika! For how beautiful and impressive they appear today than what they were earlier on! how much love they have received from the villagers, how loving they were towards the children and all that. This was the same Pauranik who had chosen them. The writer of the book must have known this would happen on the last day so he had made the last tale shorter. Pauranik informed the listeners that the tale he was going to read that day was short. He kept four pages of the book before him. The listeners could only see the blank back side of the pages. Only four pages! This gave some respite to the listeners. Pauranik began the story.”

“Once Bhagwati Kamakhya Devi was having a light chat with her friends named Jaya and Vijya. All of a sudden she raised her hand and signaled to her friends to stop. She, then, meditated and invoked Bhramari Devi. When Bhramari Devi’s voice declared her arrival, her voice was heard, Kamakhya Devi said, “My sadhak devotee living in Vindyatavi will go to have the blessing of Vindyavasini Devi tomorrow. I want you to take his life by stinging him in the form of a wasp at the
precipice of the river Narmada. Bhagwati Bhamari emitted the same voice and left.

Jaya and Vijya asked her, “Devi, if you don’t mind, let us know what is his fault.”

Devi said, “Today the sadhak told the sadhika that he had a mole on his left arm according to the scripture. The sadhika told him that she also had a red mole on the left side of her navel. The sadhak asked her to show it to him. When she showed the mole, he touched there with lust.” Jaya asked again, “If you were talking about the same sadhak, it was the last night of his sadhana. Why did he choose to break his vow of celibacy on the last night after seven years?”

The listeners gasped at the words spoken by Pauranik. Harkant and Chandralekha cast a solemn glance at each other. Pauranik continued:

“A similar incident took place during Treta Yuga. Katyayani Devi had explained this thing with an example. The king of Shankpur named Indrasen had got a temple of the Divine mother Shakti built during his time. He wanted to install a kalash and its stand to be put at the top of the temple. A Brahmin sculpture, expert like Vishvakarma, lived ten miles away from the capital. The king promised gold to one uneducated Brahmin and asked him to go there and bring back the earthen samples of kalash and the stand. The sculpture would never touch a Shudra so this Brahmin was sent to him. The sculpture arranged the earthen kalash and the stand on a wooden sheet and put it on the head of the Brahmin and said emphatically, “It is a bit heavy. Walk slowly and make sure you don’t bend it while you are putting it down.” The Brahmin took great care all the way, but when he neared the temple he was lost in his dreams of getting gold. When he arrived at the temple, he hastily got rid of the burden bringing it down with a thud. The earthen kalash broke into pieces. As a result, they could not perform the ceremony at the auspicious moment and the Brahmin didn’t get his reward. In the same way, if the sadhak thinks that he is being burdened and waits eagerly for the time to end and taste the fruits of his hardship he has undergone and loses patience, he will not receive the grace of the goddess. The same thing had happened to this sadhak.”

Pauranik finished his tale and put the paper back in the book. All the listeners including the sadhak and the sadhika stood up with a serious face. The
crowd scattered away slowly. Pauranik tied his bundle and went away casting a loving glance at the sadhak and the sadhika. The compound became lifeless again.

Harkant sat on the steps dangling his legs and Chandralekha sat on a carpet with folded legs at some distance facing him. After some time Harkant said, “This scripture writer is very intelligent. It talks about the last night on our last night!”

Chandralekha said, “Yes, Harkant, intelligent indeed, but I don’t think impatience can become an obstacle. However I don’t feel any kind of impatience. Do you feel anything of the sort?”

“No. All I think of is the future.”

“I also feel the same way and it makes me fearful of the unknown. We had to follow the procedure till now. I wonder what shall follow after this!”

“There is nothing for you to fear. The goddess herself will reside in your body. You are not supposed to do anything.”

“How will she reside in my body? I haven’t experienced a single sign in my body that she is going to do so. What will happen to my identity when that happens? Will I cease to exist as myself? Or will we share this body one by one?”

“In my opinion you will continue living your life as earlier. You should feel one with the goddess and feel one with Her.”

“But I haven’t so far experienced anything like that.”

“That means you don’t have to worry about it. The goddess will take care of it Herself.”

“But why didn’t she do that to anyone so far? She is omnipotent and can do anything. She can do that with anyone.”

“It’s not so. She needs a pious body to reside in.”

“That’s what I mean. I feel a bit shy, hesitant and fearful to admit that I have grown more pious after all these years. If I tell this openly, people may label me as an atheist.”

“Is it not possible that you yourself are unaware of the changes that have taken place within you during all these years?”
“It could be if I had not thought over it consciously. We have heard of this in many tales. We have heard that we can become holier thorough our tapascharya and a certain rite or that we could acquire divine power through the vow of celibacy. I think of myself when I hear such things. I have never felt satisfied with myself. What is your experience in this matter?

“I will remain a devotee even at the end. At the most, I worry about the new procedures. It is said that there is a temple of Holy mother Jwalamukhi in the east. A secret book would be brought here from there when our sadhana is over. All the rituals described in that book will be followed. Our path is called Uttar Marg because of two reasons. One reason is that our path is more different and unique from the right and left paths. The second reason is that our goddess is in the north and we follow traditions of that part.”

All of a sudden Chandralekha spoke in a startled voice, “Oh! It is time to fill ghee in the lamp. Both ran towards the temple. Fortunately, the flame was burning. It was Chandralekha’s turn, so she filled the lamp with ghee. While returning she said, “I was so much frightened. My heart is still throb bing.”

Harkant said, “The author of that book has, in a way, rightly noted that one needs to be quite careful towards the end.”

The last day and the last night were taken care of. The last rituals were to be performed the next day.

That day a bigger lamp befitting the occasion was lighted. Some of the children and others stayed there to take care of the lamp and the rest of the devotees had to go in the steamer to have the blessings of the goddess and return after doing pradakshina of the rock. All knew that there was a sign of a trident at the rock. It was difficult to find a sailor or a devotee who could lead them in the steamer towards that place as the occasion to go there and do pradkshina came once in a while. This time they could find only one blind sailor who knew the traditions and the place.

It was the ninth day of the new moon in the month of Shravana, the tenth month in the Hindu calendar. It was said that if they set off in the morning on this day, the trident of Jwalamukhi could be seen after they reach the rock. It was the only
time when it didn’t submerge into the sea. The steamer full of devotees started sailing on the waters of the Sindhu river. All the people were in the innermost chambers of the steamer. A special place was prepared with two planks for Harkant and Chandralekha. Harkant was seated there at the mast. All the devotees were ecstatic at the sight of the speed with which the steamer was sailing. The distant places appeared to be passing like an illusion. The steamer also was moving in the water silently. The people on the steamer were joyfully singing and chatting among themselves. Some sat as if frightened. Pauranik, sitting near the helm, was feeling quite happy that day. His joy knew no bounds as his lifetime wish was going to be fulfilled.

They reached the origin of the Sindhu river. The great waves of the sea were tossing as if wanting to toss the entire world. The sound of the waves made the devotees stop singing their religious songs. It was the place where the river and the sea merged. The sky above, the waters below or the faraway lands, nothing was static. All of a sudden there was a storm accompanied with rain. It was raining heavily and the fishermen could hardly see anything further. Many of the devotees were in a semi-unconscious state. Chandralekha sat on a raised plank. Harkant stood near the mast curiously observing the storm. Soon the fishermen started shouting and ran helter-skelter to pack the sail. The great waves made the steamer unsteady. The helmsman saw the whirlpool faraway. It should be on the left side, but today it was on the right side. He realised that it was not possible to divert the way of the steamer. He shouted at all and informed them that the steamer could not resist the whirlpool attack. When Harkant heard this, he asked Chandralekha to come near him instantly. She stood up with staggering steps and reached him. Harkant helped her stand still. He, then, embraced her in the staggering steamer and kissed her several times with intensity stronger than that of the storm raging before them as if they were a husband and wife even in their previous lives.

No one could notice this as most of them were rolling in the chamber like bundles. Those who were conscious were in worry to save themselves and their dear ones. There was chaos everywhere. It was only Pauranik who was looking at the sadhak and the sadhika with the hope that he had nursed for years. When he saw
what had happened, he asked the helmsman to navigate the steamer backwards. Soon an order to navigate the steamer was given to all. The sailors tried to save the ship with a renewed hope and they succeeded. As they came back to the origin of the river, the storm became calm. Pauranik asked all to get off on the nearby bank. No one understood what had happened. Some felt it was the wrath of Jwalamukhi. There were some who believed they have come back after pradakshina.

Pauranik asked all to go to Devigram. After all had had their lunch, he organised a meeting of the learned people and the devotees. The sadhak and the sadhika were asked to stand in front of all. Addressing all, Pauranik said, “The sadhak and the sadhika have broken their sadhana. The systematic inspection as per the tradition will take place tomorrow. The sadhak and the sadhika will have to live in the guest-house outside the compound as they cannot live there now. I hand this rule-book over to them, as per the rule, that would let them know what punishment they would be imposed if they are proved guilty and what would happen to them if they are found to be innocent. The meeting will take place tomorrow at this place and at the same time.” All present there gave a deep sigh. They felt pity for the sadhak and the sadhika, but were helpless against the laws of the goddess.

Both went to the guest-house. It seemed to them as if they had landed on an island after shipwreck. They remained speechless for a while. After some time, Chandralekha stood up and fetched a glass of water for Harkant. She also drank some water and asked Harkant to go through the rules. Soon the women of the village came to meet them in groups and said, “We haven’t seen anything. Even men say that they haven’t seen anything. No one has any proof against you except Pauranik. You should plead that you are innocent.” It was surprising that no one asked what had really happened there. Maybe they feared that they might talk about their break of vow. All would have to provide proof of guilt in that case and Divine Mother would be angry with them if they didn’t.

All left at night. It was dark everywhere. Harkant was sitting on the slab of the guest-house. Chandralekha came to him. She asked him to make sure there was no one around them. He went outside and returned and sat. It was first time she sat
beside him touching his shoulder. She said, “Have you gone through all the rules? What have you decided?”

“I have decided that I should get out of your life by accepting the wrong I did.”

“Is this your final decision?”

“All I want to say is that I ask for forgiveness for creating such a disturbance in your life.”

“Why are you speaking such words, Harkant? Why do you want to desert me in this way? I accepted your call in the face of death yesterday and I want to stay with you till we die. I don’t worry about being found guilty or innocent. I just want to stay with you. I know the goddess will forgive us.”

“Chitralekha, it is not about the goddess. It is all about the rules and regulations which are considered supreme. We have to decide according to them.”

Chandralekha tried to understand the expressions on his face in the darkness. She said, “Let me know the rules. What will they do with us if we both accept the misconduct?”

“There isn’t any benefit in doing it. If both are found guilty, they’ll have to live away from each other for lifetime. They are not allowed to meet each other and if they did so, they would receive death penalty. The fallen sadhak is allowed to go out of the village with the sign of a trident on his forehead but the sadhika can never go out of the village.”

This pained her heart all the more. She somehow kissed him on his forehead and said, “If that is the rule, we will plead that we are innocent. In the absence of any proof, we won’t get any punishment. We will leave the village afterwards.”

“I thought over it earlier, but I think it is not possible. If we are innocent, we should worship the goddess. The lamp has extinguished now. It should be lit with appropriate procedure and we should take the tapascharya for seven years again.”

When she heard ‘seven years’, she shuddered with the memory of those seven years of severe tapascharya. She sat there speechless for a long time. Harkant said,
“It is the only way for us to remain alive; the same lamp, the same worshipping and the same tales.”

“I don’t want to live that sort of meaningless life. The one moment with you on the steamer is more significant to me than those seven years. I can live with you in a condition like this where we don’t know what future has decided for us: life or death? Harkant, I won’t be able to live with you for seven years in that way.”

“That’s why I told you to let me plead guilty. It was entirely my fault that...”

Chandralekha stopped him from finishing the sentence by a kiss. She said, “You started it again.”

“I don’t want to create more trouble for you. A sadhak has the right to demand death penalty for himself. I have made plans how I will demand it for me.”

Chandralekha embraced him tightly and kissed him on the forehead and the face as if surrendering herself to him. After some time she asked, “Tell me honestly whether the sadhika possesses that right or not.”

Harkant kept quiet. She tightened her embrace all the more as if she would get the answer from him if she did that. She said:

“It would be a sin if you don’t tell me the truth. I don’t want to live with you for seven years if I am not allowed to call you mine. Do you think I would continue my life after you die? I would forcefully cling to you if you don’t allow me to be with you. If you consume poison to end your life, I would snatch away the bottle from you and die with you. If you commit suicide by drowning into Sindhu, I would jump after you. Even if you desert me with any of your tricks, be assured that I am going to die a terrible death very soon. Please, don’t harass me anymore.”

“Lekha...” He took her in his arms and caressed her back.

“It means the sadhika has the right. We will die together. It is final now. What have you decided about death?”

“It is written here that there is round shaped grass leaf in the south-east outside the compound. The sadhak and the sadhika are asked to chew the leaves which bring death to them.”
“That statement is enough for me.” She said and kept caressing her hand gently on Harkant for a long time.

After some time she said, “If the poison is already there why should we waste for the procedure and the meetings to take place? We would bring an end to our lives late at night today. We will not have to say whether we are guilty or innocent. They can do whatever they want after our death. Go and bring those leaves. No...not right now. Let the moon of the tenth day set lest its poisonous quality is diluted if you bring it too early.

She said after some time, “Kant, what a bliss I feel at this moment of life! Isn’t it strange? All experience death for once only. We will experience it twice and together.”

Peace prevailed in the atmosphere for a while. She said, “Harkant, why are you silent?”

He moved his hand over her head and back and at last said, “Lekha, I became eager to kiss you, but did you feel the same that time or ......”

Lekha kissed his face before he could finish. Harkant said again, “But tell me....” She kissed him again.

“What are you doing?”

“You did it to your heart’s content when we were in steamer. Now it’s my turn. I want to square it. But now the rest of it I will keep for the next birth.”

The smile of this couple illuminated that deathly dark for a while!

* 

_Pauranik_ and the devotees found the two bodies sleeping side by side in deep slumber in the morning.

_Pauranik_, after this incident, never got a sadhak or a sadhika. Devigram turned into shambles with the passage of time. The only person remained there was _Pauranik_ himself. He added, in traditional style, one chapter on the doom of Uttar Marg to the book.
I was fond of dogs ever since my childhood. We kept company with puppies from the beginning. As we grew, we took care of the bitch right from the time she was pregnant. We kept discussing the numbers of puppies a particular bitch gave birth to and their resemblance to the bitch or the dog. We brought shira for the bitch from the neighbours. I had always felt a kind of curiosity for the dogs ever since. I observed their each and every movement. There were few things regarding them which I could not understand. I studied a lot many books but couldn’t figure them out. The dogs often keep barking at one another with a particular sound all night. They are not fighting with anyone. A lonely dog keeps barking with a droning sound with its neck stretched upward. I wondered why they did that. The more I thought of that, the more confused it made me. Sometimes I couldn’t even sleep at night thinking about it.

* 

So desperate I was to find out the reason that once I decided to be born as a dog in my next birth. I started my tap for Brahma’s blessing. He appeared to me after one thousand years. I saw him sitting with folded legs, each of his hands carrying the four books of Vedas and chanting shlokas from the four Vedas with his four mouths. He asked me what I wanted in sign language while continuing his chanting. I said, “My lord, if you are pleased with my tap, grant me birth as a dog. Brahma kept reading with all his four faces. He, then, uttered “Oh!” with his fifth mouth to suggest his negation.

Brahma had five faces. He lost one when he was attracted towards Saraswati. That face could utter the nasal sound ‘ŋ’. For example: when we chant ‘Gananam twa ganapatim hawamahe’ (O master of the troop of Shiva's attendants! We invoke you.) The nasal sound of Ganapatim is written with a particular sign which is read as ganapating.

Brahma raised his eyes as if he wanted to ask why I wanted to take birth as a dog. I replied that I wanted to understand behaviour of the dog. He again uttered the
same negation. I asked the reason for it. He became invisible with the same sound again.

I couldn’t decide whether he was displeased with my tap or he didn’t want to grant my wish. I decided to continue my tap. How long would he not grant my wish?

My tap continued for another one thousand years. Brahmaji appeared again. I said, “My lord, you are considered the father of language. Why do you use an utterance which is not considered a language nor can it be written when you talk to me? Why don’t you talk when you choose to appear before me?”

At last he said, “Why do you want to be born as a dog when you have already taken birth as a man who is considered the best among all that would free you from all worries?”

I said, “My lord, the truth is that we don’t believe in such freedom. You are showing admiration for human beings, but according to modern belief human beings can’t experience any real feeling as human beings. All the feelings have taken their worst form in the name of culture. No one can feel the true feeling of love these days.”

“Don’t you find love in your life?”

“No, it is not that. I am leading quite a happy life. I was also going to inform you that I want the same wife as I have now when I return to my birth as a man. I don’t want any other woman as my wife.”

“It seems that you are not fully aware of what you want and what you don’t want. Reconsider everything and then come to me.”

Having said this, Brahma disappeared again. I started my tap again. I also pondered over what else to ask for during that period. Brahma appeared again after one thousand years.

“So I hope you have considered everything this time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Tell me.”

“I want to return to my birth as a man.... I mean, after my life as a dog when I want to return to my life as a man and ...”
“Why? You should remain a dog if you think it is better to be born as a dog. If you wish I turn your wife into a bitch and send her to you.”

“How can she remain my wife the way she is now once she turns into a bitch? I don’t want that. I just want to reborn as a human being and want the same woman as my wife.”

“Alright.”

“But my lord, what if I suffer a lot in my birth as a dog?”

“Why should you ask that question to me? Once you choose to be born as a dog, you should be ready to accept all the pains and pleasures that an ordinary dog experiences in its life.”

“My lord. Please grant me a wish that I can return to my birth as a human being any moment if I have to suffer a lot in that form.”

“Even demons were more intelligent than you when it came to asking for a boon after tap. Now listen, if you are born as a dog, you won’t find one single misery that would arouse a feeling in you to return to your birth as a man. You yourself have gone through a lot of pain in your life, but have you ever thought of giving your life up? Yes, man can commit suicide, but animals can’t even do that. Besides, once you become a true dog, you won’t desire to be anything else. All other animals are wiser than you in that case.”

“My lord, I want you to turn me into a man the moment I experience a lot of pain and tears well up in my eyes.”

“No animal except man ever cries so they will never have teary eyes. Their eyes may be watery the way we have when some small particles enter them. It is only humans who can cry and laugh.”

“But my lord, poets like us often describe cows’ crying in our poems.”

“You do the same thing with the sky and the tree.”

“In that case, my lord, I want you to decide whether I am suffering acute pain or not and turn me into a man again according to that.”

“You are indeed nincompoop! I have already made you a man. Don’t you think I must have done that with some consideration?”
“I got you. You can do one thing; turn me into a man the moment my wife experiences a lot of pain. After all, you are going to give me back the same wife.”

“What if she loses her love for you in your absence and she never feels unhappy in your absence?”

“That won’t happen. If it does, I won’t mind continuing living as a dog till the rest of my life.”

“Amen.”

*

It was a hot summer day. The sun was oppressing all and sundry. Kaliya - one of the dogs of Pandya colony came from somewhere panting. His long thin tongue was hanging out dripping saliva. The water in the gutter near Pandya’s house had dried down creating garbage all around. Kaliya went there and moved around three four times before he settled himself on the garbage. He put his head on his stretched legs and started panting. He heard some noise in the distance and he stood up with alacrity and ran towards it. He was running swiftly. The moment he saw Kabra near the loaf, he got frightened and fell down while trying to stop himself. He started barking as he fell down. Kabra was a strong dog. Kaliya managed himself and started saying good words to Kabra. Kabra smelled him and found him to be truly obedient. He went away from the loaf and Kaliya and sat at a cold place in a shade. Kaliya stood up, moved towards the loaf with fearful steps, looked at Kabra, showing his obedience to him. He took the loaf, tucked his tail between the legs and went away first with slow steps and then started running swiftly. He settled at a place and started eating the loaf at leisure. He barked in between when he felt somebody around. After he finished the loaf, he went to a gutter where he saw a weak lame dog whose hind legs always kept hanging while he moved. He always seemed to be ready to make a show of the fear and weakness that he suffered from. He had kept his mouth in such a way that one could see his teeth along with gums. He barked slightly and slid away. Kaliya sat at his routine place with a sense of pride on his face and tongue hanging out.
Kaliya was growing young. His tail was getting fatter. He was well aware of his place in that locality. He knew his strength was no match for Kabra so he showed his obedience to him. He treated others with his head held high and with an arched tail. He had started feeling attracted towards the bitches. He grew excited with their smell. He stood near bitches and started wagging his tail. Those bitches responded to him in the same manner. Kabra reached there all of a sudden and Kaliya had to leave the place. The bitches surrounded kabra who left the place after urinating.

There was a Bhat colony adjacent to this locality. There was one street that separated these two areas. It had become the boundary line for the dogs of both the colonies. Chanakya has said that neighbouring states are natural enemies. Many a times the dogs of both the areas lined up at one’s own boundary line and barked at one another loudly. The bravest of dogs would look into the eyes of their opponents and then call them to fight with them by throwing dust and small pebbles towards them with their hind legs. Other dogs who were not strong enough barked at one other with a moderate voice and it was difficult to say whether they were challenging their opponents or they were just barking. At last they’d mark their boundary by urinating over there and left.

One day such a dog war was going on. The dogs on both the sides were barking at one another. Kaliya became extremely enraged and in that rage he bit that lame dog who was crying in a moderate voice. The poor lame dog fell down screaming. Kabra reached the spot. Kaliya changed his place and started barking again from there. Kabra was barking and throwing dust standing at the same place. Kaliya was moving here and there. He let out a sigh when he could not suppress his anger. In between he would take one round towards the bitches and start barking, emitting all sorts of voices. Once he felt so angry that he crossed the street and reached his opponents’ area and challenged a strong dog. Both attacked each other standing on their hind legs. Some other dogs gathered and pushed Kaliya. Kaliya fell down and the dogs started biting him. Fortunately Kabra and other dogs reached the spot and a fierce war ensued. The opponents had to backtrack and Kaliya got free from their clutches. The Pandya colony dogs urinated at many places in Bhat colony
to mark their victory. It was only after they left that the Bhat colony dogs could come back. They urinated at their boundary and continued barking. After some loitering they went away from there.

Once while Kaliya was returning from somewhere completely lost in himself, he smelled a bitch around. He moved towards her like a ball fired from the cannon. She was a complete stranger to him. She was frightened when she saw him. Embarrassed, she looked down and tucked her tail between the legs when Kaliya approached her. Shaking his tail, he swelled his chest and tried to woo her by uttering some comforting words. As she got over her fear, she started responding to Kaliya. It was at this time that two bitches from Pandya colony came to them running and barking. Breathing heavily, they appeared to be fat as the fur around their neck was raised. That bitch ran away as she saw them. Those bitches followed her. Kaliya also started barking in a moderate voice just for the sake of barking. He too followed her. He took one round and then came back. Those bitches returned after smelling him on the way. Kaliya ran after those bitches and left after praising them by shaking his tail.

A terrible war broke out once again among the dogs from both the areas. The dogs wanted to end the wars once and for all, so they were attacking one another furiously. Kabra and Kaliya were the chief fighters. The war, however, didn’t end with any definite result. The fighters of both the sides got tired at last and returned to their respective areas. They kept quiet only when they went far away from one another.

Kabra got hurt in this war and he could feel weakness the next day. He could climb up a wall at one jump and would run there with pride. Today he failed to do so. He started barking angrily upon this failure. He ran around the wall trying to climb it but couldn’t succeed. Kaliya accompanied him but he gave respect to Kabra and never dared to climb the wall. He climbed up the wall with one jump today. Kabra could not divert his eyes for some time when he saw. He went to some other place and sat there.

Kabra was getting older each day. He got lame in one leg forever. He developed coughing. Both these problems became worse simultaneously so much so
that one could not say whether he stumbled because he was lame, or he stumbled because of coughing. He endured all the pains bravely. He lost his interest in all the things except food. He didn’t oppose when his place was given to Kaliya.

Now Kaliya was the strongest dog in Pandya colony. He was the master of all the bitches in the area. He was so powerful that he could loiter anywhere in Bhat colony and bite the dogs. Three children of Pandya colony had been so enamoured by his strength that they became its friend. They fed him and took him with them when they went to the outskirts of the village. They encouraged Kaliya to fight with the fierce dogs in other areas. Kaliya always emerged the winner in these fights. He kept his tail arched forever. The colour of his body had also grown bright. He had also become a favourite dog in the area.

One of these boys got married and they left to reach the bride’s home. They also took Kaliya with them. He sometimes walked under the cart, sometimes walked after it. At times he would go round in the front and mix with others. The bridegroom would keep Kaliya with him much to the dislike of his parents. All the invited guests had developed a liking for him. On their way the bridegroom and his friends helped him win many fights with their sticks.

When they reached the bride’s place, Kaliya’s needs were taken care of in Jani colony. All were engaged in one or the other work on the day of wedding. The bridegroom had to behave solemnly and his friends were engaged in their service as best men. Kaliya went for a stroll in the village all by himself. Three-four fierce dogs attacked him in one street and started biting him.

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“Why are you heaving such sighs when your condition is normal now? The doctor says there is nothing to worry about. Who is killing you?”

I suddenly heard her familiar voice.

I opened my eyes. Yes, it was my wife.

“Who told you someone is going to kill me?” I asked her.

“You were crying those words in your dream.”
“Yes, I saw in my dream that some dogs were biting me at every place. I wonder why I feel the pain here if it was just a dream! Look here… and here.”

“That is because of injections. The doctor has said that you will suffer from that pain for some time.”

“I saw that I was being attacked by the dogs. It was indeed a strange dream. It was...”

“Now don’t utter one single word. I am happy that everything is normal. I don’t understand your dream, but I do understand why dogs bit you.”

“Tell me.”

“Don’t interrupt me while I am speaking. You were suffering from typhoid. Once when you were playing with your favourite dog Prahlad, he bit you and died after two days. The doctor had a doubt that the dog might have been infected with rabies. Your condition worsened as a result of typhoid. You often felt drowsy. You were given injections on your stomach for rabies along with those for typhoid. You mistook those injections as dogs. Now don’t say anything.”

“But the dream was all together a different one.”

“I told you not to speak anything.”

“Why have you grown so thin? I don’t want you to fall sick or I will have to serve you.”

“Why should I fall sick in order to get you to serve me? I want to enjoy your service when I am quite healthy. You will know what it is to serve others when you massage the legs and stay up at night. You have fallen sick just because you would stay up secretly reading the books even when the doctor asked you to take rest. I thank god that He has made me strong enough or I would have died much before you would have recovered from illness.”

“But...”

“Keep silence. Your condition has improved just now and you have started your droning again! You mumbled in your delirium when you suffered from fever and you are doing the same thing when you are normal. Let me rub the medicine at the place where injections were given, so that the dogs stop biting you.”
“I just want you to listen to my dream.”
“I will run away from here if you utter one single word. Here I go...”
“Okay, I won’t speak anything now, but you would have to listen to that once I get well.”
“I will tolerate everything once you get well.”

I told her the entire story after five-six days. At the end I said:
“Maybe it was my illusion. But I did come back to my birth as a man and got you back as my wife.”
“You praised the bitches as a dog. Now you are praising me!”
“You are indeed very stubborn. Just think about something else. It is said that many of those great and intelligent men and women of the world got the truth behind certain things in their dream; while they were sleeping. Can you give me one name of any person who has had similar experience of animal life?”
“I can’t help myself from telling you the truth. The truth is that you knew everything that you saw in your dream. Neither your friends nor I have any curiosity regarding it. But you yourself have told me everything about it. Now tell me whether you could get the secret for which you undertook tap for thousands of years or not.”
“You are right. Though Brahma appeared to be quite an innocent man, he has, in reality, cheated me.”
“That’s why he was not willing to grant your desire to be born as a dog. Obdurate as you are, He could not convince you and so granted your wish.”
Godavari was extremely exasperated today. She had gone to help others roll papads at the wedding ceremony of her distant cousin’s daughter. But there was one woman, pretending that she did not know much, asked the other, “Have you heard of the strange happening in the village?”

“No.”
“I have heard that priest Shadanan is going to have a memorial pillar built.”
“What does memorial pillar mean?”
“You should ask Godavari.”
“What is your husband planning to do, Godavari?”
“How do we know anything about our husband’s affairs?”
“Do you mean you don’t know anything about it? I know you are just putting on an act.”
“She behaves as if she knows nothing. In reality, she must be feeling ecstatic about it.”
“Of course, the memorial pillar will also have her name on it.”

That band of women had really embarrassed the poor, quiet and simple-minded Godavari. While rolling the papads they kept taunting by pointing their rolling-pins towards her just as Mynas keep pricking the scuttling rat. She was reduced to tears. It didn’t matter to those women whether she looked at them and said anything or not, whether she listened to them and cried or not. They would observe every movement of her to level their next taunt at her. Godavari didn’t possess the art of taunting back anyone. She didn’t even know how to guard herself against such taunts by showing anger or at least by crying. When some of the women rose to leave, she also stood up without giving any apparent reason. As she turned her back towards them, she could hear their giggles.

She thought it was just because of her husband that she had to suffer pain today. He would never listen to her. When she reached home, she tried to engage...
herself in the household chores but couldn’t do so. She lay down on a bed and started sobbing.

After some time, Shadanan came there humming something. He sat on a stool and asked for water. When he didn’t get water, he realised that Godavari was sobbing. He went to her and said, “I always find you crying when I am in a happy mood. See, I have created the next line for the memorial pillar.”

“Don’t mention that memorial pillar to me. You keep busy at the court, but I have to tolerate what other people keep taunting all the time. I went to Mehtas to help with rolling papads and all the women present there started making fun of me talking about the memorial pillar. You won’t take my advice, but let me tell you our caste-people criticise you for this.”

“You really don’t understand the fact that this memorial pillar will exist even when these critics are all dead: Yoarateenaam Hi Moordhni Prakatitamahima Dutta-Padapraharaah (I am the one who would kick my foes’ heads and show my power standing on their bodies.)

Shadanan was blessed with the gift of the gab. Even his foes, who were great in number, could not stop themselves from praising him for his style of speaking Sanskrit. There was no surprise if Godavari, innocent as she was, fell for it. She asked the meaning of the line. In his reply, Shadanan explained to her everything about the memorial pillar, how the relationship with the state was established and why different caste sections came into existence. He said:

“The king of the kingdom was getting older now. He didn’t have any son. He had one daughter who was thirty-five years old; still a spinster. She was quite ugly and no one wanted to marry her. I somehow fixed her marriage. I disguised myself in the form of a mendicant and left with a disciple. I had carried a load of money, diamonds, precious stones and pearls with me. There was a kingdom called Adripur around 150 miles far from here in the south. I knew that its king was old and didn’t have a son. When it was very near, we rode our horses so fast that they died when we reached the outskirts of the kingdom.”

“But why did you do so?”

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“To show a miracle. It was early morning. People had gathered there. The disciple said in front of them that I wanted to stay there. He also told them that I would do something for their welfare if they were fortunate enough. We buried the money at different places and later I informed about it to the people using some magic power, pretending that I possessed some mystical power. We became quite famous. The people dug up a cave for us. We became more famous after we helped a Brahmin marry off his daughter and helped him arrange a luncheon for the whole Brahmin caste. The king himself came to meet me after three months. He asked my blessings for a son. After a lonely meditation for three days, I informed him that he wouldn’t have a son until he married the woman that could beget a son for him. It was for you that she didn’t marry elsewhere. I made him believe that it was a miracle and said to him, ‘There is a kingdom hundred and fifty miles away from this place. It was the famous kingdom Alkapuri in Satya Yuga. The daughter of that king was a Yakshakanya in her former incarnation. You had rejected her in your last incarnation so she is there still waiting for you. Honour her and she will give you a son.’ The king tried to give me the reward for the help which I didn’t accept. I told him that it was time for us to leave your kingdom. I also informed him that I would be able to help him for six months without being physically present there, but after that he would not even get that help from me.

“I poisoned my disciple before going to bed that night. I ran away from that place after I had laid the quilt in such a manner that people would think that I am sleeping.”

“You poisoned your disciple! How hard-hearted man you are!”

“I had no options. He might divulge our secret to others whether in that kingdom or here. I would be doomed if that happened. Wise people are right when they say that one should never share one’s secrets with one’s wives.”

Godavari controlled herself as she wanted to know the complete secret.

Shadanan continued, “And you know that the king came within six months and married the daughter of the king.”

“What if they are not blessed with a son?”
“I’ve never said that they would surely be blessed with a son. If they don’t, their dynasty will come to an end as has happened with many families. My concern was only to get her married somewhere. Do you know why I did all this?” His voice rose while speaking. “Do you know? - Yoarateenaam Hi Moordhni Prakattitamahima DuttaPadaprahahar. (I am the one who would kick my foes’ heads and show my power standing on their bodies.) I’ve destroyed all my foes. I am nothing if I don’t destroy the Shuklas.”

“He had married a woman belonging to our caste in an unjust manner. We married two women belonging to his caste. And listen, it is just because I am married to you and a man is not allowed to marry twice in our caste that I cannot marry that lady who is engaged to that pandit. What is her name?.... Yes, I remembered ....Harilakshmi. I would do something that would break the engagement and would marry her. I am influential enough to do that. It is beyond her power to refuse me. However, I don’t regret it.”

Having said this, he became aware that Godavari was looking at him wearing an angry and frightened look at the very idea of having a co-wife. Nonetheless, he continued with the same enthusiasm, “You are just another woman who takes such a trivial matter to the heart. You won’t learn not to worry over trivial matters when serious matters are being discussed. Now stand up. Don’t waste your time over trivial things. I am not going to marry her. The evening is falling. Start preparation for the evening puja. In the meantime let me have a bath.

Restless, tired and feeling defeated, Godavari turned towards household chores.

Days passed. Shadanan wrote a eulogy for the king. He arranged the words in such a way that the eulogy carried his name. He selected the place for the memorial pillar which was right in front of the house of his enemy Madhusudan. He himself purchased a stone suitable for the memorial pillar and inscribed the shlokas written by him on it and decided upon the time for its ritual ceremony and informed the king about it all. He achieved another big victory on the very first day of worshipping. The man with whom Harilakshmi was betrothed died and she returned to her parents. On
the other hand Godavari fell ill and died soon. He married Harilakshmi by forcing her father in every way he could. He performed the rituals for the memorial pillar keeping Harilakshmi by his side as a wife in front of Madhusudan’s house.

Shadanan, somehow, could not enjoy this victory to the full. Once while he was checking Godavari’s vein, as if she expressed her philosophy of life in a sentence, she said: “You killed the horse and that disciple, but you won’t have to kill me in order to marry Harilakshmi. I would die on my own.”

The greatest defeat one feels is when someone comes to know one’s innermost secret plans. That sentence kept haunting him. It had created a kind of fear in him.

The king died after five years without an heir and a distant cousin of the king came to the throne. The way neighbouring states are natural enemies, in the same manner, the contemporary kings are natural enemies too. The new king gets a queer sort of enjoyment in changing the modus operandi of the earlier king. The new king discontinued the services of Shadanan and appointed Madhusudan as the new priest. Madhusudan didn’t waste much time in getting the permission from the new king to install a stone inscription criticising Shadanan along with the earlier king in front of his house.

Instead of playing a game of words, he directly mentioned Shadanan’s name on the plaque criticising him. He had ordered for the same type of stone and engaged the same stone-cutter.

This made Shadanan extremely angry. But what could he do? To make the matter worse, his new wife was extremely quick-tempered and squeamish. She continued criticising him in his downfall.

Shadanan avoided the path where the stone that criticized him was installed, but that didn’t bring an end to the discussions. He kept on being crushed by criticism from outside as well as from inside his home. At last he left the kingdom.

Fifty years passed. Those critics and listeners both had died long ago. Those pillars carrying those commemorating stones stood there smeared with birds’ excrement, neglected by the people. One morning a foreigner entered the kingdom with the enemy army plundering the villages and farms and creating fear among all on
the way. The king fled as he heard that the enemy army was approaching. The village people didn’t want any confrontation. The foreigner wanted to go far and therefore he didn’t harass the villagers. On his way he stopped for some time observing those two pillars facing each other. The excreta of a bird flying over his head fell on him. He looked up and shot his arrow and soon a crow ended on the land with a thud. He looked around and saw a beam. He ordered in his language to put it across those two pillars and hang the crow there. His soldiers climbed up those pillars and made a curve at the end of the pillars and arranged the beam upon them. The earthen pots were hanging there from which birds drank water. They broke them and tied the crow in one pot and hung it in the middle of the beam. He said something and pointed at the crow with his sword to all his soldiers and gave a cry with happiness. His soldiers too did the same. This vast army of soldiers thus moved further.

People hidden in their houses did not come out even after three hours of their departure. Some of them went to the town-gate to make sure that the enemy army had left. It was only then that they started their routine life, fear still lurking in their hearts. The king who had fled did not return. He chose another town as his new capital which was completely safe. The days passed but the people didn’t remove the hanging crow from the beam following the dictum ‘Na Ganasyagrato Gachchhet’ (never to be first when the risk is high) or maybe because they were fearful to be the first to remove it or because they were not interested in removing it or maybe because they accepted everything that had happened. They started calling those senseless pillars as ‘The pillars of the crow’ and made it a part of their life.

The crow, the hanging pot and the beam were destroyed with the passage of time. After some more years the pillars too were destroyed with the passage of time. The buffaloes had played a pivotal role behind their destruction. The place, however, became famous as ‘The pillars of the crow’.

After hundreds of years, India embarked on a new life. Archeological department was provided to this region. An expert of stone-writing arrived here. He collected as much information as he could from the people and collected the stones from the surrounding area. He found that there was no difference of opinion vis-à-vis
the name of the place. He got the information of the stone mine from his careful study of the stone and proved that those stones that were carved belonged to the same mine and the same time and were carved by the same man in the same language. Many lines were missing. The first few lines of a stanza contained few words. He could read the name Shadanan in one stone carving which showed respect for the name. He could read the lines as ‘Yoarateenaam Hi Moordhni Prakatitamahima DuttaPadaprahara.’ In another carving he came across carving which said: Yo Gardabhninaday Vijrunbhitashadanana - the one who had opened his six mouths (i.e. Shadanana) to bray like a donkey. Now the expert was at his wit’s end. He had no iota of doubt that both the stone carvings talk about Shadanan. Shadanana and Kartikey were worshipped in the south. Was Shadanan worshipped here too? In fact there wasn’t any other proof to validate that. He wondered: how can eulogy and criticism stand side by side? He also felt the same kind of wonder about the name of the place.

These questions have remained unsolved even today. The archaeologists keep coming to this place to remember the priest named Shadanan. There isn’t any other equipment which can tell us whether the priest knows about this or not. We even can’t tell how he feels when he comes to know that those archeologists still remember him.
The wedding date for Aruna and Trivikram was declared. The youths of the entire city were curiously waiting for the date. They were surprised that Trivikram had won the love of a strong-willed lady who got offended over trivial matters and that Trivikram famous for his abstinence and dogmatic pursuit of his dreams was won over by Aruna. What brought joy to them was the fact that their marriage was in line with the reforms that they had wished for. They had discussed among their friend-circles minute details of their marriage and had decided everything. They belonged to different castes, both were degree holders and both had chosen each other without any force from their relatives. Besides, they themselves had chosen their marriage ceremony. Marriage itself is a contract, so they went for registered marriage instead of marrying according to Hindu marriage rituals. There were cases in which, people called registrar to their places and performed the marriage ceremony with all fanfare. They decided that they would visit the registrar office of the district they often visited and would invite only a couple of friends as witnesses. Many families select an auspicious day for the marriage, so they too decided that they would decide the day through a lottery. They had written the days of the year on equal-sized chits and had asked Aruna to select any one and declare the date.

Trivikram feared that the date would be same as the astrologers generally preferred, but that didn’t happen. He liked it as the day was in Kartik, the first month of the Hindu calendar which was traditionally considered inauspicious. Aruna feared that the date would be too distant. Once the date was fixed, she realised that it would be difficult for her to wait for six months for the wedding. However, she had given her consent in the spirit of a reformer. After the date was fixed Trivikram had told his friends that he didn’t want to keep the date secret, but would not be able to appreciate the rush with which people would like to congratulate him. He had advised his friends not to take any steps to spread their wedding date. Despite their desire not to let people know about their marriage date, they could not do anything in this regard because the people usually show much enthusiasm in such matters.
Both had decided that they would not meet each other till the wedding and would pass their days at their homes. Accordingly Trivikram engaged himself in his cotton business. He firmly believed that he should run his profession with perfect honesty and he passed the days happily following his determination. But Aruna had to pass the days in waiting. She didn’t have siblings at home and as she didn’t pass much time at her village during the last days of her study and so didn’t have any friends with whom she could indulge in conversation. She couldn’t start doing some worthwhile activity as she had only six months. She had to pass the days waiting for Trivikram’s letters and reading them.

It often happens that our genuine feelings hinder our understanding and keep hurting us. Our feelings at times flow without intellect and that too in the opposite direction. If she had developed a positive mindset and thought that the day of their marriage was coming closer, she would have passed the days more cheerfully. What happened with her was totally opposite. She grew more and more impatient with the passing of the days. She often felt a kind of anger for Trivikram. She started criticising him instead of showing her love in her letters.

One day she could not control her anger. The waiting period pained her all the more. When there were only six days remaining, she wrote to him: “You are rather merciless. I am pining for you and you don’t have time even to write a letter to me. I am beginning to feel that you are incapable of love. A sapling may grow in your heart but not the feeling of love!”

Trivikram wrote back a detailed answer to console her. He wrote: I remained completely busy this week, so much so that I could not even get enough time to have my meals or sleep properly. I had to pay back fifteen thousand rupees to a merchant. The person who manages my account was out of station. No one was in a position to pay me the money that they owed for the goods we sent them. Instead, they took it as an opportunity to laugh at my honesty. I also had to pay ten thousand rupees to Vanmalidas at the earliest. You know I share a good relationship with him and have a business relationship since the last two generations. I told you I would show you the golden ornaments but I had to mortgage them much against my wish to raise money.
could have sent you a letter during that time, but I thought it would make you angry and so I didn’t write to you. I would be happy just with your sign on your letter to me in case you don’t find out time enough to write in detail. But you demand a prolonged letter from me that you can read more than once. I didn’t want to send you a brief letter again from my side so I didn’t write in the last couple of days. Now it is just a matter of few days. I will be in your company till you get bored of me.”

This letter instead of consoling her made her all the more angry. She would have raised her hand on him if he had been around. Presently she wrote back to him in that angry status: “It is natural for you to be happy just with my sign on the letter. You are a merchant and I am just one of the customers for you. It is enough for you that the merchant signs the paper acknowledging the consignment and confirming that he owes a certain amount of money to you. In my case I have just to send you my sign without receiving anything from you. You have taken for granted that everything that belongs to me is yours after I gave my consent for the marriage. It is just a matter of my sign. I tell you not to indulge in such a belief. A modern woman possesses a totally different mindset. If she loves someone, she demands love in return. One would achieve nothing without giving back to her. You will never come out of the clutches of your friends and all. If it is Vanmalidas today; tomorrow it will be Natthubhai; still another day it will be Mathurbhai. You like to indulge in keeping great number of friends and think that you are some important man. I know I figure nowhere in your life.”

Trivikram replied to her in a matter-of-fact tone: “I can only say that you are my life. I can’t exactly say how much you occupy my entire existence. Yes, I am clear about one thing that I cannot break my earlier relations or limit them to some extent just because I marry a person. I think marriage should bring a new life to old relations. All other relations don’t just fall apart when we start a new relation with another person.”

Aruna became furious with that reply. She wrote: “I can see that I am just another person and nothing else in your eye. You may be educated, but your outlook towards women is medieval. A quiet and acquiesce woman of bygone time would
tolerate this type of outlook. It would be incorrect if you think that we will tolerate such behaviour.”

Trivikram wrote: “I can’t understand why you should get offended if I mention you as a person. Should I mention you as my entire life? And there is no question of being educated or uneducated. My mother was uneducated and she was clever, warm, friendly, loving and efficient woman. An educated woman too can be like her if she possesses that temperament. Mere education won’t turn us into a great human being.”

It was becoming impossible for Aruna to control her anger. She wrote: “I didn’t know that you would show your partiality towards your mother even when she is no more. It seems that you still think about the ideals that the women indulged in your mother’s time. You are harassing me now and would harass me more when I come to your house. But it won’t happen now. Don’t come to bring me there on the eleventh of the next month and send me back all my letters that I sent to you.”

Trivikram replied briefly: “Miss Arunabai, I got your letter dated...... You need not go to my late mother. As you have asked for the letters, I would like to inform you that they belong to me now. You have right only to make sure that I don’t publish them. You are wrong if you think that I would use them against you in future. I never think about those who wish ill of me and my relatives and friends, so there is no question that I would harm you with those letters. (He, then, controlled his passion and wrote further) One naturally experiences anger on certain occasions in life, but one should not come to extreme conclusions in the heat of the moment.”

Aruna: “You need not advise me like an elderly person. I can take decisions in my life. I didn’t know that you would be so mean as to refuse to send me my letters back. You can keep possession of those letters legally and I would consider myself lucky that I could save myself from marrying a vile fellow like you. (Provoked by some unknown force she wrote further) There remains nothing to write to you from my side.”

Trivikram: “I confess that I refused to give your letters back to you in a fit of rage. I should not have done so. On second thoughts I am willing to give your letters back to you. I think there is no meaning in keeping those letters with us once we
decide to part ways. There are certain communities which bury the dead. We Hindus cremate the dead. Many of the world thinkers believe that ours is the best method. We should burn our letters right in front of us.

“We were to unite on the next eleventh. Let’s part our ways on the same day. We were to meet there at half-past two for the marriage, but instead I will reach the place at half-past eleven. You too can come at that time with the letters. However, you are free to do whatever you choose to, but I advise you to carry those letters to burn them. I am not planning to inform my friends or else they would try to persuade us into marrying. We took the decision to marry without asking for their advice and we will end our relation in the same way.

“I will remain present at the place at half-past eleven. You can inform me if you have any other proposal.”

Of course, Aruna didn’t answer that letter. Trivikram was there at the registrar’s office at half-past eleven. He waited for some time and then started walking around to while away the time. After some time he saw Aruna walking towards him, carefully watching her steps, carrying the letters in a small bag. He moved towards her and met her at the banyan tree where they often met each other. He kept his head downwards and said with a bit of hesitation, “I had an idea. If we burn our letters right here in front of the court, people would curiously start gathering to have a look at it and would make guesses and we don’t know what they would report to our friends who are going to arrive here at half-past two. You know there is a lonely place at the old temple of Shiva just near the river. Why don’t we meet at the same place last time where we met so many times earlier and took the decision to get married?”

Aruna gave her consent without uttering a single word and looked towards the way leading to the temple. Both reached the place after some time.

There was a small Shiva temple which had remained unworshipped for a long time at the high precipice of the river. A mendicant lived in the vicinity. There was a well and a garden near the place. A small guest-house building also stood there for the
visitor of the temples who could take rest there. The open square was created in the midst of these buildings.

The couple arrived at the square and stood in the middle. Aruna kept looking at Trivikram without uttering a single word. Trivikram looked around. He, then, took out the bundle of letters from his bag and put it on the slab of the temple. He spread the bag on the ground and asked Aruna to sit on it. She sat there without saying anything.

Trivikram took the bundle and sat there facing the garden. He took out a match-box from his pocket and put it on the ground. He started untying the bundle as if he was taking off the clothes of a child. He said, “It was this very place where one day you, to my surprise, brought out jalebis, my favourite sweet from your bag and fed me with your own hands and I had told you that a woman is rightly called the nourishing mother and that a woman likes to feed. You had opposed my statement at that time. Do you remember it? You had accused me of being old fashioned. You have always believed it, don’t you?” Aruna just sat there staring at him without saying anything.

When he had finished untying them, he said, “Let me read them once more when we have decided to burn them.” He looked at Aruna who sat there in the same condition.

Trivikram, following his desire, opened a letter and said, “Look at this letter. I don’t have the first part of this letter. Maybe it will be somewhere in the house. It must be one the oldest letters from you. You have written: ‘You know that the meaning of Trivikram is the sun and the meaning of Aruna is the dawn. The sun and the dawn live beside each other but cannot be united. It applies to us as well. We may live together but it is meaningless to hope that we will unite.’

“I sent you my answer to this letter. Do you remember that? It must be there in your bundle. I had written that the same couple of the Vedas are described in the Puranas (Holy books of Hinduism) as Aniruddh and Okha, and then they do marry. I don’t know why I found out that answer. You are a poetess, but you must believe that
my answer was also worth-considering, wasn’t it?” He looked at her, but could find her in the same condition.

Trivikram continued reading the letters with rapt attention without considering what was going on her mind. He said, “You wrote this letter when you were at college in which you have narrated the memories of our tours. Listen: ‘We went to the honeymoon point which was quite a lonely place. I told you that we had enjoyed immense pleasure during our stay at that place. After our marriage we’ll go back to that place and visit the honeymoon point. You had, with your characteristic objectivity, said, ‘I doubt whether we would be able to go on a honey-moon. You know very well that after my father’s death, I have taken all the responsibilities of the business. I think my first duty is to be fully acquainted with the nuts and bolts of our business.’ Did you give it a thought what would I feel when you uttered those words? Your power to explain without considering others’ feeling is marvellous! I think it will take me an entire life to understand you.

Trivikram, still busy turning the pages, said, “Aruna, I don’t say this to change your decision; I am just putting the truth before you that you don’t really understand me. However, I don’t mean to say that I am extremely important that one should be tempted to understand me. To tell you the truth, even I don’t understand you completely. I would even say that we don’t understand our own selves. Ideally speaking, what sustains a marriage is the respect and desire to be helpful in each other’s progress. I think there isn’t any other way to express our love for someone. But it seems you have quite a different opinion than that of mine, don’t you?”

He looked at Aruna who didn’t show any reaction at his words.

He went through those letters again and said: “This letter talks about that full moon night. This one talks about your college friends. You have mentioned about the inquiry from your parents. You didn’t provide any answer to their queries. You didn’t let them know anything till one year. It was only after they decided to show some leniency that you told them everything. You know, women possess certain knack with which they get the things done.” All of a sudden it dawned upon him that the bright
sunshine was falling on the letter and it was reflected upon his eyes. He changed his position without realising that he now no longer faced Aruna. He contined:

“And look at this letter. I was just searching for it. In this letter you have addressed me for the first time as ‘Viku’. A sweet nickname I should say. While I read that I realized that most love stories have short names like that. My mother would often address me with that name when she would be angry with me. She would say, ‘My Viku is always there to blurt out good news to others.’ So many years have passed since she died.” He stopped for a moment and then continued, “I cannot forget what you have written afterwards in this letter. Those are the best lines that any love story can have. ‘You and I are now going to live together. What bliss it is to live with our dear one! I will be completely yours. How wonderful it sounds! You are there in every thought of mine. I will consider it my fortunes when all your life, your friends, your relatives would become my relatives and friends.’ Aruna you complain that I don’t understand you but the truth is that you yourself are difficult to understand. Here you mention that all my friends and relatives would become yours and when you got angry with me you criticised the same thing. Now tell me who doesn’t understand whom? Come on, why don’t you tell me?”

He heard a sob instead of the answer. It was only then that he came to know that he was not facing her. He put down the letters and went near her. He wiped her tears and asked her, “Why are you crying, Aruna? Did I offend you? I don’t think I have said anything that might offend you. What happened? Why are you crying then?”

She didn’t stop weeping but said angrily, “You would never realize whether you have offended me or not. You consider even this letter more important than me. You have been looking into these letters without taking care to have glance at me. You are worried about burning the letters, but you don’t see that my heart is also burning!”

Trivikram spoke in a soft voice, “Am I harrassing you, Aruna? Should you utter such words for me? Is it possible? Please, stop crying, Aruna. I can’t tolerate your crying. I would do everything you ask me to do.”
“You say that you would do everything I ask you, but I know you won’t.”

Aruna was still crying. He took her in his lap and said, “If that is what you think, I would do anything you ask me to do. If you want I would give all your letters back to you. I would never show my face to you. If you wish, I ...”

His friends who were to attend the marriage as witnesses approached them with smiling faces just at this juncture. They started joyful conversations.

“Didn’t I tell you they would be found right here? They used to hide themselves here and talk. How can they let go the last opportunity to visit this place?”

“Now they are going to get married. Why should they hide themselves like this?”

“And why are these letters and the matchstick lying here?”

“It just means that those letters have achieved their goal and now it is time for them to go!”

“Why are you keeping mum, Aruna?”

The wind started blowing. Trivikram thought it might blow away the letters so he went to letters and started collecting them. He brought them back and asked Aruna to put them in the bag. Aruna took out the bag on which she was sitting and gave it to Trivikram and said, “I had a short nap as I had stayed up entire night. Let’s go to the river and wash our faces.” She started towards the river. Following her, Trivikram said to his friends, “Why don’t you join us? The river looks beautiful from that point. I will show you a species of queer fish in a pit there.”

All joined the couple and refreshed themselves and came back talking with one another. One of the friends said, “Let’s go to the office. The registrar will be ready now after his tea. I know him and he would attend to us first of all.”

Trivikram asked Aruna, “Shall we go?”

“Have I ever refused to follow your order?”
“I took a vow of Ramdevipir; I promised a thal to Santram maharaj of Nadiad and a pilgrimage to Mahakali.”

“Oh, Khemi!” Dhaniya was shocked to hear this. “All your vows will cost at least sixty rupees and the cost of my vows will be around fifty rupees. We already owe around Rs. 250 that we borrowed for the wedding for which that Patel often comes here. When would we be able to pay all this money?” As they didn’t know which vow had united them, they had to fulfil all their vows they had taken.

“There is nothing to worry in it. We will pay Rs. 400. Sell all my ornaments to pay the debt.” Khemi consoled him.

“I didn’t tell about the fine we have to pay to the panch.”

In the hierarchy of the castes, some castes are considered lower than ours! The bhangis of Ahmedabad considered the Kathiawadi bhangis inferior to them. While he got married to Khemi, Dhaniya had to invite both the panch for dinner. When Khemi left, Kathiawadi panch organised a meeting and informed the panch in Ahmedabad. A meeting took place there. Khemi returned in the meantime, so there was no question of fine. But the expenditure of the entire procedure was slapped on Dhaniya from both the panch. The traditions and the resolutions of the community are considered inevitable and unavoidable like natural occurrences in our society.

Even Khemi was thunderstruck at this still she tried to console her husband. When women witness a man losing courage, they become all the more brave.

However Dhaniya’s worries didn’t subside. Disappointed, he slept in her lap. Khemi was also worried about everything. This couple spent three days happily. They started leading a miserable life again.

Khemi laid out her ornaments the next day and asked him to sell them. As he didn’t want her to be without her ornaments, he mortgaged the ornaments for money. He would have got more money if he had sold them and he could have paid off considerably to his creditors. The amount he got was insignificant, and all the ornaments were lost in paying the interest. Neither Dhaniya nor Khemi could understand this. They saved as much money as they could and paid the money. Dhaniya’s mother died around this time. He had to bear the expenditure of Rs. 100
for the rituals. Khemi delivered a baby after three months, and had stopped earning. Khemi could not take care of her husband during this time and so he turned towards alcohol.

When she was capable enough to run the household, she found that Dhaniya had started drinking again. She started scolding him, not with contempt but with pity. She thought it is she who was responsible for his condition. However, once she scolded him severely. Dhaniya didn’t say anything, but he didn’t return home that night. Khemi found him on the pavement of Richiroad and took him home. She tried to explain everything to him and he would just let out a sigh. Her heart pained when she thought of his condition. She couldn’t gather enough courage to give him any advice.

Dhaniya didn’t return home one cold winter night. Khemi left her two-year old baby crying at home and went in search of him. She found him lying on the sand of the river after two hours. She brought him home slowly. He had pneumonia the next day. Khemi took a vow again and called in an exorcist who asked her to take new vows. But Dhaniya did not recover from his illness. Khemi was widowed.

4

Khemi’s life as a widow was full of pains. The fact that Dhaniya had died without fulfilling his vows made her extremely sad. She thought of all sorts of afflictions that he would have to suffer in afterlife, but she didn’t know what to do.

Once when she was sweeping Richiroad, and had given up tying the knot, she started thinking about the vows Dhaniya had taken. She saw a Brahmin sitting on a slab in front of her. He had a three-lined mark and a big dot on his forehead. A thin black line was drawn on his nose and he was wearing a turban in Maharashtrian fashion. He had a rosary in his hand and a garland of beads around his neck. Having cleaned the slab and spread a sheet, Maharaj was arranging his paraphernalia which included a slate, a pen, pictures of lines of the palm, a barrel and dice. Khemi moved towards the pictures. Maharaj, with age old contempt, asked her to keep a distance.

“Maharaj, I want to ask a question.” said Khemi.
“First put four annas on the step.” Even her shadow was considered unholy by maharaj, but not her money! Khemi put four annas there. Maharaj sprinkled water over it and took it and said to her: “Ask.”

“I wanted to know if a husband’s unfulfilled vows when fulfilled by his wife, would give peace to her husband in afterlife? See it properly and let me know.”

Maharaj counted the marks on his fingers and said, “Definitely.”

When she moved to leave, maharaj stopped her and said, “But if she does so after remarriage, it won’t have any effect.” Khemi bowed to her and left.

Khemi now started saving money to fulfil vows. The lustre of her face had vanished, but still she appeared beautiful. Many bhangis came to her with marriage proposals. Her answer to all remained same: She could not marry without fulfilling Dhaniya’s vows. One bhangi was ready to give the amount to fulfil the vows, but she said she would do it with her own money.

It took seven years to fulfil the vows. One bhangi proposed to her. She replied to him: ‘I don’t want to remarry now.’